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ASPECTS OF PRECOLONIAL AKAN ECONOMY

K. Y. Daaku

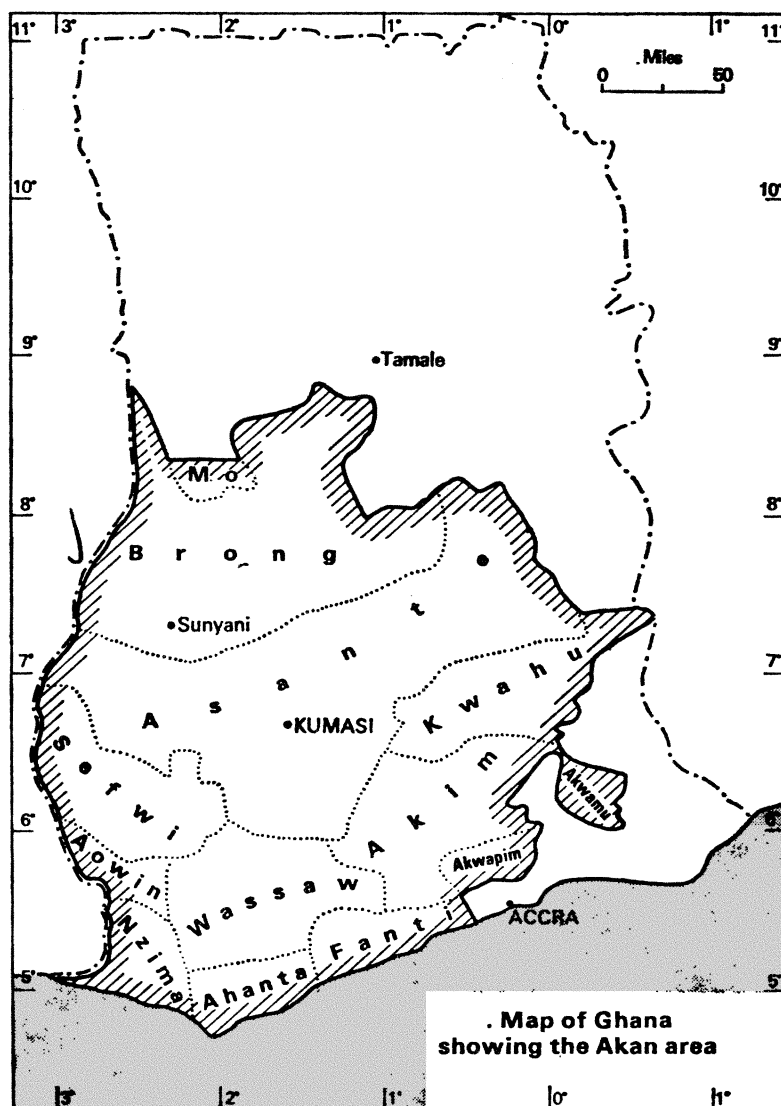
The traditional economy of Ghana was based on gold, ivory, kola nuts, and until the abolition of the slave trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century, slaves. Until the 1880s, the palm oil, rubber, and kola nuts that entered into the trading network were produced not by any systematic cultivation, but mainly collected from the forests.¹ The cultivation of such cash crops as cocoa and coffee was a feature of colonial rule, and the development of both commercial agriculture and manufacturing industries are twentieth-century phenomena, the latter appearing only with independence in the 1950s. In spite of attempts to launch Ghana as an industrial nation, agriculture forms the basis for the country's economy. Its most important exports are cocoa, timber, gold, and diamonds.

Apart from the kola nuts gathered in the forests of northern Asante, forest products did not become important in the Akan² economy until the abolition of the slave trade. All the early nineteenth-century European travelers into Asante note that the area was densely forested, with only a few patches of cultivation around the towns and villages.³ They observed correctly that the Akan economy was based on trade. The Portuguese pioneers who arrived on the coast of Ghana in 1471 found long-estab-

¹ K. B. Dickson, *A Historical Geography of Ghana* (London, 1969), 143 ff.; H. J. Bevin, "Gold Coast Economy," *Transactions of the Gold Coast and Togoland Historical Society*, II, 1 (1956), 73-85; Raymond Dumett, "The Rubber Trade of the Gold Coast and Asante in the Nineteenth Century: African Innovation and Market Responsiveness," *Journal of African History*, XII, 1 (1971), 79-102.

