

THE "ROYAL GOLD COAST GAZETTE" AND
THE ASHANTI

The above named paper is of the greatest interest and value to the research historian of Ghana. Yet even today it is hardly known among this class, since only a few of the existing histories of the Gold Coast Press make (cursory) references to it, and since before 1957 the existence of a collection of the paper was known practically only to the librarians who kept it.¹ The Gazette was founded by Sir Charles MacCarthy and published under him during the whole of his ill-fated governorship, from March 1822 until his death in the 4th Ashante War in January 1824. For coverage of this period in Ghana's history the Gazette is unsurpassed in its genre as primary source material. In this article we shall confine our interest first to glimpses of the voluminous running commentary which the paper provided on the King and people of Ashanti during the entire period of its currency, and secondly to selections from its reports on various engagements of the war. As an added interest we shall end with a comparative comment on "Ashanti bloodthirstiness", as the Royal Gazette saw it.

The material on the Ashanti will show a consistently harsh attitude on the part of Governor MacCarthy's editors, his "reporters", and his correspondents. This attitude was not to be considered surprising in the circumstances, but it was nevertheless fatal, in its hostility and utter negativism. What we learn about it from these pages, the reports we get about battles and campaigns and about the progress of operations generally, were for the most part fragmentary and episodal; these were communicated to headquarters long after the events they were reporting, or else the reports were brought back from the fronts by the British officers themselves even longer afterwards. But the supreme value of the whole material lies, needless to say, in its freshness and authenticity as original, eye-witness material. Above all, both examples: comments on the Ashanti and accounts of battles, would be seen as providing a background against which to measure the tragedies of the MacCarthy story, that is, for those pursuing this story further.

¹ A complete microfilm copy of this, the only known collection of the Gazette, will soon be available to researchers. Meanwhile, the present writer holds Xerox copies of many of its pages, which can be consulted by any interested person.

The first extensive notice devoted to the Ashanti in the Royal Gold Coast Gazette occurs in the issue of the paper for 7 May, 1822, that is, in Volume 1, No.6. It reports the "public entry into his new house" of Osei Tutu Kwamena (known in Ashante history also as Osei Bonsu), and gives the interesting information that the house was of stone, two stories high, and spacious within; that it had taken two years to build, with the bulk of the masons and "artificers" coming from (Dutch) Elmina, and the rest from Dutch and Danish Accra; that lime and American boards were supplied from Elmina, with some of the lime being carried by Fante labourers - compelled to do so by the King.... There the interest of the reader in this pleasant part of the account is abruptly halted. The next few lines of the narrative introduce that aspect of Ashanti and its ruler which obsessed the Gazette for the rest of its existence, and which it made a great play of, at every mention of the inland kingdom, its rulers, and its history; in doing so the Gazette employed language hardly less extreme than the habits of barbarism and bloodthirstiness with which it unrelentingly charged the Ashanti.

In a review of factors antecedental and contributory to the 4th Ashante War, the Gazette on 4 March, 1823, referred to "the demand made by the tyrant in 1820... for no less a sum than 1600 ounces of gold from the Cape Coast Castle....", and "the concession so unjustifiably made by Mr. Dupuis to the barbarian...." Continuing its own anti-Dupuis-Osei Bonsu campaign, the Gazette charged Dupuis (three years afterwards) with "the grossest ignorance of the true line of policy which he was to pursue; with direct disobedience to the instructions he had received in England... and of those given to him here by the Governor and Council", and with sanctioning "in his treaty (as far as such an instrument could sanction) the claims of the rapacious Osaii Tootoo Quamina, over the liberties of a whole nation of Fantees...."

On 11 March the Gazette dismissed with scorn the rumour that Elminas under the Dutch nearby had indicated they were going to join the Ashante forces against the British and their Fante² protégés. It was unthinkable surely, said the paper, that without any provocation at all Elminas would

² In this paper I use the form "Fante" as an adjective or a singular noun, and "Fanti" as plural for "many Fantes". So also "Ashante" and "Ashanti". The country is "Fanti" or "Fantiland", "Ashanti", etc.

forget their long standing connections with the King of the Netherlands and "enlist under the bloody flag of a murderer". Further on the Gazette declared, referring to the Sergeant Ricketts affair:³ "On the whole range of Africa, from Senegal to the south of the line, we have proved ourselves the friends of Africa, and except from such a barbarian, we could not expect such an act...."

