Aballow’s Story: The experience of slavery in mid-nineteenth century West Africa, as told by a victim
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[draft – not to be quoted without the author’s permission]

My paper focuses on a group of documents that record the life story of an enslaved African woman, Aballow, on the Gold and ‘Slave’ Coasts in the 1840s and 1850s. These documents were generated at Accra in 1851 by an investigation of the acting judicial assessor of the British settlements on the Gold Coast of a case of suspected slave dealing by a European trader. In this investigation, Aballow, a number of fellow slaves and other Africans appeared as witnesses and testified to her experiences. Their testimonies provide a rare and exceptionally rich account of the career and experiences of a female slave in West Africa in the era of the illegal slave trade. However, how reliable are these testimonies? What use are they for increasing our understanding of the experience of slavery and the slave trade? These are the questions that I try to assess in this paper. In order to do so, I shall, first, contextualise the documents by explaining the historical circumstances in which they were produced. This will be followed by a discussion of two factors that shaped them, the judicial context and the editorial mediation. In the last part, I will point out some aspects of the history of slavery and slave trade for which they give information.

The Acting Judicial Assessor’s Investigation of John Marman’s Affairs (Accra, 1851)
By the mid-1830s, the Atlantic slave trade had been abolished by the European countries and their former colonies in the Americas. However, slave exports continued illegally, particularly from the ‘Slave’ Coast (extending between the River Volta, in today’s Ghana, and Lagos, in today’s Nigeria) with its central port at Ouidah (in today’s Republic of Benin). British cruisers strove to suppress this trade by patrolling this coast, among others, capturing suspicious vessels and sending them for adjudication to the court of mixed commission to Sierra Leone (and, after 1842, other places such as Luanda). On the neighbouring Gold Coast, where the
Europeans had been maintaining fortified trading posts for more than 300 years and where there was a strong British presence, slave embarkations had ceased soon after the British abolition of the slave trade in 1808. However, slaves continued to leak from the eastern Gold Coast via canoe transport and overland routes into the western Slave Coast, from where they were shipped to the Americas. From the late 1830s, the British impatience with the continuing slave trade led to a number of increasingly aggressive measures. In 1839, the Equipment Act enabled British cruisers to capture Portuguese slave ships that were equipped for the trade, rather than – as was necessary before – actually carrying slaves. In 1842, the senior officer of the British naval squadron for the suppression of the slave trade on the West African coast threatened to ‘knock down’ Little Popo (today’s Aneho/ Togo), on the western Slave Coast, should any more slaves be exported from there. In 1845, the Palmerston Act unilaterally legitimated the seizure of Brazilian slave ships suspected of the slave trade by the British navy. In 1850, the British took over the Danish settlements in West Africa, thus strengthening their presence on the eastern Gold and western Slave Coast. In 1851, they bombarded Lagos and deposed Oba Kosoko, who had refused to sign an anti-slave trade treaty. In January 1852, the British navy imposed a blockade on the ports on the Slave Coast and prevented all trade. The blockade was lifted only after the local chiefs had signed anti-slave trade treaties.\textsuperscript{1}

It was in this context of these efforts to suppress the Atlantic slave trade that in November 1851 the British authorities at Accra carried out an investigation of the affairs of the British trader John Marman.\textsuperscript{2} Marman was an important personage in the commercial life of the Gold and Slave Coasts, particularly in the development of the export trade in agricultural produce. By the time of the investigation, he had been active on the West African coast for about forty years. He was based at Accra, where he lived with his wife, Abenah, but he maintained factories at various places on the eastern Gold Coast and western Slave Coast, at Winnebah, Prampram, Adafia, Kedzi, and Little Popo. Since the early 1830s he had been working as an agent of the English firm of Messrs W B Hutton & Sons besides trading on his own account. At Marman’s subsequent trial in Sierra Leone, one of the European witnesses considered him to be ‘the father of the palm-oil trade in the Bights about Popo and that neighbourhood [i.e. on the western Slave Coast].’\textsuperscript{3} Another witness credited him with controlling ‘two-thirds of the whole business at Accra. He was the most active man [i.e.}

\textsuperscript{1} For Little Popo, see Silke Strickrodt, ‘Afro-European Trade Relations on the Western Slave Coast, 16\textsuperscript{th} to 19\textsuperscript{th} Centuries’, unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 2003, chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{3} TNA: CO 267/228, encls. in N. W. Macdonald to Sir J. Packington Bart, Sierra Leone, 21 April 1852: ‘Chief Justice’s notes taken at the trial of Marman indicted for Slave dealing [n. d.], (R. A. Oldfield).
The factory at Little Popo had been established by him for Messrs Hutton & Sons in the mid-1830s. It was located in the house of George Lawson, an important African trader, and was managed by Lawson’s eldest son, George Latty Lawson. By the mid-1840s, Marman also had a private concern at Little Popo, having married George Latty Lawson’s sister Sashey, who traded on his account in a separate establishment. Besides being married to Abenah at Accra and Sashey at Little Popo, Marman also had an English wife, Elizabeth, and children in London.

