Eric Alfred Zienne was born at Kusele near Nandom in northern Ghana in 1972. Like generations of youth in search of opportunity he migrated south to Kumasi, historic capital of Asante and Ghana’s second city. In 2007 he achieved national notoriety. Also known as AK, Ataa Ayi, Baba 93, Lone Ranger, Usama and Death Man, Zienne was a daring and ruthless armed robber in and around Kumasi. In over thirty robberies he shot three men to death and wounded several more. Mostly he worked alone and in broad daylight, targeting commercial concerns with large amounts of ready cash. The authorities offered a reward for information leading to his arrest. He was cornered at his Kumasi dwelling and apprehended. Days later he was conducting police around the scenes of his crimes when he broke free and fled. He was chased, shot in the leg and recaptured. He spent Christmas 2007 shackled to a bed and surrounded day and night by armed guards in Kumasi’s Komfo Anokye Hospital.

Zienne raised public alarm at a time when Ghana’s media were full of tales of a steep rise in robbery, murder, contract killings and lawless urban youth gangs. Government acknowledged this trend and struggled to calm the fears it inspired. Beyond the moral panic and wild rumours, two known facts stand out about the Zienne case. First, the man lived his life of crime more or less in public. He invested his stolen money in a flourishing supermarket, restaurant and car-wash complex near the Kumasi racetrack. Everyone knew this and many neighbours admired Zienne’s enterprise. He cultivated an image as a local ‘big man’, giving out cash, arbitrating disputes, dispensing advice and bribing neighbourhood police to look the other way. In short, he acted very much like a ward boss, a local Kumasi politician of a familiar sort. Like such people, he was forgiven the source of his wealth by a knowing public. Like them, too, his luck finally ran out when he crossed powerful interests he could not suborn, in his case a national government under huge public pressure to do something about crime. Second, Zienne was very much a child of the age of globalized electronic media. He paid extravagant attention to his public image. He always rode a scarlet Honda 500 cc motorcycle, with gleaming chrome accoutrements, and dressed stylishly for his job. He wore designer clothes, including a long coat that concealed his weapons of choice.
These were a pair of AK-47 automatic rifles. These weapons were not imported, but were manufactured in Kumasi.¹

This article is about guns and the culture of guns in Kumasi today. Much of value has now been written about armed African youth, but little of this is concerned with guns themselves, and more specifically with their history, meaning, manufacture and use.²

This, then, is an empirical study, for it can only point to the difficulties of theorizing the extremely fluid and indeterminate situation described. Gun culture is undoubtedly important in itself though its future trajectory in Kumasi remains unclear.

GUNS IN GHANA

On 23 March 2007 Ghana’s Parliament passed a Small Arms Bill. This consolidated and superseded legislation going back to the 1960s. The new law reaffirmed longstanding prohibitions on the unlicensed making and selling of guns in Ghana and set up a framework for a national programme of action to combat and eradicate such activities. It empowered a National Commission on Small Arms (NCSA) to monitor the supply and distribution of illicit firearms throughout the country. The NCSA was to report to the President in person on a regular basis.³

President Kufuor’s NPP government first addressed the issue of illegal weapons in its Agenda for Positive Change, the manifesto that brought it to power in 2000. In 2001 government launched etuo mu ye sum (‘darkness comes from a gun barrel’), a security sweep and amnesty that offered cash for the surrender of unlicensed guns. In 2004 the NPP promoted the UN’s International Weapons Destruction Day in Ghana in the run-up to its second election victory. In 2005 Accra hosted an international conference on the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the West African sub-region. All this, culminating in the 2007 legislation, was an attempt to quell mounting public anxiety about Ghana’s ‘growing gun culture’.⁴

No one knows how many unregistered guns are in circulation in Ghana beyond the consensus that the number is large and growing rapidly. In 2005 the ECOWAS Small Arms Convention estimated that there were some 220,000, although this was no more than a guess.

¹ Media reports include ⟨www.ghanaweb.com/News/Archive⟩, ‘Police offer reward for arrest of hardened criminal’ (12 October 2007); ‘Armed robber nabbed in Kumasi’ (5 November 2007); ‘Kumasi Ataa Ayi busted’ (5 November 2007); ‘Kumasi Ataa Ayi shot’ (16 November 2007).
² See the insightful essays collected together in Africa 78 (1) 2008.
³ See ⟨www.ghanaweb.com/News/Archive⟩, ‘Parliamentarians deliberate on a draft bill on small arms and light weapons’ (17 March 2007); ‘National Commission on Small Arms Bill passed’ (23 March 2007). Previous legislation included the Arms and Ammunition Act (1962, Act 118), the Arms and Ammunition Decree (1972, NRC Decree 9), and the Arms and Ammunition (Amended) Act (1996, Act 519).
⁴ See, for example ⟨www.ghanaweb.com/News/Archive⟩, ‘Ghana’s growing gun culture’ (22 October 2005).
Independent research organizations and Ghanaian NGOs have put illegal manufacture at 200,000 weapons a year, based on extrapolations from the number of blacksmiths and allied metalworkers with the requisite skills calculated to be working in the country. These figures are no more than approximations but they do provide an indication of the scale of the problem. With greater certainty it is known that of the 20,000 shotguns legally imported into Ghana every year by the five arms importers with government licences, only some 5,500 end up registered as hunting or sporting weapons with the police. Informants in the security services say that the unaccounted-for 14,500 a year are traded illicitly within Ghana and/or sold on to foreigners, with Ivoirian political factions and Nigerian youth gangs named as significant customers.

Certainly, imports are dwarfed by the local production and sale of illegal guns, even if all researchers concede that quantifying the latter is guesswork. The staples of this illicit industry are known to be handguns, single shot or with clip magazines, and single-barrel shotguns, one round reloadable or pump action. In recent years, however, all studies confirm that significant numbers of Ghana’s most-skilled and best-equipped gunsmiths, and especially those in the Suame Magazine industrial cluster in Kumasi in Asante, have turned to manufacturing and selling copies of Russian, Chinese, North Korean, Libyan and Serbian versions of the world-renowned Soviet AK-47 automatic assault rifle. This is a weapon of a different order from handguns or even shotguns. It has a standard 30-round magazine that can be fired in single shots or all at once, and in Kumasi one of its nicknames is ‘washman’ (*otansifo*) because, although not known for its accuracy, it can be used on full burst to ‘hose down’ everything in front of it. Its reloading and firing actions are simple to the point where, as is known from tragic cases around the globe, even children can use it. Perversely, 7.62 × 39 mm full metal jacket ammunition for this weapon is not illegal in Ghana, and is readily available to those who know where to look. NATO issue 7.62 mm rounds, longer than the Russian equivalent, are in circulation as well, and local gunmakers also copy the Bundeswehr’s Heckler and Koch G-3 assault rifle. The US army’s M-16 is not copied in Ghana as local gunsmiths confirm its worldwide reputation for complexity and unreliability. In Ghana then, as all around the world, the automatic weapon of choice is the simple and rugged AK-47, a gun originally dating from 1947 that has now attained the status of an international icon of violent empowerment (Aning, Addo and Sowatey 2002; Aning and Florquin 2003; Adedeji and Mazal 2003; Aning 2003; Bah 2004; Sowatey 2005; Burrows 2006; Hodges 2007; Kahaner 2007).

