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## Beyond Elmina: The Slave Trade in Northern Ghana

Joachim Jack Agamba

### Abstract

*This paper examines the practice of embedded or repressed memory of the slave trade in northern Ghana. Noting the limited knowledge and scholarship about the slave trade in the northern part of Ghana compared to the coastal regions, I argue that the memory of slave raids are an integral part of the history of northern Ghana and is preserved and practiced by various means for various reasons. Relying on research that I conducted in northern Ghana during which I explored oral traditions, physical sites, customs and rituals as well as locating the study from relevant literature, I advance the argument that the process and practice of embedded memory essentially serves to maintain peace among the descendants of victims and perpetrators of slave raids who have to share the same space and form communities.*

*In order to further establish the social logic of embedded memory, where necessary, the process or practices of remembering the slave trade in northern Ghana to that of Elmina and Cape Coast Castles and dungeons are compared. Slave trade memory in the north is also contrasted with Cape Coast to reveal that whereas memory is "fetishized" in ritual in northern Ghana, it is "commercialized" along the coastal regions. In conclusion, the paper offers a moral dimension to the slave trade from the perspective of societies that were raided and evaluates the benefits of embedded memory. It also briefly examines the relevance of embedded memory to diaspora studies both within and outside Africa.*

## Introduction

Recent research has revealed that Ghana played a larger role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade than previously was thought and the ratio of slaves taken from there is established to be double the 17 percent that was previously established by Curtin (Eltis and Richardson 1977: 16-17). However, much of what is known about the slave trade in Ghana is focused on the Akan states in the coastal regions. The vast land that bridged the gold-producing regions of Ashanti and Jenne in the Southwest fringes of the Middle Niger (Wilks 1961a) generally was considered to be Ashanti hinterland even though this region was not part of the Ashanti Empire. It was untouched by the slave trade until the Gonja and Dagomba centralized states were invaded by the Ashanti in 1732-33 and 1744-45, respectively (Levzion 1986: 126-7). Following that, the slave trade in the north continued until the early part of the 20th century.

However, when one examines oral narratives and physical sites from this region, it becomes clear that memory of slave raiding events is not neglected but rather is retained by the indigenous people in various forms, albeit embedded. Embedded memory serves the purpose of allowing people of different backgrounds who were victims and perpetrators to share the same territory and form communities in a peaceful co-existence regardless of their ancestral pasts. This is significant because descendants of the indigenous peoples who were the object of slave raids as well as those who may be implicated as collaborators with raiders still share the same space and form communities with descendants of the settlers who conducted the raids. Considering that the slave trade in northern Ghana came to an end at the twilight of the 1800s, the peaceful nature of their co-existence suggests

that embedded memory is the key to this peaceful sharing of space and the ownership of the collective memory of the slave trade. The sadness, embarrassment and stigma of slavery and the slave trade, facilitates this arrangement and forms the basis for self-censorship on the subject by the people. Excavating embedded memory in northern Ghana therefore provides an insight into the process and practice of memory and forgetting the slave trade and the purposes it serves. I demarcate and use northern Ghana and Ashanti as well as the coastal regions not for the purpose of division but as a geographical phenomenon, relative to the slave trade in Ghana as a whole.

Where necessary, I will compare the process or practices of remembering the slave trade in northern Ghana to that of Elmina and Cape Coast Castles and dungeons, to distinguish the different ways in which memory is embedded and what is at stake in their commemorative ceremonies, in order to further establish the social logic of embedded memory. Similarly, I will observe, where appropriate, the advantages of suppressed memory in northern Ghana by recognizing how sites of the slave trade as sites of memory or cultural heritage can change the access and ownership of the stories they embody as with the castles, which sometimes ignite or stall competing memories and even engender what Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger call "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm and Ranger: 1983).

### **Background of Northern Ghana before the Slave Trade**

Northern Ghana is composed of three regions: the Northern, Upper East and Upper West, which together make up 42 percent of the land mass of Ghana. The original inhabitants were segmentary societies who emigrated from

Mande territory (Der 1998). Four of the nine great routes that linked Asante with its outer world, as described by Bowdich, were connected to the North (Bowdich 1966). Two of them, Routes III and IV, called "the old roads of antiquity" that furthered the link with Jenne, passed through or near small pockets of settlements by these indigenous peoples (Wilks 1975). Despite the proximity of Route III, in particular, which passed through Kanjarga (present day Builsa District), there is no evidence that the people in these settlements participated in any commercial activities that occurred along the route in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Nor is there any indication that these settlements were of any economic or political importance to Asante and the Mande in their trade relations. The thesis here is that the general populations that occupied the area representing northern Ghana today were not affected by 16<sup>th</sup> century slavery and the slave trade frontier as described by Lovejoy (2000).

A second wave of immigrants<sup>1</sup> settled at Bono Manso and consequently formed the central states of Gonja and Dagomba through the invasion of the indigenous peoples (Brimah 1977). Although this process involved the use of male captives for labor and the marrying of some of the few women taken as captives, there is no information indicating that they took captives and sold them into slavery (Manukian 1951). It was not until Asante invaded the two central states of Gonja and Dagomba in 1732 and 1744, respectively (Der 1998) and demanded slaves as tribute that the trans-Atlantic slave trade was introduced into northern Ghana. To meet Asante's demand for slaves, the Gonja and Dagomba chiefs, who directly bore the responsibility, turned to invading the less well-armed segmentary peoples in the region (Holden 1965).

