



The Shadows of Empire — A Study of European Colonial Forts and Castles. Accra, Ghana: Kofi Baku, Department of History, University of Ghana (Accra); John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu, Department of History and Classical Studies, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU, Trondheim), 01.08.2012-02.08.2012.

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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (November, 2012)

The Shadows of Empire - A Study of European Colonial Forts and Castles

The conference is an activity within a project called “Shadows of Empire”, which seeks to apply the transnational and entangled history approaches to the study of European expansion and colonialism in Africa, emphasizing the centrality of fortifications as sites and spaces of entanglement. “Shadows of Empire: ...” is also a sub-project under a multi-component *Beyond Borders: Transnational movements in through history* project, an institution based strategic project designed and implemented at the Department of History and Classical Studies and the Faculty of Humanities, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU, Trondheim).

The Accra conference held at the University of Ghana brought together historians, art historians, archaeologists, architects and political scientists from Africa, Europe, North-America and India, providing an opportunity for interdisciplinary exchanges on the manifold dynamics which developed in and around fortifications built by various European powers in West Africa between the 16th and 18th Centuries. The conference elicited research that went beyond the overwhelming association in the literature (and rightly so) of the fortifications with the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It sought new understandings from a variety of disciplines and perspectives (history, architecture and architectural history, demography, archaeology, geography, anthropology, and cultural memory studies, etc.) that use the fortifications as a starting point to explore how the Afro-European interactions and exchanges brokered within, around and from these fortifications affected and transformed individual

lives, as well as the social, political cultural, and economic fabric of peoples far and near. We welcome contributions that explore (a) varied aspects of the connections, interactions, exchanges networks and flows facilitated within, around and through the fortifications over time; (b) the impact of the fortifications on the history and everyday lives of Africans, particularly the localities they are situated in; and (c) contemporary appropriations and uses of the fortifications.

The individual papers presented during the conference can be grouped under five main topics: “introductory – tone setting”; “space, architecture, visual culture, and materiality”; “African-European power relations”; “heritage and memories”; and the meaning of Chinese Architecture in African built environments.

The tone setting section began with the welcome address by Kofi Baku, Head of History Department, University of Ghana (Legon-Accra). This was followed by JOHN KWADWO OSEI-TUTU’s (Trondheim) paper, “Interpreting European colonial fortifications: sources, perspectives and methods” which outlined a general framework for the historical interpretation of the forts and also offered a critical reflection on the usefulness and the limits of “transnational”, “global”, “entangled” and “cross-cultural” approaches to the study colonial fortifications.

Five papers dealt with various aspects of the theme of “space, architecture, visual culture and materiality”. HENRY NII ADZIRI WELLINGTON’s (Accra) paper, “Territoriality, Boundaries and Filters - the Power of

architectural design in Christiansborg, Osu” introduced the “Vitruvian triad” and “Wellingtonian quarternion” frameworks to discuss the key architectural design features of the 17th century Danish slave emporium named “Christiansborg” in Ghana. Among the key design features discussed are the physical expressions of territoriality, boundaries and filters that characterise Christiansborg Castle, an architectural entity that created the physical environment to shape, determine and influence the geo-political, socio-cultural and economic dynamics that played out in the European and surrounding communities at the time. The paper concludes by referencing the discussed features to the significance, meaning and messages of Christiansborg as a European imperial fortification built for the trans- Atlantic slave trade. A joint paper, “Architecture of oppression: the use of the dungeons in the forts and castles in Ghana”, by REXFORD ASSASIE OPPONG (Kumasi) and HENRY NII ADZIRI WELLINGTON (Accra) addressed the theme of oppressive function of architectural designs through a both qualitative and quantitative analysis of slave dungeons. The paper argued that despite their recognition in international and local laws as cultural heritage resources most ordinary people in Ghana see the forts and castles as relics of shame and rejection. The paper then proceeded, by means of a critical architectural design exegesis and a hypothetical post-occupancy study of the dungeons of the Elmina/Cape Coast Castles and Fort Amsterdam at Kormantin/Abanzie in the Central of Ghana, to demonstrate how these European fortifications, while they served as functional spaces to hold the European trade goods, also acted as instruments of oppression. By this means, the paper aimed to provide heritage interpreters and managers with more authentic data on the ill effects of the forts and castles on the human cargo that transited in these European fortifications during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

