

City-State Culture on the Gold Coast: The Fante City-State Federation in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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“Of several towns one must dominate the others.” (19th century Akan proverb)

Introduction

The present study offers a brief discussion of the Fante city-state system of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the time, it was the richest and most powerful polity (called *mfantseman* in the Fante language) on the Gold Coast (modern southern Ghana).¹ Organizationally, the polity was a federation of allied and rival city-states under the actual and ostensible leadership of the supreme *Brafo* (“general”; “principal military commander”) of Mankessim. Established probably in the 15th century as an autonomous urban settlement by migrants from the interior, Mankessim served as the political capital of the migrants who were (later) known collectively as the Borbor Fante. According to mid-18th century oral traditions, the Borbor Fante were migrants from “Arcania”, a territory located in the Pra-Ofin basin. The southward movement from “Arcania” most likely occurred over a period of time during the 14th and 15th centuries.² The migrants probably consisted of merchants, mercenaries, priests, and their armed retainers, servants, and slaves. Twentieth century Borbor Fante traditions indicate that the migrants were divided into five autonomous divisions, each of which occupied a section or quarter (*bron*) of the town. The leaders (or *abrafo*) of the three largest divisions, feeling too crowded, left Mankessim and spread out to take up land and to found towns and form states in other parts of the coastal area. The leaders of other divisions followed. The newly founded states were organized around a dominant town (*oman*, plural *aman*). The city-states included Kwamankese, Abora (Abura), Ekumfi, Anomabo, Anyan, Nkusukum, and Esiam among others. The movement out of Mankessim seems to have begun in the 1660s or 1670s and to have continued into the early decades of the 18th century. The *abrafo* conquered neighboring polities to the north and west and incorporated them into the Fante

federation. In 1698 the *brafo* of Abora replaced the *brafo* of Mankessim as the political-military leader of Fante. It was under this leadership, in the first half of the 18th century, that Fante armies embarked on a policy of territorial expansion and conquest.³ Territorial conquests coincided with the expansion of Fante commercial exchange. The early and later history of Fante was very much tied up with the history of long-distance trading networks.

Viewed from the perspective of an Atlantic trading system two major stages in Fante history can be proposed:

1. The period of the Atlantic gold trade (late 15th – late 17th centuries) and the “cult” of the *abirempon* (Akan, sing. *obirempon*, a wealthy, powerful person; a “big man”): territorially competitive city-states (*abirempondom*) dominated by *abirempon*;
2. The period of Atlantic slaving (late 17th-18th centuries) and the “cult” of the *awurafram* (“masters of firepower”; sing., *owurafram*, “a military leader”; “a military hero”) gives way to a political system in which the *Brafo* has become the presiding priest of the “national” oracular shrine, Nananom Mpow.⁴

In the earlier period Fante city-state society was a major exporter of gold; in another it was a major exporter of enslaved labor. The Atlantic trade effected many and continuous changes inside the society, changes that reveal complex relationships between political economy, ideology, social structure, and political organization. The various Fante towns were the locus of an articulation between two forms of social wealth accumulation and distribution: (1) revenues (“political wealth”), based on systems of surplus extraction and mechanisms of appropriation, and (2) trading and money-lending capital (“mercantile wealth”), based on marketing networks and the opera-

tions of brokers and merchants.⁵ The characteristic features of the 17th and 18th century Fante urban system were embedded in fundamental relations of production and in the historical development of a geographical and social division of labor in the greater Gold Coast region. These features included the following: (1) a spatially concentrated population of some size settled in permanent dwellings; (2) multifunctionality and organizational specialization – economic, religious, political-administrative, social, and military; (3) local and long-distance trade in necessities and luxuries; and (4) dependent settlements within the immediate hinterland.⁶

The Greater Gold Coast Regional City-State System

Structurally speaking, the Fante city-state formation was part of a regional city-state culture and system, the origins of which would seem to date to the second half of the first millennium C.E. The establishment and historical development of the Fante federation can only be properly understood within this wider context.

One useful point of departure can be found in a recent study of the historical geography of West Africa. Two geographers propose, within a generalized “pre-colonial” time frame, an analytical model that delineates and defines a specific kind of regional system and spatial organization in much of West Africa. In this model the distinction between “town” and “country” is re-formulated:

“It would be more exact to speak of the distinction between ‘market centers’, together with their immediate hinterlands of farms of indebted peasants and plantations worked by servile labor, and ‘deep rural’ farming communities where indebtedness to urban merchants and money lenders is relatively limited.

Merchants expand trading networks through the extension of credit. Through accepting advances of goods or money on traders’ terms, rural producers are bound to particular merchants, and to supplying commodities at fixed prices. Windfall profits from local shortages accrue to merchants not producers. Such profits are not dependent on the existence of a recognized currency. Debts may be contracted in kind and paid off in kind or labor service.”⁷

This model avoids the use of the term “city-state”, nevertheless it provides one way of understanding the Fante city-state as a locally produced phenomenon

and the greater Gold Coast regional city-state system as a trans-local phenomenon. However, it usefully postulates that there were different kinds of “rurality” in West Africa and that these were generated in “fields of power” produced by dominant urban marketing centers. The town is defined explicitly as a center of trading and money-lending capital, as a place of exchange and credit, and as a dominant center in relation to a structurally dependent agrarian hinterland of indebted peasants and unfree laborers. What is implicit here is that the town is autonomous. In this scenario “town” and “country” in West Africa formed interacting parts of a single set of structural processes. The social production of this difference occurred in a continuous shared space, traversed by economic and political relations of inequality. Historical movement and change were embedded in a social-spatial division of labor that generated a structured opposition. “Outside” of this formation were “deep” rural systems, presumably dominated by a redistributive political economy and by political-administrative towns inhabited by non-mercantile elite groups. These systems had their own intersecting and rival networks, and the networks reflected and shaped the urban spaces that produced them. They determined collective identities, cultural idioms, various aesthetic phenomena, political issues, and practices of representation.⁸

The argument of historical geography is that the interaction between urban market centers and “deep rural” settlements constituted the social dynamic that organized West African regional space. On the one hand, there were expanding urban commercial centers with dependent hinterlands. On the other hand, there were (expanding?) rural farming communities where the circuit of trading capital was relatively limited and credit and debt bondage were negligible or non-existent.

