

A SEABOY'S TALE: THE TRAVELS OF GABRIEL TETTEH SIKAPA 1874-1958

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Abstract:

In the literature on travelling in Africa travel accounts by Africans are rare despite the fact that the latter outnumbered their non-African counterparts at all times. One of the great hotspots of late 19th century Africa that attracted huge numbers of African migrants was the Congo Free State. In his ambition to exploit his private colony King Leopold of Belgium largely relied on forced labour whereby he created one of the most brutal, dehumanising and devastating colonial regimes ever. Yet the Congo Free State attracted high numbers of skilled migrant labourers especially from the West African Coast. In this paper I explore the memoirs of Gabriel Tetteh Sikapa (1874-1958) who as a carpenter travelled to the Congo Free State for three times. The narration of his first voyage, will be compared with those of his later trips both to the Congo and to Asante in connection with Sikapa's participation in the British campaign of 1900. I am especially interested to see how Sikapa deals with the atrocious conditions in the Congo Free State and how in his further travels and in writing his self in his memoirs he builds on the knowledge gained during this first voyage.

The Memoirs of Gabriel Tetteh Sikapa

This paper is merely a rough introduction to an autobiographical text written by a former migrant worker from the Gold Coast. The memoirs of Gabriel Tetteh Sikapa come in the form of a rather complicated document rich in information, which raises many more issues than I can take up in this paper. I have been reading this autobiography again and again since 2000 and have appreciated and used it as a valuable source. In a first section I will give you a short overview of the life history of Gabriel Tetteh Sikapa, the author of the text. Thereafter I will guide you through the text itself, concentrating on the accounts of his three working trips to the Congo Free State. The Free State is known for its brutal and dehumanised regime. Therefore I will focus in a third section on the question how Sikapa dealt with experiences of violence that he must have had in the Congo and how he made sense of these. Finally I will examine what role the Congo experiences play in his life history.

The paper is connected to my PhD thesis on the history of the Krobo region in South-eastern Ghana.¹ The region being quite close to the coast has for centuries been engaged in a lively exchange with the coastal towns. This for example is manifest in numerous traditions of intermarriages. In the course of my research, however, I noticed a new quality in the flow of new forms of music and dance, fashions and ideas into Krobo as from the 1890s. This was not only the time when the cocoa revolution attracted all sorts of people and money to the fertile forest regions of Southern Ghana. It was also in those days, that an increasing number of young men travelled outside the Gold Coast colony along the West African coast searching for opportunities and adventure. On their return they introduced new forms of popular music and dance,

¹ Title: *Christianization, Imperialism and Culture. The Expansion of the two Krobo States in Ghana c. 1830-1930*. PhD thesis Department of History, University of Basel 2005. Online at http://www.unibas.ch/diss/2005/DissB_7185.htm

fashions and ideas into their home towns. These young men and soon also women linked the rural hinterland towns of the then Southern Gold Coast to the cosmopolitan hot spots on the Gulf of Guinea.

One such migrant labourer who has left a 120 page handwritten autobiography in the Ga-language is at the centre stage of this paper.² Gabriel Tetteh Sikapa was born in 1874 in Asite near the Manya Krobo capital Odumase and was trained as a carpenter. Between 1890 and 1899 he travelled on three occasions to the Congo Free State, where he worked with the Societé de Chemin de Fer and the Societé Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo. In my thesis I used his biography on the one hand as a means to link the Krobo region to the wider world and on the other hand as an example of the appropriation of Christianity by the scholars, i.e. mission trained young men.³

Living the Gold Coast Colony

Before having a closer look at the Congo episode and its narrative I should provide you with a brief sketch of Sikapa's biography, which spans the years 1874 to 1958, thus covering the whole of the colonial period of the Gold Coast crown colony (1876-1957). Gabriel Sikapa was born to Captain Narteh Okumador and Madam Koryo Patauto. His father was an *asafoatse* or war captain within one of the twelve divisions of the two Krobo states Manya and Yilo, and his grandfather had been a famous warrior who was instrumental in expanding the Krobo settlements. His mother was a daughter of Odonkor Azu, often considered to be the first paramount chief of Manya Krobo, and a sister to his successor Sakite I. Chieftaincy modelled on the military organisation of the neighbouring Akan states was at that time a relatively new institution in Krobo and it was during the reign of paramount chief Sakite that it was implemented on a more general level. The stool or office to which Sikapa's father Okumador was elected, seems to have been a new creation and the marriage between the king's sister Koryo Patauto and Okumador according to Sikapa was a way of luring his father into this office. Sikapa did not succeed his father. It was his elder brother Madjitey who was installed as *asafoatse* of Dorm Korlenya. I will come back to this topic later on.

