

Alice Bellagamba

## Back to the Land of *Roots*

African American Tourism  
and the Cultural Heritage of the River Gambia

“There’s an expression called the peak experience’. It is that which emotionally nothing in your life ever can transcend.  
And I know I have had mine that first day in the back country in black West Africa.  
When we got up within sight of the village of Juffure the children who had inevitably been playing outside African villages, gave the word and the people came flocking out of their huts.  
It’s a rather small village, only about 70 people.  
And villages in the back country are very much today as they were two hundreds years ago, circular mud huts with conical thatched roofs” (Haley 1973: 13-14).

In the late 1960s, the African American journalist and novelist Alex Haley discovered the small rural village of Juffureh at the mouth of the River Gambia. By relying on oral sources and other methods that were criticised by academic historians, Haley identified the settlement as the place where slave traders kidnapped his ancestor Kunta Kinte so as to sell him as a slave on the other side of the Atlantic (Vansina 1994: 149-150; Dorsch 2004: 104)<sup>1</sup>. Within a few years, the publication of the novel, *Roots*, in 1976 and the production of a TV series with the same title brought the Republic of The Gambia to the attention of the international community. A tradition of meetings and interactions between Gambians and African American tourists was thus inaugurated and was to expand in the decades to come.

1. HALEY himself (1973) described his discovery of Juffureh, beginning with the stories of his grandmother about an ancestor who came from Africa, and ending up with his travel to The Gambia and his meeting with Kebba Fofana, the Juffureh elderly man that narrated to him the history of the Kinte family. WRIGHT (2004) briefly illustrates the relationship which developed between the African American novelist and Juffureh villagers. WRIGHT (1981) is also the author of a critical analysis of the sources that Haley used to write *Roots*.

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Juffureh rapidly became a preferred destination for the daily excursions, organized by tourist resorts, which during the 1970s developed close to the capital city of Banjul (Harrell-Bond 1979; Dieke 1994)<sup>2</sup>. The small community got electricity, water pipes and other facilities largely unknown in many rural areas of The Gambia.

Today, tourist guides bring visitors to the compound of the Kinte family, where till some years ago they met Binta Kinte, an old lady who was introduced as one of the living descendants of Kunta Kinte. After her death relatives from the family have begun to perform the same task. The history of Juffureh is narrated and integrated with details on Haley's relationship with the Kinte family. Guides explain how the new mosque of the village, which was completed in 1999, was dedicated to his memory. A photograph of Haley surrounded by the villagers is shown together with pictures from the TV series. In other terms, *Roots* has been locally appropriated carving out a niche for The Gambia in the popular image of the homeland constructed by and circulated within the African diaspora (Howe 1998: 108).

In the following pages, I have taken two cultural initiatives in the late 1990s as the starting point for an examination of how in recent times government and private agencies have exploited the heritage of the Atlantic slave trade as an attraction for African American tourists<sup>3</sup>. The first was the establishment of a museum of slavery in the old Albreda trading post, which is close to Juffureh<sup>4</sup>. The second was an initiation ceremony organised by

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2. Tourism began at the time of independence, with around 300 visitors in 1965. During the 1970s, the government established a number of Tourist Development Areas along the Atlantic coastline, where hotels and other facilities were constructed thanks to technical and financial support from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Development Association (IDA) (DIEKE 1994: 617). In 1993, the flow of visitors reached the peak of 90,000 international arrivals to abruptly decline in 1994 and 1995 as a consequence of the bloodless military coup that on July 22 1994 ended the First Republic of the Gambia. After the democratic transition of September 1996, figures rose again to reach the average estimate of 100,000 annual visitors. In 2001, the government established the Gambia Tourism Authority (GTA), which is a public enterprise to regulate and promote the tourism industry. In 2003, tourism was estimated to account for around the 7.8% of Gambian GDP (BAH & GOODWIN 2003: 10). For information on more recent developments see MITCHELL & FAAL (2007).
  3. Official data do not allow disentangling the number of African American tourists from the general statistic of international visitors. Ethnography shows that they are mainly middle-class and middle-aged. As a matter of fact, and in spite of government efforts to diversify the tourist offer in the past decade, the Gambia largely remains a sun-sand-beach destination for British, German and Northern European tourists (BAH & GOODWIN 2003).
  4. For almost two centuries Albreda was a trading post for slaves used by French and mulatto merchants. The British took possession of it in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For details see GRAY (1966) and WRIGHT (2004).

