Traditional Woodcarving in Elmina: The Creation of a Fishing Canoe

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Traditional Woodcarving in Elmina: The Creation of a Fishing Canoe

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Abstract

1. **Title**: Traditional Woodcarving in Elmina: The Creation of a Fishing Canoe
2. **Author**: Bjorn Olsen
3. **Objectives**: My objectives for this project were three fold:
   - To learn the process of carving the dugout canoe base through both observation and participation.
   - To investigate the cultural importance of the fishing canoe in Elmina.
   - To investigate the trade of canoe carving within the context of the Elmina community.
4. **Methodology**: My methodology includes observation, participation and interview. I spent a month researching canoe carving in Cape Coast and Elmina, Ghana, while keeping my research focused mainly on the Elmina community. I apprenticed and worked for a week with three carvers from Prampram who were in Elmina to complete a job there. I also spent time trying to locate carvers, as well as interviewing carpenters and fisherman about canoes. I interviewed a fisherman about the trade of boat carving, and about fishing culture in general. I also formally interviewed one carpenter about the craft of carpentry, as well as an informal interview with another carpenter. I informally interviewed all three carvers I worked with to get a better grasp on the craft of carving.
5. **Findings**: I learned about the tools the carvers use, how they use them, and the steps necessary to complete a canoe. The process requires permits for acquiring the tree, as well as transporting it. Some preliminary carving is done in the bush with a chainsaw, but only roughing out the canoe. Once the canoe arrives at the coast where it will be finished, the carvers use a chainsaw, *tetewa*, and *asenkuma* to carve out the canoe base. The carvers work in a series of stages, reaching as far under the side of the canoe as possible with their tools, then turning the canoe with the jack to work and reach the next section. I also did a small amount of research on carpentry, learning the basic process the canoe undergoes after the base is finished.
6. **Conclusion**: Through this research process I learned as much about how to research, as I did about canoe carving. I learned to be proactive in finding sources, and always to make one or two backup plans if something falls through. I learned that the tradition of carving is very much alive, and an integral part of the fishing community, Elmina in particular. I also learned that carving still utilizes some traditional tools, and uses them right alongside motorized technologies. This does not cheapen the traditional craft, but instead grants it a space in the modern world. I also conclude that there is still much research that could be done regarding this topic. Virtually untouched by my research have been the decorative painting styles of the Fanti, the decorative carving on the outside of the crafts, and the carpentry used to complete these canoes.
**Introduction**

My interest in woodcarving began with a brief study in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Having apprenticed under a woodcarver in a village near Kumasi and experienced a small taste of a woodcarver’s creativity within the confines of a single block of wood, I grew hungry to again witness this type of craftsman at work. For this project, I wanted to see the art of carving once again applied to everyday life, as an integral part of a people’s livelihood and culture. I also wanted to see carving on a grander physical scale than the drums and stools I helped carve in Kumasi. When I saw the fishing canoes of Cape Coast, I could not help but fall in love from afar. When asking where these crafts were created, I was pointed toward Elmina. Located about 10 km to the west of Cape Coast, Elmina serves as a district capital. It has the largest fish-landing bay in the Central Region, and as a result attracts fisherman folk (and canoe carvers) from all over the country.¹

Within this community, a canoe is not only a boat, but a concept permeating practically every facet of community life.² The canoe’s most vital function is as a vehicle of subsistence for the peoples of coastal Ghana, since fishing involves not only professional fishermen, but the entire community.”³ With fishing at the root of the culture in Elmina, and the canoe an integral part of this a fisherman’s profession, a study of the fishing canoe is the perfect opportunity to marry carving on a greater physical scale, and its integral role in a people’s culture.

For my research, I wanted to start at the very beginning of the building process of a canoe, to see the process of the canoe’s creation from the ground up. Having only a month to conduct my research, I did not want to tackle a subject too broad to fully

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¹ Britwum, Akua. “The Gendered Dynamics of Production Relations in Ghanaian Coastal Fishing,” 78
² Coronel, Micheal A. “Fanti Canoe Painting,” 2
³ Ibid 2
understand, so I excluded from my research the painting, pictograms, and decorations of each vessel.

