CHAPTER 2

The Entangled Spaces of Oddena, Oguaa and Osu: A Survey of Three Early Modern African Atlantic Towns, ca. 1650–1850

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Introduction

This essay discusses the transformation of urban space in three African coastal settlements on the Gold Coast – Elmina, Cape Coast and Osu – during the era of the transatlantic slave trade. The starting point of the essay is the idea that these locations can be understood as ‘entangled’ or ‘transnational’ spaces where expressions of early modern forms of globalisation intermingled with the local cultures of particular societies. From this perspective, the early modern Atlantic world is the macro-space, consisting of networks and flows of people, commodities and ideas that crisscrossed the Atlantic, connecting myriad port localities and their hinterlands with each other. On the West African coast, these localities constitute microcosms where African and European artefacts and customs co-existed and created what could be identified as an early form of political and cultural hybridisation.1

My aim is to chart and analyse the emergence of a ‘creolised’ space in three port towns, namely Oddena/Elmina, Oguaa/Cape Coast and Osu/Christiansborg. A ‘creolised’ space is manifested, as will be noted in the essay, by changes in the physical space, i.e., the appropriation of imported architectural elements, and in the societal space, i.e., the emergence of a distinct group of individuals resulting from the liaison of (mostly) European men and African women – the Eurafricans.2

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2 The ‘spatial reading’ of societal, cultural, and physical changes in a particular place is inspired by Karl Schlögel’s method of integrating the ‘spatial turn’ in historical research. See Karl Schlögel, Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik (München:
The ‘creolised’ space of the three African Atlantic ports of exchange was a result of the entangled history of the European-cum-African urban settlement. A remarkable feature of the African Atlantic ports was their position on the intersection between the Atlantic world and the African continent; their urban space included both the European fort and the African town. Their inhabitants consisted of various European and African ethnic groups and nationalities as well as local African European, Caribbean and American creole populations, the latter increasing in size from the eighteenth century onwards. African Atlantic ports such as Elmina, Cape Coast and Christiansborg were in every sense early modern portals of globalisation. They were the points at which Atlantic goods, ideas and culture were introduced into the African continent and they were the hubs of the export of African goods, slaves and culture into the Atlantic world and beyond. However, all of the European forts were to a larger or lesser extent what Daniel Hopkins defines as ‘circumscribed little frontier societies’ whose survival depended on interactions with the local African communities. The number of Europeans living in the forts and lodges was relatively small and there were never more than a few hundred of them on the coast at one time. In addition, the vast majority of them were employees of the various trading companies, few of whom had any interest in making a home in Africa. As Christopher DeCorse and others have underlined, their number was too small to deeply affect and change local cultural systems at large.

The urban spaces of Elmina/Oddena, Cape Coast/Oguaa, and Christiansborg/Osu underwent noticeable changes during the era of the transatlantic slave trade and the origins of these changes date back to the mid-seventeenth century. At that time, the Gold Coast witnessed profound political and societal changes,