

**Arbeitspapiere / Working Papers**

**Nr. 94**

Carola Lentz

**Travelling emblems of power:  
the Ghanaian 'Seat of State'**

2008



The Working Papers are edited by  
Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität,  
Forum 6, D-55099 Mainz, Germany.  
Tel. +49-6131-3923720; Email: ifeas@uni-mainz.de; <http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de>  
<http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/workingpapers/Arbeitspapiere.html>

Geschäftsführende Herausgeberin/ Managing Editor:  
Eva Spies (espies@uni-mainz.de)

### **Summary**

This paper presents a case study of the self-confident and creative fusion of European and African political symbols and rituals that is characteristic of Ghanaian statehood and nation-making. It explores the aesthetic and historical genealogy of the Ghanaian 'Seat of State', a throne-like stool on which the President sits when attending Parliament on important state occasions. The Seat was crafted in the early 1960s by Kofi Antubam, one of the chief 'state artists' during the Nkrumah regime, and incorporates symbols of Asante royal authority, European aristocratic imagery as well as Ghanaian neo-traditional emblems such as the Black Star. The discussion of the Seat of State's political meaning is followed by some more general observations on the history of party politics and parliamentary procedure in Ghana as examples of travelling political paradigms.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Der prunkvolle „Staats-Thron“ (Seat of State), auf dem der ghanaische Präsident sitzt, wenn er zu wichtigen Anlässen das Parlament besucht, ist ein typisches Beispiel für die selbstbewusste und originelle Verschmelzung europäischer und afrikanischer politischer Symboliken, die die ghanaische politische Kultur prägt. Der Staatsstuhl wurde zu Beginn der 1960er Jahre von Kofi Antubam geschaffen, einem der wichtigsten im staatlichen Auftrag arbeitenden Künstler des Nkrumah-Regimes, und verbindet Symbole des Aschanti-Königreichs mit der Bildsprache europäischer Aristokratien und ghanaischen Neo-Traditionen wie dem schwarzen Stern der afrikanischen Freiheit. Der Erörterung der ästhetischen und historischen Genealogien des Präsidentenstuhls folgen Überlegungen zur Geschichte der Parteipolitik und des Parlamentarismus in Ghana als weiteren Beispielen für „wandernde“ politische Symbole und Paradigmen.

### **Die Autorin**

Carola Lentz is professor of social anthropology at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. She has been conducting research in Ghana since the late 1980s.

## **Travelling emblems of power: the Ghanaian ‘Seat of State’**

Carola Lentz<sup>1</sup>

Department of Anthropology and African Studies  
Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz

For Ghana, the year 2007 was a very special year. The country celebrated its golden jubilee, for on 6 March 1957 Ghana became the first state in sub-Saharan Africa to achieve independence from its colonial masters. I was privileged to be in the country from the run-up to the peak of the quinquagenarian independence celebrations in March 2007.<sup>2</sup> Among other activities, I witnessed two festive Parliamentary sittings, one in February, during which President John Kufuor delivered the ‘Message on the State of the Nation’—an annual affair, but in this jubilee year a particularly solemn occasion—and one in March, on the eve of Independence Day. The latter sitting re-enacted the historical final session of the colonial Legislative Assembly in 1957, which the Duchess of Kent had graced with her presence, representing Queen Elizabeth II, and during which the Speaker of Parliament had read the Governor’s message to terminate the Legislative Assembly and announce that the body would reconvene as the newly independent Parliament the next morning. On both occasions during the jubilee year, Parliament was decorated festively with Ghanaian flags and banners in the national colours as well as with lavish traditional *kente* cloth, an expensive, colourfully woven fabric associated with prestige, wealth and, in the Asante tradition, royal authority. In fact, the special *kente* cloth that during the commemorative sittings adorned the back of the parliamentary dais, left and right

---

1 This paper is a revised version of a presentation held in July 2007 for the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft in the context of a proposal to establish at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz a Graduate School in the ‘Exzellenz-Initiative’ programme (excellency initiative). The paper was also presented, in a modified version in German, at the end of the 2007 academic year during the graduation ceremony of the Fachbereich Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften (Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies). I wish to thank Thomas Bierschenk for his insightful comments which greatly helped in shaping the arguments. Many thanks also go to Jan Budniok as well as Mareike Späth for helping to assemble the background information on the Ghanaian Seat of State, to Katja Rieck for her competent services in copy editing the text and to Mirco Göpfert for assisting with formatting the text and shaping up the photographs.

2 For an eyewitness account and an initial analysis of the jubilee celebrations see Lentz and Budniok 2007a and 2007b.

of Ghana's coat of arms, was presented to Parliament by the Asantehene, the king of Asante.<sup>3</sup> During the ceremonial entrance of the President, Vice-President, Chief Justice and other dignitaries for both sitting, the big *fontomfrom* drums were beaten, and special horns blown. Like the *kente*, these instruments are imports from Asante royal history, used traditionally to announce the arrival of important chiefly authorities and played at Parliament and other official venues for major state ceremonies. This citation of one of Ghana's 'ethnic' musical traditions was followed by the Ghana Navy brass band's performance of the national anthem, a piece of music based on a mixture of Western Christian hymns and West African styles.



The new Ghanaian Parliament as it is decorated for normal working sessions<sup>4</sup>  
(source: <http://www.parliament.gh/about/photo-gallery/photo-gallery.html>; 15 July 2007)

- 
- 3 Interview conducted by Jan Budniok with Jones Kugblenu, Director of Public Affairs (Parliament), Accra, 22 May 2007.
  - 4 The old Legislative Assembly and later Parliament House used to be located downtown Accra, across from the Old Polo Grounds, one of the prestigious British sport clubs (today Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park); Parliament was relocated to a new building at some distance from this venue in the early 1990s.



