Ghana and the Slave Trade: Kwadzo Senanu, Akosua Perbi, Abubakr Siddique Ahmed and Helen Yitah discuss Ama with Manu Herbstein on Radio Univers.

This is an edited transcription of two one-hour editions of Radio Univers's Read-A-Book-A-Week programme. Radio Univers is the FM Station of the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra. The programmes were broadcast on May 21 and 28, 2003. The book under discussion was Manu Herbstein's Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade[i]. The participants were Kwadzo Senanu, a former Professor of English Literature at the University of Ghana; Dr. Akosua Perbi*, Head of the Department of History at the University of Ghana; Helen Yitah, Department of English, University of Ghana; Alhaji Abubakr Siddique Ahmed, Director of Radio Univers; and Manu Herbstein.

*Dr. Perbi's long-awaited A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana from the 15th to the 19th Century (ISBN 9988-550-32-4) was published in 2004 by Sub-Saharan Publishers, P O Box 358, Accra.

PART 1, May 21, 2003

Siddique: We have the author of the book present to help us go through what he has been able to write. We are always privileged to have such an opportunity. Secondly, we are also privileged to have an historian to help us appreciate what the novelist has put on paper. I want to believe that this program is going to be a very important one, unique, as against what we have been able to do in the past. I am Abubakr Siddique Ahmed, your regular host of this particular program, Read-A-Book-A-Week.

Now ladies and gentlemen you are welcome. Manu Herbstein, A Story of Atlantic Slave Trade. I want to go to Helen Yitah to give us an introduction to the book and then I can turn to the writer himself.

Yitah: Ama, A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade is Manu Herbstein's first novel. It was published in the year 2000[ii] and won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Africa region in 2002[iii]. The story has it that while at home with her little brother Nowu, Nandzi, a young girl from the land of the Konkomba is raped and then captured by Dagomba slave raiders led by Abdulai. Her tortuous journey from her homeland to Kumasi where she serves as a domestic slave in the household of the queen mother; and Elmina Castle where she plays mistress to the head of the Dutch West India Company before she is shipped off to South America, is vividly portrayed. As she goes through various changes in name and identity, as she alternates between hesitation and resolution, between despair and hope, Ama, the writer seems to suggest, re-enacts the story of Africa in the throes of slavery and the slave trade.

Siddique: Thank you for the introduction. Dr. Akosua Perbi of the History Department of the University of Ghana is with us and Professor Senanu, the first Ghanaian professor of English literature. We are indeed very privileged to have you. Prof. Senanu has been Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana and Chairman of the Council of the University of Cape Coast; so a very powerful personality, indeed.

Now to our writer Manu Herbstein. Who are you?

Herbstein: I am a South African. I grew up in apartheid South Africa. I studied at the University of Cape Town, left South Africa in 1959 and didn't go back until 1993. I first came to Ghana in 1961. During the 60s I was in and out of the country but I've been living here permanently since 1970. By profession, unusually, perhaps, for a writer of fiction, I'm a civil engineer. My wife is a Ghanaian and my two sons are also Ghanaians. What else can I say?

Siddique: You've told us a lot. I certainly now understand why precision, one could say, is the hallmark of your book. Coming as I do from the North of Ghana, I'm cognizant of some of the settings of the story. Your vivid descriptions draw all sorts of pictures in my mind.

Now Prof. Senanu, what is unique about this book?

Senanu: Well, it is an imaginative recreation of the history of the slave trade and it has been done very carefully; because as the historian on my right is going to confirm, a lot of the events narrated in the novel are linked to historical facts. The fact, for instance, that the Dagomba warriors, having been defeated in battle were at some stage under the control of Asante and had to pay tribute by giving captured slaves; the fact that Africans themselves were as much responsible for the slave trade as Europeans; the fact that the slaves, in their longing for liberty, struggled to free themselves at various stages of the journey into slavery. These are the facts that historians know. In fact, this novel could be called The Love of Liberty. As we read, it becomes clearer and clearer that one of the most ironical things about this novel is that the ship which took Ama across the Atlantic to America is named The Love of Liberty; as it were, Ama seems to embody the yearning for liberty right from the day of her capture in Dagbon, through all the experience at the Asante court, to the experience on the boat and finally on the plantation in Bahia in Brazil. These are the things that struck me about the novel: the fact that the novelist has so imaginatively gotten together the probable historical facts of the slave trade as Africans experienced it.

Siddique: Thank you very much.

Now to Prof. Akosua Perbi. As an historian, you've also read the book. I understand you've done some studies of slavery in ancient and contemporary times. Now as you read the book would you say it differs in a way from the true history of slavery or that it is so close to the facts, that you can just take it for the truth?

Perbi: I think the story is very well told. As an historian involved in slavery as my speciality, I could identify with so many things in the book. I can see how he researched the historical accounts. I would say that it's good because he starts with the beginning, from the stage of capture, which was just one of the several means of enslavement, and then follows the experience of what slave captives went through. One other thing which

fascinated me was the fact that he chose as his central character a girl, a young girl and not a young boy, a man or even an elderly woman. The history of the slave trade tells us that a cross section of people was enslaved: young, old, boys, girls. The writer chose a girl, . a teenager, about to marry. That is significant in these days when we are emphasizing the gender issue. I think the story is vividly portrayed.

Siddique: I think that's an important point that the story is well told. And I agree with that. Now Manu Herbstein, how did you tell this story?

Herbstein: For a long time I had wanted to do some creative writing. I felt that having lived most of my adult life in Ghana, both as an insider but on the other hand, inevitably, as an outsider, seeing Ghanaian society both from the inside and from the outside, I thought I should have a story to tell. I was still searching for a theme when, in the early 1990s, there was news of the events in the North which came to be known as the Guinea Fowl War. That disturbed me. I felt guilty that having lived in Ghana for such a long time, I couldn't understand what was going on up there. When I asked Ghanaian family and friends I received no enlightenment. So I went to a library and I found there a work of anthropology written by an Englishman called David Tait, who after the Second World War was a mature student at one of the British universities and afterwards came to Ghana and went and lived amongst the Konkomba and did his research; and then tragically died in a car accident. Professor Jack Goody took his notes and put them together in a book called The Konkombas of Northern Ghana[iv]. There I discovered, I thought, the roots of the problem in the North, in a history that goes back hundreds of years. I read the story of the conquest of Dagbon by Asante in the early 1770s and the imposition of the tribute. I asked myself what it would have been like to have been a victim of events which had their origin thousands of miles away, in a different continent, with the ripples extending right up into the West African savannah. That was the beginning of the book.

Siddique: How did you pick your characters?

