INTEGRATING *ASAFO* COMPANIES FOR SUSTAINABLE OCEAN AND COASTAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT IN GHANA

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Abstract: African intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a rich resource for identity, community and sociality. Heritage institutions such as the Asafo companies in Ghana, are traditional warrior groups that historically defended the state. Today, they are critical to coastal heritage management processes. This article reveals their contribution and argues that, while Asafo groups desire greater inclusion in heritage management, the national government of Ghana seeks to decentralize ocean governance processes. But, Asafo companies are complex groupings in which identityand "place," matter. The article concludes that for a decolonial and sustainable ocean heritage management, the national government of Ghana needs to engage with Asafo companies to better understand themIn doing, so, the government will be better placed to support both a decolonial heritage conservation and ocean sustainability.

Keywords: *cultural heritage, sustainable fisheries, cultural identity, ocean care, ocean management*

Introduction

UNESCO has made important strides in the global recognition of Africa's cultural heritage. Since the inception of the World Heritage Convention (1972), the ratification of the Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH, 2003), and the consequent establishment of the World Heritage List (WHL) and the List of Oral and

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Intangible Cultural Heritages, more than 1,000 cultural sites, monuments and expressions have been nominated and inscribed for conservation. In Africa, an increasing number of sites are being recognized for World Heritage status and more effort is being made by the global heritage organization to recognize the intangible cultural heritage (ICH). In this article, it is argued that UNESCO is key to supporting the protection of living heritages in Africa and Ghana. Equally, and since adopting the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), the African state of Ghana has actively leveraged cultural heritage for sustainable development, realizing in part, the developmental "Aspirations" of the African Union Agenda 2063. UNESCO and Ghana government interventions for heritage protection are vital because these do not only advance cultural preservation but also the protection of African societies from epistemicide (de Sousa Santos 2014). To clarify, de Sousa Santos (2014) states that epistemicide (the extinction of knowledge under colonial rule) is experienced by many societies in the global South. In this article the cultural richness of the Asafo is presented, as well as arguments concerning the complexities in Ghana, which challenge inclusive heritage and coastal management. If addressed, Ghana would be in a position to not only advance the protection of culture, but also support a vibrant African epistemology and an African model for ocean sustainability.

The present article[1] focuses on *Asafo* companies and their critical role in coastal heritage and ocean management in Ghana.[2] The *Asafo* are traditional warrior groups in Akan (Fante) culture, based on lineal descent. They are historically associated with defending the state. The word *Asafo* derives from *sa*, meaning war, and *fo*, meaning people.[3] *Asafo* companies have been part of the social organization in coastal communities for centuries. Their presence is recognized in the social organization of coastal communities. Previous studies of *Asafo* companies have focused on the belief systems associated with the *Asafo* groups, as well as the impact of modernization and urbanization on *Asafo* groups. There are also studies on *Asafo* companies

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2 In the article, we distinguish between "management" and "care," seeing the former as involving multiple stakeholders that have authority to shape decision-making in the coastal context, while the latter articulates a philosophy of ocean sustainability. In this article, ocean care is apparent in the practice of No Fishing Tuesday, as this injunction is premised on philosophical ideas of the ocean needing "rest."

3 Wikipedia, 2024. Asafo. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asafo. Accessed 8 January 2025.

and their connections with canoe culture (see Oduro et al. 2024). However, these emphasize social organization (see Sue and Rosen 2013) and not (as offered here, a discussion on) the nexus between *Asafo* groups and fisheries management (Olsen 2013; Ansah, Oduro and Wilson 2022) and ocean care. The article begins with the context for heritage identification and conservation. This is followed by the method and methodology of the study. The third part of the article discusses the research findings, and our conclusion is that the UNESCO Commission in Ghana would benefit from more substantial engagement with *Asafo* companies in order to achieve more integrated cultural heritage management, a deeper understanding of coastal ICH in Ghana, and to attend to the sociopolitical challenges affecting ICH in the country.

The International and National Context of Heritage Management

In the last few decades scholars agree that heritage management can be a contested and multi-layered process (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004). Scholars also note that an inclusive heritage management process is critical to social justice (Peterson, Gavua and Rassool 2015) and the pluralizing of pasts (Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge 2007), as well as necessary for a deeper understanding of the global dimensions of culture and power "flows" (Harrison 2015). As noted, heritage management is now part of "material and discursive interventions which actively remake the world in particular ways" (Harrison 2015: 297). This has important implications, since heritage is not merely a locally meaningful concept, it is also a globally mediated process that can shape how people are culturally represented in the world. In Africa, heritage is a means by which indigenous and local peoples (IPLCs) can express their generationally rich cultural inheritances. However, and as argued here, cultural heritage is a means for engaging with pragmatic issues such as ocean governance and management. To achieve greater inclusion of IPLCs requires a better understanding of the social institutions and groups in which these communities are embedded, as well as their dynamics. A significant obstacle to inclusion are the complexities that such entities present, which are, at times, beyond the apprehension of external heritage bodies.