Many factors have contributed to the ever-increasing salience of unregistered guns as an issue in Ghana today. There is the matter of sub-regional instability, tragically so in the cases of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ivory Coast, but also in Togo and in a different and alarming way in Nigeria. Ghana’s government is nervous of the risks of domestic imitation of all these examples, and of the possibility of being drawn into disputes and even conflicts with neighbours by the
illegal exportation of smuggled weapons across its own porous borders (Nugent 2002). Moreover, in 2007 Ghana celebrated 50 years of a nationhood in which elected governments have repeatedly been ousted by armed force. Kufuor's government, like most of its predecessors, is wary and even paranoid about rumours of shadowy armed groups supposedly aiming to overthrow it. It must be said that some of the inflammatory anti-government rhetoric employed since 2000 by former President Rawlings, himself a leader of two successful armed coups, has not helped in easing tensions. Most pointedly, in recent years serious local conflicts with murderous ethnic or other dimensions have taken place in northern Ghana among the Konkomba, Dagomba, Gonja and Nanumba, and to a worrying if lesser extent in the east among the Alavanyo and Nkonya. In the north especially, Ghana's security forces have sometimes struggled to cope against guerrilla combatants now armed with numbers of automatic assault rifles made in Kumasi. 

However, all these concerns are secondary to the need to calm public perceptions of a runaway escalation in armed crime and violence within Ghanaian civil society. Many citizens believe that government is losing the battle with gun culture. Again, it is hard to measure this phenomenon. As in other societies, scare stories about gun crime have more public credibility than official statistics which can either confirm existing fears or be dismissed for underestimating them (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). By any measurement true rates of lawlessness are indeterminate, for they are always open to interpretation. In such circumstances people tend to conflate instances of crime with the instance of crime. That said, there can be little doubt that armed robbery, murder and readiness to use guns in interpersonal disputes are on the increase in Ghana, even if by how much and how rapidly is difficult to quantify. In a sense statistical debate is now beside the point, for Ghanaian society is in the grip of a moral panic about gun culture. Crimes and mayhem involving guns, and especially the totemic AK-47, have become lurid staples of Ghana's media and its middle-class dinner tables. Companies now offer security for the wealthy, ranging from sophisticated alarm systems to – in the case of two plutocratic mansions I know in the Ahodwo suburb of south Kumasi – American-style safe ‘panic rooms’. At least three consortiums in Kumasi are planning to build gated communities with their own armed security personnel and are confident that the expensive fortress dwellings on offer will be snapped up. Businessmen, local notables, politicians and the wealthy now employ armed ‘landguards’ to protect their property and ‘machomen’ with guns to protect themselves. In a predictable way this exacerbates the problem, as armed assault is increasingly met

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5See Government of Ghana, White Paper on the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Yendi Disturbance of 25th to 27th March 2002 (2003), in which serious and sustained violence in Dagomba is ascribed to ‘unfettered acquisition of local and sophisticated arms or weapons’ by combatants; in ⟨www.ghanaweb.com/News/Archive⟩, ‘Alavanyo’s blacksmithing expertise should be developed’ (22 February 2005) it is argued that Ghanaian artisans urgently need to be diverted from devoting their skills and time to making guns for local customers.
by armed response. The public now sees Ghana as becoming like Nigeria, a country of runaway gun crime and violence, to the point where the first decades of independence are mythologized as a ‘golden age’ of vanished freedoms and securities.

Analysts are agreed that the heart of Ghana’s illicit gunmaking is Suame Magazine in northwest-central Kumasi. This has the single biggest concentration of blacksmiths, metalworkers, engineers and associated tradespeople in all West Africa. Forty years of research in and on various aspects of Suame life has brought me into contact with illicit gunsmiths and their customers. Thus, the gun industry in Suame Magazine is at the core of this article. I pay due attention to its organization and economics, but my principal concern is with what might be termed the local Asante and, to some extent, the wider Ghanaian cultural politics of guns. In short, what past and present meanings in Kumasi attach to and are expressed through a gun like an AK-47? By attending to the matter of guns themselves, I hope to remedy an omission in otherwise excellent research on such issues as crime, violence, disorder, failed states and youth gangs in various parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This work tends to treat guns as the unexamined tools of violence, and even where it goes beyond that it seldom if ever grounds guns as cultural commodities with lengthy and complex histories within specific African cultures (Richards 1996; Richards and Peters 1998; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Ellis 1999; Mamdani 2001; Gore and Pratten 2003; Bay and Donham 2006). I hope too to say something about the current realities of Asante and Ghanaian life that underpin the making, selling and use of guns, and the moral panic now surrounding them.6

ANOKYE THE TERMINATOR

I begin with a parable that unites past and present. In the 1990s roads in Kumasi were upgraded. On the roundabout on the northern ring road between Bantama and Komfo Anokye Hospital a statue was erected. It was a figure of Komfo Anokye himself, the spiritual adviser to the first Asantehene Osei Tutu and traditionally famous for having drawn down the Golden Stool from the heavens to affirm the creation of Asante. The statue was life-sized and stood on a square plinth of similar height to itself. It was naturalistic in form. Anokye was depicted as an okomfo (‘priest’: hence Komfo), with a characteristic matted hairstyle (mpesempese). He was shown wearing the traditional garb of the okomfo; the raffia skirt (doso); the cowrie shells strung across his chest to form a crossroads (nkwantanan), a site of intense symbolic power; and the protective iron bangle (bansere) made from a musket barrel on his right wrist. In his right hand he held aloft a model of the Golden Stool.

6 In a conversation in Leiden in July 2007 Paul Richards, who has done as much as anyone to analyse violent disorder in Africa, asked me why I thought Ghana thus far had avoided being like Nigeria, let alone Liberia, Ivory Coast or Sierra Leone. This article is a partial exploration of that question rather than an answer to it.
In his left hand he carried a cow tail whisk (*bodua*), held out before him to sweep away evil (McCaskie 1995: 112–13, 276, 280, 290, 304).

