

## **A View From the Periphery: A Re-Assessment of Asante-Dagbamba Relations in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century\***

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This article takes as its object the historiography of the relationship between Asante and Dagbon<sup>1</sup> in the mid- to late eighteenth century, specifically as it pertains to the reputed Asante invasions of Dagbon in 1744/45 and 1772. Since the 1960s it has been an accepted fact of Ghanaian history that Asante invaded, occupied, and conquered the Dagbamba capital city of Yendi and ultimately established an over-lordship requiring yearly payments of slaves, livestock, and other trade goods.<sup>2</sup> Due in large part to the works of Ivor Wilks<sup>3</sup> and other scholars affiliated with the Institute for African Studies at the University of Ghana in the 1950s and 1970s, it is now regarded as common knowledge among students and scholars of Ghanaian history. Up to the present, assertions of Asante dominance over

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\* Funding for the research upon which this article is based was provided by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad fellowship, a West African Research Association Pre-Doctoral fellowship, and a Graduate Research Abroad Fellowship from Boston University. I am appreciative to Diana Wylie, Benjamin Talton, Lilly Havstad, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on various drafts of this article.

<sup>1</sup> The geo-political entity, or “kingdom,” *Dagbon* is inhabited by people called *Dagbamba* (more often in the literature, *Dagomba*), who speak a language called *Dagbanli* (or *Dagbani*).

<sup>2</sup> See T. Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, 3rd ed. (London: London Cass, 1824); A.W. Cardinall, *The Natives of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast: Their Customs, Religion and Folklore* (London: Routledge, 1920); Nehemia Levtzion, *Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa: A Study of Islam in the Middle Volta Basin in the Pre-Colonial Period* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968); Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975); J.D. Fage, “Reflections on the Early History of the Mossi-Dagomba Group of States,” in Jan Vansina, ed., *The Historian in Tropical Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 177–92; Martin Staniland, *The Lions of Dagbon: Political Change in Northern Ghana* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Wyatt MacGaffey, *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers: History, Politics, and Land Ownership in Northern Ghana* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013); Jean Marie Allman and John Parker, *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> See Ivor Wilks, *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History* (Legon, Accra, Ghana: Legon Institute of African Studies, University College of Ghana, 1961), and *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*. See also Phyllis Ferguson and Ivor Wilks, “Chiefs, Constitutions, and the British in Northern Ghana,” in Michael Crowder and Obaro Ikime, eds., *West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status under Colonial Rule and Independence* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1970), 326–69, and Ivor Wilks, Nehemia Levtzion, and Bruce M. Haight, *Chronicles from Gonja: A Tradition of West African Muslim Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Dagbon have been largely unquestioned. My own oral history research with Dagbamba drummers and warriors, however, raises questions about the nature and terms of the relationship between the two polities.

My aim here is to critically re-assess the evidence upon which such claims have been built and to subsequently re-evaluate the interpretations of this evidence. In so doing, I call into question the conclusions of Asante conquest and control of Dagbon, arguing that historical analyses were flawed in a number of important ways. I suggest that these conclusions are unfounded, having been unduly influenced by Ghanaian geopolitics, reductive notions about the structure of precolonial polities, and the desire of post-independence scholars to craft a definitive history from incongruent oral accounts.

I take the position that, as others have argued elsewhere, within the post-Independence project of giving Africa a “usable political past,”<sup>4</sup> early historians of Ghana sought to craft coherent historical narratives from a hodge-podge of often irreconcilable oral accounts and rare manuscripts.<sup>5</sup> In the course of constructing these narratives, it was necessary to pick and choose from among competing oral and documentary sources, which required the jettisoning of historical accounts that did not fit—or otherwise complicated—these linear and progressive narratives of conquest and state-building. It has been my experience—by no means a unique one!—as an ethnographer researching oral history among Dagbamba griot-drummers, called *lunsi*,<sup>6</sup> and warriors, called *sapashinima*,<sup>7</sup> that there is tremendous variation within the Dagbamba oral archive, even if there appears to be a high degree of consistency in select areas.<sup>8</sup>

As I will show, the written and oral testimonies upon which historical analyses were based contain inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and otherwise ambiguous statements sufficient to lead us to doubt the veracity of these accounts. Moreover, most historians of

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<sup>4</sup> MacGaffey, *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers*, 30–31.

<sup>5</sup> Tom C. McCaskie, “Empire State: Asante and the Historians,” *Journal of African History* 33, 3 (1992), 468; MacGaffey, *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers*, 3, chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Sing. *lunga*, Dagbamba drummer/historian. See John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); John Miller Chernoff, “The Drums of Dagbon,” in Geoffrey Haydon and Dennis Marks, eds., *Repercussions: A Celebration of African American Music* (London: Century Publishing, 1985), 101–27; John Miller Chernoff, “A Drummer’s Testament | Home,” *A Drummer’s Testament*, accessed January 30, 2013, <http://www.adrummerstestament.com/>; David Locke, *Drum Damba: Talking Drum Lessons* (Crown Point, Ind: White Cliffs Media, 1990); David Locke, “Dagomba Dance Drumming,” *Dagomba Dance Drumming*, <https://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/display/DagombaDanceDrumming/Welcome> (accessed April 27, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Sing. *sapashini*, Dagbamba warriors with apparent historical roots in Asante. See M. Dasana Iddi, “The Musketeers of the Dagbong Army: Dagban Kambose” (Master’s thesis, University of Ghana, 1973). and Karl Haas, “Kambon-Waa: The Music of the Dagbamba Warrior Tradition and the Individual Negotiation of Metric Orientation,” *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 13 (2008), <http://www.ethnomusic.ucla.edu/pre/Vol13/Vol13pdf/Haas.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> For example, regnal lists of paramount and regional chiefs are well known, although even this basic information contains slight variations. See Staniland, *Lions of Dagbon*, 19, and Iddi, “The Musketeers of the Dagbong Army,” 38, 50.

Dagbon have concentrated their data collection in the capital of Yendi, relying heavily on informants attached to the “court” of the Yaa Naa, which evinced an implicit assumption that an appeal to the central authority would yield the most legitimate histories. That different communities have different histories than others, that oral historians maintain different histories both within and across communities, and that this ambiguity appears to be built into the structure of historical transmission in Dagbon, was largely lost on the structural-functionalist anthropologists and positivist historians who first embarked on the data collection and synthesis on the peoples of the Middle Volta Basin.<sup>9</sup> I suggest that this is among the most important considerations in making sense of Dagbamba oral traditions.

Furthermore, as my Dagbamba interlocutors were quick to point out, there has been a noticeable and unhealthy bias towards the South in Ghana’s historical discourse. Early histories of colonial and precolonial Ghana focused disproportionately on the Asante and its supposed dominance over the northern “hinterland.” To the extent that these works dealt with the Dagbamba, evidence was too often collected from secondary sources and with little or no fieldwork or actual engagement with Northerners sufficient to be considered authoritative.<sup>10</sup>

The basis of my argument is the interpretation of the textual and oral evidence of two significant events that are purported to have taken place between Asante and Dagbon in the eighteenth century. As I will show below, this evidence that led historians to claims of the domination of the latter by the former is spurious at best, and is altogether inconsistent with materials I gathered in oral history research from 2006–2014. My first critique is of the purported invasion of Yendi in 1744/45 by Asante forces led by Asantehene Opoku Ware I. Evidence for this event is based upon short selections of two eighteenth-century documents: the *Kitāb Ghanjā*,<sup>11</sup> written in Arabic by Gonja *ulamaa* sometime in the 1750s; and *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea (1760)*,<sup>12</sup> being the memoir of Ludwig Ferdinand Rømer, a Danish merchant stationed for a time at Christiansborg Castle.

