

Griffins, Crocodiles, and the British Ensign:

KWEKU KAKANU'S ASAFO FLAGS AND FOLLOWERS



Prior to warfare and during rituals, Fante flags, or *frankaa*, were danced or carried by a specially trained member, the *frankakitanyi*, of an *asafo* company (Fig. 1). Although once serving as the military arm of the Fante, today's *asafo* serve three critical roles in the Fante community: political, in that they give the common man a voice in governmental issues; social, in that they act as a cooperative group to provide labor for public works and as the local unit called upon in cases of emergency; and religious, in that they play an important role in member funerals and state ceremonies. Fante *asafo* expanded their roles in response to the growing economy and urbanization experienced on the Ghanaian coast during the pre-colonial period.

Though one report mentions the use of a painted flag in 1693,¹ it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that Fante *asafo* groups widely adopted the use of flags. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Asante, a rival Akan group, attacked the Fante along trade routes and in port cities to gain direct access to the coast and greater profits. Constant attacks weakened the Fante's hold over the region and increased their reliance on the British, who for decades operated as mediators between the two Akan groups. The British interest was commercial; they did not want trade routes to be severed, denying access to Asante gold mines in the north. The coast

unofficially became a British colony with the Bond of 1844. When the Asante attacked the Elmina fort in 1873, the British retaliated and defeated the Asante in March of 1874. By July, Britain had formally established the British Crown Colony of the Gold Coast.

During this period, flag-makers began to include a small British ensign in the upper corner of *asafo* company flags as a mark of allegiance with the British, who were quickly becoming the major source of military power on the coast. This served to remind those viewing the flag of the strength of the Fante company, often acting as reinforcements for British troops. However, Fante attitudes toward the British may have changed by the turn of the century, for the British administration imposed strict regulations on *asafo* companies and their arts.

Fante tailors continued to incorporate the British national symbol and sometimes chose different colors or placed stripes in varied compositions. By harnessing another nation's symbol and altering it, the Fante may have been visually neutralizing British power by making it part of their own without upsetting the British administration. Though they may have simply misunderstood the actual design, greater variations in the British ensign generally appear in Fante flags sewn later in the colonial period.² The British ensign was replaced with the Ghanaian flag when Ghana gained its independence in 1957.

Fig. 1. (above) Flag dancer, Okyir Festival. Anomabo, Ghana, October 10, 2009. Photograph by Courtney Micots.

Fig. 2. (below) Kweku Kakanu (seated). Ghana, 1980. Photograph by Doran H. Ross.

Fig. 3. (right) Patterns used by Kweku Kakanu, 1978. Photograph by Doran H. Ross.



Asafo flags measure approximately 3 by 5 feet, with some companies possessing display banners up to 300 feet long. Brightly colored swatches of fabric depicting animals, objects, and humans are sewn to a typically monochromatic cotton background. Details may be added with embroidery. The cloth is imported, as are many of the motifs, most of which allude to important chiefs and warriors, proverbs, or symbols of strength and courage.

In the first Fante flag in the Harn exhibition (Pl. 46), two grasscutters, or large rodents, are hunted by a black animal with wings and a hawk-like beak. This composite animal, probably a griffin, holds a duiker, or small antelope, in its beak. The cloth on the duiker



has since worn away, so only the remains of the original stitching are visible. Griffins were borrowed from English mythical imagery and transformed by the Fante artists into their local construct. The griffin became a symbol attached to the proverb “Will you fly or will you vanish? Either way you can’t escape us.” Currently the Fante prefer a multiheaded dragon in place of the griffin in many of their arts. According to Doran H. Ross, an authority on Akan arts and former director of the Fowler Museum at UCLA, this flag was originally sewn by Fante artist Kweku Kakanu (b. 1910; Fig. 2), who worked in Saltpond (personal communication with Ross in early 2010).

In the second flag (Pl. 47), a crocodile watches over a small pond filled with fish. Frogs and birds are nearby. This popular motif is associated with the proverb “Fish grow fat for the benefit of the crocodile.” Although this flag is similar to many flags produced by Kweku Kakanu, the outlines of the crocodile and fish do not match patterns used by Kakanu (Fig. 3). His fish usually have curved tails, and his crocodiles have a large round bump at the end of the snout. The border is also dissimilar to those on flags he created. This can be seen when these two flags are compared. Thus, two explanations are possible. Either an apprentice in Kakanu’s workshop was learning from him, or contemporary tailors copied

Kakanu’s work from images available in publications such as *Asafo! African Flags of the Fante* by Peter Adler and Nicholas Barnard (1992). The latter explanation seems most likely because the border is a bright, unaged white fabric.

Symbols utilized in *asafo* flags and banners stem from a long history of pictorial references to proverbs and ideas. The presence of a crocodile, a fierce reptile common to West African waterways, conveys the idea that the enemy is doomed. Using a composite perspective, the body is depicted from an aerial view while the head is shown in profile.

As noted by Ross (2010), contemporary production of *asafo* flags in southern Ghana has been taking place in record numbers since the mid-1990s for sale to tourists, collectors, and international dealers who purchase these items mostly from dealers, or middlemen, in Accra, Ghana’s capital city. Ross has identified eight workshops, including two in the Kormantine/Saltpond area. Not only are new flags created with the British ensign to mimic pre-independence flags, but also old flags are recycled for international sale. An older flag in poor condition may be patched. The Kakanu flag with the griffin has two odd white patches—a star near the top and a rectangle underneath the griffin—both seemingly added by a local dealer to ready the flag for sale. Both flags were collected

in Accra in 1993. The flag with the crocodile likely originated from one of these contemporary workshops. ♦

References

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Notes

- 1 Phillips 1752, 228.
- 2 Flags sewn by Kweku Kakanu and his workshop are an exception. These flags represent the British ensign more accurately. Doran Ross, personal communication, 5/23/10. Perhaps this is due to his creations dating to the latter period of the colonial era (c. 1940s–1957).

46 (opposite, top)
KWEKU KAKANU
Ghanaian, b. 1910
Asafo Company Flag with Griffin (frankaa)
c. 1940s
Cotton
39 x 63.5 in. (99.1 x 161.3 cm)
Loan from the Honorable Kenneth and Bonnie Brown

47 (opposite, bottom)
AFTER KWEKU KAKANU
Ghana
Asafo Company Flag with Crocodile (frankaa)
After 1950
Cotton
37.5 x 65 in. (95.3 x 165.1 cm)
Loan from the Honorable Kenneth and Bonnie Brown