Though my study is only a small portion of culture in this community, I thought the carving of the canoe’s base held an important place within this community. If the canoe serves as a vital vessel for retrieving fish, the major industry of Elmina, then the base of the canoe could also serve as a metaphorical vessel containing the entire economy of these two towns. Without the canoe, and the solid base a canoe is built upon, the vessel would be unable to contain what it is meant to hold; the fish, the fisherman, industry of Elmina, and much of the culture of an entire community.
Methodology

My time in the field can be divided into three different portions or methods of data collection: observation, participation, and interview. I found that due to the nature of my topic, observation proved to be the most beneficial to my collection of relevant data. Long hours of silent observation of techniques and habits of the craftsman were imperative to learning how these canoes are built. This observation let the craftsman function in his natural environment, working undisturbed by my presence (and lists of questions). In turn, many of my questions ended up being answered by the craftsman’s actions, rather than his words. This being said, the eyes of the foreigner are large, though they see very little. I found it necessary to also conduct some interviews to fill the holes in my research. Interviews yielded answers to what I observed, but did not understand.

I conducted a few formal interviews with various members of the Elmina and Cape Coast communities, but found informal interviews to be a better method of glean information from community members. In conducting informal interviews, I utilized impromptu conversation rather than question-and-answer style discussion, lending to a more seamless dialogue with the carvers, carpenters and fisherman.

To completely grasp the technical nature of canoe carving, and to comprehend the physical demands of the craft, participation was also essential in my research. I was taught how to utilize the tools of these craftsmen, gaining along the way some empathy for their exhaustion at the end of each workday. Though this branch of my study was naturally important, my research’s aim was not to create anything of my own, but rather to collect information necessary in explaining the processes of canoe carving. Because of this, I found that mastery of all the craftsman’s tools was less of a priority than observation of the craftsman expertly wielding the tools himself. Participation did
however allow me to better understand the potential of these tools, and leant insight into how much skill it actually took to pare endless shavings from the canoe base.

The majority of my time spent observing, participating, and interviewing, took place within the second, third and fourth week of my research period. The first week was predominately spent researching my topic. This research took place from Friday the 8th, the day after my arrival, to Friday the 15th. Having talked to Steve (the carver I was to work with) over the telephone on both the 6th and 7th, I learned that our lessons would be postponed until the 15th. It only seemed natural for me to use this window of “free” time before my carving lessons, to begin collecting scholarly research about my topic. This research I would use to better inform me about my topic before starting my carving lessons, and to back up my own work with scholarly research.

During this time period, I attended the University of Cape Coast library, and the Internet café numerous times. At the library and café, I gathered books and scholarly articles about West African art, fishing along the Ghanaian coastline, and canoe painting among the Ga and Fanti fishing communities of Ghana. I also visited the Elmina boat harbor, and the Cape Coast boat harbor to see the physical location I would be working, and to get a feel for the atmosphere of each place.

On Friday the 15th, I met with Steve, where he informed me that we would have to postpone the carving lessons again until that next Tuesday. Somewhat annoyed at the prospect of pushing our lessons back even further, I agreed to meet him next Tuesday the 19th. Awaiting my lessons, I used the three days between the 15th and the 19th to photograph the canoes of the harbor, and familiarize myself with the area at the foot of Elmina castle where we would be working. I wanted to understand the physical makeup
of the canoe as an object, before I began making one, to capture the various steps of completion of the vessels present in the harbor, and also to record examples of their final painted decoration. One of these days, I also observed a carpenter working on a small canoe repair in Cape Coast. The canoe was beached on a small beach called Coconut Grove, directly adjacent to Cape Coast castle.

