

STATUS DIFFERENTIATION IN ASHANTI IN THE NINETEENTH
CENTURY: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

by Kwame Arhin*

The stratification of modern societies into 'classes' is the result of economic differentiation and its concomitants: different degrees of purchasing power and correlative differences in 'styles' of life of nuclear families, especially in the western world.¹ With respect to pre-industrialized societies with insignificant economic differentiation, we do not speak of 'classes' but of 'status-groups'² and the bases of differentiation have to be sought, not in differences of wealth, but in other sectors of social organization and values; for instance, as among the interlacustrine Bantu³ or in the Northern Nigerian Emirates,⁴ in the history and the military/political organization of society. In these societies what M.G. Smith calls 'prestige distribution' is tied up with association with government and power. Upward or downward status mobility depends on the increasing favour or disfavour with the ruler incurred in service in his household or administration or on the battlefield. In contradistinction to the rule in industrialized societies, economic position depends on political status.

A survey of the literature relating to Ashanti in the nineteenth century indicates that she belongs to this latter group, and, in the ensuing pages, I shall describe and discuss the indices and bases of status differentiation, as well as the factors of status mobility and draw some conclusions about the values that informed status differentiation in Ashanti.

It seems useful to start with a look at the relationship between wealth, on the one hand, and prestige distribution and the possession of authority among the coastal Fanti and the nineteenth century.

As early as the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries, Bosman, the Dutchman, who had stayed on the Gold Coast as an official of the Dutch West Indies Companies for fourteen years, remarked that he had no doubt that

* Mr. Kwame Arhin is a Research Fellow in Social Anthropology.

"only the Richest man is the most honoured, without the least regard to Nobility"

True, "kingdoms" and "captaincies" were still inherited yet so much regard is had to

Riches in Slaves and Money, that he who is plentifully stored with these, is often preferred to the Right Heir."⁵

Thus a century and a half of trading with the European had altered, on the coast, the basis of prestige distribution just as it was undermining the basis of authority. Social status was becoming mainly achieved rather than ascribed, for success in trading guaranteed a pre-eminent social position in one's town and gave one good opportunity for wielding authority. In Cape Coast, for instance, one Edward Barter had effectively replaced the traditional ruler as the controller of trade with the Europeans by virtue of his capacity to "raise a large number of armed men" his slaves and "free men who adhere to him."⁶

This, of course, had not always been the case. In the 16th century the people of the area between Elmina and Cape Coast always insisted on the permission of their headman before they would "traffick" with European traders. Prices and weights were settled by negotiation between the trader and the chief who sometimes determined the goods that were needed by his people. All presents were passed through him.⁷

The process which had started before Bosman culminated in the 19th century when Brodie Cruickshank, with his eighteen years' experience on the Gold Coast as merchant, secretary to President of the Gold Coast Council and Acting-Governor, noted that

"wealth, which consists partly in the number of slaves and partly in gold, is, however the surest qualification of power; and the rich man, if he does not choose to aim at political or municipal influence, has always the means at least of commanding the

services of those in authority."⁸

It is one of the many nineteenth century differences between the Ashanti and the Fanti, both Akan, with essentially similar socio-political institutions, that whereas among the Fanti, the nouveaux riches had replaced the traditional chiefs in the possession of effective authority, the Asantehene and the divisional chiefs had maintained their power and also possessed much of the wealth of their country. Trade had not much affected the distribution of power in the United Kingdom of Ashanti and from what we gather from Bowdich,⁹ hereditary power was still the basis of social differentiation. The reasons for this will emerge in the course of our discussion of the materials relating to status groups in Ashanti in the nineteenth century.

Our sources do not contain systematic accounts of social differentiation in Ashanti; there are, nonetheless, enough scattered pertinent remarks on the subject to enable us to build up a coherent picture of it. Bowdich, for instance, wrote:

"the higher classes could not support their numerous followers, or the lower their large families, in the city and therefore employed them in plantations in which small crooms (i.e. villages) were situated, generally within two or three miles of the capital, where their labour not only feeds themselves, but supplies the wants of the chief, his family and more immediate suite."

"Also the middling orders station their slaves for the same purpose".¹⁰

Thus to Bowdich, Ashanti or rather Kumasi society was stratified into three observable groups which we shall designate here as status groups. Scattered through the "Mission to Ashantee" are references to indices of status distinction: in behaviour and manners, in "styles of life" as reflected in material possessions, in dress and food, in values and in the possession and non-possession of certain political and legal privileges.

