



AFRICA REMEMBERED

**Narratives by West Africans
from the Era of the Slave Trade**



Philip D. Curtin



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PREFACE

The personal narratives collected in this volume have been chosen to illustrate the African side of the Atlantic slave trade. They are therefore limited to accounts by Africans (with one exception), to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to West Africa between Senegal and Nigeria. The book's objective is to make historical sources more widely available, and this implies that the texts should be reprinted in a form as unabridged as possible. In fact, only two of the narratives represent selections from a larger whole: Chapter 2 is limited to the African portions of Olaudah Equiano's two-volume work, while Chapter 3 consists of ten representative letters selected from Philip Quaque's correspondence addressed to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. While most of the narratives have been printed in the past, they are not well known; but the chief justification for the present form of publication is to present them in the context of their time and place. Therefore, each is introduced and annotated by a specialist in the history or culture of its own particular region.

African personal and place names are found with widely inconsistent spellings, and this volume is inevitably caught in the pattern. While authorities like *Webster's Geographical Dictionary* have been followed in most cases, the spellings preferred by the editors of individual chapters sometimes appear. African political and religious titles have been italicized throughout.

The general editor wishes to express his gratitude for the cordial

cooperation of the contributors. On their behalf as well as his own he wishes to express gratitude for the financial assistance of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, through the Program in Comparative Tropical History at the University of Wisconsin. His own contributions were also supported in part by the Research Committee of the Graduate School from special funds voted by the State Legislature of Wisconsin.

P. D. C.

Dakar, Senegal

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Maps by the University of Wisconsin Cartographic Laboratory.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Atlantic slave trade was one of the greatest intercontinental migrations of world history, surpassed only by the European exodus of the nineteenth century. Today, about one-third of all people of African descent live outside of Africa—a proportion only slightly less than the equivalent one-half of all “Europeans” living outside of Europe. Yet the historical record of the slave trade remains curiously uneven. The public campaigns against it during the nineteenth century drew attention to the horrors of the trade, rather than to its mechanisms. More recent historians have examined the mechanisms, but usually only those of the European-dominated, maritime segment from the coast of Africa to the New World.

These failings of historiography are not entirely a matter of documentary survival, though European records are far more detailed for the European than for the African sectors of the trade. Records, even records left by the Europeans, do throw a good deal of light on the African trade routes and on the institutions that brought slaves to the coast for sale. Other sources are constantly being discovered in the form of local written records, oral traditions, and personal narratives.¹ But all of these sources were necessarily neglected by historians until recent years. Scattered references were unclear or hard to interpret without a thorough knowledge of African history, and

1. See, for example, D. Forde (ed.), *Efik Traders of Old Calabar* (London, 1956), containing the diary of Entera Duke, an eighteenth-century African slave trader.

concentrated research into the history of Africa has only begun in the last two decades.

The documents collected in this volume all mirror the West African slave trade from the non-European viewpoint. No collection of this kind, however, could fully represent the African aspects of the slave trade. The very nature of the trade made it unlikely that many slaves could either write or preserve detailed personal narratives of their experiences. The enslaved were necessarily non-Western in culture. Only a small minority were literate (usually in Arabic), and even they had little opportunity to produce a diary or journal. Reminiscences are more common, but they have survived only through unusual combinations of luck, European interest, and extraordinary ability on the part of the narrator himself. They are generally either the work of the fortunate few who managed to escape from slavery and obtain a Western education, or else a secondhand account as told to a European reporter.²

The nature of European curiosity has itself given a peculiar bias to the body of surviving narratives. In the eighteenth century, the romantic view of the noble savage aroused the European interest in Africans—if they were thought to have had high status in their own so-

2. In addition to the accounts reprinted below, see "Autobiography of Omar ibn Said, Slave in North Carolina, 1831," *American Historical Review*, 30:787-95 (1924); John W. Barber (ed.), *A History of the Amistad Captives . . .* (New Haven, 1840); Ottobah Cugoana, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1787); Theodore Dwight, "On the Sereculeh Nation, in Nigritia," *American Annals of Education and Instruction*, 5:451-56 (1835); T. Dwight, "The Condition and Character of Negroes in Africa," *Methodist Quarterly Review*, 46:71-90 (January 1864); T. H. Gallaudet, *A Statement with Regard to the Moorish Prince, Abdubl Rabbahman* (New York, 1826); [J. A. U. Gronniosaw], *Wondrous Grace Display'd in the Life and Conversion of James Albert Ukausaw Gronniosaw* (Leeds, 1785), other editions of which had differing titles; Menèzes de Drumond, "Lettres sur l'Afrique ancienne et moderne," *Journal des voyages*, 32:190-224 (December 1826); Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Price, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself, with a Supplement by the Editor, to Which Is Added the Narrative of Asa-Asa, a Captured African* (London, 1831); V. Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa, but Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, related by Himself* (New London, 1835); J. Washington, "Some Account of Mohammedu Sisei, A Mandingo of Nyani-Maru on the Gambia," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 8:448-54 (1838). The introduction of S. W. Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana* (London, 1854), contains brief records of some 179 cases of enslavement, which have been analyzed by P. E. Hair, "The Enslavement of Koelle's Informants," *Journal of African History*, 6:193-203 (1965). Narratives of experience in slavery, especially in the United States, are much more common. See the discussion and bibliography of Charles H. Nichols, *Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom* (Leyden, 1963).

cieties. Later, in the nineteenth century, the romantic interest in Africa was replaced by the humanitarian concern of the anti-slave-trade movement. Both motives, however, prompted Europeans not only to record slave narratives, but also to manufacture them out of whole cloth. In all, European writers probably have set down more fictitious accounts of Africans in the slave trade than the whole body of genuine narratives.

The eighteenth-century fashion was touched off in part by the noble-savage literature going back to Mrs. Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), and in part by the appearance of African "kings" at the courts of France and England. The best-known of these was "Prince Aniaba," from Assini on the present-day Ivory Coast. He was not merely received at the French court: he was baptized by Bossuet himself, with Louis XIV acting as godfather. In England, Ayuba Suleiman of Bondu, whose narrative is included in the present collection, was received at court with similar notoriety in the 1730's. The fact that Aniaba was something of an impostor, or that Ayuba was not really from the social class the English imagined, hardly mattered. Their visits struck the literary imagination, and they were soon followed by a body of frankly fictional accounts of the adventures of similar African notables. These *romans africains*, as the type was called in France, began to flourish in the middle of the eighteenth century. At first they were only faintly African—merely early romantic novels dressed up with exotic nomenclature, or labeled, as in one case, *tra-duite du monomotapien*.³

In time, however, some truth came to be mixed with the fiction. A fictionalized story of Aniaba appeared in the anonymous novel, *Histoire de Louis Anniaba, roi d'Essénie en Afrique* (1740).⁴ In addition to the genuine account of Ayuba's travels, published in 1734, elements of the story were taken over and attached to the person of another visitor from Africa. The result was a new anonymous novel, *The Royal African: or Memoirs of the Young Prince of Annamaboe* (probably 1749).⁵ At the furthest remove into the world of reality, Baron Roger's *Kélédor, histoire africaine*, of 1829,

3. R. Mercier, *L'Afrique noire dans la littérature française: Les premières images (17^e-18^e siècles)* (Dakar, 1962), pp. 29-30, 91-93, 128, 147-48, 186-92; H. Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York, 1928); W. Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1942).

4. Mercier, *L'Afrique noire*, esp. p. 30.

5. W. Sypher, "The African Prince in London," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 2:237-47 (1941), pp. 239-44.

used the vehicle of fiction to carry the results of his own ethnographic and historical research in Senegal. In this case, the accuracy of the African background measured up to the best European standards of scholarship. Even some of the dialogue between historical characters was lifted straight from Wolof oral tradition.

As fiction moved closer to fact, false narratives began to appear, representing fiction *as* fact. Both the attackers and the defenders of the slave trade depended heavily on the evidence of European slave traders. But the evidence of the slaves themselves would be still more effective in the antislavery cause. Some genuine narratives were published for this reason, but antislavery writers also invented slave narratives in the style of the *romans africains* and passed them off as the real thing. Not all of these are easily distinguished from the occasionally garbled reporting of genuine African accounts—as the introductions to the accounts that follow will show. Others, however, reported the African scene with an inaccuracy rivaling the earliest of the *romans africains*. *The Life and Adventures of Zamba, an African Negro King; and his Experiences of Slavery in South Carolina, written by Himself*⁶ is one of the more blatant forgeries. The protagonist supposedly came from the banks of the Congo, but his name (Zamba or Samba) is the ordinary name for a second-born son in Senegal, some two thousand miles away. His childhood sweetheart was called Zillah—exotic enough, but clearly Biblical and not Kikongo. In addition, the author talks about white men as *bukras*, a Jamaican word, all but unknown in the southern United States, and derived from either Efik or Ibo, languages spoken in present-day eastern Nigeria.⁷

Still another pious hoax in the antislavery cause was *A Narrative of the Travels etc. of John Ismael Augustus James, An African of the Mandingo Tribe, who was Captured, sold into Slavery, and subsequently liberated by a Benevolent English Gentlemen*.⁸ In this case, the narrator claimed to be from a Mandingo village near the coast of present-day Ghana (where no Mandingo village ever existed), and to have been captured by a raiding party of Europeans (at a period when Europeans purchased slaves, rather than capturing them). In point of accuracy, Roger's admittedly fictional *Kélédor* is far more truthful than either Zamba or James. Thus the genuine slave narra-

6. Edited by Peter Nielson (London, 1847).

7. Personal communication from Professor Frederick Cassidy, University of Wisconsin.

8. Truro, England, 1836.

tives were produced in competition with pious forgeries and fictional accounts.

They also suffer from defects that might be expected of this kind of record. Only two of the present collection were composed by the narrator himself in an African language: Ali Eisami dictated his Kanuri account to a Western linguist, while Abū Bakr al-Şiddīq wrote at least one version of his narrative in Arabic. The others are partly childhood memories of the fortunate few who managed to escape from slavery and to become literate in a Western language—like Olaudah Equiano, Samuel Crowther, and Joseph Wright. But some are accounts received by a Western amanuensis and published by him—as in the case of Ayuba Suleiman, Şāliḥ Bilālī, Osifekunde, and Wargee. Only the letters of Philip Quaque were a report of events as they happened, and in the words of the narrator himself.

Highly various circumstances of composition make the collection equally various in form of presentation, literary quality, and accuracy. As sources for history, the narratives suffer especially from two failings that are inseparable from the circumstances that led to their preservation. With the exception of Quaque's letters and Wargee's account of his travels, they are recollections of the more or less distant past—often memories of childhood, recorded after years or decades. As such, they suffer from all the possible weaknesses of human memory. In addition, many were recorded, and no doubt edited, by a Western writer who passed them through the filter of differing cultures and imperfect knowledge of a common language. Errors of transmission are therefore to be expected in accounts such as those by Ayuba Suleiman and Osifekunde. But even the Westernized narrators who wrote in English were writing for a European audience, and they took the audience into account in deciding what to tell and what to omit. Thus, even Equiano, Crowther, and Wright were subject to a kind of self-imposed censorship as they sought to explain themselves and their past to aliens of limited background.

All of these narratives nevertheless have certain redeeming features. Many are the earliest written records of the authors' homelands. All three of the Yoruba narrators (Osifekunde, Joseph Wright, and Samuel Crowther) refer to a period earlier than any detailed Western record of Yoruba. Others, while they are not the sole written source for their time and place, constitute significant additions to what is otherwise known. Ayuba Suleiman, for example,