

ARTICLES

THE GOLDEN STOOL AND THE OATHS TO THE KING OF ASHANTI

by George P. Hagan*

My aim in this paper is to present an interpretation of Ashanti kingship in the light of two other political institutions in Ashanti; and it is in two parts. The first part is an attempt to interpret the functions of the King of Ashanti in the light of the symbolic significance of the Golden Stool. And the second part is an attempt at a structural analysis of the institution of oaths. The two parts of the paper, or the two themes, are related: while it is the Golden Stool which gives ritual and, therefore, ultimate validation to the authority of the King of Ashanti, it is through oaths that the prerogative of the king to command the obedience of his subjects - which is the substance of real authority - is given the force of personal commitment by his subjects, from below. It is the Golden Stool, and the Oaths which make the king 'the hub of Ashanti political system.'

The significance of the Golden Stool - the Attribute of Divinity

The symbol of political authority in Ashanti is the Stool. Every political unit in Ashanti - division, vicinage, village or lineage - has a stool which is the symbol of the authority of its leadership. All such stools, needless to say, are parochial symbols which focus attention and sentiment on segmental identities and factional interests. The Golden Stool is the sole exception to this. As the symbol which stands for the widest expanse of political authority (and all other stools fall under it), the Golden Stool enshrines the common fundamental values which all the segments of the nation espouse and cherish. It is the focus of the collective sentiments which Ashantis feel as members of one nation. And Ashantis believe that it.

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contains the collective spirit of the whole nation.

To Ashantis, the Golden Stool is the source of the nation's vitality and strength. The fruitfulness of the earth, the fertility of men and women, freedom from famine, draughts and plagues - these vital conditions of edifying social life - do not only depend on the natural causes of nature and follow the seasonal cycles of the year, but also reflect the spiritual strength of the Golden Stool. This belief in the intrinsic power of the Golden Stool is expressed in the special invocation which the King of Ashanti directs to the stool on the occasion of the festival of national purification, the Odwira:

"Friday, Stool of Kings, I sprinkle water upon you,
may your power return sharp and fierce. Grant
that when I and another meet (in battle) grant it be
As when I met Denkyira; you let me cut off his head.
As when I met Akyem; you let me cut off his head.
As when I met Damma; you let me cut off his head.
As when I met Tekyiman; you let me cut off his head.
As when I met Gyaman; you let me cut off his head.
The edges of the year have met,
I pray for life.
May the nation prosper. May the women bear children.
May the hunters kill meat.
We who dig for gold, let us get gold to dig, and grant
that I get some for the upkeep of my kingship!"²

The intimate connection between the Golden Stool and the fortunes of the nation has important social implications. Ashantis believe that when individuals' actions conform to the norms and values of the society the Golden Stool waxes strong. There is abundance of crop and meat, and women are blessed with many children. On the other hand, when individuals depart from the traditional rules of behaviour they defile the stool: that is, the values which the Golden Stool stands for suffer: the vitality of the stool falls; and, plagues, draughts and famines break out and endanger the life of

the nation. This belief, that every social action has an immediate utilitarian result, binds all the segments of the nation into a single moral corpus in which the various parts owe it to the whole to conform to the ideals enshrined in the national symbol. When the Asantehene purifies and honours the Golden Stool in the Odwira and Adaye festivals, he evokes, and reaffirms the nation's belief in, the ideals the observance of which is the condition of an ordered national life.

As might be expected, the acts which most seriously injure the spiritual life of the nation and therefore defile the stool are those that infringe the basic principles of social organization: principles which regulate interactions between individuals and categories of individuals. Let me illustrate this.

Sexual intercourse with a maiden who has not had her puberty rites (bragoro) is tabooed. When a girl menstruates she moves out of the status of girlhood; but she must wait to be confirmed, through the rite of bragoro, as an adult member of the society. Until this is done she is in the interstices of the social structure, and she is denied the rights and privileges of the more definitive social categories - the one from which she has moved and that into which she is due to enter. This anomaly is a source of potential danger to her. When a maiden bears a child in such a state a further anomalous situation is created. She cannot create a social being: when she herself is in a non-social state; her child would be considered non-social.³ As soon as such a breach is committed the culprits are ostracised and they remain in the bush till the girl delivers her child. To be reintegrated into the society the culprits have to purify themselves with appropriate rituals. They sacrifice sheep to the stool.

Sexual intercourse with a blood relative (bogyadie - eating blood) violates the social rule which defines marriage classes by the rule of exogamy. When this occurs the nation purifies itself with human blood - naturally, the blood of the culprits. Capital punishment was rewarded for another sexual offence: cohabitation with the wife of the King of Ashanti.

The king himself would be destooled if caught in adultery. Apart from these rules serving to regulate the relationship between occupants of stools and their subjects, they also served to protect the marital bond. Ashantis have always regarded the bond between husband and wife as one of the important links in their social system. The bond between a king and his linguist, which is one of the most sacred, is compared with that between husband and wife; and interference with that bond calls for death.

It is quite clear that by being made to rest on the bond between the Golden Stool and the individual, the general rules of social intercourse - of the kingship and political relationships in the society - are guaranteed the backing of an enduring collective sentiment. The Golden Stool thus functions as the bedrock of Ashanti institutions and ensures their continuity and stability.

This identification of the well-being of the nation as a whole with the ritual condition of the Stool differs significantly from the idea found among the Shilluk, the Yoruba, and the Bunyoro that national well-being and continuity depend on the physical health of the incumbent Reth⁴, Alafin,⁵ and Mukama.⁶ Among these peoples the king is made to commit suicide when he becomes old and infirm, as the weakening of his body might have adverse effects on the crops, rainfall and breeding. The Shilluk, the Yoruba and the Bunyoro, have Divine Kings. The Asantehene is not a Divine King.⁷ Unlike the Reth, the Alafin, or Mukama, the Asantehene has no spiritual bond with the people or the land, and his physical health cannot affect the productivity of the land or its people. The Golden Stool is Divine, and the King of Ashanti is only its sacred agent: he is the guardian and officiant of this national shrine. Ashantis call their King Ohene Okomfo, the King-Priest.

