



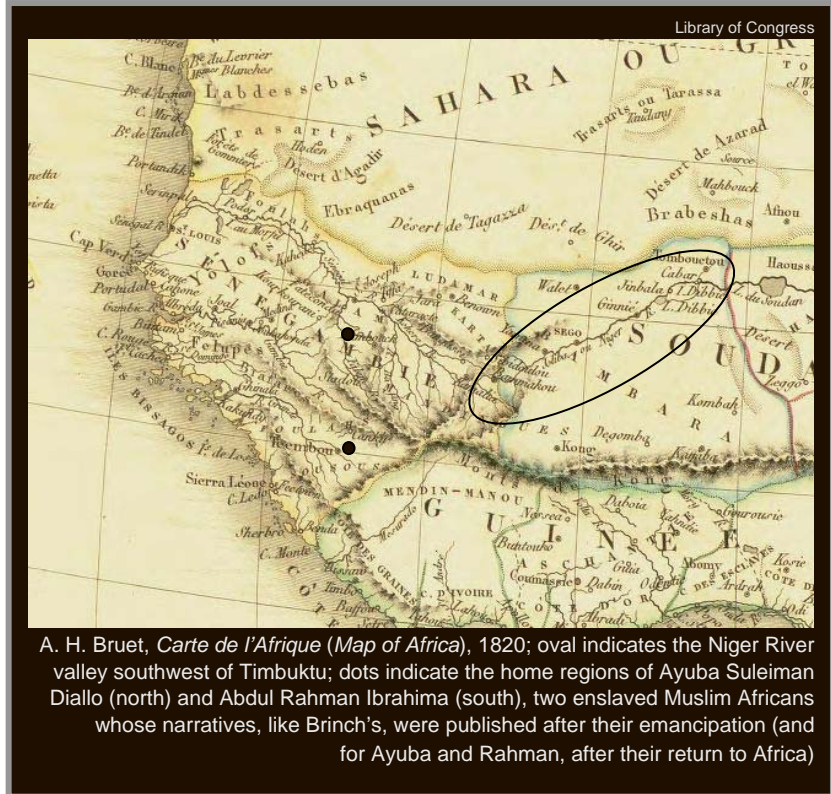
# The African Homeland of Boyrereau Brinch

*The Blind African Slave, or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch, Nick-named Jeffrey Brace. Containing an Account of the Kingdom of Bow-Woo, in the Interior of Africa*

Boyrereau Brinch & Benjamin F. Prentiss

1810, Ch. 1\_\_EXCERPTS

Boyrereau Brinch was born in the early 1740s in west Africa, most likely in the Niger River valley of present-day Mali, perhaps of the non-Muslim Dogon people of the region. At age sixteen he was captured and transported to the Caribbean island of Barbados to be sold. After fighting as an enslaved sailor on a British ship during the French and Indian War, he was taken by his owner to Connecticut and sold again. In 1777 he enlisted in the American army and served in an infantry regiment until the end of the war. In 1783 he was honorably discharged and, due to his military service, emancipated from slavery. Toward the end of his life he narrated his memoirs to Benjamin Prentiss, an abolitionist editor and journalist, who begins the narrative with a brief chapter on Brinch's homeland culture.<sup>1</sup>



A. H. Bruet, *Carte de l'Afrique (Map of Africa)*, 1820; oval indicates the Niger River valley southwest of Timbuktu; dots indicate the home regions of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (north) and Abdul Rahman Ibrahima (south), two enslaved Muslim Africans whose narratives, like Brinch's, were published after their emancipation (and for Ayuba and Rahman, after their return to Africa)

## \_\_ CHAPTER 1 \_\_

Few indeed have been the travellers who have penetrated into the interior of Africa, as far as the kingdom of Bow-woo, which is situated between the 10th and 20th degrees of north latitude, and between the 6th and 10th of west longitude; and these few have been of that class of travellers who are either incapable of, or have other pursuits than, communicating to the world that useful information, which has so long been sought in vain. We have indeed obtained some knowledge of the river Neboah or Niger, which runs throu' this fertile dominion. According to the account in Morse's *Universal Geography*, this river is one of the longest in the world. It is said to be navigable for ships of any size, upwards of 1500 miles. . . .<sup>2</sup>

