

Shadows of Slavery

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in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)



“In Africa, I finally had the opportunity to see other people and other cultures not through a racial lens, in black and white and shades of grey, but rather in colour, as people and places both familiar and unfamiliar in refreshingly interesting ways”

Alessandra Brivio interviews Sandra Elaine Greene¹

Alessandra Brivio: *Would you like to start with a brief biographical note? How did you become an academic?*

Sandra Elaine Greene: I grew up in a small town in south-western Ohio in the United States. Perhaps the greatest influence on my future career as an academic was my mother, who was an elementary school teacher. I enjoyed school; I loved reading and learning, and this was strongly encouraged by my mother. As a teacher, she served as a role model for what I, as a young woman, could do with my own life. Just as importantly I grew up in a household in which it was assumed that I would, of course, go to college.

On entering the university, I initially pursued my interest in medicine. But I was also required to take courses in the humanities and social sciences as part of my school's focus on a liberal arts education. During my first year, for example, I took biology and chemistry courses, but I also enrolled in a philosophy course. To my surprise, I found that I loved more than my biology and chemistry courses, the work of analysing texts, engaging in

¹ Sandra Elaine Greene is professor of History at the Cornell University. Her research interests focus on West Africa and more specifically on the social and cultural history of Ghana from the height of the Atlantic slave trade (in the 18th century) through the early colonial period (up to World War Two). Between her best-known books : *Gender, ethnicity and social change on the upper Slave Coast: History of the Anlo-Ewe* (1976, Heinemann Books); *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter : A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana* (2002, Indiana University Press); *West African Narratives of Slavery Texts from late 19th and early 20th Century Ghana* (2011, Indiana University Press). She is the editor, among other works, with Alice Bellagamba and Martin Klein, of *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Cambridge 2013).



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debates about their significance, and reading them as products of particular historical and cultural contexts. I shifted from a focus on medicine to one on philosophy.

By the time I graduated with my Bachelor of Arts degree, I was no longer interested in pursuing philosophy, however. I wanted instead to apply the analytical skills I had obtained from philosophy to another area of interest, African studies. Having taken three African history courses, a course on Africa politics, another on African literature and after attending many lectures and film showings on African history and culture, I decided I wanted to immerse myself more thoroughly in this field. Of course, the fact that my undergraduate days coincided with the turbulent late 60s and early 70s was also important. During the waning years of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of the Black Power Movement, I steeped myself in the writings of Franz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, and the activist politics associated with efforts to end apartheid in South Africa and Portuguese colonialism in West and southern Africa. Furthering my education was a priority throughout this period. I decided to pursue the PhD in African history.

Alessandra Brivio: *You have carried out research mainly in West Africa. Why were you interested in this area?*

Sandra Elaine Greene: When I was in high school in the 1960s, Africa was all over the news. African countries were becoming independent from colonial rule; they were experimenting with new approaches to running their countries as they sought to avoid enshrining the inequalities that characterized the histories of their own and other countries. The constitutions of many new countries incorporated women as full citizens with the same right to vote as men; others pursued new approaches to governance that many felt were well worth considering. It was an exciting time, especially for African-Americans like myself who had long felt that their status in the United States was directly affected by the status and image of Africa. Aware of the pervasiveness of racism in the West, we welcomed the hope that Africa's independence brought.

When applying to attend university, I found the small Michigan liberal arts college, Kalamazoo College, attractive, because it offered an academically rigorous program, and a range of opportunities that would allow me to travel and study outside the United States for a period of time (a semester or a year) at no extra cost. More importantly, Kalamazoo offered one of the oldest and, at that time, one of the very few study abroad programs in Africa.

My interest in political events in Africa and more specifically, in the Ujamaa programs in Tanzania, led me to want to study abroad in Tanzania, but Kalamazoo had no programs there and I had no idea, at the time, how to get there on my own. My sister, who had also enrolled at Kalamazoo College two years earlier, had studied for six months in Kenya at the University of Nairobi and then travelled across the continent to West Africa. She found



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Kenya interesting, but West Africa in the 1960s far more exciting culturally. As I listened to my sister talk about her experiences, I found it quite astounding that instead of the usual white celebrities found on the cereal boxes in the United States, the ones in West Africa actually had blacks on them as did, equally astonishingly, the currency. I had never experienced such positive affirmations of my identity as a black person in the United States outside my own African-American community. Racism had influenced so many aspect of my life, from how we felt we must dress to gain some measure of respect in the eyes of the larger white community and ourselves, to where we felt welcome and safe to live, shop, walk, work, and go to school. West Africa appeared to offer a vibrant and self-confident, alternative to the United States where racism was all too familiar.

