

THE ASESEDWA - A UNIFYING OBJECT OF ART
IN GHANAIAN SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

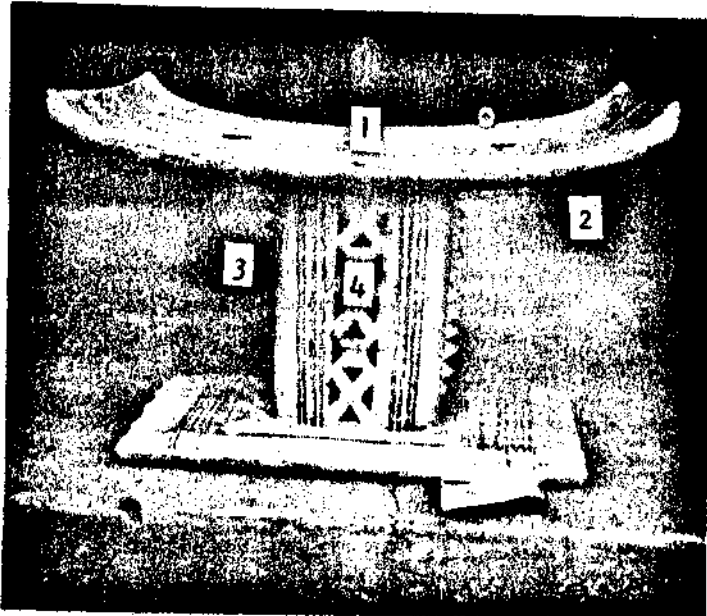
by A.K. Quarcoo*

History of most areas of Ghana prior to the sixteenth century and part of the seventeenth century is legendary or even mythical in some cases. This is because usually the kind of 'records' that were made have been unintelligible to us. These records include material objects which may be those of art for their own sake or utilitarian objects. The kind of history that is told of the origins of groups of people include some migration stories and in the recent past attempts are known to have been made to link with places very distant from present day Ghana. The present name for the country - previously called the Gold Coast during its colonial status period is one of such attempts to trade the country's linkage with ancient Ghana. While the evidence we have today points to the fact that there has been definitely some movements of a kind, the type of wholesale migrations about which we read, cannot, it seems, be often realistic. For our purpose here, it is sufficient to note that nearly all the ethnic groups in Ghana have been in this geographical location for many centuries and that they are discreetly amalgams of peoples and institutions.

Among the peoples of Akanland of Ghana and other southern and even part of northern region for example, there is one ubiquitous material object which we here call the 'asesedwa'. In a number of ways, it fosters some common institutions and behaviour patterns. A typical asesedwa which is an art-cum-utilitarian object

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which has three parts, as illustrated below:



1. ANIMU

4. SEKYEDUA

2. PUA

5. WIABOD

3. NKYEKYAA

Fig. 1

These parts are the animu, (top) the mfinifini (middle section) where there are columns or annan (feet) and the last section is the wiaboo (the base). The animu is the seat, the middle is the section which bears the design which names the stool, and the base is that part of the stool which touches the ground. Its name wiaboo literally means the 'chewer' or 'grinder' of stones. As indicated in the diagram, there are the mpua (knobs), on the reverse side of the 'upward flying' edges of the animu. They provide knobs for lifting the stool. The ntokuro are always necessary features of a finished stool. In domestic stools, they may be regarded as ornamental and just the right thing for usable stools to have. On chiefly stools of the senior grade, however, they are often also functional. Through them, bells or effigies or some sorts of trophies may be hung to decorate the stool, and to record history. The middle section is very important as it is the bearer of the principal design of a stool and stools take their name from the designs.

