

The African Homeland of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima

Cyrus Griffin, editor, *Southern Galaxy*, Natchez, Mississippi, May 29, June 5 & 12, July 5, 1828

Enslaved for forty years in Mississippi, freed in 1828, and speaking to abolitionist groups throughout the Northeast before his sponsored emigration to Liberia, Abdul Rahman was likely “the best known Afro-American in the country” at the time and “the only man freed from slavery to be the subject of a series of articles in an antebellum Southern newspaper,” the articles presented here.¹

Born around 1762, the son of a Fula leader, Rahman was raised in the Futa Jalon highlands of present-day Guinea (see maps, pp. 2-3). An educated Muslim and trained military leader, Rahman was captured in his mid twenties as a war prisoner, sold to the British, transported to the Americas, and eventually purchased by a Mississippi slaveholder. Through a remarkable chain of events, including the chance meeting in Natchez with an Englishman who had met Rahman in Africa, Rahman was freed and, with the support of abolitionists and the African Colonization Society, emigrated to Liberia with his wife. Unfortunately, Rahman died several months after his arrival and never revisited Futa Jalon, his homeland, nor did he live to see the arrival of his children the next year.

Cyrus Griffin, the author of the three newspaper articles, was a recent arrival in Mississippi from New England and supported Rahman’s emancipation.

___ PRINCE ABDUHL RAHAHMAN ___

It may be thought — it has even been hinted, that we have already attached too much consequence to the incidents of this man’s life.² We cannot help it. We are satisfied from incontrovertible testimony of his regal parentage and his civil and military eminence in his native country. It is equally certain that he was overthrown by misfortune. — We have all seen him bearing up against the sad mutation with philosophic fortitude. We know him to be a man of intelligence, and what is more a man of integrity. Such a character is sufficient to interest us. We freely acknowledge we have sympathized in his misfortunes, and we now rejoice in the prospect of his being speedily restored to his native country. We cannot but express a feeling of respect to his benevolent master for his kindness to this unfortunate man during his servitude, and for his last and kindest act in bestowing upon him his liberty. We at the same time cannot but acknowledge our gratitude to an overruling Providence in remembering this old man and granting him the only remaining, and, to human nature, perhaps the sweetest consolation, in the closing scene of life, of sleeping with his fathers.

It is perhaps due to candor to say that we have not had the pleasure of being instrumental in Prince’s³ manumission [emancipation]. It is perhaps equally due to justice to say that much may be attributed to the

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¹ Austin, p. 123.

² “One can infer how opposed most slaveholders must have been to such interests from the lack of similar productions in any Southern newspapers. Editor Marschalk, who had known AR since the early 1800s as he says, had been more circumspect; others — including Marschalk, who had been instrumental in AR’s release — would publish only negative reports on blacks — at last in the South — as we shall see. Griffin learned, too; these were almost his last remarks on AR.” [Austin, p. 245]

³ Rahman had been named “Prince” by his Mississippi slaveholder, perhaps due to Rahman’s assertion that he was the son of a tribal leader. [Austin, p. 127.]

exertions of Col. Marschalk.⁴ We now proceed to give to the public a brief historical sketch, the substance of which we received from Prince himself.

Prince Abduhl, or Abd-ool, Rahahman, was born in 1762, at Tombuctoo [present-day Mali], the capital of the country over which his grandfather was at that time King.

Footah Jallo, the country in which Prince resided after receiving his education, was originally in some degree at least, tributary to Tombuctoo as appears from the fact that the first King of that country *was appointed* by the King of Tombuctoo.

