

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exploring African Abolitionism: Fante Perspectives on Domestic Slavery in the Nineteenth-Century Gold Coast

Michael Ehis Odijie

Department of History, University College London, London, UK
Email: m.odijie@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

This article draws on a variety of primary sources to first illustrate the rise of African abolitionism in the Fante region in the mid-nineteenth century and then situate local abolitionists in the context of colonial legal abolition in the Gold Coast. When the British abolished slavery in 1874, various Fante groups had been developing local anti-slavery views and strategies closely connected to the evolution of a Fante ethnic identity fashioned against the “barbaric” Asante. Tensions arose between the Fante intelligentsia, which spearheaded local abolitionism, and British colonial elites. The article examines the rise of local abolitionism among the coastal Fante through specific ideas, individuals, and events, and discusses subsequent dynamics in the “first age” (1874–1900) of colonial abolitionism in the Gold Coast. It shows that the 1874 abolition was opposed by members of the Fante anti-slavery movement not—as has been argued—because Fante intellectuals were pro-slavery or opposed to the idea of abolition, but because they held different visions of emancipation and were critical of British abolition laws that, unlike in the West Indies, did not compensate slaveowners.

Domestic slavery was abolished in the Gold Coast by the British in 1874, the same year it became a British colony. Two ordinances were implemented: one addressing the prohibition of slave-dealing, and the other concerning the emancipation of enslaved individuals. Research on the abolition of domestic slavery in the Gold Coast generally concentrates on either the outcomes of the abolition or the context leading up to it. Regarding the effects of abolition, two contrasting studies have been particularly influential.¹ Gerald M. McSheffrey posited that the emancipation proclamation

¹ For an overview, see Kwabena Opare Akurang-Parry, “Missy Queen in Her Palaver Says de Gole Cosse Slaves is Free”: The British Abolition of Slavery/Pawnship and Colonial Labor Recruitment in

profoundly disrupted local economic and social structures.² Conversely, Raymond Dumett and Marion Johnson argued that slavery in the Gold Coast was relatively benign, suggesting that emancipation was minimally disruptive.³ Subsequent literature on the topic has largely echoed these two opposing perspectives.⁴ Exploring the lead-up to abolition, Trevor Getz adopted a gradualist approach, spanning from the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 to the 1874 cessation of domestic slavery in the Gold Coast.⁵ Throughout this period, various Gold Coast governors and European missionaries introduced a series of policies aiming to curtail domestic slavery in diverse ways and at different times. While none achieved abolition and some were even revoked, collectively, they paved the way for the 1874 ordinances. On the other hand, Raymond E. Dumett approached the background of the 1874 ordinances from a short-term perspective.⁶ He ascribed the 1874 ordinances to anti-slavery advocates in England who utilized the media to expose the prevalence of domestic slavery in the Gold Coast and pressured the colonial office into taking action.

However, the role of Africans in the abolition of domestic slavery in Gold Coast has largely been neglected. For example, the gradualist approach has not sufficiently considered the changes in domestic slave practices and ideology between 1807 and 1874 that prepared the ground for the 1874 abolition. The Ghanaian scholar Kwabena Opare Akurang-Parry was the first to argue that some Africans during this period were abolitionists or at least expressed an anti-slavery sentiment.⁷ Following Akurang-Parry, Steffen Runkel studied not only the perspective of African elites on domestic slavery from the 1860s, demonstrating that they supported and debated its abolition,⁸ but also the perspective of Africans who wrote letters to anti-slavery

the Gold Coast [Southern Ghana], 1874-ca. 1940 (PhD thesis, York University, Ontario, Canada, 1998), 17.

² Gerald M. McSheffrey, "Slavery, Indentured Servitude, Legitimate Trade and the Impact of Abolition in the Gold Coast, 1874-1901: A Reappraisal," *The Journal of African History* 24, no. 3 (1983): 349-68.

³ Raymond Dumett and Marion Johnson, "Britain and the Suppression of Slavery in the Gold Coast Colony, Ashanti and the Northern Territories," in *The End of Slavery in Africa*, eds. Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 71-116.

⁴ Alessandra Brivio, "'I Am a Slave Not a Wife': Slave Women in Post-Proclamation Gold Coast (Ghana)," *Gender & History* 29, no. 1 (2017): 31-47; Claire C. Robertson, "Post-Proclamation Slavery in Accra: A Female Affair?," in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, eds. Martin A. Klein and Claire C. Robertson (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 220-45.

⁵ Trevor R. Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa: Toward Emancipation in Nineteenth-Century Senegal and the Gold Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).

⁶ Raymond E. Dumett, "Pressure Groups, Bureaucracy, and the Decision-Making Process: The Case of Slavery Abolition and Colonial Expansion in the Gold Coast, 1874," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 9, no. 2 (1981): 193-215.

⁷ Kwabena O. Akurang-Parry, "'We Shall Rejoice to See the Day When Slavery Shall Cease to Exist': The Gold Coast Times, the African Intelligentsia, and Abolition in the Gold Coast," *History in Africa* 31 (2004): 19-42.

⁸ Steffen Runkel, "The Perspectives of African Elites on Slavery and Abolition on the Gold Coast (1860-1900): Newspapers as Sources," in *Postcolonial Studies across the Disciplines*, eds. Jana Gohrisch and Ellen Grünkemeier (New York: Brill, 2013), 243-61.

activists in London, protesting the colonial administration's failure to properly implement anti-slavery laws.⁹ The consideration that Africans were abolitionists opens a new direction for research that goes beyond Africans' contributions to the colonial discourse, laws, and implementation of abolition. Local anti-slavery or abolitionist ideologies may not always have corresponded to the ideology of colonial abolition. For example, Rebecca Shumway argued that Britain's legal abolition of slavery in 1874 "quashed the development of an indigenous anti-slavery movement on the Gold Coast by undermining the authority of Fante rulers."¹⁰ This indigenous anti-slavery tradition may have been deeply grounded in local discourses, languages, and regional history in ways that differed from the colonial abolition ordinances that were prepared without the direct input of Africans.

This paper seeks to discern a normative Fante viewpoint on domestic slavery and identify an embedded anti-slavery discourse. It contributes to scholarly literature by considering African abolitionism as a distinct subject, separate from colonial abolition. To achieve this, the paper undertakes three specific tasks: firstly, it explores the period from the late 1860s to 1874, preceding the colonial abolition of domestic slavery in the Gold Coast. Secondly, it positions the Fantes within the framework of the Gold Coast's colonial abolition process in 1874–75. In doing so, the paper reveals a tension between Fante abolitionist sentiments and colonial abolitionist approaches. Finally, it discusses the years following 1874–75. The paper outlines what appears to be a unique Fante ideological evolution concerning domestic slavery. This evolution was significantly influenced by the Fantes' political interactions with the Asante. Such interactions were pivotal in shaping most of the crucial political and ideological transformations in Fanteland during the nineteenth century.

Methodologically, the pioneering local historians of the Gold Coast approached history akin to a group biography. They sought out charismatic figures within their genealogical contexts and networks, culminating in a broader historical investigation. Notable historians like Carl Christian Reindorf and Margaret Priestley employed this methodology in their seminal studies, making it a prevailing approach to studying the Gold Coast during the 1800s.¹¹ The paper adopts a similar approach, predominantly drawing upon local press from the specified era and region, where societal matters were deliberated in a variety of formats and from perspectives distinctly divergent from

⁹ Steffen Runkel, "An African Abolitionist on the Gold Coast: The Case of Francis P. Fearon," in *Slavery and its Legacy in Ghana and the Diaspora*, eds. Rebecca Shumway and Trevor R. Getz (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 156–77.

¹⁰ Rebecca Shumway, "Anti-Slavery in Nineteenth Century Fanteland," in *Slavery and its Legacy in Ghana and the Diaspora*, eds. Rebecca Shumway and Trevor R. Getz (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 85–104.

¹¹ Carl Christian Reindorf, *History of the Gold Coast and Asante, Based on Traditions and Historical Facts: Comprising a Period of More than Three Centuries from about 1500 to 1860* (Cape Coast: The Gold Coast District Book Depot, 1895); Margaret Priestley, *West African Trade and Coast Society: A Family Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) see also Augustus Lavinus Casely-Hayford, "A Genealogical History of Cape Coast Stool Families" (Doctoral diss., SOAS University of London, 1992).

