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## ASANTE: THE PERCEPTION AND THE UTILIZATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT BEFORE THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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### Introduction

The way the Asante perceived their environment fashioned how the environment was utilized. The level of utilization was a reflection of the level of their technology. Since it was a society armed with a limited technology, the Asante only engaged in simple activities in their environment. The Asante engaged in hunting, fishing, gathering and farming. The first three economic activities predated the last one but this economic activity contributed to make the society more stable. All these economic activities mentioned were not regarded as major economic concerns; as a result they did not feature in the deliberations of the Asante royal court. Farming, for example, was regarded as the work for women, so that all attempts by early European visitors to convince the Asante to grow kola (Bowdich, 1819) and cotton (Huydecooper, 1817) on plantation basis failed because commercial cultivation did not interest the court. Fishing and hunting were also left undeveloped. In the case of hunting, for example, the only apparent improvement that came was the introduction of the gun, but the hunters were not rich enough to acquire the more sophisticated type such as the double barrel gun until the twentieth century. Fishing also remained as before, because it was plagued by too many taboos, especially lake (Bosomtwe) fishing which could have become a substantial cash earner if the lake fishermen were prepared to adopt the fishing methods from the coast.

### Gathering

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, gathering was an important economic activity, the major reason being that it was the basis of the kola industry, the single crop on which hinged the Asante northern trade. The nuts of the kola tree (*Cola accuminata* and *C. nitida*) which grew profusely in some parts of Asante were collected by women and children.

The kola trees were owned by those individuals on whose land the trees grew; thus there was not a single tree without an owner. Yet people were allowed to collect the nuts which had fallen from the trees. Only the owners of the trees had the right to pick the nuts from the trees. Bowdich urged the Asante to cultivate the kola nut tree (Bowdich, p. 336) but the Asante did not see the need to cultivate it since, according to them, it grew spontaneously in the forest.

Apart from the gathering of kola, the Asante also collected food items including fruits, snails and mushrooms. The most important vegetable items collected were the Akam (*Discorea bulbifera*), a subterranean tuber, single and round or oblong and several species of wild yam (*Discores praehensilis*). They also collected products of the palm tree (*Elaeis guineensis*) which like the kola tree grew wild in the forest. It produced nuts which served as the main source of cooking oil. At the same time the oil from the kernel was used for making soap, pomade and cooking. The same palm tree was also tapped for a local drink, the palm wine which several early writers described as delicious. (Hutton, 1821, p. 158; Bosman, W. 1721).

### Hunting

The cultural history of the Akan seems to support the hypothesis that the Asante were once mainly hunters. Bowdich appears to support this view (Bowdich, *op. cit.* p. 230). At least, this

is true of the older class whose totems were animals, including the dog which was probably first domesticated to assist in the chase. The legendary leaders of the Fante, *Obrumankoma*, *Atapagyan* and *Eson*, were hunters. The early Asante leaders such as Obiri Yeboah of Kwaman, Adu Gyamfi of Wosoo, and all the other early great leaders also knew the art of hunting. Hunters were mostly responsible for finding suitable places for the founding of many settlements.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, they were reputed to be responsible for the discoveries of useful edible foodstuffs. Hunters used dogs to experiment on the suitability of any new foodstuffs.<sup>2</sup> Through this simple method, hunters helped to widen the knowledge about edible foods in the society. Furthermore, hunters were better equipped militarily and therefore were very powerful in the society. Nevertheless, traditionally they were controlled by the chiefs. In the first place, hunters had to acknowledge the ownership of the land on which they made their chase. They were also obliged to send the thigh of any big game killed to the chief. In the case of *Ason-mofuo* i.e. elephant-hunters, they had to send the tusks, the tail and the ears to the overlord, in this case the Asantehene if the hunter was directly under him, or to the principal chief, *Omanhene*. If a hunter failed to acknowledge this custom, he was regarded as a contumacious vassal and dealt with accordingly. Finally, like any other citizen, the hunter had to perform his official court duties as demanded by tradition.

