

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



Scroll down to read the article.

HISTORY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF JOHN MENSAH SARBAH AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF GOLD COAST HISTORY

D.E. Kofi Baku

"Until lions have their own historians,
tales of hunting will always glorify the
hunter."

An Ewe Proverb.

Introduction

The role of history in national development has been acknowledged.¹ In this regard, it is generally believed that History does not only equip the Historian adequately to understand his environment but it also informs him of the alternatives available for the purposeful harnessing of the resources of his environment for development. History, in ancient Greek mythology, is reputed to be the daughter of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory and hence its general acknowledgement as the mirror of society.² It, therefore, has the capability to unravel the eclipsed past, so as to provide lessons to guide the future.

These general remarks are relevant to Africa and its development particularly in the context of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism. Indeed as early as 1898, *The Gold Coast Aborigine*, the mouth piece of the Aborigines Rights Protection Society perceptively recognised this point. It declared in its very first issue that,

*The people of the Gold Coast have a past and the rising generation must be instructed in the history of their country, for we do not know of a better weapon to be wielding in any political struggle for existence than a smart acquaintance with the history of the country, backed by a clear intelligence of the laws of the land.*³

Twenty years later in the 1920's, other African nationalists mirrored this same point. It was articulated by Solanke, the Nigerian nationalist as follows: "How is the spirit of a people to be formed and animated and cheered but out of the store house of its historical recollection."⁴ In the same vein, Rivkin flamboyantly declared that:

*History reveals to us a glorious past which can be invoked as a goal to recapture, as a birth-right, the enjoyment of which was interrupted by the colonialists and now ripe for restoration, or as a colonialist act of 'balkanization' which must be politically corrected as a part of the emergence of the African personality.*⁵

From the foregoing, it is obvious that for History, Historical writing and Historical studies to achieve their desired objectives, they have to take specific forms. For Africa, the choice is clear. Many scholars have referred to the need to decolonise African History.⁶ What has generally not been acknowledged is the fact that this decolonisation process began in some parts of Africa from the middle of the 19th Century. Indeed, when in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Gold Coast Intellectuals and Black Nationalists began to publish the histories of the African peoples among whom they lived and worked, they had in actual fact, anticipated our present day concerns.⁷

The objective of this paper, therefore, is four-fold. First, it seeks to examine, albeit tentatively, the development of the process of decolonising Gold Coast History in the late 19th

and early 20th centuries. Second, it seeks to locate some of the works of a foremost Gold Coast nationalist, John Mensah Sarbah, in the intellectual traditions of his day, and third, to argue that he initiated a radical tradition of Gold Coast historical writing which still exerts seminal influence on modern Ghanaian socio-historical and political studies. Finally the paper argues that Mensah Sarbah sought to 'decolonise' Gold Coast History, and to relate Historical writing to national independence and development. In this regard, one cannot belabour the crucial importance of the specific concerns of both the early Gold Coast nationalist intellectuals and John Mensah Sarbah with regard to the relevance of thorough historical knowledge of a people to their socio-cultural, economic and political development.

Eurocentric Historical Writing and Colonial Expansion

In 1874, when John Mensah Sarbah was ten years old British forces conquered the hinterland kingdom of Asante and declared a protectorate over the Coastal areas and the interior. The British colony of the Gold Coast and Asante was hence created. The era of formal colonialism in the Gold Coast thus began and with it came a renewed interest in its affairs. For in that same year some sixteen books of historical nature were published in Britain by British authors on Gold Coast and Asante affairs.⁸ These books were, in the main, written by soldiers, adventurers, missionaries, colonial administrators and journalists, men who were at best, ill-acquainted with the Gold Coast and its socio-cultural and political affairs. In the next twenty odd years up to about 1900, the trend continued in much the same fashion. An average of two books were published a year on Gold Coast affairs in Britain by British authors.⁹

These books shared certain basic characteristics. First, they presented distorted versions of Gold Coast and Asante history, a history in which the progressive roles of the traditional leaders and their societies were either totally ignored or denigrated. The vast Asante Kingdom, which had reached the height of its power and glory at the turn of the 18th century and had evolved sophisticated socio-cultural, political, economic and administrative systems was portrayed as barbaric, warlike and heathenish. Philip Curtin states this view succinctly when he notes that 'African political systems ... were understood to be despotisms and despotism was considered to be inimical to progress.'¹⁰

