

A tale of two polities: socio-political transformation on the Gold Coast in the Atlantic World

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This article examines change and transformation in the political economy of the Akan coast and coastal hinterland of Ghana during the era of the Atlantic world. Archaeological and documentary data indicate dramatic changes in settlement size, settlement patterns, and socio-political organization between the fifteenth and the nineteenth-centuries. On the eve of European contact there were few large settlements located on the coast or in the adjacent hinterland. With the expansion of the Atlantic trade, some African settlements emerged as centres of commercial activity, linking inland societies with European trade and growing in size and importance. These emerging polities were African, building on forms and political structures that were characteristically Akan. Yet the coastal enclaves were distinct entities, following different trajectories and in some instances incorporating features not found in interior Akan polities. Drawing on archaeological and historical data on Eguafu and Elmina, two of the principal polities on the coast, we examine the transformations that occurred on the Akan coast during the period of the Atlantic trade. These developments are evaluated in light of wider discussions of urbanism and socio-political complexity in other parts of Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Graham Connah was one of the first archaeologists to discuss the emergence of pre-colonial forest states in West Africa from an explicitly archaeological perspective, drawing specifically on his work at Benin City (see Connah 1975, 1987:122, 2004). From other work in Nigeria, he further argued for an approach he termed ‘total history’ that combined multiple sources of information, including archaeology, oral traditions and written documents, to gain a fuller understanding of Africa’s past (see Connah 1981:1–3; also see Connah 1998, 2004). This interest in the social and political changes on the continent during the recent past, and the use of multiple strands of evidence to understand those transformations, remain major research concerns for archaeologists working in Africa (for example Behrens and Swanepoel 2008; DeCorse 1996, 2008; DeCorse and Chouin 2003; Ogundiran and Falola 2007; Reid and Lane 2004; Schmidt 2006; Schmidt and Walz 2007a, 2007b; Stahl 2001). These research foci and methodological concerns have been central themes of the research carried out by the Central Region Project, which has concentrated on the archaeological record of the last 1500 years in the central Ghanaian coast and hinterland (see Carr 2001; Chouin 2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2008,

2009; Cook and Spiers 2004; DeCorse 1987, 1992, 1998, 2001a, 2005, 2008; DeCorse et al. 2000, DeCorse et al. in press; Spiers 2007).

The Central Region of Ghana has been the focus of archaeological research for several decades. Much of the recent work has been initiated by the Central Region Project, which began with DeCorse’s research at the African settlement of Elmina in the 1980s (see Figure 1). Elmina was the site of *Castelo de São Jorge da Mina*. Founded by the Portuguese in 1482, *São Jorge* was the first and largest European trade post in sub-Saharan Africa. The European forts and trading posts were the points of contact between foreign traders, interior polities and the various networks linking them. Towns and polities that lay beyond the range of the forts’ and castles’ immediate influence have received somewhat less attention than the trading ports themselves (Cook and Spiers 2004; DeCorse 2001a, in press; Kankpeyeng and DeCorse 2004; Posnansky and DeCorse 1986). Information is, however, accumulating, especially for Eguafu, a polity that already existed when the Europeans arrived on the coast (Chouin 1998, 2002a, 2002b, 2008; Spiers 2007; see Agorsah 1975; DeCorse 2001a, 2005; Deffontaine 1993; Nunoo 1957 for work on other hinterland sites). Given the

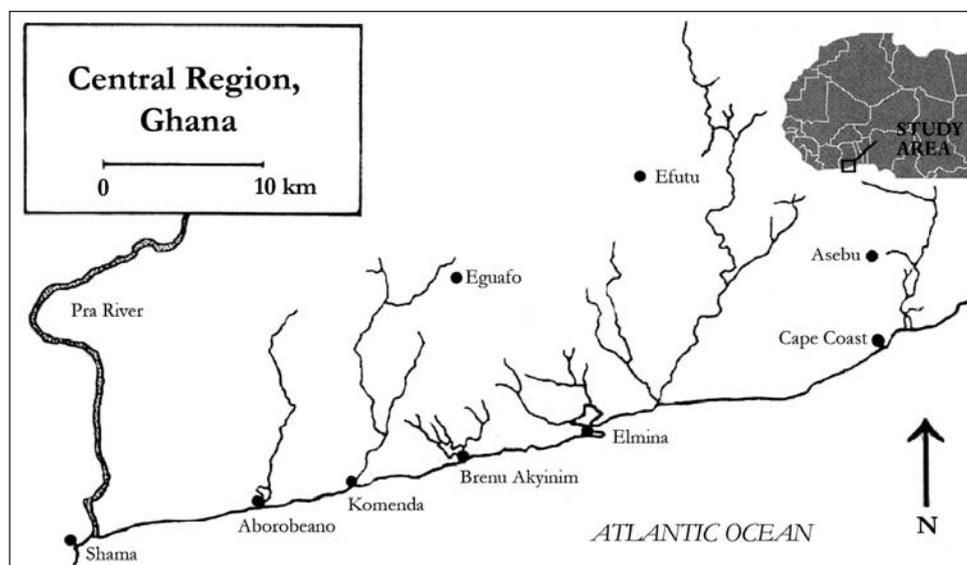


Figure 1: Central Region, Ghana (drawn by Sam Spiers).

paucity of documentary source material, understanding of the transformations that occurred in West African societies over the past five hundred years to a large extent depends on study of the archaeological record of these wider hinterland areas (DeCorse 1991, 2001a:4–6, 2001b; in another context see also R. McIntosh 2005).

One of the aims of the Central Region Project has been to place coastal towns such as Elmina into the broader, regional context of which they were part. While European documentary records attest to the existence of African polities and provide some idea of African-European interactions, written sources offer limited information on indigenous socio-political organization, customs, and the daily life of the peoples of the coast during the pre-colonial period. Archaeological survey and excavation has been conducted by the Central Region Project between the Pra River Basin in the west and the Sweet River in the east and extending ten to fifteen miles into the coastal hinterland. The region was well settled by African populations during the Late Stone Age and the Iron Age (see Chouin 2009). It was an important area of African-European interactions during the period of the Atlantic trade, including the early European outposts at Shama (Portuguese fort *São Sebastião*), Komenda (Dutch and English forts), and Elmina (Portuguese 1482–1637; Dutch 1637–1872).

Documentary and archaeological evidence indicate that the situation on the central Ghanaian coast before the seventeenth century can be dramatically contrasted with developments in the following centuries. It is clear that some historically and ethnographically known political entities on the Ghanaian coast, such as Elmina, emerged after the advent of the Atlantic trade, while others, such as Eguafu, clearly changed in form and organization. Prior to European contact in the late fifteenth century, the population of the central Ghanaian coast occupied small villages, mainly focused on lagoon resources (DeCorse 2001a:18–20, 2005). Archaeological survey of the Benya Lagoon at Elmina, Brenu Akyinim, and recent survey work around the Aborobeano Lagoon provides extensive evidence for pre-fifteenth-century occupation. With the advent of the Atlantic trade, populations became increasingly concentrated in larger settlements associated with European trade entrepôts and the capitals of the states in the immediate hinterland, which also expanded in size and importance.

