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The Evolution and Innovations in Fante *asafo posuban*

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Abstract. – The Akan have had a tradition of borrowing art from other cultures, innovating it, and incorporating it in their artistic heritage. The Fante *asafo posuban* is unique in its design and iconography among the arts of the Akan of southern Ghana. While it demonstrates its distinctness, there are strong elements of a mixture of foreign architectural elements and Fante culture represented through various subjects and subject matter on and around it. How did these monuments acquire such uniqueness not found anywhere else among the Akan? This article sets out to investigate the origins and development of the Fante *asafo posuban* and its sources of influence. *[Ghana, Akan,* asafo posuban*,* siw*, iconography, forts]*

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Introduction

There is ample evidence that many Akan ethnic groups developed a culture of borrowing from their neighbours and innovated the art they acquired in the process of incorporating it into their culture. Timothy F. Garrard has demonstrated this in his studies of Akan brass weights, which spanned three decades (1972 to 2003; Garrard 1972a, b; 1973a, b; 1974; 1979; 1980a, b) culminating in his book "Akan Weights and the Gold Trade" (1980a). Prior to this, Robert S. Rattray (1923: 12) expressed his fascination of Asante art but articulated his disquiet on the progressive acculturation the craftspeople were involved in, and cautioned that European culture should not be embraced blindly. Doran H. Ross and Garrard (1983: 8, 14) have highlighted this incorporation of foreign ideas, materials, and objects into Akan art and regalia, especially in metal works. Labelle Prussin (1980) suggests that the northern factor in Asante is important in understanding its architectural history, and points to examples in designs to support her thesis. Herbert M. Cole and Doran Ross (1977) remind us of a dynamic culture of influences and adaptations by the Akan, particularly Islam from the north, and European culture from the south. Raymond Silverman (1983: 8) concludes that the Akan were ever willing to enrich their material culture from foreign sources. Christiane Owusu-Sarpong (2003: 38) suggests that in the nineteenth century the Asante had perfected the tradition of incorporating techniques, objects, and symbols from other cultures. Other art histories such as that of the Akuapem Guan (Labi 2002a) are manifestations of adaptations and reinventions from other cultures. The Akan and other ethnic groups did not reject traditions from elsewhere but assimilated and reinvented them.

In sum, what the above suggest is the fact that the Akan were not averse to foreign art forms but receptive to new ideas. These were then integrated into already existing art forms, or the existing art were modified and developed alongside these new art. Some of these adaptions have been so well integrated in Akan art that it requires meticulous investigation to unearth these complex processes, as I shall demonstrate in this article citing the Fante *asafo posuban* as an example.

The Akan ethnic group cited above extend from the middle belt of Ghana to the southwestern coastal areas of the country and has several subgroups, in-

cluding the Fante. They have similar cultural practices and beliefs, and speak different dialects of the same language. From the northern and the central parts of Ghana different degrees of artistic works and technologies were copied from neighbours or from other subregional West African ethnic groups. As discussed above, the ground seems to be well covered among the Asante but are there further evidences elsewhere of other Akan borrowing and innovating art? Can we also find similar situations of borrowing and adaptations, for example, among the Fante, who live on the coastal areas, as has occurred among the inland Akan such as the Asante, or were there different situations leading to a different form of integration of art? Along the coast, we observe a situation in which European symbols of trade and political power represented through the forts and castles were constructed in several places. Albert van Dantzig (1980: vii) notes that within a period of three centuries over sixty lodges, forts, and castles were constructed along the Gold Coast's, now Ghana, coastal stretch of less than 500 km. It was from here the Europeans carried out trading, missionary, and political activities. Did these European architectural, economic, and cultural symbols and technology in any way affect Fante art? If they did, how different or unique was this considering the fact that the Europeans established these permanent visible evidences.

The principal causal agents in this article are the European presence and to a large extent events that occurred during the period involving their relations with the Fante *asafo*. The *asafo* reactions to European presence determined to a degree the nature and character of *asafo* art. Some of the features are traceable to local factors while others are linked to European influences, or a combination of both, leading to a fusion and diffusion of influences. But this diffusion, as Bronisław Malinowski (1961 [1945]) notes, is not one of indiscriminate give and accidental take, but one directed by definite forces and pressures on the side of the European donors as well as determined resistance and creativity on the part of the Fante recipients. Meyer Fortes argues "[c]ulture contact is a dynamic process and not a mechanical pitch-forking of elements of culture, like bundles of hay, from one culture to another" (1936: 26). Hence we shall observe that the *asafo* were careful in choosing elements that suited them as social, political, and military organisations.

The development of the *asafo posuban* reveals that Fante cultural contact with the Europeans did not result in an even diffusion of elements or balanced acculturation, instead, it has been marked by uneven and unbalanced rejection, adoption, and modification of artistic and monument styles, Western technology in travel, and sometimes cast within Fante proverbs and sayings. What happened among the Fante is similar to what Mary Louise Pratt (1992) discusses to have occurred in a social space she terms "contact zone." She maintains that transculturation is a phenomenon of a "contact zone." Pratt uses this phrase to refer to the space in which people who are geographically, culturally, and historically different and separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. "Contact zone" shall also be used here to refer to the "trade and colonial frontiers" in Fante coastal areas and to attempts to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of people previously separated by distance and historical disjunctions, and whose paths now intersect (Pratt 1992: 6f.).

In order to discuss this preposition of Akan art of borrowing and innovating from other cultures, and the Fante sociopolitical relations in the contact zone, this article is organised around a central theory of causality. It argues that *asafo posuban* is reflective, emblematic, and representative of its time, place, and circumstance of production and portrays *asafo*-European influences. This theory of causality proposes that the presence of Europeans, and their castles as symbols of power and wealth, and other European buildings including churches were sources of Fante artistic innovation. The article follows Eric Fernie's discussion of the chief model of Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) who likened art to the passage of historical time as the cycle of ages and specifically to the biological concepts of growth, maturation, and decay (Fernie 1999: 11). This article is, therefore, about the Fante *asafo* of southern Ghana and their artistic response to European (Portuguese, Dutch, and English) presence on their land and influences on *asafo siw*, traditional mounds, shrines, and fenced trees which peaked in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *posuban*, born from these encounters are unparalleled in the study of art history in Ghana. Several years of study of *posuban* and a comparison of the different ones constructed over a century provides enough data to analyse its development and changes within the period.

The Fante *asafo*

A unique feature of the Fante is the way they organise their agnatic groups into a social, political, and military organisation called *asafo*. The *asafo* were the able-bodied men and women who went to war,

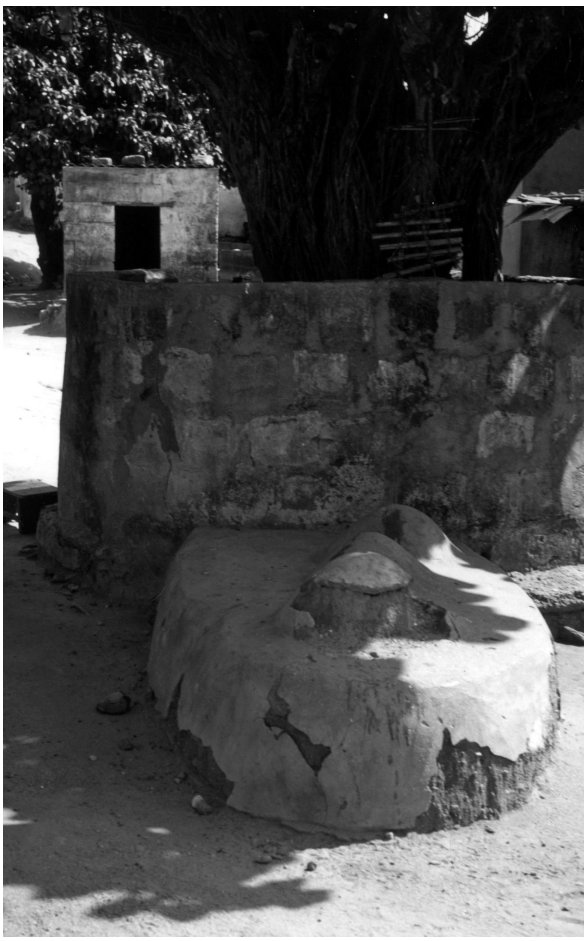


Fig. 1: A *siw* in front of Ekumfi Otuam fenced tree depicting an early form of *posuban* (Ekumfi Otuam Tuafo Asafo, 1999).

