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John Dunn and A. F. Robertson

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ahafo, like most other inhabited sections of the globe today, is not what it used to be. The ecological and demographic shift from a virgin forest thinly peopled with hunters to a huge cocoa plantation and timber stand producing massively for the world market has come in its entirety within the span of a single life. It has come, too, from the outside. No one living in or visiting Ahafo over the last few decades could fail to realise that the area was being transformed. Yet transformation is not in itself necessarily obliteration. Ahafo was not a blank sheet of paper on which the world market and the colonial state were free to scribble as they pleased. It was not inert matter in the hands of an active agent. The political energies and even perhaps the political aspirations of many in Ahafo today are still in part shaped by beliefs about the proper description of shadowy social relations in the forest before the white man came. What men today believe that Ahafo used to be is still at times (though plainly not at all times) a consideration which informs their vision of what they wish it to become. Probably no one in Ahafo would care it to revert in its entirety to how the forest was in 1896, when the British Hausa column moving through Ahafo was unable to prevent dozens of domestic slaves deserting their masters in its wake.¹ Few indeed can now remember what this meant and perhaps equally few could now imagine what it would mean. But then the Catholic population of Belfast or Londonderry have no wish to revert to the social and political conditions which prevailed before Strongbow landed. An ideal past and an ideal future are not any less toughly and emotively related because the actual past as a whole is not a condition to which anyone would choose to revert.

In writing about political change and its meaning in Africa in recent decades it has not proved easy for scholars, whether from West, East or from Africa itself, to hit upon a range of focus which captures convincingly the integrity of current political action. Constitutional pieties, ideological incantations and *mafioso* vendettas at the level of the national government have tended to be balanced by a cosy picture of small town communal entertainment at the local level. In part these difficulties have been a product of the conditions of research. But it seems likely that overall it has been the prior

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enthusiasms and anxieties of the researchers which have made it so hard for them to pick out the most revealing segments for analysis. The exigencies of decolonisation, the hasty concerns of comparative government and the austere professional caution of anthropologists have certainly illuminated many aspects of African politics. But it seems just, by now, to insist that there are many aspects which they do not appear to have found any clear means of illuminating. Between *Creating Political Order* and *Social Change at Larteh, Ghana*² there remains a wide gulf of plain ignorance and incomprehension and it does not perhaps any longer require particular cynicism to suppose that it is in this gulf that much of the meaning of African politics is to be found (if found it ever is). There are two drastically separated facets of national political action in an African state today. The first of these is the relationship between the postcolonial state apparatus and the agencies, political and economic, on the world market against which it attempts with greater or less energy or skill or dedication to protect the interests of its subject population. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this facet; but since the people of Ahafo have yet to find any way of affecting it, nothing which we have to say in the present book can hope to do much to illuminate it. The second facet, the relationship between the postcolonial state apparatus and the subjects whom it in part controls lies more within our scope. But, taking our stand within Ahafo and looking upwards, we have not concerned ourselves with the state as the trustee of the national future of Ghana, squinting sympathetically or unsympathetically down the barrel of the administration to see why its subjects make such an elusive target. Politically the perspective which we have adopted is in some respects a populist perspective, *l'arbre vu du côté des racines* as Victor Hugo put it.³ But we have not adopted it out of any simple conviction as to the location of political virtue or intelligence – that the ‘people’ know how to rule Ghana. (Do the ‘people’ know how to rule Britain? Does anyone know how to rule Britain?) The reason why we have taken our stand within Ahafo and looked upwards is not the belief that bureaucrats or parliamentarians or army officers are wicked and peasants virtuous, but the blander, if epistemologically less precarious reason that Ahafo is there. It was important for the purposes which we have had in mind that it should have been an area of something like the scale and population which it has – not somewhere as large as Ashanti or as small as Larteh. But the order of approximation was very rough and the grounds for it extremely vulgar: a matter of how large was the area for which it was possible to study the administrative records and the current political activities and institutions within a limited time and of how small an area within which we expected to reveal these political activities at a sufficiently complex level to permit some analytical progress with them. The initial grounds for our choice of Ahafo are of little importance compared with the judgement whether or

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not it did in fact prove an area of a scale suitable for revealing the processes in which we have been interested.