European viewpoints. In contrast to other prevalent written sources—such as missionary correspondence, travel accounts, colonial correspondences, and court documents—the local newspapers, largely curated and authored by educated natives, offer a distinctive lens to understand the African viewpoint on societal challenges, including slavery. While the readership of these newspapers was primarily limited to the educated elite, they were sometimes read aloud to larger audiences after translation into local dialects. Furthermore, this research consults colonial correspondences, court archives, UK parliamentary documents, early Fante dictionaries, doctoral theses, and early publications. Each source is meticulously examined within its context, ensuring the avoidance of presentism and preserving the authentic meaning of languages without decontextualizing them.

There were three core communities in Fanteland in the period under study, two of which are the focus here. The first group was made up of educated natives. Many of them were merchants with family trees that could be traced back several generations, which is why group biographies are valuable. Relying on local newspapers skews the paper's analysis toward this group, which is the main audience for the local press. The second group was traditional rulers (including kings and chiefs); they relied on educated natives to communicate on their behalf with the British administration through petitions and letters. From this reliance arose a collaboration for various political ventures between educated natives and traditional rulers. The perspectives of the third group, the uneducated followers of traditional rulers, are difficult to access. The distinction between these groups is deeply problematic because such a distinction did not exist for Africans. For instance, most of the educated natives belong to stools families.¹² However, the distinction allows the paper to anticipate any criticism and offer an integrated analysis of educated natives and traditional rulers. Although the paper's examination begins in the 1860s, there are earlier examples of anti-slavery sentiment amongst the Fante. For example, as early as 1836, Quoffee Abberrapoo (King Aggry) of Cape Coast wrote a letter to the British parliament expressing immense gratitude for the benefits conferred on the black population of the world by the abolition of the slave trade.¹³

The rest of the paper is divided into three parts. The first part attempts to locate a Fante ideology on the subjects of domestic slavery and abolition before 1874. The second section places Fante chiefs and educated natives in the context of Gold Coast colonial/legal abolition in 1874–1875. I show that these two groups were not against colonial emancipation; rather, they discussed and negotiated it according to their understanding of abolition. The final section records changes in the Fantes' ideological stance on domestic slavery following the legal abolition of domestic slavery in 1874.

¹² Casely-Hayford, "A Genealogical History."

¹³ Sir Robert Peel, "Trade with Cape Coast Castle" volume 33: debated on Monday May 30 Hansard vol. 33 cc1141-2, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1836/may/30/trade-with-cape-coast-castle>.

Fantes and Pre-Legal Abolition Debate

This section traces Fante ideology on domestic slavery and abolition prior to the 1874 legal abolition. Fantes are a collection of sub-groups making up one of the main Akan groups in Gold Coast. The Asante people are the other large Akan ethnic group in this region.¹⁴ The Fantes and the Asante people speak essentially the same language.¹⁵ Geographically, whereas the Asante people are located in the hinterland, far from the coast, most Fante people are scattered in the central coastal regions. Therefore, during the transatlantic slave trade era, the Fantes acted as middlemen between European buyers and Asante slave traders.¹⁶ Historians of the eighteenth century have stressed the relationship between the expansion of the Asante state and the political development of the Fante region.¹⁷ “The main factor that made the Fante hasten to unite,” wrote Kwame Yeboah Daaku, “was the political change that was brought about by the Asante intrusion into the coastal states.”¹⁸ This process was accelerated by the British abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, as Asante people started to seek direct access to the coast for trade. As early as 1819, T. E. Bowdich described the Asantes’ repeated incursions into the Fante region, seeking access to the coastal region for easy trade while the Fantes sought to continue acting as an intermediary.¹⁹ By that time, Asante had already invaded three times: in 1807, 1811, and 1816.

Fear of invasion by the Asante army, which persisted throughout the nineteenth century, became the crux of most developments in the Fante region, including the strengthening of Fante–British relations.²⁰ The British took advantage of this fear to consolidate their position in Fante regions, promising to fight on the Fante side in the event of a conflict with Asante in exchange for territorial control. Indigenous political and social changes, such as the creation of the Fante Confederacy, can also be understood in terms of the political dialectic between the Fantes and Asante.²¹ This dialectic, along with the cultural difference between Fante and Asante, led to a local process of social othering as

¹⁴ There are other Akan subgroups, including the Akuapem, Akwamu, Akyem, Brong, Kwahu, Wassa, and Sefwi.

¹⁵ Johann Gottlieb Christaller, *A Grammar of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi Chwee, Twi Based on the Akuapem Dialect with Reference to the Other (Akan and Fante) Dialects* (Basel: Basel Evang. Missionary Society, 1875).

¹⁶ Ty M. Reese, “‘Eating’ Luxury: Fante Middlemen, British Goods, and Changing Dependencies on the Gold Coast, 1750–1821,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2009): 851–72.

¹⁷ Albert Adu Boahen, “Fante Diplomacy in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Foreign Relations of African States: Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth Symposium of the Colston Research Society Held in the University of Bristol, April 4th to 7th, 1973*, no. 25, ed. Kenneth Ingham (London: Butterworths, 1974), 30–37; James Sanders, “The Expansion of the Fante and the Emergence of Asante in the Eighteenth Century,” *The Journal of African History* 20, no. 3 (1979): 349–64.

¹⁸ Kwame Yeboah Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast 1600–1720: A Study of the African Reaction to European Trade* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 167.

¹⁹ Thomas Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee (1819)* (London: Routledge, 2013).

²⁰ See Parliamentary Papers (PP) 1875 (C. 1140), No. 8, May 22, 1874; PRAAD ADM/1/2/19 No. 39.

²¹ See African Times (May 23, 1872), 139, “Important Fanti Papers and Correspondence,” Cape Coast, April 18, 1872.

the Fantes sought to prove themselves more civilized than the “barbaric” Asante.²² While the Fantes were essentially part of the Atlantic world, with many prominent families that intermarried with European traders and frequently travelled abroad to Britain or Sierra Leone for education (and recognized themselves as members of a growing society of English-speaking literate individuals poised to lead Africa into the modern era),²³ the Asante people in the hinterland were still involved in practices that had been discarded as barbaric by the Fantes. This process of mutual “othering” of coastal and hinterland groups is common in other West African regions, certainly in Nigeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.²⁴ It is particularly pronounced between the Fante and Asante people because of their long-standing conflict.

I argue that the Fantes’ social othering of this other large Akan group can help us understand one form of development of the Fantes’ ideological stance regarding domestic slavery—both their growing defense of some forms of domestic slavery as “benign” and their gradual movement toward an anti-slavery position. By “defense of domestic slavery,” I refer specifically to a set of defensive responses by the Fantes (as well as other coastal groups) when challenged on slavery. The defense of domestic slavery as benign in the Fante region was invoked as late as the 1890s, in a book on Fante customary law by the nationalist John Mensah Sarbah.²⁵ This view was also adopted by other coastal groups. An example is afforded by the internal debate in the Basel Mission Society that preceded and succeeded the Society’s 1863 ban on slaveholding by members.²⁶ Carl Christian Reindorf and other African catechists considered domestic slavery to be a mild form of patriarchal family lineage and openly rebelled against the Church’s mandate that they give up their slaves.²⁷

The argument for “benign” slavery was anchored in the difference between Fante and Asante practices. Domestic slavery for the Fantes was a spectrum of practices of ownership and control, with human sacrifice at one extreme and

²² African Times (January 23, 1872): 76; African Times (November 29, 1872): 56; African Times (February 23, 1871): 88, 101; African Times (May 23, 1869): 116, 129; African Times (November 29, 1871): 52.

²³ Rebecca Shumway, “A Shared Legacy: Atlantic Dimensions of Gold Coast (Ghana) History in the Nineteenth Century,” *Ghana Studies* 21, no. 21 (2018): 41–62; Rebecca Shumway, “From Atlantic Creoles to African Nationalists: Reflections on the Historiography of Nineteenth-Century Fanteland,” *History in Africa* 42 (2015): 139–64.