Sikapa received his primary schooling from the Basel Mission. He first went to school at Odumase and became the "houseboy" of one of the African teachers who happened to be a relative of his and a son of the above mentioned paramount chief Odonkor Azu. As this teacher was appointed to different mission schools in the region, the young boy got to know a few places even before he had completed his primary school. The missionaries had intended to send him to the middle boys' boarding school but on request of a distant relative from Accra he became a carpenter's apprentice. With his master he made his first trip to the Belgian Congo in 1890,

² I am thankful to Mr. Evans Sikapa, the now head of the Sikapa family who has readily shared his knowledge of the family history with me and who not only unearthed the manuscript but undertook the tedious job of translating the whole of the manuscript into English.

³ This term to the end of the 19th century for the missionaries had a negative connotation: the young men who had gone through the mission schools mostly made use of their knowledge and skills in a way rather different from what the missionaries had intended it to be. Instead of becoming agents of missionary evangelism, these young men often developed an attitude challenging the mission and promoted for example africanist ideas.

followed by another one in 1893 and then a third and final one in 1895.⁴ Sikapa then married his first wife, the Basel Mission teacher Mina Dedo in 1899. Dedo was herself a grand daughter of the erstwhile paramount chief Odonkor Azu and thus a cousin to Sikapa. In 1900 he took part as one of three leaders of the Krobo contingent in the British expedition against Asante which ended the Yaa Asantewa uprising.

Mina Dedo died in 1907 and Sikapa married Mary Dewi, who herself had lost her husband a short time earlier.⁵ Again the bride was a grandchild to the late paramount chief Odonkor Azu. According to Sikapa the marriage was a deliberate move by paramount chief Emmanuel Mate Kole who in 1911 made him a chief over Akuse, a busy trading town on the river Volta. The Krobo's claim for controlling this town, which had only sprung up within the previous forty years, however, was disputed by the very cosmopolitan population consisting mainly of traders. Sikapa soon withdrew from this office and chose to concentrate on his cocoa farming activities in the fertile Krobo up-country. He kept officiating as an adviser to his brother and war captain Madjitey in his hometown Asite and later officiated as a councillor at the paramount chief's court at Odumase.

As a farmer he successfully capitalized on the earnings he had brought from the Congo, investing in several plots of land and acquiring dozens of pawns by giving out loans.⁶ By this he made up for the lack of family labour at his disposal.⁷ He displayed his success and prestige by investing into a brass band, for which he acquired the instruments and hired a conductor from Accra. By the time he died in 1958 he had lost some of his wealth due to repeated burglaries. He is remembered as a warrior, a strict disciplinarian and as a stout member of the Presbyterian Church.

⁴ These dates are approximate. Sikapa does not provide us with exact dates, but some events and facts that he touches upon in his biography allow me to speculate on the dates. As for the first date, he is quite clear that he was recruited by the Compagnie de Chemin de Fer du Congo which, as mentioned above, only started its recruitment in 1890. This first stay lasted for one year. Sikapa must have returned to Accra before July 1892, as he was a witness to the installation of Emmanuel Mate Kole as a paramount chief of Many Krobo and the abolition of the Krobo mountain settlements. He says that he left for the Congo again "after a short rest in Accra" on a two years contract with the Soci t  Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo. On his return his father Okumador had been imprisoned for attempting to return to Krobo mountain, an event which occurred in June 1895 (BMA D-1.62, Odumase 128, G. Josenhans to Committee 22.06.1895), and had been released again on the ground that he might participate in the Asante expedition of November 1895. So this second trip must have taken place somewhere between August 1892 and December 1895. From his final trip, which lasted but one year, he must have returned well before May 1899 when he married his first wife Mina Dedo. (District Register, Basel Mission Congregation Odumase, 1860-1944)

⁵ Mary Dewi's deceased husband Stephen Djabatey Ngwah was himself a royal. Like Gabriel Sikapa he was trained as a carpenter and went to the Congo Free State as a contract labourer.

