

## GOGO HABIBA OF BIDA: THE RISE AND DEMISE OF A NINETEENTH CENTURY NUPE MERCHANT PRINCESS AND POLITICIAN

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**ABSTRACT** Since the rise of the Nupe kingdom in Central Nigeria region in the fifteenth century, women have played a prominent role in the socio-economic development of the area. Notwithstanding the traditional values of the society that restricted them from active politics, it is a well known fact that Nupe women have continued to dominate the trade and commerce of the region. Indeed, until the end of the nineteenth century, there was hardly any Nupe settlement where a cluster of wealthy women traders did not exist. Nonetheless, this position did not give them any functional role in the political affairs of the society.

However, the situation changed in the nineteenth century to give women specific and well-defined functions in the society. This served as a spring board on which a woman of note, Princess Gogo Habiba, rose to the limelight in the political and economic affairs of the Nupe society. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, she dominated Nupe politics and distinguished herself as an accomplished slave merchant with trading links spreading outside Nupeland to Lagos slave coast. Towards the end of the century, her career was brought to an end through the combined efforts by various interest groups, principal amongst whom were the British.

**Key Words:** Women; Politics; Slave trade; Gogo Habiba; Nigeria; The nineteenth century.

### INTRODUCTION

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, women were hardly allowed any significant role in politics in Nupeland, central Nigeria. The political structure was male-dominated, and the womenfolk merely stayed "behind" their menfolk only to be seen and not to be heard. Even though they were effective in the trade and commerce sectors, women could hardly use this to any advantage in the politics of the society. In fact, their economic prosperity rather attracted to them negative impressions from their male counterparts. It is a common knowledge that women were often accused of witchcraft, especially the fairly prosperous ones, in order to confiscate their property.<sup>(1)</sup>

However, this situation changed in the nineteenth century with the overthrow of the Edegi dynasty by the Fulani Jihadists (Abubaker, 1985). This political revolution replaced the Nupe state system with an emirate system of government. The new dispensation adopted policies that were a radical departure from what had existed earlier on. Prominent among these was the recognition given to women in the affairs of the society. One woman who emerged as the first Nupe woman to exercise immense political and economic power was Princess Gogo Habiba of Bida. In

other words, she was the first woman in Nupeland ever to distinguish herself in the areas of politics and trade. This paper is an attempt to document her biography with particular emphasis on her political and economic activities. An attempt is also made to examine the internal and external factors that brought her career to an end.

## WOMEN AND THE PRE-NINETEENTH CENTURY NUPE POLITICS

Before going into the life history of Princess Gogo Habiba, it is important to highlight the political situation in Nupeland as it affected the women folk before the nineteenth century. We are aware that the political set up of pre-nineteenth century Nupeland was structured on four different classes of title system (Nadel, 1942). The *Ena Gitsuzhi*, the class with royal titles was exclusively for the members of the ruling lineage and the *Etsu*, or king, was appointed from this group. The *Ena Ndeji* class was the traditional councilors' group where the *Ndeji*, Prime Minister, was appointed. Others were the *Ena Kun* class with military titles and the *Ena Nyizagizhi* class for women. It must be noted, however, that apart from the women's titles which were few, all other groups consisted more than fifteen functional and hierarchical titles. Furthermore, two out of the women's titles were linked with witchcraft and evil.

For example, *Sagi* was the title given to the appointed head of women in every Nupe town and village. Her deputy held the title of *Ninwoye*. The two women were given the responsibility of warding off the evil in the society, and more sensitive was than warding off evil was that the *Sagi* and *Ninwoye* were consulted or held responsible for any calamity that befell the town such as famine, plague, or other mysterious circumstances.<sup>(2)</sup> They were often required to identify the scape-goats for, most of whom were usually women, and to recommend the punishments to be meted out. The third title, more dignified, was that of *Soniyan*: the head of women traders and controller of markets. She was supposed to regulate and fix prices of food stuffs. However, she was usually rendered ineffective by the male-dominated traditional councils. She could not function independently of the instructions from the palaces. In any case, the palaces were more interested in commodity taxes and market levies than tributes from the vassal districts.

