

# **AFRICAN ARCHITECTURE AND IDENTITY: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY ASANTE PALACE OF KUMASE, GHANA**

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Architecture and ritual interconnect to define cultural identity. In the traditional procession ritual of the Asantehene, the Asante king, into the palace, the Golden Stool, Kente cloth, and Adinkra symbols are a part of the space and place narrative. These narratives encompass symbolic cultural habitation and the geographical landscape. This dissertation examines as a case study the nineteenth century Asante palace in the traditional city of Kumase, Ghana, Africa, to reveal the cultural and material connections to the identity of the Asante. In the nineteenth century, missionaries and European officials collected ethnographic surveys of the Asante palace before it was destroyed by the British during the colonial period. The existing ethnographic survey archives of Thomas Bowdich, a European official, explain the Asante Architecture and the palace from a European hegemonic perspective. Bowdich states that the construction of the ornamental architecture of "Coomassie" reminded him forcibly of Sir James Hall's essay, the *Edinburgh Philosophical Transactions*, that Asante Architecture was the tracing of the Gothic order to an architectural imitation of wickerwork. The records proclaim the architectural ornament on the Asante buildings was adopted from interior countries and did not originate with the Asante.<sup>1</sup> The findings in the survey do not address the phenomenological experience, ritual practice, holistic architectonic structure, and sociocultural expression of the Asante Palace according to the nation of the Asante.

This research aims to materialize and define the connection between the nineteenth century Asante palace of Kumase and the socio-cultural identity of the Asante to ameliorate the damaging effects of colonization on traditional structures. This research works between architecture and anthropology to reveal the ontological association of the Asante cultural elements, the Golden Stool, Kente cloth, and Adinkra symbols and their ritual significance to the Asante palace. From an anthropological point of view, collective memory, ritual praxis, and political and social organization explain the embodied meaning of Asante culture identity. The palace's architecture defines traditional construction methods, sustainable practices, structural phenomenological experience, and spatial narratives to interpret the social context. This research includes archival work of ethnographic records of the Asante palace, Asante culture, and the context of the city of Kumase. A close study of the Akan language of Twi reveals each cultural element's spiritual and social meaning that is an integral part of the Asante life. Analytical drawings of symbolic details and reconstructive drawings of the Asante palace are used to link material culture, phenomena, and the socio-cultural identity of the Asante based on the African point of view.

Expected results include the demonstration of the social and cultural expression of the Asante palace and the original embodied meaning based on the etymology of traditional structural references. Furthermore, this research will contribute to the history of African Architecture and vernacular palatial structures.

**Keywords:** Phenomenological, ritual, architectonic, identity, sociocultural, Asante.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since antiquity, the making of objects and symbols in many cultures in various regions has defined the purpose of existence. Making was the fundamental idea of communicating the intangible elements of the mind into tangible objects of meaning. The Asante used gold, the plentiful earth mineral of the region, to create artifacts of the culture's wealth, power, and spirituality. The most significant objects of the Asante are the Golden Stool, Kente Cloth, and Adinkra symbols. They relay a message to the people to create unity in the nation. These essential ritual elements were a part of the Asante king's procession into the Asante Palace (Figure 1). Historically, palace structures all over the world were edifices of power and authority. The monumental presence of the building or complex in the landscape was a symbolic representation of political hierarchy, religion,



Figure 1 (left): The Golden Stool and the Asantehene Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II wearing a kente cloth robe. The Golden Stool, which takes precedence over the Asantehene, is lying on its side in its own chair of state with ceremonial bells of protection, the upper surface facing the spectators. Source: Ward, 1958.

Figure 2 (right): Palace of Asantehene in Kumase Ghana facing the center courtyard of the Halls of Justice. Source: Prussin, 1980.

and sociocultural identity. However, the Asante palace was destroyed during the Anglo-Asante war 1824-1901. Nevertheless, the archives of the palace and Asante's historical reference reveal the cultural significance of the structure to the identity of the Asante (Figure 2).

