WEST AFRICAN KINGDOMS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Edited with an Introduction by

DARYLL FORDE

and

P. M. KABERRY

Published for the

INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN INSTITUTE

by the

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1971

THE OVER-KINGDOM OF GONJA

JACK GOODY

The study of indigenous African states has been held back by two main factors. Those European-trained historians who have thought it worth while to pay more than a casual glance at these societies do not always show much understanding of such social systems and become easily mesmerized by dates and events. On the other hand, those sociologists who have made a serious attempt to collect from contemporary sources the material necessary to analyse these societies and their change over time are often led astray by their involvement in the present. For when a state succumbs to conquest by a colonizing power the governmental system immediately undergoes a serious of rapid and far-reaching changes, in function, if not form. So that fieldwork in a post-conquest state, carried out along strictly synchronic, functionalist lines, will give a picture of a kingdom very different from that of earlier times.

A study of the dynasty itself has always provided some counterweight to the tendency of fieldworkers to make assumptions of continuity, to project the present back into the past. The collection of royal genealogies and lists of kings has given some overall view of a ruling group existing, and changing, in time. It is probably in the fields of economic and external relations that the most serious discrepancies arise. In external relations, because fieldworkers have inevitably concentrated on the within rather than the without; in economics, because commercial exchanges have often altered as radically as government but with less noise.

Certainly one cannot understand nineteenth-century Gonja without knowing something of its external as well as its internal relations. So I begin by describing its position with regard to neighbouring peoples, the economic system, which stretched far beyond its boundaries, and the historical framework of outside contacts.[1]

Gonja and its Neighbours

Gonja lay to the north of the wide bend made by the Black Volta, as the river swings eastward from one side of the present state of Ghana to the other (p. 180). The kingdom stretched across the full width of the country, some 200 miles in all, and rarely less than 90 miles in depth. It covered a total area of some 15,000 square miles, which in 1960 had a population of 118,000. Immediately to the north-east lay the kingdom of Dagomba and, beyond that again, those of Mamprusi and Mossi—all ruled by branches of the same dynasty; to the east was the Nanumba State, a smaller offshoot of the Dagomba group. South of Nanumba, on the hilly eastern flank of Gonja, there were a number of small-scale, stateless societies, whose inhabitants spoke an array of different languages belonging to the Guang, Gur, and the Togo Remnant families. In the south-east was the Guang-speaking town of Krachi; formerly an important market and religious centre, it commanded access to the upper reaches of the Volta (particularly important in the Ada salt trade from the coast) and engaged in extensive commerce with the countries of the savannah zone.

To the south lay Ashanti, separated not only by the River Volta but also by a *cordon sanitaire* of almost uninhabited country. While there are some physical causes for this 'desert of Ghofe', its emptiness is also a testimony to the effectiveness of the Ashanti armies and a reminder that the economy of many kingdoms of West Africa, Nupe, and Hausa, as well as Ashanti, was bolstered by trade in human as well as material goods, and by production based on a kind of plantation slavery. To the south-west lay the market towns of Banda and Bonduku, Wenchi and Kintampo, which were either anciently established or successors to older towns, such as the legendary Begho. These forest margins formed the key area in the exchange of Ashanti gold and kola nuts with the products of the Niger bend—the region of the great medieval empires of Ghana, Mali, and the other states centred on towns such as Timbuktu, Djenne, Segou, and Gao. For it was here in the gap between the Volta and the forest that primary products from the south were exchanged for the salt and manufactured goods brought down by the trans-Saharan caravans. As a result of trade and conquest, the population of the Banda area became

very mixed; and it was probably through here (or somewhat to the north) that the ruling elements of Gonja came on their journey from Mande.

The western boundary of Gonja was formed by the Black Volta. Across the river lay the small state of Buna, of Mande and Dagomba origin, set amidst a number of non-centralized, Gur-speaking peoples, such as the Lobi and the Kulango. To the north-west there was the state of Wa, another offshoot of the Dagomba kingdom. And between Wa and Dagomba lay a belt of stateless tribes, speaking languages of the Gur group (mainly Grusi but also Mossi languages) that stretched from the LoDagaa in the west, astride the Black Volta, to the Tallensi in the east, close to the White Volta. Like similar peoples of the Ashanti hinterland, their social organization is marked by strong patrilineal descent groups and parishes under the ritual control of an Earth priest.

The distribution of state and stateless societies was of fundamental importance to Gonja. The states represented an ever-present threat. Those to the north could be met by equal force and, although there were both victories and defeats, a rough balance of power existed between Gonja, Dagomba, Wa, and the other states of the Mossi group. They had similar weapons, similar military organization, and the co-operation of all was required in maintaining the trade-routes on which an important sector of their economy depended. But to the south the situation was very different. The Ashanti controlled the routes to the coast, and hence the supplies of European guns and powder. Because they refused to allow these goods to pass beyond their territory, their northern neighbours were at their mercy. After a successful expedition in 1744, eastern Gonja and Dagomba were held to pay an annual tribute to the Ashanti, who kept representatives in the main trading towns of Salaga and Yendi. Their interests were in the collection of tribute (mainly in slaves) and in trade with the Hausa (mainly in kola, cloth, and livestock).

The non-centralized societies to the north and east formed a pool of manpower that the Gonja raided to supply themselves and the Ashanti with slaves. The cavalry of the savannah states was no match for Ashanti firearms, but it could easily dominate people whose only weapons were bows and arrows. How was it that such societies remained outside the jurisdiction of states with such armed forces at their disposal? Partly because they

occupied refuge areas, like the Togo hills, which were difficult to penetrate. Partly because, like the Lobi and Konkomba, they put up strong resistance and melted away in defeat. Partly because the boundaries of states were of a fluctuating kind, since owing to limitations in communication, the control of the paramount was inversely proportional to the distance from the capital. At times peripheral areas like Taleland were loosely linked to a centralized kingdom, but the nature of the link changed over time as the influence of particular states waxed and waned. And since the base of the system was subsistence agriculture, the dynastic superstructure could be removed, leaving behind a country of viable farming communities. Finally, such acephalous peoples formed buffers between states, as well as a pool of human resources. These areas could be raided by parties of soldiers without trespassing upon the rights of neighbouring states; they formed regions of free enterprise for bands of state-controlled warriors, whose prize lay in people rather than property (of this there was little except food), who were then sold or used as slaves.