The investigation of his affairs was prompted by a complaint by Amatey Bouchee, who is identified as ‘of Moesay’ (that is Mossi, in today’s Burkina Faso) and a ‘slave of Amadee of the Dutch town of Accra’, to the magistrate at Christiansborg (former Danish Accra) that he had not been paid for services rendered to Marman several years earlier. It turned out that these services involved the sending of slaves from Marman’s household at Accra to his factory at Little Popo, a port notorious for its role in the ‘illegal’ slave trade. This appeared to implicate Marman in slave dealing, a serious crime which carried a punishment of up to fourteen years ‘transportation beyond Seas’ or up to five years hard labour. In view of the seriousness of the allegations, the acting judicial assessor of the British settlements on the Gold Coast, Brodie Cruickshank, took charge of the case.

Cruickshank’s investigation was meticulous, involving the examination of numerous African witnesses. It revealed what Cruickshank regarded as ‘circumstances of a very criminal nature’. Marman’s household in Accra comprised a large number of slaves who were employed in ‘domestic service’, apparently including work in his palm oil factory. These slaves were represented by Marman as belonging to his African wife, Abenah, rather than himself, which Cruickshank however believed to be a pretence by which Marman tried to evade the laws which prohibited British subjects from holding slaves but which did not contest the right of ‘natives’ to do so. Some of these slaves had been sent from Accra to his factory at Little Popo where, it was suspected, they had been sold, on his instruction, to slave traders and transported across the Atlantic.

Moreover, Cruickshank discovered that Marman had previously, in 1849, been

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4 Ibid., (J. Effenhausen).
5 For more information concerning the Lawsons’ role in the political and commercial life of the region, and references to Sashey as ‘Mrs Marman’, see Adam Jones and Peter Sebald (eds), An African Family Archive: The Lawsons of Little Popo/Aneho (Togo) 1841-1938 (Oxford: Oxford UP for the British Academy, 2005).
6 TNA: CO 96/23, encl. in no 87, S. J. Hill to Earl Grey, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851: B. Cruickshank to S. J. Hill, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851 (Amatey Bouchee’s deposition, Accra, 12 Nov. 1851).
8 TNA: CO 96/23, encl. in no 87, S. J. Hill to Earl Grey, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851: B. Cruickshank to S. J. Hill, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851, p. 1.
investigated for similar offences. This earlier investigation had also been prompted by the complaint of one of Marman’s agents, Odattey, of Marman’s negligence in paying him for taking slaves from Accra to the western Slave Coast. In total five slaves were alleged to have been involved, four men and one boy, the latter having been taken to Agoué (another notorious slave trading port about 10 km or miles to the west of Little Popo) and sold into the Atlantic trade. Abenah had assumed responsibility for the latter case, which was the most serious as it involved slave dealing. She had been fined for it, the leniency of this punishment being explained with allowances made due to ‘her sex and the insufficiency of prison accommodation for females.’ The fate of the other slaves had never been ascertained.

Marman had maintained that two of them had died of illness and that the others were still at his factory at Little Popo. He had been ordered to produce the latter to the Christiansborg magistrate, but when he failed to do so the investigation had been allowed to peter out.

These circumstances convinced Cruickshank that the sending of slaves from Marman’s Accra household to Little Popo was ‘frequent and systematic’ and he was determined ‘to bring the guilt clearly home’ to Marman. However, he faced two major obstacles. First, he found it difficult to prove that Marman himself rather than Abenah was responsible for the alleged offences, as Marman insisted that they were Abenah’s responsibility – a strategy that had been successfully adopted in the 1849 investigation. Second, Cruickshank found it impossible to determine the exact time when the alleged offences had occurred, as dates meant little to most of his African witnesses and they were unable to remember them. These problems were compounded by the complicated judicial situation on the Gold Coast, which was not a British territory. The British settlements on the Gold Coast were simply trading posts and, legally, British authority reached no further than the walls of their forts. This had several implications for Cruickshank’s investigation. It meant that the dates of the alleged offences became important because the relevant piece of legislation, the Slave Trade Act of 1843, had come into effect relatively recently, on 1 November 1843. This Act extended the provisions of the Slave Trade Act of 1824 to British subjects living outside the British Empire, effectively prohibiting slave dealing as well as the holding of slaves who had been acquired after this date.

The absence of territorial rights also meant that the British authorities on the Gold

