

ORIAS 2011 Summer Institute for K-12 teachers
Absent Voices: Experience of common life in world history
<http://orias.berkeley.edu/summer2011/Summer2011Home.htm>
Summarized by Timothy Doran, Ph.d.

**"Abina and the Important Men:
Engaging students in reversing the silences of history."**
Professor Trevor Getz, History, San Francisco State University.

In 1876 a young slave girl named Abina Mansah escaped her captivity near the town of Saltpond in what is today the country of Ghana. She was born in Asante/Ashanti and enslaved in several households before Qamina Eddoo's house near Saltpond, where she worked as a "housegirl." Abina fled to Cape Coast, a British colony where she was –by law –free, and found employment working for a Eurafican translator named James Davis. Abina convinced him to help her prosecute her former Saltpond master for enslaving her. They went before a British magistrate named William Melton. Melton allowed himself to be manipulated by slave-owners who gained membership on the jury and who then found her master not guilty. But Abina's statements were recorded provide access for historians to a young woman representing one of Africa's "absent voices" outside the literate elite.

In 1834, the Gold Coast became a British protectorate. In 1874, widespread abolitionist sentiment amongst the British press and public needed to be satisfied without disrupting political and economic interests of the indigenous, often slave-owning, elites on whom British authority depended. Liberation could only be achieved by individual slaves running to a place where the British actually had many soldiers, and then going to court; young women and children, especially girls, could not go to court very easily. The magistrates were paternalist middle-class British Christian abolitionists who tried to determine whether an individual was "enslaved" or a "customary dependent." Definitions were slippery. Magistrates would ask if money had changed hands, if an individual had been physically beaten, called a slave, what sort of labor they did, and whether they had received compensation. Although Abina lost her case, Getz argues that in another sense she scored a victory: she forced a group of important men to hear her. They learned what it meant, from her perspective, to be enslaved.

One problem with understanding colonialism is that only some voices are preserved and written down. Historians recover certain documents which then become canonical. Although they can be read against the grain, hearing the voices of illiterate persons is harder. Abina could neither read nor speak English. Her voice might easily have been lost. It is valuable for disempowered persons to hear the voices of others who have been disempowered before them, Getz believes: this helps them to become world citizens. Africanists often wonder if their work is valuable to Africans: Getz thinks it is. Is all of this, Getz asks, a "leftie" project to excavate voices? Not exclusively, for it increases our ability to understand the past as a whole. Our comprehension of nationalism and patriotism grows when we hear those who chose not to buy tea, and why not. One means of accomplishing this is to utilize new types of sources and to interpret them critically.

Professor Getz has edited and presented the manuscript of the trial, and offers much information on this and related topics, including primary sources and further resources, at www.abina.org/.