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THE MISSIONARY ROLE ON THE GOLD COAST AND IN ASHANTI: REVEREND F.A. RAMSEYER AND THE BRITISH TAKE-OVER OF ASHANTI 1869-1894

by Kwame Arhin*

Introductory

The Reverend F.A. Ramseyer was probably one of the most remarkable missionaries who ever worked on the Gold Coast and Ashanti (modern Ghana). He founded the Basel (Presbyterian) Church in Kumasi which bears his name. There is a 'Ramseyer House' in Ashanti's leading Secondary School, Prempeh College, at Kumasi, which is a joint enterprise of the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches of Ghana. Ramseyer is immortalized in the book he wrote with his fellow captive, S.J. Kuhne,¹ of their captivity in Kumasi, the Ashanti capital (1869-1874), while the Ashanti still remember him in the persistent legend that his captors go no atopre that is to say, meted to him the extreme punishment of forcing him to dance while carrying the large fontomfrom drum. That legend is only a measure of his sufferings as a captive and prisoner in Kumasi. Nowhere in his book does Ramseyer mention this extreme punishment which was given only to the greatest criminal offenders.

I am concerned here with the part that Ramseyer played in the campaign for the Gold Coast Government to take over Ashanti in the early eightennineties. But it is certain that to understand his 'concern' about the Ashanti, a few words about his encounter with them and his life among them at Kumasi, as well as the background to the campaign, are necessary.

Ramseyer in Captivity (1869-1874)

Ramseyer had at first not intended a missionary sojourn in Ashanti. In December 1868 he went with his wife and child to Anum in the present-day Volta Region of Ghana. S.J. Kuhne, his fellow captive and co-author joined him at the mission as a trader in cotton, an activity which was part of, and a means of, financing the mission. Kuhne had hardly settled down when an Ashanti army under Adu Bofo, the Gyasehene of Kumasi, arrived in the district as the

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allies of the Akwamu and the Anlo.²

The Ramseyer family and Kuhne were taken captive for reasons that only emerge as their story unfolds. The Ashanti were obviously suspicious that the mission was selling arms and ammunition to the enemies of the Akwamu and the Anlo;³ they hoped for substantial ransom from the British Colonial authorities;⁴ they wanted to use Ramseyer and company as diplomatic counters.⁵ Meanwhile the mission's bewilderment concerning the reasons for their capture and the Ashanti officials' skill in dangling before them hopes of an early release contributed a good deal to their mental anguish.

After they had been presented to Adu Bofo, he sent them, together with the loot from the mission, under a minor war-captain, 'Ageana', (Agyena) to Kumasi. The track was difficult between Anum and Kwahu over the Volta River and the Kwahu mountains.⁶ The Ramseyer family and Kuhne were obliged to march at the pace of the Ashanti fighting man and generally live the latter's life. This was a hard life as Ramseyer himself found out:

"The Ashantees, being a hardy race inured from youth to severest simplicity, are able to march day after day at a quick, steady pace with intervals of rest, and a modicum of food. They lie down to sound sleep at night, after a light supper of corn, waking refreshed and strengthened to resume their way at sunrise."⁷

Their food supply consisted of a breakfast of boiled yam and a supper of soup with maize and a little meat.⁸ They only fared better when the army foraged in the heavier populated and more intensely cultivated areas, such as Kwahu and the eastern districts of Ashanti. Besides hunger and thirst and weariness from the march, there was the conduct of Agyena, the officer-in-charge of the prisoners who made no distinctions among his prisoners of war and seemed to demonstrate this in a practical manner to Ramseyer and his companions.

