

GHANA-CARIBBEAN
RELATIONS
- FROM
SLAVERY TIMES
TO
PRESENT

LECTURE TO THE
GHANA-CARIBBEAN
ASSOCIATION

NOVEMBER, 2006

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This lecture is in two parts – the first part is on the Identity of Ghanaians and the Identity of Caribbeans. The second part discusses various aspects of the histories of the two peoples and focuses on what sort of relations have transpired between them since historic slavery times.

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PART ONE

(i) Who or what is Ghana?

It is known that British Colonialists when they were under pressure from Germans and French scrambling for West African territories to exploit, quickly stampeded a number of ethnic groups on the Cote d'Ivoire border and especially, many in what is now the Northern half of Ghana, into joining the Gold Coast Colony and Asante to form in 1901, the Gold Coast renamed "Ghana" at Independence in 1957.

Ghana's numerous ethnic groups speak many different languages and dialects that appear to set them apart. Nevertheless, there are many more features that unite them than divide them. We have here in Ghana, a collection of Negro West African peoples inhabiting a common tropical hot humid forest-savannah environment, a people with a common history pioneered by ancestral indigenes, sustained over the centuries by intense economic enterprises with foreign potentates in gold ivory, kola, shea butter, slaves etc.

Various European colonizers have left on the Ghanaian scene powerful imprints of Western-type Calendar, Education, technology, political and judicial systems, Christian monotheism, and an English Lingua franca. Earlier Magbregian-Sudanic contacts have also left their imprint on the local scene. So we do have currently, something of a "Cultural Mosaic", combining Islamic, Western European and traditional elements along with cultural/subsistence features introduced from the New World.

However, we can also say that we have at the core of Ghanaian society a host of cultural features that clearly distinguish us as a people.

- Our traditional governance with its pomp and pageantry
- Our traditional calendars
- Our ubiquitous Festivals
- Our unique foods (**Fufu**, **Akple**, **Ampese**, **Banku**, **Fitri**).
- Our Traditional Textiles (like **Kente** and **Adinkra**)
- Our unique Orature and Folklore and Proverbs (e.g. Ananse tales)
- Our Akan pseudo-“lingua franca”.

Above all, from north to south, east to west, Ghanaians have a congenial humane personality that is globally acknowledged.

(2) **Who or what is the Caribbean?**

The name “Caribbean Archipelago” is given to a chain of Islands located within the Caribbean Sea. Altogether they number over 30 Islands. The Bahamas Complex is the only group of 8 Islands located north of the 23½°N Tropic of Cancer. The vast majority are located south of the Tropic and they are in 4 groups:

- I: The Greater Antilles Group of very large Islands – Cuba, Haiti and Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Jamaica.

- II. The tiny Virgin Islands owned by the USA.
- III. Seven small “Leeward Islands” and six slightly bigger “Windward Islands”, all of which form an arc.
- IV. Six other Islands located north of the Venezuela mainland (Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba, Curacao, Bonaire)

There are in addition 3 mainland states Guyana, (British Guiana) Suriname (Dutch Guiana) and French Guiana, which are usually included in the designation “Caribbean states” on historical grounds

Most of these settlements listed constitute nation-states in their own right. So the question is – do we have justification for lumping them together under **identical** designation “Caribbean”?

I suggest that a number of factors provide grounds for commonality and identity:

Firstly, these settlements shared a common tropical maritime and (for most of them) an insular environment through their history.

The same tropical environment also served as a nursery of food crops such as maize, cocoyam, cassava, sweet potato, avocado, peanut, variety of beans, pawpaw, pineapple, pepper, guava, cashew, and cultural plants like cotton, calabash, dyes, rubber etc.

Some of these plants were in fact introduced by Europeans into the gardens of the Forts and Castles in the Gold Coast from the 16th century onwards.

Secondly, the Historic Demographic pattern shows that the archipelago was inhabited by Amerindians prior to the European advent, and the Great Antilles had sizeable Amerindian populations governed by Traditional Rulers.

