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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS+

45th Annual Conference of
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Proceedings of the 45th Annual Conference of the Environmental Design Research Association

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May 28-31, 2014

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Inland Gambian Preservation: A Case Study and Travel Narrative

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Introduction

This essay takes the form of a travelogue and personal narrative.1 In the tradition of the travelogue, my intention is to parlay both scholarly research findings and imbue the reader with a sense of place and of a point in time. I recount encountering two building sites on a research visit to the Gambia where I observed historic and historical structures in various states of preservation.2 Revealed on my visit is a wide range of Gambian attitudes towards preservation and also attitudes towards the built environment in general. My personal interest is in interior architecture, but this story looks at structures more as complete cultural objects without the specific boundaries of design we place on building in the western traditions of the environmental design fields.

The Gambia, a nation of 1.2 million people, defined by its proximity to the river Gambia and completely surrounded by the nation of Senegal at the western tip of the African continent, is a multi-tribal, multi-lingual nation with significant populations of Mandinka, Wolof, Serahuli, Fulani, Creole, and Jolla peoples. Originally a British protectorate, the language of government and education is English. My research was aided by representatives of the cultural repository of the country, the National Council of Arts and Culture (NCAC). I discuss two sites here, colonial Janjanbureh (Georgetown), a town located on an island in the river Gambia about 300km from the coast, and Toniataba, a small village just away from the river’s edge about 200km inland.3

My opportunity to undertake this project was provided to me by a research travel fellowship through Carnegie Mellon University. My proposal for this fellowship was entitled “Exploring Gambian Vernacular through Louisiana Creole Eyes,” and the fellowship application charged me with emphasizing the “individual,” the “particular,” and the “local.” My work was to be grounded in scholarship while keeping regard of design fundamentals, and I was to go further and think of “this time,” “this place,” and this “occupancy.”

Janjanbureh (Georgetown)

In the image shown in Figure 1, in a baseball cap and to the right of Hassoum Ceeyes (my friend, guide, and director of the NCAC’s National Museum of The Gambia), is the national parliamentary minister representing the Janjanbureh area, Foday Manka. I was honored to interview Minister Manka and to have him give me a tour of the town. Minister Minaka is also a local historian and author of a history of Janjanbureh; a copy of which he shared with me.4

Janjanbureh is the indigenous name given to the original English colonial settlement of Georgetown upriver about 300km from the coast. The two names are now used interchangeably—it seems to be a common practice in the Gambia to have renamed geographical locations with indigenous names but to keep the English term in normal use. Janjanbureh is the only settlement in The Gambia that originated from an English grided plan.

Today Janjanbureh’s population is stagnant, currently 3,223 persons (in comparison to 3,068 in 1983). Minister Manka explained two reasons for this—one is that all river towns fell into decline after Gambian independence in 1966 when the English stepped away from control of the river transportation corridor, the other is the rural to urban drift affecting the entire country. The last scheduled passenger service along the river stopped

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1 The travelogue as a tool for research as both a primary source and research dissemination tool is discussed in James Duncan and Derek Gregory, eds., Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing (New York: Routledge, 2002) and Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (New York: Routledge, 2007). Both discuss the issues of the nature of “othering” and biased interpretation that is embedded in historical travelogues, and Pratt contains a specific discussion concerning these interpretations through a post-colonial lens which is particularly relevant to my essay. I have selected a first person personal narrative format so that a story can be created that acknowledges this research bias of a western visitor while still maintaining a rigorous qualitative inquiry. H. Lloyd Goodall Jr., Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2012) and Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012) make the case that this is a relevant and valuable methodology.

2 Much of this essay is adapted from my blog “Naajawoobir: Looking Inside The Gambia” (2012), www.naajawoobir.wordpress.com.


the historic colonial structures of the town. We had a great conversation about those attitudes, derelict historical structures, and the local perception of them. The perception, it seems, is not one of respect but rather (I am hypothesizing here) distrust. It is also hard for local residents to see any pragmatic value in these structures, as they respond to English lifestyles and use building techniques that have neither survived nor are native to the area.

On my tour I got to see the local school built in 1927 and other colonial structures such as the administration building (Figure 2), on the verge of total collapse, and housing structures built for civil servants. At the governor’s residence, I met the current governor of the region, Ganya Touray, and the mayor of the coastal urban center of Serekunda, Yankubba Kolley. It is customary in West Africa to have extended greetings where you sit down, exchange extended hellos, and ask how things are where you are from, and my meeting with the Governor and the mayor consisted primarily of that. But the outcome of the meeting established a comfort level between us all, exchanging brief discussions about buildings, etc., and they gave me access to crawl around many of the area’s buildings. I did not, sadly, take any pictures in the governor’s residence as I thought it rude to even ask, but the interior was furnished with a suite of nice West African upholstered furniture (a set of four chairs and one sofa in a typical West African fashion) and had a grand sense of colonial scale. Although like most of Janjanbureh, the building was in need of renovation and repair.5

The town itself has the feeling of a ghost town. The straight, gridded streets are almost empty, and most of any new development is clustered around the old town and in a traditional African fashion. I was introduced to the town chief, Jam Jaw, who was sitting outside one of the few open stores in the town with a few friends. I toured some of the old colonial industrial buildings which were not in use and was lucky to gain access to one of the Aku houses which still existed.6

Akus are people of slave heritage whose ancestors would have been liberated from colonial owners or intercepted in Portuguese or French transit when Britain abolished slavery in the early 19th century. This home dates to that period, and may have been built by French contractors from neighboring Senegal for an established
Aku family. Aku houses are similar to a Louisiana Creole cottage. They typically have a four square plan with no central hall. They are wood framed structures (occasionally augmented with a form of palm lathe plaster referred to as krintig), have hipped roofs, and, in some cases, incorporate a gallery. The Aku are typically Christian, live in nuclear families, and speak both Aku (Patout) and English. Because the Aku had some western training, they took a position as the social elite, built western styled wooden houses, and prioritized western education. You still see a significant minority of Aku people in The Gambia’s capital, Banjul, but they have all left Janjanbureh along with the colonial settlers.