Herbstein: The first chapter that I wrote was one in the middle of the book. I did that because I could write it without doing any research. When I first came to Ghana in 1961 I lived in Cape Coast. At that time, Elmina Castle was being used as a police training college. I had a friend there who was one of the officers. So I had a chance to visit Elmina Castle before it was opened to the public. I have visited it many times since. I go back regularly. The tour guides tell a story (which may or may not be true) of the governor of the Castle selecting one of the slaves for his sexual pleasure. Recalling this story, I placed the central character in this situation. I wasn't confident of my ability to write creative fiction so I sent this sample chapter off to a cousin of mine who is a writer by profession. He said, "You can write. Go ahead. Make a book of it."

Much research followed, a good deal of it in the Africana section of the Balme Library. I found several of the characters in the work of the historians whose books I read there.

Yitah: I would like to ask Prof Senanu: this book won the Commonwealth Prize for the Africa Region.[v] What do you consider to be some of the features that would merit

such an award?

Senanu: That’s a big question.

First of all the coherent structure, the very carefully put together structure. The first section starting from Africa, the next dealing with the Europeans, the third dealing with the experience of being transported on the boat with all its horrendous suffering (and yet that boat is called The Love of Liberty); and finally the settlement in Bahia on the sugar plantation where you experience what it is to be a slave, or slavedom. So I say the structure, the carefully put together structure, from the beginning of capture right up almost to the end of Ama’s life.

Secondly, although he chooses Ama as a central character, he places over and against her somebody else, a man, Tomba, who is as devoted to liberty as Ama is. You will recall that towards the end, Ama and Tomba get married. I think it is appropriate that Tomba, as a male character with all his impulsiveness, is the one who forcefully resists the degradation of raping that Ama had been through; and because he isn’t prepared to let it go unpunished, he gets hanged at the end of the novel.

The third aspect of the novel I want to talk about is the careful details and the realism with which he invokes the localities. There are so many parts in this book where you suddenly begin to realize how very carefully this man has observed: for example the description of the horses on the farm in Bahia.

These are some of the elements which emphasize the imaginative creativeness that we find in the novel.

Siddique: I suggest that we focus our discussion today on the first part, set in Africa. Yendi, Kafaba, crossing the Volta: if you travel to the area you get to know exactly what the writer wants to put across. My question is: we as a people “benefited” from slavery, in other words, our chiefs benefited from slavery. The tribes, or clans and other entities suffered. Madam Akosua, what kind of social structures did we have at the time that made it possible for these powerful chiefs to engage in such raids on their own citizenry? Could they just go into an area and invade? What sort of structure did we have? And that takes us back to Manu Herbstein’s concern, the root causes of the conflict in the North. Have your studies revealed any answers to these questions?

Perbi: I wish there were a sociologist with us to answer that question. In the kind of political setup we had, the social structure links up with the political. When you look at pre-colonial Ghana you have the kings or the chiefs in centralized societies or centralized states. It was much easier for those centralized societies to capture and invade, than if they were not centralized; because there wasn’t that cohesiveness in the non-centralized. It was all over Ghana; if you look at North, Southern Ghana, Volta; if you look at all the ten regions in Ghana you find this picture. Also, I think we should remember we are dealing with two aspects of slavery. We are dealing with a traditional system, an indigenous system, where there was a domestic demand for labour; and then we are

dealing with an external system where there was also an Atlantic demand. These two systems were at play in Ghana and in many parts of Africa during this period.

When the Atlantic trade becomes most important, from the second half of the 16th century, we find that there is increased demand on the Coast and so there is a lot of slave raiding. In Manu's book, he takes one aspect of the sources. You have warfare, you have raiding, you have kidnapping, you have market supply and so on; but he selects one; and that helps us to understand the picture.

Siddique: How do you see the relationship between Asante and Dagbon?

Perbi: We need to recognize the role of Asante in state building. Asante was the last of all the Akan states. Others had been established from as early as the 13th century. Asante was the last, early in the 17th century. And yet, being the last, it was the most aggressive. It expanded North, South, East and West. Prof Adu Boahen tells us that at the height of Asante's power it covered almost the boundaries of modern Ghana. It included Bonduku, Burkina, part of Ivory Coast and part of Togo. It covered not only modern Ghana but extended beyond its borders. It was not only in the North that Asante demanded tribute. It demanded tribute from all the states that it defeated. So small, poor groups in the Volta, for example, might have to send only 12 captives. Every group had to send a certain number of captives to Asante.

Siddique: It reminds me of Esi[vi] in the courtyard of the Asante kingdom.

Yitah: I would like to ask Mr. Herbstein to read something for us that might capture the soul - if there is one - of the book.

Herbstein: Before I do that, I would like to pick up some of the points that have been made. One thing I want to make clear: this is a novel, a piece of fiction. I didn't set out to compete with historians. On the contrary, I am heavily indebted to their work. I found the germs of the incidents, of insights into character, in the publications of historians.

Regarding the question of structure, the name of the book is Ama: a Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The most important word there is the article "a." It's a story, just one of countless untold stories.

The accepted figure of the number of slaves who were taken across the Atlantic in the 400-year period of the Atlantic slave trade is about 12 million (though there is still some controversy about that.) Most of these people left no record of their personal stories. What I set out to do was to recreate what might have been just one of those stories.

The stories are not even remembered here in Ghana. Once some unfortunate, a mother or a daughter or a brother, had been taken, within a generation the memories must surely have dimmed and within two generations perhaps that family story will have been forgotten.

The French historian Claude Meillassoux[vii] says it like this:

“While the slave trade devastated the peasantry, who saw their children, and especially their daughters, taken away by brigands or armed bands to be sold to dealers, it enriched the cabessaires (appointed by local kings to negotiate with traders) and the agents and traders in the towns as well as the nobility, the battle-hardened soldiers and the sycophants attached to the royal courts. By a perversion of memory, the sumptuousness of the plundering kings and their cabessaires has left its mark on the area in its remembrance of the flourishing slave trade and the glories of the past, while the memory of their peasant victims has been effaced by their poverty.”

Now let me take up Helen’s offer to do a reading. Because time is limited, I’ve done some compression. I’m going to read an episode which takes place in a town called Kafaba. If you look at a map of present day Ghana you will see a small village of that name on the north bank of the Volta Lake. The original town[viii], I believe, was submerged by the construction of the Volta Dam. Old Kafaba was an important slave market long before the establishment of the better known entrepot at Salaga, 30km to the east. We know of its existence; however, as far as I know, no detailed descriptions of the town have come down in history. I used descriptions of Salaga, written100 years later. I’m lucky here: the historians will find it difficult to attack my description of Kafaba because they don’t have the evidence.