To a large extent, the area between the Pra River Basin and the Sweet River (the focus of the Central Region Project) includes areas that were at various times incorporated within the boundaries of the Eguafu Kingdom. The Kingdom already existed when the Europeans arrived on the coast in the late fifteenth century and it was one of several Akan polities that first traded with the Portuguese (Blake 1967[1942]:86; Chouin 1998; Hair 1994:39; Spiers 2007:29–32). In the following centuries there were dramatic changes in the polity's size and in the spatial arrangement of the capital, changes that hint at wider socio-political transformations. As a result of its intermediary position between the coast and hinterland Eguafu appears to have played a key role in the coastal trade, especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period that coincides with the dramatic expansion of the slave trade. Increasing population in Eguafu, which appears to have also been a trend at other hinterland towns such as Asebu and Efutu, was likely coupled with wide-ranging transformations in socio-political organization, including changes in political structures, new forms of social control, and the emergence of more centralized political hierarchies.

New polities also emerged. On the coast, settlements located adjacent to European trading enclaves such as Cape

Coast, Elmina and Komenda became the focal points of increasing trade, craft production and specialization, and emerged as independent states (DeCorse 2001a:103–144). Although these polities include political structures found in interior Akan polities, they also incorporated new features such as *asafo* military and social organizations (DeCorse 2001a:40–41).

Evidence for increasing urbanism in the Akan coast and hinterland is significant as it is one of a suite of attributes, which also includes agricultural intensification, surplus production, specialization and social stratification, that have often been used by social scientists to measure, classify and rank socio-political complexity (see for example Childe 1950; Sahlins and Service 1960; Service 1975; Steward 1955; White 1959). These characteristics have been considered to be functionally related, the relative increase in each affording a measure of increasing complexity in an evolutionary progression (for recent critiques see Patterson 2003; Trigger 2003; Yoffee 2005). While such correlations have been shown to exist in some settings, contrasting evidence including many examples from Africa, indicate that such neat relationships do not always exist (Spiers 2007:7–18, 270–271; also see Connah 1998; Fletcher 1998; discussions in Anderson and Rathbone 2000; McIntosh, S.K. ed. 1999). In many instances social control is provided by more heterarchical, cross-cutting institutions such as segmentary lineages, secret societies, age groups, and associations (Brown 1951; Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940; Goody 1957; Netting 1990; Northrup 1978; Shipton 1994; Southall 1953, 1999; Tuden and Plotnicov 1970; Vengroff 1976). Rather than a ranked hierarchy, in such settings complexity is expressed by the degree of internal differentiation (horizontal as well as vertical) and the intricacy of relations within a system (McIntosh S.K.1999:11). Such internal differentiation also suggests a greater degree of flexibility in political organization between different polities and their legitimization, something which Kwame Arhin (1966:67) has called “diffuse authority” (see also Crumley 1994, 1995; Paynter 1989). Jan Vansina (2004:265) has argued that the emergence of such variety, and legitimacy, is not constrained by environment or population pressure alone, but also the “collective imagination” of a society, a theme also explored by Norman Yoffee (2005:39–40). These observations force a reconsideration of how we define complexity and situate African models in wider debates concerning the validity of the traditional echelon of bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states. Accepting a more heterarchical formulation we can examine the degree and nature of complexity.

COMPLEXITY IN GHANA

Reconstruction of the pre-colonial socio-political organization of the Ghanaian coast is provided by observation of historically and ethnographically known polities, particularly those of the Akan. When the Europeans reached central, coastal Ghana in the late fifteenth century the inhabitants of the coast spoke Akan, an inference based on linguistic evidence and, to a lesser extent, ethno-historical data (Hair 1967a, 1967b, 1968, 1969; also see Blake 1967[1942]:52–54; DeCorse 2001a:18–20). Today the principal Akan group of central-coastal Ghana is the Fante who are bordered on the west by Ahanta speakers and to the east by the Ga. Akan is a linguistic classification referring to one of the major subdivisions within the Volta-Comoe Group (Dolphyne and Kropp Dakubu 1988:50–90). While Akan is a purely linguistic classification a high degree of cultural homogeneity also characterizes groups within the language family (see for example Christensen 1954:1; Chukwukere 1978; Effah-Gyamfi 1979; Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1980; McCaskie 1995;

Murdock 1959: 253; Rattray 1959; Schildkrout 1987; Warren 1973; Wilks 1993). Akan languages are currently spoken in a continuous geographical spread from south-eastern Côte d'Ivoire to the Volta River in eastern Ghana, including the coastal area.

The best known Akan polities are those that emerged after the seventeenth century, particularly Asante. The Asante State expanded throughout much of the interior of Ghana in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries incorporating both Akan and non-Akan groups that had formerly been autonomous polities (McCaskie 1995; Wilks 1993). This was accomplished through a variety of diplomatic, military, and cultural mechanisms, including extended exogamous matrilineal clans, or *abusua*, that have been historically important as a unifying factor of Akan identity and a means of assimilating non-Akan cultural elements. The matrilineage in Akan society is the locus of an individual's identity, determining inheritance of property, socio-political status, eligibility for state office, and links with the spirit world. A high degree of ideological and ritual conformity within Akan groups is enforced by clan elders. Patrilineal ties of varying kinds, including spiritual links of the *ntoro*, cross-cut and complement the overarching matrilineal framework (Denteh 1967; Gyekye 1987; Rattray 1959). These kinship ties are associated with a wide variety of rituals, taboos and totems. Asante culture traits, particularly language, socio-political organization and statecraft, were imprinted on non-Asante groups. On the other hand, features of other groups, including those of the non-Akan Ewe, Ga, and Dangme speaking peoples, were incorporated into a distinct and fairly homogenous Akan culture. Archaeologically, Asante cultural influence can be seen in ceramic assemblages, which in parts of southern Ghana become increasingly dominated by black burnished, carinated Asante forms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (DeCorse 2001a:116–123; also see Bellis 1987; Crossland 1989; Effah-Gyamfi 1979, 1985; Kense 1987; Posnansky 1973, 1987; Shinnie and Vivian 1991; Spiers 2007; Stahl 2001).

Asante is arguably the most centralized, hierarchical political system to have existed in pre-colonial Ghana. Structurally, Asante was a loosely bound confederacy, with a variety of cross-cutting mechanisms to limit the authority of the ruler, the Asantehene. Even heritable property rights, traditionally seen as an important basis of wealth accumulation and, consequently, class oppression (Netting 1990:45–46) do not characterize Akan land tenure (or that of adjacent cultural groups) until the latter half of the twentieth century with the advent of cash cropping (see Firmin-Sellers 1996), though Elmina may provide some earlier cases, discussed below. Land ownership among the Akan has been traditionally vested in the chiefs (*ahene*) who apportioned it to individuals, the land returning to the custodianship of the chief upon the individual's death. The chief could also give land to immigrants, who in turn paid tribute to the chief. Traditional property rights seem to reflect African notions of fairness and flexibility, with access granted to those who needed it (McIntosh 1999:8; Shipton 1994:350).

