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## An Anthropology of Common Ground

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Published by Mattering Press

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An Anthropology of Common Ground: Awkward Encounters in Heritage Work.

1 ed. Mattering Press, 2018.

Project MUSE. doi:10.1353/book.81375.



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[ Access provided at 7 Apr 2021 00:11 GMT from Universidad De Bogota Jorge Tadeo Lozano ]



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## INTRODUCTION

# COLLABORATION AND THE FRUITS OF AWKWARD RELATIONS

FINALLY, THE DAY HAD COME WHEN THE 'FREDERIKSGAVE PLANTATION AND Common Heritage Site' could officially be inaugurated. Dozens of four-wheel drives were parked along the narrow dusty road that ended at the heritage site in the village of Sesemi, 30 km north of downtown Accra, Ghana. Out of the swirling dust, more and more cars and pedestrians continued to appear. It was a sensuous display of people and dresses: chiefs and their followers in traditional clothes; ministers and officials in suits and ties; queen mothers and women in multicoloured robes; men in ironed shirts; and police officers in dark blue uniforms brought in as security guards for the inaugural day. The usual crowing of the village cock was lost in the noise from the engines of cars trying to squeeze themselves into every possible parking spot, mixed with noises from the testing of the sound system, and laughter and greetings between the recently arrived visitors. The inauguration was the culmination of four years of collaboration, financed by a private Danish fund, between people from the National Museum of Denmark, the University of Ghana, the Ghana Museum and Monuments Board, and the people of Sesemi village. Together, they had excavated and recreated the ruin of a 163-acre former Danish farming plantation, originally constructed around 1831.<sup>1</sup> By 2007, a heritage site commemorating what was most often referred to as Ghana and Denmark's common past was ready to be opened to the public.

The focus of this book is the collaborative project of creating this particular site: the Frederiksgave Plantation and Common Heritage Site, as it was undertaken by the project planners. These comprised a group of people consisting of,

among others, two archaeologists (one of them also the Ghanaian coordinator), four architects, one historian, one director, and four more or less involved coordinators from both Denmark and Ghana. I myself was part of the project both as a short-term paid consultant, employed by the National Museum of Denmark mainly to assist in making the exhibition at the site, and as an anthropologist doing doctoral research. Presenting an ethnography of common heritage work, I here explore the processes and practices of collaboration between Ghanaian and Danish institutions, heritage professionals and laymen, and focus on how all these people, in a variety of ways, engaged with each other, with lime, stones, climate, rulers, exhibition posters, trees, archives, storage rooms, emails and official documents to reconstruct the Frederiksgave plantation. The idea of commonness was articulated in the project's key writings as the overarching motivation for the reconstruction project,<sup>2</sup> but even as the project reached its conclusion, what 'commonness' was, and how it was to be achieved and performed, still seemed rather undecided.

At the Frederiksgave site, the reconstructed plantation mansion now houses an exhibition. It consists of a small booklet and several professionally designed and pre-printed posters, all made in Denmark, which together with excavated objects and copies of various items from the period unfold and explain the two countries' common past as a result of a Danish attempt to establish a plantation in order to grow crops in Africa using enslaved people as the local work-force. Based on meticulous studies of the State Archives in Denmark, the informational material at the Frederiksgave exhibition communicates a story that has its point of departure in the Danish presence and involvement in the transatlantic slave trade on the West African coast, beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century. The written material informs visitors of the Danish ban on the transatlantic slave trade in 1803 that put an end to the transportation of enslaved humans from Africa to the Danish West Indies, today the Virgin Islands, and other Caribbean islands. From the information at the Frederiksgave site, we learn that even though the transportation of enslaved people across the Atlantic was thus banned, it was still legal to keep slaves on the West African coast until the mid-nineteenth century. Accordingly, the Frederiksgave exhibition tells us that instead of withdrawing completely from the region as a result of the ban, people

under the Danish flag<sup>3</sup> settled on the West African coast itself in order to profit from the tropical climate and access to local enslaved workers. Indeed, dreams continued to flourish of exporting exotic goods to the European population increasingly addicted to the sweetness of sugar and the stimulations offered by coffee and other luxury products of the tropics. However, as visitors to the exhibition can also read on the posters in the mansion and in the booklet, even with thirty-two slaves working on the site, Frederiksgave never really succeeded as a plantation.<sup>4</sup> Instead, its location at the foot of the Akuapem Mountains attracted expatriate Danes – mainly based in the Danish headquarters on the coast, Christiansborg Castle – to visit the rather small but majestically built house, sponsored by the Danish King Frederik VI, for other reasons. Only a day's walk from Christiansborg Castle, Frederiksgave offered Danes struggling with tropical diseases a place to recuperate on the plantation veranda, where they could profit from the refreshing breeze, the silence, and the clean water from the nearby spring, and take a break from the busy, humid, and noisy coastal city, today known as Accra.

