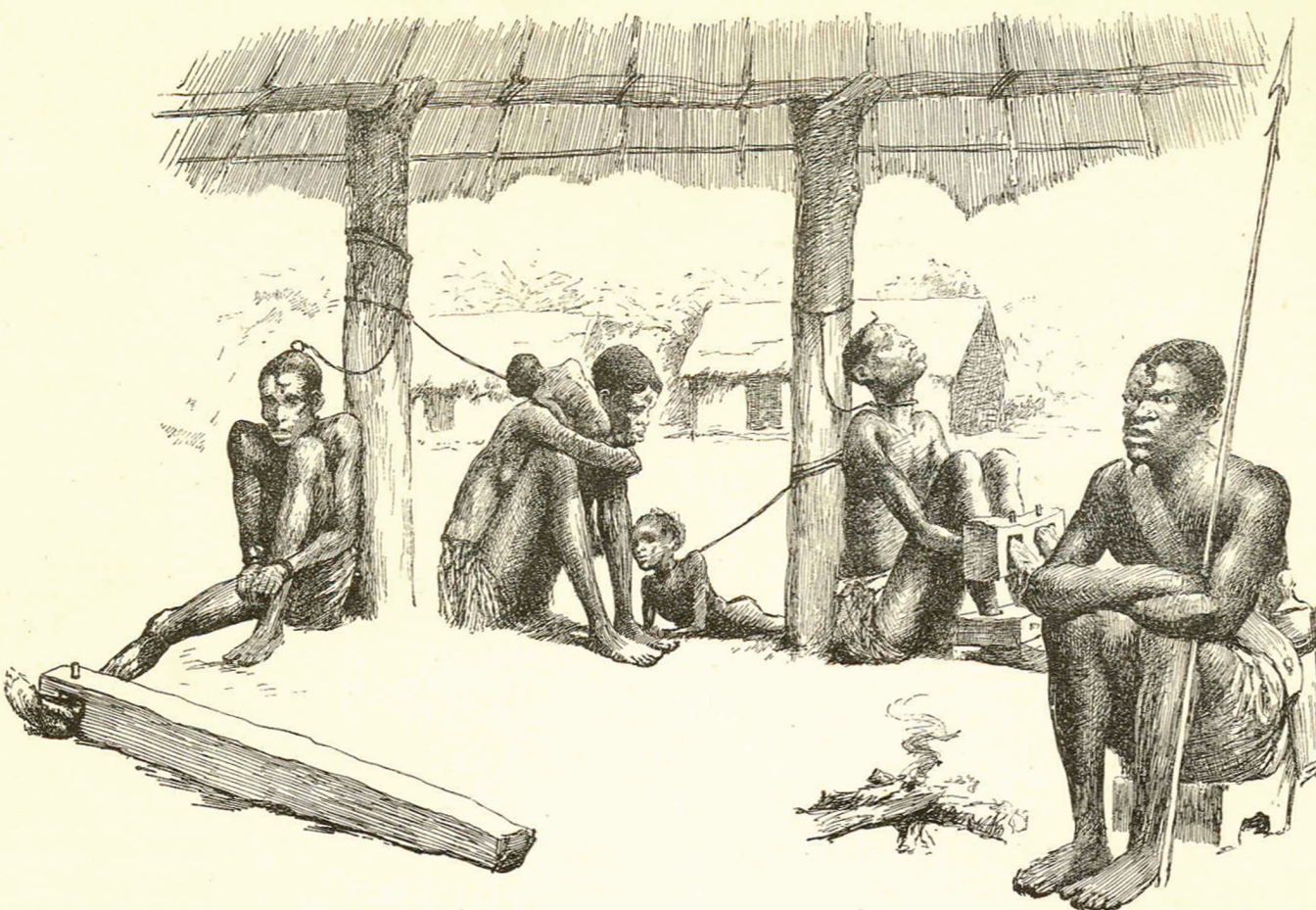


# African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade



Edited by  
Alice Bellagamba • Sandra E. Greene • Martin A. Klein

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## AFRICAN VOICES ON SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE

Even though the history of slavery is a central topic for African, Atlantic world, and world history, most of the sources presenting research in this area are European in origin. To cast light on African perspectives, and on the point of view of enslaved men and women, this group of top Africanist scholars has examined both conventional historical sources (e.g., European travel accounts, colonial documents, court cases, and missionary records) and less-explored sources of information (e.g., folklore, oral traditions, songs and proverbs, life histories collected by missionaries and colonial officials, correspondence in Arabic, and consular and admiralty interviews with runaway slaves). Each source has a short introduction highlighting its significance and orienting the reader. This volume provides students and scholars with a trove of African sources for studying African slavery and the slave trade.

Alice Bellagamba is an associate professor of cultural anthropology and African studies at the University of Milan-Bicocca. She is the author of *Ethnographie, histoire et colonialism en Gambie* (2002) and *L'Africa e la stregoneria: Saggio di antropologia storica* (2008) and coeditor of *Beside the State: Emergent Powers in Contemporary Africa* (with Georg Klute, 2008). She has extensive fieldwork experience in the Senegambia and, since 2000, has directed MEBAO, a network of Italian and African scholars working on historical memory and heritage in West Africa. In 2004–05, she was Alexander Humboldt Fellow at the University of Bayreuth, and in 2011–12 a EURIAS senior Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies of Berlin.

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CONTENTS

List of Figures .....page ix

List of Contributors..... xi

Foreword: Beyond the Printed Word .....xvii

*Kofi Anyidoho*

**Introduction: Finding the African Voice ..... 1**

*Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene, and Martin A. Klein*

**PART ONE. REMEMBERING SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE**

**1. Introduction: Oral Traditions, Historical Tales, and Interviews ..... 11**

**2. Oral Traditions about Individuals Enslaved in Asante..... 15**

*Sandra E. Greene*

**3. “The Little Things that Would Please Your Heart...”: Enslavement and Slavery in the Narrative of Al Haji Bakoyo Suso (The Gambia) ..... 29**

*Alice Bellagamba*

**4. Tales of Cowries, Money, and Slaves ..... 47**

*Alessandra Brivio*

**5. Oral Accounts of Slave-Master Relations from Cameroon Noncentralized and Centralized Polities (1750–1950)..... 55**

*E. S. D. Fomin*

**6. “He Who Is without Family Will Be the Subject of Many Exactions”: A Case from Senegal ..... 65**

*Martin A. Klein*

**7. Common Themes, Individual Voices: Memories of Slavery around a Former Slave Plantation in Mingoyo, Tanzania ..... 71**

*Felicitas Becker*

**8. Slavery in Kano Emirate of Sokoto Caliphate as Recounted: Testimonies of Isyaku and Idrisu ..... 88**

*Mohammed Bashir Salau*

## PART TWO. THE VERBAL ARTS AND EVERYDAY OBJECTS

9. Introduction: Songs, Prayers, Proverbs, and Material Culture .....117
10. Singing Songs and Performing Dances with Embedded Historical  
Meanings in Somalia .....121  
*Francesca Declich*
11. Song Lyrics as Pathways to Historical Interpretation in Northwestern  
Côte d'Ivoire: The Case of Kabasarana .....129  
*Jeanne Maddox Toungara*
12. Slave Voices from the Cameroon Grassfields: Prayers, Dirges,  
and a Nuptial Chant .....137  
*E. S. D. Fomin*
13. Silent Testimonies, Public Memory: Slavery in Yoruba Proverbs .....149  
*Olatunji Ojo*
14. In Remembrance of Slavery: Tchamba Vodun (Bénin and Togo) .....164  
*Dana Rush*

## PART THREE. DOCUMENTING OUR OWN HISTORIES AND CULTURAL PRACTICES

15. Introduction: Written Accounts by African Authors .....181
16. Some Facets of Slavery in the *Lamidats* of Adamawa in North  
Cameroon in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries .....182  
*Ahmadou Sehou*
17. Etchu Richard Ayuk's Manuscript on the Slave Trade and Social  
Segregation in the Ejaghamland .....191  
*Ute Röschenthaler*
18. Writing about the Slave Trade: Early-Twentieth-Century Colonial  
Textbooks and Their Authors .....204  
*Bayo Holsey*

## PART FOUR. SLAVERY OBSERVED: EUROPEAN TRAVELERS' ACCOUNTS

19. Introduction: Accounts by European Travelers .....213
20. The Story of Saaba: Slavery and Colonialism in the Algerian Sahara .....214  
*Benjamin Claude Brower*
21. Zenneb and Saint-André's Cruise Up the Nile to Dongola: An Enslaved  
Woman from Dar Fur (Sudan) and Her Self-Presentation .....220  
*George Michael La Rue*
22. The Ordeals of Slaves' Flight in Tunisia .....239  
*Ismael M. Montana*
23. African Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Manuscript of Jean Godot .....249  
*Pierluigi Valsecchi*



**PART FIVE. ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS**

24. Introduction: Colonial Reports and Documents .....265
25. How Kwadwo Regained His Freedom and Put the Slave-Traders  
in Big Trouble .....267  
*Pierluigi Valsecchi*
26. Witchcraft and Slavery: Accusations of Remote Vampirism – The Colonial  
Administration of Mauritania Investigates the Execution of Three  
Slaves (1928–1929).....283  
*Benjamin Acloque*
27. Tracing Their “Middle” Passages: Slave Accounts from the  
Nineteenth-Century Western Indian Ocean .....307  
*Hideaki Suzuki*
28. Gender, Migration, and the End of Slavery in the Region of Kayes,  
French Soudan .....319  
*Marie Rodet*

**PART SIX. LEGAL RECORDS**

29. Introduction: Voices of Slaves in the Courtroom.....333
30. The Expulsion of Dalu Modu: A Muslim Trader in Anti-Slavery  
Freetown.....334  
*Bruce L. Mouser*
31. “Being a Slave, I Was Afraid...”: Excerpt from a Case of Slave-Dealing  
in the Colony of the Gambia (1893).....343  
*Alice Bellagamba*
32. Interpreting Gold Coast Supreme Court Records, SCT 5/4/19:  
Regina (Queen) vs. Quamina Eddoo.....360  
*Trevor Getz*
33. A Tale of Slavery and Beyond in a British Colonial Court Record:  
West Africa and Brazil.....378  
*Kristin Mann*
34. Aballow’s Story: The Experience of Slavery in Mid-Nineteenth-Century  
West Africa, as Told by Herself .....387  
*Silke Strickrodt*
35. A Case of Kidnapping and Child Trafficking in Senegal, 1916 .....404  
*Richard Roberts*

**PART SEVEN. RECORDED ENCOUNTERS WITH THE  
ENSLAVED: CHRISTIAN WORKERS IN AFRICA**

36. Introduction: Missionary Records.....417
37. Experiencing Fear and Despair: The Enslaved and Human Sacrifice  
in Nineteenth-Century Southern Ghana .....421  
*Sandra E. Greene*

38.	<b>The Testimony of Lamine Filalou: A Young Man's Experience of Enslavement and His Struggle for Freedom in French West Africa</b> . . . . .	437
	<i>Hilary Jones</i>	
39.	<b>The Blood Men of Old Calabar – a Slave Revolt of the Nineteenth Century?</b> . . . . .	445
	<i>Ute Röschenthaler</i>	
40.	<b>Makua Life Histories: Testimonies on Slavery and the Slave Trade in Nineteenth-Century Madagascar</b> . . . . .	466
	<i>Klara Boyer-Rossol</i>	
 <b>PART EIGHT. DOCUMENTS FROM MUSLIM AFRICA</b>		
41.	<b>Introduction: Islamic Sources.</b> . . . .	483
42.	<b>The Arabic Letters of Ghadames Slaves in the Niger Bend, 1860–1900</b> . . . . .	485
	<i>Bruce S. Hall and Yacine Daddi Addoun</i>	
43.	<b>The “Hidden Transcripts” and Legal Rights of Slaves in the Muslim World: A Legal Case from Nineteenth-Century Mauritania</b> . . . . .	503
	<i>Ghislaine Lydon</i>	
44.	<b>Slave Wills along the Swahili Coast</b> . . . . .	511
	<i>Elisabeth McMahon</i>	
 <b>PART NINE. LIVING WITH THE PAST</b>		
45.	<b>Introduction: Contemporary African Societies and the Legacy of Slavery.</b> . . . .	521
46.	<b>Two Soninke “Slave” Descendants and Their Family Biographies</b> . . . . .	522
	<i>Paolo Gaibazzi</i>	
47.	<b>Without History? Interrogating “Slave” Memories in Ader (Niger)</b> . . . . .	536
	<i>Benedetta Rossi</i>	
	<b>Index</b> . . . . .	555

## FIGURES

1.1.	Map showing the countries featured in Parts One, Two, and Three . . . . .	page 8
2.1.	Map showing the location of Asante, Takyiman, and Gonja. . . . .	14
5.1.	Map of Cameroon showing featured provinces. . . . .	54
5.2.	Map of featured Cameroon provinces and provincial towns . . . . .	57
6.1.	Map of Senegal . . . . .	64
7.1.	Photo of Mzee Barwani . . . . .	78
7.2.	Photo of Mzee Juma with his youngest grandchild. . . . .	85
10.1.	Map of the Gosha district of Somalia . . . . .	120
10.2.	Photo of Nassib Bundo, c. 1903 . . . . .	123
11.1.	Map of Cote d'Ivoire with the featured province . . . . .	128
12.1.	At the funeral of Chief Forcha Akanju, Essoh-Attah . . . . .	145
12.2.	At the funeral of Chief Forcha Akanju, Essoh-Attah . . . . .	145
13.1.	Map of Yoruba ethnic groups . . . . .	148
14.1.	Tchambagan bracelets for purchase at a Vogan market . . . . .	168
14.2.	Maman Tchamba and Tchamba temple mural painted by Kossivi Joseph Ahiator . . . . .	170
14.3.	Tchamba temple mural painted by Kossivi Joseph Ahiator . . . . .	171
14.4.	Tchamba with his wife temple mural painted by Kossivi Joseph Ahiator . . . . .	172
14.5.	Maman Tchamba temple mural with a bowl of gold . . . . .	173
14.6.	Maman Tchamba temple mural with bowl of kola nuts. . . . .	174
14.7.	Adono Zowaye with her youngest daughter Notuefe Zowayè in front of the beginning stages of a Tchamba shrine. . . . .	176
16.1.	The <i>lamidats</i> of the Adamawa Plateau in the nineteenth century: Ngaoundéré, Tignère, Banyo, and Tibati. . . . .	184
16.2.	Location of the <i>lamidat</i> of Banyo in Cameroon. . . . .	185

