

THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF AN AFRICAN
PRINCESS



FATIMA MASSAQUOI

Edited by
Vivian Seton, Konrad Tuchscherer,
and Arthur Abraham



The Autobiography of an
African Princess

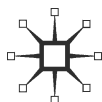


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CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Foreword</i> by Hans J. Massaquoi	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
1 My Birthplace, Ethnicity, and Parents	i
2 My Birth, and Customs about Childbirth in the Gallinas Country	15
3 Life and Customs in the Bali (Bari) Country of Sierra Leone	25
4 Life and Customs in the Vai Country of Liberia	37
5 On Beauty and Aspects of Vai Social Organization	51
6 Life in Monrovia	75
7 School Begins at Julie C. Emery Hall	89
8 More on Life at the Mission School	103
9 I Bid Farewell to Liberia	115
10 I Arrive in Germany	129
11 I Meet a Nazi . . . and More on the Work of the Consulate General	143
12 Hard Times, “Isms,” and School	157
13 Christmas and School Trips in Germany	171
14 The “Invincibles,” and My Departure for Switzerland	185

15	<i>L'École Supérieure et Secondaire</i> (Switzerland), and Rough Times on My Return to Germany	201
16	Departure for America	213
17	Welcome for a “Savage” at Lane College, and Death of Father	221
18	The Fisk University Saga	229
19	Goodbye Friends—You Shall Be Hearing from Me	249
	<i>Index</i>	253



ILLUSTRATIONS

0.1	Map of the Atlantic	xiv
1.1	Map of Vai country	2
3.1	Sketch of Teleyoma Town	26
5.1	Vai script character chart by Momolu Massaquoi, 1899	66
5.2	Vai script character chart (continued) by Momolu Massaquoi, 1899	67
11.1	Fatima in front row	150
11.2	Hotel Atlantik, 1927	154
12.1	Fatima at St. Ansgar Höhere Mädchenschule	164
14.1	Rachel and Momolu Massaquoi, ca. 1925	194
15.1	Fatima and friend, Germany or Switzerland, ca. 1932	208
18.1	Fisk University, 1943	230



FOREWORD

Hans J. Massaquoi

Author of *Destined to Witness: Growing Up Black in Nazi Germany* and

nephew of Princess Fatima Massaquoi

Had it not been for my Aunt Fatima, I would have been completely cut off from my African roots. A student in her early twenties in pursuit of an academic career at various German institutions of higher learning, Aunt Fatima was a frequent visitor to the tiny apartment that my German mother and I occupied in one of Hamburg's modest working-class neighborhoods. Often, during her visits, she would take me on small excursions during which she regaled me with some of the most fascinating stories about life in Africa, which instilled in me the wish to one day go to Liberia and see for myself. Through her, I also learned more about my brilliant grandfather, Fatima's father (Momolu Massaquoi), with whom my mother and I had lived until his departure to Liberia in 1929, and whom I adored and greatly missed.

Due to the rise of racist National Socialism and the approach of World War II, Aunt Fatima left Germany in 1937, and after studies in the United States returned to Liberia, where she built a stellar academic career. I didn't catch up with her until 1948 when my father arranged to have me join him in Monrovia. When my father and I had difficulties living in harmony, who came to my rescue? Aunt Fatima. She invited me to stay at her home until I could make more suitable arrangements. I accepted her kind offer and stayed with her, her husband, and their infant daughter, Püppchen (Vivian Seton), for a couple of weeks. During that time, I was fascinated by the breadth of her intellectual interests and by her experiences as a widely traveled student. Once again, my aunt inspired me to see more of the world for myself. Eventually, she wished me luck and bon voyage when in the spring of 1950 I headed for the United States to build my own career as a journalist.

The last time our paths crossed was in 1971 when I was sent to Monrovia to cover the funeral of Liberian president William V. S. Tubman, and I took the opportunity to drop in on my aunt for a long chat. Again, I was impressed by her command of a vast array of subjects. Clearly, one of the most educated women I have ever known, my Aunt Fatima obviously inherited her father's keen intellect and his love of education.



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We would also like to thank our editors at Palgrave, Christopher Chappell and Sarah Whalen.

We are grateful to our families—the Setons, Massaquois, Abrahams, and Tuchscherers—for patiently seeing us through this project.



