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THE SLIPPERY PATHS OF COMMEMORATION AND
HERITAGE TOURISM: THE NETHERLANDS, GHANA,
AND THE REDISCOVERY OF ATLANTIC SLAVERY

The last decade has witnessed a rediscovery in international politics of the Atlantic slave trade and the slave systems of the Americas. This is not to say that the issue had been buried in the previous centuries. The memory of this dreadful episode in the history of mankind has been preserved and transmitted in oral traditions, landmarks, archives, and libraries on the three continents involved. Moreover, scholarly work on the Middle Passage and its consequences has a long and venerable tradition. Even so the re-emergence of the issue on the international agenda is unique.

The first time the Atlantic slave trade and New World slavery were truly on the Western agenda was at the time of the abolition debates at the closing of the eighteenth century. The context of these intense and protracted debates cannot be fully understood without taking the agency of the enslaved Africans in the Americas into account – an agency most dramatically expressed in the Haitian Revolution, but in many ways all over “plantation America.” Yet those permitted to speak and those most likely to be heard at the time in these polemics were mainly the white elites of the Americas as well as politicians, specific religious denominations, and working-class associations in the European nations involved.

The contemporary agenda of the debate is less tangible and the field of participants is wider. Today, the African diaspora is the major instigator of the reconsideration of this past and its legacies, certainly more so than the reluctant former slave-trading nations but also more than the ambivalent African nations involved. In this essay I attempt to illustrate this point in a discussion of the rediscovery of the Atlantic slave trade and American slavery as part of Dutch history and the way Ghana is included in this appraisal. This analysis includes some observations on the divergence between the scholarly and the grass-roots interpretations of this past.¹

1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the conference on “The Transatlantic Slave Trade: Landmarks, Legacies and Expectations,” Accra, Ghana, August 30–September 2, 2004. I would like to thank Dmitri van de Besselaar, Michel Doortmont,

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THE REDISCOVERY OF ATLANTIC SLAVERY

It has been pointed out time and again: in world history, slavery has been the rule rather than the unfortunate exception. Among all of the systems of slavery worldwide through the centuries, the Atlantic slave trade and African slavery in the Americas are certainly the most extensively studied variants. The Atlantic system had several unique and horrifying features.

First, there is the great and unprecedented number of people forced to move over a relatively short period of three-and-a-half centuries.² Decades after the “numbers game” began, there is still no absolute scholarly consensus on the numbers involved, and outside academia figures posited are often far higher than within. Authoritative scholarly estimates now put the total of enslaved Africans embarked at around 11 million, with just over 9.5 million actually landing alive in the Americas. The number of Africans killed or having perished on the slave routes in Africa is a matter of speculation. Many, including the UNESCO Slave Trade Project, estimate that the total number of Africans enslaved with the objective of bringing them to the Americas may well be put at 20 million.

Second, there is the logistical sophistication of a trade system linking a changing set of strongly contrasting political entities in Africa, the Americas, and Europe, one of which was only recently known to the so-called Old World. On the African continent, new political configurations developed because of the emerging transatlantic trade. In the Americas, new colonies were literally created, under the whip, by enslaved Africans. Capitalism, globalization, and the intensified use of a form of labor exploitation often mistaken for an economic anachronism went hand in hand.

Third, the Atlantic slave trade is one of the most salient examples ever of racism as a justification for economic exploitation. Christianity is not incompatible with slavery in itself, and there is a long history within Christianity of whites enslaving whites. Yet in the centuries preceding the “discovery” and colonization of the New World, the European countries most involved in the Atlantic slave trade had abolished slavery and bonded labor in their own countries. By then, they had come to regard the enslavement of fellow Europeans as being at odds with Christianity and their own conception of

Alex van Stipriaan, and Piet Emmer and the editors of the *NWIG* for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2. The volume of the slave trade from sub-Saharan Africa to the Arabic world may have been of the same size as the transatlantic slave trade, or perhaps even greater (14 million). The Arab slave trade, however, extended over a far longer period (ca. A.D. 650 to the early twentieth century) and thus did not have the same intensity (Segal 2001:55-57). There has been less study of the slave trade in the Arabic world because there are fewer documents on it. An additional explanation is to be found in contemporary politics.

human rights. Few, however, objected to the idea of re-introducing a similar system elsewhere, mainly far from their own countries and subjugating outsiders conveniently depicted as an altogether different and inferior species of mankind. Occasionally religious, humanitarian, and philosophical objections were raised, but it would take three centuries before they translated into decisive action. By then many millions of enslaved Africans had been forced to make the horrendous Middle Passage.

Although the system had unique features, a better explanation for the renewed contemporary interest in the Atlantic slave trade is the three legacies it left, or is felt to have left: the tangible inheritance of an African diaspora in the Americas and Europe; the enduring effect of the racism that justified ideologically the slave trade; and widely divergent economic situations of the three continents involved. Many recent debates, whether among scholars or the general public, are informed by ideas about these legacies. Some ideas put forward are more convincing than others, but as we know, the significance of beliefs often has little to do with their empirical validity.

Whether the Atlantic slave trade has been actually “rediscovered” is disputable. Centuries of oral tradition both in Africa and the African diaspora have shaped and transmitted a body of knowledge and interpretations which only fairly recently has attracted due scholarly attention. Moreover, scholarly research on the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas has a very long tradition, dating back to the times the “peculiar institution” was still intact. Primarily because African Americans have been so central to U.S. history since early colonization, the issue was never allowed to be suppressed – even if the dominance of “white” versions of U.S. history has been, and for good reasons continues to be, a source of African American frustration and anger (Eyerman 2001, Eichstadt & Small 2002).

