

**Forts and Castles in the Colonial Period:  
Uses and Understandings of the Pre-colonial Fortifications**

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The many forts and castles that dot the coast of present-day Ghana are generally associated with the trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved people from West Africa to the Americas. Their inclusion on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1979 highlights the importance of their position in both colonial and Atlantic world histories. The forts and castles are described as monuments to the 'evils of the slave trade' as well as to 'nearly four centuries of pre-colonial Afro-European commerce on the basis of equality rather than on that of the colonial basis of inequality'. Thus, their status as world heritage is accounted for by their role 'not only in Ghana's history but that of the world over four centuries as the focus of first the gold trade and then the slave trade'.<sup>1</sup> However, the forts and castles were not only part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In the late 19th century, many also became part of the emerging British colonial state on the Gold Coast. Yet, little is known of the colonial past of these fortifications. In the existing literature on the Ghanaian forts and castles, the focus is largely on their pre-colonial history.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, since the establishment of the Gold Coast Monuments and Relics Commission in the 1940s, restoration works have tended to highlight and prioritise their pre-colonial architectural and structural features, often at the cost of their colonial features.<sup>3</sup>

This article argues that increased knowledge of the role of the forts and castles in the European colonial enterprises is a necessary supplement to existing collective memories of their use in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This nuanced view of the buildings is necessary to show that their role in the Atlantic as well as in the global power structure did not end with the slave trade. Rather, they became an important part of the infrastructure of the British colonial state through their utilisation as centres of the Gold Coast colonial administration from the second half of the 19th century until 1957, when the colony gained independence and became known as Ghana. Although the Gold Coast government converted several of the

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<sup>1</sup> See the description of the forts and castles on UNESCO's World Heritage List, which is available at [whc.unesco.org](http://whc.unesco.org).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, A. W. Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963); Albert van Dantzig, *Forts and Castles of Ghana* (Accra: Sedco Publishing, 1980); and Kwesi J. Anquandah, *Castles and Forts of Ghana* (Paris: Atalante, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Jon Olav Hove, 'Recreating Pre-colonial Forts and Castles: Heritage Policies and Restoration Practices in the Gold Coast / Ghana, 1945 to the 1970s', in John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu and Victoria Ellen Smith (eds.), *Shadows of Empire in West Africa: New Perspectives on European Fortifications* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 327–350.

forts and castles to serve other administrative purposes after 1870, the real centre of colonial state power – both symbolically and in practice – was Christiansborg Castle. Thus, the history of the Ghanaian fortresses rendered in this article will focus on the fortunes and uses of Christiansborg Castle as representative of the phenomenon of colonial state power. However, the other forts and castles will be referred to in order to illustrate specific divergences from the standard story that Christiansborg represents.

The sources used consist of archival material from the British National Archives (NA) in London and the Ghanaian Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Accra. This material sheds light on the uses and roles of the fortifications in the 20th century. Extensive use has also been made of British Parliamentary Papers (BPP-series), which have provided insights into the role of forts and castles in the establishment and consolidation of colonial rule. Additionally, the photographs found in the archives of the Basel Mission as well as the collections held at Cambridge University provide rare glimpses of the forts and castles during the colonial period. These, together with photographs from the NA, have been used to document the various purposes to which the buildings were put as well as their structural developments throughout the colonial period. Finally, this article is in part based on a wide range of diaries, journals, and films that allow us to explore contemporary perceptions and understandings of the fortifications.

### **Forts, castles, and the colonial state**

As the preceding articles in the present collection have shown, trading companies from many European countries established forts and castles along the Gold Coast of Africa between the 17th and 18th century to further trade, particularly the trade in enslaved people. However, the trans-Atlantic slave trade ended in the 19th century and the Danish and the Dutch governments decided to abandon their possessions in West Africa. In 1850, the Danish government sold its forts and castles to the British government, and the Dutch government transferred their possessions to the British government in 1873. Thus, by the end of the century, the British government owned all the forts and castles along the Gold Coast.

At the start of the 20th century, many forts were no more than ruins. Many had not seen regular upkeep for decades and had consequently fallen deep into a state of disrepair. One such example is the former Danish-Norwegian fortress in Teshi, called Fort Augustaborg, which was abandoned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As contemporary pictures shows, this fort was no more than a ruin by around 1900. Furthermore, as the fate of Fort Gross Friedrichsburg in Princes Town (Pokesu) shows, local inhabitants quarried abandoned fortresses for stones and

other building materials.<sup>4</sup> Photographic albums created at the turn of the 19th century are therefore often filled with pictures of ruined forts formerly belonging to Danish, German, Dutch, and British companies.<sup>5</sup> Today, some of these ruins can still be seen scattered along the coast of present-day Ghana, such as the former Dutch fortress in Kormantin-Abandze, called Fort Amsterdam (Fig. 10.1). When this fortress was restored around 1950, it was restored as a ruin. As the picture below shows, it is today a well-preserved ruin, representative of the many forts that were not incorporated into the emerging colonial state in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently fell into disrepair.

**INSERT Fig. 10.1 Present interior of Fort Amsterdam.**<sup>6</sup>

Yet, many forts were still in relatively good condition at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These had been incorporated into the emerging British colonial state on the Gold Coast. As robust structures, they were ideal suited to protecting colonial administrators, enforcing political control, and exercising disciplinary measures in the early phases of colonisation. In the 1850s, for instance, Christiansborg Castle in Osu offered protection to British officials from local riots.<sup>7</sup> In the 1870s, several forts and castles were used as garrisons in several coastal towns, including Anomabu, Accra, Keta, Elmina, Sekondi, Dixcove, Axim, and Cape Coast.<sup>8</sup> The latter also remained the residence of the British governor on the Gold Coast and was the headquarters for the British during the 1874 military expedition to Kumasi.

