

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DOMESTIC SLAVE TRADE AND THE EXTERNAL SLAVE TRADE IN PRE-COLONIAL GHANA

Akosua Perbi

Domestic Slavery was an immemorial institution in almost all societies of Africa, and Ghana was no exception.¹ In 1837, Maclean asserted before the Committee of Merchants that slavery had been in existence in Ghana (then the Gold Coast) from time immemorial and as such the government of Cape Coast Castle of which he was the head could not be held answerable on charges of recognising domestic slavery.²

When the Portuguese arrived on the coast of Ghana in the 15th. Century, they found in existence prosperous trade between Ghana and the Grain Coast to the west and Benin to the east. Prominent among the items of trade were slaves. The Portuguese began to act as agents in the existing trade, transporting slaves and other goods from the various parts of West Africa to Ghana.³ The slaves were needed in Ghana as a labour force in agriculture, trade and industry. Their services were also required in the military, the political and religious sectors of the country.

The external trade was not responsible for creating the institution of slavery in Ghana. When the external slave trade was introduced in Ghana from the 17th Century onwards, domestic slavery and trade were well established institutions. The external trade did not decrease or destroy the domestic trade; the two systems existed side by side sustaining each other. When the external trade was legally abolished in 1807, the domestic trade continued to thrive until its legal abolition in the colony in 1874 in Asante and the Northern Territories after 1908.

The nature of slave supply

Slaves for domestic and external use were acquired through the same means. These were direct purchase, warfare, tribute, raids and kidnapping. Convicts and debtors could also be enslaved.

So far as the domestic trade is concerned, the most valued source was direct purchase in the markets scattered throughout the country and especially Salaga market in the northern part of Ghana. Oral traditions relate that everyone was free to engage in the market trade - kings, chiefs, members of royalty and commoners. Traders from all over the country visited the slave markets with goods like kola nuts, salt and ivory to exchange for slaves and other goods from North Africa and the Western Sudanic region.⁴

The external trade was also open to everyone, but kings, chiefs and conquerors held the upper hand. This was because the most valuable source, so far as this trade was concerned, was from warfare. Since the issue of war was a state decision, how to dispose of the prisoners of war was also the prerogative of the state. In the late 1600s, Barbot stressed the importance of warfare in the external trade by relating that when the inland countries were at peace there were no slaves available on the coast, but whenever there was war, it was possible to get four hundred to five hundred slaves in a fortnight or three weeks.

When Barbot landed on the coast of Labadi in 1682, he could not get a single slave, and yet he was informed that two months before his arrival a little European squadron was supplied with three hundred slaves in a short time. It was Barbot's contention that "the trade in slaves is the business of kings, rich men and prime merchants."⁵ In 1705 Bosman remarked that the kings and nobles of the inland countries were so rich in gold and slaves and that "most of the slaves that are offered to us are prisoners of war which are sold by the victors as their booty".⁶

From the 17th to the early part of the 19th Century, the external trade continued to depend largely on warfare for their supply. Documentary records of this period emphasise in no uncertain terms the indispensability of this source. In all the wars the people of Komenda fought with their neighbours in the 1700s abundant prisoners were sent to the coast for sale. The Akwamu and Akyem wars of the 18th Century produced the same result. The Akyems sent their prisoners of war to Labadi for sale to the European merchants, while the Akwamus sent theirs to Accra Central where the European merchants waited eagerly to receive them.⁷ In 1874, Gordon affirmed that prisoners of war constituted the largest proportion of all the slaves exported from the coast.⁸

The kings and chiefs appointed someone to deal directly with the European merchants on the coast. In Asante it was the Batahene who performed this duty. In the 18th century the Labadi chief's trade was in the hands of a gentleman called Santi. He was observed as a very careful trader who sorted out the prisoners of war according to their sex and age, priced them and asked for European goods in return.⁹ In the domestic trade the same procedure was in operation. There was always someone to trade on behalf of the king or chief.

