

Mano River Anthology

From their notes, journals, and photographs of the five week trip through Guinea and Sierra Leone, the thirteen Fulbright participants have contributed to an anthology. The collection of short articles about their experiences is an additional effort by this diverse group to inform and educate those wanting to have a better understanding of Africa. This anthology is dedicated to M. Alpha Bah and his many years of academic work and scholarship concerning the Mano River Region.

Fulbright GPA 2008: Mano River Region

Timothy D. Brown

Education:

PhD, Education, Capella University

MA, Art History, University of Iowa

BA, Studio Art, Furman University

Awards: Faculty of the Year, Trident Technical College, 1997; Administrator/Manager of the Year, Trident Technical College, 2005; Management Development Program, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2002; Fulbright-Hays; Seminar Abroad Fellowship- Turkey, 1999

Trident Technical College, Dean, Division of Humanities & Social Sciences and Art History Instructor, Charleston, SC.

As I reflect upon my GPA experience in Guinea and Sierra Leone, I recall the visual imagery that either reminded me of my studies in art history or the connections to the South Carolina Lowcountry. What also struck me was the work ethic and optimism of the people there. What follows is a summary of my reflections on that experience. I have organized my thoughts in two parts: (a) the art and how it can be incorporated into my classroom presentations and (b) my impressions of the encounters with the people.

My first reflection relates to the art of the region. One of the main objectives, when I arrived in West Africa, was to study and collect art so that I could somehow return home to incorporate it into my teaching of The Survey of Western Art from the Renaissance to the Present (ART 108). ART 108, because it is so broad, provides so many opportunities for me to discuss not only the connections of West African art to the art and life of the Lowcountry but also the affiliation between West African art and non-Lowcountry artists. My discussion of art will pertain to indigo cloth, woodcarvings, baskets, and quilt designs.

Regarding African indigo cloth, I became more cognizant of the historical significance of indigo to the South Carolina Lowcountry since I have been living here for a little more than two decades now. I think that my students who are South Carolinians can appreciate the history of their home state when I have a class discussion about the indigo cloth. The history of indigo in the Lowcountry is closely connected to Elizabeth (Eliza) Lucas Pinckney. She is given credit for producing the indigo dye on her father's plantation. Though there was a trial and error in the beginning for Pinckney, her persistence led to indigo being a substantial export to England by 1747 (Roberts, 2004). Though she receives that acknowledgment, one has to take into account that the labor of the planting and extracting the dye came from the Africans and African Americans (Roberts; Feaser, 2008). Feaser, in a news brief announcing a series of presentations at Clemson University about the history of indigo in South Carolina, emphasized that Pinckney's success relied heavily on the laborers who had the skill and sophisticated knowledge of cultivation and dye making.

I can take this history of the participation of Africans and African Americans in the success of the indigo production in the Lowcountry and relate that to what I experienced in West Africa. The Fouta Djallon, one of the regions that we visited in Guinea, is known for its indigo cloth (Africa indigo, 2005). It is not a stretch for me to make that connection between the cloth dyers in West Africa with the African and African Americans of the Lowcountry who contributed to Eliza Pinckney being successful in her production of indigo dye. Labé, the capital of the Fouta Djallon, was one of the places that we visited and is known historically for its production of indigo cloth. The several panels (Fig. 1—example in background) that I purchased are some of the art examples that I can bring into the classroom to show a relationship between West Africa and the Lowcountry.

Obviously, when one thinks of the art of Africa, one has to take into account the wooden sculpture, which is the second part of this discussion on the art. I have always been aware of how African wooden sculpture has had an impact on Western European artists like Picasso. In addition, African wooden sculpture also brought to mind the artist Elizabeth Catlett, whose work was the focus of my master's thesis. During my preliminary research on Catlett, I wrote her to ask her about the African sculpture influences on her work. An excerpt of her responses follows:

I saw my first African sculpture in the Howard University Art Gallery when I was a student at Howard around 1932....I think that African wood carvings are the greatest wood carvings in the world....I am impressed by the use of the form to express emotion; by the simplification towards abstraction; by the life and vitality achieved through form relations.(E. Catlett, personal communication, April 23, 1987)

When I arrived in Africa, I was not certain of what types of sculpture I wanted to purchase for my collection, but, in hindsight, I think that Catlett's descriptions must have been on my mind, or at least Catlett's sculpture was, because I think that I was drawn to the type of sculpture that could have been an inspiration for her. The pieces that I was attracted to were simple forms but also boldly stated ones. African sculpture can be abstract but not to the point of being non-representational. The essence of form is there for the viewer. See the examples of African pieces in Figure 1 and compare with a wood carving by Catlett as illustrated at the Marketplace website (2007). These kinds of visual comparisons help the student to see how African sculpture can influence the works of African-American artists and others.

On the subject of baskets, there are very few individuals who are not familiar with the baskets of West Africa and the continuation of that tradition here in the Lowcountry. I was disappointed that I did not buy more baskets, specifically large ones. However, for the baskets that I did purchase, I feel that I got some decent representative pieces. I guess that I had hoped to find larger baskets like the ones that I saw in the film, *Family across the Sea* (Carrier, 1990). One of my colleagues reminded me that one of the reasons why I was not finding the larger baskets in Sierra Leone could be that Sierra Leone may not have fully rebounded artistically because of its Civil War (Sierra Leone, 1999), which brought so much devastation to the country and also must have had an influence on the absence of the arts. Yet, in the small, rather intimate pieces (Fig. 2) that I purchased, I saw great similarities, not surprisingly, to the basket sewing of the Lowcountry. In class presentations, the craftsmanship and influence of the African baskets can be compared not only to the many baskets illustrated in such books by Vlach (1990), and Rosengarten, Rosengarten, and Schildkrout (2008), but also the works by other visual artists whose works have examples of baskets—for example, Jonathan Green's *First Born* of 1988 and S. M-Moss's commemorative sweet grass basket monument (Fig.3) in the town of Mt. Pleasant, SC.

Just as I had made the connections between the baskets, sculpture, and indigo cloth to either the Lowcountry or western artists like Elizabeth Catlett, I also made connections to the quilting designs that I saw and the African American quilting tradition here in the US—especially what I have seen executed by members of my own family. The African American quilting tradition can be traced back to civilizations in Central and West Africa (AAQT). One of those civilizations (the Mande people) was located in Guinea. Apparently, what are prominent in the African quilt designs are large shapes and bold colors. One reason is that it is reminiscent of the tradition for the necessity to recognize people from far distances as this was crucial for [warring] tribes and traveling hunting parties (AAQT). I saw some of those same kinds of patterns and descriptions in the quilting designs in Guinea. In addition, the quilting designs are not only used for what appeared to be for bed covers (Figs.4-5), but they were also used in other areas of Guinea life as in the boat sail (Fig. 6). The large shapes and bold patterns can be found in the designs of quilts made by African American women in South Carolina associated with my own family (Fig. 7). Also, traditional African quilt patterns were not regulated by specific pattern[s]. The quilt maker had a free range to change and alternate the pattern. This technique seems to be a continuation in southern African American quilting traditions.

As demonstrated above, the art of West Africa definitely had an impression on me, but the hospitality of the African peoples had an impact, too. The first week was quite an adjustment for us. Our first road trip was grueling and challenging, to say the least. I was a little uncertain and just a little anxious of the upcoming four weeks or so left in our study. However, I felt at ease when three of my colleagues and I visited a United Methodist church in Bo, Sierra Leone (Fig. 8). After we introduced ourselves during the segment of the service when visitors were recognized, the congregation sang a song to us, blessing us on our travels while we were in this foreign land. I was so moved by this song, and felt that it really set the tone for the hospitality that we would receive while we were there. I also felt at home at this church when I heard speech patterns and inflections that reminded me so much of the Gullah language of the Lowcountry. It seemed that I was listening to one of the elders from See Wee Road in Awendaw, South Carolina.

We felt the hospitality not only in this church and others that we visited but also at a mosque in Kankan, where the men in our group were fortunate enough to meet the imam and other religious leaders. We so gladi foh meet you, is what the imam said to us, as recorded by my colleague, Donald West. When we heard that, it felt as though we were talking to a Gullah resident from the Lowcountry. They even invited us to participate in the evening prayer. What follows is an excerpt from my journal on this experience at the mosque at Kankan:

The grand mosque was absolutely stupendous. It is the largest mosque in Kankan (Fig. 9). It reminds me so much of the interiors of other mosques that I have attended in the past: the repetitive columns and patterned clean carpet on the floor. We, as dictated by custom, removed our shoes before we entered..... We were also there when the caller did the call to prayer. That was the most, or one of the most, spiritual moments that I have been a part of. His voice resonated throughout the entire building after each sound left his lips. We also participated in the prayers as well. That was the first time that I had participated in a worship experience at a mosque. I was very quiet after the prayer when we left the mosque: I contemplated that although we (Christians and Muslims) are from different religious faiths that we worship the same God. Intellectually, I always knew that, but tonight, I really felt it.

I guess that I was very moved by this experience because I felt so honored to receive this invitation to be a part of evening prayer. While I am on the subject of our visits to churches and a mosque, I want to interject that I was just amazed at the coexistence of the two major religions: Islam and Christianity. One of the things that I commented on in my journal was that I like that sense that the Christians and the Muslims exist without friction in this community.

I felt the hospitality no matter what setting we were in, and many of us commented on that. In addition, another impression that I have of the West African peoples is that they are proud of their history. In Guinea, this pride was demonstrated in the impressive collection of artifacts at the National Museum in Conakry and an archival collection of materials at a museum in Boké. One of the guides in Boké said something that was quite profound, and I recorded it as it was translated to us: If you are culturally rich, but materially poor, you [still] have something to hold on to. I think this philosophy exemplifies the Africans' desire to preserve their history. Unfortunately, what we noticed is that, though there is the wish to preserve one's culture, there is a dearth of funding to provide climate control facilities and proper archival storage material to preserve the artifacts. I commented on that in one of my journal entries after we visited the museum at Boké:

Though the Guineans know the significance of preserving one's past, the facility to preserve those items was just heart wrenching! The museum was pretty much open to the elements; there is no climate control. We went to one floor of the museum that just had stacks and stacks of documents just piled on top of one another—again open to the elements with no climate control, no archival system, no hint of cataloging or even an attempt at it. One match and those documents would be lost forever (Fig.10).

In addition to the desire to preserve one's culture via the collection of artifacts, there is also the preservation of culture through the oral tradition. For example, while we were also in Boké, we went to a presentation by the mayor. He read from a very detailed, thick, handwritten document that was based on historical facts and the oral tradition. Though the presentation was for us, many people from the community were also in the audience. We understood that they were there and would also participate in the lecture and add to what the mayor shared with us. To me, it seemed as though this was the oral tradition in action.

This reflection, thus far, has been about the art and my general impressions. A final thought is this: I am still overwhelmed by how this experience has had an impact on me—not just as an educator but as a person. I think that I will carry the memories of Africa with me forever. This was my first time ever on the continent. I hope that it will not be my last.

