

The Asante

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Frontispiece: A senior Asante chief and his officers,
c. 1897.

Jacket: The Akyempemhene of Kumase seated on a *hwedom* chair with officials holding gold-handled swords.

6 The court and regalia

The use of gold to adorn rulers and their servants was intended to impress: 'The royal gold ornaments are melted down every Yam Custom, and fashioned into new patterns as novel as possible. This is a piece of state policy very imposing on the populace and the tributary chiefs who pay but an annual visit [to Kumase]', claimed Bowdich.¹ Many gold castings represented creatures, such as antelopes, scorpions and snails, to which proverbs or sayings could be attached. The proverb could, in some circumstances, be used to express general ideas or truisms. Indeed, Asante tended to interpret regalia as having meaning beyond their form. When a local man saw the British sappers in the 1874 invasion, he claimed: 'The axes they carried were to show that Ashanti would be cut down, and the spades indicated that Ashanti would be rooted up.'²

A clear theme in Asante history is the way once-functional objects were elaborated and made to serve as regalia which could identify the rank and purpose of the bearer and also express ideas about political and moral relationships. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century development of regalia derived from the growth of central government and the problem of running a large empire without a literate class. Although literates were enticed into the Asantehene's service and written records made, most state business relied upon the integrity of those concerned and their ability to follow verbal instructions, supported by systems of checks, spying and reporting to ensure they did not exceed their brief. Instantly identifiable items of regalia, which could be obtained only from the King's court, helped smooth and speed the way of those appointed to carry out the decisions of the King and his council.

The Asante made early attempts to provide themselves with European-speaking literates. In 1743, for example, fourteen Asante children arrived at Elmina: it was Asantehene Opoku Ware's intention that they should go to the Netherlands 'to read and write and be taught music', but instead they were enrolled in a local school run by a Dutch-educated ex-slave. An Asante emissary, however, was taken to Holland and returned with impressive gifts for the King.³ By the 1820s or 30s, possibly earlier, the King and court had small numbers of literates available, often visiting outsiders. Here the difficulty was that the Asante could rarely check what they wrote or read. Asante fears in this connection were well founded: the copy of Bowdich's Anglo-Asante Treaty left at Kumase differed in a number of important points from that which he took to the coast.⁴

Throughout the century Asantehenes attempted to attract literates to their service and maintained a regular correspondence with the coast. In 1818 Osei Bonsu hoped to have people educated by the British; opposition among senior officials apparently prevented this (the Gyaasewahene argued that written

accounts would limit speculation). In the 1830s two of the Asantehene's sons, Owusu Ansa and Owusu Nkwantabisa, were schooled at Cape Coast and later sent to England, and two more Asante were educated in the Netherlands. By the mid-nineteenth century the Asante were using trained literates, mainly from the coast, at least one provided by Governor Maclean in 1836. In 1859 Asantehene Kwaku Dua had a Dutchman in his service, and the Wesleyan catechist Watts, who was in Kumase from 1862 to 1871, served as a secretary for some purposes.⁵ Literate Muslims were also used in the treasury.

Towards the end of the century the use of written records and communications had made some headway. Europeans like the Frenchman Bonnat were absorbed, albeit briefly, into the system, and Asantes like the Owusu Ansa brothers, mission educated, were fully literate. Written messages were sent: for example, in 1889 Prempe I received a written account of the fate of a force dispatched against recalcitrant Ahafo towns. The writer described himself as 'Chief Miner', possibly an Elminan. The year before the King received a letter from a Muslim divine, Abu Bakr B. Uthman Kamaghatay, setting out terms for his return to Kumase. Both letters were kept until removed from Kumase by British forces in 1896.⁶

However, despite the regular written communication between King and Europeans on the coast, literacy made little headway in government as a whole. Diplomatic negotiations at the highest and lowest levels were still carried out by preference through speech, where the rich allusiveness of Asante oratory could hint at a range of possibilities, explore them, and find the most suitable solution with a subtlety and flexibility entirely lacking in any written document.

The growing complexity of the Asante government, its members' need to communicate internally and externally, to show their differences in standing, and to reward allies or placate potential enemies are reflected in the way many items, such as swords (afena), were elaborated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What began as a functional weapon ended as an object whose significance was indicated by its size, shape and a variety of attachments, often in gold. The sword gained an increasing richness of meaning over the years until colonial rule removed many of its uses, ending its development but stimulating the growth of other forms of court art.

The first reports of swords in Akan society are inevitably from the coast. Local swords may derive from Islamic weapons passed down the trans-Saharan trade routes. Early visitors were quick to associate the swords they saw with Turkish or other Islamic weapons. Towerson wrote of 'great daggers . . . which be on both sides exceeding sharp, and banded after the manner of Turkie blades'.⁷

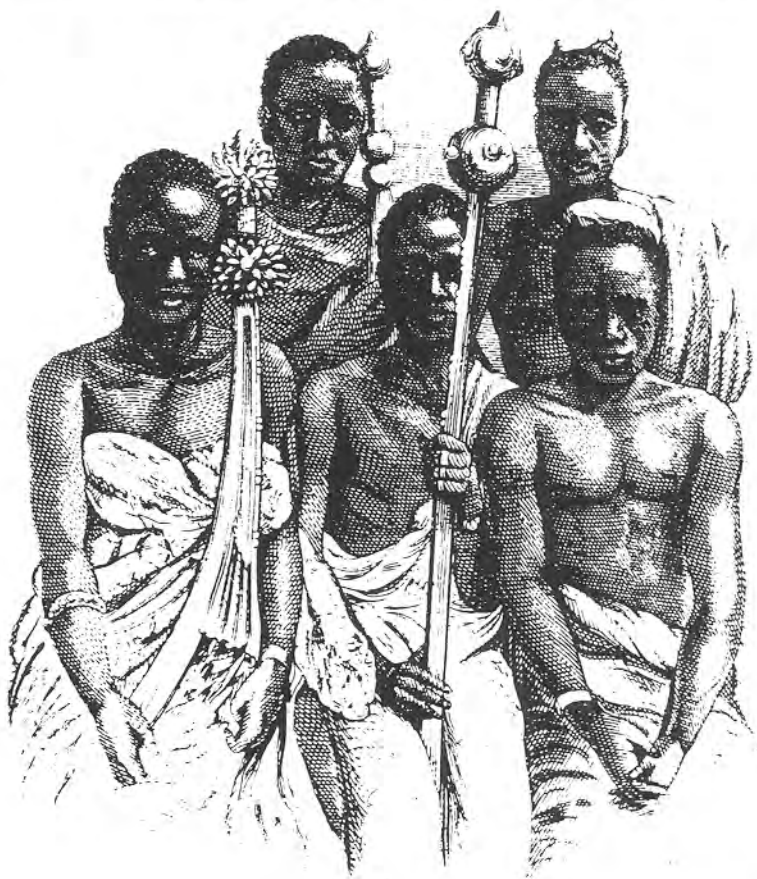
At the end of the sixteenth century de Marees noted two-edged swords with handles covered with fish (probably ray) skin or sheet gold. Some with sheaths were adorned with large red shells, others with the heads of 'Apes' or 'Tygres'.⁸ Dapper and others add slightly different details and indicate that jaw-bones of enemies were fixed to sheaths.⁹ There is substantial agreement on the form of the sword: a curved blade, broader towards the tip than the handle, encased in

a skin sheath, the handle made of two globes separated by a cylindrical grip, sometimes with a cow's tail attached. Most writers stressed the skill of local craftsmen in working iron for making weapons (and for repairing imported firearms).¹⁰

Some swords showed the achievement or status of their owners: 'They [the swords] have a wooden Guard adorned at one side, and sometimes at both, with small globular Knobs, covered with a sort of Skin, whilst others content themselves with bits of Rope singed black with the Blood of Sheep or other Cattle, with the additional Ornament of a bunch of Horse Hair, among People of Condition thin Gold Plates are usual.'¹¹ These added items indicated power and wealth: the imported red shells were expensive, and heads of slain beasts presumably showed hunting prowess. Some swords were carried when a town chief walked abroad. A sword-bearer had an important role, sometimes being sent as ambassador to other courts.¹² Barbot mentions a sword adorned with a cast-gold monkey head, and Loyer's account of Assini shows gold-adorned swords. Behind the King stood two of the royal wives 'each carrying on her shoulder a large gold sabre with a gold handle, from whence hung a figure with a sheep's skull in gold, as big as the life or bigger. On the sheath was a long shell of the same material round which was strung a hundred tyger's teeth bored'.¹³

A few swords were brought to Europe in the seventeenth century. In Ulm there is a sword from the coastal kingdom of Fetu, probably dating before 1650. The guard, pommel and sheath are decorated with ray skin, the grip and end of the pommel with gold leaf, a horse or cow tail is attached, and the blade

Asante diplomats with swords showing their status.



is pierced and stamped. Two similar swords were accessioned in the Danish Royal Collection in 1690, their handles decorated with ray skin and gold leaf. A further early sword, adorned with a red shell, is shown in Eckhout's painting of an Akan warrior, probably done in South America.¹⁴

Many Asante swords had gold adornments: 'Wolves and rams heads as large as life, cast in gold, were suspended from their gold handled swords.'¹⁵ One function of swords was identified by Dupuis: 'The royal messengers stood behind the sovereign, shouldering by the blades large crooked sabres, the emblems of their offices, and displaying the reversed hilts, cased in thin gold sheathing.'¹⁶ Those chosen by kings and chiefs to deliver messages or conduct important negotiations carried, or were accompanied by men carrying, gold-handled swords. These people were frequently encountered on the roads and paths of Asante. Visitors were often guided and controlled by sword-bearers. Huydecoper, travelling to Kumase in 1816 for the Dutch, was met by a sword-bearer of the Asante general Appia and later, nearing Kumase, met by another four sword-bearers; two went to report his arrival to the King, returned, and all four accompanied him towards the capital. Four more sword-bearers arrived and told him to dress correctly to meet the King. Later he witnessed two sword-bearers sent to stop Appia exceeding the terms of his mission. When the King wanted Huydecoper to clean the European silver at the palace, he sent a sword-bearer to command him.¹⁷ Similarly, Dupuis was escorted into the capital by two royal messengers, one of whom was a sword-bearer,¹⁸ as was Winniet in 1848.¹⁹ As Ramseyer and Kuhne passed through Dwaben in 1871, 'A messenger of the prince, distinguished by a gold sword, from which hung a large golden shell, . . . conducted us to the palace'.²⁰

Kumase traditions place this use of swords to the earliest days of Asante history, relating how the King of Denkyira sent officials to Kumase demanding gold-dust. Among these men (who included his goldsmith to test the gold paid over) was a sword-bearer carrying the *afenatene* ('the long sword').²¹ This use of swords continued until the break-up of the Asante kingdom: in the 1870s the Dwabenhene, who had left the confederacy, sent a sword-bearer to the Gyamanhene to help organise armed resistance to Asante rule.²²

Messenger swords (*asomfofena*) were numerous in the last century. According to one recent Asante authority, the present Asantehene has five *asomfofena* which are borne in parade to accompany the Golden Stool,²³ but these would have been too few to support the vast amount of pre-colonial state business, even if some was devolved to senior officials with their own sword-bearers.