For the past few decades, African scholars have lamented that traditional forms of heritage management are rarely considered nor mainstreamed into national heritage strategies and heritage management processes (Chirikure 2013; Abungu, 2019). While this may be partly true, this article suggests

that complexities in the local landscape make it additionally difficult for heritage institutions to achieve inclusive heritage management processes. Therefore, the research presented in this article hopes to, in part, respond by pointing out that there is a need for government and heritage institutions to courageously engage with dynamic and historically inscribed heritage landscapes. In Ghana, this involves engaging with and seeking to better understand *Asafo* cultural heritage. In doing so, the UNESCO Commission in Ghana can pursue a more critical heritage management (Winter 2013) that is agile enough for the complex heritage landscape that Ghana presents. The present study on *Asafo* companies will also assist UNESCO Ghana to respond to global calls for an integrated ocean management (Visbeck 2018; Boswell 2022), and facilitate UNESCO's Cultural Heritage Framework Programme (CHFP), which seeks to provide an "efficient interface"[4] between cultural heritage and the ocean decade (see also Trakadas et al. 2019).

What are the institutional arrangements for, and challenges to cultural heritage management in Ghana? The UNESCO Priority Africa Report (online), confirms that 50 States Parties have ratified the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. Eighty-eight (88) elements are inscribed on these States Parties from Africa, 22 elements are on the Urgent Safeguarding List, 65 on the Representative List, there are also two UNESCO Chairs and a regional centre for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Financially, some USD 4.8 million has been granted to Africa for ICH assistance, via the UNESCO ICH Fund. Ghana has received USD 275,938 of this amount for ICH management in 2021-2025. These facts and figures attest to the ongoing support of UNESCO for ICH recognition and protection in Africa and Ghana. Responding to calls for a deeper focus on indigenous heritage management processes, as well as capacity needs, UNESCO has also implemented a capacity building project for the safeguarding of ICH in both Ghana and Gambia in 2022. The project, funded by France, focuses on the inclusion of indigenes and indigenous forms of heritage management. The project will conclude at the end of 2025.

The national context is as follows: Ghana has an ocean strategy, the National Integrated Maritime Strategy (NIMS) and the *Blue Outcomes 2023 Document*. Both pursue multistakeholder engagement processes for the management of the ocean economy. Both emphasize the need to render ocean governance more national and more inclusive. Several ministries are involved in Ghana's ocean governance, these include the Ministries

4 UNESCO n.d. "Actions: Meet all the Endorsed Ocean Decade Actions." https://www.oceandecade.org/actions/cultural-heritage-framework-programme/ Accessed 31 July 2022.

of Fisheries and Aquaculture Development, Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation and the Ministries of Transport, Energy and Defence. As already stated, Ghana has a UNESCO National Commission and its functions are fully integrated into the global UNESCO system for heritage identification and conservation. In May 2022, its Ghana Heritage Committee adopted a multistakeholder approach to heritage management to address the issue of effective heritage management integration. This is because the committee had noted that in Ghana:

> …heritage resources are under threat by unguided development projects, which on many occasions do not undertake detailed Heritage and Cultural Impact Assessments (HIA & CIA), and environmental factors arising from climate change and other anthropogenic activities. This has in recent years led to growing calls on the Government of Ghana by Civil Society groups, Academic Institutions, Traditional Authorities, and International Organizations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and Africa World Heritage Fund (AWHF) for Ghana to step up efforts at the preservation, management, and promotion of the country's cultural and natural heritage resources.[5]

Considering the institutional context for heritage management and ocean management, it can be said that there is an enabling environment for both heritage and ocean management. Recently, however, an ocean governance study prepared on behalf of the Ghana government (Addo, Djokoto and Gbeckor-Kove 2023) indicates some gaps in ocean governance considerations. The study considers criminal and jurisdictional issues in ocean governance but does not, however, refer to issues of local, cultural inclusion, or issues of heritage significance. Similarly, in *Vision 2057* (2024: 66), it is noted that Ghana is still struggling with governance issues in general, and that its government requires more decentralization to achieve greater equality and inclusion, but the issue of cultural inclusion is not powerfully foregrounded in this document. Third, while the Ghana government is keen to decentralize

5 UNESCO Ghana Commission, May 2022. "Ghana Heritage Committee's Statement on Africa World Heritage Day." https://unescoghana.gov.gh/ghana-heritage-committees-statement-on-african-world-heritage-day-2022/ Accessed 31 October 2024.

governance and has set this in motion via the National Decentralisation Policy and Strategy (2020-2024), the process is experiencing challenges. The *Vision 2057* report notes that, "Despite notable progress, several impediments remain, including political interference in appointing local government heads, delays in fund disbursements, and inadequate resources for local governance units." The report goes on to say that "These challenges highlight the critical need for supportive legislation and the strengthening of local capacities to ensure the success of decentralisation initiatives" (Ibid. p. 66).