² The Akan are a West African subgroup who speak the Kwa languages. They occupied virtually all the forest area of Ghana and controlled almost all the gold mines. Politically they were monarchical with well organized states. The most famous of the Akan states was Asante.

³ W. Huydecoper, "Journal of the Visit to Kumasi" (unpublished manuscript, University of Ghana, Legon, 1962); T. E. Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (London, 1819); Kwesi Boaten, "A Historical Geography of Northern Asante" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Ghana, 1968).



Map 1. Adapted from K. Y. Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast 1600-1720* (London, 1970).

lished patterns of trade there. Along the Akan coastline, as in other places, salt manufacturing was a lucrative business. The coastal people exchanged salt and dried fish for food, cloth, and forest products from both the Akan and a few intrepid Mande Dyula traders. The latter came occasionally to the coast to buy salt to supplement the goods that they traded for gold with the miners in the forest region. The Portuguese also reported that canoes were used for travel along the coastline, perhaps as far eastward as Benin in modern Nigeria. The trading practices which the Portuguese soon established appear to have been merely a perfection of an already existing system,⁴ and indeed Akan participation in the trading network of West Africa, especially in the trade with the Niger Bend, assured easy adaptation of European trade to the local trade. It was no coincidence that the fourteenth-century cowrie exchange value in the Sudanese kingdom at the time of Ibn Battuta agreed with the fifteenth century Portuguese exchange value on the coast of Ghana. This, as Marian Johnson correctly points out, was due to the long-distance trade connection between the coast and the Niger Bend.⁵ It was in fact the desire of Mande traders to exploit Akan gold resources which led them in the fifteenth century to again penetrate eastward into Yoruba country to buy the beads and iron implements needed by the Akans.⁶

By the end of the sixteenth century the Akan economic production had become highly specialized, both regionally and locally. The salt and the dry fish of the coastal dwellers were exchanged for food stuff and other forest produce and the gold mining areas of Awowin and Wassa depended on their food-producing neighbors for their sustenance. At the same time Akan traders scoured the inland markets of the Wenchi-Bono-Takyiman area and beyond for such manufactured items as cotton cloth and blankets.⁷

