

Opening the Door of Return

by
James Anani Amemasor

This interview with James Anani Amemasor took place in Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, West Africa. Cape Coast Castle is one of the key fortresses used by the English for the purpose of slavery. Cheryl White, Makungu Akinyela and David Denborough were the interviewers. James Amemasor can be contacted c/o email: jamesmasor@onebox.com

To begin, can we ask you about your role here within this castle ... what is it that you do here? And why do you feel this is important?

I work here at the Cape Coast Castle as the Museum and Monuments Education Officer. This job is very meaningful to me as it gives me the opportunity to express to others the values that I hold dear. It is my role to introduce our visitors to the history of this place, a history that we cannot run away from. Our history is very important to us. It helps us to appreciate what has happened in our country and enables us to then work out how we can forge ahead. Our history helps us to understand what is happening today in this land and assists us in travelling into the future.

Why are the particular histories of this place important?

Here at the Cape Coast Castle we focus on and interpret the events of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. This particular history is very important because it helps us to understand and build upon our connection with our brothers and sisters who are in the Diaspora. It was through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade that many of our sisters and brothers came to live in the Americas and this history is very important in bringing us together as a united people.

How do you go about this? How do you engage with these histories in ways that bring people together?

The history along this Cape Coast is most visible in the slave forts and castles which are scattered along the coastline. These buildings are monuments. They are physical legacies left behind by the slave traders and colonisers. These days they are also places to which people return. Our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora come to visit these monuments to learn about what happened in the past and to learn about their roots. This castle is often their starting point. This castle, in which we are now sitting, was once a site where people were torn from one another. Now it is a site where people are coming together again.

It seemed to us that you took great care as to how you introduced us to the histories of this place. It seems you have thought about what stories to tell, and the video that was shown. Can you say a little about this ...

When visitors come here we try to be humble to them. We take people through the castle on the tour which we have developed and then we show them a video documentary. This documentary describes the culture of our people before we had contact with Europe. It then goes on to show what happened after contact with Europe, the slave trade and

colonisation, before describing our successful struggle for independence. Ghana was the first sub Saharan African country to become independent. We are proud of this history and we share it with our visitors.

And yet, there are still many ways in which our nation is struggling with neo-colonialism. We have not yet achieved real independence either economically or in our own minds. Like other African people here on the continent and in the Diaspora, we continue to struggle to obtain our freedom and independence. We discuss all of this here and we also have a museum which describes the history of this country and the history of our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora, and their achievements.

Why do you think it is important for people in Ghana and Africans in the Diaspora to come together?

In the first place, we share a common heritage and we also have in common the blackness of our skin. Many of our kinsmen in the Diaspora are now turning back to the continent to claim their roots and I believe this is very significant. This tradition has a history in Ghana. Many of our leaders, including Dr Nkrumah our first President have emphasised the importance of making links between the people of Ghana and our sisters and brothers in the Diaspora. When President Nkrumah obtained independence for Ghana he invited people like W.B. de Bois, George Padmore and other key Pan African thinkers to come and live here. These leaders were the link between the Diaspora and the African continent. This was very successful but it only went so far. We draw inspiration from these times and we think that we have to bring Africans, wherever we find ourselves, together as a united family.

It seems that you are playing a unique part in the process...everyday you are immersed in these histories and are sharing the stories with others. What does it mean to you as a Ghanaian to be making these links?

During the slave trade here in Ghana we were all in a state of a stampede. There was no peace on the continent, only total insecurity. Families rose against families, neighbors against neighbors, tribes against tribes. The slave trade had terrible effects on those that were taken away and it also left an indelible mark on Ghana. The traders took the strong and the skilled and so the land was left depopulated and without many of its finest people. The stampede and violence of those times also led to political instability which paved the way for

colonialism. We are still dealing with the consequences of all of this here in Ghana. We are still trying to de-colonise ourselves. It is ironic but we have also been uprooted from our histories. The work we do here is both for those of us here and also our brothers and sisters in the Americas. The slave trade affected us all. We share a history and so there is a need for us to come together.