⁶ In a later addition to the manuscript Sikapa lists 35 names of male and female slaves and pawns. Sikapa 1937, p.123

⁷ Sikapa had only few children, partly due to the fact that he kept a monogamous marriage. This made him prevent his only daughter from getting married. According to Krobo customary law her offspring (i.e. Evans Sikapa-Madjitey for example) thus can keep up the Sikapa line which would have vanished otherwise. Often pre-marital offspring was encouraged on the ground that they enlarged the family of the father of their mother. This access to family labour was especially important after the abolition of slavery in the 1870s. See Haenger, Peter 1997: *Sklaverei und Sklavenemanzipation auf der Goldk ste*. Basel: Helbing und Lichtenhahn. Huber, Hugo 1993 (1963): *The Krobo. Traditional Social and Religious Life of a Westafrican People*. In: *Studia Instituti Anthropos* 16, St. Augustin, p.84ff

“Listen attentively to my story of the Congo which is full of excitements!” – the first trip to the Congo Free State

Having acquainted you with the biography of Sikapa, I want to turn to the Congo episodes in his autobiographical text. Gabriel Sikapa left for the Congo with a group of eighteen carpenters and twenty blacksmiths after having signed a written declaration at the court in Accra.⁸ He had been appointed the headman of the group of carpenters. Even before setting foot in the Congo, he was a witness to the rough and dehumanised climate in King Leopold’s Congo Free State. At Boma the recruits were to change from the seagoing vessel Ela Woermann to a river boat. When the three hundred West Indian recruits of the Compagnie de Chemin de Fer du Congo who were also on the ship refused to board this river boat, the Belgians resorted to brutal force:

“Those of us from Accra disembarked while the Westindians refused to come out from the ship saying that except they see ship with an English flag or that of ours the German ship should haul them back to West India. Other than that they would not set their feet on Boma land. This brought about disorder and confusion which caused soldiers to be sent to the scene of disturbance to maintain peace and order. In the process many Westindians were shot and killed. The soldiers fired gun shots into the ship and later on entered the ship to bring out the rest who did not die. Those who died were buried. We were not hurt.” (Sikapa, 1937, pp.24f)⁹

Such brutal treatment of the recruits seems to have been quite common in the Congo Free State. The refusal of the West Indians might have been well founded, as it is known that the Congo Free State administration at times did not stick to the conditions set in the contracts and that craftsmen, for instance, were not employed in their jobs but rather as member of the militia. This meant that they were under military discipline which allowed for severe punishment. There were frequent complaints by West African labourers about brutal punishment, inadequate lodging and food or exhaustion. The works on the Matadi-Kinshasa railway project for which Sikapa was employed demanded a high death-toll. In those days up to 150 workers a month died on the construction sites.¹⁰ I was not able to find further information about the incident mentioned by Sikapa, but came across several similar incidents.¹¹ Reading Sikapa’s description of the shooting at Boma I was struck by the fact that he neither comments on the incident nor qualifies it. In his text he continues without any further reflection on what has happened:

“At two (2) O'clock in the afternoon we were all put in another ship - the Westindians inclusive - to Matadi while the German ship returned to Europe.” (Sikapa 1937, p.25)

Rather, by asserting that the soldiers were deployed to restore peace and order, he takes the position of the soldiers and implicitly blames the West Indians for their

⁸ This might have merely been the usual contract or a document clearing the recruiter of any responsibility towards the family of the recruit.

⁹ Sikapa, Gabriel Tetteh 1937: [*Memoires*] Manuscript in the Ga language, translated by Evans Sikapa-Madjitey in 1999 into the English language, page numbers refer to the original Ga-manuscript.

¹⁰ Marchal, Jules 1996: 1996: *E.D. Morel contre Leopold II. L’Histoire du Congo 1900-1910*. Vol. 1, Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan, pp.143ff.