provided security for the community, and carried out search missions. They were part of the nomination process of chiefs and part of the chief's council and could be part of the destoolment process as well. Every child joins his or her father's *asafo*. This feature of the Fante *asafo* makes the Fante, a matrilineal society, seem a double unilineal society. There is a long-standing debate about *asafo* origins. Whereas some believe it is indigenous, one from time immemorial, others are of the view that wealthy African entrepreneurs or Europeans developed it. Exponents of the first school of thought include Pieter de Marees (1987 [1602]), A. B. Ellis (1970), E. J. P. Brown (1929), J. B. Christensen (1954), and J. A. Annobil and J. E. Ekuban (1952). De Marees, writing in the seventeenth century, says, "the kings of the towns had men who were their soldiers and behaved very much as such" ([1602], 1987: 89). This was an evidence of the organisation of able-bodied men, *asafo*, whose etymology is *sa*, "war," and *fo*, "people," to protect and defend the king. Late in the twentieth century, Ellis similarly held the view that "the institution of these companies dates from very remote times" (1970: 279–297). Brown was more explicit, saying that it was "instituted by the Mfansti-Akan tribes" (1929: 204, 197). He considered the British use of the word "company" to be a misnomer because whereas the English company may consist of about one hundred people, in the Fante case an *asafo* may be ten times this number. According to Brown, the true meaning of the word *asafo* is "warriors" (1929). All these writers above suggest an indigenous origin for the *asafo* organisation.

The second school of thought holds a contrary view, namely, that *asafo* is not a traditional Fante organisation. Kwame Arhin (1966) and J. S. Wartemberg (1951) belong to this school. Arhin rejects the argument that *asafo* is a traditional organisation and claims that it originated from the nature of interactions between Europeans and Africans on the coast. Arhin is of the view that *asafo* companies on the coast possibly had their origins in "armed retainers" who gathered around certain trading merchants to provide them with protection and security during the uncertain periods of the slave trade. His other view is that the "captains" (leaders) of the *asafo* companies might have had their roots in centuries of economic relations with European traders. Through the lucrative trade in arms, gunpowder, lead, and pewter they acquired personal arms and wealth and built independent "centers of power" (1966: 68). Wartemberg points specifically to a European origin and states that *asafo* came into existence because of the Fante-Asante wars. During these wars, able-bodied men in the towns and villages around Elmina were organised, with the assistance of the Dutch, into military groups, which became known as *asafo* companies for defense and civil activities (Datta and Porter 1971, Wartemberg 1951).

A third school, however, assumes the *asafo* to be of Akan origin but has been extensively influenced. It is significant to note that Brown qualifies his statement on the Fante origin of the *asafo* and admits European influence. According to him, some of the companies at Cape Coast were formed by groups of people associated in one way or the other with Europeans. He, however, differentiates the traditional companies from those that were products of external influence. He cites Cape Coast companies such as Brofomba, Akrampa, and Amanfur as examples of those that came into existence as a result of the settlement of some non-Fante at Cape Coast by the Europeans or the organisation of the offspring of European and Fante relationships into an *asafo* organisation. These companies then came to exist alongside the original Bentsir and Inkum

Companies, which were formed in Cape Coast. He also implied that there was a similar development at Elmina. Such developments with "alien combination," he said, were exclusive to the coastal towns (1929: 200 f.). Brown's view was that although the Fante *asafo* was basically an indigenous organisation, its development was greatly influenced by European presence on the coast as causal agents, resulting in a transculturation in this contact zone. According to Datta and Porter, Christensen reached the same conclusion in 1954 and argued that *asafo* was "an outgrowth of the military tradition of the Akan, and not a copy of the European military pattern" (1971: 283). In a typical Fante town or village, there may be one, but often two, and as many as seven *asafo* companies in some cases as in Cape Coast. Their most common names include No. 1 Tuafo (advance guard) Company and No. 2 Dentsefo (rear guard) Company. Other names of the *asafo* may relate to their history, profession, or role within the organisation.

The *asafo* borrowed several paraphernalia from the Europeans and copied some of their military activities, such as marching in formation and carrying flags to identify each company, and they modified their sacred sites modelled after European architecture. These developments and the activities of the *asafo* over the years have attracted scholars who have attempted to examine it from diverse perspectives in historical, anthropological, sociological, and art historical works. Fante *asafo* monuments have been extensively studied, particularly its place and role among the Fante. Among the more recent scholars who have studied the *posuban* are Preston (1975), Cole and Ross (1977), Ross (1979, 2007), and Labi (1998, 2002a, b). Preston's "Perseus and Medusa in Africa: Military Art in Fanteland 1834–1972" contributes to the studies on *asafo* art, although it spreads the discussion thinly and goes beyond *asafo* art to the structure and organisation of the Fante and their *asafo*, suggesting extensive borrowing by the Fante from the Asante and Europeans, namely the British who occupied the castles on the coast. Preston's work discusses more of Fante and *asafo* social and political structure and allocates a small section of the work to a study of military art – particularly the two prominent *asafo* art forms – *posuban* and flags. One of the early structured historical exposé on the Fante *asafo posuban* is Cole and Ross' 1977 exhibition catalogue tracing the trajectory of the *asafo posuban* from the original *asafo* shrine, *esiwdo*, to the monumentally constructed ones in the form of monuments fashioned after European forts and castles. They introduce us to the variety of motifs on these monuments and attempt an iconographic explanation of their visual verbal nexus citing examples.

While I acknowledge Ross' (2007) comprehensive historical account of *asafo posuban*, in *African Arts* and its detailed exposé of the Kyirem No. 2 Company, Mankessim, it is an arduous task to cover the variety of *asafo posuban* and their iconography in a single article. Despite his several years of fieldwork and interviews in the Central Region of Ghana and extensive documentation of the *posuban*, Fante *asafo* studies are inexhaustible and leave room for further work. It is still possible to broaden the discussion on the Fante *asafo* and contextualise it within my thesis of the Akan culture of borrowing and innovating foreign art, and demonstrate the way in which this developed.

The Emergence of *asafo posuban* within the Prevailing Building Trends

The Europeans who occupied the forts and castles hoisted their company and/or national flags on top of them as a form of identity, national pride, and sovereignty. The sheer size of the European lodges, forts, and castles, their fortifications, the cannons on and around them, the traders, representatives of trading companies, and governments, and the soldiers who occupied them represented military and economic power. Towards the second half of the nineteenth century, these came to symbolise political power as well. The castles also became safe places where the Fante sought protection from their enemies during conflicts. The frequent changes in alliances, trade practices, and behaviour of some Europeans living in the forts sometimes created tense relations, and the Fante themselves were occasionally at the receiving end of the deadly firepower of the guns and cannons from the forts and castles when relations turned sour.

