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Slaving and Slave Trading in Africa

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Abstract

Slavery in Africa dates to antiquity. Slave trading networks in Africa transported people across the Sahara and the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, with significant numbers of people sent to the Middle East, India, central Asia, and South and Southeast Asia. Africa, however, was not only a source of export of people; enslaved persons were also imported into the continent. This article reviews scholarly research into the capture, trade, and use of enslaved men, women, and children in Africa, with a focus on Ghana. It suggests that the history and legacies of slavery and slave trading cannot be understood without reference to African historiography, the politics of knowledge production, and present-day heritage tourism. In reviewing the historical and anthropological research, it also introduces some of the possibilities, problems, and challenges of archaeological approaches to studying slavery and slave trading to demonstrate that archaeology is in conversation with—and of value to—those outside the discipline.

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INTRODUCTION

Slavery in Africa dates to antiquity, though no precise estimates of its scale exist. The terms “slave” and “slavery” are found in many African dialects, languages, and sayings. Yet, definitions of enslavement and slave status remain elusive precisely because it has existed in various forms across Africa, spatially and temporally. It is, therefore, useful to speak of slavery in Africa but not “African slavery,” as if slavery were coterminous with the continent (Cooper 1979). Large- and small-scale systems of servility and unfree labor in the Savanna and Sahel existed for centuries (Klein & Lovejoy 1979). Slave trading networks in Africa transported people across the Sahara and the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, with significant numbers of people sent to the Middle East, India, central Asia, and South and Southeast Asia. Africa, however, was not only a source of export of people; enslaved persons were also imported into the continent. Together, slaveries and slave trades have facilitated the movement of people, things, knowledge, skills, ideas, and imaginaries into, out of, and across Africa, transforming communities in the continent and beyond.

This review provides an overview of some of the themes and questions that have driven scholarly research into the dynamics and consequences of the capture, trade, and use of enslaved men, women, and children in Africa, with a focus on Ghana. I suggest that the history and legacies of slavery and slave trading cannot be understood without reference to African historiography, the politics of knowledge production, and present-day heritage tourism. In reviewing insights generated by historical and anthropological research, I also briefly introduce some of the possibilities, problems, and challenges of archaeological approaches to studying slavery and slave trading. These approaches offer fruitful future research directions and demonstrate that archaeology is in conversation with—and of value to—those outside the discipline.

SLAVERY IN AFRICA

In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars committed to postcolonial nation building produced revisionist histories that countered the colonial archive and its ideologies. In this wave of scholarship, many historians circumvented the topic of enslavement because it raised uncomfortable questions about enslavers, slave traders, the enslaved, and their descendants that were seen as a possible threat to national cohesion (Greene 2017, Keren 2009). Consequently, much research on enslavement in Africa in the early postcolonial period was conducted by non-African scholars, though gradually this shifted.

Over several decades, historians and anthropologists debated definitions of slavery and slave status. Africanists emphasized that a range of institutions, processes, and practices encapsulate a diverse spectrum of bondage practiced on the continent, including large- and small-scale enslavement, servitude, dependency, and unequal social and power relations (Manning 1990, Meillassoux 1991, Miers 2003, Miller 1988). These institutions of marginality (Miers & Kopytoff 1977) frame slavery and other forms of social oppression (Rodney 1966) within patron-client relationships. Individuals on one end of the spectrum experienced a complete loss of liberty or personal autonomy, while at the other end individuals possessed a relatively high degree of independence and agency. This breadth is reflected in the nomenclature of those owned by or indebted to others (as collateral or insurance for debts): “subjects,” “servants,” “serfs,” “pawns,” and “slaves” (Lovejoy & Falola 2003). These positions were often contested and negotiated. Some terms imply a permanent state of unfreedom, while others infer temporariness—for example, “panyarring” (seizing a family member for crimes committed or debts owed until matters are resolved). Specific to individual contexts, these terms embody historical, legal, and culturally defined rights and privileges rooted in autochthonous African conceptions of labor, freedom, and individuality (Inikori 1996).

Today, Africanists advocate for the use of local terminology and descriptions of precise conditions grounded in empirical research rather than the term “slavery.”

Unfree laborers in Africa filled various roles in agriculture, royal bureaucracies, gold mining, salt production, craft production, portage, and domestic affairs, and as human sacrifices in funerary traditions. An enslaved person’s role and status varied according to time and place, and the free and unfree often carried out identical labor. Most definitions consider that an enslaved individual could be bought, sold, bequeathed, or disposed of without their consent, or was a kinless “outsider” or “other” in a kinship-based society whose status had been reduced to a commodity. Yet, in some contexts, an enslaved person could nonetheless own other enslaved persons. Exploitation, physical and/or psychological abuse, deprivations, and restrictions on status, mobility, or manumission varied widely (Klein 1978, Lovejoy 2012, McSheffrey 1983, Miers & Roberts 1988, Stilwell 2014).

In scholarship on slavery coming from Europe and the Americas, the scale and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade have been foci for decades. Best estimates suggest approximately 12.5 million captive Africans were transported via the Middle Passage into slavery in the Americas between 1650 and 1850 (Curtin 1969, Eltis et al. 1999). This figure, however, does not include the smaller numbers traded from 1444 to 1515, or approximately 6,000 voyages for which there are no data (M.A. Klein, personal communication; Lovejoy 1982). When smuggling is also factored in, the actual number is probably closer to 14 million. For the Saharan, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean trades, an educated estimate is not yet possible. These trades lasted for longer but never reached the numbers the transatlantic slave trade reached in the eighteenth century.

