

Roots: A Visit to Juffureh.

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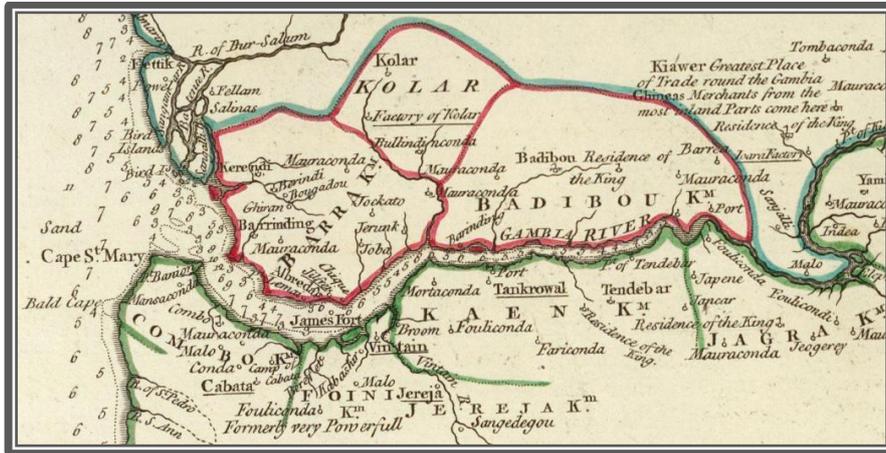


Image from "The western coast of Africa from Cape Blanco to Cape Virga, exhibiting Senegambia Proper." By T. Jefferys, 1789, (c) Cartography Associates 2009. Used under a Creative Commons License by kind permission of Cartography Associates (DavidRumsey.com).

Since 1972 UNESCO has designated some 900 places around the world as World Heritage Sites; places having outstanding natural or cultural importance to the common heritage of humanity. In Africa there are some 80 sites just under half of which are natural areas and the remainder cultural. James Island and a number of related sites on the Gambia River were selected as a World Heritage Site in 2003 to preserve historical testimony to the encounter between Africans and Europeans from the 15th to the 20th centuries. The River Gambia was one of the first European trade routes into the African interior and almost from the beginning was associated with the slave trade and the resulting African diaspora.

On the ground the site covers three different locations in The Gambia. The Six Gun Battery in Banjul, and Fort Bullen on the opposite bank of the River Gambia, are some distance from the remaining portion at James Island and Albredah 30 kilometres higher up the river. Fort Bullen and the Battery in Banjul were built during the period of British colonial rule in the 19th Century to control the slave trade in the river following abolition. The James Island site consists of a small (0.3 ha) low lying island in the middle of the river on which stand the ruins of James Fort, and an adjacent area on the north bank around the former French trading post of Albredah. The ruins of James Fort are said to comprise, the slave house, the governor's kitchen, the blacksmith's shop and a store. The fort and island are vulnerable to erosion and flooding by the strong tidal flow in the estuary.

The site at Albredah consists of a 12 km stretch of coastline along the Gambia River, extending 500 m inland from the high-water mark. It contains the ruins of a late 15th century Portuguese chapel and a restored 19th century French colonial warehouse (CFAO, Compagnie Francais Afrique Occidentale) along with a Maurel Frères colonial trading post built about 1840 which now houses a small museum. Nearby is the site of the Portuguese settlement of San Domingo. The Mandingo village of Juffureh made famous by Alex Haley in "Roots" is also within the Albredah site. A UNESCO description says, "1 km east of Albreda is the Portuguese settlement of San Domingo

established in the late 15th century. It used to contain gardens, a church, a cemetery, and a well; today only ruins of a small house remain, built from lateritic stone and lime mortar. Close by there are remains of the former English settlement of Jillifree.” Unfortunately the reality is that visiting tourists see little if any of this and, of its powerful historical testimony, they hear practically nothing.

Something like half of all tourists visiting The Gambia take the “Roots” tour to James Island and Albredah. Almost everyone takes the same boat trip across the river from Banjul to Albredah no matter which tour operator they may have used. The following account is represented as typical.

“We were picked up from our hotel in the Kombos at 7.30 am and driven into Banjul docks to board a motor launch along with about 65 other passengers. We left Banjul soon after 9.00 am and sailed across the Gambia River passing Dog Island named after the Dog faced baboons discovered there by the Portuguese. About 2 hours later we arrived off Albredah, the former French slave factory on the north bank. Docking at the long concrete jetty we walked into the village where a sign bade us “Welcome to Albredah/Juffureh” as if they were one and the same place. Here several tourist guides led us to a covered courtyard for a briefing which went roughly as follows.