All of which brings me back to the 2007 inauguration. On this day, all routine seemed reversed in the village of Sesemi. I had the chance to participate in the inauguration and, in addition to doing my fieldwork, I had agreed with the National Museum of Denmark that I would take photos and look after the board members from the Danish foundation that had financed the reconstruction of Frederiksgave. On the opening day, the 200 or so people living in Sesemi took a break from their farms surrounding the village, and from their domestic duties, to take part in the inauguration. Judging by their engagement in the festivities, it seemed as if they enjoyed the fact that the village was exceptionally crowded, noisy, and a far cry from the usual small outpost at the end of a dusty road. The guests invited from outside had been carefully chosen by the Ghanaian and Danish coordinators of the Frederiksgave project and the Chief of Sesemi, and the square stage set up for the inauguration was meticulously organised.

There was no doubt that the heritage project planners intended this to be a prestigious event. A list of prominent guests had been invited. Both the Ghanaian Minister for Culture and Chieftaincy and the Minister for Tourism and Diasporan Relations were there. The Danish Minister for Culture made his first

Welcome to the inauguration of the  
Frederiksgave Plantation and Common Heritage Site



**FIG. 0.1** A copy of the invitation to the inauguration of the Common Heritage Site (front page), 2007.



**FIG. 0.2** The inauguration site from the Frederiksgave building, 2007, Sesemi, Ghana.

trip to Africa to participate in the inauguration, and the Danish Crown Prince Frederik was also invited, although he could not attend. As mentioned above, members of the board from the private Danish fund financing the project were also present, and chiefs and officials from the surrounding area flocked to the site. Even the highest-ranking king of the area, the Ga king, came, albeit later than the other guests and with his own entourage. The high-profile celebration of the opening of Frederiksgave showed that lots of energy, prestige and money were invested in the Common Heritage Project. Even so, the inauguration events demonstrated that achieving commonness is not always a smooth operation. Three situations at the inauguration addressed and complicated commonness in various ways, namely through speeches, the transfer of a particular key, and through food at the site. I describe these situations in the following.

#### **EPISODE ONE: COMMONNESS THROUGH INCANTATIONS**

At the foot of the newly constructed buildings, four huge pavilions, each housing approximately 100 guests on plastic chairs, formed a square, leaving a large central space that would soon be taken over by the many hyperactive photographers – myself included. The first pavilion was mainly populated by chiefs and elders from the area, nicely ranked on rows of chairs. The second pavilion turned the backs of those seated there on the reconstructed main building; this pavilion held many of the Danish guests and other ‘white’ visitors, as the Caucasian race is often called in Ghana. The third pavilion, behind the rostrum, consisted of a red-carpeted stage levelled a step above the other three pavilions; this housed the most prominent Danish and Ghanaian guests. Finally, the fourth pavilion was full of officials and other people from Ghana somehow related to the Frederiksgave project. In addition, the approximately thirty young men who had worked as masons, carpenters and painters at the site were all gathered next to the fourth pavilion.

On reaching his pavilion, the Ga king stepped out of the crowd of photographers, protectors and drummers. He sat down comfortably on the only empty chair left, spreading his legs and solidly planting his royal sandals on the ground as prescribed by tradition, meticulously folding his elegant clothing. Next to

him was the Danish Minister for Culture, in a dark suit and closed shoes; from the crossing of his legs one could glimpse what seemed to be elegant silk socks, but he was evidently unaware of the Ghanaian custom of showing respect by resting both feet on the ground. Besides these two, VIPs from far and wide had made it to the village that day.

During the many opening speeches, we heard words such as ‘our common past’, ‘graced occasion’, ‘historical landmark’, ‘thank God’, ‘overlord of the Ga state’, ‘Danish ambassador to Ghana’, ‘nii me, naa me’ (greeting of traditional heads in the Ga area), ‘museum piece’, ‘Frederiksgave means Frederik’s gift in Danish’, ‘generous funding’, ‘almost *exact* replica’, ‘technical assistance’, ‘dark chapter in our common history’, ‘fruitful collaboration’, ‘common vision’, ‘African slaves’, ‘European nations’, ‘tourists’, ‘a great moment’, ‘partners in our two countries’, ‘future activities’ and ‘our globalised world’. And, with minor variations, mainly over the point at which to mention the Ga king, the introductory spell was repeated over and over again:

Honoured Minister, Mr Vice-Chancellor; Members of the Board of the Augustinus Foundation; Members of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board; distinguished members of the Board of the Frederiksgave Plantation and Common Heritage Site; academics, workers and craftsmen who have excavated and rebuilt Frederiksgave with its exhibition; staff from the University of Ghana and from the National Museum of Denmark; Chief and people of the village of Sesemi; ladies and gentlemen.<sup>5</sup>

This litany of words talked the Common Heritage Site and its participants into being in the hope that in the future the site would attract visitors across differences, matching the attendance and importance given to the site that day.