The history of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery cannot be understood in isolation from other systems of bondage on the African continent (Perbi 1992). While studies of the transatlantic slave trade contribute toward understanding enslaved Africans and their descendants in the diaspora, much of this work fails to consider the many individuals who lived through servitude in Africa prior to bondage in the New World. Atlantic-centric research also views the African diaspora as situated in the Americas rather than also within Africa itself. Scholarship in this vein overlooks forms of slavery and slave trading indigenous to the continent, and thereby risks obscuring the magnitude and diversity of unfreedom globally and excluding millions of captive Africans from recorded history (Larson 2008).

Like a focus on the Atlantic slave trade, for a long time, scholarship focused on enslaved men, despite the rise of women and gender studies in the 1970s. In Africa, female slavery in the privacy of large households was less documented, and enslavement was often masked using kinship terms or by referring to enslaved females as servants (Miller 2008). Women as slaveholders, traders, and beneficiaries of slave labor long went understudied, as the very topic challenges notions of the status of women in patriarchal systems as well as female solidarity; it was more comfortable to cast women as victims and/or passive participants in slavery. While second wave feminism celebrated certain women as powerful, and as defying patriarchal norms, it is important not just to make such claims but also to closely examine the exploitative relations through which women achieved power (S.E. Greene, unpublished comments). This change took place with Robertson & Klein’s (1983) cutting-edge scholarship, since which a number of important studies have analyzed the role and position of women in slavery in Africa (Campbell et al. 2007, Robertson & Robinson 2008). This work shows that African women employed enslaved women in both domestic and commercial contexts, particularly where they enjoyed commercial and/or political power, including as mediators in cross-cultural trade. Women also took advantage of the opportunities available to them as slaveholders (Adu Boahen 2011). For instance, enslaved women were owned by wealthy coastal Eurafrican women such as the *nhara* (Guinea), *senora* (Gambia), and *signare* (Senegal) who enjoyed property, influence, and respect in their communities. It is important to keep in mind that European colonial accounts, from which much historical scholarship derives, frequently romanticized

and/or distorted the role of African women slave owners and slave traders in perpetuating systems of coerced labor.

Enslaved women outnumbered enslaved men in West Africa partly because their social and economic vulnerability rendered them more susceptible to capture. Following capture, many slave raiders retained women as laborers or wives rather than sold them like they did men, who fetched higher prices when sold into the transatlantic trade. In African communities, enslaved women had both productive and reproductive value. In patrilineal societies, for instance, purchasing an enslaved woman was often a less expensive way to start a lineage than paying a bridewealth or bride-price. In matrilineal societies, men achieved direct control over their offspring, including those that were enslaved, rather than their sisters' children. Enslaved women were incorporated into royal households as soldiers, military commanders, trading agents, governors, and advisors. For example, in Anlo, an enslaved woman bought freedom for herself and her children, eventually becoming a slave owner and strengthening her social and economic status (Greene 1997). In Muslim societies where elite women did not perform labor outside the home, enslaved women engaged in trading, farming, building, and portage, blurring gendered labor distinctions in the process. Scholarly literature cautions against Orientalist tendencies that equate enslaved Muslim women with concubines, sexualize the harem, and oversimplify the nature of female slavery in Islamic Africa.

Today, a growing number of scholars are studying slavery, slave trading, and resistance to enslavement from African perspectives (Bellagamba et al. 2013a,b, 2016, 2017; Haenger 2000; Salau 2018). These include historical archaeologists whose perspective for a long time went unreflected in broader narratives (Posnansky 1984, Rødland & Wynne-Jones 2020). Among other things, archaeologists focus on settlement destruction, defensive structures, slave camps, slave markets, and slave quarters to provide material evidence for warfare, slave raiding, kidnapping, human trafficking, and enslavement, though interpretations of the material evidence are challenging (Swanepoel 2005). Archaeological examinations of trade routes (interregional and international), for example, do not necessarily provide definitive evidence for slave trading because humans were trafficked alongside nonhuman commodities. And while large concentrations of human remains along desert caravan routes suggest they served also as human trafficking corridors, the high mortality could have also been a result of other factors. Forest and mountain locations where escaped slaves formed maroon communities are difficult fieldwork sites.

There are also challenges to studying the slave ship, the artifact most associated with the transatlantic slave trade, archaeologically. Slavers are not easily distinguished from merchant ships carrying nonhuman cargo, apart from the presence of open gratings, airholes, copious water casks, shackles, and handcuffs. Ship modifications to facilitate the transport of captive Africans include timber shelters erected on deck (demolished when ships left Africa) and "slave decks" (dismantled on arrival in the Americas), which are hard to identify archaeologically. Despite maritime archaeology's growth since the 1960s, the high costs of underwater search and excavation mean that studies of shipwrecks are typically conducted by salvage companies. Moreover, few underwater archaeologists are drawn to African waters. Extant research that does focus on ships, their materials (Webster 2008), and shipwreck data (Svalesen 2000), however, reveals the personal belongings captive Africans took aboard slave ships included beads, amulets, tobacco pipes, musical instruments, and gaming materials. These items speak to how the enslaved exercised agency despite their circumstances (Handler 2009).

