

## **REVIVING THE SURVIVORS OF A FORGOTTEN PAST**

### **REVISITING THE ASHANTI TRADITIONAL BUILDINGS**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS DEMHIST CONFERENCE BELGRADE SERBIA**

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#### **Introduction**

Madam Chairperson Yvonne Ploum, Vice Chairs Timna Seligman and Antonio Ponte, Secretary Remko Jansonius, and members of the Board of Demhist, Members of ICOM, my honorable colleagues' presenters, and all attendees here present in person and online, I bring you greetings from the members of ICOM Ghana. I am honored to be invited to give the keynote speech of this important conference on "Remembrance of Things Lost" where we seek strategies to resurrect forgotten heritage buildings and histories to bring them to a stature of renewed significance. I am indeed grateful. I must also mention that Ghana's friendly relationship with the former Yugoslavia as two of the founding members of the Non-aligned Movement.

Ghana's history has a global reputation. It is best known as the first country to gain independence in Sub-Saharan Africa from colonialism in 1957. It is also known to be at the center of the trans-Atlantic slave trade representing 400 years of inhumanity, violence, and abuse resulting in the construction of 100 forts, castles, and trading posts along the shores of Ghana. Today, there are only 28 of these slave forts left and these have been listed on the UNESCO World Heritage list. However, the slave trade narrative has overshadowed other important histories such as the history of the Ashanti people and the deliberate destruction of the Kumasi, the capital city of the Ashanti Empire by the British in 1874. What is left to remind us of that city are 10 small traditional religious temples of unique cultural symbolism located in the Ashanti countryside outside Kumasi also listed as UNESCO World Heritage. They are the survivors of a forgotten past. We call them the ATB or Ashanti traditional buildings.

In this keynote lecture, I will use the ATBs to highlight two critical approaches to reviving lost memories of place: First is a search for extrinsic connections – that is, exploring outside the heritage site – looking for other lost histories that may be externally connected to the particular heritage site. Secondly, we look for intrinsic connections by searching for clues for new meaning

within an already existing site. These two approaches will form a framework for reviving lost history and bring new significance and knowledge of the heritage site. I will demonstrate this with a storytelling framework using old archival pictures, photographs, engravings, drawings, and images to bring to remembrance the lost Medieval city of 19th century Kumasi and its culture and history using the extrinsic approach, and then we will explore new meanings in the Ashanti traditional temples with an intrinsic approach.

### **The Extrinsic approach- the lost city of Kumasi**

With the extrinsic approach, we look outside the remaining temples. Their closest external historic link is the architecture of the lost city of Kumasi of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the capital of the Ashanti kingdom was founded by the warrior King named Osei Tutu in the seventeenth century. The story of Kumasi, its rise and fall is key to understanding the Ashanti temples. The climatic location and environmental context of Kumasi are central to the story of Kumasi. West Africa has several climatic zones and Ghana extends through three of them. The coastal savannah, the thick forest belt the northern dry savannah.. It was located in the heart of the warm, dense, humid tropical forest and was surrounded by hills, rivers, and swamps. This made it difficult for invaders to reach it from the south and the north. Kumasi's location on the trans-Saharan trade route was also favorable as a major center between the North and South, East and West. It became a huge central market and tax collecting post between the cities of the Sahel and the Maghreb across the Sahara desert and the coastal cities of the South. So it grew in wealth and power. As the Ashanti gained more control and influence over the trade route, the British at the coast became concerned about this and attempted to send representatives to Kumasi to meet with the Ashante king to discuss new terms of trade.

Three things deterred them from making this trip inland. First, the dense, gloomy forest nicknamed "the white man's grave" because it was infested with mosquitoes, secondly the belief and fear of the Sasabonsam – the mythological vampire monster of Akan legend which terrorized travellers through the forest at night. Thirdly, the kinds of horrific reports they had heard about Kumasi. In the eighteenth century, the worst rumor was that the Ashanti were a war-like,

bloodthirsty tribe, ruled by a barbarian king who had no regard for human life, who drank their enemies' blood, and whose children could behead people for fun. Kumasi was a prosperous, but dangerous, evil, unhealthy, and filthy city and its people were uncultured, hostile, and socially chaotic. One English emissary and his party accompanied by British soldiers and guides were brave enough to make the trip and survive. Thomas Edward Bowdich, an emissary from a British trading corporation, was dispatched to Kumasi in 1817 to see the king. He wrote about Kumasi in his 1819 book *Mission from Cape Coast to the Asante*. His book forms one of the first written accounts of Kumasi. On entering the city of Kumasi, Bowdich was surprised to find a city that was not like the one he'd heard about at the coast. The city had clean streets and the buildings were ornamentally decorated – the work of superior craftsmanship- the mark of civilization and not at all filthy chaotic or uncultured as he heard.

