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PREVIEW OF A SEMINAR ON THE BRONG PEOPLE

by Kwame Arhin*

A seminar on the Brong people in north-central Ghana, which was planned to be held in the first term of the 1970/71 academic year, had to be postponed for a number of reasons. The principal one among these was the absence of many of the participants from Ghana in the long vacation of last year so that they could not undertake fieldwork. It is now hoped that fieldwork will be done in the coming long vacation and that the seminar can be held in the first term of the 1971/72 academic year. This note sets out the problems and the outline of the seminar.

The traditional area known as Brong stretches from the Comoé river in the Ivory Coast in the west to the Volta river in the east. But one must distinguish the area of the Brong people from the administrative area, the Brong district of the Brong-Ahafo Region, in Ghana. The Brong district borders in the south on the Ashanti Region and the Ahafo district of the Brong-Ahafo Region, in the north on the Northern Region, in the west on the Ivory Coast and in the east on the Volta Region. The seminar is principally concerned with the Brong of the Brong-Ahafo Region though M. Emmanuel Terray of the University of Paris has written for us a paper on political succession in the Brong state of the Ivory Coast. Before the last quarter of the nineteenth century both the eastern and the western parts of the Brong area, including the Brong state of the Ivory Coast, were either effectively or peripherally with the Ashanti 'empire'. During the colonial days (1896-1957) and between 1957 and 1960 the whole of the modern Brong administrative district was administered as part of Ashanti and its chiefs, with the exception of Atebubu, were supposed to be members of the Ashanti Confederacy and its successor, the Asanteman Council.

The Brong area is inhabited by a number of peoples who may be distinguished on the basis of cultural, particularly

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linguistic, basis. There are the Brong-Akan some of whose ruling groups claim to be autochthonous while others claim migrant origin from the Kumasi and Adansi districts of the present Ashanti Region or from Akwamu in the Eastern Region. The Wenchi ruling group claims to be autochthonous; the Techiman (Bono-Manso) ruling group claims to have been the first of Akan migrants from the north to settle in modern central Ghana. The ruling lineages of Atebubu, Nkoranza, Sunyani and Berekum claim to have originated from the Kumasi district. Dormaa claims an Akwamu origin with fairly lengthy sojourns in the Kumasi district. There are also the Kulango-speaking peoples of Seikwa, Nsawkaw and Badu who claim origins from Bona and places in north-eastern Ivory Coast. Between probably the fifteenth century, when the Mande-Dyula founded the trading colony of Begho and started exploiting the gold of the Banda hills, and the end of the nineteenth century, the whole area became an archipelago of trading settlements dominated in the west between Kintampo and Bonduku by Mande-speaking peoples and in the east between Kintampo and the borders of Togoland by Hausa-speaking peoples. The Brong district taken as a whole is probably the most heterogenous in Ghana in terms of cultural differences. One finds there pagans and muslims, matrilineal and patrilineal peoples and various unrelated language groupings.¹

Cultural diversity apart, there is a pronounced cleavage in the physical environment, of differences in agricultural production and consequently in the physical conditions of life. The fifty miles or so stretch of road between Berekum and Nsawkaw in the north-east amply illustrates this. Berekum, located in the forest area, and producing cocoa and abundant tropical crops, with its numerous storey-buildings and well-laid out streets, and its impressive commercial centre, is probably the prettiest and most prosperous-looking medium-sized town in Ghana. Approximately mid-way between Berekum and Seikwa, one abruptly comes to the end of the forest area and thereafter the settlements (in sharp contrast to those south-east and south of Berekum towards Dormaa-Ahenkro), become hovels with only a few houses roofed with corrugated iron sheets, the unmistakable sign of relative prosperity in the Ghanaian rural areas. Between the forest area and Nsawkaw, further north, the land becomes predominantly grassland, with poor drainage, where the people grow, instead of cocoa, yams

on a small scale, probably because of poor communication and consequent poor market facilities. The patchy 'motor' road tells a sombre story of years of neglect owing to the supposed poverty of the land.

Before the British dealt their knock-out blow to Ashanti in 1874, Kumasi had a variety of relations with the various states and peoples in the Brong area. It is fairly certain that Kumasi had 'allied' relations with Dormaa, that it 'controlled' Gyaman (which included areas in modern Ghana and the Ivory Coast), Nkoranza, Takyiman and Atebubu; that various Kumasi subordinate chiefs were 'in charge' of Badu, Nsawkaw, Selkwa, Berekum, Nsoatre, Sunyani, Awua and Antepim-Odomase (two towns in one) and nine villages which had been part of the Techiman state but which the Ashanti insisted on directly controlling probably for reasons connected with their statecraft.

But the nature of these sorts of relations has to be spelled out in as much detail as possible. Precisely what were the practical implications of 'allied' relations, 'control' and 'in charge of': was it all a matter of 'tribute' and 'military service' or something else, perhaps performance of specific duties in the Asantehene's household? What were the historical, political and sociological 'origins' or significance of these different ties? One major problem of the seminar is to determine the practical implications of these ties. The conclusions reached may well hold for other states and peoples in other areas with whom Kumasi had such relations. Then one could define a little more precisely the character of the Ashanti 'empire', and perhaps say something about their other methods of expansion than the military.