On land, discovering objects employed for slaving, such as neck, hand, waist, and ankle irons and chains, might be evidence of organized slave raiding, warfare, or kidnapping in a given area. But these artifacts alone do not tell us how slaves were obtained or where they ended up. Similarly, pathology or bone chemistry can indicate intense labor or nutritional access in human remains,

yet these are not in themselves confirmation of enslavement. Excavations of living quarters indicate differences in the material status of free and unfree people, but historical and ethnographic accounts indicate that enslaved and free persons in West Africa did not inhabit segregated areas but often worked and lived alongside each other (Alexander 2001, Thiaw 2011). Moreover, because most enslaved people had few or no possessions, it is hard to irrefutably identify material goods that belonged to them. Identifying the varied experiences and constantly changing dynamics associated with enslavement, including over an enslaved person's lifetime, is nearly impossible using archaeological evidence alone. Certainly, new methodological, theoretical, and conceptual approaches, including those enabled by digital technologies, will help resolve some of the challenges faced by archaeologists of slavery and slave trading. Viewing the processes and effects of enslavement as part of a larger landscape of intersocial entanglements, and the implications for social and material life, scholars have underscored that the focus of research going forward should not be an "archaeology of the slave trade" but rather "an archaeology of daily life during the slave trade" (N. Swanepoel, unpublished doctoral dissertation, p. 31).

THE GOLD COAST

The Atlanticization of the study of slavery has produced a plethora of literature focused on Ghana, known during the transatlantic slave trade as the Gold Coast. This helps make Ghana a useful lens through which to look more closely at slave trading, slavery, and other coerced labor. Like much scholarship produced by African intellectuals in the 1960s, Ghanaian historiography from the independence era minimized enslavement and slave trading as economically marginal and socially insignificant (Daaku 1970, Kwamena-Poh 1973), subordinating these topics within discussions of the precolonial state, African-European entanglements, and internecine politics (Adu Boahen 1961). In Ghana, many postindependence historians were Akan and Ewe—ethnic groups that played significant roles in the slave trade and were popularly viewed as its beneficiaries rather than victims. They emphasized African statehood, power, and agency, though they omitted specificities to avoid inviting moral condemnation. Instead, they framed slavery in Africa as benevolent and less harsh than in the Americas and overlooked slavery's connections to warfare, raiding, and kidnapping. They also diminished the significance of African opposition to abolition and instead highlighted African participation in abolitionist struggles, even though the rise of "legitimate commerce" in the nineteenth century actually led to increased internal slavery and servitude in West Africa. Further, scholars emphasized that the enslaved were incorporated into families and communities. Though fictive kin were often more expendable than real kin (Stahl 2008), as nineteenth-century slave biographies reveal, kinship and lineage ties were not straightforward; an enslaved person's familial associations could include free and unfree parents, partners, and children.

Before the sixteenth century, slavery was not widespread in Ghana. This changed due to long-distance trading with the Western Sudan (c. 1400–1700), the Atlantic maritime trade (c. 1430–1800), and the rise and fall of the Asante empire (c. 1700–1900) (Shumway 2021). Scholars have debated the connections between slavery and other forms of servitude in Ghana, as well as the interrelationship between the internal and transatlantic slave trades, because the former both pre- and postdated the latter (Fage 1969). Perbi's (2004) seminal work on indigenous slavery demonstrates that in precolonial Ghana, the enslaved labored in households, shrines, palaces, the military, and bureaucracies. In the northern regions, enslavement was often harsher and longer lasting than among the southern Akan (Parker 2006). Yet, everywhere, slavery was a fluid practice.

Scholarship on the transatlantic slave trade has examined how it transformed longstanding networks, institutions, and systems, and ushered in new kinds of exchange, consumption, wealth,

status, and power. Different polities participated in and were affected by intensified slave raiding, increased internal slavery, the rise and fall of powerful states (e.g., Asante, Akwamu, Akan, Anlo), the creation of predatory landscapes (Arhin 1983; Kea 1982, 2012; Priestly 1969; Rattray 1969; Reynolds 1975; Wilks 1975), and religious change (Allman & Parker 2005, Venkatachalam 2015) and the fight for freedom (Getz 2004). While scholars once saw complex societies as enslavers and smaller societies as sources of slaves (Goody 1971), today they recognize that groups could be both enslavers and enslaved at various points, or even simultaneously.

Various communities of connection, such as coastal Africans and Europeans who worked and lived in and around coastal fortifications, have proved important avenues for study. In recent years, historians have used these communities of connection to reinsert Africans and African agency into historical accounts of the transatlantic slave trade (Shumway 2011, Sparks 2014), though in most cases the Africans they focus on are coastal elites. Challenging discourses that frame African agency as solely resistance, these studies are trailblazing precisely because they disclose African agency also as collaboration, self-interest, and greed. Research focused on the social and familial relations of Eurafrican slave traders has also emerged (Doortmont 2012, Everts 1996, Yarak 1989). This includes studies of *cassare* (mixed marriages) between Danish men and Ga women and the children from them, rooted in a close analysis of official documents (government, church) and private letters and diaries (Ipsen 2015). Recently, the use of oral histories alongside archival texts and architecture has built upon earlier work on Danish-Gas and their descendants to craft a narrative that is accessible to a wide audience, especially Ghanaians (Wellington 2011). These works should inspire more studies of African and Eurafrican women and their interactions with Portuguese, Dutch, English, Danish, and French men on the coast.