These features are true of modern Akan polities in general. Asante is well described historically and ethnographically (McCaskie 1995, 2000; Rattray 1959; Wilks 1993). It can, therefore, potentially be seen as a model for the polities of the Akan coast and hinterland. Ethnographically observed phenomena cannot, however, be uncritically applied to the past. While observations of modern polities may afford insight into older political systems, analogies cannot be taken for granted. To quote Susan McIntosh (1999:3): "... continuity must be treated as an empirical question requiring investigation by methods that facilitate the identification of change (discontinuity) as well as persistence" (also see Connah 1981:10; Stahl 1993, 2001). As in other portions of

Africa, the view of pre-colonial Ghanaian political organization is obfuscated by colonial and post-colonial infrastructures that may not correspond to pre-colonial African social organization (DeCorse 2001a:38-43; McIntosh 1999:1–3). For example, a series of ordinances were passed between 1878 and 1910 regarding Native Jurisdiction on the Gold Coast (modern Ghana), in part to provide a hierarchical framework for indigenous rulers in the new British colony. Broadly speaking, three levels of authority were instituted based on, but by no means universally represented in indigenous Ghanaian societies. These included the *omanhene* (paramount-chief) who was subject only to British rule, the *ohene*, who was subject to the *omanhene*, and the *odekuro* or village head (Henige 1973:10; Metcalfe 1964:390-393).

Further, with regard to Ghana in particular, terms such as state, king, and kingdom that are commonly used in documentary sources and oral traditions further complicate interpretations of past socio-political organization as they are inconsistently used and vary in meaning. In particular, the polities of central coastal Ghana, as in other portions of Ghana, generally labeled 'states,' lack characteristics such as non-kin based, institutionalized bureaucracies that extend power and authority over large territories that have traditionally been used by social scientists to delineate state-level societies (for example Childe 1950; Eisenstadt et al. 1988; Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940; Lonsdale 1981; Service 1975). The territories covered by the individual Akan states of the Ghanaian coast are quite limited and chiefly authority is circumscribed by various heterarchical, diffuse social structures which could accommodate group segmentation (see Arhin 1966). Population densities within this region were also comparatively low until the eighteenth century, and even then do not approach the urban concentrations such as found in other parts of West Africa, such as the Nigerian forest (see Connah 1975, 1987, 2000). Given these ambiguities, the term "polity" and reference to specific socio-political structures are more appropriately used except when specific historical or contemporary references are being used. The nature of Fante socio-political organization and the degree of complexity represented will be returned to later. As will be seen, the traditional evidence for complexity on the coast is limited, but is interconnected with increasing population.

URBANISM ON THE CENTRAL COAST

The central Ghanaian coast and hinterland can be characterized by its comparative lack of urbanization immediately prior to the advent of the Atlantic trade. Recent research by Chouin (see Chouin 2002a, 2002b, 2009) has suggested that there may have been a trend toward urbanization and complexity on the coast prior to the fifteenth century. For example, Abrem Berase, located to the north-east of Eguafu, has a surrounding ditch and bank earthwork that suggests significant investment in labour. Current data, however, indicates that these earlier sites were largely unoccupied in the late fifteenth century (see Chouin 2009). Rather, small fishing and farming villages were scattered along the coast and the adjacent hinterland (DeCorse 2001a:18–20). Evidence for the pre-European contact occupation of the coast is represented by surface scatters and midden deposits along low rises just above the shoreline or adjacent to lagoons and, in some locales, on hill-tops. In several locations granite outcrops scored with grooved grinding marks indicate the production of *nyame akuma* (or ground-stone celts). In some instances, scatters of surface material, mostly consisting of distinctive friable, orange-paste ceramics, with occasional fragments of iron slag, quartz flakes

and stone beads extend for almost a kilometre along the shore suggesting significant pre-fifteenth-century coastal occupation. While testament to the importance of coastal resources during the pre-European contact period, this settlement pattern likely represents small shifting settlements over long periods of time rather than single, continuous occupations. The well dated feature at Coconut Grove just west of Elmina indicates that this pattern of relatively small settlements along the immediate coast extends back into the first millennium AD, and possibly earlier (DeCorse 2001a:18–20, 2005; Spiers 2007:138). Although engaged in localized trade, during the late fifteenth century this coastal margin was likely at the extreme periphery of wider trade networks of the northern forest and savannah.

Increasing urbanization is the most striking change in African societies on the coast during the post-European contact period. This began as a gradual process during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that culminated during the following centuries. Detailed information on the demographics of pre-twentieth-century coastal Ghana and its hinterland is, however, woefully incomplete (De Graft-Johnson 1969; Johnson 1977). The Europeans had incomplete knowledge of the internal organization of African settlements and African residential customs. While it might be expected that some estimates, such as the numbers of militiamen, would be more accurate as they fought with European forces, the numbers reported might have been intentionally distorted or embellished for a number of reasons. Whatever information can be extracted provides no information on age or sex ratios, or the mortality rate. Given these limitations it is difficult to assess demographic change (see Fage 1980; Jones 1990:125–128; Kea 1982:39).

Demographic data is especially tenuous for the coastal hinterland. Evidence for the population of Eguafu, located twelve kilometres north-west of Elmina, consists of only a handful of pre-twentieth-century accounts. A late sixteenth-century Portuguese document suggests that Eguafu was a village of no more than 100 houses in 1572 (Teixeira da Mota and Hair 1988:74). Paul Hair (1994:77 note 126) argued that if this figure is accurate, then the population of Eguafu at this time was approximately 500 people. The problem here is that, accurate or not, this figure may already reflect the initial migration of people to coastal towns such as Elmina from the immediate hinterland. It is possible that Eguafu may have been larger prior to European contact and trade (see Hair 1994:77 note 126). In 1602, Pieter de Marees (1987[1602]:77) described the hinterland towns which he visited as “huge in comparison with the coastal towns” and further suggested that there were even larger towns further inland. He further described the town of Eguafu as being on a mountain, though it is unclear if he ever went there (de Marees 1987[1602]:79; see also Dapper 1967[1670]:434). Later still, Jean Barbot (1992:348) suggested in 1688 that Eguafu had 400 houses in contrast to Komenda, which only had 150. This would be in agreement with de Marees’ earlier suggestion that the hinterland capitals, like Eguafu, were larger than the port towns. If we follow Hair’s calculations discussed above, this would suggest Eguafu’s population was approximately 2000 people toward the start of the eighteenth century. Barbot (1992:349) further suggests that Eguafu could purportedly put 20,000 men in the field. While the number of soldiers may well be exaggerated and refer to the entire polity’s army, the difference in magnitude between this estimate and the sixteenth-century reference to the town’s size is suggestive of a gradual increase in population. It would seem, however, that by this time the coastal town of Elmina was larger than Eguafu.

Although still limited, there is more demographic information for the coast than for the interior. The information

on Elmina’s population gleaned from the documentary records is summarized in Table 1. The limitations of such compilations need to be underscored: they represent a range of phenomena and measurements, none of it very good. Presentation here serves to illustrate the relative difference in the size of the settlement suggested by the early and the late estimates. With these provisos in mind, the data indicate a substantial increase in Elmina’s population between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries. While estimates before the mid-seventeenth century suggest a population in the hundreds, the succeeding figures are more suggestive of numbers in the thousands or tens of thousands. Elmina was considered a ‘large’ settlement when the Portuguese arrived. There is little indication of what this meant, but the population probably only numbered a few hundred. During the following four centuries, the town became one of the largest, if not *the* largest, settlement on the coast. This may already have been true by the late sixteenth century when Elmina, followed by Shama, was said to be larger than settlements in the coastal hinterland such as Efutu (Hair 1994:77 note 126). Harvey Feinberg (1989:85) estimates Elmina’s population as between 12,000 and 16,000 during much of the eighteenth century, while Larry Yarak (1990:48) suggests similar figures for the 1820s. During the late nineteenth century the number of inhabitants may have been somewhat higher. A Dutch report of 1859 estimated a total population between 18,000 and 20,000 (Feinberg 1989:95 note 42; see also Baesjou 1979:214–224; Kea 1982:32–39; Wartemberg 1951:14).

