

# Chasing the Elephant's Tail: Youngmen and the elusive 'Big Man' in Ghana

By Alvin Okoreeh

## Glossary of Twi terms

There are a few terms in this work from the Twi dialect. Twi is a dialect of the Akan language and is spoken by the majority of Akan people of Ghana. The Asante people are Akan and these terms appear throughout the work conducted herein. This glossary serves as a frame of reference.

*abirempon*: big men

*akonkofo*: rich men; traders; new men

*akrakeyfo*: educated people; clerks

*akpeteshie*: gin

*amanhene*: ruler of a people

*asafo*: military organizations or companies

*asantehene*: king of Asante

*asihafo*: the poor

*asikafo*: the rich or wealthy

*kotoko*: porcupine

*nhenkwaa*: royal servant; 'rising captain'

*nkwankwaa*: youngmen

*nsafohene*: leader of the war party

*odwira*: Festival where 'big men' candidates display their wealth in front of the Asante king. The festival marks the appointment of a 'big man' candidate to 'big man' status.

*Opanyin*: elders

On a September day in 1954, the convex basin of the Subin River Valley in Kumasi trembled with escalating fervor as the reverberating war chants intensified from the Asante people. Tens of thousands of Asante gathered at this point to inaugurate their formal opposition to Kwame Nkrumah and the Convention People's Party's bid to control the destiny of Ghana (formally known as the British colony of the Gold Coast). The creation of the National Liberation Movement (NLM) constituted a challenge from the Asante people for political authority. This challenge emerged within the context of decolonization from imperial European powers- a continent-wide process that began post World War II and lasted until the 1990s. For the Asante people, the NLM represented a demand for autonomy by the Asante nation; a nation that historically and contemporaneously represented the fighting spirit and financial lifeline for the Gold Coast. Historically, the Asante region was the center of a vast empire and major pre-colonial trade thoroughfare, as well as an epicenter for cocoa production during the colonial era. The history of Asante Nationalism contests the idea of a united Gold Coast movement against British imperialism. The formation of the NLM would take the Asante political imagination and transform it into a formidable adversary in Ghanaian politics. The flag that would embody the identity of the Asante movement was revealed in 1954 amongst the raucous crowd frenzied with excitement by the possibilities of Asante self-determination. The Golden Stool, a long recognized, hallowed symbolic spiritual manifestation of the unique essence of Asante, was not the image adorning the center of the NLM flag.[1] Instead, the NLM flag featured the colors black, green and gold, representing the tradition of chiefly stools (office), lush, fertile forest of the Asante region, and the abundant gold deposits in the Gold Coast mines respectively. Affixed in the center of the flag, a picture of a porcupine, or *kotoko* symbolizing the legendary warrior class of Asante, and a cocoa tree and pod, the bulwark of African prosperity and wealth in the Gold Coast during British colonial rule.[2] Understanding the origins of the NLM, it is clear why the Golden Stool was not the choice as the symbolic nucleus of the movement. The people of Asante, toiled on the battlefield, in mines, and on cocoa fields. The NLM flag thus represented Asante identity the struggle of Asante people. Most significant to this paper, however, is what the flag

represented for a group of Asante people labeled “the youngmen.” This paper will first examine historical scholarship on the youngmen of the Asante Nationalist Movement that has implicitly defined this group as a malleable class. Building on this literature, it will then show how this group’s shifting identity was able to not only attract a broad base of people, but also support Asante bids for self-determination during the period of decolonization.

## **“Tribes,” Elites, and the Masses: The History of Asante Nationalist History**

Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, scholarship on the Asante Nationalist Movement was initially dismissive of the movement. Deeming it an impediment to the Convention People’s Party’s (CPP) attempt to solidify the country’s bid for self-governance, scholars (mostly sociologists) considered the opposition of Asante as being primordial, or long standing tribal conflicts.[3]The overarching narrative of Asante Nationalism in the subsequent scholarship of the 1970s, articulated the Asante Nationalist movement as the vessel that ruling class elites steered to re-establish their traditional authority in the struggle from the British colonial administration to self-rule.[4]This narrative explicates the establishment of a popular front as being resultant from the machinations of ruling elites. These elites used imagery (NLM flag) and expressed advocacy of local concerns to cajole support from the masses in order to preserve their interests as a ruling class politically and economically.[5]

