

1 Ghosts of Slavery?

While travelling through Anlo-Ewe villages in southeastern Ghana more than a decade ago, I came across several shrines dedicated to various local deities, known generically in the Anlo-Ewe dialect as either *voduwo* or *trowo* (sing. *vodu* and *tro* respectively). The outer walls of these shrines were adorned with colourful representations of mermaids, serpents, priestesses and priests, and visual depictions of the many spiritual entities in the Anlo-Ewe religious imagination. The images on the walls of one shrine complex near the northern Anlo town of Agbozume caught my particular attention. This shrine complex was located a good distance away from the centre of town. It was one of many rooms around a rectangular courtyard occupied by members of a single extended family. A pictorial story unfolded on two adjacent walls within the shrine. In the first picture, several slaves – chained together in single file – were being led away by men armed with guns, swords, and machetes. This procession of slaves and their captors was headed by the leader of the armed men, who carried an elaborately decorated stool on his shoulders. The image seemed to invoke a victory parade. The confidence and sense of jubilation present in the first image was conspicuously absent in the second one, which appeared to depict a more solemn, contemplative theme. The same warriors were now gathered around this stool and their slaves, bent on their knees with their arms outstretched, in a gesture implying subordination, anxiety, and worship. Not only were the slaves and the stool the focal points of the second visual composition, but they were also much larger than the warriors who had enslaved them. The slaves looked upon their former captors menacingly, while the faces of the warriors wore worried, distressed expressions. These two images made very little sense to me at that moment.

Later that day, I made my way to the local market. I became acquainted with an initiate of this shrine complex, who introduced herself as Adokomesi. She was in her late sixties, and maintained a small stall in the market, selling boiled rice and vegetable stew during the day. She explained to me that the cluster of deities to which that shrine complex was dedicated – known collectively as Fofie or Krachi Dente – were

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extremely influential spiritual entities all over Anlo.¹ Fofie referred not only to a collection of divinities, but also to a specific type of worship organised into a well-defined religious network across several towns and villages in Anlo, with a number of similar, if not completely uniform, beliefs, rituals, and practices. In the town of Agbozume alone, a large number of casual supplicants and committed initiates identified with the Fofie religious network. Adokomesi proceeded to tell me how she had come to be associated with Fofie.

Centuries ago, my ancestors were rich and prosperous. Some of them were merchants, while others were warriors. They frequently travelled out of Anlo to the slave markets in the north, to either capture or buy slaves. They kept some slaves for themselves, and sold the others at coastal markets. During one such expedition, they captured an Akan woman, and brought her here. She served her masters faithfully for several years. Her masters (my family) kept her very well. But she became just like a child of her master: she started worshipping her master's *voduwo* and *trowo*, and forgot her own people, her original home, her culture, and most importantly, the gods of her homeland. She married her master, bore him several children, and eventually died here in Anlo.

The slave master's family made a big mistake. They did not know how to perform her funeral when she died, as they were unfamiliar with her Akan funeral customs and the laws of her homeland. So they were not able to please her in death, and she remains an unhappy presence. All *voduwo* and *trowo*, including hers, are jealous beings. They need constant attention, sacrifices, and devotion. The slave master's family had encouraged this slave woman to forget her own gods. Those gods are angry with us, her descendants, and are demanding our attention now. I now represent her and devote my time to worshipping these Akan gods. I was renamed after her gods during an initiation ceremony. In fact, the name I bear is unheard of in Anlo and Eweland. It is associated with Akan gods, suggesting that my forefathers kept Akan slaves. As well as praying to our slave-owning ancestors, we must honour the slaves that our family owned in the past, because they worked hard for us. Master and slave have now become one through this worship, and we, their descendants, can be happy.²

As Adokomesi's account immediately suggests, the Anlo-Ewe have a special fascination with slavery as a collective experience in their past. The Fofie shrine with which Adokomesi was associated had about seventy other members in the town of Agbozume, known as *fofiesizwo* (sing.

