

Making the town: Afro-Brazilian Tabon returnees and the transformation of Accra from the early colonial times

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During the first half of the 19th century more than 10,000 individuals of Afro-Brazilian descent are estimated to have left Brazil to settle in West Africa. This followed the numerous slave revolts across Brazil with each revolt being punished with arrests, imprisonments, harsh punishments, and forced deportations of the ring leaders and their supporters by their Brazilian and Portuguese overlords and slave-masters. Many of these returnees consisting of former slaves, freed persons and wealthy individuals landed in the coastal towns of Lagos, Cotonou, Lomé and Accra where they established themselves and were engaged in farming, trading,

slavery and other lucrative businesses along the West African coast. In Lagos (Nigeria), these groups of returnees from Brazil are referred to as the 'Agudas,' in Cotonou (Benin Republic) and Lome (Togo) they are called 'Les Breziliens' while in Accra (Ghana) they became known as the 'Tabon' or 'Tabom.'

Successive Tabon immigrants in Accra between 1820 and 1850 settled mainly in the Otublohum section of Ussher Town, which was then under the jurisdiction of the Dutch government. They intermarried among the indigenous Ga population and adopted their language and many of their cultural practices, and with time were also integrated into the Ga traditional political system.

Nevertheless, the Tabon people maintained their Afro-Brazilian identity and many of the unique cultural practices that they brought along from Brazil and during their sojourn on the West African coast such as their professions, dressing, food, music and dances, social and cultural rites, religion etc. The leadership exuded confidence and gave impressions of being brave, well-mannered, competent, disciplined, hardworking and well organized.



Earliest Tabon stone building in Accra (1840s). Source: Steve Tonah, 2022.

This blogpost examines the contributions of the Tabon returnees from Brazil to the growth and transformation of Accra, from a small sea-side settlement into an urban and cosmopolitan centre during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Tabon contributions to

the development and transformation of Accra have to be understood against the background of two major changes in the status of the town. The first was the emergence of the British as the only remaining colonial power in Accra by 1850. The second was the decision of the British colonial authorities to move the administrative capital of the Gold Coast colony from Cape Coast to Accra in 1877 which contributed to the infrastructural and population boom that the town later experienced.

The central argument of this blogpost is that the Tabon returnees through their rapid integration and active participation in Ga society, contributed immensely to the

transformation of Accra from a fishing settlement into an urban, diversified, and cosmopolitan town mainly through the skills, lifestyle and experiences that they brought along from Brazil and elsewhere in West Africa. Furthermore, the paper indicates that the Tabon returnees provided alternatives to and sometimes complemented the skills, training and infrastructure provided by European merchants, missionaries, settlers and the British colonial authorities in Accra. As a result of their skills and innovative ideas, the Tabon became a source of inspiration and pride to the traditional leaders, the elite and other residents of Accra opposed to British colonial rule in the Gold Coast.

The Tabon returnees upon their arrival in Accra in the early 1800s participated actively in the wars of resistance of the indigenous Ga people against their Akan neighbours thus contributing to the ethnic cohesiveness of the Ga people and the consolidation of the diverse migrant groups in Accra into a resilient and united political unit. Indeed, Tabon participation and successes in the inter-ethnic wars of the early 19th century that resulted in the liberation of the Ga people from Akan domination still feature prominently in their ritual songs and celebrations today.



Hand-dug well by the Tabon in Central Accra (1840s).
Source: Steve Tonah, 2022.

The first generation of Tabon returnees to Accra were engaged in three main economic activities that transformed the lives of the residents in several ways. The first consisted of those who took up self-employment in Accra using artisanal skills that they had acquired in Brazil including

masonry, carpentry, tailoring, goldsmithing, well-digging, painting and other professions. These individuals introduced many new professions and diversified the type of skills available to the town's residents. Among the first major challenge that the Afro-Brazilian returnees faced and had to assist resolve was the perennial water shortages that plagued Accra, especially during the long dry season. While the Europeans stored water in underground cisterns in their forts to survive the dry season, the Tabon returnees introduced the construction of wells in the town thus making life much more comfortable and thus reducing the drudgery associated with fetching water from distant streams.

