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The Politics of Displays and Narratives at Elmina Castle

KODZO GAVUA
Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, University of Ghana
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5153-1472

JACOB NII MARLEY
Museum and Heritage Studies, University of Ghana
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7579-4841

Abstract

In this article we discuss Ghana's Elmina Castle, also known as Saint George's Castle, as a site of contested heritage, exploring how official narratives associated with its museum displays and guided tours exclude alternative voices, affecting visitor learning and experiences. There have been several studies of the castle's character, history, and function, as well as stakeholder contestations surrounding the castle's current role as a tourist site. However, the dynamics of the narratives presented to visitors at the site, and the ways in which the narratives have influenced what visitors learn and experience, have not yet been critically discussed. Drawing on relevant literature and field data we assembled over a four-year period (2021-2024), we examine the displays and narratives that officials of the castle present to visitors, how these narratives were shaped, and how visitors relate to them. The discussion shows how an interplay of official agendas and power dynamics has influenced the content of the castle's museum exhibition, the itinerary of guided tours of the castle, and the narratives that tour guides present to diverse groups of visitors. We contend that there is a relative lack of inclusivity in storytelling at the castle, which is motivated by political and economic goals that the government of Ghana seeks to achieve through its cultural institutions, including the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB) and the Ghana Tourism Authority (GTA). This does not only marginalise alternative perspectives and local histories about the castle. It also limits the depth of knowledge visitors can acquire about the site and the settlement in which it is situated.

Keywords

Heritage, Ghana, Elmina Castle, representation, slavery, critical museology, visitor experience

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Background

Elmina Castle is a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) in Elmina, a coastal settlement that is about 150 kilometres east of Accra, Ghana. It is the largest and oldest fortified Atlantic trading post in Africa south of the Sahara. Construction of the castle was completed in 1482 by agents of King Henry II of Lisbon, who used it initially as a modest trading post and a place for the advancement of Catholicism along the Gulf of Guinea. The trading post was subsequently developed into an edifice that housed supplies, merchants, administrators, military staff, explorers, and Catholic missionaries of mainly Portuguese background, and it became a major centre for Portuguese trade in gold and enslaved Africans over a period of 155 years. Agents of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) captured the castle from the Portuguese in 1637, refurbished and conveniently expanded it for purposes that were similar to those of the Portuguese. The castle remained under Dutch control, serving as the headquarters of the WIC and other Dutch agencies for about 235 years before its ownership was transferred to British agents following Anglo-Dutch agreements on the exchange of properties in 1872. For 85 years, the castle was controlled by the British and was managed by the Monuments and Relics Commission of the Gold Coast until 1957, when Ghana emerged as a nation state. In the postcolonial era, it functioned variously as a high school campus, a facility for training police recruits, and a local administrative office. It is administered today by the Monuments Division of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB).

The castle holds significance in Ghana's history and in global narratives on the transatlantic trade as a place of contact and interactions between Africans and various groups of Europeans since the fifteenth century. In 1972, the government of Ghana recognised it alongside the relics of other forts and castles that Europeans constructed along the Gulf Coast of Ghana as national monuments under Executive Instrument (E.I.) 42 of 1972. It was listed in 1979 together with 33 forts and castles by UNESCO as a World Heritage site based on the universal value of its architecture, aesthetics, and history as a hub of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. In 1996 the GMMB collaborated with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Midwestern Universities Consortium for International Activities (MUCIA) to rehabilitate the castle and create a museum there to educate the public about the castle's history, Atlantic trade and Elmina's cultural history. Following the castle's rehabilitation, the government of Ghana positioned it as a tourist attraction – a place of memory, learning, recreation and reflection, especially for Ghanaians and Diaspora Africans.

Literature on the castle and Elmina abounds but does not comprehensively cover the subject of public education, particularly the content and effects of certain narratives produced through and by the castle's exhibitions and guided tours. Many works have focused on the castle's architectural history, its role in transatlantic trade, and the castle's function as a tourist site. Yet the castle's designation as a national monument and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and its subsequent repurposing as a tourist attraction have implications for public education that must be examined critically.

