

The Making of “Yanimarew”

By

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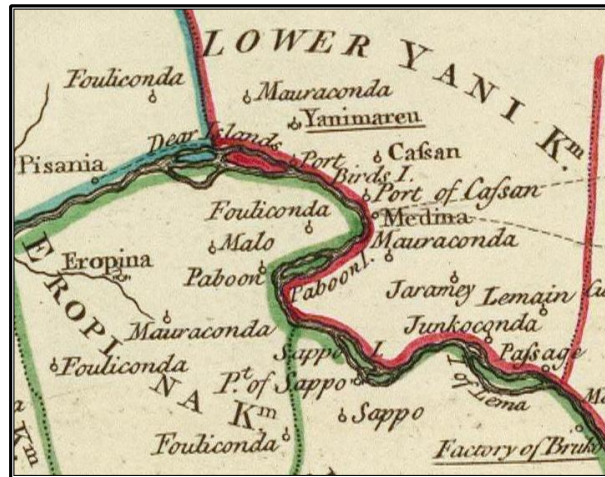


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In Foreign Climes

In the village of Caton, near Lancaster, where I grew up, there is an epitaph in the village church to Thomas Hodgson (1737 – 1817) which reads: *“After passing the early part of his life in foreign climes, he was for many years an eminent merchant in Liverpool and founder of the cotton and silk works in this his native place. He was a man of remarkable energy and warm affections, great generosity and public spirit and ardently desirous to promote the improvement and happiness of all around him.”* This cryptic summary conceals much, however Thomas Hodgson was a Liverpool slave trader who began his career as the agent on the African coast for the prominent Lancaster and Liverpool slave trader, Miles Barber. Barber had, by 1767, a contract to supply slaves to the French at Albreda in the River Gambia sanctioned by private Act of Parliament. Thomas Hodgson was sent out to make the arrangements and bring order to Barber’s other affairs on the coast. Barber’s trading post, where Hodgson was based, was at the village of Yanimarew, where coffles of slaves arrived from the African interior. It was not clear to me where Yanimarew was except that it lay some distance up the Gambia River. The Gambia being a popular winter holiday destination these days it seemed an interesting idea to set off *“In Search of Yanimarew.”*

Gambian Palavers

We left Gatwick on a cold November morning for Banjul on a 5 hour 40 minute flight over the Bay of Biscay, Portugal, Morocco, and Senegal. We were helped through the baggage claim by a friendly Security Agent who claimed to know Tata Dindin, the famous Gambian Kora player, who we had arranged to visit. However, we soon found nearly everyone claimed to know Tata. He also thought that Yanimarew was synonymous with Jangjanbureh, a town some 300km up the River Gambia on McCarthy Island. Undoubtedly I had primed him to reach that conclusion which proved to be completely wrong. The airport was inundated with bumsters selling water and fans or offering to carry your bags, and all wanting 50 or 100 Dalasis (roughly £1 to £2), even the baggage loader and the shuttle bus driver, wanted their contribution. We were driven to our hotel in the village of Bijilo some 15km from Banjul. The hotel consisted of a number of blocks of rooms in the Costa Brava Concrete style which were clean but by western standards rather tatty. However, the grounds were attractive with palms and a baobab tree and there was a good view of the Atlantic with waves crashing in

on a long sandy bay. It seemed fiendishly hot at 36C after leaving an English November. We paid 500 Dalasis for a security box which we were told was an essential precaution.

Later we walked on the beach and bought fresh fruit juice from a juice stand where various mixtures of orange, pineapple, grapefruit, banana and baobab could be had. The juice boys do not use the local water or bottled water but simply pure fruit juice. The flesh of the baobab fruit looks like dry pith but dissolves in the fruit juice. The plastic bottles containing bottled water are known as "toubab bidung" (whiteman's bottle) and seem to be much sought after. In the country districts the children are often heard calling "toubab" whilst pointing at you but if you have some of the 3 litres of water you need to drink each day you will hear instead "toubab bidung, toubab bidung." We had dinner in the hotel where a kora player was in close attendance there being few other guests.