1. THE KING: HIS PERSON AND OFFICE

The relationship between the person and office of the King is perhaps best depicted in the ritual of enstoolment.⁸ The ritual of enstool-

ment aims to integrate, as far as possible, the person of the king with the office of kingship. It therefore depicts the relationships between the person and the Stool as they are at the beginning and the end, and its intermediary stage portrays the processes of change - symbolic change - in the status of the king-elect.

Stage One

The king as a Profane Individual

The Asantehene does not embody the spiritual existence of the nation; yet Ashantis do not allow any person who cannot reflect the sacredness and beauty of their national spirit in himself to be king. A royal cannot be king if it is proved that he

- (a) is infertile
- (b) has committed felony
- (c) is impotent
- (d) is a habitual drunkard
- (e) is a gambler
- (f) is deaf
- (g) is leprous, or,
- (h) is in any way deformed (circumcision now excepted).

These physical disabilities conflict with the divine attributes of the Golden Stool. It would be implicitly contradictory to identify a leprous, impotent, or infertile man with the symbol which is considered the source of national health and well-being; and a gambler or drunkard would not have the temperance and vigilance which the duties attaching to the stool demand. The disqualifications reveal a deliberate attempt to harmonize what is empirical and

verifiable - the qualities of the royal person - with what is entirely fiduciary and hidden, the intrinsic powers of the stool. But personal qualities, however satisfactory and apt to the performance of kingly functions, are profane in relation to the functions and ideals of a sacred office, and the ritual of enstoolment seeks to change the nature of the person selected for office to fit him for his role as King.

The ritual of enstoolment begins on Monday, called Nkyidwuo, on the Ashanti ritual calendar. Two stools play an important part in the ritual of the day; the Akyiaa Ama stool and the Adwumakaasi stool. The occupant of the Akyiaa Ama stool is considered the ritual mother of the Asantehene. She is expected 'to give birth' to the royal person to be enstooled as king. Though it is not explicitly stated, the Adwumakaasihene might be considered the ritual father of the Asantehene. The Busummuru sword which is the shrine of the Busummuru god, the titular patrilineal deity of the Asantehene,⁹ is not in the possession of the Adwumakaasihene. But it is he alone who can unsheath it for the king to take the oath of office. The royal person cannot become a king until the Adwumakaasihene has performed this function.

On the morning of the Nkyidwuo, the Asantehene - elect sends to the occupant of the Akyiaa Ama stool the following items of gift:

- a. One Kente Cloth and Kyimi (Silk cummerbund)
- b. One piece of white shirting
- c. One live sheep
- d. One bottle of gin, and
- e. One bag of salt.

He sends to the Adwumakaasihene identical gifts. The Kyimi (cummerbund) is of course left out.

In the afternoon of the same day, all the Divisional, Paramount chiefs and Adikro of Ashanti and a large gathering people assemble at

Pampaso. The Golden Stool arrives and is set down at the centre of the gathering of chiefs. The chiefs and people wait for the king-elect to arrive for the ceremonies at Pampaso.

Before he leaves for Pampaso:

"...The Asantehene-elect in white - adinkra cloth and dispossessed of all the paraphernalia-leaves his palace and immediately proceeds to the Queen-mother's house to take leave of her and to receive her blessing." 10

The Queen-mother, it will be noted, is a kinswoman of the king-elect -- mother's mother, mother, sister, or sister's daughter. In the act of separation, the bonds between the royal candidate and his kinsmen are severed. In the royal family he has the profane status of eba (child), but as king he would be Nana, Grandfather. The act of separation is for the king-elect the beginning of his ritual ascent from his profane status to his sacred office. As he makes his journey from the house of the Queen-mother to Pampaso, his status is undefined; and he has no relationships except with the occupant of the Akyia Ama Stool and the Adwumakaasihene, who by accepting his gift bind themselves to him by other than family ties.

"When the new Asantehene arrives at Pampaso he greets nobody but walks majestically ahead to Pampasohene's house. The Pampasohene at this time takes no part in the ceremony, but his mother, the occupant of Akyia Ama Stool, on this ceremonial occasion acts as the Asantehene's mother. Those privileged to be present at this juncture enter a special room where the new Asantehene is locked in and after the inside ceremony is completed the Mamponghene (Nifahene of Ashanti), acting on behalf of all

the Chiefs, instructs the Gyasehene, the Akyeamehene and Nseniehene of Kumasi to request the occupant of the Akyiaa Ama Stool to give them her son, the Asantehene-elect, to go and occupy the Golden Stool. She refuses three times, then consents and charges a fee of peredwan-esea (£9. 6/-). Then she puts down the Asantehene-elect, whom she has all this time been carrying on her back in the kente cloth and puts on the white shirting, signifying success achieved by her. The kente cloth she put on at first signifies the importance and dignity of her titular son whom she has been carrying on her back. Then he is taken to another adjoining room where an occupant of a stool whispers a secret word to him and then he comes out and stands with the Gyasehene, while the Akyeamehene and the Nseniehene return to report to the Mampong-hene and the chiefs assembled that the Asantehene-elect has been given to them.¹¹

This ritual of rebirth has structural significations far beyond the complex of ritual symbols and movements in which it immediately occurs. There are various structural conflicts in which the king-elect is involved, and which might weaken his position as king. The Asantehene is not only the King of the Ashanti nation, but also king of a specific segment of the union, Kumasi. He has to be able to keep a proper balance between the ideals and interests of the Kumasi state and his obligations to the whole nation.

Also, the king-elect comes from a clan which, like all other clans, recognizes itself as corporately distinct. In its interaction with other clans, the Oyoko clan is not considered superior, and its members have few special privileges. Though the king is identified with his clan and becomes king by virtue of being a member of it, he must be an impartial judge in any conflicts in which his clan is involved.¹² In the Oyoko clan itself, kings are selected from a rather specific minor segment; and within this royal segment there are sub-divisions each of which desires

to have a son on the stool. Thus whoever is elected to be king is placed at the centre of conflict in his immediate family circle. The king of Ashanti must be above the expressions of these contradictions and free from the tensions of such a milieu. The ritual of rebirth raises the king above his personal relations and symbolically delivers him from the hidden, but all too real conflicts which might occur between his personal inclinations and his allegiance to the Golden Stool.

