Asante Ivory Trumpets in Time, Place, and Context: 
An Analysis of a Field Study

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A note on the spelling of Twi words

Certain words in the Twi language of the Asante contain phonetics with different phonemic values difficult to express in Roman script. For the purpose of representing such words, the marked vowels e and o are used. In Twi, the sound of e is as the e in “led,” or the ai in “said.” The sound of o is as the o in “oral,” or the au in “caught.” These distinctions are important in words such as sese and boso. The font y sounds as the ng “sing” and appears in the Ga word kow and Helen E. Hause’s spelling of the Twi word aben.

A digraph is a group of two successive letters whose phonetic value is a single sound. Several occur in Twi and in this article. The sound of ky is as the eh in “church.” The sound of hy is as the sh in “shell.” The sound of kw is as the qu in “quack.” The sound of dw is as jw, the sound of nw is as nyw, and the sound of tw is as tshw; these last three have no exact equivalents in English. In Twi grammar, singular nouns beginning with the letter a begin with the sound of the digraph mm in their plural forms, such as in aben and mmen, which mean “horn” and “horns” respectively.

This article is based on my 2001 fieldwork on the Asante ivory trumpets in The Republic of Ghana, the former Gold Coast of Africa. The seven ivory trumpet ensembles of the Asantehene (the King of Asante) are the ntahera, kwakwrannya, mme.nia, nkontwema, amoakwa, nkrawobe.n, and nkofe. The purpose of the study is to place the Asante ivory trumpet tradition in its historical and cultural context and to examine ensemble structures and musical logistics. Most of the article’s sources are derived from interviews, field recordings, transcriptions, and analyses, but I also corroborated oral traditions with written, archaeological, and linguistic accounts. The findings constitute a substantial contribution to our understanding of tusk-trumpets in Ghana while also leading to new hypotheses concerning their use and significance.

Introduction

A brief background to the Akan and Asante of Ghana

The Asante, the founders of the Asante Empire (ca.1700), are a part of the Akan people who constitute about half the population of modern Ghana. Adanse, south of Kumase in the
Asante region, has been identified as the cradle of Akan civilization. The Akan migrated in
clans to the present Asante region, according to Adu Boahen, from around 500 AD onward
and formed early states. By the middle of the seventeenth century a number of states,
including Kumase, Dwaben, Kokofu, Nsutu, and Bekwai, had been founded by the Oyoko
clan and eventually united to create the Asante federation, the purpose of which was to fight
the oppressive Denkyira, whom they defeated in 1701. The term “Asante” derives from the
Twi phrase *o sa nti*, which means “because of war.” Osei Tutu of the Oyoko became the first
Asante king, i.e., the Asantehene. The suffix -hene means “chief,” and in the case of Asante,
“king.”

Oral tradition tells how the Oyoko, Aduana, Bretuo, Asona, Ekoona, Askeyiri, and
Agona clans migrated northward from Asantemanso, where it is said the people emerged
from a hole in the ground. Ivor Wilks maintained that this myth about a people arriving
to a region from a down or up direction, instead of east, west, north, or south, indicates a
people’s belief in indigenous status. The Akan believe they are first and foremost, Akan
deriving from the root *kan*, which means “first and foremost.” But Wilks also commented
that it is likely the hole-in-the-ground myth represents the beginnings of agriculture. This
same myth prevails in Hani, where it is said the hole is at Begho.

The Akan language, Twi, belongs to the Kwa group of languages of the Niger-Congo. Migration theories have been explored, but searches for Akan roots become precarious when
oral claims are without supporting evidence. The modern nation of Ghana took its name
in 1957 from the first West African kingdom, the Kingdom of Ghana (ca. 500-1230). Before 1957 Ghana was known as the Gold Coast, named after the metal the Akan have been
harvesting and exporting for more than a millennium. However, some oral traditions tell
that the Akan, and thus the Asante, are descended from the ancient Ghanaians. Current
scholarship now examines the connection as a possible avenue of cultural diffusion. It is also
believed that the Akan court at Begho developed from contact with the Mande from Mali,
which postdates the Kingdom of Ghana, reaching its peak in the fifteenth century.

Asante, unknown prior to 1698, emerged as a political entity in the later part of the
seventeenth century. Earlier in that century, groups of Twi-speakers drifted northward from
Adanse, south of present Kumase, and around 1660 the Oyoko arrived under the leadership
Obiri Yeboah, who demonstrated statecraft and imported European firearms from the
coast. Oyoko was struggling for control of Kwaman when Osei Tutu I, the first Asantehene,
was chosen to succeed the deceased Obiri Yeboah. Tutu knew statecraft, for he had
previously served at the Denkyira and Akwamu courts. Moving northward, Osei Tutu
defeated the chieftains of Domaa, Tafo, Kaase, and Amakom, and established supremacy
in Kwaman. Prior to 1698 he built the new capital at Kumase and received the allegiance
of conquered states to form the Asante federation.

The field study
I conducted field research on the Asante royal ivory trumpet ensembles from September
2001 through January 2002 on an invitation from the Catholic Archbishop of Kumase,
Ghana, the Most Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong. The archbishop is also a cultural anthropologist
who has previously conducted fieldwork with Asante court trumpet ensembles. Sarpong’s fellowship provided me access to the Asante royal family and an opportunity to receive permission from the Asantehene Osei Tutu II to study the ensembles. The music is a protected tradition associated with the court and spirituality. I performed for the Asantehene on an ivory trumpet at Manhyia Palace for the Akwasidae Ancestor Veneration on 9 December 2001.

For the duration of my study I lived in Santase, a few miles southwest of central Kumase and adjacent to Frankyenebra, the home of the nkontwema trumpet ensemble. I frequently visited and stayed in Kokobriko, the village of the ntahera trumpets, and I made sojourns to locations where other court trumpet players live, including Manhyia, Asokwa, Suame, Ahwerewam, Bonwire, Ejisu, and Asikuma. I collected field recordings and interviews, and made transcriptions and cultural analyses. In addition, I consulted with J.H. Kwabena Nketia at the University of Ghana, Legon, about the study, and he told me that my task would be to obtain musical information that the musicians probably had never tried to explain before.

Few studies have been done on the Akan ivory trumpets. The first musical analysis of an ivory trumpet ensemble in Ghana was Nketia’s analysis of a ntahera in 1962. He stated
that the trumpets are used for communication through variable tones that reproduce verbal texts in much the same manner as drums. The leading part, he noted, imitates the falling intonation of speech, and the ensemble plays a hocket over which the lead trumpet “talks.”

The most notable study, by William G. Carter, is on the Dwaben ntahera.17

Classification of the tusk-trumpet

Akan court trumpets are ivory and made from the tusks of elephants. The lip-receiver is cut into the concave side near the narrow tip. When held and blown, a tusk arcs subtly and horizontally around the blower’s face, projecting the sound sideways and slightly backward. The instruments can be classified as side-blown trumpets, lateral trumpets, or transverse trumpets. In the system of Sachs and Hornbostel they are lip-vibrated aerophones, what Anthony Baines has termed labrosones, from the Latin labrosus, which means “lip,” and sonus, which means “sound.” But following R.S. Rattray’s discussion of the tympanophonetic atumpan, the Asante talking drums, I prefer to use the Greek cheilophonetic when discussing lip-vibrated aerophones used for surrogate speech. A surrogate speaker’s lips, rather than the vocal chords, vibrate through the tusk and produce word-tones. But when trumpet tones are blown as signals, they may be sub-classified as cheilosemantic, as Rattray had classified drum signals as tympanosemantic.21

Victor-Charles Mahillon catalogued the tusk trumpet as trompe en ivoire, under the broader classification of instruments à embouchure. Following Mahillon, I classify the Asante blowing-tusk as an “ivory trumpet,” although classification as a “horn” cannot be ruled out. Most European references to the instrument call it a “horn,” but I believe the term is misleading since it is a tusk in spite of its conical bore. Organologists have stated that for a tube to be a trumpet, at least two-thirds of its bore must be cylindrical. Since this is not the case for tusks, they are acoustically “horns,” but for contextual reasons I prefer to classify them as trumpets.

