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Facilitating Early Modern Globality: Uncovering the Role and Status of the *Remadores* on the Gold Coast

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This article uncovers the crucial role played by the *remadores*, or canoemen, of the Gold Coast in the making of global trading networks which converged and steadily expanded on the West African coast in the early modern era. Their inimitable skill and the footloose nature of their daily work afforded them a unique status as African workers, and special bargaining power with the various European and African polities which competed for influence in the region. *Remadores* were logistical agents in the making of local, inter-polity and global trade networks, and this paper examines their role on a local, regional and global scale in turn. As this research demonstrates, their navigational skill was a lynchpin, without which in the burgeoning trade of ivory, gold and slaves would have been completely undermined.

Introduction

Those canoes, laden with goods and men, are conveyed by the Mina Blacks over the worst and most dreadful beating seas all along the coast...where no manner of trade could be carried out without that help.¹

For as long as humans have carried out commercial exchanges, they have confronted and overcome boundaries. These boundaries might be religious, linguistic, political, cultural or geographical. To the European traders who arrived on the Gold Coast in the early modern era, there was an immediate physical boundary impeding their access to lucrative trade for the West African commodities of ivory, slaves and gold: powerful surf, unruly currents and a total absence of natural harbours.² However, long before the first Portuguese explorers arrived on the coast, skilled African canoemen mastered the punishing surf to catch fish and

¹ Paul E. H. Hair, ed., *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot of Guinea on West Africa, 1678–1712* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1992), 341.

² Peter Gutkind, “The Canoemen of the Gold Coast (Ghana): A Survey and an Exploration in Precolonial African Labour History,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, 29 (1989): 342–343.

carry out trade of their own centred on the Niger River.³ By enlisting the labour of these canoemen, the shoreline—while tricky—became a passable barrier; granting European access to a region of great commercial potential. Larger European ships could anchor offshore, allowing for commodities and people to be ferried in specially designed canoes across the surf and onto the mainland. This study interprets these Gold Coast canoemen, henceforth *remadores*,⁴ as logistical agents in the formation of local, inter-polity and global trading networks converging on the West African coast in the early modern era.

First initiated by Portuguese explorers, the tactic of enlisting the labour of *remadores* to grant commercial access to the Gold Coast was employed by Europeans well into the twentieth century—testament to the effectiveness of the labour provided, and the enduring logistical challenge posed by the coastline.⁵ This highly skilled African workforce was sometimes purchased as slaves by European polities, but more often hired on a contractual basis, receiving half their pay in advance and the other half upon completion of their contract. The aim of this paper is to interrogate the status of this numerically small yet indispensable workforce on the Gold Coast and elsewhere in West Africa, and qualify their role in the formation of trading networks.

It is important to recognise that substantial inland trade networks and economic systems existed in the region long before the arrival of Europeans. To quote historian Eric R. Wolf, the earliest European explorers landed on a Gold Coast already dense with towns and settlements, and caught up in networks of exchange that “far transcended the narrow enclaves of the European emporia on the coast.”⁶ However, contact with European trade sparked the reorientation of this network away from the Niger River and towards the shoreline, triggering a violent transformation of scale.⁷ Using *remadores* as a lens, this paper uncovers the exceptionally high density of relations and interactions across formal boundaries on the Gold Coast, which by the early modern era was a region dense with both European and African polities who sought to claim a stake in the gold, slave and ivory trade.

³ Harvey Feinberg, “Africans and Europeans in West Africa: Elminans and Dutchmen on the Gold Coast during the Eighteenth Century,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 79 (1989), 41–42.

⁴ In the primary sources encountered in this research, many terms were used to refer to the canoemen of the Gold Coast. However, the most common was *remador*—from the Portuguese word for oarsmen. For the sake of uniformity, *remador* has been used throughout this study, but when citing sources the term is reproduced in its original form.

⁵ According to the research of historian Peter Gutkind, between 1911 and 1921, 602 trucks, 169 trailers and 219 cars were loaded onto ships lying in the roads off Elmina by lashing two large canoe-boats together. Gutkind, “The Canoemen of the Gold Coast (Ghana),” 353.

⁶ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), cited in Ray Kea, *A Cultural and Social History of Ghana from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century: The Gold Coast in the Age of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, vol.1 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), i.

⁷ Kea, *A Cultural and Social History of Ghana*, 2.

Although focusing on a particular geographical region, the framework this study adopts emphasises entanglement within this space. The role of *remadores* as network facilitators is assessed on a global, local and finally inter-polity scale. This does not serve to impose rigid spatial distinctions, but the opposite. The *remadores* act as a human thread connecting local, regional, and global networks. It will also be pointed out that their actions at any one of these given levels often had important ramifications at the other levels. This approach is one influenced by the writings of historian Holger Weiss, who has made it his agenda at times to examine the local articulations of global interconnections, especially in an African context.⁸ This is a means of breaking free from what he refers to as the “straight-jacket of national narratives.”⁹ Historian Peter Gutkind produced the first and only study (1989) to deal exclusively with *remadores* within the framework of African labour history. In his own words, he was “primarily interested in the evolution of the working class on that continent [Africa] as well as its contemporary structure, consciousness and activism.”¹⁰ This paper treads very different ground, exploring the entanglement of space which *remadores* facilitated, and how their daily work on a local level facilitated early modern globality.