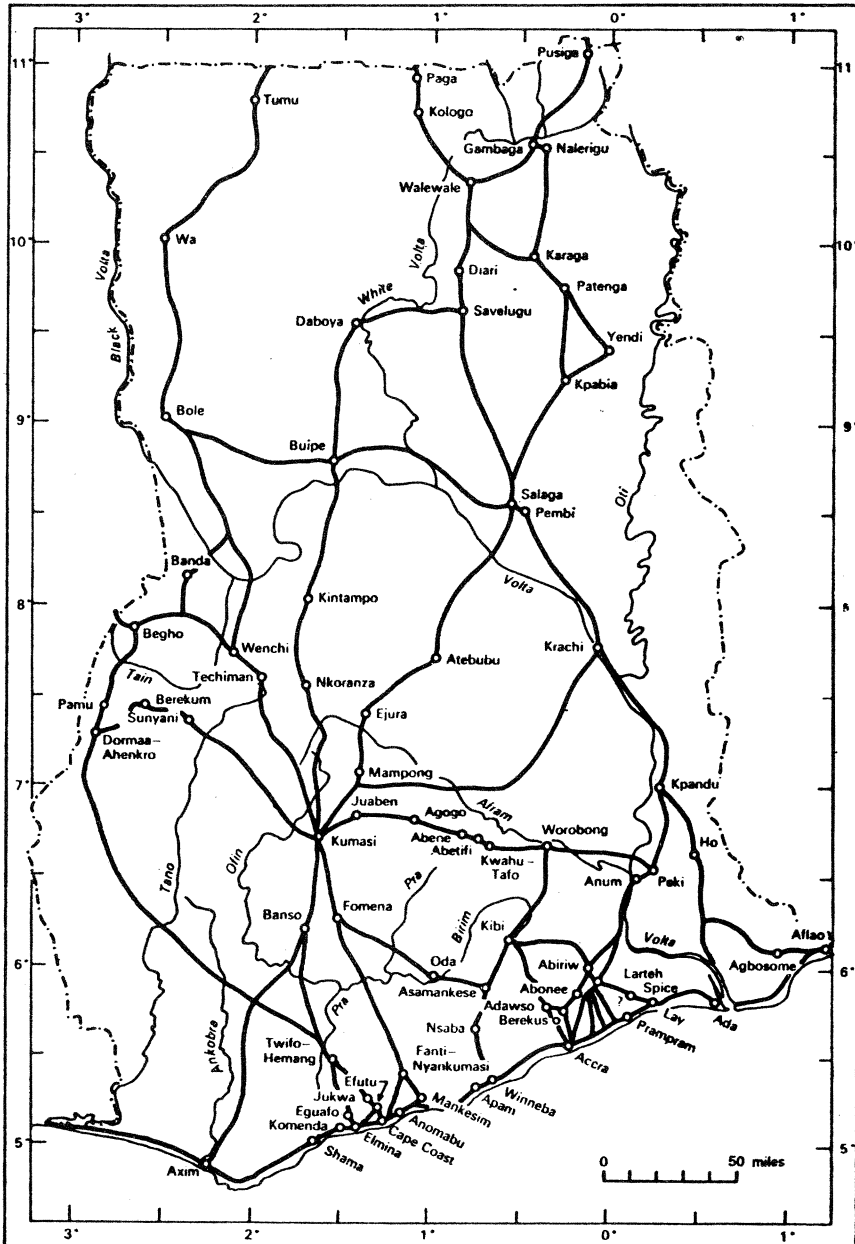
One of the most significant developments in the trade on the Ghana coast was the concentration of about twenty European forts and castles along the Akan coastline between Assini and Winneba. The establish-

⁴ J. D. Fage, *Ghana, A Historical Interpretation* (Madison, 1961), 42; J. W. Blake, *European Beginnings in West Africa 1454-1578* (London, 1937), 93; K. Y. Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast 1600-1720* (London, 1970), 6-8; Ivor Wilks, "A Medieval Trade Route from the Niger to the Gulf of Guinea," *Journal of African History*, III, 2 (1962).

⁵ Marian Johnson, "Cowry Currencies in West African Trade II," *Journal of African History*, XI, 3 (1970).

⁶ E. Meyerowitz, *Akan Traditions of Origin* (London, 1950), 89; C. Flight, "Chronology of the Kings of Takyiman," *Journal of African History*, XI, 1 (1970); P. Morton-Williams, "The Influence of Habitat and Trade on the Policies of Oyo and Ashanti," *African Notes*, IV, 3 (1968), 39-50.

⁷ K. Y. Daaku and A. van Dantzig, "Annotated Dutch Map 1929," *Ghana Notes and Queries*, 9 (1966).



Major trade routes, c. 1702

Map 2. Adapted from K. B. Dickson, *A Historical Geography of Ghana* (London, 1969).

ment of these forts brought trade right to the Akan doorstep. On the northern fringes of the forest, the important Mande trading centers of Buna and Begho, which sent gold and kola to Djenné and other northern markets, were set up. Until the beginning of the seventeenth century, both the coastal and northern markets were basically interested in the gold trade. There is no doubt that the demand for gold at these trading centers plus an increasing demand for kola nuts at the northern markets such as Begho and Buie highlighted the problem of inadequate labor for the Akan. To satisfy the increased demand, gold and kola production had to increase. Gold mining is itself a labor-intensive industry and given the unsophisticated implements at the disposal of the miners, many people must have been deployed to the mines to satisfy this ever-increasing need. Moreover, conveying kola to the north and headloading into the interior the pots, pans, and other goods now in appreciably larger quantities at the European establishments called for a growing number of carriers.

