


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Francis Fearon's Ideas and Hidden Network of African Antislavery in Nineteenth-Century Gold Coast

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## Abstract

This article critically examines the antislavery activism of Francis P. Fearon, an African activist based in late nineteenth-century Accra. His correspondence with the Aborigines' Protection Society (APS) provides a profound insight into the dynamics of African abolitionism. By analysing a collection of letters housed in the APS archive, this study sheds light on Fearon's commitment to abolishing slavery, driven by his principled opposition to family separation. The article underscores Fearon's active involvement in a network of African antislavery advocates who sought to disrupt the institution of slavery through legal challenges and international advocacy. This research extends the growing literature on African abolitionism, which primarily focuses on the efforts of African missionaries, educated elites, and grassroots movements, adding a new dimension by exploring the operations of a dedicated network committed to the abolitionist cause.

**Keywords:** West Africa; Ghana; slavery; slave trade; abolition; colonial administration; activism

On 1 September 1890, *The Times* published part of a letter from Henry Fox Bourne, secretary of the Aborigines Protection Society (APS), addressed to Lord Henry Holland Knutford, the British secretary of state for the colonies.<sup>1</sup> In the letter, Bourne stated that the APS had received credible evidence (from an informant in colony of Gold Coast) of widespread child slavery in Gold Coast, despite the abolition ordinance of 1874:

Our committee has trustworthy information that there are now in the Colony and the adjacent British territories a great number of boys and girls, estimated at 5,000 or more who are bought and retained as slaves, and that the practice of procuring these children from Salaga and other districts in the interior for sale at Accra and other places on the coast still continues and of late considerably increased, owing to the apathy and connivance of the representatives of her Majesty's Government.<sup>2</sup>

The details of the letter were extensively circulated in the British press, much to the anger of the secretary of state.<sup>3</sup> The original letter had been sent by the APS to the secretary on 20 August 1890, and

<sup>1</sup> *The Times* (London), "Slavery at the Gold Coast," 1 Sep. 1890.

<sup>2</sup> Parliamentary Papers (PP) 1890–91 (C. 6354), no. 1, The Aborigines Protection Society to Colonial Office, 20 Aug. 1890.

<sup>3</sup> *Eastern Evening News*, "Slavery at the Gold Coast," 1 Sep. 1890; *Banbury Advertiser*, 4 Sep. 1890; *Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald*, 6 Sep. 1890; *Batley News*, 6 Sep. 1890; *Staffordshire Chronicle*, 6 Sep. 1890; *Kilburn Times*, 5 Sep. 1890; PP 1890–91 (C. 6354), no. 9. Colonial Office to Aborigines Protection Society, Downing Street, 13 Apr. 1890.

sending it to *The Times* was in keeping with the society's tradition of using the British press to apply pressure on the colonial office to act on such issues. An allegation made in the APS letter was that the colonial government in the Gold Coast had failed to implement the 1874 law against domestic slavery and that the colonial governor was actively promoting its continuation. The letter provided many examples of slave cases handled by the court in Accra to support this allegation. Owing to the supporting evidence, the colonial governor and other British officials in the Gold Coast became convinced that the APS informant was a British official named Edward McMunn, a former district commissioner in Accra.<sup>4</sup> In this role, McMunn had prosecuted many slavery cases and had come into direct conflict with other British officials because of his strong antislavery position, hence the British officials' suspicion. However, Steffan Runkel has recently provided conclusive evidence that the APS informant was not McMunn, but an African activist in Accra named Francis P. Fearon.<sup>5</sup> Fearon's letters are still in the archive of the Anti-Slavery Society in the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford, and the APS report contained verbatim quotations from them. The first letter on domestic slavery from Fearon to the APS was sent on 24 June 1890.<sup>6</sup> This letter formed the basis of the APS campaign against domestic slavery in Gold Coast in the 1890s, as well as the foundation for further correspondence. In response to the initial allegation, Knutsford wrote to Sir W. B. Griffith, then Governor of the Gold Coast, to investigate the claims. Griffith replied directly to Knutsford, who then forwarded the responses to Fox Bourne of the APS, who, in turn, sent some of them back to the informant in Accra. This chain of correspondence (from Fearon to Fox Bourne of APS, from Fox Bourne of APS to Knutsford to report the allegation, from Knutsford to Griffith for investigation, and the reverse) continued for more than two years, producing many more letters from Fearon that revealed his antislavery strategies, ideas, and networks. This article will discuss the antislavery ideas and networks of the APS informant, Francis P. Fearon. Fearon was an African activist in Accra who campaigned against domestic slavery and other societal problems like drug abuse, unlawful arrests, the massacre of Africans by colonial troops (the Taviefe Massacre), corruption by colonial officials, and abuse of the jury system.<sup>7</sup> Fearon's surviving campaign letters at the APS archive, written between 1888 and 1896, are over a thousand pages. Some of his campaigns led to scandal, multiple press publications in Britain, investigations, and debates in the House of Commons.<sup>8</sup>

This article sheds light on Fearon's antislavery ideology and his network of collaborators, contributing to the expanding body of research on African-led abolitionism in the colonial Gold Coast and the broader West African context.<sup>9</sup> The scholarship on African abolitionism is diverse, falling

<sup>4</sup>PP 1890–91 (C. 6354), enclosure 1 in no. 7, L. N. Peregrine to Colonial Secretary, Accra, 7 Oct. 1890; Weston Library, Oxford (WL), MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, Vol. 2, No. 14, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 10 Oct. 1890, p. 3; The National Archives, London (TNA) CO 96/223, No. 18, Governor Griffith to Lord Knutsford, 2 Apr. 1892.

<sup>5</sup>Steffan Runkel, *Von Sklaverei und Freiheit: Afrikanische Initiativen zur Abolition an der Goldküste (1841–1897)* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag GmbH, 2019); Steffan Runkel "An African Abolitionist on the Gold Coast: The Case of Francis P. Fearon," *Slavery and its Legacy in Ghana and the Diaspora*, eds. Rebecca Shumway and Trevor R. Getz (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 156–77.

<sup>6</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 3, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 24 June 1890.

<sup>7</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 1–3; Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra (PRAAD), ADM 1/9/93, "Reckless Dealing in Drugs and Abuse of Trial by Jury in the Gold Coast Colony, A Letter by F. P. Fearon," 31 Jan. 1891.

<sup>8</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 18, C. 151/25, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 28 June 1889.

