

Alex Haley's "Roots" – The Liverpool Connection.

Copyright © 2011 by Jonathan Huddleston

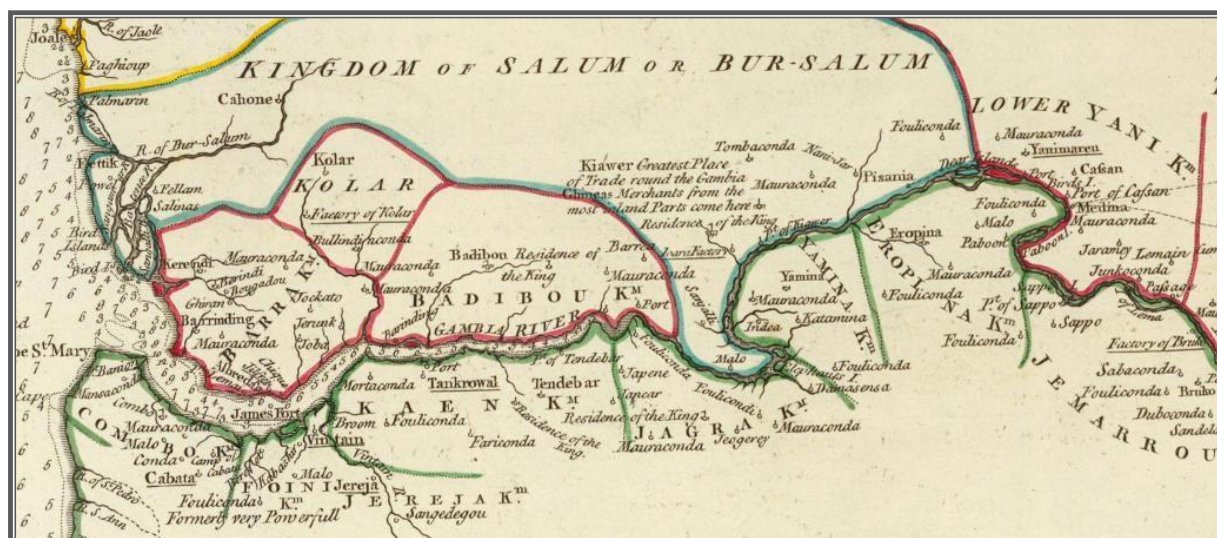


Image from "The western coast of Africa from Cape Blanco to Cape Virga, exhibiting Senegambia Proper." By T. Jefferys, 1789, (c) Cartography Associates 2009. Used under a Creative Commons License by kind permission of Cartography Associates (DavidRumsey.com).

The Tall Tales of the Djalis

Alex Haley's world famous book, "Roots", presents historians with a fundamental problem.¹ In essence the story is simply an assertion that is not susceptible to historical proof.² This is because the story of the kidnap and enslavement of a Mandingo youth, Kunta Kinteh, from the village of Juffureh on the North Bank of the River Gambia in the African Kingdom of Barra emerges from the fusion of two oral traditions; the first, the oral tradition of Alex Haley's American ancestors, and the second, an oral tradition said to have been uncovered in Africa. There is no documentary evidence to support either tradition. Various counter assertions have been made that undermine acceptance of the literal truth of the story. The oral tradition in Africa was contaminated by a willingness to please. That there was no extant griot or djali (oral historian) tradition in the village of Juffureh and those involved in producing the African story were alive to the possibilities it opened up for them. Loading the intellectual swivel with grape, it is said that the griot used was not very good but that djalis in general are highly adept at supplying suitable histories and genealogies when required; for a ruler needing to legitimate his accession a suitable and convincing history could always be produced.