²⁴ Martin L. Kilson Jr., “Nationalism and Social Classes in British West Africa,” *The Journal of Politics* 20, no. 2 (1958): 368–87.

²⁵ John Mensah Sarbah, *Fanti Customary Laws: A Brief Introduction to the Principles of the Native Laws and Customs of the Fanti and Akan Sections of the Gold Coast, with a Selection of Cases Thereon Decided in the Law Courts* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1876), 6.

²⁶ Heinz Hauser-Renner, “‘Obstinate’ Pastor and Pioneer Historian: The Impact of Basel Mission Ideology on the Thought of Carl Christian Reindorf,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 33, no. 2 (2009): 65–70.

²⁷ John Parker, *Making the Town: Gã State and Society in Early Colonial Accra* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000), 69, 88–91; Steffen Runkel, *Von Sklaverei und Freiheit: Afrikanische Initiativen zur Abolition an der Goldküste (1841–1897)* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag GmbH, 2019), 87.

milder forms of dependency at the other. Table 1 presents eleven types of slaves in Fante, ranging from a maidservant to a slave that is destined for sacrifice. While they all translate to “slave” in the English language, the Fantes discussed them as distinct practices. The Fantes’ evolving response to the question of domestic slavery reflects internal debate in the region about “acceptable” and “unacceptable” forms of dependency/slavery. By the 1860s, not only had human sacrifice been abolished in Fante areas, but other, harsher forms of slavery had also been widely eliminated locally.

Table 1. “Slave” in the Fante Language¹

Type of Slave	English Approximation
O-fi'e-nipa	A home-born slave
Afanji	A female slave from the interior with marks cut into her face
Odonko	A slave bought from the interior
Afana	A female slave or maid-servant
Afenkwa	A slave hired from his master
Ofie-nipa	A home-born slave who is like a family member
O-hofadifo	An emancipated slave
Akrafo	A male slave chosen by his master to be sacrificed on his death
Okra	A female slave destined to be sacrificed
Onyame	A slave dedicated to the gods
Werempe	A slave of the king, destined to be sacrificed on his death

¹Johann Gottlieb Christaller, *A Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Chwee, Twi): With a Grammatical Introduction and Appendices on the Geography of the Gold Coast and other Subjects* (Basel: Evangelical Missionary Society, 1881).

In the *African Times* in the 1860s and 1870s, as noted by Steffan Runkel, domestic slavery was discussed in numerous letters from the Fante region and editorial pieces, which referenced the treatment of slaves (harsh or mild), the slave trade, and the ritual murder of slaves (human sacrifice).²⁸ At this point in time, one version of the argument for “benign” slavery referred to Fantes buying slaves from Asante as a humanitarian act because it meant that the slaves would escape the barbaric treatment of Asante. This defense was invoked in response to the Kreepee (or Creepee) slave problem of the early 1870s, when slave traders were reported to be capturing people from Kreepee (also known as Peki, located in south-eastern Ghana) and selling them as slaves in the Fante region.²⁹ A local anti-slavery advocate wrote to a newspaper to complain about the so-called Kreepee slave problem, arguing that demand for slaves in Cape Coast and

²⁸ Runkel, “The Perspectives of African Elites.”

²⁹ *African Times* (September 23, 1872): 31; *African Times* (November 29, 1872): 56; *African Times* (December 30, 1872): 67; *Western Herald* (September–December, 1872).

Anomabo had indirectly caused the slave raid. The writer also accused the British officials of promoting slavery.

A fearful crime is being carried on daily in our streets here. Creepee, and its adjoining countries (noted for their fine cotton and peaceful, industrious inhabitants), have been almost desolated [...]. The grand secret of these fearful calamities is that the Ashantees should obtain young children from the age of five to ten to sell in the streets of Cape Coast and Anomabo. In Cape Coast alone, during the last twelve months, at least 300 young creatures have been sold as slaves. [...] Are the English officers doing their duty? Are they not actually funding the money wherewith their concubines purchase slaves? I can put my hand upon at least two officials of high position here who gave their concubines money to purchase slaves [...] You denounced this shameful thing some time ago [...] I beseech you that it may be put an end to. Such buying of slaves ought to be punished as a great felony.³⁰

This provoked several defensive responses from readers, one of which captures the allegedly humanitarian motive of buyers in the coastal region:

I beg to ask the writer whether it is a sin for those who buy the poor Krepees from the hands of the cruel Ashantees? Does the writer not know that it is a great boon for a slave if he or she could be sold from the hands of an Ashantee, who looks upon the lives of his slaves as those of common dogs? Can the writer testify to having seen at Cape Coast [or...] Anamaboe [...] a human sacrifice committed for any deceased master of slaves? Does the writer not consider that in Ashantee, if a master dies, some of his slaves must die with him? ... Does the writer not know that if a person is bought from the hands of an Ashantee, his or her life is saved?³¹

In the former letter of complaint, the writer denounced not only fellow Africans in the coastal regions but also British officials for practicing domestic slavery. This complicates the literature's reductive account of the British as abolitionists seeking progress and Africans as slaveholders trying to maintain the status quo. However, the reference to human sacrifice by the second writer, in a letter focusing mainly on domestic slavery, points to how the Fantes saw slavery in general (and how the concept was expressed in their language) as a range of different relations. Both ideologies developed in the Fante region, although there is more evidence for the second position by the 1860s. In the local press, many Fante writers accused the British administration of negligence in the matter of human sacrifice.³² In some cases, the administration responded by sending a commission to investigate and put a stop to the practice.³³ While

³⁰ African Times (September 23, 1872): 31.

³¹ African Times (November 29, 1872): 56.

³² For example, see C.B.P. of Anomabo, Gold Coast, African Times, May 20, 1867.

³³ African Affairs, July 23, 1867, 2.

these efforts may not be considered anti-slavery according to the rigid and binary European sense of domestic slavery, they do reflect the actual ways in which slavery and abolition were discussed within the Fante region at this time.

Another ideological stance that was common in the Fante region was a distrust of British involvement in domestic slavery, a suspicion that was shared by known anti-slavery advocates. Some educated Fante saw British anti-slavery rhetoric and policies in Gold Coast as an excuse to forward racial and economic policies. This suspicion began in 1851 when the British Governor Major Stephen Hill issued a proclamation that prohibited slave holding amongst educated natives in trading cities in Accra, Cape Coast, and Anomabo.³⁴ This proclamation, as Trevor R. Getz argued, came about as a result of the British merchants in the Gold Coast feeling that African traders had an unfair advantage in being allowed to use slave labor (whereas slavery was abolished for British merchants at the time), and for this reason they advised Governor Major Stephen Hill to issue the proclamation.³⁵ In particular, as Susan Kaplow argued, it was believed that Africans were able to use slave holding to circumvent their European creditors.³⁶ Therefore, the proclamation declared that “native traders within the Settlement who receive consignment of goods from England have been in the habit of purchasing Slaves brought down from the interior for domestic service to the great injury of the English Creditors.”³⁷ It also declared that “all Insolvent Native Debtors who shall be convicted of having employed the property of their Creditors for the purchase of Slaves will be treated as Felons.”³⁸ The educated Fante in Cape Coast and Anomabo (almost all of whom were traders) swiftly understood that the proclamation was designed to restrict their commercial advantage, which was the basis for their campaign against it. For instance, a petition from merchants in Cape Coast argued that “we find that this proclamation is to injure our character and our commercial interest.”³⁹ This petition paid less attention to the subject of slavery itself than to the allegation that the merchants had used slaves to circumvent their creditors. Even so, the petitioners agreed to emancipate their slaves if they were compensated accordingly, which the governor refused to do.

The campaign against the proclamation of 1851 produced disturbance in Fante cities of Cape Coast and Anomabo: local leaders tore up the posted notice and recalled laborers undertaken to provide civil construction.⁴⁰ The British governor rightly suspected that “the affected parties, educated natives, had a hand in it.”⁴¹ The campaign in Cape Coast was led by men like William De

³⁴ Public Records Office, Kew, United Kingdom (PRO) Colonial Office Papers (CO) 96/25 Petition to Stephen Hill Cape Coast December 15, 1851.

