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Oldendorp's "Amina"

Ethnonyms, History, and Identity in the African Diaspora

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Abstract

This article seeks both to model an approach to African and diasporic ethnonyms and to contribute to a long-running debate on the significance of "Mina"/ "Amina," an ethnonym that was widespread throughout the Americas. In a narrow sense, it argues that the term "Amina," as used in one key source, C.G.A. Oldendorp's history of the Moravian missions in the Danish Caribbean, signified the Asante state, specifically, and not the broader pan-Akan identity implied in some sources, nor the narrower "Aquambo" identity that emerges from others. More broadly, it proposes that the proper historical contextualization of ethnonyms is essential to understanding the process of identity formation in the Diaspora.

Keywords

African Diaspora – Asante – Caribbean history – transatlantic slave trade – Oldendorp, C.G.A. – slave narratives

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1 The Problem of "Mina" / "Amina"

Among the interpretive problems confronted by African Diaspora historians is how to handle the plethora of African ethnonyms appearing in the historical record. Responses have varied greatly. Some scholars have taken them, literally and ahistorically, as fixed indicators of identity, transferred intact from Africa to the Americas, while others, noting the sources' highly mediated nature, have dismissed them as meaningless. Most have taken a position somewhere between these two poles, treating ethnonyms as potentially revealing but challenging historical artifacts. Too often, however, even conscientious scholars have engaged African and diasporic ethnonyms without sufficient attention to the source material or to their African and American contexts. This article seeks both to model an approach to African and diasporic ethnonyms and to contribute to a long-running debate on the significance of "Mina"/ "Amina," an ethnonym that was widespread throughout the Americas. In a narrow sense, we argue that the term "Amina," as used in one key source, C.G.A. Oldendorp's history of the Moravian missions in the Danish Caribbean, signified the Asante state, specifically, and not the broader pan-Akan identity implied in some sources, nor the narrower "Aquambo" identity that emerges from others. More broadly, we propose that the proper contextualization of ethnonyms is essential to understanding the process of identity formation in the Diaspora. What also has to be taken into consideration is how knowledge spread or did not and what was accepted as historical reality as opposed to conjecture.

The term "Mina" / "Amina" has troubled historians of the Diaspora for a long time. The earliest scholars instantly made the connection to the Castelo de São Jorge da Mina, the Portuguese fort on the Gold Coast of West Africa, constructed by Diogo de Azambuja in 1482, and known after the Dutch takeover of 1637 as "Elmina." The fort was the first European construction south of the Sahara and a prominent marker for ships. Despite attribution to São Jorge, the term and its derivative, "Elmina" may have derived from Arabic, "al mina," which referred to a port, harbor or anchorage. Subsequently, the term has often been thought to refer to the "mines" of gold in the interior, although in fact most gold from the region came from alluvial deposits, not mines, and there were no mines near Elmina.[1]

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1 P.E.H. Hair, *The Founding of the Castelo de São Jorge da Mina: An Analysis of the Sources* (Madison: African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin, 1994). For the possible Arabic origins, see Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Arabic*, 3rd ed. J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960), 936. The term was common in North Africa and the Middle East, as at the Spanish enclave at Ceuta on the Moroccan coast, the Roman site near Tyre, in the estu-

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There are differing interpretations of how the term "Mina" came to have ethnographic significance. For Raimundo Nina Rodrigues, writing about Bahia between 1890 and 1905, the relationship between the fort and the ethnonym was straightforward: The people he called Minas came from the region around Elmina. The castle "was such an emporium for this commerce [in captives] that the terms "African" and "Mina" became synonymous." Fernando Ortíz likewise connected the name with the castle, which he noted was "the oldest (1470) [*sic*] slave factory." For Ortíz, however, the story was more complicated. Cuba's Minas, he argued, actually came from hundreds of miles east of the fort, a discrepancy he explained by referring to the region's history. He noted that "great numbers of minas were dominated by their eastern neighbors, the *achantis*," without explaining why he considered Asante to lie to the east rather than the north of where the "Minas" were located. Ortiz did note that "in Cuba we have a cabildo *mina-popó del Costa de Oro*, which further clarifies its origin." Ortíz, in other words, seems to have located the Mina on the eastern Gold Coast and in the western Bight of Benin, or "Slave Coast."[2]

Modern scholars have advanced four broad interpretations of the meaning of Mina/Amina in the western hemisphere. The first of these locates Mina/Amina on the eastern Gold Coast/Slave Coast, linked to Gbe-speakers and others in and to the east of the Volta. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, working from her Louisiana material as well as other sources, such as Alonso de Sandoval's account of Africans in seventeenth-century Cartagena, saw the term as encompassing primarily Gbe-speakers. James Sweet, focusing on Brazil, argues that Mina was really a "meta-ethnicity," or broad umbrella covering the Bight of Benin, and Mariza de Carvalho Soares, working on Rio de Janeiro, has documented a shift, with "Mina" applied largely to Gbe-speakers in the eighteenth century but coming to include Yoruba-speakers in the nineteenth.[3]

ary of Orontes River in Turkey, and other places. We wish to thank Ismael Montana for this insight.

2 Raimondo Nina Rodrigues, *Os Africanos do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Centro Edelstein de Pesquisas Sociais, 2010), 116, online at http://books.scielo.org; Fernando Ortíz, *Hampa Afro-Cubana: Los Negros Esclavos* (Havana: Revista Bimestre Cubana, 1916), 43.

3 Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 111–120; Robin Law, "Ethnicities of Enslaved Africans in the Diaspora: On the Meanings of "Mina" (Again)," *History in Africa* 32 (2005), 248, 267; James Sweet, *Domingos Álvares: African Healing and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 16; Mariza de Carvalho Soares, "From Gbe to Yoruba: Ethnic Change and the Mina Nation in Rio de Janeiro," in *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World*, eds. Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2004), 231–247. There is a parallel debate over the meaning of "Coromantee," which is not addressed in this article. For a recent treatment, see Vincent

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The second position, advanced most explicitly by Kwasi Konadu but implicitly accepted by many others, views "Mina" (and its close relative, "Coromantee") simply as a European name for "Akan" and therefore of little significance as a category of identity on its own terms. In other words, the people identified and identifying as "Mina" were in reality Akan, and the correspondence between language (Twi) and culture was very close.[4] A third perspective has emerged that emphasizes historical shifts in Africa. Robin Law argues that while Mina generally signified Gold Coast origins, eastward migration into the Ga-Adangbe-speaking area and the Bight of Benin brought new layers of significance. Walter Rucker similarly acknowledges the preponderance of Akan speakers among those identified (and identifying) as "Mina" (and "Coromantee") on the western Gold Coast, but sees the term as encompassing also Ga and Ewe-speakers to the east. Unlike Konadu, Rucker does not conflate language, culture, and identity and sees all of these categories as dynamic, rather than static. Finally, some scholars, including non-Africanists like Philip Morgan and Richard Price, but also Africanists like David Northrup, contend that ethnonyms hold little or no historical resonance and reflect little more than European designations, which ultimately served as brand-names and trademarks for slave traders. In terms of the evolution of meanings, the significance of the original reference to the Arabic term for port, harbor or anchorage seems to have been lost.[5] These four interpretations also need to take into account how knowledge was disseminated, what was actually known as opposed to conjured, and variations in perception depending upon whether information came from a firsthand observer or from an account that was fabricated from hearsay information and plain guess work. Oldendorp's terminology is a good starting point in deciphering what was known and when. This confirmation of knowledge not only applied to European foreigners in Africa but also to merchants and communities in Africa.