A second class of sword, *domfena*, was carried by generals: '. . . a general is appointed to the command of an army, by receiving a gold-handled sword of the King's from his hand (who strikes him gently with it three times on the head), swearing to return it encrusted with the blood of his conquered enemies.'²⁴ The captains used these to swear before the King: '. . . the captains rose and siezed their gold-headed swords from their attendants . . . each then directed his sword to the King . . . and swore by the King's head that they would go with the army that night, and bring him . . . the heads of all the Fantees.'²⁵

The most important swords were thought to have a special spiritual significance. According to a recent Asante writer, these form a distinct class, *keteanofena*, of two divisions, the *bosomfena* and the *akrafena*. This general class of sword is said to be closely associated with the King's spiritual health: '... they are laid at the edge of the King's bed when he goes to sleep. It is believed that the spiritual force residing in the swords will protect him while he sleeps.'²⁶ It is said that the *akrafena* are used in various rituals connected with the cleansing of the King's soul, while the others are used for the swearing of oaths and for sending messages within Kumase. Such swords for swearing are also referred to as *nsuafena* ('oath swords'). It is unclear exactly how far this distinction is a recent development. The Asantehene's most important sword is *Mponponsuo*, a large sword on which senior chiefs swear their allegiance. The hilt and sheath (*boha*) are covered with leopard skin; a gold casting (*abosodee*) in the form of a snake holding a diminutive antelope in its mouth, and several gold- and silver-cased talismans are fixed to the sheath. It has two circular gold bosses (*nem*) between the blade and handle. The bearers of oath swords wore hats made of eagle feathers with a pair of gold rams' horns in front. Some major swords, and particularly those called *Bosommuru* and *Bosomptra*, are linked to particular groups within the administrative order of the state.

Another class of swords, *afenatene* ('long swords'), were principally for display: they usually have long and elaborately worked blades and, sometimes, multiple gold-covered handles with representational carvings similar to the

A long sword (*afenatene*) of the type displayed within the royal palace at Kumase; the handles are missing. Ht 1.20 cm.



finials of umbrellas and linguists' staffs (see p.95). In many the blade is formed of a long, thin strip, twisted or even knotted, turning into a large flat sheet, pierced with geometric patterns or to indicate the outline of a crocodile or *sankofa* bird. A few of the largest have two or three blades springing from a single thin shaft. The three-bladed swords were stood, handle uppermost, near the King when he was sitting in state within the palace.²⁷ Gold-handled swords were among the items (chairs, palanquins and stools) consciously distributed as a way of rewarding or influencing the leaders of groups on the periphery of Asante rule, so bringing them into a common system of meaning, and this practice seems to have continued until the final quarter of the last century.

The main attachment to sword sheaths is a representational gold casting (*abosodee*). Early reports from the coast mention the skulls of beasts tied to sheaths, perhaps displayed as trophies or for magical protective purposes. Some nineteenth-century Asante *abosodee* seem to have had a proverbial dimension; others may have been mainly intended to show the ruler's wealth in a direct way. Recent Asante explanations tend to emphasise their proverbial aspects. Bowdich mentions a snake upon a sword, and it has been suggested that this represented the well-known proverb about the snake which after a long time finally caught the bird which had borrowed from it.²⁸ The meaning of the *abosodee* of a snake holding an antelope on the sword *Mponponsuo* is unclear. A ram's head thinly cast in gold, similar to one described by Bowdich, was taken from Kumase by British forces in 1874. Two cast-gold heads now in London may also have been sword decorations, the larger of the two with a suspension loop by which it could have been attached to a sheath.



A cast-gold sword ornament in the form of a teapot. Offinso state regalia. Ht 13 cm.

A gold casting of a 'pot', clearly copied from a European vessel, today interpreted as an *abusua kuruwa* ('family pot'), can be seen attached to one of the Asantehene's swords in a photograph taken in 1884. It has been suggested this was seen by the missionary Thomas Birch Freeman about forty years earlier: '... an immense gold sword, to which was fastened a golden decanter, holding about a pint.'²⁹ *Abusua kuruwa* pots represent the unity and mutual dependence of the lineage group. European-derived pots of this sort today adorn swords in the regalia of the Amanhene of Bekwae, Ejisu and Mampon. Formerly this image may have been interpreted as an indication of the King's access to exotic goods and also, because it is a vessel, of his ability to provide for those he ruled.

The Offinso stool has a beautiful casting, made in the 1920s, of a European teapot (it is unclear if this was a replacement for an earlier version). The Offinsohene interprets this vessel as an *abusua kuruwa* and states that the sword is used to emphasise the idea of mutual dependence and co-operation. Others, while finding this an acceptable meaning, say that the subject was chosen because it was attractive (*efe*) or because it showed the stool's willingness to adopt progressive Western customs and goods.

All *abosodee* are cast by the lost-wax process (see p.80); many have openings in the surface and were stuffed with imported red cloth to accentuate the colour of the gold. Sword decorations seem to have been treated carefully and only recast when severely damaged. Some, however, were apparently concealed or melted down in that troubled period just before and after the establishment of colonial rule, and many now in use seem to have been cast or recast since the 1920s.

Some sword images express the wealth of a chief and his stool. A sword from Ejisu has an *abosodee* in the form of the blow-pan used for removing impurities from gold-dust. A Kumawu sword has three kola pods attached. This is seen as expressing wealth through trade; a proverb says 'when the kola went north, that was when the northern cloths came to Asante'. However, other interpretations are offered: the kola is seen as a sign of respect because the Kumawuhene takes kola to the funerals of other (?Muslim) chiefs, where its red and bitter qualities express grief. Informants also offer the saying 'the ant clings aimlessly to the kola tree, it won't fall down, yet it won't pick the fruit and chew it'. Crocodiles on swords, either on their own (Mampon) or biting a mudfish (Kumawu), give rise to several readings, some opposed: 'if a mudfish gains anything, it is ultimately to the benefit of the crocodile' or 'only a bad crocodile harms the mudfish with which it shares the river'. When two creatures are depicted, a saying may be offered which turns on one or more characteristics of each. It is reported at Mampon that the crocodile is seen as standing for the Omanhene, one of whose praise-names is 'the great crocodile that swallows a stone every year'.

Several swords bear images which relate to the military powers and prowess of the chief or his predecessors. Some bear military items: shields, sometimes with a sword resting on them, cannon, or a bird with cannon mounted on its wings, a powder barrel and gun, or the head of a slain enemy, usually called a

Worosa head after the King of Banda who was slain by the Asante some time after the middle of the eighteenth century.

At present the significance of any single *abosodee*, like that of other items of regalia, is always open to discussion and argument. The Asante freely acknowledge that many parts of their culture are understood only by particular groups within their society. Many ordinary villagers today express ignorance of the significance of *abosodee* beyond the fact that they represent the power and wealth of the ruler. It is possible knowledge was more widespread in the past. However, even among those who have spent much time at the courts there is never full agreement as to the significance of any particular sword ornament. As in other areas of their life, the Asante accept an essential ambiguity or indefiniteness about meanings: anything may be understood in different, even contradictory ways, according to the situation in which it is manifest and the interpreter's inclinations or presuppositions. The image forms a starting-point from which verbal formulations may proceed and, as they develop, be adjusted to the needs of the prevailing situations.

Today swords are still used as items of display, and newly enstooled chiefs swear their allegiance on the appropriate *bosom* sword. Since the last century there has been no change in the overall form of swords. The recasting of sword ornaments which occurred in the 1920s may have arisen because minor chiefs felt free to assume types of regalia previously restricted to their superiors. A British official commented upon the sudden changes when the Asantehene returned from exile: '... the upstart Etipinhene, Kwekua Dua, clad soberly, [appeared] without as much as a gold ring to adorn him and under an ordinary black European umbrella: compare him with Kobina Safo of Akropong in his palanquin with eight gold sword-bearers and three large umbrellas, and with the chiefs of Kwaso, Fumesua, Tafo and many others who have been regarded by Government as small fry and now come into their own again.'³⁰

The role of swords has diminished since 1896, and their bearers have taken over no new functions. Messenger swords are no longer needed for state business. While the evolution of swords has largely ceased, another form of regalia has developed greatly – the staffs carried by the *akyeame* of major chiefs, the men who act as their public spokesmen or 'interpreters'. These staffs provide a further example of the way Asante adopted exotic items and used them to show status and communicate at a distance.

The *okyeame* today acts as a ruler's spokesman: in public assemblies, in discussing state business or at trials the *okyeame* repeats clearly the remarks of all involved. He wittily rephrases these in diplomatic language, stressing their importance while avoiding offence (*casa frenkyem*). He also acts as witness (*adansee*) to important business and is responsible for remembering major decisions correctly. *Akyeame* provide a main element of continuity in chiefdoms: they know state traditions and help instruct a new chief in these and the duties of his office. None the less, there is a clear separation between the ruler and his linguist expressed in the adage *Asebone nka 'kyeame fie* ('a crucial matter doesn't stop at a linguist's house'), meaning that major affairs are always referred to the King for judgement, and by the saying *kyeame dane oheneba, yekye*

(‘it is something hated and avoided for a linguist to act like a chief’). Major chiefdoms usually have several *akyeame*. The role has changed and declined from pre-colonial days when *akyeame* were often influential figures helping to frame policy and undertaking crucial negotiations for the state.

Today the wooden spokesman’s staff (*kyeame poma*) is elaborately carved, between about 1.4 m and 2 m in height and is often constructed in two or three pieces which fit together by means of simple rod and socket joints. The (detachable) finial (*poma akyi*) depicts creatures, objects, or humans, singly or in combination, often communicating an aphorism or proverb (*ebe*). Staffs are covered with gold leaf or, rarely, silver (*dwete*) foil attached by gold, silver or copper U-shaped staples or adhesives. Whenever the linguist speaks on important matters, he holds the staff for all to see. *Si poma* (‘to set the staff’) is thus sometimes used to indicate that public business is to be transacted. Staffs are usually kept with the other stool treasures in the royal palace or, when a linguist is very highly respected, by the linguist himself. The staffs are among the most elaborate and striking of all items of court art, second only to the great umbrellas (see p.107).

Asante traditions say little about the general history of staffs, for they tend to focus on the origins of particular offices, their peculiar regalia and the events regalia memorialise. Although an office may be identified by enduring material items, these are not considered to have origins or existence separately from the office and the makers of individual items are not remembered by name for more than a generation or so.

