

The Rise of Ayawaso

Ayawaso was a city on a hill whose light pierced the surrounding darkness, and brought purity and knowledge to people far and wide. If we are to know ourselves completely, we must first seek knowledge of the thoughts and deeds of our forefathers at Ayawaso; and write them upon our hearts."

The second part of these Lectures deals with the Kingdom of Ayawaso. Although Ayawaso is widely recognised as the first centralised kingdom to emerge on the Gold Coast, its role in the development of modern Ghanaian culture seems to have been generally under-researched. Reindorf's work has largely documented the extent of Ayawaso and its connections with the early kingdoms of the Gold Coast; but the detailed political history of Ayawaso as well as the social and economic systems which underpinned Ayawaso culture have barely engaged the attention of historians.

There is evidence to suggest that Dangme civilisation preceded Gá culture. Prior to the centralisation of the Gá-Dangme states, Osudoku appears to have been the epicentre of Dangme culture; the founder of the Dangme dynasty is identified as La Nimo. By the time of the rise of Ayawaso there were about thirty major Gá-Dangme towns strewn across the plains; these were united by the Gá priest-kings into a centralised kingdom.

What is known about the Accra plains prior to the emergence of the Gá-Dangme kingdom is owed to archaeologists. Anquandah has suggested that the Accra plains were inhabited during the first four millenia before Christ by Later Stone Age hunter-gatherers who were given to fishing for fresh water molluscs along the inland waterways of the Odaw, Densu and Nsaki rivers; little is known of the identity of these Stone Age inhabitants.

Under King Ayi Kushi and his son Ayitey the Gá dynasty, organised around key Gá Mashi quarters, started to assert its authority across the Accra plains, exploiting well-defined Ga-Dangme social arrangements to ensure solidarity amongst scattered subjects and to maintain authority. It has been suggested that the Gá dynasty had a "prince with a few bodyguards who had commission to rule over the Tshis [Akyems] in the interior."

Although the connection between the Gá dynasty and the ruler of the interior is not defined, there is ample evidence, particularly in the royal

names of Ofori, Ankama, Ayikuma, etc. (which are common to the Gá and Akyem royal households) to suggest a blood connection between the Gá and Akyem rulers.

Ayitey is said to have marched with the Gá, Dangmes, Obutus, Awutus and the Twi prince to establish the inland kingdom of Ayawaso. It is thought that fourteen large towns were founded by the Gá alongside Ayawaso; these included Akpadegon, Amonmole, Fanofa, Dokutso, Pletekwogon, and Kushibiete or Legon. Several other towns were established by subdivisions of the Gá. These included Wodoku, Lashibi, Wodode, Wo-Akwamu, which belonged to Nungua; Tebiano, Podoku, Lakanmabi or Ashaman and Takimabi, which belonged to Tema; and Ladoku and Ajangote, belonging to Labadi. The various towns founded across the Accra plains as well as the rest of the Adangmes, Agotimes, Akwamus and Akwapims were absorbed into the kingdom of Ayawaso which is said to have extended from Aharamata to Popo beyond the Volta.

From the hill-top capital at Okaikoi, near present-day Ayawaso, the Gá monarchs kept a watchful eye over their kingdom and consolidated their hold over the trade in gold, establishing considerable influence over peoples on the periphery of their domain. A large military force was developed to deal with upheavals and ensure tranquility within the kingdom. Dapper reported that the king of Accra had fifteen to sixteen thousand men at his command in time of war.

Equally, Romer commented that the king of Accra had "many thousand archers, assagay or spearmen and swordmen; each of his eighty generals carried a gun with ten charges of gun powder and bullets."

The army was supported by a thriving guild of blacksmiths as well as traders, merchants, farmers, salt-makers and fishermen. Aside from a standing professional army, all able-bodied persons were drafted into service during times of war. Munitions and military assistance were regularly obtained from European merchants; and vassal states sent their princes to the king's court to be educated in the arts of warfare and statesmanship.

Archaeological evidence documented by Anquandah suggests that Ayawaso flourished through a number of inter-connected activities. Excavations at Ayawaso and surrounding hills have revealed excellent pottery with complex artistic motifs and stylised figures. Alluvial gold appears to have been dredged from the rivers Densu and Nsaki and sold to

the Portuguese; the resulting commerce introduced Portuguese cloth, iron rods, European pottery, firearms, alcohol to the Gá kingdom.