Scholars of the Danish Caribbean have taken a special interest in the Amina, as they called them. Although the Danes only occupied a few small islands,

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Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 85–92.

4 Here, we use the terms "Akan" and "Twi" broadly to include both coastal (Fante) people and residents of the interior. Well into the nineteenth century, the terms "Akan" and "Twi" applied primarily to people living inland from the Gold Coast and did not include coastal groups like the Fante.

5 Kwasi Konadu, *The Akan Diaspora in the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6–12; Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550–1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991); Walter C. Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas: Identity, Culture, and Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 126.

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the rich documentary record reveals the prominence of Amina. As a result of the Danish focus on Osu, in modern-day Accra, and western Bight of Benin, they inevitably grappled with the question of Amina/Mina origins and identity. Danish interest in the Amina came to the fore at the time of the massive 1733–1734 revolt on the island of St. John, which was associated with the enslaved population identified as Amina. Early interpretations of the uprising tended to connect the Amina rebels with Elmina and recognized them as Akan, sometimes assuming a connection with Asante.[6] Later, more carefully trained Africanists contended that the "Amina" rebels were in reality "Aquambos," as the Danish called people from the Akwamu state, inland from Accra. Sandra Greene and Ray Kea in particular have argued that the Akyem conquest of Akwamu in 1730 resulted in the deportation of high-ranking political figures in Akwamu who were sold into slavery after the Akyem victory. They were identified in the Danish Caribbean as Amina and are considered to have led the rebellion.[7]

Most Danish Caribbean scholarship now accepts this linkage of the term "Amina" with Akwamu at the moment of the rebellion, although some historians have argued that in the decades following the uprising it morphed into a meta-ethnic term for all Akan-speakers. Louise Sebro has recently proposed that "Amina was a creolized category … that could function as a collective name for people who are linguistically and ethnically related but do not come from the polity." For Sebro, however, this postulation is just a starting point. As a category, Amina was extremely mutable, passing from pan-Akan meta-ethnicity among African-born residents of the Danish islands to signifier of a purely affective connection with the Gold Coast, which could be claimed even by those who never set foot in Africa. Amina in the Danish Caribbean were, as Sebro's title implies, "between African and Creole."[8] Most recent interpre-

6 Pauline Holman Pope, "Cruzan Slavery: An Ethnohistorical Study of Differential Responses to Slavery in the Danish West Indies," Ph.D. diss., University of California at Davis, 1969, 27, 91–93. Pope's analysis suffers from a flawed understanding of African history and geography.

7 Sandra E. Greene, "From Whence They Came: A Note on the Influence of West African Ethnic and Gender Relations on the Organizational Character of the 1733 St. John Slave Rebellion," in G. Tyson and A. Highfield, eds., *The Danish Slave Trade and its Abolition* (St. Croix: Virgin Islands Humanities Center, 1994), 47–67; Ray A. Kea, "'When I die, I shall return to my own land': An 'Amina' Slave Rebellion in the Danish West Indies, 1733–1734," in *The Cloth of Many Silks: Papers on History and Society of Ghanaian and Islamic in Honor of Ivor Wilks*, eds. J. Hunwick and N. Lawler (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 175–180. J.E. Petersen, *Slaveoprøret på Skt. Jan i 1733: En Strukturel og Komparative Analyse* (M.A. thesis, Århus Universitet, 1988).

8 Louise Sebro, "Mellem Afrikaner og Kreol: Etnisk Identitet og Social Navigation i Dansk Vestindien, 1730–1773," Ph.D. diss., Lund University, 2010, 84.

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tations suggest “Mina” had no fixed meaning. Its significance varied greatly across both time and space, and probably even among individual informants and observers. The term was subject to the clash between what was historical reality, that is what actually happened, as opposed to conjecture and generalizations that were based on a lack of information.

C.G.A. Oldendorp’s *History of the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, the various versions of which were written in the 1760s and 1770s, is an unusually rich source on the changing meanings of ethnic identification.[9] For Americanists, the detail in Oldendorp’s volume is unmatched, especially for the eighteenth century. No other source provides the same amount of information on the background, languages, religions, and cultures of captive Africans. For Africanists and for historians of the slave trade, Oldendorp’s work is equally rich for understanding the resettlement of enslaved people from the Bight of Benin and the Gold Coast in the eighteenth century, at the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from this region of Africa. It can be hypothesized here that the information gleaned from Danish sources, and particularly Oldendorp, has implications for the region, even though the British, Portuguese, Dutch, and French trades were much more substantial. Because of the proximity of European castles and the commercial exchange among them, there is every reason to believe that perceptions of African political and commercial interaction were similar.

Although Oldendorp’s text is a veritable cornucopia of African and diasporic ethnonyms, “Amina,” in many respects, emerges at its center, receiving more attention and references than any other. As with “Mina” in general, historians have come to different conclusions regarding Oldendorp’s specific usage. Some have seen it as more or less synonymous with “Akan.”[10] Others, especially those who have focused on the 1733–1734 St. John rebellion, have viewed it as a more circumscribed reference to a state, with Akwamu as the most probable candidate.[11] These are attempts at making sense out of conjecture that derived from incomplete information as to the meaning of the reference to Amina.

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9 Originally published as C.G.A. Oldendorp, *Geschichte der Mission der Evangelischen Brüder auf den Caraibischen Inseln S. Thomas, S. Croix, und S. Jan* (Barby and Leipzig: Christian Friedrich Laur, 1777) but often referred to in the abridged English version; see J.J. Bossard [*sic*], ed., *C.G.A. Oldendorp’s History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John* (Ann Arbor: Koroma Publishers, 1987). Also see Gudrun Meier, “Preliminary Remarks on the Oldendorp Manuscripts and Their History,” in *Slave Cultures and Cultures of Slavery*, Stephan Palmié, ed., (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 67–71.

10 Konadu, *Akan Diaspora*, 101.

11 Greene, “From Whence They Came”; Kea, “When I die.”

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Oldendorp had his own understanding of the term in the 1760s. Based on a close reading of the text, one contextualized within African and Caribbean history, we argue that Oldendorp's "Amina" actually refers specifically to the Asante state, not to Akwamu or the Akan more generally. The implications surrounding the interpretation of Oldendorp's text, both for Africanists and Americanists, relates to understanding changing political conditions in Africa and the impact on identity formation under slavery in the Americas. Despite the hazards of working with African ethnonyms in western documents, exploring what Oldendorp meant in reference to "Amina" exemplifies a methodology that contextualizes terminology. It is assumed that terms had meaning at the time that conveyed gradients of importance, but to understand what was important at the time, it is necessary to examine exact usage and timing to uncover what terms actually referred to.[12] This also allows an appreciation of what was known and who was not privy to the actual context but instead had to rely on conjecture.