¹¹ Marchal 1996, Vol. 1, pp.153.

refusal. After registering with the railway company at Matadi and receiving an identification number, the workers were employed at Matadi for a 'considerable time' – time enough to get to know Matadi as a dangerous and unhealthy place which took the lives of many of its cosmopolitan inhabitants.

“Matadi is a very hot place which put most of the Westindians into their graves. There were Chinese also there. They were many but they died in great numbers. Matadi is such a place where if you are able to stay for one month without death staring at you, then you know that you will by all means return home safely. The common sickness is swelling of the body. Alcohol is in abundance and very cheap. For this reason everybody in town goes on drinking spree from Saturday evening to Sunday evening fully soaked or drunk.” (Sikapa 1937, pp.27f)

Sikapa obviously survived the deadly climate at Matadi and he also survived the dangerous and unhealthy working conditions on the railway line under his Italian foreman. To these dangers he only refers to ad passim:

"A train from Mposo carrying gun powder collided with another train and killed many people. This accident happened twice at Matadi Railway Company and on the first occasion it claimed the life of one Ga [Accra] man. The second accident a whiteman [sic] by name John lost his life. John drinks like fish. Women at Lowanco and Kabina are harlots even more than what we know back at home. They can drink like the men simple because a bottle of alcohol costs only six pence (-/6) [sic] to buy hence you are limited by your pocket or purchasing power. One Osu [Accra] man died here and he is called Ata Tetteh. We spent one year and returned to Accra and this is my first ever trip outside my country.” (Sikapa 1937, p.28)

Sikapa did not have much time to enjoy his home-coming. His master and his relatives in Accra withheld most of his earnings for his training and for lodging him during that period. With the little money he brought to his parents in Krobo the family bought a slave to replace him in the house.¹² Sikapa had returned in time to witness an important event in Krobo history: the abolition of the Krobo mountain settlements and the installment of Emmanuel Mate Kole as paramount chief and successor of Sakite I. On this occasion to which I refer in another paper, Sikapa's master from Accra officiated as the representative of the paramount chief of Accra and Sikapa was amongst his retinue. The paramount chief of Accra in this matter asserted his loyalty to the Colonial government and welcomed the abolition. This must have put Sikapa in a position rather close to the coloniser and may have alienated him in some way from his people who in those days had to endure a traumatic experience shaking the foundations of the Krobo states.¹³

“Blackman Whiteman” – the second trip to the Congo Free State

The account of his second trip to the Congo takes with eleven pages much more space in the autobiography than the one of the first trip with merely four pages. It is rich in ethnographic descriptions of the people he encounters: especially the different Congolese ethnic groups but also Chinese people. And it also provides us with more

¹² Most probably the parents pawned somebody. Slavery had been abolished in the mid 70s.

¹³ On the abolition of the mountain settlements see Arlt, Veit 2002: *Tradition as a Resource. Changing Forms of Political Legitimacy in the Krobo States*. In: BAB Working Paper No. 3: Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien

information on Sikapa's own situation. I should mention that this time he is employed by the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut Congo (S.A.B.) which played an important part in the economic exploitation of the Congo, participating in the rubber trade. The Congolese were forced, by way of a tax system, to collect fixed amounts of rubber to fuel the new European industry of rubber tire fabrication. People would at times be mutilated and/ or murdered if they did not comply with the demands of the Belgians.¹⁴ Sikapa was again employed as a carpenter and seems to have had nothing to do with the bloody part of the company's business.

Travelling from Matadi to Kinshasa Sikapa did the same 1500 mile hike as a certain Mr. Korzeniowski (better known under his pseudonym of Joseph Conrad) did some one or two years before. Like Conrad Sikapa could rely on carriers to take his personal load and also the continuation of the journey by boat from Kinshasa to the Kasai must have been very similar to Conrad's journey up the river. Sikapa does not mention corpses lying on the wayside which in Conrad's Congo Diary give an impression of the climate of violence then reigning in the Congo.¹⁵ Nor does he mention any deserted or burnt village. Also at other places in the text it is left to the reader to guess what is happening. This is the case in the next quotation concerning women being shipped to Kinshasa from upriver on a regular basis:¹⁶

“The whites own a l[a]unch (boat) which plies between the north and the factory purposely to bring workers and many women. And any time this l[a]unch is coming down the whole township turns into ecstasy of joy like school because many women board it.”(Sikapa 1937, p.32)

Sikapa witnessed one military action against the local population, when a fight broke out in the town he was working in. He must have been very close to the centre of the fight, but again his narrative of the event is distanced and he does neither comment on his own sensations nor on the effects of the punishment imposed by the government.