## EPISODE TWO: COMMON HERITAGE IN A NEW KEY

After almost two hours, the speeches gave way to a small but distinct ceremony. People from the Danish National Museum had come up with the idea of having a gigantic key made according to the old *cire perdu* technique famous among

the Ashanti, an ethnic group from the central part of Ghana. On the handle of the key, an Akan symbol<sup>6</sup> with the so-called Sankofa image was displayed.<sup>7</sup> The Sankofa image on the key showed a bird looking back, which was often explained as meaning ‘Return and pick it up’ or ‘Pick up the gems of the past’<sup>8</sup> implying that it is valuable and important to look into the past, as the Ghanaian coordinator explained to me. From the shade of the carpeted and elevated pavilion, a group of people stepped out into the burning sun. The first in the line, the Director of the National Museum of Denmark, was holding the gigantic key. Instead of the chairman of the Frederiksgave project board – a Ghanaian professor in geography who until this moment had introduced all the speakers – a Dane from the National Museum of Denmark was given the microphone. Without further ado, he asked the Director of the Danish National Museum to hand over the key to the Danish Minister of Culture, who was then solemnly asked to hand over the key to the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana.



**FIG. 0.3** The Danish Minister handing over the key to the Ghanaian Vice-Chancellor, 2007, Sesemi, Ghana.

Each handing over of the key was accompanied by a pause for the photographers to take their photos. Finally, with the key in his hand, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana took the floor and said, 'I now hand over the key to the Chairman of the Board [of the Frederiksgave site]'; another photo session and more applause followed. The chairman responded:

I realise that I'm given a duty to fulfil, and I assure you that we, the members of the board, are going to work day and night to do all that is within our powers to ensure that the purpose for which this building was restored is achieved. Come over any time and see the progress made and we will not disappoint you.

With his last sentence, the chairman anticipated a growing concern of the Danish partner about how to secure the future of the site. In the moment, the key changing hands was meant to sanction the collaborative process of creating a common past, making visible the idea that the Ghanaians in situ were now expected to take their share of the responsibility for maintaining the two countries' common heritage.

However, the key did not only imply such a smooth authorisation of alliance. One of the Danes involved in the manufacture of the key inadvertently let slip that there had been some discussion about who should be involved in the transfer of the key. Since it was a 'symbol of ownership and responsibility', as he put it, it was very important who actually received and passed on the key during the ceremony. I was told that there were even some worries among the Danes involved in the project as to whether they were in a position to receive and give the key at all. Following the logic of the symbol, holding the key meant that, first, the Danish National Museum and, a moment later, the Danish Ministry for Culture were the *owners* of Frederiksgave. This was not formally allowed by Danish law, which I was told prohibits national public institutions from owning property in other countries. As one Dane involved in the project said with a smile immediately after the ceremony, 'The Director of the National Museum couldn't pass on the key soon enough'. Even though the key caused some legal worries among the Danish partners, though, it was a Dane's idea and

not that of the Ghanaian partners to make the wandering key a symbol of shared responsibility for maintaining a common heritage. I learned from the Dane in charge of manufacturing the key that the Ghanaian partners simply approved the idea in advance, but did not express any particular excitement about the symbol. Nevertheless, the next day one of the national newspapers in Ghana devoted a whole page to the inauguration and chose to show a photo of the Vice-Chancellor receiving the key from the Danish Minister of Culture. This little incident points to tricky aspects of funding and making heritage work as a *national* museum outside one's own borders on another nation's soil. This was a complexity that the Danish National Museum, which lacked prior experience of such bilateral work, had to deal with continuously in various ways, as we shall see throughout this book.

### EPISODE THREE: CELEBRATING COMMON HERITAGE

After the ceremony with the key, the chairman of the Frederiksgave Board invited people to the exhibition in the main building. The guests who had sat or stood still for hours now crowded into a long line, headed by the people from the carpeted stage. At the entrance to the plantation building, a red and white ribbon had been suspended between two pillars. A young woman presented a pair of scissors on a pillow to the Ghanaian Deputy Minister for Tourism, who cut the ribbon to mark the official opening of the museum. Within a few minutes, the three small exhibition rooms were full of people who stood closely together, shared the available oxygen, and immortalised each other in this particular place with their cameras and mobile phones. The social order and hierarchies established and enacted inside the four pavilions were quickly undone in the cramped museum building.

After some confused running around, inside and outside the main building, we were told that two dishes had been prepared for the guests: 'a locally made dish' and one 'made for the whites'. The invited guests seeped out of the crowded building. Some rushed immediately back to Accra; others, mainly the Danes still present, mopped their brows and gathered under some trees close to the Sesemi Chief's house, where each was provided with a pre-prepared take-away box of

chicken and rice. Others, mainly people from the area, gathered in the house of one of the village elders where 'local food' was served. Exhausted and hungry after the inauguration, I moved over to the group of Danes sitting under the trees. I was reassured to see that the group of people I had promised to take care of were all assembled under the trees as well. Within seconds, I was immersed in an exchange of email addresses in order to share photos of the inauguration. After emptying our take-away boxes in the shade, we looked at each other and concluded that the inauguration was over. Later, I learned that there had been a party in one of the elders' houses, a party that would surely have been open to us, the Danes sitting under the trees close to the Chief's house eating food for the whites. However, for some reason, at that particular moment none of us, apart from the Danish architect who had worked at the site for months, even seemed to consider taking part in the local celebrations of the opening of the Frederiksgave Common Heritage Site. Going to the party simply never registered as an option. Instead of moving the fifty metres across the dusty road to the place where the 'local food' was being served, I jumped into one of the Danes' four-wheel drives, where my body was soon cooled down by the car's air conditioning. We drove quickly down the red dust road, and disappeared into the smog and heavy traffic of Accra.

