

# BOOK REVIEWS – REVUE DES LIVRES

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I. Wilks : *Asante in the Nineteenth Century : The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order*. African Studies

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## Reviewed by Jacques Depelchin \*

Although I am not a specialist of Asante history, let alone West African history, I was eager to read the book under review because I had been impressed by several previous essays of the author. Among them : *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History* published as a pamphlet in 1961, « Aspects of bureaucratization in Ashanti in the Nineteenth Century » which appeared in the *Journal of African History*, vol. VII, N° 2, 1966 and « Ashanti Government » which appeared in *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century* edited by Daryll Forde and P.M. Kaberry (OUP, 1967). At the time of reading those essays I had been particularly attracted by the author's attempt to move beyond mere chronicle by resorting to social theory. In this respect, the essay on bureaucratization was particularly striking for it was rare then (for still is) for a historian of pre-colonial Africa to combine social theory and empirical data.

However limited the concept of bureaucratization may have been, it did help to bring out an important feature of Asante history, namely the degree of routinization which had been introduced by Asante rulers in their ruling practices. For reasons which will be given in this review, Wilks' book has produced the opposite effect: the central concept around which the whole book is constructed — bureaucracy — prevents the reader from identifying the most determining forces of Asante history in the nineteenth century. And yet, conceptually speaking, there are no differences between the above mentioned essays and the book. If the former once held a specific attraction to this reviewer, then it must be attributed to the adoption of a problematic which was similar to that of the author under review. After re-reading the above essays, it is clear that they conform totally to the problematic of the book, and the criticisms that will be raised and discussed here apply a fortiori to the earlier essays. Therefore, this review does not intend to dwell on factual interpretation as such, but rather on the problematic, i.e. on the conceptual and theoretical framework which informed Wilks' interpretation of the data.

There are many ways in which a Weberian (Wilks') and a Marxist (this reviewer's) problematic differ, this review must be seen as a very brief attempt to delineate the basis of these differences. Although the author, in his preface, seems to anticipate the kind of criticisms which will be raised, he does not address himself to the central issue of the problematic which generally informs any kind of historical production.

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In the preface, the author does not claim to produce the only possible history of Asante. He argues that his approach — politics « from the perspectives of those in the capital... » — does not mean that « rural history should be neglected, indeed it... is among the most important of the topics awaiting investigation » (pp. xiv, xv). It is always risky to attribute intentions or motives to authors, but it seems that Wilks was contrasting here « history from the top » (his) and history « from the bottom » (Marxist ?) in a manner which misconceives the distinctions that exist between a Marxist history and a non-Marxist history. Therefore, in fairness to the object of the author's work, this review will not fault Wilks for what he did not do, but rather for the way in which he carried out what he intended to study. But before doing this it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the book itself.

From the subtitle of the book « The structure and evolution of a political order » it is immediately evident that politics is the main focus throughout the fifteen chapters. Although the term is given several meanings, one of the most important ones is the way in which a government takes or arrives at and implements decisions.

The first three chapters throw the reader abruptly into an aspect of Asante « spatial structure », i. e. the system of the great roads that linked Kumase, the capital, to the outlying areas which had been incorporated into Asante. The road system is studied in very great detail because they are the visible proof (cause and effect) of the effectivity and efficiency of Asante bureaucracy. By building an extensive road system the Asante rulers provided a solid basis for an efficient bureaucracy as well as an effective instrument for the *reproduction* of the Asante state. In proceeding this way, Wilks drastically departs from the usual practice of beginning the history of African Kingdoms with a description of how conquest was carried out. By beginning with the road system, Wilks is almost saying that conquest was not the basis of Asante power. Indeed throughout the book, the military factor is constantly underplayed.

Although Wilks' particular treatment of the bureaucracy will be criticized below, he must be congratulated for shifting the attention of historians of kingdoms from the conquest process per se to the much more important problem of the process of reproduction (or non-reproduction) of pre-colonial dominant social formations. There has been a tendency to ignore this problem except for two outstanding cases: the Zulu and the Asante. The reproduction of Asante power did not depend, like Shaka's Zulu, on the constant maintenance of a large army. Wilks' thesis is that conquest did take place, and that conquest was based on military power, but once conquest was over, reproduction of Asante dominant position was carried out through an efficient bureaucracy. However, from Wilks' own data it is possible to see other processes such as for example one which would have begun with the growing economic dominance of large and powerful clans which required the use of military power at one stage. But of course oral traditions are usually silent on such processes. And yet it should be obvious that armies or armed followers can only be organized if the economic basis can produce a surplus large enough to attract addi-

tional followers. Although such an interpretation may seem speculative, the recent book of J.C. Miller *Kings and Kinsmen* (O.U.P. 1976) offers supportive evidence in that direction.

