

Praenotandum, 2103.2017: This article was published in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 15, 3 (1985): 174-200. It has slightly been edited. Page numbers have been inserted in bold between square brackets. I have moved the bibliographic references to the footnotes. I added footnote 54. I have also added, as a postscript, Adrian Hastings Editorial to *JRA* 15, 3 in which he rightly remarks that African indigenous societies were/are ruled by a 'pragmatic secularity', religion being far more 'muted' in them than students of African indigenous religions have so far suggested.

Jan G. Platvoet

(Katholieke Theologische Hogeschool Utrecht,
Utrecht, The Netherlands)

COOL SHADE, PEACE & POWER: THE *GYEDUA* ('TREE OF RECEPTION') AS AN IDEOLOGICAL INSTRUMENT OF IDENTITY MANAGEMENT AMONG THE AKAN PEOPLES OF SOUTHERN GHANA

Summary

This article explores an Akan symbol complex by means of which the Akan peoples of Southern Ghana expressed how they themselves viewed the political order of their societies. They objectified these views in the *gyedua*, the 'tree of reception': a politico-religious ('civil religion') institution that was a prominent feature of Akan towns in pre-colonial times. They used it primarily for expressing, maintaining, or restoring, the 'proper' political order. This paper will deal especially with the functions the *gyedua* had in Akan external and internal political relationships, and thereby produce 'emic', i.e. native or insider, views of Akan identity.

The European image of the Akan

Though it is, admittedly, dangerous to generalize about the opinions of whites about the Akan in pre-colonial and colonial times, it may be stated with some confidence that the prevalent white opinion of them, their societies, customs, morals and religion was a very low one. The reasons for that poor esteem were at least twofold: white ethnocentric stereotypes about the negroes as the very inversion of themselves: black, primitive and savage against white, superior and civilized;¹ and those observations of white visitors to Akan societies which seemed to prove the received views of Negroes incontrovertibly correct, such as 'their barbaric manners [which] we could not behold but with the greatest horror' of the ritual killings in an Akwamu town which the Dutch merchants Van den Broecke and Du Bois witnessed on 24 March 1703;² or the 'horrid barbarity' of the *atòperè* dance of death,³ witnessed briefly by Bowdich during the solemnities of the recep-

¹ Hammond & Jablow 1977: 15-18; Street 1975: 13-16

² Document in Van Dantzig 1978: 94

³ *Atòperè* was the most cruel and violent mode of execution in Asante. This 'dance of death' was especially reserved for those found to have a love affair with one of the (very many) wives of the *Asantehene* (king of Asante). It was a day-long spectacle in three parts. The victim, with a *sèpo* knife through his cheeks and three others in non-vital parts of his body, was first led through the town for a few hours pulled by a thorny creeper which had been passed through the septum of his nose. At certain points in the town he was further mutilated. Then he was brought to the *atòperè* tree (the *gyedua*, 'tree of reception' of the ward *Atòperèduase*, 'Under the *Atòperè*-tree')

tion of the first British embassy to Asante in Kumase on Monday 19 May 1817;⁴ or the display of the skulls of conquered enemies by the *adumfo* (executioners) of the *Asantehene* (ruler of Asante) as trophies of war on Saturday 6 September 1817, which caused Bowdich to comment: ‘I felt never so grateful for being born in a civilized country’.⁵

Such stereotypic views and reinforcing observations functioned as potent cultural, cognitive and normative barriers preventing the visitors, and even more the readers of their reports, from assessing Akan societies in a realistic way as the complex fabrics of [175] institutions and processes of political interaction between parties and factions, which they are shown to have been by a wealth of recent historical reconstructions.⁶ Prejudices caused the visitors to present, and their readers to perceive, those societies in shallow stereotypes such as ‘military despotism[s]’ ruled by cruel kings with ‘unlimited’ and capricious power over the lives of their subjects.⁷

It is the purpose of this paper to explore one symbol complex by which the Akan themselves expressed how they viewed their societies and political order. They objectified and sacralised these views in a politico-religious (‘civil religion’) institution⁸ that was a prominent feature of Akan towns in pre-colonial times: the *gyedua*, ‘tree of reception’. It was an instrument they used primarily for expressing, maintaining, or restoring, the ‘proper’ political order. This paper will deal especially with the functions of the *gyedua* in Akan external and internal political relationships, and produce by doing so ‘emic’, i.e. native or insider, images of Akan identity.⁹

A prayer to a ‘tree of reception’

[<i>Gyedua</i>],	[Tree of Reception],
<i>gye eto ne ogwan yi di,</i>	accept this <i>etó</i> and sheep and eat it,
<i>na boa ohene foforo yi</i>	and help this new King.
<i>Ma no kye.</i>	May he last long.
<i>Nya sika.</i>	May he receive [much] gold.
<i>Mma n’ani mfura.</i>	May he not become blind.
<i>Mma n’aso nsi.</i>	May he not become deaf.
<i>Mma no kote nwu.</i>	May he not become impotent.
<i>Ma mmadwofo nwo mma.</i>	May the women bring forth children.
<i>Ma kuro fi die edan nsi da,</i>	Grant this town that houses be built
<i>edan nsi ho.</i>	where houses never stood.
<i>Mma ohene mfom.</i>	May the King not make mistakes.
<i>Mmn no manfo mpa n’aba.</i>	May his people not cut off his branch.

and forced to dance beneath it for the rest of the day. After dark, the victim was taken to the *Mogyawe* (‘The blood has dried’) *gyedua* opposite the palace gate, where his arms were cut off below his elbows and his legs below his knees, after which he was ordered to dance again. Parts of his flesh were sliced off. When he had nearly died, the king gave permission for his head to be cut off (Ramseyer/Ktihne IB75: 108-109; Rattray 1927:87-89; below p. 18).

⁴ Bowdich 1819: 33

⁵ Bowdich 1819: 275

⁶ E.g. Wilks 1975

⁷ Bowdich 1819: 65, 253. I am aware that this is a bit unfair to Bowdich who was more perceptive of the intricacies of Asante politics than is suggested here. Even so, he did write the qualifications cited and contribute by them to the prejudiced views of Europeans.

⁸ Cf. Mol 1975

⁹ *Emic* statements refer to meanings ‘significant, meaningful, accurate, or in some other fashion regarded as appropriate by the actors themselves’ (Harris1968: 571).

This prayer was recorded by Rattray in 1925 in Kokofu, a town and ‘state’ (*óman*) in metropolitan Asante.¹⁰ It was addressed to the eldest and central ‘tree of reception’ of Kokofu by the *barimfo*, caretakers of the royal burial place, on the day after the installation [176] of the new *Kokofuhene* (ruler of Kokofu) Kofi Adu, after they had dressed it with a piece of white calico, had slaughtered a sheep under it and had placed *ótó* (a dish of mashed yams in a palm oil sauce) on its roots. The *gyedua* was asked – as were the other trees of reception of the town, one in each of its quarters, in separate rites – to assist the new ruler lest his people ‘cut off his branch’, i.e. depose him. It was an apposite prayer, for the deposition of rulers was part of traditional constitutional practice.¹¹ It was frequently resorted to in pre-colonial,¹² and even more often in colonial times.¹³

The Akan political system

Akan societies were politically organized either in ‘single states’ (*amantow*) or in confederations of states. Akan states were sovereign political entities, which were often quite small in terms of space and demography, comprising just one town (*kurow*) and its outlying hamlets, which had developed from farm camps. They might also, however, consist of a few, or even a number of, towns and their hamlets. In the first case, its ‘head of state’ (*ómanhene*) was the ruler (*óhene*) of that one town; in the second case, he was the *óhene* of the most important or most ancient of the towns.