“Within a short time war burst out between the Bolonca which is at the northern side of the town and the Egapa which lies down south. ... It was a fierce battle which one man by name Lilale was killed. Our factory is located at Egapa. The Egapa warrior who is also their chief (Asafoatse) is called Likpenga (Likpenna) and the man who lost his life in the battle hailed from Egapa. This situation made the Egapa people run wild and they vowed they would avenge themselves. They *tried* as much as they could but of no avail. That is they could not kill any Bolonca man and this disturbed or upset Lipenga; because it is a slur on his good name as chief and warrior. As their battle raged our whitemen sent emissaries to the Governor who immediately dispatched soldiers to the scene. On seeing the soldiers the whole township ran away to hide including the warring factions - Bolonca and Egapa. Nonetheless, all the elderly people in town were arrested and caused to pay a fine of five hundred (500) mitako which

¹⁴ On the rubber economy see for example Vangroenweghe, Daniel 1986: *Du Sang sur les Lianes. Léopold II et son Congo*. Bruxelles: Didier Hatier. Also Marchal 1996 op. cit. and by the same author: *L'Etat libre du Congo: paradis perdu. L'Histoire du Congo 1876-1900*. Vol. 1+2. Borgloon: Editions Paula Bellings 1996

¹⁵ Conrad 1926: *The Congo Diary*. Reprinted in idem 2000: *Heart of Darkness*. London: Penguin Books, pp. 152, 153, 158

¹⁶ It is true that prostitution or rather the European concept of it only took root on the Gold Coast at the turn of the century and Sikapa quite certainly had not seen any similar action on the Gold Coast. Thus he might not have had the vocabulary to name it.

is equivalent to five (£5.0) pounds, before they were released. This ended the battle and the soldiers also returned to barracks.” (Sikapa 1937, p.41)

On the ground of his previous Congo experiences and his performance during the probation period, Sikapa is not only accorded a higher salary than most of his colleagues but he is also appointed a store keeper at the company’s premises.

“I am very much liked by this white man who did not give me work to do. All that he wanted me to do was to sit in his office every morning and evening to watch over the tools and for stock taking. To this end the workers were full of hatred for me. Not quite long I was transferred further north to work under one English man called Mayjor Pameter [Major Parminter]¹⁷ who is one of the executives” (Sikapa 1937, p.31).

Reading the several cases in which African craftsmen complained to the consulate at Boma that are quoted by Jules Marchal, one can easily understand why Sikapa’s fellow workers hated him for accepting this job. Any irregularity he noted must have had potentially disastrous consequences for his fellow workers. In maintaining discipline in the Congo Free State the whip was readily made use of and from the cases reported to the consulate for British West Africa severe flogging or whipping often had lethal effects. Not only work-wise Sikapa held a prominent position and enjoyed a special treatment as the next quotation shows:

“This whiteman sent me to Jrengé to another whiteman in the factory to assist him. The next day this my new boss invited another whiteman from another factory and me and laid table for us. After the meal we began to drink seriously and when we became intoxicated they gave me an accordion (organ) to play. I tried and played "God Save The King" which they liked very much and danced to their satisfaction and thanked me. They could speak English but not quite fluent. By six thirty (6:30 p.m) in the evening the party has come to a close and the other whiteman left for his house.” (Sikapa 1937, p.35).¹⁸

Sikapa’s middleman position not only between the Congolese and the Europeans, but also between his fellow West African migrants seems to be reflected in the following information:

“I was nicknamed Blackman Whiteman which in their [the Basendji people’s] dialect is Madelendome (Madelendormeh). That is, 'Mudele' means white man and 'Ndome' means Blackman.” (Sikapa 1937, p.35)

Despite his close relationship with his employers and his identification as a black white man, Sikapa seems to have maintained close relationships with the Congolese people as well. Reading his detailed descriptions of festivals and customs it seems to me, that he must have participated in some of these and that he might have enjoyed the hospitality of the people. Also the hunting experience which he relates in his account and which is vividly remembered in the oral traditions of his family, making

¹⁷ Alfred Parminter previously had been an agent for the Congo Free State and a promoter of its idea. Marchal 1996 *L’Etat libre du Congo*, Vol. I, P. 95.