<sup>9</sup>Kwabena O. Akurang-Parry "We Shall Rejoice to see the Day When Slavery Shall Cease to Exist": The Gold Coast Times, the African Intelligentsia, and Abolition in the Gold Coast," *History in Africa* 31 (2004): 19–42; Steffan Runkel "The Perspectives of African Elites on Slavery and Abolition on the Gold Coast (1860–1900): Newspapers as Sources," in *Postcolonial Studies across the Disciplines*, eds. Jana Gohrlich and Ellen Grünkemeier (New York: Brill, 2013), 243–261; Sandra E. Greene, "Minority Voices: Abolitionism in West Africa," *Slavery & Abolition* 36, no. 4 (2015): 642–61; Michael Ehis Odijie "Exploring African Abolitionism: Fante Perspectives on Domestic Slavery in the Nineteenth-Century Gold Coast," *Law and History Review* 42, no. 1 (2024): 75–96; Michael Ehis Odijie and Uzoamaka Nwachukwu, "Colonial-Imposed Slavery and African Abolitionism: The Early Twentieth-Century Lagos Elites' Campaign Against the Native House Rule Ordinance," *Slavery & Abolition* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2024.2353095>.

into three overlapping categories. The first examines the influence of African religious and missionary efforts. Sandra E. Greene, for instance, discusses the antislavery endeavours of James Johnson, a Yoruba pastor raised and educated in Sierra Leone by the Church Missionary Society.<sup>10</sup> Appointed as superintendent of the Church Missionary Society's churches in the Yoruba hinterlands, Reverend Johnson, from his base in Abeokuta, pursued the eradication of domestic slavery, an initiative that sparked opposition from local chiefs.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, David Asante, a local Basel missionary operating in the Gold Coast, engaged in abolitionist activities in Kyebi during his tenure from 1875. His efforts ultimately led to his expulsion by the area's traditional authorities in collaboration with colonial authorities.<sup>12</sup>

Another branch of literature on African antislavery activities focuses on educated Africans and nascent anonymous antislavery voices featured in early local newspapers.<sup>13</sup> For example, in the Gold Coast, early local newspapers featured debates and discussions about slavery, with many writers expressing antislavery sentiments.<sup>14</sup> The editors of these newspapers dedicated editorial articles to addressing indigenous slavery and abolition, and even debated among themselves.<sup>15</sup> This body of anonymous antislavery writing in the early press contributes to the broader literature on African elites' antislavery discourses. One pivotal figure in these discussions was James Africanus Beale Horton.<sup>16</sup> Horton, born to a liberated slave in Sierra Leone and resident in the Gold Coast, published a seminal work in 1868 with significant antislavery commentary.<sup>17</sup> His work had a considerable impact on the Gold Coast's educated African population.<sup>18</sup> For instance, it inspired James Hutton Brew to work towards implementing Horton's vision for self-governance.<sup>19</sup> Brew's writings have been studied by scholars, positioning him as an early African elite abolitionist in the Gold Coast who left a lasting impression on subsequent generations of educated Africans.<sup>20</sup>

A third strand of literature on the local antislavery movement in colonial West Africa concerns the emergence of proletarian-like movements, particularly among those of slave descent who championed their own liberation.<sup>21</sup> A notable instance occurred in the Igbo region of present-day Nigeria.<sup>22</sup> Studies indicate that the 1909 discovery of coal in this area, coupled with the subsequent establishment of a colliery and railway system, prompted the colonial authorities to requisition labour from local rulers. These rulers often sent enslaved persons to fulfil the labour demands at the colliery.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Greene, "Minority Voices."

<sup>11</sup> Olatunji Ojo, "The Yoruba Church Missionary Society Slavery Conference 1880," *African Economic History* 49, no. 1 (2021): 73–103.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Addo-Fening, *Akyem Abuakwa, 1700–1943: From Ofori Panin to Sir Ofori Atta* (Trondheim: Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Akurang-Parry, "We Shall Rejoice."

<sup>14</sup> Odijie, "Exploring African Abolitionism."

<sup>15</sup> Runkel, "The Perspectives."

<sup>16</sup> Runkel, *Von Sklaverei*.

<sup>17</sup> James Africanus Horton, *West African Countries and Peoples, British and Native. With the Requirements Necessary for Establishing that Self Government Recommended by the Committee of the House of Commons, 1865; And a Vindication of the African Race* (London: W. J. Johnson, 1868).

<sup>18</sup> Augustus Lavinus Casely-Hayford, "A Genealogical History of Cape Coast Stool Families (PhD dissertation, SOAS, University of London, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Priestley, *West African Trade and Coast Society: A Family Study* (London, Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>20</sup> Michael Ehis Odijie, "Emancipation in the Gold Coast: The Abolitionist Views of James Hutton Brew," *Slavery & Abolition* 44, no. 1 (2023): 109–30.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Roberts and Martin A. Klein, "The Banamba Slave Exodus of 1905 and the Decline of Slavery in the Western Sudan," *The Journal of African History* 21, no. 3 (1980): 375–94.

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey I. Nwaka, "The Civil Rights Movement in Colonial Igboland," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18, no. 3 (1985): 473–85; Carolyn A. Brown, "Testing the Boundaries of Marginality: Twentieth-Century Slavery and Emancipation Struggles in Nkanu, Northern Igboland, 1920–29," *The Journal of African History* 37, no. 1 (1996): 51–80.

<sup>23</sup> Innocent Ferdinand Anidile Uzoechi, *The Social and Political Impact of the Eastern Nigerian Railway on Udi Division, 1913–1945* (PhD dissertation, Kent State University, 1985); Carolyn A. Brown, "Testing the Boundaries."

Within this context, the enslaved workers capitalised on their newly acquired organisational skills, coalescing into village groups to advocate for their freedom and political involvement in community matters. The 1920s witnessed a series of uprisings and conflicts in northern Igboland, sparked by their organised efforts to secure liberty.<sup>24</sup> The colonial administration was eventually compelled to mediate, instituting a one-off redemption fee of twelve shillings. This fee was swiftly met by some of the campaigners, utilising their earnings from the colliery.<sup>25</sup> The momentum generated by this movement inspired further antislavery campaigns within the region and beyond.

While the three sub-categories (African missionaries, the educated elite, and grassroots movements) are vital for understanding the forms of African antislavery discourse and activities, a gap in the literature persists: the absence of a category reflecting a human network actively engaged in influencing top-down abolition, both within and beyond their local milieu, akin to the Clapham Sect.<sup>26</sup> This article aims to fill that gap. The article contends that Fearon's correspondence uncovers his active involvement in a network of African antislavery advocates.