Commemorative Sitting of Parliament, 5 March 2007 (photo: C. Lentz)  
 On the dais, from left to right: Olusegun Obanja, President of Nigeria; the Duke of Kent; J. A. Kufuor, President of Ghana; E. B. Sekyi-Hughes, Speaker of Parliament; Alhaji A. Mahama, Vice-President of Ghana; G. I. Mogella, President of the Pan-African Parliament. Note the *kente* cloth to left and right of the Ghanaian Coat of arms, and the presidential Seat of State

Architectural design, decor, the dress of politicians and state officials, music, protocol, and many other aspects of parliamentary sittings and other political events all bear witness to the self-confident and creative fusion of European and African political symbols and rituals that is characteristic of Ghanaian statehood and nation-making.<sup>5</sup> Such cross-cultural, cross-societal processes of appropriation are an important theme in contemporary political anthropology as well as the sociology of organisations.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I will explore one Ghanaian example of a ‘travelling’ political symbol, namely a piece of furniture that drew my attention during the above-mentioned parliamentary sittings because its royal connotations seemed to make it rather ill-suited for a modern parliamentary democracy: the so-called Seat of State, a throne-like stool on which the President sits when attending Parliament on important state occasions. An exploration of the Seat of State’s aesthetic and historical genealogy will be followed by some more general

5 For further examples of the cultural politics of nation-building in Ghana and the creation of a ‘national’ political culture, see Schramm 2000 on the Ghana Dance Ensemble; Hess 2000 and 2001 on museums, architecture and monuments; Crinson 2001 on the National Museum; and Coe 2005 on cultural education in schools.

6 See, for instance, Czarniawska and Joerges 1996 for a general discussion of ‘travels of ideas’, and Reyna 2007 for a case study. See also the work of the research programme on ‘Travelling models in conflict management: a comparative research and network building project in six African countries (Chad, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan)’, directed by Richard Rottenburg, at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Halle-Wittenberg; the ideas behind the project are discussed in Behrends 2008.

observations on the history of party politics and parliamentary procedure in Ghana as an example of travelling political paradigms. The paper will conclude with some cursory remarks on how the analysis of African political history and practice could contribute to a better understanding of political processes and democratic systems, not just in Africa, but also in Europe and ‘the West’.

### *The Seat of State*

The Seat of State was crafted in the early 1960s by Kofi Antubam, one of the chief ‘state artists’ (Hess 2001: 72) of the Nkrumah era who also created the Ghana Mace, the symbol of Parliament’s authority, and the Presidential Chair, a stool on which the president sits at important occasions in the Castle, the seat of the executive branch of the Ghanaian government in one of the old trading forts on the Accra coast. Proficient in a wide range of artistic styles and ‘honouring national ideals’ (Hess 2001: 73), Antubam also painted a number of murals and carved wood reliefs for public buildings, among them Accra’s Central Library, the Ambassador Hotel and the main assembly hall of the old Parliament House, and he organised state ceremonies and artistic events for the Arts Council of Ghana. His works and performances brought together European representational conventions, ‘neo-Ghanaian’ elements such as the Black Star, and motifs borrowed from ‘traditional’ regional and local artistic styles, preferably from Asante, but also other ethnic groups and regions. We do not know whether the peculiar fusion of styles and symbols that characterises the Seat of State was realised to satisfy specific instructions given by government officials, but it certainly does owe much to Kofi Antubam’s biography and the multiple aesthetic influences which he embraced.

Kofi Antubam was born in the Western Region in 1922 as the son of the Omanhene of Wassa Amenfi, an Asante chief, and thus during his early years was socialised in the environment of a chiefly house. Early on, at least according to his biographer Kojo Vieta (2000: 114), Kofi showed a certain artistic talent, and one of Kofi’s uncles was so impressed by his skills that he took the boy to Kumasi where he attended school while living with, and working as a ‘houseboy’ for, a Fante merchant. However, Kofi must have been somewhat restless, for it is reported that he followed one of the traders whom he met in Kumasi to Jos, in Nigeria, where he continued his school education. When he returned home after two years, he found that his father had died in the meantime and that he had to fend for himself. Sculpting and painting as a self-employed artist provided only a modest income, but his artistic talents were soon ‘discovered’ by the Principal of Adisel College, who decided to adopt him and bring him to this prestigious school. ‘Luck smiled on Kofi Antubam’, as Vieta puts it (2000: 115), when the British Governor, Sir Arnold Hudson, asked the young artist during a visit to Adisel to create a bust of him and was so pleased with the result that he invited him to participate in one of the large colonial agricultural and artisanal exhibitions in Accra. There, Kofi was again ‘discovered’, this time by the master artist and Principal of Achimota College who awarded him a scholarship for a two-year arts and crafts course at his college and subsequently a four-year teacher training course, followed by a further arts and crafts course, all at the same institution. Kofi Antubam’s educational career was finally crowned by a British Council and

Colonial Secretary's scholarship to further his arts education at Goldsmith College in London. Upon his return, he taught at various government schools, in Tamale in Northern Ghana and in Kumasi, and finally headed the Arts and Crafts Department at his alma mater, Achimota College, until his untimely death in 1964. Besides creating important works of art for the Nkrumah government and educating future generations of teachers, Antubam also ran a radio programme under the title *Our Homeland*, and wrote a number of newspaper articles as well as a book on Ghana's cultural heritage.

Antubam believed, according to Kojo Vieta, 'that Art must reflect the values and ideas of a society ..., should be applied to utility objects... [and be made] a vital part of everyday life' (2000: 115–6). In his published views about what the 'serious modern Ghana artist' should create, Antubam maintained that the new Ghanaian artistic identity would be 'neither Eastern'—a reference to the Soviet Union's tradition or socialist realism—'nor Western and yet a growth in the presence of both with its roots deeply entrenched in the soil of the indigenous past of Africa' (1963: 129, 23, quoted in Hess 2001: 73–4). Ghana's new art needed to be based on 'the lasting values of a people's traditions', but should also take advantage of the 'better and more progressive implements, skills, and knowledge' that the history of European art provided (Antubam 1963: 13, 129). In any case, when Kofi Antubam was commissioned by the Nkrumah government to create the Seat of State, he had thorough knowledge of a wide range of different African as well as European artistic traditions and was able to artfully integrate them into the stool's design.