an American travel agency for a group of African American College students, which I had the chance to attend in 2000<sup>5</sup>. The event took place in Medina, a Jola village not far from the capital city of The Gambia<sup>6</sup>. For more than a week twenty-two teenagers, three teachers and the travel agent that promoted the tour, took part in a busy program of cultural events designed to convert them into the “true” sons and daughters of Africa. They were adopted by local families, and were considered by Medina villagers as though they were members of the community who had migrated abroad and had returned home to be initiated into the local cultural tradition. New clothes in an African style were sown for them. Girls attended courses on cooking and domestic tasks. Boys were taught about the virtues of manhood and the importance of respecting their elders. At the end of the week, the village notables officially proclaimed the African American students’ coming of age as adult men and women. I will examine the significance of this experience for the participants in the process and comment upon their different (and conflicting) agendas and aspirations. Focus will be more on the perspective of the villagers than on that of their African American guests, so as to balance the latitude accorded to the latter in the literature on Roots tourism in West Africa (Ebron 1999; Hasty 2002; Holsey 2004). Medina community welcomed the tour of African American College students as an opportunity of development from below. This perception was based on both strictly economic considerations (the injection of foreign currency caused by the visitors’ presence in their community) and a broader policy aimed at establishing lasting personal relationships with citizens from the other side of the Atlantic, which would prove useful either to sponsor local projects of development or to sustain the emigration projects of some of the local youth to the United States. Whether the expectations of the villagers were even partially fulfilled is what I attempt to assess in this essay. As Buzinde and Almeida Santos (2008: 485) recently maintained, tourism can either help resolve or perpetuate socio-economic problems.

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5. I have repeatedly carried out fieldwork in The Gambia since 1992. The issue of slavery and its historical and social memory has been at the core of my recent ethnographic and historical research within the framework of MEBAO (Missione Etnologica in Bénin e Africa Occidentale; [www.mebao.org](http://www.mebao.org)), a project co-financed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Human Sciences for Education “Riccardo Massa” at the University of Milan-Bicocca. I hereby thank the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Italian Embassy in Dakar for their support over many years.
  6. The names of the locality and of the participants in the initiative have been changed so as to protect their privacy.

## Gambian Cultural Policies and the Public Memory of the Atlantic Slave Trade

During the 1970s, the government of The Gambia actively tried to preserve the national cultural heritage. First, it established the Cultural Archives to collect historical traditions of the pre-colonial period as well as material artefacts, which in 1985 would be used to create the National Museum of The Gambia. Then, in 1979 the Oral History and Antiquities Division (OHAD) inherited the legacy of the Cultural Archives. Immediately after the publication of *Roots*, the new institution took up the task of promoting Juffureh. The OHAD sponsored the creation of an Arts and Crafts Market so that the young artisans from the village and from other areas of The Gambia could benefit from the increasing numbers of visitors. It advised the villagers to improve facilities and sanitation and carried out research into the major historical sites associated with the history of Atlantic slave trade. One of these was Fort St. James, which is located on a small island just in front of Juffureh. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this site was home to the representatives of the Royal African Company. Another was Fort Bullen, which was built by the British at the mouth of the river after the formal banning of the Atlantic slave trade by the British Parliament in 1807. Fort Bullen and the British flag which stands in Albreda today, as well as the treaties stipulated with local rulers in order to stop the illicit shipping of slaves towards the Americas, symbolize British abolitionist trend during the nineteenth century<sup>7</sup>.

The OHAD officials interviewed elders who lived in proximity of the two forts in order to collect as much historical documentation as possible. The recorded narratives were stored in the archive, which the OHAD had established in the capital city (Galloway 1976a, 1976b, 1981). Currently, such archive of tapes, transcriptions and translations is one of the major sources of information to reconstruct the pre-colonial history of this area of West Africa.

In spite of such efforts, the issues of slavery and slave trade never really captured the attention of the larger public. The research priorities of OHAD focused on highlighting the connections of indigenous pre-colonial polities to the larger historical space of the Senegambia region rather than emphasising their links with the Atlantic world (Wright 1991; Bellagamba 2006). Slavery belonged to a past that would rapidly fade away under the waves of modernisation. Why should the OHAD raise such a controversial issue in the public realm? In the early 1990s, this agenda changed when the launching of the UNESCO Slave Routes Project (1993) created opportunities for discussion on and a historical re-evaluation of the history of the River Gambia in light of the centuries of trade and cultural relations with Europe and the

7. See GRAY (1966) and CURTIN (1975) for historical details on European presence along the River Gambia.

Americas. Experience had shown in Ghana, where during the last years of the Rawlings's regime the government introduced measures to capture the attention of African American tourists and communities by restoring historical sites associated with the Atlantic slave trade (Hasty 2002; McCaskie 2007), the cultural and economic potential of this legacy (Bruner 1996, 2005; MacGonagle 2006; Schramm 2007). The Gambia tried to follow the same path.

Public reforms resulting from the structural adjustment plan launched in 1985 involved the government in the establishment of the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC), which incorporated the OHAD, the Monuments and Antiquities Division and the National Museum. After having been attached for a short period to the Ministry of Education and Youth, the NCAC was put under the responsibility of the Ministry of Tourism. This amounted to official recognition of the outward-looking and market-oriented direction the country's cultural policy was taking in contrast with the nationalist agenda of the 1970s and early 1980s<sup>8</sup>. Tourism had become a crucial source of income for the weak national economy, which since colonial times had been almost exclusively based on the commercial cultivation of groundnuts for export to world markets.

Finally, historical events played their part. As a consequence of the military coup of 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1994, which ended the Fist Republic of The Gambia, the 1994-1995 tourist seasons showed a dramatic decline which seriously affected the already weak labour market of the Atlantic coastline. Statistics show that over one thousand hotel jobs disappeared. The crisis affected transports, trade and horticultural business, which had spread up to meet the needs of the tourists (Sharpley, Sharpley & Adams 1996: 3). As a result, the NCAC turned to Haley's experience and to the 1970s and early 1980s researches of the OHAD on the historical sites associated with slavery in order to promote a number of initiatives that could reinvigorate the tourist sector and capture the emerging tourist market of the African diaspora.

