

# CONSERVATION PRACTICE IN GHANA

## A CASE STUDY: THE FETISH HOUSE AT ASAWASI (ASHANTI)

### INTRODUCTION

This case study is intended to illustrate current progress in Ghana in the fields of documentation and conservation of ancient buildings. Even though discerning critics in the past have drawn attention to the intrinsic interest and architectural merit of traditional building in Ghana, most particularly in Ashanti (e.g., by Bowditch, in his "Account of A Mission to Ashanti", 1819, and by Decima Moore and Gordon Guggisberg, in their "We Two in West Africa", 1907) it is only in recent years that any serious attempt has been made to conserve the traditional architecture of Ashanti.

Little now remains of Ashanti traditional architecture: the depredations of war in the nineteenth century (of which the sack of Kumasi by the British under Sir Garnet Wolseley in 1874, and the siege of Kumasi, during the Yaa Asantewaa war of 1900, were the most publicized occasions of war, though not necessarily the most destructive) and the phenomenal Ashanti prosperity, based on cocoa, of the first half of this century, have both taken their toll of old, traditional buildings. Sandcrete block and corrugated aluminium have replaced the traditional materials of wattle and daub, and thatch: and the christian church and the muslim mosque have superseded the fetish house of traditional Ashanti religion. Examples of traditional buildings already restored by and in the care of the Ghana Museum and Monuments Board are rare, and surviving buildings of traditional design and construction in Ashanti worth conserving, are few and remote. During the early years of its existence, the Ghana Museum and Monuments Board, under its first Director Professor A.W. Lawrence, concentrated upon the documentation and conservation of the historic castles and forts along the coast <sup>(1)</sup>. The value of these monuments of the past is now fully recognized, and their future assured; but it was not until the early 1960s that any serious attempt was made to conserve the traditional architecture of Ashanti.

<sup>(1)</sup> A.W. LAWRENCE, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1963.

<sup>(2)</sup> Michael SWITHENBANK, *Ashanti Fetish Houses*, Ghana U.P., 1969.

As early as 1956, a conscious attempt had been made to revive the forms and decorative motives of traditional Ashanti architecture, in the design of the Museum of the Ashanti Cultural Centre in Kumasi, conceived by its architects, James Cubitt & Partners, on the lines of a traditional Ashanti house, but it was not until the detailed programme of research into Ashanti traditional architecture, carried out in the early 60s under the aegis of the Ashanti Research Project, by the late Michael Swithenbank, of the Faculty of Architecture, University of Science & Technology, Kumasi <sup>(2)</sup>, had established both the extent, and the architectural quality of the surviving examples, that it was considered feasible to draw up a programme of conservation. During the last six years, the Ghana Museum and Monuments Board has carried out an extensive programme of conservation in Ashanti, during the course of which an increasing expertise in conservation techniques, as well as a growing historical knowledge, has been acquired, which will be of great importance in years to come, as the conservation programme is expanded.

The most recent major conservation work in Ashanti to have been completed, the restoration of the fetish house at Asawasi, has been selected as a case study. Mr. Adinyira, the Inspector of Monuments responsible for conservation in Ashanti, describes the policy practice of the Monuments Division of the Ghana Museum and Monuments Board; and the fetish house itself is documented, recording the work of a party of five second-year students of the Faculty of Architecture, University of Science & Technology, Kumasi, who measured and documented the building during the Long Vacation of 1970.

It is hoped that the material published here will adequately indicate the progress made in the field of conservation in Ghana in recent years, and serve as a stimulus to those responsible for conservation in other developing countries.

April 1971

A.D.C. HYLAND  
(Kumasi)

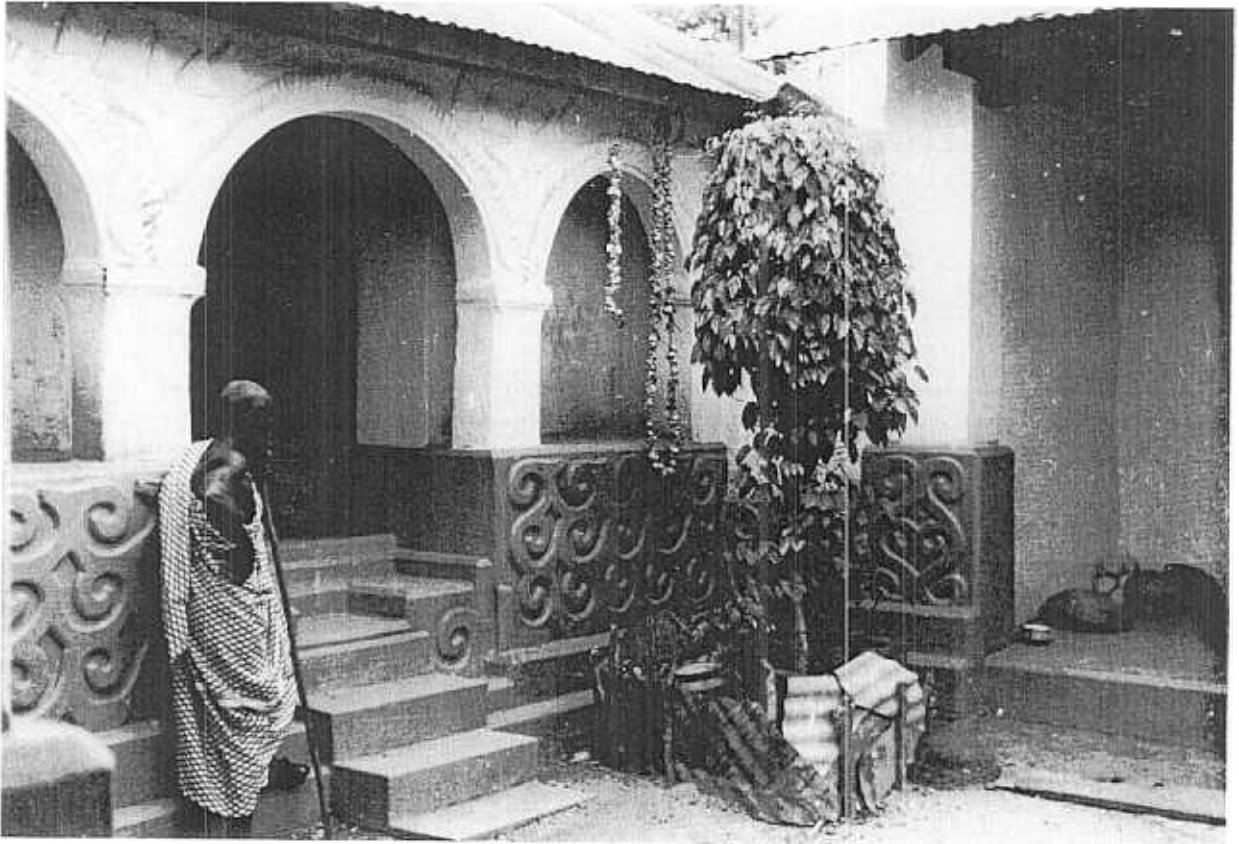


Fig. 1. — The Okyeame standing in front of the shrine room.