Such states might, however, federate *asa nti*, ‘because of war’, i.e. for defensive and/or offensive purposes. The political power of the ‘leader’ (*óhene*) of such a military confederation was usually, and in all cases initially, no more than that of a *primus inter pares*, but might grow into one clearly excelling that of the other heads of state, even to the point of acquiring a certain say in the internal affairs of their states, as was the case in *Asanteman*, the ‘Asante (*asa nti*) nation’. It came into being in the second half of the seventeenth century as the union of ‘the five single states’, *amantoonum*¹⁴ under Kumase and its ruler Oseè Tutu.¹⁵ Having shaken off Dankyira overlordship and crushed its power (ca.1698-1701), Asante took an enormous booty in gold dust from it.¹⁶ The second *Asantehene*, Opoku Ware,¹⁷ established a large empire in which many other Akan states were incorporated as inner provinces and the remaining ones, and a number of non-Akan states, became outer and tributary provinces.¹⁸

Tribute, however, was not [177] the primary aim of Asante policy, but control of trade routes. Both the four northern routes, which linked Akan-land with the Sahel long-distance trade system from Hausa-land and the trading towns on the Niger, and the four southern routes from the forty odd European castles and lodges on the coast were rerouted to converge upon Kumase. All other routes were closed, and passage beyond Kumase forbidden, making Kumase both the point of junction and of separation of the two trade systems. Kumase’s wealth and military power began markedly to exceed that of the other participants in the union in the course of the eighteenth cen-

¹⁰ Rattray 1929: 213

¹¹ Rattray 1929: 81-82

¹² Before 1874 on the coast; before 1902 in Asante.

¹³ Busia 1951:208-212

¹⁴ The concept of ‘the five [original] states’ has a chequered history reflecting shifts in hierarchy and power between the member states of the Asante confederation. Lists which may reflect early Asante history include Asumegya, Dwaben, Mampong, Kumawu and Aduaben, or Bekwai, or Offinsu (Platvoet 1982: 40-41, 234).

¹⁵ He ruled from ca. 1680 to 1712 or 1717

¹⁶ Document 95 in Van Dantzig 1978: 74-75

¹⁷ He ruled from ca. 1720 to 1750

¹⁸ Wilks 1975: 52-64

ture. It caused a continuous shift in the internal balance of power in favour of Kumase. It developed, partly with the aid of clerks from the Muslim trading community in Kumase, an extensive bureaucracy for the administration of the state and the empire and took on, more and more, the traits of a central government.¹⁹ These shifts in the balance of power, however, did not prevent the member states from asserting, time and again, their original and traditional rights of full internal autonomy and voice in external affairs.

Towns in the forest

Bosman, factor in two of the major castles of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) from 1688 to 1702, remarks about Akan towns as he knew them:

Negroes do not heed, when settling or building their villages or houses, whether or not such is done in a pleasant place. At ours, one very much loves – and rightly so – spots with a pretty view or where enjoyable paths for walking are found, or also those [spots] in the neighbourhood of which one sees a delightful waterway which may give some recreation and pleasure. But this rude people settles anywhere indiscriminately and without paying attention, and at times in places which are completely arid and unpleasant. Though there is no lack of pleasant valleys, well planted slopes and beautiful rivers here, those do not render it any diversion or joy.²⁰

Though venting his opinion in the typically conceited way of white prejudice, Bosman is correct when he states that the Akan were not interested in scenery and greenery. Akan habitations were – and are – kept thoroughly clean of all shrubs, weeds and adorning green by the daily sweeping of the living area with tough hand-brooms, not only for fear of the many snakes – half of them poisonous – but also from a deep-seated fear of the forest [178] (*èkwae*) which, in pre-colonial times, stood as a green wall around Akan towns (except for the towns on the coast which lie in a narrow strip of savannah).²¹

That fear was especially of the *kwaeberentuw*, the ‘crowded’, or dense, and ‘damp forest’. They also termed it *kwaebibiri*, the ‘black forest’. Through it ran only the narrow footpaths connecting the towns and hamlets. Very few dared to venture into that virgin forest, except brave hunters, after they had protected themselves with amulets (*asuman*), and herbalists (*adunsinfo*, *aduruyefo*), and priests (*akómfo*), both of which were believed to be familiar with the unseen beings of the forest. In Akan cosmology, the town was the ordered world of men. The dense, damp, black forest, however, was viewed as the unordered world of numerous ‘untamed’ unseen beings, i.e., beings who had not, or not yet, been inserted into human society in the normal, orderly way. And of all unseen beings, in as far as they were never fully integrated into human society. God (*Nyame*), gods (*abosom*), ancestors (*asamanfo*), amulets (*asuman*), ‘medicines’ (*nnuru*, sing. *aduru*), witches (*abonsam*, *abayifo*), imps (*mmoatia*, lit. ‘the small creatures’) and *Sasabonsam*, the monstrous god of the deep forest, were all, each in his or their own way, intrinsically linked to the forest, particularly in their fear, *èhu*, inspiring aspect.

Between these two fundamentally opposed symbolic worlds – the human and familiar one of the town; and the awe-inspiring one of the unseen beings of and in the forest²² – the Akan constructed two transitional areas, by means of which they both stressed the symbolic cosmological

¹⁹ Cf. Platvoet 2012 for critical reviews of Asante bureaucracy thesis, as proposed in Wilks 1975.

²⁰ Bosman 1704: 131; my translation

²¹ McLeod 1981: 35-40; McCaskie 1983: 28

²² On this town-forest opposition, cf. also the analysis of Aouan cosmology by Van den Breemer (1984: 277-293).

opposition between these two worlds, and created a ‘safe’ distance and gradual transition between them. They were:

- = the *kurotia*, the spacious border area around each town or village in which were situated the menstruation huts (*bradaŋ, brafié*), the middens (*sumana*), the village latrines (*mmanŋkyiri, yannee*), the cemeteries (*anisei, asamaŋpow*), and often shrines of gods (*bosombuw, bosomdaŋ*), particularly of ‘junior’ gods, i.e. of those who had recently been ‘born’ among men; and
- = the *èha* or *habaŋ*, those parts of the forest around, or in the near vicinity of the town or hamlet, in which the food plantations were situated.

The symbolic and psychic pressure of the forest upon the town is also reflected in the compact way in which a town was built.²³ In the several quarters of a town, the houses were separated by very narrow lanes and alleys only. They presented longer or shorter rows of [179] ‘closed fronts’, just as the external walls of traditional Akan houses presented four blind outer walls, in one of which was only a small front door – termed *odaŋanopóŋ*, ‘the great front door’; and in another wall was an even smaller backdoor, Akan houses consisting of a square of rooms which opened on to an inner courtyard.