The Seat of State (photo: C. Lentz 2007)

A closer look at the Seat of State reveals that its base is modelled after an Asante chiefly stool. Such stools are regarded as central objects of power that

connect the chief with the ancestral world and the power of his predecessors. They often represent proverbs that address the relationship between wealth, wisdom and authority, and other constituents of chiefly office. The specific stool 'quoted' in Antubam's Seat of State is the *kotoko dwa*, a stool that represents one of the central symbols of the Asante nation, the porcupine (*kotoko*).<sup>7</sup> The Asante nation, according to a well-known proverb, works like the quills of the porcupine: when one falls, hundreds of others will come to its aid. The porcupine thus stands for solidarity and combativeness, and since the Asante nation's military prowess was epitomised in the Asantehene's power, the use of the *kotoko dwa* was, and continues to be, a royal prerogative.<sup>8</sup>



*Kotoko dwa*, the porcupine stool from the Asante royal tradition  
(Source: McClusky 2002: 95)

Antubam's use of the porcupine stool was, however, certainly not meant as a gesture of respect towards the militant Asante nationalism that had opposed itself to Nkrumah's centralising nation-state project that suppressed all quests for more regional autonomy.<sup>9</sup> Most likely, the artist simply intended to link the

<sup>7</sup> See Bocola 1994: 44–5 for further examples of Asante stools and their different meanings.

<sup>8</sup> The use of the term 'nation' for the community ruled by the Asante king is, of course, not unproblematic, but has become common usage, in academic as well as popular discourse, during the past decades. It was strongly contested, however, in the Nkrumah era, as I discuss below.

<sup>9</sup> See Allman 1993 for a discussion of the applicability of the term 'nation' (1993: 3–15) in the case of the Asante as well as for a comprehensive history of the Asante National Liberation Movement active in the 1950s. On the Northern opposition to Nkrumah's centralist project, see Ladouceur 1979; on the secessionist movement in British Togoland, see Nugent 2002. In his insightful study of the history of Ghana's ethnographic and archeological collections, Crinson (2001) shows how these tensions between a centralist nationalist project (including Nkrumah's eclectic use of cultural objects and ceremonial from various 'ethnic' traditions) and regionalist interests worked themselves out in the organisation and representational style of the National Museum in Accra that was inaugurated in 1957.

Ghanaian President's authority to pre-colonial traditions of state-making and royal power. The bright golden sheen of the Seat of State and the carved stool at its base evoked, indeed, the Golden Stool, the venerated image of Asante statehood which was, as McCaskie put it, 'construed as being *the* enabling instrument, *the* representation, that all at once underpinned, validated and guaranteed the legal exercise of sovereign right. In Asante political philosophy, the Golden Stool ... was understood to be symbolic of the highest level at which power might be exercised' (1983: 30).<sup>10</sup>

However, the presidential seat invokes not only African pre-colonial emblems of power, but also European aristocratic imagery. Its upper part, and the arm rests which are topped with small golden crowns, are styled like a British monarch's throne. It is most likely that during his studies in London Antubam visited Westminster and drew some inspiration from the royal throne in the House of Lords.



Westminster, London, House of Lords  
(Source: <http://images.parliament.uk/>; 22 September 2008)

---

<sup>10</sup> For more details on the significance and symbolism of the Golden Stool, see Wilks 1993: 91, 114–5, 144–6 and McCaskie 1995: 48, 127–9.

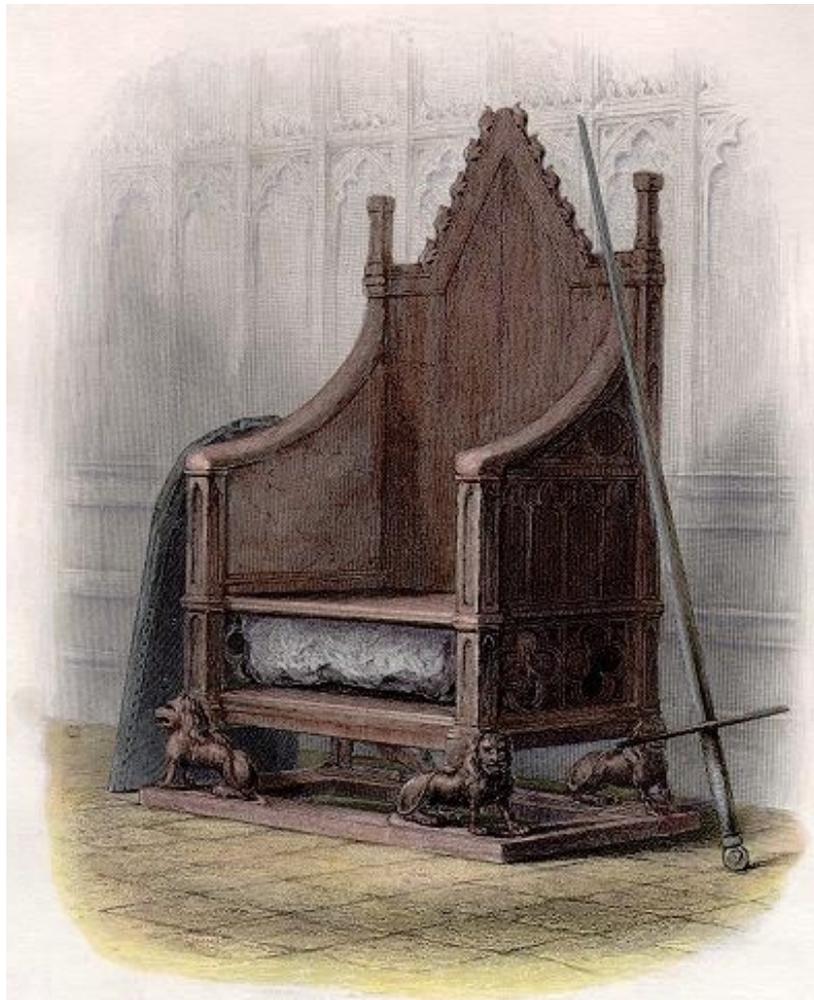


The Queen's throne in the House of Lords  
(Source: <http://images.parliament.uk/>; 22 September 2008)