16.3.	Table of penalties and sanctions used against slaves in Adamawa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries . . . . .	188
17.1.	Richard Etchu Ayuk (second from left) at his initiation ritual into the Ekpe society in Inokun, 2008. . . . .	192
17.2.	Map of the Cross River region . . . . .	193
17.3.	Village with square compounds, on the Cross River, 1912 . . . . .	194
17.4.	Funeral dance at which slaves used to be sacrificed . . . . .	195
17.5.	Slave climbing a palm tree, 1908 . . . . .	198
17.6.	Image of a Nsibiri sign, 1912. . . . .	202
17.7.	Image of another Nsibiri sign, 1912 . . . . .	203
19.1.	Map showing countries featured in Parts Four, Five, and Six . . . . .	210
22.1.	Tunis: Souk el Birka – old slave market . . . . .	243
26.1.	Map of Mauritania with featured administrative regions and locations . . . . .	282
27.1.	Map of the Indian Ocean region . . . . .	306
27.2.	Map of the featured region in Ethiopia . . . . .	309
27.3.	Chart showing the number of slaves liberated by Britain (Indian Ocean), 1852 through June 1858 . . . . .	312
31.1.	Map of the Gambia showing the boundary between British and French territories in the 1890s and the areas where the events in the court case took place . . . . .	342
34.1.	Map of the Gold and Slave Coasts showing the major towns. . . . .	386
36.1.	Map showing the countries featured in Parts Seven, Eight, and Nine . . . . .	414
37.1.	Map showing the location of Asante and Kwawu . . . . .	420
38.1.	The location of the Protestant Mission in St. Louis . . . . .	436
39.1.	Cameroons River (Cross River) from above Akwa [Duke] Town . . . . .	447
39.2.	A Calabar chief. . . . .	448
39.3.	King Duke of Calabar in full dress. . . . .	449
39.4.	Long dugout canoe on the Cross River, usually rowed by slaves. . . . .	450
42.1.	North and West Africa with major towns . . . . .	484
43.1.	Northwest Africa with major towns . . . . .	502

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## FOREWORD BEYOND THE PRINTED WORD

KOFI ANYIDHOHO

African societies, by and large, remain predominantly oral in their modes of cultural production and transmission. It seems logical, therefore, that documentation and dissemination of knowledge in and about Africa must constantly strive to go beyond the printed word. At the University of Ghana, I was privileged to lead a 1997–1998 African Humanities Institute held under the theme *Memory & Vision: Africa and the Legacy of Slavery*. Our choice of theme was guided by a strong conviction that in order to make a more confident stride into the future, the continent of Africa – and indeed African peoples worldwide – needs to reexamine closely the full implications of what one scholar appropriately describes as “the single most traumatic body of experience in all our known history. Slavery is the living wound under the patchwork of scars.”<sup>1</sup>

For slightly more than two weeks beginning on February 8, 1998, our team of African and African diaspora researchers was totally absorbed by an important field trip that put us on the trail of ancient slave routes. Our aim, quite simply, was to examine whatever traces there still might be of the legacy of slavery and the slave trade on the physical, cultural, and social landscape of certain communities known to have been most affected by the slave trade.

On our journey into the turbulent history of slavery and the slave trade in Africa, we as researchers discovered we had to reorder our thoughts. Above all, we had to revise our preferred notions of historical reconstruction and documentation. We had begun our program with a series of well-prepared lectures by eminent historians, literary scholars, and many others, almost all of whom had drawn heavily on archival records and countless written sources. Out there in the field, we discovered that some of the most challenging, the most engaging, and indeed the most compelling records and reminders of the experience of slavery and the slave trade were not to be located in the scripted and printed word, but deep in the minds and hearts of those for whom the experience of slavery must forever remain “a living wound.” The people may or may not choose to talk about the experience and its pained recollection. But its traces are there in the landscape dominated by the silk cotton and the baobab trees – lonely giants stranded amid scenes of desolation – in the cryptic language of songs sung at play by a new generation of children, in the heavily encoded battle dress of the Sandema warrior dancers, in the closely guarded relics that

<sup>1</sup> Opoku-Agyemang, *Cape Coast Castle* (Accra, 1996), 1.

make up the mysterious wealth of Azagsuk, in the eternally vigilant ancestral deity of Fiisa, and in the dark recesses of those mysterious ancient caves at Sankana, which once served as the ultimate refuge against the constant menace of slave raiders.

The Ghanaian poet Kobena Eyi Acquah reminds us in his poem “Ol’ Man River”:

For there are some things  
Which can only be said in song  
Only in the mother tongue<sup>2</sup>

We must add that there are also some things that can only be said through the deeply encoded language of the drum and the dance. This presents researchers into African history and culture with unresolved challenges. Among them is the challenge of developing a new kind of literacy, the ability and skills to read and interpret a range of sources: not only written texts, but also sources created by Africans themselves. For there are indeed some things that can only be said through the deeply encoded language of the drum and the dance. Even if we are able to read the drum and the dance, there is the other challenge of how to write and print these ancient modes of human communication. The challenge is real and perplexing, but it is not beyond a possible solution. However, it will require the combined skills and efforts of psychologists, linguists, historians, literary scholars, and musicologists. But even these specialists working together may not get very far without the crucial input of various experts within the oral, non-scribal tradition itself, experts such as Babalawo Akinwunmi, master teacher to Otis, the protagonist in Isidore Okpewho’s novel, *Call Me by My Rightful Name*.<sup>3</sup> It is the drum that calls Otis again and again to return to ancestral time; and to do so he must go in style, he must dance his way back to a mythic memory of who he once was. And when in this same novel, the twin centenarian, Taiwo, wakes up one morning and is moved by “a certain feeling,” she recognizes that it is something deeper than joy that moves her – a “Compulsion! To ... dance” – and “she begins to wriggle her frail body, her arms swaying to a silent measure.” As Kehinde, her twin sister, contemplates Taiwo’s performance, she is also “touched by a tolerable lightness of being.”<sup>4</sup> To understand the full significance and meaning of the dance and its accompanying ancestral chant, we, like Otis, must turn to Babalawo Akinwunmi, Ifa specialist, diviner, and healer, to guide our understanding through the maze of memory back to where things began to go wrong. Expert as well is the unnamed slave driver who effortlessly, almost casually, interprets the language of the drums to Ama, the enslaved protagonist in Manu Herbstein’s novel *Ama*, as they approach the Asante royal palace in Kumasi.<sup>5</sup>

In the search for such experts, our greatest challenge and also our greatest hope is in finding the true owners of the story, the genuine guardians of the sacred word. For it is in their mouths and voices that the past is reborn; it is in their eyes that the darkness of the past once again transforms into the glowing light of knowledge and vision. And in their bodies, as revealed in dance, the frozen breath of history warms up once more into livid moments of memory as an energizing force.

<sup>2</sup> Kobena Eyi Acquah, *Mysic of a Dream Dance* (Accra, 1989), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Isidore Okpewho, *Call Me by My Rightful Name* (Trenton, NJ, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Okpewho, *Call Me*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Manu Herbstein, *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Johannesburg, 2005).

**MEMORY & VISION<sup>6</sup>**[for Children of *Musu*]

We are Dancer and The Dance.

Time before Memory.  
Memory beyond Time.

We harvest Tears  
from laughter's Eyes.  
We even sow some Joy  
in sorrow's deepest Soul.

We are Dancer and The Dance.

In the space between the Drums & Us  
You'll feel unfold  
The endless saga of Ancestral Time.

We are Dancer and The Dance.

There is a Journey we all must make into our Past  
in order to come to terms with our Future.

For Five Hundred Years and more we have  
journeyed into various spaces of the Earth.  
And everywhere we go we must confront  
dimensions of ourselves we did not know were there.

There is something of Our-Story  
something of our Mystery  
carved into every TombStone  
in all the Graveyards of the World  
something of our History Enshrined  
in every Monument and in every Anthem  
ever erected in honour of the Spirit of Endurance.

Back home here here in Africa  
we perform our ResurrectionDance  
in the company of Hyenas  
pretending to be RoyalAncestors.

Some tell us ourSalvation  
lies in a repudiation of ourSelves  
a repudiation of ourHistory  
of Pain ourHistory  
of Shame ourHistory  
of Endless Fragmentation

<sup>6</sup> Originally published in Kofi Anyidoho, *Praise Song for the Land* (Accra, 2002). It was composed at the invitation of choreographer F. Nii Yartey and performed as the opening and closing act of *Musu: Saga of the Slaves*, a dance drama written and directed by Nii Yartey.

But we must wander through History  
into Myth and Memory  
seeking Lost Landmarks  
in a Geography of Scars  
and of Tormented Remembrances.

It cannot     mustnot     be  
that the rest of the world came upon us  
picked us up     used us to clean up their mess  
dropped us off into trash     and moved on  
into new eras of celebrative arrogance  
hopeful     somehow hopeful that we shall forever  
remain lost among shadows of our own doubts  
lost forever among shadows of our own doubts.

Ours is the **IntroBlues**  
the Forever Journey into **SoulTime**.

It is the quest for a Future  
alive with the energy of Recovered  
vision     a Future  
released from the Trauma  
of a Cyclonic Past  
and from the Myopia  
of a Stampeded Present.

With so much waiting to be undone  
with so much left so long undone  
to keep calling our situation a dilemma  
is just a bad excuse for inaction.

Somehow     somehow     we must  
recall that we are a People  
who once rode the Dawn  
with Civilization's Light  
still glowing through our Mind.

And if today we seem lost among Shadows  
we must probe the deep Night of our Blood  
and seek out our Birth-Cord  
from the garbage heap of History's crowded Lies.

A People once enSlaved     they say  
are too often too willing  
to be a People Self-enSlaved.

Always     we must recall the Fate  
of those who fought to the Death  
of the Last Warrior Fought  
& Fought to the Death

& Resurrection  
of the Final Hope.

*So they wiped them out?  
Drowned their screams  
Burned their nerves and bones  
And scattered their ashes  
Across the intimidating splendour  
Of this young history of lies?*

The Asante the Azande and the Mande  
the Madingo and the Bakongo  
the Basuto the Dagaaba and the Dogon  
a people who once built Civilizations  
of rare Glory  
are now but Doubtful  
memories on faded pages  
of World History.

And  
For Five Hundred Years – and more –  
we’ve journeyed from Africa  
through the Virgin Islands into Santo Domingo  
from Havana in Cuba to Savanna in Georgia  
from Voudou Shores of Haiti to Montego  
Bay in Jamaica from Ghana  
to Guyana from the Shanty-Towns  
of Johannesburg to the Favelas  
in Rio de Janeiro  
from Bukom to Harlem to Brixton  
from Hamburg to Moscow to Kyoto –  
and all we find are a Dis-  
possessed and Battered  
people still kneeling in a Sea  
of Blood lying Deep  
in the Path of Hurricanes.

No matter how far away we try to hide away from ourSelves  
we will have to come back  
Home and find out Where and How and Why  
we lost  
the Light in our Eyes. How and Why  
we have become  
Eternal Orphans living on Crumbs and LeftOvers.

We are the Dog who caught the Game  
but now must sit under the table Cracking  
our Hopes over Bones  
over Droppings from the Master’s Hands.

In spite of all that pain we can say Without a Doubt  
that as a people we do hold the World Record  
for survival against the most Unreasonable Odds.

Yes we hold the most spectacular Survival Record.  
But we must hasten to remind ourSelves

that just to survive  
simply to survive  
merely to survive  
barely to survive  
is not & can  
never be enough.

*And so still we stand so tall among the cannonades  
We smell of mists and of powdered memories.*

*And those who took away our Voice  
They are now surprised  
They couldnt take away our Song.*



It is always difficult to recover ordinary lives from the folds of history. This is especially true when it comes to slavery. For more than 400 years, men, women, and children from Africa were forcibly transported to other parts of the world. Most of their names have been lost. Their thoughts and feelings, their suffering and hopes, the little joys of their daily lives have disappeared from memory. New societies emerged and old ones were restructured as they absorbed enslaved African men, women, and children with a profound effect on the recipient societies and on those African communities that provided the slaves. Slavery and the slave trade also played a crucial role in the internal history of Africa, a past that post-abolition African societies recollect with even more difficulties than the relationships created by centuries of external slave trade between Africa and the rest of the world.

This volume of primary sources casts light on both the external and internal slave trade, and on the place of slavery in the political, economic, social, and cultural setup of Africa itself. The contributions are linked by the effort of giving voice to African perceptions and representations of one of the most tragic and sad aspects of African history.