Stage Two

The integration of the sacred person into office

When the occupant of the Akylaa Ama Stool delivers the 'new person' to the nation, the elders of the nation proceed to give him the power to rule and protect the nation. This is how Agyeman Duah describes this stage of the ritual of enstoolment:

"At this stage the Adwumakaasihene is sent for; but he excuses himself on each occasion that any one of the sword bearers is sent for him until the Busummuru Sword is sent. He then dresses in the kente cloth presented to him and with all the State Swords followed by the Busummuru in front of him, he at last arrives at Pampaso and compliments nobody but enters the Pampasohene's house. The Akyeamehene then informs him that the Asantehene-elect is about to occupy the Golden Stool and it is the Adwumakaasihene's duty to come and draw the Busummuru Sword, the emblem of the Asantehene's authority and power, from its sheath for him to take the Oath. Here too the Adwumakaasihene declines twice, but on the third occasion consents and charges Peredwan-Esea (£9. 6/-) and then draws the sword held by the Busummuruhene from its sheath and gives it to the

Asantehene-elect and whispers three times certain secret words known by only him to the Asantehene and places the Denkyekye on his head. He then puts on the white cloth instead of the kente cloth he too was wearing to show his success at performing his important national duty. Otumfuo Asantehene-elect, still in the Yard of Pampasohene's house, takes the customary oath there with the Busummuru Sword, and then all the regalia except the Golden Stool are returned to him, after which the state drums begin to sound and the women folk sing songs of praise. The Asantehene dances three times to the music of the Aprede drums and holds Apim-Asantan (a shield) in his left hand and the Busummuru Sword in his right hand respectively and leaves the house and steps outside."¹³

The reluctance of the Adwumakaasihene to unsheath the sword for the king indicates the importance of his function. It underlines the fact that the nation should not lightly or frivolously hand over its power to any person. It is to show that he is under no compulsion to perform this service that he charges £9. 6/-.

With the symbol of state power in his hand, the king-elect now proceeds to demonstrate his ability to command and lead the nation. The setting in which he does this depicts the constitutional structure of the nation and the position which the Asantehene holds in it.

"Immediately after the customary Oath, and without complimenting anybody outside, the Asantehene dances to the Fontonfrom drums. He then sends the Mpomponsuohene to inform the Mamponghene, Nifahene of Ashanti, and all the Chiefs assembled that he has finished the ceremony at Pampaso and they should

march on and wait for him at Adwabirem, at the same time, the Busummuru Sword is sent to the Queen-Mother with the same message. The purpose of the meeting at the Adwabirem is for the Asantehene to prove his ability to command and lead the Asanteman (Asante Nation).

Then he returns and puts on war dress and is carried in a palanquin from there to Adwabirem, where the Queen-Mother of Ashanti, the Omanhene and all the Chiefs remain seated. At this point the Golden Stool is escorted by the Kokofuhene, the Gyasehene, the Nsutahene, the Ankobiahene and the Manwerehene to the Asantehene's Palace. The Kokofuhene and the Nsutahene in this procession carry their cap guns."

The sitting arrangement at Adwabirem is as follows:-

"The Queen-Mother of Ashanti in white dress with Juabenhene, (Oyokohene of Ashanti), the Nsutahene (Dakohene of Ashanti) and with all the Oyoko and Dako Chiefs in full dress sitting around her. The Mamponghene (Nifahene of Ashanti), with all the Nifa (Right Wing) Chiefs, the Adontenhene of Ashanti and all the Adonten Chiefs around him. The Essumin-gyahene (Benkumhene of Ashanti), with all the Benkum (Left Wing) Chiefs around him. Asantehene then arrives in State and, still in war dress, alights from the palanquin and inspects the men at arms, walks in front of the Queen-Mother of Ashanti, and the Oyoko and Dako Chiefs, and gives an order to the men at arms to fire, by firing one gun there himself. Then the men at

arms fire simultaneously after him; and he receives the congratulations of the Queen-Mother of Ashanti, the Juabenhene, the Nsutahene, and all the Oyoko and Dako Chiefs by shaking hands with them. From there, he advances to the front of Mamponghehene, the Adontenhene, and the Nifahene (Right Wing Chief) and fires the second gun and the men at arms also fire together. Then he receives the congratulations of the Mamponghehene, the Adontenhene and all the chiefs there also by shaking hands with them. He proceeds on to the front of the Essuminyahene (Benkumhene of Ashanti) and all the Benkum Chiefs and fires the third gun to which the men at arms respond by firing as before; then he receives the congratulations of the Benkumhene of Ashanti and all the Benkum Chiefs also by shaking hands with them. After the firing, he retires to his Palace and the Chiefs disperse to get themselves prepared for the mid-night ceremony."¹⁴

Stage Three

The Climax of the Ritual of Enstoolment: The Ritual Validation of the powers given to the Asantehene to rule

The ceremony of enstoolment reaches its climax with the elevation of the king-elect onto the Golden Stool.

"At mid-night, with the exception of the Mamponghehene, all the Amanhene and all the Chiefs arrive at the Palace, in simple dress, without their seats and with only one Umbrella bearer each, who are turned out immediately the Chiefs arrive. The Golden Stool is then carried by the Chief Stool carrier, followed by

his subordinate colleagues, and brought out and placed on Banwuma (Elephant Skin) in the middle of the Bampanase Court Yard in the midst of the Chiefs; while the Queen-Mother of Ashanti, the Queen-Mother of Kokofu and a few senior female royals of the Asantehene stand some yards on the left and the Juabenhene, the Oyokohene and Dako Chiefs stand on the right hand side to watch the ceremony. Then the Chief Stool carrier sends the Gyasehene to inform the Asantehene that the Golden Stool is ready at Bampanase.

