

300 years of the Ashanti kingdom

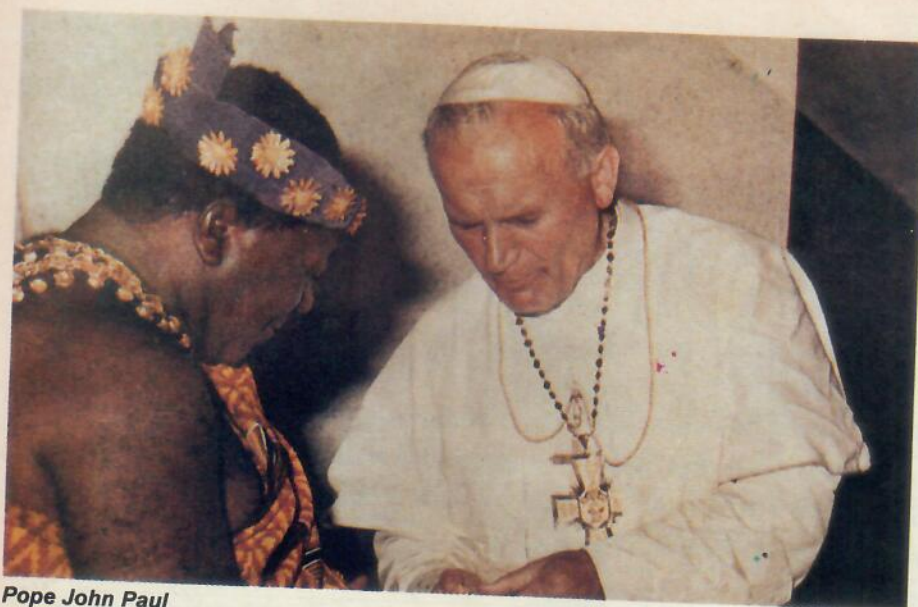
Rich in gold, mighty in battle, sophisticated in art and culture the Ashanti people of Ghana, known for their famous Golden Stool, Kente and adinkra clothes, and intricate gold jewelry, evolved into a great culture and empire in West Africa during the 18th century. From the area around the kingdom's capital of Kumasi, they extend their dominance over the boundaries of what is now known as the nation of Ghana. Their fearless and relentless wars against British imperialism made them a household name in Britain as well as throughout Europe. This special section not only marks three centuries of a great kingdom, it focuses on the celebration of the Silver Jubilee of Otumfuo Opoku Ware II.

The Kingdom of Ashanti in the 19th Century, at the peak of its glory, was what the Western world accepted as a formidable political entity in the very heart of black Africa. To subdue this Kingdom, the British summoned Sir Garnet Wolsely who had a distinguished military career in Egypt to lead a highly trained force to Ashanti. Aware of the defeat of Governor Sir Charles McCarthy at the hands of Ashanti forces and the latter's beheading, Sir Garnet received his assignment with all seriousness. Ashanti's military prowess was highly rated by the British. Its political, economic and cultural achievements marked it out as a very promising modern state not to be ignored by Europe in any African colonial policy of conquest and domination.

The decline of the Ashanti Empire which started with its defeat by British forces in 1874 reached an all time low with the exile of Asantehene (King of Ashanti) Prempeh I and the Ashanti's ineffectual attempt to turn their fortunes upwards during the Yaa Asantewaa war of 1900. The war started as Ashanti protest against the British Governor's insulting remarks about his right to own the Golden Stool as ruler of Ashanti. It however failed to throw out British military suzerainty. When the British finally returned Prempeh I, he was recognised only as Kumasihene (Paramount Chief of Kumasi) and not Asantehene (King of the whole Ashanti). Although the British recognised Prempeh's successor,



In the Ashanti kingdom: "all that glitters is gold"



Pope John Paul

Prempeh II as Asantehene in 1936 they were on the way to making Ashanti part of the Gold Coast Colony and thus depriving her of her existence as a separate Kingdom. After the Burns Constitution of the 1940's, Ashanti was firmly made part of the Gold Coast colony. The Nkrumah regime moved further to reduce the powers and independence of the Asantehene and the Ashanti nation, something which the British indirect rule system superficially ensured to some extent.

Nkrumah's successors continued the process of reducing the eminent position of the Asantehene among chiefs in the rest of the country. For instance, the definition of the Asantehene in previous constitutions as the only ruler above paramount chiefs was gradually dropped and now the constitution has no special mention of the Asantehene.

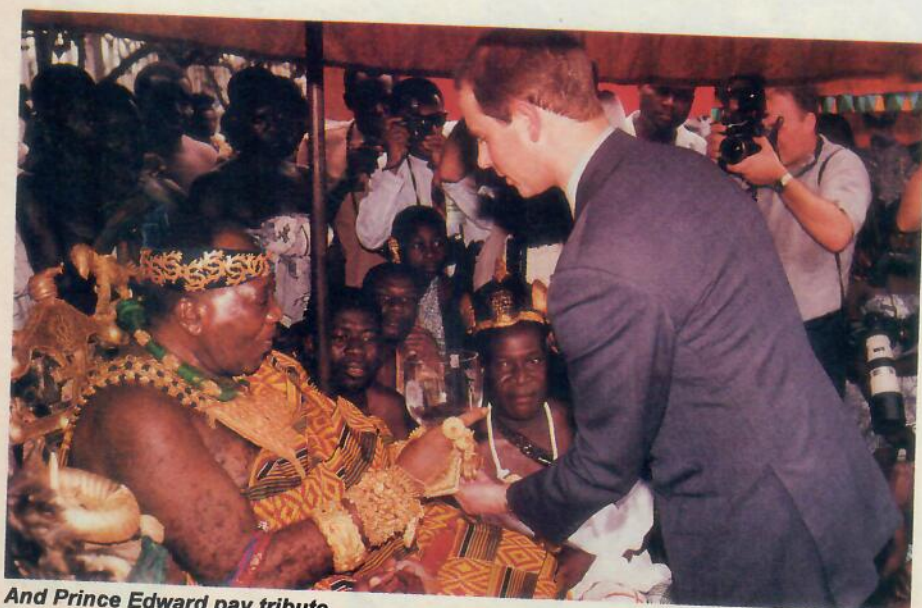
However, the Asantehene is still head of Asanteman which comprises chiefs owing allegiance to the Asantehene in the Ashanti region and the Brong Ahafo region. In practice, all chiefs in the country through historical recollections as leader of the Ashanti Empire to which they all had some form of respectful relations - do treat the Asantehene in a special way, that is with due respect. A story is told of the late Asantehene Prempeh I when he visited a town outside his domains. The people turned up in their numbers to give him the respect they reserved for an overlord. He was shocked that they treated him as their sovereign even though they were independent of him.

