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# SUGAR AND A BRAZILIAN RETURNEE IN MID NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOKOTO<sup>1</sup>

P.F. de Moraes Farias

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## I

This paper touches on four aspects of the study of Africa to which Marion Johnson made substantial contributions: the history of material culture, the economic policies of nineteenth-century Islamic states, the pioneering activities of migrants, and the anatomy of primary sources (cf. Johnson 1964-1965, 1974, 1976, 1977, etc.).

The topic described in the title of this paper has two contexts. One is the policies of mobilization of manpower and know-how, and of development of "plantation" forms of agriculture, deployed by the Sokoto caliphate in the first half of the nineteenth century (Last 1966; Abubakar 1979; Lovejoy 1983: 206-08; Austen 1987: 47). The other is the return to Africa in the nineteenth century of Africans, and descendants of Africans, from Brazil (Olinto 1964; Verger 1968: 599-635; Braga 1968, 1969; Turner 1970, 1975; Carneiro da Cunha 1985).

First we will examine twentieth-century oral traditions from Sokoto, which concern the introduction of sugar cane cultivation and the continuing production of small quantities of jaggery--coarse brown sugar--at a location between Sokoto and Wurno. Secondly, we will compare this oral information with evidence recorded in 1853 by the German traveler and scholar Heinrich Barth, and demonstrate the unity of two separate passages in his records.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, we will call attention to one instance in which the German and English versions of Barth's book significantly differ. Finally we will comment on Fulani presence in Brazil, and on the importance of Barth's above-mentioned passages for the study of the movement of returnees from southern Latin America to Africa.

## II

### Sugar Cane and Sugar in the Sokoto Area: Historical and Technical Traditions<sup>3</sup>

In Sokoto oral tradition it is to the caliphate of *Sarkin Musulmi* (*Amīr al-Mu'minīn*) Muhammad Bello (1817-37) that the introduction of the cultivation of sugar cane is consistently attributed (Johnston 1967: 158n8). Muhammad Bello is also credited with having "introduced a novel sugar-refining process on one of his farms" (Last 1967: 209n134). Some years ago *Alhaji* Dr. Junaidu, the *Waziri* of Sokoto, confirmed to me that--according to oral tradition--it was Muhammad Bello who first settled "a large number" of slaves "on a hill near to the valley of Bamurna," and who "taught them to farm different kinds of crops in the valley of Bamurna, among them sugar cane" (personal communication, *in litt.*, 3 June 1969).

The area in question is situated between Sokoto and Wurno, approximately twenty-seven km NE of Sokoto. It is within the Hamma-Ali District, also known as *Ubandoma* District because traditionally its District Head is the holder of the title of *Ubandoma*, which is transmitted in the family of Muhammad Bello's uncle 'Alī ḡan Fodio (Johnston 1967: 127; Last 1967: 43n122, 90n3, 94).

The head of the slaves settled by Muhammad Bello on the above-mentioned hill was known as *Mai-kara*--from the Hausa *mai* («master», «expert in») and *kara* («stalk», «corn stalk», «sugar cane»). The settlement headed by him was known as *Gidan Mai-kara* («the Compound of *Mai-kara*»), and still bears this name. Local oral tradition records the name of the first *Mai-kara* as Ahmadu, without volunteering details of his origin, which must have been non-Fulani (the reason for my emphasizing this will be seen later). The position of *Mai-kara* continues to be held by his descendants. It is said that Muhammad Bello himself taught the first *Mai-kara* to process the sugarcane juice so as to

produce brown sugar. The Caliph is said to have provided Ahmadu *Mai-kara* with the required implements, which are still in use.

Every year towards mid-November, as the time for the sugarcane harvest draws near, the rainy season vegetation surrounding a small furnace is cleared away, and the two old implements are made ready (figures 1 and 2). One is a shallow copper pan, with a rim curving outwards and downwards and a flat bottom, weighing 6.35 kg (internal diameter at the rim: 52 cm; internal diameter at the bottom: 40.5 cm; depth: 15 cm). The other is a ladle weighing 0.5 kg, with a perforated copper bowl (diameter: 13 cm) attached to a metallic haft measuring 28 cm, of which the last 10 cm are encased in a wooden handle. With this equipment, a small amount of brown sugar is yearly produced under the supervision of the *Mai-kara*.<sup>4</sup>

### III

#### Heinrich Barth's Visit to the Bamurna Valley

In April 1853, during the caliphate of Sarkin Musulmi 'Alī b. Bello (1842-59), Heinrich Barth made an excursion to Sokoto from Wurno. I will quote the relevant passage at length, to facilitate textual comparisons to be made later in this paper:

Having reached the highest point of the path, from whence we obtained the first sight of Sókoto, we descended into a deeper hollow or irregular valley, adorned by fine green fields of «rógo», and bordered by living hedges of the *Nux purgans* [.....].