Wherever a European building was put up, it attracted considerable labour for its construction, maintenance, and the provision of services. The maintenance of the castles also created employment and a source of training and influence for artisans such as masons, carpenters, and painters (Winsnes 2004: 71). The Swedes introduced masons from Accra and Togo to help construct the Cape Coast castle. These craftsmen remained in Cape Coast and possibly applied their expertise to the construction of homes, thereby transferring their skills to Fante artisans. Later accounts in the mid-nineteenth century inform us that the Danes also had workshops in and around their forts for smiths, carpenters, coopers, and others. It is my opinion that similar situa-

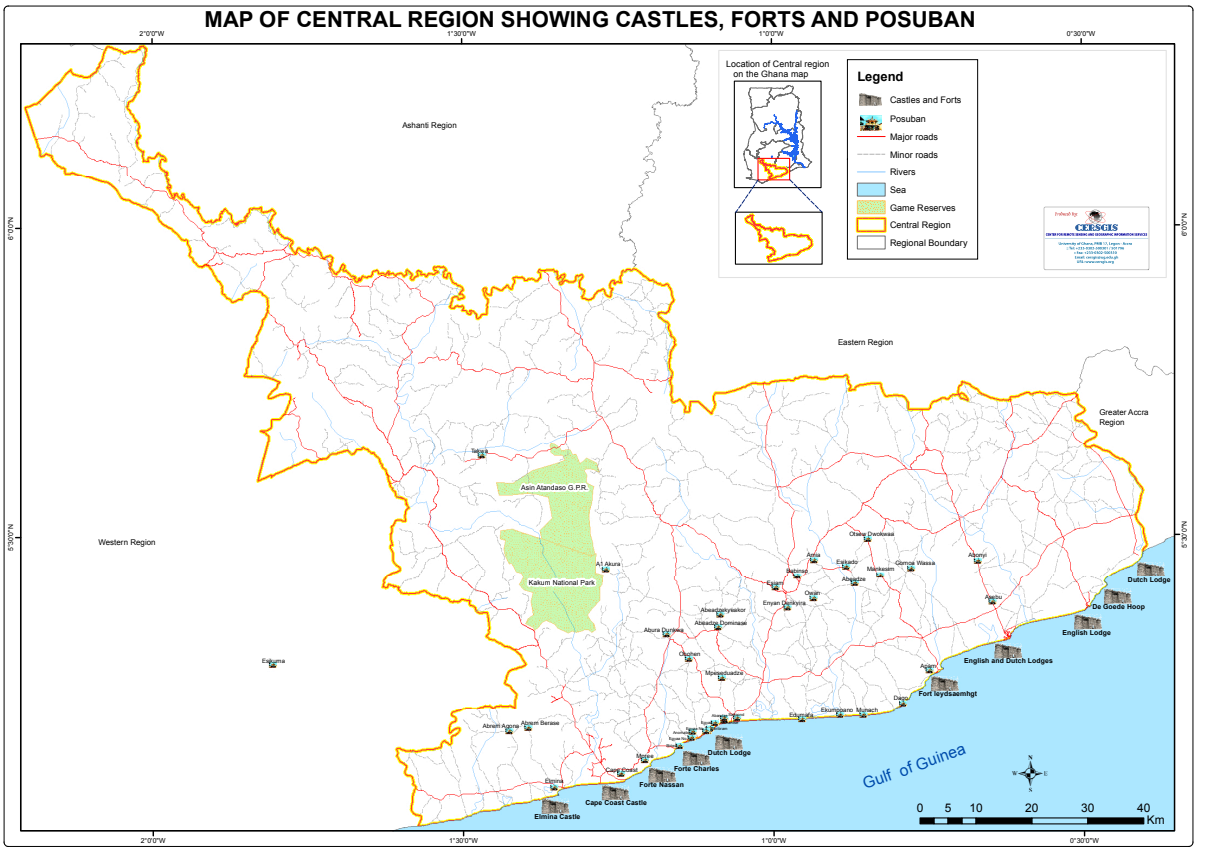
tions might have occurred around many other European castles. As European staff increased, some rented houses outside the castles, while others, especially the trading merchants, constructed their own. The Europeans also settled their freed slaves, staff, and children born to Fante women – known as mulattoes – in accommodation outside the castles.

These new buildings and castles became the rallying points for economic, social, and political activities for the Fante coastal towns, whose prominent citizens and wealthy merchants, including the new mulatto merchant class, constructed houses heavily influenced by European architectural style. Some owners of these houses included John Kabes, Edward Barter (a mulatto), John Konny, and Jantie Snees, the Elmina "*afahene*" (Kea 1982: 318). Müller observed other types of architecture among the Fante and believed they learned this style from the Christians who had built churches in European styles. In Cape Coast, the buildings were high and elegant, with walls and separate apartments inside, reflecting the new skills, designs, and wealth (see Jones 1983: 202). Local craftsmen made doors, frameworks, beams, windowsills, and all other fixtures after European designs. The inside walls were painted in colours such as yellow, red, or white and furnished with a scanty array of locally made household items, sometimes intermingled with miscellaneous foreign articles (Daniell 1856: 27). The outside walls were white-washed, with a black boarder at the bottom.

In contrast to the dwellings of ordinary citizens, wealthy urbanites constructed their houses with large courtyards, a feature associated with urban housing and high social status. By the end of the nineteenth century, many domestic dwellings of wealthy merchants and politicians consisted of houses in one or two storeys. They built dwellings in European designs, using stone and brick with wooden balconies, ceilings, and floors, and a combination of sitting, dining, living, and bedrooms within one building, painted with lime. At the main entrance of each house were two or more armed guards, who kept watch day and night.

While these innovations were occurring in the construction of domestic units and church buildings modelled after European architectural styles in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, completely new monumental posts constructed in different shapes with sculptures and paintings appeared among the Fante *asafo* companies, incorporating several features of European architecture (Fig. 2). It is these innovations and extensive borrowings from European architecture and military culture by Fante artisans that transformed *asafo* mounds and fenced trees into the elaborate monumental *posuban*. Even though Ross concedes European influence, he is tempted to speculate, based on the accounts of de Marees and Barbot, that the *posuban* evolved from Fante grave sculpture (Ross 2007: 14 f.) and that these formed the basis of a structural elaboration of gravesites and funerary elaboration to provide the prototypes of *posuban*. It can be observed that the Akan have a similar culture, and archaeological finds show funerary terracotta in several Akan places. But what compelled the Fante alone to elaborate the gravesites and funerary sculpture if we accept Ross' hypothesis? On the contrary, I suggest

Fig. 2: A new form of *posuban* with a tower, arches, geometric designs, and cannons among several other decorative sculptures on the monument, depicting aspects of European architectural design and arsenal (Egyaa No. 3 Kyirem Company, 1999).



Map: Distribution of forts, castles, and *posuban* in the Central Region of Ghana (Source: Center for Remote Sensing and Geographic Information Services, CERSGIS, University of Ghana, Legon).

that the presence of, and influence from, the forts and castles and skilled labour were the propelling factors. Certainly, the arches, towers, and cannons were from the European Christian churches and the castles. Furthermore, the construction of the *posuban* can be observed only in the coastal areas in close proximity to the castles – Map 1 illustrates this very well. It shows that they are concentrated primarily in two areas. The first group comprising Gomoa, Ekumfi, Nkusukum, Oguaa, and Anomabo, which traditional areas consist of many towns and villages along the coast and close to the forts and castles. The second group is located away from the shoreline and encompassed Abeadze, Abrem, Abura, Mankessim, Asebu, Enyan Abaasa, Enyan Denkyira, and Enyan Maim traditional areas. According to the map, the first is a coastal cluster to the southwest of the region while the second cluster is towards the northeast of the southern parts of the region. Again, as one moves away from the coast where the forts and castles are, and the southern parts of the region, the construction of *posuban* diminishes; it is not found even among the Fante further from the coast who have strong Asante influence. Therefore, Ross' conceptual model of influence from grave sculptures and can be challenged. The other Akan have maintained their funerary terracotta but have not developed these despite the presence of churches constructed in European architectural styles on their lands.