This study makes use of primary evidence amassed by Europeans pertaining to the daily administration of Gold Coast forts on a local and regional level, correspondence between those stationed at the forts and respective trading companies or European associates, and personal journals and travel accounts. These sources provide an insight into the role and status of *remadores*. Due to language constraints, Ole Justesen’s *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana* and Robin Law’s *English in West Africa* form the basis of this research.¹¹ Malyn Newitt’s *The Portuguese in West Africa 1415–1670* was also consulted.¹² These collections of European-produced administrative sources were complemented by travel accounts of European explorers and traders such as Pieter de Marees (1602),¹³ Jean

⁸ Holger Weiss, *Portals of Globalization, Places of Creolisation: Nordic Possessions in the Atlantic World During the Era of the Slave Trade* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2015), 28–30.

⁹ Holger Weiss, “Entangled Spaces—Global Connections and Local Articulations: Portals of Early Modern Globalization and Creolization During the Era of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade,” *Connections: A Journal for Historians and Area Specialists* 12 (2015), 2.

¹⁰ Gutkind, “The Canoemen of the Gold Coast (Ghana)”, 339.

¹¹ Ole Justesen, ed., *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana 1657–1754*, vol.1–2 (Copenhagen: Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selska, 2005); Robin Law, *The English in West Africa: Local Correspondence of the Royal African Company in England 1681–1699*, vol.1–3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹² Malyn Newitt, ed., *The Portuguese in West Africa 1415–1670: A Documentary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹³ Pieter de Marees was a Dutch traveller and explorer who undertook a voyage to the Gold Coast in 1600. After returning in 1602, he wrote an extensive narrative about his voyage and daily life on the Gold Coast. A century passed before another account was to surpass it in terms of scope and originality. It was translated into German, English and Latin. Pieter de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602)*, ed. and trans. Albert van Dantzig and Adam Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Barbot (1678–1712)¹⁴ and Willem Bosman (1721).¹⁵ In addition, this study makes use of translated primary material cited by historians whose work has touched upon *remadores*, despite the fact that very few historians have foregrounded the *remador* in their studies of the Gold Coast, and none within the frameworks I propose. Close analysis of these sources can shed light on the operation of the *remador* from a European perspective. However, the potential plurality of the role assumed by *remadores* who, for example, also engaged in illicit trade must be acknowledged—although it cannot here be quantified. It is certain that *remadores* did carry out trade independent of European jurisdiction in the form of interloper or contraband trade, in spite of repressive efforts throughout the early modern era. Owing to a relative paucity of available sources, it has been necessary to adopt a broad time span in this work. Although change over time is acknowledged in a broad sense, it is inevitable that some potential particularities in the role and status of the *remador* have been levelled.

The most fundamental difficulty encountered in this research has been the lack of a paper trail left by the *remadores* themselves. As a result (and due to language constraints) it has only been possible to gain an insight through examination of European-produced sources and the limitations this poses must not be underestimated. It is therefore hard to quantify the extent of the *remadores*' role in illicit trade, although European sources clearly indicate that this was taking place. It has also been difficult to discern how the *remadores* viewed themselves as skilled African workers, and this must be inferred through their actions and the reading of European sources against the grain. Historian Ray Kea stresses the obligation of historians of the Gold Coast to recognise the extreme limitations of archival analysis in giving voice to Africans' explanations of themselves in their own terms.¹⁶ Bearing this in mind, it is my contention that the role assumed by small-scale logistical go-betweens should not be overlooked given the limited sources available for historians. This would lead to historical underestimation of the diversity of agents who facilitated trans-Atlantic trade in the early modern era, and the extent to which it was facilitated by local actors.

¹⁴ Hair, *Barbot on Guinea*. Jean Barbot, served as a commercial agent on French slave-trading voyages to West Africa in 1678–9 and 1681–2. In 1683 he began an account of the Guinea coast, based partly on his voyage journals (only one of which is extant) and partly on previously printed sources.

¹⁵ Willem Bosman was a Dutch merchant in the service of the Dutch East India Company who progressed to become the chief agent of the company. His study was written in 1702 when European popular interest in the Gold Coast reached a zenith. His account was read avidly, not only because he provided a first-hand account of the Komenda Wars (1694–1700) which were fought against the British but also because the book was printed in English as early as 1705. Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Gold Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave and the Ivory Coast's* (London: James Knapton & Dan Midwinter, 1705).

¹⁶ Kea, *A Cultural and Social History of Ghana*.

This study responds to a trend in more recent historiography on the trans-Atlantic trade that challenges traditional scholarship focused on the relationship between ‘core and periphery’ in relation to trading companies or empires.¹⁷ This core-periphery model has been called into question by historians such as John Thornton who have stressed the agency of African innovation, foodstuffs and diaspora in forging trans-Atlantic networks.¹⁸ Foregrounding *remadores* in this study underscores the agency of a skilled African workforce in the formation of global trading networks, and active participation of African societies in the shaping of the Atlantic world.

Remadores resist easy categorisation as a workforce. A combination of the footloose nature of their work set against the backdrop of dense European inter-polity rivalry on the Gold Coast from the seventeenth century onwards and an awareness of the crucial nature of the role they performed afforded free *remadores* exceptional bargaining power as a skilled African workforce. They operated outside of the norms of regular logistical service, and were situated somewhere between cultural broker, skilled employee, and go-between. Strikingly, these free *remadores* (hired on a contractual basis by European merchants or polities) often worked alongside slave *remadores* whose status was, of course, entirely different—a paradox which is addressed later in this study. Whether slave or free, their physical labour acted as a lynchpin in the entanglement resulting from the contact of Europeans with the Gold Coast, and yet their role has been greatly overlooked by historians. This research offers a perspective which represents—in the words of Robin Law—“if not quite a view from below, nevertheless a perspective that was, in political terms, from the periphery rather than the centre.”¹⁹

Remadores as Network Facilitators on a Global Scale

In his 1602 description and historical account of the ‘Gold Kingdom,’ Dutch trader and explorer Pieter de Marees admitted:

Since we Netherlanders are not as experienced in this as they [the Africans, the *remadores*] are, if we want to sail in them, not being able to adjust ourselves as well and steer them properly, the result is that the canoes capsize immediately and we fall into the water.²⁰

¹⁷ For recent examples of traditional scholarship, see: David Armitage and Michael K. Braddick, ed., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009²).