Having opted for the thesis above, it is understandable that the author should go out of his way to describe in greatest detail the communication network and point out its importance: roads are not just important for the flow of goods to be traded between different areas or even for the rapid travel of government armed troops, it is crucial for the quick transmission of information from the central government to the provinces and vice versa. The great concern of the Asante rulers for an efficient system of communication is brought out when Wilks notes that they explored the possibilities « of utilizing European capital and skills to create a railroad system in Asante » (p. 41). This eventually happened in 1903, but by then the British were in charge.

The order of the first three chapters provides another revealing facet Wilks' perception of historical processes. It is only in the third chapter that Wilks introduces the labour problem (although he does not present it in those terms). Without this labour the Asante rulers would not have been able to build the vast system of roads which was used to consolidate and reproduce their power. Without this labour which produced surplus product there would not have been anything from which to extract the tribute that Wilks discusses in chapter two. Wilks does recognize the importance of slave labour, but he fails to give it the determinant role that E. Terray did in his essay on the Abron Kingdom of Gyaman (1). In several parts of the book, Wilks describes how the Asante government was forced to recruit large numbers of slaves for both civilian and military purposes. The latter even led to bitter opposition against military conscription, particularly in the 1870s and 1880s. Again, from his own data on labour it is possible to challenge the author's thesis according to which Asante's political power was built on bureaucratic efficiency and diplomatic acumen rather than on large military campaigns. Specialists who are more aware of the data will wonder whether Wilks was not over reacting against the previous orthodoxy of looking at Asante as a purely military power.

Chapters four to eight are an elaboration of the central thesis mentioned above and an examination of the mechanisms which were used to execute the policies decided at the capital. Chapters nine to eleven discuss the politics of the ruling houses of Asante. Twelve to fifteen attempt to give an overview of the « political order » by looking at the dominant forces that determined the direction of Asante politics. In these last chapters, particularly thirteen and fourteen, the relationships between Asante and the British are presented in the framework of « imperial rivals » — an incorrect characterization.

#### WEBERIAN, EMPIRICIST AND IDEOLOGICAL HISTORY

From the « Guide to sources consulted » (pp. 731-743) readers will discover that one of the few theoretical works listed is H.H. Gerth's and C.W. Mills' *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. In the text

itself, Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* is cited twice (pp. 466, 468). In the eyes of some readers, no more would be needed to classify Wilks as a Weberian, but beyond this open acknowledgement, Wilks' text suffers from a more serious weakness, namely that of letting the empirical data dictate the problematic, and it is such empiricism which dictated the use of and recourse to Weber's bureaucracy. In *Ashanti Government* already cited above one can clearly see how Wilks was led to Weber through the kind of evidence he was using. The data are such or so it seems, that it is impossible for any researcher not to be struck by the obviously bureaucratic structures of Asante — especially after they had been consolidated by Osei Kwadwo (Asantehene from 1764 to 1777) (hence the term « the Kwadwoan Revolution »). Whichever way the researcher would turn, bureaucracy (i.e. appointment to office on the basis of merit « in exclusion of the family » p. 214) was present. Because the bureaucracy in Asante was so visible, Wilks argues that to understand Asante history, one has to understand the functioning of the bureaucracy, and furthermore, the functioning of the bureaucracy can only be understood... by studying the bureaucracy.

Wilks compounds the problem of understanding Asante bureaucracy by using the term interchangeably with « political order », « government », « administration », « law and order », « state ». Wilks' empiricism can also be detected at all those levels.

For Wilks, it is the bureaucracy that links all political life from Osei Tutu to K. Nkrumah and beyond. The bureaucracy dominates all the various phases of Ghanaian history from the end of the 18th century to the middle of the 20th century. But within this static structure changes took place, in part because of the appearance of new social classes, but most of all because of the inevitable turnover of political officials, from the Asantehene to rank and file soldiers and civil servants. There is something overly harmonious in the way in which Wilks characterizes the unfolding of Asante's history. Indeed, one almost has the impression that a mechanical balance operates to maintain an equal blending of « structure » and « evolution ». How does Wilks see the evolution of Asante history ?