The next strain of scholarship on the subject began recognizing the symbiosis of Asante society and its intricate relationship with the *modus operandi* of the state. Tom McCaskie reinvigorates the discourse on Asante Nationalism by injecting the elements of cultural practices as a determinant shaping the interplay between state and society in pre-colonial Asante and in doing so excavates the meaning of status in Asante—a theme of distinct importance to this undertaking. Dennis Austin’s ground breaking, *Politics in Ghana 1946-1960* published in 1970, was the first work to identify the multiple players in Ghanaian politics. According to Austin, the chiefs, intelligentsia and the youngmen were the catalytic classes engaged in the dynamics of Asante politics.[6]

Richard Rathbone expanded on Austin’s analysis, and specifically identified the youngmen, or as he referred to them, the “aspirant businessmen” as the cause of the Asante Nationalist agitation in his *Businessmen in Politics in Ghana*. [7]However, Rathbone, with roots dug fairly deep into the driving forces of politics and economics, relegated the youngmen to little more than a

proverbial pace car for the chieftaincy and new intelligentsia who would commandeer the nationalist movement once the NLM became a political party. More importantly, this narrative posits the origination of Asante nationalist consciousness as the progeny of colonialism, engineered solely from individual aspirations of economic and political mobility rather than being rooted in legitimate historical claims.[8]

A more contemporary line of scholarship on Asante Nationalism contextualizes the nationalist movement within the framework of under-represented classes as they grapple with changing political and economic conditions. Published in 1993, Jean Marie Allman's *The Quills of a Porcupine* stands as a singularly comprehensive treatment of the NLM and the youngmen. Allman argues that Asante historiography has not considered the efficacy of subaltern classes in Asante during the thrust towards independence. Her work challenges the ahistorical premise that the youngmen's claims were rooted in opportunistic self interests conceived from primordial attachments.[9]By looking at pre-colonial relationships between the youngmen and ruling elites in Asante, Allman's arguments attempt to fill the spaces of the "intellectual deadzone," or Asante's lacuna of scholarly inquiry. Allman considers the class-consciousness of the youngmen and its implications on class struggle during decolonization, as well as provides a persuasive articulation of the youngmen whose demands can be dated back prior to British colonialism and the imposition of indirect rule. Allman's identification of the youngmen as a "weak class," however, bears further investigation.

Emmanuel Akeampong does much to further our understanding of the nexus between culture, gender relations, class, and politics in Ghana during decolonization in his 1996 work *Drink, Power and Cultural Change*. Akeampong argues that *akepetshie*(gin) and the cultural significance of fluid, (specifically blood, water, and alcohol) was gendered and was pivotal as a barometer of power and an expression of both affluence and dejection within the Gold Coast society that was rapidly stratified along class lines by British colonial rule, the cash economy, and accessible opportunities for social mobility. While Akeampong seeks to identify women within the matrix of power relations in Ghana, his work also sheds light as to how youngmen were at the center of contests waged on this front particularly when colonialism made for a continually stratified Gold Coast along socio-economic and gender boundaries.

Scholarship over the past twenty years has increasingly begun to explore the impact of gender on nationalist ideology adding another layer to this

discourse. Stephan F. Miescher's *Making Men in Ghana*, published in 2006, takes oral histories of eight *opanyin* (elders) who recall how they navigated redefining masculinity during colonialism. By analyzing the different spheres that masculinity was contested in such as labor, education, religion and relationships, Miescher offers acute insight as to the reshaping of youngmen's image in the face of colonial oppression. However, his study does show how notions of masculinity affected youngmen prior to colonialism.

While the scholarship on Asante is extensive, studies focused on identifying the youngmen are nebulous as there is no clear consensus among scholars about who or what the youngmen were. This is likely because the analysis of youngmen has been limited to the groups usefulness within the theoretical paradigm and methodology employed by the scholar. From further inquiry, significant questions arise such as: who were these youngmen? What was the historic nature of the youngmen's aspirations? How did colonialism morph the aspirations, expectations, and cultural identification of the youngmen? From the Asante nationalism purview, how did the youngmen's identity help crystallize an Asante nationalist opposition platform against Kwame Nkrumah and the CPP? The remainder of this paper will therefore discern how scholarship has defined these movers and shakers of politics in Ghana. Such a method will further dislocate Asante Nationalist history from the doldrums of primordial or purely colonial attachments.