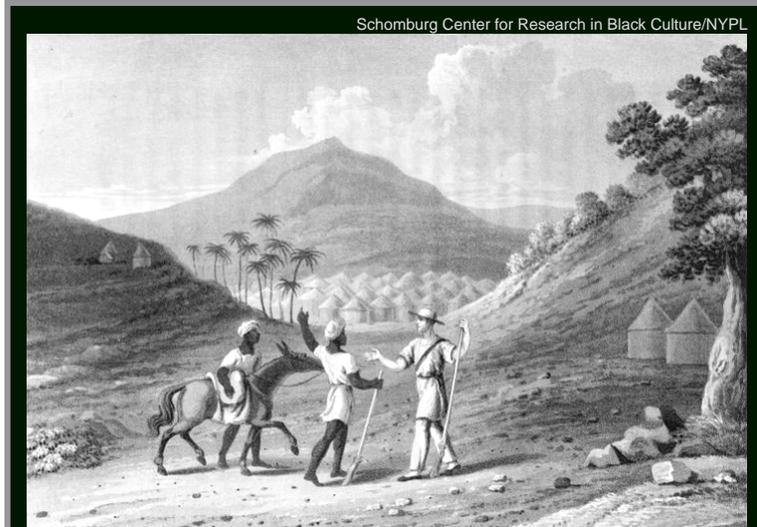
Alman Abraham, the uncle of Prince, was the first King. He became insane and was deposed. The father of Prince, by the same name succeeded to the throne. At the demise of this monarch, during a civil war, the cousin of Prince, Abduhl Lahee triumphed over his brother Sahdoo, who was slain in battle, and wore the crown for a few short days, when he, in turn, shared the fate of Sahdoo, and gave place to a third brother, Abduhl Gahdrie, who we believe is the present reigning monarch.

Prince recollects nothing of consequence that occurred during his boyhood. At the age of seven, he was placed at school at Tombuctoo. Here, and at Jennah he completed his education, and at the age of seventeen, at which time his father was King of

Footah Jallo, he received an appointment in the army. This in his native country is the only path to fame. At the age of nineteen he was sent out with a detachment of troops under the command of his uncle Soliman against the King of Bambarra, who was then in field. Soliman was killed during the first engagement and the command devolved on Prince, who immediately ordered a retreat. Prince's extreme youth rendered his competency to command doubtful to the troops, and they were about to desert him and return home.

He persuaded them, however, to consent to remain three days and put his abilities to the test. — An armistice was agreed upon between the belligerents for the same length of time, under a false pretense that Prince wished advice from his father in relation to the terms on which he might treat with his enemy; but his real object was to prepare for a decisive battle. He retreated still farther into the interior, to the border of an extensive prairie or land covered with a species of cane. A road was then opened into the

⁴ Another Natchez newspaper editor.



View of Timbo, Futa Jalon (in present-day Guinea), childhood home of Abdul Rahman, 1816, in Gaspard Mollien, *Travels in the Interior of Africa*, 1820



Colton's illustrated & embellished steel plate map of the world, 1854, detail of west Africa; Timbo and region of Futa Jalon highlands in oval

cane to the distance of one third of a mile. Here a field was cleared sufficiently large to contain five or six thousand troops, about the number of the Bambarrian army. At the expiration of the three days the King of Bambarra was informed that, instead of a treaty, Prince was ready to give him battle, and challenged him to make his appearance. The old King enraged at such duplicity immediately put his forces in motion and the next day appeared in sight of his youthful foe.

The skirmishing was commenced on the part of Prince by a body of mounted troops who were ordered to make a feint and then retreat in a different direction from the main body of the army. This was accomplished without loss, and, as it was expected, they were not pursued. The attack immediately became general, and Prince designedly gave way and retreated through the narrow defile that had been previously opened into the cane. The unsuspecting Bambarrians, elated with the prospect of an easy and complete victory, pursued close upon the rear of their flying enemy. Prince had previously opened another road that led from the field into the open country, through which he retreated and left his unwary foe in the snare he had laid for him. The plan of the battle was carried into complete execution by the detachment of light troops that commenced the attack who followed close upon the heels of the Bambarrian army, and closed the pass that led *into* the field, while the main body under Prince made a disposition to defend the only remaining avenue that led *out* of it. Then commenced a terrible destruction. The cane was set on fire. Those who attempted an escape were put to the sword. Those who remained were destroyed by the flames. Nearly the entire army was exterminated. The few who escaped immediate death were taken prisoners, among whom was the king himself. Prince found him sitting upon the ground with a few of his followers around him. — He reprimanded him for the repeated depredations he had committed upon the frontiers of his country, and demanded to know of him what punishment he deserved? “I must die” said the aged warrior; — and after examining the Prince for a moment, with profound astonishment at the youthfulness of his conqueror, he then added with much emphasis — “*and I rejoice; death alone can hide my disgrace — I have been defeated by a boy.*” — His head was then struck off with a broad sword by a soldier who was placed behind him for the purpose.

