

'The History of Ashanti Kings and the Whole Country Itself,' and Other Writings, by Otumfuo, Nana Agyeman Prempeh I. By Adu Boahen, Emmanuel Akyeampong, Nancy Lawler, Thomas C. McCaskie and Ivor Wilks (eds.). (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; pp. x + 224. £30).

*The History of Ashanti Kings* is a most unusual book. Indeed, with regard to the historiography of both Africa and the British Empire, one might deem it one of a kind. The book offers four essays by scholars of the Asante (the dominant ethnic group of contemporary Ghana, long known as Ashanti) that seek to interpret the life of its last precolonial *Asantehene*, or king, Agyeman Prempeh I (1872-1931). With key periods in the *Asantehene*'s life handled separately, including his 1896 deposition at the hands of the British, his exile in the Seychelles and, finally, his return to colonial Kumase as 'private citizen' Edward Prempeh in 1924, the essays by experienced hands like Ivor Wilks and Thomas McCaskie are reason enough to warrant review. However, the book's central focus, and chief historiographic contribution, remains its second half: a carefully edited presentation of Prempeh's Seychelles writings and correspondence, including the eponymous *History of Ashanti Kings*. The text itself has a fascinating history, having been concealed for years in the royal archives in Kumase out of the reach of most scholars. The completion of its thirty-year journey toward publication, as well as its highly useful arrangement, makes the book indispensable to students of this West African kingdom.

Yet, as the editors note in their Preface, the book's goal – in addition to making the Prempeh texts publicly available – is to offer sufficient contextualization to render the writings 'accessible to the non-Akan specialist' (p. ix). Their success in completing this second task is as uncertain as their fulfilment of the first is triumphant. This is not to question the introductory essays' value, both in contextualizing the Prempeh texts and as contributions to Asante Studies in their own right. Rather, it is merely to note a few missed opportunities the book might have exploited in the opening of the said field to wider currents in African history; which, as McCaskie himself has noted, is necessary.<sup>1</sup>

McCaskie's essay seeks to situate the early life of Kwaku Dua Asamu (the young Prempeh) in two complex contexts: within the dense and determinate networks of Asante kinship and family, as well as within the equally fluid politics of the late 19th century. He offers a very clear elucidation of the complicated dynastic politics that led both to Prempeh's birth and to the civil war (1884-8) between rival parties for the Golden Stool that devastated Asante and immediately predated the young claimant's enstoolment. McCaskie demonstrates how Prempeh's understanding both of kinship politics and of the

country's tortured contemporary history shaped his attitude to the increasingly intrusive British on the coast.<sup>2</sup> The essay concludes by noting the irony of the extent to which British agents implemented the development programmes Premeh envisaged, after the 1896 invasion – which McCaskie (quite rightly) labels a coup.

After a brief chronological gap (in which Premeh was held prisoner for a year in the Colony at Elmina, and then briefly in Sierra Leone, before being transferred to the Seychelles in 1900), Adu Boahen picks up the narrative, seeking to highlight the impact of captivity on Premeh and his fellow exiles. Given a wide berth as a high-profile prisoner, Premeh took the initiative to maintain peace, law, and order among his people at Le Rocher, as well as to ensure their welfare. During this period, Boahen argues, Premeh reconciled himself to British rule, a resolution symbolized in his avid pursuit of education and his public embrace of Christianity. Trained by Church Missionary Society agents, the young king accepted baptism in the Anglican tradition and adopted the Christian name Edward; his influential mother, the *Asantehemaa* Yaa Kyaa, became Victoria. Boahen frames these changes (pursued by Premeh, but encouraged in all of the Asante exiles) in terms of ‘modernity’, the introduction of which is a key concept for understanding the period – even if, as will be suggested below, education and Christianity are not the sole or fullest means of understanding this shift in self-perception.<sup>3</sup> However, establishing the Seychelles narrative remains key for framing the prolific writing Premeh undertook in this period, including all of the primary texts that follow. Boahen concludes by discussing the ongoing Asante demands for repatriation, in both Kumase and Le Rocher, and the shifting demands of colonial rule that eventually warranted (indeed, demanded) Premeh’s return.