In contrast, in the European countries that once pioneered the Atlantic slave trade, the “odious trade” and its legacies have been conspicuously absent from public memory until fairly recently. Certainly, British harbor towns have had black communities dating back to the times of the slave trade, and in these towns the experience of slavery was passed on orally. Likewise, British scholarship has never abandoned the study of the trade and American slavery – conveniently, there was the ground-breaking abolition at the end of the story to praise and explain. Yet in Britain in the 1930s, when isolated West Indian historians such as Eric Williams and C.L.R. James were studying Caribbean slavery in Europe, public interest in slavery did not revive. There was a revival only decades later, in the wake of the post-World War II Caribbean migration to Britain, whereby it gained a constituency interested in this past that was its own.

The Netherlands and France witnessed a similar reawakening only in the 1990s. By then, both countries were home to Caribbean communities of fairly recent settlement numbering several hundreds of thousands. Not only did

these communities demand that their past be recognized as a part of national history, but because they were the embodiment of this history, the Dutch and French were increasingly unable to claim ignorance or profess disinterest. National media and politicians took up the issue, interrogated by Caribbean intellectuals and spokespeople possessing in abundance the cultural capital requisite to make themselves heard in the postcolonial metropolis.

In this ideological climate, the French Assemblée Nationale declared the Atlantic slave trade, and by definition its own involvement in it, a crime against humanity (1998) – a symbolic gesture devoid of material consequences, as would be confirmed during the 2004 bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution. Similarly, since 1999 the Dutch government has repeatedly declared its “remorse” for the nation’s involvement in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. A national monument to commemorate this past was erected in Amsterdam, on the first of July 2001, Emancipation Day. The Dutch queen and prime minister were at the inauguration, which greatly added to its symbolic significance. Nevertheless, successive Dutch governments have refused to discuss material reparations.

Other European countries have been less inclined to weigh up their past involvement in Atlantic slavery. There is some interest in the issue from the minor players, in particular Denmark. Because, however, the former Danish Caribbean colonies were sold to the United States almost a century ago, there has been no Caribbean migration to Denmark, hence little pressure to prioritize the issue.

More interesting are Portugal, the foremost slave-trading nation, and Spain, which did not legislate the abolition of slavery in its major Caribbean colony, Cuba, until the 1880s. Apparently neither of the two countries is inclined to join in the self-accusatory gestures made by their fellow Western European nations. Given that the Iberian countries indulged fairly recently in festive commemorations of their colonial history that were anything but politically correct, this does not come as a surprise. According to the Indian historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam, the Portuguese practically “ruined their relations” with the Asian countries involved by trying to impose a celebratory tone on their jubilee, five centuries after Vasco da Gama’s spectacular maritime exploits, of Portuguese-Asian relations.³

To some degree, the Spanish celebrations of the 1492 “discovery” of the Americas also backfired. Though the events were eventually rebaptized into a euphemistic *encuentro* (encounter), in Spain the celebratory overtones remained evident. Not so elsewhere, particularly in the Americas. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995:118) astutely observed that “the most striking feature of the quincentennial was the loudness of dissenting voices world-wide.”

3. Sanjay Subrahmanyam in a debate on the Dutch India Company at Amsterdam University, 24 June 2002.

It must be admitted that neither of the two countries has experienced migration from the former slave colonies in the Americas to the extent that Britain, France, or the Netherlands did. Therefore there are few *afrolatinos* to remind the Spanish and the Portuguese of their involvement in slavery, and even fewer considered Iberian enough to be entrusted a voice in the definition of the nation. Hence, in contrast to British, French, and Dutch gestures, however half-hearted they may be, Madrid and Lisbon are not giving any such signals. Symptomatically, the first market house of the Atlantic slave trade in Lagos, southern Portugal, bears only a small sign “Mercado de escravos,” under a sign in the same style but with larger lettering saying “Galeria.” The former heart of the slave market does indeed house a nondescript art gallery with no relation whatsoever to the building’s past function.⁴

Hence it was mainly the three northwestern European slave-trading nations, as well as President Clinton’s United States that, in the late 1990s, were weighing up their own transatlantic pasts and actually condemning events that had earlier been glorified or glossed over in deliberate omission.⁵

Why did the slave trade and slavery acquire the status of acknowledged subjects for the West’s justifiable self-criticism? The horror of this past is indisputable, as is the West’s guilt, and the unmistakable hypocrisy of this stage in its history. But if horror and hypocrisy had been the only criteria, other episodes in national pasts would also have been in line for such public gestures. It undoubtedly helped that the Atlantic slave trade and slavery are completely over, and that they were abolished long ago – 170 years today for Britain, almost 160 for France, and 140 years for the United States and the Netherlands, so these sins of the forebears seem to be at a safe distance. In addition, there is always the reassuring argument that at least “we” ended it ourselves and, moreover, that Africans also participated and were therefore responsible, and that “they” continued much longer, even up to the present day.

Horror, hypocrisy, a thing of the past, space for reflection: on the face of it a fine combination of arguments in favor of a critical reassessment of this painful past. And yet these are neither the only, nor the weightiest of arguments. Of far more direct relevance was the appeal from the descendants of Africans who were once taken to the New World as slaves. By the 1990s their age-old rage could not possibly be ignored or downplayed. In the United States there was the backdrop of the exasperatingly slow and unbalanced process of emancipation of the African American population – and old story with increasingly sharp edges.

4. Personal observation and documentation, May 2003.

5. The remainder of this section is mainly taken from my introduction to *Facing Up to the Past* (Oostindie 2001).

In contrast, the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands were confronted with an altogether new phenomenon. The post-World War II exodus from the Caribbean⁶ had brought colonial history and particularly the slavery past home. The metropolis was suddenly faced with confrontational and well-articulated demands for recognition, at home.

In this new context national and international gestures of recognition and reconciliation were made, incited by the increasingly multicultural nations once deeply involved in Atlantic slavery. The Caribbean, Latin America, and certainly the relevant African countries joined in at a slightly later stage, as did the United Nations. UNESCO started its Slave Route Project in the mid-1990s. The United Nations proclaimed 2004, the bicentennial of the Haitian independence, the International Year to Commemorate the Struggle against Slavery.