What we have attempted to understand is a process of transformation in which we have endeavoured to see neither end of the causal relationship, local or national, as simply an inert or a wholly predictable force. We have assumed that there are many aspects of Ahafo identities, and less intimately of Ahafo roles, which have resulted from external pressures, as well as some aspects which have survived these pressures without drastic amendment. But we have also assumed that a great many (and probably rather more) aspects of them have resulted from a process of active response by Ahafos and by those who came to Ahafo from the outside over these decades. By the same token we have attempted to explain how far the external pressures of colonial moralism or national aspiration over these same decades have been interpreted and changed by the active character of this response. The present of Ahafo, especially in political terms, is very different from its more distant past; and it is for obvious reasons the present which we have had best opportunities for investigating and assessing. But we have tried above all to grasp how this present has become the legitimate inheritor, through Ahafo passion and action, of this historical past. As an ambition this plainly represents a studied confusion of academic genres, of history, anthropology and political science. How far it has been successful it is no longer for us to judge. But at least it should be clear that this confusion is not inadvertent, that it is indeed the point of our collaboration.

An obvious advantage of this approach may be worth emphasising, as may its even more obvious converse disadvantage. Anthropologists are bound by professional etiquette (and fitted, it is to be hoped, by personal disposition) to take seriously the values of those whom they study. In the analysis of national politics in Africa it has been a major difficulty for investigators to decide whose values it is wholly appropriate for them to take seriously. Should it, for example, be the formal criteria of liberal democracy or the salvatory hopes of socialist prophets, or the less articulated hopes of poor peasant farmers or urban petty traders? Excessive commitment to some simple image for the location of political virtue has recently been largely replaced, in Hegelian antithesis, by a pervasive cynicism as to the possibility of political value becoming localised in African political structures at all. This attitude may be less innocent than its predecessor; but it is not obviously any less offensive. To define politics stolidly in terms of who gets what when how is to ignore the pervasively relevant and altogether more fundamental question of just *why* this should be the pattern of distribution which is maintained. By looking at the complex net of dependencies and opportunities running from Accra (and abroad) down to the hamlets and compound houses of Ahafo, and seeing the scope for action and the possibilities for and

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limitations on moral solidarity at all these levels, an image may be formed of the distribution of influence and responsibility in the framework of Ahafo's politics. Such an image may lack the moral clarity of purely localist or purely national perspectives (my hamlet right or wrong – the army right or left). But it may nevertheless be more salutary for the moral imagination, whether African or foreign, to have to admit that such an image, however vague in initial outline, is closer to where it ought to begin to work than the bland or histrionic foreign archetypes so plentifully on offer. At the least it might be a better starting point from which to attempt to reflect on the possibilities and impossibilities of building political community in Africa. This is not a humble hope and it may well be judged a misplaced one. Even at best it must be balanced against the obvious disadvantage of the approach which we have chosen. By refusing to confine ourselves either to the present or to the past, we have necessarily constructed a work in which the parts are heterogeneous and in some respects potentially confusing to a hasty reader. To insist doggedly on complexity is always to risk the charge of having simply failed to elicit clarity. Books, as John Burrow has memorably noted, do not have to be isomorphic with their subjects: bald if on Caesar, devious if on Harold Wilson, muddled if on Ahafo. Several of the chapters contain both historical and observational materials and are not divided up neatly into sections labelled 'history' and 'observation'. The decision to allow this amalgam to remain was not dictated by the conclusions reached but by a necessarily subjective judgement as to what did or did not illuminate the processes by which contemporary roles and attitudes were created and (by virtue of doing so) what exactly these roles or attitudes now were. On balance we have been more anxious to suggest the illumination which can derive from this change in focus than to bring back a single and splendid snapshot of some arbitrarily chosen subject.