In the Gold Coast, the Royal Gold Coast Gazette,¹¹ a newspaper founded by Governor Sir Charles MacCarthy from March 1822 to January 1824, served as a source for primary materials for British authors for their histories of the Gold Coast and Asante. A cursory glance through the surviving copies reveal a consistently harsh attitude towards Asante, an attitude which K.A.B. Jones Quarrey has found not to be surprising in the circumstances, but which was nonetheless "fatal, in its hostility and utter negativism."¹² As a result of the continuous aggressive posture which The Royal Gazette adopted towards Gold Coast and Asante affairs, it refused to recognise some commendable features of Asante diplomacy. For example, in order to avert war with the Fantes and the British in 1923/1924, the Asantehene, Nana Osei Bonsu, astutely negotiated a peace settlement. As far as The Royal Gazette was concerned, the terms of the treaty were demands made by a 'tyrant' and the concessions subsequently made were 'unjustifiably made ... to the barbarian ...'¹³ At a time when the Asante kingdom had extended to most parts of the Gold Coast, the paper wondered how a treaty could be signed to sanction 'the claims of the rapacious Osai Tootoo Quamina, over the liberties of a whole nation of Fantes ...'¹⁴ Then also in an editorial comment on another treaty which the Asantehene negotiated in 1823, the paper talked about the 'insolent demand, from the Barbarian ... the repeated insults of a Despot'¹⁵ and of the gallant Asante army, the paper exclaimed 'a horde of ... barbarians.'¹⁶ Not surprising, though, in the same issue of the paper, a correspondent notes of the Asantes as "revengeful and bloodthirsty, who on the most slight pretences give an uncontrolled scope of their vengeance and resentment ..."¹⁷ On the whole The Royal Gazette championed a

carefully orchestrated drive, which portrayed the powerful Asante Kingdom in a poor light and in a language which as K.A.B. Jones Quartey rightly noted was "hardly-less extreme than the habits of barbarism and bloodthirstiness with which it unrelentingly charged the Ashanti."¹⁸

Yet still this was in an age known in European history as the middle ages, an age replete with sore atrocities in England (the home country of the publishers and correspondents of *The Royal Gazette*). Of this period in England, a careful observer, relying on contemporary English records has noted as follows:

*The judgment of a primitive race from a civilised standpoint is absurd; yet it is common enough. The sufferings of those unhappy wretches who were stretched upon the rack, broken on the wheel, or otherwise tortured, must have been fully as great, if not indeed greater, than those of any victim in Ashanti and these were commonly inflicted punishments. The higher race, indeed would seem to have used its greater knowledge only to devise more ingeniously cruel tortures. It has been estimated that between the years 1170 and 1783 at least 50,000 persons suffered death at Tyburn alone, and were, moreover, tortured before hand by being drawn or flogged at that cart's tail from Newgate. When the place of execution was moved there, ten men were hanged together on the first occasion and twenty on the second, of whom five had been condemned for robbing a man of something valued at three pence, some nails, a knife valued at a penny, two shillings and a counterfeit half penny.*¹⁹

Those who witnessed these executions, which were always done in public were said to have 'conducted themselves in the most disorderly manner and thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle.'²⁰

Implied therefore in this outlook (that is the disdainful European attitude to Gold Coast and Asante institutions) was the superiority of the European Society, its culture and civilisation. It was thought the moral duty of Europe to educate and civilise the Gold Coast and Africa in general. Considerable emphasis was thus laid on the contact between the Gold Coast and the Islamic world on the one hand, and the Gold Coast and the Europeans on the other. Mention was also made of the supposed influences on Gold Coast and Asante affairs by these contacts. European influences, especially, were projected as leading to progress and civilisation. It was in this vein that Martin Wight, for example, declared in-as late as 1947 that:

*Their vernaculars (i.e. of the Gold Coast peoples) are both too primitive, for them to deserve or achieve official currency. English is the necessary language of progress and civilisation and the African wants to speak it.*²¹

These books in effect presented a history of the Gold Coast and Asante, in which the heroic acts of Asante in resisting colonialism, for example, were seen as obstructing progressive development and the march to civilisation. Here also the views of Martin Wight are illustrative.²² These views are a clear endorsement of the Victorian notions of progress, development and civilisation as universal phenomena. In real terms, therefore, these views meant the universal validity of certain Western ideas, typified in such English institutions as democracy, the rule of law, parliament and an independent judiciary. British colonial rule in the Gold Coast, for Martin Wight, was therefore a manifold blessing. For, he declared:

*The unification (of the Gold Coast) which Ashanti failed to accomplish by military force in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been brought about, within the framework of British power, in terms of Western Constitutionalism.*²³

As for the coastal Fante, they were either written off as a people without a history or as willing collaborators against the ferocious Asante. In this regard, The Royal Gazette dismissed with certainty a report which indicated that it was possible that Elmina would join Asante Forces to fight the British. It noted:

It was unthinkable, surely, that without any provocation at all Elmina would forget their long standing connections with the King of the Netherlands and enlist under the bloody flag of a murderer ... On the whole range of Africa, from Senegal to south of the line, we have proved ourselves the friends of Africa, and except from such a barbarian, we could not except such an act...²⁴

And of the historic Fante Confederacy, the first real proto-nationalist movement of the Gold Coast, Lt. Colonel Ellis noted derogatorily,

Although the ostensible leaders of the confederation were still the Kings of Arbra and Mankassim, the management fell into the hands of a few semi-educated natives and Mallatos, who engaged in it as a political speculation by which they might gain money, or power, or both.²⁵

Secondly, these versions of the histories of the Gold Coast and Asante greatly influenced British officialdom and public opinion, especially on matters relating to colonialism. European civilising mission in Africa which replaced the Atlantic slave trade was predicated on the distorted versions of Gold Coast and Asante histories presented to the British reading public. For after all, some of these books were sensational, claiming to unravel some of the mysteries which surrounded the 'Dark Continent.' Thus progressive Gold Coast and Asante cultures, religious practices and thought systems were considered products of backward societies often resistant to change. Even the more sympathetic observers could not live above the European prejudice. As late as 1914, R.S. Rattray issued *Ashanti Proverbs: The Primitive Ethics of a Savage People* as the title of his book, which otherwise described in fine detail, the sophisticated and cultured language of the Asante.²⁶ The humanitarian and missionary societies which came to propagate the Christian gospel set out both to christianise and anglicise the so-called savage Gold Coast. It was thought then, that Christianity would flourish only in an environment similar to that of Europe. European social and political institutions had to be established, not only in the Gold Coast but wherever colonialism was established. But more importantly was the assumption that European civilisation was the apogee of all human progress and that Africa necessarily had to copy the historical experience of Europe. On the whole, this was to have disastrous consequences for the Gold Coast and Africa. For according to Ade-Ajayi, old songs, drums and festivals were replaced by "new hymns and the harmonica and the magic lantern shows. In place of local history and legend was substituted the history of man as summed up in the New Testament."²⁷ This invariably resulted in Gold Coast losing confidence in themselves and their institutions. It also led to a coerced acceptance of destructive foreign norms, cultures and institutions.

Finally, these books soon assumed the status of manuals for the British Colonialists and colonial administrators. Lugard's *Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*²⁸ is probably the classic example of this. It was published at a time when colonial administration was undergoing self evaluation and Empire builders in the colonies and in London keenly desired a 'Universal' formula for colonial administration which would be applicable in all colonies. According to P.C. Lloyd, Lugard's theory of Indirect rule and his publications became a happy conjunction of a dire need and a most perfect solution. In the words of Lloyd,

Lugard bequeathed to the colonial administrative service his Political Memoranda (1919) and the Dual Mandate (1922); until the 1950's these were the only books which set out, for the young administrative officer, the policy by which he

governed the territories assigned to him. In neither book are Lugard's theories presented as controversial, but as bibles of indirect rule, they contain texts to support most policies. Other administrators too have set out their own ideas about indirect rule ... Indirect rule thus grew almost into a religion in which difference of belief and practice were tacitly recognised but never discussed.²⁹

Moreover, the so-called historical facts which the books by the British authors contained, at once justified British Colonialism, at least in the Gold Coast, and also provided legal basis for the establishment of colonialism. In this regard, extensive use was made of legal and diplomatic sources to prove that prior contact and treaties with Gold Coast chiefs had preceded actual military conquest and subjugation. The treaties of 1831 and 1844 were, for example, portrayed as being freely entered into by chiefs who genuinely desired them. The latter treaty especially, became commonly known as the Bond of 1844 and was erroneously painted as having given the British the unfettered mandate to rule the Gold Coast in perpetuity. Gold Coast Chiefs were thus portrayed as having willingly surrendered their independence for British rule and protection.

The period beginning from 1874 therefore witnessed a new era in Anglo-Gold Coast relations. First it was the age when Africa bulked large in the minds of the British and other Western observers. It was also the age in which British authors contrived to create a poor image of Africa in their own minds and to reduce her to a subordinate position. By 1900 the popular and mysterious image of Africa as the 'Dark Continent' had fully emerged and crystallised. Second, it was the period which witnessed officially sanctioned policies for the unabashed exploitation of the resources of Africa for the development of Europe. A British West African Governor spelt out British aims in Africa during the period as follows:

Firstly, the treatment of native races, who are centuries behind ourselves in mental evolution, and the steps by which they may be gradually brought to a higher plane of civilisation and progress; and secondly, economic development by which those tropical countries may develop a trade which shall benefit our own industrial classes by the production, on the one hand, of the raw materials - rubber, oils, cotton, hides, etc. which form the staple of our manufacturers, and by the absorption in return of our manufactured cotton, hardware and other goods.³⁰

The survival of the Gold Coast and Asante was threatened with the production of distorted versions of their history. If we consider history as the collective traditions of a people which informs them of their past experiences and provides lessons to guide the future then, the outright denial of the existence of Gold Coast history, or the production of distorted version of its history is in effect an attempt not only to negate its past, but also to hamper its development.