Further excavations at Ayawaso have also revealed fragments of walls of furnace used for iron-smelting and smithing; finished iron implements have also been excavated as well as clay crucibles used for melting down brasswear and for the manufacture of jewellery and other ornaments.

Clearly the military organisation of the Gá was fairly more complex than could be found among contemporary peoples. It was based on a system of regimentation that drew on the house (we) and quarter organisation of the Gá-Dangme towns. Each individual fought as part of a wider unit headed by a recognised leader; the units were in turn connected to the the quarter chief under whom it fought. The resulting military system is examined in some detail in section 2.2.1 below.

The territory of the king of Accra was divided into two basic units, corresponding roughly with the plains to the East and West of Okaikoi. The Eastern plains or Boka-Nná were well-known for the pottery of Shai, and the animal husbandry of the Ningo and Prampram coastlands. The Western plains or Jor-Náá (valley site (after the Densu depression)) were largely settled and worked by agrarian farmers of Awutu and Awutu origin. The king's territory was subdivided into the coast lands of the South and hunting lands to the North. The first family known to have occupied the coastal strip of Accra was that of Lakote Aduawushi.

Towns and their households were organised along well-defined principles under which each citizen could be identified through an alternative generational naming system in which each individuals name is coded to reveal not only the town and quarter from which he or she originated, but also his or her position within the family.

According to the traditions of Naiwe and Sakumowe, the Akwapim hills were used by the Gá rulers for the settlement of slaves; hence the name (Akwa-apim or "a thousand slaves"). On the other hand, the territory which was later granted to the Akwamu was used for the settlement of fugitives. Thus when the occupants of these territories, led by a certain Amu, started to assert themselves the Gá stated dismissively: Akwé-Amu or "see what Amu is up to".

Blood relationship between the Gá-Dangme monarchs and the Akyem appears to have ensured peace between the two peoples. But to consolidate their power further and to unite the Gá with their neighbours, the Ayawaso kings contracted several strategic marriages. The Obutu and Awutu were joined to the Gá-Dangme through Mampong Okai's marriage to the granddaughter of Wyetey, Dode Akabi; and to cement their relations with the Dangme further King Okaikoi contracted a marriage to a Shai princess.

Having united their neighbours through military strength and diplomacy the Gá dynasty then proceeded to build its economic power, chiefly by monopolising the gold trade. By the reign of Mampong Okai the Gá monarch was living in considerable style; and Akwamu, Akwapim, Obutu, Awutu and the Eastern territories as far as Popo formed part of the kingdom. Dapper remarked that the king of Accra "hath the repute of a potent prince ... He hath a more absolute sovereignty over his subjects than any of his neighbours."

There were several influential officials at the king's court. The king's treasurer was described as he who "keepeth his gold and other riches; receiveth and payeth all and doth all other business for the king. He is next to the king, and he commonly hath more golden rings about his neck, arms and feet than tmx king himself.

In addition to several officials of military rank there was also the dzaramanche or captain of the traders who exercised considerable authority over the gold trade; he collected taxes and settled quarrels; he also punished offending traders.

The king himself was largely concerned with maintaining law and order in his kingdom; and keeping external powers at bay. He kept a council of elders and retained considerable judicial and executive powers. By the reign of Mampong Okai the Gá-Dangme had successfully monopolised the trade in gold in the South-Eastern part of the Gold Coast. Mampong Okai himself was reputed to be so rich that he went under the appellation Owura Mampong Okai; his son Okaikoi was nicknamed "Afadi" or the prosperous one.

In common with Gá monarchs of the time Okaikoi had kept a large court; and had many wives, courtiers and court musicians. Aside from the monarchical princes of the house of Tungmawe there seemed to have

emerged an oligarchy of powerful personages who started to exert their influence powerfully in town-quarter politics.

Aside from the general acknowledgement that Ayi Kushi was the first Gá king within living memory little has been recorded this individual; he is particularly revered by the Gá-Dangme high priests. Like a veritable Black Moses, Ayi Kushi emerges from the oral tradition as an illustrious and astute leader as well as law-giver who united the Gá-Dangme into a powerful tribe; and set the precedent for the diplomatic and conquering activities of later Gá kings.

To organise the Gá into a strong nation Ayi Kushi needed to establish a powerful core group of powerful leaders who felt sufficiently loyal to their forebears as to defend its honour at all times. Ayi Kushi also realised the value of peace and political stability as the basis of all social progress. To this end he embarked on a series of brilliant military campaigns which drove a number of people's, including the Le and Kyerepong tribes to the interior; he also instituted a number of commandments, now incorporated into the baptismal or kpodziemó blessings of all Gá infants.

