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'Remembering Enslavement: Visually and Audibly'

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Remembering Enslavement: Visually and Audibly

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The literatures of Africans, both on the continent and away from it, like all literature by all peoples, have, among other impulses, given literary expression to the various historical experiences that have shaped their lives and circumstances. A major event that makes the experiences of Africans everywhere distinctive is their recent, common histories of enslavement and their resulting, cultural (de)formations. To a large degree, the contemporary experiences of Africans, both on the continent and away from it, under slavery, (neo) colonialism, and recently, globalization provide a context to study perceived commonalities despite the separation by distance and time. For example, the fact remains that globally speaking, Africans most of the time, find themselves receiving the negative outputs of these historical, economic and political phenomena. Some of these markers are a crisis of identity and life lived at the losing end of the global social and economic spectrum. Such is the fact even when these Africans have lived in nations designated as wealthy for several millennia. The literary outputs of Africans have focused, in varying degrees, on these experiences.

A brief survey of literature written by Africans on the continent demonstrates that the written texts have patently focused on the various expressions of (neo) colonization. This phase of African experience has attracted much academic attention through proposed courses on university campuses and research output. Oral literature has not been studied to a comparable degree, even if this kind of literature makes the point that literature from the continent is much older than the important experiences of (neo) colonialism and that they exhibit their own literary characteristics. The subject for discussion here, memories of the slave experience, date before the dominant historical eras of (neo) colonization and so it is considered appropriate to explore its content from the oral sphere, specifically the folk song text. This genre allows for a multiplicity of authorship which coincides with the communal ownership of literary expressions of these events.

In this context the recent text, *Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories: Literary and Aesthetic Manifestations of Diaspora and History* (Opoku-Agyemang, Lovejoy and Trotman, 2008), is particularly relevant because, it expands on the parameters of the discussion of the African Diaspora by inviting a consideration of literature and literary expressions in examining this important subject. This is especially imperative in underscoring the centrality of literary forms in the transmission and understanding of memory. As a result, this collection of essays draws from the interdisciplinary nature of literature by focusing on history, the written and oral forms of literature, the visual and aural expressions as well as the biographical.

Apart from the narrative and material evidence, the current discussion isolates the song as one effective and surviving literary mode by which a major experience of the African Diaspora, as in the trade in enslaved Africans, is memorialized and disseminated on the continent. The overall aim in this discussion is two-fold: first, to advance the argument raised elsewhere that refutes the theory of amnesia presumed on the part of Africans who live on the continent regarding the trade in their enslaved kin (Opoku-Agyemang, 2008). Secondly, it supports the argument made by Soumonni (2000) that resistance to enslavement that is highlighted in the literature away from the continent has its home grown antecedents on the African soil. It needs to be emphasized that resistance and emancipation literature has amassed rapidly, and that the most productive times have been since the 1980s. The discussion here recognizes the works of Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd (1993); Mavis Campbell (1988); Jean Fouchard (1972); Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995); David Barry Gaspar (1985); Thomas C. Holt (1992), and Richard Hart (1985/2002) among others, which provide the reader with studies in the Caribbean regarding the subject of resistance to enslavement.

Sources that include Emilia Viotti da Costa (1985); Joao Jose Reis (1993); Rebecca J. Scott (1985); Ada Ferrer (1999); Louis A. Perez (1999) and Jane Landers (1999), allow a discovery of recent successful attempts to bring the subject of resistance in South America to the forecourt of the researcher's attention. Pierre Verger's publication of 1976, *Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia from the 19th Century* is particularly important in its fascinating insights into the cultural ties that exist between West Africa and Brazil.

W. E. B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* (1963) remains a remarkable work in the literature from the United States of America, as do earlier texts that include C. Vann Woodward (1955) and, later, Leon F. Litwack (1979). Works that deal directly with rebellion include those of Herbert Aptheker (1970); while for a good source on the organization of slave revolts, one may wish to consult Eugene D. Genovese (1979), even if this text has raised no small amount of controversy. Indeed the *Journal, Slavery and Abolition*, remains an excellent source for materials on slave insurrection. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (2000); Jeffery W. Bolster (1997) and a PhD Dissertation written by Julius S. Scott at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 1986, are sources that document and discuss the movement of sailors of African descent and their contributions to resistance. In a discussion of this nature it is important to highlight Sterling Stuckey's *Slave Culture: Nationalist theory and the Foundations of Black America* (1987) as a book that is critical in uncovering a resilient African culture's role in resistance to slavery and racism in the United States.

