



Sallah, Pierre

1796-1852

Methodist

Gambia

Multiple versions are available:

Pierre (sometimes spelled “Pear”) Sallah was an assistant minister in the Methodist Church of The Gambia. Sallah was among the first indigenous men who attained this position. He was appointed in 1831 and served the Methodist Church for 17 years.

Sallah was a Wolof from present-day Senegal, probably originating from the kingdom of Baol (called “Bawald Lambey” in Moister 1889: 172). Born around 1796 as a child of freeborn parents, he was kidnapped, enslaved, and sold to a Mulatto woman in Goree, who trained him as a stonemason.[1] In 1818 his owner hired him out to do construction work in Bathurst.

While in Bathurst, Sallah heard the missionary John Morgan preach from Ezekiel 33:11 “turn away from your evil ways” and the word hit him, to quote his own words, “like a razor”. [2] According to missionary William Moister, Sallah thereupon “burned his *greegrees* and abandoned the foolish Mohammedan superstitions, in which he had been trained up from infancy” [3], thus indicating that Sallah was a convert from Islam.

The exact date of Sallah’s conversion is uncertain. John Morgan served in The Gambia between 1821 and 1825, but there is no record in Morgan’s letters or *Reminiscences* of Sallah or his conversion. This could possibly indicate that Sallah converted shortly before Morgan left for England in March 1825 and would imply that Sallah was approximately 28 or 29 years old at the time.

It seems that Sallah had little or no formal education and there are no indications that he had received some form of Islamic education or was literate in Arabic. Morgan’s successor, Richard Marshall and William Moister gave Sallah sufficient private tutoring for him to conduct services and work as assistant missionary, but most missionaries who worked with him, commented at some point on his limited versatility in English. It seems however that his lack of education was more than compensated by his piety and zealousness. William Fox mentioned that Sallah was “energetic” and “very well received by the people.” [4]

In 1829 Sallah was recalled to Goree by his owner. Encouraged by Marshall and - it seems - by his proprietor, Sallah preached among fellow slaves in Goree, resulting in a small Methodist fellowship among the slaves on the island. Marshall, who visited Sallah’s fellowship in February 1830, reported that there were around 15 members on trial. [5] Alarmed by the possible effects of Sallah’s preaching on their slaves, several slave owners reported Sallah to the Governor. Also the resident Roman Catholic priest was weary of the uninvited “competition”. Sallah was arrested but not convicted; he was however told to stop his preaching: “They threaten me; they tell me I must not preach again; for black man no *sabby* (know) nothing.” [6] Because Sallah expressed that he had no intention of doing so, the Governor threatened with stronger measures. It was from this precarious situation that Moister was able to ransom Sallah for the sum of three hundred dollars: “I thank the good Methodist people, who get me free from slavery and from the French Governor in Gorée.” [7] The money for his ransom had come from Ireland, after an appeal from The Gambia, probably made by Moister. [8]

The congregation started by Sallah was neither temporary nor of superficial nature. When missionary Thomas Dove visited Gorée in late 1833 to recuperate from illness, the members were still meeting. Dove was invited to preach but there seems to have been no follow-up after this, no doubt because Goree was French territory. [9]

Back in Bathurst Sallah was appointed as an non-stipendiary assistant missionary to the Methodist Church in The Gambia where he assisted Moister. It seems that he initially continued to work as a mason until 1831 when he was appointed to a paid position at MacCarthy island to work among the Fula. [10] From 1833 onwards Sallah mainly served at MacCarthy island. After the mission among the Fula proved a failure, Sallah served as assistant minister among the liberated Africans who had been relocated to MacCarthy Island. The Methodist Church also employed Sallah’s wife Mary and his son John Sallah, both of whom served as teachers at the school in Georgetown.

By the mid 1840 tensions began to surface. In 1846 the African members of the Leaders Meeting of the Bathurst church wrote several letters to Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society to complain about the conduct of the missionaries Benjamin Chapman and Matthew Godman. They asked WMMS to replace them – and especially Godman – with people who would make no difference “between a black man and a white man.” [11] Despite protests by the Leaders Meeting, the two longest-serving African assistant missionaries, both Pierre Sallah and his colleague John Cupidon were suspended. The Synod of 1848 changed the suspension into discharge of office, a decision re-affirmed at the Special Synod of 1949. Cupidon was said to suffer from “insanity” and Sallah was charged with “disobedience.” [11]