As argued in this article, more attention is needed on the place of culture and heritage in Ghana. This vital because in Ghana, Intangible Cultural Heritage is critical to people's cultural identity, indigenous values and daily practice (Elochukwu and Itanyi 2019). The *Asafo* companies sustain ICH and ultimately sustainable ocean management. They express cultural values, effect cultural practices, and contribute to the local sense of place (Lovell 1999). For example (and discussed in more detail further on), even by mere utterances (regarding which group owns what), an *Asafo* leader asserts a sense of place over the coastal landscape and determines who can do what in it. And, while other stakeholders, such as fisherfolk themselves, also imbue the coastal context with cultural meaning and a sense of place, (via songs[6] for example), it is the Asafo leaders that visibly shape ocean management practice. Considering these diversities, Oduro and Ansah implemented the requisite method and methodology in order to capture the local diversity and the complexity of the *Asafo* groups themselves. Boswell assisted in analysing the data and in formulating the discussion.

Method and Methodology

The data in this article was collected using the ethnographic approach, which relies on participatory qualitative methods, specifically, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations for the collection of primary data. Ansah and Oduro collected the interviews and conducted the observations between January and July 2021. Oduro and Ansah found the ethnographic approach appropriate for primary data collection, as it reveals the social organization, interactions, modes of communication, and symbolism of *Asafo* groups, as these pertain to cultural heritage and to ocean governance (Cresswell 2014; Atkinson 1990; Van Maanen 1988).

6 Otchere, E. 2022. "Presentation on Fisherfolk Music in Cape Coast Ghana." UN World Ocean Day, 7 June 2022.

The participant observation, focus group discussions (FGDs), and semi-structured interviews conducted (which involved spending extended periods of time with the local community and in moments when they are expressing their Asafo heritage), provided information on the nature of Asafo companies and their shared culture.

Ansah and Oduro negotiated access to both study sites through the fishers on the seashore. They made use of the snowball research technique to engage a network of *Asafo* group members (see Ansah 2020), originally identified and selected informally for conversation on fishing activities. After this, key informants such as the *Asafo* company leaders were officially introduced to the authors for the data collection to commence the research. The leaders directed the researchers to other leaders of the *Asafo* companies. The researchers were also introduced to other key informants, such as the chief fisherman, *Supi,* otherwise known as traditional priests and priestesses *(akomfo),* , and other leaders who were actively involved in *Asafo* activities. Several focus group discussions were conducted in the two sites of Cape Coast and Elmina. In sum, a total of 35 men were involved in these discussions from the two study sites. In addition, ten key individual interviews were conducted in both sites (six people from Cape Coast and four from Elmina).

The researchers used purposive and convenient sampling techniques to select the research participants. The fishermen were mainly selected for the focus group discussions, while key informants (i.e., *Asafo* leaders) were selected for individual interviews. The use of FGDs was found useful because it enabled the exploration of different perspectives, dynamics, interpretations, rituals and symbolisms associated with the *Asafo* groups and their activities vis-à-vis their contribution to fisheries management. Whereas the FGDs involved only men, the key individual interviews included six men and four women.

The interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The data collectors strictly observed fieldwork protocols, such as voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, which, as Duclos lucidly sets out, is challenging to achieve in dynamic social contexts (Miles and Huberman 1994; Duclos 2019). Be that as it may, these important aspects of fieldwork and COVID-19 did not impede data collection because (1) the experience of the researchers and (2) (in relation to Covid-19) the Ghana government had eased the restrictions of movement which occasioned the pandemic.

Regarding the positioning of the researchers and authors of the present article, and as indicated elsewhere (see Oduro et al. 2024):

> The professionalisation of the social science research process in Ghana as well as the bona fide qualification and research experience of the primary researchers (Oduro and Ansah), who are Ghanaian, as well as the qualification and research experience of the secondary data researcher (Boswell) [all of whom are] seasoned social scientists, endorses the validity and representativeness of the interviews and secondary data research undertaken for the study. …it is our view that the participation of women researchers in identifying and assessing the participation of women and indigenous peoples in ocean economies is critical. The process contributes to the validity of the data, as interviews are conducted in the local languages and the researchers serve as cultural brokers, navigating between the collection, analysis and presentation of data for scholarly scrutiny and engaging with local communities to obtain an emic or insider perspective ...

Ansah and Oduro also translated and transcribed the interviews from Fante (local language) to English. The data was read repeatedly with codes generated between and across themes, categories, and patterns. The study employed the constant comparative analytic strategy as a technique with the assistance of Nvivo version 12 software in analysing the data. The trustworthiness of the study was further assured by triangulating information gathered from the participants (Gibbs 2007; Cresswell 2014). We next present the findings of the study. Furthermore, and in terms of positionality, both Oduro and Ansah are *Fante* and have lived in Cape Coast for two decades. As *Fante* people, and given their residency in the area, they had some initial insight into the role of *Asafo* companies in ocean management. As qualified researchers they were able to address the scientific questions of the study regarding the sociopolitical landscape in which the Asafo companies are situated and the challenges to their power. In the next section the findings of the study are offered.

Cape Coast Ghana and Heritage in Cape Coast

The study discussed in this article was conducted in Cape Coast and Elmina in the Central Region of Ghana (see Figure 1). The Central Region forms one of the four coastal regions out of the sixteen administrative regions in

the country. Ghana is a West African country bordered on the North by Burkina Faso, West by Ivory Coast, and East by Togo. At the South are the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean. The latest Ghanaian census of 2021 reports a population of 30.8 million people for the country with ten percent of this population involved in fishing-related activities.