The fact remains that until the text, *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*, (2003/4), an edited collection of essays presented at a conference titled "Fighting Back: African Strategies against the Slave Trade" held at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey in February 2001, there had been no volume of essays that told the story of Africans' efforts to ward off this catastrophe on the continent, nor the subsequent ways of retaining this memory. This book remains an invaluable source in providing information regarding communities in Western Africa that resisted the Slave Trade. The text contains three sections of essays that explore resistance: defensive, protective and offensive strategies, although these are by no means mutually exclusive, as the essays amply demonstrate. The geographic and ethnic foci of these researchers include Ganvie in the Republic of Benin, the Bornu Empire and the Badirmi State, south of Lake Chad, the Banda and Sara in today's Central African Republic, the Cayor and Baol of the Senegambian kingdom, as well as the Wasulu and Masina of present day Mali. The collective argument in this source singles the environment as a major deciding factor in establishing an effective method of resistance. Diouf explains in the Introduction that each essay "examines(s), in depth or in passing, the role of the environment in the strategic response of the Africans" (p.xix). Among this source, Soumonni, Bah and Ciordel and Gueye's contributions are particularly important to this discussion. Soumonni's essay focuses on Ganvie, and predicates successful resistance to the existence of a lagoon located along the Bight of Benin, created by land deposits from eastward moving coastal currents. It is an 'amphibious' environment that floods frequently due to its proximity to the So and Weme Rivers, the Nokoue lake and the lagoon on Porto Novo. The people under attack found refuge here mainly because their raiders tabooed water and so would not cross any, not even in search of potential captives. We shall visit this site shortly in this discussion and listen to the voices of the narrators.

Thierno Mouctar Bah explores how communities near Lake Chad utilized caves, mountains, underground tunnels and marshes in his essay, "Slave-Raiding and Defensive Systems South of Lake Chad from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century" (2004:15-30). Our discussion later on in this presentation regarding the caves at Sankana provides an interesting comparison. Bah's discussion as well explores how natural plants were used as a defense system in conjunction with earthworks to create mortar for building houses and defense walls. The plants also served as physical barriers that rendered passage difficult.

Adama Gueye in his article titled "The Impact of the Slave Trade on Cayor and Baol: Mutations in Habitat and Land Occupancy" describes how the people of Cayor and Baol in the Senegambia region would build their houses with straw, a material highly susceptible to arson. Sensing danger, the people would set their own houses on fire, as a defensive strategy of slowing down the pace of the slavers, and of allowing them the advantage of escaping captivity. This is an interesting contrast to the architecture in parts of Northern Ghana where raiding was intense. The people would avoid straw even as roofing material, and instead, roof with earth, so they could not be smoked out into captivity.

This resort to the environment could be taken for granted, except that the arguments are couched in a manner as to de-emphasize the application of technology to create defensive strategies. For this reason, our encounter with the story and songs of Gwollu fills a much-needed lode. Diouf's invaluable collection of essays on this subject has no input from Ghana, the country that houses the slave castles and the geographical area that, according to the scholar Akosua Perbi's research, has some thirty-four slave markets.

In this regard the recently published collection of essays on the subject (Anquandah, Opoku-Agyemang and Doortmond, (2007)) makes significant additions to the scholarship by offering the perspectives of Ghanaian and African scholars on this important subject.

The effort here is supported by the conviction, based on field work, that by locating sources in the oral sphere where such events would be stored, further contributions would be made to compliment the printed source. Placed in the broad context, this paper invites a consideration of particular ways of memorializing resistance to enslavement in Africa, specifically in a small village called Gwollu in the Upper West region of modern day Ghana. This location is important in that it still contains sites where the slave raiders were actually defeated, and enslavement made impossible through active and fierce resistance. Major material evidence of these events can be found in the remains of the defense walls and other sites that capture the collective will and brave, celebratory efforts of some Africans, in this case the Sissalis, to save life and ensure freedom. While the walls, over three hundred years old, are understandably in various stages of ruin, this physical, material evidence has metamorphosed as modes of survival beyond the physical, and has lodged itself in the many, more enduring literary and other forms including the song, to continue to tell this history and to ensure the education of subsequent generations.

