

‘You are the music while the music lasts’: Kwame Tua between the Asante and the British¹

Tom McCaskie

In this article I attempt to rework the received black-and-white portrait of a colonial collaborator with shades of complicating detail, the object being to arrive at a deeper understanding of the situational ambiguities of possibility, choice and action that presented themselves to an evidently charismatic Asante individual who cleaved to his own path through new, changing and uncertain times. As will be seen, much of Kwame Tua’s fascination lies in his well-documented roster of individual likes and dislikes, and in the behaviours authored by and woven around these by an unusually forceful personality. In mulling over this matter for a long time, I have arrived at the belief that a man such as Kwame Tua – and there were countless numbers like him in colonial Africa, although we still know shamefully little about them as individuals – was caught in a human dilemma that is recognizable as an unresolved, and perhaps finally unresolvable, tension between what historians of other times and places have termed ‘freedom *from*’ and ‘freedom *to*’ (cf. Wiseman 2004). In the seesawing, and never fully bridged, connection between these two dimensions of existence, Kwame Tua lived out his life under the impress of historical realities, but with an eye on the contingent debris of cultural condition and personal experience that he plundered – and in his case sang about – in an attempt to forge a narrative space for a directed and purposeful selfhood.

Kwame Tua (c.1865–1950), the subject of this article, has been a part of my thinking about Asante for forty years. As long ago as 1978, Ivor Wilks and I drafted a nine-page typescript biography of him drawn from the sources available to us at that time, but, suspecting that there was much more waiting to be said, we agreed to leave it unpublished (Wilks and McCaskie 1978). The puzzle was Kwame Tua’s widespread and abiding presence in oral memory. Yes, he had been a stool-holding collaborator and extortioner (*ɔhupooni*; pl. *ahupofofo*: lit. ‘bullies’), but only for a short time, and in an early colonial world peopled by more vicious and enduring representatives of the type (McCaskie 2000a). More research was needed to fix and to explain the persistence of Kwame Tua’s name in Kumase a half century after his death. Between 1980 and the mid-1990s I made annual research visits to Asante, and during these I gathered a great deal of additional oral and written material on Kwame Tua. Some of this, as will be seen below, fleshed out a vital if underexplored dimension of his life (hi)story that had been largely overlooked by historians. In Chicago, in 1992, I presented

Tom McCaskie was successively Professor of Asante History at the University of Birmingham and Professor of the History of Africa at SOAS, University of London, until his retirement in 2011. He has worked in and on Asante for fifty years and has published extensively on that subject. Email: tommccaskie@aol.com

¹T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*: number 3, ‘The Dry Salvages’ (1941). This article is *in memoriam* John Peel (1941–2015), for it is the last paper of mine he commented on before his death.

a preliminary seminar paper about these new materials, but thereafter other tasks and obligations intervened and I set Kwame Tua to one side (McCaskie 1992; see also Sloan 1992).

I return to Kwame Tua here because he has always interested me, and he still does so. The Asante persons who have given me characterizations of him told me that Kwame Tua ‘disliked authority and being ordered around’ (*ɔmpɛ nhyɛsoɔ*); that he ‘was generous to friends, giving them money and helping the poor’ (*ɔye adɔye wɔ ne mfɛfoɔ so; ɔde ɔno ana ne bɔtɔmu sika ma wɔn, ɔboa ahiafoɔ*); that ‘chiefs hated him but the ordinary people liked him’ (*na ahemfo no tan no, na mom na nipa ... amanfoɔ no pɛ n’asɛm*); and that he was above all ‘a unique personality who followed his own path’ (*ɔdamu be fua, ɔye ɔno ana ne pɛ deɛ*). My procedural method here is simply to follow the trajectory of Kwame Tua’s life, and to provide as much insight as I can about the man himself in his interactions with the world he inhabited.

I

Kwame Tua was born in about 1865 into a particular but well understood milieu of kinship, occupation and status within precolonial Asante society. Both his paternal grandfather Yaw Sapon and his father Kwasi Ampon (otherwise Kwasi Gyetoa) were successive incumbents of the Asokwa service stool (*ɛsom dwa*) in the Gyaase *fekuo* or administrative division of Kumase. These people were royal servants (*nhenkwaa*) with two specialist functions in the service of the Asantehene. Firstly, and by primary definition, they were hornblowers (*asokwafɔɔ*; sing. *asokwani*). Secondly, they were also the carriers of the king’s trade (*batafoɔ*; sing. *batani*; syn. *ɔkwantenni*, ‘officials authorized to move along the royal roads’) to the Atlantic coast and to the savanna hinterland of Asante. These occupations descended ascriptively in the male line, and so Kwame Tua was destined to become an *asokwani* and *batani*. His mother, Yaa Mena, came from Amoaman, a village belonging to the Domakwae division of the Kumase Kyidom *fekuo*. Her male antecedents and siblings were also *nhenkwaa*, but in the capacity of royal stool carriers (*nkonnwasoafɔɔ*; sing. *akonmwasoani*). Kwame Tua had at least one full brother, named Kwasi Apea Nuama, and six or more paternal half-brothers. All oral evidence makes it clear that both Kwame Tua and Kwasi Apea Nuama were close to Yaa Mena as boys and continued to seek her guidance as young men. This was a common Asante pattern of affective bonding between mothers and male children (cf. McCaskie 2003).