### **What's in a name?**

As a point of reference, the terms commoners, *nkwankwaa*, and youngmen are used interchangeably in this study. However, a crude etymological briefing will identify how authors have articulated the youngmen as a means to aid in conceptualizing this paper's focus. "Commoners" is easily defined. Asante imperialism began with the defeat of the Denkyira in 1701. The process of succession was determined to effuse from the lineages of the *Asantehenes* (Asante kings) Osei Tutu and Opoku Ware. [10]The Oyoko royal line was established as descendants of royal pedigree (primarily of Tutu as Ware's line ceased to produce successors in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century). [11]Accordingly, the distinction of commoner is based on the binary stratification of royal and non-royal descent with commoners firmly situated in the latter. *Nkwankwaa* roughly translates to "youngmen" in English. The youngmen, were dubbed so not because of their relative age but rather, as Ivor Wilks defines, as men from well-established families with low expectations of succeeding to office or attaining wealth. [12]

The *nkwankwaa*'s inability to be upwardly mobile was primarily due to hereditary birth rites and the virtual, however not absolute (as we will see), monopoly by the state over trade and accumulation of wealth.[13] Youngmen, therefore negotiated spaces that were designed to overtly cap their potential. This culturally artificial obstruction did not, however, cow their aspirations. Wilks provides a glimpse into understanding the perceptible opportunities of youngmen by describing their chances as low rather than non-existent, a distinction that is useful for the insights put forth by this paper.

Allman considers the term *petit-bourgeoisie* appropriate to define youngmen. Specifically as being "best reserved for small traders, artisans, teachers, soldiers, and the subaltern ranks of the public service," the *petit-bourgeoisie* also may be considered as a lower middle-class element. This class was neither appointed by the Asante rulers to accumulate wealth, nor was it comprised of the poor who largely came from descendants of servitude.

Rathbone's coining of the moniker "aspirant businessmen" in *Businessmen in Politics: Party Struggle in Ghana* provides clues as to how we may consider the existence of youngmen in Asante history. Rathbone recognizes the youngmen as the main catalysts to the Asante Nationalist Movement of the 1950s and 60s, however he limits his discussion of aspirant businessmen to "the African entrepreneurial elite" and "African businessmen." [14] These terms fall in line with Rathbone's methodology in praxis. Rathbone, whose focus is unmistakably in the realm of politics, views Asante Nationalism as a vehicle for an emergent elite class driven by the potential of political and economic possibilities to exact their piece of the Gold Coast pie. This perspective suggests that the political milieu resulting from the fallout of World War II, the process of decolonization, and economic factors mostly resultant from colonial rule, provided the impetus for political action for the youngmen—reducing Asante Nationalist claims to a phenomenon inspired by colonialism and fueled by opportunism by a new class of elites.

Three of the defectors from the CPP who aligned as part of the leadership in the NLM, Joe Appiah, Victor Owusu, and R.R. Amposah all hailed from royal descent or chiefly affiliations and two of these men, Appiah and Owusu were lawyers. These three men represent archetypes of Rathbone's "African entrepreneurial elites" thesis. Rathbone does provide a rough biographic of who he deems fits the criteria of "aspirant businessmen." He suggests that youngmen were commoners that had achieved at least Standard VII education, were employed in some capacity at a European run trade company, then set out to establish his own business.[15] Their existence was one of exclusion from power in the Gold Coast. However, the intriguing part of

Rathbone's definitions that will be useful for this work is the application of the word *aspirant*.

While agreeing with Rathbone as to the importance of the youngmen, Allman focuses on the social conditions and relationships experienced by youngmen as a subaltern class and on how those conditions manifested themselves through claims incorporated into a nationalist identity dating back from pre-colonial Asante to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is evidenced by her applying the term *petit-bourgeois* to the youngmen and identifying them as "traders, artisans, teachers, soldiers, and the subaltern ranks of the public service." [16] These occupations speak to a certain pattern of consumption representing the masses rather than an emergent elite bourgeois class. Having used interviews from former NLM activists, in addition to archival records, published and unpublished works, and news media, Allman centers the impact of social factors on the Asante masses and their effect in the context of Asante Nationalism rather than the elites. Her research, therefore, extends a "discursive bridge" between pre-colonial Asante and the claims made by the nation of Asante during decolonization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Allman's work is significant because it challenges the historiography of Asante on two fronts: First, it creates the context for the youngmen's claims deriving from their experiences in pre-colonial Asante, rendering the argument that their existence was merely circumstantial to the opportunity presented by decolonization debatable, and secondly, it opposes the narrative that projects all history of African decolonization as being led by elites.