According to Akan oral history, the genesis of the Asante kingdom was of divine origin established by the royal ancestress of Okyoko, Ankyewa Nyame, daughter of the supreme sky god, Nyame. The ancestress descended from the sky to the ground, and out of holes in the earth emerged the Asante people; thus, the association with clay, which means *Asan*, that was recognized by all Akan states.<sup>2</sup>

Asante's historiography grounds the critical cultural criteria of being, belonging, and identity. The narrative of the Asante nation-state constituted the connection between the tangible and intangible to establish space and religious belief. The societies' traditional oral history rectifies their official and pragmatic past, constructing a historical synthesis layered with a series of phenomena interwoven with the cosmos, economic, political power, and nature.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the nineteenth century Asante palace was the symbolic structural thread of memory intertwined with material culture. Symbolic objects of Adinkra symbols, the Golden Stool, and the Kente cloth, based on oral history and meaning, disclose the purpose of the collective culture contextual system of the Asante nation displayed in the palace.

## 1. HERMENUTIC METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for analyzing the archives of the palace as a case study draws from the theory of hermeneutics through interpreting the palace's cultural history and symbolic significance. The hermeneutic approach to observing the palace aims to understand the importance of the structure from the past and its memory in the present. This research discloses the significance of the Asante Palace in the past, the relevance of its memory for the present, and its implications for future research and scholarship. The vanishing point of cultural explication in the Asante society gives a range of vision that includes everything that can be seen as significant to the Asante identity. The Asante palace's ontological importance is based on the structure's function as a sacred dwelling for the authority of the Asante king and as a ritual space for the Asante. Specifically, the interpretation of the ontological meaning and essence of Adinkra

symbols, the Golden Stool, and the Kente cloth based on oral history reveals the purpose of the collective cultural identity of the Asante displayed in the palace. The methodological, ethical, and moral criticism of colonial perspectives of African history and architecture of the Asante were based on the insights and human vision available in the built environment at the time.<sup>4</sup> For this research, the methodology of interpreting the temporal space, material culture, and context is from an African point of view. This vanishing point in the Asante society gives a range of vision that includes everything that can be seen as significant to the Asante identity. The interpretation of the ontological meaning and essence of Adinkra symbols, the Golden Stool, and the Kente cloth based on oral history will disclose the purpose of the collective cultural contextual system of the nation of the Asante displayed in the palace. The intention is to understand the relevance of the shared system of ideas, values, and ethics within the Asante society that influences the palace representing a symbolic structure of authority.

## 2. MAKING AND MEANING

Language and meaning are interconnected to understand authentic cultural identity. The term for the West African historian is *doma* or *doma dieli*. The *doma*, the “knowers” or “makers of knowledge,” were traditionalists and kept secrets of cosmic genesis and the sciences of life. The traditional *doma* is an archivist of past events transmitted over generations, and it is customarily understood that the *doma* is gifted with a prodigious memory.<sup>5</sup> John Ki-Zerbo explains that the traditionalist *domas* were proceeded against by the colonial power, which sought to uproot local traditions to implant its ideas in large towns called “*tubabu-dugus*” or “town of whites”—meaning colonizers. The historic hegemonic transition explains the misinterpretation of the meaning of the African historian being derived from the French term *griot* instead of the African term *doma*.<sup>6</sup> In 2008 John Adjaye built upon the African historiography works of Ki-Zerbo by identifying, the *doma*, oral historian, based on the local context of Ghana. He reveals that the keeper of memories of the Asante is the *okyeame* in the Akan Twi language. The *okyeame* is a metalinguistic and court historian to the king.<sup>7</sup>

*Ichnographical Sketch of COOMASSIE, with the principal Streets and the Situations of remarkable Houses.*