In the year 1758, an English vessel, engaged in the slave trade, sailed up this river to the head of

National Humanities Center, 2009: [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/). Boyrereau Brinch & Benjamin F. Prentiss, *The Blind African Slave, or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch, Nick-named Jeffrey Brace. Containing an Account of the Kingdom of Bow-Woo, in the Interior of Africa; with the Climate and Natural Productions, Laws, and Customs Peculiar to That Place. With an Account of His Captivity, Sufferings, Sales, Travels, Emancipation, Conversion to the Christian Religion, Knowledge of the Scriptures, &c. Interspersed with Strictures on Slavery, Speculative Observations on the Qualities of Human Nature, with Quotation from Scripture*, Mt. Albans, Vermont, 1810. Full text in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library) at [docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brinch/menu.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brinch/menu.html). Some spelling modernized and paragraphing added by NHC. Footnotes from Kari J. Winter, ed., *The Blind African Slave, or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); permission pending. Complete image credits at [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm).

<sup>1</sup> For more selections from Brinch's narrative, see the Resource Toolboxes (1) *The Making of African American Identity: Vol. 1, 1500-1865 — FREEDOM #6 and IDENTITY #7* (home: [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/index.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/index.htm)); and (2) *Becoming American: The British Atlantic Colonies, 1690-1763 — GROWTH #5 and PEOPLES #4* (home: [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/index.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/index.htm)).

<sup>2</sup> "If Prentiss was correct, Brace came from the middle Niger valley, or the country that is now called Mali. This is a plausible scenario given the fact that from 1701 to 1810 nearly three fifths of all African slaves were taken from West Africa." Kari J. Winter, ed., *The Blind African Slave, or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 4.

navigation, and came to anchor before the town of Yellow Bonga. The hurricane months having commenced, they made their peace with the natives, the crew went on shore, and remained through the rainy season, which commences in May and continues until September. After this season of the year was past and during the time of high water, it appears that continued their passage up the river about 70 miles further, leaving the Captain, Supercargo, and some other officers and gentlemen to riot in the luxury of the land, with the chief inhabitants, whom their intrigue and apparent affability the Europeans had induced to become friends. While the vessel lay at anchor in a kind of lake formed in the river, they sent out their boats to steal the innocent natives and succeeded but too well.



Here we will leave these dealers in human flesh and blood, and give some account of the kingdom of Bow-woo, before mentioned. This kingdom, or principality lies about, or the capital stands about 280 miles above the town of Yellow Bonga — and here the account is taken from the narrator’s own mouth who was only 15 or 16 years of age when he was taken and borne away from prosperity, affluence and ease, into ignominious slavery.

This he [Brinch] considers to be a province or colony of the Empire of Morocco,<sup>3</sup> the extent of its boundaries he is unable to ascertain, nor can he tell accurately the number of its inhabitants. But the city of Deauyah, the capital and residence of the king, also the native place of Boyrereau, the narrator, is situated on the bank of a small river, about six rods wide, which empties into the Niger, three miles below the town, which is between five and six miles in length along the east side of said river, and is built in a manner peculiar to that country — the houses are placed in rows & are joined, only where broken off or intersected by cross streets. This town, besides public buildings, contains nine rows of houses, which are long and low, none more than one story high, except the King’s Palace. They are generally built of a kind of clay, made into a cement, which is strengthened by being bound together by small sticks of timber in the body of the walls, so that the face of the same upon both sides is made perfectly smooth and painted, or rather colored white, red, blue, green, purple, or black, according to the fancy of the possessor, which variety renders the view very picturesque and really diverting to the beholder.