The etymology of *posuban* is *pia-su-ban* (lit. "gathering place in the bedroom or innermost enclosure"), a meeting place of an *asafo* or any group. *Posuban* may also have derived its name from *pesu* ("coop" or "nest") and *ban* ("wall"). It was usually barricaded for secret rituals or used as a conclave. Etymologically, it is "the gathering place under a shade tree." The new forms of *posuban* evolved alongside the *siw* (see Fig. 1) and fenced tree, which were usually situated in the centre of the older parts of Fante towns along major paths or roads. The Fante say, "*oman taa ho na posuban sim*," meaning, "it is only when there is a strong town that there is a *posuban*." *Posuban* are often found in close proximity to the *siw* or the earlier type of fenced trees. Where there is more than one *asafo* in a town, the *posuban* is usually sited in the quarter where the majority of the company members reside. Their lo-

cations ensured easy access as meeting points. The *asafo* meeting places were often marked with a *siw* or *siwdo* (mound), a conical-shaped structure made from earth – or totem posts (Fig. 3) also called *posuban* – fences made with clay or tree branches constructed around big trees (see Fig. 1). These places serve as abodes and shrines for spirit beings or company gods when they are invoked through prayer and libation.

The original forms of *posuban* were very large trees, which the *asafo* identified as possible abodes of spirit beings and then fenced. According to Ellis, each company in a town had its own tree under which the guardian deity of the company dwelt. This was a huge tree with thick foliage. The spot where the tree grew was called *ehsudu* (*siwdo*), a word that signified a place of assembly where matters concerning the company were discussed. *Asafo* companies also raised totem poles, described in archival sources as flag posts, to mark religious sites which the companies jealously guarded. After having placed religious items in the ground, a mound was raised with an appropriate object placed on it, or a tree was planted and a fence constructed round it.

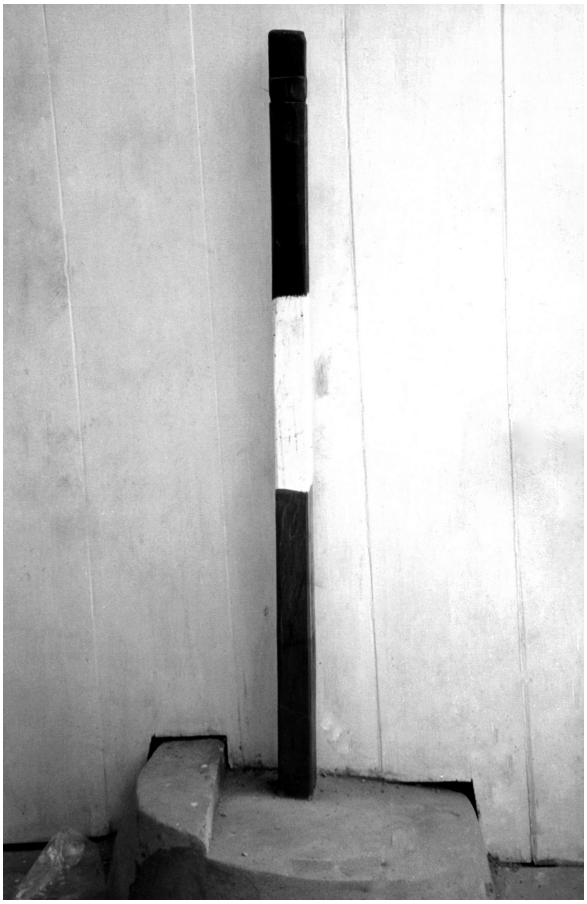


Fig. 3: A totem or flag post marking a religious ground belonging to Ayampa Company of Elmina (1999).

One purpose for constructing *posuban* was to serve as a meeting place. The *posuban* was a place where the Elders met to discuss important issues. Hitherto, the *asafo* met at the *posuban* to pray and gather inspiration before embarking on any activity, whether military or civil. They planned strategies and embarked from there to prosecute their objectives. In fact, all *asafo* activities start and end at the *posuban*. Sometimes, the companies assembled there in the night to discuss the defence of the town and carry out security operations. Ellis (1970: 82–87) suggests that it might be considered as the palladium of the fighting men of the village. Before embarking on war, each company assembled at its *ehsudu* and performed a ritual.

The skills used in the construction of domestic dwellings were applied to the design and erecting of the new *posuban*. Hence, many looked more like buildings or monuments than totem posts or shrines. The exact date when these new shrines and posts started cannot be ascertained, but by the end of the nineteenth century, these were in place and found in many places; they emerged as elaborately decorated architectural forms with sculptures and paintings also called *asafo aban*, over whose construction the *asafo* competed or quarrelled. Though oral tradition lacks accuracy in dating when these new *posuban* began, Ellis can be relied upon as providing the last decade of the nineteenth century. He suggested this as a possible date when activities were carried out at the *ehsudu* (*siwdo*).

In the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, *posuban* became the source of conflicts among the *asafo* companies. These became so intense and threatened the peace in the Gold Coast so much, that the British Colonial government passed the Native Customs Ordinance (1892) to regulate the use of such *asafo* art including sculptures and monuments. Prior approval was required for the construction of such art works. The Native Customs Ordinance (1920 [1892]: 809), in its bid to ensure peace on the colony regulated the construction of *posuban* to ensure it was not offensive or provocative to a rival *asafo*. The Ordinance defined company post to mean "any post, earth work or other erection set apart for the display of emblems or flags, or to mark a place of meeting of such company" Ordinance (1920 [1892]: 809). This was prohibited and could not be constructed without prior written permission from the District Commissioner. The penalty for its violation was a prison term or a fine, and the work was forfeited. Labi (2002b) has extensively discussed the relation between the *asafo* and the

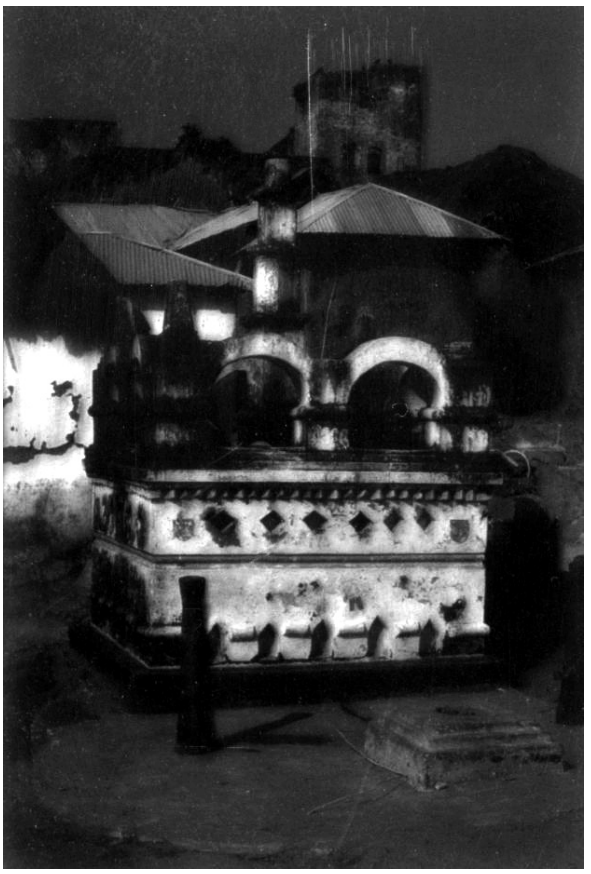


Fig. 4: The earliest dated *posuban*, constructed in 1888 showing evidence of European influence through the adoption of arches, a tower and display of disused cannons in front (Abandze; photo courtesy of Doran H. Ross, 1974).