9 TNA: CO 96/23, encl. in no 87, S. J. Hill to Earl Grey, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851: B. Cruickshank to S. J. Hill, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851, p. 34, quoting the records of the police office ([British] Accra, 17 Dec. 1849).
10 TNA: CO 96/23, encl. in no 87, S. J. Hill to Earl Grey, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851: B. Cruickshank to S. J. Hill, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851, p. 14-15.
Coast were unable to try British subjects – such as Marman – for serious crimes but had to refer them to ‘colonial courts.’\textsuperscript{12} However, they were able to sentence Africans – such as Abenah – as a result of a growth of informal power, which for a long time had included administering justice among the African population in the vicinity of the forts. This practice of administering justice had been regularised by the ‘Bond of 1844’, which was a voluntary agreement by African rulers on the Gold Coast to accept British jurisdiction. Judicial functions were the responsibility of the judicial assessor, whose post had been created in 1843, when the Crown took over the British settlements on the Gold Coast from the Council of Merchants.\textsuperscript{13} This justice was not based on British law but on local law and included an acceptance of the institution of slavery (which is what Marman had made use of in the organisation of his household). According to Cruickshank, British interference with local slavery was restricted to cases where the owner wanted to ‘sell or transport the slave out of the country or to districts not under the protection of the British government.’ Moreover, the judicial assessor has also been able to protect the slaves from ill treatment, to ameliorate their condition by improving the laws applicable to master and slave; to afford greater facilities for their manumission; and to support them in their resistance [sic] of all doubtful and ill defined claims upon them for servitude. With the transfer of a slave from one master to another within the territories under British protection he has not the right of interference unless it shall appear that such transfer was made by compulsion and for the purpose of punishment…\textsuperscript{14}

In the end, Cruickshank charged both Marman and Abenah. Marman was indicted on five distinct counts. Four of these involved the sending of five slaves from Accra to Little Popo, and consigning two of these slaves for sale into the Atlantic trade. The fifth charge referred to the case of Aballow, who had been taken in the opposite direction, from Little Popo to Accra. This charge was for having brought the person of Aballow in his vessel from Popo to British Accra, and having there feloniously consigned her to slavery by giving her as a present to his mistress Ebner [Abenah], and for afterwards aiding and abetting in the barbarous and cruel treatment of the said Aballow, and for being accessory either before or after the act, to the said Aballow being sent from his factory house in British Accra, and sold into slavery in Akim.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} TNA: CO 96/23, encl. in no 87, S. J. Hill to Earl Grey, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851; B. Cruickshank to S. J. Hill, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851, pp. 9-11.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, 20-22.
Abenah was charged with the offence of ‘cruelly maltreating her slave [Aballow], and of transporting her for sale to a district of the country where she might be less under the protecting care of the government.’

Abenah was found guilty and punished with two years’ imprisonment. Marman was sent to Sierra Leone for trial, together with two witnesses, one of them George Latty Lawson. In Sierra Leone, things became complicated due to the legal intricacies of the case, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. The outcome of these complication was the decision of the authorities in Sierra Leone to commit Marman for trial on only one charge, the transportation of two slaves from Accra to Little Popo and their consignment for sale into the Atlantic slave trade. Aballow’s case was not dealt with as Abenah had already been found guilty and punished for it. Marman’s trial, which took place in March 1852, ended in the verdict ‘not guilty’. This was due partly to the inability of the (African) witnesses to cope with the cross examination. To the disappointment of the Gold Coast authorities, Marman returned to the Gold Coast a free man. However, the investigation had ruined his business as well as his reputation and he disappeared from the records a few years later.

*Aballow’s Story*

Aballow appeared in Cruickshank’s investigation as a witness for the prosecution. She was the only one of the six slaves on whose account charges were brought forward who gave first-hand testimony because she was the only one of these slaves whom Cruickshank succeeded in tracing and bringing to Accra. In her testimony, she gives a summary of her life as a slave, focusing on her experiences in Marman’s household. Her account is brief, comprising just 433 words, but poignant. She begins by stating that she had been taken away from her country at such a young age that she does not know her origins. She then records the way in which she came into Marman’s hands, her good looks having attracted his attention while she was in a slave trader’s slave chain at Little Popo and intended for shipment across the Atlantic. Marman purchased her and took her to Accra, where she was given as a present to his wife, Abenah, and was charged with the care of Abenah’s (and Marman’s) child. She was subject to sexual exploitation by Marman, which resulted in a pregnancy, and to physical abuse, one particularly severe instance of which resulted in a miscarriage. She was then sold to Akyem,

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17 TNA: CO 96/23, encl. in no 87, S. J. Hill to Earl Grey, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851; B. Cruickshank to S. J. Hill, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851 (Aballow’s deposition, Accra, 12 Nov. 1851).
where she married and had two children. She was still living there – probably still enslaved – at the time of the investigation, choosing to return there after giving her testimony.

Aballow’s testimony is supplemented by the statements of six other individuals, three of whom were witnesses for the prosecution and three of whom were witnesses for the defence. The latter were Ana Baissa, Coffee Simpessah and Yammingay, who had all been fellow slaves of Aballow’s in Marman’s household and who still lived there – still enslaved – at the time of the investigation. The witnesses of the prosecution were George Latty Lawson, Marman’s factor at Little Popo, Yantchey, who had also been a slave of Abenah’s but who had meanwhile left Marman’s household, and Ammah, ‘a native of Dutch Accra’ who had taken Aballow to Akyem and sold her there. The statements of these witnesses are brief, no longer than a paragraph, and focus on particular events: George Latty Lawson’s statement deals with Marman’s acquisition of Aballow at Little Popo; Ana Baissa’s, Coffee Simpessah’s, Yammingay’s and Yantchey’s deal with the physical abuse that Aballow suffered in Marman’s household at Accra; and Ammah’s and Yammingay’s deal with her sale to Akyem.