However, with the establishment of the emirate system in the nineteenth century, women were allowed to actively participate in the political process. Although the new administration retained the existing titles of *Sagi*, *Ninwoye* and *Soniyan*, more functional roles were assigned to the holders of these titles. The title *Soniyan* was bestowed on an honest and wealthy woman. She was given a free hand to function and report to the palace issues concerning the markets.

Contrary to what existed before the establishment of the emirate system, the titles *Sagi* and *Ninwoye* were made exclusive to princesses.<sup>(3)</sup> Perhaps this was due to the functional and political role assigned to these titles. For example, *Sagi* became the overall head of the womenfolk just as *Emir* was the head of the entire emirate. The difference, however, was that *Sagi* and her deputy, *Ninwoye*, took orders from the *Emir*. In any case, these women were necessary for the *Emir's*

public relations.

## GOGO HABIBA'S FAMILY BACKGROUND

Gogo Habiba was born during the early years of the nineteenth century, the turbulent era of Nupe politics, to an itinerant Fulani preacher, Mallam Muhammad Bangana, alias Mallam Dendo, in Central Nupeland. The exact year of her birth is not known but the circumstances of her birth are very clear from the evidence made available by members of her family living in Bida. Her father had come to Nupeland in the late eighteenth century as a preacher, soothsayer and seller of protective charms.<sup>(4)</sup> Dendo had become popular in his career all over Nupeland by the beginning of the nineteenth century. This brought him closer to the court of the *Etsu* of Nupe at Raba, Majiyya.

Dendo's rise to fame coincided with a period of internal political crisis in Nupeland (Mason, 1970). Succession disputes between Prince Majiyya and Prince Jimada had split the Nupe Kingdom into two. In the bid to reunite the Kingdom under one sway, Majiyya, a more determined disputant, sought and received the spiritual and military support of Dendo. This was the beginning of Dendo's direct involvement in the politics of Nupeland. He was later to launch himself fully into the political affairs of Nupeland, paving the way for the overthrow, by him, of the Nupe Kings who had been his hosts.

This historical narrative is important to our understanding of the background of Gogo Habiba and the roles she played later in the economic and political spheres of Nupe society. These roles were deeply rooted in her family background. She, for example, witnessed her father's rise to prominence in Nupeland and, of course, his demise. She was very conversant with the politics that brought her family into the political limelight and in fact, she actively participated in all events that consolidated the family's political control over central Nupeland.

Be that as it may, the positive support Dendo gave Majiyya was rewarded by the latter. Among several gifts from Majiyya to Dendo were two beautiful slave girls.<sup>(5)</sup> Dendo took one of them as his concubine and sent the other to the Sultan of Sokoto to pave the way for his recognition as a flag bearer in Nupeland. It was this slave concubine of Dendo that gave birth to Gogo Habiba. However, her mother's background notwithstanding, Gogo Habiba was given the status of a legitimate child. It was customary in Nupeland that slaves that became wives or concubines of the members of the nobility were accorded total freedom.

Perhaps Gogo Habiba was the only child of her mother as no mention is made of her full brothers or sisters. In any case, one important point to be noted is that out of the nine children of Dendo, only Habiba was a female, and only three of them survived into the second half of the nineteenth century including Habiba.<sup>(6)</sup> The others were Usuman Zaki, the first Fulani Emir of Bida (1857-59) and Muhammad Saba alias Masaba, the second Emir of Bida (1859-73). It is also of interest that of all her half brothers, Habiba was very fond of Masaba who was younger than herself. The explanation for this is that Habiba's mother was attached to Masaba's mother who was a wife of Dendo.<sup>(7)</sup> Habiba regarded Masaba more as a full

brother since they were both brought up together by Masaba's mother. This relationship, to a large extent, enabled Gogo Habiba to rise to prominence during Masaba's reign as the Emir. Because of the respect he had for her, Masaba as the Emir, did nothing to check the rapid rise of Gogo Habiba.

