

FATOO KHAN, THE COLONIAL COMMISSIONER'S MISTRESS: AN AMOROUS RELATIONSHIP IN COLONIAL GAMBIA

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Abstract

This paper tackles the little discussed issue of interracial sexual liaisons in colonial Gambia. In the case study of Fattoo Khan, I seek to underscore how an illiterate and rustic middle age woman stole the heart (and head!) of the most powerful British colonial servant in the North Bank province of The Gambia Protectorate. I also seek to understand how this tryst was used by Fattoo to contest the colonial power structure, especially the wanton powers of the district chief of Upper Saloum, located in the Central Region of the Gambia. Contestation of power and influence was one of the ramifications of the sex scandal. From my research, I have also discovered that Fattoo's chutzpah was dictated by culture, tradition and literacy. I seek to trace the strange career of an ordinary woman, Fattoo Khan (c.1880-1940) who lived in the Gambia protectorate at the height of British colonial rule in the 1920s. She used charm, wit and a bit of literacy and culture to wield and peddle influence in the upper echelons of the European dominated colonial state. Our character latched onto the complex Gambian culture of the extended family to develop and maintain iron cast relationship with British Divisional Commissioners, and have access to power which no woman had in colonial Gambia at this time.

Preamble

This paper is not about the 'gyrations' of urban elite, professional women, or wives of British colonial officials. What comes out of this study is not only the steamy Whiteman-Black woman illicit love relations, but also the creative agency of a Gambian woman in the early years of the colonial period. As much of the literature on colonial The Gambia focuses on issues like the colonial coercive apparatus like the chiefs and divisional commissioners, failed colonial projects, and the advent of anti colonial politics, women, especially those of the protectorate such as Fattoo Khan, have received very little mention. Even where women have been mentioned, it is more on the elite Signaras, the mullato women who arose out of the inter-racial marriage and intermingling of European, especially Portuguese traders, and Gambians as early as the fourteenth century. This article therefore shall fill in this gap of neglect of women

in Gambian historical studies, and especially highlight role of women as active agents in the colonial state far from the stereotypical roles of the docile, the victim and the weak. This study will also for the first time introduce the issue of sexuality in Gambian history not in the usual frame of the colonial mindset of Africans' untamed sexual proclivities (as in rape, incest, etc) but within the lens of sexual choice and appropriation. This is not a story of sexual coercion by a powerful White against a weak Gambian, but relationship by contract which also melts the strict racial stereotypes of 1920s Gambia colony.

Interracial sex in West Africa during the colonial rule: in search of a theoretical framework

Of recent, historians such as Carina Ray have discussed at length the issue of interracial sex in colonial West Africa before, during and after colonial rule.¹ Ray's recent work is of particular interest to us as it is based on case studies of Colonial White male sexual liaison with African women in colonial Ghana. As both Ghana and The Gambia were ruled in almost similar ways by the British in the context of indirect rule system, much of her conclusions are relevant to this article.² A very close reading of Ray presents a credible theoretical framework of such liaisons being accidents of 'contestations', full of 'ramifications' and as being instances of 'African agency'.

By 'contestations' we mean: 'A struggle for superiority or victory between rivals' by 'ramifications' we mean the outcome of the relationships, and by 'agency' it is meant 'the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power'.³ Ray discusses interracial relationships in colonial Ghana and also highlights the love links of 'African men and European women in Britain as an entry point into a much broader history of racial and gender relations'.⁴ It is apparent from her approach that ideas or yearnings which formed at the colonial metropolis like London did easily morph and extend into the colonies. From Ray's perception, the metropolis also exported sexual attitudes and practice to her colonies.

¹ Ray, Carina E. *Crossing the Color Line: race, sex, and the contested politics of colonialism in Ghana*. Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2015, p.45.

² Brempong, Nana Arhin 'Chieftaincy, An Overview', in Irene K. Odotei and Albert K. Awedoba eds. *Chieftaincy in Ghana: Culture, Governance and Development*, Accra: Sub-Saharan Publisher, 2006.

³ <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/contestations>

⁴ Aderinto, Saheed. Review of *Crossing the Color Line: race, sex, and the contested politics of colonialism in Ghana*, In '[Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute Volume 88, Number 1, February 2018](#)' pp. 193-194.

It will be argued in this article that Fattoo Khan's amorous conjugal relations with a ranking British colonial official during the 1910s was a expression of not only her power to decide, but a sort of rebellion and a brave act of self determination on her part. Unlike Ray, this study is not a sweeping scope. Fattoo's case is studied in isolation although they have been several other cases like her's where British colonial servants developed conjugal ties with Gambian woman in the colony. There are for example, two well known cases such as that of Mr. Roberts, the Police Commisisoner in The Gambia Colony, who apparently had a child with a 17 year old Wollof girl in 1940, betrothed to a leading member of the Wollof community of Bathurst (Banjul), and future nationalist politician, Pierre S. Njie. The girl had returned home from her studies in Sierra Leone, to work as a nurse at the Victoria Hospital when she was 'seduced' by Roberts.⁵ Another case much earlier was the Martha Thorpe scandal of 1893 in which the young Bathurst Wollof girl was seduced and forced to elope with a British ship captain.⁶ Fattoo's conjugal relations with the Commissioners was therefore not a unique case in colonial Gambia, but stands out simply for the fact that it was a web of players who occupied different rungs of the colonial hierarchical ladder, with uneven powers. Indeed, by the 1950s, we started seeing the first cases of British women entering into 'legal' relationships with Gambian men, mainly students in London. But these could be subjects for further research.