¹ Fofie is a Twi word, which appears to translate as *fo* = people, *fie* = household. In the Akan calendar, Fofie is also the term for the fourth ceremonial Friday of the month, dedicated to the worship of Akan *abosom* (sing. *obosom*; Twi: deities or spiritual beings). (In the Akan calendar, a month has 42 days.) Fofie may also be used as a proper name in Twi-speaking regions, to refer to persons born on that particular Friday. The term in Anlo refers to a number of deities that are believed to originate from the Twi-speaking Akan areas of Ghana and the northern savanna. It is used also to denote a form of worship associated with these non-Anlo deities.

² Interview with Adokomesi, Agbozume, 12 August 2000.

fofiesi).³ These women had pledged their lives, as Adokomesi had, to worshipping the various spiritual entities associated with their slave ancestors. Other *fofiesiwo* I became acquainted with also emphasised similar concerns with respect to the slave-holding past. Through their descriptions of Fofie worship, they articulated a curious mixture of emotions with respect to the Anlo agency in the practice, which included fear and apprehension in relation to the slave ancestors, combined with a sense of nostalgia for the prosperity the slave trade had brought their society in the past. *Fofiesiwo* claim that they are descended from once-prosperous slave-owning families. Most of the peoples that the Anlo enslaved hailed originally from the inland Ewe-speaking areas, referred to locally as ‘Ewedome’ lands, and areas that are currently the northern and Ashanti regions of modern Ghana, and parts of central and northern Togo.⁴ These slaves would have been acquired between the late seventeenth and nineteenth centuries: primarily by Anlo merchants who traded salt and textiles in exchange for slaves from the slave markets that lay between the West African forest belt and the savanna; and secondarily as a result of the many military skirmishes between the Anlo and their various neighbours. Female slaves, in particular, were retained and incorporated into Anlo society. The Anlo preference for enslaving women was one they shared with other African societies of that era: apart from control over labour provided by a slave, the institution of slavery was also a legitimate and convenient method of enlarging a lineage or entourage (Akyeampong 2001b: 67). Land was scarce in Anlo: prestige and status were therefore realised through the control of people. Female slaves usually ‘married’ their masters, and were valued immensely by the latter for their reproductive capabilities. Anlo men, as a result, fathered children with slave women, which worked to the advantage of the former in establishing their credentials as individuals with large numbers of descendants.

Fofiesiwo also claim that enslaving peoples in the past had caused practical and spiritual problems, which they are trying to rectify through a series of ritual and religious performances and practices. They point to the fact that their ancestors – the Anlo slave masters – pursued a strategy of integrating their slaves into patrilineages and other local institutions

³ *Si* (Ewe = wife/spouse of, implying a ‘spiritual’ marriage between supplicant and deity in this context). *Fofiesi* loosely translates into ‘pledged to Fofie’, or spiritual wife of the Fofie deities.

⁴ ‘Ewedome’ or ‘Awudome’ (trans. ‘Ewe in the middle’) strictly refers to the Ewe chiefdoms of the central Ewe belt, sandwiched between the coastal Ewe zone and the northern Ewe zone. The Anlo, a coastal people located in the southernmost belt of Eweland, use the term rather loosely to describe any non-Anlo Ewe-speaking area located north of their chiefdom.

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through marriage.⁵ For the non-Anlo slave women, membership in Anlo society was contracted through their social roles as slave wives. Marriage to an Anlo man, however, imposed a number of other regulations upon the newly integrated member: in addition to observing rules and taboos of the patrilineage, these assimilated slave wives would also have had to worship deities and gods associated with the patrilineages of their masters. Ancestral deities and localised spirits occupy an important position in Anlo religious thought, as the Anlo believe that, just like themselves, their slaves would have had strong links with the ancestors and divinities of their distant northern homelands. By forcing their slaves to worship Anlo gods – in order to identify with and integrate into their masters' patrilineages – the Anlo had led their slaves to displease their ancestors and gods. They believe they have created a condition whereby their slaves were not only geographically displaced from their homes, but were also subjected to a programme of forced acculturation and assimilation. By 'Anloising' their slaves and their immediate descendants, the Anlo had deprived them of their identities and their uniqueness, which was tantamount to denying their very existence. They had condemned their slaves – to whom they owed much – into oblivion, turning them into invisible elements of Anlo social history. Generations later, therefore, the Anlo believe they are incurring the wrath of their former slaves and their long-forgotten gods for precisely these historical misdemeanours. Fofie worshippers, who are typically the descendants of slaves and their Anlo masters, believe they must now appease the long-forgotten gods of their slave ancestors, through the medium of prayer, to make up for generations of neglect.