## HER POLITICAL EXPLOITS

Gogo Habiba's main economic pursuit was in the slave trade. In the nineteenth century, the slave trade was an exclusive business concern of the members of the ruling class. Hence her commercial interests were strongly linked with politics. As I have pointed out earlier, Gogo grew up at the time her father was beginning to wrestle with the indigenous Nupe ruling dynasty for political control of the Nupe Kingdom (Mason, 1970).

By the time Dendo, her father, died at Raba in 1832 (Dupigny, 1970), her brothers had almost established full political control over Nupeland. The eldest child, Usuman Zaki, assumed the political headship. However, the sharing of other political offices did not go down well with one member of the family, Masaba. He wanted to assume the second highest title of *Shaaba* which was, instead, given to his cousin, Umaru Majigi. An embittered Masaba rebelled and established his own power base at Lade from where he intrigued against his half brothers. He maneuvered the Emir of Gwandu Halilu, who was the over-all supervisor of the Eastern Emirates of Sokoto Caliphate, to remove Usman Zaki out of Nupeland to enable him have the full control of the state affairs.

This internal crisis almost brought to an end the achievement of the Fulani over the indigenous Nupe ruling dynasty. But for the constant interference from Gwandu, the story would have been different.

Meanwhile, while all the troubles were going on, Gogo Habiba remained in Raba, the old Nupe capital, pursuing her business—slave trade—which she started before the death of her father.<sup>(8)</sup> She did not take sides in the political conflicts for she was close to Masaba and respected her eldest brother, Usuman Zaki. However, in the early 1850s when the collective interest of the Dendos was threatened, she stepped in to offer assistance. This was when Masaba at Lade was attacked by one of his own General, Umar Bahaushé. At this point, it became clear that the descendants of Dendo, albeit the Fulani, were going to lose political control to another adventurer. Masaba was defeated by his General and driven away to Ilorin where he sought refuge (Idrees, 1991). Usuman Zaki and a cousin, Umaru Majigi were in exile in Gwandu. Therefore, of all the descendants of Dendo, only Gogo Habiba was residing in Nupeland at this time. She was quite aware of the consequences of the actions of the rebel general. First of all, her business interests would be affected as General Bahaushé was likely to confiscate her property and banish her. Secondly, it would bring to an end, the Dendo ascendancy.

Therefore, from these economic and political considerations, Gogo Habiba sent a messenger to Gwandu to inform Zaki and Majigi of the happenings at home.<sup>(9)</sup> At the same time, she collected the wives and children of Masaba and dispatched them to Ilorin to protect them from Bahaushé's possible reprisals. These two steps

were very crucial if the Dendo ascendancy in Nupeland was to prevail.

The message to Gwandu prompted a sudden return of Umar Majigi who quickly organised a force to challenge General Bahaushe. By 1857, General Bahaushe's rebellion was crushed and the Dendos were re-united never to fight amongst themselves again. Furthermore, they managed to reorganise an Emirate system of government over central Nupeland with their new headquarters at Bida. The reorganisation exercise pushed Gogo Habiba into the limelight. While her brothers assumed the political leadership of the emirate, she became the undisputed head of the womenfolk. Gogo's political and economic activities blossomed and declined during Masaba's reign (1859–1873).

At the beginning of this paper, I pointed out that Gogo Habiba and Masaba were brought up under the same roof. This explains the close relationship that existed between the two until the 1870s. By the time Masaba became the Emir in 1859, Gogo Habiba had grown in influence. She already commanded a hierarchy of officials similar to that of the Emir and this included a war commander, palace officials and large followings of slaves and adventurers. Her pre-occupation was to hunt for slaves with which she traded. She diverted her attention from Nupeland to the Gwari areas where she sent her men to raid frequently. Most of the expeditions were led by herself. By 1860, she had moved out of Bida and settled at Badegi-Lapai which she established herself.<sup>(10)</sup> Ostensibly Badegi-Lapai was her slave depot and war camp. Because she showered material benefits on her followers and prospects opened to brave soldiers in her service, many people sought to be in her service. She was said to have commanded a standing army comparable to that which existed at Bida.