The involvement of the Zabarama, another wave of immigrants from Mandeland, who were escaping the violence and insecurity in the Niger region as a result of the spread of the Fulani jihad (*ibid*), most likely allowed slave raiding to spread and persist throughout northern Ghana. Having not been accustomed to raiding people to sell the captives as slaves, the Dagomba chiefs recruited the Zabarama as mercenaries in their slave raiding expeditions (*ibid*). Following the failure of one such campaign in 1856, the Zabarama remained in Grunshiland and were commissioned by local chiefs in their local wars against each other (Tamakloe 1931). The Zabarama's familiarity with the use of guns overpowered the bows and arrows of the indigenous people.

The Zabarama capitalized on this opportunity and soon were engaged in selling captives as slaves. Two Zabarama leaders emerged as a result of this development: Babatu, who controlled most of the northeast region of present day Upper East and parts of the Upper West, and Samori, whose domain included the northwest, central and western Gonja and parts of the Upper West (Goody and Arhin 1965, Holden 1965). Even though the full effect of the legal abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was felt in Europe and the New World by this time (Lovejoy 2000), slave trading was gaining steam with the Zabarama factor in northern Ghana. They soon created companies similar to those established along the gold coasts by European companies almost two centuries earlier and established local slave markets in Grunshiland, which supplied slaves to Salaga market. Babatu and Samori not only engaged in slave raiding activities but also attempted to form independent polities for themselves around 1880 (Holden 1965). By all accounts they probably would have succeeded were it not for the

intervention of the British and French who shared a similar interest in carving out political spheres of influence and dominance for themselves.

Following Asante's domination of the Gonja and Dagomba states, the choice of Salaga market over Imfaha as a result of Asante's reorganization of Gonja territory made it "the Elmina of the North" and gave rise to the slave trade in the North because of the centrality and convenience of the location of the market (Zwernemann 1958, Holden 1965). Most of the different ethnic and linguistic peoples who were raided were placed under the collective term "Gurunsi." Among them are the Kasena, Sisala, Vagala, Nunuma, Lile, Busanse, Tamprusi, Degha and Siti (Holden 1965). What is significant in this geographical and ethnic collapsing and simplification is that even though the people recognize their differences, they nonetheless have repressed those differences and generally accept themselves as "Northerners" and similarly accept the term "Gurunsi" even though they come from different linguistic units (Zwernemann 1958).

### **Memories of Slave Raiding in Northern Ghana**

Whether one is seeking testimony from people in a well-known space like the Salaga market or the little-known village of Nakong in the Upper East Region, one recognizes the presence of conscious memory through oral narratives.<sup>2</sup> In fact, oral narratives from the people of the villages of Nakong, Katiu and Chiana, who share geographical boundaries in the Upper East Region, demonstrate this very well.

## The Nakong Community

Striking evidence that social memory of the slave trade in northern Ghana is transmitted through oral history, and bears testimony to Maurice Halbwachs' inquiry into "collective memory" (Connerton 1989),<sup>3</sup> was demonstrated by the people of the village of Nakong in the Upper East region during a communal gathering at the local chief's house on September 12, 2004. In response to my questions about slave raid memories, individuals narrated what had been told to them. It became apparent that each family member was contributing a piece of memory that, when put together, formed the common story of the relationship of the village to the slave trade. Individuals from different families were able to recollect, with lucid details, stories told to them by their parents and grandparents. It demonstrates that the older generations in Nakong are repositories that have and continue to mediate memories of the slave trade to the younger ones by passing along their own memories.

Various loci in Nakong, such as a rocky cave called *kumpio*, are connected to the slave trade and evoke its memories. *Kumpio*, for example, has a special place among the people such that the ritual of libation is performed there periodically. It is the chief god of the people of Nakong, inside which guns can be found. Some of the residents took refuge in this cave during slave raids (interview with Bawa Afogache on 9/12/04). As a result, four significant community representatives — the land custodian (*Tigatu*), the chief (*Pe*), the military leader (*Tangatu*) and the protective leader (*Kvaratu*) — perform libation at appropriate times to thank the gods and also to ask for their blessings in hunting, farming and the general happiness of the people. Other



loci of memory of the slave trade that are "embedded" are bodies of water where raiders snatched women as they went to fetch water. Bawa Afogache pointed that one of them is *katiyo*. He also indicated that in some cases libation may even be poured ritually at such a locus in memory of those departed where there is specific evidence that a member of the community was indeed captured there. The local chief confirmed that slave raiders did raid the territory and pointed to the geographical direction from which they came. The chief spoke about how the raiders strategically hid close to water sources and caught women as they came to fetch water. One of them (Ma), whom he claims was rescued through magical powers but later died, is buried inside the family's courtyard. He gave details about the attire of the raiders, including that they did not carry fire at night. He also mentioned the neighboring villages to which people ran, which included the villages of Katiu, Asunia, Kong and Sandema. He referred to a tree under which the raiders lit a fire and convened a meeting one night after capturing a local woman to decide who would marry her.<sup>4</sup>

Cognitive memory claims (Connerton 1989) invoke memories of the slave trade even in cases where such evidence may have disappeared. Bawa Afogache stated that for instance, if one took refuge in a tree and survived a slave raid, then that tree became a *tangom* (a fetish, person or family god). As a result, he continued, because of the protective powers that a person may believe exist in a tree, libation may be poured at such a tree (or exact location where the tree has disappeared) and its magical powers called upon to either protect the believer or harm an enemy. Conscious memory and oral tradition keep certain memories alive even long after the physical evidence may have disappeared. J.I. Afogache pointed out, for example, that spears which use

to be found in particular locations but are no longer there are still remembered as people consciously retain the memory and pass it on with the location as a point of reference.

