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The Ghost at the Junction: Exploring the Links Between Historic and Modern Slavery in Accra, Ghana

Dr Stephen Collins

Lecturer in Performance, School of Business and Creative
Industries, University of the West of Scotland

Nii Kwaterlai Quartey

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Abstract

This article explores the conceptual links between historic and modern slavery in James Town, Accra. In Ghana, much of the narrative around the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade is focused on the slave forts at Elmina and Cape Coast. This is the case to such an extent that the position of James Town and Accra more widely has been forgotten. This is partly because the mechanisms used to transport enslaved people, through tunnels built by private merchants, made the trade less visible and so easier to ignore. In this article, we argue that the same issues of invisibility now apply to modern slavery, keeping the trade, and its victims, hidden.

Keywords: james town, accra, ghana, heritage, modern slavery, slavery

This article is the result of a two-year research project in James Town, Accra, Ghana. Undertaken from 2018 to 2020, the purpose of the project was to explore how arts and humanities methodologies could be employed to investigate and address modern slavery, a significant development issue in Ghana.¹ As well as collecting multiple first-hand accounts of modern slavery from survivors in James Town, we also took the opportunity to interview local experts, former politicians and leaders of traditional councils. These were semi-structured interviews with survivor-experts, local heritage experts and members of traditional and local government. We undertook ten in total, half of which were with survivors in the community who had varying experiences of modern slavery and human trafficking. One of the more striking

¹ see: "Findings," Global Slavery Index, accessed January 7, 2020, <https://www.globallslaveryindex.org/>; Ministry of Gender, "Children and Social Protection National Plan of Action for the Elimination of Human Trafficking in Ghana 2017-2021", accessed January 6, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/ghana/media/1851/file/National%20Plan%20of%20Action%20for%20the%20Elimination%20of%20Human%20Trafficking%20in%20Ghana.pdf>; International Labour Organisation "Observation", accessed February 11, 2020, https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100_COMMENT_ID:3963421.

findings of the project was that the conceptual links between historic and modern slavery in Ghana, how it operates and how it is hidden, were described in very similar ways. For example, we were told during these interviews that Modern Slavery did not exist in James Town, or, if it did, it was not a significant issue. Similarly, there was a view that historic slavery was located largely in the slave forts of Cape Coast and Elmina, and had not existed in any significant way in Accra itself, despite the fact that Accra has four colonial era forts. In this article I argue not only that the slave trade did exist in James Town in a significant way but that one of the reasons it is not remembered is that it was characterised by obfuscation. Further, I suggest the features of a hidden, and so ignored historic trade in enslaved people, have had a profound impact on the way that modern slavery is thought of in the area.

2019 was the Year of Return in Ghana, marking the 400th anniversary of the first landing of slaves from modern Ghana in Jamestown, Virginia, it is necessary to take a fresh perspective on Ghana's relationship with the slave trade and, particularly, whether lessons can be learned that can aid in the eradication of modern slavery. Here, then, I discuss the ways in which Accra's, and specifically Ga Mashie's (an area that is made up of old British, Dutch, Portuguese and Danish colonial strongholds on the coast) connection to and involvement in the slave trade has been forgotten. I do this for two reasons: firstly, to give context for the lack of focus on the slave trade in Accra, and secondly, to explore whether this can shed light upon the way in which modern slavery is purposely forgotten in Accra, rendering survivors as little more than ghosts: present but ignored.

The question of modern slavery in Ghana has been much debated in recent news reports.² A CNN report on child slavery on Lake Volta stated that there are as many as 20,000 children involved as modern slaves in the fishing industries.³ The reaction of the Ghanaian government was mixed, with the Minister for Information, Kojo Opong Nkrumah, calling for immediate action and some Ghanaian academics questioning the veracity of the figure and put the experience of young people involved down to traditional systems of patronage and apprenticeship along with western bias.⁴ Though Mensah and Okyere raise critical questions, particularly around consent and misrepresenting vulnerable young people, multiple sources, including the International Labour Organization and the Ghanaian government highlight practices on Lake Volta as falling under the Worst Forms of Child Labour.⁵ Moreover, we collected testimonies from survivors of modern slavery on Lake Volta who had been trafficked from James Town, as discussed below.

Definitions of modern slavery are contentious, particularly when they come into conflict with traditional practice, however, in this article, I largely draw on Ghana's own legislative

² Leif Coorlim, "Child Slaves Risk their lives on Ghana's Lake Volta", *CNN*, June 10, 2020; Mensah and Samuel Okyere, "How CNN reported in 'child slaves' who were not really enslaved". *Al Jazeera*. 2019

³ Coorlim, 2019.