Finally it is said Alex Haley simply hit upon the slave ship **Lord Ligonier** as a convenient vessel sailing from The Gambia to Maryland at about the right time to fit in with the tradition that the events occurred in "the year the King's soldiers came" which he identified with the arrival of the troops of a new colonial governor of Senegambia, Colonel O'Hara in 1766. Unsurprisingly records of the **Lord Ligonier** yield no evidence of the presence of Kunta Kinteh. Further doubt is cast by stressing the improbability that this kidnap could have occurred so close to the slave factories of James Fort and Albreda that were completely dependent on the good will of their African neighbours. The weaknesses of the oral tradition then make any examination of the historical record appear quite useless; events so thinly described could have happened at any time. To be fair, even

those who have questioned Haley's sources and historical accuracy tend to agree that the book succeeds on a level distinct from literal truth – a powerful story making visible what was hidden.

Gambia and The Company of Merchants Trading to Africa

Certainly "the year the king's soldiers came" is open to wide interpretation. Fresh companies of troops arrived at James Fort, the African merchants' principle asset in the Gambia, with monotonous regularity. Their numbers depleted rapidly on the African coast. Even if the coming of the King's soldiers represented something more memorable there were many occasions when trouble flared in the Kingdom of Barra that might have led to kidnap. There were two good reasons for the regular occurrence of disputes. One was the strategic weakness of James Island which, though it had a stout fort in a commanding position in the river, had nowhere to grow food, no access to fresh water or wood, and nowhere to bury the dead. For these it was dependent upon the village of Juffureh. James Fort paid customs to the King of Barra for the use of these facilities. Undoubtedly he also supplied slaves. According to Mungo Park the King of Barra controlled the salt trade maintaining a fleet of war canoes to transport salt manufactured in the estuary up to Casson for trade with caravans coming down from Futa Jallon.³ The other reason was the rivalry between Britain and France for control of the River Gambia and access to the slaves it produced.⁴

By the late 1740's the Royal African Company was in difficulties and in 1747 parliament refused to renew its grant for the upkeep of its forts and facilities. It was finding it difficult to function at all. In 1749 Captain Pye of **HMS Humber** reported James Island *"in a most miserable condition, the people in a melancholy situation for want of goods to carry on a trade for the support of their garrison, not having had any supplies for upwards of five years past"*. Another visitor reported that a garrison of 25 or 30 men was reduced to half a dozen and a *"common soldier"* had succeeded to overall command.

In 1750 Parliament created a regulated "Company of Merchants Trading to Africa" with an executive committee of nine elected from the merchants of London, Liverpool, and Bristol. The Company was prohibited from trading as were the committee during their period of office. Its income came from membership fees of forty shillings and an annual grant from Parliament for the upkeep of the forts. With the affairs of the former company in disarray it was not until a further act of 1752 that the new company took over.

The French took this opportunity to re-establish their former slave factory at Albreda by paying customs to the King of Barra. The factory, occupied periodically from 1665, lay provocatively opposite James Fort. From here they could extend their trade into the River Gambia. In June 1750 Gootheridge, the governor of James Fort, was replaced and he took up a position as company factor at Juffureh. By October he was dead and the King of Barra, following African custom, seized his goods and four castle slaves, custodians of the company's well at San Domingo (close to Juffureh). The fort was forced to ship its water from Kafuto on the south bank. Meanwhile most of the trade was going to the French. By December there was open hostility between the Africans and French on the one hand and the British on the other. In January the **Prince Henry** bombarded the towns of Albredah and Juffureh without dislodging the French. When a new king, Gelawley Cassa, was appointed in May he sided with the British and the French temporarily left. They were back in 1754 invited by Tom Banja, the king's brother, and the British were told to remove their goods. Soon afterwards there was an insurrection aboard a Liverpool slave-ship which was run aground. Salvage was claimed by the King of Foni but the slaver was helped off by a Carolina vessel whereupon the

Kings of Barra and Foni sent war canoes to James Island. They were driven off by cannon fire and Tom Banja was captured.

Tensions continued until the outbreak of the Seven Years War between Britain and France in 1756. In October 1757 two French privateers entered the river and captured a Liverpool privateer but refrained from attacking the fort. In May 1758 Commodore Keppel took Gorée and Senegal. In June Albredah was bombarded by **HMS Rye** and **HMS Harwich** but a force of 60 men was beaten off by the Africans. Three days later against fierce resistance they burned the factory and town. At the conclusion of the Seven Years War Senegal was surrendered to the British but Gorée was returned to the French. Unfortunately, the treaty had little to say about their disposition in the River Gambia.