Next morning we met our tourist 'rep' and just as feared he was unable to arrange a trip to Jangjanbureh. This was critical since we believed this was where we would find Yanimarew. We planned first to take the "Roots" tour to Albredah and Juffureh, the home of Alex Hailey's ancestor Kunta Kinteh, to get a feel for the history of the place before setting out in search of Yanimarew. However, we met an independent tour operator, a dynamic and charming multilingual Gambian, who was so enthusiastic about his own Jangjanbureh trip that he was going himself. Whether this had anything to do with the two gap-year Swedish girls booked on the tour is not for me to say. So we booked for the Jangjanbureh tour and the Roots tour. He also put us in touch with Tata Dindin's cousin which was an added bonus.

The Road to Juffureh

Next day we were picked up at 7.30 am outside the hotel along with two Swedish women who were also taking the Roots trip. We drove through the Kombos into Banjul picking up other passengers. On the way we drove through a very poor area and were shocked to see women and children scavenging through piles of stinking garbage that seemed to have been dumped by the roadside for the purpose. We rejoined the main road and drove on into Banjul passing through the extensive mangrove swamps that separate it from the Kombos. Banjul seemed very run down and poor, particularly in the port area. Here we boarded a large motor launch luxuriously equipped with plastic picnic chairs on deck for some of the 65 passengers. It was claimed the vessel had sailed from England to Africa, but we later heard a somewhat different and less comforting account. We were told there were 85 lifejackets on board and we were towing a lifeboat in the event of emergency but this appeared to be a very battered fibreglass boat that didn't look capable of holding more than half a dozen people. 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 Portuguese explorers. Soon after 11am we arrived off Albredah, a former French slave factory and trading post, where we docked at the long concrete jetty and walked into the settlement to a covered courtyard where the local guides held a briefing.

They said there were 3 inhabited islands on the River Gambia, Banjul itself, McCarthy Island and Paradise Island and 7 which were uninhabited including Dog Island, James Fort, originally named St. Andrews Island by the Portuguese, Pelican Island and Baboon Island. Some 25% of the vegetation along the tidal part of the Gambia River consists of Mangroves. There is no electricity or piped water supply on the North Bank and the climate is apparently 10°C hotter than the South Bank. The staple diet is Cous with groundnuts grown as a cash crop with the money invested in animals since the banks are not trusted. A typical small family may have 5 or 6 children but, given the Muslim custom of having up to four wives, a large family may have more than 25 children. We were told that after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, Albredah was in British hands and became a destination for slaves escaping from James Island which had also changed hands. It was said that in 1810 there were 90 slaves in James Fort which under pressure from the British were ordered released. The slave masters allowed the slaves to swim for their freedom to Albredah. None survived. We heard similar impossible escapes to freedom stories several times in different places.

Juffureh which is adjacent to Albredah is the home of the Kinteh family to whom Alex Haley claimed to be related in the book, "Roots", but considerable doubts have been expressed over the literal truth of the story. The current Kinteh family are the eighth generation since Kunta Kinteh's time where Alex Haley was

seventh generation. 50% of tourists coming to The Gambia visit Juffureh. At this point a Kora player started up and played a song which appeared to be in praise of the current president Yaya Jammeh. We had already heard this played by the "Djali" at the hotel who claimed he had written it, a claim which suddenly seemed rather doubtful.

The guides said that the trans-Saharan trade in slaves began after the introduction of Islam in AD 1235 into a society where domestic slaves were 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. This trade did not end until after the American Civil War by which time some 20 million Africans had been transported of which 6 million died as a result. The guides gave several reasons for the ending of slavery; the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the slave revolt in Haiti, the American Civil War and the activities of humanitarians such as Wilberforce. Following abolition the British established Banjul on the South Bank and Fort Bullen on the North Bank of the river to suppress the trade.