In addition to the sense of fear that the Anlo feel in relation to their slave-holding past, narratives of *fofiesiwo* demonstrate the development of a particular moral logic with respect to the 'lessons of history' as they are locally construed (Boddy 1989: 417). Slave holding was formerly equated with wealth: slaves were money in the past. Owning slaves was a measure of the social standing and financial worth of an individual or a lineage. Claiming descent from a slave owner is a matter of great prestige in society, and the Fofie cult, while acknowledging the harm done to slaves in the past, also simultaneously celebrates this other aspect of slavery. The Anlo retrospectively believe that the period of slave holding and slave trading in their history – from the 1720s to the 1880s – coincided with an economic golden age, during which their chiefdom prospered from the revenues obtained through the trade. The demise of the slaving era was brought on in Anlo gradually after 1807, when the

⁵ Anlo women belonged to their natal patrilineages throughout their lives, and did not assume membership of their husbands' patrilineages upon marriage. Slave wives could be integrated into their husbands' patrilineages, as they had no kin in Anlo.

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British abolished the trans-Atlantic trade. Anlo came under expanding British influence during the late nineteenth century, and in the 1870s it was integrated into the Gold Coast colony. Steadily worsening financial conditions became a feature of post-1870s Anlo, and continued into the colonial era. The inability to generate money and wealth within the deteriorating post-slavery economic climate led the Anlo to draw their own conclusions based on the events of their recent history. They developed the belief that their slave ancestors, in collaboration with their Ewedome and northern gods, were angry with them, and had begun preventing them from accumulating wealth. The Anlo came to believe they have fallen from a more prosperous period in their past; Fofie worship provides a platform for pacifying the slave ancestors and their angry gods, who are held directly responsible for this fall. Aspects of Fofie worship, and the emphasis on the well-being of slave ancestors, appears to be an Anlo attempt at making amends for the past through a series of ritual, sacrificial, and practical measures.

Are the residual effects of slavery to be found only in Anlo-Ewe country? Virtually all West African societies, from the chiefdoms of Anlo to the kingdoms of Asante and Dahomey, owed their prosperity largely to participation in the slave trade. The acquisition of people through raiding, warfare, and from internal West African markets, may have accelerated in the region as a result of the demand for slaves created by the trans-Atlantic trade. As the domestic economies of these societies also relied heavily on slave labour, the large-scale incorporation of bought people, slaves, and ethnic outsiders into local kin and social structures was widely practised in African societies, as people were valued particularly for labour and their reproductive abilities in these people-poor societies. Scholars of West Africa broadly concede that discussing any aspect of the slave-holding and slave-trading past is a stringent cultural taboo. This is not to suggest that West African societies have forgotten or are psychologically unscathed by the legacy of slavery. A growing corpus of academic literature agrees that West African societies appear to have developed a range of different emotions in relation to their agency, role, and participation in the slave-trading and slave-holding past, emotions which find demonstration through diverse cultural mechanisms such as ritual and religious practices, aesthetic expressions, and social norms.