Thus in 1763 the French re-occupied Albredah, erected a palisade and bastions, and mounted some cannon. The French governor of Gorée spent two months there trying to arrange the interception of slave caravans up river and their diversion to Albredah. By this time the voracity of the slave trade had driven the large scale capture of slaves far inland fuelling jihadist wars in Futa Jallon and beyond. On returning to Gorée the French Governor became involved in a dispute with James Debat, the governor of James Fort, over the return of four captured slaves and to exert pressure he seized the company store ship. By 1764 artillery and ordnance officers were being shipped for the defence of James Fort.⁵ By early 1765 Albreda was reported to contain six companies of soldiers and 39 cannon.⁶ In March the African Merchants commissioned large quantities of hand grenades to arm small vessels in the rivers Senegal and Gambia.⁷ Finally in 1765 Captain Thomas Graves was sent out with the frigates **Edgar** and **Shannon** and the **Hound** sloop-of-war. He informed the French governor he would not be allowed to fortify Albredah and ordered the removal of any military stores. In April 1765 Graves landed a party of marines at Albredah who were opposed by large numbers of angry Africans and forced to retreat after firing into the crowd. The surgeon was captured but later released and eventually the French were compelled to remove their stores.⁴

The Province of Senegambia

Continual conflict with the French in the Gambia led the government to end the Company's authority and create a crown colony in 1765. There were other issues; the company was accused of indulging in private trade, and numerous vessels from Bristol and Liverpool were refusing to pay customs to the King of Barra leading to constant friction. Thus the Gambia became part of the province of Senegambia with headquarters in St Louis. A Lieutenant Governor was appointed to James Fort with a salary of £200. He was instructed to guarantee free trade and was forbidden from engaging in private trade. He was also ordered "*in case any trader shall attempt to carry off any native or free negroe subject of the king of Barrah or any other sovereign or chief in alliance with or living under the protection of His Majesty's fort, he do use his best endeavours to bring the authors of such unwarrantable and inhuman practices to due punishment*".

The first Governor of Senegambia was Colonel Charles O'Hara of the Coldstream Guards. Joseph Debat was continued as Superintendent of Trade and later as Lieutenant Governor at James Fort. The Governor was given three companies of troops with officers including; Captain Matthew Pearson, Lieut. Phillip Duperton, Ensign Thomas Rothead, Captain Francis MacMillan, Lieut. Lachlan MacPherson, and Ensign Alexander Cadger.⁸ One detachment took possession of James Island in April 1766. It was this event that Alex Haley seized upon following his visit to Juffureh and which led him to the **Lord Ligonier**, the only vessel he could find bound for Annapolis, Maryland, at this time.

The **Lord Ligonier** arrived at Africa in September 1766 and left with 140 slaves in July 1767. In September, 96 remaining slaves disembarked in Annapolis and the vessel returned to London in January 1768. The registered owner of the **Lord Ligonier**, James Debat, had no interest in any other slaving vessels. His name suggests he was a relative of the lieutenant governor for whom he was arranging a shipment of slaves – likely the proceeds of illegal private trading, or accumulated bounties on bodies shipped. Arriving in London it brought dispatches from Debat complaining of the encroachment of the French and their fortification of Albredah. The master of the vessel, Thomas Davis, also worked the **Providence** for John Shoolbred, of the London Committee of African Merchants, between October 1769 and October 1770 on the same itinerary to Maryland. Almost two years separate these voyages and Captain Davis had ample time for another voyage.⁹ However, not much that was truly memorable took place in the river between the coming of the King's soldiers and the departure of the **Lord Ligonier**.

