



Restoration of Slave Dungeons in Ghana Stir Debate

By Beth Duff-Brown

ELMINA, Ghana (AP) – Tip-toeing down the narrow slope from the dungeons to the dreaded Door of No Return, you are hit by a salty sting that speaks of centuries of tears and sweat and sea.

The black man's waste that for three centuries filled the cracks between the white man's bricks has not been fully removed. Visitors can still sense what it must have been like for hundreds of thousands of Africans forced to stoop through the Door of No Return and into slave ships waiting below.

"The female dungeon still has about it an odor -- the dirt, the centuries of filth, the fear," said Constance Garcia-Barrio, a black American who recently visited the Elmina castle, built by Portuguese traders in 1482 and still standing on a cliff above the Atlantic Ocean. "To me, the castles are a tie that binds us to Africa."

Ms. Garcia-Barrio and many other American blacks who visit Ghana feel a fierce propriety over the castle at Elmina and another one in nearby Cape Coast. They don't want slavery to be forgotten, its roots buried in a country where the hushed-up practice of virgin slavery still exists in some religious communities.

"I do feel a sense of ownership," said Ms. Garcia-Barrio, an associate professor of Spanish at West Chester University in Philadelphia.

But the restoration, financed in part by \$10 million from the U.S. government's Agency for International Development, is under debate. Some black Americans say the forts and their horrors are

being sanitized by well-meaning conservationists who are turning the castles into tourist attractions that diminish the evils of bondage.

They complain about the removal of shackles and branding irons from dungeon walls and about the gift shops selling postcards and tacky trinkets alongside traditional African cloth and art.

"I am offended by the 'touristfying' of the castles," said Dr. Nelson Keith, a Jamaican-born sociology professor at West Chester and founder of its Institute for International Development, which is organizing a student and faculty exchange program with the University of Ghana.

Ms. Garcia-Barrio accepts there is a need for restoration work.

"But it should be done in a way that respects the history and doesn't mask the horror of what happened," she said. "For instance, they're putting a gift shop in what was once a male dungeon."

Some 10 million Africans were sold into slavery between the 1500s and 1800s, bartered by their own tribal kings and chiefs to European traders for such novelties as gunpowder, alcohol and mirrors. Many were held in castle dungeons along the West African coast before being marched out to slave ships that sailed for the Americas and Europe.

The castles were built by the Portuguese and Swedes as seaside trading forts and later also were used by Dutch and British colonialists. They have been named World Heritage Sites by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Elmina is the oldest surviving European structure south of the equator, and it is believed that Christopher Columbus stopped here before he discovered the New World.

Proponents of the restoration argue that the gift shops, along with a museum, attract the tourists whose dollars pay for the castles' preservation and bring revenue into Ghana.

"One reality is, no matter what you do, you just can't please all the people," said Myron Golden, an American black who is USAID director in Ghana.

To help counter some of the criticism, an 18-member board of black Americans and Ghanaians has been set up to oversee the restorations and the placement of exhibits and gift shops.

"As we are able to attract more money for the castles and more interest, I suspect that a wider variety of views can be accommodated," said Mr. Golden. "This controversy means that at least we have accomplished something. Ten years ago these were all just decaying castles in the sand."

Many Ghanaian and American tourists at the castles on a recent afternoon didn't understand the fuss and found the castles effective, despite the touching-up.

"Those things happened in the old days," said Marian Acquaye, a 29-year-old Ghanaian seamstress who brought a half-dozen nieces and nephews to visit Cape Coast. "I think we should forget all that and be together, united as friends."

Mark Heffernan, who is from Georgia, where many slaves worked on cotton plantations, walked out feeling spooked.

"There's a lot of ghosts still living in this place," said Mr. Heffernan. "But I'm glad that I've seen it, it's important. Humanity should learn from its mistakes."

For Victus Awudi, a 22-year-old Ghanaian business student, the visit was a reminder of what his country might be today if the strong healthy men and women seized by slave-traders had stayed in Africa.

"If they had stayed here -- maybe they would have made us great," he said.

When asked whether Ghanaians today felt any guilt about their forefathers' role in slavery, Mr. Awudi just laughed.

"We tend to blame the colonial masters. We don't blame ourselves." But on further thought, Mr. Awudi added, "Well, our ancestors really shouldn't have sold human beings for gunpowder and drink."