The separation of 'whites' from 'locals', and the uneasy exchange of the key to Frederiksgave, make it crucial to ask in what senses this was a celebration of a common past. Condensed in the event of the inauguration, I saw the formation and emergence of a number of subjects and objects, coming together and relating to one another in a joint, yet awkward creation of commonness through heritage work.

The difficult collaborative process of making this happen is what I engage with in this book by studying the day-to-day practices, challenges, differences and assumptions inherent in the crafting of a heritage project conceived as a matter of commonness and a shared past. Alongside this detailed ethnography of a particular heritage project, I also aim to make a methodological and theoretical claim about ethnographic research, arguing for the value of an acute attention to collaboration across difference, and to the entities that are made to emerge in this process. The book, then, is both a methods story about the relational

nature of ethnography, and also a detailed ethnographic account of heritage work. Conditioning and producing one another, these ambitions – studying a common heritage project in a postcolonial society and working ‘postcolonially’ with ethnography – are central to the book. In short, this is my way of approaching heritage work – and fieldwork – in a postcolonial key.

## A COMMON HERITAGE PROJECT EMERGES

The rather detailed inauguration story above sets the frame for some of the overall themes of the book. In the booklet produced to accompany the Frederiksgave plantation site, the aim of the project was described in the following way:

The intention was to explore the common Ghanaian and Danish cultural heritage and inform the populations of both countries about this chapter of their common history. This would occur through the excavation of and research on Frederiksgave and documenting the history of the plantation.<sup>9</sup>

For the project planners, the heritage project was seen as a last chance to do something about the quickly disappearing traces of the Danish presence in Ghana. As many of the Danes involved in the project stated, in a jointly authored article written for a Danish audience:

The purpose of the Frederiksgave project was on the one hand to preserve the Danish-Ghanaian cultural heritage, which in Ghana was and is nearly destroyed, and on the other to communicate Ghana’s and Denmark’s common history in the two countries.<sup>10</sup>

In general, the idea that ‘we’, as in the Danes, have to act now in order to safeguard the physical remnants of a Danish-Ghanaian cultural heritage that would otherwise disappear, was strongly present in the project design and in comments about it.<sup>11</sup> This ‘we’ was manifested by the introduction of the so-called Ghana Initiative under the Danish National Museum, acting as a public Danish institution concerned with the preservation of Danish-Ghanaian

cultural heritage in Ghana. From one perspective, it did indeed require Danish resources to preserve the heritage, since the relatively poor Ghanaian nation was seen as having other budgetary priorities than renovating its European-built ruins – a lack of finances that was often commented on by people working for the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB), the small public institution in charge of Ghanaian heritage and therefore automatically involved in the Frederiksgave project. Neither the importance of the sites – Frederiksgave and other Danish remains on the West African coast – nor the need to preserve them were ever really questioned by the Danish partner, once they had embarked on the projects. The sites were seen as important historical traces, and whenever I visited the dilapidated ruins together with people from the National Museum of Denmark, they lamented that so little had been done to protect the old buildings. Likewise, in a Danish newspaper the Danish coordinator wondered why nothing had been done before.<sup>12</sup> Thus, even if one party to the project of preserving a common past did not for a moment seem to doubt the value of the physical remains, others had different concerns, and not only with ensuring proper funding. Reconstructing the common heritage site was an unpredictable process, fraught with tensions and subtle negotiations of power in spite of being presented by the project-makers as an apolitical issue of salvaging physical remains of a shared and important history. Frederiksgave, then, was much more than a dormant building awaiting excavation and reconstruction; it was an enormous accomplishment to generate the site and make it emerge as a piece of common heritage.

In light of this, the Frederiksgave project invites critical reflection on what it means to ‘collaborate’ across difference and to characterise an initiative as a ‘common,’ ‘heritage,’ ‘project’. On the basis of distinct fieldwork episodes, a main aim of this book is to continuously discuss what these four components of the Frederiksgave project might practically entail, and which entities they bring to life. Instead of pursuing phenomena such as, for instance, ‘Ghanaian history,’ ‘cultural heritage,’ ‘identity-making in a postcolonial setting,’ ‘colonial legacy’ and so on, I explore the project’s four explicit keywords: collaboration, common, heritage and project through Helen Verran’s ideas of a ‘here-and-now’ and relational empiricism.<sup>13</sup> As Verran puts it, this approach pays attention to

‘vague wholes, specifying the ways [their] parts come to life and perhaps die off, identifying the mediations that are important in the ‘doing’ of [these] vague whole[s]’<sup>14</sup>. In this case, these wholes might be variously considered a heritage site, a common heritage project or even the work of producing shared pasts. This is not to say, of course, that issues of Ghanaian history or the Danish colonial legacy are unimportant for my work, but I study these by focusing on how they appear in concrete empirical settings.<sup>15</sup> Historical records and geographical setting are not a passive (back)ground on which Frederiksgave is a figure, but emerge and are articulated in particular ways within the vague whole of my fieldwork project and ethnographic account.

