Trade, Interaction and Change during the Atlantic Trade on the Gambia River
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Abstract

The Gambia River was connected to many of the major trade systems in West Africa, with direct ties to the Saharan and Atlantic networks. Prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, Mande traders traveled from the inland Niger delta to the coast trading gold and other commodities for salt. In the mind-15th century, Portuguese merchants initiated commerce along the river, ultimately reorienting trade patterns in the Senegambia from interior land-based to Atlantic maritime commerce (Quinn 1972: 7-8). This reorientation of trade routes lead to the establishment of new commercial centers favoring the Atlantic rather than the interior. Throughout the initial period of contact, local mansas claimed to pay tribute to the Empire of Mali (Crone 1937: 67). Yet several kingdoms, including Niumi, remained independent until the English imposed direct control in the nineteenth century. This paper presents preliminary findings from archaeological and historical investigations at the Atlantic period Niumi trade center of Juffure as well as peripheral villages of San Domingo and Lamin. The overall focus of these investigations is to examine the material manifestations of trade and interaction in daily life due to shifts in contact and commerce from the 15th to the 19th century.

The Niumi Kingdom, Contact, and Settlement

Evidence of settlement by the Luso-Africans, English, and French on the Gambia River in addition to documented Mande villages participating in the burgeoning commercial activities in the Niumi province provides an ideal setting for this study due to its emphasis on trade and group interactions between those both directly and indirectly involved in commerce within this local economic center (Quinn 1972; Wright 2004). The Niumi Kingdom, situated along the Gambia River and Atlantic coast, was never larger than 400 square miles with the major areas of settlement concentrated along the Gambia River and Atlantic coast according to oral and documentary sources (Gomes 1959; Wright 2004: 3-4); thus its power was not vested in its size, but rather its location at the intersection of the major land and water routes into the interior (Quinn 1972: 30). Its significance in the Atlantic complex is evident through the presence of the main French factory on the Gambia River (Albreda) as well as the base of operations for the British commercial monopoly at James Fort and Juffure.

Beginning in the 16th century, numerous villages were settled to tap into the growing European trade. At the point of contact, European merchants and travelers described these ‘kingdoms’ within their own frame of reference, causing them to focus on the West African kingdoms’ recognition of a central
ruler and payment of tribute to this individual (Vansina 1962: 326-327). Mansas and village heads permitted the construction of several trading factories associated with established villages (Wright 2004). The English and French were allowed to construct factories within existing villages as long as they accepted the local ruler’s terms of trade, which often involved fluctuating prices and demand. Additionally, several groups of traders were given special “stranger” status and established new villages in order to facilitate commerce between local mansas and foreign merchants. In exchange for regular tribute, these individuals were provided with food and lodging, personal and property protection (Conrad and Frank 1995; Brooks 1993).

Between the 16th and 17th centuries numerous villages were settled along the riverbank in previously unoccupied areas. Several informants interviewed in the 1970’s by Donald Wright (1977, 2004) discuss a series of villages established along the river bank during this time to accommodate the growing population of strangers forming the numerous trade diasporas in the region. A consequence of this was a sharp increase in the population of Niumi; the overall demographic composition was transformed from predominantly Mande to a multi-ethnic center bringing previously unknown groups into contact and resulting in the emergence of a highly influential Luso-African community.

The emerging commercial center consisted of a number of these newly established villages which were located as part of the 2004 and 2006 field survey of the area surrounding the former commercial center. Four former settlements were selected for intensive excavation—San Domingo, the village and English trading factory at Juffure, and first village of Lamin—each of which presents a unique aspect of the trade (Fig.1). These are discussed in European written accounts and Royal African Company logs as having some level of interaction in the Atlantic Trade. The village and trading factory at Juffure were in continual contact with the English on James Island and served as the central village in the local commercial center that included San Domingo. San Domingo was originally a Luso-African settlement that had strong ties with British who later established a small filling station there in the 1730’s where a small contingent of company slaves resided. The fourth site is the early village of Lamin that is known to have had ties to the English trade, but unlike the other sites, was not formally part of the British commercial interests.