Table 1: Canoe, household, militia and population estimates for Elmina from the late fifteenth century to the late nineteenth century.

Year	Canoes	Households	Militiamen	Population
c. 1460s	–	500+	1,500–2,500	–
c. 1578	–	–	5,000–6,000	–
1606	–	–	103	–
1621	–	300	200	–
1625	–	–	900	–
1630s	–	–	800	–
1631	–	800	–	–
c. 1640	300–400	–	–	–
c. 1650	400–500	–	2,000	–
1670	–	–	8,000	–
c. 1680	–	–	12,000	–
1688	300	–	4,000	–
1695	–	–	5,000–6,000	–
1700	–	–	50	12,000–16,000
1702	–	–	1,000	–
1709	–	–	3,000+	–
1737	–	–	4,000	–
1739–1740	–	–	5,000	–
1782	–	–	3,000	–
c. 1820	–	–	–	12,000–15,000
1859	–	–	–	18,000–20,000
c. 1866	–	–	–	19,000

Sources: The material in Table 1 is drawn from a number of sources. The 1490s estimate is based on a reference in Hair (1994:77 note 126) which actually refers to Shama that the sources imply was slightly smaller than Elmina. The population of Shama is given as 500 households, hence the figure for Elmina is given here as 500+ households. The figures of 1578 and 1606 are from Vogt (1979:125, 155) who describes a conflict with Efutu and a land battle with the Dutch. The 1630s population estimate of 800 is given by Vogt (1979:184) without elaboration. Sources for the 1621–1709 period were surveyed by Kea (1982:39) and those between 1737–1782 by Feinberg (1989). The circa 1820 figure is based on estimates given by Yarak (1990:48). Referring to the 1820s, he comments that a variety of sources can be used to place Elmina’s population between 12,000 and 15,000. 1859 and 1866 census data on Elmina and surrounding communities were compiled by Baesjou (1979:214–224).

Significantly, the relative increase in both Elmina's and Eguafu's population suggested by the documentary record is consistent with archaeological data, which also show a steady increase in the size of both settlements. Archaeological evidence indicates that pre-European contact Elmina was confined to two small loci on the Elmina peninsula. In fact, these discrete occupation areas may represent divisions within the town and account for the early European reference to the settlement as the "Village of Two Parts" (see DeCorse 2001a:47-52; Hair 1994:129). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the town expanded west along the Elmina peninsula and into portions of the area north of the Benya Lagoon (DeCorse 2001a:47-52). Archaeological data on the post-fifteenth-century period indicate a similar pattern at Eguafu, where we see the abandonment of the hill-top site and the expansion of the valley settlement during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Cook and Spiers 2004; Spiers 2007:138, 252-257). This period of expansion was followed by a period of decline that extends to the present, with the current settlement still occupying less area than it did at its apogee. Although the coastal population fluctuated, with the size of individual settlements dipping at times, the trend toward the emergence of larger towns is clear. Satellite villages may have played a supporting role for these larger settlements; for example, it has been argued that certain villages were responsible for portions of the Eguafu military (see Sanders 1975).

With some variation, these share the socio-political organization found in Asante. Notable differences among the coastal Akan include patrilineal inheritance of *ohen* among the Elmina, something that may, in fact, have been more general throughout the Akan coast (see Chouin 1998, 1999). The polities, then, can be seen as Akan states, duplicating the form and structure found in the Asante, though to a substantially lesser degree in terms of scale and degree of centralization. A survey of place names and African states mentioned in early European accounts suggest a correspondence with the general location, if not the specific organization and extent, of polities identified in later periods. Maps of the coast by Luis Teixeira in 1602 and a Dutch manuscript of 1629 show Eguafu (Comendo) to the west of Elmina, while the country of Efutu (Fetu, Futu, Afutu) lies to the east as shown in Figure 2 (see Blake 1987; Cortesão and Teixeira de Mota 1960 vol. 3:67-70; Daaku 1970:182-184; Daaku and Van Dantzig 1966; de Marees 1987[1602]; Kea 1982:23-28; and Müller cited in Jones 1983). Efutu controlled much of the coast east of Elmina as far as Cape Coast. The Dutch map further shows the Eguafu Kingdom bordered by Abrem to the north-east, Adom to the north-west, and Yabiw and Ahanta to the west. This western border was linguistic as well as political (see Daaku and van Dantzig 1966; Hair 1969:229; Kea 1982:27). The relative positions of the polities seem to hold through the seventeenth century (see Roussier 1935:10). These names, and possibly the lineal descendants of the polities represented, still exist (Chouin 2005).

POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

The demographic changes and transformations in settlement patterning that are seen on the coast hint at broader changes in socio-political organization. Today the central coast of Ghana is divided into a number of autonomous, traditional states.

This correspondence in name and location suggests a degree of continuity in the political structures over the past 500 years, yet actual evidence for fifteenth-century political authority is limited and the transformations that occurred prior to the nineteenth century are difficult to trace (DeCorse 2001a:38-43; also see Hair 1994:52-56 note 31, 35, 37; Ballong-Wen-Mewuda 1984:75-106; Blake 1977:99-100).