The importance of the spatial dimension was further developed by LOUIS NELSON (Charlottesville) in the paper titled “Coffle, Castle, Deck, Block”. It argues that the so-called ‘slave holes’ or ‘prisons’ of the massive fortifications were not the only spaces of containment in the long journey from Africa to the Caribbean. The paper presents the fortifications as the second stage in a series of four critical spaces experienced by slaves from the moment of capture to their moment of final sale: Coffle, Castle, Deck, and Block. The paper, which is based on field work in Ghana and the Caribbean and on a careful examination of documentary and visual records, reconstructs the spatial experience of the enslaved, reconstructing not

just the physical spaces but also the spatial experience of the senses. Bringing together the surviving wooden yoke in the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool with the mid-18th century map of the Kingston, Jamaica, waterfront, the paper integrates a wide range of evidence to reconstruct the spaces of enslavement and sale. The need for a critical approach to visual sources was highlighted by EMILIY MANN (London) in a paper titled “William Smith’s views of English fortifications in Africa”. Built on William Smith’s eighteenth-century views of European fortifications in West Africa, this paper contextualises the production of the views with reference to the contemporary British debate about the profitability and the strategic importance of the forts. At the same time, she deconstructed the artistic discourses embedded in the views, unveiling what they were showing and what they were actually obliterating. The paper by FRITZ BIVERIDGE (Accra), “Culture contact and space – archaeology of trade and cultural entanglement at Dixcove, Ghana”, offered a detailed insight into the material dimension of African-European contacts. Drawing on archaeological excavations in and near Fort Metal Cross (established in 1692 by the English in Dixcove, Western Ghana) as well as on historical records and ecological data, his paper showed how cross-cultural contacts impacted on the economy and the customs of the region but also on the Europeans living and trading in the fort. The rich finds – which include objects from Britain, the German area, Venice, Bohemia and even China – demonstrate how a rather small settlement like Dixcove became a place of transcontinental entanglements.

Three papers discussed issues relating to the mutual relations between Africans and Europeans in the 17th and the 18th century, highlighting the themes of co-operation and conflict, location and identity, as well as gender and trade. ROBERTO ZAUGG’s (Basel) paper, “Grossfriedrichsburg: A Site of African-European Interaction and of German Memory”, focussed on Fort Grossfriedrichsburg, established in 1683 by the Brandenburg-ers in Princess Town (Western Ghana). Arguing that early modern relations between the Brandenburgers and the Akan cannot be described in terms of unilateral dominion, he analysed some patterns of negotiation which took place around the fort and which included moments of both cooperation and of conflict. Moreover, he showed how this history of mutual interaction had been later distorted by an imperialist narrative, which was spread through historiography and popular culture and which aimed at glorifying Grossfriedrichsburg as the “first German colony” in order to provide a historical legitimacy

for late nineteenth-century German colonialism. Examining another single European base, the Danish fort of Prindzenstein in Keta (Eastern Ghana), PHILIP ATSU AFEADIE (Accra) in a paper titled “Fort Prindzenstein: A Monument in the Identity of Keta-Someawo” reconstructed how its presence impacted on political structures and ethnic relations in the region. A lasting impact of the location of the fort led to an increasing separation of the Ewe people of Keta from the neighbouring Anlo people and finally to the creation of the independent state of Some by the former. In this process, the Danes tried to take profit of the Anlo-Ewe conflict. At the same time, however, they were instrumentally used by their African partners who aimed to implement their own political, commercial and military agenda. KWABENA ADU-BOAHEN’s (Cape Coast), “Female Agency in a Cultural Confluence: Women, Trade and Politics in 17th and 18th-Century Gold Coast”, discussed African-European relations under the aspect of gender. Even if European written records mainly concentrate on male-male relations, African women were not at all absent from the spheres of trade and politics. Not only did they hold a strong position on local markets, which were crucial for supplying the fort garrisons, but in some cases they were also important intermediaries in inter-regional trading relations and even sovereigns of coastal states. To see women as passive subjects and to obliterate them from the history of African-European relations would be thus highly distorting.