The second event is the abduction of the Dagbamba paramount chief, Yaa Naa Abdallah Gariba, by the Asante in or around 1772, apparently led by Adontenhene

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<sup>9</sup> See Meyer Fortes, *The Dynamics of Clanship Among the Tallensi* (London: Published for the International African Institute by the Oxford University Press, 1945); R. S. Rattray, *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1932); David Tait, *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana* (International African Institute, 1961); A.W. Cardinall and E.F. Tamakloe, *Tales Told in Togoland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970); A. C. Duncan-Johnstone and H. A Blair, *Enquiry into the Constitution and Organisation of the Dagbon Kingdom* (Accra: Government Printer, 1932); Fage, “Reflections on the Early History of the Mossi-Dagomba Group of States”; Wilks, *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History*.

<sup>10</sup> In “Empire State,” McCaskie excoriates much of the historical work on Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, stating that it was “urgently produced, sometimes haphazard in its framing, very often historically naive, simplistic and unreflective in its premises, analyses and use of evidence, and disablingly restricted in its range of comparative intellectual reference,” 468.

<sup>11</sup> Wilks, Levtzion, and Haight, *Chronicles from Gonja*.

<sup>12</sup> Ludvig Ferdinand Rømer, *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea (1760)*, trans. Selena Axelrod Winsnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Kwaaten Pete, which resulted in annual payments of slaves and possibly other trade commodities from Yendi to Kumasi. The data for this comes primarily from oral sources, many with wildly varying details and evincing political agendas. As I will show, any historical re-construction must be undertaken with great caution.

Apart from a very few eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works (discussed below), the only information we have regarding Asante-Dagbamba relations come from oral sources recounted since the latter part of the nineteenth century up through the present.<sup>13</sup> Coming from Dagbon, Nanumba, and Asante, these oral traditions differ widely concerning the conditions that led to the Yaa Naa's seizure, the terms of his release, the parties involved in the negotiations, and the ramifications of the whole ordeal. Oral traditions relevant to this discussion were collected over the course of two more or less distinct periods: the colonial period, especially the first two decades of the twentieth century<sup>14</sup>; and the period beginning just before independence and lasting into the early 1970s.<sup>15</sup> These accounts are complicated by my own research with Dagbamba and Asante drummers in the twenty-first century, all of whom refute that the relationship between these two states had ever been based on anything but friendship and mutual respect.

Interestingly, throughout my oral history research in and around Tamale in 2006–2014, none of my informants had any knowledge of the Asante and Dagbamba ever having engaged in a military conflict, and the notion of Asante domination over Dagbon was universally dismissed as preposterous. That an American researcher would come to Dagbon asking about Asante “overlordship” was, to them, clear evidence that the historical record had been manipulated by writers from southern Ghana, where schooling had been introduced generations earlier than in the North, and where literacy remains far higher.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> An Arabic manuscript from the Mole archive which mentions trade items between Kumasi and Yendi is discussed in Phyllis Ferguson, “Islamization in Dagbon: A Study of the Alfanema of Yendi” (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1972), 220–23. It was evidently written some time after the death of Naa Gariba, although its provenance is unknown.

<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Fisch, *Dagbane-Sprachproben* (Hamburg: Gräfe & Sillem, 1913); Cardinall, *The Natives of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast*; Cardinall and Tamakloe, *Tales Told in Togoland*; Francis Charles Bernard Dudley Fuller, *A Vanished Dynasty: Ashanti*, 2nd ed, Cass Library of African Studies. General Studies, no. 78 (London: Cass, 1921); R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929) and *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Goody, *The Ethnography of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, West of the White Volta* (Cambridge: Colonial Office, 1954), and “The Akan and The North,” *Ghana Notes and Queries*, no. 9 (1966), 18–24; Wilks, *Northern Factor in Ashanti History*; Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*; Fage, “Reflections on the Early History of the Mossi-Dagomba Group of States”; Ferguson and Wilks, “Chiefs, Constitutions, and the British in Northern Ghana”; Ferguson, *Islamization in Dagbon: A Study of the Alfanema of Yendi*; A.A. Iliasu, “Asante’s Relations with Dagomba, C. 1740–1874,” *Ghana Social Science Journal* 1, 2 (1971), 54–62; Iddi, “The Musketeers of the Dagbong Army”; David Tait, *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana* (London: International African Institute, 1961).

<sup>16</sup> MacGaffey notes that the literacy rate in the Northern Region is the lowest in Ghana at 23 percent, *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers*, 48. See R.B. Bening, “Colonial Control and the Provision of Education in Northern Ghana, 1908–1951,” *Universitas* 5, 2 (1976), 58–99; Jack Goody, “Restricted Literacy in Northern Ghana,” in Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

There is a general feeling among Dagbamba that their history has been misrepresented, written by foreigners and Southerners with little or no language competency in Dagbanli and a general lack of understanding regarding traditional cultural and political structures. As IAS professor and titled Dagbamba drummer Zablong Zakariah Abdallah lamented to me in 2012, “it isn’t that the facts are not there, but publication is not easy.” In recent years, however, a number of Dagbamba writers have undertaken various projects to write and publish their own histories in Dagbanli and English, funded largely through local literacy organizations.<sup>17</sup>

Buaru Alhassan Tia, a sapashini elder and drummer, complained to me that throughout the early days of colonialism and independence, the Asantes’ early access to education, along with most Dagbambas’ reluctance to educate their children, allowed certain actors to manipulate the historical record, telling me that “their eyes were opened first, and here, our eyes were not open.” He explained that

[T]hey were writing everything down. They learned so much from the books, but you [a Dagbamba] don’t know much about it. You don’t hear, you don’t understand it, you don’t know what it is. These days, as our eyes are also open, we have gotten to know. Did the drummer know why he should send his child to school? The drummer did not know why he should send his child to school. Even a chief would not send his child to school, only his slaves. That is why the other tribes are more educated than us. [...] We were showing strength while they were showing education. That is why, in everything, we are behind. [...] So, all they are saying— they are telling us lies.

Because their eyes were open before us, when they came here, anything that would happen, they would write it down. So, here in the North, if you observe, there are so many older people who are here without birth certificates. I can’t imagine an elderly Asante man who will not have a birth certificate. As I am here now, I don’t have one.<sup>18</sup>

After reviewing the available evidence, taken together with oral histories collected in Tamale, in the Northern Region of Ghana in 2007, 2013, and 2014, I suggest that claims of an invasion of Yendi in 1744/45 were based on questionable evidence and faulty analysis,

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Press, 1968), 198–264; see also Deborah Pellow, “Chieftaincy, Collective Interests, and the Dagomba New Elite,” in *Development, Modernism, and Modernity in Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 43–61.

<sup>17</sup> See Haruna Mohammed Mburdiba, *Kpamba Yeligu* (Tamale, Ghana: Self published, 2014); Paul Dawuni Issahaku, *Dagban Yu’Naha* (Tamale, Ghana: GILLBT Printing Press, 2013); R. M. Yahaya, *Folktales from Dagbon: An Introduction to Storytelling* (Tamale, Ghana: The Open Press, 2010); Literacy and Development Through Partnership, *Dagbon Kaya Ni Yelikura: Selected Cultural and Historical Collections on Dagbon* (Tamale, Ghana: Literacy and Development Through Partnership, 2007); Ibrahim Mahama, *History and Traditions of Dagbon* (Tamale, Ghana: GILLBT Printing Press, 2004); Salifu Mohammed, *Dagbon Wahi: Dagomba Dances* (Tamale, Ghana: Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT), 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Buaru Alhassan Tia, interview with the author, Tamale, Ghana, June 30, 2014. Trans. Alhassan John Issa.

and likely never happened. I also suggest that the events leading to the bolstered trade agreements between Asante and Dagbon in the late 1700s—especially concerning the issue of whether slaves sent from Yendi to Kumasi constituted tribute, debt, or trade—have been obscured by the number of competing accounts. Furthermore, any attempt to definitively discern “what really happened” cannot be unproblematically separated from the subject positions of the various historical actors who lived through the events of the eighteenth century and whose oral testimony informs our knowledge of the past.