Confronted with the prospect of unacceptable versions of their history, the nationalist intellectuals of the Gold Coast generally and John Mensah Sarbah in particular adopted the strategy which Ali Mazrui has called "counter-penetration." In this enterprise they used tools similar to those used by Europeans to reconstruct the correct versions of their people's history.

Reclaiming the Past

Gold Coast nationalist intellectuals effectively applied the tools provided by formal western education, firstly, to question the grounds for the acquisition by Britain of further power and jurisdiction in the Gold Coast beyond those originally granted by the Bond of 1844, and, secondly, to the study of Gold Coast societies. This endeavour of 'taking a new look at the history'³¹ of the Gold Coast - a history in which the identity, the worth and the role of the African was emphasised - was largely successful and the publications by these early 'part-time and non professional historians'³² soon assumed considerable importance.

This era of systematic historical writing by indigenous Gold Coasters was inaugurated by the Reverend Christian Carl Reindorf. *The History of the Gold Coast and Asante Based on the Traditions and Historical Facts Comprising a Period of More Than Three Centuries From About 1500-1860*³³ was the first real attempt at producing an 'Afrocentric' history; it also continues to be important in Ghanaian historical studies³⁴ for the book attempts to make the African an actual participant in his own history, not just a passive and subservient observer or a gullible recipient of foreign norms and cultures.³⁵ Closely connected with the process of documenting the indigenous versions of Gold Coast history was also the process of celebrating indigenous West African heroes. In this regard, The Reverend Solomon Richard Brew Attoh-Ahuma's *Memoirs of West African Celebrities in Europe, 1700-1850, With Special References to the Gold Coast*³⁶ was indicative of the mood of the times. For according to Attoh-Ahuma:

*The Nineteen Representative Men of Culture and renown whose memoirs it has been our fortune to unearth and reproduce in these pages, do not by any means exhaust the list of those intellectual giant-sons of Africa - who held their own in Europe and America in the eighteenth century.*³⁷

As would be noted presently, John Mensah Sarbah and soon after him, Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford, followed in a similar vein and published a number of socio-historical and legal books on Gold Coast societies. In these histories, the Gold Coast nationalist intellectuals sought to do the following: first, to challenge some of the more unacceptable assumptions which informed European authors in their publication about them. Second, to influence British official and unofficial opinion. Third, to demonstrate the uniqueness of the historical, social and cultural systems of their societies. The main theme in this connection was that the societies which they studied and to which they belonged had a past of which they were justifiably proud. Finally these publications sought to inculcate a new sense of direction in the youth, what the Reverend S.R.B. Attoh-Ahuma called the 'rising generation.'

These then, in a general way, were some of the concerns and pre-occupations of the Gold Coast nationalist intellectuals. We shall now turn our attention to the specific contributions of John Mensah Sarbah to this national tradition.

Sarbah and the Decolonisation of Gold Coast History

John Mensah Sarbah was born at Anomabo near Cape Coast in 1864. He was educated at the Wesleyan Primary and High Schools in Anomabo and Cape Coast. In 1880, at the age of 14, he was sent to England and was educated for four years at Queen's College, in Taunton, Somerset. In early 1884, Sarbah returned to the Gold Coast only to set sail for England again in the middle of that same year. On the 25th of June, 1884, he was admitted to the Lincoln's Inn to study Law and was called to the Bar three years later, on 4th May, 1887. At the tender age of 23 he had become what is probably, Gold Coast's first Barrister.³⁸

Back in the Gold Coast, Sarbah set up a lucrative legal career, became a leading member of the 'Mfantasi Amanbuhu Fekuw' or the Fante Political Society and the proprietor and editor of the *Gold Coast People*. He pursued a career which soon marked him out as a patriot and a nationalist agitator. More importantly, Sarbah like other Gold Coast nationalist intellectuals was quick to realise that the success of the practical politics of the British in the Gold Coast rested, in the main, on their control over what they considered the desirable versions of the histories of the Gold Coast and Asante. For him, therefore, if the Gold Coast was to develop along the lines that reflected its true historical experience, then a new version of its history was needed, a version in which its heroes were carefully selected and its progressive cultural, social, political and economic institutions and systems were emphasised. He, therefore, published respectively in 1897 and 1906, the *Fanti Customary Laws: A Brief Introduction to*

the Principles of Native Law and Customs of the Fanti and Akan Districts of the Gold Coast, With Report of Some Cases Therein Decided in Law Courts.³⁹ (Hereafter Fanti Customary Laws) and Fanti National Constitution: A Short Treatise on the Constitution and Government of the Fanti, Ashanti and other Tribes of West Africa, Together with a Brief Account of the Discovery of the Gold by Portuguese Navigators, A Short Narration of the Early English Voyage and a Study of the Rise of British Gold Coast Jurisdiction, etc. etc.⁴⁰ (Hereafter Fanti National Constitution). Indeed, both books like that of Reindorf were well received. A contemporary review of the former book noted that its publication was most opportune, appearing as it did:

In those sad days of promiscuous and indiscriminate legislation, when the ordinary feats of our Star Chamber were assuming proportions out of all cess with the genius of progressive history, and in direct antagonism to the spirit of advancing light and thought of the day. Even today we are quite convinced that the work has only begun to manifest its wholesome usefulness in respect of the national exigencies of our ordinance-ridden country.⁴¹

As for the latter book it was a tour de force with a special section which reviewed Anglo-Gold Coast relations and argued out that illegality of the extension of formal British power and Jurisdiction in the Gold Coast. As a consequence the British colonialists in the Gold Coast became profoundly aware of the fact that there were alternative versions to the histories produced on the Gold Coast, which if known would not only embarrass them, but would also lead to a challenge of their authority. Not surprising, therefore, there soon developed carefully orchestrated moves to obstruct the production of of such facts and histories. In December 1890, for example, the Governor of the Gold Coast issued instructions 'for the collection and destruction by fire or sinkage in the sea of all old records, papers and other matters which can no longer be of any use.'⁴² In an interesting passage, Sarbah reveals how he managed to buy some valuable historical records which were being burnt by African workers at the Cape Coast Castle in the preparation of their 'noonday meal'. According to Sarbah,

In the year 1888, the Supreme Court being in Gothic House, Cape Coast Castle, I found some Kru boys one day cooking their midday meal, and burning as faggots several bundles of papers. On the ground were many more. Asked where they got them, they replied from a big box close by and the contents of which they were at liberty to use in any manner they pleased. It was the Gold Coast version of an old, old story over again: Knowledge through patient and frugal centuries, enlarging discovery, and recording it; ignorance, wanting its day's dinner, lighting a fire with the record, and flavouring its one roast with the burnt souls of many generations. On enquiry, the District Commissioner said the box was full of rubbish, and the Kru boys had spoken truly. Next day, for three pence, two of those bundles changes hands; examined, they were found to contain papers, the most important whereof are now published. The remaining contents of the box were shortly afterwards pitched into the sea, it was said, by order of an high official. The archives of the colony have been mostly destroyed.⁴³

This deliberate act of vandalism was soon followed by the withdrawal of the permission granted to Sarbah to use the facilities of the European archives in the castles along the Coast. Indeed, his predecessor, the Reverend C.C. Reindorf, the foremost Gold Coast historian, suffered a similar fate and was denied the use of the Danish archives in Accra. These acts did not at all leave Sarbah in any doubt about official Colonial mind on indigenous versions of Gold Coast history. For Sarbah, therefore, "history is sometimes troublesome; historical facts are often embarrassing in

West Africa, and nothing so facilitates a spirited indefinite policy as a clean foolscap sheet of paper."⁴⁴

Yet still, the nationalist intellectual, John Mensah Sarbah, was determined to fill up the 'clean foolscap sheet of paper.'⁴⁵ When Sarbah began to write his genuine nationalist history, he depended on the now known methods of historical research: written and oral evidence.⁴⁶ He collected substantial oral evidence from members of the Fante Societies who were of earlier generations and who remembered much of the earliest Fante and Coastal histories. This was carefully supplemented by evidence from written sources.

This meant a painstaking research in archives in both the Gold Coast and in England. For Sarbah, 'real' history consisted of the study of progressive change and development of dynamic societies and not the study of the so-called primitive and static societies. By complementing oral evidence with solid written evidence, therefore, Sarbah was presenting a dynamic view of Gold Coast history which challenged the existing historiography.⁴⁷

Thus beginning from about 1887, "Sarbah published a number of weighty books and articles in prestigious African oriented British journals. Taken together, these books and articles covered some 400 and more years of Gold Coast history which focused attention on some important aspects of the Gold Coast and African past."⁴⁸ Four very important and closely interrelated arguments were developed by Sarbah.