⁴ Mensah and Okyere, 2019

⁵ ILO, 2018; Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2017.

framework, including the Ghana Children's Act, 1998; Labour Act, Ghana, 2003 and the Human Trafficking Act, 2005, which together provide an effective framework for Ghana's legislative definition of modern slavery. This is further supported by the *National Plan of Action for the Elimination of Human Trafficking in Ghana 2017-2021*, which was published in 2017 by the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection. The definitions of modern slavery and human trafficking in the NPA broadly align with the International Labor Organization.

Global Slavery International estimates that in Ghana 133,000 people are living in modern slavery and gives a Government Response Rating of CC, the third lowest category.⁶ The U.S. Government's Annual Trafficking in Persons (TiP) Report categorised Ghana as the lowest Tier 3 country between 2015-2017. The failure to tackle issues of modern slavery and people trafficking has real economic impact. Potential restrictions to US Aid and funding from the Millennium Challenge Corporation can amount to millions of USD of development money being withheld from the country.⁷ The 2018 TiP Report upgraded Ghana to a Tier 2 country, after Ghana committed USD 83,866,652 over five years to addressing the issue.⁸ As the report notes, in the last year the Ghanaian government has increased the number of investigations into people trafficking and forced labour, inaugurated a specialist board and begun the dissemination of awareness-raising materials.

Given that the issue of modern slavery is attracting significant attention domestically and internationally, it is perhaps surprising that it remains so underexplored in the literature and hidden in communities. Hence, it is precisely this 'invisibilising' that we explore in this article and how the forgetting of the local dynamics of the transatlantic slave trade has profoundly affected Ghana's response to modern slavery. To begin, it is useful to describe some of the way in which trans-Atlantic slavery is memorialised in modern Ghana.

Ghosts at the Crossroads

In her 1965 play *Dilemma of a Ghost*, Ama Ata Aidoo includes a scene in which the protagonist, Ato, has a nightmare. He sees himself as a child, singing a song of the ghost of a captured slave at the crossroads, wondering which way to go:

'One early morning,
when the moon was up,
Shining as the sun,
I went to Elmina Junction

⁶ Global Slavery International, 2018.

⁷ US Department of State, "Trafficking in Persons Report, 2018", 5 February, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-trafficking-in-persons-report/>

⁸ National Plan of Action, 2017-2021, 30. The funding is broken down into four themes: Prevention, protection, prosecution and partnership. For 2019, a total of USD 18,057,740 was the total national budget for tackling Human Trafficking in Ghana.

And there and there
I saw a wretched ghost
Going up and down
Singing to himself
'Shall I go
To Cape Coast,
Or to Elmina,
I don't know,
I can't tell. I don't know,
I can't tell'.⁹

The ghost represents the many who died on the journey from the Salaga slave market to the slave forts of Elmina and Cape Coast. Together, the forts processed thousands of slaves to plantations in the Americas and the Caribbean. The ghost's indecision highlights the fact that either destination is a death sentence, if not literally then metaphorically: a deracination from the land, tradition and identity. However, it also highlights that Elmina and Cape Coast came to represent the slave trade in Ghana, both in terms of sites of memorialisation, but also in terms of defining the geographical and historical sites of the trade in the national imaginary. Though the trade was carried out across various locations along the coast of modern Ghana, by the time Aidoo was writing the play in the mid 1960s, slavery in Ghana had become so synonymous with these sites that the ghost has only two options: Elmina or Cape Coast.

One of the reasons for the positioning of these two forts at the geographical centre of Ghana's experience of the slave trade is that Elmina and Cape Coast are accessible to tourists. Elmina Fort and Cape Coast Castle dominate the coast line. They are highly visible landmarks with large dungeons. As a tourist visiting the sites today, it is easy to trace the route of the enslaved, through the geography of the towns to the forts, and to the 'door of no return'. Regina Bendix suggests that heritage regimes work to formalise a national sense of 'authorised heritage'.¹⁰ This enables, or encourages, a unitary reading of historic events that fits a neat narrative. In Ghana, the memorialisation of slavery has crossed over from traumatic memory into heritage and tourism.¹¹ Through initiatives of successive Ghanaian governments, such as PANAFEST, the Joseph Project and the Year of Return, the major slaving sites of Cape Coast and Elmina castle play host to bus tours and documentary makers coming to explore the horrors of the past. The result, as discussed by Okudzeto, is that a narrative has developed around historic slavery in Ghana that is situated almost exclusively at these two forts. However, thirty-