The Economy of Gonja

The towns of Salaga in the east and Bole in the west specialized in trade with the countries of the north and south; in the centre, Daboya, Tuluwe, Gbuipe, and Kafaba were also important centres at different periods. Although Gonja lay outside the forest zone, it was to these towns that many traders came to exchange the live-stock, cloth and manufactures of the north with the kola, gold and other produce of the south. Northern trading communities had been established in Kumasi by the beginning of the nineteenth century, but many travellers preferred to keep away from both the Ashanti and the rain forest, and to transact their business in the savannah towns. It was just such exchange facilities that Gonja provided. The town of Salaga had a number of different wards inhabited by different groups of strangers, some of whom specialized in the particular commodities that formed the basis of the external exchange, the Ligby in gold, the Hausa in horses. Such trading was a very skilled business in this highly monetized sector of the economy. And it formed part of a network of commercial relations that linked the trading communities of Gonja with the hinterland of the states of Dahomey and Yoruba (which, like Ashanti, controlled the European traffic from the Coast),

as well as with the great market towns of northern Nigeria, to which came merchants from the shores of the Mediterranean (Clapperton, 1829: 68, 75–6, 110, 137–8; Lucas, 1790).

The inhabitants of Gonja gained considerable benefit from the traders who came from near and far. It is clear from the account of early travellers such as Binger that strangers passing through the country were called upon to pay duty to divisional chiefs. This payment was a kind of protection money and, provided the charges were not exorbitant, traders usually preferred to travel in relative security through such kingdoms rather than run the risk of being raided in the country of their chiefless neighbours.

There was also much small-scale trading going on between the settlements; young men from the chiefly and Muslim estates tramped from village to village, carrying cloth, kola, and trinkets. In the larger villages were found craftsmen of various kinds. In Daboya the extraction of salt and the dyeing of cloth formed important activities. In the larger towns lived persons who spent more or less their entire time in smithing (often Numu), in butchering (often Hausa), in weaving, or in magico-religious activities concerned either with the local cults or with Islam. In addition, there were part-time specialists, such as barbers, and others, like drummers, were employed mainly by chiefs.

Despite the trading, raiding, and manufacture, the basis of the productive system was the hoe cultivation of yams and cereals. Gonja farms usually lie at a distance of one to five miles from the village. Binger's account of the region round Salaga shows the existence of farm encampments where men lived with their slaves. Slaves were found in other parts of the country too, and were owned by all members of all estates. The captives taken among the Grushi were not for export only; they were also an important element in the economy, performing both male and female tasks on behalf of the other estates.

The History of Gonja

The tale one most frequently hears about the creation of the Gonja state begins with the migration of a band of warriors from 'Mande' (usually identified as the Mali region of the upper Niger) some time in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. These migrants appear to have followed the trade-route leading from the Niger towns of the Segou–Timbuktu area (the termini of the

trans-Saharan caravans) down to the gold-bearing areas of Banda, Jaman, and Buna, situated in the Ashanti hinterland. In this region, just north of the forest, were to be found many of the famous trading towns—Begho and Bonduku, Namasa and Nsoko, Bono-Mansu and Techiman.

The inhabitants of this mixed area included small groups of people who spoke languages of the Mande (Northern-Western) family and had long been settled there; farther west one finds other peoples who speak languages of the second main subdivision of the Mande group (Southern-Eastern) and who seem to be autochthones. But there also appear to have been indigenes who spoke Guang languages such as the ruling estate now speak; and it was possibly here (or farther to the east above Nkoranza) that the newcomers adopted their new language. And it was from here too that they conquered, perhaps were driven to conquer, the land they now occupy. Present-day Gonja was then inhabited by a number of small groups, speaking Gur and Guang languages, under the loose hegemony of the Dagomba and Nanumba kingdoms.

The Gonja invaders were accompanied by Muslims, also of Mande origin, and by some followers of commoner status. They established their rule over the autochthonous groups and created a polyglot empire that stretched across the confluence of the Black and White Volta rivers and straddled trade-routes to Hausa in the east, the Mossi states in the north, and to Mande in the west.

The major enemies of the new Gonja state were the northern Akan chiefdom of Bono-Mansu and the 'Mossi' kingdoms of Wa, Buna, Nanumba, and Dagomba. In their struggles with these powers the Gonja were most successful. But in the mid-eighteenth century the rising power of Ashanti spread its dominion northward and established tributary relations over Dagomba and parts of Gonja that endured in some form or other from 1744 until the Ashanti themselves were defeated by the British one hundred and thirty years later. The effect of the Ashanti invasion of 1744 was to loosen the links between the eastern and western parts of the country. It was in the east that the Ashanti influence was most strongly felt, since their major interest (apart from tribute) lay in the town of Salaga, which provided an outlet for their kola to the countries of the north-east; the Togo Hills

made it essential for traders to cross Gonja and Dagomba to get to Hausaland. The result was that some of the divisions lying to the east of the White Volta tended to look to Kpembe rather than to Nyanga as their capital. The organization of Kpembe seems to reflect this state of affairs, for, unlike other divisions, it has a series of territorial subdivisions, each under the control of a specific 'gate'. In this way it duplicates the form of the state itself and undoubtedly represents the point where fissive tendencies have proceeded the farthest.

The Gonja are acutely interested in their past, which is recorded in drum histories, in Arabic and Hausa manuscripts, and in oral traditions handed down from generation to generation. Most of these traditions are firmly linked to the name of the conquering hero, Jakpa, who is seen as the founding ancestor of the dynasty and the creator of the state. Particularly in oral tradition, all localities and all estates link important and marvellous events to his name. The tangled skein of stories that surrounds him presents the historian with an impossible task, but it gives a sense of unity to a scattered nation which had become highly decentralized in many aspects of its organization.

The Social Estates

This brief account of the history of Gonja is sufficient to indicate the existence of at least three major social groups, the rulers (*NGbanya*), the pagan commoners (*Nyemasi*), and the local Muslim community (*Karamo*), who form a kind of *deuxième état* comprising the congregation as well as the priesthood. In addition, there were strangers (*bfɔ*), many of them Muslims, and slaves (*anye*), most of them pagan.

In each case group membership is primarily determined by paternal filiation, but frequent intermarriage, combined with a strong cognatic emphasis at the domestic level (especially the widespread institution of fostering between kin), gave rise to a measure of concealed mobility. For the Mohammedans, conversion is a legitimate means of entry to the community of believers, but Muslim born and Muslim convert are distinguished from one another in many social contexts, and people always tend to regard the convert as a potential apostate. The Muslim estate (the local hereditary element as distinct from the wider community of believers) is divided into named patronymic units

on the Mande pattern, and membership of these 'clans' often influences a man's role within the community. From the standpoint of the political system the body of Muslims is viewed as being recruited primarily on an hereditary basis.