A comparative analysis of this literature suggests that the nature of the concerns developed by West African societies fall into three broad descriptive categories. In the first case, certain societies appear to be troubled by the social expulsion and exclusion of people through the slave trade. In such societies, a number of ritual mechanisms and oral traditions record extreme remorse at selling one's own people, especially kin and children, into slavery. Shaw (2002) argues that the slave-trading

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era was characterised by the breakdown of social cohesion and trust due to the rampant raiding and kidnappings in Temne society. These unsavoury memories are encoded in divination techniques and ritual knowledge, reproduced through asymmetrical gender relationships and kinship structures, and played out in the political sphere in post-colonial Sierra Leone where witchcraft and stories of cannibalism serve as metaphors for the same kind of exploitation that slaves would have endured as victims of predatory slave dealers. Similarly, Argenti (2006) argues that the masking performances of the *fulengan* society in the Oku chiefdom of the Cameroon Grasslands display an etymological link between masking and slavery: choreographic and dramatic features of these masquerades recreate the violence and deception involved in the act of selling kin into slavery. In the Dahomean heartland, the Fon appear to be concerned with the well-being of the souls of the people that they had sold into the trans-Atlantic slave trade: Herskovits tells us that during ceremonies associated with the cult of the royal ancestors in Abomey, there were always libations poured for those members lost to the community through slavery (Herskovits 1938).⁶

Secondly, smaller, non-centralised groups of people, placed typically between or at the boundaries of aggressive states, lived in perpetual fear of enslavement. Located at the fringes of the Dahomean kingdom, the Gen, AJA, and Hueda peoples of the Middle Slave Coast lived in constant fear of capture, which found articulation in the creation of ritual objects, anthropomorphic statues known as *bocio* (Blier 1995). The *bocio* are figures tightly bound with cords, gags, and strings of cowries, objects that were visual signifiers of the slave trade. Rather than providing aesthetic enjoyment, these statues were meant to awaken a negative disquiet in their audiences. Called *kannumon* or ‘the things belonging in cords’ (ibid.: 26), they reflected individual disempowerment and social breakdown to which the peoples of the Middle Slave Coast had become accustomed during the height of Dahomean slave raiding.

In the third instance, some societies have developed fears about the effects of the incorporation of large numbers of foreign slaves into society. Measures have been put in place to uphold the achieved status of assimilated slave descendants. Those concerned with the plight of incorporated

⁶ A notable exception to this scenario is described by Charles Piot (1996). The Kabye of northern Togo were notorious for selling their kin into slavery. In 1909, German ethnologist Leo Frobenius noted that children from that society were usually traded in exchange for cowries. These transactions were usually undertaken by mothers’ brothers of those sold into slavery. Maternal uncles were the family members who were regarded as the most affectionate and trustworthy, and who exercised ritual, social, and moral control over the pre-pubescent children of their sisters. Piot noted that members of the Kabye community within which he conducted his fieldwork continued to discuss this aspect of their past quite openly, and joked about it casually (Piot 1996: 31).

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peoples were usually slave descendants themselves: their attitude towards their slave origins is generally one of shame; they seldom acknowledge this aspect of their past openly, usually resorting to elaborate measures to conceal it.⁷ The Fulbe, an agro-pastoralist people in northern Benin, had a discrete category of person in their society, known as *maccube*, which loosely translated into slave. The descendants of the *maccube* are known as the *Gannunkeebe*, indicating that slave ancestry is ascribed in Fulbe society. The *Gannunkeebe* seldom respond directly to historical questions which relate to their slave origins, and their elders do not consciously pass down verbal narratives of slavery to the youth, favouring a complete rejection of this aspect of the community's past (Hardung 2002). Elsewhere in West Africa (from Niger to the Republic of Benin and the Gambia), slave descendants negotiate a number of strategies to cope with the stigma that host societies attached to their slave antecedents, from migration to concealment (see Bellagamba 2009; Hahanou 2009; Rossi 2009).

Closer to Anlo, the Asante and the Akan in general also appear to be concerned with the absorption of slaves into institutions and society. Many able office bearers were products of unions between slaves and free people, which resulted in the Asante state setting itself up as the guarantor for the achieved assimilated status of such people. The Asante rule *Obi nkyere obi ase* (Twi: one does not disclose the origins of another), maintained – and still does in Asante customary law – tremendous importance (Wilks 1975: 86). This rigid stance on not exposing one's slave origins is the norm not just in Asante, but also in the broader Akan belt: what we find in this cultural zone in general, is an artificial state of amnesia, induced either by the state machinery or societal laws (Poku 1969; Wilks 1975; Klein 1981, 1994; McCaskie 1995).