Two Asante theories about staffs have been published recently. In 1964 Kyerematen suggested staffs developed from clubs like those used nowadays as symbols of authority by northern Ghanaian chiefs. He also suggested staffs were in use before the end of the seventeenth century when King Obiri Yeboa is said to have introduced a new form decorated with monitor lizard (*mampam*) skin. He also recorded that at the beginning of the seventeenth century a staff was surmounted by a carving of an okra (*nkruma*) pod recalling the proverb ‘the nkruma does not reveal its seed from the outside’. Kyerematen adds that the Asantehene’s own linguists had staffs with tops only after Prempe I’s return from exile, copying those used by linguists of lesser Asante chiefs.³¹ Other published traditions are contradictory, implying staffs were created for two Kumase linguists during the reign of Kwaku Dua I, or were in use c.1700–20.³²

These indigenous sources can be supplemented by European ones which indicate that these staffs have their origin in canes used by Europeans on the coast in the seventeenth century or earlier. Wooden staffs or canes were long used as markers of status and items of formal ‘dress’ in Europe. The moral or physical decay which could befall a European on the Gold Coast was indicated by his neglect of canes: ‘most of the factors [traders] . . . have dwindled from the genteel air they brought; [and] wear no cane nor snuff-box’, wrote one visitor.³³ Despite this doleful observation, canes remained in use and local goldsmiths had ‘good skill in making spoons, buckles, buttons, heading canes or tipping the deer’s feet’ (the latter, presumably, to make snuff boxes).³⁴

Gold-topped canes, therefore, were a part of European coastal life. Whites

needed to communicate with local people, the potential source of wealth. To do this they evolved several systems: for example, to indicate that a ship wished to trade a cannon was fired or a flag hoisted. For more complex interchanges pidgin languages based mainly on Portuguese and English developed. A few people were taken to Europe to learn its languages and customs. A perennial problem for whites was how, without native literacy, to communicate with people out of direct contact. It was essential to have messages and replies delivered accurately, and to know the bearer of a message was acting with the sender's full authority. The first problem was largely solved by the growth of a class of Africans or mulattoes proficient in remembering messages and repeating them accurately. Early in the eighteenth century European canes began to be used to solve the second problem.

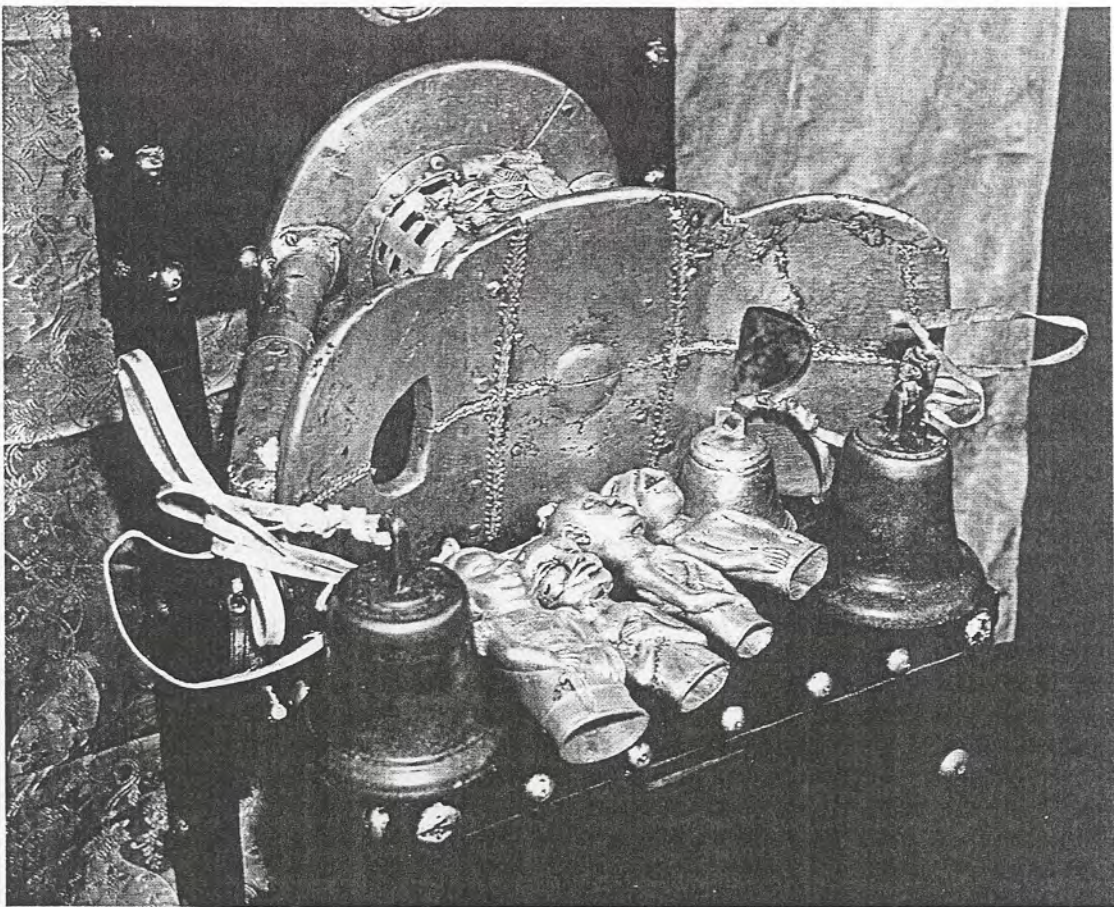
By the late seventeenth century at least a few staffs were in local possession. Müller mentions one and talks of an 'Obcjammi' (*okyeame*) who translated the King of Fetu's words into Portuguese for visiting whites,³⁵ and the missionary Kemp³⁶ recorded in 1892 that the Fante chief of Mankessim possessed 'a silver headed sceptre' presented in 1701 to a predecessor by the Dutch Governor-General. That this survived for nearly two centuries shows the high value placed on such gifts. By 1721 canes were used to show their bearers were official messengers: 'A man soon arrived with John Conny's [an important local trader] stick to demand the customary payment.'³⁷

The limitations of communication imposed by a non-literate culture and the fact that Europeans were rarely able to travel very far from their coastal forts clearly required insignia of credence. By the end of the eighteenth century if a European, mulatto or native was dispatched upon an embassy to a native chief, he would carry a decorated staff to show he was on important business and acting on behalf of the power which issued the staff. Eventually the staff came to imply that a speedy interview was required with the local ruler and the message borne was no ordinary one.

Gold- or silver-topped canes were easy to carry, durable and not easily counterfeited – many probably had engraved inscriptions identifying donor and recipient. Occasionally other odd items of undoubted European origin were pressed into use. Sometimes flags, hats and even ebony rulers were used in this way by Europeans and Africans, and the latter, of course, used gold-decorated swords.

The Dutch Governor-General Daendels' journal for 1815 to 1817 records several aspects of the use of staffs. He planned 'to send a flag or stick to the Ashantee General' to inquire the reasons for Asante military activity near the coast. He also noted that 'One of the Ashantees, who carried the staff, now beginning to speak, said that they had come with positive orders from their King'. The rivalry of the European powers in the distribution of staffs and other regalia also comes out clearly: the 'English [that is, in English employment] Interpreter told them [the local people] that they should have an English flag and staff, to which they replied that they had no other Masters but the Hollanders'.³⁸ A 'large cane with silver knob and chain' and other rare, expensive gifts from Holland were conveyed to the Asantehene by the Dutch

Right The Golden Stool, placed on its side on the *hweɔm* tea chair. The gold effigies represent slain enemies of the Asantehene.



Below The hands of the Omanhene of Kumawu, showing typical gold finger rings and armlets. He is holding a gold-encased fly-whisk.



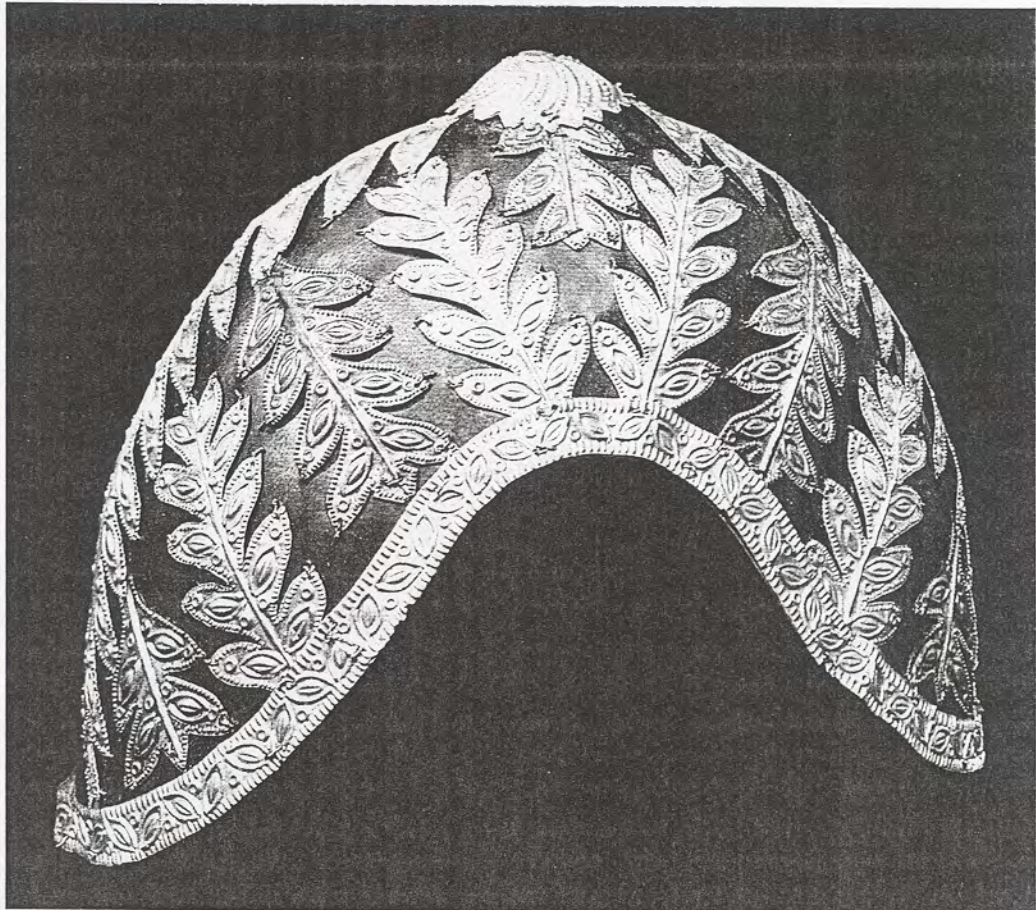


Sword-bearers of the Kumawu paramount chieftaincy. The sheaths are decorated with golden castings.



Above A sword-bearer wearing an eagle-feather hat decorated with golden ram's horns.

Right Leather cap with silver and gold decoration, worn across the back of the head by the Asantehene, senior chiefs and officials.