¹⁸ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World 1400–1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

¹⁹ Robin Law, *Ouidah: the Social History of a West African Slaving ‘Port’ 1727–1892* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 3.

²⁰ De Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom*, 117.

Throughout the early modern era Europeans were rarely able to master the skill of canoe navigation, obliging them to enlist the services of *remadores* at considerable expense. A letter from the Governor of the Danish fort of Christiansborg to the directors of the Danish West India and Guinea Company in 1736 indicates that the *remadores* were aware of the special bargaining power this afforded them, and sometimes exploited it to their advantage. In response to pressure to limit monthly expenses from financiers in Denmark, the monthly expenditure was disclosed:

The King's dues, monthly	32 rdl
The Caboceers in <i>Orsue</i>	5 rdl ²¹
The Company's messengers	4 rdl
Company <i>rimadores</i>	66 ³ / ₄ rdl ²²

The governor goes on to justify the exceedingly high proportion of fort funds spent on *remadores*, of which there were 12, arguing that this “indispensable category” when “well maintained” and given the same as they would receive in ports under the governance of rival European powers, are “more alert and enterprising” and less likely to defect.²³ By nature of their trade, *remadores* were footloose workers, and the readiness of the governor to defend their salary indicates that he was aware of the capacity of *remadores*, through defection, to sever the global and local commercial networks that the forts depended on for their survival and all forms of commercial profit.

The *remadores* were responsible for transporting commodities to and from the larger vessels which arrived at the Gold Coast, and their barks were perfectly designed for this. The canoes were generally 16 feet in length, and manufactured in forested regions near to the coast such as Axim, Ackuon, Boutrou, Tackary and Comendo.²⁴ The canoes were designed to withstand the event of capsizing in the surf with as little loss of merchandise as possible, with goods bound to cross-bars on the boats. Smaller canoes were used to transport lighter loads, passengers, and to take messages and could be manned by a single *remador*. However, larger boats could also be purchased at Juda and Offra to ferry large groups of slaves, oxen and commodities weighing up to ten tons.²⁵ These larger canoes were manned by up to 20 oarsmen and usually rented out on a temporary basis; and could be sent

²¹ The word *Caboceer* is derived from the Portuguese word *cabociero*, meaning headman or official. *Caboceers* were the directly-appointed agents of coastal West African chiefs responsible for the procurement of slaves from the interior.

²² The monetary system in the Danish West Indies was complicated because the currencies of many countries were used concurrently. One of the currencies used was the Danish *Rigsdaler* (Rix-dollars) abbreviated to ‘rdl.’ Information cited in Niklas Jensen, *For the Health of the Enslaved: Slaves, Medicine and Power in the Danish West Indies, 1803–1848* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2012), 60.

²³ Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol. 2, 512.

²⁴ See, for example: de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom*, 118; Hair, *Barbot on Guinea*, vol.1, 346.

²⁵ Gutkind, “Canoemen of the Gold Coast,” 342–343.

to the Gulf of Guinea and beyond that to Angola.²⁶ The use of the larger canoes increased after the end of the seventeenth century, when the region was roughly delineated by Europeans not only as a principle source of gold, but also grain, ivory, and increasingly slaves.²⁷ The canoes were necessary for importing and exporting, and were also exchanged as commodities and offered as gifts to local African rulers.²⁸ These skilled canoemen were the means via which Atlantic goods and material culture were introduced to the continent; and their labour was fundamental in the export of African goods, slaves and culture to other parts of the continent, Europe and beyond.

One major shortcoming in historiography on Atlantic trade, according to Holger Weiss, has been the lack of scholarly attention directed towards the entanglement of African port cities with one another (although much has been said about the entanglement between Atlantic and African ports, or Atlantic ports with one another).²⁹ *Remadores* offer an unusual perspective through which to explore inter-African port entanglement, as their labour connected the commodities available at the Slave Coast and Ivory Coast with the European bases on the Gold Coast. According to Robin Law, the indigenous population at Ouidah had no tradition of navigation of the sea, therefore it was necessary for traders to hire Gold Coast *remadores* in order to land goods and embark slaves.³⁰ To take one example, according to translated records preserved in a journal at the Danish fort Christiansborg, the largest ship of the Danish navy *Christianus Quintus* arrived at Christiansborg on 12th of April 1703, at which point a nine-man canoe was dispatched under the command of the merchant Hans Pedersen to the Slave Coast to trade for slaves.³¹ Just two days later, the *remadores* returned with merchandise and slaves to load onto *Christianus Quintus*. Between the 18th and the 24th of April the nine-man *remador* canoe ferried goods between the Slave Coast and the ship *Christianus Quintus* docked on the Gold Coast five times, finally returning on the 25th April accompanied by a second five-man canoe loaded with merchandise, after which the *Christianus Quintus* set sail to the West Indies. Slaves sourced in other African ports were also sold on to African merchants in return for gold on the Gold Coast.³²

²⁶ Hair, *Barbot on Guinea*, 545.