It is noteworthy that whilst the distinction between the higher and lower "orders" appears to be clear-cut with respect to the above criteria, the evidence is thin for the existence of "middling orders". This, of course, does not preclude a number of families hovering on the border-line between the two groups. But the economic conditions certainly did not exist for the emergence of a "middling order" i.e. the "middle class" in the sense that we think of it today: either as the bourgeoisie, a group of people who own the "means of production" and buy the labour of others; or in the (Max) Weberian sense, i.e. of a group of people whose "style of life" or "life chances" are distinguishable from those of others by virtue of their purchasing power, in the market.¹¹

Land was plentifully available to high and low alike and land was, besides labour, undoubtedly the greatest factor of production in Ashanti of the early 19th century. I should suggest that the markets in Kumasi were patronised mainly by the Moslem immigrants since Ashanti were subsistent in essentials; elsewhere in Ashanti, the goods exchanged in the market were mainly within the means of chief, freeman and slave.¹²

Criteria of status distinction

Confining ourselves to the higher and lower "orders", then, these were distinguishable by various criteria. The higher orders were composed of the kingly and the chiefly families. The king and the royal lineage were, of course, at the top of this stratum and had a life style that distinguished them from the rest of the people. Also within the whole stratum, there were distinctions of rank based on political distance from the king.

The 'higher orders' owned slaves whereas probably only a few of the rest of Ashanti owned any slaves. The ownership of slaves enabled the king and chiefs to cultivate larger farms and there maintain a larger table than the rest who had access to the king's or the chief's table.¹³ The meals of the king and chiefs were different from, and better than,

those of the commoners: the former had soup "of dried fish, fowls, beef or mutton and groundnuts stewed in blood"; the soup of the latter was concocted of "monkey's flesh and the pelts of skin."¹⁴

The higher orders, says Bowdich, and this is obvious even today, were distinguished by the beauty of their features: they were more handsome and personable than their subjects. This distinction in features was perpetuated by a practice among the women members of the royal lineages which crystallized their august social position:

"the sisters of the king may marry or intrigue with whom they please, provided he be eminently strong or personable and that the heirs of the stool may be, at least, personably superior to the generality of their countrymen."¹⁵

The general rule was that royalty should marry unrelated royalty but if the king's sisters preferred a commoner he should be personable and was given a political office in order to raise his social status. And whilst the chiefs and their families were generally "clean" in person the people were "dirty".¹⁶ This was to be expected since the ownership of slaves gave some amount of freedom from menial work to chiefly lineages denied to subjects.

The top Ashanti were distinguished in manners from the ordinary run of men: chiefs were always "dignified", "courteous" and "hospitable" in private though "haughty" and "abrupt" in public; the lower orders were "ungrateful", "insolent" and "licentious". To this appraisal of lower order manners, the king himself attested though Bowdich may have carried over his impression of the "lower orders" in England:

"the King repeatedly said he believed them (the lower orders) to be the worst people existing except the Fantees: and not comparable with many of their inland neighbours."¹⁷

Lower order "insolence" was probably an unsuccessful imitation of chiefly hauteur.

The most objective factor of distinction between the social groups was the scale of expenditure which characterized the chiefly stratum. The chiefs, Bowdich wrote,

"feed bountifully by the labours of their slaves, and sharing large sums of revenue (the fines their oppression has imposed on other governments) with incalculable fees for corruption, refine upon their equipage even to satiety, and still possess a large supply of income daily accumulating."¹⁸

The king, of course, indulged in the exhibition of the greatest expenditure. His courtly dresses (and those of his retinue) and regalia at his first meeting with Bowdich and Dupuis were the supreme measure of Ashanti's economic and cultural attainment; while the chiefs approached his splendour in various but deliberately settled degrees as marks of their rank. The glittering splendour of the chiefs contrasted glaringly with the dull conditions of the lower orders.¹⁹

The after-life, as conceived by the Ashanti, was a reflection of the living world:

"Kings, Caboceers and the higher orders are believed to dwell with the superior deity after death, enjoying an eternal renewal of the state and luxury they possessed on earth."