To explore Fearon's significance in this context, it is essential to first provide a brief overview of his life and connections. Originally from Sierra Leone, Fearon worked as a teacher before relocating to Accra in the 1860s to become a rum trader. His father was a liberated slave who resettled in Sierra Leone.<sup>27</sup> Records of Fearon appear in Gold Coast colonial documents from the 1870s; notably, he signed a petition protesting increased trade duties on imported rum, and in 1884, he was embroiled in a legal dispute. Fearon had sanctioned the punishment of one of his workers for theft through a traditional chief in Accra, Ga Mantse Tackie Tawiah I: the worker was found guilty and incarcerated in the chief's prison.<sup>28</sup> F. P. Fearon is frequently mentioned in court records. For example, an 1881 court register, later publicised by a local newspaper, documents Fearon bringing charges of larceny against individuals named Bonnie and Jack.<sup>29</sup> This case was also covered by the *Lagos Times* and *Gold Coast Colony*.<sup>30</sup> He was an active participant in the Anglican church of Accra and a patron of the Gold Coast Methodist Church.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, he engaged with local newspapers on various issues. In 1886, Fearon penned a letter to the editor of the *Western Echo*, James Hutton Brew, criticising the conduct of the British district commissioner, Mr. Freeman, in a legal matter involving King Tackie.<sup>32</sup> Details of his oldest child, Francis Henry Fearon, also appear in the Gold Coast press. Fearon's second child, David George Lionel Fearon, passed away at the age of twenty-eight in March 1895; this event was announced in both local and Sierra Leone newspapers, indicating the breadth of Fearon's connections.<sup>33</sup> Fearon also discussed the death of his son in APS letters, an event that may have precipitated a period of illness and depression that lasted until his own death in 1897.<sup>34</sup>

Fearon's life and actions provide a useful lens through which to explore broader antislavery dynamics in nineteenth-century West Africa. The following sections will place Fearon's contributions within

<sup>24</sup>Nwaka, "The Civil Rights Movement."

<sup>25</sup>Obinna Charles Okwelume, "Igbo Caste Practices: Persistence and Public Attitudes in the Media" (PhD dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2010).

<sup>26</sup>The Clapham Sect was a group of social reformers and evangelical Christians based in Clapham, London, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They played a key role in the abolition of the slave trade and the movement to end slavery in the British Empire. Notable members included famous abolitionists such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce.

<sup>27</sup>Runkel, "An African Abolitionist."

<sup>28</sup>PP 1985 (C.1140), Enclosure 1, 2, 3, and 6 in no. 6, William W. W. Johnston to the Earl of Carnarvon, 18 Apr. 1874.

<sup>29</sup>*Gold Coast Times* (Cape Coast), "Proceedings in the District Commissioner's Court in the Month of July," 27 Aug. 1881.

<sup>30</sup>*Lagos Times and Gold Coast Colony Advertiser* (Lagos), "Correspondence," 13 Apr. 1881.

<sup>31</sup>*Gold Coast News*, "From a correspondent," 30 June 1885 and 11 July 1885; *Gold Coast Methodist*, "Accra Circuit," 1 Dec. 1886.

<sup>32</sup>*Western Echo*, "F. P. Fearon to the Editor 'western Echo'" 22 Sep. 1886, 7.

<sup>33</sup>*Sierra Leone Weekly News* (Freetown), "Accident in Accra," 30 Mar. 1895.

<sup>34</sup>WL MSS. Brit. Emp. S. 18 / C151, no. 21, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 26 Apr. 1895; WL MSS. Brit. Emp. S. 18 / C151, no. 24, Francis H. Fearon to Fox Bourne, 20 Nov. 1895; *Gold Coast Express*, "Death of Francis Fearon," 13 Oct. 1897.

this larger context, shedding light on how local actors like him engaged with colonial authorities and the broader abolitionist movement. The first section that follows establishes a contextual backdrop for Fearon's antislavery efforts. I will examine the colonial abolition of slavery in the Gold Coast in 1874 and the subsequent tensions that arose between local abolitionists and the colonial state, situating Fearon within the wider African antislavery narrative aimed at the colonial administration in the colony. The second section analyses specific allegations made in Fearon's "slave letters." The third section delves into Fearon's original antislavery ideas as articulated in his letters. The fourth section maps out Fearon's antislavery networks.

### Divergent paths to abolition: colonial policies and African resistance

The Gold Coast officially became a British colony in 1874. In the same year, the new colonial governor abolished domestic slavery through two ordinances: one abolishing slave-dealing and another emancipating people in slavery.<sup>35</sup> These ordinances were developed without consulting African stakeholders, and the governor implemented the British India model for abolition, named after its previous use in India. This approach made slave-dealing and slaveholding illegal but did not seek to disrupt existing servile systems.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, the governor proclaimed that slave masters in the Gold Coast could retain their slaves if the enslaved persons chose to remain with their masters, and no significant measures were taken to promote emancipation.<sup>37</sup> This passive method of abolition incited conflict between the colonial administration in the Gold Coast and African antislavery advocates who favoured a more proactive approach. In the local press, figures such as Brew advocated for a comprehensive resolution to the slavery issue to prevent ambiguities.<sup>38</sup> Brew and other African leaders urged the colonial government to provide compensation to slave owners — a practice customary in British abolition — and recommended that the government acquire land from traditional rulers to allocate to freed slaves, thus safeguarding them from poverty.<sup>39</sup> As the governor continued with the India model, some Africans in Cape Coast initiated a campaign of petitions directed to the queen and the colonial office in London. They mobilised women and chiefs to write numerous petitions, challenging the governor's method of implementing abolition.<sup>40</sup>

The campaign of petitions ultimately failed. The petitions, which went through the colonial governor in the Gold Coast, were dismissed by the same when he reported them to the secretary of state for colonies. The governor argued that the signatories were not the genuine authors but rather that the petitions had been orchestrated by local troublemakers who were themselves slave owners seeking to perpetuate slavery.<sup>41</sup> Following the legal abolition of 1874, African antislavery efforts in the Gold Coast increasingly targeted the colonial administration, which many Africans perceived as insufficiently committed to ending slavery. For instance, historians acknowledge that from the 1870s onwards, some recruits to the Gold Coast constabulary were enslaved persons that British recruiters had bought from the Northern Territories — a fact known to Africans at the time and widely discussed in press commentaries.<sup>42</sup> For instance, in 1887, a correspondent asserted in the *Western Echo*

<sup>35</sup> PP 1875 (C.1139), Enclosure 1 in no. 21, "An Ordinance to Provide for the Abolition Of Slave Dealing" and "An Ordinance to provide for the Emancipation of persons holden in Slavery," 17 Dec. 1874.

<sup>36</sup> Kwabena Opare Akurang-Parry, "Slavery and Abolition in the Gold Coast: Colonial Modes of Emancipation and African Initiatives," *Ghana Studies* 1, no. 1 (1998): 11–34.

<sup>37</sup> Odijie, "Emancipation."

