

The Tabom of Accra, Ghana: A Study of the Integration Processes and Memories of Slavery and Slave Trade Among Descendants of Ex-Slaves and Returnees from Brazil

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The Tabom of Accra are descendants of ex-slaves and returnees from Brazil who have largely integrated into the autochthone Ga society but have successfully maintained some aspects of their unique (and syncretic) culture and traditions brought over from Brazil to West Africa. They are part of an estimated population of over 10,000 individuals and families that left or flee Brazil and settled along the West African coastal region during the first half of the 19th century.

The return of the Tabom to Accra took place at a time that the trans-Atlantic trade, although officially outlawed by many (European, and Latin American) countries, still continued along the West African coast. Thus, some of the wealthy ex-slaves and returnees from Brazil to West Africa, including the Tabom, used slaves for domestic and agricultural work while others were themselves involved in the trans-Atlantic trade in slaves and other commercial goods. Thus, the Tabom and their descendants have not only a complex relationship with slavery but also a controversial individual and collective attitude and memories about slavery and the slave trade.

The first part of this study (April – December 2022) will involve an ethnographical and biographical study of descendants of prominent and ordinary Tabom individuals and families. Using observation, narrative interviews, group discussions and archival studies, we will study the lives and livelihoods of several generations of selected Tabom individuals, investigate the unique aspects of their culture (particularly their settlement history, traditional religion and politics, funeral practices, music and dance, social reproduction of the family, role of women and girls etc.) and their relationship with and processes of integration into the Otublohum Clan and Ga society.

During the second part of the study (January to June 2023), we will utilize our understanding of tabom history and culture to examine the context of their participation in domestic and trans-Atlantic slavery and trade, their knowledge of the past, the role of slaves in Tabom families and enterprises, individual and collective memories of and attitudes to slavery, historical and commemorative places and activities linked to their return, the (mystical) relationship to Brazil (Salvador de Bahia) as their ‘homeland’, and the nostalgia and commercialization of their Brazilian inheritance.

In the third part (Between September and December 2023), the researchers will undertake a study tour of Brazil (Salvador de Bahia) to explore the historical context of the trans-Atlantic trade/slave trade, the exodus of freed and ex-slaves from and return to Bahia, the sources of Tabom traditions and culture, and the perspectives of Bahia residents to slavery and Afro-Brazilian relations.

The final part in 2024 will largely be devoted to compiling the various write-ups that have been prepared during the first three parts of the study into a comprehensive volume on the Tabom of Accra.

This Tabom project is part of the larger research project on “Individual and Collective Memories of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Ghana and Brazil” being jointly undertaken by the Centre for the Study of Methods, Georg-August University, Göttingen/Germany, the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre/Brazil and the Department of Sociology, University of Ghana, Legon from 2022-2025.