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Alessandra Brivio

*DOMESTIC SLAVERY AND DOMESTIC WORK IN THE GOLD COAST (GHANA):
THE INVISIBILITY OF WOMEN'S LABOUR**

Abstract

This article locates the deep roots of the contemporary “invisibility” of domestic workers in the transition from slavery to wage labour in the Gold Coast. An understanding of the present-day condition of domestic workers requires an examination of the legacy of slavery, especially what came eventually to be called “domestic slavery”. The ambiguities in defining domestic slavery and the claim of its supposedly benevolent nature contributed to the silence behind which exploitation has been hidden and forgotten. In this article, I focus on the absences, the unsaid and the women’s invisibility.

KEYWORDS: DOMESTIC WORKER, SLAVERY, WOMEN, GOLD COAST

Introduction

Domestic work in Africa is currently understood as a precarious, low-valued and unorganised form of labour. A predominantly female occupation, it is carried out by migrants and other members of the most marginalised segments of the population. In the last ten years, there has been growing recognition of the rights of these workers as well as an increase in their their awareness and ability to organise themselves¹. Recent International Labour Organization (ILO) figures suggest that there are 5.2 million domestic workers in Africa, but this figure appears to be an underestimation². In 2011, the ILO enacted the Domestic Workers Convention (n.189) to improve labour standards in household employment, while several countries have tried to regulate domestic service.

In 2016, I met Deborah Freeman, the current General Secretary of the Union of Informal Workers Associations (UNIWA) in Ghana. She was working to raise

* This article was completed thanks to funding from MESAO-Missione Etnologica in Senegal e Africa Occidentale (ex-MEBAO) and from the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN 2017) “Genealogies of African Freedom” (code KFW5RJ-004), at the Research Unit of the University of Milano Bicocca.

1. S. Marchetti, D. Cherubini, G. Garofalo Geymonat, *Global Domestic Workers: Intersectional Inequalities and Struggles for Rights*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2021.

2. International Labour Office, “An Overview of Domestic Work in Africa”, *Briefing Note*, 1, 2013.

the awareness of domestic workers in order to include them within her organisation. In Ghana, she explained, domestic workers are among the most exploited, worst-treated and invisible workers. According to the Ghana Statistical Service (2010), roughly 0.6% of the economically active population were employed as domestic workers. This, however, refers to regular workers and is probably an undervaluation. Freeman's estimate is that around 20% of the total active population are regular, but this figure, too, is on the low side³. For its part, Law and Advocacy for Women in Africa (LAWA-Ghana) stated there is at least one domestic worker per house, and large houses could have as many as six⁴.

To define domestic work in Ghana and to identify who the domestic workers are are no easy tasks, however⁵. Domestic work takes place in private spaces, using under-age workers, poor relatives and badly paid migrant women⁶. They are largely undeclared, and often remain unnoticed by social and political structures. In general, it is the "invisible" nature of this work that raises problems even in its definition⁷. Precisely because it is very difficult for people in that position to rene-

3. M. Awumbila, D. Badasu, A. Anamzoya, O. Alhassan, "Urbanisation and Changing Dynamics of Migrant Domestic Work in Accra, Ghana", Paper presented at the first international conference on Urbanisation & Rural-Urban Migration in sub-Saharan Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, November 26-27, 2012, in M. Awumbila et al. "Please, Thank You and Sorry – Brokering Migration and Constructing Identities for Domestic Work in Ghana", *Journal of Ethic and Migration Studies*, 45, 14, 2019, 1-17.

4. LAWA-Ghana (Leadership and Advocacy for Women in Africa-Ghana), *Domestic Workers in Ghana: First to Rise and Last to Sleep*, Washington DC, Georgetown University Law Center, 2003.

5. K.O. Akurang-Parry, "Transformations in the Feminization of Unfree Domestic Labor: A Study of Abaawa or Prepubescent Female Servitude in Modern Ghana", *International labour and working-class history*, 78, 2010, 28-47; D. Tsikata, "Like Your Own Child? Employers' Perspectives and Domestic Work Relations in Ghana", in C.R. Rodriguez, D. Tsikata, A.A. Ampofo, eds., *Transatlantic Feminisms. Women and Gender Studies in Africa and the Diaspora*, Lanham MD, Lexington Books, 2015; D. Tsikata, "Domestic Work and Domestic Workers in Ghana: An Overview of the Legal Regime and Practice", *Conditions of Work and Employment Series*, 23, Geneva, International Labour Organization, 2009; N.A. Apt, *A Study of Child Domestic Work and Fosterage in Northern and Upper East Region of Ghana*, Ghana, UN Children's Fund, 2003.

6. Tsikata, "Like Your Own Child?"

7. According to Adelle Blanckett, domestic work includes "a broad range of responsibilities, functions, and tasks, often invisible and undervalued, undertaken in and for a household". A. Blanckett, "The Decent Work for Domestic Workers Convention and Recommendation, 2011", *The American Journal of International Law*, 106, 4, 2012, 778-794. The International Labour Office's Law and Practice Report claimed that domestic work "is linked to the global history of slavery, colonialism and other forms of servitude. In its contemporary manifestations, domestic work is a global phenomenon that perpetuates hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, indigenous status, caste and nationality [...] Domestic work [...] is looked upon as unskilled because most women have traditionally been considered capable of doing the work, and the skills they are taught by other women in the home are perceived to be innate. When paid, therefore, the work remains undervalued and poorly regulated. By contrast, studies that provide space for domestic workers to speak often reveal their belief in the dignity of their hard work, and, as such, it warrants recognition and respect and calls for regulation (ILO, "Report IV. Decent work for domestic workers", International Labour Conference,

gotiate class and status distinctions, domestic work forms an important political arena within which to criticise their relations of personal dependence⁸, to struggle to avoid being treated as “slave”⁹ and to use “intersectionality as social movement strategy”¹⁰.