Fig. 2. —The village street of Asawase with the Okyeame's compound visible on the right.



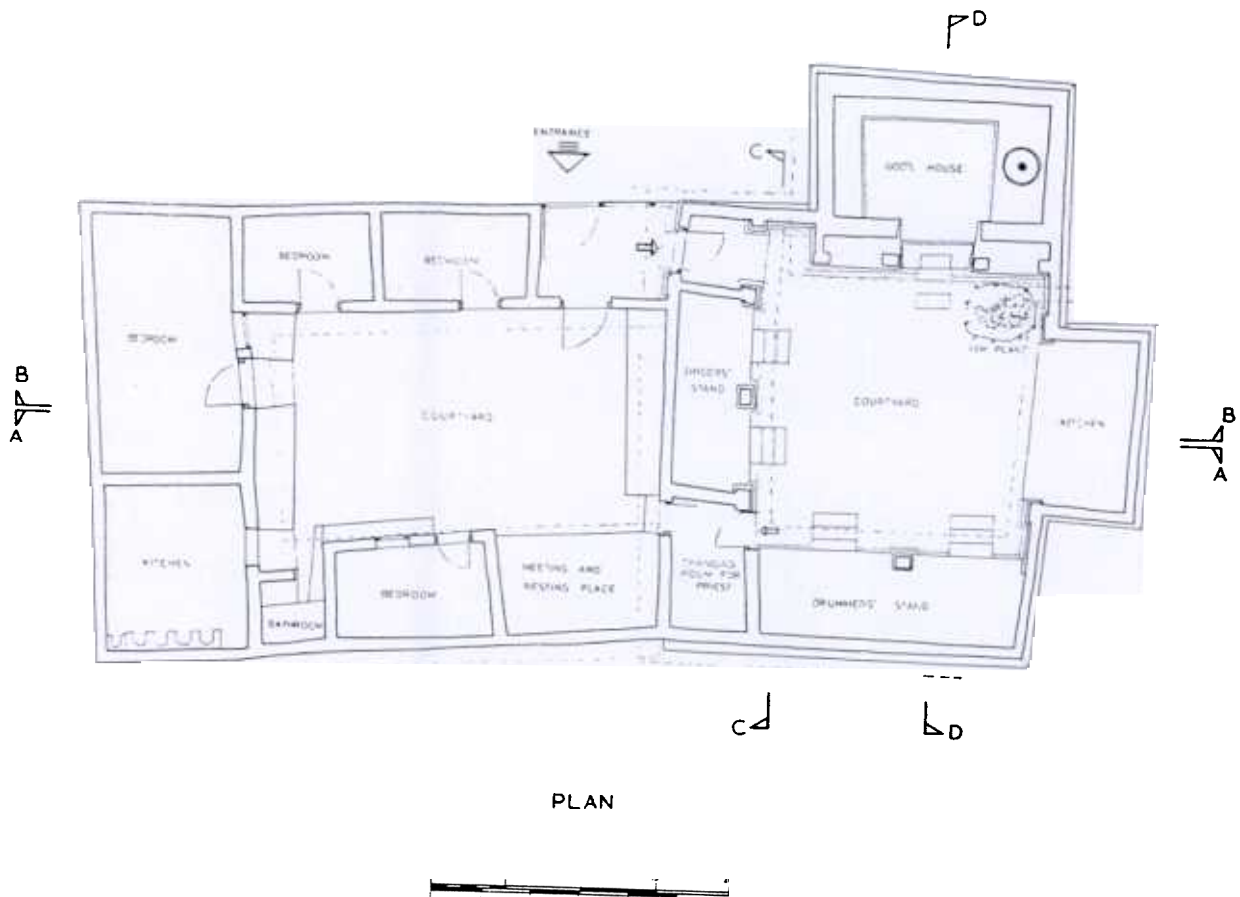


Fig. 3. — General plan of the house.

## 2. THE CONSERVATION OF VERNACULAR BUILDINGS IN ASHANTI

Buildings built to traditional plans and constructed with local materials are found in all the regions of Ghana. Though the architectural forms differ from region to region, the problems of their maintenance and repair are very similar. In this article, I am limiting myself to buildings used for housing fetish shrines, found in Ashanti (Asante) and Kwahu.

In the early history of the people of Asante written by Rattray <sup>(1)</sup>, mention is made of these traditional buildings, their structure and use, and of the designs found on the walls. These patterns are similar to those stamped on "adinkra" cloth, almost all of which symbolize proverbial sayings.

(1) R.S. Rattray, Ashanti. London, 1923

### A. The Structure of these buildings

Though many of these houses were rebuilt in "Pisé-de-terre" or swish after the Juaben and Yaa Asantewaa wars, originally they were constructed with tough bush sticks 4" - 6" in diameter stuck into the ground, closely spaced and of a height of 10' - 11'. These posts were put up corresponding to the plan of the building, marking the outlines of the various rooms as set out on the plan. These posts were linked together by horizontal members of split-bamboo, mid-ribs of raffia palm leaves or cane (dembre) at intervals of 3" - 5" woven between the posts in the form of wattle. The structure was then covered with a steeply pitched roof, thatched with sheaves of leaves. After that, clay or surface loam soil mixed with water and kneaded to a malleable consistency was used in filling the gaps or spaces left between the timber framework. This formed a mud wall of 9" - 10" in thickness.

The first part of the construction being completed and left to dry, a designer was invited to lay another coating of well prepared clay, about 3" - 4" thick, on which he produced the mural decorations of various forms.