Prince then returned home, where the highest encomiums was passed upon his conduct, and he was rewarded by the appointment of chief in command of the King’s forces.

(To be Continued.)

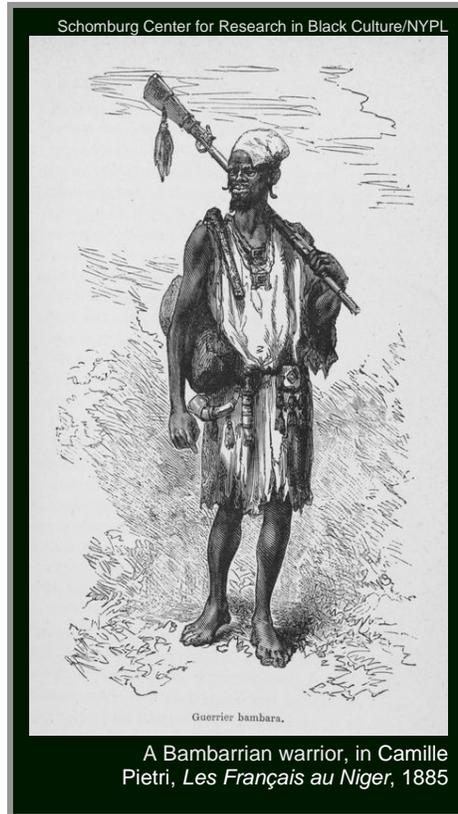
PRINCE, THE MOOR

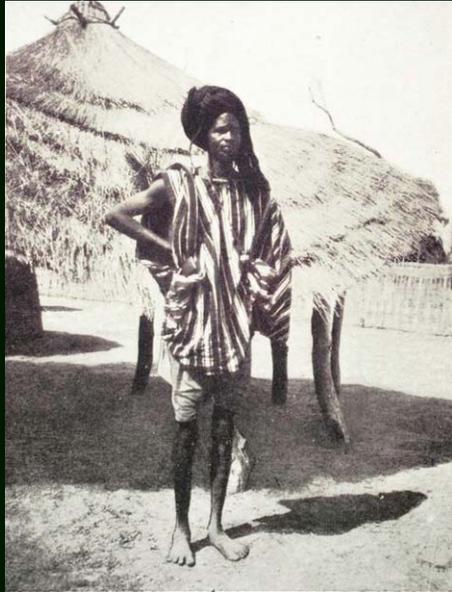
(Continued from our last number.)

The time and circumstances of Prince’s capture have been related elsewhere; a repetition of them would be superfluous. He has been a slave forty years. During that time he has supported an unblemished character. This we repeat as a fact somewhat remarkable, as he has been, of course, the constant associate of negroes with whom vice is almost instinctive.

Prince is a Moor.⁵ Of this, however, his present appearance suggests a doubt. The objection is that “*he is too dark for a Moor and his hair is short and curly.*” It is true such is his present appearance, but it was materially different on his arrival in this country. His hair was at that time soft and very long, to a

⁵ I.e., a north African Muslim of Arab and Berber descent.





"A Fula of the Gambia hinterland"

Men of the Fula peoples, photographs in H. H. Johnston, *Britain across the seas: Africa*, 1910



"A Fula type"

degree that precludes the possibility of his being a negro. His complexion, too, has undergone a change. Although modern physiology does not allow color to be a necessary effect of climate, still one fact is certain that a constant exposure to a vertical sun for many years, together with the privations incident to the lower order of community, and an inattention to cleanliness, will produce a very material change in the complexion. It is true his lips are thicker than are usually those of the Moor; but the animal frame is not that of the negro. His eyes, and, in fact, his entire physiognomy is unlike that of any negro we have ever seen. And if the facial angle be an infallible criterion, the point is established, his being equal and perhaps greater, than most of the whites.