Hunters often had their prescribed territories in which they made their chase, and these boundaries were within the traditional state boundaries. Within their prescribed territories, hunters teamed up and founded hunting camps (*nnanso*) where they lived with their attendants, (*ayawfuo*), during hunting expeditions.

Before firearms became widespread, they might have used clubs, spears and arrows in hunting. But hunting became more remunerative with the widespread use of muskets because they could then kill many big animals, including the elephant and the lion.

The adept hunters knew the characteristics of all the big game (which were reported to have spirits - *sasa*), and to learn these techniques an apprentice hunter would have to remain in this "school", under the tutelage of a master hunter, preferably *Ason-mofuo* (i.e. elephant hunter), for several years. (Efa, E., Accra, 1950; Asare Opoku, 1971, pp. 14-16).

It must be noted that some settlements in Asante were regarded as traditional hunting settlements, e.g. Abofuo and Akomadan in Ofeso (Ofinso), Drobonso and Sumiso in Sekyere. Also the defeat of Sekwi gave the Asante the whole territory up to River Bia, known as Ahafo which became the game preserve of the Asante. (Fuller, F.C., London, 1921, pp. 26-27).

In addition to professional hunting was the *group hunting* which was practised throughout Asante. These expeditions took place during the dry season. Due to the dryness of the forest at this time, it was fairly easy for the people to walk freely in the bush. This group hunting (*atwee*) had to be well organized to avoid accidents (*tub ene*). Often there were two main groups, the gunners who shot at the game, and the unarmed, who scouted the vegetation to spring the game. During such an expedition, the people would decide to hunt in a particular bush. The area was then surrounded one half by the gunners and the other half by the bush beaters.

Hunting had one general effect on the Asante political system, it served as a training ground for the Asante warriors. The Asante were known not to possess a standing army, and there was no formal training in gun warfare; it was therefore in such hunting expeditions that they acquired the art of accurate aiming and shooting.

Trapping went with hunting. The hunters also made powerful traps for the big animals. Trapping was a widespread activity and was not limited to hunters. Non-hunters could set their traps, but these went in for traps intended for small animals owing to the dangers involved in setting traps for big game.

## Fishing

Large scale river fishing did not develop in Asante in spite of the presence of big rivers such as Tano, Bosom Pra and Ofe. This was perhaps due to their lack of technology to handle the swift currents in big rivers. In the case of Tano and Pra, it was taboo to fish in them because they were regarded as gods.<sup>3</sup> Throughout this period this ban was doggedly adhered to. They only knew and practised small stream fishing known as *ahwee*. Fish traps were also used. Both men and women engaged in fishing but on the whole it was principally considered to be the work of men. The impression created so far could be that all small streams could be exploited for their fish, but this was not so in Asante; rather some streams were regarded as sacred or gods, therefore, the fish in them were not eaten. Nevertheless, the number of such streams was small, but each locality had one or two of such sacred streams.

## Lake Fishing

Instead of the dugout canoes used at the coast, the lake fishermen used a log of wood with a side roughly hewn, which they called *padua*. This was made of very light wood called *Odwuma fufuo* (*Musanga smithii*) and it measured six feet to ten feet long and about a foot wide and between six to eight inches thick. They could lash two or more of the *mpadua* together to form *mpata* or raft. (Rattray, R.S. 1969, p.62).

The appliances used for fishing were as simple as the *mpadua*. They included various fish traps and nets, such as *Niakwa*, *Mpapare*, *Kotoku*, *Kotoku Kese* and *Bagye*. There was yet another way of fishing in the lake. The method was called *Abontuo*. The fisherman dived under the water for about thirty seconds and came up holding a fish between his teeth to leave the hands free for swimming.