Domestic work, of course, has been an age-old occupation in Africa¹¹. It has been defined by different terminologies and has involved people of different status: slaves, pawns, dependent people and family members.

When I first approached this topic, I was researching the emancipation process following the 1874 abolition of slavery in the colony, and the traps and difficulties that former slave women endured¹². The lack of colonial records suggests that the issue of domestic workers was not regarded as a topic of any interest, except for the male domestic workers employed by colonial officials, the colonial staff, “euphemistically called house boy, garden boy, even ‘nurse boy’”¹³. This was the first indirect evidence that female domestic work was not generally perceived as a real employment: it was so widespread as to be considered a natural constituent of every family and a “traditional” female role, or one that was “tainted with notions of slavery, primitivism and promiscuity”¹⁴. The continuities between domestic slavery and domestic work at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in Ghana were enormous, and abolition and emancipation further ex-

99th Session, 2010, available at: https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/previous-sessions/99thSession/reports/WCMS_104700/lang--en/index.htm (last access May 16, 2023).

8. F. Viti, *Schiavi, servi e dipendenti. Antropologia delle forme di dipendenza personale in Africa*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2007.

9. M. Gardini, “The Risk of Sliding Down. Domestic Work and the Legacies of Slavery in Madagascar”, *American Ethnologist*, 47, 3, 2020, 264-275.

10. D. Cherubini, G. Garofalo Geymonat, S. Marchetti, “Intersectional Politics on Domestic Workers’ Rights”, in E. Evans, E. Lépinard, eds., *Intersectionality in Feminist and Queer Movements*, London and New York, Routledge, 2020, 236-254; J. Jihye Chun, G. Lipsitz, Y. Shin, “Intersectionality as a Social Movement Strategy: Asian Immigrant Women Advocates”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38, 4, 2013, 917-940.

11. Literature on domestic work in Africa mainly focus on child-labour. For an overview, see: J. Cock, *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1980; K.T. Hansen, *Distant Companions: Servants and Employers in Zambia, 1900-1985*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1989; L. Pelckmans, “Memoryscapes of Slavery? Dependent Mobility by ‘Related’ Domestic Workers in Fulbe Elite Families in Mali”, in J. Quirk, D. Vigneswaran, eds., *Slavery, Migration and Contemporary Bondage in Africa*, Trenton NJ, Africa World Press, 2013, 149-180; S. Hepburn, “‘Bringing a girl from the village’: Gender, Child Migration & Domestic Service in Post-colonial Zambia”, in E. Razy, M. Rodet, eds., *Children on the Move in Africa. Past & Present Experiences of Migration*, London, James Currey, 2016, 68-84; Gardini, “The Risk of Sliding Down”.

12. In 1874, two ordinances abolished slavery in the newly established Gold Coast colony: “N.1, 1874, Ordinance for the abolition of slave-dealing” e “N.2, 1874, Ordinance to provide for emancipation of persons holden in slavery”.

13. D.F. Bryceson, “Domestic Work”, in S. Bellucci, A. Eckert, eds., *General Labour History of Africa: Workers, Employers and Governments 20th-21th Centuries*, Geneva, ILO, 2019.

14. Bryceson, “Domestic Work”, 310. See also: K.T. Hansen, “Body Politics: Sexuality, Gender and Domestic Service in Zambia”, *Journal of Women’s History*, 2, 1, 1990, 120-142.

panded the category of “domestic work. Domestic slavery and pawnship continued in the coastal cities of Ghana almost undisturbed, sometimes with just a lexical change from slave to servant. The existential condition of the people involved had not substantially changed, and this was particularly true for slave women performing domestic labour¹⁵.

Colonial governments in Africa took advantage of the female farming system with a view to supporting to male labour migration.¹⁶ In the southern towns of Ghana, the capitalist economy increased the demand for male wage labour, while the structures of the domestic economy remained unchanged and continued to depend on the exploitation of the labour of women and children¹⁷. Even in the countryside, the plantation economy and the exploitation of cocoa massively increased the disparity between women’s and men’s work¹⁸. To support domestic economies, the invisible labour of former slaves, low-class women and very young people became crucial.

Forced domestic labour, known as *abaawa* in the Akan language, was a pre-colonial institution which spread dramatically during the emancipation period¹⁹. According to Akurang-Parry both social campaigners and academics have tended to neglect the problem of *abaawa* exploitation because of the “uncomfortable fact that those engaged in activism that seeks to liberate and empower women are themselves beneficiaries of *abaawa* labor”²⁰. While there might well be some truth to this argument, the invisibility of female domestic work, as feminist scholars have shown, has been a global issue, inherent to capitalism. During colonial period, hierarchies built upon gender, “race” and age became constitutive of class rule, and accumulation was possible due to the process of dispossession, targeting women’s unpaid labour as well as nature²¹.

15. C. Robertson, M. Klein, eds., *Women and Slavery in Africa*, Madison WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 1983; A. Brivio, “‘I Am a Slave Not a Wife’: Slave Women in Post-Proclamation Gold Coast (Ghana)”, *Gender & History*, 29, 2017, 31-47.

16. Bryceson, “Domestic Work”, 309; F.I. Ekejiuba, “Down to Fundamentals: Women-centred Hearth-holds in Rural West Africa”, in D.F. Bryceson, ed., *Women Wielding the Hoe: Lessons from Rural Africa for Feminist Theory and Development Practice*, Oxford, Berg Publishers, 1995, 47-61.

17. P. Haenger, *Slaves and Slave Holders on the Gold Coast. Towards an Understanding of Social Bondage in West Africa*, Basel, P. Schlettwein Publishing, 2000; C. Robertson, “We Must Overcome, Genealogy and Evolution of Female Slavery in West Africa”, *Journal of West African History*, 1, 1, 2015, 59-92; B. Rogers, *The Domestication of Women: Discrimination in Developing Societies*, London, Tylor and Francis, 1981.

