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'COMPRADORES-IN-ARMS':  
THE FANTE CONFEDERATION PROJECT (1868-1872)

Dennis Heinz Laumann

### Introduction

This paper will focus on the historiography of the rather obscure Fante Confederation of 1868 to 1872. Created and led by an educated bourgeois elite, this alliance of many Fante and non-Fante states arose in the period immediately before the formal British occupation of African territory along the Gold Coast. Their goals, as outlined by Bill Freund, were straightforward:

They conceived of the confederation as the bare bones of a Western-type state that would promote English education, road construction and commerce with a unified legal code, military force and political representation beneficial to the Anglicised merchants of the coastal towns (91).

The Fante compradores were a minority of western-educated merchants along the Gold Coast who occupied an important and profitable position in the centuries-old Euro-African trade. Kwame Arhin, in his article "Rank and Class Among the Asante and Fante in the Nineteenth Century" offers the following characteristics as typical of the Fante comprador:

The assumed superiority of the educated, *qua* educated, over the non-educated; the adoption of European life styles by the educated as some kind of status symbol; and aversion to manual labor as the supreme index of the attainment of 'European status' (1983: 17).

Thus, these merchants were 'European' in manner, tended to be Christians, and as Freund writes, "[they] acquired an unprecedented importance in this era" (65). Below the traditional Fante rulers and these compradores, were the ruled. Arhin argues that "if the bourgeois, petit bourgeois and the proletarian classes are to be found among the Akan peoples in the nineteenth century, they must be sought in coastal Fante society" (19).

The Fante Confederation was a marriage of convenience, albeit a very weak one, between the compradores and the Fante kings and chiefs. Because of the leading role the bourgeois class played in this movement, our sources are disproportionately focused on the activities of these men. We have, therefore, little understanding of the political

activities and daily lives of the Fante people. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the class divisions which existed in nineteenth century Fante society in order to understand how the Fante Confederation came into existence and why it ultimately failed. I will first briefly discuss the sources available on this period of Ghanaian history.

### Sources

Since the leaders of the Fante Confederation were western-educated (and, hence, literate) we are fortunate to have a number of primary sources written by the compradores involved in the movement. As is most often the case in histories of Africa, especially of the pre-colonial period, African sources are nearly impossible to find. The historian often has to rely on European sources, from missionary studies to colonial records, in order to reconstruct the pre-colonial period. Thus, histories of Africa tend to be overly Eurocentric in focus and analysis.

The compradores involved in the Confederation project, however, have left behind a wealth of information on the events during the period under discussion. In addition to a good number of 'official' Fante Confederation documents, such as customs reports, war manifestos and, of course, the Fante Constitution of 1872, many letters written by the leaders of the movement are available for study. R. J. Ghartey, who held the post of King-President of the Confederation in 1872, was a prolific letter-writer and, thus, we are able to gather a Fante perspective on the chain of events.<sup>1</sup> Many correspondences from Africanus Horton, another leader of the movement, still survive, as well. Horton was an African surgeon, trained at the University of Edinburgh, who wrote *West African Countries and Peoples*, a book which influenced the Confederation to a large extent.

Other Fante voices may be found in the pages of *The African Times*, an African publication which was produced in London. The publisher of this monthly newspaper, F. Fitzgerald, was a staunch supporter of the Fante Confederation overseas and actually served as the project's representative in England. The newspaper was distributed along the West African coast and often printed letters and perspectives by the compradore leaders of the movement (Limberg, 1974: 14).

There are, of course, many European documents available for analysis on the period. These include the official documents of the British colonial office in London and British officials at Cape Coast, as well as the records of the Dutch colonial office at the Hague and of the Dutch officials at Elmina.

Numerous studies of the Gold Coast in this period have been written, but the attention given in each to the Fante Confederation project varies. An African work written during the colonial period portrays the Confederation as one of the earliest African nationalist movements against English domination. Casely Hayford's *Gold Coast Native Institutions*, published in 1903, argues that the Confederation was created in response to British expansionism along the coast. This is contrary to the accepted explanation that the British-Dutch fort exchange agreement of 1868 was the impetus for the movement. Hayford clearly had a political agenda, however, since he was living in British-occupied Gold Coast when he published his work. Obviously, he was interested in portraying the Fante Confederation as an early resistance movement against British imperialism. Hayford argues that the Fante had elaborate plans for building roads and schools, systematically collecting taxes, etc., but that these efforts were foiled by the British authorities on the Gold Coast.