INTRODUCTION

The Vais may have a song to sing, a parable to utter, a prayer to offer or a law to interpret—all of which may be necessary elements in the progress and enlightenment of mankind.

—*Momolu Massaquoi*¹

Princess Fatima Massaquoi was descended from royal lineages of the Vai people of both Sierra Leone and Liberia. She was born in southern Sierra Leone about 1904,² daughter of Momo IV (Momolu Massaquoi) who wore the crown of the Gallinas, and she died in Monrovia, Liberia, in 1978. Her autobiography was written between the years 1939 and 1946 and examines her life experiences in Africa, Europe, and America (see figure 0.1). She lived an extraordinary life on all three continents, and her story records everything from insider views of traditional life and societies in Africa, to her experiences of intense racism in Nazi Germany and the segregated American south. During her journey she plays her violin for royalty and presidents, entertains Marcus Garvey with her poetry, crosses paths with leading intellectuals and entertainers, and even attends Nazi rallies.

While she was a student in the United States, she began writing her life story as a class project for a social psychology course at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1939. From that point it grew until she completed it in 1946 as a student at Boston University. Her account reflects three important segments of her life. The first part (1904–1922), contains her recollections of her infancy in southern Sierra Leone and her early childhood and school experiences in Liberia. The second part (1922–1936) relates her life as a young woman coming of age in Nazi Germany, very much in the public eye as the daughter of the sociable Momolu Massaquoi, Liberia’s consul general to Hamburg, Germany. Under the pressure of increasing racism in Germany, and with the help of her father’s friends, she traveled to the United States. The third and final part of her story (1936–1946) records her observations and experiences in the United States and concludes as she prepares to return to Liberia.

It is unfortunate that she did not add the natural fourth part of her life story, her life and work in Liberia, where she made great contributions to



Figure 0.1 Map of the Atlantic



her country's development. She served her nation in a number of important capacities and distinguished herself as a scholar and professor at the University of Liberia (1947–1972), where she founded and directed the Institute of African Studies and served as dean of the Liberal Arts College until shortly before her death. Her later work brought her the Bronze Medallion of Molière by the French Chamber of Deputies (1956), the Iron Cross by the president of the Federal Republic of Germany (1962), the Grand Star of Africa by the Liberian president, as well as an honorary Doctorate of Humanities from the University of Liberia (1973). She influenced generations of Liberians who were her students, and an account of her interesting later life and career, mostly missing in this action here, deserves to be written.³

Very little has been known publicly about Fatima Massaquoi, outside of Liberian circles that is, until relatively recently. That situation changed, perhaps, with the publication in English and German of a best-selling book by her nephew, Hans J. Massaquoi, titled *Destined to Witness: Growing Up Black in Nazi Germany* (the German version being *Neger, Neger, Schornsteinfeger!: meine Kindheit in Deutschland*). Hans Massaquoi, born in Hamburg in 1926, was the son of Momolu Massaquoi's son Al-Haj. He and his mother, Bertha, lived at the Massaquoi villa at Johnsallee in Hamburg until Momolu Massaquoi returned to Liberia in 1929. In his book, Fatima Massaquoi appears with her bright yellow leopard-skin coat and "Afro so huge it would have aroused the envy of a Fiji Islander."⁴

Hans Massaquoi also recounts the racial insults his "Tante Fatima" received on account of her relationship with a prominent young German man, and how she reluctantly agreed to buy Hans his Nazi action figures—Hitler, Göring, and Goebbels—for his Christmas present. Also mentioned in Hans Massaquoi's book is his cousin "Püppchen" (Little Doll), Fatima Massaquoi's daughter and only child, who is one of the editors writing here. Indeed, for those readers who have enjoyed reading *Destined to Witness*, they will find in the pages of Fatima Massaquoi's autobiography colorful descriptions of events and people mentioned by her much younger nephew Hans. Fatima Massaquoi's story is in some sense a prequel to the family history related by Hans over 50 years later.