The first was the *Roots Homecoming Festival*, which aimed at showing African American tourists the investment opportunities in the country, besides of course displaying its rich and complex cultural heritage to the world at large. In 1996, the festival was inaugurated and was to become a permanent fixture in the years to come, one which the government itself has rapidly transformed into an international stage to draw attention on the achievements of the new regime<sup>9</sup>. Significantly, the festival always takes place at the end of the tourist season, either in May or in June, so as to extend the flux of visitors of the previous months.

8. I described Gambian cultural policies and their intersections with the tourist market elsewhere (BELLAGAMBA 2006). HUGHES and PERFECT (2006) offer detailed analyses of the socio-political consequences of the 1970s and 1980s economic crisis.

9. The *Roots Homecoming Festival* has its own website <[http://: rootsgambia.gm](http://rootsgambia.gm)>.

The second initiative was the attempt to have Fort St. James and a number of other historical sites restored and included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, as would eventually happen in 2003. The third was the production of a guide to The Gambia's historical sites (Meagher & Samuel 1998). The fourth was the establishment of the Albreda exhibition on slavery, which the NCAC organised rather hurriedly to meet the celebration of the 1998 *Roots* Festival. The nearby village of Juffureh welcomed the new museum as a further economic opportunity and took it as a sign that the government born out of the military coup was more aware of their community's real needs than the previous one had been. On the same day, tourists can now visit the Albreda exhibit, and then cross the river to reach the ruins of Fort St. James. On their way back, they can tour Juffureh and buy souvenirs at the local Arts and Crafts market.

### Inside the Albreda Museum

Albreda Museum was set up in an old commercial building, whose history goes back to the expansion of the groundnut trade along the River Gambia in the second half of the nineteenth century. European companies left the country after independence and their abandoned buildings rapidly turned into decaying remnants of a recent past in which the country's economy had prospered. Tourists and visitors are not aware of such historical details, however.

The guide to the historical sites of The Gambia clearly states that the history of the building hosting the slavery exhibition is quite obscure (Meagher & Samuel 1998: 62). There is no other explanation to help visitors to disassociate this nineteenth-century commercial building, which was involved in a wholly legitimate trade, from those used for holding slaves awaiting shipment to the Americas during the previous centuries. At the time, trading posts along the river consisted of huts and stockades, as described in the account of Francis Moore (1738), who for a number of years ran a commercial factory for the Royal African Company close to the current settlement of Janjanbureh in the Central River Region<sup>10</sup>.

At the exhibition entrance, a large sign declares: "In West Africa slavery is an old phenomenon, though slaves were integrated into kinship groups

10. Janjanbureh is another famous historical site, located on MacCarthy Island, about 300 kilometers from the coast in the middle of the River Gambia. The British acquired the island in 1823 and transformed it into an outpost of their colonial presence along the river. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Janjanbureh was a flourishing commercial settlement, where run-away slaves as well as people escaping raids on the mainland found refuge. Popular memory remembers the locality of *Jonkakunda*, which is in front of MacCarthy island on the north bank, as a place where slaves were kept before being sent to other areas. Actually, *Jonkakunda* hosted a British trader and his mulatto family in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (GRAY 1966: 277-278).

and could manumit themselves. The arrival of the Portuguese, and then of other European nations changed the nature of the slave trade. Local elite and traders got involved in it at the expense of the commoners.” This representation of indigenous slavery as a benign institution can be found in both the museum leaflet and the guide to the historical sites of The Gambia (Meagher & Samuel 1998: 45-46).

Both the guidebook and the exhibition therefore made a clear distinction between indigenous and exogenous slavery, between the fate of slaves who were to be assimilated into the structure of local societies and those who were deported across the Atlantic. Brutality and exploitation characterised the treatment of the latter, whereas the former were in a situation more similar to servitude than enslavement. The rest of the exhibition tells how ancestors of Africans from the diaspora were forced into exile. The first room explains the Triangular Trade in a simplified form. Old weapons, coffers, Venetian beads and a variety of objects used as currency in transactions are shown together with other pre-colonial archaeological findings.

The implicit message is that slavery was a form of violence exerted on harmless human beings. This message is strengthened by a number of wooden shapes, which decorate the walls and represent a caravan of chained men, women and children.

#### WOODENSHAPES REPRESENTING THE TRAFFIC IN SLAVES INSIDE THE ALBREDA MUSEUM



(photograph of the autor, Albreda 2000)

Some other shapes, again painted in black, depict slave traders, thus exposing African involvement in the trade. A third set shows the procedure by which slaves were branded before being embarked on the ship.

