



## Original Article

## Mining and conflict in the Akyem Abuakwa Kingdom in the Eastern Region of Ghana, 1919–1938



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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the conflict involving the *Okyenhene* Ofori Atta I and two of his subordinate chiefs, Kwaku Amoah of Asamankese and Odikro Kwame Kuma of Akwatia, in colonial Ghana. Popularly referred to in Ghanaian historiography as the “Asamankese Crisis”, this conflict was triggered by the discovery and subsequent exploitation of diamonds in the township of Akwatia. It is argued that the quest for resource control in the Akyem Abuakwa traditional area proved to be a major driver of social conflicts in Ghana during the period under study.

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## 1. Introduction

Ghana one of the few countries in West Africa perceived to be an oasis of peace in a region otherwise characterised by civil wars, rebel activities and general instability. But this image about only masks a festering wound of communal violence, inter-ethnic conflicts and armed confrontations in the northern part of the country. Since 1980, Northern Ghana has witnessed intermittent eruptions of either intra-ethnic or inter-ethnic conflicts. There have been wars fought between the Nanumba and the Konkomba in 1981, 1994 and 1995; between the Bimoba and the Konkomba in 1984, 1986 and 1989; between the Nawuri and the Gonja in 1991 and 1992; and between the Konkomba, Nawuri, Basari and the Nchumuru on the one hand and the Gonja on the other hand in 1992 (Mbowura, 2012).

The north, however, is not the only place in Ghana where conflicts have or tended to erupt. Notably, the quest for resource control in the gold-aggregated and diamondiferous areas in the south has triggered social conflicts during the country's pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. This paper contributes to this debate by providing a detailed analysis of resource control in the Akyem Abuakwa traditional area, a major mining-related disputed which occurred in Ghana during the colonial period. Here, the discovery of diamonds ‘ignited’ a conflict between Nana Ofori

Atta (the paramount chief of Akyem Abuakwa) and Kwaku Amoah, the chief of Asamankese, who at the time served under Ofori Atta in the colonial hierarchy. Both Ofori Atta and Amoah claimed the right to grant concessions and extract royalties arising from the diamond discovery. Amoah was joined by several allies, most notably, Kwame Kuma of Akwatia, the chief of Accra (the Ga Mantse), the colonial capital, and the sub-chiefs of two subdivisions of Accra (Osu and James Town). The crisis escalated when Amoah and Kuma declared their intentions to secede from Akyem Abuakwa.

The crisis was defused by the colonial administration. It came to Ofori Atta's aid by implementing the Asamankese Division Stool Treasury Ordinance (ADRO), which stripped Amoah of his control over the Asamankese Treasury and placed it into the hands of the colonial government. The colonial government made the correct decision because Ofori Atta had a legitimate traditional claim to the land and natural resources of Akyem Abuakwa. Kwaku Amoah, however, was an unscrupulous chief who defied tradition for personal gain. In this project he was assisted by a group of Western-educated lawyers from a nationalist organisation, the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA). Similar to Amoah, the lawyers were motivated by self-interests and disrespectful towards tradition.

## 2. Methodology and study location

The study uses a historiographical approach that combines the use of primary and secondary data sources in a complementary

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**Table 1**  
A glossary of important words.

Term	Meaning
Okyenhene	The Paramount ruler (Chief) of the Akyem Abuakwa Kingdom. In this paper, the use of the word Okyenhene refers expressly to Nana Ofori Atta I
Benkumhene	The Chief of the left division of Akyem Abuakwa
Akwamuhene	The Paramount Chief of the Akwamu traditional area
Apesemaka	A branch of the Asamankese Asafo who opposed the reign of Okyenhene Ofori Atta I
D.C.	District Commissioner (a British colonial official)
Omanhene	Paramount ruler of a traditional Akan state

manner. These data were supplemented by oral data collected through field work. The bulk of the primary, mainly archival, data were derived from documents preserved in the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Accra and Koforidua, as well as in the Akyem Abuakwa State Archives (AASA) at the Kyebi Royal Palace (see Table 1 presents an overview of the cast of characters presented in this paper).

### 3. Location of Akyem Abuakwa

Modern Akyem territory comprises over 3120 square miles of land (Addo-Fening, 1988). It shares borders with Kwahu to the north and north-west and with Krobo, New Dwaben and Akwapim to the east and south-east. In the South, Akyem Abuakwa borders Agona and in the West, Akyem Kotoku. Stretching from Gyegyeti and Kankang in the north to Adeiso in the south-west, Akyem Abuakwa spans the Nsawam-Nkawakaw railway with the greater part of the state lying west of it (Fig. 1). Akyem consists of three subdivisions: Abuakwa, Kotoku and Bosome. The largest sub division, Abuakwa, occupies about two-thirds of Akyem territory and measures approximately 1870 square miles. (Addo-Fening, 1997; Gold Coast Review 1(1) 1925; Debrunner, 1967). Kotoku and Bosome share the remaining one-third to the west. Akyem Abuakwa's population in 2000 was estimated at 1,160,000 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010).