The tree in the street

One feature of Akan traditional towns was, however, a clear exception to this rule of compactness: the *abónteŋ*, the ‘long’ or main ‘street’ which ran in one straight line from the southern to the northern end of most towns. Varying in width from 30 to as much as 300 feet, it clearly separated the eastern and western half of the towns, and in them the quarter or quarters – one for each *abusua*, matrilineage. Akan towns might have any number of quarters, and matrilineages, from two to seven or eight. If a town had more than two matrilineages, the quarters on the same side of the *abónteŋ* were separated by a smaller street (*aboróŋ*), which stood at a right angle to the main street. It was, therefore, not the town which was compactly built, but its quarters, thus expressing in spatial density a major cultural norm of Akan societies, that of the corporate solidarity of the *abusua*, as expressed also in the proverbs

*Abusua te sè nfwireŋ,
egugu akuw-akuw*

The matrilineage is like [some] flowers:
it flowers in bunches

*Abusua yè dòm,
ne wo na òba ne wonnua*

The matrilineage is [like] an army,
and the child of your mother is your [true] sibling²⁴

The *gyennua* or trees of reception were the only plant life therefore the Akan admitted to, and cultivated in, their towns. They were found in the streets separating the solidary lineages. They were usually one per street, though a main street might have a few, but at ample distances from each other. *Gyennua* were shade trees with large heads and usually with dense foliage. They often belonged to the type of shade trees called *banyans* in colonial parlance and which belonged to one of the several (wild) fig varieties²⁵ and to the wider group of strangler epiphytes, growing to a

²³ The compact way in which Akan towns were built also had a military function. It was one of the elements of their superior military organisation, which enabled the immigrating Akan after 1400 to take Southern Ghana from the Guan (Bartle 1980: 7).

²⁴ Rattray 1916: 125; my translation

²⁵ *Ficus benghalensis, ficus religiosa, ficus vogelii*, etc.

height of some 60 feet in the Akan [180] towns.²⁶ Other trees, however, also served as *gyennua*, as is clear from the names of towns such as Kumase ('under the *kum* tree'), Odumase ('under the *odum* tree, *Chlorophora excelsa*) and Besease ('under the cola nut tree', *Sterculia acuminata*), each of which were named after their (central) tree of reception, as were many quarters of town.²⁷

Cool shade and the reception of strangers

The term *gyedua* itself is proof that the Akan considered the reception of strangers a major function of this tree. Their closed houses and compact quarters show that they highly valued the privacy of household and matrigroups. 'Public' life was conducted in the streets and especially under and around the tree of reception.²⁸ Its cool shade symbolised relationships that were cool (*adwo*), or had 'cooled down' (*adwo*) and were therefore harmonious and quiet. It symbolized the relaxed relationships between two quarters meeting under the *gyedua* in the street separating their quarters, and those between the several matrilineages of the town, when they met under the central tree of reception of the town in the main street before the *ahemfie*, the residence of the ruler. It also symbolized the relationship offered to the strangers who were received under it by the ruler or the head of a matrigroup (*abusuapanyin*). A town, or a quarter, which was internally at peace, and undivided, and therefore militarily strong, offered the cool relationships of peace to those it received in the cool shade of its *gyedua*, if they had come with intentions of peace.

Some grand examples of such receptions are on record, such as that under the *kum* tree on *Adwabirem*, the large market and assembly place of Kumase, that was accorded to the Dutch envoy Willem Huydecoper on Wednesday 22 May 1816. Relationships with the Dutch were usually cordial, and that may have been the reason why Huydecoper was received on a Wednesday (*Wukuda*).²⁹ Relations, however, had been poor and hostile with the British. British envoys were received on Mondays, *Dwoda*, 'day of coolness/tranquillity/peace': T.E. Bowdich on 19 May 1817; and J. Dupuis on 28 February 1819. Several other first official receptions were on a Monday, like that of the Wesleyan missionary T.B. Freeman on 1 April 1839.

Some 30,000 to 50,000 people crowded onto *Adwabirem* and [181] adjacent streets during these four receptions. This, and the display of political unity, military power and wealth in gold deeply impressed these European visitors, as is apparent from their accounts.³⁰ Political unity was shown in the scores of *mmamkyinii*, the wide, colourful state umbrellas, in the cool shade of which sat the several Asante heads of state and other rulers with their retinues. Military power was demonstrated in the war trophies displayed, such as the skulls and jawbones of rulers and

²⁶ Lawson & Enti 1972: 16; Turner 1971: 30 and cover; Wilks 1975: Plate I; McLeod 1981: 28, 29, 37

²⁷ E.g. the seven wards of Wenchi were: *Aklease*, 'under the cashewnut tree'; *Ababaase*, 'under the roofing-cane tree'; *Sisiriase*, 'under the tulip tree'; *Nyase*, 'under the silk-cotton tree'; *Abgase*, 'under the oil-palm'; *Nkwadunse*, 'under the banana tree'; and *Sòfoase*, 'under the *Sòfo* tree' (Busia 1951/1968: 3). For other instances in Kibi, Akropong and Kumase, cf Christaller 1933: 309, 324, 387; Frimpong 1945: 82; Brokensha 1972: 250; Rattray 1927: 112, 113, 146; Mensah 1966: 29 and 'Coomasie Survey Plan 1910, showing old native districts'; Wilks 1975:379-381; Lewin 1978: 19).

²⁸ In major Asante towns, public affairs were also dealt with in the *adampan*, the ornamented 'empty rooms' which officers of the central administration built against the front side of their houses for conducting the business of their clients in them; and in some of the courts in the residences of the rulers which were set apart for court cases and/or the deliberations of political councils (Bowdich 1819/1966: 305, 308, plate vIII; Dupuis 1824/1966: 83, frontispiece; Wilks 1975: 377-279, plates IX-XII, XV).

²⁹ Wednesday 22 May 1816 was likely a *kuruwukuo*, 'Town Wednesday', on which the Asantehene celebrated the *wukudae*, the 'Wednesday *adae* rites' in honour of his deceased predecessors/royal ancestors, in the morning, and sat under the *kum* tree on *Adwabirem* in the afternoon dispensing drinks to his retinue and visitors.

³⁰ Huydecoper 1816-17/1962: 15-17; Bowdich 1819/1966: 31-41; Dupuis 1824/1966: 70-83; Freeman 1844: 46-51

generals of vanquished nations tied to war drums, and in the great amount of gunpowder fired from thousands of muskets. There was a dazzling display of gold in several forms: the many heavy ornaments of pure and solid gold worn by the rulers; the regalia, either of solid gold or of carved wood overlaid with gold leaf, carried by court officers and pages; and the many gifts fashioned in precious metal which the *Asantehene* (and his predecessors) had received from other nations, African and European, which were carried for display by the female and male court attendants of the *Asantehene*.

The ceremony of reception was in two parts. In the first, the envoy greeted one by one all the major dignitaries of Asante seated with their retinues under their large state umbrellas in a horse-shoe formation. He began at its left hand end and proceeded towards its centre where the *Asantehene* and his officials were, and continued till its right hand end. In major receptions this greeting took two or more hours. Then the envoy and his suite were conducted to the (or a) *gyedua*, tree of reception, and were seated in its shade upon a platform (*sumpi*, *sumpene*) and upon Akan stools (*ykongua*). The envoy was in this way given a royal reception and accorded temporarily a (ceremonial) royal status, as *gyedua*, platform and Akan stool were all three intimately associated with the 'royal' office of a ruler. The envoy having been seated there, all the Akan rulers came in their turn to greet and welcome him, which ceremony took even more hours than the first part. Among the Dutch, English and missionary envoys to Asante in the early 19th century Willem Huydecoper was, perhaps, best qualified by virtue of his having been born and bred in Elmina,³¹ to understand the intentions and meanings expressed in such a reception. His description merits to be quoted extensively:

[182]

At two o'clock, we were summoned in the name of His Majesty [the *Asantehene*] by four other sword-bearers to make our entry into the Main Square in a slow and solemn manner. [...] What an honour, however, what exclamations! Greater honour could not have been paid to a king than was paid to me today! More than 50,000 people were gathered there, his majesty having sent for all his small kings from all their villages for this day, all of them very beautifully adorned with gold, and each of them having more than 50 soldiers behind them. Golden swords, flutes, horns &C-a, and all that one can think of, had been brought out. I counted 54 big umbrellas in the Market Place, not counting the smaller ones.