The second room explains the passage across the Atlantic and life in plantations, while the third describes the emancipation process in Northern and Central America and the effects of the Atlantic slave trade on the Senegambia. This is depicted as a region ravaged by a pagan ruling elite that oppressed the rest of the population. Such view stems from the religious wars of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which saw Islamic reformers successfully achieve the political control of this area of West Africa (Gray 1966; Klein 1972, 1998). A map, which comes from Francis Moore's account of his travels (1738), illustrates the main settlements along the river in the early decades of the eighteenth century. A model of Fort St. James shows what the building looked like before it became a ruin.

The final part deals with the present day. There is a small section of the exhibition on "Liberated Africans", *i.e.* the slaves that British naval patrols along the coast freed from the hand of slave dealers after the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807 (Gray 1966; Webb 1994). There is a list of names taken from the colonial archives and an explanation of the crucial role they played in the social, economic and political development of the colonial settlement of Bathurst, which is today Banjul, the capital of The Gambia. The last section of the exhibition deals with Kunta Kinte and Alex Haley, as they both epitomise the experience of return. During the 1970s, African Americans chose to cross the Atlantic to establish a new relationship with The Gambia. The awareness of a common origin mitigates the brutality of the ancient enslavement, and an invitation to embrace a future, in which this old relationship becomes a commitment to each other, is made quite explicitly in the closing panels of the exhibition.

Two statements are at the core of the museum's narrative. First, the slave trade involved both Europeans and Africans. Second, Europeans made the greater profit from it. For a visitor who is familiar with the history of the region, such assertions sound more incomplete than superficial. Details, which easily could have been drawn from the available historical literature on slavery and the slave trade in Senegambia (Curtin 1975; Klein 1977, 1998; Barry 1998) are not part of the exhibition. This is mainly due to a lack of access to such information rather than to an explicit intention to ignore facts. Historian Donald Wright (2000: 24), who visited the Albreda Museum in 1998, has credited it to be "much better than one would expect, given the government's poverty and the lack of resources for constructing such things". Nonetheless, the exhibition has been organised around a number of omissions.

From a historical point of view, one of the most significant is surely the complete lack of references to whatever importance the memory of slavery and the slave trade might still have in contemporary Gambian society. Both are represented as pure international phenomena, which connected the river to the world at large. Apart from the initial remarks on the benign nature of domestic slavery, all other references to the place of this institution in local society have been erased. The exhibition attempts to separate Atlantic and local history, the first of which is centre stage and the second is downplayed or even completely expunged.



The curators of the Albreda Museum could not do otherwise and for a number of reasons. After independence, slavery and the slave trade were not among the OHAD's research priorities. As in other West African countries, such matters from the past were put aside in order to concentrate on nation building (Gaugue 1997; Austen 2001). Consequently, the archive of oral sources that the OHAD established and on which the NCAC relied to create the slavery museum did not provide sufficient information to include the topic of local slavery into the exhibit. Objects were also few, as the institution had neither time nor resources to engage into systematic campaigns of collection. Beads, coins and other small items, which were already at the National Museum, were moved to Albreda.

In addition, the link between the slave trade and the Islamic wars of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the fact that the internal slave trade continued until the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are not issues that Gambians are eager to discuss in public and still less to air on the global stage of cultural tourism. The descendants of late 19<sup>th</sup> century slaves and slave masters still confront each other with their reciprocal memories. In order to avoid complaints and conflicts, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in particular after the achievement of independence such distasteful past has often been silenced (Klein 1998; Bellagamba 2009).

By creating a narrative on slavery tailored exclusively to meet the expectations of African American tourists, the Albreda Museum has unintentionally contributed to push the controversial legacy of internal enslavement to the margins of public debate, which reinforces the already existing tradition of silence. Similar processes were also implicit in the initiative organised for African American students, which took place in the village of Medina in 2000.

### Private Initiatives in the Field of the "Roots" Tourism

Since the inauguration in 1996 of the *Roots Homecoming Festival*, the Gambian government has used the NCAC to cultivate relations with African American tourists. Along with the Independence Day or the 22<sup>nd</sup> July anniversary of the military take-over, the *Roots Festival* has become an opportunity to impress visitors with extravagant ceremonies, new hotels and monuments, good roads and anything else that creates a sense of progress and advancing modernity and bolster the legitimacy of a regime founded on a coup. Over the years, each of the principal localities that could be of interest to the foreign visitors, such as Juffureh, the president's hometown of Kanilai and the settlement of Janjanbureh, has been endeavouring to raise its own profile within the festival<sup>11</sup>.

11. Not far from the coast, the President's hometown of Kanilai, which has been developed into an attractively modern settlement with excellent facilities, has

Besides the government, a number of private initiatives have flourished as well, although they are less renowned than the official ones. In Janjanbureh, local youths trying to earn a little money have created their own interpretation of a “Slave House” using the basement of an old colonial commercial building, which actually traded in groundnuts and not slaves.

#### THE “SLAVE HOUSE” OF JANJANBUREH



(photograph of the autor, Janjanbureh 2006)

The owner, who lacked the resources to restore the building, kindly tolerated their presence for a while. Then, other members of the family, who lived in town, came into possession of the building and the related exhibition, and are currently attempting to transform it into a more solid business. The recently elected Member of Parliament has put the cultural marketing of the old colonial settlement of Janjanbureh at the top of his political agenda.

