

## Sessarakoo, William Ansah

(fl. c. 1736–1750),

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enslaved West African prince whose celebrated story took place within the context of the intense rivalry between England and France for the lucrative African slave trade. The young African became a kind of pawn of the commercial interests of these two nations along the Gold Coast in West Africa (present-day Ghana). His life enters the arc of the western imagination briefly, for only several years, before returning to the relative obscurity of his origins. Nuanced by the irony that the son of a slave trader had himself been enslaved, Sessarakoo's story gives a fuller idea of the complexities of the slave trade in Africa.

Sessarakoo was born to a wealthy Fante ruler (*ohinne*), John Bannishee Corrantee. Corrantee controlled the area around Annamboe (now Anomabu, on the coast between Accra and Sekondi), and from this position engaged in a lucrative trade in slaves and gold. Sessarakoo grew up in the midst of a veritable trading empire, as a large percentage of slaves bound for the new world was shipped through Annamboe. A little is known of his personal attributes, as he was called "Cupid" by English traders, in reference to his "sweet and amiable Temper."

His ambitious father felt that his position would be enhanced if he educated his sons in the ways of European commerce. He sent one son to France for this purpose, and all went well. He then decided to educate Sessarakoo for the same purpose in 1744. At this point the English dominated the area around Annamboe, and so Sessarakoo was sent to Britain for his education, in the company of the son of Corrantee's chief wife. In Sessarakoo's case, however, the enterprise began badly. The captain entrusted with taking the young man to England instead sold him into slavery in Barbados, in the West Indies. Upon hearing this, John Corrantee refused to trade with the British until Sessarakoo was redeemed. The young man's betrayal was largely due to the fact that the captain operated as a free agent, and so fell outside the bounds of conduct observed by the official British trading organization, the Royal African Company. In 1748 Sessarakoo was located and arrangements made for his release through the efforts of the company and the British government. He was then brought to London, his originally intended destination.

There he was considered a celebrity, at least in part because of the "romantic" nature of his story, one of the betrayal and ultimate redemption of an exotic prince, but also because of the importance of his father as a major trading partner of the British. With this consideration in mind, he was put under the protection of George Montagu-Dunk, the Earl of Halifax, and the president of the Board of Trade. While in London he was treated with the respect and ceremony befitting a high-born foreigner. From a privileged place within the center of London society, Sessarakoo was constantly feted. He was introduced to King George II, and his own royal status of prince was recognized. To further reinforce his identification with the British power structure, he was baptized as William Ansah Sessarakoo on 30 November 1749.

With a black companion, Sessarakoo attended a performance of Thomas Southerne's play *Oronooko*, itself based on Aphra Behn's 1688 novel of the same name. From a contemporary account (*London Magazine*, February 1749), his reaction to the story was visibly intense, as he must have recognized his own predicament in that of the ill-fated adventures of the fictional African prince. In turn, the poet William Dodd, in *The African Prince* (*Gentleman's Magazine*, 1749), projected Sessarakoo's situation into the realm of literary artifice, casting his example in the form of two impassioned letters written by a fictional captured African noble to a lover at home.

Sessarakoo's passage through the consciousness of British society was amply recorded in word and image. His remarkable experiences were published as *The Royal African: or, Memoirs of the Young Prince of Annamboe* (1749, and two subsequent editions to 1754) and quickly became a best-seller. The account established Sessarakoo's elevated status in his homeland and from this fact argued for the humanity of all Africans.

In an oil portrait painted by Gabriel Mathias in 1750, Sessarakoo is presented as a gentleman in an elaborately brocaded jacket with a hat under his left arm, a stance often adopted by sea captains. This image was made more widespread through its publication as a print the same year, accompanied by a lengthy description of Sessarakoo's adventures.

An account of his story was also published in the popular journal, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, in July and August 1749. The next year an engraved portrait of him was published in the same magazine. It appeared as a double portrait, and included an image of Job ben Solomon, another African who had suffered similar mistreatment by slave traders about fifteen years before.

Sessarakoo was repatriated to Annamboe at an uncertain date. One can only speculate on just how much his relatively brief experience of the full perspective of the western slave trade affected his insights into the practice locally in his homeland.

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