Hayford's work was followed three years later by John Mensah Sarbah's *Fanti National Constitution*. Sarbah does not necessarily analyze the events of the period, but rather offers three important documents: the Fante Constitution of 1871, the Scheme of April 1872, and a report by the British Governor at Cape Coast, John Pope-Hennessy, on his 1872 meeting with Fante leaders.

Three British colonialist studies of nineteenth century Gold Coast were surprisingly pro-Fante and critical of the British-Dutch fort exchange. A. B. Ellis, a colonial officer, published his *A History of the Gold Coast of West Africa* in 1893. Ellis argues that the European powers showed complete ignorance of African political affairs by going ahead with the fort exchange, despite resistance from the coastal peoples. W. W. Claridge, in *A History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti*, had mixed reviews of the Fante Confederation. Published in 1915, his book states that the Fante united for defensive and offensive purposes against the British. While Claridge condemns the mistakes made by the British (e.g. the fort exchange), he views the Fante Confederation and its constitution as "utterly impracticable" and "framed by a few educated and semi-educated men" (614). W. E. F. Ward, in his 1940 work, *A History of the Gold Coast*, writes "there never was a greater political mistake" than the fort exchange. Ward sympathizes with the Fante Confederation and criticizes the British colonial administration at the coast.

David Kimble published *A Political History of Ghana* in 1963 and offers a thorough analysis of the Fante Confederation. Kimble acknowledges the British-Dutch fort exchange as the spark for the movement and attributes the failure of the Confederation to the ignorance of African affairs and outright hostility of the British.

Following a general trend in studies of the mid-nineteenth century Gold Coast, Douglas Coombs, in his *The Gold Coast, Britain and the Netherlands, 1850-1874*, published in 1963, concentrates primarily on the diplomatic activities of the European powers. David McIntyre's 1967 *The Imperial Frontiers in the Tropics, 1865-75*, is guilty of the same crime.

By the end of the 1960s, Africanist scholars began focusing on African conflicts and diplomacy on the Gold Coast. Former Ghanaian presidential candidate, A. Adu Boahen, writes about the history of inter-Akan politics in his article, "Asante, Fante and the British 1800-1880," published in the 1965 collection, *A Thousand Years of West African History*. Boahen accurately attributes the historic economic competition between the Asante and the Fante as the determining factor in the birth of the Fante Confederation movement.

Francis Agbodeka, another Ghanaian historian, returns to the nationalist argument that the Confederation was a response to British colonialism. In his book, *African Politics and British Policy in the Gold Coast, 1868-1900*, published in 1971, Agbodeka portrays the Confederation as a functioning state with an elaborate administrative and financial bureaucracy.

Lennart Limberg, the leading Fante Confederation scholar by default, wrote his 1974 PhD thesis, entitled "The Fanti Confederation, 1868-1872," at the University of Göteborg in Sweden. This work followed his essay "The Economy of the Fanti Confederation," published in the 1970 *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*. Limberg focuses on the diplomatic efforts between the Fante and Asante in Africa and the British and Dutch in Europe in their efforts to continue the obstructed Euro-African trade during the Confederation period. Limberg studied many Fante documents and British and Dutch colonial records and offers a thorough analysis of the behind-the-scenes negotiations between the African and European powers. In addition, he analyzed the Fante financial records, and discusses the economic activities of the Confederation. Limberg, like most of the scholars writing on the period, devotes almost all of his attention to the political history of the Confederation. Nevertheless, Limberg and Agbodeka will serve as my major sources, since their works are the most thorough studies of the Fante Confederation movement.

As I have already stated, the limited number of available sources on the Fante Confederation period offer little social historical information. That is, the scholars of the period are more concerned with the diplomatic activities of the powers on the Gold Coast and in Europe than with the masses, who fought the endless Asante-Fante wars and offered their services for the Fante Confederation armies.