First it was an imperial power established by the founders Osei Tutu and Opoku Ware (up to 1750). There followed a period of « constitutional monarchy » which « transformed Asante from a predominantly military power into a civil polity » i.e. Osei Kwadwo, Osei Kwame and Osei Bansa — 1764-1823). From 1834 to 1867 Asante was moved « rapidly in the direction of nation-statehood » by « a modernizing autocrat » : Kwaku Dua I. Finally, with Kofi Kakari (1864-74) Mensa Bonsu (1874-83) and Agyeman Prempe I, Asante seem to have entered the era of parliamentary politics during which the various Asantehene were described as having « assumed many of the characteristics of the presidential monarch » (p. 372, 3). A very neat evolutionary scheme indeed which begins with tribal politics and ends with parliamentary politics.

However, behind this major trend, Wilks identifies shifts in terms of tendencies which at times strengthen what is called the war party, and which at other times pushed the Asante political rulers to advocate

peace, or, in the words of Osei Bonsu in 1820 « never to appeal to the sword while a path lay open for negotiation » (p. 299). Needless to say that the latter quote also became one of the leitmotives of Wilks thesis (see p. 29, 64, 190-1, 278, 325, 444-5, 451, 478, 483, 495, 514, 539, 606, 683, 692). As noted earlier, Wilks' reaction against the previous orthodoxy of seeing Asante as essentially a military power may have been overdone especially when he discusses the confrontation with the British. It is also clear that Wilks is also reacting against a certain type of African history :

*Throughout this study I have been concerned less with those aspects of Asante society which are unique to it, and more with those aspects it has in common with other complex societies whether on the continent or elsewhere. Accordingly I have felt no hesitation in applying such terms as « bureaucratization », « mercantilism », « modernization » and the like to those aspects of the Asante experience which invite comparison with similarly identified phenomena in other societies. To critics on this score I reiterate my belief that only thus can the Asante past be viewed within the wider perspectives of human endeavour and its place within comparative history ultimately be assured (p. 14).*

Like those other writers who were reacting against colonial propaganda, Wilks' purpose is to demonstrate that there was nothing peculiar in the Asante social formation and that it could even be understood through European history or through the use of distinguishing categories which have been applied to other social formations. While Wilks' aims of struggling against the kind of parochialism, which led to looking at African history as something unique, must be praised ; the alternative he offers — which is essentially one of comparative politics — fails to bring out the specificity of the Asante social formation. It may be asked whether comparative history is not an admission of failure, a failure to come to terms with the history of a particular area or social formation in its own terms. Among Marxist historians a similar failure led, for a long time, to sterile efforts of analyzing the African social formations through the « model » of the Asiatic mode of production (2). At various points, Wilks realizes that he is resting his analysis of politics in Asante on evidence which was distorted by a serious Eurocentrist perspective. Although Wilks warns his readers against being influenced by this perspective, he is unable to steer his own analysis away from it :

*it is not being argued here, of course, that the parties of nineteenth century Asante were similar to those of mid-twentieth century Ghana — or, for that matter, of Europe. But it is (Wilks emphasis) being suggested that the parties of nineteenth century Asante bore sufficient resemblance to those of nineteenth century Europe for nineteenth century European commentators to be prepared to write of both in the same terms (p. 481).*

Earlier on, however, the author was not as cautious :

*Rattray's seemingly facile comparison of the role of the senior counselor with that of the prime minister is one which should not be treated too lightly... As early as 1820 Hutton, with considerable insight, was led to essay a comparison of the position within the administration of the Gyakye counselor Kwadwo Adusei Kyakya with that of the four so-called Privy Councillors... — p. 472).*

Comparative history has attracted an increasing number of adherents over the last few years, especially among non-Marxist historians. Unfortunately comparisons and analogies in history cannot replace analysis. Comparisons and analogies can only be short cuts which at most can serve as brief illustrations. As such, comparative history can only be descriptive, that is, eminently empiricist. *Asante in the nineteenth Century* is a brilliant description of how Asante bureaucracy operated, but it does not analyze the *nature* of that bureaucracy for if Wilks had studied the nature of Asante bureaucracy, he would have had to deal with the specific differences such as the nature of the relations of production, the nature of the economic base upon which the Asante state was based.

## THE ASANTE STATE

Although Wilks does not examine the nature of the Asante state, he does have a conception of the nature of that state, and it is precisely such a conception which led him to produce a descriptive account of one of the aspects of the state.