Around this object of art has developed a number of social usages which make it almost the one object which may be said to epitomise the culture of Ghana. The institutions associated with the object make it a unifying art in Ghanaian social organization. The seemingly fantastic claim for this object of art may be seen in a different light when it is recognised that the stool today is an item of household furniture, the most prized object or article of a legacy, an article essential in some rites de passage, politics and regalism and it is also required in the reverential acts for the dead. The asesedwa had a function throughout the life span of a person - from the cradle to the grave and even thereafter. Dr. Kyerematen in his *Panoply of Ghana*, neatly summarises the function of this object of art when he writes:

"Among the settled peoples of the south, the acquisition of a stool was regarded as a prime necessity. The first gift to be made by a father to his child when the latter begins to crawl was a stool. Crawling signifies that the child has come to stay. A young girl undergoing the rite to mark her attainment of puberty was placed on a stool

and it was customary for a husband to present her newly married wife with a stool to make sure of keeping her. It was on the stool that a deceased person was bathed before being laid in state. Because of this close association between a person and his stool - there is a saying that there can be no secret between a man and his stool - It was believed that his spirit inhabited the stool he regularly used and this persisted even after his death. Hence one was expected when vacating one's stool, to tilt on its side, to prevent someone else's spirit or an evil spirit from occupying it".

Kyerematen, 1964, p.11.

It has been observed elsewhere¹ that an Akan father usually gave a crawling child a stool in recognition of the fact that the immediate danger zone for it was passed by the child and that it was likely to survive. Custom also stipulates² that any one who enters a house must be given a stool to sit on. This is a basic civility that must be accorded. Next, the stranger must be given plain cool water to drink before greetings are exchanged and any other business transacted. Aggression or friendlessness or mere uncouthness is being exhibited if this basic courtesy is lacking. Therefore the particular social interaction subsequent to a particular reception is dictated by the reception that is given to an incoming person.

Quite apart from being an act of courtesy, it was also believed by some people that the spirit of a person entering a house is given a chance to settle firmly in him when he sits down. This is one of the reasons for the custom. Every household therefore has a number of stools reserved for use by strangers as well for individual members of the household. Inmates of a house are attached to their seats and it is the intimacy between a man and his stool that gave rise to the general belief or saying that a man's soul lives in his stool. Personal stools must be jealously regarded for it was even believed that conflict was inevitable when strange spirits accidentally or deliberately inhabit other people's stools.

As a further development in importance of personal stools, such stools were inherited after the death of their

owners. As families grew one may assume that the personal stools of certain individuals became correspondingly important. The heads of lineages possessed stools which they passed down to posterity and the stools so inherited helped to preserve and present the presence of the departed elders. The importance of stools was related to the importance of the matrilineal bond in Akan social organization whilst in the patrilineal communities the stools were related to the patrilineal bond. Later patrilineal stools were also important to some extent even in matrilineal societies. Succession to political offices tended to be principally related to the stools. This level of development in the importance of what began as ordinary 'seats' is that which provided the unifying institution for the many ethnic groups in Ghana. In other words, the institution of chiefship, as a political style, developed around, and in relation to, the asesedwa as a symbol of legitimized office and authority. This kind of institution continues to operate in all Ghana south of the Northern and Upper Regions. However, the political type even in these two regions are almost identical - skins being substituted for the asesedwa type of stool.

In the summary of a recent study of 'Akan stools and their social context',³ it was indicated that this special stool - the asesedwa - acquired a marked importance in Akanland and in the later 18th and 19th centuries, this reached a significant height of excellence in Asante where certain stools as 'community stools', attached to kin groups but others to kinship only. Even some offices purported to be leadership ones were based on the idea of stools even though not necessarily on physical stools. The complexity of the expanded Asante kingdom and that of the problems raised by it brought about the later diversification in governmental processes which introduced into the system not only some patrilineal stools, that is, stools whose incumbents derived their right of inheritance by virtue of their paternity, but also other kinds of kin-stools. Ostensibly, the advent of the Golden Stool of Asante vividly crystallised the form of government we designate as the 'stool polity'. This is not to say that the form was invented by Asante, but it might be granted that, it was made a kind of firmly plastically codified political theory by Asante - the stool being the symbol of the BEING and the SOUL of a nation. In Asante, their supreme national stool was designed to be a symbol of their soul and being, solidarity, unity and continuity.