The dates of the events recorded in these testimonies are difficult to determine. As noted above, the lack of dates presented a major problem for Cruickshank’s investigation (and one of the reasons why the case against Marman fell apart during the trial at Sierra Leone and he walked free). Nevertheless, from information given in the testimonies it is possible to narrow down the period when this happened. According to Aballow’s testimony, she was sold to Akyem ‘about 8 Years ago’, that is about November 1843. (NB This was just when the Slave Trade Act of 1843 came into effect = coincidence?) Furthermore, George Latty Lawson identified the slave trader at Little Popo who sold Aballow to Marman. This was Isidore de Souza, the eldest son of Francisco Felix de Souza of Ouidah, who worked at Little Popo as his father’s agent. He is documented to have been stationed at Little Popo between 1840 and 1849, returning to Ouidah following the death of his father and the destruction of his house at Little Popo by a fire in May 1849, in order to succeed his father as ‘Chacha’. 18 According to this, the events described by Aballow would have occurred between 1840 and 1843 or 1844. 19 This would mean that the time that Aballow spent in Marman’s household was not very long

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19 Unfortunately, the Lawson family archive does not help here as the correspondence preserved in it starts only in 1843, with only two exceptions. However, for the period between 1843 and 1850 many visits by Marman to Little Popo and the western Slave Coast are documented (Jones/Sebald, *An African Family Archive*).
but a few years at most.

It is very tempting to speculate about aspects of Aballow’s life, such as her age and her origins. However, there is very little information to go on in these testimonies. Regarding her age, there is Lawson’s observation that she was ‘small’ at the time Marman acquired her, referring probably to her young age rather than (merely) her size. However, at Accra she became pregnant, which means that she was nubile. Supposing that she really did not stay at Accra very long, this would mean that she probably was in her (early) teens when she came into Marman’s hands and in her (early) twenties when she gave her testimony.\(^{20}\)

As regards her origins, she was unable to give information as ‘she was carried away from her native Country at such an early age that she does not know the place of her birth.’\(^{21}\) According to Lawson, she had been one in a group of 250 slaves who had been brought ‘from leeward to Papo to be shipped.’\(^{22}\) Most likely, this meant that she had come from Ouidah, Dahomey’s port and the centre of the illegal slave trade on the Slave Coast. The decentralisation of Ouidah’s trade after the Equipment Act of 1839 meant that the slave traders based there sent slaves in canoes along the coastal lagoons in order to be embarked from places to the east and west, as these were less rigorously watched by the cruisers of the British navy’s anti-slave trade patrol.\(^{23}\) However, beyond Ouidah it is difficult (impossible?) to trace Aballow’s movements. Dahomey was one of the biggest suppliers of slaves in the illegal trade, acquiring slaves from a huge area through warfare, raiding and trade networks with the interior.\(^{24}\) Neither does her name seem to give more information. These days, ‘Abalo’ is used by the Ewe, Mina and Fon, that is groups on what used to be the western and central Slave Coast and its immediate interior. It means ‘to move away the bad spirits’ and is used by the Ewe, Mina and Fon for children ‘who are born with the propensity to attract negative spirits.’\(^{25}\) The question however is who gave Aballow this name, was it her family or (one of)

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20 In his published account of his sojourn on the Gold Coast, Cruickshank notes that the age of marriage for girls there was ‘about the thirteenth year’ (B. Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa* (1853), 2nd ed., London: Frank Cass, 1966, 193).
21 TNA: CO 96/23, encl. in no 87, S. J. Hill to Earl Grey, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851: B. Cruickshank to S. J. Hill, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851 (Aballow’s deposition, Accra, 12 Nov. 1851).
22 TNA: CO 96/23, encl. in no 87, Gov. S. J. Hill to Earl Grey, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851: B. Cruickshank to Gov. S. J. Hill, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851.
23 This practice was documented by several contemporary observers. For an account of a slave who was transported from Ouidah along the lagoon in order to be embarked elsewhere, see Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua; His Passage from Slavery to Freedom in African and America*, ed. by Robin Law and Paul Lovejoy (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2001), 148-9.
24 If Aballow had been captured by Dahomey in the 1830s, it is likely that she was of Yoruba or Mahi origins, as these groups were the main targets of Dahomean campaigns. For the 1840s, Le Herissé gives the following lists of Dahomean campaigns: [1841] Houebi (Nagots); [1842] Sakete (Nagots); [1843] cultures d'Atakpame; [1844] Ouece; [1845] Mondjiba (Nagots) (*L'Ancien royaume du Dahomey: moeurs, religions, histoire*, Paris, 1911, 323).
her owners? The latter seems more likely, particularly given the young age at which she was enslaved. Perhaps it was George Latty Lawson’s sister Sashey, under whose control the girl came just after she had been acquired by Marman, or Abenah, to whom she was given at Accra. This is also supported by information concerning some of the other slaves involved in this trial. For example, Coffee Simpessah who identified himself as a Mossi had an Akan name (Coffee or Kofi being the name given to boys born on a Friday). Another example is one of the slaves who had been sent by Marman to Little Popo, a Krepi woman, and who allegedly been given as a present to Sashey. With reference to her, George Latty Lawson stated that ‘[h]e did not know her name, but his sister called her Kakaye.’ However, the wording is ambiguous and it is not clear whether he meant that Sashie gave her this name or whether she called her by this name because she had learnt it from the woman?