Carter, quoting Nketia, states that African “horns” are made from animal horns or elephant tusks, and “trumpets” are made from wood. But elsewhere Nketia uses both terms interchangeably for Akan tusks. The archaeologist Merrick Posnansky uses the term “ivory trumpets,” apparently to distinguish them from horn as a material. But the Asante generically say “horn” when translating the Akan Twi word aben into English, for this term has been widely used throughout their recorded history.

Sarpong used the term “horn” in his publications, but he told me that the instruments should be called by their Twi terms, aben for a singular horn and mmén for plural. Helen E. Hause spelled aben as aben, and recorded the term as meaning “animal horn(s),” but by association becoming “the generic term for a wind instrument made from a horn or an elephant tusk.” The Asante, however, formerly had a specialized term for an elephant tusk that differentiated it from a horn. This term is asokoben, or asoko’ben, and it derives from the prefix form of esono, meaning “elephant,” combined with ko, the prefix form of the term for animal horns in the Ga language of Asante’s southeastern neighbors, with the suffix form of aben, “horn.” I think that since the Asante conceptualize a tusk as functionally different from a horn, there is reasonable justification to differentiate tusk further by using the English
term “trumpet,” or even better, simply “tusk.” In colloquial Twi the word *aben* has replaced *asokoßen*, but the conceptual difference remains, and the tusks’ social and spiritual functions at the courts parallel that of trumpets elsewhere.

Regarding the terms used for the musicians, a singular trumpet blower is an *abenhyëni*, as the suffix -*ni* denotes a single individual. Trumpet blowers are thus *mmenhyëfôô*, the suffix -*fôô* denoting a group of people. The infix -*hyë*- is complex and is from the word *ôhyën*, which means “to blow an *aben*” or a “car or taxi horn.” The term means more than honking. It is denotative of a trumpet blower making a statement, for much of their performance, even in musical contexts, is spoken phrases in the surrogate language understood by the *mmenhyëfôô* and the chiefs. Surrogate speech is spoken tonal text recited from the vibrating lips of the performer. In the case of the Asante *mmenhyëfôô*, the speeches are usually praises or “strong names,” called *mmaranee*, to the Asantehene.

Ivory trumpet making
An elephant’s tusks are its incisor teeth; they grow continuously from the elephant’s upper jaw throughout its life. Tusks grow conically hollow for one third of their length from the proximal end. Ivory craftsmen commissioned by the courts sand and file tusks down to trumpet size at their workshops and chisel rectangular lip-receivers, 2.5 x 1.5cm, into their concave sides near the narrow end. For speaking trumpets they drill a vent hole into the apex that can be manipulated by the thumb to produce a higher tone when it is open.

I met the carvers in Kumase’s Ananta District where the Asante’s tusks traditionally have been sent for trumpet making. Kong in northern Ivory Coast had been a source of tusks in Ghana for centuries, although formerly they also came from northern Ghana, particularly Damongo, where the Asante kings have had game reserves.

Elephant hunting and ivory importation have been prohibited in Ghana since the Elephant Conservation Act of 1988. Manfred Kofi Aduamah, the master carver, told me that the Asantehene is sparing with the ivory stock. Damaged trumpets are salvaged, not replaced. I have seen numerous cracked tusks bound in industrial black electrical tape, still in use, and sometimes two broken pieces are attached together to produce one longer trumpet. Several trumpets were so badly damaged by 1997 that the reigning Asantehene, Opoku Ware II, commissioned a new trumpet for each of the Kumase trumpet ensembles. In 2001 I saw two ensembles that were missing instruments due to damage.

The trumpets vary in arc length from 33.7 to 85.1cm, depending on the ensemble for which a trumpet is intended and the particular tonal role it has to play in the ensemble. Since the combination of tusks of different lengths blown together gives that group its unique tonal quality, a group must replace a broken tusk with one of identical length. It is not known when the requirements for lengths of tusks were established.

Ghana was the first country to draw up a national strategy for the conservation of elephants. Most Akan tusk-trumpets traditionally have been taken from the Ghanaian forest and savannah elephants. It is believed lately within the Scientific Exploration Society that the Ghanaian elephants are of a distinct genetic or anatomical form.
Royal context
Akan ivory trumpets are the property of chiefs and are blown only for ceremonial occasions wherein a chief takes part in a spiritual rite that reifies his connection to Asante ancestry. Even in Christian Ghana, traditional Asante religious practices continue in the process of “inculturation,” and the Asante maintain their strong practical devotion to their ancestors. Ancestral venerations are made every forty-two days at the Akwasidae festivals, at which the royal Akan are brought into communion with their ancestors. Trumpets, along with drums, bells, and kwadwomfoo singers perform at Akwasidae venerations as they do at royal funerals and political inaugurations. Since these groups perform only on such occasions, Nketia has classified their performances as “occasional music” (as well as “court music”). In Nketia’s terms they are not “recreational,” because they are tied to ritual, nor are they “incidental,” because they are an integral part of it.

In Kumase I observed ivory trumpet ensembles performing at two ancestor venerations at Manhyia Palace (the second of which I joined in the performance), four days of funeral services for the Asantehene’s family elder Nana Kakari in November 2001, at the awarding of an honorary doctorate to the Asantehene Osei Tutu II at Kumase University of Science
and Technology, and at numerous rehearsals scheduled especially for my research. In January 2001 the ntahera trumpet ensemble from the Dwaden court performed at the inauguration of Ghanaian President John Agyekum Kufuor, and in August 2002 the seven Kumase ensembles performed at the installation of United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan as a traditional Asante chief. Both Kufuor and Annan are from Kumase, and ivory trumpet recitations praise the living Akan leaders as they equally do the Akan ancestors.

The Asante court in Kumase maintains the greatest number of ivory trumpet ensembles in Ghana, for the Asantehene has been the central political authority in the region since Asante’s defeat of Denkyira in 1701. Even in modern Ghana the Asantehene has political legitimacy and serves as governor of the Asante region. Paramount chiefs under the Asantehene’s jurisdiction are allowed to maintain specific numbers of trumpet and drum ensembles according to their rank. Akan chiefs outside the Asantehene’s jurisdiction also have trumpet groups at their courts. The ivory trumpet tradition is widespread in West and Central Africa, being found in Ghana, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Congo.

**Kumase trumpet groups**

The Asantehene owns seven ivory trumpet ensembles that have been created or acquired through conquests by past Asantehenes, particularly the first, Osei Tutu I. Two of them are assigned to the Queen Mother, the Ohemaahehene. Those at the Asantehene’s Manhyia Palace are the ntahera, kwakwrananya, mmęntia, nkontwema, and nkofe, each of which will be explained in the course of this article. Those assigned to the Queen Mother—the amoakwa and the nkrawoben, who perform at her palace and travel with her to Manhyia for events—will also be described. The amoakwa and the nkrawoben perform together in one group, accompanied by a drum-and-idiophone ensemble called the tipre.

In a performance, a lead speaking-trumpet of a group renders mmaranee (praise) as a solo passage, and continues rhythmically reciting a catch-phrase from the mmaranee over a two-part melorhythmic hocket played by the ensemble. The ensemble melorhythm also is based on the catch-phrase. The melorhythms played by ensembles in accompaniment to spoken mmaranee are considered to be songs, or nwom in Twi.