When I saw this, I was deeply touched in my spirit by the courtesy of his majesty. I left my hammock and proceeded on foot, shaking hands from one person to the next till I came to his majesty before whom I made three bows and whose hand I shook thrice without speaking a word. I shook hands with at least two hundred people. All the while, there was much music and drumming on all sides. Yet, an exact order reigned among all the troupes.

When I had finished this [greeting], his majesty had me conducted to a big tree [and] up onto a mountain [platform, JP], upon which I in my turn had to take a seat in order to receive the counter compliments from his majesty and the state councillors, all the generals, captains &C-a. There and then I saw [before me] all the magnificence of a king of such majesty as one may also see in Europe. I was seated there upon a mountain, upon a big Negro stool with my flag planted in front of me, and all my men seated behind me. Then each king came in turn to me with much music and a great number of soldiers, seated in a big palanquin under a great umbrella and paid their [sic] compliments to me. They all remained seated in their palanquins till some 10 paces away from me. Then they de-

³¹ He was the son of an Elmina mother and J.P.T. Huydecoper, Director and Governor-General in Elmina Castle from 22 March 1758 to 5 October 1760 and again from 10 September 1764 till his death at Elmina on 11 July 1767. Being a mulatto, Willem Huydecoper was a *Vrijburgher*, 'Free[born] Citizen', of Elmina. As such he was subject to Dutch law (of the Castle) and not to the traditional law (of Elmina town) (Feinberg 1969: 122; 225).

scended with the greatest respect and came to me on foot and shook hands with me, some of them twice, others three times, in a most friendly manner. This lasted from 3 to 6 o'clock when His Majesty arrived also in all his glory, descending from his palanquin at some distance in magnificence and in all splendour, followed by several women and men with swords, golden Punch bowls, ewers made of gold and silver, &C-a, approached me and shook my hands three times, and looked at me for a while, for at least five minutes, and said to me, welcome, welcome, welcome, as often as three times. He smiled very kindly at me and said, you are beautiful, I love you very much. Having said this, he said again, welcome, and descended speedily, at a trot, from the mountain, followed by all his suite. After him, at least another ten [dignitaries] came under [their] big umbrellas in order to greet me, and it was quite [some time] past seven o'clock in the evening before it had all come to an end.³²

Peace and war

Such receptions of ambassadors did not, however, result immediately and automatically in treaties of peace, or of alliance, or of goodwill and commerce. The Asante took much time for deliberation, negotiation, and promulgation of the agreement concluded. Huydecoper was kept in Kumase for a full year. Bowdich, having concluded a treaty on Sunday 7 September 1817, tried to enforce his departure on 15 September. As a result, Osei Bonsu reluctantly [183] allowed him to leave on 22 September. Only Dupuis stayed less than a month in Kumase. The Asante conducted their negotiations with great political shrewdness and at times demanded redress of their political grievances in quite an uncompromising manner.

Being a symbol of political unity and therefore also of military strength, the Akan *gyedua* featured not only in the political processes of concluding peace, but also in those of waging war. Whenever an Akan town was taken by an Akan army, it was put on fire only after all its *gyennua*, trees of reception, had been cut down.³³ Before going to war, the ruler of a town might visit the central *gyedua* of his town and swear to it that he would not take to flight nor allow the enemy to capture the town and cut down its *gyennua*. A victory won was at times attributed to (spiritual) assistance rendered by the *gyedua*. It might be honoured upon the return of the victorious army by the burial of the skull of a defeated general at the foot of the central tree of reception.³⁴

Conditional power

The expression and manipulation of external political relationships was, however, not the foremost function of the tree of reception. It was even more important in the game of political power, at times subtle, at times rude, within Akan traditional towns, states or federations. Western observers found it very difficult, if not impossible, to understand that game. In their eyes, the Akan traditional political system contained a number of contradictions. It seemed both republican and monarchical, despotic as well as constitutional, democratic and oligarchic. Akan towns, states and federations were ruled by kings who were 'sacred' and inviolable, but who might also be deposed.³⁵

An Akan ruler did indeed possess much political power. That power had, however, only been entrusted to him after he had been selected from a small number of competitors – with the correct matrilineal qualifications – for his abilities, and because of the support he enjoyed, and on the express condition that he rule in constant consultation with his 'elders' (*mpanyimfo*) who were his

³² Huydecoper 1916/17: I37-738 (my translation)

³³ Rattray 1929: 203, 213-214n1, fig. 39; Claridge 1915/1964; II: 305; Lewin 1978: 117

³⁴ Rattray 1929: 213-214n1; Christensen 1954: 113

³⁵ Cruickshank 1853/1966, I: 233; Sarbah 1906/1968: 25-26; Rattray 1929: 82-83, 87; Wilks 1975: 387 ff.

[184] councillors as well as the heads and representatives of the matrilineages and the quarters of the town. This implied that he could stay in office as long as he enjoyed a reasonably wide support. The major elements of the Akan traditional political system were, therefore, three:

- = at each of the four levels of political organization (quarter, town, state, and federation of states) headship or rulership was 'owned' by a matrilineage, which, on the three higher levels, was termed the 'royal' or 'free-born' matri-group (*adehyea abusua*). It 'possessed' the town, state, or federation because it had, or was believed to have, founded it, or because of some other title;
- = its ruler was selected from a limited number of male members of the *adehyea abusua* on three grounds: genealogical position, ability, and political support;
- = the latter condition implied that a candidate could be not elected unless he was acceptable to (a majority of) the matrilineages, towns or states which happened to be the political entities composing the 'federation' (town, state, or federation of states) over which he was to rule. Generally speaking, a new ruler was acceptable only if he promised to respect the traditional autonomy of the federating matrilineages, towns or states and rule the federation by consultation.

The rights of the *adehyea abusua* in the process of the selection of a new ruler were, therefore, restricted to that of proposing a candidate for the office through the *ohemmaa*, ('female ruler', 'queen-mother').³⁶ The 'people' (*oman*), i.e. the whole of the political community or 'nation' as represented especially by *ɲkwaŋkwa* or *mmerante*, the 'young men' who had not been elected to a public office but formed the military might of that town or state, had the right to accept or reject the candidate proposed, and bring him, or bring him not, to power. This constitutional right was expressed in the maxim:

Ódehye nsi hene The free-born/royal does not install the king³⁷

Moreover, after a new leader had been accepted but before he was installed, the traditional conditions upon which power was entrusted to him were recited to him and he was expressly asked to [185] state whether he accepted these limitations of his power. The *okyame*, 'court-speaker', recited to him a list of political prohibitions, such as:

<i>yempe ayamonyo</i>	we do not allow embezzlement
<i>yempe asodine</i>	we do not allow deaf ears
<i>yempe kwaseabuo</i>	we do not allow abusive language
<i>yempe atim'sem</i>	we do not allow solitary decisions
<i>yempe Kumasem'</i>	we do not allow the Kumase way [of rule]

³⁶ Supreme political positions were virtually always occupied by males in this matrilineal society. Women might, however, have considerable political power, and theoretically even have ultimate power. The male ruler was on each of the four levels of Akan political structure flanked by a female counter-part, also chosen from his own matrilineage. A ward was ruled by the *abusuapanyiyi*, elder of the matrilineage, and the *oba panyiyi*, 'eldest woman'. A town was governed by the *ohene*, 'leader', ruler, chief, and the *ohemmaa*, 'female leader'; a state (*oman*) by the *omahene*, 'head of state' and *omahemmaa*; and the Asante confederation by the *Asantehene* and the *Asantehemmaa*. A ruler always addresses his female counterpart as 'my mother', which she often actually was, though she might also be his (classificatory or biological) sister. She had her own 'stool', her own ancestral black stools (of her predecessors in this office) and stool rites, and a seat in the council of the town, state or confederation. Her effective political power was usually, however, not great.

