



A New Look at the Akan Gold Weights of West Africa

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Abstract. – 2,547 geometric and 1,248 figurative Akan gold weights have been statistically evaluated. Only the geometric forms reveal the existence of a distinct weight system. We cannot find any evidence that European weight standards or the Arabian trade standard are represented within the Akan system. The general frequency distribution of the so-called figurative weights differs considerably from that of the geometrical weights. From the metrological point of view we must, therefore, conclude that the figurines were not produced as weights but for another purpose. The figurines have a symbolic meaning. They represent the Akan traditional knowledge manifested, for example, in proverbs and sayings. The latter were of vital importance for regulating the social framework in a society without a written language. [*Akan, gold weights, geometric weights, figurative weights, weight system, reckoned values*]

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1 Introduction

Akan gold weights were used for weighing gold dust, which for centuries was the main currency in the Gold Coast. We find geometric forms and figurines mostly made of brass using the lost-wax process. Up to the present it has been generally accepted that both the geometric forms as well as the figurines were used as weights – the so-called Akan or Asante weights. For daily trading they were carried, together with a balance and other accessories, in a bag called a *futuo* or *dja*. Wealthy families owned a second *futuo* containing a large number of weights, balances,

accessories, figurines, and other items of European origin called pseudoweights. These *futuos* were believed to be part of the soul of their owners and were not opened without a certain ceremony being performed.

The geometric forms were weights. The figurines have a symbolic meaning, apart from what they actually portray, which is obvious, related to the state, ancestors, the family, and/or everyday matters. Moreover they represented proverbs of the Akan people, which led to them being called "proverb weights."

The metrological principles of the weight system are not easy to define, and even now they are not definitely known because, in contrast to the weights of other cultures, these weights have neither inscriptions nor adjuster's marks. But it is reasonable to assume that the Akan weight system incorporates an Arabic standard as a result of the ancient gold trade across the Sahara desert. Garrard (1980) established a system of 60 weight classes, which included the Arabian gold and trade standards, as well as the Portuguese and the English troy standards. He set up the hypothesis, still maintained in Phillips (1995), that all these standards are incorporated in the Akan system of geometric and figurative weights.

Garrard's research work on Akan weights is undoubtedly meritorious. However, from the metrological point of view he was in error on several counts. For instance, he equated the nominal weight of a weight class with the highest point of the Gauss weight-class curve (number of weights against the mass), which is in fact about the mean. For the *pereguan* (16 *mitkal*), the curve extends