While the autobiography covers a vast array of experiences and situations in Africa, Europe, and the United States that deserve extended discussion, three in particular are important to note here because Fatima Massaquoi alludes to them but never fully contextualizes them in her writing. The first was an accident in her childhood in Monrovia that injured her hands, suffered in the course of a punishment administered

by her stepmother, Ma Sedia. Fatima had been accused of taking something from a food storeroom and was punished by having to stand on a box with her hands tied above her with a hanging rope to keep her hands aloft. She fell from the box, alone in the storeroom, with no one hearing her cries for help, and the rope brutally ripped the flesh and twisted the bones in her hands. She forgave Ma Sedia, who she loved dearly, yet her hands were a painful reality that she was forced to deal with for much of her young life. These required constant medical attention, which curbed her activities such as playing the violin. The condition of her hands also prioritized her position among Massaquoi children for inclusion in the trip to Germany in 1922. Fatima was very self-conscious of her hands throughout her young life and always made it a point to hide the scars on her hands in photographs.

Secondly, by the end of her stay in Germany, she does not explain the circumstances of her father's sudden departure from Germany for Liberia in 1929 after being recalled from his diplomatic position, and what subsequently transpired once back home. Briefly, Momolu Massaquoi, who was in failing health, was recalled because leaders in government (the True Whig Party) feared he was secretly collaborating with the opposition (the People's Party). Additionally, he was suspected of not being in full support of the defense of Liberia amid international accusations of slavery and forced labor.

When he returned to Liberia, he assumed the position of postmaster general. He declared his intention to run for president in 1931 against his close friend Edwin Barclay, who held the position upon King's resignation in 1930. This resulted in a dramatic backlash against him and the entire Massaquoi family. Intimidated by Massaquoi's popularity, Barclay sought to criminalize him. Although he failed, he succeeded in preventing him from contesting via a series of lawsuits that continued long after, until Massaquoi's death in 1938. But Barclay did not stop there. After winning the presidency, he sought to obliterate Massaquoi by getting his achievements and services to the state expunged from all public records and history books. But Massaquoi's monumental record could not be wiped out; it has continued in public memory and in oral history. Barclay stayed in power until 1944, when William V. S. Tubman became president.⁵ Only then could Fatima return home without the fear of political persecution, but by then her beloved father had already died.

Lastly, Fatima refers to her great great grandfather, King Siaka, perhaps the greatest of the Vai kings "whose fame is still legendary in the Gallinas." Yet outside the confines of the text there has remained a keen sensitivity, even regret, in the Massaquoi family concerning the

involvement of their forebears in the slave trade that sent tens of thousands of captives across the Atlantic Ocean into bondage. King Siaka and his son Prince Manna were directly involved in this trade, and some of the now famous Amistad captives passed through their hands.⁶

In this book we have striven to retain as closely as possible the original voice of Fatima Massaquoi, yet render that voice in an easily readable way. Massaquoi's typescript draft contains hundreds of strikeouts and notes in the text and margins, making the editing process a challenging one. We have attempted as best as possible to incorporate such changes as Massaquoi intended, and likewise have corrected obvious typographical, punctuation, and grammatical errors in order to make the text readable and modern. Likewise, we have given modern standard spelling to peoples and places to avoid confusing the reader. While we attempted to avoid any substantive changes in the narrative, at several points we were forced, for purposes of publication and readability, to cut from the original writing. We are confident that in this process the integrity of the original has been preserved.

English was not Fatima Massaquoi's first language. In her early years she spoke Mende and Vai, and while she learned English as a schoolgirl in Liberia, her English was surpassed by her fluency in German and French learned as a student in Germany and Switzerland. At the time of her writing, the literary language which influenced her most was German, and at times she appears to translate her thoughts directly from that language. On the other hand, she often gives literal translations in English of African expressions that may appear curious to a Western audience.

Massaquoi occasionally inserts her own footnotes in her text and our editorial footnotes have been sequenced into the original footnotes, in all such cases appearing in square brackets followed by "Eds." In sections where she includes songs or poems in Vai or Mende we have left off her attempt to provide phonetic transcriptions, which were difficult to read in the original. Original page numbers in the manuscript have not been followed to allow smoother reading and avoid the irregularities in pagination, with missing pages or duplicated page numbers. In order to present the book in an organized fashion, we have had to break up certain sections into smaller chapters and use a standardized format for letters, quotes, and subtitles.

