

“We must keep black men of power in our pay”:

**The Reliance of the English Slave Trade on
African Labor**

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On October 10 1781, the Council of Cape Coast Castle reported:

That it is necessary from our present weakness to keep black men of power in our pay, that through their influence, we may live in peace and amity with the natives who would otherwise molest us, knowing we have not a sufficient force to protect ourselves.¹

This statement is both a succinct indication of the precarious and African controlled position of the English in West Africa while being misleading in that it only illustrates the English reliance upon the African elite. The reign of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa saw both the pinnacle and decline of the English slave trade, yet the everyday functioning of this trade on the West African Coast remains relatively unexplored. By examining the relationship between the Company and its servants at Cape Coast Castle and the various Africans of the town of Cape Coast, the nature of England’s coastal presence, along with the active nature of African participation not only in the slave trade but within the Atlantic world, becomes clear. The English relied upon a system of bribes, presents, *dashees* and high paying jobs to keep the elite happy while also employing both free and unfree African laborers to ensure the daily exchange of commodities for slaves.

The Slave Trade Created Elite:

On the Gold Coast, England’s presence extended and intensified the social divisions found within African society. At all ten of their forts and castles along the coast, the Company maintained its relationship with the local African elite through an elaborate system of presents, *dashees*, jobs and customary rights. The slave trade’s continual operation

depended upon free and unfree African labor while the African elite allowed the English to remain on the coast. The weakness of the English position was one reason for the extensive presentation of *dashees*. Most of the money paid to the African elite went to the local caboceers (leader of a tribe or village) and penyins (the elders of the various tribes, states or villages). The local elite dealt and interacted with the Company's representatives in a variety of ways. Upon the arrival of a slaver, tradition dictated that the captain invite the local elite aboard after inquiring into the price and supply of slaves. By presenting them with *dashees*, the captain ensured his ability to purchase slaves.² In 1753, a pawn, the son of one of the Fante's chief priests, desired to see England. The Company decided that the small amount expended would increase trade with the Fante.³

The relationship between England and the African elite can be seen in the important relationship that developed between Cudjoe Caboceer and the Company. Cudjoe was the Company's intermediary at Cape Coast Castle and, until his death in May 1776, played a vital role in creating and maintaining the Company's relationship with the Fante. In many instances, Cudjoe rectified the various *palavers* (disputes) enveloping the Company. In September 1752, when Governor Thomas Melvil attempted to negotiate a political and trade treaty with the Fante, the various caboceers demanded 1,000 bendies each -- a bendie's value was £8. Melvil presented them with brandy and sent Cudjoe in to negotiate separately with each. The treaty's completion owed much to the work of Cudjoe.⁴ Cudjoe benefited in other ways than direct employment from his position. In 1767, when the Company desperately needed laborers, Cudjoe presented a group of free laborers for hire. Early on, they worked hard but they quickly grew lazy and disruptive causing the Company to spend extra money to oversee them. When they were fired, Cudjoe collected all of their wages and it was only then that Governor Gilbert Petrie realized that he had hired Cudjoe's personal slaves.⁵

The importance of the African elite appeared in the moneys and goods transferred from the Company to the elite. In February 1750, Cudjoe, in his position as caboceer and linguist, received £70 coast money per annum, castle bomboy James Hinch £50, messenger extraordinary George Bunissee £48, warehousekeeper servant Essinee £27 and six black soldiers £18 each. In that month, the penyins of Cape Coast received, once a week, their customary flask of rum. On eight February, the penyins received another flask as a *dashee* while on the

