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Spring 2023

Published on Mar 29, 2023

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# Studying the Swahili Coast

## and Kumasi as Built

### Environments

Looking at Kumasi and cities on the Swahili coast as built environments, and what historians can learn from studying urbanism in this way.

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Published on Mar 29, 2023

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## Introduction

Cities are infinitely complex spaces containing abundant layers of information that can help us better understand certain societal structures. African urbanism in particular has been subject to a multitude of influences, and those influences are reflected in different aspects of its cities. By studying African cities as built environments consisting of infrastructure, buildings, and things, historians can see the impact foreign nations had on the urban power structures and shifting African identities.

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# The Swahili Coast: Power in Permanence

Nations outside of Africa significantly affected the architecture in many African cities. For example, in Meier's "Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere", she states that, "the imposing stone mansions and the austere silhouettes of mosques on the Swahili coast materialize the 'difference' of the Swahili city: it is a permanent place, unlike the 'pagan' impermanent earthen settlements of the mainland. This understanding of architecture constitutes a defining feature of local worldviews. Stone is significant to Swahili coast residents because it embodies the desire to claim belonging to the civilizational order of urban Islam."<sup>1</sup> Here it is clear that in the urban Swahili coast, permanence, in the form of stone building material, acts as a direct link to Islam. The Swahili coast is therefore more connected to nations outside of Africa not only in terms of religion but visually as well.

By studying the Swahili coast as a built environment, historians can gain a different understanding of their internal relations, as well as foreign relations. By knowing that the stone buildings signified a permanent connection to Islam, it is clear that religion was important, and the people who were more dedicated to religion most likely were rewarded with permanent housing. If historians were to look at building patterns of the Swahili coast, they may be able to

determine where the more powerful, high-ranking members of the cities resided. This could play a part in a larger narrative of determining where power used to lie in society and help historians better understand how the Swahili coast interacted with outside nations. By viewing the Swahili coast as a built environment, historians can gain insight into this aspect of urbanism that may not have been accessible by studying non-architectural aspects. Lastly, the identity of the Swahili coast is shaped by this, as it is clear that there was allegiance to Islam. Historians can determine that the identities of the people on the Swahili coast were not entirely concentrated in Africa, but were subject to outside influence.

## **The Shifting Dynamic of the Asante Palace**

In his article, Professor Tony Yeboah outlines the relationship between a former ruler of Kumasi, Prempeh I, and the British colonial ‘palace’ he returned to. The British “raised £3,000 to build a two-storey house on a three-acre plot of land to accommodate him.”<sup>2</sup> However, according to Professor Yeboah, the Asante people were reluctant to this new palace for two main reasons. He writes, “The new house cost an estimated £3,000, nowhere close to the value of the magnificent palace that had been demolished...The first hesitation is a refusal to allow the British the honour of contributing

financially to the housing of the Asantehene. As a result of this objection, the chiefs and people repaid the British colonial government's contribution before their 'long-lost hero' was allowed to occupy the facility. The second stated reason for the rejection was that the new house did not conform to the pattern of Asante palace architecture."<sup>3</sup> This example demonstrates how the British forced their ideology on the architecture in Kumasi, and how the people of Kumasi were against this. Moreover, once Prempeh I had passed away, "his successor, Prempeh II, with support from the Asanteman Council, initiated moves to abandon the joint-funded palace and commissioned a 'suitable accommodation for the office of the Asantehemaa and Asantehene, and which will make adequate provision for housing' the sacred and important regalia."<sup>4</sup> This shift is absolutely crucial for historians studying the built landscape of Kumasi. It is perfectly clear in the Asante palace that the British imposed their ideology in architecture while Prempeh I was in power. However, once a new leader was in charge, he immediately attempted to change the architecture. Historians can see that architecture acted as a medium for the identity of the Kumasi people, and Prempeh II attempted to re-align the architecture with the true identity of his people. By studying the Asante palace's changes between Prempeh I and Prempeh II, historians can gain valuable insight into not only how British colonialism influenced

architecture and Kumasi society, but how the Kumasi identity was later attempted to be reflected in the new palace not constructed from British ideals.

## **The Limitations of Studying the Built Environment**

Although the above example illustrates what historians can gain from studying African cities as built environments, there are several limitations that come with viewing a place solely from this perspective. The main limitation is that we are not able to gain insight into the lived experiences of the inhabitants of these cities. A city is physically comprised of infrastructure, buildings, and things, but at the same time, the people who live in the city are what make it thrive or not. A city's physical attributes would be meaningless without people interacting with it. That is why for historians, only studying cities through the architectural lens does not allow them to see if the trends in architecture actually translated to the lives of people.

Historians may be able to make educated guesses and theories about how architecture impacted the lives of a city's inhabitants.

However, without first-hand accounts, historians can never say for certain. African cities in particular must be studied from multiple viewpoints because of the amount of foreign influence they have been subject to throughout history. Only studying African cities

as built environments would not be able to touch on all aspects of these multi-faceted, complex cities. Historians can use this lens as a tool to help construct a narrative of an African city, but it should not be used alone to avoid generalizations.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, historians can learn a significant amount about African cities by studying them as built environments comprised of infrastructure, buildings, and things. On the Swahili Coast, historians can gain a better understanding of the outside influence of Islam on the architectural choices of the city, as well as how permanence was used to not only signify that connection to Islam. In Kumasi, historians can visibly see British colonialism affecting architecture, as well as why leaders either decided to go along with or push back against the colonial influence. Furthermore, although the study of African cities as built environments does not delve into the lived experiences of the cities' inhabitants, it is still a useful tool for historians. Architecture does not tell us everything, but it can still be used as a piece of the puzzle for better understanding of intricate African cities.





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