2 Interpreting African Ethnonyms from the Era of Atlantic Slavery

Most scholars who work with Oldendorp and other texts containing precolonial African ethnonyms use them to shed light on the question of identity in the diaspora and the origins of the enslaved population in Africa. Ethnonyms, in other words, offer a window into ethnicity, which we might define as a discourse of difference with language as the primary referent, analogous to the body/biology for race. There are of course many additional categories of identity and difference in Africa, past and present: gender; age grade; rank (noble, commoner); occupational caste; religion; political allegiance; status as enslaved or free; locality; and clan. For those reasons, it is important not to reify ethnicity as an essential, defining category of identity.[13]

Moreover, ethnicity and ethnonyms—signified and signifier—are not the same things. To evaluate the former, to decode the meaning of "Amina" in a particular locale, requires a prior critical evaluation of the ethnonym itself as used in the sources where it appears. "Amina" certainly did signify something in

12 Paul E. Lovejoy, "Methodology through the Ethnic Lens," in *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed*, eds. Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 105–117; idem, *Slavery in the Global Diaspora of Africa* (London: Routledge, 2019), 195–218.

13 On the many problems and complexities connected with African ethnonyms, see *African Ethnonyms and Toponyms* (Paris: UNESCO, 1984).

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the Danish Caribbean, but that meaning changed and varied among those who recorded it. This point, which can be applied to the vast array of sources containing African ethnonyms—autobiographical narratives, travelers' accounts, government registers, runaway slave advertisements—is not particularly innovative. We simply suggest that a thorough internal and external criticism of the sources containing ethnonyms occur before there is any attempt at interpretation, a fundamental task for historical analysis.

There has been some suggestion in the literature that African ethnonyms, especially those that appear in New World sources, are not meaningful, that they are simply convenient designations used by slave traders. Philip Morgan, for example, asks whether the focus on African regional cultures in the Diaspora places historians "in danger of adopting the hermeneutics of the observer" and cautions against placing too much stock in "the ethnic lexicon of New World planters and slave traders." For Morgan and others, ethnonyms reveal little useful information about the African heritage or identity of any person or group. The term "Yoruba," he points out, originated as a Hausa term for the Oyo kingdom but was not originally used by Yoruba speakers themselves. In fact the use of the term can be dated as early as 1613 in the writings of Ahmad Baba in Arabic in Timbuktu, while the antiquity of the Hausa term, Yarabawa, is certainly very old, predating the use of the term by those who spoke the Yoruba language.[14] Yoruba only became common in the second of the nineteenth century, as propagated by C.M.S. missionaries, who were returnees from Sierra Leone, having been freed from slave ships, or their descendants. They consciously adopted the term used by Muslim societies to the north and promoted through commercial interaction dominated by merchants from the north who were Muslim and spoke Hausa. Richard Price, criticizing what he terms "African-centric representations of African American society," makes a similar point regarding Igbo speakers, who did not apply the term to themselves in Africa but did in diaspora. Both conclude that these terms have little connection to any "real" categories of African identity and are therefore of limited use for understanding the diaspora.[15]

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14 John Hunwick and Fatima Harrak, eds., *Mi'rāj al-Su'ūd: Aḥmad Bābā's Replies on Slavery* (Rabat: Réservé à l'Institut des Etudes Africaines, 2000), 39, 42, 45; Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Context of Enslavement in West Africa: Ahmad Baba and the Ethics of Slavery," in *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*, eds. Jane G. Landers and Barry M. Robinson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 20–22.

15 Philip D. Morgan, "The Cultural Implications of the Atlantic Slave Trade: African Regional Origins, American Destinations, and New World Developments," *Slavery and Abolition* 18, No. 1 (1997): 134–135; Richard Price, "The Concept of Creolization," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: Volume 3, AD 1420–1804*, David Eltis, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univer-

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Our position is that ethnonyms are valuable pieces of historical evidence, though like all evidence ethnic terminology needs to be handled carefully and critically. In the documentary record of New World slavery, ethnonyms represent unguarded moments when an acknowledgement of an enslaved person's humanity slips into the archive, often as a result of the inherent contradiction in defining people as property. Ethnonyms appear in sales documents, runaway advertisements, and court records, as well as in sources that acknowledge the humanity of the enslaved, such as ecclesiastical records. For those interested in enslaved Africans as people rather than solely as slaves, ethnonyms are potential way around the dehumanizing tendencies of the archive. In fact, the term "enslaved Africans" expresses this dualism and speaks to a major divide in scholarly approaches. Why label such terminology "ethnonym" rather than ethnicity? Because so often the reference is to language, not something as vague as ethnic identity. Language is often thought of as an indicator of ethnicity without considering that most people spoke more than one language, as when forced into oppressive conditions like slavery and forced migration. The ethnic identification might well reflect the language recording information, conducting interviews, or situationally interacting in a multi-language environment.

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall has drawn a useful distinction between the ethnonyms applied by planters, slave traders, and colonial officials, as contrasted with the terms of self-identification as found in autobiographies, baptismal records, and interviews, such as those conducted by Oldendorp. However, the boundary between the two is conceptually blurry. Some of these designations lost all meaning the moment the initial slave sale took place. Nobody ever claimed an identity as coming from the "Windward Coast," a term imposed on scholarship from an analysis of slave ship voyages and long criticized as inappropriate.[16] But Africans did at times claim the names bestowed by slave traders as part of a process of New World regeneration, as in the case of the "Coromantee" in the British Caribbean. Slave traders in eighteenth-century South Carolina applied the designation "Angola," the name of the Portuguese colony where the dominant language was Kimbundu, to anyone arriving from West Central Africa, despite the fact that many of the people sold under that name

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sity Press, 2011), 528–530. See also the scepticism expressed by Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity & Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 143–144; David Northrup, "Igbo and Myth Igbo: Culture and Ethnicity in the Atlantic World, 1600–1850," *Slavery and Abolition* 21 (3) (2000), 1–20.

16 The term "Windward Coast" originated among slave traders and is one of the standard regions of the *Slave Voyages* database, www.slavevoyages.org. For a critique, see Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Trans-Atlantic Slave Voyage Database and the History of the Upper Guinea Coast," *African Economic History* 38 (2010), 1–28.