The population of Juffureh is about 1000 and that of Albreda about the same. The guides said they represented the Travel Foundation and were there to guarantee this was a Responsible Tourist Attraction by minimising the hassling of tourists. If they had been as successful in this as claimed it defies imagining what it must have been like before as the hassle was intense and continual. We walked into Juffureh and, just as when we landed, we were surrounded by hustlers selling sheaves of exercise books and cheap sweets which, to save us the trouble of distributing them, could be dropped off at the school, still in their packaging, for the children of the village. This seemed rather too convenient. Despite the guides claims some were involved in the hustling themselves. One of the guides "befriended us" and for a while helped to stem the begging. We were led past a baobab tree to be shown at some length the forms of various animals including an elephant, a monkey and a dolphin which could be made out in the bark of its trunk.

Then we were taken to the museum in a former Maurel Frères trading post built about 1840. It was a scruffy affair containing a few borrowed artefacts largely from outside The Gambia. We had little time to take anything in and we rushed through taking snaps as we went. Had we but known it, we had located Yanimarew, for we found much later among our snaps a picture of an old map of West Africa with this trading post clearly visible. There was a legend inscribed, "*Mr Moore's Account of the English Settlements on the River Gambia in 1730*". There followed a list of 12 factories, headed by an account of James's Fort and Island, and including; "*Yanimareu Factory. On the North side of the River where the Company have a Black to purchase Corn for James's Fort.*" Also mentioned was Jillefree Factory lying on the North Bank close to Albredah, which supplied James Fort with vegetables and where they maintained a burial ground. For this customs were payable to the "*King of Barrab*". We bought a map of the Historic Sites of the Gambia which we found also marked the site of Yanimarew but in its correct African form of Niani Maru.

Hurried out of the museum, we were taken to the Kinteh residence where two sisters were introduced and we were invited to pay them to be allowed to take their pictures. There were no takers, probably because there were few, if any, Americans in the group. This seemed to cause a heated argument between the family and the guides. We were then led to the village "bantobah" – the village parliament – in which meetings relating to village matters are held. It consisted of low adobe walls with bench seats in a square with a corrugated iron roof. In traditional villages it would be a simple wooden platform beneath a suitable shade tree. Here we were introduced to the head of the village, a woman, and were invited to purchase signed certificates of our visit for 25 Dalasis – again she had few takers. Undoubtedly the group's attitude had hardened due to the constant and unremitting hustle for the tourist dollar. Our guide told us this money was for her personal use and not for the community as a whole. Many of the houses of the village consisted of dilapidated breeze block buildings with corrugated iron roofs. It was dusty and unkempt with litter everywhere. We were next taken to the village craft market where the desperate hassle rose to new and virtually intolerable heights. Our guide introduced us to a woman with a rather scruffy stall selling beads and sarongs who was almost reduced to tears when we made it plain we would not be buying. After that our "guide" abandoned us. On our way back to the boat we donated 100 Dalasis to the school and 100 Dalasis to the guides.

Time was so short that a number of things we could see, either as we walked around or that were detailed on notices, were not even visited including the Portuguese chapel, the CFAO (Compagnie Francais Afrique Occidentale) trading post and a replica sailing ship clearly visible in the village. We arrived about 11.30 am and left the briefing about 12.00pm, walked to the museum by 12.15 which we left, way behind the rest of the party, by 12.30. After visiting the Kinteh household and bantobah we were back on the boat soon after 1.30. Thus the tourist sees little of genuine historical relevance. Surprisingly perhaps the only genuine part of the experience is the unremitting hassle. When Mungo Park visited Juffureh in 1795 he remarked of the inhabitants, *"but they are commonly very noisy, and very troublesome; begging for every thing they fancy with such earnestness and importunity, that traders, in order to get quit of them, are frequently obliged to grant their requests."*

James Fort

Back aboard the boat we were served with a buffet lunch as we sailed to James Island now much reduced in size due to erosion. Just off the island we debarked into a leaky old pirogue and the whole group were landed in two runs. A fierce current, no doubt the cause of the erosion, ran past the jetty and the approach was very tricky. The passengers had to carefully make their way forward and scramble out up the jetty steps one at a time in order to avoid oversetting the pirogue. We were treated to some pretty 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 then we would be there for days. However he did inform us that he was born in Banjul on Lancaster Road where many streets still have their colonial names. We wandered around the ruined fortress in an unstructured manner for about 20 minutes before setting off once again via the pirogue to the waiting motor launch. There was little to see at the fort and less information; a few ruined walls, a supposed slave dungeon – actually the guardroom - and something labelled the council room.