Asantehene dressed in white Adinkra cloth lowered to his waist with the Afuduo on, and the Busummuru Sword in his left and the Mpomponsuo sword on his right, gold Kantan (Gold Necklace) and gold Awoso on his neck, Denkyemkye (crocodile hat) on his head, and wearing the Mpaboa-Kessie (King Sandals), with his Nthinkwa (attendants), marches majestically to the Court Yard towards the Golden Stool and halts in front of it. Then he turns about and sends the Mpomponsuohene, holding the Mpomponso Sword (which has now been corrupted into Mpomponsuo Sword), to tell the Mamponghene in his house that he is ready for his coronation.

The Mamponghene wastes no time but proceeds with his Akyeamehene (Head Linguist) and on arrival takes his stand with the Nifa Chiefs. Then he advances alone, and supported by all the Nifa Chiefs, the Adontenhene of Ashanti and all the Adonten Chiefs, takes hold of Asantehene's right hand. The Essumigyahene supported by all Benkum Chiefs join in on his left. The Kronti and the Akwamu Chiefs hold his right foot, and the Gyase, Ankobia and Manwere Chiefs hold his

left foot; the Akyempimhene and all the Kyidom Chiefs (Rear guard of Asantehene) hold his waist.

The Kokofuhene, at this time holding his cap gun, stands behind the Golden Stool on the right; Nsutahene, holding his cap gun also, stands on the left of the Golden Stool, while the Chief Stool Carrier in white dress holds the Golden Stool standing. The Asantehene is then lifted up and the Mamponghene repeats, three times, the words 'we place you on the Golden Stool of Ashanti with our united blessing'; and each time he is placed upon it; then the Queen-Mother of Ashanti, the Queen-Mother of Kokofu, and the women present sing songs of praise and the Asantehene is given to the Asumamfuo (State Palanquin Carriers) who carry him in their palms, in charge of the Gyasehene, the Ankobeahene and the Manwerehene, to a room called Me-Eda, where he remains quietly till the next day, which is Fobena (Tuesday).

On the morning of this day, the Asantehene sends Ntaanu (£16) by a Linguist to the Mamponghene and again dresses in white and sits in state on a white gold gilded stool to receive the blessings of the Asantehemaa, the Kokofuhemaa and all the Chiefs and prominent people privileged to offer such blessings.

Then the women folk sing songs of praise. The Asantehene then distributes sheep and drinks to the Chiefs according to their status, and presents to all who are entitled to them, and the whole day singing of songs of praise and jubilation continue throughout the town. The next day, dressed in full regalia, the Asantehene again sits in state at the same court yard

at Bampansa for the Amanhene (Paramount Chiefs) and Divisional Chiefs to take leave of him. Then, the all important ceremony of the enstoolment of the occupant of the Golden Stool, the constitutional Monarch of the Ashanti Nation, is completed."¹⁵

Now, what does kingship mean in the light of the ritual of enstoolment? The king of Ashanti occupies the Golden Stool, he does not sit on it. The Twi expression "te so" means occupy, as in the statement "Ote asaase no so" (he occupies or lives on the land). Te so also means 'resting one's bottom on something', as in Ote afurum no so (he is sitting on the ass). According to the traditional beliefs of the Ashanti, the king should never come into physical contact with the stool. During the ceremony of enstoolment, when the Divisional chiefs signify their collective physical support by lifting the king 'onto' the stool, no part of his body should touch the stool. The stool is considered so charged with power that it can numb any part of the body which comes into contact with it. It is believed that such a contact might make the king impotent. This idiom might be given two quite distinct but related interpretations.

In the first place, the king does not share and cannot claim to be imbued with any of the powers of the stool. He is distinct from the sacred office he holds; and it is implied that the stool is superior to its occupant.

In the second place, the idiom indicates that the support which the stool gives to the king is moral and not physical. The Golden Stool, the symbol of the collective values of the people, is put behind the king on enstoolment to show that the collective moral strength of the nation is behind him. And this gives the ultimate validation to the king's authority. Sitting on the stool, in the sense of taking occupancy of it, implies the acceptance of the rights and responsibilities attaching to the stool.

When a royal accepts a stool, he loses all his personal rights and obligations. In a dramatic gesture, when the constitutional issues

of election are concluded, the people capture the candidate of their choice and strip him of all his personal belongings. The clothes and jewelry he might be wearing at the time of his seizure are all taken away from him. In place of these personal rights, the nation gives the candidate the rights and privileges of office. The stool provides him all the necessities of life. The state settles his debt and the stool heirloom becomes his security. The king marries and cohabits with the wives of the stool or "stool wives" (aye te); and these wives may not be women of his choice. The children of the king are the children of the stool. The king has no claim to personal service, personal rights or personal opinion. His personal behaviour and actions are punctiliously institutionalized - even to the point of prescribing how he should walk, dance, talk, smile, bathe, eat, drink, defecate and spit. And there are hereditary court functionaries who see to it that the prescribed forms of behaviour are adhered to.

The nation gives the king all these services and gratifications appropriate to his elevated position through a system of shared duties to the stool. Thus certain villages or families provide the stool with wives, some with chamber servants, others with food from the king's farm, and yet some others with toilet facilities. In the Gyase, or court administration, there are special attendant officials for the cleaning of the king's body and his kra; there are officials in charge of the preparation of his food, his clothes, sandals, stool property and jewelry, etc. All these officials have their chiefs who are hereditary rulers deriving their offices from their fathers. With a few exceptions, all stools give him military service.

In return the nation claims certain functions of the stool; and these functions devolve upon the king as the duties he has to perform to the stool. The king of Ashanti ensures that all Ashantis live by the collective norms of the nation which the Golden Stool enshrines. This aspect of his duty is primarily a judicial one. The king is the supreme judge of the nation. His duty is to protect the laws and customs of the nation. He must know the laws of the nation and, while protesting them by word of mouth, must also be seen to live

by them. He must constantly measure his own behaviour¹⁶ and the behaviour of his subjects against the body of norms and rules which are intended to secure peace and harmony in the nation. This judicial duty is not only secular but also ritual; for, as defaults injure the ritual state of affairs, so must punishments or rewards repair them; whence the frequent concern to slaughter sheep in settlements of most issues involving breaches of traditional norms. The importance of this function appears more clearly in the state of affairs of the nation when this responsibility is abdicated through death.