⁹ Ama Ata Aidoo, A. 1995. *Dilemma of a Ghost*. London: Longman, 65

¹⁰ Regina Bendix Bendix, "Tourism and Regional Culture," *Annals of Tourism Research* Vol.21 no. 1 (1994): 173-175

¹¹ Senam, Okudzeto, "Emotive histories: the politics of remembering in contemporary Ghana," *Atlantic Studies* Vol. 9 no. 3, (2012): 337-361.

three castles and forts, representing two thirds of the total on the coast of West Africa are situated in modern Ghana.¹² Though it is important not to diminish the significance of the role played by Cape Coast and Elmina castles in the transatlantic slave trade, it is striking that the vast majority of the focus of Ghana's slave history rests on two forts. Consequently, it is useful here to consider the potential role that Accra's forts played in the deportation of enslaved people in order to rebalance the narrative.

Accra has four forts that have, until very recently, been inaccessible to the public. Christiansburg Castle (Danish, 1661) was the residence of the British Governors and then presidents of Ghana following independence in 1957 until Flagstaff/Jubilee House was built in 2007. James Fort (British, 1673) was redeveloped as a prison and only decommissioned in the last few years. Similarly, Ussher Fort (Dutch, 1649) served as a prison and is now the offices of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board. Fort Vincente (Portuguese, c.1560), now Franklin House, remains a private residence and inaccessible to the general public. Both the inaccessibility of these forts and the visibility of the trade in Elmina and Cape Coast has arguably obfuscated, almost to obscurity, the history of the trade in Accra. During our research, we were told, for example, that James Fort 'was too small' to have played a significant role in the slave trade and that it lacked a Door of No Return, which is such an evocative symbol of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Indeed, the size of the forts, particularly compared to Cape Coast Castle, speaks to the fact that they were originally built as trading stations.¹³ Attitudes towards the European traders highlights that they were by no means the major powers in the area. Hargreaves notes that they were regarded as 'tolerated aliens', rather than colonial powers,¹⁴ and Hugh Thomas (1997) notes, the forts and their inhabitants 'were merely tenants' of the land who paid ground rent to the local ruler.¹⁵ However, the fact that these four forts, built by four different European powers, are situated within a short walk of one another suggests that they, in fact, represent a significant investment by the Dutch, the British, the Danes and the Portuguese in Accra and that the area must have been strategically and economically significant enough to sustain European interest. Here, then, it is useful to discuss the development and specific characteristics of the slave trade in Ga Mashie, the area of Accra, which includes James Town, Ussher Town and Osu, where the

¹² Akosua Adoman Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana from the 15th to the 19th Century* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2004)

¹³ From the time that they were built up to the 1886 Berlin Conference on West Africa that began the 'Scramble for Africa' and the European colonial project in earnest, the British only maintained a small and increasingly reluctant presence on the Guinea Coast. Aydelotte notes that 'the senior members of the second Gladstone ministry [...] were generally opposed to new colonial adventures' (William Osgood Aydelotte, 'The First German Colony and Its Diplomatic Consequences', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, Vol.5, No.3 (1937) 291). They had only maintained a presence at all because it was feared (as noted twice in correspondence between the Gold Coast and the Colonial Office in 1842 and 1868) that if they did not the French would. (G. E. Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana: Documents of Ghana History 1807-1951* (Legon: University of Ghana, 1964) 188-9 and 323)

¹⁴ Hargreaves, J. *West Africa Partitioned* (London: Macmillan Press, Ltd, 1974) 13.

¹⁵ Thomas, H, 226.

four forts are situated during the period of the transatlantic slave trade in order to identify whether any of the defining characteristics of the trade in Accra can help to develop a more specific understanding of the dynamics of modern slavery in the area.

Historic slave trading in Ga Mashie

At the time the forts were built, the Transatlantic slave trade was in its infancy, though other forms of slavery and slave trading did exist. Perbi notes that slavery, and the ‘institution of domestic slavery’ (2004), has always existed in societies that make up modern day Ghana and that the Atlantic slave trade when it developed in the mid 17th century, was regarded at the time as a ‘parallel trade’ to the longstanding indigenous trade in enslaved people.¹⁶ This indigenous trade had specific characteristics and people enslaved as the spoils of war and individuals bonded to families for the payment of a debt, known as ‘*panyerring*’.¹⁷ The transatlantic trade in many ways industrialised the trade in slaves and had quite different characteristics modeled on capitalist modes.¹⁸

In the Osu community, which is part of the larger Ga-Mashie administration, as is James Town, Wellington notes trading in humans was not a common practice until the Portuguese introduced it when they brought forced labourers from Allada, an area of modern Nigeria in the early 17th century.¹⁹ The timing of the building of Fort Vincente underlines that the Portuguese were involved in various forms of trade prior to the trade in slaves, as were the British, Danes and Dutch.

