THE TWO ASANTES: COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS OF "SLAVERY" IN AKAN-ASANTE CULTURE AND SOCIETY[x]

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In his Asante in the 19th Century (Cambridge, 1975)[2], the historian Ivor Wilks threw down the gauntlet to challenge the accepted anthropological picture of Asante society and culture inherited from Rattray[3] and Fortes. At the heart of Wilks' critique there are two kinds of question:

1. Empirical questions about the sources of permanence and change in Asante history. Here Wilks challenges the centrality of matrilineal kinship and of the lineage (abusua) to Akan-Asante society.

2. Ideological questions concerning different perspectives in social science which derive from and reflect different interests in the history of Ghanaian society.

Today I will deal with both types of question by focussing on the interpretation of slavery.

Briefly, the essential differences between Rattray[3] and Fortes[4] are kinship vrs class. I will first outline each of the contrastive approaches, and then attempt to construct a synthesis from the two competing interpretations.

Fortes, taking his lead from Rattray, is concerned primarily with the problem of order. He seeks to describe sources of stability anc continuity in Asante culture and society.

Wilks, on the other hand, focusses on the political and economic engines of change. He seeks to describe sources of discontinuity, especially political and historical transformations.

Fortes begins with Rattray's assertion that "Descent".. settled the status of an Ashanti for all time." Rattray, and Fortes after

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him, seek out the sources of structural coherence in Akan-Asante society in matrilineal kinship. Rattray's metaphor of "concentric circles of loyalty" envisages the minimal segment household as a structural paradigm for each succeeding level of Asante social and political organization.

Wilks denies the centrality of matrilineal kinship and the relevance of the lineage to 19th century Asante political organization. He even goes so far as to imply that the lineage was a transient feature in Asante history (p.106). Wilks substitutes the formation of social classes, for the matrilineage, at the center of Asante's political arena. To Wilks class structure, rather than kinship, is the fundamental, the critical mechanism in Asante political life during the 19th century.

In his interpretation of slavery, Fortes extends and refines Rattray's ascriptive criteria, when he describes how jural inferiority is handed down to descendants of Odonko men and women:

> "In Ashanti anyone who was enslaved was by definition kinless, that is, in the first instance, without recognized filiative ties in an Ashanti clan and therefore devoid of citizenship in the political community. He could be employed in responsible service by his owner and many slaves held positions of high trust and influence in the king's court. But he was not sui juris. It was only if he was granted quasinepotal status in his owner's lineage that he acquired the limited jural autonomy of a lifelong jural minor, ... the status — or at best the implicit stigma — of slavery was in theory never extinguishable. It clung to descendants through males of a male slave in theory forever, and put the matrilineal descendants of a female slave under perpetual quasi-service - tutelage."
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> (Fortes: Kinship and the Social Order, London, 1969, p. 263).

In social practice this has meant that descendants of odonko (slave) women have been barred from lineage headships, however, even Fortes would admit that, with this exception, they have been able to achieve a kind of de facto equality. It is important to note that Fortes

concentrates on domestic slavery in the classless, matrilineal arena of traditional Akan society. Operating within this traditional arena, Fortes acknowledges two jural norms which allow these descendants of unfree women to achieve economic mobility and practical assimilation. These two norms are:

1. a customary law which protects the self-acquired property of an odonko, or her descendants - from alienation by her owner (or anyone else, for that matter). To the degree to which this customary law was upheld in practice, it blocked the separation of the product of slave labour from the product of free labour. This jural norm equating the rights to personal property of an odonko with those of an Asante freeman (A) blocked any tendencies toward the formation of a mode of production based on unfree labour in the traditional Akan society, and, therefore, (B) blocked the formation of a class structure based on differential access to the product of slave labour.

2. The second norm operating to assimilate descendants of odonko women into traditional Akan society was the Asante taboo against disclosing another's origins — obi nkyere obi ase — ('one doesn't disclose another's origin'). This taboo reflected a tendency toward realpolitik and expediency in Asante culture (Apter's "instrumental" ethic). It recognized the need to rewrite political histories as well as personal genealogies in order to bring them into line with traditional Akan values and folk ideology.

However, despite the de facto assimilation of large numbers of descendants of unfree women into Asante lineages, Fortes' whole analysis makes clear that the real price paid by these people was more private, personal and psychological. These were people who, in the inner sanctum of the lineage, were always threatened with being exposed for the inadequacy of their credentials, even though they could depend on lineage support in the outside world. I think that in the end, although their odonko origins may have blocked their

political mobility inside their lineages, the real "implicit stigma of slavery" which was "in theory never extinguishable" was an inner, psychological and symbolic stigma from which they could not escape so long as they remained in a traditional Akan, i.e. lineage setting. Equally important from a social perspective, however, was the fact that the operation of these jural norms reinforced the unity of the lineage in the face of any external threat. These jural norms operated to insure that, so long as they remained in traditional communities, and lived out their lives as lineage members, there would be no stronger supporters of the traditional order than descendants of unfree women.