In his account of urbanization in “pre-colonial” Ghana, the archaeologist James Anquandah offers a point of entry into the conditions that made the formation of towns a possibility:

“The first half of the second millennium A.D. witnessed a phase of expansion in metal technology, in subsistence and cash economies, and in urbanization and state formation The period A.D. 1000 to 1400 seems to have witnessed the emergence of the earliest towns and principalities In most parts of Akanland, the period A.D. 1500 to 1800 was the high-water mark of urbanization and state formation.”⁹

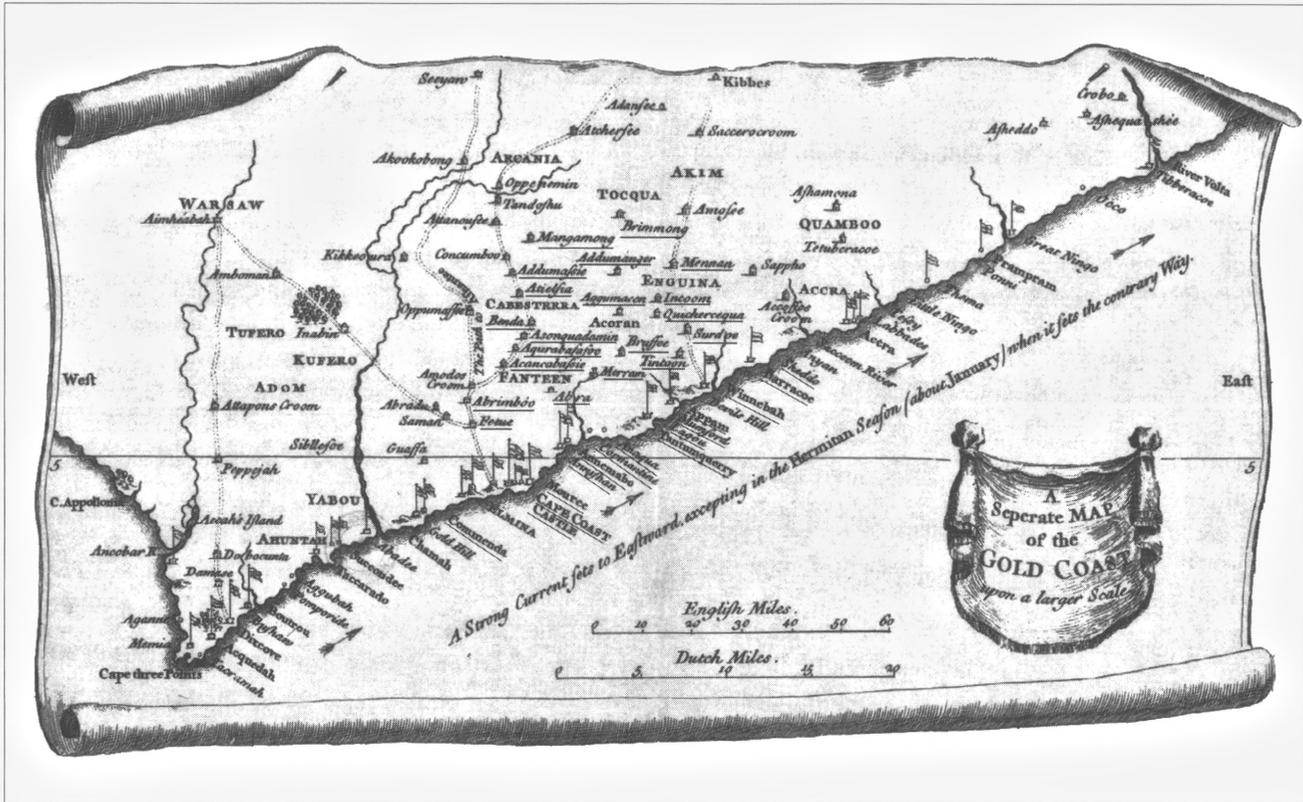


Fig. 1. Map of the Gold Coast from a ca. 1740 navigational chart. Towns in the Fante Federation are underlined. Abra = Abora, Annemabo = Anomabo, Cormantine = Kormantse.

The processes and activities described by Anquandah represent different modes of resource utilization and different strategies to control resources as well as particular modes of surplus appropriation and capital accumulation. With some modification, a two “stage” historical perspective (1000-1400 and 1500-1800) can provide a chronology of regional city-state development. Recent archaeological research requires that the dates for the appearance of the “earliest towns” be pushed back to the 9th and 10th centuries. (See below)

Period one (9th-15th century) featured the founding of towns and centralized political formation (city-states; principalities) and economic and social expansion. There were fundamental changes in the social and geographical divisions of labor and in the forces and relations of production and considerable population growth. These can be summarized as follows:

1. the separation of craft production and agricultural production and the concentration of crafts in towns or in specialized craft villages in the hinterland of urban centers;
2. the separation of craft production and trade, which

was the basis for long-distance trade and the emergence of professional merchants;

3. the rapid expansion of the gold extractive industry in the central forest districts;
4. the emergence of craft, military, and merchant associations or “guilds”; and
5. the large scale employment of bonded or servile labor imported into the area via extensive trading networks and employed in settlement re-organization and land clearance in the central forest districts (i.e., the Pra-Ofin basin).

