

Osei-TUTU John Kwadwo, 2000.

THE ASAFOI (SOCIO-MILITARY GROUPS) IN THE HISTORY AND POLITICS OF ACCRA (GHANA) FROM THE 17TH TO THE MID-20TH CENTURY. Trondheim: Department of History, Norwegian University of Science and Technology. xxxi + 413 pp. Maps, photographs, illustrations, bibliography and index. ISBN 82-7765-032-9.

Reviewed by Kalle Gustafsson
University of Helsinki, Finland

John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu's dissertation is an outcome of the *Asafo History Programme*, launched in 1996 between University of Ghana, Legon, and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim. The programme was completed in July 2000. The aim of the programme was to re-evaluate the role of the *asafo* companies in Ghanaian history. Osei-Tutu's thesis attempts to show that *asafo* companies occupied a central position in the Ga socio-political formation, although the *asafo* institution originated in the Fante area. As indicated by the title, geographically the study is limited to Central Accra, although examples are also drawn from Osu and other Ga towns. Chronologically the study is divided between the pre-colonial and the colonial periods – the transition from the pre-colonial to the colonial occurring in the 1870s.

Osei-Tutu draws from sources as varied as published accounts by European travellers and missionaries, official minutes, letters, dispatches, administrative reports, and court records, complemented by ethnographic data collected by the author in the 1990s. The strength of the book is that Osei-Tutu lets the participants in the struggles over power to speak for themselves by quoting directly and extensively from speeches and other written records. However, an unfortunate flaw in the bibliography is that it omits an account written by a Danish missionary Monrad in 1822, although Osei-Tutu relies on Monrad's description in several instances.

After the general introduction which establishes the objectives and the method of the study, chapter 2 deals with the history of the Ga state up to the early nineteenth century. Osei-Tutu shows how the Ga kingdom was subjected to almost 150 years of Akan overrule, beginning with the Akwamu invasion in 1677-1681. Internal division and intrigue among the Ga led to the initial defeat in 1681, and endemic disunity affected Ga history throughout the period under study in the book. In the second half of the seventeenth century Accra was split into relatively small territorial, political, and military entities. Osei-Tutu convincingly argues that the contest over space became fundamental to the creation of the Ga polity. This became evident when the *asafo* companies of the various *akutsei* (sg. *akutso*: a quarter of Accra) clashed during the course of the

nineteenth century. However, Osei-Tutu points out that “*asafo* fights were rare in Accra, compared to the Fante towns” (p. 119).

Although *asafo* companies were at times locked in fierce rivalry and competition, they also co-operated in matters of general concern. One of those instances was the ‘*Katamansu*’ war in 1826, when the Ga allied with the British against the Asante. The war ended in a victory for the British and their fifteen local allies, and the Ga people regained their ‘independence’. As Osei-Tutu points out, the war was clearly regarded by the Ga as a turning point in their history, and the war was commemorated in the Ga tradition as if it were exclusively a Ga-Asante war. In the nineteenth century, the *asafo* companies visibly assumed the traditional *asafo* role as defenders of the *manbii* (commoners or citizens, ‘the people’) against external threats. The vigorous objection against the policies of the Europeans started in 1853, when the *asafobii* in Osu opposed the tax collection imposed by the British in 1852. As described in chapters 6 and 7, opposition to taxes surfaced again in 1924, when the *asafobii* disagreed with the colonial officers over the imposition of the Municipal Corporations Ordinance. They also challenged the Native Administration Ordinance (NAO) in 1927. According to Osei-Tutu, the opposition was initially directed against the reforms suggested by the colonial government, but it soon transformed into an internal question of the Ga polity. The basis of the conflict was the claim held by the *asafo* companies that the Ga *Mantse* and the ‘Intelligentsia’ did not identify with the *manbii*. Thus, the Ga elite were viewed as being unable to defend the interests of the majority of the people. The conflict culminated in 1929 in the destoolment of the Ga *Mantse* Tackie Yaoboi.

On a critical note, Osei-Tutu’s text suffers from occasional typos and errors in punctuation which should have been corrected in the final phases of editing the thesis for publication. Some sentences were incomprehensible to the present reviewer, such as “he [Casely Hayford] broke his relations with that group [Aborigines Rights Protection Society] due apparently to the uncompromising stand against what was considered as inadequate the colonial Constitutional reforms of mid-1920s” (p. 321). Page 295 proposes an appendix containing a petition against the NAO in 1928, but it is not reproduced anywhere in the book. It is a shame, because it would have further presented the Ga people in their own words. Also, the reproduction of the photographs at the end of the book could have been handled more carefully.

Despite these minor shortcomings, Osei-Tutu’s thesis clearly demonstrates the importance of the *asafo* institution in the Ga social formation and history. The most enjoyable feat of the book is the way Osei-Tutu employs the concept of negotiation in his theoretical framework. In fact, constant negotiation is the red line that runs through the book and ties the nine chapters together. Negotiation is clearly manifested in the way the Ga chose peaceful means – meetings, delegations, and petitions based on dialogue – to confront the colonial order instead of engaging in open violence. It also indicates that the negotiating parties do not necessarily have to be of equal power. Osei-Tutu’s ability to

clarify how history in Accra was shaped by conflicts and contradictions is admirable. Altogether, this book is an important contribution to our understanding of the history of Accra, the Ga people, and the *asrafo* institution.