¹⁸ For the role of popular music in the biography of Sikapa and its relationship to Christianity see Arlt, Veit 2002: *The Scholars Dance. Popular Culture and the Appropriation of Christianity on the South-eastern Gold Coast, c.1890-1918*. Paper presented at the symposium ‘Performing Culture’, Amsterdam June13-14, 2002

him a hunter of big game and adventurer, hints to such a close relationship with a local chief.

“It was at Bokatulaka that I shot and killed an elephant.¹⁹ The chief of the town called Mopoka inspired me to kill this big animal. I fired two shots; one at the head and the second shot straight into its mouth and it fell dead.” (Sikapa 1937, p.42)

‘Sea never dry yet’ – the third trip to the Congo Free State

After two years in the Congo Sikapa returned to the Gold Coast. From the £50 he had earned his master in Accra, Jacob Tettehfiio, withheld the largest part. During his absence Sikapa’s father Narteh Okumador had run into trouble with the government when he participated in an effort to reclaim the abolished settlements on Krobo Mountain and the shrines connected to them. Tettehfiio had arranged for legal assistance during the imprisonment and had had large expenses. It must have been a painful blow for the young man to see his newly acquired wealth vanish like this. Narrating this experience he resorts to a Congolese proverb in order to cope with his disappointment:

“I was told the same story when I got to Krobo; hence I gave my parents the little money my master gave me out of my earnings from the Congo. The Basendji (Basendsi) people have a saying like this 'Mpermona Janbi or Mpermona Jankoma'. This saying make people feel that the Basendji's are stupid people because the meaning of this saying is that everything one does to them be it an offensive behaviour, insult, any pleasant behaviour or even an uncouth attitude towards a woman, the first thing he or she will say is this: "It is God's word" or "It pleases God". Then he or she leaves you even if he or she is angry. When I disembarked in Accra from Congo I brought with me an air tight box. Madjitey [Sikapa’s elder brother who later succeeded Okumador as chief] took this box to Krobo and ever since it is with him including every thing therein.” (Sikapa 1937, p.43)

Not only had his father’s conservative political interests spoil the young migrant’s successful home-coming. His brother in addition embezzled some of the goods Sikapa had brought home. I will come back to this relationship with his elder brother, which is a recurrent theme in the text and which, as I will show, is in some way the leitmotiv of the autobiography. Sikapa continues with the narration of the event which led to the imprisonment of his father and how he was set free through a clever move by the paramount chief Emmanuel Mate Kole: soon after Okumador’s imprisonment the British set off for their military campaign against the Asante and for this they relied on the assistance of the southern states of the Gold Coast. The paramount chief convinced the governor that the imprisoned persons were among the most important Krobo warriors and that they were needed if the Krobo were to assist the British. According to Sikapa the paramount chief was bound to do so on the basis of Okumador’s marriage with Koryo Patauto, daughter of the erstwhile paramount chief Odonkor Azu.

¹⁹ I should mention that one of the most influential Krobo chiefs of the late 18th century was called Muala Okumsro, a name that refers to his prowess as a hunter of an elephant. The single reference to Sikapa’s hunting experience in the light of this information thus has an important symbolic power.

Before Sikapa continues with his narrative of the third trip he provides us with a general account of Krobo history, a description of the Dipo initiation rites for girls and a description of the organisational structure of the Krobo with their various divisions. On first sight this seems to be an unstructured and out of place conundrum of information. But when considering the above mentioned leitmotiv, the information supplied makes sense and a structure can be detected in the text which aims at positioning the writer within Krobo society and history, proving that he is fully eligible as a chief. This impression was reinforced when in the course of my study of the text I found out, that a loose and unnumbered page entitled “Conclusion” that I had previously placed at the end of the text actually follows this section.