Another respondent, Nadumtera Afogache, spoke about the direction from which the raiders came, adding that it was during a period when water was scarce and therefore women were easy targets at water sources. He said that it was the women who then sounded the alarm on the raiders as they were attacked. He indicated that some of the people who were captured were taken to "Sola" [Salaga]. He also talked about an aunt called Awubung in Kumasi who was married to one of the raiders.<sup>5</sup>

Besides evoking memories of the slave trade, some loci remain witnesses to activities of the slave trade. They are not only ostensible reminders, but are also repositories to which memories can be traced. The evidence they provide thus evokes continuous memory to fuel transmission through conversation, performance and ritual. For example, Anesenye Kupilugu indicated that certain mounds of earth containing utensils and tools, which are found in various parts of the village, represent homes that fell to slave raiders: "You can find heaps of soil with utensils and tools that used to be homes as proof of raids." Such spaces are sacred and so intentionally are left untouched because it is a taboo to rebuild on such a space. He added that there was a slave camp at Paga (referring to the famous slave camp at the town of Paga about five miles from Navrongo). These forms of embedded memory are a reminder to the people that particular homes fell over time because all the able-bodied men and women were captured, leaving the children and old people to be absorbed by other families. In some cases, the name of a person evokes memory of the slave trade as

with the case of the name *Kazaresam* among the Kasena people.<sup>6</sup> *Kazare* refers to Gazare (Alfa Gazare, whom Babatu succeeded in the Zabarama hierarchy). The name is therefore a reference to houses that were "emptied" by the Zabarama slave raids.

The heroic role that women played to save the village from raids was recounted by some respondents. One of them, Tonyara, pointed to the direction from which the raider<sup>7</sup> entered, and said that he married the daughter of a local resident. He also added that some women voluntarily went to the raiders and offered themselves to become wives. As a result, the raiding party proceeded to raid neighboring villages. That is how the people of Nakong were probably spared from further raids.

The embedded memory of the slave trade in northern Ghana is revealed even in some of the lineage frameworks of families. Nadumtera Afogache, related a personal family story in relation to the slave trade, narrating that his grandfather who was called Kaba, was captured by raiders and taken to the village of Chidongo in the Wuru geographical area. But at night, a woman gave him water in which *dawadawa* (a local spice used for cooking throughout northern Ghana) was dissolved and put around the chained hands of his grandfather, which allowed him to escape back home. He noted that he was born as a result of such a successful escape. Anesenyé also noted that some of the people from Nakong who were captured but were able to escape were not able to return home.

Another respondent, Atawusu Azuma, recounted the story told to him by his father about the behavior of some of the raiders. They made friends with some of the local people and jokingly would tie the hands of a man, then another, before beating them into submission and dragging

them away or killing them if they resisted. He said that his ancestors ran to the neighboring village of Kayoro returning only after the raiding ended.<sup>8</sup> He added that their population would have been depleted were it not for this temporary migration during the raids. A woman, Anibura Afogache, described how another woman used spears on raiders, suggesting that women armed themselves when necessary.

Some regular traditional religious rites of the people of Nakong project appropriately with Connerton's (1989: 48-50) discussion of ritual behavior. According to Chief Bawa, the ancestral spirits are asked to protect the people from slave raids, among the other requests and supplications that are made during ritual sacrifices on a clay altar, *jom*, that involve drinks, fowls and animals. Although the altar and the sacrificial ritual itself does not directly emanate from the slave trade, as is the case with the Hupila shrine of the Diola Esulalu (Baum 1999: 117-20), the regular reference to the slave trade by the people of Nakong serves as a symbolic connection and continuity with the past. The social memory of the slave trade is thus retained and transmitted through the symbolic process of libation. Past events and people connected to those events are evoked because they have a bearing on the lives of those who are living today.

Certain rituals among the people of Nakong and other Kasena that involve music connect directly with memories of the slave trade. According to Bawa Afogache, a short flute (*bumbula*) was used to draw attention to the presence of raiders and to rally the men to fight. In addition, particular styles of drumming and singing that were used to rally the people during slave raids and dirges are still used today (*Kasena luse*) to accompany the corpse of a member of the community who dies away from home. Similarly, during the funerals of adult males, bows are used to shoot arrows in

the direction of the village of Paga, where the most famous slave camp was established during the raids, to demonstrate bravery. Through such funerals, a collective memory of the slave trade comes alive.

Bawa Afogachie's dress and what he said about it reveals that even history can be worn on the body. He indicated that the smock he was wearing may contain magical powers capable of protecting him: "You may shoot a bullet at me but the bullet may fail to penetrate. Or even water may come out of your gun." This brought laughter from the crowd but his statement indicates that dress codes can be part of the slave trade narrative as "protective armor." What one wears may be considered as body literature containing secrets that natives can read.

Events of the slave trade are sacred to the community because of its tragic consequences; people died, others were taken away and community life in general was disrupted. As Nadumtera Afogache indicated, "slave raid stories are not told by heart. They are sad stories. When you see 'evidence' and ask, they'll tell you. Otherwise, they generally don't."<sup>9</sup> It is therefore not impossible to embellish some positive outcomes or underplay events in which local actors could have been implicated during the slave trade. The value of the sacred nature of slave trade narratives seems to dissuade intentional distortion. This was evident in the fact that when respondents were asked for more details, they repeatedly replied that they could not add to what they had said for that is what they were told. Oral narratives of this nature also facilitate intentional "forgetting" of certain information that individuals may want to remain as a secret to the community.