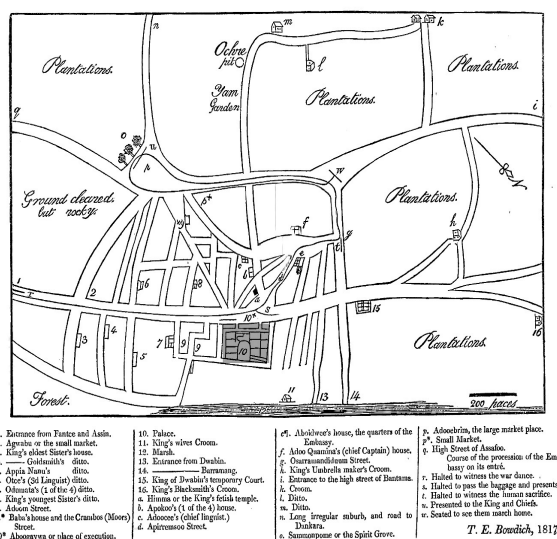


Figure 3: Drawing of Kumase city map with Asantehehe's Palace complex (10. indicated in gray) and the King's fetish temple (a. indicated in black) showing the close alignment between the political and religious structures. Source: Bodwich, 1819, Buah 1996.

Based on oral history, the establishment of the imperial city of Kumase, which means "under the *kumnini* tree," was ascertained through a process conducted by the priest Okomfo Anokye (Figure 3). He planted three trees at different locations. Two of the trees died, and the surviving tree was in Kumase.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Okomfo Anokye in 1695, during the *Odwira* festival, which means purification, caused the Golden Stool "*Sika Dwa Kofi*," which means Golden Stool born on Friday, to descend from the sky before the Asantehene, king, Osei Tutu before the Akan nation (Figure 4). The people received the supernatural display by the priest. The act enshrined the soul of the kingdom in the religious, political, and economic power of the Asantehene Osei Tutu, also regarded as *Nyame Kese*, the great god.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 4: Ethnographic drawing of the First day of the Yam Custom by colonial surveyor Thomas Bodwich. The illustration depicts the annual *Odwira* festival, also known as the Yam festival in Kumase. It was an enforced attendance for the provincial chiefs. The point of these festivals in their rituals, drama, and pageant was to reenact, reinterpret and transmit Asante history, renew communion between the dead and the living and emphasize the unity of the Asante nation. Everyone in attendance of the festivals was theoretically united in their allegiance to the occupant of the Golden Stool, the center of the festival (under the large red umbrella with an elephant finial). Source: Bodwich, 1819, Arhin, 1967.

## 2.1. GOLDEN STOOL

The union of the Asante nation began in the seventeenth century in the city of Kumase under the leadership of Prempeh Osei Tutu. The aura of the magical powers of Okomfo Anokye, a priest, aided Osei Tutu in sealing the union of the Asante nation with the "Golden Stool," *Sika Dwa Kofi*. The Asante's kingship is a constituted political institution of the Asante nation in two parts. The Golden Stool, the sacred element of the Asante and the Asantehene Oaths, makes the king 'the hub of the Asante political system. The Asante king's position is of divine symbolic significance linked to the Golden Stool, which represents the seat of power to the Asante nation. The ceremonial oaths and structural institutions reinforce the social implications, values, and norms to invoke the continued fortune of the kingdom. The two themes are related: while it is the Golden Stool that prescribes ritual, it is through oaths that ultimate validation facilitates the authority of the Asante king.<sup>10</sup> In the ritual procession of the Asantehene to the palace, the Golden Stool is never allowed to touch the ground and is carried on the shoulders of the ceremonial official (Figure 5). The stool is considered so sacred that no one is allowed to sit on it. Each new Asante king is lowered and raised over the Golden Stool without touching it. The enstoolment ceremony interconnects with the Asante palace as the structural symbol of authority that house both the Golden Stool and the Asantehene.