sixteenth Cudjoe received an anchor of brandy. The African elite also received money indirectly through the customary ground rent and water custom. In March and April 1751, the Company paid £24 in ground rent and water custom.⁶ August of 1766 saw pay of three and one half gallons of rum, worth £1 13s, delivered to “Black Men” while for September to October they received £32 10s paid in the following goods: iron bars, rum, halfsays, tassaties and brandy.⁷ In 1776, the Council submitted a report to parliament concerning the expenses for the period of 1770-76. In this time the Company paid out over £7426 in “Black Men” salaries while spending over £10,628 on “Presents and Dashees.”⁸ The goods paid to this elite involved a sizable portion of the Company’s budget when remembered that it received yearly parliamentary grants of between £10,000 to £15,000. In 1764, Governor William Mutter requested the following gifts sent for the local elite: three black hats with silver lace and another three with gold lace and six “hickory canes with silver heads.” Mutter added that “neither the cloths, the hats, nor the lace, should be fine, but gaudy and ostentatious.”⁹ The Company’s dependency upon the Africans did not force them to like them.

Coastal African Wage Labor:

While the elite cooperated with the English it was both free and slave labor that made England’s African trade possible and profitable. One of the most important groups of wage laborers was the canoemen as Cape Coast lacked a natural harbor.¹⁰ The Company’s supply ships arrived here, usually late with spoiled or unwanted goods, thus making it the responsibility of the governor to supply the outposts. As West African coastal geography ensured a constant surf beating against the shore, the tantamount problem involved moving commodities from ship to shore and conversely slaves from shore to ship. This was where the canoemen came in. Paul Isert’s journal of his voyage to Guinea described the coastal waters as very shallow, hence ships dropped their anchors one and one half miles off the coast. Isert reported that most Europeans who attempted to take a small boat ashore usually capsized. Only the coastal fishermen possessed the skill, bravery and dexterity to successfully get their canoes through these breakers. This ability did not diminish their respect for the sea as Isert illustrated that before any attempted to bring their canoes through the breakers they followed a simple ritual. The leader of the canoe recited a few words, offered some brandy to the sea and then struck the canoe with his fists.¹¹ The canoemen were not

always successful. Upon the arrival of the supply ship *Phoenix* on 12 May 1762, four or five large canoes were lost to the rough seas. This loss caused Governor Charles Bell to declare that May was the worst time to try to land ships. On 16 June 1762, in another correspondence to the London African Committee, Bell commented that the seas remained rough causing the *Phoenix's* unloading to proceed slowly. He was happy to report that no canoes had been lost.¹²

The variety of uses for canoemen increased their value to the Company and to the slavers plying the coast for slaves. As already shown, one use involved the unloading of the supply ship but canoemen also loaded ships with supplies and carried slaves out to the slavers. In June of 1755, Governor Melvil was happy when the canoemen unloaded the annual supply ship in three days. He then sent the Company's canoemen, his own personal canoemen and some free canoemen to Annamaboe to unload the supplies needed for the building of the fort there.¹³ Around the same time, Melvil reported that the free canoemen carrying water to ships lying upon the road were being paid "well."¹⁴ Another use for the canoemen emerged in 1764 when the Company required timber to continue its repairs at Cape Coast Castle. Governor Mutter reported that to obtain timber Company slaves traveled ten to twelve miles inland where they felled the trees and cut them into planks. Since it was a customary right that the local peoples supply the forts with all of their wood, the Company hired free laborers to load the canoes and then canoemen to carry the timber to the fort. The canoemen were not restricted to just the unloading and loading of ships lying off the coast. The Company used them to send supplies up and down the coast to the various outposts and to carry messages and presents not only along the coast but inland along the rivers. The various ways that the Company utilized the wage labor of the canoemen made them an important element in the creation of the slave trade's profits.