When the various details contained in each individual and family are brought together, the information about the

group as a whole begins to emerge. Where distortions exist, they can be identified through lack of corroboration by other members of the community. In spite of the imperfect nature of memory, especially when filtered through subjective human beings, what is important in this process is that with the consequences of the information they disseminate in mind, each member of the older generation chooses the type and amount of information to give to the younger generation. Embedded memory therefore becomes an informed traditional process that takes on a reflex quality due to its nature of transmission and serves both the individual and the group.

### The Katiu Community

During interviews conducted on September 12, 2004, the people of the village of Katiu, who are neighbors to Nakong, shared stories about the slave trade that were handed down from generation to generation through oral history. They claim that Babatu never succeeded in defeating Chiana. "Ayagtam blew the alarm and people started getting ready to face the raiders by sharpening their tools but were told to stop wasting time and face the enemy promptly," according to Alorewo. He added that one person who was known to have been captured by the raiders was called Awolwo. "He was captured at Kalveo and taken to the Sandema area." He added that the raiders then went eastward through the villages of Kayoro and Lambao. They attribute their defeat of the raiders to the powers of *zambao*, their chief deity. The bees from *zambao* attacked the raiders and they ran away. Felix Zangwiu said his father was a chief who performed sacrifices in *zambao* and explained that *zambao* is a cave in a hill containing two compartments where

the locals took refuge. It is one of several other gods and is considered to be a male god as there are female gods as well: "As a male god who is expected to protect, *zambao* performed his expected duty. The people run to him and he protected them while letting the bees attack the raiders as they came by the cave. *Zambao* therefore did his job." He explained further that *zambao* stands for *zene baro* which means, honor a man.

Fadre Yara shared the stories he was told in which Gazari, Babatu and Samori had magical powers that made them bold enough to enter villages without caution. "They were not afraid," he explained. He added that the slave raiders were known to dress in white, which made them identifiable from afar. People therefore run away in fear upon seeing any person dressed in white. Due to this, captives who were either released or able to escape after spending some time with the raiders also were seen as raiders or their agents and people ran away from them.<sup>10</sup>

When asked about local participation in the slave trade by the indigenous people generally, Agave Avilugu responded that their people understood that captives were made to participate in raids under duress. He explained that because captives belonged to the raiders who practically owned them and therefore controlled their behavior, they could not be trusted as they were understood to be acting upon the orders of the raiders.

When asked why slave trade stories are not widely told to the youth of today, the general consensus was that such stories also would unearth old rivalries and disturb the peace of the community. "We don't talk about the past because in the past, people protected themselves with medicinal powers. Today, such protection is not there. More so, people whom your ancestors were superior to back then may be superior

to you today and they may want to prove that to you by hurting you. It is therefore best to leave things alone, otherwise, old rivalries would be unearthed," Fadre Yara explained. Felix Zangwiu added that "talking about the past will only unearth old wounds." Similarly, Yangwara Awudiu added that "talking about the past will only bring discord." Agyave Avilugu put it plainly: "If we were to tell these stories plainly, we wouldn't be able to sit together." This is a good example of the benefits of embedded memory. By "burying the past," it is the evil manifestation of the past, not the past itself, which is buried. Intentional forgetting or repressed memory in this case therefore benefits the community. On the other hand, memory is actually reinforced in a positive way (but as an impulse of unity) since it is generally understood why certain topics should be "buried." However, it also means that as "archives" or repositories of knowledge, the death of the elderly means that libraries of knowledge are burned since they take with them pieces of information that they may not have shared.

Memory of the slave trade is part of the ancestral pasts of the community handed down to the younger generation as part of their legacy. It is quite clear that while preserving the history of the people is important, so is the exercise of caution in the process in order to maintain peace and harmony. The articulation that captives who failed to return immediately ceased to belong to their people is worth noting. Especially when compared to the escape of Kaba as indicated during the Nakong interviews above, it suggests that the longer captives remained with the captor, the more difficult it would have been for them to be able to return home. This is significant in terms of the diaspora not only within northern Ghana, but the country as a whole.



## The Chiana Community

The Chianapio, (chief of Chiana) Rowland Adiali Ayagtam II (interviewed in March 2003), indicated that the slave raiders came to the Kasena area from Dolbizan (Sisala area). He was told that the Zabarama people were a war-like people who interfered with the local chiefs. They divided and ruled, using the chiefs to punish each other. He said that the Zabarama sometimes were invited by the chiefs in the general area and gave an example of a story that was told that a family called Kanwate in Kanjarga hired the Zabarama from the Kasena area to aid them in a dispute, thus corroborating the account of Emmanuel Tamakloe (1931). He also said that the Zabarima often would turn against chiefs whom they had previously supported and mentioned Leo, Prata in present day Burkina Faso, as one of their stations, and recalled ranks of the Zabarima leadership in succession; Hanock [Alfa Hano], Gazari and Babatu.

