



(LYRCD 7454)

**ASANTE KETE DRUMMING:
MUSIC OF GHANA**
Recorded and produced by Joe Kaminski

THE ASANTE AND AKAN OF GHANA

The Asante, the founders of the Asante Empire (ca. 1700), are a political division of the Akan people. The Akan are one of forty-five ethnic groups in Ghana who constitute about 60% of the population. The Akan are divided into the Fante and the Twi. The Twi are divided into several kingdoms, including Asante, Akwapim, Brong, Akyem, and Kwahu. Adanse is a location south of Kumase in the Asante region considered to be the cradle of Akan civilization. It is not certain, however, when and how the ancestors of the Asante entered this forested zone, but Akan clans probably migrated to the present Asante region from around 500 AD onward, forming early states. By the middle of the seventeenth century a number of these states, including Kumase, Dwaben, Kokofu, Nsutu, and Bekwai had been founded by the Oyoko clan and eventually united to create the Asante federation. The purpose of the Asante federation was to overthrow the oppressive Denkyira kingdom, which they did in 1701. The term "Asante" derives from the Twi phrase "ɛsa nti," which means "because of war." Osei Tutu of the Oyoko clan became the first Asante king, i.e., the Asantehene. The suffix -hene means "chief," and in the case of Asante, "king."

Oral tradition tells how eight Akan clans, the Oyoko, Aduana, Bretuo, Asona, Ekoona, Asekyiri, Agona, and Asenee, migrated northward from Asantemanso where it is said the people emerged from a hole in the ground. Ivor Wilks maintains that this myth about a

people arriving to a region from a down or up direction, instead of east, west, north, or south, indicates a people's belief in indigenous status.[1] The Akan believe they are from there, for they are the first and foremost. The word Akan derived from the word root "kan," which means "first and foremost." However, Wilks also commented that it is likely the hole-in-the-ground myth represents the beginnings of agriculture there.[2] This same myth prevails in Hani where it is said the hole is at Begho. Merrick Posnansky states that Akan tales of holes are not pure myth but relate to an ill-remembered and long distant past.[3]

The Twi language belongs to the Kwa group of languages of the Niger-Congo language family. Beliefs in southward migrations from northern Niger kingdoms are also maintained in the Akan oral traditions of Akwamu and Tekyiman, but searches for these roots become precarious when their oral traditions are without supporting evidence. Nevertheless, the modern nation of Ghana took its name in 1957 from the first known West African kingdom, the Kingdom of Ghana (ca. 300-1076), a former Niger kingdom. Tekyiman oral tradition maintains that the royal household is descended from the ancient Ghanaians. This view gained support by Joseph Boakye Danquah and other nationalists during present Ghana's negotiations with Great Britain for independence. Scholarship has been examining the ancient Ghanaian connection as an avenue of cultural diffusion without drawing definite conclusions. The Akan court at Begho, however, developed from contact with the Mande from Mali, postdating the Kingdom of Ghana and reaching its peak in the fifteenth century. Present day Ghana received its name in 1957, and prior it was known as the Gold Coast, so called for the mineral the Akan have been mining and exporting for more than a millennium.

The royal house of Akwamu maintains an oral tradition that traces its migration from Kong, a Mande-Dyula trading center in north central Ivory Coast, via Wam, Twifo, Asamankese, Nyanaoase, and then to Akwamu in southeastern Ghana. Wilks states that Akwamu was significant for being the earliest of all the centralized Akan forest kingdoms, and is generally credited for introducing the type of semi-military government that had been characteristic of the Twi-speaking peoples such as the Asante.[4]

Asante, unknown prior to 1698, emerged as a political entity in the later part of the seventeenth century. Earlier in that century, groups of Twi-speakers drifted northward from Adanse to Kumase, near to the earlier trading town of Tafo. The Oyoko became established there under the leadership of the twin brothers Twum and Antwi, then Oti Akenten, and then Obiri Yeboah who demonstrated statecraft and imported European firearms from the coast. They conquered previous settlers and were later joined by groups of emigrants from the south who were attracted by the opportunities the new area offered.[5] While struggling for control of Kwaman, Osei Tutu I, the first Asantehene, was chosen to succeed the deceased Obiri Yeboah. Tutu knew military statecraft, for he had previously served at the Denkyira and Akwamu courts. Moving northward, Osei Tutu defeated the chieftains of Domaah, Tafo, Kaase, and Amakom and established supremacy in Kwaman. Sometime prior to 1698, he had built the new capital at Kumase and received the allegiance of conquered states to form the Asante federation.

Asante through its history expanded north into and beyond the Begho region until its spread was arrested on the frontiers of Kong; yet it originated in the south where contact with the powerful Akwamu people had formerly taught the Asante techniques of effective military organization. The question of the cultural origins of the Asante is in considering whether Asante culture derived inherently from Akwamu with its ties to Kong and thus Mali, or if Asante later absorbed cult influences with the take over of northern regions such as Brong where Tekyiman and Begho are located. Another question is whether the Asante's practices are indigenous.