Interest in the influence of slavery on human societies gripped the contemporary imagination in the United States, in part, as a result of the civil rights struggle. In finally acknowledging the rightful claims to full citizenship rights by peoples of African descent (most of whose ancestors had been enslaved), all Americans were forced to recognize the importance of slavery in shaping the history of the Americas. During this same period – that is, in the 1960s–1970s – social historians in Europe and the Americas were starting to challenge the elitist nature of the mainstream historiography. By examining the hidden histories of commoners, workers, women, and other historically subordinated groups, they brought to light the exploitation that many had suffered at the hands of the powerful and the prestigious. These were the contexts that saw the study of slavery and other injustices fire the historical imaginations of scholars far and wide but it took a bit longer for slavery and the slave trade within Africa to enter the picture. Colonial regimes, which held onto power up to the 1960s, saw these practices in Africa as a problem they had solved despite contrary evidence that they in fact continued to exist in places on the continent. African nationalists and the first generation of African scholars who had participated in efforts to free their countries from colonial domination also had no interest in exploring the heritage of slavery or the internal slave trade. They feared it would divide their new,

fragile nations. Instead, they focused on histories that contributed to the establishment of a unifying pride in the pasts of their newly independent countries. That objective was shared also by scholars from the West who focused on reconstructing the histories and cultures in Africa's past. Instead of considering the ignoble past of internal slavery and slave trade, they concentrated on collecting formal oral traditions, historical narratives that served as the charters for existing political structures and that could be used to construct the kinds of academic histories that nationalists needed to foster the much sought-after pride in local institutions and practices undermined by European colonialists. When both African and Western scholars, under the influence of the changing political and intellectual trends in the Americas and Europe, began to turn their attention to slavery, they soon learned that this field of research was fraught with difficulties. There were silences in colonial archives, and informants of slave origin were generally reluctant to discuss their histories. Memories of slavery were unsettling for those whose ancestors owned slaves and for those who were the descendants of the enslaved. The children and grandchildren of the masters often did not want to talk about what their ancestors had done, and the descendants of slaves did not want to speak of a status from which they sought to escape. Many of the oral sources presented in this volume illustrate this restraint.

In 1969, Philip Curtin published *African Slave Trade: A Census*,<sup>1</sup> which critically examined estimates for the slave trade and tried to produce new ones. This spawned a major body of research on slave trade demography<sup>2</sup> that has made available a great deal of information about the slave trade and about slavery within Africa. We know not only about overall numbers, but about regional and ethnic distribution, male-female ratios, the number of children exported, and the organization of the trade. Yet, there are limitations. The demographic studies about the export trade – whether they focus on Africa or the Americas – are based on European and American shipping and customs records. It was clear that slavery and the vast military and commercial machine that supplied the labor needs of the Americas, of the Arabic Peninsula, and of the Indian Ocean also fed a demand for labor within Africa. Field research generated some material about the internal trade and slavery within Africa, but European sources were far more abundant. The earliest works on slavery within Africa – those of Claude Meillassoux, Suzanne Miers, Igor Kopytoff, Frederick Cooper, Paul Lovejoy, Claire Robertson, and Martin Klein<sup>3</sup> – focused less on quantitative analyses and more on qualitative descriptions. They did so using their own field observations and, for many, accounts produced by such European informants as slave traders, missionaries, and colonial administrators. But what of African perspectives? We need to hear how Africans understood and now remember that part of their own past associated with slavery and the slave trade. We need to listen to African voices.

Perhaps the earliest and most important effort to find African voices came once again from Philip Curtin, whose *Africa Remembered* culled a series of African narratives from

<sup>1</sup> From the University of Wisconsin Press.

<sup>2</sup> The culmination of almost forty years of research has been gathered together into the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, which now contains data on about 35,000 of estimated 41,000 slave voyages across the Atlantic. See <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search>

<sup>3</sup> Claude Meillassoux (ed.), *L'esclavage en Afrique précoloniale* (Paris, 1975); Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1977); Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, 1977); Paul E. Lovejoy, *The Ideology of Slavery in Africa* (Beverly Hills, 1981); Claire Robertson and Martin A. Klein (eds.), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983).

rare published literature.<sup>4</sup> This study was supplemented in the 1990s by Marcia Wright's *Strategies of Slaves and Women*. In that volume, Wright tapped the life histories of women caught in the maelstrom of the East African slave trade, which had been collected by missionaries. It produced a picture that focused on the strategies of enslaved women.<sup>5</sup> Then in the course of the 1990s, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Slave Route project encouraged research on the causes, forms of operations, and consequences of the slave trade.<sup>6</sup> In 1998, the distinguished Ghanaian poet, Kofi Anyidoho, organized a seminar entitled 'Memory and Vision: Africa and the Legacy of Slavery', which took a group of African and diaspora scholars through the hinterland of Ghana to explore African tales of slavery and the slave trade. In the process, Anyidoho developed a methodology that focused not on personal histories, but on memories of places and events. In the same year, the historian Djibril Tamsir Niane brought together a number of contributions on oral traditions and slavery in an online publication sponsored by UNESCO.<sup>7</sup> Scholars like Mamadou Diawara and Akosua Perbi were simultaneously finding ways to access memories of slavery by collecting songs, proverbs, and folktales,<sup>8</sup> while Ibrahima Thioub was chastising his colleagues for having downplayed the role of slavery in modern African history.<sup>9</sup> By making fresh materials available, this volume considers the ways Africans experienced slavery and the slave trade, and what followed in the course of abolition. Giving voice to slaves and the descendants of slaves has been our major concern. As our contributors make clear, this objective is not always achievable in the strict sense of finding sources articulated by slaves themselves. More often than not, their voices must be disentangled from narratives, texts, records, and an array of other evidence not originally meant to represent their perspective like missionary accounts, court records, and the historical narratives of master descendants.

The immediate genesis of this collaborative project was the organization in 2004 by Sandra Greene and Carolyn Brown of the African Slavery Oral Narratives Project. They believed that a lot of data on African slavery could be found in the field notes of scholars who were asking other questions and wanted to encourage scholars to take a deeper look at their data. A few years later, troubled particularly by the problem of finding slave voices, Alice Bellagamba suggested to Martin Klein that they organize a conference on the topic at the Rockefeller Foundation conference center at Bellagio, Italy. When it turned out that Brown and Greene had similar plans, we joined together. The conference took place in 2007. Much to our surprise, we received so many interesting proposals that we could not host them all at a conference center that had a capacity limit of twenty-three persons. As a result, we held a second and larger conference in Toronto in 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Curtin (ed.), *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Madison, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> Marcia Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women* (New York, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=25659&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=25659&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

<sup>7</sup> Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Traditional Orale et Archives de la Traite Nègrière* (Paris, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Mamadou Diawara, *La Graine de la Parole. Dimension sociale et politique des traditions orales du royaume de Jaara (Mali) du XVème au milieu du XIXème siècle* (Stuttgart, 1989); Akosua Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana from the 15th to the 19th Century* (Accra, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Ibrahima Thioub, "Regard critique sur les lectures africaines de l'esclavage et de la traite atlantique," in Issiaka Mande and Blandine Stefanson (eds.), *Les historiens africaines et la mondialisation* (Paris, 2005).

We found that many scholars – some established, but also a significant number of younger ones – were thinking about the same methodological problems that concerned us. Furthermore, some were interested in exploring different kinds of sources. We were interested in any kind of sources that cast light on how Africans experienced slavery, and in particular from the point of view of the enslaved. Much of what was presented at the conferences involved not new methodologies, but more critical and systematic ways of approaching older ones, although we were also interested in exploring new types of sources. We came to realize that there existed surprising potential in oral traditions, proverbs, and songs, but also in rituals and material culture. Kofi Anyidoho's foreword and poem invite us to pay attention to the living memories of slavery and the slave trade textured into the fabric of contemporary African societies. As they often require long-term acquaintance with people and contexts along with knowledge of the language in which they are performed and of the larger social and cultural background, such sources have often stymied researchers. This is one of the reasons why the selection of materials we present here opens with oral sources. The volume is divided into nine parts, each preceded by a short introduction. Each document has an introduction that comments on the way the sources were collected or identified and their value for the analysis of slavery. A list of questions helps the reader think critically about the source, and a short bibliography is provided for further reading.

The documents in [Part One](#) are not the formal state narratives that were the focus of research in the 1960s, but rather the oral traditions, historical tales, and interviews that present the perspectives of former slaves and their children as well as the descendants of the masters. They illustrate the diversity of traditions within Africa and the different kinds of information found in them. These documents give details on slave systems, life in slavery, and the struggles of ex-slaves for upward social mobility.

[Part Two](#) looks at a relatively unexplored set of sources: proverbs, songs, and material culture.<sup>10</sup> These sources present us with few facts, but rather with the way images have persisted, sometimes buried in fantastic folktales or religious rituals, at other times in songs and proverbs. These folk memories begin to give us a picture of the fears engendered by four centuries of slave-raiding and the ways those memories are perpetuated into the present.

Part Three focuses on African written accounts of slavery. It includes the defense of slavery by a slaveholding African chief, culled from the archives, the treatment of slavery in an African-authored text, and the effort of an African intellectual to understand the history of his own society. These documents suggest that more sources can be found illustrating diverse African attitudes and experiences. Some documents also display the ambiguous situations in which some Africans found themselves.<sup>11</sup>

The African voice is sometimes implicit in action and at other times is presented in the words of others. [Part Four](#) deals with European travelers' accounts. There are documents on slave flight in Tunisia, an account by a European travel writer of the poignant dilemma of the African concubine of a French pharmacist, a French description of a slave

<sup>10</sup> At the Toronto conference, Nicholas Argenti presented a paper of the memories of slavery buried in children's stories from Cameroon. It is being published as "Things that Don't Come by the Road: Folktales, Fosterage, and Memories of Slavery in the Cameroon Grassfields", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (2010), 224–254.

<sup>11</sup> Randy Sparks presented at Bellagio the letters of the sons of prominent slave traders from Calabar, who were enslaved in a local conflict but quickly freed and lionized while living in England, often by people hostile to slavery. We did not publish these because Sparks has written on the case. See Randy Sparks, *Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

woman shipped north into Saharan slavery, and an account of a European sailor who at the beginning of the eighteenth century described the social inequalities and hierarchies of the Gold Coast.

[Part Five](#) suggests that in spite of the research already done, there is a lot of material to be found in colonial archives. The African voice is found in the letters and petitions Africans addressed to their colonial rulers and in the things Africans did. It is filtered through the reports and perceptions of colonial administrators and military officers who had to deal with slaves and sometimes reported their dealings. But a critical reading of these documents gives us a picture of the struggles of ordinary Africans.

One of the most important sources on the African experience is the courtroom. [Part Six](#) presents cases in which slaves appear either as litigants or as object of litigation. There are limitations to what we can get from judicial sources. African testimonies are shaped by their strategies and by the advice of prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges. They do, however, provide examples of slaves speaking in their own voices. The cases presented here illustrate the trade in and exploitation of slave women, but one deals with slavery and inheritance and another involves the report of a slave trader brought in front of the court for his activities.

Part Seven involves missionary sources. Unlike administrators, missionaries stayed in one place and generally learned the languages of those they were trying to convert. Most of the early converts to Christianity were slaves. The missions often wrote up the experience of their converts in order to publicize what they were doing and to raise money to continue their efforts. Mission archives are thus often a rich source of the slave experience.<sup>12</sup> The cases presented here give a few of those stories, including two documents that raise the issue of human sacrifice.

The possibility of Muslim sources, written either in Arabic or in African languages using Arabic script, has recently come to light as scholars have begun working with documents preserved in private archives. The Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu has 700,000 documents. There are more in other repositories. Many of these documents have not yet been studied, but Part Eight contains letters between a commercial family and a slave who traded on its behalf ([Chapter 42](#)). There is also a study of a court case involving a runaway slave in Mauritania ([Chapter 43](#)). Finally, [Chapter 44](#) presents a totally unexpected source: slave wills from the island of Pemba in East Africa. This is particularly interesting because slaves were not supposed to be able to bequeath.

The last part of the volume focuses on the contemporary legacy of slavery, specifically the way in which the descendants of slaves and the descendants of masters shape their current relationships. In many parts of West Africa, the stigma associated with slave origins endures, but so too have slave descendants continued their struggle to gain respect and social recognition in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>13</sup>

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Carolyn Brown was part of the team that initiated this project. She was valuable in the conceptualization of the conferences that led to this book, provided valuable contacts, and did

<sup>12</sup> Wright, *Strategies* Edward Alpers, "Suema."

<sup>13</sup> For more such cases, see Alice Bellagamba, Sandra Greene, Martin Klein, *The Bitter Legacy. African slavery past and present* (Princeton, 2013). For contemporary slavery, see Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999); Joel Quirk, *The Anti-Slavery Project. From the Slave Trade to Human Trafficking* (Philadelphia, 2011); Benjamin N. Lawrance and Richard L. Roberts, *Trafficking in Slavery's Wake. Law and the Experience of Women and Children in Africa* (Athens, 2012).

some editing. We valued her collaboration and regret that other commitments forced her to drop out of the editing of this volume.

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1.1. Map showing the countries featured in [Parts One, Two, and Three](#).

Source: Based on a map published by *Africa Today*. Revised Edition (1990).



## **PART ONE**

# **REMEMBERING SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE**



Oral data on African slavery are a rich source of information, especially when one is trying to enrich historical interpretations with studies about the lives of real people. For a variety of reasons, however, such source materials are difficult to access and interpret, a problem that should never be underestimated.

Post-abolition African societies have confronted the distasteful legacy of slave-dealing and slaveholding mostly by obliterating it from all levels of public discussion. Many local communities also share an understanding that emphasizes the notion that digging into the past is a potentially conflict-laden exercise. Memories of enslavement and life in slavery can disrupt contemporary social alignments by reopening the wounds of past violence and suffering. In the course of the twentieth century, and even today, this has made both individuals and groups extremely selective about what they deem worthy of narration.

Forgetting, however, is a more complicated task than commonly assumed, even when oblivion is systematically organized. Memories that one section of a society considers dangerous another opts to preserve covertly. Things unspoken in public can be narrated in confidential settings, thus circumventing cultural and social censorship. Such narrative strategies apply not only to personal recollections, but also to the mnemonic reserves out of which oral traditions (which historians of Africa have depicted as often lacking direct reference to slavery and the slave trade) are built. It all depends on the ways historical knowledge is produced, shared, and transmitted in the social and cultural context under scrutiny and on the researcher's ability (and patience) to tackle the nuances of this multi-layered process.