In the photograph in Figures 3 and 4, you can see that this building is vacant and in disrepair, although there was a lot of interesting repair work done by the owner who is trying to keep the structure from collapse. Notable to me was that the building was on a clay fired brick foundation; Akus would have been trained in this skill by either the English or neighboring French, but would have left with the British at the time of independence. You don’t see any signs of this technology elsewhere in the area today.

These colonial era structures are almost all in significant levels of decay, the school being the most cared for and active. I got a sense that residents of Janjanbureh understood that the structures had potential value, but did not feel that value themselves. You see interesting graffiti on the walls (Figure 5) that denigrates the structures, but I noticed that my guides were not ashamed or even particularly aware of the graffiti. There is no apparent plan for preservation of these structures, and in a way it seems that they should deteriorate as the systems of colonialism that created them have also left. And part of the purpose of this essay is to share them with a larger population, as it seems unlikely they will survive much longer.

**Toniataba**

Pictured in Figure 6 wearing the long haftang is junior cleric Salem Mohamed Fadid Gannah and Usman Jawara to his right. They are between our driver, Wuyyeu Manga and Hassassoum Ceesay. Their village of Toniataba is a regional center for Islamic study, and the junior cleric is the teacher there. The village is also the location of, reportedly, the largest round Mandinka hut in The Gambia. It was large, easily over 30 feet in diameter (Figure 7).

Salem and the village are used to occasional visitors, as the hut is listed in some versions of the Lonely Planet Travel Guide⁷, and he was skeptical of my coming. Fortunately having a guide from the NCAC seemed to put him more at ease, although in our conversation he also commented on promises other researchers had made to

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⁷ Alex Newton, Lonely Planet West Africa (West Africa, a Travel Survival Kit, 3rd ed), (Oakland, CA: Lonely Planet, 1995).
to have recorded this. I noted to myself that the cleric was telling a familiar story, but that his voice had a soft and thoughtful tone, even more so than most Mandinka speakers who are very melodic in their cadence and rhythm.

The cleric shared additional information with me about the preservation of the building, describing the difficulties in repairing the mud walls and the use of mud brick to create repairs (Figure 8). He was concerned that once readily and immediately available roofing palm fronds were now a further and further trek away; making the biannual roof repairs more and more difficult. It was clear, though, that the village would do what was necessary to make repairs and that preservation was not a concern. He explained that the hut was over two hundred years old.

I was struck by the contrast of the attitude toward preservation of these structures and the colonial ones in Janjanbureh. I was left thinking that there was something to be said for the attitude of the locals in Janjanbureh towards the colonial structures. In order for something to be worth saving, the community has to

help in the maintenance and restoration of the hut that never materialized. Salem, though, become comfortable with me as we discussed the building. It was in this conversation that I realized that once people understood that I wanted to learn about their building / home / trade, they got comfortable with me quickly. I hope my enthusiasm for their buildings or work came through in translation. I think in this case it did.

Salem shared the history of the hut. It was built for an Islamic saint or walui named Saikou Ousman Jimbiteh Fatty who was said to have mastered the Koran and to be close to Allah. He was also a successful farmer and provider, building this large hut as a record and legacy for people to use as an example of holy life. The building is now a tool for learning in both the village and those who come to study in the village. If I accomplished anything on this trip, perhaps digitally recording that story for the Gambian national archive is it. Everyone in my research party seemed very pleased

Figure 6: Junior cleric Salem Mohamed Heidek Famarah Heidah

Figure 7: Overview of Toniataba hut.

Figure 8: Mud wall repair.

Figure 9: Circular hut plan drawn in sand.
value it. And although I found the colonial, particularly the Aku houses, quite nice, this hut was more essential to the Gambian identity of place.

I was not allowed to go or photograph inside this hut. The gentlemen of the village made it clear that it was off limits and there were even some things they were not sharing with me about it. But they did draw the plan in the sand for me (Figure 9), explaining how there was an inner circle, which they drew as sealed with dwelling compartments surrounding the perimeter. To my eye, no one was living there, but I could have been wrong. The building had a large covered veranda that is used a classroom and gathering space, and that gave the structure a sense of activity (Figure 10).

Conclusion

These two instances of historical structures reveal two very different relationships Gambians have to significant structures of their past. I have constructed this narrative to compare the Gambian frameworks in both attitude and situation. Comparing a symbol of colonialism to a symbol of indigenous culture will obviously lead to different conclusions, but the essay reveals the state of preservation in the minds of Gambians resulting from the range of global pressures impinging on this small West African country. The authenticity of the indigenous inevitably seems to trump the shadow of power that colonial buildings seem to represent.

References


Photography Credits

All photographs are by the author.