The canoemen realized their importance to the Company and used this to their advantage. The canoemen did not passively allow the Company to exploit their skills but instead they used their skills to profit from the European presence that had been sanctioned by their rulers. In 1754, the refusal of the Annamaboe canoemen to work for what the Company offered forced Governor Melvil to send Cape Coast canoemen to Annamaboe to unload a supply ship.¹⁵ This wage dispute was common as the Company always attempted to pay the canoemen as little as possible yet continually complained of the expense of hiring so many. The canoemen's wages were low, especially compared to the physical

labor that they performed; yet they found numerous ways to profit from their labor. The canoemen developed a customary right to pilfer some of the supplies they transported as they came into daily contact with goods of the Company and English traders. They quickly realized that their wages were minuscule compared to what the English possessed. This custom developed naturally as supervision of the canoemen only occurred when they were either loading or unloading their canoes. When the Company hired bomboys to supervise the “launching, drawing and landing of canoes,” they soon found that the African bomboys continually looked the other way.¹⁶

The records of Cape Coast Castle for February 1751 illustrated the diverse uses for canoemen. Under the category of “presents and *dashees*,” canoemen received a present whenever they fitted out a new canoe or carried messages or messengers. On 2 February, canoemen received one flask of rum and one fathom of tobacco as subsistence while the canoemen who carried the Danish governor and his wife to Cape Coast Castle received three flasks of rum. Rum and tobacco were the most common form of payment but not always: two canoemen going to Winnebah received a keg of tallow and one sheet while a nine-hand canoe going to Winnebah received one perpet and four sheets. The Company kept canoemen waiting on the beach to be used whenever needed and paid these canoemen a weekly wage of alcohol if they worked or not. Canoemen also received pay when they were used to help rectify the almost continuous series of *palavers* along the coast. To pay off *palavers* involving the Company, goods needed to be sent and thus the Company hired canoemen to carry them to those *palavering* the Company.¹⁷

The canoemen’s worth existed not only in their physical labor of propelling their canoes up and down rivers, along the coast and through the breakers but in their ability to move goods and supplies, slaves, messages, people, presents and, at times, to fight. Along with the canoemen, another important element of the Company’s success and stability in West Africa came from their employment of free labor. Unlike the labor of the canoemen, which contained various elements, this almost completely physical labor involved the maintenance of the coastal trading infrastructure. The Company’s dependence on free African labor was based first on necessity and second on the developing racial attitudes of the eighteenth century. In 1753, Governor Melvil wrote “the white laborers are almost all sick, I never expected much good from’em for this is not country for Europeans to work in the sun, even though they are

sober men.” In that same year M. Apperly, commander of the fort under construction at Annamaboe, reported:

These white men which I have at present that are not artificers (which is four) are useless for me as no white man can work at labourer work in this country. The white bricklayers can work but five hours a day and the blacks seven hours in the day. The sun being so extremely hot here; as I find the black bricklayers are the people I am to depend on for building the fort, out of the 23 men slaves Captain Bruce brought [from] Gambia, I've made twelve bricklayers, three carpenters and three smiths.¹⁸

The Company hired coastal labor because of their constant lack of European labor and because they believed that in the harsh African environment Africans could work more. One of the justifications for American slavery justified the use of free labor on the coast. Of course, if slavery comprised the dominant labor force of the western areas of the Atlantic it would seem logical that the Company, so near to the source of slaves, would use slaves exclusively. The Company did use slaves and pawns, yet a reflection of Governor Mutter illustrated the dilemma the governors of Cape Coast Castle worked under.

As to Company slaves, it would undoubtedly be necessary to have a supply of them, but till they could be procured [mainly paid for], free labourers might be hired, and they would come full as cheap as Company slaves, but then they must not be relied upon entirely, for if they once saw you could not proceed without their assistance, extravagant wages and insolent behavior, would in spite of the greatest indulgences, knock all our schemes in the head.¹⁹

The Company did not want free labor to realize its importance within the growing economy.