The problem of interpretation comes next. It goes without saying that oral data that directly or indirectly refer to slavery, the slave trade, and enslaved individuals can help develop a robust and grounded knowledge of African slavery from an African point of view. But like more conventional historical sources, these data should not be taken at face value. The narrative structure of this kind of materials is deeply culturally embedded. The performer and the audience share a common reservoir of meanings and representation, which might sound confusing to outsiders. Proper historical and ethnographic contextualization is crucial to a full understanding of the messages oral data carry.

The chapters in this part of the volume present three different kinds of oral sources. The first are oral traditions from Ghana and the River Gambia. Following the classic

definition developed by historians of Africa, oral traditions are information about the past transmitted across generations by word of mouth. The message usually refers to a historical period antecedent to the lifetime of the narrator, although some historians prefer a broader definition that includes personal and social reminiscences. The second category of sources consists of historical tales from Cameroon, Benin, and Togo. These differ from oral traditions not because of the mode of transmission, but because the content blurs the boundary between facts and fiction in the very eyes of the narrators and the audience. The third group presents a set of interviews from Southern Tanzania, Kano (northern Nigeria), and Senegal, and provides insight into the ways in which the research encounter shapes the production of historical knowledge.

## ORAL TRADITIONS

In strict terms, the expression “oral tradition” denotes both the content of what is transmitted and the process of its transmission. This means that researchers have to pay attention to what is narrated and to the practices and contexts through which knowledge about the past is handed down through the generations, whether done deliberately or not.

In former times, the production and reproduction of oral traditions depended almost exclusively on the interests of the narrators and their audiences in talking about and listening to parts of their past. Oral traditions that stopped being performed simply disappeared. Transmission patterns, however, changed with the arrival of professional historians from the 1950s onward, and with the massive spread of Islamic and Western literacy in the second part of the twentieth century.

Today, the boundary between oral and written texts has become fuzzier. Researchers, for instance, can access oral data collected, transcribed, and edited by their predecessors (like the Asante and Gonja sources introduced by Sandra E. Greene in [Chapter 2](#)). The challenge, as Greene explains, is to clear up why certain sets of memories (in this specific case associated with the lives of eighteenth-century enslaved individuals) have been kept alive until the time they were recorded. Their political use to sustain legitimacy claims is one of the possible reasons. In [Chapter 3](#), Alice Bellagamba presents an oral narrative about slavery produced in 2000 by Bakoyo Suso, a renowned twentieth-century Gambian griot and oral historian. By quoting examples from the nineteenth-century history of the River Gambia, Bakoyo offers a sensitive reflection on slavery and the slave trade, which is deeply rooted in local history, and addresses issues of moral, social, and political concern to contemporary Gambian society. What kind of social world sustained slavery and the slave trade? Is that past really gone forever?

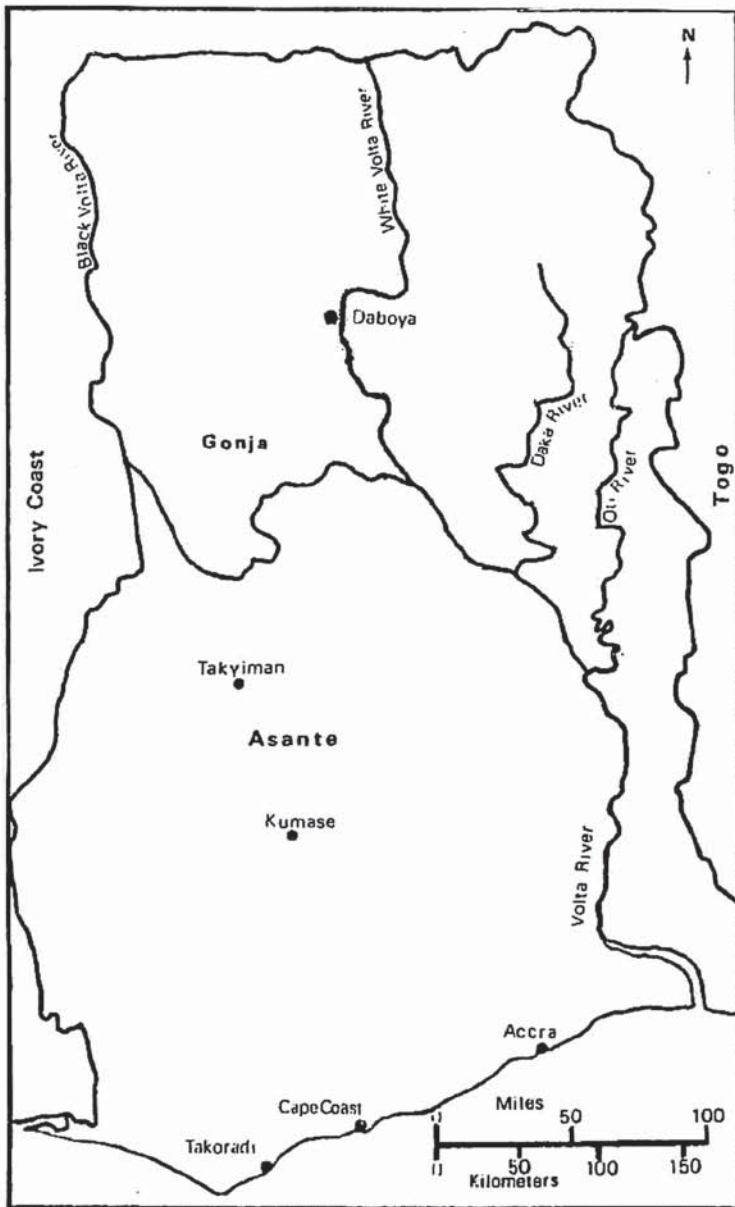
## HISTORICAL TALES

Messages from past generations are not always remembered and transmitted to others because of their historical content. At times, their moral script is more important. This does not prevent their use as historical source to uncover the social and intellectual history of the symbols, ideologies, and discourses on human beings and their sociality, which developed along with slavery and the slave trade and underpinned the daily lives of both slaves and masters. The two Cameroonian accounts introduced by E. S. D. Fomin in [Chapter 5](#) comment on masters’ disloyalty toward their slaves by taking a cue from the vicissitudes of

two individuals whose memory, for tragic reasons, has been preserved across generations. The first account deals with a slave owner and sounds like a warning to all power-holders who abuse their subordinates. The second depicts the intrinsic vulnerability of the slave's condition by describing the dramatic death of a court slave. Alessandra Brivio's materials ([Chapter 4](#)), on the other hand, fade into myth, and their historical content is hardly detectable. Nonetheless, they testify to the moral debate spurred by enslavement and the slave trade in the coastal societies of West Africa, which supplied slaves to the Atlantic markets. By evoking the crude images of cowry shells growing on slaves' rotting corpses, these tales question the legitimacy of wealth accumulated through the systematic exploitation of human beings.

## INTERVIEWS

Probably nothing highlights more the fact that oral data are not simply picked up from informants – as implied by the verb “to collect” to describe this kind of process – than the dynamic of interviewing, where data collection is deeply influenced by all those involved in the interviews. Researchers must become familiar with the etiquette of the society they study. They have to learn how to formulate questions in ways that sound neither offensive nor intrusive. If they deal with slavery, they need to be even more tactful. Most of the time, they are not alone, but accompanied by interpreters and other kinds of mediators. At times, recollections surface almost spontaneously in the midst of discussions on other topics. In other instances, people refuse to provide any answers at all to questions. In [Chapter 6](#), Martin A. Klein reminds us of the importance of taking into consideration not only the content of the interview, but also the behavior of the people involved and the events that unfold between them. Mohammed Bashir Salau, in [Chapter 8](#), emphasizes how dominant scholarly research interests in the 1970s molded the questions about slavery posed to Kano informants. Interviewers encouraged informants to focus on certain parts of the past, and in so doing, they ignored other elements (for instance, the part gender played in the organization of the Kano slave system). In [Chapter 7](#), Felicitas Becker sensitively explores the field of social memories and personal recollections surrounding a slavery plantation in Southern Tanzania. As she notes, remembrances about slavery are interwoven with other recollections, and an analysis of the ways informants narrate their stories is as important as what is said in the course of the interview.



2.1. Map showing the location of Asante, Takyiman, and Gonja.

Source: Based on a map in Glenna Case, Wasipe under the Ngbanya (unpublished PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1979), xi.

SANDRA E. GREENE

**T**he state of Asante was founded in the late seventeenth century in what is now central southern Ghana. In the approximately 200 years it existed as an independent polity, it developed a massive bureaucratic apparatus to manage affairs of state. It deployed sophisticated diplomatic means to negotiate with friends and enemies alike. It developed and managed a series of roads that linked Asante's economy to both the Atlantic coast and the savannah zone to its north. But it was also a state that did not hesitate to use military force. Between 1701 and 1774, Asante conquered all those polities and peoples located within a radius of approximately 100–250 miles, whose independence was deemed a hindrance to its political and economic interests. In its first imperial foray in 1701, for example, it conquered the polity of Denkyera. This was then followed by thirty-seven years of periodic but frequent warfare, as Asante extended its imperial control in all directions. By 1774, their military successes had expanded the boundaries of the Asante state to include much of what is now the modern state of Ghana. The warfare continued, however. For another 122 years, between 1774 and 1896 (when Britain conquered it), Asante continued to deploy its military largely to suppress the many rebellions organized by the conquered.<sup>1</sup>

One of the consequences of this military activity was the production of prisoners of war. Throughout the eighteenth century, many were conveyed to the coast where they were sold and transported to the Americas. Others were marketed to meet the local demand for domestic slaves. Still others were allocated to Asante military commanders in recognition of their leadership roles in battle. Most often the prisoners retained in Asante were used by their masters as agricultural laborers in underpopulated regions of the state, as a potential pool of funerary sacrificial victims, and as possible sources of additional income from the ransoms paid by the families of the enslaved. Not all prisoners were sold or distributed as booty to subordinates, however. The Asante king kept many for the state. Included in this

<sup>1</sup> For two excellent maps, which position Asante and its trade routes within the region, see T. C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-colonial Asante* (Cambridge, 1995), 32, 77. On a discussion of Asante's imperial expansion and the development of a road network to control its conquered territories and the trade that was carried on these roads, see Ivor G. Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The structure and evolution of a political order* (Cambridge, 1975), 1–64. On the use of the military by the Asante, see D. J. E. Maier, "Military Acquisition of Slaves in Asante," in David Henige and T. C. McCaskie (eds.), *West African Economic and Social History: Studies in Memory of Marian Johnson* (Madison, 1990), 119–132.

group were royal family members from conquered territories and a number of Muslims, many of whom were deemed valuable because of their literacy. Information about such individuals is limited, however. We know they were captured. We also know how they were integrated into the state bureaucracy as valued assets.<sup>2</sup> But many questions remain. Some individuals were well remembered in the home districts from which they came. Others have been almost completely forgotten. The memories that do exist can vary considerably. In one place an individual is recalled as a major figure in their community; in another location, that same person is remembered only because they became so prominent in Asante. Why is this the case? This chapter addresses this question by focusing on the oral traditions associated with two individuals, Gyamana Nana and Kramo Tia, captured (or invited to take up residence in Kumase, the Asante capital) by a conquering Asante state in the eighteenth century. Both were retained (along with their descendants) as members of the Asante bureaucracy that served the Asantehene in Kumase. Whereas the next pages of this introduction explain why Gyamana Nana and Kramo Tia were remembered differently in different locations, the oral traditions themselves raise a number of other questions about slavery and the public discussion of this institution in West Africa.

## GYAMANA NANA OF TAKYIMAN

In 1722–23, the state of Asante invaded the polity of Takyiman (also once spelled Techiman, situated to the northwest of Asante) and captured a member of the royal family, Gyamana Nana (also remembered as Nana Dwamenawa).<sup>3</sup> Even though she was taken to the Asante capital of Kumase as a prisoner of war and enslaved there until her death, memories of her remain. Oral traditions recited in both Kumase and Takyiman more than two hundred years after her capture still recall her existence and her suffering. One of the Kumase traditions is typical:

When the Asante defeated Takyiman, they took as prisoner to Kumase a woman known as Gyamana Nana. She was a very wealthy woman. She was so rich, in fact, that a new cloth was woven for her every day, which she put on when she bathed. But when she was brought as a prisoner to Kumase she was made to sweep the rooms in the palace, and she learned what it was like to be poor. She was further humiliated by being asked to draw water: the vessel given her was a sieve.

While she was in the palace, Gyamana Nana saw her own granddaughter there. Gyamana Nana was troubled. She approached the Asantehene and said that she did not mind how she herself was treated, but that she wanted her granddaughter to be cared for. So the Asantehene gave the girl to Bantamahene<sup>4</sup> so that he would look after her. It was her

<sup>2</sup> For the most comprehensive discussion of the production and use of slaves in Asante, see Maier, “Military Acquisition.” On Muslim captives and non-captives in the Asante administration, see David Owusu-Ansah, “Power and Prestige? Muslims in 19th Century Asante,” in Enid Schildkrout (ed.), *The Golden Stool: Studies of the Asante Center and Periphery* (New York, 1987), 80–92.

<sup>3</sup> Gyamana Nana is variously described as the Queenmother of Takyiman or a sister of the Queenmother. See Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *Akan Traditions of Origin* (London, 1952) 43–44; Nana Kwame Nyame, “General Techiman History,” in D. M. Warren and K. O. Brempong (eds.), *Techiman Traditional State Stool and Town Histories, Part I* (Legon, 1971), 20.