On 30 July 2001 Kwame Sarfo, an evangelist and self-styled prophet from Christ The Living Temple in Obuase in south-west Asante, attacked Komfo Anokye's statue with a hammer while brandishing a Bible. A crowd gathered and threatened to kill him, but workers from Suame Magazine bore him off to the nearby dwelling of Bantamahene Baffour Awua. The police were summoned. Kwame Sarfo was arrested, charged and later sent off to Accra for psychiatric evaluation. He claimed that God had appeared to him in a vision and told him to destroy this ‘idol’. During his attack Kwame Sarfo climbed onto the top of the plinth and broke off the statue’s left forearm and the hand holding the whisk. The hammer, Bible and whisk were all impounded by the police. The media duly reported this 'sacrilegious act'.

In Kumasi, as is always the case with the inexplicable, opaque or occult, all kinds of interpretations were made of Kwame Sarfo’s action. One such concerned the shattered forearm of the statue. The whisk was recovered but the debris from the limb itself was said to have been stolen. Not only that, but the damage inflicted exposed a pair of iron rods around which the sculptor had moulded the missing forearm. These struts now projected from the remains of the amputated limb. The statue was nicknamed the Terminator, because the newly visible rods resembled the sub-surface structure of the arm of the cyborg played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in the movies of that title. These films, like others that combine extreme violence with otherworldly powers, are hugely popular among Kumasi’s male youth (Meyer 2006). The Terminator films fetishize the invincible power conferred by guns of both actual and imaginary design, and their plots resonate with deep traditional Asante beliefs about shape-shifting, identity theft, masquerade and power over death (McCaskie 2004; Parker 2004).

The conflation of Komfo Anokye and the Terminator was offered as explanation for the disappearance of the debris from the statue. It was said that apprentices (*asuanifo*) and other youths from Suame Magazine had spirited away all the rubble so that their ‘masters’, at once their actual employers and demonic instructors, might grind it up and mix it with shrine water to create a charm to turn bullets aside (*asuman korobo*) (McCaskie 2000: 46–7). This mixture was used to ‘wash’ (*dware*) AK-47 assault rifles being made in Suame Magazine. This rendered the guns receptive to the power (*tumi*) of both Komfo Anokye and the Terminator. These weapons were said to be ‘hard’ (*duru*) in their increased range, accuracy and reliability, and they invested those who used them with the immensity of their magical power to deflect enemy bullets. I was informed that these guns were in great demand and commanded premium prices, for they guaranteed success in any

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7 See for example ⟨www.ghanaweb.com/News/Archive⟩, ‘Evangelist arrested for destroying Komfo Anokye’s statue’ (31 July 2001); ‘Komfo Anokye’s attacker remanded’ (1 August 2001); ‘Komfo Anokye’s statue’s destroyer mentally ill’ (10 August 2001).
enterprise in which they were used. Asante purchasers punned on their name, converting the original AK-47 designation to KA-47 to signal their association with Komfo Anokye. Even Togolese buyers named these weapons ‘2 Février’ after the luxury hotel of that name in Lomé, which was built to impress and overawe.

The point of this story is not its veracity but instead the clues it gives to unpacking the cultural history and politics of the gun. Guns, originally muskets, have long been a potent icon of manhood status in Asante. They were mythologically charged, for they were instrumental in the creation of Asante. Authoritative tradition associates Komfo Anokye with the magical power of Asante weapons and with the occult enfeeblement of enemy guns. At the epochal battle of Feyiase (1701) he is said to have made a tree swell itself to receive all the musket fire of the Denkyira, and then resume its normal size so that the Asante volleys found their mark (Agyeman Prempeh I 2003: 109; for context McCaskie 2007). Guns literally made Asante, and magical guns are features of many traditions. Throughout Asante history guns were also politically charged, for they were the irreducible tools of force and power. Nineteenth-century Asantehenes stored the latest-model guns in royal arsenals so as to offset any challenge to their own authority. Then, during the chaotic dynastic wars of the 1880s, Kumasi ‘youngmen’ or non-office holders (nkwankwaa) forced access to the rapidly evolving industrial products of European gunmakers – weapons with rifling, breech-loading magazines, ever higher rates of fire and killing power – and used them to compensate for their lack of a political voice as marginalized commoners (Wilks 1989: 530–43, 549–56). This was echoed in the run-up to Ghana’s independence in the 1950s. Then gangs of ‘youngmen’, many of them biological as well as jural minors but with an access to guns, were footsoldiers in political faction fighting in Kumasi (Rathbone and Allman 1991; Allman 1993: 51–83).

The gun has been salient as an icon of power throughout Asante history. Its cultural politics are suffused with signifiers. Like other key components of Asante identity its intentional status is complex, but also ambiguous. It has served both to assert and to challenge received socio-political hierarchy and order in, it should not be forgotten, a culture marked by violence and bloodletting. It is a metonym for sanctioned power, as when the Asantehene is characterized as ‘he who sits amidst a thousand guns’. But its quiddity, as a thing in itself, is neutral. It is possession, purpose and use that make the gun speak for its user by quite literally speaking for itself. Guns, so I was told by the famous Asante nationalist politician Baffour Akoto, proclaim and impose an order beyond themselves. Their use asserts the user’s nature and view of the world. This, he said, was why Asante people were prepared to condone the use of guns if sympathetic to the user’s intention, and this was an identification that might be extended to bandits as well as office holders. Regard was often bound up with an estimate of what using a gun said about someone’s decisiveness about their own life, in the senses of ‘taking a stand’ (gyinae) and the willed execution of that stand (atembu). A daughter of Baffour Akoto provided an illustration
of this principle from her father’s life. As a child she went with him to inspect his farms at a hamlet in Bron Ahafo. They found the village in turmoil. A man holding a bloodstained cutlass stood in the market and the villagers claimed he had already killed people. Baffour Akoto got out of his car and to the local people’s alarm he went up to the man. He picked up a wooden pestle, knocked the man down and disarmed him. He then sent his driver to fetch the police. To make sure there was to be no escape he asked for a shotgun, loaded it, stood over the prone man, and calmly and deliberately discharged both barrels into his legs. This was *gyinae* and *atembu*, and applauded as such. 8

**GUN CULTURE: SUAME MAGAZINE AND BEYOND**

On 9 February 2007 S. K. Ennin, Asante Regional Chairman of the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) and news editor at Kumasi’s popular ASH FM radio station, was having a drink with friends in the oddly, perhaps significantly, named Liberal World Spot bar in the city’s Mpankrono suburb. Eyewitnesses said that an unregistered white saloon car drew up to the bar and several men got out. They entered the bar and fired into the air with automatic weapons and pistols. They then shot Ennin in the stomach and killed him before driving off in their vehicle. 9

I knew Sam Ennin and like many others was shocked and puzzled by his death. In the Ghanaian media an orgy of apocalyptic moral panic about gun culture and crime took place. News stories were illustrated with agency pictures of assault rifles, and from the President’s office down there was universal media condemnation of this ‘barbaric assassination’ accompanied by much hand wringing and soul searching over the state of society. In Kumasi confusion reigned. The police were believed to have arrested a suspect but this was swiftly denied. Then in April two men were charged with murder. Both were northerners with criminal records for armed robbery. Police impounded a cache of guns that included two pump action shotguns, a Beretta automatic pistol and a locally made AK-47.