During the late 1990s Medina villagers in partnership with an African American travel agency made similar efforts to promote African American tourism. The owner of the travel agency, who promoted the idea of the

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become a reference point for Jola communities and cultural groups of The Gambia and Lower Casamance. During the *Roots Festival*, Kanilai hosts several cultural initiatives that attract visitors from the whole sub-region as well as visitors from outside the African continent.

2000 ceremony, had visited The Gambia several times. Eventually, he decided to establish his own network of private relationships alongside the economic opportunities the government offered to the African diaspora. With the assistance of some Gambian friends, he visited Medina and negotiated the assistance of the villagers for the tour he meant to organise.

Medina is a community of around 2000 inhabitants. It is located in a region largely populated by Jola who either belong to Jola groups historically settled in The Gambia or who moved into the country as a consequence of the enduring political instability of Lower Casamance in the past decades (Galloway 1980; Foucher 2005; Nugent 2007). A good tarmac road, which had not been completed when I witnessed the initiation ceremony in 2000, connects the village to the capital city. At that time, the community had a primary school, a skills center, a Mosque and a number of small shops. The villagers lived of agriculture and small businesses, as well as participation in the labor market of the Gambian coast as resort workers, civil servants and private-sector employees. As in other Gambian villages, Medina's local economy largely benefited from emigrants' remittances.

The African American travel agent liked the village. Relatively accessible, it offered the kind of rural environment that could attract tourists, who wished to use western-style hotels on the coast as a base, while also obtaining some first-hand experiences of African life. The community was ready to stage an initiation ceremony for the African American guests and in that providing a unique opportunity of entertainment. It is worth remembering that *Roots* (Haley 1976) begins by mentioning Kunta Kinte's initiation, as well as the daily rhythm of life in rural Africa. Kunta was fetching wood when slave-dealers captured him. Kunta Kinte, however, is described by Haley (1976) as a Mandinka and ceremonies initiating children into manhood and womanhood are not typical of the Jola. Mandinka communities, for instance, perform it and in certain areas like Janjanbureh, they are quite conservative and traditionalist in the way in which the boys' circumcision ceremony is organised. For instance, they continue the custom of segregating the children in the bush for more than three months. So, apart from the friendly attitude of Medina villagers, why did the travel agent choose a Jola community?

In the global imagination, the Jola—along with other groups of the Senegambia like the Balanta at the border with Guinea Bissau or the Bassari of Eastern Senegal (much more difficult to reach for the tourists than the coastal Jola communities like Medina)—have gained a widespread and unrivaled fame for their attachment to custom and traditional religious practices, which date back to colonial times or an even earlier period (Mark 1992; Lambert 1998; De Jong 2002). This stigma of backwardness, which for a long time deprived the Jola of prestige in the Gambian and Senegalese society, has become an advantage in relation to the wider world. The Jola can now use it as a distinctive marker of their identity so as to meet the traditionalist desires of foreign tourists.

African American visitors who come to The Gambia are in search of objects, images and behaviours that may evoke life as it was in this region at the time in which their ancestors dispersed across the Atlantic. They would prefer not to see the Coca-Cola factory (which is located on the main road to the capital city) or the ubiquitous Nestle milk advertisements, because they long for a mythical and unchanging past of thatched-roof houses, calabashes, charms and old-fashioned artefacts. They deplore the intrusiveness of beach-boys and their westernized appearance and manner, but look favourably on any behaviour that could be considered traditionally authentic and more representative of local than global history.

Medina met such expectations. Moreover, and meaningfully, the Jola communities and other decentralized societies of precolonial Senegambia, are widely supposed to have been only marginally involved in the slave trade (Galloway 1980; Mahoney 1995)<sup>12</sup>. This is an important detail for African American tourists. Mandinka, Wolof, Fula and Serrahuli groups (which all together represent around 90% of the Gambian population) recognised slavery within their social structure and actively engaged either in slave raiding or in slave trading. Today, they have to deal with this controversial legacy in their relations with the African diaspora and Gambian society as well. On the other hand, the Jola see themselves as passive victims of the slave trade. This view is shared by other sections of Gambian society and in recent years it has been reinforced by the public declarations of the President of the country, who is a Jola and who has been very active in promoting the culture of his ethnic group on a national stage. The historical engagement of Jola communities with slave-dealing remains confined to academic debates and is ignored by the wider public. They are therefore in a good position to enter into a dialogue with African Americans, as both groups can perceive themselves as having suffered of the same historical processes of enslavement, subjugation and social humiliation.

“As I look at them, I cannot believe they sold their own brothers. Slavery was the result of war and not of reciprocal betrayal”<sup>13</sup>. Such was the spontaneous comment of the travel agent who organised the tour in the village of Medina, when after the end of the ceremony I approached him to explain the research I was carrying out on the historical and social memory of

12. This interpretation relies heavily on the first ethnographic reports written by British officials during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and ignores the role of Jola as slave raiders in the economic networks generated by the Atlantic slave trade before the nineteenth century. LINARES (1987) has uncovered historical evidence of the gradual involvement of the ancestors of the contemporary Jola in the slave trade from the fifteenth century onwards. BAUM (1999) has explored the place of slavery in the ritual and religious life of some Jola communities of Lower Casamance, while the testimony of BERTRAND-BOCANDÉ (1849) mentions the incorporation of slaves in the Jola communities of the Lower Casamance during the second half of the nineteenth century.