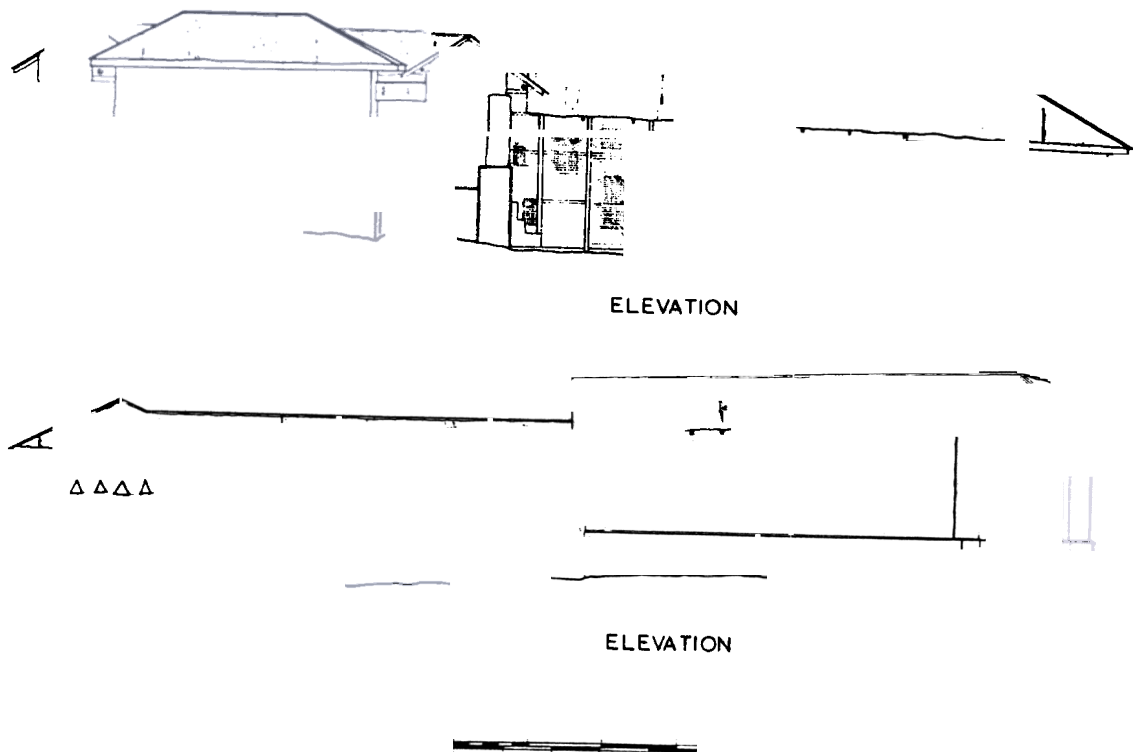
The decorations below four feet above ground level were laid in heavy relief and smeared with red clay (ntwuma) and others above 4' to the full height of the wall, were in light relief and smeared with white clay (hyirew). Both clays were available from local deposits, and were highly valued as building materials.

**B. Their present condition before restoration**

**C. Principles and Processes of Restoration**

To restore these weak walls and not to destroy the decorations, the walls had to be tested to find out whether or not the posts were rotten; so also the foundations. The weakest parts of the foundations were examined and underpinned by digging a cavity under the walls for a short distance at intervals, fixing a shuttering where the foundation had to be raised above ground level and sand cement concrete poured into the cavity. By this method the whole length and breadth of the building was provided with a mass-concrete foundation.

The next step was to sound the wall to detect the positions of rotten posts; these were also removed, leaving inside the wall, cane (dembre) binders which in most cases were strong enough. Then the whole gap was filled with kneaded clay; this had to be done in alternate spaces; attempts should not be made to open



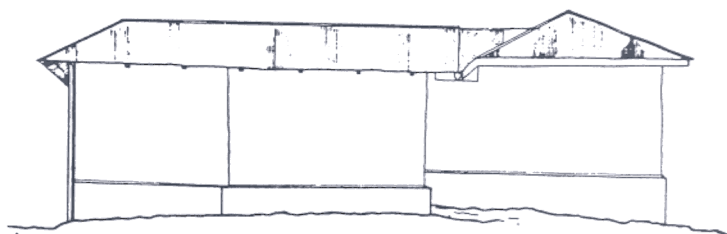
too big a gap at one place at the same time, and care should be taken to see that the previous work is thoroughly dry before opening another gap near it. By this means all rotten posts were removed and clay filled in their places. Where a big stretch of wall was found to be weak and unable to carry the weight of the roof trusses, a re-inforced concrete pillar was inserted inside the wall (2). This method was applied especially to lintels, pillars, columns and archways. When we were satisfied that the wall now rested on concrete foundations, all bulged out parts of the wall were either propped up, jacked up into a vertical position, or rebuilt, as necessary, before the mural decorations could be treated.

(2) Reinforced concrete pillars are inserted into the structure as follows: firstly, a rectangular recess of the required cross-section is cut into the rear of the wall without disturbing the face of the existing structure; secondly, the reinforcement is inserted and formwork fixed across the face of the recess; thirdly, the concrete is poured. Adequate adhesion is obtained between the concrete and the cut clay. - A.D.C.H.

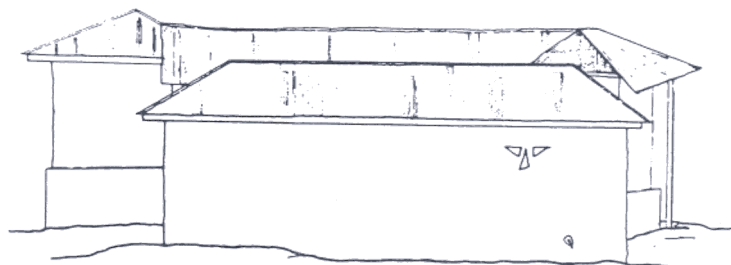
In most of the neglected buildings one finds cracks in the mural decorations and portions fallen off altogether. The lost parts were usually restored, first, by studying the existing piece of the decoration carefully and then reconstructing the lost part.

We use good clay, remove all roots and pebbles from it, knead it thoroughly, leave it under cover of banana leaves or wet cloths for three days, before applying it on the wall. It is left on to dry and then the cracks are filled before applying a coating of white clay (hyirew) above and red clay (ntwuma) below.

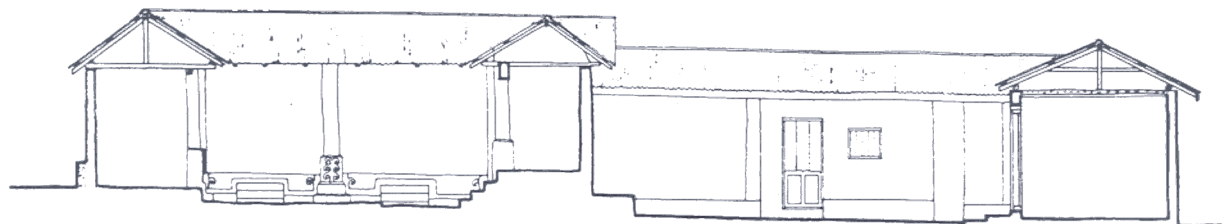
To preserve these walls and mural decorations in their original setting in clay or mud, it is important to treat the walls in a way that will retain their colour and appearance, or by the use of chemical to render the walls weather or waterproof, and yet to retain its colour and appearance. Presently we are compelled to use cement and solignum as a coating on walls and wood respectively, to render them waterproof and impervious to attack, but this is no ideal method of preservation.