Until the end of the 17th century the “pivot” of the region’s economy was Bighu.¹⁰

Period two (16th-19th century) witnessed the apogee of town and state formation. A regional city-state system organized around dominant commercial centers was replaced by a regional state system (Asante) organized by a dominant military-political center (Kumase).¹¹

During the first period the transformative processes were evident in different parts of the greater Gold Coast region: along the northern rain forest-savanna

ecological divide, within the forest itself, and along the southern edge of the forest and the coast. Urban centers and their hinterlands represented a “technology” of power entailing the management of space, labor, and material and cultural production. Towns organized “topographies” of power that regulated and controlled the flow of commodities and surplus, the campaigns of armies, the passage of enslaved persons, and the distribution of cultural products and ideas. Archaeological evidence reveals that throughout the period forest-based urban settlements shared a similar material culture and technology.¹²

From the 11th century on, and probably even earlier than this, long-distance commerce was of major importance in the greater Gold Coast region. Several major trading networks intersected in the region. Within the long-distance trading systems, Bighu functioned as a terminus of the gold route from the Niger Valley-based commercial centers such as Jenne and as a terminus of the kola route from Hausaland and Bornu. The gold fields of the Black Volta and Pra-Ofin basins produced for the urban markets of the Middle and Upper Niger Valley trading centers as well as for local consumption. Muslim Wangara (Juula/Dyula) caravan merchants from these centers transported slaves, Saharan salt, and other commodities to the hinterland region.¹³ Wangara capital investment facilitated the emergence of the regional city-state system. I would suggest that this route transformed particular local “deep rural” communities into “port cities”, i.e., market and administrative centers, for the Sudanic gold trade. Along the northwestern fringes of the forests the earliest process of city-state formation can be dated to the 11th century with the founding of the trading center of Bighu. Between the 12th and 14th centuries other centers like Bono Manso, Bima, and Ahwene Koko were founded.¹⁴

In the central forest districts (Adanse, Asen, Aman-sie, and so on) there is evidence of large urban settlements engaged in the gold trade well before the 13th century. Recent archaeological evidence indicates that towns of some size were present in the 9th and 10th centuries. One such town is the famous site of Asantemanso in Amansie, one of the “original” places of Asante. In the 10th century it had a population of “several thousand people,” according to one archaeological report. There is strong evidence of active craft industries (iron working and pottery making) in the town. The earliest pottery styles are similar to “Earthworks Pottery,” which is found in some quantity in the Birim River Valley at ancient town sites, some of which were densely occupied. These places might

very well have been city-states. The Birim Valley towns are associated with a striking earthwork complex characterized by trench systems, banks, and deep interior ditches. Two kilometers north of Asantemanso archaeologists have found a 9th century cult or sacral area covered with hundreds of pots. Its precise function remains unknown, but it was probably the location of certain specialized activities. The town probably depended on the agricultural and livestock production of surrounding villages, however there is no direct archaeological evidence for this. Doubtless, hunting and gathering served as other means of subsistence. Nothing is known about the political status of Asantemanso or the size of its hinterland.¹⁵ The town can perhaps be considered an early example of a city-state formation.

The “proto-Asante” population began to disperse from Asantemanso, probably in the 15th century, moving north where they established towns such as Kwaman (the later Kumase), Dwaben, Kokofu, Kumawu, and a number of others. These towns became centers of political power, and can be interpreted, perhaps, as the extension of an urban center’s hinterland into “deep” rural farming communities. Asantemanso continued to be occupied, but from about 1500 onward it steadily shrank in size and population to the point where the 20th century village of Asantemanso is only a fraction of the size of the 14th century town of Asantemanso. Other towns replaced it as foci of wealth and power.

A contemporary of Asantemanso was the town of Adanse in Adanse. The size and layout of Adanse’s ruins indicate, in the words of one archaeologist, a large and complex settlement. This place enjoys a central role in local cosmology. It is remembered in traditions not only as one of the five original great towns (or capitals) of the Akan people and as the first capital of the Adanse state but also as the center of the universe. The date of its founding is not yet known, but archaeological surveys of the huge mounds that cover the ruined site have revealed that Adanse was fairly populous in the 9th century. In the main period of occupation, 13th – 15th century, it was one of the largest towns in the region. The production of iron and other metals (gold and bronze) was an important activity in the town and glass production might have been pursued as well, although the evidence for this is ambiguous. The presence of brass gold weights suggest that gold weighing and trading in gold occurred. Close to the towns was a large *asensie* (“the place of pots”), that is, an elite cemetery where funerary pots and terra cotta figurines com-

memorated the dead. Adansemanso was abandoned in the late 16th or the early 17th century.¹⁶

Different oral traditions refer to towns and other settlements in the Adanse and Asen districts between 1000 and 1500.¹⁷ Their material relationship to Asantemanso and Adansemanso has still to be determined by archaeology. There is also another level of historical understanding that needs to be engaged. Why are the two city-states represented as “original” and “originating” places in the oral traditions? The “urban center/hinterland”-“deep rural” paradigm points toward the need to know what crises there were in 15th and 16th “urbanism” for Asantemanso and Adansemanso to appear as great places among the descendants of those who migrated from the two centers.