²⁷ Kwame Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast, 1600–1729: A Study of the African Reaction to European Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) 21.

²⁸ There is evidence of the import, for example, of fabric from Northern Africa which was in high demand on the west coast of Africa in the early modern era.

²⁹ Holger Weiss, “The Entangled Spaces of Oddena, Oguaa and Osu: A Survey of Three Early Modern African Atlantic Towns, ca. 1650–1850,” in *Portals of Globalization, Places of Creolisation: Nordic Possessions in the Atlantic World during the Era of the Slave Trade*, ed. Holger Weiss (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2015), 26–27.

³⁰ Law, *Ouidah*, 29.

³¹ Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol.1, 129–130.

³² Gutkind, “The Canoemen of the Gold Coast,” 341.

Remadores acted as a human bridge between the coastal communities of the Gold Coast, and other important coastal localities in West Africa where they migrated (voluntarily and coercively) to capitalise on their skills. This paper directs attention towards the demographic globalisation which occurred as *remadores* of the Gold Coast moved to other African coastal areas to hire out their skills, which facilitated material and cultural exchange on a larger scale through the export and import of commodities of ivory, gold, fabrics, weapons and slaves in their canoes.

Remadores took on a great strategic importance for European traders aiming to gain possession of the Gold Coast as they were a lynchpin in the global trading network of ivory, slaves and other West African commodities. The importance of *remadores* is made plain in a letter to the Royal African Company from John Thorne, an English representative posted at a factory in Ouidah:

Wee have great occasion for a canoe or two, and some paddles...a 7 hand canoe which was here was broken adrift in a turnadoe, soe that at present wee have a great want of canoes, and you had as good send me noe ships as noe canoes, for without them nothing can be done.³³

In the Danish sources the importance of the *remadores* can be inferred from the competitive wages free *remadores* received and also from the lengths Danish officials went to recapture *remadores* who ran away. At Fort Christiansborg, a policy was enforced that if any slave *remador* escaped, the other hired *remadores* would be forced to pay a debt of 72rdl.³⁴ Defecting or escaping *remadores* not only threatened to sever Atlantic trading networks, but also potentially strengthened rival European forts along the coast. This policy is insightful as it gives historians a clue as to why some European polities kept both slave and free *remadores*. In the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, it is perhaps surprising that workers so crucial to trade and daily life on the Gold Coast were not all enslaved to minimise cost and risk for European merchants. However, one explanation lies in the footloose nature of their work. On a daily basis, *remadores* transgressed boundaries and travelled to places where nobody without their skills could reach. It was therefore incumbent on traders to keep at least a small base of loyal free *remadores* (whom they attracted with wages and material rewards) to prevent the slave *remadores* from paddling away with precious goods, defecting, or simply fleeing. This hypothesis is supported by the policy outlined above, although this research has unearthed no explicit explanation for the slave/free *remador* paradox from early modern contemporaries.

³³ John Thorne, *Ophra in Arda*, August 19, 1681 (*Letter from English Factories in Ouidah to Royal African Company Officials, Requesting Remadores*) in *The English in West Africa*, ed. Robin Law, vol.1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 222.

³⁴ Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol.2, 589.

Historian of the Gold Coast Ray Kea makes an important point when he notes that “texts cannot be regarded as ahistorical abstractions or as ephemera; they were grounded in real historical events or relationships.”³⁵ The texts encountered in this study are embedded with contemporary ideas and prejudices: they were written to justify, to entertain, and to record for posterity as much as they served everyday administrative purposes. Since this study is dependent on European-produced sources, they can never fully show the role of the *remador* in contra-band trade. At all European forts along the Gold Coast in the early modern era, *remadores* were forbidden to contact the vessels lying in ‘the roads’ until the captain had announced his arrival, and needed permission before approaching any vessel which arrived to the port.³⁶ The *remadores* were ostensibly operating within the global trading networks which primarily amassed European commercial profit. However, in spite of formal condemnation, piracy and interloper trade also flourished in the early modern era—although without records the scale of this is impossible to quantify. The account of Dutch merchant Willem Bosman (1705) hints that there was an independent community of *remadores* settled at the port of Ouidah who traded directly with larger European merchants for African cloth: “The Blacks come with canoes there to trade in them [North African cloth], and carry them off almost immediately.”³⁷

This is supported by the near-contemporary account of Frenchman Jean Barbot, who claimed to illegally purchase gold from *remadores* at Tebbo.³⁸ Therefore, although most of the sources encountered indicate that the *remadores* operated within European-controlled trading networks, they may just have often forged networks of their own for personal profit.

When read against the grain, restrictive measures intended to curb the ability of *remadores* to carry out their own trade might indicate the extent to which they were engaged in this activity, thereby undermining European trade networks. For example, on 28th June 1514, King Manuel I of Portugal issued the *Ordenações Manuelinas*, imposing a bureaucratic system on virtually all aspects of Portuguese overseas trade. Under these regulations, any *remador* contacting Portuguese ships before they reached the fort of Elmina was to be “whipped and have his ears cut off on the first offence, and to be hanged for a second offence.”³⁹ The stringency of the punishment indicates the damage caused by independent *remador* trade. Additionally, strict control over the *remadores* was a means by which King Manuel sought to monitor trade on the Gold Coast more broadly, and potentially starve out his rivals. The global trading network could thus be controlled via strict regulation

³⁵ Kea, *Cultural and Social History of Ghana*, 127.

