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IRIS Summer Fieldwork Award, 2017 – Research Summary**

The IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award, made it possible for me to return to Ghana from June 8 to August 25, 2017. I did a combination of archival, oral traditional and ethnographic research in preparation towards my dissertation proposal. My research focuses on the ways in which African urban families, merchants and polities conceptualized (in)security in their alliances with European forts during and in the transition away from the slave trade. Scholars, have typically framed the transition from the trade in captives to ‘legitimate’ goods in West Africa in the context of economic history and debates about whether there was a “crisis of adapting” to forms of economic activity apart from selling captives. These narratives and debates have often been linked to questions about economic development and the transition away from the slave trade. Despite the value of these questions, scholars have often neglected the more cultural and religious aspects of the transformations and adaptations initiated by West African actors.

Whilst in Ghana, I interviewed over twenty mainly elderly men and women in Accra, Anomabo, Cape Coast and Elmina. My interviewees included the descendants of eighteenth and nineteenth century Gã, Fante, Euro-African and Afro-Brazilian merchants and potentates. The oral traditions I collected from these families emphasized African state expansion, slave trading and raids, insecurity and the rise and fall of commercial families on the Gold Coast. Other narratives and my own observations revealed the multiple functions of commercial households as political, sacred, familiar and protective spaces. For example, in some nineteenth century Euro-African households such as the Vialla, Catherine Swanzy and Smith houses, I saw protective shrines and extant home burials. Rituals associated with these shrines and extant graves were central to

contemporary family narratives about the sacred nature of households as spaces of ancestral veneration and protection.

Apart from the spiritual and the sacred, oral traditions emphasized these households as centers for negotiating political power, commerce and in the context of the numerous conflicts between the Gã, Fante, Dutch, Danes British and Asante in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Family relics and material artefacts such as earthenware pots, imported European whisky and rum bottles, vintage furniture, mounted cannons, Congreve rockets and the heavily stone or adobe-built architecture were central to narratives of commerce, security and political anxiety. How do these extant artefacts validate the oral traditions and biographies of the merchant households? How can these artefacts help analyze and historicize how Gold Coast Africans conceptualized insecurity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Since there are hardly any eighteenth century documented records in Ghana itself, I will follow the archival paper trail in London and Copenhagen to fully historicize my ethnographic observations.

The oral traditions and family histories I collected enhanced my understanding of the nineteenth century Deeds Registry I consulted. I specifically read portions of the six volume “Ancient Documents,” which contained property inventories, wills, mortgages, commercial transactions and architectural drawings of elite nineteenth century households. In addition, I also read the ADM /2/7, kept in the Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra. A careful reading of these sources revealed how urban African merchant families expressed political and economic vulnerability and anxieties in “real” security concerns (stone construction, walls, etc.), as well as spiritual and intangible forms of protection including, home burials, ritual spaces and ancestral veneration. These material and cultural transformations occurred in a context where Britain’s influence evolved “from one that asked to one that demanded and at last

commanded.” (McCaskie, 688: 1999). In reaction, merchant families such as the Richters and Bannermans simultaneously used or conceptualized their fortified stone-built household as commercial, burial and ritual spaces and as a bulwark against Gã, British and Asante aggression in the early 1800s. In May 1858, an ailing and bankrupt James Bannerman (1790-1858), requested to be buried in his wife’s and niece’s house if a British company, W.B. Hutton and Sons auctions his house. What does Richter’s and Bannerman’s stories tell us about anxieties about economic and political insecurity and uncertainties in the Gold Coast Atlantic world? How did local potentates materialize these transformations in the transition away from the slave trade?

The IRIS summer fieldwork award was extremely helpful. It made it possible for me to expand the scope of my research. By shifting attention towards the cultural, affective and spiritual dimensions of households, fortifications, urban and social transformations, my study offers a new perspective on how urban families experienced and materialized (in)security at the end of the Atlantic slave trade in West Africa.