In May 1766 O'Hara reported that the French had begun to re-fortify Albredah and had established factories at Portudal and Joal. In August 1766 Lieut. Duperton, now in command at James Fort, seized a French vessel from Honfleur lying at Albredah to which the Liverpool slave merchant Miles Barber was contracted to supply 300 slaves. This was the **Michodière**, Captain Louvet, owned by Messieurs Massac and Lemarcis.⁹ Duperton released the vessel on condition that it returned to Honfleur. The governor reprimanded him for interfering in trade but he also asked the Board of Trade whether this proceeding contravened the Navigation Acts. This prompted Miles Barber to secure a private Act of Parliament in February 1767 to allowing him to do just that.¹⁰ On the African coast the only result of the seizure was French indignation and African resentment.

In January 1767 Governor O'Hara reported that he could give no account of the condition of James Fort as the two officers sent there had died and a plot by the garrison to seize the fort had been discovered. The ringleaders were taken to Senegal by O'Hara for trial. Meanwhile two French snows were lying at Albredah trading for slaves. Matters flared again over a native of Barra who had shipped as a slave-ship linguister to the West Indies in 1765. Returning two years later he had attempted to shoot the master who handed him over to Debat. Debat decided to hold him until "*he could find a favourable opportunity of making a merit with the king of Barra by releasing him*". But when O'Hara arrived at James Fort for his first visit in February 1768 the King refused to see him. The King continued to demand his release but when it was eventually agreed, "*the King of Barra arrived at the Fort, and Lieutenant Governor Debat sent immediately on board the Snow for the negroe, but was informed by the Snow's people at the return of the boat that the day before the negroe had broke from his confinement, jumped into the sea and that they had seen him eaten by a shark*". Outraged, the people of Barra seized four Europeans and twelve slaves and refused to allow James Fort access to wood or water.⁴

The Burning of Albredah

Thus by early 1768 the Governor was in open conflict with the King of Barra who began to seize the merchants goods and vessels, along with traders, castle slaves and "*every Thing they could lay Hold of*."¹¹ The previous October two transports had been engaged to take artillery and stores to James Fort and Cape Coast Castle¹² which arrived in early 1768 bringing fresh troops.¹¹ With these Debat decided to attack Albredah.⁴

"Before daylight in the morning of the 23d of April, being St George's day, every man having a St George's cross in his hat, we surrounded the town, but was rather too soon, being discovered by

the outguards and the barking of dogs; but to complete my design and my orders, immediately began the attack, when a smart engagement and a warm fire ensued. In less than an hour I was master of the place, burnt the town to ashes, destroyed everything that I could in that time come at, made many prisoners and embarked the troops with little or no loss. The prisoners are all here, among whom is the Queen of Baragh, who had been upon a visit in this place, it being like Bath in England, where the better Sort of people come for the benefit of their health. Her Majesty was so unfortunate as to have three of her fingers tore off by one of our hand grenades. I have taken all care in my power of her, also the governor; and she is now attended by our surgeons." Debat's thirty nine prisoners were held hostage for the safety of the prisoners taken by the King of Barra.

On June 16th they attacked "Layman" – the contemporary village of Lamin - but with less success fearing an encircling attack from two nearby towns. Some of the garrison were killed including a French volunteer, Mr Brulet, and Ensigns Hushem and Crosser.¹¹ Debat went to St Louis to seek reinforcements but there fell ill leaving James Fort in the care of Ensign Fury, "lately arrived on the coast, totally unexperienced in the manners and genius of the people, and subject to those violent excesses to which he soon died a martyr". Whilst Debat was away James Fort came under attack. At four o'clock in the morning on 14 July 1768, twenty war canoes with 500 men swooped on James Fort. Of the 40 men in the garrison many were sick and discipline was poor. Debat reported, *"So bad a look out was kept that they were nigh ashore before the least alarm. The troops got into the gates just in time with the castle slaves. Fury was ill and Williams (the clerk of the cheque of the ordnance) managed the whole affair. They attempted at one place only to scale the walls and were beat off. Two soldiers and two blacks were killed on our side, which is all our real loss. A tolerable number of the blacks were cut off. The whole might have been destroyed with ease had the guns been properly pointed to destroy their canoes."* The hand of the French was strongly suspected, *"The retreat of the assailants from the island was so precipitate and confused that they left their scaling ladders behind. Now the natives were never known to have a thing of that kind in their possession before, nor even the most intelligent one among them either genius to invent or tools to make one."*¹⁴

The trouble now spread up and down the river affecting all the English traders in it. And in August 1768 Miles Barber's African Agent in the Gambia, Captain Thomas Hodgson, became embroiled in the dispute.