18. B. Grier, “Pawns, Porters, and Petty Traders: Women in the Transition to Cash Crop Agriculture in Colonial Ghana”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 17, 1992, 304-28; K.O. Akurang-Parry, “‘The loads are heavier than usual’: Forced Labor by Women and Children in the Central Province, Gold Coast (Colonial Ghana), 1900-1949”, *African Economic History*, 30, 2002, 31-51; G. Austin, *Labor, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labor in Asante, 1807-1956*, Rochester NY, University of Rochester Press, 2005.

19. Akurang-Parry, “Transformations in the Feminization”; Tsikata, “Like Your Own Child?”.

20. Akurang-Parry, “Transformations in the Feminization”, 29.

21. A. Mezzadri, “Class, Gender and the Sweatshop: On the Nexus between Labour Commodification and Exploitation”, *Third World Quarterly*, 37, 10, 2016, 1877-1900; S. Federici, *The*

Domestic work has long remained hidden and shrouded in silence, and this article aims to locate the origins of this invisibility in the transition from slavery to wage labour. A different way of putting it is that a full understanding of the present-day condition of domestic workers requires an examination of the legacy of slavery and, in particular, what came to be known as domestic slavery.

The ambiguous definition of domestic slavery, as well as its supposedly benevolent nature, contributed to the silence behind which exploitative practices have been hidden and forgotten. My focus in this article, then, is on absences, the unsaid and the invisibility of women. In the first part, I discuss some of the labour legislation passed in the last decades of nineteenth century, highlighting the ambiguity of the British colonial administration, its concentration on male labour and the shifting direction of its policies. In the second part I discuss two judicial cases that involved young female servants. They demonstrate that the exploitation of domestic work and the recruitment of servants represented the norm, while the prospect of sexual abuse within the master's family was hardly regarded as scandalous. As Angela Davis wrote with regards to the USA, housework kept the familiar imprint of slavery, women continued to be viewed as legitimate sexual prey for men, and the shift from slave to maid was more lexical than practical²².

The male domestic workers

In 1875, the “Ordinance for regulating the relations between employers and employed under contract of service” was passed as a supplement to the Emancipation Ordinances of 1874. Its purpose was to facilitate agreements for hiring and services, and the stipulation of voluntary contracts when an informal labour relationship was already in place. To mark the rupture with slavery, the legislator focused on the nature of the contract, written or unwritten, stipulating that it should not bond the worker for longer than three months, with the exception of domestic servants, for whom the limit was six months. Section 15 was expressly written for those who, despite having become free under the Emancipation Ordinance 1874, had continued for a time to render services without contract to their former master and could wish to be employed differently. For apprenticeship contracts, the ordinance showed some weakness and inconsistencies; it enabled a child of between nine and sixteen years of age to be given as an apprentice by his father, mother or other “guardian” for a period not exceeding five years²³. Several

Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation, New York NY, Autonomedia, 2004; B. Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour*, London, Zed Book, 2000; M. Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*, London, Zed Book, 1986.

22. A. Davis, *Donne, razza e classe*, Roma, Alegre, 2018, 126.

23. The National Archives (TNA), Kew, United Kingdom, Colonial Office (CO) 96/116, Mr Chalmers to Governor Strahan, 24 December 1875, 405-417.

Ordinances followed suit, their aims alternating between the attempt to regulate the contract relations between employers and employees and the perceived need to support efforts to recruit workers, thereby ensuring the continuity of labour.

While labourers (miners, roadbuilders, load carriers, etc) often reacted to the new measures, resorting to different forms of resistance²⁴, domestic servants and their working conditions remained in the shadow. They were intrinsically weak and unable to find common ground. They were completely isolated and submitted to hierarchical and personal relationships. It was a vertical labour system which left no room for horizontal alliances between pairs. Most of them were former slaves, pawns and dependents: people, in other words, belonging to the lowest class. The growing number of African lawyers and journalists actively engaged against the colonial system and labour exploitation never approached domestic labour issues. As members of the African elite, they were themselves employers. According to N.K.A. Busia the institution of domestic service in Ghana originated during the colonial period as a response to the colonialists' needs for domestic help. After independence, African elites inherited the colonial practice and guarded it as a symbol of their newly gained status.²⁵ Other scholars have situated domestic work within the traditions of female servitude or explained it by reference to kinship systems.²⁶

The 1891 Census defined domestic servants as a class that:

includes all persons engaged in Domestic offices and Household Duties. Here are included wives, widows, daughters and other relatives, chiefly females, engaged in domestic offices or household duties, all those persons broadly definable as in 'service' or in attendance upon men, e.g. Domestic Servants, Cooks, Grooms, Washermen and laundresses &c. This is a very large and important class of the population, embracing as it does more than half the female population. Most of

24. Most of the studies have explored the recruitment of railway and mine labour; others, to a lesser extent, have looked at labour for roadbuilding, portage and hammock-carrying. See, among the others: K.O. Akurang-Parry, "Labour Mobilization and African Response to the Compulsory Labour Ordinance in the Gold Coast (Colonial Ghana), 1875-1899", *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 4/5, 2000-2001, 83-104; K.O. Akurang-Parry, "Colonial Forced Labor Policies for Road-Building in Southern Ghana and International Anti-Forced Labor Pressures, 1900-1940", *African Economic History*, 28, 2000, 1-25; S. Kunkel, "Forced Labour, Roads, and Chiefs: The Implementation of the ILO Forced Labour Convention in the Gold Coast", *IRSH*, 63, 2018, 449-476; J. Crisp, "The Story of an African Working Class: Ghanaian Miners' Struggles 1870-1980", London, Bloomsbury, 1984; Austin, *Labour, Land, and Capital*; K. Tsey, *From Head-Loading to the Iron Horse: Railway Building in Colonial Ghana and the Origins of Tropical Development*, Bamenda, Langaa RPCIG, 2013; R.E. Dumett, *El Dorado in West Africa: The Gold Mining Frontier, African Labor, and Colonial Capitalism in the Gold Coast, 1875-1900*, Athens OH, Ohio University Press, 1999.