EAST ELEVATION



WEST ELEVATION



SECTION A - A

We await the outcome of research into the most suitable chemical preservatives for mud buildings in the tropics. With regard to the restoration of the roofs of these buildings, it has been the policy of the Board up to the present, principally for reasons of economy, to retain the existing roof structure (i.e. at the shallower pitch) only making such renovations as are necessary to make it sound, and also to retain the corrugated iron sheeting, which does at least match with the general roofing of the village houses. We are experimenting, however, with thatch, and hope to arrive at an acceptable and reasonably maintainable solution which will more effectively convey the original appearance of these buildings.

G. L. ADINYIRA  
(Inspector of Monuments)

### 3. DESCRIPTIVE REPORT OF THE FETISH HOUSE AT ASAWASI

The village of Asawasi is situated near Ejisu which is a larger village some eleven miles from Kumasi on the Kumasi-Accra Highway. Asawasi lies about 2 1/2 miles off the highway and is accessible from Ejisu by an untarred road.

The Fetish House is situated more or less centrally in the village which consists of some 20 buildings. The Fetish House building consists of a courtyard house where the village Okyeame (linguist) lives with his family, and the Fetish area proper, where the fetish practices and functions are carried out. The building is basically rectangular in plan and divided into the two areas. The Fetish area is of much more

Fig. 5. — The shrine room before restoration.



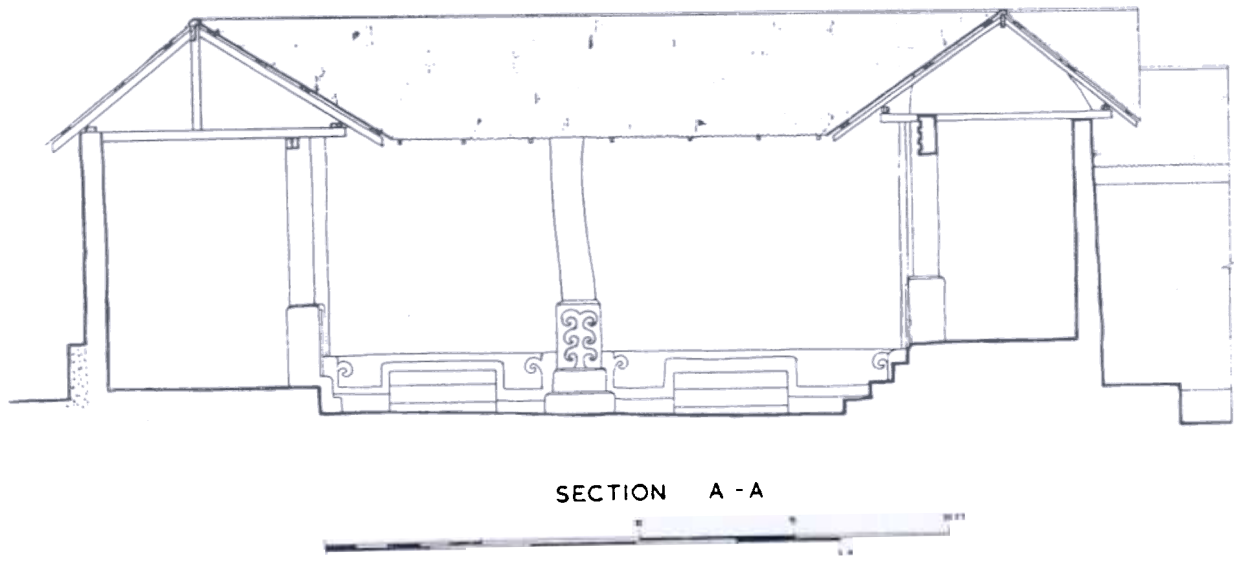


Fig. 6. — Sections through the first courtyard.

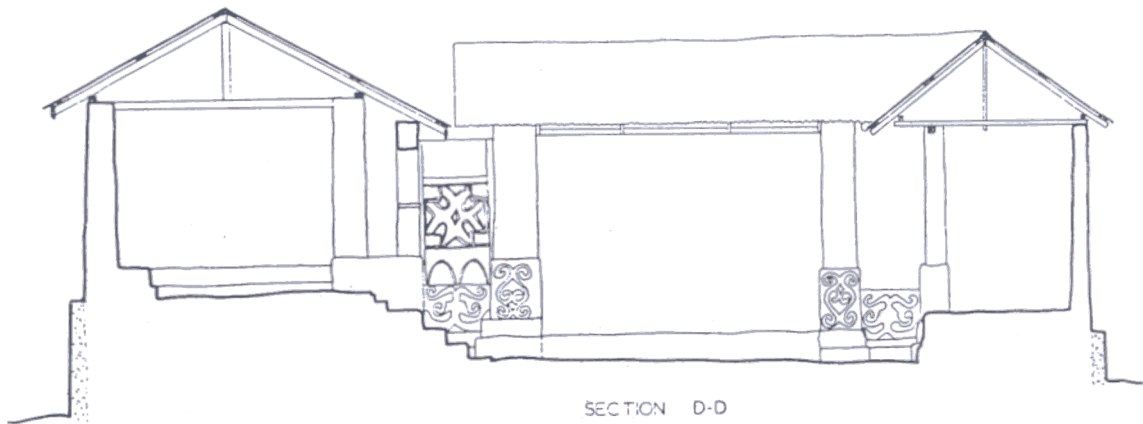
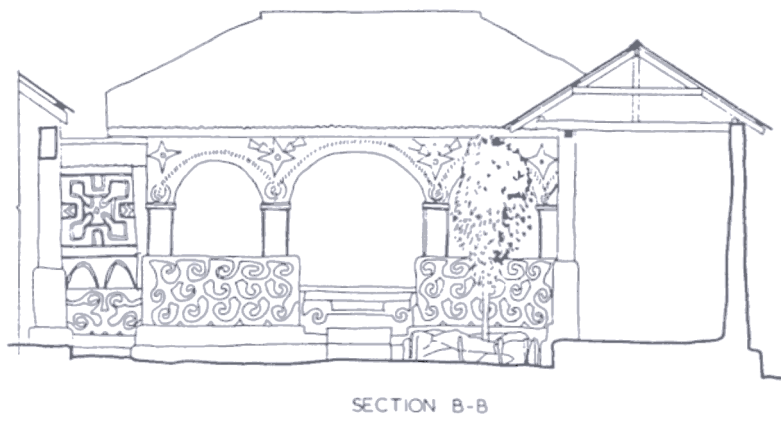




Fig. 7. — View showing main entrance to the Fetish House.

