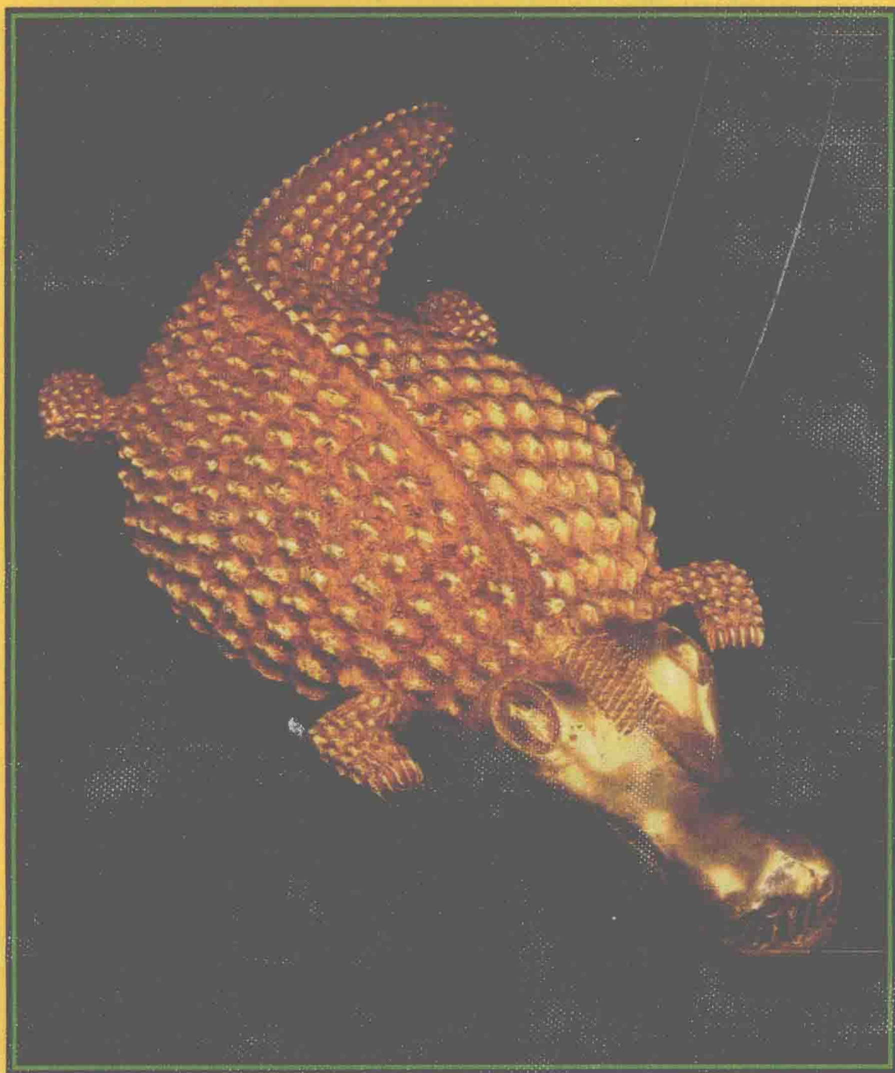
A Cultural and Social History of Ghana From the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century

Book 2

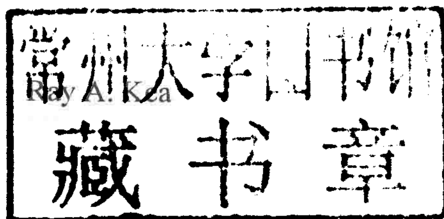


A CULTURAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF GHANA FROM THE SEVENTEENTH TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Gold Coast in the Age of Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

Book 2

Ray A. Kea



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Ivor Wilks

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Chapter Four

Subalterns and Social Struggle

"Another will tear up the prison records.
Another will break down the doors of the jail.
Another will wipe from our thin shoulders
The dust and blood fallen from our necks." (G. Peguy)

"Silences, gaps, absences, ellipses, lapses, all of them symbolic of the truths that historical writing is after all writing and not reality, and that as subalterns their history as well as their historical documents are necessarily in the hands of others." (Edward Said)