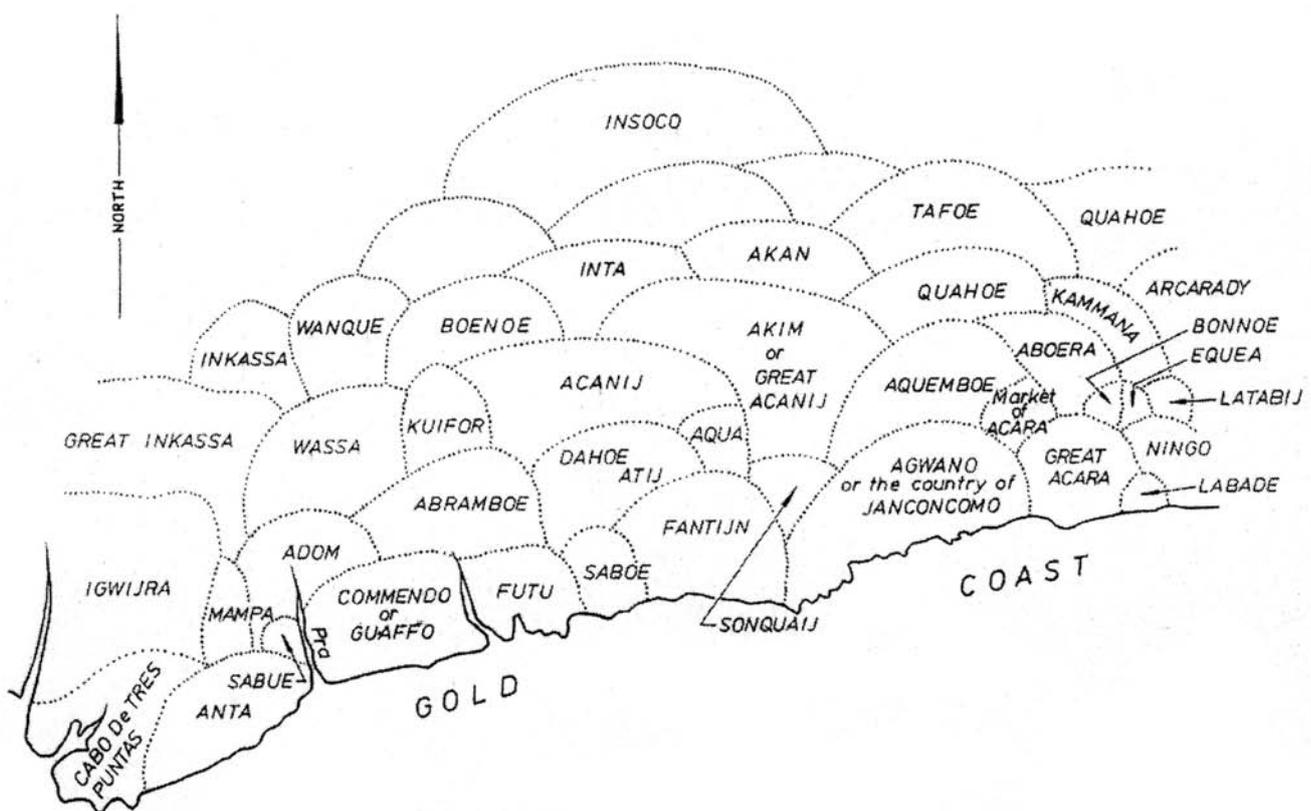


Figure 2: 1629 Polities Map (Redrawn by Stuart Spiers from Daaku 1970:199): note that this map is not to scale, but represents the southern coast of Ghana. Figure 1 covers the area of Comendo, Futu and Saboe on this map.

POLITIES 1629

The political structures that are found in more recent periods did not appear fully formed, but rather gradually evolved in the preceding centuries. Modern political descendants have both an Asante cultural veneer and colonial overlay. With these provisos in mind, the socio-political organizations of the late fifteenth-century probably consisted of small polities centred on major settlements, which likely incorporated some of the structures of social control documented in ethnographically known coastal polities. The earliest European descriptions of African rulers are, in fact, superficially similar to modern accounts. A variety of source material – written, oral and archaeological – collectively suggests a great deal of continuity in certain aspects of religious beliefs, behaviour, and material culture (DeCorse 2001a:175–192; also Blake 1967[1942]:53; Hair 1967a, 1967b, 1968). For example, early Portuguese accounts describing the initial meeting of the African leader Caramansa and Portuguese commander Azambuja are illustrative: “Hither the king came, and before him a great noise of trumpets, bells and horns, which are their instruments, and he was accompanied by an endless number of blacks, some with bows and arrows, and others with assegais and shields; and the principal persons were attended behind by naked page-boys, with seats of wood, like chairs (*cadeiras*), to sit upon” (Rui de Pina translated in Hair 1994:20). The weapons, musical instruments, and the kingly procession itself are consistent with later descriptions of ceremonies at Elmina and adjacent parts of the coast down to the present day (DeCorse 2001a:175–192; see de Marees 1987[1602]:33–35; Hair 1994:83–84 notes 145, 146, 148; Jones 1983; Wartemberg 1951:98–99).

Eguafo

Our knowledge of the Eguafo Kingdom during the fifteenth and first half of the sixteenth centuries from documentary sources is scant, and relates more to the associated port towns of Shama, Komenda and Elmina. During Eustache de la Fosse’s journey between 1479 and 1480, he only identified two places to trade on the borders of what we know to be the seventeenth-century Eguafo polity: Shama and Elmina, both referred to as “la minne” (see Foulché-Delbosc 1897: 181–182; Hair 1994:43 note 3). Whether these were also the borders in the fifteenth century is unclear. Pacheco Pereira (1937:119), who travelled to the Gold Coast between 1498 and 1505, wrote that midway between the villages of Shama and Elmina was the “village of Torto”. This is the first identification of Komenda we have from European sources (see Fage 1980:54–55), though again it does not refer to the inland polity. Rui de Pina, from material collected in the 1490s (Hair 1994:6), wrote of a war which was started between two men who lived in the vicinity of Elmina (Blake 1967 [1942]:86). Hair (1994:39) has cautiously argued that this may refer to the rulers of two polities which surround Elmina: Eguafo and Efutu. Certainly by 1503 we have reference to an individual “who is now king of Acomane [Eguafo], came hither with all his people to a point about three bombard shots from this fortress [*Castelo São Jorge da Mina*] in order to clear the roads to the fortress there and to permit the merchants to come” (Blake 1967[1942]:94; also see Chouin 1998). Ray Kea (1982:28) noted that the town of Eguafo was referred to in 1688 as “Aguaffoman”, which would further suggest the existence of the Eguafo *oman* or state. By the nineteenth century, however, the population of Eguafo was in decline, and late in the nineteenth century it was reported that the ruler of Eguafo could only promise 150 men to assist in a military campaign (Brackenbury 1968[1874] II:127).

The site of Eguafo, capital of the Kingdom, has three broad occupation phases. The early phase dating from the

second half of the first millennium AD to the time of European contact was marked by a small defensive settlement with limited evidence for long-distance trade and limited differentiation in the artefact inventory. This signature is similar to other Late Iron Age sites on the coast and in the hinterland (see DeCorse 2001a:18–19; 2005). From the seventeenth century, however, the settlement size of Eguafo increased, long-distance trade goods become more plentiful, and artefact types become increasingly varied. This original hill-top settlement was abandoned, to be supplanted by increasing settlement in the adjacent valley. The original hill-top site subsequently became known as the Dompow, the principal sacred grove of the Eguafo Kingdom (see Chouin 2002a:180). This transformation in the settlement pattern seems to occur at the height of Eguafo’s involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the settlement continuing to expand until the end of the eighteenth century. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century Eguafo incorporated state-characteristics, including: a relatively defined territory; system of rule; capability to mobilize armies; ability to levy taxes on trade; and, initially, control of adjacent settlements and port towns.

Yet the Kingdom had limited power in practice, and rulers seem to be enstooled and deposed in an endless cycle during the eighteenth century (Chouin 1998, 1999; Spiers 2007:67–68). These internal struggles for power, however, were only part of the problem affecting Eguafo, and indeed other coastal polities. In 1699 the conflict between the emerging Asante State and that of Denkyera began, which had a profound impact on coastal polities and their relationship with European traders. When Asante emerged victorious, both the Europeans and the independent coastal ports, such as Komenda and Elmina, tried to bypass the coastal polities who had previously acted as middlemen in the slave trade, and deal directly with the Asante State itself, reducing Eguafo’s role (see discussion in Doortmont 2002:20–21). Eguafo’s third occupation phase begins in the late eighteenth century and marks the polity’s increasingly marginal status and inability to control inland trade routes to the port towns of Elmina and Komenda. While some members of Eguafo were well positioned to benefit economically from the trade in persons rather than the earlier trade in gold, this also marked a period of great political instability in the Eguafo Kingdom during the eighteenth century, where the former boundaries of the state were challenged and eventually reduced to the nucleus of villages which today form the core of the Eguafo Traditional Area (see Fynn 1974a).