### Opoku Ware’s Campaign of 1744/45

Two very short passages constitute the entire corpus of contemporary documentation to support the position that Asantehene Opoku Ware I invaded and occupied Yendi, the seat of the Dagbamba paramount chief, or Yaa Naa. The first is a line from the *Kitāb Ghanjā*; the second was written by L.F. Rømer, a clerk and later a “merchant” employed by the Danish West India and Guinea Company, stationed at Christiansborg Castle between the years 1739 and 1750. Both documents are marked by a vexing combination of temporal specificity (although conflicting) and geographical ambiguity. They have each been widely cited, but until now their veracity has not been questioned. I shall address them each in turn, pointing out inconsistencies within each document and what I believe to have been missteps in analyzing them in the course of writing history.

I begin with the indigenous account written in the North, as translated and contextualized by Wilks, Nehemia Levtzion, and Bruce Haight in *Chronicles from Gonja*.<sup>19</sup> Line 70 of the *Kitāb Ghanjā*, in the English translation, reads:

At the end of the same year in Dhu al-Hijja [January–February 1745], the cursed unbeliever, BQ [Opoku], entered the town of GhGh and plundered it.<sup>20</sup>

In the exegesis of the text, Wilks et al explain that *GhGh* [غغ] “appears to be the standard rendering in local Arabic of the Gonja name for the Dagomba, *Nwon*. If so, ‘the town of GhGh’ is presumed to be Yendi, the Dagomba capital.”<sup>21</sup> A close look at the word choices on the part of Wilks et al., however, reveal a significant degree of uncertainty on the interpreters’ part. Their argument that the occupied city is “presumably Yendi” is predicated upon what “appears to be the standard rendering” of the Gonja word for Dagbon makes for an interesting theory, but hardly constitutes convincing evidence. The use of “If so” serves to further equivocate their theory and weaken the argument. Perhaps most befuddling is that the authors decline to explain how or why *GhGh* [غغ]—a word containing no “N” [ن]—could possibly be taken to represent what might otherwise have been spelled *Nn* [نن], a word containing no “Gh” [غ]. These two words have only the unvocalized and omitted vowels in common [و], letters that the reader must fill in on his or her own.

Phyllis Ferguson offers an alternative explanation, although reaching a similar conclusion, when she suggests that “[t]he Arabic form *Ghuughu* represents the Gonja

<sup>19</sup> Wilks, Levtzion, and Haight, *Chronicles from Gonja*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

*Gwong*, ‘Da(gbon).’”<sup>22</sup> Her translation of the passage differs only slightly, leaving the reader with little doubt about where the text is describing: “In 1745 an Asante army entered, and plundered, a ‘town of Ghuughu,’ *that is, of Dagbon.*”<sup>23</sup> Wilks and Ferguson worked closely in the late 1960s and early 1970s, conducting field research together and co-publishing “Chiefs, Constitutions, and the British in Northern Ghana.”<sup>24</sup> It stands to reason that they would share views on this point of Asante dominance over its “hinterland.”

A similar translation of the same manuscript was offered in Jack Goody’s earlier work, “The Ethnography of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast West of the White Volta.”<sup>25</sup> Acquired from A.C. Duncan-Johnstone of the British colonial authority and included as an appendix, the English translation postulates غغ as a rendering of *Gwong*, which Goody interprets as “Dagomba,” although there is no mention of a particular town.<sup>26</sup>

Yet another issue with accepting that GhGh refers to Yendi is that the Dagbamba capital is mentioned by name in two other sections of the *Kitāb Ghanjā*. The first is in recording the death of “the king of Yāndi [ياند],” presumably Yaa Naa Zanjina, in 1714, and the second may or may not refer to the death of Zanjina’s successor Yaa Naa Andani Sigli, referred to in Line 33 as the “king of Yāni [يان].”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the authors also specifically name “Tunu’ma land”—the western part of what is now Dagbon<sup>28</sup>—in what is almost certainly the record of Andani Sigli’s defeat of Gonja chief Muhamman Wari.<sup>29</sup> There are two important takeaways here. First, when the authors wished to refer to Yendi, or to Tuma, they did so in specific terms. It has already been noted that the early historiographers of Ghana misjudged the nature of precolonial polities regarding the degree of centralization. It is simply incorrect to assume, as so many have, that Yendi and Dagbon would have been synonymous entities in the early and mid-eighteenth century, when the

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<sup>22</sup> Ferguson, “Islamization in Dagbon,” 216.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, italics added.

<sup>24</sup> Ferguson and Wilks, “Chiefs, Constitutions, and the British in Northern Ghana.”

<sup>25</sup> Goody, *The Ethnography of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, West of the White Volta*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>27</sup> Wilks, Levtzion, and Haight, *Chronicles from Gonja*, 98.

<sup>28</sup> There is some confusion in early sources regarding the location of “Tunuma.” Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, and Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Cass, 1824), both locate Tunuma, or Tonoma, in eastern Dagbon in the vicinities of Yendi and Zabzugu. However, Tuma, or Toma, is the western part of Dagbon (Wilks et al., *Chronicles from Gonja*, 122; Ferguson, “Islamization in Dagbon,” chapter 4).

<sup>29</sup> The Gonja chief known as Muhamman Wari is called Kumpatia in Dagbon. Dagbamba oral histories support this account and its timing in conjunction with the death of Naa Zanjina, although he is said to have been in Sabari, east of Yendi, during the battle (see Dolsi-naa Abubakari Lunna and David Locke, “The Story of Dɔ̄gu, Appellation of Tugu-Lan’ Yemusa,” <http://sites.tufts.edu/dagomba/history-stories/>, 2001; see also Levtzion, *Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa*, 88–89, 197; contra Ferguson, “Islamization in Dagbon,” 132–54, cited in Wilks, Levtzion, and Haight, *Chronicles from Gonja*, 122.

*Kitāb Ghanjā* was written. Furthermore, if eighteenth-century Gonja would have referred to contemporary Dagbamba as a unified ethno-linguistic group, they almost certainly would not have had terminology to distinguish between what are now regarded as Nanun, Dagbamba, and Mamprussi. Even today, members of these groups all refer to themselves as “Dagbamba” when speaking their own languages. If “GhGh” does indeed refer to Dagbamba, this designation covers most of present-day northeastern Ghana, not just Dagbon.

The second issue with the *Kitāb Ghanjā* is that there are known errors throughout the document. “Yendi” is spelled differently in consecutive entries, just one instantiation of what Wilks et al., describe as “many errors of spelling, grammar and syntax.”<sup>30</sup> Similar inconsistencies occur in other sections, including GhNGh [غنغ] and GhN [غن] in reference to Bonduku,<sup>31</sup> and GhBGh [غبغ] and GhNBGh [غنبنغ] for Gambaga.<sup>32</sup> Both Joseph Dupuis and Wilks make mention of a major town in the area around Daboya, just beyond the Desert of Ghofan, named Ghobagho.<sup>33</sup> Considering the Gonja authors’ and copyists propensity for spelling errors, it is within reason that GhBGh [غبغ] could easily have been mistakenly represented as GhGh [غنغ]. We may never know whether Opoku Ware I occupied Yendi, Ghobagho, or some other community in Ghana’s north, although the evidence certainly points away from Yendi. The larger point here is that the evidence presented in the *Kitāb Ghanjā* is far from conclusive, and that any claims based on Line 70 can only be conjecture, at best.