As was customary, the boy Kwame Tua was taken by prescriptive right of his father to be trained as an *asokwani*. He was assigned to the royal ceremonial *ntahera* horn (or trumpet) ensemble, whose practitioners lived at Dekyemso, close to the royal palace. The *ntahera* comprised seven instruments made from ivory tusks. These were the *seseɛ* (‘the sayer’, the soloist who begins and determines the piece), two *afɛ* (‘the callers’, the providers of the bass underline), three *agyɛsoa* (‘the responders’, who answer the *seseɛ* before the other instruments join in), and *bɔsoɔ* (‘the reinforcer’, which picks up and repeats the melodic line of the *seseɛ*) (see Sarpong 1990; Kaminski 2012; Ampene and Nana Kwadwo Nyantakyi III 2016: 198–9). It is widely recalled that the boy Kwame Tua

proved wonderfully adept; he spent at least five years learning and memorizing the complex phrasing of the *sesee* and mastering its repertoire. His preferred accompanist on the *agyesoa* was the older *asokwani* Yaw Awua from Edweso. The two were close intimates within the *kuo* ('gang') formed by the apprentice *ntahera* players at Dekyemso. Once Kwame Tua had mastered the rhetorical idiom of the *ntahera*, he went on – as only the most gifted musicians did – to improvise and compose around the symbolic and proverbial associative Twi phrases played by the *ntahera* ensemble. He worked through, around and beyond these to produce passages of music that were inflected by, and freighted with, new meanings. At some point in this process of learning, Kwame Tua also discovered that he had the 'strong' musical voice (*nne a emu ye duru*) and 'clarity of mind' (*adwene mu da ho*) required to construct and to sing his own compositions (Nketia 1973).

Asantehene Mensa Bonsu (1874–83) was a complicated man with sudden and unpredictable mood swings that might conclude with either reward or punishment for his interlocutors. Famously, Asante royal musicians were considered to be exempt from prosecution or punishment, most particularly if they were creative virtuosi like Kwame Tua. So, the most skilled 'horn players are emboldened to say what they or the public think and say it the way they want' (Sarpong 1990: 13). Kwame Tua clearly did this, in both his playing and his singing, and so he became a favourite of the notably fickle Mensa Bonsu. The Asantehene admired and appreciated Kwame Tua's musical skill and verbal inventiveness, and the arrogant, often sly and critical, bravura (*nhenkwaasem*) of his performances. Indeed, Mensa Bonsu affectionately nicknamed him *Kwame Tua akyemfo* ('Kwame Tua, the big spider with the poisonous bite') (on Mensa Bonsu's character, see Asare 1915; McCaskie 2011). However, in March 1883, Mensa Bonsu was removed from office and sent into internal exile in a coup that degenerated into political chaos and then dynastic warfare (1883–88). During these five years there was no Asantehene, and so *nhenkwa* such as Kwame Tua had neither a king to serve nor a court to support them. Kwame Tua first took refuge with his mother at her village of Amoaman; when it was engulfed by the fighting, he fled to a village belonging to the Ntaherahene close to Lake Bosomtwe. Others among his peers took more radical steps. Ntaherahene Yaw Pepera, Kwame Tua's brother Kwasi Apea Nuama and other *asokwafɔ* fled south for safety into the British Gold Coast Colony. Kwame Tua's horn-playing partner Yaw Awua also decamped to Cape Coast in the colony, taking with him stolen gold dust and regalia belonging to the Asokwa stool, and there he allied himself with fellow exiles who were working to secure the restoration of Mensa Bonsu's deposed brother, Asantehene Kofi Kakari (1867–74). That was not to be, however, and by 1886–87 the contest to occupy the Golden Stool lay between the Kumase royals Agyeman Prempeh and Yaw Twereboanna.

Kwame Tua returned to Kumase. According to his own later testimony, he was a partisan of Yaw Twereboanna, or more exactly he was an unswerving opponent of Agyeman Prempeh because of his visceral detestation of the latter's scheming, ruthless mother, the Asantehemaa Yaa Kyaa.² It is reported that Yaa Kyaa

²See National Archives of Ghana (NAG), Kumase, ARG 1/2/25/9, 'Candidates for Kumasi Stool', Kwame Tua to Chief Commissioner of Ashanti (CCA), dated (dd.) Kumase, 30 May 1931.

reciprocated this hatred and wanted Kwame Tua executed for his association with the refugee *asokwafɔɔ*, and above all for the ‘bold impudence’ of his songs. The problem was that Kwame Tua was well known and popular with a lot of people, including a number of influential Kumase chiefs. So Yaa Kyaa hatched a plot to remove Kwame Tua from Asante, and to have him quietly disposed of far away in the north. In 1887, Kwame Tua was a member of a three-man mission sent by Yaa Kyaa to Buna to bring home the learned Kumase Muslim Abū Bakr, so that he might offer prayers and blessings at Agyeman Prempeh’s enstoolment. A secret instruction was also sent to Abū Bakr telling him to sell Kwame Tua into slavery upon his arrival in Buna. Troubled by this order, and by what it implied about political conditions in Kumase, Abū Bakr evidently spoke with Kwame Tua. The two decided to flee into the Gold Coast Colony, and they settled in Agona Swedru. Abū Bakr was still living in the colony when Agyeman Prempeh was enstooled as Asantehene on 26 March 1888. He then wrote to the new government in Kumase seeking assurances about his safety, and on receiving these he travelled back into Asante in 1889 (see Wilks 1976). By then, Kwame Tua had joined the community of Asante exiles in Cape Coast, including the refugee *asokwafɔɔ*, most of whom were unreconciled political opponents of Yaa Kyaa and Agyeman Prempeh.