Chief Adiali stated that Chiana was attacked by slave raiders four times with the first coming from the direction of the village of Kayoro and the fourth from Sandema. But the hills, where the locals took refuge, acted as barriers to the horses of the raiders. The locals therefore shot at the raiders with bows and arrows from their vantage points. The use of the hills as a defense mechanism, he pointed out, explains why the people kept settling beneath the hills. Also, the people of Chiana and Sandema eventually saw the need to fight the Zabarama as a united front, which they did. And so the Zabarama were challenged at both Sandema and Chiana. The chief also narrated stories that connected to the slave raids. In one, he talked of how a woman who was brought back from an encounter with the

Zabarama at Paga was given to the chief but was discovered to be pregnant when she was unchained. She later gave birth to a beautiful girl who was named Kachigru. When peace returned, Kachigru returned to Pugu but was taken forcefully by Sante, the local chief, as a wife. She would give birth to a boy called Lugucheng who would later become chief. Chief Adiali added that in the early years of his chieftaincy,<sup>11</sup> a messenger came saying that Kachigru wanted to return to her place of birth and wanted to know if the chief was still alive. But she never made it back.

Chief Adiali explained that the reason the slave raiders were successful in most of their raids was because when one village was attacked, the neighboring villages did not go to aid their neighbor, "This explains why Babatu defeated communities, right from Dolbizan, to Leo, to Bia, to Kumbule, to Pugu, to Paga." He added that chiefs had to escape including Ayenva of Paga who escaped to Namo and Kukwara of Navrongo who went to Kologu area. It is clear that slave raids were responsible for forced migrations of ordinary people as well as chiefs. Chief Adiali explained that people were sometimes taken from the Zabarama during encounters that proved to be successful by local resistance. Such people were usually taken along by the local victors to their villages. As such, during an encounter with the Zabarama around the Paga area, Chiana people were able to take slaves from there and brought them to Chiana, the descendants of who are still present today. Other people from Paga, he said, immigrated to Chiana but returned to their homes.

### **The Builsa Community**

The Builsa people who live about 20 miles southwest of Nakong have a strong memory of the slave trade

embedded in text, physical sites, ritual and oral history. One of Babatu's captains, Amariya, was a Builsa who led a revolt against Babatu (Holden 1965). A man of significant importance in the Zabarama hierarchy as a general, he is referenced in the oral histories about the slave trade by his people. The Azagsu shrine in Sandema is a physical site that is linked to Amariya and contains memories as well as evidence of the slave trade that virtually is embedded and excavated only when necessary. The shrine probably contains more objects belonging to the raiders than any other part of northern Ghana at one location. According to the chief's official spokesman, Pontius Pilate, the Zabarama slave raiders were overpowered on these grounds and the shrine is credited with the feat. The shrine contains parts of guns, spears, daggers, wrist bands, horse stirrups, utensils and other objects that were taken from the Zabarama slave raiders following Amariya's revolt. These material objects are visible, palatable signs of slavery's history. They are also witnesses or triggers for memory.

The different pieces of evidence provide visceral information about the slave raiders with a voice that cannot be minimized. They are expert narrators as well. Although embedded, the contents of the Azagsu shrine effectively rival the slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast as witnesses and makes embedded memory distinctive. This form of embedded memory functions as a locus of cultural heritage. It also forestalls "invented traditions" because there is no need or demand for overt or didactic explanation of its function.

The Azagsu shrine is unique as an example that embedded memory does not necessarily encourage forgetting. Rather, this form of embedded memory when compared to Elmina and Cape Coast Castles highlights its

advantages. This form of memory is anchored into the cultural or psychic geography of the Builsa people and triggers a different kind of memory because of their sacred disposition toward the locus. The shrine is not in the public domain and the sharing of its contents is at the disposition of the local people. While most of the information imparted to tourists at the castles is not embedded and therefore not unique as it can be found in published texts, that of the Azagsu shrine is unique and is owned by the people. The people therefore own the shrine and the memory associated with it. The shrine reminds them that they once were attacked but were able to defeat the foe. In contrast, the popular nature of the castles outside of the local community has superseded local ties to them. This has engendered competing legacies as Africans in the diaspora can lay claim to the castles and contest their use (Singleton 1989) in ways that may not be necessary in northern Ghana. Also, when compared to the disappearance of objects pertaining to the slave trade from a locus of public domain, such as the Ghana National Museum in Accra, the benefits of embedded memory, as with the Azagsu shrine, can be appreciated.

Apart from the Azagsu shrine, similar weapons and material objects that were taken from defeated Zabarama slave raiders by the Builsa are embedded underneath a heap of refuse in front of the chief's palace as revealed by chief of the Builsa, Nab Ayieta Azantilow, during an interview in May 2003.<sup>12</sup> In all these years, the people have never seen the need to excavate these items for any reason. A popular preferred surface interpretation of this rubbish heap is that it represents the populace nature of those residing in the chief's palace. The other interpretation, which is embedded because it is not openly discussed, is that buried underneath the huge rubbish heap are relics belonging to defeated slave

raiders. Although out of sight, the "evidence" can be referred and pointed to in conversations as if they were physically available. Embedded memory has allowed this phenomenon to continue through generations.

During their annual Fiok festival, the Builsa people also commemorate their resistance and defeat of slave raiders by re-enacting battle scenes. This form of embedded memory persists to commemorate an important event in Builsa history, which is done every year in December as part of the thanksgiving ceremony following the harvest season. In essence, the Builsa celebrate the willing affinity among themselves as survivors during the Fiok festival.

### **The Paga Slave Camp**

Some communities in northern Ghana did not receive warning early enough to mobilize forces and protect themselves from slave raiders. In addition, where the landscape did not offer natural refuge for escaping locals, communities fell rather rapidly before raider attacks. Such seems to have been the case with the town of Paga (Holden 1965). The Paga slave camp today represents a tragedy that does not warrant visits by the local or surrounding communities. According to a local tour guide in April 2003, the majority of members of the village took refuge among this area of small rocks. But one of their own divulged the location to the raiders. The location was so conducive for the raiders that they kept all the people there and turned it into a slave camp from where would-be slaves were marched to the Salaga market.