The stories you tell here are very powerful and yet you walk within them every day. Each day, you walk through the dungeons, telling the stories, and it clearly has an effect on you each time that you do it. What makes it possible for you to do this each day and to do it in the loving way that you do?

I have been doing this work for six months now. It is always emotional and yet it has become part and parcel of me. No matter the situation, we cannot run away from our history. There is a need for somebody to always talk about this and to educate others. I have to do this. I try as much as possible to present the history in the way that it happened so that our visitors can learn about what happened here.

We'd like now to ask you about some of the particular aspects of the tour that you took us on. When you guided us through the slave dungeons they were such desolate places through which many thousands upon thousands of people would have passed in terror and confusion and many others would have died. It was utterly heartbreaking to imagine people treating others in this way. It was also very hard to conceive how anyone survived the treatment they received here, let alone how they survived the middle passage to the Americas. You guided us through these dark cells until we came to the third dungeon where the shrine is in place. Can you tell us about this shrine?

The shrine in the final dungeon is dedicated to the God Nanaa Tabir. The local people of the Cape Coast worshipped this God in the image of a rock long before the construction of this castle. When the British settled here the local people no longer had access to their God so they moved the rock (which acts as shrine to Nanaa Tabir) out of the castle. It remained outside until 1974 when it was brought back to its original location. The shrine, which is now located in the final dungeon, serves an important purpose.

It is there to inform our visitors that we Africans had our own religion long before we had contact with Europeans. The libation, or drink offering, which is poured whenever

visitors enter the dungeon, proudly demonstrates our beliefs and reclaims the space as sacred.

The libation also serves to explain to visitors a little about the religious concept of African people. When the priest is about to perform the libation, he shows the offering to almighty God. He mentions the God's name and then he pours the libation. But the libation is not poured directly to God. Instead it must be poured through the lesser beings. The religious concept of the African was that God created the universe but that God is too pious to be contacted directly by humans. In the religious concept of the African, there are other spirits in the world which are closer to God than the human being. These spirits are believed to be in the images of rocks, trees, lagoons, rivers and lakes. So the libation is poured through these lesser beings and yet God is the ultimate receiver of the act.

Recently some professors of history in Europe have claimed that Africans did not have a history before Europeans arrived, and for that matter that they did not even consider the idea of God. But these were just derogatory remarks. Africans have always had a concept of God and the shrine and libation plays an important part in shedding the true light on African religious concepts.

For us, it was very significant that the shrine was there in the most desolate of places as it offered a sense of redemption. It was very important for me to witness the libation. To me (MA), as an African person living in the Diaspora, it was affirming of our strength as Africans. When other Africans visit here do they particularly appreciate the libation?

The vast majority, perhaps 90%, treasure it. But some of our visitors are Christians and they do not want to be a part of the libation. I am also a Christian but I know that our forefathers had their own religion and whoever visits here I want to make sure that they also learn from our perspective and learn about the history of this land.

The other experience on the tour that we wanted to ask you about involved the Door of No Return. Can you speak about how you introduce visitors to that particular part of the Castle and what it is like for them?

The Door of No Return was the point where large numbers of African people lost contact with this continent. It is the door through which Africans who had been captured walked onto

the ships that would take them to the Americas. The Door of No Return was where fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters who had been captured in wars and raids were finally separated. They could not see each other again. It is the place where people were separated from loved ones and from the land of Africa. It is a terribly powerful place and whenever people stand there they express their emotions. For our sisters and brothers from the Diaspora, this was the point where their ancestors lost contact with this continent and for that reason it was known as the door of no return. It is a place where people express their loss and sorrow and we see some of our kinsmen and women from the Diaspora weeping at this point.

I then take people through the door itself and we stand outside the castle, not far from where the ships would have once been. I then invite our visitors to look back at the door through which they have just come. Painted above the door on this side is now a small sign that says, 'The Door of Return'.

In 1998, on the 1st of August, this door was re-labeled The Door of Return. That was the day when the mortal remains of two African ancestors were brought back from the Diaspora to the continent. One ancestor was from Jamaica and was called Crystal. The other was from the US, his name was Samuel Carson. Their families had brought these ancestors back to be buried on African soil. The remains were brought through what is now The Door of Return into the courtyard and a short but impressive ceremony was held. These ancestors were then taken into the country north of here, where there was once a slave market on the river that was called slave river. This is the place where the captives were washed for the last time before they were brought to the coast. The families reburied the ancestors there.