GHANA AND THE DUTCH SLAVE TRADE

In the Netherlands, a platform of organizations representing the perhaps 300,000 Dutch of African descent (to put this into perspective, less than 2 percent of the Dutch population of around 16 million) was the driving force behind the government's first-ever policy on slavery since its abolition in 1863. In 1999, the government officially expressed its support for the construction of a monument to commemorate slavery. Three years later the national monument to commemorate slavery and its legacies was erected, and the establishment of a research and educational institute, NiNsee, followed (Van Stipriaan 2001, Kardux 2004).

More such symbolic gestures have been made or are in the making. Thus the municipality of Flushing in Zeeland, the Netherlands, which had the most active slaving harbor of the Netherlands, decided to erect its own monument in 2005. Likewise, once the mayor of Amsterdam learned that his residence had been home to a merchant involved in the Atlantic slave trade, he requested that a committee of citizens with mainly Afro-Caribbean roots write an explanatory notice to be attached to the mansion. As incidental surveys indicate, public awareness has increased significantly over the past half decade or so. Yet in wider society, the whole issue of Atlantic slavery continues to be regarded primarily as an Afro-Caribbean concern.⁷

The presence of both Queen Beatrix and the Dutch prime minister at the inauguration of the monument in Amsterdam symbolized the state's willingness

6. In the Jamaican poet, Louise Bennett's mockingly biting phrase, "a colonization in reverse."

7. This slightly pessimistic conclusion derives mainly from my own active involvement – as a white scholar and advisor to Dutch government and politicians – in these issues over the past decade.

to face up to its slavery past. Ghana's ambassador to the Netherlands was also prominently present. By then, Ghana had virtually become a representative of all of Africa. Members of the Ghananian community in the Netherlands were indeed appreciated participants in the debates on the monument.⁸

How does the past connect Ghana and the Netherlands, and how much significance do the various actors attach to the slave trade in the historical association? As for the past connection, Dutch colonial history extends to Africa, the Americas, and Asia. In the first centuries of colonial rule, two companies, the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) and the Dutch West Indies Company (WIC), represented the Dutch state both in trade and colonial rule. The VOC had Asia and the Cape Colony as its domain, while the WIC focused on West Africa and the Americas.

For a variety of reasons which have as much to do with contemporary domestic policies as with colonial history itself, the Dutch nurture a long tradition of pride for the accomplishments of the VOC, while the long-obscured history of the WIC was only recently rediscovered. Whereas the VOC was recently commemorated with pride, the WIC is mainly remembered in a context of remorse precisely because the African slave trade belonged to its core business (Oostindie 2003).

That the VOC was involved in slave trading and slavery to a similar extent as the WIC is not ignored, but it is certainly not a central issue in historiography and much less in public memory. More generally, the slave trade in Asia and Oceania remain underresearched in comparison with the transatlantic trade. This historiographic neglect is probably because the Asian slave trade had relatively less impact than its Atlantic counterpart, but also by the fact that its legacies are not as conspicuous and particularly that it left no significant identifiable diaspora.⁹

In the transatlantic slave trade, the Dutch were a minor but important participant. Of an estimated grand total of 11 million enslaved Africans shipped across the Atlantic, their share was probably half a million, just below 5 percent. This places the Dutch above North America, in the same category as Spain, and far behind France and particularly Portugal/Brazil and Britain.¹⁰ The share of the Dutch slave trade in and around the Gold Coast was greater.

8. Mainly, that is, with the Surinamese Dutch. The Surinamese community (some 325,000 people) has a longer history in the Netherlands and is more extensive than the Antillean community (125,000). Half of the Surinamese Dutch are of African origins, the other of Asian ancestry. Surinamese have been dominant in the debate on the monument, a dominance sometimes provoking irritation with Antilleans.

9. Drescher & Engerman 1998:364. On the early Dutch slave trade in Asia, see Vink 2003 and the extensive literature cited therein.

10. Postma 2003:137. Postma places his revised aggregated Dutch slave exports from Africa, 1600-1803, at 501,409, or 4.6 percent of the estimated total. As Eltis (2001:Table

Even if mainly the slave trade seems to be remembered today, African-European trades extended beyond this. This applies to Dutch trade relations with West Africa as well. The greater value of this trade was in commodities, not in human cargo. The major West African exports to the Netherlands were gold – increasingly not a domestic African product but re-exported from Brazil – followed at a great distance by ivory, while the key import items were textiles, followed by military stores and cowry shells.¹¹

Elmina, the Dutch trading post on the Gold Coast in contemporary Ghana, became a linchpin linking Africa with the Americas, and particularly with the Dutch slave colonies in the Caribbean. The first permanent Dutch trading post on the Gold Coast, and indeed in all of Africa, was the fortress Nassau, near Mori, founded in 1612 as an open incursion into the untenable Portuguese monopoly in the region. The first Dutch attempt to conquer the nearby and mighty Portuguese fortress of São Jorge da Mina (Elmina) failed miserably in 1625. The second attempt, initiated in northeastern Brazil, which was taken from the Portuguese in 1630, succeeded in 1637. A series of minor fortresses nearby soon changed flags too. The Dutch were now at the apex of their exploits both in Brazil and Africa, and soon conquered major Portuguese fortresses in contemporary Angola and São Tomé. Securing a steady supply of enslaved Africans for their newly acquired Brazilian plantation colony became a major interest for the WIC. The Dutch captures of both Angola and São Tomé and Brazil, however, would soon turn out to be temporary successes only.