Emmanuel Akyeampong, in turn, briefly outlines Premeh’s final seven years in a much-changed Kumase, lived first as ‘citizen’ (but widely – if privately – acknowledged as *Asantehene*) and then, in a wildly inventive and ultimately unsuccessful demonstration of indirect-rule resourcefulness, as ‘Kumasihene’ (a title invented by the British) until his death in 1931. Akyeampong looks to demonstrate the extent to which the British colonial government, the Asante, and Premeh himself all renegotiated the nature of kingship in this period. Given the wealth of available sources for this era, Akyeampong’s essay reads as the weakest of the four. He continues, like Boahen, to embrace the *Asantehene* as the harbinger of Asante modernity, yet notes how Premeh vastly disappointed the up-and-coming educated Christian sect – for example, by closing down the Kumasi Gentleman’s Club, on the grounds that their lavish displays usurped chiefly privilege. By noting a few anecdotal examples from the period, Akyeampong demonstrates the importance of Premeh to the evolving policies of British indirect rule. In stating merely that Premeh

was ‘comfortable’ in both worlds, however, Akyeampong passes too quickly over the importance of indirect rule to Premeh himself.

Wilks’ concluding essay offers a masterful hagiographic review of the *History* text itself, as well as a reflection upon Premeh’s approaches to literacy and authorship. Wilks provides crucial historical grounding for understanding and decoding the text, making his the most truly accessible to the non-Akan specialist of all four essays. For example, he traces Premeh’s incorrect chronology in the text back to the bizarre conversion by Joseph Dupuis (a visitor to Kumase in the early 1820s) of the Arabic dates of Dupuis’s primary interlocutors, the Kumase Muslims, directly into the Gregorian calendar. Most fascinatingly, perhaps, Wilks chronicles the text’s long and tortured journey toward publication, and the contributions that scholars such as Boahen, A. A. Y. Kyerematen, Phyllis Ferguson, Wilks himself, and later McCaskie, Akyeampong and Lawler have all made to its eventual presentation here. Previously, these few lucky researchers were the only individuals outside of the Manhyia archives to have seen the text – now, as Wilks notes, each page is available on the British Academy website!<sup>4</sup>

With nearly 100 pages of introduction thus out of the way, the book turns to the Premeh texts themselves. As primary sources their content, of course, is beyond criticism. Lawler, McCaskie and Wilks have nevertheless discharged their transcribing and editing responsibilities with considerable skill and care. The basic content, Wilks suggests, can be divided into three: history, ethnography, and genealogy. Premeh begins by offering a synoptic history of the founding of the Asante state, attempting perhaps to give its pre-kingdom myths greater shape and legitimacy. Premeh ends the history with the Opoku Ware’s succession by the founding king, Osei Tutu, thus establishing the basic principles of dynastic progression that (in theory) were to shape Asante politics for the next 150-plus years. Premeh then offers an assortment of ethnographic material relating to the dynasty’s basic history and rule, including lists of the founding Asante cities and ruminations on the Asante calendar, the *ntjr]* lineage system and the funeral of an *Asantehene*. Following this short chapter one finds what Wilks rightly considers the masterwork of the Premeh texts: his compilation of ‘office lists and genealogies’. The lists, if not terribly compelling reading, are nevertheless crucial sources for understanding 18th- and 19th-century Asante history.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, though not part of the original *History* text, the editors have helpfully included a sample of Premeh’s correspondence from the Seychelles period. In these letters, among other things, one finds three different, complete accounts by Premeh of late-19th-century Asante-British relations, and of his arrest and exile. Interestingly, they show a remarkable shift in tone, moving from a 1913 version stressing the *Asantehene*’s contrition, to later varieties addressed more to the Asante audience at home, focusing upon the grave injustices of the situation. Finally, one

finds the 1925 ‘History of Nana Premeh’s adventure during his 30 years captivity, namely Elmina, Sierra Leone and Seychelles’, in which Premeh attempts to make a full account of his stewardship of the Asante community-in-exile on Le Rocher. He provides lists of those who accompanied him to the Seychelles and those who joined him there, and details of all those who were born and who died on his watch. Letters to local colonial officials recount his over-riding concern for the proper burial of the dead exiles, and for the rebuilding and dedication of the royal mausoleum at Bantama (burned by the British during the 1900 war). Taken as a whole, the Premeh texts seem to be an attempt to reassert the centrality of the royal experience to an Asante greatly transformed by thirty years of colonial rule.