³⁷ For this maxim and the injunctions, see Rattray 1929: 82, 85, 143, 165, 191, 253; Sarbah 1906/1968: 20-21, 43; Field 1948: 22-25, 26, 33-34; Busia 1951/1968: 11; Christensen 1954: 117-120; Warren/Brempong L971, I: 116-123; Wilks 1975: 512, 543-548; Platvoet 1982: 107-108; Roberts 1983: 29.

<i>yempe ebe ba se,</i>	we do not allow to be told [time and again]:
<i>'kwan nni ho, kwan nni ho'</i>	'There is no time now, there is no time now'
<i>yempe popo</i>	we do not allow violence

To which were added political commands such as 'cause your ears to hear', 'be humble', and 'rule us gently, and we will serve you gently'. To each of these rules of conduct the ruler-elect was to answer *mate*, 'I have heard [and understood]', or *me pene so*, 'I agree', and thus make public his intention not to rule his people in the autocratic, bureaucratic and at times violent ways which had increasingly become the mode of government at Kumase in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, but in the traditional way of constant consultation with the *mpanyimfo*, elders, and of respect for the autonomy of the wards, or towns, or states which they represented.

The gyedua and the political community

The tree of reception was a major symbol of political harmony between an Akan ruler and his political community, whether town, state or confederation of states. Expressing a political ideal and norm: the subtle balance of power which reconciled the demands of autonomy ad intra and unity ad extra, it could be used both to evoke, express, promote and legitimate docility towards a 'good' ruler, and to engender resistance to a 'deaf one who took all decisions in his own head'. The admonition by this 'somewhat wild and turbulent populace'³⁸ to 'rule gently' was also the scarcely veiled threat that a harsh ruler would not be tolerated but would be removed.

The tree of reception was in the first place a symbol of unity, especially of smaller residential units, such as hamlets (*ɲkuraa*) and [186] the wards (*aboroŋ*) of towns. It was believed to unify those living in them in an invisible way, as is stated in the proverbs

<i>Gyedua si abontenɲ</i>	The tree of reception stands in the main street,
<i>ne hi wo fie</i>	but its roots ('extremities') are in the house

<i>Dua si akuraa a,</i>	If a tree stands in a hamlet,
<i>ne ntim wo wo fie</i>	its roots reach into your home ³⁹

The unifying function of the tree of reception was particularly well developed in the Fante towns on the coast. Harbouring groups of heterogenous origins, Fante towns were marked by a strongly developed rivalry between their wards and an equally strong sense of solidarity of the quarters which was symbolically expressed in the *dua ase* ('under the tree'), as the *gyedua* was termed there. The people of a ward gathered 'under the tree' and around it for ritual and social meetings, but also to defend the tree and the ward against attacks by weapons, jeering songs, humiliating remarks or the sacrilegious violation of the tree by the tearing off of a branch or a leaf. The Fante *dua ase* was, therefore, surrounded by a fence or wall and sometimes termed *posubanɲ*, a fortified post. That term was, however, more properly applied to a monument in the near vicinity of the *dua ase*, which expressed the military power of the ward and its *asafo etsikuw*, 'war company', in the shape of a European castle, man of war, with lions, leopards and cannons (and recently aeroplanes). The third element in this symbolic complex of *dua ase* and *posubanɲ* was the *esiw*, a one

³⁸ Rattray 1929: 85

³⁹ Twi texts in Rattray 1916: 182; my translations. Another proverb appositely expresses the reverse: *ómanɲ rebebo a, efi afiemu*, 'if a state falls apart, the cause is in the houses' (Rattray 1916: 125).

foot high cone of clay under the *dua ase*, in which the god of the war company of the ward was believed to reside and which served as its altar.⁴⁰

Rivalry between wards was not a marked trait of most other Akan towns. The trees of reception, and especially the central *gyedua* in the main street in front of the *ahemfie*, the residence of the ruler, were believed to usually vouchsafe unity and harmony between the ruler and his people, and internal peace, as was stated by Kwame Afram, *Kumawuhene*, in 1925:⁴¹

A *gyadua* (sic!) in peace [i.e. which is unruffled] has a *sunsum* (spirit), which keeps the town together. Young men sit under its shade and serve the Chief, and *Anansesem* (spider stories) are related under it.

[187] However, though primarily expressing the unity of a town, state, or confederation, it also symbolized the tensions in that unity, especially those between the ruler and the ‘young men’ (as the representatives of the people at large). The unity and the tensions were both expressed in the rites, which were performed by a new ruler on the day after his installation, when he visited all the quarters of his town in order to thank each of his elders for his election and to address all the *gyennua* of the town, which had already been clothed in a new piece of white calico. Pouring a libation of palm wine under each of the trees, he informed it of his election and prayed to it:

<i>Me na nne ye de me asi akonnuaso,</i>	Today they have put me on the stool,
<i>me sere wo akyigyina pa,</i>	I pray you to protect me well,
<i>me sere wo 'kwahan tenten,</i>	I pray you for a long stretch of life,
<i>me sere wo animonyam,</i>	I pray you for fame,
<i>emma me manfo empa</i>	Do not permit that my people cut off
<i>me aba,</i>	my branch,
<i>ma oman yi nye yiye.</i>	Grant that this nation may prosper. ⁴²

The central element in this prayer (spoken at Asumegya) is, as it was in the one recited at Kokofu cited above,⁴³ the request that the tree of reception prevent the deposition of the new ruler. It implicitly states the right of the people to depose a ruler who transgresses the limits imposed upon his power, and it refers obliquely to the frequent use which Akan peoples made of it. However, deposition is referred to here as the ‘cutting off of my branch’, which is one of the several ways in which a close symbolic association of the ruler and the ‘tree of reception’, as a politico-religious institution, is expressed. These other symbolic associations and ritual practices must be explored first.

The gyedua and the ruler

The close symbolic association, and even identification, of the tree of reception and the ruler may be shown in several ways. First of all, whenever a new *gyedua* was to be planted – e.g. because a new ward was to be built, or a town was to be moved, or a defeated community returned from exile to a town in which the enemy had cut [188] down all the *gyennua*, or because a god had ‘ordered’ its planting –, it was the privilege of the ruler to plant it. His *okyame*, court-speaker, did

⁴⁰ On the heterogeneity and strife in Fante towns, cf Christensen 1954: 123; Feinberg 1969: 81, 104, 106, 113, 120-124, 141ff., 167-174; Ross 1979:3; Gocking 1981: 46-58. On the *dua ase* complex, cf Ffoulkes 1907-1908: 269-273; Christensen 1954: 112-113, 123-126; Cole & Ross 1977: 186-198 and figs. 363-380.