The death of the King creates a critical constitutional situation. It means the people have lost their protector: Dua kese abu, the Great Tree (which gives protection to the nation) has fallen. Asase apae, the earth is sundered: The bonds which held all the separate units of the state together no longer exist. The schisms inherent in the segmental union appear; and the land is literally fragmented into possessions of villages, and individuals.

Every interregnum is a period of vicious intrigue and sordid licence. The story is told by Rattray¹⁷ of a friend of his who, when sent to announce the death of a king, killed all but one of the people in his retinue. Normally it was only the Asantehene who could condemn a man to death and command his execution. The excuse of this chief was that the loss of his lord had pained him. And Rattray explains that the excesses of brutality and hostility in these times occur because Ashantis work themselves into such a psychological frame that they break the law quite in spite of themselves. Much as sentiment played a part in the general insecurity and lawlessness which ensued the death of a king, I think this psychological state was engendered within an ideological and structural framework: the law-enforcing lord is absent; and there is none to guard the sacred values of the nation.

Structurally, whenever the king "went to village", the major segmental units of the nation and their subsidiary divisions sought for a new balance of power. While the different units knew their different roles in the union nation, they also recognized that the influence and

honour that each of them had in the union depended upon the extra-institutional relations which they were able to develop between themselves and the reigning monarch. Between the different segments of the nation there continued a balancing of tribal chief against tribal chief; for the chief was, first, the symbol of his segment's unity for which he stood against the nation and other segments within it, and, then, a part of the military organization in which he represented the state. In the absence of the king no one Division can enforce the jural bonds which bind the several segments together. Indeed, such bonds can be said not to exist.

THE OATH

As soon as a king is installed, all major chiefs take oaths of allegiance to support him. This jural action transforms the congeries of social units into a corporate body. With the recognition of a common supreme authority, the relationships between the different segments become regularized; and they can then act as one "person" - which is indeed how Ashantis picture the union of their states.¹⁸ Formally, it is the Asantehene who gives directions and orders -- as head of the union -- to the other members of the corporate body. The response which he receives depends on the bonds of oaths by which they severally pledge to heed his call.

The smallest units of which the state is composed are the localized stool families. And it is in the political functions of such families that we see the primary structural significance of oaths.

Ashanti laws of succession to kingship and their organisation into chiefships may be summed up as follows:

- (1) The nation is divided into a number of chiefships on a territorial basis, under a king who himself rules a large area, the Kumasi State.

- (2) Stools can be acquired by
- (a) matrilineal succession: from mother's brother to sister's son.
 - (b) There are a number of chieftainships held by sons of chiefs, to which succession is by the sons of the senior male of the royal family.
 - (c) Individuals might acquire stools as the reward for distinguished service to the nation.
 - (d) In addition to these chieftainships, there are two important female chiefs' titles (hemmaa, Obaapanin) which are said to give the right not only to bear kings but to name a person to the kingship. Succession to these is from sister to sister to daughter, and then to a grand-daughter. In the absence of a male royal to occupy a kingly stool a female royal in any of these categories could be enstooled as "King". (Juaben Sewaa).

When we come to consider how a particular individual is selected for office we see that considerable options are left to the king-makers, and what Audrey Richards says about the Bemba is also true of the Ashantis:

"In most types of succession whether to the name and spirit of a dead man or to his office, there are usually two or three potential heirs, and although there are certain rules of priority, it is practically never the case that there is one child known as heir to the chieftainship from birth and brought up as such, as occurs in those South African tribes in which the eldest son of the great wife must always succeed. A Bemba chief, or commoner, is succeeded by his brother in order of age, next by his sister's children, and failing them, by

his maternal grandsons. Difficulties arise when there is a choice between an older classificatory 'brother' not a sibling, but possibly a mother's sister's son, or an even more distant 'brother' still, and a young man, a maternal nephew who is the son of the deceased's own sister, with whom ... his ties were very close. Here the principles of primogeniture conflict with that of propinquity of kingship, in the case of a branch of a family that has been in existence for three or four generations, and it is probable that in these cases the nearest heir is appointed unless he is manifestly unsuitable, when the more distant 'brother' or maternal nephew is selected. I never heard of a regent being appointed for a young man."¹⁹

Though political power derives from lineage membership, it is not coterminous with lineage authority. Though the lineage principle of succession is applied to the selection of a candidate for a stool, there might be so many major segments of the royal lineage competing to put a candidate on the stool that friction and family feuds might develop. Beyond defining the category of persons who might accede to the stool, the lineage principle gives no guide to the selection of a particular individual. Because of this, forces outside the royal family might cause a rift in the royal family by supporting or showing a willingness to support individuals from different minor segments of the royal lineage. The candidate selected must be the choice, not of the royal family but of the elders and people of Ashanti.

After the candidate has been selected, lineage solidarity cannot be taken for granted. There is always the possibility of a segment of the royal family intriguing to cause the destoolment of the king or insinuating disaffection and disloyalty in the nation. Ashantis anticipate this by making all the male members of the family who are all eligible candidates for the kingship to swear a sacred oath of allegiance to the relative who is chosen for the stool. It is here that the first oaths of allegiance are

taken for social harmony and solidarity. Throughout Ashanti all politically significant lineages swear the personal oaths of allegiance directly to their heads of lineage. These are the fragments of authority or allegiances which have to be put together and given to the king at the head of the nation.