RETHINKING WHAT WE KNOW

"History to the Defeated"

What was the nature of subaltern historical identities on the Gold Coast? Who or what was a subaltern and what elements constituted conditions of subalternity? Floating outcasts, masterless men and women, and rebels and insurgents with their alienated self-consciousness and subversive discourses, together with (dis-)confirmations of agency and personhood, were distinguishable and ambivalent features of the Atlantic world's social geography. They can be identified among the consequences of layered and structured histories. They were among the effects of a history, or a set of histories, grounded in the uneven distribution of material and psychic well-being, and they were always situated in relationships of power and force. Or to phrase the matter somewhat differently, they were subordinated social subjects, subjugated voices (*gbei*), upon whom history, in one way or another, made its demands. Their lives deconstruct the homogeneity of history into what Michel Foucault termed "genealogy," that is, disparities, dispersions, discontinuities, and contradictions. The social past of subalterns was heterogeneous, fragmented, and sub-

ject to multiple patterns of domination. The central questions are these: In what voices do subalterns speak and what is the tone of their voices? What stories do they have to tell? Finally, how does one assimilate a different set of particulars, namely subalterns' experiences, into the familiar meta-narratives of Gold Coast/ Ghanaian and West African history? To recover something of their history and their subversive capacities, it is necessary to take seriously the experiences and thoughts of the subordinated in all of their heterogeneity. However, to recover suppressed or silenced voices does not mean that the recovered texts and their places of utterance are not to be critiqued or re-inscribed in order to determine their egalitarian and liberatory impulses and possibilities. The voices and their texts belong to the strata of sea-town historicity.

The working premise of this chapter is that actions, practices, and events of the past were socially situated and that all situations were historically structured. However, the effects of events, practices, and actions cannot be reduced to the conditions that produced them, for the socially situated and the historically structured possessed their own mediated and internal logic and dynamic. What does socially situated mean and what weight does it carry as an analytical and descriptive category?[1] In their phenomenology, that is, in the sense of the internalized effects of traumatizing and exacting experiences, events, practices, and actions specified local space-times in the framing configurations of regional and global world-system processes. The particular task of the chapter is to recover the silenced and suppressed historical experiences of those whom Ranajit Guha calls the subaltern classes.[2] In some social-political contexts, these experiences constituted subversive moments and texts. They did not produce a hermeneutics of justice. The underlying assumption is that the aspirations of the subalterns were authentic, although in most cases they did not have the possibility of realization.

My study seeks to recover subalterns' self-awareness of the tensions, incongruities, and injustices of everyday life and locate the sites where power was exercised on liminal persons, individual material subjects, in concrete situations. It aims, too, to delineate instances of collective solidarity. Subaltern consciousness and actions, it should be remembered, received the effects of global commercial exchanges and they were produced and constituted within these exchanges, specifically the social relationships, discourses, and organized spaces established and shaped by the exigencies of Commerce. A framing question reveals the chapter's

implicit thesis. How did differentially located subalterns inhabit and understand their contemporary global and local moment, a moment structured by hierarchy and authority relations? One can pose a series of related questions: What expressions and sites of insubordination, opposition, dissidence, and struggle did history produce in and around the coastal towns? What political economy produced and sustained these sites? Can resistance, violent struggle, and mutinous confrontation be regarded as another way of representing a subversive presence in the social relations of Gold Coast Commerce? What deep structures and fields of struggle can be identified? What politics of silence obscure the content and material reality of resistance and struggle? Who are the subjects of protest and insubordination? It is said that wherever there is oppression, there is resistance to it.[3] The questions seek to identify a historical and social landscape of a particular kind. They point to the locations of past struggles and oppositions, which problematize the assumed isomorphism of Tradition, Custom, and Community in a timeless landscape. An analysis of subalternity reveals the discontinuous and contradictory relationships that permeated everyday life. The chapter contends that subaltern voices and subaltern discourses and hermeneutics are to be found in the details of their actions, in the social spaces they occupied, and in their liminal juxtapositions. The agencies of action and struggle were as varied as the movement of individuals between their roles and their role relations. They are both complex and compelling.