What probably made the expansion of the lake fishing more difficult were the various taboos. For example, there were taboos on the following things: iron hooks of any kind, the cast nets (*Asawu*) the use of canoes, boats, sails, paddles or any hollow log, brass or metal pans. Furthermore, there should be no fishing on Sunday. These taboos were economically unprogressive and resulted in the lake fishing being on a small scale. Perhaps they were afraid that extensive fishing would deplete the fish in the lake, hence these restrictive measures. However unprogressive the lake fishing might be, it was the main source of a type of fish which the Asante called *Asuoho apatre*. (*Tilapia multifasciata*, T. zillii). The fish was a delicacy when it got to areas beyond the lake.

The royal court at Kumase regarded the lake as its property. For example, the Asante court resettled Fante and Wassa war captives to do fishing on the Lake. Unfortunately these fishermen were not allowed to introduce either the canoe or the cast net which were familiar to them; they could not, therefore, revolutionize fishing on Lake Bosomtwi.

## Farming

At the beginning of the Asante kingdom the art of farming was known, but cultivation was on small scale. Three factors were responsible for this. In the first place, the Asante were armed with only crude implements, therefore gigantic trees and thick vegetation defied their technology. Secondly, the Asante regarded some of the big trees as the abode of gods and therefore were not to be felled. Lastly and most importantly was the fact that areas which were farther away from settlements were left undisturbed. On his way to Kumase in 1816 Huydecooper noted that farms were more numerous around the larger settlements, because little village surrounding these large settlements cultivated the land in order to supply the towns with foodstuffs (Dickson, K.B., 1964).

During this period farming was practised on a purely subsistence level, and the food produced from the farms was on a limited scale, as a result of several inhibiting factors, the most important being the relatively small population. Secondly, the people could obtain food from other sources such as gathering. Thirdly, at that time, food production was the concern of only the women because men were rather interested in activities such as trading and mining and these were the very economic activities which received state patronage. Often farming was interrupted when there was unrest in the state or when the Asante were on a punitive campaign outside their own territory. During such hard times wild foodstuffs and fruits featured prominently in the diet of the people.

Perhaps farming in Asante remained on a subsistence level because the court did not care for commercial agriculture. It seems the Asante did not know the importance of commercial farming. For example, all attempts to induce them to cultivate cotton on commercial basis failed (Benneh, G. 1967, p. 62). On this score one could not describe the Asante as agricultural people (as today) rather they were described as commercially minded people. Consequently, farm sizes were small; they were mere patches of cultivated ground. The average size of a farm might have been less than an acre; however, this depended on the size of the family and its ability to work. Furthermore, the farms in Asante did not develop any significant or clear cut shapes such as the strips of the *huza* among the Krobo of Eastern Ghana (Fig. 1). The shapes of the farms have been irregular patches of cultivated grounds distributed sporadically over the cultivated areas (Fig. 2). This development was probably due to the nature of land-holding among the people which lacked the rigid control seen among the Krobo. Any member of the landowning group was allowed to cultivate any piece of land within the group's land, each according to his capabilities.

The farms in Asante were characterized by a system of mixed cropping. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Asante definitely knew and cultivated yam, cocoyam, plantain and banana; these crops, especially yam and plantain, dominated the farms. It seems undeniable that yam was the first cultivated crop among these people (Posnansky, M. 1969). This conclusion derives from the importance of the religious ceremonies attached to the cultivation of the crop (Coursey, D.G., 1966). Several species of the yam are indigenous to West Africa e.g. *nkamfuo*, (*Discorea dumerorum*) and *pona* (*D. retundata*) (Dalziel, J.M., London, 1937, pp. 490-492). Several species of the old cocoyam, (*Colocasia spp.*) were also cultivated and eaten by the Asante. *Brobe* (*C. antiquorum*) was also cultivated but it was not very prominent in the farms. It was only cultivated along the banks of streams and, like water yam, did not feature prominently in the diet.<sup>4</sup>