## 2.2. KENTE CLOTH

In the ritual procession of the Asantehene into the palace, special Kente cloth was woven for the ceremony. The cultural object of the Kente cloth, as explained by

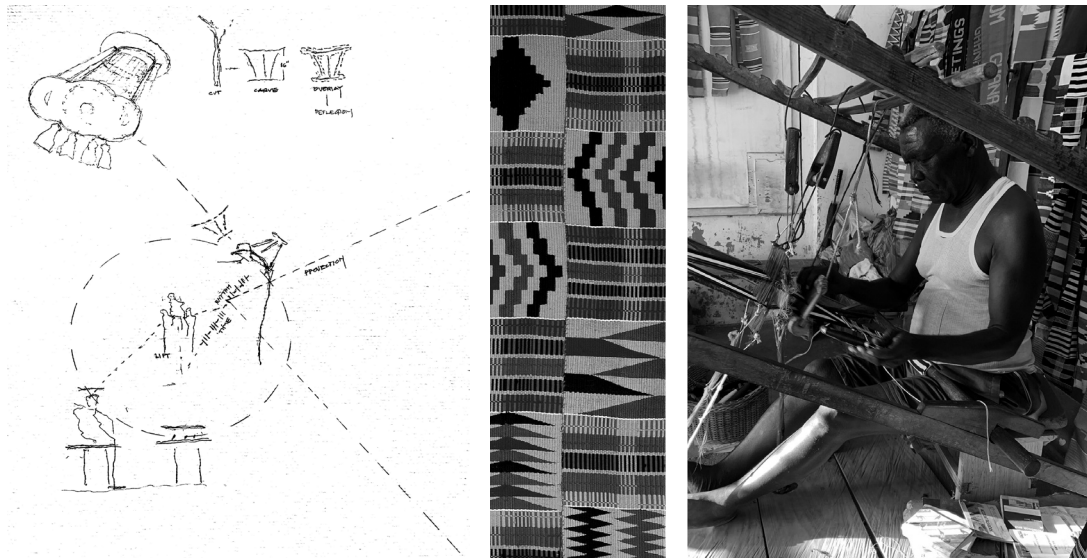


Figure 5 (left): Analytic drawing of the Asantehene and Golden Stool ritual procession. Source: Drawing by the author.  
 Figure 6 (right): Kente cloth Right, Weaver in loom making Kente cloth in Accra, Ghana. Source: Author 2019.

Abraham Ekow Asmah, a scholar of African art history, states that the Kente fabric is a historical royal cloth. Kente (*kenten* which means basket) cloth is an "African traditional textile that is a visual representation of history, philosophy, ethics, social conduct, religious beliefs, political thought, and aesthetic principles."<sup>11</sup> The narratives of Kente cloth and Kente weaving vary in measure and degree. Kente weaving is an indigenous technique dating back to the 16th century in Ghana. The Asante pioneered Kente weaving, having a traditional story told over generations about two brothers, Nana Kuragu and Nana Ameyaw, who learned the noble art by observing a spider spin its web on a farm they visited. Each geometric shape has a symbolic meaning, collectively revealing a hidden message.<sup>12</sup> Weavers were considered to have supernatural powers and significance because their work was considered a gift from God, *Nyame*, the supreme God of the Asante. Kente weaving is also strictly done by men. The parts of the weaver's loom also have symbolic meaning.

Kente weaving designs evolve on the *Nsadua Kofi*, a traditional loom according to the weaver's philosophy, creativity, and intention for weaving the cloth (Figure 6).<sup>13</sup> There are eight parts of the frame; four represent elements of nature; earth, air, fire, and water, and the other four parts symbolize the cardinal directions; north, south, east, and west. The weaver was also counted as a part of the divine essence of the loom. Before the weaver began to work, a ritual of invocation and touching every part of the loom was performed.<sup>14</sup> The Asante Kente cloth design comprises dots, lines, shapes, textures, and colors carefully crafted to form geometric shapes and intricate patterns that exhibit balance, rhythm, variety, proportion, and repetition. Ghana's indigenous Asante Kente fabric is woven in long, narrow strips on traditional looms using brightly colored silk or cotton yarns that are then stitched lengthways to form different sizes of cloth for men and women.<sup>15</sup>