Despite the greater differences that existed in the nineteenth century, styles of life were not markedly distinct from one another, except for particular individuals. Even then, the relative position of the three major groups could not easily be summed up on a single scale, since the Gbanya were interested in holding office, the Muslims in trade and in religious grace, while the commoners had a closer bond with the earth and with its animal and vegetative produce. Each enjoyed a position of some prestige in certain activities and not others, though in most situations the chiefs were clearly more privileged than the rest.

Moreover, the three major social categories differed both in the way they were composed and in the way they conceived of themselves. The ruling estate formed one unit of unilineal descent, all of whose members, both male and female, regarded themselves as descended in the male line from the conquering hero, Ndewura Jakpa, 'Lord of the Towns, Conqueror with the Spears'. The Muslims were divided into a number of descent units, subdivisions of the widely dispersed Mande patriclans (*diammou*). Membership of these units plays some part in matters of succession to Islamic roles and offices, but is of limited significance, except in the case of the Sakpare, who belong to the Mande patriclan known as Kamagte. The Sakpare claim descent from Fati Morukpe, the White One, who supplied Jakpa with supernatural aid in his wars of conquest. Just as the Gbanya fill the major chiefly offices, so the Sakpare usually fill the priestly office of *Limam* that is attached to each division.

The commoners, on the other hand, form a number of more or less distinct groups, each with its own linguistic and cultural traditions. The names by which they know themselves are specific 'tribal' designations, such as Vagella or Anga. But the other estates lump these groups together as *Nyemasi*, commoners. Such unity as they have derives from common submission to the Gbanya, for whom they are simply a residual category of non-Muslims, ineligible for chiefship. But the commoners are not held within the system by force alone. Marriage and ideology are also powerful factors. There is frequent intermarriage between

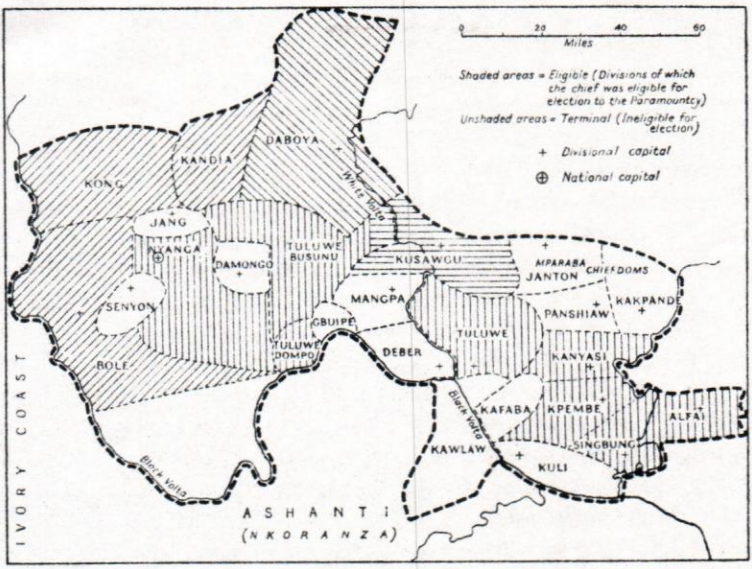
members of different estates. Ideologically, too, the commoners are strongly linked with the other estates. Although the ruling group is not Muslim, many of the state ceremonies are in fact feasts of the Islamic calendar. And in these performances the commoners too participate; although each of the plebeian groups has its distinctive features, a common Gonja culture is to be found in the dances they dance, the songs they sing, and the tales they tell. Intermarriage and co-residence on this scale could permit no other outcome.

The Territorial System

The three major estates are found throughout the length and breadth of the land. The commoners, of course, are mainly concentrated in 'tribal' groups, the Muslims are mostly found in the trading centres, and the ruling estate in the divisional capitals. One of the important features of the Gonja state is the absence of any permanent concentration of the descendants of Jakpa in the national capital. The ruling dynasty is divided into a number of segments, each resident in one of the territorial divisions of the country. There was no primary dynastic segment of this kind in the capital, Nyanga, nor any but temporary representatives of the ruling estate, who went with the paramount on his appointment.

In each territorial division the primary segment of the ruling house was further divided into two or three secondary dynastic segments, which were sometimes identified with particular wards of its capital. In Gonja political theory chiefship of a division passed in rotation from one secondary segment to another. In the same way the paramountcy of all Gonja (the Chiefship of Yagbum) was occupied in turn by the heads of the major divisions of the country—although, even in political theory, this process was recognized as more irregular, as one of oscillation rather than rotation.

In the nineteenth century there were some fifteen divisions of Gonja (p. 189). Although nearly all were ruled by chiefs who claimed agnatic descent from Jakpa, not all of these were deemed eligible for election to the paramountcy. The eligible or 'gate' divisions were by far the largest in terms of population; the dead-end or terminal divisions, whose heads were ineligible for further promotion, were much smaller and often acted as sanctuaries for



The Divisions of Gonja

men and women fleeing the justice of the other chiefs, or even of the paramount himself.

As the Gonja see their political system, any member of the ruling estate, any agnatic descendant of Jakpa, is a potential occupant of the highest office in the land. How, then, is this idea to be reconciled with the dichotomy between eligible and terminal divisions? The divisional chief who succeeds to the paramountcy had to uproot himself from his natal home in order to go and live in the small and distant village of Nyanga, the nation's capital. Some of his kinsfolk went with him, but the majority stayed behind. Moreover, in moving from his division to the capital a man was apparently exchanging an active command for a ritual and juridical office.

The dispersion of the ruling estate made chiefs reluctant to leave the place they knew best in order to take on the burdens of kingship in a strange area. The Gonja saw the rulers of terminal divisions as the successors of chiefs who in the past had refused the paramountcy when their turn came. Such a view is undoubtedly too simplified. But the reluctance is a fact, and so, too, is the dichotomy between eligible and terminal divisions. In the

nineteenth century the eligible divisions appear to have been Bole, Tuluwe, Kong, Kpembe, Kusawgu, and Kandia, while Daboya supplies the present paramount. The terminal divisions were Gbuipe, Mangkpa, Senyon, Kawlaw, Deber, Jang, and Damongo, whose heads were spoken of as the Councillors (*Begbangpo*) of the Yagbum Wura. But it seems highly unlikely that they ever came together to form a council as such. In the first place, their villages were far from the capital; in the second, the chief of Gbuipe, who occupied an important position in the ritual system, was never permitted to see the paramount once he had been installed.