The trumpet blowers in Kumase conceptualize two sound types for their groups: the pee group and the paw group. The trumpets’ lengths physically determine these sound types because short tusks produce high pitches, or pee sounds, and long tusks produce low pitches, or paw sounds. The mmęnhyefoconceptually hear pee or paw when blowing to help them produce the correct sound on a respective instrument. These conceptualizations help blowers physically shape their oral cavities in order to create the air volume required to fill a tusk and thereby produce the fullest possible tone on the instrument. A long tusk thus needs greater air volume at a slower velocity. Thinking paw dilates a blower’s throat and lowers his tongue to produce more air volume. A short tusk requires greater air pressure in order to displace the higher-frequency sound passing through the vibrating lips into the
short tube. Thinking *pee* raises the blower’s tongue to facilitate this and create a faster air speed. The *paw* groups (long trumpets) are the *ntahera*, *kwakwranynia*, and *nkofe*. The *pee* groups (short trumpets) are the *mmentia*, *nkontwema*, *amoakwa* and *nkrawoben*.

**Musical structure of an ensemble**

The lead trumpet, or speaking trumpet, of a group is called *sesee*, meaning “speaker.” In a song, the *sesee* recites the introductory *mmaranee* by lipping tones into the tusk in high-low patterns in imitation of Asante spoken language, Asante-Twi.

William G. Carter conducted a well-known study of the Dwaben *ntahera* that focused in part on *sesee* spoken text, initially in his master’s thesis (1971) and then again in his doctoral dissertation (1984). Whereas Carter discovered that a speaking trumpet’s bound morphemes and attached vowels are carried in one tone, i.e., one tone per two syllables, I found that some three-syllable combinations are also carried in just one tone, such as the elemental phrase “*momma so*,” which means, “Lift it up!” “Lift it up” directs the blowers to raise their instruments, for the *sesee* is beginning a song. Carter indicated that the Dwaben *sesee* articulated three syllables, whereas I recorded the *kwakwranynia* *sesee* Bernard Asante articulating the entire phrase with only one. The discrepancy exists among the players and not the researchers.

Carter also noted the rolling *r* rendered with a flutter tongue and the nasal *n* blown as two tones, the second slurring upward. Varied articulations occur amidst the changes of high and low tones of the surrogate Twi the *sesee* has mastered. Carter indicated four tone levels: high, low, falling, rising.

The ensemble led by the *sesee* consists of two divisions of tusks of varying lengths, longer than the *sesee*, and grouped by size into high and low tonal clusters. Each instrument contributes a single pitch to its respective cluster. In songs, the clusters are alternated rhythmically in patterns of interlocking high and low tones, particular to each song, making each a unique and identifiable hocket.

By convention, seven trumpets make an ensemble. The six that blow the two clusters are divided into three sub-groups, *agyesoa*, *afre*, and *bosoo*. There are three *agyesoa*, two *afre*, and one *bosoo*. The three *agyesoa* and the *bosoo* cluster together. The *agyesoa* and *bosoo* respond first to the *sesee*’s entrance signal and produce the first cluster on a weak pulse. *Agyesoa* means “responder,” and the tusks are shorter than the *afre* and *bosoo* tusks. The *bosoo*, usually the longest tusk, functions as the *agyesoa*’s ground, though it is not certain whether *bosoo* means “bass.”

The cluster consisting of *agyesoa* and *bosoo* alternates with the *afre*, which are longer than the *agyesoa* tusks but approximately the same length as the *bosoo*. The *afre* produce a lower cluster and blow rhythmically on the strong pulses of the song. The *afre* lengths are usually closely matched, just a few microtones apart in pitch. On occasion I have heard *afre* players match unisons somehow, whether intentionally or unintentionally. But matching pitch is irrelevant to a group, for the pitches are untempered and their combinations make unique clusters. Metrically, a song begins on the entrance of the *afre*, after response of the *agyesoa*.
Throughout the hocket, the afre are always on the strong pulses and the agyesoa and bo.soo always respond. Carter noted that afre means “one that calls.”

In the Kumase ntahera, the cluster consisting of the agyesoa and the bo.soo can be written in the Western pitches $d - 10$ cents, $d - 25$ cents, $e\# + 35$ cents, and $Bb + 20$ cents. This cluster alternates with the afre cluster $B - 10$ cents and $Bb - 5$ cents. The sesee pitch can be expressed as $eb\# + 25$ cents, the glides of the surrogate speech revolving around it. The sesee usually lips the tones considerably, down often as far as a fourth. The sesee’s vent hole is at its apex and is manipulated by the thumb. The vent hole facilitates lipping when the open hole is used for the lower lipped tones. Closing the hole facilitates lipping the pitch up again, for the open-holed lower tones allow for less lip movement when slurring back up to the closed-hole fundamental. The open-hole high tone is used only when cueing the ensemble such as after an introduction. The sesee player then opens the vent hole and blows strongly the higher open-holed tone, $e\# - 15$ cents, which is produced in the shorter air column created inside the tusk by the open hole. At a song’s finale the sesee again signals the ensemble to cadence by blowing this open-holed $e\# - 15$. The agyesoa and bo.soo then cease, and the sesee and afre cadence together on a formula consisting of three longer tones, lipped in rhythm downward.

Figure 3
Philip Asamoah Bonsu of the nkontwema group, blowing a kwakwrannya bo.soo.
then up. It must be understood that among the sesee players in Kumase, the only time the open-holed higher pitch is used is to signal entrances and cadences. Outside of Kumase the sesee players use the open-holed higher tone in the speech patterns, without any recourse to the open-holed lower pitch. Throughout the songs, various players rattle their tongues in their exhalation, for this articulation adds greater vibration to the tones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sesee</th>
<th>agyesoa and bosoo</th>
<th>afrê</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e¹ - 15 cents</td>
<td>d - 10 cents</td>
<td>B - 10 cents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e♭⁰ + 25 cents</td>
<td>d - 25 cents</td>
<td>B♭ - 5 cents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lipping down</td>
<td>c♯ + 35 cents</td>
<td>B♭ + 20 cents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1
Tusk pitches of the Kumase ntahera group.\(^{44}\)

Below is a transcription of Amansa epe Wahye Brabe, which means “The People Like and Come to See,” connoting “people coming to see the Asantehene.” It was transcribed from a recording I made of the Kumase ntahera. The sesee surrogate speech follows the tonal and rhythmic contour of the phrases. The translation of the speech is as follows:

Lift it up!
We have lifted ourselves.
Listen!
The people come to see.

The agyesoa and bosoo respond with Amansa, which means “the people.” Throughout the song the sesee with the afrê then recite Brabe, which means “come,” then epe wahye, which means “like and see.”

The origin of the ntahera trumpets
The ntahera is the most significant of the Asantehene’s trumpet ensembles, and most of the paramount chieftaincies throughout the Akan world also have one. J. Agyeman-Duah recorded that, apart from Kumase, only the Dwaben and Nsuta chiefs had recognized ntahera groups.\(^{45}\) But Sarpong noted that the chiefs of Kokofu, Mampon, Bekwai, and Ejisu also had the ntahera.\(^{46}\) I studied the ntahera at Kumase, Ejisu, and a Denkyira ntahera at Asikuma.

Nketia understood that Osei Tutu captured the ntahera trumpets from the king of Tafo.\(^{47}\) But Sarpong understood that Osei Tutu created the ntahera, then gave it to the Nsutahene to polish and subsequently to the people of Dekyemso to look after.\(^{48}\) A.A.Y.
Kyerematen stated that the *ntahera* surrogate speech conveys no serious messages but that by its sound alone it instills fear in an enemy.49 Agyeman-Duah also noted, “When anyone hears the sound of these horns, he runs away.”50

Nana Kwame Fofie Opoku, the Kumase Ntaherahene, chief of the *ntahera*, revealed to me that the power of the *ntahera* derives from its mythological origin. The fear it instills is not from the sound alone but rather from the *ntahera* spirit that uses the trumpets for its abode. It is said to have descended from heaven with the Golden Stool.