<sup>38</sup> *Gold Coast Times*, "Editorial," 24 Oct. 1874, 50.

<sup>39</sup> *Gold Coast Times*, "Editorial," 30 Nov. 1874, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Odijie, "Exploring African Abolitionism."

<sup>41</sup> PP 1875 (C.1159), no. 1, Governor Strahan to Earl of Carnarvon, 3 Jan. 1875.

<sup>42</sup> Sarah Balakrishnan, "Imperial Policing and the Antinomies of Power in Early Colonial Ghana," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 53, no. 2 (2020): 173–93.

newspaper, “slavery is forbidden... but white officers can indulge in it with impunity.”<sup>43</sup> The same writer suggested that the public contribute to a fund to prosecute a specific colonial officer: a recruiter who engaged in slave dealing in the northern region, a known source for slaves. The writer pledged £5 of his own money towards this effort. The newspaper editor, James Hutton Brew, added, “if funds are forthcoming, we will undertake to prosecute Capt. Firminger for slave dealing.”<sup>44</sup>

By this time, growing distrust of the colonial administration led the educated Africans in the Gold Coast to seek direct communication channels with the colonial office in London, suspecting that the local administration was misrepresenting their concerns.<sup>45</sup> This resulted in a political initiative known as the “deputation scheme.” Partly a response to the flawed emancipation process, the scheme aimed to establish a direct channel to London to voice local grievances, including the absence of African representation in the colony’s Legislative Council.<sup>46</sup> Public meetings and protests advocating for the deputation scheme were spearheaded by Brew in Cape Coast and his brother-in-law, Edmund Bannerman (a confidant of Fearon), in Accra. The necessity for such a scheme was articulated during a meeting in 1886, where a campaigner argued that:

all petitions must first go through the Governor... but the Governor would give his own version of what he thought they ought to contain, generally perverting the truth. Hence nothing good hitherto has come from memorials. Take for example the subject of the emancipation of slaves in this colony. Prince Brew [James Hutton Brew] advised the Kings and Chiefs to send a memorial to the Queen. It went through the Governor, who subsequently misrepresented to the Colonial Office the facts therein stated. Hence no good results [issued] from the action.<sup>47</sup>

The colonial authorities dismissed the deputation scheme as merely a disagreement over the payment of compensation to slave owners.<sup>48</sup> In April 1887, Bannerman and his associates were reprimanded by the governor in Accra, who expressed the colonial administration’s disapproval of any deputation scheme. At the same time, proclamations were distributed throughout Accra affirming the irrevocable abolition of slavery without compensation.<sup>49</sup> However, in a conciliatory move, the colonial administration soon appointed George Cleland of Accra to the legislative council, thereby undermining one of the main incentives for the deputation scheme. Following Cleland’s untimely death, he was succeeded by John Mensah Sarbah.<sup>50</sup>

After the deputation scheme faltered, some educated Africans sought the assistance of sympathetic organisations in Britain to present their petitions, hoping that these entities would directly communicate their appeals to the colonial office. This led organisations such as the APS to become significantly involved in the local politics of the Gold Coast from the late 1880s. Established earlier in the decade, the APS aimed to safeguard the rights of indigenous peoples under colonial rule, particularly within British dominions, making it an ideal medium for conveying local grievances due to its direct connection to the colonial secretary, the British press, and the House of Commons.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Western Echo*, “Captain-Firminger,” 31 Dec. 1887, 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Western Echo*, “The Deputation Scheme,” 14 July 1886, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Marguerite Evelyn Rowand, *Press and Opinion in British West Africa, 1855–1900* (PhD dissertation, The University of Birmingham, 1972); *Western Echo*, “The Deputation: ‘Now or Never.’ Our Manifesto,” 16 June 1886, 5; *Western Echo*, “The Deputation Scheme,” 14 July 1886, 3; *Western Echo*, “The Deputation Scheme Grand Meeting at Accra,” 7 Aug. 1886, 4. John Parker, *Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000).

<sup>47</sup> *Western Echo*, “The Deputation Scheme,” 3.

<sup>48</sup> Odijie, “Exploring African Abolitionism.”

<sup>49</sup> Parker, *Making the Town*.

<sup>50</sup> Samuel Tenkorang, “John Mensah Sarbah, 1864–1910,” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 14, no. 1 (1973): 65–78.

<sup>51</sup> Kenneth D. Nworah, “The Aborigines’ Protection Society, 1889–1909: A Pressure-Group in Colonial Policy,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 5, no. 1 (1971): 79–92.



The APS also published a journal that featured reports from local informants and exposed colonial scandals. The APS archives contain numerous correspondences and reports from the Gold Coast, spanning from the late 1880s to the early postindependence years, detailing various complaints from Africans that could not be adequately addressed by the British colonial governor.<sup>52</sup> For example, on 30 July 1889, J. P. Brown and Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford from the Mfantasi Amanbuhu Feku (Fante National Association) wrote to the APS, highlighting the colonial government's neglect of Moree, a Fante town.<sup>53</sup> In the Accra region, Fearon was one of the most prolific correspondents to the APS from the 1880s until his death in 1897. Fearon's efforts to combat domestic slavery in the Gold Coast was one of the campaigns that involved the APS, and it reflected the broader conflict between local antislavery advocates and the colonial administration, with Africans challenging the administration's lack of commitment to abolition.

### Francis Fearon's antislavery letters

Fearon's first letter to the APS, dedicated to domestic slavery, spans sixty-three pages and includes ten appended documents.<sup>54</sup> Sent on 24 June 1890, it addressed both domestic slavery and the corruption of customs officials in the Gold Coast. This correspondence laid the groundwork for the APS's initial report to Secretary of State for the Colonies Knutsford, on 20 August 1890, and featured in reports to British newspapers.<sup>55</sup> As noted above, Knutsford reached out to Griffith, the governor of the Gold Coast at the time, to probe the assertions, eliciting a direct reply. The governor's letters were accompanied by responses from other colonial officials in the Gold Coast, forming part of his rebuttal against the APS's allegations. Despite repeated requests, the APS preserved the confidentiality of Fearon's identity.