<sup>4</sup> The Bantamahene, a senior official in the Asante government, had his political base in Bantama, in the nineteenth century a village north of central Kumase. The community also held the distinction of being the location of the royal mausoleum.



descendants who became the Abanasehene.... The Abanasehene is responsible for the Asantehene's clothes.<sup>5</sup>

This memory of Nana Gyamana, like other oral traditions, has served a variety of purposes. It commemorates her capture as an historical fact, for she was indeed captured by Asante in 1772–73. But this particular account also animates these bare bones with anecdotes that despite their implausibility make the incident both memorable and useful for reinforcing a particular political perspective. Gyamana's experience of having to collect water in a sieve, for example, is a description not easily forgotten. At the same time, as a memory retained by her Asante descendants, it represents the affront they have opted not to forget even as they themselves continue to live in and remain affiliated with the Asantehene's bureaucracy. Other traditions retained in Takyiman itself, which focus largely on Takyiman's defeat, serve other purposes. They recall a once independent polity that as a consequence of its conquest was forced to provide Asante with soldiers throughout much of the late eighteenth century. These individuals were used as shock troops, taking the brunt of enemy fire and suffering far greater casualties than the members of the Asante military itself, even as their royal captives are remembered as having brought a more "civilized" culture to the Asante.<sup>6</sup> By remembering Takyiman's defeat and Gyamana's capture, Takyiman's leaders were able to use these memories to justify to their people more than one hundred years later their decision to rebel against Asante rule in 1896. The tradition probably served the same purpose when Takyiman unsuccessfully resisted in 1935 British colonial efforts to reintegrate it into the Asante Confederation, and it likely played no small part in the Takyiman-led effort by several states to secede from the Asante Confederation in 1951.<sup>7</sup>

Different reasons account for the tradition's survival in Asante. In 1973, Dr. Alex Kyerematen – a respected historian of Asante art and a descendant of Gyamana Nana – indicated that while the Asantehenes, Nana Prempeh II (1931–1970) and Nana Opoku Ware II (1970–1999) were well aware of this history, "it [was] not talked about in Kumase," in keeping with Asante law prohibiting the disclosure of someone's origins. Yet the memory of the enslavement of Dr. Kyerematen's ancestor was still very important for Asante. The existence of her descendants as servants of the Asantehene was a physical reminder of the historic power of the Asante to extend its influence over a now independent polity. Although they would not speak publicly about the origins of his ancestor, they remembered nevertheless. At the same time, the descendants of Gyamana Nana resident in Kumase had their own reasons for remembering. Her place in their family memories reinforced their own identities as citizens of a polity that they recalled as once larger, more wealthy, and independent of the state that would later enslave their ancestress. It was also served as the very basis for the periodic invitations they received to visit their ancestral home.

<sup>5</sup> Ivor Wilks, *Conversations about the Past, Mainly from Ghana, 1956–1996*, Vol. 4, 1968, July 10–1999, April 13: FN 96: Interview with Alex Kyerematen.

<sup>6</sup> On the Asante use of troops from conquered states as frontline troops, see Emmanuel Terray, "Contribution à une étude de l'armée asante," *Cahiers D'Études Africaines*, XVI: 61–62 (1976), 312–318. Takyiman appears to have been treated at times as a tributary state, and at other times as an inner province in which they participated in the Asante government. On Asante organization of its various provinces and Takyimans status, see Kwame Arhin, "The Structure of Greater Asante," *Journal of African History*, 8: 1 (1976), 65–85; and Wilks, *Asante*, passim.

<sup>7</sup> See William Tordoff, "The Brong-Ahafo Region," *Economic Bulletin of Ghana*, 3: 5 (1959), 2–18.

## KRAMO TIA OF GONJA

Reasons for remembering in one place can constitute the very rationale for forgetting in another locale. Such is the case with the polity of Gonja. Present in both Kumase and Gonja oral traditions is the name of one 'Uthman Kamagatay, also known as Usmanu Kamara or Kramo Tia (the "little Muslim"). In the Asante capital of Kumase he is remembered quite clearly as a captive obtained during an 1844 Asante campaign against Gonja:

[There was a] very powerful Kramo or Moslim who was gifted in the Koran and worked miracles. . . . This Moslem was captured red-handed and sent to Kumasi. He was known as Kramo Tia. When Kramo Tia arrived in Kumase, he became a permanent Moslem consultant of the Asantehene. He was captured with his two wives, namely Wurukye and Awuro Kyaah.<sup>8</sup>

Memories of Kamagatay are decidedly different in the Gonja town of Daboya and among Kamagatay's relatives in Kumase, however. There, he too is remembered in terms of his travels to Kumase, but not as a war captive who was enslaved at the court of the Asantehene, but rather as a guest of the Asante king. According to the Gonja traditions, Kramo Tia was invited to Kumase because of his learning; he then opted to remain of his own free will. The differences between these two traditions are a result of how two different communities have chosen to remember the past. For Asante, remembering Kamagatay as a prisoner reinforced its identity as a conquering power that had the ability to commandeer and benefit from the services of those over whom it exercised authority. For the Gonja, their emphasis on the voluntary nature of Kramo Tia's service worked to reinforce its image as a respected polity whose citizens had knowledge that was often sought without the threat of violence by neighbors both near and far. Denying Kamagatay's capture also served to de-emphasize the humiliation the Gonja polity experienced when it was indeed violently subordinated to the power of the Asante state.<sup>9</sup> In both cases, history was selectively appropriated to reinforce a valued image of the historical self within the larger region. Will we ever know whether or not Kramo Tia was enslaved or instead opted on his own to reside in Kumase? Perhaps not, but the oral traditions about him (as well as those about Gyamana Nana of Takyiman) can tell us a great deal about the past and the politics of memory.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

### On the traditions about Gyamana Nana and Kramo Tia

1. Both Gyamana Nana and Kramo Tia found themselves resident in Asante. The descendants of both these individuals – and in the case of Kramo Tia, he himself – came to hold central positions within the administration of the very state

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Glenna Case, *Wasipe under the Ngbanya: Polity, Economy and Society in Northern Ghana* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1979), 231.

<sup>9</sup> That the Gonja preferred to limit the ignominy of their 1844 defeat is evident in how they have also chosen to recall the war. Great emphasis in the oral traditions is placed on their resistance and the fact that they inflicted serious casualties on the Asante military leadership when they sought to make arrests in Daboya. Far less emphasis is placed on Asante operations thereafter (which were ultimately successful). See Case, *Wasipe*, 231–234 and J. A. Braimah, *The Ashanti and the Gonja at War* (Accra, 1970), 11–32. On the history of Asante-Gonja relations as it involved Kramo Tia, see Wilks, *Asante*, 275–279; and Bruce M. Haight, "Pontonporon and Koko: Asante-Gonja Relations to 1874," in Enid Schildkraut (ed.), *The Golden Stool: Studies of the Asante Center and Periphery* (New York, 1987), 60–72.

that had enslaved them. Why would slaves and strangers have been given such opportunity? Why would slaves and strangers be interested in participating in the very administrations that had removed them or their ancestors from their natal homes or conquered their home communities?

2. The traditions about Gyamana Nana and Kramo Tia refer to the Asante laws that prevent public discussion of one's origins. Why would such a law have been enacted?

### On the traditions about Gyamana Nana

3. Included in the documents are traditions that describe her as either the Queenmother of the state, as the sister of the Queenmother, or simply as a wealthy woman. What might be the significance of these different descriptors?
4. Oral traditions often contain fanciful elements designed to make an incident so memorable that it can withstand the memory-eroding effects of time. What fanciful elements can you identify in the Takyiman traditions? What purposes do they serve beyond making the story memorable?

### On the traditions about Kramo Tia

5. Of the conflicting explanations about the circumstances that brought Kramo Tia to Kumase, which do you find more plausible?
6. How does the fact that Kramo Tia and his descendants both acquired a number of slaves and at times were given as debt slaves to others impact your understanding of how slave systems operated in West Africa?

## TERMINOLOGY

*hajj*: the pilgrimage to Mecca, a journey that all devout Muslims are encouraged to perform

*-hemaa*: the Asante term for the most senior woman political leader of the named location – for example, Daboyahemaa

*-hene*: the Asante term for the royal political leader of the named location – for example, Asantehene, Daboyahene, and the like

*Imam*: Muslim prayer leader

*Limam*: Gonja term for the head of the Muslim community

*-wura*: the Gonja term for a royal political leader whose full title included the name of the community over which he had authority – for example, Gbuipewura (royal head of Gbuipe), Daboyawura (royal head of Daboya)

## ORAL TRADITIONS ABOUT GYAMANA NANA OF TAKYIMAN

### 1. Asante traditions maintained by Gyamana Nana's descendants

**DR. ALEX KYEREMATEN:** Interviewed by Prof. Ivor Wilks and Dr. Phyllis Ferguson, September 12, 1973, Kings College, Cambridge, England.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This interview can be found in the Ivor Wilks, *Conversations about the Past*.

**CONTEXT:** Dr. Kyerematen, a distinguished anthropologist and author of a number of studies on Asante royal regalia, agreed to answer questions about his own background in an interview that took place in Britain. Excerpted here are those portions in which he discussed his ancestors. The individuals mentioned included those ancestors who connected him to the royal families of Asante and Takyiman. His maternal grandfather, Kwame Boaten, was Kyidomhene in Asante (a military title, but in reality a position that involved overseeing the management of a number of towns and villages under the authority of that office).<sup>11</sup> This relative also participated in the 1895 Asante embassy to London, when Asante was seeking to negotiate directly with the British crown at a time when its independence was threatened by European colonial expansionism. Others mentioned included his maternal great grandfather, Akyeampong Tia, brother of the Asantehene Nana Kwaku Dua Panin and his ancestor, the Asante captive, Gyamana Nana of Takyiman.

My mother was the daughter of Kyidomhene Boaten, the one who was a member of the embassy to London. Kyidomhene Boaten's father was Akyeampong Tia. He was the brother of Nana Kwaku Dua Panin [the Asante king, Asantehene], and for that reason, the Asantehene always calls me grandson.

I am a member of the Abanase. The Abanasehene is responsible for the Asantehene's clothes.

I work closely with the new Asantehene [Nana Opoku Ware II]. Among other things, I am a member of the committee for building his new palace.

My ancestors were from Takyiman. Even now I am invited to go there on various occasions. But this is not talked about in Kumase. Neither [Asantehene] Nana Prempeh II [1931–1970] or [his successor] Nana Opoku Ware II [1970–1999] will refer to it, though they know about it. When the Asante defeated Takyiman, they took as prisoner to Kumase a woman known as Gyamana Nana. She was a very wealthy woman. She was so rich, in fact, that a new cloth was woven for her every day, which she put on when she bathed. But when she was brought as prisoner to Kumase she was made to sweep the rooms in the palace, and she learned what it was like to be poor. She was further humiliated by being asked to draw water: the vessel given her was a sieve. While she was in the palace, Gyamana Nana saw her own granddaughter there. Gyamana Nana was troubled. She approached the Asantehene and said that she did not mind how she herself was treated, but that she wanted her granddaughter to be cared for. So the Asantehene gave the girl to the Bantamahene so that he would look after her. It was her descendant who became the Abanasahene. Osei Bonsu built a new palace of stone, and created the position of Abanasahene

## 2. Takyiman tradition I

**NANA KWAME NYAME:** Interviewed by D. M. Warren and K. O. Brempong, August 16–17 and October 9, 1970, Takyiman.<sup>12</sup>

**CONTEXT:** According to D. M. Warren, and K. O. Brempong, their interviews with Nana Kwame Nyame were initiated as part of a larger effort to record the histories of the chiefs

<sup>11</sup> Ivor Wilks, *Asante*, 475.

<sup>12</sup> Warren and Brempong, *Techiman* (Legon, 1971).

and towns that made up the Takyiman (in their report spelled Techiman) Traditional State. Initially they brought together the elders of a town or those associated with a particular stool (the symbol of political office) to relate these histories. This method, however, proved rather unwieldy. Trying to bring everyone together at a single time was difficult. Disagreements among the elders could derail the entire session. Accordingly, as noted by Warren and Brimpong, they abandoned this approach “and allowed only one narrator to present a history. If another elder disagreed with the first narration, he was then asked to present his version.”

The account by Nana Kwame Nyame presented here is perhaps one of the most detailed and extensive accounts in their collection. While it might differ in one detail or another from other versions about the Takyiman past, the Asante’s capture of Takyiman’s queenmother, named in his account Dwamenawa rather than Gyamana Nana, is consistent with most other accounts recorded at the time.

It is believed that the Techiman<sup>13</sup> people came from a hole in the ground at a place called Amowi. They were very great in number and therefore they decided to build villages for themselves .... The people decided to build a capital which was called Maaso. Maaso was the abode of the Omanhene. The various families always came together to pay homage to the Omanhene at Maaso. Years elapsed and the Techiman people lived peacefully. Everything progressed, especially farming and hunting. The Bonohene [the ruler of the Bono state of which Takyiman was a part] stayed at Maaso for a long period until the First Techiman-Asante War. This war is dated from the reign of Asantehene Opoku Ware [c. 1720–50]. The war was a very grand one; they fought for seven good days without rest. Techiman fought so well that she nearly conquered Asante.

On the seventh day [of the war], the Asante decided to retreat because they had run short of gunpowder. Nana Bafo Pim, the Nkoranzahene [i.e., the leader of a group of refugees from Asante who had been allowed to settle on Techiman land] went to trick Nana Kese Bashyia, the Benkumhene [the commander of the left wing of the Bono-Takyiman army] ... for some gunpowder. Bafo told him that he was going to help the Bono beat the Asante. Basahyia was at first reluctant to part with any gunpowder because he could not go back to Maaso to collect more. All the same, he gave half of his gunpowder to Bafo and Bafo’s trick worked effectively ... [for] Bafo fought for the wrong person. He gave the gunpowder to the Asante. Bafo’s next trick [also] worked perfectly. He asked Kese Bashyia to put his guns in water, telling him how straight they would shoot the following morning if they were washed. Bafo also said that he himself had put all of his guns in water to wash them as he wanted to clean them for the next day. One of the Bono soldiers disputed this and told Kese Basahyia that it was a trick because he had tried it once, but the gun would not shoot. The soldier was rebuked and immediately beheaded for challenging the chief. The man accepted his death philosophically, but warned them about the future and told them that they would regret their decision. Benkumhene Kese Basahyia then put all his guns in water in the hope that they would be more effective against the Asante the next morning. At this time the war was being fought fiercely ... Bafo informed the Asante of the trick that he had played. He told them to be courageous the next morning, as the Benkumhene had been deceived and would have to retreat. The fighting was now very fierce in ... Techiman

<sup>13</sup> This is a different spelling for Takyiman.