In the window of time between the 15th and the 19th I met Kwame, a young man who sold paintings at the gates of Elmina Castle. Whilst I was in Elmina, he became my friend and my guide. He was eager to help me with my research, after I promised to buy one or two of his paintings. He proved to be a very helpful connection in Elmina, putting me in contact with numerous others who would help me with my research.

One Tuesday the 19th, I arrived at the gates of the castle, to find Steve nowhere in sight. After calling him numerous times without answer, I decided to give up on Steve, and find another carver or carpenter to work with. Kwame found another carpenter willing to educate me within the same hour.

The new plan was that this carpenter would teach me about carpentry, while repairing a very small canoe. I had to speak to he owner of the boat, asking if he would be okay with the prospect of me learning carpentry on his boat. He agreed, under the condition that I buy the wood for the repair. After a trip to the lumberyard to see if they indeed carried the right wood, and to check prices, I learned the wood would be around 200 cedes. 200 cedes added to the 150 cedes the carpenter was asking for lessons, seemed like a hefty sum money for one weeks research.

I decided to think about the deal that afternoon, and get back to Kwame the next day with an answer. Though the portion of money was large, I was also running out of
options, and needed to begin the observation and participation portion of my ISP soon. I wanted to be sure that I was spending my stipend wisely, and wound up telling Kwame that I would look for other options around Cape Coast, and if I could find nothing more immediate and less expensive, I would work with his carpenter in Elmina.

Luckily, Kwame called me the very next morning having just talked to three carvers that arrived in Elmina that very morning. They had just started carving three large canoes, and would be in the Elmina harbor for the next ten days to finish the job. They also spoke English, and were willing to teach me about canoe carving for only a small fee when they were finished—("just whatever you feel is right to give"). This seemed like too perfect an opportunity to pass up. I was observing and learning from them that very afternoon.

I observed and worked with the carvers from the 20th to the 27th, while they completed three canoes. I left Cape Coast every morning at around 6:00 AM and arrived by taxi in Elmina at about 6:30 AM every morning. I would stay with the carvers at the base of the castle, until the late afternoon. I would leave anywhere between 2:00 PM and 3:00 PM. During this time, I also observed two different carpenters repairing separate boats beached near the carvers workspace, and interviewed another carpenter about the trade of carpentry. I also was able to participate a small amount with one of the carpenters, who taught me about the tools he was using. I then used the remainder of my time in Cape Coast, the 28th of November to the 2nd of December, to collect and record all of my research.

**Findings:**

**The Carvers**
One of the most wonderful things about this project was the opportunity to meet so many new, and helpful individuals. The people of Elmina were especially warm towards me. The same people would greet me every morning on my way to the carvers. Fisherman would consistently look up from their net mending to greet me and ask how my morning was, and passersby would always direct me to the nearest taxi to and from to Cape Coast. The men that I watched and carved with were also extremely hospitable, going out of their way to make me comfortable, and excited to teach me their craft. From the very beginning, they welcomed me with open arms, immediately began showing me techniques on how to use their tools, and the correct stances one must assume, when using them.

The crew of carvers consisted of three men: Moses, Nicholas, and Eben. All three were not from Elmina, but from Prampram, a town about 30 miles outside of Accra. They were in Elmina only for this job, and would return back to the Greater Accra Region upon its completion. The job was to carve out three canoe bases hewn from gargantuan logs of the *wawa* tree, dress them all, and prepare them for carpentry work (which is the next building stage of the canoe). They would arrive early in the morning at around 4:30 to 5:00 AM, starting early to take advantage of the cool morning air. The owner of the canoes provided them with lodging every night, bought fuel and oil for the chainsaw when necessary, and provided the carvers with sachet water and meals every day.

Both Moses and Nicholas spoke English freely, so naturally, I conversed with them the most. Moses was 35 years old, close to 6 ft., and had not a single pound of fat on him. He was lean, muscular, and always with a smile on his face. Also a mason, he
claimed that the reason he liked canoe carving was because it was very hard work. He
indeed was a hard worker, and said he enjoyed the physical stress of the trade.

