



Essien, Kwame. *Brazilian-African Diaspora in Ghana: The Tabom, Slavery, Dissonance of Memory, Identity, and Locating Home* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2016, pp. 402, ISBN: 9781611862195), reviewed by Saheed Aderinto, Ph.D. (saderinto@email.wcu.edu; aderintosaaheed@yahoo.co.uk; Associate Professor of History, Department of History, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC).

This work by Kwame Essien (a Derrick K. Gondwe Fellow and Assistant Professor of History and Africana Studies at Lehigh University) represents first-class research on African history, historical memory, transatlantic discourse, and the African Diaspora. The book tells the story of the ex-slaved from Brazil who returned to the Gold Coast (later Ghana) from the 1820s and their descendant, the Tabom. The author further weaves hardcore historical research methodology with a close-knit narrative on place making, memory, self-representation, citizenship, and identity formation among other significant dynamics. This book critically examines how the ex-slaved from Brazil settled in Accra, why they chose Accra as their new home, their significant contributions to Ghanaian society, and the ways in which their descendants have preserved their ancestral history, while reenacting it from time to time.

Historians of Ghana, memory, Atlantic world, and the African Diaspora will quickly accept the validity of the central arguments of this book, which are not only clearly articulated, but also backed, with a dense trove of primary sources from archives in Africa, Europe, and South America. The also contains dozens of oral interviews, historical images, and content analysis of sources like pamphlets commemorating important events in the lives of the Tabom community in Accra.

First, the book places the story of the Tabom at the center of Ghanaian history. While the history of other returnee communities such as the African Americans is well-known, those of the returnees from Brazil and their descendants have remained in the margins of Ghanaian history for a long time. The second trajectory of this book relates to how the formerly enslaved escaped from slavery in Brazil, only to be placed under British imperialism in Ghana. This second direction powerfully brings to limelight, the shifting meanings of freedom, violence, and oppression across location, power configuration, and identity. The third central plank on which this book rests connects human energy, talents, and entrepreneurship with the movement of cultural bodies. It explores how the returnee Brazilians, through their social institutions, craftsmanship and skill, and education, contributed to the cultural identity, artistic, and economic lives of Ghana. In other words, the multiculturalism in Accra and Ghana cannot be fully understood without accounting for the contributions of the formerly enslaved returnees and their Tabom descendants.

The fourth major observation of this indispensable book is significant for modern day international and diplomatic relations in that it explains how diaspora communities and their descendants continue to establish relations with the modern state that emerged out of their former or imagined homeland. The mutual affairs between the government of Brazil and the Tabom has not only helped foster diplomatic relations between the government of Ghana and Brazil, it has also led to the resuscitation of historical memory as seen in the case of the restoration of the Warri House, first house built by an ex-slaved returnee in the 1830s. This “mutual exchanges within the broader transatlantic context” the author posits, have significant implication on the discourse of commercial and heritage tourism, and global cultures and history in the 21st century (p. xxiii).

In ten chapters organized into three coherent parts, Essien delineates the three generations of Brazilians and their descendants in Ghana. He takes his readers through carefully composed narratives, thought-provoking arguments, and first-class expositions that compelled them to think critically about place making, identity formation, transnational culture and networks, among other interesting discourses. History, events, and human bodies are not treated as discrete and impervious entities. In Essien critical hands, one is led through the experience of ex-slaved returnees and the Tabom beyond the confines of historical timelines, and within the context of multiple roots, cultural boundaries, transnational frontiers and geopolitical space. This overlapping approach to thinking about people, events, location and time works really well for a book that attempts to capture the fluidity and circulation of cultures within the context of human movement, the homes they built or imagined, and how the idea of the homeland manifests in their understanding of heritage and self-representation.

Among the many strengths of this book is the articulation and division of people of Brazilian descents in Accra based on when they arrived in Ghana, the period of their birth in Accra, and important timelines in Ghanaian history. This approach is effective in that it allows readers to map the connection between location and time as well as between identity and the broader political regimes in which people lived. If the first generation of ex-slaved returnees fought hard to establish a home and negotiated traditional political institutions in the early decades of their life in 19th century Accra, the second and third generations (the Tabom) would have to contend with serious problems, ranging from land dispute to identity crisis and citizenship. But the involvement of the first generation of returnees in slavery and human enslavement business during the 19th century presents some complex paradox about how human beings process violence and injustice within the realm of the environment in which they lived and the shifting identity they assume over time. For one thing, one would not expect ex-slaved returnees or even their descendants to practice slavery, since they understood the horror of an institution that deprived them of their freedom and uprooted them from their original home in the first instance. But as the author observes, slavery was an integral component of the coastal life in 19th century Accra, and the involvement of ex-slaved returnees constituted a component of a broader social and economic matrix that was central to daily life at that point in time.

The contradictory role of the British who established colonialism and all its paraphernalia of violence in Africa, while trying to abolish slavery in Brazil it is explored in greater details in this work as the author shows in clear terms that the numerous land disputes involving the Tabom in twentieth century Accra can only be understood within the context of unstable definition of citizenship and place-belonging in colonial Ghana. The violence of colonialism therefore went beyond the well-documented stories of imposition of draconian economic and political laws—it also included the creation of structures that marginalized Tabom’s identity and self-assertion in the protracted claims and counter-claims of ownership of landed property. In analyzing the life histories of Tabom in the 21st century, the author is able to show that the success of the descendants of the ex-slaved should be considered as an important story of integration, struggle, success, and self-will—all rolled into one.

This book is successful by all standards. Essien has a unique gift for identifying both obvious and obscure facts, and composing clear narratives that give a lot of beauty to the historian’s craft. Brilliantly conceived and executed, the book has opened up a new frontier in African Diaspora, memory, and Ghanaian history. Not only did it complement existing works in a strong manner, it has laid the framework for identifying and integrating diaspora communities existing in the margins of historical scholarship into the rightful place they belong in the production of knowledge.