WOMEN TRADERS AND BIG-MEN OF GUINEA-CONAKRY

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Along the rivers of coastal Guinea-Conakry, a number of women were active participants in commerce and politics during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Among the more prosperous women traders were Betsy Heard, Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Crowdson along the Bereira River, Elizabeth Frazer Skelton and Eliza Proctor of the Rio Nunez, and Mary Faber, Bailey Gomez Lightburn, Mrs. Emerson, and Mrs. Campbell who operated factories near the Rio Pongo. Successful women entrepreneurs among these rivers were not unusual to the windward coast for the time. Perhaps the earliest and best known woman trader had been Bibiana Vaz of EuroAfrican ancestry who operated out of Cacheu on the Cacheu River during the seventeenth century. Bibiana Vaz had married a Portuguese captain, Ambrosia Gomez, and had drawn into her commercial empire other Luso-Africans who proclaimed a brief republic in 1684.

Less spectacular but certainly more visible were the women traders of Gorée and Saint Louis some of whom were of EuroAfrican descent, others of indigenous background. These African traders, the "Signares," attached themselves to European traders or civil servants for the purpose of obtaining commercial and political advantages as well as social status. Europeans were attracted in turn by the expert knowledge of and the ties to the local market which the "Signares" represented. Europeans also were drawn to "Signares" by the chance to escape from the tedium of life on the coast and by the desire to establish a household, if only for a short period. Such a system of "mutual concubinage benefited both parties.

Similar conditions no doubt prevailed elsewhere along the windward coast, but
perhaps in a less systematized fashion than in the French or Portuguese settlements. Along the rivers of Guinea-Conakry, for example, Lançados and Portuguese from the Portuguese settlements had established liaisons with indigenous Africans from the sixteenth century, and by the mid-eighteenth century, English, French and American traders joined to assist the transformation of commerce ever closer tied to the Atlantic Ocean and the New World. Of these rivers, the Rio Pongo was particularly well-suited for the development of a strong community of African, EuroAfrican and European traders, some of whom were women. The Pongo has its source in the highlands of the Futa Jalon and has long served as a path by Fula, Mande and other groups bringing African goods and slaves coastward in search of European and American manufactures. In the eighteenth century, the Fula imposed their suzerainty over the indigenous peoples along the coast and placed paths leading to the factories under their protection. European and EuroAfrican traders sent factors into the interior along well-known networks where they could advertise the quality and quantity of goods available for trade in coastal factories and could direct particular goods to specific factories on the coast. Direct linkages between the coast and the interior were particularly attractive for traders in the area of Guinea-Conakry.

The physical character of the Rio Pongo on the coast was a further advantage to the development and continuation of trade. In addition to the main entrance to the river, three other waterways or bars could be crossed to gain entrance to the upper river. Each of these avenues meandered through mangroves before reaching grasslands where principal factories were located. While a hindrance to commerce before 1800, the multiple entrances, meandering waterways, and treacherous bars actually provided a natural warning system against capture once slave trading became illegal and once the Royal Anti-slave Trade Squadron took up watch off the river's mouths. As the squadron vessels contained one aperture, slavers slipped through another, and more often than not, escaped undetected. These conditions attracted slavers from rivers not so well blessed and indirectly stimulated commerce in legitimate products, as will be noted later in this paper.

Another advantage enjoyed by traders in the Rio Pongo was the relationship which had developed over time between strangers-outsiders and landlords-headmen. Agreements of tenancy and payments for protection and other services were generally made between
two individuals on a one-to-one basis, but there were observed norms and obligations which protected both landlords and strangers as groups in this relationship.\textsuperscript{8} One objective of the relationship was to establish a marginal position for strangers in indigenous society--a way for the stranger to fit in, yet remain separate from owners of the land. Strangers were not to enjoy political privileges, which were reserved for the landlords and their kin.

While strangers would ostensibly be restricted to a commercial role by this relationship, two other political realities in the Pongo acted to mitigate this restriction. Firstly, there was no identifiably organized state structure existent among the river's peoples as of the late eighteenth century. Instead, the political power of each headman was restricted to his own village or to his ability to provide protection to other headmen who wish to place their villages under his protection. Some headmen, especially among the Susu of the upper river, claimed to be the founders of their villages and to be recent migrants into the area.\textsuperscript{9} Others were first or second generation successors of village founders who themselves had been newcomers who became successful on the coast. In two cases, Portuguese \textit{Lançado} families had gained political control of towns in which they had major economic interests, with one, William Fernandez, acting and recognized as a paramount headman in the Dembia River.\textsuperscript{10}

A second political reality was an apparent presence of mechanisms which permitted persons of slave descent or of outsider origins to acquire significant influence. Landlords often gave daughters of slave wives to their strangers, and the next generation was generally better educated and more widely travelled than were local political leaders. This generation acquired influence, then, as advisers to rulers with whom they also often shared collateral kinship.\textsuperscript{11} Another way to obtain influence was through commercial success. Occasionally landlords gave strangers tenancy in their own villages, but the usual practice was to locate them at a distance where they could be observed and where the presence of large caravans of outsiders would not disrupt their own bases of power.\textsuperscript{12} With time, the factories became centers around which other factors collected and service people gathered. Strangers became Big Men (as described by Allen Howard and most recently by James Thayer) and slipped into a special category within a marginal society which could
have similar ranks within itself.\textsuperscript{13}

It was in this marginal society, then, where women found commercial and political opportunities far greater than those available to women who were tied to tradition and social networks. Space does not permit here a full description of traditional female roles vis-a-vis commerce and polity, and indeed one would be hard pressed to find much information on women in standard studies on the Susu and Baga peoples. Fleeting references to traditional women are sketchy at best, and only occasionally are such women named or described, generally in unflattering terms. Theophilus Conneau, for example, described the principal wife of John Ormond as powerful, scheming, and one who turned on Ormond during his last days.\textsuperscript{14}

Other indigenous women who established linkages or relationships with Europeans included the unnamed wives of Benjamin Campbell, John Emerson, Crowdson, and Michael Proctor. As wives of Europeans, who were themselves marginal, these women acquired a marginal status and with it its commercial opportunities. In some cases, wives became an African anchor to a hoped-for commercial network which seldom developed beyond the single factory. In addition to indigenous Africans were EuroAfricans born in the rivers trading communities. John Ormond, Jr., had more than thirty wives with many children, and there were more than a dozen of his type in the Rio Pongo at the turn of the century. From the large number of offspring of this group, some left for study abroad, some acquired the commercial property of their fathers, and some no doubt melded into the general population.\textsuperscript{15} Some married Europeans or EuroAfricans and acted, as had those mentioned earlier, as African anchors to a new world trade connection. Such was the case with Elizabeth Frazer Skelton and Bailey Gomez Lightburn.

The successful woman entrepreneur and chief whom I have chosen to illustrate the opportunities available to women, however, comes from a third source, a woman who was from the outside. Mary Faber of Sangha in the upper reaches of the Rio Pongo was described in 1838 as a Nova Scotian from Freetown who married Paul Faber, an American ship captain who had opened a factory in the upper Pongo around 1809.\textsuperscript{16} The circumstances of Mary's birth and her marriage to Faber are unknown, but the opportunities for courtship between a Freetowner and a Pongo-based trader were present at
the time. Assuming that Mary was born to Nova Scotian settlers at Freetown at the turn of
the century, she would have been approximately ten years of age when the Church
Missionary Society opened its schools in the Rio Pongo in 1807-8. Among the more than
two hundred "scholars" who boarded at the schools before their closing in 1817 were
numerous girls from Freetown, one of whom might have been Mary. The baptismal list of
1815, for instance, identified thirteen girls named Mary or Maria, some of whom had Nova
Scotian names. Letters and journals written by the mission teachers, moreover, contain
occasional references to girls who left the schools to marry classmates or others in the river.
Such descriptions always emphasized the "loss of souls" and in some cases the need to
move the schools to Freetown where such temptation would be removed.

Paul Faber was an excellent suitor for a young Nova Scotian woman who was, as
events later proved, ambitious, enterprising, and free from obligations to family in the
Pongo. Faber had arrived in the Pongo area around 1809, at the end of the American
embargo and as soon as the slave trade revived. In addition to a return of prosperity in the
Pongo, Faber also found a commercial hierarchy in the process of generational change.
Several of the older established traders had died or left the river and leadership was passing
to newcomers like himself who organized trade in a more structured and monopolistic
fashion. Among those who cooperated with Faber to provision slave cargoes on a quota
basis were Samuel Samo, William Wilson, John Ormond, Jr., and Styles Edward
Lightburn.

The early role which Faber played in this arrangement is unclear, but as a ship's
captain he may have been primarily engaged in transporting slaves to the Americas where
as late as 1816 he maintained contacts with the Havana-based firm of Antonio de Freres
and Company. An Admiralty report of 1839 still identified him as "carrying" slaves from
Africa to Cuba. Faber's first confrontation with the British came late in 1811 when the
ruler of the Rio Pongo, representing a faction which opposed the monopolistic and
exclusive group listed earlier, accused Faber of complicity in the seizure of the Colonial
Sloop George. That ship had attempted to curtail slavers in the Pongo in September of
1811. A year later, William Skelton, Jr., and others testified that Faber had shipped slaves
in both 1811 and 1812.
Following a brief absence from the river after 1812, Faber had returned to the Pongo by 1816 where he maintained his commercial base until his death in 1851.\textsuperscript{24} Whether Mary married him before he left in 1812 or after he returned in 1816 is unclear. The decade and a half from 1816 to 1833, however, was an important period in the life of the Fabers. Having established a factory at Sangha in the Bangalan branch of the Rio Pongo, Paul and Mary Faber enjoyed the protection of John Ormond, Jr., who as chief of Bangalan town was considered the most powerful trader, chief in the upper river, and representative of Fula interests on the coast. Ormond had allied himself with the Fula of upcountry and supported by that alliance governed the Bangalan branch as separate from the Susu and Kati controlled areas of the lower river. During this period Paul Faber carried slaves to the Americas, while Mary remained at Sangha where she maintained the family business and gave birth to a son, William. The decade of the 1820s, however, was a difficult but profitable period for Mary Faber at Sangha. The royal Anti-Slave Trade Squadron focused surveillance on the river and raided factories in the upper river several times searching for slaves available for shipments to the Americas.\textsuperscript{25}

Separating market slaves from locally used laborers became increasingly difficult for squadron captains after 1826, because slavers, including the Fabers, began to construct coffee plantations which conveniently served as concealment for continued slaving. In 1827, one captain reported that Ormond owned between 5,000 and 6,000 plantation slaves, none of which could be clearly identified as marketable.\textsuperscript{26} In the same year, another observer noted that the Fabers had more than 6,000 coffee plants in the ground at a plantation located above Lisso on the Fatala branch of the Rio Pongo and were exporting local and upcountry grown coffee through Freetown merchants to British markets.\textsuperscript{27} By maintaining a subservience to Ormond and indirectly to the Fula, the Fabers improved their position and share in the continuing slave trade and expanded with the use of slave plantation labor into coffee production as well.

Following the death of John Ormond, Jr., in 1833, his brother William Ormond became chief of the Bangalan region. William had not the strong character or abilities of his brother.\textsuperscript{28} These weaknesses eventually produced a power vacuum in the upper river and brought families who had cooperated under Ormond into open conflict. For five years,
however, Mary Faber of Sangha, Bailey Gomez Lightburn of Faringuia and Chief William Ormond of Bangalan provisioned slavers according to a quota arrangement similar to the practice established earlier by John Ormond, Jr. Then, in October 1838, Mary Faber abruptly discarded the arrangement and provisioned a slaver with a cargo totally from her own stock. Ormond retaliated by stealing a large number of Faber's slaves, and the Ormond and Faber forces armed for war. Bailey, Lightburn, meanwhile, remained neutral. As the disagreement between Mary Faber and William Ormond escalated, other circumstances brought a major alteration of politics in the upper river. In the early stages, when it appeared that warfare might actually break out, two resident traders from Freetown who refused to buy and sell slaves met with William Ormond and convinced him to return Faber's slaves. This attempt, however, only served as proof to Mary Faber that Freetown was attempting to intercede in her dispute with Ormond and that Freetown based-traders hoped to play an increased role in the upper river once that dispute was resolved. Consequently, Mary now portrayed herself as representing the "native" faction against the "Mulatto" or Freetown oriented group. With the apparent acquiescence of the Fula governor, Mary commenced hostilities by looting the stores of legitimate Freetown traders in the area and by blockading the river between Bangalan and Sangha. Ormond retaliated by stopping river traffic below Sangha. With trade in the upper river halted, the Fula intervened, deposed Ormond as chief of the district, and appointed a new Fula governor at Bangalan. Two years later William Ormond died. With no capable successor to maintain Bangalan, the center of trade in the Bangalan branch shifted to Sangha, with Bailey Lightburn also enjoying commercial success at Faringuia. Mary Faber now was supported by a resident Fula governor and clearly had become the most powerful trader in the upper river. She had, in effect, inherited the power base held by John Ormond, Jr., in the early 1830s. Her husband, Paul, is rarely mentioned in the sources after the mid-1830s.

The forceful imposition of a Fula presence in Bangalan in 1838 and the rise of Mary Faber and Bailey Lightburn in the upper river under Fula protection rekindled antagonisms between the upper and lower river chiefs and trades and eventually led to new warfare. For nearly a century the Susu and Kati rulers of the lower river had recognized Fula suzerainty and the technical right of the Fula to reject or concur with local elections of
chiefs. Before 1838 the Fula were always distant enough that their interference was rare. After 1838, however, a Fula governor was located less than fifteen miles from the Susu capital of Thia. The death of King Yati Yende Kati in 1838 and a contested chieftaincy election between one faction which was supported by lower river traders and chiefs and the other supported by Faber, Lightburn, and the Fula led to an invasion of the lower river in 1842 by the private slave armies of Faber and Lightburn whose forces sacked the Susu capital. The Fula deposed Culom Kati who had ruled for four years, enthroned their own candidate, Bala Bangu Kati, and moved the capital to Boffa, away from Thia and the influence of the lower river traders.\(^{32}\)

With legitimate trades removed from the Rio Pongo and the lower river chiefs and traders intimidated by a Fula presence at Boffa, Mary Faber, as well as others in the upper river, enjoyed unparalleled prosperity in the 1840s. No new legitimate traders entered the river's commerce during this period, and those families already established avoided the new competition which occurred along the neighboring rivers. Another change bringing success to establish families was a transformation of many traders from outsiders into Big Men, headmen or chiefs, thereby allowing them to escape customs and anchorage duties normally charged strangers in the river. For a time, a drop in the prices paid for coffee brought concern to traders, but increased French demands for groundnuts led Pongo traders to change from coffee to groundnuts.\(^{33}\) Leading the shift to groundnut production were the matriarchs of the Faber and Lightburn families, whose sons, William Faber and Styles Edward Lightburn, Jr., began to assume more prominent positions among the river's elites. William Faber, operating large plantations in both the Sangha and Lisso area, became headman of Sangha after his father's death in 1851 and continued to ship slaves as late as 1860.\(^{34}\)

The decade of the 1850s opened as a promising period of continued prosperity and increased influence for Mary Faber and her family, the Lightburns, and even for traders in the lower river where a Fula regent kept careful watch over Bala Bangu Kati at Boffa. While the Pongo had escaped intervention from either Britain or France thus far, neighboring rivers to the north and south were less fortunate, and the Pongo's time was at hand. In 1852, officials from Sierra Leone arrived at Boffa with a request that Bala Bangu
Kati sign a treaty formally ending the slave trade, guaranteeing protection for property belonging to Sierra Leone traders who might venture into the river, and permitting an agent of the British government to establish an official residence at Boffa. Initially Bala Bangu Kati hesitated, but, sensing no opposition from the Fula regent, he signed the treaty on 17 January 1852.\textsuperscript{35}

For Mary Faber, the treaty of 1852 became a rallying call once again for military cooperation among upper river chiefs and traders. This placed the "Native" faction against those of the lower river whom, she believed, had acquiesced to Sierra Leone and outsider trading interest. Faber also was convinced that the lower river traders, or "Mulatoo" faction, sought to use this new treaty to remove the Susu of the lower river from Fula suzerainty. A large army of slaves from Faber's and Lightburn's plantations gathered at Dominguia where they joined the slave army of Charles Wilkinson and invaded the heartland of Susu country. The lower river chiefs counterattacked with great force, turned the invasion into a rout, and both captured and burned Sangha before being repulsed at Faringuia. Only then did Fula soldiers arrive and intercede to protect their allies in the upper river.\textsuperscript{36} Although skirmishes continued into 1855, the war was a defeat for the Faber family. After 1852, Faber regional political influence diminished, although the Bangalan branch of the Rio Pongo continued to be shared by the Faber and Lightburn families. Whether in consequence of this defeat, or for other reasons, Mary Faber after 1852 assumed a less visible position in the river's life. This change was so pronounced by 1857 that a missionary then visiting the river identified Mary as matriarch of the family and her son William as "Ali of the King of the Fullahs."\textsuperscript{37} The Faber commercial empire meanwhile expanded in the Bangalan and Fatala branches where it maintained large groundnut plantations into the mid-1850s.\textsuperscript{38}

The narrative of Mary Faber's rise in commerce and political power closely parallels the success pattern for Big Men as outlined recently by Thayer. One path to Big Man status was through inheritance or through appointment. The death of John Ormond and the failure of his brother to adequately represent Fula interests in the river resulted in a transference of power from the Ormonds to the Fabers through Fula designation. In a sense Mary Faber had obtained an inheritance, as designee of the Fula governor. Another path to
Big Man status was through acquired wealth. As Thayer has noted, however, wealth is the most tenuous mode of being or becoming a Big Man, for such a person must not only acquire wealth and keep it, but it must also be distributed to relatives and others in such a way that they are all drawn into a network of depending on him. This can then be turned to social, political or economic power. But the status is tenuous; if he loses his wealth, no one will listen to him, seek his help or come to him for counsel.  

Mary Faber's success fits this pattern well. As long as Faber defended commercial interests of dependent traders in her section of the river and satisfactorily represented Fula political objectives on the coast, Faber could expect to be respected as a Big Man. Once she could no longer represent those interests, to use Thayer's phrase "none will listen to him [her] except those who have to, in other words his [her] immediate family."  

In this paper I have sought to demonstrate that it was possible for women to acquire significant positions of power in commerce and politics on the African coast during the nineteenth century. The choice of Mary Faber as the example to illustrate patterns of success was one of convenience. Perhaps another half dozen were similarly active in the rivers of Guinea-Conakry during the same years. But one can reasonably ask whether an indigenous woman of that area, unattached to Europeans or EuroAfricans, could have acquired a similar status. My reading of the sources suggests indeed that only women in marginal status were afforded such opportunities.
FOOTNOTE

1. I am indebted to the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and the American Philosophical Society which sponsored research in Sierra Leone and European archives during the 1979 spring semester. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of several colleagues who read various drafts and recommended changes, some of which I have incorporated.


6. Council, February 27, 1796, CO270/3, Public Records Office [hereafter cited PRO], London; Macaulay to Cooper, n.d., enclosed in Council, April 26, 1796, CO270/4, PRO.


11. Examples abound for successful EuroAfricans who studied abroad, travelled widely and returned to the Rio Pongo to play important advisory roles. Perhaps the most powerful was Thomas Curtis who became advisor to the Susu rulers in the Pongo but the most widely travelled were Jellorum Harrison who studied in Edinburgh and from 1803 to 1813 travelled as a missionary in Central Asia among the Tartars and a cousin, Richard Wilkinson, who studied in England to be a catechist and in 1822-23 journeyed to the West Indies and to Baltimore in Maryland.

12. Dual towns of this nature included Thia-Dominguia, Thia-Kissing and Kucundy-Walkaria. It was not uncommon for a caravan numbering more than a thousand to visit a single trading town.


15. Ibid., p. 201. Among those who studied abroad and returned to inherit property and position were John Ormond, Jr., Emmanuel Gomez, William Fernandez, William Skelton, Jr., Richard Wilkinson, Betsy Heard, and Elizabeth Frazer. Others married EuroAfricans, and their former identifications were not maintained. Of the large number of children who attended Church Missionary Society schools in the Pongo between 1807 and 1817, only a few are mentioned in the later literature.

16. Doherty to Glenelg, 10 December 1838, and enclosures, CO367/148, PRO.

17. Samuel A. Walker, Missions in Western Africa Among the Soosoos, Bullons, etc. (Dublin, 1845), pp. 267-72.

18. Renner to Secretary, 12 February 1814, CA1/E3, and 24 June 1814, CA1/E3, Church Missionary Society, London [hereafter cited CMS].


20. "Captain George Howland's Voyage to West Africa, 1816-1817," in New England Merchants, ed. by Norman R. Bennett and George E. Brooks, Jr. (Boston, 1967), pp. 81, 92. The editors of New England Merchants correctly observed, however, that Howland's Jacob Faber may have been a different person altogether.
21. Admiralty to Colonial Office, 19 March 1939, and enclosures, CO267/155, PRO.

22. Renner to Secretary, 30 October 1811, CA1/E2, CMS.

23. Trials, pp. 16-17, Review of Trials, p. 78.

24. Royal Gazette and Sierra Leone Advertiser, 7 August 1819.


27. Campbell to Goderich, 28 July 1827, CO267/82/Confidential, PRO.


29. Unfortunately the only reports of this incident come from Benjamin Campbell who was married to a daughter of Bailey Lightburn and who was an adversary of Mary Faber. Doherty to Glenelg, 10 December 1838, and enclosures, CO267/148, and Admiralty to Colonial Office, 19 March 1839, and enclosures, CO267/155/Offices, PRO.

30. Benjamin Campbell was one of these.


32. Macdonald to Grey, 17 February 1852, and enclosures, CO267/227, PRO; Arcin, Histoire, pp. 142-143; Saint-Pere, "Petit historique," p. 137.


34. Macdonald to Palmerston, 4 November 1850, FO84/788; and Fitzjames to Newcastle, 8 August 1860, CO267/, PRO.

35. Macdonald to Grey, 17 February 1852, and enclosures, CO267/227, PRO.

36. Arcin, Histoire, 142.