In the issue of 18 March, 1823, a correspondent, "Africanus Secundus", wrote a long letter in which he defended certain aspects of the conduct and activities of members of the late African Company, commiserated with the Fanti over their "extreme sufferings", and, expectedly, condemned the Ashanti. "Africanus Secundus" maintained "that the Ashantees have by that war ruined their best interest, as since then they have not had a moment's peace, but are constantly involved in intestine disputes and insurrections.... The Ashantees", he adds, "are revengeful and bloodthirsty, and on the most slight pretences give an uncontrolled scope of their vengeance and resentment...." But for all that, this correspondent manages to sound conciliatory and apologetic about all his topics - even the Ashanti, of whom he says finally that "it may not indeed be difficult to check the severities of these people by a steady observance of just conduct...." Not so the Gazette, which in that same week's editorial mentions "an insolent demand, from the Barbarian, of 200 ounces of gold upon a British merchant at Accra", "the repeated insults of a Despot", "the Fantees who were compelled to fight in the ranks of our enemy", and "a horde of... barbarians" - all referring, of course, to the Ashanti.

On the aftermath of the first big battle of the 4th Ashante War - an account of which follows presently - the Royal Gazette of 18 March also reported and suitably commented as follows:

With regard to the movements of our enemy, we have no positive information: we know indeed that the Ashantee Caboceer, who acts as Resident, or Ambassador at Elmina, on hearing of the attack at

Dunquah left his post, and proceed[sic] there to enquire into the circumstances, but returned a few days after. The magnanimous Quamina Bootaquah, who with so much zeal to his master had seized upon the Serjeant, and bravely witnessed his assassination, on hearing the firing in the bush, turned his back, and cautiously proceeded to prepare quarters for his army, in the rear of Mansu. The messenger dispatched on that memorable occasion, reached Comassie in seven days: it is said, that the great barbarian was highly indignant at the insult offered him, in the defeat of his murderers and marauders ... that he foamed at the mouth more violently than when he politely conversed with Consul Dupuis: his Captains, whom able Acting Consul Hutton calls the Aristocracy of the country, were instantly summoned before the presence of their master, and swore on their swords that they would cut the throats of all the whites, destroy the English Forts, [etc.]....

On hearing that the whites would not tamely allow of their soldiers being murdered, in order that their skulls and limbs might ornament the banqueting room of O'Saii Tootoo Quamina, ... they again, and again, swore that without reservation or exception all white men or mulattoes should be immolated to the Ashantee Fetish....

This passage ends with a line of prayer for deliverance from the Ashanti, in Latin: A furore Ashanorum, libere nos!

The following week, 25 March, 1823, there was a follow-up story on the despatch of three Ashante captains, and also editorial comments on this particular matter, couched in sarcastic terms at once macabre and highly entertaining in its unintended humour:

Turning aside from the contemplation of human misery and degradation: we shall speak of ourselves... by recent information it appears that the march of the

three Ashantee Captains who were to annihilate us, (or as a very worthy, ingenious, and modest man said... "drive us into the sea") - terrible as it was, did not extend beyond the suburbs of the great Comassie: their courage being then more cooled, they returned their golden swords into the scabbards, and retrograded home. They may talk to them of the slavery which we wish to impose on their country (Fantee), praise the tender mercies of O'Saii Tootoo Quamina, who only takes all their gold, and, kindly when none can be found, accepts as Pawns, their wives and children to grace the sacrifices he makes to his ancestors....

We shall not enter into a maze of conjecture; a few days will expose the crooked policy of the sable monster. We wait with great composure and sang froid.

(Curiously enough, the first phrase in the above passage was in reference to slave raiding and re-captive activities around Brazil, the French West Indies, and Cuba, which, on the Gazette's own terms, would hardly appear to have been a less miserable or degrading subject than Ashante atrocities.)

"We regret", said the Gazette to its readers on 8 April, "that want of room will prevent our offering any details upon last week's occurrences... we can only say, that the attempt of the Ashantees to frighten the Accras (English, Dutch and Danes) into an offensive alliance against us, has failed: the Caboceers, left to their own judgment, have returned a most dignified answer to the messengers of the murderous drunken braggadocio...."

But here and there the Gazette found itself compelled to acknowledge, though in a backhanded way, some positive qualities and achievements of these people whom itself referred to, or allowed a correspondent every now and then to describe, as "a superior people", "a gifted people", and better. On 2 June, 1823, for instance, the paper carried a grudging but favourable full-scale review of Ashante military and civil organization, showing the sophisticated skill of its techniques of imperial control and domination. Referring first to "the extent of Ashantee power", and comparing Ashanti and Dahomey, to

the advantage of the former, the Gazette declared that "taking the extent of the territory they claimed before the present war, it is surprising how they conducted their affairs, when everything is considered..." The paper then continued:

Without archives, or even the advantage of books or writing, they appear to have managed every state so that the government were advised of their proceedings. The extensive connexions of their merchants, must have put those in power in possession of much valuable information ... by such means they would be able to learn the physical strength and resources of every independent country with whom they had intercourse. By those facilities they have aggrandised themselves at the expense of every people, without exception, to whom they could extend their military intrusion. The system of placing a caboceer, or chief, in every conquered town of consequence, had tended much to enrich the superior classes of society generally ... and as the measure enables them to maintain a numerous retinue, it affords great facilities... organizing a large force on an emergency, and to this advantage alone their extraordinary success in arms is to be attributed....