There are additional problems with our sources. Firstly, most of them are extremely dated, having been written during the colonial period, some before the turn of the century. Second, our African sources, such as Hayford, attempt to portray the Fante Confederation as something, we will argue, it was not: a fully-functioning state which arose in response to encroaching imperialism. Our contemporary African sources, such as Boahen and especially, Agbodeka, offer no evidence for their passing assertions that the Fante Confederation administration actually existed on a day-to-day basis. Based on the material available, it appears that the Fante government met very infrequently and that the government was ill-organized. An additional problem is that I obviously do not have access to the primary sources in Accra for a paper of this scope.

#### The Historical Background: Euro-African Trade and Politics Along the Gold Coast in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

The profitable Euro-African trade along the Gold Coast was the focus of all economic (and, hence, social and political) relationships during the nineteenth century. That is, the numerous Asante-Fante wars, the dominant position of merchants within the Fante states, the strength of the Asante empire, and the active pre-colonial era expansionism of British authority were all heavily influenced by this trade.

After several wars with the Asante and with an increase in the volume of trade along the coast, the Fante states had united into a loosely-organized confederation in the early nineteenth century. Agbodeka writes that the Fante organized "powerful military combinations" with other coastal states during crises and that "on such occasions the various divisions in Fante were known to have formed themselves into a confederacy" (1970: 1). This came after many years of disunity, climaxing in 1750, when the Fante states split into two separate parts, Bore Bore Fante in the west and Ekumfi Fante in the east (Webster, 88). The Fante and the Asante had had a long history of conflict, as evidenced by the many wars fought in the early part of the nineteenth century. The two Akan sub-groups were at war no less than five times from 1806 to 1825. Thereafter, with the exception of a brief war in 1863, no major battles were fought between them (Boahen, 1965: 346).

The Asante empire, with its capital at Kumasi, was centered directly north of the Fante states. Asante was a highly-centralized expansionist state dependent on the revenue and goods derived from its export of gold, palm oil and ivory to the coast (Agbodeka, 1974: 4).

The Fante states were situated along the Gold Coast from the River Pra in the west to (approximately) the present-day Ghanaian capital of Accra. The Fante fulfilled a self-perpetuated role as the 'middlemen' in the trade between the Asante in the interior and the Europeans at the coast.

The Fante-Asante wars in the early part of the century were fought over access to this Euro-African trade. The Asante were mostly reliant on the Fante to bring their goods to the coast and to obtain European products from them in return. The Asante desired to trade directly with the Europeans at the coast, however, the Fante resisted their efforts and insisted on trading with the Asante in inland markets such as Foso and Manso (Boahen, 1965: 531). The Fante compradores were determined to maintain their position in the coastal trade and "[The Fante] often closed the trading paths to the sea-board, to the dismay of Asante traders, who were sometimes insulted and attacked coming to and from the coast" (Agbodeka, 1971: 9). The Asante not only wanted to avoid the middlemen (i.e. the Fante) but also wished to secure direct access to the coast to make the purchase of European arms and ammunition easier. The Asante obtained their weapons mostly from the Dutch fort at Elmina and from the Danes at Accra (Webster, 1980: 88).

The Asante, however, did not succeed in their military objectives of capturing direct routes to the coast. They did conquer and annex some southern polities, including the Fante state of Denkira (Denkyira). After the war of 1826, relations between the Fante and Asante remained relatively peaceful, as the Asante became more concerned with the expansionist designs of the British.

The British and the Asante fought several major wars during the 1820s. The Asante, again, were interested in obtaining direct access to the coast and felt that the British, working in conjunction with their Fante allies, were an obstacle to this. The British viewed the Asante as a burden on Euro-African trade, and hoped to conquer them in the belief that a vast inland market would open to them (Webster, 88). The British sided with the Fante and were equally concerned about continued conflict between the two African powers:

It was the sheer military power of Ashanti (Asante), fed by the constant exchange of gold-coast for fire-arms with the Dutch at Elmina, which kept the British and their Fante allies along the central stretch of the Gold Coast in a state of constant alarm (Oliver and Atmore, 1972: 36).