25. N.K.A. Busia jr, "Slaves of a Culture: The Case of Domestic Servants in Ghana", *Occasional papers*, Oslo, Centre for Development and the Environment, University of Oslo, 1991.

26. Akurang-Parry, "Transformations in the Feminization"; M. Assimeng, *Social Structure of Ghana: A Study in Persistence and Change*, Legon, Ghana Universities Press, 1999; G.K. Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana*, Accra, Universities Press, 2003.

the Cooks are males, and laundry work is confined almost exclusively to this sex also²⁷.

This definition tried to summarise two typologies of domestic workers on the basis of gender. On the one hand, were female unskilled domestic servants (working on kinship bases), while, on the other, were the male skilled domestic servants, such as cooks, steward boys and laundry workers, employed by the colony. Female domestic workers were also neglected by the official statistics. In 1891, the British estimated that, in Accra, over 12% of the 8,824 people classified as workers were domestic servants. In Ada, they were 26%. According to the 1901 census, Accra domestic servants were 672, more than 14% of the total working population²⁸. These estimates obviously did not consider women workers, since the latter were claimed to be almost half of the whole female population. The difficulties involved in defining domestic work and particularly its female component show that this occupation was a grey area within which different forms of dependency were still hidden. Moreover, the absence of women from colonial statistics can also be attributed to the view that female domestic work was a form of unskilled work, distinct from “real” productive work²⁹.

In 1939 the British Government published “Notes for the Guidance of Europeans in the Gold Coast”. While giving much space to the issue of male domestic workers, the text passed women under almost complete silence³⁰. The “Notes”, which were intended to help European newcomers to cope with African people and to foster the development of good relationships between employers and workers, made suggestions on the moral and ethical character of Africans. Despite their ostensibly good intentions, such remarks were imbued with racism and paternalism and revealed how the idea of work was still informed by relations of dependence.

The editors suggested that readers establish rules concerning working hours and wages for domestic servants. They explained that the legal position between the master and his domestic staff was not always clear or well understood. Usually, the wages were paid at the end of the month, whereas section 8 of the “Master and Servant Ordinance” stated that the contract should be a daily one³¹. The advice was to pay monthly and, to assure the return of the “boy”, to give him a

27. Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD), Ghana, Administrative Records (ADM), 5/2/1 *Report on the Census of the Gold Coast Colony for the year 1891*.

28. PRAAD, ADM 5/2/2, *Report on the Census of the Gold Coast Colony for the year 1901*.

29. The 1911 Census put it thus: “with regard to domestic servants it is probable that a great number of those who are so described should be returned as of ‘no occupation’ as they are engaged merely in household duties and are not hired servants”. PRAAD, ADM 5/2/3, *Census 1911*, 37.

30. PRAAD, Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO) 21/10/20, *Notes for the Guidance of Europeans in the Gold Coast*.

31. Quoted in the Notes: “every home contract of service wherein no agreement is expressed respecting his duration, not be a contract to perform some specific work without reference to time, shall be deemed to be a contract at will and shall be determinable by either party at the close of every day without notice”. PRAAD, CSO 21/10/20, 4.

“dash” whenever the master went on leave³². Of course, no indications were given on the amount of the dash or the wage; in general, the editors suggested improving the personal and informal relationship between masters and servants. It could be better, they stated, when going on leave, to gift the servants with old clothes, hats, shirts, newspapers and picture papers rather than money. The paternalistic nature of the relationship should be nourished; servants, for instance, should be proud of their master’s social improvement. To this end, the master was prompted to give small increments to his servants when he received a salary increase, because this would encourage a boy who had attached “himself to a junior or ‘small’ master at the comparatively small wage (to) remain in his household, gradually increasing his small wage as he becomes more experienced, and his master’s position improves”. The implication was that a domestic servant did not have the dignity of a real worker, but was a dependent whose fortune should remain linked to his master’s social position. The editors envisaged a sort of mutual apprenticeship for both servants and low-class masters, and they were clearly tracing a model inspired by traditional forms of slavery.

These instructions advocated for judicious but random work contracts, completely based on the relationship developed between employer and employee.

According to the 1910 Blue Book, the average monthly wages for domestic servants were high and varied from £1 to £5 for adult men³³. The reality was probably quite different. As late as 1942, a new association, the “Union of Cooks and Stewards of Ashanti”, was founded. One of its first political steps was the compilation of a petition signed by ten workers and sent to the Labour Department. Their aim was to increase wages overall and to establish minimum wages. The prevailing monthly rates at the time were from £2.10 to £3 for cooks and from £1.10 to 1.50 for stewards. The petitioners asked for £7 for cooks and £5.10 for steward. They claimed prevailing wage levels were insufficient for their high rents and travelling costs. They also denounced the totally unregulated working hours (they could finish at 4 a.m. and start again at 6 a.m.) and the lack of compensation when the employers went on leave or decided to dismiss them (they asked for one month’s wage). The acting Chief Inspector of Labour stated that, in his opinion, the minimum wage they were asking was “fantastic” and would prevent some Europeans from employing any servants. Their work was unqualified and there was no uniform standard. In the country, he explained, most servants began to work as unqualified small boys; therefore, a minimum wage could not be paid to untrained or semi-trained servants. The claim to a month’s wages in case of dismissal – he further pointed out – was contrary to the Master and Ser-

32. For a discussion of the “boy” as a social and hierarchical condition and on the infantilization of subordinates in Togo, see: M. Gardini, “Working as a ‘Boy’. Labour, Age and Masculinities in Togo, c.1975-2005”, in Razy, Rodet, ed., *Children on the Move*, 104-122.