Conditions of life got better when they arrived within the borders of Ashanti itself. The tracks were better, apparently, from frequent use:

"As we approached Ashantee proper, we were struck by the increasing fertility of the well-watered country. In the vicinity of every important place the roads were good, and sometimes for miles together suitable for traffic."⁹

The chiefs, priests of the local deities and the people of the districts of Kwahu, Agogo, Efiduase and Dwabin through which the route lay showed great kindness to the missionaries. Agyena, the officer, was superseded by a higher officer who had instructions from the King of Ashanti to treat his prisoners better.¹⁰

Meanwhile in Kwahu Ramseyer's child had died from fever consequent on the long march and lack of good nourishment. Ramseyer's comment on this is significant:

'Oh, how hard it was to suppress the bitter feelings against those who had murdered this innocent babe by their cruelty.'¹¹

Life in Kumasi was not too bad and was even interesting. The missionaries lived on an average allowance of 9 dollars given to them every fortnight when the Ashantiene celebrated the Little and Great Adai festivals. There were, in addition, occasional gifts of sheep and food supplies. Life was brightened by the spectacles offered by the ritual dances during these festivals which were sometimes attended by the chiefs of the principal Ashanti divisions. They were lucky to fall in with the French trader, M. Bonnat, who looked upon his lot as a prisoner with equanimity and turned his hands to practical amelioration of their conditions. He improved the prisoners' furniture and urged them to occupy themselves by cultivating farms. They were no more under the supervision of the hard Agyena. They were befriended by the Ashantiene's cousin, Prince Ansah, who had been educated in England at the British Government's expense and now acted as the unofficial Ashanti ambassador at Cape Coast, the colonial governor's residence. They were now in touch with friends both on the Gold Coast and in Europe who wrote to them, sent them gifts and worked for their release.

It would be false, however, to say that the missionaries were happy at Kumasi. Their life was harassed by thieves and hangers-on who took off the major parts of gifts from the king. They had a distaste for the more rigorous aspects of

Ashanti rituals of kingship and punishment. They were horrified by the consequences of Ashanti warfare such as the treatment of war-prisoners. They were worried about 'human sacrifices' though in their own words, the 'victims' were 'mostly criminals.'¹² There were minor irritations like the blasphemies of the Ashanti; one Afrifa, for example, declared that the Ashantihene was God. Finally Karikari, the Ashantihene, was suddenly seized by the idea that his prisoners, Fante, Anum, and the Europeans, should pay for their keep by building him a European-style house and Ramseyer was obliged to act as his foreman of works.¹³

Uncertainty about their release was the straw that broke the camel's back. On their arrival in Kumasi, they were told that their stay there would wait upon the arrival of Adu Bofo who had taken them captive. The King declared he could do nothing for them, for

'According to the laws of the Ashantee country, the King had no power to set prisoners at liberty till the general who captured them (returned)'.¹⁴

When he returned, Adu Bofo wanted an impossibly large ransom, a thousand petedwane (£8,000) for the king and £6,480 for himself.¹⁵ When pressed by the Governor of the Gold Coast, the Ashanti released them for a £1,000 ransom, they reached Fomena only to be dragged back to Kumasi because the Ashanti feared some trickery on the part of the Gold Coast Government.

In the light of these experiences, it was natural that Ramseyer and his companions should bear the Ashanti a grudge. As they said:

'We had long had difficulty in cherishing any love for the Ashantees, now the measure of their blindness seemed full and punishment deserved.'¹⁶

It was also natural that they should wring their hands with delight at the news of imminent invasion of Ashanti by British forces under Sir Garnet Wolseley and see in it God's judgment and chastisement of those who had trifled with His servants. Ramseyer and Kuhne wrote:

'We felt that Ashantee would have to be humbled, for thousands of murdered victims were crying to heaven.'

while we who so gladly would have brought peace, must be the means of bringing misfortune upon this blinded land.¹⁷

The missionaries were released at the approach of Wolseley's forces and lived to see the humiliation of Ashanti.¹⁸ The core of the Ashanti 'empire' was, however, left to itself to engage in the old activities albeit on a minor scale, and thus give an opportunity to Ramseyer to contribute to its final downfall.

