

Biography and Society



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and Society**

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RESEARCH REPORTS

Individual and collective memories of slavery and the slave trade: A contrastive comparison of different communities, generations and group- ings in Ghana and Brazil¹

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Introduction

Gabriele Rosenthal & Maria Pohn-Lauggas

While we reported on our specific questions and, above all, our first field visit to Ghana in the fall of 2022 in the December 2022 newsletter, this report focuses primarily on our empirical findings in Brazil to date and initial reflections on the similarities and differences between the two countries. This includes, above all, the relevance of memorials and school education in both countries. We will publish the comprehensive empirical findings from our second field visit to Ghana in fall 2023 in the next newsletter.

Our empirical interpretive study focuses on making a contrastive comparison of collective and individual memories of slavery in different regions, generations and groupings in Ghana and Brazil. While in Ghana we concentrate on the coastal region and on various regions in northern Ghana, our focus in Brazil is on the Salvador region and on Brazilians with Afro-Brazilian relatives or who present themselves as Afro-Brazilians or Blacks. We are interested in the question of which collective knowledge about the past is passed on in families, local communities and other we-groups. We are also investigating which forms of slavery², slave capture and slave trade (trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan, as well as intra-African and intra-Brazilian) are addressed by whom, how, and in what contexts. Places of remembrance are examined as sites of contested discourses on the past: what is conveyed in these places, what is not, and who encounters whom in these memory practices? In other

¹ See: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/650363.html>

² We cannot discuss this here, but as far as possible in our analyses we distinguish between the different kinds of slavery (pawn slaves, house slaves, etc.) people talk about. However, this is not always clearly specified.

words, we reconstruct public memories and commemoration practices, as well as the memories and memory practices of specific groupings and families.

For this purpose, we use an approach that combines the sociology of knowledge and figurational sociology in order to reconstruct the interrelationships between different memory practices. The research is methodologically plural, using a combination of methods, such as participant observation, spontaneous or planned group discussions, biographical-narrative interviews, family interviews, expert interviews, ethnographic interviews, discourse and image analyses. This combination varies depending on the research context, research process and field access. Furthermore, we include archival studies and document analysis, by which we mean discourse analysis of different texts, including media texts, such as the websites of memorial sites, local communities or other groupings that refer to the topic of slavery.³ As empirical findings that have now been confirmed, we can state that Afro-Brazilians and Ghanaians have the following in common:

- remarkably little knowledge about the past enslavement of relatives or ancestors in their family or we-group,
- shame with regard to a family past with enslaved relatives, and
- certain repair strategies that serve to “heal” a burdensome collective past (i.e. partly also family past) or to make it unquestionable.

In both countries, there is obviously a tendency to be proud of having ancestors or relatives who had a powerful position in the past as opposed to a weak position. In Brazil, this pride or positive self-definition among Afro-Brazilians often refers to European ancestors (and thus perhaps implicitly also to ancestors who themselves bought or sold enslaved people). Here, however, we can observe an increasing tendency toward a stronger positive self-definition as Black among members of younger generations, as was also very explicitly expressed in some of our interviews. In Ghana, too, European ancestors are usually associated with pride, but so are also indigenous ancestors who collaborated with slave traders or slave raiders, and people who owned enslaved people. The main difference is that among Afro-Brazilians their collective history before slavery, i.e., knowledge about the history of their African region of origin and the corresponding social, local or ethnic groupings, is often condensed in a very homogenizing way to an “African origin”. In Ghana, on the other hand, much more detailed historical knowledge is handed down, especially at the courts of kings or chiefs, in the context of local we-groups or other groupings.

