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GOLD AND THE AKAN OF GHANA

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THE economy of the Akan kingdoms of the past in Ghana, christened the Gold Coast by early European traders, was based on gold, and the prosperity of the various states and the advanced civilization of the people depended through the centuries on their export of the metal. Although their methods were primitive, the Akan prospectors nevertheless discovered in the course of time all the deposits now worked by European companies.

Gold was probably discovered at an early date by the primitive peoples living in the heart of the forest region, where in some places small pieces of gold can be picked up after the rains.† As far as we know, gold was first properly mined and traded by the Akan, who had founded the Bono Kingdom (*c* 1295) in the savannah country north of the forest. Being immigrants from the Sudan, they knew about gold and exploited the auriferous river beds when they discovered them in their new country. Under Bono's second king, Akumfi Ameyaw I, an embassy, headed by Prince Obunumankoma, was sent to the courts of the great Sudanese kings to advertise his country's wealth and acquaint himself with the prevailing conditions of the trade. He also, it is believed by his descendants, travelled to the 'White Man's Country', possibly Egypt or North Africa, which was then in the hands of Arabs and Selchukian Turks. When Obunumankoma himself became king in 1363, he established a gold dust currency with standard gold weights for the weighing of gold dust. This sytem was in use in India and was presumably introduced by Rhadanite Jews from Persia into the first Ghana state situated in the western Sudan (*c* 800-1240). The Rhadanite Jews travelled widely in the Near East, Europe and Africa, spreading the techniques of commerce wherever they went. After 1500, when the Portuguese had settled on the coast of Ghana for trading purposes, the Akan incorporated Portuguese weights into the Indian system.

During Obunumankoma's reign (1363-1431), the gold trade started to flourish in Bono. A new town came into being near

† At Akropong in south-western Ghana my interpreter showed me where, as a child, he had picked up gold from the gutter, and pointed out stretches of earth, bordering the streets, where gold dust sparkled.

the capital, Bono-Mansu, to house the foreign traders, many of whom resided there permanently. A market was built solely for the import and export trade, and, in later centuries, this expanded considerably in order to accommodate the trans-Saharan caravans from North Africa. These visited the capital once a year in the dry season, laden with silks, Italian brocades, wines, and other luxury goods. That this is not a fairy tale we know from the account of a traveller in Tunis who, in 1792, heard of such a caravan setting out for the Gold Coast. Were the site of the great market, now overgrown with bush, to be excavated, further evidence of the close trade connection between North Africa and the Gold Coast of the past would undoubtedly be revealed.

The method of gold-digging among the Akan developed into a complex system. Every man and woman was permitted to stake a claim in a gold-field, either along a river or stream, or in the hills. The simplest method of obtaining gold was the panning of river gravel. The earth was collected in different sized calabashes, which were gyrated till all the impurities were washed away and the heavier gold remained. The gold dust was then dried in the sun and stored in vessels ready to be used as money.

In the dry season, pits of about two to three feet in diameter, and often as much as 30-50 feet deep, were dug in the thick beds of auriferous gravel in the main channels of the gold-bearing rivers. A man squatting at the bottom of the pit filled wooden bowls with earth, which were then hauled to the top by means of ropes, and the women or boys washed it in different-sized calabashes (by the same process as before) till pure gold dust was obtained.

Apart from these simple pits, upright or steeply sloped shafts were sunk in hilly regions. These shafts, like the pits, were neither timbered nor reinforced at the mouth, and varied in depth to an extent of 180 feet. The miner cut the ore loose with a hoe, iron chisel, or gouge, working all the time by the light of a palm oil lamp, and descended by means of a rope ladder, or by foot holes cut in the side of the shafts. The gold-bearing rock, after it had been hauled up, was pounded by the men with hammers till reduced to a coarse powder. Then, having been finely ground, it was washed by the women till the particles of gold were freed from all impurities.