Fig. 8. — Vertebrae of sacrificial animals hanging from the caves of the shrine room.



interest architecturally and culturally and will be described in detail in later paragraphs.

The outside elevations of the entire building are very simple with all the walls plain and with hardly any openings. Apart from the main entrance, the only openings on the outside of the building are six small triangular holes in the kitchen of the Okyeame's dwelling area.

The Okyeame's courtyard home consists of four bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a sitting area all surrounding the courtyard. Only two of the bedrooms have any windows at all and they both open into the courtyard. Except for doors and windows of the various rooms, the courtyard elevations of this area are as plain as the outside of the building.

The Fetish house proper is in the form of a rectangular courtyard enclosed by four covered areas, one on each side, each with a specific function. Two of these areas have floors elevated some 2 feet above the ground level of the courtyard to form platforms, one for Singers and the other for Drummers. The third area is elevated just about a foot above the courtyard level and serves as a kitchen or cooking area. The last but most important area is the actual room or "shrine" of the god. The floor level here is about 3 feet above the courtyard level with a short but fairly ornate arrangement of steps leading up to it.

The shrine room is partially open to the courtyard, and partially concealed by a solid wall: the façade of



the shrine room is emphasised by the freestanding arcade, of three semicircular arches, which stands in front of the shrine room. Access to the shrine room is through the central arch. Such an arcade is extremely rare in traditional Ashanti architecture, and no other surviving fetish house is known to have an arcade of this kind. The source or derivation of this architectural feature is open to speculation.

In the corner between the drummers' and singers' platforms is a small room which serves as the priest's dressing room. On the ground just in front of the shrine and to the right of the entrance is a small enclosure about a foot high which is said to contain charms. In this enclosure, which is called the *Abaamu*, are a number of tortoises which are the sacred animals of the god.

The only ornamentation in the building is found on the walls and columns of the fetish area. The meanings of these designs were not available from the *Okyeame* but he stated their connection with the gods and they are apparently variations and combinations of standard *adinkra* symbols. The façade of the shrine presents the most ornate elevation, consisting of three arches

freestanding in front of the shrine rooms, with the entrance through the central arch. Ornamentation on the Façade consists of interesting mouldings on either side of the entrance below the flanking arches and lacy designs above the arches.

The basic material of construction is swish, apparently with some form of timber reinforcement. However most of the wall surfaces have been rendered with waterproof mortar to prevent excessive weathering. The roofing material which was originally thatch has been replaced in recent years by corrugated iron sheets. In some of the mouldings, raffia cane strips are to form the outline of the designs before the final thickness of swish is applied, the cane strips being left in place, as a firm arris.

It was not possible to establish the exact age of the building. However from the history given by the *Okyeame*, it may be deduced that its age would certainly exceed 100 years, but 150 years may be a nearer guess. It must be realized that the age given here is merely speculative, since the method of establishing it was rather unreliable. Altogether there have been five fetish priests at *Asawasi* and each one was

Fig. 9. — The ornamented façade of the shrine room. Drumming and dancing accompanies fetish worship.



the sole priest during his term of office and was succeeded by the next only after his death. Succession is not necessarily immediate since it is left to the god to "call" the next priest. The office of priesthood will be dealt with in detail later but this brief account is to illustrate the method of establishing the age of the building, based on the number of priests, which can be seen to be rather unreliable. The last priest was said to have died about 30 years ago and there has been none since. So assuming roughly that each priest served for an average period of 20 years, that would give a total of 100 years, plus a few years in between the reign of each. The figure should therefore be something around 150 years. The actual figure could however differ by as much as 100 years depending on the actual term of office of each priest.

A full account of the history of the building was however obtained without, of course, the relevant dates. The first priest was Nana Bewuo. The village had been in existence for some time when one day Nana Bewuo was possessed by the spirit of the god Bannie. Nana Bewuo, with something clenched in his fist, requested to be taken to another village, Tano-Obuasi, where on arrival it was confirmed that the god Bannie was the son of Takora the god of Tano-Obuasi. Nana Bewuo was instructed in his priesthood at Tano-Obuasi and later returned to Asawasi to build the shrine to the specifications of the god Bannie. It remains to this day in its original form though it must have been renovated several times.

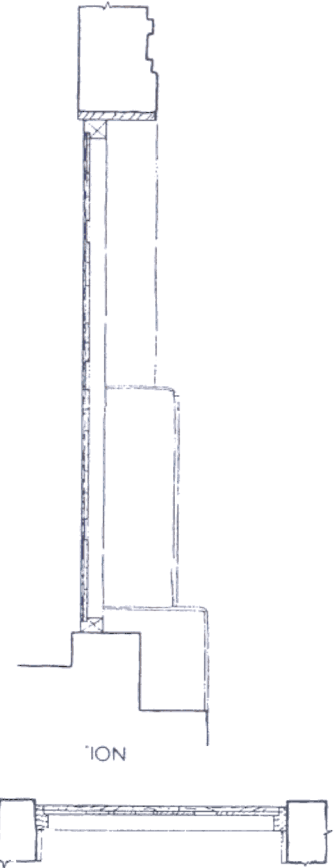
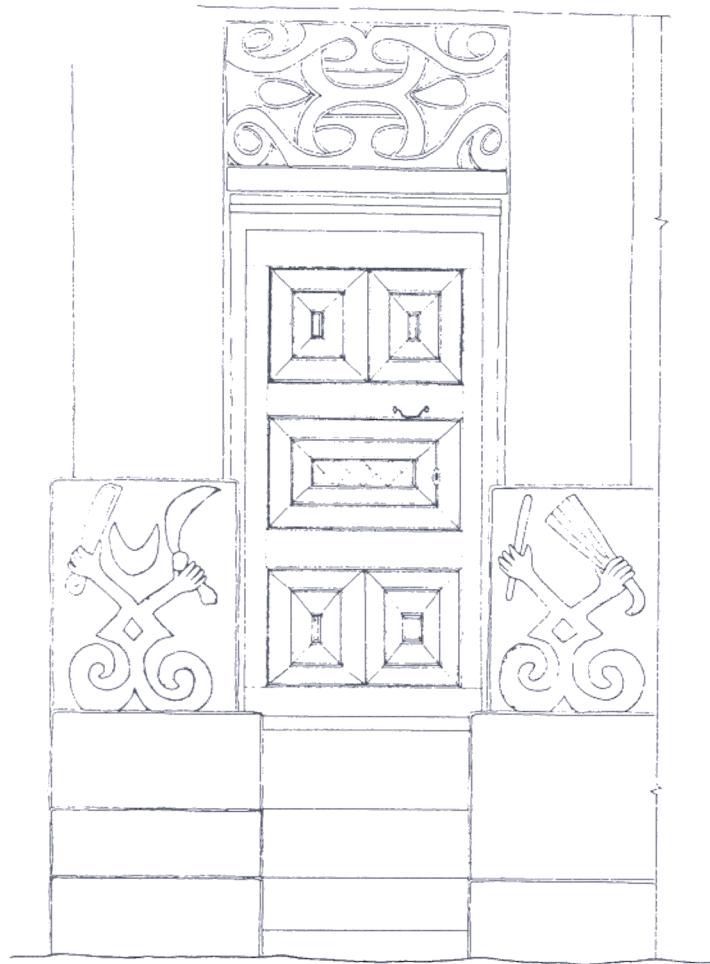
Nana Bewuo was succeeded by Komfo Appiah Panin, then Nana Komfo Serwaa a woman, and Komfo Afia Fofie also a woman. The only priest known to the present Okyeame was Komfo Appiah Kuma who was the last priest, who died some 30 years ago and has not yet been succeeded. The present Okyeame himself is well over 60 years old.