**Insights from Imports: A Comparison of the Documentary and Archaeological Records**

At the height of the Atlantic Trade in the 18th century, detailed Royal African Company inventories and transactions list goods imported and exported from each factory on the Gambia River. In addition, transactions between Luso-African traders are present including goods they received from the company in exchange for commodities such as beeswax and elephant teeth. The most detailed records exist for Juffure Factory, while a handful of references to Lamin and San Domingo can be found. Thus
archaeological collections and trade lists can be compared directly for Juffure Factory and Village with an underlying assumption of interaction between all sites due to geographical proximity and an awareness of one another. A comparison between inventories of goods sent to Juffure Factory and imported materials recovered archaeologically provide interesting insights into the commercial role of Juffure as well as the local population’s desire for or consumption of imports from the Atlantic. Though this examination focuses particularly on Juffure Factory, data is available for the Gambia as a whole and provides further information (Curtin 1975a: 90). The most referenced imports coming into the area between 1727 and 1741 when extant journals are available include beads, firearms, brass pans, cutlasses, cloth, and iron bars in addition to rum from the Caribbean and wine from Madeira. The major exports in the company logs include beeswax, ivory, gold and slaves in that order. When the imports sent to Juffure are compared to trends on the river, and finally to the archaeological record, it is possible to draw several conclusions with regard to local consumption, exchange practices, and demand. In this paper, only a sample of these material classes have been selected that best demonstrate these trends.

**Guns and Weaponry**

A significant point of interest is that French goods were not found during excavations, with the exception of one gunflint at San Domingo. Juffure (English) and Albreda (French) are within .5 km of one another, and San Domingo is less than 2 km to the east; it is known through company records that trade was often conducted between the British and French though this only occurred when trade stores were deficient in specific goods, mainly alcohol. Logically, one would therefore expect to find both French and English goods at Juffure and particularly San Domingo simply due to proximity.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, cutlasses, knives, and various trade guns form a significant portion of the trade items sent to Juffure Factory, however, a single rivet from a sword hilt and blade fragment were recovered from Juffure Factory. High numbers of gunflints and shot were recorded in the trade logs as well, but again few were found and flaked flint in the assemblage is predominantly from ballast stone which forms the bulk of the flint. According to Curtin’s (1975: 90) data, guns and weaponry comprised 13.8% of the Gambia trade whereas these items made up 27% of the imports in the company trade logs for Juffure Factory from 1727-1741. Yet despite these numbers, only three artifacts from Juffure Village and Juffure Factory representing this category were found. It should be noted that Curtin did not include gunflints, shot, or lead balls in his percentages, however, these did not form a significant percentage of the archaeological assemblage at any site.

**Cowries, Beads and Semi-precious Stones**

In the early to mid-18th century records there are frequent references cowries yet only two were
found during excavations; one at Juffure Village and the other at Juffure Factory. Amber beads, crystal, and arrangoes (carnelians) are amongst the most numerous entries in the company logs throughout the 18th century, yet only three carnelians and one piece of amber were recovered archaeologically; five crystal beads have been identified comprising less than 1% of the total beads recovered from all sites. Trade logs list red, yellow, white and black beads as the most numerous imports and any further description of beads is restricted to size and shape such as small, medium, or large oval, round, or pipe beads; the majority of the entries (68%) simply list ‘beads’ measured by weight (lbs). The most numerous beads recovered were white, followed by red, blue, black, yellow, and green. It is significant that blue and green beads were not specifically listed in the Juffure Factory accounts. Though Juffure Factory and Village follow this trend, however at San Domingo black beads comprise twice the amount of blue and no green beads are present. A total of 1737 glass beads were found during excavations, the bulk of the assemblage from Juffure which strongly contrasts the relative absence from Lamin (only one white bead). This is indicative of the Juffure/San Domingo trade center’s position as distribution point, or re-exporting center similar to the role played by Banjul today rather than a significant point of consumption. It can also be inferred that the overall lack of known imports in the archaeological assemblages is a result of locals active (or non-active) role in trading activities.

Local Production: Pipes and Ceramics

A second point of interest to this study is local production. The two classes of artifacts that provide the most insight at this time are locally produced pipes and ceramics. At this time, there is a dramatic increase in locally produced pipes and ceramics apparent through the diversity of materials, decorative patterns, and forms (pipes).

Tobacco Pipes

English manufactured pipe stems are often used as accurate tools for dating; however, if the sample is small, as with any material, the results loss their quantitative value. The sample size from any of the four sites do not provide any statistically relevant dates, but the dates recovered are still of interest as indicators of import trends. The average dates from European pipe stems from all sites range from the late 17th to the mid-18th century: Lamin1680, Juffure Factory 1714, Juffure Village 1734.6, and San Domingo 1730. There were no pipes from the late 18th to 19th century recovered. According to historian Philip Curtin (1975b), tobacco was not a significant import until the 1830’s, but travel accounts note local growth a century earlier. Additionally, there are no accounts for trade in either British or Dutch tobacco pipes, while the most numerous collection of European pipe steams from any site in the regions comes from a single context within a shovel test dug at Albreda dating to the mid-19th century. This is of
interest due to the variety and amount of locally produced pipes found in 18th and 19th century contexts at Juffure, San Domingo, and Lamin, whereas European pipes dominate the 17th to mid-18th century collections (Fig. 2).