Osu and the surrounding area of Ga-Mashie became a site of contested European influence with merchants of various nationalities trying to secure trade with the local Ga king. The Swedes routed the Portuguese trading station in Osu in 1652 and took over trade in the area. Seven years later, in 1659, the Danes-Norwegians arrived in Osu. The Dutch, who held Fort Crevocoeur – now Ussher Fort - moved against the Danes, but the Danes stayed in the area and were invited ‘to the Fort at British Accra [James Fort or Fort St James] around 1660’.²⁰ The area was under the control of King Okai Koi of Labadey, an area just to the east of Osu. In August 1661, Jost Cramer, a Danish Governor of fort Friedrichsborg gave 50 benda of gold to King Okai

¹⁶ Perbi, 66

¹⁷ Perbi, 70. When defining *pawning* Perbi states: ‘the pawn became a pledge, a mortgage or a security for what a person owed’. Perbi, 49.

¹⁸ Williams, E. *Capitalism and Slavery*. (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2022).

¹⁹ Interestingly, the name Allada, or Alatta, still persists in James Town and denotes an indigene.

²⁰ H. Nii-Adziri Wellington, *Stones Tell Stories at Osu: Memories of a host community of the Danish Transatlantic slave trade* (Accra: Sub-Sahara Publishers, 2017) 39.

Koi for the right to access and use the promontory at Osu and it was here that the Danes built Christiansburg Castle.²¹

The use of Christiansburg Castle as a slave fort is well documented and the remnants of the trade can still be seen today. The building of castle began in 1661 but took nearly a century to complete, during which time the international slave trade grew in importance, as did Christiansburg Castle's role in it. In 1751, acting Governor, Carl Gustav Engmann instigated several expansions to the castle, including 'a substantial underground cistern, larger slave dungeons, warehouses, more residential accommodation and a chapel'.²² The larger slave dungeon suggests that the trade in slaves from Accra was becoming more profitable and was recognised by the Danes as being a lucrative investment.

Writing in 1809, HC Morad, a Danish chaplain in what was referred to as Guinea, which includes modern Ghana, described it as a place 'where no one is more redundant than he who cannot be a supporter and spokesman for the slave trade'.²³ There were sixty-three slave markets in Ghana, one of which can still be seen in Fort Vincente in Ussher Town, Accra.²⁴ Though the British formerly abolished the slave trade in their colonies in 1837, ending the trade was an extremely slow process. In March 1877, David Asante visited Salaga market where he witnessed the arrival and selling of 400 slaves and then a further 350 over the course of the following days. He was told that annual turnover had been up to 15,000 people.²⁵ Moreover, Greene notes that in areas of British West Africa 'colonial officials acknowledged that slavery continued to exist [...] up to at least 1924'.²⁶

The Danish slave route was from Copenhagen to Osu to Saint Croix and Saint Thomas. Wellington notes that '97,850 ... men, women and children, and in some cases babies, were bound, bundled and canoed out to European ships as human cargo for sale in the Danish islands of St. Thomas and St. Croix in the Caribbean'.²⁷ This, required the development of a complex and highly skilled supply chain beyond the control of the state. In Osu, in 1792, the King of Denmark-Norway granted the right to private Danish traders to be involved in the slave trade 'leading former employees of the Danish administration to build and settle in the Danish-Osu community. These became the so-called 'free-traders' who lived outside Christiansburg in their

²¹ Wellington, 41

²² Wellington, 45

²³ Morad, H.C. *Two Views from Christiansburg Castle: A Description of the Guinea Coast and its Inhabitants*. Trans. Selena Axelrod Winsnes. (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2007) 265.

²⁴ Perbi, 44

²⁵ Perbi, 47

²⁶ Sandra Greene, (2015) "Minority Voices: Abolitionism in West Africa" *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol.36 no.4 (2015) 645

²⁷ Wellington, 11

own stone houses built in the European style'.²⁸ These became the Danish-Osu families: the Lutterodts, Fleischers, Hesses, Hansens, Larsens, Meyers, Schandorfs, and Richters'.²⁹ In many cases, the decedents of these families still retain significant property and influence in Ga-Mashie and Ghana more widely. Hansen House, for example, is one of the larger houses in James Town and Hansen built and owned the first hotel on the Coast, the Sea View Hotel, which, until recently, stood opposite the James Town lighthouse.