Thus in conceiving Asante youngmen, it is necessary to consider the mobility or *aspirant* character of the group within a wide range of Asante social strata that includes how pre-colonial society created the aspirations of youngmen and how those aspirations changed during colonial rule. By doing so we are able to understand the historical premise by which youngmen were able to use their identity to appeal to a broad base of Asante faithful against the Nkrumah-led CPP. [17]

Kwame Arhin in his work *Trade, Accumulation and the State in Asante in the Nineteenth Century* and Gareth Austin's work '*No Elders were present: Commoners and Private Ownership in Asante, 1807-96*', have shown commoners were able to exact a market share in the kola and rubber trades first in 1831 when the market more closely resembled an open free trade system then again in the 1880s when the state's grasp on trade thoroughfares became unmanageable. [18] Accordingly, youngmen in pre-colonial Asante experienced a level of success in wealth accumulation through a quasi-free

market economy. This success provided models for other youngmen to aspire to on a trajectory towards big man status. In this case, it must be understood that pursuit of achieving status was accomplished incrementally in the same character as accumulation.

Youngmen consequently represented a range of commoners in the class negotiating the spaces and interactions between the rich, *asikafo*, and the poor, *asahafo* in pre-colonial Asante. To further substantiate this position, Arhin argues that *nkwanakwaa* were unlikely to have “constituted an identifiable economic and political stratum,” [19] meaning that their interests were fluid, likely depending upon where in the continuum of achieving their aspirations they were.

Both McCaskie and Arhin suggest that the youngmen’s dethroning of *Asantehene* Bonsu represented the first legitimate free market on status attainment in pre-colonial Asante. [20] The identity of Asante youngmen, as an aspirant bourgeoisie, had been forged by the implications of status and the pursuit of social standing through accumulation. The dawning of civil war, prosperity in trade, and the intrusion of colonialism which allowed for a new social elite, the *akonkofoo*, to transport the ideals of the *abirempon* into a newly revised standard in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through class, the *Abirempon 2.0*. [21] A new role model for the *nkwanakwaa* would come to the forefront with the turning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and imposition of the British colonial regime in the Gold Coast.

### **Class, Status, and all things in between**

Thus far this paper has engaged in the ways that scholars have identified youngmen and how those youngmen have articulated their aspirations in pre-colonial Asante allowing for insight as to how the youngmen were more than just an aberration of the colonial regime. It is necessary to inspect the idea of identity manifesting itself in the form of class-consciousness, status, and class struggle to further illuminate the 20<sup>th</sup> century conceptions of aspirations for youngmen. The importance of recognizing class cleavages is central to articulating how the youngmen were able to appeal to the “Asante-ness” of the people during the Asante Nationalist movement.

Emmanuel Akeampong’s social and cultural history of alcohol adds further depth to Allman’s inclusion of class-consciousness and struggle by incorporating how alcohol was used to identify status and used accordingly by classes that were continually striated.



Achieving the status of *akonkofo*, “rich man” would be the pinnacle of achievement for the Asante in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.[22]The *akonkofo* would garner the admiration of the youngmen as they were able to contrive power from the weakened state of the traditional Asante chiefs by utilizing their recognizable status and usurping the accouterments of the *abirempon* status.[23]It has been said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and as *akonkofo* built upon their status and capital interests through trade and money lending, a patron-client relationship developed that likely inspired the aspirant bourgeoisie (youngmen) to aspire to the level of *akonkofo* much in the same way their pre-colonial predecessors did with the status of the *abirempon*. However, it is important to recognize that Akeampong identified *akonkofo*as “rich Asante traders in rubber.”[24]This identification signifies the incremental process that many of these new rich social elites utilized to attain their status, largely having backgrounds as commoners at the onset of their careers of accumulation.