Unfortunately I cannot be so tidy with Wilks as with Fortes. This is partly because of the extraordinary breadth and detail of his work, partly because of the nature of the historian's craft. Wilks' work is not characterized by a single, comprehensive analytical approach. However, it is possible to extract one of the main themes of his analysis by focussing on his interpretation of slavery. This theme is class.

While Fortes is concerned primarily with the traditional order, Wilks' main concern is the non-traditional elements which, in his view, characterize the Asante state. A crucial element which, according to Wilks, separates Asante state. society from traditional Akan society is its class structure. According to Wilks, slavery in Asante State society can only be understood in terms of this developing class structure. In this context, lineage membership diminished in importance, as from the early 18th century onwards it came to compete with class interests. These class interests were polarized in Kumase into the relation between its rich and its poor, including its slaves. Kumase's rich were its Asikafo class, and its poor were its Ahiafo class, into which slaves were assimilated. Summarizing Bowdich,[5] Wilks concludes that:

> "The distinction between rich and poor, between asikafo and ahiafo, was in fact one all too apparent to those who visited the capital. While, for example, polygamy was the rule among the former, the freemen among the ahiafo seldom had more than one wife and the slaves remained for the most part unmarried. While the 'higher orders' enjoyed a diet of dried fish, fowls, beef and mutton, the 'poorer classes' lived on stews made from dried deer, monkey, and animal pelts. Unlike their superiors who were 'nice and clean', the 'poorer sort of Ashantees and slaves' were neglectful of personal hygiene. Every town house, it was said, 'had its cloacae, besides the common ones for the lower orders without the town."
> (p. nn3)

The role of slavery in this class society was, according to Wilks, to provide labour for state agriculture and industry:

> "Slaves were in fact of crucial importance to the Asante economy not so much for the export trade as for satisfying the labour requirements of agriculture and industry.... It seems clear, however, that while free Asante commoners were also heavily involved in food production, there were other spheres of enterprise which were abhorrent to them; in which, therefore, dependence upon unfree labour was all but total. Principal of these was gold mining, against which strong religious taboos operated."
> (pp. 176-177)

Wilks is here describing a mode of production based on slave labour.[x] This implies the suspension of the jural norm which protected the odonko's self-acquired property.

Wilks is aware of the assimilation of large numbers of descendants of slaves into the ranks of Asante freemen. As a matter of fact, he carefully documents a state policy which relocated entire villages of political hostages as late as the 1879's, for the purpose of repopulating areas devastated by war. For example, the second generation of some Ewe slave villages was already indistinguishable from its Asante neighbours. If, then, its slaves were assimilated in the next generation, where did the Asante State find replacements

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[x] I have since heard that Wilks has criticized the more far-reaching extensions of a slave mode of production to 19th century Asante by Terray, but I have not yet seen Wilks' criticisms of Terray.[6]

to fulfil the demand for unfree labour? They could only have come from war and tribute, or from criminals and others disgraced in Asante society.

But does this ahiafo constitute a class? While on the one hand, Wilks has insisted that their primary value to their masters was as producers, (even more than as commodities - certainly after 1810), and even labels them a "proletariat", nevertheless he defines this proletariat as "the class of those having no abusua" (p. 706). This is ironic. The whole drift of Wilks' use of "class" has been to counterpose it to kinship as a force in Asante history, and yet he is compelled to define it in relation to the Akan matrilineage. Such a definition tends to deprive "class" of its usual meaning. If non-lineage members constitute the "proletariat" then do not all lineage members constitute the "bourgeoisie"? If "class" is to have any meaning so far as the history of slavery in the Asante state is concerned, it must refer to a counterposition between classes as well as the critical interests within each class. Classes compete with other classes, not with descent groups.

There was only one moment in Asante history when such conflict surfaced and threatened the stability of the Asante state. This was the decade 1810-1820 following the closure of the maritime slave trade. The growing numbers of unmarketable slaves in Kumase had become the unruly ahiafo crowd, described by Bowdich and Dupuis[7] in the late teens of the 19th century which strained the military-police resources available to Asante's rulers in the capital. Asante rulers responded to this threat by redistributing their surplus unfree population into the countryside where they became enclosed in domestic units and their utility was redefined by traditional values and norms. While I think it is possible to speak, of "class" and class interests in Kumase during this decade, 1810-1820, "class" becomes less relevant the further we move from that time and

that place. Social classes can not be abstracted from particular cultural and historical contexts: In the words of Edward Thompson:

> "Class is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes; and, ultimately, the definition can only be made in the medium of time - that is, action and reaction, change and conflict. When we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same categories of interests, social experiences, traditions and value-system, who have a disposition to behave as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class itself is not a thing, it is a happening."
> (The Poverty of Theory, London, 1978, p.85)

I think that any interpretation of "slavery" in Akan-Asante culture must be able to account for its function in maintaining the strength and unity of the lineage, and also to account for that moment in history when it generated class conflict. While it is true that large-scale assimilation of unfree people and their descendants took place within the traditional order, it is equally true that the presence of growing numbers of unfree people in Kumase during the decade 1810-1820 contributed to the formation of opposing class interests. Both processes, the assimilation and the differentiation of unfree 'outsiders', operated simultaneously, although the former was accelerated and intensified after 1810. The ambivalent feelings of Asante towards the descendants of those who had once been designated "captives" and chattel "slaves", and had often been segregated into separate slave villages, but who increasingly infiltrated the traditional networks of Akan kinship and marriage, is reflected in the semantic ambiguities which cloud references to Akan "slavery". Both processes - ethnic assimilation and class differentiation -- were fused in Akan thought and feeling and compressed into the term odonko.

The historical setting of Asante society tended to bring out the class character of the relation between an odonko and an Asante Owira, - superior. A traditional Akan context tended, on the other hand, to translate the odonko-owira relation into its predominantly classless idiom. In both cases an odonko began as captured or purchased property, who "belonged to" his master, and at the same time was identified as someone, already socially inferior, who originally "belonged to" one of the groups on the fringes of Asante. Both proprietory senses clung to an odonko. An odonko belonged to an individual Akan owner and also belonged to a non-Akan group. The Akan traditionally divided the world into those who "belonged to" Akan lineages and those who "stood outside" the abusua. In the different senses of "belonging to" which are encapsulated in the meanings of odonko are compressed both (1) the essentials of Akan ethnicity, of cultural Akanness (Fortes), and (2) the preconditions for social stratification and class formation in Asante history (Wilks). While, culturally, the folk images of a social inferior and an outsider were thus fused in the one word, the image which surfaced as dominant and characteristic was determined by its particular cultural and historical context.

"Belong to" in Akan society potentially has meaning in three spheres: the sphere of political-potestal authority; the sphere of economic exploitation; and the sphere of kinship. These three spheres of meaning when taken together, constitute a cultural, conceptual, symbological mechanism which enables men and women in Akan society to justify, rationalize and explain "slavery". I call this mechanism the property-authority-descent nexus. This nexus governs the interchangeability of symbols for property-authority and descent according to their matrix in different social and political contexts. This substitutability of the symbols of property-authority and descent, in turn, served to guide the descendants of odonko women as they constructed false credentials

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to free Akan ancestresses. This nexus of meaning which engineered tracing descent from a free woman by transposing a property and authority relation into a descent line was an invaluable conceptual tool in Ashanti culture. In a culture with so highly developed a sense of social form, the correct presentation of self, -- having one's genealogical credentials in order, -- can be terribly important. Given the psychological and jural primacy of descent in Ashanti culture, its isomorphism with meanings of property and authority allows individuals and even entire political groups to fabricate a past which is most appropriate to their present social-image. It was especially important to descendants of odonko women to be able, conceptually, to translate property rights and authority over people into descent lines which would then, a priori, connect the purchased or captured odonko ancestress to her owner's mother's lineage, (such a priori kinship, of course, creates a priori incest, providing another incentive for enforcing the tabu on revealing another's origins).

As an illustration of the way this property-authority-descent nexus worked we can observe an "old Ashanti of Mampong" explaining the relation between land tenure, military service and the dispensation of kinship by fiat, to Busia who went on to generalize about the historical movement of peoples from one division to another.

> "In the old days everyone who lived on your land was your subject, and so he accompanied you and fought in your wars. Because when he came to settle on your land, he became your kinsman." (K. Busia, The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti, Oxford, 1951, p.50)

In Busia's terms: since "his right to farm where he does is conferred by his kinship", it follows that an Asante farmer must descend matrilineally from an Asante "ancestor known to have farmed there before him." Reversing the order of premise and conclusion in Busia's formulation is to reason according to the property-authority-descent nexus. If

the jural condition confers the fact, then the existence of the fact, in itself, verifies the jural condition. So, Busia's old Ashanti concluded that,

> "Because . . . he came to settle on your land, he became your kinsman."
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> (ibid.)

This is the sort of reasoning employed by an odonko's descendant ligitimizing his or her status as an authentic Asante to the outside world. It is also the sort of reasoning employed by household heads in Ghana during the closing years of the nineteenth century when access to capitalist markets for rubber and cocoa made it more advantageous for them to exploit their fie nipa, ('house people') economically, as producers, rather than non-economically as reproducers.