Throughout the investigation government and police worked hard to contain rumours surrounding the case. They denied any political dimension to the murder, although the victim was a nationally known commentator and an office holder among the activists and other members of the GJA, an organization with a history of turbulent relations with successive governments (Hasty 2005). Officialdom made an issue of the northern origins of those arrested. The message was they were not Asante, probably not even Ghanaian, and this left hanging

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in the air ancient prejudices about an undifferentiated north being resolutely ‘other’ in its addiction to atavistic, primitive violence. Implicit in this was a distinction between an orderly Ghanaian society and the criminal aliens who entered into it and preyed upon it, and this struck a chord among a minority of the more extreme Asante nationalists in Kumasi. The underlying metaphor was that of biological parasitism, in which viral entities armed with guns attacked and infected the otherwise healthy body of civil society. The murder, then, was officially cast as a purely criminal act carried out by aimless and violent youth from outside in pursuit of cash, mobile phones and anything else they could steal and carry away. However, and not for the first time, official explanations were greeted with widespread scepticism in Kumasi.

I did not need all the e-mails and telephone calls I received from Kumasi to suggest to me that politics might be involved somewhere in Ennin’s death. Neither did I require them to tell me, though a few of them did, that the gun culture that killed him at once reflected and expressed the massive and ever-growing economic disparities between Kumasi’s (and Ghana’s) ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’, indigenes and immigrants alike. It must be said, however, that much of Asante public opinion is in nervous denial about this. First, and perversely, everyone in Kumasi understands at some level that the rise in gun use is a tribute to Ghana’s fragile but sectoral economic recovery, and that it is a violent critique of the yawningly uneven distribution of money and goods promised by a globalized world over the past few years. Reluctance to face up to this knowledge owes something to prudent silence in the face of authority, but in Kumasi it arises too from the preferred self-image of a community assembled around presumptions about its glorious shared history. In consequence, it is comforting and reassuring to displace the responsibility for supposedly random killings like that of Sam Ennin onto non-Asante elements in Kumasi society. The context of denial is the sense that Kumasi’s present and future as the bearer of Asante’s past are under threat. Certainly, explosive growth in the city’s population over the past fifteen years has seen Kumasi change character (McCaskie 2008). A lot of Asante now fear that they will soon be a minority in their own capital, a site inextricably bound up with their historic sense of identity. Denial is the order of the day in Kumasi most precisely because its Asante inhabitants know they are sitting on a rumbling fault line, irrespective of the stories they tell themselves about external predators or government machinations. Symptomatic is a disposition to luridly coloured conspiracy theories that point to places where people know the truth of what is happening, but conceal it for their own unguessable reasons. The pre-eminent such place is Suame Magazine. Anyone who has visited Suame Magazine knows it to be a remarkable place. It is only 1.8 km long by 0.3 km wide and is jammed in between two main roads that run north from Kumasi. This confined space contains some 9,000 engineering enterprises and metalwork businesses, of which perhaps 5,000 are devoted to vehicle repair and the remainder to blacksmithing and metal industries of every kind. It is the single biggest concentration of such businesses in all West Africa and is famous throughout the
sub-region. Some 80,000 people work in Suame Magazine in the industries described and in vending food and providing other services to the work force. Social scientists and development planners have produced many studies of Suame Magazine, and have even drawn up tidy but misleadingly ordered maps of the site (Sunnu 1975; Dawson 1988; Powell 1995; McCormick 1998; Obeng 2001; Adarkwa and Post 2001; Adeya 2006). True, there is a road of a sort that snakes its way north–south through the place, with lateral east–west branches running off it. There is also much directional signage, mostly buried beneath a forest of advertisements, placards and notices. There are even zoning plans showing neat hatchworks of plots and properties. However, none of this prepares the visitor for the experiential reality of the place. It is a chaos of congestion, overcrowding and motion, and a bedlam of noise underpinned by the bass notes of metal being endlessly hammered. In all this roads are notional, directions conflicting and sub-divided plots awash with owners, tenants and squatters. A babel of languages attests to the international importance of the place, and mass flight from regular police raids shows that there are Asante here with something to hide as well as immigrants with no legal right to be in Ghana. After forty years of exposure I still have to be ‘led’ to find people in Suame Magazine, an embarrassment mitigated by the fact that even Kumasi residents need the same service. All this makes Suame Magazine, of course, an ideal venue for any clandestine enterprise, including the making and selling of illegal guns.

Suame Magazine is named for Suame village, seat of the head of the royal hammock-bearers since the eighteenth century, and home to a British colonial military magazine and armoury that was sited there in 1910. By the 1930s the British army had no more need of this site (nor of its equivalent at Kokompe in Accra). Asante metalworkers, already familiar with the place through their jobs, began to move their own workshops there from overcrowded Adum in downtown Kumasi. In the 1950s Nkrumah decided, as part of his drive for industrialization, to use the skills on site as the nucleus of a vehicular engineering ‘cluster’. Plots of land and other incentives were offered to those in the Kumasi motor, metal and allied engineering trades willing to move there. From the 1950s on, this new community forged a distinctive identity around its interlinked occupational specializations, using the traditional Asante tools of cooperation and self-help. In 1957, incoming artisans joined together to form the Magazine Mechanical Association (MMA), a mutual aid cooperative that assisted members with funeral and land litigation expenses and a range of other problems.