In their exegesis for Line 70, however, Wilks et al., also point to “independent evidence of a major Asante expedition in 1744–45,” which they describe as a “confrontation of Asante musketeers and northern cavalymen” which ultimately “resulted in military deadlock.”<sup>34</sup> This evidence is found in *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea (1760)*, to which I now turn.

### “A Reliable Account”

The following passage, along with the *Kitāb Ghanjā*, has been used by historians of Ghana as evidence of Asante’s dominance over its hinterland in the precolonial era, what has been called “Greater Asante.”<sup>35</sup> A critical reading of Rømer’s narrative, however, leads one to question the foundation of this argument. In this section I argue against the widely accepted theory that this particular account describes the sack of Yendi by Asante, on two

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 101 and 105.

<sup>33</sup> Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee*, xxviii–xxxvi; Wilks, *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History*, 41.

<sup>34</sup> Wilks, Levtzion, and Haight, *Chronicles from Gonja*, 130.

<sup>35</sup> See Kwame Arhin, *The Structure of Greater Ashanti, 1700–1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Larry W. Yarak, “Elmina and Greater Asante in the Nineteenth Century,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 56, no. 1 (1986), 33; Ivor Wilks, “On Mentally Mapping Greater Asante: A Study of Time and Motion,” *Journal of African History* 33, 2 (1992), 175–90.



counts. First, this narrative describes a military defeat, not a victory that resulted in terms of Dagbamba tribute; and second, as I argued above in reference to the *Kitāb Ghanjā*, the city occupied by Opoku Ware I in 1744/45 was not Yendi.

[I]n the beginning of 1744, Oppoccu broke camp with his men, with the intention of going to war against the powerful nation lying NE of Assiante. Some of our Accras, who were with Oppoccu at that time as Danish emissaries, also travelled with him, and this was recorded in their reports to us. *I cannot recall the name of the nation.* [...]

They made their way for twenty-one days, at times hindered by bush and rivers. After this they arrived at a desert where there was not a blade of grass to be seen. They walked for fourteen days in quicksands, and on occasion the army went without water for two days. [...] Finally they came to a flat land where they saw many well-populated cities. (Oppoccu was accompanied by many of his people who had travelled and traded in that land.) The Assiantes fell upon the inhabitants and took them prisoner. Advancing still farther, they came to a large city where Oppoccu and his 300,000 men made camp, since the inhabitants of the city had deserted it. [...] The Assiante traders assured their king that he would go through many such towns before he came to the [capital] Residence.

The Assiantes stayed in that city for an entire month because Oppoccu was afraid to advance further. Finally Oppoccu's enemies came and surrounded the entire city with a numberless army. The Assiantes then had to fight their way through the enemy ranks, which they did, suffering great losses. The enemies' horses were frightened by the [sound of] shooting, since these riders had no guns but used lances or spears, and swords. Wherever the Assiante army marched the enemy surrounded them, and this continued through the desert, right back to the Assiante forest. Thus ended the war for Oppoccu, who had considered himself to be the greatest king in the entire world. He had captured several hundred prisoners and horses, etc., but he and his allies had lost 40,000 men in the desert, where one of our messengers also starved to death. This campaign lasted for eight months.<sup>36</sup>

According to Rømer's narrative, the Asante army, having been surrounded by cavalry, fought their way out of the city and all the way back to the forest in the South. Opoku Ware I lost 40,000 of his 300,00 men, compared to only "hundreds of slaves and horses, etc." captured during several months in the field. One can only wonder how the occupation of a deserted city and a subsequent retreat in which 13 percent of the army was killed could have been interpreted as an Asante victory. Despite the absence of any documentary evidence, Wilks concludes that the expedition was "an indifferent success," writing that "[t]he Dagomba nevertheless subsequently sued for peace, and acknowledged some sort of Asante overlordship."<sup>37</sup> Robin Law presents a similar reading that, although the outcome

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<sup>36</sup> Rømer, *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea*, 170–72; italics added.

<sup>37</sup> Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, 21–22; see also Wilks, *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History*, 14.

was “somewhat ambiguous,” the Asante “emerged victorious” because of their superior firepower.<sup>38</sup>

Rømer clearly did not share this view of Asante success. Writing on interactions between Opoku Ware I and a certain African man named Noy employed as a messenger between the Danes on the coast and the Asantehene (see note 44 below), he remarks that

Noy went along [with Oppoccu] in the famous campaign that Oppoccu launched against a nation NE of Assiante; and our good boy Noy, together with others, starved to death (as the fetish at Labode prophesied to him before he left Accra). Even if he had returned alive, Noy would not have been able to tell us anything other than that Oppoccu and the Assiantes could also show their backs to their enemies.<sup>39</sup>

The suggestion that this campaign—inasmuch as it involved the occupation of Yendi—was a success, “indifferent,” “ambiguous,” or otherwise, let alone one that established “effective control,”<sup>40</sup> is simply without merit. All the more curious is that neither Rømer nor the *Kitāb Ghanjā* make any mention of a diplomatic settlement reached between the Asante and whomever it was chasing them. That the events of 1744/45 resulted in some type of peace process, in which the Dagbamba “acknowledged ... Asante overlordship,” is wholly unlikely and, more significantly, unsupported by any evidence.

Regarding the location of the Asante occupation, there are two major issues in the Rømer testimony that suggest that the army of Opoku Ware I was in a city other than Yendi. The first is the distance they are likely to have traveled, as measured in days. Rømer’s informants stated that the Asante army marched for thirty-five days (twenty-one and then another fourteen) before reaching some “well populated cities.” According to Dupuis, who had heard from traders coming into Kumasi, the Mossi capital of Wagadugu was a distance of “twenty-five journies by the Salgha and Yandy Roads” from Kumasi.<sup>41</sup> Ferguson notes that the travel time from Kumasi to Salaga was fourteen days, Salaga to Yendi was five days, and another five from Yendi to Sansanne-Mango, which is due east of Gambaga along a different road leading from Yendi. Thus, after traveling only twenty-four days along well-established trade routes (as the Asante had experienced traders with them), the army would have overshot Yendi as well as Mamprussi territory to the north.<sup>42</sup> According to the Rømer narrative, however, they had only just passed through the forest after twenty-one days, and slogged for fourteen days across the Desert of Ghofan, a trip that should have taken far less time.

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<sup>38</sup> Robin Law, *The Horse in West African History: The Role of the Horse in the Societies of Pre-Colonial West Africa* (Oxford; New York: Published for the International African Institute by Oxford University Press, 1980), 142.

<sup>39</sup> Rømer, *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea*, 159. Brackets in original.

<sup>40</sup> Ferguson and Wilks, “Chiefs, Constitutions, and the British in Northern Ghana,” 342.

<sup>41</sup> Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee*, cvii.

<sup>42</sup> Ferguson, “Islamization in Dagbon,” 233.