It is often said today by sensitive students of African local politics that the accumulation of precise information about such topics is a perilous enterprise because it is so likely to get into the hands of (and presumably to be put to use by) those powerful external interests which do not have the interests of Africans at heart. The argument for ignorance is seldom an overwhelming one in any of its variants in social affairs. It is also far from obvious from the viewpoint of the manipulated whether a little knowledge is in any general way any less dangerous than a lot. But whatever the general desirability of 'Area Handbooks for Africa', it is hoped at least that the focus of the present work on the disparities between external ambitions as they come to Ahafo and the fate which befalls them on their domestication there may serve to discourage, rather than to promote, fantasies of the transformation or even of the effortless manipulation of an inert material.

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The collaboration on which this book is based has involved no very clear-cut division of labour. Before either of us left for Ghana we discovered a congruence of interests and have hoped from the outset that our experience could be combined usefully, particularly in the task of finding out as much about Ahafo as possible in the time available to us. Purposely our approach has not shown much regard for disciplinary boundaries, indeed insofar as we may be categorised as social anthropologist and political scientist our research and the preparation of this book have involved us in substantial role exchange. In this process the social anthropologist has discovered public records and the administrators and politicians of the capital, while the political scientist has accustomed himself to living for lengthy periods in a small forest town and conversing with his neighbours. Aware that we have been studying a very complicated political field we have made a point of knowing each other's business and at times have found that two heads may be more reassuring, if not necessarily more reliable, than one.

For both of us our research has involved documentary study and field investigations. Developing a sense of historical continuity extending back some seventy years, and tracing the relationship between Ahafo and the various political centres, have involved examination of public records in London, Accra, Kumasi and Sunyani. By the courtesy of the Commissioner for Local Government and with the kind co-operation of the various local officers we have been allowed to examine open files in the Goaso District Office and the three Local Councils. This has given us privileged access to contemporary information which we have attempted to use with due respect. It must be noted that government attitudes towards enquiry into political and social processes were, during the period of our study, liberal and broad-minded to an extent quite uncharacteristic of other times and other places; we are gratefully aware of how much our research has been facilitated by this prevalent mood of tolerance for academic inquisitiveness. It is very probable that much of the paper accumulated during seventeen years of local government in Ahafo and now stored in an outhouse in Goaso may not survive archival selection and the thirty year restriction on public documents; a student may therefore feel justified in searching through such records with some care if he is given the opportunity. Much the same is true of the legal and local administrative papers which remain in Goaso. There has certainly been much elimination of 'redundant' material already, although it is difficult to assess the extent of this. It is well known that a large proportion of the documents relating to the years of Convention People's Party rule were destroyed at the time of the February 1966 coup d'état.

Our study of contemporary political process has been confined to three years, 1968-71, conspicuously a period of political transition in Ghana. In 1969 a representative Constituent Assembly was convened by the police-

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military junta to approve a new constitution for the Second Republic, and shortly afterwards authority was handed over to the popularly elected government of Dr Busia's Progress Party. The moods of resignation and scepticism, deepened by the disgrace of the N.L.C. chairman in 1969, and of hope embodied in the untarnished reputation of Dr Busia, were all experienced in varying degrees by the people of Ahafo. Nationally there was much introspection and self-criticism focussed on public enquiries into the political and financial trustworthiness of a number of eminent men. Although caution may not have been dispelled there was a mood of candour both in Accra and in Ahafo, an indulgence in the luxury of expressing political opinion which could ill be afforded in the years before 1966. In conversation we were frequently reminded that such frankness would have been impossible in the mutual mistrust of the Nkrumah era, particularly as it was often inferred in Ahafo that we were 'from the government' no matter how much we tried to cast our roles in more independent terms.

