

CHAPTER 5

ASAFO COMPANY FLAGS

DISPLAY OF ASAFO FLAGS

An Asafo Company's flags (frankaa) embody the soul of the Company. Ffoulkes noted that,

"...Company flags are amongst the most important of Company emblems, and each Company depicts something on its flags, to copy which is the most deliberate form of challenge to the Company, as one Company can only use the symbols of another by right of conquest."

There are a variety of situations under which a flag is made. Some are commissioned to replace flags that have deteriorated. Others are created to celebrate events; such as, the installation of a new Chief or Captain or for festivals. A Chief or Captain may pay for a flag in his honor and select its design, but the flag belongs to the Company. Renewed or replaced flags usually replicate the design features of the original. Completely new flags commissioned by the younger generation of Asafo members are likely to promote positive values and peace rather than military themes.

Occasions at which flags are brought out for public display include the funeral of a Company member, the installation of a new Chief or Captain, the annual yam and path-clearing festivals, and for other town and regional festivals. As reported by a Cape Coast Asafo elder, Supi Minnah (quoted by Aidoo), flags are displayed at meetings, "Whenever Asafo members meet to discuss issues concerning the welfare of the society, the flag is positioned among them to signify the presence of their ancestors. With this, deliberations are done peacefully among members and whatever decision is taken binds all."

Flags are carried by men called flag dancers (frankaakitsanyi) who have received several years of special training in how they are to be displayed. The skills required to properly carry Asafo flags and perform with them are acquired through apprenticeship with a senior flag dancer. Apprenticeship may begin as early as 10 years of age, and the apprentice usually lives with the master. Training has a religious component, and the flag dancers are believed to be endowed with supernatural powers. Usually, the dancer's only outfit is a grass skirt held in place by a woven raffia belt (FIG 30). Some of the skirts have two or three overlapping tiers of grass, and the grass may be dyed different colors. White powder is applied to the dancer's body, limbs, and face. A Company

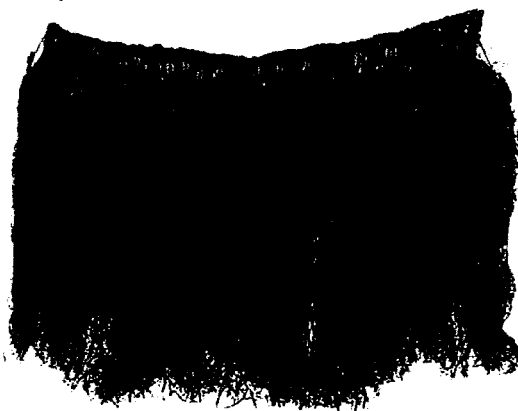


FIGURE 30. Frankaatani Grass Skirt
This skirt has a single tier of brown grass. Small bells and cowrie shells are attached to the belt.

usually has several flag dancers of different ages with varying degrees of skill and seniority. When a flag is carried in public, the flag dancer is escorted and protected by one or more assistants who may be armed. He is also accompanied by musicians playing drums, beating gong-gongs, and blowing horns. The flag dancer's performance draws attention to the attributes of the Company, including its military power, victories in battle, and its leadership role in protecting the community. The dancer's performance involves complex, acrobatic choreography.

Asafo flags are an amalgam of the African tradition of communication through proverbs with provocative military display. Historically, the flags primarily referred to military subjects directly or indirectly by boasting of the Company's power by using threatening, and challenging images that were often linked to proverbs. In some instances, the images may have an educational function, whereby social values are communicated. Thus, the image of a snake, a reference to the proverb, "Without its head, the snake is like a rope", points to the vulnerability of a Company whose symbol is a snake if it does not have strong leaders, and it underscores the importance of effective leadership in the community. Lacking a written language, the Fante and other Akan peoples used proverbs and imagery to maintain morals, codes of conduct, and social norms within their communities. The same proverbs and images were also used to communicate with outside groups. Although the recorded repertoire of proverbs and aphorisms known to the Fante, Ashanti and other Akan peoples numbers in the thousands, only several hundred are represented in Asafo flags. One important role of flags was to serve as a record of historical events; such as, victory in a battle or the installation of a leader.

ASAFO FLAG DESIGN

The fields of the majority of Asafo flags consist of a single sheet of plain, colored cotton cloth with a smooth texture. The cloth of older flags tends to be thinner than that of newer flags, often with tears and repairs. Rarely, two sheets are sewn together for particularly large flags. Other materials such as silk, burlap, damask, and more recently synthetic fabrics are used in place of cotton textiles.