Back at the boat we were treated to another authentic 18th century experience as everyone had to scramble up the netting slung over the side of the launch to gain the deck. We then sailed back across the River for a couple of hours to arrive back at Banjul around 5.30 pm. On the way back we talked to a Dutch woman working as a volunteer in The Gambia. Despite long experience in working on development projects she seemed to have had enough of The Gambia where she implied that conditions were chaotic with little commitment to local organisation. All her time was spent reorganising the local office instead of working on the project. No paperwork had been filed in years and was simply lying in heaps around the offices. She was almost at the point of giving up and going home. As we sailed into Banjul a grain ship was unloading American rice and gangs of dock labourers were circulating round the bagger piling up the sacks. We drove back through Banjul past the State House – the former Governor's Mansion – and Arch 22 commemorating the coup of the 22nd of July 1994 which only the president, the former army officer and leader of the coup, Yaya Jammeh, is allowed to drive through. We drove back down Atlantic Highway, reinforced to seaward by a polder built by the Dutch, and past a large graveyard dating back to colonial Bathurst. We then passed through the former government quarter, and diplomatic quarter, past the Botanical Gardens and finally back to our hotel. All in all this was a rather sorry, sordid and pathetic affair for a trip to a site of immense historical importance, indeed a United Nations World Heritage Site.

The Road to Jangjanbureh

Following the Roots tour we spent the next day resting and preparing for an overnight trip to Jangjanbureh and the search for Yanimarew. Next day we got up at 5am and had coffee and a part of breakfast; a ham and cheese sandwich and a boiled egg. Outside the hotel we waited with two Swedish women for our 6.15 pick-up which finally arrived at 6.45 but by Gambian time it was not even slightly late! We rode to the Banjul ferry terminal picking up more passengers – about 8 in all – and waited for the ferry. On the dock we met a labourer who claimed to know where Yanimarew was – at the time our first real clue. At first he seemed to say that Yanimarew was "a region of Georgetown," Georgetown being the colonial name for Jangjanbureh. However, after further conversation it appeared that Yanimarew was "in the same region as

Georgetown” where he was originally from. This proved to be entirely correct. The crowded ferry from Barra arrived about 7.30am bringing workers into Banjul and we left on an equally crowded ferry at 7.45. Two boot boys insisted on washing our shoes with soapy water despite our protests and were utterly disgusted to receive only 50 Dalasis for the service instead of the 300 they demanded. We docked at Barra about 9.00am with a huge crash, the ferry seeming to ram the dock as hard as it possibly could. Given the state of most of the vehicles aboard this seemed calculated to be highly dangerous. The port of Barra was crowded with people, livestock, trucks and cars waiting for the return ferry to Banjul. Leaving Barra about 9.30 we drove up country on a modern and for the most part fairly smooth two lane highway through a landscape of savannah and mangrove swamps passing on through many villages constructed either from breeze block or in the traditional style. After an hour and a half we arrived at a country hospital which had been built by a foreign NGO. The interior of the hospital was filthy but the doctor who showed us round maintained it was cleaned daily and the problem was due to broken windows. There were about 20 women and children in the waiting room and we were shown a refrigerator for storing vaccine, the consulting room, and the operating theatre in which was an absolutely filthy sink. In one ward there was even a motorcycle in among the patients! What a contrast to the brand new Ford Everest ambulance standing in the grounds. It was impossible not to think they would be better off arranging births and performing operations in the back of that than on the wards.

