



*Chieftaincy and religion  
– collusion and alternative roles*





# The persistence of Asante chieftaincy under colonial rule: explanations of an enigma

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*Nsuom nam firi nsuom a, Dwu, Dhene a Onni akyyitaafɔ no Onye Dhene bio*  
A fish out of water dies; a king without followers ceases to exist.

Asante proverb

## 1. A history of Asante chieftaincy

In most African countries under British rule their colonisation went together with a diminishment of the formal power of their traditional authorities. In the pre-colonial period African chiefs and queen mothers in these countries had executive, legislative, judicial and cultural-religious roles to fulfil. In the colonial period the traditional authorities fell under the direct rule or most often under indirect rule, and were controlled by British Chief Commissioners (BCCs).<sup>1</sup> Land and other taxes that in the pre-colonial period formed the largest part of the income of the traditional authorities were under indirect rule levied by the BCCs.<sup>2</sup> The decolonisation of the British African colonies and the period afterwards went together with a further reduction of the formal powers of the chiefs.<sup>3</sup> The modern African leaders who led these African countries to their independence perceived the traditional authorities as archaic rulers who counteracted the modernization of Africa and whose wings should therefore be clipped.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, in almost all former British colonies the traditional authorities retained a measure of influence and prestige.<sup>5</sup> In Ghana, in 1952 a dual political system was put in place that took over most of the tasks of these authorities except for those concerned

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1 HAILEY, 1953.

2 ARHIN, 1999: 69-81.

3 NUGENT, 2004.

4 RATHBONE, 2006: 43-44.

5 HUGENT, 2004.

with customary matters, such as female circumcision, naming ceremonies and rites of passage.<sup>6</sup> Ghanaian chiefs and queen mothers therefore still derive a significant part of their influence and prestige from their roles in 'embodying Ghanaian religion and culture'. Politically, the traditional authorities exercise influence and prestige by sitting together with local politicians in the local councils as advisers, but they have been barred from active participation in politics.<sup>7</sup> Economically, these authorities still earn a considerable amount of money with the allocation of land but their income is limited, because they are forced to share the profit of the land tax with their superiors (e.g. the Asante King) and the local government.<sup>8</sup> Although political and economic factors should thus be taken into consideration to understand the persistence of chieftaincy in Ghana, this phenomenon cannot be fully explained without investigating the resilience of the religious roles of the traditional authorities. This article that is based on doctoral research therefore provides a religious explanation for the persistence of Asante chieftaincy in the colonial period in Ghana.<sup>9</sup> The Asante are a cultural group that belongs to the Akan, which is the umbrella name of cultural groups in Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo that share cultural and linguistic characteristics. The Akan speak Twi, which is a tonal Kwa language of South Central Niger-Congo and attach great value to the performance of rituals such as naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals that are most often of a religious nature.<sup>10</sup> The focus will be laid on two religious functions of Asante traditional authorities (chiefs and queen mothers) in the pre-colonial (1701-1902) and colonial periods (1902-1957). My article will highlight the continuity and change in the roles of the Asante traditional authorities as religious mediators and peacekeepers.

Asante chieftaincy originates from a number of little states (*berempon-doms*) that formed a military union to protect themselves against the Denkyera. In 1701 the growth in importance of the Asante in the Union led to the founding of the Asante Kingdom and the enstoolment (enthronement) of Osei Tutu (1701-1718) as the first Asante King (*Asantehene*). The institution of Asante chieftaincy was divided into two socio-political bodies: the inner council, which was a small deliberative social body (*agyina*) and the central government council or Asante National Council (*Asantemanhyiamu*) that increased in power until 1874 when the British sacked Kumasi as a result of non-resolved Anglo-Asante conflicts about the latter's amount of influence over the coastal states. The Anglo-Asante relationship had remained troublesome, and in 1873 members of the war party under the rule of Asantehene Kofi Kakari (1867-1874) decided in favour of another war against the coastal states. However, the costs of this war in terms of lives and material were so high that the *Asantemanhyiamu* decided to withdraw soon after the first attack on the coast. In the following, British General Wolseley decided to burn down Kumasi to diminish the power of the Asante people over the southern states, whom the latter protected in exchange for profitable trade.<sup>11</sup> In February 1874 the Asante and the British signed the Treaty of Fomena; soon after the *Asantemanhyiamu* relinquished all political claims to the southern provinces, most of which became part of the British Gold Coast Colony. By then, out of fear that the French would colonize the

6 RAY & REDDY, 2003: 83-123.

7 BOAFO-ARTHUR, 2002.

8 DEVAS & KORBOE, 2000.

9 MÜLLER, 2009.

10 OGOT, 1999; BRAFFI, 2002.

11 LEWIN, 1978: 41-53; WILKS, 1989: 492-509.

Asante region, the British policy was focused on weakening the Asante state in order to be able to colonize the Asante territory.<sup>12</sup> In 1891 the British Governor Hull invited Agyeman Prempeh I, who as a consequence of civil war ruled an already weakened Asante Kingdom, to become part of the British overseas empire. Prempeh I declined the offer and attempted to resurrect the *Asantemanhyiamu* to full power. In 1896, despite Prempeh I's decline, the British government in London decided to deport the ruler first to Sierra Leone and, to decrease the remainders of his influence over Kumasi, even further away to the Seychelles Islands, in order to bring the Asante Kingdom under increased British administration. The colonial committee appointed three experienced Asante to form the Native Committee of Administration (NCA), of whom one was forced to show the location of the Golden Stool to the British Governor Frederick Hodgson. By taking a place on this royal seat Hodgson believed that the Asante would fully surrender but he missed the throne's religious importance to the Asante who regarded it as a great insult that a foreigner wished to sit upon their most holy shrine. Therefore, Hodgson unconsciously declared the last Anglo-Asante war led by the queen mother<sup>13</sup> of Ejisu Yaa Asantewaa and on 1st January 1902, the British defeated the Asante in the battle of Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante Kingdom became the 'Crown Colony of Asante'. This Crown Colony was divided into a number of administrative units that fell under the responsibility of the British Provincial Commissioner who was responsible to the British Chief Commissioner and the Gold Coast Governor. By mid-1905, Gold Coast Governor Fuller decided that the Kumasi administrative unit should be ruled directly by the Council of Kumasi, which was structurally but not functionally a resurrection of the Kumasi Council founded in 1888. The restoration of the Council was meant to formally restrict the political power of the members of this new form of the Asante Chieftaincy Institution and to advise the British Chief Commissioner (BCC) on issues relating to Greater Kumasi.<sup>14</sup> The BCC referred to himself as the Kumasihene, a title that he invented to make clear to the Asante that he, rather than Prempeh I, was the most important political authority in Kumasi. The BCC appointed individuals as chiefs who had showed their allegiance to the British regime in earlier times, such as members of the *akonkofo*, a highly self-conscious group of capitalists, notables and gentlemen who were neither necessarily literate nor Christian (see Section 3.1).<sup>15</sup> In 1896, Prempeh I was exiled but he was never officially destooled. In the 1920s, the British political system changed from direct to indirect rule.<sup>16</sup> On 11 November 1926, King Prempeh I returned to Kumasi and was appointed as the new Kumasihene to rule under the political authority of the British governor and the Queen of England until his death on 12 May 1931. On 22 June 1931, the Council of Kumasi ceased to exist and Prempeh II was enstooled as Asantehene within the British framework of indirect rule.<sup>17</sup> On 31 January 1935 the Asante Confederacy was restored, which implied a return to the structure of the Asante Chieftaincy Institution of before 1874 "*that gave a seat to the Asantehene, the head chiefs (amanhene) of fifteen Ashanti divisions, and seven Kumasi 'clan' chiefs (nsafohene)*".<sup>18</sup>

12 WILKS, 1989: 660-661.

13 A queen mother is legally the "mother" of a chief or king, but in fact she is not his real mother but, in most cases, his sister.