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in the colony were Kikongo speakers who had embarked from ports some three hundred miles north of Luanda or came from other parts of the interior. Still, the Carolinians' ignorance did not prevent so-called "Angolas" from investing the category with meaning. By the early nineteenth century, the term "Angola" had been transmuted into "Gullah."[17]

In other instances, terms that originated in Africa as exonyms (names used for "other" peoples) were eventually claimed with reference to the "self," as the term Yoruba was, although hesitantly and over time. These are particularly common in the diaspora since such ethnonyms signaled outsiderness and hence the possibility of enslavement. The term "Nagô," best known as a designation for Yoruba-speakers in nineteenth-century Brazil, is one example. It originated among Fon-speakers to refer to people from western Yorubaland, many of whom were seized in raids and sold into Atlantic slavery at Ouidah.[18] In fact the closest Yoruba-speakers to Dahomey and Ouidah, the main slave port, were from the area known as Anago. Several diasporic ethnonyms originated in Africa as exonyms, only to be accepted and imbued with meaning in the New World. The Louisiana archives are filled with documents in which people clearly referred to themselves as "Bambara." That term, considered derogatory in some contexts in West Africa, originated as an exonym among Muslim merchants to refer to non-Muslims, particularly Bamana-speakers, and hence to their enslaveability. French slavers and planters retained the term, but that did not prevent Bamana-speakers in Louisiana from reclaiming Bambara for purposes of self-identification. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Bambara had become a meta-ethnonym that encompassed speakers of the Mande languages, whether Malinke or Bamana. The common identity the term signified was the basis for at least one rebel plot in 1764.[19]

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17 Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas*, 23, 38–42. On "Coromantee," see John K. Thornton, "The Coromantees: An African Cultural Group in Colonial North America and the Caribbean," *Journal of Caribbean History* 32 (1) (1998), 161–178, and the works cited in note 2. On "Angola" as the progenitor of "Gullah," see Margaret Washington Creel, *"A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 15–17. Creel notes that a second ethnonym, "Gola," was likely an additional progenitor of term.

18 Robin Law, "Ethnicity and the Slave Trade: 'Lucumí' and 'Nagô' as Ethnonyms in West Africa," *History in Africa* 24 (1997), 213–214.

19 Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas*, 96–100; Peter Caron, " "Of a Nation Which the Others Do Not Understand": Bambara Slaves and African Ethnicity in Colonial Louisiana, 1718–1760," *Slavery and Abolition* 18 (1997), 98–121. For further discussion of "Bamana" vs. "Bambara," see Sundiata A. Djata, *The Bamana Empire by the Niger: Kingdom, Jihad, and Colonization, 1712–1920* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1997), 180–181.

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Ethnonyms are therefore useful but problematic entry points into the question of identity in the diaspora. Although terms can signify a common identity as a people (ethnicity) or a common place of origin (often rendered as "nation" or "country"), in the majority of cases ethnonyms appear to signal a common language or at least a shared secondary language. Confusion results largely from the European tendency—which during the colonial era became embedded within the discipline of anthropology—to assume that languages (understood to be discrete entities) and peoples (nations, ethnic groups) coincided very closely, if not perfectly: a people were defined by a language and vice versa. We take the contrary view here, arguing that while ethnonyms tend to signify a common language, speech communities cannot be assumed to share a common identity because identity was multi-faceted and situationally contingent, not unitary. Ethnonyms, therefore, must be read carefully, and in context. Among Africans in the Americas, ethnonyms in the documentary record are generally the product of conversations between the record creators and enslaved men and women. It is therefore essential to understand as much as possible about the people who transcribed them and the circumstances and purpose of creation.

3 Oldendorp and His Writings

Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp was born in the village of Grossenlafferte, Lower Saxony, in 1721. Deeply religious, he became a member of the United Brethren (Moravians) while still in his teens. In 1766 he traveled to the Danish West Indies, which consisted of St. Thomas, St. John, and the much larger island of St. Croix. Oldendorp's official task was to compose a history of the Moravian mission in the islands, which had been in operation since 1732. While he carried out his assignment faithfully, he also took the opportunity to speak with the islands' black residents, free and enslaved, creole and African born. Though hardly free of the racial and cultural condescension of his era, as a Brethren, Oldendorp was part of one of the more radically egalitarian sects of the eighteenth century. While Oldendorp had no objection to slavery as an institution, and while he was fully convinced of the ignorance and uncivilized nature of the people he wanted to convert and did convert, he had a sincere interest in the histories and cultures of enslaved Africans unlike almost any other Europeans of his time. Oldendorp's views developed as a student at the University of Jena in the 1740s. A child of the Enlightenment, he studied natural history and was acquainted with the work of Linnaeus, which promoted a proto-ethnographic sensibility in his work. Most

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significantly for this discussion, Oldendorp spoke directly (almost certainly in Dutch and the local Dutch-based creole) and through interpreters with Africans from thirty different "nations," representing twenty-six different languages.

Although there can be no doubt that Oldendorp's knowledge and understanding of Africa were far from perfect, virtually no other European of the era elicited as much detailed, accurate information as he did. One measure of his astuteness is the geographic precision with which he located the various "nations" in Africa. In true Linnaean fashion, he attempted to impose conceptual order on what he heard, fixing each group geographically along the African coast with striking accuracy, as Sigismund Koelle would do in Sierra Leone in the 1850s and as P.E.H. Hair would confirm in the 1960s. In anticipation of later linguistic study, Oldendorp classified his informants' languages by creating word lists, as Koelle would do a century later. So while we must not forget the context in which these interviews took place—a slave society as brutal as any other—Oldendorp managed to elicit more and better information than virtually any contemporary, which was consistent with addressing the Moravians' past protests against poor treatment of the enslaved.[20]

Oldendorp returned to Herrnhut, the Brethren's German headquarters, in 1768 to compose his history of the Moravian mission in the Danish Caribbean. Completed the following year, Oldendorp's initial draft, known as "Origainalmanuskript I" or OMS I, ran to 3,000 pages. His patrons, the Unity Eldest Conference of the United Brethren, realized the manuscript was too long to publish. Oldendorp revised his manuscript (OMS II) but failed to substantially reduce its length, so OMS II was given to Johann Jakob Bossart, head of the church archives, to condense and edit. Bossart trimmed Oldendorp's manuscript to one-third of its former length, deleting much of the material on the islands' natural history. Oldendorp protested Bossart's editorial decisions but ultimately accepted the result. Bossart's German-language edition appeared in print in 1777 at over 1,100 pages. An English translation of some of interviews

20 Gudrun Meier, "Preliminary Remarks on the Oldendorp Manuscripts and Their History," 67–71, in *Slave Cultures and Cultures of Slavery* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), Stephan Palmié, ed. See also J. Van Gent, "Rethinking Savagery: Slavery Experiences and the Role of Emotions in Oldendorp's Mission Ethnography," *History of the Human Sciences* 32 (4) (2019), 28–42. On the linguistic geography of the African coast, see P.E.H. Hair, "Ethnolinguistic Continuity on the Guinea Coast," *Journal of African History* 8 (2) (1967), 247–268; S.W. Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana: Or a Comparative Vocabulary of Nearly Three Hundred Words And Phrases In More Than One Hundred Distinct African Languages* (London: Church Missionary House, 1854).

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was published in article form in 1983, and the heavily edited Bossart publication appeared in 1987.[21]

While Bossart's published version and its English translation both contain useful information for scholars of Africa and its diaspora, they inevitably omit some two-thirds of Oldendorp's original manuscript. Most relevant to this discussion, the published version includes much of Oldendorp's general historical-ethnographic commentary on Africa in aggregated form but haphazardly omits many details from his conversations with individual Africans. For example, Bossart's account of a Fulbe man from Senegambia leaves much valuable information out, on topics such as Islamic religious practices and the informant's account of his displacement by a drought and subsequent enslavement. Bossart's Gold Coast discussion similarly excises many details on the enslavement of Oldendorp's informants.