The numbers cited by Rømer simply don't add up, casting doubt on the veracity of his account. Furthermore, Rømer also writes that the campaign lasted a total of eight months despite the fact that his timeline allows for only about three, plus an unspecified amount of time during which they "fell upon the inhabitants and took them prisoner."<sup>43</sup> That Opoku Ware's campaign was launched in the dry season months at the end of 1744 or beginning of 1745, rather than in the beginning of 1744, as Rømer states, does not prove him wrong on all counts, but is worth noting.<sup>44</sup>

The second issue is that Rømer specifically states that the Asante forces had not yet reached the capital, but were instead occupying another city. This portion of the narrative has, inexplicably, never been taken up by any of the many writers who have pointed to this passage as evidence of Asante dominance over Dagbon, including A.A. Iliasu in his defense of Dagbamba sovereignty during this period (see below, pg. 222).<sup>45</sup> As a piece of historical evidence regarding Asante's relations with Dagbon in the mid-eighteenth century, Rømer's narrative is simply unreliable.

Alternative interpretations of the Asante campaign of 1744/45 exist, although they have not held up to those offered by Wilks, Fage, and Ferguson. Paul Ladouceur, for example, suggests that this city was actually Kpembe, the site of a major Gonja chieftaincy.<sup>46</sup> J.K. Fynn also concludes that the area under attack was in Gonja territory, rather than in Dagbon,<sup>47</sup> and Wilks even concedes that "Kpembe must have been occupied—if not before—by 1744–5, during the major invasion of the northeast."<sup>48</sup> Significantly, the 1989 French translation of Rømer's narrative follows Fynn in placing Opoku Ware I in Gonja territory,<sup>49</sup> while in the more recent English version, translator

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<sup>43</sup> Thirty-five days marching, one month occupying the city, and the retreat south, which can only be assumed to have been conducted more expeditiously than the march north.

<sup>44</sup> Letters, proceedings, and diary entries from Christiansborg Castle, including some written by Roemer himself, place Opoku Ware I in Kumasi early in 1744; see Ole Justesen, ed., *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana 1657–1754: Vol. 1, 1657–1735*, trans. James Manley (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2005), 600, 606, 655, 657. The messenger referenced in the above quotation is believed to be an African man named Noy, who letters place in Christiansborg in February and March (ibid., 652–53) of 1744, returning from a trip to Kumasi by 21 July (p. 658), and in Keta in August of the same year. According to council minutes dated 22 June 1745, Noy had already been replaced, having "died of an illness contracted" in Asante, where he had apparently been sent before 11 March 1745 (p. 673).

<sup>45</sup> Iliasu, "Asante's Relations with Dagomba, c. 1740–1874," 55–57.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Ladouceur, *Chiefs and Politicians: The Politics of Regionalism in Northern Ghana* (New York: Longman, 1979), 33; see also Benedict G. Der, *The Slave Trade in Northern Ghana* (Accra: Woeli Pub. Services, 1998), 8.

<sup>47</sup> J.K. Fynn, *Asante and Its Neighbours, 1700–1807* (Evanston, IL: Longman, Northwestern University Press, 1971), 77–78.

<sup>48</sup> Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Ludwig F. Römer, *Le Golfe de Guinée, 1700–1750: Récit de L. F. Römer, Marchand D'esclaves Sur La Côte Ouest-Africaine*, trans. Mette Dige-Hess (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989).

Selena Axelrod Winsnes cites personal communication with Wilks in suggesting that the unnamed city was Yendi.<sup>50</sup>

To summarize my argument thus far, I have suggested that the available documentary evidence, in the forms of the *Kitāb Ghanjā* and Rømer's *Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea*, does not allow us to ascertain the name or location of the community invaded by the Asante forces in 1744/45. Furthermore, the little that can be gleaned from these documents suggests that the community so occupied was likely not Yendi, but rather a town in Gonja territory. My conclusion is further bolstered by the silence of Dagbamba oral traditions regarding battle with Asante and the purported occupation of Yendi. It is tempting to consider that Dagbamba oral historians may have removed these narratives from the historical record in an effort to save face. The prominent place of defeats against the Gonja and, later, the Germans, however, suggests this is not the case.<sup>51</sup>

However, the larger historical problem, as I see it, lies in the effects that this historical improbability has been postulated to have caused. Namely, that this military campaign resulted in Asante securing Dagbon as a tributary, or “vassal” state. In their co-authored essay, Ferguson and Wilks state that “Dagomba ... had been within the ambit of Ashanti since 1744/5, though after the British sack of Kumasi in 1874 effective control over the region collapsed,” going on to note that “Dagomba had been a peripheral part of Greater Ashanti since 1744/5.”

This is not to say that there is no evidence of conflict between Asante and Dagbamba actors in precolonial Ghana, or that there is no basis for the suggestion that the Yaa Naa was for a time beholden to the Asantehene to one degree or another. On the contrary, there is ample oral evidence to support such claims. The events that may have given rise to these conflicts, however, most likely occurred three decades after the Opoku Ware I campaign. As I will demonstrate in the following section, the available historical evidence presents a more complicated picture than the narrative presented in twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship on the topic.

### **Yaa Naa Abdallah Gariba and the *Kambon Samli***

Our two main sources on early nineteenth century Asante are the testimonies of T. Edward Bowdich and Joseph Dupuis,<sup>52</sup> which give us the most extensive accounts of Asante in the early nineteenth century. However, these texts offer contradictory claims on the nature of the relationship of Asante and Dagbon. Further, neither man traveled to the North, and having collected all of their data on this region in Kumasi, theirs are only second-hand

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<sup>50</sup> Rømer, *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea* (1760), 171.

<sup>51</sup> On Dagbamba accounts of wars with Gonja, see Dolsi-naa Abubakari Lunna, *The Story of Dikala, Dance-Drumming for Blacksmiths*, interview by David Locke, Medford, MA, March 7, 2002; Mburdiba, *Kpamba Yeligu* (Tamale, Ghana: Self published, 2014); Iddi, “The Musketeers of the Dagbong Army: Dagban Kambonse,” 67; Karl J. Haas, “Music, Masculinity, and Tradition: A Musical Ethnography of Dagbamba Warriors in Tamale, Ghana” (Dissertation, Boston University, 2016), 90–91, <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/17739>.

<sup>52</sup> Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*; Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee*.

accounts.<sup>53</sup> Bowdich states that Dagbon was tributary to Asante, and provides the oft-cited figures of annual tribute from Yendi (“500 Slaves; 200 Cows; 400 Sheep; 400 Cotton Cloths; 200 Ditto and silk”),<sup>54</sup> explaining that Dagbon was “tributary” to Asante.<sup>55</sup> Yet, he also displays some skepticism. Bowdich suggests that Dagbon exercised political autonomy when he writes that, while the Asante commanded troops from twenty-one tributary states, “[n]either Inta [Gonja] nor Dagwumba furnish any, the Ashantees pretending to despise their troops too much to use them.”<sup>56</sup> Dupuis’s account directly contradicts that of Bowdich when he states quite clearly that “Yandy forms no part of the empire, but it is true that Ashantee influence carries great weight in the councils of the sovereign of Dagomba.”<sup>57</sup> Taken together, we are left with an inconclusive picture of the political relationship of Asante and Dagbon in the early nineteenth century. In interpreting the data of these two writers, we must bear in mind that they, just like their modern-day counterparts, may have been offered contradictory or misleading information by informants with their own gaps in knowledge, biases, and political agendas.

If the extant information regarding the Asante involvement into the Middle Volta Basin in the mid-eighteenth century is ambiguous, it can at least be said to be limited to those few accounts already discussed above. The events surrounding the apparent capture and ransom of Naa Gariba by agents of Asantehene Osei Kwadwo (fl. 1764–1777), however, are more numerous and less definitive, coming to us in multiple variations in the oral traditions of both nations. As may be expected, we see divisions between Asante and Dagbamba oral histories, with varying historical actors and significant variations within each tradition.

