The value of using materiality to draw larger conclusions about the history of globalization.

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When analyzing the traditions and culture of a place, we have a responsibility to put our analysis in context which requires acknowledging the physical environment as much as the literature and oral history that portrays a particular time in history. Generally this leads to a plethora of closer questions such as “who” the people in a particular area were based on the architecture and decor styles they chose. For example, if we were to stumble upon an igloo in the desert it would provoke questions about the people who had settled in the area's exposure to the world around them. In looking to rationalize why a building or community looks a certain way, we are asking much deeper

questions about how that particular society codified themselves into hierarchies. Despite the written history being incredibly valuable for our understanding of international relationships, Cape Coast and Swahili city-states reveal the importance of looking at infrastructure and architecture as informers of the power struggles and intentions of those who created them.

Cape Coast is a port city in Ghana, roughly 85 miles from Accra. It was settled on land in the Efutu kingdom and the land was rented monthly by "the Dey," [1] the King's chief advisor. The Castle, a fort surrounded by water on three sides, is the undoubted pinnacle of Europe's foothold in Ghana. The building was well-documented in written reports since its inception as a middle man for trade goods, most notably enslaved peoples entering the Middle Passage. William St. Clair writes about the importance in trade markets and Britain's attempts to relay it as such to a global audience in *The Door of No Return: The History of Cape Coast and the Atlantic Slave Trade* saying, "There can be a few buildings elsewhere in the world about which more is knowable." [2] Though it passed through hands, the Castle ultimately belonged to the British who "proudly listed its many excellencies." [3] It would be easy as historians to read these reports and envision a scene of dominance, the British swooping in and creating a "beautiful castle," "strong, solid, well

positioned and expertly constructed for it's purpose." [4] We must look at the building and what it has to say, because it tells a very different story.

It is easy to begin understanding why buildings themselves can be of value to historians, especially when they are as prominent in larger narratives as Cape Coast Castle. The Castle, and the British's presence in Ghana was monumental for the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, a means of trade that made the Royal African Company very wealthy. We tend to look at the slave trade and assume complete guilt on the colonizers part. Cape Coast Castle tells a different story, "many other men, women, and children, Europeans, Africans, Americans, and Asians, were indirectly employed…in complex services that were essential to the operation of the trade." [5] The castle was dependent on resources and food from the Efutu people and "local allies derived their incomes from the work that the Castle provided and from the profits of the trading." [6] This is not the structure of a domineering European imperialist colony, this is a building that served a system that worked in tandem with the agency of the local Ghanaians in which it was "built, rebuilt, modified and maintained with the consent of." [7]

The bigger picture of the Castle implicates guilt for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade upon both parties, presenting them as collaborative; this postulation of power makes complex the idea of who was selling enslaved African bodies. This is absolutely crucial for historians because it dismisses the written narrative that comes with imperialist written documents. Rather, we see that local African governments were in partnership with and limited beneficiaries of sending enslaved people to the New World, "it was helpful to both parties in the decolonization process to remember that the long relationship between the Gold Coast and Great Britain had begun as a voluntary, essentially commercial, arrangement." [8] The castle allows us to analyze a different perspective revealing the power structure between the Efutu people and the small, defenseless British population that lived on rented land.

The Swahili coast stretches through prominent cities including Mombasa, Zanzibar and Lamu. The city-states are not homogenous with one another but share distinct cultural underpinnings. Their position on the coast has allowed them to engage in international trade for centuries. Prita Meier in *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere* describes how Swahili cities' built environment shows the impacts of globalization saying, "its architecture

continues to function as a symbol of cosmopolitan power … giving material force to an age-old Swahili desire - the desire to claim belonging to a range of elsewhere." [9] Oral culture here reveals supra-locality, but it takes actually looking at the neighborhoods and distinct buildings to realize it actually defines what is 'local' for Swahili people. Meier builds on the identity of those who find themselves settled in Swahili cities, "its built environment is a palimpsest of local and international developments. It therefore is not a useful endeavor to attempt to classify what is local or foreign in the city." [10]

Why is it that creolization can only truly be grasped by looking at buildings? The inability to differentiate between people on the basis of language, race, religion or ethnicity in these city-states pushed society over time to find a unique culture that some could find pride in, and others could strive for. This social fragmentation became materiality. "It was the material form of the port itself that structured an array of transcultural practices." [11] The legacies of an elitist society rooted in their ability to obtain and show off international ornamentation is visible on the living infrastructure of the cities today. The limestone, stuccowork, and arrangement of foreign pottery and textiles revealed who you are in society, "to master the

faraway meant one had the means to not use imported objects in any sort of recognizable way." [12] An example Meier draws from is Barghash, Sultan of Zanzibar in the late 19th century. His House of Wonders, she says, "is important to emphasize now that his collections reflected the tastes and desires of the larger coastal population. While his palaces featured the most ostentatious and flamboyant assemblages of exotic exports and object d'art, he was in fact following local precedent." [13] This was even further exacerbated in the 20th century when the world was rocked by a new consumer culture, which Swahili emanated by developing the mindset of, "one object was never enough; what was desired was the amassing of the physical materiality of things." [14] Both examples show the agency attached with procuring material culture unfamiliar to your area to elevate your social position. This phenomena can be witnessed by looking at Swahili waterfront culture all throughout history. Meier wraps this claim around in her introduction saying, "In the case of the Swahili coast, the enduring physicality of stone architecture was reanimated in moments of sociopolitical crisis" [15] as a means of telling the cultural and societal differences amongst people groups there that are not so easily spotted otherwise because of the mixing pot Swahili port-cities were.

In conclusion, the study of material culture, such as infrastructure and architecture, offers insights into the complexities of globalization transcending and compounding the limitations of written records. Cape Coast Castle and the Swahili city-states demonstrate how the built environment reveals deeper often overlooked aspects of societal collaboration and power dynamics. These physical structures challenge binary narratives of domination or cohesiveness. Ultimately, materiality not only reflects the past in a tangible way, but is a means to engage with historical complexities that may not be identified otherwise.

Why not start the discussion?

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