

An Brief and Incomplete History of Yanimarew

By

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Yanimarew lies some 220km up the Gambia River on the North bank above Nianijaa Bolong and the Kingdom of Bur Saloum with its former great trading posts of Joar and Kiawer. Early maps seem to show the village lying a little way inland from the port of Yanimarew but these are essentially diagrammatic. The first description of the village was by Fransisco de Lemos Coelho in his Description of the coast of Guinea (1684) who referred to Nanhimargo saying, *"The village, which is the same as the port, is on the waterside on the north bank. It is very attractive, has very friendly inhabitants, and offers a large quantity of foodstuffs, as well as, hides, cloths and blacks, also some ivory. Cola can be profitably sold here"*.¹

In 1730 Frances Moore was appointed a writer for the Royal African Company and left an account of his travels about the Gambia River in that service. He described the kidnap of Job Ben Solomon son of a high priest of Bundo in Futa who was sold at the factory of Joar to a Captain Pyke and taken to Maryland. In travelling himself to Joar, where he was supposed to take charge of the factory, he described the drunken overbearing behaviour of the King of Barsally. He turned down the post because of his unpredictable and dangerous behaviour. Returning to Joar later he travelled to Yanimarew. *"The next day we arrived at Yanimarew, which is the pleasantest port in the whole river, the country being delightfully shaded with palm and ciboa trees, the leaves of which are made use of for covering houses"*. *"Here the Company have a small house, with a black factor, to purchase corn for the use of the fort. In 1734 several separate traders coming to Joar, and finding themselves ill used by Serin Donso, the chief broker, they one and all came up to the place, and made the merchants bring up their slaves from Joar after them, which had like to have occasioned a quarrel between the King of Yany and the King of Barsally the latter thinking that the former had sent messengers to decoy the ships from his port of Joar."*¹

Perhaps the situation described by Moore prompted a need to outflank the King of Barsally and that was the reason behind the development of a factory at Yanimarew. It was significant that ocean going vessels could navigate this far up the river which remained broad and deep. Gray in "The History of the Gambia" mentions the long residence of Robert Heatley at Yanimarew. *"He first arrived in the river in 1763 during the last days of the regime of the Committee of Merchants. He appears to have left finally in 1788. During that time he traded principally at Nyanimarau. He made a number of voyages to North America and the West Indies, but stayed on one occasion for a period of five years in the river, on another for three years, and on another for close on one year. Heatley spoke Mandinka fluently, He dealt in ivory and wax, but his principal trade was in slaves whom he carried to Jamaica, Dominica and South Carolina"*.² Records show Heatley sailing as captain and owner of the Africa and the Ferret sailing out of London for the Gambia between 1783 and 1786. For the next ten years he took off between 2 and 300 slaves each year. In many of these voyages he had as co-owners John Oldermann and Thomas Sharpless.³

Thomas Sharpless had enlisted in Governor O'Hara's Africa Corps eventually becoming a sergeant. Posted to James Island, and disease taking away the senior officers, he rose to command of the garrison when Governor MacNamarra succeeded O'Hara in 1775. Sharpless and Macnamarra indulged themselves in an illegal private trade and Sharpless eventually set himself up as a private trader at Bintang financed by MacNamarra.⁴ Macnamarra had succeeded Debat, who died in 1772, in charge of James Fort and the likelihood is that private trading by company and colonial servants

was continuous throughout the period. Letters written to Thomas Hodgson at Yanimarew in early 1771 suggest that Miles Barber was giving up his interests there as a vessel was to call to remove his property. The vessel was also bringing back four black boys of whom John Hodgson says, “I’ve made ‘em very fine”.⁵

John Hodgson also mentions that Sparling and Blundell of Liverpool have dispatched the *Friendship* to the Gambia to trade for slaves using bills of exchange and is sceptical, correctly, of their chances of success. But they had been driven to it by reports from Captain Colley of the Nancy that “*there was more slaves at & about the fort than they knew what to do with*”. Perhaps this was connected to the King of Barra having broken the peace with his neighbours. John Hodgson adds mysteriously, apparently referring to Colley, “*That Youth I expect Debat will have got hold of with fine promises – or else the Gentlemen of the association, as he calls them in his curious card to you – either will do to cure the Cases of Gambia –*”

Debat of course was in charge of James Fort at this time. He further goes on to say that, “*I have already mentioned that the St. John arrived here the 31st of January – Capⁿ Glen handed me your packets – in which was the Grand association, and all the other papers – it was a villainous combination indeed – the attack upon your character is beyond everything – I am very glad you could heartily despise it without pain – but indeed they have painted a character so bad – that when the (sic) come to apply it to you – it is really laughable – They must be an abandoned set of wretches! God send you well from Amongst them!*” By these remarks he appears to be alluding to conflict between the traders; perhaps with officials at James Fort engaged in illicit trade. Nevertheless he says, “*It gives me pleasure that you have been able to bring M.B.^s affairs so well round in Gambia – the Yanimarew & St. John cannot clear less than £2000 – if the remainder come as well off – it will be a fine affair*” John Hodgson also refers somewhat cryptically to the trade with the French which surprisingly for the year 1771 does not sound far advanced, “*Your scetches of French Trade pleases us vastly – and would have you try it now – I think you may assort a Cargo for it out of this – without hurting your Trade up the River.*”