In all versions of the story, Yaa Naa Abdallah Gariba was called to Kumasi to meet with the Asantehene or his representatives. Some stories state that the Yaa Naa was invited, others that he was summoned to answer for a crime, and still more say that he was captured in Yendi by Asante forces. Generally speaking, oral traditions of the capture and ransom of Naa Gariba can be separated into two camps: those which have Asante intervening in conflicts internal to Dagbon, and those that have an imperialist Asante consolidating hegemony over the economically important but militarily deficient “hinterland.”<sup>58</sup> Dagbamba sources speak of the paying down of a debt, or *Kambon samle*

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<sup>53</sup> Dupuis did, however, work closely with men from the interior while in Kumasi, including Gambaga native Muhammed al-Gamba, who was apparently a direct descendant of a Mamprussi paramount chief.

<sup>54</sup> Bowdich notes that both Gonja and Dagbamba pay an identical annual tribute; *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, 320–21. Widely varying figures have been quoted by other scholars, see Fuller, *A Vanished Dynasty*, and A.C. Duncan-Johnstone and H.A. Blair, *Enquiry Into the Constitution and Organisation of the Dagbon Kingdom* (Accra: Government Printer, 1932).

<sup>55</sup> Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, 235.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>57</sup> Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee*, xxxix.

<sup>58</sup> See Rattray, *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*.

[*samli*],<sup>59</sup> while the Asante refer to tribute extracted through military dominance. A significant number of Dagbamba narratives include Yaa Naa Gariba and his eventual successor Naa Saa Ziblim as central characters embroiled in internecine conflict, with little mention of Asante actors beyond vague references to the Asantehene. From the Asante side, Adontenhene Kwaaten Pete is often named as the man who succeeded in taking Yendi. Following a brief historiography of the Asante and Dagbamba accounts, I will revisit my suggestion that the oral archive has been misinterpreted and misrepresented in such a way that privileges a position that assumes Asante dominance of the northern “hinterland.”

Asante oral histories are limited, relative to the Dagbamba oral histories. In *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, R.S. Rattray writes that a certain Akuamoah Panyin, a chief and possibly founder of Mampon, was said to have fought under both Osei Tutu (d. 1720) and Opoku Ware (d. 1750). According to Rattray’s sources, Akuamoah made war “on his own account against the Guan,” who were aided in this fight by the Chief of Yendi, a certain Gyengyenrurudu.<sup>60</sup> The name Gyengyenrurudu has not been traced to any Yaa Naa, although Fage suggests this may have been Naa Zanjina (fl. ca. 1700–1714),<sup>61</sup> who almost certainly died before the accession of Opoku Ware in 1720 (see above). There is no mention of tribute.<sup>62</sup>

Oral histories collected from representatives of the Adontenhene and Asantehene in 1972 by M. Dasana Iddi both claim that during the reign of Opoku Ware I, Adontenhene Kwaaten [Kwame] Pete “conquered the king of Yendi.” Both stories tell us that this brought about the annual tribute payments of slaves, livestock, and cloth, while just one of the two has the Yaa Naa carried to Kumasi, which is consistent with some versions of the story told in Dagbon.<sup>63</sup> Fuller, writing in 1921, states that the “King of Yendi” was marching an army south to “overwhelm” Asante in the time of Osei Kwadwo (fl. 1764–1777). Adontehene Kwaaten Pete was dispatched to meet them in battle, and defeated the Dagbamba handily. “An annual tribute of 1,000 slaves, 1,000 cattle, 1,000 sheep, and 1,000 fowls was imposed on Yendi, one-tenth of which was given to Kwamin Pete as a reward for his service.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Kambon* is the adjectival form of *kamboŋa* (pl. *kambonsi*), referring to residents of the forest zone and coast, (*nyoŋ-ni*), including all Akan groups, Ga, and Ewe, as well as Asante. *Samli* is a Dagbanli word meaning “debt.” See Tony Naden, “Dagbani-English Dictionary” (Tamale, Ghana: G.I.L.L.B.T., 2013), 787. The Dagbamba warriors’ lineage are also called *kambonsi* (or *kambonse*), although the term *sapashini* is more common in contemporary usage.

<sup>60</sup> Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, 237.

<sup>61</sup> Fage, “Reflections on the Early History of the Mossi-Dagomba Group of States,” 180.

<sup>62</sup> Similar stories were collected by a J. Agyeman Dua in Mampong, although the lack of identifiable place names and actors are even more of an issue than in Rattray. See Iddi, “The Musketeers of the Dagbong Army: Dagban Kambonse,” 46.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 44–45.

<sup>64</sup> Fuller, *A Vanished Dynasty*, 34.

Most Dagbamba accounts include the reigning Yaa Naa Gariba and his nephew and eventual successor Naa Saa Ziblim as primary actors.<sup>65</sup> Our earliest source for the circumstances surrounding an involuntary remittance of slaves from Yendi to Kumasi appears to be Fisch,<sup>66</sup> who wrote in 1913 that Naa Gariba was summoned to Kpembe to answer for the loss of a slave who had escaped after the Asantehene had already paid for him. The Yaa Naa was ordered to pay an annual penalty of ten slaves.<sup>67</sup> British colonial officer Harold Blair, notable for his fluency in Dagbamba language and culture, recorded the testimony of one Mallam Halidu, who claimed to have heard the story as a child from the chief drummer of Yendi, or Namo-Naa.<sup>68</sup> According to Mallam Halidu, the Asante attacked Yendi, but Naa Gariba could not convince the other chiefs of Dagbon to come to his defense, and so was easily captured and subsequently ransomed for 1,000 slaves, and so “[f]rom that time a tribute of slaves was paid yearly to the King of Ashanti.”<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, Blair notes that, “Ashanti always feared Dagbon, and treated the Dagomba as a powerful people, although tributary to their king.”<sup>70</sup>

E.F. Tamakloe reports from his Dagbamba informant that the Asante intruded into Dagbon at the invitation of Ziblim, who was maneuvering to usurp the Yendi skin.<sup>71</sup> The Asante entered the capital without opposition and arrested Naa Gariba, but released him after negotiating a payment of 2,000 slaves, to be paid in annual installments of 200. Why this debt should have lasted beyond the ten years necessary to pay off the full amount is left unexplained. Other versions have the Asante arresting Naa Gariba for perceived infractions against the Asantehene, including one recorded by Iliasu, which has Ziblim interceding on Gariba’s behalf after his abduction by the Asante, though Iliasu provides no pretext for the invasion.<sup>72</sup>

David Tait collected two versions of the capture of Naa Gariba in the 1950s. One, recorded in Yendi, describes the incursion as retribution for the theft of a flock of sheep being raised in Western Dagbon for sale to the Asantehene. The other, from Nanun *lunsi* and recounted in Ferguson, claims that Naa Gariba chose sides in a chieftaincy dispute in

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<sup>65</sup> In at least one version, one of Naa Gariba’s unnamed sons is involved. As no distinction is made between natural-born sons and nephews in Dagbanli, this may well refer to Ziblim.

<sup>66</sup> Fisch, *Dagbane-Sprachproben*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 75; Iddi, “The Musketeers of the Dagbong Army: Dagban Kambonse,” 36–37.

<sup>68</sup> Duncan-Johnstone and Blair, *Enquiry Into the Constitution*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 50–51.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Cardinall and Tamakloe, *Tales Told in Togoland*, 268–69. This version is commonly cited, see Iliasu, “Asante’s Relations with Dagomba, c. 1740–1874,” 56–57.