Archaeologists working in Ghana have also generated insight into diverse topics related to slavery and slave trading such as slave camps, slave raiding, displacement, architecture (protective, defensive fortifications), demography (depopulation), sociopolitical organization, agriculture, and tools of bondage and torture (Bredwa-Mensah 1999, DeCorse 2001b, Kankpeyeng 2009, Perbi & Bredwa-Mensah 2007, Swanepoel 2011). This work has revealed the social instability caused by intensified slave trading and state expansion as reflected in settlement dynamics, labor patterns, craft production, and trade (Stahl 2001, 2007, 2015; Stahl & Cruz 1998). Indeed, cross-cultural contact, exchange, production, and consumption facilitated by global exchange networks ushered in social, behavioral, and material changes that Stahl (2002) describes as “cartographies of taste” in response to new circumstances also evident in technological and material continuities, discontinuities, and transformations (style, form, design) over time (DeCorse 1992).

HISTORIES AND MEMORIES

More fortifications exist along the coast of present-day Ghana than in all regions in West Africa combined (or, in fact, in the whole of the Atlantic world). Therefore, central to studies of the transatlantic slave trade are Ghana’s forts and castles. Dating back to the fifteenth century and established by the Portuguese, Swedes, Dutch, English, Danish, French, and Brandenburg-Prussians along the Gold Coast, these fortifications were used to incarcerate captive Africans prior to their transport across the Atlantic (Anquandah 1999, Engmann 2021b, Ephson 1970, Feinberg 1989, Osei-Tutu 2018, Osei-Tutu & Smith 2017). From c. 1650 to 1800, approximately one million captive Africans were trafficked from Ghana out of the continent; the vast majority of these individuals would have spent at least some time being held in a coastal fortification.

In 1972, the Ghana government listed 25 extant forts and castles as national monuments. Seven years later, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) inscribed them as World Heritage Sites. In 1994, the fortifications were included in UNESCO’s

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flagship Slave Route Project dedicated to studying, managing, conserving, and developing educational materials associated with enslavement. Today, the fortifications are managed by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Creative Arts and its antiquity body, the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board.

Early studies on Ghana's coastal fortifications employed architectural, archival, and field survey data (Hair 1994, Van Danzig 1980) to survey, identify, and document these sites for heritage management reasons. Lawrence's (1963, 1969) pioneering research stands out. Impressive in detail and scope, it has also received criticism for providing Eurocentric accounts of historical, social, and material life in and around the fortifications, and overlooking African agency. Yet, these criticisms aside, Lawrence was key for paving the way for archaeological contributions. Indeed, archaeological manifestations of the transatlantic slave trade at the forts and castles, and in surrounding towns, can provide an alternative archive to written documents produced by European slave traders. The archaeological archive expands conventional historical research, studying change from the pre- to post-transatlantic slave trade periods in ways that cannot be captured by written sources alone.

In the decades since Lawrence's work, archaeological research and fieldwork have remained largely confined to short-term projects (e.g., surveys and small-scale excavations) at the coastal fortifications and houses built by Eurafrican merchants associated with these sites (Boachie-Ansah 2008; S. Gyam, unpublished thesis). In this work, conservation, preservation, and restoration concerns have trumped research agendas since the aim has been to attract visitors. Nonetheless, despite the inability to engage in long-term research and fieldwork, these projects have produced valuable new findings, especially related to the material goods that were common in transatlantic trade. Some comprehensive studies exist. For example, archaeological excavations uncovering glass beads, ceramics, alcohol bottles, and smoking pipes at Bantama confirm oral histories that a fort existed (Calvocoressi 1977). Though few artifacts were retrieved at Fort Ruyclover on the Ankroba River, archaeological excavations have confirmed the fort's brief life and violent destruction by an explosion stemming from a trade dispute between Africans and Europeans, illustrating that commerce was frequently plagued by tension, mistrust, and misunderstandings (Posnansky & Van Danzig 1976). At other sites, archaeologists have unearthed imported items such as Dutch, English, and Danish manufactured goods (ceramics, bottles, beads, smoking pipes). Locally produced items (pottery and smoking pipes) reveal that trade with locals occurred at markets nearby or through everyday forms of exchange. Some excavated pottery from fortifications is similar to that produced today in Ghana's Shai Hills, as corroborated by ethnoarchaeological work. Nonetheless, the scanty excavated material culture from fortifications attests to the harsh condition and treatment of incarcerated captive Africans prior to their forced removal from the continent. Material evidence for the identities of the captive men, women, and children from diverse localities and ethnically heterogeneous groups is questionable, if not impossible.

Moreover, much of this archaeological work is primarily descriptive and undertheorized in orientation. Historically, many archaeologists in Africa have adopted functionalist interpretations of their finds (Ogundiran & Falola 2007); Ghana proves no exception. They have analyzed artifacts' formal properties and interpreted them as indicators of social variation, trade, cross-cultural contact, material wealth, and consumption patterns; they have been less inclined to use objects as ways to understand social relations, identity, inequalities, and power relations, including when objects were recontextualized and put to uses for which they were not originally intended. This is unfortunate since objects' meanings are not fixed but contextual and subjective, politically, socially, and culturally mediated according to local regimes of value. Archaeologically speaking, Ghana's forts and castles remain unexplored in detail.