The logic of the urban social context, that is, of life as lived from the point of view of the ruling elite, was one in which pressures and conflicts of some sort dominated. Ivor Wilks provides a description of the rise of *obirempon* families who had their origins in Adansemanso and Asantemanso, and this development was to contribute to the decline of both places. The source of their wealth was long-distance trade. They moved northwards from the two towns in the 15th and 16th centuries and where they settled they created, according to Wilks, a new kind of political establishment – the *abirempon*dom. It was organized around a dominant town or city which exercised suzerainty over villages of free (*nkoa*) and unfree (*gyaasefo*) subjects. The *abirempon* represented a “re-territorialization” of space, since they were the organizers of large-scale land clearance project in the central forest districts in the 15th and 16th centuries. The *abirempon* also represented new kinds of political jurisdictions, new forms of public power and public authority, a new sense of community, identity, social solidarity, place, and culture. Wealthy, well-organized, and prestigious *abirempon* established their political and social power over a relatively wide area through their commercial relationship with the Wangara trading network and through the consolidation and institutionalization of ceremonial and ritual practices associated with court culture. The ancestors of the Borbor Fante can perhaps be identified with the emergent *abirempon*. They moved south to the coastal area where they founded towns like Mankessim. From the late 15th century, where they traded with Portuguese and later other European ships. For the period 1500-35 it has been estimated that the Portuguese imported ten to twelve thousand slaves into São Jorge for the *abirempon*dom labor “market”. The high con-

sumption culture of the towns’ rich and powerful and the reproduction of elite economic and political power depended on the employment of servile labor – as producers and as household/court servants/attendants. Hence, the importation of slaves from Benin, the Niger Delta-Igboiland region, and Allada was of overriding importance.¹⁸

The 15th-17th century period was the “era” of the town-dwelling *abirempon*, or *cavaleiros mercadores* as they were known in 15th and 16th century Portuguese sources. The *abirempon* had their wealth and presence not simply because of the Adanse and Amansie city-state system and its gold mining industry but because this system was the termination of the gold route from the Middle Niger Valley. The Niger gold route was a source of different kinds of investment – economic, technological, and cultural. Like Asantemanso and Adansemanso, the *obirempon* towns functioned in part as entrepôts for the gold route and in this capacity they became recipients of Wangara investments. Alliances of powerful *abirempon*dom led to the rise of expansionist, dynastic city-states in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries (e.g., Akwamu, Denkyira, Fante, and Asante), and this development transformed the political face of the region.¹⁹

The historical specificity of the way immigration (Wangara and other merchants, slaves, and so on) and trading/money-lending capital have played themselves out in the Gold Coast regional context is exemplified in the institution of the *abusua* (pl. *mmusu-atow*). This institution seems to have emerged in the 15th and 16th centuries in Adansemanso, and it became one of the distinctive institutions in the *abirempon*dom. It was to become hegemonic throughout much of the region in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries. When viewed historically and in terms of a political economy, the “originary moment” of the *abusua* can be linked to the movement of trading capital, although it was not merely the “instrument” or “emanation” of capital. Nor was it a “tribal” organization. An early 20th century missionary report captures well the historical and social character of this institution. The report relates that the *mmusu-atow* were “companies of original families ... but not in the meaning of consanguinity, rather may be described as an alliance offensive and defensive whose members have to support themselves in paying debts and defraying expenses of funeral customs, etc.”²⁰ The “companies of original families” each had a particular name, which was not, initially, an ethnic term nor a clan, tribal, family, or lineage but a “formula” or an

abridgement of a “formula”. The “formula” recalls the origin of the founding ancestor or the circumstances in which the group, or “company” was founded. The “company” identifies itself with a name or word that designated an honorable and prestigious status. It was a title of honor. Wilks maintains that the *mmusuatow* were instrumental in the period of forest clearance as a means of incorporating and socializing unfree labor (Akan, *gyaasefo*). It would have operated as a normative framework – a communitarian or collective organization at the level of the *abirempon* – that “defined” and “managed” the relationship of its members to money (accumulation: gold; cowries; credit), labor (appropriation: slaves and bonded persons), and the market (distribution: trade).²¹

In Fante country possible urban sites of the 14th-16th century period are known archaeologically as settlements, apparently fortified, on steep hilltops which had been leveled. In the forested valleys were to be found farming villages inhabited (presumably) by peasant cultivators and slaves.²² The assumption is that the towns were politically autonomous and were the seats of particular *obirempon* (Borbor?) families who were organized in *mmusuatow*. They were certainly in communication with the towns of the forest. Mankessim was a large town at the end of the 15th century. In one of its iron-producing “suburbs” archaeological excavations have revealed (pre-16th century) terra cotta human portraits, which probably commemorated deceased high-status Borbor Fante. The site of the portraits no doubt marks the cemetery where the elite families were buried.²³

Fanteland and other coastal and sub-coastal areas became more specialized and interdependent in their economies. Towns developed distinctive craft quarters and specialized craft villages were established on the outskirts of urban centers. Some places specialized in metalworking, others in boat building, salt making, or bead making. Other places specialized as livestock and fowl markets, as produce export markets, or as slave markets. In addition, there were autonomous villages and towns of priests and priestesses that were places of sanctuary for debtors, runaway slaves, criminals, and others. There were other places that combined economic specialization with administrative activities. The different forms of specialization and settlement multi-functionality were the basis of the coastal and sub-coastal central place network and hierarchy. Furthermore, towns were characterized by organized town plans with carefully demarcated streets and public, or market squares.²⁴

Seventeenth Century Fanteland – the Era of the Gold Trade

Archaeology provides some information on these features of the Gold Coast. Other evidence can be found in European documentary sources. One early 17th century Dutch source indicates, on the basis of locally acquired information, that the greater Gold Coast region counted well over fifty polities, from the coast to the northern fringe of the forest. How many of these places can be described as city- or town states is open to question. But the general pattern seems to be either an alliance of city-states which formed a political confederation or a dominant town or city with a hinterland of villages, hamlets, and, in some cases, dependent towns. A contemporary Dutch report provides one useful perspective on the coastal and sub-coastal settlement pattern:

“The towns which lie towards the interior of the country [i.e., eight to sixteen kilometers from the seaboard] are richer in goods and gold than the frontier [i.e., coastal] towns, and have more houses and are more populous than the seaside towns; they also have wealthier merchants who conduct more trade than those in the coastal towns whose inhabitants are the interpreters, boatmen, pilots, officials, fishermen, and slaves of the inhabitants of the interior towns... but I have learned from the Blacks that further inland still are larger towns containing multitudes of people...”²⁵

From this account it appears that the coastal communities, consisting of principal towns and salt-making and fishing villages, formed the dependent hinterlands of dominant inland towns, which were political and economic centers. Along the Fante coast were fishing and salt-making villages and two ports or “sea-towns”, Great Kormantse, the main Fante port in the 17th century, and Anomabo. All of these places were dependent on Mankessim. A century or so later other sea-towns had become part of the expanding Fante system, e.g., Cape Coast, Komenda, Mouri, and Winneba. By this time the principal coastal ports were wealthier than their early 17th century predecessors and had acquired hinterlands of villages and hamlet of their own. In practice these places enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy, although *de jure* they continued to be part of the larger political system.