The Asante Golden Stool, the seat of Asante kingship, is vested with the power of the souls of the Asante ancestors, who continue to use it as their abode. They are the souls who protect the Asante kingdom. If the Golden Stool were to be captured or destroyed, the Asante believe it would bring the end of the Asante nation. The Golden Stool is safeguarded and hidden in a royal shrine, where it remains a conduit in ancestor veneration. It consists of carved wood covered in gold leaf, and legend has it that Osei Tutu’s high priest and advisor Okomfo Anokye conjured the Golden Stool down from heaven to a mountaintop, where it miraculously landed on the lap of Osei Tutu. According to the myth, the *ntahera*, too, was conjured down from heaven with the Golden Stool. For this reason the *ntahera* is the most important of the trumpet ensembles.

The *ntahera* is in essence a spirit that drives away evil to protect the nation. When sounded, it unleashes itself in order to dispel its enemies. The Kumase *ntahera* has been
maintained at the village of Kokobriko since Osei Tutu’s time. The Kumase ntahera trumpets are still kept in this village where the ntahera trumpet blowers live, and where I attended their rehearsals.

**Denkyira ntahera**

I also researched a Denkyira ntahera at the Asikuma court in Ghana’s Central Region. Asikuma is a chieftaincy that existed within the old Denkyira kingdom but survived Denkyira’s defeat by the Asante in 1701. Denkyira oral tradition dates from before 1500, to the Nkyira court at Abankesieso in the north, when Denkyira was called Nkyira.\(^{51}\) The people migrated southward because of wars.

The Denkyira trumpet blowers trace the ntahera and its repertoire to the court at Abankesieso. Kwame Nkrumah, the Denkyira Kontihene, said that all of the trumpet traditions in Ghana began in Abankesieso. Nkrumah also told me that the Nkyira migrated from the ancient Ghana Kingdom in the Western Sudan (ca. 500-1230), but the connection, lacking archaeological and linguistic evidence, remains precarious. Nkrumah said that the

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**Figure 4**

Denkyira ntahera, pouring a libation to the ntahera spirit abiding in the trumpets.
first Denkyirahene was a woman named Nana Ayekra Adeboe, and that she was the first to use ivory trumpets in Denkyira.52

Eva Meyerowitz’s collected data on the Tekyiman-Brong ntahera from the 1940s is similar to Nkrumah’s in terms of its matrilinealism. The Tekyiman-Brong trace their ancestry to the Bono (Brong) Kingdom, founded in 1295 after refugees fled south from a kingdom called Dia, located at the Niger River bend. As Meyerowitz gathered, a number of refugees under a new king and queen fled to the Black Volta, and after the king’s death, the queen mother hid the court regalia, including the ntahera, in order to prevent the election of a new king.53 This ntahera was abolished after Brong’s defeat by the Asante in 1723.

Kwamina B. Dickson and Rattray have commented that the introduction of a few change-producing families to a society must not be confused with a migration of an entire population.54 If we cannot presume the origins of the Akan people from this southward migration, the oral traditions of the ntahera might still indicate the ivory trumpets’ use in pre-Asante times.

Neither the origin of the ntahera nor the derivation of its name is known. The Denkyira trumpet blowers, however, revealed to me a facet of ntahera spirituality and the concept of the trumpets as its abode. I participated with the players in a libation to the ntahera before the tusks were blown. The libation consisted of pouring a drink over the tusks while praying to the spirit for permission to teach the songs to me.

The kwakwrannya
The kwakwrannya is another Kumase trumpet ensemble of the paw type, i.e., the tusks are long and they produce low tones. Only one kwakwrannya exists in Ghana, and it is maintained at the Asantehene’s court in Kumase. Although the kwakwrannya normally comprises seven tusks, it had only six in 2001 as a result of the damaged sesee. An agyesoa tusk had taken its place and was used for speaking, though it had no vent hole. The sesee player, Bernard Asante, was skilled at lipping the tones on this tusk without the hole.

The kwakwrannya were war trumpets used to precede the Asante infantry in battle, using their sound to instigate bees and other wild animals to attack the enemy. Kwakwrannya’s meaning is derived from the phrase kōkwam 掌门ya, which means “does not travel without it,” denoting it is never left behind.55

Sarpong noted that the kwakwrannya was created by the traditional priest Okomfo Anokye for Suabri, a war general. The legend goes that Okomfo Anokye filled the kwakwrannya tusks with wasps, bees, ants, and snakes to act as talismans against the enemy.56 Sarpong also noted that the kwakwrannya received £4 per battle, whereas the ntahera received £2 to guard the palace.57 The kwakwrannya repertoire is identical to that of the ntahera, but with different clusters, appropriate to the former’s tusk lengths. The kwakwrannya trumpet blowers live, and have always lived, in Ahwerewam, a village off Sunyani Road.
The **mmentia**

*Mmentia* literally means “short trumpets.” The word *mmen* is the plural of *aben*, which means “trumpet” (singular). The suffix *-tia* means “short.” The creation of the *mmentia* is attributed to Osei Tutu I and is said to have descended from heaven with the *ntahera* and the Golden Stool. The *mmentia* perform only praises to the Asantehene and do not play songs. They recite his signature motif, *Atoto We Sane*, which means “We are removing the knot.” The living Asantehene Osei Tutu II took his name from Osei Tutu I, the founder of Asante. The phrase “We are removing the knot” refers to the legend of Osei Tutu I, who was said to have had the ability to untie a legendary knot capable of being untied only by the true ruler. Osei Tutu I hacked the knot with an ax.³⁸ Today the phrase symbolizes the Asantehene unraveling society’s problems.

The *mmentia* blowers walk behind the Asantehene in processions and stand behind him when he sits in state. *Mmentia* are found at other Akan courts, where typically only one *aben* (singular of *mmentia*) is blown. Two *mmentia* are usually blown at once for the Asantehene, and occasionally three. Kyerematen saw *mmentia* plated in gold leaf at the Durbar (Festival) in honor of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, who visited Kumase 14 November 1961.⁵⁹

The *mmentia* are *pee* trumpets, and unlike the *paw* ensembles in groups of seven, they blow in duet or in trio, tuned approximately a whole step apart. *Atoto We Sane* is call-and-response between higher and lower *mmentia*, their cadence forming a whole-tone cluster. When the *mmentia* are blown in trio, they create a triad cluster.

An *aben* is often blown alone to render individual lines of proverbial *mmaranee*. *Mmaranee* (strong names of the Asantehene) are actually catch-phrases from longer proverbs. The tones produced on an *aben* are denotative of words, and the words are connotative of conceptions contained in the proverbs. These conceptions are rooted in Asante cognition, and *mmaranee* thus evoke strong images and sentiments.