This was the valley of Bamúrna, which is distinguished on account of its fertility and abundance of water, but for this same reason is rather unhealthy, and, during and shortly after the rainy season, becomes quite impassable for travelers. Close to the source, which rushes forth from the western cliffs, a small market is held, where travelers generally make a short halt; but this spot being very narrow, and affording but little comfort for a midday halt, we went on a little farther, and halted for an hour or two at the end of the vale, under two fine *dúrremi*-trees a little to the right of the path. Here, where

the principal vale is joined by a side branch, and where the greatest amount of moisture is collected, the vegetation is especially rich, and a beautiful *limún*-tree full of fruit adorned the place, besides young offshoots of the plantain. But more interesting still was a small plantation of sugar situated at the foot of the hill, although the stalks were at present only about sixteen or eighteen inches high; and I was not a little surprised when I learned that this piece of ground belonged to a man who not only cultivated, but even prepared sugar; but I did not then make his acquaintance, as he was absent at the time. (Barth, *Travels* 1965, 3: 126-27; see also *Reisen* 1857a-1858a, 4: 172-73; *Travels* 1857b-1858b, 4: 171).

The end of the passage leaves the impression that Barth may have met, at a later date, the man he describes here as the owner of the sugar-cane plantation. Yet there is no record of such a meeting--nor any other explicit references to Bamurna sugar--anywhere else in the published German text of Barth's general account of his journeys (*Reisen* 1857a-1858a), or in the English editions of the same work (*Travels* 1857b-1858b, 1857c-1859, 1965).

However, with his flair for neglected evidence, Professor Tadeusz Lewicki of the University of Kraków called attention to another passage in Barth's printed German text (Lewicki 1967: 55). This passage refers to an unspecified area near Sokoto, in which there were a small sugarcane plantation and a sugar refinery operated (*betrieben*) by a Pullo (Fulani), who had spent twenty-five years as a slave in Brazil (Barth, *Reisen* 1857a-1858a, 3, 139).

Having confined his discussion to the German text, Lewicki omits a point which is of interest to students of the textual history of Barth's book: the description of the man concerned as a Pullo ex-slave, and as a returnee from Brazil, is missing in the English (British and Anglo-American) editions of Barth's work (*Travels* 1857b-1858b, 3: 153; 1965, 2: 340, which reproduces 1857c-1859). In these editions the same passage simply refers to «a small plantation of [sugarcane], and boiling houses on a small scale, carried on by a native», without any further details.

Although Lewicki rightly guesses that the



Figure 1

Left to right, *Alhaji* Dr. Muhammad Junaidu, the *Waziri* of Sokoto, holding the ladle; *Malam* Isiaka *Mai-kara*, holding the basin; and the *Ubandoma* Abdulkadiri Jelani (at *Gidan* *Mai-kara*, early November 1969).

passage about the returnee, and the passage about the valley of Bamurna, both refer to the same sugarcane plantation and sugar refinery, he regrets the lack of an explicit link between the two (Lewicki 1967: 55).

Yet, for a moment, the missing link seems to emerge, albeit without indication of source, in a version of Barth's book not mentioned by Lewicki. Ironically, this is the abridged French translation of the *Reisen* (Ithier 1860-61), which has been noted for leaving out many of the most important passages of Barth's book, and for taking excessive liberties with other passages, rather than for adding to our knowledge of Barth's writings (Bernus 1972: 1). There we read:

Nous arrivâmes [...] au point culminant de la route, d'où nous eûmes la première vue sur Sokoto; nous redescendîmes ensuite dans une vallée étroite, profonde, [...] aux beaux champs verts. [...] C'était la vallée Bamourna, célèbre par sa fertilité [...]. Mon attention fut attirée plus encore par le rare spectacle d'une petite plantation de cannes à sucre, située au pied du rocher. Ces cannes n'étaient hautes que de 16 à 18 pouces, mais je fus encore plus étonné d'apprendre qu'elles produisaient réellement du sucre. Le propriétaire de la plantation était un Poullou qui avait été vingt-cinq ans esclave au Brésil; malheureusement il était absent, ce qui ne me permit pas de faire sa connaissance. (Ithier 1861, 3: 227)