Firstly, Sarbah pointed out that Gold Coasters, and more specifically, the Fantes had from time immemorial inhabited the lands on which they lived before their contact with Europeans in the last quarter of the 15th century. Secondly, Gold Coasters have developed their own distinctive social, economic, political and legal-constitutional system and practices before their contact with Europeans. Some of these, according to Sarbah, had despite the ravages of colonialism survived in their basic essentials. Thirdly, for the whole period of European contact with the Gold Coast, Europeans had rented, but never owned the lands upon which their trade forts and castles stood. Fourthly, the relations between Gold Coasters and Europeans had always been carefully defined by treaties, such as the treaty of 1831 and the Bond of 1844. Thus any extension of European political and judicial authority beyond the confines of their rented forts and castles had to be covered by prior agreements between Gold Coast chiefs and Europeans and these were confined in the form of treaties.

The establishment of the above points fully supported by oral and documented historical evidence was crucial for Sarbah. For him, history was a guide to the present and to future progress. The above points, therefore, provided him with solid basis with which to attack the existing European historiography on the Gold Coast, and indeed, British colonialism and colonial policies. Thus, Sarbah argued cogently that, all extensions of British authority outside the forts and castles, without the consent of the Gold Coast chiefs were illegal, and, according to established British constitutional principles, tyrannical. In the view of Sarbah, Gold Coasters possessed natural liberties similar to those possessed by all free-born British and these were inalienable because they were enshrined in their "national constitution, which had existed from a time which the memory of man runneth not to the contrary."⁴⁹ This in effect meant that Gold Coasters who were outside the forts and the castles on the coast, and especially those in the hinterland were free to pursue their customary lives as dictated by their laws and socio-political institutions. The British, therefore, had no control, whatsoever, over their land, resources and property.

Secondly, it followed that all administrative and judicial structures and authority established by the British outside their forts and castles on the Gold Coast had to be subjected to the consent of the local chiefs otherwise, they lacked any legal force. Similarly, it meant that Gold Coasters who had thorough knowledge of the social, legal and political institutions of their society had to be effectively co-opted into advising on the desirability of certain administrative and legal

policies. Finally, since relations between the Gold Coast and the British had always been guided by mutually agreed treaties, the unilateral declarations of 1874 of a colony over the Gold Coast lacked any force whatsoever.

Sarbah's books like those of other Gold Coast nationalist intellectuals, entered into several editions and were widely read in Africa, Europe and America. Indeed, the books were favourably reviewed by the press of all the three continents. Thus by opting for the prestigious book publication, Sarbah had in fact initiated a process which was to be adopted by the foremost modern Ghanaian historians of the early nineteen sixties. It is the process of producing an Africanist 'Counter history' against British imperialist propaganda. It was an endeavour which demonstrated to Blacks, wherever they were to be found that they had 'real' history and a 'real' African past of which they could justifiably be proud. Moreover, by contrasting the dynamic nature of Gold Coast societies with the destructive effective of imported British institutions Sarbah placed question marks on at least one aspect of Western imperialism: the British civilising mission.

The success of Sarbah's books as Africanist 'counter history' was demonstrated by the fact they soon acquired the status of authoritative texts as indeed had been acquired by Reverend Reindorf's book and were used by the colonial administration as reference texts for the determination of colonial administrative and judicial policies. They were also used in the courts of law, in commissions of inquiry into local and municipal government disputes and in legislative council debates.⁵⁰ In this regard, Sarbah's books became instrumental in protecting local African interests particularly where questions of control over land and the imposition of direct taxation were concerned.

Relevance of Sarbah's Works

If we accept A.M. Babu's dictum that "To know the present we must look into the past and to know the future, we must look into the past and the present,"⁵¹ then, we should appreciate the crucial significance of Sarbah's publications in at least three respects: Gold Coast lands remained the properties of the chiefs and peoples of the Gold Coast; direct taxation was imposed only with direct representation in the legislative council; and the definite call to ensure that plans for the development of the people, and the exploitation of their resources were firmly placed in their hands. It is on this latter point that we shall now dwell.

Sarbah decisively linked well-defined educational policies which clearly recognised past national history and current national concerns to the development of genuine nationalism which was necessary for national development. His words in this respect are revealing:

I have often pressed the claims of a suitable national system of education which, in addition to inculcating the essential virtue of self-help and emphasizing the benefits of mutual cooperation derivable from social family units, shall, among other things, teach how best the agricultural and industrial resources of the country may be so developed as to create permanent national interests ...⁵²

Then also Sarbah called for the establishment of what he called 'Public Council' in each district. This is similar to the District Assembly experiments which are currently being developed in Ghana. In a passage which is remarkably perceptive and which clearly anticipates our present-day concerns, Sarbah developed his ideas:

Let the Public Council in each district with its gradation of authority, be recognised by the British Government as an essential African institution representing the people. At stated periods, the Principal Government Officer of the district, for the purposes of explaining new ordinances, communicating any Government Orders, and, whenever he is appealed to for his opinion, of advising them. In other words, he should identify himself with the people as much