British colonial administration in the nineteenth and twentieth century. There are archival records that mention *asafo* "company posts" or "flag posts" over which the *asafo* sometimes fought. One such incident was an 1856 conflict in which Impesseduadzi, Patuaku, and Bentsi-gua Companies attacked Kwaman and uprooted a sacred tree, which they carried to the Kwaman Company post and destroyed.[1] The oldest of the new types of *posuban* (Fig. 4) was found at Abandze, a town about 115 kilometres west of Accra on the Accra-Cape Coast road, in 1974 by Cole and Ross (1977: 187). It was dated 1888, but has since been demolished and a new one remains uncompleted at the time of this work. It belonged to all three Abandze Companies. There is also evidence from Cape Coast that District Commissioners and a chief destroyed some *posuban* in the early 1900s because of disputes over them. Similar incidents occurred in other places, including Mumford.[2]

This new type of *posuban* is a unique monument, whose style expresses the flexibility and adaptability of Fante *asafo* culture. Its features include a combination of geometric designs, arches, and towers, which stand out as monumental art works in Fante towns and villages, towering above traditional architecture and contrasting the landscape with their sculptures and paintings. The *posuban* are extravagant structures that have little connection with indigenous architecture, but, at the same time, reflect in their decorations *asafo* philosophy and culture. European influences have blended into Fante culture and become major artistic expressions, which represent the *asafo* as military companies. The adaptation of the designs of forts and castles and incorporating European arsenal and local military officers and traditional subjects into the style of *posuban* and what they represent, reflects the belief of the *asafo* in displaying strength through the symbols associated with it.

Posuban are massive and colourful structures emphasising the presence of the *asafo*. They range in size from six by six by six feet in length, breadth, and height to fifty by thirty feet, rising to the height of about a three-storey building. They have become advertisements of the strength, power, and glory of the *asafo* and the town as a whole. *Posuban* have become increasingly grandiose in both size and decorative embellishment. Recent structures retain some of their original functions but have also acquired additional ones, such as providing halls for the laying in state of a deceased member, storage of regalia and, occasionally, providing accommodation for a caretaker to maintain the *posuban*. Many *posuban* depict statues of members of the *asafo* company that owns it, as well as a wide range of statues of animals. The art which surrounds them includes *asafo* regalia, religious and mythological symbols, animals, manufactured domestic items, and imagery from their interactions with European culture.

Among the variety of *posuban* are those constructed in the shape of European warships in Ekumfi Aakra, built in 1929 and modelled after a British destroyer, with fireplaces for smokestacks. Other examples are Anomabo No. 6 Kyirem (Fig. 5), Elmina No. 5 Abese, Serafa Aboana No. 2 Company, and the Egyaa No. 3 Kyirem Company, whose ship is within the walls of the *posuban*, and which are all clear proofs of the influence of European architec-

1 Adm. 11/1/257: The Company of Kwaman against Impesseduadzi and Others (In: Public Records and Archives Administration Department of Ghana [PRAAD]. Accra).

2 See Adm. 11/1/257 and Adm. 11/1/1473: Cape Coast District Riots, Case No. 761. (In: Public Records and Archives Administration Department of Ghana [PRAAD]. Accra).

Fig. 5: Anomabo No. 6 Kyirem *posuban* in the shape of a warship and the statute of *Supi Kweku hwe wo ho yiyie* (Supi Kweku be careful) in front (2001).

ture and technology. They symbolise the military character of the *asafo*, their equipment, beliefs, and their perceived capabilities in naval attack and sea travel, though they had never used any of these nor constructed and travelled in any. Other *posuban*, such as Otuam No. 1 Tuafo (Fig. 6), Impesseduadzi No. 2 Dentsefo, and Elmina No. 2 Akyem have aeroplanes on them, and a few are constructed as houses, sometimes with towers for hoisting flags.

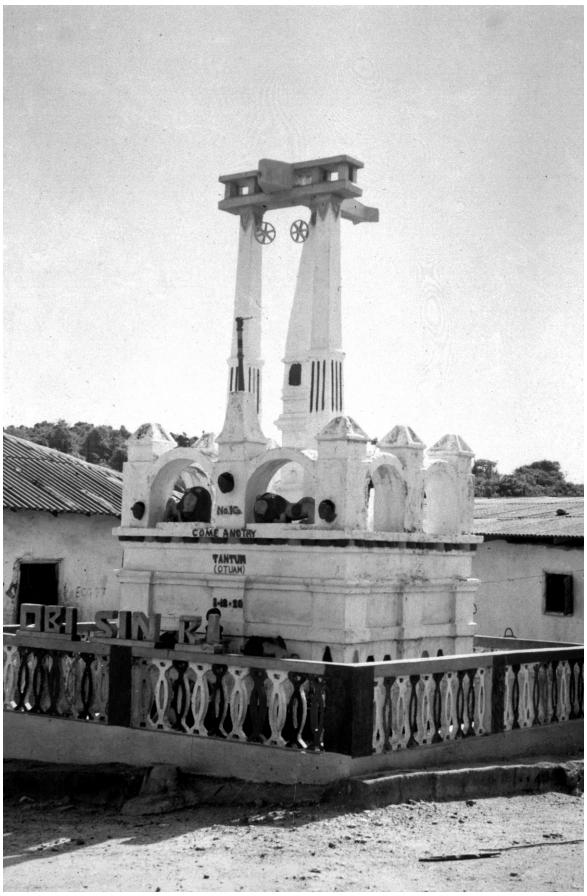


Fig. 6: A *posuban* belonging to Otuam No. 1 Tuafo with an aeroplane on top, further supporting European technological influence in the construction of these new *asafo posuban* (1999).

The development of the *posuban* can be grouped in three phases between the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twenty-first century. The initial ones in the first phase appear from the 1880s to the 1940s. The middle decades of the twentieth century saw a second phase with growth and changes in the style which characterised the *posuban*. After this period, political and economic developments impacted negatively on *posuban* construction after the 1960s and experienced less enthusiasm and imagination in its construction, which characterised the third phase.

The Early Features of the New *posuban*, 1880–1940

This first group of *posuban* belong to the first phase, the period between the last two decades of the nineteenth century and towards the middle of the twentieth century which may be considered the birth or the childhood of *posuban*.[3] In the last decade of the nineteenth century, elaborate rectangular structures began to be constructed in Fante coastal towns such

3 The analysis and discussion, which follows on the phases of development of the *posuban*, are partly based on Doran H. Ross' field notes between 1974 and 1981 on the sculptures on *asafo posuban*, in addition to my own fieldwork in 1998 and 2008.

as Elmina, Cape Coast, and Apam. They were often constructed in single levels or floors and painted usually in black and white. The *posuban* constructed within this early period were small, square, or rectangular structures with arches, towers, and small drawings of figures, symbols, and icons in relief (see Fig. 2).

The 1888 Abandze *posuban* (Fig. 4) was a small, modest square monument with two arches on each side, a central tower rising above it, painted predominantly in white with grey and blue parts, with two disused cannons standing at two corners. On it was written a Fante proverb, "*ibedzidzi na asa anaa ebesa na edzidzi*" (Will you prefer to use the enema before eating or use it after eating). This proverb is painted in a silhouette of a person bent down in front of another, a common expression found on flags challenging rivals to decide whether they prefer to fight before negotiating peace or vice versa. The essence of the message here is the unavoidability of punishment or conflict irrespective of the choice of time of preference to use the enema. The frequent use of arches was characteristic during the period: the Mankessim No. 2 Kyirem (1891), Cape Coast No. 5 Brofomba (1907), Beresi No. 4 Wombiri (1921), Abrem Agona No. 1 Ankobea (1921), Egyaa No. 1 Tuafo (1922), and Impesseduadzi Dentsefo (1941) all had arches.

European military equipment and modes of transportation, especially ships, influenced the construction of *posuban* during its early appearance. For example, the *posuban* of Serafa Aboano No. 2 (1931) was constructed in the form of a ship with paintings and drawings silhouetted on its sides with no details. They were simple, flat works in black, comprising both human figures and animals; whereas some *posuban* have sculptures of guns or salvaged disused cannons and cannon balls from the forts and castles.