One way the *akonkofo* demonstrated their status was their control over alcohol. Alcohol has culturally symbolic significance in Ghana from forging contracts of marriage to exemplifying wealth and the highlife. As elders controlled land and liquor, the *akonkofo*, with their means and reputations, effectively waged a class war with the chieftaincy using alcohol as a measuring stick. Meanwhile, a new class of youngmen evolved during this time.

Wage laborers became the new archetype for the youngmen of old, marking the instance of the evolving social order attendant to the incremental processes of accumulation. These men had little chances to attain wealth and perceived their opportunities to do so as being stymied by the colonial regime but would factor heavily in the nationalist political scene in the 1950s and 60s. These *nouveau* youngmen used alcohol not as a means to display wealth, but rather as “an avenue of escape as workers faced wages that failed more than ever to meet the basic needs of their families, paradoxically straining already straitened household budgets.”[25]The matter of wage laborers is addresses more fully below however, if as Akeampong suggests, alcohol was used to coagulate perceptions of affluence as well as the realities of destitution, the argument that consumers of these libations constitute a wide spectrum of social strata is clearly applicable.

Allman states that youngmen have been adroit in their ability to create partnerships and gain the support of the rich and the poor historically.[26]A closer reading of Allman’s proclamation suggests that the youngmen of Asante shared similar goals as the rich and the poor.[27]Allman further suggests that

the youngmen were a “weak class” citing their propensity to forge alliances to demonstrate that fact. Allman cites the “weaponizing” of the cocoa issue as a pillar in the Asante Nationalist platform by youngmen as an example.[28] However, what Allman did not consider in taking that position is identifying the perceived weakness of the youngmen as a class in terms of the mobility within the social strata that youngmen exercised allowing them to effectively articulate the nationalist message to the masses.

The embers of nationalism are stoked by messages that evoke an emotive commonality in experiences of adversity and oppression. Many youngmen were cocoa brokers, clients, or relatives of cocoa farmers and laborers and felt the impact of Cocoa Marketing Board rejecting the farmer’s request to raise the price of cocoa on the international market. Class struggle therefore was a message of seminal importance to the platform of the youngmen in devising the NLM and its appeal to a largely diverse constituency. This message gained support of youngmen as they experienced the concerns of the parties involved, first hand, by virtue of their aspirant identity that involved them in various stages of the socioeconomic order.

In *Nkrumah and the Chiefs*, published in 2000, Rathbone “hooliganizes” the youngmen in discussing the destoolment cases of the 1920s and 1930s, when youngmen were key factors in ousting various *amanhene* from their seats in chiefly office. He advances the level of the youngmen’s nefarious activity to the status of agents provocateur that coerced otherwise loyal chiefs to abdicate their allegiance from the Nkrumah’s Ghana Nationalist movement to the NLM.[29] This interpretation posits the youngmen as a band of recalcitrant agitators rather than consider their legitimate claims as a marginalized class historically. In this instance, the sources contribute directly to how history is written.

Largely taken from newspapers, archival data from England and Ghana, and regional reports crafted by colonial administrators and their chiefly accomplices, Rathbone’s slant on Asante Nationalism underscores an African elite nationalist ideology within the scope of a subaltern class structure. Rathbone at once categorizes youngmen as avaricious go-getters and angst filled juvenile delinquents representing a large swathe of class orientations that made up the NLM. That Rathbone can refer to youngmen as both a class of African elites and as something short of a band of organized misfits, speaks to the fluidity with which scholars have debated the youngmen’s political maneuverability in the nationalist landscape. As Rathbone states, “the formation of the NLM made available a more extensive national identity to the

numerous and widely differing local forces.”[30]The impact of colonialism made the youngmen’s diversity crucial to the Asante Nationalist Movement.

Colonialism morphed the ambition of youngmen, transforming the tenor of their ideals from hopeful aspirations to anxiety induced by masculine obligations. The pomp of an appointment of an *abirempon* and an *odwira* festival (the elaborate ceremony arranged for an *abirempon* candidate to display his wealth in the presence of the *Asantehene*) was replaced by palpable angst at the proposition of not being able to pay for school fees for their children or provide chop money for their wives with the depression and general deterioration of the economy. As Stephan F. Miescher argues, 20<sup>th</sup> century youngmen, prior to the World Wars, gladly traded their obligations in marriage, fatherhood, and employment for the prestige associated with becoming a soldier.[31]Colonialism, therefore forced youngmen to reconsider and renegotiate their conceptions of manhood- a barometer that similar to pre-colonial identifications exceeds the measure of class and extends to concerns of status.