The Dutch West India Company's fragile hold on West Africa thus centered on Elmina, even though the Dutch held a number of minor fortresses in its vicinity.¹² There proved to be no way to keep other European nations from infringing upon the presumed Dutch monopoly. A series of other fortresses in the immediate vicinity were soon held by other Europeans, particularly the British, but also the Danes and others. Elmina itself remained Dutch until it passed into British control in 1872, long after the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, and to the bitter amazement of the local African rulers, who for good reasons thought neither the Dutch nor the British had any right what-

III) indicates, half the imports into the Dutch Caribbean (specifically to Curaçao and St. Eustatius) were immediately re-exported. The proportion of enslaved Africans actually destined for the Dutch Americas proper was therefore only 2.7 percent.

11. Den Heijer (2003:153-4, 157, 159) provides figures for specific shorter periods only. The proportional value of the major WIC exports from the Gold Coast to the Netherlands, 1675-1731 were 86.6 percent for gold and 10.3 percent for ivory. The value of the major WIC imports into West Africa, 1700-23, was 50.6 percent for textiles, 12.2 percent for military stores, and 11.2 percent for cowrie shells.

12. The Dutch East India Company developed Cape Town in contemporary South Africa as its major settlement in Africa.

soever to negotiate a trade of ownership of this *African* property (Doortmont 2002:29-30).

There was by no means an exclusive connection between Elmina or the entire Gold Coast and the Netherlands during the period of the slave trade. First, many other regions of Africa supplied human cargo to the Dutch slave traders. The foremost historian of the Dutch slave trade, Johannes Postma, has demonstrated that the enslaved Africans brought to the Dutch colonies in the Americas hailed from many regions. In the period of the trade monopoly held by the WIC up to the late 1730s, the Slave Coast (contemporary Togo, Benin, and the Western part of Nigeria) and the Angola/“Loango” region (contemporary Congo and Angola) provided 45 and 30 percent of all slaves, respectively. The share of the Gold Coast was nearly 22 percent. In the subsequent period of free trade the share of enslaved Africans shipped from Loango dropped to 35 percent, while the greater part was dispatched via Elmina. Postma indicates, however, that perhaps a majority of those shipped through Elmina did not actually come from the Gold Coast or its immediate hinterlands, but rather from the Windward regions. By then, Elmina had become the last port of call of the Dutch slave trade in all of western Africa (Postma 1990:112-24).

The population of enslaved Africans going to the major Dutch Caribbean plantation colony, Suriname, may have been similarly heterogeneous in ethnicity. Alex van Stipriaan estimates that around 30 percent of all enslaved Africans brought to Suriname were shipped from Elmina. Though known collectively as Kromanti, they were probably of more diverse ethnic origins. Another 30 percent were shipped to Suriname from Loango, 25 percent from the Ivory Coast and the Grain Coast (Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast), and 15 percent from the region once known as the Slave Coast (Van Stipriaan 2000:13).

A combination of economic, political, and military factors may explain the changing pattern of slave supplies. Like all other European slave traders, the Dutch bought Africans wherever they could and at the lowest possible price. Access to specific trading posts in Africa was partly a question of the military balance of power. The price level was another major factor, partly dependent on the competition of other buyers, partly on the conditions at the supplying end. Thus, the demise of the Slave Coast in the early eighteenth century was attributed by a Dutch merchant to the increasing supply at the Gold Coast created by political instability in the latter area. He explained that the expansion of the Ashante in the interior had had a negative effect on the production and supply of gold, but had at the same time provoked a substantial rise in the number of prisoners of war offered for sale as slaves to the Dutch (Den Heijer 2003:160, 164).

The Gold Coast supplied enslaved Africans to other European nations as well. The Portuguese had footholds elsewhere in West Africa and soon

also negotiated their way back into the immediate region of Elmina. Their share in all of the slave trade from West Africa – called the Costa da Mina by the Portuguese – was massive, but the proportion traded from the Gold Coast specifically is difficult to determine. Apart from temporary incursions by the Swedish and the Brandenburgers, the French and, to a lesser extent, the Danish were consistently active on the Gold Coast too. Nevertheless, the British were by far the most important slave traders in this particular part of West Africa.¹³

ELMINA AS A *LIEU DE MÉMOIRE* IN GHANAIAN-DUTCH RELATIONS

The direct historical links between Ghana and the Netherlands through the “odious commerce” are indisputable, and it is not my intention to diminish Elmina’s present role as a symbol of these long and shameful years of early Dutch expansion. Nonetheless Dutch involvement in the Atlantic slave trade extended far beyond contemporary Ghana and, conversely, the Gold Coast’s commercial relations were neither limited to slave trading nor to Dutch merchants and officials.

In recent scholarly literature on the bilateral relations, the embeddedness of the slave trade in a wider array of commercial relations is emphasized. A good example of this approach is the edited book published on the occasion of the tercentennial of Ghanaian-Dutch relations, fixed somewhat arbitrarily in 2001-2002. Most contributors to the book, *Merchants, Missionaries and Migrants: 300 Years of Dutch-Ghanaian Relations* (Van Kessel 2002), go out of their way to emphasize that the slave trade was a shameful chapter in this past, but certainly not the only chapter in the bilateral relations. Interestingly, throughout the book, both Ghanaian and Dutch authors stress that traders on both sides acted on equal footing: there was no way for the Dutch to dictate the supplying end of the market, whether in slaves, gold or other “goods” (Van Kessel 2002).

The obvious fact that the Dutch Atlantic slave trade extended far beyond the coastal regions of contemporary Ghana seems lost to all but a handful of scholars. In public debates and government statements in the Netherlands on the slavery issue, one observes a tendency to conflate all of Africa into Ghana, or even Elmina. This historical inaccuracy is easily explained. We dearly need tangible legacies of the past – and if ever there was one monumental *lieu de mémoire* of the Dutch slave trade, it is obviously Elmina with its “Gate of No Return.”