The King’s palace is situated near the north part of that city, and is composed of about thirty buildings of a very diversified appearance, many of them are in some degree elegant, and this palace includes all the public buildings of the city, except a market and two places of public worship. The country adjacent, for many miles around, appears like a perfect plain, and thinly inhabited, except where there are villages, which are to be met once in about two leagues, generally, in every part of the kingdom, except in the mountainous part, of which he has but little knowledge. The climate, as may naturally be supposed, is uniformly hot, except in the rainy seasons (which is called in their language *vauzier*). As a very learned writer observes, “The natives in these scorching regions would as soon expect that marble should melt,

<sup>3</sup> Under Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur, Morocco invaded the area that is now Mali in 1591 and established a sub-Saharan empire that subsided gradually in the seventeenth century. . . Morocco controlled a trade route through the Sahara desert, and Brace’s account suggests that the Kingdom of Bow-woo continued trading with Morocco through the mid-eighteenth century. [Winter, p. 93]

and flow in liquid streams, as that water, by freezing, should loose its fluidity, be arrested by cold, and ceasing to flow, become like the solid rock.”

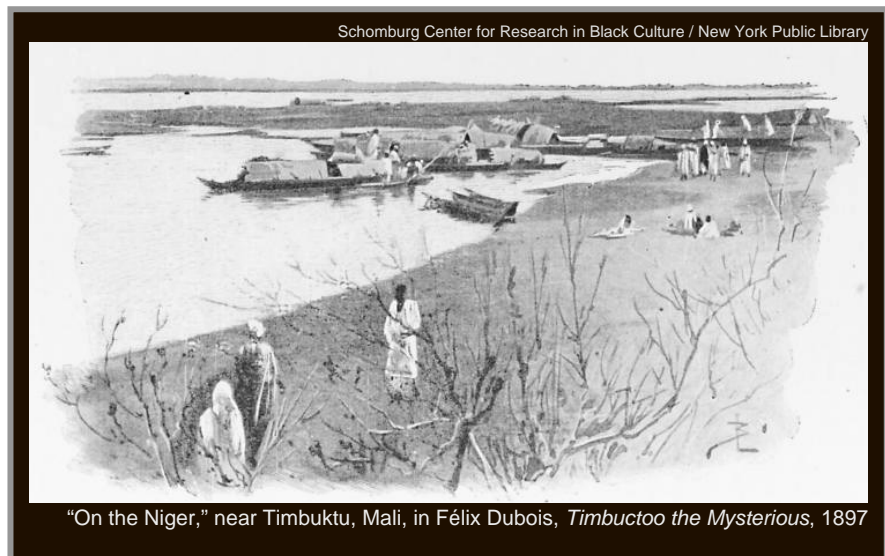
### *Laws & Customs peculiar to this Country.*

The King is absolute, and enjoys unlimited authority over his people. He has, properly speaking, no ministers: the first grade of nobility perform the office of councilors of state, and are properly governors or first magistrates in counties or small districts, and on important occasions are summoned to sit in grand council before the King.

Petty offenses are punished with whipping. Adultery is considered as a capital offense, and the offenders are both tried in grand council before the King, and if clearly proved guilty, by at least two witnesses, both the adulterer and adulteress are buried alive, with their heads above ground, which are shot into pieces and left exposed to view for the terror of others. Murder and Treason are adjudged and punished in the following manner: at the close of a war in which the King in person is commander in chief, he assembles all of his chief officers to what is called the grand War Feast, as a preparatory step to the banquet. He causes strict inquiry to be made into the conduct of every officer and soldier, those who have been guilty of any offense, also those who have signalized themselves, are indiscriminately called before him and his council, on a full, fair and candid investigation. If it does clearly appear that any officer or soldier have been guilty of cowardice, they are banished from the kingdom, with this condition, that if they engage in any foreign service and are once distinguished for their bravery, they are again restored to the privileges of citizenship, but if they return without thus retrieving their characters they are shot as traitors, who are on a fair conviction by two witnesses before the king, in grand council in the foregoing manner, sentenced to be shot by twelve of their ablest archers. Murderers are punished in the same way.