To address these deficiencies, a team of German researchers published a transcription of Oldendorp's 3,000-page manuscript (OMS I) in 2000. The transcription was particularly necessary because the original was written in the now-obsolete German script. This transcribed, published version of OMS I, expertly annotated, has only recently begun to find its way into historical scholarship on Africa and its diaspora. It is this version that forms the basis for the present discussion.[22]

Some understanding of the setting of Oldendorp's conversations, the Danish Caribbean, is essential to interpreting his text. Denmark occupied its Caribbean possessions in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century with the acquisition of St. Thomas in 1671 and St. John in 1683 (not settled until 1717), completing the process with the acquisition of St. Croix in 1733. The latter was the main sugar island, while St. Thomas was the commercial and administrative center. Most of the captives who disembarked in the islands came from the

21 Meier, "Preliminary Remarks," 67–68; C.G.A. Oldendorp, *Geschichte der Mission der Evangelischen Brüder auf den Caraibischen Inseln S. Thomas, S. Croix, und S. Jan* (Barby and Leipzig: Christian Friedrich Laur, 1777); Soi-Daniel W. Brown, "From the Tongues of Africa: A Partial Translation of Oldendorp's Interviews," *Plantation Society in the Americas* 2 (1) (1983), 37–61; C.G.A. Oldendorp and Johann J. Bossard, C.G.A. *Oldendorp's History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John* (Ann Arbor: Koroma Publishers, 1987).

22 Compare the version in OMS II, as published in Oldendorp, *Geschichte der Mission* (1777), 274–275, 350, or Oldendorp, *History of the Mission* (1987), 161, 208–209, with OMS I, as published in Oldendorp, *Historie der Caribischen Inseln Sanct Thomas, Sanct Crux, und Sanct Jan, inbesondere der dasigen Neger und der Mission der evangelischen Brüder unter denselben: kommentierte Ausgabe des vollständigen Manuskriptes aus dem Archiv der Evangelischen Brüder-Unität Herrnhut*, eds. G. Meier, S. Palmié, P. Stein, and H. Ulbricht (Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 2000), 1:373–374, 480.

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Gold Coast, which is hardly surprising given that Osu was the center of the Danish slave trade. But Danish slave trading was only part of the story. Despite being possessions of Denmark, most of the islands' white population came from elsewhere. The Dutch were particularly influential in the early years, and their language furnished the basis for the islands' creole, "*Negerhollands*." The Dutch also dominated the merchant community on St. Thomas and connected the islands to their commercial networks. This was especially true during the early eighteenth century, when approximately two-thirds of all enslaved Africans arrived aboard Dutch vessels, against less than one-third who arrived aboard Danish ships. Later on, the British would dominate the merchant community of St. Croix, but by then the Dutch influence was well established. Danish ships came primarily from the Gold Coast, and many of those on board Dutch ships did, too. While the British were active in the slave trade almost everywhere on the African coast during the middle of the eighteenth century, they too were present on the Gold Coast in significant numbers. Hence it is not surprising that Akan were heavily represented in the enslaved population that staged the uprising on St. John in 1733–1734.[23] Moreover there is every reason to think that there was a connection between the defeat of Akwamu and the presence of enslaved captives from Akwamu in St. John.

In addition to the American context, understanding how the name of a Dutch fort became an ethnonym for a people living in a Danish colony requires an examination of historical developments in Africa. Mina/Amina is invariably linked to the commercial castle at Elmina, allegedly derived from the Portuguese "a mina," or "the mine," because the interior was the source of gold, which was the commodity most in demand. But the term also became equated with those who spoke Twi and were recognized as Akan, as well as by the political entity in which they resided and owed allegiance, hence Fante, Akyem, Denkyira, Akwamu and many others. As the slave trade grew, Mina/Amina became associated with any enslaved person who embarked for the Americas from the Gold Coast, including some who did not speak Twi as a first language, and indeed, some who did not speak it at all. In the late seventeenth century, through the dominance of Akwamu, whose language was Twi, Mina/Amina came to be applied to the region immediately north of modern Accra, where

23 N.A.T. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix* (Mona and Cave Hill: University of the West Indies Press, 1992), 1–19; Waldemar Westergaard, *The Danish West Indies Under Company Rule, 1671–1754* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 2; Erik Gøbel, *The Danish Slave Trade and its Abolition* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 3–15, 25–34; *Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, online at https://slavevoyages.org/voyages/ixcBmBRX.

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the language and ethnic affiliation was Ga-Adangbe, not Akan. Eventually the term became associated with the Gbe languages further east as far as Dahomey and Ouidah. The people identified as "Minas" who embarked from these eastern areas had little connection to the Akan region or the Fante coast. Little and Grand Popo, that is, Aného, which is located where the Mono River and the lagoon system behind the coast overflowed into the Atlantic, is an exception. Immigrants from the region near Elmina and along the Fante coast settled there, establishing their hegemony over the indigenous Hula population. Hence there was perhaps some rationale for the extension of the term Mina to the region east of the Volta River. Mina/Amina has historical relevance because the term and its variations have been associated with discernible "ethnic" or "national" origins in the Americas among enslaved populations and those who controlled them through slavery.[24]

It seems reasonable to suppose that Dutch slave ships, some perhaps from Elmina itself, used the term "Amina" as a label for those who were taken from the Gold Coast to the Danish islands in the early eighteenth century. Over time, the meaning of the term seems to have shifted with the vicissitudes of the slave trade. Likely due to the influence of the Dutch-speaking community, it became the standard term for people from the Gold Coast, and for most time periods and in most documents, Amina seems to have been more or less synonymous with Akan-speakers, without regard to state. Sandra Greene and Ray Kea may be correct that the meaning narrowed at the time of the St. John rebellion of 1733–1734 to refer specifically to people from Akwamu. As the governor at the time reported, "The [rebel] negroes [are] so-called Minas, but [are] actually from the Akuambu-ish [Akuambuiske] nation."[25] But whether the meaning of Amina did narrow to signify Akwamu in an exclusive sense is not certain. That is one way to interpret the governor's statement. But it might be that the governor understood the rebels from Akwamu to be a part of a larger Mina/Amina "nation." Whatever the case around the time of the rebellion, Amina took on a much broader meaning in subsequent decades. Moravian communicant lists from the 1750s suggest that Amina signified a pan-Akan identity.[26] There is no suggestion that the term specifically designated people from Akwamu.

24 Silke Strickrodt, "A Neglected Source for the History of Little Popo: The Thomas Miles Papers ca. 1789–1796," *History in* Africa 28 (2001), 293–330.