The first letter began with a discussion of the slave dealing ordinance of 1874 which provided for the abolition of slave dealing and alleged that the ordinance has "for all practical purpose, gone into neglect." Fearon claimed that the trade in slaves, "consisting chiefly of little boys and girls," had "systematically been carried on ever since," in violation of the 1874 law, but that it had "now increased to a very great extent, with the connivance of the government."<sup>56</sup> To support this claim, Fearon discussed the cases of slave dealing that have been dealt with at Accra in the district commissioner's court from 1887 to April of 1890 using the court register. While there were eight cases of slave dealing between July to December of 1887 — with slight punishment for conviction, and only two cases in 1888 with no punishment — thirty-six cases were prosecuted from January 1889 to April 1890.<sup>57</sup> Fearon attributed the increase in the number of cases to the appointment of MacMunn as district commissioner of Accra. Fearon argued that MacMunn's approach to the prosecution of slave dealers dissatisfied the colonial governor and other British colonial officials. He stated in a subsequent letter that MacMunn "said to me that the Governor disliked his administering the law of the colony in slave-dealing cases against the offenders and was greatly displeased with him on that account."<sup>58</sup> This was confirmed in one of the governor's letters to Knutsford, in which he quoted the chief justice of Gold Coast as saying that he had asked MacMunn to stop dealing with slave cases because he "inflicted heavy fines."<sup>59</sup> In the meantime, according to Fearon, Governor Griffith started demanding that slave holders convicted by MacMunn have their slaves returned to them.

<sup>52</sup>For letters from Gold Coast, see: WL MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 22 / G17; WL MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 22 / G209; WL MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 22 / G210; WL MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 22 / G933e. For Nigeria, see WL MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 22 / G18 and MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 22 / G211. For Sierra Leone, see WL MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 22 / G19. For Gambia, see WL MSS. Brit. Emp. S. 22 / G16.

<sup>53</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 28, J. P. Brown and Casely Hayford to Fox Bourne, 30 July 1890.

<sup>54</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 3, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 24 June 1890.

<sup>55</sup>PP 1890–91 (C. 6354), no.1, APS to Colonial Office, 20 Aug. 1890.

<sup>56</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 3, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 24 June 1890, 2.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 6–8.

<sup>58</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 14, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 10 Oct. 1890, 5.

<sup>59</sup>PP 1890–91 (C. 6354), no. 7, W. B. Griffith to Lord Knutsford, Accra, 26 Jan. 1891.

Fearon described the case of Fanny Hagan, who had been charged with and prosecuted for slave dealing before MacMunn. Drawing from court records, Fearon reported that Hagan had been charged with buying a female child named Nyamie Domah for £5. The charge had been investigated and Hagan had been convicted and charged £3, or, in default, 3 months' imprisonment. The slave child was liberated by the court and placed with a matron of the prison to be apprenticed. However, when Governor Griffith heard of the ruling a few days later, he immediately ordered the district commissioner return the child to Hagan. As Fearon inferred, Domah "was consequently placed in slavery the second time by the Governor himself."<sup>60</sup> Fearon directly quoted the court record of the episode: it reads "Nyamie Domah given back to Fanny Hagan by order of the Excellency the Governor."<sup>61</sup> Fearon drew attention to this case and asked "whether it is not a sufficient proof that the Governor himself is guilty of slave-dealing? especially as the law... of 1874 has conferred on him no such power." He described it as "strange and detestable" and testified that it had shocked many Africans in Accra.

The APS quoted the court record in its report to Knutsford. In one of his follow-up letters to the secretary of state, Griffith conceded that he had ordered the return of the slave child, but justified this by stating that Hagan had written a letter requesting that Domah be given back to her under the Masters and Servant Ordinance on the grounds that the enslaved girl was a playmate of her own daughter's and had been well-treated.<sup>62</sup> Fearon, however, discredited the governor's response — which had been forwarded to him by Fox Bourne — in subsequent letters by pointing out little details indicating the governor's dishonesty. For example, Fearon wrote on 4 June 1891 that the governor's claim that the accused was married by referring to her as Mrs. Hagan was "a palpable falsehood."<sup>63</sup> The colonial government had a policy against apprenticing freed slave children to unmarried people. Hagan was a known concubine to a man named John Myers, and Fearon argued that the governor was aware of this.

Fearon also discussed the cases of Daday, Lamley, Akromah, Acquorkor, and George Owoo, who were charged with slave-dealing offences involving seven young girls. Although the children were taken from the accused at the time of their arrest and temporarily placed with the matron of the prison while the charges were investigated, "here again the Governor, on being informed of it, ordered the District Commissioner MacMunn to stop all further prosecutions against the... slave-dealers, and worse still, ordered him to deliver back the seven little girls to the said accused persons; which was done accordingly."<sup>64</sup>

Although Fearon discussed numerous vital details of slave dealing and holding in Gold Coast, such as the price of slaves, their condition, the process and method of their acquisition, estimated numbers of slaves in the colony, the change from adult slaves in the past to child slavery since 1874, and the region(s) from which they were brought into the colony; he used specific cases to show a clear connection between the colonial government's lack of commitment to implement the abolition of slavery and the broader acceptance of slavery in the colony. For example, the governor's order for the slaves to be returned to their masters created a precedent and a signal to court officials not to be strict on slave cases. Fearon argued that the return of slaves to their masters also emboldened slave dealers and slaveholders who started to refuse to give up their slaves or expected their slaves to be returned to them. He cited the case of one Adome, who after being convicted of slave dealing was given back her slave (named Adoley) by the court, even without a specific order from the governor. Explaining this case, Fearon stated that he had been "informed by one of the officers of the court, that in giving her [the slave] back to her owner, [the court] followed the precedent made by the governor Sir W. B. Griffith."<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 3, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 24 June 1890, 15.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup>PP 1890–91 (C. 6354), no. 7, W. B. Griffith to Lord Knutsford, 26 Jan. 1891.

<sup>63</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 18/ C151, no. 28, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 4 June 1891.

<sup>64</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 3, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 24 June 1890, 16.

<sup>65</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 14, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 10 Oct. 1890, 15.



Another case Fearon detailed involved a boy named Sam, who was enslaved by Ellen Quartey.<sup>66</sup> Sam fortuitously found his biological mother, from whom he had been estranged for years, and sought emancipation from Quartey to be with her. When his plea was rejected, Sam approached the court for his freedom. District Commissioner Peregrine, MacMunn's successor after the latter's dismissal by the governor, dismissed Sam's application, instructing him to return to Quartey. When Joseph Cornelius, an African, took initiative on Sam's behalf, the plea was again denied by the court. Cornelius then pursued criminal charges against Quartey, but despite the court's recognition of the charges, Quartey faced no consequences partly because "she was a concubine of some white man" and also because of the district commissioner's "fear of incurring the displeasure of the Governor as his predecessor MacMunn had done."<sup>67</sup> Another case involved slave boys petitioning the district commissioner for their freedom, only to be informed by Peregrine that his mandate did not include addressing slavery cases.<sup>68</sup>

The details of the cases discussed in the allegations led the colonial governor and other British officials in the Gold Coast to suspect that MacMunn was the APS informant.<sup>69</sup> In subsequent letters Fearon described the indignation directed towards MacMunn after the allegation was published by the APS. He observed that "the slave-dealers here and some of the Government officials... are cursing and swearing most vehemently at MacMunn who they believe is the person who reported the matter to the Aborigines' Protection Society... I am determined to let them remain under their delusion."<sup>70</sup> His anonymity allowed him to gather more information about how the colonial governor dealt with the allegations and reported them back to the APS.