14 WILKS, 1989: 123, 403.

15 MCCASKIE, 1986.

16 AKYEAMPONG, 2003.

17 KWADWO, 2000.

18 TRIULZI, 1972: 99.

The Asante Confederacy was limited in power, but its importance increased, especially between the 1940s and 1950s. In 1936 the members of the Asante Confederacy succeeded in claiming back the legislative powers of the traditional authorities. In 1940 the Asante Confederacy received its powers back to declare or modify “*native law and custom which it may consider expedient for the good government and welfare of the Confederacy*”.<sup>19</sup> In 1941 the Asantehehene was restituted the Kumasi stool lands that had become government property. In 1946 the Asante Confederacy aimed at increasing the power of the Asante Chieftaincy Institution and especially that of its members in Kumasi. In 1950, the Asante government (since then known as the *Asanteman* Council) realized the goal to centralize its power and govern more effectively by an increase of the number and importance of the Council’s members in Kumasi. The power of the *Asanteman* Council only declined after Ghana achieved independence in 1957.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. The religious roles of Asante traditional authorities in the pre-colonial period

The two religious roles of the Asante traditional authorities in the pre-colonial period were those of mediators with the spiritual beings and peacekeepers between groups of various Islamic and Christian denominations. In the Asante society, the concept of “traditional authorities” refers to either chiefs or queen mothers. Chiefs are male rulers believed to receive spiritual power by occupying a stool, which is a type of throne. Queen mothers are female rulers who supposedly received their power by spirit possession.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.1 The Asante traditional authorities as mediators

The mediator function of the traditional authorities consisted of the maintenance of a good relationship with the spiritual beings such as the High God (*Nyame*), the lesser gods (*abosom*) and the ancestors (*nsamanfo*), by performing religious rituals. Of all ancestors who were believed to guide the living, those of the paramount chiefs were considered to be the most important and were therefore venerated most extensively. The traditional priests and priestesses and the chief’s royal servants (*nhenkwaa*) performed religious rituals within the Asante society. Traditional priests or priestesses venerated the spirits to resolve or prevent conflicts of humans with beings of the spiritual world and they informed the traditional authorities about the opinion of the spiritual beings on the need for war.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, they took part in purification rituals that formed an aspect of the yearly harvest festival (*Odwira*), which is the last of nine units (*adae*) of 42 days of the Asante ritual calendar (*adaduanan*).<sup>23</sup> These units are occasions for venerating the ancestors. The *Odwira* festival marked the end of the year and the beginning of the new harvest, and was meant to commemorate the death of all Asantehenes by performing mortuary rituals that linked them to the ancestral spirits. Its function was to recover relationships between human beings, to cleanse the environment from evil spirits and

19 *Ibid.*: 101.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Interview with Offinsohemma Ama Serwah Nyarko, Offinso Palace, 10 March 2006.

22 UCHENDU, 1965.

23 BARTLE, 1978.

to remember the deceased of the past year.<sup>24</sup> The festival symbolized the homecoming of the ancestors (*nsamanfo*) by being fed with mashed yam (*oto*), the only popular staple food of the Asante. It was also an occasion to thank the living for their contributions to the Asante Kingdom (*Asanteman*) in the past year and for the renewal of the allegiance of the household personnel (*nhenkwaa*) and the subordinate rulers to their king.<sup>25</sup> The celebration of the *Odwira* festival re-established the power of the Asantehene and legitimized the Asante Institution of Chieftaincy.

A way for chiefs to mediate between the material and the spiritual world is by being enstooled (enthroned) and performing rituals for the spirit (*sunsum*) inside their stool to venerate their ancestral clan spirits. The most important stool in the Asante Kingdom was the Golden Stool (*Sika Dwa Kofi*) that symbolized the highest level at which political and religious power was exercised.<sup>26</sup> The Asantehene's Golden Stool and the stools of other chiefs were believed to contain a communal soul (*sunsum*) that consisted of the spirits of deceased chiefs. The *nhenkwaa* performed religious rituals on behalf of the Asantehene and all other chiefs to venerate the spirits in their stool rooms, which contained the stools or royal seats of the past rulers of their clan. Another symbol of unity that Asante traditional authorities used to legitimize their power was the swearing of an oath meant to strengthen the relationship between the living and the dead. Every chief had to swear an oath that he would give military help to the king before he could be enstooled. If its taker the chief turned against his king, the gods (*abosom*) would kill him.<sup>27</sup> The celebration of the *adae* and the *Odwira* festival, the swearing of an oath, the Golden Stool and the stool rituals were important indigenous religious elements in the exercise of the religious mediatory role the Asante traditional authorities had.

## 2.2 The religious peacekeeping role of Asante traditional authorities

The peacekeeping role of the Asante traditional authorities is related to maintaining peaceful relationships between Asante indigenous believers, Muslims and Christians. In this context, the chiefs acted as diplomats, regardless of the group's belief, cultural background and/or political orientation. Their aim was and the more is to promote 'syncretism' between their 'Indigenous Religions' and other religions with a special focus on Christianity and Islam. Unlike Parrinder's<sup>28</sup> 'African Traditional Religion'<sup>29</sup> the term 'Indigenous Religions' does not refer to an essentialist description of static and unchanging customs with pre-colonial roots. Instead, 'Indigenous Religions' place emphasis on the religious experience of the believers and on these religions as dynamic and as engaged with social conditions in global contexts. According to Harvey and Thompson<sup>30</sup>, Indigenous Religions refer to the religion of believers who call themselves 'indigenous' being involved in a dialogical process of making ancestral heritage relevant to the next generation, thereby placing the term in social context.

24 RAMSEYER, KÜHNE, ET AL., 1875.

25 GILBERT, 1994: 105-115.

26 WILKS, 1979; MCCASKIE, 1986.

27 BUSIA, 1951: 54; RATTRAY, 1956: 103-104; MCCASKIE, 1986.

28 PARRINDER, 1954.

29 Ranger denotes this term as a form of 'invention of tradition', referring to the non-existence of static and unchanging African religions and to their dynamics and social and historical contextualization. See RANGER, 2002.

30 HARVEY & THOMPSON JR., 2005: 3.

According to Berner<sup>31</sup> religious syncretism is the fusion of deities, religious ideas and elements of different religions, which can take place on an elementary or on a system level. On the elementary level it comprises the incorporation of religious elements of unrelated beliefs into a religious tradition, on the system level it refers to the blending of religious systems. Berner created a number of models that run from A1 to C5, which enabled him to subcategorise and further specify the varieties of religious syncretism. He also distinguishes unconscious and conscious religious syncretism thereby referring to the mingling of religions being either a coincidental or a deliberate process.

In the case of the traditional authorities in Ghana religious syncretism has always been a conscious process because these authorities were very aware of the danger of alternative religious beliefs, such as Islam and Christianity, for the persistence of the Asante Kingdom and after its colonization the Asante Chieftaincy Institution and Asante state. In the pre-colonial period the traditional authorities monitored the processes of religious syncretism and made sure that those did not exceed the level of taking a suitable amount of elements of the world religions Islam and Christianity, and the incorporation of these elements into the Asante Indigenous Religion. In Berner's terminology the Asante situation in this period was a form of 'syncretism on the elementary level' or a sociomorphic model (C2), which refers to the type of relations between and among the gods that are formulated in analogy to the hierarchical order of a social system. The colonial period is one of transition from the C2 model to a model of systematic religious syncretism (A1). According to the A1 model, followers look for similarities in goals and godly figures, and eliminate the competitive relationship between the religions. Today, the Asante traditional authorities are highly active in consciously promoting similarities between the Asante Indigenous Religion, Islam and Christianity as a strategy to reduce inter-religious tensions in society.<sup>32</sup>

The role of Asante traditional authorities as religious peacekeepers or monitors of processes of religious syncretism thus goes back to the pre-colonial period, and since then it has increased in importance. To understand the transition in Asante society from religious syncretism on the elementary level (A1) to the system level (C2) it is important to provide insight into the introduction of Islam and Christianity in the Asante society and the interaction of Asante traditional authorities with Islamic and Christian religious leaders in pre-colonial and colonial times.

## Islam

The first form in which Islam was introduced in Kumasi is known as "the Suvarian tradition," which consisted of followers of Al-Hajj Salim Suwari (1523/24-1594), a learned Soninke cleric from the core Mali area. Suwari created a "moderate form" of Islam that gave guidance to Muslims among "pagans" (such as the Asante) who, because of their positions as guests in non-Muslim areas, could not afford to attempt to convert their hosts into Muslims. Suwari believed that Muslims in the land of the "infidels" (*Dar-al-Kufr*) should "not attempt to proselytise their hosts, because this would be interfering with God's will, who would bring non-Muslims to convert in his own time".<sup>33</sup> The Suvarians were allowed

<sup>31</sup> BERNER, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Offinsohemma Ama Serwah Nyarko, Offinso Palace, 10 March 2006.