There are 3 inhabited islands on the River Gambia, Banjul, McCarthy Island and Paradise Island and 7 which were uninhabited including Dog Island, James Fort, Pelican Island and Baboon Island. Some 25% of the tidal reaches of the river consists of Mangroves which played a significant role in the location of trading posts. There is no electricity or piped water supply on the North Bank. The staple diet is Cous with groundnuts grown as a cash crop. The money is invested in animals since they do not trust the banks in the South. A typical small family may have 5 or 6 children but, given the custom of having up to four wives, a large family may have more than 25 children.

The trans-Saharan trade in slaves began after the introduction of Islam in AD 1235 in a society in which domestic slaves formed part of a caste system. The Arabs took slaves back with them, never to return. The trans-Atlantic slave trade began with the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century who established the base on St Andrews Island that later became James Fort. This trade only ended after the American Civil War in 1865 by which time 20 million Africans had been transported of whom an estimated 6 million died. Following abolition the British established Banjul on the South Bank and Fort Bullen on the North Bank of the River Gambia to suppress the slave trade.

The guides also told us they represented the Travel Foundation which aimed to ensure this was a Responsible Tourist Attraction by minimising the hassling of tourists. If they were as successful in this as they claimed it is difficult to imagine what things must once have been like as, once outside the briefing, the hassle was intense and continual. Walking into Juffureh we were surrounded by hustlers selling sheaves of exercise books and packs of cheap sweets which, to save us the trouble of distributing them, could be dropped at the school, still in their original packaging. This seemed rather too convenient. Despite our guides’ status some were clearly involved in the hustling themselves. One guide “befriended us” and for a while helped to stem the continual begging. On the way into Juffureh we were taken to see an “elephant tree”, a baobab, where the forms of a variety of animals including an elephant, a monkey and a dolphin could be made out in the bark of its trunk.

This was followed by a brief visit to the museum in the Maurel Frères trading post. The museum was a scruffy unkempt affair containing photocopied texts and pictures and a few borrowed artefacts nearly all from outside The Gambia. We had little time to take anything in and rushed through taking snaps as we went. Afterwards, among our snaps, we found a map of West Africa with a brief description headed; “Mr Moore’s Account of the English Settlements on the River

Gambia in 1730". There followed a list of 12 factories, headed by James's Fort , including, Jillefree Factory lying very close to Albreda which supplied James Fort with vegetables and where the Royal African Company had their graveyard. This was probably as near as we came to getting some solid information about the historic site we had come to visit.

The village of Juffureh, now re-located conveniently close to Albreda, has become famous as the home of the Kinteh family with whom Alex Haley claimed a common ancestry via the kidnap of the Mandingo youth Kunta Kinteh. And so, hurried out of the museum, we were taken to visit the Kinteh family where we were invited to pay to take photos of two sisters representing the 8th generation since that time. There were no takers, but then there were few if any, Americans in the group. This lack of interest seemed to cause a heated argument between the Kinteh family and the tour guides. Next we were led to the village "bantobah" – the village "parliament" building. It was a square of low adobe walls with bench seats and a corrugated iron roof. Here we met the head of the village, the alcalo, and were invited to purchase signed certificates of our visit – again there were few takers. Undoubtedly the group's attitude was hardened by the unremitting hustle. Our guide said the money was purely for the alcalo's benefit and not for the whole community. The houses round about consisted of dilapidated breeze block buildings with corrugated iron roofs. The village was dusty and unkempt with litter lying everywhere. From the bantobah we were taken to a small craft market where the desperate hassle rose to new and almost intolerable heights. Our guide introduced us to her mother who had a rather scruffy stall selling beads and sarongs. She was almost reduced to tears when we said we would not be buying. After that our "guide" abandoned us. Hurrying back to the boat we donated 100 Dalasis to the school and 100 Dalasis to the guides.

Time was so short during the visit that many things we could see as we walked around or that were mentioned on notices were not even shown to us, including the Portuguese Chapel, the CFAO trading post and a replica sailing ship. We arrived about 11.30 am, left the briefing about 12.00pm, walked to the museum by 12.15 which we left about 12.45. After visiting the Kintehs and the bantobah we were back on the boat by 1.30. It was only later that we discovered that we had not actually been to Juffureh at all! It seems the villagers of Juffureh have moved their village from its original site to be in a more convenient location.