Fatima Massaquoi was known by several names throughout her life. She was called "Famata" in early life, a Vai and Mende contraction of Fatimata derived from the Arabic form "Fatima." As she describes in her autobiography, she was named after her grandmother, Queen Famata Sandimani. While in Germany, she began using the standard Arabic

form, “Fatima,” for her name. In 1948 she married Ernest Freeman, whose original Vai name, “Fahnbulleh,” had been changed to “Freeman” while he had been in school. Instead of adopting her husband’s Western-sounding name (considered a “slave name” by her family), she reverted the name to “Fahnbulleh.” Her new name, post autobiography, became “Fatima Massaquoi-Fahnbulleh.” Her husband also changed his name to “Fahnbulleh.” Most of her friends, students, and colleagues, however, simply called her “Madame.”

Fatima Massaquoi-Fahnbulleh lived her life until the day she died with a single regret, that her autobiography relating her experiences and observations in her early life was left unpublished. Five years before her death, in 1973, she suffered a stroke. At that time she was living in Monrovia, Liberia, along with her daughter, Vivian, and her son-in-law and two grandchildren. It was this decisive event that led Vivian to arrange through her mother’s colleagues at the University of Liberia to have the autobiography microfilmed, with the thought in mind that this small step would ensure a measure of permanency and exposure for the monumental work.⁷ By this time the manuscript totaling over 700 typewritten pages and over 203,000 words, was suffering the ill effects of the tropical environment. The title she gave to this work was “Bush to Boulevard: The Autobiography of a Vai Noblewoman.” The original manuscript can no longer be traced, and it is thought to have perished in the Liberian Civil War, which lasted from 1989 to 1997. The editors here relied on the microfilm, viewed in both its positive and negative forms, which allowed us to read from very dark and very light pages.

The story of the genesis of the autobiography is an important part of the autobiography itself, as readers will see from one of the late chapters of the book. It was by no means a rosy experience or memory, but it did produce the felicity of this work. Fatima Massaquoi’s first attempt to write about her life began in 1939, in a social psychology course at Fisk University taught by Chinese scholar Dr. Bingham Dai, who assigned the work as a class project. She was encouraged to continue with her writing, subsequently working with Fisk professor Mark Hanna Watkins, who at the time she was assisting with linguistic studies. However, for most of the time, their relationship limped through a dramatic clash over broken promises but perhaps more crucially, over issues of “intellectual property.” In 1943, Watkins who had never been to Liberia or any part of Africa, published an article on the exclusive male society of the Vai, drawing his information from Massaquoi’s autobiography and private letters exchanged between her and her brother, Siaka.⁸ While Watkins later claimed that he had received full authorization from Massaquoi as an “informant,” and had even purchased the letters from

her, she maintained that the first she knew of the publication was when a friend brought it to her attention, and that she never would have agreed to sell her family letters to Watkins. According to Massaquoi, the relationship was finally severed when she perceived that Watkins intended to publish her autobiography, which he was reading and editing, under his own name. This resulted from a published report, in another journal later that year, which included the title of Massaquoi's book with only Watkins name attached to it.⁹

Massaquoi took up the complaints she had with Fisk authorities, beginning first with several of her professors, and eventually with the Fisk president and even the Fisk Board of Trustees. On the verge of financial destitution and fearing that the Fisk authorities would get her deported, she sought legal representation on the matter, only to be denied help by one lawyer after another once they learned who the high-powered Fisk individuals involved in the dispute were. Finally, she met a sympathetic lawyer who would argue on her behalf, local civic and political leader Coyness L. Ennix, known for his flamboyant style and cigar smoking. With his help, no lawsuit became necessary.

As Massaquoi left Nashville for Boston, she was awarded a master's degree for a thesis on "Nationalist Movements in West Africa" (a thesis topic she proposed but never wrote). More important, perhaps, was the satisfaction of repossessing all her original autobiographical writings. Watkins retained the material he had gathered from Massaquoi for a Vai dictionary, along with several Vai stories and songs he had recorded from her. He also retained a short and incomplete version of Fatima Massaquoi's autobiographical account, dealing with the early period of her life in Africa, written in his own hand on the reverse sides of used examination booklets, infused with his own edits and notes.¹⁰

Fatima Massaquoi clearly rejected her characterization as a passive informant in her collaboration with Watkins, as she had for years worked with leading German scholars—including August Klingenheben, Diedrich Westermann, and Ernst Damann—on scientific studies of the Vai language and even taught the language for five semesters at the Seminar für Afrikanische Sprachen at the University of Hamburg at the invitation of the renowned professor Carl Meinhof. Indeed, she went on to publish a number of items relating to Vai language and culture¹¹ as well as teach in the field, and her obituary credits Watkins only with having *assisted her* in compiling a Vai dictionary, which was a "marvelous achievement."¹²