Any comparison with the passages quoted, or referred to, earlier in this paper will show that the French translator, being less careful than Lewicki, simply amalgamated the two passages in the *Reisen* (1857a-1858a, 3: 139; 4: 172-73). The seamless continuity thus established between the two pieces of evidence reveals itself, under examination, as artificial. But, actually, the link between the Pullo returnee from Brazil and the Bamurna plantation was explicitly stated elsewhere by Barth. Internal evidence suggests that the relevant document was not seen by either Ithier or Lewicki. It was Marion Johnson's eagle eye that noticed the document, and it was she who drew my attention to it.

Annexed to a communication by Petermann in the *Mittheilungen* (1855, 3: 3-14), which quotes

from Barth's letters from Africa, there is a «Sketch of the Surroundings of Sókoto and Wurno» as recorded by Barth in April 1853 and drawn (or, rather, redrawn) by Petermann. On this sketch, captions in small print are attached to a number of place names and landscape features. Immediately to the southwest of a hill labeled as «the highest point of the route, from which Sókoto is visible» (cf. Barth, *Travels* 1965, 3: 126, quoted above), the Bamurna valley is represented and named, and given the following caption:

Fruchtbares Thal, mit Quellwasser und einen Markt versehen. Auch wohnt hier ein Fellani, der 27 Jahre Sklave in Brasilien war, und hier eine Zucker-Plantage angelegt hat. (Fertile valley, provided with spring water and a market. Here also lives a Fulani who was for 27 years a slave in Brazil and has established a sugar plantation here.)

Here the anonymous Fulani returnee is stated to have lived twenty-seven years in Brazil, not twenty-five as in the *Reisen* (1857a-1858a, 3: 139), and in Ithier's translation and Lewicki's paper. But, no matter which the real duration of his stay in Brazil was, the real importance of the evidence in Petermann's *Mittheilungen* is in the fact that it establishes beyond any doubt that both Barth's evidence about the Fulani returnee and the oral tradition of Sokoto and *Gidan Mai-kara* refer to the same sugarcane plantation, and to the same sugar-producing village, in the valley of Bamurna. This ensures the legitimacy of comparisons between the oral and the written data.

According to Barth, sugarcane grew wild in West Africa, readily available to those prepared to bring it into cultivation (Barth 1857a-1858a, 3: 139; 1857b-1858b, 3: 153; 1965, 2: 340; but compare Lewicki 1974: 115). Contrary to Barth, the oral accounts attribute to Muhammad Bello, and to him alone, the *héros culturel* role of initiator of this cultivation and of the technology of sugar production. No memory seems to have been preserved of the exile who learned this technology, in hardship, on the other side of the ocean (unless he is remembered in some other guise, and according to other criteria).

The terminology used by Barth does not make clear what precise position the returnee occupied in the valley of Bamurna. Had a small parcel of



Figure 2

The ladle and the pan poised on the furnace used for the production of jaggery (Gidan Mai-kara, early November 1969).

land been given to him in the valley in his own right? Or was he, instead, given the position of overseer of the estate established by Muhammad Bello, and of the work of the *Mai-kara*? Certainly he himself was not the *Mai-kara*, who may be safely assumed to have had a different personal background.

#### IV

##### Fulani Presence in Brazil and in the Movement of Return to Africa

The presence of Fulani Africans in Brazil is attested without doubt (Carneiro da Cunha 1985: 103). They were known there as Filani, Fula, or Fulah (cf. similar names in Barth, *Reisen*, 1857a-1858a, 4: 144; *Travels* 1965, 3: 110). A slave remembered simply as «Fulah» was a noted sculptor in Rio de Janeiro in the eighteenth century (Karasch 1987: 204). In the late 1840s Francis de Castelnau, consul of France in Salvador, the capital of the province of Bahia, collected there vocabularies from some African languages, among them «Filani» (Fulfulde of Fulani). According to him only a very small number of Fulani were then found in Salvador, and all of them were literate (presumably in Arabic and/or *‘ajami*) and very staunch Muslims (de Castelnau 1851: 9, 49-60).