Wilks' conception of the Asante state does not differ significantly from the views advanced by other writers on the same subject. They too consider the pre-colonial state as an institution which somehow comes about as a result of the inability of the kinship structures to regulate social relations. For example, in his recent book on Angolan pre-colonial social formations, J.C. Miller characterized the development of the pre-colonial state in the following manner :

*Mbundu political history moved in no single direction but consisted of an irregular alternation between the triumph of institutions based on the loyalties of Kinship and those articulating the demands of the Kings (3) (emphasis added).*

Writing on Asante, M. Fortes pointed out that the state was not characterized by « a territorial polity... It was primarily a constellation of stools — a union of political communities bound to one another by chains of interlocked allegiances to eminent office within a framework of law and fiscal, religious and military organization reinforced by a network of clanship, dynastic kinship (4) (emphasis added).

In other words, the transition from «kins» to «kings» is seen as a natural one, even if the transition is taking place, as Wilks points out, amid tensions :

*By the 1880's, then the level of consciousness of the asikafo (wealthy persons, J.D.), was such that they should probably be regarded as constituting a small but growing bourgeois middle class with distinct interests and aspirations transcending loyalties and allegiances of a traditional kind. (p. 705) (emphasis added).*

Thus one institutional system — kinship — leads (without explaining how) to another institutional system — kingship. For Wilks, the state and its bureaucratic apparatus are seen as *sui generis* or at most as the work of one man (« the Kwadoan revolution »). The bureaucracy or the state are not conceived as being the site as well as the result of conflicts and antagonisms. Indeed, Wilks seems to hold to the typical Weberian view that the bureaucracy itself (through its operators, through laws, through the constitution) contains the elements that help to resolve or anticipate and therefore prevent conflicts. Thus, in discussing the civil war that broke out in 1883, Wilks explains it thusly :

*Lacking precedents in constitutional law to which reference could be made, Asante was to move towards civil war. As all attempts at the political resolution of the issues failed, its leaders turned increasingly to the use of violence in the attainment of their goal (p. 543) (emphasis added).*

Such a view of the legal apparatus implies that constitutions, bureaucracies and all social institutions are somehow the creation of wise men or men invested with that function of devising appropriate institutions. This is not to say that Wilks denies the existence of social classes, but again his conception of classes is either empirically or ideologically derived. Classes are identified in terms of their goals or aspirations not in terms of how they relate in the process of social production. Since the aspirations of representatives of all classes can be reduced to some common denominator, Wilks can then argue that class antagonisms do not provide the dynamics for social change in Asante :

*political tension resulted, however, not from the emergence of class conflict as such. Indeed, the aspirations of even the « asikafo and ahiafo (underprivileged group including elements from both the free and unfree population) in the period were in some respects complementary rather than antithetical (p. 719).*

Like an earlier student of Asante, Rattray, Wilks totally subscribes to the upward mobility thesis (p. 706) on account of the fact that « in nine cases out of ten, (an Ashanti slave) possible became an adopted member of the family, and in time his descendants so merged and

intermarried with the owner's kinsmen...» (p. 706). For Wilks there can be no antagonism between the slaves and their owners since

*the well-being of a slave was bound up with that of his master, whose prosperity in turn depended upon that of the abusua, of the village, of the province and of the nation. The aspirations of ahiafo, in other words, were bound up with becoming participants in abusua affairs, and not in making cause with those of similar standing in other localities. (pp. 708-9).*

On reading this one wonders whether Wilks is not being influenced by the ideology of the ruling classes in the capitalist social formations, and in particular its North American version. In the latter social formation, the orthodox view of the ruling class is that there could be no antagonism, for both the working class and the capitalist class are striving toward the same goals of satisfying, for example, basic human needs like a decent house, happiness, freedom of expression and (today) an unpolluted environment.

In the Asante case Wilks perceives the *asikafo* and *ahiafo* as sharing « a common interest in establishing certain basic individual liberties, for example, the freedom from restrictions upon capital accumulationalion or freedom from military conscription ». (pp. 719-20). Unfortunately, for once, Wilks does not provide the much needed evidence to show that both classes did *engage in common political action* against the government. In any case, this would have been impossible for the freedom that the *asikafo* was struggling for was eminently *economic* while the *ahiafo's* struggle was essentially *political*.

Overall then, Wilks notes the emergence of classes, and he also notes growing conflicts, but he seems to be determined to keep both independent of each other :

*Political tension resulted, then, rather from incompatibilities between the emergent horizontal or class consciousness and the older vertical consciousness — that is, the view of the citizen's place within society as fixed within a pyramidically structured system of established (ascribed or achieved) allegiances culminating in the Golden Stool.*

Like many other Africanists, Wilks seems to be arguing that « what kept Asante back » was the conflict between the « traditional » and the « modern ».