From the sketch map drawn by Bowdich, the layout of Kumasi compared to small towns in Europe at the time, for it was a well-organized, cosmopolitan town with a city center, named streets, and residential districts arranged by social class. It was divided into suburbs by broad streets, back alleys, and had an architecture of two-story houses built of earth, with walls of ornate decorations, details, and mural artwork. The people were noble, courteous, and proud of their culture. This streetscape illustration by TE Bowdich shows the structure of the houses on the main streets. These structures had a courtyard in the middle and high roofs over ornamental verandah columns with symmetrical motifs and relief embellishments on the lower plinth. These decorations were more elaborate in temples, dwellings of nobles, and the residences of army captains.

R. Freedman, a British anthropologist in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, noted the remarkably high level of Ashanti craftsmanship. In Kumasi, there were experts in Goldsmithing, casting jewelry, and sculpture, especially the symbolic Akan stool and drums used to celebrate occasions. It is believed that the souls of the owners of the stools resided in them after death. The Ashanti of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were known for their Adinkra symbols, a set of symbols used by the Ashantis in their arts as a repository for knowledge, wisdom, values, and ideals. Each of them has a meaning and can be a phrase that tells a proverb, or code of social conduct and moral behavior. One cannot speak

of Ashanti culture without speaking of the kente cloth, a colorful fabric of geometric patterns arranged in rhythmical arrangements, woven on a loom. It was worn by Kings and nobles in the times of old Kumasi. It is believed to have been inspired by the web of the spider, a famous character in Akan folklore . Another speciality of the Ashanti dressing culture is the Adinkra stamp print cloth which exhibits Adinkra symbols.

The Ashanti practiced the federal form of democracy with its vassal towns. It was governed through a system of administration made up of elders, priests, a policing system, and an organized army of generals and captains, and trained troops with superior military strength. From Bowdich's illustration of the Courtyard of the Asante king's palace, each courtyard had a tree in the corner called the Tree of God, a place where libation was offered to the Supreme God of the universe. Engravings by another British visitor Dupuis show the Chief's Palace and residence, in the center of the city. One of the Kings later built a stone palace much like what was at the coast. It was known to have a large library of books and ancient manuscripts, and a grand assembly hall where the King and elders met with learned men and travelers. In the city was a central temple and not far off in the suburb of Bantama was the masoleum of the Kings, which housed the mummies of the monarchs as was done in ancient Egypt. It was rumored to contain raw Gold and treasures for the King's afterlife.

An important fact to note about Kumasi was that it had the largest market in West Africa. It was the center of the Gold trade ( from which the country had its former name -the Gold Coast). The bustling market sold everything from ivory, ceramics, salt, leather, beautiful woven textiles, jewelry, glass beads, metal crafts, door locks, and, of course, slaves in exchange for weapons. Kumasi was a multicultural city. The Ashanti accommodated many other African and Arab people from as far as Egypt and beyond. The city had a Muslim quarter nearby. According to Bowdich, the Moors, and Tuaregs from North Africa and Andalusia were present in the city at the time, and some of them were functioning as counselors and accountants for the king's treasury in the gold trade.

The core of Ashanti culture is their traditional religion. The Ashanti kings even today have a long-standing heritage of faith in the afterlife, the role of the ancestors, and the supremacy of the one and only creator God. The religion has a figure head, but is not in the form of a man like in major religions of the world. It is a 300-year-old Golden Stool, which represents the soul of the Ashanti nation. This Stool was not carved by human beings. In the seventeenth century, It was called out of the spiritual heavens by a powerful traditional priest called Okomfo Anokye ( whom the biggest hospital in Kumasi is named after). It descended out of the sky in front of a whole crowd. It is a symbol of unity of the Ashanti nation. When the king sits in state, the Golden stool is placed on its own throne beside the king as a spiritual force and ruler in its own right. Kumasi became the spiritual powerhouse of the king because of the position of this stool. It was preserved in a space in old Kumasi's main temple, which was next to the palace.

### **The Anglo- Ashanti wars**

From the castle in Cape Coast, the British were not happy with the growing power of the Ashanti and the terms of trade. So started one of the longest wars which went on for almost 70 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The British launched military campaigns against the Ashanti destroying much of the countryside. The Ashantis fought back bravely but of course, their rifles were no match for the blazing canons of the British soldiers. On reaching Kumasi British soldiers ransacked the city, looted the temple, and burnt the whole city down. These drawings are from the British newspapers of the time. They rigged the King's palace and all the houses of the nobles with explosives and blew them all to ashes and set the city ablaze. The city was erased to the ground and continued burning for three days. Fortunately the Golden Stool was hidden in the forest.