25 Quoted in Sebro, "Mellem Afrikaner og Kreol," 83.

26 Kea, "When I Die," 175; Sebro, "Mellem Afrikaner og Kreol," 87.

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4 Internal Evidence: Narratives by and about "Amina" in Oldendorp's Manuscript

The task at hand, however, is to decipher the meaning of Amina/Mina across time. Our interest is in the meaning of Amina in Oldendorp's research at the moment when he spoke with and about Amina people. His conversations were more probing than any held previously or in the many decades that followed. As a result of his curiosity and thoroughness, Oldendorp's interviews are especially valuable as testimony about the interior of what was known as the Gold Coast, especially for the area west of the Volta River.

People identified as Amina figure prominently in Oldendorp's manuscript and arguably their testimonies stand at the center of his interpretation. Although only five of his informants were identified as Amina, he spoke with many more people from neighboring areas who had something to say that helps to establish what he meant when he used the term Amina. Many of these informants gave information on geographic locations in relation to Amina. The internal evidence therefore consists of three types of statements: general descriptions of the Amina presumably synthesized from Oldendorp's conversations with people identified as Amina; remarks about those identified as Amina by those who were not so labelled; and geographical information supplied by both. Oldendorp, like most Europeans, conflated states, peoples, and languages into "nations." Because his comments reflect this, it can be difficult to know whether he is referring to people, language, or cultural identity in a given passage in the context of the region's history.

Oldendorp begins his discussion of Amina with general comments on people and polities in the interior of the Gold Coast. Presumably, most of the information came from his Amina informants, but that is left largely implicit, and it is possible that he aggregated their statements with those who apparently were not considered to be Amina. The central theme of these general statements is the power of the Amina polity, as well as its deep involvement in the slave trade. We are told that the country of the Amina itself was very large and full of villages, "which might be called cities due to their size." He noted that the Amina had one king, but there were several "under-kings, or governors," known as "Caboseers," for each district. The Amina people, according to Oldendorp, were the "noblest, most warlike" in the interior of the Gold Coast. They were also the region's foremost practitioners of "man-stealing, even among themselves." He claimed that the Amina disliked work and preferred to "steal" people from neighboring nations. These descriptions, of course, do not apply exclusively to Asante, but the emphasis on superlatives ("most warlike," biggest slave raiders) were descriptive of a time when Asante had consolidated

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its position as the region's greatest power, controlling most of the Akan region, as well non-Akan areas to the north, all of which suggests that Oldendorp's informants had Asante in mind when they spoke with him.[27] While Oldendorp's general description of the Amina state is generic and could possibly have applied to any number of Akan polities, only Asante had the political stature of Oldendorp's Amina at the time.[28]

Oldendorp is specific when he lists neighboring nations against whom Amina waged war, which enables the identification of Amina with Asante. His Amina was surrounded by "Fante," "Akkim" [Akyem], "Akkran" [Accra], "Asseni" [Assin], "Kifferu" [Twifo], "Atti," and "Adansi." Elsewhere, he refers to a "Kramanti" [Koromante] informant, which can be added to the above list. All of these were Akan polities, except Akkran/Accra. Two other states, "Beremang" and "Okkau," are ambiguous. "Beremang" can be tentatively linked to Abura, which was part of Fante. The editors of OMS I suggest that "Okkau" likely signified Kwahu/Kwawu, but it seems equally possible that it was a rendering of "Akan." The coastal Fante, of course, were a persistent opponent of Asante even after their eventual defeat in 1807. Several of the others had been incorporated into greater Asante during the reigns of Osei Tutu and Opoku Ware and in that sense were part of the larger state. Their listing as separate nations likely stemmed from the fact that some had only recently been conquered (Akyem, Accra), or had rebelled against Asante (Twifo), or been otherwise troublesome (Assin).[29]

Perhaps the most significant feature of this list is what it omits: a specific reference to Asante. As the region's most powerful state at the time, dominating virtually the whole region, it might be expected to see Asante mentioned on any list of Gold Coast polities, especially one focused on the frequency of warfare. The most likely explanation for Asante's omission is that Oldendorp's Amina and Asante referred to the same polity. To be sure, the list omits other regional polities, such as Denkyira and Akwamu. But by the time of Oldendorp's visit to the Danish Caribbean, these had already been incorporated into Greater Asante.

That interpretation, however, is complicated by the fact that Oldendorp does refer to Asante twice. These discrepancies, if they are discrepancies, require explanations. The first reference is based on the testimony of an informant from Akyem who told a story about the death of Opoku Ware. The informant

27 Oldendorp, *Historie*, 1: 383–384.
28 Oldendorp, *Historie*, 1: 383.
29 Oldendorp, *Historie*, 1: 383; J.K. Fynn, *Asante and its Neighbours*, 1700–1807 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 75, 80–87.

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reported that one community of Amina people worshiped a river because it once grew so large that the whole area had flooded. According to the informant, "when the King of Assanti, Opokku, was ill, they went to the water and offered it much gold if it would allow Opokku to live. The water answered: his time had come, as it would for others. It could not save him from death." The passage, of course, might be read as implying a distinction between "Aminaland" and "Assanti." But another explanation is that Oldendorp inserted the word "Assanti" not because his informant used it, but rather because he knew it from other texts. We know, for example, that he read the works of Ludewig Ferdinand Rømer, the German-born employee of the Danish West India Company who spent most of 1739–1749 at Christiansborg and published two detailed accounts of the Gold Coast in 1756 and 1760. Rømer witnessed a key period in the consolidation of Asante's power over the region, and both Asante ("Assiante") and Opoku Ware ("The Assiante King Oppocu") figure prominently in his accounts. It seems most probable that Oldendorp recognized "Oppoku" in his informant's narrative and connected him with Rømer's "Assiante." Whether Oldendorp understood the overlap between Amina and "Assanti" is not certain.[30]

Oldendorp's second mention of "Assanti" also presents some complications. It appears in an interview with a person he identified as "Kassenti," which he attempts to clarify as an exonym for the people who referred to themselves as "Tjamba" [Chamba, i.e., Konkomba]. The Kassenti, he stressed, were "distinct" from "Assanti." The problem is that Oldendorp may have been referring to the Kassena people who are ethnically and linguistically distinct from the Chamba/Konkomba and were further north. The Kassena are to be identified with the Gur or Gurunsi, not the Konkomba.[31] It is not clear why Oldendorp equated the man with "Tjamba" but in either case he was referring to the region north of Asante. However, Oldendorp's purpose for raising the issue was clearly to dispel any confusion over two similar-sounding names, one of which he almost certainly already knew from Rømer and perhaps other sources. Both anecdotes demonstrate that Oldendorp was aware of and knew the name of Asante and raise the question of why he did not simply refer to "Asante" in his description rather than rendering it as "Amina."

By the time Oldendorp wrote, Asante was well known to Europeans. It appeared, for example, on Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville's 1729 map of the Gold Coast (Figure 1), which was widely reproduced in such publications as

30 Oldendorp, Historie, 1: 399. On Rømer, see Selena Axelrod Winsnes, "Editor's Introduction," in A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea (1760), by L.F. Rømer, trans. Selena Axelrod Winsnes (Oxford: British Academy and Oxford University Press, 2000), xiii–xv, 136.

