

From Middelburg to Ghana: The Public Memory of the Slave Trade

During the 2017 spring semester, I was enrolled in the Qualitative Statistics course with Professor Veldkamp in which I was introduced to, among others, Naturalistic Inquiry. We sought to put into practice the interviewing techniques that are typical of this social research method. Thus, we conducted a research project on the question: *how does the slave trade feature in the experience and study of Middelburg's history?* This project confronted us with the bleak history of the slave trade, and laid the groundwork for my Academic Internship.

Among our selected research participants, I had the opportunity to speak to Anneke van Waarden from the Zeeuws Archief and Professor Van Dixhoorn, who were interested in projects related to the topic. The fact that the Zeeuws Archief harbours the records of the Middelburg Commerce Company (MCC), which are on the UNESCO World Heritage list, provided more incentive to put it to further use besides the existing interactive website¹.

One aspect that was highlighted by our previous research was the scattered memory of the Slave Trade: spreading across four continents, with remnants dating back centuries ago. Ghana was one of the more notable cases of interest and I chose to look into it more closely. Despite being Ghanaian, my knowledge of the subject was far from 'a given'. In fact, my awareness came from a combination of vague recollection of primary school lessons, documentaries that were broadcasted on TV during my childhood and the vague notions and sentiments around the topic. Given this limited understanding, I thought it would be personally enriching to visit the castles and monuments where the trade took place and to speak to local residents and tourism contributors. Moreover, my background had some

¹ <http://eenigheid.slavenhandelmcc.nl/?lang=en>

Jennifer Akpene Kwao

advantages. My familiarity with the place, the people and my fluency in Twi would help me easily manoeuvre the environment in order to get the result I needed.

With this initiative, Professor Van Dixhoorn agreed to supervise my research which would take the form of an internship at the Zeeuws Archief. He first introduced me to the new but growing field of Public History and Public Memory by referring to publications and research of past interns. These texts drove my increasing familiarity with the field and it allowed for serious consideration of qualitative research as the most viable method for collecting data. Naturally, this meant that I could again apply the skills I had acquired from Professor Veldkamp's course but on a much larger scale.

Having arrived at 'the Public Memory of the Slave Trade' as the title of my research, and focusing specifically on Ghana and Middelburg, I daringly set off on my trip to Ghana. However, this resolution was not without challenge. Living outside Ghana about eight years now and returning intermittently over the years, I had greatly overestimated my ability to handle the hustle and bustle. The traffic situation in Accra for example played a critical role in how productive I could be in one day, so I had to learn to adjust my schedule to the car crashes, unreliable drivers and rogue traffic goats slowing down my progress.

Walking through the streets of James Town for example, I was constantly confronted with the harsh living environment of the people, at the same time I had to face my task as a truth-seeking historian. In real time, I had to consider what questions were appropriate for the interviewee, what were ethical questions, what was the truth within the narrative I was hearing and what directly aided my research goal? Other times, here in Middelburg as well, I had to deal with people who refused being interviewed or those who completely went off script and decided to conduct their own investigative interview. Basically, the nightmares our qualitative statistics textbooks warned about.

Jennifer Akpene Kwao

Nevertheless, it was an opportunity to look at history beyond textbooks. 'Beyond' here is emphasized because the research does not serve to nullify what textbooks say, rather to see how people use written history and memory to create tangible/concrete materials for the public to digest. This real-world display of history also allows for consideration of what it means for the wider context of society. For example, the monument at Balans square at the Abbey shows how Middelburg tries to memorialize its past, at the same time, it represents a growing interest in this history or rather a move to force a conversation on the topic. It is from such an assessment that contemporary debates on topics like Surinamese-Dutch identity, Zwarte Piet, are highlighted, offering themselves as windows to understanding the complex relationship between the present and past.

As I have come to learn, it is far easier to conclude that there is no public memory in Ghana or in Middelburg than it is to assess the reality of it and to understand the complexities of the history of the Slave Trade. Anne Reed, in an assessment of the heritage of slavery, points to economic needs, a priority of most Ghanaians, thereby summarizing the general attitude towards the memory of the slave trade. Having witnessed the living conditions of people in James Town, or those in villages near the Elmina castle and the Cape Coast castle, and the desperation of the many young men turned commercial artists/street hawkers, who hustle you at the entrance to the monuments, it is understandable that economic interest tramples other concerns. However, it is incorrect to conclude that there is no public memory of the Slave Trade in such places, especially amongst locals who are constantly reminded by the buildings from this past. As many interviewees confirmed, people are aware of the history, Ghanaians especially note the older generation's knowledge of it. But many are burdened by everyday issues that are of more pressing concerns.

From Middelburg to Ghana, I have had the pleasure of speaking to many people, each carrying a unique perspective on the topic. I have had the opportunity to experience the

Jennifer Akpene Kwao

history at the places it took place. I have been able to apply the knowledge I acquired in Qualitative Statistics on a more extensive project. With my results, experiences and conversations with people, I hope to advice future projects on the topic, from UCR or the Zeeuws Archief. Additionally, I look forward to aiding collaborative projects and efforts between the organizations and the people I had the pleasure of speaking to.