At Badegi-Lapai, she traded in slaves without any interference from the state officials. She is said to have traded in slaves as far as Lagos with Madam Tinubu, another slave merchant (Mason, 1976). With the expansion of her economic base, she became politically very influential. She used her economic resources to obtain the loyalty from the nobility. It came to the point that Emir Masaba (1859–73) could not take any major decision without Gogo Habiba's approval. Thus, she dominated Masaba and of course became the power behind the throne. For example, those who sought any political or economic favour from Masaba went through Gogo Habiba.

This situation angered Masaba's Councillors whose power and influence were overshadowed by Gogo Habiba. Yet it was difficult to plan any mischief against her because of the bond between her and Masaba. The only way opened to them was to advise Masaba to curtail Gogo's growing influence by asking her to move back to Bida. The Councillors warned Masaba that if Gogo did not return to Bida, there would be a flood of people moving out of Bida to stay with her at Badegi-Lapai. That would mean conceding the leadership position to Gogo Habiba. After all, Gogo Habiba was more accommodating than Masaba and her leadership style had attracted to her side the best men of nobility and military prowess. For example, she personally led her soldiers to war fronts, and rewarded merit instantly.<sup>(11)</sup>

It would appear as if Gogo Habiba was not prepared to move back to Bida. It is not known why she refused to heed Masaba's request to return to Bida which was made repeatedly for the next seven months. However, we cannot overlook the

possibility of Gogo's advisers urging her to stay on, and also Gogo's fear that her business might decline. In any case, she decided to abandon Badegi-Lapai and moved some 15 km to Bida. She settled at this point which she named Badegi-Alugi.

The refusal of Gogo to enter Bida township continued to disturb Emir Masaba. He was becoming more conscious of the potential dangers inherent in Gogo's popularity and sound economic base. Hence, he paid several visits to Gogo at her new base pleading with her to return home. Gogo requested that a large palace be built for her which Masaba did. She rejected the first three on the ground that they were too small to accommodate her and her personal attendants. Masaba was forced to put up a compound comparable to his own Palace for Gogo at the Bantigi area of Bida. It was only then that she moved into Bida, taking possession of all the four buildings including those she had rejected earlier. All the houses are situated in the Bantigi quarters and their ruins are still visible today.

It is said that Gogo moved into Bida with about six thousand followers and property which included cattle and thousands of slaves. The entire populace of Bantigi quarters, the most densely populated ward of Bida, was settled by Gogo. They were either her soldiers, personal staff or slaves. Some of her slaves were settled in the surrounding villages to farm for her. For example, she left some people behind at Badegi-Alugi who were mainly engaged in fishing for Gogo's personal consumption.

With the move to Bida, Gogo ended the personal expeditions and slave raids. However, she did not disband her warriors who continued to carry out raids on her behalf. Emir Masaba did not prevent this even though he may not have been happy with such activities. Perhaps he wished to avoid a civil war that could have involved his soldiers with Gogo's men. In any case, Gogo's men were more adventurous and comprised the best known warriors. Thus, in the Bantigi quarters, an independent administrative machinery operated under the supervision of Gogo Habiba. She had her own *Ndeji*, the Prime Minister whom she housed in one of the compounds Masaba had constructed for her. It was to this *Ndeji* that she married even though he was her employee. Until the time she moved into Bida she had remained single. There is no evidence whatsoever to explain why she chose to remain single until she was too old to bear children. In any case this explains why she left no child behind to survive her. One of her personal aides she settled in one of the compounds given her by Masaba was *Majindadi Gogo*. He was chief of personal staff and adviser.

## THE BRITISH AND THE DEMISE OF GOGO

Perhaps Emir Masaba had made a political blunder by asking Gogo to move to Bida. For the few years Gogo was resident at Bida, she remained the defacto ruler of the central Nupeland. She enjoyed the good will of the people, acting as the benevolent link between them and their leader whom they regarded as ruthless and high-handed. She would overrule Masaba's harsh orders. In spite of Masaba's ruthlessness and high handedness, he respected and obeyed Gogo. It was however obvious that Masaba's only stumbling block was Gogo Habiba. But, as pointed

out earlier on, there was little he could do to cow her.