Pre-colonial interracial sex: The Signaras

The regions which comprise today's Republic of The Gambia had their first contact with Europeans in 1456 when the Portuguese navigator Alviso Cadamosto arrived into the River Gambia region with a caravel searching for the mythical gold fields. Soon after, more Portuguese and other European navigators and traders arrived in the region, and by the late 1400s, over a dozen riverside trading posts had been established to handle the brisk commerce between local Africans and Europeans.⁷ Most famous of these riverside trading stations were Bintang, Kaur, Fattatenda and Buroko, some of which still exists⁸. The commercial intermingling soon created sexual intermingling also between African women and European traders. Indeed, by the mid 1500s, European

⁵ See Ceesay, Hassoum. *Founding Father: P.S Njie: a moral biography*. Banjul: Fulladu Publishers(forthcoming).

⁶ See Grey-Johnson, Nana. *The History of the Newspaper in The Gambia*. Banjul: BPMRU Publishers, 2004, p.8-9.

⁷ Mahoney, Florence. *Stories of Senegambia*. Banjul: Banjul Publishers, 1974, p. 18.

⁸ Ceesay, Hassoum. 'Back to the land' Chiefs and urban decongestion in colonial Bathurst, Gambia 1930-1960'. *Journal of Mande Studies*, 2016, p.72-76.

explorers such as Richard Jobson visited the River Gambia regions and were witnessing the presence of a new population of mullatoes which came out from the interracial sexual liaisons. The female offspring of these White-African sexual relationships were called Signara who soon became an economic and social force controlling trade in the River Gambia area, and in Gorée and St Louis, Senegal, where they lived opulent lifestyles. Gamble maintained that the Gambian Signara population came in two waves: the first were the offspring of the early European traders in the hinterland from around the 16th century, while the second wave were Signara women traders who came from Gorée and St Louis to settle in Banjul after its founding in 1816.⁹

Peter Mark explains further: 'At Albreda and Bintang 'Portuguese' women, many of whom were important traders or, like the wife of the Spaniard at Bintang, the daughters of local rulers, contracted alliances with European men.'¹⁰ Both trading centres were to remain bastions of Signara prosperity through the 19th century.

The Signaras were charming, enterprising, eclectic and wealthy. Catherine Vidrovitch-Cocquery described them as 'women with sense and pride.'¹¹ Many of them became powerful traders who owned sailing ships that plied the region's major ports. They were also capable agents of acculturation who introduced several aspects of European culture, including dress styles, architecture, food and language. They wore European style long dresses, full skirts and high-heeled shoes like Europeans in Paris or Lisbon; however, underneath these dresses they wore layers of 'serr' (hand woven cloth wrappers), as Wolof women do. The Signaras were therefore cosmopolitan; they picked the best from the two cultures they could claim as theirs.

Although many Signaras were able to build up considerable fortunes from the capital bequeathed to them by their European companions, many more owed their fortunes to their own entrepreneurship. Signaras lived mostly in centres

⁹ Gamble, David. *Verbal and Visual Expressions of Wolof Culture*. Brisbane: Gambian Studies No. 22, 1997, p.22; See also, Ceesay, Hassoum, *Gambian Women: an Introductory History*. Banjul: Fulladu Publishers, 2007, p.28-30.

¹⁰ See Mark, Peter. *Portuguese's Style and Luso-African Identity, precolonial Senegambia in the sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Indiana University Press, 2002, p.94.

¹¹ See Cocquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine. *African Women: a modern history*. Boulder: CA, Westview Press, 2000, p.99.

controlled by Europeans such as Albreda, Bintang and Juffureh, which were less vulnerable to wars and pillage, and would be able to inherit their husband's property, unlike in areas outside European control. The few who lived up river at Kataba or Doomasansang like Liza Itla owned huge herds of livestock like cattle and sheep³, but their wealth was imperilled by marauding chieftains and greedy male relatives. In 1685, Signara Chatty, described by Cocquery-Vidrovitch as the 'African widow of a Portuguese slave trader', became the commercial agent in Albreda of the Damel of the Wollof state of Kayor, while Signara Mari Mar was famous for hosting shipwrecked sailors at Bintang.

The signaras were owners of big tracts of land along the coast from Bakau to Gunjur, bought from chiefs. By 1866 the whole stretch of land from Cape St. Mary to present-day Fajara was owned by Signaras who built beautiful houses rivalling the British governor's houses.

The Signaras were also active players in the politics of the early Gambian colony. In the 1870s they joined the rest of the business elite in Banjul to campaign successfully against the plans by London to exchange The Gambia for Gabon with the French. They were women of social, economic and political standing who played a leading role in the evolution of The Gambia in the 18th and 19th centuries. Were it not for the protectionist policies of the colonialists that favoured British traders, they would have remained a leading force in the economic life of The Gambia. However, as the Europeans penetrated the interior with the protection of militia, their economic clout began to wane. Fattoo Khan and the chiefs Sawallo, the dramatis personae of this story must have known, met and dealt with Signaras as they lived and operated mainly at the wharf towns or riverside trading stations along the River Gambia of which Upper Saloum had many.¹²

It is clear therefore that there had been a strong history of interracial mixture between Gambians and Europeans as far back as the 1500s largely as a result of commercial intermingling in the trade centres.

Besides the many detailed studies on the Signaras of Senegal and Gambia (Senegambia), the literature on the history of women in the Senegambian space is still in its infancy, so to say. Carney¹³ discusses the role of women as rice producers. She highlights the historical evidence of Gambian women being rice

¹² Gamble, David. *Districts of The Gambia: Lower and Upper Saloum*. Brisbane: CA, 1999, P.28.

¹³ Carney, Judith. *Black Rice* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001, p.23.

growers and therefore, nourishers of the household, and stresses the important role age groups or *kafos* play in women rice growing capabilities. Although *kafos* are outside the gamut of this study for the simple reason that they are cultural groupings serving traditional roles in society, they offer important glimpses into the workings of women's groups. What is still largely missing from the literature is studies on amorous relationships between Gambian women and colonial officials, and how these relations which grew out of particular contexts of the influence of such cultural matters as the extended family systems and chieftaincy.