Today MMA has some 10,000 members and it controls the leases on at least 800 site plots. This body was the model for the internal organization of Suame Magazine, and today there are many other such associations. For instance, the specialist Engine Reborers Association (ERA) numbers only 30 members, who work on rehabilitating worn-out car engines; and the Magazine Caterers Association (MCA) is a large body dominated by women food sellers who arrange the weddings of members and provide other services. There are perhaps three dozen
such bodies in Suame Magazine today. Many now have immigrant members, but the male organizations remain resolutely Asante in outlook and practice. They are in essence facsimiles of the traditional Asante kuo, mutually supportive companies or gangs of men and youths with interests in common. In practice they are informal, and even sometimes secretive, networks of association through word of mouth. Informants speak of the ‘Suame Republic’ and resent the presence of external bodies. Thus, in the 1980s the Ghana National Association of Garages (GNAG) set up an Asante Regional Secretariat in Suame Magazine. A powerful association based in Accra, it now claims access to some 1,000 leasehold plots in Suame Magazine. It is disliked as a non-local intruder and, since it represents garage owners, for basically class reasons. The self-image of the Suame Magazine workforce is that of men proud of their skills in getting jobs done, labourers in dirty overalls rather than people in shirts and ties.

Organizations like those listed above are the key to work and life in Suame Magazine. The site is a hugely intensive version of a Ghanaian commonplace, a forum for labour and reciprocal exchange where associational, informal and individual links are crucial in getting things done. This can be seen in the way work itself is carried out. Vehicles requiring extensive attention and servicing pass from hand to hand through such links to the artisans and apprentices who specialize in discrete aspects of refurbishment and repair. To put things simply: if a customer wants a set of racing alloy wheel-hubs then he is ‘led’ by someone who has done something else to his vehicle to a business friend or associate who deals in these kinds of parts – imported, locally made or even stolen to order. The principle at work is the reciprocal solidarity and sociability of making a living. In Asante terms, as many people as possible should be helped to ‘eat’ (di) from the same transaction as is done, literally, from the same bowl. The making and selling of guns follows this pattern, which is doubly desirable in an illegal trade like firearms. Gun making and selling is done piecemeal, by personal contact, recommendation and word of mouth. The trader who sells Russian night vision optical assault rifle scopes originating in Chechnya (and there is such a man) is a specialist, and one that a client will never find without being passed along a chain of individual connections. Illegal gun dealers, like all artisans in Suame Magazine, lead what might be called designing lives – in two senses of that term. They design their labour so as to maximize income for themselves and their associates. They design their businesses to be decentralized so as to avoid any form of external scrutiny. As with everything in Suame Magazine, there is order in the arms trade but no appearance of it. Secrecy and surveillance are paramount in dealing with potential customers. It is little wonder, therefore, that people in the business are hugely enthusiastic about mobile phone technologies.10

10 I am informed that mobile phones revolutionized the gun trade, enabling immediate and untraceable contact between participants. However, it remains a paranoid business. One
In 1975–6 I talked several times with Kofi Donkor, chief blacksmith at Fumesua on the Accra road east of Kumasi. At that time, I was mainly interested in pre-colonial craft production for the Asantehene’s court and household. I took a full inventory of Kofi Donkor’s tools and watched as he directed his apprentices in working the bellows and forge. He talked about the past when iron was extracted by heating rock (atwetwe bo). Now, he said, this was no longer done. Instead his apprentices went weekly to collect scrap metal to work with from fitters in Suame Magazine. He had trained his nephew to blacksmithing, but the young man had gone off to Kumasi to open up an electrical workshop and better himself. This was Osei, second child of his favourite sister. Kofi Donkor showed me saakra, two small iron chisels fastened to a piece of wood that he carefully removed from a cloth bundle. This was the badge of his trade and a personal charm (asuman) that helped him succeed in business. He intended to bequeath it to Osei, a skilled if now lapsed blacksmith. I was sent off to meet with Osei, who worked out of a lean–to by the now demolished A. Lang & Co. warehouse on the south-west side of Suame Magazine. His verandah looked south down a slope to the scrubby remains of Suame forest. This is gone now and built over, but Osei and I struck up a friendship and he and his intimates became and are still my guides to Suame Magazine.

To the south-east of Suame Magazine, just across the relentlessly busy main Kumasi–Mamponten road, is an area of scrubland and shacks called Old Tafo Cemetery. It was indeed a graveyard under the British, with a cottage for the resident sexton. Itinerants and vagrants, many of them Muslim paupers, are still buried there at night in hastily dug shallow graves. Strictly speaking this is illegal, but over the years it has become a habitual practice and the police tend to look the other way. Parts of the site still look a little like a cemetery, but much of it has been squatted on and built over with shanties, or used as a dump for rubbish of all kinds. Abandoned dead babies are sometimes found there. From the Dekyemso ridge to the south, the flare of fires can be seen on the old cemetery grounds in the dark. Parents tell children there are ghosts (asamanfo) there, but this may be to spare them a more worrying truth. Certainly, few people will venture into the old cemetery grounds after dark. This is because it has the reputation of being a meeting place for armed criminal gangs. They assemble there at night to plan, to retrieve caches of weapons concealed or buried by them on site, and to set off across the city to rob and burglar under cover of darkness. Guns are often secreted in old graves, a practice that goes back to the dynastic conflicts of the 1880s. It is widely believed that

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trader who operates in Suame Magazine is nicknamed ‘One Stop’, because he transacts his business through a succession of mobile phones that he uses for a very short time before discarding them ‘for security reasons’. One mobile phone of his had a memory function that displayed Kuwaiti and other Middle Eastern numbers. He said that he had acquired it in Abidjan.

the police know about this, but are paid to stay away and to tip off gangs about planned security sweeps. All kinds of stories surround Old Tafo Cemetery, and some at least of them are true. I know this to be the case because in Suame Magazine I was introduced by Osei to a man whose business was servicing air conditioners, but who was also a wealthy gunsmith. He made and sold weapons, including AK-47s, to criminals who operated out of the old cemetery precinct. He spoke quite freely about his clandestine work, although it was made clear to me that no cassette recording was to take place.

He put matters simply. He was in the illegal weapons business for the money. It was a lucrative trade, more rewarding than fixing air conditioners. A handgun might be sold for US$30–50, a single barrel shotgun for up to US$200, and a locally copied AK-47 assault rifle for anything up to US$1,000. He did not sell ammunition, but knew men who did. His first-ever customer was a locally resident Lebanese who was ‘led’ to him in the 1990s. The man had two AK-47s and asked my informant if he knew of anyone who might copy them. The Lebanese was offering good money. My informant said he thought the guns were destined for militias in Beirut, but he did not ask about this. He took one of the AK-47s to a friend’s engineering workshop in Suame Magazine. The pair found the gun to be a simple assembly, with neither finely engineered parts nor intricate components. My informant decided to do the work himself and said it took him less than a week to master the principles and a month to produce his first copy. The Lebanese was satisfied, paid over US$275 for the first gun, and ordered as many as could be made over the following eighteen months. Then the Lebanese went off to Beirut, but by then my informant had mastered the craft and was in business. Since then he had made guns for customers from both northern and southern Ghana, Ivory Coast and Nigeria. One Ivoirian client brought him a French military weapon to copy, but he was unable to achieve a close-enough engineering fit between ‘the small, small parts’ he made. 12 AK-47 copies, on the other hand, he could now make from scratch.