Historical archaeologists employ a "multiple lines of evidence" approach, studying objects alongside texts, oral histories, and ethnography to craft a revisionist history of the transatlantic

slave trade and enslavement. To this end, archaeologists have contextualized their archaeological interpretations and become better versed in Atlantic African economic history, cross-cultural contact, and theories of global encounters. They have shifted from paradigms of European-dominated economic entanglements, and European agency/African peripherization that characterized early scholarship, and have abandoned problematic notions of stable, bounded, and homogenous national, racial, and ethnic categories such as “European” and “African.” Instead, archaeologists investigate European-African encounters as occurring in interdependent, reciprocal spaces defined by disruption, ambivalence, and ambiguities, and they examine how these forces shaped economic, political, sociocultural, and familial life by providing contextual and material evidence for stratified social systems and African agency. Though the effects of the transatlantic slave trade were not identical everywhere, similarities in the archaeological records in contexts with similar political, economic, social, and historical circumstances reveal some common patterns (DeCorse 1991). For instance, cowries, beads, bottles, glass, brass, copper, iron, smoking pipes (local and imported), ceramics, pottery, and firearms—not to mention evidence for the introduction of new crops such as maize, cassava, tomato, and papaya—have been uncovered throughout the Ghanaian coast and add to the material repertoire of African life, though scholars caution against overemphasizing the material impact of imported commodities associated with the transatlantic slave trade on African communities (Lane & MacDonald 2011).

Anthropological archaeology approaches to studying the impact of the transatlantic slave trade in towns close to fortifications have produced varying data. DeCorse’s (2001a) groundbreaking work on life in Elmina town has revealed that imported trade goods (ceramics, glass, brass, beads, buttons, buckles, slate) outnumbered locally produced items (ceramics, grindstones, faunal remains) during the transatlantic slave trade. Yet, despite the Dutch introduction of imported commodities that signaled wealth and power, Akan foodways, architecture, religion, ritual (household shrines), and burial patterns (beneath house floors) continued according to local practices rather than acculturated to European lifeways. At Dixcove, further along the coast, however, the Akan adopted European clothing while the English embraced local cuisine. European formal education, construction designs, materials (glass windows on metal frames, red bricks, metal hinges) and technologies were incorporated in African architecture. Traditional medical practices persisted despite the introduction of Western medicines (Biveridge 2014, 2020). Archaeology reveals both the ruptures and continuities during the transatlantic slave trade.

Historical and archaeological work has also furnished insights into the experiences of “castle slaves,” “company slaves,” “inventory slaves,” “factory slaves,” “king’s slaves,” “committee slaves,” and “service slaves” who labored at coastal fortifications. The property of European companies and private administrators, as well as African, European, and Eurafrican traders, these enslaved individuals were purchased, rented, pawned, and born into slavery. When European officials, merchants, and captains refused to purchase captives due to old age, ill health, disease, or disability, and African traders from the interior did not want to return them, they were sold at a reduced price as “refuse slaves” and incorporated into castle slavery. So too were the children that African mothers were forced to abandon prior to the Middle Passage. Castle slaves provided skilled and unskilled labor, including feeding, supervising, and caring for those incarcerated at the fortifications. Castle slaves’ “pay” or “allowance” was often in the form of a food ration as they were prevented from subsistence farming (Hernaes 2002, Shumway 2014).

Identifying castle slaves through an analysis of European traders’ correspondence and company account books is possible, though many female castle slaves in relationships with European men remain nameless, usually described as “concubines” or “wenches” (terms that were also applied to free women). Archaeologically, identifying castle slavery (Engmann 2024) is challenging because most castle slaves lived in settlements outside fortifications. Within the fortifications, it is

difficult to distinguish castle slaves' material traces since they occupied and moved within many of the same social spaces as captive Africans, Euraficans, and Europeans. Analyzing the archaeological data is further complicated because castle slaves' allowances were often allocated in imported goods and commodities, which were also consumed by free persons. Outside of fortifications, castle slaves lived and worked alongside other unfree laborers, traveled to coastal towns, and journeyed aboard slave ships. Thus, the search for material evidence of castle slaves needs to extend beyond fortifications, and indeed, the West African coast.

Archaeological work connected to coastal fortifications has explored Danish plantations that cultivated agricultural products (coffee, indigo, cotton) in the Volta and Akuapem, for instance Bibease, Frederiksgave, and Brockman (Boachie-Ansah 2009; Bredwa-Mensah 1996, 2008), exploring the material repertoires associated with plantation slavery on the West African coast as an alternative to the transatlantic slave trade. Influenced by historical archaeology's conceptual and theoretical frameworks developed to understand plantation slavery in the Americas, these studies focus on landscapes, the lives of the enslaved, agriculture, foodways, and material possessions. Architecturally, slave houses were built of "wattle and daub"; clay is challenging to identify in the archaeological record, yet artifact locations substantiate written records of material life. Excavations of a plantation slave village provide a wealth of information on imported and locally produced objects that illustrate work, subsistence farming, trade, and exchange. Muskets, gunflints, and faunal remains illustrate fishing, hunting, collecting (antelopes, grasscutters, squirrels, birds, fish, and snails), breeding (poultry, pigs, goats), cultivating (maize, yams, plantain, cassava), and trading (cowries) were engaged in by the enslaved on their "free days" (they labored four days a week on plantations). These activities supplemented their rations, providing calorific and nutritional value. Imported European and Asian ceramics speak to slavery's materiality, and local ceramics divulge culinary preferences (preparation, serving, consumption, storage). An analysis of alcohol bottles elucidates the objects' reuse in rituals. Here, Bredwa-Mensah's (2004) pottery typologies are of immense value. He also combines archaeological evidence alongside the enslaveds' ethnicities and cultural origins through examination of the names inscribed in Danish archives.