When a priest dies, his successor is said to be chosen by the god. The person is possessed in the same manner as was Nana Bewuo and is directed to the shrine where he is shown to the Okyeame. The person is then sent to Tano-Obuasi for training as a priest which may last up to about a year, and after returns to Asawasi to take up his office. The time between the death of a priest and the "vocation" of his successor by the god is in no way definite. This may take a bare hour, or as in the last case, several decades. Anyone can become a priest no matter who he or she is or where he or she lives, but at any time that he is possessed he is directed by the spirit to the shrine. Priesthood is for life but if at any time a priest does something grievously wrong it is believed that the god will "dismiss" him by death.

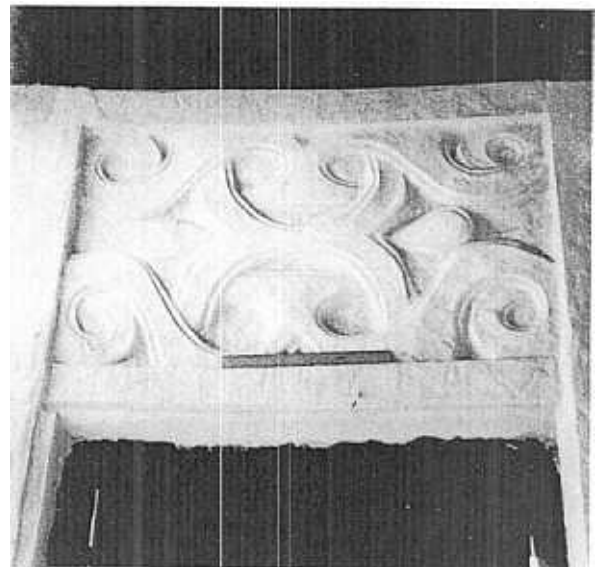
At any time someone may ask the priest to say prayers and perform purification rites on his behalf. However there are special days of prayers and offering, the "Dabone" which falls every forty days. On the Dabone, the whole village assembles inside the shrine



Fig. 10. The door leading into the Fetish area

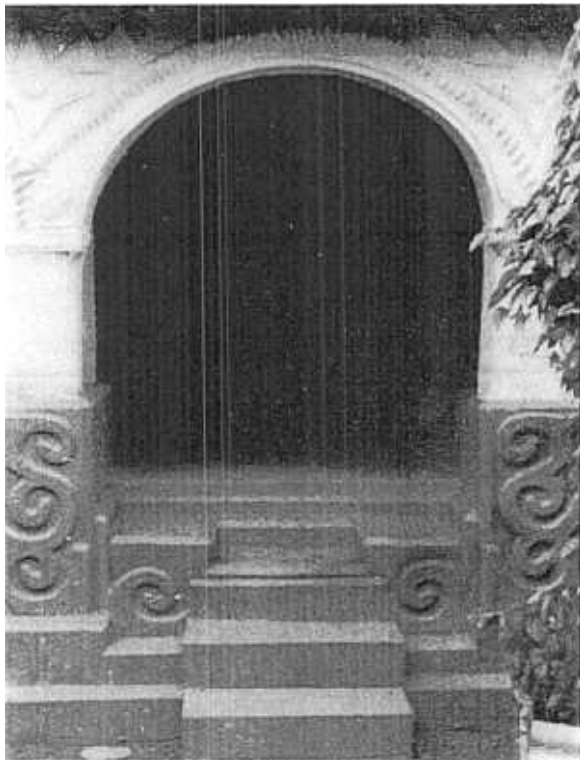


the



intricate design the door

Fig. 13. — Entrance to the shrine room. Note the modelling of the plinth and staircase.



courtyard, the drummers and singers take up their respective positions and after an opening prayer, accompanied by pouring of libation by the priest, drumming, singing and dancing commences. The village chief then enters and takes up his seat in front of the singers. After some time prayers are said for the entire village and individuals may come forward with their troubles and make sacrifices for special reasons. After the offerings, drumming and dancing continues until the end of the meeting. Offerings consist of drinks used for libation and livestock which are slaughtered. Hanging from the eave of the Temple above the Abaamu are strings of sheep and goats' vertebrae. One vertebra is removed from each sacrificial animal and is added to the lot.

As can be expected there are certain taboos connected with the shrine. Originally footwear was not permitted inside the shrine courtyard, but now this is confined to the inside of the shrine rooms. Women are not allowed inside the shrine during their menstrual period and smoking and whistling are prohibited inside the shrine courtyard.

Fig. 14. Chiefly chairs of the village of Asawase.