Before I read the extract, I should explain that as the level of the Volta rose and fell during the year, areas were flooded and then exposed as the water level dropped. These were used for keeping slaves and livestock or for agriculture. One road was left clear, from the town, set at a higher elevation, down to the riverside.

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River Road was lined with small market stalls. In the morning Gonja women cooked and sold thick, sour, red-brown millet porridge; at noon and in the evening it might be grilled bream or catfish or succulent prawns in groundnut soup, served with rice, boiled yams or maize bread. Others offered spicy fried cakes of boiled beans, millet or rice. Young girls, daughters of the caterers, roamed the Lower Town with head trays of roasted groundnuts or foaming pots of honey beer.

After dark, River Road took on a different aspect. The porters[ix], exhausted from the days work, lay asleep wherever they could find a place to lie; but the food sellers were still there, their flickering oil lamps defining the edges of the road. Wealthy merchants from the Upper Town came out to stroll down to the river and to display, in the moonlight, their newest outfits and their youngest and prettiest wives. The men, meeting friends and associates, would bow deeply, shake hands and exchange infinitely protracted greetings and courtesies. A young wife, bathed and perfumed and dressed to show her husbands pride, her eyes expertly made up with lustrous silvery blue-white antimony, would shyly drop her left knee and touch the ground with her left hand. Then she would stand quietly by, waiting patiently for the end of the men's palaver, demurely aware of the

admiration which the intricate embroidery on her wrapper and blouse and the style and color of her head tie were attracting in the moonlight. And she would finger her gold earrings and neck chain, her bangles and her rings.

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Nandzi trudged up the hill behind Akwasi Anoma, her feet bare, her body wrapped in her two cloths, the man's baggage on her head. Any stranger could guess their relationship. If the man ahead of her had been her father, Tigen, she would not have given the matter a second thought. If it had been Itsho, suddenly returned from the spirit world, she would have begged him to let her carry his possessions. But Akwasi Anoma was not her father and he was certainly not her freely chosen lover, dead or alive. Akwasi Anoma was a stranger to her. He was not even, so far as she knew, her owner.

When she was together with her fellow slaves, Nandzi felt hidden in anonymity. But here, as she wound her way through this great seething crowd of people in Akwasi Anoma's footsteps, it was obvious that she was the man's creature. It was obvious; yet it was so commonplace that nobody noticed. Nandzi and her master might just as well have been invisible. Of that she soon became aware, and so doing, turned her attention elsewhere.

The first slave compound they passed at once impressed itself indelibly on Nandzi's mind. Many years later, in another continent, she could still recall every precise detail of the picture. There must have been as many as three hundred slaves. They were confined within a fenced area, on one side of River Road, together with horses and asses, oxen, cows and goats. The livestock wandered freely within the kraal, seeking pasture in the overcropped bare surface. The slaves were chained in groups of ten or twenty. Some were young boys and girls. They squatted morosely, most of them practically naked, exposed to the pitiless malevolence of the sun. At night, she could see, they would have to sleep on the bare ground without mats, many without even the meanest cloth to protect them from the cold and damp. They were clearly underfed.

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Near the fence sat an emaciated woman. A chain joined the manacle on her right ankle to the others in her circle. A child, a thing of skin and bones, lay on her lap, too ill or listless even to cry. Flies buzzed at its eyes and nostrils. The mother saw Nandzi looking at her and caught her eye. Without releasing her gaze, she lifted her flat, empty breasts. Then she held out both palms. That woman could be me, it could be my mother, thought Nandzi. She spread her hands in a gesture of impotence and despair and dragged her gaze away.

Siddique: Thank you very much.

I want to capture this scenario of the past and the present. Slavery in those days, the dehumanizing treatment of our own: how does it reflect in contemporary times? Have we

sat down to think about it, to look at the various angles of it, as a people, to write about it? If we haven't, what lessons do we have to take from this particular book?

Senanu: Well, it has been approached from various angles. For instance, some poets have used the physical presence of the castles on the Coast and seen them as the basis of power. They have used the dungeons that are still there, that we use as an attraction for tourists, as symbols of what the slave experience might have been. Our ancestors were responsible to some extent for this experience. So the experience of slavery and the anguish of it are being gradually brought into the consciousness of a number of our writers. Opoku-Agyeman[x], for instance, has written a collection of poems which uses Cape Coast Castle as a symbol of what happened to us in the past.

But I must say that no one book has gone into such elaborate detail to recreate both the process and the experience of slavery such has been done by Manu. This is why the book is worth careful study. Of course, now that we also have the Danish record of Christiansburg Castle and the slave trade centered around that Castle[xi], there are now documents available to us to begin to appreciate what happened in the past.

You know, through oral history itself there is no easy way in which the experience of slavery could have passed down to us from the 18th and 19th centuries. Some of us do not feel guilty at all. It is only when it is recreated like this that we begin to understand what is at the back of our state of being at the present moment.

Siddique: But to what extent should we feel guilty?

Senanu: Well that, I think, is a debatable point. Nevertheless, if you realize that the historical records indicate that it wasn't only tribal warfare, it wasn't only the fact that there were some centralized states which were able to control smaller ones and raid them for slaves; in some cases families even pawned their own children. There are cases where a man would come and sell his wife. Now I think that if you begin to come upon this kind of record you will see the need for us to introspect, well, have a sense of guilt.

Now I have a personal point to make here because an American anthropologist has made remarks about the fact that Ghanaians don't feel responsible for what has happened to African Americans.[xii] In fact some Ghanaians refer to African Americans as odonko[xiii] not realizing that their grandfathers were responsible for these people becoming slaves in America. So this whole issue of guilt is coming up and I think it is something which we ought to debate.

Siddique: Interestingly, when the African Americans come here on a visit and they go to the castles and they have their cameras on them and they eventually break down and shed tears, I would watch them on television and look at them and I would ask, What is happening to them? Why is he or she shedding tears?

It captures your concern. We don't know, we've never been told.

Senanu: We ask ourselves, should we feel guilty for what happened in the past? I suggest that quite often we are not very much aware of how implicated even ordinary people were, ordinary citizens, families, pawning their children, husbands selling their wives. It is because we are not aware of this and have a kind of amnesia, that the more creative writing we have about this, the more we begin to understand ourselves. Maybe there are some things which are happening right around here now which reflect and repeat some of these things we did in the past. I think it's important for us to take this writing very seriously.

Siddique: In our schools there is a sort of a history of Ghana that we are taught. I doubt if it really captures this scene. Is it a deliberate attempt to suppress history?

