Atlantic Africa in the autobiographies of former slaves

Guy Saupin

Life in Africa and the trade of enslaved people along the African coast are rarely mentioned in the autobiographies of former slaves. These accounts raise problems of interpretation due to the context of their writing, and must be confronted with historical data. They do, however, have a unique value: they do give voice to the victims of the transatlantic slave trade.

In the autobiographies of former slaves published in England and the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries, those that include the first part of their lives in Africa are unfortunately a minority. We have counted around twenty. These accounts raise major problems of interpretation, as they most often result from a collaboration between an African voice and a collector-editor-publisher, in an active participation strategy towards the abolitionist movement, including a risk of distortion through conversion to Christianity, a process intimately linked to emancipation.

They need to be confronted with the analysis of interdisciplinary academic research, which crosses data from African orality and the accounts of outside travellers. However, they are endowed with a unique value: these are the voices of the victims of the trade of enslaved people, the privileged way not to limit the study of African agency to that of their persecutors. These few testimonies prevent the millions of others' expressions of suffering from being shrouded in total silence.

The social environment

The autobiographical narratives help to clarify the social environment in Africa in which these authors evolved. Membership of the elite dominates (12 out of 14 known cases). It is portrayed through the economic power, measured in terms of the large number of enslaved peoples and the power to hire out the labor of many freemen, and participation in political power as king or head of a lineage that included the council of Elders. Poverty is only mentioned twice. J. Jea, from Old Calabar (present-day Nigeria), seized in war at the age of two/three in the 1770s, recalls his "poor

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but industrious" parents. O. Wooma, who had lost his father at the age of eight, was taken in by his older brother, who pawned him off to borrow two goats. All of which seems to highlight the influence of initial education in the writing of autobiographies, as a form of social capital.
A few stories illustrate the impact of trade on the formation of couples. Baquaqua's father, born in the late 1820s in Zooggou (Djougou, north of present-day Benin), a trading post dependent on the Borgou kingdom, belonged to the non-native, Dendi-speaking Wangara merchant network. Gewe, the future C. Mulgrave, born in Luanda in Portuguese Angola in the 1820s, describes her father as a Mbundu chief working for a Portuguese trader, and her mother as a "mulattress" from a "prominent family". Polygamy appears to be a widely accepted custom, a significant sign of social power. The most frequent situation tends to fluctuate between two and three wives.

Social ties are organized in concentric circles, placing kinship at the center, in which the close family forms part of the wider lineage, reinforced by friendships, a sense of belonging to the neighborhood, to "congregations", to the community formed by villages and towns, whether closed or open, marketplaces linked by networks, but in some cases country capitals or pilgrimage centers.
These stories illustrate their insertion into a traditional slave society. The origins of slavery are well known: war, abduction, judicial penalties (theft and adultery), seizure for debt (Wooma). The work of the council of elders shows a swift, mainly restorative justice. The captives' itineraries to the Atlantic Ocean, punctuated by changing hands, illustrate the behavior of different masters. O. Equiano, of Igbo origin in the Niger delta, born around 1745, shows himself surprise at his successful family integration, leading him to a certain oblivion of his servile status and even to the hope of adoption. However, reversibility is unpredictable and complete, either by a sudden accident or by an inexplicable arbitrary decision.

Cultures

Three of the identifiable religious cultures refer to Muslim references. S. Diallo, son of a Fulani marabout from Fuuta Tooro on the middle Senegal, was involved in the Atlantic trade across the Gambia in the 1730s; M. Baquaqua belongs to a very practising religious family from northern Benin; and U. Gronniosaw, originally from Borno (northeast of the present Nigerian territory), received a Muslim education, but his parents seem unable to answer his questions, which raises the problem of the inconsistency of an arranged narrative.
Most references are made to traditional animist religions, based on the worships of numerous deities and ancestors, and the frequent use of fetishes and sacrifices.

Belinda, born in the early 1710s, was seized in a sacred wood on the Gold Coast (Ghana), while accompanying her parents. J. Wright, of Yoruba (western Nigeria) origin, identifies two public deities in his community, according to gender, with their processions of priests and servants, and the thousands of private deities honored in each family home. Divination is a common practice, taking the form of auguries for war or business, even among Muslims (Baquaqua), but also to cure diseases.
Wright explores burial rituals, differentiating between the practices of his people and those of his aggressor. The accumulation of precious goods in the tombs, mainly textiles of great price, refers to the flagship product of the Atlantic trade, arousing their pillaging for commercial purposes. In one of the stages of its transfer, the king's death is followed by the sacrifice of all the royal slaves, raising fears of a levy among the traders.
Collective identification in terms of ethnicity, translated as "nation", refers to linguistic and customary differences. In his Yoruba dictionary, S. Crowther, a captive freed by the Royal Navy in Sierra Leone in the late 1820s and later a member of the Anglican Church Missionary Society, illustrates the awareness of differences. The question of language is essential for displaced victims. At the same time, Equiano shows a fluidity of proximity and some real ruptures.

The seizure

Lost wars were the main reason why a population would fall into the export trade. These were local wars, often among the same "nation", surprising an unprepared people, for Broteer Furro (later Venture Smith) in the first third of the 18th century, or initially seen as being distant (Wright). J. Joseph's father, Chief Ashante, of the powerful inland empire of the Gold Coast (Ghana) in the 18th and 19th centuries, did engage in fighting, but was defeated. L. Asa-Asa of Sierra Leone, liberated by the Royal Navy in the 1820s, was captured by the Adinyé, who destroyed his village three times. All those who could took shelter in the woods. Tallen, later renamed Dimmock Charlton, born around 1800 and originally from the present Guinea, was the victim of a Mandingo raid.
L. Asa-Asa counts the Adinyé by the thousands. Broteer, a captive incorporated in the army descending towards the Gold Coast, reports 6,000 men. Weapons were many and varied. Broteer describes a technique used to smoke people out of houses built into the ground, how the defenders responded with a shower of poison-tipped arrows, and how an antidote was immediately applied to the wound. The walled towns, protected by high walls, a deep moat and a thorn hedge, resisted for as long as the population remained spared from famine. The city of Wright resisted for seven months. Defeat meant pillage, systematic burning and the execution of very young children and the elderly

Kidnappings mainly affected isolated children, driven by their games outside the village - a wood for O. Cugoano (around 1760, in the Fante country, now Ghana), a beach near Luanda for Gewe, a riverside for C. Spear, kidnapped with four other children by "white" sailors in 1779, perhaps in the Rivières du Sud (now Guinea)? -or left in the village while the adults worked in the fields (Equiano).
M. Baquaqua fell into a trap set by rivals or in revenge for his previous role in the service of the local chief. A. Diallo (Job, Salomon's son), dealing with the English on the Gambia, was sold by his rivals. Sibell, born in the first half of the 18th century in the up-to-now unidentified country of Makedunru, was abducted by her brother-in-law, with whom she lived, her sister having the rank of second wife. A broken pipe, whether accidental or in revenge, was enough to justify that Wooma, still then under pledge, should become property of his brother's creditor, and its sale a year later.
Gronniosaw's account is so exceptional that it seems hardly believable. He describes a journey of his own making from Bornou, southeast of Lake Chad, to the Gold Coast, on the invitation of an African merchant from the coast, which might be in line with the requirement for trust in trade networks. Upon arrival in the harbor city, he was at first greeted as the king's son, then harshly accused of being a spy and condemned to death, even though he stayed on as the merchant's guest. Mercifully pardoned by the king, his persecutor, he is finally handed over to the Atlantic slave trade.

From the interior to the coast

Depending on the seizure location, the route to the coast varies in length, duration and difficulty. It may be on regular roads with welcome "cabins", or off-road. The geography is varied, alternating between mountains and farmlands, from savannah to forests. Nights in the woods are a constant cause for anxiety: you need to protect yourself from wild animals with campfires. In the countries bordered by rivers, you quickly switch to dugout canoes. During stopovers in the villages, the captives must be separated for close night-time surveillance, as it is feared that they will escape.
The treatment is correct, without brutality, but they have to carry their own food. L. Asa-Asa recalls a sick neighbor being killed on the road. Some are sold several times: six for Asa-Asa and Wooma, seven for Equiano. During his transit through the illegal slave trade, Wright moves from the house of the warlord who received him as booty to a first domestic market, then a second, before arriving by pirogue at Ikko, the place of contact with the Portuguese, i.e. three sales on African soil. The final journey was made by night, for embarkation at dawn, but this did not prevent the Royal Navy from boarding the ship off the coast, facilitating its release in Freetown.

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On the coast, Cugoano speaks of a factorerie ("harbor city") with captives sent to the fields or to the sea for portage. Broteer was thrown into the jails of the Anomabu fort, the main trading site on the Gold Coast in the 18th century. Sibell describes it as a "big house that needs to be filled".

Visions of African captivity

The expression of trauma underlines the marked impact of kinship as the matrix of social issues: the pain of separation, the hope of redeeming oneself, substitution through adoption. In a gradual degradation, the coastal stage is the most terrible, with its plunge into the unknown: the whites, the sea, the trading ship and the fear of cannibalism. Sibell and Wright describe the African port city as "cruel", and Cugoano forgets the name of the "infernal fort". A few stories raise the question of African responsibility. Asa-Asa, who has no wish to leave England and return home for fear of being recaptured, blames the elites.

About the author

Guy Saupin is a doctor of history and a professor emeritus of modern history at the University of Nantes. His academic interests are centred on maritime Atlantic port town development from economic, social and cultural perspectives. He has also researched the social and cultural linkages between European and African societies during the early modern age

His latest book is entitled: L'émergence des villes-havres africaines atlantiques au temps du commerce des esclaves, vers 1470-vers 1870, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2023

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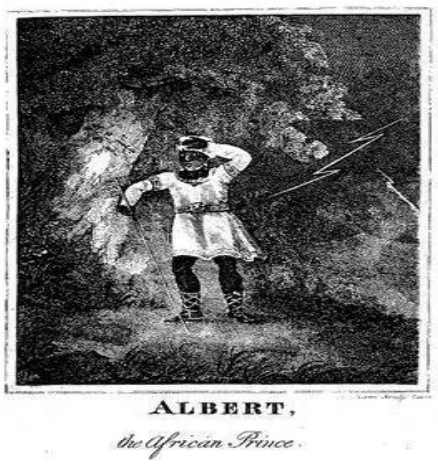
Illustrations

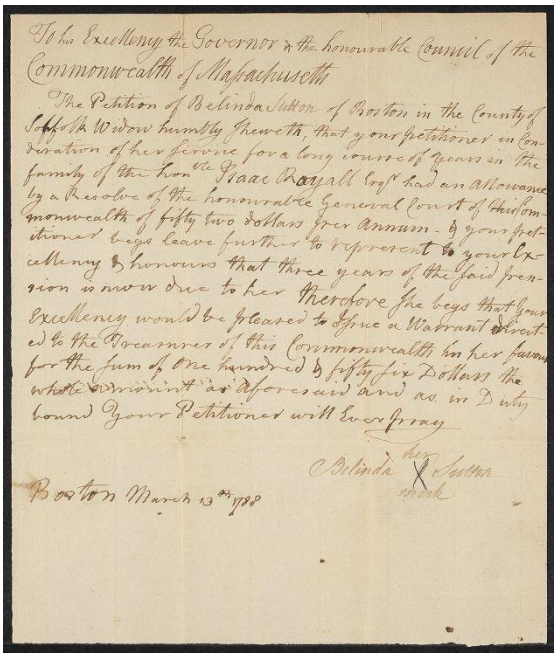
Olaudah Equiano, aka Gustavus Vassa, first published in 1789, ©Common Wikimedia.



A narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African prince, Gronniosaw, James Albert Ukawsaw, edition 1810, © Common Wikimedia.

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano ou John Stewart, Abolitionniste Ouest Africain et serviteur de Richard et Maria Cosway, gravure, Richard Cosway, 1784 © Alamy.

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (Job ben Solomon), William Hoare, 18e siècle, National Portrait Gallery (London) © Commons Wikimedia.



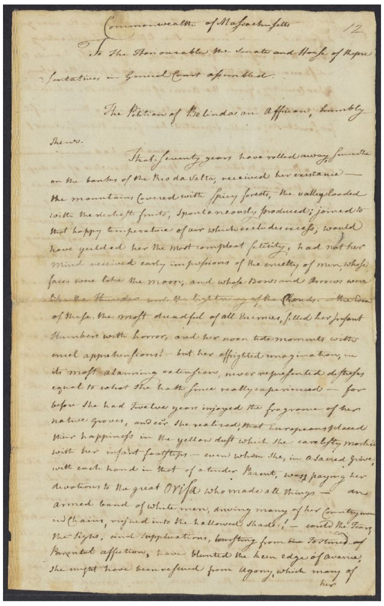
To his Excellency the Governor & the honourable Council of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

The Petition of Belinda Sutton of Boston in the County of Suffolk Widow humbly sheweth, that your petitioner in Consideration of her service for a long course of years in the family of the Hon.ble Isaac Royall Esq.r had an allowance by a Resolve of the honourable General Court of this Commonwealth of fifty two dollars per annum - & your petitioner begs leave further to represent to your Excellency & honours that three years of the said pension is now due to her Therefore she begs that your Excellency would be pleased to cause a Warrant to be issued to the Treasurer of this Commonwealth in her favour for the sum of One hundred & fifty six Dollars the whole Amount as aforesaid and as in Duty bound Your Petitioner will Ever pray

Belinda her X Sutton mark

Boston March 13th 1788

Belinda Sutton's 1788 petition, courtesy of Massachusetts Archives, © 2023 The Royall House and Slave Quarters. All Rights Reserved.


Commonwealth of Massachusetts 12

To the Honourable the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled.

The Petition of Belinda an Affrican, humbly shews.

That seventy years have rolled away, since she on the banks of the Rio da Valta, received her existance — the mountains Covered with spicy forests, the valleys loaded with the richest fruits, spontaneously produced; joined to that happy temperature of air which excludes excess; would have yielded her the Most compleat felicity, had not her Mind received early impressions of the cruelty of men, whose faces were like the moon, and whose Bows and Arrows were ~~like the thunder and the lightning of the Clouds.~~ — The idea of these, the most dreadful of all Enemies, filled her infant slumbers with horror, and her noon tide moments with cruel apprehensions! — but her affrighted imagination, in its most alarming extension, never represented distresses equal to what she hath since really experienced — for before she had Twelve years enjoyed the fragrance of her native groves, and e'er she realized, that Europeans placed their happiness in the yellow dust which she carelessly marked with her infant footsteps — even when she, in a sacred grove, with each hand in that of a tender Parent, was paying her devotions to the great Orisa who made all things — an armed band of white men, driving many of her Countrymen in Chains, rushed into the hallowed shades! — could the Tears, the sighs, and supplications, bursting from the Tortured of Parental affection, have blunted the keen edge of avarice, she might have been rescued from Agony, which many of her

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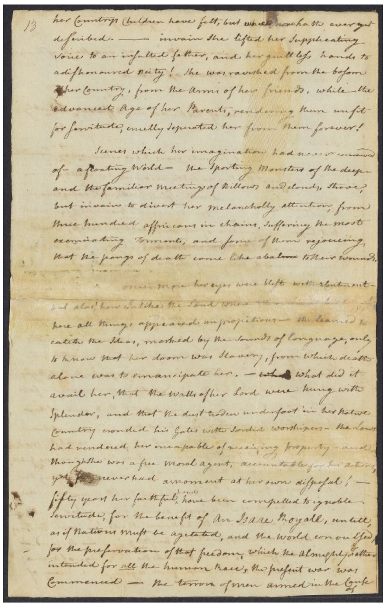
13 her Country's Children have felt, but which none hath ever yet described. — in vain she lifted her supplicating voice to an insulted father, and her guiltless hands to a dishonoured Deity! She was ravished from the bosom of her Country, from the Arms of her friends, while the advanced Age of her Parents, rendering them unfit for servitude, cruelly seperated her from them forever!

Scenes which her imagination had never conceived of — a floating World — the sporting Monsters of the deep — and the familiar meeting of billows and clouds, strove, but in vain to divert her melancholly attention, from three hundred Affricans in chains, suffering the most excruciating torments, and some of them rejoicing, that the pangs of death came like a balm to their wounds.

Once more her eyes were blest with a Continent — but alas! how unlike the Land where [illegible] — here all things appeared unpropitious — she learned to catch the Ideas, marked by the sounds of language, only to know that her doom was slavery, from which death alone was to emancipate her. — ~~what~~ What did it avail her, that the walls of her Lord were hung with splendor, and that the dust troden underfoot in her native Country crowded his Gates with sordid worshipers — the Laws had rendered her incapable of receiving property — and though she was a free moral agent, accountable for her actions, yet [illegible] never had a moment at her own disposal! — fifty years her faithful hands have been compelled to ignoble servitude, for the benefit of an Isaac Royall, untill, as if Nations must be agitated, and the world convulsed, for the preservation of that freedom, which the Almighty Father intended for all the human Race, the present war was Commenced — The terror of men armed in the Cause of

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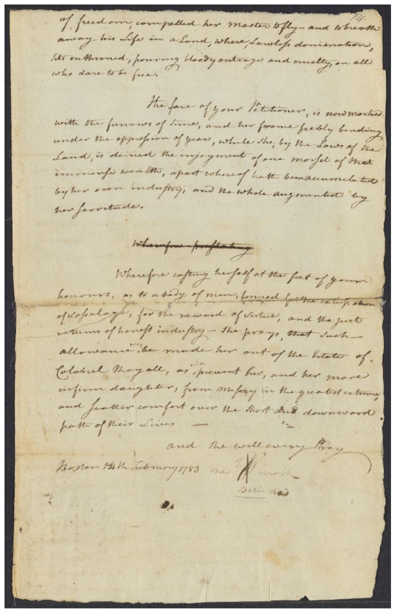
14 of freedom, compelled her master to fly — and to breathe away his Life in a Land, where, Lawless domination, sits enthroned, pouring bloody outrage and cruelty, on all who dare to be free.

The face of your Petitioner, is now marked with the furrows of time, and her frame feebly bending under the oppression of years, while she, by the Laws of the Land, is denied the enjoyment of one morsel of that immense wealth, apart whereof hath been accumulated by her own industry, and the whole augmented by her servitude.

~~Wherefore prostrating~~

Wherefore casting herself at the feet of your honours, as to a body of men, formed for the extirpation of vassalage, for the reward of Virtue, and the just returns of honest industry — she prays, that such allowance may be made her out of the Estate of Colonel Royall, as will prevent her, and her more infirm daughter, from misery in the greatest extreme, and scatter comfort over the short and downward path of their Lives —

and she will ever Pray

Boston 14th February 1783 the X mark of Belinda

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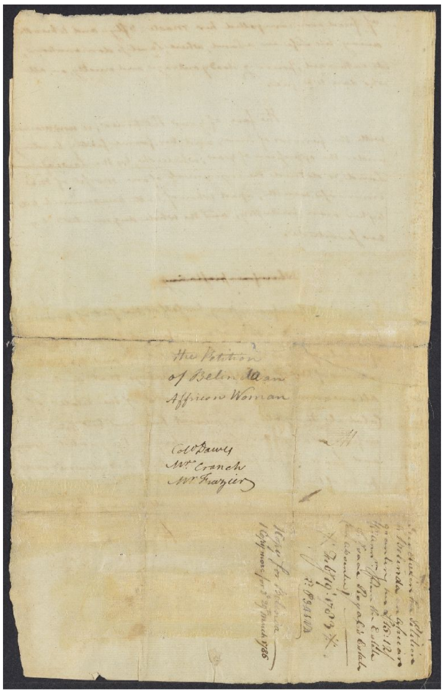
The Petition of Belinda an Affrican Woman

Col. Dawes
Mr Cranch
Mr Frazier

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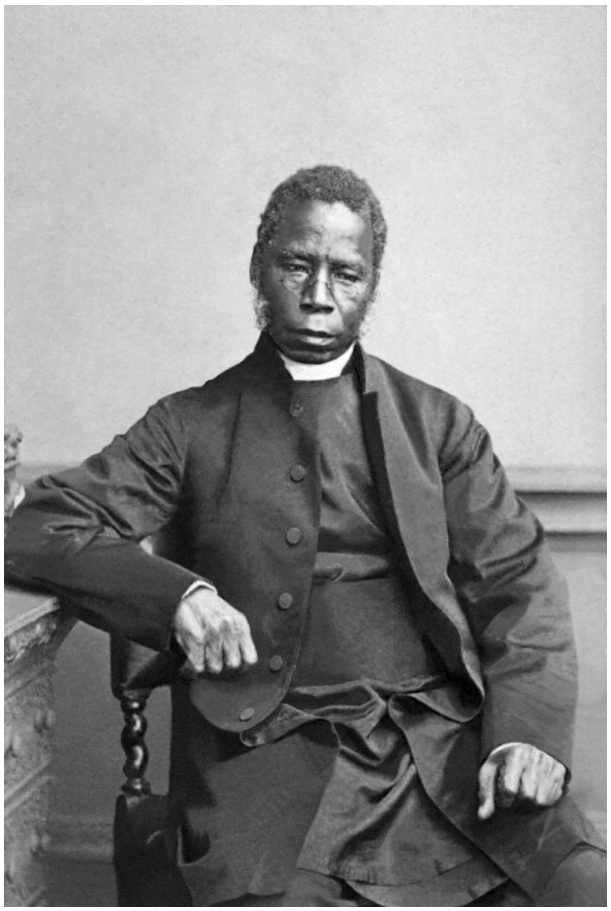
Bellinda's petition adressé au « Commonwealth of Massachussets", 1786, © Harvard University.



Samuel Ajayi Crowther (c1809–1891), former enslave man who became the first black Anglican Bishop, © Alpha Historica / Alamy Stock Photo.

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