Historically in Ghana, the technical arts of Kente cloth weavers and artisans attached religious practices to their profession. Rituals were performed to invoke the blessing of God and the deities associated with the particular craft. Workshops and tools had to be consecrated by the pouring of libations and offerings of the blood of an animal before work started.<sup>16</sup> The

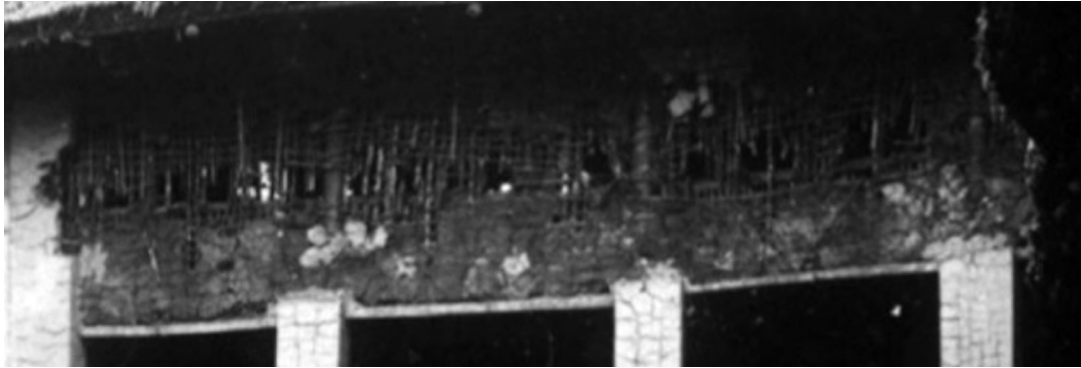


Figure 7: Woven wattle and daub system in the entablature of the Asante palace Source: Prussin 1980.

practical construction of the Kente cloth, philosophical creation of the weaver, and sacred spiritual ceremony were a unit of symbolism that represented a deeper meaning of truths and values of the life of the Asante. The pattern designs, both symmetrical and asymmetrical, colors and motifs were instruments of secret communication that strengthened the Asante culture.<sup>17</sup> African architecture and arts had a sacred quality that exceeded the technical construction and physical beauty. There was an intangible body, soul, and cosmological communication with buildings and cultural objects.

In Thomas Bodwich's ethnographic survey of Kumase, the Asante palace and houses were constructed of local materials such as bamboo, laterite clay, stones, cottonwood, cane, grasses, and palm leaves.<sup>18</sup> The natural materials used to weave Kente fabric and the palace were symbolic representations of the Earth, which was considered sacred. Enclosed spaces with walls constructed of textiles or woven bamboo and earth were the expanse of existence. The supernatural belief and tangible craft merged to validate life and belonging.

### 2.3. ADINKRA SYMBOLS

The cultural element of Adinkra is an Akan Twi word that means farewell or good-bye. It is a group of symbols created by the Asante as a writing system. Each sign can be associated with an aphorism that offers insight into the Akan way of life. The Adinkra and their accompanying proverb were and still is a form of a communication system that preserves and transmits the cultural and spiritual values of the Asante. These symbols were also used on the facade of buildings designed by the Asante.<sup>19</sup> Adinkra symbols on the Asante palace's facade were carved into the structure to display a message of meaning (Figure 8). The reliefs of Adinkra symbol Dwenini Aben "ram and horn," which means "humility and strength," are displayed on the plinth of the building and base of the column, and the passive cooling brise soleil system has the symbol of Tabon, a paddle which means "courage and hard work."<sup>20</sup> The building speaks through the Adinkra symbols inscribed on the facade of the Asante palace. The weaving technique was also displayed in the palace's wall construction of wattle and daub and the thatch roof system. Wattle, and daub is a typical wall assembly used to create buildings by the Asante using local materials. It consists of a wood framework that builders craft as a woven lattice of horizontal and vertical branches or wood posts; upon this system, wet laterite balls are pressed onto the lattice surface at a thickness ranging from six to nine inches.<sup>21</sup> Traditionally, African masons or builders were not esteemed for their technical expertise but respected for the magical powers