Unable to pursue my interest in studying in Tanzania, I spent my last year of university at the University of Ghana, Legon, where I studied philosophy, history, dance, and music while absorbing as much of the culture that I could. I had already applied to graduate school before I left for Ghana, but my very positive experiences in Ghana reinforced my interest and commitment to study African history. For the first time, I began to feel free of the all-pervasive wariness that becomes a necessary part of life as a black person living in a society that exhibits in unpredictable ways and times, both blatant and subtle forms racism. I finally had the opportunity to see other people and other cultures not through a racial lens, in black and white and shades of grey, but rather in colour, as people and places both familiar and unfamiliar in refreshingly interesting ways. Having been freed from this American intellectual and cultural prison, I was more than ready to embrace an Africa that gave me such freedom of thought. Graduate school in African history was the right decision.

Alessandra Brivio: *When did your interest in slavery start?*

Sandra Elaine Greene: I actually avoided for many years focusing on the history of slavery and the slave trade in Africa. When I was in graduate school, I found it impossible to distance myself from, or be objective about a history that had so impacted my own ancestors, a history whose legacy continues to dominant life in the United States. I was also very reluctant to reinforce the notion that African history was significant only in so far as it was connected, in this case, to the history of the United States, because of the trans-Atlantic slave trade or to Europe in the case of colonialism. Instead, I wanted to focus on those topics that seemed important to Africans themselves, topics that placed Africans at the centre of their history, a history that did not portray Africans as simply victims. Of course, I began my field work with my own presuppositions about what I was looking for and what I would find, but by listening to the people I interviewed in south eastern Ghana, I was quickly disabused of a lot of these presuppositions. I was forced to refocus my interest on those areas that the community deemed most important so as to understand their history and culture as they did. This meant shifting my focus to study religion and religious beliefs. I had not anticipated this at all; and this, in turn, led me to examine the



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history of ethnic and gender relations in the context of war, migration and changing economic opportunities during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. My motivation was less about an interest in slavery and the slave trade, however, and more about understanding the past so as to better understand contemporary life in Ghana. Only later after having established deep connections within the communities in south eastern Ghana where I conducted my research, only after gaining the trust of many people in the community did I finally turn more directly to the topic of slavery. By the time I began working on this topic, I knew how to write about it in ways that were culturally and socially grounded, and sensitive to the concerns of the communities where I conducted my research. This meant that I didn't begin gathering information on slavery until the late 1980s.

Alessandra Brivio: *As a historian you have studied the so-called traditional religions. What has been the link between religion and slavery? And what has been, if any, the impact of missionaries on the emancipation process?*

Sandra Elaine Greene: I didn't make the link between the traditional religious orders in south eastern Ghana and slavery until I began conducting interviews about the history of slavery in the area. At the time I began interviewing people on this topic, I had already collected information about the so-called *trokosi* (religious slavery) system, but it was not understood locally as a form of slavery, and I didn't see it that way at the time either. Instead, I heard in interviews about the competition for status that had emerged in south eastern Ghana when the Atlantic slave trade increased tremendously in the area. Certain religious leaders began offering their shrine houses as a place for slave traders to hide those they intended to sell into the Atlantic slave trade at a time when Europeans were attempting to suppress the trade. I was also told how a number of religious orders began selling some of their initiates into the Atlantic slave trade as a means to make money to enhance their own economic status vis-à-vis the wealthy in their communities. So this was one link that emerged from the interviewing I did in the area. Only later did I re-examine my field notes and re-think how I should understand *trokosi*.

My interest in the relationship between Christian missionaries and slavery emerged from my examination of the records of the Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft (NDMG), the Bremen-based missionary society that operated in south-eastern Ghana, west of the Volta River. As happened with other missionary societies, the NDMG had a difficult time converting locals to their religion, so they began purchasing children who could be trained to help them with their work. In time they abandoned this approach, but the missionaries' exposure to and involvement with the institutions of slavery that existed in the areas where they worked meant that they wrote quite a bit about how slaves were viewed, how they were treated, and handled by the local legal systems. Missionaries were not in a position, however, to free anyone except those whom they purchased in their early years, and most often those whom the missionaries did purchase, did not necessarily want individual freedom per se, but rather sought incorporation into a set of social networks that allowed



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them to live a decent life. Some individual missionaries certainly encouraged or certainly supported the efforts of the enslaved to leave their masters and join the Mission community, and some missionary societies sought to prohibit their members from holding slaves, but that was about as far as they could go, given the fact that they operated as guests in the communities in which they operated.