It seems that after his dismissal Pierre Sallah briefly worked for the trader and nemesis of the Methodist Church Richard Lloyd but died shortly afterwards. He had been a member of the church for about 25 years and had served as its assistant missionary for more than 17 years. His wife Mary, who had served the Methodist Church as a teacher, died in December 1852. [12]

Sallah was exemplary for a whole generation of men who were vital in the earliest decades of the Methodist Church in The Gambia. In an era when expatriate missionary service was frequently cut short by illness and death, indigenous agents such as Pierre Sallah, John Cupidon, the brothers John and Amadi Gum, William Sallah, Robert McDonough and William Jouf, formed the mainstay of the incipient Methodist Church of the Gambia. Few details about the life and work of this first generation of indigenous agents have been preserved. However, thanks to William Moister, contemporary and colleague to Sallah and Cupidon, who recorded an autobiographical text of Pierre Sallah and part of the life-story of John Cupidon in his publications, their lives and contributions were rescued from oblivion. [13]

Martha Frederiks

References:

[1] Sallah relates his captivity story in a letter to the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society [WMMS]: “Me was born in a heathen Jalloff country, called Bawald Lambey, near Senegal, West Africa; and brought up a shepherd’s boy, as was my father before me. But one day my father wanted me to go from home with him on some business: I leave the flocks with one men till I come back; by my God, Who does everything for my good, not let me go home again. When my father and I get to the place, I went into the bush with some boys of that place to get some wild fruit. By and by I leave the boys in that bush, for I think my father he want me. But when me get a little way in the path, a bad man meet me in the way. O, that man have no pity for little black boy! He put something in my mouth, because I make too much cry; and then he take me to a dark bush, and he tie me there with a rope, and he leave me there alone till midnight. Many bad animals

live in that bush. Then man come with two more men; they cut the rope: me then walk all night; me get no supper. Three days me walk without food, only me drink little water. Me think me must die for true that time; but at last me get to the main land near Gorée, and they sell me there for rum, tobacco, and many other things, which I see with my eyes.” W. Moister, *Missionary Stories. Narratives, scenes and incidents*, London: 1889, 172-3.

[2] Sallah narratives his conversion story as follows: “When I first hear the name of Jesus Christ, I ask the people who go to church what they mean; they tell me that He is the Son of God, and that He die for all the world. O, what mercy! When I know the Saviour’s name, that time I no rest at night. I go to some friend every night to teach me to read, for I not able to read at the time, for every day I work; so then every night I get some friend to teach me in the way of the Lord Jesus. I go on little more in reading and praying to God. Every day my heart get a little nearer to God. I then ask the Minister to let me go to Class; he says yes. There I hear more about Jesus, and believe in Him with all my heart. O my God, I praise Thee! and Thee only will I love.” W. Moister, *Missionary stories*, 173.

[3] W. Moister, *Memorial of missionary labours in Western Africa, the West Indies and the Cape of Good Hope*, London: 1886 (third expanded edition), 139.

[4] Marshall to WMMS, St. Mary’s February 26 1830, Box 293 H2709 mf. 831; Fox to “My dear brother” [someone in Sierra Leone] St. Mary’s June 10 1834, Box 294 H2709 mf. 841. Note: the Box numbers refer to the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society archives (now part of Methodist Missionary Society Archives) at SOAS in London; the H and mf. numbers reference the IDC microfiche edition.

[5] Marshall to WMMS, St. Mary’s February 26 1830 Box 293 H2709 mf. 831. It is unclear how this community related to the Methodist fellowship in Goree visited by John Morgan in 1822. J. Morgan, *Reminiscences of the founding of a Christian mission on the Gambia*, London: 1864, 42.

[6] W. Moister, *Missionary stories*, 174.

[7] W. Moister, *Missionary stories*, 174.

[8] Moister to WMMS, St. Mary’s August 14 1831, Box 293 H2709 mf. 832.

[9] Dove to WMMS, St. Mary’s October 30 1833, Box 293 H2709 mf. 834.

[10] Moister to WMMS, St. Mary’s May 14 1831, Box 293, H2709 mf. 832.

[11] Leaders to WMMS, St. Mary’s October 29 1846, Box 295 H2709 mf. 879 and mf. 881.

[12] Synod minutes 1846, Box 297 H2708 mf. 2 and Seymour Gay to WMMS, October 30 1846, Box 295 H2709 mf. 881; Special Synod minutes 1848, Box 297 H2708 mf. 3.

[13] May to WMMS, MacCarthy Island Febr. 27 1853, Box 295 H2709 mf. 886.

[14] W. Moister, *Memorial of missionary labours, *138-141; W. Moister, *Missionary Stories, 172-175.*

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