<sup>33</sup> ROBINSON, 2004: 56.

to accept the authority of non-Muslim rulers and supported the latter insofar as it enabled the Muslim community to “*follow their own way of life in accordance with the sunna of the Prophet*”.<sup>34</sup> The Suwarian tendency had a “non-proselytising character” and set limitations with regard to following the authority of the “pagan” ruler.<sup>35</sup> None of these characteristics imply that its followers are syncretistic in religious terms. There is no stimulation of dialogue in the Suwarian tradition and the characteristic element of waiting for Allah to pull the infidels (*kufri*) out of the state of ignorance (*jahiliyya*) promotes an attitude of indifference of Islamic practitioners towards the religious views of their hosts.

Because of being so far away from “the land of Islam” (*dar-al-Islam*), the part of the world governed by Muslims and Islamic law (the *shari’a*), the Suwarians in the Asante Kingdom often found themselves at the fringes of what was accepted in the Suwarian tradition, for instance, by praying for the well-being of the Asantehene and by attending indigenous rituals such as *Odwira* that included the ritual killing of human beings, a practice that the Suwarians attempted to abolish. Overall, however, they kept their distance regarding the ideas of Asante indigenous practitioners in fear of backsliding (*ihmal*) and even of apostasy and were very much aware of the dangers, in terms of their belief, of staying in “the land of unbelievers” (*Dar-al-Harb*).<sup>36</sup>

The Suwarian tradition was introduced in Kumasi in two strands. This Islamic tradition was brought to the Asante society in the 15th century by Mande-Dyula traders from places north of Kumasi such as Begho, a town with a goldmine that also functioned as a collection centre for gold in the more southerly districts.<sup>37</sup> In 1722 Begho was sacked by the Asante troops and became part of the fast-growing Asante Kingdom.<sup>38</sup> By the middle of the 18th century, the savannah kingdom of Gonja also came under direct Asante control and Dagomba and Mamprusi were now included into its sphere of influence. Additionally, the rulers of the Asante kingdom established diplomatic contact with the Mossi kingdom of Wagadugu, and the involvement of the Asante in the profitable trade of kola nuts also intensified contact with Muslims and increased the need to maintain diplomatic relationships with them. As a consequence, the Asante oral diplomatic service developed into a bureaucratic apparatus operated by Muslims who worked for the Asantehenes and who, unlike the Asante royals, were able to read and write. These Muslims became known as Asante *Nkramo*, referring to their capacity to read the Qur’an, which they learned at the Sankore teaching mosque, a centre of Islamic learning in Timbuktu.<sup>39</sup> From the period of Osei Kwadwo’s government (1764-1777), they worked for the Asantehenes at their palace as advisers in matters of trade and foreign affairs and as keepers of records and accounts in Arabic. Another one of their functions was to perform religious services for the protection of the Asantehenes with the help of amulets (*suman*).<sup>40</sup>

Asantehene Osei Kwame (1777-1803) was also sympathetic toward Islam and equally used the Asante *Nkramo* at his court to maintain a cordial diplomatic relationship with Muslim rulers in the north of the Asante Kingdom, such as Gonja and Mamprusi. He asked the Asante *Nkramo* to write peace settlements with regards to the Northern Muslims with

34 WILKS, 2000: 98.

35 WILKS, 2000; ROBINSON, 2004: 56.

36 WILKS, 2000.

37 WILKS, 1962.

38 STAHL, 2001.

39 HISKETT, 1984; MCCASKIE, 1995.

40 SCHILDKROUT, 1970.

whom he was at war in order to keep the medieval trade route from the coast to Western Sudan and into the Saharan desert open.<sup>41</sup> Asantehene Osei Tutu Kwame (1804-1807) was a friend of the Asante *Nkramo* and one of these latter, Kamagate (Karamo Togma), called the Asante King “a misguided infidel”, of moral qualities superior to those of the King of Dahomey whom they believed to be an “infidel of infidels” (*Kaffar ben a Koufar*).<sup>42</sup> In 1819, the British Consul Dupuis<sup>43</sup> came to Kumasi for negotiations and stayed one year in this town. He observed that Asantehene Osei Bonsu (1807-1824) continued to rely on Muslim advisers and that he had developed a real chancery for the diplomatic services of the Asante *Nkramo*, who had gained a considerable amount of religious influence with the Asante kings. The Asante *Nkramo* provided charms and amulets and foretold the future in relation to the outcome of war.<sup>44</sup> Dupuis observed that “*the Asante people did not know the content of the Qur’an but were persuaded that it was a volume of a divine creator*”.<sup>45</sup> To show respect to the Suwarian Muslims in Kumasi, Asantehene Osei Bonsu sent Asante boys to the Islamic school of Muhammad-al-Ghamba, the head of the Asante *Nkramo*, but made sure the school did not become too popular.<sup>46</sup>

The second form of Islam in Kumasi was the orthodox Islamic tradition of Uthman dan Fodio that consisted of followers of this 18th-century Hausa Muslim from Gobir, who had started a Muslim reform movement in 1804 to reinvent the *Dar-al-Islam* (The Territory of Islam).<sup>47</sup> For Uthman, the two steps in saving the Muslims from living in a “territory of infidelity” were first to flee (*al-hijra*) to a neighbouring area and then to start an Islamic holy war (*jihad*). The *al-hijra* and *jihad* were perceived to be the obligation of an orthodox Muslim to prevent apostasy among fellow Muslims in the *Dar-al-Kufr* (the Territory of Infidelity), although in practice the Hausa Muslims in Kumasi were so strongly involved in Asante affairs that they adhered to a more moderate form of Islam than what was subscribed to by Uthman dan Fodio.<sup>48</sup>

The more radical Hausa Muslims, who unlike the Suwaris, attempted to convert the Asante to Islam, settled in Kumasi in the beginning of the 19th century. Most popular among the Asante was Sharif Ibrahim, a Borno(-alim), who supported himself through the profitable business of manufacturing charms and amulets and by offering his prayers in return for gifts.<sup>49</sup> Many other Hausa leaders were unpopular among the Suwaris in Kumasi, who were afraid that too much intimacy with those orthodox Muslims would negatively affect their relationship with the Asante royals.<sup>50</sup> These radical Muslims were unpopular because they saw the Asante Indigenous Religion as a pagan cult that was to be eradicated by converting the Asante to Islam. They only succeeded in proselytising a small number of Asante. The orthodox Muslims had great problems with important elements of the Indigenous Religion such as the ritual killing of human beings and libation in honour of the ancestors.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, most orthodox Muslims were less popular among the Asante than were the Suwaris; after the 1830s the former were no longer

41 WILKS, 1961; LEVTZION, 1968: 14-29.

42 WILKS, 2000: 104-105.

43 DUPUIS, 1824.

44 ADJAYE, 1984.

45 DUPUIS, 1824: 97, 107, xiv.

46 WILKS, 1961: 20-21.

47 ROBINSON, 2004: 139-152.

48 WILKS, 1966.

49 WILKS, 1961: 27-28.

50 HISKETT, 1984: 133-135.

51 WILKS, 1966: 152.

welcome in Kumasi and their trade was restricted to places such as Salaga and markets north of the Volta.<sup>52</sup> Regarding issues of religion, there was less cordial contact and religious syncretism between the Asante traditional authorities and Hausa Muslims than between those authorities and adherents of the Suwarian tradition.