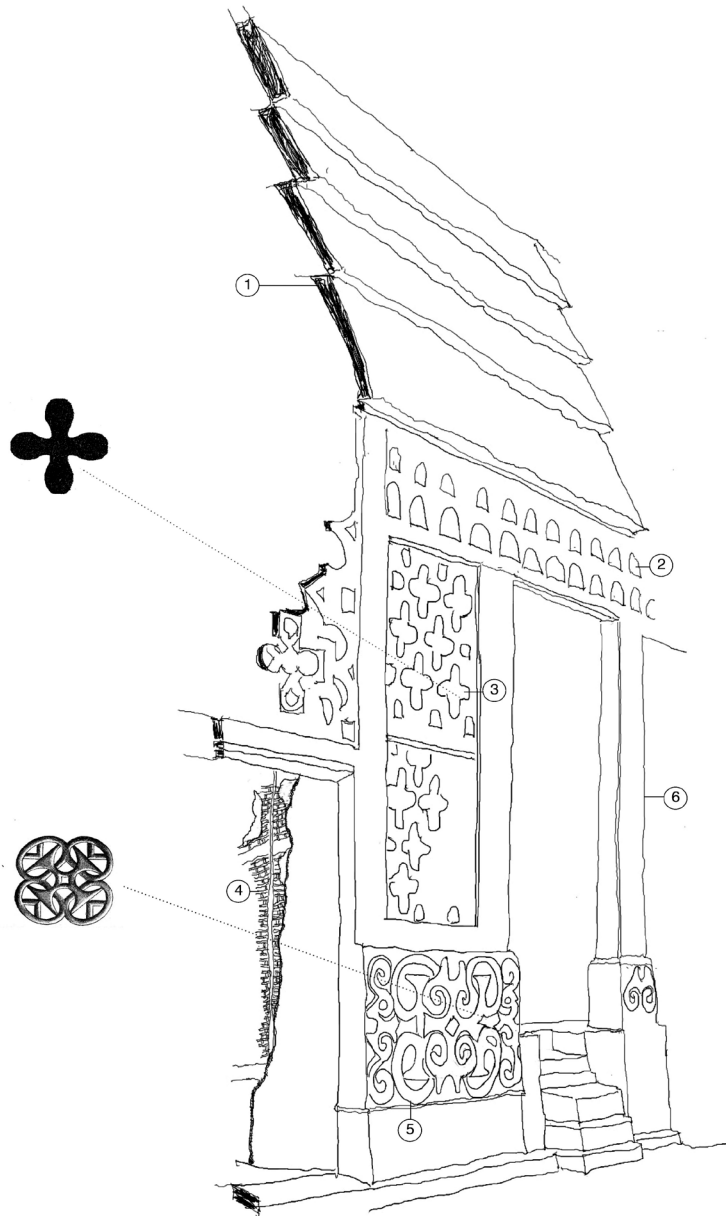


Figure 8: Right, Detail drawing analysis of the Asante palace façade 1. Thatch roof 2. Ornament brise soleil system 3. Brise soleil system with Tabon Adinkra symbol 4. Wattle and daub wall construction 5. Plinth with Dewenini Aben "ram and horn" Adinkra symbol 6. Column with base "ram and horn" Adinkra symbol. Source: Drawing by author. Tabon symbol Source: Glover, 1992 Dewenini Aben. Source: Ramseyer and Steiner, 1901.



Figure 9: Exterior of Asante Palace, National Archives, UK, CO 1069-34-132-2-001, Source: Unknown 1874.

granted to them by the deities of the Earth and their ancestors. The skill of erecting an earthen wall was interpreted as a gift from supernatural forces. Several propitiatory rites must be addressed to the builder to ensure the success of the building process. The structure built by the mason becomes a sacred place.<sup>22</sup> The earthen wall's technical woven lattice system and thatch roof transform into a symbolic enclosure of divine existence (Figure 9).