13. Conversation with J.-P., 26 april 2000.

slavery and the slave trade. He continued by describing the efforts he was making in the USA to collect enough funds to build a monument for Alex Haley in Juffureh. In his perspective, the history of The Gambia and the vicissitudes of Haley almost coincided.

Significantly neither slavery nor the traffic in slaves were ever overtly mentioned during the week that the African American College students spent in the village. Their historical knowledge of the Atlantic slave trade was built up by visiting Juffureh and the Albreda Museum. On their way back to Dakar, where they would join their flight for the USA, they were supposed to visit the Island of Gorée as well. Haley's *Roots* and government narratives—as embodied by the official historical sites of The Gambia and of Senegal—filled up their historical imaginary without leaving room for alternative readings, which critically complicated the picture. Comparatively, also Medina villagers largely ignored this remote past apart from what they learnt at school or by following the *Roots* festival on the national television<sup>14</sup>. Thus, not only tourists' perception but also Gambian popular memory of the Atlantic slave trade is fed by official narratives, as Katharina Schramm (2007) observed in Ghana. However, I found no trace of what she describes as the opposite contamination of officialdom with living memories of the traffic in slaves that continue to shine in the interstices of public discourse (*ibid.*: 72).

As in the case of the Albreda Museum, official memories displace local ones. Medina, like other communities, has its own history of sufferance which departs from the Atlantic narrative and points to the painful and intimate realities of greed and betrayal. Two weeks after the departure of the African American tourists, Landing Jammeh, an elderly Jola man from Medina provided me with the following details during an interview. Landing referred to the religious wars, which afflicted this area of The Gambia on the eve of British colonisation, and during which Jola communities were raided and destroyed by Muslim warriors. His recollection included a touching description of how slave traders used to seek the complicity of members of the community and come at night “to wake them up so that they would open the fence for them [...]. They would enter and capture the children. They would take the women as well”. Cotton cloth was an important commodity during the nineteenth century and highly prized in the Lower Gambia, where cotton was not grown. Landing explained how the heads of powerful households would select some of the children under their protection and sell them to slave traders for cotton: “People had many children, you know, but not all the children were loved in the same way”, he concluded<sup>15</sup>.

14. Through an analyses of history textbooks, M.-L. NEIJTS (2005) made a preliminary assessment of the ways in which educated Gambians construct their historical knowledge of Atlantic slavery.

15. Interview with L. J., 10 May 2000.

Elderly men and women's ability to narrate the past and bring it alive in front of their listeners was one of the things that struck Alex Haley's literary imagination, when he visited The Gambia in the late 1960s. Though taking cue from Haley's experience, the initiatives in the field of African American tourism which have developed in The Gambia of the last decade transform the complex history of Atlantic slavery and enslavement in simplified narratives ready to be consumed. Like mythical charters, these narratives sustain the encounters between African American tourism and the cultural heritage of country, without raising disturbing questions that could eventually transform this controversial past into a battleground to claim contemporary rights.

### "Have You Seen what they Gave Us?" Cultural Tourism from the Villagers' Point of View

Ferdinand De Jong (1999a, 2002) has traced the transformations of Jola initiation rituals in the late twentieth century and has demonstrated their strategic use by the communities of Lower Casamance to create a sense of belonging among members of the urban and international diaspora. Until the 1950s and 1960s such rituals strengthened the elders' control over young men, who could neither get land to cultivate and build nor marry before being initiated. Rituals guaranteed cultural continuity across the generations (Mark 1992: 38).

In the following decades, the ceremonies gradually adapted to the changing living conditions of Lower Casamance and coastal Gambia, as a result of the increased socio-economic interdependence between rural and urban areas (Lambert 2002; Linares 2003). Whereas on the eve of colonisation, initiation rituals forged links of solidarity among politically independent neighbouring communities that tried to resist the intrusions of slave-dealers by enclosing in remote areas, today the same rituals create feelings of local identity among community members dispersed outside the village. The Medina ceremony resonated with these recent transformations. Although adapted, it was based on the current wording of other Jola initiation rituals that are organised during the summer holidays when migrants and their families return home. In the 1950s and 1960s, initiates were required to remain in the sacred grove for several months. Progressively, their seclusion has been reduced to a few weeks<sup>16</sup>.

16. Jola communities of Lower Casamance perform male initiation rituals every 25 years (DE JONG 1999a, 2002). The ceremony requires that the initiates spend a period of training in the village sacred grove, which is a space outside the village purposely left uncultivated. Sacred groves are accessible only to initiated men, and even today what happens inside is considered to be secret to the rest of the community.

Medina villagers further simplified the event for their African American guests. The boys spent only a night in the village grove. They were not shown the village shrine, which is today a controversial aspect of the initiation ritual, since the majority of the villagers is Muslim. The night in the grove was an exhausting experience both for the boys, as they were not accustomed to sleeping outside in the bush, and for their initiators, who complained among themselves of the boys' lack of courage and their demands for comforts that the village could not provide. The next day, the return of the group to the village was welcomed by the firing of guns, as is customary in such festive occasions. The young men who had escorted the young initiates in the bush danced as they accompanied them back to the main square where under the shade of a big tree they met the girls, who had been hosted in local compounds and dressed up for the occasion. The closing ceremony took place in the presence of the whole community. Speeches followed the dances and performances of traditional characters, like the *Kumpo* mask<sup>17</sup>.