There were, to go one step further, other individuals who from time to time came to the defence - but almost always qualified - of the Ashanti. Joseph Dupuis was one, though he was completely rejected in the results of his mission. A British contemporary of Dupuis, W.H. Hutton, was another. Hutton had been in service on the Gold Coast around the 1820's and, in the days of uncertainty as to MacCarthy's fate in the Battle of Nsamanko in early 1824, wrote to the Times of London⁴ giving his personal reasons for hoping that Sir Charles, if alive and an Ashante prisoner, would be safe. He said, inter alia:

Although it cannot be disputed that the Ashantees are a barbarous nation, yet as I have been among them, and witnessed their humanity to prisoners captured in

⁴See The Times Index, January-June, 1824.

the late wars with the Buntakoos ... I can of course speak with confidence upon the subject....

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3. It is not by any means a case without precedent for the Ashantees to have a European Governor in their possession, and treating him kindly; as they some years ago captured a Governor Flindt and kept him for five months, during which time he was treated with the greatest humanity and respect, after which he was ransomed for 400 l. ...

Alas, Sir Charles MacCarthy's case did not turn out to confirm Hutton's evidence or hopes, for he was not taken prisoner but died in battle.

Now let us briefly examine the case against "Ashanti bloodthirstiness", "Ashanti atrocities", "Ashanti barbarism", blood-letting, "inhuman brutality"... Why so much should have been said in so much horror and outrage about this subject, in the midst of a medievalist world hardly different from Ashanti in its human manifestations, is a phenomenon that, duly called to attention, cannot fail to excite the most profound impression in the beholder. In what way and to how many degrees of horror Ashanti "cruelty" - though truly terrible in itself - can be said to have surpassed that of England, Europe, or America, is a question of great interest. To it W.W. Claridge, in his indispensable standard work cited so often, provides some of the answers. "The charge of cruelty" against the Ashanti, he writes (p.188 of the History), "stands on a different footing". He continues:

Many of their customs are undeniably cruel; but this cruelty is dependent not so much upon any innate blood-thirstiness, as upon the stage of civilization in which they are. Their principal atrocities have always been carried out in pursuance of their religious beliefs and practised on criminals or prisoners of war.

He adds:

A very large proportion of the so-called human sacrifices

that are always adduced as evidence in support of this charge were really nothing more than public executions of criminals who, after condemnation, had been reserved until victims were required for some religious ceremony in which the sacrifice of human life was considered essential....

Claridge continues by pointing out that no one must forget the equal truth that "only within comparatively recent times [had] the death penalty... been reserved for cases of wilful homicide even in England". "Formally", he adds, "and at a time when the English were infinitely more civilized than the Ashantis, men and women were hanged or burned almost daily for offences that would now be considered trivial". The English record is indeed impressive, viewed from facts most of which Claridge took from a famous old English journal, the Gentleman's Magazine (Vol.lix, part i, p.272). The passage from Claridge (p.189) follows:

The judgement [the judging] of a primitive race from a civilised standpoint is absurd; yet it is common enough. The sufferings of those unhappy wretches who were stretched upon the rack, broken on the wheel, or otherwise tortured, must have been fully as great, if not indeed greater, than those of any victim in Ashanti: and these were commonly inflicted punishments. The higher race, indeed, would seem to have used its greater knowledge only to devise more ingeniously cruel tortures.

It has been estimated that between the years 1170 and 1783 at least 50,000 persons suffered death at Tyburn alone, and were, moreover, tortured beforehand by being drawn or flogged at the cart's tail from Newgate. When the place of execution was moved there, ten men were hanged together on the first occasion and twenty on the second, of whom five had been condemned for robbing a man of something valued at threepence, some nails, a knife valued at a penny, two shillings and a counterfeit halfpenny.

But that was by no means all. The proclivities and social behaviour of the English people themselves at this time would seem to have been in no way in advance of those of the Ashanti. "...It is notorious", states Claridge, "that so long as executions were carried out in public, they never failed to draw enormous crowds, who conducted themselves in the most disorderly manner and thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle".