Background to Ramseyer's campaign, 1874-1889

The 1873-74 invasion of Ashanti struck a fatal blow to the kingdom. Both its economic and political effects were overwhelming and it is remarkable that the kingdom lasted over the new two decades. Here we can only sketch the effects of the invasion.¹⁹

Economically, the king's coffers were exhausted. Amankwatia's adventures in the Gold Coast Protectorate immediately before the invasion cost the country 6,000 peredwane nearly £48,000 in arms and ammunition.²⁰ The financial consequence of this was that the King, Karikari was compelled to have an unauthorized recourse to the national treasures in the Bantama Mausoleum which was one of the reasons for his destoolment after the war.

The impoverishment of the Ashantiene also led to an increase in indirect taxation in the time of King Mensah Bonsu. Court fines and tolls in transit were abnormally increased. The first contributed to the revolts in Bekwai, Kokofu and Manso-Nkwanta, the southern districts of central Ashanti and the second to Nkoranza's disaffection towards Kumasi.²¹

Politically, the defeat of the army and the destruction of Kumasi had a shattering effect on the Ashanti who had all along believed that whatever they did the British would not go to Kumasi.²² The result of it all is what may be called political anomie, a loss of certainty about their ultimate political values. The Ashanti questioned whether the Ashanti Union itself was any longer necessary and saw in the colonial government at Cape Coast an alternative to the supreme superordinate authority of the Golden Stool of Ashanti.

Of this anomie, the secessionist movements and the succession disputes which culminated in the civil wars (1882-83, 1884-85, 1888-89) were symptoms. Asafo-Adjei, the regent-chief of Juabin told the Governor of the Gold Coast after the Kumasi-Juabin war of 1875 that 'everyone thought Ashantee was broken and that they might do what they liked and if anyone wished to get away from Ashantee they would be assisted.'²³ It seemed clear to the constituent chiefdoms of the Ashanti Union that the British were interested in, and would assist, the fragmentation of the Union. So it was that the chiefs who contemplated secession invariably notified the governor of their intention to seek protection under the colonial government.²⁴

The invasion of Ashanti had the same effect on the erstwhile provinces and tributaries of Ashanti. In the east, Atebubu and her Brong neighbours, Salaga and Dagomba, and in the west, Gyaman and Takyiman took their chance to throw off the Ashanti yoke.²⁵ And as in the case of Asafo-Adjei of Juabin, they all saw the colonial government as their ultimate protector. As a matter of urgent defence, they formed, in both the east and west, tribal confederations which were defensive anti-Ashanti organizations.²⁶

The colonial government was at first interested not in political rule of these territories but only in their trade: its concern was to encourage increasing trade between them and the coast, to open new trade routes which would skirt Ashanti and thus break the monopoly of Ashanti entrepreneurs of the North-South trade which had, before 1874, been supported by Ashanti military and political domination of the area. In 1876 and 1881 the colonial government sent Special Commissioners, Gouldsbury and Lonsdale respectively to the northern districts to 'sell' the advantages of trade with the south to the chiefs and peoples. To the latter, however, these visits meant that the 'conqueror' of Ashanti concurred in their rebellious postures.²⁷

Between 1875 and 1889, the Ashanti were prevented from attempting a reconquest of these territories by their civil wars which paralysed the political and mobilizing machinery. By 1889, however, Prempeh (the successor to Kwaku Dua II in 1888) who had imposed a semblance of peace after driving the adherents of his rival-candidate, Atwereboanah, to Atebubu and the British Protectorate, felt strong enough to attempt a consolidation policy, to recover some of his lost territorial legacy, including Nkoranza, Atebubu and the neighbouring chiefdoms.²⁸ A further object was to re-open the trade routes to Salaga which had been closed by the Eastern Brong people after 1874, as a gesture of defiance towards Ashanti.