The images on both sides of a flag are usually identical, but rarely there may be subtle differences. It is believed that images were painted or embroidered on the earliest flags. Unfortunately, few flags older than 100 years are available for inspection and as noted previously, historical documentation of Asafo flags prior to the mid-nineteenth century is sketchy at best. Although recently there has been a return to creating flags with painted images, most extant flags were made by appliqué, a needlework technique in which pieces of cloth are stitched to a larger sheet to create a design. In the case of Asafo flags, the appliquéd pieces that are often cut using cardboard stencils are in the shapes of people, animals, objects,

geometric forms, letters, and numbers. The pieces are assembled to create a tableau that tells a story. Embroidery is used to add details. The stitching throughout older flags was often done by hand. Appliquéd elements are almost always hand sewn today, but the border and canton are frequently machine sewn. Because sewing machines have been available in Africa since the beginning of the twentieth century machine work can be found on older flags, and sometimes relatively new, replacement flags are entirely hand sewn. The type of thread used for sewing can sometimes be an indication of the age of a flag.

In so far as can be determined, the earliest Asafo flags had neither borders nor fringes. When and where these decorative elements were first added remains uncertain. The first borders were narrow, rectangular strips that were sewn along the edges of flags, perhaps to reinforce them. More recently, wider borders composed of triangles and bolder squares or rectangles were introduced. Fringes may have been adopted from English Company flags that were typically decorated in this manner. The fringe consists of a strip of white cloth that is sewn to the non-hoist edges of the flag and then cut at evenly spaced intervals along the border. As the cloth becomes frayed over time, the fringes on older flags are often curled and twisted whereas those on more recent flags consist of uniformly cut tabs. When a flag is danced, the edges, particularly the fly edge, are brushed along the ground. As a result, with repeated use, the fringes become soiled and acquire an orange color from the widely present clay soil that Barbot described as

“... heavy and the color of crushed brick”.

Asafo flags are revered as shrines dedicated to ancestors and the places where they are stored are considered to be sacred. Rituals are performed to the spirits of the flags. Taboos that apply to shrines generally also apply to the flags, including the nearly absolute prohibition of women touching flags or entering a posuban.

In addition to flags, more affluent Companies have banners ranging in length from about 10 feet to more than 100 feet in length. Each of these long textiles, referred to as a river, stream, or path-of-the-stream, consists of a series of flag images appliquéd on a long strip of cloth. Each image tells a separate story rather than episodes in a streaming narrative. Banners are attached to poles along streets in the vicinity of the Company headquarters, or they are carried in a procession to celebrate a festival. Parades with flags and banners begin, and usually end, at the Company posuban.

ASAFO FLAG SYMBOLISM

Certain images may be “licensed” by a particular Asafo in a community. The interpretation of an image may vary between Companies and even among the members of a given Company at any time. The symbolism attached to a few graphic flag images is explained in relation to individual flags depicted in Chapter Six.

THE ASAFO FLAG CANTON

The national flag of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is known as the Union Flag. Since the first appearance of the Union Flag in the Gold Coast was on ships as a jack flag, it was commonly referred to as the Union Jack, a term often used today even when the flag is hoisted on land.

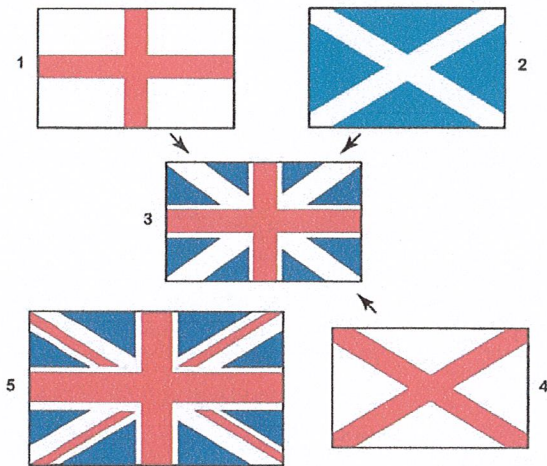


FIGURE 31. Union Flag of the United Kingdom and Ireland

The early English flag had the red cross of Saint George on a white field (1). Following the union of England and Scotland in 1606, the white saltire cross of Saint Andrew on a blue field (2) was added to create the flag of Great Britain (3). Marking the union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801, the red saltire cross of Saint Patrick (4) appeared on the Union Flag of the United Kingdom and Ireland, commonly referred to as the Union Jack (5). Versions of these stages in the evolution of the Union flag appear as the cantons of Asafo flags.

The history of the Union Flag covers several centuries during which it was revised as the United Kingdom grew. The earliest form, dating from the 13th through the 16th centuries, consisted of the red cross of Saint George, representing England, on a white field (FIG. 31). The cross was positioned so that the arms crossed in the center of the field, resulting in four quarters of equal size, a configuration referred to as quarterly. In 1606, King James I ordered the creation of the first form of the Union Flag by adding the white cross of Saint Andrew on a blue field, representing Scotland, to the cross of Saint George. As a result of the union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801, Saint Patrick's cross that appears as a red diagonal on a white field was added to create the Union Flag as it is known today. Although the flag appears to be symmetrical, the white stripes above and below the red diagonals differ in their width. On the hoist side of the field, the white stripes above the red diagonals are wider than those below. This relationship is reversed on the fly side of the flag. The result of this design feature is to provide equal prominence to the white Saint Andrew's and the red Saint Patrick's saltire by giving the former a higher position on the hoist half and elevating the latter on the fly half of the flag.