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Benjamin Talton

Ghana Studies, Volume 18, 2015, pp. 193-195 (Article)

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

DOI: [10.1353/ghs.2015.0001](https://doi.org/10.1353/ghs.2015.0001)



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# THE NORTHERN FACTOR IN GHANA HISTORY

BENJAMIN TALTON

A friend told me of meeting a lorry driver in a restaurant in Bolgatanga, capital of Ghana's Upper East Region. He had arrived from Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and was heading south. When she asked of his final destination, he responded, "Ghana!" The unwitting irony and humor in the man's response speaks directly to popular perceptions of "the north," among Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians alike, as somehow not really Ghana. Northern Ghana—presently Upper East, Upper West and Northern Regions—has been widely regarded as shaped by a history and culture distinct from its neighbors in the regions to the south.

In Ivor Wilks's publications, from the early 1960s through the mid-1990s, his goal to provide the ingredients for a cohesive history of Ghana, extending back to the fifteenth century, is evident. In reconstructing these histories he pioneered "the north's" historical significance, particularly with regard to Asante. Similar to other historians and anthropologists of the 1950s and 1960s, Wilks was concerned with political structures.<sup>1</sup> He viewed Asante's relations with its neighbors from the perspective of Kumase. Asante was, for him, in any case, the nucleus of modern Ghana. The cultural, commercial, and spiritual goods from the north sparked Asante's growth in the sixteenth century, and, following the European interruption of the first half of the twentieth century, the development of modern Ghana. For our purposes, the north refers both to Ghana's northern region and, at times simultaneously, but often distinctly, all land and peoples north of "Greater Asante" extending into the Sahel. Wilks's claims, simplified here, but, hopefully accurately rendered, did not come without controversy and dissent.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Larry Yarak, "Elmina and Greater Asante in the Nineteenth Century," *Africa* 56:1 (1986), 33–52: 33.

2. A. Norman Klein offered a direct challenge to many of Wilks's conclusions, particularly his, so-called, big bang theory of Asante's origins, in "Slavery and Akan Origins?"

Wilks revealed the northern factor in Ghana history as hidden in full view. In a lecture at Legon in 1995, despite J.B. Danquah's insistence to the contrary, Wilks plainly described no tangible link between modern Ghana and Old Ghana. Mali, rather, ignited the historical processes culminating in the birth of the Ghanaian republic.<sup>3</sup> Yet Mali, as a country name, of course, was already taken; and Wagadu (Old Ghana) did not carry Ghana and Mali's historical heft. Songhai would not do, as well, for there was a modern Songhai people and language. As a Mande power, Ghana, the popular name for Wagadu, satisfied Gold Coasters' desire for links to West Africa's golden age. Wilks continuously reiterated that such connections were readily available in Ghanaian history and culture.

His argument in this regard is the thrust of the first chapter in *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History*, which he reiterated in subsequent essays and lectures.<sup>4</sup> It centers on Dyula merchants from Mali in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, whose trade in goods for gold from Akan expanded mining and commerce, and the wealth from which Asante emerged and grew. Ground zero, so to speak, was Begho (Nsoko), directly south of the Black Volta's southern bend.<sup>5</sup> The town was the southern terminus of the trade route to Jenné for Dyula merchants, when Twi and Guan-speakers carried

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*Ethnohistory* 41:4 (1994), 627–656, and again in “A Reply to Wilks’s Comments on ‘Slavery and Akan Origins,’” *Ethnohistory*, 41:4 (1994), 666–667. As the latter title suggests, Wilks offered a response and not subtle counterattack on Klein in the same issue of *Ethnohistory*, pp. 657–665. Klein subsequently presented an alternative analysis to Wilks’s thesis on Akan origins. See, Klein, “Toward a New Understanding of Akan Origins,” *Africa* 66:2 (1996), 248–273.

3. Ivor Wilks, *One Nation, Many Histories: Ghana Past and Present* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1996), 23.