The period from March to August 1969 was one of extremely active political manoeuvre, both nationally and in Ahafo itself. Opportunity for inspecting and for understanding political allegiance in the making was plainly extremely favourable in this time. But several features of the election campaign and its background meant that our opportunities for inspection and perhaps for understanding also, were more favourable in some directions than others. One of the authors had become a relatively close friend of one or two of the Legon academics who played a prominent part in the organisation of Dr Busia's campaign and was thus much better informed about the strategies adopted on a national scale by this party and about the problems which it encountered than he was able to become in respect of other possible or actual national political parties. Whatever effect it had on his sympathies as an observer, it does not seem likely on reflection that this perspective had any very distorting impact on the interpretation of what took place in Ahafo. More important and more accidental was the fact that the house in which both the authors stayed throughout their time in Ahafo became one of the major centres for organising the Progress Party campaign in the Asunafo constituency. Since the District Secretary of the Party lived in the next door room to the one which was occupied in succession by the authors and since he was on very good terms with the authors long before he occupied this office, it was natural for us to be presented with a much richer and less formal sense of what the local organisers of the party were up to than could have been open to us under any other conditions. Some of the less edifying aspects of the campaign were apt to be discussed outside the bedroom window in the early hours of the morning, while the two leading candidates for the Progress Party nomination met for the first time in our room. But such contingent conveniences of this location were plainly balanced by the tendency for us to

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become associated with the Progress Party as a political interest, particularly in the minds of their active opponents. Extensive efforts were made to offset this, one major asset in the attempt being the unwavering aversion of our Krobo assistant to the Progress Party and his excellent contacts with their opponents. (He was offered a major organisational position in their party in the constituency.) But partly because of the difference in the political styles of the two parties discussed in the text, a contrast in tone between the respectable and the mildly raffish, and partly because of the intractable physical location of our room, it is certainly true that both our knowledge and our understanding of the political activities of those who led the National Alliance of Liberals' campaign was less intimate than in the case of their opponents. It has been necessary to exercise considerable discretion in the precision of our descriptions of behaviour known to us which was in breach of the electoral laws. On balance we do not believe that the accounts of the behaviour and purposes of one side as presented is any more or less reliable than that of the other. But it is important that this is a matter of judgement and that we did *know* less about one side than about the other.

We have both been uncomfortably aware of our slow and inadequate progress in learning the vernacular, and of the need for linguistic competence in understanding and interpreting the subtleties of political interaction. Our attempts at coming to grips with this consisted mainly of interviews structured with some care, and the extensive (but always overt) use of portable tape recorders. The interviews were essentially open-ended, and only those conducted with the Ahafo chiefs could in any sense be described as a set. These consisted of a series of meetings, never less than two and in one case as many as seven, with each of 26 of the 28 chiefs. The chief was invariably interviewed in the company of at least one elder and in many cases meetings involved a full session of the stool council. Partly intentionally and partly by force of circumstance we have been concerned with the public, not the private face of the chief. These meetings could generate a memorable sense of occasion, involving such preliminaries as the pouring of a libation to the stool ancestors, gods and fetishes. At times they acquired a momentum of their own, the interview being transformed into a series of forceful and illuminating political statements. The set was incomplete in that the question guide was not rigorously applied and that it proved impossible to meet the chiefs of Pomakrom and Siena because of communications problems.

In a relatively unstructured way we also interviewed as many of the people who were concerned in the present or in the past with Ahafo politics as we could. These included cabinet ministers, Members of Parliament and parliamentary candidates, regional and district administrators, local council personnel and many others. We also interviewed the elders, town committee members and other prominent citizens of Goaso, the administrative and

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commercial centre of Ahafo. Although the frame of reference for our study has been the Ahafo communities, in matters of detail we have devoted attention specifically to Goaso, our home town. A lengthy questionnaire was applied quite rigorously in the interview of 32 men and 26 women, selected somewhat arbitrarily from the people of the town with the assistance of the local government house register. The sample was chosen without much statistical finesse, its representative nature being judged very much by rule of thumb. Subsequently it provided a valuable guide in the assessment of contemporary political attitudes. As with all our interviews, each was recorded in full and translated with the aid of our research assistants.