The Organization of a Division

A territorial division is thought of as a collection of villages owing allegiance to its chief, but it also includes the expanse of savannah woodland in which the villages are scattered and which their inhabitants hunt, together with the streams that supply their water and their fish, and that often act as divisional boundaries, watched over by the chief's ferrymen (*ntere*). Village populations range from 50 to 300 persons; the average density in 1960 was 7·5 persons per square mile.

The divisional capital is the focus of political life. It is there that the chief lives, surrounded by subordinates of many kinds. In some divisions the secondary dynastic segments are each linked with separate villages, and in one instance the capital moved from village to village when the chief died. But more usually there is no continuing association between a village and a particular dynastic segment; when a man is appointed to a chiefship he and his family go off to his new post. For a member of the ruling estate, promotion often means yet another move, either to a more important village or else to the divisional capital. If the title carries no village the holder remains in the capital and attends the chief's court. So Gbanya rulers are posted in most villages to administer their affairs, but these chiefs are always assisted by local elders, the Master of the Earth, and shrine priests.

At the annual Damba ceremony chiefs from outlying villages foregather in the divisional capital to pay homage to the chief. The town overflows with visitors, for many villagers go to join the festivities, salute their kin, exchange gossip, and to see their chiefs humbling themselves before their political overlord. This

is a favourite time too for those living outside the division to come on a visit to their kin.

The divisional capital usually consists of several wards, each of which is associated with a secondary segment of the dynasty, with the Muslims, or with the commoners. The commoner groups include autochthones, refugees from Ashanti in the south, and nowadays ex-slaves from the north. The autochthones are represented by the Master of the Earth (*Kasaweliwura* in Gbanyito, *Tindaana* in the Mossi languages, *Heu hey* in Vagala) and his assistant (*Kupo*), who holds the knife. Refugee groups are represented by two main figures, the *Mbongwura*, the leader of the soldiers, and the *Kagbirwura*, the custodian of important medicine shrines, such as those at Jembito and Chaama; not all soldiers and shrine priests belong to refugee groups, but both guns (which are linked with the Ashanti) and 'medicine shrines' (which are moved about quite freely, in contrast to the static treatment of Earth Shrines) tend to be associated with outsiders.

Muslims have their divisional Limams, who participate in all major ceremonies. And though births, marriages, and burials of the ruling estate are different from those of the Mohammedans, a Muslim is always needed for these major rituals of the life-cycle. But birth is mainly a Gbanya affair, since it defines eligibility for high office, an eligibility which was made manifest in the cicatrices cut on the cheeks of every potential chief at his naming ceremony, seven days after birth. And although each member of the ruling estate has an Islamic name, the Muslims are not called to the ceremony; a messenger is sent to seek the appropriate name and returns with the choice of two.

Nearly all villages had their own chiefs; and the divisional capital contained many such office-holders, including ones with titles that bore the names of villages long since deserted. But it was primarily to people rather than to places that chiefship attached, and a title continued even when everybody had moved to another village and with the passage of time had become the subjects of the local chief. Such titles may still entail ceremonial duties, and they are invaluable counters in chiefly manœuvres.

Whether or not they have subjects, 'administrative chiefs' are of two kinds. Those of the first rank are members of the ruling estate, who may rise to the headship of a division. Those of second rank are the sons of female members of the ruling estate, for the

daughters of chiefs no less than the sons belong to the ruling group. In their own right they can become 'female chiefs' (*Wuriche*), a role which came to the fore at rites of passage in both the cosmic and the human cycles—at the annual Damba ceremony, as well as at funerals: upon these and other occasions the *Wuriche* took charge of the affairs of women. They could not themselves hold chiefships involving jurisdiction over males, but they could (in their capacity of 'residual siblings') transmit rights to certain chiefships to their sons, even though these were not members of the ruling estate. These 'sisters' sons' (*eche pibi*) were appointed to the headships of various villages, but they had a more important role in the divisions, which was similar to the part played by the heads of terminal divisions in respect of the paramountcy. At critical junctures, such as interregna, it was they who took precedence in processions, while the potential successors played a relatively minor role.

The installation of a chief of any degree requires the co-operation of both the Muslim and commoner estates: it is their representatives who place the white robe over the chief's head and who admonish him on the duties of a ruler. And it is the non-Gbanya who are in fact the main custodians of Gbanya tradition; the Muslims, with their ability to write, produce histories; the commoners, with drums as their mnemonic, preserve in rhythmic form pithy statements about the Gbanya past. And just as all chiefship is referred to the deeds and descendants of Ndewura Jakpa, so to him too the Muslims refer the traditions of their migrations, and the commoners, often enough, the stories about their shrines.

The Court of the Divisional Chief

The chief held his court in the large round meeting hut (*lembu*), or sometimes in front of his sleeping room. This was where cases were heard, where all serious discussions (*malaga*) took place. It was the main forum of village life. Except in the larger townships, most significant communication passed through the chief. Every Monday and Friday senior men came to pay their respects and give their news; if anyone failed to appear, inquiries were set in motion. All visitors went to greet him with gifts as well as words. Apart from a man's landlord, the chief was the first to see the newly arrived traders, who told him of the state of the road,

the happenings of nearby towns, and the affairs of the outside world. What was of great importance, particularly in the smaller, isolated villages, was his position as the gatherer and dispenser of information. The job of the chief was to keep the village 'cool', internally as far as disputes were concerned, externally with regard to strangers and the wider political system. He also protected his village from mystical agencies by means of his chiefly medicine and his knowledge of witchcraft. He was its most powerful inhabitant as well as the centre of its communication system.