The unusual reception accorded the Asantehene throughout the country is due to a number of factors, including respect for his historical position. The splendour of the Asantehene's personal appearance and his entourage is another reason. He wears the best Kente, Adinkra, gold ornaments and Aggrey beads, gold sandals and is preceded by famous swords with gold embossments.

The Ashantis originated 'Kente' which in some circles in America tends to symbolise blackman's pride in his cultural past. The Kente which started in the early 18th century originated during the glorious days of Ashanti. The Asantehenes were identified with specific designs. For instance, Kwaku Duah I is identified with famous *Mmae da* meaning the first of its kind. Certain Kente designs were therefore reserved for the Asantehene's use.



Prince Charles



And Prince Edward pay tribute

Those who are fascinated by Kente cloth have a good cause to see the Asantehene in person because he is likely to be attired with the best Kente anywhere in the world. The same could be said of the *Adinkra* printed cloth.

Some of the *Adinkra* designs have become so famous that they are easily recognizable symbols of communication in Ghana. The *Gye Nyame* (except the Lord) symbol has been adopted by Christian

A whole chapter can be written on Asantehene's *Abotire*, headgear, trinkets, amulets, also gold plated, gold rings symbolising the grandeur, majesty and artistry of the Asantehene. The *Abotire* headgear is beautiful velvet set against gold art works. There are imitations of gold headgear but you have to meet the Asantehene to see an original artistic gold headgear. Around his neck and on the wrist and arms are gold beads or

also be used for a court occasion. There are different types of horns, *mmentia*, the short horns for specific appellations and the *ntahra* orchestral type. The horns all bellow out the praises of the Monarch and allude to memorable events of the Ashanti's past. For instance the *Ntahra* would allude to the death of Duodo the faithful servant if they want to set the tone at court for mourning. The *durogya* the flute is remarkable for playing dirges. The court musicians invoke the right atmosphere for the monarch. Then the poets refer to moments in Ashanti history to give the monarch the right patriotic feelings. For instance, the executioner holding his sword before the monarch provokes laughter when he beseeches the latter to order him to execute those who obstruct the monarch but at the same time pleads with him to show the milk of human kindness in his dealings with executioners. In another mood the executioners urge the monarch to follow the deeds of bravery and patriotism of his ancestors.

The Ashanti religion is much in evidence when the Asantehene is seated in state. The state swords *mponponsuo* and *Busumru* are not only important for their gold embossments but are important for their mystical significance. They invoke benign spiritual influence around the monarch. The most important mystical object is the Golden Stool. Not only is it priceless in terms of its value in gold and its antique significance, it is also the most important mystical object in Ashanti. It embodies the soul of the Ashanti Nation and constitutes the focus of Ashanti patriotism and unity. It provides its occupant with an aura of respectability that lift him above the populace. *Asikadwa*, the Gold Stool, is exhibited in public once in five years. It appears in a pomp and majesty that beggar description. It has its own drums, umbrellas and entourage. People stand to attention at its arrival.

The Asantehene undoubtedly captures the attention, respect and veneration in Kumasi that his ancestors did centuries ago. It is to the credit of the founders of the Ashanti nation that in spite of constitutions and military governments in Ghana's history, the Asantehene as head of Asanteman or Asante Kingdom remains a dominant figure in many respects in the affairs of Ghana. ☺

By Oheneba Agyeman Abeyield



His Majesty: Opoku Ware II

Churches. As in Kente's case the *Adinkra* has special designs for the Asantehene. Various mourning cloth designs *Ntiamu* (hand printed) *Nwomu* (special weavings), *Koben* (red dyed cloth) have become nationally accepted and are best displayed on the Asantehene at specific and appropriate occasions. In fact there is an expert of the Asantehene who selects the appropriate cloth and attire for the Asantehene.

The sandals worn by the Asantehene are beautiful artistic works. Gold decorations, silver decorations, precious stone decorations and leather work on sandals show beautiful Ashanti art works of centuries. These sandals have attracted a lot of attention during the Asantehene's visits inside and outside Ghana.

stones of intricate designs which are a marvel to behold. On the ankles and legs are decorations of gold and precious stones. When the Asantehene is fully dressed he is a sight so majestically beautiful that he automatically attracts crowds. When he was in New York in 1984 to open the "Ashanti Kingdom of Gold" exhibition, the Asantehene in full regalia attracted such a major attraction that truck loads of extra police had to be rushed in to control the ever surging crowd.

Seated in State the Asantehene is surrounded by his poets, musicians and drummers. Kete drum is generally for court occasions. *Fontofrom* drum is generally for riding in palanquin but it can