Another difference, which requires further empirical examination, appears to be that in the coastal region of Bahia the memorials and museums have less significance for the collective memories of Afro-Brazilians than the memorials on the Ghanaian coast have for the cultural memories of the Indigenous population. The memorials in the so-called slave castles (especially in Elmina and Cape Coast), the slave dungeons that can be visited there, and the suffering of the people who died there or were shipped from there, are of central importance in the prevailing cultural memory or – we could also say – prevailing version of a national memory. For exam-

³ For the methodological approach, see Becker, J./ Pohn-Lauggas, M./ Santos H. (2023): Rosenthal, G. (2022).

ple, school classes, including classes from northern Ghana, are often taken to visit them. In Ghana, we were able to prove empirically in various regions (especially in the Upper East) that the versions of slavery conveyed in the memorials have a decisive influence on cultural memory throughout the country, and thus increasingly override the versions of communicative memory.⁴ In other words, the knowledge about the time of slavery that is still handed down in families and local communities, which here often relates to slavery or slave capture or slave trading within Africa, is increasingly disappearing from the memory of the younger generations. Instead, knowledge about the trans-Atlantic slave trade which is passed on in schools and memorials is replacing the knowledge handed down by members of the older generations. In other words, the content of communicative memory in respect of slavery, i.e. knowledge passed on mainly orally in families and (local) communities, is in danger of being forgotten.

As already mentioned, our research in the coastal region of Bahia shows a greater significance of everyday practices, especially religious practices, in the commemoration of ancestors from “Africa” and their enslavement. As Eva Bahl and Lucas Cé Sangalli explain below, representations of a so-called African culture and religion are very homogenizing. There are usually no references to specific local groupings or regions of origin in Africa, and there is a lack of concrete historical knowledge.

What is similar in both countries is that the inner-South American and inner-African slave trade is discussed much less in the interviews than the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Or to put it another way, despite the very different figurations of Indigenous groupings, Europeans and Afro-Brazilians, there is an overemphasis on the trans-Atlantic slave trade in both countries, and an underemphasis on the indigenous or “internal” slave trade. This can be explained by the need to avoid making an issue of the “internal” conflicts and acts of violence between certain groupings in the past. If it is thematized, especially in Ghana, then preferably in a defused or detoxified form that lends itself to reconciliation without complications. This may be seen as strengthening “national” cohesion or peace, while conflicts between sub-groupings that are not resolved in some way presumably continue to simmer.

Literature

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⁴ We refer here to our social constructivist modification of the concepts of J. Assmann (2008).

See: Pohn-Lauggas, M. (2020); Rosenthal, G. (2016).

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Memories of slavery and the slave trade in the region of Salvador da Bahia (Brazil)

Research Report Brazil 2023

Eva Bahl (University of Göttingen), Lucas Cé Sangalli (University of Göttingen)

Introduction

Between December 2022 and April 2023, we conducted fieldwork in different parts of Brazil with a focus on the intergenerational transmission of individual and collective memories of slavery and the trade in enslaved people. In this report, we will focus on findings from fieldwork conducted with our colleagues Artur Bogner and Gabriele Rosenthal between January and April 2023 in Salvador da Bahia, the region of Recôncavo Baiano (São Félix/Cachoeira and surrounding areas), and on the Dendê Coast. We will discuss our findings which are based mainly on participant observation and interviews with members of different groupings in these regions of the state of Bahia. Furthermore, we carried out historical analyses, and interpreted other kinds of data material, such as website presentations of memorial sites, art exhibitions, and fictional literature. We will begin with some reflections on specific figurations in memory disputes in Brazil, and the role of generational differences and family or community dialogue. This is followed by an explanation of the interrelationship between practices and places of remembrance (like memorial sites as more formal places of remembrance or other places which can be characterized as less public and more informal). The relative absence of formal places of remembrance of slavery (in the sense of memorials dedicated explicitly to this purpose) is a central finding of our research to date. Closely related to this discussion are further findings that primarily concern the tourist marketing of places and practices, as well as the importance of religious practices.

The significance of figurations in memory disputes

In contrast to Ghana, which is not characterized by a *white* elite like Brazil, but by Indigenous elites or ethnic groupings, memory disputes in Brazil take place in a context of structural racism. Here, there are conflictual figurations and power inequalities between Black (Afro-diasporic) and *white* Brazilians (often with a European