

## **Two to One ... Ghana**

By: Marcella Phillips-Grizzle

The Republic of Ghana is a West African nation believed to be the ancestral home of the vast majority of Jamaica's Black population. Its national flag – much like the Ethiopian flag, which is revered by Jamaica's Rastafari community – consists of the colours red, green and yellow, and has a black star depicted in its centre.

The Republic is situated on the Gulf of Guinea and is bordered to its east by Togo, its west by Cote D'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), and its north by Burkina Faso. Formerly known as the Gold Coast, Ghana is the first sub-Saharan country to have gained independence from Great Britain on March 6, 1957, with its first Prime Minister being the pan-Africanist, Kwame Nkrumah.

But there is another Ghana that many non-Africans may not be aware of, and that is ancient Ghana. While the Republic of Ghana – like many nations of the 'old world' – has its own remote history and legacies steeped in survival and conquest, the moniker of *ancient Ghana* refers, in this case, not to the distant history of the Republic, but to an entirely different land.

The Soninke are the indigenous inhabitants and founders of ancient Ghana, which is located in present-day western Mali and south-eastern Mauritania. While this ancient empire is not directly associated with modern-day Ghana, the present nation-state's name, Ghana, means 'warrior king' in the Soninke language.<sup>i</sup> It is believed that, following the destruction of the ancient empire of Ghana, its Diaspora dispersed to neighbouring lands, including the territories of modern-day Ghana, the land of the Akan peoples.

The Ashanti ethnic group is the largest, most powerful, (and today, the most well-known) of the major Akan peoples of modern-day Ghana, which includes the Bonoman, Denkyira, and the Akwamu. The name, Asante, means 'because of war' in the Twi language. "This name comes from the Asante's origin as a kingdom created to fight the Denkyira kingdom."<sup>ii</sup>

Gold trading was a major commercial enterprise of the Akan. It was also a mainstay of ancient Ghana's economy so much so that their Arab trading counterparts came to refer to the ancient territories of Ghana as the *land of gold*. In the eleventh century A.D., Muslim traders spoke of a prosperous and influential empire in Western Sudan which became known as the ancient empire of Ghana. "By 1068, Ghana was the largest, wealthiest and most powerful state in West Africa."<sup>iii</sup>

<sup>iii</sup> Mirroring this association is present-day Ghana, which was so notable for its gold that when Europeans began to trade with the Ashanti people (firstly, the Portuguese who built the Elmina Castle as their base; through to the British) their nomenclature for the strategic Gulf of Guinea portside territory was the *Gold Coast*.

By the nineteenth century, “a real political revolution had taken place in [modern day] Ghana as a result of the emergence of the Asante empire” which oral traditions and published sources indicate took place between 1700 and 1750 A.D.<sup>iv</sup> According to author, Adu Boahen, the “first factor in the rise of the Asante empire ... was the formation of metropolitan Asante or the Asante confederacy. The second was the rise of the Atlantic trade, and the third and most decisive was the ability, diplomatic skill and martial ardour of two of the Asante kings, Osei Tutu and Opoku Ware, whose reigns spanned the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>v</sup>

But it is, arguably, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade that Ghana’s Gold Coast was largely associated with. Beginning with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1470, European forts – most famous of which was Elmina Castle – were erected along the coastline of Ghana for trade in originally gold and ivory, but eventually – and significantly, as well as disproportionately – enslaved Africans.

The growing association with Europeans inevitably led to European takeover of Ghana’s lucrative trading activities. “Britain annexed the southern vassal states of Asante and constituted them into a Protectorate while they converted their forts and settlements on the coast into the British Crown Colony of the Gold Coast in July 1874.”<sup>vi</sup>

The Ashanti led resistance activities against the growing incursion of the British. Four ‘major’ wars were waged against the British, but it was the *War of the Golden Stool of Asante* in 1900 that was arguably the most notable for this Ashanti uprising was not only political and ideological, but significantly, religious and cultural, with the root of the uprising being the ostentation of a British official, Frederick Hodgson, who dared to usurp the power and sovereignty represented by the Golden Stool, which was not only the embodiment of rightful rulership of the king of the Ashanti (the Asantehene) but also the soul of the ruler and, by extension, the wider Ashanti Kingdom.