33. *Colonial Reports-Annual, Gold Coast. Report for 1910*, n. 688, published by His Majesty’s Stationary Office, London, 1911.

vant Ordinance. He, however, admitted that, in some cases, inadequate wages were indeed paid to domestic servants³⁴.

A year later, the Labour Adviser to the Secretary of State for the Colonies recommended the opening of vocational schools for training in household duties. The acting Governor, G.E. London, did not support the idea. First, he observed, a high proportion of domestic servants were migrants, and the school would increase the demand for employment among local people, leading to possible “ethnic” conflicts. Secondly, professionalisation would increase salaries, and many employers risked being unable to afford domestic staff. He stated that the apprenticeship system was better, because it could improve training standards and serve the employers better. The general idea was that employers should engage domestic servants only if they were in the position to test the “boy”s’ character: only then could the master “learn something of his character and ability”. That is why the “licence book” was introduced. On it, every employer was supposed to write his observations on the “boy”, allowing the next employer to find servants suited to his needs.

The domestic servants’ issue was not a real concern for the colonial administration, and it soon disappeared from the reports. Women, for their part, were completely absent from even such limited debates as did take place within the administration.

Defining domestic slavery

In the Gold Coast the language of servitude was semantically complex. The different forms of servitude were not fixed but could be transitory: in general, the status of a slave could deteriorate due to age, debt or the commission of crime. Moreover, there does not seem to have been a term for domestic slavery: they were slaves who belonged to the kinship group. The notion of domestic slavery was a colonial invention but, from the analytical point of view, it was a category capable of explaining forms of dependence with a much longer history³⁵. Servile relationships are best understood within specific temporal contexts and local cul-

34. PRAAD, CSO 25/3/104, Labour Department, Kumasi, 1942.

35. On domestic slavery and slave emancipation in the Gold Coast, see: S. Runkell, “The Perspectives of African Elites on Slavery and Abolition on the Gold Coast (1860-1900)”, in J. Gohrisch, E. Grunkemeier, eds., *Postcolonial Studies across the Disciplines*, Leiden, Brill, 2013, 243-261; A.A. Perbi, “The Legacy of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana”, in R. Shumway, T. Getz, eds., *Slavery and Its Legacy in Ghana and the Diaspora*, London, Bloomsbury, 2017, 202-218; P. Valsecchi, “Careers of Slaves and Bonded Individuals on the Western Gold Coast (17th-18th Century)”, *Working Paper*, 22, Università degli Studi di Teramo, Department of Communication, 2007; T. Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa: Toward Emancipation in Nineteenth-century Senegal and the Gold Coast*, Athens OH, Ohio University Press, 2004; C. Robertson, “Post-Proclamation Slavery in Accra. A Female Affair”, in M. Klein, C.C. Robertson, eds., *Women and Slavery in Africa*, Madison WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 220-245; G.M. McSheffrey, “Slavery, Indentured

tures. In pre-colonial Ghana there were at least five terms to define unfree people³⁶. In the aftermath of abolition, domestic slavery had been generally described as a benevolent institution by colonial observers. The strongest argument in favour of this interpretation was that slaves who purchased their freedom often refused to go back to their own people. This choice was generally explained in terms of gratitude to the master's family, and little attention was given to the social and economic difficulties that former slaves could face in obtaining their freedom. The condition of domestic slaves was often equated to that of the lower classes in Europe³⁷. Secondly, it was emphasised that, potentially at least, everybody in the Gold Coast was a slave: local social institutions were characterised by a continuum from servile outsider to partial or full membership of kinship groups.

Brodie Cruickshank was one of the first Europeans to describe who made an important contribution in describing what was would later be called domestic slavery in the Gold Coast.³⁸ He was deeply involved in a network of local interests and clienteles, which comprised both and under his control there were slaves and pawns: he was a bright observer of the local society but not alien to it. He recognised that the usual definition of slavery did not adequately describe the social reality of the Gold Coast natives. Every man, he stated, "by birth is a slave, or liable at the will of others to be reduced into slavery, for slavery is an emanation of parental and family authority"³⁹;; and he went on to describe marriage, by analogy, as a form of slavery because wives were regarded as the property of the family elder, and husbands considered them as pawns⁴⁰.

Richard Pine, governor of the Gold Coast from 1862 to 1865, stated that domestic slavery was an issue that "cannot and is not intended to be meddled with", and he added: "I have not known any instances of domestic slaves leaving their owners for our Castles forts or settlements on this long line of Coast for the

Servitude, Legitimate Trade and the Impact of Abolition in the Gold Coast, 1874-1901: A Reappraisal", *The Journal of African History*, 24, 3, 1983:349-368.

36. For instance, *akoa*, which can be traduced as servant, bonded, or subject, and which was used to denote various forms of dependence. It could be used to describe a servant in a household, but, figuratively, it could also refer to the people who were subject to a stool. More generally, it signified the relationship between people placed at different levels of a hierarchical scale, even within the same kin. On these notions, see: R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, Oxford, Clarendon press, 1929, 33; T.C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-colonial Asante*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 289-290; A.A. Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana. From the 15th to the 19th Century*, Accra, Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2004, 3.

37. J. Quirk, "La schiavitù e le sue forme 'minori' d'asservimento in prospettiva giuridico-storica", *Mondo Contemporaneo*, 2, 2015: 113-139.

38. Brodie Cruickshank, a Scotsman, resided in the Gold Coast from 1834 to 1854. He was a prominent merchant, the commander of Fort William at Anomabo and Judicial Assessor. In 1853, he was appointed Acting Governor of the British forts and settlements in the Gold Coast. He died in Lisbon in 1854, on his way back to Britain.

39. B. Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa*, 1, London, Hurst and Blackett, 1853, 313.

40. Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years*, 313.

last two years. They are part and parcel of their families to which they are attached as their children; consequently, there is no danger to be apprehended on this point"⁴¹.

