3-1-2008

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Tales of Slavery: Narratives of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Enslavement in Africa

University of Toronto, May, 20-23, 2009
Call for Proposals

The export of men, women and children from Africa to the America lasted over four hundred years and touched most communities in Africa, directly or indirectly. We now know a great deal about this trade: its gender and age composition, the ways in which individuals and communities responded to the trade, the extent to which warfare, kidnapping, legal mechanisms, economic processes and religious institutions generated a pool of people to be bought and sold. We know about resistance, the formation of slave-trading states and the increased use of slaves within Africa. We have some autobiographical accounts by those who were literate or achieved literacy after their capture, but these are few. Most of the sources used to write the history of slavery in Africa are European, but the memories of the external and internal slave trade remain and are embedded in African ritual, song, and memory.

We are inviting proposals dealing with the exploration of new research methodologies and the re-examination of old ones. Our major objective is to make available to students and scholars African sources on slavery, enslavement, the slave trade and to improve our understanding of these documents. The conference will deal with all parts of Africa and is open to any methodology that taps African voices. Our goal is to seek out and explore newer methodologies, to find more African sources, and if possible, to look for the voices of the slaves themselves. We also want to make these sources more widely available. We can accept sources originating from other continents only if they involve memories of Africa and the trade from Africa.

This conference follows on one organized at Bellagio, Italy in September 2007 and entitled Finding the African Voice: Narratives of Slavery and Enslavement. It explored a wide range of different kinds of sources: oral traditions, life histories recorded by missionaries, court documents from both colonial and Islamic courts, petitions to colonial authorities, proverbs, folk-lore, music, and personal correspondence. Because of space limitations at Bellagio, we limited ourselves to West and Northwest Africa and to the historic past. We are now interested in opening up a wider range of questions, for example, the impact of the slave experience on witchcraft belief and on contemporary representation of political power, personal and social memories relating to trajectories of emancipation/resubordination in colonial and postcolonial times, and narratives of contemporary enslavement. We are also interested in a fuller exploration of
music, dance, proverbs and folklore and would like to collect as many life histories as possible from the point of view of descendants of slaves and of former masters and slave-dealers.

Interested persons should submit a title and an abstract to slavery.tales@utoronto.ca. All participants will be expected to post on the conference web-site a month before the conference a copy of their papers and at least one document on which the paper is based. Our objective is to publish both a collection of sources and a volume of essays.

We hope to have funds available to bring scholars from Africa, including graduate students working on questions of slavery. Other participants will be expected to find their own funding.