In the course of the 17th century, the Portuguese were superseded on the Gold Coast by different European trading companies – Danish, Dutch, English,

Swedish, and Brandenburger. The agents of these companies established themselves in the various ports, or “sea-towns”, from the Ankobra to the Volta River. They conducted their trade from castles, forts, and factories (or lodges). Each company had contracts and/or treaties with the local authorities who had jurisdiction over the ports where the commercial stations were located. In the 1680s and 1690s a stretch of nearly twenty kilometers of the Fante-dominated coast displayed, in the words of one study, the “most intensely developed sector of the Euro-African trading system”.²⁶

In the 17th century the main export of the Gold Coast was gold. The leading gold merchants throughout the century were known as “Akani”. They were from the inland kingdoms of Asen (“Arcania” in 17th century documents), and were in all likelihood linked historically to Adansemanso and Asantemanso and their trading systems. Any European trading establishment that wished to deal in the “purest gold” had to conduct trade with the Akani, all of whom were *abirempon*. In 1601 there was only one Akani captaincy on the coast. It was located in the city-state of Elmina (Edena), the largest of the Gold Coast ports in the 17th century. By the 1630s and 1640s Akani captaincies were to be found in all of the coastal towns between Shama and Winneba and in the sub-coastal political capitals and the inland market centers. They had a particularly heavy presence in Fante towns, and by the end of the century some leading Akani merchants had joined the Fante political establishment. The wide-ranging trading operations of this mercantile corporation caused them to set up captaincies throughout the greater Gold Coast region, from the forest fringe towns (e.g., Bighu) to the coast (e.g., Great Kormantse). A captaincy consisted of a varying number of traders and brokers and could have as few as ten or as many as 100 members. A captaincy was under the authority of a “captain” and his assistant (“lieutenant”), both of whom were appointed by Asen authorities.²⁷

In Fanteland the persons who conducted the greatest trade with the Europeans were for the most part “nobles” (*abirempon*, *afahene*, *ahen*, etc. in the Fante language): that is, they were “captains” or “officers” of towns and villages. Noble status was a recognized judicial category in Fante and elsewhere on the coast and in the interior. All nobles belonged to what was called, in contemporary documents, the “confraternity” or “brotherhood of nobles”. This was a “horizontal” social organization that was established in towns and villages throughout the region. Priests and

priestesses had their own organization, which was separate from the “confraternity of nobles”. Together with the “vertical” *mmusuatow* organization, the confraternity was a distinctive feature of city-state culture. Persons who held noble status enjoyed particular privileges and entitlements wherever he (or she) traveled:

1. the right to own, buy, and sell slaves, and to trade in other commodities;
2. the right to trade anywhere;
3. the right to attend town council meetings as participant members;
4. the right to have drums and horns and horse and elephant tails;
5. the right to hold a feast day whenever desired;
6. the right to receive part of the fines levied in the town court; and
7. the right of exemption from enslavement for themselves and their children.

An individual could attain noble status in three different ways:

1. by birth or ancestry;
2. by merit, that is, by the performance of “some great and honorable exploit for the benefit of the state”; and
3. by wealth, that is, by purchasing an office to which noble status was attached or by purchasing the title of noble in a three-day public ceremony.

The system of noble privilege and entitlement began to break down in the early 18th century and by the 1720s it was no longer in operation. Its decline occurred in the wake of the military expansion of polities like Akwamu, Fante, and Asante.²⁸

Juxtaposed to the “brotherhood of nobles” was the 17th century institution of “poor relief” for the urban destitute (*anihumanifo*; *adofo*). This institution was to be found in Fante and other Gold Coast towns and can be identified as another defining feature of city-state culture. An anonymous 1665 reference mentions that following the main harvest peasant families “furnished the poor for gold”. In other words, revenue collectors (*marini*) distributed among the urban poor part of the taxes paid by the towns’ rural hinterland. Another source of poor relief was the fines imposed by the courts and town councils. In 1645, for example, Amadu, the ruler of Great Kormantse, was fined 3 ounces in gold by the town council, one ounce of which was intended “for the poor” (*voor den armen*)

resident in the town. The priestly “estate” was another source of relief. Priests and priestesses set aside a portion of the many offerings they received from wealthy penitents for re-distribution among the “poorer sort of people”. The offerings included gold dust, gold ornaments, livestock, agricultural produce, and trade goods. The agents of the European trading companies followed local relief practices by contributing to the material welfare of the impoverished. Thus, the merchandise that Dutch factors seized from smugglers was customarily distributed among the poor in the towns where they had trading stations. The Danish commandants of Fort Fredericksborg, located in the sea-town of Amanfro, had another policy. They distributed to the poor of Amanfro the fines (always paid in gold) that had been levied on employees of the Danish company.