A panel purchased to bring into the classroom to show a relationship between West Africa and the Lowcountry A small, intimate piece that shows great similarities to the basket sewing of the Lowcountry S. M-Moss's commemorative sweet grass basket monument Guinea quilting designs used for bed covers Guinea quilting designs used for bed covers

Guinea quilting design used for a sail Large shapes and bold patterns can be found in the designs of quilts made by African American women in South Carolina associated with Brown's own family United Methodist church in Bo, Sierra Leone The largest mosque in Kankan Stacks and stacks of documents just piled on top of one another at the museum

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The Audacity of Knowledge

Debanjan Joy Datta

Education:

MAT, Social Studies, The Citadel

BA, Geography, Virginia Tech.

Award: Coached North Charleston Boy's Basketball City Champs in 2008

Alice Birney Middle School, North Charleston, Social Studies Teacher – Grade 7.

If you were to ask me who the president of Sierra Leone currently is, I, like most Americans, would not know and be unable to answer the question. As a matter of fact, like most Americans, I would probably classify the continent of Africa as a country. Most Americans, when confronted with the term Africa, would probably have visions of wild game animals running about, tribesmen in their villages, and jungles teeming with exotic plants. Almost all of my seventh grade students refer to Africa as a country instead of a continent. What they fail to readily understand is that Africa is an extremely diverse continent. It has a multitude of languages, countries, ethnic backgrounds, units of money, religions, physical geographic features, and a host of other categories too numerous to mention. On my recent trip spent in Guinea and Sierra Leone, I most readily noticed the incredible knowledge people had of American culture, politics, and geography.

In Guinea, I was fortunate to meet with an individual who spoke fluent English. Salim was Sierra Leonean and lived about eighty kilometers from Kan Kan. He was in the eastern city of Kan Kan making arrangements for his brother's funeral. As I shared a Coca Cola with him, I became very inquisitive and wanted to know everything about him. He began by discussing his situation and later segued into how American society would one day bring about the downfall of Western civilization. He was convinced that his god would one day punish all Westerners. I continued to listen with an impartial ear. Salim felt as though women in America were too independent and that spiritual guidance was missing with most of them. I briefly imagined telling my wife and daughter that they were too independent. Then I briefly imagined my wife punching me and tagging my daughter's hand so she could finish the job. I very briefly imagined the scenario. In addition, Salim stated that American teenagers seemed disrespectful towards adults and always immersed themselves in materialism. I told him that I did not disagree with the materialism comments, but I noticed most of the young people in Guinea walking around with cell phones, mp3 players, trendy clothing, and sports equipment. Although for the most part, this man made many faulty generalizations, the fact that he had a decent concept of American culture was astonishing.

Early in our trip, an image of Sierra Leone that stood out the most is that of the multitude of Obama 08 posters scattered throughout Freetown and the Obama buttons that many people wore. I realized that these people would not be voting for Obama, so why the fascination, I asked. Like many Americans, many Sierra Leoneans embraced the simple fact that someone of African origin was running for the most powerful office in the United States, if not the world. An African-American...president of the United States...unimaginable...an historic occasion...Someone pinch me. Is his election going to happen in my life time? One Sierra Leonean I distinctly remember is Gabriel Scott, founder of the Freetown Normal School. Not only did he proudly wear his Obama t-shirt, but he was also sporting four Obama campaign buttons. He discussed at length how American policy towards African nations might change with the election of Obama. I quickly reminded him that President Bush had done more for Africa in the form of humanitarian aid than any other US president. Gabriel just smiled and said, ...but he [Bush] is not of African origin like Obama.

As I visited schools in Guinea and Sierra Leone, many of the students were engaged in activities dealing with political and geographic concepts. Whether the students were in primary school or at a university, most were correctly able to identify the geographic locations of their own countries, as well as questions pertaining to Russia, China, Japan, India, and the United States. Their geographic knowledge of the world seemed astounding. Several university students that I spoke with talked about the United States as if they'd visited. They freely and accurately rattled off cities, states, and physical geographic features, such as the Rocky Mountains, with ease. Unfortunately, when I was their age, there would be no way I could possibly even locate Guinea or Sierra Leone on a map.

The chasm of knowledge that the American students have of Africa will hopefully one day inch closer towards the knowledge Leoneans and Guineans have of the United States. It would be extremely unfair for me to categorize my travel in Guinea and Sierra Leone as an in-depth voyage to Africa. That would be like someone from abroad visiting the New England region and bragging about visiting North America. I fully realize that the experience and knowledge of Guinea and Sierra Leone is but a mere scratch for me in the world's geographic and cultural surface. Hopefully one day, I'll be able to say that I have visited, gained first hand knowledge, and learned in depth from the people and geography of what I perceive to be the most misunderstood continent in the world, the continent of Africa.

A Trip to Mother Africa

Curtis J. Franks

Education:

MA, History, Jackson State University

BA, History, St. Augustine's College

Advisor to SUMA the African American Student Association, College of Charleston, member of the African American Museum Association. Advisor of the African American Students Association, CofC.

Avery Research Center for African American History & Culture, College of Charleston,

Director of Museum Education and Exhibits, Charleston, SC.

At long last, I am finally on the continent affectionately and accurately referred to as Mother Africa, the Cradle of Civilization, home of all humanity. That's what I thought when our plane from Paris landed at a dimly lit airport in Conakry, Guinea. I would venture to say that the majority of our group had similar thoughts and feelings.

Shortly after our arrival, a gentle rain began to fall, a reminder that it was indeed the rainy season. I interpreted this also as a sign of Mother Africa's place in the giving of life. It portended good things for the trip and for those on the journey, if we were willing to be flexible. Therein lay the key to the trip: to be flexible and prepared to make adjustments, in schedules and attitudes, on the fly.

As I wrote in the last issue of the Avery Messenger, funding from the Fulbright Hays Group student-abroad project made it possible for me to travel and study in Guinea and Sierra Leone with 11 other educators from the Charleston area for approximately 35 days this summer. Selection was competitive in nature. Each of us was required to submit written proposals explaining how the trip to the Mano River region of West Africa would expand and enhance our base of knowledge, and how the experience might be shared with others.

My opportunity to share this experience involves the numerous programs and projects that the Avery Research Center sponsors that pertain to the African imprint on the history and culture of the Lowcountry. The area under consideration has been one of the main areas of focus for Avery and its collections, especially the English-speaking countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone. However, we have few holdings that relate to Guinea. Thus, the Fulbright grant afforded me an opportunity to collect materials from Guinea to add to the Center's collections. In my proposal, I stated that, while in Guinea, I would collect and document architecture, textiles, food ways, music, musical instruments, landscape, adornment, and art.

Throughout the trip, adaptability and flexibility were key. The journey was arduous as we traveled by van, jeep, small boat, moped, motorbikes, and foot over terrain that one simply would have to witness to believe. Long stretches of the roads were not only unpaved but had huge holes as well. The journey from Conakry, Guinea, to Freetown, Sierra Leone, ordinarily takes no more than nine hours; we spent almost 15 hours on that trip. The various modes of transportation were required if we were to experience the diversity of the area—that is, the diversity of ethnic groups and landscapes, and how those two key concepts manifest themselves in the architecture (urban and rural, traditional and modern) and the flora and fauna.

Our itinerary included visits to slave fortresses (Bunce Island in Sierra Leone; Boké, Boffa, and Farenिया in Guinea); museums, colleges, and universities; churches and mosques; markets and clothing cooperatives; and various industries (bauxite plants in Fria and Kamsar, Guinea). Throughout our travels,

I was amazed at the variety of the landscape, especially in Guinea, where the majority of our time was spent.

We saw clear evidence of the linkages between the Mano River region and the Lowcountry of South Carolina and the Sea Islands. This was especially the case in Freetown and Bo in Sierra Leone and in Kan Kan and Kamsar, Guinea. The prevalence of brightly painted, decorative wrought-iron doors and gates reminded me of Charleston's architecture.

On the trip to Bo, Sierra Leone's second largest city, we immediately became aware of the natural beauty of the rural countryside: lush green grass, some of it similar to the Lowcountry's sweetgrass, stately palmetto trees, and tropical fruit trees, all heavily loaded.

In Bo, as in many rural areas in West Africa, the majority of the structures are made of a thick, mud-based brick that resembles stucco. The structures are conical in shape, with thatched roofs on top of sticks. Usually, several huts or traditional houses encircle a compound. Separate from the main buildings is the cooking area or kitchen, which has a thatched roof but is open around the sides, gazebo-like.

Throughout the rural areas, we saw from the road numerous mortars and pestles, which reminded us of the importance of rice in West Africa. Centuries ago, labor and ingenuity provided by enslaved Africans from this same region were directly responsible for the cultivation of rice in colonial South Carolina. Another common and familiar site is the fanner basket, used to winnow rice. In Bo, we viewed rice fields and the tools and instruments used to prepare rice for consumption.

In Bo, several people in our group attended St. Augustine's Methodist Church. The service was very uplifting and was driven by the familiar call-and-response method of singing and preaching. The service was rendered in Mende, English, and Krio, and the Krio resonated with us right away due to its linguistic kinship to the Gullah language. (We also encountered a Krio speaker while attending a Muslim prayer service in Kan Kan, Guinea.)

Besides these connections with the Lowcountry, we were particularly struck by the reminders of the civil war in Sierra Leone, which ended in 2002 after about a decade of fighting. We saw amputees playing soccer on the beach. We visited Njala University in Bo, which was destroyed during the civil war. By Western standards, the university library is nonexistent, with very few volumes and subject areas. It was heartbreaking, but the reality is that university officials are starting over. (Members of the Fulbright delegation donated books and supplies and made a monetary contribution to the school.)

To complicate matters further, the university and the nation are dealing with day-to-day issues of survival. Officials at the university stated very clearly that their objective is to make education more practical and less theoretical. They feel that their challenge is to develop an educational system which will result in the production of food for the nation. Throughout our travels in both Guinea and Sierra Leone, there seemed an urgent need to produce food for a large segment of the population.

The church we visited was founded at the onset of the civil war and served as a refuge for the people of Bo throughout the war and after. It was quite obvious to us the importance assigned to the church by its congregants. In fact, the church, which was sizable, was filled to capacity, with some of the congregation seated in folding chairs in the aisle. As was the case throughout our time in West Africa, the people in the church were extremely hospitable to us. On numerous occasions we benefited from the importance

that Africans, regardless of their ethnicity, assign to interpersonal relationships, as well as the practice of a very special and unique kind of African humanism.

A pervasive optimism, which appeared to be infectious, was especially evident in Bo, despite the devastating impact on the area's resources, human and otherwise. In fact, it was through the stories of the people that survived the civil war that we began to get a sense of the war's enormity: the relatives and acquaintances killed, the natural materials needed to make baskets and other items destroyed.