Hodgson seems to have come off in 1772 and returned to Liverpool to set up his own operation with his brother John. However, Yanimarew continued to be used as a trading post for slaves and was used by John Shoolbred a member of the London Committee of Merchants Trading to Africa. He had employed the captain of the Lord Ligonier, Thomas Davis, to make two voyages to the Gambia with the *Providence* between October 1769 and October 1770. In 1773 another vessel belonging to Shoolbred, the *New Britannia*, Captain Deane, whilst lying at Yanimarew with 250 slaves aboard, suffered an insurrection.⁶ The black boys working for the factory smuggled carpenters’ tools to the slaves who broke into the magazine and armed themselves with the available weaponry. Finding, after an hour of fierce fighting, that they could not prevail over the crew they detonated the magazine resulting in the total destruction of the vessel and the deaths of over 300 people.

In 1778 during the American Revolutionary War the French took James Fort and reduced it to a heap of ruins with a few barrels of powder. Alerted by the French at Albredah before the attack the Africans set about the English traders up and down the river and seized their goods. They were forced to take shelter in James Fort only to surrender to the French.⁷ However by 1780 traders began to return and the factory at Yanimarew was re-established. In the next few years, with the loss of the American colonies, proposals to establish a convict colony at Yanimarew or at Isle Lemain were examined but dropped. At this time the three traders at Yanimarew were decried as having “a

very poor appearance, being quite pale and emaciated, and hardly able to crawl. They told me they regularly fell sick in August".⁹

Little else has emerged to fill out its history before the end of the 18th century when it was noted that a Koranic school had been established at Yanimarew.¹⁰ Gray says that in the closing days of the slave trade it was the principal port for the embarkation of slaves in the river. At the beginning of the 19th century the upper river became disturbed by tribal divisions and many traders including the man who had helped Park, Robert Ainsley moved their factories down river, Ainsley moving from Pisania, just below Yanimarew, to Tendaba.

Little has emerged from the 19th Century period. It remained an important trading post for colonial goods apparently the base of BTC (Barthese Trading Company). Groundnuts and other agricultural products were traded for blankets, lamps and kerosene apparently until the 1950's. Presently the site is frequented by Niuminke fishermen periodically, according to Gamble they used also to bring salt here for trade.¹⁰ There is also a modern hunting camp, said to be French, and owned by someone called Barnard.

At Sankulay Kunda the village elder told us that when he was young there were shops at Niani Maru operated by BTC and that it was a very busy trading post. At the end of the rainy season when the crops were ripe they were sold to BTC. In exchange BTC sold lamps, kerosene and blankets. He said that Niani Maru used to be a very big town – there are still many baobab trees on the banks of the river there as evidence of this – and that it was one of the oldest villages in the area. It was bigger he said than the village of Kaur whose present population is between 1000 and 2500 people. The Alcalo of Sankulay was a young man hardly 30 years old who said his father, now dead, was born about 1924 and his grandfather about 1870 and his great grandfather about 1810 or 1820. His great grandfather was called Sankulay Mbye and he was also the village Alcalo. The Alcalo of Nyangabantang – a place on the North Bank Road between Farafenni and Wassu roughly at the same longitude as Yanimarew- was Ngari Sabally and he chased Sankulay away because of the importance of Niani Maru. Sankulay fled to Senegal but later returned to Kuntaur, presumably later still he returned to Sankulay Kunda.

David Gamble also recounts some of this history. According to Gamble Ngari Sabali was the chief in Nianibantang (Yangabantang) at about the end of the 19th century. He was dismissed by the British for embezzlement and he went to Senegal where he died many years later possibly in 1931. He was replaced by Sankulay Mbie who in turn was dismissed for embezzlement and replaced by Ousman Salla.¹¹ On the face of it the two accounts are somewhat contradictory and may illustrate the difficulty of getting accurate oral histories particularly with an interpreter interposed. On the other hand it is possible they refer to different events. Gray's idiosyncratic History goes into the 19th century history of this region in more detail, particularly of the Soninke – Marabout wars, however, all without giving the names of most of the African chieftains involved. However he does quote the colonial governor, Colonel D'Arcy, on the position existing at Nyanimaru in 1863 during the Soninke – Marabout Wars, "The Soninki King is bound by treaty with the Colonial government to keep open the roads and to protect trade. At present he is quite unable to do so, for the town adjacent to the wharf is Marabout and bids defiance to the King by the erection of a stockade commanding the wharf". Gamble implies that the Soninke ruler of the west of Niani, Ngari Sabally, was still nominally in power at the time of the Anglo-French boundary commission (1889). It seems worth keeping both versions for the time being in the hopes that further clarification might be forthcoming.

On the official map of Historical and Cultural Sites produced by the National Centre for Arts and Culture (2005) it appears that Yanimaru is shown as Niani Maru. Significant features recorded as

being present include shell mounds, a major stone circle, a European Trading Post and stone pillars. The boys from Sankulay told us that there were pillars present but we could not find them because the grass was still very long after the rainy season. Possibly these were fallen pillars from the trading post building but more likely they were laterite pillars associated with the stone circle.

References

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10. Gamble p44.
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