Eben, also extremely muscular, looked older, and spoke the least out of the three
men even when conversations were not in English. He moved in a way that was calm and
calculated, carefully directing his tools so they would land perfectly with every swing. He
was friendly, but his quietness gave him a slightly mysterious air.

Nicholas’s stature was opposite of Moses and Eben. He was strong, but short, and
much rounder than the other two men. He too always had a smile on his face, but was
also quick to give you a piece of his mind if you disagreed with him over any political,
social, or religious matter, emphatically lecturing about what is right and what is wrong.
He had been carving for over 20 years, and his experience was evident. Every stroke of
his tool created perfect grooves over the surface of the canoe.

I learned the most about carving from hours of observation of the carvers at work,
and also through informal interview. I acquired information about the process of
obtaining the tree, logistics of its purchase, transportation, and initial steps of log
preparation, all through informal interview with the carvers. Other information about
these preliminary steps in the process came from a formal interview with a fisherman
named Uncle Jo, who had participated in many of the steps listed above. Though I
wanted to focus my research mainly on the work of the carver, I have also included some
information about the steps of the canoe’s completion after the carvers have finished their
job. My knowledge about carpentry stems from both observation of anonymous
carpenters at work in Cape Coast and Elmina, a formal interview with a carpenter named
Joseph (translated by my friend Mensah), and an informal interview with an anonymous carpenter working in Elmina.

Figure 1: Nicholas Sharpens the asenkuma blade with the sharpening stone.
**The Tools and Wood Used**

The tool selection used to carve the canoe base is one that is actually quite minimal. For heavy-duty wood removal, shaping of the outside of the canoe, and rough shaping of the inside of the canoe, the carver uses a chainsaw with a bar approximately two and a half feet long. Repeated daily use dulls the chain quickly, so the carver sharpens it every day using a rattail file. A saw with a bar any shorter than two and a half feet, simply would not cut deep enough into the canoe base, or be long enough to shave wood from the side of such a large log. (See Figure 2 and 3) Chips and sawdust from the chainsaw were consistently swept up using a broom made of a small bundle of twigs. In Twi this is known as a *prie*.

For removal of smaller portions of wood, and for gouging out large hunks of wood created by the chainsaw, a tool called the *asenkuma* or “digging axe” is used. This tool consists of a thick, flat blade, sharpened at a 90-degree angle on one end. On the other end of the blade there is a ring where the handle is inserted. The blade can be removed from the handle when the tool needs to be sharpened, and is fitted snugly back onto the knob of the handle when the blade is sharp. (Fig. 1, and 2)

For dressing the final surface of the canoe, the *tetewa* or “dressing tool” is used. This tool is very similar to the *asenkuma* in design, though it is much lighter, has a shorter handle, and has a curved thin blade used for scooping out long chips of wood (fig. 2). The tool is meant to cut across the grain of the wood, rather than parallel to the grain. It creates a series of uniformed grooves running across the width of the inside and outside of the canoe. When used correctly, the *tetewa* creates a very smooth and finished final surface on the canoe.
The blades of the *tetewa* and the *asenkuma* are both sharpened on a large sharpening stone purchased in Prampram. The carvers use sachet water to whet the stone, then rub the metal continuously against the stone to refine the edge of the blade. (Fig. 1)

The handles of these tools are both made from the wood of the *Aplechi* tree. This type of wood is used because it is extremely hard. Though the blades of these tools were bought from a blacksmith in Prampram, the handles were all collected from the bush, cut from trees providing the perfect ‘v’ shape essential for each handle.

A large jack is used to turn the canoe, tilting the boat so that all areas of it may be worked. Usually, at least two men must work to push the bar up and down due to the extreme weight of the log. The bar of the jack is also utilized as a crowbar from time to time, prying off large portions of wood that have been partially severed by the chainsaw.