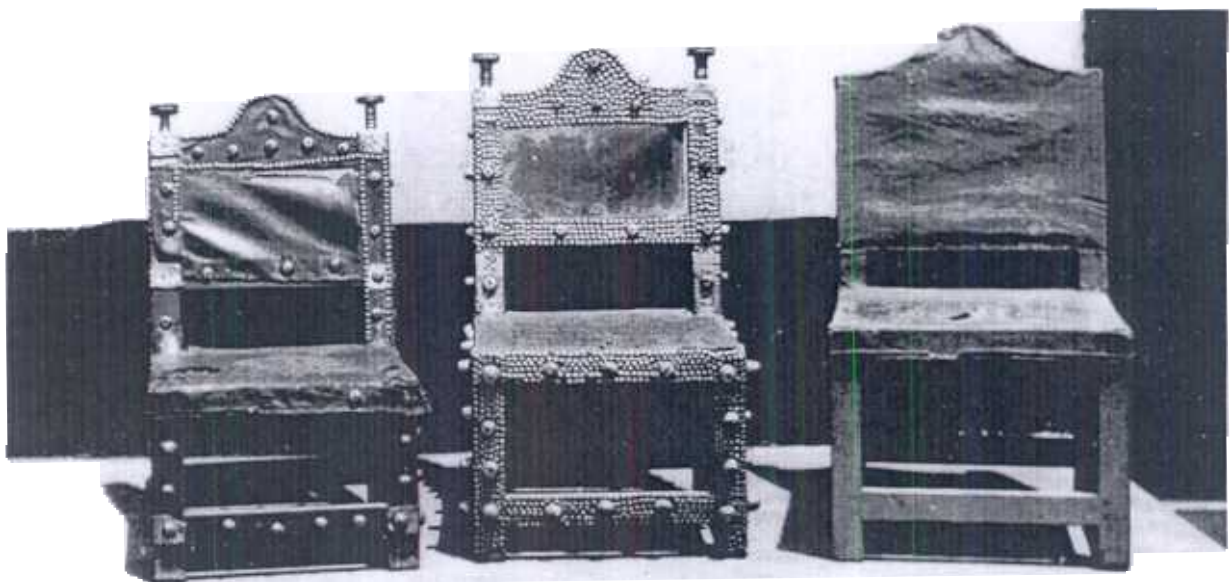


Fig. 15. — Part elevation of the singers' stand.

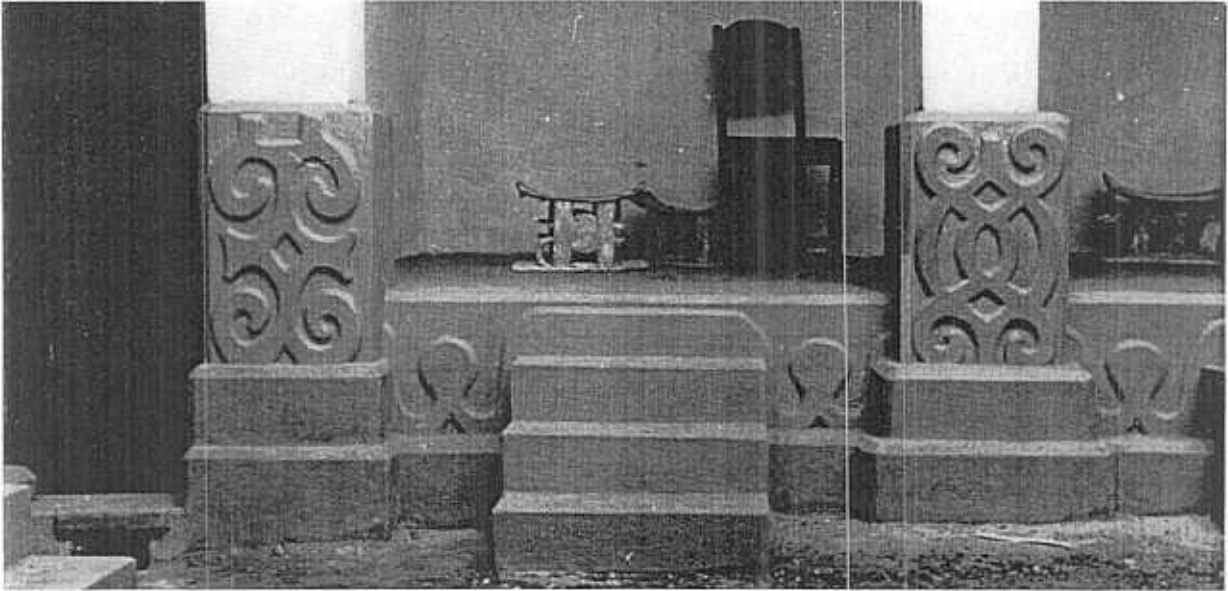
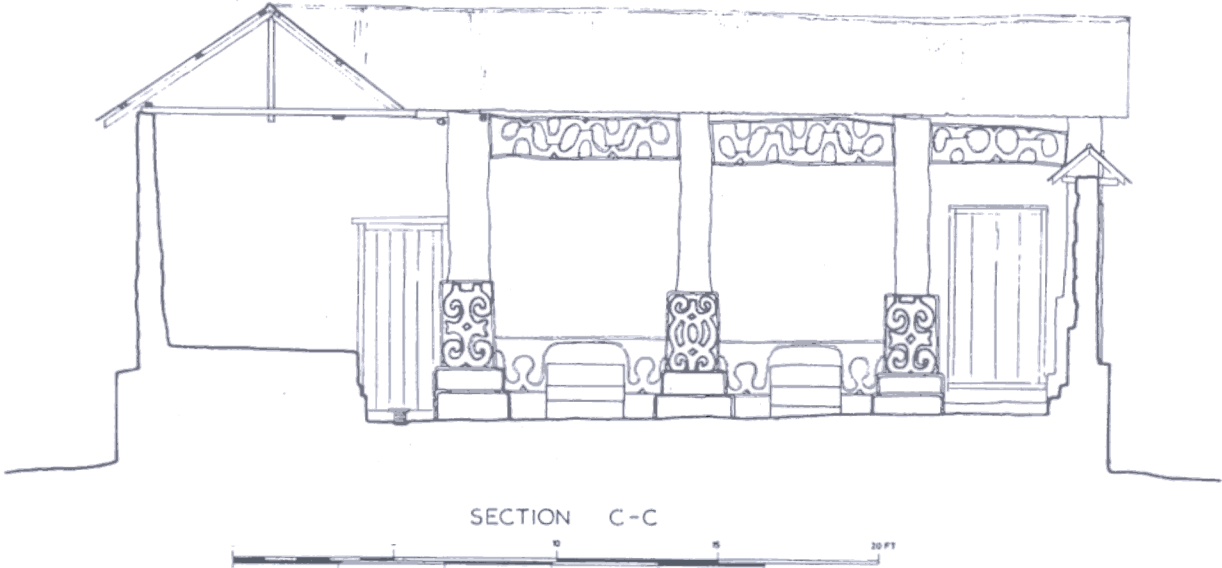


Fig. 16. — Section of the singers' stand.



