

Pieter Boele van Hensbroek

### **Beyond 'Westplaining' in writing West-African intellectual history**

#### Abstract

Describing the emergence of African nationalism as resulting from African intellectuals contacting Enlightenment idea about freedom and equality can be considered an example of 'Westplaining'. In this way indigenous knowledge traditions and social ideals are neglected and the creative thinking of African activists remains unseen. This paper reports on a study of Gold Coast debates and political action between 1870 and 1910 that tried to revitalise Fanti states in the face of British encroachment – with special attention to the remarkable Fanti Confederation and the Aborigines Rights Protection Society. It shows that, contrary to most accounts by historians, such movements were not steered by a separate, westernised 'educated elite', but were directly rooted in local political and intellectual cultures, and produced remarkably sophisticated and original political thinking.

#### Key words

Westplaining, Post-colonialism, Intellectual History, Gold Coast, Educated Elite, Fanti Confederation, Aborigines' Rights Protection Society.

#### Biographical information

Dr. Pieter Boele van Hensbroek works at the interfaculty Globalisation Studies Groningen institute and teaches political philosophy subjects in the university minor programme in Development Studies. He published a.o. the book *Political Discourses in African Thought: 1860 to the Present* (Westport Praeger, 1999). He taught at the University of Zambia and worked many years in cooperation programmes between the University of Groningen and universities in Africa and Asia.

The Israeli intellectual Einat Wilf coined the notion of ‘Westplaining’ to criticise those who analyse Palestinian positions by ignoring what Palestinians themselves say, while applying interpretations from the ‘West’. Also in writing African intellectual history it is always a struggle to understand historical African intellectuals from their own words and context of action. Interestingly the problem of Westplaining is shared by many ‘critical’ or ‘postcolonial’ academics who give colonialism (rather than capitalism, modernity, or globalisation) a central place in world history and absorb concepts, dichotomies and stereotypes that were coined exactly by colonialists and racists (like ‘race’, ‘the West’ vs ‘Africa’, ‘Black’ vs ‘White’, ‘individualist’ vs ‘communal’).<sup>1</sup> In this way the specific political agency of historical African intellectuals and their creative ideas remain unseen. This paper hopes to show that detailed study of the writings, speeches and actions of historical African intellectuals plus understanding these as interventions in specific political contexts can unlock a rich intellectual history.

Such an ‘unlocking’ intellectual history requires a focus on specific African discourses and intellectuals and cannot be general overviews of historical periods or regions – even less of ‘African’ thought, ‘traditional knowledge’, or generalised contrasts between ‘African’ and ‘Western’, ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ knowledges. In order to do justice to their creative and pioneering contributions, we have to specify exactly *which* intellectuals, *when* and *where*. Taking their words very seriously is thus both an academic and an ethical requirement for African Studies.

A good case-study is the intellectual dynamics at the end of the nineteenth century when European colonial expansion threatened to overpower existing political formations. Indigenous intellectuals grappled to find a response. Such a ‘Great Confrontation’ happened all over Africa (and beyond). The Unesco General History of Africa vol. VII starts with: “Never in the history of Africa did so many changes occur and with such speed as they did between 1880 and 1935”. I focus on the Gold Coast case not because as the most advanced or representative for Africa, but because of the good availability of sources. We can consult African newspapers, books, declarations, constitutions, and extensive colonial records. Thus, we can study all three reasonably well: the excellent historical works on the specific Gold Coast political context, the intellectual productions of the intellectuals themselves, and the scholarly interpretations of these intellectual products - thus trace possible Westplaining in the latter. Especially interesting are two extraordinary political movements in the Gold Coast, namely the Fanti Confederation around 1870 and the Aborigine’s Rights Protection Society (ARPS) founded 1896. Both political movements struggled to maintain Fanti sovereignty and self-determination in the face of mounting British encroachment during the nineteenth century.