Let us look into how all the lineage segments in Ashanti come to give their authority to the King. According to Busia:

"The heads of the important lineages were the chief's councillors. Each of them held a hereditary office, the symbol of which was a stool. The man who was chosen to be the head of the lineage was not necessarily the most senior member. When an elder died, the chief sent a message to the senior woman and the senior man of the lineage, requesting them to elect a man to be the head of their lineage. All the grown-up men and senior women of the lineage then held a meeting to select a candidate. They considered the sons of all the women of the lineage whose children had a kin-right to the office. When they had decided on one they sent to the father and mother of their chosen candidate to beg them for their son. If the parents agreed they said 'We give him to you.' The members of the lineage, including all the men and women, met again in the house of the senior woman. The candidate was informed that he had been selected to become the head of the lineage. 'We put you in the place of our ancestors'. The male members one by one swore to 'serve you in the place of our ancestors, so that you in turn may serve the chief'. The senior man then sent to tell the chief that they had chosen a man to be head of their lineage. If the chief

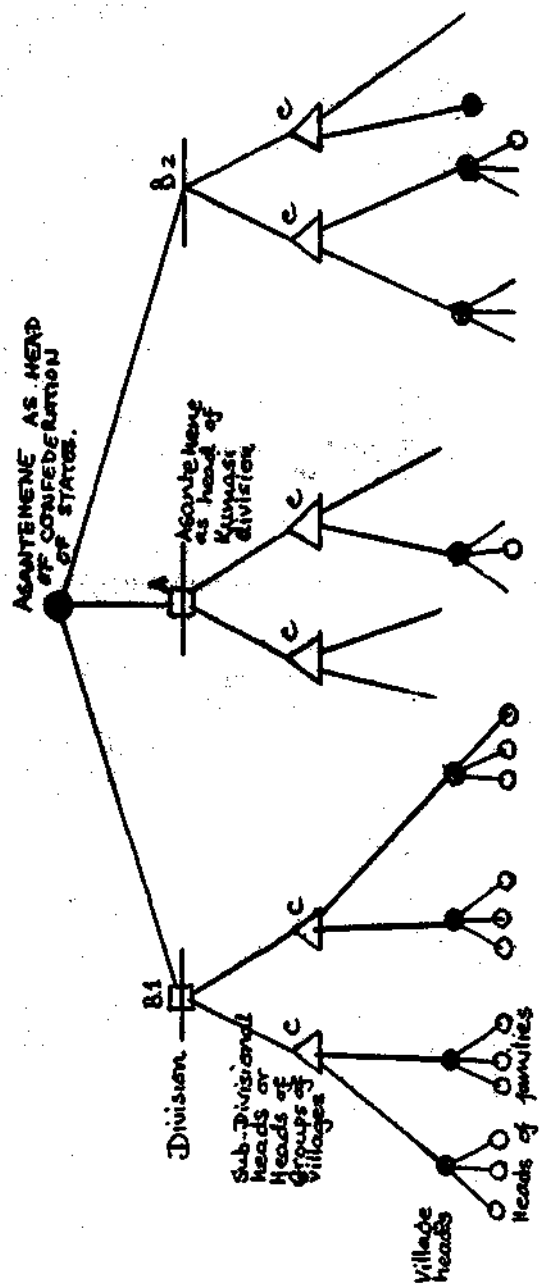
accepted the nomination, a day was fixed when the lineage could present their head to the chief and his elders. If the chief did not like the nominated candidate, he gave his reasons and asked the lineage to elect one with whom 'I could look after the state'. On the appointed day the candidate, accompanied by the senior members of his lineage, was brought to the chief's house where the chief and his elders would have met already. The senior man of the lineage, on behalf of himself and the other members presented the candidate to the chief and his elders as the chosen head, and took the oath of allegiance as follows: "I beg to swear by Thursday (the forbidden Oath). This man we have brought to you, if he does anything wrong, and I do not advise him, if I do not serve him well so that he too may serve you well, then I have broken the oath." The candidate swore a similar oath to serve the chief faithfully. The chief then directed that a stool be given to the candidate so that he might sit down. After he had sat down, the Okyeame Panyin (head spokesman) claimed the aseda (thanksgiving fee) from him. This was usually £4. 10/- and a bottle of rum. After the rum had been drunk by the assembled elders, the chief's spokesman, on behalf of the chief, gave the lineage stool to the candidate whom he admonished never to rebel against the chief. The candidate was then carried away from the chief's house on the shoulders of his friends to the music of the fontomfrom drums, and the singing of ose (jubilant song) of the members of the lineage, thanking the Supreme Being, whose day is Saturday. The candidate was thenceforth the head of his lineage and an elder or councillor of the chief." 20

The heads of families make their pledges (*nsuae*) to village chiefs. Village chiefs make their pledges to heads of vicinages (*Odikro*). The *Adikrofo* severally swear to their divisional chiefs who, in turn, pledge allegiance to the king of Ashanti. The scheme of allegiance created by the various pledges might be represented as in the sketch below. Through this system of pledges the *Asantehene* obtains formal jural ties and support from all the states in the union: the people serve and support their family heads and chiefs, and through them their *Odikro*, *Omanhene*, and then the king.

What gives the pledges their binding force is the invocation of some tragedy of the nation, division, vicinage, village or family. The pronouncement of such a tragedy, *ntam*, operates by a special formula: "If you (or I) do not do so and so; or if you continue to act thus, or if you do not give me such and such a thing, may the tragedy of (usually the day or place of the tragic event is mentioned for this purpose), recur." So that if one so acted as to fulfil the condition, the consequence followed, and one became guilty of injuring, or making liable to injury, the social life of the nation, state, village or family. In such circumstances society becomes bound to take legal and ritual actions to protect itself.

Oaths have their source in some tragic social event, and the desire to prevent such a tragedy recurring makes the oath one of most important supports of the social system as it makes enforceable the rules of social intercourse. Generally, the invocation of a tragedy (*ntam*), even when it does not operate as a binding force behind a pledge, acts as a device which enables one person to regulate or control the behaviour of another. Thus oaths do not only permit the king and his chiefs to command the services of their subjects, but also enable slaves and commoners to impose obligations and restraints on the king and his chiefs, as on any other individual in the nation.

A king of Ashanti was once impeached by means of this formula. According to Rattray, "the king had invoked the national taboo, in the cause of sanitation, ordering that every one must clean his compound. He himself, or those responsible, omitted to do so in the precincts of the



palace. One Kweku Seku Otweafunu, i.e. Kweku Seku, the corpse-dragger to the king, spoke the prescribed taboo against the king himself (Kwaku Dua I), for not causing his own compound to be cleaned. The case was heard and the king was fined ten pereguan of gold dust, i.e. £80, he bought his head for this amount."²¹

The extent to which one could use the oath in controlling others is to be found in this saying which, according to Rattray, "has the force of a legal maxim." The saying is: "If any one 'swears an oath' upon you saying that you must strip off your clothes and give them to him, then strip them off, and inquire his reasons for making the request afterwards (Obi ka ntam gu wo so se pa wo ntama ma no a, pa ma no, na wo bise n'asie)."²² It is with this effect that the oath might be used for making legitimate claims of rights against people.