A recitation of Osei Tutu II’s signature motif and *mmaranee* may be translated as follows:

```
We are removing the knot, Osei Tutu,
Porcupine Opoku, Important Opoku.
Where is my Mother?

You are of ancient royal blood.
Human beings tire, tire, tire for nothing.
Only heaven, only heaven, only earth, no one else.
```

The connotation of this text is as follows:

```
We are untying the bonds of oppression.
You are addressing our problems.
Opoku Ware II (the second Asantehene) is the great porcupine. [The
porcupine is the symbol of the Asante people and a fierce fighter that shoots quills from a distance. As soon as one quill is shot it is replaced by another already grown.]

Osei Tutu I looks for his mother because he was an orphan. [His parents were killed in the Denkyira war.]

You [the present Asantehene] are of ancient royal blood.

Human beings are too weak to surpass your power

Only heaven and earth together equal your strength. 60

Atoto We Sane, the signature motif of the Asantehene Osei Tutu II, is transcribed below in Example 2. It is blown by the mméntia as a call and response. The tone is changed on each instrument as the blower opens the vent hole for the higher tone. The tones of the calling abéntia in Western pitches are approximately $c^2$ (closed hole) and $d^2$ (open hole). The pitches of the responding abéntia are approximately $bb^1$ and $c^2$.

Example 2

Atoto We Sane (transcription).

The asókóben

As stated earlier, asókóben was the specialized term used by the Asante to differentiate an elephant tusk from a horn, derived from the word esono (elephant) and the combination of the Ga and Twi words for “horn.” 61 But Rattray noted that the asókóben, along with the ntahera and nkufe (nkofe) trumpets, were present and performing at the Wukudae ancestor veneration on 17 August 1921. 62 This reference distinguishes the asókóben as an instrument separate from and in addition to the other ivory trumpet groups.

Sarpong noted that the asókóben was associated with the mméntia. 63 Kyerematen observed it in procession following the mméntia at the Durbar in honor of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. He described it as being long and said it is also called asisibéri (asesebéri), which means “speaking trumpet.” Kyerematen added that the asókóben is used
principally to recount history or to send out messages. In 2001 only one trumpet blower I interviewed remembered the *asokøben*, and he told me that the players no longer come to the palace, for “they have grown old and lost their teeth.”

**The nkontwema**
The *nkontwema* trumpet ensemble originated in Akyem Kyebi in pre-Asante times. Oral tradition states that Osei Tutu asked the *nkontwema* to accompany him to war against Denkyira (ca. 1700), but written sources indicate that that Akyem was on Denkyira’s side. Asante eventually conquered Akyem in 1742 under the second Asantehene Opoku Ware, and it is more likely that Asante acquired the *nkontwema* then. The *nkontwema* eventually settled in the village of Frankyenebra near Kumase.

The *nkontwema* is a *pee* group, i.e., the trumpets are short tusks, and it is arranged in a group of seven like the *ntahera* and the *kwakwrannya*. But their sound quality is distinct because of their smaller sizes. Their repertoire is also different. Two of the *nkontwema* *afře* and one *agyesoa* are wrapped in woven red, green, and orange wool, the function of which, apart from decorative purposes, is not known. I was told that the term *nkontwema* is taken from the name of the place in Akyem Kyebi where the ensemble originated. A divination ritual of the same name uses seven antelope-hide cords fastened with talismans of beads, shells, teeth, and horns. The seven cords are believed to be able to predict the future and uncover lies. The term probably derived from the Twi word for the duiker antelope (*o. twe*). The *amoakwa* and *nkrawo*n

**The amoakwa and nkrawo*n**
According to the Amoakwahene, Nana Agyei Mensah II, chief of the *amoakwa* trumpets at Asokwa, Osei Tutu I acquired all ivory trumpet groups from Denkyira. Asokwa is the district of Kumase where trumpet blowers from Denkyira were platoon to serve the new Asante court after 1701. But Nketia noted that Denkyira trumpet blowers moved to Nsuta after the battle of Feyiase; thus the Amoakwahene’s information may or may not be entirely accurate as concerns the early history of other Asante trumpet groups. But the *amoakwa* and the *nkrawo*n are still based in Asokwa. The *amoakwa* and *nkrawo*n trumpets traditionally have been assigned to the Queen Mother, the Ohenmaahene; they play at her palace in Kumase. Whether their role as the Queen Mother’s ensemble came from Denkyira is not known.

The *amoakwa* includes seven trumpets, named *sesee*, *agyesoa*, *afře*, *booo*, *nkonton* (meaning unknown, possibly drumstick), *Ohenmaafie* (i.e., Queen Mother palace), and *promaso* (i.e., the front yard to Manhyia Palace). Their repertoire is unique. They are augmented by the *nkrawo*n trumpets, for the two groups play together. The *nkrawo*n trumpets are distinguished by their red women’s headscarves, called *nkrawo*, wrapped around the tusks. I was told that a combined total of thirty-six trumpets have been blown at once by both *amoakwa* and *nkrawo*n, but usually the number does not exceed eighteen. I saw nine in the group when they performed at funerals. The *amoakwa* and *nkrawo*n are...
the only Asante trumpet groups that perform arrangements accompanied by a percussion group called the *tipre*, consisting of *atumpa* talking drums and a unique set of iron-plate cymbals called *chian-chian*.

The Amoakwahene still regards the Denkyira as his ancestors, and he maintains that the Denkyira made peace with the Asante and volunteered to serve. He also said the Denkyirahene Ntim Gyakari maintained pure gold trumpets, cast in the form of tusks. The length of a forearm, they were never blown and existed only for show. In processions the carrier held the instrument over his left shoulder with the right hand, his arm crossing his chest. The gold trumpets, the Amoakwahene said, led the processions, followed by the blown trumpets. Sarpong noted that each trumpet group had a “gold horn,” called *asikabêne* after the word *sika*, which means “gold,” and they were made of ivory with gold plate.71 The Amoakwahene said that the existing gold trumpets are kept hidden in the royal shrines, to which only the Asantehene and his cabinet have access.

The *amoakwa* and *nkrawobêne* were the only two groups I encountered in Asokwa in 2001. The meaning and derivation of the term *amoakwa* is unknown, but it is probably the name of the place in Denkyira from where they were taken.
The asokwafuo

Both Rattray\(^7\) and Wilks\(^7\) discussed the asokwafuo, as the trumpet blowers were once collectively called. Asokwafuo literally means “Asokwa people,” and it comprised the royal drummers and trumpet blowers. The drummers were later reorganized into the akyeremadefoo,\(^\text{74}\) a separate office. I have heard trumpet blowers nowadays collectively referred to as mmenhyefoo because the ntaherafoo, kwakwrannyafoo, and nkontwemafoo have never lived in Asokwa. But Wilks noted that trumpet blowers underwent training in Asokwa every night,\(^7\) for the name derived from “asokohen,” the term for “elephant-horn.” But the amoakwafuo and nkrawofenfoo remain in Asokwa and are sometimes called asokwafuo.

Both Rattray and Wilks described the specific duties of the nineteenth-century asokwafuo, which were quite different from the duties of the twenty-first-century mmenhyefoo. In a category of nhenkwaa,\(^7\) or palace servants, the asokwafuo worked as royal sextons who, among other things, maintained the palace grounds and repaired buildings.\(^7\) Sarpong noted that the asokwafuo were considered as the king’s “wives,” for like “wives,” they could not be sued, have charges brought against them, nor be required to remove their sandals or lower their cloth when standing before the king.\(^7\)

At the time of Osei Kwadwo (1764-77), the fourth Asantehene, the asokwafuo became agents for the Company of State Traders. Kwadwo appointed his son Kwasi Ampon as Asokwahene, and under Ampon the asokwafuo were renovated. A senior trumpet blower named Kwame Dendo accompanied a trading mission to the coast with the task of reporting on the condition of the reconstructed road. Later, in 1815, the Asantehene’s gold trumpet blower Amankwa Boahen headed a party of two hundred men who arrived in Accra to collect revenues and open talks for further trade.\(^7\) Rattray noted that the asokwafuo traders were not paid, but became rich charging fees on transactions.\(^8\)