My analytic, inspired by Verran, offers a means to engage with commonness in the making. This focus on the here-and-now implies a radically contemporary view of common heritage as arising from encounters, rather than as a natural result of an historical process, possibly topped up with present-day negotiations. These encounters are in no way devoid of history, but in my anthropology of the Frederiksgave project such historical content can only be understood as it is actualised and materialised in collective action in the present. I see no such thing as Frederiksgave or ‘common heritage’ *a priori* – a primordial material object to which one can add a theoretical layer, to paraphrase anthropologist Martin Holbraad.<sup>16</sup> As Holbraad suggests, things and ideas are conflated, and all one can do is to *think* through things<sup>17</sup> – and, I might add, with a nod to Claude Lévi-Strauss, choose things that are good to think through one’s interests with. My point here is that there is no *ding an sich* or given grounds to given figures.<sup>18</sup> The context, whether regional, thematic or theoretical, is in and of itself a perspective and a product of analysis,<sup>19</sup> just as theory as a driver of analyses is not reserved for researchers.<sup>20</sup> For this book, then, ‘Ghana’, or ‘cultural heritage’, or ‘collaboration projects’ would not work as fixed contexts. Instead, in the collective doings of Frederiksgave, common heritage emerges within the practices of the project as and alongside such (also emergent) entities, events and properties as Ghana, Denmark, shared history, slave trade, commonness, collaboration, or what have you, as all of these are practised in funding applications, Danish and Ghanaian newspapers, offices at the National Museum of Denmark and at the University of Ghana, during guided tours at the forts and castles along the

Ghanaian coastline, in construction materials, in histories of slavery, in choices of exhibition materials, in Danish cultural politics and in the village of Sesemi, to mention only some.

This complexity has an important bearing on my field research and ethnographic storytelling. In exploring the heritage project as always emergent, I sought out actors who were most invested in and concerned with creating Frederiksgave through day-to-day project-making. I did not try to look 'behind' these quotidian practices to some imagined field of pre-given national identities or other such entities that could then be represented; instead, I focused on the voices and actions – and, indeed, shared analytical interests – that continuously brought my field to life. Methodologically, my field engagements can be characterised as a sort of dustballing<sup>21</sup> through the making of common heritage, all the while exploring the bumps in its course created by awkward as well as smooth encounters. Jointly, those of us (most) involved in Frederiksgave chose stories and objects that were good to think with, while letting others go. Writing ethnographically about social life in specific settings is thus not a retelling of 'things the way they were.'<sup>22</sup> Indeed, my assembled Frederiksgave was and is generated by all the encounters and activities I participated in and which jointly produced it as a common heritage project.

In light of this, anthropological method to me is a reflection on the creative process of exploring what falls within our definition of our field and what should be left out; it is a matter of paying attention to how we see in order to incorporate this analytical endeavour into a generative methodology. Hence method becomes a matter of making explicit and critically investigating our questions and choices, and their role in creating the analytical object which becomes the field. Method, in this sense, is an adjectival qualification of the object – a process of selection with the aim of exploring rather than describing what I did 'out there.'<sup>23</sup> Even though it might seem trivial to say, I want to stress that anthropological fieldwork is a dialogue, where one must listen carefully and interrupt respectfully. Fieldwork, and the ongoing analyses guiding the work, is a common activity where one is engaged in a constant give and take that shapes the field as we go along, including the conceptual and analytical resources we draw on or create in the process. What we subsequently do and

publish is an attempt to answer to this creation. My method, then, is also very much a theoretical stance, implying that anthropological objects of study – such as collaborative common heritage – are figurations emerging in the process of analysis, rather than given data. Instead of concluding what Frederiksgave really is (or is not), this generative approach can say what it *also* is.<sup>24</sup>