### 4. Context

During their period of migration from Adanse to Bansa and their subsequent occupation between the Pra and the Birem valley, the Akyem “acquired” a region which was both auriferous and diamondiferous. Some classic European texts portray Akyem Abuakwa as a primary source of gold (Jenkins, 1972). For example, in his writings, Macdonald (1896) simply refers to Akyem Abuakwa as “auriferous Akim”: by 1852, gold mining had, indeed, become a principal source of livelihood for the Abuakwa people. Moreover, according to Cruickshank (1858), within the same period, some parts of Abuakwa were reportedly as “prolific as Ashantee in gold production”. Between 1925 and 1939, the Consolidated African Selection Trust Company's plant, located at Akwatia, produced approximately 3,000,000 karats of gold at mines around Akwatia and Asubone, from a plot of 3.04 km<sup>2</sup> (Junner, 1943). Such an enormous endowment of mineral wealth made Akyem the envy of neighbouring states, especially Akwamu, which was already an imperial power to the south with an equally ambitious inclination to control trade. Finding it very difficult to conquer Akyem through arms, the Akwamu resorted to implementing harsh economic policies which indirectly granted them control of the gold trade at the expense of Akyem producers (Wilks, 1957; Dumehasie, 1997).

Akyem responded to this economic blockade by taking up arms. The numerous wars that ensued between the two states, therefore, eventually resulted in the decisive defeat of Akwamu

in 1730 (Wilks, 1957). By virtue of this victory, all Akwamu territories became integrated into the larger Abuakwa State, including such towns as Asamankese, Akwatia, Akyease, Tafo and Kwaman. The Abuakwa Kingdom extended from the River Pompom in the east, to the Pra in the west, and from the Kwahu boundary in the north, to the Densu River in the south.

All of these lands were governed by one customary law, the Abuakwa land tenure system, under which, the *Okyenhene* has the right of ownership of Abuakwa tribal lands for the paramount stool of the state. The sub-chiefs also claimed immediate control and administration of their stool lands. A citizen's title to his fallow [*mfuwa*] or *Asefia* (site of ruined building) remained inviolable subject to the exigencies of the state. The *Okyenhene's* role as the custodian and administrator of all Okyeman lands was duly acknowledged by all and sundry and thus reflected in the wealth sharing customary practices of Abuakwa: he was entitled to a portion of a snail harvest known as *Awafee* and leg of game (*Bosre*), one-third share of *Ahudee* (treasure trove), and one-third share of *Epo* (a nugget of gold valued upwards of £2). In the case of *Epo* and *Ahudee*, the two-thirds share goes to the discoverer and the stool occupant who owns the land (Dumehasie, 1997).

#### 4.1. The rise of diamond mining in Akyem Abuakwa

This section provides a detailed account of the dynamics of the conflict which the discovery and mining of diamonds in Akyem Abuakwa spawned. The rise of industrial mining in Abuakwa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries threatened not only this time-honoured customary practice but more significantly, political, economic and other social institutions. The European mining and prospecting firms negotiated for concessions and paid rents and royalties directly to stool occupants without reference to the *Okyenhene*. This ignited what would become a protracted dispute between the Paramount Stool and the Chief of Asamankese, a conflict often referred to as the *Asamankese Dispute*. It was one of the most celebrated cases arising from the politics of land alienation. This was not unprecedented but it was undoubtedly the most serious and protracted crisis in the history of Akyem Abuakwa.

Tradition has it that, during the seventeenth century, a party of refugees from Adanse led by one Ofori Panin settled in the area to the north of the Birem River in what is now Akyem Abuakwa (Addo-Fening, 1975). At the time of their arrival, most of the modern Akyem Abuakwa was a part of the Akwamu Empire, with its capital at Nyanoase. Asamankese was then an important town, in which the stool was next in position to that of the king of Akwamu (Wilks, 1957).

The Akyem were settled on the western border of the Akwamu Empire; and, from the mid-seventeenth century, they began to threaten the integrity of that empire through a series of incursions into its northern districts (Addo-Fening, 1975). The Akyem exerted the pressure on this north-western border until 1730 when, acting in alliance with mutinous subjects of Akwamu, they overran the entire western section of the empire, including the original Akwamu country which was thus lost forever to the Akwamu stool (Addo-Fening, 1975). The Ofori Panin (Paramount) Stool, under whose leadership the wars were fought, claimed ownership of the conquered Akwamu lands, and took “possession of all the Aquamboe Crows” (EFC Notes).<sup>1</sup> Asamankese, which formed a part of the vanquished Akwamu territory, was integrated into the Akyem state and came to be placed under the *Oseawuo* Wing of the kingdom. A cordial relationship ensued between the Ofori Panin Stool and the Stool of Asamankese. For a

<sup>1</sup> Dispatch from Apam (Gawron), 17 September, E.F.C. Notes, 214. Deposited at the Department of History Library, University of Ghana, Legon.

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