For example, Fearon described a visit from his close friend Bannerman, who was close to the governor and the colonial administration more generally. Unaware that Fearon was the informant, Bannerman revealed that the Acting Queen's Advocate Charles Turton had told him that MacMunn — whom the governor erroneously believed to be the informant — had "done great injury to the Governor by reporting him very strongly through the Aborigines' Protection Society, charging him with allowing the system of slavery to be organised and carried out in this colony." Bannerman added that "the charge was a very serious one and the Governor found it very difficult to disprove it."<sup>71</sup> Bannerman then informed Fearon that the governor wished for educated Africans, including Fearon, to undertake to contradict the APS report about domestic slavery in local press.<sup>72</sup> While Fearon himself refused to write to the local press, this request from the colonial governor may explain why some educated Africans came to write articles disputing the APS's report, which the governor subsequently used to his advantage.<sup>73</sup>

### Fearon's ideas on antislavery

Fearon's letters display a set of original ideas about slavery and abolition in the Gold Coast. Both missionaries and the colonial regime had repeatedly discussed domestic slavery in terms of the treatment of slaves, sometimes suggesting that the good treatment of slaves was to be desired. Before Gold Coast became a colony in 1874, the local British administration only intervened in domestic slavery in cases of cruelty or maltreatment.<sup>74</sup> After 1874, the new colonial governor set out to abolish domestic slavery but also announced to local traditional rulers that they could keep their slaves if they were treated

<sup>66</sup> WL MSS Brit. Emp. S. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 3, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 24 June 1890, 20.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> PP 1890–91 (C. 6354), Enclosure 1, no. 7, L. N. Peregrine to Colonial Secretary, 7 Oct. 1890; TNA CO 96/223, no. 18, Governor Griffith to Lord Knutsford, 2 Apr. 1892.

<sup>70</sup> WL MSS Brit. Emp. S. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 14, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 10 Oct. 1890, 9.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>73</sup> *Gold Coast Chronicle*, "A Grave Error," 14 Oct. 1890, 3; *Gold Coast Chronicle*, "Editorial," 15 Nov. 1890, 2.

<sup>74</sup> *African Times*, "W. A. Parker to the Kings and Chiefs of Christiansburg," 23 July 1868.

well.<sup>75</sup> For Fearon, the crucial issue that made domestic slavery deplorable was less the harsh treatment of slaves but rather the separation of families. He explained his antislavery motive as follows: "being a father of children and a brother as well as in a family, and knowing how dear and tender the ties between parents and children are, as well as between brothers and sisters and other relatives, and the painfulness of separation between them, I am naturally moved."<sup>76</sup>

For this reason, Fearon argued against the notion of mild slavery in both ideological and practical terms. "Slavery in its mildest form, if such a thing is possible, is still slavery and means if nothing else, separation and loss of relatives and friends."<sup>77</sup> This was a radical view at the time because of the different types of slaves that existed in traditional Gold Coast societies; where in the near past, some slaves were designated for human sacrifices and others were treated like family members.<sup>78</sup> Many educated Africans who spoke against slavery at the time, such as Brew and Casely Hayford, made a clear distinction between "mild" slavery and "harsh" slavery. For Fearon, the distinction between harsh and mild slavery was spurious: allowing mild slavery in the colony created a market, which in turn produced miseries in territories not directly controlled by the British from where the slaves were brought into the colony. As he argued, "as the demand for slaves increases... so the slave-hunters commit all sorts of depravation... in order to keep up constantly the supply of slaves to this colony."<sup>79</sup> Hence Fearon's argument for abolition was not restricted to Gold Coast, but extended to all the territories outside the colony which were indirectly affected.<sup>80</sup>

These arguments came into direct conflict with those of the colonial administration. For example, after reading some of the correspondence between the APS and the colonial office sent to him by Fox Bourne, Fearon was shocked by the responses to the allegations. The governor and other colonial officials denied the allegations, where possible, or suggested that slavery in Gold Coast was mild — indeed, Peregrine used the term "so-called slave child," to refer to the slave returned to Hagan, in a letter appended to one of the governor's responses.<sup>81</sup> Griffith admitted giving instructions to repress "slave dealing proper," suggesting that some forms of domestic slavery were too mild to be properly called slavery.<sup>82</sup> The governor also suggested that slave children who had been purchased in Salaga and the Northern Territories "immensely benefitted... so far as themselves are concerned, however questionable in theory the action of those who obtained them in Salaga may be."<sup>83</sup> Fearon considered this argument to be shameful and horrifying; he argued that Griffith "must have been an old slave-dealer himself in his native country, the West Indies" for the way he seemed to support it.<sup>84</sup> "As domestic Slavery is absolutely abolished in this Colony," Fearon argued, "I see no reason for the distinction made by Governor Griffith in his report between it and what he calls 'slave dealing proper.'"<sup>85</sup> His explanation of the governor's attitude regarding slavery in Africa was racism towards Black people; he argued that the governor "thinks the negroes are only fit to be made slaves of."<sup>86</sup>

Another way that Fearon's ideas came into conflict with the colonial administration was in his opposition to a proposed ordinance for the registration of alien children. On 29 September 1890,

<sup>75</sup> Odijie, "Emancipation."

<sup>76</sup> WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 3, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 24 June 1890, 12.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>78</sup> Odijie, "Emancipation."

<sup>79</sup> WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 3, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 24 June 1890, 3.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>81</sup> PP 1890–91 (C. 6354), Enclosure 1 in no. 7, Peregrine to Colonial Secretary, 7 Oct. 1890; PP 1890–91 (C. 6354), no. 7, W. B. Griffith to Lord Knutsford, 26 Jan. 1891.

<sup>82</sup> TNA CO 96/220, no. 10, Fox Bourne to Lord Knutsford, 15 Apr. 1891.

<sup>83</sup> PP 1890–91 (C. 6354), no. 7, Griffith to Knutsford, 26 Jan. 1891.