Amoako-Hene et al. provide some insights into visitor satisfaction and education at public museums managed by the GMMB. The work includes Elmina Castle Museum but fails comprehensively to inform its readers about the museum's educational services and impact. Celestina Avorgbedor's MA dissertation, *A Study of Elmina Castle Museum Collections and Narratives* focused on the provenance of collections displayed in the museum's gallery and the participation of people from Elmina in the museum's exhibition development. This work has pointed to a lack of local community involvement in the museum's exhibition development and narrative construction but does not discuss how the museum's displays and narratives affect visitor learning and experiences. As argued by Bruner, narratives do more than share information. They also influence the thoughts, understanding, and perceptions of audiences and, by inference, their behaviours. The content and presentation of narratives are shaped partly by the sociocultural and physical contexts of museums which, in combination with circumstances in which visitors find themselves, influence the way in which visitors interact with displays and learn from them. So far, there is little information on the extent to which the Elmina Castle Museum's displays and the narratives presented at the museum and during guided tours of the castle influence what visitors learn and experience.

The castle's position as a tourist attraction has engendered variable definitions of its value by the relevant agencies of the Ghana government and other stakeholders in relation to peculiar political, economic, social and cultural interests and agendas. These definitions reflect various power dynamics and other non-explicit factors, including diverse and sometimes conflicting intellectual views, sentiments, and tendencies that undergird the narratives the museum displays and tour guides present. Constructions of the narratives have been complicated by the castle's dual designation as a national heritage and an international site of memory for the trade in enslaved Africans. The government of Ghana celebrates the castle's significance as a monument that commemorates the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans and a place for Diaspora Africans to reconnect to their African roots. It also recognizes the castle's potential for generating foreign exchange through international tourism. Yet the purposes for which visitors flock to the castle are multivalent. For example, many Ghanaians visit the castle to learn about its history and for recreational purposes, and international visitors of the African Diaspora go there in search of ancestral connection, spiritual renewal, and rejuvenation. The overlapping and sometimes conflicting interests have shaped what officials of the castle display and the stories they tell about the site. The museum exhibition and the guided tours are, therefore, media through which versions of the castle's past that are both selective and politically charged are communicated.

GMMB staff, together with volunteers they recruit as tour guides, have constructed narratives about the castle's past based on information they have gleaned from scholarly works and UNESCO documents that associate the castle with the transatlantic trade in enslaved people. These narratives reflect the Ghanaian government's desire to position the castle as a focal point for Diaspora Africans to reconnect to their African roots and thereby generate revenue. However, aspects of the narratives

have drawn concerns among some stakeholders. They have been observed, for example, to be biased towards European perspectives on Elmina's history and Diasporan African interests, while marginalising the Elmina people's perspectives. The rest of our discussion will explore primarily what is displayed and narrated at the castle, including what is emphasised, marginalised, and silenced, and how the exhibition and guided tours shape what visitors learn and experience. We will also discuss how interactions between visitors and tour guides at the castle affect visitor experiences and learning.

A summary of how we assembled data

The data which has informed our discussion is mainly qualitative. Apart from literary information that provided us with much background to Elmina and Elmina Castle, we gathered primary data at the castle and in the Elmina settlement. This formed part of our activities in the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons supranational research project. With the consent of the management and staff of the castle and other research participants, including visitors to the castle, we gathered primary data by touring, examining, and documenting displays and their associated labels in the castle's museum. We also observed visitor interactions with the displays. In addition, we participated in 21 formal tours of the castle, joining various domestic, international, and mixed visitor groups. We also paid critical attention to how guides conducted tours, which narratives they presented, and how the various audiences responded to different presentations. In addition, we engaged seven tour guides (four men and three women) in semi-structured interviews. These we documented audiovisually to learn about the sources of narratives and the factors that influenced their presentations. A total of 54 tourists, including 39 Ghanaians and 15 non-Ghanaian visitors, completed questionnaires about their personal and sociocultural contexts. This included their motivations for visiting, self-reported levels of knowledge before and after touring the castle, factors influencing their on-site experiences, their recommendations for enhancing visitor experiences and satisfaction, and the outcomes of their visits. In partnership with officials of the castle, we placed books for visitors' remarks at the castle's reception, receiving a total of 777 comments between 2023 and 2024. Among them were 233 Ghanaians, 395 non-Ghanaians, and 149 people who did not state their nationalities. Beyond the castle, we explored the Elmina settlement and engaged a cross-section of the inhabitants, comprising 95 people among whom were fishermen and fishmongers, priests, students, teachers, and retired civil servants. They were consulted about their memories of the castle and their relationships with it, as well as what they considered to be their cultural heritage. We also participated, on different occasions, in annual festivals of the Elmina people that comprised performances of customary rites, music, dance, and other activities. The information we gleaned from our studies of the museum exhibition, tours of the castle, and the politicking that undergirded the museum displays and tour narratives will be presented and discussed in the sections that follow. Given that processes of heritage construction are not fixed but dynamic, we understand the data that we collected as integral

to understanding how Elmina castle as a heritage site is being shaped and produced in the present. The data is also selective as the research participants presented to us what they remembered or chose to speak about.