The granting of free trade licences to private merchants represents a critical moment in the expansion of the slave trade in Ga Mashie as individuals were now able to establish and expand their own business, thus fueling local competition. This led to two important developments: firstly, the development of a local network of merchants, whose allegiances were established and secured through marriages and who acted independently of state control, and, secondly, the development of increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for ensuring the continued growth of their business interests, one of which is explored below.

Richter's Tunnel at Christiansburg's Castle: Architectures of forgetting

When the trade in enslaved people exceeded the physical capacity of the grounds of Christiansburg Castle, the private merchants expanded beyond the castle's walls into their private residencies. Like Cape Coast Castle and Elmina, Christiansburg Castle has a purpose-built slave dungeon. Enslaved people were moved from the dungeon, through the courtyard and to a staircase near the cliff edge. Moving down the spiral staircase, they reached the Door of No Return, which leads to the beach, from where people were transported in canoes and small boats to the waiting ships.

Wellington's description of the trade at Osu is suggestive of a certain scale of commerce from Christiansburg. However, the dungeon itself is not large and is clearly smaller than those at Cape Coast and Elmina. The obvious conclusion to draw from this is that though there was a trade in enslaved people from Accra, it was not of the same scale of the trade from the other, larger sites. This is precisely the argument we heard when investigating the links between historic and modern slavery in the area: that though the slave trade may have happened in Accra it was not, could not have been, on the scale of that carried out at Elmina and Cape Coast.

However, two issues must be born in mind. Firstly, as Wellington notes: 'in 1707, when the slave dungeons could no longer hold the large number of slaves delivered to Christiansburg, the Danes created slave-houses built outside the fort',³⁰ and, secondly, that at the bottom of the spiral staircase, just to the left of the door of no return, there is large tunnel dug into the rock. In the tunnel there are small rooms. The tunnel leads out of the castle grounds and to the house of a private merchant named Richter. Richter was a free trader granted licence by the Danish

²⁸ Wellington, 69

²⁹ Wellington, 70

³⁰ Wellington, 71

government to trade in slaves sometime after 1792. His house, like those of several merchants, is just outside the grounds of castle. Indeed, both James Fort and Ussher fort have similarly large, private houses in their vicinity built by merchants.

What this tunnel suggests is, firstly, that it must have been economically viable for Richter to undertake such a precise exercise of engineering; the potential profits must have been worth the effort. Secondly, that it kept the trade hidden. The purpose of the tunnel was to avoid paying tax owed per head of slave. Richter's slaves moved from his home outside the grounds of the castle, to the meet the door of no return that opens onto the beach. From there it is a walk of no more than 10 meters to the shore under the canopy palm and almond trees.

The significance of Richter's tunnel is that it provides a new insight into a hidden, subterranean element of the slave trade in Accra. The people being moved through the tunnel by Richter would not have been kept in the castle or in one of the slave houses mentioned by Wellington, but in Richter's house. In order to avoid tax, Richter would have deliberately hidden the number of slaves moving from his land to meet those 'officially' held at Christiansburg just as they stepped onto the beach, which throws into doubt any official tally of people exported from the coast.

Equally, it provides an insight into how local free merchants adapted the trade to increase personal profit. Richter's house is close to Christiansburg, but a short distance down the coast in James Town and Ussher Town, there are a large number of houses that date from the same period and records of merchant families from these areas marrying and forming business alliances.³¹

Legacies of slavery in James Town

In James Town there is a street called Bannerman Road. Like many streets in James Town, it is broad and straight, running south from the Atta Mills High Street. Bannerman Road contains several notable houses, one of which is famous locally for being the first midwifery facility in Accra. Aalegoi House, which still stands, was built in the 19th century as the home of 'a prominent female slave dealer called Aalegoi'.³² Aalegoi was not the only slaver in James Town and hers was not the only substantial house in the area. Indeed, many large houses line the roads that are a short walk to what was once the most important harbour for import and export along the coast of modern Ghana, and over which three forts still stand, one British, one Dutch and one Portuguese. The proximity of these houses to the coast is striking. Many of these houses are known locally as *moume*, which in the local Ga language means 'prison' or 'fort'. This points to the fact that large houses contained strongholds and these were used, in some cases for holding slaves away from public view. In the well to do area of Accra, there was no visible movement of large numbers of slaves through the streets. Instead, the movement took place underground.