Ethnographers of the Anlo and southern Ewe have noticed that these closely related peoples seem to be deeply distressed over the manner in which they forcibly assimilated peoples into lineages through slavery in the past (Rosenthal 1998, Wendl 1999, Venkatachalam 2012, Rush 2013). Rosenthal's study of the Ewe of southern Togo suggests that these societies commemorate their slaves through their engagement with

⁷ Some recent work has begun to suggest that slave descendants in some parts of West Africa spoke quite unabashedly about their pasts, as in the southern Ewe case. In an article written in 1999, Susan Rasmussen argues that the 'slave narrative' genre in Africanist scholarship needs to be re-evaluated. Through her analysis of two narrative accounts – one a former Tuareg slave and the other a former slave owner – she is able to illustrate that the slave voice is unashamed of the servile past, while the aristocratic voice expresses a sense of remorse at her agency in enslavement, her privileged position along with her subjectivity in history, as well as her class positioning in relation to slave descendants (Rasmussen 1999).

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two religious orders, the Gorovodu⁸ and Mama Tchamba. Rosenthal interprets the southern Ewe engagement with these orders as an elaborate culture of guilt that has developed in accordance with the dynamics of local history: the spirits of northern slaves have become the gods of the descendants of their southern masters, and the master–slave equation is inverted through the act of possession, generations after the demise of slavery. Through the practices of the Tchamba cult, the neighbouring Mina of Togo (immediately east of the Ewe), also revere slave ancestors in a similar manner, through spirit possession and a corpus of ritual measures aimed at the appeasement of their foreign-born slave ancestors (Wendl 1999). In southern Eweland, initiates of these analogous orders are neither reluctant to acknowledge the debt their communities owe to slavery, nor unwilling to admit their own slave antecedents. Thus, the ability to engage with the legacy of slave origins openly – albeit within the context of religious networks – appears to be a distinctive southern Ewe cultural trait, somewhat extraordinary when viewed through the comparative lens of West African ethnography.

Religious Change and Slavery in the Historical Imagination

This book revolves around two interrelated themes, which are dealt with in tandem with each other: (1) the relationship between memories of the slave-holding past in the historical imagination and an evolving Anlo identity over the twentieth century; and (2) religious change through Anlo social history.

My first thematic focus is the working of memory in the Anlo historical imagination. Anthropologists and historians have formerly treated history and memory as antithetical, diametrically opposed means of accessing the past (Lambek 2002: 54). History was meant to signify a record of events, written by a historian, and generally treated as a well-preserved discourse, immune to distortions. Memory, on the contrary, was believed to be its disorderly counterpart that manifested itself through folklore, myth, and even ritual, and was prone to constant distortion. In tracing the recent development of the Fofie cult in Anlo through available sources, this study is also addressing the complementary relationship – and tension – between memory and history, between the methods associated with the study of orality and historiography. It thus also interrogates the convergent and divergent spaces inhabited by Africanist anthropologists and historians.

⁸ Gorovodu deities continued to be revered in contemporary Anlo, though their worship is configured in a manner that is very different from the practice in southern Togo, where Rosenthal conducted her research.

How have memories of slavery been constructed, and then reproduced by successive generations in Anlo social, cultural, and religious landscapes? Firstly, I am interested in the mechanisms and the cultural apparatus through which information about slavery is passed on and preserved – in other words, in the ‘particular modalities’ through which the Anlo construct their relationship to their past (Cole 2001: 104). In Anlo, the past is remembered through a variety of means: in discursive and non-discursive ways; it is explicitly verbalised in accounts and codified in non-verbal gestures; it is embedded in the landscape and embodied in ritual. Secondly, I wish to explore the relationship between the functioning of social memory and identity. I am not concerned solely with contemporary identity as a static phenomenon in the present; rather, I am interested in the evolution of an Anlo identity as a continuous process over the twentieth century and how it developed in definitional terms in relation to peoples of slave origin in the chiefdom, a process which was undoubtedly influenced by the space occupied by memories of slavery in the Anlo psyche.

