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## **African abolitionists in the struggle against slavery in the Gold Coast during the early colonial period.**

Let me start by expressing my gratitude to Claudia Buess for inviting me to speak in this webinar.

I also want to extend my appreciation to Mission 21, the successor organization to the Basel Mission. The Basel Mission, known at various times as the Basel Mission Society, Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, and German Missionary Society, began its work in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in 1828. Thus, it is an integral part of Ghana's history. In West Africa, missionaries often played a crucial role in social developments during the early 19th century. For instance, the Basel Mission was central to the development of several local languages in Ghana. They were the first to systematically document the Twi/Fante and, I believe, the Ga language. This was achieved by training local linguists and creating dictionaries in these languages, thereby preserving them in written form. This contribution is particularly significant for researchers.

Today, however, I would like to focus on the issue of domestic slavery and the ongoing efforts to abolish it.

I intend to explore the role of local Africans in the anti-slavery movement within the Gold Coast, now known as Ghana, particularly between 1860 and the 1890s. During this era, the Basel Mission was notably active in the region, and thus, features prominently in this narrative. The prevailing accounts of domestic slavery abolition in Africa predominantly highlight the roles of Europeans, especially colonial authorities and missionaries like the Basel Mission. However, this perspective is both one-dimensional and incomplete. My research investigates the presence and impact of African abolitionists who advocated for the end of slavery. It further examines how these local activists, if present, engaged with the colonial administration and groups such as the Basel Mission.

For clarity, it's important to distinguish between the transatlantic slave trade, where Africans were transported overseas, and domestic slavery, where Africans were bought and sold within their own localities. The slave trade was abolished by the Danes in 1803 and by the British in 1807. Despite this, domestic slavery persisted in the Gold Coast. Both the British, based in Cape Coast, and the Danish, based in Accra, who had invited the Basel Mission to the region, allowed indigenous forms of slavery to continue. It was not until 1874, almost fifty years after the Basel Mission's arrival in the Gold Coast, that the colonial government enacted legislation to abolish domestic slave trading and slaveholding.

The individuals I am concentrating on opposed slavery in the Gold Coast and critiqued the colonial government's and sometimes missionaries' attitudes toward slavery in the region.

To start from the 1860s; one of the first local Africans to create an argument against indigenous slavery was James Africanus Beale Horton (1835 –1883). Horton was the son of a resettled slave in Sierra Leone where he received a missionary education. He moved to the Gold Coast (the cape coast region especially) in the early 1860s, working for the colonial government. While in the Gold Coast, he witnessed domestic slavery first-hand and began

writing against it. Horton's ideas were influential in the Africa-antislavery network that developed among educated Africans from the late 1960s onward; because he authored one of the first indigenous political books in West Africa, entitled "West African Countries and Peoples; and a Vindication of the African Race," in 1868. This book was widely read by educated natives at the time. In this book, he argued that Africans should stop indigenous slavery and gave suggestions to the British on how to abolish it.

Although he was a Christian who received education from missionaries, he criticized European missionaries in the Gold Coast for their leniency towards domestic slavery. The Basel Mission falls under this critique.

He also proposed to the British administration how to abolish domestic slavery, by declaring towns like Cape Coast and Accra as 'free towns' and then the expansion of the 'free towns' to other areas as well as the distribution of land to former slaves.

Horton's perspectives are articulated in his 1868 publication

He also advocated for self-government in Fante and Accra, actions which led the British to view him as a troublemaker. Many educated Africans were influenced by his book, with some attempting to implement his ideas. For example, in response to Horton's advocacy, educated Africans in Ghana's Fante region (the Cape Coast area) established the Fante Confederacy, a movement for self-governance, in the late 1860s

The emergence of African anti-slavery sentiment in the Gold Coast, particularly among the educated elite in the Cape Coast region, is largely attributable to Horton. Horton was acquainted with James Hutton Brew, who, in the 1870s and 1880s, became a significant figure in the local press and newspapers, within African intellectual circles, and in the growing anti-colonial discourse of that era. Through Brew's influence, it is conceivable to trace the dissemination of some of Horton's ideas into the Gold Coast's intellectual thought of the early to mid-20th century.

Brew was a lawyer who came from a family of notorious slave traders. In 1874, he opened the first regular local print newspaper, known as the *Gold Coast Times*, in Cape Coast. This newspaper was one of the first in the country to be owned and run exclusively by Africans. The *Gold Coast Times* featured many commentaries and campaigns against slavery by Africans and offered insights into how Africans perceived the colonial government and missionaries.

When the colonial government abolished slavery in 1874, the move sparked extensive commentary in the *Gold Coast Times*. James Hutton Brew and other Africans entered into a dispute with the colonial government over the method of abolishing domestic slavery. Brew advocated for the colonial government to: (1) acquire land and distribute it to freed slaves to prevent them from falling into destitution and (2) compensate slave owners, as slaveholding had been a valid form of property right recognized by the state up until that point.

To quote "The government must purchase land or acquire some territory by treaty with the kings and chiefs on which it could keep, maintain and support the slaves emancipated by it, before it talks of the abolition of slavery" or freed slaves "will not be able to find home nor resting place as they will be driven from village to village, from plantation to plantation, until they find their emancipation an incubus on them, and some of them as they travel inland will

find themselves transported across the frontier and resold to the Ashantis from whom they were originally bought’

Therefore, he argued that without establishing means to support freed slaves, such as providing land for farming, emancipation would give rise to new issues.