31 We wish to thank Ismael Montana for this identification.

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Thomas Astley's multi-volume compilation of voyage narratives, which appeared in the 1740s.[32] The most likely explanation is that Oldendorp drew on his prior knowledge of Asante in his ethnographic analysis of the Danish Caribbean, where he had discovered that the term Amina applied to people from the interior of the Gold Coast. Significantly Oldendorp's two references to Asante apply to specific contexts, both possibly derived from his reading of Rømer or other contemporary sources.[33] There is no suggestion that he had seen d'Anville's map, which does not refer to any place called Mina or Amina. Moreover, Asante is clearly marked on d'Anville's map. It is certainly possible that Oldendorp never saw d'Anville's map, but at the time, d'Anville was the foremost cartographer of his day. He composed some 211 detailed maps of many parts of the world, including different parts of Africa. He also continued to publish extensively until his death in 1782. D'Anville had engravings made of his maps in London as well as in Paris, which does not mean that Oldendorp would have had easy access, but otherwise it can be supposed to have circulated among ship captains plying the coast of Africa. How far beyond the purview of geographers and mariners d'Anville's re-construction of the political geography reached is not known, but it seems not to have influenced Oldendorp. D'Anville's map was reproduced with slight modifications after 1729, but the changes do not affect the overview. Asante is clearly identified, as is Akwamu and other Akan polities in the region. There is no Mina or Amina.

Oldendorp's general comments on the Akan region and its people drew on the comments of informants from elsewhere than Asante, most of whom were not Twi-speakers themselves, but who provided descriptions of the land and people that confirm the identification of Amina with Asante. Not surprisingly given the fact that Oldendorp's informants had been enslaved, the context is one of warfare and slave trading. For example, a man from the Gur-speaking area to the north of Asante related to Oldendorp that he been taken with his mother and sister during a war with the Amina. Because raids were frequent in his area, he described how elders and children hid in a hollow inside a nearby mountain. Another informant, a woman from the region to the west of Asante, said that her people waged war against both the "Mandingas" and Amina. Of course, Asante was not the only polity raiding its neighbors for captives, but the focus on enslavement fits Asante better than any other polity, while the mention of "Mandinga" [Mandinka] refers to such Muslim enclaves

32 Thomas Astley, ed., A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels, 4 vols. (London: T. Astley, 1745–1747).

33 Oldendorp, Historie, 1: 403; Thomas Astley, ed., A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels, 4 vols. (London: T. Astley, 1745–1747).

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FIGURE 1 D'Anville's map of the Gold Coast, 1729
SOURCE: RARE BOOK DIVISION, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY. "A MAP OF THE GOLD COAST, FROM ISSINI TO ALAMPI BY M. D'ANVILLE" NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY DIGITAL COLLECTIONS. ACCESSED JUNE 26, 2023. HTTPS://DIGITALCOLLECTIONS.NYPL.ORG/ITEMS/510D47DF-FFD3-A3D9-E040-E00A18064A99

as Buna, Bonduku and perhaps Kong to the north and northwest of Asante.[34] As the two accounts suggest, Oldendorp's informants provided clues in the form of geographic information which confirm that Amina and Asante were the same.

Oldendorp used his informants' statements to place the "nations" of the Gold Coast interior in geographic order, from north to south inland from the coast. One woman, identified as "Mangree," said her homeland was far from the sea and that the "Kanga," "Mandinga," and Amina all were their neighbors. This seems to place the woman's homeland in modern-day Côte d'Ivoire, with "Kanga" (also "Ganga," a common New World ethnonym for people from the interior of upper Guinea) to the west, "Mandinga" or Mandinka to the west and north, and "Amina" to the east. Oldendorp also spoke with several informants from Muslim polities to the north. A "Sokko," (Nsoka), man came from a polity that bordered Amina to the north and reported that after being seized in a raid or war he had to endure a seven-week journey to the coast. Another

34 Oldendorp, Historie, 1:379, 385; Ivor Wilks, The Northern Factor in Ashante History (Accra: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1961); J-L. Boutillier, Bouna, Royaume de la Savane Ivoirienne (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 61–68; Emmanuel Terray, Une Histoire du Royaume Abron du Gyaman: Des Origines à la Conquête Coloniale (Paris: Karthala, 1995), 92–95.

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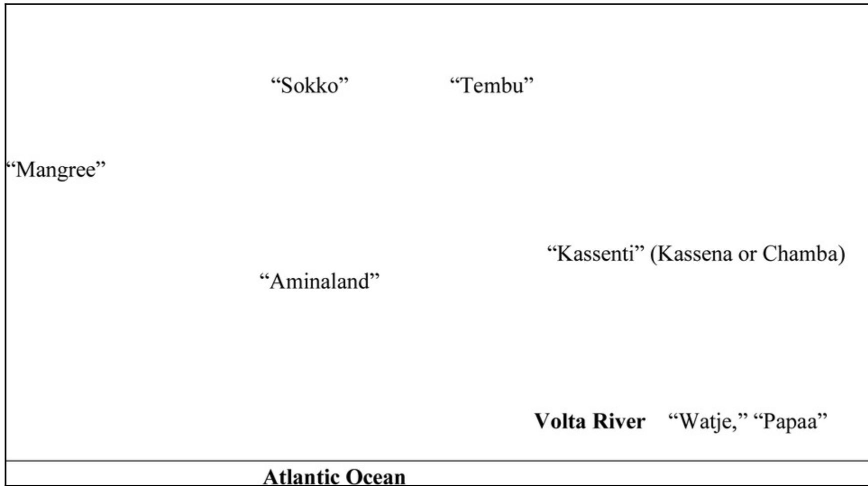

FIGURE 2 Relative positions of "nations" neighboring "Aminaland," after Oldendorp
SOURCE: OLDENDORP, *HISTORIE*, 1:365–420

informant identified as "Tembu," an apparent reference to a people from the Gur-speaking region to the northeast of Asante, was sold to Amina and then marched to the coast, where he was resold to traders at Accra. A woman of the "Papaa" nation was captured by the Amina while visiting her sister in the "Watje" country. Both names refer to the Gbe-speaking area east of the Volta.[35] Plotting the positions of these places in relation to Amina gives us the following rough map (see Figure 2). As the sketch makes clear, Oldendorp's Amina state was quite large, bordering different polities and waging war over a wide compass, from the forests of West Africa to the Muslim regions of the savanna to the north, and across the Volta River. Only Asante fits this context for the interior of the Gold Coast in the mid-eighteenth century.

5 External Evidence: The Gold Coast in the Mid-Eighteenth Century

The identification of Oldendorp's Amina state with Asante fits the timeline of events on the Gold Coast in the middle of the eighteenth century. Although Oldendorp did not supply information on when his informants were enslaved, how old they were at the time of the interviews, or how long they had been in

35 Oldendorp, Historie, 1: 409–410, 484–485. "Watje" is the name of a town/kingdom (Notse) and a language in modern-day Togo. See Rucker, Gold Coast Diasporas, 34.