I begin with the premise that the outcast, the marginalized, and the rebellious, categories of socially constructed differences that affirmed the priority of properly socialized others, belonged to a civil and political world that was hierarchically organized around discourses of power, status seeking, and social relations of inequality. Hence, a cultural distinction was made between those who were in the world and had manners (*bajen*) and those who were not in the world and had no manners (*be jen*). The distinction was an effect of the complexity of historical and social forces and struggles. These were tied up with histories of lordships and power relations, warfare and conquests, inequities, conspicuous consumption, surplus extraction, and wealth accumulation. The hidden contradictions of discourses and social relations were constituted around institutional complexes within which the farms of villages (*akrowa*), markets (*jaji*), royal courts (*maŋtshewei*), places of judgment (*kojomohei*), festivities (*kusumei*), ritual ceremonies and exchanges (*woŋtshumei*), oracular revelations (*gbalei*), and relations of appropriation (*tshu*

onia) had their places and movements. Within this habitational and existential field, social and material inequalities expressed an ideology of difference, exclusion and inclusion, social membership and social disconnection, affirmations and valuation, and silences and suppressions. This is the horizon historical analysis is obliged to acknowledge and critique. It also has to acknowledge human action and aspirations amidst contingent sequences of events and the systemic logic of surplus accumulation and social reproduction. The world of the *nshonamãji* could not re-produce or maintain itself without generating contestation. The coastal and inland *Herskaber* ("lordships"), *Fyrstendømer* ('principalities"), and *Kongeriger* ("kingdoms"), in the language of Christian Protten, were the main agencies of sovereign power on the political scene. They had their organized landscapes. There were towns and cultivated fields, palaces and cottages, and hunting grounds and workshops, and each of these formations nested down as best it could in the heritage of its social production and historical anomalies.[4] Uprisings, violent opposition, insubordination, crime, and marronage were among the defining elements of this heritage in much the same way as cooperation, solidarity, negotiation, and accommodation.

The present study acknowledges and re-centers the long and complex history of social struggles, agency, and the intrapolitics in and around the *nshonamãji*. An examination of hidden and public transcripts aims to identify relations of domination and subordination and the actions and thoughts of subalterns forged within these relations. The transcripts configure a class-based politics and sociality that was embedded in regimes of production, surplus, and commodity exchange, although they are not often presented in this way. Intrapolitics calls to mind the domain of daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts. The study looks at the sea-town social order from below and not from above and regards spontaneous refusals and the social and personal consequences of destruction and expropriation. Within the ambit of intrapolitics there are no specific allusions to great and recognizable events or the centers and important markers of the past, all associated with ruling dynasties and dominant social-political systems.[5] An implicit, underlying assumption is that a fundamental shift in power relations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries extended the scope of the disenfranchised and the depth of their disenfranchisement.

At different historical moments, changes in the strategies of global capital accumulation led to intended and unintended effects. These effects are to be seen in the

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long and complex history of social and political struggles, instances of disruption and displacement and confrontation, and episodes of economic and political turmoil.[6] It is equally necessary to recognize hegemony and the different modes of power - domination is different from authority, which is different from coercion - and the different capabilities of power - as a capacity and resource or as a practice and discourse. It is necessary to go beyond the power/resistance model that can only conceive of power as constraint or as always negative in its effects. If power were recognized as something that was exercised as well as a centered resource to be mobilized, this conception would mean that power worked on subjects and worked over them.[7] The eighteenth century project of Commerce, with its insatiable drive for wealth and profit, intersected and reproduced dominant inequities and moments of subaltern resistance, which sometimes carried an anti-Commerce inflection. Inequities and resistance cannot be separated from each other, nor from the project of Commerce.

In a 1761 Memorial of the Committee of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, the turbulent interaction of subjects and objects - the raw materials of social experience - were transformed into something more ordered and coherent than the messiness and disorderliness of life.