We left about 11am and drove another hour up to Farafenni where we stopped to buy soft drinks, water and stretch our legs. It was a busy market town but looked like a typical ‘developing’ world shanty town. We took a toilet break at a hotel, Eddie’s Hotel, Disco Bar and Restaurant, in which a number of westerners were staying though electricity only came on after 6pm. The rooms surrounded a courtyard shaded by large trees. From Farafenni we continued on the Trans-Gambian Highway toward Wassu and Kuntaur for half an hour before stopping for a roadside picnic. Here we met a family working on their peanut crop. In typical Gambian tourist style we gave them sweets, but as we left we gave them the remains of our breakfast. The delight this produced in the children was a strong contrast to the dutiful way they had accepted the sweets. Leaving here about 1.15pm we arrived at the stone circles of Wassu just after 3pm. “The Stoneman” was our guide to the stones and associated museum and he proved to be a delightful man, well informed, not only about his stone circles and their history, but also about the history of The Gambia. There are hundreds of stones circles in the region covering an area from Farafenni in the west to Basse in the east of Gambia and extending north into Senegal as far as Niori and Tambacounda. The stones are found along rivers above estuarine water and the number in each circle varies from 10 to 24 with some forming concentric circles. The stones are of laterite sandstone which is soft when unweathered and easy to cut from the quarries. On exposure they weather to form hardened rocks rich in iron and magnetite. The stones are cylindrical with a flat top about 0.75 to 3 M in height and the circles are 4 to 7 M in diameter. Some are associated with burials and carbon-14 dating places the Wassu circles in the African Iron Age between 600 AD and 1000 AD. The Stoneman told us that artefacts had been found within the circles carved with designs resembling Celtic patterns. Unfortunately after looking round the circles there was no time to visit his museum and everyone piled back into the minibus while we raced round the museum snapping the exhibits – while the bus driver hooted his horn to hurry us up. Whilst there we asked The Stoneman about Yanimarew and he confidently said he knew exactly where it was. All we had to do was go back to Yangabangtang and turn left and it was then about 30 minutes drive through the bush! By 3.30 we were back on the road to join our boat at Kuntaur. This was understandable haste with a four or five hour trip up the Gambia before us and with the sudden onset of tropical night around 7pm. On the way into the village of Kuntaur we were stopped at one of the ubiquitous police check points. These were encountered at every village on the way and seem a heavy hand laid on the population. Every few kilometres there is a check point where generally the driver is asked for his papers and insurance documents. Occasionally the vehicle is given a cursory inspection and the driver asked to sound his horn. But obvious tourist vehicles are sometimes quickly waved through. Occasionally the check point is unmanned or it is too hot or the policeman too lazy to get up and do his inspection. Sometimes they are armed sometimes military personnel seem to be present. Here in Kuntaur one of the Swedish girls was seen accidentally photographing the police station – strictly forbidden. The police officer became very angry and

demanded she be taken into the police post for interview. An angry and animated interchange took place between our guide and the policeman but we were eventually allowed to proceed.

Minutes later we arrived at the quay in Kuntaur and climbed aboard a large two-decked pirogue which was quickly away up the River Gambia to Jangjanbureh. Leaving Kuntaur we saw on the North bank the ruins of a 19th Century trading post which The Stoneman later told us had belonged to Maurel and Prom. At first, in the heat of the afternoon, there was little wild life to be seen but as the evening came on we saw much more including weaver birds, ibis, heron and fish eagles. We saw 3 or 4 hippos but the tide was high and only their heads were visible. We also saw monkeys in the trees and passed the occasional fisherman in small dugout pirogues and the occasional fisherman's settlement on the bank. It began to grow dark and there was a beautiful sunset on the river. Unfortunately our boat had no lights. Our Captain later said he could not afford them.

The consequence; we ran into the Jangjanbureh ferry! The ferry was returning from the north bank to Georgetown. It was well illuminated and crowded with people yet the helmsman failed to see it and likewise the captain of the ferry failed to see the pirogue. As the two vessels approached there was a great deal of shouting and we shouted back to the captain warning of the danger. He ran to the bow and began shouting back to his helmsman to turn. He was too slow and seemingly unaware of which way the danger lay and when he did turn, instead of trying to turn behind the ferry – though it may have been too late for that - turned in front of it. Finally the captain began shouting to reverse but it was too late. The ferry, with its loading platform sticking out before it, struck us just aft of the bow and drove us hard into the Georgetown bank. Fortunately we had all already hit the deck. Equally fortunately the ferry went quickly into reverse. And after some moments we were able to continue amid imprecations passing between the two vessels. We sailed over to the north bank and disembarked at the Jangjanbureh camp on a rickety old wooden jetty with convenient foot sized holes in the boards shortly after 7.30pm. The camp was in the African style with Spartan huts with tiled floors, lit by candle light, with a kerosene lamp outside the door. There was a raised platform with a mosquito net for sleeping and a single wooden chair and table. There was a separate and rather nasty toilet and shower with a kettle of water and basin for washing. There was no electric power or hot water. The camp was apparently co-owned by a German businessman with Gambian partners. Soon after 8pm we repaired to the open-air restaurant for dinner of chicken yassa and rice preceded by tomato soup. We discussed with our guide jumping off the tour and going back to Wassu to visit Yanimarew. This was arranged with The Stoneman who agreed to arrange our transport to Yanimarew and see to it that we got back to Bijilo by local transport.