<sup>72</sup> Iliasu, “Asante’s Relations with Dagomba, c. 1740–1874,” 58–59.

the Nanun town of Bimbilla, and so “Asantehene intervened, and found Bulali [the Nanun chief] in the wrong,”<sup>73</sup> subsequently punishing Naa Gariba by levying an annual tribute.

Iddi collected perhaps the most geographically dispersed body of oral histories in Dagbon during the late 1960s for his master’s thesis on the history of the sapashinima, or as he calls them, the *Dagban-kambonse*.<sup>74</sup> Sapashini chiefs from the communities of Tuusaani, Savelugu, and Tolon, in eastern, central, and western Dagbon, respectively, recounted versions of the story of Naa Gariba’s capture that were nearly identical to each other.<sup>75</sup> In these narratives, Naa Gariba was arrested by Asante forces for failure to pay an already existing debt, presumably incurred through trade. He was carried south on a palanquin, but did not reach Kumasi. It seems that whenever the men carrying the chief stopped to rest, each of them died. This pattern was repeated several times until Gariba was finally released, sending his sub-chiefs to represent him in Kumasi.<sup>76</sup> In each version of the story, Asante guards returned with the chiefs to Yendi in order to ensure future payments of the debt, and these guards are the ancestors of contemporary sapashinima. In yet another instantiation of this story, Buaru Alhassan Tia told me that Naa Gariba traveled to Kumasi at the invitation of the Asantehene, to whom he was related through his mother.<sup>77</sup> According to Tia, Asante guards accompanied the Yaa Naa back to Yendi, settling at the nearby village of Tuusaani, and became his royal executioners.

Interestingly, there is no mention in the Dagbamba stories of the circumstances leading to the origin of the debt, although Ferguson discusses an Arabic document of unknown provenance which suggests one possibility. According to her informant, Yendi had been sending slaves to Kumasi in exchange for guns, clothing, and brandy, and there came a time when the Yaa Naa’s account was in arrears. Unwilling or unable to pay for the guns or for the men who had carried the guns to Yendi, Naa Gariba was arrested and brought to Kumasi, where it was agreed that the debt would eventually be paid off in installments.<sup>78</sup> Zablong Zakariah Abdallah, who grew up studying Dagbamba oral history in Zabzugu, in eastern Dagbon, told me a similar story in 2012. According to Zablong, Yendi and Kumasi had been engaged in trading guns for slaves, but at a certain point the guns had failed to arrive from the South, and so Naa Gariba refused to send slaves.<sup>79</sup> As in

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<sup>73</sup> David Tait, Mss. “A” (Legon, Accra, Ghana, n.d.), Institute for African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon; mss. “B” (Legon, Accra, Ghana, n.d.), Institute for African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon; cited in Ferguson, “Islamization in Dagbon,” 219, brackets in the original.

<sup>74</sup> Iddi, “The Musketeers of the Dagbong Army: Dagban Kambonse.”

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 139–41, 40.

<sup>76</sup> This story of the palanquin, which gave rise to the Asante *Kotoko* proverb, “*Oku apim, apim bebu*” (“If you kill a thousand, a thousand will come”) is well-known today around Dagbon.

<sup>77</sup> Buaru Alhassan Tia, interview with the author, Tamale, Ghana, January 10, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Ferguson, “Islamization in Dagbon,” 220–23.

<sup>79</sup> Zablong Zakariah Abdallah, interview with the author, Medford, MA, September 13, 2012. On the gun-slave cycle, see Warren C. Whatley, “Guns-For-Slaves: The 18th Century British Slave Trade in Africa,” unpublished manuscript, 2008.



the previous accounts, Naa Gariba was carried by an unfortunate succession of palanquin-bearers to Kumasi, where terms were reached and amicable relations reestablished.

The word “debt,” rather than “tribute,” is used by Ferguson’s informant Mallam al-Hassan Mole in explicating the Arabic manuscript, and Zablong did the same in our interview together. Iddi’s informants used the term *kambon samle* [*samli*] to describe the annual slave payments to Asante.<sup>80</sup> Another speaks of “*daba yobu*” (lit. “slave payment”), although Iddi uses “debt” in his translation.<sup>81</sup> We have, at this point, basis to question the use of the word “tribute” and its appropriateness in this discussion. All of the existing material derived from Dagbamba sources indicates that Dagbambas saw the slave payment as part of a debt between the office of the Yaa Naa and Asantehene. In almost all cases, the debt was incurred through force. That Asante was in a position to arrest the paramount chief and issue a summons is, no doubt, a testimony to the relative imbalance of military and economic power between the two polities. However, As Benjamin Talton notes regarding Dagbon’s precolonial interactions with the militarily weaker Konkomba, political power “does not necessarily translate to broad and consistent authority.”<sup>82</sup>

I believe that we can confidently surmise from the assembled traditions that Naa Gariba was in all likelihood captured by agents of the Asante kingdom. I argue here, however, that the fallout of this capture is not so clear.<sup>83</sup> In analyzing the evidence, we must not only attend to matters of privilege and voice in discerning which accounts are reliable, but also to the implications of translations and word choices. The *kambon samli* was known only to my Dagbamba interlocutors who had encountered these stories in the course of secondary education; it was unknown to those whose historical knowledge had come only through oral transmission. Furthermore, I suggest that much hinges on differentiating whether slaves sent from Yendi to Kumasi were done so as tribute, ransom, debt, or in the course of reciprocal commerce.

This critique was first suggested by A.A. Iliasu in 1971, who suggested that “at no time did Dagbon fall within Asante’s sphere of control,” arguing that the relationship of Asante and Dagbon was best described as one of “socio-economic symbiosis rather than conquest or tributary.”<sup>84</sup> His basis for this reasoning was that, as the annual payments of slaves, livestock, and cloth were the result of negotiations over the life of Yaa Naa Gariba, the payments constituted ransom rather than tribute. J.K. Fynn, a primary proponent of the concept of “Greater Asante,” refutes Iliasu’s position on the grounds that he is dismissive

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<sup>80</sup> Iddi, “The Musketeers of the Dagbong Army: Dagban Kambonse,” 35.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–41.

<sup>82</sup> Benjamin Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Ghana: The Konkomba Struggle for Political Equality*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 35.

<sup>83</sup> It has been widely accepted that the Dagbamba gunmen known as the kambonsi originated from the agreement between Asantehene and Naa Gariba. I argue elsewhere that while certain kambonsi institutions may have originated at this time, they probably only developed into a discernible lineage in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and that their associations both with Asante and with guns has been exaggerated in this century (in preparation).

<sup>84</sup> Iliasu, “Asante’s Relations with Dagomba, c. 1740–1874,” 56.

of “known evidence.”<sup>85</sup> Larry Yarak similarly dismisses Iliasu’s claims, calling the ransom-not-tribute argument “a semantic game.”<sup>86</sup> However, Yarak goes on to suggest that Iliasu’s article is nevertheless important in that it represents an early, if flawed, attempt to understand a center-periphery relationship of so-called “Greater Asante” through the perspective of the periphery.

