Introduction

For centuries, European traders have impacted significant social, economic, and environmental changes to the West African cultural landscape, playing active roles in shaping new identities, group memory, and trade relations. This influence did not end with the abolition of the legal exportation of slaves from Africa by Europe and the US in the early nineteenth century, rather it prompted traders to explore new networks and establish more secluded trading posts. This pattern is seen in coastal Guinea, where tidewater routes provide access to the interior regions, as in the Rio Pongo. Despite the 1808 declaration by European powers and the United States to prohibit the exportation of slaves from the African continent, the area continued to serve as a principle location from which Americans and Europeans obtained slaves to transport to the New World. These traders often gained access to political capital and resources (including slaves) by engaging the “landlord-stranger” relationship, in which marriage into local elite families provided entrée to social networks (Mouser 1975). Remnants of trading establishments resulting from such interactions are present at several localities along the Rio Pongo, and have provided historical archaeologists the opportunity to engage in further investigations of the continuation of the Atlantic slave trade throughout the illicit period. The research presented here discusses on-going excavations at the historic village of Gambia, one such site on the Rio Pongo where archaeological research hopes to yield further information on socio-political relations in the region during the illicit slave trade period.

Project Background

My research expands on the 2013 Rio Pongo Archaeological Project co-directed by Kenneth Kelly (University of South Carolina), together with El Hadj Ibrahima Fall (Université Nelson Mandela, Conakry), which investigated several sites associated with the illicit slave trade. The international archaeological team conducted excavations at the sites of Bangalan, Sanya Paulia, and Farenya, each associated with known 19th century slave traders who had been enmeshed in local politics as a means to access slave trade resources. At each of these sites there is a strong connection, through inherited oral traditions, between modern residents and the 19th century occupation (Kelly et al. 2015). In 2016, I began to research the historic village of Gambia, located in the Boffa prefecture in coastal Guinea, another illicit slave trade site on the Rio Pongo. Written records (most notably an edited collection of autobiographical manuscripts) indicate that the trading post of Gambia was directed by the European trader Théodore Canot (Conneau 1976). This site is of particular interest when compared with those excavated during the 2013 season; in his manuscript Canot discusses interactions with the principal trader at Bangalan (site excavated in 2013), and notes similarities between their two trading posts. While the other slave-trade era sites examined by Kelly et al (2015) maintain strong historical ties to current villages and their populations, that is not the case at Gambia. At the sites of Bangalan, Farenya, and Sanya Paulia, for example, there is a shared historical memory among residents of the geographical layout about the historic occupations; however no such singularly agreed histories have been observed among residents living in nearby Gambia, rendering the site unique in its memorial footprint. My ongoing research goal is to explore the difference between those sites, especially why there is no direct connection between current populations and the Gambia site, as it is geographically and temporally similar to those previously excavated on the Rio Pongo. I conducted archaeological research at Gambia between January and April of 2016 as part of my dissertation research, assisted by three Guinean interns who had attended the Rio Pongo archaeological field school in 2013.

A major methodological goal of the project was to involve local community members. Prior to 2013, no archaeological excavations had been conducted in the region, and only a handful had ever been conducted in the
country. For this reason, local residents have little understanding of archaeological methods and motivations, and were often suspicious and skeptical of our intentions. As the season went on, we encouraged interactions with local residents and volunteer participation, and had nearly daily visitors to site activities. As a result of these interactions, we received valuable information that made essential contributions to, and in some cases drove, our research initiatives.

Gambia, located to the south of the modern-day village of Bakoro, is situated on a tidal inlet of the Rio Pongo, providing it with geographical protection in the form of invisibility against the surveying British ships during the era of the illicit trade. These large ships, patrolling coastal waters to prevent the exportation of slaves, were unable navigate the shallow tidal inlets. Currently, the area in which the historic village of Gambia was located has only one residence, but written records and archaeological evidence suggest a greater population presence during its historic occupation. Initial survey of the area identified twelve mound remains, six stone surface features, and several additional features of interest. These were grouped into five major interest areas, which we have named as the Jetty, Sentinelle, Jean Illi Mound, Complex, and Ancien Village. [FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE]

Jetty

The Jetty is a major architectural feature characterized by daily differential access during the changing tidal periods of the Rio Pongo. Measuring roughly 20 meters long by 4 meters wide, and nearly two meters in height along most of its length, the jetty would have provided loading access to small ships during a higher tide. The tidal nature of the Rio Pongo is severe-- at high tide the Jetty can be completely submerged, while at low tide the water recedes nearly 60 meters. At the base of the Jet-
Two large *fromager* (*Ceiba pentandra*) trees, likely to have been intentionally planted to provide shelter and shade during the era of the jetty’s construction. A single 2m x 1m excavation unit was opened c. 30 meters northwest of the jetty in an area identified as “Gardien.” The excavation unit was dug on a small mound that yielded construction materials and European ceramics consistent with an early-nineteenth through early twentieth century occupation. While no clear structure walls were located, the quantity of construction materials and ceramics recovered from the unit suggest the existence of a structure nearby, possibly to serve as a magazine or storage prior to loading small ships. If modern foliage were removed, clear views of the Jetty would be possible from the Senzinelle and Ancien Village locations. **[FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE]**