Migration from the farming villages to the towns was a fairly continuous process in the 16th and 17th centuries. It was this constant influx that contributed to the permanent presence of destitute persons in and around the towns. The institution of poor relief was a feature of the gold trade era. In the 18th century, when the trans-Atlantic slave trade was at its height, this social policy was no longer in operation.²⁹

The populations of the Fante towns were culturally and linguistically heterogeneous, for the towns attracted people from a wide geographical area, not only from their immediate hinterland and from other Gold Coast ports and villages but from other parts of coastal West Africa as well. A coastal town such as Great Kormantse consisted of several social “estates”, excluding slaves and persons in debt bondage:

1. a political-military elite;
2. resident Akani brokers and merchants from Arcania;
3. priests and priestesses;
4. local traders and brokers;
5. fishermen, salt-makers, artisans, and other commoners;
6. a town militia (*akofokum* in the early 17th century; *asafo* from the second half of the century on).

The Fante city-state system was “open” or inclusive, in the sense that persons from other towns and polities, distant or near, could, under the right circumstances, acquire an office, opportunities to trade, and high social status, that is, ennoblement. Citizenship in 17th century Fante meant being a citizen of a town, and through town citizenship one was a subject of the *Brafo* of Fante.

The urban militias, essentially organizations of commoners, were particularly important in this regard because of their social functions as institutions of integration. For example, any male stranger (whether a free person or a slave) who settled in the town was obliged to join a militia, although there were some exceptions to this blanket rule. This affiliation was one of the means to citizenship status. Anomabo had two quarters in 1681 organized in a single militia (the “Bendifoes”) of between 400 and 500 musketeers. However, with the population growth of the town and the recruitment of strangers the town’s militia in 1700 numbered 2,000. In the 17th century, fishermen, salt producers, craftsmen, and priests were generally excluded from militia service; their citizenship status was tied to other town institutions and practices. Rural communities were attached to one or another militia, thus an *obirempon* who founded a couple of slave villages with newly purchased slaves placed the villages in his particular militia. In the early decades of the century, villages in times of war fought under the banner of various political overlords. In the second half of the century, villages were transferred by the town councils to the town militias and henceforth fought under the banner of the militia officers. “Ambo”, the ruler of Great Kormantse (ca. 1632-1646), had ten to fifteen villages under his authority. Under the old system the male villagers would have followed the flag of one or another of the town’s elders into battle, as subjects. Under the new *asafo* system they would have belonged to the town’s militia, and the citizenship rights of the villagers would have been established through the militia. In 1664 the town alone could muster a militia force of 300 men (Ibid. p. 62). Kormantse’s rural communities could probably mobilize 500 to 800 men. The total population of Kormantse and its hinterland in the 1660s was probably in the range of 5,000 to 8,000. In 1682 it was referred to as “ye great town”.

The urban residences as well as the towns and villages of priests and priestesses were inviolable sanctuaries. The priestly villages and towns – consisting of priests, priestesses and their apprentices, servants, and slaves – were self-governing and were under the authority of a superior priest. Thus, debtors fleeing creditors, slaves and pawns running away from their owners, persons accused of criminal acts and fleeing punishment could find refuge by entering a priest’s/priestess’s compound or by reaching a village or a town under the rule of a priest or priestess. At least in theory, no outside authority could violate the sanctity and sanctuary status of priestly property. On its own

specially designated terrain, priestly authority exceeded all others, including that of the Fante *Brafo*. Within the Fante system there were clearly identifiable overlapping jurisdictions and sovereignties.

There was a sizeable labor force attached to the European fort in Great Kormantse, which was in the hands of the English company until 1664, after which the Dutch company held it. It included servile laborers, boatmen, and artisans who were collectively known as the Company's slaves or the Castle working slaves, and interpreters, envoys or messengers, gold takers, and brokers who were known as the Company's servants. These persons received regular salaries and wages from the companies, and either lived close to the fort or in one of the four wards of the town. The fort paid monthly rent to the Fante *Brafo* and regular subsidies to the Kormantse ruler and the town council, the captain of the Akani and his assistant, and town militia as well as to different officials from Mankessim. Each ship that anchored off the coast of Kormantse paid customs duty to the revenue collector. In addition, payments of various kinds were made on "holy days", in time of war, on the feast days of nobles, and on the occasion of the marriage or death of a noble.

In the second half of the 17th century the notables of Mankessim (or "Great Fanteen") included among others:

1. the *abrafo* of the different quarters, each of which had its own internal administrative organization;
2. the chief revenue collector (*groote marijnje*);
3. the captain of the *caboceers* (i.e., magistrates and various office-holders);
4. the captain of the *mancebos* ("young men", i.e., the city militia);
5. the *curranteers* (i.e., representatives or delegates in the state assembly at Mankessim);
6. an Akani captaincy (of brokers, traders, and apprentices as well as servants and slaves);
7. priests and priestesses of the oracular shrine *Nananom Mpow* ("the grove of the ancestors"), the principal shrine of the Borbor Fante.

The other major towns of Fante had similar organizational structures. Mankessim was distinguished from the other towns by the scale of its administration. Its population size is not known with any degree of certainty, but at the end of the 17th century there were, perhaps, between 20,000 and 30,000 permanent inhabitants. With its dependent hinterland the total population of the Mankessim complex could have been as much as 80,000.

In the mid-17th century Anomane ("Annomanie"), the *brafo* of Nkusukum quarter, exercised jurisdiction over the small coastal town of Anashan. Under his direct authority was the *curranteer* of Nkusukum, who represented this quarter in the state assembly. The representative did not live in Nkusukum quarter but in Anashan, which he also represented as a *curranteer*. Another person under "Anomane's" jurisdiction was a certain Adoni ("Adonie"). The son of a deceased *Brafo* of Fante, he was in charge of the Mankessim militia ("captain of the *mancebos*"), a position to which he was presumably elected (by the *mancebos*). The militia, which was known by the name "Bendifoes", numbered about 2,000 musketeers. Adoni was a man of wealth. Part of his estate included "Aniang", a village near the coast, and personal dependents, who amounted to more than 110 men, women, and children.³⁰ Nobles were free to move from one town to another. Anomane and Adoni could leave Mankessim, take up residence in another Fante town such as Kwamankese and be appointed to political or military offices there, or they could travel further afield to settle in the places beyond Fante. Their noble status and membership in the confraternity of nobles guaranteed them a positive reception.