Women in colonial Gambia

Women did not play any formal role in protectorate administration as there were no women village headmen, chiefs or tribunal members. Colonial officials in the protectorate such as Commissioners, rarely brought along their wives, making women quite invisible in protectorate administrative affairs. However, informally, wives of chiefs and mistresses of the British officials were influential players in the districts. For example, chiefs' wives settled matrimonial disputes, supervised the distribution of food aid and mobilised people to welcome visiting colonial officials. David Gamble remembers the wives of powerful colonial chiefs like Abu Khan, Matarr Ceesay and Mama Tamba Jammeh as among such powerful women who were responsible for distributing rice fields and plots of land for women vegetable gardening.¹⁴ Jobson also described how women were sold into slavery or seized into marriages by suitors who could not afford to pay the dowry. He once famously rejected an offer of a group of young slave girls from a dealer, and described the scene of a party of young men kidnapping a young lady for their fellow who wanted her as a wife but could not settle the bride price. He observed that certain notables had as many as eight wives, 'with room for concubines', because there was 'severe punishment for adultery and fornication: both men and women were sold into slavery.' He also noted the hard rut of women pounding rice and other grain to provide meals for the family, and the norm of women eating after the men had already done so. Jobson suggests that this explained why many of the women he saw looked thin and ill-fed! The colonialists did little to eradicate practices that are now seen as violations of women's rights such as female circumcision, tattooing and wife inheritance. Indeed, by denying women a say in the colonial administration, they were made more vulnerable and dependent. Denied political control by the colonialists and

¹⁴ Gamble, David. *A Review of Development Schemes in The Gambia*. Brisbane: State University of California, 2007, p.76.

their agents, the chiefs, women largely resorted to commerce to become independent providers.

As The Gambia Protectorate is the setting of this paper, it is relevant that we pause a bit and explain the structure and method of British protectorate administration, especially assessing the roles of the chiefs and the powerful Travelling Commissioners, who operated within the confines of the Indirect Rule system.

The British Indirect rule system in the Gambia and chiefs

'Indirect rule involved the use of local chiefs to implement colonial policies', wrote the Cameroon historian Natang Ben Jua writing about British rule in Southern Cameroon. Unlike the French who completely replaced the local chiefs with French officials, the British administered their colonies through preexisting authorities and structures such as chiefs and their Native Tribunals.¹⁵

Historians are generally agreed that Lord Lugard perfected the system of rule through the chiefs in Northern Nigeria, in the second decade of the 1900s. However, as explained below, The Gambia Protectorate created in 1894, was one of the earliest spaces for British experimentation with the policy of indigenizing of the colonial state, through the use of local customary institutions and values to meet their need for cheap, yet effective minimum administration in their colonies. Aside chiefs, indirect rule also involved the use of other traditional power loci such as village headmen and elders, in protectorate administration.

Long before Lugard had stated his ideas in the celebrated book, the *Dual Mandate* (1914), British authorities in The Gambia had divided the territory into small administrative units called districts, usually based on existing cultural and customary boundaries, led by chiefs many of whom were appointed from the quondam ruling families. One reason why indirect rule worked seamlessly well in The Gambia was that almost all the pre-colonial entities had identifiable centres of power such as kings, or owed some allegiance to roving religious reformers called marabouts, such as Foday Kabba who commanded much respect and authority.¹⁶

¹⁵ Jua, Ben Natang. 'Indirect Rule in British Cameroon', www.lucy.ukc.ac.uk accessed 5/7/2011.

¹⁶ Foday Kabba Dumbuya (1830-1900) was the religious leader for much of Kiang and Foni areas of The Gambia from the 1870s up to his death in battle against the British in 1900. In Foni where there were no recognised Kings, he was highly regarded as leader who converted the Jola into Islam.

There were two types of chieftaincies in colonial Gambia: hereditary and non-hereditary chiefs. The latter comprised of chiefs who did not hail from former ruling families. These were chiefs of districts created only after 1894 such as Lower Niuni and Lower Saloum; they were paid fewer stipends and were elected to the chieftaincy through election by village heads. Hereditary chiefs were hailed from a line of successive rulers dating to the pre-Protectorate eras. Sawallo Ceesay of Upper Saloum, Mama Tamba Jammeh of Illiasa, and Cherno Bandeh of Upper Fulladu were good examples of hereditary chiefs. They were paid handsome stipends, in compliance with treaties of cession of territory that their ancestors had signed with the British in the 1890s. However, the British expected all chiefs to wield strong powers to enable them fully control their districts; in the minds of the people also, chiefs like the Kings before them, were supposed to be strong, ruthless and powerful. This dual expectation of absolute power made chiefs to be authoritarian and obsessed with control and discipline.

When a vacancy existed in a district with hereditary chief, the Travelling Commissioner for that Province will confer with the elders and village headmen to see a suitable replacement within the ruling family. In cases where no suitable person was found a chief would be selected from outside the ruling family by the Commissioner and approved by the Governor in Bathurst. Thus, a chieftaincy could be hereditary now only for it to be non-hereditary the next time. However, when a qualified person later appears from the former ruling family, they could claim back the chieftaincy at the next vacancy.

How did a chief's seat become vacant? According to the Protectorate Ordinance 1894, the Governor had the powers to appoint chiefs and also to dismiss them. Thus, many chiefs lost their seats thanks to a dismissal from the Governor in Bathurst, acting upon advice from the Commissioner of that Province. Accusations of corruption, embezzlement of tax revenue, witchcraft torture, were common reasons given for the dismissal of chiefs. In many cases, these were merely subterfuge for the Commissioners to settle vendettas against chiefs they did not like for one reason or another. Often times, dismissed chiefs were further punished by banishment to a far away corner of the Protectorate, for many years, before they were allowed to return home. Omar Ceesay of Upper Saloum, Mansajang Sanyang of Kantora, Karamo Dibba of Central Badibbu were among chiefs who suffered banishment after dismissal. In extreme cases, chiefs who fell out of favour with the colonial government were exiled to Sierra Leone, as in the case of Musa Molloh.

