

Gugu Mkhulisi

History 256 Reflection Paper

Prof. Abdulai Iddrisu

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I was one of the students who had the opportunity to study how West Africans in Ghana; recall slavery and the implications of slavery on the development of Ghana in January 2020. Prior to going on this program, I had taken a class on slavery but I was under the impression that either way, someone had to leave Africa to go to the “New World” and the weakest people were sold off. However, from further examination of slavery, my perception has changed now that I have studied not only from academic texts but also from observation and interacting with people and spaces. I already had the idea that Ghanaians do not speak much about slavery, just from conversations with my Ghanaian friends and how they avoid the subject, however, I also realised that education plays a huge role in silencing and minimizing the impacts of slavery - both domestically and internationally. Slavery already benefited slave merchants and placed their descendants at an economic advantage, however, knowledge on slavery also comes with a price tag nowadays which was evident in some sites. From how the media depicts Ghana, it is inevitable that one would assume that the country is overall, recovering from slavery and that every part of Ghana is fairly developed - however, that is not what is seen on the ground - there are developmental disparities that are evident between the North and Southern parts of Ghana. Silences surrounding slavery, how education perpetuates these silences, economic gains from slavery and the overall development and disparities within development will be discussed, in depth, in this paper.

There are evident silences that surround slavery and these became clear within the first twenty-four hours of being in Ghana and this became a reoccurring theme throughout the stay in Ghana. On the first day in Ghana, we visited the Artist Alliance Gallery which contains artwork by artists from Ghana and West Africa, at large. They also have artifacts of traditional healers and kente from Asante and Ewe, respectively. One of the questions posed after we did a tour of the gallery was why there were no artifacts relating to slavery and the response was that slavery was emotional and

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nobody wanted to speak about it. The curator also mentioned that they had shackles but he could not locate them - if shackles were important, they would have been placed in a safe place. We later found a painting of forcefully slaves being loaded onto a boat , in a corner on the third floor as though everything pertaining to slavery was intentionally being hidden. The silences were then reiterated in Salaga where we were welcomed by the board welcoming us to Salaga Slave Market after which we were led to a museum. The location and condition of the museum inadequate to a place as significant to slavery as Salaga - there were barely artifacts of slavery or even people who showed interest in the topic - both in teaching and even maintaining the place. We later learned that people of Salaga overall did not want to be associated with the museum because it reminded them of the dark times of slavery. On our visit to Sakpulgu Slave Market, we found the same situation - very little artifacts which were not well kept or preserved. The only difference at Sakpulgu was that even the chief acknowledged involvement in the slave trade, which we did not really get at Salaga. The topic of slavery is emotional to many but as Martin Klein's text suggests, in studying oral traditions on slavery, one must go into the field already aware of the fact that memory is selective and people will tell you what they want you to know. As much as being a descendant of a slave is somewhat celebrated outside of Africa, because it shows progress in your life, it is shameful in Africa and therefore, Africans would rather forget about slavery. This forgetfulness is what we observed at the Asante Museum in Kumasi, where the tour guide did not mention slavery until he was asked about it - even though there are artifacts in the museum that alluded to slavery. Overall, the silences surrounding slavery shows the wish for Ghanaians to erase a part of their history and their involvement in slavery - instead of acknowledging it. They are taking Kwame Nkrumah's words of "forward ever, backwards never," in their literal sense.

