**The narrative of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw**

*The Narrative of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself*, first published in Bath in 1772, contains the earliest known first hand account of what it was like for a black man to migrate to Britain.

Gronniosaw (c.1710–1775) was born in the Borno region of Western Africa, in the area now known as Nigeria. He was tricked into slavery at around the age of fifteen, transported across the Atlantic, and eventually sold to a family in New York. Here he converted to Christianity and became deeply involved in [Calvinist](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/calvinism?s=t) [theology](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/theology?s=t). After working for many years as a domestic slave, Gronniosaw was granted his freedom in his master’s will. He enlisted as a soldier for the British in the Seven Years War, and eventually came to Britain aboard a prisoner-of-war ship around 1764.

The publication of Gronniosaw’s *Narrative* was paid for by Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntington, who was the de facto head of the Calvinist connexion in Britain at the time. Her cousin, Walter Shirley, wrote a preface for the *Narrative*, setting it in the context of the Calvinist doctrines. While Gronniosaw ‘related’ the text, he was illiterate, and so it was dictated, probably to Mary Marlowe, a friend of Hastings. The text was first published in Bath by William Gye and Thomas Mills in 1772. Gye and Mills mostly printed religious texts for the Calvinist connexion, including the hymnbooks for Hastings’ churches. Bath was an important centre for Calvinism in Britain at this time.

Gronniosaw’s text was intended first and foremost as a ‘conversion narrative’, designed to illustrate God’s love and the benefits of converting to Calvinism. Perhaps disturbingly, it advocated the position that enslaving Africans was a positive thing, since it helped them to convert to Christianity. Calvinism held that one did not need to be free to be accepted into God’s love. This idea was disputed at the time, especially by the Wesleyan [Methodists](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/methodist?s=t), and so Gronniosaw’s text was seen as an important piece of pro-Calvinist propaganda.

The publication proved relatively popular and went through several editions. A 1779 edition was published in Welsh in Aberhonddu, where the Countess of Huntington ran a theological college. Changes in the text’s long title give an indication of the increasing importance of religion in the way the text was marketed and read. Compare the 1772 first edition, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as related by Himself*, to the 1790 third edition, *Wonderous Grace Display’d in the Life and Conversion of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince.*

Given that the main publishers and sellers of the *Narrative* had connections to British Calvinism, it is likely that most people who read the text in the eighteenth century were interested more in its religious message than what it could tell them about migrating to Britain.

**What does Gronniosaw’s narrative tell us about his experience of migration?**

After arriving in Britain, Gronniosaw travelled to London, where he met his wife, a white textile worker named Betty. Together with their children, they later travelled around the country looking for work. Not only did migrants like Gronniosaw experience many of the hardships common to poor people in Britain at the time, but they also had to contend with racial prejudice.

In [Excerpt 1](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/uploads/Excerpt%201%20-%20James%20Albert%20Ukawsaw%20Gronniosaw%2C%20(1772)%20A%20Narrative%20of%20the%20Most%20Remarkable%20Particulars%20in%20the%20Life%20of%20James%20Albert%20Ukawsaw%20Gronniosaw%2C%20an%20African%20Prince%2C%20as%20Related%20by%20Himself.pdf) of the *Narrative* Gronniosaw meets with two very different responses from British people in Portsmouth. The woman who ‘kept a Public-House’ sees that Gronniosaw is unfamiliar with Britain and exploits him, [defrauding](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/defraud?s=t)him of his watch and his money. Her brother’s wife, on the other hand, sees that Gronniosaw is being taken advantage of, and takes him into her home. She offers to help him recover his possessions, and even proposes to use ‘rougher means’ to help him! In [Excerpt 2](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/uploads/Excerpt%202%20-%20James%20Albert%20Ukawsaw%20Gronniosaw%2C%20(1772)%20A%20Narrative%20of%20the%20Most%20Remarkable%20Particulars%20in%20the%20Life%20of%20James%20Albert%20Ukawsaw%20Gronniosaw%2C%20an%20African%20Prince%2C%20as%20Related%20by%20Himself.pdf), Gronniosaw relates that he has been helped by his friend Mr. Gurdney to find some work in a village near Norwich. But he is targeted by some local ‘inferior people’ who undercut him. When his young daughter dies, none of the local clergy will bury her. Clearly, this has more to do with the fact that she is black than the excuses that the clergymen give, though Gronniosaw himself seems hesitant to acknowledge this.

**Religion, marriage and migration**

Gronniosaw was a deeply religious man. He understands all of the difficulties he experiences through religion and prayer. When he leaves Portsmouth at the end of Excerpt 1, for example, he is not angry about being conned on his own account, but that he has missed the opportunity of finding some ‘Christian friends’. At the end of Excerpt 2, he and his family are forced to move away from Norfolk to Kidderminster as a result of the ‘ill treatment’ they received from the locals.

In Britain, Gronniosaw went through a two major religious rites of passage: baptism and marriage. Although the Yorke-Talbot opinion of 1729 had explicitly stated that baptism did not make slaves free, many black people in Britain still believed that being baptised offered some protection from being re-enslaved. Even though this became less pressing after the Somerset case of 1772, many free black people in Britain continued to have themselves baptised as a way of formally becoming part of the religious community.

Marriage was another important religious ritual that helped black immigrants to settle and put down roots in Britain. As many black migrants had come to the country after fighting in the military, men far outnumbered women. Among urban working-class communities, ‘mixed’ marriages, between black men and white women, were not uncommon, particularly in the latter half of the century. Nevertheless, there were often objections to such unions.

This passage from Gronniosaw’s Narrative relates to the mid-to late-1760s:

*‘I waited on Doctor Gifford who took me into his family was exceedingly good to me. […] after I came to Doctor Gifford I expressed a desire to be admitted into their Church, and set down with them; they told me I must first be baptized; so I gave in my experience before the Church, with which they were very well satisfied, and I was baptized by Doctor Gifford with some others. I then made known my intentions of being married; but I found there were many objections against it because the person I had fixed on was poor. She was a widow, her husband had left her in debt, and with a child, so that they persuaded me against it out of real regard to me.—But I had promised and was resolved to have her; as I knew her to be a gracious woman, her poverty was no objection to me, as they had nothing else to say against her. When my friends found that they could not alter my opinion respecting her, they wrote to Mr. Allen, the Minister she attended, to persuade her to leave me; but he replied that he would not interfere at all, that we might do as we would. […] I firmly believed that we should be very happy together, and so it prov’d, for she was given me from the LORD. And I have found her a blessed partner, and we have never repented, tho’ we have gone through many great troubles and difficulties.' (30)*

**Questions and Student Activities**

* What did Gronniosaw expect to find when he came to Britain? Did the reality match his expectations?
* Are there any clear clues in the extract that the parson's refusal to bury Gronniosaw’s was daughter based on race?
* Why did Gronniosaw and his family move from place to place so often?
* How did British people help Gronniosaw and his family?
* Why do you think Gronniosaw gave his money and his watch to the woman in Portsmouth?