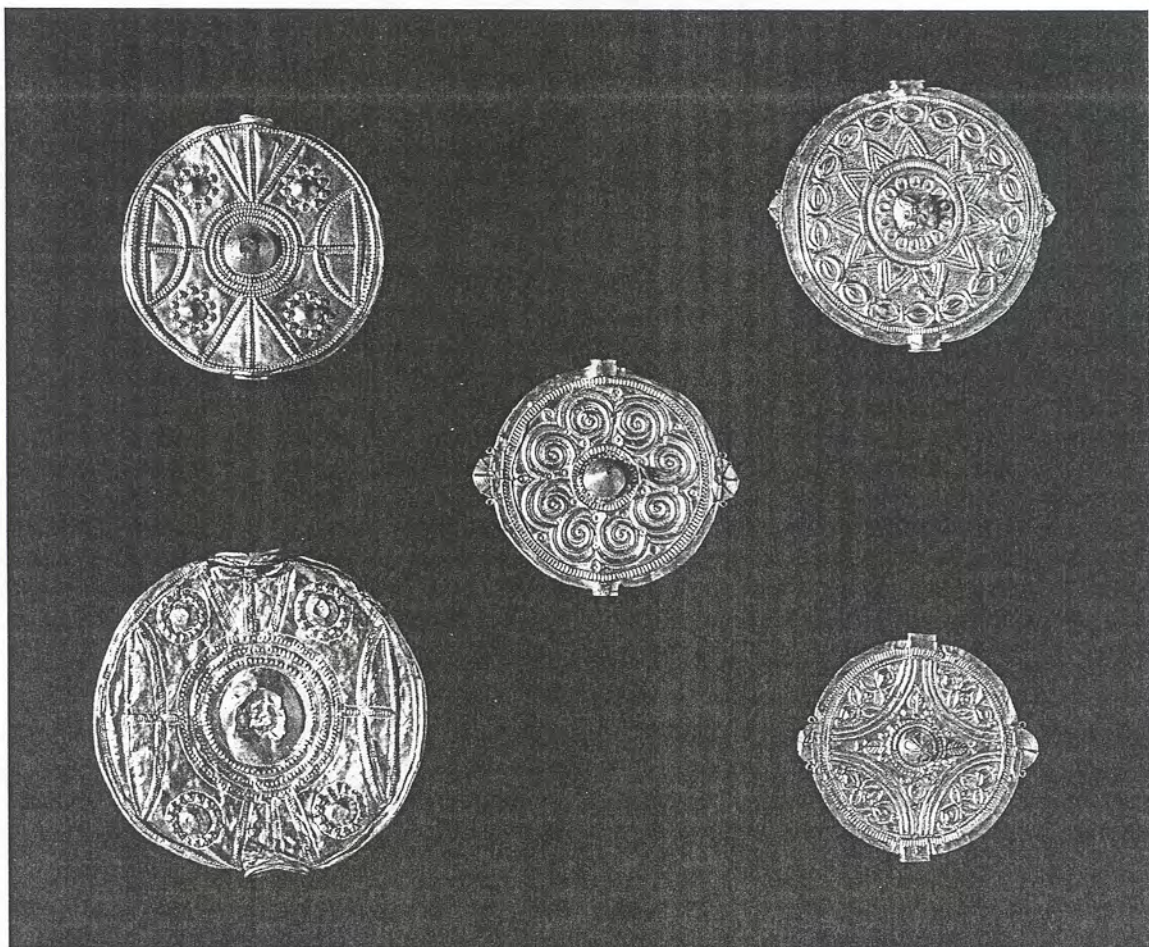
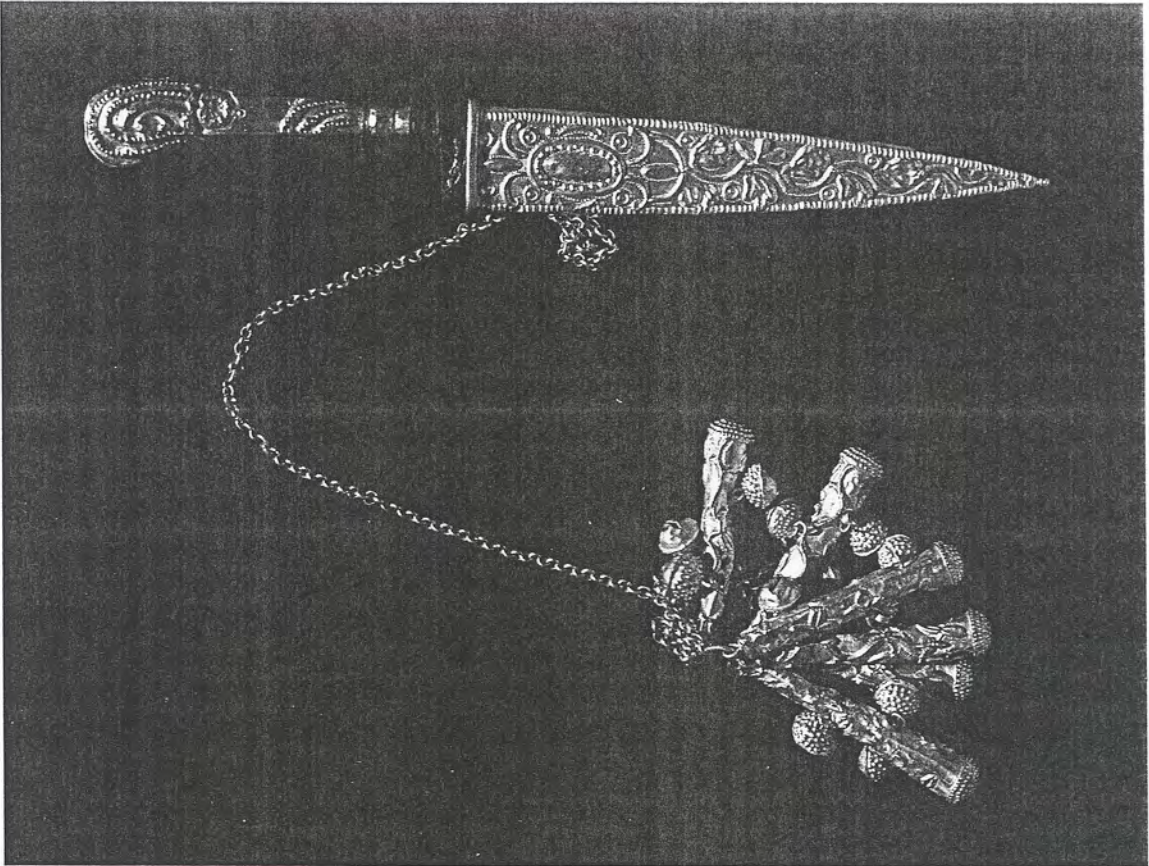


27 The Omahene of Kumawu seated beneath a state umbrella, with gold-handled swords in the foreground.

Opposite (top) A gold-decorated European table knife, probably from the Kumase court.

Opposite (below) Gold *kra* pectoral discs (*akrakɔfomu*), worn by servants of the Asantehene and some paramount chiefs.