However, the fortifications were built for defensive purposes. While they were important as military footholds and for the pacification of nearby villages and towns, they did not play a role in the actual colonisation of the interior of the Gold Coast. The following description of Fort James in Accra can tell us much about their late-19th century military role:

In conclusion, I can only note that this fort [Fort James], though incapable like most others on the coast of resisting an attack from the sea, and, moreover, though so placed

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<sup>4</sup> The names and spellings of forts and castles varies depending on source and time. I have generally adopted the spellings used in the other articles in the present collection.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance picture of Fort Augustaborg in the British National Archives (NA), CO 1069 34/7, “Ruins of Fort Austenborg [sic] (Danish) at Tassy [sic]”, available on [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com).

<sup>6</sup> Picture by Axel Christophersen. Reproduced by kind permission by Christophersen.

<sup>7</sup> See the article by John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu in the present collection (Chapter 1).

<sup>8</sup> Government Publications Relating to Africa in Microform. *Annual Departmental Reports Relating to the Gold Coast and British Togoland, 1943–1956* (EP Microform Ltd.) (GPRAM), Official Report on the Gold Coast Colony by Governor Freeling, 30 May 1877.

as to be unable to inflict any damage on any enemy attacking Accra from the land side, would nevertheless be useful as a place of refuge in case of reserves, and is also available at all times for a storehouse for such government goods as it would be unsafe or inexpedient to bestow elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

In order to defend key positions in the new colonies, the British built two new fortresses, one in Kumasi and one in the Cantonments in Accra. By the late 19th century, the forts and castles were used mainly as storehouses for guns and gunpowder, and as prisons for very different categories of inmates. At Elmina, for instance, the small tower at the east corner of the castle is known as Prempeh's Tower. Here, Asantehene Prempeh I was imprisoned between 1896 and 1899 before he was taken into exile in the Seychelles.<sup>10</sup> Both Fort James in Accra and Cape Coast Castle were used as prisons from the 1870s until far into the post-colonial period.

The Gold Coast Colony took shape by 1919 through the territorial amalgamation of the Gold Coast Crown Colony, Asante, the Northern Territories, and the Trust Territory of Togoland (British Togoland). Under British ownership, the role of the old forts and castles as garrisons and defensive infrastructure waned. From this period, British colonial film documentaries on the Gold Coast presented the fortresses in benign terms and emphasised their new roles as tools for furthering what many in Britain understood as the country's "civilising mission" abroad.<sup>11</sup> In one such documentary, *Castles and Fisher Folk* produced in 1933, the narrator notes that the 'castles in the tropics', which were 'once fortresses' used in the 'struggle for the mastery of the West Coast and its treasures of gold and ivory', had become beacons of peace and progress: 'Now the Union Jack floats peacefully over those fantastic castles'. Furthermore, in depicting how 'a native boy comes out to learn his English grammar' at Fort Metal Cross (at Dixcove), the film portrayed the British use of the buildings as tools of social development rather than as military outposts. The changed role and benign uses of the fortifications in the British 'civilising' project on the Gold Coast was emphasised at the end of the film, when the narrator made the following poetic description:

The sun begins swiftly to sink, the palm trees shimmer in the evening light, the breakers beat out echoes of the past, of bloodshed, of cruelty, of slavery forever

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<sup>9</sup> Parliamentary Papers of Great Britain (PPGB) (c.892) Vol. 46, enclosure to No. 100, Report on Accra by Captain J. Fred. Crease, Royal Marine Artillery, 29 September 1873.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Hyland, *The Castles of Elmina: A Brief History and Guide* (Accra: Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> On ideas of British civilisational superiority, see Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 78–132.

ended in these days, when the forgotten fortress is a rest house, where the Englishman can shelter for the night as he journeys through on his official round to find out how best to care for and help the native races of West Africa.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to being rest houses for colonial officials, there were several other uses, as attested to by a map published by the Gold Coast Survey Department in 1949, 'Forts of the Gold Coast: Past & Present'. Many were post offices, some were lighthouses, and others were simply listed as 'government offices', a designation that denoted multiple functions.<sup>13</sup> However, despite their more peaceful presentation, many fortifications were still used as prisons in the 20th century. The 1949 map lists 'prison' as the present use of several fortifications, including Fort James and Fort Ussher in Accra and Fort Prindsenssteen in Keta.<sup>14</sup>

In the late colonial period, the use of the old fortresses became even more diverse. This was largely due to heritage management policies adopted by the colonial government after the Second World War. Since funds for upkeep were scarce, heritage managers were eager to keep the forts and castles in use, because this ensured government funding for repairs.<sup>15</sup> In fact, heritage managers were actively seeking cooperation with government departments to find new uses for old fortifications. In the 1950s, different government departments used 18 forts and castles.<sup>16</sup> For example, the Gold Coast Monuments and Relics Commission cooperated with the Social Services Department to restore and renovate Fort William in Anomabu in the late 1940s (Fig. 10.2). The fort, which had previously served as a slave depot, garrison, and prison, was turned into a youth centre called the 'King George VI Memorial Youth Centre'.