**Sentinelle**

The Sentinelle is located north of the Jetty, and 25 meters above the river level. Local residents described this area as a major lookout point used to inform of incoming ships. The Sentinelle area is a rectangular-shaped plateau, roughly 80x100 meters, has a relatively leveled surface, and is surrounded by a linear demarcation of small cobbles (roughly 20-30cm in diameter) on all sides that face the water. Two units were excavated in the Sentinelle zone. The first, a 4mx1m trench identified as the “Fondation,” was dug near the southern edge of the Sentinelle area, northeast of the Jetty, where a square-shaped stone feature was visible on the surface. One potential mud wall feature was identified during excavation, but intense rodent activity greatly compromised its integrity, rendering a clear interpretation difficult. Compared to other areas where excavations were conducted at Gambia, the Sentinelle yielded relatively few construction materials, and the majority of artifacts recovered comprised non-diagnostic glass fragments and local ceramics. This supports the interpretation suggested by oral traditions that the Sentinelle may have served as a guard location, where permanent residences may not have been established. Such a vantage point would have been helpful as well during the illicit slave trade era occupation, providing additional security against surprise raids from British anti-slavery patrol ships. Northwest of the surface of the Sentinelle, and on a gentle slope down from the plateau surface, we excavated a 2m x 1m trench, identi-
fied as “Four,” in the remains of a small mound that local residents believe to have been the oven for the house of Jean Illi (see discussion below). Apart from several large brick fragments and some cement near the surface of the mound, no major charcoal deposit was found, nor were other indications of cooking activities identified. Imported and local ceramics comprise the majority of artifacts recovered from the Four (see figure 6), and no structural materials were located. At this time the function of the Four area is unknown. Several other surface features have been located, mostly small square and circular stone features, and we expect to further their investigation.

Jean Illi Mound

This mound was named according to local accounts that attribute the occupation of the site to Jean Illi. He was an important figure of the early twentieth century colonial administration, believed to have worked with ancestors of current residents. However, to date, we have not identified the name Jean Illi in written records. The mound, roughly two meters tall, appears to have a man-made flat surface on top of which a house could have been built. We excavated a 4m x 1m trench into the mound, which yielded the highest artifact density of all excavation units (Figure 6). Within the first 20 cm of excavation we uncovered a section of a possible mudbrick wall. The wall was very fragmentary and it is likely that architectural materials were taken from the site and reused in later constructions. The test excavations at Jean Illi seem to suggest that it may have been a space reused over time throughout the multiple occupations of the site. A cooking area excavated near the base of the mound yielded three in-situ cooking stones on top of a bright orange burnt earth, similar to what is still observed in Guinea; Figure
4). The cooking area, approximately one meter below the surface, indicates it had been in place at the time of the mound’s construction, and that the space may have already been occupied prior to the presence of colonial administration. Additionally, imported ceramics recovered from the Jean Illi Mound are consistent with an early-19th through mid-20th occupation, again indicating a European presence, or, prior to the colonial period, significant trade in European goods.

Complexe

The area known as the Complexe includes mound remains approximately 15-20 meters wide, built onto a natural hillside, sloping to the north, east, and south, and merging into the hillside on the west. Two excavation areas were explored within the Complexe zone; the first, a 4m x 1m trench was excavated near the northeast edge of the mound, and located the corner of a packed-mud retaining wall (Figure 5). Medium and large cobbles abut the inside of the retaining wall and appear to be part of a fill comprised of soil and cobbles that had been thrown inside the wall to raise the surface of the mound before a house was built on its summit. The upper levels of fill excavated contained almost exclusively local ceramics (n=178), with the only other artifacts of the levels recovered being glass (n=4), imported ceramics (n=3), and nail fragments (n=2). In the lower levels of this fill, local ceramics decrease (n=86), while there is an increase in imported ceramics (n=14), glass (n=48), and nail fragments (n=4). The imported ceramics and glass that were recovered are consistent with an early-mid 19th century occupation. The increase of imported goods in earlier levels suggests the reuse of a previously occupied space; if the upper levels

Figure 4: Photo of local kitchen in Bakoro (Photo credit: K. Goldberg)
of fill had been dug from a local source that had been occupied prior to construction of the mound, it could explain the decrease of imported goods in the more recent deposits. On the surface of the mound, a small path of in-situ fired brick indicates a possible external walkway. Adjacent to the surface of the mound, a cut stone foundation extends outward from the mound approximately 2m x 4m, and does not appear to align with the mound retaining wall or with a potential structure on top of the mound. The purpose of this cut stone foundation is currently unknown. Théodore Canot, upon return to Gambia in 1828, notes: “I hoped to take my people by surprise at Kambia; but when the factory came in sight from the hilltops back of the settlement, I saw the Spanish flag floating from its summit, and heard the cannon booming forth a welcome to the wanderer.” Based on the matching dates of imported artifacts and the geographical positioning of the mound ruins, it is possible that the Complexe may be the location of Canot’s described factory. A second excavation in the Complexe zone, named “Poubelle,” was a 1m x 1m unit 40m northeast of the Complexe mound where a high density of 19th century artifacts were present on the surface. Artifacts recovered from this excavation unit included a high density of large glass fragments, including several nearly complete bottles. This unit was equidistant between the Jean Illi and Complexe mounds, and may have served as a midden for either or both residences.