An example of religious syncretism between the Asante Indigenous Religion and of all Islamic traditions – which is most frequent in the case of the Suwarian tradition – is the Asante’s use of protecting powers (*asuman*) sold by the Asante *Nkramo*. *Asuman* is “*a charm, amulet or talisman, worn as a remedy or preservative against evils or mischief, such as diseases and witchcraft, consisting or composed of various things such as feathers, hair or teeth of various animals, beads, scraps of leather or paper inscribed with mystic characters and tied around some limb or hung about the neck*”.<sup>53</sup> The Asantehenes used *asuman* that contained Qur’anic texts on their warrior cloth (*bata kari kесе*) to make it spiritually “bullet proof”.<sup>54</sup> Asantehene Osei Bonsu, for instance, wore amulets with Qur’anic texts to protect himself against evil spirits during the Dwamen war he fought between 1811 and 1818 with the Gyamanhene Adinkra, who had copied the Asante Golden Stool and undermined the political authority of the Asante.<sup>55</sup> Another example of religious syncretism are the Twi expressions for Islamic religious buildings or activities, such as *Nyame dan* (small mosque) and the expressions *Me kɔfrɛ Nyame*, “I will pray to God, I will go to the mosque” and *Onyame fre*, “to pray to god,” that were used by Twi-speaking Muslims.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the Asante *Nkramo* contributed to religious syncretism by synthesizing Asante, Christian and Muslim calendars.<sup>57</sup> Out of fear of Islamic influence, the Asantehene did not allow the penetration of (even) moderate Islamic ideas into the Asante Indigenous Religion beyond the elementary level. The fear the Asante royals had of Muslim influence becomes clear, for instance, from the reports of the British Consul Dupuis. The latter, during his visit to Kumasi in 1819 observed that they feared that the patrilineal descent system that accompanied Islam would be a threat to the continuation of their royal matrilineal lineage and undermine the authority of the Asantehene.<sup>58</sup>

## Christianity

The Asante royals maintained a relationship with religious leaders of six European Christian societies: the Wesleyan Missionary Society (WMS) and the Basel Missionary Society (BMS), whose European Christian missionaries were first welcomed in Kumasi in 1839; the Society of the African Mission (SAM), whose missionaries came to Kumasi in the 1880s; and the Northern German Missionary Society (NGMS) whose members did not dare to come to the interior of the Asante Kingdom until the 1890s. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) was dormant during most of the 19th century and the missionary activities of the Church of England Mission in Kumasi were unsuccessful until 1913.<sup>59</sup>

52 LOVEJOY, 1971.

53 CHRISTALLER, 1933: 483.

54 ROBINSON, 2004.

55 WILKS, 1989: 271-273.

56 CHRISTALLER, 1933: 357; ROBINSON, 2004.

57 ADJAYE, 1984: 136-138.

58 DUPUIS, 1824: 245.

59 ARHIN, 1992: 55-57.

The European Christian missionaries from these societies all started their religious activities on the seashores of the Gold Coast. Since death rates among them along the coast were very high, most did not make it as far as Kumasi and those few who entered the interior in the 19th century often feared the Asante, because of their cruel customs, such as the ritual killing of human beings. Asantehene Kwaku Dua I (1834-1867) welcomed a limited number of Wesleyan and Basel missionaries to live and work in Kumasi, since he believed that their diplomatic skills were in the interest of the Asante. Asantehene Kofi Kakari (1867-1874) was pleased with the possibility of using Basel missionaries as *ad hoc* chancery officials such as in the case of Ramseyer who was held captive in Kumasi for four years, along with his colleague, Kühne. Kakari was reluctant to accept the Christian belief these missionaries brought with them, since he feared the negative effects of Christianity on the Asante Indigenous Religion, which all Asantehenes used to legitimize their power.<sup>60</sup> Asantehene Mensa Bonsu felt that Asante royals should supervise the introduction of Christianity. On 10 April 1876, he indicated that the Wesleyans were welcome if they “*helped the peace of the nation and the prosperity of trade*”.<sup>61</sup> In 1876, Mensa Bonsu’s response to Ramseyer and to the presentation of the Bible by other missionaries indicates that he did not welcome these missionaries for religious reasons. He in fact told them that the Bible was not a book for the Asante and that he would never embrace the Christian religion.<sup>62</sup>

In 1880 King Bonsu welcomed the Catholic priests Auguste Moreau and Eugène Murat of the Society of the African Mission (SAM), who were the first Catholics in Asante history to travel to Kumasi. The Asantehene did not allow any Protestants to enter his kingdom because they were less respectful towards the Asante Indigenous Religion.<sup>63</sup> The Catholics were seen as less likely to cause a threat to the persistence of that religion, whose symbols played an important role in the legitimization of the Asante kingdom. Initially, Mensa Bonsu had welcomed the missionaries of the Wesleyan and Basel Societies because of their diplomatic skills. In 1880, when Asante-British relations became even tenser, he only allowed Catholic missionaries to enter Kumasi. After 1880, the English chancery, part of the Asante diplomatic service, had educated several Asante to be proficient in English and in British modes of diplomacy and the Gold Coast and Asante affairs. Consequently, it was no longer necessary to ask European Christian missionaries, whose loyalty to the Asantehene was often questionable, to fulfil the task of diplomats on an ad-hoc basis.<sup>64</sup> Between 1883 and 1888, the Asante were plagued by a civil war and ruled by a highly unstable interim government (*kwasafo manhyiamu*) (8 March 1883 to 28 April 1884) and later by a number of Asantehenes with short reigns.<sup>65</sup> After the war, under Prempeh I the English chancery developed a diplomatic service relying on Asante diplomats who were skilled and experienced in their negotiations with the British. King Prempeh I never had to use European Christian Missionaries to negotiate with the British, and in the years before his deportation he was reluctant to let in any of them because he rightly feared an increase in European influence on the religious ideas of his Asante subjects, which eventually caused the fall of the Asante Kingdom.<sup>66</sup>

60 ADJAYE, 1984.

61 Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society archives, London (WMMS), Picot to Boyce, dd. Cape Coast, 3 May 1876.

62 FINDLAY & HOLDSWORTH, 1921; ARHIN, 1992: 175.

63 AMA 15/802.02 19.222, *Report Moreau*, 16 June 1882.

64 ADJAYE, 1984: 124-131.

65 KWADWO, 2000.

66 ADJAYE, 1984: 124-131.

In 1896 the British welcomed European Christian missionaries in Kumasi and opened the Asante kingdom for the latter's religious activity. Three years later missionaries of the BMS, WMS and Church of England mission opened a considerable number of churches to receive a large group of church attendants, including Asante converts. In 1900, as a consequence of Asante revolts, most churches were destroyed. After 1901 the story of Christian religious organisations was again one of steady growth with regard to the number of members and of newly founded chapels, Sunday schools and day schools.<sup>67</sup> In 1913, the missionary G.M. Morrison of the Church of England Mission established an Anglican church, school and chapel.<sup>68</sup>

In the pre-colonial period, Asante royals attempted, and succeeded to a certain extent, to limit the influence of Christianity on the Asante society by only allowing the inclusion of certain elements of this religion. An example of syncretism between the Asante Indigenous Religion and Christianity on the elementary level is the coexistence of traditional and Christian marriage rituals. According to the Asante Indigenous Religion, a prospective husband should pay a "knocking fee" (*abowmubodze*), which symbolizes the promise to marry a girl. Due to the influence of Christianity on Asante customary marriage rites, they included the giving of an engagement ring and a Bible.<sup>69</sup> The introduction of monogamous marriages by European Christian missionaries and the abolition of the custom of the ritual killing of humans had a great impact on the indigenous belief of the Asante and decreased the extent to which the Asante traditional political institution was legitimated by this religion. Polygamy secured the sustenance of the royal lineage, and Asante traditional authorities used the ritual killing of human beings to keep their subjects under control. Christianity was a threat to Asante royals, because European Christian missionaries undermined both kinship solidarity and their authority. Converted Christians distinguished themselves from the rest of the Asante society. They lived in separate parts of town and they listened to the European Christian missionaries instead of the Asante chief and queen mothers.

### 3. The religious roles of Asante traditional authorities in the colonial period

In the pre-colonial period, the role of traditional priests and priestesses, and of chiefs who performed rituals during the *adae* and *Odwira* festival and in the stool room and swore an oath, was religious mediation. In their function as religious peacekeepers the Asantehehenes maintained contact with Islamic and Christian religious leaders; their relationships were best with those who were most tolerant toward the religious rituals of the Asante traditional authorities and of other indigenous religious believers. Generally, the Catholics and the Suwarians were more welcomed in Kumasi than the Protestants and the orthodox Hausa Muslims. The next sections focus on the continuation of the role of the Asantehehenes Prempeh I and Prempeh II's in religious mediation and peacekeeping under colonial rule.

67 KIMBLE, 1963: 153-154; WYLLIE, 1980: 5-6.

68 ARHIN, 1992: 55-57.

69 POBEE, 1977: ADJAYE, 1984.

### 3.1 Asantehene Prempeh I

In 1924 Prempeh I returned to Kumasi. In his function as religious mediator he dealt with the groups in the Asante society known as the *akonkofo*, *nkwankwaa* and *nhenk-waa*. As religious peacekeeper he maintained a relationship with Islamic and Christian leaders. I will focus on the attitude of members of these groups toward Prempeh I and vice versa.