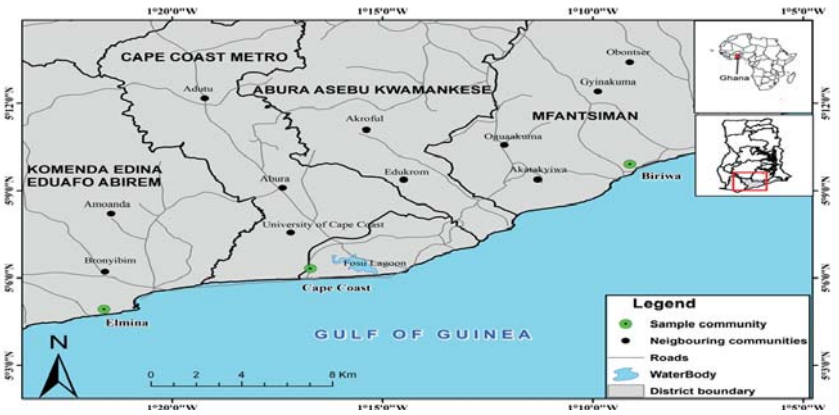

Figure 1. Map of Cape Coast with Elmina marked in green (Source: Oduro 2024)

Cape Coast, which is traditionally known as Oguaa, is the colonial capital of Ghana and the current capital of the Central Region. As such, it has a vibrant formal sector with a number of schools, especially secondary and boarding schools, and governmental offices with a recognizable number of people engaged in informal work (Oduro, Otoo and Asiama 2018). The city has a population of 189,925 people, with 51 percent women and 49 percent men. Cape Coast also doubles as a heritage site with castles and museums that date back to the precolonial period.

Elmina, also known as Edina, is the capital of the Komenda/Edina/Eguafo/Abirem municipality on the south coast of Ghana. It is situated on a bay on the Atlantic Ocean, 12 kilometres (71⁄2 miles) west of Cape Coast. Both sites have a huge colonial history and cultural heritage. The indigenes identify as *Fante*. Their traditional occupation is fishing with the women mainly involved in processing and distribution, while the men go to sea. They are, however, artisanal fishers rather than industrial or semi-industrial fishers (Antwi 2017; Koufie 2002; Aheto et al. 2012). Elmina has a population of 33,576 made up of 51 percent females and 49 percent males (Ghana Statistical Service 2021). Elmina has the third largest fish landing site in Ghana, after Tema and Sekondi harbours. Although Elmina's fishery

is artisanal, it nonetheless generates roughly 15 percent of the nation's fish output (Ibid.). As a result, Elmina makes a major contribution to the local economy and way of life as well as the GDP of the country's fisheries. The Elmina fish landing dock is built along the bank of the Benya lagoon and thus provides an ideal landing site for most of the canoes and small semi-industrial boats engaged in traditional fisheries.

Both Elmina and Cape Coast celebrate different annual festivals, such as the *Oguaa Fetu Afehye* for the Cape Coasters and *Edina Bakatue* (Lagoon opening) for the people of Elmina. Also, Cape Coast and Elmina have seven *Asafo* companies each, which are closely linked to fishing activities and their festivals. In comparison, these two sites share a number of common features, they are coastal sites, have a culturally rich indigenous population, and the population expresses its cultural heritage in various rituals. But to understand these sites, and the *Asafo* companies, requires paying attention to the diversity of the groups living in these coastal towns, the issue of land ownership and control, as well as the politics of autochthony in West Africa (and arguably, Africa as a whole). Colonial histories of the continent give the impression that land issues are only relevant insofar as the colonial/European dispossession of Africans is concerned. However, and as we shall show next, there are existing and complex struggles for control over land and resources that have continued throughout colonialism and may well have preceded it. There are also complex and continued expressions of Intangible Cultural Heritage originating from these groups, which have continued to exist throughout processes of colonial rule. Li (1995) presents a valuable account of the *Asafo* under colonial rule, stating that although "disempowered" by the colonial powers, these "commoners" often rejected colonial impositions by unseating the chiefs appointed to rule them. We will return to this issue further on in the discussion as it helps to unfold what may be happening in present-day Ghana.

Group Identity and Organization of the *Asafo*

Group identity forms a visible part of *Asafo* companies' social organization. These social identities derive from membership of the companies acquired via the patrilineal line. Each *Asafo* company is headed by a leader known as "*Supi*" (Superior Captain), who assumes the position on merit (loyalty, hardwork, and commitment). Operating under the command of the *Supi* is the *Safohen* (Captain). The general captain of the warrior, who is responsible for giving orders during the normal operations of the *Asafo* company or

during warfare, is known as the *Tufuhen* or *Twafohen*. Members of an *Asafo* company are members of the lineages in Cape Coast. This is not to suggest that all members of the lineages are members of the *Asafo* companies. On average, the membership of an *Asafo* company number between 150 and 200. The number of *Asafo* chiefs ranges between 50 and 70. The criteria for membership are largely ascriptive. By custom, an individual qualifies to be inducted into an *Asafo* company insofar as he was born to a man who is a member of that *Asafo* company. Invariably, an individual joins his father's *Asafo* company rather than his mother's *Asafo* company, even though the inheritance and succession are determined matrilineally. This seeming contradiction is understandable in the light of socialization patterns in which a father performs a function of training the male child to develop the qualities of a warrior. For instance, an *Asafo* company member's mother may belong to the *Asafo* No.1 Company, but he belongs to No. 4 because his father belongs to Number 4.