### **The standard story about the ‘educated elite’**

General historical works on Africa (handbooks, encyclopaedias etcetera) pay much attention to political and economic history but remarkably little to intellectual culture. A General History of Europe would not do without extensive attention to Kant, Mill or Marx, but in UNESCO’s formidable project *General History of Africa* the attention to African thinkers is minimal.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to the

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Mignolo 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Although aiming at a solid African perspective, e.g. the name of the prominent Gold Coast lawyer and writer John Mensah Sarbah is not even mentioned. However, especially in the 1960s and 1970s a

often excellent, historical works on the Gold Coast in this period, the Fanti Confederation and the ARPS are analysed in terms of interactions between three groups of actors, Kings, the educated elite, and the British. The educated elite then is depicted as playing an intermediary, 'broker' role. Having had a European education, they are said to have infused western ideals and notions (like 'nation', 'constitution', 'rule of law', 'self-determination') into the indigenous political scene, thus planting the seeds of 'nationalism'. Such representations starts from a sociological, social groups, analysis. In that framing the 'educated elite' is clearly set apart with its own interests, dreams, and political projects. Being urban professionals, lawyers, traders, administrators they would be removed from the hinterland 'natives' and 'Natural Rulers' (as they often called themselves); being educated 'Black Englishmen' they believed in the civilising influence of Christianity and the British empire. The Nigerian historian Ayandele sketches the stereotype in a rather crude way: "... a new species of African – hybridized, transmogrified and passionate borrowers of Western values, ideas, norms, mores, thought-patterns, religion and cosmology; deserters of their fatherland's cultural heritage; revellers of the white man's mental world, worshippers of the white man's education, apostles of political, social, and cultural aspirations completely at variance with the aspirations of the rest of the continent".<sup>3</sup>

Even the excellent Ghanaian historian Abu Boahen writes: "having been told that they had no history worth taking seriously..." they "... inherited the acquisitive individualism of Western liberal democracy, particularly some of its Victorian tenets such as laissez-faire, the idea that knowledge meant power, belief in progress and the natural harmony of interests as well as the belief that 'ordered liberty' and prosperity went hand in hand."<sup>4</sup> Note that the wordings 'inherited' and 'having been told' suggest that the views and political ambitions of the educated did not result from autonomous thinking about the situation at hand. Let alone that their ideas could be an extension of political ideas and institutions historically rooted in Gold Coast societies (as some of these African intellectuals themselves explicitly claimed!). Even Trevor R. Getz's interesting 2008 book *African Voices of the Global Past: 1500 to the Present* interprets the Fanti Confederation as deriving from the adoption of 'bourgeois moral values promoted by the British middle class..', thus "... African merchants, professionals, and lawyers declared an independent state with a European-style government ..' which 'expressed the hopes and aspirations of the African bourgeoisie of the period'.<sup>5</sup>

### **Colonial roots of the standard story on the 'educated elite'**

Interestingly, this habit itself of castigating the educated echoes their description by colonial officers after 1870 as 'half-backed', 'half-caste', 'semi-educated savages', 'unprincipled', 'self-interested'. The relative openness of the colonial administration to educated Africans became quickly reduced in the last decades of the nineteenth century, due to the increasing actual power of the British, the ever

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number of specific interesting works on African political thinkers have appeared (Langley, July, Davidson, Ayandele, de Moraes Farias)

<sup>3</sup> Ayandele 1971, p 691

<sup>4</sup> Boahen 1985, p 633. Boahen's remarks concern the leadership of the NCBWA not the ARPS, but both had basically the same leadership. His stress on the fact that these movements had political independence 'decidedly not on their programme' (p. 642) sounds as an insult, whereas at this high tide of colonial occupation and empire it was on no agenda; however, self-government was (see below).

<sup>5</sup> Getz 2008, p 65

more virulent European racism, and the reduced need for Africans in the administration as quinine gave Europeans better survival chances on the Coast (the 'White Man's Grave'). But also the fact that the educated organised protest, petitions and court cases contributed much. A.W.L. Hemming, an influential officer at the London Colonial Office, called the educated 'the curse of the West Coast' and 'a thorn in the side of the Government of the Gold Coast'; 'all natives are incurable liars' he wrote in 1875.<sup>6</sup> The Gold Coast governors feared the Fanti Confederation initiative which was actually a united force of almost all actors in the Coast. An essential part of colonial strategies to reduce opposition was to create a divide between 'educated' and 'Natural Rulers', the 'true' Africans.