In contrast,

"the spirits of the inferior classes are believed to inhabit the house of the fetish in a state of torpid indolence, which compensates them for the drudgery of their lives."²⁰

Accordingly, the social position of a person dictated the character of the funeral rites accorded him: the other world had to be adequately informed of the social position of the dead and so prepare for him a fit welcome. Hence,

"the decease of a person is announced by a discharge of musketry proportionate to his rank or the wealth of his family."²¹

Funeral rites and the visits of important persons like Bowdich and Dupuis, afforded the greatest opportunity for the display of conspicuous consumption. The amount of musketry discharged, the drinks and contributions that passed between bereaved and sympathisers, and in the case of the chiefs of the higher rank, the number of slaves or reserved prisoners of war 'sent along to serve him in the other world', were all challenges (poa twa), validatory exercises in the assertion of status. The challenge, of course, was covert because social differentiation was part of the political-cum legal order. Men behaved strictly within the official order of precedence and it was unsafe to surpass in equipment one's superiors.

The higher economic position of the high was shown in a social institution like marriage. A chief generally gave one periguin (£8 2s.) to the family of his prospective bride; the commoner could only afford one "ackie" (4s. 6d.) Correspondingly, while the chief was entitled to ten "periguins for adultery, the commoner claimed only an ackie" and a pot of palm wine.²²

The position of the higher order was safeguarded by a number of legal privileges which impressed their high status upon others. The highest legal privilege was exemption from the executioner's sword either as punishment or in the disorders consequent on the king's death. The privilege was limited to the royal family but sometimes granted to chiefs of the top notch and the descendants of an exceptionally brave man such as Tweneboa Kodua, the chief of Kumawu and contemporary of Osei Tutu (the accredited founder of Ashanti), who sacrificed himself to ensure the victory of Ashanti against

the Denkyeras (1699-1700).²³ A chief was generally allowed to die by his own hand if he killed an equal. He was fined a sum equal to the price of seven slaves if he killed an inferior. He could obtain permission from the king to put his own slave to death. The chief could put his wife to death for infidelity if her family failed to pay a suitable compensation.²⁴ The chief had a greater say in political affairs if indeed the lowly placed Ashanti was ever allowed a voice in national matters besides helping to choose his immediate elder by shouting his approval or "booing" his disapproval. And the chief was, in all probability, less liable to legal prosecution.

It was said above that there were gradations within the "higher order" based on political distance from the king. Ramseyer and Kuhne, who lived in Ashanti for four years as political prisoners and acted as secretaries for the king and his council, remarked that rank among the chiefs was distinguished "by the different insignia or emblems of their dignity."²⁵

Chiefs of the first rank, like those of Mampong, Dwaben and Kokofu, were noted for their "large silk umbrellas topped with gold, a large band of elephant tusk blowers and several drums." They had also the largest possible number of attendants. They were allowed to have their sandals ornamented with gold "like those of the king."

Physical symbols of rank among the higher chiefs were carefully distributed while the chief of Mampong had the silver stool for a mark of his distinction as deputy Commander-in-chief of the Ashanti army, the chief of Juaben was allowed to have his own "keteband" otherwise only owned by the Ashanti king.

Chiefs of the second rank i.e. other divisional chiefs like Mampong, Juaben and Kokofu, were noted for "their silk umbrellas topped with carved wood, a very nicely carved arm-chair ornamented on each side with brass nails, preceded by a party of twelve boys carrying elephant tails and horn blowers and drummers."

Chiefs of the third rank, leading sub-chiefs - Benkumhene, Nifahene, Twafohene and others with recognizable position in the army of the divisions had carved arm-chairs, servants carrying elephant tails and umbrellas made of cotton.

Chiefs of the fourth rank had the same symbols, but in place of elephant tails had those of the horse, while chiefs of the fifth rank had "large portly umbrellas but with common and less ornamented arm-chairs."²⁶

These were not symbols only of rank but also of authority. It is true that under the king divisional chiefs were otherwise autonomous among themselves. But the various categories within the higher orders wielded corresponding degrees of influence within the councils of Ashanti as a whole. The degree of influence wielded by the chief was in some sense a measure of the chief's own personality, his wisdom and political skill. But it was also a measure of the antiquity of the stool which the man occupied, the part his ancestors had played in the history of Ashanti, which was related in turn to the size of the land, and the population over which he ruled. Rank was thus closely related to the distribution of power among the hereditary rulers of Ashanti.

Similarly within the category of "lower orders", there were undoubtedly gradations. Some were distant kinsmen and affines of the king and the chief and were accorded the "rating" that was attached thereto. Others were more successful in the trade that was allowed to the commonalty. Others might have been distinguished in wars and gained rewards in gold and slaves which altered their prestige among their neighbours.

But the major distinction was that between the freeman and the slave. This distinction was, on the whole, blurred by the well-known processes of incorporation by which Ashanti sought to wean their slaves and captives from their former allegiances. The first of these measures of incorporation or integration of alien peoples was the law attributed

to Osei Tutu which forbade an enquiry into the origins of peoples planted into Ashanti, or the revelation of the slave origins of a branch of a family by the outsider.²⁷ A slave was a slave within the family and not to outsiders.