#### Akonkofo

In 1901, the *akonkofo* founded a highly self-conscious group of influential businessmen.<sup>70</sup> In the 19th century individual *akonkofo* settled on the coast as refugees after taking money from the stool (the King's treasure) to avoid the high tax they had to pay to the Asantehene.<sup>71</sup> The *akonkofo* rebelled against these taxes that were meant to prevent ordinary Asante from accumulating substantial private capital they could use to set up big merchant houses. The Asante traditional authorities were afraid that huge sums of private capital in the hands of ordinary Asante would threaten the persistence of the Asante state because it would enable non-royals to compete with chiefs for power or to sell arms to political rivals of the Asante.<sup>72</sup> In the 18th century only traditional authorities (the "Asante merchant princes") were involved in large trade and trade organisations.<sup>73</sup> In the 1880s and 1890s, the *akonkofo* accumulated private wealth by fleeing to the coast and by trading with Europeans as rubber brokers, moneylenders and dealers in gold. This made them politically influential and enabled them to question the enrichment of the Asante traditional authorities at the cost of ordinary Asante taxpayers and to organise themselves against them.<sup>74</sup> To understand the mediatory function of Asante traditional authorities it is important to know whether the *akonkofo*, who became influential in Asante society under early colonial rule, were only economic or also religious dissidents.

In terms of cultural preference, the *akonkofo* behaved like big men or chiefs and were not reluctant to show off their wealth by buying big mansions and wheel charts. They were impressed by the culture of their British colonial rulers, dressed like Westerners and formed their own association; although they were illiterate, as a consequence of their travels as traders and their contact with the Europeans, they were the purveyors of new ideas. They were in favour of the Western education for their children that the European Christian missionaries provided<sup>75</sup>, even though many of them were neither literate nor Christian.<sup>76</sup> A sign that the *akonkofo* favoured the Asante Indigenous Religion is that with the support of colonial rulers they managed to buy chiefships to achieve personhood, a prerequisite of becoming an ancestral spirit.<sup>77</sup> The *akonkofo* also demonstrated that in religious terms they did not stand against the old establishment of Asante traditional authorities when they joined in the agitation for the return of

70 POBEE, 1977; MCCASKIE, 1986.

71 WILKS, 1979; MCCASKIE, 1986.

72 ARHIN, 1986.

73 ARHIN, 1986; MCCASKIE, 1986; DUMETT, 2009.

74 MCCASKIE, 1981.

75 ARHIN, 1986.

76 MCCASKIE, 1986.

77 MCCASKIE, 1986; WIREDU, 1998.

King Prempeh I to Kumasi and contributed to the fee for Fante politician J.E. Casely Hayford to write a petition to the British government to permit the return of their king.<sup>78</sup> The opposition of the *akonkofo* to the traditional authorities was limited to the economic regulations that prevented them from accumulating private wealth. In religious issues, despite their modern Western lifestyle, they remained adherents of the Asante Indigenous Religion and supported the Asante traditional authorities and their *nhenkwaa* in continuing their religious mediatory role.

### Nkwankwaa

The *nkwankwaa* were a group in Asante society that consisted of ‘non-office holders such as lawyers, shopkeepers, petty traders, public letter writers, clerks, schoolteachers and artisans’.<sup>79</sup> The *nkwankwaa* are sometimes referred to as “young men,” a term that refers to their fresh ideas about modernity, individuality, gender relations and the accumulation of wealth, which (like the *akonkofo*) they believed should not be a privilege of the traditional authorities.<sup>80</sup> The *nkwankwaa* were both subjects of and political dissidents from the Asante traditional authorities. On 24 September 1921, the stoolcarrier Kwasi Nsenie Agya confessed that he and other *nkwankwaa* were guilty of stripping the Golden Stool of its gold. Agya remarked:

While we were sharing Dwantua [Kwadwo Dwantua] said, he is a stool carrier [*nkonnwasoani*] and that *only the wood in it [the Golden Stool] is important but the gold about it is nothing*.<sup>81</sup>

According to McCaskie<sup>82</sup> the fact that Agya, who worked for a chief, made a distinction between the wooden core inside of the Golden Stool (*Sika Dwa Kofi*) that he believed to be inspirited, and its golden covering, indicates that the *nkwankwaa* did not stand against the Asante traditional authorities for indigenous religious reasons. In the 1930s, like the *akonkofo* they believed that the Asante society had benefited from the colonial authorities that had decided to abolish the tax system of the 1880s; they also turned themselves against Asantehene Prempeh I’s plans to reintroduce this system. The petition formulated against this decision by the *nkwankwaa* and *akonkofo* under the lead of J.E. Casely Hayford contributed to the fact that, after discussions with the British Chief Commissioner, Prempeh I dropped the issue.<sup>83</sup> If the *nkwankwaa* and the *akonkofo* were only political, not religious dissidents, one would intend to draw the same conclusion for both groups in the Asante society in relation to their religious mediatory role. However, the *nkwankwaa* weakened their role as mediators by their being involved in the foundation of a number of anti-witchcraft cults such as Tigare, Kune and Aberewa, which were a rival force in Asante indigenous religious matters.<sup>84</sup> Between 1907 and the 1950s, the *nkwankwaa* anti-witchcraft movements mushroomed in the Gold Coast and became very popular, because they used the local Indigenous Religions.

<sup>78</sup> ARHIN, 1986.

<sup>79</sup> BOAHEN, 1975: 136.

<sup>80</sup> ALLMAN, 1990; CHAZAN, LEWIS, ET AL., 1999: 269.

<sup>81</sup> Harper Mss, cited in MCCASKIE, 1986: 16.

<sup>82</sup> MCCASKIE, 1983; MCCASKIE, 1986.

<sup>83</sup> ALLMAN, 1990: 269.

<sup>84</sup> DEBRUNNER, 1959; FIELD, 1968; MCCASKIE, 1981.

The colonization of the Gold Coast, and the concomitant increase in opportunities for ordinary Asante to accumulate private wealth affected the economy and caused a huge amount of spiritual fear among indigenous religious believers. In the pre-colonial period, the Asante traditional authorities had controlled the spiritual realm by disallowing any new spirits to enter without their consent. The fall of the Asante kingdom decreased the strong control of the spiritual realm that the Asante traditional authorities exercised. The British colonial rulers further diminished this control by suspending the open celebration of the *Odwira* festival on a state level, which had been meant to strengthen the spiritual bond between the traditional authorities, their subjects and the spiritual beings.<sup>85</sup> Most likely, the colonial rulers suspended the celebration of *Odwira* because they feared it would threaten their authority. As a consequence of the anti-witchcraft cults and changes in society, many inhabitants of the Gold Coast believed that evil spirits from outside the spiritual realm and their religious comfort zone were the cause of many harmful changes in their family life. For example, the transition from a matrilineal kinship system to a patrilineal system during the colonial period had consequences for the modes of inheritance and created tensions especially between a man's wife and the women in his family.<sup>86</sup> For Asante indigenous religious believers it seemed to be clear that these tensions were caused by evil spirits and therefore it was of the utmost importance to eradicate the members of their families who were possessed by those spirits and had turned into witches. Believers joined anti-witchcraft cults because their leaders propagated the eradication of witchcraft, and they hoped that making witches confess their guilt would restore the social order.<sup>87</sup>

The *nkwankwaa*'s anti-witchcraft movements were religious rivals of the traditional authorities, because those movements also legitimized their power with the help of the Asante Indigenous Religion. Like those authorities they introduced the custom of swearing an oath to the cult leader and used rules that were similar to those created by the priest (*Okomfoɔ*) that had helped the first Asantehene to found the Asante kingdom (the Seventy-Seven Laws of *Okomfoɔ* Anokye).<sup>88</sup> The *nkwankwaa*'s witchcraft cults dealt with the evil spirits that had entered the Asante society after the (spiritual) power vacuum that had come into being after the deportation of Prempeh I in 1896. For the Asante traditional authorities the *nkwankwaa* were a rivalling force in the spiritual realm; the authorities believed the large number of their followers undermined the Asante institution of chieftaincy and weakened the role as religious mediators that the Asante traditional authorities held.

