

PEKI COLLEGE OF EDUCATION



SOCIAL-SCIENCES DEPARTMENT: HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

Statement from Ghanaian Students in the Ghanaian-German Exchange Programme

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Missionaries & Enslavement: Memory and Reparatory Justice

We, the Ghanaian students participating in this Ghanaian-German exchange programme, extend our sincere appreciation to our German professor for the recent seminar on “Missionaries & Enslavement: Memory and Reparatory Justice.” The session provided valuable insights into the many positive contributions of Christian missionaries to Ghana’s development. These include the establishment of formal schools and hospitals that laid foundations for modern education and healthcare, the introduction of new agricultural skills and cash crops such as cocoa (which became a cornerstone of Ghana’s economy), vocational training in trades, and the efforts of certain missionary societies to combat aspects of the slave trade by purchasing the freedom of some enslaved individuals and promoting what was termed “legitimate commerce.” These achievements have left lasting legacies that continue to benefit Ghanaian society in various ways, and we acknowledge them with gratitude.

However, for memory work to be meaningful and for reparatory justice to be authentic, our joint teaching and learning in exchange programmes must embrace the full historical picture including the complex entanglements between missionary activities, the systems of enslavement, colonial exploitation, and cultural disruption. Many of these negative dimensions are often

underemphasized or entirely absent from European curricula. As Ghanaian students with direct connections to the sites, oral histories, and lived consequences of these histories, we believe it is essential to bring these perspectives into our shared discussions. This bidirectional approach will enrich the understanding of both Ghanaian and German students and contribute to genuine healing and stronger future relations.

The history of enslavement and its aftermath in Ghana is vividly preserved in our coastal slave castles, such as Elmina and Cape Coast, which served as brutal transit points for millions of Africans forcibly transported across the Atlantic during the transatlantic slave trade. These sites stand as powerful testimonies to the immense human suffering inflicted. While many Basel Mission and other German-linked missionaries arrived primarily in the 19th century after the peak of the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807, Germany's earlier direct participation in the trade must be acknowledged. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the Brandenburg-Prussian Africa Company established Fort Gross-Friedrichsburg (also known as Groß Friedrichsburg) on the Gold Coast near present-day Princes Town. This fort functioned as a key trading post where enslaved Africans were held, purchased, and shipped across the Atlantic. Historical records indicate that Brandenburg-Prussian vessels transported thousands of enslaved people, with the fort serving as a hub for gold, ivory, and human cargo until its sale to the Dutch in 1721. This early German involvement forms part of the broader European colonial architecture that enabled the enslavement of Africans.

Even in the later missionary period, the Basel Mission (which began work on the Gold Coast from 1828 and became deeply influential in what is now southern Ghana) operated within colonial economic and social structures. Although the Mission officially opposed slavery and engaged in some manumission efforts, historical scholarship reveals more complicated realities. The Mission relied significantly on the labor of children and youth at its stations and plantations as part of its broader project of "Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization." Children were often acquired or sustained through various means including freed slaves who then worked to "repay" their freedom, pawns, or local arrangements, and were required to perform domestic chores, agricultural work (including early cocoa and coffee cultivation), construction, and maintenance. This labor was integral to sustaining the mission stations with limited budgets. Scholars have documented how childhood itself became a site of contestation, where missionary authority, racial hierarchies, and patriarchal structures intersected to exert control. In some instances, children participated in strikes or resistance against these conditions, highlighting the tensions involved.

Beyond labor practices, missionary activities frequently involved profound cultural and spiritual disruption. The Basel Mission promoted the establishment of "Salem" settlements self-contained Christian communities (such as those in Akropong-Akuapem and Abokobi) where converts were encouraged or required to live separately from their non-Christian families and communities. In these Salems, converts adopted European-style clothing, housing, marriage practices, and daily routines while being discouraged from participating in traditional rituals, drumming, dancing,

ancestral veneration, or other elements of Akan and broader Ghanaian cultural life. Indigenous languages and knowledge systems were often sidelined in mission schools in favor of European ones, and traditional spiritual practices were labelled as “pagan” or superstitious. This approach, while intended to protect new converts and instill Christian discipline, resulted in significant cultural alienation. Many converts experienced severance from their kinship networks, undermining the communal fabric central to Ghanaian societies and eroding the authority of traditional rulers and family elders. The long-term effects include intergenerational identity struggles, loss of indigenous knowledge, and lingering divisions within communities that persist today.

