BLACK HISTORY MONTH FEATURE

The Gold Empire of Asante

By Thelma Elizabeth Harris

"There was something about seeing the King-being so close to him and his attendants—that made me want to reach out and just grab a clump of gold", said one stunned observer.

Gold. That magnet of all civilizations throughout the ages continues to charm and awe. Gobs and globs of it adorned one man, the Asantehene, King of the Asante People of Ghana, West Africa.

The gold attire of the Asantehene and his gold-laden entourage, valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars, provided Americans their first glimpse into the cultural and historical background of "one of the most complex and fascinating of African peoples."

In a gold dazzle that befits Hollywood, the King (Opoku Ware II), dignified and poised, greeted the museum croud and other goups some days later in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. in true splendor.

Gold rings embellished each finger. There were gold bracelets galore, gold necklaces. His head was enwreathed with a fabric band studded with thick gold symbols.

Kente cloth of predominately gold and orange colors draped his body. Kente, an extricately and complex weave is associated exclusively with Ghana. Traditionally Kente was the cloth of only the King and the royal family as was another cloth, Adinkra. The King wears Adinkra at casual affairs.

This was not a production staged for the American people. This was an authentic 300-year tradition of the Asante people reinacted on United States shores. Truly an amazing feat and a unique happening.

The Asante have an important place in West African history as to diplomatic policies, military skills, administrative and trade organization. A major contribution is their institutionalization of a league for trade and expansion among a core group of chiefs employing the Golden Stool shrine.

An ingenious cosmology was presented Osei Tutu, Chief of Kumasi (1697-1731) by his advisor, counsellor, friend and priest, Okomfo Anokye, who created the legend and the tradition of the Golden Stool.

His magical exploits is said to have "brought down from the sky with darkness and thunder and in a thick cloud of dust, a wooden stool adorned with gold, which floated to earth and alighted gently on Osei Tutu's knees."

This creation of an instrument to unify various states was accepted on faith and trust by the chiefs of six other states and became the founding fathers of the Asante con-



The Asantehene, Otumfuo Opoku Ware II, occupant of the golden stool.

federacy. That Anokye had foreseen the tremendous potential of such an alliance indicates his considerable political acumen.

Anokye is much revered in Asante history. This coalition created an Asante army to which each divisional chief contributed soldiers.

The group pledged loyalty to Osei Tutu, who moved his base to Kumasi and promoted himself, with approval, from Kumasihene to Asantehene, King of the six groups.

Thus began the long, dynastic line of Kings of Asante groups. With a common religious bond the union was a tremendous success and expanded rapidly incorporating territory through wars, trade, treaties, manipulation and persuasion.

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Ashanti cast bronze lid of gold dust box, Ghana.

By the end of the 18th century, Asante was an empire with hegemony over an area much larger than today's Ghana. Each incorporated divisional state also took the oath of allegiance to the Asantehene of Kumasi and the Golden Stool, shrine and soul of the Asante nation just as the original states.

The Odwira Festival of the Asante and other Akan people with its 40-day Adae Calendar has practically nationalized a Ghanaian traditional religion with only slight changes in names and dates in various regions.

The use of gold as currency provided the Asante with the wealth for dominance. All the vassal states paid tribute to the treasury at Kumasi and contributed men for military

Another legacy of the Asante is their courage, self-assurance and military prowess. They are a prideful people. The Asante never accepted defeat. They considered themselves only out-maneuvered by the British who took

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Ashanti gold weight in form of fish, Ghana.

-Gold empire

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nine years and nearly a century to subdue.

The Asante won several battles against the British only to finally succumb to the technology of superior weaponry. "Of all the states of West Africa involved in resistance against European occupation, Asante had by far the longest experience", writes Michael Crowder.

It is this saga that pins the "badge of courage" on the Asante. The Asantehene, Prempeh I. was the centerpiece around whom this historical account unfolded in the closing years of the last century. These years also placed in history a major female political leader, Yaa Asantewaa.

Lifting the historical curtain we find illuminating events scarcely touched upon today. Kumasi's enormous influence as the seat of an autonomous state remained strong well into the nineteenth century even after several British-Asante wars.

England's first military confrontation had begun in 1806. Years later, in 1874, Sir Garnet Wolseley, a major-general of Queen Victoria's army, known seldom to use peaceful arbitration and called "shot-gun-Wolseley", sent soldiers to blow up the Asante King's palace and to collect as much as they could of the treasure which he had described earlier in this

"The palace abounded with curious and most beautiful ornaments which in pattern and design were peculiar to the country, All were made from very pure gold of the deepest rich and reddish yellow that I have ever seen elsewhere.