Women form part of *Asafo* companies. The number of women in an *Asafo* company may as well be as the number of males. Though some are very old, there are some who are quite young (younger than 50 years) and these women are put in charge of women who may be much older than them. They offer very critical services, ranging from protecting the shores from degradation by reporting sand wining activities, cultural performances (such as singing and dancing) during festive occasions, and performing the administrative functions of the *Safohen*. In Cape Coast, five women hold positions in a 12-member executive council of an *Asafo* company. In essence, Asafo groups are diverse in the sense that the groups consist of men and women, autochthonous peoples, and recent migrants, people who are part of the lineages but not part of the companies, and those who attain leadership by virtue of birth and those who attain it via effort. As we will show next, even greater complexity exists within this sociopolitical landscape because issues of migrancy and old political grievances (i.e., arguments over leadership) also affect solidarity and common purpose among the *Asafo*.

In Cape Coast, there are seven *Asafo* companies, which are recognized largely by their unique numbers, labels, and colours. These are:

No. 1 – Bentir – Red

No. 2 – Oguaa Anaafo – Blue and White

No. 3 – Oguaa Ntsin – Green

No. 4 – Nkum (Kobea titi boekro) – Yellow

No. 5 – Brofo Nkoa (Abrofomba) – White

No. 6 – Amanful or Amemforfo – Wine and Black

No. 7 – Akrampa Takyi – White and Black

During the interviews, it was found that the ancestors of the elders of all *Asafo* groups are migrants to Cape Coast, traditionally known as *"Oguaa,"* which literally means market, and *Kotokuraba*, which literally means River of Crabs, most notably from Efutu and Techiman. The fact of migrancy and contestations around autochthony (who "belongs" and who rightfully owns what) resonated throughout the research findings.

Historically, the "Bentir" company, who migrated from Efutu, and the "Nkum" group, who migrated from Techiman, were a single *Asafo* company. Indeed, the Nkum *Asafo* company arrived at a time when the Bentir company had already settled in Cape Coast. In this regard, the Bentir company was and still is regarded as the "Aboase," meaning original migrants and therefore, putatively, those who belong the "most." Thus, the Nkum company joined the Bentir to form a unified force with an enhanced capability to protect resources and human lives. They, however, recently separated after a long-standing unresolved conflict over leadership. Oral history from the Bentir *Asafo* company leader, corroborated by an Nkum company leader, indicates that succession of the then unified Asafo company leadership (particularly the selection of a "safohen") occurred within the lineage members of the Bentir company alone because of their status as original migrants (i.e., those who belong the most and thus have most rights to determine issues of importance). Nonetheless, this regime was contested by the members of the Nkum lineage, who (applying the modern principle of majority rules) believed that they constituted a majority of the company and were more warriorlike than the members of the Bentir lineage. When the Nkum lineage requested to have one of their members installed as the *Safohen*, the Bentir lineage refused, hence the separation of the Nkum lineage to form the now Nkum Asafo company.

The presence and the arrivals of *Asafo* companies in Cape Coast between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries were occasioned with claims of land possession by the *Asafo* companies; every *Asafo* group, except No. 7: (Akrampa Takyi) owns and occupies specific geographical spaces within the Cape Coast township. The Bentir (No. 1) group does not have a huge land size; theirs begins from the Commercial Bank to the area around the

Ministries all of which are near the coast, hence the Southern part of Cape Coast covering over a thousand acres. Two *Asafo* companies (No. 3 and No. 4) are touted as the late-migrant *Asafo* companies, who also settled at coastal communities of Cape Coast dispersed to other parts of the township and thus boast of enormous land space possessions. For example, the land for the Ntsin, *Asafo* company Number 3, stretches from the University of Cape Coast's east gate towards the Centre for National Culture as they further captured a significant portion of the middle parts of Cape Coast, together with "Siwdo," "Abura," "Kakumdo," "Abubonko," "Jaaseman," and "Woanyiwaato." The people of Kometigom are at "Ankaful" and "Esuekyir." It is on record that Nkum, the Number 4 company, first moved here to capture the land. Though the land size possessed by an *Asafo* company was not coterminous with their military and numerical might, it was a critical resource which, after centuries, was to become a demonstrable source or wealth and influence.

Out of the seven *Asafo* companies, three of them (i.e. No. 1, No. 2 and No. 4) are involved in artisanal fishing or have activities directly bearing on fishing. Collectively, they are known as KW'ASA, described in detail as "KOW-ASA." Literally, the terms KOW means company (group) and ASA means three. KWO-ASA thus implies "three companies," which means that the three *Asafo* companies are those who own and occupy lands dotted along the coast stretching from Ekon in the East and Duakor in the West. The Nkum company (No. 4) is touted to have captured the biggest portion of total land size of Cape Coast township. Each group usually has an identifiable colour. These unique colours are used by the respective *Asafo* groups in the aesthetic designs of the canoes they use for fishing. Stemming from the KOW-ASA, *Asafo* companies' core activities, apart from engaging in warfare, are inextricably linked with fishing. Briefly, and as alluded to earlier, originally and before colonial rule, the Asafo were warriorlike groups (Li, 1995). Under colonialism the power of these groups was degraded since their chiefs were "unstooled" (Li 1995). Nevertheless and as previously stated, the Asafo retained traditional/cultural power since they employed cultural means to unseat the chiefs appointed by the colonial rulers.