Back on the boat we were served with a buffet lunch as we sailed over to visit James Island which is much reduced in size due to erosion. The boat came to just off the island where we debarked into a leaky old pirogue. A fierce current, no doubt the cause of the erosion, ran past the jetty and the approach was very tricky. The passengers had to go forward and scramble out one at a time in order to avoid oversetting the pirogue. We were treated to some egregious and off hand rubbish about the slave trade by a tour guide from the boat – who told us, by way of excuse, that if he told us all he knew about the slave trade we would be there for days. We then wandered around the ruins in an unstructured manner for about 20 minutes before setting off again via the pirogue to the waiting boat. There was little to see at the fort and less information; a few ruined walls, a supposed slave dungeon, something labelled the council room and an undocumented model of the fort. Back at the boat we were treated to a reasonably authentic 18th century seafaring experience scrambling up the netting slung over the side of the boat to gain the deck. We then embarked on the two hour journey back across the River arriving back in Banjul around 5.30 pm from where the various tour operators took their parties back to their hotels."

This is a rather sorry, sordid and pathetic affair for a visit to a site of such immense historical importance. The site represents over 500 years of contact between Africans and Europeans

beginning with the Portuguese represented by the Portuguese Chapel and the site of the settlement of San Domingo. The history of British involvement is represented by James Fort established by the Royal African Company but later run by the Committee of African Merchants and finally destroyed by the French in the American Revolutionary War. Equally representative of this period is the village of Jillefree (Juffureh) which provided James Fort with water, vegetables and a site for their graveyard. Albredah and Juffureh also represent the struggle between France and Britain for control of the West African coast. Even the story of the kidnap of Kunta Kinteh has a role to play since it is reputed to have occurred as both sides vied for influence with the King of Barra who charged customs to both sides for the use of James Island and Jillefree (British) and Albredah (French). Albredah and Jillefree remained important trading posts to the end of the colonial period. However since the visitor is not shown any of these places, apart from James Fort, it is no surprise that none of this historical context emerges.

Such publicly available descriptions of the site as exist seem confused as to what is on the ground and exactly where it is. The UNESCO description quoted above says the European settlements of San Domingo and Jillifree lie 1 km East of Albredah. A prominent notice at Albredah states, "The publication of Alex Haley's Roots brought Juffureh into prominence. The village from which they claimed Kunta Kinteh was taken into slavery was an earlier settlement about 1km east of present village and a little inland from the ruins of sandomingo." Jillefree and Juffureh are in fact synonymous. However, Google Earth places Juffureh two kilometres to the east and about 1.5 km inland, a location which if correct would place it outside the boundaries of the World Heritage Site which, although it extends 12 km down the coast extends only 500 metres inland.

It seems clear that as things stand this important heritage site in no way provides the cultural experience that its visitors deserve. It is superficial, rather sordid and in the final analysis almost entirely fake. It seems the villagers of Juffureh have moved their village from its original location to be close to the pier at Albreda with its ready supply of tourists. As a result visitors see hardly anything of consequence. They don't see the original village of Juffureh at all wherein, somewhere, lies a graveyard containing the bones of British soldiers, sailors and slave traders. Nor are they shown the ruins of the Portuguese chapel or the site of their San Domingo settlement, nor the CFAO trading post from the later colonial period. Instead visitors are simply left exposed to the intense and desperate begging of the supposed descendants of the Kinteh family. All concerned deserve better than this, the villagers, the tourists and not least this supremely iconic place. It is not clear what if anything needs to be or can be done to save James Fort from being finally eroded away. However an historic site of this importance can surely provide skills and employment for large numbers of local people and thereby provide a more memorable and informative experience for its many visitors.

The question arises as to what should be done to improve develop and properly manage this historic site. UNESCO used to run a programme called Friends of World Heritage whose aim was to enlist support from individuals to protect and preserve World Heritage Sites. Unfortunately it seems to have been limited in scale and to have been finally disbanded last year. Perhaps the time has come to form a society of The Friends of James Fort – or something with a broader cultural remit - with the aim of providing some support to promote the sustainable protection, preservation and good management of this area as well as providing a proper cultural experience for its many visitors. At the same time organised beggary might be turned into gainful employment and useful and transferable skills could be developed among the local population by supporting and encouraging a well managed museum development programme.