It is astonishing how this discourse of tarnishing the educated, fabricated by some of the worst colonials, remains so dominant even among African commentators and historians. It partly feeds upon again a Eurocentric prejudice, popular also among critical scholars, that if African intellectuals or activists favour constitutionalism, multipartyism, checks and balances or free markets, then they did not derive these views from their own assessment of the state of the world or their own ideals of freedom, and democracy, but that they must have imported these from 'the West'.<sup>7</sup> Such Westplaining is not only historically incorrect, but also an insult to all those in Africa who have been activists for such ideals.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, this paper has to counter at least two common prejudices about educated elite intellectuals. First, that the educated elite involvement in the Fanti Confederation and the ARPS was that of a separate interest group with its own agenda; second, the prejudice that they were importers of foreign ideas, delinking themselves from the political and cultural traditions of their countrymen. I will show that the educated elite's real political engagements (at least until 1900) were fully part of the efforts of the Kings and rulers in Fantiland to maintain their self-determination, and that the ideas were not derived from imports but were a transition within the intellectual and political histories of the Fanti peoples.

### **The alternative story: the educated continue the role of the Kyiame intellectual**

The alternative assessment of the educated has to start from the specific role of intellectuals in the tradition of Fante - Akan peoples, particularly the role of the Kyiame (often translated as 'spokesman' or 'linguist'). Joseph Casely Hayford, one of the key Gold Coast intellectuals between 1890 and 1930, describes the Kyiame thus: "The Linguist is the most important personage of the Native State. He is in some cases more influential than the Chief... he often attains to a position of great influence in the community. (...) The Linguist is generally the repository, or if you like, a walking encyclopaedia, of all

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<sup>6</sup> Hemming quoted from Reports and Minutes. Kimble, p 91. See also dispatches to the Colonial Office by e.g. Salmon for denigrating terms used.

<sup>7</sup> It also synchronises with an often observed fact that younger generations of Africans tend to criticise previous generations of being excessively 'westernised', while the newer generation in fact may itself lead a more 'westernised' life than any of the previous generations. I criticise the 'Import Thesis' in several texts (Boele van Hensbroek 1999 and 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Basil Davidson's magnificent book *The Black Man's Burden* is completely built around the idea that the Nation State has been an import from Europe with fatal consequences. The idea that political thinkers all over the world around 1900 could have concluded from their own serious analyses that the nation state is a necessary asset to overcome colonialism and/or achieve rapid modernisation, he does not account for. See my 'Cursing the Nation-State'.

traditional knowledge and information in connection with the stool under which he serves. (...) The linguist ... comes by his knowledge from the very first acquaintance with Court functions, history and tradition, continuing his education or training throughout the greater portion of his life, and often extending the field of his enquiries till his knowledge embraces the political history of the whole State, as well as of sister States. When he speaks, therefore, he does so as one having authority.<sup>9</sup> Every Stool had its Kyiame and the position of the highest grade, the Omankyiame, is hereditary. Thus growing up in the household of a Kyiame provides superior schooling in the knowledge base present and creates great responsibilities towards the traditional system in which one is rooted. Given the dramatic challenges to Gold Coast societies in the nineteenth century, it can be expected that the Kyiame families took up the challenges of European knowledge and power. It is reported that 'the Kings and Chiefs, and other inhabitants sent their sons to be educated in mission schools and in England, 'and be trained there in the English system of Parliamentary Government and as professional men''.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Kyiame lineages added European knowledge to their intellectual armoury as a conscious strategy. Who then were these 'sons'?

In a rarely cited 1991 article 'Prosopographical Approaches to Fante History' Augustus Casely Hayford reports on his sophisticated exercises in (partly computerised) tracing of family histories in Fante. He discovers continuities and linkages along family lines that contradict the easy categorisation of Fante society in three groups. Important family ties run straight through these artificial categories. Most important for my argument: he discovered that the three key intellectuals around 1900 were part of Oyiame families, John Mensah Sarbah grew up in the household of the Omankyiame Kodwo Kwegyir, J.E. Casely Hayford was born in the household of Reverend James Hayford, the Fante Oyiame Kwamina Afua, and J. De Graft Johnson was grandson of the Kyiame Joseph De Graft.