³⁶ Gutkind, “The Canoemen of the Gold Coast,” 348.

³⁷ Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Gold Coast of Guinea*, 337.

³⁸ Hair, *Barbot on Guinea*, 351.

³⁹ Teixeira de Mota, *Some Aspects of Portuguese Colonisation and Sea Trade in West Africa in the 15th and 16th Centuries* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1978), 10–11, cited in Gutkind, “The Canoemen of the Gold Coast,” 343–344.

of the *remadores* along the Gold Coast. And yet, *remadores* also wielded a dangerous ability to forge trading networks of their own, and sabotage the burgeoning European trans-Atlantic trade of Gold Coast commodities. English official John Thorne stationed at “Ophra in Arda” wrote an intriguing letter to the Royal African Company officials on 4th of December 1681 seemingly complaining about a *remador* strike:

For canoemen I have 13 here, and if you send downe anymore pray lett them be pawnes, for those which came with Captain Lowe proved rogues. For the last three dayes when there was occasion for them moste, we could not get them to carry off the slaves, to Captain Lowe’s great damage, but was forced to hyre others...⁴⁰

This source is further evidence of the precarious stake claimed by European polities on the Gold Coast, and their dependence on *remadores* who were a crucial link in the chain of the global trade networks which converged in the region in the early modern era.

Remadores as Network Facilitators on a Local Scale

Most European trading companies vying for a stake in commercial trade with the Gold Coast established multiple forts along the coast to secure access to commercial and subsistence goods and to shelter the communities which they established there. The Danish possessions on the Gold Coast, for example, consisted of the main Fort Christiansborg (founded in 1658),⁴¹ and four smaller forts which were ceded to the British in 1850. *Remadores* were important not only in facilitating trans-Atlantic and intra-continental trade by ferrying goods to and from the shoreline, but also in communicating *between* European forts, carrying messages or sourcing and distributing local supplies.

In 1717, the Dutch governors at Elmina were placed under pressure to justify the financial burden of maintaining fifteen forts along the Gold Coast.⁴² The directors argued that the maintenance of a high number of forts was crucial to the defence of the interests of the Dutch West India Company for the following reasons:

- To stave off attacks from the African population living around or near a fort.
- To guarantee the security of sea communication by small boat; if there were fewer forts, greater distances would exist between them, and sea travel would become more hazardous, making contact with the outforts more difficult if not impossible.

⁴⁰ Law, *The English in West Africa*, vol.1, 222.

⁴¹ The fort was occupied by the Portuguese between 1680–82.

⁴² Harvey Feinberg, “Africans and Europeans in West Africa,” 41.

- To preserve alternative places to attract African traders in case the roads to a particular fort were impassable.⁴³

Clearly the directors saw advantages that were strategic, commercial and defensive, and the possession of multiple forts necessitated the employment of *remadores* to distribute supplies, convey messages and people between them.

The sources analysed pertaining to both Danish and English coastal enclaves illustrate the dependence on *remadores* to source and distribute essential supplies for the maintenance of the fort network. On 3rd of May 1738 Governor Boris at Fort Christianborg penned a letter to the Directors of the Danish West Indies and Guinea Company urgently requesting more sloops, since the local *Fantes* had retained and panyarred all of the Danish-owned canoes “because of some fabricated palaver either with the *remadors* or with our Negroes.”⁴⁴ He notes, “at the fort we are desperate” since without canoes the basic supply of *millie* could not be attained.⁴⁵ The heavy dependence of Europeans on the local transport services of the *remadores* illustrates the vulnerability of the Danish trading posts on the Gold Coast—irrespective of the influence their trading companies might wield commercially on a global level.

Other evidence can be found in the account of the Portuguese royal chronicler Rui de Pina. De Pina was appointed royal chronicler in 1490, and penned an extensive account of Portuguese enterprise in Africa, at a time when the King had previously ordered the establishment of the fort of Elmina and intended to make the gold trade an exclusive monopoly. The account, therefore, was likely a propaganda exercise to expound the benevolence of King Dom João III’s intentions and legitimise his actions. Nevertheless, the chronicle includes a letter addressed to Alfonso de Albuquerque, chastising him for his harsh treatment of the local populations in the town of Mina. The letter reads:

In our name, they [local population at Mina] serve us in everything required of them, and with their canoes and their servants they bring wood to the captains of our ships. Many of them make large purchases from our factory and most of them are accustomed to buy the odd cloth which they sell from their canoes.⁴⁶

The conciliatory tone adopted by the King to safeguard the *remadores* from Albuquerque’s violence is indicative of the vital role played by *remadores* in equip-

⁴³ Feinberg, “Africans and Europeans in West Africa,” 26.

⁴⁴ *Fantes* refers to people residing in the south-western region of the Gold Coast. *Panyarred* means the practice of seizing and holding persons until the repayment of debt or resolution of a dispute which became a common activity along the Atlantic coast of Africa in the 18th and 19th centuries. Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol.2, 462.

⁴⁵ *Millie* refers to millet. Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol.2, 462.

⁴⁶ Letter from Dom Joao III to Alfonso de Abluquerque, governor of Sao Jorge da Mina, Tomar (October 13, 1523), translated from the chronicle of Rui de Pina published in: António Brásio, ed., *Monumenta Missionaria Africana, 1471–1531*, vol.1 (Lisbon: Agencia Geral do Ultramar, 1952), 451–2; accessed in Newitt, *The Portuguese in West Africa*, 96.

ping the fortress at Elmina with crucial supplies, and in purchasing spoiled goods from the cloth factories which might otherwise have gone to waste.