### **A new Kumasi**

So we come to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the most damage was effected on Ashanti culture and history. It was the coming of colonialism and modernization. First, the British built a fort in the middle of the old city probably on the site of the destroyed palace to completely bury its memory and subjugate its power. In 1922, The Ashanti king, who had been exiled far away now a British subject was released and returned to a completely new Kumasi to live in a colonial house and not a traditional palace- an entirely new construction system without

any reference to the old. The new Kumasi was now a colonial administrative center. The British ordered new ways of planning and buildings that excluded Ashanti forms and aesthetics. Offices for colonial administration a post office, hospitals, Schools, and churches sprung up. The Ashanti building aesthetics of former days were replaced with British classical colonial architecture. The schooling system disregarded indigenous knowledge and introduced a new language of English as the mode of communication of writing and reading. Ashanti Nobles now built British colonial houses with classical features instead of the Ashanti symbols. Slowly the appreciation of the Ashanti traditional buildings began to be forgotten. Kumasi today remains a great commercial hub in West Africa. But it has no trace of the architecture of old Kumasi anywhere in it. The new religion of Christianity and its negative effect on traditional religion has been evident over the last century. Although Ashanti traditional culture is still strong and vibrant, the core belief of traditional religion has been shaken by the overpowering effects of the major world religions of Christianity and Islam which do not recognize the lesser gods of the temples. Very few people would need to go to a temple for healing as there were now modern medicines and hospitals.

### **The Intrinsic approach -The symbols of the Ashanti Traditional Temple**

After the destruction of Kumasi, only the temples which were outside Kumasi were left to testify of its great architecture. According to the federal system, there was a temple in various towns in the Ashanti Kingdom. The traditional Ashanti temple features four open, but covered areas, one of which is the sacred room. The Chiefs, drummers, and praise singers have spaces in the other three areas. Here, rituals are performed on specific days. This is the plan of a typical one- the Yaw Tano temple which has some decorations which we will examine. This brings us to the intrinsic approach. By this, we take a look at the symbols in the temples and try to find new meaning by deep reflective research that reveals connections to other histories and cultures and bring a whole new meaning to its historical significance.

Some believe that these symbols are a varied form of Adinkra symbolism. And indeed, some adinkra symbols are found on some temples. However, intrinsic analysis reveal something else. From these slides, it can be seen that the Ashanti traditional temple mural symbols bear some

similarities to that of Northern African Islamic Umayyad art. Wall motifs in Morocco and Mauritania being Caliphates under the Umayyad dynasty may have resulted in the fusion of Islamic iconography and traditional Berber art. This may have reached West Africa through the trade routes mentioned earlier.

The existence of active trade routes between the Hausa city of Zaria in present day Nigeria and Kumasi would make it possible for the same wall motif tradition to be present in both places. An examination of the Wall motif patterns of the Ashanti religious buildings and Hausa architecture reveals the extent of this relation. The traditional Hausa architecture of Zaria also has symbols on its walls. It can be noticed that these are almost replicas of the ones on the Ashanti temples. Similar symbols can be found in the Al Karouan mosque in Tunisia. A possible hypothesis for this can be based on the fact that Kumasi was well populated with Muslim men of learning probably from the Hausa states as well as North Africa. It can also be postulated that building craftsmen and masons traveled from Zaria to Kumasi or vice-versa to ply their trade. A critical look at the Ashanti king's Taureg regalia confirms Ashanti- Maghreb relations. That is the new historic significance of the Ashanti temples when examined intrinsically. From this, we learn that the colonial divisions and borders have made us believe that the African cultures have no relations with each other. However, the ATBs prove otherwise. These cross-influences can be attributed to the trade routes connections broken by colonial borders till this day. The Ashanti Traditional Temples are recorders of African cultural and social interactions disrupted by colonialism.

In conclusion, as heritage professionals, architects, preservationists, historians, conservationists, art historians and museum enthusiasts, it has become imperative to look for new ways to bring fresh perspectives to our House Museums and collections in Post-Covid-19 times when the world is undergoing yet another change in modifying the social life in the cities of nations. In the developing world, priorities have changed pushing heritage matters to the bottom of the list of government priorities. This calls the stories of our collections and house museums to be told in different ways. Extrinsic and intrinsic methods require a deeper examination of heritage to discover possible links to areas and fields not yet explored. This way fresh grounds of knowledge

will be discovered bringing new significance and meaning to our exhibits which in the face of world events are begging to slip into forgotten memory.