**INSERT** Fig. 10.2: Fort William in Anomabu, ca. 1950s.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Creighton, *Castle and Fisher Folk* (London: Colonial Film, 1933). See [www.colonialfilm.org.uk](http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk).

<sup>13</sup> Hove, 'Recreating Pre-colonial Forts and Castles'.

<sup>14</sup> Gold Coast Survey Department, *Atlas of the Gold Coast* (Accra, 1949), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Ghana Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD), RG 11/1/255, Note by P. Wilkins, Ministry of Education, 9 August 1950.

<sup>16</sup> Hove, 'Recreating Pre-colonial Forts and Castles', 332–333.

<sup>17</sup> Picture from the Alan Rudwick collection at the Royal Commonwealth Society, available at University of Cambridge Digital Library, [cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk](http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk). Collection classmark Y30448J. Picture reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

As noted earlier, Elmina Castle and Cape Coast Castle, two of the most important and infamous castles that operated during the slave trade, became part of the British colonial infrastructure and were used for various training and administrative purposes. Elmina Castle was primarily used as a training centre and as barracks for the Gold Coast Police.<sup>18</sup> Cape Coast Castle, however, had uses that were more diverse. Towards the end of the colonial period, it was used as the administrative centre of the Central Region, and it housed offices for the local government, forestry department, public works, health department, and customs and excise departments. In addition, it was used at different times as the district magistrate's court, a prison, a post office, and the regional headquarters of the Gold Coast Legion, an ex-servicemen's union.

Public funding of the maintenance work on the forts and castles was secured through a use-and-maintain arrangement whereby, as a condition for their continued occupation, government institutions (security, judiciary, and civil service) that used the buildings took responsibility for the maintenance and repair work with government subventions. This arrangement appeared to be problem-free when only one department used a building and took sole responsibility for the repair work thereon, as the Gold Coast Police did at Elmina Castle. However, when several departments used the same building, the problem of the sharing of maintenance costs would arise, and the buildings would fall into disrepair because the problem would go unresolved, as in the case of Cape Coast Castle in the 1950s. Observing the poor condition of the castle, A. W. Lawrence, the Conservator of Monuments and Professor of Archaeology at the University College of the Gold Coast (later University of Ghana), noted in 1954 that 'the present appearance [...] is extraordinarily unseemly, and in parts squalid'. He contended that it was better that forts would be used by a single government department, preferably the Police Department, which maintained Elmina Castle 'in a really creditable condition'.<sup>19</sup>

The transition to independence did not mark a break in the varied uses of the fortresses. After independence in 1957, for instance, Elmina Castle became a barracks and training centre for the Ghana Police Department, while the Cape Coast Castle continued as a regional administrative centre where several government departments in the Central Region operated. The buildings attained a new salience in the 1960s as potential tourist sites and were promoted as such by the Ghana Tourism Board and the Ghana Museums and Monuments

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<sup>18</sup> Hove, 'Recreating Pre-colonial Forts and Castles', 333; Christopher DeCorse, *An Archaeology of Elmina: Africans and Europeans on the Gold Coast, 1400–1900* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 45, 68–70.

<sup>19</sup> PRAAD, RG 5/1/31, Report on Cape Coast Castle by A. W. Lawrence, 12 August 1954.

Board. The two castles, which were developed into museums in the 1970s, were, together with 16 other forts and castles, included on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1979.<sup>20</sup>

Currently, both Elmina and Cape Coast castles are among the most important memorials to the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the world, receiving international and local visitors. Expectedly, African Americans coming to West Africa in search of their roots constitute a significant group of visitors to the two sites.<sup>21</sup> Christiansborg Castle has not achieved a similar prominence as a tourist site or as a museum because of its political and security roles in both the colonial and post-colonial contexts. However, the lack of tourist attention does not imply insignificance. Indeed, when the British colonial headquarters were moved from Cape Coast to Accra, Christiansborg was propelled into the limelight as the governor's residence and office.

### **Christiansborg Castle: The colonial administrative centre**

From the 17th century, Cape Coast Castle served as the British headquarters on the Gold Coast. However, in the 19th century the climate in the town was considered unhealthy for Europeans to live in. Already in the 1860s, British officials were discussing a move to Accra, a town that was considered more climatically conducive to the health of the British officials. In addition, in 1850 the Danish government sold its Gold Coast possessions to the British. This included Christiansborg Castle in Accra, which the British immediately converted to an administrative centre.

British officials were discussing a move of headquarters from Cape Coast to Accra in the 1860s. In his 'Report on the Condition of the British Settlements on the West Coast of Africa' submitted to the Colonial Office in 1865, Colonel Henry Ord commented on plans for the transfer of the seat of government from Cape Coast to Accra. In Ord's opinion, Accra had a reputation of being a healthier town than Cape Coast and was in his opinion 'certainly a more cheerful and pleasanter residence'. He noted, however, that the earthquake, which ruined several public buildings in Accra in 1862, had rendered the plan impossible. The ruined buildings included Fort James and Christiansborg Castle, 'which would have been occupied by the government establishments, and whose condition is such as altogether to

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<sup>20</sup> Hove, 'Recreating Pre-colonial Forts and Castles', 344. See also [whc.unesco.org/en/list/34](http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/34).