There are three possible ways in which a person upon whom a tragedy is invoked might act: "First he could comply forthwith with the demand, and not take any further action in the matter; any possible evil results were thus immediately nullified—in fact none were possible, because the contingency, the happening of which would alone put the sanction into operation, actually never occurred. The person using the formula thus readily and simply obtained what he desired.

"Secondly, the person thus adjured, if he considered the demand made (on the threat of a repetition of a misfortune following non-compliance) unjust, might perform the required action, but simultaneously (or later on) invoke the same calamity and bid the person who had sworn the first oath, upon him to show good cause for having done so. Yet a third line of action was possible. He might refuse altogether to agree with, or to obey the order and would answer the demand by saying, 'If I do what you demand then may the calamity you have invoked happen. In either case he did what is now called 'responding to the oath' (bo ntam so)."²³

In the latter two ways of responding to an oath some kind of arbitration is held to find out whether the national taboo has been abused. The person who evokes the taboo seeks to show before the court that his demands on the opponent are justified, and that he had called upon the taboo to support his claim. If the claim turns out to be unjustified the taboo is deemed to have been defiled, and the person who evoked it pays compensation to the king or chief whose oath was evoked. He also pays a fine to the person upon whom the oath was evoked. The latter pays these fines if the oath was justly evoked against him.

The court at which the case is heard is determined by whether the oath sworn belongs to a family head, village chief, Odikro, Omanhene or the Asantehene. The Asantehene usually permits the Omanhene of any of the original five states of the union to arbitrate in a case of Ntam Kese, (Great Oath) but no lower chief would be permitted to do this. Similarly an Omanhene might permit an Odikro to proceed to hear a case involving the invocation of an Omanhene's oath. This rule is generally observed in all disputes, throughout the political system.

In a dispute between two parties if any of them invokes an oath, it is the duty of the chief, to whom the fact of the taking of the oath is reported, to investigate the matter, whether the person be his subject or not, and then having done so to inflict a fine on the guilty person. The only caveat is that the oath should be within the jurisdiction of the chief by rank. If the oath appears to have been violated or perjured, the person taking it is fined, which when collected, is sent to the person whose oath was taken. The latter can, moreover, depute another chief to collect the dues for him.

Fines for oaths are graded, and are now according to Bafuor Osei Akoto as follows:

Asantehene	.....	Osuaa ne Doma	£2	7s	0d
Omanhene	.....	Suduo ne domafa	£1	3s	6d

Odikro	.....	Nsano	13s	0d
Osafohene	.....	Doma	7s	0d

If a chief, after hearing a case, did not send the fines to the chief whose oath was sworn, he himself could be brought before a court.

Whoever is found guilty in a case of any kind can invoke a higher oath and compel the judgement to be set aside and the case taken to a higher court. In such a case the convict invoked the oath against the Akyeame (linguists) of the court which heard his case for having given him a "twisted verdict." Here the Akyeame are presumed to have denied the person his right (to a fair arbitration); and the oath compels them to defend their judgement before a higher court and show that their verdict was not biased. If the higher court finds the Akyeame guilty of twisted judgement, they are made to pay very heavy fines for their perjury of the oath. Otherwise, the convict is made to pay new and heavier fines. In the past, whenever judgement was passed in a 'great oath' (ntam kese) case, sheep were slaughtered at the various mausolea and also in front of "the shrine of the national soul -- the Golden Stool." The device of the oath therefore aided the individual to invoke the spiritual power of the Golden Stool for the protection of his rights.

It is difficult to see in practical terms the compulsive ritual power of the oath, but the following description of the Nhyira (one of the great oaths of Ashanti) might help to make this clear.

According to Kyeame Opoku:

"We have three important oaths of which two are practically obsolete.

They are Nhyira, Taame and Kwasida.

Nhyira, Cursing the Omanhene

a. Form

"Obosom kum Ohene, efiri se adee a wode aye me
Me dee meko, wo nso so fa ka.

Spirit of "....." kill the king for what you have done to me.
I am going away (to die) and I leave the debt to you.

b. Origin

The Omanhene is supposed to be immortal.
Once a certain man in the time of Ntim Gyakari asked this
curse on the then leader of the Kumawus and the latter died.
So this oath or curse was forbidden.

c. Penalty.

Upon this oath being sworn both the plaintiff and defendant
were immediately arrested. The Kyeamehene had to report to
Omanhene who at once ordered his servants to go out and get
twelve sheep, twelve fowls and twelve eggs.
The Nhenkwaa had the right to go into any one's house and take
the sheep, fowls and eggs or to take them off the street, no matter
whose property they were.
The carcasses of the sheep and fowls sacrificed were then sent to
the Ashanti King together with a few egg-shells. These were
sent "post to post" and any one refusing to take them could be
executed. Then both plaintiff and defendant, known as accused,
were haled before the Omanhene. The one who swore the oath
was imprisoned and the accused party handed over to the Kyeame-
hene to be looked after. When the Ashanti King received the sheep,
fowls, and egg-shells he sent an executioner to kill the 1st accused.

The object of sending an executioner from Kumasi was to ensure
the Ashanti King getting his share of the deceased's property. The
2nd accused, so called, because he was held part guilty, in that
his conduct has forced the first accused to swear such an oath,
had to pay the cost of the sheep, fowls and eggs to the Omanhene.
The Ashanti King in addition could impose any fine he liked on
the second accused for the purpose of washing away the blood in
the executioner's hairs. He could remit a part of this fine to the

Omanhene. The moveable property of the executed man became the property of the Ashanti King. This oath has died out. The last time it was sworn, was at Temati when a man called Nontwiri cursed the Omanhene Kwami Afram and King Prempeh. He was owed money by a man, I forget his name and he lost his temper. Then the King sent an executioner to kill him, but at the same time King Prempeh was captured at Kumasi and the man was set free.²⁴

The slaughtering of sheep and fowls on the threshold of the palace protects the king from the harmful effects of the oath. It insulates the house of the king from the spreading pollution of the oath. The sheep, fowls and eggs are taken from any house not only because the arrest of the ritual pollution should be done as quickly as possible, but also because the pollution affects every citizen in the state. Because of this, and because no oath should escape proper judicial and ritual action, every citizen of Ashanti has the legal power, and obligation, to arrest (*kye dedua*) any person who invokes an oath, and send him before his chief or the king. In the case of the Nhyira the offence has to be dealt with by the Asantehene. Whence the relay of the information from "post to post" under the pain of death to anyone who refuses to continue the chain.