It would be unfair to suggest that the entire Asante history is viewed in this light, and Wilks' analysis is certainly much more complex than it may have been suggested here. His analysis of the mercantilist interests in Asante and the kind of conflicts that developed between them and the bureaucracy will certainly inspire new researches and new interpretations. Some readers may find that comparisons unanticipated by Wilks could be drawn between the Asante state and its post-colonial version.



In the Asante state accumulation of wealth was only possible through accession to bureaucratic positions. A similar situation obtains in the post-colonial state as has been shown by the recent work (5). Wilks, however, does not concern himself with production of wealth. In great part this is because of his predetermined view of the bureaucracy as the institution that maintains cohesion and peace in society. For Wilks it is the bureaucracy which is responsible for reproducing the dominant positions of the Asantehene. And when one writer suggested that the Asante state was essentially an instrument for the exploitation of the masses — « of the superior preying upon the inferior classes ». — Wilks prefers to say of such evidence that it was « reductivist » (p. 129).

By concentrating on the mode of operation of the bureaucracy, the author, prevents his readers from seeing the mode of production upon which the Assantehene, their court retainers, their soldiers and servants could rely to reproduce their dominant position. Wilks has examined in detail the circulation of wealth in Asante, and specifically how that wealth was used to pay for a large body of bureaucratic officials (through a system of commissions) (p. 440). Even when Wilks deals with the « origins » of wealth, it is still at the level of circulation and distribution of surplus already produced and not at the level of expropriation of the surplus. In the process of discussing the distribution of the surplus, Wilk provides an interesting explanation for the non-development of an autonomous bourgeoisie. On the principle that the King was heir to the gold of every subject, from the highest to the lowest, the Asante government collected heavy death duties (p. 697). The explanation, however, could only be partial and refer to the size of the bourgeoisie. From Wilks' evidence itself it is possible to advance the argument that the autonomous bourgeoisie grew from within the bureaucracy itself and that the collection of heavy death duties could only be a means of reducing the economic basis upon which the bourgeoisie could build itself.

Wilks ends his book on a note which reinforces his main argument of bureaucratic rule in Asante. In some four pages at the end of the volume the author covers the colonial and post-colonial period of Ghanaian history. For Wilks there are parallels and analogies between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If bureaucratic rule by a few is the best form of government then it should follow that any king or political leader who ventures beyond the boundaries set up by the bureaucracy will be overthrown, « vomitted » as it were. Wilks does not put it in those words, but that is the theoretical conclusion one must draw from his general interpretation of Asante history.

A bureaucracy is best for all people because it prevents abuses (6). So Wilks argued that on the one hand the government of Asante was against the growth of an indigenous bourgeoisie, and on the other and gave in on the demands of *ahiafo* who wanted to be freed from military conscription. One must assume that Nkrumah was overthrown precisely because he overstepped the boundaries of the government (sometimes synonymous with bureaucracy). Thus, throughout

Ghanaian history, the government or the bureaucracy is seen as something separate, an institution which stands above society. The government or the bureaucracy is given a life of its own, and the fact that the author can quote Nkrumah (p. 721-2) to lend support to his thesis should not necessarily mean that both were having the same views, but rather that Nkrumah's analyses of the Ghanaian situation contained weaknesses which may help explain his demise.

In reviewing such a voluminous and extremely well researched book, one is bound to do injustice to the author's labours especially if the review focuses on an attempt to uncover the problematic that guided the work. By criticizing its empiricism, ideological (and one might add functionalist) slants this reviewer intended to draw attention to characteristics that have tended to dominate the production of African history. However, the best tribute one can pay the author of *Asante in the nineteenth Century* is that his own work provides the data for a different interpretation and for testing different hypothesis, and because of this quality it will remain a landmark not only in Asante history, but also in African history.

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## FOOTNOTES

- (1) E. Terray, « Long-distance exchange and the formation of the State: the case of the Abbron Kingdom of Gyaman », *Economy and Society*, vol. III N° 3, 1974.
- (2) See especially the various articles that appeared in various issues of *La Pensée*.
- (3) J.C. Miller, *Kings and Kinsmen*, London, O.U.P., 1976.
- (4) M. Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order*, Chicago, 1969, p. 154.
- (5) See especially the work of I. Shivji on Tanzania: *Class Struggles in Tanzania*, T.P.H. and Heineman, 1976; and the essay by A. Cournanel, « Idéologie et développement », *Africa Développement*, vol II, N° 1, 1977.
- (6) On this Weberian conception and analysis of the bureaucracy see Paul Q. Hirst's excellent *Social Evolution and Sociological Categories*, London, 1976, especially chapter 6.