Central to the lore surrounding Ayi Kushi are what are generally regarded as the Seven Commandments of Ayi Kushi. Legend records that the commandments of Ayi Kushi were given to the gathered tribal elders on Kushibiete or Legon hill (hill of knowledge). Ayi Kushi's Seven Commandments were for the members of the group to love and to cherish the commandments of their fathers; to obey the will of the Deity at all times; to show extraordinary self-sacrifice for the group; also, to show sacrifice as a life-long duty to one's children; not to steal; not to lie; and to be utterly truthful and pure in all one's activities.

The Commandments appear to have risen out of Ayi Kushi's concern to preserve the religious purity of the Gá-Dangme; the fight for religious purity was ultimately to lead to the expulsion of the major religionists to the coastal strip where a hard stratum of the aboriginal Gá-Dangme religion was ultimately mixed with the nature-gods exemplified by Nai, Sakumo, etc; and by the orgiastic antics of the akon cult and other fetish religions.

At Legon, Ayi Kushi is also said to have bound the Gá leaders and their peoples by a Sacred Covenant; the leaders pledged themselves and their

descendants to perpetual loyalty to the ruling house. In return the Grulers vowed to rule justly according to the precepts of the religion of their ancestors; and to defend the interest of the Gá-Dangme at all times. In recognition of this covenant Ayi Kushi decreed that both his remains and those of the assembled Gá-Dangme leaders, including Obutu and Awutu leaders, were to be interred on Okaikoi hill which was to be a symbol of the perpetual unity of the peoples of the South-Eastern coast of the Gold Coast.

Part of King Ayi Kushi's duties as supreme lord of the Gá-Dangme was to occasionally sit in judgment over disputes between his various subjects; he appeared to have delegated part of this job to leading priests and other influential people. Thus developed the custom of holding court and public arguments under trees in the court-yards priests; Sakumo-tsoshishi and Osrama-tsoshishi in the present Gbese quarter being well-known examples.

Ayi Kushi's judgments laid down the various rules which ensure the ethnic cohesion of his people; for instance, his precept that patrilineality is the defining principle of Gá-Dangme citizenship has generally been observed to this day. For assimilated peoples such as the Akwamu, many of whom were married to Gá-Dangme women matrilineality (emphasising the Gá-Dangme female blood) became all-important.

After the political leaders had departed Ayi Kushi invoked the name of the Almighty in the manner of his ancestors, and made a covenant with the leaders of the quarters and the households. Amidst scenes of thunder and lightning the peak of Legon hill is said to belched sulphurous smoke as the old king called on the name of his ancestral God.

Before the assembled mass of Gá, Adangme, Awutu and Obutu peoples, the king is said to have prayed, poured water on the ground and asked the Almighty to bless and set his people aside to be an example of piety to other peoples. Ayi Kushi is believed to have retired to the coastal strip, and died shortly after gathering the people on Legon hill; his remains were, as he had decreed, buried on Okaikoi hill.

Ayi Kushi was succeeded by his son, Ayitey, who consolidated the gains of his forebear principally by the complete assimilation of the Awutu and Obutu into the Gá-Dangme polity through marriage. Further, the inhabitants of the new territories were encouraged to inter-marry with Gá-

Dangme peoples and to think of themselves as Gá-Dangme. In this way the people of Senya Bereku and Awutu became assimilated into the family of Naiwe; to the present day the ruling families of Awutu and Senya Bereku bear the title of Nai in recognition of their blood relationship with the Gá.

By the time of King Mampong Okai the kingdom of Accra was the most powerful and most prosperous political entity to have yet emerged in Southern Ghana. So magnificent was the king's court and his power over the interior tribes that that he was styled Owura Mampong Okai; he was said to have ridden in a chariot and started to turn the attention of the Gá-Dangme tribes to the presence of Europeans on the coastal strip. Owura Mampong Okai extended his kingdom further eastward as far as Popo; his death was followed by the regency of Dode Akabi, "an intelligent and masculine woman and Princess of Obutu", whose alleged cruelty is still remembered by the Gá.

Dode Akabi's easy accession to power and her long reign (1610-1635) obviously suggest the degree of assimilation of previously non-Gá peoples. However, Dode Akabi's has hitherto been treated rather unfavourably by historians. Reindorf relates a series of brutal decrees issued under her authority; she was finally killed after she had ordered her subjects to sink a well at a place called Akabikenke.