The Judicial Context and Editorial Mediation

The testimonies of Aballow and the other witnesses make for gripping reading. Due to their concision and richness in graphic detail, they produce an immediacy that rarely characterises the ‘standard’ slave narratives with their elaborate style and propagandist overtones. However, as historical sources these testimonies present us with problems that are similar to those of other slave narratives. In particular, there are two factors that influence their authenticity and reliability, and which I want to discuss in the following. These are the judicial context in which they were generated and the editorial mediation.

As concerns the judicial context, the fact that these testimonies were produced in a court room casts doubt over their reliability. In the court room, people are under great pressure to say the ‘right’ thing. Rather than stating the truth, even as they understand it, they have their own reasons for saying things or not saying them or saying them in a particular way. This is clearly shown in these testimonies, which, while agreeing on the major points of events, show remarkable discrepancies in the details. In the following, I will examine these discrepancies, focussing on the three episodes that became the focus of the investigation: the purchase of Aballow at Little Popo, the flogging she suffered at Accra and her sale to Akyem. I start the flogging, for which there is the largest number of testimonies and perspectives.

26 TNA: CO 96/23, encl. in no 87, Gov. S. J. Hill to Earl Grey, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851: B. Cruickshank to Gov. S. J. Hill, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851.
Aballow mentions three floggings, all three of which were inflicted by Abenah. For the first, she gives no reason and states that Marman was away at Little Popo at the time. The second is explained as a punishment for having ‘allowed the Child to sit down among tar’ and was allegedly ordered by Marman. The third is said to have been due to Abenah’s jealousy after Aballow had become pregnant by Marman. It was meted out while Marman was there, in the house, and resulted not only in her back being ‘much cut’ but also in a miscarriage. This flogging is described in detail: she remembers being held over a puncheon by four people, among them Coffee Simpessah, one of the witnesses of the defence.

The other witnesses describe just one flogging. According to the defence witnesses, this was a punishment for an injury suffered by the Abenah’s child while in Aballow’s care, involving tar getting stuck to his bottom. Ana Baissa echoes Aballow’s explanation for the second flogging, implying that the child’s injury was a result of an accident or negligence: ‘one day [Aballow] allowed [the child] to fall into the tar on the floor.’ Coffee Simpessah and Yammingay however testify that Aballow had wilfully hurt the child. According to the former, ‘[Aballow] took care of her Mistress’s child and one day put tar up its fundament’, while Yammingay noted that ‘Aballow closed up the Child’s fundament with Pitch, which caused the Child to become Sick and Cry.’ All three of them state that Abenah reacted by flogging Aballow severely, with Coffee Simpessah and Yammingay implying that this was a mother’s passionate reaction to the injury done to her child. According to Yammingay,

When the Mother Marman’s Wife discovered what Aballow had done, she was very angry, and flogged her Severely with a Whip. She (Mrs Marman) used the Whip severely. Aballow’s back was cut. The child was sick for some time. It took three days to get the Pitch from the child’s bottom by means of Palm Oil […]

While agreeing that Aballow’s back was cut, they deny any knowledge of her pregnancy and miscarriage, Yammingay and Yammingay explicitly so, Ana Baissa implicitly by not referring it. All three make clear that Marman played no role in this incident; Yammingay does not mention him at all while Ana Baissa and Coffee Simpessah positively state that he was away at Little Popo at the time, thus contradicting Aballow’s statement that he was there and (with regard to the second flogging) had even ordered the punishment.

Yantchey, who was a witness of the prosecution, gives a very different version of events. She implies that she had not been present at the flogging but saw Aballow shortly afterwards, ‘laying on the floor with her back much cut and complaining of great pain in her belly.’ She remembered Aballow telling her not only that the flogging had been due Abenah’s jealousy in consequence of Aballow’s pregnancy by Marman (thus confirming Aballow’s
statement), but also that it had been Marman himself who had meted out the punishment: ‘[Aballow] said her Mistress, Marman’s Wife, had been jealous of her and had caused Captain Marman to flog her and that being pregnant the flogging had made her miscarry.’ Furthermore, she testified to seeing ‘the abortion on the floor.’ At the end of her statement she again emphasized having been told by Aballow that Marman himself had flogged her.

Ammah, another witness for the prosecution, also supports the possibility that Aballow was pregnant. He did not witness the flogging of Aballow but saw ‘recent sores on her back’ when he took her for sale to Akyem. Although he states that he did not know that she had been pregnant, he remembered her being ‘sickly all the way’ and telling him ‘her belly was sore.’