Furthermore, missionary work sometimes accommodated or operated alongside local and colonial forms of exploitation. To gain permission to preach and establish stations, some missionaries navigated relationships with local leaders who practiced various forms of bondage, and the Mission’s economic activities (plantations, trading companies) aligned with the shift from the slave trade to cash-crop economies that continued exploitative labor patterns. Broader colonial structures, in which missionaries often collaborated with European administrations, reinforced racial hierarchies and economic dependencies that replaced overt enslavement with new forms of control.

Reparatory justice, as articulated in the Accra **Proclamation on Reparations** (adopted at the 2023 Accra Reparations Conference), goes beyond financial compensation. It calls for truth-telling, cultural restitution, healing of historic wounds, reclamation of heritage, and the establishment of mechanisms such as a Global Reparations Fund, curriculum reforms, and collaborative programmes that address the legacies of enslavement, colonialism, and associated harms. It emphasizes building a united front for justice for Africans and people of African descent.

What Ghanaian students can contribute to teaching this theme in Ghanaian-German exchange programmes:

We bring irreplaceable **lived experience, local memory, oral histories, and decolonial perspectives**. Many of us have family stories, community knowledge, and personal connections to the slave castles, former mission sites, and Salem communities. We can organize guided reflections at Elmina or Cape Coast Castle, sharing how these histories continue to shape identities, faith practices, social relations, and development challenges in Ghana. We can highlight African concepts of justice, restitution, communal healing, and resilience that differ from or complement Western frameworks, drawing from indigenous philosophies that emphasize restoration of balance and relationships.

Practically, we can propose context-specific reparatory actions: joint curriculum development for Ghanaian schools that presents a balanced missionary history (acknowledging both contributions and harms); community-led heritage projects at former slave and mission sites; initiatives to document and revitalize suppressed indigenous knowledge systems; educational funds or

scholarships addressing intergenerational gaps caused by cultural disruption; and public dialogues that center Ghanaian voices. Our input adds emotional authenticity, urgency, and grounded reality, helping German partners understand why selective narratives focused mainly on positive impacts can feel incomplete or painful from our side.

What German students can contribute

German students offer **access to rich archival resources, advanced research methodologies, critical self-reflection capacities, and institutional networks**. The Basel Mission archives in Switzerland and Germany, along with Prussian colonial records, contain detailed primary sources on both the achievements and the more difficult aspects, including labor practices, cultural policies, and daily operations at mission stations. German partners can facilitate transparent access to and joint analysis of these materials, helping reconstruct nuanced histories.

They can also draw valuable comparisons from Germany's own robust tradition of confronting difficult pasts (such as Holocaust memory and education) and apply those lessons to discussions on slavery and missionary legacies. Structured pedagogical approaches, digital collaboration tools, and connections to funding bodies (for example, DAAD programmes) can support long-term joint projects. Most importantly, German students can model the courage to examine and teach the negative effects of missionary and colonial entanglements, aspects that many in Germany may not have encountered in depth during their own education. This willingness to engage in uncomfortable truths creates the foundation for equitable partnership rather than one-directional knowledge transfer.

In conclusion, Ghanaian-German exchange programmes on "Missionaries & Enslavement: Memory and Reparatory Justice" have immense potential when they prioritize honest, bidirectional dialogue. Ghanaian students contribute the contextual depth, lived memory, and moral urgency rooted in the physical and cultural landscapes of trauma and resilience. German students contribute archival expertise, methodological rigor, and a commitment to self-examination. Together, we can develop co-created teaching modules that include field visits to Ghana's slave castles paired with archive work in Germany, student-led research projects examining both positive legacies and negative impacts (such as child labor practices and cultural alienation), public exhibitions or dialogues, and concrete proposals for reparatory initiatives aligned with the Accra Proclamation.

By courageously teaching the complete story, celebrating genuine contributions while confronting the shadows of enslavement, exploitation, and cultural loss, we honor the past, foster mutual understanding, and lay groundwork for healing and equitable futures. We invite our German counterparts, professors, and institutions to engage with us in this vital work with openness, respect, and a shared commitment to truth and justice.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these reflections. We look forward to continued dialogue and collaboration.