Further archaeological research and fieldwork are required to gain a fuller understanding of the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the forts, castles, and plantations along the West African coast. Theorizing about the material evidence uncovered by archaeology must be developed. Today, approximately one-third of all original fortifications still stand in some form. In some cases, the dilapidated condition of these sites due to the effects of time, environment (salt air and encroaching sea), intrusive commercial development, and poor heritage management and conservation makes archaeological work a challenge. Many sites have been looted or are submerged under water or lie buried, without any visible evidence they ever existed. The extant fortifications risk continued decline due to limited investment in their study, management, preservation, and conservation.

This neglect is at odds with increased scholarly and public interest in the role of Ghana's forts and castles in the history and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade over the past few decades (Anquandah et al. 2007, Okudzeto 2012, Oostindie 2005, Osei-Tutu 2007, Shumway & Getz 2017, Stahl 2008; see Brichet 2018 for plantations), even if numerous misconceptions continue to feature in Ghana's national education curriculum (Bonsu 2016). A burgeoning corpus of writings by scholars, public intellectuals, fiction writers, and graphic novelists (Aidoo 1965, 1970; Eshun 2005; Getz & Clarke 2016; Hartman 2007; Herbstein 2005; Morrison 1990; Opoku-Agyemang 1996; Reed 2004; Richards 2003; Wright 1954) on both sides of the Atlantic directs attention to the forts and castles. As "difficult," "negative," "dissonant," and "atrocious" heritage, Ghana's fortifications act as the symbolic and material embodiment of the history and memory of the violence and brutality of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. Inspired by Alex Haley's (1976) popular novel and television series (1977), *Roots*, African descendant people in the diaspora have been

traveling to Ghana's forts and castles since the 1990s. As heritage tourists and/or pilgrims, they return to these sites of death and suffering through the prism of heritage tourism, roots tourism, dark tourism, thanotourism, and/or pilgrimage, inspired by Tunesian ritual theories of separation, liminality, and reintegration (Essah 2001, Mowatt & Chancellor 2011, Teye & Timothy 2004), blurring the boundaries between travel, tourism, and spiritual journey. Ghana's forts and castles—as sites where captive Africans were incarcerated and deported from the African continent—form part of a collective memory of capture, detainment, enslavement, and forced migration.

Constructions of Africa have always been central to the African diasporic imaginary (Mudimbe 1988). Mostly middle class and traveling in tour groups, African descendants often frame their trip as a “return” to Ghana. African diasporans as “returnees” date back to Ghana's immediate independence period. Shortly after independence in 1957, for example, President Kwame Nkrumah invited many well-known African diasporans to assist with nation building. These included Julian Mayfield, Martin Luther King Jr., George Padmore, Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, Richard Wright, Leslie Lacy, Muhammad Ali, and W.E.B. Du Bois (Gaines 2006). For many diasporans, then and since, visiting the fortifications marks a symbolic return to an ancestral homeland. Yet the return is not to just any homeland; it comprises a secular pilgrimage (Reed 2015) to an ancestral homeland associated with violence and transgenerational trauma. A rite of passage (Hasty 2002), it represents a journey of self-discovery, self-actualization, and consolidation of the self fundamental to the acts of witnessing, reclaiming, healing, and giving thanks.

Disputes over the politics of inclusion and exclusion surrounding representation, remembrance, and commemoration at the fortifications are well-trodden ground, though they show no sign of abating. Such contestations reveal the multiple actors, interests, and agendas associated with the history and memory of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery more broadly, albeit not all fortifications form part of this transatlantic slave trade heritage discourse. Bruner's (1996) pioneering ethnographic study set the agenda for anthropological work examining forts and castles as heritage sites. As Bruner and subsequent scholars have shown, fortifications as contested heritage sites speak to the ways in which the past is remembered, distorted, forgotten, and memorialized. Among other things, conflicts exist over the terminology employed in discourse surrounding the fortifications. For instance, African diasporans suggest that the term “castle” ignores the centrality of the cell in fortifications and their ancestors' experiences, instead evoking romantic notions of European architectural grandeur (Finley 2004) and Disneyfication (MacGonagle 2006). Yet, European castles contained cells. In disagreements over preservation, many African diasporans argue that as sacred sites, fortifications should be allowed to continue to decay, for their agentic capacity, and to serve as stark reminders that bear witness to the horrors of the transatlantic slave system. For many diasporans, these sites' significance lies primarily in the experience of human bondage they facilitated across the Atlantic Ocean.