⁴¹ Rattray 1929: 213-214n1

⁴² Rattray 1929: 144; my translation

⁴³ On p. 175, footnote 10

so in his name. When the hole in which it was to be planted had been dug, the speaker poured some gold dust into it, put the sapling upon it and said:

<i>wo gyadua, yi ye dua wo</i>	Thou, reception tree, we plant you here
<i>ama nnipa ewo ha</i>	in order that the people who live here
<i>atenase wo ase;</i>	may [come and] sit under you;
<i>mma obiara nuu;</i>	let no one die [here];
<i>ma kuro yi nyina.</i>	Cause this town to stand firm. ⁴⁴

If at all possible, each ruler should plant at least one *gyedua* during his reign in order that he might be remembered by that tree of reception. After the death of a ruler, the association between him and his memorial tree could be so intimate that people might believe him to reside there and would address and venerate him at that tree.⁴⁵

Evidence of the close association of the ruler and the tree of reception, particularly the central *gyedua*, may also be found in the public receptions on *Adae*-days, after the ruler had performed the rites of feeding his predecessors in this office in the ‘room of the blackened stools’ (*apuyyua-dan*), especially the one on *Kurukwasi*, ‘Town-Sunday’, which occurred once in each Akan ‘month’ of 42 days (*adaduanan*).⁴⁶ Sitting on the platform (*sumpi*, *sumpene*, or *èsè*) under the central *gyedua*, the ruler received the oaths of fealty of the subordinate rulers, captains and courtiers, and the homage and votes of thanks of his people and handed out palm wine to them. At other times, palm wine parties were held around the *gyedua*, the ruler being seated upon the platform, which was then termed his *sadwa*, his ‘drinking seat’. In Kumase, palm wine was frequently distributed, the *Asantehene* sitting upon the *sumpene keseè* (‘the great platform’) under the Kum-tree in the main assembly place (*Adwabirem*) – the ‘mountain’ upon which Huydecoper had sat feeling like a king – on festive occasions. On more sombre occasions such as funerals and ritual executions he sat upon *sumpene kuma* (‘the smaller platform’) under the *gyedua* universally known as *Mogyawe* (‘[where] the blood has dried’), opposite the entrance of the *ahemfie*, the royal residence.

[189] The close association of the ruler and the tree of reception is also apparent in the idea and the practice that the ruler, whenever he appeared in public, should always sit, or walk, in the cool shade of the *gyedua*. The very wide (up to 30 feet) state umbrella, therefore, served as the portable *gyedua* of a ruler, which its bearer moreover made to ‘dance’ and rotate in order to effect greater coolness for the ruler and his retinue during the procession through the town. A second meaning of *gyedua* was, therefore, the carrying-pole of the state umbrella (*bamkyiniè*), and a third the state umbrella itself. Umbrella and *gyedua* were also termed *Kataman* and *Mankata*, ‘[That which] covers the nation [with its shade]’ and causes it to be cool and in peace and harmony, as expressed in the saying:

⁴⁴ Twi text in Rattray 1929: 213-214n1; my translation

⁴⁵ Rattray 1929: 213-114 note I; Meyerowitz 1951: 186-187. Freeman (1844/1968: 58) was shown a group of thirteen ‘Physic-nut trees’ between Kumase and Bantama which had been planted, he was told, as memorials for deceased Asante kings.

⁴⁶ On the *Adae* rites, cf. Rattray 1923: 92 ff., 114 ff.; 1929: 109-110n2; Fortes 1950: 257-257; Busia 1951/1968: 27-29; Sarpong 1971: 35-75. On the Akan calendar, cf. Bartle 1978. On the receptions and parties under the *gyemua*, cf. Bowdich 1819/1966: 323; Freeman 1844/1968: 129-130, 136, 159; Rattray 1923: 108-112; Warren/Brempong 1971, I: 120; Wilks 1975: 383-386. Cf. also footnote 29 on the *wukadae*, the smaller *adae* rites that were celebrated also once a ‘month’.

Maṅkata ama yèṅ asom' adwo yèṅ
na yèṅ ho atò yèṅ

If 'Cover of the Nation' has given us tranquility
then we are happy⁴⁷

The most intimate association of ruler and *gyedua* was, however, at the death of either. When a *gyedua* had been blown over by a rainstorm or had lost a major branch, the ruler had it covered with white calico, killed a sheep for it, drew a line of red clay (*ntwuma*) on his forehead as a sign of mourning and had the drummers beat out the funeral lament *damirifua*, 'condolences'. He might also order that apotropaic rites be performed. It was forbidden to use its wood as firewood. Conversely, the standard formula of announcing the death of a ruler was

dupòṅ kèse atutu the great [and] mighty tree has fallen⁴⁸

It was more dramatically announced, however, by the *wirempefo*⁴⁹ running wildly into the streets and attacking the *gyennua* from which they struck off leaves and twigs with sticks. This ritual violation of the trees of reception might be repeated at the time of the final funerary rites for the ruler.⁵⁰

The close association of ruler and *gyedua* was continued in the royal cemeteries (*banem'*, *barrem'*), in which, or near which, a tree of reception was often planted, such as those on the *Akyeremade Barim* and the *Ahemaho* cemeteries in Kumase, in front of the mausoleum [190] of the kings of Asante at Bantama, and in Kaamu near Wenkyi. One rite in the annual Old Year-New Year celebrations in the months August to December required the ruler (*óhene*) and *óhemmaa* ('queen-mother') to proceed to the cemeteries of their predecessors and bring them a meal of the new yams which they deposited under the *gyedua* of the cemetery. During these celebrations, termed *Odwira*, 'Purification', in Asante, the *Asantehene* also had a number of *ḡkyere* (people condemned to death by ritual execution) slain under the *gyedua* in front of the royal mausoleum at Bantama in order to increase the retinue of his predecessors in the land of the dead.⁵¹

The gyedua, the ruler and the nation

The request of a new ruler to the *gyedua* not to permit 'my people to cut off my branch' must be understood in the terms of this identification of the ruler and the tree of reception. In this complex of meanings, any attack upon, and violation of, a *gyedua* – other than the ritual one by the *wirempefo* in the frenzy of mourning after the death of a ruler⁵² – was tantamount to an attack upon, a cursing of,⁵³ and an act of insurgence against the ruler.⁵⁴ Rebellion against a ruler was often

⁴⁷ Christaller 1933: 464, my translation

⁴⁸ Rattray 1927: 107n1

⁴⁹ The *wirempefo* were in office only in the liminal period between the death of a ruler and the installation of his successor. It was their task to remove the 'blackened stools' of former rulers from the *apuyḡuadanḡ* ('room of the black stools') in the royal residence to a hut in the forest (Christaller 1933: 573; Rattray 1927:178-181; 1929: 86, *passim*).

⁵⁰ Rattray 1927: 178-181; 1929: 213-214n1; Warren & Brempong 1971, I: 96

⁵¹ Freeman 1844/1968: 57; Rattray 1927: 112-113, 139-143, 146, frontispiece, figs. 59-60; Busia 1951/1968: 32-33; Platvoet 1982: 84-120.

⁵² On this mourning-frenzy, cf. Rattray 1927: 109-110.