Throughout our travels, we made presentations to students in colleges and universities, public and parochial schools, and community groups. We were always accorded respect, and the students were very attentive. But, at the end of the day, invariably the question from them was, How will your time here studying and sharing benefit us concretely? Of course, the same question now is being posed on the back end of the trip. As a partial answer, I offer the following: as a grateful beneficiary of the Fulbright Program, I have and will continue to speak and write about the experience, offering my perspective of the African connections.

In closing, let me say how truly grateful I am to have had the opportunity to travel to the Mano River region of West Africa under Fulbright Hays' sponsorship. The trip afforded me the opportunity to add to the Avery Research Center's material culture holdings, as well as its photographic collection. Additionally, the trip provided opportunities to document the diversity in landscape, architecture, ethnicities, and other facets of life in the region, a region in which people of African descent in this area have very strong historical and cultural connections. Though the area is still impacted by the recent civil war, Africans in each of the respective countries are forging ahead in a very optimistic and positive manner. As was stated in a National Geographic Magazine issue on Africa (September 2005), Despite all its problems, African peoples produce magnificent art, graceful cultures, terrific music, great works of the mind, and astounding acts of political and moral courage. All of these were on display during our visit to West Africa. All of them will remain indelible in and on the minds and hearts of those who made that journey and who have promised to share their experiences with others.

Seeing West Africa: Notes from a Traveler

C. Ann McDonald

Education:

PhD, English, Vanderbilt, University

MA, English, Vanderbilt, University

BA, Literary Studies, University of Texas at Dallas

Trident Technical College, English Instructor, Charleston, SC.

I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad, after all, sailed down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms, and recorded what he saw. How could I stand up in 1975, fifty years after his death and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's.

— Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*

On Feb. 18, 1975, Chinua Achebe first presented *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness* at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In that speech, he states that Joseph Conrad, despite the fact that the novel did indeed criticize European imperialism in general and the atrocities committed in the Congo Free State in particular, was a bloody racist. At the heart of Achebe's criticism is the understanding that *Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. Achebe's point here is a good one: Africa is often seen through Western eyes as primitive, less civilized than Western nations and therefore in need of either aide or conversion. In other words, Westerners see Africa as a place to be either rescued or conquered.

Plenty examples of this Western view abound. Mohamed N'Daou, the Fulbright scholar who went with us to Guinea and Sierra Leone in the summer of 2008, noted that the image of starving African children with extended bellies, protruding rib cages, and flies crawling from their mouths permeates the Western imagination. Though this image, often used by charitable organizations to inspire donations that would end world hunger, pertains to specific African countries during various time periods, it has become associated in the minds of many Westerners with all of Africa. Accepting this single image to represent the entire continent of Africa would, however, be like using pictures of men in food lines during the Great Depression, or photographs of people sleeping in the Louisiana Superdome in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, to embody all of North America. The pictures below, taken in Guinea and Sierra Leone, stand as testimony to Professor N'Daou's response to such a generalized depiction of African life: Our children do not have flies in their mouths.

In my effort to avoid overgeneralizations, I do not wish to downplay the real need for economic advancement in many parts of Africa. However, though humanitarian efforts are needed in parts Africa, as they are in all parts of the world, there is an inherent problem in viewing all of Africa as indigent and therefore in need of Western aide. As Achebe puts it:

The kind of liberalism espoused [in *Heart of Darkness*] by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe, and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. That extraordinary missionary Albert Schweitzer, who sacrificed brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans in much the same area as Conrad writes about, epitomizes the ambivalence. In a comment which I have often quoted but must quote one last time Schweitzer says: The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother. And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being.

In other words, this kind of charitable perspective is ultimately condescending, placing Africa in a position of inferiority as the junior brother— akin to, yes, but less advanced than the West. Thus, we see, all in the name of charity, gross misunderstandings that lead to a depiction of African culture(s) as inferior to English, European, and North American culture(s).

One such example is the America Idol *Idol Gives Back* campaign. In a segment filmed for the broadcast of this television event, Simon Cowell — moving in slow motion through scenes filmed on a trip to an unidentified part of Africa while the sad piano strains and remorseful vocals of a Coldplay song assure us that I never meant to cause you trouble,/ I never meant to do you wrong — interrupts a woman whose home he has entered to tell her, as she tries to explain why things are not in good condition, that in fact her home is in terrible condition. At the end of the footage, as he walks over mounds of garbage, Cowell exclaims, This is quite literally hell on Earth.¹ In these scenes, Cowell, as well-intentioned and sympathetic as he may seem, participates in an orchestrated depiction of Africa as generally horrific. His moral outrage at the hellish conditions he encounters is the reaction of the senior brother, as it were, who must step in and take over for a badly managed continent that fails to meet his standards. Furthermore, the campaign assures us that by simply picking up the phone we can save the impoverished continent through our charitable donations. A highlight of the campaign? Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown, in 2008, pledged to donate 20 million mosquito nets at a cost of approximately 197 million dollars.² This pledge recalls Achebe's criticism of Schweitzer, who built a hospital with substandard hygienic practices to meet the needs of his junior brother.

I do not mean to suggest here that we should turn our backs on Africans in need. The point, however, is this: the images that come into the homes of America via the *Idol Gives Back* campaign are filtered through the eyes of those who have travelled to Africa and brought back a singular depiction of an expansive continent, and, as Achebe tells us, travellers can be blind. Accepting this depiction as the sole definition of African life is tantamount to believing that the *Idol Gives Back* segments about poverty in New York, New Orleans, and East L.A. provide a balanced, all-encompassing view of life in the U.S.A. In his essay, Achebe turns the lens around, inviting us to view the idea of foreign aid from his perspective, when he offers a vision of the West as the recipient of much needed assistance from Africa:

Perhaps a change will come. Perhaps this is the time when it can begin, when the high optimism engendered by the breathtaking achievements of Western science and industry is giving way to doubt and even confusion. There is just the possibility that Western man may begin to look seriously at the achievements of other people. I read in the papers the other day a suggestion that what America needs at this time is somehow to bring back the extended family. And I saw in my mind's eye future African Peace Corps Volunteers coming to help you set up the system.

Achebe's vision of an African Peace Corps allows western culture to see itself through different eyes, no longer the helper—heading into the underprivileged African hell on Earth, armed with donations, medical supplies, and a slight contempt masked by pity—but the helped.

As I've said, Africa is depicted in Western culture as not only impoverished but also as savage. Achebe addresses this depiction as well, suggesting that the Western mind has a psychological need to see Africa as less civilized:

Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparing it with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity, it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently, Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity. Keep away from Africa, or else!

Here, Achebe claims that, for the West, Africans are to be either pitied or feared. When we prepared for our trip to West Africa, I encountered people who responded to the news that I would travel to that part of the world in ways that represented both views. For every person who either asked if I was bringing back a baby or let me know — as did the woman who assured me her preteen daughter would love to go to Africa and just get down there on the ground with those babies and hug them all — that they approved of what they assumed was my missionary venture, someone else recoiled in horror when I announced my travel plans. Wasn't I afraid that I would stand out as American because of my white skin? Wasn't I afraid of the violence? Wasn't I afraid of the bugs? Wasn't I afraid of the lions? Wasn't I afraid of the water? Wasn't I afraid to be in a world where no one spoke my language, ate my food, dressed, looked, acted, or thought like I do?

I have travelled before, but no one ever asked, when I was planning a trip to Ireland, France, Hawaii, or Canada, if I thought I'd surely meet my doom once I left my homeland and embarked on a journey into the great unknown. I cannot say if what I experienced in Guinea and Sierra Leone is typical of the entire continent, but I can tell you that none of the Americans in our group, regardless of their skins' hue, passed through Africa without their nationality being known; I can honestly say that I have heard more news reports of violence on American than West African soil; I know that, for quite some time, lions have not been seen in either Guinea or Sierra Leone; I encountered fewer bugs in West Africa than I did on an outing to a nature reserve in Charleston; I drank, as I do on this side of the Atlantic, bottled water that was readily available in the numerous markets and convenience stores that also sold toothpaste, cookies, mangoes, and cards with minutes for the ever-present cell phone; I had, largely due to the multi-lingual abilities of the West African people, very little trouble communicating while I was gone; I wore, as Mohamed N'Daou advised me to do before I packed to go, my own clothes; and I found that the food, most likely due to the influence of West Africa on traditional Southern cuisine, tasted like coming home.

I have to admit that the threat of violence was not what one might call a non-issue. On the night we arrived at the airport in Conakry, the capital city of Guinea, we heard, as we walked with our bags to the van that would become almost our second home, popping sounds in the distance. Though we tried to assure ourselves that the sounds were caused by fireworks, they were, as we feared, gunshots. In fact, had we arrived one day later, we would not have been allowed to enter the country. As it was, when we travelled a few days later from Guinea to Sierra Leone, we had to delay our trip back to Conakry as we waited for the Guinean government to resolve an issue that had caused the threat of a military coup. They did, however, resolve that issue, and, rather than coming away from that experience with the feeling that I had been in danger, I came away instead with a feeling of respect for the leaders of Guinea because, despite the threat of it, the government had avoided violence through negotiation.

I have one last point to make: seeing other cultures challenges us to meet the unfamiliar with an openness that may be hard to find, since we often look through blinders that we don't even know are in place and therefore cannot truly see that which is right in front of our eyes. At the beginning of the Idol Gives Back segment, Ryan Seacrest, travelling in Africa with Simon Cowell, asks a man who is preparing to take them on a day tour through an African city, So tell us what we're going to see today. The man answers, It's different from wherever you're used to. Placed in the context of the Idol Gives Back message, this man's statement seems to forebode the visual unfolding of a world of misery and poverty that the viewer has yet to see; however, the man's answer can also be taken as a reminder that what we see when we visit another culture is just that—different—and the challenge is to see that which is unlike our own world for what it is, not for what we imagine it to be. Perhaps the most difficult thing to do is to see difference and not interpret it through one's preconceived notions of the world. As Achebe states, Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad, with xenophobia, can be astonishingly blind. As much as Conrad, as much as Cowell, I went to Africa with a Western lens through which to view the land, the people, and the cultures I encountered. Ultimately, I know that my experience in West Africa has given me a new way of seeing that region, but I also know that I have only seen a very small part of a very big continent, and that, try as I might, I have not been able to see through a culturally unbiased lens. I hope, however, that I opened my eyes and mind to the things I saw while travelling through Guinea and Sierra Leone so that I have brought back with me at least a clearer view. Like Achebe, I realize that, although the work which needs to be done may appear too daunting . . . it is not one day too soon to begin.

1 Watch for yourself at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyV_0Hb2n4Y.

2 See British PM pledges to donate 20 million mosquito nets. Apr 9, 2008.
<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5iC-eWBHlmchZx0o9zB13ldJob1SQ>.

Visiting a Malinke Village in the interior of Guinea

Mark Nadobny

Education:

National Board Certification, Early Adolescent/Social Studies/History

MA, Secondary Education, Social Studies, Northern Kentucky University

BS, Social Science, University of Cincinnati

BA, Secondary Education, Social Studies, New York State University

AA, Liberal Arts, Nassau Community College

Moultrie Middle School, Mount Pleasant, SC, chair of the Social Studies Dept, World, US, & South Carolina History teacher—Grade 8. Trident Technical College Adjunct Professor.