Who were the Travelling Commissioners?

Power and duties of the Commissioners

The ordinance created two Travelling Commissioners for both banks of the Gambian territory: North and South Bank; in later years, the Commissioners were increased to four, then five, now based at Mansakonko, Basse, Georgetown, Kerewan and Brikama. In the 1940s, a Senior Commissioner was appointed to coordinate the work of the four Divisional Commissioners.

The Commissioners were superintendants of the districts under their purview and all chiefs and village headmen were answerable to the Commissioners. The Commissioners were men-on-the spot for the Governor, and therefore enjoyed almost unlimited powers of action. Poor communications with Bathurst meant that they took decisions first, before letting the Governor or the Colonial Secretary know about the issue. In many cases, Commissioners bypassed the chiefs in matters such as tax collection and judicial matters, which is why some of them wondered if in fact, they were not engaged in 'direct rule'; the provision of the Ordinance that gave Commissioners the powers to run any district where a chief had died or was incapacitated until suitable replacement was found, further gave them 'direct rule' like powers. The typical Commissioner had to multitask: he was required to keep daily, monthly diaries of activities; keep the accounts of the province; issue gun licenses; carry out inoculations against diseases, supervise road construction and sanitary awareness, etc.

The earliest Travelling Commissioners were Mr. Ozanne for North Bank and Mr. Sitwel for the South Bank, appointed in 1893. Their duty it was to tour the length of the country explaining to the people the meaning of protectorate administration, identifying the right people for appointment as chiefs and village headmen, signing treaties with the few unconquered Kings and chiefs such as Musa Molloh and establishing the boundaries with French Senegal. It was a hazardous job; of the first twelve Commissioners, three died on duty, two were killed at work and two were declared insane and sent back to England. It was a perilous job indeed! What was not unpleasant however was the descriptions of the glamour of Gambian women like Fattoo Khan made by European explorers who visited the River Gambia region.

Expressions of beauty of Gambian women in colonial accounts

The earliest accounts written by European explorers who visited the Gambia region in the 15th and 16th centuries give vivid descriptions of the role, status and physical beauty of Gambian women.

Writing in 1455 while exploring the River Gambia, the Portuguese explorer Cadamosto noted the fashion and body adornments current among women at the time: 'The women are clothed in garments of cotton. Their dresses are loose clothes, partly coloured, blew and white, tucked about their middles, and from the waist upwards, bare... They caste another cloth, as they wear below, upon their shoulders, which hangeth loose... and without question, very charming.'¹⁷ To complete their sartorial elegance, Cadamosto observed that women also 'worked designs upon their flesh with the point of a needle, either on their breasts, arms or necks. These appear like those designs of silk are often made on handkerchiefs; they are made with fire and they never disappear.'¹⁸

The Portuguese explorer might have been describing scarification rituals like tattooing, which had medicinal, aesthetic and spiritual significance among many ethnic groups in the region. His compatriot, Lemos Coelho, who sailed along the River Gambia in 1669, recorded thus: 'The black females are the most beautiful on the whole river'; he was referring to the Wollof women like Fattoo Khan, he had come across.

It is noteworthy that the concept of beauty and presentation of one's self is so important among the Wollof that they have no less than five words all expressing beauty, elegance and dignity and as many expressions for self-worth and self-respect.¹⁹ Demeanor and dress were more than for public presentation but also to establish lineage and role in society, Female sexuality was enjoined in dress and jewelry as much as with *jiko*(character), which was the Wollof's abstract form of beauty which inhered *inside* the person.

Mandinka mythology remembers that Mama Mansa Kebereng Jammeh had enough beauty which wooed the Jokadu king, Sanake Demba, into marrying her

¹⁷ Quoted in Gamble, D.P and P E H Hair (eds). *The Discovery of the River Gambia by Richard Jobson* (1623), The Haklyut Society, 2001, p. 118. The following explorers have given written accounts of their journeys to the River Gambia in the 1400s and 1500s: Alviso Cadamosto (1455 and 1456 voyages), Usodimare (1455), Diego Gomez (1455/1456), Duarto Pacheco Pereira (c.1508), Valentim Fernandes (c.1508), Jao de Barros (1552), Francisco de Andrade (1582), Andre Alvares de Almeida (c.1594), Andre Donelh (1628), Francesco de Lemos Coelho (1669/1684). D P Gamble and P E H Hair's edition of Richard Jobson's travelogue includes short excerpts from each of these explorers' descriptions.

¹⁸ Quoted in Gamble, D.P and P E H Hair (eds). *The Discovery of the River Gambia by Richard Jobson* (1623), The Haklyut Society, 2001, p. 118.

¹⁹ Gamble cites 'rafet' (beautiful, elegant); 'yem' (appropriate, fitting); 'mat' (striking personality); 'jeka' (created beauty), 'jongoma' (naturally beautiful woman); see Gamble, D. and Salmon, L. and Njie, A. *The Wollof*. San Francisco: the author, 1985, p.45.

and abdicating his throne to live in Niimi. But before doing so he had ensured that Jokadu became a vassal of Niimi. The legend goes that Sanake paid a courtesy call to the Mama Mansa Kebereng Jammeh and met her having a bath. The courtiers told her that there was a king waiting to see her, she told them to tell him to wait as she had no clothes on. When she finally emerged from the royal bath, she said to her assembled subjects 'This king is now my man. I have not had a man for long. Here he is now'. Sanake abdicated and went to live with the Niimi Mansa.²⁰ With this brief contextual underpinning of feminine elegance and sexuality we can now narrate the Affair.