<sup>84</sup> WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 18/ C151, no. 28, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 4 June 1891, 5.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

only a few weeks after Knutsford sent the APS's allegations to Gold Coast's governor, the legislative council in Accra introduced "An Ordinance to provide for the registration and Protection in certain other respects of Alien Children in the Gold Coast Colony."<sup>87</sup> Given its timing and focus, it is likely that the ordinance was a reaction to the APS's allegations. Fearon argued against the ordinance, stating that:

as registration of slave children after they have been liberated is already an established practice in our courts of justice in this colony, I can see no necessity for such an ordinance, unless it is intended, as it is rumoured to be, to enable slave owners to register their respective slaves with the government under the false design of alien children.<sup>88</sup>

For Fearon, the ordinance effectively allowed slavery, as alien children in the colony were likely to be slaves brought into the colony from the Salaga and northern region.<sup>89</sup> Fearon pleaded with the APS in several letters from 1891 to campaign against the ordinance, arguing that some Africans in Accra were worried about it. In line with this view, the APS wrote to the colonial office who directed the complaint to the governor in Gold Coast.<sup>90</sup> In response, the colonial government in Gold Coast explained to Knutsford that the ordinance "was intended to regulate the lawful possession of alien children."<sup>91</sup> For Fearon, the very notion of possession of alien children, who were likely to be from the region that supplied slaves to the colony, was functionally slave ownership, since it promoted separation of families and could lead to continuation of slave hunting in the northern region.<sup>92</sup> Although the colonial government disputed Fearon's interpretation, which was represented by the APS, they nevertheless abandoned the ordinance citing "many difficulties," which was a victory for Fearon and his network.<sup>93</sup>

Without fully applying this same argument to the court apprenticeship of freed slave children, Fearon argued against the practice as well because of its resonances to slave ownership. He wrote, "I have never applied to the government for any of the slave children to be apprenticed to me... nor do I wish to have any of them."<sup>94</sup> Instead of apprenticeship of freed slaves, Fearon suggested to the APS — in a detailed proposal subsequently conveyed to Knutsford — that the government should provide freed slaves with homes and education instead of giving them to local individuals. He calculated the sum of fines that had been paid in slave-cases in Accra for the past few years and argued that these funds could be directed towards the proposed project:

from the fines which have been paid in the number of slave dealing cases mentioned in my letter of 24th of June last, which amount to 166 pounds, and from further fines which may be obtained from future prosecutions from slave dealings, I have no doubt that a portion of the necessary funds can be obtained... for homes and schoolhouses for these unfortunate children and to supply them with books, cloth[e]s, food and other necessities of life until they grow up and are able to take care of themselves.<sup>95</sup>

The colonial office forwarded Fearon's proposal to the governor, who rejected it.

<sup>87</sup>TNA CO 96/212, enclosure 8 in Gold Coast no. 247, "Minutes of a Meeting of the Legislative Council of the Gold Coast Colony held at Government House, Christiansburg Castle, Accra, on Monday the 29th day of September 1890," 1 Oct. 1890.

<sup>88</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 3, no. 8, Francis P. Fearon to Fox Bourne, 31 Jan. 1891, 31.

<sup>89</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 18/ C151, no. 26, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 21 Apr. 1891.

<sup>90</sup>PP 1890–91 (C. 6354), no. 10, Colonial Office to Aborigines Protection Society, 4 Apr. 1891.

<sup>91</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 18/C165b, no. 140, Queen's Advocate to the Colonial Secretary.

<sup>92</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 3, no. 8, Francis P. Fearon to Fox Bourne, 31 Jan. 1891.

<sup>93</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 18/C165b, no. 140.

<sup>94</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 3, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 24 June 1890, 12.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

## Fearon and African antislavery networks

Fearon did not operate in isolation. His social network was expansive, spanning the Gold Coast and beyond. He was actively involved in Christian circles within the Gold Coast, contributed to local press and trade organisations, and collaborated with other prominent Africans on jury duties in Accra.<sup>96</sup> He maintained a friendship with Ga Mantse and corresponded with eminent figures like John Mensah Sarbah of Cape Coast, a member of the Gold Coast Legislative Council.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, Fearon corresponded with Brew, with some of their exchanges published in the latter's newspaper.<sup>98</sup> His closest friend was Edmund Bannerman, a prominent figure in Accra who was not only Brew's brother-in-law but also the son of James Bannerman and the grandson of Asantehene Osei Yaw Akoto. Fearon's connections also reached into Lagos and Sierra Leone.<sup>99</sup> However, researching the extent of his antislavery network presents challenges; Fearon was reticent about revealing the identities of his collaborators to the APS. He only shared some details of his network upon specific requests from the APS for more information.

For instance, in a letter to the APS dated 10 October 1890, Fearon provided the confidential court register of slavery cases from 1887 to 1890 to support his allegations. "In compliance with your request," he wrote "I beg to enclose to you herewith a copy of the District Commissioner's Court Register... it is made in the form of the original register, and is an exact copy of it in every respect."<sup>100</sup> The register contained confidential court details about slave cases including names of slaves, slave dealers, nature of punishments, and remarks from court officials. The court official that allowed Fearon access to this confidential register was in collaboration with him from the first letter dated 24 June 1890, where Fearon discussed the court register at length. When the APS requested some form of evidence, Fearon returned to the official to obtain a direct copy. At this point, the news report from the allegation was already known in Accra. Fearon explained how he managed to acquire the register as follows:

You may perhaps wish to know how I came to get a copy of the above-mentioned Register of the Court; I therefore beg to inform you that I was privately allowed access to the original register and granted permission to take a copy of it... from the copy of it which I had taken, I make the one which I enclose to you herewith.<sup>101</sup>

He further stressed the confidentiality of the information and that his collaborator in the court was frightened of reprisal: "I give you this piece of information in confidence... if the Governor and some of the other Authorities who are his creatures were to know the person through whom I obtained it, I have not the least doubt, they will not hesitate to pour tremendously all their indignation upon his head."<sup>102</sup> Although it is impossible to name the court official, it is evident that they shared some of Fearon's ideas about domestic slavery. Later, the court official, along with others in his network, agreed to testify should there be an inquiry.

Fearon also mentioned a direct interview with other court officials on several occasions. For example, while discussing two slave cases in the register in 1888, he said "none of the official of the Court is able to tell what had become of them; it is therefore very probably that... the slave-dealers from whom they had been taken, managed to get hold of them again."<sup>103</sup> One year after the initial allegation,

<sup>96</sup> *Gold Coast News*, "From a correspondent," 30 June 1885 and 11 July 1885; WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 3, no. 8, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 31 Jan. 1891; WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, nos. 13 and 18.

<sup>97</sup> WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 18, C. 151/25, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 28 June 1889.

<sup>98</sup> *Western Echo*, "F. P. Fearon to the Editor," 7.

<sup>99</sup> WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 18/ C151, no. 27, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 15 May 1891.

<sup>100</sup> WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 14, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 10 Oct. 1890, 34–35.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 14, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 10 Oct. 1890, 8.