What to make of these discrepancies? They may seem baffling on the face of it, but an examination that takes into account the courtroom context shows that they result from the two different strategies used by the contesting parties. Cruickshank wanted to build a case against Marman and therefore needed to prove two things: first, that Aballow had been treated cruelly and, secondly, that Marman had taken an active part in this. Therefore, the witnesses of the prosecution emphasise Marman’s role in the abuse as well as Aballow’s pregnancy and miscarriage and Abenah’s maliciousness (as she caused Aballow to be beaten out of jealousy). The strategy of the defence was just opposite. They tried to show, first, that the treatment of Aballow, while severe, was not cruel and, second, that it had been Abenah’s doing rather than that of Marman (this being the strategy that had worked so well in the 1849 investigation). Thus, in the version of the events presented by the defence’s witnesses, Marman played no role at all but was away at Little Popo. The responsibility for the flogging was solely Abenah’s. Moreover, in these testimonies (particularly those by Yammingay and Coffee Simpessah), Aballow is represented as a wayward slave whose punishment is justified by a serious misdemeanour, that is the wilfull injury of her mistress’ child. They deny any knowledge of her pregnancy and miscarriage, making the punishment appear less cruel.

These same strategies also influenced the witnesses’ representations of the second episode on which Cruickshank’s attention focussed, relating to the sale of Aballow to Akyem. The crucial issues here were the reason for which Aballow was sold, the identity of her seller (Marman or Abenah?) and, if it was Abenah, was she responsible for Aballow’s sale to Akyem (which according to Cruickshank was illegal as it meant selling her ‘out of the country or to districts not under the protection of the British government’)? Or did she merely sell Aballow to
Amahsaye (which was not a crime as he lived in Dutch Accra, unless the transfer had been made ‘by compulsion and for the purpose of punishment), who then decided to sell her to Akyem with the help of Ammah?

According to Aballow, her sale to Akyem had taken place soon after the flogging that had led to her miscarriage, once her back had healed. She offers no explanation for it but implies a connection with the flogging, thus indicating that they happened for the one and same reason, that is Abenah’s jealousy. Yammingay and Coffee Simpessah, however, clearly represent it as a separate punishment for another serious misdemeanour by Aballow: the theft of beads from a women in Dutch town. In their version, this was the last straw for Abenah who again became angry and resolved to sell Aballow. They emphasise that the sale was Abenah’s initiative (Yamningay: ‘Amahsaye received his Instructions from his Mistress…’; Coffee Simpessah: ‘Marman’s Wife determined to sell her’) and that Marman himself had nothing to do with it but was away at Little Popo at the time. Significantly, they do not refer to the sale to Akyem but only state that Aballow had been sent to Amahsaye’s house in Dutch Accra (Yammingay). For the prosecution, Ammah testified that Aballow had been brought to him by Amahsaye for sale in Akyem. She told him that she belonged to Abenah but he did not know whether she had been sold by Abenah to Amahsaye (which would not have been a crime) or – implicitly – whether it was Abenah who sent her for sale to Akyem.

The third episode on which the investigation focussed was that of Marman’s purchase of Aballow at Little Popo. For this, there are two descriptions, by Aballow and George Latty Lawson. Aballow simply states that Marmon ‘bought’ her from her owner after he had discovered her in Little Popo and ‘took a fancy to her’. This clearly implicated Marman in slave dealing, which was a serious crime – if it had happened before 1 November 1843.

George Latty Lawson’s version of the events is more complicated. According to him, Marmon did not acquire Aballow himself but he, Lawson, did so for him. Furthermore, she was not bought but exchanged for another slave, and Lawson gave her to Marmon as a present for the latter’s wife, Abenah, refusing to accept any money for her. This means that Marman was not guilty of dealing: he may have incited Lawson to acquire Aballow but he did not buy her himself. Lawson uses the same strategy that was used by the defence witnesses in their representations of the other events about which they were questioned, denying any active involvement by Marman.

Lawson was a witness of the prosecution but his position was ambiguous. By the time of the investigation, he had been engaged as Marman’s agent at Little Popo for nearly fifteen
years and had developed a close relationship with him. At the trial in Sierra Leone, he stated that Marman was to him ‘more like a father than anything else.’ As a native of Little Popo, he was not under the jurisdiction of the judicial assessor, but his family’s (and particularly his father’s) influence at Little Popo depended to large extent on their good understanding with the British. In the early stages of the investigation (when Aballow’s case was examined), he was trying to protect Marman. However, he was caught committing perjury in his deposition concerning the fate of two slaves who had been sent to Little Popo by Marman. Cruickshank then forced him, under threats of punishment, to admit that he had lied, which seems to have frightened him into becoming a witness of the prosecution.

The second problem concerns the question of editorial mediation. Whose voice, in fact, are we hearing? Is it really Aballow’s, or is it that of the acting judicial assessor, Brodie Cruickshank? Or somebody else’s? On the one level, what do we know about the way in which Aballow and the other witnesses were prompted or led by questions, and the way in which their statements were recorded and turned into coherent accounts? Very little indeed. Some of Cruickshank’s questions can be deduced from the witnesses’ statements. Aballow’s poignant statement about her ignorance of her origins was evidently a response to a question asked by Cruickshank concerning her country of origin. Similarly, the emphasis placed on the fact that Marman was not present when the incidents occurred (at the end of Yammingay’s and Ana Baissa’s testimonies) were probably prompted by questions by Cruickshank (or the defence counsel?) trying to ascertain this.