The positive images described above were powerful as they were read in the books and journals in Europe. They were positive images.²¹ Yet, at the advent of formal colonial rule, European perception of African, especially African women, was less charitable. Now they were being denigrated as immoral and syphilis carrying sluts. Accordingly, many immorality laws were designed to reduce White-African women mixture in the colonies like The Gambia. This is why the McCallum Mistress Affair is especially noteworthy and paradoxical.

McCallum Mistress Affair

In early 1919, the career of the commissioner for the North Bank Province, Mr J K McCallum, was brought to an inglorious end by a love scandal that rocked the colonial administration. It involved Sawalo Ceesay, Head Chief of Upper Saloum, Commissioner McCallum, and three Saloum ladies: Fatou Khan, Fatim Samba Mbowe and Fana Kumba Lowe. The ladies had used their charm to entrap the colonial commissioner in a sex scandal, which necessitated a commission of inquiry led by Senior Travelling Commissioner, Mr H L Pryce. The recommendations of the inquiry led to the dismissal of McCallum, the vindication of Chief Sawalo, and precipitated a radical shake-up of the protectorate administration by Governor Cameron.²² The story of Fatou Khan, mistress of North Bank Travelling Commissioner McCallum illustrates the power and sway of women in the running of the districts during the colonial period.

²⁰ Wright, Donald. *The World and a Small Place in Africa*. Newyork: W E Sharpe, 1994, p. 94.

²¹ See Musisi, Nankayike. 'The Politics of Perception or the Perception of Politics? In *Women in African Colonial Histories*, Jean Allman, Susan Geiger(eds)Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002, p.97.

²² See 'Report on Upper Saloum District', 1933, PUB 13/13, The Gambia National Archives, Banjul. The report on the state of the district for 1933 by Commissioner Assheton details the scandal and the subsequent probe, and the undignified exist of McCallum. For more details on the Affair see also, Ceesay, Hassoum. *Gambian Women: an introductory history*. Banjul: Fulladu Publishers, 2007, p.94.

Sawalo alleged that one of the women, Fatou Khan, the chief's sisters' daughter, had made herself into a 'Queen Victoria' (the long-serving and most powerful British monarch who died in 1901), and she had arrogated to herself the powers of a commissioner. The chief also alleged that Fatou Khan used her amorous liaison with Commissioner McCallum to exact rice and coos levies on farmers in the North Bank Province, and that McCallum allowed Fatou Khan to receive money from a trader called Sering Niahana Ceesay of Bati Hai, in Upper Saloum, which she refused to pay back.

The commission of inquiry set up by the Governor to probe the affair sat at Kaur from 14 January 1919 to 5 February 1919. McCallum admitted his liaison with the three women, and also agreed that such romantic associations had swayed his impartiality and judgement. Fatou Khan admitted to the commission that she levied a bushel of coos from each town in Upper Saloum. Sawalo exacted the levy, and handed it over to McCallum, who gave it to Fatou to sell it in Bathurst, the colonial capital. Fatou was caught up in a painful dilemma of breaking prudish traditional norms of values surrounding celibacy, adultery, and cohabitation with a European, seen in protectorate circles as a stranger and oppressor on the one hand and benefitting from the power of being the willing mistress of the all powerful colonial Commissioner.

The Commission of Inquiry epitomised how the British empire could be rattled by the amorous adventures of two cogs (McCallum and Fatou) in its mighty wheel. Even the empire could be vulnerable and its seeming hegemony contested from the most unlikely quarters! Fatou's escapades made her into a powerful figure of change, with the agency to bring about the first recorded commission of inquiry in colonial Gambia. Fatou has become a player in colonial micro-politics. Equally, telling is that at the time of her relationship with the Commissioner, Fatou was almost past child bearing age and therefore 'freer of external constraints than in (her) younger age' and had 'greater space and vulnerability'.²³

The ramifications of the scandal were swift. McCallum was suspended and later forced to retire with an annual grant of 227 pounds. The affair was indeed a big blow to the colonial administration that lost a pioneer colonial civil servant, McCallum, who spoke fluent Wolof and was instrumental in establishing the protectorate administration in colonial Gambia. Furthermore, it revealed the open secret of amorous relationships between white colonial officials and African

²³ Berger, Iris. *Women in Twentieth Century Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p.16.

women. The decision of the governor to retire McCallum was indeed judicious. However, such a rare case of fair play was less a result of colonial policy than fair-mindedness of Governor Cameron. The scandal showed the ability of women to influence the power and actions of colonial officials.

But who was this intrepid chief who dared the might of the colonial establishment by challenging the shenanigans of the travelling commissioner? This questions bring us to the issue of 'contestation' as understood in Ray(2015, 8). The chief as explained above felt that the affair was threatening his own rampant hold on power; in other words, Fattoo's dalliance with the Commissioner was a recipe for a power contest. By her growing influence, Fattoo had become a pretender to the chiefs' throne, so to speak. The colonial records and recent studies of chieftaincy in colonial Gambia are replete with the examples of the intolerance of chiefs to any apparent or real contest or opposition to their powers be it from the subjects like Fattoo or even from the Commissioners. The hereditary chiefs like Sawaloo felt and liked to be seen as monarchs without the crowns, simply because they hailed from the demoted royal families. This is why in many instances, when the British felt embarrassed by excesses such as false imprisonment, torture and seizure of wealth by the chiefs, the punishments were exemplary and unforgiving: banishment or imprisonment.²⁴

Sawalo Ceesay was born around 1840 in Njau, 200 km from Banjul, and excelled as a wrestler in his early years. Later he fought in the jihad armies of Maba Jahou Bah, and when Maba died in 1867, Sawalo joined the ranks of another Islamist, Mamud Ndari Bah. In 1890, he got tired of being a soldier of fortune and returned to Njau where he became an alkali. When the British declared the Gambia Protectorate in 1894, Sawalo was their obvious choice as Head Chief of Upper Saloum for his known record as a feared warrior. The first task assigned him by Commissioner Ozanne was to end slave trading in his district; he soon fulfilled the task to the satisfaction of the British. The district report of 1897 was quite complimentary of the improving roads and sanitary conditions in Upper Saloum, the efficient tax collection and the fact that the district had grown to 40 towns with 1,254 huts! However, the chief was growing senile, which made the British commissioner secretly start grooming his son Omar to replace him. When

²⁴ Ceesay, Hassoum. 'Chiefs and Colonial Administration in Colonial Gambia: 1894-1965; *In Leadership in Colonial Africa*, G Jallow(ed), Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p.41-42.