Almost certainly in an effort to solve the labor problem, the Portuguese initiated what one historian has described as "one of the oddities of early Afro-European trade in West Africa, the practice of buying captives from Benin to sell to the Akan traders at Elmina." Although the exact number of people who entered the Akan economic system as a result of the Elmina-Benin trade may never be known, it must have been substantial if the figures quoted for two isolated instances can be used as evidence. In April 1529 and August 1535, a total of 2140 people were brought to Elmina.⁸ Like many West African societies, the Akan easily absorbed former slaves, integrating them completely into society. The many slaves who were brought into Elmina — they were mainly female — soon helped to increase the population and the labor shortage was doubtlessly improved as a result.

The gain in population enabled the Akans to maintain an appreciably high level of gold production that sustained both the trans-Atlantic and the northern trade. That the amount of gold produced was substantial is indicated by the Portuguese gold export from the coast. By the end of the sixteenth century, Portugal was estimated to be carrying from the coast annually between 2000 and 3000 pounds, or £100,000 sterling, worth of gold. The amount was one-tenth of the world supply and was so important to the Portuguese economy that they made an attempt to monopolize the trade. Gold went northward to the Niger Bend in large enough quantities to lead to the establishment of large Mande trading towns like

⁸ Walter Rodney, "Gold and Slaves on the Gold Coast," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, X (1969), 19-28.

Begho,⁹ and in the early seventeenth century all of Holland came to depend solely on gold from the Akan mines in Ghana for its coinage. Moreover, in spite of the increase in the trans-Atlantic slave trade during the last few decades of the seventeenth century, the level of gold production did not fall below the early Portuguese exports, and by the turn of the century the Danes, Brandenburgers, Dutch, English, and Portuguese were actively trading in both gold and slaves. W. Bosman, a Dutch historian who was on the coast at the end of the seventeenth century, estimated the annual gold export at 7000 marks, or £224,000.¹⁰ However, in the eighteenth century the increased demand for slaves dropped gold production to a level below that of previous centuries.

The shift to the slave trade greatly affected the economic as well as the socio-political organization of the Akan people. From the fifteenth century the Akans had been forming larger political groupings in response to the external trade. The first such state had been established in the northwestern fringes of the forest in the Bono-Manso area to exploit the trade to the north. The concentration of European traders along the coast in the seventeenth century meant, however, that a reorganization of the states in which the commodities were obtained and through which they passed would grow to major importance in local politics. The latter part of the seventeenth century saw the increasing importation of firearms into Ghana, with the Dutch and the English competing to outsell each other in the new commodity. Indeed, by the end of the century the importance of firearms overshadowed all other European imports into Ghana.¹¹

Much has been said about the effects of the arms and the slave trades on African societies. The debate is still raging over the actual number of slaves taken from Africa to the New World. It has even been suggested that the overall effects on Africa may not have been as detrimental as they have been painted, since the Europeans supposedly brought in exotic food crops which aided the growth of the African population.¹² Propo-

⁹ Ivor Wilks, *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History* (Legon, 1961).

¹⁰ Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, 21-23, 47; W. Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London, 1721); Fage, *Ghana*, 47.

¹¹ Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, 150-152; S. Tenkorang, "The Importance of Firearms in the Struggle between Ashanti and the Coastal States," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, IX (1968), 1-16.

¹² W. Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast* (London, 1969); J. D. Fage, *A History of West Africa* (London, 1969); Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969); S. Tenkorang, "British Slave Trading Activities" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of London, 1964); K. Y. Daaku, "The Slave Trade and African Societies," in T. O. Ranger, ed., *Emerging Themes in African History* (Dar es Salaam, 1968).

nents of the benefits of slavery agree that the effects differed from place to place, that the incessant wars and raids which fed the slave trade told heavily on African institutions. Yet politically, they argue, states like Asante, Dahomey, and Futa Jalon which succeeded in insulating their nationals from the threat grew strong enough to boldly, though unsuccessfully resist the advance of the colonial powers in the nineteenth century.¹³ Whatever the merits of such an argument, few African states became strong enough to provide the necessary protection for their citizens. The majority, like Akwamu and the Kongo kingdoms, either committed national suicide by selling their own citizens or, without effective central organization, became easy prey for their more powerful neighbors.