II

From 1889 until 1896, Kwame Tua lived in Cape Coast. He traded in alcohol and learned carpentry, and supported himself in part by practising this trade. Forty years ago historians knew little about this period of Kwame Tua’s life, but it is now possible to document the influence these years had on him. First, let us look at Cape Coast itself. During the 1890s, this Fante settlement beneath the fort that served as British headquarters throughout the area covered by the slave trade and beyond was undergoing rapid expansion and transition. It had a fluctuating population of 12,000 to 15,000 inhabitants, drawn there from across the Gold Coast, West Africa, Britain and Europe by its booming trade. That commerce was led by exports of wild rubber from Asante and its hinterland. In 1895 alone, rubber exports through Cape Coast were valued at £320,000 sterling, and the Gold Coast and Asante were the third largest producers of that commodity in the world. Commercial opportunities abounded, and Cape Coast’s European and educated Christian Fante merchants lived on ‘well-drained streets with extremely well-built business and residential houses on either side’ (Kemp 1898: 16; see also Macdonald 1898; Freeman 1898; for context, Gocking 1999). The roadstead was busy with merchant vessels, and hordes of traders, stevedores, porters and the like were clustered around the landings. This was a polyglot, ever shifting population that came from the Gold Coast, Asante, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, and included Muslim traders from far inland as well as the famous ‘Kru boys’ of Liberia who crewed, loaded and unloaded the ships (Frost 2002).

We must try to see the new world of Cape Coast through Kwame Tua’s eyes. It was a visual, sensory and experiential education, quite literally a pedagogic ‘opening up of the eyes’ (*anibue*; *anite*) onto new ways of being for a young

man trained from childhood to serve the Asantehene in Kumase (see McCaskie 1999). Like Yaw Awua and others of the refugee *asokwafɔɔ*, Kwame Tua must have understood that his enemies Yaa Kyaa and her son were no match for British industrial and military power, and that if the stories and rumours circulating around him were accurate then Asante, enfeebled by its civil war, would soon become a British possession. He must have understood, too, that life in Cape Coast was every bit as ruled over by the need for money and wealth as was Kumase, but here there was no royal court to support and progress the aspirant young man (*akwankwaa*; pl. *nkwankwaa*). Instead, the individual must find his own opportunities to make money. Kwame Tua had to look to himself. He traded and then became a trained carpenter in a town undergoing a building boom. He also had great and evolving musical skills, and equipped with these he found himself by chance in the right place at the right time.

The polyglot palm wine drinking bars of Cape Coast were home to crowds of port workers and visiting seamen, and new musical styles were forged in this milieu. Perhaps the most important of the many instruments introduced by sojourners was the guitar. ‘Kru boys’ used a two-finger guitar style and this was picked up by local Akan habituated to playing the indigenous stringed *sanku* and *seperewa* in much the same manner.³ The legendary Kwame Asare, taught to play guitar by a Kru sailor, became the leading local maestro of Cape Coast’s emerging ‘palm wine’ music style (a forerunner of ‘highlife’). His father was a musician in his own right and was also a storekeeper who sold carpenters’ tools. Whether or not Kwame Tua came to immerse himself in the local music scene through this connection is unknown, but it must be deemed a distinct possibility. Certainly, it was in Cape Coast that Kwame Tua came fully into his own as an innovative musician and singer. He played the guitar and *seperewa*, and he composed in the new styles for accordion and concertina (*brofo sankuo*) and for the guitar (*asiko*). With fellow musicians he performed his own songs at weddings, funerals, society and other parties, and during Christmas, Easter and other festivals. He sang and played for money and alcohol, and it was in Cape Coast that he came more fully to inhabit the sort of individualistic persona hinted at in his earlier life. A master of words as well as music, Kwame Tua employed song in a highly personal way, to praise or damn others, to comment on life and on the issues of the day, and to heighten, foreground and release his own emotions (Nketia 1973; Collins 1996; see also Feld 2012; Plageman 2012; Shipley 2013).

Numerous Asante traders as well as refugees came to Cape Coast in the early 1890s. All brought information of variable quality about political affairs in Kumase. Yaw Awua cultivated such people, for he had become a British intelligence source who frequently made visits to Government House in Accra. His years of intriguing in Asante affairs, following his theft and flight from Kumase, convinced him that it was only a matter of time before irresistible British power annexed Agyeman Prempeh’s kingdom. He worked towards that end, and expected to prosper in the ensuing colonial dispensation. Kwame Tua saw similar opportunities in British suzerainty, and thought that he might return home and finally gain wealth and status under British rule. Cape Coast, as noted, ‘opened up his eyes’ to an order based on individual achievement rather

³The earliest description known to me of Asante musical instruments is in Bowdich (1819: 361–9).

than ascribed rank, in which the former royal drummer, now a worker on his own behalf and an experimental musical virtuoso, might give free rein to his talents, opinions, desires and dislikes. In 1896, the British occupied Kumase and sent Yaa Kyaa, Agyeman Prempeh and their most important councillors into exile. The tale of this largely unplanned, ad hoc usurpation by local British actors, and of the anarchic dislocations that ensued, has been fully told elsewhere (Wilks 2000a; McCaskie 2000b). Yaw Awua, Kwame Tua and many others now returned to Kumase in the wake of British occupation.