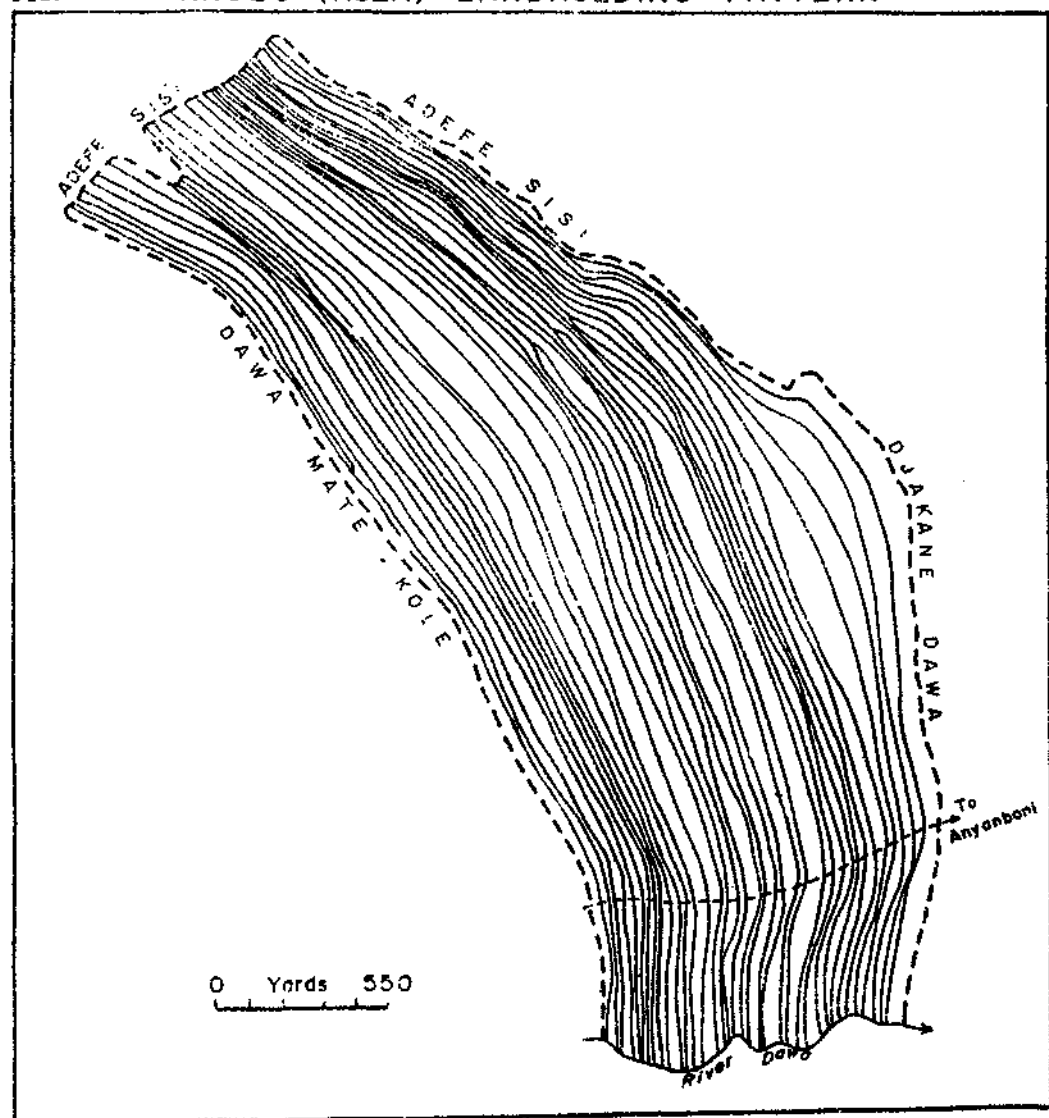
Plantain, (*Musa sp.* [AAB]) which was known before 1700 was first cultivated after the yam. Its Asante name *boa-ode*<sup>5</sup> i.e. "supplement to yam," shows that the yam was the first to be cultivated and eaten. After the yam, plantain was the next dominant crop on the farms during this period. Another member of the *Musa* family which was cultivated was Asante Kwadu, (*Musa ABB*). This type of banana was as widespread as plantain yet its use was only secondary to plantain. Finally, there was *efre* (*Cucubira maxima*) whose cultivation was widespread. This crop was important for the elderly because after boiling, it could be eaten by the toothless because of its softness. It was popular among aged females.