13. Curtin 1969:122, 128-9, 150, 170, 200, 207-8, 210-13, 221, 223-7; Thomas 1997:346-9.

Yet there is an additional, truly postcolonial factor at work here. Over the past decades, a small but thriving Ghanaian community has established itself in the Netherlands. This community officially numbers around 15,000 today, though unofficially it counts many more. Over half of them live in Amsterdam, which, because of its large Caribbean community, is also the heart of the slavery debate. Moreover, it is there that the national monument in commemoration of Atlantic slavery stands. Not surprisingly Ghanaians already participating in local politics and community work also became involved in the slavery debate as almost the only Africans, whence the rediscovery of the “colonial” links which had nothing to do with their initial decision to move to the Netherlands. This pragmatic rediscovery of historical links is a perfect illustration of how the context in which the transatlantic slave trade was rediscovered in Europe primarily reflects contemporary domestic concerns and conditions.

In the Dutch public debate, full attention is being paid to the Dutch role in the slave trade on the demand side, whereas the African role on the supply side is rarely touched upon. The neglect of the African role is not particularly surprising. The debate began chiefly as a means to break the silence surrounding transatlantic slavery, which for so long veiled this past and which was offensive and grievous to the descendants of enslaved Africans now living in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Any “white man/woman” pointing to joint responsibilities, whether evenly borne or not, is likely to be considered as openly evading the question of metropolitan responsibility. Moreover there is little inclination to embarrass the Ghanaian community with questions and accusations regarding their forefathers’ possible involvement in the selling off of the ancestors of the contemporary Caribbean communities in the Netherlands. It seems that Dutch Caribbean protagonists in the debate tend to shy away from the subject in order not to create internal dissension. Certainly, Dutch authorities are in no position to raise the point of African complicity.

Councillor Hannah Belliot with the Amsterdam town council, *did* raise this delicate issue in public – significantly, she is of Surinamese descent. In 2002, on the occasion of the tercentennial, Ashante King Otumfo Osei Tutu II visited the Netherlands. The invitation was extended by the Dutch government. At a reception, Mrs. Belliot refused to shake hands with the king, demanding in vain apologies for the Ashante involvement in the slave trade instead.¹⁴ History repeated itself, for three decades ago, a select group of Maroon chiefs from the interior of Suriname traveled to Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria, and likewise – though more politely – demanded explanations from the African chiefs they met there for the selling of their forebears. They did not receive a satisfying answer either (De Groot 1974:18-9, 22, 32-36).

14. Documented in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, June 20, 2002.

In diplomatic relations, Accra has made it clear that the past linkages through the slave trade should not present a major issue on the bilateral agenda, thus sparing the Dutch government further embarrassment, but also itself – after all, the issue is also a potentially divisive one in Ghana’s contemporary multiethnic society. Thus the remorse over the slave trade expressed by the Dutch crown prince on his 2002 visit to Ghana was prompted less by Ghanaian pressure than by Dutch domestic concerns. The prince’s declaration, while a symbolic gesture of importance, evaded an outright apology and thereby the matter of reparations: “We look back with remorse to that dark age of human relations. We pay tribute to the victims of this inhuman trade.”¹⁵

ACCURACY, APOLOGIES, AND ACCUSATIONS

The way Ghana is included in what for all practical purposes is mainly a Dutch debate – including the Dutch of Surinamese or Antillean descent, and now the Dutch Ghanaian community too – points to the wider question of scholarly accuracy in a politicized context. After all, the slavery debate as it has emerged in Western countries such as the Netherlands advocates a breaking of the silences of previous generations yet risks to substitute new half-truths and silences for old ones.

Academic debates should not shy away from delicate issues. But the core business of scholarship, even of scholarship of such horrifying episodes in world history as the transatlantic slave trade, is analysis and accuracy, not apologies or accusations. The prime concern of scholars of slavery in the Atlantic world includes both the need to work toward a balanced assessment of the past and its presumed contemporary legacies and to report these findings to a wider audience. Whatever the scholarly community relays should be based on sound research; it should not simply tell the interested public what it prefers to hear. There is therefore an academic responsibility not to accept a divergence between the scholarly debate and the politicized public discourse. Much is lost when the pasts and legacies the two circuits evoke correspond to entirely separate realities.¹⁶

15. Visit of April 15, 2002 to Elmina. *NRC Handelsblad*, April 16 and 18, 2002. *De Volkskrant*, April 18, 2002.

16. The case against the emergence of two discursive “circuits” discussing the slave trade and its legacies is made emphatically by Pieter Emmer in the postscript to the reprint of his both authoritative and controversial monograph on the Dutch slave trade (Emmer 2003:241-71). I agree on this with Emmer, even if unfortunately his own contribution to the bridging of this divide is at times unduly polemical and therefore counterproductive.

The so-called numbers game may illustrate this point. In the past decades a good deal of scholarly time and effort has been spent on assessing the total volume of the Atlantic slave trade, the regions of origin, destinations, gender ratios, mortality rates, and so on. As new archival records were combed and new methodologies and immense quantitative data sets were developed, the reliability of the scholarly evidence has increased.¹⁷ Even if disagreements over figures continue and the numbers game “is likely to remain a significant historical industry for some time to come” (Eltis & Richardson 1997:2), there is a fair degree of consensus. The most widely accepted scholarly calculations tend to converge and have not been significantly revised since Philip Curtin (1969:268) estimated that the total of enslaved Africans that actually landed in the Americas was around 9.5 million. Recent estimates still suggest there were around 11 million embarkations and around 9.5 million landings (Eltis & Richardson 1997:2; Drescher & Engerman 1998:372; Eltis 2001, Table 1). Arguments for an upward revision by long-time participants in the numbers game, such as Joseph Inikori and Paul Lovejoy, yield only moderate discrepancies: around 10.2 million arrivals (Lovejoy) and 12.7 million departures (Inikori), a revision of around 7 to 15 percent, respectively (Eltis 2001).