³¹ Wellington, 186-191

³² D.A. Tetteh, and K.Y. Tuafo, *James Town, British Accra: history, luminaries and landmarks*, (Accra: self published 2018) 38

Hansen House, for example, on James Fort Rd, which runs parallel to Bannerman Rd, has the entrance to a tunnel in the courtyard. Now partially sealed over, the tunnel leads from the house, below the street, to the cliff below the lighthouse. Similarly, an interviewee told of a tunnel that leads from Hansen's hotel, the Sea View, directly into James Fort. Considering the context of the time, with a close-knit merchant class driven by competition with one another, it is no surprise that these tunnels exist as merchants sought to extract maximum profit from the trade in slaves, but it is perhaps surprising that they have been kept secret for so long. How many tunnels there are is unclear, but in many ways, that is the point. The privateer merchants used their properties to move unknown numbers of enslaved people to the coast in secret, and from this trade and the trade in cocoa and palm oil, James Town became a rich mercantile centre.³³

As Macmillan's account from the late 19th century notes, James Town was a thriving metropole on the Guinea Coast. Many of the buildings that now exist in a dilapidated state on the main road that runs along the coast were built as boutique department stores and showrooms, which were 'the most handsome retail establishments on the coast'.³⁴ Prior to the harbour at Takoradi being built in the 1920s, teams of canoeists brought heavy goods, including motorcars, from ships to the beach at James Town.

Built on the success of the merchant class, James Town was an area of manifest wealth, where the architecture reflected the success of its owners. Though that wealth may now be seen in the decay and dilapidation of colonial era buildings, behind this decay are the clues of private enterprise. Large houses line wide roads and under those roads lie tunnels built by private merchants for the transportation of enslaved people, a story that along with the wealth of James Town, has been forgotten, ignored in favour of the much more visible – and tourist friendly – sites of Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle.

In answer to the charge that James Fort was 'too small' to process a significant number of enslaved people, it is clear that enslaved people were not necessarily held in the fort itself but in private houses and then moved to meet the ships. Similar to the tax evasion practices of Richter, the tunnel that begins at Hansen house, does not, according to contemporary residents, lead to the fort at all, but to near the lighthouse, so enslaved people leaving Hansen House would not have been processed through the fort at all. It is also useful to note that the Door of No Return was removed from the Fort when it became a prison. Hence the act of re-engineering to make the fort fit for various uses have effectively rendered it a palimpsest, with one use obscuring the previous and giving contemporary scholars the impression that it could never have acted as a slave fort.

³³ Alistair Macmillan, *The Red Book of West Africa: Historical and Descriptive, Commercial and Industrial Facts, Figures & Resources* (London: F. Cass Publishers. 1968)

³⁴ Macmillan, 173

Modern Slavery in James Town

In the *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida describes hauntology as something that ‘begins by coming back’.³⁵ It is a temporal rupture, where the past makes itself felt in the present; where something considered long dead re-emerges to reassert its presence on the living. The presence of slave tunnels under the feet of the James Town community act as a reminder, a palimpsest over which the modern James Town is overlaid. The characteristics of slave trading in Ga-Mashie during the height of the Transatlantic trade explored above are echoed by the characteristics of modern slavery; what kept one hidden and easy to ignore, provides a way of considering the entrenched and insidious nature of the other. One of the legacies of the invisibilising of historic slavery is the impact on the community’s ability to acknowledge the fact and scale of modern slavery in James Town. Throughout our research we were told that modern slavery did not exist in the area but the research team identified James Town as a recruitment and destination point for three distinct forms of modern slavery: young boys being recruited to the fishing industry on the Volta Lake, young girls being brought to Jamestown as sex workers and young women leaving James Town to work in domestic service in the Gulf states. All three of these areas are identified in Ghana’s laws as being examples of modern slavery and all three share the characteristic that the individual’s family are complicit in the sale of the child.³⁶ Hence, like historic slavery in the area, modern slavery is simultaneously known and not known, seen but unacknowledged.

The Ghanaian government’s National Plan of Action for Eradicating Human Trafficking 2017 - 2021 (NPA) highlights the ‘increasing trend’ of young women leaving to the Gulf States. Hence, there is an urgent need to find effective mechanisms for combatting trafficking at the local and international levels. Typically, the women are school leavers, educated to senior level. They are approached by local agents, sometimes directly, but often through a family member. The agent describes an opportunity to travel and make money, important pull factors for young people in an area of significant economic poverty.³⁷ Individuals are rarely told precisely what they will be doing. More often they, or their parents, are promised that they will receive education, travel, relief from a precarious home life and money. These offers are seen not just as an opportunity for the individual but for the family as there is an expectation that any income will be pooled income to support the wider family. Interviewees noted that one of the factors leading to trafficking is ‘the prestige that is given to people or families who travel abroad in our communities’ and that there is a belief ‘that once you travel abroad, you’ll automatically become