The next set of papers addressed the themes under the topic of heritage, memory and the politics of remembrance. NEELIMA JEYCHANDRAN (Los Angeles) offered a critical appraisal of museums inside former slave castles. She showed how the pressure of diaspora lobbies heavily influences the shaping of the exhibitions in order to meet the expectations of African-American visitors. Places such as Cape Coast Castle have become important lieux de mémoire for the descendants of slaves in the USA and their “pilgrimages” constitute an important factor in the touristic economy of coastal Ghana. At the same time, the historical narratives and the identity agenda imported from the USA tend to marginalize African memories connected to the forts, hindering the forts to become sites of memory for the Ghanaian society. Then EBENEZER AYESU’s (Accra) paper, “Obama at the Cape Coast Castle (Ghana): meaning and appropriation of ‘Gate of no Return’”, discussed the significance of President Obama’s visit to the Cape Coast Castle during his one day state visit to Ghana in July, 2009. The paper argued that in an apparent effort to use his

high profile as the President of the United States, and his African origins to “officially,” mark the symbolic “return” of the African Diaspora to its roots, Obama visited the Slave Castle and passed through the historic “Door of No Return.” Historic as the passage of the “Door of No Return” and its interpretations is, it consequently raised issues regarding the use and appropriation of the “Gate of No Return.” Additionally, it called for the examination of what Obama’s presidency does and/ or does not mean to African Americans and the African Diasporas on one hand and to Africans in general.

The last paper, “China, architecture and Ghana’s spaces: Concrete Signs of a soft Chinese imperium? ”, by LOYD G. ADU AMOAH (Berekusu) shifted the focus from European forts to the meaning of contemporary Chinese architecture in Sub-Saharan Africa built environments. The paper notes that Africa’s interaction with China is beginning to be marked tellingly by Chinese architectural inscriptions on the African landscape which need to be deconstructed. The furore in the African press and academia that has greeted the building and handing over of the African Union headquarters by China in Addis Ababa makes such an interrogation imperative. Amoah’s paper offered some understanding of this nascent phenomenon using the Accra cityscape as an explicatory point of reference. It argued that the very visible and undisguised presence of China’s architectural signature in Accra represents in style and concrete a contemporary fortificatory expression of China’s soft power directed at two publics. The first public is the government and the people of Ghana for whom the message is growing Chinese fraternity, benevolence and influence. The other public is China’s geo- strategic political and economic competitors in Ghana and Africa: the message is that China has become a force to reckon with. In engaging in this analysis this work seeks to locate the meaning of fortifications within contemporary global and local discourses on power, architecture, symbols, interests and international relations.

At the end of the conference, and through the themes addressed in the papers presented it became clear that the fortifications built by Europeans along the African coastline are a veritable starting points for the generation of stimulating inter-, and multidisciplinary academic research bordering on trans-continental and even transnational entanglements.

Conference Overview:

John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu (NTNU, Trondheim): “Beyond Borders: transnational movements through his-

tory” (introduction to the project and the conference)

John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu (NTNU, Trondheim): “Interpreting European colonial fortifications: sources, perspectives and methods”

Roberto Zaugg (University of Basel): “Grossfriedrichsburg: A Site of African-European Interaction and of German Memory”

Emily Mann (Courtauld Institute of Art): “William Smith’s views of English fortifications in Africa”

Rexford Assasie Oppong (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology) and Henry Nii Adziri Wellington (University of Ghana): “Architecture of oppression: the use of the dungeons in the forts and castles in Ghana”

Louis Nelson (University of Virginia): “Coffle, Castle, Deck, Block”

Henry Nii Adziri Wellington (University of Ghana): “Territoriality, Boundaries and Filters: the Power of ar-

chitectural design in Christiansborg, Osu”

Neelima Jeychandran (University of California): “Colonial Spaces, Postcolonial Memories: A Critical Analysis of Museums Inside the Slave Castles”

Philip Afeadie (University of Ghana): “Fort Prindzenstein: A Monument in the Identity of Keta-Someawo”

Fritz Biveridge (University of Ghana): “Culture contact and space – archaeology of trade and cultural entanglement at Dixcove, Ghana”

Kwabena Adu-Boahen (University of Cape Coast): “Female Agency in a Cultural Confluence: Women, Trade and Politics in 17th and 18th-Century Gold Coast”

Ebenezer Ayesu (University of Ghana): “Obama at the Cape Coast Castle (Ghana): meaning and appropriation of ‘Gate of no Return’ ”

Lloyd G. Adu Amoah (Ashesi University): “China, architecture and Ghana’s spaces: Concrete Signs of a soft Chinese imperium? ”

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Citation: Roberto Zaugg. Review of , *The Shadows of Empire — A Study of European Colonial Forts and Castles*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

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