## Nhenkwaa

In the pre-colonial period, the *nhenkwaa* were a political and economic sub-elite that participated in the administrative system of the Asante traditional authorities and adhered to the Asante Indigenous Religion. In the colonial period, the *nhenkwaa* remained the most loyal followers of these authorities from whom they derived their social status and who provided them with jobs such as sword bearers, umbrella and palanquin carriers

85 LEWIN, 1978; MCCASKIE, 1995.

86 NZEGWU, 1996.

87 Public Records and Administration Department (PRAAD), Kumasi, 1/30/1/6, F.C. Fuller, "Chief fetish Priest Aberewa" (2/07) 1907-1908, 6 Aug. 1908.

88 OLSEN, 2003.

or cooks. Some *nhenkwaa* (*Obosomkwaa*) served a deity (*Obosom*) and were appointed to help in the chief's performance of religious rituals during the ritual calendar days (*adae*).<sup>89</sup> In the 19th century, when the Asante chanceries became less dependent on Christian and Islamic diplomats (a fact that enhanced the reliability of the Asante diplomatic service), the *nhenkwaa* became part of those chanceries and specialized in dealing with issues in relation to the British, Danish and Dutch or the Islamic hinterland north of Kumasi.<sup>90</sup>

After Prempeh I's deportation, many *nhenkwaa* lost their positions, but like many other ordinary Asante in Kumasi, they remained loyal to King Prempeh I, who had continued to perform indigenous religious rituals in the Seychelles Islands. In 1924, Prempeh I returned to Kumasi and those *nhenkwaa* who had left the town after their King's exile recommenced their position in service of the Asantehene. Although they no longer worked in Prempeh I's diplomatic service, which had been suppressed under colonial rule, the *nhenkwaa* restarted their jobs as members of his household.<sup>91</sup> The *nhenkwaa* had a positive effect on the continuation of the religious mediatory function of the Asante traditional authorities because they worked for them, believed in them as their religious leaders and resumed the performance of indigenous religious rituals.

## Christians

During his stay in the Seychelles, Prempeh I received confirmation and communion in the Anglican Church and encouraged his subjects in the Crown Colony of Asante to convert to Anglican Christianity and attend the St. Cyprian Anglican Church founded in Kumasi in 1913. In 1924, Prempeh I returned to Kumasi as much more a Christian than when he had left Elmina castle in 1896, but he did not turn against the Asante Indigenous Religion.<sup>92</sup> After Prempeh I's repatriation, he allowed European Christian missionaries to bring the gospel and build schools such as the Wesleyan College in Kumasi.<sup>93</sup> However, since his enstoolment as Kumasihene in 1926, Prempeh I also attempted to restore as many pre-colonial Asante indigenous religious symbols and objects as possible, including the *Aya Kesse*, a huge brass pan that stood in front of the Bantama royal mausoleum. The Asante king found these religious elements very important for improving his relationship with Asante indigenous believers and as preparation for the restoration of the Asante institution of chieftaincy, a goal that was realised in 1935 under the reign of Asantehene Prempeh II. Kumasihene Prempeh I had a pragmatic attitude toward religion and befriended both adherents of the Indigenous Religions and of Christianity. He promoted Christian education because he believed it was important for future generations of the modern Asante society, but he also restored the harem with stool wives, which was an important symbol for indigenous believers, and he ceased to be a communicant of the St. Cyprian Anglican Church. Prempeh I was the Kumasihene of a society in transition, and as a religious peacekeeper he had to befriend both sides. Restoring the harem and other indigenous religious customs and symbols disappointed and worried some of the educated Asante (*akonkofo*) who had helped Prempeh I to

89 MCCASKIE, 1986.

90 ADJAYE, 1989.

91 AKYEAMPONG, 1999; AKYEAMPONG, 2003.

92 AKYEAMPONG, 1999: 86.

93 BOAHEN, 1975: 86.

come back to Kumasi and had hoped to bring back a modern leader.<sup>94</sup> Yet, for Prempeh I, restoring the harem was the only option, because otherwise he would have lost important connections with the royal families that were his most important indigenous religious adherents.<sup>95</sup> His other indigenous religious initiatives included the restoration of the royal mausoleum at Bantama that had been destroyed by British troops in 1896 and of the Golden Stool after its desecrations by the *nkwankwaa* in 1921. In 1929 in Prempeh I's function as religious peacekeeper he brought the Golden Stool inside St. Cyprian's Anglican Church in Kumasi during the Thanksgiving Service and placed it in front of the altar. At that time, he felt that the restoration of the whole Asante institution of chieftaincy would not be realised during his lifetime and that he would reign over his people under colonial rule. To bind the Asante indigenous believers to him without being subversive to the British, whom he feared would send him back to the Seychelles Islands, he disposed the Golden Stool, the most important symbol of political power in the eyes of Asante indigenous believers, to the Church of the coloniser.<sup>96</sup> Prempeh I's attempt to befriend both traditional and modern religious forces in the Asante society was most problematic with regard to the orthodox Protestant Christians. During Prempeh I's absence in Kumasi, the Protestant missionaries of the BMS, the WMS and the Church of England who had not been welcome in Kumasi as a consequence of their heavy critique on the Asante Indigenous Religion, had taken an opportunity to convert a considerable number of Asante (see Section 2.2). Some of the orthodox European Christian missionaries and their converts among the Asante turned against Prempeh I because of his enthusiasm for religious syncretism. In their opinion, the veneration of ancestral spirits was a pagan cult and they believed that drumming and dancing on state occasions was hateful to the Christian God. They protested against the ban imposed by the traditional councils on farming in certain areas during days dedicated to the veneration of the earth deity (*Asase Yaa*) and questioned the authority of the Asante chiefs and queen mothers.<sup>97</sup>

## Muslims

In 1924 Prempeh I also resumed his negotiations with Muslims of the moderate Suwarian tradition and of orthodox Islam living within the Asante society. His relationship with the Suwaris remained cordial and in 1928 he expressed his wish to the District Commissioner (DC) of Kumasi to revive the defunct college of physicians (*nsumanfiesu*). Between 1844 and 1896 the *nsumanfiesu* headed by the *nsumankwahene* (chief of medicines) had been responsible for the physical and spiritual welfare of the Asante. The Asante *Nkramo* occasionally provided King Prempeh I with talismans and religious maxims, as they had regularly done to his predecessors.<sup>98</sup> Since the early 19th century, the Asante *Nkramo* had been kept physically close to the Asantehene's place of power. They lived in a spatially circumscribed neighbourhood of Kumasi known as the old Kumasi settlement, which was not a distinct area in town.<sup>99</sup> Prempeh I's relationship with other orthodox Muslims in Kumasi was more problematic. His attitude

94 ARHIN, 1986; AKYEAMPONG, 2003.

95 AKYEAMPONG, 2003.

96 AKYEAMPONG, 1999; AKYEAMPONG, 2003.

97 BUSIA, 1951.

98 PRAAD, Accra, Eastern Provincial Commissioner's Diary, April 1928.

99 SCHILDKROUT, 1978.

towards some of these Muslims from the north and from Syria was unfriendly, because they were successful entrepreneurs and owned many of the more impressive buildings in Kumasi, which they used to display their wealth.<sup>100</sup> This ran against the conservative opinion of Prempeh I, who held that economic innovation had to benefit Asante society and maintain the status quo. Prempeh I did not encourage Islamic entrepreneurship and attempted to keep Kumasi closed for enterprising orthodox Muslims.<sup>101</sup> In the Muslim settlements in Kumasi (*zongos*) lived an increasing number of Hausa Muslims who had come back from wars they had fought for the British against the Asante such as the battle of Yaa Asantewaa, and who openly supported the British Chief Commissioner. These Hausa Muslims had profited from British colonization, because in 1927 the British appointed their headman, the Sarkin Zongo, as chief of all Muslims in the Asante Protectorate and gave him his own civil tribunal. The British thus increased the importance of the Hausa Muslims in relation to the Asante paramount chiefs, as the former had not had any chiefs in the pre-colonial period.<sup>102</sup> The orthodox Muslims were not a group of individuals from which Prempeh I could expect much sympathy, but he did not restrict their religious freedom. The Hausa and other Muslims were allowed to build mosques anywhere in Kumasi so that the street picture of this town was that of small mosques and European missionary churches located next to each other.<sup>103</sup>

### 3.2 Asantehene Prempeh II

In his religious mediatory role, Asantehene Osei Agyeman Prempeh II had to deal with the *nkwankwaa* and the educated elite. As a religious peacekeeper he continued to maintain a relationship with Christians and Muslims in the Asante society.