It is no accident that exactly Sarbah, Casely Hayford, De Graft Johnson, and later Danquah wrote extensive studies on the indigenous political systems to underpin ARPS claims. August Casely-Hayford claims that 'the earliest books came directly from the households of the Okyiame..'. He even uses the term 'metamorphosis': 'the indigenous skills metamorphosed from skills that had traditionally serviced the stools into skills that could best address colonial legislation'.<sup>11</sup> The picture of Fanti intellectuals that appears here is not at all one of alienated Black Englishmen, but of people who were rooted directly in their African traditions and strove to preserve, adjust and transform these to fit the difficult and radically changing context of increasing British intrusion and Fanti kings trying to preserve their sovereignty and self-determination.<sup>12</sup>

Such an alternative positioning of the intellectuals also fits much better with an analysis of the texts and politics discussions in the Fanti Confederation and the ARPS. It was only later, after 1900 and the final colonisation the Gold Coast and Ashanti, and after the chiefs and Kings became co-opted into the colonial administration and politically neutralised, that a clear split between these rulers and 'educated elite' appeared and that the last formulated their own political projects such as the

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<sup>9</sup> Casely Hayford 1903, p 69-70

<sup>10</sup> Kimble 1963, p. 92, quoting from an ARPS petition that outlined how the Kings responded to the 1865 Select Committee report on British retreat from the Coast. Almost all the 25 prominent people described by M.J. Sampson in his *Gold Coast Men Of Affairs* came from the most prominent families in their communities and were Mission-educated. In other parts of Africa mission school may have failed to attract children of the elite.

<sup>11</sup> Quotes from A. Casely-Hayford 1991, p 49 and p 50

<sup>12</sup> For understanding the long-term trends in 19th century Fante politics for preserving sovereignty, see Abodeka 1964. For a highly detailed reconstruction of it see Limberg 1974.

National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA). It was exactly the colonial administration that tried to brand the educated as a separate class, thus successfully splitting the Fanti opposition. Already in 1873 the Secretary of State Kimberley stated that it is better to have “nothing to do with the ‘educated natives’ as a body” and rule through the natural rulers only.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Movements, Texts and Innovative Ideas**

A short explanation of the Fanti Confederation and the ARPS is needed to prove the shared vision of educated and kings of preserving Fanti sovereignty.

#### **Fanti Confederacy**

A curious and important British Parliament Select Committee report in 1865 recommended a retreat from the Coast and gradual handing over to the ‘natives’. The Colonial Office and the British governors did not intend to actually follow this policy, but for West Africans it was a landmark. In combination with their resistance to an imposed exchange of trading forts between the Dutch and the British, it led to a revitalisation of an older tradition among Fante kings to meet in times of crisis in the town of Mankessim where they founded the Fanti Confederation in 1868.<sup>14</sup> Apart from bringing together a large army to prevent the exchange of forts, they formulated an ambitious modernisation programme and political structure for the region. The British governor saw this as a great threat, arrested some of the key members and effectively detached individual Kings from the Confederation by intimidation and offering favours and finances. The Kings still needed British protection against the powerful Ashanti empire to the north, which showed when in 1873 the Ashanti overran the Coast. An all-white British elite force came in and in 1874 inflicted total defeat on the Ashanti who were even chased out of their capital Kumasi. Instead of self-rule by the Fanti Confederation Gold Coast became a full Crown Colony.

#### **The Aborigine’s Rights Protection Society (ARPS)**

A new high-tide of political mobilisation occurred halfway the 1890s when the colonial government declared all unused land State land. This would end one of the last prerogatives of the Kings, namely to control the allocation of land. The African reaction was the founding of the Aborigines’ Rights Protection Society (ARPS) by Kings, traders and educated, maybe the first ‘modern’ political movement under colonial rule. Its first big action, a delegation to London, was a great success and the ARPS continued to be important for a decade. In the framework of these struggles high quality studies on the indigenous political systems were published by Sarbah and Casely Hayford and local newspapers, as well as the influential African Times (mostly filled by Africans but published in London), fanned political and cultural self-awareness.