Replica of a Ghanaian (Chieftain's)  
Stool (Part of the Jean Small  
Collection donated to the ACIJ/JMB)

With the growing move towards decolonisation of the British colonies in the twentieth century came the resurgence of traditional cultural practices. Included in the spirit of cultural revivalism in Ghana is the medium of art, which is highly symbolic in Ghana. Textile art, for example, is a deeply rooted and esteemed traditional artistic practice in Ghana. It is highly symbolic, and for the Adinkra, for example, historically and culturally significant. “Adinkra is a kind of cloth, which like the Kente was originally woven on narrow looms.”<sup>vii</sup> In Adinkra patterns, “which in the main consist of graphic patterns stamped into plain cloths, are mainly proverbs or maxims or history or philosophical summaries of ideas”.<sup>viii</sup>



Multi-patterned Adinkra Cloth With Symbols Resembling a Stylised Ghanaian Stool (Part of the ACIJ/JMB collection)

According to author, A. K. Quarcoo, the “exact origin of adinkra symbols as used in the cloth which bears the name is yet to be specifically determined. ... It is, however, generally believed that the name adinkra is associated with one Nana (King of Chief) Kofi Adinkra, King of Gyaman, who was punished by an Asante King, Nana Osei Bonsu, about 1818, for daring to claim that he too had a Golden Stool. ... For, the like of the Golden Stool should never be said to have existed before or after the historic descent of the Golden Stool. For his ‘insolence’ Kofi Adinkra’s head was cut off as a trophy. Additional trophies captured from Gyaman after this punitive war were the adinkra stool symbol, the Adinkra cloth and technical know-how of adinkra cloth.”<sup>ix</sup>

Much like the institutionalisation of the Adinkra among Ghanaians is the cultural significance and perpetuation of festivals. According to A. A. Opoku, the peoples of Ghana have “evolved

various rites and rituals for all the important events of life”. Typical rites include child-naming, puberty-related initiations, as well as cyclical events such as marriage and death. “But far more important than these rituals, which are performed only by the little family or clan circle, are the annual and seasonal festivals, which bring together the whole people of a town and, indeed, the whole tribe.”<sup>x</sup>

There are two main types of festivals celebrated in Ghana: harvest festivals – particularly the annual Yam Festival – and festivals honouring the life and memory of the dead, such as the Adaye of the Akan.<sup>xi</sup> Within harvest festivals, “in which the emphasis is on Tweekuampon, the Sky God, Giver of rain and sunshine and on the lesser gods who are His servants here below [.]” the priest plays the most significant role. He presides over the “special presentations of new crops” to the tribal god in gratitude of the good harvest bestowed.<sup>xii</sup>

Ghanaians believe in life after death and in the guidance and agency of ancestors, whether recently departed or more ancient ones. They believe that festivals are an expedient way of not only paying homage to the ancestors, but also as a means of appealing to them for aid and protection from dangers, whether from natural or human sources. Such ‘ancestral’ festivals are usually presided over by the chief (as opposed to the priest) as he is the “living representative of the ancestral leaders of the tribe”.<sup>xiii</sup>

Of arguably greater significance, as stated by Okopu, is the belief that “the festivals are used to purify the whole state so that the people can enter the New Year with confidence and hope”.<sup>xiv</sup> This communal setting for the purification of the Ghanaian people is arguably underpinned by their traditional belief that “preserving life is the real purpose of all religious activity”.<sup>xv</sup> This is a tenet of Africans the continent over – despite nationality or creed – that history and culture are borne out of life preserved, which in turn creates a cycle of renewal and growth. As has been the case with the Republic of Ghana, the rebirth of this nation allowed for the casting off of a name that no longer served them, and the adoption of one that symbolises resilience, strength, and the hope of a people.

---

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> “Ghana”, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghana> (accessed 28 September 2020).

<sup>ii</sup> “Ashanti Empire,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashanti\\_Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashanti_Empire) (accessed 28 September 2020).

<sup>iii</sup> George Stride and Caroline Ifeka, *Peoples and Empires of West Africa* (Ontario: Nelson Publishing, 1971), 31.

<sup>iv</sup> A. Adu Boahen, *Ghana: Evolution and Change in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Ghana: Longman, 1976), 15.

<sup>v</sup> Boahen, 15.

---

<sup>vi</sup> Boahen, 34.

<sup>vii</sup> A. K. Quarcoo, *The Language of Adinkra Patterns* (Ghana: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1972), 6.

<sup>viii</sup> Quarcoo, 5.

<sup>ix</sup> Quarcoo, 6.

<sup>x</sup> A. A. Opoku, *Festivals of Ghana* (Ghana: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1970), 4.

<sup>xi</sup> Opoku, 4.

<sup>xii</sup> Opoku, 6.

<sup>xiii</sup> Opoku, 6.

<sup>xiv</sup> Opoku, 4.

<sup>xv</sup> Theo Sundermeier, *The Individual and the Community in African Traditional Religions* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 14.