It will be apparent that our observation of Ahafo has depended to a large extent on hanging on the words of our informants. For this reason quite lengthy periods were spent painstakingly reconstructing, translating and transcribing tape-recorded interviews and meetings. We selected very carefully from a quite impressive list of applicants a 33 year old interpreter/assistant, Mr J. Omersu Kwablah, who has subsequently contrived to make a career out of the bizarre occupation of assisting students in the field. Our main criteria for this choice were his wide knowledge of Ghanaian languages, his relaxed proficiency in public relations, his sound geographical knowledge of Ahafo gained during service with the Co-operative movement and (as a southerner by birth) his relative disengagement from local politics. After some time Mr Omersu developed a helpful understanding of our research interests, and a patient sympathy for our at times frenetic pursuit of meanings. While we depended heavily on his linguistic tutorship we avoided confining our exploration of certain perplexing terms, ideas and values to conversation with him alone, and have always taken advantage of the interest and patience of our English-speaking friends in Ghana. We were also able to rely on the competence of our clerk and copy-typist Mr Alex Amoako-Attah, particularly where the need to observe meetings and other events very closely warranted the deployment of all available eyes, ears and pens. The interest of one of us in public decision making⁴ intensified our scrutiny of certain events, and it could be said that one by-product of this obsession was to sensitise our assistants and ourselves to the minutiae of political interaction generally.

Although we may feel that we have explored many different ways of learning about Ahafo, our research must inevitably manifest many shortcomings. Some of these we may ascribe to shortage of time and resources, others to inadequacies in our own perceptions and field methods. Perhaps it would be fair to say, however, that throughout our research we have repeatedly reminded each other of our cardinal concern for as clear a presentation of as wide a range of views of Ahafo politics as possible. In our fieldwork we were concerned that these values should be elicited with the minimum of inter-

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ference from our own constructions and preconceptions. It is our hope that at least some of these voices from the present and the past have survived the rigours of interpretation and will speak candidly for themselves in the following chapters.

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CHAPTER 2

CHANGING COMMUNAL IDENTITIES

The identity of Ahafo, in political as well as geographical terms, derives in large measure from the Tano river, which rises near Techiman in central Ghana and flows out into the Juen lagoon over 150 miles south, on the Ghana/Ivory Coast border. The Tano has provided the main orientation for settlement and today the population of Ahafo is concentrated in the wide valley around its central reaches. The Bia river, running a parallel course through the forest thirty miles to the west, is very different; it is a boundary marker which relatively few Ahafos have actually seen, whereas the Tano is a focus for human interests and a source of political growth. Named after Tano or Ta Kora, the most important of the Ashanti terrestrial gods,¹ its waters are treated with great ritual respect and many of the fetishes closely associated with the establishment and growth of the Ahafo communities are alleged to have been discovered in the river. However contentious the political integration of Ahafo may be, there is much to suggest to the people who live around the Tano that they belong to a quite distinctive place.

Ahafo provides a lush and potentially rich environment. It is an area of dense forest and savannah woodland, well watered with an average annual rainfall of 60 to 80 inches, and the forest ochrosols are soils well suited to cocoa, the prime cash crop of the region. Some 20 miles west of the Tano the forest is sparsely settled, and herds of elephants still pose a threat to the establishment of new farms. The forest extends in a pattern of reserves and shelter-belts, protecting the farms on the south from the annual incursion of dry harmattan winds. Boundaries to the south and east are more open, reflecting the two main axes of communication into the district. The district and regional boundary with Ashanti, defined in 1959, runs through the Disiri forest reserve and an area of relatively sparse settlement 15 to 20 miles east of the Tano.

The settlement of Ahafo is supposed to date from the middle of the eighteenth century when isolated communities, primarily concerned with hunting and the gathering of forest produce, were established. These origins are still expressed in the geographical and political relationships between communities, but Ahafo is very much a product of the cocoa era in Ghana. The crop was first exploited in the hills to the north of Accra in the first