This notion of one or a group of stools representing a people or the collectivity was apparently inherent in the constitutional practice and belief system of Denkyira, the great Akan political power, which was succeeded by Asante at the beginning of the 18th century. The study of other Akan communities also suggest that they also had the same or very similar political style or ideology.

Significantly, however, the use of the object and idea of the stool spread especially with the Asante but also to some extent, with other Akan influence. Among the Ga, for example, this object of art is believed to have started as a 'war medicine' when the Fanti, another Akan group, introduced it to them. There was a strong contrary view which suggested that the Ga knew and had the kind of stool - the asesedwa - to which we refer in this paper in their culture, long before 1660. Further investigations by an ethnographer like Dr. Field⁴ seems to establish that what was regarded as a particular stool during the reign of a priest - King Okaikwei of the Ga, was more of a head-rest characteristic of East Africa. The Ga, today however, regard the stool as a unifying object and a symbol of political and ritual office. The shape and form of this stool is typically that of the Akan asesedwa. Before the asesedwa, however, priests who were mostly the influential 'political' functionaries, had a round-top type of stool which again is very much like some traditional stools of Uganda in East Africa.⁵ The relationship if any, between the Ga priest stools and such East African stools is yet to be investigated. The noteworthy thing about the political institution of the Ga is that it is closely, if not identically, patterned on the stool polity of the Akan. The points of convergence are many more than the points of divergence. It is significant that even the drum language of this ethnic group is Akan and so is that of most parts of Adangme, Eweiland and Northern Ghana.

It is reported that the Krobo of the Manya group, for example, actually learnt the art of chiefship from Akwamu while the southern Krobo called the Yilo Krobo, were introduced to this kind of government by their first 'stranger ruling' lineage from Denkyira.⁶ The object and idea of the asesedwa in political organization is

Diagram of the piece referred to
as a Ga stool c.1600

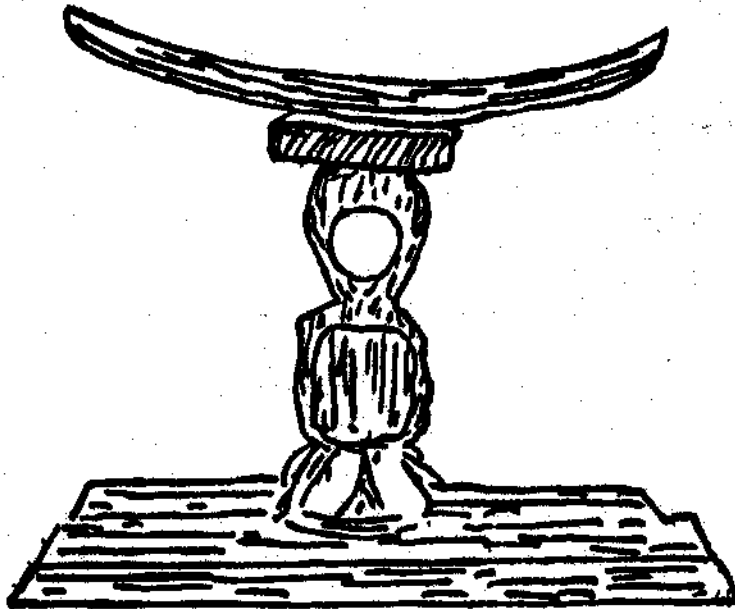


Diagram of the 'stool' referred to by M.J. Field
'pillow for the neck'. It is a kind of artifact
Dr. Carl Reindorf referred to as the Ivory stool
of Ashangmo. (Field, 1940, 140-145)

Fig. 2

therefore a widely accepted sociological phenomenon in Ghana. Stool incumbents inherit the social personalities of their predecessors and so there is the idea of corporations aggregate to each other and represented in corporations sole which are the stools which in combination form the structure. (cf. M.C. Smith, 1956, p.68).