In Search of Yanimarew

Next day we rose at 7am for breakfast at 8 of battered beans, doughnut pancakes and coffee. We boarded the pirogue once again and sailed over to Georgetown about 9am. On the south bank there was a substantial concrete jetty but it had long lengths of re-bar poking out at the end which in one place had been roughly bent so that a vessel could dock without much damage. The jetty was broken and collapsed at the landward end and some women from the town were using the sloping sections as a convenient place to do their washing, hanging the clothes out to dry on nearby bushes. Passage over this section was quite tricky. We walked westward along the road toward the ferry landing past the ruins of a 19th or early 20th Century trading station which was described as a 16th to 18th century slave market. We then walked on to a supposed "slave dungeon" which was in the cellar of a colonial building which was brick built and appeared to be of relatively recent (early 20th C) origin. We were given a talk about the slave trade in the region and the role of this "dungeon" and were shown some "manacles" which were quite clearly not manacles at all but scaffold couplers and stamped "Boulton" and bearing a patent number. There was a round well in the floor which we were told filled and emptied with the tide from which the slaves were reputed to derive their only water. There is little reason to associate Jangjanbureh with the slave trade. The most important place for the embarkation of slaves this high up the River Gambia was Yanimarew from where loaded vessels could sail directly to sea.

We walked into the dusty unkempt town and were shown a freedom tree which was a Kapok planted within walled grounds where there seemed to be a small museum. We were regaled with yet another “impossible escape” story in which it appeared that if the slaves could escape and “hook” the freedom tree they immediately became free. However, the feat was impossible as the slave masters all had guns and dogs. Who knows what this story is supposed to illustrate – the cruelty of the slave masters or their predilection for reinventing murderous versions of childish games. We were then invited to view a small wooden house said to be the oldest in Georgetown and several hundred years old. This seemed quite unlikely given its condition and the activities of the ubiquitous African termite. We visited a small vegetable market housed in a concrete structure with a corrugated iron roof. It looked very poor. From there we walked back to the boat past the ferry terminal where the boys were playing jembe as the ferry docked and singing “Welcome to Jangjanbureh.” We sailed back over to the camp and joined our bus which left driving down a rough bush road. We rejoined the North Bank Road and drove on through farmland back to Wassu.