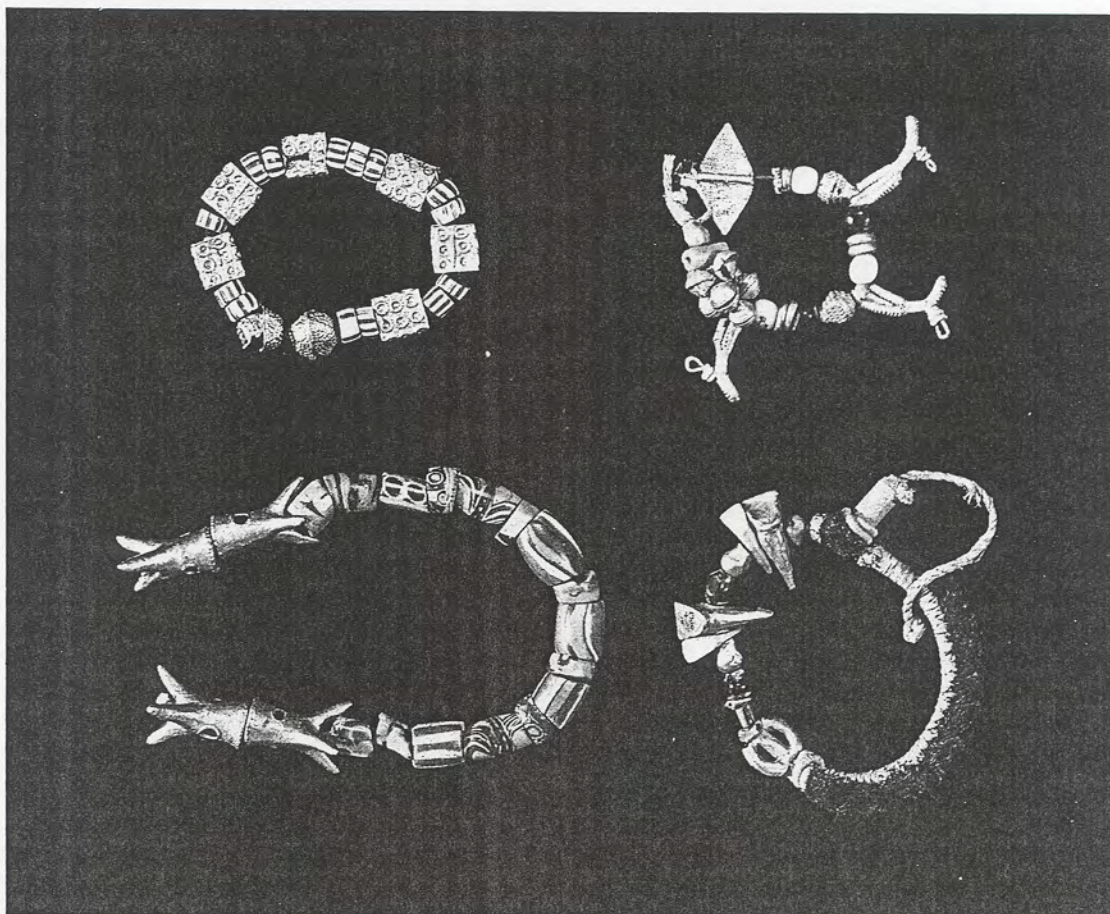


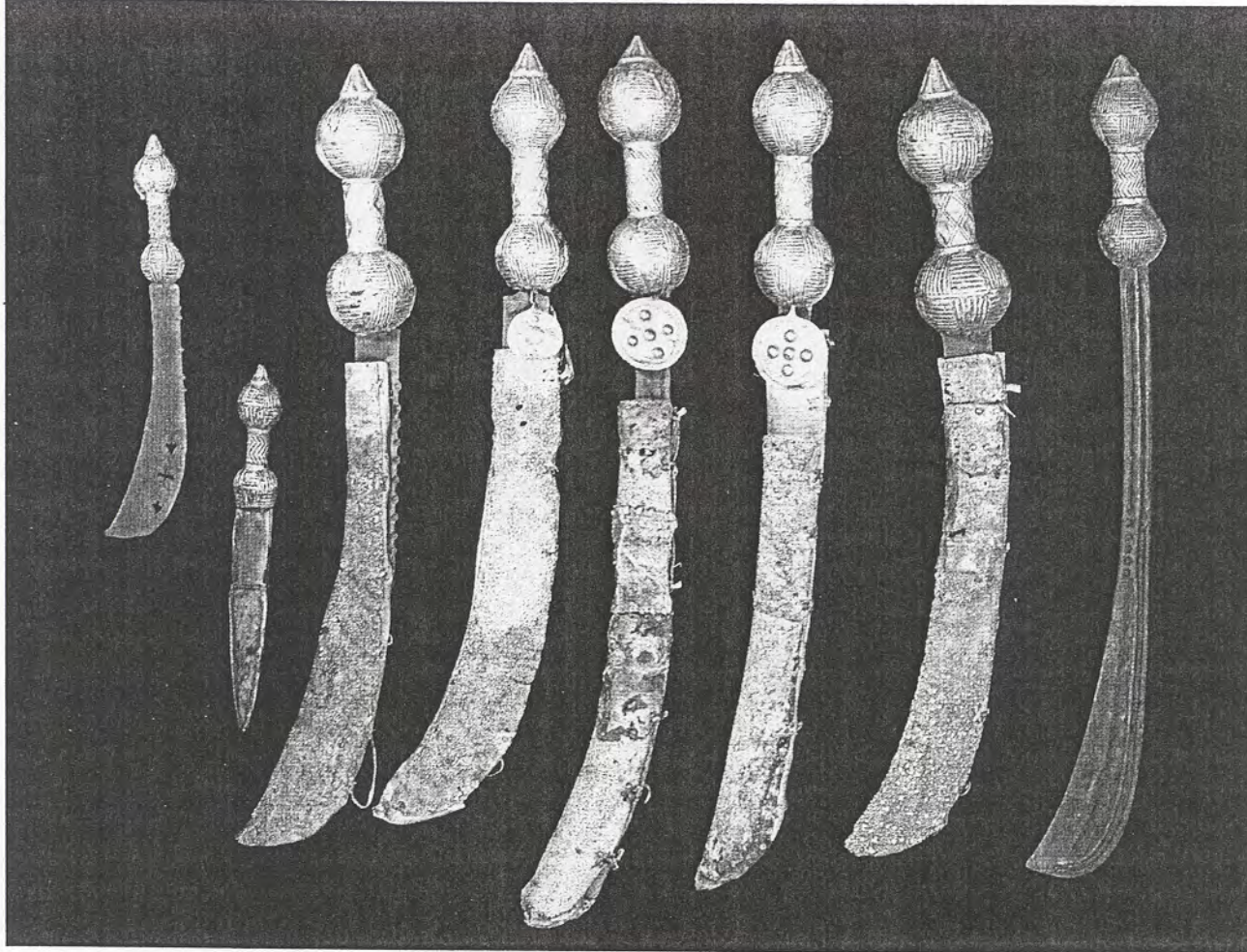




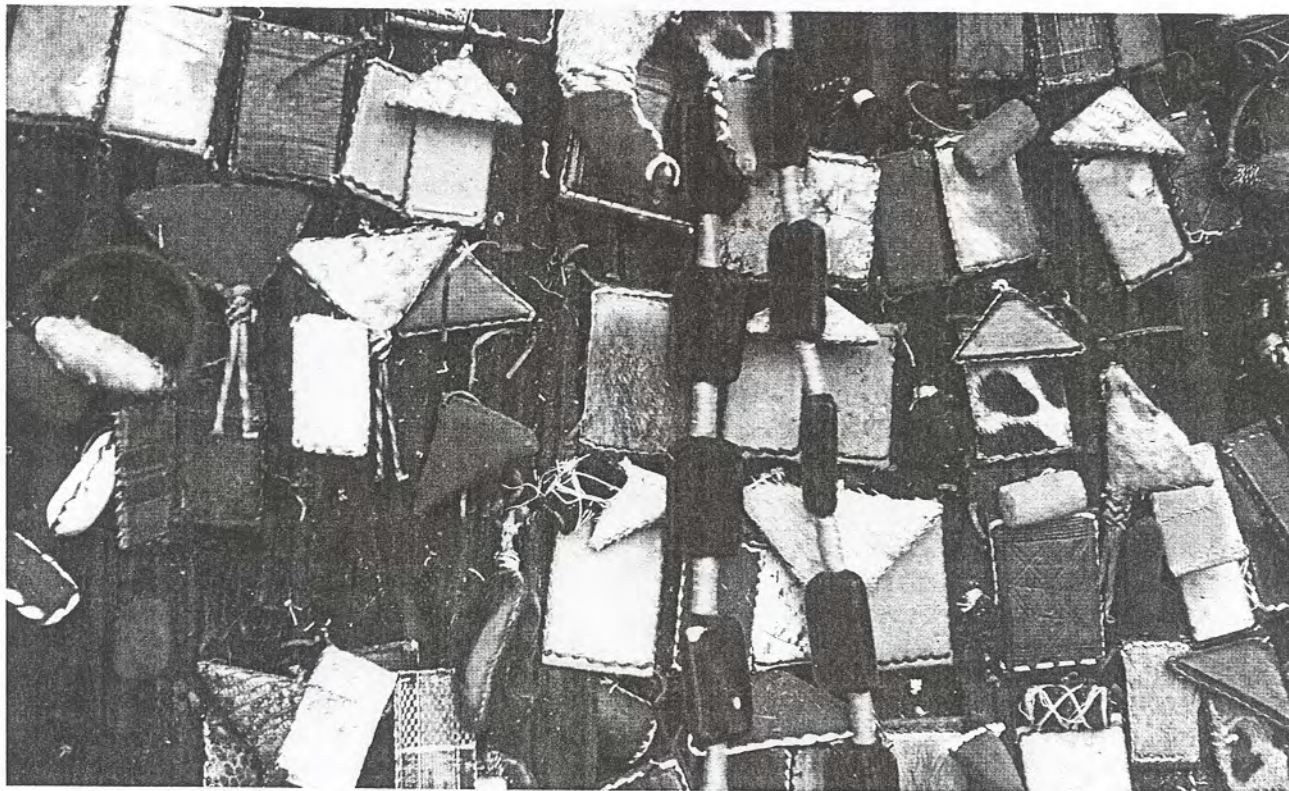
Above Women of a local matrilineage (*abusua*) at the funeral rites of a lineage co-member, wearing mourning colours of red and black.

Right Four protective wristlets. Some of the gold castings represent stylised molar and incisor teeth.

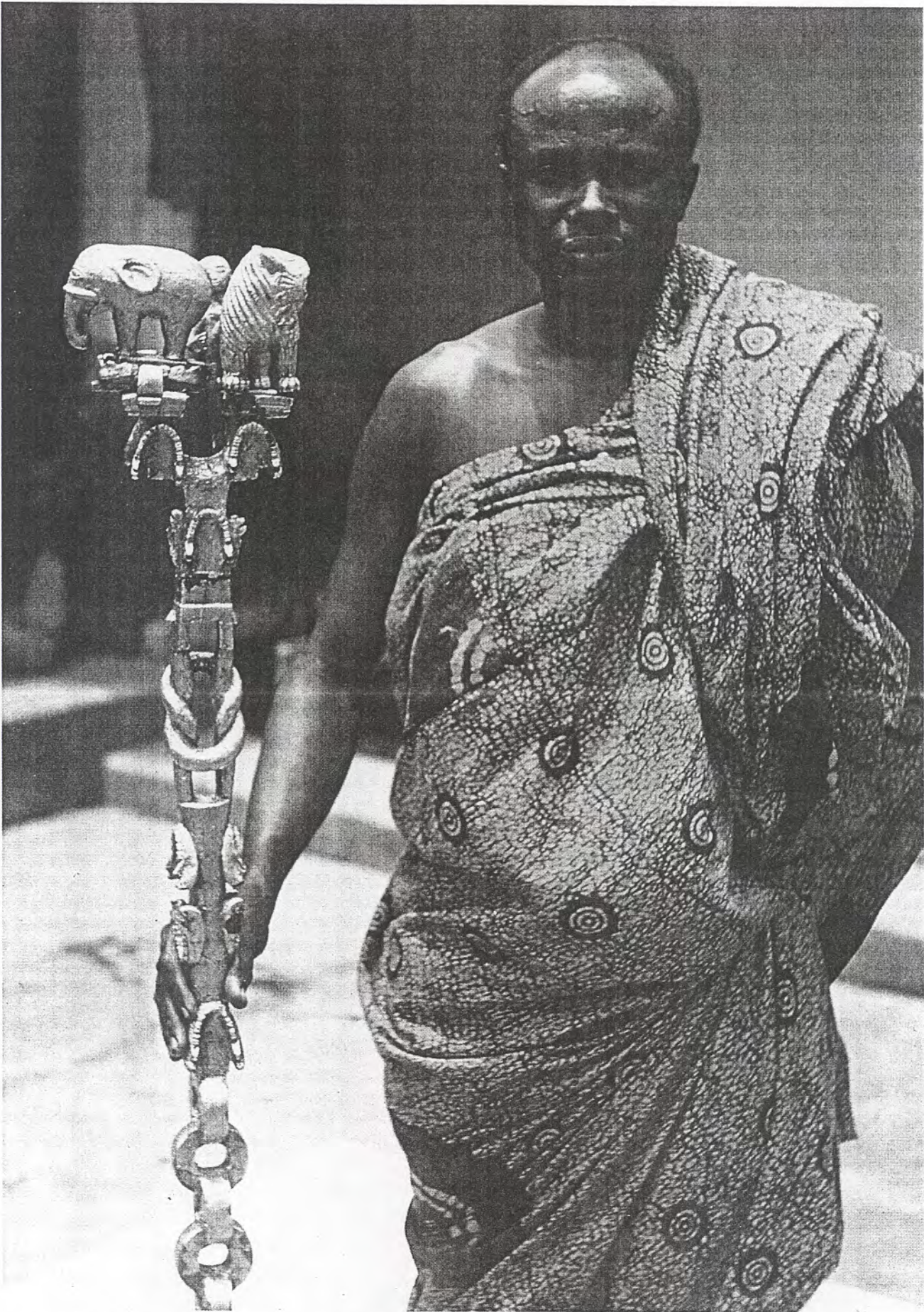




Swords (*afena*) with iron blades and wooden handles covered with gold foil. The sheaths are of ray skin.



A section of a war smock (*Batakari Kеше*) from Ejisu covered with protective talismans encased in cloth and leather.



A man holding a spokesman's staff (*okyeame poma*) covered with gold foil.



Boakye Tenten, senior Asante diplomat and Asantehene's spokesman, at Kumase in 1884. In the foreground are two spokesman's staffs.

emissary Huydecoper who noted that the King soon appeared in public with this Dutch staff – a minor diplomatic triumph.³⁹

Staffs were given to local rulers for political reasons, and they were subject to political manœuvrings and changes. If flags and canes were seized by insurrectionist or conquering states, the original donors (or their political successors) had to decide if the forced transfer of the object also marked the transfer of the earlier relationship to the new holders. Conversely, an attack upon a cane and its bearer was seen as an attack upon the issuing country. When a cane and its bearer were seized in the Wassaw area, the Dutch took it as a defiance of their authority and were little mollified when one of those suspected of involvement claimed 'he would never dare to panyar [seize for ransom or security for a debt] the least whiteman's Cane and young man, much less a Governor General's'. Governor Daendels threatened to go personally to regain his 'gold stick'.⁴⁰

Eventually the term 'staff' became almost a synonym for negotiation: 'The staff is not back yet, I sent it yesterday but have not yet got any reply', a junior official wrote to Daendels. Without such staffs messages lacked authority and force. When Huydecoper encountered an Asante general, he promptly gave him a Dutch flag from the store he carried for just such a purpose. When asked why he was not given more, he explained that 'the Asante messenger had come to the General [Daendels] without cane or sword'⁴¹ and therefore, Huydecoper claimed, the Dutch were unsure of both the messenger's credibility and his master's status. Staffs could be put to more sinister uses. Daendels suggested: 'If we . . . wish to arrest a Caboccer of considerable property and influence we

must send the Staff to him and request him in a friendly manner to come into the fort'. Ironically, about the same time the Dutch complained of illegal seizures of people 'with the help of the cane of the King of Elmina'.⁴²

The use of canes within Asante is described by Bowdich, who himself used both canes and flags. In making formal visits to the King the English 'never did without the flag, canes and soldiers'.⁴³ Whenever an interview was urgently sought with the busy Asantehene, servants with canes were dispatched to stress the gravity of the request: for example, two were sent to ask for the prompt surrender of a detained letter. It was proposed to send a servant south to collect supplies, and he was to have a cane to prove he was not trying to steal the expedition's resources. Conversely, when the Cape Coast 'messengers' in English employ refused to support Bowdich they were deprived of their canes and with them their official standing.