Sawalo learnt of the plot, he swore to punish his son and the scheming Commissioner McCallum.

In October 1918, Commissioner McCallum submitted to Governor Cameron a report on the conduct of Sawalo in which he accused the chief of high-handed action against the town of Bantanto that terrified the villagers so much that they fled to the nearby Nianija district. Mr McCallum recommended that Sawalo, together with his native tribunal members, should be dismissed and exiled and that the district capital, Njau, be “burnt” to the ground.²⁵

Even the Governor in Banjul was shocked at the strong-arm tactics recommended by Commissioner McCallum against the chief. However, the chief did not leave the vengeful commissioner have his way. Chiefs Sawallo was prepared to contest the overarching powers of the Commissioner. He travelled to nearby Ballanghar to meet the ardent nationalist, Edward Francis Small, then a mission teacher in the village, who wrote a strong riposte against McCallum’s allegations, which he sent to Governor Cameron. The chief accused McCallum of having illicit sexual affairs with a harem of local Saloum women, who had, therefore, become so powerful and influential that they no longer obeyed the chief and his court.

Colonial Gambia of 1918 and 1919, the years when the Affair became public, was reeling from the painful effects of the First World War. The War time emergencies had led to occasional food shortages in the rural areas. The war conscription the availability of war time jobs in Bathurst, the capital, and had denuded the villages of much needed farm hands. Grains such as coos were the mainstay of the food supply chain. Requisitioning grain, as Fatoos was accused of doing, had become a major crime, so to say. This forced the colonial Governor in Bathurst to act and decisively and swiftly.

Culture in the ‘Affair’

To fully understand this amoral story, we must bear in mind certain issues which scholars interested in cultural history have tended to ignore such as the practice of concubinage, dowry and cultural acceptance of sex across racial lines.

²⁵ See ‘Confidential Report on Head chiefs, 1930’ CSO 3/152 , The Gambia National Archives, Banjul.

To strengthen her influence on McCallum, both the chief Sawallo and Fattoo Khan influenced McCallum into concubinage with two other women, both of whom shared blood relations: Fana Kumba Lowe and Fatim Mbowe.

Not only British colonial officials engaged in concubinage, but also it was the norm for kings and chiefs who following Islamization were restricted by religion to four wives, but who by the fact they were powerful people always looked for more matrimonial ties with the daughters of allies, or even enemies to political ends. When it suited the colonial officials, concubinage was disparaged and termed 'sexual slavery'; punishable under colonial laws. The fate of the King of Fulladu Musa Molloh (1850-1931), who in 1919 was deposed by the British as chief of Gambia Fulladu and exiled to Freetown, comes to mind. The British said his many wives and concubines who numbered in the dozens were being held against their will and they attacked his fort and arrested him bringing the last effective anti-colonial ruler in colonial Gambia.

An anthropologist who studied the role of women in early Gambian politics observed: 'Fattoo protected her uncle Chief Sawalo Sise of Upper Saloum District from the wrath of colonial officials for many years by making McCallum write positive annual reports on him despite his senility. She fell out with Sawalo in 1917, when he refused to collect the grain levies, and was retired'.²⁶ Here Fattoo was simply answering to the sense of entitlement common in Gambian culture on relatives and even acquaintances. Colonial chiefs provided comfort to British officials in the form of Rest Houses for the overnight stays of the itinerant British Officials, and other forms of creature comforts. The chiefs saw this as their natural role of African hospitality towards strangers; even though the British saw it as an entitlement. So much that in the Annual Confidential Reports on Chiefs, the Travelling Commissioners gave high or low marks to chiefs who did or did not afford the British officers 'well kept Rest Houses'.

The African extended family also matters in this relationship. Fattoo Khan was a divorcee, almost menopausal and therefore, had greater sexual freedom. As a widow, he was obliged by custom to live under the chief who was a sort of an uncle, but her middle age gave her the leeway to challenge aspects of family restrictions and therefore was able to co-habit with the Commissioner. If the African extended family system is anything to go by, they were properly

²⁶ Price, J. H. "Some Notes on the Influence of Women in Gambian Politics." Institute of Social and Economic Research, Conference Proceedings, 1958, p.15.

sheltered by their powerful uncle, Chief Sawalo. It was while in the household of the chief that they caught the eye of the lustful British colonial official. Recent scholarship has revealed that such sexual liaisons across racial lines, may have been strange but were accepted and even sometimes encouraged by male relatives like Sawallo.²⁷

Yet, oral traditions from Upper Saloum collected by this writer says that the relationship between Fattoo and McCallum was simply 'an adulterous tryst' not even concubinage as no bride price was paid or offered by the Commissioner.²⁸ In local culture, sexual relations become recognized only after the lengthy rituals of offering and settling the bride price in cash or kind by the man. If this has not happened, it is neither a marriage nor concubinage.