Payment was in cash and in hard currency, principally US dollars. Ghana’s liberalized currency regime meant the country was awash in dollars and other foreign currencies brought in by returnees or remitted from the diaspora. Some Kumasi clients, and here he clearly meant criminals, paid in gold jewellery or other valuables made of precious metals. These were assayed, melted down and sold off for him by a goldsmith he had met years ago in Youngsters Chop Bar in Asafo. Once he had accepted DVD players in part payment, but this was from a man he had known as a child. I asked if he could tell me something about how the business was organized. He said those who worked with

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12 Those who know about such things tell me the weapon was probably the French army’s GIAT FAMAS assault rifle, known to its users as le clairon (‘the bulge’) because of its odd magazine housing configuration. This weapon has a firing mechanism with a lever delayed blowback action, which I am informed is unusual and has to be manufactured to very precise engineering tolerances.
him called him ‘father’ (agya) out of respect, and because in the usual
Ghanaian way his co-workers were kin or bound to him personally. Two
of his brothers worked for him and he regarded his junior employees as
his ‘nephews’. He dealt with sales on his own, for skill and care were
needed in assessing potential customers. These were always ‘led’ to him
by someone he trusted who would vouch for them. Sometimes, if he
was uncertain about somebody, he would ask him for a non-refundable
additional down payment in advance. Was his business dangerous? Yes,
a little, he said, but all seeking his services were watched for some time
before they met him. Payment could be problematic, for Nigerians were
given to haggling over an already agreed price. If he took on a contract
(dwuma nhyehye) the work was pieced out to his workforce all over
Suame Magazine. His role was now supervisory. No gun parts were
made on his own premises any more and final trials and assembly were
done elsewhere. The AK-47 needed skill in making the springs and
magazine loading mechanism, but overall it was not difficult to make. I
touched on the morality of his business. He was unoffended and matter
of fact. Asante had always had conflict and crime, and perpetrators as
well as those at risk wanted weapons. Guns were a booming business
and if he did not supply them someone else would. He had a lot of
competitors. Suame Magazine was the hub of the trade, but there were
similar places in many Ghanaian towns. He had trafficked guns on both
sides of the Konkomba–Dagomba conflict and, repeating the Asante
stereotype, he said northerners were backward and addicted to violence.
The police presented little problem, for they too needed money and
could be paid off. He was more worried by the ‘Buffalo Squad’, the
security service’s elite intervention force, for they were all outsiders and
did not know ‘how things worked’ in Kumasi. I mentioned smuggling
and was told it was relatively easy. Methods had to be changed from
time to time. A few years ago, he said, guns were smuggled beneath the
floor panels of flatbed trucks with goats tethered on top. This worked
until policemen at Aflao on the Togo border stole the goats themselves
and in the process discovered the guns they were standing on.

At another meeting with this man and Osei, an encounter lubricated
by the whisky I had brought, I asked him why he thought gun
use was on the increase. He became uncharacteristically loquacious.
He narrated a rough and ready but recognizable class analysis of
contemporary Ghanaian society grounded in his own life experience.
Like lots of others in Suame Magazine, he was apprenticed as a
blacksmith in his youth in the 1970s. He was trained by an uncle in
his natal village in Asante’s Sekyere district north of Kumasi. He was
scraping a living at this trade at the time of the coups led by Rawlings
in 1979–81. He believed in Ghana’s new ruler and thought society
would be made less corrupt and more egalitarian. Instead, like many
Ghanaians, he suffered in the severe economic crisis of the early 1980s.
His uncle went out of business because he had neither metal to work nor
customers with money. He himself took up farming but this was only
to subsist. Still without a real job, money or prospects, but now with
children to feed, he drifted to Kumasi in the later 1980s. There he slept
in a ‘Rawlings Hotel’, slang for an upended metal goods container, in Oforikrom in the east of the city. He took any job that paid, including rubbish collection, filling in potholes and stacking lumber in a Kaase sawmill. He hung about Suame Magazine to play cards and drink with others in his situation. Then in the 1990s, as the economy picked up, he found work as a fitter in Suame Magazine with a man he knew from his long bouts of enforced leisure. He learned electrical repair and in 1998 opened his own workshop specializing in air conditioners. Like his friends and workmates in 2000, he looked to Kufuor as he himself had once looked to Rawlings to improve the economy and his own life. After all, Kufuor was from Kumasi and he promised to usher in a ‘Golden Age of Business’.

He readily conceded that Kufuor had made Ghana richer. If I doubted this I should go to south Kumasi and look at the newly built mansions and the luxury cars parked in their driveways. Now was truly sika bere, ‘the season of money’. However, all this new wealth was more unequally distributed than at any time in Ghana’s history. It had all been taken by politicians, businessmen and big chiefs, and the mass of people were poor and getting poorer. People were angry about this, and at the erosion of civility, care and community that had made Ghana into ‘a dog eat dog’ society. This was why ever-rising numbers of youths as well as others were resorting to guns to get a share of a cake otherwise denied them. Mass immiseration cheek by jowl with extravagantly flaunted wealth, he said, was responsible for the rise in gun crime, and even for some outbursts of so-called ‘tribal’ violence.

I was then told bluntly that for most Ghanaians economic recovery was Kufuor’s kumaforote, a mirage that would kill them. There was no ‘trickle down’ effect. Most people were ‘despairing’ at the costs of education, health, even food, and the absence of well-paid jobs. Youth in particular had a bleak future. The basic message here was that if people took to gun crime or armed violence then this was a despairing quest for income, redress, justice and revenge.