4. See for example, Wilks, *One Nation*, 24.

5. Wilks’s theses did not go unchallenged, but his efforts to affirm the historical links of “Greater Asante” toward a national history were understood. A. Adu Boahen did not mince words in his appraisal of Wilks’s thesis in the *Northern Factor*. His arguments were, according to Boahen, quite simply wrong. Still, Boahen praised Wilks for his pioneering work to highlight the north’s significance in Asante, and, therefore, Ghanaian, history. See, A. Adu Boahen, “The Two Faces of Ashanti,” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 6 (1962), 126–129. Similarly, in the journal *Man*, anthropologist Jack Goody challenged Wilks’s arguments for the political significance of Islam among the polities north of Asante. Goody, while commending Wilks’s contributions to Asante history, criticized him for relying too heavily and trusting too readily the accounts T.H. Bodwich and Joseph Dupuis, both of whom used Muslim informants for their written accounts of culture and history in Asante. See, Jack Goody, “Review: The Northern Factor in Ashanti History,” *Man* 62 (1962), 142. See also, See T.H. Bodwich, *A Mission from Cape Coast to Ashantee* (London, 1819), and Joseph Dupuis, *Journal of Residence in Ashantee* (London, 1824).

out dumb-barter with Dyula.<sup>6</sup> “The extension to the coast of the Niger-Begho route was a matter of some consequence for the history of Ghana,” Wilks wrote, “for the event was closely connected with, among other things, the rise of the new kingdom of Ashanti” and, therefore, modern Ghana.<sup>7</sup>

The Malian factor also made agricultural production possible, as wealth from the gold trade provided the means for labor to clear the forests. Economic influences spilled into politics and culture, for Dyula founded Gonja, to Asante’s north, under Nybanya in the early seventeenth century, and spread Islam to Dagbon. Earlier, Dyula migration and settlement established Wa and shaped the development of Mamprugu.<sup>8</sup> In Asante, the Mande made an indelible cultural, linguistic, and political imprint.<sup>9</sup> Asante’s growth, as Wilks writes, was “the beginnings of a history that bonds people together rather than separates them.”<sup>10</sup> The point is clear: modern Ghana is a product of Asante, not of the British, and Asante’s growth was propelled by economic and cultural influences from the north.

Although Wilks did not write a history of modern Ghana, his work illuminates the many pieces, northern, Muslim, Malian, Akan, etc. that became modern Ghana. Clearly, he did not deal with all of the country’s ethnic, cultural and historical parts. What it meant to be Ghanaian, at the time, and what Ghana was, remained an open question. Yet, as the anecdote of my friend and the south-bound truck driver in Bolga highlights, perceptions of Ghana that marginalize the north persist, despite the efforts of scholars such as Wilks. Nonetheless, subsequent generations of scholars of Ghana might build upon the methods that Wilks honed and the broad perspective of history that he encouraged.

*Temple University*

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6. Wilks, *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History* (Institute of African Studies, University College of Ghana, 1961), 4.

7. Wilks, *Northern Factor*, 12. For historian Kwame Arhin, “Greater Asante,” as a term, resonated more with the polity’s economic and political relations with its peripheries than “empire.” See, Arhin, “The Structure of Greater Ashanti (1700–1824),” *The Journal of African History* 8:1 (1967), 67. The debate over the nature and extent of Greater Asante was lively and interesting. See, for example Yarak, “Elmina,” 33–39; J.K. Fynn, “The Structure of Greater Ashanti: Another View,” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 15:1 (1974), 1–22; A.A. Iliasu, “Asante’s Relations with Dagomba, ca. 1740–1874,” *Ghana Social Science Journal* 1:2, 54–62.

8. Wilks, *One Nation*, 24.

9. On Islam in Dagbon and Asante, see Wilks, “A Note on the Early Spread of Islam in Dagbon,” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 8 (1965), 87–98, 88. For Wilks’s analyses of Mande linguistic and cultural legacies in Asante, see “The Rise of the Akwamu Empire,” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 3:2 (1957); see also, Wilks, *One Nation*, 25.

10. Wilks, *One Nation*, 26.