³⁵ Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa*, 54.

³⁶ Susan B. Kaplow, “Primitive Accumulation and Traditional Social Relations on the Nineteenth Century Gold Coast,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines* 12, no. 1 (1978): 19–36.

³⁷ PRO, CO 96/23 Proclamation by Governor Hill, November 27, 1851.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ PRO CO 96/25 Petition to Stephen Hill Cape Coast December 15, 1851.

⁴⁰ Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa*, 56.

⁴¹ PRO CO 96/25, S. Hill to the Colonial Office, April 23, 1852.

Graft and Joseph Smith, as the petition shows.⁴² De Graft and Smith were the two most influential local figures in the Wesleyan church in Gold Coast.⁴³ Both men started as native workers employed by Thomas Birch Freeman. Freeman, who introduced the Methodist religion to colonial West Africa, was a known abolitionist, who exchanged letters with Thomas Clarkson on how to abolish slavery in West Africa,⁴⁴ was in close touch with Fowell Buxton⁴⁵ and tried to persuade the King of Asante to stop trading slaves.⁴⁶ De Graft was a Fante preacher and a close companion of Freeman's, accompanying him to the Asante hinterlands, modern Nigeria (Badagry, Lagos, and Abeokuta), Dahomey to launch missions, and even England, as well as assisting Freeman in his local efforts against domestic slavery.⁴⁷ It may appear contradictory, then, that De Graft was a staunch opponent of the 1851 proclamation. However, locally, the campaign against Governor Major Stephen Hill's 1951 attempt was a campaign against the injustice of a proclamation designed particularly to disadvantage African traders, as opposed to the narrow question of slavery. This episode created a distrust that lasted for many decades, where educated Fantes who were anti-slavery in their statements were also opposed to British anti-slavery rhetoric and actions, including legal abolition as discussed below.

However, local ideologies on abolition developed in the 1860s. For example, during the short-lived Fante Confederacy movement in the late 1860s and early 1870s, where traditional rulers teamed up with educated Fantes to achieve self-rule, several senior members of the Confederacy fought against harsher types of local slavery within and outside the region.⁴⁸ The Fante Confederacy offers a useful perspective on Fante abolitionism (not only in the local sense, as explicated above, but also from a more Eurocentric perspective, treating slavery as homogeneous); here, the work of James Africanus Horton is crucial. Horton, who was born in Sierra Leone, served in the British Army as a staff assistant surgeon on the Gold Coast. The Fante Confederacy has been described as an attempt by educated Fantes such as James Hutton Brew (subsequently founder and editor of the *Gold Coast Times* and, much later, the *Western Echo*) to put Horton's ideas into practice.⁴⁹ Although Horton was from Sierra Leone and of Nigerian descent (tracing his ancestry to the Igbo society), he is today

⁴² PRO CO 96/25 Petition to Stephen Hill Cape Coast December 15, 1851; see also John Pritchard, *Methodists and Their Missionary Societies 1760–1900* (London: Routledge, 2016), 68.

⁴³ Casely B. Essamuah, "Ghanaian Appropriation of Wesleyan Theology in Mission 1961–2000 (2003)," <http://www.methodistheritage.org.uk/missionary-history-essamuah-ghanaian-2003.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Paul K. Boafo, *John Wesley's Theology and Public Life: His Socio-Political Thought in the Ghanaian Context* (Accra, Ghana: Asempa Publishers, 2014); John Milum, *Thomas Birch Freeman: Missionary Pioneer to Ashanti, Dahomey, and Egba* (London: S. W. Partridge, 1893).

⁴⁵ Frank Deaville Walker, *Thomas Birch Freeman: The Son of an African*. No. 8. Student Christian Movement (London: Student Christian Movement, 1929).

⁴⁶ Thomas Birch Freeman, *Journal of Various Visits to the Kingdoms of Ashanti, Aku, and Dahomi, in Western Africa* (London: John Mason, 1844).

⁴⁷ Freeman, *Journal of Various Visits to the Kingdoms of Ashanti*, 131–33.

⁴⁸ Joe Dawson, "Human Sacrifices—Effort By The Agent Of The Fanti Confederation To Prevent Them." *African Times*, January 23, 1872, 1871, 76.

⁴⁹ Casely-Hayford, "A Genealogical Study," 168.

regarded as the intellectual leader of the Fante Confederacy, and there is evidence that he was inspired by the Fantes in his thinking and writing on Africa.⁵⁰ Indeed, E. A. Ayandele argued that Horton “spent his political energy on behalf of the Fanti”; articulating Fante grievances, which according to Ayandele, almost cost him his job.⁵¹ I regard Horton as a Fante not only because he resided in Anomabo and Cape Coast but also because the Fante region was the primary emphasis of his writings on domestic slavery and abolition, and he exerted a critical influence on the Fantes and the planned Confederacy.

Very few historians have considered Horton an African abolitionist; instead, he has been viewed critically as an Anglophile who frowned upon African culture.⁵² Many of his views are presented in his book, *West African Countries and Peoples*. For Horton, domestic slavery was one of the greatest obstacles to the civilization and development of Gold Coast; he argued that such practices had to be uprooted for civilization to take root.⁵³ His attack on domestic slavery had practical as well as moral grounds: he argued that it fostered in slave owners behaviors inimical to the development of Gold Coast, such as laziness.⁵⁴ Horton was familiar with the different categories of slaves and the debate in the Fante region about the “acceptable” and “unacceptable” forms of slavery. Laying out a program for abolition, he argued against the defense of benign forms of slavery.⁵⁵ Addressing friends in the region, he called for action: “this is not a time for mincing matters, and my friends on the Gold Coast must understand that I speak of the natives at large [...] by their keeping domestic slaves, they are supporting an institution which has a most deplorable effect on the rise of their country.”⁵⁶ Domestic slavery, for Horton, was one of the reasons for the gradual degeneration of Cape Coast. “When the few men who now occupy important posts in the country, such as Blankson, Grant, and Brew [all of whom are Fante], shall have passed away, Cape Coast will not have men to point out as evidences of its importance. Who among the rising generation can fill up the places [...]? So long as the educated population support domestic slavery, so long will Cape Coast occupy an inferior position as regards progressive civilisation.”⁵⁷

Horton’s discussion of domestic slavery was positioned within a broader discussion of self-government in Gold Coast; for example, when proposing the Fante

⁵⁰ Christopher Fyfe, “Africanus Horton as a Constitution-Maker,” *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 26, no. 2 (1988): 173–84.

⁵¹ Emmanuel Ayankanni Ayandele, “James Africanus Beale Horton, 1835–1883: Prophet of Modernization in West Africa,” *African Historical Studies* 4, no. 3 (1971): 691–707.

⁵² He is one of the three African abolitionists discussed by Steffen Runkel in his book (along with David Asante and Francis P. Fearon). See Runkel, *Von Sklaverei und Freiheit*.