A very interesting aspect of the western Brong area is its intricate political pattern. It is generally known that Kumasi has 'islands' or dependent villages in the area. I believe it is not so generally known that the Dormaa state consists of discrete territories in the Brong and Ahafo areas. Beside Dormaa-Ahenkro district proper, Abessim, five miles and Chiraa, thirteen miles, within Sunyani as well as Boma in the Ahafo area form important wings of the Dormaa state. Why among the traditional areas in central and southern Ghana does Brong alone have this political structure?

There appear to be two main answers which need further investigation: early migrational movements ending in the formation of states and villages and the impact of Kumasi on the Brong area. The ruling lineages of the various states and towns came from different areas without the sort of common purposes which could have promoted unifying movements among them. The ruling lineages of Selkwa, for example, claim that their founding ancestors migrated from further north and that, on their arrival, they preferred to ally themselves with the powerful state of Ashanti. The ruling lineages of Berekum were originally a group of warriors from Asokore, stationed there to watch the Gyaman people after those people had been driven into what is now known as the Ivory Coast; the settlement later developed into a buffer state. Sunyani was founded by a dissident group from Kumasi-Amakom. Awua-Odomase was founded by a brother of an occupant of the Bantama-Kumasi stool while the Antepim stool of the other part of the town was founded by a man from Dankylra. The Ashanti probably played on the divisive potential of this variety of background.

All this is probably why before about 1946 there were no internally sustained efforts at political unification among the Brong until, as the chiefs say, the Kumasi chiefs gave them cause to try to establish the Brong-Kyempim Federation, the constitutionally unrecognized fore-runner of the Brong-Ahafo House of Chiefs established by the Republican Constitution of 1960.

Gouldsbury (1876)² reported a movement among the peoples of Krachi, Atebubu, Basa, Wlase, Prang and Yeji - which Ferguson later (1893)³ called the Brong Confederation. Ferguson also said the Nkoranza people joined it during their war with Kumasi in 1892-93. But Krachi, Basa, Prang and Yeji do not call themselves Brong so that there were only three Brong states, Atebubu, Wlase and Nkoranza in the 'confederation'. The association was not born out of any consciousness of Brong unity but out of the need for a common defence among neighbours against the Ashanti common enemy. There was also in the same period a 'confederation' embracing some members in western Brong, Gyaman, Techiman, Selkwa, Suma, Drobo, Kwatwema and Sehwi, south of Gyaman among others. Again Selkwa and Sehwi are not Brong so that it cannot be called a 'Brong' confederation.

tion. It was like the one mentioned above, a defensive alliance among neighbours against Ashanti.⁴

But who, then, is 'Brong'? There is first a purely administrative definition; they are Brong who live on the territory defined by the 1960 Republican Constitution as Brong territory. But the founders of the Brong-Kyempim Federation point out in their numerous petitions, of which I have copies, that besides occupying a common continuous stretch of territory, the Brong people have 'ethnic' interests, dialects, practices and fears which separate them from the Ashanti and which, in their estimation, justified a separate administrative area and a separate organization of their chiefs.

Against the background of what the observer can see for himself and the claims of the Brong political movement, certain pertinent questions can be raised and it is on the basis of these questions that contributions have been invited as shown below. Our interest is ethnographic and historical and the method partly comparative: to what extent can one identify a common Brong culture and what are the differences between it, that of Ashanti and the other Akan? But is it possible that our conclusions may be of some practical value to the government in taking what is really a political decision: should certain chiefs in the Brong area continue in their traditional allegiance to the Asantehene and his subordinate Kumasi chiefs?

REVISED LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

<u>Name</u>	<u>Topic</u>
Professor J.H. Nketia Director, Institute of African Studies	- Introductory Lecture.
Mr. B. Aning Institute of African Studies	- Brong Traditional Music.

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<u>Name</u>	<u>Topic</u>
Dr. Kwame Arhin Institute of African Studies	- The Kumasi Islands in the Brong Area.
Nana Agyeman Badu Omanhene of Dormaa	- The Political Organization of Dormaa.
Dr. George Benneh Department of Geography	- Economic Geography of the Brong Area.
Mr. Kwamina Poh U.S.T. - Kumasi	- Political Relations Among the Brong Peoples.
Dr. Florence Dolphyne Department of Linguistics	- Brong Dialects.
Mr. George Hagan Institute of African Studies	- Brong Social and Political Institutions.
Mr. Kofi Asare Opoku Institute of African Studies	- Brong Traditional Religion.
Professor M. Posnansky Department of Archaeology	- Some Archaeological Aspects of the Brong Area.
M. E. Terray University of Paris	- Political Succession in the Brong State of the Ivory Coast.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Jack Goody: Ethnography of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. Colonial Office, 1954.
2. V.S. Gouldsbury: Report on Mission to Salaga. Public Record Office (P.R.O.) Colonial Office (C.O.), 879/9. Gouldsbury visited the Salaga and Krachi in 1876.
3. G.E. Ferguson: Memorandum on the Brong Tribes d. 24/11/1893. In PRO/CO. 879/39.
4. Notes on Gyaman taken on October 1881 In Further Correspondence Relating to the Affairs of the Gold Coast.