³⁵ Jaques Derrida, 1994, *Spectres of Marx*. (London: Routledge, 1994) 11

³⁶ see: the TIP Report 2018, 200; NPA, 2016

³⁷ Raymond Tutu, John Boateng, Janice Busingye, and Edmund Ameyaw, “Asymmetry in an uneven place: migrants’ lifestyles, social capital, and self-related health status in James Town, Accra,” *GeoJournal*. Vol. 82 no. 5 (2017) 907-921

rich'. When survivors return, they report being deceived, overworked, starved, abused, molested, and/or forced into prostitution'.³⁸

Testimonies collected as part of our research in the James Town community bear this out, with survivors reporting long-term medical and psychological damage resulting from their experiences. We were told stories by women who live with permanent eye damage because they were kept indoors for two years for fear that they would escape if they were allowed out. However, the interviewees also noted that the impression that they are now wealthy remains and they find themselves isolated from family and community who maintain the belief that what survivors have gained outweighs what they have suffered. One of the consequences of this is that there is no mechanism through which survivors can share their stories and so communicate the dangers of trafficking to other high-risk groups and so the problem remains hidden. The family's and community's expectations of those returning from abroad often means that there is no desire to acknowledge their suffering.

During the project, we spoke to an individual who had been sold by their father into slavery in the fishing industry on the river Volta. As a child, they had been taken from James Town to the Volta region where they had stayed for 10 years. As a Ga speaker, they did not speak the local language, they did not know how to paddle a fishing boat or how to fish. They slept on the earth floor and they 'buried I don't know how many friends'.³⁹ The story they told was of horrific suffering and brutal treatment, where attempts to escape were met with severe beatings and deaths were commonplace. Though, as mentioned, there are debates concerning customary apprenticeships and how children learn trades to support themselves and their families, this notwithstanding, in the testimony given as part of our research, the individual did say that they were given away in return for payment, transported to a region that they did not know and forced to work among people whose language they did not speak. They were kept against their will and escaped with the help of a local trader.

One of the most striking parts of this testimony was that on returning to James Town years later, having escaped from the Volta, they met an old school friend who told them that their father had told the community that they were dead and that a funeral had been held. The child was, as the song suggests, a ghost.

Clearly, the issue of the translation of concepts between English and Ga, and traditional practice and modern human rights law raises complex questions around heritage practices, which require nuance and understanding to negotiate. Where customary practice suggests that children engaged in paid domestic work to support the household is perfectly acceptable, there is a lack of distinction between what the law classifies as Modern Slavery or the Worst Forms of Child

³⁸ NPA, 2

³⁹ Interview, 2019

Labour, and customary practice.⁴⁰ This area, as the NPA acknowledges, requires further development of legal texts and their enforcement. That said, there are also issues of how practices that are explicitly unlawful, such as child trafficking, sex work and, increasingly, trafficking of domestic workers to the Gulf States, are routinely ignored at state and community level, how survivors are supported and whether their suffering is acknowledged at all. Again, this is not a new problem, but one with roots in historic slavery. Writing in 1927, de Graft-Johnson noted that though ‘no slaves can openly be bought in the Northern Territories [...] there is probably not a single village where there are not to be met with some slaves or decedents of people regarded as slaves’.⁴¹

One of the most telling interviews was a local NGO, which works with young girls brought from villages to Accra for sex work. The interviewee described a complex supply chain with multiple agents and intermediaries all in charge of specific elements. The process begins with an individual, sometimes a family member who comes to the village: normally it’s an auntie or an uncle or someone who has been in Accra for a long time and comes to the community and is looking very well dressed and comes to the parents and says ‘I want to take your child to Accra’ the conversation is ‘I want your child to continue their education in Accra’. And then the parents think ‘that’s a good thing’ because in the villages they are having difficulties in going to school instead of children going to school you see them going to the farm. So if someone comes and says I want to take your child out to go to school in Accra, it is agreed upon. But what they do is they don’t go to one house; they go to different houses so that by the time they are ready to come back to Accra they have about 10 children.⁴²

As with the mechanisms for invisibilising historic slavery, modern slavery employs methods to ensure that it remains hidden:

they arrange with the long-distance drivers. So those children are not even put in the normal buses, we have yam buses. So, they put them under the yam buses and they arrange yams on top of them. So, when they are coming or the patrols are coming, they will not even see any human being in that car.⁴³ (2019)

In another parallel with historic slavery, when they arrive in Accra, the children are passed to a local agent who controls and exploits them:

⁴⁰ US Department of Labor, “Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor – Ghana 2019”, accessed 16 January, 2020, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/ghana>.