Miles Barber and The Factory at Yanimarew

By February 1767, Barber held contracts to supply slaves to the French at Albredah sanctioned by Act of Parliament. Thomas Hodgson went out to make the arrangements to a trading post in the village of Yanimarew.¹³ At the same time, another coming man in the Liverpool slave trade, James Penny, was sent out to Barber's factories in Sierra Leone and the Isles de Los. Both brought advantages allowing the interception of slave caravans from Futa Jallon where the voracious market for slaves on the coast had added profit to piety in the practice of jihad.

Formerly a Royal African Company factory which had also been used to supply corn for James Fort, the slave factory of Yanimarew lay 220 km up the Gambia River in the Kingdom of Niani. It was far enough inland to give them their strategic advantage. To the south lay the African Kingdom of Bar-Saloum, known to the English as Barsailey. Here lay the village of Kiawer formerly described as "the greatest place of trade round the Gambia. Merchants from the Most Inland parts come here." Another factory, Joar, lay 3 km west of Kiawer on a tributary of the river and both were close to the residence of the King of Bar-Saloum.¹⁴ About 20 km upstream lay the Port of Casson, near the contemporary Kuntaur, the highest point to which an oceangoing vessel could navigate. In

1772 an opponent of the slave trade prompted by the Somerset case described the rule of the King of Barsailey.¹⁵ However his account was at least thirty years old. The King was said to be addicted to brandy and when in need, or of weapons and luxuries for his followers, he waged war on his neighbours to make slaves and on occasion set upon his own towns. The slaves were taken to Joar to be exchanged for European goods.

Barber's activities at Yanimarew and his involvement with the French brought a disturbing factor into the Gambia River. Between 1767 and 1771 Barber's agent Thomas Hodgson arranged numerous shipments of slaves, many delivered to Virginia and Carolina, using several vessels, **The Gambia**, **The Yannemarew**, **The St John** to which may be added charter vessels as well as French vessels from Albredah.¹³

Restitution for Sundry Robberies

In August 1768 as the trouble spread about the river Hodgson became directly involved in the dispute with the people of Barra.¹⁶ They had overpowered a schooner belonging to Captain Marshall, killing all but two of the crew, who escaped by swimming off, and seized all the property on board. They had also seized two schooners and their goods belonging to Captain Evans and two boat loads of goods belonging to Captain Hodgson. Richard Evans, a private trader on the coast, had previously (1763) been involved in kidnapping a King's son who drowned while attempting to escape. Evans was lucky to escape with his life and was forced to flee "practically naked" to James Fort.¹³ In a letter Evans described the attack on the fort which was beaten off with the loss of three men and complained that though the private traders paid duties to the fort it had neither arms nor men to offer them protection.¹⁶ On the contrary the private traders were forced to assist the fort. A snow, which had been fully slaved for over 5 weeks, dared not move because of the many war canoes that were waiting to capture her. He blamed the French and their settlement at Albredah and believed the trade would fall completely into their hands. Few had vessels of sufficient force to trade under these conditions and many had vulnerable settlements on land. He accused an ensign at James Fort, left in charge while the governor was in Senegal, of detaining one of Miles Barber's charter vessels to protect the fort. Though they offered their brig **Lively** as a substitute it had been refused. Hodgson, Marshall and Evans had armed and fitted out the brig, **The Lively**, with one avowed purpose, "to seek restitution for the sundry robberies the Barrack people have committed against us." What was meant can only be guessed at but, considering the widespread practice of holding "pawns" as insurance for loaned trade goods who could be carried off and sold into slavery in default, the implication seems obvious.

