

Prenotandum: This review of Japin's novel *The two hearts of Kwasi Boakye* was published in *AASR Newsletter* 19 (May 2003): 47-54

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Kwasi Boakye (1827-1904): From Kumase to Java

Japin, Arthur, 2000, *The Two Hearts of Kwasi Boakye* [: a novel]. London, etc.: Vintage, 342 pp., 2 photographs, ISBN 0-09-928787-0, pbk, £ 6.90.

Japin, Arthur, 1997, *De zwarte met het witte hart; roman*. Amsterdam, etc.: De Arbeiderspers, 389 pp., 2 illustrations, ISBN 90 295 2321 2, pbk.

[47] The title of the Dutch original, *The Black Man with the White Heart*, suggests that this novel is an Uncle Tom's Cabin-type of story. It is not. The English title captures its gist better. It presents the tragic stories of the lives of Kwasi Boakye (c. 1827-1904) and Kwame Poku (c. 1827-1851), two Asante 'princes', who were presented at the Dutch royal court in 1837, by means of 'letters' Kwasi Boakye 'wrote' from his retirement as tea- and coffee-planter on Java around 1900. These fictionalised letters are based on Kwasi Boakye's own letters and numerous other documents stored in archives at Delft, The Hague and other towns in the Netherlands, in Weimar, Dresden and other towns in Germany, and on documents in the Asante National Archives in Kumasi, Ghana.

The life stories of the two are, on the one hand, those of total alienation from Asante life, language and culture through their incorporation into Dutch upper bourgeoisie, and, on the other hand, that of a proper colour bar, frustrating their integration into Dutch colonial society, in Elmina castle as well as on Java. Their talents, training and connections never got them the posts, the status and income, which a white man of equal standing, training and achievements would definitively have obtained.

This review has three parts. I first briefly survey why the *Asantehene* ('ruler', 'king' of Asante) sent two young Asante boys, Kwasi Boakye and Kwame Poku, to the Netherlands 'for education'. Then I detail briefly their lives. Lastly, I briefly discuss Japin's novel.

The historical context

On 20 March 1837, Kwaku Dua Panin (1797-1867), *Asantehene* from 1834 to 1867, entrusted two ten year old boys from his close entourage to the Dutch Major-General Jan Verveer for education in Europe. They were his own son, *oheneba* ('child of the king') Kwasi Boakye, and a 'royal' (*odehye*) of the 'Golden Stool' (*sika dwa kofi*), Kwame Poku, who might possibly succeed him as ruler of Asante.

Verveer had arrived in Kumase, Asante's capital, on 13 February 1837 at the head of the largest Dutch embassy from Elmina to Kumase ever. His retinue consisted of over 1000 people, and included a military brass band. And he brought numerous gifts for the *Asantehene*.¹ The Dutch were clearly eager not only to consolidate their longstanding relationship with Asante, [48] but also to negotiate a new phase in it, and a new purpose for it, in the post-slave trade era. Their goal was to use it for the recruitment of (former) slaves as military personnel for their colonial army in the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia.² They had been buying 'recruits' in Elmina from slave-owners from 1831 onwards, but that had brought in far fewer 'recruits' than the Dutch needed. So, Verveer was sent to Kumase in 1837 to try to establish a recruiting depot there, to be manned permanently by a Dutch officer. By such measures, it was hoped, a much larger numbers of soldiers would be recruited. In addition Verveer was to persuade the *Asantehene* to deliver 1,000 recruits per annum himself in return for deliveries of firearms by the Dutch.

After a month of negotiations, a contract was signed on 18 March 1837, in which Asante agreed to deliver 1000 recruits annually to Huydecoper, the newly appointed Dutch agent at Kumase. It received 2000 guns in advance, to the equivalent of 32,500 Dutch guilders, or 325 slave recruits.³ Both as a guarantee that he would keep his side of the bargain, and to ensure that more European skills and knowledge would be introduced into Asante in the near future, the *Asantehene* handed over his son, *oheneba* Kwasi Boakye, and his matrilineal cousin (*wofase*),

¹ Yarak 1987: 132.

² Cf. also Yarak 1990: 107-110.