It's been nearly eight months since I've returned from my Fulbright trip to West Africa, and I still regularly reflect upon the many experiences, people, and opportunities I'm fortunate enough to now include in my compilation of travel experiences. As an educator, I routinely try to incorporate my many travel experiences into the classroom. This Fulbright trip to West Africa has proven to be a windfall of knowledge for me, regarding not only the further understanding of underlying and related historical events but also a more profound insight into the livelihood of populations of a different region of the world. In particular, this experience has allowed me to immerse myself in a completely foreign cultural setting of which I normally would never have been able to experience. When charged with the task of selecting one instance or moment from the hundreds that were lived over the course of the five weeks spent in West Africa, I find that the undertaking becomes rather daunting. Naturally, there are several that immediately come to mind; however, when considering the motivation to do justice to so many people and places that we visited, the task suddenly becomes a bit of a challenge. After much deliberation, I've chosen to discuss one particular opportunity a visit to a Malinke village in the Fouta Djallon region while in transit from Dabola to Kankan, Guinea.

In what seemed to be a spur of the moment decision, the procession of vehicles the Fulbright team was traveling in pulled over to the side of the road as we passed an apparent example of a typical Malinké village. The leader of the Fulbright team introduced himself to some of the village members and explained our purpose as educators, where we were from, and that we would like to visit the village and meet with some of the people. Quite graciously, but with some apprehension, we were invited into the village to have what in my opinion would be one of the defining moments of the Fulbright experience.

We were first directed into a courtyard area where some informal introductions were made. The Fulbright members then dispersed into smaller groups to explore the village. After traveling through West Africa for nearly four weeks and admiring the many scenes before me, I regularly took interest in the brick huts with thatched roofs that seemed to dominate the rural communities. With this curiosity in mind, I made it a point to study one of these huts, of which the village mainly consisted of, up close. A family invited several of the Fulbright members into their home, and I promptly followed. Once inside, I first realized how comfortable and secure it felt. I had my reservations from impressions made from the outside; however, once inside, I was able to observe the sturdy construction of the roof and inner walls. Though I only spent several minutes in the home, I was overly impressed, as well as convinced of its suitability to the environment and general conditions of West Africa. Before leaving the home for other observations in the village, I noticed a chicken in the doorway and took the picture located below to the left. To me, this image symbolized the simplicity and calmness of the life that surrounded me all this

time while in the West African countryside and only at this moment did I fully realize it. The picture located to the right is of me squatting in the doorway of the hut.

After leaving the home I continued on, with other members of the team, to another building that seemed to resemble a storage and/or cooking area. There were several benches situated around two sets of rocks that seemed to hint that it was some type of cooking or work area. The few items that were scattered in and around the sight were rudimentary in appearance but most certainly hand-constructed by a village craftsman. I was even under the slight suspicion that this was a place to bake bread as there existed a smaller door, built into the side of the building and in the locality of the supply of twigs and sticks for burning. Just to the right of the pile of wood I noticed a mortar and pestle arrangement and asked some nearby people about it. They very graciously instructed me on the proper use of it and allowed me to have myself photographed using the tools. I was overly intrigued by the surroundings I was in and eager to see more of the Malinké village. I can recall pondering the fact that in the year 2008, some people still live in a traditional way in West Africa, while in other regions of the world, such as in Charleston, SC, people live quite differently. I concluded that it's all relevant to one's culture and surroundings and that varying cultural perspectives need to be considered regarding what is the norm or expected within a living environment. Below left is a picture of the above described setting, and to the

After expressing my gratitude for their hospitality, I realized that the group was starting to assemble in the courtyard where we had initially started. By this point, word had spread throughout the village that foreigners were visiting, and thus a large gathering of children started to congregate in the courtyard area. Once rejoining the group, we took up a small collection of money to offer to the men and women of the village as a token of our appreciation for allowing us to visit and observe their way of life. It is at this point that I felt a connection to the village and its people, and I arranged to have a picture taken with the children. This particular experience was a memorable one for me, as I was able to make a true connection with the people of West Africa. There were many different personal goals of the various individuals of the Fulbright team, and mine was to learn more about the city of Charleston, SC by visiting one of its many but also least understood historical roots. It's through this experience that I've been able to understand further what makes, if you may, a Charlestonian, an acknowledged connection to West Africa.

It was early in the trip, while walking the streets of Freetown, Sierra Leone, where I first came to realize that what I had been looking for was literally in the faces of the people around me. Through the physical features of the people of West Africa I was able to see my students and realize that they were undoubtedly distant cousins separated by a tragic history. Not until the closing weeks of the trip was I able to finally understand the true connection between West Africa and the Lowcountry region of the United States. This relationship is with the people who are merely separated by distance, time, and culture but connected in spirit.

Fulbright Hays Participants: African Travel Stories and the Construction of Inner African Observers

Saidou Mohamed N'Daou

Education:

PhD, History, University of Minnesota

Science and Applied Social Sciences Academy (Sofia-Bulgaria): Specialization in Social Studies

BA Institut Polytechnique Gamal Abdel Nasser de Conakry (Diplome d'Etudes Supérieures)

Member of Faculty Senate; Member of A&S Honors Council; Member of Council of International Studies, African Studies Association, Manden Studies Association & Association des Historiens de Guinée; and affiliate Faculty of the African American Studies Program

Chicago State University, Department of History, Political Science, & Philosophy, Professor of History.

Fulbright Hays Mano River participants have learned to cross cultural bridges, in order to meet the African Other in the African cultural environment. This is what I told myself after I read the stories that the Fulbright Hays participants have written about their one-month-travel in Guinea and Sierra-Leone in the summer of 2008. It is my final general assessment of the cultural impact of the study abroad project, organized and implemented by Donald West, of Trident Technical College (South Carolina). I participated in all the important stages of the project, as a guest speaker before the field activities; a liaison with the Guinean Government; and a travel guide and advisor in Guinea and Sierra-Leone. I intend to tell a short story of my participation, focusing on the intellectual development of the Fulbright Hays participants. The story is structured to reflect these two forms of participation and the insights I got from them.

As a guest speaker, I engaged the participants in a debate that challenged them to transcend the limitations of their academic training by answering two questions about the 1871 Foton War between the Fulani and the Dialonka of Sangalan (Guinea). The two questions are concerned with the outcome of the war and the identity of the producer(s) of the text on the 1871 Foton War. After reading the story about the 1871 War, the Fulbright scholars were asked to answer these questions: Who won the war? and Who (is) (are) the author(s) of the story? I was certain that, until they had discovered the perspective of the producer(s) of the story, they would not have answered correctly the two questions. Failing to do so, they could have only projected and consequently rediscovered their own intellectual perspectives.

This hypothesis was confirmed by the answers to the related question, is this (story) history? Because of the fact that the characters in the story were not only human but also animal and supernatural beings, with the capacity to influence the outcome of historical events, all the participants believed the account of the 1871 Foton War to be partly legend, myth, and even a tale. Considering the dates and the names of people and places used in the story, the Fulbright scholars also believed that the story was partly history. Almost all of them considered the Fulani to be the winners of the war because these are the characters that are presented as military troops -- with ample military supplies, benefiting from the resources and the drafting of soldiers in all the nine provinces of the theocratic Empire of the Futa Jalon --compared to the natural and human resources of Sangalan, not bigger than one Fulani province. As another supporting material for their argument, the scholars also used the fact that the Dialonka of Foton committed a collective suicide after their military commander was caught and killed by the Fulani. The majority of the scholars dismissed the idea that a living-dead ancestor of the Sangalanka reversed the course of the war by inflicting a military defeat on the Fulani by drowning them in the Dimma River. But how can we make sense of the ending of the story, which emphasizes the idea of the Fulani's defeat and the return of only few of them to Futa Jalon to serve as the witnesses of the Sangalanka's victory? The scholars who accepted the definition of the ancestor as a living force declared the Sangalanka as the

winner of the war. However, they did not know how to account for the impact of the collective suicide in Foton. During the debate, the scholars complained that the story does not tell the reader how many soldiers died and how many of them survived. The concern for numbers, people, names, dates, places, recorded events, historical figures, visual images, words, and concepts reflects the difference of perspective between the Fulbright scholars and the Sangalanka, which one can trace back to the two groups' cultural training. The scholars have been trained to value the material and secular aspects of life, whereas the Sangalanka believe in the spiritual essence life.

What is implicit in the account of the Foton War is the belief that only the descendants of the ancestors who own the land and have continued to protect Sangalan against its enemies deserve to be leaders of Sangalan. The story gives the Keita Dombiyane all the credits for the successful past resistance of the Sangalanka against the Fulani. It makes the claim that this group and its ancestor were the defenders of the Sangalanka, during the 1871 Foton War. In the context of the political struggle for power in pre-colonial and colonial Sangalan, the Keita elite used their account of the Foton War to position themselves as the owners of the land and the legitimate leaders of Sangalan. The point of entry of the story is the first paragraph that defines Foton as a social entity that was integrated in Sangalan, through the Keita group of villages. The Fulbright scholars, who did not have this vital knowledge concerning the sociology of Sangalan, could not understand that the story is artistically constructed, with the aim of representing the 1871 Foton War as a war between the Keita Dombiyane of Foton and the Fulani of Futa Jalon. In the story, the other Sangalan groups of villages are either ignored or simply represented as just those of the other Sangalanka, who did not come on time to help the Dombiyane in war with the Fulani. A collective impact of the story is that the Keita have constructed a usable past, which would have transformed a negative outcome of the 1871 Foton War into a victory, a source of pride for all Sangalanka. This claim of victory is the outcome of a cultural logic, rooted in the Sangalanka's ancestral beliefs.

The Fulbright scholars needed to transcend their cultural limitations, in order to cross the bridge that leads to the Sangalanka's cultural space (i.e., their inner and outer worlds). Is this possible? There is a debate over this issue that does not seem to end. It is not my intention to revisit it. My story is about what I did to help the Fulbright scholars meet Africans in their own cultural settings and interact with them, without unconsciously projecting their culture during the encounter.

My presentations at Trident Technical College were all about social representation and identity construction, which best draw attention on visualization through the concepts and other material supports of ideas-images used by the cultural producers. Like these presentations, the story of the 1871 Foton war is a text, consisting of one system of ideas-images that is associated with one system of material supports of ideas-images. The material supports of ideas-images illustrate, materialize the ideas-images.

The constant immersion into constructed texts produces culture, an ensemble of the producers' valued ideas-images and material cultures. The deconstruction of the story of the Foton war allowed the Fulbright scholars to meet mentally the African Other on his/her own cultural ground. They learned that reading the story of the Foton war is essentially dealing with the Sangalan cultural producer(s) on an unfamiliar mental territory.