The canes used and distributed at this date by Europeans were wooden sticks about 1.2–1.5 m high, tapering towards the bottom, capped with a gold or silver knob and with a band encircling the body. The Asante canes were also of simple form. Bowdich recorded that they were the 'peculiar insignia' of the Asantehene's four linguists, and he saw 'gold canes . . . elevated in all directions, tied in bundles like fasces' carried by the linguists' attendants. Bowdich's illustrations show these bundles: the canes seem to be straight untopped staffs covered with gold. It is unlikely that any were topped with representational carvings, although some may have been copies of European-style sticks with gold or silver knobs.⁴⁴ Bowdich's widow refers in a novel to the King of Asante sending 'a man with a gold-headed cane' to show that white travellers 'were under his protection'.⁴⁵

Canes in the European style were in use among the Asante and in coastal areas well into the twentieth century. Cruickshank, speaking of the coast, mentions 'silver-headed canes', and Beecham talks of 'nobles' with their attendants 'bearing gold headed canes'.⁴⁶ Boyle, writing in 1874, reports a southern chief 'carrying a stick with silver handle'.⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that decorated linguists' staffs are not among the detailed list of the things seen by the British in 1874 in the Asantehene's Stone Palace. Decorated staffs are not mentioned by the three white captives Bonnat, Ramseyer and Kuhne: despite their extensive opportunities to observe courtly and diplomatic practice in the early 1870s, all they record are 'staves straight and crooked, with gold and silver knobs'.⁴⁸ Elaboration came much later.

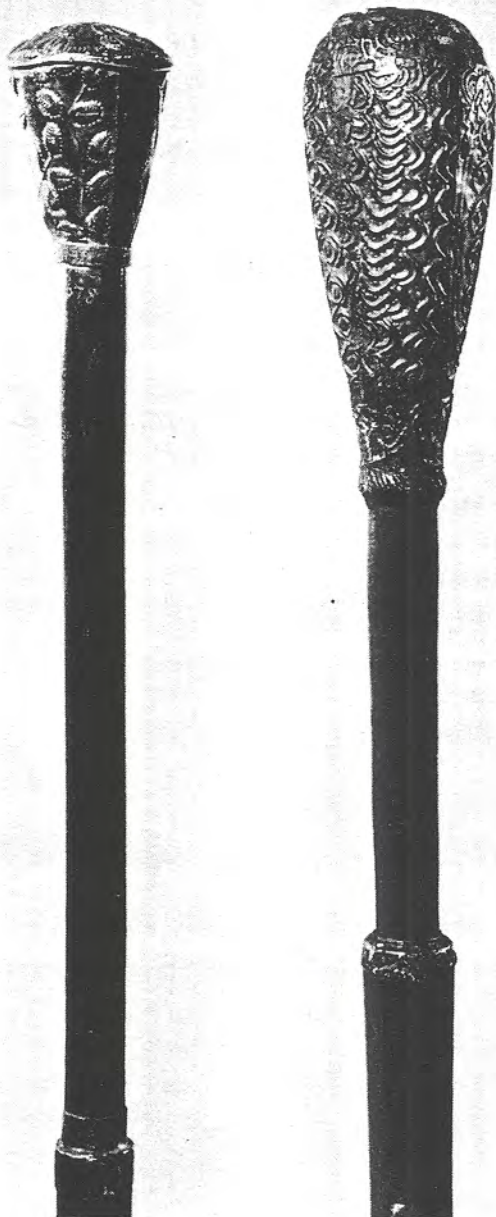
Over the centuries what began as a purely European object became part of a changing system of meaning for Africans and whites. To most local people canes were status markers and proof of the ability of local leaders to gain access to the goods and the ranking system introduced by the whites. Between whites and local cane-holders the canes expressed more or less enduring political alliances, and at times they signalled that the sender wished to communicate an urgent or important message.

These changes in meaning were not associated with a change in the physical appearance of the canes. Where semantic change occurred, the source of change was located in the context of use, or in alterations in other communi-

cation systems used alongside the canes – for example, in the verbal messages of their bearers. For a long time the form of the canes remained constant while their meaning altered. By 1817 canes had become status markers for the Asantehene's linguists. Locally copied canes were shown in large numbers, in a form of visual hyperbole, and here meaning depended mainly on the quantity rather than the form of canes.

Staffs of European origin with decorated or emblematic tops came into use in coastal and southern areas during the late nineteenth century. During the 1873–4 Anglo-Asante war British naval forces sent messengers to local chiefs bearing 'palaver-sticks, i.e. long Malacca canes with a ferule at one end and a gold or silver ornament representing an alligator or tortoise at the other'. Burton gave an umbrella with a silver elephant on top to the King of Apollonia; he had seen that the king already had a cane in that form.⁴⁹

Two 19th-century
spokesman's staffs with
silver tops.



A series of photographs, almost certainly taken in early 1884, show scenes at the court of Asantehene Kwaku Dua II.⁵⁰ All the staffs in these are of simple form – straight sticks, about 1.2 m long, decorated with strips or sheets of gold or silver in their upper halves. None has a representational top. This type of staff appears in photographs taken well into the 1930s.⁵¹ Some canes illustrated from this period may have been of European manufacture for ‘message sticks’ were still being distributed in the early 1900s to chiefs loyal to the British interest. Rattray recorded traditions in the 1920s that the linguists of some (unnamed) major chiefs had ‘gold and silver staves’. The staff of the Asantehene’s linguist was supposed to be made of gold, the Mamponhene’s of silver, but that of Dwaben had only a top of gold. Those of other major chiefs’ linguists were covered with red felt. He commissioned carvings to show people of different ranks and roles in Asante: one was of an *okyeame* carrying a simple staff with a plain knob.⁵²

The impetus towards having more elaborate staffs seems to have entered Asante from the south. Fante groups began to develop staffs with carved tops towards the end of the nineteenth century. Large numbers of elaborately carved and painted staffs, sometimes only 60–90 cm long, were collected before the 1920s, probably among southern Akan groups, although their exact use and original ownership are still unclear. By 1917 some southern Akan

The top of a modern spokesman’s staff, carved from wood and covered with gold foil, representing a saying that the hen knows when dawn will break but leaves it to the cock to make all the noise. Offinso state regalia.



linguists carried plain, metal-knobbed staffs, while others carried staffs entirely covered with gold leaf and topped by representational carvings in the forms of the backward-facing *sankofa* bird, two men facing each other and a man seated at a table or desk. Such sticks were not used in Asante until after the mid-1930s. At the restoration of the Asante confederacy, for example, no photograph located so far shows a linguist staff topped with a representational carving. Asantehene Prempe II's linguists carry two staffs, probably of European origin, at the ceremonies.

The elaboration of the form of linguists' staffs occurred mainly after the linguists who used them had lost their old positions within the Asante political structure, when their long-distance negotiating skills were no longer required. In the 1940s increasingly complex and grandiose staffs began to be produced. These often have elaborately carved shafts incorporating clocks, chains, wisdom knots and other motifs, which are usually interpreted as expressing some aspect of chiefship, for example, joining or binding the state together. However, the sayings by which this association are made vary from informant to informant. There is considerable diversity in the representational tops. Many depict creatures or situations which, through their associated sayings, express ideas of inequality in power. A staff top of an elephant stepping on a trap is intended to convey that when an elephant does this it is not caught but smashes the trap, a comment upon the superior powers of ruler and also a warning to those who wish to ensnare him. Another staff top, of a hen and a cock, has an associated saying to the effect that the hen knows when dawn will break but leaves it to the cock to make all the noise. The ambiguity of this is obvious: one party may know something but not shout about it, but whether the party is the chief or his people will depend on different viewpoints.

Swords and staffs show the way alien objects were taken up, elaborated and used by the Asante to give form to political competition and alliance, and to distinguish those who claimed power from those they ruled. The firearms and weaponry so essential to Asante military expansion were treated in a similar fashion. The two most important items were the guns themselves, initially flintlocks but later cap-guns, and the belts (*ntoa*) containing small wooden containers for powder, knives (for removing the heads of slain enemies) and pouches containing shot and gun flints. These were worn diagonally across the upper part of the body or around the waist.

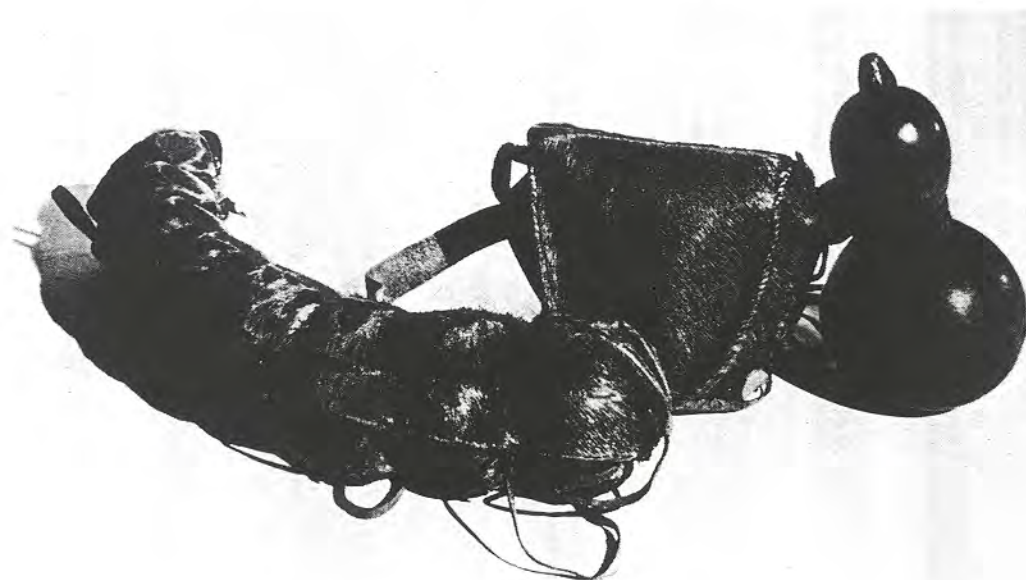
The weapons and ammunition belts of chiefs and retainers were often elaborately adorned to show their owners' wealth. Bowdich noted that the 'corslets' of the gun-bearers of the Asantehene were made 'of leopard's skin covered with gold cockle shells, and stuck full of small knives, sheathed in gold and silver, and the handles of blue agate; cartouch [*sic*] boxes of elephant's hide hung below, ornamented in the same manner. . . . Their long Danish mukets [*sic*] had broad rims of gold at small distances, and the stocks were ornamented with shells', and other soldiers' ammunition belts 'were embossed with red-shells and small brass bells'.⁵³ Decorated ammunition belts and guns of this type have survived as stool property, while undecorated guns and pouches, formerly in the majority, have since 1896 been allowed to decay and

disappear. Most which survive are in collections outside Ghana, many of them obtained by British forces on the battlefield.

Gun barrels were wrapped with brass wire or tightly bound cloth to minimise the risk of bursting, a perpetual problem with ill-maintained poor-quality firearms, charged or overcharged with unreliable gunpowder. The addition of golden 'cockle' shells was less obviously functional. The way such shells came to adorn guns and ammunition belts again indicates how the exotic was assimilated into Akan culture.