Perbi: Yes, I think traditionally amongst us Ghanaians there has always been that issue of you don't disclose someone's origin and it's always been that idea of not talking about the slave trade and slavery. In fact, it's a very sensitive topic and it's very difficult, if you're going to the field, to get people to open up. It takes a while to get people to know who you are, that you don't mean any harm, that you're really doing something for academic reasons. So I think we really need to get to the point as Prof said, when we have more writing and we have more reading. That also helps us. We need to have the information first and know how to spread it; because that way it can help us to know more.

I was part of the UNESCO Slave Route Project for a couple of years. In one of our workshops in Paris, we were looking at how the slave trade is taught in different African countries and I had to represent Ghana. And in fact there wasn't much in the primary school, JSS, secondary only those who were in history and there wasn't much, about 2-3 pages in the textbook. We realized there was a lot of work to be done. Interestingly, it was not only in Ghana; many of the African countries had the same experience. Apart from the U.S. where it was being taught seriously, many European countries didn't either. It is a problem which the UNESCO project is trying to tackle. So I think Manu has done very well. It is a brave effort to bring this out and talk about the details which you don't want to talk about.

Siddique: We don't know our history. At times we get up and point fingers at people not knowing our own contribution to a problem. We've had situations in this country where someone will say, "Well, where from you, go back to the North." But we forget that at a particular point in our history we went there and brought them to work in the cocoa farms and the mines and moved them down to the South. You know, if we don't know this we cannot have peaceful coexistence. Concerning the case of Dagbon and the other small tribes, if people don't know the history they cannot appreciate its role. The onus lies on all of us, I think, to tell the story in a way that would not destabilize, not inflict wounds. It has to be carefully done. What do you say, Manu Herbstein?

Herbstein: I was aware while writing this book that I had to be very careful about cultural baggage. I didn't want to experience the criticism of people asking, "Who the hell are you, Manu Herbstein, a white South African, coming to lecture us about the slave

trade"? I'm told that that is a reaction that can come very easily, particularly on the other side of the Atlantic. So I exercised care in tying to tell the story from the point of view of a central character who was right down there at the bottom of the heap.

On the question of guilt, I don't think anybody living today, not Africans, not Europeans, needs to feel guilty for acts for which they were not personally responsible. What we may feel guilty about is our ignorance. I think, for instance, in the United States, where race is still a sickness in their society, they have totally failed to deal with the issue because they are not teaching in their schools the history of the United States as it actually happened; the history of the genocide of the Native Americans and the history of slavery and the slave trade. The history they teach, of the American Revolution, of the Civil War, is from a European, a white American point of view.

This is a difficult task, of which, as a South African, I am very much aware. For the future health of our society, devising a common history that all South Africans can accept, seems to me a task of critical importance. It is a task which has not yet been completed. The same could be said about the history of the Atlantic slave trade.

Yitah: Mr. Herbstein, you mentioned cultural baggage. There seems to be so much cultural baggage in the story. I'm not sure if it's meant to enhance the story of the slave trade or tone it down. Because there are all these chiefs, the Asantehene in his palace with all the splendour, the installation of chiefs. The passage you just read told us quite a bit about the life in Kafaba at the time. Why do you bring in so much of that?

Siddique: Let me pass that question to Prof. Senanu.

Senanu: What Helen Yitah refers to as cultural baggage is inevitable in a story like this. For the story to be credible it needs to be anchored both to material reality, to locality, to events like, for instance, the whole ceremony and rituals surrounding the death and the burial of a chief. For us to believe that these things happened while the slave trade was on, we must get some of these details in; and for that matter I don't see how we can avoid cultural baggage. It is true that what does happen is from the narrator's point of view. The picture of life in Ghana that a street child would present is bound to be very different from that of the people who ride in air conditioned cars.

Siddique: Exactly. Thank you for your wisdom.

This brings us to the end of this week's program. Next week we are going to deal with the second part of the book that deals with the crossing of the Atlantic. Make time for us next week as we explore this wonderful historical novel.

I want to end with this inscription which appears on a plaque at both Cape Coast and Elmina Castles.

In everlasting memory of the anguish of our ancestors.
May those who died rest in peace.

May those who return find their roots.
May humanity never again perpetrate
Such injustice against humanity.
We the living vow to uphold this.

PART 2, May 28, 2003

Siddique: You are welcome to Read-A-Book-A-Week. Last week we discussed a book by Manu Herbstein about the slave trade and he made the point that the article “a,” “a story” is very important in our analysis and our overview of this book, Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Also present are Professor Kwadzo Senanu, Dr. Akosua Perbi and Ms. Helen Yitah. First we will go to the author to briefly summarize what we did last week to enable us to move forward.

Herbstein: Please forgive me if I start with a plug for the companion website of the book, into which I have put most of the original texts which I used in my research. There are many interesting and difficult-to-find historical texts there. The URL is www.ama.africatoday.com.

There are four sections to the book: Africa, Europeans, The Love of Liberty and America (America in this case being Brazil.) We dealt last week with the section set in Africa, that is Ghana. We talked about the involvement in the slave trade of the ancestors of present-day Ghanaians.

Nandzi (this is her birth name) is a young woman left alone in her hamlet in the savannah. She’s a Konkomba. It’s the early 1770s. Asante has conquered Dagbon and imposed on its rulers an obligation to deliver a number of slaves to Kumase each year. The peace settlement stipulates that those slaves should not be Dagomba. So the Ya Na, the ruler of Dagbon, is obliged to send out warriors to hunt for people to enslave.

Nandzi is captured and sent far away from her home. I don’t deal with her family’s lingering sadness, pain and sense of guilt, but you can well imagine it.

I mentioned also the fact, as Alhaji Siddique has just said, the fact that the book is subtitled, A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade. What I meant to emphasize there was that this is one of some twelve million potential stories, stories of people who lived a long time ago, stories which are lost to us. In a way, while writing this book, I felt I was pouring libation, that I was calling up the memories of all these lost people and saying that we all need to do the same to allow their spirits to rest in peace. And our own.

Siddique: Thank you very much. I believe that somewhere in the book Ama does just what you’ve just said.

Now at the beginning of the second part of this book, Europeans, you quoted Leviticus 25: 44-46. What is the relationship between the Europeans and this quote from Leviticus?

Herbstein: In this quotation from Leviticus God authorizes the children of Israel to take strangers into servitude and to give those slaves as an inheritance to their children. So I'm saying that slavery was authorized by the Bible and the Europeans who came to the West African coast saw no moral ambiguity in what they were doing. I don't know whether they referred to Leviticus, but slavery was the practice of the times and for hundreds of years nobody questioned it. Of course, we have the intriguing case of the African (probably Ghanaian), Jacobus Capitein, who wrote his doctoral thesis in Europe justifying the slave trade in biblical terms; and who was subsequently sent to Elmina to serve the Europeans in the castle as their priest. So I was making the point that these people, if they thought about it at all, saw nothing evil in what they were doing

Siddique: Let us come back to this later, to the biblical allusions as well as the historical allusions. Please read the passage for us.