In marked contrast, Ghanaians emphasize the fortifications' many functions throughout their history, including but not limited to the role they played in the transatlantic slave trade. As a case in point, British colonials imprisoned Asantehene Prempeh I in Cape Coast Castle prior to his exile in 1896. Today, the castle is therefore celebrated as signifying Asante resistance to British colonialism. Further, many Ghanaians desire restoration to present a “modern,” “international” museum-like visitor experience. For many African diasporans, whose not-too-distant ancestors toiled in slavery and who live in places where racial inequalities are still stark, “improving” fortifications is sanitizing or “whitewashing” history (Robinson 1994). Controversies have also emerged vis-à-vis a blackface performance, embraced by some Ghanaians but regarded racist by African diasporans and others (Cole 1996), and souvenir sales—i.e., what items are appropriate to commercialize (Engmann 2022). Recent improvements in tour guides' narratives include noting Africans' roles as enslavers, complicating oversimplified dichotomies of European oppression and African

victimhood, and terminologies have been updated—for example, use of “the enslaved” (replacing “slave”) and “Eurafricans” and “mixed-race” (replacing “mulattoes”).

Architectural historians, curators, anthropologists, and archaeologists’ careful readings of public engagement demonstrate that guides’ stories typically converge around the fortifications’ architectural features and physical spaces (Apoth et al. 2018, Apter 2017, Jordan 2007). Curatorial displays address Ghana’s history, culture, and relations with Europe during the transatlantic slave trade, colonial, and postcolonial eras, marginalizing local experiences and voices (Duah 2000, Kreamer 2006, Singleton 1999). Certainly, objects’ “power” and their attendant materialities are affective because they act as mnemonic devices for collective memories, conveyed from the past and sustained into the present. Yet, since most fortifications display few or no objects, the presence of absence encourages us to rethink the role of materiality in understanding the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, transgenerational trauma, dislocation, and reclamation (Engmann 2022).

The ways in which fortifications are represented and understood intersect with questions around African identity, Africanness, and Panafrikanism (Benton & Shabazz 2009, Schramm 2010). Some scholars claim that Ghanaians do not appreciate African diasporans’ symbolic relationship to fortifications and their need to affirm their African heritage to anchor their sense of belonging in the world; they suggest that Ghanaians, by contrast, seek to forget the transatlantic slave trade and its attendant horrors in favor of building a new national identity (Finley 2001). This silencing among coastal Ghanaians is illustrated by their forgetting, misremembering, and/or identifying their associations with Europeans in a positive light, rather than acknowledging their “negative” ancestry as descendants of slave traders (Holsey 2008). Yet other scholars stress that the history of the transatlantic slave trade is only one chapter in the forts and castles’ longer histories, and that the transatlantic slave trade itself forms only one chapter in the *longue durée* of slavery, servitude, dependency, and unequal power relations in Ghanaian history. Scholarly accounts of disremembering and/or amnesia do not indicate that Ghanaians have forgotten or remain unaffected by their slave trading and slave holding pasts, but rather that they have developed a different range of emotions to these phenomena than those held by diasporans (Engmann 2019b, 2022). These emotions are demonstrated through social and cultural norms such as rituals and religious practices, and through aesthetic expressions (Venkatachalam 2015).

Scholars have also shown how communities and individuals frame, understand, and remember the slave experience, regarding African collaboration and resistance, through oral histories, songs, naming practices (Opoku-Agyemang 2007), ritual, and witchcraft (Parker 2006), including among those not enslaved but who lived in fear (Saboro 2013, 2016), even if, at times, archaeological research contradicts oral testimonies of slave raiding in Kansana (Boachie-Ansah 2005), possibly fueled by heritage tourism benefits, and metanarratives around Ghana’s north as a source of enslaved people overlook that southern ethnic groups were also enslaved.

Over the years, successive Ghanaian governments have promoted heritage tourism and development (Engmann 2021a, 2023a,b) through initiatives such as the Pan African Festival of Theater and Arts in 1992, Emancipation Day in 1998, the Homecoming Summit in 2001, and the Joseph Project in 2007. These were accompanied by the provision of citizenship rights and dual nationality status and of land grants to diasporans, part of an effort to encourage foreign investment in Ghana more broadly. In 2018, Ghana secured US\$40 million from the World Bank to develop heritage tourism. In 2019, the “Year of Return” initiative promoted Ghana as a tourist destination and investment opportunity to coincide with the four hundredth anniversary of the first enslaved Africans’ arrival in Jamestown, USA. This initiative included visits to heritage sites, healing ceremonies, performances, lectures, investment forums, relocation, and repatriation conferences. Reportedly US\$3.312 billion was brought in by the Year of Return events. In 2020, the Ghana government’s “Beyond the Return” was built upon this momentum. Making heritage

“pay” (Agyei-Mensah 2006, Konadu-Agyemang 2001, Osei-Tutu 2002, Yankholmes et al. 2009) and efforts to commercialize the “return” remain deeply entrenched within a capitalist culture that engages a complex set of practices, discourses, and meanings (Ebron 1999) that in previous centuries commodified people themselves. Indeed, descendants of enslaved peoples are today’s heritage tourists/pilgrims.

Despite the financial success of commemoration initiatives, critics have noted a “politics of exclusion” that has prioritized remembrances of the transatlantic slave trade and African diasporans’ interests over other forms of slavery and coerced labor in Ghana. Also overlooked have been other African diasporas (Agyare-Yeboah 2019) and earlier returns, such as that of the Tabom, an Afro-Brazilian community descended from formerly enslaved peoples in Brazil that returned to Jamestown, Accra, in the nineteenth century (Amos & Ayesu 2002, Essien 2016). Heritage tourism initiatives have also ignored slaving’s impact on local communities in regions such as Assin Manso (Benson & McCaskie 2004) and northern Ghana (Benson 2007/2008, Der 1998).