___ GOVERNMENT OF FOOTAH JALLO ___

The government of Footah Jallo is an elective limited monarchy. It is hereditary so far as the crown descends in the same family. The eldest son is the heir presumptive, and not heir apparent, his succession to the throne, depending upon his moral character and ability to govern at the time of his predecessors death. These qualifications are determined by the people. The eldest son, however, of the whole blood (Moorish) and of equal capacity, is preferred to the others.

The country is divided into four departments, or states, over which are placed officers called Chernoos or governors, who are, in matters strictly local and of minor importance, independent of the King. No capital punishment, however, can be inflicted without the royal mandate.

The King has a council consisting of five persons, nominated by himself, and this nomination, to be rendered valid, must be sanctioned by the people. In the hands of the King and his council are lodged the legislative, executive and to a very great degree the judiciary power. Public opinion, however, appears to have a negative upon all their actions. There is no country perhaps where it operates with so much force.

The people assemble once in each year at Teembo, the capital, at which time all new laws are promulgated, and the repeal, if any, of old laws made known. This meeting is generally composed of the most distinguished men of the nation, and not the entire mass of the people though all who are so disposed may attend.

All grievances are here generally made known, petitions for the removal of offices and the like.

Whenever war becomes necessary the people are called together, the King makes known to them the cause, and appeals to them in the name of the Prophet [Mohammed] to defend their country and their religion. This appeal is never made in vain. They repair promptly to the place of rendezvous, and are ready for the field. Their campaigns are usually of very short continuance.

The art of warfare with the Footah Jallo is comprised in a single word — stratagem. The point of honor with them, as Mr. Jefferson remarks of the American Indian, is made to consist in the destruction of

their enemy with the least possible injury to themselves. When compelled to open attack, they make use of firearms. although the shield and the lance are, to a considerable extent, retained. The horse, in addition to the weapons of his rider, is armed with a long spear upon the breast and one upon each fore leg immediately above the knee-joint. A judicious charge from a body of such cavalry bears down all opposition and produces terrible havoc.

___ LAWS ___

The juridical systems of the country are very brief and simple, particularly that which relates to property. Real or personal property does not descend in equal parts to the children. The proportion is as three to one in favor of the sons. The widow draws an equal share with the daughters, and this in addition to a settlement which the law compels to

be made upon her previous to marriage. As man was created from the earth, derives his sustenance from the same source, and must again commingle with that parent of all, it is supposed to belong, in a peculiar manner, to God; for this reason land cannot be sold. The Alcoran [Koran] allows it to be devised.

Their *Criminal Code*, is certainly not more sanguinary than that of many civilized nations.

Larceny, the first detection, is punished by whipping, the second offense the left hand, and for the third the right hand is cut off. No hopes are entertained of the reformation of one guilty of the fourth act; consequently the good society requires that he suffer death.

A person guilty of perjury in a civil action pays the loser the amount of property involved. In criminal cases he suffers whatever punishment his testimony may have brought upon the accused.

In all batteries [physical assault] the Mosaic rule, "an eye for an eye" &c. was, formerly, literally adapted. In some cases it is now commuted to a fine.

Adultery is punished with stripes [whipping]. Ravishment [rape], Burglary, Arson and Robbery are capital felonies.