As well as distributing supplies, *remadores* were also required to convey messages and letters between forts via the rivers and sea. Without the aid of *remadores*, communication was hampered, leaving outposts in vulnerable isolation. Since communication was necessary, some forts without *remadores* were obliged to rent *remador* services from other European powers, at considerable expense. A letter to the main English fort from a factory outpost in Sekondi written by Mark Bedford Whiting on the 20th of June 1683 reads: “I would wright your Worship oftener only I am in want of a canoe and to hyre a canoe every time is chargeable, the Dutch have them here for that purpose.”⁴⁷

The sources also document instances of *remadores* communicating between fort governors and the slaves captured and held on the ships. In a letter to the directors of the West India and Guinea Company (1705), Governor Lygaard reports the death of over twenty slaves, as they were held aboard a ship before it sailed, due to exposure to the elements, cramped conditions (“stinking air”), and the “cuts and blows” inflicted on them. He alludes to the *remadores* operating as intermediaries between the slaves below deck and the Governor himself: “It is said that they [slaves being held below deck] were very ill treated with cuts and blows and also suffered from hunger and thirst. They themselves often complained to me [Lygaard] through the *remidors*.”⁴⁸

The interference of the Danish governors at Fort Christiansborg in African cultural practices to ensure the compliance of the *remadores* is another illustration of the power wielded by *remadores* as logistical agents. To the great annoyance of the chaplain, the governors at Fort Christiansborg continued the practice of “eating *fetish*” (the local means of oath-swearing) as a way of securing a promise well into the eighteenth century. An entry in the diary kept at Christiansborg on the 3rd of February 1744 records an incident when the Company *remadores* sent down to Ningo with goods in the large canoe negligently left the canoe on the beach at night, and it was swept against rocks and destroyed. The next morning the *remadores* sent word back that “they would not come here to the fort before the governor had sent the Company’s Messenger, Soya, to them to eat *fetish* that they would not be punished.”⁴⁹

The journal recounts that “the governor, *nolens volens*, had to do what they asked, so they would not run away altogether”.⁵⁰ This illustrates three points: the degree of bargaining power afforded to the *remadores* because of the footloose nature of their trade; the dependency of the Danish forts on the local and global

⁴⁷ Law, *The English in West Africa*, vol.1, 4.

⁴⁸ Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol.1, 199.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, vol.2, 654.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

networks facilitated by the *remadores*; and how an awareness of this forced the Danish to adhere to indigenous cultural practices in this instance.

Remadores as Network Facilitators on an Inter-polity Scale

After the advent of European trade heralded by the arrival of Portuguese merchants on the Gold Coast in 1471, the commodities of gold, ivory and various agricultural products such as pepper, dyewoods and gum arabic were predominantly traded in exchange for European (or European-acquired) products. However, by the end of the seventeenth century, the focus of the export trade had turned to slaves. The first European settlement on the Gold Coast, São Jorge da Mina, was established by the Portuguese in 1482. Over the course of the next century, the Portuguese used force in an attempt to monopolise all European trade in the region and stave off English, French and Dutch merchants. However, these attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, especially since accounts such as that of Pieter de Marees heightened European interest in the Gold Coast region. Already by 1720, the Gold Coast can be described as a ‘colonial fossil’:⁵¹ Merchants and representatives of a plethora of European trading companies (later colonial powers) had established communities and commercial forts along the coast which featured alongside the pre-existent African polities and communities. *Remadores* offer a fascinating lens through which historians can explore inter-polity rivalry and competition along the bustling coast. All European polities were bound by a common dependence on the services of *remadores*, which paradoxically fostered competition to secure their services and at times cooperation in securing the return of those who had defected.

Due to the footloose nature of their work, traders were obliged to offer a competitive wage to *remadores* to prevent them from taking their services elsewhere. Rival European forts in the region were consequently locked in competition with one another to secure the labour of *remadores*.⁵² Danish sources indicate that slave *remadores* did at times escape or defect. For example, in a letter to the directors of the West India and Guinea Company, Governor Syndemann complains:

A man slave, who had been made the company’s remedor on the Upper Coast ran away from us when he was sent up in the time of the previous Governor with the company’s canoe to take water out of our recently arrived ship. We have never since been able to catch him.⁵³

⁵¹ Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast*, xiii.

⁵² Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol.2, 512. Here, we find evidence of competition among European polities for *remador* services (see previous example cited in fn.23 of this study).

⁵³ Governor Syndermann et. al., Christiansborg, to the Directors of the West India and Guinea Company, Copenhagen. General Letter (March 21, 1724), accessed in: Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol 1, 316.

The very fact that officers at Fort Christiansborg saw fit to introduce a policy of holding free *remadores* accountable for escaping slave *remadores* with a heavy fine indicates that the *remadores* did escape or defect from time to time.⁵⁴

As well as a mutual dependence on *remador* services, rival European forts were also reliant on one another to ensure the return of *remadores* who had escaped or defected. At times of war, refusal to return escaping *remadores* to their ‘original’ fort was also a sign of inter-polity aggression. In 1730, at the time of the Danish-Dutch conflict on the Gold Coast, in the minutes of a ‘secret council,’ it is recorded: “We have not yet got back either our remedors or Company slaves who had run away and been taken to the Dutch town.”⁵⁵

It is unclear from this extract whether the *remadores* actively defected to the Dutch side, or simply fled and were captured by the Dutch. However, the fact that they were not returned is a sign of tense relations between the polities. When relations were amicable, some European stations also loaned out the services of *remadores* employed at different forts, for a fee.⁵⁶ At times of peace and war, then, *remadores* transgressed European polity boundaries—sometimes working on commission and sometimes through defection.