With the help of longtime family friend, the internationally acclaimed musician Roland Hayes, Fatima Massaquoi moved to Boston to begin course work toward her PhD. While at Boston, the Fisk misadventure

continued to haunt her, as the issue of her autobiography consumed and frustrated her greatly. Without completing her degree at Boston University, she accepted a professorship in Natural History and Foreign Languages at Liberia College in 1946, which became the University of Liberia in 1951. For the first time since 1922, Fatima returned to her home and to her family.

Massaquoi's daughter, Vivian Seton, also known as "Püppchen," is today the primary Massaquoi family conservator. Vivian inherited from her mother a wealth of personal artifacts belonging to her grandfather Momolu Massaquoi, which Fatima acquired directly from him or from his late wife Rachel Johnson (Ma Sedia). Included in this collection are some of Momolu Massaquoi's writings and letters to prominent individuals, as well as diplomas and clothing (including his often-photographed diplomatic uniform worn in Germany). These items, along with Fatima Massaquoi's own library, diaries, and other belongings, are safely housed by Seton in the United States.

Perhaps the most important part of this rather vast treasure is the collection of hundreds of black-and-white photographs—many of them taken professionally in studios—of various members of the Massaquoi family in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. Most of these photos have never been viewed publicly. They include family photos, as well as those of prominent individuals—royalty, presidents, well-known academics, politicians, and entertainers. The photos contain rare shots of Africans in Germany and a rare gem of Marcus Garvey's lieutenants being entertained at the Massaquoi dinner table in Hamburg. A glimpse of these important historical photographs was offered in Hans Massaquoi's *Destined to Witness*. Several of the photographs from this collection were reproduced, including the portrait of Momolu Massaquoi wearing the crown of the Gallinas and the evocative cover photo of Hans as a young schoolboy wearing a swastika on his chest, which are all of great historical interest.

The publication of this book brings closure to a dream that went unfulfilled, until now that is, which was Fatima Massaquoi's desire to see her story brought to the world. It also brings closure for another woman, her daughter, Vivian, who promised her mother that one day she would make that dream a reality. The project might perhaps never have been realized if not for the urging of Konrad Tuchscherer, who over the years has engaged in field research on the Massaquoi family in the Gallinas, the Sierra Leone section of the Vai, which straddles the modern Sierra Leone-Liberia border, where members of the Massaquoi family still live and the history of the Massaquoi crown is still very much remembered. In the course of his research on the indigenous Vai and

Mende scripts, he visited the birthplace of Princess Fatima Massaquoi and traveled the roads that she once walked. For many years he has felt that Princess Fatima Massaquoi's autobiography provided vivid insider accounts of Africa as well as a unique narrative of experience outside the continent, and his diligence made this project possible.

Finally, it was the hard work and timely involvement of Arthur Abraham, the leading historian of Sierra Leone that ultimately made the completion of this book possible. Abraham, in his fieldwork and archival research over the last 30 years, had examined the life and career of Fatima's father, Momolu Massaquoi, and published about him. He brought his great insights and expertise to the project. At a time when the project was languishing, Abraham generated the steam to push the project through to its final realization. His relentless efforts to restructure the manuscript to meet the publisher's requirement, without losing any substance, gave consistency and better structure to the narrative by reorganizing material to align with chapter themes, even sometimes changing chapter titles to better reflect the chapter content, etcetera.

It is a sanguine note on which to conclude that nearly 70 years after the completion of her autobiography, Princess Fatima Massaquoi's story finally enters the public domain, which thus fulfills her dying wish.