Literacy in the 'Affair'

'She taught McCallum Wolof, and the Wolof grammar and dictionary he subsequently wrote were for many years the standard reference for colonial officials'.²⁹ Colonial officials like McCallum, were with the missionaries, the earliest people to experiment with the writing of scripts for local languages like Wolof. They did this to be able to communicate in spite of the interpreters, whom they did not always trust. The literacy and intellectual history of West Africa is enriched by such narcissistic efforts to learn and vulgarize languages like Wolof. Fattoo went far ahead of most women in colonial Gambia when McCallum taught her to read and to forge his signature. She became a willing recipient of the Whiteman's wisdom, knowledge and manners, and therefore sealed her new role as an agent of the colonial establishment. Fattoo exhibited the ability to appropriate the colonial master's skills to contest the chief's monopoly of exploitative tactics. In this way also, she became unwitting agent of change, a strident rival to the wanton, and often detested, power of the chief Sawallo.

Much of the credit for McCallum's fall from grace goes to Mr Edward Francis Small who wrote the petitions against the commissioner on behalf of Sawalo. Mr Small had arrived in Ballanghar in 1917 to work at the village church but soon began to champion the rights of the local people. In 1922, he took up the case of Chief Omar Ceesay of Njau, son of Sawalo, who had been wrongfully dismissed,

²⁷ Berger, Iris. *Women in Twentieth Century Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p.20-21..

²⁸ Interview with Amie Jamma Ceesay, (85 years) Njau village, Upper Saloum, May 10 20015.

²⁹ Price, J. H. "Some Notes on the Influence of Women in Gambian Politics." Institute of Social and Economic Research, Conference Proceedings, 1958, p.17.

and succeeded in having the governor reinstate the chief. Small's story tells us about the early days of the African intellectual class in colonial Gambia. He attended the only primary school on colonial Gambia from 1897 onwards, and later had to move to Sierra Leone to pursue High School education which was not available in Gambia. Among the British West African possessions, Gambia was least endowed with educational opportunities such that until 1927 the government did not run any school; Western education was left entirely in the hands of the Missions. Small and the few other intellectuals were from the Krio group, descendants of Liberated Africans re-settled in Gambia and Sierra Leone from 1830 onwards. They were a favoured class of the British who saw them as more pliant and receptive of Christianity and West norms than the indigenous Wollof, Mandingo or Fula. Small became a journalist and crusader for social justice and a strong critic of colonial rule which is why he took up the case of Fattoo Khan with intense vigour. He rightly saw it as a new notch in colonial exploitation of the weak African in the high period of colonial rule. His was a good example of the engaged intellectual against colonial excess compared to the compromised intellectuals such as the first Gambian lawyer Sir John Forster (1873-1940). West African intellectual history has to make this very clear distinction between the whistleblower intellectual like Small and the acquiescing intellectuals like Forster who helped to draft the draconian Gambia Criminal Codes in the 1920s.

J. H. Price wrote that McCallum delegated more and more of his official responsibilities to Fatou, who, although illiterate, was able to run the district through the official interpreters, who would read over official letters to her and take down in English the replies which she dictated.

According to Price McCallum's sole responsibility was "to sign the letters which she drafted; that responsibility, too, he divested himself of before going on leave by teaching Fatou how to forge his signature." Consequently, even after he went on leave, Fatou was still sending letters to the Colonial Secretariat in Banjul.

This should lead us to the role of interpreters as compromised intellectuals in colonial West Africa. Interpreters were the backbone of the colonial establishment and as they invariably would have had a modicum of Western education, they qualify to be seen as among the intellectual elite of colonial period. In Fattoo's case, we see how she used the interpreters to run the affairs of the biggest region in colonial Gambia despite her illiteracy. Here the evidence

shows the duties and work of a compromised intellectual who aided and abetted colonial system no matter the consequences. But who were mostly likely to become interpreters in the chiefs' courts in colonial Gambia in the first two decades of the 1900s?

Chiefs educate their children: Muhameddan and Armitage Schools

The sons of chiefs were the first cadre of interpreters in colonial Gambia. This is because they were the first non Krio to enjoy the privilege of Western education. While chiefs and ordinary subjects in other parts of West Africa resisted colonial rule by refusing their children to attend Western schools, Gambian chiefs embraced colonial schools with open arms as far back as 1903 when the Muhamedan School was opened in Bathurst. Chiefs like Sawallo Ceesay, Kebba Sanneh, Jatta Selung Jatta sent their sons to the school all of whom were to become chiefs in the 1920s and 1930s.

In 1927, Governor Sir Cecil Armitage opened Armitage School in MaCarthy Island specifically to provide elementary education for the sons of chiefs, who were expected to work in the protectorate administration as chiefs, court clerks and interpreters. Many chiefs sent their sons to the school, which always received much attention from successive Governors and Commissioners.³⁰

In 1945, Armitage was upgraded to a secondary school; in 1949, it had a Teachers' College attached to it and in 1961, it was expanded and completely rebuilt. Its school roll of 1947 included the sons of chiefs and other protectorate boys who were to occupy senior positions in government in the years leading to independence in 1965. In a letter to the Secretary of State for Colonies in 1944, Governor Sir Hillary Blood explained the need for upgrading Armitage to a secondary school in these words: 'there is an urgent need for Protectorate youths with higher education in a number of branches of Government service... the inauguration of Native Treasuries will call for staff with secondary education, and I am repeatedly asked by chiefs to open village schools, which I refuse due to lack of train teachers...'. By embracing Western education, chiefs were able to help sustain the colonial system by ensuring a good supply of educated protectorate people ready to work in the protectorate administration as court clerks, interpreters, and police officers. Armitage School's role in Gambian

³⁰ See 'Armitage School Report.' EDU 1/157, Gambia National Archives, Banjul; see also 'Armitage school'. EDU 2/2, Gambia National Archives, Banjul. According to information in this file, Armitage opened on 12 January 1927 with a roll of 16 boarders and 14 day pupils, with a staff compliment of three.

colonial intellectual history therefore was to churn up educated chiefs who would be better servants.