My concentrated focus on the Frederiksgave project as it became a heritage site of common interest made some figures more apparent than others during my fieldwork. Such selection is inevitably part of any anthropological project. My narrow focus on the process of collaborative reconstruction has made some of the people involved in the project seem more prominent and dominant than others. The project planners, in particular, appear vital and enthusiastic when talking about turning the ruin into a heritage site of common interest. Other people were involved in the project, but did not engage as much in its explicit goal. I have grappled with this challenge mainly by following the focus and logic of the project and its planners, who differentiated between this main goal and what they termed ‘side-effects’ of the project. Importantly, this has led me to pay less attention to the project’s less dominant voices, although they were a constant presence in the awkward engagements that I analyse throughout the chapters, and are vital clues to the complexity of commonness in collaborative heritage-making that is my overall concern. If Ghanaian workers or villagers seem less outspoken in this book about the project of constructing a common heritage site, this is a reflection of the idea that the object of study is generated along the way, and through the fieldwork experiences of those who take an interest in it. As such, the relative absence of, say, the viewpoints of Ghanaian masons is not a result of ‘misrepresentation’, lack of access, or national bias, but is in itself an important critical finding, speaking volumes about the politics of common heritage. One of the privileges of anthropology, as I see it, is to explore non-commissioned processes of collaborative and local (can it be otherwise?) theorisation through which subjects and objects emerge via the work of those who care.<sup>25</sup> This localises my analysis just as much as my informants’ analyses of their lives and the world, even if we might of course have different genres at our disposal and different aims at heart – say, constructing a building or writing a book. With these considerations in mind, I now turn to discuss

what I take the words ‘collaboration’, ‘project’, ‘common’ and ‘heritage’ (in that order) to imply in the collective ambition of generating Frederiksgave as a site of commonness.

In her book *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005), Anna Tsing suggests that we can undertake an ethnography of global connections by focusing on

zones of awkward engagement, where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak. These zones of cultural friction are transient; they arise out of encounters and interactions.<sup>26</sup>

Given that the Frederiksgave project in Ghana grew out of spatially widespread collaborations and advances, or even depended upon international relations, I see the Frederiksgave heritage work as global.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the Danish National Museum’s recent engagements in ‘the hot colonies’ – as the former museum director collectively termed Danish interests in India, the US Virgin Islands and Ghana, in order to distinguish them from what he called ‘the cold colonies’, designating former Danish colonies such as Greenland, Iceland and the Faeroe Islands – were all instances of global connections and collaborations across differences.<sup>28</sup> Importantly, such a focus on the globalised nature of heritage work does not preclude a localised anthropological study of these projects, as also noted above. In Tsing’s work, indeed, the global connections *take place*, and friction points to the specificity of these connections.<sup>29</sup> In order to study friction as a productive process, one must therefore ‘begin again, and again, in the middle of things’.<sup>30</sup> Taking these cues, my field – the collaborative reconstruction of Frederiksgave as a continuous creation of a common past – can be seen as a zone of awkward engagement, a momentary spot of cultural friction generating new figures, understood as constellations of ideas, nations, persons, tools, artefacts and construction materials.

‘Awkwardness’ is presented as a productive term for studying the friction implied in collaboration across divides – as a companion to dialogue. In my case, working with awkward engagements allows for what I think of as a generative analysis of the Frederiksgave heritage project. Such an analysis co-creates its

object by using differences productively, rather than mapping them as if they were parts of an already given object. I thus explore collaboration as a product of disparity – as a friction that captures relations or connections between things and ideas that do not quite fit. *Collaboration*, then, becomes at once a complex empirical feature (different people joining forces to create Frederiksgave across divides), an analytical key to finding out what the Common Heritage Site was made to be (what they were even building and on what grounds), and a theoretical puzzle in need of investigation (what it means to work together with and through difference).

But what, then, is a project? A project can be defined as ideas and practices that are relatively tightly clustered, appearing as particular historical activities and designed to have a beginning and an end.<sup>31</sup> A project is based on and can be seen through concrete activities. In the case of the Frederiksgave project, these concrete activities were the reconstruction of a ruin and its transformation into a heritage site supposedly of common interest. These activities were undertaken in Ghana and Denmark, in archives, universities and museums, as well as in emails, newspapers, applications for grants, discussions, and so on – a range of ‘places’ that expands a narrow and physical understanding of location. The Frederiksgave project was initiated in 2004 with a grant from a private Danish fund, and ended in 2007, as projected in the project description and application for the funds.<sup>32</sup> Even after 2007, though, additional grants were allocated for further reconstruction and landscaping of the site, and to help the newly established board with their initial work.<sup>33</sup> With these characteristics, the Frederiksgave project was initially able to appear in reports, plans and applications as a coherent and pre-defined whole. However, projects never fully accomplish what the planners intend in any straightforward way. As Paul Greenough and Anna Tsing remind us, it is in the very unfinished nature of a project that a study of it must begin.<sup>34</sup> The incomplete realisation of projects teaches us about the world.<sup>35</sup> Following this lead, I explore the reconstruction of the Frederiksgave site as a *project* in this specific sense, namely as a concrete, incomplete and unpredictable undertaking – i.e. not as a pre-designed whole which was then merely implemented, but as an object that was created through bumbings, failures and reformulations.<sup>36</sup> A project, in this sense, becomes a

valuable prism through which to ethnographically explore the unpredictable process of making common heritage.