Herbstein: This is Leviticus 25, verses 44-46.

Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover, of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondmen for ever.

Siddique: How do you relate this to Exodus, that Ama used to read and more or less enjoyed? Is there any literary contradiction? Prof?

Senanu: Well, I think that in spite of this quotation from Leviticus, the entire story seems to emphasize the relevance of Exodus, of getting out of slavery, of seeking liberty from bondage. That is what the story is about. It is a story, a probable experience of one of those who were sold into slavery and had to go through all the stages, first in Africa, then on the Coast, then on ships which took them across the Atlantic and then settled on sugar plantations in Brazil.

Now before we pick up the biblical reference and allusions, I would like to ask Dr. Akosua Perbi to help us to assess the historical reliability of this story. As we read this story, we come to incidents which are supposed to remind us of historical facts. What is your impression of the historical reliability of this text?

Perbi: Last week I made the statement that the story is very well told. I could identify with much I read in the book, for instance: the issue of capture, the issue of the treatment of gender. My own research shows that from the 15th to the 19th centuries most female slaves in Ghana fetched a higher price than the male slaves. It was like that because of their reproductivity, their sexuality and also for production. Across the ocean the males fetched a higher price than the females. The story presents this clearly.

I could identify with all the experiences that this young woman had to go through, the rape, you know; and seemingly being married to the Director General in the Castle. If we read the experiences of women in both of the Americas, it was similar. So I think Manu has done well to capture that. I often asked myself, "How did you get into the mind of . . . "? It shows the kind of research that he did, that he put himself well into the picture. So it's quite well told. It's reliable.

Siddique: Has he brought himself, his emotions, his feelings, into this work? His background, his everything.

Perbi: In fact, I must say that if you read the book you think that maybe it was a woman who wrote it. I could identify. In certain portions of it I could close my eyes and think, "Me, I'm glad it's not me. I can't believe that it's a man who is writing that." He has really put himself in it.

Siddique: Prof. Senanu, could you address that?

Senanu: Yes, I think he has proved himself very reliable in empathising, certainly with the central character. At points, one felt that he was romanticizing this girl, a 16 or 17-year old girl: the kind of acumen that she has and how very quickly she picks up and how savvy she is. It seems to me that the sympathy between the author and the central character is clearly there. I think that it is also there in the fact that at the very end of this novel the phrase that is picked up is "the love of liberty, the love of liberty," and it is the central character who represents this theme of the novel. We can say that she is a heroine of traumatic experience who is determined by every means to get out of the predicament of being subject to other peoples' will.

Now I can underline this by looking at what I would call the transition points in the novel, the incidents that always trigger off the next stage. You can start from the very beginning. Now this girl who is only sixteen years old, who is already intolerant of the custom of getting married to an old man, who enjoys an affair, an illicit affair, with a young man. In fact, this is an archetypal beginning. Manu Herbstein, one would almost think that this girl who deliberately disobeys her parents, who picks up a fruit and eats it, reminds us of Eve's first transgression of the rules.[xiv] Constantly you would find that at the transition point it is an act of desire on the part of this girl that pushes her, even at the point where she is leading a rebellion on the ship against somebody who has chosen her as a concubine. Maybe Helen can pick this up and see other points where it is an act of desire from this girl that pushes her.

Of course, the narration is committed to taking her away from Africa across the sea to America. You can see the commitment there. But you can ask yourself, how does the author get her there? Because there are points where you can say, now she's going to settle. When she's in Kumasi and she has seduced the young king, you are now wondering, What next? And then, of course, the royal household will not have this kind of thing and so she's sold and goes to the Coast. And at the Coast she virtually becomes the mistress of De Bruyn and it looks like this is where she is going to settle. She has

learned English and yet something else happens and she's pushed forward. I think the writer should elaborate a little more on the character and the way she is propelled from one section of the story to the next and ends up where the voice is, "The love of liberty, the love of liberty, the love of liberty." It is the love of liberty that has structured all her actions throughout.

Herbstein: There are several different questions here. My elder brother read the book and he said if he had one criticism it was that the writer had fallen in love with his character. Maybe she is too good to be true. But then, if I had created as my central character a girl who is dull and stupid, a girl who accepts what happens to her without questioning, without resistance, there would hardly have been a story to tell.

And who is to say that then, as now, there were no gifted and intelligent girls with a capacity for adaptation to circumstances? Think of those children in the North who never get a chance to go to school, of those girl children who are born with good genes but are deprived of an education.

On the other hand, every character in the book, I think, has something of me in him or her, even the bad characters. So I'm not writing only from her point of view.

I found Prof. Senanu's insight, his contention that the story is propelled from one stage to the next by Ama's desire, particularly interesting because that's something that hadn't occurred to me. I saw the plot rather as growing from the tension between, on the one hand, struggle and resistance, and on the other hand, adaptation to circumstance.

So in Kumasi she is learning to adapt, to become Asante, if that is possible. She is stimulated by what she discovers about Asante culture, which is very different from her own. She's a country girl from a small hamlet and she's come to a big, sophisticated, city.

Again, when she becomes the concubine of the Director of Elmina Castle, yes, he is exploiting her, he is using her, but at the same time he opens her mind to science, to world literature. This is a device that I used because I wanted her to have the opportunity to analyse the Europeans from her point of view, to see them through her own, African, Bekpokpam/Asante eyes. She couldn't do this unless they shared a language. In the circumstances, that language could only be a European language. So I contrived to have her taught English.

Siddique: Please come in now Helen and talk about her having this desire.

Yitah: Yes, as Prof rightly said, she does seem to have this spirit that cannot be put to rest until she has got what she wants. I agree that what she wants is her liberty. Even when she gets to Brazil and she sees that she is being sold and she becomes the property of the owner of the plantation she still keeps forging ahead. It's like saying, "where there's a will there is a way." And she keeps on planning. Of course, it leads Tomba into another kind of trouble but it doesn't deter her. And I think that eventually even though

she's maimed and physically and emotionally wrecked, I think she still derives some satisfaction from what she has been able to achieve, in spite of the circumstances.

I must say that I also felt quite surprised by the kind of character that she is. I happen to know the area where she's supposed to come from. I asked, is this possible, you know, for such a girl to come from this area of the country? But maybe he wants us to learn that a slave can be aware of her rights and even try to secure her rights, damn the consequences.

Siddique: And influence others, when she became the interpreter on board ship and the way she played the game, virtually making a fool out of the white man.

