

Project organisers

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Note on terms

In recent years, the term "enslavement" has gained importance over "slavery" to emphasize the process of violence and avoid the dehumanizing and humiliating connotations associated with the term "slavery". Consequently, terms such as “enslaved person/people” and “enslaver” are now used. However, a change in terminology alone is not sufficient. It is crucial to analyse and discuss the respective historical context and circumstances. Glossaries for alternative terms are available online (e. g. A Glossary of Terminology for Understanding Transatlantic Slavery and ‘Race’, <https://nottinghammuseums.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/3a.-Slavery-and-Racial-Terminology-Glossary-Omitted-Terms.pdf>)

Background Information on the Topics

Before the “Transatlantic Slave Trade” and colonisation in present-day Ghana as in other parts of Africa the enslavement of humans was widespread as Akosua Adoma Perbi, historian at the University in Ghana, has researched. Such systems of enslavement coexisted with the “Transatlantic Slave Trade” which overshadowed with its enormous number of enslaved people, brutality and institutionalised racism existing forms of enslavement. Unlike previous practices, enslaved people were not seen as human beings. They were racialized, seen as commodities, and reduced to their mere labour power. However, Perbi and other scholars emphasize that the Western term "slavery" is not appropriate for regional forms of enslavement in Africa. The practice was fluid; enslaved people were considered human beings, had rights and their social position could change. Therefore, it would be more precise to use and describe the local terminology.

The histories of enslavement are well known in Ghana. It is a subject in school and public memories. At the heart of the collective memory lies the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans. The UNESCO International Day for the Remembrance of this trade with and its abolition is an important event in Ghana. The many former fortresses and castles on the Gulf of Guinea (named Gold coast by European traders and colonisers) still bear witness today. From there the enslaved people were shipped across the Atlantic. Today these historical sites are National Monuments of Ghana. There, guided tours and exhibitions are offered to learn

about the past and its aftermath. Exhibitions also address the history of enslavement in African societies. However, the forms of memory are manifolded. One can distinguish between tangible and intangible forms of memory.

Tangible Forms of Memory

These forms include, apart from the internally well-known forts and castles at the coast, further historical sites of enslavement: e.g., sites of “slave markets”, “slave burial sites”, “slavery resistance sites” and further relicts along “slave routes”. These historical sites, in particular the forts and castles at the coast, are also significant for the African diaspora. Moreover, after the abolishment of the trade in enslaved humans, the then freed enslaved people with no knowledge about their homes formed settlements: e.g. in the Volta region, close to the former slave market site Salaga: Shishipe, Gurunshi-Zongo and Bau(Garimbayi).

Intangible Forms of Memory

Such forms of memory include names of towns, tales and stories, family wealth and names, beliefs and misfortune, songs or festivals like the Feok Festival commemorating the victory over the slave raider Babatu originating from present-day Niger.

Germany and Enslavement

Germany was involved in the “Transatlantic Slave Trade” in different ways. The still visible relic from a distance is Fort Gross Fredericksburg, built between 1683 and 1684 by the “Brandenburg African Company”. The city of Emden, at the coast in Northern Germany close to The Netherlands, was the home port of the “Brandenburg African Company”. In recent years in this city as well as in other parts of Germany the history of this company and further entanglements of e.g. German merchants and seafarers in the trade with enslaved Africans and plantation owners have been addressed more frequently. Research, but less so public memory, has also included the involvement of missionaries of all denominations (including missionaries of the Bremen Mission) in the enslavement of people to a certain extent. Nevertheless, most of the German population is not aware of the past and in which ways Germany consumed and benefitted from the trade and goods produced by enslaved Africans.

Contemporary Conditions akin to Enslavement

Modern Slavery is an umbrella term for “situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power.” The repercussions of enslavement and colonialism as well as new forms of extractivism, the further dominance by Western powers in the economy with its continuing structural injustices have severe consequences for many Ghanaians. They are struggling to make a living, and therefore extreme forms of exploitation are not unknown in Ghana. The authors of the exhibition brochure on historical and contemporary forms of enslavement from 2021 state: “Human trafficking (domestic and international), bondage (religious/ritual) sale and exploitation of children, forced and early marriage, forced commercial sex work or sexual exploitation, and forced labour especially in fishing, farming and illegal mining, are examples of modern-day slavery in Ghana.”

Aftermath of Enslavement & Justice

According to experts the Transatlantic Trade in enslaved people contributed greatly to the long history of colonisation and “underdevelopment” of Africa (impoverishment, caused by exploitation, oppression & dependency). Among the consequences were: the depopulation of African regions, the loss of workforce, the brutalisation of societies, loss of identities, strengthening of powerful states in the region at the expense of small ones, the dependency

of African regions on the needs and demands of Europe and America, racism and Eurocentrism with effects on the knowledge production and its distribution in education systems. At the same time, new social division lines emerged with slave raiders and wealthy indigenous merchants. In a nutshell: the whole fabric of Africa is affected by the aftermath of slavery and colonialism, shaping social, cultural and political structures and collective, individual identities with less self-esteem as well as social stigmas related to enslaved ancestors and disadvantages regarding, e.g., leadership, land rights and inheritance.

Justice for the historical injustices of the enslavement of African people and colonialism has long been demanded. These demands were further intensified by the African Union resolution in 2026. One year earlier the African Union focussed on “Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations”. It was stated: “Reparatory justice for Africa can promote healing, equity, and recognition of the rights and contributions of African peoples when defied. It encompasses a range of initiatives aimed at addressing historical injustices stemming from colonization, slavery, and systemic discrimination”. On March 25 the majority of the United Nations General Assembly voted for a resolution (A/80/L.48) that classified the enslavement of Africans as “the gravest crime against humanity.” Argentina, USA and Israel voted against the resolution, Germany and all European nations abstained although much wealth was accumulated in Europe through the enslavement of Africans. Nevertheless, the resolution marks a new level of quality, which gives hope that steps towards reparatory justice will be taken. The President of Ghana has made a significant contribution to this campaign in recent years. However, there are fears that the remembrance of African “indigenous slavery” and the African beneficiaries of the Transatlantic Trade in enslaved Africans could lead to downplay the responsibility of Western actors. These concerns are not unjustified, as in the past, references to historical practices of enslavement in African societies have been used to relativise or make others forget that Europeans and US Americans were responsible for the brutality of this historical form of enslavement. However, after the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade the German colonial administration exploited the continuing enslavement of African people to recruit labourers e.g. for plantations in present-day Cameroon.

References & Links

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