⁵³ James Africanus Horton, *West African Countries and Peoples, British and Native. With the Requirements Necessary for Establishing that Self Government Recommended by the Committee of the House of Commons, 1865; And a Vindication of the African Race* (London: W. J. Johnson, 1868), 117.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Confederacy, he argued that domestic slavery (through its corollary, polygyny) “enervates the energies of the male inhabitants; and instead of thousands of bushels produced yearly for exportation, there is scarcely sufficient for home consumption.”⁵⁸ His detailed proposal for abolishing domestic slavery in the region (which included instant abolition and distributing land to the former slaves)⁵⁹ was somewhat radical and thus difficult for the Fante Confederates to accept. It is very likely that James Hutton Brew, who was closely associated with Horton,⁶⁰ and other senior members of the Fante Confederacy were aware of Horton’s argument for abolition as they set out to put his political idea into practice. Yet, Horton’s followers, friends, and fellow Confederates could not have adopted his proposal in their propagation of the Fante Confederacy, not least because of their dependence on traditional rulers for political influence. Questioning domestic slavery (in the broad way that Horton did) would have lost these educated natives their most cherished assets in the quest for self-government, namely traditional rulers—especially given British attempts to persecute these natives and lure traditional rulers away.⁶¹

As Rebecca Shumway observed, the Fante Confederates seem to have deliberately avoided the topic of domestic slavery, despite their extensive discussion of other social matters in the region.⁶² Although their social standing may have discouraged them from expounding a Horton-like abolitionist position, some of their writings suggest that they gave the question of domestic slavery some thought. For example, James Brew (who was in communication with Horton and later became the editor of the *Gold Coast Times*, arguing for abolition)⁶³ and King Gharthey IV of Winneba (the first president of the Fante Confederacy; formerly a merchant and King of Winneba) expressed objections to domestic slavery at certain points.⁶⁴ However, they were arguably also complicit in the practice; that is, if slavery is defined without differentiation, as Horton did. For example, as a lawyer, James Brew defended a suspect slave owner,⁶⁵ and there is evidence that King Gharthey applied to the British Governor regarding the escaped wife/slave of one of his dependents in 1869.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁶⁰ Horton was James Brew’s doctor during the Fante Confederacy movement, during which Brew financially contributed to the publication of Horton’s book entitled “Letters on the Political Condition of the Gold Coast” in 1870. However, in 1874, Horton sued Brew for outstanding medical debt. Brew’s biting remarks towards Horton in 1874–75 is copious in his newspaper. However, Brew was included in Horton’s will after his death. See Ray G. Jenkins, “Gold Coast Historian and Their Pursuit of the Gold Coast Pasts: 1882–1917” (Dissertation, The University of Birmingham, 1985), 218 – note 3.

⁶¹ *African Times* (September 23, 1872): 31, 36; *African Times* (June 24, 1872): 46; *African Times* (July 23, 1872): 10–15.

⁶² Rebecca Shumway, “Cultural Syncretism and the Duplicity of Anti-Slavery on the Gold Coast (Ghana),” *African Studies Association Conference*, November 20–23, 2014.

⁶³ Akurang-Parry, “We Shall Rejoice.”

⁶⁴ Accra PRAAD-SC 7 No. 236. A Letter from Quaminah Attah Abbrabra about his Sister and Child Captured in Ammantin 1870, May 9.

⁶⁵ Accra PRAAD SCT 5/4/19 *Regina v. Quamina Eddoo*, November 10, 1876.

⁶⁶ Accra PRAAD-SC 7 No. 143. A Letter from Governor Usher, July 12, 1869.

However, these actions could be explained within the discourse of “acceptable” and “unacceptable” forms of dependency. Although Joseph Dawson used the banner of the Fante Confederacy to campaign against human sacrifice, which was viewed domestically as a form of slavery,⁶⁷ none of the other Fante Confederates ever questioned the traditional rulers on slavery.

The Fantes and Legal Abolition in 1874

This section situates Fante chiefs and educated natives in the process of colonial/legal abolition in Gold Coast in 1874–1875. It shows that all the ideologies expounded in the preceding section interacted with the colonial abolition process. From the moment at which Gold Coast began the process of becoming a colony (a status it achieved on July 24, 1874, with its territory extending from the coastal areas to an ill-defined inland border), the British press called attention to domestic slavery, as did the local press. Although becoming a colony would entail the abolition of slavery, there was active discussion of domestic slavery as well as the correct method of abolishing slavery.⁶⁸ In this context, educated Fante natives also openly discussed domestic slavery. The *Gold Coast Times*, which was propitiously established at the beginning of 1874, offered a very detailed commentary on domestic slavery and the process of abolition, sometimes openly advising the government on how to make the abolition law effective.⁶⁹ Although its editor, James Brew of the Fante Confederacy, supported the attempt to abolish domestic slavery, his vision for legal abolition, which included paying compensation to slave owners and distributing land to freed slaves, conflicted with that of the British colonial governor.⁷⁰

The origin of the two 1874 ordinances, one providing for the abolition of slave dealing and the other for the emancipation of persons beholden in slavery, lies in a series of letters between the Earl of Carnarvon, who was then the colonial secretary, and Governor George Strahan.⁷¹ Carnarvon discussed different options with the Governor and finally adopted the “India model,” whereby the legal status of slavery would be abolished without compensation to slave-owners for their property or transition measures for the freed slaves. This method was adopted because it was less costly than other viable ones. Meanwhile, educated natives in the Fante region were engaged in domestic debate on the method of abolition, focusing on compensation and land distribution. The *African Times* (and its editor) took a clear position against

⁶⁷ *African Times* (January 23, 1872): 76; see also PRAAD-SC 7 No. 151 Dawson to Ghartey.

⁶⁸ Michael Ehis Odijie, “Emancipation in the Gold Coast: The Abolitionist Views of James Hutton Brew,” *Slavery & Abolition* 44, no. 1 (2023): 109–30.

⁶⁹ Akurang-Parry, “We Shall Rejoice.”

⁷⁰ Odijie, “Emancipation in the Gold Coast.”

⁷¹ PP 1875 (C.1139), No. 3, The Earl of Carnarvon to the Officer Administering the Government of the Gold Coast, August 21, 1874; PP 1875 (C.1139), No. 5, Governor Strahan to the Earl of Carnarvon, September 19, 1874; see also PP 1875 (C.1139), No. 7, The Earl of Carnarvon to Governor Strahan, October 29, 1874. See also PRAAD ADM 12/5/82; see also Kwabena Opare Akurang-Parry, “Slavery and Abolition in the Gold Coast: Colonial Modes of Emancipation and African Initiatives,” *Ghana Studies* 1, no. 1 (1998): 11–34.

compensation in a long essay published on August 29, 1874, which argued that the approach taken in the West Indies (where compensation had been paid by the British) should not be applied to Gold Coast. In its September 24, 1874, edition, the *Gold Coast Times* (and Brew) made an argument for compensation, structured largely in response to the *African Times* piece.⁷²

When Governor Strahan invited the chiefs and kings of the Fante region to a *dubar* (local meeting) in October 1874 to inform them of the colonial government's plan to abolish slavery, educated natives speculated in the press on the issue to be discussed. The editorial of the *Gold Coast Times* concluded that the topic must be "the slave question," because this was "uppermost in the minds of all."⁷³ The editorial went on to raise the question of compensation, saying, "we will rejoice to see the day when slavery shall cease to exist in the Gold Coast in any shape or form; where all shall be free [...] nevertheless, with all this, we contend that the slaveholders are entitled to compensation."⁷⁴ Educated Fantes understood that any attempt to emancipate slaves should involve compensation, as was customary in the British abolitionist tradition, because ownership of slaves was regarded as a form of property. The colonial government's reluctance to entertain compensation, as in 1851,⁷⁵ led to a denunciation of the legal abolition even by anti-slavery advocates like the editor of the *Gold Coast Times*. The compensation debate became a new basis for continued distrust of British anti-slavery rhetoric and policies.

Another topic of debate in 1874 was acceptable and unacceptable forms of slavery. During the *dubar*, at which the Governor informed traditional rulers of the British intention to abolish domestic slavery, translation problems arose between the Governor and the traditional rulers. Governor Strahan had feared that such problems might emerge; in an internal memo, he stated that he was eager to avoid "misunderstanding which might arise from a misapprehension of my meaning by the interpreter or a failure in his part to convey to me the meaning of the natives."⁷⁶ Governor Strahan reported that after reading his statement on the government's intention to abolish slavery to the traditional rulers and leaving them to discuss it among themselves, he received the following response: "we have talked [it] over and [...] agree [with] what the Governor has said [...] we will give up buying slaves." The deputation then asked practical questions about what to do with old pawns. Furthermore, the Fante chiefs suggested that "with regard to those who live with us, they are as it were our families [...] disagreements sometimes happen between us, yet the difference is talked over, and then we are at one again." This, noted the Governor in a letter to Carnarvon, implied "that they had not thoroughly understood."⁷⁷ However, it seems that the traditional rulers had understood Strahan; they were referring to home-born slaves, who were viewed as family

⁷² *African Times* (August 29, 1874): 19–20; *Gold Coast Times* (September 24, 1874): 46–47.

⁷³ *Gold Coast Times* (October 20, 1874): 50.