On another level, this concerns the issue of translation. Neither Aballow nor any of the other witnesses spoke English as their mother tongue, and only George Latty Lawson had any proficiency in English and knew how to write and read it. He was the only person to sign his witness statement, while all the others made a cross. Aballow’s mother tongue is unknown, but presumably she and the other witnesses gave her statements in Ga, the language spoken in Accra. Or was it Fante, which in this period was widely used as a lingua franca on the Gold

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28 TNA: CO 267/228, encls. in N. W. Macdonald to Sir J. Packington Bart, Sierra Leone, 21 April 1852: ‘Chief Justice’s notes taken at the trial of Marman indicted for Slave dealing [n. d.], (G. L. Lawson). The use of the kinship idiom in Lawson’s description of his relationship to Marman is intriguing, particularly in the light of Kristin Mann’s discussion of a court case at Lagos in 1879. In this case, one client described his relationship to his patron as follows: ‘He agreed promising to be as a father to us and help us in any difficulty. We were to be his sons and do what he wished us to do […]’ (Mann, ‘Owners, Slaves’ 161.

29 For a detailed discussion, see Jones/Sebald, An African Family Archive, Strickrodt, ‘Afro-European Trade Relations’, chapter 5.

30 TNA: CO 96/23, encl. in no 87, Gov. S. J. Hill to Earl Grey, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851: B. Cruickshank to Gov. S. J. Hill, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851 (G. L. Lawson’s deposition, Accra, 12 Nov. 1851).

Coast? Brodie Cruickshank, who by the time of the investigation had lived on the Gold Coast, specifically in the Fante area to the west of Accra, for more than 15 years, was fluent in Fante and probably also in Ga.32

The Testimonies as Sources for the History of Slavery and the Slave Trade

Despite these problems, Aballow’s testimony is an important source for the study of slavery and the slave trade in West Africa in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly as this is a period for which there is little first-hand information. The sources that we have were mainly generated by agencies involved in the suppression of the trade (such as officers of the British navy and British consuls) rather than the slave traders themselves or the victims, and they usually document what happens on sea rather than on land. There are of course other autobiographical accounts by individuals who had been enslaved in this period and (wider) region. Among the best known of them are the narratives by Ali Eisami, Osifekunde, Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Joseph Wright, who all came from the interior of the eastern Slave Coast (i.e. the area of modern Nigeria) and had been sold into the Atlantic trade in the 1810s and 1820s.33 Another account is by Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, from Djougou (in the north of today’s Republic of Benin), who had been sold into slavery and transported to Brazil after having been kidnapped. His embarkation has been dated to 1845 and probably took place at Little Popo, where (probably like Aballow) he had been taken along the lagoon from Ouidah.34

Aballow’s testimony however differs from these (‘standard’) slave narratives in several respects. First, her account was recorded relatively briefly after the events which it documents – eight years according to Cruickshank’s estimation – and she was still enslaved at the time of the recording. What matters here, however, is not so much the length of time that had passed between the experience of slavery and the recording of the events. Rather, it is the change of perspective experienced by authors such as Samuel Crowther and Mohammah Baquaqua due to their liberation and conversion to Christianity, which influenced how they

32 Peter Haenger, Slaves and Slave Holders on the Gold Coast: Towards an Understanding of Social Bondage in West Africa, ed. by J. J. Schaffer and Paul E. Lovejoy (Basel: P. Schlettwein Publ., 2000), 2. For the subsequent trial in Sierra Leone, Lebrecht Hesse, a member of Accra’s merchant elite (and himself a larger holder of slaves) was sent to Freetown as an interpreter. For information concerning Hesse, see John Parker, Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra (Portsmouth: Heinemann et al., 2000), 66, 91, 123.
33 These narratives were published in Philip D. Curtin, Africa Remembered: Narratives of West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967). The vessels on which Crowther, Eisami and Wright were embarked were subsequently captured by the cruisers of the British anti-slave trade patrol and they were liberated and settled at Sierra Leone, where their narratives were recorded.
34 Baquaqua, The Biography.
remembered their African past. Second, Aballow’s narrative is unusual because it is corroborated by collateral testimony. Although (as discussed above), the collateral witnesses contest details, they do corroborate the general events recorded in Aballow’s account, such as her acquisition by Marman at Little Popo, the treatment she suffered in Marman’s household and her subsequent sale.

Third, Aballow’s testimony is unusual because she was a female slave and as such she made and documented a range of experiences that were specific to her sex and gender. One aspect is the casual sexual exploitation of female slaves. Aballow was picked out of the slave chain by Marman who found her attractive and wanted ‘to marry’ her. She documents being regularly sexually abused by him – he ‘was in the habit of having Carnal intercourse’ with her – and becoming pregnant by him. Her story mirrors that of Abenah, Marman’s Accra wife, who according to Cruickshank had also been purchased by Marman from a slave dealer and brought to Accra to live with him, and with whom he had fathered at least one child. Yantchey, the former fellow slave of Aballow’s who became a witness for the prosecution in Cruickshank’s investigation, also had a child by Marman. She also documents the sexual jealousy among the slaves, explaining the fierce treatment she received from Abenah as a result of the latter’s jealousy after she had become pregnant by Marman.