It appears as if every state in Ghana engaged in warfare either on a small scale or on a wide scale throughout pre-colonial times. The external trade was therefore regularly supplied from this source throughout the period of its operation in the country. The rise of the Asante state in 1700 had great effects on the external trade. As Asante engaged in wars of conquest and expansion, thousands of prisoners were marched down to the coast for sale. From 1700 - 1900 Asante never ceased to supply slaves from this source.

It is interesting to observe that while the European merchants on the coast were being supplied with slaves acquired in the country predominantly through warfare, people of Ghana were also being supplied slaves in the slave markets by the Hausa and Mossi traders; the northern peoples of Ghana and Samory Toure. These people acquired the slaves through various means but largely through warfare. Warfare therefore played an indirect role in the domestic trade so far as the slave markets are concerned. The importance of warfare in the acquisition of slaves has been so from ancient times to modern times in all societies world wide which have engaged in slavery. Macmunn contends that slave-owning, slave-making and slave trading "has been so since the beginning of time, and ever since stronger races learnt how to prey on the weaker."¹⁰ The bulk of slaves utilised by ancient Greece and Rome were prisoners of war. In the middle ages Europe was supplied slaves primarily through warfare.¹¹ In the modern period, the same phenomenon was at work in all societies including Ghana.

The northern markets were supplied with slaves and other goods by the Hausa traders, professionals of the long distance trans-saharan trade and the Mossi of Burkina Fasso. There were also slave markets among the Mossi in Buna, Bonduku and Ouagadougou. Some traders from Ghana preferred travelling directly to the Mossi markets for slaves while others seemed satisfied with the slaves brought down to the north by the Mossi. Within a few months of their stay in Salaga in 1877, Opoku and Asante witnessed the

arrival of 1,600 slaves brought by Hausa and Mossi traders. What amazed them was the fact that these slaves readily found purchasers. These visitors were informed that in the older days travellers estimated an annual turnover of about 15,000 slaves in Salaga alone.¹² After 1874, the Brong markets of Kintampo and Atebubu became important slave markets and the Hausa and Mossi traders brought caravans of slaves to these markets.¹³

The northern peoples themselves engaged in warfare and raids in order to supply the markets with slaves. The Dagbon people for example raided the Dagarti, Grushi, Kanjarga, Frafra, Kusasi, and Lobi peoples. In exchange for slaves, they received kola nuts and sometimes gold.¹⁴

In 1895, Samory Toure established his headquarters at Djimini in modern La Cote D'Ivoire and sent his son Sarantye Mori eastwards to make contact with the flourishing towns of Bonduku, Bole, Buna and Wa. Within a year, Samory's forces had occupied the towns and were spreading throughout the north. These campaigns led to the enslavement of hundreds of people who were sold in the Dyula towns of Bole, Buna and Wa, in the Gonja market of Salaga, in the Brong markets of Kintampo and Atebubu, and in the Volta region market of Kete. In addition to supplying these markets, Samory established camps at which traders could go to purchase slaves.¹⁵

Samory made such an impact on Ghana that Adanse oral traditions refer to him as "Saamonoo nnokofo wura" (Samory the slave master).¹⁶ He is also remembered in Asante not only as a great warrior, a supplier of war captives and a potential ally, but also associated with the rise of a great demand for grey-bait and calico which the Asantes obtained from Cape Coast. Samory's warriors needed these items because their uniform was made of flowing white gowns.¹⁷ His activities came to an end in 1898, when in the heat of the "scramble for Africa" he was faced with both French and British forces carving out empires for themselves. He was captured by a small party of French riflemen and deported to the island of Ogoe off the coast of Gabon.

Slaves acquired through tribute was the prerogative of the king or chief who had emerged victorious from a war. In the early 19th Century, Bowdich noted that after the conquest of Dagomba by Asante, Dagomba paid as tribute 500 slaves, 200 cows, 400 sheep, 400 bales of cotton cloths and 200 bales of silk cloth.¹⁸ Yendi paid 1000 slaves, 1000 cattle, 1000 sheep and 1000 fowls.¹⁹

All the states south of the river Pra, which had been conquered by Asante, paid tribute in slaves.²⁰ Some of the slaves received as tribute found their way to the coast during the period of the external slave trade.