Notes

1. Momolu Massaquoi, "The Vai People and Their Syllabic Writing," *Journal of the African Society*, Vol. 10 (1911), p. 466.
2. For a discussion of Fatima Massaquoi's year of birth, see p. 13, note 18 below.
3. For short biographies of her later career, see: Mary Antoinette Brown-Sherman, "Profile of a Fallen Daughter," *Palm*, Vol. 9, Nos. 5–6 (1979), pp. 33–35; Raymond J. Smyke, "Fatima Massaquoi Fahnbulleh (1912–1978): Pioneer Woman Educator," *Liberian Studies Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1990), pp. 48–73. Massaquoi's former students have often drawn attention to her influence on their lives and careers—see, for example, the interview with Liberian ambassador Rachel Gbenyon-Diggs in Marilyn Séphocle, *Then, They Were Twelve: The Women of Washington's Embassy Row* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), p. 93.
4. Hans Massaquoi, *Destined to Witness: Growing Up Black in Nazi Germany* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999) and *Neger, Neger, Schornstein!: meine Kindheit in Deutschland* (Bern: Scherz, 1999). In the English version, see pp. 60–63 for a description of Fatima Massaquoi.
5. For a full treatment of Momolu Massaquoi's return to Liberia and his subsequent bid for the presidency and the backlash, see Raymond J. Smyke, "Massaquoi of Liberia: 1870–1938," *Genève-Afrique*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1983), pp. 73–105.

6. See Adam Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernels: A History of the Galinbas Country (West Africa) 1730–1890* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983), pp. 56–61 on King Siaka and p. 117 for King Siaka's family tree. For King Siaka's relationship with the Amistad captives, see Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion* (New York: Viking, 2012). See also Arthur Abraham, *Mende Government and Politics under Colonial Rule* (Freetown: Sierra Leone University Press, and London: Oxford University Press, 1978) and *The Amistad Revolt* (Freetown: USIS, 1987).
7. "Writings and Papers of Fatima Massaquoi-Fahnbulleh, Institute of African Studies, University of Liberia, Monrovia, Liberia" (Bedford, NY: African Imprint Services, 1973).
8. Mark Hanna Watkins, "The West African 'Bush' School," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 48, No. 6 (May 1943), pp. 666–675. Massaquoi's complaints to Fisk authorities that Watkins had drawn from her autobiographical notes and letters without permission were never pursued once she left Fisk. The article would prove to be the most influential of Watkins's career, subsequently reprinted three times: Charles S. Johnson, ed., *Education and the Cultural Process* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), pp. 38–47; Solon T. Kimball, ed., *Readings in the Science of Human Relations* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1950), Vol. 2, pp. 451–460; and George Spindler, ed., *Education and Culture: Anthropological Approaches* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), pp. 420–443.
9. "Official Reports and Proceedings," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1943), p. 67.
10. The title of this appears as "Morning Beam: The Autobiography of a Vai Noblewoman: The Education of an African Girl in Three Cultures." An attached note reads: "written by Fatama Beendu Sandemanni (1911/12–), daughter of Momolu Massaquoi, a Vai and Liberian statesman, and Massa Mbaalo, a Mende; written as a project for a class in Anthropology taken under Charles S. Johnson, in which the students wrote an autobiography." This material is held in the Charles S. Johnson Collection, Special Collections, Fisk University, Nashville, TN (but the reference to Johnson is incorrect, the professor was Bingham Dai, and the course was "social psychology"). The linguistic material collected by Watkins from Massaquoi, including sound recordings, are held in the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University. Without Massaquoi's further assistance, Watkins was never able to publish any of his research on Vai.
11. Fatima Massaquoi-Fahnbulleh, "The Seminar on the Standardization of the Vai script," *University of Liberia Journal*, Vol 3, No. 1 (1963), pp. 15–37; Fatima Massaquoi-Fahnbulleh, *Fatu's Experiences* (New York: Frederick Fell, 1953); Fatima Massaquoi-Fahnbulleh, *The Leopard's Daughter* (Boston: Bruce Humphries Publishers, 1961).
12. Mary Antoinette Brown-Sherman, "Profile of a Fallen Daughter," *Palm*, Vol. 9, Nos. 5–6 (1979), p. 34. A reference to the Vai dictionary, without Watkins name attached to it, appears in "State College Gets New Professor," *The Weekly Mirror* (Monrovia), Vol. 17, No. 42 (October 25, 1946), p. 1.

CHAPTER I

MY BIRTHPLACE, ETHNICITY, AND PARENTS

It was in Gendema, then the capital city of the Gallinas, that I first saw the light of the world. The Gallinas is a territory inhabited by the Vai people, who occupy territories in southeastern Sierra Leone and western Liberia (see figure 1.1). The term Gallinas, which applies only to that portion of the Vai country that is situated in Sierra Leone today, is derived from the Portuguese word *gallinha* (hen), and the name was probably given to the territory because of the great number of guinea fowl found there by Portuguese sailors.¹ The original inhabitants of the country themselves call this territory Massaquoi, and this name was chosen because a member of the Massaquoi family played the most important role in its founding, and a Massaquoi has sat on the throne of the country since its foundation. Another name by which it is known is Jayalɔɔ (Jayaloh), a contraction of Jayalɔɔ which means Jaya's country, after one of the kings.