This leads me on to look at what ‘common’ might imply at Frederiksgave, by attending to the manifold practices through which the project came to be characterised as such. As a common heritage project between partners from Danish and Ghanaian institutions, academics and workmen, (both trained and untrained), bureaucrats and trainees, the Frederiksgave project continuously invoked a notion of ‘our past’ and explicitly aimed to explore the shared Ghanaian-Danish history, as I also described in the story of the inauguration. Soon after I was introduced to the project in the summer of 2006, it became clear that the short but often-repeated word ‘common’ was causing just as many tensions and challenges as it was providing goodwill, felicitations and celebrations – again, these contradictions are seen in the story of the inaugural ceremony. It became apparent that the word ‘common’ was not merely a simple adjective added on to the notions of ‘heritage’ and ‘project’, even if it was presented that way in funding applications and other documents; instead, it indicated and produced awkward relations.<sup>37</sup> As anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1987) has argued, greater insight might be gained by maintaining a tension or ‘hesitation’ between two disciplines – in which each perspective is rendered vulnerable by its susceptibility to being ‘mocked’ by the other – than by attempting to let one substitute the other, or by choosing between them. The awkwardness generated by such tension, then, is more like a doorstep than a barricade; the genteel dubbing of the project as ‘common’ is a starting point for my analysis, not a result. The premise for my work, then, is that the *commonness* in the Frederiksgave project is produced as a continuous and unending organisation of, among others, ‘Danes’ and ‘Ghanaians’, history and the present, artefacts and words, the local and the global. My concern here is to not readily replicate dualisms of, for example, ‘Danes’ versus ‘Ghanaians’, or ‘black’ versus ‘white’ – though both these dualisms emerged regularly during my fieldwork in Ghana and Denmark – but rather to explore the hesitations that mock the assumed naturalness of such dualisms. This, in my opinion, is a hallmark of an ethnography of a post-colonial heritage project – a point I will return to in Chapter Five.

The understandings of collaboration, projects and commonness described above have a direct and very important bearing on what I take the notion of ‘heritage’ – the fourth of the words that I need to discuss in this introduction – to imply in the context of this book. By heritage I simply mean to indicate the ethnographic phenomenon I explored during my fieldwork. Heritage, here, is nothing but its particular instantiations in the Frederiksgave project. These instantiations – the empirical material for this book – are in a sense themselves results of the project planners’ analyses, my questions during fieldwork, and all of our activities at the site, and are thereby expressions of theories about heritage.<sup>38</sup> This is to say that as an ethnographic phenomenon, heritage as it was brought to life in the Frederiksgave project was ‘theorised’ in a number of ways by the project planners and by me.<sup>39</sup> The reason why I engage with common heritage, then, is that it was an important part of the project planners’ vocabulary that I encountered and contributed to during fieldwork. As a discipline based on fieldwork, anthropological analysis of heritage has the advantage of taking its point of departure from concrete empirical fields, rather than from pre-given ideas about what heritage is. The latter approach, I think, would unwarrantedly reduce the empirical material to mere ‘cases’ or ‘illustrations’ of an already given object. Ethnographies, I believe, can do better than that.

To be sure, pointing to this theoretical element in any ethnographic material is not to imply that the project of the anthropologist is coextensive with that of his or her interlocutors, or that he or she uncritically adopts positions held by his or her ethnographic subjects. But it is meant to complicate neat distinctions between data and analysis – a deliberate complication that is an important premise for this book as a whole, which focuses on the emergence of Frederiksgave through a collaborative process in which project-makers, anthropologists, notions of commonness, historical records, walls and trees took part, among many others.

The notion of heritage was often used by my interlocutors, primarily the people from the National Museum. In qualifying what they meant by the term, they often mentioned the importance of knowing one’s history, and referred to various charters and conventions. According to the UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972),

which is still in force, heritage is defined as material and tangible monuments, sites and formations worth conserving for the future due to their 'outstanding value' from the perspectives of, among other things, science, art, aesthetics, history, anthropology and conservation.<sup>40</sup> Over the last few decades, scholars have drawn attention to the US-Eurocentric perspective reflected in these universalising formulations.<sup>41</sup> Even though discussions within UNESCO have aimed at broadening the concept of heritage – resulting, for instance, in the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), and the Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) – the Frederiksgave project was very much perceived by the project planners as in line with the Venice Charter (1964) and the UNESCO Convention from 1972 in its focus on conserving material constructions of outstanding value, as I will discuss further in Chapter Three. At least, this was the explicit motivation behind the project in the eyes of the planners; the ruin of the former Frederiksgave plantation had enough value to deserve action. Importantly, it was never presented as a community project – a type of project that has been treated relatively extensively in heritage literature.<sup>42</sup> Nor was it a project communicating an oral tradition maintained by generations of villagers living close to the site, or any other such instance of intangible heritage catering to other views of the past than those of the project planners. Being based on a seemingly uncomplicated view of heritage as described in the Venice Charter, the Frederiksgave project did not employ any notion of community to be treated with special care. In this sense, the Common Heritage Project deviated from what seem to be trends in Anglophone heritage work to develop inclusive and alternative practices that recognise subaltern communities or other competing concepts of heritage.<sup>43</sup> In the spirit of the Venice Charter and the 1972 UNESCO Convention, then, the Frederiksgave Common Heritage Project planners understood heritage as something that is already there and has an inherent value – a position that of course gives rise to a series of other difficulties and subtle negotiations of importance, as I will show throughout the book. The point here is to stress that these difficulties were – perhaps curiously – never articulated as having to do with 'community', 'colonialism' or 'subaltern legitimacy', as some newer heritage literature suggests.<sup>44</sup> Rather, to the project planners, all of whom were