The British Queen sits on this throne when she opens a new parliamentary session and addresses the nation. More generally, as the long-standing parliamentary clerks K. B. Ayensu and S. N. Darkwa put it in their history of the Ghanaian parliament, 'Ghana adopted the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy' (1999: 119), including most aspects of parliamentary procedure. However, the year 1960 marked an important change in Ghana's political system: Ghana became a republic, with a single-party system, and the position of the Prime Minister was transformed into that of the President, who as head of the executive was invested with much wider powers. Significantly, Antubam created the Seat of State after this transition, that is, after Kwame Nkrumah had combined, so to speak, the powers which in the Westminster model are divided between the Prime Minister and the Head of State. In a way, then, the new President of Ghana was to emulate the Queen's role in Parliament, and Antubam must have regarded it as

appropriate to import some of the British emblems associated with this tradition and incorporate them in his Seat of State.

The creative appropriation of European symbols of power by African political elites is a long-standing process that began in the early days of the trans-Saharan and transatlantic trade. Traces of European royal paraphernalia can be found in quite a number of ceremonial objects that today are considered the essence of pre-colonial Ghanaian traditions. It is important to emphasise, however, that such powerful fusions of symbols from historically and geographically distant political fields are by no means a uniquely African phenomenon. Like the Ghanaian Seat of the State, the English Coronation Chair, for instance, which may have been another of Antubam's sources of inspiration, bears a highly significant 'traditional' object of power at its base, namely the Stone of Scone.



The Coronation Chair and the Stone of Scone

(Source:

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Coronation\\_Chair\\_and\\_Stone\\_of\\_Scone.\\_An\\_onymous\\_Engraver.\\_PubTimes\\_New\\_Romanlished\\_in\\_A\\_History\\_of\\_England\\_\(1855\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Coronation_Chair_and_Stone_of_Scone._An_onymous_Engraver._PubTimes_New_Romanlished_in_A_History_of_England_(1855).jpg); 22 Sep. 2008)



The Coronation Chair, side view

(Source: [http://photomas.net/pmaspages/uklondon2\\_pmas.htm](http://photomas.net/pmaspages/uklondon2_pmas.htm); 22 Sep. 2008)

The Coronation Chair was commissioned by King Edward I in 1296, and it was specifically designed to contain the Stone of Destiny, as the Stone of Scone is also known. This stone is said to have once served as the pillow stone of the Biblical Jacob and to have been brought to Scotland by the early Christian missionaries who allegedly used it as a travelling altar. Since the late ninth century, the stone was kept in Scone, a short distance north of Perth, and all Scottish monarchs were seated upon it during their coronation. When the English, under King Edward's leadership, fought successfully against the Scots in the thirteenth century, the English monarch captured the Stone as spoils of war and took it to Westminster Abbey in London where it was fitted into the Coronation Chair. All British sovereigns, except Queen Mary, have been crowned on this chair—with Queen Elizabeth the last to have been so in 1953.<sup>11</sup> One may speculate if Kofi Antubam perhaps quite deliberately placed the Asante stool in a position analogous to the one occupied by the Stone of Scone in the English throne, namely as incorporation of an ancient tradition symbolic of the foundation of power as well

---

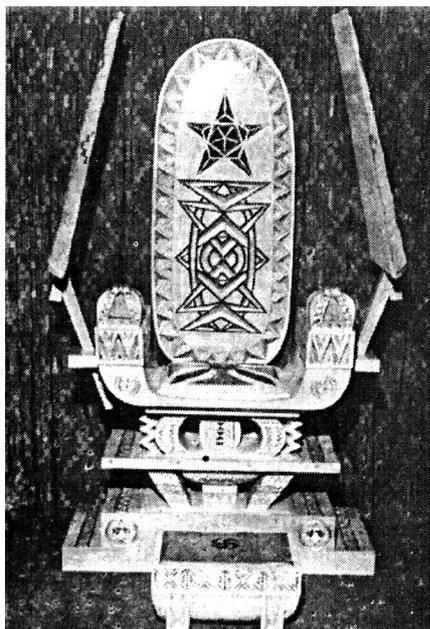
11 For more details on the Stone of Scone and the Coronation Chair, see the informative homepage of Westminster Abbey; e.g. [http://www.westminster-abbey.org/tour/coronation\\_chair/index.html](http://www.westminster-abbey.org/tour/coronation_chair/index.html), consulted on 6 June 2007. In 1996, the British government returned the Stone of Scone to Scotland (where it is kept at Edinburgh castle) provided it would be sent back to Westminster for future coronations.

as a celebration of the victory of the new regime over the old authorities. Given that Nkrumah had to face, and overcome, quite significant resistance from Asante nationalists and prove himself sovereign over the pre-colonial, and later colonially backed, chiefdoms, this interpretation may not be too far-fetched.

Finally, Antubam decorated the Seat of State with one of Ghana's most prominent 'neo-traditions', as one may perhaps call them, namely the Black Star, the Lodestar of African Freedom, which Ghana also displays in her coat of arms, flag and, very visibly, on the Independence Arch.