In a nutshell, Sikapa complains in this conclusion about the behaviour of his three brothers who have turned against him, as they are “flowing in riches” and points out that his own son Josiah Tetewayo Sikapa Okumador is the eldest offspring of Koryo Patauto’s children and thus the next in line for the chieftaincy. Previously in the text he has made clear that his brother Madjitey, the present chief, is not fit to occupy the office on several grounds.²⁰ Indeed, in this light the whole body of the text turns into a fervent charge against the brother, a powerful resource to legitimate a claim for the chieftaincy and thirdly a means for the author to present himself as an accomplished Krobo man in the tradition of his father and grandfather.

However, Sikapa does not end his text here but rather goes on writing another sixty to seventy pages and I will continue with my chronological presentation of it in order to include the last trip to the Congo. In a next chapter Sikapa narrates the history of his grandfather Anibereku Petchi Madjitey, another great warrior and hunter, which further proves that he belongs to a most prominent and historically rooted section of Krobo society. Following this he comes back to his last trip to the Congo Free State. Introducing it, Sikapa depicts the migrant’s fate:

“I was obliged by economic considerations to move again to the Congo to practice my trade. ...After I had rested enough in Accra as well as my hometown Odumase, I decided to go back to Congo. In those days people who travel abroad and come back are accorded great respect. Much so it is our proudest boast that you are called a seaboys. “Sea never dry yet” is our motto. Again after a short stay one begins to sell one’s clothings and precious belongings owing to financial difficulties. With this problem starring at me, I went to my master Jacob Tetteh Fio and asked permission to go back to the Congo and work. He agreed and while I was preparing to leave he asked ... an apprentice carpenter to take the trip with me. In those days the passage was two pounds ten shillings per one person, hence he paid the passage for the two of us and we set off to Matadi where the Railway Company was. We joined this company because I was well known, for I have worked with them before and more so, I was holding their identification number 2192 which makes things easier for us.” (Sikapa 1937, p.63)

So much easier the things seem to have been that the account of this stay extends merely to two pages. The carpenters worked with two Italian engineers at Songololo, a place as busy as Matadi, attracting migrants from Europe and British West Africa

²⁰ As I was asked by the head of the Sikapa family to treat these references in the text as confidential I cannot provide you with any details.

but also from the now Senegal and Gambia. Their task was to bridge a dangerous river, but what seems to have impressed Sikapa more is the Italian chief executive:

“He is a drunkard but experience[d] and hardworking. He likes his drink more than food and any time of the day he is drunk. At times he spoils his dresses with faeces as a result of excessive drink or intoxication.” (Sikapa 1937, p.64)

One day Sikapa dreamed that his father had died and he decided to return home. The trip on a slow steamer calling on every single port allowed him to get to know the more important ports along the Gulf of Guinea expanding his geographical knowledge and to return as an even more experienced man. Herewith the narrative of the Congo experiences has come to an end.

Before moving to the third section of my paper I will briefly touch upon the further sections of the text. In the following chapter Sikapa narrates the history of his father who indeed had died during the author’s absence. The next two sections are on the Krobo marriage customs and on the way the Krobo used to do burials on the Krobo Mountain. This practice had been abolished in 1892 along with the mountain settlements. The reader is then confronted with two short exposés entitled “My philosophy of human character” and “My philosophy of who is a brother”, which for Sikapa again are a way to cope with the disturbed relationship with his brother chief Madjitey. The chapter on his participation in the British expedition against Ashanti then is again in the same vein as the Congo narratives and cover some fifteen pages. The final twenty pages then are filled again with a mixture of testimonies of people, political events in which Sikapa took part in his function as councillor to the chief, bits of Krobo history and especially information on the early settlers in his hometown and some Klama songs, which contain some of the early Krobo oral traditions.