Moreover, the insecure and threatening atmosphere the slave trade created was inimical to the pursuit of local craft industries. Craftsmen faced not only the fear of being enslaved but the uneven competition in African markets, which were swamped in many instances with useless European goods. Like the political, the economic effects were uneven, however, and items like guns and iron rods formed part of a capital investment in the hands of Africans which aided the program of territorial expansion, mining, and the subsistence agricultural economy. And in spite of the slave trade, the European presence stimulated trade in general.

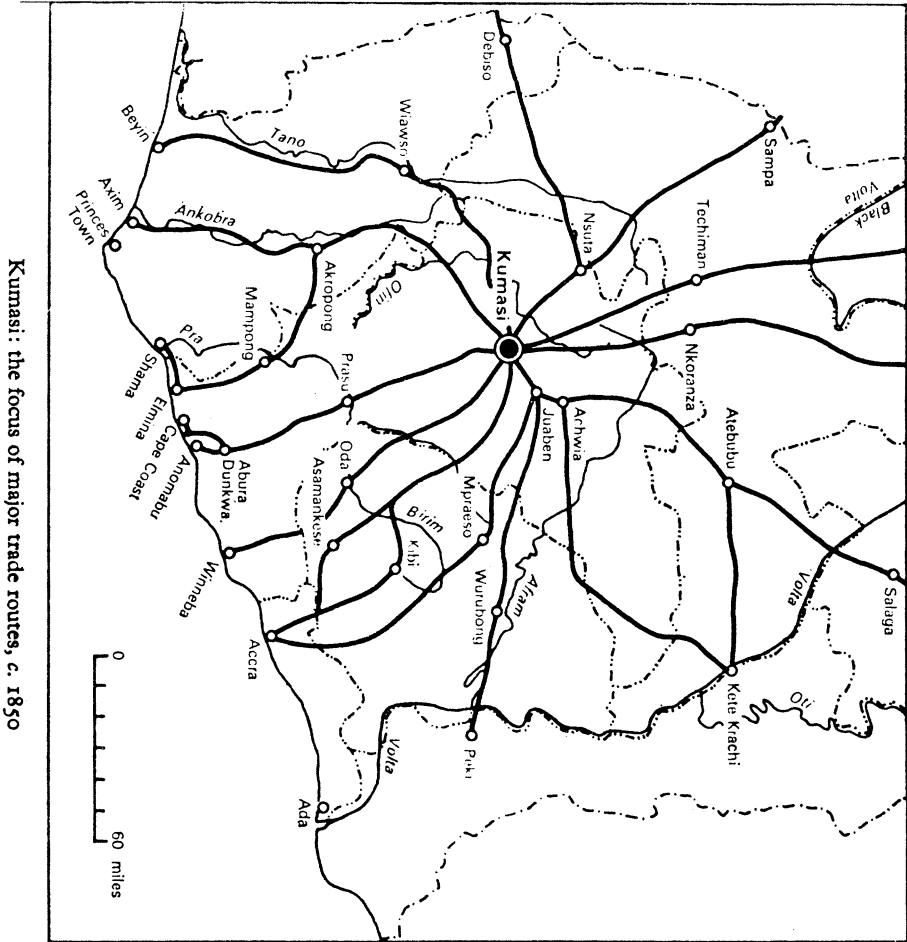
One of the interesting features of the Akan trade was that it was never state administered. In spite of the importance trade held for the rulers, no efforts were made to monopolize it. Unlike Dahomey to the east, Asante, the most powerful Akan state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, made no attempt to prevent the populace from trading.¹⁴ Indeed, most of the trade which was carried on between the Akans and the Europeans throughout the precolonial era seems to have depended on the efforts of individuals. What made such a development possible was the nature of the system of land tenure. Like many West African systems, the Akan system was egalitarian and prevented any artificial shortage of land,¹⁵ which was corporately owned and so could not easily be alienated. Chiefs and elders who in theory owned the land were only custodians for the living, the ancestors, and the generations not yet born. The individual had absolute right to all that accrued to him as a result of his labor on the land, but all that was beneath the land belonged to the community. As a

¹³ Rodney, "Gold and Slaves."