Education, as inspired heavily by Western education, perpetuates the silences surrounding slavery and only tells the narrative of slavery from one view - that of the

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Europeans. During our forum with students from the University for Development Studies, we came across two types of students; those who knew nothing about slavery and those who had learned about slavery in their high school history classes. When examining the knowledge from those who had learned about slavery, I realised that the education that they received was white washed. Firstly, they failed to distinguish between slavery and servitude, which minimizes the magnitude of the impact of slavery because then it seems equal to servitude. It also removes the blame from Europeans who were involved in Trans-Atlantic slave trade and places it on Africans - who started slavery (servitude) which Europeans tapped into. This is the same view that was expressed by J.D Fage. However, whenever slavery is discussed, it is important to distinguish it from servitude because as much as they were somewhat similar, there is racism, violence and permanent displacement of Africans that came with Trans-Atlantic slavery, which we can never relate to servitude. However, there is no entrance fee for Ghanaians who visit Elmina Castle and overall, the entrance fee for Ghanaians into slave sites is significantly lower than for other people which suggests that Ghanaians have access to these resources but choose not to acquire the knowledge on slavery.

On the contrary to the silences that surround slavery, there is a group of people and institutions that use slavery for economic gains which is both an act towards speaking up and a means further exploiting those who were affected by slavery. Paga-Nania Slave Camp, was the first place we visited where it was clear that the tour guide would not engage with us before we paid to be there. Paga-Nania is a tourist site from slavery and is the only place where the tour guide spoke too freely about slavery - I even asked if speaking about slavery was easy to him. Overall, I felt as though he romanticized slavery and I was overall skeptical about how truthful he was being throughout our tour - apart from the fact that Katharina Schramm's paper alluded to the fact that some of the information there would be questionable. The idea of monetary value being placed on knowledge was evident on our visit to Yendi, where Babatou's

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relative refused to speak with us because he saw no gain to speaking with us. This brought about the question of whether or not knowledge on slavery would be easier to obtain if we use money. Would it be easier to get people to speak about slavery if we pay them for the knowledge. The Year of Return yielded a lot of income for Ghana with activities that attracted people from outside the country, especially African-Americans who are searching for a part of their history and a connection to Africa, by all means. However, because the program was all tourism and fun-activity based, the idea of it being a time for people to connect with their roots was not achieved. This whole program was to generate more income for Ghana and not much about education thus only just further exploited African Americans and used their existence as a commodity - as their ancestors were, years ago.

There is evident disparities between the North and Southern parts of Ghana in terms of tourism, education and the concentration of non-profit organisations. In addition to the fact that the Year of Return activities were concentrated in the North, thus only brought business and profits to business in the Southern parts of the country, it was a reflection of resources and funds of Ghana - they are all concentrated in the Southern part of the country. This unequal distribution of funds trickles down to other developmental facets such as education. Children in the Northern parts of Ghana are not doing well at school which is proved by the results from external examinations. This is due to the fact that the children travel very far to school to be taught by unmotivated teachers. In Sakpulgu, there were a lot of children and no school because of poor infrastructure which is apparently common in the Northern regions because resources are only used in the South. This is particularly problematic in the case of Ghana because it is considered as a Newly Industrialised Country in talks of development based on the condition of the South so these disparities will only increase. There is however, a high number of Non-Profit Organisations operating in the North, particularly in Tamale which may be hopeful for many because they work to improve or address

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some of the issues that the government is overlooking. This is also good for any African country because international organisations giving back to poorer parts of it could be viewed as reparations for the harm that was done by the countries in which they were founded in. However, Nana Akufo-Addo, the president of Ghana expressed a wish for a “Ghana beyond aid” which means that these organizations will be shutting down their operations and the country is moving towards a state of full independence. Considering the disparities that already exist between the North and South of Ghana, it is almost inevitable that these disparities will only increase with the removal of aid (which Northern parts of the country depend on) and continuation of the government to attend to operations and issues present in the Southern parts of the country.

Overall, Ghana has the potential to rise to be one of the strongest economies of Africa- as long as they acknowledge the country’s history and use it as a starting point of development. To move forward, you need a starting point and if you do not acknowledge your past, you have no way to know how far you have come and certainly will not move forward. As much as Kwame Nkrumah commanded Ghanaians and Africans to move forward and never backwards, the starting point has to be acknowledgement of our history so we never repeat the same mistakes. That will be the beginning of steps forward.