

Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

Volume 11. South and East Asia, Africa and
the Americas (1600-1700)

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LEIDEN • BOSTON
2017

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Richard Jobson

DATE OF BIRTH	Unknown; probably last quarter of the 16 th century
PLACE OF BIRTH	Unknown; probably England or Ireland
DATE OF DEATH	Unknown; after 1626
PLACE OF DEATH	Unknown

BIOGRAPHY

Richard Jobson was an agent of the Guinea Company who traded for seven months on the Gambia River in the years 1620-1. Apart from his journey to Guinea, few details of his life are known. Jobson was probably born in the last quarter of the 16th century, possibly in England; Gamble and Hair also suggest Ireland as a conceivable place of birth (Gamble and Hair, 'Introduction', pp. 38-9). From his writings it can be deduced that Jobson had received some formal education, possibly at a grammar school. The 1620-1 voyage to the Gambia River appears to have been his first journey in the service of the Guinea Company.

On his return to England, Jobson published his travelogue under the title *The golden trade: or, A discovery of the River Gambia* (1623). He appears to have embarked on another voyage to Guinea in 1624 or 1625, but the expedition seems to have been abandoned as early as Dover. In 1626 or 1627, Jobson wrote a petition to Charles I, pleading – in vain – for the resumption of trade on the Gambia River. The petition is the last known record of Richard Jobson's life.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Secondary

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WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

The golden trade: or, A discovery of the River Gambia

DATE 1623

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE English

DESCRIPTION

The golden trade is an account of Richard Jobson's seven months' sojourn along the Gambia River in the years 1620 and 1621. The book was published in 1623, shortly after he returned to England, under the full title *The golden trade: or, A discovery of the River Gambia and the golden trade of the Aethiopians. Also, the commerce with a great blacke merchant, called Bukor Sano, and his report of the houses covered with gold, and other strange observations for the good of our owne country. Set down as they were collected in travellings, part of the yeares, 1620 and 1621*. The book is about 55,000 words long (119 pages in the Gamble and Hair edition) and appears to have been based on a daily journal kept by Jobson during his journey. The original journal is no longer extant, but two excerpts of about 5,000 and 10,000 words respectively have survived in Samuel Purchas' multi-volume *Purchas his pilgrimes* (1625).

In *The golden trade*, Jobson presents his material thematically. He gives a detailed description of the Gambia River, the people living on its banks and the flora and fauna. It is noteworthy that Jobson mentions his African guides by name, a rare occurrence in 17th-century European travelogues on Africa.

Throughout the text, Jobson makes intermittent observations on religious matters, such as the presence of Muslim religious leaders at the court and the importance attached by non-Muslim peoples to amulets made by marabouts. More significant than these short observations, however, is Jobson's lengthy exposé entitled 'The discourse of their Mari-buckes or religious men' (Gamble and Hair, *Golden trade*, pp. 122-36). In about 14 pages, Jobson portrays the religious life in the town of Setico (Sutukoba, in present-day Gambia), which he describes as a holy place, a place of pilgrimage, populated exclusively by marabouts and their slaves. Jobson appears to have spent an extended period of time here. The text consists of material he gathered from his informants as well as his personal observations, commended by Gamble and Hair for their 'freshness' and identified as deriving 'largely from his ignorance about the religion' (Gamble and Hair, *Golden trade*, p. 40).

Jobson's account includes detailed descriptions of ablutions and prayer rituals, as well as eye-witness accounts of the funeral-rites for the chief marabout of Setico and the performance of male circumcision. He also describes, for example, the writings and learning of the marabouts, their education system and the value they attach to literacy, their abstinence from alcohol, their itinerant lifestyle, their immunity in intertribal wars, their manufacture of amulets and their keenness to acquire paper.

In addition to his portrayal of Islamic life in Setico, Jobson's text includes observations regarding the differences and commonalities between Christianity and Islam. As commonalities Jobson identifies the shared belief in monotheism as well as shared knowledge of figures such as Adam and Eve, Noah and Moses. These observations led Jobson to the erroneous conclusion that the Gambian marabouts were acquainted with the Old Testament. The main difference between Christianity and Islam, as he saw it, was the Muslim belief in Jesus as a prophet, rather than as the Son of God. As far as is known Jobson did not speak any of the indigenous languages or Portuguese, and his information was probably mediated by translators and/or informants.

In general, Jobson's descriptions of Islam and Muslims in Guinea are sympathetic and respectful; they testify to a genuine curiosity about Islam and the lives of the Gambian marabouts. He seems to have been courteously received by the Muslim leadership in Setico and was allowed to attend intimate life-cycle rituals such the funeral for a chief marabout and the performance of male circumcision.

SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of Jobson's text is threefold. First, it gives rich, detailed information about the life and practices of 17th-century rural Muslim communities along the Gambia River. Second, it seems to indicate that, even in West African Muslim communities that had had little or no contact with Christians or Christianity, there was knowledge of anti-Christian polemics. Jobson mentions that the marabouts of Setico spoke with him about the difference between Christian and Muslim views about Jesus, and did so with arguments such as: 'God cannot be seen', 'no one can see God and live' and 'God does not have knowledge of woman'. Third, Jobson's text also gives an insight into how the Setico Muslim community endeavoured to make theological sense of the fact that a people who clearly had erroneous religious opinions were richly blessed and superior in knowledge and skills: 'for amongst themselves a prophesy remains, that they shall be subdued, and remaine subject to a white people'. Only

after the period of subjugation had passed and 'the fullnesse of time is come' would they too receive similar blessings (Gamble and Hair, *Golden trade*, p. 130).

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Richard Jobson, *The golden trade: or, A discovery of the River Gambia and the golden trade of the Aethiopians. Also, the commerce with a great blacke merchant, called Bukor Sano, and his report of the houses covered with gold, and other strange observations for the good of our owne country. Set down as they were collected in travelings, part of the yeares, 1620 and 1621*, London, 1623 (repr. Amsterdam, 1968); STC 14623 (digitalised version available through EEBO)

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