In Bono, and later in other Akan states, all gold collected

by individuals had to be presented periodically to the Chief Treasurer. His assistants weighed it and retained one-third as a state tax, returning the rest to the owner, who then also split it into three portions, sending one-third to his clan chief and retaining two-thirds for himself. In the case of slaves, however, all gold had to be surrendered to the master, who would retain two-thirds for himself and return a portion of the rest to the slave as pocket money. In the case of marriage, or other circumstances, the slave owner was obliged by law to give him his remaining gold; though in most of the Akan states of the forest region, particularly in Asante (Ashanti), no such humane law regarding slaves existed. There the slave was entirely dependent on the whim of his master and had no legal right to the gold he dug.

All the gold dust collected by the State Treasury in Bono was stored in large vessels up to five feet in height. Gold nuggets were not allowed to be circulated as money, but were cast in the form of yams and stored similarly—being pushed through loops of ropes fastened to poles, so closely packed that they formed a long wall. The Golden Wall, as this Treasury was called, was erected at Akyinhatai, not far from the capital, and it surrounded the large flat rock on which gold dust was dried and bottled like wine. The police force in charge of the treasure was so great, that a village sprang up to house its members and their families.

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The Akan king was regarded as the Son of the Sun-god and personified the sun on earth. Indeed, the Akan minstrels still sing: "The King is (the manifestation of) the Sun". His main duty therefore was, like the sun, to give life in the sense of prosperity to the state, and in order to do so, he had to strengthen his life-giving *kra*, his solar soul, with gold, the metal of the sun. All the great Akan kings therefore slept on a bed, which was placed on top of a truncated seven-step pyramid, so as to be as near as possible to the Sun-god; the mattresses and pillows were stuffed with gold dust, and the bed cover was made of imported gold brocade, or of woven yellow silk which was sometimes embroidered with gold thread. Each step of the pyramid, which ascended to the bed, was covered with one or the other colour of the rainbow, since the rainbow was believed to be the bridge between heaven and earth.

The Bono king, on waking in the morning at sunrise, used to dip his hands in a bowl filled with 'fresh' gold, which a messenger on horseback brought each night from the nearest goldfield. When the king had risen he went to the *Nyame Dua*, the altar to the Supreme Being that stood in the courtyard near to the entrance of his palace. This consisted of a tree trunk, or post, with three branches cut short which were covered with a layer of thick gold sheet and which supported a golden basin filled with rain water. The king would dip aromatic *adwera* leaves into the water and sprinkle some of it into the sky, and then some over himself, in order to bless his life-giving soul. In this way he thanked the Sun-god for his good health and prayed for long life and prosperity for himself and the state. The golden *Nyame Dua* was one of the many objects which the Asante took from the Bono after their conquest of that country, and it still existed in 1749, when it was seen and described by a Danish envoy, a mulatto from the coast, who was sent to the King of Asante on a diplomatic mission. The Danish envoy also saw the 'Golden Throne' which was cast in the form of a big 'lump of gold'. This throne had only been used by the Bono kings at the close of the rites on New Year's day, the day of the autumnal equinox, when the sun rises due east and looks on both hemispheres equally. The king, personifying the sun of the new year, would be clad solely in a loin cloth woven of gold thread, his whole body dusted with gold which adhered to his oiled skin, and would wear a profusion of gold ornaments.

Apart from his throne shaped in the form of a gold nugget, the King of Bono sat on a low golden stool, carved and covered with a layer of gold sheet, or on a throne chair (*asipim*), decorated with gold. The 'Golden Stool' of the Asante kings was believed to contain the soul of the Asante people and symbolized their power, health and riches. It was never sat upon, except on rare occasions when its power was invoked, and the king then made a mere pretence of sitting upon it three times before resuming his seat on his own stool. The 'Golden Stool' was created when the Asante nation was born in 1701 and was almost entirely destroyed at the time of the last Anglo-Asante war. From its remains, however, a new golden stool was made, which the people are permitted to see, lying on its side on its own throne chair, when the king sits in public after the *Adae* ceremony.