¹⁴ K. Polanyi *et al.*, eds., *Trade and Markets in Early Empires* (New York, 1956). They define administrative trade as trade which runs through government controlled channels.

¹⁵ H. Hymer, "Economic Forms in Pre-Colonial Ghana," *Journal of Economic History*, XXX, 1 (1970), 33-50.

Map 3. Adapted from K. B. Dickson, *A Historical Geography of Ghana* (London, 1969).



member of a state every citizen had a right to mine gold, with only minor restrictions. By custom he was expected to give two-thirds of all gold nuggets and all treasure troves to the chief, who was also entitled to part of the ivory captured.¹⁶

This egalitarian system of land tenure opened up trade for all. The individual in his trading efforts was unlimited and completely responsible, and rulers were at best to provide a peaceful framework within which trade could operate. Very early in the eighteenth century the European traders on the coast learned to their intense disappointment that in spite of the costly presents they had heaped upon the Asantehene, Osei Tutu, he could only suggest to Asante traders that they conduct their business at one European establishment over another.¹⁷ Inland, state or official traders may have come under the jurisdiction of the inland chiefs, but even here the whole transaction was carried out at the discretion of local leaders. Normally headed by a state official under the Gyaase division at court, and not infrequently heralded by the insignia of office identifying the traders as the king's men, state trading was an occasional rather than a regular feature of the Akan court.¹⁸ Indeed, official Akan trade depended on the activities of a long line of professional traders, who either stayed at trading centers as brokers and middlemen or became itinerant traders, buying and selling anywhere where profit was to be made. These were the *abatafo* and *akonkofo*, the long-distance traders and retailers rolled into one.

If the rulers did not monopolize trade in the precolonial era, on what was the economy of their states based? The relationship between rulers and traders is one of the most intriguing characteristics of the Akan state organization. Much that has been written on it has not been helpful to the historian. European writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw it as a grand conspiracy perpetrated by kings, nobles, and a few merchants to deprive the ordinary people of the benefits of trade.¹⁹

¹⁶ K. Y. Daaku, "Trade and Trading Patterns of the Akan of Ghana," in C. Meillassoux, ed., *West African Trade and Markets* (London, 1971), 106-119; Kwame Arhin, "Aspects of Ashanti Northern Trade in the Nineteenth Century," *Africa*, LX, 4 (1970); Kwame Arhin, "The Financing of the Ashanti Expansion, 1700-1820," *Africa*, XXXVII, 2 (1967); R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (London, 1929), 99-105.

¹⁷ Furlay Collections, Balme Library, University of Ghana, Legon, Dutch Records, Large Notebooks, 1, Director General to Council of Ten, October, 1705; Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, 35.

¹⁸ For the organization of the Akan trade, see Daaku, "Trade and Trading Patterns."

¹⁹ P. de Marees, *Descriptions and Historical Account of the Golden Coast of Guinea* (The Hague, 1602); D. Birmingham, "A Note on the Kingdom of Fetu," *Ghana Notes and Queries*, 9 (1966), 30-33; J. Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* (London, 1746); Bosnan, *New and Accurate Description*, 92.

A recent writer has described it as a symbiotic relationship in which the effective political and military organization of the state increased both territory and the scope of trade, which in turn led to greater taxation to enrich the state.²⁰ Such an ideal relationship presupposes that the Akan states derived much of their revenue by taxing traders. On the contrary, direct taxation had little place in the Akan scheme of things, as Asantehene Osei Bonsu pointed out to J. Dupuis, the British resident at Kumasi, in 1820. Experienced as he was in a culture in which the economic motive was very much emphasized, Dupuis was not unnaturally surprised that no effective taxation of traders was instituted in Asante. Although the Asantehene was referring to a nineteenth-century aspect of Asante administration, there is no reason to doubt that he was describing a custom of long precedence. Moreover, his statement could have been made by any of the Akan rulers, since the basic socio-political organization of all Akan groups was very similar. The king defined the lack of taxation as a moral issue:

I cannot tell them [the traders] to give me gold when they buy and sell . . . but I must give them gold and provisions and send them home happy and rich, that it may be known in other countries that I am a great king and know what is right.²¹

To most African rulers the provision of hospitality not only to traders but to all kinds of visitors was more important than the mere acquisition of wealth. Both the Fanti and Assini rulers indicated this to the Dutch at the beginning of the eighteenth century. They too refused to mar their relationship with foreign traders by granting trade monopolies to a limited number; all foreign traders were their guests.²² Such an open door policy to traders was not peculiar to Akan rulers. C. W. Newbury has noted that in both Yorubaland and in the Tukolor states rulers did not even indirectly tax traders. Income from such taxes, he observes, was insignificant in their economy. This lack of a clear-cut Western-styled fiscal policy in West African states has led one writer to conclude that the Mossi state was structurally weak and another to generalize that many West African states were significant only in terms of area and political organization since their economic bases were not strong enough to support a high degree of concentration.²³ If weakness of structure is measured

²⁰ Hymer, "Economic Forms."

²¹ J. Dupuis, *A Journal of a Residence in Ashantee* (London, 1924), quoted in Ivor Wilks, "Asante Policy towards Hausa Trade in the Nineteenth Century," in C. Meillaux, ed., *West African Trade and Markets* (London, 1971).

²² Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, 61.

²³ E. P. Skinner, *The Mossi of the Upper Volta* (Stanford, 1964), 125; C. W. New-

only in terms of defense against outside aggression, then all West African states were truly very weak indeed, for in the end they all succumbed to the technological superiority of the European colonizing powers. On the other hand, if a definition of strength is based on the political and socio-economic norms of the African people then the stricture of weakness cannot be sustained, since Asante, for instance, was known to have attained a high degree of bureaucratization by the beginning of the nineteenth century²⁴ that was eminently suited to its administrative needs. H. Hymer²⁵ has correctly described the Asante capital, Kumasi, as a city of thirty to forty thousand inhabitants supported by its own artisans, craftsmen, and farmers, and a very short step away from industrialization when it was conquered by the British.

For the Akan states in general and Asante in particular, right, as Osei Bonsu put it, was a structure in which the economic, social, and political systems were intricately interwoven, with everyone given his due. Within this pattern, the king provided the protection within which trade could flow with limited official interruption. The rationale behind such a policy was simple. The king's wealth and indirectly that of the state was potential rather than real. It relied on the capacity and the readiness of the people to pay all the extraordinary taxes and tributes needed to sustain the state. In polities like the Akan ones in which there was no standing army, national defense depended on the collective efforts of the people, who brought personally-owned firearms to supplement what the state provided for the king's bodyguard. The egalitarian system of land tenure and the open door trade policy were measures designed to enable the people to enrich themselves and indirectly to enrich the state.²⁶

In the light of this it is difficult to reconcile the popular assertion first put forward by T. E. Bowdich that the Asante adopted measures to inhibit the development of a mercantile class because they feared that any open encouragement of a merchant class would upset the neatly balanced socio-political system.²⁷ Interestingly, the statement is inferential rather than a fact Bowdich collected from the Asante he interviewed. Such an

bury, "Trade and Authority in West Africa," in P. Duignan and L. Gann, eds., *Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960* (London, 1969).

²⁴ Ivor Wilks, "Aspects of Bureaucratization in Nineteenth-Century Ashanti," *Journal of African History*, VII, 2 (1966).

²⁵ Hymer, "Economic Forms."

²⁶ Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*; oral traditions collected by K. Y. Daaku of Assin-Twifo (Legon, 1969), of Adanse (Legon, 1970), of Denkyira (Legon, 1971) [hereafter Daaku oral traditions].