Eighteenth Century Fanteland – the Era of Atlantic Slaving

In the 1690s the Fante federation faced a serious political crisis that resulted in civil war. The *Brafo* of Fante was accused by the *brafo* of Abora of violating the *mfantseman* constitution and therefore the supreme ruler of the federation no longer enjoyed legitimacy or recognition. The constituent city-states took sides and in the ensuing clashes the *brafo* of Abora emerged victorious. He assumed the mantle of *Brafo* of the Fante city-state federation. During the eighteenth century Abora was, militarily and politically, the dominant city-state. Its rise to this position can be traced to the last two decades of the century. In the early 1680s the ruler of Abora pursued a policy of building up his city-state's military strength by recruiting "vaggabondes" and "runaways" (that is, escaped slaves) as soldiers. By 1700 the town had, in addition to the "Bendifoe" company, two other militias – the Tafo and the Ankobia. The military build-up continued throughout the first half of the 18th century. By the middle of the century the town had a total militia force of five companies. Each was headed by a "captain" or "colonel", and each one would have had more than 2,000 men. In the first quarter of the century the

Abora militias led Fante armies in a succession of campaigns of conquest. The Fante army of 1700 could muster 25,000 to 50,000 men. One result of territorial expansion was that the Fante federation transformed itself into the most powerful and the wealthiest polity on the Gold Coast. The wars of conquest led to the destruction or decline of rival city-state systems.³¹ Under Abora leadership, Fante society became more militarized than it had been in the 16th and 17th centuries.

During the period of Abora political-military dominance several noteworthy developments can be identified:

1. Great Kormantse declined in importance and was replaced by Anomabo and Cape Coast as the two principal sea-towns in the federation;
2. Mankessim emerged as the great religious center of the federation;
3. Fante traders, especially those resident in Anomabo, emerged as the dominant merchants in the Gold Coast export-trade in slaves and this contributed to the collapse of the Akani trading system.

The traffic in forced migration (Atlantic slaving) assumed unprecedented dimensions in the 18th century. In 1679 it was reported that Akani merchants controlled all of the long-distance trade of the greater Gold Coast region, that is between the coast and the distant interior. By the early 18th century this was no longer the case. Already in the 1680s the sea-town of Anomabo had developed strong commercial ties with various inland districts and commercial centers. Anomabo traders were to be found in such places as Asante, Akyem, Akwamu, Twifo, and so on. A 1717 report gives a brief account of the town's aggressive mercantile practices:

“Their manner is to employ multitudes of people in most countries to engross all the slaves wherewith the interlopers [European free traders] are continually supplied and of late they have practiced a trade from a new channel by carrying great quantity of goods through Fante and Abramboe and even to Cuifero [Twifo] country to intercept the traders coming to Commenda and to [Cape Coast]”.³²

Agents of Anomabo traders resided in market towns and political centers in the interior for the purpose of directing as many slave caravans as possible to Anomabo and away from rival sea-towns. The policy was fairly successful. In the second half of the century

Anomabo was the leading port on the Gold Coast, with a population probably exceeding 20,000 permanent residents. It was also the wealthiest. New political offices were created, new villages were founded thus expanding the territory over which the town held jurisdiction, and a large militia force was developed. Office-holders, brokers, and traders established settlements in surrounding areas for the purpose of land cultivation and these were linked to the town through the militia companies. In the 1750s the English trading company built a fort in the town, and by this time Anomabo traders were active in the sea-towns on the Ivory and Slave Coasts.

Anomabo was the center of the federation's mercantile activity. Cape Coast, Mouri, Tantumkweri, Egya, Apam, Little Komenda, and Winneba were other commercially active sea-towns. They, too, had militias, a hinterland of village settlements, trading company establishments, and markets. All benefited from the period of Fante territorial expansion, under Abora leadership in the first quarter of the century. From the 1730s to the 1760s Mankessim, as the center of the worship of *Nananom Mpow*, successfully challenged the dominance of Abora and its allies. The title, *brafo* of Mankessim (formerly *Brafo* of Fante), ceased to have any military connotations whatsoever. The *brafo* assumed the role of chief officiating priest (*osofo*) of *Nananom Mpow*, and hence the title came to be identified with the priesthood of the great Mankessim oracular shrine. Thus, one historian wrote:

“By the second half of the 18th century... *Nananom Pow* had become ‘The Talking God’ of the Fante people. It had become an oracle which was not only able to give supernatural guidance but also was expected to give audible advice when consulted. Furthermore, there arose a powerful school of priests who officiated at *Nananom Pow* and who were able to satisfy those who consulted the oracle.... [Thus,] it was in the second half of the 18th century that the Borbor Fante deliberately made *Nananom Mpow* the abode of gods... From that time onwards *Nananom Mpow* was not only the ancestral shrine of the Borbor Fante but also the seat of an oracle to which men [and women] turned in their uncertainty about the future. Here, the priests and *abrafo* healed the sick, practiced magic, and maintained an intelligence network that enabled them to obtain information on the private lives of their clients which is then given out as if it were a result of divination or revelation.”³³

The transformation of the religious and social role of the shrine was one of the consequences of Fante territorial conquests and the tremendous growth of the Atlantic trade. While it served as one institutional means to consolidate the conquests, it also came to serve as a symbolic field of Fante mercantile activity as evidenced in the growing wealth of places like Anomabo and Cape Coast. The shrine reflected and expressed the imagination and social consciousness of slave trading merchant families, great and small, of the federation, and its conquered territories, in the second half of the 18th century.