We should remember, too, how in France during the Revolution the avenging "sans culottes" raised a shout and cackled loudly as they counted the heads of the nobility severed by the dripping red blade of Madamme la Guillotine, knitting and joking noisily in between the falling of heads. And what about the slavers who - in addition to all we know about the animal-conditions in the ships of the "Middle Passage" - hurriedly threw overboard whole rows of chained human beings, in the effort to escape condemnation and punishment by a capturing man-of-war?⁵ Or the record left to us by Wulff Joseph Wulff,⁶ another Dane of interest to Ghanaian history, who wrote home in 1836 that

One is free to treat one's slaves as he likes.... often they are bound to a post which is called the virgin, and now 2 soldiers are commanded, one on each side of the sinner, who are giving him such licking that the whole back is tattered and the blood is running down at the heels....⁷

All this matching of barbarism with barbarism took place in the dark ages of as late as the 19th century! By the 20th century the Ashanti were no longer in a position to indulge in the human-blood sports of which they were accused in such shocked moral tones. But was the 20th century, then, a "season of light" for white, European humanism?

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See a series of "Letters from the Guinea Coast", published in the Danish Valkyrien in 1832 (Vol.1) by a former Danish official. Passages dealing with these episodes were translated for this author in Copenhagen by Miss Lise Pedersen, a secretary at the Danish Embassy in Accra during a period between 1961 and 1963, to which eager cooperation I have become permanently indebted.

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The evidence on this and similar practices during these times indicates that both the African middlemen, the Arab raiders, and the European traders and residents indulged freely in them.

... Again, the terms "civilized" and "Christian" begin to have a very strange ring, particularly in the ears of those who have been judged to be neither civilized nor Christian, when a Christian nation surrenders to a foul and violent orgy, as Germany did during the Third Reich. For the crime of their ancestry, millions of people in the middle of the twentieth century, and in the heart of Europe - God's citadel - were sent to a death so calculated, so hideous, and so prolonged that no age before this enlightened one had been able to imagine it, much less achieve and record it....

(Emphasis mine)

The words are those of James Baldwin, in a now celebrated work, the essay "DOWN AT THE CROSS: Letter from a Region of my Mind".⁸ These words put "Paid" to a debt, but still leave Baldwin's question unanswered, his question why most of the white world has treated the non-white - especially the black - with such monumental hypocrisy, such total moral dishonesty and cowardice?

Fortunately, as for James Baldwin so for the Ashanti: there were some Europeans, at least, who saw other traits of character in them, apart from "inhuman cruelty", bloodthirstiness, and worse.

Claridge himself says (pp.190-1) that

The hostility that has been shown towards the Ashantis by the English were not of the former's seeking. They were always favourably disposed towards the European and anxious to remain on friendly terms with them. Indeed it is ridiculous to suppose that they could have felt otherwise; for they know that it was their presence on the Coast that provided them with a profitable outlet for their gold and slaves and

⁸ Better known in book form as The Fire Next Time.

furnished them with the means of procuring such manufactured articles as they learned to appreciate....

He quotes James Swanzy (p.187) who, testifying before a committee of the House of Commons in 1816, said: "It is a singular thing that these people, the Ashantees, who had never seen a white man, nor the sea, were the most civil and well-bred people that I have seen in Africa. It is astonishing to see men, with such few opportunities, so well behaved".

Joseph Dupuis, of the ill-fated Treaty, goes into some detail of his own and other peoples' experiences (pp.187-8 of Claridge):

The Ashantees, of all ranks, are thus loyal and zealous.... and the king takes pleasure in recounting his forbearance, and describing the aggravation that roused the vengeance of his ancestors and himself, against those federal powers which, in an early age, were independent little kingdoms, and now submit to the yoke of government as provinces of the empire. The king... took particular pains to ingraft an impression upon my mind that it was a maxim associated with the religion he professed never to appeal to the sword while a path lay open for negotiation. He maintained that he would defy even his enemies to prove that his assertion deviated from the truth, either as regarded himself or his ancestors. Be this as it may, the Moslems themselves corroborated the assertion, although they accuse the government of unbounded ambition.... It is worthy of remark, that many of the whites upon the Gold Coast so far acquiesced in the sentiments as to admit that Ashantee has never been engaged in war with the maritime States from sheer caprice and rapacity. I may also be permitted to quote Mr. Mollan's words to me, 'that he never knew the king to make a palaver without cause, or violate his word.'

Another English officer under the old civil administration said: "The Ashantees are evidently better acquainted with the rules of decency and morality than any people we know of in this country."

K.A.B. Jones-Quartey.



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