<sup>21</sup> Edward M. Bruner, 'Tourism in Ghana: The Representation of Slavery and the Return of the Black Diaspora', *American Anthropologist* 98 (1996): 290–304, 291.

preclude their restoration, were even the country secure against a return of this dangerous and destructive visitation'.<sup>22</sup>

The question of moving the headquarters from Cape Coast was again raised in the 1870s.<sup>23</sup> Cape Coast was still considered an unhealthy town for climate- and sanitation-related reasons. Furthermore, the space available was deemed inadequate for the needs of a growing colonial administration. As the memorandum by Captain M. T. Sale on the choice of seat of government put it, 'the house accommodation at Cape Coast Castle is insufficient, and more could not readily be provided'.<sup>24</sup>

The alternatives to Cape Coast considered by British officials were Ada, Elmina, and Accra. Ada was considered because of its location at the mouth of the Volta River. However, the climate at this place was thought to be 'so entirely unsuited for the residence for Europeans', that any further consideration was deemed unnecessary. Elmina had become an alternative after the transfer of Dutch possessions to the British government, which included Elmina Castle and Fort St. Jago. The government considered Elmina, with its good landing place (the best on the coast), relatively good water supply, and relatively healthy climate as having advantages over Cape Coast. Furthermore, it had 'a fine castle, a more or less complete system of forts', and, after the British bombardment of Old Elmina, 'a site [...] ready for the erection of government buildings'. However, the town was also considered to have several drawbacks, such as the swamps found behind the town, which were seen as 'fatal to any prospect of improving the sanitary condition of the place'. In addition, the site available for government buildings and residences repulsed British officials, as they were 'saturated with filth, and, owing to the horrible native custom of burying the dead within the houses, objectionable in the extreme as building ground'.<sup>25</sup>

While the drawbacks outweighed the advantages with regard to Elmina, the opposite was the case concerning Accra. This town had several drawbacks, including 'a very imperfect water-supply' and a landing considered 'bad and at times even dangerous'. Yet, the advantages were considerable: it was the largest commercial town in the area, and it was surrounded by 'open and comparatively healthy country, drier and freer from swamp than any other place on the coast'. Furthermore, in the hills to the north of the town was a place called

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<sup>22</sup> PPGB Vol. 37, Copy of the Report of Colonel Ord, the Commissioner Appointed to Inquire into the Condition of the British Settlements on the West Coast of Africa, 1865, 21.

<sup>23</sup> John Parker, *Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 97.

<sup>24</sup> PPGB (c.1343) Vol. 52, enclosure to No. 41, Memorandum on the Choice of the Seat of Government of the Gold Coast by M. T. Sale, 3 March 1875.

<sup>25</sup> PPGB (c.1343) Vol. 52, enclosure to No. 41, Memorandum on the Choice of the Seat of Government of the Gold Coast by M. T. Sale, 3 March 1875.



Aburi, considered 'far healthier than any place within reach of Englishmen on the West Coast of Africa'.<sup>26</sup> According to the Gold Coast governor, George C. Strahan, Accra possessed advantages from 'the sanitary point of view which ought to outweigh every other consideration'.<sup>27</sup> The Secretary of State for the Colonies concurred and in 1875 decided to move the headquarters of the Gold Coast Colony to Accra.<sup>28</sup>

Christiansborg was not, however, an obvious choice as residence for the governor. According to A. W. Lawrence, who investigated and restored the castle in the 1950s, the castle was nearly completely ruined in the earthquake of 1862. Except for the belfry, 'no building above the rampart level survived on the west and east sides, and none on the south above the heads of the staircases'.<sup>29</sup> As the following description of the castle from 1873 show, the castle had not seen any repairs since the earthquake:

Beautifully situated as is this, to all appearance, imposing fortress, on a salient point of land, one cannot help experiencing, on a near approach to its commanding walls, a pang of regret that by one fell stroke of an earthquake so grand a pile of buildings should have been reduced to such a ruinous condition.<sup>30</sup>

In the report written by Captain M. T. Sale in 1875, the reasons for using Christiansborg are outlined for the Colonial Office. As the report shows, the primary reason had to do with security considerations. Sale and those he interviewed during his brief stay in the newly created Gold Coast Crown Colony did not consider the British presence sufficiently secure. Sale therefore argued that the 'Government House and the principal executive offices should be placed together and within the walls of a fort'.<sup>31</sup> In this context, the ruined Christiansborg was thought to be ideal. The old walls were considered 'a fine, massive and, for the coast of Africa, well-built structure of solid masonry'.<sup>32</sup> This structure could provide a walled headquarters at a cost considered 'trifling compared to that which would be necessary to provide the same thing on a new site'.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> PPGB (c.1343) Vol. 52, enclosure to No. 41, Memorandum on the Choice of the Seat of Government of the old Coast by M. T. Sale, 3 March 1875.

<sup>27</sup> PPGB (c.1343) Vol. 52, No. 41, Governor Strahan to Earl of Carnarvon, 5 March 1875.

<sup>28</sup> PPGB (c.1343) Vol. 52, No. 44, Earl of Carnarvon to Governor Strahan, 9 April 1875.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts*, 216.

<sup>30</sup> PPGB (c.892) Vol. 46, enclosure to No. 100, Report on Accra by Captain J. Fred. Crease, Royal Marine Artillery, 29 September 1873.

<sup>31</sup> NA, CO 879/8/4, Report by Capt. M. T. Sale on Public Works [in the Gold Coast], Colonial Office, 1875, 2.

<sup>32</sup> NA, CO 879/8/4, Report by Capt. M. T. Sale on Public Works, Colonial Office, 1875, Appendix 4: Memorandum Respecting the Utilization of Christiansborg Castle.

<sup>33</sup> NA, CO 879/8/4, Report by Capt. M. T. Sale on Public Works, Colonial Office, 1875, 2.