Dividends of amorous relations between Colonial officials and local women

Berger (2016: 21) states that such relationships as that between Fattoo and the Commissioner had 'advantages for both the women involved and their families'. The benefits were usually material and also intangible as in status in society. Courting the powerful and usually feared White boss was encouraged by chiefs like Sawallo for their relatives as the women got material benefits like regular income. Fattoo as we have seen got rewards for her living with the Commissioner. She also shielded her uncle from many sanctions by the Commissioner. She wielded power also. She even learnt the ways of the White as in being able to write. These were the dividends from her relationship with the Commissioner.

Polygamy was the norm even before Islamization in the 10th century. The practice of marrying multiple wives symbolized power and wealth. High dowry meant that only well-to-do men could afford to marry many women. In order to cement their hold on to power, rulers courted loyalty by marrying from each clan in their kingdoms.

Fenda Lawrence and Fattoo Khan: a comparison?

As mentioned at the beginning, interracial relationships in the areas along the River Gambian are as old as the European presence. The intermingling was not only commercial but also sexual. Fenda Lawrence's story was that of another Gambian woman in an interracial relationship. She was born around 1742 to a Serahule family that lived in the Kingdom of Wuli, in the upper limits of the River Gambia. Fenda was described as 'a black, free woman of material substance, a considerable slave trader', who lived in Kaur, in the central reaches of the River Gambia.³¹ She migrated to Georgia, USA, in May 1772 in search of a

³¹ 'She voluntarily hath come: a Gambian woman trader in Colonial Georgia,' by Lillian Ashcraft-Eason, in *Identity in Shadow of Slavery*, Paul E Lovejoy (ed), Continuum, London and New York, 2000, pp.202-218. This is a well-argued essay, which, though thin on evidence on the life of Fenda particularly her later years in the US, gives a thorough argument on the subject. My thanks go to Judith Carney for introducing me to the work. See also Lerone Bennet Jr. *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America (1619-1966)*, Johnson Publishing, Chicago, 1966, p.41. The certificate of passage issued by the Governor of Georgia states: '(Fenda) is a free black woman and heretofore-a considerable trader in the River Gambia on the coast of Africa (who) hath voluntarily come to be and

better life and more lucrative trade. Her father worked at British-owned factories at Wulitenda, Doomasansang, Bansang Tenda and later, Carrol's Wharf, in Nianija, while her mother worked as a maid for white traders. She therefore grew up in the multi-cultural business environment of the factories along the river, which had mulatto, European and African populations. This shaped her life. Furthermore, the numerous successful mulatto women traders who operated up river must have inspired Fenda into trading. Although she was not of mixed race, she nonetheless belonged to the Signara class because of her wealth and marriage to a European trader.

In 1760, she married an Englishman called James Lawrence, who was the employer of her parents at Kaur. As her husband was away most of the time up river negotiating trading rights with chiefs, Fenda ran the businesses at Kaur and Nianimaro. She used this chance to build up her network of business contacts in the region.

In 1780, her husband died leaving her with three children. She was now to take charge of his vast business concerns along the river, which included three shallops that plied the river ports transporting goods and slaves. However, Fenda was unable to remain a successful trader because local chiefs and armed marauders coerced her into surrendering her fortune. She lost her boats to the king of Wuli, who sold them off to a French trader based in Albreda. Also, her own parents forced her to yield much of her business to them. Lilian Ashcraft-Eason has suggested that 'patriarchal, paternalistic and communal tendencies within the Kingdom of Saloum' (where Kaur was located) could have interfered with Fenda's business in Kaur as the *alkali* and local chiefs questioned her dower rights or for other reasons withdrew their support. Fenda would have had a problem because under both local law and Islamic law, wives could not inherit their husbands' property. Traditionally, when a foreigner like Fenda's husband died, the local chiefs had the right to claim their property.

Whatever might have pushed her out of her homeland to the Americas, Fenda left Kaur with her family aboard a slave ship called *New Britannia* in 1792 and arrived in Georgia, an exile determined to succeed. With the help of contacts she knew while in Kaur, she soon obtained full residency status, and gained acquaintances with the trade community of Savannah, the main city of Georgia.

remain for sometime in this province.' The Governor gave orders that she should be allowed to 'pass unmolested within the state' while doing her legitimate business.

She bought and resold slaves and also traded in cotton, such that she began to make profits. Before she died, Fenda had built a huge trading concern in Georgia and other southern states. A difference between Fattoo's story and that of Fenda is that Fenda was in a marriage in the African context while Fattoo was in an informal relationship.

Conclusion

The McCalum Mistress Affair truly shook up the colonial administration. It brought to light the well kept secret of amorous relations between local women and British colonial officials. It also underscored the role of culture and the emergent intellectuals in influencing the flow of the colonial administration. The Affair 'reshaped perceptions of interracial relationships across race, class, gender and location' in colonial Gambia.³² The strange aspect of the Affair is that Fattoo escaped censure; while her partner lost his job and career. The Affair was also outstanding seen in the context of the times it happened: late 1910s when the colonial machinery was at its most ferocious and racist views of Africans, especially African women, were quite strong in Europe.

Fattoo's sexual escapades with the Commissioner did not produce any children if the oral sources from Upper Saloum are to be believed, but it has the legacy of falsifying the 'pseudo-intellectual construction of racial difference, which individuals and groups have used to divide and rule societies, was challenged as Africans and Europeans contracted sexual relationships on both long- and short-term bases'.³³ Fattoo could therefore be cast in the light of an avant garde multi-racialist at the height of the colonial period when the races were divided and women had little room to manoeuvre in the colonial space.

While future research could try to unearth the further ramifications of this Affair looking at for example, if it had led to legislations to forbid interracial sexual liaisons, what is clear now is that Fattoo was a powerful female agency

³² Aderinto, Saheed. Review of *Crossing the Color Line: race, sex, and the contested politics of colonialism in Ghana*, In '[Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute Volume 88, Number 1, February 2018](#)' pp. 193-194

³³ Op.cit, p.193.

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