

As Built

Oxi Mancer

16 October 2026

Original: <https://oximancer.com/stories/as-built/>

Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Dzokpo, 3 March

Dear Mama,

You told me not to write about the sea, so I will start with the house.

This morning I stood in Mr Amegashie's front room while the scanner went round it like a slow bee, and thirty kilometres inland, in a field that grew cassava last year, a machine the height of a church was already printing the same room in wet red earth. I have seen the file. The new room will have the same brown patch on the ceiling where the rain came through in 2031. It will have the same nail by the door with nothing hanging on it. The only thing it will not have is the sound of the waves, which in his front room is so loud that twice we had to stop talking and wait for them to finish.

I know you did not want me to take this job. I know you think I came to Dzokpo to look for something. I came because the Like-for-Like Resettlement Programme pays better than the Ministry, and because my Ewe is so bad they had to give me a pair of Hearth earbuds to translate, and they still hired me, which tells you how few people want to spend four months telling old people that their village is going to move.

Here is what I do. When a house has been scanned, I sit down with the household and we go through Schedule R-7, the Schedule of Retained

Imperfections. The scanner finds every flaw: cracks, stains, a step worn into a dip, a shutter that does not close, a wall painted in three different blues because the shop ran out twice. The new house is printed exactly as built unless the family asks for a correction. So we go flaw by flaw. Keep, or correct. People here call it the crack paper.

I thought everybody would correct everything. Who would not want a roof that does not leak? But today a fisherman called Senyo kept a brown stain on his bedroom wall that is the shape of Lake Volta, because his son learned the map of Ghana from it. A woman called Dela kept the front step that tips her forward every morning, because “then I will know I am home.” Mr Amegashie, who taught at the primary school for forty-one years, corrected his roof and kept everything else, including the nail. I asked him what the nail was for.

“For asking about,” he said.

Auntie Akorfa’s house is on my list for the second week. I have not gone to see her yet. I am telling you now so that you do not hear it from someone else.

Your daughter, Selorm

Dzokpo, 11 March

Dear Mama,

Thank you for the voice note. I know you say a voice note is not a letter, but I played it three times anyway. No, I am not eating fish every day. Yes, I sleep under the net.

I did Auntie Akorfa’s house on Monday. She made me tea with too much milk and asked me nothing about you, which in our family is a kind of question. The scanner found two hundred and six imperfections. She kept almost all of them. I will tell you more another time, or perhaps she will.

Let me tell you about the wall instead, because it is eating my whole week.

Behind Mr Amegashie's house and Mama Esinam Tamakloe's house there is a shared wall, low, laterite, with broken bottle glass set along the top, green and brown, which in the evening light looks like a row of boiled sweets. Halfway along, the wall bends. It goes out and around a coconut palm, like a man stepping around a sleeping dog, and then comes back to its line. The palm is old and leans over Mama Esinam's yard, where she has her four fish ovens, and every few weeks a coconut falls on her side.

For forty-five years they have argued about whose palm it is.

Mr Amegashie has a survey map from 1958, folded into sixteen and soft as cloth, on which the boundary is a straight line. On a straight line the palm is his. His father planted it in 1974, he says, and he was nine and remembers the hole. Mama Esinam says the mason who built the wall in 1979 went around the palm because everybody knew whose it was, and the mason's son is still alive in Anloga and will tell you so. The mason's son, I am told, says whatever the last person who bought him a drink wants him to say.

The programme's rule is simple: boundaries are rebuilt as built, unless both households sign a variation. The scanner measured the bend. It is one metre and twelve centimetres at the widest. The palm itself cannot come, because palms that old do not survive a move, but our agronomist has germinated three of its nuts, and the strongest seedling will be planted in New Dzokpo exactly where its mother stood, inside the bend. So the quarrel will be printed to the centimetre and replanted.

I spent two hours with them yesterday. They will not sit in the same room, so I walked between the two yards with the tablet like a waiter. Mr Amegashie wanted the straight line. Mama Esinam wanted the bend. Each refused to sign anything the other had touched. In the end I wrote item thirty-one on both their schedules: *Boundary wall, bend at palm. Disputed. Retained as built pending agreement.* Then I went and sat on the beach until my hands stopped shaking. They do that now after the long sessions. I do not know why.

You asked me not to write about the sea. I am sorry. It is not the sea at Labadi. It is bigger, and it is in a hurry. Last August it took the coast road, the Catholic school and the football pitch in one night. At low tide the top of the school wall still sticks up out of the water, and boys sit on it and fish where their classroom was.

Most of the young men will not move. They say the copy is thirty kilometres from the water and you cannot smoke fish you do not have. The programme has printed Mama Esinam's ovens anyway, all four, down to the soot. She kept the soot.

