In April 1714, Frantz Boye, the governor of the Danish trade outposts on the Gold Coast (modern day Ghana), which was the ‘hub’ of the Atlantic slave trade in West Africa, reported to the Directors of the Danish West India and Guinea Company in Copenhagen that he had acted according to the Directors’ orders and sent the gift that came out with the Company’s ship to ‘Aqvando’ (Akwonno), the king of Akwamu. The gift included ‘a fine flint[lock], a pair of ditto pistols and a hat with a gold galloon,’ including an assortment of other luxurious products. As Boye states, both he and his ‘Noble Principals had sent him [the king] this gift [...] with the request that he will use his best endeavours to ensure that trade can come here to the fort.’ However, the king was not satisfied and demanded instead ‘one item of each sort of goods that had come out with the ship.’ In addition, the king demanded to be paid the same amount of costum that the king of Fida (Ouidah) on the Slave Coast enjoyed, as well as goods worth ‘twenty slaves.’ If the Danes failed to grant the king’s requests, they would not be supplied with any slaves.

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1 The term ‘Danish’ and ‘Danes’ denotes inhabitants of the conglomerate state Denmark-Norway-Schleswig and, between 1806–1864, the Duchy of Holstein.


4 Justesen, Danish Sources, p. 248.
The Danes, along with their European rivals on the Gold Coast, bought slaves from local African rulers and polities. Payments and gifts such as those mentioned above formed the political backdrop of the tributary relationship that existed between African rulers and European traders in West Africa during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. However, there never existed a formal agreement regulating this complex system of tributary payments between African potentates and Danish traders. Instead, a process of ‘creative misunderstandings’⁵ seem to have evolved in the early 18th century in which conflicting notions of tribute were a cause for concern and confusion between the Danes and their African counterparts.

Giving gifts to local African potentates served a dual purpose. Firstly, gifts served commercial purposes in inducing trade with the local population. The Danes gave gifts to territorial overlords such as Akwamu and other rulers and caboceers⁶ (‘headmen’) with whom they traded as a means of promoting and selling their goods; the Europeans often called such gifts dashes.⁷ Secondly, and most importantly, gifts served political purposes. The Danes — and other Europeans — were required to pay tribute to their African overlords to show and assert their respect of the local ruler’s suzerainty.⁸ The Danes paid fixed tributes in the form of monthly costum on land rent for the forts as well as on the import of goods to Akwamu.⁹ The Danes also gave gifts more haphazardly to show respect and to satisfy a local

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⁷ ‘Dasche’ or ‘dash,’ likely to be of Akan origin and a convergence with the Portuguese das ‘give.’ According to Jones (*German Sources*, p. 35, n. 76) a ‘dash’ was a present which Europeans were obliged to give to African traders or intermediaries between African and European traders, and amounted to 5–7 per cent of the merchandise involved in the transaction. In Danish sources, ‘dashe’ is used to denote ‘gift’ or ‘gratuity’ (Justesen, *Danish Sources*, p. 4, n. 9). ‘Dash’ is still used in Ghana today to denote tips or tipping.


⁹ Jones, *German Sources*, p. 183.