Some crops were known to have been introduced to this country by either the Muslims or Whitemen. In some cases one cannot tell when the crops were introduced and how they reached the Asante territory. Noteworthy among such crops which the Asante knew, before their migration from Adanse were the banana, (*Musa sp.* ABB), the sweet potato, (*Ipomea batatas*), and pawpaw.

In the nineteenth century the crop which seemed to have spread very rapidly was maize, (*Zea*

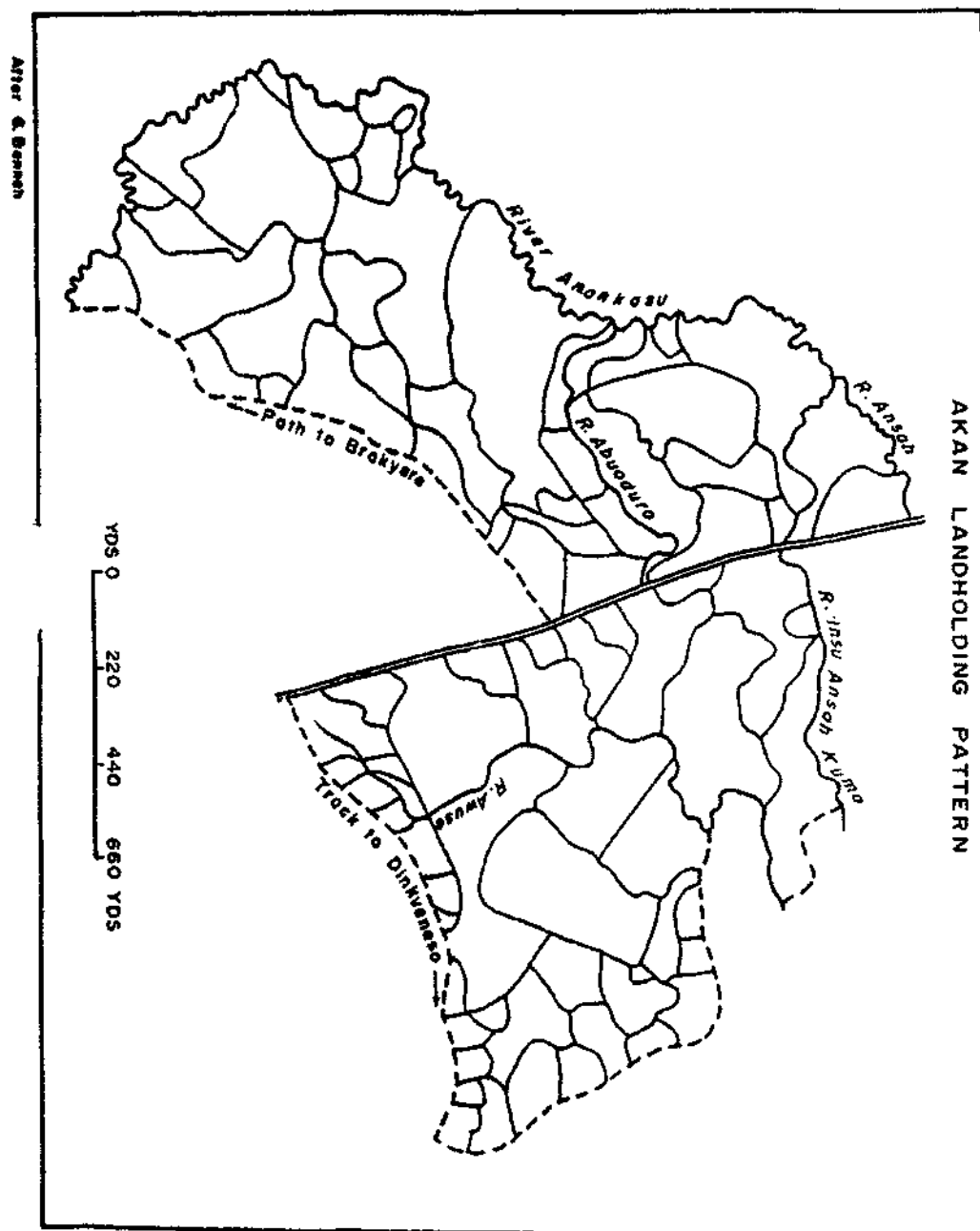
FIG. 1

KROBO (HUZA) LANDHOLDING PATTERN



After G. Bennis

FIG. 2



mays). This crop had earlier been introduced to the coast by the Portuguese. Businessmen, such as John Kabes and John Clanssen were cultivating large maize fields (Daaku, K.Y. 1970, pp. 120-121). The maize cultivated along the coast was sold both to the whites and the inland traders who went to the coast. A report in 1680 claimed that corn was in short supply at the coast because "the upland blacks came down to clear the corn of the waterside people" (*ibid.*, p. 121). From the above it looks likely that some of the beans might have reached Asante in the eighteenth century through the activities of the Asante traders to the Coast. There is no evidence to show where it was first cultivated (Dickson, K.B., *op. cit.*, p. 27). But when the Asante had learnt its usefulness as military ration in 1806, its cultivation became widespread and attracted the attention of Bowdich (*op. cit.*, p. 338). Unfortunately the crop did not feature as normal food in the diet of Asante; it was only used during funerals, and also when on active military campaigns (it was either fried *nkyewie* or made into powder, *kyekyire* and eaten either with pawpaw or alone).