The Cape Coast elite shared the same opinion. In 1899, the pages of the "Gold Coast Aborigines" quoted Pine to support the idea that Emancipation had been intended to weaken the power of the native aristocracy. Its only result had been to give "these emancipated slave a dangerous social status" that would "sow the seeds of intense hatred for imaginary wrongs; instead of gratitude there was the basest insolence inseparable from the ever-present idea of a conscious social inferiority"⁴². For its part, commenting on the Emancipation Act, the *Gold Coast Chronicle* published an article in 1895 about the "so-called slaves" who regretted their former status because, after emancipation, they had been reduced to miserable conditions. The writer wondered: "What harm is there in buying a person if it is for the purpose of securing his moral, social and intellectual elevation?...often the purchase of a human being proved the means of saving his life... from human sacrifice."⁴³

As late as 1927, it was still possible to make a stand in defence of domestic slavery and pawnship. John C. de Graft Johnson, the then Assistant Secretary for Native Affairs, was asked to write a memorandum on the "Vestiges of slavery in the Gold Coast"⁴⁴. He was from Cape Coast and belonged to an important family directly involved in the issues he was writing about. In a letter to J.C. de Graft Johnson, discussing a case involving a slave woman who had married de Graft Johnson's father, the Secretary for Native Affairs claimed: "I have heard you praise the days when your family had domestic slaves and you have told me how well treated and how really part of the family they were"⁴⁵. His favourable view of domestic slavery was clear. In the country and especially in the colony, he claimed, the slaves and the descendants of slaves did not live as slaves. They had a portion of the family or community lands; they helped their "master" to farm, and "those who stay in the house perform such household duties as hired servants in European countries do". In return, they were "fed and clothed and given all the privileges of children while staying with their masters. Otherwise, they are only required occasionally to perform such duties as selling, going on errands etc"⁴⁶. According to de Graft Johnson, slavery and pawning had been ways of avoiding starvation because a person in need could find a protector for himself and his children.

41. TNA, CO 96/68, Governor to Cardwell, Cape Coast, October 1865.

42. PRAAD, Special Collections (SC) 22/391 *The Gold Coast Aborigines*, 11st March 1899.

43. "The Emancipation Act", *The Gold Coast Chronicle*, December 12, 1895.

44. PRAAD, ADM 11/1/975, Domestic slavery, "Vestiges of slavery in the Gold Coast", October 1927.

45. PRAAD, ADM 11/1/975, Domestic slavery, From Secretary Native affairs to J.C. de Graft Johnson.

46. PRAAD, ADM 11/1/975, Domestic slavery, "Vestige of slavery in the Gold Coast", October 1927.

The general idea was that domestic slavery was not akin to the cruel and inhumane slavery of the Americas. The local elite was protecting their own interests, but they were also facing increasing racial discrimination by the European personnel of the Gold Coast colony. The contact between coastal people, such as Fante, and the African-descendent people from America brought a racially conscious and anti-racist version of abolitionism⁴⁷. As Rebecca Shumway points out, the same question faced by the 19th century slave-owning African elite—whether the term slavery, which evoked the brutal, racist institution in the Americas, could equally be used for the many forms of dependence and unfreedom practised in Ghana—is still highly contested today⁴⁸.

For this article, the relevant point is that this debate gave no voice to former slaves and low-class people and made invisible the forms of exploitation inherent in domestic servitude. After abolition, the British administration used slavery as a weapon against the more hostile chiefs and kings but generally did not deem it necessary to intervene in matters of domestic service. On the contrary, under colonial rule, the kinship idioms became a rigid code and women lost part of the power to negotiate the condition of their dependence. By the same token, women who escaped from their kin were stigmatised as immoral and “wicked”⁴⁹. In the Gold Coast, the solution envisaged for liberated young female slaves, especially those of foreign origin who were still being sold in the North, was to foster them⁵⁰. After the formalisation of apprenticeships from the 1890s, freed slaves were entrusted to colonial officials, powerful traditional chiefs or religious institutions. The recipients undertook to bear the costs of their food, clothing and education; in return, the girls would work as maids. The former slaves could leave the foster institution only upon finding a husband⁵¹. Several hundred freed slaves were affected by these measures, but they gained no real improvement in their condition. Apprenticeships turned into a system of forced recruitment, leading to many young women becoming the domestic servants of the African elite⁵². Some girls

47. R. Shumway, “Anti-slavery in Nineteenth Century Fanteland”, in Shumway, Getz, eds., *Slavery and Its Legacy*, 85-104.

48. Shumway, “Anti-slavery”, 98. On this issue see also: S. Runkel, “An African Abolitionist on the Gold Coast: The Case of Francis P. Fearon”, in Shumway, Getz, eds., *Slavery and Its Legacy*, 156-177; M.E. Odijie, “Emancipation in the Gold Coast: The Abolitionist Views of James Hutton Brew”, *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 44, 2023, 109-130.

49. See among the others: M. Wright, *Strategies of Slaves & Women: Life Stories from East/Central Africa*, London, James Currey, 1993; D. Hodgson, S. McCurdy, eds., “Wicked” Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa, Portsmouth NH, Heinemann, 2001.

50. K.O. Akurang-Parry “‘I often shed my tears about this’: ‘Freed’ Slave Children and ‘Apprenticeship’ in Colonial Ghana, ca. 1890 to ca. 1930”, in P. Landau, ed., *The Power of Doubt: Essays in Honor of David Henige*, Madison WI, Parallel Press, 2011, 147-169.

51. PRAAD, Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/126, Slave Children. Several liberated slaves were placed in arranged marriages with colonial civil servants or lived with District Commissioner “as live-in servants” (Akurang-Parry, “I often shed my tears”, 152).