III

A well-informed, Twi-speaking contemporary of Kwame Tua said of him that he was brave, astute and very eloquent, but also aggressive and a bully (Asare 1915). After 1896, Kwame Tua exhibited all of these traits in Kumase and gained a singular notoriety among those whom the Asante recall bitterly as bullying extortioners (*ahupofofo*). He first settled in the Domakwae quarter of Kumase in a dwelling close by that of Abū Bakr, his companion of a decade earlier in his flight from Buna to the Gold Coast Colony. He seized lands around Kumase that belonged to the Asokwa stool and established tenant farmers on them. He was often in the company of Donald Stewart, the harassed British Resident in Kumase, and let everyone know that the new rulers listened to his opinions and took his advice. To make money he practised extortion (*ɔkahyɛ*), which he dressed up as the recovery of legitimate debts (*aka dan*). He carried a charm called *kabere* and used it to detect thieves and other malefactors so that he could fine them. He used an animal skin whip to scourge people (*ka mpire*) who stood up to him when he demanded money. All around Kumase he and his gang of ruffians extracted whatever they could from people, so much so that in Mpankrono village Kwame Tua is recalled as ‘a beast of prey’ (*akekaboa*) of fierce demeanour and insatiable appetites (*ɔyɛ keka*).⁴ All of this predation was carried out in the name of, and with the purported sanction of, the British. In truth, in its earliest years the colonial regime was so undermanned, ignorant, fragile and nervous that it depended on people like Kwame Tua just to keep it informed, and to suppress any opposition by cowing people with or without the rule of law. Kwame Tua was acknowledged to be quite fearless, but all too often in a swaggeringly insolent way. Precolonial *nhenkwaa* sometimes behaved like this, but ultimately they were answerable to the Asantehene. Kwame Tua moved beyond this kind of behaviour to practise what the Asante termed *akokurokosem*, the magnification of the self exclusively in one’s own interests.

It was at this time, and as an extension of the foregoing, that Kwame Tua started to pioneer a new conception of the Asante ‘big man’ (*ɔbirempon*; pl. *abirempon*). In the precolonial era, being recognized as such was linked to office holding and sump-tuary laws; these were carefully calibrated by rank and degree, and defined for each individual the ways in which wealth might be consumed and displayed in dress, regalia, accoutrements, and so on. An office holder who exceeded his status in

⁴The man who recited these epithets to me in Mpankrono spat deliberately and forcefully on the ground whenever he mentioned Kwame Tua by name.

consumption and display was said to lack appropriate self-control, and the act of ‘eating’ (*di*, or ‘consuming’) in this manner carried royal sanctions and penalties for intemperately vain and offensive behaviour. Kwame Tua consumed wealth (and women) in great quantities, and wore about his person an excessive display of gold ornaments. In part, this reflected his own experience of the individualism of European *laissez-faire* capitalist modernity at Cape Coast. Indeed, one of his standard catchphrases in dismissing someone as being of no worth was to say ‘he has never been to the coast’ (*ankɔ mpoano da*). And yet Kwame Tua remained very much an Asante man, with a powerful drive to legitimize himself by occupying an important stool in emulation of all the ‘big men’ in the culture of his childhood and youth. It is known that Kwame Tua, and some others like him, constantly badgered British officialdom to award them important stools. Not to do so, they said, was to expose the colonial enterprise to conspiracy and insurrection by unreconciled incumbents who yearned for the restoration of Agyeman Prempeh (see Asare 1915).

Kwame Tua was right, at least up to a point. In later life he recalled that when the final Asante uprising – the *yaa asantewaakɔ* – ‘was being boiled, I first heard of it and gave information to Mr. Hutton the Resident who took it to be a trifle word’.⁵ As is well known, Governor Hodgson’s demand for the surrender of the Golden Stool was the final provocation that led to hostilities. By this time, Hodgson mistakenly thought that the stool was hidden at Bare Tonto Kokoben, north of Kumase, because of faulty intelligence that had reached him in Accra. Kwame Tua now compounded this error by saying that he had it on the authority of his mother Yaa Mena and others that the stool was indeed in Bare Tonto Kokoben. Kwame Tua guided a British force there. Nothing was found, but the British troops had to fight their way back to safety in Kumase. Kwame Tua informed the British that revolt had been fomented by the Kumase Gyaasawahene Opoku Mensa, and that it was he who had given the order to attack the column on its way back from Bare Tonto Kokoben. Opoku Mensa was detained in the Kumase fort and died there of British neglect – or, as his stool elders thought, he was murdered by Kwame Tua or one of his agents. As will be seen in due course, this death was to have consequences.

Kwame Tua recruited fifty ‘young men’ to fight in defence of the besieged British in the Kumase fort, and fourteen of these were killed. Worse followed. Yaa Mena, mother to Kwame Tua and Kwasi Apea Nuama, was apprehended and killed by the insurgents, together with twelve of her kinfolk. According to oral sources, the murder of Yaa Mena was an extravagantly brutal act of revenge against Kwame Tua. She was beheaded and her corpse was mutilated before being cut up and thrown into the bush for scavenging animals to consume.⁶ It is severally recalled in Kumase that Yaa Mena’s murder was carried out by Kwaku Akyerem and Kwabena Akompi, acting on behalf of their fellow members of the Gyaasewa *mmamma* – sons and patrilineal grandsons of the celebrated Gyaasawahenes Opoku Frefre (d. 1826) and Adu Bofɔ (d. 1883), the latter being the father of Opoku Mensa. No less an authority than Asantehene Opoku Ware II told me sadly that the killing of Yaa Mena was comprehensible,

⁵NAG, Kumase, ARG 1/2/25/9, Kwame Tua to CCA, dd. Kumase, 30 May 1931.

⁶Thus, when Kwasi Apea Nuama celebrated a funeral custom in Kumase in 1912 for the long dead Yaa Mena, there was no formal interment because there were no remains to bury.

but executed in a quite unacceptably excessive manner. It is worth pausing over the horrific death of Kwame Tua's beloved mother, for it had a very specific impact on him. In a paroxysm of grief, he swore a solemn oath to avenge himself on the Gyaasewa stool and its people.