Town.... The war continued the next morning. One section of the Asante infantry began to invade from the Benkumhene's side. They knew he was now handicapped and could not retaliate. The main reason for this particular attack was the capture of the Bonohene at Maaso .... The Asante were able to capture the Bono Queenmother, Nana Dwamenawa .... A messenger was sent to inform them.... [After] this calamity ... Techiman retired and the Asante won the war.

Techiman became a vassal state of Asante. She paid taxes to the Asantehene and her men were conscripted into the Asante army in time of war. Opoku Ware [the Asantehene] rewarded Bafo with the greater part of Techiman's land as his trick had worked perfectly and had resulted in the Asante victory. While Techiman remained a vassal state to Asante, Bafo and his people enjoyed the fruits of Techiman's land.

### 3. Takyiman tradition II

**NANA KOFI BIAANTWO:** Interviewed by Eva L. A. Meyerowitz in 1945.<sup>14</sup>

**CONTEXT:** Nana Kofi Biantwo was the Krontihene (an administrative position within the royal court of Takyiman, which is part of the Bono state) at the time of the interview. He presented this tradition in an interview attended by two other royal officials: Nana Yao Doako, Ankobeahene, and Nana Kwasi Tabiri, Akwamuhene, as well as by an elder, Nana Kwame Nyama.

Note that the spelling of names here again is slightly different from the spelling found in the previous documents. Nevertheless, they refer to the same places and people. Baafa = Bafo; -hemmaa = -hema; Kumasi = Kumase; Mansu = Maaso.

One morning ... when consulting [his] god's oracle ... the High Priest of [the god] Tano in Takyiman ... got the "intelligence" that a most beautiful woman with evil designs on the kingdom was on her way to Mansu [also known as Maaso, capital of the Bono state of which Takyiman was a part]. He immediately sent a message to the King, warning him of this beautiful, light-coloured and charming stranger, and stated that if she succeeded in sleeping with him a battle would result which would be very serious for the Bono Kingdom. If, however, she could be taken prisoner and the insteps of her feet cut deeply, no harm would come to the state. When the message arrived in Mansu, [the king's son] Boyemprissi made fun of the oracle and said that Bono was so powerful no nation on earth could conquer it. A short while later the High-Priest of Tano sent another warning to the King, begging him to be [e]specially careful on a certain day, for by this time the High-Priest had learned the day on which the woman would arrive. He again advised the King to get hold of her straight away and to make the cuts in her feet.

The day came and the beautiful woman ... sat in the marketplace, where she was duly discovered by court servants of the Bonohene, whose job it was to bring any pretty woman they saw to the Palace. When they arrived, the councillors, remembering the warning of the High-Priest of Tano, wanted to seize her and make the cuts in her feet, but the King, at once enamoured, said that he could not bear to see so beautiful a woman hurt or disfigured. The councillors were angry, but when Boyemprissi sided with his father, the latter was strengthened in his resolve to have his own way. He seduced her the same night. Next morning the

<sup>14</sup> Eva L. A. Meyerowitz, *Akan Traditions*, 39–44.

strange woman had disappeared and when this news spread, gloom prevailed in the city; they all thought that she had taken the spirit of Bono with her and that the oracle's prophesy would come true. When the High-Priest of Tano received the news he told the King that Bono was now faced with war and that the Kingdom would fall in forty days ...

Two days after the High Priest of Tano's last message, Baafo Pim [the leader of a group of refugees from Asante who had been allowed to settle on Takyiman land], had gone to Kumasi ostensibly to convey ... gold dust [as a present from the Bonohene] to the Asantehene Opoku Ware. [In reality, Baafo Pim had used the money to provoke war between Asante and Bono to avenge an insult he had suffered from the Bono king's son.] [When Baafo] returned to Mansu, he told the Bonohene that the Asantehene was highly pleased with his present and that he would come to thank him in person and cement the growing friendship. In addition Baafo told him that he (Baafo) wished to perform the funeral rites for his late uncle.... As these final rites were long overdue, Baafo suggested they take place during the visit of [the] Asante ...

It is always the custom at a funeral to fire shots into the air, and when during the conversation the guns were mentioned, Baafo remarked that it would be wise to bury the guns in the river for awhile, so that they should look clean and fresh on the day of the ceremony. Since the Bono knew little about firearms, having had no major war for a century ... [they] allowed [themselves] to be persuaded.

As the day approached on which the Asantehene and his entourage were expected at Mansu, the Bonohene prepared to receive his royal guest as magnificently as possible. The day came, and just as [he] was putting on his state robes a messenger arrived from the High-Priest of Tano with the prophecy that there would be a battle that day, for the visitors...would come with an army.... A few hours later ... shots were heard ... and there was no doubt that a battle had begun.

What happened was this.... The Takyiman soldiers threw themselves between the enemy and [their] threatened city and for seven days fought a desperate battle. They hoped for reinforcements from Mansu, but none came.

At Mansu the confusion was terrible. When it was realized that the High-Priest's prophecy was coming true, everybody was paralysed with shock.... Then everybody prepared to [flee]. The chiefs would not fight; they were angry with the King for having ignored their advice... and one after the other they left with their people ...

The Queenmother Dwamara Akenten hid ... a few miles north of Mansu, from where she secretly ruled the remnants of her people for another two years; then she died. Her sister [Gyamana Nana], the heir apparent, who had hidden near Boyem with some of the princes and princesses, was betrayed and taken into captivity to Kumasi where she gave herself out as the Bonohemmaa.

It is not known what happened to her ... but apparently they were quite well treated at first ...

Kumasi was indeed a poor place at that time compared with Bono-Mansu. In spite of the victorious battles and the great loot taken ... Kumasi remained a provincial backwater and its people, including the court, lacked all refinement. According to the information [provided by] the present Asantehene – and his view is widely held in the country – ... the Queenmother's heir apparent [i.e., Gyamana Nana, and the other royal captives from Takyiman] ... showed the Asante how things should be done. Their weavers wove fine cloth, their goldsmiths taught the Asante how to decorate the state emblems with gold, and how to make gold jewellery for the Queenmother and the royal women. Their musicians showed



them how to play on new musical instruments and introduced new songs and dances. The Chief who was once in charge of the great market at Mansu organized the market of Kumasi for trade, and introduced the standard gold weights from Bono. As court etiquette was practically non-existent, [Gyamana Nana] for a while supervised the teaching of the princes and princesses [of Asante].

When [Gyamana Nana], later, however was made to sweep the most stinking parts of the Kumasi market, she died soon after.

## ORAL TRADITIONS ABOUT KRAMO TIA OF GONJA

### 1. Asante traditions<sup>15</sup>

**NSUMANKWA STOOL HISTORY OF ASANTE:** Collected by J. Agyeman-Duah as part of the Institute of African Studies Stool Histories Project.

**CONTEXT:** The Nsumankwafo, or the corps of royal physicians, had the responsibility for maintaining the health of the Asantehene. Their head, the Nsumankwaahene, as noted by David Owusu-Ansah, “search[ed] for the best medicine or charm to protect the Asantehene. He thus consult[ed] the *Adunsifo* (herbalists) and *Abosomfo* (priests possessed by a deity) ... [as well as] prominent priests outside Asante if he [was] convinced that their services [would] be of benefit to the king.” As leader of the Muslim religious community in Asante, Kramo Tia served the Asantehene under the Nsumankwaahene. If he sought an audience with the king, the request was sent through the Nsumankwaahene. And if the King wished to summon Kramo Tia, it was done through the Nsumankwaahene. It is for this reason that the Nsumankwa Stool Histories have something to say about Kramo Tia and the history of his relationship with Asante.<sup>16</sup>

It is ... said that he [a Gonja ruler] had a very powerful Kramo or Moslem, who was gifted in the Koran and worked miracles for him. This Moslem was captured red-handed and sent to Kumasi. He was known as Kramo Tia. When Kramo Tia arrived in Kumasi he became a permanent Moslem consultant of the Asantehene. He was captured with his two wives, namely Wurukye and Awuro Kyaah.

**THE ANANTA STOOL HISTORY OF ASANTE:** Collected by J. Agyeman-Duah as part of the Institute of African Studies Stool Histories Project.

**CONTEXT:** The Ananta Stool, according to Akosua Perbi was a “service stool,” an administrative office created by Asantehene Opoku Ware (1720–50) for his servant Ofosu, “in recognition of the spirit of initiative and valour displayed when he repulsed an attack by ... the chief of Assin.” Ofosu’s troops were “made a part of the king’s personal guard.” Their head, the Anantahene, was made responsible for the king’s physical safety when he was engaged in a particular religious ritual. He also had authority over the Nsumankwaa, the

<sup>15</sup> The stool histories excerpted here were collected by J. Agyeman-Duah and are now housed at the Manhyia Archives in Kumase, Ghana. These excerpts come from Glenna Case, Wasipe, 231–232.

<sup>16</sup> The quote comes from David Owusu-Ansah, *Islamic Talismanic Tradition in Nineteenth Century Asante* (Lewiston, 1991), 4; for more information on the position of Muslims in Asante, see also David Owusu-Ansah, “Power or Prestige?”, 80–92.



royal physicians, the latter of whom, in turn, were responsible for the Muslim community in Kumase. It was because of their authority over the Nsumankwaa and the Islamic religious community in Kumase that the Ananta stool history retains information about Kramo Tia.<sup>17</sup>

[It was the Asante military leader, Asamoa Nkwanta] who went to Daboya and captured Kramo Tia during the reign of Nana Agyeman I (Kwaku Dua I), the least pugnacious king.

## 2. Gonja Traditions<sup>18</sup>

**WASIPEWURA MAHAMA SAFO II:** Interview by Glenna Case with Mathilda M. Soale, February 14, 1976, Wasipewura's Palace, Daboya.

**CONTEXT:** Mahama Safo, age fifty at the time of this interview, became the political leader of the Daboya division of the Gonja state in 1954 at the age of thirty-eight. This February 14 conversation with Glenna Case was the third of some twenty-four exchanges she had with him over the course of nine months. In this particular interview, he had become much more comfortable sharing what information he knew about the history of his polity, but like many other Gonjas he also found it difficult to acknowledge the undeniable historical reality of Gonja's subordinate status under Asante during much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this interview and in subsequent ones, he emphasized the status of Daboya as the supplier of imams to neighboring polities.

Usmanu Kamara [the Daboya name for Uthman Kamagatay or Kramo Tia] was not stolen! In the olden days the Kumasi people had their Limams from Daboya.... The Asante went to the Gbuipewura to ask him for a Limam. Then the Guipewura also sent a message to ... tell the Wasipewura he should give a Limam to him to give to the Asante ... then a Limam [was] sent to the Guipewura to be sent to the Asante.

**IMAMU AL-HAJI HAMADU B. ZAKARIA, LIMAM OF DABOYA:** Interview by Glenna Case with Ahmed A. Mahama, June 6, 1976, Limampe Ward of Daboya.

**CONTEXT:** In this thirteenth of twenty-one interviews with Glenna Case, Zakaria emphasized, as had the Wasipewura, Mahama Safo II, the existence of a relationship between equals as it pertained to Gonja-Asante relations. Equally important to Zakaria was the fact that Daboya was the source of so many of the imams who served in other polities in the region.

I have no knowledge of Daboya being under the Asante, but the relationship that existed between them was because of the salt from Daboya and the kola nuts from Asante. Asante brought Kola to this place for the exchange of salt. Also if they needed *mallams* they came to Daboya. Were it not for the *mallams* of Daboya all of the surrounding area would have no *mallams*.

<sup>17</sup> Akosua Perbi, "Mobility in Pre-colonial Asante from a Historical Perspective," *Research Review*, NS 7: 1-2 (1991), 72-86.

<sup>18</sup> Case, Wasipe.

### 3. Traditions maintained by Kramo Tia's Descendants

**AL-HAJJ SUMAILA B. MUMUMI, ASANTE-NKRAMO IMAM, AND MALAM IMORU B. BUKARI**, other elders of the skin (symbol of office): Interview by Ivor Wilks, August 3, 1965, Kumase.<sup>19</sup>

**CONTEXT:** This interview, conducted by Ivor Wilks and J. Agyeman-Duah, took place in Kumase and was organized with the *imam* of the Asante Muslim community. Although quite a few individuals were present, Wilks indicates that “Malam Imoru was the principle speaker.” The purpose of the interview was to obtain information about the Asante Muslim community.

Kramo Tia came to Kumase at the time of Nana Kwaku Dua I [1834–1867]. He was from the house of the Daboya Limam. He was the Limam of Daboya. His true name was Uthman, and he used the *nasab* Kamaghatay.... The reason why Kramo Tia came to Kumase is this. The Chief of Daboya (Daboyahene) made himself a gold calabash. The Asantehene considered this improper, and sent three chiefs to the Chief of Daboya, namely Asamoa Nkwanta, Domfe Kyewa, and Apeagyei. They were ordered to bring the golden calabash to Kumase. Kramo Tia was then the Imam of Daboya. The wife of Kramo Tia was named Wurikye. She was the queenmother of Daboya (Daboyahemaa) and the sister of the chief of Daboya. The chief of Daboya was arrested and taken to Kumase. His sister Wurikye went with him. So Kramo Tia decided that he would also go to Kumase to accompany his wife. The Asantehene questioned the Chief of Daboya about Kramo Tia, and the chief of Daboya explained that Kramo Tia was a very powerful *mallam*. This was accepted, and Kramo Tia was asked to stay in Kumase.