Le Village

During the 2016 survey, I identified remains of a large settlement, located approximately 40 meters above river level, and 100 meters west of the Complex, on the
flat surface of a large hill, and potentially associated with the Gambia village. This area appears to be surrounded, at least on the western and southern borders, by a linear demarcation (non-functional) wall of small cobbles. Outside of this cobbled wall are several level platform areas with clear views of the Rio Pongo, and could have served as defensive watch areas. Within the demarcated walls of the village, the survey team identified remains of five smaller mounds. It is likely that more structures may have existed in the area, but could have been destroyed by reuse of construction material. Severe erosion appears to be also affecting the village area; while nineteenth and twentieth century artifacts, including construction materials such as nails and door hardware, are common across the site surface, spanning more than several thousand square meters, shovel test pits indicate that artifacts of this era do not continue more than 8 centimeters into the soil (in most pits, historic artifacts were not found deeper than 4 centimeters) and there are no visible surface structure remains. However, shovel test pits indicate that below 40-60 centimeters of sterile soil there is a layer with only locally-made ceramics, suggesting a pre-European occupation.

In addition to 40 shovel test pits, we excavated a 2mx1m trench into one of the identified small mounds in the village area, named “Haut.” The scale of this mound differed dramatically from those at the lower elevation, the mound remnants measuring roughly 2m x 3m, with the center only 30 cm in elevation higher than the surrounding area. This mound yielded another cooking area (identified by the presence of bright orange burnt soil immediately underneath three triangularly situated similarly-sized cobbles), and a very high percentage of locally made ceramics.

The erosion evidenced by the results of these shovel tests highlight one of the many dangers facing Guinean heritage resources as continued large-scale charcoal production is rapidly contributing to severe problems of deforestation and erosion. If the deforestation resulting from charcoal production continues at its current rate (and interviews with local residents suggest the production rate may actually be increasing) many historic and pre-historic archaeological sites will face very real environmental threats.

Summary

Excavations yielded 4480 artifacts (Figure 6), all of which were washed locally, cataloged in Conakry, and deposited at the national museum. Artifacts include local and imported ceramics, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, glass containers and glass beads, faunal remains, floral remains, and lithics. A ceremonial deposition of the artifacts at the museum was conducted with the Minister of Culture and Director of the Museum at the end of the 2016 field season, and all local residents are invited to explore the findings. During the Fall 2016-Spring 2017, further research and collaboration is underway to develop...
an exhibit display of the Rio Pongo collection. While on-going artifact analysis seeks to develop a more detailed site chronology, imported ceramics and glass recovered across site loci are consistent with an early-19th through early-/mid- twentieth century occupation.

The European occupation of Gambia during the illicit slave trade period, according to archaeological evidence, documentary records, and oral accounts, had a great impact on local socio-political and economic conditions. As the variety of artifact types in the assemblage demonstrates, Europeans were deeply enmeshed in local settlements at Gambia. Trader Théodore Canot, like others in the Rio Pongo, used his status at Gambia to maintain a presence in the slave trade well after the 1808 exportation ban, into the mid-19th century. On-going research and analysis continues in an effort to determine what unique features of the settlement at Gambia might account for the lack of connection, via oral traditions, between the modern and historical occupations that is seen among similar sites along the Rio Pongo. This research will contribute to an increased understanding of the various characteristics that contribute to the diversity of the illicit slave trade in coastal Guinea.

Acknowledgements

The research presented in this paper would not have been possible without a great deal of international support. The author would like to thank Mr. El Hadj Fall for his organizational and logistical support, as well as continued research collaboration. Dr. Kenneth Kelly not only introduced me to the Rio Pongo project through my participation in his 2013 Projet Archéologique, but has also provided advisement and research support. His excellence Barry Siaka, Minister of Culture, Sports, and Heritage in Guinea is gratefully appreciated for his encouragement of historic research and shared interest in preserving historic sites in Guinea. Fodé Issa Sylla, Edmond Soumaoro, and Momadou Aliou Diallo provided incredible excavation assistance. This research was made possible by financial contributions generously provided by The Ceny-Walker Institute of International and Area Studies, the Institute for African American Research, the Office of the Vice President for Research’s SPARC Grant, and the Department of Anthropology, all at the University of South Carolina.

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