In June 1900, Hodgson and a party that included Kwame Tua, among a number of other Asante supporters of the British, broke out of the Kumase fort and fled in a pitiable condition to Cape Coast. While they were there and in Accra, British military reinforcements crushed Asante resistance. Resident Stewart held a formal reception on the parade ground in front of the Kumase fort for Kwame Tua and others who had returned to Asante with him. It is said that at the close of this event Stewart listened uncomprehendingly with all the gathered Asante to a song composed for the occasion by Kwame Tua. He played guitar and accordion and was accompanied by his friends Amankwaa and Osei Dwenti on the small and twin gongs (*dawuro*; *nawutia*). The song was in the *asiko* style, and it used innuendo (*akutia*) and comic insult (*ayensin*) to disparage members of the old regime. This song is long lost, but it is reasonable to surmise that it contained versions of some of the *ad hominem* insults directed at the same people by Kwame Tua in later compositions. Akan Twi is a language rich in gross insults, but these were not utilized by Kwame Tua (see Warren and Brempong 1977). Instead, he tried to pin down individuals by highlighting or exaggerating things that were widely whispered about them. Thus, Yaa Kyaa was 'a forger of lies' (*ɔbɔmafo*), 'addicted to hypocrisy' (*nkontompo*), and 'a back-stabber who said one thing and did another' (*nkɔmmodifo a goru nnipa ho*); in turn, her son Agyeman Prempeh was ruled by 'a lack of humane consideration in all things' (*agygyirisem*); and the old elite of Asante office holders were 'good for nothing' (*akisiwa*; lit. 'insignificantly small rats').⁷

IV

Early in 1901, Stewart submitted a list of sixteen Asante 'loyalists' to Accra, and announced his intention of assigning them to the stools left vacant after the war of 1900–01. This was approved, and on 25 March the nominees were formally confirmed in office in Kumase. Kwame Tua was made Kumase Gyaasewahene. 'When the war was over,' he declared, 'I was asked by Government to tell what best I liked that they can award to me for my assistance given them, and I preferred to occupy the stool of Obuabasa (Jasewah).'⁸ Kwame Tua had got what he wanted, and the tale of his turbulent incumbency of Gyaasewa, and his battles with its *mmamma* and subjects as he sought revenge for his mother's murder and to enrich himself at their expense, is the most lavishly documented episode in his life history; it is still recalled as such today.⁹ The first thing he did after his appointment

⁷Conversations with *akyeame* Buasiako Antwi and Baffour Osei Akoto, dd. Kumase, 1996, 1998 and 2000.

⁸NAG, Kumase, ARG 1/2/25/9, Kwame Tua to CCA, dd. Kumase, 30 May 1931.

⁹The principal documentary sources are NAG, Kumase, ARG 1/2/1/3, 'Deposition of Chief Kwami Tuah (from Gasiwa stool) by his subjects', dd. 1905–06, with enclosures; Asare (1915); Denteh (1965); Nana Opoku Frefre II (1975); Manhyia Record Office, Kumase, CRB Native Tribunal 17, Obaapanin Ekuah Afriyeh v. Chief Kwadjo Poku, dd. 1932–33; University of Ghana-Legon, Ashanti Court Records Series, AS/CR 101, Mmamahene Joseph Kwesi

was to take personal custody of all the Gyaasewa stool property and regalia. This included 80 *mperedwan* of gold dust (worth £640 sterling at the time) and a keg of silver. He sought and recuperated villages and subjects lost to Gyaasewa since the 1880s. These he taxed or fined as he saw fit. He copied the Asantehene, charging a hefty *ntaanu* (£16 sterling) even for minor offences. He doubled the amount of the war indemnity imposed on the Gyaasewa *mmamma* by the British and pocketed the difference. He built not one but three houses in Kumase ‘in the European style’, and he designed and commissioned his own *kente* ‘tartan’ from the royal weavers at Bonwire. And, in an unequivocal sign of the arriviste as Asante ‘big man’, he began to ‘consume’ (*di*) women of high status. By 1907 he had sixteen wives, five of whom were ‘princesses’ (*ahenemma*), daughters of Asantehenes Kofi Kakari, Mensa Bonsu and Kwaku Dua Kumaa.¹⁰ Kwame Tua ‘commissioned huge gold and silver bracelets and anklets’ for these women, and this ‘extravagant lifestyle’ was paid for by extorting as much money as possible from his subjects (Asare 1915). This sort of ostentatious display attracted comment, and it was rumoured that Kwame Tua lay down to sleep on a golden bed in a room full of valuables.¹¹

In August 1905, Chief Commissioner Fuller inaugurated a colonial Council of Chiefs in Kumase. This had fifteen original members, including Kwame Tua. The purpose of this body was to assist the Chief Commissioner to govern in the manner of a de facto Asantehene. Kwame Tua’s principal role was ‘to gather information’ and report ‘secretly’ to Fuller (Wilks 2000b).¹² This was the last straw as far as the beleaguered Gyaasewa *mmamma* were concerned. In September, they declared Kwame Tua to be customarily destooled. Fuller demanded explanations from both parties. Kwame Tua said that his opponents were trying to foment another uprising, and were conspiring to involve him in it. His enemies made the following charges: that Kwame Tua had leprosy (this had been the ostensible reason for the destoolment of Gyaasewahene Adu Nantwiri in the 1840s); that he had secured a personal loan of £157 using stool property as surety; and that he had extorted and stolen money relentlessly and on a large scale. Kwabena Asubonten, a senior member of the *mmamma*, then submitted to Fuller a detailed list of Kwame Tua’s fiscal malpractices. This included fifty-seven documented instances of extortion, amounting to £1,500 in all; a second list raised that total by a further £1,000. Fuller feared that this discontent was the prelude to a general insurrection, as Kwame Tua consistently told him.

The Chief Commissioner now summoned both sides to a hearing on Gyaasewa stool affairs. The *mmamma* argued that Kwame Tua was not one of them, and so as a usurper he had no interest in the future well-being of the stool and was content

Edubofuor v. Charles E. Osei, dd. 1939–40; Rhodes House, Oxford, Mss. Brit. Emp. S.344. Harper Papers; and Nana Otamakuro Adubofuor (Pinanko Nifahene) (2000).