**AL-HAJJ SULAYMAN:** Interviewed by Thomas James Lewin, July 10, 1970, Kumase.<sup>20</sup>

**CONTEXT:** Al-Hajj Sulayman, who was between eighty and ninety years of age at the time of this interview, had met with Thomas Lewin three previous times to discuss various aspects of the history of Asante. In this fourth interview, Al-Hajj Sulayman discussed his own family background. He had four wives and had made the *hajj* in 1949. He had studied with a number of Islamic teachers in Kumase, but had to end his educational training prematurely because of financial difficulties. Thereafter he pursued tailoring as his profession. In this interview, he drew on the family knowledge he had acquired as a grandson of Kramo Tia. Mentioned as well were the discursive norms that governed discussions in Asante about slave origins and his own experience as a debt pawn.

My grandfather's name was Osumana, nicknamed Kramotia. Kramotia was born in Buipe ... in Gonja. He was brought to Kumase from Daboya by the Asantehene. Kramotia was a special *malam* for the Daboya chief before he was brought to Kumase ...

Kramotia had the office of leader of the Muslim community in Asante. Abu Bakr [Kramotia's son and my father] succeeded Kramotia ... Abu Bakr prayed for the Asantehene. This was his work.... Every Friday he prayed for the Asantehene. Abu Bakr took over from his father, Kramotia ... I saw Kramotia when he was a very old man.... Every Friday Kramotia was carried to the Asantehene's palace on my and others' shoulders. Kramotia was then too old to walk ...

<sup>19</sup> Wilks, *Conversations about the Past*.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas James Lewin, *The Structure of Political Conflict in Asante, 1875–1900. Volume II – Asante Field Texts* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1974), 65–75.

[Like his father, Kramo Tia], Abu Bakr also received slaves from the yearly tribute given to the Asantehene. Every year, one thousand slaves [men and women] were given to the Asantehene. Abu Bakr received five from the one thousand. The Asantehene's representative was stationed at Salaga [a major slave market in the polity of Gonja to the north of Asante]. He made sure that the Asantehene got one thousand slaves yearly [as tribute]. This happened during the time of Kwaku Dua I [1834–1867].

The area from the present army barracks [in Kumase] to Kwadaso had nine ... huts for farming.... Seven or eight people stayed in one such [hut]. All the people there were Abu Bakr's slaves. Abu Bakr took them over from Kramotia, who had them first. The slaves paid in yams, eggs, fowls, goats, plantains, and other farm goods. Kramotia did not get [this] land from the Asantehene. He had money and developed the land. He put his slaves to work on this land. Anybody with money could stay anywhere in Kumase. Only slaves lived in these nine [farm huts]. Around forty people lived there in all. The slaves were taken from different tribes. Mossi men married Dagomba women, Dagartis married Mossis, etc .... Abu Bakr gave the women that were brought to the men slaves without wives. A child of two slaves was Abu Bakr's. Abu Bakr's first two wives were from Buna. They were not slaves. His other four wives were slaves. They lived in the nine [farm huts]. Any man with money could buy slaves in Salaga. Slaves were bought with kola nuts in Salaga. The slave cost more in Kumase than in Salaga. A man examined the feet to find if a slave was healthy: thin feet and ankles meant he was healthy; round feet and ankles meant he was not healthy. A slave cost 15 shillings, 18 shillings, one British pound. The cost depended on whether the slave was strong ...

In the old days, it was hard to find out a person's place of origin. It was disrespectful to ask old people about their origins. It is not right to talk about origins in Asante.... The last four wives of Abu Bakr were brought to Asante as slaves ... but once married they became Asantes. My mother was a slave. I myself was sold for eight pounds during the Yaa Asantewaa War [1896]. [My father], Abu Bakr [had been] caught by the British during the Yaa Asantewaa War. One hundred pounds was paid by some elderly persons in Kumase and some Asante chiefs to free him. I myself was sold for eight pounds. Others were sold for the rest of the one hundred pounds. My own brothers took me to a wealthy Asante to get the money to free Abu Bakr from prison. I served beyond Kwadaso. I farmed and carried foodstuffs to Kumase. Food only sold here for three or four pence. At times the food had to be left behind because people did not buy it. For seven years I served at Ohwinase. A woman, Akosua Owusuwaa, bought me. She is now dead. Her son, named Kwaku Dua, is still alive. He is a Muslim. His Muslim name is Seidu. At the end of the seven years, I was freed when my elder brothers got the eight pounds.

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### “The Little Things that Would Please Your Heart...”

Enslavement and Slavery in the Narrative of Al Haji  
Bakoyo Suso (The Gambia)

ALICE BELLAGAMBA

Bakoyo Suso is a *jaloo* (the Mandinka term commonly translated as bard or griot).<sup>1</sup> In other words, he belongs to one of three main social categories that Mandinka culture recognizes as part of its historical legacy: freeborn, professional endogamous groups (bards and praise-singers, also known as griots – sing. *jaloo*, plur. *jali*; blacksmiths – sing. *numoo*, plur. *numoolo*; leatherworkers – sing. *karangkewoo*, plur. *karangkewoolu*) and descendants of slaves.<sup>2</sup> In the past, each category had its internal articulations. Freeborn could be part of the ruling class or commoners devoted to trade, farming, cattle-rearing, and Islamic studies. The *jali* specialized as oral historians, musicians, and praise-singers but also as hunter-bards, singers, and drummers for the youth and the elders. Their ability to enchant their audience with the deeds of past heroes stands as a living symbol of the way Africans preserved their historical memory through oral performances.<sup>3</sup>

In 2000, while carrying out fieldwork on memories of slavery and the slave trade along the River Gambia, I invited Bakoyo, whose historical ability I long knew, to talk about these topics. At first, he showed surprise, slavery not being something easily discussed in the Gambia. People and scholars used to approach him to inquire about the great leaders of the precolonial past or to know where their ancestors hailed from and how they became part of the Gambia River elite of warriors, chiefs, notables, and religious scholars. After a while, however, Bakoyo agreed. In 1996, the government of the Gambia established the Roots Homecoming Festival, a development aimed at attracting African-American tourists through the celebration of the connections between the river and the Americas created by

<sup>1</sup> “Griot” is a French-derived term for the ancient hereditary occupational class of the *jali*. T. Hale, *Griots and Griottes* (Ohio, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> In Mandinka, the slave is *jongo* (plural *jongolu*). Today, such term is not frequently used to talk of descendants of slaves, whose origins are often hidden under the more generic etiquette of *korewo* (member of the family but also herd of cattle) or *nyamaloo*. The last term refers to members of professional endogamous groups, which might be of free origins, like Bakoyo, or descendants of slaves originally given to the *nyamaloo* as compensation. The inclusion in this category of all descendants of slaves is a matter of courtesy, which amounts to the overlapping of some of the *nyamaloo*'s ceremonial tasks (like slaughtering animals) with those of descendants of slaves.

<sup>3</sup> Ethnographic and historical literature illustrates the *jali*'s ability to cope with the requests of new national and international markets, which since the 1960s and 1970s have profoundly transformed the context of their artistic production.

Bakoyo Suso, recorded by Alice Bellagamba and Bakary Sidibe, Dippakunda, The Gambia, May 2, 2000. Transcription and translation of Isatou Conteh.

the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>4</sup> Like other *jali*, Bakoyo felt marginalized. In spite of his reputation as oral historian, no government official ever contacted him, nor was he invited to contribute to the initiative. My request offered him a chance to display the density and depth of his knowledge in front of an audience of friends and acquaintances, which on that day followed his performance.

Unlike the other elders I met over the years, he did not talk in general and normative terms. Instead, he took specific historical episodes from his repertory of oral traditions on the nineteenth-century history of the River Gambia and used this reservoir of representations and meanings to illustrate details of enslavement, the slave trade, and life in slavery.

This chapter presents an extract from the resulting narrative. As it often happens with oral traditions, the text requires a lot of background knowledge to be understood. Bakoyo uses a language full of idiomatic expressions, names, and historical references – which today are unfamiliar to the majority of young Gambians (but not to men and women of his generation) – to touch on issues of contemporary moral and social significance. Is it fair to enslave other human beings? Could the slave descendant ever make others forget his or her origins? Without losing sight of the original narrative order, I divided the text into paragraphs preceded by a short comment, which helps further contextualize their historical content. Footnotes identify the major localities and historical characters, and help put Bakoyo's account into a dialogue with colonial records and Senegambian historical literature.

## SOME BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bakoyo was born in Eastern Gambia in the 1930s. By then, the Gambia was a British colony and protectorate.<sup>5</sup> The legal status of slavery had been formally abolished in 1930, after two ordinances (enacted respectively in 1894 and 1906) closed the traffic in slaves and opened opportunities for the emancipation of bonded men and women.<sup>6</sup> At the time of Bakoyo's birth, relationships between former masters and their ex-slaves were rapidly

<sup>4</sup> A. Bellagamba, "Back to the Land of Roots. African American Tourism and the Cultural Heritage of the River Gambia," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Special Issue: "Creating Tourism Out of Culture," XLIX (1–2): 193–194 (2009), 453–476.

<sup>5</sup> British presence along the River Gambia dates back to the sixteenth century and to the involvement of British traders in the Atlantic slave trade. In 1816, Great Britain consolidated its political influence by founding Bathurst, a military and mercantile settlement at the mouth of the river meant to be a base for patrolling the coast against the traffic in slaves, which the British Parliament had outlawed in 1807. After independence (1965), Bathurst became Banjul, the capital of the Gambia. In 1823, the government established the settlement of McCarthy Island, which lies about 300 kilometers inland from the coast. In the next decades, Bathurst and McCarthy Island hosted thousands of liberated Africans (locally known as *Aku*) displaced from Sierra Leone to the Gambia. The colony of the Gambia, which included Bathurst and the immediately adjacent mainland, came officially into being in 1888. By the end of 1892, the administrator of the colony began the creation of a protectorate, which was completed in 1901 when British rule was extended to Eastern Gambia. M. Gray, *A History of The Gambia* (London, 1966); B. Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> For a comparative analysis of the process of emancipation in French West Africa and the Gambia see M. Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge, 1998); P. Weil, "Slavery, Groundnuts, and European Capitalism in the Wuli Kingdom of Senegambia, 1820–1930," *Research in Economic Anthropology*, 6 (1984), 77–119; A. Bellagamba, "Slavery and Emancipation in the Colonial Archives: British Officials, Slave Owners, and Slaves in the Protectorate of the Gambia (1890–1936)," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 39:1 (2005), 5–41.

changing. Former slaves sought recognition and rights; former masters insisted on rank and social discrimination. Groundnut commercial cultivation was the backbone of the rural economy.<sup>7</sup>

Bakoyo's family engaged in farming and trade while also offering their services as bards to the rural elite. Chiefs, traders, and cattle-owners retained the resources to promote the *jali* as artists and oral historians. Listening to a *jaloo*, who sang the epic of pre-colonial warriors and rulers and publicly praised the deeds of the contemporary elite, was a common and greatly appreciated form of entertainment. Such performances enhanced reputations and social identities. Bakoyo was socialized in this kind of environment. He saw his mother praising the big traders and their wives while former slaves danced for their masters. He attended the public performances of the most famous artists of the time, men like Jali Fode, who during and after World War II toured the major settlements along the River Gambia and sang about events taking place in other parts of the world. "Hitler said: I will take afternoon tea in London" was one of Demba Camara's songs, another famous performer of the time.

Bakoyo was also associated with Bamba Suso, who was one of the first *jali* to be recorded by the newly established national Radio Gambia in the early 1960s. Bamba's historical repertory included the epic of Sunjata Keita and the oral traditions of the major precolonial polities along the River.<sup>8</sup> Because of this background, Bakoyo has become a well-respected oral historian. Before independence, he migrated to the outskirts of the capital city of Banjul, where he performed for the emerging national political elite, businessmen, and high-ranking civil servants. As a young man, he sang and played the kora (the harp-lute used to accompany Mandinka *jali* oral performances). His compound was a long-important meeting point for Mandinka intellectuals and professionals, who visited Bakoyo to participate in lively political and historical discussions. Youth attended as well. The fact that he knows so much about slavery is in itself indicative of the enduring significance of the past associated with slavery and the slave trade in the contemporary Gambia. Like most of the *jali*, he did not expose the social origins of groups and individuals historically associated with him and his family. When I asked about the slave entourage of Alpha Molo Baldeh and Mussa Molo Baldeh of Fuladu, two of the war leaders of the second part of the nineteenth century with whom Bakoyo's family is connected,<sup>9</sup> he replied by quoting a famous statement of Jali Fode: "I have something in my head which is too big for my mouth" – in other words, I know more than what I am going to disclose (see Narrative 6). I assume this elegant mixture of revelation and silence is precisely what kept the audience

<sup>7</sup> K. Swindell and A. Jeng, *Migrants, Credit and Climate: The Gambian Groundnut Trade, 1834–1934* (Leiden and Boston, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Mande oral traditions celebrate Sunjata Keita as the founder of the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century. Some of Bamba Suso's recordings were published. See G. Innes *Sunjata: Three Mandinka Versions* (London, 1974) and B. Suso and B. Kanute, *Sunjata* (London, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Fuladu was one of the major polities of late-nineteenth-century Senegambia. Its influence stretched from the middle and upper Gambia down to Guinea Bissau. Alpha Molo Baldeh established the kingdom and ruled from about 1865 to 1881. The son Mussa Moloh took the leadership of Fuladu in the early 1890s and maintained it until colonization. See C. Quinn, "A Nineteenth Century Fulbe State," *Journal of African History*, 12:3 (1971), 427–440. An ancestor of the Suso *jali* associated himself to Alpha Moloh, when he had yet to become a successful military leader. G. Innes, *Kaabu and Fuladu: Historical Narratives of the Gambian Mandinka* (London, 1976). A consistent collection of oral traditions on Fuladu, recorded during the 1970s and early 1980s, is available in the archives of the Research and Documentation Division, National Council for Arts and Culture, Banjul, The Gambia.



fascinated and attentive while Bakoyo performed his narrative. The past is a battleground, and everybody admired his ability to cast light on some of the saddest turns of the river history without underrating the humanity and suffering of the men and women involved.