*as possible. By so doing, he will have many opportunities to judge local men, things, and events with kindness and precision ... when travelling through the district or attending a meeting of the Public Council, he should be accompanied by a doctor, an engineer, or an agricultural expert, or any other person qualified to give sound advice or assistance to the inhabitants, in relation to such important matters of sanitation, public hygiene, scientific agriculture, and the proper development of the natural resources of the country.*⁵³

Clearly, then, Sarbah is of direct relevance to us in Ghana. He did not only identify the fact that knowledge of the past (i.e. history) is an essential guide to the present and the future, but that such knowledge is crucial to planning and development. His clarion call for the establishment of what he calls 'Public Council,' what we call in Ghana today 'District Assemblies' and their recognition as 'essential African institutions representing the people' is remarkable. Sarbah was in fact rooting national planning and development in the local or district areas. The people guided by their historical experiences must themselves determine their development programmes and design the means by which they must be executed. For Sarbah, therefore, the local people should be given the chance to determine and express their interests and thereby have a complete control over their destiny.

Of similar importance is Sarbah's call on the Principal Government Officer in the district, the equivalent of our present-day District Secretary and all the Senior Officers who work with him to identify themselves with the people as much as possible. We cannot belabour the importance of creating rapport between Government Officers and the people they serve. But above all, local and, therefore, national development is enhanced when Government Officers are fully acquainted with local needs, problems, potentials and initiatives. This can only be achieved if Government Officers regularly tour the districts as was suggested by Sarbah.

Conclusion

Given the general concern about the 'African condition'⁵⁴ and indeed the current concern with developmental strategies one is invariably impressed by the remarkable perception of John Mensah Sarbah. His realisation that a thorough knowledge of the laws, customs, norms and politics of his native Gold Coast was a necessary prerequisite for the creation of a real nationalist history is indeed remarkable. So also was his realisation that nationalist history was the foundation on which the Gold Coast nation could be built; and, finally that there was direct relationship between a people's knowledge of their history (taken as representing their collective traditions, norms and experiences) and their present and future development.

If we accept the dictum that "Nations are founded on Nationalism ... Nations whose nationalism is destroyed are subject to ruin", then, there was clearly the need for a well-defined Gold Coast nationalist tradition. The fact that Ghana was the first Black African Country to attain independence, and the fact that some of the traditional laws of the Gold Coast were respected by the British Colonialists to the extent that the Gold Coast was not subjected to some of the obnoxious colonial laws which plagued other parts of the continent adequately testify to the fact that patriotic Sarbah, by rescuing the history of the Gold Coast from British imperial historiography, laid the basis for creating the independent nation of Ghana.

Footnotes

1. See, for example, A.A. Boahen: *Clio and Nation-Building in Africa*, Accra: Universities of Ghana Press, 1975. See also, H.V.H. Sekyi: *Education, Nationalism and Nation Building*, Accra: Universities of Ghana Press, 1974.
2. A.A. Boahen: *op. cit.*, p.4.
3. *The Gold Coast Aborigine*, 1 January, 1898, p.1.
4. Quoted in A.A. Boahen: *op. cit.*, p.12.
5. *Loc. cit.*
6. See, for example, A.A. Boahen, *op. cit.*, p.16
Walter Rodney: *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, London and Dar Es Salaam, Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o: *Decolonising the Mind*, London, Heinemann, 1986.
7. See, for example, the works of J.A.B. Horton, Reverend J.B. Anaman, Reverend E. Samson, T. Opoku, J.B. Palmer, A.W. Clerk and P. Hall.
8. See, R.G. Jenkins: "Gold Coast Historians and the Pursuit of their Gold Coast Pasts, 1882-1919." Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1985. p.1. (Hereafter, 'Gold Coast Historians').
9. R.G. Jenkins, 'Gold Coast Historians,' p.2.
10. See R.J. Gavin's review of Phillip D. Curtin's *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1870*, Winsconsin, 1964, in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 3, 1, 1964, pp. 158-159.
11. Hereafter, *The Royal Gazette*.
12. K.A.B. Jones-Quartey: "The Royal Gold Coast Gazette and the Ashante" *Research Review* 4, 1, 1967 p.19.
13. *Ibid.* p.20.
14. *Loc. cit.*
15. *Ibid.*, p.21.
16. *Loc. cit.*
17. *Loc. cit.*
18. *Ibid.* p.20.
19. See the *Gentleman's Magazine* (Vol. LIX Part 1) p. 272. Quoted in W.W. Claridge, *The History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti* p.189. See also K.A.B. Jones-Quartey, *op. cit.* p.20.
20. *Loc. cit.*
21. Martin Wight: *The Gold Coast Legislative Council*, London, Faber and Faber, 1946. p.68.
22. *Ibid.* *passim*
23. *Ibid.* p. 205
24. K.A.B. Jones-Quartey: *op. cit.* pp. 20-21.
25. Lt. Col. Ellis: *History of the Gold Coast*, Quoted in S.R.B. Attah-Ahumah's review of J.E. Casely Hayford's *Gold Coast Native Institutions*. See S.R.B. Attah-Ahuma: *Memoirs of West African Celebrities in Europe, 1700-1850 with Special Reference to the Gold Coast*, Liverpool, D. Marples and Co., 1905, p.225. (Hereafter, *West African Celebrities*)
26. Published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1914.
27. J.F. Ade Ajayi: "The Place of African History and Culture in the Process of Nation-Building in Africa South of the Sahara." *Journal of Negro Education*, p.206.