Selorm

Dzokpo, 19 March

Dear Mama,

Something has happened that I am not allowed to tell anyone, so I am telling you, because you have not spoken to anyone from this village in forty-eight years and I do not think you will start now.

Mr Amegashie came to the site office yesterday evening after the others had gone home. He was wearing a pressed white shirt, as if for church, and he carried the 1958 map. He sat on the plastic chair, put the map on my desk and did not unfold it.

"I want to change item thirty-one," he said.

I told him again that a variation needs both households to sign.

"No. Listen to me. I want the bend moved. Put it the other way, around my side, so that the tree stands in her yard. One metre and twelve, you said. Give it to her."

I asked him why. He took a long time. The generator outside was coughing, and he waited for it to finish, the way he waits for the waves.

"Because I am seventy-nine and she is eighty-one," he said, "and in the new place there will be no sea and no fish and nothing for her hands to do, and the tree will be a baby, and she should have something that

is hers from the beginning.” Then he tapped the map. “And you will not tell her I asked. You will write that the survey was corrected. Make it the government’s fault. Everybody here believes everything is the government’s fault. They are usually right.”

I said I could not put a false reason on a variation.

“Then do it honestly,” he said, “and do not tell her the honest part.”

At the door he stopped and said, “Your mother was in my class. Primary five. She was the only child who could do long division in her head, and the only one who argued with me when I was wrong.” He seemed to think this explained something about me. Perhaps it does.

I have not decided anything. I am writing it down tonight so that tomorrow I will know I really heard it.

Selorm

Dzokpo, 22 March

Dear Mama,

Now it is worse.

Today was Mama Esinam’s last session, the ovens and the yard. The earbud was in my ear as usual. When she speaks I hear her voice, and then half a second later I hear her voice again in my head, speaking polite English, a little too sweet. It makes her sound like a woman reading out a recipe. She is not that kind of woman.

We had kept the soot and the cracked chimney on oven three and the place where the ground is black from forty years of coconut husk fires. Then we came to the wall, and she reached over without a word, took the earbud out of my ear, and dropped it into a basin of shallots.

Then she spoke to me in Ewe, slowly, the way you would speak to a child or a goat, and I understood almost everything. It surprised us both.

She said the tree is his. It was always his. She was eleven when his father planted it, and she carried the water for it from the lagoon in a paint tin, and his father gave her a groundnut for every trip.

I asked her why, then, forty-five years.

She looked at the wall for a while. Then she said that in 1999 his wife died in the rains, and afterwards he stopped speaking. He went to school, he came home, he closed the door. He did not come out for funerals or for football. People left food on his step and found it there in the morning with the ants. "So I stole his coconuts," she said. "Every morning, early, I took whatever fell, and I left the husks on my side of the wall where he could see them. And every morning he came out to the wall to shout at me. He shouted for a month. Then he started to enjoy it. Then I could not stop, because if I stopped he would know why I had started."

I said nothing. My Ewe does not go that far, and anyway there was nothing to say.

"Now we are going," she said. "No sea. He will sit inside that copy of his house and look at that copy of his nail. Move the bend onto my side. Give him the tree. Write that the map was right. He trusts maps. Let him win once, from a piece of paper, and not from me. And you will not tell him."

Then she fished the earbud out of the shallots, wiped it on her cloth, and put it back in my ear herself, and in the polite English voice she asked if I wanted to take some fish home for my mother.

I said yes. It is in the freezer at the site office. I do not know how to post a smoked fish to Accra.

So now I have two requests on my desk, and they cannot both be done. He wants the tree on her side. She wants it on his. Each wants a secret. If I do neither, the wall is built as it was and nobody ever knows. That is what the rules say I should do. It is also the easiest thing, and I have

noticed that the easiest thing is usually where my own cowardice goes to hide.

Selorm

Dzokpo, 29 March

Dear Mama,

I have done something and I am still not sure if it was right.

On Thursday I asked them both to come to the wall at five o'clock, about item thirty-one. I did not say the other one would be there. They each arrived, saw the other, and turned round to go home, and I said, quite loudly, "Both of you have asked me to give the tree away."

They stopped.

I said that each of them had come to me alone and asked me to move the bend so the palm would stand in the other's yard. I said I could not do both. I said I would not do either without two signatures, which was true, and that I would not lie on a government form, which was also true, and that they were both too old for me to be frightened of anymore, which was not true at all.

I did not tell them why. I want you to understand that part. I told them what each had asked, and not the reasons. His reason is his, and hers is hers. I think a person can be kind with half of a secret, if she is careful which half she gives away.

For a moment nobody spoke. The sea went on behind us. Then Mama Esinam said something to him in Ewe that I will not write down, partly because it was rude and partly because I am not certain of the verb, and he answered in the English he uses for parents at prize-giving, and then they were both talking at once, across the broken glass.