Oduro and Ansah's fieldwork shows that the three *Asafo* companies noted are also engaged in some minor non-fishing activities such as trading and crab catching. Notwithstanding their engagement in these minor jobs, the membership of an *Asafo* company and that of a fishing team become largely inseparable. In this sense, an *Asafo* company provides an occupational, political, and social identity to a fisherman which as a sequel provides

a sense of solidarity and mutual support among the members of an *Asafo* group during fishing. Adding to the complexity, is that there are four remaining *Asafo* groups (i.e No. 3: Oguaa Ntsin, No. 2: Brofo Nkoaa, No. 6: Akrampa Takyi, and No. 7: Amanful) who are non-fishermen groups. These are groups that have coalesced on the basis of shared geography, ethnicity or shared social concerns. In the next section, we offer insight into the rituals of Asafo, which in our view, adds yet another rich and complex layer to the story of coastal Intangible Cultural Heritage in Ghana.

Rituals

We agree with Clifford-Geertz (1973) that "ritual is consecrated behaviour." As part of their heritage, the *Asafo* company in Cape Coast perform rituals to appeal to the "generosity" of the ocean in the first instance and, secondly, to elicit appropriate ocean care behaviour from residents and fishermen. In this regard, and before proceeding to the next point, the *Asafo* consecrate the ocean through both ritual action and a call for prohibitions (i.e., No Fishing Tuesday). The process of "consecration" begins, as Oduro and Ansah observed, with utterances that indicate both the authority of an *Asafo* company leader over a particular place and his authority, *tout court*. An *Asafo* leader of the Bentir group said, for example, "now I am the leader and the one who oversees this house is gone and since I am the eldest among all the young people here in charge of everything in the house… Though the family belongs to the 'Nsona' clan and I belong to the 'Kona' clan, I do everything in the house; I am the one who prays whenever we have a meeting and I chair every discussion we have." These prayers invoke the aid of the gods in the forthcoming fishing. Along with these prayers are the dances of special dancing groups, known as *Adziwa*. The latter have their own leaders. The *Adziwa* incorporate synchronized movement and dance in their ritual to ensure supernatural beneficence (Wyllie, 1968) as well as enable the performers and partakers in the rituals to connect with the supernatural through inner or external transformations that potentially reveal divinity (Hanna 2004; Wiltermuth and Heath 2009). The *Adziwa's* power as a dance group lies in its ability to produce multisensory experience (i.e., sound, taste, and proprioception through the dance) which creates moods that shape human behavior in the ritual, ecstatic context (Hanna 2004). The dance performed by the *Adziwa* also makes the ritual even more powerful as it generates strong community ties.

The rituals are not only meaningful to fishing, they are part of a socially ordered routine to invoke the benevolence and the support of the

supernatural in *all* social activity, including fishing organized on a regular basis. An *Asafo* leader held that, his company could go on and sprinkle the ritual food offerings on the principal streets of the city covering thousands of meters. It was not only on Tuesday, but every Tuesday. This is done for the following reason:

> We do this for the gods in the sea to realize that our time is due so that they help us for… It is the "Kow-asa" who allow all the other four *Asafo* groups to rest… (Kwesi Fynn, 52-years, leader, Anaafo *Asafo* Company).

In the days preceding the No Fishing Tuesday, the *Asafo* companies symbolically demonstrate their authority (and their warrior past) by bearing arms and firing gunshots in the air. Their actions are not only authoritative, they are also reminiscent of the colonist's imposition of power through the use of arms. Oduro and Ansah were told that preparations for the No Fishing Tuesday begins on the preceding Thursday, so that by Friday everyone finds his gunpowder and some community elders also buy some and bring them to the *Asafo* groups. So, from Friday morning to mid-afternoon, there will be sounds of gunshots throughout the community. Therefore, *Asafo* leaders advance sustainable fishing not only by imposing a ritually mandated "rest" but also by symbolically asserting control in the firing of gunshots. Social change has not bypassed *Asafo* companies. As expressed in the narrative of two different *Asafo* company leaders:

> For about 30 to 35 years now we have stopped all these things… everyone says he or she goes to church. Today being Tuesday for instance, we have to play the *Asafo* drums, but if I go and call my son and my brother, he will ask me to take the lead because he sees it to be a disgrace to be part of the *Asafo* drumming… even the uneducated fisherman sees it to be disgraceful, you see. So, things are no longer the way they used to be. For me, I saw some of those activities and participated in them and it is nice… And we were getting a lot of fishes to the extent that people exchange cassava and pepper for fish (Joe Afu, 57-years, leader, Bentir *Asafo* Company).