In Africa, I used many examples to demonstrate this idea of cultural encounter with the Other. In Sierra Leone, I used my joking with the Fulani to reveal the culture that justifies it. At the market, I told the Fulbright scholars that the group of Fulani with whom we were dealing were my slaves, and I added that by nature, they are thieves because of their ancestors. I also used my knowledge of the traditional technique of negotiation to cut better financial deals for the American guests. I always went for half of what the Fulani asked for and negotiated to get what was acceptable for all of us. The scholars learned that the joking with the Fulani was not racism, stereotyping, or ethnocentrism. It is a device that creates peace and unity between two different groups (king and his subordinates, Fulani and Susu, Mandinka and Kisi, man and woman, old enemies etc). The Fulani and the Sangalanka were old enemies because of the Fulani's conquest of Futa Jalon and their numerous attempts to conquer Sangalan. Today, they are allies, thanks to their culturally-invented joking alliance. Because of my mother's Fulani tradition, the Fulani are my uncles with whom I can joke and even insult without making them angry. To the contrary, the Fulani can easily guess on the identity of the joking ally and find the appropriate defense against his culturally constructed opponent. It is this type of alliance that I had with Alpha Bah, in the Fulbright group. The Fulbright scholars became very comfortable with the joking, after they understood its meaning. For example, the Fulbrighter Lisa was my Fulani onto whom I projected my anti-Fulani jokes. She defended herself very well, exhibiting her Fulani pride.

Through bargaining and joking, the Fulbrighters deeply immersed themselves into the African culture. They did not only know, but they also experienced the African culture, combining the ideas and the feelings associated with them. The papers that the Fulbrighters wrote about their experiences in Africa provide the evidence for the positive impacts of their deep immersion in the African culture. They did not become Africans, but they have cultivated an inner space in them that will always allow them to meet and deal with Africans, their human fellows. All of the written stories are about the producers' personal experiences and their capacity for self-expression. All the topics focus on the African Other and the Fulbrighters' perception of Africans in Africa, classroom and/or in the texts. The authors have found their own way of seeing Africans and relating to them. They have elevated their understanding to the level of a rational discourse that will certainly reflect itself in the lives and professions of the Fulbright scholars.

Cultural Detective: Finding Artifacts Related to Rice Cultivation while in the Mano River Region

Elaine Nichols

Education:

MA, Public Service Archaeology, University of South Carolina

MS, Social Administration (Planning), Case Western Reserve University

BA, Political Science, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Awards: Who's Who Among African Americans, National Council of Negro Women, The YMCA Family Center Award South Carolina State Museum, Columbia, SC, Curator of History, Exhibits Curator Museum Guide. Also Storyteller, South Carolina Humanities Council.

South Carolina and the Mano River Region of West Africa share many cultural and historical connections. Most importantly, there is a major linkage between rice and the cultural legacy of the people. During the 18th century, the importation of rice into South Carolina and the enslavement of people from the Senegambia region of West Africa were essential to the economic survival of the Palmetto State.

For thousands of years, African rice developed as wild species. Ultimately, villagers began to cultivate fields by flooding the rice plants during the growing season, which naturally eliminated weeds, maintained optimal temperatures, and increased its yield. West Africans began to develop more elaborate methods for growing rice through controlled irrigation.¹

When South Carolina was established in 1670, the original English settlers from Barbados brought enslaved Africans with them. According to Charles Joyner, the early technological knowledge [for cultivating rice] was supplied by African, not Europeans, as the Europeans had no knowledge or experience with rice culture... at all²

Elizabeth Allston Pringle, daughter of Robert F.W. Allston wrote,

Only the African race could have made it possible or profitable to clear the dense cypress swamps and cultivate them in rice by a system of flooding the fields from the river by canals, ditches, or floodgates, drawing off the water when necessary, and leaving these wonderfully rice lands dry for cultivation.³

In July 2007, I, along with 12 other scholars/educators, was awarded a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship to visit Guinea and Sierra Leone between May 2008 and June 2008. My goals were to examine cultural connections (primarily related to material culture and rice) between the people of Sierra Leone, Guinea, and South Carolina and to establish relationships with museum professionals, scholars, institutional leaders and residents in Sierra Leone and Guinea for future exchange programs.

My specific objectives were to find examples of artifacts related to rice cultivation, such as agricultural implements (hoes, flailing sticks, winnowing baskets, mortars and pestles, etc.) used in planting, processing, storing, cooking, and consuming rice. I wanted to explore the ways in which cultural traditions associated with rice in South Carolina were similar to or different from the traditions in Sierra Leone and Guinea. This included how the people used their agricultural implements, as well as the manner of processing, preparing, and eating rice.

The search for artifacts and information was a circuitous route, and the following comments reflect the journey as well as the results of the search. My first opportunity to talk with anyone about rice, as well as to collect appropriate artifacts, occurred when we visited Bo, Sierra Leone. Bo, the second largest city in Sierra Leone, is about 140 miles south of Freetown, the capitol, and was one of the most memorable places that we visited. The people were extremely friendly and very generous towards us.

On May 31, 2008, we left Freetown around 9 am. The drive was pleasant, even though we traveled on mostly unpaved roads, and it was extremely hot and humid. We arrived at the Sir Milton Hotel around 5 pm. My room was at the back end of the second floor hallway. There was no light either in the hallway or in the room, and there were only a few occupants on the floor. Karen Stewart-Cain and Lisa Randle graciously agreed to let me share their room, which had a queen-sized bed, was at the front of the hotel, and had lights.

The following morning was spent visiting Bo (Njala) University. We returned to the hotel in the early afternoon, and several of us went to the market place looking for educational objects and souvenirs. I enjoyed the market place and all of the sights, sounds and smells, but I was not successful in finding any research objects.

Later that day, Curtis Franks (Avery Research Center), Lisa Randle (College of Charleston), and I went with Douce, a local resident and well-respected businesswoman, to find a place to purchase a mortar, pestle, and fanner basket. We walked to an area near the Methodist Church, but they had closed for the day. We walked down the main street in the area near a Lebanese grocery store, but none of the shops had either a mortar and pestle or a basket. We continued walking beyond the outskirts of town, stopping at several places along the way.

We passed many stores that had signs advertising their goods or services. In Guinea and in Sierra Leone, vendors often used beautiful visual images to advertise their businesses, which made it easy and fun to identify a particular business. The hair salon had drawings of women with stylish micro-braids or fancy coifs, and the bridal shop had a life-sized image of a bride wearing a traditional, white European-style wedding gown.

Finally, after about two hours of walking from one end of Bo to the other, Douce took us to the place where she had recently purchased her own mortar and pestle. The person did not have any in stock. I asked Douce if I could buy her mortar and pestle. She was very reluctant but eventually agreed to sell them to me. She described and then demonstrated how she used her mortar and pestle to pound rice. The method was the same as the historical accounts that I have read about enslaved Africans in South Carolina. In African homes and restaurants, rice was typically served with a meat or fish stew and could be eaten with the fingers or flatware. Today, it is cooked over a three-stone hearth or with modern cooking equipment, depending on the place and the individuals.

We went to Douce's house, where we met her husband and daughter. Although she could not find the pestle, she sold me the mortar, which I took back to the hotel. She brought the pestle to the hotel later that evening. The wooden mortar, about 18 high and 12 wide, was made from a small, hollowed-out tree trunk. The mortar was held between the knees, and the pestle was inserted into the mortar to pound the rice to remove the husk from the grain.

The next day, Victor, a young man who was in his late 20s or early 30s and the self-proclaimed concierge for our group, went to the market place and found a large fanner basket. I was able to photograph individuals pounding rice in a mortar and pestle.

Although I observed several women and girls winnowing rice in Guinea and Sierra Leone, I was unable to photograph them. Their technique of tilting the basket back and forth with a slight bounce to allow the wind to blow away the chaff was similar to that of enslaved African Americans. The persons that I saw fanning the rice did not want to be photographed, and I respected their wishes. They stopped when I started observing them. I was unsure if they regarded my watching them as an invasion of their privacy, or if they simply could not understand why an everyday work activity provoked such attention from a stranger.

My collecting experiences in Bo were just the beginning of the process. When we returned to Guinea, I saw similar practices and material examples in Conakry, in an upland Malinké village, in Labé, and in Kankan. These African people were processing rice in much the same as their African American ancestors did in the Palmetto State.

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Christianity and Islam in West Africa

Lester Pittman

Education:

PhD, History, University of Virginia

MA, History, University of Virginia

MA, International Studies, University of Southern California

AB, History, The Citadel

Awards: NEH Summer Institute, The Silk Road... East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawai'i, 2006; Institute on Teaching about China and the United States, joint Chinese-American faculty exchange, 2005. Infusing Asian Studies into the Undergraduate Curriculum, Summer 2003, East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawai'i;

Trident Technical College, History, Humanities & Political Science, History and Political Science Instructor, Charleston, SC.

Encountering Muslims and Christians in West Africa reveals the power and complexity of religion as an influence in the modern world. Africans take religion seriously, and both Islam and Christianity are growing in Africa. Religion in West Africa is also syncretistic and integrated into other areas of life. While the expansion of Islam and Christianity in Africa has led to conflict between Muslims and Christians, in some countries like Nigeria and the Sudan, in Sierra Leone and Guinea, where I visited in 2008 with a Fulbright group, relations are good between these two faiths.

While Islam came to West Africa centuries before Christianity and is the predominant religion throughout the region, the balance between Muslims and Christians varies considerably from country to country. Guinea, a former French colony, is about 85% Muslim and 8% Christian, while Sierra Leone, a former British colony, is about 60% Muslim. Estimates of the Christian population in Sierra Leone vary from 10-30%.

History

Although Islam spread to North Africa by the Arab conquests in the 7th century, Muslim merchants brought Islam to the coast of East Africa and the interior of West Africa in the 8th century, and, by the 10th century, the kings of Ghana had converted to Islam. With the expansion of the Mali empire in the 13th and 14th centuries, Islam spread throughout West Africa to the Atlantic coast. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Fulani initiated a series of religious conquests (jihad) from Nigeria to Guinea and Senegal that created Islamic states. Islam became a force both for Fulani political control and in the resistance to British and French colonialism.

Christianity took root in Egypt, North Africa, and Ethiopia between the 1st and 4th centuries, but it did not arrive in West Africa until Portuguese missionaries introduced Catholic Christianity in the 15th century. While the powerful Islamic Songhai Empire still ruled the interior, the Portuguese, French, and British began, in the 16th century, to establish footholds along the coast of West Africa. At the beginning of the 19th century, both Protestant and Catholic missionaries began a concerted effort to convert the peoples of West Africa to Christianity. Freed African slaves, who had converted to Christianity, played an important role in the establishment of Liberia and Sierra Leone. Long before the arrival of the Europeans, African Muslims promoted schools and centers of Islamic studies in West Africa. Likewise, Christian missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, made contributions in the field of education in the 19th and 20th centuries. Anglican missionaries established Fourah Bay College, the oldest Western-style college in West Africa, in 1827.