In February 1824 the British were defeated by the Asante, but won a second war in July of the same year. The Asante were again defeated by the British in 1826 and further weakened by the Maclean Treaty of 1831, which mandated that the Asante give up all claims to their

southern provinces. The treaty, however, also stipulated that the Euro-African trade should remain unobstructed and that merchants should be free of harassment, an order obviously directed toward the Fante (Agbodeka, 1971: 9).

Meanwhile, the British and Fante established closer (pseudo-colonial) relations, as evidenced by the Bond of 1844. This treaty granted the British some judicial authority over internal Fante affairs. This judicial power, however, was limited to cases involving murder and theft (Agbodeka, 1971: 15). Thus, British authority along the Gold Coast, at least within the powerful Fante states, was expanded as "an informal protectorate came into being" (Agbodeka, 1971: 11).

The Dutch and the Danes were the other major European powers with trading interests along the Gold Coast. The British position was strengthened in 1850 when the Danes left the coast, having sold their forts to Britain. The British and the Dutch controlled several forts each along the coast, with the British using Cape Coast as their administrative center and with Elmina serving as the base for Dutch operations.<sup>2</sup>

The British and the Dutch decided to more clearly define their trading spheres of influence and, in 1876, agreed to swap several forts. The British gave up all their forts west of Elmina in exchange for a number of Dutch installations along the eastern stretch of the Gold Coast. Thus, British influence now centered east of Elmina while the forts of the western Gold Coast were under Dutch control.

These two European powers were unprepared for the resistance they were to encounter from various African groups along the coast, particularly the Fante. The fort exchange was negotiated in Europe, without any African participation, but Africans were to play an important role in the course of events over the following years. This resistance led not only to the formation of the Fante Confederation in 1868, but eventually to the complete withdrawal in early 1872 of the Dutch from West Africa.

Immediately after the news of the exchange was announced, African resistance to the proposed change commenced. The peoples of Apollonia, Wassaw (Wassa), Dixcove, Secondi (Sekondi) and Denkera were unwilling to submit to Dutch authority:

The kings . . . all used the same arguments to oppose the proclamation. They pointed out that, since the time of their ancestors, they had been under the British government and they asked what they had done to be given to the Dutch. They would do anything proposed by the British but they could never serve the Dutch government (Limberg, 1974: 23).

Despite the paternalistic nature of Limberg's analysis, it appears that his comments are accurate for the most part. But, in order to comprehend



the fierce resistance the Dutch encountered from these African groups, one needs to understand it in the context of the long-standing alliances and conflicts outlined above. The Dutch, naturally, were associated with their African allies, the Asante. The coastal groups, obviously, were weary of falling under the authority of the Asante's European allies, for they not only feared possible Asante military attacks, but were concerned also about their important positions in the coastal trade. If the Asante finally achieved their long-time objective of a direct route to the coast under the protection of their Dutch allies, it would be economically and politically disastrous for these coastal groups.

#### A brief History of the Fante Confederation (1868-1872)

The Fante states were in the forefront of this resistance. Clearly, with the history of conflict between the Asante and the Fante states fresh in their minds, and the dominant role they played in the coastal trade an overriding concern, the Fante had potentially the most to lose from the British-Dutch agreement. Agbodeka writes:

The Fante and the others in the Western District<sup>3</sup> knew that the Dutch were friendly with their enemies, the Asante, and they realised that if the former became firmly established in the West the latter would find it easier to attack the coastal districts (1971: 24).

Thus, in January 1868, a number of Fante kings, chiefs and merchants met in Mankessim, the traditional religious and political center of the Fante, to map out their strategy. Dubbed the "Mankessim Council," the participants agreed to form a united government based in that town. Kings Edo (Edu) of Mankessim, Otoo of Arbah (Abura) and Ortabil (Ortabill) of Gomoah were named "Presidents of the Fantee Nation" (Limberg, 1974: 23).

