

Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

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(1700-1800)

Edited by
David Thomas and John Chesworth

with Jaco Beyers, Karoline Cook, Lejla Demiri,
Martha Frederiks, David D. Grafton, Alan Guenther,
Emma Gaze Loghin, Claire Norton, Reza Pourjavady,
Douglas Pratt, Charles Ramsey, Peter G. Riddell,
Umar Ryad, Carsten Walbiner



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Jean-Baptiste Gaby

DATE OF BIRTH Approximately 1640
PLACE OF BIRTH France
DATE OF DEATH Approximately 1710
PLACE OF DEATH France

BIOGRAPHY

Jean-Baptiste Gaby was a 17th-century French Franciscan friar. The little that is known of his life with certainty pertains to his voyage to West Africa in 1686. He is thought to have been born around 1640, and at an unknown point he entered the Franciscan order. For most of his life, he appears to have lived and worked in the friary of Loches (Feller, *Supplément*, p. 385).

In March 1686, Gaby and three other Franciscans set out from Le Havre on a journey to West Africa ‘to preach religion in Nigritie’ and to ‘combat the heresy of Calvinism’ (Gaby, *Relation*, p. 7). The group arrived in Tenerife (Canary Islands) on 13 May 1686. After a brief stay, they continued to the mainland of Africa, reaching St Louis (present-day Senegal) on 5 June.

Few details of the group’s sojourn in Senegal are known. Gaby records that, at the instigation of Father Tartari, three members of the group left St Louis to preach the gospel in ‘Nigritie’. Gaby himself stayed in St Louis, to attend to the spiritual needs of the local Christian community (Gaby, *Relation*, pp. 23-4). It is uncertain what happened to Gaby’s companions and whether or when they eventually returned to France. It is also uncertain how long Gaby worked in Senegal; he seems to have returned to France before 1689. In that year, Gaby published an account of his experiences and observations in Senegal, entitled *Relation de la Nigritie*. Gaby is thought to have died around 1710 (Feller, *Supplément*, p. 385).

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

Jean-Baptiste Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie, contenant une exacte description des royaumes et de leur gouvernements, la religion, les moeurs, coutumes, et raretez de cet païs, avec la découverte de la rivière du Senega, dont on a fait une carte particuliere*, Paris, 1689

Secondary

- J. Pirotte, art. 'Gaby (Jean-Baptiste)', in R. Aubert, J.-P. Hendrickx and J.-P. Sosson (eds), *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques*, Paris, 1981, vol. 19, pp. 589-90
- F.X. de Feller, art. 'Gaby, Jean-Baptiste', in *Supplément au dictionnaire historique de l'abbé F.X. de Feller*, Paris, 1819, vol. 10, p. 385
- J.B.B. Eyriès, art. 'Gaby, Jean-Baptiste', in L.G. Michaud (ed.), *Biographie universelle, ancienne et moderne*, Paris, 1816, vol. 16, p. 230

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Relation de la Nigritie, 'An account of Nigritia'

DATE 1689

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE French

DESCRIPTION

Relation de la Nigritie, a publication of about 90 pages, presents an account of the observations of Fr Jean-Baptiste Gaby during his sojourn in the area of present-day Senegal in the late 17th century (its title in full is *Relation de la Nigritie, contenant une exacte description des royaumes et de leur gouvernements, la religion, les moeurs, coutumes, et raretez de cet païs, avec la découverte de la rivière du Senega, dont on a fait une carte particuliere*, 'An account of Nigritia, containing a truthful description of kingdoms and their governments, religion, manners, customs and peculiarities of the country, including the discovery of the river Senega, of which a special map has been made'). The book describes the flora and fauna of the West African mainland, as well as portraying the various ethnic groups, their customs (e.g. circumcision, marriage, funerals), political organisation and religion. The book is best known for Gaby's claim to have discovered the River Senegal and his assertion that the Senegal, the Niger and other rivers in West Africa, such as the Gambia and the Rio Grande, all spring from Lake Bornu.

Relation de la Nigritie is a rich source on West African Islam. The book offers detailed descriptions of the celebration of Muslim festivals (e.g. *Īd al-fiṭr*, *Īd al-aḏḩā*, *Mawlid*, including local terms such as *Koriteh*, *Tabaski* and *Gamo*), as well as Muslim practices such as fasting, the *ḩajj*, polygamy, funerals, circumcision, Islamic education, the manufacture and use of amulets for humans and animals and so forth (pp. 39-48). In addition, the book contains two exchanges between Gaby and some Senegalese *marabouts* (pp. 30-9). The men discuss a variety of topics,



Illustration 17. Jean-Baptiste Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie*, map of the source of the Niger, Jolo and Senegal rivers, according to Gaby's understanding

among them the love of God, the Trinity (which Gaby likens to a lily and a triangle) and the permissibility of engaging in interreligious debates. Over the course of the conversation, Gaby reiterates a number of classical polemical arguments, such as the notion that Muḥammad spread Islam through violence and did not perform miracles to substantiate his prophethood. According to what he says, the exchanges resulted in the conversion of a number of Muslims.

In 1968, an unknown manuscript was discovered, entitled *De l'origine des nègres du Sénégal, coste d'Affrique, de leurs pays, religions, coutumes et moeurs*. Its author, Louis Moreau de Chambonneau, served several terms as representative and later director of the Compagnie du Sénégal in St Louis, and is known to have written extensively about his observations in the Senegal area (Pirotte, *Dictionnaire*, p. 590). Carson Ritchie, who published an annotated edition of the manuscript, estimates that this particular text was written between 1673 and 1677 (Ritchie, 'Deux textes', pp. 289-91).

Charles Becker has compared Chambonneau's manuscript and Gaby's *Relation*, and demonstrates that Gaby's text depends heavily on Chambonneau's. This dependency (Becker calls it plagiarism) is particularly evident in passages dealing with geography and ethnography, including those that describe West African Islam, though generally speaking Gaby's text is slightly more elaborate than the Chambonneau manuscript. Gaby's account of his discussions with some *marabouts*, however, seems to be original; they have no parallels in the Chambonneau manuscript (Becker, 'A propos', pp. 17-21).

SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of Gaby's *Relation* is twofold. First, despite the fact that he may have copied Chambonneau's *Traité*, his *Relation de la Nigritie* has served and continues to serve as a rich resource on 17th-century Islam and Muslim practices in Senegal. Gaby's book offers eyewitness observations of West African Islam (irrespective of whether these are his own or Chambonneau's), which thus became accessible to a larger audience as early as 1689; the Chambonneau manuscript remained unpublished until the late 1960s. Hence, Gaby's widely quoted text has long influenced European perceptions and representations of Islam and Muslims in Senegal.

Second, Gaby's text demonstrates that in 17th-century West African Christian-Muslim exchanges, both parties employed arguments from the classical polemical repertoire to challenge the other. Arguments

mentioned by Gaby include refutation of the Trinity, the presumed violent spread of Islam, the denial of the prophethood of Muḥammad and a condemnation of polygamy.

PUBLICATIONS

J.-B. Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie, contenant une exacte description des royaumes et de leur gouvernements, la religion, les moeurs, coutumes, et raretez de cet païs, avec la découverte de la rivière du Senega, dont on a fait une carte particuliere*, Paris, 1698 (repr. Paris, 1972); ark:/12148/bpt6k843770 (digitised version available through BNF)

STUDIES

Pirotte, art. 'Gaby (Jean-Baptiste)'

C. Becker, 'A propos d'un plagiaire. Le P. Gaby', *Notes Africaines* 133 (1972) 17-21

C.I.A. Ritchie, 'Deux textes sur le Senegal, 1673-1677', *Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire. Series B (Sciences Humaines)* 30 (1968) 289-353

Martha Frederiks