This event was powerfully symbolic in the sense that the ancestors were brought back to the continent. While these ancestors may not have necessarily been from Ghana, once they were brought to the continent and buried on the continent that is enough for us Africans. The ancestors were brought back and at the same time The Door of Return was opened for the descendants to come back and trace their roots.

This is clearly something that you feel is important. Can you tell us why?

When we stand outside the castle, looking back at The Door Of Return, I always tell my visitors to observe the movement of the sea. When you stand there at The Door of Return you can see the waves moving towards this place. So many people

have been taken from Africa across those waves, but now the waves are bringing them back. Our brothers and sisters were once taken across the ocean but they are now coming back through the same door. The movement of the sea tells us a lot.

When we re-enter the castle through The Door of Return I welcome all my visitors irrespective of where they are coming from. For our kinsmen and women from the Americas I welcome them back to the continent. I say, 'Akwaaba' which means 'you are welcome'.

Our brothers and sisters from the Diaspora often feel so happy when we welcome them back.

For some time they have not been on the continent and we have had some differences here and there. I have deduced that some of our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora do not always feel so happy, so when we welcome them like this and they feel they are a part of us, then it is possible for us to go about sharing peace and even laughter here and now.

So the Door of Return is a very important place for us Africans of the continent and of the Diaspora.

It must be significant for you, having just taken people through some of the terrible aspect of the histories, having been through the dungeons for example, to then be in a place to welcome people back through the Door of Return. What is that like for you?

The Door of Return serves as a reconciliation point for the castle and for our histories. Our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora sometimes point an accusatory finger at those of us on the continent, saying that we actually captured and sold them. And we cannot be left out. We do have a certain blame to share, but I always tell our sisters and brothers that the situation at that time was such that Africans who were on the continent had to fight to save their own skin.

To me, our histories are very sad. We cannot write that chapter out. It has happened. But we can try to come together and reconcile. When our kinsmen and women come back and walk through the same door through which their ancestors left, it is powerful for me and also for them. It is a point of reconciliation. It is a point where we state that we are all Africans – not just those of us who are on the continent, but wherever we find ourselves.

Do English and Dutch people also visit here to try to understand the histories that their ancestors were a part of? What is this like?

When other nationalities come here, like Europeans, I take them on the tour and I tell them exactly what I tell my African brothers and sisters. By the end of the tour I try to talk a little about reconciliation because I believe it is important. Without it there will always be a gap between our peoples.

Europeans do visit here. Sometimes it is rather unfortunate that I cannot see the impressions on their faces. When the people are of African descent I can usually tell what is going on for them. This is not always true with Europeans. Only a few come and talk to me afterwards about the crime that happened here and their feelings about it. I know the majority deep down feel very sad about what happened here. I had some English and some Dutch people here recently who were taking the tour and who part way through decided they could not continue. They said they were so ashamed of what their ancestors did here that they could not stay any longer. I believe there is a need for reconciliation with these people also.

Can I (DD) say that it has been a very powerful experience for me as a white Australian to be here. I have some English ancestry and I have felt shame, outrage and such sorrow at what occurred in this place. I also have an incredible appreciation and respect for the ways in which you are inviting us all to come to terms with these histories. The care with which you are doing this has been very moving to me.

And thank you also for giving me the opportunity to express in words what this place means to me. I have of course only been expressing my personal views. Thank you for letting people know about our Cape Coast Castle. We wish to act as the link between the past and the present. Whatever we have here we wish to extend to our visitors. So, for giving me this opportunity. I am also thankful.

While I (MA) teach African studies in the United States, and am of African descent, this is the first time I have been on the continent of Africa and I am very glad that we came here. The ritual at the shrine, the libation and the your welcome to us were all very important to me. I found myself sobbing as I came back through The Door of Return. They were good tears. When you welcomed us, I said to myself, I feel like I am home. At that point I felt more like myself than I have ever felt. That was very important to me and I really appreciated it.

Thank you so much.