Today many Asante knives, ammunition belts, gunmen's caps and guns are decorated either with much-worn red shells or with closely similar gold castings. Other castings used in the same way look more like insects, with the carapaces divided along the length of the back and separate head sections with two eyes. Today informants are unsure what, if anything, these castings represent. Some suggest they are a creature of some sort (*boa bi*), others that they may be a fruit of similar shape called *adam*, and still more explanations are offered.⁵⁴ However, it is highly likely that all these castings are ultimately derived from the red sea shells initially used on the coast to decorate war-gear.

There are early accounts of war-gear adorned with shells. Bosman noted how local males 'have a cap on their heads made of a crocodile's skin, adorned on each side with a red shell'.⁵⁵ De Marees records the use of such shells on swords: '... at the end of the sheathe . . . they put a great red shell, as broad as a man's hand, which is in great estimation with them.'⁵⁶ A painting by Eckhout of an Akan wearing a sword at his belt, and which dates from the first half of the seventeenth century, shows it adorned with a red shell. Loyer records the practice of adorning swords with gold copies of shells of Assini.⁵⁷ The matter began earlier. Duarte Pacheco Pereira noted that among the items traded at Elmina by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century were 'certain red shells which they prize as we prize precious stones'.⁵⁸ Roger Barlow, in a volume based on a work by the Spaniard Bachiller Enciso published in 1518



A 19th-century war belt made of animal skin, with gourd and wood containers for powder and shot.

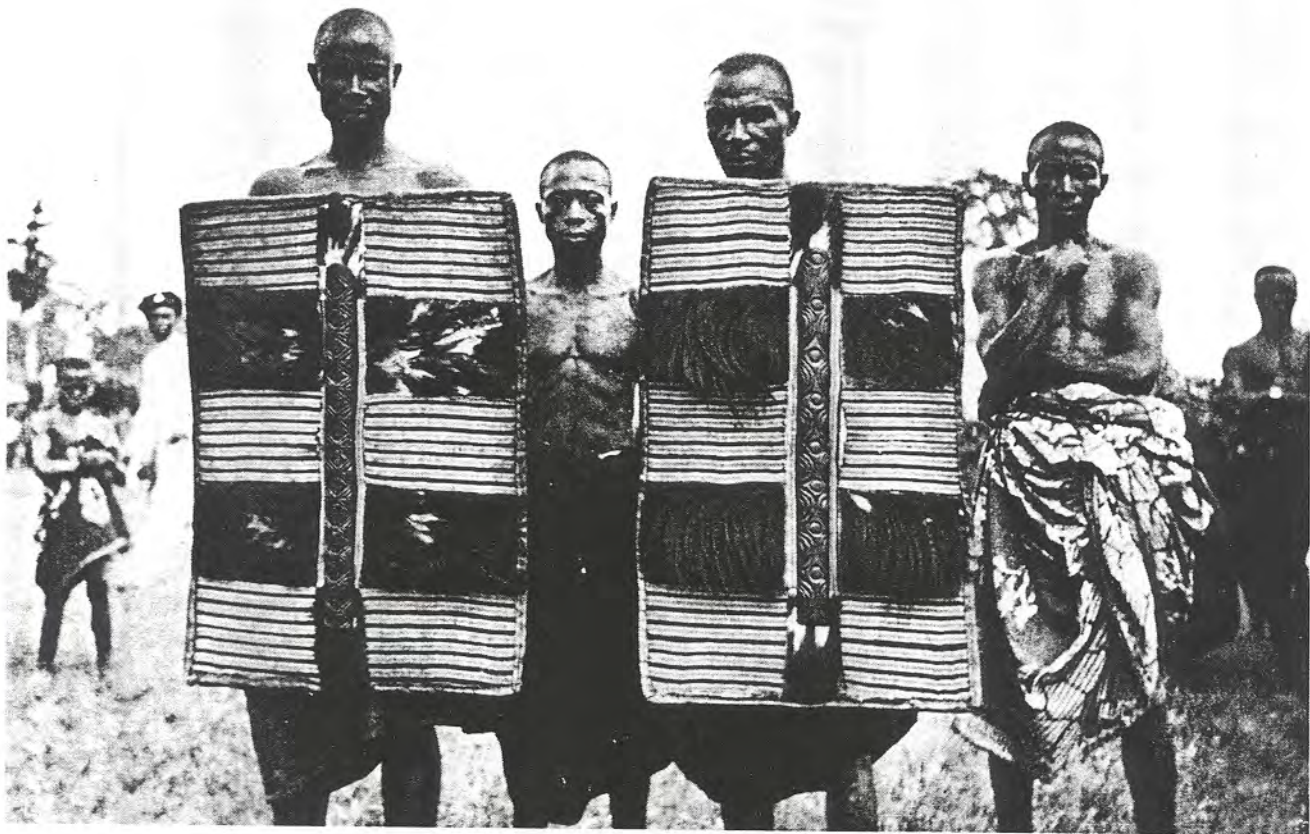
and based on earlier sources, says of the area between Cape Three Points that 'they give the gold in truck of ringes of latyu [brass] and coper and for certain red shelles of fysshes'.⁵⁹ Other early accounts leave no doubt that these shells were an important item by which gold could be obtained. A document by Hernando del Pulgar states that shells from the Canary Isles could be exchanged profitably at Elmina: '... he who carried out very great shells of the sea demanded 20 or 30 pesos of that gold for each shell.' He provides a reason for the demand: '... because in those districts many thunderbolts fell from the sky, and those savages believed that any man whatever, who carried one of those shells, was protected from the thunderbolts.'⁶⁰

This passing observation suggests why such exotic shells came to be associated with swords, guns and warriors' accoutrements. Throughout West Africa it is believed that thunder and lightning have a physical form: during severe storms thunderbolts fall and can later be found on or near the surface of the ground. The Asante believe each burst of thunder and lightning contains a thunderbolt and they may look for these near any object struck in a storm. The items they perceive as thunderbolts are the worn-down remains of Neolithic axes referred to as '*Nyame akuma* ('God's axes') which continually wash out of the soil. Trees or buildings hit by lightning or death by lightning blast are believed to be caused by '*Nyame akuma* hurled from on high.

It is unclear why red shells should originally have been considered as protection against '*Nyame akuma*. However, it is possible to speculate that their use on weapons of war arose from an intermediate conceptual stage: a stage in which local people made a link between the noise and flash of firearms, the wounds they inflicted, and the harm which was already known to be caused by thunder and lightning and which was conceived as being caused by '*Nyame akuma*. European guns may thus have been seen as projecting a form of '*Nyame akuma*. We may therefore speculate that the Asante decoration of war-gear with shells and gold derivatives of shells is a distant continuation of the fifteenth-century beliefs and practices reported from the coast. If exotic shells were seen as a protection against thunderbolts, they could also have been taken up as a protection against gunshot and so been adopted as an important protective addition to the equipment used in fighting. This is speculation; what remains, however, is evidence that the most important types of military equipment were adorned with items originating far from Asante and which could be obtained only by trade.

Firearms made obsolescent the shields used formerly, but these have retained a symbolic role. Large shields (*ekyem*) were made by attaching a hide cover to a wicker or wooden framework. Such shields are depicted in numerous gold-weights, both as frames and complete shields, and many of the latter have their outer surfaces decorated with bells and metal plates. A few, apparently early, shield weights show them decorated either with elephant tails and keys or representations of these: presumably these indicated the sword-bearer's high status. Weights also show shields being held by men on foot or by mounted warriors.

Shields clearly became used less often in battle as spears and bows and



arrows were increasingly replaced by imported firearms. They were, however, used in Asante until Prempe I was forcibly exiled, and were again brought out for the enstoolment of Prempe II.

Early sources indicate that shields were used to show the status of the owner as well as to protect him. The more important people had leopard, crocodile or elephant skin upon their shields, and Bosman records that a man who had achieved high status was permitted to carry two shields.⁶¹ The earlier coastal custom of dancing with shields was continued in Asante: at one point in his installation the Asantehene dances bearing the *Bosommuru* state sword in his right hand and a shield in his left. Until recently, however, the symbolic significance of these shields was not understood.

A clue to this was recently discovered among the accounts of a planned slave rising in Antigua in 1736.⁶² The slaves involved were clearly Akans, although not necessarily Asante, and in planning their revolt they made use of ranks and practices from their homeland. It is clear that these shields were used in a ritual, a 'shield-dance' in which a ruler, having danced with a sword and spear, swore to prosecute a planned war with the utmost vigour and not to desert the field. The shield thus remained as a special indication of warlike intention and is still used to stress the military, aggressive role of a newly installed ruler.

The strong verbal component and the subtleties of meaning of major regalia within Asante were often misunderstood by Europeans. Perhaps the clearest case of the conflicting assumptions of Asante and European negotiators arose

Above Shields, photographed during the 1930s.

Right Gun-men wearing war belts decorated with golden shells.



from the diplomatic use of the Golden Axe, *Sika Kuma*, an item of regalia dispatched from Kumase only on the most major diplomatic missions. Like messenger swords it was intended to show unequivocally that the mission bearing it came from the Asantehene and his council and was empowered to conduct especially important negotiations and investigations. In 1806 the Asantehene dispatched a party to investigate a dispute in the south, sending officials to one of those involved 'with two gold-headed swords and a gold axe, and requested him to remain quiet'. A rival group seized the royal negotiators, killed them, and took the swords and axe which, it was reported, were later passed to a Fante group to raise support.⁶³ A Dutch source gives an account from the Asante viewpoint: two chiefs, regarded by Asante as ruling areas within their realm, came into dispute. One rejected the Asantehene's intervention and fled to Fante with his supporters. An envoy from Kumase was sent to obtain their return, but the Fante refused to co-operate. 'The Asante Monarch then sent an envoy on whom [he] hung his golden sword and before whom was carried the Golden Axe of his forefathers as proof that this [envoy] represented his person. But the Fante scoundrels – who are the worst people on earth – murdered the Envoys and robbed them of the golden axe and Sword and everything else they had with them. After this [the Asantehene] having sent [envoys] for the third time, they [the Fantes] answered saying that their great fetish had taken the axe and Sword to Heaven.'⁶⁴ This serious defiance of the authority of Kumase was one of the factors which led to the 1807 Asante invasion of Fante.

In 1881 a crisis occurred in relations between the British and Asante, and the Golden Axe was brought out again. A refugee from Kumase fled to Cape Coast and claimed British protection. A day later a senior delegation arrived, bearing the Golden Axe, and demanded he be returned to Kumase. The British saw the axe as a symbol of aggression and a threat, taking a literal view of its meaning. Griffith, the Lieutenant-Governor, later wrote: 'The refusal of a demand from Ashanti accompanied by the Golden Axe, means war on the part of the Ashantis, that they will cut their way to the accomplishment of their purpose. The Golden Axe was sent down in 1863 and 1873 and war followed.'⁶⁵ The British were told by a number of local people that the real meaning of the axe was more subtle: it showed the Asante determination to cut through all blockages on the path to a settlement. The British refused to see this, and, although a second embassy followed, the matter was unresolved and both sides feared that war was likely. One of the most experienced officials, Boakye Tenten, one of the Asantehene's *akyeame*, was then sent to the coast with a mission numbering about 400 people. He carried about 57 kg of gold, raised by a special tax, to offer to Governor Rowe towards the heavy indemnity imposed in 1874 and as an indication of the Asante desire for continued peace. He stressed that the British were not to see the Golden Axe as a sign of war.