The Museum Exhibition



Figure 1: Part of the Elmina Castle Museum exhibition from the entrance

The exhibition at Elmina Castle Museum, titled 'Images of Elmina Across the Centuries' (Figure 1), is housed in a one-storey structure at the central courtyard of the castle, originally built by Portuguese emissaries. The structure was used as a chapel since the fifteenth century until after 1637, when Dutch operatives took over the castle from the Portuguese and converted it into an Auction Hall for the sale of enslaved people. The GMMB in 1996 reconfigured the hall into a museum. The museum exhibition encompasses a series of display panels and cases that have been arranged in an interspersed rectangular layout and grouped under seven main topics: 'The Environment', 'People and Culture', 'Economic Activities', 'Trade with Europeans', 'Impact of European Contacts', 'Architectural History', and 'The Asante at Elmina'. The displays comprise printed images of people, places, and activities, as well as ethnographic and archaeological materials, most of which are supported with textual information. Drawings and sketches of Elmina and the castle, and texts on Elmina, local people, and building constructions in the pre-Atlantic contact era are displayed under 'The Environment'. Archaeological and ethnographic collections on

display comprise objects that were acquired through loans, donations, and purchases. Overall, the exhibition has information that is expected to provide visitors with a background to Elmina, the Atlantic trade, and the Elmina Castle.

Tours of the castle usually begin at the museum, where visitors are asked by tour guides to explore the exhibition by themselves before they are conducted to other spaces within the castle. According to the tour guides we interviewed, the self-guided tour is intended to enable visitors to gain some visual insights into the castle and Elmina's history. This is done to prepare visitors for detailed information they receive at other spaces in the castle. However, the museum's display panels lack a coherent narrative order, and the placement of some exhibits is disjointed. For example, a subsection of the exhibition entitled 'Slave Trade' has been listed under 'Architectural History', and two shackles and a branding iron exhibited as archaeological finds are oddly mounted under 'Trade Goods' (see Figure 2: The 'Trade Goods' subsection.). Also, many of the exhibit labels offer minimal contextual information.

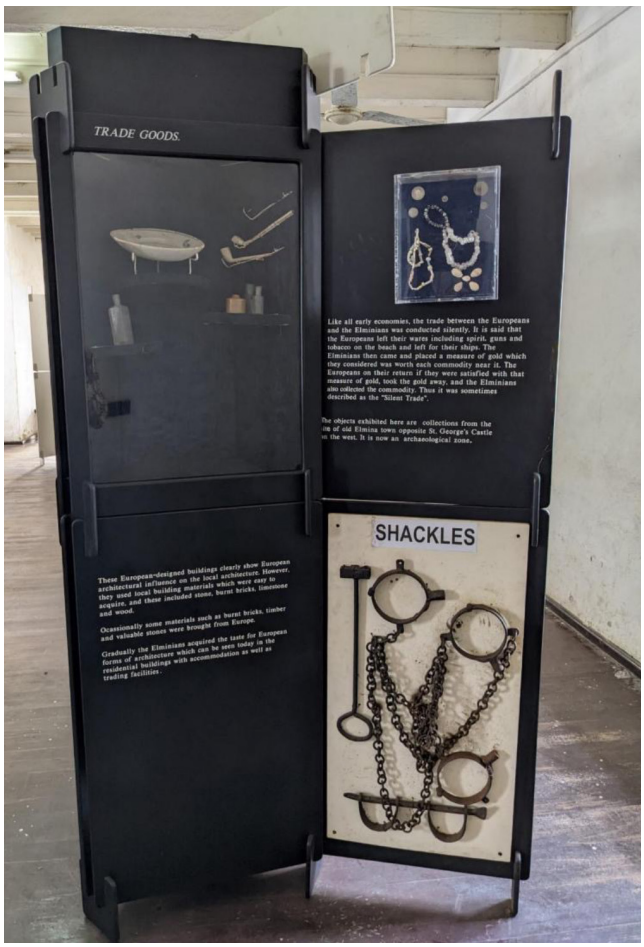


Figure 2: The 'Trade Goods' subsection.