Among the physical evidence that can be observed at the Paga site are excavations in the flat rocks and a water spring that provided an easy means of feeding the slaves.

There is also a disintegrated tower erected by the raiders that provided the convenience of surveying the landscape to make sure that people did not escape. A graveyard is located nearby the tower, and the local tour guide indicated that according to oral tradition slaves were buried in groups and slave raiders used stones as markers to identify the graves to avoid excavating old graves when burying new corpses.

The Paga slave camp is probably one of the best examples of selective memory and how the politics of memory plays into the way societies choose to remember their past. Because of the sadness associated with the slave camp, the site is not a popular one with the people. Many people in the surrounding communities such as Navrongo grow up into adulthood without knowing about the story and or location of the slave camp. For example, while conducting this research, I was surprised to discover how few adults from Paga and the neighboring town of Navrongo knew about this slave camp. The choice to “forget” the location and its connection with the slave trade may be justified because of what may be considered the greatest loss in the community’s history, as well as the shame attached to its inability to protect itself. One can understand why there is no desire to circulate the narrative. From Holden’s (1965) account, the manner of the attacks must have been swift and without warning. With the chiefs taken or having escaped quickly, the people must have scrambled together in one location as the only option of survival. It is therefore shameful to recount these events, even if the circumstances were excusable. Also, the fact that the man who led the raiders to the location is identifiable means that his descendants could be burdened by the acts of their ancestor, even if he divulged the location under duress.

Embedded memory facilitates this unique part of the history. It is therefore not surprising that in towns where the slave trade narrative entails victory or a positive outcome, like Gwolu, Ulo and Sankana in the Upper West region, it is easy to come across information about the slave trade, whereas in towns like Paga, which were subdued rather quickly, the people are not so eager to disseminate information about the slave trade. As a result, the memory of events has been purposefully marked by a culture of collective amnesia. Due to the shame and blame that likely will persist with possible negative consequences, embedded memory is crucial among such ethnic groups because it serves to keep the peace. Even in areas where a sense of pride is attached to their history with the slave trade based on successful resistance, as was the case with the Builsa people, the negative stories are suppressed.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Sisala**

The people of northern Ghana did not submit easily to the slave raiders but rather they offered various forms of resistance. Among such efforts were protective walls built by the peoples of Gwolu and Ulo in the Upper West region and that of Nalerigu in the Northern region. Although those of Nalerigu and Ulo have been reduced to stumps of soil, those of Gwolu still remain in significant height to indicate their utility. The Gwolu walls were composed of inner and outer walls and were commissioned by chief Tengie. According to his great grandson, G.B. Bukari, after building the original wall that was situated close to the homes, they realized that they were still vulnerable due to the sources of their water supply being outside of the wall. The chief therefore commissioned the construction of an outer wall to protect the water sources.

The local historian related in detail how the bricks were built and how the walls were constructed. He could describe the drainage design and artificial cataracts that were constructed to allow only water to pass through but restricted human mobility and enabled them to capture raiders who tried to get through the walls. He recounted how the local warriors hid behind the inner wall and took the raiders by surprise and shot at them with bows and arrows when they climbed over the outer wall and approached the homes. The people of Gwolu were also privileged since they received news beforehand about the presence of the raiders through their neighbors, allowing them to prepare. Although the walls still stand tall in front of the chief's palace at Gwolu, details of it are embedded, to be shared at appropriate times by the older generation. Bukari indicated that the walls are sometimes used for target practice to teach members of the younger generation archery and to remind them of the history and importance of the wall. Through the wall, slavery's past not only is remembered but also is a testimonial to unity and a reminder of what can be achieved when the people come together in times of crisis.

### **The Dagaba**

At Ulo, in the Upper West region, the Dagaba also built walls of resistance against raiders. But more than the walls are the memories of Bayon, the only known individual in the area to build an army of resistance against the slave raiders. The people of Ulo revere the former chief as a valiant warrior who stood up against the slave raiders. A baobab tree stands in front of the chief's palace with marks that supposedly are the foot and hand prints of Bayon to



remind his descendants of his greatness. Elderly members of the community (interviewed in May 2003) also claimed that bullets from Babatu's forces still are lodged inside the baobab tree as it was used for cover by local warriors during the resistance. Although such a unique historical narrative is bound to involve some embellishment as it is passed along, the baobab tree is nonetheless an archive and a museum all at once, from which the memory of the slave trade emanates and is passed on to future generations. Bayon's grandson, Rev. Fr. Evarest Kunwolong (interviewed in May 2003), stated that Bayon refused to negotiate with the raiders and chose instead to raise a standing army to withstand them. The baobab tree alone remains an important historical archive that testifies to Bayon's greatness. The tree does not only embed the memory of the slave trade, which is anchored into the cultural or psychic geography of the people, but it also embodies and anchors the slave trade narrative.

For the Dagarti community of Sankana, located not very far from the regional capital city of Wa, the obvious physicality of the rocks still embeds important history that comes alive through the indentations on the rocks. They locate where local warriors grounded gun powder to resist the Zabarama slave raiders. Similarly, a large cave, not very far from the rocks, offered the women and children refuge. For this reason, the cave is revered and celebrated, albeit, without any ritual practice, but through oral tradition as indicated by some elders (interviewed in May 2003). They recall that the women were able to prepare foods that did not require cooking (for smoke would have attracted the raiders), while local warriors used the rocks to offer resistance and protected the community.