The travel agent who organised the tour was the first to speak. He stressed the friendly links that his agency had developed with Medina villagers. He admonished the students to keep alive the memories of their adventure. Then the Imam and the village chief expressed their gratitude to their African American brothers and sisters. "Jola culture—continued the village chief—is deep and what you have seen is but a fragment of it. You must return so as to deepen your knowledge."

In this way, he re-emphasised the division between the visited and visitors, and claimed the active role for the former in the encounter. The Medina community could not really choose whether to accept or refuse the tourists—not being in the economic position of doing so—but it could try to control the encounter, deciding what to display and what to preserve from the intrusion of foreign guests. The village chief invited the tourists to continue in their efforts by coming back and learning more local traditions. The initiates were given certificates of attendance that highlighted their new African names. For the students this was just a piece of paper they could show to relatives and friends—a signpost of their restored link with their ancestral land to be hung on the wall at home. So commented the sixteen year old Thomas. He had not really enjoyed his night in the forest. For the villagers, the same certificate expressed the hope of creating enduring transnational relations. It implied future requests of aid in terms of development for the community and for its families, who had adopted the young tourists within their ranks. Behind the apparent courteousness, and the rhetoric of reciprocal brotherhood, both groups were disillusioned

17. *Kumpo* is a Jola mask made of grass: today it is one of the traditional characters of Jola ceremonies, but as DE JONG (1999b) shows, *Kumpo* was created during the 1930s by young men who returned to their villages after having worked in other areas of the Senegambia.

with the encounter. The African American students left the village with the conviction they had been deprived of real access to local culture. Indeed, the village chief's words reinforced their feeling of having undergone a fake initiation. The villagers complained of a lack of immediate and concrete material reward. Surely the tourists' money had provided a week of fun for the whole community, but if they were to organise the same initiative for a Gambian patron—either a politician or a member of the elite—they undoubtedly would have gained more than the seventy dollars and a pile of old clothes left by the travel agent before the group's departure for their hotels on the coast. "Have you seen what they gave us?" protested the lead dancer as soon as the students left. "Old clothes and seventy US dollars. I called all these people to dance from the surrounding villages. How am I going to compensate them? This money is so little"<sup>18</sup>.

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"You visit the country as a tourist. We are so friendly with foreigners. You travel around, you learn our ways of doing, and when you are back home, you can use the knowledge and the photographs you got to entertain your friends or even to gain profit by selling the materials. This is not fair. This is just exploitation"<sup>19</sup>.

I came across this remark in 2008 as I was travelling towards eastern Gambia on local transports. The young man sitting near me thought I was one of the independent tourists, who venture out of the hotel resorts towards the countryside. He had just visited his family and was going back to the village where he worked as a schoolteacher. Since the 1970s, government and tourist agencies have been marketing The Gambia as the "smiling coast of Africa", but behind the friendly attitude that local people display towards the tourists, the words of this young man betray deep feelings of exclusion. His bitterness brought back to my mind the closing of the initiation ceremony for the African American tourists I attended eight years before in Medina. The old clothes that the students presented to the villagers as if they were a precious gift, just before departing, and the seventy dollars which were given to compensate the dancers, exposed the socio-economic chasm that divided the hosts from the African American tourists who were temporarily their guests.

Bayo Holsey's (2004: 167) invites to read the contemporary tourist reappraisals of the Atlantic slavery's legacy, which take places in West Africa, in light of the unequal power structure of global capitalism, which relegates countries like The Gambia to positions of permanent economic and social

18. Conversation with I. S., 26 April 2000.

19. Conversation with A. K., Basse, The Gambia, January 2008.



marginality. I have tried to follow such suggestion by analysing both the Albreda Museum and the Medina ceremony against the background of the changing and intersecting routes of the African diaspora. The two initiatives link the forced displacement(s) of the past to the return travels of African Americans to West Africa. Both overlook not only the internal slave dealing and slave trade but also a more recent and crucial dimension of the African diaspora, that is West Africans' emigration to Europe and North America (Akyeampong 2000: 183).

Every year, a number of middle-aged and young African Americans tourists visit The Gambia to perform what they see as deeply moving pilgrimages in search of their ancestral African roots (Ebron 1999; Timothy & Teye 2004). Conversely, every week, in the early hours of the morning, Gambians queue in front of the American Embassy, which is located in one of the upper class residential areas in the outskirts of the capital city. They hope to get a visa to cross the Atlantic for educational and economic reasons or in search of political asylum. Due to restrictions of the USA immigration policy this has become increasingly difficult to achieve, especially for those who either do not belong to the political and economic elite or who are not sufficiently supported by family members already abroad.