Relief works usually occupied a small part of the *posuban*. Examples of early incised reliefs were the padlock and key on the Asebu Ankobea *posuban* and Saltpond Lowtown No. 1 Tuafo *posuban* (Fig. 7). Small sculptures were introduced onto the *posuban* at the beginning of the twentieth century, reflecting the references to Fante sculptural traditions. With tensions increasing and struggles escalating among the *asafo*, the *posuban* increased in size and range of sculptures. The symbols varied and different themes, animals, and items were sculpted and placed on different *posuban*. Other sculptures that characterised the *posuban* of this period were men of valour, such as *asafo* leaders and other individuals, animals, and objects representing power, such as soldiers, police officers, military weapons and warplanes, lions, and leopards. Some sculptures were symbolic, indicating roles played by those *asafo* officers. These symbols emphasised and reinforced the strength and military character of the *asafo*. As the struggle for dominance among the *asafo* continued and trade increased, European items, such as clocks, shovels, pick axes, and a crown on the Anomabo Dentsefo *posuban*, were incorporated into the decoration of the *posuban*. Examples of these are found on the Cape Coast No. 5 Brofomba and Kormantse No. 2 Nkum *posuban*.

Fig. 7: Saltpond Lowtown No. 1 Tuafo Asafo Company *posuban* with a key and padlock in relief.

The Period of Maturity, 1941–1960

The mid-twentieth century (1940s–1960s) marked the second phase, when *posuban* became more elaborate in their designs and the range of sculptures on them broadened. Honeycombs (prefabricated sandcrete designs that resemble the honeycombs of bees) were introduced during this phase, which began in the 1940s with Ekumfi Muna (1941) and Ekumpuano No. 1 (1948) *posuban*. These two were among the first to introduce honeycombs into the *posuban* balconies. Additional levels or floors increased the height of the *posuban* to tower above the single-level (one-storey) ones, emphasising the new dominance over the landscape.

New sculptures or effigies representing past *supifo* (heads of an *asafo*), *asafohinfo* (heads of smaller units within the *asafo*), and *asafoakyerefo* (heads of women's groups in an *asafo*) pay tribute to the roles they played in the history of the company. However, literal physical resemblance was not of the essence in emphasising their values and exploits. These statues portray the history and bravery of specific leaders within the *asafo*. They are seen as military heroes and heroines, embodying patriotism and nationalism in their stand against conquest from other *asafo* and Akan neighbours. Statues of two senior officers who helped in the construction of the *posuban* at Kormantse flank the sculpture of Supi Kow Bentum of No. 2 *Nkum* Company. He is depicted as a brave hero dressed in battle uniform, with a whip as his symbol of office, while the two officers beside him carry guns (Fig. 8). Statues of other *asafohinfo* are placed on the Mankessim No. 2 Kyirem, Impesseduadzi No. 2 Dentsefo, Ekumfi Muna, Elmina Nos. 4 Wombiri and 5 Abese, and Apam Tuafo No. 1 *posuban*.

Many *posuban* occupied religious sites and, therefore, did not lack in religious icons representing gods and deities. This helped create a solemn ambiance of respect, meditation, and reflection on the ancestors and the supernatural. Because of this religious cast, sculptures of priests, priestesses, and symbols of their gods are found on them. The masons are called upon to create icons and mythological creatures representing the manifestations of spirit beings revealed to the *asafo*. Examples of such are a priest of Muna *asafo* (1941), *sasabonsam* (the devil) on Ekumpuano No. 1 (1948) and on Dago No. 1 Tuafo *posuban* (1955) (Fig. 9), a double-headed eagle on Anomabo No. 6 Kyirem *posuban* (1952), and an angel on Esikuma Brakwa *posuban* (1955). There are also other non-traditional religious images, such as figures of Jesus Christ.

The quality, quantity, nature, and character of the sculptures, sizes of *posuban*, and other features indicate a period of maturity of *posuban* art and the exhibition of confidence in the use of new building materials, complex designs, and expanded content and iconography. Some of the characteristics of this phase included an emphasis on geometry and symmetry, which eventually became an integral part of the style. Decoration and aesthetics became synonymous as various precast sandcrete products were added to the design and construction of the *posuban*. The *asafo* broadened their choice of imagery and symbols to include more varieties of locally manufactured and imported items, in addition to the range of art which characterised the first phase, reemphasising the formal culture of expressing pride in their martial past.

A comparison between the two *posuban* in Dago (Figs. 9 and 10) may illustrate the change in style during the first two phases. The Dentsefo *posuban*

Fig. 8: Kormantse No. 2 Nkum *posuban* with the sculpture of three leaders in front with Supi Kow Bentum in the centre. It pays tribute to him for his contribution towards the construction of the *posuban* (2001).

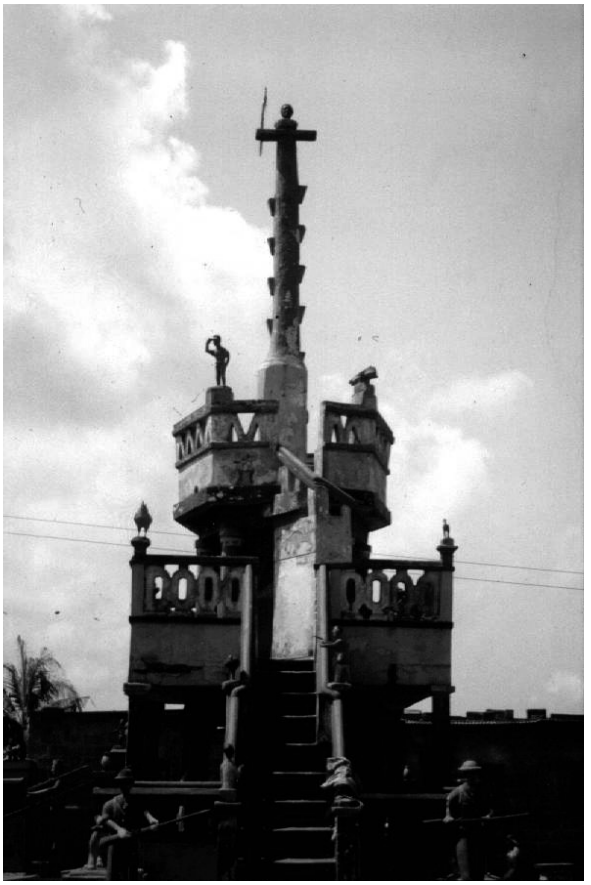


Fig. 9: A multiple storey *posuban* in a "wedding cake" shape belonging to Dago Tuafo, with armed officers in front constructed during the second phase of development in 1955 (1999).

in Fig. 10 was constructed in 1936, belonging to the 1880–1940 phase. It represents the modesty of the birth of a simple *posuban* with arches and paintings around it and an elephant pulling down a palm tree placed on top of it. Though small, however, the underlying values of strength, wit, and provocation were amply made clear through the sculptures of soldiers and the elephant with its trunk around the palm tree. The Tuafo, having observed the philosophy and symbols of Dentsefo, in 1955 put up a *posuban* more than twice the height of their rivals, Dentsefo. They also positioned soldiers with guns at the corners of the *posuban*, for what is strength without a gun to fight with and the support of powerful predators such as leopards. The arches disappeared in the latter style, as they were too simplistic and old-fashioned. On each of the levels were sculptures and a pronounced tower, rising high above every structure.

With the approach of independence in the mid-1950s and a booming timber, cocoa, and oil palm trade, the *asafo* were motivated to focus on aesthetics, thus changing the style of *posuban* construction. Small *posuban* were given equal aesthetic attention, with the Gomoa Debiso No. 1 Kyirem introducing balustrades with twists and turns in 1954 on a single-level *posuban*. Extravagant display of sculptures and compositions of images characterised the *posuban* that were constructed during this period. In 1957, Gomoa Abonyi No. 1 Tuafo introduced a small statue of their *asafoakyere* comfortably seated with the heads of four small lions on their *posuban*, alluding to the strength of the company. The use of lions, which started earlier, was replicated on sev-

Fig. 10: A small *posuban* belonging to Dago Dentsefo. Though small in size it depicts both traditional (elephant pulling down a palm tree), wit and provocation (the horse and its rider) and European (military officers) symbols of power. Constructed during the first phase of the development of *posuban* and completed in 1936 (1999).

eral other *posuban* and became a common symbol. The Biriwa No. 1 Abrempon *posuban* (1958) presents the viewer with a gathering of sculptured important *asafo* leaders crowded around the *posuban*. In addition to these figures are animals closely placed beside one another with no visible order and space between the sculptures.