By 1889, the colonial government had stumbled on to the fact that trade would not flourish if Ashanti remained in her troubled states. The imperial designs of the colonial government had more or less crystallized: to ensure smooth and prosperous trade between the Gold Coast and the interior a certain measure of political control, direct or indirect, over the peoples concerned was necessary. The government realized that the time was fast approaching when Ashanti itself would have to be brought within the colonial framework. Thus it was necessary to prevent Prempeh's policy of consolidation from succeeding. In 1889, Brandford Griffith, the acting governor started the policy of weakening Ashanti further by giving encouragement to the dissident chiefs of Mampong and Nsuta who had taken refuge in Atebubu after their war with Prempeh's adherents: he sent, after representations from Ramseyer, then stationed at Abetifi, a guard of constabulary to convey the chiefs to settle in the Protectorate and he warned the Ashantihene against attempts to recover his lost northern territories.²⁹ Hodgson was only prevented from adding territories to the Protectorate by the British Government who did not want further responsibilities on the Gold Coast and in 1891 rebuked Hodgson's invitation to Ashanti to apply for membership of the protectorate as being *ultra vires* and contrary to British policy.³⁰ By 1890, however, Hodgson had already secured a jumping-board for further expansion in the hinterland and placed a limitation on Ashanti consolidation ambitions by signing a treaty of protection with Atebubu in November, 1890. It was this treaty which brought about the despatch of a British Expeditionary force to Atebubu late in 1893 and Ramseyer's campaign for the establishment of British rule in Ashanti.

111. The Atebubu Affair and Ramseyer's Campaign (1893-94)

It was the Ashanti-Nkoranza war of 1892-1893 which brought about what I call the 'Atebubu Affair', that is, the threatened confrontation between Ashanti and British forces in Atebubu in 1893.

In 1888, Prempeh, the Ashantihene, had reasons to doubt the allegiance of Opoku, the Nkoranzahene, who had been a consistent supporter of the late King Karikari and seemed to have some difficulties in transferring his allegiance to his successors. Opoku consistently refused to go to Kumasi to swear allegiance to Prempeh when the latter became Ashantihene in 1888. When Prempeh asked for the formal oath of allegiance, Opoku demurred and extricated himself from

a delicate situation by pledging himself to recover the Eastern Brong territories for Ashanti.

Opoku died in 1891 whereupon Prempeh called upon his successor, Kori Fua, to swear the allegiance which Opoku had refused. Fua refused, and, anticipating an Ashanti attack, applied to his neighbours, including Krachi, Mo, (north of Kintampo) and Atebubu for help. Atebubu sent a token force of thirty gun-men to the aid of Nkoranza but represented this to Ferguson, the Gold Coast Government's representative, as meant to protect his borders against the Ashanti since the Treaty of Protection signed with the colonial government forbade Atebubu to go to war without prior reference to the Governor. The thirty gun-men gave the Ashanti an excuse to encamp in the Atebubu district.³¹

Nkoranza won the first engagement but were decisively beaten by the Ashanti with a bigger army, composed of men from the Ashanti districts of Mampong, Nsuta, Abesim, Offinso, Kumawu, Kwaman, Ejisu, Agogo and Asokore and a few from the Juabin people at Konongo. The Nkoranzahene fled with this army to Atebubu and then to Wiase, a neighbouring district. The flight to Wiase brought in pursuit the Ashanti who encamped near Abease to await the orders of the Ashanti-hene on whether to retire or execute the promises of the Ashanti general who is said to have sworn at the start of the war:

"I will proceed to Nkoranza or wherever the king of Nkoranza may be and bring him to you. I will visit Brumasi [north of Abease]; I will take my breast-plates from the kings of Prang and Yeji and Guan (northern and eastern neighbours of Atebubu). I will encamp at Atebubu where the shady trees will give shelter to my troops and on my return, I will bring Atebubu, Nkoranza and all the Brong nation with me to you as part of your kingdom by conquest."³²

Whether Amankwatia's oath was in earnest or just heady rhetoric, Ashanti aims in the area were frustrated by the presence at Atebubu of colonial troops under Sir Francis Scott.

