

Individual and collective memories of slavery and the slave trade: Preliminary Reflections from Salaga and Yendi

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Slavery existed in Africa prior to the transatlantic trade in slaves. The large-scale organization of European slave trading and the development of industry and massive plantations dependent on slave labour which gave rise to a trade in humans that was staggering in its scale. Existing scholarly data has it that, approximately 10 million enslaved people were transported during the transatlantic slave trade, at rates of up to 100,000 persons per year (Thomas, 1997).

Even though the Trans Saharan Slave Trade preceded the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the latter was the most organized, and it profited its European and African counterparts a great deal. The people of northern Ghana were not mere spectators of this misadventure but active participants. The Portuguese were the first to introduce Atlantic trade into the northern part of Ghana, trading in consumer goods but later resorted to slaves to be used as labour force in the new world in America (Ward,1958). By this time the British, French, Dutch, Danes, and Germans also joined in the scramble for African humans, at prices even cheaper than horses (Der,1999). Owing to some factors including humanitarian concerns, the trade in slaves was abolished in the 1800s.

Years after the slave trade was abolished in its entirety, scars of the trade still exist in the memories of descendants of slaves and slave raiders. While the Salaga market was one of the famous centres in West Africa where slaves were sold to buyers from the sub-continent and beyond Babatu remains a star participant in the raids of communities in the northern part of Ghana, and whose descendants are still alive in the Dagbon Capital of Yendi, his last place of sojourn where died.

This study is interested in documenting what is left of memories of the slave trade in Salaga and Yendi. In Salaga, the research team interviewed about six key respondents which included the following:

- The royal households of Kpembe
- Islamic clerics on their role in documenting Gonja history
- Community traditional spiritual heads
- Cassawura (earth priests)
- Descendants of captured slaves who were sold to Wangara merchants
- Descendants of slave-wives

At Yendi the team interviewed mainly, custodians of slavery/slave trade related relics, families of raiders, namely Babatu and also Fiddlers/Dagomba oral historians.

Preliminary findings from Salaga and Yendi reveal invaluable insights into memories of slave trade and slavery with its attendant ramifications for several generations, including the unborn. Undoubtedly, the transatlantic slave trade which lasted more than four centuries and wrecked considerable havoc on vulnerable groups mainly from the interior until the mid-19th centuries. Internal slavery which appeared more humane is akin to an age-old practice of fosterage among close family members or kinship groups in some Ghanaian societies which was a source of primordial conviviality. Interestingly slavery which predates the Trans-Atlantic slave trade continued to flourish in Salaga even after 1860. This was so because the slaves that were meant to be sold to middlemen for onward shipment remained in Salaga after the trade was abolished and had to be traded internally.

These two towns are very important for this study because, whereas Salaga was a market that attracted various trade items including humans, Yendi was one of the numerous conduits through which ‘human supplies’ reached Salaga, an important link of the supply chain to the Coast before shipment across the Atlantic. The roles played by the Gonja and Dagomba in the scheme of things brings to the fore the influence of stately groups in pre-colonial times. These chiefly ethnic groups had an elaborate traditional political system and thus imposed their rule on the rather ‘weaker’ stateless or acephalous groups. With the Gonja at Kpembe, and controlling the lucrative trade in Salaga, the Dagomba took charge of and controlled all the merchandise that passed through their vast territory, including providing a conducive environment for notorious slave raiders like Babatu.

Descendants of perpetrators and victims continue to subsist in harmony. As may appear to the outsider, there are no clear cut ‘delineations’ as there is compromising silence on peoples’ origins. The history of origins of individual families or ethnicities are well known by insiders though not for open discussion. One’s origin only surfaces in extreme situations. Nonetheless, the ethnic diversity of Salaga lend credence to its role in slave trade and slavery as persons from different walks of life ended up in a town that busked in trade; one of the most influential towns in West African history.

The diversity of memories in Salaga and Yendi reflect the different shades of backgrounds traceable to several centuries of interactions, involving persons from far and near. These different shades of memories are essential and central in telling the story of slave trade and slavery across time and space. Researchers are currently in the process of transcribing the interviews.

The research team plans to visit Salaga and Yendi for the second time in December, complete the transcription of the interviews and write the draft report.