⁵³ Christaller 1933: 158

⁵⁴ An incident recorded by the Wesleyan missionary Thomas B. Freeman (1844/1968: 57-58) shows how watchful Asante were about their *gyennua*. On visiting the mausoleum at Bantama in the afternoon of Saturday 6 April 1842, Freeman, trained at Kew Gardens as a botanist, noticed: 'Several splendid Banyan-trees are luxuriating in the centre of the main street; on one of which I saw a pretty variety of *Epiphytical Orchidae*, in full bloom. [...] As we were proceeding homewards, two or three men, belonging to the Chief, came running after us. [...] They

proclaimed by the ‘young men’ striking off leaves and twigs from the (central) *gyedua*, thus stating their intention to depose him, with, or at times without, the due processes of law.⁵⁵ The causes were usually the widespread feeling that this ruler did not listen well and did not rule *in concilio*. Such an attack upon the *gyedua* and the king was possible only if it expressed a widespread feeling. For, as long as a ruler enjoyed a wide support, he had, within the limits set by the constitution, great power and could easily dispose of a small group of insurgents. He was then deemed to enjoy the special protection from *Nyame* (God), as is stated in the saying

Sraman [nsi] gyedua Lightning [does not strike] the *gyedua*⁵⁶

As long as a ruler occupied the stool of his predecessors legitimately because of a wide support, he sat upon it as their representative. Any attack upon him was then taken to be an attack upon them, his ancestors, and had to be expiated, often by the lives of the insurgents.⁵⁷

[191] *The tree of reception itself*

The rites discussed show that the Akan addressed the tree of reception, clothed it, fed it, asked for protection from it and expected it to further their interests. These several modes of communication might be combined, or used singly, as in the instance of a little boy who continued to wet his sleeping mat and was sent by his father to the *gyedua* of the ward in order to promise the tree:

Nana Gyedua, me ka wo nan Grandfather Reception Tree, I swear
se menyonso anadwo bio I will not wet [my sleeping mat] again tonight⁵⁸

Communication was often restricted to clothing the tree in pieces of white calico, which seems to be the most typical Akan mode of gift-giving to trees, e.g. in rites of reconciliation.⁵⁹ That standard veneration included a libation and a libation prayer when the tree had to be informed of something or when some request was to be made to it, in which case the rite was at times expanded with a dish of cooked food. The sacrifice of a sheep or a bull to it seems to have been exceptional.⁶⁰

It may be concluded from these modes of religious behaviour of Akan believers that they conceived the tree of reception to be a being to whom words and gifts could be addressed, i.e. a ‘person’ with whom they could communicate by sending messages to it and from whom they believed they could and did receive answers to their messages to them. The *gyedua* was part of their

had been watching to see if we gathered anything from the Banyan-trees as we passed under them; and, on seeing my interpreter (who was riding in a palanquin) raise his hand to protect his face from the leaves, &c., they thought he had plucked some by my direction, and that I intended to make a medicine from them, for the purpose of poisoning the King. They seemed fully satisfied, however, from an explanation on the part of my attendant, that they were under a mistake’.

⁵⁵ Sarbah 1906/1968: 43-44; Rattray 1929: 83-85, 145-146, 168, 215-216, 255. It was constitutional praxis to forgive a ruler a first, and sometimes even a second offence.

⁵⁶ Wilks 1975: (495-)497

⁵⁷ Rattray 1929: 144. The great power of a king, as long as he is acceptable to his people, is expressed in the following proverbs (Rattray 1916: 114, 117, 125; my translations): *óhene bedi wo kasa a, efi mamfo*, ‘if the ruler imposes a fine upon you, the origin is the people’; *ómaɲ kum wo a, na óhene kum wo*, ‘if the people [want to] kill you, then the ruler kills you’; *ade a óhene pè, na wayè ma no*, ‘whatever the ruler wants is done for him’.

⁵⁸ Twi text in Rattray 1929: 12; my translation

⁵⁹ Platvoet 1982: 94, 110

⁶⁰ Rattray 1927: 4n2; 1929: 144, 213, 213-214n1, 222, 304n3. The author witnessed the sacrifice of a bull to the central *dua ase* of Cape Coast by the *Oguahene* (Chief of Cape Coast) on Friday 3 September 1976.

social and socio-religious ‘world, which consisted of both their fellow-believers and co-citizens and all ‘unseen’ (or meta-empirical) beings⁶¹ postulated for them by their religion: God, gods, ancestors, souls (human, animal and vegetable), amulets, medicines and other man-made ‘things’ (drums, stools, certain instruments), as well as forest imps, wandering ghosts, and witches. Communication with them was after patterns, institutionalized for the believers by their religion as sets of reciprocal relationships between the believer or believers and one, some or all of these beings. As these sets of relationships and patterns of communicative behaviour were, in term of morphology, identical or similar to the sets of relationships and patterns of social communication between men (i.e. the Akan as citizens), the two groups of sets of relationships, the religious ones and the social [192] ones, formed one social ‘world’, one ‘society’, in the minds of the believers of Akan traditional religion.

The world(s) of the numerous unseen beings postulated by Akan religion was, however, part of that of the believers only in as far as they, in the eyes of the believers, had been ‘inserted’ properly into the human world by reciprocal relationships being established between them and particular unseen beings. As has been shown above, it was a prominent belief in Akan religion, that major parts of the worlds of unseen beings were undomesticated and fearful, i.e. not, or not yet, linked to human society by sets of reciprocal relationships governing the behaviour of believers towards the unseen beings and those that were believed to govern the behaviour of those beings towards men. The unseen world(s) as wild and awe-inspiring was the (unseen) world of the forest. The *gyedua* represents one of the several ways – be it a paradigmatic one – of the insertion of that unknown and fearful world into that of humans. The *gyedua* is that *pars pro toto*, the forest in a single tree, which men (Akan believers) have cultivated in their towns. It is a *trait d’union* between the world of men and the separate world(s) of the unseen beings of the forest, and an articulation of the link(s) between these, to the Akan, distinct worlds. For however fearful that untamed world of the forest is, man cannot live without it. No Akan town could be without its *gyedua* in pre-colonial times. The central ritual element of the foundation of a new Akan town or ward was the planting of its *gyedua*.⁶² It symbolized the incorporation of some part of that fearful world into that of men by the establishment of sets of reciprocal relations with some of its unseen beings.

Akan representations about the *gyedua* as a meta-empirical being are vague and varied. They have never been stated by Akan believers, except as far as mentioned below, and must be deduced from their ritual behaviour towards it. The nucleus of their belief in respect of the tree of reception is that it, like any other tree, possesses a *sunsum* or ‘soul’, and therefore also a certain *tumi*, (spiritual) ‘power’ which it could use in a beneficent or harmful way. The *Kumawuhene* Kwame Afram, who was the most important informer of Rattray in this matter,⁶³ referred to the beneficent effects of an unruffled tree of reception when he stated that ‘a *gyadua* (sic!) in peace has a *sunsum* which keeps the town together; [the] young men sit under its shade and serve the Chief’. This *sunsum* seems to be the invariable meta-empirical core representation which caused the tree of reception to [193] be a being which could be addressed as *Nana Gyedua*, ‘Grandfather Tree of Reception’. This core was, however, expanded in various ways.

⁶¹ ‘Meta-empirical’ refers to those beings postulated by belief, the existence and operation of which cannot be proved or disproved conclusively by the methods of empirical science. ‘Unseen’ is a short-hand term for ‘meta-empirical’.

⁶² Van den Breemen 1984: 292-293

⁶³ Rattray 1929: 213-214nl, 222, 304, fig. 43

One expansion was the burial of a powerful *suman* (amulet) under the *gyedua* when it was planted. A priest possessed by his god might order the ruler to do so in order to achieve a stronger protection of the town, the amulet being named *Ómanɲyina*, ‘Protection of the nation’.⁶⁴ Another expansion was the association of the *gyedua* with a god. Either a god might reside in a tree of reception, as did the god Mpeni in the *gyedua Mpeni* in Akropong,⁶⁵ or the tree itself might be considered a god, as were all *nnua ase* in Fante towns, who were moreover intimately associated with the gods of the war-companies of the town quarters believed to reside in the little cone of clay under each *dua ase*.