This shift in settlement patterning over the past five hundred years is of particular interest in understanding the transformations in the Eguafo polity. During the pre-contact period, and during the height of the early gold trade, Eguafo occupied a defensive settlement located on a steep hillside (the Dompow) and parts of the low-lying territory. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, possibly in response to an increasing population and a shift in the focus of the coastal trade from gold to slaves, the settlement in the Dompow was abandoned. This shift could also imply a reorganization of defensive strategies during that time which might make the use of such a hill-top refuge unnecessary. The temporal depth of the sacredness of the Dompow is unknown, but we can suggest that its creation helped to physically anchor the Eguafo Kingdom at a time when its sovereignty was being challenged, the northern borders were being threatened, and its coastal ports had become independent polities. The sacred grove gave the Eguafo Kingdom a sense of permanence, and possibly a sense of autochthony, at a time of increasing warfare and a seemingly unstable system of leadership. While we have no solid, documentary proof of the grove’s sacredness until the mid-nineteenth-century (Chouin 2002a:180), it is clear that the religious significance of the

Dompow is tied to the political stability, and legitimization, of the Eguafu Kingdom.

Ethno-historically, succession of the Eguafu rulers was normally matrilineal, and their power was circumscribed by a council of chiefs and elders (see Fynn 1974a; Sarbah 1968[1904], 1968[1906]). While patrilineal succession of political power became the norm at Elmina, in Eguafu there have also been such instances of succession. For example, Michael Hemmersam, who was on the Gold Coast between 1639 and 1645 (as cited in Jones 1983:123), wrote that a quarrel arose between the Eguafu ruler and his brother, who had garnered popular support and “wanted to act like the king”. The ruler announced that he planned to remove his brother as heir, and give it to his son. This was apparently acted upon within the year, after the ruler’s death (see Chouin 1999:171–172; Ratelband 1953:23). This illustrates the flexible nature of inheritance, especially with regard to kingship.

What sort of power did these rulers have and how did they use it? While we have European references to warfare, trade and political boundaries it is difficult to get a clear sense of political authority. One area where we do have some documentary evidence is regards taxation. African traders were obliged to pay tolls to the tax-collectors in order to pass through a state and bring their goods to the coast. We can point to several instances in the documentary record, for example Dalby Thomas (Furley Collection N38 II: 103) noted in 1709, that the coastal polities had limited resources, either in gold, ivory or slaves, and hence relied on taxes from both Europeans and Africans alike for their main source of income. De Marees (1987[1602]:58) wrote that “the traders who come from the Interior have to pay the King of the Port where they want to do business... for passing through the King’s Land”. Further, in 1693 a difference arose between the Twifo and Eguafu because “the King of Commany [Eguafu] has ordered his people to arrest some traders from Quiffer [Twifo] with merchandise to the value of 10:2:8 marks which they had bought from the English at Cabo Cors [Cape Coast], on account of their having slept in his village,” indicating they were to have paid some sort of tax for passing through the kingdom (van Dantzig 1978:55). European traders on the coast were not immune from such taxes either, for example in 1687 when the British Royal African Company (RAC) was building its fort at Komenda, the ruler of Eguafu demanded that the RAC should pay a monthly ground rent (Law 2001:114).

Such tax revenue became state property, though it is unclear as to what use it was put and the extent of the ruler’s control of it. Describing a meeting in 1686 the English agent at Komenda noted that the ruler of Eguafu could only decide on issues affecting the Kingdom (in this case the construction of the British trade post at Komenda) in the presence of the royal household, and with their support (Law 2001:97). Documentary references suggest that, with regards to government, meetings were held in “a special house for the purpose” (Ulsheimer regarding his 1603–1604 voyage cited in Jones 1983:31). Alternatively, Barbot (1992:511) wrote that towns usually contained a “large space empty in the middle, where people hold their markets and their meetings”. Archaeological evidence from Eguafu, while indicating an increasing range of material culture during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fails to document dramatic differences in wealth accumulation that might suggest the development of more hierarchical political structures. Nor are impressive public buildings represented. Archaeological evidence for pre-eighteenth-century burial practices was not recovered at Eguafu. While it is possible to suggest the use of discrete burial grounds for some individuals by the eighteenth century, house-floor burials that were uncovered when looters

dug through an old foundation within the contemporary town were also present at this time (Spiers 2007:266–270). Oral traditions and limited archaeological data suggest that there were different burial grounds for Eguafu elite, commoners, and strangers, though these are difficult to assess as much of these portions of the site have been looted. Traditional burial practices, including what we know of funeral rituals and interment practices, during the post-contact period varied greatly depending on a variety of social factors including age, gender, social status, wealth, and religion (see DeCorse 2001:187).

This brief discussion of the settlement of Eguafu has illustrated a change in settlement pattern from a small, defensive settlement to a much larger town during the seventeenth century which was echoed in other places in the Central Region of southern Ghana, such as Elmina or in the capitals of other coastal polities discussed further below. This increasing level of urbanization, and change in settlement organization, which tried to accommodate an increasing population and to capture revenues from long-distance trade, may have actually provided the means for the development of alternative networks of power within the diffuse and poorly centralized political structure of the Eguafu Kingdom. This in turn may have led to the political instability observed during the eighteenth century and the shrinking of the Kingdom’s (and settlement’s) borders.

Elmina

In contrast to Eguafu, Elmina (now the principal town of the Edina State) only emerged as an independent polity after the advent of the Atlantic trade. Although the relationship between Elmina and neighbouring polities at the time of European contact cannot be fully evaluated, it is clear that fifteenth-century Elmina was not an independent state. Prior to European contact the Eguafu and Efutu states may have both claimed territorial rights to Elmina. Some Elmina oral traditions recount the founder of Elmina was Kwa Amankwaa, a member of the Eguafu royal family who came to Elmina to hunt (Feinberg 1969:8–14; Fynn 1974b:3–4; Meyerowitz 1952, 1974:76–77). Support for Efutu claims, on the other hand, primarily come from documentary sources. The principal source is the Dutch map of 1629 (see Figure 2) that states “... in the old days one half [of Elmina] used to be under Great Commendo [Eguafu] and the other Futu [Efutu], who came there to collect their contribution” (see Daaku and Van Dantzig 1966; Feinberg 1969:12). This division is repeated in later sources. The Portuguese, and later the Dutch, at Elmina gave gifts to both kings of Eguafu and Efutu at various times (see Blake 1967[1942]:44–45; Fynn 1974b:4; Meyerowitz 1952:70–73, 1974:76–80; Yarak 1986a).

Regardless of the political claims that may have existed over the port town, the Elmina settlement became increasingly autonomous after the founding of the *Castelo São Jorge da Mina*. By the mid-sixteenth century, the settlement was an independent polity, which expanded with the assistance of the Portuguese and the Dutch during the following centuries. Both British and Dutch Komenda would follow a similar path, becoming independent from Eguafu by the end of the Komenda Wars in the early eighteenth century, when the prominent trader John Kabes was able to found a new paramount stool independently of Eguafu (see Henige 1974a:241–242). There is, however, no evidence for kingship at Elmina until much later, and even then it is an office lacking in the hierarchical authority typified in traditional formulations of the state.