Who was really to blame? The conversation took on a historical dimension. Kumasi, he said, had always been Oseikrom, the king’s town, and it was still in the hands of royals and their kin and associates like the Kufuor family. These were violent folk, the ‘holders of the knife’ in the old days, and still today unafraid to use force to maintain their position. This was nkwankwaa talk of a sort one might have heard in the 1950s or the 1880s. Had not my interlocutor told me that he had expectations of the Kufuor government? Yes, he had, but it turned out to benefit only a closed circle of the royal and the rich, often the same people, and this had been the pattern of Asante history. I was much struck by this peroration, a more forceful version of things I had heard here and there from others, and I decided to test out its line of reasoning among Kumasi people. What I found I can only describe as a haltingly

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13 The term kumaforote was used by Asante hunters to describe the mirage of water that lured deer to death by exhaustion in their efforts to reach it.
formulated but palpable sense of class consciousness. For example, Kumasi has a lengthy history of random acts of mob justice. Robbers, armed or otherwise, when caught by crowds have been lynched or ‘necklaced’ with burning tyres in the South African manner. Why is this done? Many people answered by drawing a clear distinction between criminals with guns who robbed or killed ‘moneymen’ (sikafo) and those who preyed on their fellow poor (ahiafo). To steal from the rich was not moral but it was understandable, because great wealth in Kumasi was always and inevitably ill-gotten. This was a case of little thieves stealing from very big thieves. If the rich were shot to death, then this was an expected and even just outcome of lives devoted to a selfish accumulation of wealth at the expense of others. Deeply rooted Asante norms and Christian beliefs are united here in condemnation of those who acquire riches and do not share them. Virtually everyone who said killing was against Christian morality also mentioned biblical texts against the worship of Mammon and the inevitable justice of ‘as you sow, so shall you reap.’ By contrast, to steal from poor ‘fellow sufferers’ was deeply immoral. Here a sharp distinction was made between habitual criminals, overwhelmingly identified as immigrant non-Asante, and desperate local youth without hope.

Of course this is only part of the story, and one that expresses a general consciousness of social ills described at ease rather than the panic-inducing thoughts and fears of everyday lived experience. Thus, there is no doubt that whatever people’s considered views of the moral distinctions between those who use illicit guns, Kumasi folk are thoroughly alarmed by the extent of the gun culture around them. It is often said that youth, as distinct from career criminals, are now alienated to a point where they have become destructively violent parasites on society. Many in Kumasi have tales of guns and shootings, witnessed, reported or rumoured, and very often linked to xenophobic panics about the city’s ungovernability because of the flood of homeless, jobless non-Asante immigrants. Unsurprisingly, immigrants tell the same sorts of stories but tend to emphasize the violent, bloody, sacrificial history of the Asante state. Dispassionate observers exist, and they can see that gangs broken up and arrested by the police are as often as not a mix of Asante and non-Asante. They also see the finer distinctions in Kumasi’s gun culture. Armed professional robbers are not the same as violent youth gangs, although the two often overlap in membership and sometimes work in tandem. Robbers are driven on by cupidity, youth by a despair and rage that finds only one of its expressions in stealing. Youths are if anything more dangerous than criminals, for they are addicted to the imaginaries of collective mayhem in which victims are robbed and shot as part of the generalized destruction that uses explosive violence to assuage aimlessness. Armed youth gangs are now a feature of Kumasi life. Terrified citizens can

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14 Consult ⟨www.ghanaweb.com/News/Archive⟩, ‘Suspected armed robber lynched’ (7 May 2007) for a recent and notably gruesome example.
be caught up in the destruction and turf wars that characterize their behaviour in random ways that feel and are quite different from the targeting practised by armed professional robbers.

CONCLUSION: GUN CULTURE AND THE NOT SO HIDDEN INJURIES OF CLASS

In the early afternoon of 1 March 2005 youths armed with guns, cutlasses, axes, clubs and knives carried out a series of coordinated attacks on vehicles and buildings in the Kumasi areas of Ash Town, Manhyia around the royal palace and Muslim Al Abar in the New Zongo. Stores were looted and set on fire. Bystanders were assaulted. One or more girls were raped in Ash Town and another was gang-raped in Al Abar. Security forces confronted an estimated three to four hundred rampaging youths in Manhyia. A gun battle ensued with assault rifles being fired by both sides. Finally, police tear gas forced the youths to fall back towards Suame Magazine. By then Manhyia was littered with looted and burning buildings and vehicles. In their retreat armed youths hijacked taxis to make their escape. Others on foot fought a running gun battle with the police. In the course of this a Muslim rioter from northern Ghana called Issaka (among other names) was shot dead. At Suame Magazine the situation was finally stabilized, but only after an hour-long gun battle along the banks of the Nkradan stream in the north-east of the ‘cluster’. The youths then melted away, but sporadic automatic weapons fire continued to be heard in north Kumasi as evening approached. Police arrested nine participants, a mix of Asante and northerners. All were poor and economically marginal. Five of them gave their occupations as street trader, one as blacksmith, one as vehicle fitter, one as labourer, and one, incongruously, as ‘footballer’.15

A long investigation by government and enquiries by myself uncovered the following about what transpired. Early in the morning of 1 March a northerner from Tamale named Gado Kabiru, a member of the armed youth gang that ran amok later that day, was accused of being a thief by a person or persons unknown in Suame Magazine. A mob gathered and lynched him using electrical wire. He was Muslim, and three to six hundred of his fellow gang members and other youths armed themselves, put the body in a shroud, and immediately interred it in a shallow grave on the Old Tafo Cemetery grounds. Alcohol and ‘wee’ (marijuana) were produced and consumed by all present, Muslim and otherwise. Speeches were made claiming that the killers of Gado Kabiru were members of a rival Suame Magazine–Old Tafo youth gang. There was bad blood between the two groups because of conflicts over territory, drugs and girls. The gang that now left the cemetery to go on the rampage called itself ‘Kumasi Al Qaeda’. It paid sloganeering lip service to Salafist ideas about jihad, but its recruits were non-Muslim

15 See ibid. ‘Nine Kumasi mayhem gangsters remanded’ (2 March 2005).
Asante as well as Muslim immigrants. Its opponents, the supposed killers of Gado Kabiru, were the ‘AKs’, a name needing no explanation. Some called the ‘AKs’ the ‘Night Soil Men’, a sour joke about their pioneering tactic of rampaging through the city at 4 a.m. when the police patrols changed shift.  

The media went to town on this story and sensationalized it, but like all truly affecting moral panics it was rooted in real events as well as in fearful imaginings. ‘Fear grips Kumasi’ was a headline that captured the city’s mood. What alarmed residents was that armed violence seemed to have crossed an invisible line into a new phase of gang rampage and mass lawlessness. Formerly people left mobile phones and cash at home in case they chanced to be held up by criminals. Now they carried both, for if armed youth gangs full of alcohol, drugs or simple adrenalin accosted them, they might well pay with their lives for having no valuables to surrender. Many now refused to halt their cars when traffic lights turned red, and especially in areas full of idling young men. Amakom Junction, a well-policed crossing, was nicknamed ‘Rolex Stop’ following rumours that youths there might cut off drivers’ hands just to take their wristwatches as trophies. Stories circulated about young men swearing blood oaths on magical assault rifles to bind themselves to lives of violent mayhem. It was said that girls were being kidnapped off the streets and sexually abused, and that children were being abducted to be sacrificed as victims in gang rituals. After 1 March, Kumasi police were reinforced by 250 draftees brought in from other regions, but this only confirmed public fears that the city was a war zone spiralling out of control. Dr Addo-Kufuor, Minister of Defence and the President’s brother, made an official visit to Kumasi and voiced concern that his hometown was ‘degenerating into gang warfare’. He was alarmed by the sheer ‘impunity’ with which armed youths hijacked vehicles and rampaged through Kumasi firing off assault rifles and terrorizing citizens.  