We can look at the plight of wage laborers more intently to illuminate this point. Stephan F. Miescher complicates our understanding of gender during colonialism in Ghana in general, but we may extract applicable scholarship from his work to apply to the Asante nationalist discussion. Miescher’s sources are based on oral histories. Accordingly, as is the case with Allman and Akeampong who use this type of source in their work, Miescher offers critical insight from the experiences of the participants of the struggle for independence and the dynamics of power and status in Ghana from the perspective of the “every-day” man.

While he was not the first to elucidate the term, Miescher’s consideration of *akrakyefo*, falls within the rubric of the biographic of the “aspirant businessman” provided by Rathbone earlier and yields yet another attainable ideal for youngmen through the accumulation of knowledge as a conduit to labor in a modernized society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Miescher states, *akrakyefo* were educated largely through missions and having succeeded in passing the Standard VII examination were trained to work as “clerks, cocoa brokers, storekeepers, pupil teachers...as certified teachers and pastors,” as well as represented a lawyer-merchant class.[32]Additionally, Kofi Darkwah has argued that the “educated elite” experienced varied levels of western education creating a spectrum of highly educated and lesser-educated professionals.[33]This suggests, as this work implies, that there was a perceptible gradient in social standing in a group largely considered as a class in common. The *akrakyefo*’s learned status and the spoils of that status (i.e.

job, wealth, or advanced education etc.) accorded *akrakyefo* significant cachet in the community.[34]The clout gained by the status of *akrakyefo*, also created seclusion for commoners that reached this status.

According to Miescher, *akrakyefo* experienced dual isolation as an intermediary in colonial transactions often steadying their loyalties between their employers, the British colonial administration, and the obligations of their hometown affiliations. They also endeavored to achieve aspirations of wielding some measure of power in the realm of politics.[35]As the *akrakyefo* found themselves juggling between expectations of their hometowns and employers as well as the resultant effects of mission education's expectations of manhood, the *akrakyefo* were forced to come to terms with their realities with their masculinity and the fate of a burgeoning nation in the balance. As Miescher states in terms of politics, "an educational sub-elite, consisting of primary school leavers employed as traders, teachers, and clerks, 'played a key role as a connecting link between coastal elite and protesting commoners.'"[36]Their ability to do so was due to their mobility within the Asante social strata that was cultivated by an aspirant identity.

## **Conclusions and Insights**

Scholars have paid special attention to youngmen in the narrative of Asante Nationalism. As the prime movers in politics in Ghana during the thrust towards decolonization, scholars have articulated that youngmen were the only coherent group capable of mobilizing a mass nationalist movement.[37]Identifying youngmen in this capacity challenges narratives of decolonization that consider the leadership of small pockets of elites as the *raison d'être* of African nationalism. In other words, Asante Nationalist historiography has trended towards emphasizing the role of the subaltern classes in the reimagining of the Ghanaian nation-state during decolonization rather than acquiescing to a style of history that puts the privileged few at the forefront of inciting political, social, economic and cultural change, thus making the youngmen a vital piece to the Asante Nationalist puzzle. While acknowledging the catalytic nature of the youngmen, scholars have applied varying terms in attempting to define the youngmen. The result has been that the historiography of youngmen has reflected a class identity fostered by historical aspirations tied to the attainment of status.

Inasmuch as we have gone to some length to consider an aspirant nature as a characteristic of the youngmen's makeup, we may consider the function of fulfillment of aspirations through the context of accumulation of wealth and later through the accumulation of knowledge for Asante as an incremental

process. In doing so, it is apparent that until a level status was reached such as *abirempon*, *akonkofo* or *akrakyefo* it is possible for youngmen to represent various stages of incremental accumulation, which gives rise to an identity that is fluid across a broad spectrum of social strata. The class identification of the youngmen was rooted in aspirations of cultural and special status benchmarks, the pursuit of which enabled youngmen to articulate an Asante Nationalist ethos. In other words on their quest towards obtaining recognizable status in society, it can be argued that most if not all *akonkofo* or *akrakyefo* were at one point commoners but not all commoners would be *akonkofo* or *akrakyefo* though they could always aspire. Ultimately, the NLM's political claims would fade into obscurity, but the Asante nation would be reincarnated in a different form in 1966, when the National Liberation Council ousted Kwame Nkrumah via military coup.