> "That on the 18th of March 1761, Mr. Caldwell Craig attended the Committee to acquaint them that two Black Free-Men belonging to the River Gambia, one called Tosser, the other Angoor Join, voluntarily shipped themselves on board the Boss, Captn John Sear, in order to assist in navigating the ship, there being no other hands to be got, and without which she could not proceed on her voyage to America.
> That soon after her departure for Gambia, there happened an Insurrection of the Slaves on Board the said ship, in which these two Free-Men, by helping to quell it, were very instrumental in saving the ship and cargo.
> That the said ship in her voyage was taken and carried into Martinico, where the said two Blacks were cleared at the Admiralty Office as Free-Men; but the owners of the privateers, the King David, Captn Roussele, have detained the two men, to work on board the privateer, Captn Sear not knowing what steps to take to get them cleared; but was informed the method is to apply to the Governor of Antigua, to request him to satisfy the General of Martinico that the two aforesaid Blacks are Free-Men.
> That certificates of their Freedom under the hands of the Governor & Council of James Fort, Gambia, are deposited in the Admiralty Office at Martinico.
> That [they're] not being sent back may be of great prejudice to the trade, as their friends will think they are sold as slaves."[8]

A rebellion of enslaved and coerced men, women, and children on a ship bound for the plantations of the Americas was successfully put down with the invaluable as-

sistance of two of the ship's navigators, "Free Black-Men" from the Gambia River Valley. The agency of the dispossessed and dislocated insurgents was dis-confirmed by the initiative of the Gambian Valley navigators acting in concert with the ship's wage-earning crew. Continuing its voyage, the ship was seized by privateers and taken to Martinique in the Caribbean where the captain of the privateers' vessel employed the two navigators as slave laborers. The intervention of the Admiralty Office and the General of Martinique settled the matter. The relations of power that defined the Admiralty Office ascribed an order for status identity that operated at the same time as a form of abstract and practical intelligibility. Free or slave status was to be decided according to juridical definitions and legal precedent. The navigators were, indeed, "Free-Men" and not slaves. They received official certificates affirming and guaranteeing their freedom. The statements (*énoncé*) of the Memorial existed under the conditions of a complex group of relations, which Foucault calls "discursive," and the regularity that binds the statements' relations he designates a "discursive formation." The Memorial's language can be analyzed in terms of a cohesive and autonomous empirical order of factual information; however, one must recognize the material contradictions that produced the Memorial's discursive practices and which were re-produced in them - ambiguity, conflict, denial, displacement, power, and tension.[8a]

The merciless conditions of Atlantic slaving produced an insurrection among enslaved persons who had disappeared from their homelands. There were other juxtaposed agents: a wage-earning ship's crew pursuing its livelihood, privateers in pursuit of riches, and the sovereign power of empire builders institutionalized as the Admiralty Office (naval warfare), the General of Martinique (colonial governance), and the African Company (trans-national profit-making). The mercantile world of the slave ship could not re-produce or maintain itself without bringing forth insurrectionary others, like the rebellious slaves aboard the Boss. Out of desperation and in the face of death, they created their own relations of solidarity. In the Admiralty Office archives, the action and the depth of passion and conviction of slave rebels had neither dimension nor dignity.[9] Yet, the historian assuming that the aspirations of enslaved rebels were authentic could posit the possibility of their realization and thus construct a view of history around the realized possibilities of subaltern subjects who constituted the eighteenth century Atlantic working class.