On the one hand, there is the appeal of an homecoming, which results in the occasional, though intense, experience of visiting the Albreda Museum, Juffureh and the historical sites related to the Atlantic traffic in slaves so as to experience the emotions of discovery that Haley so romantically described in his narrative. On the other, there is the attraction that since the 1980s international migration has been exerting on young and less young sections of the population. Both processes intersect in ways, whose assessment surpasses the scope of this essay. International tourism in general, as well as the return of successful emigrants for holidays who indeed are a specific category of visitors, fuels local imagination of places elsewhere, which the majority of Gambians will never experience. As a matter of fact, till the early 1990s, encounters with North European visitors offered the opportunity to emigrate to a number of youth, who got visa and financial support thanks to friendly relationships with tourists<sup>20</sup>. Currently, tourist areas are well guarded both by police and private vigilantes. Young men and women, who seek to get in contact with tourists without having the proper authorisations, are sent away. At times, police arrests them with the justification that their idle behaviour compromises the positive image of the country. The effort to turn tourism into a local resource goes on, however. Establishing and cultivating international connections is essential

20. The issue of beach-brokers (locally called "bumsters") has been widely commented upon by the literature on Gambian tourism. Romantic adventures and marriages with north European ladies have been one of the routes to international migration, particularly for young males. See, for instance, DIEKE (1994) and EBON (1997) who discusses such phenomenon from a gender point of view.

not only to sustain migratory projects but also to provide the material, moral and social assistance to make up for the lack of government patronage and overcome the fact of living in a country, whose record of human rights violations has dramatically increased after the military coup<sup>21</sup>. Medina villagers made such an attempt without being successful. Within a few years, relations between the village and the North American travel agency broke down and, to my knowledge, none of the villagers have yet travelled to the USA as a result of the friendships formed by this experience. Moreover, the initiative, which was organised on a private base, could not compete with government-driven ones.

In 2000, during the millennium edition of the *Roots Homecoming Festival*, the government itself took up the idea of initiating African American visitors into Jola culture, which deprived Medina of whatever chance remained to offer something original and unique in the tourist market.

*Dipartimento di Scienze Umane per Formazione "Riccardo Massa", Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca, Milan.*

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21. Emigration has become a discussed topic within Gambian society. Young people's exit has been interpreted as a consequence of the country's deteriorating political and economic conditions since the coup, as well as of their exposure to Western culture and life-style as a consequence of international tourism. See, for instance, "Searching for Greener Pastures", *The Daily Observer* (Banjul), 28 December 2007 (Posted to the web 28 December 2007) or "Nerves: an Apotheosis of a whole Generation", *Gainako On-Line Newspaper* (Posted December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2006). As JANSON (2006) has shown, religious education is one of the strategies of upward social mobility open to young men who do not have the chance to emigrate.

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#### ABSTRACT

In the late 1960s, the African American journalist and novelist Alex Haley identified the small rural village of Juffureh at the mouth of the River Gambia as the place where slave traders kidnapped his ancestor Kunta Kinte so as to sell him as a slave on the other side of the Atlantic. Within a few years, the publication of the novel, *Roots*, in 1976 and the production of a TV series with the same title brought the small Republic of The Gambia to the attention of the international community and inaugurated a tradition of encounters between Gambians and African American tourists. This article addresses the public memorialization of the Atlantic slave trade and the use of such heritage as a tourist resource in contemporary The Gambia by illustrating two initiatives of the late 1990s both aimed at marketing the land of *Roots* to a global audience of African American tourists. The first was the establishment of a slavery museum in the locality of Albreda, near Juffureh. The second was an initiation ceremony that a small Jola community in the proximity of the capital city of Banjul organised for a group of African American College students in 2000.

#### RÉSUMÉ

*Retour au pays de Racines. Le tourisme africain-américain et l'héritage culturel du fleuve Gambie.* — À la fin des années 1960, le journaliste et romancier africain-américain, Alex Haley, a identifié le petit village rural de Juffureh, situé à l'embouchure du fleuve Gambie, comme l'endroit où les commerçants d'esclaves ont enlevé son ancêtre Kunta Kinte afin de le vendre, comme esclave, de l'autre côté de l'Atlantique. Quelques années plus tard, en 1976, la publication du roman *Racines* et la production d'une série télévisée portant le même titre ont attiré l'attention de la communauté internationale sur la petite République de Gambie, et ont inauguré une tradition de rencontres entre Gambiens et touristes africains-américains. Cet article traite de la commémoration de la traite atlantique des esclaves et de l'utilisation d'un tel héritage comme ressource touristique dans la Gambie d'aujourd'hui. Ce thème est illustré par deux initiatives commerciales entreprises à la fin des années 1990, toutes deux destinées à « vendre » la patrie de *Racines* à un public de touristes africains-américains. La première a été la création d'un musée de l'esclavage dans

la localité d'Albreda, près de Juffureh ; la seconde, une cérémonie initiatique organisée, en 2000, par la petite communauté jola, près de la capitale Banjul, pour un groupe d'étudiants africains-américains.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: Gambia, Albreda, Banjul, Juffureh, African American tourists, novel *Roots*, slavery, trade slave/*Gambie, Albreda, Banjul, Juffureh, touristes africains-américains, roman Racines, esclavage, commerce d'esclaves.*