Fulani contributions to Brazil are more difficult to investigate than those made by other African cultures, which were represented in Latin America by larger numbers of people. The recognizable presence of Fulani culture in Brazil was comparatively short-lived. In the late 1890s, when Nina Rodrigues collected African-language vocabularies in Salvador, he was able to gather materials belonging to the Hausa and Kanuri languages, among others, but Fulfulde was no longer spoken there (Nina Rodrigues 1935: 186-229).

Since the Fulani are distributed over many areas of West Africa, more often than not it is difficult to pinpoint the area of origin of particular «Fula»/«Filani» groups or individuals mentioned in the historical records of Brazil. However it is not unlikely that the returnee of the Bamurna valley had come back to his area of origin--Hausaland--since there is evidence of Muslim Fulani being enslaved, and taken to Brazil, in consequence of battles fought in Hausaland during

the Sokoto *jihad*.

One telling case is an African interviewed by de Castelnau in Salvador, Al-Hājj Muhammad [b.] ‘Abdullāh, then a man apparently in his seventies (de Castelnau 1851: 46-48). He was a Fulani born in Kano, and it was from Kano that he traveled to Mecca--a journey which he still vividly remembered. He had been enslaved at Katsina «by the Hausa, against whom the Filani were waging war at the time». This may well refer to the 1806-1807 *jihad* campaigns against Katsina, in which Kano contingents played an important role (Johnston 1967: 63, 65; Bala Usman 1981: 117-18). In Bahia he had bought his freedom back with the fruit of his own labor, and earned his keep as a carpenter. De Castelnau stated that he was literate in Portuguese as well as «in his own language». He was treated with veneration by the Hausa who also frequented de Castelnau's house. A fervent proselytizer, he did his best to convert his host to Islam. Having failed, he refused to continue his visits to the French consul. He had been living in Salvador for about thirty years (de Castelnau's estimate) or probably longer. It may be suggested that the Fulani returnee mentioned by Barth was taken to Brazil in somewhat similar circumstances, perhaps after being captured in an unlucky but minor military encounter, or perhaps after a serious defeat such as that inflicted on the *jihad* forces at Tsuntsua in December 1804 (Last 1967: 31-32).

Sugarcane plantations and sugar mills manned by slave workers existed in several regions of Brazil, including Bahia. They were not restricted to rural areas: small mills were found in the suburbs of the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Salvador (Reis 1986: 239; Karasch 1987: 194-95). Slaves brought to work in sugar mills were given training in the required skills: their tasks demanded more than physical work (Schwartz 1983). It is an educated guess that the anonymous Fulani who developed the production of sugar in the Bamurna valley had learned it in this way, and had become a freedman after many years of slave work. As a freedman, he may have been able to leave the country on his own decision.

As to the date when he took his know-how to Africa, a few tentative calculations may be permitted. If indeed he was enslaved during the *Jihad* in Hausaland, which lasted from 1804 to 1808, and spent twenty-five or twenty-seven years

in South America, his return can not have taken place earlier than 1829 nor later than 1835, two dates which fall within the caliphate of Muhammad Bello (1817-37). Interestingly, the year 1829 saw a much larger number of returns to Africa from Brazil than the years which immediately preceded it (Verger 1968: 633n3). But 1835 was an even more significant year in the history of Brazil.

Although returnees from Brazil were already arriving on the West African coast as early as the last decades of the eighteenth century (Turner 1970: 5), it was in 1835 and 1836 that the movement of return reached its peak. This was a consequence of the discriminatory legislation and other forms of repression (including deportation) against African freedpersons, which immediately followed the Muslim rebellion of January 1835 in Salvador (Verger 1968: 356-58, 599-600; Carneiro da Cunha 1985: 72-86, 101; Reis 1986: 273-81). This was the revolt against the slavemaster state institutions in Bahia known as the *Malê* rebellion (from the Yoruba *Ìmàlè*, «Muslim»). Contrary to some interpretations, there is no reason to believe that the movement was an offshoot of the Sokoto *jihād*, nor that it was under the hegemony of Hausa or Fulani Muslims. There is no evidence of Fulani involvement, and most of the participants were *Nagô* (an umbrella name which, in Brazil, covered the Oyo Yoruba, the Ègbá, and the Ìjèbù, as well as the Ànàgó), with the Hausa in a distant second place (Reis/Moraes Farias 1989: 48). Nevertheless, like other Muslims, Muslim Fulani freedpersons must have found themselves under considerable pressure in Bahia and other parts of Brazil after January 1835, since Islam was now regarded by the authorities as subversive. This may well have been the background to the departure, from Bahia or somewhere else in Brazil, of the returnee mentioned by Barth in connection with the valley of Bamurna.

