

LETTERS TO AFRICA

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From Dr. Malcolm McLeod

Sir, Research on the art and material culture of Africa has increased greatly in recent years. No less than three papers¹ in the book *African Art and Leadership*² deal with 'art' originating within a comparatively small geographical area: that of the old Asante Empire and its periphery. To be of the greatest use such studies must be based on a careful consideration of source material and be accurate in their apparently unthinking attribution of objects to such named areas. I believe there are grave defects in these respects in Douglas Fraser's paper 'The Symbols of Ashanti Kingship' and I wish to note these, to point out the almost totally unacknowledged source of nearly all of Fraser's data, and to cast doubt on his attribution of an extremely well-known piece of art to the Asante people.

It is first necessary to deal with the sources of the data used by Fraser. Although these are not given in the paper they can be established with reasonable certainty. Some data seem to be derived from the standard published works on the Asante (although there is no evidence of extensive reading among these), some data may, perhaps, be derived from brief fieldwork carried out by Fraser, and a few pieces of information have been obtained from a fellow American who has carried out research in an Akan (but non-Asante) area.³ However, it must be stated quite clearly that the great majority of the data on which this whole chapter is built are taken, with the very minimum of alteration, from the Oxford doctoral dissertation of Dr. A. A. Y. Kyerematen, himself the leading expert on Asante royal regalia. So far almost nothing of this long and detailed work has appeared in print, and the fact that part of it has now appeared under Professor Fraser's name makes it doubly important that it is used with due care and that readers should know its true source. This basic source is acknowledged only in a perfunctory and general way by Fraser who says, in a footnote: 'This chapter is compiled from information supplied by the Honourable A. A. Y. Kyerematen, Ph.D., Director, Ghana National Cultural Centre, with the kind permission of the late Asantehene Otumfuo Nana Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II'.⁴

At the outset, therefore, we have to face the fact that Fraser's article is mainly a very summary and slightly altered version of a long and well-documented piece of original research carried out by Dr. Kyerematen. This research was carried out with the

full support and aid of the late Asantehene, and was only possible because of Dr. Kyerematen's own family ties with the Asante court. If other authors, like Fraser, are to use such sources and to anticipate their full publication by those who produced them, it is to be hoped that they will give full and proper acknowledgement, and wherever possible, check, supplement, and modify them in the light of all other available information. Fraser has demonstrably failed to do this.

While it is the aim of this paper to keep as close as possible to matters of fact and to invite discussion of these where they may be in dispute it is also necessary to touch upon certain of the theoretical aspects of Fraser's paper. The general plan followed by him is to summarize the historical background to the Asante state, discuss the position of the Golden Stool as a supposed focus of loyalty for the Asante people, outline the part played by other types of stools in Asante life and then discuss in more detail royal regalia. His final section is more analytical and in it he discusses the various levels at which the 'symbols' used by Asante leaders function. There are several deficiencies in this over-all approach.

Firstly in no place in this paper is there any attempt to discuss or even state in the barest terms native Asante ideas about either kingship or symbolism and meaning. If Asante have any ideas about these (as they surely do) it is impossible to discover them here. Nor is the position of rulers, their rights, duties, powers, and mystical standing, considered in any detail. This cannot be attributed to any lack of published information; on the contrary Asante kingship has been one of the main preoccupations of nearly every important writer on Asante from 1817 onwards, from Bowdich and Dupuis, through Winnet Bonnat, Perregaux, Rattray, and Busia to Wilks and his students. Vast amounts of data and numerous ideas about Asante kingship have been published. It is also clear from Fraser's writing (or rather from Kyerematen via Fraser) that certain key features of Asante 'art' (and again the term is never defined or elaborated) need to be explored much more deeply in relation to kingship. For example Fraser notes (as many have done before) that certain objects are made to bring to the observers' minds certain aphorisms or proverbs (*ebe*). This clearly raises all sorts of questions about the relationships between words and objects (or more accurately more or less fixed and widely known chains of words and some objects of

¹ See Seiber, Fraser, and Bravman in Fraser and Cole, 1972.

² Fraser and Cole, 1972.

³ See Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 148.