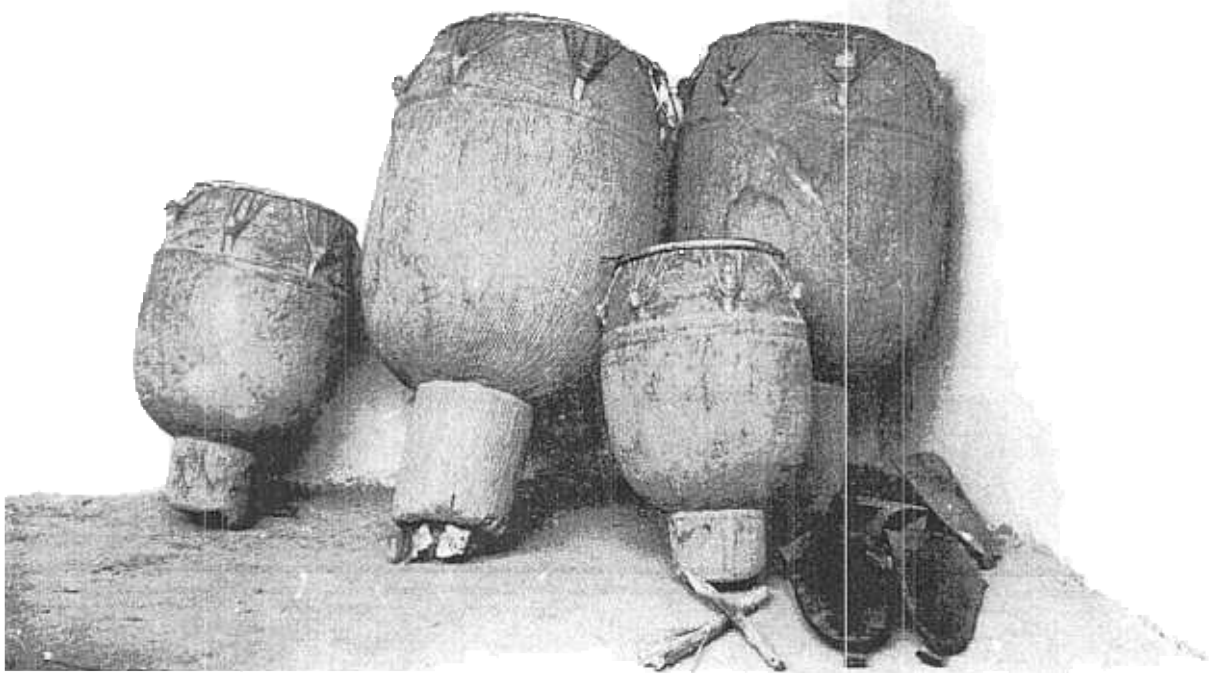


Fig. 17. The drums: essential accompaniment to all social and religious activities.

Modernisation of Ghanaian society is taking its toll of traditional customs. Such buildings and the institutions attached to them have had their share of the damaging consequences. Until recently the building itself was in a state of near dilapidation and it was only the timely action of the Ghana Museum and Monuments Board that saved it from complete ruin.

The fact that the office of the priest has been vacant for the past 30 years bears testimony to the lack of interest of the village. Another factor here is the fact that a great majority of the population of the village consists of children of school-going age, that is below 15 years old, the rest being old men and women. The younger adults seem to have moved to the cities and towns.

The building in its present state of restoration with its intricate and intriguing designs and mouldings presents a rich and interesting example of the cultural heritage of Ashanti.

Suveyed, measured and documented by E.K. AKOTOYEH-KUBENU, A. BROWN, G.N.K. DOMETY, A.T.Y. GAD-ZANKU, H.C. WARMANN, students of Architecture. Under the direction of W.F. HILL, Lecturer in Architecture, University of Science & Technology (Kumasi).

## RESUME

Parmi les quelques Maisons aux Fétiches récemment restaurées par la Commission des Musées et des Monuments du Ghana figure celle d'Asawasé, petit village des environs de Koumassi. La Commission, en effet, après avoir consacré ses travaux de conservation et de réparation pendant les cinq premières années de son existence aux seuls forts et châteaux construits par les Européens, a élargi depuis quelques années le champ de ses activités pour y inclure, parallèlement, le domaine beaucoup plus important de la construction autochtone. Peu de ces maisons du type Ashanti traditionnel restent encore debout, car elles sont particulièrement vulnérables face à l'assaut du progrès moderne; un effort maximum est fait actuellement pour conserver celles qui y ont résisté. La Maison aux Fétiches d'Asawasé se trouve être la dernière en date à avoir été restaurée (1970).

L'Inspecteur des Monuments de la Commission des Musées et des Monuments du Ghana, M. G.L. Adinyira, trace les grandes lignes de la politique pratiquée par ses services en ce qui concerne la conservation des constructions autochtones du pays et décrit les procédés

adoptés pour leur réparation ou leur reconstruction. Les bâtiments traditionnels en clayonnages revêtus d'argile ou en pisé ont particulièrement tendance à se détériorer et il s'agit d'améliorer les techniques employées actuellement, donc de poursuivre les recherches sur la préservation des matériaux locaux.

Pendant les grandes vacances de 1970, peu après l'achèvement des travaux d'Asawasé, des relevés ont été effectués, des mesures notées et une documentation complète réunie, par un groupe d'étudiants de deuxième année de la Faculté d'Architecture de l'Université des Sciences et de la Technologie, sous la direction d'un de leurs professeurs, M. W.F. Hill. On a conclu, en se fondant sur la tradition orale, à une construction datant d'il y a cent ou cent cinquante ans.

Le texte contient un court historique du bâtiment, suivi d'une description de sa conception architecturale; celle-ci est conforme à la tradition Ashanti, le principe étant celui d'une cour centrale entourée de loggias ouvertes et de chambres closes. Les étudiants ont pris des photos et établi des dessins cotés; ce genre d'activités figure régulièrement, d'ailleurs, au programme des études de la Faculté d'Architecture de Koumassi.

Fig. 1. — L'Okyeame devant le péristyle.

Fig. 2. — La rue du village d'Asawase. A droite, le complexe de l'Okyeame.

Fig. 3. — Plan d'ensemble.

Fig. 4. — Coupes et élévations de la demeure.

Fig. 5. — Le péristyle avant restauration.

Fig. 6. — Coupes dans la première cour.

Fig. 7. — Entrée principale de la maison des fétiches.

Fig. 8. — Vertèbres d'animaux du sacrifice pendus au péristyle.

Fig. 9. — La façade du péristyle durant une cérémonie religieuse.

Fig. 10. — La porte ouvrant sur la salle aux fétiches.

Fig. 11. — Détails de la même porte.

Fig. 12. — Décor surmontant la même porte.

Fig. 13. — Entrée du péristyle avec son ornementation.

Fig. 14. — Sièges des chefs du village.

Fig. 15. — Partie de la tribune des chanteurs.

Fig. 16. — Coupe devant cette même tribune.

Fig. 17. — Les tambours, élément essentiel de toute activité socio-culturelle.