In Europe, missionary societies lobbied for the abolition of both the slave trade and of slavery wherever it existed, but the policies and actions of those who actually carried their Christian faith to Africa were forced to modify their ideals in the face of realities on the ground. Often, it was a few of the African converts who had become catechists and evangelists for their missionary societies, who pushed the most for their missionary societies to take a hard stance against slavery. Many of these individuals were former slaves themselves. Still they were a distinct minority amongst both the African converts and the European missionaries.

Alessandra Brivio: *You published a very interesting article on slavery's legacy and trokosi. How in general can the historical debate on slavery help us understand new forms of labour exploitation and new forms of slavery?*

Sandra Elaine Greene: My article on the history of *trokosi*, emphasized the fact that this form of slavery emerged in particular communities in response to specific economic and social conditions and opportunities. Perhaps the most important lesson this history can teach others is the fact that forms of exploitation are constantly evolving, and that while the competitive drive for profits encourages some to exploit the labour of vulnerable others in a variety of ways, economic motives are not the only incentivizing factors. A desire for social status and power also impels many to exercise exploitative control over others.

Alessandra Brivio: *Your studies focus particularly on life histories and slaves narratives. From a theoretical point of view what is the importance of this intimate approach to the historical debate on slavery?*

Sandra Elaine Greene: Scholars who focus on the history of slavery, like scholars in many other fields, often seek to construct general understandings about the phenomena they study. They strive to stand back from innumerable case studies, to offer an orderly way of understanding of what they study. In their study of slavery, they construct theories that delineate, categorize and differentiate the different forms of slavery. They offer ways to determine what distinguishes the free and the unfree from the enslaved; bonded labour from coerced labour. They outline the factors that seem to influence how different slavery systems have evolved over time and they emphasize the importance of such theories for



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offering a comprehensive analysis of what otherwise can be perceived as a massive body of undifferentiated and overwhelmingly detailed minutia.

Theories are important. They do essential intellectual work. But they can also obscure. Easily lost in the effort to construct categories and generalizations is the fact that slavery is about human beings interacting with other human beings. The enslaved were not simply objects to be bought and sold, used and discarded. They were people, individuals with discreet personalities, with needs, desires, and concerns. The relationship between slave owners and the enslaved was deeply influenced by this reality.

Only by uncovering these individual lives and relationships can we get at a real understanding of how slavery operated on the ground in ways that influenced the entire system.

Alessandra Brivio: *What was the contribution of African intellectuals to abolition and emancipation?*

Sandra Elaine Greene: Very few African intellectuals, either Islamic scholars or those educated in Western-educational institutions, actively argued for the abolition of indigenous slavery and the emancipation of Africa's enslaved population. Islamic scholars were more interested in distinguishing those who could not be legitimately enslaved (fellow Muslims) from those who could be enslaved (polytheistic believers) than in questioning the institution of slavery as a whole, while western educated Christians most often insisted that bondage in Africa was such a mild institution that it should be of no concern to those who wanted to bring Christianity, "legitimate" commerce and civilization to the continent. This makes the few African intellectuals who did actively fight against indigenous slavery a particularly interesting group, despite their distinctively minority status. I examine this small group of African abolitionists in an article entitled, "Minority Voices: Abolitionism in West Africa," that is in the December 2015 issue of the journal, *Slavery and Abolition*. In this article, I discuss the thoughts and actions of three intellectual activists, David Asante (Gold Coast/Ghana), Thomas Hill (Sierra Leone), and James Johnson (Sierra Leone/Nigeria). I note that all three were probably exposed to the proverbs and songs within their own communities that lamented the plight of the enslaved before they themselves (in the case of Hill and Johnson) were enslaved, but that it was their western education that gave them the framework they eventually used to make sense of and articulate their opposition to indigenous slavery. None of them, however, despite their best efforts, were able to counter the social, political and economic forces operating in the region that supported the continued existence of slavery. Abolition and emancipation had to await the actions of various colonial governments, and more importantly, the actions of the enslaved themselves once they heard that slavery had been abolished.



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