Senanu: I want to pick up one of the things that Manu said, that there is something of himself in all the characters. I was going to ask him, Now surely, not in the white slave masters, particularly on the boat, who are exploiting this girl; or certainly not in Williams, certainly not in Jensen who violently rapes her? Now, I don't know how far an author, in empathizing with a character, how far that goes, such that he can identify himself even with these wrecks on the ship.

One of the things that comes out for me about slavery or slavedom, as I call it, is that in some ways it deteriorates the moral fibre of those who take it that this is a normal trade. Now when I look at the white characters in this story, I am disgusted at what they have become. It is true De Bruyn is very fatherly, very kind; but what is this lecherous old man doing, you know, when he decides he is unwell because he wants to lie in bed with this girl for an entire working day? So I would like Manu to address this: as to how he identifies with these degenerate characters. (much laughter)

Herbstein: I think the ladies on this panel should comment on that. I'm saying something about the eternal animal nature particularly in the male of the species. I'm not saying that I have behaved like that (much laughter). You talked about this question of the morality of these people and that's an issue that I have tried to bring up, below the surface. All the characters in the book have choice, they have moral choice. Some of them are not aware that what they are doing is in any way reprehensible; some of them are aware and say, well, that's how things are; and there are others who are aware and are troubled by the choice.

Now that is very difficult. It is very difficult to act in accordance with moral rules that are not of your own time and place. A young Ghanaian was visiting from America the other day and I asked him about the climate of opinion there. He told me that he doesn't express his views about the war in Iraq to his American colleagues because it's not worth his job to do so. You know, there's pressure; it's very difficult to speak out and say, what we're doing is wrong; and if it's so today, it was also true then.

Then you have the character of George Hatcher, the seaman who gets killed, a simple country boy (as Ama was a simple country girl) who is not a willing part of the apparatus of exploitation. He has been caught up in events in the same way as she has. And he's a

sympathetic character.

Senanu: Let me say, there's also the doctor, the surgeon Butcher, who apologizes to Ama for this, for what they are subjecting them to. So, although most of the characters, one can say, are reprehensible, yes, you're right about the young man Hatcher; and the surgeon Butcher even takes the occasion to apologize to Ama in the course of their interaction together. And, you see, he is a surgeon who is assigned the task of at least making sure that the slaves enjoy some level of health. It is interesting that he takes Ama in at all so that they can attend to the immediate health needs of the slaves. So in spite of the fact that most of the Europeans are wrecks, we ought to speak up for these two, Hatcher and Butcher.

Yitah: I am intrigued by the issue of interpretation and the way Ama deliberately distorts the message of the white man, making a fool of him.

We have a story that has been handed down that when the slavers came to the North they often got people to interpret for them, people who claimed to speak English. There is this story about this man who was asked to interpret what the white man said and anything he said, the man simply told the people, Relax, he hasn't said anything bad yet. And then the white man would speak at length, and the man would say, Relax, the white man hasn't said anything bad yet. You know, What did he say? He hasn't said anything bad yet and finally the white man realized he was not being properly interpreted, that he would speak at length and a short phrase was all that he heard. Ah! He gave the man a hefty slap and the man said, Now you disperse, he has now said something bad. (laughter)

So I don't know if you heard this story somehow or whether it has something to do with this story.[xv]

Siddique: Prof Senanu, you've made a very important observation on how Butcher tried to sort of apologize. Perhaps you can read that passage from the book?

Senanu: Yes. This is the point when the slaves have arrived in Brazil (p.349 of the text) and the English captain is about to put his goods, as it were, on sale. The ship's doctor, Butcher, is very much concerned that they should not hand over these slaves without his making his own position clear, so this is what he says to Ama. He is searching for his words.

"This might be the last chance I have to talk to you alone. Williams hopes to sell you all here in Salvador to pay for the repair of the ship. I have no idea of what fate awaits you in Bahia, though I cannot imagine that it could be worse than what you have been through on this vessel.

"There is something I want to say to you. I shall carry with me for the rest of my life a sorely troubled conscience. There are many evils in my own country: the English poor are little better off than you slaves, many of them. Yet it is the suffering that you have

endured, and your disfigurement, that will haunt me. And that is because I have played a part in inflicting it upon you. For that, I can only beg your forgiveness. I know that my apologies will do you no good but I want to ask you to hear me out all the same. I am deeply sorry for what we have done to you, to all of you. I know now that the slave trade is an evil business. I shall make my views known when I return to England though I have few illusions as to what I might achieve by doing so."

Siddique: Thank you very much. I want to go to Dr. Akosua Perbi. Just listening to Prof and casting your mind back to the time when Edina, Cape Coast, Anomabu, Accra, used to be a very active coast, ships moving from one port to another, loading and unloading and so on and so forth, would you say our people were deeply involved in this? Were they as regretful, as bitter as in this book painted by Manu Herbstein?

Perbi: A very difficult question. There are no documents to show that, but I think we can infer. . . you know there are two things to this: wherever the slave trade has been practised, whether it is Africa, whether it is Europe, whether it is America, the slave traders have always followed it as a form of business. That is something we look back at and are not always happy about. We should also realize that those who bought the slaves also saw it as business, so it was strictly business: along the Coast, from the North down to the South, from East to West along the coast and in the interior, it was the order of the day. Unfortunately because we don't have written documents to show how any of them might have felt. But there is a question a lot of African Americans ask me every time I have to talk to them about the slave trade and when they go to the Castles: whether Africans didn't realize the brutality of the slave trade, or why, if they heard about it, they kept going on and on. Sometimes I say, "Well, when there's economic gain, sometimes you don't look at all these things." And that is what happened in the case of Ama's story. As I read through Ama, I realized that at a point one of them even said of the owners, "We don't have the authority and we are being paid for the work." In other words, "Don't blame me for anything: I am just taking instructions." And in Africa, the people in Africa will tell you this, too, "I am taking instructions from the chief" (or the king or the raider or the slaver or whatever) "so you can't blame me for this story we are telling.?

Yitah: And this whole thing is tied up with the Dagomba defeat by Asante and the demand for slaves from Dagbon every year, because Ama blames her situation on that, she ties it to that issue.

Siddique: But she seemed to be forgiving in the sense that much as she came into the Asante king's palace and she had a new name, she seemed to think she was not as maltreated as by the whites. So were there differences in the slavery practised amongst us, as compared to the chattel slavery of the whites?