It is interesting to observe the persistent demand for slaves during the closing decades of the 19th Century at a time when the external slave trade had long been abolished. This underscores the importance of the domestic slave trade to pre-colonial Ghana. Slaves were still needed to fulfil the labour requirements of households, shrines, palaces, the military and other state needs.

The benefits of the domestic and the external slave trade

The domestic and external slave trade existed side by side throughout the pre-colonial period because both were beneficial to the country.

The northern markets received kola nuts, ivory, rubber and sometimes gold dust principally from Asante, Akyem and Kwahu. Salt, mainly produced by the coastal states, was also sold in these markets. The Mossi traders brought slaves in addition to livestock, cotton, shea butter and mats. The Hausa brought slaves, livestock, cowrie-shells, woolen

materials, carpets, silk, leatherware, silverware, iron pots, copper and brassware. Traders from Gyaman supplied the market with cotton stuffs and gold dust, those from Tagyan, ivory, soap, honey and coloured bark mats. The people of Bonduku brought cloth while the Timbuktu caravans supplied shawls and tobacco. There were also traders from Kano and other towns of the Niger.²¹

All the traders from North Africa and West Africa brought specific goods to exchange. No wonder Von Francois remarked in 1888 that the northern market at Salaga was "the best place for the anthropologist, ethnographer and linguistics student who wants to study the people of the Niger. Not only all products of the Niger bend, but also all the tribes of the Niger come together here."²²

Prices at the northern markets varied according to supply and demand throughout the pre-colonial period. A slave could be bought for one kola nut or fourteen thousand nuts, 20 to 200 cowries, 8 shillings to seven pounds.

In 1889, Wolf observed that the slave trade was energetically carried on in Salaga and that "the whole importance of Salaga is so closely connected with it, that the possible attempt of a European power to suppress it could easily lead to a great war in which not only the Hausa but also the whole Western Sudan would take part."²³

Three years later, Ferguson reported to the government at Christiansborg Castle as follows:

*The number of slaves, the quantity of cattle and the extent of the farms are the measures of wealth in these interior countries.*²⁴

In addition, he observed that hired labour was rarely procurable. The slaves therefore performed the work of the farm and the transportation of the master's goods. The domestic slave trade was thriving indeed in the 19th Century.

When one examines the exports from Ghana in the northern trade, one realises that agricultural products featured prominently. The kola nut for example was very much valued in the western Sudan and throughout North Africa especially by traders who had to ply along these long routes. Bonnat was so impressed with the value of this nut that he felt that if the Akans were compelled to surrender either their gold mines or their kola trees, they would not hesitate to retain their kola trees. He noted three remarkable qualities about the nut which made it so valuable. The first was its ability to sustain the body without food and without a sense of hunger; the second was the absence of thirst when no water could be obtained, and the third was the removal of all sleepiness. All these qualities were important to a traveller or trader plying the trans-saharan routes.²⁵ Cohen explains that since Islamic orders forbade smoking and drinking of alcohol, all muslims found kola a suitable substitute. The kola nut was also exchanged as a gift, used as a drug for certain illnesses and offered to guests at ceremonies.²⁶

With respect to the external trade, slaves, gold and ivory were the main exports in the 17th and 18th Centuries. All travellers to Ghana made mention of these three items.²⁷ Slaves however overshadowed the other two items. In 1647 Director-General Jan van del well at Elmina Castle lamented:

So many ships and yachts of foreign nations have appeared on the Gold Coast with commissions from the crowns of France, England, Denmark and Sweden.

*Various of them have their principal trade based on the slave trade.*²⁸

In the 1720's, William Smith, a British trader on the coast observed that slaves were in such abundant supply that he wondered, "why this is called the Gold Coast I know not."²⁹ In the 18th Century, Ghana became a major source of slaves in the trans-atlantic trade. Ghana contributed about a fifth of the total slave exports from West Africa. (See Table 1 below).

Documentary and oral records indicate that the bulk of the prisoners of war were from the interior of Ghana. Hundreds of slaves from the Northern region were sold on the coast.