'The Prince [Boakye] further explained that Asante had two symbols of war, a peculiar sword and a certain cap; whereas the "Gold Axe" being "fetish" and endowed with some magical and mysterious power, is never sent on a hostile errand'. This garbled version of indigenous exegesis continues: 'The

weapon, said Prince Bwaki, is so old that no one knows its origin, and it is held so precious that in procession it precedes the Great Royal Stool, or throne of Asante. The leopard skin, bound with gold upon the handle, symbolises courage in the field; the gold is wealth, the iron strength.⁶⁶ Boakye is also quoted as saying that in future the Golden Axe, so open to misunderstanding, should not be used: 'The Queen of England presented a silver-topped cane to Quaco Duah [the Asantehene] this cane the King has, and he proposes to have it copied in gold, and to send the cane with his messengers in future, so there shall be no mistake about the meaning, as there was about the axe.'⁶⁷ Governor Rowe indicated these peaceable overtures would carry more weight if the Axe were handed over to the British. The matter was referred to the Kumase council at the end of April, and in late May of 1882 a senior official arrived from Kumase explaining how, after lengthy debate, it had been decided to present the axe to Queen Victoria.

The largest, most striking items of regalia were the multi-coloured umbrellas (*kyinie*) used to shade senior chiefs whenever they appeared in public. By the time Bowdich visited Kumase these were central to the displays connected with kingship, and they had probably been used in Asante long before 1817. Chiefs using umbrellas for shade were observed on the coast in the seventeenth century. It is possible that the Akan learned of umbrellas from the north: an umbrella topped by a golden bird was used to shade the ruler of Mali in the fourteenth century.

The umbrellas seen by nineteenth-century visitors were generally circular, but a few square or rectangular ones were also reported. Circular umbrellas were usually, perhaps always, made to fold. The frame was made of a hard, evenly grained wood, *twafoyeden* (*Harrisonia occidentalis*), in three parts: the central shaft, perhaps 7.5 cm in diameter and about 3 m long, and two sets of ribs. The top set of ribs supported the cloth covering and folded downwards; the lower set braced the upper ones and was attached to a wooden

The Golden Axe of Asante presented to Queen Victoria. Reproduced by Gracious Permission of Her Majesty The Queen.





The King of
Nkoransa, c. 1897,
seated beneath his
state umbrella.

collar which slid up and down the shaft. The inner ends of the lower ribs were hinged to slots in the top of this sliding collar, and a hole was drilled through each outer end. The upper ribs were similarly hinged to a wooden ring fixed at the top of the central shaft. These upper ribs were about two or three times as long as the lower ones, and each was drilled between a third and half-way along its length from the centre. A single length of rope was threaded alternately between the holes in the outer ends of the lower ribs and those in the upper. When the lower collar was slid up the central shaft, the ribs were pushed outwards, the rope was tightened, and the upper ribs, to which the cloth covering was sewn, were forced outwards and rigidly braced. The collar was then fixed in position by a wooden peg, a nail pushed through a hole in the shaft or a sprung clip. Umbrella making was a skilled task: in the early nineteenth century there was a village of umbrella makers just outside Kumase, presumably supplying the palace and the senior functionaries of the capital, and most major states seem to have had their own umbrella makers into the present century.

The coverings for umbrellas were clearly intended to be spectacular, and imported cloths were mainly used, both for the dome and for the hanging valance. The predominant colour in many umbrellas is red, but many also

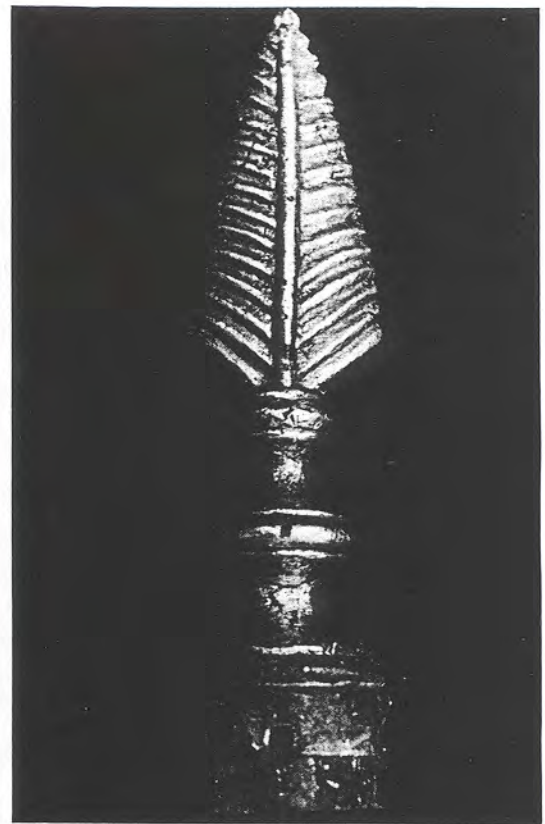
have areas of coloured velvets (yellow being preferred) and pieces of vari-coloured patterned prints. A small umbrella given to Bowdich, and described as a 'child's' umbrella, is covered with several types of imported cloth. A few very important umbrellas are covered with thick multi-coloured *nsaa* cloth, made by the Fulani from sheep or goat wool. The umbrella used to shade the Golden Stool and known as *Katamanso* ('the covering of the nation') was made of this, and so is one used by the Bantamahene.

An umbrella was obviously used to keep the chief physically cool, but it was also intended to promote a condition of spiritual peace and coolness (*dwo*) and to create around him a particular symbolic space. Rattray quotes a well-known saying: *Onyame nhu ohene apampam* ('God should not see the crown of the King's head'),⁶⁸ and the umbrella serves to isolate the King from above in the way that his sandals prevent his ever coming into direct contact with the earth beneath. The Asantehene was covered with an umbrella whenever he left the palace and when he moved from one part to another: even when he and other senior chiefs held audiences at night, they sat beneath umbrellas.

One obvious function of the umbrella was to signal the presence of the chief. When the streets of the capital were crowded with the vast unruly throngs celebrating the Odwira festival or in the confusion of the battlefield, these huge umbrellas, towering high above men's heads, could be seen easily. When a chief walked, his umbrella-bearer (*kyinie kyimini*) made the umbrella 'dance' to the music of the drums and horns that accompanied his chief, sounding his praise-names and recounting his deeds. The bearer raised, lowered and spun the umbrella pole to make the valance flap and twirl to produce a cool breeze and to show the umbrella's colours to best advantage. The umbrella thus combined the element of display and spectacle with the idea of the necessary coolness of the chief, a coolness to which the great fans and elephant-tail whisks which were used around the King also contributed.

The umbrellas seen and described by Bowdich were topped by a variety of images: '. . . crowned on the top with crescents, pelicans, elephants, barrels, and arms and swords of gold; they were of various shapes, but mostly dome, and the valances (in some of which small looking glasses were inserted) fantastically scalloped and fringed; . . . a few were roofed with leopard skins, and crowned with various animals naturally stuffed.'⁶⁹

These tops (*kyinie akyi*) are detachable: they usually have a square socket in their base which fits over a block protruding from the top of the umbrella, and a pin or nail is pushed through a hole in both to keep the finial in place. There exist a number of documented nineteenth-century umbrella tops, and several more are depicted in photographs taken in the last two decades of the century. This evidence makes it clear that the most common type of umbrella top was the one showing a *babadua*, a type of cane with rings running around it at short intervals. A number of explanations of this top are now proffered: according to some, the *babadua* was used in constructing barricades during war; according to others, it was particularly strong and resilient (it is often used in house construction). Other sources suggest that a path of *babadua* was put down, and when the cane broke under the weight of warriors the army was big enough.



Above (left) Umbrella top, in the form of five *sankofa* birds, made of wood covered with gold foil.

Above (right) Umbrella top in the form of the *aya* leaf. Offinso state regalia.

Clearly the underlying idea is of resilience and toughness. Asantehene Kwaku Dua II, who reigned briefly in the mid 1880s, was photographed seated under an umbrella topped with a *babadua* cane, and umbrella tops of the same type were used by the Amanhene of Nsuta, Nkoransa, Kokofu, Bekwae and Wankyi in the 1890s.⁷⁰ The umbrellas under which Prempe II was shaded after his installation were also topped in this way, and the great majority of those used by senior chiefs at the parade following the installation were topped with carvings of *babadua*. The predominance of this type of umbrella top is indicated by Rattray's remark: 'The ornamental tops of state umbrellas are called *Babadua*.'⁷¹

Another common umbrella top depicts a war-horn (*akoben*). Tops of this type ('crescents') were observed by Bowdich and are today among the regalia of several major states as well as a number of Kumase chiefs. A number of proverbs are put forward to give the significance of this horn, but all turn on its importance in war and the fact that only the victorious have the right to sound it: 'When an army is defeated a horn is not blown in its honour.'⁷² It is possible that this type of top is ultimately derived from the Islamic crescents which often decorated the umbrellas of Muslim rulers, an exotic image which has been interpreted by the Asante in terms of their own culture.

Three other common images are the *sankofa* bird, a chevron-patterned fern called *aya*, and the top of a strong-smelling plant, *prekese*. The fern *aya* is said to be a form of visual pun: the plant is considered beautiful because of its symmetrical form (just as the *babadua* is admired for its regularity), but its name, spoken with the tones slightly altered, also means abuse. The top is

therefore said to be a warning against ill-considered speech in the ruler's presence.

A number of other nineteenth-century umbrella tops are known in a variety of forms: at least one top made from animal skin is preserved within Asante, in the regalia of the Bantama stool, and is a model of an elephant. Other tops, of unclear provenance, depict a lion, a hand holding a pistol, and a hand with a thumb raised in the air.

The earliest explanation of the significance of these tops is, inevitably, given by Bowdich: 'a small black wooden image, with a bunch of rusty hair in the head'⁷³ was intended to represent an Akyim chief slain by the chief to whom the umbrella belonged. The majority of images, however, now seem to have a far more indirect and generalised significance than this. On one level these images are considered pleasing because they are well carved and show things or creatures which are themselves considered beautiful or powerful, and on another they are given a wider significance by having various verbal formulae attached to them. These sayings, aphorisms and proverbs are interpreted as making truistic statements about the chiefs who are sheltered under the umbrellas and their political position.

In the past there also seems to have been some restriction placed on who could possess umbrella tops of particular types. Rattray claims 'they varied according to the rank of the chief. The top of the King of Ashanti's umbrella was of gold and might represent a war horn, *akoben*, a hen covering her chickens, *akokobatan*, or a palm tree, *abe*. The *Babadua* of *amanhene* were of silver, with the exception of Juaben, who being of the King's clan might have one of gold. Gods have their umbrellas for their shrines just as kings and princes, but they are made of white material and are generally surmounted by a gong (*odawura*)'.⁷⁴ The views Rattray expressed were probably a statement of the ideal rather than the practice at the time he wrote. Nowadays most umbrella tops of Amanhene are covered with gold leaf, and a number of nineteenth-century umbrellas possessed by *abosom* are of red and not white cloth.