Since *remadores* were a prerequisite to trans-Atlantic trade on the Gold Coast, securing their services (or depriving rivals of their *remadores*) was inherently political. Depriving a rival of these commercial linchpins was a harsh and effective means of sabotaging their activity. Danish sources indicate that this tactic was pursued at the time of the Danish/Dutch conflict in the early seventeenth century, and most likely elsewhere. It is crucial to note that *remador* hostage-taking was not just a European tactic, but one also pursued by African leaders. For example, it is recorded in a Danish letter to the directors of the West India Company (1731) that:

Immediately after the Aquambue prince who had been detained in the Dutch fort had been killed, the King of Aquambue started a dispute against the Dutch factor, and immediately withdrew a number of the remedors and fishermen who lived in the Negro towns by the forts and took them up the coast.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol. 1, 589. Here, we see a policy outlined for punishing free *remadores* when slave *remadores* escaped or defected, by way of a heavy fine (see previous example cited in fn.34 of this study).

⁵⁵ Governor Waeroe et al. Christianborg, to the Ship’s Council on the Habet Galley (Copy of Secret Council minutes) (November 18, 1730), accessed in: Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol 1, 426.

⁵⁶ Law, *The English in West Africa*, vol.1, 4. Here, we find evidence of one European polity loaning the services of their *remadores* to another European polity for a sum of money (see previous example cited in fn.47 of this study).

⁵⁷ A. Willemsen, Copenhagen, to the Directors of the West India and Guinea Company, Copenhagen (July 11, 1731), accessed in Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana* vol 1, 442.

Remadores were not only used as pawns in conflicts, but sometimes actively participated in acts of sabotage and warfare too. On 9th December 1730, it was reported to the directors of the Danish West Indies and Guinea Company that the rival “Dutch Negroes along with [Danish] Company slave *remadores*” hatched a plan in order to successfully defect to the Dutch town. The plan, apparently, was to distract the attention of the Danish officials by setting fire to a sloop giving the rest of the slave and free *remadores* the opportunity to escape unnoticed.⁵⁸ At night, two of the company *remadores* set light to the sails of a sloop which had pulled into the Danish Fort, and “tried to burn up the sails,” but their plan was thwarted when a female slave raised the alarm. Again, Jean Barbot also details an instance of *remadores* embroiled in inter-polity rivalry. At the time when relations were tense between Danish and Dutch forts, Dutch *remadores* supposedly attempted to execute the Danish Governor when transporting him in their canoes. The account reads:

When they were going ashore again the Dutch remidors toppled and capsized the canoe outside the breakers, whereby the governor almost lost his life. For five of the remidors hung on to him to keep him under the water and drown him. He is still spitting blood from this, and has much pain in his chest.⁵⁹

This account may have been exaggerated for dramatic effect for European readers, and hanging on to one another may have been more of a survival technique than assassination attempt, yet, if we choose to accept this story (despite the very reasonable criticism against it) we can learn something of the involvement of *remadores* in political conflict. In this passage *remadores* were at least portrayed to be deeply involved in inter-polity rivalries both actively and passively. What we do not know definitively is the extent to which *remadores* were coercively embroiled in these conflicts, or whether they felt a genuine sense of duty and loyalty towards those for whom they worked.

In conclusion, historian Jeppe Mulich assesses inter-polity connections as reactions to “shared internal and external threats to security and social order posed by slave uprisings, revolutions, and inter-imperial war, alongside local inter-polity rivalries.”⁶⁰ In this case an alternative shared threat to security has been examined, namely the vulnerability of the forts without the services of *remadores*. This sometimes fostered amicable inter-polity connections in the form of loaning the

⁵⁸ Governor Waeroe et al. Christiansborg, to the Directors of The West Indies and Guinea Company, Copenhagen, General Letter (December 28, 1730), accessed in: Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol.1, 436–7.

⁵⁹ Governor Waeroe et al. Christiansborg, to the Directors of The West India and Guinea Company, Copenhagen (March 22, 1732), accessed in: Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana* vol 1, 453.

⁶⁰ Jeppe Mulich, “Microregionalism and Intercolonial Relations: The Case of the Danish West Indies 1730–1830,” *Journal of Global History* 8, no.1 (2013), 74.

services of slave *remadores* to other European communities at a cost, and returning those who escaped to their ‘original’ forts. However, in times of conflict, *remadores* were also embroiled in inter-polity rivalry. Sometimes they were taken as hostage to sever rivals from the commercial trading network and access to essential supplies, and at other times it seems they were even involved in the fighting directly.

Conclusions

In her study *Go-betweens and the Colonization of Brazil 1500–1600*, historian Alida Metcalf identifies three main categories of go-betweens who facilitated transatlantic interaction: the physical go-between, the transactional go-between, and the representational go-between.⁶¹ Metcalf’s categorisations are set out in relation to the *remadores* of the Gold Coast and the role they performed on a global, local scale and inter-polity scale. This underscores the importance of *remadores* as facilitators of trans-Atlantic interaction on the Gold Coast and the shortcoming of Metcalf’s three categorizations in quantifying their role.