28. Published by Blackwood and Sons, London, 1922.
29. Peter C. Lloyd: 'Lugard and Indirect Rule,' *Ibadan* 10, 1960, pp. 18-19.
30. Quoted in J.M. Sarbah: *Fanti National Constitution*. London, William Clowes and Son Ltd., 1906, p. xix.
31. This phrase is borrowed from A.A. Boahen. See A.A. Boahen: "A New Look at the History of Ghana" *African Affairs*, 65, 1966. pp.212-222.
32. This phrase is borrowed from R.G. Jenkins: "Gold Coast Historians" *passim*.
33. First published in 1895. Revised and reprinted in Accra by the Universities of Ghana Press, 1966.
34. For relatively recent commentaries on C.C. Reindorf's work, See, R.G. Jenkins: *Impeachable Source? On the use of the Second Edition of Reindorf's History as Primary Source for the Study of Ghanaian History*. *History in Africa* 1, 4, 1977 and 2, 5, 1978, and O. Omosini: "Carl Christian Reindorf: His Contribution to and Place in the Development of Modern West African Historiography." *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria* x, 2, 1980.
35. This method of looking at Ghanaian History has generally been accepted by present-day Ghanaian academic historians. See, for example, F. Agbodeka: *African Politics and British Policy in the Gold Coast, 1868-1900: A Study In Forms and Force of Protest*. London, Longman, 1971. *Ghana in the Twentieth Century*, Accra, Universities of Ghana Press, 1972 and A.A. Boahen: *Ghana: Evolution and Change in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, London, Longman, 1975.
36. See footnote 25.
37. S.R.B. Attah-Ahuma: *West African Celebrities*, p.4.
38. For a complete biography of John Mensah Sarbah, See, The Hon. Mr. Justice Azu Crabbe: *John Mensah Sarbah, 1864-1910*, Accra, Universities of Ghana Press, 1971. See also S. Tenkorang, John Mensah Sarbah, 1864-1910 *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* (1973) xiv, 1, pp. 65-78, and E.H. Mends: "The Sociological Relevance of a Nineteenth Century Nationalist, J.M. Sarbah: A paper presented to the Tenth Annual Conference of the Ghana Sociological Association, Legon, 1978.
39. First published in London in 1897 and Reprinted in London by Frank Cass, 1968.
40. First published in London in 1906 by William Clowes and Co. and Reprinted in London by Frank Cass, 1968.
41. S.R.B. Attah Ahuma: *West African Celebrities*, p.249.
42. Quoted in R.G. Jenkins: "In Pursuit of the African Past: John Mensah Sarbah, Historian of Ghana" in R. Lotz (ed.) *Under the Imperial Carpet: Essays in Black History 1780-1950*, London, Rabbit Press, (Forthcoming) p.8 (Hereafter, 'Sarbah, Historian of Ghana').
43. J.M. Sarbah, *Fanti National Constitution* p. xi.
44. Loc. cit.
45. Loc. cit.
46. R.G. Jenkins: 'Sarbah, Historian of Ghana.' *passim*.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.

49. J.M. Sarbah: **Fanti National Constitution** p. xi.
50. Of the **Fanti Customary Laws**, **The West African Mail** noted that "No West African Administrator should be without Mr. Sarbah's volumes, and no student of West African questions can afford to leave these works unread." See the advertisement to the **Fanti National Constitution**.
51. See A.M. Babu's Postscript to Walter Rodney's **How Europe Under-developed Africa**, p. 312.
152. J.M. Sarbah, **Fanti National Constitution**. p. xviii.
53. *Ibid*, p. xxi.
54. This phrase is borrowed from Ali Mazrui **The African Condition, A Political Diagnosis**, **The Reith Lectures**, London, Heinemann. 1980.