Indeed, the first generation of Tabon returnees was able to pass on many of their artisanal skills unto the larger Ga population, thus improving the quality of life in the town. For example, the Tabon leader Aruna Nelson established the famous 'Scissors House' in 1854, the first professional training centre where hundreds of Accra residents were trained in tailoring and associated skills. The impact of the Tabon on the dress code and fashion business among the city's elite population was immense. Tabon males, particularly the educated leaders, were remembered as "all-round men who dressed properly [...] in European suits with top hats" (Amos & Ayesu, 2002, p. 51). The men through their dressing and behaviour became the epitome of

civilization, self-confidence and gentleness among the elite of Accra during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Similarly, they introduced the skills of stone-cutting into blocks using the appropriate tools and used these stone-buildings for the construction of their homes. The stone-buildings of the Tabon painted in white stood out distinctively amidst the surrounding mud and thatched-roof dwellings of the local residents. These early 19th century rugged stone-buildings were subsequently improved upon with time. It did not take long for the Afro-Brazilian architecture introduced by the Tabon to be emulated by the wealthy Ga elite across other quarters of Accra and in the newly established

suburbs.



Tabon-inspired Sobrado architecture in Accra (ca. 1920s). Source: Steve Tonah, 2022.

The second major economic activity involved persons who went into both subsistence and large-scale cultivation of food (cassava, maize, tomatoes, vegetables etc.), horticultural, herbal medicinal products as well as tree crop plantation (cashew, mango, silk cotton, among others) after clearing the wooded savanna lands

at the outskirts of Accra. The produce from these agricultural ventures secured and diversified the food sources available to the growing population of the town. The Tabon returnees also introduced new dishes to the residents thus diversifying the culinary scene in Accra. As the population of Accra expanded, many of these so-called Brazilian farmlands in the outskirts of the town were later converted into residential and commercial properties for use by the colonial authorities and the residents. With the construction of new residential buildings in the suburbs of Accra to cope with the rapid expansion in the population of Accra during the early 20th century, the one-storey *sobrado* and the two-storey *térreo* buildings

depicting the Afro-Brazilian Tabon architecture spread throughout the town and still dominate the architectural landscape of central Accra today.

The third major economic engagement of the Tabon that impacted on the lives of the residents included a group of traders and wealthy merchants engaged in commercial trading activities in Accra and along the West African coast using their network of relationships with other returnees from Brazil. The Tabon built several warehouses in Accra that were used for the storage and transshipment of goods such as textiles, light manufactured items, palm oil, gold, traditional medicines, artefacts as well as slaves to the West African

coast, Brazil and the Americas. These trading activities created employment for the youth in Accra, increased economic activities in the town and cemented Accra's position as a major trading town in West Africa.



Tabon Agbe group performing at a funeral with the Tabon priestess. Source: Steve Tonah, 2022.

Finally, I would like to mention the contribution of the Tabon returnees to the provision and popularization of education in Accra. The Tabon were among the first to demand from the British, who had taken control of Accra from the Dutch in 1850, to establish a secondary school for their children and as a result the Wesleyan mission established the first post-primary school in Accra in 1876. Indeed, the Tabon were so passionate about education that they are even reported to have supported their slaves and servants to pursue education.

Generally, in the theoretical discussion on the emergence of cities in the 18th and 19th centuries, emphasis have

frequently been placed on cities as locations with large, high population density, heterogeneity of economic activities, high levels of economic specialization, increased individualism and anonymity, a socially diverse population, among many other characteristics. The emergence of cities in Africa has often been associated with the activities of European merchants and colonial administrations. While not disputing this fact, this paper has established the contributions of Tabon immigrants from Brazil and the South Atlantic to the making and transformation of Accra during the early 19th century. They played a key role in securing the town and strengthening the traditional leadership and polity, as well as

in the cultural, social, and economic transformation of Accra into a modern, cosmopolitan town with diversified economic activities and a skilful and educated population. They also contributed to the cultural diversity and hybridity of Accra and the city's tradition as a place where strangers are welcome and given the opportunity to thrive.

Nevertheless, we did also argue that the Tabon leadership also made several errors of judgment upon their arrival in Accra. Their involvement in the slave trade and slavery, particularly at a time that the European powers had formally banned the trade, remains a blot on their otherwise illustrious contributions to the

growth and modernization of Accra. Furthermore, their management of the group's agricultural lands at the outskirts of the town and their consequent transformation of these lands from group ownership into private ownership created divisions, bitterness and acrimony among successive generations of the Tabon. This accounts for the numerous intra-group feuds and court cases and the estrangement of some Tabon families from the group's activities. The mismanagement of the agricultural lands and the chaotic allocation of these lands have also contributed to the chaos, disorderliness and violence associated with the management of land in Accra since the early 20th century.

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