



Rebecca Shumway. *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011. 246 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58046-391-1.



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On the Glory Days of Eighteenth-Century Fanteland

On a steamy afternoon late in August 1970, I nearly drove my Volkswagen beetle into a felled tree after rounding a turn on the gully riddled dirt road between Es-huehya Junction and Fante Ekumfi Arkrah. Arkrah is a village that curls its spine along a kilometer of the littoral of the Gulf of Guinea between Anomabo and Cape Coast. As soon as I braked, dozens of armed men jumped from the bush, firing in the air and brandishing their black powder âDane guns.â

Several of the *asafo* took aim at me, intentionally missing too close for comfort. I was pulled from the car. I stood in the middle of the road with my companion, Asafohene Obuokwan Sam. Sam was a powerful Asafohene âcaptainâ at Ekumfi Arkrah. His grandfather had fought the Asante just north of here at Bobikuma Thicket. My knowledge of this was useful for the unnerved poker face I was wearing as musketeers approached me at a trot and fired rounds right next to my ears, dusting me with black powder. The mix was raucous and ritualistically rowdy. Soon I was hoisted aloft and thrown into the air, caught and tossed again and again until finally being

brought down to the shoulders of one of their strongest. Into the village I was carried aloft amid the men firing their weapons while cartwheeling, cake walking, and rolling in the sand. This was my âcaptureâ and the first stage of my initiation as an *asafohene* âcaptainâ into the Fante militias called *asafo*.^[1] I was taught the call and response *asafo* greeting right there on the spot.

Asafo ko enyewo!
—*Wo enyewo!*
Wo enyewo mfraa sika!
—*Sika mbraa!*
Oman bi betum no?
—*Ahh, ahh!*
Wo enyewo!
Abaa sa!

Asafo victor!
—*Victor of course!*
Victors out for booty!
—*Booty will be ours!*
—*Can any outdo us?*

—Hell, no!
 Victorious of course!
 —With the third battalion!

Little did I know then that I was in the heartland of the Borbor Fante, a people about whom I would be reading forty years later in Rebecca Shumway's absorbing telling of *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Her account of the dominance of the Fante in eighteenth-century Gold Coast slave trading is one of the long-awaited documentations of the historical importance of players other than Asante in Gold Coast history. So much of history is military history. Gold Coast history has been dominated by the conflicts between Great Britain and Asante—much to the chagrin and vexation of many of Ghana's inhabitants. These bellicose confrontations that gathered momentum in the first decade of the nineteenth century and terminated in the sack of Kumasi, the Asante capital, seven decades later were accompanied by the collapse of Fante hegemony in central Gold Coast slave transactions. If history amounts to military history, the emphasis in Ghana has been where and when the biggest battles between the biggest adversaries were fought. But this began to happen only after the decline of the confederated Borbor Fante who prior to the rise of Asante, had controlling interests in much of the slave marketing along almost the entire coast of present-day Ghana between Accra and the River Pra, and northward up to Twifo-Praso.

Shumway's extensively documented chronicle covers the period before the fortunes of the Asante wars began to dominate Gold Coast history. I would not want to bore the reader with my evaluation of the relationship between Shumway's assertions and her documentation. I found her documentation of the highest value. What I do want to convey is something of the spirit of the book or rather how it tries to convey the spirit of the times she is writing about. And this is something that is often absent in historical writing. Shumway is very concerned about

giving us a sense of micro-history and she labors nobly at relating the quotidian and cultural milieu of the glory days of Fante hegemony on the southern Gold Coast. Her descriptions of the importance of the unifying roles of religious shrines among a people I know firsthand even to this day to be tragically in love with diffuse political authority is a significant contribution. Equally meaningful are her discussions of the political power of the wealthy, and how that wealth was created—not always a direct result of the slave trade. Her telling of these more intimate but important aspects of history is sometimes detoured by diversions into contradicting or even scolding other scholars. Shumway's writing stands well enough on the strength of her own explications.

This is a book whose telling is true to its title and chapter headings. You always know why you are reading what you are when you are. But the problem with writing history is that it is difficult to avoid sounding like you are writing a list of facts. How does one make history flow like a narrative without sounding like one has lapsed into fiction? Oh, if we could all make these books read like James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) or Amin Maalouf's *Leo Africanus* (1992).

As we stood next to a shrine at Ekumfi, where an Asante vanguard had penetrated just one thousand meters from the lapping waves, I asked captain Obuokwan Sam why the word *sika* (gold) concealed the word for slaves. His reply was that they would not put the word for slave in their greeting. "We trafficked in slaves so that we could get gold and with gold we could get anything. The Asante had the gold but the slaves had to pass through us to get to the trading depots and castles at Winneba, Apam, Anomabo, and Ogua." The details are in Shumway's *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*.

Note

[1]. My Fante name is Asafohene George Kweku Nkonyansa.

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