52. Akurang-Parry, “‘I often shed my tears’”; A. Brivio, *Donne, emancipazione, marginalità. Antropologia della schiavitù e della dipendenza in Ghana*, Sesto San Giovanni, Meltemi, 2019.

tried to resist these measures that did not substantially reduce their dependency, or improve their lifestyle, and which would probably deny them the freedom to choose the man they preferred or who best responded to their needs.

Female domestic servants

The condition of former slaves and other marginalised people, especially females, were improved neither by the unsystematic policies of emancipation nor by the general idea that domestic service was less a form of employment than a way to repay the fosterer's hospitality.

I will now present two cases discussed in the Cape Coast Native Tribunal in 1913⁵³. The cases were the result of debt litigations and present the picture of a society completely imbued by relations of dependence where domestic slavery and pawnship only appeared in the background of litigations. The girls belonged to the margins of society and were therefore mistreated and exploited; as women, moreover, they could always be sexually abused, which, however, did not seem to arouse particular reproach.

In July 1913, the court discussed a case involving a girl called Efua Sam⁵⁴. Efua Bosumafi, the girl's grandmother, was the plaintiff and J. William de Graft Johnson was the defendant. J. Coleman de Graft Johnson, who would go on to write the well-known "Memorandum on Domestic Slavery", was present in court to vouch for his cousin J. William. Both parties were members of the Cape Coast elite. Efua Bosumafi, too old to be present, was represented by her son, Augustus Dawson Andoh, who was then employed in the provincial commissioner's office. Five years earlier, Efua Bosumafi had borrowed money from J. W. de Graft Johnson to bear the costs of a funeral. As a guarantee of the debt, she agreed to send her young niece Efua Sam to Sekondi to work as a domestic servant for Ekua Ahima, the defendant's sister. After two years, Efua Sam escaped from Sekondi, reached the grandmother and confessed that her mistress's husband, Samuel Davis, had "seduced" her. The grandmother immediately turned to J.W. de Graft Johnson, who, after interrogating Samuel Davis, declared that the violence never happened. The girl's family insisted, and de Graft Johnson suggested bringing the girl to a local healer and "gynaecologist", who confirmed the violence.

The issue at stake was the amount of money the two parties should repay. The grandmother had accepted from J.W. de Graft Johnson a further small sum (two pounds) for medical expenses, but she claimed the right to the compensation traditionally expected when a woman was abused and the act did not lead to a promise of marriage. She would not pay the debt to J.W. de Graft Johnson, who

53. I have discussed these two cases in: Brivio, *Donne, emancipazione*.

54. PRAAD, Cape Coast, 71/1/1/3, Civil Book Paramount Chief's Tribunal, Cape Coast, Efua Bosumafi vs J.W. de Graft Johnson, Claim £10 from the defendant for depriving the plaintiff of her right with regard to Efua Sam being seduced by Samuel Davis, 18 July 1913, 199 and following.

conversely refused to forsake it, thus implying a certain amount of guilt on the girl's part.

The grandmother claimed she had been deceived: she was an old lady and had trusted J.W. de Graft Johnson, a respectable man, a member of the Gold Coast Aborigines' Rights Protection Society and a Cape Coast "big man". She had therefore followed his indication, taking the little girl to a healer, rather than to the hospital, so as to avoid legal problems and social shame for Samuel Davis, which would also have involved de Graft Johnson.

The girl had run away after two years of unpaid work, but since the debt and the interest had not yet been repaid, de Graft Johnson claimed his right to return the girl to his sister. He had interrogated Efua Sam and learned that Samuel Davis had had sexual intercourse with her well before the day she escaped. For this reason, he had scolded Efua Sam, who, in his opinion, should have immediately reported the incident if she was not agreeable to the situation; the insinuation of the girl's guilt was clear.

As Efua Sam refused to return to Samuel Davis' house, de Graft Johnson demanded the repayment of half the debt (£6), while Efua Sam's family hoped to obtain the compensation of another £6. The trial continued for several more days and saw many witnesses. The judge finally deliberated that the accused did indeed have to pay the elderly lady £12. He had probably estimated that the fine for the crime of seduction, which had never been paid, and the two years of Efua Sam's free work, corresponded to the cancellation of the debt. The fact that Efua Sam had been pawned, a crime punishable since 1874, was not even mentioned.

Three months later, in the same Cape Coast court, Ekua Duku asked for the return of her daughter Jarba, who was living with another woman⁵⁵. Jarba was probably one year old when she was sent to Cape Coast by her mother's sister. In this case, traditional practice was intertwined with the new economic needs of the local society. Jarba was, in fact, her mother's tenth daughter and, according to a widespread custom throughout the Nzema (Western region), the tenth born had to be sacrificed, otherwise, misfortune would befall the family and the village. The new-born girl had been sent to the aunt in Half Assini, probably to save her. Here, a businesswoman from Elmina named Yanyiwah, who spent a lot of time in the Nzema region, knowing of the *bulu*, the practice of killing the tenth child, had asked to have the child. She had sent some money, which should have been used to support the child for the first months and, then, when she could barely walk, Yanyiwah took the baby to Cape to train her as a future young maid.

It emerged from the discussion that the woman had already tried to buy another girl and that she was not the only one who roamed the region for that purpose. Jarba's mother had decided to seek the return of her daughter more than eight years after her departure from Half Assini. The judge, Chief Ackah, from

55. PRAAD, Cape Coast, ADM 71/1/1/3, Civil Book Paramount Chief's Tribunal, Cape Coast, Ekua Duku vs Yanyiwah, 8 September 1913, 451 and following.

Cape Coast, asked the mother if the child had been sold or pawned, because Yanyiwah was asking for £40 back. The market in young female servants was quite dynamic and did not only follow the kinship network. Cape Coast women, like Yanyiwah, acted as recruiters of free labour; they moved in rural and marginal areas of the country where they could more easily find girls to train as domestic servants.