#### Nkwankwaa

In 1949, the *nkwankwaa*, who had continued to strive for political power since the 1880s and hoped to gain economic power through this engagement, played a key role in the founding of the Convention People's Party (CPP), with whom Nkrumah would win the elections at the eve of independence. However, in 1953, the *nkwankwaa* saw a drop in the percentage of their seats in the new Legislative Assembly, with five percent, compared to that of 1951 in the Asante Council. In 1954, the government passed an amendment to the Cocoa Duty and Development Funds Bill that fixed the price of cacao far under the average price on the world market: a decision meant to diminish the wealth of the *nkwankwaa*, many of whom were involved in the cacao business. The *nkwankwaa* drew the conclusion that the party was not going to help them achieve their goals. Therefore, they broke with the CPP and sided with the Asante traditional authorities. Initially, some of these authorities felt betrayed by the *nkwankwaa*, because only shortly after the restoration of the Asante Confederacy by the British colonial rulers they had attempted to destool Asantehene Prempeh II, in an act supported by powerful paramount chiefs who did not benefit from the Confederacy's restoration. Eventually, those traditional authorities

100 SCHILDKROUT, 1975; AKYEAMPONG, 1999.

101 AKYEAMPONG, 1999.

102 SCHILDKROUT, 1970; SCHILDKROUT, 1978: 88.

103 Interview with Sarkin Zongo Al-Hajji Sheikh Zakuruka at his palace in the Kumasi Zongo, 16 April 2006.

sympathetic to the Asantehene joined the latter and the *nkwankwaa* in their struggle against the CPP, for the pragmatic reason that the *nkwankwaa* were the only group in Asante society that could mobilize the masses of Asante farmers and other Asante subjects that were dissatisfied with Nkrumah's decision to lower the cacao prices. In a successful effort toward reconciliation with the chiefs, the *nkwankwaa* coupled their demand for a higher cacao price and Asante autonomy within a federated Gold Coast, with a call for the preservation of the chieftaincy, and positioned themselves as defenders of the "sacred" (in their eyes) Asante institution of chieftaincy. The *nkwankwaa* knew how to make pragmatic use of cultural nationalistic feelings of ordinary Asante to reach their goals; in their fight against the low cacao prices they used slogans such as "*We have the warrior spirit of our great Ancestors within us*".<sup>104</sup> They believed that they needed the chiefs to ideologically legitimize their movement against Nkrumah, because these chiefs would bring "*the support of the spirits and ancestors of the entire nation*".<sup>105</sup> Allman holds that the *nkwankwaa's* use of these words in quotations should be perceived as expressions of cultural nationalism that enabled the *nkwankwaa* to mobilize a mass of Asante people against the CPP. The *nkwankwaa* made use of the creatively reintroduced symbols of the Asante Indigenous Religion – some with help of the British – to reach their political goals. However, in the opinion of this author, the *nkwankwaa's* use of reintroduced Asante indigenous religious expressions and symbols cannot be explained only by referring to their political instrumentality.<sup>106</sup> First, McCaskie<sup>107</sup> makes the point, as explained in Section 3.1, that in 1921 the *nkwankwaa* were not political enemies of the Asantehene but also indigenous believers who did not oppose the religious meaning of the *Sika Dwa Kofi*. Second, McCaskie informs us that during the colonial period the open celebration of the *Odwira* festival was suspended on the level of the state, but Lewin<sup>108</sup> makes clear that during this period on a village level the chiefs and Asante commoners continued the celebration of the ritual days (*adae*). The *nkwankwaa* adhered to the Asante Indigenous Religion which, like all Indigenous Religions, is pragmatic and of which it was an aspect to incorporate other religions and ideas.<sup>109</sup> According to Cox:<sup>110</sup> "indigenous religious believers are tolerant of the religions and ideas of other people and often borrow and incorporate aspects of them into their own belief and practices". After the 1950s, anti-witchcraft cults became unpopular and the *nkwankwaa* helped the Asante traditional authorities to spread their cultural national ideology based on the Asante Indigenous Religion. Under the reign of Prempeh II, despite cultural nationalism, the *nkwankwaa* did not cease to be indigenous believers and they remained loyal in religious terms to the Asante traditional authorities, which had a positive effect on the religious mediatory role held by these authorities.

104 BAFFOE, E. Y. (1954), *Cocoa price agitation*. Kumasi, cited in ALLMAN, 1990.

105 ALLMAN, 1990.

106 RANGER, 2002, further describes the practices of African traditional authorities under British colonial rule to invent traditional customs as a colonial strategy of controlling their subjects.

107 MCCASKIE, 1986.

108 LEWIN, 1978.

109 PLATVOET, 1992.

110 COX, 1998: 15-32.

### 3.3 The educated Asante of the Asante Kotoko Society

The Asante educated elite succeeded the *akonkofo* and aimed at promoting national unity and the improvement of the living conditions of the Asante population.<sup>111</sup> The elite distinguished themselves on the basis of literacy and the use of the English language during meetings, and they dressed like Europeans.<sup>112</sup> In 1916 they founded the Asante Kotoko Society that aimed at guiding the Asante into modernity. In the 1940s, the members of this society split up and joined two opposing political parties; the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) that promoted traditional rule, or the Convention People's Party (CPP).<sup>113</sup> The Asante educated elite was divided into a group of Christians who were simultaneously adherents of the Asante Indigenous Religion, and Christians who despised the latter religion.<sup>114</sup> As a consequence, some had a negative and others had a positive effect on the ways in which Asante traditional authorities exercised their religious mediatory role.

#### Christians

In terms of the incorporation of Christianity in the Asante Indigenous Religion, Prempeh II continued the project that had been started by Prempeh I, although the former chose a different church to become the religious home of the Asante Royals. Prempeh II, who did not like to identify himself with the British royal family, encouraged his subjects to become Roman Catholics and therefore chose to leave the St. Cyprian Anglican Church. Prempeh II's belief in Roman Catholicism did not prevent him from believing in Jesus as Nana, "*the Great and Greatest Ancestor*"<sup>115</sup> When he spoke the Lord's Prayer Prempeh II never closed his eyes. He doubted whether there was an *Onyankopong Kurom* (Heaven) but at the same time expressed a deep fear for the *Obonsam Kurom* (Hell fire). Despite his Catholic background, however, Prempeh II followed the royal protocol by visiting the stool room at Bantama to honour his ancestors – the departed Asantehenes – during *akwasidae*.<sup>116</sup> A development in the history of the Catholic Church that has stimulated interreligious dialogue is the transition stage from Vatican I (1869-1960) to Vatican II (1962-1965). In the latter period, the Catholic Church was much more tolerant toward the incorporation of elements of Indigenous Religions in Catholicism. King Prempeh II was a pioneer in finding common elements in Catholicism and the Asante Indigenous Religion. His positive attitude toward religious syncretism that he showed throughout the colonial period is evidence for the continuity of the religious peacekeeping role of the Asante traditional authorities.

#### Muslims

King Prempeh II continued the cordial relationship between the Asantehenes and the Asante *Nkramo* that had been so characteristic from the 18th century. Under his reign,

<sup>111</sup> TORDOFF, 1965.

<sup>112</sup> ARHIN, 1986.

<sup>113</sup> BREMPONG, 2000.

<sup>114</sup> AKYEAMPONG, 2003.

<sup>115</sup> Email interview with Bishop Peter Sarpong, 4 April 2008.

<sup>116</sup> ANTI, 1996: 178-180.

the restored *nsumanfiesu* remained intact and the demand for *asuman* decreased. Furthermore, this Asante king improved the relationship of the Asante royals with the Hausa Muslims. In Prempeh II's time, political power shifted from the traditional authorities to the political parties, which could only organise themselves by using the existing political structures of the regional chieftaincy institution.<sup>117</sup> In 1956, for instance, it was only with the support of Prempeh II that the National Liberation Movement (NLM) formed into a proper political party.<sup>118</sup> The Muslim Association Party (MAP) also depended on the support of the Asante traditional authorities. In 1958, among other parties, the MAP and the NLM merged into the United Party (UP) to strengthen their position in their struggle against the Convention People's Party (CPP). The UP stood for the promotion of traditional values, Asante or Muslim, and the preservation of chieftaincy, which ideologically united the Asante and the inhabitants of the Muslim settlements. Some Muslim headmen supported the CPP, but the majority of them and their Islamic subjects joined the UP.<sup>119</sup> King Prempeh II's continuation of the tradition to welcome Asante *Nkramo* to live at Manhyia and his agreement to fuse his political party with that of the orthodox Muslims is evidence of the religious peacekeeping role the Asante traditional authorities continued to hold.