Sale did not propose a restoration of the old castle, something he considered a too 'costly affair'. Instead, he suggested that the basement of the castle should be used as the foundations for a new Government House and that the range of necessary offices should be constructed. This would require both the demolition of some old buildings and the construction of several new buildings. Sale proposed that the 'upper story of that block of buildings which formed the Government House [of the old castle] should be taken down to floor level' and that 'the defective part of the wall [be] built up from the basement to 2nd floor level'. This would then form the basis for the timber-framed buildings that would become the new Government House, including, among others, buildings to house a dining room, bedrooms, offices, the private secretary's rooms, and two reception rooms, with one being reserved for 'Native Chiefs, & c.'. <sup>34</sup> By 1877, the work proposed by Sale had been completed: after the clearing of the ruins, wooden buildings were erected above the old Danish-Norwegian floors. <sup>35</sup>

The British governor moved into the newly renovated Christiansborg Castle in 1877. <sup>36</sup> With the exception of a short spell between 1899 and 1901, when the castle was used as a so-called 'Lunatic Asylum', it would remain the residence of the governor. According to the 'Lunatic Asylum Annual Report' for 1899, the castle had been 'overhauled and rendered a very suitable residence for the insane'. Gradually, slight defects were corrected and improvements made 'till at the present time it can be favourably compared with similar institutions in the Mother country'. <sup>37</sup> In August 1901, however, the inmates were removed to the Colonial Hospital Asylum and the castle was converted once more into the governor's residence. <sup>38</sup> The fact that governors in the coming years lived in an old asylum was of course not lost on anyone and it became the butt of many jokes. In 1941, for instance, the future Gold Coast governor Sir Alan Burns made the following observation before his departure to the Gold Coast: 'What does alarm me a little is the history of the Government House in which I shall have to live. It began, I understand, as a slave depot, it then became a lunatic asylum, and it is now a home for governors. I suppose this is the right progression'. <sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> NA, CO 879/8/4, Report by Capt. M. T. Sale on Public Works, Colonial Office, 1875, Appendix 4: Memorandum Respecting the Utilization of Christiansborg Castle.

<sup>35</sup> The building process can be seen in the pictures CO 1069/12 and CO 1069/13, NA. The former, from 1876, shows the ruined castle, while the latter, from 1877, shows the newly built government house. The pictures are also available on [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com).

<sup>36</sup> GPRAM, Official Report on the Gold Coast Colony by Governor Freeling, 30 May 1877.

<sup>37</sup> NA, CO 96/356, Lunatic Asylum Annual Report for the Year Ending 31 December 1899 by Superintendent Alexander E. Knight.

<sup>38</sup> GPRAM, Colonial Report No. 397, Gold Coast Report for 1902.

<sup>39</sup> The Royal African Society, 'The Society's Evening Meeting For Sir Alan and Lady Burns and Miss Margery Perham 28th August, 1941', *Journal of the Royal African Society* 41 (1942): 55–60.

When Burns did move into Christiansborg in 1941, he saw that many changes had indeed been made to it since the 1870s. In 1928, the Secretary for Native Affairs, H. S. Newlands, made the following description of the newer additions to the castle: ‘Turn to the new dining hall [Fig. 10.3], panelled and vaulted in the mahogany of the country and showing the Cipher of King George the Fifth and the date 1917 on its walls. You are now amid the wonders of a new world. Electric light, telephones and an irreproachable dancing floor fill the rooms’.<sup>40</sup> Reports on the condition of the castle from the 1930s indicated that it was also equipped with a billiard room and card room (both with leaking roofs).<sup>41</sup> However, the old castle still lacked essential facilities when Burns arrived. Among the first things he allegedly had installed after moving in were water closets to replace the so-called ‘thunder-boxes’.<sup>42</sup>

**INSERT** Fig. 10.3 Dining hall, Christiansborg.<sup>43</sup>

### **Christiansborg and Victoriaborg: A colonial ‘fort community’**

In addition to making the castle the new residence for the governor, the open land west of Christiansborg called ‘New Site’ and later ‘Victoriaborg’ provided ample space for the buildings required by the colonial administration.<sup>44</sup> On this site, the colonial government constructed a courthouse, the legislative assembly, and buildings for the colonial secretariat, later known as the ‘ministries’. Furthermore, Victoriaborg provided land for low-density housing as well as gathering places such as the European Club and the Polo Ground. The latter was also one of the most important gathering places in the colony: the Polo Ground offered space for official parades and palavers, and other public meetings.

Per Hernæs has suggested that forts and castles in the pre-colonial period were part of larger ‘fort communities’ made up of the European fortification and the surrounding African society. The two depended on each other for trade, supplies, and protection. Furthermore, ties between the two were cemented by considerable interaction, particularly through marriages

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<sup>40</sup> PRAAD, SNA 11/1614, H. S. Newlands, ‘Christiansborg Castle’, Accra, 1928.

<sup>41</sup> See PRAAD, CSO 1/2/2, Half-Yearly Report on Condition of Christiansborg Castle, 18 July 1935 and 12 July 1930.

<sup>42</sup> Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781–1997* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), 515.

