

## **Preface**

*Forts, Castles, and Society in West Africa* is a timely contribution to the varied ways of understanding the position, utility, and impacts of forts and castles that European trading companies built in West Africa from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The volume makes a compelling case for seeing the fortresses as buildings that formed nodes in several middle grounds around and within which humans interacted and brokered all kinds of transactions. Thus, while acknowledging the utility of the fortresses as transitional holding places and markets for enslaved Africans prior to their transportation to the Americas, this volume demonstrates that the fortresses had enduring impacts on the social and physical spaces of West Africa. This book is a timely, albeit overdue, answer to A. W. Lawrence's admonishing in *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa* (1963) about the lack of historical studies on the position of the fortresses within their West African milieu.

Indeed, the fortresses that competing national European chartered companies erected in West Africa offer grounds for both popular and scholarly research into their existential realities. From the scholarly perspective, they are 'frozen' historical sources for the study of local as well as global interactions and connections. This understanding relates to the original *raison d'être* of the buildings as strategic infrastructure to facilitate and secure the respective national shares of the trans-Atlantic trade, of which the slave trade was for over two decades the central component. As historical sources, their presence allows for the study of their impact on society and the physical space of West Africa, on the one hand, and their role in the wider Atlantic context, on the other. From the contemporary perspective of memory, heritage, and tourism, the buildings represent 'living' mementos of the capability of human beings to contrive or convert architectural forms into tools of oppression for profit. This is even more pertinent in the context of the Atlantic slave trade, where traders used the fortresses as platforms through which they violently engendered a forced labour regime through the capture and transportation West Africans, and their enslavement in the Americas. One of the enduring consequences of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was the creation of an African-American diaspora, the descendants of the enslaved. Significantly, many members of this diaspora imagine as well as seek a return to their ancestral homeland through an examination of the tools of their ancestors' oppression. Paradoxical? Not quite. For, without the presence of the remnants of the fortresses the experience of the suffering that their ancestors had to endure could not be visualised and felt so poignantly.

Osei-Tutu, J. K. (Ed.) *Forts, Castles and Society in West Africa: Gold Coast and Dahomey, 1450-1960* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018)

And this is where the agenda of the conference and the methodological underpinnings of the present anthology come into play. Studies that focus on the victims and tools of the slave trade are generally silent or at best diffuse about the real ‘oppressors’ in the trade, the humans who profited from dehumanising and oppressing others. Such studies generally (implicitly and explicitly) focus instead on the architectural contrivances utilised to perpetrate the slave trade, characterising them as ‘oppressive’. While not dismissing views (popular as well as scholarly) of the fortresses as epitomes of the slave trade, the conference attendees sought to offer an alternative approach to the study of, as well as stimulate scholarly debate about, the other uses and impacts of the fortresses. The individual chapters of this anthology illustrate this alternative approach by giving plausible understandings of the buildings as objects of social action as well as ‘actors’ in the Afro-European interaction through empirical insights into how they were utilised by humans as well as how their ‘presences’ affected their social and spatial environs. The bottom-line argument of this anthology is that though the contrivances of enslavement and oppression may look horrendous and make people cringe at the very sight of them, observers ought not to encumber them with the ‘sins’ of those who contrived them for the purpose of profit through oppression.

Despite having this overarching theoretical consensus – namely, to discuss and examine the positions, utilities, and socio-spatial impacts of the fortresses within West Africa and globally (in the case of the Dutch-Elmina-Java links) – the conference agenda did not seek to impose any specific theoretical or methodological approaches on its attendees. Rather, the individual authors, all of whom are established scholars and experts in their fields of history, were required to bring their own theoretical and methodological angles to the exploration of the object of study and theme under investigation. This open-endedness has led to a diverse set of theoretical and methodological approaches that, through individual case studies of the Afro-European interactions on the Gold Coast and the Slave Coast, respectively, have produced alternative understandings of the fortresses thereon. This diversity of approaches is also reflected in the varied lengths of the individual chapters in this collected volume. Professor Emeritus Irene Odotei’s video presentation during the conference featuring interviews and ritual performances relating to the shrine of the local deity Nana Tabiri, which is located in the ‘male slave dungeon’ of Cape Coast Castle, would have added an interesting angle on the theme of forts, ritual, and spirituality had it been developed into a chapter for this volume.

At the conference, the issue of ‘labelling’ provided moments of lively discussion. For instance, the participants keenly debated the extent to which the ‘European’ label is still

Osei-Tutu, J. K. (Ed.) *Forts, Castles and Society in West Africa: Gold Coast and Dahomey, 1450-1960* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018)

suitable as a contemporary descriptive of the fortresses, which have been inherited by African states and adopted by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites. As the editor of this anthology, I have chosen the title 'Forts, Castles, and Society in West Africa' partly as a way of navigating the apparent anachronism that the label 'European' entails in the contemporary context. However, the fact remains that Europeans originally built and utilised the fortresses to serve their particular interests. Thus, it would appear to be a misnomer to insist that they are 'African' or 'Ghanaian' or 'Beninois', and so on. Another labelling issue that generated animated discussion but that did not end in a consensus conclusion was whether to name the fortresses by their functions as 'trade' or 'slave' or 'conquest' forts. A chronological overview has been provided in the introductory essay of this volume (Chapter 1) to differentiate between the fortresses according to their period of construction and the main purposes for their construction.

John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu  
Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)