<sup>103</sup> WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 3, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 24 June 1890, 6.

with no investigation from the colonial office, Fearon started to disclose some in his networks and informants. On the case of Daday, Lamley, Akromah, Acquorkor, and George Owoo whose slaves were returned, he claimed to have received his information from his close friend Bannermen, who was a counsel for the case, and from Acquorkor, who visited Fearon in his home.<sup>104</sup> Referring to his network, he mentioned that in the case of Sam (the slave boy), “my informant confirmed the information that he gave me before.” He also discussed an informant — who may have been the same — who, in response to the denial of the district commissioner,

is willing to state, if called upon, before any person or persons who may be appointed to hold an enquiry into the matter that Mr. Peregrine did publish in the district commissioners court that he was not sent there to hear cases of slave dealing and that he (the informant) was the person whom he had ordered to interpret it [into] Akan language to the people who were present in the Court and that he did so accordingly.<sup>105</sup>

Another individual likely to be part of Fearon’s network was Joseph Cornelius, who initiated legal proceedings against a slaveholder after the court denied Sam his freedom. Fearon noted that he possessed the documents Cornelius filed, indicating he had access to these papers and made copies before they were officially submitted to the court.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, Fearon used the pronouns “we” and “our” in ways that suggested an active network. For example, he stated,

we have no hesitation in saying that in our humble opinion .... Governor Griffith is prejudice[d] against the general welfare of the negro race and... if he had had it in his power, he would have repealed the law of the colony against slave-dealing and make slaves of most of us and our children.<sup>107</sup>

The former District Commissioner Edward MacMunn also became part of Fearon’s antislavery network in Accra, although only after Fearon had already sent the first letter to the APS. Fearon met MacMunn at Bannerman’s home on 22 July 1890, few weeks before MacMunn returned to England. At the first meeting, MacMunn had brought up the topic of slavery to which Bannerman argued that slave holding was neither wrong nor against the law, and that only slave dealing — which he defined as selling a slave or buying a slave for the purpose of selling them — was against the law. Fearon joined the debate and expressed strong opposition to domestic slavery, which had interested MacMunn, who remarked that he was unaware there were Africans opposed to slavery. It is noteworthy that the difference between Bannerman’s and Fearon’s positions on domestic slavery might be attributed to the different types of slavery. While many educated Africans in the Gold Coast opposed slavery, they often accepted less brutal forms, especially as practiced in coastal regions like Accra and Cape Coast. In contrast, Fearon was more radical and made no such distinctions, which may have explained the difference between his positions and those of Bannerman. MacMunn subsequently visited Fearon and they discussed slavery at length:

I informed him [MacMunn] in the course of the interview that I had reported the matter to the Aborigines’ Protection Society and implored it on behalf of the slaves to have it laid before parliament for its consideration, with a view that vigorous and effective measures may be taken to liberate all the slaves in the colony and in the British territories adjacent to it, and that an end may be put to slavery... with which he was much pleased.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>104</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 18/C151, no. 28, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 4 June 1891, 5.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>107</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 3, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 24 June, 1890, 17–18.

<sup>108</sup>WL MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22, G. 17, vol. 2, no. 14, Fearon to Fox Bourne, 10 Oct. 1890, 6.

In subsequent visits MacMunn expressed that he could provide valuable information to the APS to help the campaign against slavery in Gold Coast. Fearon discussed his meeting with MacMunn mainly because the former district commissioner was on his way back to England after being sacked by the governor and agreed to meet with the APS to answer any questions regarding the allegations. Fearon wrote to APS: "I therefore beg to refer the Society to him for any further information that may be required on the subject and for confirmation of all the facts stated in this as well as in my letter of 24<sup>th</sup> June last."<sup>109</sup>

After a year and several months into the allegation, with no success in the changing colonial policy on slavery, Fearon told the APS that he was willing to testify against the colonial government, granting the APS permission to disclose his name, but only if the colonial office agreed to an investigation.<sup>110</sup> He also stated that other Africans were willing to testify should the colonial office decide to investigate. Although this did not persuade Knutsford, who was trying to avoid a scandal, it further shows that Fearon had a close network of antislavery activists in the Gold Coast.<sup>111</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay has critically discussed the antislavery activism of Francis P. Fearon, using it to shed light on a set of original ideas and networks on African abolitionism in nineteenth-century Accra. Fearon's extensive correspondence with the APS reveals a deep-seated commitment to eradicating slavery, driven not by religion or a rejection of slavery's cruelty, or personal experience with enslavement, but by a fundamental opposition to the practice of human bondage and the separation of families. As detailed in this essay, Fearon's efforts reveal the existence of a network of antislavery Africans who were not only ideologically opposed to slavery but were also actively engaged in its disruption through legal battles (such as those led by Joseph Cornelius) and by leveraging local and international advocacy groups to directly challenge and influence colonial policies. Importantly, this article contributes to a growing body of literature on African abolitionism that underscores the pivotal role played by Africans themselves in the fight against slavery, challenging the narrative that abolition was primarily a product of external influence. Moving beyond the traditional focus on the contributions made by African missionaries, the perspectives of the educated elite in their public writings, and grassroots and proletarian movements, the article underscores the existence of an active network working both dedicatedly and clandestinely for the abolition of slavery.

Although Fearon displayed original ideas that were not influenced by religion or political considerations, he also shared some perspectives with some African abolitionists who preceded him. His rejection of the distinction between harsh and mild forms of slavery aligned with Africans who strongly opposed the concept of mild slavery before him. For instance, Horton also argued against mild slavery and went even further by proposing the compulsory emancipation of slaves in the Gold Coast, stating that "it is probable that some slaves may prefer to remain with their masters, who are generally kind and indulgent to them, and on whom they depend for support; but this should not be permitted."<sup>112</sup> Horton argued that domestic slavery, in any form, was the greatest drawback to any improvement of civilisation because it promoted laziness, immorality, and polygamy.

For Fearon, the distinctions were spurious, as any form of slavery involved family separation, and the market for so-called mild slavery in one area resulted in harsh realities in others. Fearon's contemporaries — such as Brew, Casely Hayford, and Sarbah — were also against domestic slavery, but they made a distinction between harsh forms of slavery and mild slavery, often discussing the relatively humane form of slavery in the Fante region compared to that in Asante.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>110</sup> TNA CO 96/220, no. 10, Fox Bourne to Lord Knutsford, 6 Aug. 1891.

<sup>111</sup> WL MSS Brit. Emp. AS93-18B/ CI65, no. 49, Colonial Office to Fox Bourne, 21 Jan. 1892.

<sup>112</sup> Horton, *West African*, 223.

<sup>113</sup> Odijie, "Exploring African Abolitionism."



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