Any assessment of these two movements has to take into account the political horizon at that moment in time. The Fanti Confederation tried to capitalise on the momentum of the 1865 Select Committee policy (the period of ‘Mid-Victorian Optimism’) and could have resulted in an effective

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Kimble 1963, p 90

<sup>14</sup> Agbodeka 1964 and Limberg 1974 give detailed reconstructions.

political formation.<sup>15</sup> The Kings and chiefs definitely had the lead in the Federation, with educated persons as advisors and secretaries. The ARPS operated with a quite different political horizon, namely the hard fact of colonial rule. J.B. Danquah noted later: “The Gold Coast people had effectively become part of the Empire, and for weal or woe, what they could best do to foster the national cause was to work from the British constitution itself ..”.<sup>16</sup> The ARPS struggled to preserve the remaining autonomy of indigenous rulers and to convince the British that self-rule building upon indigenous political institutions was a realistic option – next to inclusion into the Common Wealth similar to Canada or Australia.

Reading the books, newspapers, and constitutions produced around the two movements, one cannot but be impressed by the quality of arguments, scholarship and the political commitment expressed. Rather than imports from Europe, it are attempts to analyse and reframe indigenous institutions and to subsequently propose them as concrete indigenous alternatives to the imposed colonial order. They try to frame a policy of ‘modernisation-from-indigenous-roots’ and take the Meiji revolution of Japan as an example. They can also be compared to Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao in China trying to reframe and revitalise political alternatives from China itself.

A more detailed look the formulations of the Fanti Confederation and ARPS projects brings out the originality of ideas that remain unseen in the Westplaining traditions of writing history. For instance the 1871 Constitution of the Fanti Confederation contains policy ideas more ‘modern’ than their assumed Western tutors. Its Article 5 speaks of a President, elected by the body of Kings, while Article 38, Section 6 rings “To determine, according to the majority of votes of the people, the succession to the Stool of any king or chief.” Articles 21 to 25 speak of the establishments of ‘national schools’; “That schools be also established, and schoolmistresses procured to train and teach the female sex”; “That the expense of erecting each school be defrayed from the national purse ...”; “That in districts where Wesleyan Schools are at present established the kings and chiefs be requested to insist on the daily attendance of all children between the ages of eight and fourteen”.<sup>17</sup>Such an ambitious modernisation agenda shows the progressive thinking on the Coast in these years; taking it as import of copying work ignores that such a national agenda cannot be found in Europe in the early 1870s! Like Benedict Anderson showed that Latin America preceded Europe in developing the idea of a ‘nation’, and like the modern idea of Civil Society developed earlier in Latin America and Eastern Europe than in the West, we have to admit that several Fanti Confederation policies were more progressive than European ones at the time.

My second example of creative political thought is the work of J.E. Casely Hayford – lawyer, newspaper publisher and politician. His *Gold Coast Native Institutions* is a 260 pages analysis of Akan political systems, of the history of dealings with the colonials, and his suggestions as to how Gold Coast could create its own modernisation building further from its traditions. “On what lines to proceed? He will take the Native State System ... and develop and improve upon it on aboriginal lines, and on scientific principles” and “.. you have a perfect system, which, properly developed,

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<sup>15</sup> A great inspiration for the Fanti Confederation was the 1868 book *West African Countries and Peoples* by Africanus Horton (born in Sierra Leone from ‘recaptive’ parents – enslaved but liberated from slave ships by the British navy), outlining a blueprint for a series of independent states on the Coast.

<sup>16</sup> Danquah 1969, p.20

<sup>17</sup> The Constitution of the Fanti Confederacy is reprinted among others in Casely Hayford 1903 as Annex C.

would usher in a new civilisation, the like of which the world has probably never seen.”<sup>18</sup> His imaginative book *Ethiopia Unbound*, which reads like an autobiographical novel, illustrates these ideals of ‘heathy growth from within’, avoiding cultural suicide, and avoiding a fate to become ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water in your own country’.

This article shows that we can contradict the easy and degrading assessments of historical African intellectuals by the direct study of their creative intellectual work. In particular, the common Westplaining idea that they were basically importers (‘brokers’) of ideas from ‘the West’ can be disproved in the case of the prominent Gold Coast intellectuals by tracing their personal ancestry and by reading their texts. Carefully reading these truly activist and innovative Gold Coast intellectuals shows the wealth of intellectual history in Africa without having to resort to colonial stereotypes like the ‘westernised’ and the ‘true’ African.

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<sup>18</sup> Casely Hayford 1903, p 250 and 251



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