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# Intercultural intimacy in Danish Guinea, 1680-1740

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Half a year ago, when I sent in the abstract to a paper for this session it made sense that the title would be "Postcolonial challenges to women's history". At the time I was teaching a history and theory course at Copenhagen University broaching different methodological and theoretical approaches to the history of cultural encounters during the period traditionally termed the European expansion. Postcolonial theory was a substantial part of the reading material for that class. When my teaching requirements were fulfilled it no longer seemed as obvious that my research can be classified as womens' history or even as a postcolonial challenge.

My research is focused on intimate relations between Danish men and African women in and around the Danish trading post Christiansborg in Guinea in a broad period covering the Danish presence on the coast from 1680 to 1850. Understanding intimate relations as well as cultural encounters my aim is to investigate which roles they played and what they meant in the overall relations between Africans and Danes at Christiansborg. With Ann McClintock and others, who have worked on issues of gender and colonialism, I tend to think of all European encounters with Africa as inherently masculine enterprises. Considering that far most of the Europeans who traded, colonized and settled were men this might seem obvious, but as obvious as the number of men in the European expansion is, there has hitherto been little research done on how this male predominance affected the colonial world.

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In this paper I will focus on social practice at Christiansborg and on how the Danish trading company and the Danish church choose to regulate relationships between Danish men and African women at the fort before 1740. The area of the Gold Coast that today is known as Ghana did not become a colony until the 1850s, after the trading posts were sold to the British. The paper that I am presenting today is therefore a pre-colonial history about regulating male sexuality in an African trading post. This does not mean, however, that it is irrelevant to think in terms of colonialism and in lines drawn out by postcolonial theory, which is a point I will get to in my conclusion. My argument in this paper is that the protestant church in Guinea accepted and encouraged concubinary relationships with African women as a means to ensure that the Danish men fulfilled their responsibilities as Christian husbands and fathers.

### **A male community**

From the beginning in 1680 Danish men in Guinea had sexual relations with African women. In one of the very first letters from Guinea to the Danish trading company Vestindisk-guineisk kompagni Governor Prange described how he arrived and found the fort in a poor condition, the few surviving company assistants having used the company goods and gold on "whores and other frivolities".<sup>1</sup> In the following years letters and travel accounts from Guinea mention sexual relations between white men and black women repeatedly.

In the late 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> century the company tried to prohibit sexual relations between Danish men and African women, but a ban seems to have been unenforceable. In 1711 Governor Frants Boye wrote to the company that: "The garrison cannot be persuaded, either by exhortations or punishment, to refrain from mixing with the heathen women."

It is possible that Governor Boye was not very eager to enforce the company directive prohibiting interracial sexual relations, since he himself had a relationship with at least one African woman at Christiansborg. Yet, Boye's personal interest in the matter is not as interesting as the fact that he had become governor while having an African concubine. At some point around 1700 the question about interracial sexual relations must have changed from if they should be allowed to how they could be managed. From early on in the 18<sup>th</sup> century relationships with African women were the norm at Christiansborg and these relations played

a formative role in the micro society at the fort.

The men who went to Danish Guinea were for the most part young men under thirty and unmarried. In the early period which is the focus in this paper, they came from all parts of the Danish Helstat, from Germany and the Netherlands. Among governors, assistants, chaplains and doctor there are very few traditional Danish "sen-names", which suggests that most came from landed gentry or merchant families. The company assistants worked with administrating the trade, which in the early period mainly consisted of trade in ivory and gold, and by the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the slave trade had grown to a successful enterprise. To secure and enhance the trade it was necessary to maintain good diplomatic relations with the local African nations and much of the daily work at the fort in Guinea evolved around negotiations with visiting Africans or traveling inland to meet with trading partners.

Daily life at the fort was characterized by abysmal living conditions and high mortality. Travel accounts describe how European men on the Gold Coast lived their lives there as if they were going to die soon, which many of them in fact were. Many Europeans died within the first months on the coast and even more within a year. They died of malaria, or climate fever as the Danes on the coast called it, but apart from this quite a few apparently died from Guinea worms, infections, other diseases and "excessive living" as several accounts called it.

An ever present anxiety caused by a constant presence of death and disease was most likely enhanced by a feeling of cultural displacement and isolation. Africa is still culturally foreign to us today, but arriving on the Gold Coast in the early 18th Century meant entering a world virtually unknown, and it is reasonable to assume that encountering Africa initiated a considerable shock for the Danish company employees.