#### 4. Conclusion

The research question in this article was to what extent the religious roles of Asante traditional authorities explain the persistence of chieftaincy among the Asante in Ghana. The focus was on the chief's religious mediatory and peacekeeping roles. In the pre-colonial period, religious mediation between the inhabitants of the spiritual and the material world played an important role in the legitimization of the Asante institutions of chieftaincy. Indigenous religious symbols such as the Golden Stool (*Sika Dwa Kofi*), performance of rituals for the ancestral spirits in stool-rooms, the celebration of ritual calendar days (*adae*), the *Odwira* festival and the swearing of an oath were crucial in the chiefs' mediation with the spiritual world. From an indigenous religious believer's point of view, it was only as a consequence of this mediation that the traditional authorities could control the spiritual realm, prevent evil forces to enter that realm and protect the Asante Kingdom from falling. In this period, the Asante traditional authorities were adherents of the Asante Indigenous Religion and they were deeply convinced that mediation with the ancestral spirits, with the help of their religious specialised servants (*nhenkwaa*), was crucial for the spiritual health of their kingdom. The chiefs' other religious role as peacekeepers was even more delegated to the *nhenkwaa*, who first worked for the chiefs as oral diplomats, and since the 19th century in the written diplomatic service. During the transition from oral to written diplomacy, the Asante traditional authorities invited Muslims of a moderate Islamic tendency to work for them as diplomats at the court and used the writing skills of Christian European missionaries. The Protestants among the latter were generally more orthodox than their Catholic colleagues, as were the Hausa Muslims in comparison to the Suwaris. The more orthodox the Islamic and Christian religious leaders became the less useful for the diplomatic

<sup>117</sup> SCHILDKROUT, 1978.

<sup>118</sup> ALLMAN, 1990.

<sup>119</sup> SCHILDKROUT, 1978.

service of the Asante traditional authorities they were, because the chiefs could not work with employees who were hostile to the Asante Indigenous Religion, upon which the religious and political power of the ruling individuals was based. The less tolerant Muslims and Christians turned out to be in relation to the Asante Indigenous Religion, the more their presence and religious ideas formed a threat to the persistence of the Asante Kingdom and, in consequence, the less they were welcome in Kumasi. The more critical the protagonists of these religions were of the Asante Indigenous Religion, the less eager were the Asante authorities to allow for the incorporation of elements of these religions in their indigenous belief. In terms of models for the level of religious syncretism, the Asante situation in the pre-colonial period corresponds with the level in the sociomorphic C2 model formulated by Berner. Religious syncretism, according to this model, only takes place on the level of taking elements. The Asantehenes did not believe that the Bible itself would bring any good to the Asante. The Qur'an, on the contrary, was perceived as a book that contained religious power, and the Asantehenes believed that making use of *asuman* containing quotations from the Qur'an would protect them against war enemies and increase their religious authority. In 1896 the Asante Kingdom formally ceased to exist and in 1902 it became part of the British Empire. Despite Prempeh I's residence in the Seychelles Island, the majority of the Asante populations remained loyal to him and continued to regard him as their king. The most loyal of the Asante subjects of King Prempeh I, who was not formally destooled until 1926, could be found among the *akonkofo*, who helped him to come back to Kumasi, and the *nhenkwaa*, who had once served him. During Prempeh I's exile, the British colonial rulers suspended the celebration of *Odwira* on a state level. However, the fact that on the village level, the traditional authorities in Kumasi and Prempeh I on the Seychelles continued to perform rituals for the ancestral spirits shows that during the colonial period the religious mediatory role of the chiefs persisted. In 1926, once back in Kumasi and enstooled as Kumasihene, Prempeh I restored the most important indigenous religious symbols in his quest to maintain a cordial relationship with his regional religious supporters, but also because he was both an Anglican and an indigenous believer. In this function as religious peacekeeper, Prempeh I was much more involved in maintaining diplomatic relationships with Islamic and Christian world religious leaders than had been his predecessors. In this period, the focus of the Asantehenes shifted from foreign affairs meant to keep the religious strangers outside the Asante society, to internal affairs and maintaining the social order. Equal to his predecessors, Prempeh I experienced most difficulties with the religiously intolerant orthodox Protestant and Hausa Islamic religious leaders and their followers.

In 1935, in their mutual struggle against Nkrumah, who tried to clip the wings of the traditional authorities, the Asantehene Prempeh II and the *nkwankwaa* increased the pragmatic use of indigenous religious symbols. The Golden Stool and royal artefacts partly maintained their indigenous religious meaning, but partly they also became 'traditionally invented' elements of cultural nationalism, an ideology that helped the traditional authorities in cooperation with the *nkwankwaa*, to reach the mass of the Asante. In this period the power shifted from the Asante traditional authorities, the churches and the Islamic headmen and *ulama* to that of political parties, who used existing political structures in the Asante society. The Asante Indigenous Religion became a political weapon employed by Prempeh II and the *nkwankwaa* in their struggle for power in the

Legislative Assembly, which would transform into the modern Ghanaian government. Asante traditional authorities made pragmatic use of their Indigenous Religion, but they did not cease to be indigenous believers. In the changing Asante society, most traditional authorities and their subjects were religiously syncretistic as both Asante indigenous believers and Christians, which means that the chiefs continued to fulfil their religious mediatory role. The colonial period was a transitional phase from religious syncretism on an elementary level (C2) to a system level (A1) that emphasizes the unity of the goal, the truth of the religions, and the possibility of testing different routes, the latter eliminating the competitive relationship between religions. Prempeh II's task as religious peacekeeper became more important and he was more successful than his predecessors in uniting Christians, Muslims and Asante indigenous believers, for instance, by founding the United Party and reducing the competition and power struggle between Islam and Christianity. In conclusion, in the colonial period, the Asante traditional authorities continued to fulfil their religious mediatory role, but the exercise of this function became less important for them than it had been in the pre-colonial period. The religious peacekeeping function, on the contrary, increased in significance throughout the colonial period. As a consequence of the continuous role the Asante traditional authorities had in mediation and peacekeeping roles, the Asante Chieftaincy Institutions in its different forms, the pre-colonial Asante Union, the *Asantemanhyiamu*, the Kumasi Council, the colonial Council of Kumasi and the Asante Confederacy were continuously legitimized with the help of rituals and symbols derived from the Asante Indigenous Religion. The mass movement that was mobilised by Asantehene Prempeh II – with the aid of the *nkwankwaa* – by using cultural nationalistic symbols and an ideology having their roots in the Asante Indigenous Religion, contributed to the fact that in the postcolonial period the Asante institution of chieftaincy was not abolished but incorporated into the modern democratic government. However, institutionally the study of religion and the study of chieftaincy were deliberately separated in African universities, to better serve the African nationalistic goal of promoting pride for African religions and African syncretistic religions and expressing condemnation for the political outmoded Institution of Chieftaincy. The study of the religious functions of the Asante traditional authorities was therefore left out of the African academic curriculum, whereas the North Atlantic academic world mainly concentrated on the task of African development assigned to the traditional authorities. The insight provided in this article into the relationship between religion and chieftaincy is meant to start filling the academic gap on this matter and to show that alongside functions of an economic and political nature the religious roles of traditional authorities have transformed but have nevertheless continued to be significant since pre-colonial times. The term of Indigenous Religions recently introduced in the study of religion as describing dynamic and socially contextualised religions of indigenous populations, is adequate to express the social historical continuation of (Akan) spirituality. Berner's concomitant model of religious syncretism has helped to take the matter up beyond the level of delegating the study of African Indigenous Religions in British colonial Africa to scholars of essentialist and static and structural studies of religion (such as Parrinder's African Traditional Religion) or to that of political historians like Hobsbawm and Ranger who describe these religions mainly in terms of politically motivated 'invention of traditions'.

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