³ The *Asantehene* actually delivered only 235 'recruits'. In the period 1831-1842, a total of 2,280 'recruits' were shipped from the Gold Coast to Java, 1,400 of whom had been obtained from Asante (Yarak 1990: 111; cf. also Wilks 1975: 198-199).

odehye ('royal') Kwame Poku,⁴ to Verveer for education in The Netherlands.⁵ Traditional accounts in Kumasi have it [49] that it was intended that Kwasi Boakyé was to be trained as a blacksmith and to be trained in the latest developments in gun-making in Europe, for Asante was eager to acquire the newest European firearm technology.⁶

Their lives

After their arrival in The Netherlands, in late June 1837, the two young boys were placed in a boarding school in Delft for six years. There they received 'a solid

⁴ Kwame Poku was a son of the granddaughter of the *Asantehemmaa* ('female ruler', 'Queen-Mother', of Asante) Konadu/Kwadu Yaadam (ca. 1752-1809), Ata Sewaa (ca.1801/02-after 1818/20), by her marriage to *oheneba* Adusei Kra (ca. 1794-1836), who was a son of Opoku Fofie (ca. 1775-1799), *Asantehene* from 1798 tot 1799 (cf. Wilks 1975: 204, 327-331, 778; McCaskie 1995: 189, 477). Kwame Poku, therefore, was an 'orphan' by the time he was sent to The Netherlands in 1837.

⁵ Yarak 1987: 132-133, 143n11. Asante interest in Western education began as early as 1740, when Opoku Ware sent twelve boys and two girls to Elmina for education in The Netherlands. But the Dutch kept them in Elmina where they attended the school in the castle conducted by the black minister Capitein (Wilks 1975: 202). In 1831, *Asantehene* Osei Yaw Akoto (1800-1833, ruled 1824-1833) gave two other boys from his close entourage as hostages to the British: *oheneba* Owusu Nkwantabisa (1819-1858), Osei Yaw's son, and Owusu Ansa (1822-1884), son of the former *Asantehene* Osei Bonsu (1779-1824, ruled 1800-1824). They received a British education, first at the Cape Coast castle school, from 1831 till 1836. There they were baptized as William and John by Joseph Dunwell, the first Wesleyan missionary to the Gold Coast. In 1836, Kwaku Dua gave permission that they be sent to England for further education. On their return, in 1841, they were appointed briefly as British agents at Kumase at a 'pension' of £ 100. That of Nkwantabisa was already withdrawn in 1842 for 'improper behaviour', and Owusu Ansa returned to Cape Coast in 1844 at the request of Kwaku Dua Panin for misbehaviour and because there was much opposition in Kumase against his close involvement in the Wesleyan Mission in Asante. While Nkwantabisa remained in Asante and disappeared from public view, Owusu Ansa continued to play a significant role in at first the religious and then the political developments in the Gold Coast till his death in 1884 (cf. e.g. Kwamena-Poh 1977; Wilks 1975: 203-204, 589-631; McCaskie 1995: 138, 392-393).

⁶ Wilks 1977: 217. Asante interest in Western (and Muslim) education in the 18th and 19th centuries was inspired by pragmatic interests such as its desire to acquire the latest military technology for its armies and to develop a modern administration for its empire. But 'foreign' education, especially in Europe, remained highly controversial among Asante leaders, for they correctly perceived it as intimately linked to the Christian religion and as inspiring Asante pupils with values incompatible with those they held themselves (cf. Wilks 1975:200-206, 662-665, *passim*).

bourgeois education', not only in reading and writing, French and German, history, geography and mathematics, but also in dancing, playing the piano, trumpet and clarinet, as well as in art and fencing. Their supervisor reported that he had never seen Dutch children learn so much in so short a time.⁷ They were also instructed in the Christian religion and baptised in September 1843. They were regularly invited at the *soirées* of the upper class of The Hague, and at the courts of the Dutch kings William I (ruled 1814-1840) and William II (ruled 1840-1849), where they were befriended by the Crown Prince Alexander, born in 1817,⁸ and especially by Princess Sophie, born in 1824, who married the Duke of Sachsen-Weimar in 1842. In view of Dutch plans for starting gold mining operations in the Gold Coast, Kwasi Boakye, the more brilliant student of the two, was sent to the newly founded Royal Academy at Delft in 1843 for studies in mining engineering.⁹ Kwame Poku was registered there also in 1844, but for one year only. In 1845 he was transferred to a military school at The Hague.¹⁰

[50] Kwaku Dua Panin kept intermittently in touch with his nephew and son. In 1845, he requested that they be returned to Asante as soon as possible. Kwaku Poku volunteered to go back in 1846 and arrived back at Elmina Castle in October 1847. Kwaku Dua Panin, however, ordered him to stay there until he had mastered Twi, the vernacular, again. Kwaku Poku, who believed that he was 'next in line to the throne',¹¹ was greatly frustrated by this, and even more by his exceedingly poor prospects of a career in Dutch colonial military service. The rank of lieutenant,

⁷ Yarak 1987: 133.