⁷⁴ *Gold Coast Times* (October 20, 1874): 51.

⁷⁵ PRO CO 96/25 Governor Stephen Hill to Petitioners Cape Coast December 15, 1851 *Gold Coast Castle*.

⁷⁶ PRAAD. ADM/1/7/10, No. 400.

⁷⁷ PP 1875 (C.1139), No. 11, Governor Strahan to the Earl of Carnarvon, November 3, 1874.

members in Fanteland. As noted in the previous section, domestic slavery for the Fantes was a spectrum of practices, with human sacrifice at one extreme and very mild forms of dependency at the other.

In response, Governor Strahan told the Fante rulers that there would be no forcible disruption of domestic arrangements; it would be up to them to render their relationships with their slaves “so happy that there should not be any wish or need for separation.”⁷⁸ From this, the Fante’s traditional rulers inferred that emancipation was only necessary for some types of slaves. For this reason, during the first months of legal abolition, there were examples of selective responses to emancipation, with Fante people writing to the colonial administration to recover some family slaves that opted for emancipation.⁷⁹ It is therefore evident that the Fante rulers agreed to the emancipation but marked out at least one category of slaves as exempt. When international media reported that the abolition was intended to be selective using harshness as the criteria,⁸⁰ Governor Strahan quickly issued a statement that the report was “wholly erroneous,” and Carnarvon wrote to British newspapers to deny that the emancipation was only applied to harsh slavery.⁸¹ This new stance on stopping all forms of slavery led to an alliance between educated natives (who wanted compensation) and Fante Chiefs (who initially understood the proposed law as the abolition of certain types of slaves), which formed the basis of a campaign through the writing of petitions.⁸²

All of the petitions were directed toward arguing that emancipation should only occur in forms of slavery that involve cruelty or maltreatment and, at the same time, arguing for compensation.⁸³ Although the three main petitions carefully argued that the system of domestic slavery had been in place in the region since time immemorial, their main objective was to build a case for compensation (educated Fante’s argument), as excerpts from the three petitions show below.

These slaves and pawns are now, so it appears, to be emancipated without compensation being granted to their owners [...] Such a course, your petitioners most humbly urge, will be a deathblow to the cultivation of native produce.⁸⁴

your Memorialists would most respectfully and humbly urge their claim to compensation at your Majesty’s hand for [...] the loss of the services of their slaves and pawns, their plantations, which will become and

⁷⁸ PP 1875 (C.1139), No. 11, Governor Strahan to the Earl of Carnarvon, November 3, 1874.

⁷⁹ PRAAD. ADM/1/7/10, No. 8, January 26, 1875; see also PRAAD. ADM/1/7/10, No. 23, February 6, 1875.

⁸⁰ Daily Telegraph (December 3, 1874).

⁸¹ PP 1875 (C.1139), No. 19 and 20 Governor Strahan to the Earl of Carnarvon December 27, 1874; see also PRAAD. ADM/1/7/10, No. 440.

⁸² Gold Coast Times, March 31, 1875.

⁸³ PP 1875 (C. 1159), No. 1, Governor Strahan to the Earl of Carnarvon, January 3, 1875.

⁸⁴ PP 1875 (C. 1159), Inclosure 1 in No. 1, To his Excellency Captain G. C. Strahan, RA., Governor of the Gold Coast Colony, &c. Cape Coast. The Petition of the Undersigned Kings and Chiefs of the Gold Coast Protectorate. Cape Coast, December 30, 1894.

are being ruined for the want of hand to cultivate them, and the immense sums expended by them in the purchase, support, and maintenance of those slaves, whom they bought and retained under the cognizance of your Majesty's authorities here who had recognized the institution as a lawful one.⁸⁵

in case your Majesty should be pleased to give your gracious assent and allowance to the said Ordinances, that your Majesty will graciously order that compensation be granted and paid your Petitioners for the loss of value of their slaves and pawns, the deprivation of their services, and the ruin of their plantations.⁸⁶

After receiving the first petition, the Governor met with five of the six Fante traditional rulers who had signed it without meeting with educated Fantes. At the meeting, as reported by Governor Strahan, "the subject of compensation, which is, as it were, the keynote of the petition, was not once alluded to by any of the speakers." This led the Governor to conclude that the petition had emanated from educated Fantes in Cape Coast.⁸⁷ In his conversations with the five Fante kings, he said, they had not only expressed full understanding of the meetings and the intention of the Governor but had also been willing without argument to accept the abolition of slavery. For this reason, the Governor gave no credence to the second and third petitions, which had 86 and 19 signatures, respectively (the third petition was from women). To the Governor, his meeting with the signatories of the first petition suggested that the Fante traditional rulers did not oppose the British attempt to abolish domestic slavery. However, their acquiescence might have stemmed from political necessity, as neither the traditional rulers nor the educated natives were consulted to provide input on the law.

The language of the ordinances and the proclamation was prepared by David Patrick Chalmers, who communicated it to the Governor. In preparing the first drafts of the ordinances, Chalmers argued against placing slave-related offences under chiefs' or kings' courts because he suspected that their sympathies would lie with the offenders.⁸⁸ The first drafts of the ordinances were discussed by Carnarvon, who was generally in favor of a harsher sentence for slave dealing than the five-year maximum proposed by Chalmers (in the slave-dealing abolition ordinance). Carnarvon suggested that all children born after the date of the commencement of the ordinance should be deemed free.⁸⁹ Although the Governor met with traditional rulers to inform them of the

⁸⁵ PP 1875 (C. 1159), Inclosure 1 in No. 2, To the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty in Council. The Memorial of the Undersigned Kings, Chiefs, Headmen, Captains, and other Principal Men of the Gold Coast. Cape Coast, January 7, 1875.

⁸⁶ PP 1875 (C. 1159), Inclosure 1 in No. 3, To the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty in Council. The Humble Petition of the Undersigned Ladies of the Gold Coast Protectorate. Cape Coast, January 7, 1875.

⁸⁷ PRAAD. ADM/1/2/19 No. 2. Governor Strahan to Carnarvon, January 3, 1875.

⁸⁸ PP 1875 (C.1139) Inclosure 4 in No. 5, D. P. Chalmers to Captain G. C. Strahan, September 18, 1874.

⁸⁹ PP 1875 (C.1139) No. 7, The Earl of Carnarvon to Governor Strahan, October 29, 1874.

British desire to abolish slavery, both educated natives and traditional rulers were excluded from the development of the ordinances. The final drafts of the ordinances, which were substantively different from the original drafts, were also prepared and revised by David Patrick Chalmers.⁹⁰ The ordinance providing for the abolition of slave dealing outlined six main offences. It allowed the customary court to sit on cases as authorized by the Governor. It stipulated a punishment of up to seven years (and a fine) for slave dealing. It declared slaves brought into Gold Coast to be free. It also voided all slavery contracts (including pawnship contracts). The emancipation ordinance freed all persons born after November 5, 1874 and regarded the compelling of anybody's service through coercion unlawful. After the passage of the two ordinances, the Governor issued a proclamation of the Ordinances.⁹¹

Studying the court cases that followed the abolition ordinances offers insights into many aspects of their application. D. P. Chalmers, the first Chief Justice of Gold Coast, reported that the emancipation process was to some extent successful, both in his letter to the Governor in 1875⁹² and, much later, in his report on the effect of the abolition exercise.⁹³ Some people used the proclamation as a basis to escape their families—an interpretation that at first confused some administrators.⁹⁴ Apart from general confusion within the colonial administration (as some administrators interpreted the promulgation incorrectly, according to Governor Strahan⁹⁵), in some court cases local rulers acted on the assumption that the liberation of slaves did not include female slaves.⁹⁶ Studies have used court cases occurring soon after the proclamation to show how fluid the categories of “slave” and “wife” were at this time.⁹⁷ Some “wives” who had been cruelly treated argued in court that they were really slaves.⁹⁸ Most of these cases were heard in colonial courts, but local chiefs were sometimes recruited by the courts. The proclamation generated further confusion regarding whether slaves had the option

⁹⁰ PP 1875 (C.1139) Inclosure 3 in No. 21, Chalmers to Captain G. C. Strahan, December 9, 1874.