Metcalf defines the physical go-between as the “men, women, and children who crossed the Atlantic Ocean, thereby linking not only Europe and America, but Europe and Africa, and Africa and Asia.”⁶² These forced and free migrants carried their own representational practices to new destinations and also acted as biological go-betweens transferring disease, flora, fauna and domesticated animals from place to place. The *remador* might be considered a physical go-between within continental Africa owing to their (sometimes forced) migration to non-native ports and coastal enclaves to capitalise on their skills, also transferring ‘representational practices’ to new places by spreading their knowledge about surf and tide navigation. Additionally, *remadores* facilitated trans-Atlantic human traffic in their work ferrying travellers, traders and slaves between ships and the Gold Coast hinterland.

Transactional go-betweens, according to Metcalf, are the “translators, negotiators, and cultural brokers.”⁶³ This group closely resembles the ‘trading diasporas’ defined by Philip Curtin, who acted as brokers across vast cultural divides, facilitating the entanglement of markets and commodities around the world in the pre-industrial era.⁶⁴ It is challenging to assess the role of the *remador* as a transactional go-between since their role altered over time, and they left no paper trail themselves to gain a more holistic understanding of their activities.

⁶¹ Alida Metcalf, *Go-betweens and the Colonization of Brazil 1500–1600* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005) 9.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁴ Philip Curtin, *Trade Diasporas and Cross-Cultural Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1–2.

Before colonial forts were established on the Gold Coast, *remadores* assumed a more active role as transactional go-betweens, bringing goods from the hinterland to the traders directly without Europeans having contact with the African vendors beforehand. Pieter de Marees (1602) narrates an instance of three Dutch trading ships pulling into the bay simultaneously.⁶⁵ The traders were forced to offer a competitive ‘Dache’ or tip to the *remadores* to secure their access to the best of the Gold Coast commodities. He concludes the anecdote with the remark that ‘striving with one another, they [Dutch ships] diminished each other’s gain.’⁶⁶ However, the agency of the *remadores* as transactional go-betweens diminished as forts were established which dissolved the need for *remadores* to act as a point of contact between Europeans and the African traders. In more informal circumstances *remadores* did mediate across hierarchies of power at a later date. A previous example has been cited of *remadores* relating information between African slaves and European governors.⁶⁷ It is certain that some *remadores* undertook a more active role as transactional go-betweens when engaging in contraband trade directly with European and African ships. When employed by European trading companies their role was predominantly, but not exclusively, confined to physical labour.

However, none of Metcalf’s definitions qualify the important role *remadores* assumed as logistical go-betweens, bridging the physical spaces between European forts, between the ship and the shore, and in facilitating networks of a local, global scale and inter-regional scale. Their daily work as go-betweens, ferrying goods to and from European ships, was of fundamental importance in the maintenance of trading networks and European coastal enclaves in West Africa. This study has now established the crucial role played by *remadores* in breaching natural barriers to trade as well as in the formation of interlocking trade networks on a local, inter-regional and trans-Atlantic scale.

In this narrative, *remadores* have been given a central place in the consideration of interlocking networks which converged and steadily expanded in the region in the aftermath of inter-continental contact. This was not done to offer a maverick or unorthodox perspective, but because they rightly deserve to be placed centrally in this narrative. *Remadores* of the Gold Coast facilitated and were integral to the entanglement of African and European goods, ideas, and culture both on the Gold Coast and beyond. Uncovering the importance of the African *remador* in the formation of cross-Atlantic trading networks in the early modern era is one means of responding to John Thornton’s call to recognise the active role assumed by Africans in the making of the Atlantic world.

⁶⁵ “Dash: The Gift of the West African Commercial Life: Etymology and a Brief Genealogy,” Open Source Guinea, accessed August 25 2017, <http://www.opensourceguinea.org/2015/08/dash.html>.

⁶⁶ “Dash: The Gift of the West African Commercial Life.”

⁶⁷ Justesen, *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana*, vol.1, 199.

It was through the skill, dexterity, and speed of the *remadores* that Gold Coast goods found a global market, and *remadores* also acted as portals ushering European goods, ideas and influences into Africa. Historian Holger Weiss has advocated a greater understanding of how “early modern forms of globalization intermingle with local culture”—focusing particularly on the Gold Coast in his study.⁶⁸ However, this study has demonstrated how one local culture on the Gold Coast, a culture of canoemanship passed for centuries from father to son, spurred on entanglement on a local, regional and global scale. Uncovering the importance of *remadores* as network facilitators also exposes the fragility and precariousness of the dense entanglement of commercial interests on the Gold Coast in the early modern era. Aware of the importance of their services to European interests, and due to the footloose nature of their work, *remadores* enjoyed special bargaining power as a work force.

The inadequacies of this paper in providing a holistic understanding of the role and status of the *remador* must be acknowledged. It is difficult to qualify the role they assumed when conducting contraband trade, and the personal profile of the *remador* has remained elusive since this study heavily relied on European-produced sources. Since this study has predominantly made use of Danish and English sources only in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, it has not been possible to fully gauge the macro-shifts in the role and status of the Gold Coast *remador*: here, there is scope for further research. There have been obstacles to understanding the *remador* in his own terms, and yet attempts at uncovering the contribution made by this African workforce of unique status should not be abandoned entirely for such reasons. It is hoped that by uncovering their role, historians may come to a better understanding of the diversity of agents and agency involved in the tentative establishment of trans-Atlantic networks, recognising those whose intimate knowledge of their physical surroundings equipped them to overcome the many tangible and intangible barriers to trade on the Gold Coast and beyond.

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⁶⁸ Weiss, “The Entangled Spaces of Oddena, Oguaa and Osu,” 22.