⁸ He ruled as William III from 1849 to 1890.

⁹ Cf. Yarak 1990: 102-103. Pace Wilks (1975: 204) who reports that he was schooled at the Delft Academy 'in Amsterdam'.

¹⁰ Yarak 1987: 133-134.

¹¹ Kwame Poku was actually quite 'close to the throne'; cf. above note 4. His brother, Opoku Ahoni, had been formally elevated to the (new) office of 'second heir apparent' upon the election of Kwaku Dua Panin as *Asantehene* in 1834. But he had been executed in 1847 or early 1848 for allegedly scheming against Kwaku Dua Panin and/or for his 'conversion' to Christianity (McCaskie 1995: 189, 391). By 1850, therefore, Kwaku Poku's chances of succession to the Asante 'throne' were actually quite dim because of his foreign education, the strong anti-Christian sentiments prevailing in Kumase, and the internal dynastic tensions and troubles in the Oyoko *abusua* in the latter half of the reign of Kwaku Dua Panin. On the intricacies of the *abusua* (matrilineal) Oyoko and preferred *ntoro* (patrilineal) *Bosommuru Adufudee* and *Bosommuru Asafodee* kinship filiation of claimants to the Asante 'throne', and the vicissitudes of succession to it, in mid-nineteenth century, cf. Wilks 1975: 327-373; McCaskie 1995: 166-199.

which he had been promised, was never bestowed on him, for it was unacceptable to his superiors at Elmina Castle that a black man would be in command over white men. On 22nd February 1850, Kwaku Poku, still a corporal and still waiting for an invitation from Kwaku Dua Panin to come and visit Kumase, placed the hunting rifle, presented to him by Dutch government on his departure, against his head and committed suicide.¹²

Meanwhile, Kwasi Boakye had completed his training in civil engineering ‘with distinction’ in 1847 and had offered to return to the Gold Coast for service in the Dutch gold mining effort, but only on the condition that he be sent to the Royal Saxon Mining Academy in Freiberg, Germany, for two more years of training in mining engineering. Two reasons were important for this decision. One is that Saxony not only offered him the best training then available in mining engineering, but also another two years of pleasant life in upper class circles and at the court of the Duke of Sachsen-Weimar and his wife Sophie.¹³ The other was an urge to Christian mission. He felt in 1847 that he must return

[51] ‘as a tool in the hand of Providence to bring light and civilisation to thousands of my country men and fellow Africans [... and as] a link in the chain through which God makes visible the kingdom of his Son in the land of darkness’.¹⁴

However, by late 1849, he had reversed that decision and asked that he be sent instead to the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). This change of heart was due in part to the letters he had received from the unhappy Kwame Poku at Elmina, and in part to other dismal news. The Dutch gold mining efforts proved such a disaster that they were abandoned in 1849. And he learned also that Christians were being ‘persecuted’ at Kumase. Kwasi Boakye now stressed that he felt ‘the greatest [possible] aversion’ against the ‘mores, customs, habits and religion’ of his people and turned down emphatically requests his father, Kwaku Dua Panin, sent in 1853 and 1854, that he return to Asante, if only for a brief visit. Later entreaties for his return, in 1879, either did not reach him or went likewise unheeded.¹⁵

¹² Yarak 1987: 134-136.

¹³ Yarak 1987: 136-138.

¹⁴ Letter of Kwasi Boakye, at Freiberg, Saxony, to the Dutch Ministry of Colonial Affairs at The Hague, The Netherlands, of 29.01.1849; quoted in Yarak 1987: 138.

¹⁵ Yarak 1987: 138-139, 142.

So, in September 1850, he arrived in Batavia (now Jakarta), Java. On the very day of his arrival, he learned that Kwame Poku had committed suicide. He was appointed aspirant engineer, but with the qualification 'extraordinary' and under the secret clause that it was 'self-evident that he ought never to be placed at the head of the officers of the department of mines'. It was also stipulated that he was to be kept under the permanent supervision of a very unfriendly older fellow student from Royal Academy at Delft.