Accra, Independence square and arch, decorated with the Black Star  
(Photo: C. Lentz, 2007)



The Seat of State, details of design  
(Source: Vieta 2000: 116)

Although an outside observer may speculate about the multiple aesthetic, political, and religious genealogies of the star symbol, in the eyes of most Ghanaians its firm association with African independence has superseded any such older connotations, and the star can therefore be regarded as a 'neo-tradition'. For Kwame Nkrumah himself, who had attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, the first American institution of higher education for men of African descent, and who had served, together with George Padmore, as secretary for the pan-African movement's decisive Manchester Congress in 1945, the Black Star, was, of course, a symbol closely connected with the Garvey movement. In 1919, the Jamaican black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey had launched the Black Star Line, a shipping company that was to promote worldwide commerce among black communities and contribute to 'repatriate' Americans of African descent. For Nkrumah and other CPP leaders, the Black Star therefore symbolised hopes not only for the decolonisation of the African continent, but also for a liberating impact of Ghana's and other African countries' independence on racial emancipation in America. Whether Kofi Antubam was aware of the Black Star's connection with Garveyism, is a moot point. Most contemporary Ghanaians, however, tend to interpret the Black Star as a uniquely Ghanaian symbol rather than one borrowed from an older pan-Africanist movement. In any case, different from the Asante stool and European throne imagery, the star evokes no associations of royal or otherwise personalised supreme power, but rather of an egalitarian and popular project of African liberty, directed against the colonial regime and all forms of dependency. Thus, Antubam's Seat of State joined not only European and African emblems of royal power, but also complemented these with a symbol referring to a self-confident, democratically organised nation potentially critical of abuses of power.

As mentioned above, Antubam created many more objects, paintings and carvings which fuse European and 'traditional' as well as 'neo'-Ghanaian artistic styles, and he was not the only artist to do so.<sup>12</sup> It is such fusions and symbolic innovations as well as ceremonies and artistic performances which contribute to the creation of a 'national culture', and more specifically a national political culture, that lends to the newly created nation-state an aura of self-evidence and naturalness.<sup>13</sup> However, the nationalist and unifying intentions of the artists and cultural performers notwithstanding, their 'quotations' from local and regional traditions are always critically observed by Ghanaians from their own as well as, and even more so, from other ethnic and regional origins. Particularly non-Akan groups are acutely aware of a certain Akan dominance in official, but also popular Ghanaian representations and artefacts of 'national culture'. Also, the frequent borrowing from Akan royal pageantry for official state celebrations is by no means welcomed by everybody, especially not by those from pre-colonially segmentary 'chief-less' societies who are proud of their pre-colonial democratic

---

12 See Crinson 2000, Schramm 2000, and Hess 2000 and 2001 for further examples.

13 For a detailed analysis of the creation of 'local' and 'national' culture through bureaucratic routines of state-employed cultural officers, see the case study of N'Guessan (2008) on the Centre for National Culture in the Upper West Region.

traditions.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the creation of a national imaginary is an on-going and contested project.

*Parliamentary procedure and the 'Westminster tradition'*

In Ghana, as elsewhere, it is, of course, not only symbols but also political institutions and practices that were 'imported' and locally adopted. The Ghanaian Parliament's information sheet for visitors explicitly and self-consciously states that, despite the introduction of a unicameral legislature instead of a two-chamber system as in Britain, 'Parliament operates very much on the lines of the Parliament in Westminster. It follows to some extent the Westminster model'.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in one of the recently published books on Parliament's history, and parliamentary organisation and procedure in particular, that also serve to acquaint newly elected parliamentarians with the institution, the Speaker of Parliament at the time, Hon. Peter Ala Adjetey, proudly states: 'The Ghanaian Legislature is a complex institution rooted in the Westminster tradition' (Parliament 2004: 11). This refers to procedural matters as well as to the two-party system, with a majority and a minority, or government and opposition party, which has characterised much of Ghana's political history.

The 'Westminster model' is also reflected in the early parliamentary architecture, as one can see when comparing the British House of Commons with the Ghanaian Legislative Assembly in the 1950s (which inherited the spatial arrangements of the former Legislative Council as shown in photo 12). The fact that in the new Ghanaian Parliament (see photo 1) the seats have been rearranged in horse-shoe formation, instead of two rows of opposing benches, points to the fact that since the 1979 constitution, Ghana has also adopted many elements of the American Congress system, and became what Ayensu and Darkwa have characterised as (without implying anything negative) 'a hybrid of Westminster and Congress system of government' (1999: 199).

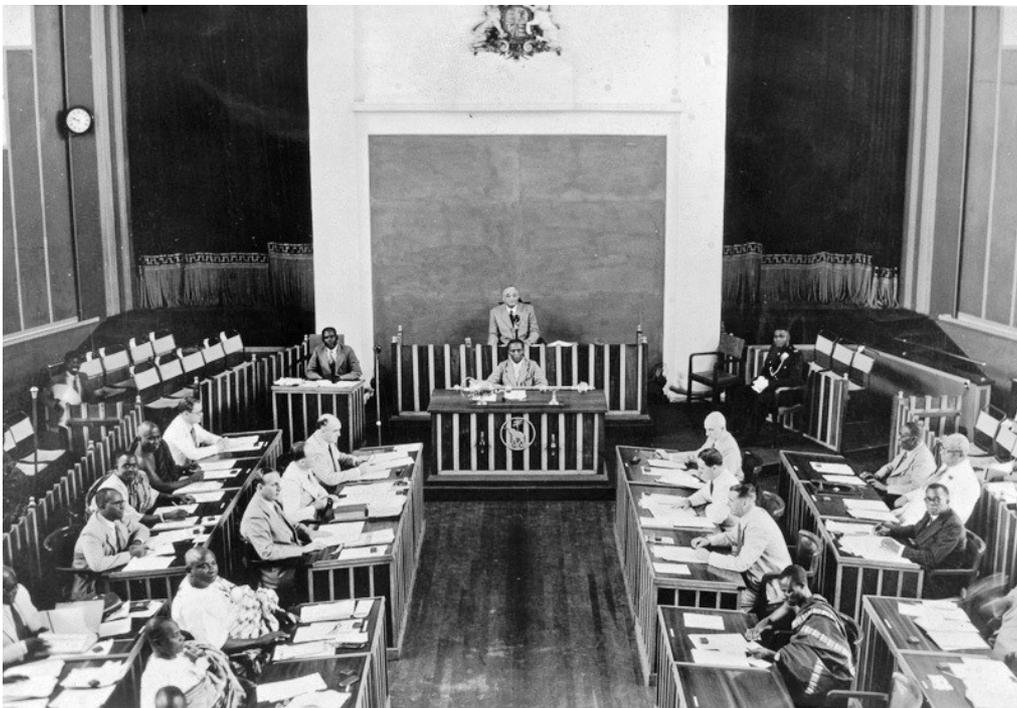
---

14 When in the 1990s the arrival hall of Kotoka International Airport in Accra was remodeled in the shape of an Akan stool, this occasioned quite bitter commentaries among my Northern friends. For some of the controversies about the inclusiveness of the independence jubilee celebrations in 2007 with regard to the representation of all Ghanaian regions, see Lentz and Budniok 2007a and b.