"The soldiers took the most valuable articles. Seven masks hammered from pure gold were among the objects taken. Most of them represented men's faces about half life size, but one weighing forty-two ounces had been shaped into a magnificent ram's head.

"Bracelets of gold, ammunition belts, caps mounted in solid gold, knives sent in gold, gold-handled guns, leopard-skin hats adorned with beaten gold, gold-studded sandals with inscriptions on the soles, even children's toys in gold".

Wolseley had arrived in 1873 with 1,500 well-equipped British soldiers and suffered immediate defeat at the hands of the Asante and their military genius.

Humiliated and feverish, Wolseley's army retaliated the following year. They stripped the royal palace of its treasure of gold, silks, jewelry, silver and other works of art, then mined the palace and set the whole town

This looting and destruction took place from February 4th to February 6, 1874. Meanwhile, the alerted King Karikari had retreated taking the Golden Stool with him.

This victory brought more of the Asante kingdom into the British dominated coastal colony and forced the Asante to relinquish control of Elmina "castle".

In addition, England reiterated the demand for war indemnity of 50,000 ounces of gold from the Asante people to pay for the cost of the military expedition. The big gain for the British was the enormous raw materials of the region made reluctantly available by the

The town of Kumasi as viewed sadly by the British Captain R.A. Freeman, had been "adorned with houses of admirable construction, careful and artistic finish and in excellent

"On all hands, indeed, amidst the univer-

sal ruin and decay, were hints of departed property and evidence of a culture far superior than that seen in the littoral regions and as I looked around the blighted city within its demolished buildings and its demoralized citizens, I could not help reflecting on the strange and regrettable facts that its ruin had been accomplished by a nation that yearly spends millions on the conversion of the heathen and the diffusion of civilization."

The priceless and well-known gold mask in the likeness of King Karikari, one-half life size, is now in the famous Wallace collection in London. Valued at one million dollars, it was originally pilfered by the Wolseley army in 1874.

(To be Continued)

-Recipes

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Garnish with additional banana slices, desired. YIELD: 4 servings.

SOUTH SEAS BANANA FRITTERS

2 eggs

1/3 cup milk

- 1. tablespoon melted butter or margarine
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- teaspoon sait
- 4 bananas

Oil for frying

Confectioners' sugar

In container of electric blender combine eggs, milk and melted butter; cover; blend 10 seconds. Add flour, sugar, baking powder and salt. Cover. Blend at high speed 30 seconds longer. Pour batter into small bowl. Cut bananas into 1-inch chunks. Dip chunks in batter, shake off excess.

In deep fat fryer, heat 2 to 3 inches oil to 375°F. Fry bananas until golden on both sides. Dust with confectioners' sugar. Serve with Coconut-Rum Sauce.*

YIELD: 4 servings.

*Coconut-Rum Sauce

3/4 cup water

- 1 tablespoon cornstarch 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 2 to 3 tablespoons coconut rum

In small saucepan mix cornstarch and water. Add sugar and butter. Bring to a boil over low heat, stirring constantly until sugar

dissolves. Boil 1 minute longer until sauce thickens, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat, stir in liqueur. YIELD: 1 cup sauce.

OLD-FASHIONED BANANA DATE-NUT BREAD

- 2 cups unsifted all-purpose flour
- 11/4 teaspoons baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon ground alispice
- 2/3 cup butter or margarine, at room temperature
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 2 eggs
- 11/2 cups mashed ripe bananas (4 to 5
- 1/4 cup unsulphured molasses
- 1/2 cup chopped pitted dates
- 1/2 cup broken pecans
- 1 teaspoon grated orange peel Confectioners' sugar

Grease and flour one 9-inch tube pan. In a medium bowl mix flour, baking soda, salt, cinnamon and allspice. In large bowl of an electric mixer beat butter and sugar at medium speed until creamy. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Blend bananas and molasses together. Beat in flour mixture alternately with banana mixture, beating well after each addition.

Stir in dates, pecans and orange peel. Pour batter into prepared tube pan. Bake in a 350°F. oven 55 to 60 minutes or until cake tester inserted in center of cake comes out clean. Remove from oven; cool on wire rack 15 minutes.

Turn cake out; cool completely. Sift confectioners' sugar over top. YIELD: 8 to 10 servings.