⁹¹ PRAAD. ADM/1/2/29 No. 44.

⁹² RO, CO 96/116, Chalmers to Governor Strahan, Cape Coast, December 24, 1875.

⁹³ PP 1875 (C.1159) Enclosure in No. 2. Report by Sir David P. Chalmers. June 27, 1878.

⁹⁴ PRAAD. ADM/1/7/10, No. 23; see also PRAAD ADM/1/2/19, No. 8.

⁹⁵ PRAAD. ADM/1/7/10, No. 10; PRAAD. ADM/1/7/10, No. 37; PRAAD. ADM/1/7/10, No. 23.

⁹⁶ PRAAD, SCT 5/4/15, *Regina vs. Kofi Donkoh and Ashun*, March 1, 1875; see also SCT 5/4/16, *Regina v. Oweaguow*, July 12, 1875; SCT 5/4/19, *Regina v. Acquassie Mirriwah*, December 1, 1876. See also ADM 1/7/10, No. 414, Chalmers and Civil Commandant Elmina, November 9, 1874.

⁹⁷ Brivio, “I Am a Slave Not a Wife”; Trevor Getz, “The Claims Wives Made: Slavery and Marriage in the Late-Nineteenth-Century Gold Coast Colony and Protectorate,” in *Slavery and its Legacy in Ghana and the Diaspora*, eds. Rebecca Shumway and Trevor R. Getz (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017). See also PRAAD Gold Coast Supreme Court Records (SCT), Cape Coast and Accra (High Court Records, Cape Coast 1874–1876; District Court Accra, 1876–1878). Between the end of 1874 and September 1875, the Cape Coast High Court (SCT 5/4/15 and SCT 5/4/16) considered 46 cases involving domestic slavery, the majority of which involved women.

⁹⁸ PRAAD, SCT5/4/16, *Acquassie Quaw Essell v Essuah Adjueraboe*, October 14, 1875: 454–58; PRAAD, SCT5/4/16, *Quabina Ampimah v Yawah Odochinawah*, October 15, 1875, 458–62; PRAAD, SCT5/4/16, *Codjio Owan or Woon v Adjuah Filamponomah*, October 14, 1875: 463–66.

to remain with their masters. We find several commentaries on this issue in the local press, such as the example below:

A Salaga man came here to trade and brought his wife and his child. [...] even if the woman had been the man's slave, how could the mere possession of a slave make him open to persecution? When here, Governor Strahan and Judge Chalmers issued a decree that anyone who chose to remain with his master could do so. Where then is this poor man's crime? [...] According to the Gentlemen just named [Strahan] a man could keep his slave as long as the slave voluntarily remains with him. The woman was asked if she were the man's slave, and she answered that he bought her and married her. The man explained that this was the custom of his country.⁹⁹

Post-Ordinance Debate among Fantes: Post-1875

This section charts changes in the Fantes' ideological stance on domestic slavery following the legal abolition of domestic slavery in 1874. The first observation is that tension between the Fantes and Asante continued, especially due to the recurrent fear of invasion by the Asante, which sometimes led to mobilization.¹⁰⁰ As a result, the Fantes continued to portray the Asante as barbaric, and domestic slavery continued to be discussed, specifically in terms of human sacrifice and harsh forms of slavery in the Asante region.¹⁰¹ For example, arguing against the approach to the 1874 emancipation of domestic slavery, a *Western Echo* editorial stated that "we have ever been the staunch opponent to slavery as such that existed in foreign countries and other climes," giving the example of "poor slaves who are daily being made victims to the knife of the Asante executioner."¹⁰² Compared with enslavement by the Asante, the writer regarded domestic slavery in Fante as a "misnomer." The writer then asked:

Why should we not be allowed to take into our service under a system of registered apprenticeship the poor slaves who are daily [murdered in Asante]? Would this be slavery? Would this be an act of inhumanity? We think not. It would be the means of saving thousands of lives annually from a cruel death; it would lift the cloud from off the dark scenes of slavery; it would bring thousands of suffering humanity within the pale of civilized life.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Gold Coast Times, December 24, 1881.

¹⁰⁰ Gold Coast Times, February 11, 1881, "Another War!"; Gold Coast Times, February 4, 1882.

¹⁰¹ Gold Coast Aborigines, January 8, 1898, 4, "Bishop Taylor Smith on Benin and Ashanti"; Gold Coast Times, October 1, 1881, "Human Sacrifice in Coomassie"; Gold Coast Times, October 8, 1881, "Human Sacrifices in Coomassie"; Gold Coast Times, October 22, 1881, "To the Editor of Gold Coast Times"; Gold Coast Times, December 24, 1881; The Western Echo, August 7, 1886; The Western Echo, August 24, 1886.

¹⁰² The Western Echo, May 21, 1886, 4.

¹⁰³ The Western Echo, May 21, 1886, 4.

Furthermore, the mode of Governor Strahan's abolition in 1874 was regarded by Educated Fantes as the cause of several social and economic problems in the region. For example, a general decline in trade between the colony and the hinterland from 1875 became the topic of many editorials and much correspondence in the local press. This trade dip primarily concerned educated natives, most of whom were merchants selling goods to the hinterland. They immediately began to discuss the problem of trade in terms of Strahan's emancipation and the fact that the colonial administration had not put measures in place to mitigate the problem.¹⁰⁴ Cudjoe Mensah of Anomabo put forward the following argument in the pages of the *Gold Coast Times*.¹⁰⁵

The second but most injurious cause [of the decline in trade] is the emancipation of the slave trade. Now all along the Coast and in the Interior we have no other means of transportation than the carrying [of] our loads upon our head. And this is done by our servants, rather domestic slaves. But now that the servants are free and are seduced by the Haussa as soon as they arrive on the Coast, to abandon their masters, the traders prefer rather to buy sufficient at a time for use than taking these servants with them on the Coast for trade. These dear Editor are the principal cause[s] of trade becoming so dull as it is.

This argument was not necessarily anti-emancipation; rather, it criticized the particular manner in which the exercise had been conducted. Another educated native (using the name Voxal) asked, "why is trade so dull?" and answered that this was due to the emancipation of domestic slaves, which had made Asante people worried about losing their carriers (for fear that their carriers would run away once they reached the colony). He added:

of course, we are not to be understood as deploring the abolition of the slave trade on the coast. On the contrary, we are thankful for it, for we sincerely affirm that it has been one of the greatest curses of Africa. But we most certainly hold that unless something is done trade will continue to dwindle until it is entirely ruined.¹⁰⁶

This argument was like the 1851 debate where the restriction of slave ownership in the Fante region was seen as harmful to the commercial interests of educated Fante natives (who acted as middlemen for European goods). This position was widespread amongst the educated Fantes in the 1880s.¹⁰⁷ The leading Fante intellectuals from the 1870s to the beginning of

¹⁰⁴ *Gold Coast Times*, June 9, 1895, 6, "Letter to the Editor."

¹⁰⁵ *Gold Coast Times*, November 17, 1877.

¹⁰⁶ *Gold Coast Times*, October 15, 1881, "Trade with Ashanti and the Interior."

¹⁰⁷ See also the *Western Echo*, November 18, 1885: 3; The *Western Echo*, December 9, 1885, The Emancipation Act; The *Western Echo*, December 30, 1885, 4; The *Western Echo*, January 9, 1886, 8, "Ruined by the Government"; The *Western Echo*, July 14, 1886, 4, "From a Correspondence"; The *Western Echo*, October 23, 1886, 7, "The Effect of Emancipation Act"; The *Western Echo*, June 30,

1900 held this view, namely James Hutton Brew, John Mensah Sarbah, and J. E. Casely Hayford.