<sup>43</sup> Picture from Sir Alan Burns’ Collection of Gold Coast photographs, 1940s from the Cambridge Digital Library. The metadata connected to the picture contains the following description: ‘General interior of the dining room, looking across the tables towards the sideboard and the portrait of King George V which hangs on the further wall. The ceiling of the room is barrel vaulted in wood paneling supported on pairs of square columns running along the side of the room. The date 1917 is carved in the paneling above the royal portrait. Above the dining table a ‘punkah’ type fan is suspended with a system of pulleys for operation’. This photographic collection can be found at [www.cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk). **Collection classmark Y30448D. Picture reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.**

<sup>44</sup> Parker, *Making the Town*, 97.

and family connections. However, during the 18th century fort communities underwent important changes ‘in their political-commercial character, from predominantly “ports of trade” to important political actors as well’, participating in regional political struggles like a ‘petty state’.<sup>45</sup>

However, in the 1850s the fort village at Christiansborg, known as Osu, was bombed and wiped out by the British.<sup>46</sup> For security reasons, old Osu was not reconstructed. In its place, or a bit west of its original place, a new sort of ‘fort community’ emerged. This colonial fort community differed considerably from its pre-colonial forerunner. Most importantly, while pre-colonial fort communities were characterised by the many interactive relationships between Africans and Europeans, the emerging colonial fort community was racially segregated: jobs in the colonial administration located in Victoriaborg were reserved for Europeans, as were the high-cost living quarters. The clearest example of segregation was to be found in the European Club: here, Africans were excluded as members until the 1950s.<sup>47</sup>

Another difference between the colonial and pre-colonial fort communities is the extensive spatial influence exercised by the former compared to the latter. In the pre-colonial days, fort communities exercised little or no direct political power outside the community. The colonial fort community, in contrast, was the political centre for the entire colonial territory: the governor, living in Christiansborg, was the British monarch’s representative and the head of the colonial administration. Civil servants working in Victoriaborg were responsible for the day-to-day administration of the Gold Coast Colony, an area that after 1919 corresponded to the present-day borders of Ghana.

However, the political power of the colonial ‘fort community’ should not be exaggerated. Although it formally controlled a territory that far outstripped the sphere of influence of pre-colonial fort communities, its actual control of this territory was limited. Indeed, on the eve of the Second World War the elite administrative division of the colonial

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<sup>45</sup> Per Hernæs, ‘European Fort Communities on the Gold Coast in the Era of the Slave Trade’, in John Everaert and Jan Parmentier (eds.), *Shipping, Factories and Colonization* (Brussels: Wetenschappelijk Comité voor Maritieme Geschiedenis, Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, 1996), 167–180, 173.

<sup>46</sup> However, not all of old Osu was wiped out, and residential buildings continued to exist to the north of Christiansborg. See Holger Weiss, ‘The Entangled Spaces of Oddena, Oguaa and Osu: A Survey of Three Early Modern African Atlantic Towns, ca. 1650–1850’, in Holger Weiss (ed.), *Ports of Globalisation, Places of Creolisation* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 22–67.

<sup>47</sup> Nathan A. Plageman, *Everybody Likes Saturday Night: A Social History of Popular Music and Masculinities in Urban Gold Coast / Ghana, c. 1900–1970* (Doctoral Thesis: Indiana University, 2008), 41. Instead, Africans and Europeans could meet and interact at the Seaview Hotel, which was located just across the road from Fort James. See, for instance, Richard Wright’s description of Accra society in the 1950s in *Black Power* (1954) (New York: Harper, 2008).

service in all the British African colonies numbered no more than 1,200 men.<sup>48</sup> Thus, as Hernæs has noted, ‘colonial rule never became completely effective in terms of controlling every bit and parcel of African society, and as we know they had to resort to indirect rule for the purpose of district administration’.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the governor was the British monarch’s representative in the colony and as such the embodiment of the colonial connection. In addition, while local administration was largely outsourced to traditional African authorities through indirect rule, the governor and his staff still had control of policies encompassing the entire colony, such as defence, economic development, and social reform.

### **Christiansborg Castle: A symbol of British colonial power**

Throughout the 20th century, British officials actively used Christiansborg as a symbol of colonial power on the Gold Coast. For instance, the castle was used as a motif on official documents, such as stamps. Whereas images of the castle adorned stamps produced in the Gold Coast in 1928 and 1938, the 1938 set of stamps specifically had the name ‘Christiansborg Castle’ embossed on them. In 1948 and 1952, the motifs on Gold Coast stamps became more varied, with castle motifs featuring sporadically alongside other motifs depicting African drums, stools, and cocoa pods.

By the time of the Second World War, Christiansborg had become an important landmark on the Gold Coast.<sup>50</sup> From all over the world, visitors to the colony would come to the castle to learn more about its history. According to the novelist Richard Wright, who gives an account of his visit to the castle in the early 1950s, the guards doubled as tourist guides:

I visited Christianborg [sic] Castle which was built by the Swedes in 1657 and taken by the Danes in 1659. [...] It is at present the official residence of the Governor of the Colony, Sir Charles Arden-Clarke. White, vast, standing at the edge of the Atlantic, it dominates the tropic, sandy, palm-treed landscape. As I entered the castle grounds, the armed Northern Territory guards came to attention. I explained that I wanted to look

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<sup>48</sup> This included district officers and central secretariats but not the staff of the agriculture, railway, or other specialist departments. See John W. Cell, ‘Colonial Rule’, in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 232–253, 232.

<sup>49</sup> Per Hernæs, ‘A Symbol of Power? Christiansborg Castle in Ghanaian History’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 9 (2005): 141–156, 155.

<sup>50</sup> Indeed, as Hugh Roach noted in 1945, it was ‘a landmark to all the pilots bringing their aircraft to land on Accra aerodrome’. Hugh Roach, ‘Christiansborg’, *African Affairs* 44 (1945): 131–134.

over the castle. Six of them spoke at once: 'Me, Massa'. They were eager because they wanted that inevitable 'dash' at the end of the tour.<sup>51</sup>

The many tourists were primarily interested to see the pre-colonial remnants still existing in the castle, particularly the slave dungeons found in the foundations, which survived the 1862 earthquake.<sup>52</sup>

The castle also drew other groups of visitors more interested in its colonial function. In 1946, the colonial secretary received a request by the Presbyterian Infant Junior School in Akuse to visit to the castle. As the headmaster of the school noted, many children at the school had 'not visited Accra before and have no idea of the Governor's residence'.<sup>53</sup> The secretariat was not opposed to such a visit, since it had 'educational value'.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, since the castle was both the residence and office of the governor, some rules were introduced: school parties should not exceed 30 and the number of visits was limited to four a month. The parts of the castle open to these visitors were the dungeons and courtyard, the battlements and terraces on the first-floor level, and the gardens. Finally, requests to visit the castle should be sent to the director of education at least three weeks in advance.<sup>55</sup>

Over the following years, several school parties wished to visit the castle. Interestingly, requests to visit were generally addressed directly to the governor rather than to the director of education. For instance, in December 1948 the headmaster of the Presbyterian Infant and Junior School of Agogo sent a handwritten letter to the governor and his wife, asking their permission to see the castle.<sup>56</sup> According to the available archival material, no school party was turned down, but many were reminded that their request should have been addressed to the director of education.

However, not all visitors to the castle were welcome. On 28 February 1948, disgruntled veterans in the African Ex-Servicemen's Union and many supporters marched towards Christiansborg to deliver a petition to the governor asking for better job opportunities and pensions. This march would become part of the spark that started the Accra Riots. Prior to the protest march, the leader of the Union, Ben Tamakloe, was summoned by the commissioner of police and reminded that the protest and procession could only take place if

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<sup>51</sup> Wright, *Black Power*, 406.

<sup>52</sup> Roach, 'Christiansborg', 132.

<sup>53</sup> PRAAD, RG 3/1/390, Request for Permission to Visit Christiansborg Castle by the Presbyterian Infant Junior School, Akuse, 18 October 1946.

<sup>54</sup> PRAAD, RG 3/1/390, Note by the Colonial Secretary to the Director of Education, 2 November 1946.

<sup>55</sup> PRAAD, RG 3/1/390, Note by P. E. Hamilton, A.D.C., 3 December 1946.

<sup>56</sup> PRAAD, RG 3/1/390, Letter from A. Bediako to Sir Gerald Creasy, 11 December 1948. See also Letter from Methodist Senior School at Alonsu, 12 July 1949.

approved and undertaken along a prescribed route. According to the Watson Commission that was set up to investigate the causes of the riots, the commissioner of the police agreed that a small deputation of the protesting veterans would be allowed to submit the petition at the secretariat in Victoriaborg. In addition, the route of the procession was agreed upon, a route that did not approach Christiansborg or its neighbourhood.<sup>57</sup>

On 28 February, a large group of ex-servicemen assembled on the old Polo Ground located on the beach in Victoriaborg. A large group of supporters and spectators reinforced them. According to the Watson Commission, when the ex-servicemen started their march, they numbered up to 2,000 persons. The marchers did not follow the prescribed route, but headed instead directly towards Christiansborg. This destination was chosen because of its symbolic value. As the Watson Commission later reported, the ‘temper and purpose of the crowd were manifest from remarks such as “this is the last European governor who will occupy the castle”’.<sup>58</sup> When the protestors reached the junction between Rowe Road, Castle Road, and Christiansborg Road, which forms a triangle known normally as the ‘crossroads’, the police halted them. In order to stop the protestors, the police opened fire, killing two persons and wounding several more.

The protestors’ resolve to march to Christiansborg illustrates the symbolic importance of the castle. It was not sufficient to go to the secretariat in Victoriaborg. In their testimony to the Watson Commission following the riots, the leaders of the Ex-Servicemen’s Union stressed the importance of seeing the governor who resided in the castle:

It was due to the foregoing grievances that the decision was taken that a petition embodying these grievances should be presented to His Excellency. It was the feeling that sufficient importance was not being attached to the Ex-Servicemen’s case and that their fate had been left in the hands of junior officials of the Administration. It was this consideration, which actuated the decision to present the petition to the Governor himself.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, the leaders stressed that it was the symbolism of the office of governor that mattered, not the person of the unfortunate Sir Gerald Creasy. As they themselves noted, Creasy had only been in the Gold Coast for a month and they had ‘nothing against the

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<sup>57</sup> NA, CO 964/32, Par. 39, Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Disturbances in the Gold Coast, 1948.

<sup>58</sup> NA, CO 964/32, Par. 40, Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Disturbances in the Gold Coast, 1948.

<sup>59</sup> NA, CO 964/14, Memorandum by the Gold Coast Ex-Servicemen’s Union to the Watson Commission, 24 April 1948.

Governor [personally] and no harm was ever intended'. Nevertheless, to engineer change, they had to meet with the governor as the symbol at the castle, since this would help assure 'the illiterate members that their Governor had personally received their petition'.<sup>60</sup>

The shooting of the protestors and the beginning of looting in Accra marked the start of the Accra Riots, which would last for several days and result in 29 deaths and 237 injuries. The British colonial government needed to bring in troops from Nigeria to regain control of the major towns in the Gold Coast. The riots accelerated the political reform process that was taking place in the colony and were an important reason for the appointment of the Coussey Committee in 1949, an all-African committee tasked with making recommendations for a new constitution for the Gold Coast. The so-named 'Coussey Constitution', which ceded a greater degree of internal self-government, came into effect in 1951. In the elections to the new Legislative Assembly, the Convention Peoples' Party (CPP) led by Kwame Nkrumah was victorious. This anti-colonial, nationalist party would eventually take the Gold Coast to independence in 1957 under the new name of Ghana.

To signal Ghana's newly won independence, the government immediately implemented policies and practical changes to illustrate the new political reality. The government immediately introduced new mintage called the 'Cedi' and substituted the imprint of Queen Elisabeth's head with that of Kwame Nkrumah, the prime minister, on both the new Ghana coins and paper money. The government furthermore built a new State House but the image and symbolism of the 'Castle' as a centre of power was maintained. Christiansborg Castle was renamed as Osu Castle (also known in Ghanaian parlance as 'The Castle') and used as the headquarters of the first post-independence government. The symbolism was that the citadel of power was now in African hands.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the images used in Ghana's Coat of Arms (Fig. 10.4) to project the history, visions, and unity of the new country included a depiction of a white heraldic castle on a heraldic sea with a light blue background in the top right quarter of the shield. Although President Kwame Nkrumah, mainly for security reasons, moved his residence and some governmental functions to the Flagstaff House (a former British military barracks) in the Cantonments, 'The Castle' remained an important symbol of power.<sup>62</sup> After the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah's government in a military coup in 1966,

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<sup>60</sup> NA, CO 964/14, Memorandum by the Gold Coast Ex-Servicemen's Union to the Watson Commission, 24 April 1948.

<sup>61</sup> Russel Warren Howe, 'Ghana: The First Year', *The Phylon Quarterly* 19 (1958): 277–285; Douglas G. Anglin, 'Wither Ghana?', *International Journal* 13 (1957/1958): 41–59.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Rathbone, 'Casting "The Kingdom into Another Mold": Ghana's Troubled Transition to Independence', *The Round Table* 97 (2008): 705–718, 718 n. 52.



the Castle regained its status as the residence of successive Ghanaian heads of state – democratically elected and military alike.

**INSERT** Fig.10.4: Ghana's coat of arms, which was introduced in 1957. Osu Castle is depicted on the top right.<sup>63</sup>

### **Conclusion: Memories of the slave trade and colonialism**

The importance of the forts and castles along the coast of Ghana (formerly British Gold Coast) have not been emphasised enough in the history of the colonial period. Academic publications, travel guides, and the museum and tour guides at the castles themselves focus primarily on the pre-colonial history of the fortresses, particularly their utilisation in the trans-Atlantic trade. Yet, as this article has shown, the forts and castles became part of government infrastructure from the late 19th century to 2013. It does not argue that the memory of the trans-Atlantic slave trade should receive less attention. On the contrary, it narrates the uses of the buildings in the post-abolition (colonial and post-colonial) period as a supplement to the story of the buildings that were so central to the history of African-European interactions. As Michael Rothberg reminds us, the interaction between different collective memories does not take the form of a 'zero-sum struggle for pre-eminence'. Rather than seeing collective memory as 'competitive memory', he suggests that we consider memory as multidirectional, as being 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing'.<sup>64</sup> Thus, by comparing the pre-colonial and colonial 'fort communities', we can get a better understanding of the changing notions of race as well as of the dynamic and shifting relations between the Atlantic rim continents. This insight can provide new prospects for future global relations.

Since Ghana attained independence in 1957, Christiansborg Castle / Osu Castle has been used as the residence of both military and elected heads of state. It has seen several structural changes. In the 1950s, it saw considerable restoration work carried out by A. W. Lawrence, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Ghana and Director of the National Museum. In the 1960s, when it became the residence of the president of Ghana, it was further modernised, and a new bloc of offices was added immediately to the west of the castle. A new era in the building's history is about to commence. In 2008, the Government of Ghana

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<sup>63</sup> Coat of Arms of the Republic of Ghana. Picture by the author.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

inaugurated a new Presidential Palace, which was erected at the site of the old Flagstaff House. Initially named ‘Jubilee House’ to mark Ghana’s 50th anniversary as an independent state, the Palace has been renamed ‘Flagstaff House’. There is an official consensus for the conversion of the original part of the Castle into a museum and for the development of the surrounding areas along the beachfront into commercial hubs. For the latter purpose, Ghana’s Ministry for Tourism, Culture, and Creative Arts in 2016 approved plans for the redevelopment of parts of the Accra/Osu beachfront under the Marine Drive Tourism Investment Development Project. This project will encompass the area stretching from Osu Castle to Baiden Powell near the Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum and will include the creation of a museum in the old castle.<sup>65</sup> Expectedly, the museum aspect, when implemented, will highlight the colonial as well as the pre- and post-colonial periods of the castle to address issues such as racism, human rights, and democracy.

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Gov’t Sells Accra’s Coastline to Investors ... as Cabinet Approves Marine Drive Project’, 14 October 2016, <http://www.businessworldghana.com/government-sells-accras-coastline-investors-cabinet-approves-marine-drive-project/>; ‘Tourism Centre to Cover Land from Osu Castle to Arts Centre’, 10 January 2016, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/tourism-centre-to-cover-land-from-osu-castle-to-arts-centre.html>.

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