

Making Money

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INTRODUCTION

Atlantic Lives

Anglo-African Trade in Northern Guinea

A EURO-AFRICAN widow named Hope Heath traveled the main carriage road leading from her residence in Leyton, Essex, to London in July 1697. There, on July 10, she married Samuel Meston at St. James Duke's Place, the Anglican parish church of Aldgate Ward in the City of London.¹ Her second marriage must have been a welcome new beginning for Hope and her two-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, after enduring several years of difficult family disputes and legal struggles in the wake of her husband's death. What had set off seemingly endless rounds of acrimonious controversy were the deaths of two important English men in Hope's life—John Booker, her former master; and William Heath, her first husband. It was because of them both that she had left the northern Guinea Coast, land of her birthplace, to live the life of a free woman of color in London.

These three people were brought together by the Guinea trade and England's Royal African Company (RAC) at James Island fort on the lower Gambia River. Booker had first arrived at James Island in 1680 and quickly rose to serve as assistant to the company's principal agent there. William Heath arrived in June 1683, serving as a soldier at the fort and then at Juffure, a company outpost on the mainland. In March 1686, Heath assumed the important position of company factor, which put him in charge of keeping track of the trade goods stored in their warehouse and handling the company's sales and purchases.² It was around this same time that Esperança (Hope) must have come to James Island, though involuntarily as a child captive. Where she had come from and who named her Esperança

will probably never be known. She had been born into a community on the mainland in about 1675, but she then suffered some kind of horrible calamity that tore her from home and family and forced her into captivity. On James Island, she lived and worked as one of Booker's personal household slaves inside the fort, along with her so-called brother, Sanko. In assuming for himself the role of paterfamilias to his child slaves, Booker sent her away to a boarding school in England in the 1680s to learn to read and write in English. And young Esperança came to be known among English-speakers as Hope Booker.³

Her life changed dramatically upon the death of John Booker in early June 1693. Calling her "my girle Speranca," Booker gave Hope in a codicil to his will her unconditional freedom, title to her jewelry and other personal possessions, stewardship of his slaves, and an impressive lifetime annuity of £25 for her maintenance.⁴ If Hope Booker and William Heath had not been acquainted earlier, they certainly did get to know each other very well as they collaborated to carry out Booker's funeral and burial arrangements and set about administering his personal estate at James Island. Heath began to court her, pleading that she agree to marry him there according to the local custom on the Guinea Coast and promising that at the first opportunity they would marry again in a formal Christian ceremony. Their marriage took place on the island in October 1693 at a public celebration in which they pledged before God and an audience of witnesses their lifelong love and devotion to each other.⁵

The following March, William Heath sent his wife to London, where he planned to join her after completing his work for the company and putting his own and what remained of Booker's affairs in order.⁶ Delays kept him tied down at the fort for over a year, with the result that he was not able to be with Hope for the birth and christening of their daughter, Elizabeth. This failing he lamented publicly to his coworkers in the many toasts he drank to the health and safety of his wife and child.⁷ When he finally did set out for England, he stopped over and spent several months in Lisbon, primarily to sell off some of Booker's estate and his own personal property and trade goods to contacts he had among English and Portuguese merchants who resided there. Sadly, when at last on the final leg of his homeward voyage, he died at sea in December 1695 without ever having made out a will.⁸

When the news of William's death reached them, Hope Heath was about twenty years old, well into her second year in England, and baby Elizabeth had just had her first birthday. A storm of wild accusations and outlandish

charges was soon to erupt and further complicate Hope's already difficult circumstances. Her circle of English acquaintances centered on the contacts and associates of Booker and her husband, and they all had interests, as did she, in seeing to the administration of the estate Booker had amassed on the Guinea Coast. To that end, the merchant Humphrey Dyke, executor of Booker's original will, had already presented a copy of the codicil to it in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC) in August 1695. But when news of the death of William Heath arrived, William's brother, Samuel, filed a bill of complaint against Dyke and three others, including Hope. All of them, he claimed, were conspiring to defraud him of his right to inherit his brother's personal property. Referring to Hope as "Sparnissa, alias Hope Booker," he charged that she had lived with William Heath as his hired servant, not as his wife.⁹ Dyke then appeared again before the PCC, this time to present evidence of the legality of Hope and William's marriage, the legitimacy of Elizabeth as their daughter, and thus the right of Elizabeth to inherit. The court ruled that the marriage and daughter were indeed legitimate and also granted Dyke the authority to administer the personal estate of William Heath.¹⁰