The displays classified as the 'Impact of European Contact', for instance, emphasise European interventions in local culture with reference to new crops, architecture, and formal education. Yet they do not inform viewers about the influence that the African-European trade at Elmina had on the growth of European nations or its influence on the Elmina settlement. For example, the transformation of the old Elmina settlement adjacent to the castle into an elite residential enclave of storey buildings constructed of stone, which British soldiers bombarded in 1873, is missing in the stories presented by the exhibition. Many of the Elmina residents we worked with expressed reverence for the old Elmina settlement as a landmark of their forebears' greatness and detested its destruction by the British. Instead, the displays highlight the emergence of a mixed-race community in Elmina, citing as evidence European names such as Duncan and Viala that some of the local people bear. They also showcase a photograph of 'Flower girls during a wedding ceremony' and an unlabelled photograph of an Afro-European family. During our studies in Elmina, we interacted with descendants of figures such as Jan Neizer and Carel Hendrik Bartels, who have been memorialised in street- and placenames for their roles as mediators and brokers between European and African traders. These figures are celebrated for their economic, political, and other contributions to the growth of Elmina, but the exhibition has omitted information on such communally memorialised 'heroes' and their place in Elmina's history.

None of the sections refer to suppression by colonial administrators, resistance by Elmina's people, or the successful economic and social relationships that people in the area forged with some European merchants. Several of the 95 inhabitants of Elmina interviewed by us would have liked the exhibition to inform people, for example, about their forebears' 1873 resistance to the transfer of the Elmina Castle by the Dutch West India Company to British agents, resulting in the exile of their leader, Nana Kobina Gyan I.[1] In Elmina, a statue of Nana Kobina Gyan I in 'Nana Kobina Gyan Square' commemorates the leader. To many of the interviewees, the absence of information about the survival of the Elmina people and the reconstruction of their settlement after British bombardment has the effect of silencing the resilience of their forebears.

The omissions limit the scope of the historical information that the exhibition presents and reinforce interpretations of Elmina's past. The explanations privilege narratives of European impact on the contributions, experiences, resistance, and resilience of local people. They also reflect a politics of representation that marginalises the voices of those who are perceptively being represented.[2] The display of shackles and branding iron as trade items, for example, expresses a political construct that legitimises these exhibits as European trade goods. The display also downplays the repressive circumstances of their use. Overall, the exhibition prioritises European agency over local agency and leaves many gaps in the history of the castle and Elmina.

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1 R. Baesjou, *An Asante Embassy on the Gold Coast* (Leiden: Afrika-Studiecentrum, 1979), 49–50.
2 L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006), 80.

Information we gathered from the 54 visitors with whom we engaged at the castle and from the visitor remark books was instructive regarding the structure and content of the museum exhibition. Most of the visitors intimated that they would have preferred a guided tour of the exhibition, while some expressed an interest in digital and tactile options that would make the storytelling more vivid. The following is a sample of comments the visitors made in relation to the museum exhibition:

> '*It was too packed*'; '*Not enough information*'; '*Some images were faded and there was no label*'; '*Some pictures did not have text describing the context*'; '*The way to present could be more attractive*'; and '*The museum was too packed, with less space for navigation*'.

These comments suggest that visitors were not comfortable with the modes of exhibit presentation. The use of diverse visitor learning options, including documentary videos, digital animations and three-dimensional models of exhibits, in addition to the current format of the museum presentation may, therefore, enhance visitor-learning experiences at the museum.

Tours of Elmina Castle

Guided tours of Elmina Castle offer oral narratives that supplement what the displays and texts of the museum exhibition present. The tours are organised each day of the week from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm by different guides, including GMMB staff and volunteers. Each tour begins with an orientation at the castle's main courtyard near the museum. The size of a tour group varies between 15 and 30 members. Following their orientation and self-guided tour of the museum exhibition, visitors are conducted by the guide through various officially designated spaces, such as 'Cells'; 'Female Dungeons'; 'Male Dungeons'; 'Governor's Bedroom'; 'Officers' Mess'; 'Governor's Battery'; 'Governor's Kitchen'; 'Dutch Church'; and a 'Door of No Return' through which enslaved Africans were supposedly led by their owners to boats that ferried them into the diaspora. Also included in the tours were spaces identified as the cells in which King Prempeh I and Queen Yaa Asantewaa of Asante were detained in 1896 and 1901 respectively, before they were exiled by British colonial administrators to the Seychelles Islands.