In revisiting the symbolism of the NLM flag, the porcupine's reference to the Asante warrior spirit harkens back to when the lower strata of society played a pivotal role in constructing the Asante nation. The youngmen of the 20<sup>th</sup> century embarked on a similar mission underscoring the importance of viewing the claims put forth from subaltern classes during the process of decolonization. Accordingly, rather than consider the historically political agency of youngmen as opportunistic benefactors of local issues in an attempt to exact a semblance of power, the youngmen may be considered as an elastic polity that had a specific identity. This identity was cultivated by having their own experiences as a function of the incremental processes of accumulation and aspirations for status that were culturally imbedded in Asante prior to colonialism.

## Endnotes

[1] McCaskie, T. C. *State and society in pre-colonial Asante*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 127

[2] Allman, Allman, Jean Marie. *The quills of the porcupine: Asante nationalism in an emergent Ghana*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993. 16

[3] See Allman, *The Quills*. Allman provides a breakdown of the scholarship on the subject of Asante Nationalism. For further research specifically see Smock, *The Politics of Pluralism: A Comparative Study of Lebanon and Ghana*, Fitch and Oppenheimer, *Ghana: End of an Illusion*, Vail, 'Introduction' "The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa", Osei, *A New Conceptual Model for the Study of Political integration in Africa*

[4]Allman, *The Quills*, 4

[5]Allman, *The Quills*, 5-6

[6]Austin, Dennis. *Politics in Ghana, 1946-1960*. London: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1970.

[7]Rathbone, Richard. "Businessmen in politics: Party struggle in Ghana," 1949-57." *The Journal of Development Studies*9, no. 3 (1973): 392

[8]Allman, *Quills*, 8

[9]Allman, *Quills*, 6

[10]Wilks, Ivor. *Asante in the nineteenth century: the structure and evolution of a political order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011: Originally published in 1975. An extremely detailed and thorough genealogy through five generations of succession is provided by Wilks here. 344-350

[11]Wilks, *Asante*, 728

[12]Wilks, *Asante* 535

[13]McCaskie, *State and Society*, 44

[14]Rathbone, *Businessmen*, 393

[15]Rathbone, *Businessmen*, 396

[16]Miescher, Stephan. *Making men in Ghana*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006, 84

[17]A brief discussion of the social order in pre-colonial Asante is required to further investigate the genesis of the aspirant identity of young men. Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the leaders of Asante made office holding a meritocracy. [17]Until that time, the only means by which one could succeed to office was to be of Royal descent or be a client of the Asantehene also referred to as a *nhenkwaa*. According to McCaskie, the pinnacle of status in pre-colonial Asante society was the title of *abirempon* ("big man"). [17]The change made by the Asante rulers now allowed for two more sectors of the Gold Coast to achieve the highest social status and office. Those sectors were prominent officers of the military, *nsafohene*, and traders.

The accumulation of wealth was the Asante ideal and the mechanism by which commoners, specifically merchants and traders, achieved upward social mobility. The emergence of the Asante meritocracy and European trade further delineated class distinction due to the emergence of a merchant class of traders specifically in the commodities of gold dust, kola nuts, and human traffic, in effect becoming in Asante what Weber has called political capitalism..

The state was able to appropriate the wealth of the *abirempon* candidate upon the candidate's death and exercised a veritable monopoly on trade and the recognition of *abirempon* status, however, as both Kwame Arhin in his work *Trade, Accumulation and the State in Asante in the Nineteenth Century* and Gareth Austin's work '*No Elders were present*': *Commoners and Private Ownership in Asante, 1807-96*, have shown commoners were able to exact a market share in the kola and rubber trades first in 1831 when the market more closely resembled an open free trade system then again in the 1880s when the state's grasp on trade thoroughfares became unmanageable. Accordingly, youngmen in pre-colonial Asante experienced a level of success in wealth accumulation through a quasi-free market economy. This success provided models for other youngmen to aspire to on a trajectory towards big man status. In this case, it must be understood that pursuit of achieving status was accomplished incrementally in the same character as accumulation.

[18]Austin, Gareth, *No Elders were Present*': *Commoners and Private Ownership in Asante, 1807-96*, 28

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