The Atlantic world's mercantile project had another aspect. In the 1930s the British anthropologist M.J. Field in the course of her work among "the Gã people" of the Gold Coast records a dominant and authoritative oral tradition (*blemasãne*) concerning an ancient Accra. The tradition was the product of a social or collective memory, which can be identified as an ordering and knowing subject about the past, and an archive of a particular discursive formation. The archive can be defined as the set of possibilities which was drawn on in the generation of statements and which defined them as statements and allowed the creation of subjects, objects and concepts. "In the early days of the *Gã Mashi*," she quotes, "the land on the inland side of Accra...was dense thicket and dangerous forest 'full of wild beasts and robbers in hiding.' "[10] The narrative relates what happened in "the early days" (a knowable object) and, therefore, is more than a narrative about that which was said to have happened. It represents a category of knowledge of a particular kind - knowledge as recollection. It registers a way of reflecting on or thinking about past experiences in a certain manner, for example, as a metaphor of power relationships, an inventory of entities and events, or as collective identity. It describes a single place - "the land on the inland side of Accra" - as a site that contained entities that would and could not be mastered. In contrast to Accra, the "forest" (*ko*), the "wild beasts" (*kolo*), and the "robbers" (*ojotfalei*) were signifiers of insecurity, uncertainty, irrationality, perversity, and untenability. The tradition inscribes a particular knowledge about transgressive and abominable elements in a definable past. The truth about these elements can be assayed only relative to the truth claims of other orders and names within a larger pattern or field of discourse. The larger pattern or field, a space of subject positions and of differentiated functions for subjects, was produced in varied forms within the material and social relations that constituted *agwasen*. The tradition's truth about the early days of Accra can be placed beside the Memorial's truth about a slave rebellion. In the context of the eighteenth century Atlantic slave trade, each truth, functioning as a form of power, demarcated a certain level of events and through the narrated events disseminated the effects of power.

In her exegesis of various *Kpele* songs, the anthropologist Marion Kilson offers pertinent orientations relevant to an understanding of the kind of cultural and historical consciousness evoked by a memory of ancient Accra.[11] Space itself had a history. The "thick dangerous forests" defined a spatial realm of the uncultured and the unmastered. The tradition's tropes of "wild beasts" and "robbers in hiding" dif-

ferentiated negative Others, the unspeakable and the unthinkable, who inhabited the forbidding forests. In contrast to the liminal and perilous spaces of forest, beast, and robber, Accra itself represented a stable center and a centering presence, a focal point of culture, thought, and history and a locus of the domesticated and the mastered. Its social memory composed a narrative about its own past, that is to say, it was capable of ordering and naming. "Wild beasts," representing the nonhuman, and "robbers in hiding," representing the inhuman, could not achieve this level of rationality. They were what Accra's *agwasen* was not. They were an antithesis of culture and order, being incapable of writing - that is, naming, classifying, ordering, knowing, and identifying reality (*jen*). By their very presence they threatened the integrity and coherence of *agwasen*. The ability of *agwasen* to transcend the inhuman world by remaking it in the image of ideal forms prescribed by reason, morality, and ritual was constitutive of humanity and culture.[12] In the midst of uncertainty and impending peril, *agwasen* functioned as a custodian of rationality and refinement. At one analytical level, Accra's politics of social recollection can be read as a legacy of an Atlantic world mercantile system, whose contradictions provoked not only a slave rebellion in 1761 but also a collective memory about past experiences of danger and menace. The twentieth century social memory of an ancient Accra and the eighteenth century rebellion of slaves bound for the Americas belong to what can rightly be called an Atlantic genealogy.[12a]

Traces of liminality and rebellion have been scattered over an eclectic range of materials from archival records to oral histories. The two textual practices - an eighteenth century Memorial and a twentieth century Accra oral tradition - are, historically speaking, congruent. As sites of mediation, they represent discourses of authority and inscribe and delineate expressions of dominant normative orders. They represented spheres of organization (order) and responded to and mediated the exigencies of defined alterities, which represented spheres of non-organization (disorder). The exigencies, in turn, represented systemic contradictions of organization. As dominant and hegemonic expressions, they decided how these alterities would be seen. On one side were the centering, naming, and organizing collectives and solidarities of the dominant - "Free Men," the African Company, the Admiralty Office, the General of Martinique, and a collective memory of an ancient Accra normative order. These entities carried unified, proper names and through their agency provided material for (meta-)narratives of cultural and political self-repre-

sentation. Facing them, on the other side, were unpredictable and dangerous entities, namely rebellious slaves, wild beasts, and robbers in hiding who inhabited an unfathomable and perilous domain. The Atlantic world's mercantile project was a site of interactive, non-synchronous (non-contemporaneous), and antithetical elements and relationships and discursive histories that addressed, concealed, or resolved the contradictions, ambiguities, antinomies, anomalies, and anxieties. There were, of course, contemporary counter-hegemonic texts and practices that did not participate in the discourses which rendered rebels, outlaws, criminals, and other marginals illicit.[13] The Atlantic world-system belonged to globe-spanning processes associated with the globalization of a European capitalist system.