As the French and British exerted more direct imperial control over Africa in the late 19th century, Africans began a long struggle for independence from European domination. Religion played a role in this resistance, as it did in other aspects of African life. The Fulani jihads failed to stop the advance of European imperialism, but French and British colonial officials recognized the powerful influence that Islamic leaders had over the people. The Christian churches became associated with the colonial rulers and the African elites that collaborated with colonialism. Yet, many leaders of the independence movements in West Africa received their education in Christian schools and colleges. Christian missions trained indigenous clergy to take over leadership of the African churches, and African evangelists and catechists spread the faith far more effectively than European or American missionaries. African independent churches also competed with the missionary churches and experienced rapid growth in some parts of West Africa. Therefore, Christianity survived the retreat of European empires from Africa in the second half of the 20th century and, along with Islam and indigenous African religions, continues to play a significant part in the lives of the peoples of West Africa.

Observations of Muslims and Christians in West Africa 2008

As our Fulbright group traveled for five weeks in Guinea and Sierra Leone in the summer of 2008, we visited schools, universities, churches, and mosques. This gave me an opportunity to talk to Muslims and Christians about their faith and the role of religion in their societies. We attended worship services of various Protestant denominations, as well as in Catholic churches and one mosque. As we drove through the African countryside, we noticed that the newest buildings in the villages were usually mosques, churches, or schools. Signs along the road indicated that some of the churches and mosques were built with funds from co-religionists in Europe or the Middle East.

While the Christian services showed some influences of the foreign missionary legacy, distinctly African styles of music, singing, dress, and languages were prevalent in both Protestant and Catholic churches. The Roman Catholic Church is still evident in Guinea, as it was in French colonial days, while the Anglican Church remains a leading denomination in neighboring Sierra Leone; but alongside the Catholics and Anglicans, there are many other Protestant churches (Methodist, Baptist, AME, Apostolic, Pentecostal) and independent African churches. The American ambassador in Guinea indicated the on-going cooperation between the embassy staff and local Muslim and Christian religious leaders on initiatives to solve social problems and build institutions of civil society. Another remarkable feature of religion in both Guinea and Sierra Leone was the good relations that exist between Christian churches as well as between Muslims and Christians.

There were many reminders of Islam wherever we went, from the call to prayer in cities and towns to the ubiquitous mosques and Islamic dress. In villages, some Muslim women worked naked to the waist in the fields or caring for children, while in cities and towns a few women were shrouded in black from head to foot. Yet there was little evidence of an increase in conservative Islam found in other parts of the Muslim world. A Muslim shrine in Timbo, Guinea, revealed several aspects of Islam in West Africa. It was at the grave of Karamoko Alfa Barry, the founder of the Fouta Empire in 1725. While shrines are discouraged in Sunni Islam, the Sufi brotherhoods, which have had a strong influence in West Africa, honor great Muslim leaders with such shrines. Sufi Islam also tends to be more syncretistic than other forms of Islam and therefore more compatible with African traditions of honoring ancestors.

In Kankan, we visited the Grand Mosque, a center for Islamic studies in West Africa for centuries and the spiritual home of the Malinké people. The senior imam welcomed the men of our group to join him and the city elders in a space at the front of the mosque, while the women were segregated in another room. At the time for evening prayer, he invited the men in our group to join them in the prayers.

My overall impression was that both Islam and Christianity play an important role in the lives of people in West Africa. Though they take religion seriously, they are not inclined to interreligious conflict or extremism. While several West African countries, including Sierra Leone, have recently experienced political violence and civil war, religion did not play a significant part in the strife. African Islam and Christianity provide examples of toleration and mutual respect between religious communities in Guinea and Sierra Leone.

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Fulbright-Hays Group Visits Guinea and Sierra Leone

Lisa B. Randle

Education:

PhD program in Historic Archeology, University of South Carolina

MA, Public History, University of South Carolina

BA, International Studies, University of South Carolina

Scholar with African American Professor's Program, University of South Carolina

Site Coordinator, UNESCO TST Curriculum Initiative, College of Charleston, (Also Adjunct Professor, teaching Introduction to Historic Preservation) Charleston, SC.

On May 25, 2008, two College of Charleston employees departed from Charleston bound for West Africa. Lisa B. Randle and Curtis Franks were among 13 educators selected to participate in the prestigious Mano River Fulbright program.

The objectives of the trip included experiencing daily life and customs of West Africa; drawing connections among Gullah, Geechee, and West African cultures; and sharing these lessons with African and Lowcountry students and adults. The group studied in Sierra Leone and Guinea for approximately five weeks. The entire Mano River Fulbright team included employees from Trident Technical College, the Charleston County School District, the College of Charleston, the Avery Institute, the South Carolina State Museum, and Chicago State University.

After an overnight stay in Conakry, the group spent a few days in Freetown (the capital and largest city) and Bo (the second largest city) in Sierra Leone. About the size of South Carolina, Sierra Leone is recovering from its civil war (1991-2002). While in Freetown, we visited Bunce Island and Fourah Bay College, founded in 1827 as the first western-styled university in West Africa. In Bo, we visited Njala University, a major university and second largest after Fourah Bay College; both are part of the University of Sierra Leone system. Njala was previously known as Bo Teachers College; it became a full college in 2005 and operates on principles similar to Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute.

The majority of the Fulbright trip was spent in Guinea. The itinerary included Musée National de Guinée, Grande Mosque, Niger Market, University of Conakry in Conakry, and Iles de Los, just off the coast. Side trips were made to the village of Farenya and the towns of Boffa and Boké; all have past associations with the slave trade. Guinea is a major exporter of bauxite; we visited the site of two plants in the towns of Kamsar and Fria. We spent time in Mamou, Pita, Dalaba, Labé, Timbo, and Kankan in the Fouta Djallon (Fuuta-Jaloo, Fuuta Jalon, and Futa Jalon) region in the center of Guinée. Timbo was formerly an important religious center in the eighteenth century, as evidenced by its mosque. On the road to Kankan, we spent time with a family in a Malinké Village that is known for its vernacular architecture. Kankan, the second largest city in Guinée with a largely Mandinka population, is known for the Université de Kankan, its religious scholars, and its mango trees.

In an exit roundtable discussion at the U.S. embassy in Conakry, U.S. Ambassador Philip Carter stated that we had visited more of Guinea than any of his staff.

The Exploration of Culture and Family in the Classroom

Karen Stewart-Cain

Education:

PhD, Interdisciplinary Studies degree with a concentration in Sociology, Union Institute and University

MS, Sociology, Valdosta State College

BA, Political Science, Western Michigan University

Licensed Social Worker of South Carolina

Awards: The Resiliency of Aging People of Color—presenter, Manchester College, Oxford University, 2005; Who's Who Among American Teachers

Trident Technical College, Sociology Instructor, Charleston, SC.

Young American college students have a tendency to see the world monolithically; that is, they have a rigid and uniform view of how things are -- a one world order, so to speak. As a sociologist, my quest in the classroom is to use culture and the components of cultures to explore other parts of the world and to help students develop a broader perspective and worldview. Since most of my students are interested in family issues, I typically start there as a jumping off point to more complex issues.

When I ask students to define family, they immediately become aware that there are many definitions of family. Each student views the family from his or her own perspective. Some see the family as an institution revered and even considered sacred. As the discussion progresses, the students' definitions of the family broaden even further. Some define family as a place where much pain, injury, and violence is experienced. The idea that there are many differences between families emerges, and the students begin to understand the functions that the family serves: even though families come in a wide variety, they all provide joys, disappointments and more, and these individual families create the differences that make up our society and culture.

After this introduction, in which we establish the family's influence on our diversity, we move on to explore the connection between family and culture. We do this by engaging in a pedagogical exercise called the Lemon Study. Each student receives a lemon, and then they are asked to give characteristics of their lemon. Next, the students place their lemons in an assigned bag with other additional lemons. All of the lemons are mixed in one plastic bag, and finally the students are asked to claim their particular lemon. Most of the students are able to locate their own assigned lemon. They (students) list subtle differences as well as the similarities of their lemons, demonstrating that, while lemons look alike on the outside, you begin to see it more clearly and more uniquely when you study one specific lemon. This exercise allows them to consider the possible variations of families and marriages as well.

As my young scholars struggle to discover what a family should be, some begin to recognize family as strange characters occupying communal space, sharing resources, colds, and, at some point inflicting pain on one another (Bombeck, 1987). Others see the definition of family in the same light as former Vice-President Quayle: the only real family is one that is anchored in legal heterosexual marriage (Strong and Devault, 1995). Students often do not believe that people of different sexual orientations are entitled to the same rights as heterosexuals; they are also uncomfortable with people selecting non-traditional families (non-Eskimo family structure, meaning mom, dad, and offspring), as well. From these insights (discussions including the lemon study), we then move to the idea that families are intimately connected to culture.

The next exercise is the exploration of the connection between family and culture. In both classes, Marriage and Family and Social Gerontology, students are asked to share their understanding of culture. These students see North Americans as having a superior culture; however, they are unable to verbalize either what culture is, or what makes their culture more advanced than others. The students are presented with material objects from Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. In a group discussion, each student assesses the item and states its value to the particular community. The final piece of the activity is for students to write a guided paper that assists them in seeing that cultures are like families: they are similar in some respects yet different in others. Nevertheless, they all provide a function for humanity.

The topic of most interest to students in the family structure of Guineans, Sierra Leoneans, and Nigerians is polygamous marriages. The Temne of Sierra Leone, similar to other sub-Saharan Africans, see marriage as an important rite of passage into adulthood, for men as well as women. However, times are changing; many couples still see the value of plural marriages, although at times they prove to be more than a challenge. The functions of polygamous unions are expanding the labor force and reducing the introduction of syphilis to the family by giving the husband available sexual outlets, since sex activity is prohibited with pregnant or nursing wives. Sometimes the husband will seek counsel from his wife before taking another wife. Men may divorce their wives, but women cannot divorce their husbands. If a husband is cruel to his wife, then the wife may seek the assistance of the elder of the group.

One permitted option is that this woman may return to her family's home; however, she must return her wedding gifts. Younger women and men, urban dwellers, and educated folks are less likely to support polygamy. One important twist in polygamous unions was caused by the Civil War in Sierra Leone, which forced women to move into Guinean refugee camps. These women, for safety reasons, entered into bulgur marriages. These unions are consensual and obtained their name from sharing of bulgur wheat distributed by the Nations World Food Program (Gale, 2007, p.356). These bulgur women are also known as big women in the refugee camps and enjoy a considerable amount of prestige within the camp community; this prestige comes at a high cost, however, when dealing with the outside world. The bulgur wife is very similar to America's notion of a common law wife.

In Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria, women occupy a special place in society. Women are kin-keepers of the elderly and the children; they work outside of the homes, labor in co-ops and markets, operate shops, and toil the fields. Women are said to have mystical powers (S. M. N'Daou, personal communication, July 25, 2009). Women in the urban centers have more access to freedom and education than their rural counterparts in all three Western African countries; however, women's educational accomplishments are lower than males. In Guinea, 15 to 30 percent of the population is functional in French. Both Nigeria and Sierra Leone are English-speaking countries. In Nigeria, 78 percent of the males are literate, but only 68 percent of the females are literate, whereas in Sierra Leone, the literacy rate for females is 24.4 percent, and males 46.9 percent. (The World Factbook, 2008).

Guided Paper Requirements for Social Gerontology

The students are instructed to select developing or developed nations of interests and required to write a guided paper on culture by answering the topics listed below:

- General information about their selected country including geographical location
- Family
- General structure characteristics
- Men/women head of household
- Courtship
- Marriage
- Birth customs
- Labor Childbirth practices
- Death customs
- Culture Socialization of children
- Socialization of middle-age adults
- Socialization of elderly Medical care/housing
- Status system (caste or class/ethnic group/kinship)
- Status of women, men, children, the elderly
- Inheritance
- Magic
- Religion
- Politics (the manner in which goods and services are submitted to citizens)
- Economic Organization
- Economic Structure

In the culmination of our class, students report their findings from the paper over an international meal, during which the students also converse with international scholars. They then view a brief documentary of three West African countries made by faculty and staff members.

The outcome of these exercises proves to be beneficial because the students become engaged in their own learning process, and this engagement leads them to ask provocative questions. These questions are used to challenge their peers and educators alike. These questions tend to strengthen their analytical thinking and encourage the students to take more responsibility for their own learning with a commitment to assist others. It is acknowledged in this paper that Bombeck's Family: The Ties that Bind and Gag is not a scholarly source; however, at times, one must use unconventional means to grab the student's attention, and this text was the vehicle that started the students to think outside of their comfort level.

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My West African Adventure

Blondelle E. Swinton-Tolliver

Education:

MS, Education, University of Charleston

BS, Elementary Education, Wilberforce University

Advisor and contributor/participant, Humanities and Science and Math, Coastal Legacy Workshops, South Carolina Sea Grant Consortium

Angel Oak Zion Elementary School, James Island, teacher's coach, Math & Science educator-Grades 4-5.

My trip to West Africa was phenomenal. We spent the year before planning, preparing, and bonding as Fulbright Participants. Before leaving the USA, we studied, on the campuses of Trident Technical College and the College of Charleston, the language, politics, culture, and religion of Guinea and Sierra Leone, West Africa. However, neither time, money, nor guest speaker could have totally prepared us for what we would experience in the Mano River Region of West Africa.

On May 25, 2008, thirteen excited Fulbright participants left the USA. The next day, we were up bright, and early, eager to visit the American Embassy at Conakry, Guinea. By evening, we were on our way to Freetown, Sierra Leone. We were fortunate to have had the best African guides and drivers to help us experience the region. Nevertheless, traveling in the Guinea/Sierra Leone territory at night is not recommended. Miraculously, we made it safe and sound to Freetown, a little shaken, but not broken.

Sierra Leone has a population of about four million, and Freetown is the main commercial hub. Freetown has a wonderful relaxed and inviting atmosphere about it. I have never been to the Caribbean Islands, but I would imagine that there are similarities in the ambiance of Freetown and the Caribbean Islands.

We checked into a nice hotel called the Barmoi where some of us had beautiful ocean views. We spent the first evening walking and mingling with the people on Lumley Beach. The friendliness and hospitality of the people was extraordinary, and the beach is incredible with its sapphire-tinted water and white sand. We visited many places in Freetown, among them, the American Embassy, Bunce Island, Fourah Bay University, Cape Town Community School, and the community market.

Cape Town Community School was close to the hotel and the first school that we visited. We made a monetary donation and presented some of the school supplies that we had brought from America. It was hard to believe how much the school was lacking in resources and teaching aids, not to mention the physical structure. The number of students in each classroom was outrageous. So, when you look into the eyes of the children, you want to help.

The Bunce Island visit in Sierra Leone took me back in history. It was an extremely emotional episode. Just think, shiploads of Africans, my ancestors, were taken from this point repeatedly over centuries, never to be returned to their families and communities. That's hard to swallow. I rejoice in knowing that my ancestors were extremely intelligent, talented, and resilient people. This thought helps to soften this hard emotional reality. I asked myself, why would people cross vast oceans, risking their own lives, over and over, to unlawfully and immorally destroy families and communities? Bottom line: during a horrendous period in our history, West Africa was robbed over and over again of its greatest natural resource, people.

Later on in the week, we visited a lively little town called Bo. It is the second largest city in Sierra Leone. Bo appeared to still be in recovery from the recent civil war. We stayed at the Sir Milton Hotel in Bo. It was easy to tell that it was once a very nice hotel. The physical structure of the hotel confirmed that, and Sir Milton was actually the Prime Minister in the 1960's. All things considered, Sierra Leone, as a whole, felt good to me. In Bo, we hung out with the locals, attended various religious services, and visited Njala University and numerous grade schools. On June 3, we ended our stay in Bo, and we returned to Conakry, Guinea, upon U.S. Embassy approval, of course.

The Republic of Guinea's primary language is French, integrated with various ethnic dialects. Guinea's population is about ten million people. Guinea is made up of regions defined by topography, with major cities in each region. There are four well-defined regions designated by their own distinct climate, flora, and fauna. This is reflected in Guinea's history, traditions, and dialects. Presently, the country is experiencing extreme economical and political strife, but the people are proud and optimistic. Conakry, the capital, is a bustling, multi-ethnic city. As Fulbright participants, we were anxious to plunge into our own individual Fulbright inquiry everywhere we went. Some of the places in Conakry, lower Guinea we visited were the University, the Museum, the US embassy, Ile of De Los, and the Grand Mosque.

While in Conakry, the embassy hosted a presentation for us on the current state of affairs in Guinea and safety issues while traveling in Guinea. At the embassy, we enjoyed an art exhibit, visited the American library, and used the computers to check and send emails. We met the Prime Minister, and he took time out of his busy schedule to talk with us. Finally, we were treated, by the embassy, to a delicious lunch at a very nice hotel, The Rivera.

As we traveled from region to region, we visited educational institutions and other significant sites satisfying curiosities, conducting inquiries, and providing words of inspiration to the young and old. We shared our professional passions and perspectives on education, and we made donations. After our visits to each region, we typically returned to Conakry, our base. Primarily, we stayed at one of two hotels in Conakry, either the Novotel, or the Hotel du Golfe.

Dr. Mohammed N'Daou, our guide and host, made his home in Conakry available to us to exchange and store clothes and supplies and to refresh ourselves before and after each leg of our adventure. His family and friends were incredibly wonderful.

From there, we took road trips to other locations in Lower Guinea, such as Kindia, Fria, Boffa, Boké, and Camsar. We explored Fouta Djallon, Middle Guinea, traveling through Dalaba, Pita, and Timbo to Labe'. In upper Guinea, we spent time in Faranenya, Kouroussa, and Kan Kan.

On one road trip, we arrived in Boffa as the fishermen were bringing in the catch of day, blue crabs and fish. I was surprised to see blue crabs that looked exactly like the ones I enjoy at home. We visited the Bauxite Plant in Fria, but we were not allowed to tour it. Nevertheless, we discussed the political and economical situation surrounding the plant. At Farenya, we visited a village that is significant to African American history. The people of the village were kind and generous. I learned that this site has a direct connection to Charleston and Savannah by way of the slave trade. We visited a grave site and participated in an ancestral ceremony on the riverbank.

Farenya is an amazing place to visit. According to history, Niara Bely was the daughter of an African chief. She married Stiles Lightburn, a European, who had influential relatives living in Charleston, SC, on Wadamalaw Island, and Savannah, Georgia. The couple became deeply involved in the slave trade and established a slave trading empire on the Rio Pongo. As a matter of fact, in the 1800's, she actually fought to maintain slave trading after her husband's death. There is African folklore about her mystical powers and what she was capable of doing, supernaturally. She eventually signed a treaty that gave the French control of part of Guinea.

As we traveled across Guinea, our group presentations and individual presentations continued to stir excitement for and inquisitiveness about America and Americans. Dr. N'Daou translated the English into French for each presenter. If I had a dime for every time I exchanged address information with someone, then I could probably buy another plane ticket to West Africa.

In Boké, Guinea, we toured the Museum and the water front. To me, the waterfront was similar to locations in Charleston. Below the Museum, we visited a cold, dank, dungeon that was used to hold enslaved Africans for shipping. It was disturbing to see remnants of shackles and items of captivity used to imprison people. That was a tearjerker. The elders in Boké told us stories about the family that once lived above the dungeon and their involvement in the slave trade. Currently, the floors above the dungeon are a museum. The museum is in need of help and funds to preserve the artifacts. As a group, we moved on to another site on the river and viewed ruins of a fort and a slave ship.

On June 11th, we visited Dr. N'Daou's daughter's home in Kamsar and enjoyed a delicious lunch. Her whole family and community served us joyfully. Fatou is a master indigo dye artist, so this provided me the opportunity to learn more about indigo, my personal Fulbright project. I wanted to know more about the science part of it as well as the cultural connections to West Africa. After shopping at the market for the supplies, Fatou started to demonstrate the process. I learned that, today, most people in West Africa use synthetic dyes and fixers because it is more convenient, efficient, and available. Traditionally, they start with 100% cotton and use various materials, such as thread, raffia, and recycled plastic bags, to create the patterns on the fabric. As a rule, this process takes place outside, even during the rainy season. I also learned that when the actual plant is used, the indigo dye is made by crushing fermented leaves from the indigo plant. The women of the highlands of Guinea are famous for their indigo cloth. Culturally, the indigo cloth is a symbol of wealth, abundance, and fertility all over West Africa.

On June 13, we traveled to Labé, the largest town in the Fouta Djallon. On the way, we stopped at two majestic waterfalls and a very nice crafts market. The falls are spectacular, but the roads are awful. We were lucky to find local guides in the region to assist us in safely navigating the roads. In Labé, we shopped for leather goods, indigo, and baskets. Later on, we spoke to a large, enthusiastic audience at the University. On Wednesday, we visited Kouroussa, the home of Camara Laye, a famous Guinean author. He wrote *L'Enfant Noire* (The Dark Child). We met his brother, who explained some symbolisms in the book as they relate to his brother's life and childhood.

The last major city we visited was Kan Kan in Upper Guinea. We spent a lot of time at the University visiting their American Reading Room. At the University, we attended an event that was a part of the graduation ceremony and interacted with some remarkable students and faculty. After a few days in Kan Kan, experiencing the local essence, we returned to Conakry. Our final sight-seeing tour was of the Iles De Los, one of a chain of islands off the coast of Conakry. This particular island once had a fort that was used during the slave trade to imprison people for transporting to America. We toured a church and the ruins of the fort before leaving the island.