As has been suggested, the provision of these texts to the wider scholarly public is reason enough to laud the book. This long-awaited volume, which promised much, meets at least two crucial considerations head on. First of all, both the texts themselves and the interpretative essays can be read as companion pieces to some of the key historical texts of pre-colonial Asante, be they Wilks’ classic tome on Asante politics,<sup>6</sup> McCaskie’s fiery retort and examination of 19th-century ideological practice,<sup>7</sup> or even Boahen’s very recent examination of the 1900-1 war.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, they offer a necessary corrective to (perhaps, even, a substitute for) the deeply flawed anthropological works of R. S. Rattray, which have had such a long and unfortunate influence over study of the Asante.<sup>9</sup> Rattray was a contemporary of Premeh, working as the colony’s first (and only) anthropological officer in the early 1920s. Indeed, the two corpora deserve to be read side by side, contrasting Rattray’s perception of an ossified, decaying state with the more dynamic picture that emerges from the *History* writings. Rattray, in his search for folkloric ‘purity’, completely overlooked both the vitality of received tradition and the profound changes Asante was undergoing during the compilation of his anthropological catalogues.<sup>10</sup> This might be more forgivable were it not for the long-lasting effect his captivating books have had upon anthropological study, historical approaches to culture and (almost comically) Asante, and even black diasporic, nationalism.<sup>11</sup> *The History of Ashanti Kings* offers at the very least a colonized perspective to a story well explored from the other side.<sup>12</sup> In the end, Rattray failed to demonstrate how Asante was experiencing ‘an economic revolution caused by cocoa farming and cocoa export, [and] that this revolution created a powerful class of ‘youngmen’ standing outside the concentric circles of social responsibility he [Rattray] had idealized’.<sup>13</sup> Of course, Premeh’s writings suffer from a similar ideological and investigative blindness. At the very least they offer two interesting rhetorical elaborations of ‘Asante tradition’.

The potential that this new volume acquired through so fully categorizing the Premeh texts remains, however, only partially fulfilled. Oddly, McCaskie has previously written

rather fully on the same point. Back in 1990, for example, McCaskie held that the *History* remained a ‘highly directed, ideological document that seeks to make particular assertions about the historical bases and evolution of Asante culture’.<sup>14</sup> ‘Modernization’ in Asante created a large class of newly powerful figures, no longer dependent upon royal patronage or connections, and thus with strong interests in thwarting the *Asantehene’s* repatriation (and almost inevitable restoration). The *History*, then, can be read as an argument against such interests in favour of returning a lost order. Boahen and (more so) Akyeampong hint at this point, in briefly discussing the early importance of symbolism, but never address it directly. For a book aimed at those with detailed knowledge of the region, it might be acceptable to omit such a consideration, but in seeking to accommodate ‘non-Akan specialists’, the editors have missed an interpretative opportunity. What is more, Prempeh’s embrace of what Boahen and Akyeampong label ‘modernity’ was perhaps more contingent than suggested. The *Asantehene* fully took to Western education and literacy but, it seems, his adoption of a Christian doctrine and lifestyle remained more conditional (as his demand for continued polygamy demonstrates). How, one might ask, could one reconcile such a herald of modernity with the attempt, upon returning to Kumase, to reclaim as many privileges and rights as possible, that were his due only in the light of two hundred years of received practice? Impossible, unless one posits that such self-conscious understanding and presentation of one’s own historicity, such ‘invention of tradition’, is, in fact, a very modern practice (as opposed to opening oneself to literacy and Western religion, both present, if only in a limited manner, in Kumase for quite some time before 1896).

This, however, remains a limited, theoretical concern. Of greater interest is the extent to which the book meets its second self-proclaimed goal: accessibility to the general reader. The record here is mixed. On one hand, the texts themselves are spectacularly edited and arranged and lend themselves to quite easy reading and interpretation (particularly given their occasionally esoteric subject matter, not to mention the physical state of the originals). On the other hand, the essays, for all their strengths, are on the whole still best suited to one already familiar with some of the main tropes and arguments of the Asante Studies circle. This is clearly demonstrated in small matters, such as casual, unexplained references to complicated incidents such as ‘the Golden Stool episode of 1921’ (p. 32) and the ‘Native Jurisdiction Act’ (p. 39). It can also be found, perhaps, in one considerable absence: any reference to the texts’ wider historiographic or comparative value. Boahen notes that the Asante exiles were not the only prisoners in the Seychelles; the Buganda monarch, of Uganda, was a prisoner there as well. A greater effort to signal the importance of these writings as an insight into the mind of a ‘traditional’, elite African response to colonialism might have made the book more engaging for a wider audience with interests in Africa and colonialism more generally.

Nevertheless, these more or less minor faults pale in comparison with the editors' substantial achievement in producing this book in the first place. The essays do serve as a substantive and quite effective introduction to the Prempeh writings. In editing the texts themselves, Lawler, McCaskie and Wilks have decided to take an approach that might have been controversial, if it were not so well executed. Arguing that most of the *History* text was compiled from fragments, they have chosen to deconstruct the text, separating out and organizing it with regard to specific topics, rather than proffering the whole text intact. In this regard they more than meet the need of the general reader, and should be duly commended. What is more, they provide a Concordance of nearly thirty pages at the end of the book, containing thoroughly cross-referenced lists of every person and place referred to within the *History*. Much more than a mere index, this is their true gift to the specialized scholar.