The Company's labor requirements continually tottered between complaining that not enough could be found or that there were too many who cost too much in wages. In January 1753, Governor Melvil complained of an attempt by the African workers to raise their wages. This occurred at a time when the Fante had reminded him that they could raise a force of 95,000 men -- probably a good time to renegotiate wages.²⁰ In March of 1753, Melvil reported that he had 100 free laborers and canoemen “employed daily” and needed more supplies to pay

wages.²¹ Almost all of the coastal transactions, including wages, involved goods not species. In 1762, Governor Thomas Bell, during a labor shortage, explained his solution to the London Committee: "There was an absolute necessity to hire some freemen as labourers to help carry on our great building, I give them four ackies in trade goods/month, which is no more than the pay of an ordinary Company slave, I am obliged however to give them goods in advance."²² In 1766, the Cape Coast area received an unusually heavy rainy season. Governor John Hippisley reported that Cape Coast Castle was "rotted," "damaged" and "sinking into the ground." This problem was intensified by the fact that he did not possess enough slaves, and could not hire enough free labor, to correct the structural deficiencies. The following January, 1767, Governor Gilbert Petrie reported that "neither a bricklayer or carpenter can be spared without obstructing in a great degree the important and necessary work of rebuilding this castle."²³ The Company was in constant want of labor or the supplies necessary to pay this labor.

African Slave Labor:

The Company found that, while very useful, free labor, be it either African or European, was not their only option. The Company's mission was to ensure the infrastructure and the supply of slaves for the profitable slave trade. The commodity that they ensured a constant supply of could be used as a labor source. The only hindrance to using slave labor was the Company's parliamentary-created prohibition of selling slaves. The act that created the Company allowed it to buy slaves for use in its possessions along the coast. Thus, because of their proximity to the source of slaves, coupled with their ability to buy the best, slave labor became an important element in the day by day operations and upkeep of the Company's possessions. The other source of unfree labor available was pawns but the possession and use of pawns created complications. The Company's slaves and pawns competed with free African and European labor in doing the Company's work yet the Company never found one source of workers to be superior to the others.

An important issue within slavery studies and African history during the period of the slave trade involved the fact that slavery already existed in Africa and that African slavery differed from western slavery. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff examined the nature of African slavery and how westernized slavery prohibited one from understanding African

slavery within its cultural context.²⁴ An important question that arises here is what occurred to African slavery and European slavery when they existed side by side. At Cape Coast Castle, the Company used its slaves in the western manner while the Africans, if they did not sell their slaves, used them in an African manner. Yet, the following examination of the Company's use of slaves shows that, while they viewed their slaves as commodities, the treatment of the slaves was different and more humane than what was found in the Americas. The Company paid its slaves a wage and they were given the same privileges as the free workers. The benefits of employment, coupled with the restrictions placed upon the Company concerning its own buying and selling of slaves, served more as an opportunity than as a chattel system. It can be guessed that, in West Africa, contact between the two types of slavery, caused each to change -- at least locally. The consequences of this contact remain an area where much study and thought needs to occur.

The Company had many options where and from whom it could purchase slaves yet they quickly learned some important lessons that helped them to efficiently employ slave labor. One of the first lessons learnt was that it was better to buy slaves from far away for local use. This was because local slaves were more likely to flee and find protection among family and friends. The Company continually sought to purchase Gambia slaves who they used for a great variety of tasks around Cape Coast Castle but the most time consuming, and important, involved the constant repair and strengthening of the castle. The castle needed to be constantly maintained or the weather would totally destroy it and, concurrently, the Company believed that if the castle appeared formidable to the Africans then the Africans would believe the Company to be more powerful than what they actually were. During the summer of 1765, the Company's slaves busily tore down and rebuilt one of Cape Coast Castle's walls. By fall of the same year, the Company engaged its slaves in "paving the spur" to prevent a new tank from being destroyed by the rain. Their next job involved repairing the south wall. The discovery that the roof of the magazine was rotten and needed immediate attention interrupted this work.²⁵ In 1768, Governor Gilbert Petrie commended the slaves on doing an excellent job in building and repairing the castle especially the three slave carpenters whose skills excelled beyond the Company's two white carpenters. This improvement was especially important as it appeared that the Asante and Fante would soon go to war.²⁶ One last example of slaves being used for castle repairs occurred during late 1770, when Governor David Mill reported that the slaves needed to be paid or he would have to hire thirty to forty laborers to carry

stones. At this time, Governor Mill experienced trouble in hiring free laborers; therefore, he requested that he be allowed to purchase twenty or thirty young Gambia slaves.²⁷