In this paper, I have urged that, in the Golden Stool, we have an inanimate object which symbolizes all the notions of physical and moral power which in other societies - Nyoro, for example - are identified with the physical health of the reigning monarch. While among the Nyoro, the king is at the centre of the rituals of national purification and renewal - as the object of purification - among the Ashanti, the central object is the Golden Stool, with the Asantehene acting the role of officiating priest. Ashanti 'kingship' is more radically dissociated from the person of the king than is the case among the Nyoro; and it is placed above, and not on the same place of sacredness as, the king. This has far-reaching practical consequences.

In the first place, unlike the Shilluk Reth, the Mukama of Bunyoro and the Yoruba Alafin, the king of Ashanti does not have to be killed in

order to transfer the kingship from a corrupt or aging incumbent to a new person. When a king commits sacrilege or abuses his trust, Ashantis destool him or force him to abdicate by swearing various oaths and preferring charges against him. Significantly, regal assassinations are rare in Ashanti history. In any case regal assassination is not institutionalized. As to senility, Ashantis would rather keep an aging king on the stool than kill him. To Ashantis longevity is a divine gift.

Another implication of the radical distinction between the person and office of the king is that, though the king of Ashanti bears the epithet "Asase Wura", "Owner of the Land", he does not own the land in the sense in which the Mukama is said to own the lands of Bunyoro. The king of Ashanti has no right to distribute at will the lands of his people, and he cannot exact taxes from the harvest which the people reap from their lands. Ashanti is not a "fiefdom". Ashanti lands are stool lands, and the health of the land depends on the spiritual strength of the Golden Stool and not on the health of the incumbent king. The king owns the land only in the sense that he is responsible for its protection.

In my analysis, it also emerges that it is because the Golden Stool contains the power of the land and the behaviour of the people might affect the power of the stool and reduce the productivity of the land, that the king has authority to judge and punish. So, the functions of kingship are based on the belief surrounding the Golden Stool; and these beliefs constitute the "traditional" grounds for the validity of the authority of the king: that is, the grounds on which the people themselves might accept the authority under which they live. I shall here pass over the element of "Charisma" demanded by Ashanti kingship - for I have treated that sufficiently - to analyse further the significance of oaths to the kingship. Apart from "tradition", "charisma" and "rational legality" are the canons by which the validity of the authority of the king of Ashanti is judged.

Ashanti is a spiritual union and a legal corporation. The nation possesses what Professor Evans-Pritchard has described as "moral density ... great enough for (the) segments to be represented by a common symbol"

in the Golden Stool. But this factor alone could not eliminate or control "the powerful tendencies towards fission in the structure they compose."²⁵ For effective corporate action, particularly in matters of common defence, Ashantis recognize a common monarch who does not only reign but also governs. The recognition which the segments give to the king is founded on the pledges which the various segments make to the king. Through the oaths of allegiance, the king, though head of but one segment of the union, acquires power to raise and organize forces greater than any of the segments of the union can dispose of. The oaths give to the king of Ashanti power to impose physical and ritual sanctions to keep the segments of the nation together.

Ashanti is morally united under the symbol of the Golden Stool. But as a legal union, it undergoes dissolution whenever the Golden Stool is vacated through the death, destoolment or abdication of a king. Every interregnum gives the segments of the union an opportunity to jostle for accommodation in the power structure. It is not unlikely that the person chosen to occupy the stool would reflect in his character the aspirations and ambitions of the majority of the people. By the people's ability to exercise a choice of candidate for the stool, they managed, by the examination of the similarities and contrasts in the characters of successive chiefs, to indicate the broad outline of the policies they wanted the nation to pursue. When all the chiefs come together to enstool the king, their pledges do not only validate the power of a particular king - the person they are enstooling; they also reaffirm the constitution under which the kingship is established.

As the state is conceived, any form of social conflict might be construed as harmful to the constitution of the political corpus and the ideals which animate it. One has only to swear an oath to achieve this end. In their most commonplace applications, oaths permitted social conflicts of any form to be canalized and controlled by the traditional processes of law. The invocation of an oath referred cases to and, therefore, implied recognition of, the system of authority distribution. Every deliction which involved the invocation of an oath thus served to consolidate the power of the king and his chiefs in ritual and political terms, and, not least, in financial gains.

9. See Rattray, *ibid.* pp. 136-137.
10. Agyeman-Duah *IAS*. 33 p.5.
11. Agyeman-Duah *ibid* cit loc
12. Matters affecting the Oyoko clan are dealt with by the Oyoko-hene. Meyer Fortes stresses this point in the "Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations (edited by Max Gluckman), Manchester University Press, 1962, p.59.
13. Agyeman-Duah *ibid.* p.6.
14. Agyeman-Duah *ibid.* pp. 6, 7.
15. Agyeman-Duah *ibid.* pp. 7, 8 (my parenthesis).
16. See K.A. Busia, *ibid.* Chap. II and R.S. Rattray (1929) Chap. XI.
17. R.S. Rattray *ibid.* 109-110.
18. The military divisions of the nation are co-ordinated and patterned after the human body.
19. Audrey Richards, African Political Systems (edited by M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard) O.U.P. London, New York, Toronto, 1940, p.100.
20. Busia *ibid.* p.8.
21. Rattray *ibid.* p.212.
22. See Rattray *ibid.* p.206 footnote 2.
23. See Rattray *ibid.* p.206.
24. Note No. D.28 Kumasi Archives.
25. E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1962) pp. 84-85.