Senanu: I'm sure that Dr. Perbi will confirm that there has always been a difference between domestic slavery, its benign nature, the possibility of mobility, social mobility within the structure, as compared to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and we see this very clearly in this book. And it's there in the difference between the horrendous suffering these people go through, for instance when they are in the ship crossing when there is a

storm and they're being tossed up and down and people die in that hold. So that's an indication of the difference between domestic slavery, its benign nature, as compared to the slave trade as a trade for which even some people regret, but can still say, "Now this is a business transaction, we are just making somebody's capital yield profit.? That's what it is. "The people in Liverpool don't know what we are going through but they are demanding that the money that they have put up in getting this ship to come to the West Coast, that money must be replaced for them."

And for that matter it raises the wider issue of the Atlantic trade and the wealth that it created for Europe and America and the poverty that it created for us which we are still having to face. I mean these are some of the wider implications of this novel.

And I think we ought to be very grateful that Manu has put all these historical facts into a story which is gripping but at the same time underlines the strong moral issues that were at stake.

Siddique: I want to capture what you said about the wider implications of the arms race, the conflict that we have in Africa, specifically in West Africa.

On page 215, De Bruyn says, "If you examine the weapons closely you will soon discern the reason. Warfare is endemic on this part of the Coast. Most of the slaves who come to us are prisoners of war. If we did not sell arms and ammunition there would certainly be less warfare and the supply of slaves might dry up. There is, however, a distinction between the quality of arms required for such local warfare as will ensure a steady supply of slaves and weaponry that might pose a threat to ourselves. Beyond that we do, of course, exercise some discrimination in the choice of our customers; we would not want even weapons of inferior quality turning up in the hands of potential enemies. I believe that the other European companies adopt a similar policy. We have no formal contract with them to that effect but there does seem to be some sort of unwritten agreement of long standing.

"Let me illustrate: we have intelligence that the Asante who are important customers for muskets, have recently made conquests in vast territories to the North of them; and that they are exacting large numbers of slaves in tribute. Pamela, though she is somewhat reticent about her origins, is evidently one of those. Some of those slaves they no doubt use for agriculture, mining or as domestic servants; but many are sent down to the Coast in exchange for European manufactures, trade goods from the East and, you have guessed it, more arms and ammunitions. So the wheel turns and turns."

And the wheel is still turning.

Perbi: Demand and supply, they call it. You know the issue of warfare in slavery is so basic in the historical record. Any country you take, any period of world history - Ancient, Middle, Modern - anywhere you study, warfare is vital to slavery. If you read documents on Ghana written by the traders who came, the Dutch traders, French traders, all of them from the 15th to the 19th century, you'll find that warfare is the greatest

source of slaves. In fact, one of them, Bosman, said, “Wars make Negroes plenty, but gold scarce.” Gold was important from the 15th to the first part of the 17th century. Then American demand made the trade in slaves more important than gold. There was an English trader called William Smith who came to Ghana in the 1720s; he came because of the gold trade. He was disappointed to find that everywhere he went along the Coast, from West to East, it was the slave trade. So he made the point, “Why this is called the Gold Coast, I know not! It should have been called the Slave Coast.” So warfare is vital to it. Of course, the demand and supply becomes an international issue and you want to respond, “What do you want”? When it was gold, Ghana responded with gold and ivory. Then it was slaves; and when the slave trade stopped and the Europeans demanded “legitimate trade,” to produce for export, we started producing these cash crops, which have become a legacy and a problem for us now.

Herbstein: So the wheel turns and turns and we’re in a not very different situation today. The slave trade was an early manifestation of the globalization of European power, European in the sense of the Europeans in Europe and in North America; using European technology to exploit the rest of us; and exploring the rest of the world to see how they could make use of the labour and raw materials of others.

Senanu: Let me take it from there. The other side is that the initiating act is the warfare, the division; the warfare that produces all the slaves. Now we ought to deal with that issue. If we are quarreling among ourselves and taking slaves of one another, then we create the raw materials for the white man to buy. I think it is essential that this element of the tribal divisions, the ethnic quarrels and so on (inter and intra) should be highlighted. As it is the whole of the West African region is caught up in tribal troubles all over again.

Who is to blame? All of us. I talked about the act of desire. One of the things which one can see is that Ama, when she’s captured, thinks it all through and says, “Well, perhaps it is because I ate that meat which custom says I should not.” There is always that coincidence between the individual’s act of disobedience and the intervention of external forces which, as it were, will punish you for not conforming to the regulations of the society. So we cannot just blame it on the external forces; we must also recognize our own implication. When you ask me, “Who is responsible”? I reply, “I am as responsible as everybody else is.”

Siddique: Do you want to address that?

Herbstein: I think it’s clear that the ultimate responsibility lies with the growth of capitalism in Europe, with mercantilism, with the industrial revolution, with the demands of capitalism. Without that, without the European explorations, yes, there would still have been, there was indeed a slave trade within Africa. But it was of a different nature and dimension; and through a period of time perhaps there would have been resistance and reform from within the societies which practised it.

Siddique: We had the Trans Saharan slave trade?

Herbstein, Yes, sure, that's another story. You know there's a great novel that deals with the Trans Saharan slave trade, which was written by Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who wrote it originally in Hausa. It's available translated into English; but that's another story completely.[xvi]

Siddique: Prof brought out this whole idea of desire. Consider the desire of Ama to go back home at any point in time, going back home to the ancestors. And even with her ability to read, to appreciate the Bible, she was making a certain analysis that at the time one would say, going by the book, that she was ahead of her time. Looking at the sacrifices that they made and then the blood of Jesus. I want us to look at that.

Senanu: Let's start with her obsession with her first lover Itsho, who was killed when she was captured. She regards him as an ancestral spirit to whom she appeals at crucial moments. At times she feels that she doesn't get in touch with him but at other times she feels that his spirit gives her direction. It seems to me that this is another important element of the story. When people have been subjected to any kind of traumatic experience and they begin to look inside themselves, they ask themselves, "What can I hold on to"? Here is this young girl from a village and the only thing she has learnt from her community is that outside of any human physical help you have the help of your ancestral spirits. She doesn't even know of any ancestors except Itsho who has now joined the dead. So there is the whole issue of what African slaves hung on to spiritually when they were faced with a void, with trauma. This is one of the things which runs through the novel. It is there right at the very end when, on the plantation in Bahia, the slave Olukoya from Nigeria, who was being trained in traditional religion before his capture, secretly becomes the priest of the slave community. They must get together occasionally to appeal to the ancestors to rescue them from the fate that has befallen them. I think no human being is without this kind of spiritual awareness or yearning; and the yearning for liberty is part of the awareness of this resource which we have as human beings.

Herbstein: I would like to support that with something written by Doudou Diene who is the head of the UNESCO Slave Route Project. He says, "The slaver, concerned solely with the slaves work capacity and hence their bodily strength, was unable to reach their inner life force - that is, their gods, their myths, and their values, which were in their minds and gave them the inward strength to survive, to resist and to find self-renewal in a hostile environment . . ." I think that sums it up very well.