### 3. RITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

The implicit meaning of a space is revealed through the interaction and movement of society with buildings. Rituals and architecture are interconnected to shaping the experience with structures. The intentional coded message in the aesthetics, the meanings established during ceremonies, and the relationships people enact with a building penetrate beyond traditional utility assumptions. Architecture reflects society as an element of time and memory.<sup>23</sup> The cosmical symbolism in temples and palaces is a reduplication of structures made not with hands. The divine or heavenly association is interlinked with sacred ceremony and the building.<sup>24</sup> In traditional Asante architecture, architectonic components of a built environment and the natural landscape merge into a conscious spatial frame through rituals to establish space. The establishment of place through the medium of ancestral attachment validates human existence. The Asante palace was a spiritual place for the Asante people.<sup>25</sup> The destruction of the Asante palace royal compound in 1896 was a displacement of ceremonial grounds and the ritual space of the Asante. The British transformed the area into a colonial commercial district, and the materials from the palace were used to build a fort. After World War I, as a form of repatriation, the British erected a new palace, the Manhyia Palace, as the new seat of the Asante nation, which became a museum in 1995.<sup>26</sup> Hess reveals that the Manhyia Palace is forcibly serving as a cultural ritual significant structure for the Asante. During the museum's opening, a replication of the Asantehene (King) ceremonial procession was conducted from the king's residence to the palace grounds, representing the authority of the Asante nation.

From a phenomenological point of view, the ritual culture explains the lived spatial experiences between the body, the building, and the phenomena associated with the Asante palace. In understanding phenomena, the symbolic



cultural representation in the palatial architecture of the Asante reveals the philosophical meaning of "being" and existence in the Asante society. From an ontological perspective, ritual and spiritual connections of the Asante material culture are linked to the palace. The concept of "being" references that the structure of experience was connected to the cultural objects of meaning: the Kente cloth, Golden Stool, and Adinkra symbols that were inscribed into the construction of the palace. The temporality of the cultural elements is the implication of the phenomena.<sup>27</sup> The building, cultural objects, and ceremony create an intangible spatial experience. The Asante palace's ontological significance is based on the structure functioning as a sacred dwelling to the authority of the Asante king and ritual space for the Asante. Additionally, the presence of the building was emblematic of belonging, safety, and stability in the society.<sup>28</sup> The aspects of symbolization in the nineteenth century Asante palace are critical cultural criteria to the concept of being, belonging, and identity.

## CONCLUSION

This research contributes to the African Architecture body of knowledge. Furthermore, the palace study elucidates the Asante hierarchy in the material culture and its symbolic significance. The current literature on the 19th century Asante palace of Kumase consists mainly of colonial historiography. Research after Ghana's independence in 1957 has yielded sparse cultural and architectural knowledge of the contextual dialogue of the country. The preliminary findings of the palace based on archival analysis of images reveals a holistic architectonic structure of memory. Asante's traditional building methods and cultural elements of making and meaning are displayed in the façade of the palace. The meaning of the motifs reveals philosophies, religious beliefs, and social norms based on the Akan Twi language of the Asante. This research will define the connection between the nineteenth century Asante palace of Kumase sociocultural identity of the Asante from an African historiographic perspective to ameliorate the damaging effects of colonization on traditional structures and contribute to the gap of knowledge on the palace.

Furthermore, this research contributes to understanding indigenous technologies and materials conducive to climatic conditions, topography, and geographical location that can be implemented in modern built environments. The information on the nineteenth century Asante palace can be used as a reference for architectural study relating to language and meaning. The knowledge attained from this study will be used for future digital reconstruction of the nineteenth century Asante Palace. The research will also serve as a didactic pedagogy model for African Architecture History, transitioning from colonial to African historiography. Furthermore, the research knowledge and the 3D digital model will provide a virtual spatial experience of the palace and give insight into the Asante vernacular architecture and culture.

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