Sierra Leone and Guinea are equally captivating. The faces of the people seemed so familiar to me, and the cultural connections to the Low Country are prolific. I discovered that indigo has implications that are deeply rooted in West African tradition, art, and science. As a result of this trip, I am able to dispel misconceptions about Africa and my ancestry. Ultimately, my West African Adventure was absolutely unbelievable, and I will always celebrate it as a major event in my life. I credit this to the exceptional Fulbright participants and all of the people and organizations that played a significant role in making it a reality. In view of this experience, I want to know more about West Africa and to be a part of an effort to help the children of Guinea and Sierra Leone.

I am very proud to be African by genetics, and, at the same time, I know how wonderful it is to be African American.

Boké and the Lowcountry

Donald West

Education:

MA, History, University of Cincinnati

BA, Social Studies Teaching, University of Maryland, Eastern Shore

History & Political Science Coordinator

Member of the Association for the Study of African American Life & History and member of the Liberian Studies Association

Trident Technical College, History Instructor, Charleston, SC.

For most people who identify with the Lowcountry's connection to Africa, all too often Sierra Leone is the place they have marked as their ancestral home. This is why the Fulbright trip to Guinea was necessary and important. Sierra Leone was also included in this Mano River study abroad, but it was not the primary target. Like the Lowcountry, which consists of more than one state, the Mano River Region is made up of four African states (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire). Côte d'Ivoire has recently joined the Union of West African nations committed to economic cooperation. Though Guinea-Bissau is not a member of the Mano River Union, it does share many of the same cultural and historical characteristics of the other four nations. It is not just Sierra Leone, but also the entire African coast from Senegal to Angola that made a profound impact in the Western Hemisphere. Equally significant to this little-known chapter in US history has been the retention of Africanism in the form of religion, music, art, storytelling, language, architecture, agriculture, as well as culinary traditions, and the contributions of the Mano River Region to the Lowcountry.

After nearly one week in Sierra Leone, the group of thirteen educators who made the journey together to West Africa would spend the rest of the five weeks in the French-speaking country of Guinea. So much of Guinea, like Sierra Leone, is a striking reminder of the coastal region of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Northern Florida. First of all, both regions of each country can point to a common history, including the Atlantic Slave Trade, European colonialism, and the existence of well-established ports and local industries with a global link. In addition, each region also has its own unique historic chapter in the struggle for human rights and self-determination. Lastly, the world-renowned artisans of both areas were the other common threads connecting Guinea, as well as Sierra Leone, with the Lowcountry. From the very beginning, I was looking forward to making the comparison between Boké, Guinea and the Lowcountry.

Although there were many similarities throughout the country, the Boké Province, located on the Atlantic coast of Lower Guinea, reminded me most of all of the Lowcountry. After a few days in Conakry, we left the peninsula, making stops in Fria, Farrenya, and Boffa before a four-day stay in the city of Boké. All four places are part of the Boké Province. Fria is an industrial town where the oldest bauxite plant in Africa is located. As we approached the city, I thought about the similarities between Fria and Georgetown, South Carolina. Georgetown is also a small industrial city, with its largest employers a steel and a paper company.

The processing of bauxite into alumina has been done at the Fria plant since 1950. The town is dominated by the plant, which contributes heavily to the diverse businesses, accommodations, restaurants, and recreational services. The plant is currently operated by the Russians, and mining is done in the surrounding areas and several other places throughout the Province. This was a very timely visit; it was preceded by an excellent conference by students, faculty, and governmental officials addressing the state of Guinea's natural resources and minerals and whether changes should be made

between Guinea and foreign inventors. I referred to the situation as the Chavez effect spreading around the world. The day before we arrived in Fria, the Fulbright group attended a daylong conference held at the Université de Gamal Nasser in Conakry. The bauxite industry is Guinea's principle export. After one day in Fria, we left for our other destinations. A fork in the road afforded us a brief stop in Boffa before going to Farrenya. Once known for its involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, Boffa sits on the Fatala River and is a small fishing town. The river was the main artery that connected the coast with the interior for the slave trade. Over the years, because of a newly constructed bridge over the river, the town is no longer a popular stop-over. Its better days may be in the past. Farrenya is about a two-hour drive from Boffa on the Rio Pongo, aka the Fatala River. Farrenya, a small village like Boffa, is also famous for its past connection to the slave trade. Decades after the Atlantic Slave Trade had ended in the United States, enslaved Africans were still being procured by Queen Niara Bely, a notorious trafficker, and her white husband from South Carolina, Stiles Lightburn. Later, Queen Niara turned to legitimate trade, the making and selling of soap. This was a very interesting and enlightening experience. After passing through Boffa again, we were on to the city of Boké for a few days.

In Boké, our educational excursion started out with morning meetings with some of the regional officials, including the governor of Boké and the mayor of the city. A number of community people were present as well. They shared with us some history of the area, discussing the great Mali Empire, as well as the rivers of the Province and how they were used during the Atlantic slave trade. The mayor also stated that the rivers helped to develop trade with the Portuguese, French, and English. This trade resulted in Guinea having more contact with the Europeans than other parts of West Africa. Incidentally, about fifty years ago (during colonial rule), Boké was where Sekou Touré organized workers, women, and young activists to achieve independence. After the meeting, we went to the Musée de Boké. There was a nice display of artifacts, but one very shocking surprise was the archives at the museum and the poor conditions of the records. The staff recognizes the state of the collections; however, money and resources are needed to rectify the problems, and Guinea has so many other pressing issues.

French explorer René Caille, whose travels into the interior of West Africa took him to Timbuktu, visited Boké in 1827. Boké was occupied by the French two decades later in 1849. What is now the main museum building was once the offices and residence of the French commandant. It was built in 1878. We were told that the basement was a prison to keep slaves brought from the interior. Of course, there are some questions about whether or not the museum, once a fort, was indeed linked to the slave trade. Smuggling and illegal activities in the slave trade certainly included the area, if not the building itself. Later, before we left Boké, the Fulbright group and the museum's director visited another location, near the Rio Nunez Port, with a link to the slave trade. This location included a nearby French castle standing in ruins and covered in overgrowth. On the river — stuck in the mud, half-buried — was a vessel from the period. Unexpectedly, at a rundown, abandoned brick building along the river, we were shown where Amicar Cabral, the charismatic Guinea-Bissau freedom fighter, conducted his operations for a time.

While in the city, we also visited a regional training/trade school, where everyone, including S. Mohamed N'Daou, who also translated for us, briefly spoke to students and faculty about our teaching philosophies, our various classroom styles, and the subjects we taught. Curtis Franks and Elaine Nichols talked about how the many cultural and historical topics are used to exhibit, display, and educate the general public at the museums where they work. The students and faculty in Boké have none of the resources and equipment of the average American classroom, but their efforts to get the most out of their education is inspirational.

Before leaving for Conakry, we traveled west in the Province to the Atlantic coastal town of Kamsar, where another bauxite plant is located. The Kamsar plant is currently the world's second leading bauxite producer. Back in Boké that night after dinner, we were guest at the community center where a traditional Baga mask ceremony was held, including dance and drumming. At one point during the program, women from a local co-op gave each of us a bag of dried mangos. When I finally got around to eating it, I recognized their efforts to start a growing new industry in Guinea, dried fruits. It was a great treat and pleasant surprise.

The Baga of Guinea and Guinea Bissau are among the best known rice cultivators of West Africa. It was their ancestors — the Mende, Temne, Kissi, and other ethnic groups from the Mano River Region — who brought their expertise of rice to the Lowcountry. Like the Gullah of the Lowcountry, the Baga artisans of Boké are also well-known. Their traditional wood carvings and masks are found in a variety of markets throughout the world and in numerous museums. The contemporary iconic thinking man, a particularly favorite item among many West African artisans that can be found throughout the entire Senegambia and Mano River Regions, is one of the more popular art pieces. Baskets are made in Boké, too. They are different in design and style from the ones in Sierra Leone. Other items from the area demonstrate the resourceful and creative abilities for which Africans are known, as scrap pieces are turned into toys, jewelry, and other marketable articles. Leaving Boké for the rest of Guinea, I kept thinking about the similarities of the two regions of the Atlantic, the coastal connections, especially between the people of the Lowcountry and Boké, and the strong sense of pride each group has in their heritage and traditions that make both places quite unique.

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Mano River Project

Benjamin Yelm

Education:

MS, Technology in Education, Lesley University

BS, Education, Miami University

Award: Coached North Charleston Boy's Basketball City Champs in 2007

Morningside Middle School, North Charleston, chair of 6 & 7 Grade Social Studies, World and US History teacher–Grade 7th.

I took part in the Mano River Project last June in an attempt to improve my understanding of the connection between West Africa and the South Carolina Low Country. By studying this connection, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the connected histories of these two places. My primary objective was to use my understanding to teach my students how West Africa and the Low Country are connected. I hoped to do this by sharing videos, pictures, and stories. Upon returning to school this year, I have found a multitude of different ways to use this experience with my students.

In my 7th grade class, we study modern world history, including the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. One strategy I used with my students was to show them video from Bunce Island, a major staging point in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. By seeing the video, my students understood more deeply where the enslaved Africans were held and how the logistics of the trade worked. They also saw the similarities between the landscape of West Africa and the Low Country. Several even remarked that looks just like here.

I also told my 7th graders of the people working in West Africa to preserve the history of the region. I explained how, just like people here in the Charleston area try to preserve the history of plantations and buildings in South Carolina, people in West Africa are doing the same. I then discussed how the two efforts were interrelated, that the histories of places in Charleston are not possible without the histories in West Africa. It really seemed to hit home to many of the students who were not very knowledgeable about the history on the African side of the Atlantic.

I was also able to use this experience very effectively when my 7th grade class moved on to European Imperialism. I explained that in the two countries we visited, Guinea and Sierra Leone, they spoke French and English respectively. Then I asked the class, why? Blank stares looked back at me. I used that as an opportunity to speak about the colonial/imperial time period and how both the French and English had interests in controlling land in the two countries. I also spoke of attending a Christian church service to reinforce the idea of how European's spread Christianity.

In addition, I explained the current conditions of the countries, how both have had serious problems with different groups trying to take and maintain power. I explained how I met many different types of people from many different ethnic groups. I then discussed with them how the European countries created boundaries that did not take into account the different ethnic groups living within that country. The fact that I had spoken firsthand to many different people of many different ethnicities, which gave me a credibility with my students that I never would have had if not for the experience.

In my 6th grade classes, we study ancient history. When we were studying the spread of Islam throughout West Africa by the Mali Empire and Mansa Musa, I was able to explain how I had seen and interacted with many Muslims while in both Guinea and Sierra Leone. I also used my experience to explain the tradition of the griot in Africa. I told my students about Africa's oral history tradition and shared my experience of seeing a griot while in West Africa.

Overall, this experience has truly helped me teach my subject better and more thoroughly. By just having pictures up in my classroom, I have had many wonderful conversations with students about the experience. I also feel like I have inspired some of my students to go out and see the world because of my experience. They have seen how it has enriched my life, and they now want that for their life. Without this experience, I truly would not be either the same person or teacher.

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