Iliasu’s argument against Asante dominance over Dagbon rested primarily on his claim that the annual slave debt was an installment of a ransom payment—denoting a contractual obligation stemming from an isolated and limited military conflict—rather than tribute, “the payment of which is symbolic of adherence to subjection.”<sup>87</sup> These annual payments might well have been regarded as tribute from a lesser power to a greater one by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Asante, but not by Dagbamba. As Yarak has shown, Europeans regarded the annual *kostgeld* payment by the Dutch to the Asantehene as rent on Elmina, and that paid by local Africans as “tribute;” the Dutch simply saw these payments as assuring the “furtherance of favourable trade relations.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, the difference between tribute and debt—or ransom—is in this instance a matter of perspective; in accusing Iliasu of playing “a semantic game,” Yarak appears to miss his own point that “in assessing the nature of relations between the centre and the periphery it is important to reconstruct how these relations were characterized by the historical actors themselves.”<sup>89</sup> I am suggesting that the conceptual differentiation between ransom and tribute is less useful in determining the true nature of the relationship between Asante and Dagbon than in investigating how the actors involved might have perceived those payments. It may well have been that the goods sent from Yendi to Kumasi were seen by Dagbamba as debt payments, and by Asante as tribute. Up to now, these transactions have been viewed from only the southern perspective. Much to the chagrin of many Dagbamba I worked with in Tamale, the perspective represented in the history books as well as Ghanaian popular media has overwhelmingly been a position that supports the theory of Asante dominance.

Any effort to decipher “what really happened,” then, raises a handful of issues. Beyond questions of the nature of the debt payments, or what the exact numbers of the remittances were (matters of which, I suggest, we are unlikely to ever reach a satisfactory conclusion), is what the agreement established between the paramounts of Kumasi and Yendi, and what that entailed for their broader constituencies. Did this agreement make the Asantehene the “overlord” of Dagbon? Did Asante “own” the Dagbamba, as some translations suggest?<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> J.K. Fynn, “The Structure of Greater Ashanti: Another View,” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 15, 1 (1974), 1–22.

<sup>86</sup> Yarak, “Elmina and Greater Asante in the Nineteenth Century,” 36.

<sup>87</sup> Iliasu, “Asante’s Relations with Dagomba, c. 1740–1874,” 57.

<sup>88</sup> Yarak, “Elmina and Greater Asante in the Nineteenth Century,” 44.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>90</sup> See London Public Records Office, PRO CO.879/52, African (West) 549, Translation of a Letter from Ya-Na Andani, n.d., 110, quoted in Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, 307; Iddi, “The Musketeers of the Dagbong Army: Dagban Kambonse,” 139–41.

What is clear to us now, though certainly was not to the Independence era historians of Ghana, is that—irrespective of whether annual payments from Yendi to Kumasi were tribute, debt, ransom, or otherwise—the kidnapping of the chief of Yendi would not, in 1772, have constituted the conquest of the whole of Dagbon. It is now widely accepted that the polities of precolonial Ghana were not the centralized states that independence-era historians, like the colonial anthropologists before them, had presumed them to be.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, it is unclear whether the concept of “Dagbon” existed at that time: present-day Dagbon is constituted of the areas under the chieftaincies of Savelugu, Mion, Karaga, and Yendi, and in the past was divided between Tuma in the West and Naya in the East.<sup>92</sup> As MacGaffey points out, to conceive of a unified, precolonial Dagbon presupposes “essential ethnic identities that may not have existed until colonial officers used the concept of tribe as an administrative tool. In the precolonial north, identities seem to have been multiple, situational, and fluid.”<sup>93</sup>

In the eighteenth century, the chiefs of Dagbon presided over a loose confederation of variably contiguous constituencies, all of whom were united by a common ancestry. Previous to the colonial imposition of the Native Administration under the policy of indirect rule, the Yaa Naa was a figure who could be described, following Peter Skalník’s model, as enjoying tremendous authority but only limited power to exercise it.<sup>94</sup> Simply put, the office of the Yaa Naa was not as powerful at that point in history as is often presumed. While the chiefs of Dagbon may have recognized the seniority of the office of the Yaa Naa, Dagbamba history is filled with internecine struggles and challenges to the authority of the paramount.<sup>95</sup> Each chief’s power was limited by his ability to enforce his authority, and only occasionally extended to the autochthonous communities residing within, or between, frequently shifting boundaries. Regarding a polity as de-centralized as Dagbon almost certainly was, it is a mistake to equate Yendi with Dagbon; even if most twenty-first-century Dagbamba would, their eighteenth-century ancestors likely would not have. Put another way, strong-arming the Yaa Naa would not have been equivalent to securing all of present-day Dagbon as a “vassal” state.

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<sup>91</sup> See McCaskie, “Empire State”; Peter Skalník, “Questioning the Concept of the State in Indigenous Africa,” *Social Dynamics* 9, 2 (December 1983), 11–28; MacGaffey, *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers*; Michel Izard, *Gens Du Pouvoir, Gens de La Terre: Les Institutions Politiques de L’ancien Royaume Du Yatenga (Bassin de La Volta Blanche)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Michel Izard, *Moogo: L’émergence D’un Espace Étatique Ouest-Africain Au XVIe Siècle: Étude D’anthropologie Historique*, Collection Hommes et Sociétés (Paris: Karthala, 2003); Susan Drucker-Brown, “The Structure of the Mamprusi Kingdom and the Cult of Naam,” in H.J.M. Claessen and Peter Skalník, eds., *The Study of the State* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), 117–31.

<sup>92</sup> Ferguson, “Islamization in Dagbon,” xvi.

<sup>93</sup> MacGaffey, *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers*, 20.

<sup>94</sup> Skalník, “Questioning the Concept of the State in Indigenous Africa,” esp. 12–17.

<sup>95</sup> See Cardinall and Tamakloe, *Tales Told in Togoland*, 268–69; Lunna and Locke, “The Story of Dogu, Appellation of Tugu-Lan’ Yemusa”; Dolsi-naa Abubakari Lunna and David Locke, “The Story of Naani Goo, Appellation of Naa Andani” (Interview Transcription, Medford, MA, March 2, 2001), <http://sites.tufts.edu/dagomba/history-stories/>.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that claims of Asante dominance over Dagbon in the precolonial era have been greatly exaggerated, having been founded upon the speculation and misinterpretation of spurious evidence, an overt bias towards Asante hegemony in the selection of historical data, and the misunderstanding of the nature of precolonial polities. Indeed, my conclusions call into question the existence of such an entity as Greater Asante, insofar as it is purported to have extended to the borders of present-day Ghana.

In critically reviewing the evidence of an Asante invasion of Yendi in 1744/45, I showed that both the *Kitāb Ghanjā* and Rømer's *Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea (1760)* provide evidence that is ultimately too limited to determine the community occupied by Opoku Ware I during this campaign. I also argued that the dominant narrative of the annual remittances of slaves from Yendi to Kumasi did not take into account the many recorded histories of the apparent capture of Yaa Naa Gariba by the Asante, and were dismissive of those that complicated the singular narrative of Asante dominance over Dagbon. Nor were considerations of perspective taken into account in surmising the perceived relationships between the Asante center and its periphery, displaying a distinct lack of attention to Dagbamba voices. As Yarak demonstrates, relations between Asante and Elmina in the same period were dynamic and contingent upon changes in politics, economics, and the actors involved.<sup>96</sup> More than this, relationships were perceived differently by different actors, and that determining the nature of these relationships is more a matter of perspective than objective fact.

By starting from a position that accepted Asante dominance over its “hinterland” as a *fait accompli*, it may have been too easy for early historians of Ghana to read the above sections of the *Kitāb Ghanjā* and *A Reliable Account*, along with the vast body of oral traditions, as confirmation of what had already been believed true, casting aside contradictions and erroneous statements in favor of those clues that seemed to point to linear narratives that were neat and definitive. But histories, of course, are complex and messy, and open to interpretation; oral traditions especially so. In the interest of serving both the past and the present, it is time that voices from the periphery are brought in to complicate the narrative of Greater Asante.

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<sup>96</sup> Yarak, “Elmina and Greater Asante in the Nineteenth Century,” 46–47.