The tour guides present narratives that are generally standardised by institutional protocols. The narratives derive from various literary works on the castle's history, including self-published books and videos that some of the castle's management produced privately. Newly recruited tour guides are given orientation by the castle's management and are encouraged to study the available literature on the castle before they are allowed to operate. They are also sent on tours of the castle for a few weeks with experienced tour guides for practical training. The orientation and practical training ensure that the new guides conform to the tour format and official narratives about the castle. Nevertheless, guides often tweak their presentations with personalised interpretations and dramatise them to suit the categories of visitors they guide. Minor

variations exist, therefore, in the narratives the guides presented to different visitors, such as Diaspora African visitors, Ghanaians, groups of non-Ghanaian Africans, and groups predominated by Europeans. However, some visitors were apprehensive of the singular use of English by tour guides to communicate and of the relatively large numbers of visitors on a tour. A few examples of visitors' remarks that illustrate such apprehensions are as follows:

1. 'You must take some one person that speak French or speak slowly.' (19.04.2023, Ivorian)
2. 'We need a tour guide for francophone thank you.' (16.09.2023, Ivorian)
3. 'The tour guide should always separate the whites from the Ghanaians during the tour because of language barrier. Some Ghanaians do not understand the English language, but this language is spoken to the people during the tour.' (29.10.2023, Ghanaian)
4. '… We were too many for the tour guide, next time provide enough tour guides to take large groups.' (22.09.2023, Ghanaian)

Depending on the preferences of visitors, therefore, the castle management may consider using a popular Ghanaian language and French, in addition to English, during tour presentations.

Content analyses we undertook of a sample of narratives tour guides present revealed that the presentations are sequential. First, they situate the castle within the broader context of European-built fortifications in West Africa, emphasising that



Figure 3: A tour guide presents narratives to visitors at the 'inner courtyard' of Elmina Castle

while Ghana has many forts, only a few, including Elmina Castle, are designated as 'slave castles'. This generalises the historical significance of the castle and establishes a framework for understanding its specific role in the Atlantic trade. After this, presentations focus on the 'Inner Courtyard', 'Dungeons', 'Door of No Return' and their connections to the inhumane conditions endured by enslaved Africans: overcrowding, the absence of sanitary facilities, and brutal punishment of recalcitrant slaves. Presentations are punctuated by emotionally charged language and dramatic symbolisation of spaces. The space referred to as 'Door of No Return', for example, which appears to be too small for people to access, is portrayed as the final passage into oblivion by those enslaved after they were starved and lean enough to go through the passage. It is questionable, however, whether merchants would starve their 'human commodities' before presenting them for sale. Some historical accounts suggest that enslaved Africans were fed with corn and other foodstuffs, except in cases where their enslavers failed to acquire corn in local markets.[3]

A narrative that is popularly presented by tour guides explicitly addresses the gendered dimensions of the trade in enslaved Africans. This narrative discusses the specific hardships and abuses female captives endured, such as sexual exploitation and physical punishment. In presenting this narrative, tour guides point to a balcony overlooking the 'Inner Courtyard', from where 'the governor', who has no specified identity, is reported to have watched and selected enslaved girls and women. These women were selected from several others who were let out of their dungeon and led into the courtyard. The guides claim that each of the females the governor selected was bathed by European male soldiers with water drawn from a cistern at the courtyard and subsequently escorted to 'the governor's quarters' through a wooden staircase and a trapdoor that connect the courtyard to the upper floor. According to them, an enslaved female who resisted the governor's sexual demands was punished by chaining her to a heavy ball of metal, which the castle management has displayed in the courtyard. While some of the guides identified the metal as a cannonball, others claim the ball was produced purposely to punish enslaved females who resisted the governor's sexual demands. The narrative on sexual exploitation also claims that enslaved females who became pregnant through sexual abuses were relocated to the Elmina settlement. There, the European staff of the castle cared for them and gave their mixed-race children, identified as 'mulattos', preferential treatment in the form of formal European education and subsequent recruitment to serve at the castle.