All the insignia of the Akan kings were made of gold, and many are still in use to-day. The 'Golden Triangle', a breastplate, is still worn by the King of Asante, and the 'Golden Axe' and the 'Golden Drum' are carried before him on ceremonial occasions, together with the 'Golden Lutes' and *Ntahera* horns, an orchestra of seven horns, made of elephant tusks covered with gold in which celestial symbols are engraved by the repoussé technique. These musical instruments belonged originally to the kings of Bono, but were looted by the Asante in 1740.

To the insignia of office also belong the golden-hilted state swords decorated with the representations of animals—such as the lion, crocodile, snake, dove, fish, a hen with four chickens, and so forth. All are cast in gold, are fairly large in size and usually of exquisite workmanship.

The staves of the royal spokesmen are carved and encased in gold, as are the ornaments which surmount them. Originally these consisted of the animals emblematic of the clans in the state; but in later times whole proverbs, having reference to the contents of the speech of the royal spokesmen, were depicted. Staves of both kinds are still in use. The bodyguard of the King of Asante still have rifles, each decorated with a royal emblem cast in gold; and over their chests and abdomens they carry miniature shields, decorated with an assortment of knives and a variety of symbols in gold.

In addition to the king's insignia and emblems, all the ornaments worn by him on ceremonial occasions are made of gold—the necklaces, armlets, finger rings, leg ornaments and toe rings. Gold ornaments also decorate the king's head-dress and sandals. And not only in his lifetime is the king surrounded with gold. His corpse is dressed in precious cloth and adorned with the gold ornaments he wore during his lifetime. The seven openings of his body are filled with gold dust, and his head and hands rest in bowls filled with gold. When, after one to three years, his body is taken out of the coffin, the bones of his skeleton are joined together with gold wire, and when this has been done, the skeleton is dressed in the king's regalia. In Bono, eyes made of gold used to be inserted in the sockets of the skull, while in Asante, there is a tradition that during the last century a gold portrait mask of the king covered his skull. The royal skeleton was then placed in another coffin, which in Bono and Asante in the past was encased in gold—the gold

sheet being engraved with the symbols of the divine kingship in the repoussé technique. The coffin was then removed to its final resting place, the royal mausoleum in a sacred grove outside the town.

The gold weights and gold weighing apparatus, the gold dust spoons and small gold dust boxes of the kings of Bono were cast in gold. They are said to be still in existence and in the possession of an Asante chief, the head of the Juaben State, whose ancestor received them as loot for services rendered in the Bono-Asante war of 1740. The golden weights of the Asante kings were lost during the Anglo-Asante wars, in 1896 or 1901.

The gold weights of the ordinary people were cast in brass by the *cire perdue* technique. A set consisted of 60-80 weights, and there still exist hundreds of different designs, which may be divided thus:

(*a*) Weights decorated with geometrical designs, of which many are religious symbols.

(*b*) Weights depicting animals, which symbolize deities. An interesting example is the so-called *sankofa* bird, which is is the same as the *bennu* bird of the ancient Egyptians—the names of both meaning 'that which revolves', namely, the eternal sun. The *sankofa* bird is used by the kings as a royal emblem.

(*c*) Weights illustrating men and women in various occupations, such as making a sacrifice, nursing a child, hunting an animal, riding on horseback, and exchanging ceremonial greetings.

Unlike the stylized statuettes and expressionistic masks which are the familiar objects of African art, the Akan gold-weights are by contrast unique, in that they deal with themes which are taken from daily life and treated realistically. The forms of men and animals are simplified, the men modelled with particular vividness and the animals made to represent deities. The latter are usually recognizable by the signs with which they are decorated and which symbolize divine powers—the spiral representing birth and creation; the lozenge or diamond, procreation; the triangle, ruler over sky, earth and underworld; the zigzag line, life-giving fire; and so forth. The gold weights are delightful objects and are much in demand by collectors, particularly as each single weight bears the stamp of the individual personality of the artist who created it.