### **The Talensi**

The Tengzug Shrine of the Talensi of Tongo, seated similarly to the rocky cave of Sankana, is commemorated partly due to the role that the landscape played in protecting the people during raids. Slave raiders were resisted from within these rocks with the local inhabitants and surrounding communities taking refuge inside the cave while the men shot at raiders from vantage points around the rock (John Bawa Zude, interviewed in May 2003). In addition to the physical site, the persistence of oral tradition in retaining the slave trade narrative was articulated by the chief who recounted how the slave trade affected his family (interviewed in September 2004). He indicated that the two brothers who survived raids on the family were able to repopulate the house. A traumatic past is thus condensed and congealed into a vital power.

### **The Gonja**

In some parts of northern Ghana where there are no sites to memorialize the slave trade, oral tradition paints a vivid picture. The Gonja, who did not initially raid other peoples to take captives as slaves, turned to buying slaves from the Zabarama following the establishment of slave trade activity (interview of Yabonwura and elders in April 2003). "Princes and princesses were bought and sold until they discovered slavery activities in the South and stopped," said an elder. Information such as this suggests that in situations whereby "selling somebody into slavery" may have been a means to disgrace that person and the family, the consequences of such actions were not clear until the full effects of the slave trade were realized. The Gonja elders

also shared a story that illustrates how the slave trade narrative persists with oral tradition. With regard to the ritual of slaves being undressed for buyers at the market place, it was revealed that women were undressed indoors while men were stripped outside. An elder narrated how according to oral tradition, on one occasion when a woman was revealed naked in the open market, a man committed suicide by banging his head against a tree because it was sacrilege to strip a woman naked in public. Information of this nature is not spoken unnecessarily and thus is a form of repressed memory that is shared when appropriate.

The multiple benefits of embedded memory are recognized when Imoru Babatu, a great grandson of Babatu, expressed the memory of his great grandfather and his slave trade activities with caution (interviewed in April 2003). He indicated that the family is cautious about the way information is passed down to younger generations. They do not boast about their ancestry but live carefully, preferring to allow time to heal wounds. In fact, he preferred to talk about the religious intentions of his father and how he preferred to marry "Gurunsi" women as opposed to those from other neighboring groups.<sup>14</sup> This was corroborated by the Chianapio, Rowland Adiali, who said that his father married one of Babatu's daughters and pointed to the spot where her hut was located.<sup>15</sup> However, she never had a child before she died. Even though the family does not have a living relation with that of Babatu, the chief remembers the link his family has with Babatu. By treating slavery's past delicately, the notion of "the other" is incorporated into the whole, thus allowing community to be formed and sustained by both descendants of those who were raided and those who conducted the raids.

## Salaga Market

Salaga market, along *Route IV* of the Great Asante Roads as described by Bowdich and linked to Timbuktu and Hausa land (Wilks 1965a), is today a shadow of its former self. It is a sharp contrast from the rich information about it in the *Salaga Papers* (Johnson 1965). There are no monuments or markers on the grounds to refer to its importance as “the grand market of the Inta kingdom” (Johnson, Acc. No. SAL/53/1). Although more has probably been written about Salaga market than any other loci of memory in the North, it looks no different from other markets in the region. Nonetheless, this locus, which was an agency for the slave trade in northern Ghana and beyond, is a significant space where the memory of the slave trade resides through various sites.

According to Iddrisu Sulemana (interview of 10/2003), a baobab tree was replanted on June 24, 1970 to replace the fallen one that retained much history as an essential part of the market. With its disappearance, the planting of a new tree to replace it serves to retain a physical connection with the memory of the slave trade, because of its significant embodiment to the slave trade narrative. Apart from the tree, a drinking well on the market grounds that was constructed by slaves for the slave masters to drink from is preserved. Also, not far from the well, the Ghana Private Road Transport Union (GPRTU) occupies a building that was used to hold slaves. Although the exterior and most of its interior does not tell the story of the structure, the ceiling retains its ancient essence. The aged wood and mud plaster of the old parts of the ceiling sharply contrast with the modern additions.

The drinking wells for slaves are situated a few hundred yards away from the market. Similarly, less than half a mile away from Salaga market as one approaches it, are several wells where slaves were bathed and prepared to fetch a handsome price at the market. These various loci may appear to be insignificant on the surface, but they are witnesses to activities of the slave trade and its history.

The most striking memory of the slave trade at Salaga is one which truly is embedded; the burial grounds for dead slaves. Here, on the protruding roots of a baobab tree, a weekly ritual is carried out in memory of those who could not make it beyond Salaga. A lady mixes flour and cow's milk in a calabash and speaks to the spirits of the departed as she pours small amounts of the liquid onto the baobab tree, saying: "a baobab tree can take both good and bad wind. If we get good wind or bad, the ancestors so will it."<sup>16</sup> The burial grounds effectively evoke the memory of the slave trade on a regular basis probably more than Salaga market, through the libation routine. More importantly, the continued homage that has to be paid at the cemetery means that young generations will continue to be chosen as trainees to take over the process. Through this, the memory of the slave trade and enslavement is retained.

In all the various conditions described above, conscious memory interacted with embedded memory. Such oral history together with physical sites not only bears testimony but function as living witnesses which provide records without a trial. They also bring to fore, a moral dimension to the slave trade that some scholarship has underplayed (Klein and Klein 2003).

