Forty-five years ago (1965), when some of us were beginning our studies of the history of the Upper Guinea coast, there existed only a few published general histories of Guinea-Conakry or region-based models to guide us. André Arcin’s substantial works (1907 and 1911) provided original but awkward structures from which we could commence our work, but his monographs tended to be based heavily upon a colonial presence, a necessity to make sense of a complex colony, and a reliance upon oral traditions or other uncited sources, many of which could not be tested a half century later. Christopher Fyfe’s comprehensive history of Sierra Leone had just been published in 1962. Fyfe’s foremost emphasis was to chronicle the development of the Sierra Leone settlement and chart that colony’s progress, but his extensive documentation was extraordinary in that it demonstrated the clear link between the “Northern Rivers” and British enterprise from Freetown and opened Britain’s archives as sources of information about the history of these rivers in new and profound ways.
Earlier works by Lucien Marie François Famechon, Jules Machat, Fernand Rouget, Laurent Jean B. Bérenger-Férand, Ch. Bour, and others, centering upon the peoples, economies, and terrain of coastal rivers, continued to be instructive, but these authors were writing at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, and they tended to treat the histories of indigenous peoples as interesting and exotic and at the same time relatively unimportant to the colony’s regional development. Only a single serious overview, seventy pages in length and written by Jules Hubert Saint-Père, had been produced on the history of the Rio Pongo, and while it included both oral traditions and documented history, it minimized the British period which dominated the river’s commerce from 1750 to 1850. Only four studies, by Antoine Marie Jean Demougeot, A. Corre, J. Figarol, and Dr. Méo, had been written for the Rio Nunez. Little if anything had been done with respect to pre-colonial development within the Konkouré, Morebaya, Forékariah, or Melicouririvers, and where those did exist, they tended to focus upon events that explained aspects of colonial conquest, pacification, or economic transformation. In effect, those of us then carving out for ourselves sections of


coast or particular ethnic groups for analysis and historical reconstruction found it necessary to begin almost from scratch and generally with only a vague notion of where our research might lead us.\textsuperscript{6} Ours, also, was the dilemma of which model to follow: an Africa-centric approach that emphasized oral traditions and required our physical immersion among the peoples we were studying; an Atlantic-centric approach that placed its focus upon the impact of commerce and other western influences upon Africa’s development; or perhaps even a mix of the two.

My early exploratory efforts upon this section of coast were not focused originally on the Nunez and Pongo rivers, nor was it clear which model I might follow. Indeed, political events helped to shape my research and my approach when it became evident, by the mid-1960s, that tensions existing between the Republic of Guinea and the United States would make it unlikely that an American could expect to conduct research within Guinea or perhaps even to visit it. Norman Bennett and George Brooks’ work on American merchants trading in Africa and Fyfe’s documentation with respect to Sierra Leone and circumstances within its “Northern Rivers” were sufficient to suggest, however, that an archive-based and non-Africa-centric study of trade and politics in the coastal rivers would be possible, even if that were inadequate.\textsuperscript{7} In any case, it was clear that archival sources would need to be mastered if one expected to make sense of any other material found within and about these rivers. John Davidson’s thesis of the Sherbro and its hinterland (finished in 1969) provided a


\textsuperscript{7}Norman Bennett and George Brooks (ed.), \textit{New England Merchants in Africa: A History Through Documents, 1802 to 1865} (Boston, 1965); Fyfe, \textit{Sierra Leone}.
useful model, one that might be adapted to fit different conditions and events in coastal Guinea. Joseph Harris’ thesis on the Fuuta Jaloo, completed in 1965, perhaps would suffice to place events upon the coast within a larger context of interior history.8

In the winter of 1967, I spent five months combing archives and libraries that, at least then, were mostly located within London.9 My only boundaries were the current borders of Guinea/Conakry, which meant that my search covered all the rivers of coastal Guinea. At that time, there was yet no chronology of events or trends either in my mind or published with sufficiency anywhere to my knowledge. The volume of material found in records of the Colonial Office, War Office, and the Admiralty, and in missionary archives was indeed daunting and also manageable, but nearly all of it was in primary and hand-written sources. Fyfe had provided specific direction to data within those archives, but he had described events as covered in those rivers only peripherally and only sufficiently with respect to Sierra Leone history. It was in those archives that I first met fellow-dissertationists Winston McGowan and Gustav Kashope Deveneaux; all of us happened to be ordering up the same material, and we learned to share documents, leads and Insights. (I still recall the surprise and momentary shock on Winston’s face when I told him that Joe Harris had just completed a thesis on his topic.)

II

My focus upon commercial and political trends in the Nunez and Pongo rivers came gradually and only when it became unambiguous that the history of peoples in the region south of Conakry would inevitably involve a history of canoe trade up and down the coast, with prominent Mandingo and Susu lineages and rapidly expanding

Islamic influence as essential features. None of the latter could I cover adequately without reshaping my interests and conducting research in Freetown or northwestern Sierra Leone. Luckily, mine was a good choice, for unknown to me at the time, David Skinner and Allen Howard were engaged with those topics, and they would continue to publish on those matters to the present. In contrast, the Nunez and Pongo rivers segregated themselves as separate centers of significant Atlantic-based enterprises, whether those be in the slave trade or its suppression, in missionary efforts, or later in emerging legitimate commerce. I was fascinated by the number of topics and potential narratives, each of which seemed to be demanding my attention. I prodded McGowan to complete his thesis quickly—he took forever to finish (1978). Gus Deveneaux was more accommodating, finishing his writing in 1973.

Three works completed in the early 1970s profoundly influenced our view of events in the Rio Pongo. In 1970, George Brooks’ study of the activity of Yankee traders upon the west African coast and Walter Rodney’s original and impressive synthesis respecting the history of Upper Guinea were published, and these provided new insight regarding the mechanics of the slave trade and the character of Europeans, Euraficans, and Africans who were so involved. Both authors placed events in the Pongo within a larger landscape of Atlantic-basin and coast-specific history, and they identified trends or patterns that could be tested within the context of more specific


11 See my thesis, page 302 (accessible at http://yorku.ca/tubman/Publications/SHADD/Documents/Mouser/index.html) for a list of Fula rulers provided to me by McGowan during this period.
loca
tional events.\textsuperscript{12} Two years later, Stiv Jakobsson’s important and comprehensive study of early British missionary efforts in west Africa was published, and in this work, Jakobsson reached conclusions about Church Missionary Society efforts in the Pongo (1808-1817) that still need to be tested.\textsuperscript{13}

Other but unpublished materials that were unknown to me at the time, included the research being carried out by Bela Vassady Jr., upon missionary activities from the West Indies that maintained schools and missions in the Pongo after the mid-century and more recently by Wabinte Wariboko’s treatment of that group’s activities in the Pongo and in southeastern Nigeria.\textsuperscript{14} Ten Guinean scholars, Mahawa Bangura, Mamadou Diallo, Oumar Dieng, Charles Sorry, Georges Sorry, Oumar Sow, Nabi Musa Suma, Mouctar Sylla, Boubakar Ba, and Aliu Wann at the University of Conakry, in the 1970s were completing theses on aspects of coastal and Pongo related history. Most of these relied heavily upon published French materials and upon oral traditions collected along the coast. None of these have been tested for accuracy.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, I place my own thesis, com-


pleted in 1972, in the same category - there has yet to be a systematic test given to its conclusions. In the thirty plus years that followed these original works, there seems to have been no attempt to integrate existing research or to produce a new and comprehensive synthesis of Pongo history. I assume that most of us were busy earning a living. I nibbled at the edges of Pongo history occasionally, but my primary interests during those years lie with detailed transcriptions and annotations of several lengthy reports written by traders, missionaries, and colonial officials regarding circumstances and events in the “Northern Rivers,” especially in the period when these rivers were most under American and British influence.16


The mid to late 1980s brought a flurry of curiosity to events within the Rio Pongo. Victoria Coifman expanded her Senegal-based interests southward to the Pongo, as did Daniel Schafer. These authors were primarily focused upon American, EurAfrican, and European families that were active within the Atlantic-basin, whether in Africa or in America, and both stretched our Pongo borders to include Liverpool, Florida, and South Carolina as part of reciprocal diasporan expansion. Odile Goerg’s contributions respecting the


slave trade and its connection to circumstances within the Fuuta Jaloo furthered our understanding of that commerce. Martin Klein’s work respecting slavery, the slave trade, and slave insurrections added significantly to our consideration of underlying social forces at work in the rivers. Marie-Christine Cormier-Salem’s recent monumental work on the physical setting of coastal rivers drew our attention to the influence of geography to the character of the Pongo. New work being conducted by numerous persons up and down the coast and that focus on changes within stateless societies prior to imperial conquest or with resistance to slavery have advanced our respect for new methods of analysis. Within the Pongo region, original research conducted by Ramon Sarró, David Berliner, and Mohamed N’Daou on the Baga peoples, Odile Passavant and Saliou Sampil on the Naloe people, Edda Fields-Black on linguistics and rice culture, and Judith Carney on black rice have all helped to increase our knowledge of trends in the river, as also have the works of Paul Hair, Marie Yvonne Curtis, and Frederick Lamp. My own 2008, and his data was not kept. This can be the fate of much research, especially for those of us who began our studies in the 1960s. I would hope that we would produce a network to make sure that data not disappear. It was hard enough finding it the first time.


work in recent years has continued to focus mainly upon transcription and annotation of texts that improve our own understanding of underlying forces operating within the slave trade and of descriptions of Pongo peoples as described by travelers and missionaries who visited the rivers in the early nineteenth century.21

By far, however, the most important new synthesis of the history of this section of coast, especially with respect to its interpretation of the Pongo as a part of a larger regional history, is that put forward by Boubacar Barry in 1988, a work that was translated into English in 1997.22 I recall traveling to Decorah, Iowa, in the early 1980s to attend a lecture delivered by Barry, and I was intrigued and later amused when he kept mentioning an author named Musa, whom I had never heard of. Indeed, Musa seemed to be writing precisely on topics that I had covered in my thesis or publications.23 After an embarrassing lapse of perhaps ten minutes, it became clear that Musa

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was me, with an understandable mispronunciation that I had encountered frequently elsewhere on the African coast. When studying Barry’s 1988 work and the 1997 translation, however, I was struck by the fact that while Barry had accepted much of my reconstruction of events upon the coast, he had reached conclusions that varied significantly in places from my own.

In 2000, a cooperative research project from a Conakry-base and led by Maladho Baldé and Aboubacar Touré of the History Department of the University of Conakry, with the collaboration of Victoria Coifman (University of Minnesota) was formed and carried out preliminary research in the Pongo. Another on-site study was conducted in 2006 by a group from the University of South Carolina, led by Kenneth Kelly, in cooperation with the University of Conakry, the Ministry of Tourism, Fondation Internationale de la Solidarité (Fondis), and the Musée National in Conakry. Even the University of Charleston, South Carolina, sent student groups to the Pongo, reportedly to collect oral traditions and conduct archeological surveys. The number of participants collecting data and investigating historical sites is indeed impressive, although a bit puzzling. Essentially, the objectives of all of these efforts have been to identify, inventory, protect, and salvage existing sites and materials and to collect data and traditions/stories/genealogies before they are corrupted or removed/lost.

III

The question at hand, however, is whether we are ready to produce a new and comprehensive synthesis of Pongo history. Is it possible to

produce a blend that gives sufficient attention to the Africa-centric and the Atlantic-centric models, both of which approach the coast with different objectives and from different perspectives? My answer in 2003 when I presented a paper on this topic at the Boston ASA annual meeting was that we should begin to work toward a synthesis, if only to avoid the error of doing nothing and missing an opportunity encouraged by developing interest. Opportunities come and go, often with little encouragement. What a difference seven years have made. Recent events along this coast, while lamentable and discouraging, have focused world attention to the problems of civil unrest and of reconciliation, nation building, and social and structural instability in a zone stretching from Guinea-Bissau to Côte d’Ivoire.\textsuperscript{25} Attention attracts funding that inevitably will be spent in one or another way. Indeed, continuing designation of the slave route between Timbo and the coast at the Rio Pongo as worthy for recognition as a world heritage site should add further immediacy and interest to the region, if for no reason other than its potential and merit for funding. This is also one of the few areas of the African coast about which aspects of its collective history can be researched on four continents. As we make that attempt, several topics come to mind that need attention contiguous to this synthesis. This list of topic suggestions (the ten most important in my estimation) might also encourage younger (and older) scholars to invest in the history of the Pongo.

\textit{Family histories}—Many influential African and EurAfrican families in the Rio Pongo date to the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and their genealogies cross both the British and French periods. Many of these lineages are well grounded in foreign archives; but often there is a lack of connection in records, partly a consequence of changing names and methods of recording. That is made more complicated by a modified family system with multiple wives and subordinate branches. Some EurAfrican families also had branches living in Africa, North America, and England as early as 1800. In effect, lineage reconstruction (through use of family traditions and British,\textsuperscript{25}See Jacqueline Knörr, and Wilson Trajano-Filho (ed.), \textit{Powerful Presence of the Past. Integration and Conflict along the Upper Guinea Coast} (Leiden, 2010).
French, and even American sources) should be possible, although reconstruction needs to be approached cautiously to avoid coaching respondents and forcing linkages to existing archival data. That is particularly true for those who are assigned to collect information from family members. In the Pongo, knowledge represents power, and information about one’s family is personal and very private. Data collected in archives is a very different sort. Ideally, someone (or body) that is sensitive to local practice and to the feelings of families whose roots may date to the slave trading period, and that has experience in data collection of this type should be identified. And, ideally, that person or body should act as a central gathering point for all genealogical data being collected. My concern is that ill-prepared and well-meaning persons will spoil the project if not trained to ask questions carefully and to follow locally acceptable protocols. Family record-keepers who “know” their history and who are always leery of outsiders’ motives may well refuse to participate with questioners who ask uninformed questions or may simply provide incorrect answers. I can easily imagine the thoughts of an elder who learns that he is about to be quizzed for the fourth time by a student.

_Missionary history_—Three missionary groups were active in the Rio Pongo during the nineteenth century. a) Records of the Church Missionary Society’s activities at the beginning of that century are particular rich in data about families, economy, and political transformation. Someone or persons need to search through that data for information of several distinct types. The story of the mission, its activities/success/failures, and its impact upon local peoples needs to be evaluated in itself, as a separate topic altogether. That has not yet been attempted, although Jakobsson made an admirable first effort in the early 1970s. Children belonging to important families in the Pongo, and some subordinate branches as well, attended CMS schools. Their families interacted in significant ways with the society, and often CMS records detail family connections, genealogies, and activities. Another topic from CMS reports would include a description of local economy at a time when the Pongo was undergoing a significant transformation when slave trading became illegal.
b). A second missionary group, the West Indian Church (Barbados), arrived in the river in the mid-1850s. Hand-written reports from that missionary effort no longer exist, but published notes in that society’s magazines and journals contain detail, although not to the degree available in CMS records, that should be digested more systematically that has been attempted. Vassady’s thesis should be sufficient as a guide to that material. c). A third and certainly the most enduring missionary effort was that carried out by the Congrégation du Saint Esprit, an order which established its main center at Boffa, the region’s administrative center, at the beginning of the French period. The records of that society are extensive, are only now being used, and surely deserve thorough study.26 It is clear, however, that persons associated with that mission were active in historical site preservation and description and in genealogical reconstruction, among other things.

By looking closely at the records of these separate missions, it should be possible to track lineages and lineage transformations, commercial transformation, and political trends. The history of each missionary effort also is a worthy topic for investigation.

There is also an interesting history of religious communities in the Pongo, whether those be linked to Church of England, Roman Catholic, or Barbadian Christian groups or to Islamic ones. These communities have played prominent roles during specific periods, whether to accommodate to changes being imposed from the outside or to oppose external influence in the period leading up to independence.

_Fula connection_—Barry’s synthesis demands testing. That may require the involvement of someone well-versed in Fula history and major trends between the interior and the coast, perhaps Barry himself. Barry’s treatment, and indirectly that of McGowan’s, suggests a strong Fula presence within the Pongo from the end of the eighteenth century. That interpretation seems logical and convincing, but it

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26 Archive du Saint Esprit, Chevilly-Larue, France. Sarro, Coifman, and Curtis have used these archives, and select documents have been published in [Père] Gérard Vieira, _Sous le Signe du Laïcat: L’église Catholique en Guinée_ (Dakar, 1992).
remains uncertain to me that that view can be substantiated by documented evidence from the coast. Barry’s interpretation needs to be verified sooner rather than later, before it becomes accepted as an indisputable and integral part of Pongo history. My fear is that we may soon miss that window of opportunity, if we do not act quickly. On the other hand, his synthesis may be correct, but we need to know that for certain also.

*LusoAfricans*—From the eighteenth century, important LusoAfrican families have played significant roles within the Rio Pongo, and more particularly in that part of the river extending southward toward Bouramaya on the Konkouré River. These families, who still reside in the area, set a model for integration and synthesis with local Baga and Susu peoples and formed ruling dynasties that survive in church, economy, and politics. These families interlocked through marriage with the Ormonds, Lightbournes, Wilkinsons, Fabers, Curtises, and Harrisons (I suspect many more) and formed large corporations of interest that continued into the colonial period and, even now, exercise vast influence within coastal Guinea. A thorough study of these LusoAfrican and EurAfrican families is crucial to our understanding of power within that section of the Pongo. Brooks’ recent work on EurAfricans provides a beginning, and we trust that he carries that study to the present.27 In any case, data collection and analysis must proceed swiftly, before it is lost.

*Oral tradition collection*—Someone with training in collection and use of oral data needs to look closely at traditions recorded by Arcin and Saint-Père, the Spiritan Fathers in the 1860-1930 period, and Guinean writers in the 1970s to determine where to begin or continue systematic collection and preservation. I am likely the last person to consult on how to proceed in this matter. Nevertheless, it seems to me that there now exists sufficient material, already in print, that needs to be reconciled or interpreted, and new avenues of

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research established for filling gaps or dealing with contradictions where those occur. In effect, oral traditions ought to be useful and used. They also need to be understood and explained, before those of us who are not trained to deal with oral traditions misuse them and – through our writing – give a degree of permanence and importance to narratives that may not stand the test of time.

*Town histories* — Many towns in the Pongo region date to the eighteenth century and to the slave trading past. Suffice it to say here that there is ample room for town histories. Ideally, someone with experience in researching and writing town history should be identified and given an advisory (perhaps supervisory) role for those working in the field. One would hope that attempts to collect information about towns and interview villagers would be coordinated in some fashion and that villagers not become discouraged by competing projects. Whether town residents would cooperate on the short term with an outside data collector is another matter that needs to be resolved before such research should be undertaken. Certainly town history would include a comprehensive study of terrain and soil types, the impact of rivers, tides and inundation, elevation, wildlife, economy, and other considerations that might influence a town’s location and its development. A side benefit may come with identification of voluntary associations, town quarters, and religious groups. It will be difficult to guide informants away from a natural tendency to justify control by particular families or lineages.

*Historical site identification and preservation* — It is my understanding that much of the work commenced by the 2000 and 2006 collection efforts has been involved in this effort. From my vantage, this should include towns or town sites (even if they no longer exist), forts, barracoons, wharfs, trade paths, and physical remains. One of the challenges in this regard may be to convince town elders of the importance of such sites, whether that relates to attracting visitors to their towns or to preserving aspects of their own heritage. Of concern, of course, is the instance that once items are identified as having historical value, that value may be marketed in other ways, such
as souvenirs to tourists. But equally crucial and for the sake of harmony, those initiating efforts from abroad should make extra effort to avoid duplication and to encourage the development of leadership roles within Guinea’s academic community. The stakes are too high to risk becoming involved in internal competition or turf struggles, especially when resources are so scarce.

**Impact of ethnic reconstruction**—Lamp’s and Sarro’s separate observations with respect to a revival of Baga identity, whether for ethnic reasons or as a rationale for claiming land-holding rights, needs to be considered thoroughly. Ethnic reconstruction may be based in fact or in fancy. That is not to say that our task should be to keep such efforts true to a historical base, but it does seem apparent that historians bear some responsibility to keep tabs on these efforts and bring some awareness when those efforts go astray, at least to a degree. In any case, it is hoped that the historian will not be shy or fail to note discrepancies when they do occur. Equally challenging is the issue of shifting identity or identities, with persons assuming multiple identities over time, depending on what was expedient and profitable for the time. Coifman, Fields-Black, and Klein have mentioned this dilemma, describing it in terms of shifting identities, shifting frontiers or boundaries, or simply a history of Susuization, a process ongoing from the eighteenth century.

**British/French transition**—Without question, a significant change occurred in the Rio Pongo when the French imposed dominance in the 1860s. The transition, in political/social/economic terms, from a period of independence and/or British influence and from one in which political and commercial elites had only recently warred against each other, to a period in which political mastery was vested formally by the French authority upon the Kati family at Thia brought profound change to the river. That period has not yet been studied in detail. With the predominance of French commerce came French rule, French missionaries, French schools (old/new boy networks), a primary connection to Dakar/Saint Louis instead of Freetown, and a gradual shift of power to Conakry, a new administrative
center created at the tip of Cape Sangara and on the Island of Tumbo. This may have been the most profound event to occur in Pongo history during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and it needs to be studied thoroughly.

Slavery as an institution—To my knowledge, there has been no systematic study of slavery in the Rio Pongo, other than that contained in Martin Klein’s study of resistance on the coast. In my thesis, I dealt with the slave trade as it existed in the early decades of the nineteenth century, but nowhere did I focus on slavery as an institution or the types of subalterns (subordinate relationships) that existed within that society. James Thayer wrote several pointed essays about this issue, but only a few of those were published and none led to a thorough study. Studies by Richard Rathbone on the nature of resistance, more recent work by Ismail Rashid with respect to slavery in northwestern Sierra Leone, and an earlier study by Bronislaw Nowak on plantation slavery/rebellion in the Forécariah River suggest models that may be applied in the Pongo with some utility. To be sure, early forms of slavery or subordination were complicated and likely differed from master to master, although it would be expected that certain modes would have been followed. Some slaves were clearly considered as domestic slaves and some fused into lineages as slave-branches, while others were destined for sale to buyers in the Atlantic-basin, while still others enjoyed nearly free status, with the exception that they paid a portion of their wages to their patron.

Those relationships changed as the region shifted economically from one focused on the slave trade as a primary source of income and enterprise, to production of coffee, groundnuts, and other products for the primarily French market. Much of that transformation is surely described in French records, for plantation labor was crucial to the colony’s financial success.

IV

Of these ten topics, several clearly will require a physical presence in Guinea for that research to be fruitful. For any research being conducted within the Pongo region, there needs to be a strong Guinean component that is more than that of sponsoring institution. A Guinean leadership role will help to produce a crucial core of scholars and researchers that has committed to the Pongo region as a legitimate and useful study area and a field of study that is worthy of their students’ attention. Some research, however, and especially that involving missionary records or missionary efforts, can just as easily be conducted from afar. In the latter instance, for example, Church Missionary Society records and most of the publications of the West Indian Mission are available on microfilm. Indeed, many aspects of family history that involve a residence or activities outside of Africa cannot be conducted within Guinea. The addition of research data that is increasingly becoming available through digitization projects promises to transform our ability to use archival material as unimaginined only a decade past. In effect there is plenty to do and our access to data multiplies with each passing year. The opportunities for younger scholars are enormous, if only those of us who started in the 1960s will add mentoring to our basket of tasks during our period of leisurely retirement.
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