The prices of slaves in the external trade varied from fifty five to seventy pounds weight of cowries; twelve pounds, one ounce to six ounces of gold. While the northern markets sold slaves from a few shillings to about seven pounds, the European merchants bought the slaves at twelve pounds. This was profitable business so far as the traders of the country were concerned. The lower the price bought for the slave in the domestic trade the higher the profit made by the trader. The two trades were sustaining each other.

Table 1

ANNUAL EXPORTS OF THE TRANS-ATLANTIC TRADE IN THE 1780s

Country	Number
Senegambia	2,200
Sierra Leone	2,000
Grain and Ivory Coasts	4,000
Gold Coast (Ghana)	10,000
Slave Coast to Benin	12,500
Niger Delta to the Cameroons	22,000
Total	52,700

Source: A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa*, London 1973, p. 102.

From the 17th to the 19th centuries, some European goods were made available in the northern markets by Asante traders. There was therefore a flow of goods northwards and southwards. In the early part of the 20th century, the supply of European goods reached such a climax that both male and female traders from Sierra Leone to Lagos visited the markets with local goods to exchange for European goods. The Africans from Lagos paid a fare of one pound to travel by ship to Accra and it took thirty days march to get to Salaga. Many of the traders stayed in the north for one year or longer until they had profitably disposed of the goods they brought with them. In 1889, Wolf described the English trade with the northern market as considerable. Items like cloth, yarn, knives and needles had English trade marks on them.³⁰ It is interesting to observe that the European

goods which found their way to the northern markets were very different from those exchanged for slaves at the coast. It appears as if guns, gunpowder and liquor were reserved solely for the external trade on the coast. It also seems that Asante reserved the guns, gunpowder and liquor for herself and sent the other goods to the northern markets.

In 1817 and 1820, Asantehene Osei Bonsu expressed extreme disappointment at the abolition of the external slave trade to Bowdich and Dupuis. He made it very clear that it was a very profitable business.³¹ To Asante, in addition to the profits accrued from the domestic and external trade, the external trade provided a ready outlet for what they deemed a redundant slave population. The external trade helped Asante to check and regulate the slave population in the kingdom. It was Asante policy not to allow slaves to outgrow them for fear that they would take over the kingdom. Asante had learnt a bitter lesson from the Bonduku war of the early 19th Century in which some of her slaves joined the Bondukus against her.³² When Hutchison visited Kumasi in 1817, Gyasehene Opoku Frefre advocated the revival of the external trade because the slave population was getting too numerous for public safety and they wanted to get rid of some of them. Opoku said he had a slave who had 1000 armed slaves and he could revolt just as Kwadwo Kuma had earlier done when he led about 10,000 slaves to rebel.

In 1820, Asantehene Osei Bonsu explained to Dupuis that while Asante could regulate the number of slaves purchased at the markets or received through tribute, she could not do the same for those taken in the course of a military operation.³³ Two years later Major Chisholm informed Sir Charles Macarthy of a meeting that had been held at Abora by representatives of the Elminas, Accras, Wassaws, Assins and other tributary states of Asante to discuss the alteration in the mode of payment of tribute to Asante. Asante was asking for tribute in gold or European goods instead of slaves.³⁴ Osei Bonsu related to Dupuis:

*A long time ago the great king liked plenty of trade more than now; then many ships came, and they bought ivory, gold and slaves; but now he will not let the ships come as before and the people buy gold and ivory only.*³⁵

When Dupuis explained to the king that the external slave trade had to be abolished for humanitarian reasons, the king replied:

*The white men who go to council with yourmaster, and pray to the great God for him, do not understand my country, or they would not say the slave trade was bad. But if they think it bad now, why did they think it good before. Is not your law an old law, the same as the Crammo Law? ... If the great king would like to restore this trade, it would be too good for whitemen and for me too, because Ashantee is a country for war, and the people are strong.*³⁶

The external trade was also valuable to Asante because she could not feed or support the numerous prisoners of war. Infact after the Gyaman war of 1820, Asante was faced with a great problem of disposing of 20,000 prisoners of war. After half that number had been sacrificed, others were sold or given out as gifts to the army captains and members of royalty while many died because Asante could not feed them. Asantehene told Dupuis to tell the king of England that he could readily supply him with 10,000 prisoners of war who will work for him. He could also give him beautiful girls and women in great numbers to give to his captains.³⁷

The stoppage of the external trade also had some repercussions in the northern domestic trade because the annual turnover of slaves drastically reduced. Specific figures are not available but Opoku was informed in 1877 that when the slave trade was at its peak, Salaga market alone turned out over 15000 slaves annually but that the numbers had decreased³⁸. From the accounts of the number of slaves seen by travellers at Salaga at the end of the 19th century, one can estimate a decreased annual turnover of about 7,000 slaves. This is because during the peak trading season, from December to March, very large caravans consisting of between 500 and 2,000 slaves arrived in Salaga. The annual turnover of slaves therefore decreased to about half the number.³⁹

The spectacle of slavery

There is enormous literature on the negative effects of the external trade and very little on the domestic trade. Manning sums up the spectacle of slavery appropriately with the word - "its chains, slave ships and broken families."⁴⁰ The demands for slaves for both domestic and external purposes and the benefits of the two systems of trade introduced elements of brutality and harshness into both trades. Slave raiding became very frequent all over Ghana especially in the Northern region. In 1927, District Commissioner Cardinall noted with dismay what he called "islands of anarchy" in the Mossi and Dagomba countries. These islands of conquered peoples provided permanent reservoirs for slave hunting and the Kokomba formed one of these reservoirs. Cardinall asserted that slave-raiding had only recently ceased and that "every year to this day they (i.e. the Kokombas) indulge in a little blood-letting ... there is an annual inter-village war."⁴¹ Oral traditions relate that large areas of land in the northern region were desolated and depopulated.

Asante demand for tribute from the northern peoples added more vigour to the slave raiding activities. Braimah contends that under Asante domination, the northern peoples made sacrifices by going to war to obtain slaves to pay to the Asante representatives. It was a common sight to see the Kpembe contingent in Grushie country hunting for slaves to give to their Asante masters.⁴²

Raiding was practised by the Fante among their immediate neighbours and beyond. A British report of 1760 noted that when trade was bad the Fante went to Akyem, Akwapim and beyond to raid for slaves. The Fante became such noted slave raiders that Rev. Philip Quaque of the Anglican church at Cape Coast remarked that the commonest method of acquiring slaves during the second half of the 18th century was raiding.⁴³

In southern Ghana, the Akwamu people earned the greatest "reputation" for slave raiding. In the second and third decades of the 18th century, special organisations emerged which were purely concerned with the enslavement of freemen. They terrorised the countryside at night and seized any unfortunates who might be around. These people were then sent secretly to the coast. Kings Akwanno (1703 - 1725) and Ansa Kwao (1725 - 30) had their own bands who raided neighbouring territories especially the Krobo lands.⁴⁴ Members of these organisations were nicknamed "sicca dingers" by the Europeans. The word is derived from the Ga word "sika din" (black money). Slaves were thus likened to marketable commodities.

Kidnapping also became a useful method of acquiring slaves and it was practised all over the country. European travellers to Ghana in the 17th and 18th centuries often made mention of this method.⁴⁵

Enslavement became punishment for many offences which would have otherwise fetched a fine. Bosman reports that the brother of the king of Komenda committed an offence and was sold into slavery, together with his wife and children. Common prisoners who could not raise a ransom were also sold as slaves.⁴⁶ If a purchased slave committed adultery, she was sold. In the case of a free woman the punishment was the payment of two ounces of gold: one and a half ounces to the one who had been offended and half an ounce to the court.⁴⁷

There are recorded cases of enslavement through deception and this was how relatives were sold to the slave buyers. In the first half of the 18th century, Romer, an employee of the Danish Guinea Company, narrated an incident which occurred at Christiansborg Castle. An Akwamu man who wanted to buy some European goods was brought to him by his servants. After spending over half an hour examining the goods, he told Romer that he had fine goods but it was a pity that he had nothing for payment. An hour later, the Akwamu man returned with his wife to help him to choose the goods not knowing that they were in exchange for herself. They left the goods and went out, a scuffle followed. Some men with whom he had arranged this deal seized the wife and put her in chains. This man pretended to fight with the men. After the incident, Romer's servants teased the Akwamu man for going through that drama when he could have easily exchanged the woman for the goods and gone to pacify the Krepi fetish, since his wife was from Krepi.⁴⁸

