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# Baquaqua, Mahommah Gardo

(c. 1820s–after 1857),

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author of an exceptional English-language slave narrative about enslavement in West Africa and Brazil in the nineteenth century, was, according to his own account, born to a Muslim merchant family in “Zoogoo” (Djougou), Benin, an important commercial town, likely in the 1820s.

Baquaqua’s letters and biography trace his journey from his homeland in the interior to the coastal kingdom of Dahomey, then via the slave trade to Brazil (Pernambuco and Rio de Janeiro), with continued travels to New York City, Boston, Haiti, upstate New York, Canada, and Liverpool, England. Baquaqua is also notable for making the cultural transition from being a Dendi-speaking Muslim, who had studied at a Qur’anic school and knew some Arabic, to that of a Portuguese-speaking slave in Brazil, then to a free Baptist convert in Creole-speaking Haiti, and finally to an English-speaking supporter of abolitionists in North America and England. Only a part of this remarkable journey appears in *An Interesting Narrative: Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua*, which he dictated to Samuel Downing Moore, a Unitarian minister and abolitionist from Ireland. The sixty-six-page *Biography* was published under Baquaqua’s own copyright in Detroit in 1854, thus giving voice and agency to one of the millions of Africans sold into slavery in Brazil. The *Biography* is now recognized as an “invaluable addition” to the corpus of slave narratives written by those born in Africa.

The exact date of Baquaqua’s birth is unknown. In one version of his captivity experience in Africa, he was first kidnapped as a child and ransomed, only to be kidnapped again and enslaved. Although there are uncertainties about how long he spent as a slave or servant in Africa, his biography clarifies that he was exported as a young adult from near the port of Ouidah (Whydah) in what was then Dahomey.

Baquaqua testified to treatment before his departure from Africa that included branding, being chained together with other slaves, and being stripped of his clothing. On the slave ship, he was crammed in with the other males, while females were placed on the other side of the hold. No one could stand or even sleep. They were fed only boiled corn and suffered greatly from thirst and confinement in the filth and stench. They were permitted to go on deck only twice; and those who died, of which there were “a great many,” were thrown overboard.

After the slave ship arrived in Recife, Pernambuco, in the northeast of the Brazilian Empire in 1845, he was purchased by a Portuguese baker. Baquaqua documents the difficult process of adapting to enslavement in Brazil. After trying to please his new master, he soon learned that he had “a tyrant to serve.” Because of the terrible treatment he endured, Baquaqua started drinking and tried to run away, but he was recaptured and returned to the baker. When he neglected his job of selling bread, he was

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again beaten. After he tried to drown himself but failed, he was sold south to Rio de Janeiro, the Brazilian capital. He probably traveled on one of the small coasting vessels that commonly transported slaves between Recife, Salvador, and Rio.

Baquaqua recalled that he spent two weeks in the slave market in Rio before being sold to a ship's captain named Clemente José da Costa, who called him José da Costa. In the nineteenth century, enslaved Africans were commonly used as ordinary seamen on all types of ships, including slave ships. Baquaqua, however, served as the cabin steward on the *Lembrança*, a ship that made two trips to southern Brazil before sailing from Rio to deliver a consignment of coffee in New York. When the ship docked in New York in 1847, local abolitionists attempted to free him, but they faced legal challenges in the New York court system, during which time he was put in jail. When it seemed that the next appeal would fail, Baquaqua escaped from jail and fled to Boston with the help of the Underground Railroad.

In September 1847, abolitionists convinced him to seek freedom in the free black republic of Haiti. Once again, Baquaqua faced the difficulty of adapting to yet another culture and language, until a Mr. Jones, an African American, introduced him to the Reverend William Judd and his wife, Nancy Judd, of the American Baptist Free Mission Society. They took him into their home, where he worked as their cook and first learned English, becoming proficient enough to read the Bible and write letters in English. Under the influence of the Judds, he converted to Christianity and was baptized in 1848.

After about two years in Haiti, Baquaqua returned to New York to continue his education so that he could work as a missionary in Africa. With the support of abolitionists, including the Free Baptists, he secured funding for his schooling and studied for about three years at New York Central College in upstate New York until 1853. After leaving school, he participated in further fundraising for the Free Baptist missions and traveled throughout New York and Pennsylvania. In spite of his heavily accented English, he proved to be an effective speaker on the abolitionist lecture circuit, because of his compelling antislavery message based on his own experiences as a slave.

After a series of racist attacks and threats of further violence, Baquaqua moved to Canada. By 1854 he had settled in Chatham, Ontario, where he may have met fugitive blacks from the United States. Due to Chatham's proximity to Detroit, he crossed the US-Canada border to arrange publication of his narrative. Shortly thereafter, he returned to New York City and left the country in 1855 for Liverpool, England, from whence he planned to return to West Africa. However, he encountered many difficulties in securing funding, and was still in England as of 1857, the last date in which he appears in the historical record. Although he may never have reached Africa, his biography survives to document his resistance to enslavement, as well as his unique journey from bondage in Africa and Brazil to freedom in New York and England.

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