In 1893 reports reaching the Governor that the Ashanti intended to attack Atebubu after their campaign in Nkoranza and requests by Atebubu for military

protection led the Governor to send Ferguson to the borders of Atebubu and Nkoranza to spy on the movements of the Ashanti army, and, to request from the Secretary of State, permission to send a detachment of Hausa Constabulary to make a demonstration with the 'Maxim guns' and thus frighten off the Ashanti from Atebubu.³³ Permission was granted and the Inspector-General of the Gold Coast Constabulary, Sir Francis Scott, was sent up with a staff and men numbering 300 only to discover that the Ashanti had decamped, certainly from fear of an encounter with the British forces. The Ashanti encampment had been a test of the seriousness with which the colonial government regarded their protecting duties. The arrival of Scott, following in the wake of Ferguson, who had spoken to Ashanti spies, convinced them of the consequences that would attend an attack on Atebubu. The British would have seized Ashanti earlier than 1896.

The timely withdrawal of the Ashanti army produced some sort of an anti-climax and the episode was turned into an opportunity for various groups to renew their clamours for a final solution to the Ashanti question, that is, for forcible inclusion of Ashanti in the British Protectorate. Of the various voices, perhaps, the most clamorous was that of the Reverend Ramseyer.

Already in 1889 Ramseyer, who was then stationed at the Basel Mission at Abetifi in Kwahu, the border territory between eastern Ashanti and the eastern portion of the Gold Coast Protectorate, had assumed the role of an intermediary between dissident Ashanti chiefs and the Governor of the Gold Coast. Ramseyer informed the latter that he had received a message from the Nsutahene asking for permission to settle in the Protectorate.³⁴ An officer, Badger, was accordingly sent to Atebubu only to be informed by the Nsutahene that he had not sent any message to Ramseyer and that he had no desire to seek refuge on the Gold Coast.³⁵

Ramseyer also assumed the role of a spy on Ashanti making it his business to report on those of her activities which he knew would antagonize the Governor against her. Thus he found it significant to report to the Governor that the Ashanti-hene had sent a message to the Kwahu chiefs asking them not to receive any of the defeated Mampong people in Kwahu.³⁶

Ramseyer's opportunity, however, came with the Atebubu episode. The Governor acknowledged and made use of his role as a spy. He urged him on the eve of Ferguson's departure to organize a spy-network on the Ashanti, to give

every assistance to Ferguson and 'to glean all possible information with regard to affairs in Ashanti and to acquaint me with it.'³⁷

Ramseyer was quick to realize the potentiality of the expedition to Atebubu as a means for the final overthrow of Ashanti. Writing to the Governor at the start of the expedition, he 'rejoiced' at the steps that were being taken towards Ashanti; he hoped that the 'decisive steps' would now be taken and this was to bring Ashanti under the British flag. He alleged that the Juabin people left at Konongo were 'begging' to be taken into the Protectorate and that his fellow missionaries at Abetifi wanted the imposition of British rule upon Ashanti. He reminded the Governor of what he regarded as justifiable reasons or excuses for taking over Ashanti:

"The more as it can be done without a single shot being fired. The war indemnity [imposed by Sir Garnet Wolseley by Treaty in 1874] has not been paid and the Ashantees are giving every year trouble to the English Government, and having now forced the Governor to such expenses [towards the Atebubu expedition] there are indeed reasons and ground enough to tell them 'you are under our jurisdiction!'"

There was a final hysterical outburst: 'For humanity's sake, for the welfare of the country, for the real peace of all the tribes of the Gold Coast and for the benefit of the spreading of the word of Salvation which must be brought to all nations, we the missionaries of Abetifi take the liberty to ask the British Government to do the finishing stroke and bring Kumase and all that is remaining of Ashantee under the British Flag.'³⁸ He also wrote to Scott, the leader of the expedition, on the same lines urging him to invade Ashanti from its rear.³⁹