¹⁰These five *ahenemma* were Yaa Dufie of Kumase, Afua of Breman, Afua of Atrama, Yaa of Asokwa, and Amma Benehene of Kumase; this last was a daughter of Asantehene Kofi Kakari, and she stayed with Kwame Tua ‘even when he became poor’.

¹¹This story is a staple of the Asante mythology surrounding self-created great wealth. (In)famously, Krobo Edusei – Nkrumah’s tribune in Kumase, and a Convention People’s Party (CPP) government minister – was said to have had a gold bed made for his use. The transgression is that of *lèse-majesté* or ‘placing oneself above the Asantehene’, who lies in state in ‘the great golden room’ (*sika dan*) after his death.

¹²NAG, Kumase, ARG 1/2/25/9, Kwame Tua to CCA, dd. Kumase, 30 May 1931.

to loot its very considerable riches and spend them on himself. Kwame Tua countered that a conspiracy to remove him had existed since his installation, and that this was bound up with a scheme to raise another rebellion against the British. Fuller was concerned above all with the security of colonial rule, and so he found for Kwame Tua and said that he would not be destooled now or at any time in the future. The Gyaasewa *mmamma* refused to accept this decision, and continued to bombard the British with letters of complaint. Then, on 10 October, with Fuller intransigent on the matter, an angry crowd of Gyaasewa subjects broke into one of Kwame Tua's Kumase houses, ransacked it, and assaulted him. Fuller now acted with draconian speed. Custodial sentences of one to three years were handed down to three 'ringleaders' and others received swingeing fines and were bound over to keep the peace. The resistance to Kwame Tua did not disappear, but instead became covert and desperate. A solemn oath was taken among the malcontents to kill him. Kwame Tua got wind of this, fled to the security of his brother Kwasi Apea Nuama's dwelling in Kumase Nsuase, and from there communicated to Fuller an offer finally to abdicate. Fuller at last accepted defeat, but reluctantly and with singular conditions. He declared Kwame Tua to be destooled, but replaced him from the Gyaasewa *mmamma* with Kwabena Asubonten, and not with the malcontents' choice of Kwadwo Poku. More startlingly, he decreed that the now destooled Kwame Tua was to keep his seat on the Kumase Council of Chiefs, and to support this status he allowed him to retain two of his new urban houses and a large silver stool that had been made to his specifications. He also made an *ex gratia* payment of £200 to Kwame Tua for his loyal service, and raised this without any demur to £350 when the recipient asked for more.

This arrangement is unique in the archive pertaining to the British removal of Asante chiefs from office. Not only that, but while the case was ongoing Kwame Tua wrote to Fuller no fewer than thirteen times from September to November 1905. Fuller never replied in writing, but internal evidence in the files reveals that the two men met several times to discuss the crisis. Kwame Tua presented himself as an *ahenkwa* in Fuller's service, 'now you are the King of Ashanti'. And, in the manner of an Asante monarch, the Chief Commissioner seems to have 'promised to get me [Kwame Tua] up in a good post' if the Gyaasewa *mmamma* succeeded in taking the stool back. When Kwame Tua told Fuller that he intended to abdicate, 'I replied that I would only allow his abdication on certain terms, which would provide him with ample compensation.' After he had left office, Kwame Tua wrote to thank the Chief Commissioner for all the 'benefits' he had secured for him. All this strikes one as an oddly high level of care and consideration by a senior representative of the British Crown towards a man he thought 'frank and fearless', but also 'addicted to drink' and often 'foolish' and 'tactless'.¹³ If we leave to one side the perennial colonial anxiety about security, or even an unlikely fellow feeling between the two men, then how are we to explain what transpired? To this day, Asante oral memory is convinced that the wily Kwame Tua knew too much about Fuller's personal affairs

¹³NAG, Kumase, ARG 1/2/1/3, Kwame Tua to CCA, dd. Kumase, 8, 12, 14, 18, 22 and 24 September, 11 October, and 8, 11, 20, 21, 24 and 28 November 1905; and CCA to Colonial Secretary (Accra), dd. Kumase, 28 September and 29 November 1905.

for the Chief Commissioner of Asante (CCA) simply to abandon him. It is certainly the case that Fuller set himself up to be – and was seen as – an Asantehene, at a time when an infant colonial administration was mired in a system that still operated very much in terms of its own historical rules. Of course, Asantehenes received gifts of gold from parties who hoped to benefit from their patronage. Was Fuller also offered such donations, and did he accept them? Quite simply, we do not know. What we do know is that in 1919 Fuller retired from his post, was awarded a KBE, and went off to live in a villa in Antibes until his death in 1944. We also know that after his long tenure in Asante, government in Accra began to entertain doubts about the high level of independent power exercised by the Chief Commissioner as chairman of the Kumase Council of Chiefs.¹⁴ While we cannot give firm answers to these surmises and possibilities, it is perhaps worth remarking that even today historians tend to accept without much questioning the British colonial civil service's high view of its own probity.

V

The Akuapem catechist Asare, who knew all those involved in the Gyaasewa dispute, reported that Kwame Tua decided to abdicate after fleeing for safety to his brother's house in Kumase. The two had a talk, and Kwasi Apea Nuama offered the following advice: 'Even where subjects are contented with a chief, governing them is not easy. How much more difficult it is then when you are out of favour with them. It would be better for you to give up.' Kwame Tua pondered this, and when it became clear that Fuller would ensure his future income, property and security, he decided to quit (Asare 1915).