I did not put the earbud in. I stood a few metres back and I watched their hands, because I could only follow perhaps one word in five, and that was enough. He was pointing at the palm and then at her. She

was pointing at the palm and then at him. They were having the same argument they have been having for forty-five years, only now it was turned inside out. He was shouting that the tree was hers to keep, and she was shouting that it was his, that his father had planted it for him and not for any woman with a paint tin, and he was shouting that it was exactly because it was his that he could give it, and she said, I think, that he had always been a terrible teacher of logic.

It went on until the light was going. Senyo came to the gap between the houses to see who was being killed, and when he saw who it was he laughed and went away again. Dela brought out a stool and sat on it to listen, as if it were the radio.

At the end, Mr Amegashie unfolded his map. All sixteen squares of it. He looked at the straight line for a long time. Then he folded it up again, and handed it over the wall to her, and she took it. He did not say anything. She did not say thank you. She put it inside her cloth, at the waist, where she keeps her money.

Neither of them signed. Item thirty-one now reads: *Boundary wall, bend at palm. Disputed. Retained as built at the request of both households.* That is the only sentence I have ever written for this programme that is entirely true.

When I was walking back, Mr Amegashie caught me up on the path. He was out of breath. I thought he would be angry. He said, "You are a worse liar than your mother. That is a compliment," and went back home.

Mama Esinam has not spoken to me since. But there was a parcel of fish outside the office door this morning, wrapped in newspaper, still warm.

Selorm

New Dzokpo, 14 June

Dear Mama,

They moved on Saturday.

I wish you could have seen it, though I know you would have said the whole thing was a circus, and you would have been right. Trucks, a brass band from Keta, a man from the Ministry with a ribbon and a very large pair of scissors. There is a plaque, of course. It says *Nothing Lost*. Somebody had already scratched a small question mark after it by Sunday morning. I suspect a retired schoolteacher, but I have no evidence, and I am not going to look for any.

It is the strangest place I have ever stood. Every house is exactly right. The step that tips Dela forward tips her forward. The stain in the shape of Lake Volta is on Senyo's bedroom wall, and his son lay on the bed on the first night and named the towns along its shore out loud. The nail is by Mr Amegashie's door. He has hung his map case on it, empty. Everything is exactly right, and every few minutes somebody turns their head towards the south, to listen for something, and then stops, and looks embarrassed. I do it too. I have only been here four months and I do it too.

The ovens are printed and Mama Esinam is using them. A truck brings fish from Keta twice a week now. It costs more and tastes, she says, of diesel and other people's luck. But she lights the fires at five every morning, and the smoke goes up from four chimneys exactly where it went up before, only with cassava fields around it instead of water.

The seedling is planted inside the bend. It is about as tall as my knee, with three leaves like green feathers. The agronomist says a coconut palm takes six years to bear fruit. Mr Amegashie says he will be dead by then. Mama Esinam says that would be exactly like him, to leave before an argument is finished.

Every evening, when it is cooler, they both water it. She waters it from her side, with a paint tin. He waters it from his side, with a plastic jug. Each of them, I am told, explains loudly to anyone passing that they are watering the other one's tree, out of the goodness of their heart, because the other one is too old and too lazy to do it properly. The seedling gets

twice as much water as it needs. The agronomist is worried about it. I told him to leave it alone.

Now I have to tell you about Auntie Akorfa, and I have to break one more promise to do it. I have broken two in this village already. I am getting very good at it, and I am not proud.

When we did her schedule in March, there was one item she would not decide in front of me. Item fourteen: *Crack, kitchen wall, left of the hearth, approximately the length of a hand. Plaster loss consistent with impact.* She sat and looked at it for a long time, and then she said she would tell me later, and on the last day before the move she came to the office and said, “Keep it.”

I asked her if she was sure. Everyone corrects impact damage. It is the first thing they correct.

She said, “My sister made that crack with a pestle in 1996, the night before she went to Accra. She was aiming at me and she missed. She always missed. She was better at sums.” Then she made me promise not to tell you she had kept it, because, she said, it would look like she was asking for something, and she is not asking for anything. She is only keeping a crack.

I have been in her new kitchen. It is a copy of the old one, which means it is a copy of the kitchen you grew up in, which I have never seen until now. The shelves are where you would expect your hand to go. The window looks out at the cassava instead of the sea, but it is the same window, the same blue paint, the same nail holes where the calendar used to hang. And to the left of the hearth, at about the height of a woman’s shoulder, there is a crack the length of a hand, with a little chip at one end, exactly where you left it.

Your daughter, Selorm

As Built by Oxi Mancer. First published at <https://oximancer.com/stories/as-built/>.

This story is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). You may share and adapt it for any purpose, provided you credit Oxi Mancer, link to the original story and indicate if changes were made. License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>