Although there are records of governors who managed Elmina Castle over the years, the narratives are silent on the identities of 'the governor' and soldiers involved in sexual exploitation and other abuses of enslaved women and girls. This information gap, and other controversial narratives, for example, about the 'Door of No Return', lead to unsettled debates among visitors and scholars about the interpretation of the site.[4] The tendency for some of the Europeans who served at Elmina

3 S.E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674043770

4 Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*, 118; Osei-Tutu, *Slave Castles,* 148-53.

Castle to engage in sexual assaults, especially when bored or drunk, cannot be ruled out. However, the vivid descriptions of assaults are not supported by any references, and this renders the narrative more speculative than factual. It is known that the residence of governors during the early Dutch period in Elmina was located at what is currently identified as 'officers' mess'.[5] A 1620 floor map of Elmina Castle[6] associates the governor's quarters in the early seventeenth century Portuguese period with two rooms which tour guides currently describe as 'governor's kitchen' and 'officers' kitchen' respectively. Thus, although some colonial governors might have resided in the part of the castle that is currently labelled as 'governor's quarters', the location of their respective residences varied temporally.

Lawrence's architectural analysis of the castle's chronology and of the evolution of the castle's structural modifications suggests that the balcony overlooking the inner courtyard from where 'the governor' supposedly stood to select his female victims was added to that part of the Portuguese building by the Dutch after 1774 and was not part of the original Portuguese design of the castle.[7] This raises questions about the origin of the wooden staircase and trapdoor that connected the inner courtyard to the upper floor. According to a 1637 plan of the castle, the inner courtyard was open and surrounded by vaulted storerooms, with residential spaces located above, and food and essential supplies stored in a few rooms on the ground floor.[8] The Dutch altered the Portuguese structure by introducing new rooms within the inner courtyard area. Lawrence[9] suggests that the British refurbished a cramped Dutch staircase that previously connected one of the new rooms in the inner courtyard to the upper floor. They probably constructed the trapdoor to regulate access and to prevent accidents. The staircase, trapdoor, and courtyard in question probably served multiple purposes under different European regimes. Their framing in a monolithic narrative that centres on abuses of enslaved females illustrates how the castle's institutional narrative has privileged a selected aspect of the castle's history over its temporal complexities, transforming the meaning of the multi-functional facility into a singular interpretation to attain a political and economic end.

Some of the stories the tour guides tell are laden with historical inaccuracies. Many of the guides claim, for example, that only male Europeans served at the castle during the Atlantic trade, although historical documents indicate otherwise. Sixty Portuguese men and three women are known to have been retained at the castle immediately after its original construction.[10] Apart from the three, four European women also served at the castle in 1529 as cooks, nurses, and sex workers, among other things, in accordance with a set of rules for the trading post's inhabitants.[11] It is likely that other European and Afro-European women were in the castle to fulfil

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5 Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*, 134–35.
6 J. Vogt, *Portuguese Rule on the Gold Coast, 1469–1682* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 174.
7 Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*, 176.
8 Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*, 105–106; Vogt, *Portuguese Rule on the Gold Coast,* 27.
9 Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*, 142.
10 M. Newitt (ed.) *The Portuguese in West Africa, 1415–1670: A Documentary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 95; Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*, 105.
11 P.E.H. Hair, *The Founding of the Castelo de São Jorge da Mina: An Analysis of the Sources* (Madison: University of Wisconsin System, 1994), 36, 91.

both domestic and sexual roles. The tour guides also claim that enslaved Africans transferred from the castle through the 'Door of No Return' descended a wooden ladder into canoes packed on a relatively shallow part of the sea, which touched the wall of the castle. They were then transported to ships that docked a few meters away. Alternative information indicates, however, that the opening in the north bastion of the castle, now referred to as the 'Door of No Return', served as an entrance through which goods from the beach were sent into the castle with the assistance of a crane and windlass.[12] This suggests the sea was distant from the walls of the castle, contrary to the tour guides' claim. Available archival maps produced by Johannes Vingboons between 1660 and 1667 and J.C. Bergeman in 1799 show no direct contact between the 'Door of No Return' and the sea, but rather a beach between the edifice and the sea. Lawrence continues as follows:

> When the North bastion was rebuilt in 1640-4, the northern half was replaced by a low battery, upon which guns were mounted to command the beach. Some Portuguese masonry may be preserved just beyond the battery. Including a small gateway, known to have existed in 1637, from which a wooden stair now leads down to the beach.[13]

This description by Lawrence was in reference to the relatively larger and gated opening (see Figure 4: A rear view of Elmina Castle showing the 'Door of No Return'



Figure 4: A rear view of Elmina Castle showing the 'Door of No Return' (on the left) and the gated doorway (on the right), which used to have wooden stairs.