On the basis of such estimates, the total number of Africans enslaved in the interior of the continent with the objective of being transported to the Americas is often put at 20 million. There is neither absolute certainty nor consensus, and such figures are used in much of the scholarly community with due prudence. In contrast, the numbers brought up in public debates often exceed this amount by a wide margin. Thus one finds references to “more than three hundred million men and women ... forcefully uprooted and dreadfully transported from their Motherland” in an official brochure, published in 2004 by the Ghanaian government.¹⁸ The president of the Dutch platform urging for a monument in commemoration of slavery advanced a number of 60 million enslaved Africans, again, not an estimate corroborated by scholarly analysis.¹⁹ Some of these divergent estimates are a result of poor acquaintance with recent scholarship. Others are prompted

17. Particularly the one compiled at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute of Harvard University (Eltis *et al.* 1999).

18. Embau Moheni 2004:16. The prominent Ghanaian historian, Kwesi J. Anquandah, president of the Ghana Chapter of the UNESCO Slave Route Project, suggests a more cautious figure, though one that clearly exceeds conventional calculations: some 7 million Africans exported from the Gold Coast alone. Quoted in a magazine published by the Ministry of Tourism and Modernisation of the Capital City: *Ghana: A Different Africa*, [2004] p. 13.

19. Barryl Biekman, quoted in an article “De zwarte holocaust,” *De Groene Amsterdammer*, May 13, 2000.

by a deep mistrust of “white” scholarship. The depiction of a wide range of sensitive issues may be similarly colored, amongst them being the participation of Africans on the supply side, the profitability and economic significance of the slave trade for the three continents involved, the background to abolition and its widely divergent timings, the connection between the slave trade and racism then as now, the issue of trauma borne in the African diaspora and its consequences in contemporary societies, the relevance of religion to systems of slavery (Christianity versus Islam), and so on.

The terminology at a recent conference in Accra on the slave trade betrays the effect of emotions on scholarship.²⁰ Several participants at the conference fiercely objected to a broad use of the very term “slave trade.” Any references to contemporary problems such as the abduction of children in Africa – a major issue addressed at the conference by a representative of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights – under the heading of “slave trade” were deemed incorrect, if not irresponsible. The argument is straightforward: “Nothing compares to the atrocities of the Atlantic slave trade.”

While any attempt at trivialization is out of place, one may well question the affirmation that “nothing compares.” There is a thin line here between scholarship, politics, rage, and hypocrisy. At the Accra conference, the concepts of “slave trade” and “slavery” were explicitly narrowed to refer to the Atlantic variant while paradoxically the term “Holocaust” was expanded to include the Atlantic slave trade. Indeed, the once uniquely U.S. locution “Black Holocaust” has gradually acquired popularity all over the “Black Atlantic.”²¹

There is an evident political rationale behind the shifts in connotation that “slave trade” and “Holocaust” undergo, which one may or may not condone, but intellectually this maneuver is not convincing. Particularly in the Western world, there appears to be a willingness to commemorate, to erect symbols of remembrance, to record and canonize stories of repression, victory, and redemption. Whereas no nation is eager to dwell on its own past sins, communities with a history of being oppressed are not inclined to remember their own histories with detachment. Inevitably, at times unsettling debates emerge about who suffered most, and jealousy is directed at those who have been most successful in finding recognition

20. Conference on “The Transatlantic Slave Trade: Landmarks, Legacies and Expectations,” Accra, Ghana. Personal observations during the conference and a subsequent visit to Elmina and other fortresses.

21. Google offers over 1.2 million entries for “Black Holocaust.” A Dutch-language Google search for *zwarte holocaust* results in 11,400 entries. The latter search also leads to a white racist web group that both ridicules Dutch of African origins and downplays or denies the Jewish Holocaust (web search March 15, 2005).

and compensation for past suffering. Often the emphasis on victimhood is married to the expectation of reparations.²²

The ways in which victimhood and agency are treated in public debates are also indicative of the particular slant the depiction of the Atlantic slave trade gets: mainly as a history of European colonial powers abusing Africans and the continent of Africa, and hence as a tale of simple bipolar racism. While scholarship has moved beyond that crude schematization, the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade as an issue embraced in the three continents involved and by international institutions such as UNESCO seems to have dictated a narrowing of the issue again to the racial-cum-colonial issue.

As Singleton (1999:157) remarks, many Ghanaians “feel that they have no reason to apologize” for their ancestors’ involvement in the slave trade. At the Accra conference participants did not shy away from discussing African agency in the trade. Inevitably, with such openness the debate assumes a potentially divisive dynamic not only between the African diaspora and Africans, but equally within African countries such as Ghana, with its different ethnic groups brought together in one in what became the Republic of Ghana only long after the abolition of the slave trade. Some of these ethnic groups once enslaved others, an embarrassing truth known to all, yet hard to discuss – yet another warning against debating the Atlantic slave trade from a purely moralistic perspective.

HERITAGE TOURISM

Even if there are serious philosophical objections to the very idea of nations repenting or demanding apologies for past wrongs (Trouillot 2000) few would question the relevance of commemorating historical atrocities. But there is no obvious way to even begin to respectfully remember any event of mass suffering, whether it be the Atlantic slave trade, the Holocaust and the Gulag, Cambodia’s killing fields, or the recent genocide in Rwanda. Things become even more complicated once the remembrance of past horrors becomes part of heritage tourism, which is a money-making business, after all.

Silencing the past of Atlantic slavery is no longer an option. The way to break past silences is not evident, and whatever choices are made in representing Atlantic slavery in museums are bound to stir controversy (e.g.,

22. See Buruma 1995; in the context of the Dutch debate on slavery, see Oostindie 1999. See also Ian Buruma’s essay “The Joys and Perils of Victimhood,” *New York Review of Books*, April 8, 1999 and Tony Judt, “A la Recherche du Temps Perdu,” *New York Review of Books*, December 3, 1998.

Vaswani 2001, Haviser 2002). Whatever initiatives are undertaken to give this past its proper place in public memory, the “dangers of banalization and tokenism” (Price 2001b:62) are always clear and present.

Ghana, too, supported by USAID, UNESCO, the Danish and Dutch governments, and others, is now actively engaged in developing its own heritage tourism. Inevitably the slave trade is at the core of this developing tourism and is given a more privileged position probably than local Ghanaians would like it to be (e.g., Bruner 1996, Singleton 1999, Hartman 2002). Here too, contemporary concerns and contingencies tend to interfere with historical realities. African Americans were the first to develop interest, on a larger scale, in visiting the “Homeland.” Today, this interest is still heavily concentrated in the English-speaking African diaspora. This Anglophone preponderance in turn has stimulated a disproportional, if not exclusive, interest in English-speaking Africa, and particularly in Ghana. Ironically, “Africa” is narrowed to connote the present more than the past centuries.

There are some speculative explanations for why primarily Anglophones show interest in Africa, and English-language Africa at that. First, most Homeland visitors hail from the English-speaking African diaspora in part simply because of their relative prosperity in comparison to most of the African diaspora. Furthermore, it is precisely in the United States that African Americans have felt more excluded from the domestic mainstream than anywhere else in the African diaspora. It may be that they seek a sense of belonging in an African Homeland which they do not have in their physical home. The British West Indies meanwhile have a long-standing migratory and ideological interaction with the African American community. In contrast, the other relatively affluent segments of the diaspora are increasingly more integrated in their former metropolitan culture; this applies particularly to the French Caribbean departments. If there is an African *lieu de mémoire* of any significance to the Caribbean French, it is rather the island of Gorée, part of Francophone Senegal and thus of the former French colonial world.²³

That the contemporary United States and Anglophone Caribbean orient themselves toward African states where English is widely spoken is not surprising, even if this does not necessarily reflect the origins of their ancestors.²⁴ But why particularly Ghana? Perhaps the long-standing relations between African American and West Indian intellectuals with Kwame Nkrumah has set a lasting precedent. In addition, of the relevant

23. Email communication, Kenneth Bilby, March 28, 2005.

24. On Google, linking “slavery and heritage tourism” to Ghana yields 7,360 results. Nigeria scores even higher (9,830), but of course this is a much larger and more populous state. Non-Anglophone states such as Angola (4,600), Senegal (4,700), Benin (852), and Togo (723) all yield fewer results (web search March 15, 2005).

“Anglophone” African countries, Ghana is economically and politically the most stable and hence most attractive destination, and, of course, it possesses the largest number of fortresses from the period of the Atlantic slave trade.

Whatever the historical accuracies or distortions, Ghana in return has started to present itself as “the Black Star of Africa and the gateway to the Homeland.” As the country’s minister of tourism explains, “we hope to give tourists, especially those of African descent in the Diaspora, a real feel of the experience of their ancestors as they went through the torturous moments of being captured, trekked through the wild African forest, crossing rivers and being sold to slave dealers.” Ghana hopes that in 2007, the fiftieth year of the country’s independence and the two hundredth anniversary of the British abolition of the slave trade, “our brothers and sisters whose ancestors were forcibly taken away from us [will] return to the Homeland, at least for a pilgrimage and to reconnect with their roots.” The Republic has already institutionalized a national “Emancipation Day.” The choice for the first of August is illustrative of the rather narrowly defined symbolism of the rediscovered transatlantic linkages. This particular day is, of course, the day of the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, a date without any particular prior meaning to Ghana at all (Obetsebi-Lamprey 2004:7).

Ghana, a country struggling to diversify its economy, is thus profiting from its preferred relations with the African diaspora in its development of heritage tourism. Along the Atlantic coastline, fortresses once in use as centers of the slave trade are now being restored to attract tourists, some of whom are descendants of the enslaved Africans shipped from these very places – or willing to believe so for lack of proper documentation. Several things strike the visitor. The guides at the fortresses, while they avoid moralizing, do produce their own silences: no mention here of the African supply side.²⁵ One wonders what the forts thus tell the great majority of visitors, who are actually Ghanaians. And one wonders where reconciliation, the buzzword at the Accra conference, plays a role.

The development of this heritage tourism implies commoditization and standardization. Thus in various fortresses one observes the same routing and even the same apparently standardized and centrally produced signs (“Female Slave Dungeon,” “Door of No Return,” etc.). All fortresses are apparently allotted a “Door of No Return,” irrespectively of the architectural accuracy of its location within the fortress and indeed of the fact that probably the majority of the enslaved Africans never set foot in the fortress but were directly transported to and from the Atlantic beach. Tourist facilities – restaurants, souvenir shops – are added within or immediately next to the forts. Inevitably, local

25. The guides probably adjust their explanations to suit the “ethnic” composition of the groups of visitors taking a tour (Hartman 2002:768-69).

youth hang about, imposing conversation, friendship, and more tangible commodities on the visitors. For them, it seems to matter little whether the *obroni* (originally “whites,” today “foreigners,” generally) are black or white (Bruner 1996:295; Hartman 2002:766). In fact, to keep the locals from harassing tourists of whatever color, signs indicate that only tourists are allowed to enter Elmina castle (Bruner 1996:298, Singleton 1999:158).

Small wonder, then, that some African diaspora visitors have been outraged by the commercialization of their ancestors’ suffering. The restoration of the fortresses was denounced in vain as “whitewashing” and “cleansing” of the tragic past (Bruner 1996:291; Singleton 1999:157). Less assertive reactions also reflect the uneasiness with the way the painful past is presented and new transatlantic solidarities are offered. After a visit to Elmina castle, Saidiya Hartman (2002:768) remarks that the idea expressed by the guided tour (“You are back!”) makes her ill at ease. “The most disturbing aspect of these re-enactments is the suggestion that the rupture of the Middle Passage is neither irreparable nor irrevocable, but bridged by the tourist who acts as the vessel for the ancestor. In short, the captive finds his redemption in the tourist.”