The fort was small and after 6 o'clock at night it had to be locked from the inside. Excessive drinking, fighting and arguing seem to have been part of the daily life. The company council often had to deal with all kinds of quarrels and fights among the men caused by disagreements about money, goods, sexual partners, or simply by excessive drinking. Some company employees went mad while living at the fort. Others accidentally shot themselves or each other, and descriptions of arguments about whose responsibility it was to close the main gate at night as well as men sleeping with weapons in their beds suggest a high level of insecurity and fear among the company employees.

In short a preliminary acquaintance with the situation at Christiansborg make it understandable that a ban on sexual relations with African women, or any ban aimed at regulating the social practice at the fort, would have been difficult to enforce.

### **“Shameful and ungodly manners”**

In 1722, just after the protestant chaplain Elias Svane arrived at Christiansborg he wrote a worried letter to the Danish company in Copenhagen Svane complained, that “the children that our Blanche hitherto have had with the black women here, live without any enlightenment about God or their salvation.” He requested that the company send out an assistant to teach the growing number of mulatto children at Christiansborg and asked the company to honor their Christian responsibilities and supply the children with food, lodging and linen for clothes.<sup>2</sup>

In this letter Elias Svane did not suggest any regulation of the sexual relations, but two years later he wrote another letter, that deals with the subject more explicitly. Prohibiting the men from sexual relations with African women was apparently not a solution for chaplain Svane. Citing Saint Paul he agreed that it is “better to marry than to burn”<sup>3</sup>, but requested that the company take “other measures highly necessary for the final abolition and purgation of the long-standing, shameful and ungodly manners of this Christiansborg.”<sup>4</sup>

Svane was also disturbed by the men leaving their African wives unsupported in Guinea when their employment by the company ended: “Those of our Christians who have taken wives here from among the heathen will not keep them, except ... at the utmost only for the time they remain at this place or in the country; but later, on their departure, they wish to be divorced from them for always and absolutely.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Svane it would be better if the company employees bought African concubines. Having a relationship with an enslaved instead of a free woman meant that the men could take the women wherever they wanted, within Guinea or beyond, without having to ask their families' permission. This also meant that the men could be made responsible for their African wives and children beyond their time on the coast. On top of that enslaved women were much cheaper to acquire, since a female slave could be bought for 40 Rigsdaler. while marrying a free African woman would be

more expensive.<sup>6</sup>

Though from Svane's view it would be even better to deal with the problem of company employees' sexual needs by making sure that the men were married before they were sent out and to allow them to bring their wives. The main problem with this solution was that many of the Danish women would probably die, but the advantages would be great. Not only would the men not have to sleep with African women, but the Danish women could do sewing and washing at the fort and even instruct African women in these skills.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps Svane had trouble believing in the idea of sending a greater number of Danish women to West Africa in the 1720's. In any case he did not return to the idea again in the letter. In the rest of the text he described the situation at Christiansborg as if sexual relations between Danish men and African women were unavoidable.

### **A dispensation from Denmark**

In 1726 governor Suhm wrote to the company that it was "more difficult to check fornication here [at Christiansborg] than in our home country" and requested advice on how to deal with the situation. According to Suhm other European nations on the coast had permitted their employees to have African concubines and Suhm had already asked the chaplain to write to the bishop in Denmark to ask what the church thought of such relationships, but he felt he also needed a response directly from the secular authority.<sup>8</sup>

It seems that the question was still unresolved a year later, when the new governor Pahl complained that Chaplain Chresten Heiggaard would not let the company employees at Christiansborg take the sacrament. According to Pahl, the chaplain Heiggaard wanted those of the men who had African concubines to marry them.<sup>9</sup> Pahl wrote to the company that the men had offered to assure the priest orally or in writing that they would take their African wives with them, when their employment by the company was over, if the wives wanted to go.

As mentioned earlier the question of the men leaving their African wives in Guinea was also of great importance to Elias Svane, and it is very likely that this question was posed directly to the bishop of Zeeland, Christen Worm. According to Ludwig Rømer's travel account from 1760, Worm gave a dispensation concerning the inter-racial relationships in Guinea:

"There has been at Christiansborg a Dispensation by Bishop Worm, that all Danish were allowed to take a black Woman [Fruentimmer]; though NB. not more than one, and on the following Conditions: 1). the man should promise, that his Heathen Wife was converted to Christianity. 2). when the man went to Europe, that he should take her with him, NB. if she wanted. On these Conditions everyone of our Nation has his Maitresse, among other [nations] no such Ceremonies are used."<sup>10</sup>