In records of the defendants' official answer to Samuel Heath's complaint, there appears a section that is of special interest, as it was framed by Hope Heath herself. In the section, she outlined her own specific concerns and objections. As written in the court documentation, she insisted on registering her proper English name, Hope Heath. And she understandably took great offense at the statement that she had been William's hired servant, which she firmly denied as an untrue and scandalous claim. Her most important point, however, centered on the nature of her relationship with William Heath and the evidence that Dyke had presented in court, which demonstrated the legality of her marriage and daughter.¹¹ That evidence, in fact, also provided stunning proof of Samuel Heath's mendacity. William's devotion to his wife and daughter was spelled out clearly and eloquently in letters written by William to Hope, to his family, and to Humphrey Dyke, and these were shown in court along with specimens of William's handwriting. More damning to Samuel, however, were four letters that had been written to Hope herself, addressed to her as Mrs. Heath, wife of William. Three of them were from William and Samuel's sister, Dorothy, and one was from Samuel's own wife, Elizabeth.¹² In other words, the Heath family was well aware of William's marriage to Hope and had formally acknowledged it in writing. Whatever thoughts and sentiments had moved Hope to preserve

these family letters, she could not have envisioned how sadly and annoyingly useful they would turn out to be.

Hope Heath's story highlights several important themes in early modern African and Atlantic history that are central to this book. Here we see the direct intervention in an English court of a seventeenth-century Euro-African woman and recently freed slave who was actively pursuing her own economic and legal interests.¹³ She had managed to secure the annuity that was bequeathed to her by Booker along with an untold amount in personal property and bills of exchange through various of her merchant contacts. Her literacy in English was a key to her success, but so too were aspects of her character that had been noted by others, such as her respectability, well-mannered bearing, and sharp intelligence.¹⁴ And on July 12, 1696, almost one year to the day before her second marriage, Hope was baptized at St. Mary's, the parish church in Leyton. Describing her as "Hope Heath a Black mayd about 21," the record suggests that she was a practicing Christian and had some understanding about the importance of the Anglican Church and its centrality to English law at the time.¹⁵ Hope stands out as a particularly poignant example of the various forms of mixed Euro-African identities people created for themselves as they lived and worked within the multicultural social networks of Atlantic commerce.

Hope's childhood experiences of captivity and enslavement illustrate some of the special particularities of early modern Atlantic history, a history that was marked by people's increasing geographical mobility as well as their considerable social fluidity, even for some of the unfree. To sharpen and bring home these features more fully, a recurring motif in this book about individual people and their daily lives is the role played by contingency or happenstance in shaping them. Lives as they are lived seem and are in many ways highly unpredictable and even, at times, contradictory. A focus on particular people's lives and careers also takes us inside the complex social worlds of Euro-African trade, allowing us to see how it was organized and carried out on the ground and how it worked on a day-to-day basis. More specifically, the focus here is on global Anglo-African commerce at a particular time and place on Africa's Guinea (western) coast. This book presents one richly detailed example of what were many and varying local histories in the early modern Atlantic basin.

My main sources for writing this history are archival primary sources—records of the RAC, especially for the period 1672 to 1713, when the company held a monopoly on England's trade in Africa.¹⁶ Many scholars have

tapped into this archive for writing histories of the company itself, British economic history, British trade and colonization, precolonial Africa, and Atlantic trade. Company correspondence, for example, provides useful details about matters of concern between its officials in London and their many far-flung employees. Three volumes of letters between London and the Guinea Coast between 1681 and 1699 have been transcribed, edited, and published by Robin Law, making these sources available to scholars around the world.¹⁷ Less well known are all sorts of other business and accounting records kept by the RAC. They, too, have been used by some scholars, albeit infrequently and rather selectively. These are the records that have been especially important in my research for this book, both as a counterweight to the London-centered views that predominate in the company correspondence and as a vehicle for gaining access to the myriad roles, interests, and experiences of individual people on the West African coast, especially Africans, who took part in Atlantic commerce. This African side—Africans' involvement as captives and also as merchants, landlords, suppliers of exports and provisions, laborers, artisans, interpreters, seamen, porters, consumers, and providers of information and services—still needs to be spelled out for particular times and places all up and down the Guinea Coast.¹⁸

My geographical focus is Upper (or northern) Guinea, where the RAC took over and maintained a massive trading sphere around its three forts and many outstations. It was a huge, socially complex, dynamic zone of commerce, intercommunication, and cultural change as well as a supplier to the transatlantic slave trade and trade with Europe. Recognizing that the slave trade was part of a much larger multilateral and intercontinental commercial system utterly transformed and enriched my understanding of it, especially for this time and place. Seen from the vantage point and perspective of the Upper Guinea Coast, and situating it in the longer-term context of world history, the Guinea trade represents both a continuation of older historical patterns and the ushering in of totally new ones.

This West African coast, called Guinea by Europeans, was the final coastline of Africa to be opened up to international maritime commerce. The Guinea Coast was renowned among European sailors for its seemingly impossible navigational barriers. Its constant southwesterly winds and ocean currents appeared to preclude voyages of return, so no one dared sail south very far beyond the Canary Islands. It was not until the 1430s, after much investment and experimentation, that Portuguese mariners discovered how they could sail their ships down the Guinea Coast and make a return trip

home via a different set of more favorable wind patterns they had found farther out into the Atlantic. This breakthrough opened up the Guinea Coast for the first time to European exploration and Euro-African Atlantic commerce.