The mechanics of the stools and attached offices and the exact positions and competences of stools in a stool polity type of administration is not discussed here. Suffice it to point out that there are great similarities or identities throughout Ghana since basically the pattern is the same.

The point of our interest in this survey is that the idea and object of political stools point to a basic unity of the structure of government basic to the ethnically diversified country of Ghana. The resultant political structure of Ghana here called the stool polity, is, we suggest, a common and unifying institution.

Quite apart from its purely political use, the asesedwa - the symbol of office - has also become a point of reference to the ancestors and one of the principal means by which monuments are raised to their memory. Stools of departed chiefs or distinguished lineage heads are specially treated and kept for their remembrance. Periodically they are brought in to view or their places of rest are visited and the stools are ceremoniously and reverently treated.

If it is remembered that one of the requirements of the stool polity kind of government championed by Asante regarded it unlawful for anyone, no matter his social or political status, to refer to the antecedents of people who may have slave ancestry, the unifying quality of chiefly stools may be appreciated.⁷ The idea was that none was to be put at a disadvantage by such references. The seed of unity seems, it is held, to lie in this requirement since discrimination on the grounds of difference in ancestral origin was not countenanced. The feeling under the circumstance, was, if anything, denied any force or life or a spring board from which to vault.

Early Round-top Priestly Stools of the
Ga and Adangme of Ghana

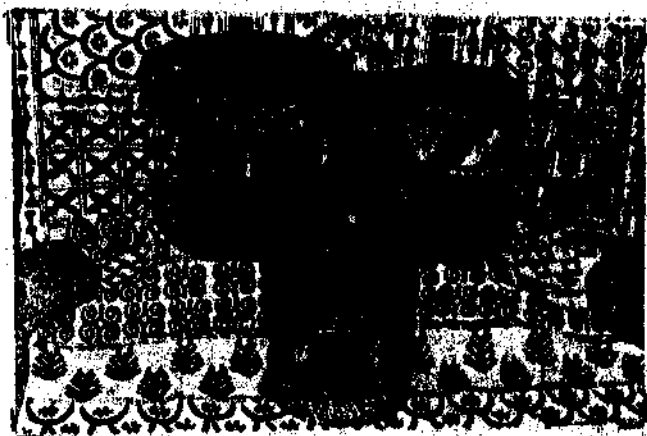


Plate 1.

Our concern here is to highlight the force of the stool as national object of art and the institutions which have, in time, developed with it to make it a unifying agent in Ghanaian social organization. We have indicated its ubiquitous nature - being present at all the levels of the social structure but laid a kind of emphasis on the political significance of the stool. Mention has also been made of the use of stools as monuments to the memory, especially of the good chiefly ancestors. The fact that these styles of life relating to the stools are 'near universal' in Ghana is what makes them a binding force and a significant constant in the social structure.

Even more so, however, is the resilience of the object in contemporary Ghanaian culture. At least it looks like the symbol which still has the supreme political significance in most parts of the country. Its current significance may be attributed to a number of things but principally to the general revival of interests in the asesedwa type of stool and all it symbolizes at all levels of the social structure. The mechanism of the Ghanaian stool polity is democratic in style and is comparable to the well known political process generally called democracy or democratic government. Imbedded in the constitution of the stool polity are the provisions of checks and balances where stools at various levels and with various competences balance one another, act as buttresses to apex stools but at the same time, by their representation of segmentary aggregations, provide sanctions on these 'top' stools. Tyrants develop only when the political machinery becomes faulty in one way or the other or through the weakness of a people or the extreme craftiness of unscrupulous stool incumbents. Often when this happens, therefore, the fault may be said to be not with the structure so much as with the people and the stool 'personnel' of any particular time.