Today, the head of the Edina state is the *Omanhen*, who rules through monarchical succession. He is viewed as the

political, military and religious leader of the Edina state. In contrast to most other Akan groups, inheritance of the position is considered patrilineal. The *Omanhen* must also be a member of the *Enyampa Asafo* and a member of either the Anona or Nsona clans. Other important officials are the state linguist (*Oman okyeame*), the heads of families (*nguabadofo*), the heads of the *asafo* companies (*Asafohene*), and the divisional chiefs. While the organization of the modern Edina state may appear clear, the origins and structure of these features are complex. A single king and the central role of the *Omanhen* did not emerge until the eighteenth century (DeCorse 2001a:39–40, 2008; Henige 1974b).

Although some writers have viewed Caramansa, the African ruler who met with Azambuja at the foundation of *Castelo São Jorge da Mina*, as the King of Elmina (one on a list of rulers stretching back to the thirteenth century) there is no textual evidence for this (for review see DeCorse 2008). After his initial appearance, Caramansa is not mentioned in Portuguese records again. On the basis of the limited contemporary documentation available, Caramansa can only be described as a ruler, possibly either from, or subservient to, a neighbouring polity, but whatever his position it was not comparable to the *Omanhen* of the Edina state known ethnographically (Hair 1994:55–56 note 37; Henige 1974b:504).

While the lack of reference to a single ruler at Elmina is negative evidence, it seems unlikely that a principal figure with whom the Portuguese interacted would be left unnoted in the documentary record for over two and half centuries. There is, in fact, evidence to the contrary. In 1639 the Dutch Director General noted that the Elmina people customarily “communicate all occurrences to the [Dutch] General, because they have no king; and they stand so firmly upon their rights that they would rather place their lives in peril than be robbed of them by any of the neighbouring kings” (as cited in Feinberg 1970:24). Throughout the seventeenth century Dutch references to political relations within the settlement of Elmina refer to more than one ruler. Beginning in 1629 three different “quarters” were noted as each having their own *caboceer* (captain), the people being organized “as a republic of their own” mostly governed by the Portuguese (Daaku and Van Dantzig 1966; see also Feinberg 1989:99–103; Henige 1974b:504). References to “kings” appear in European records only after 1732. At this date the Dutch appear to have been unfamiliar with the position and viewed it as a new office. Eighteenth-century references usually refer to a First or Upper King, a Second or Under King, and a Third King. This may denote the formalization of the office of the “king” or *ohen*. The specific powers and authority associated with the office likely evolved even more slowly.

Succession of the *ohen* also appears to have varied at Elmina. The position may have rotated among lesser kings and not followed strict patrilineal succession, power eventually being centralized in a paramount king or *Omanhen*. Although succession of the position is now regarded as patrilineal (unlike for example at Eguafu, or other Akan polities) king lists suggest the actual line of inheritance has been variable. In fact, the issue of succession remains a source of great debate in modern Elmina, as it has in other coastal Fante states (see for example Chouin 1998:65–73, 1999). The Elmina royal court was likely initially undistinguished, with the importance of the *Omanhen* and the royal court becoming fully solidified during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even then the head of the state appears as only one of a series of political balances, the most important of which were *asafo*, discussed below.

Notably, personal ownership of land also emerged early in Elmina, though slowly, and largely perhaps a consequence of European interests (DeCorse 2001a:59–62; also see Busia

1951; Firmin-Sellers 1996; McCaskie 1995; Wilks 1993). As in Asante, ownership of land (including mineral rights) was traditionally vested in the family stool, and so the head of family acts as the custodian, giving individuals the right to use such land which only returns to the family stool once they have ceased to use it. Common land is vested in the paramount stool. The *Omanhen* has the ability to grant land to settlers, and extract tribute from them, which then goes back to the stool (see for example de Marees 1987[1602]:110–111). Change in how ownership was conceptualized may have begun in the coastal towns during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as chiefs increasingly attempted to control and profit from the land. At Elmina, the earliest mention of private property (*erfgrond*) dates to the early eighteenth century (Algemeen Rijksarchief NBKG 318). A corollary of the fact that the office of *Omanhen* did not emerge at Elmina until the eighteenth century may have been comparatively limited control over the profits afforded by land tenure. Occupation of houses, if not private ownership of houses, likely insured ownership within the town. In the surrounding farmlands of the expanding Edina State, allocation by divisional chiefs and lineages continued to be the means through which land rights were established. Perception of the commercial value of land did not begin until the twentieth-century.

Among the principal hierarchical structures within the coastal Akan, the *asafo* are most important. The *asafo* are military associations based on lineal descent, often associated with specific areas within a town known as *bron* or wards. They are characteristic of the coastal Akan, particularly within the Fante states. Membership is by patrilineal descent, which generally contrasts with the matrilineal orientation of other aspects of Akan office succession and kinship, though the patrilineal inheritance of the position of *ohen* at Elmina has been noted (DeCorse 2001a:40–41; also see Arhin 1966; Christensen 1954:108; Chukwukere 1970, 1980; Danquah 1928:16–20, 199–121; Datta and Porter 1971:281; de Graft-Johnson 1932; Ffoulkes 1907; Hernaes 1998; Sarbah 1968[1906]:26–32). Certain aspects of *asafo* organization, pageantry and symbolism suggest European influences, for example the company structure, the use of flags, and the representation of European warships and uniforms in shrines. Nevertheless, the groups are clearly indigenous in form and conceptualization. They may represent Akan institutions, such as the young men’s associations in Asante (*mmerante*) that evolved to include new elements and non-traditional groups. In Elmina, for example, *asafo* included groups made up of company slaves, *vrijburgers* (a certain group of Elmina mulattos), and Europeans (see Christensen 1954:107). The *asafo* provided a mechanism through which young men and commoners could express their opinions. Although often characterized as serving primarily military or social functions, the *asafo* are also validated through rituals and fealty oaths. Each *asafo* had its own shrine in which offerings were made.

At Elmina the origin of *asafo* likely predate the office of *Omanhen*. Beginning in the late seventeenth century or early eighteenth century, the number of leaders noted in Dutch records increased, possibly an indication of the development or expansion of the *asafo* system (Henige 1974b:505–506; Baesjou 1979:19; Christensen 1954:107; DeCorse 2001a:40–41; Feinberg 1989:104–108; Wartemberg 1951:53–55). The *asafo* organization may have started to emerge in neighbouring coastal states, like Eguafu, at about the same time (Chouin 1998:129–141). Elmina’s seven core *asafo* were recognized by 1724, but three others were added during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Two of the additions consisted of refugees displaced by the Fante War of 1810. The final *asafo* was the Akrampa, consisting of the Dutch West India Company slaves and their descendants. This brought the

total number of Elmina *asafo* to ten, more than any other settlement. For example, in the twentieth century Eguafu only had four *asafo* companies resident in the town itself, though the kingdom as a whole had twelve (Fynn 1974a).