Because nowadays we misbehave at the beach and we have turned our backs to the gods, so some things are not going on well… we have also stopped the *Asafo* paramilitary displays because we are all educated. If we are to call the members of the *Asafo* and ask that we sing a few songs, it will be a problem… so a lot of things have changed. We have a god behind the castle he is called

"Naafon." When the time comes, we have to get the items we will use for the rituals and what we will also wear and put in our pockets… Our leaders of old were Christian who held on to their faith, but when the time comes for customary practices, they join us … (Safohen Akae, 47-years, Deputy, leader, Nkum Company).

In effect, some seen to look down on the role of the *Asafo* companies in rituals to promote a sustainable fisheries regime. But, as the following comment suggests, being part of an Asafo company is not just about the possibility of advancing a more inclusive ocean management system. When an *Asafo* company leader was asked whether there would be some people who were fishermen without belonging to any *Asafo* company, his answer was as follows:

> No. Then that person will be a *stranger*… For all those at the beach, even if they say they do not belong to any *Asafo* group, their fathers may be part of an *Asafo* group… (Kwesi Fynn, 52-years, leader, Anaafo *Asafo* Company).

This comment suggests that Asafo companies are also vital to the shaping of contemporary identity and not only to ocean management or cultural heritage. This heritage and source of ocean "philosophy" is at risrisk. One of the *Asafo* group leader was quick to point out that the *Asafo* company has "really gone down… when one of our chiefs died and we had to go to the Jubilee Park for our display, none of the groups came." When asked about

Figure 2. Blue and White Canoes and Flags belonging to Asafo Company No. 2 – Oguaa Anaafo. (Source: Authors)

the reason for the decline in people's involvement in the activities of the *Asafo* companies, an *Asafo* company leader said that, "It is because in the olden days all the churches… Roman, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Zion…they knew the functions of the *Asafo* companies, but nowadays someone will just read a few pages of the Bible, gather about four people and begin a church… They undermine the importance of the *Asafo* companies" (Kwamina Esson, 56-years, leader, Anaafo *Asafo* Company).

Politics among the Asafo Kow-asa

Politics form part of every social group and the *Asafo* companies are not an exception. Oduro and Ansah asked research participants if they deployed their political systems and structure to address fishing-related irregularities. *Asafo* company members responded by speaking about fishing irregularities and illegalities in the Cape Coast township. They noted that fishing with lights is "detrimental" to marine life. The *Asafo* members also commented on the ravaging effects of strong rains and accompanying winds. They indicated an understanding of the debilitating ecological and economic impacts of unsustainable fishing activities, such as the use of dynamite in fishing and in illegal harvesting and the transhipment of fish. One of the interviewees said,

> so when they throw the dynamite and the quantity of fishes will be equal to the catch of about three canoes, about one or two of that quantity will die in the sea and smell. So the other fishes who are alive will sense danger and move far away… if for instance they were coming from Elmina, they will return and move far away… so the dynamite is very serious, it destroys things very much… Just as there are weeds in the forest there are weeds under the sea… And when the fishes play until it gets late, they go into the weeds and even feed on them. But since the "saiko" [illegal fishers] began, they destroy all those weeds leaving the place bare, so when God allows the fishes to come… you know different types of fishes come at different seasons… so when God opens the door for the fishes to come and we fight with them till they get tired, they have to bow down their heads and go into their rooms to find something to eat. So when they go and do not find the weeds they continue their journey and keep moving. So the "saiko" are the ones destroying everything… If you look at the nets that our small canoes use, if it is a "saiko" fisher who goes to

> the sea, those fishes will not be eaten… they clear all the sea weeds that the fishes feed on… so if we had gone to the sea today being Tuesday for instance, you would think the fishes will be very nice by tomorrow, but when you go tomorrow, they will not be there. So the "saiko" fishers and those who fish with dynamite are those destroying the sea (John Aidoo, 51-years, leader, Bentir *Asafo* Company).

On the basis of the recognition and understanding of some of the fishing irregularities, the Asafo companies have maintained and applied a politics that generally sustains traditional practice aimed at ocean care. As noted, the system is hierarchical with the Chief Fisherman being at the apex. The Chief relies on his authority and may sanction a fisherman who is engaged in fishing irregularities. Since the role is ascribed, an *Anaafo Asafo* company leader indicated that "A Chief Fisherman is a chief no matter what." If, therefore, one considers the significance of inclusive systems to achieve both a democratic heritage management and an inclusive ocean management, there is the challenge of ambiguous action in local cultural heritage systems. To clarify, not all heritage leaders (and leaders per se) are committed to protecting the ocean at all times. As the researchers also found, fishermen may violate the traditional fishing customs because an *Asafo* company has not yet installed a Chief Fisherman. Thus, it is not only the issue of the authority of the *Asafo* leader, but also the existence of an unestablished system which may encourage fishing irregularities. Even so, there are customary and regulatory processes in *Asafo* companies. One interviewee said, " … they call the elders to plead on the person's behalf… The elders will ask of what shows that you are pleading… so they will get up and present a bottle of schnapp and 'cedi' or 'pon kro' [an equivalent of 1ghc or 2ghc today]. When these things are presented, the elders will pardon you and caution you to not do that again… You will even be afraid" (Kwesi Fynn, 52-years, leader, Anaafo *Asafo* Company).