It is regarded that Asante's power essentially rose due to the collapse of central authority in the middle Niger kingdoms and the subsequent increase of trade on the coast with the Portuguese and then the Dutch and British.[6] Asante inherited the market as well as past kingdoms' cultural traditions such as kete.

KETE DRUMMING

Kete is an Akan drum ensemble, the origin of which is unknown. Many kete ensembles exist in the Akan regions of Ghana and play at funerals. The Asantehene's ensemble plays at ancestor veneration and formerly played at executions. They were also taken to war.[7] Baama Owusu Sekyere indicates that earlier Asantehenes had them played in the royal mausoleum while they inspected the royal skeletons.[8]

The music of kete is reputed to possess the power of attracting good spirits.[9] J.H. Kwabena Nketia states that the surrogated texts extol high moral values through the telling of heroic ideals.[10] A kete dance developed that involves symbolic hand gestures reflecting these values. It is danced barefoot and trained male dancers dance with their lapa cloth lowered beneath the chest.

The instruments of kete are, from left to right in figure 2, the petia (small stick drum), kwadum (master drum), apentema (hand drum), and abrukua (stick drum). The donno (hour-glass-shaped talking drum) is absent from this group, and the ntorowa (gourd rattle) and dawuro (boat-shaped, hand-held iron bell) are in the back row not seen in figure 2. Kete ensembles once contained a vocal choir and choir of atenteben (vertical bamboo flutes), but both are no longer utilized.

Isaac Nketia is the leader of the Nsuase Kete Group, a professional ensemble that performs at funerals. It rehearses at the Asame Boys School near Prempeh Hall in Roman Hill, Kumase. Isaac is a master drummer and professional dancer, but in this group, he plays the petia (small stick drum).

Gabriel Ololai Martey plays the kwadum, which is the master drum. Yaw Damso plays the apentema (hand drum), and Richard Dwoomoh plays the abrukua (stick drum).

Isaac states that there are about fifteen different kete in the repertoire, and that they are based on different rhythmical styles of different chiefs. I recorded five on October 13, 2001.

1. Abofoɔ is slow and played when old men and women dance. It usually begins a kete program because the program always starts slow. The word bofoɔ means “hunter,” and abofoɔ thus means “hunters”. In this dance, the dancer imitates the action of a hunter who spots an animal, and he moves very carefully towards it to shoot it. (13:07)
2. Akuokuo Nisuo may be slow or fast. This recording is of a fast one. The word nisuo means “tears,” and Akuokuo Nisuo thus means, “Please let somebody cry for me.” In this dance, the dancer makes a movement to symbolise the plea for sympathy. (9:20)
3. Akwadwom is fast. The word kwadwom, from which this title derived, is a song of praise. In this dance, the dancer depicts the joy and happiness in his actions, praising the chief or the deceased person. (10:49)
4. Agyambua is slow. The word refers to a tree whose branches are curved in a peculiar way. It is a special tree. The dancer imitates those curved branches expressing his uniqueness, or the uniqueness of the person he is praising with the dance, either the chief or the deceased person. (14:01)
5. "Highlife" is fast with a distinct dawuro pattern. It is said that it may only be danced by a strong, healthy, young man with a “strong heart” due to its abrupt rhythmical peculiarity. Its name is taken from the popular brass band genre of the nineteenth century. (11:17)

The particular selections of kete and their sequences are not prescribed.

Their selections and orders are made at the discretion of the drummers, determined by who is dancing. I have also seen and heard kete drumming in Catholic Masses. When the host is consecrated, the drums increase their volume. When the host is lowered, the volume diminishes.

SOURCES AND FOOTNOTES

Ivor Wilks, *One Nation, Many Histories: Ghana Past and Present* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1996), 16.

[2] *Ibid.*, 17.

[3] Merrick Posnansky, “Dating Ghana’s earliest Art,” *African Arts* 13:1 (November 1979), 52-53.

[4] Ivor Wilks, *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History*, (Legon: Institute of African Studies University College of Ghana, 1961), 9.

[5] M.D. McLeod, *The Asante*, (London: British Museum Publications Ltd, 1981), 12.

[6] Ivor Wilks, *The Northern Factor*, 11.

[7] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 282.

[8] Baama Owusu Sekyere, *Burial and Installation Ceremonies for Asante Kings* (Kumasi: Adaex Educational Publishing, 1999), 21.

[9] Barfu Boaten I, *Akwasiada Kese - A Festival of the Asante*, (Accra: National Commission on Culture, 1993), 43.

[10] J.H. Kwabena Nketia, "Asante Court Music," in *The Golden Stool: Studies of the Asante Center and the Periphery*, ed. Enid Schildkrout, 200-208. *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 65:1, 1987), 202.

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