Direct trade with Europe started out as comparable to Africa's ancient external trading networks along her Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean shores, by which goods such as gold, ivory, animal skins, rhinoceros horn, ostrich eggs and feathers, and captives were exported in exchange for precious stones such as agate and rock-crystal, beads made of coral or shell, plain and patterned textiles, and a variety of containers large and small, made of ceramic, glass, or copper alloy. What set the Euro-African Guinea trade apart from these earlier ones was its later timing and much greater intercontinental scale and—above all—the regularity and volume of the trade in captives, which grew enormously during the years described in this book and even more so during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The intensity of the trade in slaves between Africa and the Americas was a totally new, dramatically different, and tragic episode in world history. Ships were loaded and sent off across the Atlantic with cargoes made up entirely of hundreds of imprisoned and suffering human beings.

Looking back on the late seventeenth-century north Atlantic, one might see it simply as a time of gradual transition, as merely a backdrop to revolutionary events that came in the mid-eighteenth to nineteenth centuries.¹⁹ For those people who experienced it, however, with no knowledge of where their strategies and decisions might take them, it must have seemed a particularly volatile and uncertain time, demanding much experimentation with very high risks. This comes across repeatedly in the RAC records as they show how important the nonslave African exports were to the company and how its officials in London entertained enthusiastic but ultimately unrealistic wishes to establish plantations of tropical products on the Guinea Coast.²⁰ Viewed especially from the vantage point of northern Guinea, and considering its convenient location relative to Europe, the transatlantic slave trade can be seen in its full global context as an important part of what was actually a much more complex and expansive economic picture. And it is this larger, multilateral global network, which linked the Guinea Coast directly with Europe as well as to the Americas, that I refer to generally as the Guinea trade. West Africa performed multiple roles in early modern Atlantic trade—as a supplier of slaves to the Americas, as a supplier of some slaves along with gold, ivory, dyewood, and other raw or processed

materials to Europe, and as a market for European exports and reexports from Asia.²¹

There are two interrelated parts to this book. One part is global in scale, laying out the West African setting and the origin and production of Afro-Eurasian commodities that were traded. The other part shifts to a human scale—a social history of human activity and personal relations—focusing on individual people who were involved in RAC trading operations on the Upper Guinea Coast. Chapter 1 takes the reader through an overview of West Africa prior to the era of Atlantic trade, showing how centuries of Islamic commerce across the Sahara had shaped and reshaped its regional and interregional markets and trading networks. This was the social, economic, cultural, and material environment to which European merchants had to adapt. The overview continues in chapter 2 and expands the geographical scale to include the production and producers of the major global commodities—European, Asian, and African—that were central to the Guinea trade. Early modern Euro-African trade was built with the skills and labor of countless people worldwide.

The core of the book—chapters 3, 4, and 5—is a social history of RAC traders, support staff, suppliers, and captives in northern Guinea during the company's well-documented monopoly period. The chapters represent three main categories of people who were active participants in the trade, willingly or unwillingly. Chapter 3 tracks the careers of free Africans and Euro-Africans who supplied export goods, provisions, and services to the RAC. Chapter 4 shifts to the experiences, fates, and fortunes of people in successive stages of captivity or enslavement and instances when they actively refused unfree status. And chapter 5 surveys the surprisingly varied employees of the RAC on salary, some of whom were hired from nearby African communities. Taken together, these people's intertwined lives and careers present the reader with a vivid and memorable picture of the African side of early modern Atlantic trade, showing what it could mean to its participants—European, African, and Euro-African—and how those in this particular corner of the world carried it out.

In the writing of this book I have followed several guiding principles. One is that I hope to reach a wide audience, and to that end I aim for language that is clear and accessible. African history, especially precolonial African history, is not widely taught and may seem so distant and unfamiliar to readers that it comes across as an unappealing, intimidating, or even impenetrable topic. My years of teaching African history have shown me

that describing the experiences of individual people in Africa's past offers to the uninitiated an effective and welcoming entryway. Readers may wonder about how and on what basis I selected the named individual people whose stories I tell in my chapters of social history. They are mainly a self-selected sample of people who chose to work for or with the company for a sufficiently significant amount of time such that they repeatedly entered the company's documentation, thereby giving me the opportunity to track their careers. I could have included more Luso-African individuals in the group, but I was aiming also to present a cross-section of people, showing complexities and variations in their identities. For each of them I gathered many fragmentary pieces of their lives and kept them in files until I began to write, and it was only then that I could fully see and appreciate both the individuality of people in the sample and the remarkable and sometimes surprising things they did over time.

Finally, my writing reflects my commitment to teaching historical thinking—showing students where history comes from and how historians examine, wonder about, grapple with, and interpret their primary sources.²² I often refer directly to the evidence, the particular sources, what they may or may not mean, what they may indicate, and also what seems to be missing. These historical actors who turned up in my archival sources have intrigued and humbled me again and again, and in gratitude for the richly rewarding opportunity to do this work I aim to understand and respect their lives, not to judge them.