The compradores led this movement behind the scenes, organizing future meetings, drafting a constitution and arranging the collection of customs duties and other levies. The unofficial leader of this merchant group was Horton.

In February, the Dutch bombed the coastal town of Commendah (Komenda), a British possession which refused to recognize Dutch authority (Limberg, 1974: 25). The Fante held a "council of war" to discuss the Dutch attack and the perceived Asante-Dutch threat to the coastal states. The non-Fante states of Denkera and Wassaw joined a mostly-Fante military alliance "to form a confederation among themselves for mutual support" (Horton in Agbodeka, 1971: 24) and agreed to fight the Dutch in order to "hand over the Dutch territory to the

English government" (Horton in Limberg, 1974: 26). The war against the Dutch and their African allies at Elmina began in March.<sup>4</sup> According to Limberg, the war, which began with a series of skirmishes in April, consisted mainly of "slave-hunting" at this point (26). Horton claimed that the combined forces of the Fante-led military alliance numbered 15,000 men (Agbodeka, 1971: 25).

The Fante were successful in blocking off any trade going into or coming out of Elmina. They failed, however, in maintaining a united front. According to numerous sources, competition for leadership between the kings of Arbah and Mankessim led to the former withdrawing his troops from Elmina. While the king of Arbah was often regarded as the traditional leader of the Fante peoples, the king of Mankessim now assumed this role, as his state became the center of the Confederation movement (Limberg, 1974: 27). According to Limberg, the Fante, represented by Horton, held negotiations with Elmina in order to resolve the conflict. A peace treaty negotiated in June between the two African sides, with British representatives in attendance, fell through, however, because Elmina was not willing to suspend its alliance with Asante beyond the agreed upon six-month period. The Dutch attempted to obtain material assistance and moral support from neighboring villages, but these peoples refused to support the Dutch against the Fante-led alliance, and the siege of Elmina continued (Limberg, 1974: 30).

By the end of 1868 the compradores had drafted a working constitution and the Mankessim Council became the "Fante Confederation." The unified Fante-led government was to be headed by a King-President and his councilors, who would include kings, chiefs, elders, etc. Beneath these traditional leaders would be a National Assembly made up of representatives from the various states in the Confederation. While there is no evidence in any of the sources that this government was formally established, Agbodeka confidently writes: "This meant that all Fante and the adjacent districts now possessed a confederate government with a single head" (Agbodeka, 1971: 25).

The working constitution of 1868 outlined the judicial system, which also was to be headed by the King-President. The Confederate Court was to meet at Mankessim but, as Agbodeka points out, it is not clear from the sources which cases would be heard at this central court and which would be judged in the regional courts. Only those cases "dealing with questions of property and immorality" would definitely be sent to Mankessim, according to the constitution (Agbodeka, 1971: 25). Ghartey was named King-President and Chief Magistrate of the court at Mankessim (Limberg, 1974: 41).<sup>5</sup>

The compradores meeting in Mankessim also agreed to raise a poll tax and divided the Confederation into districts in order to simplify its collection (Agbodeka, 1971: 25). According to Limberg, the collection of road duties began in December (Limberg, 1974: 41).

The siege of Elmina continued in 1869, despite the resumption of peace negotiations. Trade along the interior routes had come almost to a standstill, but the Confederation managed to extract some income in the form of road duties from the minimal commerce which continued (Limberg, 44).

All the powers involved in the Gold Coast trade, with the exception of the British, expanded their military operations during 1869. The Dutch responded to the continued resistance of numerous coastal cities with a naval attack in June on Dixcove. Meanwhile, their Asante allies answered a Dutch plea for assistance (Limberg, 1974: 50) and sent a force of roughly 200 men to Elmina, arriving in December (Agbodeka, 1971: 32). It is not clear from the sources whether there were any Fante-Asante clashes during this march from Kumasi to Elmina. The Fante, too, were on the move, sending troops to both the eastern and western fronts.

Despite these military developments, all sides intensified diplomatic efforts to resolve the numerous regional disputes. In June 1870, the British and Dutch began discussions over the situation on the Gold Coast. The following month, the Dutch decided that they would leave the coast and hand over their forts to the British (Limberg, 1974: 53). By this time, the Fante had sent an additional 5,000 men to the western front (Limberg, 1974: 56).