The tools used by the carpenter are all hand tools rather than electric tools. The men working on the carpentry jobs were all very proud of the fact that “in Africa we use manpower, not electricity.” I had several men from different crews explain this fact to me. Their tools included handsaws for cutting the beams to length, a plane for smoothing the edges of each beam, six-inch nails, and a small sledgehammer for driving in the nails.

The type of wood used for the canoe is called *wawa*. It is used for both the base of the canoe, and also the beams added to the canoe by the carpenter. When the enormous *wawa* trees are harvested, the logs are usually cut in half, allowing two canoe bases to be made from one tree. Qualities of the wood that make it ideal for canoes include its low density allowing it to float easily, and the easy at which it can be carved. People also claim that the wood is bitter, dissuading insects from boring into it, though from personal
experience of chewing wawa sticks every morning, I question whether this particular quality of the wood is true or not.

The wawa trees are harvested from many regions of Ghana including the Western Region, (which is where the trees for these particular canoes were harvested), the Ashanti Region, the Eastern Region, the Brong Ahafo Region, and the Volta Region.

Figure 2: (Listed from Top to Bottom) Asenkuma, tetewa and the chainsaw. Note the difference in blade curvature between the asenkuma and the tetewa.
Beginning Stages of the Canoe

The process of finding, acquiring ownership, felling, and transporting the *wawa* trees is no easy matter. The whole process of even getting a tree to the stage and location where we began our work, can take upwards of three months. Permits take time to go through, and all the logistics of travel must be worked out. Though the carvers did not fell or transport these particular canoes to Elmina themselves, they know the process well, and completed it many other times with other canoe jobs. Below is a shortened account of the process the canoes underwent to arrive at the base of Elmina castle. It was pieced together from numerous informal interviews with Nicholas and Moses.

According to the two, the *wawa* trees are usually found in the forest by hunters who stumble upon them while searching for animals. The hunter informs the carvers that there is a *wawa* tree on a parcel of land. From here, the carvers must find the bush manager, or the owner of the land, to ask permission to harvest the tree. The bush manager decides whether or not he is willing to sell the tree and the price he is selling it for. If he agrees to let the carvers harvest the tree, then he will alert the Forestry Commission, who gives the carvers a harvest permit. In order to legally cut down the tree, the carvers must have the permission of the Forestry Commission in the form of this harvest permit. The carvers must also ask permission from the chief of the village where they are harvesting. He will give the final go ahead to the carvers, deciding whether or not they may use the land.

With the permit in hand, and the chief’s permission, the carvers may proceed to the bush to harvest. They will generally spend the night in the bush, for the job takes more than one day. They fell the tree, split the log in half, and rough out the canoes’ basic
shape. After the canoes are roughly shaped with the chainsaw, they are transported to the road. From there, the logs are transported to the coast.

The bush manager also owns the machinery necessary to drag the canoes to the road. The machinery generally used to clear a path to the road is a caterpillar, tractor or a bulldozer. Once the canoes are to the road, they are loaded onto a truck to be taken to the coast for finishing. The carvers will also need a police permit to transport the canoes on public roads. At every checkpoint, they must show authorities the police permit, and the harvest permit.

Traditionally, the trees would be cut near the coastline, so transportation to the ocean would be eliminated or very minimal. As numbers of *wawa* trees along the coastline decreased, men would have to move further and further inland to find trees for their canoes. In the case of harvest inland from the coast, carvers would use rivers as a means of transportation to move the canoes to the coast. ⁴ If no rivers or machinery were available, men would have to use manpower to drag the canoe to the road. I was informed by Uncle Jo, a fisherman, that traditionally, before heavy equipment, the logs were dragged through the forest over palm leaves, which are very slippery, creating less friction between the logs and the ground.

The preliminary carving of the canoe also begins in the bush. The first step after felling the tree is to clear enough of the brush around the log to allow for walking and working using machetes. Once there is a large work area cleared, the log is examined from all angles by the carvers, each man taking note of the natural curves and concavities

⁴ Verrips, Jojada, “Ghanaian Canoe Decorations,” 45
of the felled tree. When the carvers have determined where the canoes are fit within the log, they use the jack to roll the log so it may be cut in half from the right angle.