## Conclusion

Studying embedded memory of the slave trade in northern Ghana is a way of thinking about a larger dynamic or problem. Information about the slave trade in northern Ghana lacks an indigenous perspective if we are to go by published texts alone. The perspective from raided communities whose preoccupation was resistance and escape tells us more about not only such a horrific past, but also illustrates that to communities that were the object of raids, the origins and the skin color of the raider is insignificant. Such supplementary evidence not only diffuses debates by some scholars that Europeans did not raid Africans to acquire slaves, but rather Africans raided and sold each other to the Europeans who were stationed at the coasts.

Embedded memory of the slave trade in northern Ghana has the potential to contribute significantly to diaspora studies both within Africa and outside the continent. The responses in connection with escape from capture by respondents from the Nakong and Katiu interviews, suggests that captives who were retained long enough to begin dressing in clothes provided by their captors would have encountered problems in returning home since residents of any locality would have seen them as raiders and would have reacted accordingly. This factor could have played a role in "escapees" settling somewhere else instead of going home. Also, some members of Akan ethnic groups originate from northern Ghana as a direct result of the slave trade. As such the diaspora within Africa itself deserves further study. As noted by Alpers in the case of Griga's caravan journey across the Sahara (Alpers unpublished), "The Middle Passage" that captives had to travel from

northern Ghana to Salaga market and from there to Ashanti or other parts of West Africa to be enslaved, could be just as significant as the journey through the Middle Passage across the Atlantic.

Embedded memory has been very crucial to the persistence of the slave trade narrative for individual families and whole ethnic groups alike. It facilitates how and when descendants of those who were raiders and those who were raided upon choose how and when to remember the events without upsetting the balance that exists amongst them. Such a form of memory also allows descendants of those who were raided to mourn the losses incurred during raids, but it also allows them to celebrate the victories whether big or small. The manner in which the various physical sites and loci come into play is so organic and sacred that there is no incentive to "manufacture" the stories that relate to them. Above all, the "embeddedness" of the memory does not mean that the memory is missing or misplaced. But like a revered family heirloom that needs to be protected, embedded memory is a deliberate act that allows retrieval at will in order to serve a purpose when needed, and then returned to its proper place for safe keeping. In fact, embedded memory in this context is a way of life. This means that every generation owes it to the next, as custodians of the narrative, to protect, share and hand over these accounts to the next generation.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mande emissaries were sent to discover the reason for the drop in gold supplies from Ashanti, which was a direct consequence of the arrival of the Portuguese in 1470.

<sup>2</sup> Based on fieldwork that was conducted in various parts of northern Ghana in 2003 and 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Connerton (1989: 38) takes issue with Halbwachs on his notion that "groups are made up of a system, or systems, of communication." But the small gathering at Nakong reflects that the ways and manner in which information is passed down to younger generations does involve a system of communication between the older and younger generations.

<sup>4</sup> This raises a question on the meaning of marriage in this context. What is considered "marriage" here translates into ownership.

<sup>5</sup> Again, the question on the meaning of marriage in this context is raised. Enslavement may be misconstrued as marriage.

<sup>6</sup> Professor Awedoba, University of Ghana, Legon. Personal communication on 8/9/04.

<sup>7</sup> The reference to a raider or raiders by different people may bear testimony to some raiders being prominent and therefore singularly identifiable or raiders who probably spent a few days and interacted with the people which may have led to a marriage through negotiation.

<sup>8</sup> This corroborates Malam Abu's description of events as referenced by J.J. Holden (1965: 69).

<sup>9</sup> "Seeing" in this context invites the wise saying that "what an old man can see sitting down, a young man would climb a tree and not see it."

<sup>10</sup> Agave Avilugu, interviewed on 9/12/2004. His statement suggests that some people who were captured but escaped after some time with the raiders would have had problems communicating with local people whose first inclination would have been to run away or even attack the returning escapees.

<sup>11</sup> Rowland Adiali was made a chief in 1950 at the age of 18. See Allison M. Howell (2000: 4). "Pe Rowland Adiali Ayagtam II-Golden Jubilee Celebration."

<sup>12</sup> Nab Ayieta Azantilow was made a chief of the Builsa people on December 19, 1931. The chief had just commissioned the excavation of the relics but the digging had not yet begun at the time of the interview.



<sup>13</sup> See Holden (1965: footnote 70). The story about the captured Kanjaga chief Amnu later collaborating with the raiders after he was spared would probably be the “forgotten” part of the story in most oral accounts. This does not mean that it is totally forgotten. Rather, embedded memory allows it to be suppressed for obvious reasons.

<sup>14</sup> This information illustrates the enigma of the slave trade in these areas and why more understanding is required. It attests to the fact that works by some scholars, such as that of John Thornton (1992, 1998) on Africans involvement in the slave trade is understood differently by some African societies. See earlier reference to my interview with Chief Rowland Adiali in March 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Typical of the guarded manner in which some aspects of the slave trade are discussed; the chief spoke about this during a conversation while we took a break from the interview.

<sup>16</sup> Words of the “libation lady” at the Salaga slave cemetery. It would be revealing to find out whether those who carry out the libation at the slave grounds have slave ancestry or not. Although it may be possible to get this information if it is done diplomatically, the fact that it is embedded serves the function of maintaining a cohesive community. While it may serve the curiosity of the outsider would it serve any purpose for the local community or be respectful to those of slave ancestry if the community knows the answer but prefers to embed it as they have?

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