The last two crops whose introduction had a lasting effect were cassava (*Manihot utilissima*), (Johnston, B.F., *op. cit.*, p. 25), and the new cocoyam, (*Xanthosoma segetiferum*). Both crops came in during the second half of the nineteenth century. The new cocoyam was first introduced into Ghana by the Basel Missionaries from the West Indies, (*ibid.*, p. 137), and was first cultivated and used at Akropong-Akuapem. In Asante cocoyam is called *kukurantumi* (which is a town in Eastern Region near Koforidua-New Dwaben). It is very likely that those Dwaben who returned from Akyem (in Eastern Region) introduced this new foodcrop in Asante in 1880s. It was first cultivated in Dwaben traditional area. It was from Dwaben area that it spread to other parts of Sekyere, Kwabere, Atwoma and Amansie in 1890s. The crop's quick rise to prominence both as a crop in the environment and in the diet of the people was due to its palatability.

Cassava also came from the coast, possibly through the Dwaben who were near Accra where the crop was very important. It was introduced to the environs of Dwaben and Efidwaase about the same time as cocoyam. Unlike cocoyam which spread rapidly throughout Asante, cassava's diffusion was rather slow. This was because it could not compete with the yam, plantain and cocoyam. It was in Kwabre and Atwoma where it was accepted not as a staple but as cash crop for the alien population in Kumase, especially the coastal peoples such as the Fante, and Ga and the Ewe. Indeed, cassava's final spread throughout the core area of Asante (and its role in the diet of the Asante) is only recent when poor soils made the cultivation of yams and cocoyams difficult. Cassava is a crop which does well even in poor soils. That is why it is in Kwabre where (due to long tillage of the soil) cassava cultivation is well established, and is dominating the agricultural landscape.