## WHERE IS THE SLAVES' VOICE?

When Bakoyo ended his narrative, some of his friends and acquaintances prompted a discussion by reminding him that his family also owned slaves. Everybody knew that in the past, patrons compensated their *jali* with slaves. This happened also to Bakoyo's ancestors.

In the masters' eyes, slaves were dependants, people unable to take care of themselves and quick to exploit the situations out of which they could gain some material rewards. Is it therefore possible to retrieve the voice of the enslaved from Bakoyo's account? Is not his narrative but another expression of the masters' ideology that silenced the slaves?

I believe it is not. Slaves' voices whisper through the recollections of this former master. Bakoyo unveiled the role of rulers and merchants in the slave trade (Narrative 1). Slaves' subordination is explained by quoting examples from daily life (Narrative 4). The text details how their subjection to masters was reversed in the ritual space of public ceremonies. For one day, slaves took the stage and could publicly mock those masters who did not act generously. The slaves sang and begged so as to make the master ashamed (Narrative 4). There is agency in this picture as much as the recognition of interdependence between masters and slaves. Slaves' initiatives emerge through Bakoyo's description of their efforts to work once a week on their personal fields in order to improve their conditions and strive for the little things "that would please your heart" and make life bearable. The crucial role they played in the reproduction of their masters' social world is illustrated by the care they took in supervising their masters' children during the circumcision ceremony (Narrative 4). Their own children, instead, belonged to the master of the mother, and could be disposed of at his/her will. Bakoyo stressed that this lack of control of their offspring was one of the major deprivations slaves experienced. In the midst of a society that considered large families a major attribute of freeborn elderly men and women's identity, slaves often aged alone. After a life spent taking care of others, their time to be cared for never materialized.

The story of Momadou Fatima Jawla, who was the son of a slave woman and also a renowned military leader of the late nineteenth century, is touching (Narrative 7; Narrative 8). Momadou was never integrated into the Jawla family at the same rank as his freeborn brothers and sisters. He fought and brought the booty to his elder brother time and again but in the end he had to realize that the brother never truly respected him.<sup>10</sup> Even after the official abolition of slavery in 1930, remarks Bakoyo (Narrative 9), slaves obtained full recognition in the eyes of their former masters only by accepting the redemption rules that masters themselves established. The account closes with a few remarks about the resilience of the social stigma associated with slave origins in contemporary Gambia.

<sup>10</sup> B. Sidibé, *A Brief History of Kaabu and Fuladu (1300–1930). A Narrative Based on Some Oral Traditions of the Senegambia (West Africa)* (Torino, 2004), 87 and ff.



## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What does Bakoyo's narrative tell us about the continuation of the traffic in slaves out of the British settlement of Bathurst in the course of the nineteenth century?
2. How were people enslaved and who were the major actors at play?
3. How did the slave Mamadi Manyang acquire a social position?
4. What role did the slaves play in the ceremonial lives of their masters?
5. Can you figure out why Bakoyo wants to underline by quoting the proverb: "slavery, only a bad slave disowns it"?
6. What does the story of Momadou Fatima Jawla teach us about slaves who dared to rebel against their masters?
7. What is Bakoyo's opinion on slavery?
8. What is the relevance of Bakoyo's account for the history of slavery along the River Gambia, and for the general understanding of slavery as an institution?

### 1. "Let me first explain how this land was ..."

Bakoyo's starting point is the mid-nineteenth century, as shown by some of the historical figures he mentions, like Mansa Demba Koro, who ruled the North Bank state of Niumi in the 1850s.<sup>11</sup> Raids, war, and the combined interests in slaves by external (the white man) and internal (big merchants, warlords, and religious scholars) forces made life perilous. This epoch of chaos and social disruption bequeathed contemporary Gambian society and culture with the shared idea that power always entails abuse and violence. The term "soninké," which recurs in the narrative, identifies the pagan ruling elite of the River Gambia. "Marabout" stands for the Islamic reformers and leaders, who successfully struggled to achieve political supremacy in this historical period. Military confrontations between the "soninké" and the "marabout" fed the internal traffic in slaves for several decades. This traffic, in turn, existed in response to the hunger for labor spurred by the expansion of commercial groundnut cultivation in the Senegambia region after the 1830s.<sup>12</sup> There is not enough evidence to state whether the events mentioned really took place although Bakoyo's narrative evokes the major phases in the history of the traffic in slaves, and of its abolition along the river Gambia.

The first person mentioned in the story is Findy, whom Bakoyo describes as a white slave dealer. He was probably a representative of the mulatto or African population of Bathurst whose lifestyle mimicked that of the Europeans.<sup>13</sup> At the time, British legislation outlawing the traffic in slaves was effective only within the restricted boundaries of British jurisdiction: in Bathurst, the immediately adjacent mainland (known as the Ceded Mile on

<sup>11</sup> D. Wright, *The World and Very Small Place in Africa* (Armonk, NY, 2004), reconstructs the precolonial and colonial history of the kingdom of Niumi, which was located at the mouth of the River Gambia.

<sup>12</sup> M. Klein, "Social and Economic Factors in the Muslim Revolution in Senegambia," *Journal of African History*, 8:3 (1972), 419–441; C. Quinn, *Mandinko Kingdoms of the Senegambia* (Madison, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Bakoyo's Findy could be the son of Col. Alexander Findlay (the first Lieutenant-Governor of the Gambia, who was also called Alexander), or the colonial engineer James Finden who had a compound in Jeshwang in the 1850s (see J. M. Gray, *A History*, 391) and became the head of the Gambian militia in the 1860s. Another possibility is the trader of Ibo descent and leader of the liberated Africans' community in Bathurst, Harry Finden. A. Hughes and D. Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia (1816–1994)* (Rochester, 2006), 62–63. I am grateful to David Perfect for his help in clarifying this point.

the north bank and British Kombo on the south one), and MacCarthy Island. Immediately outside these enclaves, the slave trade was endemic, and British documents clearly describe the involvement of the Bathurst mercantile community and its African associates.<sup>14</sup>

After Findy, the slave Mamadi Manyang is introduced. His story speaks of the movement of people between the Upper River Gambia and the Atlantic coast in the course of the second half of the nineteenth century. The master, whose surname was Ceesay, probably belonged to one of the trading families whose commercial connections linked the River Gambia to contemporary Eastern Senegal, Mali, and Guinea.

I will narrate what I heard from our elders and what I can remember of it.<sup>15</sup> Slaves left from the River Gambia for the white man's land. What I will try to tell is the history of how this happened. I will report what I heard. This is what I will narrate. Let me first explain how this land was, before the advent of slave trade. Then I will talk about slavery.

At that time the black race was pagan. Pagans loved tobacco very much.<sup>16</sup> Tobacco formed part of our tradition, it was a worthwhile thing because it could get you a wife; whatever you desired you could obtain it if you had some tobacco.<sup>17</sup> Today, the land I am talking of is the Gambia but yesterday it was not the Gambia. They used to say the ruler of Wuli, the ruler of Niani, the ruler of Badibu, the ruler of Kiang, the ruler of Kombo, the ruler of Niumi.<sup>18</sup> Each ruler had his area. They knew about each other but they governed independently. In the beginning, the white men did not come to rule over us. They came to trade and learn about these places. There were indigenous rulers. Prosperous traders were prominent as well. They engaged in farming. Farming allowed them to acquire wealth.

Rulers were freeborn and enslaved people. If you are more powerful than someone else, you can attack him or her forcefully and take him or her away. Some rulers would get up in the morning, and would go to raid other human beings, who in turn tried to hide. They would see children whom they knew were immature; they would capture them and take them away. If there were traders around, they would leave such children with the traders. The traders would say: "these are our slaves!" As they grew up, the majority would become hard working farmers. Farming was a prosperous activity; the merchants reinvested their wealth in cattle and gold ornaments. They captured slaves in this manner. We had slavery even before the coming of the white men.

I was told about a white man called Findy, who lived in Kombo. He came to meet the ruler of Niumi, who was called Mansa Demba Koro.<sup>19</sup> Findy said to Mansa Demba Koro: "I want to buy slaves. I need your assistance in getting a place to keep them before sending them away." Mansa Demba replied: "Fine." Findy looked at all the places around Essau in proximity

<sup>14</sup> C. Quinn, "Mandinko," 139.

<sup>15</sup> This is the formulaic expression Mandinka *jali* and elderly people in general use to introduce their historical narratives.

<sup>16</sup> The Mandinka term for pagan is *soninke*, which comes from the verb "so-ni." This means "pouring libations." P. Nugent, "Cyclical History in the Gambia/Casamance Borderlands: Refuge, Settlement and Islam from c. 1880 to the Present," *Journal of African History*, 48 (2007), 221–243. Popular memory recalls the *soninke* with a mix of fear and admiration. Fear depends on their unpredictable style of rule, which in the nineteenth century relied on raids and war. Soninke rulers, however, are admired for a number of qualities which Mandinka culture for long kept in high regard: cunning and secretiveness, bravery and loyalty.

<sup>17</sup> American tobacco was one of the major imported items of trade during the nineteenth century.

<sup>18</sup> The major precolonial centralized polities of the Gambia River. See Quinn, *Mandinko*, 29 and ff.

<sup>19</sup> This is Demba Adama Sonko, who was in power in 1833. See R. W. Macklin, "Queens and Kings of Niumi," *Man* (1935), 67–68.

of the sea but they were not apt.<sup>20</sup> Findy feared that the ship could not anchor there. He returned to Mansa Demba and asked to be introduced to Mansa Suling Jatta at Busumbala, so that Mansa Suling could assist him.<sup>21</sup> Suling invited him to survey the area that is today known as Jeshwang.

In Mandinka, Jeshwang means "jong suu," the home of the slaves. A Jola<sup>22</sup> woman lived in Jeshwang but she came later. She was called Joosuwaq, but the locality is not named after her. Findy came and settled there. He was buying slaves from Niumi, Fogni, Kombo, and many other places. He built a big enclosure. He bought slaves and put them there. He would load them on the ship and carry them to the white man's land. I do not know the place where they went.

This continued for long. By then, this land produced a very sweet honey. But the white men brought sugar. Findy would supply his slaves with sugar and biscuits so that they would forget where they came from. In such a way, he would keep them quiet. He also gave them tobacco to smoke and sent tobacco as a gift for those who provided him slaves. At times, he would get slaves for free. Findy acted in such a way. But there was a ruler in the land of the white man called Queen Victoria. As she came to power, she said that slavery had to be abolished. Findy received a message via sea. He had many slaves with him on the ship. They brought the slaves back to Jeshwang. Those who knew where they came from left but those who did not know where they came from remained.<sup>23</sup>

In Bathurst, there was an Aku man called Forster.<sup>24</sup> Findy realised that the slaves in Jeshwang had become useless. He decided to leave but he left the place into the custody of the Forster family. The Forster family put a man who had come from the East to live there.<sup>25</sup> He was called Mamadi Maniyang.

Mamadi Maniyang had come to the Kombo with his master Maniyang Ceesay. Mamadi became a very big wrestler. Forster loved wrestling. Thus, he took Mamadi and adopted him.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Essau is a locality in Niumi, on the northern bank of the river, which was related to the Sonko, one of Niumi ruling families. C. Quinn, "Niumi: A Nineteenth Century Mandinko Kingdom," *Africa*, 38:4 (1968), 443–455.

<sup>21</sup> In 1840, Mansa Suling Jatta signed an agreement with the British of Bathurst for a cession of a part of his territory, which became part of British Kombo. J. M. Gray, *A History*, 367. This shows that the events narrated presumably took place in the 1830s or 1840s, at a time in which Bathurst had already been established as a military base to fight the slave trade along the river.

<sup>22</sup> The Jola (or Diola) are one of the ethnic groups of Southern Senegambia. C. Quinn, "Mandinko," 25 and ff.

<sup>23</sup> This probably involved significant incorporation of slaves into Findy's entourage, which must have used them for agricultural production. Such a practice, which was common at the height of the Atlantic slave trade, intensified with the expansion of groundnut cultivation for commercial purposes from the 1830s until the beginning of the twentieth century. See K. Swindell and A. Jeng, *Migrants*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel John Forster (c. 1830s–1906) was a prominent member of the liberated African (Aku) community of Bathurst. He traded in rice and by 1875 was one of the wealthiest men in Bathurst and played an important role in the political life of the colony of The Gambia. A. Hughes and D. Perfect, *A Political*, 67–68.

<sup>25</sup> Mamadi Manyang was a Tillibunka, which in Mandinka means "somebody from the East." In colonial correspondence, this local word indicated immigrants from the Upper Niger Valley and Eastern Senegal, which for centuries also had been the main centers of enslavement for the Senegal and Gambia rivers. In the course of the nineteenth century, the expansion of groundnut cultivation along the River Gambia attracted a steady flux of seasonal laborers and settlers, but until the end of the century, the category of Tillibunka, included also displaced persons and groups of people, fleeing the wars of Al Haji Umar Tall and of Almami Samori Toureh, as well as the slaves who were the by-products of their military campaign. P. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa. Senegambia in the Age of the Slave Trade* (Madison, 1975), 177 and ff.

<sup>26</sup> This section of Bakoyo's narrative reminds the audience that Aku personalities, who had achieved predominant positions in trade as well as in the public life of MacCarthy and Bathurst, often protected individuals