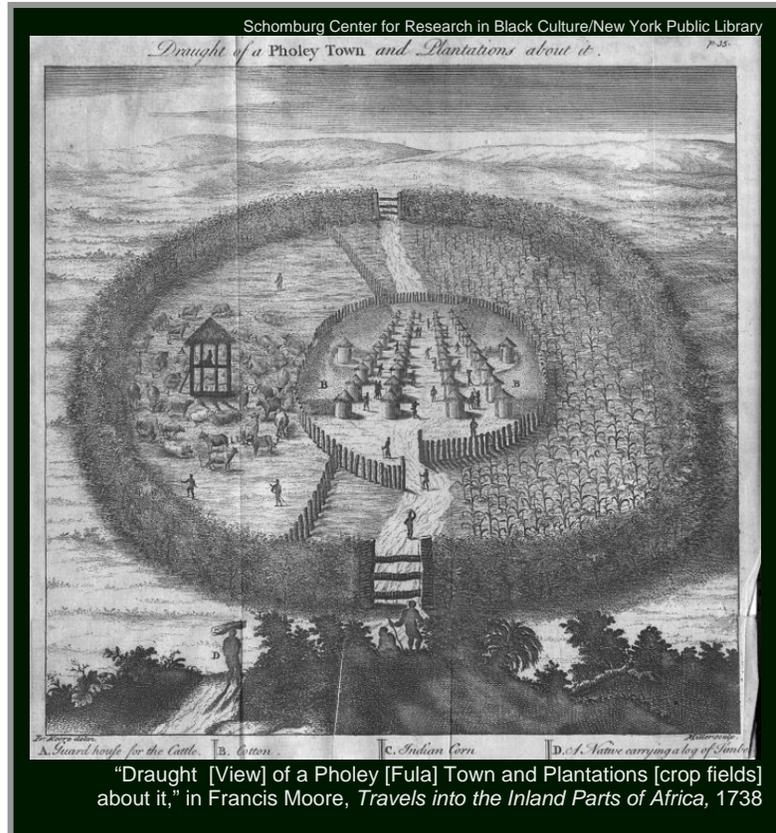
The manner of inflicting death is generally by what is familiarly called the *bow string*. A rope is coiled around the neck of the victim, and manual force applied to each end until he expires. Other modes are frequently practiced; a two-edged knife is plunged into the neck in a direction to separate the carotid arteries; sometimes the executioner is placed behind the criminal and strikes off his head with a broad sword.

___ ABDUHL RAHAHMAN, THE MOORISH PRINCE ___

(Continued from our last.)

___ RELIGION OF FOOTAH JALLO ___

The religion of this country is professedly Mahomedanism [Islam]. We are not sufficiently read in the religion of the Prophet to decide with any precision whether it be strictly such. So far as we are able to judge we are inclined to the contrary opinion.



The Footah Jallo believe that Christ was the son, not of God but of Mary. They give full credence to his miraculous birth and divine mission — that he wrought miracles and finally offered himself up a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of the world. They believe that he will again appear at the consummation of time to sit in Judgment upon the world. They are fully convinced however, that due deference will be paid to the Prophet — that Christ will appear first at Medina — that Mahomed will be called forth, mounted upon a white horse, and given in charge to Gabriel who will conduct him to the highest seat in the highest heaven.

They believe that the Father and Spirit are one and the same, not only in essence but in person, the hypothesis being founded on the simple basis that divisibility would be superfluous, as Deity is omnipresent — a doctrine, which, to say the least of it, is far from irrationality.

Prince speaks of the Christian religion with strong evidence of mature reflection. He points out very forcibly the incongruities in the conduct of those who profess to be the disciples of the immaculate Son of God. “I tell you,” said Prince (an expression with which he usually prefaces any important relation⁶), “the Testament very good law. You no follow it; you no pray often enough; you greedy after money.” “You good man, you join the religion?” “See, you want more land, more neegurs; you make neegur work hard, make more cotton.” “Where you find dat in your law?”

On being asked if such were not the case in his own country, “No, no” he replied with much earnestness. “I tell you, man own slaves — he join the religion — he very good — he make he slaves work till noon — go to church — then till he sun go down they work for themselves — they raise cotton, sheep, cattle, plenty, plenty.”

Pilgrimages to Mecca are often performed by the followers of the Prophet. Many venture across the Red Sea; but those in any degree doubtful of their piety take especial care not to quit terra firma [land]; they consequently are obliged to submit to the peregrination around upon the isthmus of Suez.