²⁷ Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle*, 167; Arhin, "Aspects of Ashanti Northern Trade"; Morton-Williams, "Influence of Habitat and Trade."

argument ignores the highly interesting Akan concept of society. A people who openly assert that *Sika ne Panin*,²⁸ or "money is the elder," meaning that the rich person has most influence in councils, must have reconciled the dichotomy between those who became rich by their own efforts and those with the wealth of the traditional aristocracy. As Ivor Wilks has adequately demonstrated, Asante high office was available to commoners as well as nobles, to non Asante as well as to Asante.²⁹ The system of social mobility through economic means was not a peculiar feature of Asante social organization, for "the Asante nation was but an Akan state writ large."³⁰ The early seventeenth and eighteenth-century writers like Pieter de Marees, W. J. Müller, and William Bosman had seen powerful traders integrated into the traditional order and given political offices in addition to their trading activities.³¹ Admittedly, on the east the presence of the European forts and personnel in larger numbers and the fact that some powerful traders were supported by the foreigners against the traditional rulers made the process of integration difficult and led to what has been described as diffused authority.³² But in the inland states the corrosive effects of trade and foreign culture on the people could only have been minimal, if present at all. There are too many instances in local traditions of successful traders integrated into the Akan states for a merchant class to have been a threat to the socio-political order. The careers of men like Agyei, a salt trader who became chief linguist of the Asantehene in the nineteenth century, Kwaku Akore of Adanse, a successful trader who was raised to the status of chief, and many of the Asante diplomats show how the socio-political system was resilient enough to admit of innovations in the process of political growth.³³

The precolonial Akan economy was based on trade and from the early fifteenth century the Akans built their kingdoms along the termini of trade routes. The early kingdom of Bono-Mansu developed in response to the gold trade through the Mande town of Begho to the kingdoms of the Western Sudan,³⁴ and the rise of Denkyira in the middle of the seventeenth century was due to its control over the sources of gold and prob-

²⁸ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs* (London, 1914), 162.

²⁹ Wilks, "Aspects of Bureaucratisation"; G. P. Hagan, "Ashanti Bureaucracy" (unpublished manuscript, University of Ghana, Legon, 1970).

³⁰ B. D. G. Folson, "The Traditional Political System" (unpublished manuscript, University of Ghana, Legon, n. d.).

³¹ De Marees, *Description of the Golden Coast*; Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, 93-143.

³² K. Arhin, "Diffuse Authority among the Coastal Fanti," *Ghana Notes and Queries*, 9 (1966).

³³ Daaku, "Trade and Trading Patterns"; Daaku oral traditions; Wilks, "Aspects of Bureaucratisation."

³⁴ Meyerowitz, *Akan Traditions*, 89.

ably the kola growing areas. Significantly, when Akwamu proved unable to conquer the gold mines of Akyem it directed its expansionist efforts to the slave coast, the area east of the Volta River, in an effort to control the trade in slaves.³⁵ And Asante power, which had grown from the early seventeenth century in the kola-producing area, soon encompassed the sources of gold by defeating all the gold-rich states of Ghana. From there it controlled virtually all the eight principal arteries of trade leading to the northern and coastal markets. Unlike many other states, however, the Akan, whose political organization was but an enlargement of the nuclear family, saw in the state the fulfillment of the aspirations of all its members. From the fifteenth century trade had proved the best source of wealth. It was therefore open to all. Through trade rather than conquest the states were able to regularly incorporate other sources of capital, such as goods and slaves, to sustain their economy. The openness of the society in which outsiders were so easily integrated enabled the Akan polities to survive. Some, like Asante, increased in strength despite the slave trade until they were defeated by the British at the end of the nineteenth century.

H. Hymer has suggested that the egalitarian nature of the Akan land tenure militated against the emergence of a landowning class which would have capitalized on the land and turned the states into modern capitalist societies.³⁶ Given the Akan conception that a man's true greatness lies not in the acquisition but the disbursement of wealth, landed aristocracy with obligations to an extended family may not have invested their capital in business. Perhaps the failure of some African societies to accept individualistic and acquisitive capitalistic norms lies in what Osei Bonsu described in the 1820s as "what is right" — the honor of being considered generous. A popular Akan proverb says, *Sika peredwan da kurom a ewo amansan*,³⁷ "any capital in a town belongs to all the townsmen," for *Sita fre mmogya*, "money brings all blood relations together."

³⁵ I. Wilks, "The Rise of the Akwamu Empire," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, III, 2 (1957), 99-132.

³⁶ Hymer, "Economic Forms."

³⁷ Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs*, 164.