Her accession to power as the first major female figure in Gá, and indeed Gold Coast, history should certainly rank as a remarkable event attesting to the skills of this powerful personality; Dode Akabi certainly displayed the ruthless decisiveness that has marked the careers of admired male statesmen the world over. Her alleged atrocities aside, Dode Akabi appears to have kept the kingdom intact. However, the manner of her death indicates a degree of dissent among her subjects.

Dode Akabi's regency and greatness is, perhaps, best analysed in the context of her role in the evolution of chiefship in the Gold Coast. Until her accession to power, chiefship appears to have been a male preserve. The chief in the theocratic state of Accra was by definition also a high priest or wulomo; he took a personal part in ritual dancing. As the high priest could only be male, Dode Akabi's rise to power necessarily entailed a schism between the powers of the wulomo and that of the king; this marked the

secularisation of Gá-Dangme politics, and the concentration of religious authority in the hands of the wulomei.

Since her authority, unlike her predecessors' was no longer derived from privileged access to the Deity, Dode Akabi had to formulate new methods of governance; this she did principally through the previously untried method of direct legislation which appears to have so drawn the ire of her subjects. She brought a new magnificence to royalty, chiefly by combining Western luxury with new standards of culture.

Analysed this way, Dode Akabi emerges as a formidable figure whose rise as the first female political leader of the Gold Coast opened new vistas of power to her gender. She is generally believed to have introduced much display, jewellery and colourful attire into the institution of chieftaincy; some even attribute the custom of sitting on stools to Dode Akabi. Prior to Dode Akabi stools were mainly taken into war, and held aloft to lift the spirit of the troops; popularly regarded as having no authority from the Deity, she demanded to sit on the war-stool to visually symbolise her authority over her people.

The reign of Okaikoi was the beginning of a fresh assertiveness by the Gá-Dangme. Okaikoi's power was based largely on the cult of the warrior, signalling the final shift of power from priest-kings to secular kings whose power rested almost exclusively on their ability to manipulate and control affairs within the Gá-Dangme polity.

Okaikoi appears to have continued Dode Akabi's policy of political control of his subjects, casting aside the previous practice of rule by consensus and through the authority of the Deity; it was the first major challenge to the theocratic basis of Gá-Dangme kingship. Surrounding himself with a body-guard of selected youth, Okaikoi demanded unlimited recognition and subservience from both subjects and conquered peoples; he also institutionalised the practice of princes of provincial states serving as armour-bearers in the king's court, formalising a practice which had always existed among the Gá-Dangme in a more general form.

Further, Okaikoi formed the Akwashong or supreme military command; this was intended to provide the basis of a renewal of Gá-Dangme military power. The king used the Akwashong as the basis for a new praetorian guard of fighters trained in aspects of warfare ranging from the handling of

firearms to fist-fighting. Although this soon led to resentment on the part of the old generals, it also led to the hitherto unexcelled expertise of the Gá at akotoku or fist-fighting. Okaikoi himself was famed for his personal valour; he was said to have killed leopards and lions bare-handed, and to have distinguished himself in battle and in several duels with neighbouring princes and noted warriors.

Confident in his own physical strength and courage as well as the fighting quality of his men, Okaikoi ignored his generals more and more. This divided the Gá-Dangme army and led to a conspiracy to topple the king; the conspiracy, hatched by Nikoilai and other generals involved the betrayal of the king into the hands of the Akwamu. According to Reindorf, the generals and the majority of Okaikoi's warriors arranged with the enemy to fire without bullets.

Thus, deserted and betrayed by his generals, the great king took his final stand against the Akwamus with a small force made up largely of his body-guard. With unequalled courage and ferocity he held the advance of the entire Akwamu army for the greater part of the day, killing six commanders himself. Eventually tired by his exertions and realising the treachery of his generals, King Okaikoi retreated to Nyantrabi where he mounted his royal stool, prayed for the prosperity of those warriors who had stood by him, and asked that no success should attend the efforts of the deserters; then took his own life. However, the courage of the king and his body-guard enabled thousands of women and children to be evacuated from Ayawaso, earning for him an imperishable name.

2.2 The contribution of Ayawaso to African history

2.3 The Social and Military Organisation of the Gá-Dangme

Gá-Dangme society is highly ordered in an ascending order along the basis of we, akutso, quarter, town and sub-group; each being a territorial and social unit through which the individual is linked the Gá-Dangme polity.