Yet another crop which the Asante knew, but which Bowdich and others did not mention as a foodcrop in Asante is rice. This foodcrop held a rather unique position in Asante. According to the tradition of Tano Cult<sup>6</sup> rice was used to feed the deity when yam was scarce (the period between April and June). Again during the same lean yam periods the paramount chiefs in Asante, when washing their soul (i.e. *se wodware won kraa*) they used rice in place of yam.<sup>7</sup> This idea of the use of rice was acquired from the Brong, where Tano Cult originated. The Brong knew and cultivated rice along the Tain and the Tano rivers. Since the Asante only needed small quantity of rice for the rituals mentioned above, they did not care to cultivate it, because they obtained their supplies first from Brong area and later probably from Wassa and Nzima areas. Its presence in Asante today is only a twentieth century phenomenon. It is cultivated in Asante-Akyem around Dwaso and Obogu areas and also in Western Asante where there are large rivers with considerable marshes. In the environs of Kumase its cultivation was unknown perhaps



because of lack of extensive marshes.

Other food items that were known and cultivated in the nineteenth century were sugar cane, (Bowdich, T.E., *op. cit.*, p. 324), fruit trees, legumes and vegetables. One does not know exactly when the Asante acquired such cultivated fruits as pineapple (*Ananas comosa*), lemon (*Citrus limon*), which was frequently used as native medicine, and oranges (*Citrus sinensi*, and *Citrus aurantium*). Oral tradition recounts that by 1800 these fruits were known. These were probably introduced by the Portuguese. The Basel Missionaries were reputed to have been responsible for the introduction of mango (*Mangifera indica*), and the avocado pear (*Persea americana*). These might have reached Asante during the second half of the nineteenth century through Asante traders, soldiers, and the Dwaben who lived in the Eastern Region.

The Asante knew and cultivated groundnut (*Arachis hypogea*). In Asante its home has been in the northern fringes around Adwera. When the Mampon people spread northwards after 1702 they saw the original inhabitants of Adwera cultivating groundnuts on a large scale. The same transitional zone (the ecotone i.e. between the forest of the South and the savanna of the North) legumes such as the bambara (*Voandzeia subterranea*) and cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*) were cultivated before the Asante occupied it in the early decades of the eighteenth century.

In the forest areas the Asante cultivated vegetables like okro (*Hibiscus esculentus*). This crop was mentioned by Bowdich. Garden egg and tomato (*Nnenkyem nɔ*) were also cultivated at the time of Bowdich. These crops were normally cultivated in back yard gardens near settlements.

They also cultivated spices such as ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), the malaguetta pepper (*Piper nigrum* and *P. guineense*) and chilli pepper (*Capsicum spp.*). These spices were normally cultivated on food farms except the malaguetta, which was raised separately. Ginger was cultivated on a large scale in Atwoma around Nkawie and Toase. Malaguetta was also cultivated in Kwabre around Safo and Asonomaso. Both crops entered into commerce. Pepper which was used in the diet of the people as a spice was ubiquitous in Asante.

The food crops which were the principal elements in the farms were raised under the bush fallow system of farming. It is likely that this system developed from the shifting cultivation, but in 1700 this old system of farming, e.g. shifting cultivation, was already a thing of the past. The main characteristics of the bush fallow system were firstly, that a single farm contained various kinds of crops with different harvesting periods, and secondly, this system was a means whereby the land was allowed to rest in order to recuperate its lost fertility.