By the turn of the twentieth century, subsequent *posuban*, including the Gomoa Esikuma Tuafo (1959) and Dentsefo *posuban*, increased the number of symbols and included new ones such as the Ghanaian flag. This embraced the horizontal national colours, with its patriotic red representing the blood and toil of their forebears who fought for the independence of the new nation, the mineral wealth of the country symbolised by the gold in the middle, and the dense forests and environment depicted as green at the bottom. The black star in the middle of the flag portrayed Ghana as the first country south of the Sahara to gain independence and give hope and inspiration to other African countries to liberate themselves from colonial rule. The Anomabo *posuban*, completed in the 1960s, reflected the new prosperity of the immediate post-independence period and the hope for a better future. The prosperous companies constructed bigger *posuban* with increased numbers of sculptures and decorative motifs, which became indicative of new-found artistic freedom. The chief characteristics of this phase were an increase in the size of the *posuban*, introduction of honeycombs, religious and mythological sculptures, paintings, elaboration of art works on the *posuban*, and a decline in the use of arches.

The Stagnation of the 1960s

Contrary to expectations, the development of *posuban* began to lose momentum in the late twentieth century in its stylistic development, the numbers that were constructed, and vibrancy in their thematic variations and decorations during this period is classified as the third phase. This raised questions on the relevance of the *posuban* and its future among the Fante creating doubts if the Fante still had the interest and ability as previously to continue constructing them. This reduction in construction and declining incidents of contentions over them reduced the colonial government's interest in earlier Fante art.

Three significant things occurred during this phase, which seems to represent a period of stagnation of this lively artistic tradition. The first was the repetition of many earlier symbols; the second was the decline in construction of new *posuban*; and the third was the lack of maintenance and dilapidation of some *posuban*. The same period witnessed a dramatic downward turn in the fortunes of the *asafo*, as members migrated to other towns in search of jobs or to work on cocoa farms. This led to a reduction in *asafo* membership in many towns and villages. The continued influence and spread of Christianity and the emergence of new independent charismatic and syncretic churches, all of which frowned on some of the practices of the *asafo*, reduced their attractiveness to the youth and made it difficult for them to attract new and younger members and funds to maintain their *posuban*.

The last group of *posuban* within this period of rapid evolution and decline includes those of Ajumako No. 1 Apaagya (1966) and Anomabo No. 2 Etsiwa (1969). The Abura Dunkwa No. 1 Nkum (1971), Elmina No. 5 Abese (1972), Kormantse No. 2 Nkum (1973), Abeadze Dominase No. 1 Tuafo (1974), Edumafa No. 1 Kyirem (1974), Apam No. 1 Tuafo (1976), and Anomabo No. 7 Akomfodzi Seikyi (1977) being the most recent. They all depict similar decorations with symbols, honeycombs, towers, different levels, balconies, and a wide variation of themes. The Apam No. 1 Tuafo *posuban* is probably the largest *posuban*, while the Mankessim No. 1 Tuafo *posuban* (Fig. 11) is probably the most elaborate of the Fante *asafo posuban* using several geometric designs. The four-level Mankessim *posuban* has a brightly painted tower, making it very conspicuous in the town. The symbols include an emblem resembling that of the Ghana Police, lions, anchors, and other motifs, with a variation of crosses on the first-level balcony. In front of the *posuban* are statutes of two people sitting and playing *oware* (a local board game).[4] Peace, which seemed to have eluded the *asafo* for a while, now became a reality and, in many ways, the motivating factors for conflicts and protests were removed hence the urgent desire to compete and outdo a rival in constructing *posuban* with iconography declined. There were no distinct new symbols and icons during this period but a repetition of many earlier ones, and new aesthetic forms.

4 *Oware* is an Akan game comprising of twelve holes divided into two with six on each side. This can be made out of tree plunk. Four seeds are placed in each hole and one player collects the first four seeds and adds one each to the next hole with seeds till his or her four are finished. If there are seeds in the last hole, he/she puts in a seed, he/she collects the seeds and continues to add on. A player's turn ends if he/she finishes up with a hole with no seeds. In the course of playing, if a player adds a seed to a collection to reach four, he/she collects the seeds as a win. This continues till all the seeds are finished. Each person then fills the holes with the seeds won and the one who fills in the most holes is the winner.

Fig. 11: Mankessim No. 1 Tuafo *posuban* featuring elaborate geometric designs, which characterised the third phase (photo: Doran H. Ross, 1974).

The Art of *asafo posuban* and Its Future

The nature and character of the *asafo*, the presence of European colonialists – the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, and their relation with the *asafo* – and the general conditions existing among the Fante at the time, contributed to the development of the *posuban*. These works represent a style of art portraying the martial character of the *asafo* and their intra- and inter-*asafo* struggles. Is it reasonable at this point to conclude that the source and motivation for the changes came mainly from the presence of European trade posts in the form of lodges, forts, and castles? These European influenced buildings, including churches and novel buildings of the new wealthy Fante, later came to embody multiple symbolisms among the Fante.

As the *posuban* developed, they incorporated artistic and aesthetic values not present in traditional architecture. Various shapes (including ships and aeroplanes), sculptures of animals, figures, mythology, and colour became important, setting the *posuban* distinctly apart from local buildings. Typical European features such as towers, arches, and cannons, which dominated the early *posuban*, not always were found in the newer styles. Rather, *asafo* leaders, local incidents, mythological sculptures, and proverbs in visual forms were now placed on the *posuban*. Local Fante iconography, whose meanings and significance were identified as essential for incorporation into the design, construction, and decorations of the *posuban* to enhance an *asafo* style started as small silhouettes. In recently constructed *posuban*, honeycombs of various shapes and designs and balustrades pre-cast in concrete were commonly used as balconies. The new designs and themes reflected changes in the political landscape as well as the prosperity that characterised the new independent nation and the challenges they started encountering.

Two things happened in the contact zone, which transformed the traditional *asafo* mounds and meeting places. These were the construction of elaborate *posuban* and the depiction of *asafo* themes of might, and power by adapting and modifying them from European symbols familiar to them, such as architecture, sea travel, and weaponry and incorporating and localising them into Fante proverbs and symbols.

Nevertheless, with time the symbols of provocation, insinuation, and inspiration, including independence from British rule and *asafo* culture and philosophy, eventually overshadowed earlier European symbols of power such as cannons and cannon balls. These symbols and representation were hitherto unknown on the *siw* and fenced trees. By the end of the twentieth century, local symbols and traditional religious beliefs and various supernatural representations had taken over as predominant symbols suitable for a new age.

A comparison between some of the *posuban* of different periods indicates a style that started in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, maintaining its essential features yet responding to the changing technological advances. An evaluation of the Asebu Ankobea *posuban*, constructed in 1935, representing the first phase, and the Asebu Moree No. 2 Alata *posuban*, put up in the third phase in 1961, reveals the transformations, innovations, and changes in the construction of *posuban*. The Alata *posuban* is bigger, with honeycombs, lions, birds, and many other relief works on the walls, contrasting the smaller, square, and thicker-walled Ankobea *posuban* constructed with only arches, three balustrades on each side, and a flat drawing of two keys and a padlock.