Aballow documents the ‘domestic’, i.e. African, slave trade and slavery rather than the Atlantic trade as she had not been embarked for shipment across the Atlantic. (And in this respect it should perhaps rather be compared to the life histories that were recorded by the missionaries of the Basel Mission Society on the Gold Coast in the 1860s?) An aspect of domestic slavery that her testimony illustrates is the sale of slaves as a means of punishment. This is well-known in other contexts, such as, in the Atlantic trade, the sale of slaves to European traders for transportation across the Atlantic, and, in the Americas, the sale ‘down the river’. A striking feature is the deception that was involved in the sale of Aballow. She was tricked into leaving Accra by first being sent to Amah Saye’s house with a fellow slave (Yammingay), ostensibly in order to take cowries to him. Amah Saye then took her to

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36 Peter Haenger discusses in detail the story of a slave and Christian convert, Rosine Opo, which was recorded by the missionary Johannes Mader in Akropong in 1868 (Slaves and Slave Holders, 15-48).
37 See ibid., 44, for the case of Elizabeth Gyabisa (in 1868), which shows that ‘disobedient or stubborn slaves were in danger of being sold or of being sacrificed at the funeral on the occasion of a death in their owner’s family.
38 The sale of troublesome slaves into the Atlantic trade was the crucial issue in the other charges for which Marman was investigated. One female slave reportedly believed that ‘she was going to be sold because she had run away to Cape Coast and had cohabited with one of the Soldiers.’ One male slave was sent to Little Popo after he had tried to run away and ‘because he did not do his work’, while another was disliked by Abenah because he was ‘too Saucy’ (TNA: CO 96/23, encl. in no 87, Gov. S. J. Hill to Earl Grey, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851: B. Cruickshank to Gov. S. J. Hill, Cape Coast Castle, 24 Nov. 1851 (depositions of Amatey Bouchee, George Latty Lawsons and Tette Klarne, Accra, 12 Nov. 1851).
Ammah, who made her accompany him to Akim on the pretence that he wanted ‘to make fetish’ in the bush. She only realised that she was sold when she saw the gold change hands.\(^{39}\)

However, despite its focus on domestic slavery and trade, Aballow’s narrative also gives information concerning the Atlantic slave trade, specifically its close connections with domestic slavery and the export trade in agricultural produce. Although intended for sale into the Atlantic trade, Aballow narrowly escaped being exported from Africa by having been picked out of the slave chain due to her physical attractiveness. This not only shows how closely the domestic and the export trade in slaves were linked. It also illustrates a point that has been made in the literature concerning the unpredictability for enslaved individuals of their final destination.\(^{40}\) For slaves, such as Aballow or Mahommm Baquaqua, there was no way of knowing where they would end up, in domestic slavery or the Americas, or indeed whether they would be taken across the Sahara to North Africa or the Middle East. In the end, this was determined by coincidence, even if the chances might have been greater for female slaves to remain in Africa and male slaves to be sold into the Atlantic trade - as indeed it worked out in the cases of Aballow and Mahomma Baquaqua.

Furthermore, the close link between domestic slavery, the Atlantic slave trade and the ‘legitimate’ commerce is also shown by the information given in the testimonies concerning the organisation of Marman’s household, such as the use of slave labour in his palm oil factory (captured graphically in the image of Aballow being held over a [palm oil] puncheon while being flogged), his social intercourse with slave traders at Little Popo (where else would Marman have seen Aballow ‘in the Slave Chain’ if not in Isidore de Souza’s baracoon?), and the sale of rum in his yard at Accra, which would have been imported by the illegal slavers from Brazil or Cuba. Further detail emerged at Marman’s trial in Freetown, where George Latty Lawson described the household of his sister Sashey, Marman’s wife at Little Popo: ‘[She] had a great many servants principally women, some of them were relations to her, and got no pay, this is the usual way.\(^{41}\)

Marman’s dependence on slave labour may have been illegal, but his case was spectacular or exceptional only in the respect that he was a European. The African and Euro-African elites on the Gold Coast (some members of the latter filling important official posts) held large numbers of slaves, on whom they depended for their economic and political power. Indeed, Marman seems to have emulated their life-style, at least as regards the organisation of

\(^{39}\) Ibid. (depositions of Aballow, Ammah and Yammingay, Accra, 12 Nov. 1851).


\(^{41}\) TNA: CO 267/228, encls. in Gov. N. W. Macdonald to Sir J. Packington Bart, Sierra Leone, 21 April 1852: Copy of depositions taken before the Police Magistrate, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 10 March 1852.
his household(s).\textsuperscript{42} In this way, his case – and Aballow’s career – can probably be regarded as typical.

\textsuperscript{42} See Haenger, \textit{Slaves and Slave Holders}, 32; Parker, \textit{Making the Town}, 91-3.