

The African Press Coverage of Japan and British Censorship during World War II

A Case Study of the *Ashanti Pioneer*, 1939-1945

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Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between the African newspaper coverage of Japan and British censorship during World War II, based on the case of the *Ashanti Pioneer* that was published in the British Gold Coast. The *Pioneer*, Asante's first daily newspaper, was first published in November 1939. Originally, the Kumasi-based newspaper mainly published articles related to local affairs and took a neutral stance towards the recent war. However, around the turn of the decade (1939-40), it gradually shifted its stance towards a pro-war position, and after the 1940s, its stance on Japan shifted from positive to negative and even to hostile.

A recent paper read by the present author suggests possible causes of the 'abrupt reversal' and changing image of Japan among the Gold Coast newspapers during World War II.¹ Among them were the adopted imperial consciousness of African intellectuals, the awakening of African superiority through their experience of the war, the rivalry among non-European nations and/or the censorship imposed by the

¹ Yasu'o MIZOBE, 'Turned into the Enemy: The Changing Image of Japan among Gold Coast Newspapers during World War II', Paper presented at the international workshop 'Re-evaluating African and WWII', at Rutgers University on 29 March 2008.

colonial authorities. The current paper focuses on censorship and scrutinizes its influence on the stance taken by the *Ashanti Pioneer*.

With regard to the *Pioneer's* change of stance during WWII, the existing study also points out factors such as 'colonial government censorship' and 'political pressures emanating from conservative African nationalist politicians'.² However, this research does not refer to any official documents that highlight the relationship between censorship and the shift in stance. This study is chiefly based on documents filed as 'Newspapers General'³ in the Kumasi Branch of the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD), as well as original articles of the *Pioneer*, which are stored in PRAAD's Cape Coast Branch and Newspaper Library at Colindale, UK.

I. The *Ashanti Pioneer* and J.W. Tsiboe

The first issue of the *Ashanti Pioneer* was published in Kumasi, the then Gold Coast and present-day Ghana in November 1939. It was published by the Abura Printing Works, which was established and owned by John Wallace Tsiboe (1904–1963). Tsiboe, son of a local chief's family in Abura Dunkaw, started trading in Kumasi after completing his secondary education at the Wesleyan Boys School, Kumasi. According to Fynn, 'he was hard-working and shrewd, and within a few years had become one of the wealthiest men in Asante'.⁴ As 'a patriot and nationalist', he was 'determined to hasten the end of British colonialism and exploitation by establishing a newspaper to popularize his

John Wallace Tsiboe



[Source] *The Ashanti Pioneer*,
19 February 1940.

² A. M. Israel, 'The Afrocentric Perspective in African Journalism—A Case Study of the *Ashanti Pioneer*: 1939–1957', *Journal of Black Studies*, 22 (1992), pp. 411–428. It mentions two editorials from the *Ashanti Pioneer*, which refer to Japan and indicate an abrupt change in the viewpoint concerning Japan (pp. 417–8). However, the article does not mention any *Pioneer* articles published between January 1943 and December 1945, since the microfilm that it cites does not contain them.

³ 'Newspapers General' (11/9/39–31/8/43), PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3

⁴ J. K. Fynn, 'Tsiboe, J. W.', *Dictionary of African Biography*, vol. 1, *Ethiopia–Ghana*. New York, 1977, p. 322.

aims and ideals'.⁵

After WWII, Tsiboe devoted himself to political activities. When the Convention People's Party (CPP) was founded in 1949, he became the chairman of the Asante division. Later, after breaking with Kwame Nkrumah's CPP, he joined the Ghana Congress Party led by K.A. Busia, and then formed the National Liberation Movement in Asante, which was later merged into the United Party along with all the other opposition parties in 1957. As he kept utilizing the *Pioneer* as an 'opposition paper', it was banned not only by the colonial government in 1950 but also by Nkrumah's government in 1962, since it continually campaigned for political reforms and social justice for the Asante people. Many studies, therefore, refer to the *Pioneer* as a 'paper with a long and proud history',⁶ 'a symbol of the freedom of the press in Ghana',⁷ and 'one remarkable exception'⁸ among the other Ghanaian newspapers.