The other method of incorporation was by marriage. A slave woman was often married to her master or his nephew and the children became part of the man's matrilineage. The faithful male slave would be allowed to marry the daughter or sister's daughter of the master. In a matter of a few generations, the origins of the children would be lost.

The slave was accorded rights which normally belonged to the freeman. A slave could own property including slaves. He could swear an oath, could be a competent witness and could inherit his master in the absence of true heirs. It may be pointed out, however, that a slave could sue and be sued only through his master.²⁸

In spite, though, of the rights of a slave which theoretically were not much different from those of the freeman, there were real distinctions between the free Ashanti and the slave. An incorporated slave had only a slim chance of inheriting the lineage property. According to Rattray, the slave could not go to the chief's house unless he was the chief's slave. He could not mix freely with free men; he might not wear gold ornaments; he was expected, and made to, work harder; he was not buried in the free men's cemetery, which denied him belongingness to the family; and he was not given that final tribute to the real Ashanti, funeral custom.

Quite probably he was to a lesser degree protected by the collective strength of his master's family than in the case of the free man. He was more likely to be sent off with the chief on his journey to the other world.²⁹ And in any case, the slave was always aware of his status and this awareness set him apart from the free man.

There were groups within the slave category. The pawn who was a free Ashanti sold into servitude by his family for debt or as a habitual deviant³⁰ was half-way between the freeman and the slave. The family of the woman pawn, for instance, did not relinquish all responsibility towards the pawn and they retained some rights in her. The husband and the family shared the debts incurred by the woman just as they shared the treasure trove that she discovered. The family of a free woman shared her debts without the help of her husband who correspondingly did not have a claim on her property or discovered treasure. But more significant, the pawn could hope for an ultimate release when the family paid the debt for which he had entered into servitude. A slave could gain freedom only by running away. A maltreated pawn could run away without her family incurring liability for the debt. Maltreatment sort of cancelled the debt which was a guarantee for proper behaviour on the part of the master of the pawn. Lastly, the ties of kinship which bound the pawned and the "pawnee" would ensure a kinder treatment for the pawned than in the case of the slave.³¹ Thus the pawned Ashanti did not entirely lose the status of freeman as happened in the case of the captive slave, or the Ashanti who had been sold "outright".

Status Mobility

There were thus, broadly, three classes: the kingly and the chiefly families, the free families and the slaves incorporated within these families with gradations within the groups. Descent initially determined the social group of an Ashanti: status was mainly ascribed rather than achieved. But Rattray certainly went too far in asserting that "birth settled the status of an Ashanti for all time."³²

There is enough evidence to show that Ashanti society was quite mobile even if mobility in Ashanti cannot be statistically measured in the manner of present day sociology. The movement was both upward

and downward.

Bowdich recorded a few instances of these upward and downward movements. Agay (Agyei), a slave boy from Akwamu, rose from his slave status in the king's service to that of a top linguist (spokesman) and a roving ambassador. Agyei had distinguished himself for wisdom, eloquence and the courage of his convictions.³³ Others rose from the lower ranks through courage and distinction in war, the king, in certain cases, paying the thanksgiving fees due to the court.³⁴ Such raised persons were immediately enriched to enable them to live in a state befitting their new position. They were dispatched to collect tribute to which they were entitled to a percentage.³⁵ They were given gold either to trade with or lend at an interest which, at the time of Bowdich's visit, stood at thirty-three and a third per centum.³⁶ The wiser and the more eloquent among the newly elevated were appointed ambassadors; the king "enriched the splendour of their suites and attire as much as possible." Apart from the perquisites attached to the post of ambassador, there were further opportunities for self-enrichment through "extortion"³⁷ i.e. making additional demands on the tributary or the erring Ashanti subject-chief. The Ashanti king's policy of creating "counterpoises" to old hereditary chiefs further increased mobility. Osei Tutu Kwame (c. 1800-1824) Bowdich wrote, "... took every opportunity of increasing the number of secondary captains by dignifying the young men brought up about his persons still retaining them in his immediate service."³⁸ Among these men were Bowdich's "housemaster Aboidwee (Aboagye) who was raised to Bakkee's (Boakye) stool and a seat in council to which 1700 retainers were attached."³⁹ Boakye had been disgraced for abandoning the campaign against the Akims and the Akwapims in 1814.⁴⁰