The Company did not restrict the labor of its slaves to just repairing and maintaining the castle and other buildings. In January 1753, Governor Melvil used slaves to unload the supply ship rather than hire free canoemen. While the slaves did a good job, Melvil reported that “other ships can not be expected to be unloaded with such expedition, as it would destroy all of our slaves.”²⁸ The use of slaves to unload the supply ship was an unusual occurrence, as the local canoemen were much more qualified for the job, yet it demonstrated the Company’s willingness to use slaves over free labor whenever possible. The same year, in an effort to keep his bricklayers employed in just laying bricks, Apperley requested that he be allowed to use slaves to blow stones. The Company, whenever possible, attempted to use its unskilled slaves to do any hard physical labor as skilled workers were scarce.²⁹ Governor Mutter, in a correspondence to the African Committee, explained the Company’s policy towards free and slave labor. According to Mutter, the hiring of free labor only occurred when the Company did not possess enough slaves to do the job.³⁰ Of course, the endemic underfunding of the Company meant that, for most of the time, it did not own, or could not purchase, enough slaves.

The other form of unfree labor available to the Company involved the use of pawns. The coastal meaning of pawns remains rather ambiguous even after a thorough examination of the Company’s records. A pawn, while considered as a form of debt peonage, was not a slave, in the European definition of the term, because some amount of personal freedom remained. Toyin Falola and Paul E. Lovejoy have worked to place pawnship into its proper historical perspective as it correspondingly developed with slavery. They contend that pawnship “is related to questions of indebtedness, labor control, gender and capital flows in societies that were only perfectly connected to world markets.” Pawnship emerged out of coastal poverty and was related to the attempt of families to survive at a subsistence level. When a family could not afford the commodities it desperately needed, a pawn, usually female, was contracted to the merchant. The purpose of the pawn was that its labor, now controlled by the merchant, would cover the interest on the debt and continue to provide subsistence for the family. This meant that the debt remained to be paid which, in turn, made it hard to pay off the pawnship contract. Falola and Lovejoy stressed that the pawn was not property,

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only the pawn's labor, and that there existed legal channels to prevent abuse. This was important in that most pawns were held locally; thus their families and friends could easily observe the treatment of the pawn.³¹ The locality of pawnship created difficulties for the Company when it accepted pawns, as they could not be transferred to other forts to labor.

Conclusion:

The success of England's late eighteenth-century slave trade centered on the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa's relationship with both the local African elite and the free and unfree supply of African laborers. The elite allowed England to remain on the coast and greatly benefited from this relationship both directly and indirectly. The laborers, both free and unfree, while exploited through their grueling physical labor and low pay were an active element of the slave trade and in the creation of the Atlantic World. Africans did not passively allow the English to come in and carry off slaves; instead, it was the Africans who dictated the slave trade along the coast. The African elite permitted the English to remain because of the benefits they received while other Africans determined how the Company utilized the coastal labor supply. In all instances, the Africans of Cape Coast, and of the Gold Coast, held the upper hand. By demonstrating the active role of Africans in West Africa our knowledge of the contributions of Africans to the growth of the Atlantic, outside of slavery, changes our traditional view of a European dominated and created Atlantic.

NOTES

1. Public Records Office (PRO), Kew, England. Treasury Office, African Companies: T70/152, "Cape Coast Castle Council Minutes 1770-1781", 10 Oct. 1781, f. 52.

2. Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London, 1788; reprinted, NY: AMS Press, 1973), 7.

3. PRO. T70/30, "Correspondence from Africa to England 1750-1762, Governor Thomas Melvil to African Committee", 10 March 1753, 8. Dashee is a coastal word for presents yet the English context means bribe.

4. PRO, T70/29, "Correspondence from Cape Coast Castle Council to African Committee (London), Governor Thomas Melvil to African Committee", 23 September 1752, 50.