The role of the *asafo* in Elmina politics contrasted with other coastal Akan polities, as the *asafo* appear to have had a preeminent position in the political hierarchy. Most significantly, the *asafo* determined the election of the kings (Feinberg 1970:24; Henige 1973:226, 1974b: 506–507). The political structure of Elmina is also distinct in its lack (prior to 1873) of divisional chiefs, and the nineteenth-century creation of the *besonfo*, a council of wealthy Elmina people that also originated from the *asafo* (Feinberg 1969:72–89; 1970, 1989; Yarak 1986b:33–34). These institutions to some extent counterbalanced one another, but within the Elmina polity all were of secondary importance to the patrilineally linked *asafo*. The Dutch clearly recognized the primary importance of the *asafo*. The overall leader of the *asafo* (*ekuwessonhin*) and the individual company heads all received a larger allowance than the king (Feinberg 1969:86). Such favouritism may have fostered a vested interest in the *asafo* relations with the Dutch.

The growing infrastructure of the Elmina polity was commensurate with its increasing political autonomy from the neighbouring states of Efutu and Eguafu, and the emergence of port towns like Elmina, Komenda and Shama as competitors for territory from the hinterland states. Elmina originally was limited to the settlement area and adjacent farm lands. With its emergence as an independent polity, however, additional land was incorporated with the help of the Portuguese and the Dutch. By 1813 it had extended as far to the east as the Sweet River, the location of the modern boundary (Feinberg 1989:77). Presently, the Edina State with Elmina as the capital includes several towns and smaller settlements. It is bounded by the stools of British Komenda in the west, Oguaa (Cape Coast) in the east, and Eguafu to the north. Oral traditions suggest some of the villages currently incorporated within the Edina State were part of Eguafu until the nineteenth century (Fynn 1974b:21).

A European policy which encouraged independence reinforced Elmina's isolation from adjacent polities, and it can be used to explain, at least partially, the town's distinctive, self-perceived identity. Conflict with the neighbouring states fostered Elmina's long term ties with the Asante. By 1750 Asante had reached its greatest extent, having incorporated much of modern Ghana, and became a major power in coastal politics (Fynn 1971; McCaskie 1995; Wilks 1993).

DISCUSSION

In the mid-nineteenth century, Brodie Cruickshank wrote on what the historian Kwame Arhin (1966) has since called the "diffuse authority" of the coastal Fante political system. Cruickshank stated that it was "not a despotism, nor a constitutional monarchy, not an oligarchy, nor a republic, but partook of something of the qualities of each of this different form and depended much upon the individual character and riches of the chief modified by traditional customs and precedents" (as cited in Arhin 1966:67). Arhin located the origin of this diffuse power not in the immediate colonial past of the nineteenth century, but in the preceding centuries of trade with Europeans which allowed merchant traders to establish political independence from, and present a challenge to, the authority of coastal hinterland polities. The success of coastal traders showed the need for diplomacy and alliance building on the part of rulers in whose territory they traded, including neighbouring polities, the Europeans in the trading posts and castles, ritual specialists, military leaders and merchants, to keep control of the trade routes within the kingdom, and capture the benefits from this external economy

which passed through them (see also Boahen 1974; McCaskie 1990; Yarak 2003).

The politics of coastal Ghana challenge us to reconsider how we define socio-political complexity, both anthropologically and materially in the archaeological record, and how we place African models in the wider debates concerning socio-cultural evolution. As has been discussed, increasing urbanization, along with a package of other attributes, has often been seen as a suite of attributes indicating increasing socio-political complexity, ultimately culminating with politically centralized, bureaucratic states. Documentary sources, oral traditions, and the archaeological record provide only glimpses into coastal Ghana's past, yet the transformation of comparatively smaller, dispersed settlements into larger urban concentrations is clear. These emerging urban centres, such as Eguafu and Elmina, developed new political structures and some of the other associated features traditionally used as indicators of complexity. Nonetheless, strongly centralized political authority did not emerge. The politics of the Akan coast and coastal hinterland are characterized by various heterarchical, cross-cutting institutions rather than the formation of a hierarchically ordered, class based society.

The trajectories of the different polities varied. The Eguafu Kingdom, at its height in the seventeenth century, had grown to incorporate land from the Pra River Basin in the west to the Sweet River in the east. The population of the capital itself grew in size, resulting in the abandonment of the old hill-top settlement in favour of the valley below. The Kingdom had a military that may have been organized around a series of satellite towns within its core. Further, it could levy taxes on traders who passed from the north to trade with Europeans on the coast and its people had increasing access to trade goods. Nevertheless, the political structure seems to have remained poorly centralized. The powers of individual rulers were circumscribed by a council of other chiefs, elders, and other cross-cutting social groups. This is reflected in the archaeological record, in that there does not seem to be any clear distinction in material wealth within the capital. There are no elaborate palaces or public structures in the pre-colonial period. This lack of centralization may have been both the polity's strength and its ultimate weakness. While the diffuse authority allowed the incorporation of diverse interest groups and a means of mitigating conflict, the lack of centralization ultimately left the polity unable to control the economic and social arena in which it operated. During the eighteenth-century, the Kingdom verged on civil war; bypassed by trade it decreased in prominence.

Elmina, on the other hand, though probably once a part of Eguafu, quickly emerged as an independent polity with the advent of the Atlantic trade. Initially, Elmina had no single ruler but operated more as a republic where power was shared between different quarters of the settlement. The position of king, as a title, only appears in the eighteenth century. As Yarak (1986b:35) has pointed out, despite the heterogeneous nature of the Elmina population and occasional conflict between different segments, the town functioned as a political unit independently of Eguafu and Efutu. A variety of informal cross-cutting links served to unify the settlement. These included intermarriage, the general importance of trade, economic competition with surrounding Fante groups, and Akan culture. It was, however, the traditional, African cross-cutting means of socio-political organization that provided cohesiveness in the settlement's internal political organization and relationships with neighbouring polities. A similar scenario has been described for Adom, where according to Willem Bosman (1967[1705]:25) in the early eighteenth century, the Adom Kingdom was also governed by several leaders rather than a single ruler.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that the structure, make-up and expression of Eguafu and Elmina were African. The antecedents of their political structures were kin-based Akan organizations, their models the institutions and government of the neighbouring Akan states. This point can, in part, be illustrated by the Europeans' apparent lack of understanding of African political systems and their structure. For example, a French visitor to Elmina in the 1670s describing the *asafo* system noted that the "...Negroes who are in the village below the fortress took their arms and came three or four hundred in number with their unfurled flag to have a drill at the castle. I thought that they were doing that on his orders but he [the Dutch Governor-General] told it was at their own initiative, that they were crazy people who assembled at every moment, day and night" (Anon. 1674:19; see also Chouin 2004; DeCorse 2001a:206 note 119). In terms of material culture, while there is an increase in European trade goods on the coast (particularly at sites like Elmina and Komenda), African forms still predominate, particularly in local pottery, but also with local tobacco pipe manufacture, ivory carving, bead making, and gold and brass working.

The heterarchical structures and their varying trajectories of development are what make the polities of coastal Ghana interesting. Although generally called states or kingdoms in the European travel accounts of the period, they lack characteristics such as the centralized bureaucracies that are generally used to classify societies as complex states. Their territories were not extensive and, where single rulers are present, their authority is circumscribed by various heterarchical, diffuse social structures rather than stratified hierarchies. On one hand, the polities serve as a different model of complexity, and illustrate the need to incorporate more varied ideas of how authority is maintained. On the other, they illustrate the varied trajectories which the evolution of political structures follows. The polities of coastal Ghana do not follow the same pattern of development, nor do they present a unidirectional evolution from lesser to greater complexity. They thus afford insight into the varied processes that likely always characterized the evolution of political systems.

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