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the colony, it is possible in some cases to infer whether a person was a child or adult at the time of enslavement. The reference to Opoku Ware's death by one informant confirms that he could not have left Africa before 1750, but greater precision is not possible. However, Oldendorp conducted his interviews between 1766 and 1768, which implies that many if not most of his informants arrived in the 1750s and early 1760s. This temporal framework suggests that most of the informants had come of age during the reign of Opoku Ware (ca. 1720–1750) and were enslaved during the reign of his successor, Kusi Obodum (1750–1764).[36]

The first paramount ruler of Asante, Asantehene Osei Tutu, spent seventeen years consolidating the Asante state after 1700, incorporating neighboring Akan-speaking provinces, by force if necessary. Opoku Ware, his successor as *asantehene*, continued the projects of consolidation and expansion. Of particular importance to this discussion is the long-running conflict which ultimately led to the incorporation of Akwamu. Initially Asante and Akwamu formed an alliance against their common enemy, Akyem, which was situated between them, but in the end, Asante incorporated both Akyem and Akwamu into its empire. From Asante's perspective, Akwamu was a problematic ally which blocked trading paths to the coast and engaged in diplomatic double-dealing. In 1730, Akyem invaded Akwamu, which resulted in its defeat, apparently with Opoku Ware's implicit consent. Many Akwamu were forced to flee eastward across the Volta as Akyem took control of the region. A large number of Akwamu captives were sold into slavery in the Danish Caribbean and elsewhere. They would play a central role in the St. John uprising of 1733–1734, as both Greene and Kea have described. Asante and Akyem emerged as the dominant powers in the interior of the Gold Coast, although access to the coastal trade castles and therefore domination of the slave trade remained a source of friction. Akyem continued to control access to the sea at Accra, while Asante traded through the Fante coastal ports, especially Koromantyn, Anomabu, Cape Coast, and Elmina. After years of tension and intrigue, Opoku Ware conquered Akyem in 1742, at which point Akyem and Akwamu (by virtue of the 1730 conquest by Akyem) became incorporated as provinces of Greater Asante. Asante had consolidated its position as the dominant power in the interior of the Gold Coast.[37]

36 For the death date of Opoku Ware, see Fynn, Asante and its Neighbours, 81.

37 Fynn, Asante and its Neighbours, 67–75. See also Ivor Wilks, "The Rise of the Akwamu Empire, 1650–1710," Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana 3 (2) (1957), 56–58.

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These events provide context for understanding what Oldendorp meant in referring to Asante as "Aminaland" which appears on the face of it to contradict the conclusion of Greene and Kea that those who took part in the 1733–1734 uprising in the Caribbean were from Akwamu. Akyem had only conquered Akwamu three years earlier, while Akyem remained independent for another nine years. By the time Oldendorp spoke with his informants, Akwamu had ceased to be an independent polity for almost thirty-five years and had been a province of Asante for almost twenty-five years. Although we do not know how long Oldendorp's informants had been in the colony, given what we know about the lifespan of Caribbean slaves, it is almost certain that very few if any of his informants had arrived before the 1730s. Oldendorp's informants, most of whom had probably been enslaved in the 1750s and 1760s, seem to have transferred an older understanding of Amina as people from Akwamu into a pan-Akan category that signified the state that was the unquestioned regional power of the day.

The non-Akan ethnonyms from the Gold Coast that appear in Oldendorp—"Kassenti," "Tembu," "Watje," "Sokko"—also trace back to Asante's wars of expansion and conquest. At various points in the 1720s–1740s, Opoku Ware invaded the northern Muslim-dominated regions of Gonja and Dagomba and the region of Gurunsi.[38] Significantly, three of the four are exonyms, or names that a people use for others (the fourth, "Watje" is the name of a language). "Sokko" is particularly revealing because it is clearly a rendering of Nsoka, which was a term used in the Akan region for people from the north.[39] The fact that an exonym used among Akan-speakers should become the accepted term for Asante suggests that Akan cultural and linguistic hegemony was strong in the colony's slave quarters. The apparent acceptance of Sokko as a term of self-identification by people who would not have identified as such in Africa offers a window into the dynamic transformation that African-rooted identities underwent in the New World context.

38 Ivor Wilks, Asante in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 18–28.

39 Geographical Names, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, Bethesda, MD, USA, online at https://geographic.org/geographic_names/name.php?uni=-2881444&fid=1966&c=ghana.

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6 Conclusion

The ethnonym Mina has a long and complex history, its meanings varying greatly in both time and space. As a result, any interpretation of Mina/Amina must be context-specific, sensitive to the circumstances under which the documents in which the designation appears were created.

The internal evidence suggests that the Aminaland and Amina identity described by Oldendorp's informants was Asante. Most significantly, Oldendorp's list of ethnonyms associated with Amina omits Asante, by far the most powerful state during the timeframe of his informants' enslavement, which points to the inevitable conclusion that Amina was Asante. The external evidence points to the same conclusion. The term Amina was probably adopted in the Danish Caribbean in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century as a result of Dutch prominence in both the slave trade, its local merchant community, and plantation ownership. A surge of captives resulting from the 1730 defeat of Akwamu by Akyem led many in the colony to associate Amina with Akwamu in the years immediately afterward. The documentation produced by the 1733–1734 rebellion, which was led by Amina/Akwamu slaves, made this connection visible. But with the absorption of Akwamu first by Akyem in 1730, and after 1742 by Asante, the flow of captives to the Danish West Indies shifted to reflect the larger Gold Coast slave trade. Captives from Asante joined those from other Akan-speaking provinces and further afield. In addition to his Amina informants, Oldendorp interviewed many others, non-Akan speakers who had been enslaved by Amina. These groups reflect the various Asante military campaigns of the 1740s–1760s and point once more to the same conclusion.[40]

In a larger sense, we have argued for greater rigor in the interpretation of African ethnonyms from the era of the transatlantic slave trade and have tried to model an approach that can be applied more widely. Contrary to those scholars who see ethnonyms as lacking in usefulness for understanding the origins of enslaved people in the Americas, we argue that they are in fact valuable, if problematic pieces of information, and are often the only acknowledgement of a person's humanity in an archival record that usually renders them as things. Methodologically speaking, this requires three attributes. First, the sources themselves require thorough criticism and contextualization in both time and

40 For a portrait of this process, see D.J.E. Maier, "Military Acquisition of Slaves in Asante," in West African Economic and Social History, eds. D. Henige and T.C. McCaskie (Madison: University of Wisconsin African Studies Program), 119–132.

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space. The application and reclamation of Mina/Amina, as we have shown, varied not only across colonial empires (Portuguese, French, British, Danish), but within specific colonies, as seen in the shifting relationship between Amina, Akan, and Akwamu in the Danish colonies. Second, the African provenance of the ethnonym is of the utmost importance. Was it an endonym (the name people use for themselves), or an exonym? The latter is particularly prominent in the diaspora given its connection with outsiderness and enslaveability. Or perhaps it is a toponym, the name for a place. Finally, we need to consider the dynamic transformations that occurred in both Africa and the Americas, tracking, for example, the formation of meta-ethnonyms and the changing terms of reference for identity. The human dimension of the slave trade will only emerge when all of these questions are addressed.

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