During the early phase of WWII, the *Pioneer* did not express any sympathy with its colonial masters. An editorial on 4 December 1939 entitled 'Europe Is Mad' contained the editor's misgivings about the war in the statement, 'the whole world looks at Europe and gapes with awe and surprise, for Europe appears to have become a den of mad men'.⁹ However, towards the end of the year, the editorials began to appeal to the readers to prepare for the war.¹⁰ In the beginning of the following year the *Pioneer* published an editorial entitled 'Rule Britannia!', which was concluded with the following words:

Let us pray for this [British] Empire to live and continue to exercise democratic principles. Let us pray for this Empire to improve in her government from day to day as to be able to attain that perfection that will make her the unquestioned leader of the whole world. Let us pray for Britain. RULE BRITANNIA!¹¹

Thereafter, war-related articles, including 'War News' from foreign news agencies, came to occupy most of the space in the paper and this trend continued until the end of the war. In 1941 the *Pioneer* began displaying a 'V' symbol for victory at the top of the front page of each issue, as well as a 'B' symbol for 'Give to

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kwame Karikari, 'Press, Power & Politics: Ghana 2000' A Freedom Forum Report on the Ghanaian Media, Arlington: Freedom Forum, 2000. p. 9. (<http://www.freedomforum.org/publications/international/mediaforum/2000/africa/ghanaprrereport2000.pdf>)

⁷ J. K. Fynn, 'Tsiboe, J. W.', p. 322.

⁸ K. A. B. Jones-Quartey, 'The Ghana Press', *Report on the Press in West Africa*. Ibadan, 1960, p. 45.

⁹ 'Europe Is Mad', *The Ashanti Pioneer*, 4 December 1939.

¹⁰ 'The Time Has Come' and 'War Economy', *The Ashanti Pioneer*, 11 and 20 December 1939.

¹¹ 'Rule Britannia', *The Ashanti Pioneer*, 30 January 1940.

Buy [the] Biggest Bomber [to] Bomb Berlin' after 1942. It also appealed to its readers to increase the production of rubber as a contribution to war efforts.

II. Coverage of Japan during World War II

The *Pioneer's* coverage of Japan in its very early issues did not reveal any hostility. For example, the editorial of the 28 November 1939 issue mentioned Japan in the following manner:

Japan is a world power to-day. In just a little over seventy years ago Japan was a backward State almost on the same footing with the Gold Coast. We could safely say that the Gold Coast was much more politically advanced than Japan then... To-day the Gold Coast is backward politically, economically, educationally. Her comparative progress with that of Japan is an Inverse Proportion. How did Japan do it? She amassed a great national wealth, and with it dispatched her worthy sons and daughters abroad to learn all that human mind could invent. These returned home with their great acquisitions to re-make Japan, and they have re-made Japan. Let us follow this example and take our proper place in the Empire and on the surface of the earth.¹²

This was not the first time Japan had been presented as a model for the Gold Coast. Such references had already appeared in some books published at the beginning of the twentieth century by early Gold Coast intellectuals.¹³

However, after the 1940s, particularly after 1941, when Japan formally declared war on the Allied nations, the press of the Gold Coast, including the *Ashanti Pioneer*, changed its stance towards Japan. In the issue dated 4th August 1942, the editor introduced a newly published brochure entitled 'Japan' written by Moses E. Danquah. The review read:

Printed in attractive style, it is a mine of information of a people [Japanese] who, in less than a century, have carved a niche in the temple of fame, but who intoxicated with [an] exaggerated view of their wonderful achievement, are helping to wreck [the] liberties of mankind.¹⁴

¹² 'Wine is Mocker', *The Ashanti Pioneer*, 28 November 1939.

¹³ For example, leading personalities in the early twentieth century Gold Coast such as J. M. Sarbah, J. E. Casely-Hayford and S. R. B. Attoh-Ahuma referred to Japan in their publications, where they portrayed it as a model of successful modernisation among non-Western nations. K. K. Prah, 'Nationalist Attitudes in the Gold Coast in Response to the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905' (paper presented at the Afro-Japanese Relations in Historical Perspective symposium, Johannesburg, South Africa, 1 November 2008).

¹⁴ 'Japan', *The Ashanti Pioneer*, 4 August 1942.