What, then, can a history of order (*gbejianoto*) and the rational (*shishi*) say about the agent/agencies (*felei*) behind acts of resistance, gestures of opposition, the motives of violent rebellion, and the moral integrity of individually and collectively based insubordination? In what way is a theory of historical contingency conceptually relevant to these matters? A materialist historiography constructs what can be called alternatives to the present and to the metaphysics of immediacy, which are dominant and hegemonic, with their compelling sense of cohesion, integration, and consensus, but, in fact, are not unproblematic nor transparent. A 1761 Memorial and an Accra social memory are exemplary instances of the metaphysics of immediacy.[14] A materialist perspective attempts to produce knowledge about the suppressed, the plight of the rejected, and the circumstances of the marginalized of history on the grounds that they constitute a reality to be studied. It posits and proximates the multi-dimensionality of the "historical process to date" (Gramsci) and exposes the dark corners of oppression and meaningless violence, the lost possibilities, unrealized dreams, and aborted hopes that are part of the domain of subalternity.[15]

Philosophers and anthropologists alike understand the moral worth and pragmatic integrity of formal political structures like the *omaŋ* and *maŋ* as routinized and regulated. But usually this approach is enacted without reference to the calamitous events, imbalances, and tensions of quotidian life (*Alltagsleben*). Nor is attention devoted to the unequal social-cultural relations and the unforeseen situations that generated the necessary conditions for exclusion, disloyalty, bitter conflict, and periodic mutinies. More generally, the possibility of constructing histories from below and the various modes of subjection is compromised.[16] But

once the moral worth of the *omaŋ/maŋ* is seen as problematic and complex, an account of its moral praxis must include excess, incoherence, contradiction, dominances, appropriations, technologies of power, and hierarchy. How and why are such potentially disrupting impulses, from the viewpoint of authorizing historical actors, mobilized, denounced, utilized, and/or repressed? This question is not included in descriptions and explanations of the paradoxes of *omaŋ/maŋ* praxis but with the public domain.[17] The paradoxes comprised actions condemned by normative codes and conventions as unlawful and criminal. What conditions enabled such actions to be carried out? Were they emblematic of resistance and the insubordination of displaced subalterns?

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the most common crimes in coastal Winneba were said to be "thefts, adultery, and a neglect of religious and other customs."[18] The culprits who were guilty of these transgressions against property ownership, the sexual integrity of marriage, and the observance of religious and other conventions are not identified. In other early nineteenth century coastal towns, specifically Appolonia, Anomabo, and Cape Coast, "the most common crimes committed are adultery and thieving, usually punished by death, but in most instances by slavery or heavy fines of gold." In Anomabo, in particular, defamation was described as a frequent crime, presumably among high status families. A Dutch officer observed that the neighboring town of Apam was full of debtors, runaway slaves, and rogues; hence, it had a well-known reputation as a disorderly and lawless place. While the presence of debtors, escaped slaves, and rogues in Apam says something about a certain style of life in the town, it is also indicative of a social environment of struggle, insubordination, and resistance in places beyond Apam. A mid-nineteenth century account of the Gold Coast offers a general comment about the perpetrators of crime: "Most of the crimes at present committed on the Gold Coast are perpetrated by vagabonds, who have absconded from their masters and who live by theft and plunder." The vagabond, apparently pawns and slaves who had deserted their masters' employment, was evidently a definable social type, forming thereby a "naturalized" criminal element in the towns. The crimes and unlawful acts documented by British and Danish authorities in the 1830s and 1840s provide additional evidence about the range of unlawful acts and, in some cases, the social circumstances of persons charged with crimes.[19]

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