Moses says that the two smaller canoes at Elmina came from the same tree and the largest of the three came from a separate tree. This leads me to concur that one log is not always utilized for two canoes, but rather is used depending on the size of the tree felled, and the size of the canoe desired.

When the tree is split, the flat surface that will become the bowl of the canoe is turned upwards, and the contours of the canoe are drawn onto the surface with charcoal. The front and the back of the canoe are then sculpted with the chainsaw, keeping the back slightly larger than the front in diameter. This allows the front of the canoe to more easily cut through the water.

With the outer contours of the canoe roughly cut out, the carvers must then begin carving out the inside of the canoe. They begin with a plunge cut around the entire perimeter of the canoe, following the charcoal outline closely. This area of the canoe wall will be kept vertical, butting up against curved, bowl portion of the canoe base.

After this plunge cut is finished, establishing the perimeter of inside of the canoe, the carvers cut a shallow valley inside the canoe with the chainsaw. It spans the entire length of the canoe, but does not reach the desired bottom of the canoe. The bottom will only be reached in the finishing stages of canoe carving. (Fig. 3)

After these first stages of the carving have been completed, the canoe can be transported to the desired location for further carving.
Figure 3: Shown here is first valley cut using the chainsaw and also the plunge cut along the perimeter of the inside of the canoe.
Carving of the Base

This account is one pieced together mostly from participation and observation. When I did not understand the actions of a carver, I would ask, and they would answer. Generally, the time and efforts of the carvers were split between the front and the back of the canoe throughout the day. They would alternate sides and jobs of the canoe, sharing the different types of work that had to be done. Both Moses and Eben used the chainsaw, though they were forced to cease using it after 9:00 AM. This was because the employees of Elmina Castle were disturbed by the chainsaw’s noise, as were the tours beginning after 9:00 AM. Moses informed me that under normal working conditions in Prampram, he would feel no inhibition to using the chainsaw all day, but because of this restriction, chainsaw work was reserved for the early mornings.

The main tasks of the chainsaw were as follows: to carve large pieces parallel to the grain of the wood off the outside of the canoe, decreasing the width of the canoe (fig. 4), and also to make series of shallow, cross-grain cuts on the outside of the canoe that could be removed with the asenkuma. The saw was also used to make cross-grain plunge cuts on the inside of the canoe creating sections that are then removed using the asenkuma.

Once the chainsaw has removed as much as is safely possible, the tetewa can then be used to dress the outside of the craft. This creates the grooved, final surface of a finished portion. If there is a large amount of material that must be removed past 9:00 AM, then the carvers use the asenkuma to remove large pieces of wood and bark rather than the chainsaw. (Fig. 5)
Figure 4: Moses carves off pieces of bark and wood that span the entire length of the canoe using the chainsaw.

When working the inside of the canoe, the sections created by the saw’s cross-grain cuts are systematically removed using the asenkuma. (Fig. 6) After this procedure, uneven surfaces created by the asenkuma are smoothed out using the tetewa.

The tetewa is also used for dressing the corners of the craft, cleaning them up. (Fig. 7) As sections of both the inside of the canoe and the outside of the canoe are worked and finished, the canoe is tilted further and further on it’s side with the jack, so the whole surface may be reached and worked.
Figure 5: Wood is removed from the outside of the canoe with the asenkuma (left), and the tetewa.
Figure 6: Eben removing portions of wood created by the chainsaw with the Asenkuma. Notice the finished canoe in the background of the photograph.
Figure 7: Nicholas uses the *tetewa* to smooth out rough surfaces created by the *asenkuma* and also cleans up the corners of the canoe with the *tetewa*.
The Carpentry

I must admit that the focus of my research was not on the carpentry involved in making the dugout fishing canoe, but rather the carving portion of the process. Though most of my efforts were channeled towards carving, I was intrigued about the processes that follow the carving. After the whole surface has been shaped and dressed, the carvers step away to let the carpenters finish the canoe. Below is a short account of methods I observed on two small canoes, and one large canoe. The process in theory is simple enough: height is added to the side of the canoe by stacking beams, nailing each beam to the one below it. Completing the process though, takes a skilled eye and skilled hands.