The fact that people falsified their genealogies, or even that political leaders re-wrote the histories of entire groups, is not, in itself important to me. I focus rather on the fact that these fabrications have a discernible pattern; on the fact that genealogical prevarication was structured, given shape by the very norms, values and meanings in Akan matriliny into which their users were trying to slip undetected. The spontaneity with which Asante employ their property-authority-descent nexus is a strong, albeit indirect reflex of the thoroughgoing historical assimilation of odonko outsiders into the social and cultural matrix of Akan matriliny.

An examination of the range of applications of the term odonko in each of its different contexts reveals both the unity and diversity of its meanings. This semantic unity and diversity reflects the overall historical unity of Akan culture as well as crucial differences between the nascent class mechanism of state slavery in Asante, and domestic servitude in the classless traditional Akan social order. However, locating its "slaves" in a separate social and symbolic space than that which was occupied by "authentic" Akan was fundamental to all Akan meanings of "slavery", regardless of their historical

location. There is something about one's identity as an Akan which is inherently non-odonko, just as there is something inherently non-Akan about an odonko. Since being an Akan meant descending from a free Akan ancestress, then, in order to understand the meanings of "slavery" in Akan culture, we must come to terms with the symbology and conceptualization at the root of Akan matriliny. Here we find evidence of that minimal, yet essential, template of meanings and values which has remained imprinted on what can be identified as a distinctly Akan culture through all the traumas of the 18th and 19th centuries in West Africa.

What we recognize from outside Akan culture, looking in, as continuous meanings, values and affects, are seen from inside, by an Akan looking out, as crucial elements in the formula for his or her personal and social identity, for his or her credentials as an Akan. This cultural template of Akanness provided the descendants of "slave" women in a domestic context with the key for encoding a uterine connection to free Akan ancestresses, and from there to the elaboration of public credentials as full memebers of traditional society. The same template which provided the jural, symbolic and conceptual tool employed by "slaves" in their passage to freedom — or at least to "freedom" as it was understood in traditional Akan culture — also reinforced the segregation of state slaves, by their Asante owners, from its population of freemen and freewomen. Fastening on the non-Akanness of the odonko as a foreigner or stranger facilitated the final depersonalization of state slaves as commodities for export. In other words, in the domestic-lineage context where the "slave" was more likely to be protected from outsiders when applying the criteria of Akan identity to writing his or her own public credentials, these key meanings, values and conceptualizations at the root of Akanness were used by descendants of "slaves" to achieve their more effective assimilation into the traditional social order. In the

context of independent Asante state however, their owners, rather than the slaves themselves applied the criteria of Akan identity at crucial moments to preserve their class interests by separating and isolating Asante's unfree population from its free citizens. The same cultural criteria of Akan identity tended to be applied to achieve opposite results for the "slaves" in traditional households, and for their masters in 18-19th century Asante state society.

It is from Rattray and Fortes the anthropologists, that we learn to appreciate the symbolic forms, values and folk ideology at the root of Asante cultural continuity. It is from Wilks, the historian, that we learn about its political and economic discontinuities and changes in historical direction. If we are to come to terms with the unity and comprehensiveness of Asante culture, then it is necessary to incorporate elements from both approaches into our understanding. Or else, we may one day discover two Asantes separated by the walls of academic departments.

Moreover, to depict Asante without its historical flexibility, as Fortes tends to do or without serious recongnition of the ingredients of its cultural continuity, as Wilks tends to do, is to add an ideological coloration which, while it may reflect an important outlook in precolonial Asante or in Nkrumah's Ghana, must nevertheless remain incomplete. So, as we fault Fortes for a too static and rigid a concentration on the lineage and for reifying the jural norms of Akan matriliny, we can almost hear his old traditionalist informants making their case in the thirties and forties. Fortes sometimes appears to have assimilated the ideological rationale for conservative, traditionalist values into his descriptions of Asante society. Jural norms, like the invisible blueprints of ancestral will, seem to underlie the form and meaning of social and political life. It is almost as though Fortes has employed his considerable craft, to underwrite, in the language of social anthropology, the formal ascriptive goals and values of traditional Akan-Asante society.

Wilks, on the other hand, gives us an Asante history resonant with the needs and hopes of the early days of an independent Ghana. His Asante do not represent a primitive, pauperized people, plundered and disoriented by the slave trade and world capitalism. Rather, Wilks presents us with an Asante which is a real 19th century African nation state. It comes complete with social classes and political parties, and the golden age of its achievements paves the way and sets an example for the optimistic future of a new Ghanaian nation. If Fortes, like Asante's chiefs, is sometimes too narrowly traditionalist, then Wilks, like Asante's slaves, has invented glorious ancestors to redeem a new Ghana's past and insure its future.