Kwame Tua returned to musical innovation, composition and performance. He refined his already formidable skills, and became the acme of what Asante people expected in a virtuoso. The renowned Asante musicologist Nketia singled out Kwame Tua as an illustrative example of this kind of supreme artist, and characterized the type at length. The Asante performer, he observed, 'must be guided by knowledge of tradition, a knowledge of how to construct a phrase, how and where to add a second part, how to build up new material and place it against something that is already going on, how to increase the animation of the piece'. The performer, he went on, 'can always reproduce what he has learned', but the very best 'are those who can bring their own individual artistic contribution into what they are doing. Ability in handling these uncodified structural procedures enables the creative performer to create and recreate pieces in appropriate contexts' (Nketia 1973: 99–100). A person who was supremely good at this, such as Kwame Tua, gave the auditory lead in a spectacle that might include additional musicians, dancers and other participants. The customary praise term for such a person was 'your playing is a beautiful thing' (*wɔ agorɔ yi yɛ fɛ*). Kwame Tua favoured the guitar, which, like the traditional *seperewa*, was often associated

¹⁴See NAG, Accra, ADM 11/1/1906, 'Ex-King Prempeh, 1926–7', enclosing 'Position of the Kumasi Council of Chiefs by Governor Guggisberg: Secret Memorandum', dd. 12 February 1925; and NAG, Accra, ADM 11/1/1313, 'Coomassie Council of Chiefs'.

with the venting of strong emotions such as love and loss, and with excessive behaviour in which alcohol consumption played an enabling part. Early colonial Kumase's new elite of arriviste merchants, businessmen and stool holders commissioned Kwame Tua to sing their praises in compositions tailored to a wide range of social occasions, from traditional drinking parties (*saadwa*) to individual rites of passage, and even on occasions when, for example, a rich man (*sikani*) wanted to be seen by an audience moving into his newly built house in the European style. Skills at Kwame Tua's level were needed for these sorts of compositions, for the musical ferment of the times meant that clients often demanded a combination of orthodox Asante devices with novel elements they might have heard around them as they went about their daily lives.

Kwame Tua, however, was not simply a tame composer for hire. In the Asante manner, he also employed his talents to give expression to his personality. Countless oral testimonies concur in saying that he was eloquent in his mastery of allusion and euphemism, but also cantankerous and quarrelsome. His life experiences, culminating in the crisis over the Gyaasewa stool, made him adversarial and even cynical. With some justification he saw enemies all around him, and he used his music to criticize and deflate individuals and practices that attracted his disapproval. He composed and performed songs that mocked people and things, and an appreciative Kumase public lapped up and circulated these biting commentaries. One of these songs took aim at rich old men who accumulated women (which included Kwame Tua himself, at least in the younger days of his stool-holding pomp): 'Having once been impotent in your youth, how can you expect to be virile in your old age?' (*Wo anwoba wo mmerantee bere mu na worebebo ako kora a na worebe wo?*). Another such song mocked those bereaved married folk who hurried through funeral observances on their way to another liaison or partner: 'the widow(er) who eats *fufu*' (*kumafo a odi atego*), an offence in that *fufu* should not be eaten before the *adaduanan* ('forty-day') funeral rite (see Donkoh 1994: 275–83). Kwame Tua punctured reputations, and even extended this tactic to litigation in which he was involved. Thus, I have been told that he quarrelled with the Tafohene Yaw Dabanka, and prior to their appearance in court he regaled the attending crowd with a composition that satirized and played with the meaning of the name *dabanka* (lit. 'the big iron rod').

Kwame Tua was curious, adventurous, and notably open to new experiences. In conjunction with his continued loyalty to the British (or to Fuller), this prompted him, aged about fifty, to undertake a remarkable initiative. In 1916, the Gold Coast Regiment was embarked at Sekondi to take part in the East African campaign. Towards the end of that year it suffered heavy losses in action against the Germans in the vicinity of Kilwa. As a result of this, and because of casualties from disease, it was necessary to raise a second draft. On 25 March 1917, Fuller convened a meeting in Kumase in order to recruit men for East Africa. Kwame Tua voluntarily enlisted. In April he sailed for East Africa. He spent nearly a year and a half there on active service, and he came home to Kumase in September 1918. He had the substantive rank of corporal, but had also held the acting rank of sergeant, in number 4 platoon, 'B' company. The following year he was one of those ex-servicemen awarded the Military Medal and a bounty by the Gold Coast government. During his military service, Kwame Tua took an interest in the Gold Coast regimental band, and is said to have learned to play the kettle drum and the cornet. He wrote songs about the sorts

of complaints familiar to all soldiers, from monotonous army rations to martinet sergeant majors (Nketia 1973: 95–6).

After the First World War, Kwame Tua appears only in glimpses. We know that he had personal problems in advancing age, very probably with alcohol and women, and certainly with increasing poverty. At one level he was a victim of his own innovative success. He was copied by younger men, who then built upon his legacy in their own ways to satisfy ever evolving public tastes. His ‘disciples’ included Kwame Mensa (a Muslim convert who took the name Kramo Seidu) and Ata Kwabena. The former was a master of the bamboo ‘flute’ (*durugya*) that accompanied some of the Asantehene’s horn ensembles. Kwame Mensa then learned to play the accordion and became a songwriter. Ata Kwabena came from Mampon in north Asante, and, like Kwame Tua, he became a guitar virtuoso. By the 1930s new artists were being recorded in London as well as locally by Zonophone, HMV and other companies, and some 200,000 records (78 rpm) were being produced annually for the West African market. Apart from age and fashion, there is perhaps one other reason why Kwame Tua’s appeal declined. We have seen that he was trained first in the highly allusive and metaphorical Twi of the precolonial Asante court. By the 1930s, most of the mass audience had lost even their limited connection with that aesthetic tradition. The most distinguished musical memorialist of Kwame Tua today is Koo Nimo (b. 1934 as Daniel Amponsah). He found an old man in Kumase who taught him to play the *seperewa*, and then took the *odonson* folk music style and adapted it for guitar. He says that when he plays, the Asante audience sometimes has trouble understanding the references and meanings in his lyrics.