⁴¹ Perbi, 209

⁴² Interview, 2019

⁴³ Interview, 2019

they are given to the *magagiers*. The *magagiers* are the older women who have done sex work for so long that they are not very old but they are not really active. So the men come, pay the *magagiers* and sleep with the children and the *magagier* takes the money.

Finally, some children are sold to local pimps who pay the *magagier*, placing the child into debt bondage. The child is then in a situation where they ‘have to work to pay for that money, even though you did not ask to be brought, even though you were trafficked you still have to work for that’.

The complexity of this process has clear resonances with the process of moving enslaved people in James Town during the 18th and 19th Centuries. Though no longer literarily ‘underground’, the practice is secret enough to keep it out of sight. The strategies of recruitment, transportation and debt bondage employed in trafficking people to and from James Town remain consistent with those employed by the local free merchants of the 18th and 19th centuries. As with the slave trade of that time, it is impossible to know how many victims of modern slavery are currently in James Town. Writing In 1979, Bartle posed the question:

While slavery survived many centuries in West Africa, it obviously did not survive the present. Or did it? Related forms of work without pay, such as pawning, appear to have all the features of modern roles, such as house maids and apprentices [abaawa], that they may be obvious adaptive survivals of old institutions in new guises.⁴⁴

These new forms of slave-trading, slavery and the more complex areas of traditional and familial practices, are strikingly similar to those described in the period of the transatlantic slave trade. The complexity and sophistication of the supply chain, coupled with an effective invisibilising apparatus, that keeps victims of modern slavery and human trafficking unseen and unprotected means that, as with slave trading in the 19th century, the structures of recruitment, trafficking and bondage remain. In terms of the dynamics and characteristics of slavery and slave trading, the present is haunted by the echoes of the past; the victims, innumerable ghosts.

Conclusions: The Ghost at the Crossroads

Since independence, the Ghanaian government and various cultural agencies have invoked the image of the *Sankofa*, the image of a bird bending its neck back to its tail. The folk imagery at play here is a reaching back towards the past to inform the present and the future. The Sankofa bird is both representation of a rational state and also of a Ghanaian post-independence political identity, that the answer to future problems will be found by looking back. However, in terms of slavery, so much of the past has been forgotten and ignored in favour of an easily

⁴⁴ P.F.W Bartle, “Inequality and Cyclical Migration: Changing Patterns of Traditional Society,” *Ghana Journal of Sociology*, Vol.12, no.1 (1978/1979)

digestible narrative of colonial era slavery, that modern slavery and its victims are as invisible as those who were moved in tunnels to the beaches of Accra.

The relationship between the community and slavery remains remarkably consistent – that these things are forgotten, avoided and not seen. One of the key findings from our research was the extent to which slavery had been forgotten in Accra. Contemporary accounts, particularly from Osu, note how evident the trade was and how it formed part of the backdrop of everyday life.⁴⁵ This is a very different picture to the current narrative of the slave trade, the positioning of the memorialisation of historic slavery at two sites, Elmina and Cape Coast, is significant as it has enabled slavery, politically and socially, to remain firmly in the past. However, there are compelling conceptual similarities between historic and modern slavery in James Town, the acknowledgement of which might help to develop new strategies for recognising, discussing and tackling modern slavery.

There are multiple push and pull factors at play that inform the trafficking of children and young people into modern slavery. However, one constant is the role of family members in encouraging or facilitating children to enter into precarious and potentially life-threatening situations is driven by poverty and the hope for a better life. It is worth noting that Pieter de Marees, a Portuguese merchant wrote in 1602:

the slaves found here are, firstly, poor people who are enslaved because they are unable to earn a living; secondly persons who owe their king some fine which they are unable to pay, so that they are condemned to slavery by the king as a form of payment. Thirdly, *there are young children who are sold by their parents because they do not have the means to bring them up or feed them.*⁴⁶

The Year of Return saw several government-funded initiatives to highlight the links between Ghana and a diaspora dispersed through the transatlantic slave trade over 400 years, during the same time period the drivers of slavery have remained consistent.

Equally, the slave trade in Ga-Mashie was characterised by what is not seen, what is made invisible. As the scale of the trade was hidden from residents during the colonial era, so modern slavery remains hidden in strikingly similar ways. The survivors of modern slavery we spoke to in James Town are not hard to find. They live in the community, and have stories to tell that would act as a powerful warning to other, potentially vulnerable individuals.

⁴⁵ Wellington, 2019.

⁴⁶ Perbi, 49

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