Another of the king's appointments which began with Osei Tutu was the "captaincy of a body of war captives, slaves and pawns owned by himself or bequeathed by a dead chief. A newly appointed captain was given gold for equipment; land was attached to the captaincy and some of the captives, slaves and pawns were settled on the land and paid the captain tolls."⁴¹

Those who so rose replaced others who had forfeited the king's pleasure by insubordination. Bekye (Bowdich's house-master) mentioned above was constrained to hang himself in disgrace for remarks he was said to have made about the king. Tando, an erstwhile roving ambassador, was reduced "from noble to beggar" for settling a dispute with the Wassaw people without instructions. Appia Manu, the commander of the Ashanti army against the Akims and the Akwapims (1814-15), was disgraced and reduced for daring to challenge the king's orders.⁴²

Bases of differentiation and factors of mobility

Thus it is clear that the factors that ensured and changed status in Ashanti were unlike those on the coast. The difference is due to the different directions in which political development took in Ashanti and indeed, in the inland Akan kingdoms and on the coast.

The Ashanti court's policies and practices from the foundation of the federation had prevented the growth of a considerable body of traders, independent of the royal and chiefly families, whose position might have been threatened in the way the new rich men effectively usurped the power of the traditional authorities on the coast. Bowdich wrote of the "higher orders" in Ashanti:

"they consider that war alone affords an exertion of display of ability and they esteem the ambition of their king as his greatest virtue."⁴³

It is impossible at this point in time to determine the extent to which other Ashanti (of the lower ranks) shared these sentiments: yet it may be borne in mind that Ashanti on the whole had come to the trading enterprises late. This, in turn was probably due to the fact that the energies of Ashanti, were from the first, directed to the pursuit of expansion for reasons that lay in their geographical situation vis-a-vis the trade

routes to the trade centres on the coast. Bowdich comments on Ashanti ineptitude for trade and compares them with the early Romans.

"They have no idea of buying more of the various articles than will supply themselves; and have a small residue to barter for the cloth or silk and tobacco in the Inta and Dagwumba (Dagomba) markets. They are as little commercial as the Romans were in their infancy."

This is not to say that the Ashanti did not trade; they just did not have the commercial spirit and were hardly animated by the profit motive. Bowdich was probably right in suggesting that the commercial spirit was probably deliberately discouraged by the governments of Ashanti for fear of the changes that a group of wealthy merchants might bring about in the political order:

"and the government would repress rather than encourage the inclination (believing no state can be aggrandized except by conquest) lest their genius for war might be enervated by it, and lest either from the merchants increasing to a body too formidable for their wishes to be resisted or too artful for their experience to be detected, they might sacrifice the national honour and ambition to their avarice, and furnishing Inta, Dagwumba or any of their more powerful neighbours (who have yielded to circumstances rather than to force) with guns and powder", 44

and inadvertently cause the decline and fall of Ashanti.

So it was that much of Ashanti trade to the south and north was the preserve of the king, chiefs and their immediate connexions:

"none but kings and great men trade here, the same

as myself",⁴⁵ the king told Dupuis.

This does not mean that there was not some covert trading by some private individuals. The king's men could not have supervised all the trading paths that linked Ashanti with the north-west, the north and the south. And, in any case, we find the king asking Huydecoper, the Dutch, to suggest to the Dutch governor at Elmina "to make a distinction between the King's trade and that of all other persons."⁴⁶ It merely means the king and chief traded more than others.

The point, however, still holds that the trade policy and practices of the court did restrict Ashanti trading enterprises while other rules curtailed the growth of wealth among private individuals in Ashanti and so circumscribed the threat that independent wealth might have posed to the traditional political order. The rule that the Ashanti king was ultimately the heir of his subjects⁴⁷ and that the king had a third share of treasure troves⁴⁸ would prevent the accumulation of capital in private hands.

Recently, the induction of Ashanti into the world economy and the protective umbrella of the colonial regime have combined to produce an incipient middle class. But in the nineteenth century such developments were successfully checked. Hereditary power was still the basis of social stratification, and wealth was incidental to power. The "life chances" of all Ashanti were bound up not with the vagaries of the market but by the fate of the Ashanti monarchy and the success of the Ashanti political expansion.

Accordingly, the Ashanti kings saw to it that Ashanti was and should remain a "nation of warriors". Status differentiation was, like everything else in Ashanti, not left to chance but tied up with the controls which the rulers of Ashanti imposed on Ashanti society in the attempt to realise their political visions. The basic Ashanti values were military and political.

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