

Rock Residences in Anomabo, Ghana: Architectural Statements of Power and Identity

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I spent six months in coastal Ghana this summer and fall learning the local Fante language and conducting fieldwork to complete my dissertation. By thoroughly examining the stone and brick residences of the historically significant coastal town of Anomabo, I was able to delve into larger questions dealing with artistic homophony. These structures visually demarcate the struggle for identity and power on the coast during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Previously, these residences have not been documented, as scholarly focus has been on coastal forts and castles.

I interviewed the families of these residences as well as leaders and historians of Anomabo. Archival research was conducted in Accra and Cape Coast. I discussed my research with scholars at the University of Ghana in Legon, the Institute of Science and Technology in Kumasi (KNUST), and the University of Cape Coast. I also utilized the National Archives in Accra and Cape Coast.

Some of the earliest surviving structures in Anomabo are European buildings. However, even though several Fante masons were trained in stone nogging at this time, the Fante did not incorporate these European technologies and forms until after



the devastating Asante war of 1807. Its seeming permanence appealed to the Anomabos, just as today cement blocks are the building material of choice. In contrast, earthen architecture, once the Fante technology of choice for residences, is more vulnerable to war, rain and termites. The coastal stone was used as a rubble masonry, also termed nog construction - a system using a wood framework with masonry infill. These buildings may be faced with stone or brick. During this period of rebuilding, masons doing the work were trained by Christian missions who established vocational training in Ghana by the mid-19th century. The missions promoted the *sobrado* design house that exists all over the European colonized world.

About sixteen stone nog buildings survive in Anomabo, most built by wealthy Fante merchants. While these houses vary in their plans and elaboration of design elements, my study will examine how the Fante selected certain aspects to construct

an elite coastal identity that offered an image of power during an increasingly powerless century. Yet, several Fante aspects of plan and design were retained, and most importantly, new forms were created. These identity markers were largely possible on the coast because of its history as a commercial site. Individuals could achieve wealth and power through their own industry, rather than having inherited it. They wanted and were expected to express their status in a public way.

These homes are power symbols, demonstrating visually that the owner has the ability to construct a stone house of such size and prominence and of a style reflecting his worldly knowledge, connections and travel. Such architecture makes a powerful statement about Fante wealth, intellect, and mobility in the global world.

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