Ramseyer's hopes and expectations were not fulfilled. Scott's and the Governor's attempts to turn the expedition into an invasion of Ashanti were vetoed by the Secretary of State. But Ramseyer was not discouraged. He carried on his fight for the overthrow of Ashanti to London, where he enlisted the support of Lord Wolseley, the 'conqueror' of Ashanti. In his letter to Wolseley, he emphasized those points about Ashanti which he knew would find the greatest response in the veteran soldier who, Ramseyer hoped, would influence the British Government in favour of his own wishes. He tried to arouse Wolseley's sympathies with lurid accounts of Ashanti activities in Nkoranza during the

recent war. The Ashanti, he wrote, had attacked Nkoranza because the latter had refused to pay tribute 'in slaves', had burnt Nkoranza towns and taken 2,000 'women' and 'children' captive. For effect, he resorted to exaggeration: he alleged that the whole of Ashanti (the larger part of which had, in fact, sent contingents to fight the Nkoranza) 'with the exception of Coomassie with very few towns' were expecting to see the English Government bring their law and make peace reign in the country and were 'astonished' that this had not happened. He appealed to the general prejudice against Ashanti: the Ashanti-here, he said, had in consequence of Scott's withdrawal from Atebubu without striking a blow, 'become more impudent than ever'. He appealed to the general dislike for a futile disbursement of funds; in spite of the English Government's expenses on Scott's expedition, he said, the 'bloodthirsty' King of Ashanti had been left to 'trouble' the country and because of the futility of the expedition the 'adherents' of the colonial government had been placed in a 'dilemma', wondering whether to leave the country or submit to Ashanti. He even appealed to the Englishman's pride; English prestige, he said, had suffered a blow as the result of Scott's abortive campaign and the result was constant 'quarrels' and 'troubles' in the interior. Finally he appealed to Wolseley's conscience and to English economic interests: the Ashanti, he asserted, were continuing 'human sacrifices' which they had undertaken by the Treaty of Fomena to abolish; they had shut up the country for educational and commercial purposes, the King refusing to allow schools to be opened. Almost as an afterthought, he averred that his 'sole desire' was that the Ashanti should receive the blessings of mission work.⁴⁰

Finally from Neuchatel in Switzerland, he wrote to the Colonial Office enclosing a letter from his missionary colleague, the Reverend Perregaux at Abetifi in which the latter gives a 'pitiful description' of what was going on in the Ashanti country.⁴¹

Such was the measure of Ramseyer's contribution to the destruction of Ashanti's independence. He was in good company in supposing that the Ashanti had to be forced 'to progress'. He was, almost certainly, genuinely concerned about the 'soul' of the Ashanti and convinced that their 'progress'-educational, religious, economic - could only be achieved within the colonial framework.

This may account for the vigour of his campaign for the overthrow of Ashanti. In this campaign, he sometimes showed scant regard for the facts⁴², showed himself

too credulous and resorted to the spy's tactics, and, in his role as the advocate of all the centrifugal tendencies within the Ashanti kingdom, he would have been regarded as an enemy of the Ashanti state if the King had known of his activities. It seems a fair assessment that Ramseyer typifies that sort of missionary who, in his ignorance of the meaning of foreign cultures and in his lack of sympathy for native political aspirations became the colonialist agent par excellence. Finally, it may be the case that the conquest or continued existence of Ashanti was the test of Ramseyer's faith in God. It would be recalled that he had foretold God's judgment and chastisement of Ashanti for her misdeeds, including the capture of Ramseyer.

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3. Four Years p.127.
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a trader who had been associated with Ramseyer's
mission] if we had ever supplied the Anum with guns
and ammunition."
4. Four Years, p.159.
5. Ibid, p.267.
6. See Ibid, pp.4-47.
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10. Ibid, p.49.
11. Ibid, p.47.
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15. Ibid, p.267.
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35. Ibid.
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37. Ag. Governor to Ramseyer, 22/9/1893 in
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38. Ramseyer to Ag. Governor, 31/10/1893 in
C - 7917.
39. Scott to Colonial Secretary, 7/11/1893 in
C.O. 879/39.
40. Ramseyer to Lord Wolseley, 9/6/1894 in
C - 7917.
41. Ramseyer to Colonial Office, 10/8/1894 in
C - 7917.
42. Though Ramseyer reports in his book, op.cit.
pp. 178-179, that the King and Chiefs expressed
willingness to send their children to school, he
now tells Wolseley in 1894 that they were preventing
the establishment of schools in Kumasi, while a Methodist
Mission was working in Kumasi during Ramseyer's days in
the town.