So, from 1850 to 1855, Boakye served as his personal secretary and was continually humiliated him. His grip on him was lessened only after a physical confrontation in 1855, and an intervention by the Governor-General himself, who ordered that Kwasi Boakye be given independent assignments. In 1855, Kwasi Boakye also asked for another assignment, but the Ministry of Colonial Affairs in The Hague ignored this request. Therefore, he applied for a two year leave and returned to The Netherlands in early 1856 to plead his cause in person there and at the court. He was then told that he would never be released from his 'extraordinary' position, and so he requested dismissal from Dutch colonial service and demanded compensation for the wrongs done to him. After much prevarication, the Dutch King William II decreed in September 1857 that Kwasi Boakye be appointed 'Titular Mining Engineer' and be granted the (considerable) pension of DFL 400 a month for the rest of his life.¹⁶ Boakye's other request, that land [52] be allocated to him in East Indies, was referred, however, to the Council of the Governor-General.¹⁷

After his return to the East Indies in early 1858, it took that council six more years to allocate land to Kwasi Boakye at Madioen on Java. He used it for the cultivation of coffee rather than tea, but was not very successful in that line of business. He never married, but had 'free love' relationships with three local women, from which five children were born, three of which survived. They were his two sons, Quamin (Kwame) and Aquasi (Kwasi) Junior, and a daughter, Quamina (Amma) Aquasina. He gained the respect of the local population. He even became a bit of a celebrity, when the fiftieth anniversary of his arrival in the Dutch East Indies was celebrated by his friends and high-ranking colonial officers in September 1900. After his death, on 9 July 1904, in the military hospital at Buiten-

¹⁶ Pace Wilks (1975: 204), who writes that he 'became Director of Mines' before he turned to coffee planting in the 1870s.

¹⁷ Yarak 1987: 139-141.

zorg, now Bogor, on Java, he was buried not only with full government but also with Masonic honours. It became apparent then that he had risen to high positions in the Masonic Lodge at Bogor.¹⁸ Most of his grandchildren now live in The Netherlands.¹⁹

The novel

The months leading up to the celebration of Kwasi Boakye ‘jubilee’ in September 1900 serve as the framework for Japin’s novel. When the idea is first suggested to him in January 1900, a sulking Kwasi Boakye firmly rejects it. However, he becomes ‘haunted by the past’, and despite his unwillingness to consider the suggestion, begins to dig into his letters, memoirs and memory, and to write a first draft of a speech for that occasion. It leads him also to recall and describe vividly his life in Kumase, Verveer’s arrival and mission there in February 1837, his and Kwame’s selection for schooling in The Netherlands, their travel to Elmina and their departure by ship to The Netherlands.

After an interlude on the plans for the celebration being forced upon him in March 1900, Kwasi Boakye tells about their time at the boarding school in Delft, their being invited at the Dutch royal court, and their friendship with Willem Alexander and Sophie. He then describes his training at Delft and Weimar, and ‘reproduces’ Kwame’s letters from Elmina till the day of his suicide.

After another interlude on how the plans for his ‘jubilee’ were taking shape in August 1900 despite his stubborn ‘resistance’, Kwasi Boakye describes the humiliations he was subjected to during his first period on Java, his return to The Netherlands to obtain redress, and his life on Java as a [53] pensioner and planter. The book ends on 10th September 1900 with a still sulking Kwasi Boakye facing the inevitable: his jubilee.

The book excels in the description of the (presumed) moods and emotions of the two trainees: their despair at their selection; their wonder about the wider world: Elmina, The Netherlands, Germany, Java; their feeling comfortable in Dutch upper class society; their joy at their friendship with Dutch royalty; their frustration and fury at the colour bar; Kwame’s hurt at his exclusion from Kumasi for no longer mastering the language, and their total alienation as Christians from ‘barbarous’ Asante life and ‘customs’; Boakye’s devotion to his three Javanese ‘wives’ and the children he had with them; his constant petty quarrels with his faithful servant; and

¹⁸ Yarak 1987: 141-142.

¹⁹ Van Heiningen 1997.

his nagging regret that his letters to Sophie and the Dutch king went unanswered increasingly as the years passed by.

Ethnographically and historically, the novel contains quite a number of mistakes, inaccuracies and exaggerations in respect of Asante in the first half of the nineteenth century. These may be forgiven to the novelist, for he does not fictionalise history as historians have documented it, but as he has Kwasi Boakye, the main character and subject of his novel, remember and recount it.

The translation of the book is excellent. The book is greatly recommended to AASR members. It is hoped that the publishers will make it available in bookshops in Africa at a price which African buyers can afford.

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