

Kyeame Banahene April 24th, 2006
Interviewed by Emmanuel Akyeampong at Manhyia Palace

Prof: Nana, I would like to talk to you about power. We were talking about how we understand power, what do we mean when we say power. You were saying that when the British came they abolished human sacrifice and all forms of killing.

Kyeame B: The commissioner divided the country into three. Those who were happy were those who were conquered and brought under Asante. In the olden days everyone had to travel through Edena. That was where Prempeh [I] was first taken when he was captured. Within the week Asantes were there fighting to get him back. It was very close; you could walk there in a week. Then he was taken to Sierra Leone, once again Asantes followed. So he was taken to Seychelles. But despite all that, we did not enstool another Asantehene. They assured us that they would not kill him; they would study the situation for a while and return him when all is calm. They assured us that if we stopped killing they would return him.

Prof: so they had taken Prempeh away, there is no Asantehene, so how did the other chiefs show power? How did they exercise power?

Kyeame B: The chiefs. The power that existed before was in killing. But it had been stopped. So the British realized that they had to live with us in harmony if capital punishment was to be discouraged. All the chiefs, Mamponghene, Juabenhene, etc., lived in their own capacities. The British supported their autonomy and made them strong in their own ways especially the chiefs who supported the English. When we got the news that the British would return Nana Prempeh I was eight years old. So when Nana Prempeh returned I was eight years old. Then I heard my father saying that the Englishman stated that he would not allow him to be Asantehene, but they would rather make him Kumasihene. So my father and his fellow elders quietly served both the British and Nana Prempeh. Then seven years after his return, they asked us what we wanted to do; did we want him back as Asantehene? We said yes and that is when the confederacy started. That is the one I started to serve here. It was during Kwame Kyeretwie's time that I begun to serve. I was seven when I was taken to Manhyia and given to him. Then when I was 25 years when Hitler was fighting with the British I enlisted for the British against Hitler. I was returned in 1946. About four years later, in 1949 nana Prempeh II made me a linguist.

Prof: Nana, before the English came, we had our own police.

Kyeame B: Yes, our police was abrafo. They are the ones that pave the way for Ohene when he is coming. They chant as they lead Ohene with their sword.

Prof: Is the Abrafo the same as Adumfo?

Kyeame B: Adumfo and Abrafo are the same with a minor difference. They are the same but they are all under Adumhene.

Prof: Did we have a court before the English came?

Kyeame B: Yes. We had the native court. When the English arrived at Edina they heard about us. When Prempeh was here, he had a court, but that was where Prempeh was arrested. When Prempeh was here in Kumasi the other chiefs were afraid of him, so when he was arrested they were happy. Later when the English realized that they had to return power to the Asantes -- Mampong, Juaben, Nsuta, Kokofu etc, -- they were told that they were returning power of adjudication to them, but if anyone is found guilty, he cannot be killed, rather he should be allowed to appeal before the colonial court.

Prof: When we say that someone has money, it means he has lands, gold etc. when we say someone has power it means money, gold, land etc. so our understanding of power is only power over other people.

Kyeame B: You see, in our culture, the land belongs to the Abrempong who helped Asanteman in its war efforts and were rewarded with lands. They are just caretakers actually. But if you sell a parcel of land Asantehene has a share in the proceeds. For example if you sell land for one pound: Asantehene gets one third, the caretaker gets one-third and the stool gets one-third. But now it has increased to four to include the committee. Now, governance has changed so much. If it is a Kumasi land. Well, for example, Akyeremade is under Akyempimhene. No matter how much you sell it for, the chief/caretaker gets one-fourth, the stool gets one-fourth, the elders get one-fourth and the town committee gets one-fourth. If you don't follow this guideline, you can be destooled.

Kyeame B: I am beginning to loose my voice. Do you understand me at all? Am I clear enough? I would meet with you again. What ever you want to know ask me. The only thing I would not discuss is specifically what happened to Otumfuo Asantehene or what did he do? Those are not permitted, anything else I would discuss with you. We would have to meet again. I can barely hear you, my hearing is not very good these days. I had to put medicine in my ears this morning so I am picking up some background noises.

Prof: So what if someone sells land in Bekwai

Kyeame B: well, he is an omanhene. So when he sells land, he sends a portion to the Asanteman treasury. One fourth comes to the Asanteman council treasury.

Prof: I am also very interested in learning about wars. In the olden days when we conquer and take captives what did we do with them? What did we do with the slaves/captives brought to Asante? I know we sold some as slaves, what else did we do with the others we brought home to Asante?

Kyeame B: The leader of that war (the Osahene), if he wants to keep them, he could keep them. He kept them to serve him so that he in turn can serve Asantehene.

Prof: So don't the warriors share the captives?

Kyeame B: Well, Asantehene can take some depending on the type of captives. For example if they were six captives, Asantehene could just keep 2 and return the four to the Osahene. And he

used the captives as rewards for the war generals to encourage and motivate them. During that period, we were not so much after money as after human beings. We didn't want money; we wanted to capture as many people as possible.

Prof: You said something very interesting – You were after people rather than money. There is a saying that goes that “if one has people, he has a wealth.”

Kyeame B: Yes, we weren't after money. You needed people to serve in your court, farm your lands and develop your town for you, which boost your status as a chief. Then you can enstool a chief there and the town continues to grow and flourish.

Prof: Who do you enstool as chief, one of the captives or a native?

Kyeame B: the one who accompanied him to war is usually made caretaker over their captives. Because if you put a captive they would run away. Now we are all mixed together.

Prof: When we went to the Gyaman war, they were very good goldsmiths so when we conquered Adinkra we brought some of the goldsmiths as captives. Can you tell me something about how Kumasi was developed? For example, how did Bonwire, Ahwiaa, Ntonsu and all these craft towns get to be situated where they are? Was it by some developmental design or plan?

Kyeame B: Otumfuo told his elders that the British perceive us as backward and barbaric because of human sacrifices. So all captives are allowed to be who they are. Some would even refer to you as uncle, but you cannot be enstooled, if you dare contest, you will be told [of your slave ancestry]. That is why most prominent people do not go near stools because you will be told. You will be told how your grand fathers came to be in this house.

Prof: So someone would always remember that? Or there would come a time that all of those who knew would be dead?

Kyeame B: There would always be someone who would know. No one would say anything unless you provoke them. Because the stool was there long before your ancestors were captured or bought, long before you made your money, so you cannot suddenly become a royal because your luck has changed. You will be told. And whoever that is being told usually know their history and origin, and their ancestors advise them to serve well so that they would always be included in the royal fold, but if you fail to do so, you will be exposed. Usually the arrogant ones would even challenge that with an oath until they are eventually exposed in public or in adjudication.

Prof: Can a family decide that they have run out of heirs, and choose someone not a royal to be enstooled?

Kyeame B: Yes, it all depends on the arrangements between the families. If there is respect among the factions and everyone knows their place then it can be arranged. If it is understood in its proper contest, then you can be appointed as a regent. Then if caution is not taken, they could come back and claim the stool citing that incident as evidence.

Prof: Can a woman have power?

Kyeame B: No. that is why we say that “a woman can weave a traditional shield (kyem), but cannot throw it”

No matter what a woman can do or possess, she cannot match or be better than a man.