The immediate objective of this discussion has two interrelated strands: first, to demonstrate, through tangible and audible forms, efforts of the forebears of the heroic people of Gwollu in resisting a phenomenon that defies their logic and second, through the first, to dispute the idea of an all-encompassing African silence on the events that led to as well as the aftermath of enslavement. It proceeds by providing a very brief survey of recorded acts of advocacy by peoples of African descent, aimed at addressing an important vestige of enslavement. The second is to share information stored in song from the field on this important topic that, despite the passage of time, has not quite yet made its way into the written mode of resistance and memorializing of enslavement. The paper's ultimate aim is to demonstrate that resistance to enslavement, has its antecedents from the motherland, and that the memory of the events many decades ago on the African continent still resonates in the lives of the descendents people, still living on the continent, who so suffered these occurrences. In particular, this paper shares and contextualizes the songs that the people of Gwollu sing in memory of the Trade in Enslaved Africans.

The current discussion, as already indicated, takes the reader on a trip to a small rural town in the Upper West Region of Ghana, called Gwollu. The purpose is to share the communal experience of the residue of resistance to enslavement in both narration and song. The information presented here has come from so many voices that it is fair to use the first person narrative voice for the purposes of verisimilitude and of deep gratitude to the entire community who elected to share this important history.

PLATE 1: Defense Wall at Gwollu © Naana Opoku-Agyemang



This wall over there is many many years old, constructed at the time of the notorious raiders, Babatu and Samori. We had lived out here without much trouble. Our troubles had been understandable and dealt with through dialogue. We believe there was no matter too delicate for words or too heavy for discourse; there was no knot the tongue could not disentangle. But incomprehensible things started happening; words failed to describe them. They had to do with the disappearance of people. When those mentally disturbed leave without telling any one, we usually find them when we go searching. But, a man would leave for the farm and never come back, never be found, dead or alive. A woman would leave to fetch water for domestic chores and disappear, forever. A child would take the goats or cows herding and the parents' tears would not bring him back. A healer would visit the forest in search of herbs and would have taken his last steps away from the village. On very rare occasions someone taken for lost would come back and tell such weird stories of being trapped in a net and whisked away on the back of a huge animal. In better times we could have put the tale in the volume of narratives devoid of effective humor. Just imagine someone coming to tell you s/he had seen another human being trapped by a net in the forest, like fish would be trapped in a lake. Even such luxuries as laughter had evaporated from our lives. The unimaginable had become real.

The loss of people was becoming so common that we had to find ways of ending the phenomenon. Even the name of our town bears witness to the fact of looking for safe environment. Gwollu, in Sisaali, means 'going round and round.' The town's name foregrounds the migratory nature of the people, and as we shall soon learn, in search of a safe haven. Finding no haven that nature could readily offer, the people applied their intelligence to raw matter, resulting in the defense walls. While some worked on the farms, others would be in the trees, on the lookout. On a couple of occasions they would spot people on horseback trying to throw nets over unsuspecting people. The unbelievable had become credulous. An alarm used to serve the purpose of scaring them off. We defended ourselves with bows, arrows, cudgels, spears and pointed axes. These were all locally produced from iron ore that we had in abundance. The guns came later, from those raiders that we would disarm.

We could not fathom what they would do with their victims. Free labor? Why? Did we offend their gods? Steal their property? Take their lands, or cattle, or crops? Why would anyone unleash such mayhem on others for no apparent reason? Much later we learned that some of the captives had been recruited into their army and others sent to a far away place at the sea and taken even farther

away to destinations we did not even know existed. Later on we also understood that the trouble between the Asantes and the Gonjas had resulted in the disturbances of our peace.

The disturbers of peace would come at night and wreck havoc. They would capture people of all ages, set houses on fire and leave nothing but destruction. At first we thought we could try to understand. We decided to send emissaries to find out our offence and why they would avoid known ways of settling disputes and visit such calamities upon us. Our leader, Tanja, was part of this delegation. The trouble was that we did not even know whom to dialogue with because no one had openly declared war against us. They realized too soon that the calamity was everywhere. Known settlements stood devastated and abandoned. Matters that still the tongue.

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