In addition, the same issue published a contribution from a 'Student of History', a reader from Accra, which stated:

It is characteristic of the Japanese to sacrifice any precious possession to the achievement of an aim set before them. They have also according to the nature of their environment, developed a naval power. But they cannot be a match for either the British Empire or the United States. Thus every body will take heart and contribute in whatever he can to the war effort. Persistent perseverance and utmost endeavours will never fail us in getting the Axis completely vanquished.¹⁵

The former describes Japan as a newly developed nation perverting its achievement to harm human liberty, which the British Empire along with the Allied nations was protecting. The latter clearly aims to present Japan as an enemy nation by using the word 'Axis'.

As the war intensified, more and more banners and war reports referring to Japan occupied the front page as well as the inside pages. Moreover, after 1942, the *Pioneer* began to use the derogatory term 'Jap'.¹⁶

After 1944, when the Gold Coast soldiers of the Royal West Africa Frontier Force actually fought with Japanese soldiers in the India-Burma Theater, the *Pioneer* published some editorials in which the editor praised the ability, bravery and superiority of the West African troops in the field. For example, the editorial entitled 'They Are On The Move' commented:

HOW OUR HEART WELLED within us when the news of the movements of the brave lads in far away India was released last Wednesday! ... The brave West African lads have enlisted for service overseas to fight against the King-Emperor's enemies; they are doing battle to purge the world of EVIL THINGS represented by Nazism and Fascism, the worst and most dangerous aspects of human nature which deny elementary rights of human beings to a people outside the Aryan race, especially the black race which is generally regarded as the "service" race for the dominant races of the world.¹⁷

¹⁵ 'Our Post Bag (Reader's Views)', *The Ashanti Pioneer*, 4 August 1942.

¹⁶ However, as far as the author has confirmed, the *Pioneer* did not disparage the Japanese by using disdainful words as did the Cape Coast-based *Gold Coast Observer* did in its front-page article 'Our Kith and Kin in Burma', published on 18 August 1944. See also Mizobe, 'Turned into the Enemy', pp. 6-7.

¹⁷ 'They Are on the Move', *The Ashanti Pioneer*, 18 February 1944.

III. Censorship and the *Pioneer's* Response

As is evident from the above survey, as the war progressed, the *Pioneer* gradually shifted its stance regarding Japan as well as the war itself. Although various factors contributed to this change, this paper limits its focus to the censorship imposed by the colonial authority. In the British West Africa, it has been pointed out the colonial governments—more precisely, the colonial office in London—had been reluctant to regulate the local press.¹⁸ In fact, the Gold Coast government issued an ordinance¹⁹ to regulate publications in 1897, which remained substantially the same law until the independence of Ghana despite some amendments in 1950, 1952 and 1958.²⁰ However, the law required all publishers to register with the government their names, the dates of publication, the number of copies published, the price, and so forth, and did not allow the government to officially censor the publications.

Nevertheless, during the war, the government introduced special regulations to censor all the publications as well as mails and telegrams in the colony. When the war broke out, the colonial government issued the 'Defence (Restriction of Publications) Order, 1939', under which an information officer was appointed to examine and approve for publication the newspapers and other material submitted to him. Although the order was applied initially to publications in Accra, after December 1940, papers published in Kumasi were subjected to the same form of censorship.²¹ However, both in Accra and Kumasi, editors did not have to submit copies prior to publication because 'the co-operation between the Editors and the Information Officer has been satisfactory'.²² Instead, the information officer checked each issue of the publications and warned the editor when he found it to be undesirable.²³

In Asante, the Chief Commissioner of Ashanti was appointed as the examiner of the government censorship.²⁴ In his reply to the appointment letter, H. C. Stevenson, the then Chief Commissioner, stated, 'I have been working on the lines indicated in your letter since our only newspaper, the '*Pioneer*', was first published', and interestingly, he continued, 'I have found that the proprietor of this paper [Tsiboe]

¹⁸ Yasuo MIZOBE, *A Survey of the Gold Coast (Southern Ghanaian) Newspapers in the Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century*. Cape Town, 2007, pp.34–36; Fred I. A. Omu, 'The Dilemma of Press Freedom in Colonial Africa: The West African Example', *Journal of African History*, 9, 1968.

¹⁹ 'The Book and Newspaper Registration Ordinance', *The Gold Coast Government Gazette*, 30 November 1897.

²⁰ Jones-Quartey, 'The Ghana Press', p. 44.