The services he gave were repaid by gifts of goats and by the return of services. Visitors to the town, and subjects returning from their travels, brought him food or drink which he shared with those who sat around him (*mpotassibi*). His farms were hoed by the young men (*mberantia*) under the charge of their leader, the *Kaiyerbiwura*. The latter could be either noble or commoner, for in the category of young men were included all persons of any estate who were without office and of less than middle age. It was this same group who organized village dances, cleared paths, and worked in the fields of the village chief, who needed a larger farm to feed not only visitors but also his larger household of wives, children, and dependants. For in this the chief's sons were of limited assistance. The fission of residential units occurs at an early stage in the Gonja developmental cycle; some sons are sent to live with siblings of the parents, some walk about the country or attach themselves to other chiefs, while many of those that remain in their natal village live in another compound and farm on their own. In a rotational system the chief's sons are never his successors; nor under the Gonja mode of inheritance are they the heirs of his property; they have to establish their own position and their own *peculium*. In any case, members of the ruling estate are not always the most enthusiastic of farmers; their military past, the use of slaves, the chiefly tasks and virtues, all militate against too close a dedication to agricultural pursuits.

In addition, the chief benefited from more direct forms of tribute. From raids he received his quota of captives; from the commoners he received livestock at traditional festivals; from traders he collected transit and trading duties; from hunters he got a leg of each animal killed; fishermen sometimes presented him with fish; he received gifts from newly appointed chiefs,

and a proportion of all ivory collected and gold mined. He did not, however, attempt to control market activities in the manner of Ashanti kings (Ferguson, 1891). The taking of judicial oaths again brought the chief some return. But these sources of revenue were not destined for the use of the chief alone; the rest of the community expected to share in one way or another.

Apart from receiving additional services and respect, the most obvious way in which a chief differed materially from his fellow villagers was in the number of wives—although here again a certain amount of redistribution in the form of extra-marital affairs often took place. Besides those he had married in the usual way, the chief's wives also consisted of women who had fled to his compound following an unwelcome or unhappy marriage, harsh treatment from parents or foster-parents, accusations of witchcraft, or because they were female twins.

But the expenses of running a large household and of appeasing the in-laws tended to disperse the wealth he accumulated in other ways, while the rotational system inhibited any concentration of property over time in one segment of the ruling estate. Moreover the dynastic segments themselves were gradually increasing in numbers at the expense of the commoner estate, partly through concealed mobility but mainly because of the greater appropriation of sexual services, combined with the marginally better care and diet provided for the children of a chief. And this increase in the ruling estate meant a proportionally wider distribution of privilege through the community as a whole.

The Judicial System: Courts and Sanctuaries

Gonja villages were small and compact. Many disputes were settled by the heads of the domestic groups concerned. Others were ignored until they boiled over into some accusation of witchcraft or sorcery. In many cases leaders of sub-groups would help individuals to reach a settlement. This was especially true of Muslims, whose customs differed from those of other estates and claimed the authority of Islam. Nevertheless, every Gonja had the right to 'seize the chief's leg' and ask him to give a decision. The chief himself could also initiate proceedings. But a chief's meeting hall was like the court of an early medieval king rather than a modern court of law; although it is convenient to describe cases in the language of contemporary jurisprudence, 'trouble

cases' were only part of the continuing stream of 'serious discussion' (*malaga*) that flowed through the meeting hall.

The case would be presented by the plaintiff and answered by the defendant. Where necessary, witnesses were called for, either by a sub-chief or by an executive officer, usually the spokesman or *Dogte*, who carried the chief's staff as a sign that the order came from the proper quarter. But the judicial process employed supernatural as well as 'natural' methods, as when one or both parties took an oath to a major shrine in order to establish the truth of the testimony.

In addition to these local jurisdictions, there was appeal to the centre, and asylum at the periphery. Any Gonja could appeal from a divisional to the paramount's court; he would 'seize the leg' of the next highest chief and ask for a reversal of the judgement. If he failed, the payments would be greater, so he increased his risks both ways. This procedure of appeal sometimes involved the swearing of an oath; the formula used could refer to a disastrous event, as in the great oath of Ashanti, or else to the chief's mother. Directly or indirectly, the oath had to come to the ear of a commoner official, known in some parts as the Chief of the Knife (*Kasangwura*) and in others as the Executioner (*Egbangpo*); this man was in charge of the war medicine of the division, which also played a part in other transactions to do with killing, in witchcraft as in palpable homicide.

The capitals of the terminal divisions, and particularly the town of Gbuipe, were sanctuaries for people fleeing the justice of the paramount or other chief. In theory, no one could demand the return of such a fugitive, and this right of asylum is still vigorously asserted. Important shrines and their priests, together with mosques and their Limams, often had a similar function on a more local level. And the function was quite explicit: to provide a breathing space so that tempers could cool and the case be reconsidered.

For the chiefs of these divisions, the role of councillor to the nation is closely linked with the privilege of sanctuary. For like the Islamic and commoner priests, they are inside the state but outside the field of rivalry for high offices; they are both within and without, a position from which they can effectively influence the judgement of the paramount or divisional chief.

The Paramount's Court

Until 1944 the residence of the Yagbum Wura was at the village of Nyanga, to which he came at the time of his appointment to the paramountcy. Today Nyanga is a tiny hamlet, but it was probably always small. There is but a passing reference to it in early accounts of Ashanti (Bowdich, 1819: 172), and the first visitors to produce reports overlook the place altogether (Ferguson, 1892).

One reason for the smallness of the capital was the fact that there were few, if any, members of the ruling estate domiciled in Nyanga. The king and certain of his close kin resided there during his tenure of office. Even the local councillors were dispersed in the villages directly attached to the paramountcy, scattered at distances ranging from six to twenty miles. This dispersal was another reason for the relatively small size of the capital. The senior spokesman, known here and in some of the larger divisions as the *Nso'owura* (Leader of Dyula), lived in Nyanga itself. But most of the other advisers were heads of nearby villages, and commoners at that. Some miles away at Kokolassi, lived the Whisperer, who spoke advice into the king's ear and received his murmured instructions. The chief of another village, Sakpa, was guardian of the king's wives and of his eunuchs. The chief of Taari looked after a group of Muslims of the Timite section (*Mbontisua*), who claim to have accompanied Jakpa from the Nkoranza area when he invaded western Gonja. There were two other councillors: the chief of the now vanished village of Konkorompe was a Muslim of the Jabagte section, who are said to have lived in the area before the Gbanya invasion; and the Bia Wura, who is said to have resisted the advances of the Gbanya but then to have joined them, agreeing to guard their left flank against the state of Buna, situated to the west of the Black Volta river. Each of these advisers played a prominent part in the great annual ceremony of Damba. The chief of Sakpa went round the villages to remind them about the gifts for the paramount; the Whisperer supervised the distribution of meat; the chief of Taari collected one hundred kola nuts from his Muslims, to be given to the chief of Bole.[2]

Characteristically, this major festival of the ritual and political year was celebrated by divisional chiefs at their own capitals. At Nyanga the paramount, his entourage, and his villagers performed Damba on their own, although the other chiefs seem to

have sent representatives. Indeed, I have been told that divisional chiefs kept in permanent touch with the paramount, placing one of their wives at the now deserted village of Zengpe to look after visitors coming from their area.