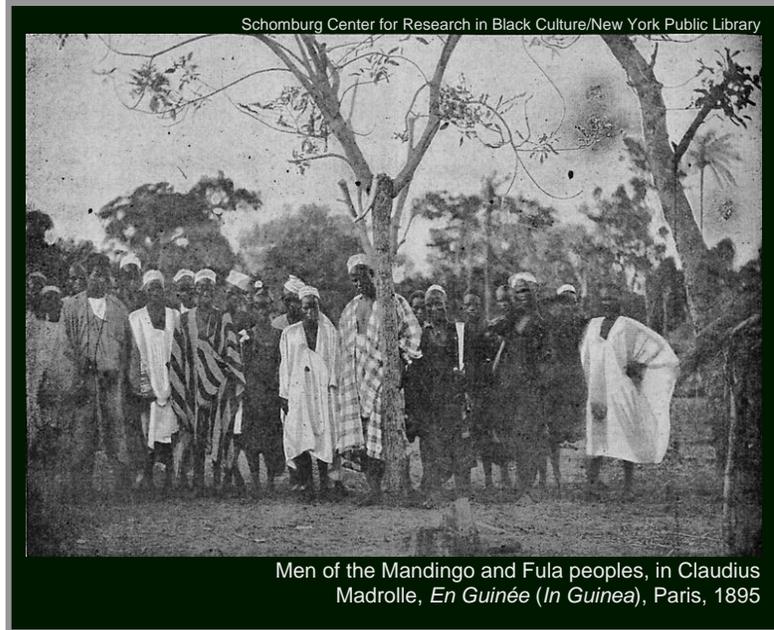
___ PRINCE OF FOOTAH JULLO ___

(Concluded.)

In Footah Jullo the arts and sciences are almost unknown. The most ordinary mechanical arts are in a very imperfect state, not that the people of this country are destitute of the facilities for acquiring them, but they are totally averse to all innovations. The only farming utensil in general use is the hoe. The plow would be entirely useless, as it would be considered sinful to move it with a horse which was given to man for other purposes.

Their houses are constructed of unburnt brick, inlaid with mortar of the same material. Glass windows are not tolerated, and in fact numerous improvements that have been made known by the English resident among them are not adopted, as they are considered luxuries which are proscribed by their religion.

⁶ Relation, i.e., item to be related, told.



Men of the Mandingo and Fula peoples, in Claudius Madrolle, *En Guinée (In Guinea)*, Paris, 1895

The people of this country are principally Moors and appear to possess no peculiar trait of character to distinguish them from the same race in other parts of Africa. They are hospitable to strangers, never receiving remunerations for any kindness within their power to bestow. This fact has been attested by one of our citizens, now no more, who was a short time resident among them. They are rather effeminate and grave; this may be imputed to an inactive life which appears to follow, almost as a matter of course, the prohibition of all convivial amusements.



Music, perhaps, has contributed more to enlist and chasten the social virtues, to exalt the feelings — to inspire ardor, whether in the military camp, in the sanctuary of the Most High, or in domestic life. In a word, it has done more to stamp the better part of the character of man than any other science. Of its hallowing effect they know nothing, it being prohibited, together with dancing, by their religion.

The Footah Jallonians, being Mahomedans, are allowed four wives. The female with them, however, as with all uncivilized and semi-barbarous nations, is less a companion than a slave. Considerable attention is devoted, in this country, to the acquirement of knowledge, particularly with the higher class. The branches of education usually taught in their schools are reading, writing, common arithmetic and a superficial knowledge of the languages⁷ of those nations with whom they hold commercial intercourse. After this a portion of time is devoted to the laws of their country. The Alcoran is the principal book to be read, a profound knowledge of which requires the study of years. From seven to ten years are considered requisite to the accomplishment of a full course of study. Destitute, however, of a thousand facilities for acquiring knowledge known to civilization, it cannot be supposed that the fruits of their labor is commensurate with the length of time devoted to the object.

⁷ Prince speaks the Bambar[an], Mandingo, Jallonkah, and Foulah languages, in addition to the Arabic. [note in original Griffin article]