According to Vai traditions of origin,² there lived a great king in the Mande land whose name was Kamala,³ nicknamed Jomanni, who was very adventurous and enterprising, always looking for new places to conquer. It happened that one day a group of the king's special hunters, who had made their way deep into the forest after traveling several years, heard a great roaring noise, to investigate which they climbed up to the top of a mountain. They discovered that from this summit they could see a great distance over the surrounding area. In one direction they saw a large body of water so expansive that there was no visible land beyond it. They hastened to return to their homeland to tell King Kamala that they had seen the "end of the world." Thereupon the king sent them back with more hunters to obtain more information concerning what they had seen. The spot on which the hunters stood when they beheld the ocean they called Kɔiji (salt water), where grew a town by the same name and even to this day is in existence.

The people with whom the hunters came in contact were the Gola people,⁴ who lived near that body of water and scraped salt from the rocks that had been left there by the ocean. With these Gola, the hunters

exchanged some dried meat for salt and departed. When the hunters had reported all that had happened on their journey, the great Mande king Kamala assembled all of his people and asked the hunters to narrate their experiences. Then the leader of the hunters stood upright and recalled



Figure 1.1 Map of Vai country

their fights with crocodiles, leopards, and other animals, in which many of them died, leaving only seven to return to the Mande country.

Perceiving fear in the eyes and faces of his people, King Kamala immediately asked: "Who is going to open the road leading to sundown (the west)?" But no one spoke. Then, Kamala the Younger looked in the direction of his father and seeing that his father wanted him to do one great deed that would show that it was he, indeed, who had begotten him (for with the Vai the children of great people are known by their deeds), stood up and said: "Father, I am going to lead the way to the shores of the great water to the west."

Thereupon rose the sons and nephews of the other Mande kings, eleven in all, and they spoke one by one: "We are also prepared to follow Kamala the Younger in opening the way to the ocean." Then Kamala the Great ordered: "Let the head of each country [territorial division] supply ten cavalries equipped to carry provisions for the trip. Each cavalry must consist of twenty-five warriors." The outfit of Kamala the Younger consisted of 3 cavalries with 50 horses. There were in all 13 regiments, making a total of 316 warriors with 140 horses.

On the following day at dawn they assembled all the horses, provisions, and equipment for the trip. Then Kamala the Great took his *ban-jalo* (warrior sword) and a big spear and gave them to his son saying, "if in truth it is I who begot thee, then go straight to the shores of the great body of water in the west allowing nothing to stop you or cause you to turn back until you have reached your destination." He turned to his nephew and said, "You are going to be the leader of these people. Stand at the head of all these warriors and lead them until you have reached the ocean." And his nephew accepted the challenge, or, as the Vai say "laid his hands under them."

The Mande people departed in two batches; the first comprising one regiment with ten horses and their riders left on the first day including Kamala and his cousin. Their journey led them into a great forest called Kambo. If one stood at its foot and looked up, one would gain the impression that the mountain extended all the way to the skies. On that mountain lived all kinds of fierce animals that fought the traveling Mande, and many of the people perished in the struggle. Besides, the paths in that forest were very narrow, and the hunters knew only one path. Consequently, the travelers became greatly disturbed and said to Kamala: "We cannot enter deeper into this forest. We are not willing to die in such a wicked manner. Therefore we are going to sit at what seems to be the entrance to this dense forest and find another way to the west. Whichever side of the mountain we find to traverse we shall pass by that way."

There they stopped, at the foot of the mountain, where they built a big town. They spent four years there, during which time other Mande

men and women, apart from the warriors, joined them. It was during that period that children were born to them by the women who had come there. The people living not far from the foot of the mountain had also given them wives, who also bore them children. When the feet of those children became strong and able to carry little things, the group left that town to continue their journey.