The colonial government rejected both demands. For African critics like Brew, the colonial abolition of 1874 was a sham. They believed the government merely enacted the emancipation law to avoid criticism in Europe. However, they neither promoted nor propagated it; they even discouraged slaves from seeking their freedom to prevent disturbances. This created tension between African anti-slavery advocates and the colonial government, cantered on the government's refusal to involve them in the process, refusal to distribute land to former slaves, and refusal to pay out compensation to former slave owners.

Some African abolitionists who advocated for the 1875 law and worked to free many slaves encountered opposition from the colonial government. A case in point is David Asante, a Basel missionary, who endeavored to promote the 1874 abolition law and encourage slaves to seek freedom. This, however, incurred the colonial government's displeasure; the governor labeled him a troublemaker and suggested that the Basel Mission's leadership transfer him to a different locality—a request they complied with.

To provide a brief history of David Asante: he was one of the first local students at the Basel Mission School in Akuropon when it opened in 1844. He was not a slave; in fact, he was from a royal family. The Basel missionaries trained him to become a teacher and a missionary assistant. He even went to study in Switzerland in 1857 and returned to the Gold Coast in 1862 when he was ordained and became the first African minister in the Gold Coast Basel Mission with full missionary responsibilities. David Asante contributed to some of the early development of dictionaries for local languages; he was a translator and a linguist, and he joined Johann Christaller in producing dictionaries in the 1870s.

In 1874, when the British enacted the anti-slavery law, David Asante was in Kyebi (Kibi) in modern Ghana's eastern region, where the Basel missionaries had established a station and school. The paramount chief of the town was related to David Asante. However, after the legal abolition of slavery David Asante saw an opportunity to promote abolition. He had been expressing anti-slavery sentiments since the early 1860s but there was no platform to act. Now that slavery had been abolished, he decided to act. Between 1875 and 1877 he widely publicized the Slave Emancipation Ordinances in Kibi, encouraging slaves in Kibi to liberate themselves. When slaves interested in the ordinance visited the mission station, Asante met them, offered shelter if they left their masters, provided employment opportunities at the mission, encouraged conversion to Christianity, and reassured them of freedom from physical or spiritual retribution from their masters. David Asante helped many slaves by providing them with employment and encouragement. He even baptized former slaves, telling them they no longer required their former masters' consent to become Christians or fear customary sanctions. It's unclear whether the Basel mission supported David Asante in this effort. What we know from the historical record is that some European missionaries considered his approach to be radical. The colonial government later requested the Basel Mission to transfer David Asante as he was tagged a troublemaker.

Finally, I would like to share the story of Francis Fearon, an African trader based in Accra during the 1880s and 1890s, who was also an abolitionist. Fearon actively protested the

colonial government's failure to enforce the anti-slavery law of 1874, resorting to secret correspondence with sympathetic organizations in Britain to put pressure on the colonial authorities.

On September 1890, the *London Times* published a report from the Aborigines Protection Society (APS) accusing the colonial authorities of allowing slave dealing and slaveholding in gold coast; this led to a colonial scandal. Francis Fearon was the informant behind this. Despite the British government's enactment of anti-slavery legislation in 1874, its lack of enforcement was apparent to African campaigners like. Fearon criticized Europeans, including colonial officials and some also missionaries (including Basel), for not doing enough to fight against domestic slavery. He argued that Europeans viewed domestic slavery in the gold coast as benign and not harsh. He viewed this as evidence of European racism towards Africans and conveyed his concerns through numerous letters to the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society (currently known as Anti-Slavery International). His extensive writings, totalling more than a thousand pages, are preserved in the APS archives at Oxford.

To conclude,

allow me to synthesize these points with two key observations.

First, there was ongoing tension between the colonial administration and African anti-slavery activists. African abolitionists frequently came into conflict with the colonial government. Although the administration officially opposed slavery, their commitment to eradicating domestic slavery was lacking. This was partly because many Europeans, from the 1860s onward—including colonial officials and missionaries—perceived slavery in the Gold Coast as a benign, paternalistic relationship between master and slave. As a result, African abolitionists (as well as some of their European counterparts) were often regarded as troublemakers. One contributing factor was the diversity of slavery practices in the Gold Coast, meaning that slavery did not represent a uniform experience; some forms were far more severe than others.

Second,

For the most part, the Basel Mission also regarded domestic slavery as a form of paternalistic relationship. In the 1840s and 1850s, the Basel Mission condemned slavery as sinful, yet it did not take concrete action beyond this condemnation. This stance was markedly different from that of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). By the 1860s, the Basel Mission had prohibited its African converts from holding slaves, which naturally led to friction with influential figures like Carl Christian Reindorf, who maintained that African slavery was essentially a paternalistic relationship.

So, despite the presence of African anti-slavery activists within its community, such as David Asante and his cousin Theophilus Opoku, the Basel Mission did not actively oppose slavery to be degree of exerting enough pressure on the colonial government in the manner that the Church Missionary Society (CMS) did in some regions. The Basel Mission assumed more of a bystander role. David Asante, in particular, was regarded as a political extremist for his anti-slavery stance. Comparing the Basel Mission with the CMS, it is evident that the CMS's direct connections with the British Parliament and UK media enabled it to influence colonial

governors (and collaborate with African abolitionists) in places like Nigeria and Sierra Leone in ways that the Basel Mission could not in Ghana.