The Asante were not only negotiating with the Dutch and the African leaders at Elmina but also with the British. According to Limberg, the Asante played an important role in the 1870 British-Dutch fort agreement discussed above (Limberg, 1974: 60). The British attempted to offer their services in negotiations between the Asante and the Fante, but these diplomatic efforts were for the most part unsuccessful. An exchange of prisoners between the two African powers was arranged by the British, however (Limberg, 1974: 64).

The British were slowly becoming impatient with the decline of commerce along the coast. Although the British were probably secretly pleased that they would now be the sole European power along the Gold Coast, the hostilities between the Fante and the Asante would continue to keep trade at a standstill. The British began to flex their imperial muscle, issuing a warning in the spring of 1870 to the African states of the Gold Coast. Limberg writes that the proclamation basically said "they might as well be friends as they were soon to be together under British rule" (Limberg, 1974: 65). Obviously, the British were not afraid of hiding their true intentions for the Gold Coast.

It is difficult to determine whether or not the Confederation government even functioned during this period. It appears the National Assembly met at least once in 1872, since our sources claim that this body passed the 1869 working constitution (Limberg, 1974: 72). Limberg states that the Confederation still collected a "moderate but steady" income from road duties (Limberg, 1974: 70). The military alliance, however, was slowly dissolving. The first to withdraw troops from the Fante-led armies was Arbah (Limberg, 1974: 68). Ghartey was replaced as King-President in 1872 by the kings of Arbah and Mankessim, who jointly held the post until the following year when King Edo of Mankessim alone retained the title. King Otoo of Arbah instead was named "General Field Marshall of the Fante Nation" (Agbodeka, 1971: 26).

In 1872, however, the compradores revived the political life of the Confederation and drafted the Constitution of the New Fante Confederation. This final document further increased the powers of its authors through the creation of an Executive Council. The body was to be composed entirely of educated Fante (i.e. the compradores) and would make all decisions for the Confederation (Limberg, 1974: 74). The Constitution was accepted by the National Assembly in November of the same year.

The British were now determined to undermine this renaissance of the Fante Confederation. After the approval of the Constitution by the National Assembly, the British administration at Cape Coast had the compradore leaders of the Confederation arrested. They were released the following month after pressure from the colonial administration at Sierra Leone (Boahen, 1965: 359). The Cape Coast officials continued their intimidation of the Confederation leaders, however, and had the homes of those leaders searched for evidence of "treason" (Limberg, 1974: 85).

Resorting to "threats, bribery and persuasion," the British attempted to win the loyalties of traditional Fante leaders (Limberg, 1974: 77). The British Governor at Cape Coast, (first name?) Salmon, issued a proclamation in February warning "all loyal subjects" not to support the Confederation (Limberg, 85). The British administration proposed the creation of a "native council" to be composed of Fante kings and chiefs in replacement of the Confederation (Limberg, 85) and began paying salaries to loyal Fante rulers (Agbodeka, 1971: 31).

In 1872, British officials negotiated with the Fante compradores over the future of the Confederation. The result of these discussions was a "Scheme" which served as amendments to the Constitution rather than as a replacement. The Fante not only agreed to work in close cooperation with the British administration at the Cape Coast, but also gave up their right to collect taxes or levy customs along the trade

routes. In return, the British granted greater African representation in the British-dominated Legislative Council at Cape Coast and agreed to finance the Confederation administrative apparatus through its own colonial funds (Limberg, 1974: 87). The closing paragraph of the Scheme threatened that either the Fante accept this compromise or "Her Majesty's Government will have to take over the whole country, and govern it as vigorously and on the same system and principles as it does Her other colonies" (Limberg, 1974: 88). It is quite astonishing how blatant the British officials at the Coast were about their imperial designs.