The Road to Yanimarew

At Wassu we left the tour and waited for The Stoneman who arrived on his bicycle. We walked with him down the road to the garage where we talked to the proprietor of a bush taxi who asked 1500 Dalasis for the trip to Yanimarew and back. We got him down to 1000 Dalasis but only after he had pointed out at some length that he normally carried at least a dozen people who all contributed to the trip and so to take just two people he had to be compensated. However, as it turned out his bus was under the care of a mechanic and would not be ready for a while. The Stoneman talked to another driver who had a working bus – a Mercedes with crude bench seats fitted in the back – and he agreed to take us for the same price. Stoneman had his daughter with him who was about eight years old and she was ill and so she had to be taken home. We walked back with him to his compound which was a square enclosure largely given over to the growing of vegetables. There were two huts in the compound and a low bantobah. His father was there – one of the few really old men we had seen. There was also a low “barbacoa” for storing vegetables. The Stoneman then called his wife to come and look after their two girls. After about half an hour she arrived and we walked with The Stoneman back to the main road and into the village. On the way we passed a little workshop where several men were busy sewing clothes on treadle sewing machines. Arriving back at the garage around noon we joined our driver and his apprentice for the journey to Yanimarew. The driver was extremely skilful driving his bus over the rutted sandy road which in places had been washed out during the last rains. The trip was bumpy and treacherous but the driver made good progress sliding his bus around like a Finnish Rally driver. On the way we made a couple of stops to discover the best way forward from local villagers. After leaving Wassu on the North Bank Road toward Farafenni we took the second bush road on the left. The first village we passed through was called Sinchu-janau. The next village was Manjumba which The Stoneman told us also had stone circles associated with it. There were two at the entrance to the village and two at the exit. He said there were “mysterious moving lights” associated with these stones. Asked about the appearance of these lights he merely said “They are just mysterious lights!” The next village we passed through was Sinchu Medina. The Stoneman told us that below here in the Gambia River lay the wreck of the Lady Denham – named after the wife of the governor of The Gambia from 1928-30. One of 5 steamers on the Gambia, it sank about 3 miles above Niani Maru after a collision with the steamer Vig 20 in December 1946. It is the subject of a short story called The Man who Came to His Own Requiem in a collection of short stories entitled A Krio Engagement and Other Stories by Nana Husami. Apparently the wreck is still there. Here we passed several women by the roadside splitting rushes to make brushes for sale at the local “Flow Market” which is held in each village on different days. The next village we passed through was called Safaru and had a large mosque in green and white with two small square minarets at the front. The last village was Sankulay Kunda which lay about a mile from Yanimarew.

We arrived at Yanimarew about 1pm having picked up, at Sankulay Kunda, a number of young hitch hikers riding on the outside of the bus. The site was abandoned. There was little there but some fishermen’s huts which were only occupied seasonally by the fishermen. There was a short concrete jetty which was being

used to fill many large plastic water butts and a camp apparently established by French hunters. It was constructed very much in the same style as the camp at Jangjanbureh with African style huts. It too was unoccupied. The Stoneman told us that Yanimarew was originally occupied by the Fula tribe. After the end of the slave trade there were many companies trading to Africa and The Gambia including; CFAO (Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Occidentale) founded in 1887 and still in business in West Africa today, UAC The United African Company formed by merger in 1929 and later absorbed by Unilever, BTC – Barthese Trading Company, Maurel and Prom founded in Bordeaux in 1813 and who built the trading post at Kuntaur, and Maurel Frères another Bordeaux based company, and the African and Eastern Trading Company. These companies imported European goods and exported bees wax, cotton, palm oil and palm kernel. At Yanimarew we found the foundations of a trading post and a marker post with BTC carved on it.

After an hour or so, thinking we needed to be on our way, if we wanted to make the ferry back to Banjul we returned up the track but stopped at Sankulay where we talked to the people of the village and gave sweets to the children. Here we talked to the village elder and the Alcalo of Sankulay Kunda and learned something of the history of Yanimarew.

We left Sankulay Kunda about 3pm bouncing and sliding along the bush road back to Wassu. When we arrived The Stoneman noticed a green tourist taxi parked in the village. We had seen this taxi on the ferry from Banjul the day before and later parked up in Jangjanbureh camp. The Stoneman knew they would be going back to Banjul as they had called in at the stone circles on their way up country. Previously we had agreed to have tilapia and rice cooked by The Stoneman's wife at the museum and have a more measured look around. Then we would stay at a hotel in Kuntaur run by a Dutch woman and her Gambian husband and then The Stoneman would guide us back to Banjul next day since by now it was nearly 4pm and almost impossible to get back by bush taxi that day. However, now The Stoneman suggested we could get back to Banjul that night if we took the tourist taxi but we would have to negotiate this with the tourists and with the driver. He went off to take care of this and of course the Dutch couple who had hired the taxi knew him from their visit to the stone circles. The driver of the taxi negotiated a deal of 1000 Dalasis to take us back to Bijillo.

