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PROJECTS

“Individual and collective memories of slavery and the slave trade: A contrastive comparison of different communities, generations and groupings in Ghana and Brazil”¹

Research report on the first field trip to Ghana by Gabriele Rosenthal & Maria Pohn-Lauggas for the team in Germany

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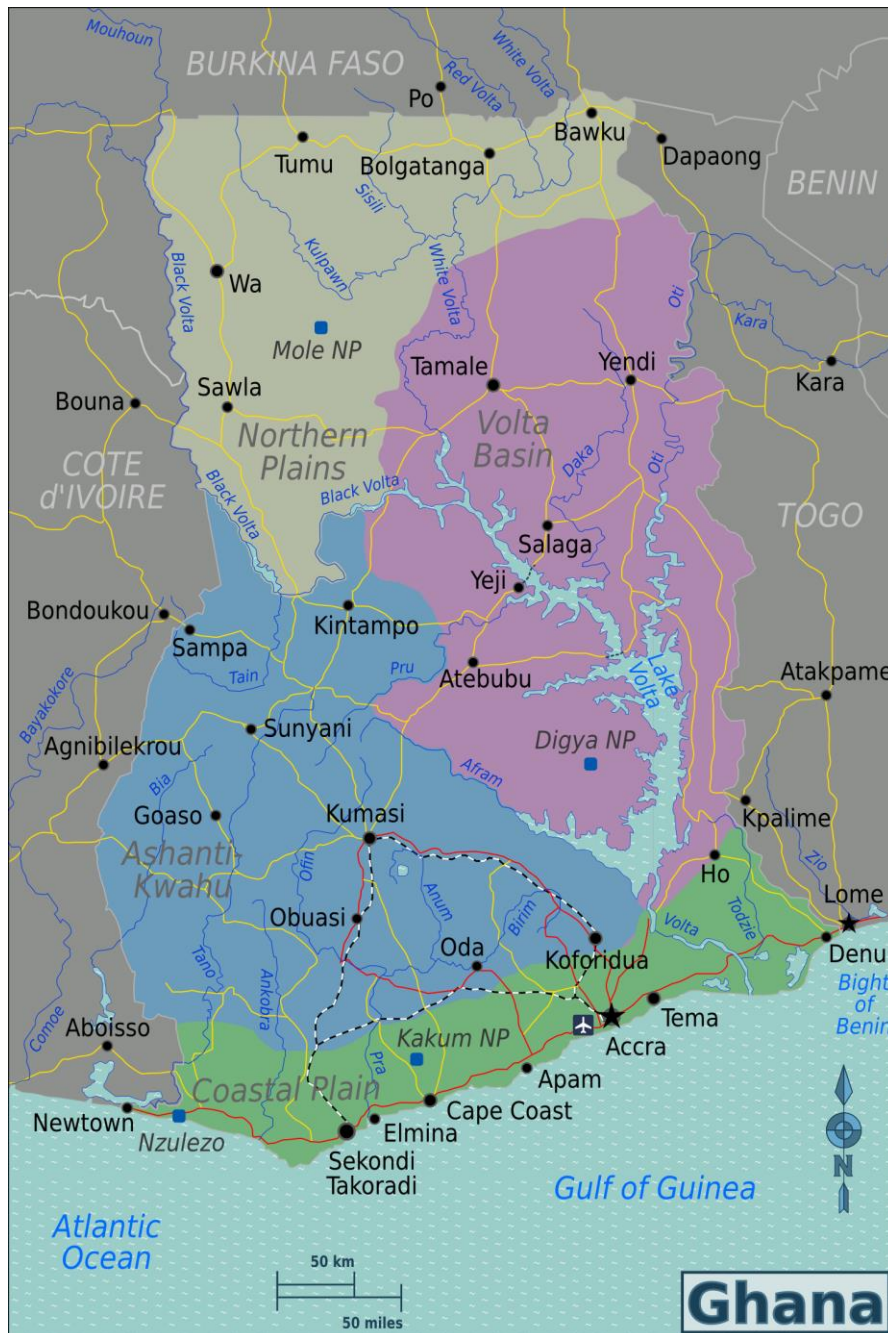
Duration of the project: 2022–2025

Our empirical interpretative study focuses on a contrastive comparison of collective and individual memories of slavery in different regions, generations and groupings in Ghana and Brazil. In October and November 2022, the team from Germany carried out the first field trip to Ghana. Together with Prof. Steve Tonah and his team, we started conducting interviews and participant observations in Accra, Cape Coast and Elmina. After this we worked together with his cooperation partners in Tamale, Salaga, and the areas around or in Navrongo, Sandema, Bolgatanga and Yendi in the north of the country².