⁴ Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 137.

limited variability) yet there is not even the most cursory discussion of the part played by proverbs in Asante life, or the ones which are used in court situations, the various problems of linked meanings or ambiguity in objects and so on. Equally it may sound plausible to say that 'mystical values'⁵ adhering to objects help secure the obedience of subjects to rulers or that virtually all important Asante regalia have 'at root religious functions'⁶ but as we are not told what Fraser means by 'mystical values' nor given even the briefest ideas about Asante religion such statements do nothing to aid our understanding of the Asante situation.

Lest it be thought these criticisms are too general and demand too much from what is essentially a brief and unoriginal piece of work, it must equally be pointed out that the paper also contains a number of disturbing errors of detail: errors such as seem likely to have been made only by someone comparatively ignorant of the Asante and the vast literature about them. To take a few examples: Fraser attributes the founding of the expanding Asante state to Osei Tutu for whom the regnal dates 1697–1731 are given.⁷ Yet such a dating for this ruler has long been cast in doubt by the paper of Wilks and Priestley,⁸ and by other writers and if their revised chronology is to be rejected it would be useful to know the grounds on which this is done. Fraser also, in the traditional way, ascribes a major part of the founding of the Confederacy to the priest (*okomfo*) Anokye who is said to have brought down the Golden Stool from the sky. He also describes Anokye as the 'Chief Priest',⁹ yet as we know nothing about the nature of Asante religious organization in 1700 it seems pointless (and possibly mistaken) to refer to Anokye in this way. Moreover a closer acquaintance with the literature might cause Professor Fraser to have some hesitation in accepting at face value the *current* myths which centre around Nokye. Today the existence of Anokye is firmly believed in throughout Asante and in many other Akan areas. A multiplicity of tales are told about him, numerous objects are shown as having belonged to him, and he appears in several genealogies. Yet on the other hand Anokye seems to appear in the literature only towards the end of the nineteenth century. The early accounts of the foundation of the Asante state collected by Bowdich and Dupuis in 1817 and 1820¹⁰ (i.e. only about 120 years after the supposed descent of the Golden Stool) are entirely king- and chief-centred and make no mention of Anokye and his miracles.¹¹ The differences between the present-day widespread oral accounts

and the patchy and seemingly late literary accounts is striking: the reasons for this can only be shown with more research. Yet in such a situation it behoves all writers to tread carefully and not to accept *contemporary* and unsupported oral tradition or myth as being *historical* fact. Fraser fails to do this and, although here, as elsewhere in Fraser's chapter, it may be claimed that he is merely following as closely as possible Kyerematen's original work, this is no excuse, for the uncritical acceptance of any source does nothing to increase our knowledge and understanding. It is quite clear that Kyerematen's main aim was to record court traditions centring around items of regalia associated with the Asantehene's court as these were recalled and related in the 1950s and 1960s. Anyone borrowing these should try to understand them for what they are and treat them accordingly.

Other minor but disturbing errors also appear in the text. It is incorrect, for example, to imply that all kings who die in office have stools blackened after their death:¹² for certain types of death bring pollution (*musuo*) which prevents those suffering them from becoming full ancestors with their own blackened stools. Nor is it really acceptable to translate the complex of Asante ideas centring around '*mogya*' ('blood') merely as 'biological nature'.¹³ While the term '*mogya*' may, at one level, refer to the actual physical substance of blood it is also associated with the transmission of this from mother to child and with the whole situation of dependence and duties within the matri-group, with marriage and mating rules and, even, with the range of relationships within which witchcraft can operate. Such over-simple translations as 'biological nature' serve only to distort and devalue the complexities of Asante ideas.

Other errors occur: the town of Kumawu¹⁴ is twice mis-spelled and even if this may be attributed to sloppy proof-reading there is surely no excuse for a map which manages to misplace totally nearly every major Asante town¹⁵ by distances of 50 miles or more. But then such towns are described as being 'city-states'¹⁶ at the beginning of the eighteenth century although we know virtually nothing of their size, constitution, or nature at that time. If terms like this can be flung about it is little wonder the towns themselves may wander around West Africa. A number of errors can also be seen in Fraser's use of Asante, or supposedly Asante, words. (No doubt Asante readers will add to or correct the ones I list here.) A stool for eating should be *dididi* original of a twentieth-century reference to Anokye but even this source, if Wilks is right in his dating, shows how much less important the Anokye myth was in the nineteenth century.