Perbi: This brings to mind something that is very important now in academic study, what we call Africanisms. In North America it's a whole academic discipline where you can look at music, you can look at poetry, dance, Anansi stories. These are things which you can study and know that the roots are back in Africa where the slaves had to find a sense of belonging. There are certain things which must have given them a name, OK, but he knows within himself who he is and what he is. And I think these are things we should also be thinking about, that in the midst of the trauma, in the midst of the hardships, the beatings and the whippings, what really makes you you, is what you think

about yourself internally, spiritually. What nobody can touch, as it were. And that is what has given the Africans this story that now we can talk about as Africanisms. The diaspora effect of slavery is amazing. There has not been any continent that has not been touched by African slaves. We are told that in Brazil alone now there are about 200 million Africans. That is just one country. We shouldn't underestimate the impact of the diaspora and we should also be sensitive when we think of it.

Senanu: Our time is almost over. The religious and spiritual aspect of all of this is coming out now. It is quite clear that when African Americans now look at religious phenomena, they relate back to their ancestors, going back into themselves and trying to find out what they can hold on to when the white man's religion is not any kind of rescue for them. And so this, this search turns itself into jazz for instance. Anybody who understands jazz music must know that this is coming from the soul of people who are yearning for something they can hold onto. These are the manifestations of the inner life of these people who had gone through traumatic experiences and yet who were able to surmount that experience by calling on resources right back home on the Continent where they had their roots.

Siddique: Prof, what would you say to our listeners, would you approve this book? And to our ladies especially, do you think we should go and get a copy and read it, and if you think so, why?

Yitah: I think that everybody should go and get a copy of this book because it is clear from all that we have said that the book has a lot in it for everyone, no matter your inclinations or your background, whatever. If you are thinking about slavery and about its effects today, the book has something in it for you. And it even takes us beyond the borders of our country to other continents and gives us glimpses of what the rippling effects of this slavery are, you know. So I think this is one good reason. But as a literary person, I think that there is another reason which is that the book is replete with literary merit. We talk about a well constructed story, we talk about the characters, you know, who would emboss themselves on your mind, like Ama, the heroine, and so on. I think these are good enough reasons to read it.

Perbi: I think as a historian, you've done my work for me. It is important for us all to know some history because history is a means of identity and it is a means of knowledge. I think this is an opportunity for me to tell everybody to know some of your history so that when people are talking, you can defend yourself.

Siddique: Now, the novelist himself, the author of the book, Manu Herbstein.

Herbstein: Unfortunately, Ama doesn't have a trade publisher. It's been submitted to many publishers, particularly in Britain and America but also in Switzerland and the Netherlands. No trade publisher so far has been prepared to publish it. So it's been published in what is called Print-On-Demand. There are a few copies on sale in Accra. I

think the Legon bookshop has run out, there is a bookseller in Osu, Riyas, who will be getting some more copies in. Otherwise, you have to have a credit card and order from one of the on-line booksellers like Amazon.

Siddique: We only want people to read about our history. What they have done or what we together have done. Listeners, I have enjoyed this book and think it is indeed a very good one. You have everything that you need to know. Some of the conflicts that we have today in this particular country of ours, you'll get to know how it all started and why we should really sit down with the people to look at our society very well and structure it for posterity.

I want to thank Prof Senanu for being in the studio for the first time. We have enjoyed his company. He has given us great insights. Thank you all for coming.

[i] Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade by Manu Herbstein paperback - 450 pages; published by [e-reads]; ISBN: 1585869325 companion web-site: http://www.ama.africatoday.com/ Winner of the 2002 Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Book http://www.commonwealthwriters.com/ Nominated for the 2003 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. www.impacdublinaward.ie

[ii] Actually 2001. The date given in some copies of the paperback is incorrect.

[iii] Ama also won the overall Best First Book Prize, the first time this had gone to an African author in the 14-year (now 15-year) history of the Prize.

[iv] Tait, David (ed Jack Goody), The Konkombas of Northern Ghana, Oxford University Press, 1961

[v] See note 3.

[vi] Esi's father is a Fante prisoner of war, who is enlisted in the Asante army and subsequently rewarded for his valour with land and an Asante wife. MH

[vii] The Slave Route, UNESCO. http://www.unesco.org/culture/dialogue/slave/html_eng/origin.shtml

[viii] At approx. 8o27'N, 0o47'W

[ix] These are the porters who have been carrying head loads of kola from the canoes at the river bank up to the market in the town. MH

[x] Opoku-Agyeman, Kwadwo, Cape Coast Castle, A collection of poems, Afram Publications Ghana Ltd, Accra, 1996. ISBN 9964 70 170 5

[xi] See, for instance, chapter 4 of Leif Svalesen's The Slave Ship Fredensborg , translated by Pat Shaw and Selena Winsnes, with an introduction by Dr. Akosua Perbi,

Sub-Saharan Publishers, Accra, 2000, ISBN 9988-550-21-9/9988-550-23-5; also Thorkild Hansen's Coast of Slaves, translated by Kari Dako, Sub-Saharan Publishers, Accra, 2002, ISBN9988-550-31-6

[xii] This may be a reference to Bruner, Edward M., Tourism in Ghana: Representation of Slavery and the Return of the Black Diaspora, American Anthropologist, Journal of the American Anthropological Association, Volume 98, Number 2, June 1996, 290-304. (See abridged version on this web-site.)

[xiii] [adonke] - slave. Christaller's definition: a native from the interior, such as were formerly brought thence and sold as slaves in the countries nearer the coast.

[xiv] Tait (op. cit) (writing, of course, about custom in the mid-20th century) tells us that from puberty Bekpokpam girls are allowed full sexual freedom by their parents (within the limits of incest) until they marry. A man may visit the girls home and sleep with her in her mothers room. If the girls father is there, the room may not be available! Also the guinea corn grows tall and thick. Such affairs are risky and may lead to killings and feuds. Girls are discreet about mentioning their lovers and do not speak to them in the market. Many women are pregnant by a lover when they go to their husband. Contraception is not practised. The child belongs to the husband, not the father. MH

[xv] No, I've never heard this particular story. However, I do recall reading, more than fifty years ago, a short story in the collected works of the Afrikaans poet and story teller, C. J. Langenhoven. The story was called Die Tolk (The Court Interpreter) and the humour has a similar source, in that the reader or listener knows more than the wielder of power, in Langenhoven's case, the white Magistrate. That might have been at the back of my mind as I wrote. MH

[xvi] Balewa, Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa, Shaihu Umar, A Novel About Slavery In Africa, Markus Wiener, 1989. (First published in Hausa in 1955)