UP THE SHAI HILLS
(HOME OF SHAI PRE 1892)

We have been trying to get to the top of the Shai Hills ever since we became interested in the hill-top towns which were there in the nineteenth century. Somehow the fates always seemed to be against us. Either it was in the middle of the rainy season, and the ground around the hills was quagmire; or it was the height of the dry season, and the grass was so high that it covered everything; or the Army was in occupation, on some unpublicised business of its own. Only in June, within weeks of the final departure of one of us from Ghana, were we at last successful.

We could, of course, simply have walked up the hills without further ado. But to do that would almost certainly be to get lost in the tangle of ridges and clefts which make up the Hills; and there would be a real danger of falling on some over-grown precipice. We were fortunate to have as guides, two very experienced hunters from Doryumu, who know every path in the hills and could show us the old towns and other interesting places.

Though the hills look so steep and bare from the road, we were surprised to find that the path, with only one or two short steep stretches, was quite easy and well-graded - very much easier than the steep path up Adwuuku known to those who have visited the seventeenth century site there. Moreover, much of the path runs through a very pleasant light woodland, which gives welcome shade on a hot day; we were fortunate in having guides who could cut away the undergrowth and the overhanging creepers, but for the most part the path was well-marked and in good condition. The grassy sections were much harder work, as well as being out in the full sunlight.

Having made a couple of short rests in the lower, steeper and more open part of the path, we had our self-respect partly restored at the "Young Men's rock", where men returning home had been accustomed to rest on their way; we passed at least one other "authorised" stopping place. Our respect grew for the young women who regularly trod the path with headloads of pots for the market; the road to Prampram, they told us, was covered with the broken remains of pots which had not survived the journey.

Pottery was the great industry of the towns of the Shai Hills. "We dug clay, and ground rock, and made pots; that was our work" - that was what one old priestess told us when asked about the towns in the hills. We had learned quite a lot about the towns by asking the very old women about them. It was in 1892 that the British Government forced the Shai people, and also the Krobo, to leave their hill towns; this was an attempt to suppress "Krobo customs", which were then widely believed to involve human sacrifice. Before 1892, although many of the Shai had farms in the Akwapim hill-foot and across the Akwapims, the hill towns were their home towns; there the dead were buried, there national and family festivals were held, and there girls underwent their puberty rites; and there, also, until 1892, all the Shai pots were made. A girl who was ten in 1892 would be 84 today; and we have interviewed quite a number of old women who were ten and over before they left the hills.

These old women had told us about the crowded houses, built of clay with stone footings to the walls, and only the narrowest alley-ways between the houses. On the hills we saw the stone footings still standing, supporting narrow terraces of flat ground on which the houses had been built. Only the chief's house, the house of the grandfather of the present paramount chief of Shai, has its swish walls still standing to a considerable height, in the area which we visited. All the old women insisted that the houses (except those associated with the puberty rites) were rectangular, and that agrees with what we saw of the walls. But an early visitor, the Missionary Riis in 1839, wrote of round houses with pointed roofs. Possibly the houses changed from round to rectangular in the course of the nineteenth century; houses in the Adangme coast-towns are believed to have changed in this way in the eighteenth century, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that the change in Shai may have been later.

We did not visit the area where the girls did their puberty rites, though we had been shown the place from below on a previous occasion; it is at some distance from the towns.

Several of the old potters who told us about the hill towns told us that, owing to the congestion in the towns, and the grass roofs of the houses, pot-firing was done in an open space called Gbɛtɛm, outside the towns. This open space we were shown, now overgrown with tall grass, but still deep in the ashes of generations of pot-burning fires; here and there

were pots which had cracked in the burning, left where the potters had abandoned them at least 74 years ago - pots exactly like those still made by Shai potters today. We do not know how long Gbɛtɛm was in use as a burning-field; it would make an obvious place to dig, as one might find well-stratified pottery remains there.

Much could also probably be done in the actual town sites. We were told of, but did not see, family tombs in the form of a stone-lines pits, in which the remains of former burials were pushed aside to make room for the latest burial.

Another place which we did not have time to visit was the meeting-place, Magbɛtɛ [1], which would doubtless yield tobacco pipes in some numbers.

One place which we were shown was the caves known as the "talking stones". According to the story, when the Akwamu defeated the Shai in the early eighteenth century, almost all of the Shai were driven from the hills, with the exception of six people who took refuge in these caves; they formed the nucleus for the eventful re-establishment of the hill towns.[2]

The caves are approached by a hair-raising scramble up one side of a sheer rock, and then part-way down a gulley on the other side. The actual cave-mouth is so low that one has to crawl through it. There is an even narrower entrance at the other end, and a side-exit very remniscent of the "postern" on Adwuuku, but partly blocked by a dry stone wall. The cave itself is triangular in section, formed by great blocks of stone leaning against each other. It has a population of white-winged grey bats. The top of the rocks forms a splendid watch-tower. The whole arrangement, though quite different in detail, is remniscent of the "citadel" on Adwuuku, though there is nothing to correspond to the walled-in space with gun-parts on that hill. Both are admirably designed to keep out unwanted visitors, and to see them coming from afar; both could have been used as refuges after the Akwamu disaster.

We did not have any explanation of the name of the caves; it is not unlikely that some of the stones do "sing", as is not uncommon in this type of formation.

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1. Magbɛtɛ was between Hiowe-wem and the bigger and more populous Mla-wem. See Carl Reindorf history of the Gold Coast and Ashanti.

2. Story as given by the Hiowe division of Shai.

The area around the caves is now covered in light secondary forest; but it is believed that most of this has grown up since 1892, though a few larger trees are probably older. One extensive area of forest on the slopes is remembered as a place where cocoyams grew very well, and there seems to have been a good deal of farming actually in the hills up to 1892, though never enough to support the whole population. The old potters remember a great shortage of firewood, which would agree with the absence of forest in the hills.

Our visit was only the most preliminary of preliminary surveys. We did not visit Mla, the larger of the two nineteenth-century hill-towns, nor did we visit any of the hills which bear the names of other towns remembered from the seventeenth century. Moreover, the whole area was much overgrown, and much more could be seen if it could be burnt over at a suitable time of year - this applies to the grassland, not to the forest, which covers what was probably mainly farm land. There is scope for a general study of the natural history of the hills; to give one example only, the burning-field is covered with a grass quite different from that of the surrounding area; it is possible that the vegetation cover might give many more pointers to what lies underneath.

Now that the new road is open, the Shai Hills are easily accessible from Legon. They must be almost unique in being an uninhabited site of which the recent history is known in some detail, down to living memory; it even falls within the first Gold Coast census. We feel there would be scope for a study of the hills as a joint activity by people from many different backgrounds.

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