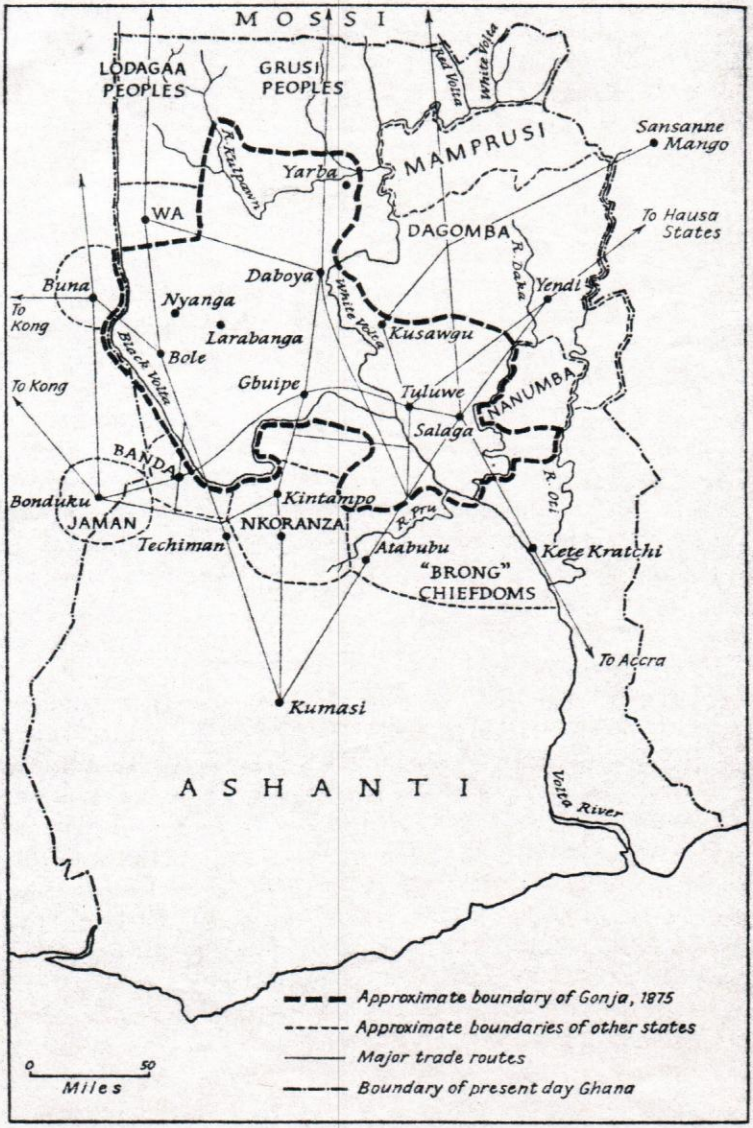
While the nation's capital was small and regional autonomy great, Nyanga was nevertheless the hub of the communication system of the state. In the last century, as in this, the Yagbum Wura received a stream of visitors who gave and gathered information about the state of affairs. Difficult trouble cases, particularly those dealing with chiefship, were brought before him (though as arbiter rather than judge); and here, too, came requests for help from divisions threatened from outside.[3]

The paramountcy was also important in the ritual field. While there was no complex system of national ancestor worship, the paramount's predecessors were always implicated in oaths of appeal. Near to Nyanga were sited important national shrines associated with each of the three estates: the Muslim town of Larabanga, the commoner shrine known as Senyon Kupo, and the royal burial place of Mankuma. The most powerful religious objects of the ruling estate, the *Alite*, were kept by one of the king's councillors; these two staves, which had been given by Fatu Morukpe, the priestly aid of Jakpa, to the first Yagbum Wura, were carried into war by the Gonja army, and one at least is said to have been destroyed in 1895 at the battle of Jentilipe, when Samori's forces inflicted a resounding defeat on western Gonja.

When the paramount died, the eldest son sat temporarily in his stead, while the regalia were taken in charge by the Chief of Senyon. The late chief's horse, his staff, and his sandals were sent to the Chief of Gbuipe, as proof that he was indeed dead. A time was then fixed for the major chiefs to meet at the capital under the Chief of Kagbape (near Gbuipe) and install a successor from among their number. In theory, the kingship passed to the head of the next division in line, a claim which had been publicly announced at the previous installation when he (or his predecessor) seized the reins of the new chief's horse and led him from the traditional place of enthronement to the capital itself.

Military Organization

The story of the acquisition and the loss of the *Alite* epitomizes the changes that Gonja underwent during the three centuries that



The State of Gonja and its Neighbours (1875)

intervened between the original invasion and the coming of colonial rule at the end of the nineteenth century. The Gbanya invaders were clearly an efficient fighting force. From their base south of the Black Volta they attacked the three main commercial centres in the savannah country across the river: in the west the Bole area, on the road to Buna, Wa, and the north-east; in the middle the Gbuipe–Deber region near the confluence of the two Voltas, on the road to Daboya and to the Mossi and Hausa states; in the east the towns of Salaga and Kafaba, where commerce was carried on with Mossi, Hausa, and Ashanti traders.

Gonja rule was established over this area by a powerful force that included cavalry and was feared on both sides of the Volta. The Gbanya still have the ideology of a warrior group. Their myth is one of a conquering hero; the regalia are iron lance-heads and, like other dynasties in the area, they had strong connexions with the horse. The rulers provided an élite force of cavalry armed with spears and swords; the commoners fought with bows and arrows; the Muslims assisted with spells, medicines, and religious grace.

But the very success of the Gbanya led to a weakening of the civil and military organization upon which their power depended. Their extensive conquests were divided out among the ruling dynasty to form a much looser kingdom where force was effectively mobilized only at the divisional level. By the beginning of the nineteenth century there was little central control of military forces, and the divisions appear to have made alliances and conducted wars independently of other parts of the country.