For the merchant families of the coastal and inland entrepôts, the Mankessim shrine, pursuing, it would seem, a political-cultural strategy of demilitarizing the Fante public realm, embodied and articulated the imaginary and symbolic order of an increasingly mercantile society.³⁴ The shrine became hegemonic in the realm of belief, morality, collective identity, and social life. The priesthood of the shrine saw the need to pacify the land following the bitter and bloody wars of expansion. The judgements, advice, and exhortations of the shrine-oracle were to “pacify” and mediate the subsequent problems of conquest, such as the distribution of rewards among the military families and city-states. The social basis of the shrine’s new ideological dispensation is to be found in the needs and aspirations of accumulating merchant families and households in Anomabo and elsewhere. Through its shrine Mankessim acquired a vast hinterland of believers and penitents whose fortunes were tied to the rhythms of the world of Atlantic trade.

Conclusion

The city-state system in the greater Gold Coast region (among Akan- and Guan-speaking populations) has a long and multi-faceted history that is ultimately but not exclusively tied to long-distance trade. This history can be traced archaeologically to the 9th and 10th centuries. The emergence and development of the Fante city-states represents a later phase of this history. From its origins Fante seems to have been a federated system of semi-autonomous city-states, each with its own territorial base, military force, and marketing and trading relations. Rivalry within the Fante system was intense, as civil wars were not an uncommon feature of its political history. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries Mankessim managed to remain dominant, initially in a political capacity, but later in a religious, cultural and symbolic one.

Notes

1. Kea (2000) 178-81.
2. Kea (2000) 178; McCaskie (1990) 133-5; Brown (1929) vol. I: 53-4. An early 19th century tradition claims that the ancestors of the Borbor Fante came from Takyiman (“Takiman”) north of the rain forest. Bowdich (1966) 171. See also McCaskie (1990) 133.
3. McCaskie (1990) 135-38; Brown (1929) vol. I: 53-54; Boahen (1974) 26-35. The word *oman* carries the following meanings: town; the inhabitants of a town as a political body, that is, town in the sense of the public, the state; the body of inhabitants of a country united under the same government. Riis (1854) 210; Christaller (1933) 304-5.
4. McCaskie (1990) 135-8; Boahen (1974) 27; Kea (1982) chapter 3.
5. Kea (1982) chapters 1, 3, & 8 passim.
6. A detailed survey covering the 16th to early 18th centuries can be found in *ibid.*
7. Mabogunje & Richards (1985) 43.
8. Stahl (1994) 82-91; Wilks (1993) chapter 1; Garrard (1984); Anquandah (1982) passim; Posnansky (1975).
9. Anquandah (1982) 73, 96, 100. Also Stahl (1994) 82-98; Posnansky (1972); *idem* (1971).
10. Stahl (1994) 86-9, 92-5; Wilks (1993) chapters 1-3; Kea (1982) chapters 1-2; Ozanne (1971) 47.
11. Kea (1982) chapter 7 and conclusion.
12. Anquandah (1982) chapter 8; Posnansky (1975) passim; Ozanne (1971) 44-63; Davies (1967) 283-93, 308-16; Cf. Kea (1982) chapter 2.
13. Wilks (1993) chapter 1; Anquandah (1982) chapters 7 and 8.
14. Stahl (1994) 84-91; Wilks (1993) chapter 1; Anquandah (1982) chapters 7 and 8; Kea (1982) chapter 2; Ozanne (1971) 47-50, 55-6.
15. The information in this paragraph is taken from the following: Shinnie (1996) 195-203; Shinnie & Shinnie (1995) 6-15; Stahl (1994) 93-5; Davies (1967) 287-90.
16. Vivian (1996) 37-42; Shinnie (1996) 16-17; Shinnie & Vivian (1991) 4-6; Anquandah (1982) 68, 87.
17. For a discussion of pre-Asante towns in the Pra-Ofin basin see Wilks (1993) chapters 1-3; Kea (1982) 85-90; Boaten (1971) 50-59; Ozanne (1971) 48, 64.
18. Wilks (1993) chapters 2 & 3; Kea (1982) 90-4 & chapters 5 & 7.
19. Stahl (1994) 92; Anquandah (1982) chapters 7-9; Wilks (1985) 484-502. McCaskie (1995) chapters 1 & 2; Kea (1982) passim; Wilks (1962); Posnansky (1975) passim.
20. Wilks (1993) 78-82; Kea (1982) 92-3, 364-5 notes 164, 165, and 167; Cf. Sarbah (1966) 4. The report of the Basel missionary Lochman is dated 19 October 1912 (Basel Mission Archives, Basel, Switzerland).
21. Cf. Wilks (1993) 78-82, 95-100.
22. Cf. Davies (1967) 285, 287.
23. Anquandah (1982) 26, 104; Ozanne (1971) 30; Davies (1967) 310, 314.
24. Stahl (1994) 95-8; Kea (1982) 57-69; Ozanne (1971) 45-8; *idem* (1963); Also DeCorse (1992) 164-90; Coquery-Vidrovitch (1991) 1389-1410.
25. Pieter de Maree` quoted in Kea (1982) 23.
26. Meinig (1986) 74; Albert van Dantzig (1980); Kea (1982) chapter 6.

27. Kea (1982) chapter 7. For a discussion of a rival commercial-political system, Akwamu, based on the city-state of Nyanaoase (Nyanawase) see idem (1980).
28. Ibid. 101-2 and chapters 3 and 8 passim. Also Memel-Fote (1993) 363-9.
29. Kea (1982) 303-7.
30. Ibid. 62, 147. Adoni's dependents appear to have been Mankessim residents.
31. Kea (1982) 133, 137, 379 note 61; Boahen (1974) 30-36.
32. Quoted in Kea (1982) 246, 285. This was a period of wars of conquest (e.g., Asante) and Anomabo merchants were quick to take advantage of them by placing agents in the capitals and other towns of the expanding powers.
33. Fynn (1976) 56, 57. McCaskie (1990) 138-39.
34. Kea (2000) 179-81.

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