But those who have signalized themselves in battle, or by extraordinary feats of military skill and bravery, or wisdom in the war council, are invited to partake of the feast with the King himself, and created, if old men, members of the council; if young men, are made members of the king’s life guards, which consists of seventy or eighty young noblemen. This ceremony is performed in the following manner. Twelve young virgins of noble birth are arrayed in blue silk robes and adorned with gold caps, bracelets of gold upon their right arms and ankles. The hero is seated on a kind of second throne. A maid approaches him with a bowl of water and a white linen cloth, another with a flask of oil; they wash and anoint his feet. He then has a wreath of honor placed upon his head, which is a gold laced cap, with two globes of solid gold on each side, which are for the purpose of fastening in, and supporting plumes by way of ornament. Then he is allowed to kiss the queen’s hand and be seated in the proper seat according to his grade of nobility.

Thus at the close of a war with the Yough Boo nation, the grandfather of Boyrereau, on the father’s side, was honored with the title of councilor and governor of the county of Hugh Lough. His name was Yarra Brinch — Here we must observe that titles in some degree are hereditary, as his son, the father of the



present narrator, succeeded to the title of governor of said county, whose name was Whryn Brinch. He was also Captain of the king's Life Guards, which as before stated, consisted of seventy or eighty men, honored according to the foregoing custom, or descended by right of nobility to this station. His mother's name was Whryn Douden Wrogan had living,<sup>4</sup> when last he received a father's blessing or beheld a mother's tender anxiety, three Brothers and four Sisters, to whom the pure and unsullied love of artless simplicity and fraternal affection rendered thrice dear, as nature unshackled by artifice was the principle guide of their tender youthful minds, the mention of whose names calls from a heart almost subdued by grief, one sad tear of fraternal remembrance consecrated to religious resignation.

The eldest brother's name was Cressee, 2d Deeyee, 3d Yarrah; the eldest sister's name Desang, 2d Bang, 3d Nabough, 4th Dolacella. Boyrereau descended from Crassee Youghgon, grandfather on the mother's side, who was a distinguished officer in a former war, and after a glorious campaign, he returned with the trophies of victory, covered with wounds, to the capital, amid the acclamations of a grateful people, was created first Judge of petty offenses and civil differences, in the county of Voah-Goah. Boyrereau was the third son, and seventh child of an ancient and honorable family in the kingdom of Bow-woo, situated in that part of Africa called Ethiopia,<sup>5</sup> and of that race of people denominated negroes, whom we as a civilized Christian and enlightened people presume to call heathen savages, and hold them in chains of bondage, who are our fellow mortals, and children of the same grandparent of the universe. These reflections bring to his mind the following scripture:<sup>6</sup>

EZEKIEL, chap. 2:

1. And he said unto me, son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee.
2. And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me.
3. And he said unto me, son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me; they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day.
4. For they are impudent children, and stiff-hearted: I do send thee unto them; and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God.
5. And they, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, (for they are a rebellious house) yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them.
6. And thou, son of man, be not afraid of them, neither be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns be with thee, and thou dost dwell among scorpions; be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house.
7. And thou shall speak my words unto them, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear; for they are most rebellious.
8. But thou, son of man, hear what I say unto thee, Be not thou rebellious, like that rebellious house: open thy mouth, and eat that I give thee.

DEUTERONOMY, chap. 28:

64. And the Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy fathers have known, even wood and stone.
65. And among these nations shalt thou find no case, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest; but the Lord shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind.
66. And thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life.
67. In the morning thou shalt say, would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, would God it were morning! For the fear of thine heart where-with thou shalt fear, and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see.
68. And the Lord shall bring thee into Egypt again with ships, by the way whereof I spake unto thee, Thou shalt see it no more again: and there ye shall be sold unto your enemies for bond-men & bond women, & no man shall buy you.

EXODUS, chap. 22:

20. He that sacrificeth to any god, save unto the lord only, he shall be utterly destroyed.
21. Thou shalt neither vex a stranger nor oppress him, for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.
22. Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child.
23. If thou afflict them in any wise and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry.
24. And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows and your children fatherless.

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<sup>4</sup> Break in textual flow in original.

<sup>5</sup> Not referring to present-day Ethiopia in northeastern Africa. In numerous pre-twentieth-century maps of Africa, regions in northern Africa are designated as "Ethiopia."

<sup>6</sup> Books of the Old Testament.