The growing popularity of tracing family histories, genealogies, and ancestry among African diasporans (including the massive popularity of “roots” television shows) has also played into the politics of the return. Loss of intergenerational heritage knowledge due to the transatlantic slave trade and slavery has rendered DNA tests popular, despite their fraught nature. This reflects a shift from oral histories, made popular in Haley’s work and a major influence on earlier generations of returnees, to “science” as a knowledge source. Politically, protests over George Floyd’s murder in the United States, the global Black Lives Matter movement, and the worldwide reinscribing, decommissioning, toppling, removing, and destroying of monuments associated with enslavement have made reckoning with the histories and legacies of slavery newly urgent. In this wider sociopolitical context, calls for apologies, restitution, reparations, and restorative justice on both sides of the Atlantic continue. Ghana’s slave fortifications, in this environment, are political symbols as much as historical markers.

Despite the perennial politicization of heritage and challenges for researchers of Ghana’s forts and castles, there is fruitful work being conducted that is simultaneously advancing scholarship, public awareness, and community engagement, including community outreach education (Engmann 2019a; Engmann & Engmann 2023a,b). Ongoing critical heritage work at Christiansborg Castle, for example, examines the history and afterlives of the Danish transatlantic slave trade from the Eurafrican Danish-Ga (i.e., the progeny of relationships between Danish men and Ga women) slave trader perspective (Engmann 2019b). It reveals how Danish-Gas conceptualized the world around them and negotiated inequalities around race, ethnicity, class, gender, and social difference in ways that often ran contrary to Danish metropolitan directives around intimacy, sexuality, marriage, and other social relations. Danish-Ga identity, status, power, and wealth were performed through social and material practices. Consumption of imported “exotic” commodities, for instance, was a means through which Danish-Gas differentiated themselves as enslavers and those who could be enslaved (Engmann 2021c). Tacking back and forth between the past and present, and employing historical archaeology and archaeological ethnography, critical heritage research and fieldwork at Christiansborg Castle privileges the insights of direct descendants of Danish-Ga unions as knowledge producers in a democratic, collaborative, inclusive, and participatory-orientated approach to heritage work. Referred to as autoarchaeology, this approach demonstrates that guilt and shame transcend the past and present, excavating a slave trading heritage that many would rather forget. Nevertheless, this approach to collective responsibility for the role of ancestors of individuals, families, and communities in the transatlantic slave trade strives to keep alive the memory of those who suffered as enslaved Africans during the transatlantic slave trade and slavery and offers possibilities for restorative justice on both sides of the Atlantic (Engmann 2023a,b).

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The lives and legacies of African and Eurafrikan slave captors, owners, and traders engaged in both internal and transatlantic enslavement remain an important area for enquiry. The use of different sources, taking into account different disciplinary epistemologies and interpretative tools, enables scholars to create new forms of knowledge that have both historical and contemporary relevance. Future critical heritage work should demonstrate a political commitment to the communities in which scholars work. More specifically, research and fieldwork should be in consultation, dialogue, and collaboration with—and in service to—local communities, especially those of direct descendants.

CONCLUSION

The history and afterlives of slavery and slave trading in Ghana, as in Africa as a whole, continue to pose challenges to scholars, underscoring that the past is never truly past. In West Africa, descendants of the formerly enslaved mostly avoid talking about their slave ancestry for various reasons, including potential implications for inheritance, leadership, land rights, ritual proscriptions, and social stigma (Akyeampong 2001; Bellagamba et al. 2013b, 2017; Greene 1997; Klein 1989; Perbi 1996). To discuss social origins that include enslaved antecedents in Ghana goes against social customs dating back to the seventeenth century; as the Asante Twi saying goes, “Obi nkyere obi ase” (one does not disclose another’s origins) (Wilks 1975), and hence Greene’s (2011) groundbreaking work that employed unpublished and untranslated slave owners’ biographies and diaries stands out. Ancestry that includes enslavers and slave trading is more readily acknowledged (Bailey 2005; Greene 2003, 2017), yet this too can create awkwardness, as descendants of former enslavers, slave traders, and the enslaved often continue to live in close proximity to each other.

Further research needs to be conducted not only at fortifications but also in other areas where captives were known to have been procured through wars and raids, and where they were sold and incarcerated. This work would yield insights into topics such as depopulation and changes in material culture that slaveries and slave trading instigated. Future projects could study unanalyzed excavated collections retrieved during cultural resources management work. Comparative approaches could investigate material life at fortifications and plantations in West and East Africa, as well as at sites throughout the geography of the African diaspora. A well-funded research agenda might also address the importation of enslaved persons—for example, the Portuguese importation of slaves from various parts of West Africa into the Guinea Coast to work at their trading posts in the fifteenth century.

Africa has 7 million enslaved people, according to <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/> (figures for 2021), despite slavery being illegal everywhere. This fact underscores the need for human trafficking and forms of unfree labor in Africa across contexts to be further studied, keeping in mind sensitivities and both the legal and social ramifications of such investigations. The legacies of slaveries and slave trading continue, and the forces that created systems of slavery and human trafficking in the past continue into the present (Greene 2009).

Please see the **Supplemental Bibliography** for additional references.

Supplemental Material >

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