So we set off in a very old Nissan 4x4 whose driver was clearly in a hurry to make the ferry at Barra and tried to drive at over 70 kph all the way. We stopped briefly in Farafenni to find somewhere to have coffee but before we found Eddie's Disco Bar & Restaurant the driver became anxious to be getting on and so we settled for cokes and water and were off once again travelling fast down the highway. Just after leaving Farafenni the left rear tyre disintegrated and a shower of dust and stones came into the cab through the completely porous and rusted wheel arch. The tread had been completely stripped away and although the tyre didn't burst it was doughnut shaped and down to the cross ply. One of the anchor bolts had sheared off in the process. While the driver changed the wheel some passing African boys stopped to talk to us. Some of them appeared to have severe mouth infections. The Dutch couple gave each of them a pen.

Fifteen minutes later we were barrelling down the road on the spare. Soon after dark the same tyre blew out with sparks, flames and burning rubber completely destroying it. We were in the dark in the middle of nowhere with mangrove swamps on either side of the road, crickets chirping, frogs croaking and fireflies all around, under a clear African sky with the Milky Way high overhead. The driver set up a safety triangle behind us and said we had no choice but to put on the treadless tyre which he changed by the light of our head torches. Another wheel bolt had sheared away. We set off again trying to distribute the load over the good tyre, thinking that there was some involvement of the bodywork in these two blowouts on the same wheel. At first we proceeded more slowly but it was not long before he was touching 70 again. All the while we were in fear of another imminent blowout and disaster. However we managed to reach Barra safely and bought two passenger tickets for the ferry. The port area was crowded with vehicles and passengers waiting for the last ferry and, among the throngs of people, dogs and pigs wandered freely about. Apparently 35 second hand cars had come down from a ship docked in Dakar that day and this had completely filled a couple of ferries and backed up all the traffic. Our driver, who was going to have to spend the night in his taxi as it was not going to get on board that day, managed to find a policeman to guide us on board with the story that we were on our way to the airport to catch a flight. He made arrangements for a friend to meet us on the other side – the port

area of Banjul may well be completely safe in the dead of night but it surely does not look that way. He (and we) were worried that Barra was dangerous at night and we were warned that the boat would be too. We were warned to keep a tight hold on our bags and to keep a tight watch on them for any attempt to slit them open. We waited an hour or so before we could board when we walked down among the trucks and cars coming off the ferry. This ferry – supposedly the 10pm ferry but it was much later than that – would be the last. We headed for one of the downstairs cabins despite its being hot and noisy because it was relatively quiet. The ferry was a battered affair – bars between the cabin and the car deck had been replaced with re-bar and these were all bent out of shape. The windows were either non-existent or broken and a woman placed her baby daughter beneath a broken window with large hanging slivers of glass still in place which seemed on any impact destined to maim or kill her. The ferry took us over to Banjul without incident and we made our way forward so as to get a quick exit and be away – to be honest we'd had enough of being "on Safari". However the ferry was unable to dock. It kept ramming the dock with great force and then it would grind along a good way to port and then grind back a good way to starboard and then back up and take another ramming run at the dock. After half an hour of this with the vehicles, which we were standing among, looking as though their hand brakes would fail at any minute we decided we'd had enough and risky or not we were going to jump. As soon as the ship had rammed the dock hard once more and the gap was relatively narrow we leaped onto the on-ramp and ran down. What a relief. We then had to face an immigration officer demanding to see our papers which foolishly none of us had. Well actually we did but I was not about to say so fearing they would disappear only to be returned for an appropriate fee. Being by this time somewhat overwrought I was pretty forthright with the official telling him as I had not left the country I hardly needed a passport. At this outburst he became a little more conciliatory or at least less aggressive and suggested I need not carry my actual passport but a photocopy should be carried at all times. I thanked him for the advice and we left the port greatly relieved. We were met by our driver's friend in a makeshift mini bus with old sofas in the back. We dropped our Dutch friends in the Bakau area and were then driven back through Senegambia to Bijillo.

We arrived back about midnight and headed for the bar for a couple of beers. The head waiter was staggered to see us and asked, "What has happened to you? You look terrible!" As to the ferry he merely dismissed it as useless and said it was always like that on a falling tide and it could sometimes take well over an hour for it to engage the dock.