The Spanish invasion, settlement and gold economic exploitation of the Caribbean, especially the Greater Antilles in the 15th and 16th Centuries, hastened the decimation or migration of the Arawak and Carib Indians. It also resulted in the “peopling” of the Sub-Region with Spanish Whites, Spanish Free Blacks, Spanish

Christianised Black **Ladinos** Slaves as well as Black **Bozales** Slaves imported directly from Africa.

Moreover, it witnessed the emergence of a new race of **Mullatos** and **Criollos**. The massive importation of African Black Slaves by Dutch, English, French, Danes and Brandenburgers during the peak era of sugar-cotton-tobacco plantation economy revolutionised the demography of the sub-region and gave to the Antilles a substantial African Diaspora Mullato and Criollo population.

This demographic pluralism was paralleled by a cultural pluralism as the Caribbean gained momentum in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries as a “frontier of opportunity”.

My view then is that the Caribbean is “Caribbean” whether Spanish Caribbean, Dutch, English, French or Danish, and whether it is White, Black, Mulatto or Criollo.

PART TWO
CARIBBEAN – GHANA RELATIONS IN
HISTORIC TIMES

The year 1656 is a landmark in Caribbean History. That year, the Dutch who had been operating in NE Brazil since 1633 were expelled. They took with them to the English and French Antilles the Black Slaves who had know-how of the sugar production culture. Henceforward, sugar began to dominate Caribbean economy. As sugar required abundant intense slave labour, Dutch, English, French, and after them, the Danes and Brandenburg, all began to specialise in export of Negro slaves from West Africa. Angola and Congo to the Caribbean.

The West Indies became the lynch-pin of the old Colonial system of Europe.

Great Britain

(1) Next to Portugal, Great Britain was the largest exporter of slaves to the New World. Its exports in 1662-1807 numbered at least 3 million. Some of the biggest slave shipping tycoons (Humphry Morice of Bristol and Liverpool and William Callow of London) were major exporters of slaves from Cape Coast, Anomabo and James Town, Accra to Jamaica, Grenada, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Leeward Islands and Windward and Islands By 1809, Jamaica, the largest British sugar colony had 300,000 slaves and over.

Netherlands

(2) Slaves from the Gold Coast, known collectively as “Kormantin Negroes” were sourced by the **Dutch West Indian Company** from its Forts at Elmina, Accra, Axim, Apam, Moure, Senya Bereku etc. The bulk were taken to Suriname but a few also reached Curacao, Bonaire, Aruba, St. Martin and St Eustatius.

Some Dutch West Indian Company officials in the Gold Coast (like Nicholas Bakergem and De Petersen) actually owned Slave Ships as well as Sugar Plantations in Suriname. Their families in Netherlands and Elmina inherited their Caribbean businesses. Some 22% of the half a million slaves exported to the New World by the Dutch went to Suriname and 30% of that number came from the Elmina area. Between the 1780s and 1863, the Dutch-Elmina-Caribbean business of the Bakergem family continued to flourish.

Denmark/Norway

(3) **The Danish Norwegian Royal West Indian and Guinea Company** operated the slave export business from their SE Gold Coast forts, especially Fort Fredensborg of Ningo, to the Virgin Islands (St John, St Thomas and St Croix) from 1672 to the late 18th century. Danish ships operating in the triangular trade network carried firearms, textiles, paper, metalware and West Indian coral necklaces in their ships en route to the Gold Coast.

They took on board in the Gold Coast Elephant and Hippo ivory and Slaves. Most of the slaves were Akwamu, Anlo Ewe and especially Krepi of South east Gold Coast who fetched a high price because the Krepi were known to be hardworking and reliable workers in the Caribbean.

The Danish ships exported ivory, slaves and coral necklaces to the Virgin Islands and used the profits from their sales to buy Puerto Rican and Virgin Island timbers, tobacco, sugar, cinnamon bark, dye wood and cotton for export back to Scandinavia. A recent archaeological underwater excavation of the Fredensborg shipwreck in Norway confirmed the details of the lucrative Danish trade, which brought considerable prosperity to St Thomas and St Croix.

Brandenburg (Germany)

- (4) **The Emden Company** of Brandenburg was another Slave dealer in the Caribbean sub-region in historic times. A thirty-year contract (1685-1716) between Denmark and Brandenburg enabled ships from Brandenburg to export slaves from its forts in the Ahanta, Nzema and Takoradi area of the Gold Coast to the Virgin Islands whence some slaves were transhipped to Berbice in British Guiana.