The Scheme of 1872, obviously, signified the slow death of the Fante Confederation. The movement's leaders failed to meet after these negotiations with the British and, hence, the Confederation project lost all momentum. There is no single point or event we can identify as marking the death of the Confederation. Instead, the movement began to disintegrate, as numerous Fante leaders (traditional and bourgeois) chose to embrace British offers of assistance.<sup>6</sup>

### Conclusion

Clearly, the Fante Confederation was (a) an immediate reaction to the 1868 British-Dutch fort exchange agreement and (b) a movement created and perpetuated by the Fante compradores. The fort exchange was the spark which fueled the movement for a united bourgeois-led super-state. Although Agbodeka argues that the Fante Confederation was a nationalist movement in response to British imperialism, this conclusion ignores the nature of the pre-Confederation relationship between the Fante states and the British administration. The two powers were close allies, as evidenced by the aforementioned Bond of 1844, and throughout the Confederation period, according to our sources, the Fante always sought British approval for their movement. Once the Confederation seemed near collapse, most of the Fante leaders of the Confederation switched their allegiances to the British colonial regime at Cape Coast. This development must be understood in the context of the historical relations between the Fante and the British, as outlined in a previous section. The two groups had a mutually-profitable relationship, which proved more important to the Fante compradores and traditional leaders than the nationalist movement Agbodeka claims the Fante Confederation represented.

The fact that the compradores were able to persuade the Fante rulers to unite in a political and military alliance in 1868 was not unusual. As stated above, the Fante had had a history of forming

temporary confederations when their security was at risk. The fort exchange was correctly perceived as a threat to the economic and political sovereignty of the Fante states.

The central concern for both the compradores and the traditional rulers was the continuation of the latter's 'middlemen' role in the Euro-African trade along the Gold Coast. For the compradores, their livelihoods were at risk. Arhin writes that a "genuine mercantile class" rose in the nineteenth century whose members held important roles in the Euro-African trade as self-employed traders or as agents representing British commercial houses (Arhin, 1983: 16). These merchants dominated the economy of the Fante states which, in the words of B. Cruickshank, "became a nation of pedlars [sic]" (Arhin, 1983: 16).<sup>7</sup> The rulers, too, were entirely dependent on the revenues in the form of customs duties derived from the Euro-African trade.

The Fante Confederation project, however, was doomed to fail from its inception. It is impossible, as I argued above, to determine from the sources available whether or not this compradore-created state had any popular support. It is obvious that the traditional Fante leaders held the future of the Confederation in their hands.

The compradores were entirely reliant on the Fante kings and chiefs for military and political support. Only the traditional leaders could muster the forces necessary to wage war against the Dutch at Elmina and the other forts along the western section of the coast. Limberg writes, "Nobody but the kings and chiefs could collect a united army of about 15,000 men, nobody else could demand the taxes be levied and nobody else could decide on war or peace" (Limberg, 1974: 28). Powerless, the compradores used the Fante kings and chiefs as covers for their own political schemes.

To the British, too, it was clear that the compradores were impotent without the support of the traditional Fante rulers. While the British officials at Cape Coast complained of the "self-interested Mullatos" and "semi-educated blacks" (Ussher in Limberg, 1974: 28) for halting the trade along the Gold Coast, they acknowledged that the traditional leaders held the real power and, hence, became the focus of their diplomatic activities.

Thus, the Fante Confederation could only exist if it had the support of the traditional rulers. As we have seen, the alliance between the Fante states, on the one hand, and the Fante and non-Fante states on the other, was always a weak one throughout this period. Once the British became the sole European power in 1872 along the Gold Coast, they focused all their attention on persuading the Fante rulers to withdraw their support from the Confederation. This only further weakened the fragile alliance of states comprising the Confederation. The compradores were powerless in the face of the intense diplomatic

efforts by the British aimed at the very foundation (i.e. the backing of the Fante leaders) that the Compradores so depended on in order to carry out their plans for this Western-style nation. As Limberg writes:

The traditional rulers had the political power. The educated men had no power and could only act through the kings and chiefs. As advisers they tried, however, to build up a position of power for themselves under the protection of a European-style constitution (1974: 102).