The largest variety of diagnostic locally produced pipes is from San Domingo. These pipes include a wide variety of forms and designs, and are similar in shape and material to those found further up river from sites dating from the mid-13th to late 17th century in the Central River Division (Lawson 2003a: 266). Some of these forms and designs may have originated outside of the Senegambia such as Sierra Leone (Hill 1976) (Fig. 3).

The earliest contemporary description of pipes in the Gambia is from 1620 by Richard Jobson. He mentions tobacco pipe production as one of three types of industry on the river, the other two being ceramic manufacturing and leatherworking. In this discussion he describes some of these pipes:

> Tabacco pipes, wherof there is few or none of them, be they men or women doeth walke or go without, they do make onely the bowle of earth, with a necke of the same, about two inches long, very neatly, and artificially colouring or glassing the earth, very handsomely, all the bowles being very great, and for the most part will hold halfe an ounce of tobacco.

(Gamble and Hair 1999: 161)

It is apparent from Jobson’s account that pipes were being made in the region at the beginning of the 17th century. The overall lack of European produced pipes from late 18th and 19th century contexts suggest that by the mid-1700’s, the local producers were able to adequately meet demand.

**Local Ceramics**

One important goal of this project is to establish a preliminary archaeological sequence that will assist in determining differences in availability and consumption between sites as well as overtime. Currently, there is one typology available for local ceramics in The Gambia. This typology is focused on long-term change and includes ceramics from the first century of the 1st millennia AD to 1900; it is divided into three phases defined by changes in decoration, form, and refinement (Lawson 2003a; 2003b). Even though the overall structure of this typology presents a good starting point for analysis, it can only serve as a guide. On initial inspection, numerous differences appear between the local ceramics from Niumi and those in the CRD assemblages. Most notably is the high occurrence of shell temper as well as shell impressed decorations on the Niumi collection that are not reported in Lawson’s typology. Of further interest is the fact that the ceramics incorporated in her phase II (1300-1700 AD) continue into the late 19th century at Juffure and San Domingo and appear in the upper contexts at Lamin.

What is most evident in the assemblages from these sites is the increase in types and variety of
ceramics present throughout the period of the Atlantic trade, followed by a sharp decrease through the mid-19th century; by its close, locally produced ceramics are largely limited to buff or light pink, grog tempered wares. This phenomenon was also noted by Matthew Hill at Cassan which is contemporaneous with the Niumi sites (Hill 1987), also in the CRD region. He attributes this to the multi-ethnic nature of the trading village which served as that region's main port.

The ceramics that appear to predate, or have been in use during the early years of the Atlantic Trade are mainly limited to sand and organic tempered wares with a limited variety of decorative motifs, or no decoration present at all (Fig. 4). However, the type of temper as well as decorations found on sherds from the 18th and 19th centuries is numerous including shell, grog, and sand tempers either used on their own or in numerous combinations of the three with organic materials. Furthermore, there is an increase in the assortment of impressed, twine, and punctuated motifs including combinations of these with incised lines.

**Summary and Conclusions**

The above discussion represents the initial phase of artifact analysis for this study. At this time, the assemblage has largely been viewed as a whole with little intra-site comparison. Diagnostic imported finds coincide with the height of the Atlantic Trade in the region (mid-18th century) but reveal potential trends in the availability or popularity of these goods over time. Faunal and botanical analysis has yet to be completed. Preliminary analysis in conjunction with documentary sources present several interesting questions. Though it has been argued by some that the Atlantic trade marginalized West Africa’s ties to the interior markets, one must consider what the absence of known trade items such as various beads and cowries from the assemblage means. The most intriguing point is that Niumi appears to have functioned as a re-distribution point on the coast where various goods were exchanged but rarely were consumed by the local population who had preferences independent of the larger networks. Upon completion of this analysis it will be possible to trace shifts in consumption and interaction between and within these sites in relation to the Atlantic Trade and the advent of the colonial era.

**References:**

**Figures:**

Fig. 1. Sites identified during survey occupied during the Atlantic Trade (ca 1500 to 1900).

Fig. 2. Locally produced tobacco pipes from Niumi.

Fig. 3. Large pipe recovered from San Domingo similar to those reported by M. Hill in Sierra Leone.

Fig. 4. Locally produced ceramics from Niumi.