In battle, the asokwafuo carried ammunition and the chief’s food.\(^8\) But Sarpong noted that prisoners of war were given to the Ntaherahene and Kwakwrannyahe.\(^8\) Adubofuor noted how the drums and horns kept sounding in order that a flank would not attack a friendly unit by mistake.\(^3\) John Beecham in 1841 noted that the tusk trumpet was the most martial of instruments, and every chief had his own “air” so that in the heat of battle his respective position could be ascertained.\(^4\) The battle calls of the Asumegya, Bekwai, Dwaben, Kokofu, Kumawu, and Mampon chiefs, for which Rattray gave texts and translations, are still played when these chiefs are at court or visiting the Asantehene.

The nkofe

The nkofe is a long-trumpet ensemble in Kumase that shares its repertoire in part with the ntahera, kwakwrannya, and nkontwema. Its name derives from kofe from Gá language, the Gá being the people of the Accra region where the asokwafuo went to do commerce. Kofe derives from the Gá words kon, which means “horn,” and fe, which means “to blow.”\(^85\)

The fourth Asantehene, Osei Kwadwo, created the nkofe in the eighteenth century, apparently for his son Kwasi Ampon, the Asokwahene who renovated the asokwafuo. Agyeman-Duah’s first note on the nkofe indicated, to the contrary, that Osei Tutu I created it prior to the Akim War and that he captured it at Adanse. But Agyeman-Duah’s second
note states that contemporary sources maintain that the *nkofe* was created by Osei Kwadwo, though without citing a source.\textsuperscript{86}

Kyerematen listed the *nkofe* as the leading trumpet group, followed by the *ntahera* at the Durbar in honor of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Kumase on 14 November 1961.\textsuperscript{87} He noted that another name for the *nkofe* is *kokonanya*, meaning “is never left behind when the King turns out in state.”

It proved impossible for me to obtain interviews with the *nkofe*; however, Nkofehene Nana Kofi Owusu II was hospitable to me and allowed the recording of the *nkofe*. Agyeman-Duah indicated that the same Nana Kofi Owusu II has been the Nkofehene since at least 1976.

**Owuo and *tatwia***

Rattray described one of the nineteenth-century *asokwafoo*’s roles at a royal funeral, wherein they carried the body to “the place of drippings,”\textsuperscript{88} where it began the first stages of decomposition. In the footnote to this passage, Rattray described a trumpet called *owuo*, meaning “death,” the name taken from its sound.

*Owuo, owuo, owuoo, death, death, death.*\textsuperscript{89}

At the Durbar in honor of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Kumase in 1961, Kyerematen listed a trumpet called the *tatwia*, the other name for *owuo*. He noted that it imitated the bark of a dog, which is *otwia*. He further indicated that it is blown in the direction of an enemy to warn them of annihilation if they should approach.\textsuperscript{90} Here again is a trumpet performing a protective function, as with the *ntahera*, in this case blown to protect Queen Elizabeth II. *Tatwia, or owuo,* is played at funerals for this same reason—to protect the spirit. Kyerematen also stated that *owuo* was blown for executions in pre-colonial times. The *amoakwa* demonstrated its sound for me. It sounds like a dog’s howl, and it is no longer played publicly.

**Ivory trumpets as power***

The acquisition or creation of ensembles since the founding of Asante has been a right maintained only by the Asantehene. As stated earlier, a chief’s rank is reflected by the number of musical ensembles he is permitted to retain by decree of the Asantehene. The Asantehene, the most powerful chief, therefore has the most. At sacred and political events, the Asante court ensembles perform publicly in order to display Asante power and prestige. In the royal processions for the events I observed, the *nkontwema* led the parades, followed by the *ntahera*, and then the *kwakwrannya*. The trumpet groups processed amidst drummers and courtesans carrying regalia. The *nkofe* then immediately preceded the Asantehene and the *mmentia* processed behind him.

By convention, when the Asantehene sits in state, numerous polyphonic ensembles play separate songs simultaneously in counter-juxtaposition to create what I have termed a “sound barrage.” The ivory trumpet ensembles perform a very important role in this
phenomenon. Nketia has referred to it as “noises off,”91 in the sense of much noise being made for the festivity of the occasion. But “noises off” as a description of what the musicians are doing does not explain the underlying cultural reason for doing it, which is to protect the court. In creating a sound barrage, ensembles make staggered entrances based on the Akan aesthetic of “energy level and intensity factor,” wherein gradations of intensity are achieved on the separate energy levels culminating to raise the sound’s intensity.92 The term “barrage” has a military denotation in that the sound is directed outward to create a protective barrier for those behind it (pampim in Twi). Outside the barrage, enemies are dispelled, while within it the earthly commune with the ancestral. Nketia told me that the “sound barrage” analogy, based on my informants’ descriptions, is a viable explanation for this musical phenomenon.93

Such spiritual functions of music-making in other cultures have previously been noted in trumpet studies. Baines wrote that ancestor’s voices are sepulchral, and ancestors are invited to commune after the appropriate sounds are made through certain musical instruments.94 For the Asante, “sound barrage” is not an invitation but the clearing away of harm. Klaus P. Wachsman95 also noted trumpets’ magico-religious functions in cultures, and E.M. von Hornbostel wrote that such sound-producing instruments are invested with “mysterious and superhuman potency.”96

Historical, Archaeological, and Linguistic Accounts

Early descriptions

Early descriptions of Akan ivory trumpets by travelers shed light on the trumpets’ early uses and context. The first such description is by Pieter de Marees, member of a Dutch trading expedition in 1602.97 Marees noted that horns made from elephant tusks were decorated with incisions and blown only for the king or captain.98 I did not see any incised trumpets in 2001. Marees’ work also contains the first illustration of Akan trumpet blowers in the engraving of the “Nobleman’s” ceremony.99

In 1681 the French Huguenot Jean Barbot described Akan trumpets of various sizes made from elephant tusks, one with a hole at one end for signaling.100 The engravings of the three ivory trumpets in Barbot’s book also indicate that Akan tusks were once incised with decorations.101

William Bosman’s references to “elephants’ teeth” as “blowing-horns” in 1704102 have been criticized for being strongly opinionated,103 in spite of the subsequent clarification of his original Dutch text.104 Bosman indicated the tusks’ use and function in performance for chiefs, whom he described as those who “acquire a reputation and great name among their fellow citizens,” and he also noted tusk-blowing on “merry” days.105

T. Edward Bowdich’s descriptions from 1817 offer a more valuable contribution. After his arrival in Kumase, he wrote in an apparent reference to a “sound barrage,”

Upwards of 5000 people, the greater part warriors, met us with awful [sic] bursts of martial music, discordant only in its mixture; for horns, drums, rattles, and gong-gongs were all exerted with a zeal bordering on phrenzy….”106
But on another occasion he wrote:

The bands, principally composed of horns and flutes, trained to play in concert, seemed to soothe our hearing into its natural tone again by their wild melodies.\textsuperscript{107}

Bowdich also mentioned a “gold horn blower,”\textsuperscript{108} and noted that even the ivory horns’ mouthpieces were ornamented with gold.\textsuperscript{109} He classified “horns” as the loudest of the musical instruments, blowing flourishes for “martial and grand effect.”\textsuperscript{110}

Bowdich also explained surrogate speech:

It has been mentioned in the Military Customs of the Ashantees, that peculiar sentences are immediately recognized by the soldiers and people, in the distinct flourish of the horns [ivory trumpets] of the various chiefs: the words of some of these sentences are almost expressible by the notes [tones] of the horns….\textsuperscript{111}

\textit{Mm\!\!odwe-mm\!\!odwe}

Bowdich indicated that he saw “horns” ornamented with the “jawbones of human victims.”\textsuperscript{112} Sarpong, in his 1990 study, stated that the jawboned ivory trumpet is called mm\!\!odwe-mm\!\!odwe.\textsuperscript{113} In Twi, the singular of jaw is \textit{ab\!\!odwe} and the plural is \textit{mm\!\!odwe}. The double \textit{mm\!\!odwe-mm\!\!odwe} denotes a trumpet ornamented with many jawbones. The imagery of the Asante gold brass weights also indicates that as many as nine may be attached.