I raised these events at an Asante cocktail party in a London mansion. ‘Kumasi is like America now’ was a comment passed and assented to by many guests. The remark is worth pondering for what it says about the perceptions of change that allow Kumasi folk to draw comparisons between their hometown and the world’s pre-eminent gun culture. Daily life in Kumasi now includes the making, selling and using of guns on a hitherto unheard-of scale. What does this mean? Has modernist disenchantment in Asante reached a point, as in currently more violent societies in Africa and elsewhere, where some are ready to embrace the chimerical seductions of re-enchantment offered by the assault rifle? Are AK-47s in Kumasi the iconic ‘typewriters of the illiterate’, making...
GUN CULTURE IN KUMASI

I have written elsewhere of how, over the past twenty years, and with an unstoppable acceleration, West Africa’s cities have exploded in population and size. A new urban footprint is emerging along the coast of the sub-region. This is an archipelago of ever-increasing connectedness running from the oil-rich Niger Delta and Lagos westwards to Cotonou, Accra and Abidjan. Kumasi, like Yoruba cities in Nigeria, is an inland outlier of this configuration. Unplanned runaway urbanism is metastasizing along the littoral and reaching inland. A new complication here for Ghana is the fact that in June 2007 offshore oil was found at Cape Three Points in the Western Region. The oil companies and Kufuor’s government are talking about 600 million barrels, which is a large field. Accra has given due warning of the hazards as well as the benefits that can accompany the sharing out of national oil wealth. This is timely, for if and when oil revenues are added to the already volatile mix that is galloping urbanism in Ghana, it is more likely than not that inequalities in cities like Kumasi will be magnified rather than reduced.

I think there is a powerful pedagogy that arises from an exploration of gun culture in Kumasi, even if as yet it is little studied or understood. Asante is neither Darfur nor the Congo, in that its gun culture has not—yet?—been universalized into the violence associated with societal rupture or breakdown. However, the emergence and growth of gun culture within an African socio-political order that ostensibly ‘works’ suggests at first sight that the AK-47 is indeed a ‘typewriter of the illiterate’, or that the hidden injuries of class are not so hidden after all. I have tried to show, however, that to rest our conclusions there would be incautious. It is the reach of global capitalism’s latest incarnation that is altering the picture. Guns are instruments of use, but their function is increasingly embedded in and articulated by a sovereign imaginary of consumption. This, I would argue, is now internalized if far from clearly understood on Kumasi’s streets. Travel, the diaspora, advertising, electronic communication and the rest in a world organized around ‘the death of distance’ (Cairncross 1997) inculcate among Kumasi’s youth, and others who are economically marginal, a regime of endless wants and desires that cannot remotely be satisfied. I am tempted to say that cities like Kumasi are becoming agglomerations that fail to deliver at the

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19 This phrase is borrowed from the Hungarian Janos Sugar’s Typewriters of the Illiterate (2001), a film about the global ubiquity and symbolic complexity of the AK-47 assault rifle. For those with a taste for a more demotic celebration of the AK-47, let me quote the character of the arms dealer Ordell Robbie in Quentin Tarantino’s film Jackie Brown (1997): ‘The AK-47. For when you absolutely, positively have to kill every motherfucker in the room. Accept no substitutes.’ I am sure there are Kumasi youths who think the same kinds of thoughts.

20 See McCaskie (2008); see Beuving (2006), for example, for Cotonou’s booming second-hand car trade and its impact across West Africa.

21 See (www.ghanaweb.com/News/Archive), ‘Significant oil find in Ghana’ (18 June 2007); ‘Jubilation over oil discovery’ (19 June 2007); ‘Ghana’s oil won’t be a curse – Kufuor’ (21 June 2007).
bare level needed to sustain themselves. Future governments of Ghana, as elsewhere in Africa, may soon find themselves confronted with a type of violence that demands cake and will not be fobbed off with bread.

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GUN CULTURE IN KUMASI


**ABSTRACT**

This article is about gun culture in Kumasi today. Gun use in Asante, and elsewhere in Ghana, has increased significantly in the last decade. In practice and in the public imagination this is associated with the rise of youth gangs and the criminalization of urban space. Much has been written about youths and violence elsewhere in Africa, but this article focuses on the neglected topic of guns themselves— their manufacture, sale, distribution, use and meanings. In Kumasi, which in Suame Magazine has the biggest indigenous metalwork and engineering complex in all of West Africa, skilled artisans now make copies of
imported automatic assault rifles, like the Soviet AK-47, as well as shotguns and pistols. This development is explored in a number of ways, and most especially in terms of the relationship between guns and their local history, Kumasi youth, crime and shifting patterns of desire and consumption. It is the purpose of this article to add to the growing literature on ‘violent youth’ in Africa, but to do so from the viewpoint of the weapons that enable this violence.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article a pour thème la culture des armes à feu à Kumasi aujourd’hui. L’usage des armes à feu en pays Ashanti, et ailleurs au Ghana, s’est considérablement développé au cours des dix dernières années. Dans la pratique et dans l’imagination publique, cet essor est associé à la multiplication des bandes de jeunes et à la criminalisation de l’espace urbain. On a beaucoup écrit sur les jeunes et la violence ailleurs en Afrique, mais cet article s’intéresse à un thème négligé, à savoir les armes elles-mêmes, leur fabrication, leur vente, leur distribution, leur utilisation et leurs significations. À Kumasi et plus particulièrement à Suame Magazine, le plus grand complexe métallurgique et mécanique indigène d’Afrique de l’Ouest, des artisans habiles fabriquent aujourd’hui des copies de fusils d’assaut automatiques importés, comme la Kalachnikov AK-47, ainsi que des fusils et des pistolets. L’article explore cette évolution à plusieurs égards, en se penchant plus particulièrement sur la relation entre les armes et leur histoire locale, les jeunes de Kumasi, la criminalité et les schémas changeants du désir et de la consommation. Il a pour objet d’ajouter à la littérature croissante consacrée à la « violence des jeunes » en Afrique, mais du point de vue des armes qui rendent cette violence possible.