By way of a conclusion

Trapped in the fascinating research into a regional or rather local history my encounter with Gabriel Sikapa has allowed me to break out of the hinterland political entity of the two Krobo states and to travel across the Gulf of Guinea. When doing my reading on the history of the Congo Free State I had to cope with the immense violence for which Leopold’s own private colonial project has become known. Most probably it was the confrontation with those shocking pictures of mutilated people, labourers being chained, whipped, flogged or shot and with those incredible accounts of eye-witnesses of the Free State regime, that have urged me to try and explore Sikapa’s account of his journey to the Congo in this light.

Gabriel Sikapa was indeed confronted with violence during his trips to the Congo and as a matter of fact his narrative starts right off with what must have been a shocking experience. However, he does not criticise this violence, rather he seems to rationalise it as a means of maintaining order and discipline. Having received a Basel Mission education Sikapa will have been very familiar with the concepts of order, discipline and punishment. This even the more so as he had been a houseboy to a Basel Mission teacher. The African staff of the Basel Mission and later the Presbyterian Church, having appropriated the concept of discipline as the key element of education, are known to have put even greater emphasis on discipline and the punishments going along with it than the European missionaries.

As I have mentioned in the introductory overview of his life history, Gabriel Sikapa today is remembered as a strict disciplinarian. In fact, his discipline seems to have been the capital on which he built up his further career, for example during the Yaa

Asantewa war of 1900 when he was selected as a headman over 600 Krobo recruits.²¹ Or in an oral tradition of his family that has struck me again and again: as I have mentioned before, Sikapa at a later stage of his life was running a brass band of his own. He is said to have disciplined his musicians if they had performed badly by locking them up in his house for up to twelve hours – not in order to have them rehearse more but for punishing them! Interpreting Sikapa’s rationalisation of excessive violence in the Congo by way of his concept of discipline, has provided me with a key to understanding the punishment of the musicians, which – in the beginning – I merely read as an exaggerated oral history.

I have showed that the leitmotiv of the whole autobiography is the confrontation with chief Madjitey, who according to Sikapa undeservedly occupies the family throne. In this setup the Congo experiences become a key element in the construction of Sikapa’s self-representation as a royal, warrior, hunter and traveller – in brief: as an accomplished man worthy of his forefathers and fit to occupy the throne. Establishing oneself as a warrior and being initiated into one of the famous Krobo war deities had been an important element in Krobo manhood and I should mention that these war deities are indeed described in Sikapa’s text. However, the Yaa Asantewa war was one of the last wars in which young Krobo men could prove their bravura.²² In this light the migration as a contract labourer (as a precursor to contemporary migration patterns) becomes an interesting element in the construction of Krobo manhood and might be at the root of the Ghanaian concept of the “been-to”.²³ Even though Sikapa more or less failed to bring home to Krobo adequate revenue from his first two trips he enjoyed great respect for his status as a “Seaboy”.

In the Congo and in the Asante war, as well as in his time as chief in Akuse or as councillor, Sikapa capitalised on his role as a middleman. Whereas he received considerable financial rewards for it from the side of his Belgian employers and a medal from the British, he managed to gain in prestige and popularity also among the Krobo.²⁴ Becoming a “black whiteman” surely made for some alienation especially from the more conservative realms of Krobo society. Writing down his history and therein presenting himself as a true Krobo provided him with a means to resolve this problem and to reconcile tradition and modernity.

²¹ According to the Basel missionary Deuber the Krobo contingent numbered only 400 soldiers. Basel Mission Archives D-1.74, Afrika 1901, Odumase 172, A. Deuber to the mission board, Odumase 06.03.1901

²² According to missionary Deuber who was an eyewitness to the glorious return of the Krobo recruits many of the returnees brought home some trophy (human skulls and jaw bones). These were a requisite for being initiated into the cult of one of the war deities’. Basel Mission Archives D-1.74, Afrika 1901, Odumase 172, A. Deuber to the mission board, Odumase 06.03.1901

²³ Travelling abroad is an omnipresent wish of young Ghanaian men [and women] and they go through great risks in order to become a “been-to [abroad]”, a zeal which cannot be explained in economic terms only. I am thankful to Paul Jenkins who at the very beginning of my studies in African history directed my attention to this topic.

²⁴ This applies especially to his leadership during the Asante war, where he used his position to resolve several severe problems his subordinates ran into.