\textbf{Figure 6}

\textit{Mm\!\!odwe.} The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889 (89.4.1499). Photograph by Joe Kaminski, with permission from The Metropolitan Museum of New York.
to an abenh. The mmogwe in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Crosby Brown Collection (no. 89.4.1499) has two (see Figure 6).

It has been suggested that the function of the mmogwe was to signify both enemies and elephants praising the Asantehene, but I have not been able to verify this explanation in the field. I was told that the mmogwe are sacred and kept in shrines. Within this religious context it has been traditionally believed that the jawbone of an enemy transferred his spiritual energy to the force abiding in the tusk. A reading from Bowdich illuminates this: He explains that certain body parts of defeated enemies were used as talismans. Warriors would wear a victim’s bone or eat a piece of his heart. Bowdich maintained that without harnessing the spiritual forces left astray, the Asante feared “their vigor and courage would be secretly wasted by the haunting spirit of the deceased.”

African traditional religions have been regarded as “animistic,” however, Asante belief is not in objects having spirits but rather in objects being abodes of spirits. Edwin W. Smith commented that spirits act on one another from their abodes, and he more accurately classified this concept as “dynamism.”

The Mande connection
Posnansky conducted archaeological research at the site of the medieval market town of Begho, outside Hani in Brong Ahafo, northwest of Kumase and near the Ivory Coast border. Ivory trumpet shards were found in a sixteenth-century setting. This is the earliest hard evidence of ivory trumpet usage that can be traced in an Akan region. This time frame is the same as that of the Nkyira court at Abankeseso, where the Denkyira trumpet blowers told me that a trumpet tradition also once existed. Begho in particular, along with the twenty or so small states in the region in general, had well-established trade links with Jenne, from where Mande traders sought avenues south to the rainforest in Akanland via the route through Kong in present-day Ivory Coast.

As early as the first Ghana kingdom in the Western Sudan (ca. 500-1250), a people known as the Wangara, with whom a barter system known as the “silent trade” was carried out, lived farther south across the Niger River in the tropical forests. In the “silent trade,” heaps of salt and goods carried in caravans across the desert were left for the Wangara in exchange for the gold they left in its place. The exchangers never met and the identity of the Wangara remained a mystery, but they are thought to have been early Akan. The southward spread of the Mande peoples was a result of this silent trade, although nothing can be said of the time of arrival of the Mande at Begho. Carbon-14 dates a proto-urban settlement at Begho, called Nyarko suburb, to 965-1125. B.W. Andah states that the evolution of both local and immigrant groups at the site are yet to be explored in detail, but the present evidence suggests a large, populated settlement with interrelated communities and a developed trade network prior to the Mande.

The ivory carvers in Ananta whom I met and interviewed hold the view that the Mande introduced ivory trumpets to the Akan along with other cultural influence, essentially derived from the Mali court (1234-1483). According to Hause, in the Mandingo language of the Mande and the Malinke dialects, the terms for the elephant tusk trumpet and its
variants are būru, būnu, būlū, būdū, and b'ru. Looking at the earliest references to trumpet usage in Mali, as described by Arab writers, we find animal horn and elephant tusk trumpets in the fourteenth century. Ibn Fadlallāh al-‘Umarī (d. 1348) wrote that the Mali royal entourage contained būq (Arabic for trumpet) made from the horns of animals, and Ibn Battūta noted in 1352-53 that Mali’s military bands consisted of drums and būq that were made from the tusks of elephants. I believe that the Mandingo term būru and its variants

Figure 7
Map of the Mande trade route from Jenne to Begho.
are similar to the Arabic term *būq*, just as the Persian term *būrī* is probably similar to the Arabic *būq*, Latin *buccina*, or Greek *βωκανη*. Farmer has outlined the arguments concerning the divergent etymological views of the origins of *būq* and *būrī*. I further maintain that the terms for trumpet prefixed with *bu-* are of the same archaic root but have developed locally at different times in history, while the origin of the root remains unknown. Battūta provides the earliest specific reference to *būq* as an ivory trumpet in medieval West Africa, and if they were ever used at the court of ancient Ghana (ca. 500-1250), no evidence has survived.

**Linguistic evidence**

Drawing on the linguistic data, I hold the view that ivory trumpets already were in use by the Akan before Mande contact. In his article “The Mande Loan Element in Twi,” Wilks lists the names of two types of drums that were introduced in the cultural diffusion. However, he did not list any of the Mandingo terms for ivory trumpet that the Mande may have used, so I believe that there is no evidence that the Akan aben is a borrowed concept from the Mande. Aben is clearly an Akan term that bears no relation to the Mandingo *būrū*.

According to Hause, be.n (aben), the Akan term for “horn,” is not even the same as the Ga *fēn*, which is from *fē*, meaning “to blow.” Since the Ga term for “horn” is *kon*, and apparently unrelated to Akan, I draw the further conclusion that the Akan aben had its own development, separate from even the Akan’s nearest southeastern coastal neighbors, the Ga.

Oral traditions, historical geographic data, and linguistic evidence reveal that an Akan population was in the rainforest prior to later migrating peoples, though specific time inferences are speculative. Member groups of the Kwa language family, including the Akan, occupied the region and among them there was a degree of cultural continuation. The linguistic evidence suggests that the Volta-Comoé group, which includes Akan, constitutes the ancestral group to many of the other Kwa subgroups, thereby making the Akan language among the earliest. The meaning of the term Akan derives from the word *kan*, which means “first and foremost.”

Historical geographic evidence suggests that the rainforest of the Akan was an obstacle to migrating peoples. When penetration did occur, it was not *en masse* but by small groups of people. When outsiders had a cultural influence on their hosts, they were still probably absorbed into the local population. Rattray stated that the migrations of a few families who produced cultural changes have been confused with large migrations of people. While the Akan did have cross-cultural contacts with the larger and smaller neighboring ethnic groups of the north and of the Guinea coast, the idea of mass movements is an unconvincing approach to cultural diffusion. Many court cultures in West Africa have had ivory trumpet traditions, including the Gā, the Ewe, the Yoruba, and the Edo. While similarities appear, neither archaeological nor linguistic grounds exist to suggest mass migrations from Benin, nor from ancient Ghana to the north, as some oral traditions suggest.

Terms for ivory trumpet in the various West African languages do not indicate a precedent for Akan borrowing, at least prior to the eighteenth century, when the Asantehene
Osei Kwadwo borrowed the concept of the nkofe from the Ga. As stated above, the Mandingo terms for ivory trumpet are bûrû, buînû, buîlî, bûdû, and b’îrû, and they have no linguistic similarity to aben. Other terms for ivory trumpets used on the Guinea coast have been me in Agni, kọfẹ’in Gà, akọfẹ’in Ewe, fe’in Togo, akho or aho in Dahomey, ako in Edo, owuo in Yoruba, and iuO in Ahlo. Another Edo name for the instrument is orbu. The Akan term aben has no linguistic similarity to any of the preceding terms, and my conclusion is that aben performance among the Akan is not only a prehistoric tradition, but was an established tradition long before identifiable outside influences affected Akan cultural history. The terms owuo and owu, which mean “death” respectively in Akan and Yoruba, however have a curious similarity. In Asante the owuo trumpet played at funerals to ward off evil, as stated earlier. The Yoruba owuo may be a cross-cultural concept, but the term still has no bearing on the origin of the aben.

Conclusion