5. PRO, T70/31, "Correspondence from Cape Coast Castle Council to African Committee (London), Governor Gilbert Petrie to African Committee", 31 June 1767, 237.
6. PRO, T70/425, "Cape Coast Castle Account Journal #1 for February 1750/1".
7. PRO, T70/459, "Cape Coast Castle Account Journal #31 for August to October 1766", 15, 47.
8. PRO, T70/155, "Report of Cape Coast Castle Council 1770-76".
9. PRO, T70/31, "Governor Thomas Mutter to African Committee", 27 Feb. 1764, 76-7.
10. K. Y. Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast 1600-1720: A Study of the African Reaction to European Trade* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1970), 33, illustrated the coastal economic dependency on the canoemen. Other works concerning the importance of canoemen to West Africa include Robert Smith, "The Canoe in West African History" *Journal of African History* 11 no. 4 (1970): 515-33; and Peter C.W. Gutkind, "The Canoemen of Southern Ghana" in *The Workers of African Trade*, edited by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Paul E. Lovejoy (London: SAGE Publications, 1985).
11. Paul Erdmann Isert, *Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade: Journey to Guinea and the Caribbean Islands in Columbia*, translated and edited by Selena Axelrod Winsnes (Copenhagen: 1758; reprinted, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 27-28.
12. PRO, T70/31, "Governor Charles Bell to African Committee", 12 May 1762, 1; and, Bell to Committee, 21 June 1762, 2.
13. PRO, T70/30, "Governor Thomas Melvil to African Committee", 9 June 1755, 82.
14. PRO, T70/30, "Governor Thomas Melvil to African Committee", 17 March 1755, 85.
15. PRO, T70/30, "Governor Thomas Melvil to African Committee", 1 July 1754, 63.
16. PRO, T70/152, "Cape Coast Castle Council Minutes" 1770-1781, 16 June 1780, f. 44.
17. PRO, T70/425, *Journal*, February 1751. This is the most thorough journal in that it lists the actual wages paid instead of just combining them under their heading in a lump sum.
18. PRO, T70/30, "Governor Thomas Melvil to African Committee", 14 March 1753, 11; and Melvil to Committee, 22 April 1753, 27.
19. PRO, T70/31, "Governor William Mutter to African Committee", 10 January 1764, 50.
20. PRO, T70/29, "Governor Thomas Melvil to African Committee", 7 January 1753, 53; and Melvil to Committee, 30 October 1752, 52.
21. PRO, T70/30, "Governor Thomas Melvil to African Committee", 11 March 1753, 9.
22. PRO, T70/31, "Governor Charles Bell to African Committee", 24 December 1762, 24. Daaku's, *Trade and Politics*, 37, gives the value of one ackie to be five shillings with sixteen ackies being worth one ounce of gold or the inflated coastal value of £4.

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23. PRO, T70/31, "Governor John Hippisley to African Committee", 13 July 1766, 194-96, Hippisley died during this rainy season; and "Governor Gilbert Petrie to African Committee", 31 January 1767, 232.

24. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, " 'Slavery' as an Institute of Marginality" in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977).

25. PRO T70/31, Governor Mutter to African Committee, 20 July 1765, 136; and Mutter to Committee, 25 October 1765, 149-50.

26. PRO, T70/ 31, "Governor Gilbert Petrie to African Committee", 31 March 1768, 290-1.

27. PRO, T70/ 31, "Governor David Mill to African Committee", 19 November 1770, 393.

28. PRO, T70/29, "Governor Thomas Melvil to African Committee", 7 January 1753, 53.

29. PRO, T70/30, "Mr. Apperley, at Annamaboe, to African Committee", 8 September 1753, 34.

30. PRO, T70/31, "Governor Thomas Mutter to African Committee", 10 January 1764, 50.

31. Toyin Falola and Paul Lovejoy, eds., *Pawnship in Africa: Debt Bondage in Historical Perspective*, African Modernization and Development Series (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 1-6.