The act of taking an African concubine was called to cassare or to calisare and the practice was most certainly, like the word, inspired by earlier Portuguese traders on the coast. How long Bishop Worm's dispensation was in use at Christiansborg is unknown, but seemingly the document was lost at some point. In 1747 Chaplain Flye wrote to his bishop that the men on the coast still referred to a dispensation that allowed them to take an African concubine, but that the document to prove it was gone.<sup>11</sup>

Apparently the practice was at times very official and accepted. In 1765 I have even found the calisarede (the concubinages) to be listed alongside the Christian "copulerede" (married) couples.<sup>12</sup> I do not know when the practice of entering the concubinages into the church register started or how long it continued, but what is certain is that "cassarering" – taking an African concubine – was common practice at Christiansborg the rest of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and right up until the sale of the Danish forts and lodges on the coast in 1850.

As I hope to have made clear it was not an easy task to survive in Guinea in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and it seems that the concubinary relationships was a major part of the men's integration into the African-European society on the coast. The African women cooked for the men and took care of them when they were sick and the men learned about African culture and language from their concubines.

## **Conclusion**

After failing to enforce a complete ban on the sexual relations the company governor asked the chaplain to write to the church authorities in Copenhagen – bishop Worm – who issued a dispensation for the men at Christiansborg. This dispensation and Chaplain Svane's thoughts about the sexual relations between Danish men and African women at Christiansborg suggest that the concubinary institution – cassarering – was a way to

ensure that the Danish men fulfilled their Christian responsibilities as husbands and fathers.

Finally – to hint at a place for this conclusion in a session about “postcolonial challenges to women’s history” I will return to one of my opening remarks about it being relevant to think in lines of colonialism and post-colonial theory in a history about pre-colonial concubinary relationships.

Post-colonial theorists as well as historians often depict the colonial world and colonial practices as structured by a more or less over-arching European colonial discourse. The classical example is of course Said’s Orientalism<sup>13</sup>, but in many other and more recent post-colonial interpretations of the colonial era colonial discourse tends to be imagined as a more or less enforceable structure.

It is of course widely debated how hegemonic colonial discourse was or could be, but it is often a stated purpose in post-colonial readings to deconstruct, to focus on cracks and weaknesses in texts and to read against or counter to colonial discourse, and thereby presupposing that a structure exists. Thinking along such lines it occurred to me how pre-colonial Christiansborg was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that it might take my research interesting places to think of how this pre-colonial situation was formative to the micro society on the coast. There were no European institutions to enforce social regulations. And if there was a colonial discourse or an exvivalent European discourse about racial and cultural supremacy it was certainly not over-arching or hegemonic.

My idea is that the early interracial concubinary relationships that I have talked about in this paper were as affected by African practices and the local social situation at Christiansborg as by European ideas about race. In my future research it will be interesting to see what happens in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By that time the society at Christiansborg had grown and developed into a mixed – creolized – coast society. Institutions were solidifying and perhaps I will find evidence of the colonial discourse that found its way into the very heart of Africa by the end of the century. Another inspirational thought I can draw from thinking about Christiansborg in post-colonial terms could be to try out the thesis that the concubinary institution of cassarering was a “pre-colonial colonial institution” – a European way to regulate an otherwise very African based trade society.

NOTER

- 1 Rigsarkivet, V.-g.K. Breve og dokumenter fra Guinea, 4/7/1681. Translation from German in Ole Justesen (ed.): *Danish sources to the history of Ghana: 1657-1754*. Forthcoming.
- 2 Rigsarkivet, V.-g.K, Breve og dokumenter fra Guinea, 6/2/1722. My translation from Danish.
- 3 Rigsarkivet, V.-g.K. 122, 3/15/1724. English translation in *ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Rigsarkivet, V.-g.K. 122, 3/15/1724. English translation in *ibid.*
- 8 Rigsarkivet, V.-g.K. 122, 9/28/1726. English translation in *ibid.*
- 9 Rigsarkivet, V.-g.K. 122, 9/10/1727. English translation in *ibid.*
- 10 Ludwig Ferdinand Rømer: *Tilforladelig Efterretning om Kysten Guinea* (København 1760), p. 245-246. My translation.
- 11 Landsarkivet, Sjællands stifts bispearkiv, Breve fra udenfor stiftet, B.3.C.1.
- 12 Landsarkivet, Sjællands stifts bispearkiv, Breve fra udenfor stiftet, B.3.C.1.
- 13 Said, Edward W.: *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books. New York 1978