15 Leaflet produced by the Office of Parliament, Parliament House, Victoriaborg, Accra, no date given, but probably 2006, which presents a brief history of Ghana's legislature, lists of the names of Speakers of Parliament, the leadership of Parliament, departmental heads and various committees, as well as explanations of the parliamentary logo and the symbols used in the Ghana Mace.



House of Commons, London  
(Source: <http://images.parliament.uk>; 22 Sep. 2008)



Legislative Council Ghana, 1949  
(Source: <http://www.dspace.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/1147>; 22 Sep. 2008)

However, this more recent ‘hybrid’ has not changed the fundamental nature of the two-party system that remains dominant. Despite the advent of new political parties that sometimes strive to present themselves as a ‘third force’, as did Rawlings’ New Democratic Congress in the 1990s, the Ghanaian electorate generally interprets all political competition in terms of ‘government’ and ‘opposition’, and all parties are regarded as heirs to one of the two political traditions formed in the late 1940s—the more liberally oriented United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) of J.B. Danquah and others, and the more radical Convention People’s Party (CPP) established by Kwame Nkrumah.

Indeed, the ‘two-party’ paradigm was once deliberately exported to Ghana by the British in the 1940s and 1950s, albeit in a contradictory process. While the Governor of the Gold Coast was still hesitant to accept that constitutional reform was necessary, a number of young leftist, labour-oriented British students toured the country as tutors in an extramural studies programme of the newly founded University College of Ghana. Not so much in the larger cities, but in rural areas in the South and in the rather marginalised North, these tutors gave lectures to politicised young African literates on European political history, constitutional law, political party systems, etc. And they left ‘book boxes’ for consultation between meetings, including, for example, Erskine May’s *Parliamentary Practice*—a book that is still quoted as relevant reference literature in Ayensu and Darkwa’s 2006 introduction to parliamentary procedure. In the North, the first generation of Ghanaian parliamentarians received their basic political education in these discussion groups.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, the African appropriation of the British party system was governed by local dynamics. The political activists aligned themselves with either the ruling CPP or the oppositional United Party (UP)—‘heir’ to the UGCC tradition, and formed in 1957 out of an alliance of several regional opposition parties—not along the lines of party programmes or social class, but along the fault lines of local conflicts. For instance, if the son of a ruling chief stood as the candidate of Nkrumah’s party, the chief’s opponents would invariably join the UP. Yet, the democratic model was never completely superseded by local agendas. The same political activists, who joined a party according to the logics of local conflict, engaged in impassioned debates on the merits of the party system in general or the advantages and disadvantages of centralist models of government. At the same time, the democratic paradigm was applied beyond the sphere of ‘modern’ politics. In chieftaincy succession disputes, for instance, contesting factions began to demand that the chief be popularly elected.<sup>17</sup>

16 Information from several conversations with Ivor Wilks, in Evanston, USA, March 1991 and May 1993. Wilks was among these tutors, as were Dennis Austin and David Kimble, who were later to become well-known political scientists writing on Ghana. For more details on political education and early party politics in Ghana’s North-West see Lentz 2006: 200–3. On the history of the Legislative Assembly, party politics and decolonisation more generally, see Kimble 1963, Apter 1972: 175–256 and Austin 1976. David Apter (2008) has recently presented an instructive personal account of Ghana’s independence years (during which he conducted his dissertation fieldwork in the country) and the struggles over which political model the new state should follow.

17 For examples of these processes in Northern Ghana, see Lentz 2006: 175–227; for an older instructive case study from the Brong Ahafo region, see Dunn and Robertson 1973. On the continuity and strength of the Ghanaian two-party system, see also Morrison and Hong 2006; I would, however, disagree with Morrison and Hong’s overall insistence on the impact of ethnic and regional factors on party preferences (which they problematically operationalise

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in more detail how ‘travelling’ political paradigms such as the party system and parliamentary democracy were appropriated and modified.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, a lot has been written on elections in Ghana (and elsewhere), but much less on the internal workings of political parties, and virtually no in-depth research has been conducted, as far as I can see, on African parliaments.<sup>19</sup> This is a highly relevant field of future research, and what is particularly needed, in my view, is studies that complement, or even contrast, conventional political science analyses with anthropological perspectives and research methods.

\* \* \*

The Ghanaian example is a case of a very self-confident and creative combination of local and Western repertoires of statehood. Of course, one would have to explore in greater depth how the broader population perceives these symbols and rituals. But on the basis of our department’s collective research experience in West Africa we can assume that in this region, modern statehood is deeply engrained in society. By incorporating statehood and paradigms such as representative democracy into local political styles, the forms of modern statehood are modified and re-interpreted. At the same time, this incorporation changes these local political styles. Such processes of appropriation and change that affect not only the travelling models but also the society into which they are incorporated constitute an important field of inquiry in political anthropology.

Of central relevance here is the concept of ‘path dependency’. How new institutions and rules are introduced is co-determined by existing institutions and rules. Can we perhaps explain the relative stability of the Ghanaian state by the political heritage of the Asante and Fante states? At least according to Ivor Wilks’ (1975) much-discussed thesis, these pre-colonial polities underwent a quasi-Weberian process of rationalisation and bureaucratisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But to answer such a question with any degree of certainty requires the interdisciplinary cooperation of historians, political scientists and anthropologists and a combination of approaches which have hitherto often been separated. In-depth case studies, for instance, are one of the strengths of anthropology, while comparison has been a hallmark of political science; and qualitative methods which are the mainstays of anthropology and history can be fruitfully combined with quantitative analysis that often characterises political science.

