

## *Tabom - The Afro-Brazilian community of Accra*

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It was very strange for me as a Brazilian to arrive in Ghana and hear tales of a people called “Tabom”, because of the familiarity of the term with greetings in the Brazilian Portuguese. The Tabom People is an Afro-Brazilian community of former slaves, who decided to come back to the African continent of their ancestors, after they bought their own freedom in Brazil\*. When they arrived in Accra they could speak only Portuguese, so



they greeted each other with “Como está?” (How are you?) to which the reply was “Tá bom”, so the Ga people of Accra started to call them the Tabom People.

We in Brazil already know about various communities of Afro-Brazilian descendants in West Africa, most of them spread through Benin, Nigeria and Togo. Some studies estimate that in the 19th Century

approximately 10,000 former slaves decided to return to Africa. Throughout these countries we can find estates, schools and museums with the name “Brazil”. In Lagos there is an estate called “Brazilian Quarter” and a club with the name “Brazilian Social Club”; in Benin we can find a school called “Ecole Bresil”. In those countries it is very common to find family names like Souza, Silva, Olympio or Cardoso. Some of them were very well known in their countries. One was the late Sylvanus Epiphanio Kwami Olympio who was elected the first President of Togo in 1960. The first Chacha of



Benin, that means the chief and controller of trade and relations with foreigners, was the Afro-Brazilian Francisco Felix de Souza, he became very rich due to his involvement in the slave traffic. He had 53 wives, 80 children and about 12,000 slaves. When he died, he left an empire of an estimated 120 Millions Dollars to his successors. The royal line of the Chachas still exists nowadays in Togo. The first Brazilian Ambassador to Ghana arrived in

1961. He was an Afro-Brazilian called Raymundo de Souza Dantas. He cites in his book "Africa difcil", that he received a letter from a Togolese called Benedito de Souza, who alleged to be his cousin.

In Ghana, the only representative group of people that decided to come back from Brazil is the Tabom People. They came back on a ship called S. S. Salisbury, offered by the English Government. About seventy Afro-Brazilians of seven different families arrived in Accra, in the region of the old port in James Town in 1836, coming from Nigeria as visitors. The reception by the Mantse Nii Ankrah of the Otoblohum area was so friendly, that they decided to settle down in Accra. The leader of the Tabom group at the time of their arrival was a certain Nii Azumah Nelson. Since than time the Nelson family has been very important to the History of the Tabom People. The eldest son of Azumah Nelson, Nii Alasha, was his successor and a very close friend to the Ga King Nii Tackie Tawiah. Together they helped in the development of the whole community in commerce and environmental sanitation.

At the present moment the Tabom Mantse is Nii Azumah V, descendant of the Nelson's. The Tabons are also known as the founders of the First Scissors House in 1854, the first tailoring shop in the country, which had amongst other activities, the task to provide the Ghanaian Army with uniforms. Proof of these skills is without any doubt Mr. Dan Morton, another Tabom and one of the most famous tailors nowadays in Accra.

Because they were welcomed by the Ga people and received by their king as personal guests, the Tabons received lands in privileged locations, in places that are nowadays very well known estates, like Asylum Down, the area near to the central train station and around the Accra Breweries. In those areas, the mango trees planted by them bear silent witnesses to their presence. In the estate of North Ridge there is a street called "Tabon Street", which is a reminder of the huge plantations that they formerly had there. Some of the Tabons live nowadays in James Town, where the first house built and used by them as they arrived in Ghana is located. It is called the "Brazil House" and can be found in a short street with the name "Brazil Lane".

The Tabons did not arrive poor, but rather with much wealth. Because of their agricultural skills, they started plantations of mango, cassava, beans and other vegetables. They brought also skills such as irrigation techniques, architecture, carpentry, blacksmithing, gold smithing, tailoring, amongst others, which certainly improved the quality of life of the whole community.

Apart from all these contributions, they also influenced the religious life of the community, helping in the definitive establishment of the Islamic religion and the preservation of some African religions that they modified in Brazil, like the shango. Nowadays the Tabons are completely integrated in the Ghanaian society and are a part of the Otublohum Section of the Ga People.

\* Up to now it is not very clear, if they really bought their freedom and decided to immediately come back or if they were at that time free workers in Brazil, but were deported after the Male Revolt of 1835. A lot of Afro-Brazilians were deported back to Africa, especially Moslems who organized the Male Revolt. Since they arrived accidentally in 1836 in Accra and most of them were Moslems, it can possibly be the case. Only detailed and deeper studies can prove one of the suppositions.

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Source:

- DANTAS, Raymundo Souza. *África difícil. (Missão condenada : Diário)*. Rio de Janeiro : Editora Leitura S/A, 1965.
- Programme of the Swearing In Ceremony of Tabon Mantse Nii Azumah V. February 26th, 2000. Pages 2-3.
- Relatos de integrantes do Povo Tabom gravados pelo autor.