A different expansion was the association of a tree of reception with certain deceased persons: with the ruler who had planted it and was believed to reside in it; with the leader of a war company who had been very brave and was buried under it; or with important slain enemies whose skull had been buried beneath it.⁶⁶ Lastly, the platform under the tree of reception upon which the ruler sat might also be the residence of one or more additional unseen beings. *Ókómfo* Anokye, the famous co-founder of the Asante confederation, is said to have buried a python (*enini*) in the ‘great platform’ (*sumpene kesè*) under the central *gyedua* of Kumase, the *kum[nini]* or ‘python-killer’.

Centralistic and autonomistic uses of the gyedua

The tree of reception was a religious institution for the regulation of both external and internal political relations after the Akan ideal of ‘cool’-ness, peace and harmony, i.e. of relations in which the heat and anger of strife and disagreement had ‘cooled down’ (*dwo*) and been removed. In the internal political relationships, cool relationships were conditioned by, and implied, the respect for the autonomy of polities (wards, towns, states) that had federated.

As has been shown above the *gyedua* was a symbol expressing, and was believed to promote, the corporate unity of the town quarter and the matrilineage ‘owning’ it. Local matrilineages and their wards were the well-defined basic political and military segments of Akan towns and states, which cultivated their unity [194] and solidarity, as the following Twi proverbs show:

<i>Abusua baako nipa koro</i>	One [a] matrigroup [is/acts as] one person
<i>Abusua yè dóm, na wo na óba ne wo nua</i>	A matrilineage is like an army, and [it is] your mother’s child [which is] your [true] sibling
<i>Abusua te sè nfwiren, egugu akuw-akuw</i>	A matrilineage is like [some] flowers, it flowers in bunches ⁶⁷

In most Akan towns, however, the *gyedua* was not situated in the centre of the ward (*aboroŋ*), but in the street (also *aboroŋ*) separating two wards. It was their half-way meeting point, and the institution which expressed and promoted their unity, the roots (‘extremities’) of the *gyedua* extending, it was thought, invisibly under the houses on both sides of the street and binding them together with invisible bonds. As a visible and mystical *trait d’union*, it expressed the desired ‘unity at a distance’ of matrilineages eager to safeguard their autonomy.

⁶⁴ Meyerowitz 1951: 72

⁶⁵ Christaller 1933: 387

⁶⁶ Rattray 1929: 213-214n1; Christensen 1954: 113

⁶⁷ Twi texts in Fortes 1950: 257; Rattray 1916 125; my translations

In a similar way, the tree of reception functioned as a regulating mechanism at each of the higher levels of the Akan traditional political system: by means of it, a minimum of unity was established, maintained, or restored between federating polities intent upon maintaining a maximum of autonomy. The political consensus about the mode and measure of federative unity was expressed and validated in the rites and ceremonies at the central tree of reception of that federation. However, if that political alliance broke down, the *gyedua* provided the symbolic and political means to express and instigate rebellion, and to attempt to exchange the existing alliance for one which approximated more closely to the ideal balance of autonomy and unity. This balance was a delicate one.

Political alliances did not usually last long in Akan politics because of a widespread culture of assertiveness in personal and group relations in Akan societies, epitomized in the proverb

Óbra yè ako Life is war

The *gyedua* as a regulatory device for the maintenance of a balance between unity and autonomy in a political federation could, however, be considerably adjusted in opposite directions to [195] suit either autonomistic or centralistic policies within federations. The political use of the *dua ase* in Fante towns is the best example of an autonomistic adjustment which reduces unity in federation to its barest minimum and its lowest level, that of the town when attacked. In times of peace, the quarters express their rather violent and often riotous opposition to each other by converting the *dua ase* into a 'fortified post' (*posuban*), by expanding it with a monument of military boast and bluff (*posuban*) and by connecting it intimately with the god of the ward's war company residing in the *esiw*, the altar of clay, under the *dua ase*.

The best example of a centralistic use is that of the *gyennua* of Kumase, capital of Asanteman (the confederation led by Kumase) and of the Asante empire, and the seat of a powerful, well-organized government. Several Kumase *gyennua* are noted for their continuous association with political violence in the form of frequent ritual, judicial and political executions carried out under them. The second most important tree of reception of Kumase, that opposite the entrance of the residence of the Asantehene) was known as *Mogyawe*, '[where] the blood has dried'. Another spot in Kumase was known as *Nkram*', 'in the midst of blood'. It was only a few yards away from the *gyedua* of *Ahemaho*, the cemetery where the 'queen-mothers' of Asante were buried. A third spot and *gyedua* was *Diakómfoase*, 'under [the tree which] devours priests'. Under it, priests and politicians who had fallen into disgrace were executed. It is likely that in 1880 some two hundred *Bonsamkómfo*, witch hunting priests with political right wing aspirations, were executed under it.⁶⁸ Finally, several *akyere*, convicts condemned to death and reserved for ritual execution, were killed at least once a year beneath the *gyedua* in front of the royal mausoleum in Bantama.⁶⁹

It must, however, be stressed that these autonomistic and centralistic uses were not so extreme as to undo the normal and major function of the tree of reception: the creation of some measure of federative unity between polities jealously safeguarding their autonomy, and the safeguarding of some measure of autonomy in a centralistic federation. The Fante use of the *dua ase* did effectively prevent the creation of a strong federation between the Fante town-states but allowed enough room for a workable unity in these town-states themselves. At the other extreme, a traditional policy of [196] 'Indirect Rule' and a fair amount of local autonomy was a constant and es-

⁶⁸ Cf. Platvoet 1991: 163-167 for the aspirations and fate of this witch hunting movement.

⁶⁹ Rattray 1927: 112-113, 139-143, 146, frontispiece and figs. 43, 46, 60; cf. also footnote 3 on the *atóperè* tree.

sential element in Asante bureaucratic centralism, not only within *Asanteman*, or the Asante federation, but also in the Asante empire.

Note on Twi orthography

η is pronounced as a nasalized ng; *è* and *ó* as open, as in French ‘belle’ and ‘tonne’; *n* is unnasalized; *e* and *o* are pronounced full, as in English ‘prey’ and in French ‘mot’.

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Postscript

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Adrian Hastings, EDITORIAL

Marguerite Dupire, in her fascinating analysis of the symbolism of dogs among the Serer, remarks how the myth of the death and burial of a dog was recorded by a missionary as explaining the origin of human death as a punishment from God, but by two anthropologists as explaining how the Serer began to practise funerary reciprocity – a basic piece of machinery for their social structure.

On the whole, *the four studies of traditional thought presented in this issue could be seen as collectively throwing light upon a certain secularity in their societies or, perhaps better, upon the primacy of a muted 'civil religion'*. Rogers shows how crucial the role of proverbs has been and remains, in Malagasy society yet how little they have to do either with God or ancestral spirits. They provide instead a sort of core of civic wisdom and secular morality. The witch-finding movements listed by Chakanza have little if anything religious about them, while *the function of the Gyedua tree among the Akan is as a symbol of political balance*. Religion can certainly not be banished from any of these areas, but it may be *over-easy to lay emphasis upon the uniformly religious character of all traditional African society. The impression these studies provide is far more of a pragmatic secularity in which an underlying religious connotation may be seldom wholly absent but is often far more muted than students of religion have suggested. The secularism of African tradition is a dimension still inadequately explored, but we would be wise not to ignore it.*