France

- (5) The French were not successful in Fort building in the Gold Coast. Hence, like the Portuguese in the 18th Century, the French operated as freelance privateers that carried many “Kormantin” slaves to Martinique, Guadeloupe, and St Domingue.

(6) West African Cultural Exports: Various scholars have been focusing on cultural aspects of Slave Route Studies such as “Mamewater” or “Watramama” and “Voodoo” cults of the Caribbean region. Available archival records show that slaves exported from the Slave Coast of West Africa (Benin, Togo, and Yorubaland) as well as the Gold Coast introduced the “Mamewater” spiritism to the Caribbean region. In recent times, this historic cult practice has been on the upsurge in the Caribbean and the Southern U.S.A. Folklore on Ananse the cunning trickster originating from Akan communities in the Gold Coast was diffused in the Caribbean region as well as the North American Mainland by slaves in historic times. Professor and Mrs. Melville Herskovits who researched in the 1920s and 1930s among New World slave communities in Suriname and Northern America were able to trace Akan origin folklore, **Oware** game, drumming and dancing types, and **Mpintin** drum instruments to these New World cultural crucibles.

(7) **CARIBBEAN BACK-TO-AFRICA MOVEMENT**

Gold Coast – Caribbean relations have not been an entirely one-way traffic, in spite of the fact that New World black slave descendants do have bitter memories of their betrayal and sale by their African ancestors to white slave dealers.

This point is well illustrated in Basel Mission histories of the period 1815-1918. In 1815, the Basel Mission of Switzerland and Southwest Germany embarked on evangelism in the Gold Coast, an enterprise that eventually led to the establishment of schools, training colleges, churches, the Basel Mission Trading Company the introduction of the first motor vehicles and modern road building systems.

The first two decades were a fiasco as white Missionaries died quickly. Akuapem King, Ado Dankwa I, suggested to the Basel Mission the local usage of African Missionaries. The Basel Missionary, Andreas Riis applied to metropolitan authorities and was asked to lead a Mission to Jamaica to recruit African Caribbean Missionaries for the Gold Coast.

In 1843, Riis and a Liberian-born Missionary George Thompson brought from Jamaica Six West Indian families comprising 24 adults and children who settled at Akropong. One of them was Hasford from British Leeward Island of Antigua.

The others all Jamaicans, consisted of Clerk, Greene, Hall, Miller, Mullings, Robertson and Rochester.

The group was accompanied by a Teacher, Catherine Mulgrave, later to become Head of the Christiansborg Castle Mulatto Girls' School.

The Missionaries were well resourced and motivated. They built stone houses, churches, schools, established plantations, learnt the indigenous languages and related closely with the local people and so played significant roles in the Basel Mission. They were given the option to return to the West Indies after 5 years. Most decided to stay. By 1918, when the First Independent Presbyterian Church met, two of the Jamaicans were elevated: Rev. Nicholas T. Clerk became the First Moderator of the Ghana Presbyterian Church and Rev. Peter Hall became the Synod Clerk.

Church Historians have been tracking down the descendants of Jamaican Basel Mission Pioneers. By 1999, Winfred Mullings the great grandson of the original Mullings was on record as still occupying the 19th century Jamaican quarters at Akropong. Descendants of the Clerks, Halls, and others are also extant.

Since Ghana's independence some Caribbean Professionals have been trickling back to Ghana either as Visitors in the short term or as Residents. The details are better known to the Ghana-Caribbean Association and need to be inventoried in the Internet.

But I will end with a footnote on a remarkable visit in the 1970s of a select Group of Maroon Traditional Rulers from the Suriname hinterland who came to West Africa. They stopped in Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria, to dialogue with local Chiefs.

They were at pains to enquire from them the reason why their ancestors elected to engage in slavery and slave trade and sold their forebears to white dealers.

This year, 2006 a group came all the way from the Virgin Islands bent on searching for their roots in Ghana.

For sure, these returnees are not the first and will not be the last to stage a come-back to Ghana and West Africa.