The first set of beams is both nailed to the carved base and also glued to the base using a tar-like black paint. This paint is only applied to the first round of beams. The second level of beams does not have this paint.

When bought from the lumberyard, these beams are not properly planed. The edges are still very rough from the sawmill and must be smoothed using a hand plane. This is done on the building site.

After every board is measured and planed for the first time, it is set atop the last set of beams, staggering the location where the ends of two beams meet, much like how bricks are laid. If there is daylight between the lower beam and the higher beam placed atop for checking, then the top beam is removed, and planed again. The carpenter’s helpers check for daylight, and the carpenter marks the gaps with a pencil. He then planes either side of the gap, to level out the edge of the beam.

The nails used are generally six-inch nails. They are not inserted into the lower beam through the top edge of the higher beam, but instead, are hammered into the lower beam from a point about 2 or 3 inches below the top edge of the higher beam. They are
also inserted at an angle. Though pounding the nails in at an angle allows more of each nail to enter the lower beam, you also risk the nail completely penetrating the other side of the lower beam, if the angle of the nail is too steep upon first penetration. A handy trick used to prevent this problem, was to slightly bend the end of each nail, so that if the angle you pound your nail in at is too steep, the end of the nail will still travel down, and not through to the other side of the beam. (See fig. 8)

Figure 8: The risk of penetrating to the other side of the beam, versus bending the end of the nail and avoiding this problem
Conclusion:

On Research

Through this experience, I have learned so much not only about canoe carving, but also about how to conduct research. For me, the importance of this project was split equally between learning about the craft of canoe carving, how to acquire information I am looking for in a respectful manner, and how to compose all of this research into a cohesive body of work. Also important is making sure the research that I have collected is truthful in the way it portrays the subjects and topics I am writing about. In this month alone, I have learned so much.

Being one of my first times alone in the field and with numerous directions my project could direct me, naturally I made quite a few “mistakes”. This being said, I do not think that making mistakes in the overall scheme of my project, negatively affected my research, but rather added to the long list of things I have learned from this project. In making mistakes, one still learns about what should and should not be done. Also, if you actually make the mistake you are told not to make, you are much less likely to repeat it.

A key aspect of research I learned in the field is the to have a backup plan for everything. Things will not always work out the way you intend them to, and it is imperative not to depend on a single person or event for your research. You still must be assertive in following through to complete your data and finding information, but you must also prepare if something falls through.

I found this out by relying too much on a single source for information. Steve, the carver that I was to work with, ended up not following through when I needed him. When I did get in contact with him, he postponed my carving lessons from the time I expected I would start working, to a whole week later. Adhering to the original schedule I had for
my project, I should have agreed, but also set up plans with another carver as a backup. This would still leave time for Steve to contact me if he was going to, and would also give me plans if he fell through a second time. Because time is so valuable when conducting research, a backup plan is essential so you do not waste it.

Another aspect of my research that is flawed but that I have learned from is the necessity to get the broadest selection of results from my data pool as possible. This takes the form of interviewing and observing a wide range of people all within the community you are researching.

Upon reflection about my research, I do not think that I successfully represented enough people involved in the process of carving the canoe. Even the people that I obtained the most information about carving from, the carvers themselves, were not from Elmina, but Prampram. This is a completely different region of Ghana, and though they were conveniently working in Elmina, their skills and practice do not all come from Elmina, or the Central Region. I was able to observe three carpenters of the area, and formally interview another carpenter, but this is not sufficient data to support generalizations about the craft, or assumptions about how all carpenters work. My data is limited in this way, but I have learned so much from this process.
**On Tradition**

Upon arrival, the Elmina harbor seems like a hectic place. The crowds, smells and sights will swallow you up if you are not used to the atmosphere. As you spend time there though, you begin to become accustomed to the busy sense of the town. The more time I spent there, the more I realized that everywhere around me, tradition was being passed from generation to generation, the skills of the father handed off to the son.