Such was the desperate position that in December 1768 the Admiralty ordered two sloops and a frigate to sail for James Fort.¹⁷ The squadron under Captain Tonyn with the **Felix** and the **Hound** arrived in early 1769 and brought Debat back from St Louis. In the mean time Yellow fever had taken its toll of the troops sheltering in James Fort. 17 had died, including Captain Francis MackMillan and several other officers, leaving only four fit for duty.⁴ Tonyn began stopping Dutch and French vessels in the area. A Dutch factor, connected with the French, wrote that their only hope was to try to widen the breach between the English and the King of Barra. He maintained that French emissaries, using "the most magnificent presents ever known to be made in this Kingdom" had secured "the strongest Assurances of Protection and Commercial Acquisition that was ever made to Europeans." The arrival of the naval squadron changed the balance of power. French vessels put to sea to avoid confrontation whereupon the "Natives gave up all their engagements."¹⁸

By July 1769 Governor O'Hara "with great difficulty" concluded a peace with the King of Barra. But the merchants were still concerned that the French remained at Albreda.¹⁹ Although peace had been restored the private traders were concerned that "the singular and very partial indulgence granted to Miles Barber" had "effectually completed the most sanguine wishes of our enemies." French ships were still passing up to Yannemarew returning with slaves, gold and ivory. The coffles of slaves that the traders used to purchased at Yannemarew now went to the French at Albredah where there were then 5 sail of large French ships. James Fort was dilapidated and none of the garrison had survived the conflict or sickness brought on by the rains.²⁰ However by December Tonyn had seized two French and one Dutch vessel near the mouth of the river and by mid 1771 letters from the African coast reported that the King of Barra "had broken the peace with his neighbours" thus promising to make the trade "more brisk" than in the recent past.^{21, 22}

With a state of open warfare existing between the English slave traders and the Africans, the kidnapping and selling into slavery of a young villager from Juffureh seems to turn possible into probable. Similar events occurred at the same time (1767) on the River Calabar in the Bight of Biafra when Bristol and Liverpool slave traders intervened in a dispute between the inhabitants of New and Old Calabar. As a result two princes of Old Calabar were kidnapped and sold into slavery in the West Indies.²³ Whether the story of Roots is true or not, it is very plausible, despite the failure to paint a realistic portrait of life in 18th century Juffureh. If Haley really did derive this part of his story from conversations with Gambian Djalis, they, with consummate skill, seem to have supplied him with exactly the right historical context. A time when the kidnap described not only could have happened but, with a high degree of probability, almost certainly did.

References

1. Roots, Alex Haley, Hutchinson, 1977.
2. Wright, Donald R. (1981). "Uprooting Kunta Kinte: on the perils of relying on encyclopaedic informants." *History in Africa*, vol. VIII, p 205-217.
3. Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Parts of Africa*.
4. The account is largely based on J. M. Gray's *History of the Gambia*, with additional references as below.
5. *Gazetteer*, 03/10/1764.
6. *Gazetteer*, 08/03/1765.
7. *Gazetteer*, 13/03/1766.
8. *Gazetteer*, 23/09/1765
9. STDB
10. Documents illustrative of the history of the slave trade to America, Elizabeth Donnan, Vol 3. New England and the middle colonies. Carnegie, Washington, 1930.
11. *Gazetteer*, 28/10/1768.
12. *London Evening Post* 10/10/1767.
13. *And The Children's Teeth are Set on Edge*, Jonathan Huddleston, Tioli, 2010 – www.tioli.co.uk
14. *The western coast of Africa from Cape Blanco to Cape Virga, exhibiting Senegambia Proper*. By T. Jefferys, Geographer to his Majesty. London, Printed by Robt. Sayer, No. 53, Fleet Street, 1789.
15. *Morning Chronicle* August 3, 1772
16. *Gazetteer*, 12/12/1768
17. *Gazetteer* December 16, 1768
18. *St. James's Chronicle* May 13, 1769
19. *Gazetteer*, 08/07/1769
20. *Middlesex Journal* December 12, 1769
21. *Whitehall Evening Post* December 21, 1769
22. *Middlesex Journal* November 7, 1771
23. Randy J. Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar*, Harvard University Press, 2008.