During all this time Kamala the Great had heard nothing of his son, so he sent people in search of his son saying, "Go in search of my son, and when you hear of him, please return and clear my head (i.e., let me know); go straight to him before returning to me." Those messengers traveled long and far before they reached Kamala the Younger. They spoke to him saying, "Your father Jomanni is worrying very much about you because he has heard no news of you." When the traveling comrades of Kamala saw the messengers, some of them wanted to return to the Mande country. But Kamala the Younger told them that he could never return to the Mande country before reaching the sea. Then he turned to the messengers and said, "Return and tell my father that on the fourth day of the new moon, I shall enter the forest. If God be willing I shall see the ocean before returning to the Mande country." Then he assembled all of his people and told them that he would be departing when the new moon appeared. They all showed great fear, but Kamala paid no attention.

On the fourth day the new moon arose, Kamala's herald announced to all that they would depart the following day. Then Kamala called all the heads of the various countries together and asked them: "Who is going with me into the forest tomorrow?" Whereupon, his brother Ngolo, who had followed him, and his cousin, who had been entrusted with leading the armed men, stood up and said that they would continue to follow him. But the other heads said that they were afraid and could not go if they were to enter the dense forest.

Kamala felt hurt, but he said nothing. Hastily he mounted his white horse, and before leaving, turned to his comrades and said: *won kono mbe taala fai* (wait here for me; I shall go forward). Turning his back on them he made his way into the forest. Those who remained became the *Kono moenu* (waiters), and those who advanced became the *Fai moenu* or *Vai moenu* (the forward goers). Thus originated the names for the Kono and the Vai peoples, who to this day remain separate ethnicities.⁵

There were several adventures with wild beasts in the forest, Kamala himself reportedly slaying thirteen leopards while his younger brother earned the sobriquet Fangaloma because he was stronger than a chimpanzee. The valor of Kamala's spear-bearer also earned him the name Kiyatamba. When they came out of the forest, Kamala changed his bearing and did not continue in the direction of Koiiji.

On their arrival at the coast, the inhabitants of the country appeared intimidated, for they had never before seen so many people coming out of the forest at one time. The rulers then asked of Kamala, "Have you come to declare war on us or have you come to trade?" Kamala replied, "I have not come to declare war, nor have I come to trade or to seek anything whatsoever. I have come to see the ocean." The kings of the land thereupon accepted Kamala (i.e., they put their hands under him) saying, "Then this land has nothing evil for you." The kings then gave them guest houses and had food prepared for them.

While talking to the kings of the land, Kamala heard the roaring noise and surmised that someone was bringing war upon him. He quickly instructed his spear-bearer to get all the warriors to follow him, leaving the rest behind. As he mounted his white horse, Fangaloma and Kiyatamba and their officers all followed him. They traveled a day and a half before reaching the ocean. At the moment just before the sun stood directly over their heads, Kamala's horse ran straight into the ocean. Since Kamala was still sitting on that horse, it turned back to the shore. It repeated this action seven times. So did the other horses which had been following. Then Kamala threw up his spear and planted it in the ocean sand, shouting "*kalalase... kalalase*" (the spear has reached). Kamala had reached the object of his journey. The Mande people built their first town where Kamala thrust his spear. That town remains to this day and the Vai people still call it Kaase, a contraction of the Mande *kalalase*.

Kamala himself remained in Kaase and sent for his carriers and bearers of burden baskets. As soon as they arrived, they went to the lakes. It was at that same time that he crossed the Kee and Kpaale rivers and reached the spot where his father's original messengers founded the town of Koiiji, which still exists in the Gbema section of the Vai country.

After sometime in Gbema country, he crossed the Gbeya river, known today as the Mano river, where he met people who honored him by giving him all kinds of animals, wives, and a place to live in. This place was called Telebo (sunrise) by our father Kamala, because he himself had come from the place where the sun rose. It is from this town that the entire Teewoh country (morphed from Telebo by locals) received its name. The Teewoh country is situated exactly between the Gbema (Gbeya) and Mafa rivers.

Kamala's younger brother Ngolo, who acquired the name Fangaloma, settled in Teewoh, and he and Kamala founded the town of Gbese in that country. Gbese then became the capital of the Teewoh and the seat of the Fangalomas, who later became the Fahnbullehs, for Fangaloma's nephew, was Fahnbulleh, the very first of the Fahnbullehs. Our fathers have told us that Kiyatamba also settled in Teewoh. Many of the Mande