What exactly constitutes the subject matter of memory, and how can we determine that a people are indeed remembering the past? Anthropologists agree that remembering in the strictest sense is an individual activity, as memories can only be possessed by the individual in his or her mind. Ethnographic knowledge is traditionally generated by informants in the form of answers to questions posed by the anthropologist. Informants’ replies take the form of discursive verbal narratives, where they are usually explicitly aware of what they are saying, in response to questions of the anthropologist. Individual narratives of the slave-holding past have informed much of my research on the Fofie cult, and such narratives of *fofiesiwo* and their families have occupied centre-stage in this ethnography. Scholars have often made a crucial distinction between the memories individuals possess, dividing them into autobiographical and semantic memory (Bloch 1998: 117). Autobiographical memory consists of episodic memory, typically experienced by an individual during his or her lifetime. Semantic memory constitutes generalised knowledge about the past, taught to members of the community; these memories can be either practical or theoretical, part of a larger corpus of the tradition learnt from just being in society. Historical memory, the events of a more distant past, is considered a subset of semantic memory. Autobiographical and historical memory, of course, cannot be studied, or retrieved, in isolation from these other memories (*ibid.*: 121–4). Over the course of a period of time, autobiographical memories usually become assimilated into semantic – and historical – memory (Laidlaw 2004: 4), and they are difficult to disentangle from one another. The distinction between autobiographical, semantic, and historical memory is negligible within the context of the Fofie cult: metanarratives and micronarratives merge

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in the most unlikely ways, while contemporary family histories are juxtaposed to regional events in chronologically incompatible sequences. Anlo ‘memories’ of the slave-holding past varied, depending on who was entrusted with their narration. Memories of the slave-holding era focused on the nature, personalities, and homelands of the women the Anlo once enslaved, not dissimilar to Adokomesi’s account furnished above. While the basic gist of the stories about slavery remained roughly constant, the details shifted depending on who voiced them. For instance, *fofiesiwo* in the act of trance, when possessed by the slave spirits, lamented the ill-treatment of slaves in Anlo; Fofie shrine-owners boasted the number of slaves their ancestors owned or captured in war, a reflection on how wealthy their families were in the past; accounts of Ewedome women living in Anlo were concerned with Anlo ‘savagery’ in the past. Individuals from the same lineage will often narrate factually different accounts about the same shrines, idols, ancestors, and slave spirits. These accounts are chronologically and temporally distorted, as demonstrated in Karin Barber’s (1991) study of *oriki*, or Yoruba praise poetry. As in the case of *oriki*, their historical variegation is ignored, and although they contain references to historical moments, they are not arranged in chronological order, and older units are not separated from newer ones. While there may be elements of truth in these narratives, the truth value in itself is not important; what is important is that they are being kept alive by the community in some recognisable form. For many *fofiesiwo* (and indeed initiates of other cults), ‘discovering’ their connections with the slave spirits (or other *trowo* or *voduwo*) was preceded by recurring periods of sickness, which was alleviated upon joining the cult(s) in question; in such cases, memories of these illnesses fused with their experiences of being possessed by slave spirits, their own life histories, and fragments of memories of historical slavery in Anlo. Bodily memories of illness were such overwhelmingly traumatic experiences that they came to influence how biography and social history were remembered; all these three categories merged in the narratives of initiates until they were completely indistinguishable from each other.⁹

The erratic nature of individual memories therefore makes their truth and analytic value about a past suspect. In *On Collective Memory* ([1950] 1992) Maurice Halbwachs argued that memories could be produced collectively by societies, in dialogue with the social frameworks within which they are generated. According to him, collective memories are also essentially unstable: they are constantly reworked in keeping with ‘the politics of the present’. Therefore, given their shifting nature, memories need to

⁹ This is not dissimilar to what Kleinman and Kleinman (1994: 714) observe in their study of victims of trauma and political violence in Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution.