

Travellers to Sierra Leone in the 18th and 19th centuries

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the governors of the colony of Freetown (present-day Sierra Leone) commissioned a number of exploratory journeys to the territory of the northern rivers, the area between the River Nuñez and the Scarcies estuary (present-day Guinee Conakry). Many of the reports of these expeditions are still extant, offering a window into the economic, political and religious dynamics of the region, and more particularly of the Susu Muslim state of Moria and the Fula Imamate of Futa Jallon.

The background to the expeditions was the increasingly precarious viability of the recently established 'Province of Freedom' for Liberated Africans. In 1787, the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor in London had sponsored the establishment of a free settlement for the impoverished Black Poor in Britain on the coast of present-day Sierra Leone. Beset by disease, death and the hostility of the indigenous Africans, the colony failed; most of the settlers died and Granville Town was set ablaze by the neighbouring Temne. In 1792, the settlement was re-founded. A group of 1,131 Nova Scotians arrived on the coast in 1800, joined by some 600 *maroons* from Jamaica and, from 1807 onwards, by large numbers of 'recaptives', slaves liberated en route to the Americas when the slave-ship transporting them was captured (Walls, 'West African languages', p. 389).

In England meanwhile, a group of philanthropists founded the St George's Bay Company, later renamed the Sierra Leone Company, in order to make the settlement viable and profitable. The vision of its abolitionist initiators was 'to spread Christianity from its post on the coast, to promote trade in African products and to oppose the slave trade' (Mouser, 'Editor's introduction', p. ix). However, the company's unyielding denunciation of the slave trade alienated both indigenous Africans and resident traders, and thwarted attempts to establish any sustained form of legitimate trade with the hinterland.

In 1793, the directors of the company decided to investigate the possibility of shifting its commercial interests to the region of the northern rivers. Two alternative strategies were explored. The first was the creation of a new trade route that connected Timbo, capital of the Imamate of Futa Jallon, with Freetown via Kukuna, Kambia and Port Loko. It would bypass

the Susu Muslim state of Moria, which had been established in the mid-18th century and had since conducted a series of jihads in an attempt to Islamise neighbouring towns and kingdoms, leading to a volatile stalemate between Moria and its non-Muslim neighbouring state of Sumbuya (Mouser, 'Amara, Alimamy of Moria', p. 4).

In 1794, James Watt (born possibly in Glasgow c. 1760, died Freetown, 1795) and Matthew Winterbottom (born South Shields, died Dix Cove on the Gold Coast, 1794) were requested to explore this route. The two men undertook a three-month journey that began in the estuary of the Pongo river, passed through Labé to Timbo, and returned via the Scarcies river route to the coast. Although, according to Watt's journal, the Fula ruler Almami Sadu supported the venture and a number of Fula representatives joined Watt and Winterbottom on their return journey to Freetown, instability in the region and opposition to the plan by Susu rulers meant that it did not materialise. In 1814, Sergeant William Tuft conducted another expedition to Timbo in order to 'assure Fula authorities of the Colony's continued friendship and to obtain agreement for opening an "unrestrained communication"' (Mouser, 'Continuing British interest', p. 772). Again, neither the Fula nor the British were able to implement their plans. A year later, in 1815, yet another expedition, led by Brevet Major John Peddie, Captain Thomas Campbell and Lt Stokoe, set out for Timbo but failed to reach the capital (Mouser, 'Continuing British interest', p. 772; Mouser, *Forgotten Peddie/Campbell expedition*, 2007). In 1821, a fresh attempt was made by assistant staff surgeon Brian O'Beirne, who travelled to Timbo via the Scarcies corridor, to negotiate a trade route between Freetown and Timbo. O'Beirne successfully reached Timbo in March 1821 and met with Almami Abdul Qadri (Mouser, *Guinea journals*, pp. v-vi, 229). However, despite the combined Fula-British interests in the route, the expedition once more did not yield tangible results due to repeated obstructions by the Moria ruler Almami Amara, who considered a direct trade route between Timbo and Freetown a threat to his economic and political ambitions.

In 1822, Alexander Gordon Laing (born in Edinburgh 1794, died near Timbuktu 1826) was commissioned to attempt to appease the Susu rulers. He travelled twice to Moria and once to Sulima to negotiate the route, but failed to reach an agreement. The last British 19th-century expedition to Timbo (1841-3), only partly government-funded, was made by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) linguist William Cooper Thomson (born Balfour, Scotland, 1804, died in Timbo, 1843). He got as far as Timbo in June 1842,

but became embroiled in a power struggle between Almami Abubakar and his challenger Omar. Sources suggest that Thomson was detained in Timbo against his will for 18 months; he died in Timbo in November 1843 after a brief illness. His 12-year-old son, who had accompanied his father to Timbo, eventually returned to Freetown with the news of his father's death and with his papers (Mouser, 'Continuing British interest', pp. 278-9; Stanley, 'Narrative of Mr. William Cooper Thomson', pp. 106-7). The Freetown-Timbo trade corridor never materialised.

The second strategy considered by the St George's Bay Company aimed at setting up factories in coastal towns where well-established trade routes reached the Atlantic, e.g. in the estuaries of the Pongo, Nunez, Dembia and Forekaria rivers. The rationale for engaging in this coastal trade was part of an indirect plan to obstruct the slave trade by bulk-buying rice and other comestibles brought to the coast by caravans from the hinterland, and by paying higher than normal prices for them. In this way, the company would not merely procure much-needed commodities for the colony and stimulate legitimate trade along the northern rivers, but would also frustrate slavers and slaver service depots at such points as Iles de Los by buying up foodstuffs required for the transatlantic journey, thus boosting food prices and creating scarcity. This strategy, they thought, would ultimately drive the slavers out of business (Mouser, *Guinea journals*, p. 10).

In 1802, Richard Bright, councillor of the Sierra Leone Company, made an overland journey to the major coastal towns between the Conakry and Scarcies rivers, while later that year Alexander Smith, also employed by the Sierra Leone Company, undertook a similar voyage along the coast. Meanwhile, in 1798 missionaries of the Edinburgh Missionary Society, followed by the Society for Missions to Africa and the East (later renamed the Church Missionary Society) in 1804, had begun work in the Pongo river area (Mouser, 'Origins of Church Missionary Society accommodation', pp. 1-28). Although a factory was opened on the Pongo river as early as 1794, the Anglo-French wars and their aftermath had profoundly affected the trade on the coast, and the number of ships mooring at the coast had dwindled. When Britain abolished the slave-trade in 1807 and its ships began cruising the West African coastal regions to intercept slavers, most slavers began to avoid the northern rivers region altogether and the commercial significance of the region diminished even further. By that time, however, the company had already lost interest in the coastal region (Mouser, 'Editor's introduction', pp. 10-12).

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

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WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

British exploration of the northern rivers territory (Guinee Conakry), 1794-1843

DATE 1794-1843

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE English

DESCRIPTION

Most explorers engaged by the Sierra Leone Company and its successors to explore trade opportunities in the territory of the northern rivers recorded their observations in journals, many of which are still extant. Some of them (e.g. those of Matthews and Laing) were published shortly after the expeditions were completed. These have now been digitised and are accessible online. Other journals until recently only existed in manuscript form (e.g. those of Watt, Bright, Smith and O'Beirne), but in recent years they have been made available through the painstaking work of the Africanist Bruce Mouser. Matthew Winterbottom's journal is no longer extant, but some of his observations have been preserved through his brother Thomas's book, *An account of the native Africans in the neighbourhood of Sierra Leone* (1803), which repeatedly prefaces passages with 'as observed by my brother' or 'my brother was present'. Similarly, Lord Stanley drew on the (still extant) notes and letters of William Cooper Thomson when he was composing the narrative of Thomson's journey to Timbo that he published in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society London* (1846).

The journals, supplemented by materials from missionary sources and sporadic Muslim sources (e.g. letters to the governors of Freetown), give an impression of daily life in the northern rivers territory and the Futa Jallon hills, detailing observations on food, customs, dress, trade, politics, law and religion, as well as recording oral narratives on the political and religious history of the region, such as the Islamisation of the Susus, as well

as on the origin of the Muslim states of Moria and Futa Jallon. It seems likely that more sources than those described here offer details about Islam and the relations between Christians and Muslims in the northern rivers region, among them the archives of the Sierra Leone Company and its successor institutions, personal archives of its employees and of colonial officers, correspondence by resident traders, maritime journals, and papers and letters by the Liberated African settlers in Freetown.

Although they represent an exclusively European perspective, the exploration reports offer a wide range of details on Islam, its ritual and legal practices, its material culture, and its history in the area. Issues addressed include:

1. Observations and oral traditions on the history of Islamisation and the establishment of the imamates of Moria (Susu) and Futa Jallon (Fula), as well as on the short-lived but violent career of an itinerant *mahdī* among the Susu. Richard Bright, for example, observes that, by the early 19th century, most of the Susu elite had become Muslim (Bright, in *Guinea journals*, p. 73; page references are to the published editions of the journals by Mouser and others, rather than to the original manuscripts). Bright records traditions of eye-witnesses who narrated that the Islamisation of the Susu had taken place in the mid-18th century, when they were still children, as a joint venture of Mandinka and Fula Muslims (*Guinea journals*, pp. 88-9). He also records that some groups resisted embracing Islam but that there was continued pressure on non-Muslim groups to convert (*Guinea journals*, pp. 66-8). Bright, Winterbottom and O'Beirne all describe the upheaval in Susu country during the short and violent career of an itinerant charismatic *mahdī* called Fatta, who reportedly attracted a large number of followers, deposed a number of Susu chiefs and seems to have abused women on a rather large scale (Winterbottom, *An account*, pp. 246-50; Bright, in *Guinea journals*, pp. 96-7; O'Beirne, in *Guinea journals*, pp. 246-50). Bright (*Guinea journals*, pp. 47-8) records that this *mahdī* was

a native from Mondugo, the capital of Conya, which is one moon's journey from Fouricaria [Forekaria]. He came with an army of followers to this and the neighbouring rivers and beheaded some of the chiefs on the charge of heresy, saying that they did not pray and read upright. His learning and address, which appeared to these people surprising in so young a man, and a celebrated passage in the koran where a prophet to come is spoken of under the name of Mahadi [*mahdī*] conspired to delude the people. This imposter was killed by Brama Sayou [Brima Sayo] in the Benna country about 11 years ago.

2. Observations of ritual practice, such as funerary rites (Watt, *Journal*, pp. 65-6; Winterbottom, *An account*, pp. 245-6), Ramaḍān (Winterbottom, *An account*, p. 231), ritual slaughter (O'Beirne, in *Guinea journals*, p. 165), prayers (Bright, in *Guinea journals*, p. 39; O'Beirne, in *Guinea journals*, p. 240) and charity. James Watt (*Journal*, p. 40) observes that elderly people in Timbo received a weekly ration of rice from the Almami to meet their needs, which he in turn had collected in the form of tax. All explorers comment on the rigour with which prayers were observed. Winterbottom (*An account*, p. 231) records about the Muslims in Timbo: 'They attend to the ceremonial duties with such strictness as might well cause Christians to blush.' O'Beirne (in *Guinea journals*, p. 164) also observes that prayer had become part of the official ceremonies and public exchanges in the Susu town of Kukuna, which was part of the Islamic state of Moria.

3. Material religion, such as Muslim architecture, dress-code (Winterbottom, *An account*, p. 232; O'Beirne, in *Guinea journals*, p. 224), and the use of amulets (O'Beirne, in *Guinea journals*, p. 146; Stanley, 'Narrative', p. 118). While nearly all reports mention the ubiquitous presence of mosques, Watt, Winterbottom and Thomson make more detailed observations. Watt describes (*Journal*, p. 96) the existence of mosques without walls, fashioned from pieces of wood to indicate the walls, with pebbles as carpeting. Winterbottom records (*An account*, p. 232) that women in Bereira prayed in a circular building adjacent to the mosque rather than the mosque itself, with a man standing in the corridor to transmit what was being said in the mosque (see also Bright in *Guinea journals*, p. 39). He adds that European men were prohibited from entering the mosque, though they were, curiously enough, permitted to visit the women's premises. Thomson mentions mosques with separate sections for male and female worshippers (Stanley, 'Narrative', p. 116), and says that he was repeatedly allowed to conduct his personal (Christian) devotions in the mosque (Stanley, 'Narrative', pp. 114, 117).

4. Muslim literacy and education (e.g. Watt, *Journal*, pp. 22-3; Bright in *Guinea journals*, pp. 40, 48, 73; Winterbottom, *An account*, pp. 217-21). Most reports give detailed descriptions of qur'anic schools and comment on the profusion of books and literary skills of the ruling elite. When Watt was staying at Labé, he met the king and some elders engrossed in books under an orange tree, and exchanged views with them on the creation narrative and on prophets such as David and Solomon (Watt, *Journal*, pp. 22-9). Bright (in *Guinea journals*, p. 54) records that both Almami Amara of Moria and his brother Senasi [Senesi] were renowned among the Susu for their erudition and proficiency in Arabic. Both had been educated in Timbo, a

strategy that facilitated good education as well as networking opportunities to get acquainted with the future elite among the Fula. According to Bright, Senasi had also visited Mecca and had passed through Hausaland, Timbuktu, Segu and Timbo on his return journey (Bright, in *Guinea journals*, p. 56). Both the king of Labé, Ali You Malfi ma Labay, and Almami Sadu of Timbo indicated to Watt that they were interested in sending one of their sons to England to be educated (*Journal*, pp. 23, 57), demonstrating how education (both European and Islamic) was considered a means of acquiring knowledge as well as forging political ties.

5. Legal system. Several of the journals report that the legal system in the northern rivers territory and the Futa Jallon was based on the *sharī'a*, with O'Beirne explicitly observing that '[i]n trying criminals, they are wholly guided by the Koran' (Watt, *Journal*, pp. 39, 68-9; Bright in *Guinea journals*, pp. 40-1, 59; O'Beirne in *Guinea journals*, pp. 236, 242-3, 246). Bright's journal offers a detailed description of the procedure at Mandingo tribunals, recording that witnesses were to take an oath on the Qur'an and that legal books were to be consulted before the sentence was pronounced (Bright in *Guinea journals*, pp. 39-40). Both Watt and Bright were fascinated by the penal law and Watt witnessed the punishment of an adulterer who received 102 lashes and had his hair shaved off, describing it in some detail (Watt, *Journal*, p. 69). Bright (in *Guinea journals*, p. 59) adds that, among the Mandingoes, free persons received a set number of lashes, but slaves were whipped to death for adultery and similar crimes. Free persons were never sold into slavery for such offences. In Timbo, O'Beirne and his crew were ordered to refrain from socialising with the local women on pain of having their throats cut, leading O'Beirne to give a detailed description of the execution of convicts and the observation that they were denied a Muslim funeral (O'Beirne in *Guinea journals*, p. 236).

6. The slave trade. Given the abolitionist ideology of the Sierra Leone Company, it is not surprising to find in the journals long expositions of the evils of the slave-trade and the benefits of legitimate trade (e.g. Watt, *Journal*, pp. 33, 44, 55, 62, 231; O'Beirne in *Guinea journals*, p. 168). Both Watt and O'Beirne perceived that slave labour and the slave trade were essential to the economies of Moria and Timbo. Watt (*Journal*, pp. 51-2) documents that slaves outnumbered the free people in Timbo by five to one, while O'Beirne (in *Guinea journals*, pp. 217, 220) observes that most of the agriculture depended on slaves, who lived in separate slave villages surrounding Timbo. Bright (in *Guinea journals*, p. 40) also notes that slaves were considered a form of currency, recording that the fee for a three-year cycle of qur'anic education consisted of a slave or the equivalent in cash.

He also records that some Muslims exploited the local appeal of education and set up a qur'anic school as a lure get children into their clutches, subsequently selling them into slavery.

Watt was told that religious wars were ordered by Muḥammad and that the Qur'an legitimised enslaving non-Muslims (Watt, *Journal*, pp. 44, 62), though another of his informants told him that religion was only a pretence for war and that slaving was the real objective (Watt, p. 70). Bright, in conversation with an *ʿālim* in Bereira, also notes that local traditions connected slavery to Noah's curse on his son Ham (Genesis 9:20-7):

My curiosity led me to ask Le Hai Booboo [Lahai Bubu], one of the most learned school masters of Fouricaria [Forekaria], what reason their books assigned for the difference of colour in the black and white people. He told me that, according to their books, that mark of distinction was the effect of Noah's curse on Hama and his posterity for discovering their father's nakedness, by which also they were doomed to sell each other to the White people. (Bright, in *Guinea journals*, p. 91)

SIGNIFICANCE

The journals offer a wealth of detail on the history as well as the daily practice of Islam in the northern rivers region in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and provide a window into the political, economic and religious dynamics of the region on the eve of European colonisation, underscoring the dominance of the Fula imamate in the Futa Jallon and its complex relations with the Susu state of Moria. The journals also detail how representatives of trading companies and political authorities, though ideologically and religiously motivated, endeavoured to establish diplomatic relations with powerful Muslim empires in the region by foregrounding common interests of trade and knowledge acquisition. The representations of Islam and Muslims in the journals are, generally speaking, descriptive and respectful.

The expeditions and the expedition reports, as well as the French and German translations of some of them, are indicative of the growing Western European interest in West Africa in terms of its political structures, its economic possibilities, and its religious landscape. Governments, chartered companies, private traders, and missionary societies alike relied on information from these and similar reports to develop their political, commercial and missionary strategies.

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