The individual is born into a specific adebo shia (plural: adebo shiai) which constitutes part of a we or a larger ancestral household. Presently, the we are concentrated in the ancestral settlements of the Gá-Dangme and in the outlying villages. A we usually comprises a maximal lineage made up of smaller lineages linked by remote ancestry or common residence. Members of the we are usually referred to as the we-ku or wekumei (people of the we-ku) and acknowledge the same weku yitso (head of

family). It is the responsibility of the weku to inculcate in the individual the Gá-Dangme social and economic ethic, and to ensure that he or she performs his or her role as a good citizen. In ancient times, the we-ku was much more closely-knitted and fought in the same war company or ta-ku under an asafoiatse appointed by the neighbourhood or akutso.

In practice, the akutso (plural: akutsei or group of [family] trees) constituted the basis of the Gá-Dangme socio/political order; the akutso is the Gá-Dangme state in microcosm. It provides the first major forum for discussion of issues affecting the body-politic; and in serious cases sends a deputation to the chief, articulating the concerns of the leaders of the various we. The man-dzranó (public square) of the akutso provides a place for public assembly, news-exchange and debate, initiating young people into the art of public speaking, political discussion and public entertainment.

The akutso therefore forms an important segment of the quarter; through the man-dzranó it performed, in ancient times, a role now undertaken by the daily and periodical press; through debate and public assembly, it also offered individuals the opportunity of vigorous intellectual exercise. The average citizen mixed with the exalted personages of the generation and if he was sufficiently diligent learnt of heroic exploits, the origin of customs and traditions and the general history of the group. By superior mental cultivation in this manner, many individuals rose above their rank; some were able to found we of their own; others were elevated to the quarter council; yet others, like Wetse Kojo, were able to found their own quarter.

The quarter is a political division of the Gá-Dangme polity; all smaller units are sub-divisions. The quarter is linked to the King through the quarter stool whose occupant or chief regularly swears oath of allegiance to the King, particularly prior to and during the Homowo/Asafotufiam/Nmayen festival.

The residence of the chief or mantse-we is an important point in traditional politics, constituting in essence an appellate court with jurisdiction over all matters arising within the limits of the quarter; it also exercised original jurisdiction in all matters considered to be of sufficient importance to merit the attention of the chief and his councillors.

Although a chief may delegate a good number of cases, he occasionally hears an important action himself. On such occasions he sits formally robed and surrounded by several courtiers robed according to rank. Matters of law aside, various other issues, mainly political and social, constantly engage the attention of the mantse-we officials.

Such occasions become a compelling demonstration of formal and idiomatic speech as well as custom, usage and procedure. The mantse-we tends to form the minds of many eminent courtiers and citizens used to listening to important matters and keen to acquire knowledge of traditional custom.

In times in war, heads of families and other influential persons in the akutso are called upon to provide troops and logistics. Able-bodied youngmen gather at the public square and are drilled for the war by specially appointed officials. The akutsei collectively appoint their own asafoiatse, usually a distinguished veteran of an old war, and one who would subsequently be capable of representing the interests of the akustei at quarter meetings.

The asafoiatse is therefore usually a man of forceful personality and considerable leadership qualities, able to instil discipline and inspire confidence in the troops. The various asafoiatsemei are in turn commanded by a shipi or captain of captains who is directly under the Akwashongtse (head of the Akwashong) or General Commander; the king remains the Commander in chief, and consults closely with the Akwashong. Although the men generally fought as one group during battle, individuals stuck with their own neighbourhood company under the asafoiatse. The entire body of fighting men was in turn divided into 4 main parts. At the rear were the reserves who kept the munitions and supplied them to the frontmen as and when required. In the main body of fighting men, troops from the seven quarters were divided into three units, corresponding roughly with the right wing, the van and the left wing. The king, if he happened to be at the war front, fought in the van together with the Akwashongtse and other distinguished generals. The other wings and subdivisions were commanded by the shipi.

As the ranks resounded to the clash of arms exhortations were heard from the rear, urging the men to fight ever forward and animating the zeal of the troops. If any prisoners of war were captured, the task of quartering them fell to the rear; and if reinforcements were needed fresh troops were called

up from the rear. It was the duty of the commander of the rear to also gather intelligence for the army. If the war was delayed or prolonged he got some of his men to procure rustic attire and mount reconnaissance surveys on the position of the enemy. He also kept a hawk's eye on the progress of the war and gave the Akwashongtse valuable advice on strategy and tactics, pointing out weak lines of defence in the ranks of the enemy and co-ordinating the movement of logistics and fresh troops.

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