After abolition, the police were supposed to investigate alleged pawing, but, generally, such cases were deemed to be without foundation because they accorded with “traditional” practices. In 1934 the District Commissioner and the police officers of the Eastern Region undertook an inquiry into pawing, following a confidential letter from the French “Commissaire” of the “Territoire du Togo”, Maurice Bourguine, to the Gold Coast Governor. Although the inquiry concluded that there were “no instances of alleged pawing of children from Togoland to the Gold Coast”, some important details did emerge from the report. In those years increasing numbers of families migrated from Togo to the Gold Coast to work for the cocoa farmers⁵⁶. When families arrived, “it is likely that young girls and boys are sometimes placed with other families for training or domestic service as a means of providing their keep while the adults are employed on farms or elsewhere”. The practice of recruiting “juvenile labour” directly in French Togoland villages also came to the surface. The recruiter arranged with the families for the hiring out of girls and boys, who remained in Gold Coast for a year, after which the recruiter collected the wages and the children and returned with them to the villages. The Provincial Commissioner claimed that the children were treated in the same way as Gold Coast children who were similarly placed by their parents with other persons or families, that no case of ill-treatment was reported and that, as far as the girls were concerned, the employers were aware they did not have “the right to have sexual connection with them”⁵⁷.

In the 1950s, K. A. Busia undertook a survey of social change in the urban areas of Sekondi-Takoradi. He described the widespread employment of housemaids due to the increasing involvement of women in economic activities and their consequent mobility. He highlighted the common practice of sending one’s daughter away to live with neighbours or kinsfolk. It was a recognised form of training for marriage in traditional African society, he claimed. The girls were not usually paid but were fed and clothed, and they regarded this as payment for their services. In many cases housemaids received “very inadequate care and in other cases, what can properly be described as cruel or callous treatment”; and he added: “it was admitted in public discussions that pawing was still practised in the society and that many housemaids were obtained from this source.”⁵⁸. Servants

56. PRAAD, CSO 21/1/127, Children from Togoland under French mandate, pawing of, in the Gold Coast.

57. PRAAD, CSO 21/1/127, PC Eastern Province to SNA, 18 August 1934.

58. K.A. Busia, *Social Survey of Sekondi-Takoradi*, Accra, Gold Coast Government Printer, 1950, 36.

who were bonded by debt were in the worst situation. Busia transcribed the stories of some of these young girls who, unlike the non-pledged ones, were malnourished, slept on the floor without a mattress or pillow, on the veranda or in the kitchen, and often worked from 4 a.m. to 10 or 11 p.m.

Conclusions

Three notable points emerge from these cases: the continuity between domestic slavery and domestic work, the centrality of debt and the almost exclusively female dimension of the most exploited forms of domestic work. It is also clear that very young women were becoming domestic servants and that this was not solely a legacy of slavery but was also the result of the changing economic system and the increasingly dynamic market in low-paid workers. Domestic servants were, however, all but invisible and were only seldom mentioned by reports, laws and studies. As noted in Roger Sanjek's 1970s research into the dynamics of households in Adabraka (a central neighbourhood in Accra), domestic employment was not even considered by social analysts discussing the informal sector⁵⁹. For example, Keith Hart wrote that in Nima (another neighbourhood in Accra), informal opportunities for women, apart from trading, lay mainly in becoming the concubine of several men. The Frafras people were the worst paid, and they mainly worked in "domestic labouring", but Hart mentioned only cooks, stewards and watchmen, all male activities⁶⁰.

The situation has been changing in recent years, and the issue of domestic workers is emerging from the silence. However, the general conditions of the labourers appears not to be improving. Deborah Fahy Bryceson has identified three tendencies in 21st century Africa. First, there is a rising demand for domestic workers due to the expansion of the African middle class. Second, notwithstanding such an increase, high urban migration rates have produced unemployment, pushing some female domestic labourers to look for jobs outside their country or for employment in menial and despised jobs, such the young women from the North of Ghana who work as *kayaye* (load-carriers) in the urban markets⁶¹. Third, the fostering of child from rural to urban areas to serve as domestic labourers in kin and non-kin households has been intersecting with different forms of trafficking⁶².

Tsikata's recent survey revealed that, although 70 per cent of the persons involved were unrelated to their employers, the idiom of kinship remained perva-

59. R. Sanjek, "The Organization of Households in Adabraka: Toward a Wider Comparative Perspective", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 24, 1, 1982, 57-103.

60. K. Hart, "Informal Income. Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 11, 1, 1973, 61-89.

61. Brivio, *Donne, emancipazione*

62. Bryceson, "Domestic Work", 324.

sive. This was partly because of the continuing practice of fostering and the “troubling similarities in the work conditions of fostered young people and domestic workers”⁶³. The discursive practice of treating domestic workers as kin had already been deployed by apologists of domestic slavery and was a sign of the cage that could imprison the workers. The point was that the work of those engaging in unpaid or unwaged activities was not regarded as employment. The work of early feminists showed that this process of exclusion, and the division of the labouring classes through differences of gender, race and colonial status, were central to the reproduction of the capitalist system. The abolition of slavery saw the spread of female domestic work because domestic labour became largely the province of women, many of whom were former slaves and pawns. It was mainly for men that the abolition of slavery and the subsequent economic transformation of the colonial period opened up opportunities for employment and social mobility. In general, wage labour and skilled labour were imagined exclusively for men, to the point that in colonial Gold Coast the majority of domestic servants (cooks, stewards and laundries) working for colonial officials were male. Women were invisible workers because it was considered “natural” to their female essence to work for free. During the colonial period, former slaves entered the lowest levels of society, to which other segments of the population were to be added over the years, such as migrants. The abolition of slavery did not interrupt the exploitation of the most disadvantaged social classes, precisely because colonialism, first and neoliberal policies, later, have only deepened the class disparities and increased the disadvantages of the many, in favour of the few.

63. Tsikata, “Like Your Own Child?”, 197.