12 Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*, 118, 177.
13 Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*, 178-179.

(on the left) and the gated doorway (on the right), which used to have wooden stairs.) within the 'Riverside Yard', which had wooden stairs leading to the beach. The discrepancies between historical documentation and tour guides' presentations demonstrate further how certain narratives have been selectively framed and exaggerated at the castle to evoke emotional responses in visitors.

The emphasis on suffering in the tour guides' narratives suggests a form of trauma-centred remembrance that limits the spectrum of collective memory to a monolithic narrative. The narratives may be popular and deepen emotional engagements with the castle, but they leave little room for critical enquiry and alternative interpretations that could provide visitors with a broader understanding of the site's structural transformation and variable contexts of use and reuse. Comments, such as '*What is the source of the history presented?*', and '*Tour guides should stop adding to the narratives*', which some visitors wrote in the book for visitor remarks that we placed at the castle, indicate the concerns certain visitors had regarding the authenticity of some of the narratives they heard.

The sequencing by officials of spaces to which visitors are conducted and stopped on tours influence the narratives tour guides present and the character of their presentation. The tour route may be seen as a form of spatial narration, where movement through the monument constitutes a physical enactment of a narrative structure. This aligns with Field's three-act narrative paradigm,[14] which consists of a beginning, a middle, and an end, and provides an organising framework for dramatic narration. Starting at the main courtyard of the castle, the tour guides typically begin tours with an orientation in which a story of Elmina before Europeans arrived there in the fifteenth century, the construction of the castle, and the trade between Africans and Europeans in precious metals and other commodities is narrated to establish a state of equilibrium in Elmina's pre-Atlantic history before the disruption that ensued subsequently. The middle phase of the tour usually focuses on dungeons and cells where enslaved Africans were traumatised, in contrast to the governor's quarters and a chapel above the dungeons to illustrate conflict and tension. The presentation in this phase depicts the building of the castle and other interventions the Portuguese made as disruptions of life in Elmina which the Dutch after 1637 intensified with assistance from some Africans, such as the Asante. The third phase of the narrative structure dwells, first, on the resilience of enslaved Africans, some of whom attempted to resist or escape and were subjected to harsh punishment, including incarceration in cells without food and water. The presentation portrays the British as saviours who abolished slavery on the Gold Coast to restore order, overlooking the 85-year history of British colonial subjugation of the local people. In the final phase of the presentation, the tour guides signal closure of the disruptive era, and the emergence of a new equilibrium through reflective commentaries that are meant to encourage visitors to engage with the moral lessons of Elmina Castle's history. The guides make statements such as '*What we do here is not to remind us of the pain, but to educate so that*

14 S. Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, 3rd ed. (New York, Delta, 2005), 90.

present and future generations learn from it'. Commemorative plaques mounted on walls within the castle's main courtyard by some indigenous Ghanaian leaders (chiefs) and by some members of the African Diaspora also serve as a ritual closure that reinforces messages of remembrance and transformation. The trauma-centred narrative appears to be favoured by the castle management as a means of emphasising the immorality of the transatlantic slave trade and evoking deep emotions among visitors of African origin.

Political underpinnings of Elmina Castle's Displays and Narratives

The curatorial choices made in both the museum exhibition and the guided tours reflect broad political imperatives. The emphasis of the exhibition and tour presentations on European impact on the people and culture of Elmina, and on the trauma that enslaved Africans experienced during the transatlantic trade, have silenced aspects of Elmina's multifaceted history, cultural heritage, and postcolonial transformations. In addition, the castle's architectural history and aesthetics, which may enrich the value of the site to a cross-section of audiences, have been silenced. The dominant narrative in both the exhibition and tours foregrounds European perpetrators of violence and rupture while minimising the role of African intermediaries in the transatlantic trade, local resistance and resilience, and the complex interplay between external and endogenous influences. These curatorial choices, which affect the emotions of some of the castle's patrons, including Diaspora Africans, can be seen as a convenient means of generating income for the GMMB and tour guides. They do not only mystify the castle but also set it apart as a sacred site. However, they simplify the historical significance of the castle and Elmina, and shape visitors' knowledge and perceptions of the site within narrow parameters. In addition, these curatorial choices raise questions about whom the museum exhibition and guided tours are intended for, and whose heritages are constructed and presented at the castle, while underrepresenting and silencing the memories and voices of the local people and other stakeholders.