The Asante farmers had a clear idea of the climate throughout the year and they tried to apportion their activities within the framework of the climatic conditions. The farmers knew that climatically the year was divided into four seasons: December to March - the dry season, which they called *pe bere*; April - July - the big rainy season they called *Bampon Suo* (the failure of *Bampon Suo* was always fatal to the farmers); and August - mid-September, a short dry period (*Ofupe bere*) and to early November - the minor rains which they called *Kyikiriki Suo*. Furthermore, some of the seasons were associated with some acknowledged phenomenon, e.g. the dry season - *pe bere*, was associated with the shedding of leaves of *Akonkodie* tree (*Ceiba pentandra*). Again the arrival of *Akobonso*, a type of butterfly, indicated that the planting season had ended.<sup>8</sup>

The farmers believed that the Creator was responsible for giving rains and therefore prayed through the gods and the ancestors for rain. A little variation in the season could mean that someone in the community had infringed some of the traditional taboos. This called for propitiation of the gods and the ancestors. This belief was so strong that farming activities were full of such customs of appeasing the gods, e.g. the gods had to eat of the new crop, especially maize and yams before the community did.

To make a farm, a farmer selected a piece of 'grown up' forest on the basis of indicator plants such as *Odwuma*, the silk cotton tree. The selected patch was then weeded after a short ceremony. Some of the trees were then felled to allow in sunshine (*Onyame anihunu afuo mu a enye yie*), (literally, the farmer believed that without sunshine from God the farm would not be successful). Then late January when the rains were about to commence, the farmer burnt the cut bush, and the final preparation of the patch started. The patch was then cleared of all weeded stuff. This work was done up to the middle or end of the March when the rains had started. March - April, the beginning of the rainy season, then coincided with the planting of maize, yam, plantain, and other vegetables. Planting continued throughout April until May. In June a kind of butterfly called *Akobonso* arrived in large numbers. The Asante farmer then knew that there should be no more planting of yam. The planting season had passed.

Harvesting started in late June with young maize. The farmer would leave some to dry in the farm during the short dry period in August-September. This short dry period was utilized to prepare small patches for *Apese buro*, the quick growing corn. With the commencement of the rains in September, the second maize was planted, and this took only two months to mature for harvesting in late October and early November. By the first half of December, the yam might have matured so harvesting would begin and continue until late January.

The harvesting of cassava and cocoyam was delayed for a year while plantain normally took one to one-and-a-half years to mature. Such a farm would continue to produce food for subsistence for a couple of years until after three to four years it could be left to fallow. During the first few years of the fallow, the farm's yield of plantain would continue to feed the farmer.

The Asante farmer used very simple tools. The two prominent tools were the cutlass, *adre* and the hoe, *aso*. They also had an axe, (Hutton, 1821, p. 205) which was used in felling the small trees. These locally made tools were not powerful farming implements, and their use was, therefore, tedious. Such poor tools partly contributed to the preponderance of small farms.

### Conclusion

This paper has discussed how the Asante put their immediate environment to use for a living. Those were the days when the population was low, and the growth of the population was also quite slow, and therefore the pressure on the land was not severe. So, for a long time the environment appeared undisturbed. But the Twentieth Century with its attendant assault on the environment as a result of the introduction of commercial farming, the environment changed faster and more drastically. The result is the exhausted soils and poor yields of food-crops such as plantains and cocoyam in the areas closer to the metropolis of Kumasi. Perhaps a follow up of this paper will be the assessment of the environment as at now. In a nutshell, however, we can conclude that the environment in some places can be described as degraded which needs quick repairs.

## Footnotes

- 1) This was due to their knowledge about the physical conditions of the districts where they made their chase.
- 2) The tradition of the discovery of plantain.
- 3) For example, Tano river was regarded as the chief of the gods in Asante and the fishes in them were the daughters of the gods.
- 4) It was believed that when a man ate it he lost his masculinity.
- 5) The assertion by C.J. Taylor that plantain was introduced by the Portuguese is very doubtful ref. *Synecology and Silviculture in Ghana*. Its name *boaode* does not mean whiteman's yam.
- 6) Tano Diety is the chief traditional diety for the Asante, whose original shrine is at Tano Boase in Brong near Takyiman. It also has sons, the first son *piesie* being Safo Takora in Asante.
- 7) Rice is not a staple in Asante even today.
- 8) This was their conception of the seasons. Today the traditional Asante farmer still counts the seasons in the same way.

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