The authority of the *Asafo* is recognized by the police, as the latter engages the Chief Fisherman in the arbitration of irregular practices. In this way, the *Asafo* companies have legitimacy with and are interwoven into the formal legal system. The companies also "regulate" power in communities via the social processes of honour and shame, as the fishers have specific rules regarding who can go where in the sea to catch fish. Both the formal and the informal management of power, honour, and shame offer integrated and locally relevant means to sustainably manage marine resources. For example, Oduro and Ansah asked about the settling of disputes. They found that when

Asafo leaders receive information about a dispute, they send emissaries to ascertain the situation. While a disputant may reside elsewhere, the disputes are likely to be settled in Cape Coast, Elmina or Moree, depending on where the complainant is coming from. The magnanimity of the disputants and mediators is expressed as follows:

> When there are disputes among the fishermen, each one reports the issue to where he comes from and people from both parties will sit and settle the issue and make sure the fishermen reconcile (John Aidoo, 51-years, leader, Bentir *Asafo* Company).

In the course of conflict resolution, the principles of representation, fairness, and social justice are adhered. These are expressed in a manner where the *Asafo* com "Kow-asa" select some seven elders from each group. So when there are disputes to be resolved they inform the chief and they go and address those issues and bring feedback to him. The following example was given:

> Maybe those in Number 1 will do something that is not pleasing, the leaders will not come… If they will come, they come with their flag together with two or three elders who would guide the leader… that is what brings misunderstandings (Kwesi Fynn, 52-years, leader, Anaafo *Asafo* Company).

The function of settling disputes is carried out with involvement of the Ghana Police Service who hitherto were not involved. It constitutes one of the organizational changes in the law-enforcement regimes. This was expressed in an interview with an *Asafo* company leader in Elmina:

> We were not involved during our time, but now they have the contact of the Police and they can call them to arrest you when you make the least mistake. Those times we were not fishing on Sundays and Tuesday, but people came to catch fish here on Sundays and send them away, so our leaders spoke about it until Sunday was given to us (Kwamina Esson, 56-years, leader, Anaafo *Asafo* Company).

This new arrangement involving the police service is occasioned by some discontent. Involvement of the police has rendered the compliance to fishing-related customary laws which could have protected fishermen in the use of their canoes to reduce in its efficacy. For example, a leader of an *Asafo* company revealed this in the following way:

> I said something about the Police; it is the boys with the tricycles who bring us a report that the Police take something from them after they have been arrested… I called the Police one dawn and made them arrest three of the tricycles and sent them away. I was there myself…because of these things when I sleep, I wake up between 2:30am and 3:30am to come and sit in front of my house… And when I see anyone passing, I call the Police myself… I followed them to send the three tricycles away… (Safohen Akae, 47-years, Deputy, leader, Nkum Company).

Conclusion

In this article, we argue that *Asafo* companies promote heritage and coastal management in an integrated and locally meaningful manner. However, and as now concluded, the *Asafo* are much more than this. They are evidence of an enduring epistemology and philosophy of ocean sustainability, one grounded in indigenous and autochthonous forms of ocean care. As alluded to earlier in this article, ocean care consists of a locally meaningful philosophy of ocean protection. In the case of Ghana and the *Asafo*, it is found that this philosophy includes a concept of the ocean as a living entity that requires "rest" and protection. In this regard, the ocean is an entity to be engaged with, by ritually relevant interlocutors and leaders. Equally, there are members that need to follow prohibitions designed to protect the ocean.

The process is not without its challenges as the companies are also political entities and their leaders wield significant power, which is sometimes contested and at other times leads to police arrest. Considered differently, the *Asafo* are a rich repository of heritage and coastal cultural heritage. They are a means by which indigenous and local peoples in coastal Ghana can express their generationally rich cultural inheritances. The study shows that this heritage is complex, since it includes symbolic (colonial and warrior) elements that are potentially not laudable, for example, the use of gunshots to induce compliance with prohibitions on fishing! Although generally well-meaning, not all *Asafo* leaders are above accepting illegal fishing in some instances. But if one considers the laudable elements, the *Asafo* provide social structure, identity, membership, regulatory mechanisms and, from the ICH perspective, a means to practically recognize and protect intangible cultural heritage. A present challenge that remains is that *Asafo* companies are seen to belong to a pre-modern past (Yarak 2003; Asare 2018; Asare

and Adjei 2015). This means that *Asafo* companies are still not really seen as critical to mainstream developmental processes, including heritage and ocean management processes.

The implications are that there is a gradual erosion of regulatory powers of the *Asafo* companies and a disregard of their belief system. Ultimately, this may lead to greater fishing irregularities which *Asafo* companies could prevent. Presently, the practices, symbolic behavior, complex social interactions, and historical linkages of *Asafo* companies emphasize their critical contribution to ocean governance and cultural heritage. We argue that including the Asafo companies in both, as well as more decentralized governance and an inclusive heritage management practice in Ghana, has the potential to yield a nationally sustainable fisheries management practice. The Asafo are supportive, protective, and regulatory and while their roles are being eroded by processes of modernization and globalization, they continue to remain important to both fisheries management and cultural practice.

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