Both the domestic and external trade broke up families and disrupted the country's social life. In 1873, Boyle met a party of traders at Nyankumasi in Fante territory and records this touching incident:

*A woman in my company, a slave, recognised her mother amongst a convoy of female carriers. They each cast down their burdens and fell into one another's arms. They did not kiss as we do, poor black wretches - but they sobbed and laughed with a catching breath ... The pair had been captured by the Ashantees seven years ago and separately sold.*⁴⁹

The conditions of slaves in both the domestic and external trade were appalling. That of the external trade is very well known. In the domestic trade, slaves in the markets were chained together in groups of ten to fifteen by the neck and exposed the whole day from morning till evening in the sun. They were often hungry, thirsty and weak. Barbot reports that slaves were severely and barbarously treated by their masters. They fed them poorly and beat them inhumanly. He found many slaves with scars and wounds on their bodies when they were sold to them.⁵⁰ In 1878, a slave trader informed Buss that the food given to the slaves at the markets was not really enough to support life and strength.⁵¹

After these slaves had been bought from the markets by individual families, the treatment they received depended on the character of the owner and the owned. Some documentary and oral records assert that on the whole domestic slaves were well treated. Other traditions however claim that there was a clear distinction between the treatment of male and female slaves. While the female slaves were treated more leniently, the males were harshly treated and made to do very hardwork. Punishment meted out to male and female slaves differed. While a female slave would be starved and kept indoors, her male counterpart would be severely flogged. Boyle observed in the 1870s that there were conflicting reports on the treatment of slaves and that Captain Helden said he had produced in court several times implements of torture runaway slaves had shown to him.⁵²

Armitage's contention that slaves in the domestic trade went through similar conditions as those in the external trade only at the point of acquisition is not wholly correct.⁵³ Cruickshank asserts that during his 18 years stay in Ghana he witnessed numerous court cases in which slaves accused their masters of ill-treatment. He had had occasion to grant thousands of certificates of freedom to slaves during a long period of magisterial duties. He lamented that "a man's flesh and blood form the staple currency of the country."⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

The domestic slave trade had been in existence for centuries when the external slave trade was introduced into Ghana by the Europeans. This new avenue of trade was readily welcomed by the people of Ghana. The means of acquiring slaves for this new trade was not difficult to find because the domestic trade had already set the pattern. The domestic trade therefore fed the external trade with slaves indirectly and directly. Indirectly through purchase from the slave markets, and directly through warfare, slave raiding, kidnapping, deception etc.

The introduction of the external slave trade coincided with the rise and expansion of states in the country, prominent among these being Asante. The rise of Asante in 1701, its conquests of consolidation and expansion to the north, south, east and southeast of the country, resulted in the enslavement of thousands of prisoners of war who were needed for domestic and external use. Asantehene Osei Bonsu explained to Dupuis in 1820 that Asante wars were undertaken in resistance to aggression, to revenge some insult, or to maintain certain rights. He reiterated:

*I cannot make war to catch slaves in the bush like a thief. My ancestors never did so. But if I fight a king, and kill him when he is insolent, the people are mine too. Do not the white kings act like this?*⁵⁵

Barbot observed in the 17th century that the principal motives of the wars were ambition, plunder, or giving assistance to others before at variance.⁵⁶ Since slaves were exchanged in the external trade for guns and gunpowder, several states including Asante were strengthened. The importance of fire arms has been very well detailed by Tenkorang.⁵⁷ Warfare, raiding and kidnapping were very rife in the country to the extent that Bosman remarked that the chief occupations of the people of Ghana were commerce, agriculture and warfare.

Both the domestic and external trades were considered very beneficial and profitable. Ghana received a wide variety of goods in exchange for agricultural products, gold, ivory and slaves. There was a flow of goods northwards and southwards.

The two trades had negative effects on the country. It brought about a state of insecurity, brutality and harshness. The domestic and external trade shared a lot in common, consequently a symbiotic relationship existed between them in the 17th and 18th centuries.

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