The results of our studies in Elmina show that, despite the contents of the museum exhibition and the narratives that tour guides present at the castle, the local people, who refer to their settlement as 'Edina', keep memories of select aspects of their past which they value and share intergenerationally to foster harmony and relative peace in their settlement. Among these memories are those pertaining to events associated with the people's settlement histories, resistance of their forebears to colonial domination and suppression, and memories of Africans and Europeans who endeared themselves to the people through economic and other forms of support they provided the Elmina community in colonial and postcolonial times. Such memories form the basis for festivals, family gatherings, and other ceremonies that the people celebrate. At the same time, the people conveniently disremember or silence aspects of the past they deem as having the potential to evoke memories of violence and trauma experienced by their forebears at the hands of European enslavers and colonisers. For example, many of the people are reticent about Elmina Castle and

rarely enter its inner premises, which they perceive as places that house 'evil spirits' and are the preserve of the government of Ghana and foreigners. The emphasis of the museum exhibition and the tour guides' narratives on trauma experienced by enslaved Africans in the castle is, therefore, politically disadvantageous to the interests of the local Elmina community, who would prefer to not be reminded of their traumatic past. Some of the visitors to the castle we interacted with intimated that their tour experiences were too traumatic for them to repeat their visits and that they would revisit only when opportunities are provided for them to learn about other aspects of the castle and Elmina's history. The emotional intensity of the tour guides' presentations can, therefore, limit repeat visits to the castle.

Overall, the museum exhibition and guided tours at Elmina Castle reflect a complex interplay of official political, economic and social interests as against the interests of other stakeholders. While the castle museum ostensibly aims to educate the public about the history of Elmina Castle and Elmina's cultural heritage, the interpretive strategies employed there are influenced by political choices that both shape and constrain what visitors experience and learn. The exhibition and tour narratives could be revised by the castle management in collaboration with researchers, but their perpetuation popularises and promotes the castle as a veritable manifestation of the sordid story of the enslavement and trading of Africans on the Gulf Coast. In addition, the narratives render the castle a tourist attraction. The selective presentations and interpretations of the castle's history and Elmina's cultural heritage that tour guides offer have the potential to skew visitors' understanding of the castle and Elmina's past. These dynamics necessitate a critical reappraisal of the museum's curatorial practices and a revision of its displays and narratives, with an emphasis on inclusivity, reflexivity, and the active engagement of a diverse range of local stakeholders. By embracing dissensus methods in narrative construction at the castle whereby no story is privileged over another, interpretations and presentations of the sites will recognise and reflect alternative perspectives to the Elmina people's history and cultural heritage and enrich the experiences and knowledge of visitors.

Reflections and conclusions

This article has discussed the historical narratives that are currently presented at Elmina Castle through its museum exhibition and during guided tours, the influence of official interests on the narratives' construction, and how the narratives and the modes of their delivery affect the experiences of visitors to the castle. The discussion has shown that the narratives have been constructed based on selected aspects of Elmina's past and the castle's history that exclude alternative memories and perspectives, including those of the people of Elmina, as observed also by Avorgbedor.[15] The narratives inform people within limited aspects of the environmental, social, and cultural contexts of Elmina, while dwelling on aspects of European colonial experiences

15 Avorgbedor, *A Study of Elmina Castle Museum Collections and Narratives,* 53.

in Elmina with particular emphasis on the transatlantic trade in enslaved people, and acts of repression and trauma the enslaved experienced at the castle. Although the castle was actively used by agents of successive European nations for about 475 years before Ghana emerged in 1957 as a sovereign geopolitical state, its history is presented as if there were a continuum in the use of its spaces, features, and structures. This history is presented in ways that evoke sad emotions and, occasionally, anger among visitors. Apart from positioning and promoting the castle as a focal point for the transfer of enslaved Africans to the European and American diaspora, the narratives have been configured ostensibly to target Diaspora African and other African tourists. Many African and Diaspora Africans are attracted to the castle, enabling the GMMB as an institution and its tour guides as private individuals to generate income. However, the scope of knowledge visitors acquire about the castle's history and the experiences they gain at the castle is limited. The politics of sidelining alternative voices on what a heritage site means to different publics in the pursuit of official goals and aspirations is, therefore, detrimental to the sustenance of heritage tourism.