
Ghana: A New King in Ghana

In April, the Ashanti celebrated the coronation of a new ruler, in a ceremony as rich in history and tradition as it was in colour. Story by Bob Burch.

In April, the Ashanti celebrated the coronation of a new ruler, in a ceremony as rich in history and tradition as it was in colour. Story by Bob Burch.

As occupant of the Golden Stool - the symbol of Ashanti unity and the source of Ashanti inspiration - Otumfuo Opoku Ware II was the traditional ruler and head of Ashantis. He died in the early hours of February 26, 1999, just short of his 80th birthday and was laid to rest on March 26 in a funeral attended by leaders from across Africa. The Ashanti believe his spirit remains within the soul of the Ashanti Kingdom. As his countrymen say, "He has gone on a journey to his village."

Unlike most monarchies, power among the Ashanti is determined by a matriarch. The Queen Mother wields great power and ascension to the throne is usually via the eldest nephew of the reigning king. Thus, Barima Kwaku Duah was nominated as the successor to the Golden Stool and was accepted by the Kingmakers' Council. Potential successors are groomed from an early age and tend to be highly educated professionals. Opoku Ware was a noted lawyer and surveyor in his early years. Duah has vast experience in economics and has represented a number of foreign investors in Ghana.

Following the death of an Ashanti king, the populace enters a mourning period which will last a full year. Traditional black Adinkra mourning cloth is worn at all state occasions. The new king-elect enters a 40 day period of solitude whereupon he receives instruction and secret knowledge. During this time, he chooses his King Name. In the case of Duah, this period was shortened because elders had anticipated his eventual status and instructed him well. Emerging from isolation, Duah adopted the title Otumfuo Osei Tutu II in honor of his distant relative who founded the Ashanti Kingdom.

On April 25, Osei Tutu sat in state at the Royal Manhiya Palace to receive his regional chiefs and foreign dignitaries. April 26 marked his actual coronation with rites both public and private. The process began with a procession to an ancestral home known as Pampaso where various secret rites were performed.

The dressing of the king is supervised by Baffour Domfeh Gyabour III, the chief fetish priest. On this solemn occasion, the king is dressed in batakarike, a royal regalia featuring gold ornaments and talismans. This attire is actually a war dress worn by early kings when they went into battle. To symbolise his humility, the king elect leaves Pampaso with a sheaf of grass in his mouth, signifying the fact that he has nothing to say in what is happening. He is carried aloft in a palanquin to the Kumasi Sports Stadium - the only venue large enough to receive the many guests and dignitaries on hand to witness the making of a king.

Massive throngs lined the streets along the route to the stadium, shouting and cheering as their new king made his first public appearance. Attended by sword bearers and royal guards, drummers beat out ancient rhythms on fonfon and atumpan drums, while antique muskets boomed in the background. Entering the stadium, Osei Tutu paid homage to his regional chiefs and greeted heads of state. His appearance in the stadium was brief. He carried out his duty of firing an ancient musket three times, symbolically demonstrating his ability to lead the Ashanti in time of war. At this point in a long and complicated process, the king is in full possession of all the regalia entitled to him as ruler of the Ashanti - all but the actual throne, the Golden Stool.

In the wee hours of the night, he is formally enstooled in a secret ceremony where priests and attendants seat him thrice on the throne. This is the only time that the Golden Stool is actually touched by the king. It is rarely displayed in public; for state occasions the king occupies an ornate traditional chair. The coronation was finally completed at 3:00 a.m. on the morning of April 27 as 34 Paramount Chiefs from the Ashanti traditional lands swore their allegiance to the new king.

In the days that followed, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II reaffirmed his commitment to the Ashanti people and vowed to dedicate his reign to national unity, education, land reform and the environment. He continues in the traditions of his long line.

Montreal-based Bob Burch is a regular contributor to Travel Africa. He is a frequent visitor to Ghana.