In the nineteenth century the main enemy was the Ashanti, and although they fought various engagements, the Gonja always suffered defeat at the hands of the gunmen from the south. The Gonja had commoner chiefs called *Mbongwura*, *Mbong* being the name for the Akan; here the word referred to the 'war leaders', associated with guns and swords rather than horses, and descended from refugees from the south-west, Grusi slaves from the north, or from other commoner groups. These groups appear to have been recruited in an attempt to counter attacks from the south. But even so, the fire-power of the Gonja was much inferior to that of the Ashanti, who controlled the European trade from the south and strictly forbade the export of guns and powder to the north. The chief of Ashanti told Dupuis that he and his ancestors

'owed all they possessed to the trade they enjoyed with white men'; 'the whites sold him guns and powder; he liked that trade, for his was a *war country*' (1824: 139, 140). As a partial defence, some Gonja made sporadic use of defensive fortifications and guerilla tactics; the people of Bute built a number of strong-points and claim to have thrown the Ashanti raiders into their laterite cisterns; in 1872 the chief of Daboya invited his Ashanti visitors to enter the meeting hall and then ignited the keg of powder on which he himself was sitting;[4] and when the British entered Kumasi in 1874 the inhabitants of Salaga took the knife to the Ashanti residents.

During the nineteenth century the Gonja engaged in other military activities. Various western divisions joined in alliances against the Ashanti: in the west there was a threat from Songhai raiders and a series of battles with Samori's forces; the east was attacked by Dagomba soldiers during the Napo wars. Indeed, around this time the danger of outside attack seems to have led to an attempt to strengthen centralized control, for the paramountcy provided a convenient rallying point around which military co-operation could take place.

Apart from these external wars, armed force was used in struggles over succession and in raids for captives. There was no national army, and it was only on the level of primary and secondary segments that military organization was effective. However, raids on the Grusi brought together men from different divisions, and the booty had then to be shared out at the capital. Aside from the enrobing of a new king, this was one of the few occasions when divisional chiefs went to Nyanga.

If some recent observers of Gonja have had difficulty in reconciling past glories with present status, the discrepancy is due to three main factors. Firstly, the military defeats of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Secondly, the British conquest, which meant there was little point in maintaining a military force, especially when wars and raids were suppressed and trade was passing into other hands. Farming became the mainstay of the economy, a change which was far from welcome to all. Finally, Gonja had herself developed from a colonizing to a tributary and then to a colonized power, not simply because of a lack of guns and powder but because the expansionist phase of the early kingdom led to a decline in the military organization and adminis-

trative centralization. In the absence of improvements in the system of communication, more extensive dominions are bound to result in the diffusion of power, which leads to the fission of the state.

Religion, Rite, and Ideology

Given the autonomy of the divisions in all day-to-day affairs, given the dispersion of military power, given the comparative isolation of the capital, it is perhaps surprising that the Gonja state did not split apart altogether.

One of the major factors in maintaining a loose unity, even under the least favourable conditions, was the system of succession by which the paramountcy passed from one division to another. But rotation alone could have done little to counter the powerful tendencies to fission. What gave massive support to national unity was the ideology of common descent held by all the members of a widely dispersed ruling estate who regarded themselves as the offspring of Ndewura Jakpa. Not only members of the ruling estate but also the local Muslims stressed the Jakpa legend and provided it with the sanction of literacy and of a world religion. Even the commoners constantly placed themselves in relation to the coming of the conqueror. Only foreign traders (also Muslims) and foreign slaves remained apart.

Throughout the land, localities associated with the life of Jakpa are revered as shrines and sanctuaries. The greatest of these is, of course, his grave, which is situated at Gbuipe. It is the chief of this small division who has to be informed of the death of every paramount and who then sends a representative to the capital to install his successor. But he himself can never become Yagbum Wura nor can he ever see that chief once he has been enrobed.

The Gbuipe Wura is the most important councillor of the kingdom. His is a town of peace; it has no war leader; no guns should be brought here for the purposes of war; and the local segment of Sakpare Muslims provide the paramount with his Limam. In myth (though there are many variations) the first paramount was Jakpa's eldest son, and the chief of Gbuipe was his youngest: the former represents him in life, the latter in death.

Various sacred spots throughout the kingdom are connected with Jakpa and other paramounts. Near Kpembe in the east,

people point to the ruined walls of the house he built of swish and honey; in the middle of the country is the village of Tarkpa, where he was wounded, the grave of his 'father', Manwura, and a shrine for his regalia at Nyangawurape. In the west is the royal burial ground. These dynastic shrines are often guarded by Muslims or commoners rather than by the Gbanya themselves, thus giving all parties a direct interest in their preservation and in their holiness.

As in other parts of West Africa, medicine shrines are found scattered through the country. These differ in the distribution of their altars and in the size of their congregations. The most important of the older shrines are those at Senyon in the west, Jembito in the centre, and Chaama in the east. In addition, subsidiary altars of Dente and Burukung, whose main centres lie to the east of Gonja, in Krachi and Siare, are found in various parts of the country. Of these medicine shrines, the one that Gonja point to most frequently, both in speech and in rite, is the Senyon Kupo, an Earth shrine which has won a national clientele. Usually Earth shrines have only local relevance, although similar customs attach to all localities. But the congregations of medicine shrines vary over time as altars are established in different places. Both sets of shrines are linked to the commoner estate, although Earth shrines are generally associated with autochthones and medicine shrines with immigrants.

Dynastic, Earth, and medicine shrines are propitiated at annual intervals on a community basis and irregularly by individuals and groups in times of affliction. Royal graves are cleared before the grass is burnt in November, while sacrifices to the Earth shrines take place when the rains come, and those to the medicine shrines are made at yearly gatherings where members of the congregation come together.

The Muslims have no shrines, but their influence is strong in the rites that mark out the cycles of yearly growth and of human life. As the Muslim calendar is based upon a lunar calculus, the Islamic year is out of step with the rhythm of the seasons. The major festivals represent not the phases of the productive cycle but of the Prophet's life. As in other universalistic religions, the liturgical year bears the imprint of the critical junctures in the Prophet's life; the main festivals are those celebrated throughout the Western Sudan: Jentige (the fire festival), Damba (the Pro-

phet's birthday), Akisi (Ramadan), and Dongi (when the rams are slaughtered).[5]

For the Gonja the greatest of these ceremonies is the Damba festival of Dyula origin and held here upon the day when the Prophet was named, six days after his birth (18th Rabi'al Awwal). For on this occasion all Gonja celebrates, not only the Muslims themselves. The chiefs of outlying villages come into the divisional capitals with representatives of the other estates. The commoners provide a cow for sacrifice, the Muslims say prayers for the whole community, and the chiefs do public obeisance to their overlord. The medicines and emblems of chiefship are brought out and their power displayed for all to see. Women and girls get new dresses, dance, and acquire husbands and lovers. A large meal is jointly prepared and offered to all comers.