If this returnee put his knowledge of sugar production into practice in the Bamurna valley still within the lifetime of Muhammad Bello (as is indirectly suggested by oral tradition), this must have begun no later than 1836, the year of the last harvest seen by the Caliph (Last 1967: 81). Arguably, Muhammad Bello may have been credited with developments that actually took place after his death. But in the case under consideration there is no obvious clash between

the time parameters proposed by oral tradition and those suggested here from other evidence.

Most available data on the impact of Brazilian returnees on Africa concern those belonging to the Yoruba and Gbe (Ewe-Aja-Fon) linguistic groups. Fulani returnees are very rarely mentioned. Yet, in 1845 Duncan may have included Fulani among successful farmers present on the West African coast, who had come from Brazil after a failed rebellion:

The country ten or twelve miles round Whydah is very interesting, the soil good, land level, and in many places well cultivated by people returned from the Brazils, as I before stated. Since my last mention of these people I learn that many of them were driven away from Brazil on account of their being concerned in an attempted revolution among the slaves there, who turned against their owners. These people are generally from the Foolah [Fula, or Fulani] and Eya [Oyo] countries. Many, it appears, were taken away at the age of twenty or twenty-four years, consequently they can give a full account of the route to Badagry, where they were shipped. They are by far the most industrious people I have found. Several very fine farms, about six or seven miles from Whydah, are in a high state of cultivation.

There is another class of colonists, emancipated slaves from Sierra Leone, who emigrated to Whydah, with the intention of farming, but they are inferior in that science to the former class. (Duncan 1847, 1: 185-86)

There are parts of Duncan's book which are unreliable, as has been proved by none other than Marion Johnson. But, as she stated herself, there is no reason to think that the same applies to his first volume, which includes the above-quoted account of the Whydah area (Johnson 1974: 58-59). But Duncan's evidence remains geographically confined to people settled on coastal areas. This happens with most available sources on the returnees, which concentrate their attention on the coast (Lagos, Porto-Novo, Whydah, Agoué, etc.), or on the more southern parts of the West African hinterland.

Yet it is known that a certain number of

returnees went further north. Evidence dating from the second half of the 1850s shows Brazilian returnees transferring themselves from Lagos, not only to the interior of Yorubaland, but also to Nupeland and Hausaland (Verger 1968: 617-18). In the same period Emir Shi'ta of Ilorin, who ruled from 1836 to 1861, was encouraging the settlement of Hausa and Nupe returnees from Brazil in his territory (Danmole 1980: 87).

It was Barth, however, with his references to sugar-making in the Bamurna valley, who attested to the northernmost specific case of returnee activity. Moreover the person concerned was a Fulani, i.e., a member of an ethnic category of

returnees about which only very scarce evidence exists, and his move to the Sokoto area dated from earlier than the northward moves of other returnees. Hence Barth's evidence, laconic as it is, is a precious datum for students of cultural transfers between Africa and America in the nineteenth century.

In all likelihood the Brazilian input to sugar technology in the Sokoto area was added to earlier inputs from within Africa itself (Wigboldus 1988: 18). But that transfer of expertise from South America must not be overlooked by historians of crop production in the Caliphate.

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#### NOTES

1. Marion Johnson and I had planned to write up this piece of work together. One of the last things she said to me was a teasing reminder that this paper should be published. Her contribution to it is acknowledged in the text. But I also wish to acknowledge here the scholarly help and intellectual stimulation she gave me so often, and so generously, over the many years of a warm friendship begun in 1964, in the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ghana, Legon.
2. For information on Barth, see Mansell Prothero (1958), and Kirk-Greene (1962).
3. I am grateful for the uncommonly generous, thoughtful, and tireless help given me in 1969 and 1970, in the collection of the evidence discussed in this section, by *Alhaji* Dr. Junaidu, the *Waziri* of Sokoto, as well as by the *Ubandoma* Abdulkadiri Jelani, and by *Malam* Isiaka *Mai-kara*.
4. As to the crushing of sugar canes by horse-driven mills, possibly also introduced by Caliph Muhammad Bello, see Swindell (1986: 87).

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