The study of African forms of politics, statehood and democracy has sharpened our attention for certain phenomena, which can also contribute to a

---

by using administrative regions as units of analysis), but rather emphasise that—with the exception of a handful of electoral constituencies where one party has an overwhelming majority—party cleavages usually reach down to the local level nearly everywhere and are, paradoxically, one of the integrative forces of the Ghanaian polity.

18 For another instructive example of how democratic models were appropriated, and modified, in African (local) elections, see Bierschenk 2006.

19 Political scientists have recently (re)turned to the study of elections and party systems in Africa; see, for instance, Emminghaus 2003, Mozaffar and Scarritt 2005, Carbone 2006, Morrison and Hong 2006, and the articles assembled in Basedau et al 2007. With respect to studies on parliament, one of the rare exceptions is Lindberg 2008 on Ghana; see also Hornsby 1989, and Hounkpe and Lalaye 2001 on the Kenyan and Beninois parliaments respectively.

better understanding of developments in ‘Western’ societies. Such phenomena are, for instance, the importance of informal political processes, legal pluralism and the multicentricity of power, which the political scientist Richard Sklar (1993) referred to as ‘dual authority’ or ‘thrones behind the throne’. Another political science concept developed drawing on African data is ‘extraversion’ (e.g. Bayart 1993), that is, the dependency of states on ‘external’ income and international agencies rather than their own citizenry. We may add to this the weakness of established political parties, resulting in the personalisation of politics, an increasing volatility of electoral decisions and the rise of a new type of political entrepreneur who establishes his own party and relies heavily on the media.<sup>20</sup>

A normative view would let us summarise such phenomena under terms like ‘weak states’ (Migdal 1988) and ‘defective democracies’ (Merkel 2004, Merkel and Croissant 2004, Puhle 2005); or, perhaps more optimistically, suggest that we are dealing with embryonic forms of ‘real’ democracy.<sup>21</sup> A less normative stance permits us to realise that these phenomena are themselves the norm and not the exception in the more than fifty ‘neo-democracies’ (Schmitter 1999) which have sprung up all over the world since the 1970s—in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and elsewhere. And we might well ask whether these phenomena and processes are not increasingly characterising our so-called ‘strong states’ and ‘old democracies’ as well. In this sense, what we observe in Africa, or other parts of the Global South, may well represent the harbinger of our own political futures, it may provide, as Bierschenk puts it, ‘a hint of what lies ahead for the “archeodemocracies” of Old Europe’ (2006: 569).

Our discussion has taken us very far from the Ghanaian ‘Seat of State’. But I would like to suggest that the study of cross-cultural, cross-societal processes of appropriation—such as the case of ‘travelling’ political symbols which I looked at in this paper—is not only an important field of inquiry in contemporary political anthropology, but also constitutes one possible analytical ‘entry’ into much larger debates, namely on the current global transformations of statehood and democracy—an entry which combines case studies with comparative analyses and which avoids the trap of normativity.<sup>22</sup>

---

20 See, for instance, Bierschenk’s (2006) case study on the role of political entrepreneurs in the municipal elections in Benin.

21 For a brief summary of the discussion on ‘fragile states’, see Krause and Jütersonke 2007; Migdal and Schlichte 2005 present an overview of discussions on the ‘state’ and a critique of normative, OECD-centric political science studies.

22 For an interesting renewed discussion on different ‘cultures of democracy’, see Gaonkar 2007 and the other contributions to the special issue of *Public Culture* on which Gaonkar comments. One research programme in which members of our Mainz department are engaged and which aims to contribute towards, and critically shape, the emerging new ‘anthropology of the state’ is ‘States at Work: Public Services and Civil Servants in West Africa’. Financed by the Volkswagen Foundation and under the direction of Thomas Bierschenk and Mahaman Tijani Alou, a political scientist from Niamey (Niger) and African and German senior and junior scholars study the daily workings of state institutions and the practices of public servants in the education and justice sectors in four West African countries (Benin, Niger, Ghana and Mali). This project aims precisely at a non-normative, empirical, in-depth study of bureaucratic routines and strategies that neither ‘exoticises’ African bureaucracies, nor is blind to locally specific appropriations of universal models. See [http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/projekte/StatesatWork\\_neu.html](http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/projekte/StatesatWork_neu.html) for more information,

## References

- Allman, Jean. 1993. *The Quills of the Porcupine: Asante Nationalism in an Emergent Ghana*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Antubam, Kofi. 1963. *Ghana's Heritage of Culture*. Leipzig: Köhler and Amelang.
- Apter, David. 1972. *Ghana in Transition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Apter, David. 2008. Ghana's independence: triumph and paradox. *Transition* 98: 6–22.
- Austin, Dennis. 1976. *Ghana Observed: Essays on the Politics of a West African Republic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ayensu, K. B. and S. N. Darkwa. 1999. *The Evolution of Parliament in Ghana*. Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers.
- Ayensu, K. B. and S. N. Darkwa. 2006. *How our Parliament Functions: An Introduction to the Law, Practice and Procedure of the Parliament of Ghana*. Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers.
- Basedau, Matthias, Gero Erdmann and Andreas Mehler (eds.). 2007. *Votes, Money and Violence: Political Parties and Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Bayart, Jean-François. 1993. *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. London: Longman.
- Behrends, Andrea. 2008. Traveling models in conflict resolution: a new approach to conflict research and intervention. *Africa Peace and Conflict Network, Briefing # 2*. <http://www.africaworkinggroup.org/files/BehrendsBriefing2.pdf> (7. Oct. 2008).
- Bierschenk, Thomas. 2006. The local appropriation of democracy: an analysis of the municipal elections in Parakou, Republic of Benin, 2002–03. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 44: 543–71.
- Boccola, Sandro (ed.). 1994. *Afrikanische Sitze*. München: Prestel.
- Carbone, Giovanni M. 2006. Comprendre les partis et les systèmes de partis africains: entre modèles et recherches empiriques. *Politique Africaine* 104: 18–37.
- Coe, Cati. 2005. *Dilemmas of Culture in African School: Youth, Nationalism, and the Transformation of Knowledge*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Crinson, Mark. 2001. Nationbuilding, collecting and the politics of display: the National Museum, Ghana. *Journal of the History of Collections* 13 (2): 231–50.
- Czarniawska, Barbara and Bernward Joerges. 1996. Travels of ideas. In: Czarniawska, Barbara and Guje Sévon (eds). *Translating Organizational Change*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 14–48.
- Dunn, John and A. F. Robertson. 1973. *Dependence and Opportunity: Political Change in Ahafo*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Emminghaus, Christoph. 2003. *Politische Parteien im Demokratisierungsprozess. Struktur und Funktionen afrikanischer Parteiensysteme*. Hamburg: Leske und Budrich.
- Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar. 2007. On cultures of democracy. *Public Culture* 19 (1): 1–22.