This article has offered an introduction to the ivory trumpet ensembles of the court of the Asantehene in Kumase, Ghana, where the royal tusk blowers practice and perform their ancient art in the twenty-first century. It has explained the conceptualization of the ivory trumpet in Asante thought as regards its classification and royal context, reasons for tusk blowing, and musical logistics of ensemble performance. Oral traditions obtained from interviews with players and chiefs have been corroborated with written accounts of the Asante trumpets, or “horns” as they are most often called, to support the findings. A conceptual hypothesis in need of further investigation is how the “sound barrage” is created and how it functions in religious and cultural contexts. The researcher must seek explicit and implicit meanings for the musical phenomenon.

But the problem with a study of an Akan ivory trumpet tradition is in attempting to ascertain origins. Oral traditions are precarious for two reasons: they are shrouded in myth and they are prehistoric. The fact that they are prehistoric complicates matters when trying to corroborate oral traditions that claim that the Akan migrated from ancient Ghana. Vansina warns that Akan ruling dynasties said to be indigenous often have secret versions about their origin, showing them to be immigrants. But as argued by Andah, and earlier by Rattray, such migrations of ruling-class families were on a small scale, with the rulers becoming absorbed into the local cultures.

Archaeological investigation needs to continue in order to sort out directions of cultural influence, but the linguistic evidence suggests the dynamics. Analysis of terms for ivory trumpets on the Guinea coast and in Mali indicate that the aben is an indigenous instrument to the Akan, with a development separate and probably prior to the ivory trumpet traditions in neighboring areas.

The people of Hani, near the Begho archaeological site, told me that the first aben came out of the hole in the ground with the first people. The story, shrouded in myth, implies an indigenous status for the aben, just as it does for the Akan as “first” people. Gaining support from the linguistic hypothesis, I believe it can be said that the aben is indeed indigenous.
A chain of court cultures that use ivory trumpets for ceremonials and rituals extend throughout the Congo and West Africa. I do not know to what extent any of them survive, except for those of the Asante, among whom the tradition continues, as does a genuine concern for the repertoires. Ben Asante told me that ivory trumpet songs once numbered in the hundreds, but only some thirty of them are still performed today. Occasionally songs are revived when an elder calls younger tusk blowers to rehearsals, as I have seen Nana Yaw Donkor, the local chief of Frankyenebra and retired nkontwema sese, do several times.

It would be impossible for any one researcher to conduct fieldwork in all of the African courts, even if the necessary invitations were to be extended. Traditions are too numerous and widely dispersed, and many have fallen into disuse. Sarpong suggests that the present study should be continued to the north, to Ghana’s Brong Ahafo Region, then northwest into Ivory Coast to Kong, the Mande center where the Asante procured most of their ivory until 1817—also, presumably, a source of ivory for Mali and ancient Ghana. In 1819 the Asante defeated the Gyaman Kingdom in eastern Ivory Coast, causing the Mande-speaking Dyula state in Kong also to decline. Sarpong feels certain that ivory trumpet groups continue in this region. Gyaman, Sarpong states, had a repertoire older than and distinct from that of Asante, and traces of it may still survive in outlying village courts.\(^5\) The goal of such a study would not be to ascertain the origins of the traditions, but to understand the diversity of the traditions and their diverse repertoires. Ivory trumpet surrogate speech with its ensemble hocket catch-phrases is an oral tradition filled with historical meaning, contained in the metaphors of the denotative word-tones. It is a valuable aid for historians.

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NOTES

1 The letters e, o, and n are used in place of the IPA (International Phonetic Association) letters e, o, and n. They were shown to me by Tony Atwereboanda, my principle translator and court liaison.
2 The current Asantehene is Osei Tutu II, whose namesake was Osei Tutu I, the founder of the Asante federation.
5 I follow Jan Vansina in distinguishing oral tradition from oral history. Oral histories are reminiscences and accounts of events that occurred during the lifetime of the informants. Oral traditions, such as those explained in this article, are histories and their evolutions, transmitted beyond...


8 Ibid., 20.

9 Ibid., 17.

10 I visited this hole outside of Hani in Brong Ahafo, northwest of Kumase.


12 Wilks, *One Nation*, 17.


16 Ibid., 49.


20 From ζειλος, i.e., “lips.”


22 Victor-Charles Mahillon, *Catalogue descriptif et analytique du musée instrumental (historique et technique) de Conservatoire royal de musique de Bruxelles*, vol. 3 (Ghent: A. Hoste, 1900), 332.


30 Information from Philip Asamoah Bonsu of the nkontwema trumpet group.


34 Ibid., 10.
36 Carter, “Ntahera Horn Ensemble.”
38 Ibid., 265.
39 Ibid., 277.
40 Ibid., 266.
41 Ibid., 264.
42 Information gathered at my sessions with the Kumase ntahera.
43 Carter, Asante Music, 278.
44 The tone measurements were made on a Korg Chromatic Tuner CA-20.
46 Sarpong, Ceremonial Horns, 2.
48 Sarpong, Ceremonial Horns, 4.
49 A.A.Y. Kyerematen, Regalia for an Ashanti Durbar (Kumase: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 1961), 4.
55 Sarpong, Ceremonial Horns of the Ashanti, 3.
56 Ibid., 3; but the information was also told to me by Nana Owusu, a kwakurannya seseq.
57 Ibid., 9.
58 Kyerematen, Regalia, 8.
59 Ibid., 14.
60 Barima Owusu Achaw, abentiahyen, and son of the Mmẹntiahyene provided the Twi text, translation, and connotation.
61 Hause, “Terms for Musical Instruments in the Sudanic Languages,” 51.
62 Rattray, Ashanti, 94.
63 Sarpong, Ceremonial Horns, 4.
64 Kyerematen, Regalia, 14.
66 Barima Owusu Achaw, abentiahyen, and son of the Mmẹntiahyene.
67 Sarpong, Ceremonial Horns, 3; Frankyenebra is the site I visited most.
69 Told to me by the Nkontwemahene Nana Owusu Amsah; cf. Geoffrey Parrinder, West African


Sarpong, Ceremonial Horns, 1.


Wilks, Asante in the Nineteenth Century, 761.

K. Nkansa-Kyeremateng, Akan Heritage (Accra: Sesewie Publishers, 1999), 83; also told to me by Nana Owusu, a kwakuramnya sese.

Wilks, Asante in the Nineteenth Century, 457.

Ibid., 458.

Ibid., 455.

Sarpong, Ceremonial Horns, 8.

Ibid., 456-57.

Rattray, Ashanti Law and Constitution, 161.

Ibid., 124.

Sarpong, Ceremonial Horns, 9.


Hause, “Terms for the Musical Instruments in the Sudanic Languages,” 50.


Kyerematen, Regalia, 4.

Rattray, Religion and Art in Ashanti, 114.

Ibid., 114, note.

Kyerematen, Regalia, 14.

Nketia, African Music in Ghana, 103.


Baines, Brass Instruments, 37.


Pieter de Marees, Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602), transl. from the Dutch by Albert van Dantzig and Adam Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Ibid., 93.

Ibid., 167.


Ibid., plate 48, opposite p. 571.


3 T. Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast to Ashantee*, with a statistical account of that kingdom and geographical notices of other parts of the interior of Africa (London: John Murry, 1819), 31.

4 Ibid., 33.

5 Ibid., 37.

6 Ibid., 36.

7 Ibid., 36, in “Music” chapter.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 36.


13 Told to me by the Nkontwemahene Nana Owusu Ansah, chief of the *nkontwema* trumpets in Frankyenebra.


18 Boahen, *Topics in West African History*, 56.


20 Based on the map by Ivor Wilks in *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History*, 2.


132 Farmer, “Bûq.”


136 Ibid.

137 Ibid.

138 R.S. Rattray, The Tribes of the Asante Hinterland (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), xx; For a further defense of these linguistic and historical geographic positions on early migrations in the Akan region, see Kwamina B. Dickson, A Historical Geography of Ghana, 14-15.

139 Andah, “The Guinea Belt,” 495.

140 See nkofe in text above.


142 Ibid., 50-52.

143 Hélène La Rue, “And All the Trumpets Sounded for Him: A Comparative Study of Two Royal Trumpet Traditions, England and Benin,” paper read at the 17th Congress of the International Musicological Society, Leuven, Belgium, August 2002.


145 See “owuo” in text above.

146 See “Ivory trumpets as power” in text above.

147 As told to me by the Denkyira Krondihene, Kwame Nkrumah.

148 Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition as History, 97.


150 Sarpong, personal conversation, 2002.