From what I have seen, this first takes the form of exposure. At a very young age, the children of Elmina are exposed to fishing culture because it is so rich and present in Elmina. Boats, fisherman, nets and fish sellers are everywhere because the economy relies so heavily upon fish.

I was fortunate enough to witness a fully loaded canoe return from sea, heaping with nets filled with fish. It so happened to be the ‘Chelsea’ flagged, “One God” canoe of my friend Mensah’s grandmother. As the crew unfolded the nets tangled with small fish and began shaking their catch from the nets holes, children materialized on the shore, running to collect piles of fish that had fallen from the net. As the fisherman worked to gather their large catch, these youngsters weaved in and out of their legs, gathering all the fish that had been dropped. This partially displayed a mad dash to collect free fish, but is also an example of how intertwined fishing is in the lives of these people.

After the crew had assembled all of their nets, and their catch lay in piles, fishmongers came to collect the fish owed to them. With these sellers also came children of a slightly older age. They would help fill the bowls and buckets with fish, and help pull the carts of fish away. Also among this age group of kids were ones helping their fathers and family members on their fishing canoes. Among the crews of men would always be two or three young men helping and learning from older fisherman.
As for the carvers, Nicholas says the tradition of carving has been the same for generations. He states that because of the chainsaw, carvers are now able to create canoes that are much larger than before. It is also a quicker way to finish carving a canoe. In many ways though, the way they carve is the same way their fathers carved, and their father’s fathers. It is a tradition that will continue as long as artisanal fishing exists in Ghana. There will always be a need for these canoes, he says. The trade has been around for a long time. Moses says that though wawa is harder to find, the tradition will continue until all the wawa trees are gone.

Though the trade utilizes very modern technologies such as the chainsaw and the machinery used in the bush to transport the logs, traditional tools such as the tetewa and the asenkuma are still essential to the craft of carving. Carving still utilizes some traditional tools, and uses them right alongside motorized technologies. This does not cheapen the traditional craft, but instead grants it a space in the modern world. It is amazing that canoe carving still utilizes these traditional hand tools, and that the tradition of carving plays such an essential role within the fishing community. The tradition is still alive, and a vital part of the fishing community of Elmina.
Further Research

The topic of my own research is very specific, and fails to touch upon many topics also involved with the creation of the fishing canoe. Aside from the preliminary carving of the canoe, there are many other research areas that can be studied. One is the carpentry performed after the canoe has been carved. Though I wrote briefly on this subject, and there is much research to be done that I did not touch upon in my paper.

Other areas that can be researched further are the decorative paintings and carvings on the surface of the canoe. There is much depth in the making and choosing of symbols that represent yourself and your crew. The decorative aspect to the canoe is one that defines each canoe, and the crew of that canoe. Ownership, choice of decoration, and the process of decoration should all be further explored.
Work Cited


Informants

Carvers:
Moses- (Nov. 21.) *On Tools, the Trade, and Carving Techniques*. Carving site at Elmina Castle, Elmina, Ghana.

Nicholas- (Nov. 21.) *The Processes of Acquiring the Wood*. Carving site at Elmina Castle, Elmina, Ghana.

Eben- (Nov. 23) *On Using the Tetewa*. Carving site at Elmina Castle, Elmina, Ghana.

Carpenters:


Fisherman:
Uncle Jo- (Nov. 6) *On the Canoe, the Fisherman, and the Role of the Canoe in the Fishing Community*. Sammo Guesthouse gazebo, Cape Coast, Ghana.

Interpreters:
Fifi- (Nov. 6) *On the Canoe, the Fisherman, and the Role of the Canoe in the Fishing Community*. Sammo Guesthouse gazebo, Cape Coast Ghana.


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