¹² Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 142.

¹³ Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 144.

¹⁴ Fraser and Cole, op. cit., pp. 138, 139.

¹⁵ Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 139.

¹⁶ Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 138.

⁵ Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 149.

⁶ Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 149.

⁷ Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 137.

⁸ Priestley and Wilks, 1960, pp. 83–96.

⁹ Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 139.

¹⁰ See Bowdich, 1819, and Dupuis, 1824, *passim*.

¹¹ See also Reindorf, 2nd edit., n.d., pp. 51–2 and 65–7, for a late nineteenth-century view. Wilks (MSS., p. 231) suggests a date in the 1860s for the

'*dwa* and not *did 'dwa*'¹⁷ as Fraser gives it, and the normal term for gold dust is *sika futuro* rather than the word *suruboo*¹⁸ which Fraser implies is used. Most important of all is the name of one of the most important of the Asantehene's state sword which is here written as 'Mpomponson'. Whether Fraser is aware of it or not this is a departure from normal practice for in everyday speech ordinary Asante refer to this sword as *Mpomponsuo* (as a few moments inquiry in Kumase would have established). It is noteworthy that Kyerematen himself writes the sword name in this way in parts of his dissertation.¹⁹ Later Kyerematen chose to write *Mponponso*.²⁰ It seems that he took this step on the advice of the late Asantehene who preferred, towards the end of his life, to see the usual and general pronunciation of *Mponponsuo* as wrong and to alter this to *Mponponso* which he scanned as 'responsibility'. Fraser, using the third form, does so without any explanation or apparent justification; possibly he is not aware of the difference between the usual form of the word and the one he uses.

There are also subtle errors of emphasis in this paper. To give one example: in talking of the emblematic umbrella tops seen by T. E. Bowdich in 1817 it is not enough to talk of these as 'gold' without pointing out that Bowdich also talks of emblems made from the stuffed skins of real beasts:²¹ an observation apparently confirmed by the presence of such an umbrella top in the regalia of the present Bantamahene. Details such as these are of some importance for they may throw light on the development of regalia. Fraser's lack of interest in them, or ignorance of them, oversimplifies the whole picture he draws.

But Fraser not only uses material largely taken from Kyerematen in this uninspired and uncritical way but he fails to follow up many of the most interesting aspects of Asante art which he mentions in passing. Nothing is said about the ideas associated with the three primary Asante colour categories,

black (*tsuntum*), red (*koko*), and white (*fufuo*), even though the difference in status between black and white stools is mentioned. Nor is any explanation offered for the supposed incorporation of hair, nail parings, and rings into the Golden Stool or for why this stool, like a chief, should never touch the ground. In dealing with the positioning of state swords one would also like to see the importance of the left/right dichotomy explored; there are plenty of references to this in the literature on Asante. Where explanations are offered these tend to be superficial and simplistic, for example, if the Golden Stool was, as Fraser says, the 'focal point of the national cult' (and we are told nothing of any rites in this supposed cult), it still remains to be explained why so many states did not fight on the side holding the Golden Stool in 1900 and why the stool itself was desecrated and parts of it sold by Asante in the 1920s. The simplistic picture of events of the Yaa Asantewaa war of 1900 drawn by Fraser is simply not true. Nor is the whole political situation in the closing decades of the nineteenth century considered or any thought given to how this might have affected either current mythology or the importance of the Golden Stool.

Finally, and very briefly, I would point out that the brass vessel (*kuduo*) which Fraser twice illustrates as 'Ashanti' cannot easily be accepted as Asante work. The central figure of this shows definite facial scarification and, while clearly a chief, wears no sandals. These are two profoundly unAsante characteristics. The status and origin of this *kuduo* (and another by the same hand) will be dealt with more fully in another place. Until then it is only necessary to repeat that in the study of African art all sources and all attributions must be handled with more care and criticism than Fraser seems to have done.

Yours faithfully

M. D. McLEOD
Magdalene College
Cambridge

¹⁷ Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 142.

¹⁸ Fraser and Cole, op. cit., p. 148.

¹⁹ Kyerematen, n.d., p. 218.

²⁰ Kyerematen, n.d., p. 381, and Kyerematen, 1961, p. 11.

²¹ Bowdich, 2nd edn., 1873, p. 37.

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