For example, James Hutton Brew created the deputation scheme and a dedicated newspaper—The Western Echo—to protest the effect of the colonial abolition.¹⁰⁸ The scheme was a less ambitious version of the Fante Confederacy; it was first proposed by James Hutton Brew in 1882, in the *Gold Coast Times*. The deputation scheme involved a plan to send a deputation to London to protest lack of local representation in Gold Coast. Many townhall meetings were held across Gold Coast to promote deputation.¹⁰⁹ “Such a deputation,” wrote in *Western Echo*, “would without doubt open the eyes of the Colonial office to the utterly ruined condition to which the country had been reduced through the ill-advised measure, the sudden abolition of slavery.”¹¹⁰ The colonial establishment adopted a simplistic explanation of the deputation scheme, viewing it as a surreptitious attempt to revive domestic slavery.¹¹¹ Henry Thurstan Holland, Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1887 to 1892, wrote in a letter to the Gold Coast Governor: “the measure which it is understood that the deputation was intended to advocate are not such as could be entertained by Her Majesty’s Government, that no compensation will not be given, that the abolition of domestic slavery is absolute and cannot be reversed.”¹¹²

Although the deputation scheme failed, partly because of Brew’s financial difficulties and John Sarbah senior’s acceptance of a seat in the Gold Coast legislative council,¹¹³ the scheme left a mark in the Gold Coast’s political development. For example, David Kimble argued that it was the beginning of nationalism in the Gold Coast.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, as J. E. Casely Hayford noted, the deputation scheme became a prototype for future protest movements in the Fante region like the creation of Gold Coast Aborigines’ Rights Protection Society (for which Hayford was a co-founder and president) which was a protest against colonial land law in the 1890s.¹¹⁵ Casely Hayford, Like Brew, was also a prominent Fante intellectual of his time. His book, published in 1903, embodied the local ideologies on slavery. While stating that he despised “slavery in any shape or form,”¹¹⁶ he joined John Mensah Sarbah Junior in arguing that slavery in the Fante region was humane and considerate.¹¹⁷ At the same

1886, 6; The Western Echo, June 16, 1886, 4; Gold Coast Express, September 14, 1897, 2, “The Labour Question.”

¹⁰⁸ Evelyn Marguerite Rowand, “Press and Opinion in British West Africa, 1855–1900” (Dissertation, The University of Birmingham, 1972).

¹⁰⁹ John Stephen Parker, “Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra, 1860s–1920s” (Diss. School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1995).

¹¹⁰ The Western Echo, April 10, 1886, 6; see also the Western Echo, May 21, 1886, 5.

¹¹¹ Cf. TNA, CO 96/180, No. 121, Griffith to Holand, April 7, 1877, Enclosure.

¹¹² Letter reproduced in The Western Echo, April 28, 1887, 2.

¹¹³ Ray G. Jenkins, “Gold Coast Historian.”

¹¹⁴ David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana the Rise of the Gold Coast Nationalism 1850–1928* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

¹¹⁵ Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford, *Gold Coast Native Institutions: With Thoughts Upon a Healthy Imperial Policy for the Gold Coast and Ashanti* (London: Sweet and Maxwell Limited, 1903).

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

time, he argued that the commercial prosperity of the region was negatively affected by the 1874 emancipation ordinance,¹¹⁸ and strongly denounced the British for their anti-slavery rhetoric which, he argued, served the interests of British capitalists.¹¹⁹

Such diversity was reflected in the local press. On the one hand, some educated natives accused the British of hypocrisy when it became known that white officers bought slaves.¹²⁰ “Slavery is forbidden to us under heavy penalties but white officers can indulge in it with impunity,” wrote an educated native named A. Fanti, who then proposed that the public donate to a common fund to persecute the officer. He offered to donate 5 pounds of his own money. The newspaper editor [James Hutton Brew] added, “if funds are forthcoming we will undertake to persecute Capt. Firminger for slave dealing, with a view to ascertain whether there is one law for the black and another for the whites.”¹²¹ In the same context, some educated Fantes were worried that the abolition law had not been properly administered by the colonial regime and called for abolition to be taken more seriously.¹²² Indeed some Fantes developed an external form of anti-slavery, which took the form of a civilizing mission targeting the hinterland. This followed from the portrayal of Asante and Northern tribes as barbaric and led some educated natives to call on the colonial regime to annex the regions to spread civilization. For example, a Cape Coast correspondent in a local newspaper wrote: “the slave question is one upon which the Asante mind is anxious [...] The Asantes may consent to [stop] human sacrifices, but they will still decapitate human beings, unless the Kingdom is incorporated into the Protectorate, slave dealing there will not be readily forgo.”¹²³

Conclusion

This work aims to elucidate the Fante perspective on domestic slavery. In the Fante language, “domestic slavery” encompasses a range of dependencies, sparking a domestic debate over “acceptable” and “unacceptable” practices. By the 1860s, the Fantes had already abolished some of the more severe forms of slavery that continued to be prevalent in Asante. The dialectical relationship between Asante and Fante, coupled with their mutual othering—where the Fantes viewed the Asante as the “barbaric” hinterland inhabitants—contributed to the ideological discourse on domestic slavery. Some Fante intellectuals contend that the term “slavery” is misapplied to Fante traditions, arguing that it was primarily in Asante that a more brutal form of servitude, sometimes leading to the death of slaves, existed. Some Fantes believe that purchasing slaves from Asante was a humanitarian act, rescuing them from the Asante’s harsh treatment. This perspective, in various forms, was shared by

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹²⁰ *The Western Echo*, August 31, 1887, 5, 17–31.

¹²¹ *The Western Echo*, December 31, 1887, 10 Captain-Firminger.

¹²² *Gold Coast Times*, November 12, 1881, “Letter to the Editor of The Gold Coast Times.”

¹²³ *The Western Echo*, October 31, 1887, 5, “Ashanti; For External Abolition”; see also *The Gold Coast Express*; September 25, 1897; *The Gold Coast Express*, October 6, 1897, 2.

prominent Fante intellectuals of the time, such as James Hutton Brew, John Sarbah, and J. E. Casely Hayford. Concurrently, Fante intellectuals engaged in extensive debates with British colonial officials and their anti-slavery rhetoric. They perceived the British anti-slavery rhetoric and policies as mere pretexts for advancing racial policies favoring Europeans, a sentiment echoed by educated locals in the 1850s and J. E. Casely Hayford in his 1903 book.

Brew's writings present an apparent contradiction. For instance, in 1874, he asserted that land should be distributed before any discussion of abolition and also argued for compensation. Yet, in an 1886 article in *Western Echo*, he posited that it would be a humanitarian act for Fantes to take the poor slaves frequently subjected to violence in Asante.¹²⁴ This contradiction underscores the political dynamics between the Fante elites and the “barbaric” Asante on one hand, and between the Fante elites and the British on the other. While I concur with Rebecca Shumway's assertion that Britain thwarted—or even damaged—the development of an indigenous anti-slavery movement in the Fante region, I attribute it to a different reason than she does. While she attributed it to the undermining of the authority of Fante rulers and elites, I believe it stemmed from the British exploiting domestic slavery for political gains, which instilled mistrust among the educated natives. Nonetheless, traces of Fante abolitionism can still be discerned. For instance, James Africanus Horton championed radical abolitionism, which largely sidestepped domestic politics. Yet, a closer examination of some of Horton's arguments reveals parallels with the views of leading Fante intellectuals. One such viewpoint, espoused by James Hutton Brew in 1874, advocates for the distribution of land to freed slaves. However, post-1875 the Fantes' stance on domestic slavery became increasingly antagonistic toward the British, particularly in relation to the manner of the 1874 abolition—not the concept of abolition itself. Educated natives started critiquing the colonial abolition process, attributing the colony's trade depression issues to it.

Acknowledgements. I extend my sincere gratitude to Professor Benedetta Rossi, Professor Kate Skinner, and Dr. Bronwen Everill for their invaluable insights. I also wish to thank my UCL colleagues, Michelle Liebst and Alexander Meckelburg for their continuous support and feedback. Appreciation is further extended to the participants of the 2021 AFRAB conference and the discerning anonymous reviewer. Your collective wisdom has greatly enriched this work.

Funding statement. Research for this article was funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 885418).

¹²⁴ The *Western Echo*, May 21, 1886, 4.

Cite this article: Michael Ehis Odjie, “Exploring African Abolitionism: Fante Perspectives on Domestic Slavery in the Nineteenth-Century Gold Coast,” *Law and History Review* 42 (2024): 75–96. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248023000548>