
This is mainly a historical and political discussion of the slave-trade history in Anlo (Ghana) from the 17th to the 20th century (with the focus on the 19th to the 20th century).

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The author opens with a discussion of different attitudes of slave descents in West Africa and North America towards their origins and further discusses that in modern Ghana, few Ghanaian historians have worked systematically on slavery and the slave-trade.

Two developments brought about more discussion of the legacy of the slave trade and slavery in the Anlo society in Ghana today: the first development came from UNESCO’s declaration of some forts and castles in Ghana built by the Europeans, among which Atorkor, an Anlo coastal town and former slave-history site was also listed; the second development was a result of a report in 1993 by Ghanaian media about the existence of ritual female bondage in some areas in Ghana.

Anlo, located in southeast Ghana, bordered to the east by the Republic of Togoland and isolated from the rest of Ghana, lacked gold and ivory as well as land and fertile soil, all of which made it both necessary and accessible to play a part in the slave trade.

Before the colonial period of Anlo, it had been from the 1750s on constantly engaged in dispossessing its neighbor Ada’s salt ponds and fishing grounds, which Anlo lacked itself. The consolidation of the Anlo war-machinery also contributed to Anlo’s being an important player in the slave trade.

The Dutch took charge on the Slave Coast from the 1630s, and were joined in the Guinea trade from the mid-seventeenth century by the English, French, Swedes, Brandenburgers and Danes. By the late 17th century, several polities dotted between the Volta estuary (south) and the Lagos Channel (north) all took part and vied as intermediaries in the Atlantic slave-trade. Part of the reason was geographical: the major Anlo slave marts were all located between the lagoon and the sea, facilitating the smuggling of slaves along the lagoon and the shipping from ports other than Keta, which was mostly under Danish control.

Not only did the slave traders in Anlo sell slaves to the New World, they also kept some slaves themselves, especially women, whom they married and over whom they had much control (including their offspring).

The slave trade was welcomed by the local governor, who at the same time also felt threatened by the wealth of the slave traders. From the 18th century, the priests of powerful shrines began to demand young women, fisididi, as payment from devotees who sought their service and these women remained as servants of the shrine for the rest of their lives. These services could be in aid of childbirth, healing, the settling of disputes or vengeance for wrongs committed. Fisididi became institutionalized and grew in Anlo society over the 19th century.

Fisididi loosely means “wife of chief” and mainly exists in Anlo (north), whereas the other kind of human payment, trokosi (literally means “pledge of god”) is mainly practiced in Tongo (south).

A trokosi currently functions as a punitive institution for checking crime. However, the exploitation of the sexuality and labor of the trokosi are its most blatant features.

From the 1970s on, humanists in Ghana as well as in other countries began investigating the trokosi practice and condemned it as inhumane, which brought international attention.

The author believes that it is the acts of betrayal by local chiefs that contributed greatly in the abduction of local inhabitants, and that it is the chiefs that suggested these slave-trade spots be considered as a Slave-Trade Memorial worthy of national preservation and tourist promotion. It is also those powerful chiefs, indigenous priests and educated “traditionalists” that pledged to uphold African “culture” in the face of Western/Christian encroachment.

In the process of investigating into the slave-trade history of Anlo, the author discovers that despite the fact that the “oral tradition” of the slave-trade is passed down through generations in forms of songs, drum names or as proverbs, the “oral data” of individuals gets lost quite easily, and usually dies with the death of the individual who experienced them.

by Sicong Zhu