COOL SHADE, PEACE AND POWER

THE GYEDUA ('TREE OF RECEPTION') AS AN IDEOLOGICAL INSTRUMENT OF IDENTITY MANAGEMENT AMONG THE AKAN PEOPLES OF SOUTHERN GHANA

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The European Image of the Akan

Though it is, admittedly, dangerous to generalize about the opinions of whites about the Akan in precolonial and colonial times, it may be stated with some confidence that the prevalent white opinion of them, their societies, customs, morals and religion was a very low one. The reasons for that poor esteem were at least twofold: white ethnocentric stereotypes about the negroes as the very inversion of themselves: black, primitive and savage against white, superior and civilized (Hammond/Jablow 1977: 15-18; Street 1975: 13-16); and those observations of white visitors to Akan societies which seemed to prove the received views of negroes incontrovertibly correct, such as 'their barbaric manners [which] we could not behold but with the greatest horror' of the ritual killings in an Akwamu town which the Dutch merchants Van den Broecck and Du Bois witnessed on 24 March 1703 (document in Van Dantzig 1978:94); or the 'horrid barbarity' of the atopere dance of death1 witnessed briefly by Bowdich (1819:33) during the solemnities of the reception of the first British embassy to Asante in Kumase on Monday 19 May 1817; or the display of the skulls of conquered enemies by the adumfo (executioners) of the Asantehene (ruler of Asante) as trophies of war on Saturday 6 September 1817, which caused Bowdich (1819:275) to comment: 'I felt never so grateful for being born in a civilized country'.

Such stereotypic views and reinforcing observations functioned as potent cultural, cognitive and normative barriers preventing the visitors, and even more the readers of their reports, from assessing Akan societies in a realistic way as the complex fabrics of institu-
tions and processes of political interaction between parties and factions which they are shown to have been by a wealth of recent historical reconstructions (e.g. Wilks 1975). They caused the visitors to present, and their readers to perceive, those societies in shallow stereotypes such as ‘military despotism[s]’ (Bowdich 1819:65) ruled by cruel kings with ‘unlimited’ (Bowdich 1819:253) and capricious power over the lives of their subjects.2

It is the purpose of this paper to explore one of the symbol complexes by which the Akan themselves expressed how they viewed their societies and political order. They objectified and sacralized (Mol 1975) these views in a politico-religious (‘civil religion’) institution which was a prominent feature in Akan towns in precolonial times: the gyedua or ‘tree of reception’. It was an instrument which they used primarily for expressing, maintaining, or restoring, the ‘proper’ political order. This paper will deal primarily with the ‘political’ functions of the gyedua, in Akan external and internal political relationships, and produce by doing so ‘emic’ images of Akan identity.

A Prayer to a ‘Tree of Reception’

[Gyedua],
gye eto ne ogwan yi di,
na boa Ohene soforo yi
Ma no kye.
Nya sika.
Mma n’ani mfura.
Mma n’aso nsi.
Mma no kote nwu.
Ma mmadowo nuo mma.
Ma kuro yi die edan nsi da,
edan nsi ho.
Mma Ohene mfom.
Mma no manfo mpa n’aba.

[Tree of Reception],
accept this eto and sheep and eat it,
and help this new King.
May he last long.
May he receive [much] gold.
May he not become blind.
May he not become deaf.
May he not become impotent.
May the women bring forth children.
Grant this town that houses be built
where houses never stood.
May the King not make mistakes.
May his people not
cut off his branch.

This prayer was recorded by Rattray (1929:213) in 1925 in Kokofu, a town and ‘state’ (oman) in metropolitan Asante. It was addressed to the eldest and central ‘tree of reception’ of Kokofu by the barimfo, caretakers of the royal burialplace, on the day after the installation