On no occasion are the main features of the social organization so clearly brought out as at this time of general rejoicing. The institution of chiefship is reinforced; sub-chiefs are humbled in their subjects' eyes, and the role of each estate is publicly re-enacted. So, too, are the ideological bonds which prevented this locally autonomous state from completely splitting apart. For, when the meat and cooked food are distributed, the commoner chief in charge calls out the names of various groups that make up the nation, including its political divisions. 'People of Tuluwe,' he shouts, and any person from that division steps forward to claim his share.

The composition and unity of this scattered kingdom are also reiterated, for participants and observers alike, in the rites that celebrate the main stages in the human cycle. Rites of birth (or naming) tend to be particular to each group, since they are the ceremonies by which these groups perpetuate themselves. The Gbanya are given elaborate tribal marks; both they and the Muslims are circumcised and named seven days after, when a commoner circumcises and the Limam supplies the proper day names. Marriage is a composite ceremony, since brides are frequently taken from other estates; there is some ritual but few transactions of property, although Muslims try to retain a religious control over their daughters and wives by means of an additional rite. It is death, however, that demands the participation of all; Earth priest, Muslim, and chief are each involved, and while every estate has its own idiosyncratic rituals, the general form of

the mortuary ceremony is the same for all. And on this occasion, as in the annual ceremonies, portions of food are not only distributed through the whole village but are also set aside for the other divisions in the realm.

Summary

The State of Gonja has undergone several transformations in the course of the last three hundred years. The phase of military expansion was followed by one in which the local segments of the kingdom achieved a large degree of autonomy. During this second phase, which lasted until 1874, some divisions of the realm became tributary to the Ashanti. After twenty-five years of uncertain liberation, the British, who had conquered their powerful neighbours, brought them under the control of the central government of the Gold Coast.

In 1933, under the impetus of 'Indirect Rule', the colonial power made a determined effort to re-establish the traditional political structure of the state for purposes of local government. This rebirth was partly effective because the Gbanya saw themselves as a nation even at the end of the nineteenth century when the powers of the king were low, when Samori was attacking from the west and the British advancing from the south. The idea of nationhood continued to exist under such unfavourable conditions for several reasons. Firstly, the country had not depended, since the expansionist period, upon a strong central government. Secondly, the system of rotational succession gave every member of the ruling estate a direct stake in its continuity. Thirdly, in rite, in religion, and in ideology the unity of the state was impressed upon the three main estates, whatever their position.

A state of this kind has some similarities to the continental régimes of the early Middle Ages. This aspect of decentralized power, seen as transitional between the disintegration of one centralized system and the rise of another, Coulbourn sees as the core of 'feudalism'. The position of the ruling estate depended in the last analysis on horsed cavalry, though guns were increasingly important military weapons. But other feudal institutions, such as dependent land tenure, do not occur in Gonja, and it seems best to avoid blanket terms based largely upon the historical experience of Western Europe. We have here a stratified kingdom, where the estates each have their different practices, which in

some cases extend to the languages themselves. But the Gonja are bilingual in everything, and local cultures are supplemented by a national culture to which commitment, though it diminishes as one descends the political hierarchy, is always an important factor. Counteracting the centrifugal pull of the locally autonomous state was the centripetal force of a national ideology, reinforced by common rituals, by the sharing of food, the rotation of office, and by frequent visiting.

NOTES

1. This essay presents a first and not a final sketch of the political system. I paid several short visits to the country between 1950 and 1952, and published a brief account of the history of the area and of its language groups. My wife and I carried out fieldwork there in 1956–57 and 1964–66, and the following papers have been published as a result: Esther N. Goody: 'Conjugal Separation and Divorce among the Gonja of Northern Ghana,' in *Marriage in Tribal Societies* (ed. Meyer Fortes), Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology, No. 3, 1962; Jack Goody: 'Rotational Succession in Gonja,' in *Succession to High Office* (ed. Jack Goody), Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology, No. 4, 1966. There is very little published work on the social organization of Gonja. It will be noted that the maps, pp. 180, 189, give slightly different boundaries for the state of Gonja. The first represents a reconstruction of the situation in 1875; the second is based upon the administrative district of Gonja at the time of the Independence of Ghana (1957).

2. Just as Kpembe had a special position in the east (due to its distance from the paramount and to the influence of outside forces), so Bole did in the west. Unlike other divisional chiefs, the Bole Wura celebrated Damba at the national capital rather than at his own.

3. Hutchison recounts how a dispute between the senior chiefs in Eastern Gonja was taken before the Asantehene at the Odwera festival (Bowdich, 1819: 397). Relationships with Ashanti clearly varied from division to division and from time to time. The statements of Bowdich and Dupuis concerning western Gonja during the first two decades of the nineteenth century present a picture of a continuing struggle against the Ashanti, in a north-eastern alliance of states that included Kong, Buna, and sometimes Jaman (or Abron, capital Bonduku).

4. Lt.-Col. H. P. Northcott, *Report on the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast*, War Office, London, 1899, p. 13; Ramseyer and Kühne, *Four Years in Ashanti*, London, 1875, p. 231.

5. In addition, there is Achang, the Festival of the Guinea Fowl, held on 27th Rajab. And set firmly within the seasonal cycle is the Yam Festival and other more local ceremonies.

REFERENCES

In a general article of this kind I have largely avoided giving references for my statements, which include manuscript sources, including our field notes. Specific reference is made to the following:

Binger, L. G.	1892	*Du Niger au Golfe de Guinée*. Paris.
Bowdich, T. E.	1819	*Mission from Cape Coast to Ashantee*. London.
Clapperton, H.	1829	*Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa*. London.
Coulbourn, R. (ed.)	1956	*Feudalism in History*. Princeton.
Dupuis, J.	1824	*Journal of a Residence in Ashantee*. London.
Ferguson, G. E.	1891	*Report on Mission to Atabubu*. London.
	1892	*Report of a Mission to the Interior*, 9 December 1892, (CO.96/230, 2199). Public Record Office, London.
Gouldsbury, V. S.	1876	*Report of his Journey into the Interior of the Gold Coast* (CO.96/119, 5162 no. 2).
Lucas	1790	*Proceedings of the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa*. London.