In short, Akyeampong, Boahen, Lawler, McCaskie and Wilks have together created a unique and lasting contribution to the field of African Studies. Its occasional narrow specificity and theoretical deficiencies are in many ways minor, for regardless the book will remain a crucial reference for this period in understanding African responses to colonialism. A key African voice has been restored to historiographic prominence after an exile of far too many years.

*St Antony's College, Oxford*

KEVIN DUMOUCHELLE

NOTES:

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘It seems to me that Asante historiography,’ McCaskie wrote earlier, ‘is in danger of becoming a “closed system” in the sense that it restricts itself to posing those categories of questions to which (apparently) reasoned and logical answers can be supplied.’ T. C. McCaskie, ‘Accumulation, wealth and belief in Asante history, to the close of the nineteenth century’, *Africa*, 53:1 (1983), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed this insertion of African subjects’ self-understanding into the region’s history, particularly with regard to kinship matters, seemingly remains one of McCaskie’s larger historiographic goals. His thoughtful examination of the subject with regard to Kwaku Dua III (Prempeh)’s grandfather and stool namesake, Kwaku Dua I (1834-1867), provides a useful supplement to the essay here. See McCaskie, ‘Konnurokus[m]: kinship and family in the history of the Oyoko K]k]] dynasty of Kumase’, *Journal of African History*, 36:3 (1995), pp. 357-89.

<sup>3</sup> Rather, Boahen comes closer with the remark that it must have been Prempeh’s ‘determination to preserve the traditions and history of Asante for posterity and above all to legitimise his Oyoko

---

lineage and perpetuate its rule that he embarked on the preparation of the history presented in this volume' (p. 29).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/src/fha/ashanti> provides scanned digital photos of each page of the *History* text.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, McCaskie notes, genealogy remained at the centre of the Asante system of knowledge. 'The cognitive key to understanding...in pre-literate Asante society,' he writes, 'lies in the basic distinction between genealogy *per se* and direct, lived experience buttressed by the recall of immediate memory.' McCaskie, 'Konnurokusñm', p. 360.

<sup>6</sup> I. Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: the Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). See also J. K. Adjaye, 'Asantehene Agyeman Prempe I and British colonization of Asante: a reassessment', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 22:2 (1989), pp. 223-49, and W. Tordoff, *Ashanti Under the Prempehs 1888-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

<sup>7</sup> McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> A. A. Boahen, *Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante-British War of 1900-1* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs: the Primitive Ethics of a Savage People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1916); id., *Ashanti* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923); id., *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927); id., *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929). The Premeh texts also certainly offer a deeper insight into Asante than does the contemporary history written by its former Chief Commissioner, F. C. Fuller, in *A Vanished Dynasty – Ashanti* (London: John Murray, 1921).

<sup>10</sup> Rattray's 'self-imposed task was to record and to document a world that he conceived of as being on the verge of extinction – a world uncontaminated by Europe or by the "seventh standard boarding-school philosophy" of educated Africans, a world of elders and "greybeards" in 'remote villages', a world, above all, of pristine custom and tradition': McCaskie, 'R. S. Rattray and the construction of Asante History: an appraisal', *History in Africa*, 10 (1983), p. 189. Indeed, the 'live, future-oriented trends were shut out, as were the dynamic forces in the past which had created the Ashanti Empire. A reader of his volumes wonders by what institutions and energies that empire was sustained': T. H. von Laue, 'Anthropology and power: R. S. Rattray among the Ashanti', *African Affairs*, 75:298 (1976), p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, K. A. Busia, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti: a Study of the Influence of Contemporary Social Changes on Ashanti Political Institutions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), and J. B. Danquah, 'Autopsy on Old Ashanti', *African Affairs*, 51:203 (1952), pp. 134-43.

<sup>12</sup> The official British side is particularly well researched in the following: W. E. F. Ward, 'Britain and Ashanti, 1874–1896', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 15:2 (1974), pp. 1-34, and S. C. Ukpabi, 'The British Colonial Office approach to the Ashanti War of 1900', *African Studies Review*, 13:3 (1970), pp. 363-80.

<sup>13</sup> von Laue, p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> McCaskie 'Inventing Asante', in P. F. de Moraes Farias and K. Barber (eds.), *Self-Assertion and Cultural Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa* (Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1990), p. 56.