- Hess, Janet B. 2000. Imagining architecture: the structure of nationalism in Accra, Ghana. *Africa Today* 47 (2): 35–58.
- Hess, Janet B. 2001. Exhibiting Ghana: display, documentary, and ‘national’ art in the Nkrumah era. *African Studies Review* 44: 59–77.
- Hornsby, Charles. 1989. The social structure of the National Assembly in Kenya, 1963–83. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 27 (2): 275–96.
- Houkpe, Matthias and Francis Lalaye. 2001. Le parlement béninois, cet inconnu. *Façons de Voir (monthly journal)*.
- Kimble, David. 1963. *A Political History of Ghana*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Krause, Keith and Oliver Jütersonke. 2007: Seeking out the state: fragile states and international governance. *Politorbis* 42: 5–12.
- Ladouceur, Paul A. 1979. Chiefs and Politicians: The Politics of Regionalism in Northern Ghana. London: Longman
- Lentz, Carola. 2006. *Ethnicity and the Making of History in Northern Ghana*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Lentz, Carola and Jan Budniok. 2007a. Ghana@50 – celebrating the nation: an account from Accra. *Africa Spectrum* 42 (3): 531–41.
- Lentz, Carola and Jan Budniok. 2007b. Ghana@50 – celebrating the nation: an eyewitness account from Accra. *Working Papers of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz* 83.
- Lindberg, Staffan I. 2008 (forthcoming). The rise and decline of parliament in Ghana. In: Barkan, Joel (ed.), *Legislatures in Emerging Democracies*. see [http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/sil/downloads/Lindberg\\_in\\_Barken\\_ed2008.pdf](http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/sil/downloads/Lindberg_in_Barken_ed2008.pdf); 7 Oct. 2008.
- May, Erskine (ed. by Sir C. Boulton). 1989. *Parliamentary Practice*. 21st edition. London: Butterworth.
- McCaskie, T. C. 1983. Accumulation, wealth and belief in Asante history. I. To the close of the nineteenth century. *Africa* 53 (1): 23–43.
- McCaskie, T. C. 1995. *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McClusky, Pamela. 2002. *Art from Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back*. Seattle: Seattle Art Museum.
- Merkel, Wolfgang. 2004. Embedded and defective democracies. *Democratization* 11 (5): 33–58.
- Merkel, Wolfgang and Aurel Croissant. 2004. Conclusions: good and defective democracies. *Democratization* 11 (5): 199–213
- Migdal, Joel S. 1988: *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Migdal, Joel S. and Klaus S. Schlichte. 2005. Rethinking the state. In: Schlichte, Klaus S. (ed.), *The Dynamics of States: The Formation and Crises of State Domination*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1–40.
- Morrison, Minion K. C. and Jae Woo Hong. 2006. Ghana’s political parties: how ethno/regional variations sustain the national two-party system. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 44 (4): 623–47.

- Mozaffar, S. and J. R. Scarritt. 2005. The puzzle of African party systems. *Party Politics* 11 (4): 399–421
- N'Guessan, Konstanze. 2008 (in press). Die Bürokratisierung von Kultur. Ein staatliches Kulturzentrum in Nordghana. *Working Papers of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz*.
- Nugent, Paul. 2002. *Secessionists, Smugglers and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Parliament of Ghana. 2004. *A Guide to the Parliament in Ghana*. Accra: Parliament of Ghana.
- Puhle, Hans-Jürgen. 2005. Democratic consolidation and 'defective democracies'. Facultad de Derechos, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, *Working Papers Online Series* 47.  
[http://portal.uam.es/portal/page/portal/UAM\\_ORGANIZATIVO/Departamento/CienciaPoliticaRelacionesInternacionales/publicaciones%20en%20red/working\\_papers/archivos/47\\_2005.pdf](http://portal.uam.es/portal/page/portal/UAM_ORGANIZATIVO/Departamento/CienciaPoliticaRelacionesInternacionales/publicaciones%20en%20red/working_papers/archivos/47_2005.pdf) (7 Oct. 2008)
- Reyna, Stephen. 2007. The traveling model that would not travel: oil, empire, and patrimonialism in contemporary Chad. *Social Analysis* 51 (3): 78–102.
- Schmitter, Philippe C. 1999. Critical reflections on the 'functions' of political parties and their performance in neo-democracies. In: Merkel, Wolfgang and Andreas Busch (eds.), *Demokratie in Ost und West. Festschrift für Klaus von Beyme*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 475–95.
- Schramm, Katharina. 2000. *Dancing the Nation. Ghanaische Kulturpolitik im Spannungsfeld zwischen Nation und globaler Herausforderung*. Münster: Lit.
- Sklar, Richard. 1993. The African frontier for political science. In: Bates, Robert H., V.Y. Mudimbe and Jean O'Barr (eds.), *Africa and the Disciplines. The Contribution of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 83–112.
- Vieta, Kojo T.. 2000. *The Flagbearers of Ghana*. School Edition I. Accra: ENA Publications.
- Wilks, Ivor. 1975. *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilks, Ivor. 1993. *Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante*. Athens: Ohio University Press.