Situated on the coast of Ghana, the castles of Elmina and Cape Coast are among the country's most well-known national memorial sites. Captives were kept here in the dungeons before being loaded onto the slave ships of trading companies from various European countries, and shipped to the “New World” on the other side of the Atlantic. The central position of these castles in Ghana's memory culture today is a result, at least in part, of their great significance in the context of “Slavery Heritage tourism” (in the public discourse in Ghana sometimes: roots tourism) by descendants of enslaved people, primarily from the US, which is strongly focused on the transatlantic slave trade (and North America) (see e.g. Schramm 2008).

¹ See: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/650363.html>

² On the research of our project partners in Ghana and Brazil see the project reports linked on the project homepage (see footnote 1).



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In the north of Ghana, we concentrated on those regions and memorial sites which were closely associated with slave raiding and the slave trade. This includes the former Pikworo slave camp in the Kassena-Nankana West District, the memorial sites within the territory of the Builsa in the districts of Builsa North and South, and Salaga (East Gonja District, Northern Region) which was perhaps the biggest and most important slave market in what is today Ghana. When planning this study, we worked on the initial assumption that the intra-African slave trade and (local) resistance to slave raiders in the north must also play an important role in the collective memory. During this first field trip, we gained a much more differentiated picture, depending on which particular grouping, local community and social setting we were dealing with, and we intend to investigate this further.

Without going into great detail, we present here our preliminary empirical findings, some of which require further field work, including in particular interviews with people whose views contradict these findings. To do this we will seek out outsiders who do not always comply with the rules of the dominant discourses, using methodological designs which have proved to be effective in earlier empirical studies. As Artur Bogner and Gabriele Rosenthal discovered in their interviews with outsiders in both Uganda and Palestine, this offers a very good opportunity to learn about the components and interpretations of collective history which are sidelined or silenced by the dominant discourses (cf. Bogner/Rosenthal 2022).

Our assumptions at the moment are:

1. What people know and what they say about slavery in the past differs greatly depending on the region in which they live, and their ethnopolitical or local or social grouping. Often their knowledge consists mainly, or only, of what is printed in school textbooks, and is seldom based on oral traditions. This suggests that there are differences corresponding to people's level of education and (socio-)political positioning, and we intend to investigate this more closely during our next field trip. However, we have already noticed that so-called royals seem to have a much greater knowledge than so-called commoners in respect of orally transmitted knowledge that is explicitly relevant to our study.
2. On the coast of Ghana, due to the public and geographical presence and great visibility of the memorial sites, and the guided tours of them, the dominant focus is on the transatlantic slave trade. This also applies to what we were told by our interviewees. They do speak of an intra-African slave trade but relate this almost exclusively to the keeping of slaves at the royal court of the Asante (Ashanti), and by other members of this powerful ethnic group which was dominant, and is still very important and influential today, in the south of the country. Our pointed questions about slavery, slave trade and slave raiding in the north of the country showed that this is a subject about which most of our interviewees in the south know practically nothing. To put it bluntly, one could easily gain the impression that both the intra-African and the transatlantic slave trade 'began' in Kumasi, the capital of the Asante kingdom. And yet most of the enslaved people who were shipped across the Atlantic from this coast most likely came from the north of present-day Ghana and neighbouring regions.
3. This forms a clear contrast to the presentations we heard in the north. Here, what people know about slavery or enslavement, and the way they speak about it, is concentrated on intra-African activities which took place especially in the north of Ghana. Not always, or only rarely, do people make a connection between these activities and the transatlantic slave trade. The slave raiders are said to have been people who came from areas beyond the borders of present-day Ghana (especially in what are today Burkina Faso und Niger). Our interviewees repeatedly explain how their forefathers had no choice but to let the slave raiders take people away, or to send them as a form of tribute to the Asante king. Members of different groupings gave us different information about which people were chosen to be sold or given away as slaves (young orphans, for instance). On the basis of the interviews we have conducted so far, we will in future work on the assumption that members of some groupings (such as the Dagomba) speak about slave traders and slave raiders in their family past more, or more often, with pride than with shame.

4. This difference in the presentations made by interviewees in the north and in the south is not really surprising; and yet we did not expect the difference to be so clear, and above all we did not expect to find such a lack of knowledge, about slavery in the north, in other parts of the country. During our next field trip we will try to find voices which contradict this and we will conduct interviews in the region of Kumasi (in the Asante kingdom).
5. In the north of the country, it became clear to us that all groupings kept slaves, and that everyone knows this. However, depending on which grouping they belong to, people talk about it in different ways, focusing on different actors and different historical phases. However, almost all interviewees mention the names of commonly known slave raiders, in particular Babatu and Samori (see e.g. Weiss 2008).
6. The interviewees all emphasize that no one speaks openly about which local families were slaves in the past, and how many or which other families (including those of former slave owners and slave traders) know this. That would be regarded as discrimination. Apparently, no one likes to admit that they had an ancestor or a family member with a slave past. But in the village, in the compound, in the town, most people know it. And it is a topic that is frequently mentioned casually in short ethnographic interviews.

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