An opportunity arose for Masaba to do away with Gogo for he was not only scared of her popularity with the people but was also envious of Gogo's wealth. This opportunity came by the advent of the British merchants. These merchants claimed they had come to civilise Africa by legitimate commerce which ultimately would prepare the way for the downfall of slavery in the continent (Crowther, 1970).

This was the opportunity Masaba exploited to the fullest to his own advantage. The idea to introduce "legitimate" commerce and to stop the slave trade was welcomed by him. It seemed indeed an opportunity for him to acquire wealth since the British traders needed his approval for their activities in Nupeland (Adeleye, 1971). All the same, he was already disgusted with the way and manner Gogo Habiba was selling off her slaves rapidly. Masaba also had his eyes on Gogo's property. He had already inherited all the property of his late brothers, Princes Mustafa and Mamudu. He was sure that Gogo's property was his once she died since she had no child. But he was alarmed that the old woman was disposing of her property.

Therefore, Masaba sided with the British merchants to end the slave trade, which meant disposing of Gogo Habiba. Masaba's immediate acceptance of the British proposals, without consulting with Gogo and other members of the ruling family, demonstrates that he was prepared to eliminate her. He quickly recognised Her Majesty's government and offered Lokoja as a trading settlement for the British (Crowther, 1970). He even went on to send a detachment of his soldiers to give the foreign merchants the required protection, and encouraged his subjects to send produce of all kinds to the British.

Gogo Habiba rightly realised that the result of Masaba's flirtations with the British was that she was going to lose her main source of wealth and political power (Mason, 1970). She was said to have challenged Masaba on the matter but found out that he was resolute. Moreover, the British continued to buttress him as a powerful Monarch in the Middle Niger area. His army acquired modern weaponry and a constant supply of fire arms. Thus, the slave trade declined, in detriment to Gogo's economic pursuits.

The relationship between Masaba and Gogo degenerated. Masaba was confident of the British support. The situation prompted Gogo to plot against Masaba. With some members of the ruling family, she allied with Etsu Baba of the old Nupe ruling dynasty to eliminate Emir Masaba. The plot was uncovered and Gogo Habiba was forced to commit suicide. This marked the exit of an indefatigable revolutionist and sagacious merchant.

At the death of Gogo, Masaba inherited all her property and made sure that no woman was allowed such prominence until he died in 1873. His successors continued this policy.

## CONCLUSION

In a society that for centuries pushed the womenfolk to the background in the political affairs of state, Gogo Habiba emerged as an indefatigable revolutionist and successful merchant in the nineteenth century. She had not only led and mobilised men but was also a threat to the maledominated administration of the state. Her career was caught short by the advent of the British merchants whose principal aim was to get rid of their competitors in trade in order to exploit the economy fully. Hence, under the canopy of the abolition of the slave trade, Gogo Habiba got black mailed, a situation that led to her premature demise.

## NOTES

- (1) Oral evidence derived from Alhaji Saidu Madawaki Bida (interviewed at Bida on September 7, 1988).
- (2) Oral evidence, Madam Aminatu Nnashiya of Muregi (interviewed in July and August 1984).
- (3) Oral evidence, Alhaji Saidu Madawaki Bida.
- (4) National Archives Kaduna (henceforth NAK) Bid Div B655 Nupe History.
- (5) Oral evidence, Alhaji Saidu Madawaki Bida.
- (6) NAK SNP 17 2355 Notes on Nupe.
- (7) Oral evidence, Alhaji Saidu Madawaki Bida and Mallam Shaaba Abubakar Usman.
- (8) NAK Bid Div B655.
- (9) Oral evidence, Alhaji Shaaba in Checheko's compound, Bida.
- (10) NAK Min Prof. Acc 7. History of Nupe Province.
- (11) Oral evidence, Alhaji Saidu Madawaki Bida.

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