Within the last period, some companies carried out renovations and increased the size of their *po-*

Fig. 12: The current Saltpond No. 2 Dentsefo *posuban*.

suban, introducing new icons and symbols to reflect new challenges and needs. Some earlier art works have been demolished and replaced with newer ones, representing new ideas and thoughts. Other *posuban* have been renovated and expanded. Today, arches have gone out of fashion. The Apam No. 2 Dentsefo added another floor with a short honeycomb as a balcony to their original single storey building constructed in 1962, after their rivals, the Tuafo, had put up a three-storey *posuban* dwarfing theirs. This was indicative of the competition among the companies. The Saltpond Lowtown No. 2 Dentsefo *posuban*, which was a single level built in 1921 (Fig. 12), was extensively renovated in the early 1980s. The whale and seal, originally on the floor in front of the *posuban*, have been demolished. An additional level was added, but the multi-headed bird at the top of the *posuban* was maintained. On the ground floor now is a composition of a battle scene in which the *asafo* have decapitated their enemies (Fig. 9). This referred to a specific historical incident, which the Saltpond *asafo* believe is more relevant to them and illustrative of their fighting capability and strength than the earlier whale and seal. However, the common feature of depicting *asafo* leaders, past conflicts, themes of power, and Fante proverbs makes many of the *posuban* iconography repetitive, easy to identify and interpret, though many are interpreted in specific cultural and historical contexts thus making them fluid in their meanings.

This account of *posuban* has seen it deteriorate due to lack of maintenance. Several sculptures found by Ross in 1974 were either damaged or lost by the end of the century. *Posuban* are rarely renovated during annual festivals and attempts to maintain them are at the minimum. They have become historical works reflecting European influences, tense relations among the *asafo*, and artistic experimentation with new building materials and iconography. The existence of conflicts and efforts at reconciliation in some towns have compelled some companies not to construct elaborate *posuban*, if any at all; they might maintain only the traditional fenced trees or mounds, as observed in Mumford. It is, however, noteworthy that the Dutch government had assisted to renovate the *posuban* in Elmina, a project that started in the early twenty-first century.

Some of the earlier new *posuban*, however, have either been renovated or replaced with newer ones. Unfortunately, a number of new constructions have died stillbirths, as they remain under construction several years after commencement due to lack of resources. Each *posuban* is unique and its symbols reflect the desire to insinuate, and boasts about the superiority of one's company over others. This fact seems to have limited the range of artworks and themes, while failing to give free unconstrained expression to their artistic imagination.

Currently, some *posuban* serve as storage places for *asafo* regalia, namely, flags and musical instruments. These sites and monuments were and are still revered as shrines and may also be compared to an armoury; thus, any attempt to dishonour, abuse, or take away any of the disused missiles such as broken bottles or old knives would be resented. The peculiar situation in which the Fante found themselves makes the study of change in shape or form of *asafo* art over time an important discussion. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, there was evidence of a gradual change in the style of constructing these sacred sites. Fante artists were actively involved in social, political, cultural, and trade exchanges along the coastal contact zone. The sociocultural, economic, and political life in this area was not static but a dynamic process in which the Fante incorporated ideas, systems, and materials from an external culture into their own.

Conclusion

The *asafo*, as a socio-military and political organisation, created these *posuban* to represent physical and moral strength. The themes reflect abuse, ridicule, and depiction of war spoils and victories. They sometimes veer into social commentary with accompanying proverbs or wise sayings, casting insinuations or innuendos. They also have sayings and songs of various kinds that praise themselves and boast about their prowess – real or perceived. These have been strongly emphasised in studies produced between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, representing the tensions and instability in Fante towns, where *asafo* often quarrelled and

fought among themselves over art, especially during the festive months between May and September (Labi 1998, 2002a, b). These works represent provocative works, often exaggerated and distorted with animated qualities and symbols. This style showed extensive and free borrowing of European symbols of power to psychologically compel rivals to react, fight, or accept being ridiculed. Simply put, *asafo posuban* iconography reflects dominance, revealing the antagonistic relations among the companies. The style also demonstrates a dogmatic belief in the cultural practice of producing offensive art and resisting external mediation.

Many art works represent the *asafo*'s perceptions, beliefs, history, and ideas without a corresponding attempt at realistic representations of human beings and animal images, or of the environment, hence the commonality of subject and subject matter. For example, many Fante proverbs and symbols are used by several *asafo* but sometimes with local variation to their meanings to suit a particular *asafo*. The developments and changes during the period under discussion have been in the material, shape, and size of the structure, the variety of both traditional and European symbols of power, and the adoption of new symbols and subject matter. Hence, the communicative and symbolic contents of *asafo* art have become more pronounced and elaborate, indicating changes in styles and methods of production clearly demonstrating the Fante ability to adopt, adapt, and modify foreign art, symbols, and ideas and reinterpret them into local iconography. The persistence of some decorative styles is evidence of the continuity of some traditional aesthetic values and the philosophy and motives behind their creation.

From the late nineteenth century, the functions of *asafo* art, especially in its communicative aspects, became important. The artistic and symbolic aspects of *asafo* iconography became more elaborate on the *posuban*. The artists' composition, use of space, balance of images, harmonisation of colours and the murals are all evidence of these transformations and the importance of *posuban* in *asafo* culture. The iconography on the *posuban* thus became important in representing historical, cultural, or social issues and was used as a nonverbal form of communication. *Asafo posuban* is dynamic and the style will continue to evolve. It may be appropriate to speculate, based on the evidence above of incorporating current and relevant ideas on the *posuban*, whether new ones should be constructed. Representations, or recasting of certain historical and cultural ideas, or facts, believed not to be well represented on the previous one, may be demolished or modified. New icons, materials, and themes continue to be added. However, the existing ones continue to portray continuity in form, iconography, and function, while new ones are rarely constructed.

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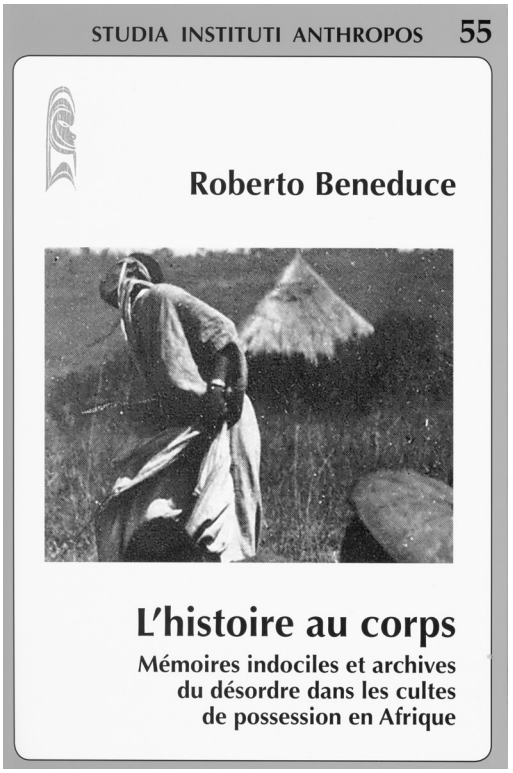

Entre plusieurs mondes. Ainsi pourrait-on résumer l'expérience des possédés : corps suspendus entre clivages privés et images d'un passé fracturé qui continue à hanter le présent, âmes prisonnières d'un vortex de conflits indicibles et de violences oubliées. Comment faire parler ces archives ? Et quelle prise de parole peuvent-ils affirmer ces voix et corps convulsés, éteints et réduits au silence partout un cortège de diagnostics, interprétations et contraintes variés ? Cette étude se propose d'identifier, dans les pratiques et les discours liés aux cultes de possession en Afrique, les significations irreductibles et contradictoires de ces expériences « non ordinaires » et de ces mémoires obstinées, où des subjectivités inquiètes en quête de reconnaissance semblent finalement trouver leur expression.

Roberto Beneduce: L'histoire au corps. Mémoires indociles et archives du désordre dans les cultes de possession en Afrique. Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg Switzerland, 2016. vii+316 pp. ISBN 978-3-7278-1762-5. ISSN 0570-3085.