Can the Ghanaian government really do much better, short of letting the fortresses fall into ruin? Whatever compromises are made and whatever delicacy is observed by museum curators and guides, the deep contrasts are not likely to disappear. The parallel between the endemic mismatch between “European” and African diaspora visions and feelings regarding the slave trade is obvious. To complicate things in the case of Ghana, the very European nations – the Danish and particularly the Dutch – formerly involved in slave trading are now financially assisting the Ghanaian government in its policy of developing this heritage tourism.

The irony is obvious: there would have been no particular reason for Ghana to maintain any specific relationship with either the Netherlands or its former Caribbean colonies, if not for the Ghanaian community in the Netherlands and because Ghana is one of the countries selected by the Dutch government for preferential development aid. The preservation of cultural heritage is one among many development projects now funded by the Dutch, and so it is that this former slave-trading state is now co-financing the upkeep Elmina, its own erstwhile main slave-trading fortress.

While the whole endeavor may have a wry flavor to it, Elmina is now firmly fixed as the ultimate *lieu de mémoire* for the Dutch slave trade. Not only did the crown prince express his remorse for Dutch slave trading at Elmina, but in several recent Dutch television documentaries on the trade, Elmina figures prominently. Heritage tourism developed for the African diaspora in the Netherlands or its former Caribbean colonies is almost matter-of-factly directed to Ghana, not to any other site in Africa.

Historical accuracy is not the major concern behind this heritage tourism, but rather the longing to connect to a tangible Homeland – with the Afro-Caribbean communities in the Netherlands taking the lead, whether because of their relative prosperity, their permanent exposure to a European society in which they are a cultural minority, or a combination of the two. Incidentally, in the recent upsurge of genealogical websites offering databases on manumission, of the emancipation registers, and so on one observes the predominance and political clout of the diaspora now in the Netherlands. How this apparent longing to connect back to ancestors once toiling under slavery relates to contemporary identity issues is a matter of debate. Nonetheless, it is the metropolitan state which, through its national archives, facilitates this roots-searching.²⁶

CONCLUSION

In the general debate on slavery and its legacies, there are also many issues of lesser sensitivity that deserve serious reflection, simply because they will help us understand the rich variety of cultures developed in the diaspora. For example, any serious study of African American culture should begin by establishing the various origins, and thus cultures, of enslaved Africans that influenced the New World creolization processes.

Accuracy has been under-appreciated in understanding the past and the present alike. Patrick Manning (2003) points out “an ironic blind spot of Africa-diaspora studies: the African continent itself is presented too often in oversimplified terms of an undifferentiated Homeland.” Beyond academia, such oversimplifications are omnipresent. Here again, the conflation of Africa and Ghana in the discussion of slavery in the Dutch orbit and beyond is not particularly helpful.²⁷

The challenge of somehow bridging scholarly concerns and African identity issues remains, and there are no easy answers or clear-cut divisions. Some remarks regarding a recently started program on “The Atlantic World and the Dutch, 1500-2000” may illustrate this point. In this project an attempt is made both to identify the major landmarks, archival records, and library resources rooted in the centuries of Dutch exploits in Africa and the Americas and to establish what research initiatives and priorities presently exist. The project is based and financed in the Netherlands, yet by definition attempts to link up with archives, libraries, and scholars

26. For Suriname see <www.nationaalarchief.nl/vrij-in-suriname>; for the Antilles <www.nationaalarchief.nl/vrij-van-slavernij>. A similar project has been developed for the Surinamese of Asian descent: <www.nationaalarchief.nl/suriname>.

27. Manning 2003:488. On creolization with particular reference to Africa and Suriname, see Van Stipriaan 2000; Price 2001a.

in all countries involved.²⁸ Ghana is among these; so are Angola, Aruba, Brazil, Ghana, Guyana, the Netherlands Antilles, Suriname, and the United States.²⁹

The issue of the Atlantic slave trade is obviously a preponderant one in the project, at least for the first centuries of the “Dutch Atlantic.” Yet the extent to which representatives of the various countries involved define the slave trade and slavery as the defining characteristics of early Dutch expansion in the Atlantic realm differs considerably. As a consequence there is, next to the straightforward accusatory Caribbean attitude and its apologetic metropolitan complement, the very ambivalent African attitude. Moreover, there is the perspective from New Amsterdam, one in which the African dimension of early Dutch settlement was recently rediscovered, but certainly not as a defining characteristic (e.g., Jacobs 1999, Shorto 2004). And finally, there is the view from the pioneering Dutch settlements in the Americas, in Brazil. Here, the naive observer is amazed by the uncritical tone and even sheer exaltation characterizing many contemporary Brazilian renderings of Dutch colonialism.³⁰

These widely divergent perspectives somehow relate to the same historical phenomenon. Accounting for these divergences is in itself a worthy subject for scholarly analysis. And, to conclude on a deliberately old-fashioned positivistic note, no serious explanations are likely to come forward without getting some historical facts right first.

28. The project is based at the KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (www.kitlv.nl) in Leiden and is supported by the Amsterdam Municipal Archives, the Dutch National Archives, the Erasmus University Rotterdam, Leiden University, the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy (Ninsee), and the National Library of the Netherlands.

29. Territories where Dutch exploits were more transitory, like for instance Gorée, São Tomé, and Tobago are included.

30. For example, Herkenhoff 1999, Montes, Mota Menezes & Galindo 2004. Rosa Ribeiro (2004) offers a provocative analysis of the Brazilian interpretation of “Dutch Brazil” (1630-54); see also Pijning (2002).

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