Kwame Tua’s last documented intervention in public affairs was in 1931, when he was in his mid-sixties. In that year Agyeman Prempeh died, and a contest ensued over who was to succeed him in office as ‘Kumasihene’, the British-appointed ruler of the Kumase division. The eventual winner was Kwame Kyeretwie (Osei Agyeman Prempeh II). Kwame Tua thoroughly disapproved of him. Unbendingly aristocratic and haughty, Kwame Kyeretwie was imbued with an unshakeably strong sense of elite entitlement. On a more personal level, it was rumoured that Kwame Kyeretwie had seduced a wife of Kwame Tua’s brother Kwasi Apea Nuama. So, Kwame Tua entered his unavailing protest by writing to the British. In a preface to his objections, he supplied his credentials by listing those colonial officials he had faithfully ‘served’ over three decades – Stewart, Henderson, Armitage, Fuller, Maxwell, and the then current CCA Newlands. He went on to allude to the matters already mentioned, but then reached the nub of his objections. In the 1880s, he said, the people supported Yaw Twereboanna, but Yaa Kyaa schemed and connived to make her son Agyeman Prempeh king. Now, in turn, her daughter was trying to impose her own son, Kwame Kyeretwie, on a people who did not want him. I showed this letter to *akyeame* Baffuor Osei Akoto, who said laconically that Kwame Tua was a ‘troublemaker’, and added that ‘no medicine exists to cure hatred’ (*otan ni aduru*).¹⁵

¹⁵NAG, Kumase, ARG 1/2/25/9, Kwame Tua to CCA, dd. Kumase, 30 May 1931; and Fortes Papers, Cambridge, 8.51, ‘Chief Nuama’, 1945.

I have no evidence about the last years of Kwame Tua's life beyond a general consensus among those who spoke about him that he died in poverty after a very long and disabling illness (most, but not all, mentioned heart trouble and strokes). I do not even know when he died, but the balance of opinion is that it was around 1950, when he was about eighty-five years old.

VI

I said at the start of this article that Kwame Tua has been a part of my thinking about Asante for four decades. I have now set down here all that I know about him from my own research, and from that of others chiefly interested in his musical career and contribution. This latter aspect of his life, vitally important to his sense of himself and to many of his contemporaries and successors, was unknown to Wilks and myself when we first reconstructed his trajectory in 1978. At that time, we thought of him as a 'transitional' figure, a man trained in the skills and status of a royal *ahenkwa* in a still independent Asante whose inherited world collapsed around him. In the new and uncertain colonial order, he repudiated (with a hatred personified in Yaa Kyaa and her son) a world that had betrayed his ambitions by its disappearance. He then identified himself with the new and rising world authored by the British, but Wilks and I had little idea of the impact Cape Coast made on his selfhood in the years that he lived there. We were on more familiar ground when he returned to Asante to pursue wealth, status and consumption through office holding in a deformed but recognizable reworking of the order once presided over by the Asantehene. And we were unsurprised by his fall into political forgetting, beyond the generic labelling of him as a totem of 'collaboration' in the oral memories of postcolonial Asante people.

It seems to me now that Kwame Tua is emblematic of a tension in the Asante – and perhaps in the African – past that predated colonial overrule but was highlighted by it, and that survives to this day in various modified guises. On one level, this is the old problem of lives transacted between a prescriptive and ascriptive social order on the one hand, and the desiring individual self on the other. Imperatives to and rejections of both are manifestly present in the life and unsettled – and unsettling – times of Kwame Tua.

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Abstract

This article is an interpretive biography of Kwame Tua (c.1865–1950), one of millions of Africans born into an independent society that was overtaken by colonial conquest and overrule. Kwame Tua was from Asante, now in the republic of Ghana, and held the ascriptive status of a royal servant (*ahenkwa*) who might have expected a specialist career as a royal hornblower. He was musically very gifted. However, after ruinous civil wars in the 1880s, the Asante king was sent into exile in 1896, and from 1901 to 1957 his kingdom was a British Crown Colony. This article discusses Kwame Tua's responses to these radically altered circumstances and his efforts to forge a place and identity for himself between the new imperial order and his Asante inheritance. It is argued throughout that the pursuit of detail is all in such a study so that we can get as close as possible to the personality of the individual in interaction with the times he lived through.

Résumé

Cet article est une biographie interprétative de Kwame Tua (c.1865–1950), l'un des millions d'Africains nés dans une société indépendante tombée sous le joug de la conquête coloniale. Originaire de la région Ashanti aujourd'hui située dans la république du Ghana, Kwame Tua occupait le statut ascriptif de serviteur royal (*ahenkwa*) qui aurait pu espérer une carrière spécialisée de sonneur de cor. Il était très doué pour la musique. Mais, après des guerres civiles désastreuses dans les années 1880, le roi ashanti fut envoyé en exil en 1896 et son royaume devint une colonie de la couronne britannique de 1901 à 1957. Cet article traite

de la réaction de Kwame Tua à ce changement radical de circonstances et de ses efforts pour se forger une place et une identité entre le nouvel ordre impérial et son héritage ashanti. Tout au long de l'article, l'auteur souligne que la recherche du détail est essentielle dans une telle étude pour aller au plus près de la personnalité de l'individu en interaction avec l'époque qu'il traversait.