²¹ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/19, Colonial Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Ashanti, 9 December 1940.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

has been most willing to co-operate and ready to listen to advice'.²⁵ In fact, most of the articles the authorities warned newspapers about concerned the military situation of the Allied Powers, including their troops' positions and plans. In such cases, the proprietor and editor of the *Pioneer* immediately responded to the warnings and rectified them as directed.²⁶

The degree of 'satisfactory cooperation' between the *Pioneer* and the authorities can also be inferred from the following correspondence between them. The editor of the *Pioneer* sent the chief commissioner a letter to ask him to issue a short message on special occasions, such as the paper's anniversary or Christmas.²⁷ In every message, the commissioner appealed to the readers to contribute to war efforts and expressed his satisfaction with the *Pioneer*'s role in encouraging war efforts. Among these communications, the 1942's Christmas message of 1942 is worth quoting here:

Last year as a result of Japan's treacherous attack upon the United Nations, we celebrated Christmas under the shadow of one of the greatest perils that has ever threatened the existence of the British Commonwealth of Nations. We then realised that that peril was to be intensified in the months that lay immediately before us. But we were sustained by faith in the justness of our cause ... A hard, and I fear costly, fight lies before our armed forces and we must support them not only by increasing our production of materials essential to the war effort but also by the sacrifice of many of those amenities which we had believed to be parts of our every-day life. It is only through this spirit of self-sacrifice that we can hope to gain a lasting Peace based on Good Will.²⁸

Furthermore, in May 1943, when the war had intensified, Abura Printing Works organised an 'Evening Dress Dance' at Prempeh Hall as part of the war charity campaign 'under the distinguished patronage of His Honour the Acting Chief Commissioner of Ashanti and Otumfuo the Asantehene'.²⁹

One of the factors that sustained 'satisfactory cooperation' was the chronic shortage of newsprint during the war. Immediately after its founding, the *Pioneer*

²⁵ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/21, Chief Commissioner of Ashanti to Colonial Secretary, 12 December 1940.

²⁶ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/2, Chief Commissioner of Ashanti to J.W. Tsiboe, 15 September 1939; ARG 1/28/3/27, Chief Commissioner of Ashanti to Colonial Secretary, 19 May 1941; ARG 1/28/3/38, Tsiboe to Chief Commissioner of Ashanti, 7 October 1941.

²⁷ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/41, 48 and 72, Baiden to Chief Commissioner of Ashanti, 10 November 1941, 7 December 1942 and 30 August 1943.

²⁸ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/50, Chief Commissioner's message, 19 December 1942.

²⁹ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 6/9/5, 'War Information—Record of Events'.

published a small notification entitled 'Notice To Our Agents', which read as follows:

Papers are very scarce as a result of the War, and in order to standardise our daily output and to avoid unnecessary waste of papers, time and strength we are strongly appealing to you, therefore to let us know at once exactly how many copies you want and don't ask for more.³⁰

About six months later, the editor of the *Pioneer* submitted a petition to H. C. Stevenson, the then chief commissioner of Ashanti, in which he complained of the serious shortage of newsprint due to the war and asked the government's assistance in obtaining newsprint.³¹ Stevenson requested the information officer in Accra to take precautionary measures on this matter, stating, 'I should be sorry if the only Ashanti paper were compelled to close down owing to lack of newsprint and I hope that the Editor's request will receive sympathetic consideration'.³² However, the information officer did not accept this request because the *Pioneer* had not submitted precise information about its circulation and stock of newsprint.³³

As the war continued, the government tightened its control on newsprint. In September 1941, the information officer ordered the *Pioneer* to discontinue the use of the plate entitled 'Aim High, Strive Hard, Go Forward' on the front page, not only because 'supplies of newsprint are limited' but also because 'this plate is of indifferent quality in itself, and it could hardly be said to add to the news value, or propaganda value, of the newspaper'.³⁴ Tsiboe promptly followed the order and stopped using the plate.³⁵ The *Pioneer's* dependence on government newsprint grew in December 1941 when the government decided that all newsprint for local newspapers would be rationed by the Government Printer.³⁶

The supply of newsprint was the lifeline of the *Pioneer* and, more seriously, the

³⁰ *The Ashanti Pioneer*, Saturday, 4 December 1939.

³¹ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/5, 'Petition of the Editor, Ashanti Pioneer, Praying His Honour the Chief Commissioner of Ashanti To Assist in the Matter of Newsprint', 12 June 1940.

³² PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/8, Chief Commissioner of Ashanti to Information Officer, 17 June 1940.

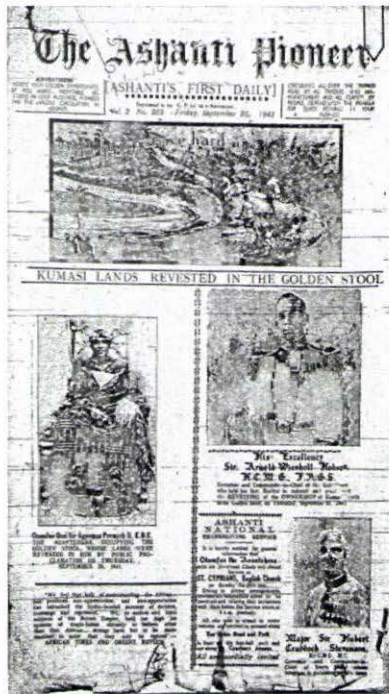
³³ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/9, Information Officer to Chief Commissioner of Ashanti, 19 June 1940.

³⁴ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/35, Information Officer to Chief Commissioner of Ashanti, 26 September 1941.

³⁵ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/36, Chief Commissioner of Ashanti to Information Officer, 30 September 1941.

³⁶ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/39, Information Officer to Chief Commissioner of Ashanti, 3 December 1941.

Abura Printing Works, the *Pioneer's* publisher. This is because jobbing, such as supplying cash books, bill forms, market tickets, posters, and so forth, was 'a fairly large part of the business of the Abura Printing Works'.³⁷ It is therefore not surprising that Tsiboe, the proprietor and one of the most prominent businesspersons in Asante, made desperate efforts to ingratiate himself and his newspaper with the government in order to secure newsprint for his business.



[Figure] Cover page of the Ashanti Pioneer (26 September 1941)

Conclusion

This paper has briefly examined the *Ashanti Pioneer's* changing stance on the subject of Japan as well as the war during WWII. Focusing on governmental censorship, this paper has indicated that the management of the Asante's private newspaper, at least ostensibly, willingly accepted the government's censorship instead of opposing it,

³⁷ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/54, Report by Inspector of Government Printer, 29 January 1943.

and that the governmental control of newsprint significantly contributed to the proprietor's 'loyalty' to the government. It may be possible to say of the *Pioneer's* changing stance as 'The *Ashanti Pioneer* gradually became an organ of war propaganda...'³⁸, and that 'In spite of its proclamations of nationalist intent, [it] did not maintain a consistent Afrocentric perspective during its early years...'³⁹

However, the *Pioneer* continued to be the mouthpiece for the Asante's affairs even during wartime. In September 1941, when the government revested land in Kumasi in the Asantehene, almost the entire issue of 25 September contained articles relating to this news, with war news being pushed to the last column on the final page.⁴⁰ The government did not censor such articles either. Rather, the colonial authorities in Kumasi seemed to be 'tolerant' of discussing Asante affairs. In the anniversary messages to the *Pioneer*, the chief commissioner of Ashanti stated that, 'I am confident that... this newspaper will help to make useful contributions to the solution of the post war problems of Ashanti'⁴¹ and that, 'I am pleased to note that it [the *Pioneer*] is already promoting discussions as to post-war problems'⁴².

This paper clarified the relationship among governmental censorship, the government's control of newsprint, and local press's reactions to these restrictions. Moreover, it also pointed out the apparent 'honeymoon relationship' that existed between the local press and the colonial government. However, it is necessary to further investigate the business status of the newspaper company and carefully examine the business and political ideas of Mr Tsiboe, through a consideration of his life, in order to elucidate the relationship between the company's management affairs and its loyalty to the government. In addition, a comparison between the *Pioneer* and the south-based *Gold Coast Observer* and *Gold Coast Independent* will be of great significance to this study. These issues will be included in the author's future research.

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³⁸ Israel, 'The Afrocentric Perspective in African Journalism', p. 415.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 427.

⁴⁰ *The Ashanti Pioneer*, 25 September 1941.

⁴¹ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/42, Chief Commissioner's message, 12 November 1942.

⁴² PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/28/3/74, Chief Commissioner's message, September 1943.

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