publicly paid state institutions within the two countries concerned, heritage was understood as something to be excavated, renovated, conserved, collected and researched. And this is perhaps the overall reason why I wanted to explore the project ethnographically in the first place: maybe fieldwork experiences would complicate this potentially naïve approach built into the Frederiksgave project. Maybe seemingly simple concepts of common heritage would turn out in practice to be much less straightforward. Keeping in tension both my fieldwork experiences, and the scholarly literature and debates in which I had been steeped as a researcher and academic, then, the approach I adopted made clear that I could neither see common heritage as already existing, waiting to be unveiled and worshipped for its outstanding value, nor simply as the result of compromises or tensions between distinct communities. Instead, to offer a contribution that draws from, complements and extends the work of the project, I approach heritage, too, as something that people do through various relations with construction materials, ideals, places, archives, standards, policies and each other.

With these qualifications of the words ‘collaboration’, ‘project’, ‘commonness’ and ‘heritage’ in mind, I think of this book as an ethnographic exploration of the complex ways that the Frederiksgave Common Heritage Project came to life through the difficult collaboration of people, materials, tools, words, documents, scientific practices, valuations, and so on. My overall aim is to contribute to a new generative mode of researching cultural heritage, and, more broadly and perhaps more importantly, to suggest and practise an anthropology of common ground that is appropriate for a postcolonial era.

## BOOK OUTLINE

In Chapter One, I offer an account of the making of my object of study. I focus on how the Frederiksgave plantation became a project site and my field site, by describing how I continuously encountered the Common Heritage Project through fieldwork in Ghana, on the basis of documents that described the work, in archival sources, in the texts that I was given, through the Ghanaian location that hosted it, in the National Museum of Denmark that financed it, and in other

places besides. As such this chapter is also figured out through fieldwork and does not present a stable background for my ensuing analyses.

In Chapter Two, I shift to an investigation of how people from the Danish National Museum conceptualised, designed and framed the Frederiksgave project from the outset. I critically analyse how they envisioned the Common Heritage Site as a cultural encounter with its roots in cultural relativism. Furthermore, I seek to investigate further the notion of ‘our common past’ as embedded in an idea of a universal history to be shared equally by the two parties. Although planned and innocently presented as an instance of an encounter between pre-given cultural entities (Denmark and Ghana), and as a simple matter of scientifically informing about and displaying a common (and difficult) history, the main point is to show that in the process of its realisation the Common Heritage Project figured these and other entities in complex ways in moments arising out of friction and contact.

In Chapter Three, I concentrate on the actual material reconstruction process of the heritage site, and on the workings of things. The chapter engages discussions about the authenticity of materials, and my main point here is to investigate the overseeing architect’s analysis of the reconstruction site, and explore how his interest in the materials and techniques used in the reconstruction was a vital element in imitating the original Frederiksgave plantation and thus bringing it to life. Rather than finding pure imitation, I emphasise the creative alterations, indeed, the magic elements, of reconstructing a heritage site.

In Chapter Four, I turn to ideas of fetish and powerful materiality in order to understand the constant attention paid to topography and the nature of the materials used in the reconstruction process. The concept of the fetish, originating in a cross-cultural setting of trade in West Africa, is the prism through which I explore the expression and creation of value, which again produced and described the Frederiksgave site as an authentic heritage site that could communicate our common past in truthful ways. The main point is to show that valuing heritage can be seen as complex and mysterious, and that its effect *as heritage* can be shown to rest on different valuations.

In order to qualify heritage work as a generative activity, in Chapter Five – which is also the concluding chapter, reflecting back on the previous ones – I

engage the notion of the ‘postcolonial moment’ to analyse how sameness and difference, rather than being givens, were constantly made during the Frederiksgave project. In order to do so, I purposely stay in the awkward and dissonant situations that kept challenging the difference and sameness anticipated by the project planners. I argue that we should not ignore these difficult moments, but rather use them actively in the further generation of common heritage projects. In other words, there might be a lesson to be learned if we let these moments stay around and do not shy away from the unsettled negotiations and subtle power relations at play in these encounters. Postcolonialism, in this light, becomes an analytical impulse and not a quality of specific regional settings, or a marker of an epochal period. I thus end by suggesting that to pay attention to the details of how subjects and objects emerge in the joints of the concrete is to discover a fresh way of engaging in heritage work for the future – and of conducting postcolonial anthropology on common ground.