Limberg's comments lead me to another conclusion alluded to above, namely that the Confederation was purely an attempt by the compradores to increase their own political power (and thus subvert the authority of the traditional leaders) while maintaining their dominant role in the Euro-African trade. There is no doubt that this project was created, led and dominated by the western-educated Fante merchants. From the beginning, the compradore leaders of the movement summoned other merchants to join them in their project. In September 1868, these architects of the Confederation published an address in *The African Times* to "the natives of the Gold Coast," beckoning all educated men to support the Fante project (Limberg, 1974: 34).

With the nominal backing of their traditional leaders, the compradores created a constitution which granted all power to themselves. As Limberg writes, "The position of power which they had prepared for themselves was quite amazing" (1974: 73). The 1872 Constitution, for example, was signed by numerous Fante kings and chiefs yet reserved all positions of power to men of "education and position" (Limberg, 1974: 73). The title of King-President, granted to the kings of Arbah and Mankessim, was purely a ceremonial position. The Executive Council called for in the 1872 Constitution was to be comprised of a vice-president, secretary, treasurer, under-secretary and assistant treasurer, all of whom were to be educated men (Limberg, 1974: 73). While the Fante rulers held all political power, the compradores had economic and intellectual power. Their command of the English language, for example, gave them an advantage over their traditional rulers. The Confederation documents and constitutions were all written in English and had to be translated to the kings and chiefs, according to our sources.

These facts did not go unnoticed by the signatories of the two Fante constitutions. According to Limberg, already in 1869 the Fante kings and chiefs expressed concern "about their old rights and powers" (1974: 41). Competition for leadership among the Fante rulers was also a factor in the failure of the Confederation. As noted above, the siege of Elmina was plagued by infighting in the military alliance. As early as one year into the life of the Confederation there appeared to be "no unity

among the Fanti kings and an almost total lack of leadership" (Limberg, 1974: 55).

The compradores were not free of competition within their elite group, either. According to our sources, many of the educated men behind the Confederation were envious of the power Gharthey enjoyed. This led to, among other things, accusations from fellow compradores of financial misdealings on Gharthey's part (Agbodeka, 1971: 26). *The African Times* often served as the forum for criticisms of Gharthey (Limberg, 1974: 69).

Therefore, I argue that the Confederation failed because of the tenuous position of the main forces behind it, the compradores. They were primarily responsible for its intellectual development, yet wholly reliant on the traditional leaders for its existence. The traditional leaders were the sails of the boat the compradores designed and built. The infighting which plagued both groups, and the suspicions of the traditional rulers about the intentions of the compradores, weakened the already fragile foundations of the Confederation, which were then further undermined by British imperial policies. As Freund writes:

The weakness of the compradore stratum, which failed to organise an efficient fighting force or systematic revenue collection, brought about the collapse after several years. Yet it was also subverted by British hostility. The British, for the first time, preferred to cut out the compradores from any potential role as a national bourgeoisie and to deal directly with the chiefs (1984: 91).

Unfortunately, because of the nature of our sources, as discussed in a previous section, my study of the Fante Confederation, too, focuses too heavily on the political history of the Confederation. Based on the material available, it is difficult to ascertain the extent of popular support for the Fante Confederation and the level of legitimacy it was awarded. The Fante Confederation movement is a period in late-precolonial West African history which begs for further research.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Gharthey Papers are held in the National Archives of Ghana in Accra.

<sup>2</sup>Elmina, founded by the Portuguese in 1482, was the oldest European fort along the Guinea Coast.

<sup>3</sup>The author is referring to the area west of the Fante states.

<sup>4</sup>Limberg claims that the Africans of Cape Coast, the center of British trade along the Gold Coast, joined the Fante-led military alliance (1974: 26). However, this seems almost unlikely, for the British most surely would not have allowed the local African population to join in the military campaign against the Dutch.



<sup>5</sup>Ghartey's official title became "King Ghartey IV of Winnebah" (Limberg, 1974: 69).

<sup>6</sup>After two Asante invasions of the coastal states in 1873 and 1874, the Gold Coast was formally annexed by the British in July 1874 as the British Crown Colony of the Gold Coast.

<sup>7</sup>See *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa* (London, 1853).

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