The binding associations of this object of art seems to have been demonstrated in its use as a symbol of respect and political leadership in contemporary Parliament House of Ghana. This was done even at a time in the first Republic of Ghana when, periodically, chiefship appeared to have lost its eminence in spite of its definite entrenchment in the constitution. The realization of the binding grip

of the political institution that developed around the use of the stool as a symbol of office, did not suddenly occur in Ghanaian culture. A number of the 'elitist' political associations of the pre-Ghana independence era clearly demonstrated their faith in it. The Aborigines Right Protection Society whose last stalwart personality may be said to be the late lawyer and philosopher, W.E.G. Sekyi, appeared in principle, to have in many ways. The missionary principal, Rev. S.G. Gibson of Mfantshipim in the days of Governor Sir Clifford of the Gold Coast becoming aware of the attachment of the society to the spirit of the institution is reported to have praised them for recognizing their indigenous heritage.⁸ It was realised that the past was not all shameful and nameless and that the forefathers of the culture did, indeed, evolve a system of customs and usages and polity which are collectively unifying and trustworthy as a democratic system.

The history of Ghana indicates that there have been efforts to keep alive the institution of the Akan Stool Polity which maintained the stool as its principal symbol. No generation of formerly educated people has ever failed, to indicate that the Akan stool polity, upon which many Ghanaian stool polities appear to have been fashioned, need to be dynamic. In fact, the institution showed dynamism even in old Asante as we hinted earlier.

When in the colonial era, it became evident to the administrators that there was a strong attachment of various peoples to their 'town' or national stools, a lot of respect was accorded to the object and the institution. The unifying potential of the asesedwa came home vividly to the British colonial power even before the effective annexation of Asante when a woman, Yaa Asantewa, led the war 1900 against Her Majesty's government. It was too much for the Asante to bear when governor Frederick Hogson was alleged to have asked for the symbol of Asante unity. It seems reasonable to believe that the idea of oneness as an ideology crystallized in the object of the historic Golden Stool of Asante has been the first of the main lessons the stool polity imparted whenever it was adopted in Ghana. Good and unified government was possible through the stool polity style of government for the process provided effective lines of communication from the top to even the village levels.

There is something unique about the institution of chiefship as practised in Ghana. The unique aspects of it are not glamorous. It is not the ceremonial, or leadership aspect of it that is unique. It is not even the functions of the incumbents of the stool that are singular but the very institution of the polity with its processes that present a binding and unifying force in Ghanaian social organization.

The former segmentary or theocratic political systems of the country adopted, or merged into, the system of a government - the stool polity - which paved the way to an easier amalgamation into the so called world modern state of today. This proposition may be arguable but it is a fact that the stool and the political institution that emerged from its use has been a unifying device in Ghana. Linguistically - through drum language, and culturally through the patterns of social behaviour and acculturation, the stool as an object of art, may be regarded as the supreme cultural, unifying, political and even the national symbol of Ghana.⁹

Current Form of the Ceremonial 'Golden Stool' of Asante



Plate 2.

FOOTNOTES

1. 'Akan Stools and their Social Context', Edinburgh, 1970. Unpublished doctoral thesis.
2. Ibid., p.21.
3. Ibid., pp. 86-87, 102.
4. Social Organization of the Ga People (1940), p.140.
5. See overleaf. Wachsmann, K.P. and Trowel Margaret, Tribal Crafts of Uganda, London, Oxford University Press, 1953.
6. Akan Stools and their Social Context, 1970, p.264.
7. See Busia 1958, pp. 21-22.

 Akuamoa Panyin of Juabeng and Osei Yaw Akoto were destooled, the former for his abusive tongue and the latter for reproaching people with their slave ancestry.
8. Aliceo Thomas: Evolution of chiefship in the Gold Coast.
9. This observation is an element in the conclusions of my general study of Akan Stools and their Social Context. The study was principally possible through the help and encouragement of my head of department and Professor J.H. Nketia, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. The subject was first suggested to me by Dr. M.J. Ruel of Clair College, University of Cambridge, formerly of the University of Edinburgh. He took a major part in fashioning the framework of the study. I am very grateful to these scholars and to the University of Ghana which sponsored my research and work.

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