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## Creating Partnerships for Global Education: St. Mary's College of Maryland's Collaborative Learning Program in The Gambia

Bill Roberts

### Tubabs, Baobabs, and Bantabas

I begin this introductory chapter with a note of explanation about the title for this book. In 1996 I led the first St. Mary's College of Maryland (SMCM) study tour to The Gambia. The group published their papers under the title, *Tubabs Under the Baobab: Study and Adventure in West Africa*, in 1997. A Tubab is a white person, a foreigner. The baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*) is something students quickly learn to identify; it features prominently in photographs, paintings, batiks, stories and legends of the region. In addition to being a ubiquitous part of the natural



*Baobab trees*

environment, Senegambian peoples (the people living in present-day countries of Senegal and Gambia) attach special social and spiritual symbolic meanings to it. The baobab provides both food and medicine to people, and a haven for spirits, serpents, and birds in its branches (Wildlife Department 1978; Hallam 1979).

I suggested the name for this book, *Tubabs Two: from the Baobab to the Bantaba*, to the 1998 group before we returned to the USA. *Bantaba* is the term in the local language used to refer to the public meeting and resting place in the village. Every Gambian village has a bantaba where people (mostly men) sit, rest, and talk. The title of the first book, *Under the Baobab*, suggests a group of tubabs who observed all that took place around them from the 'shade' of their baobab tree. The intent of the current title, *From the Baobab to the Bantaba*, is to signal a change in

both our location and perspective. I encouraged this group of SMCM tubabs to participate as fully as possible in Gambian life, and helped several students design a learning methodology that combined research with social service. We have tried to write a book that will be both interesting and useful for our Gambian friends and colleagues, as well as others interested in The Gambia.

### The 1998 Study Tour

During the summer of 1998, St. Mary's College of Maryland (SMCM) mounted its second study tour to The Gambia, West Africa. Seven students, led by myself, Bill Roberts (aka Yahya Bajaha), arrived in Bakau, The Gambia, late one evening towards the end of May. We began our trip with a commuter flight from National Airport, Washington, D.C. to JFK International, New York. Students encountered various problems on their way to the airport before we left Washington. One student locked the car keys inside the car at a rest stop. Another drove to Dulles International before she realized the flight was leaving from DC's other airport, National. The latter student arrived literally minutes before the plane's departure. Once we arrived at JFK, we boarded an Air Afrique plane that went direct to Dakar. In Dakar we were met by a Gambia Public Transport bus driver named Saho, whose family was from the far eastern end of The Gambia (the Upper River Division, or URD) where I had served as a Peace Corps volunteer. He drove our chartered bus throughout that long, hot day and evening from Dakar, through Mbour, Kaolack, Farafenni (where we crossed the Gambia river by ferry), to Soma and then on to Bakau.

Browns and reds dominated the local landscape in late May. Swirling dry dust blew across the road, sweeping over the scattered skeletons of the domestic animals that didn't survive the Sahel's harsh dry season. From our bus, we saw that farmers already were preparing their fields in anticipation of the rainy season, which was still over a month away. Their task was to rake up and burn whatever plant stubble or other litter remained as cover on the thin soil in their fields where they eventually would plant either millet, peanuts, or cowpeas (also known as black-eyed peas in the U.S.A). The unfortunate effect of this farm practice is that the already thin topsoil is further exposed to wind erosion. Scientists have learned that after the Saharan winds blow dust and soil off the western side of the continent, it is carried by prevailing winds across the Atlantic ocean to the

Amazon basin, where it is deposited over the forest canopy during the rainy season. It's ironic that even today West African soil helps sustain the largest rainforest in the Americas, while in earlier centuries it was people captured and transported as slaves from this region to the Americas who helped build and sustain the new frontier societies there.

The heat that first day was terrific. We frequently stopped to find bathrooms, cool drinks, and snacks on our way towards the Gambia river. We missed the first ferry in Farrafenni, but eventually crossed and made our way to Tendaba camp on the south bank of the Lower River Division (LRD) near the village of Kwinella, where Peace Corps/The Gambia trains new volunteers. Tendaba camp boasts good food and a friendly staff; menu items include shrimp, bushpig (warthog), and other delicacies. It was very late by the time we arrived at our base of operations, the Friendship Hotel in Bakau.



*Friendship Hotel, Independence Stadium, Bakau*

After a good night's sleep the students met Ebrima Colley, who works for Peace Corps/The Gambia as a language and culture teacher. Ebrima was charged with teaching the St.

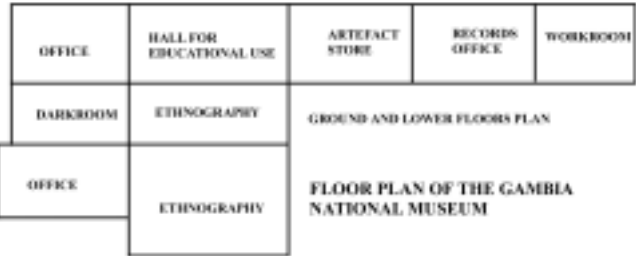


*Students with Ebrima Colley, studying Mandinka language*

Mary's group the basics of using the Mandinka language (the Mandinko are the largest ethnic group in The Gambia). He also led discussions on various topics of Gambian culture, in particular U.S. American and Gambian cross-cultural differences. Language and Culture was the primary focus of the students' learning activities during their first week in country. They also visited the Gambian National Museum, Royal Victoria Hospital, and other medical and health facilities in the Greater Banjul Area (GBA).



*Front view of Gambia National Museum*



*Figure 1.1 Layout of Gambia National Museum*

The second week in country featured excursions farther afield. We went to Abuko Nature Reserve and took a boat trip along the mangroves of the Lamin Bolong to the Gambia river, and learned about pressures on the natural environment.

We met with numerous Gambians and expatriates who were working in areas of interest to us, including archaeology, public health, medicine, and education. The society for Mande studies, MANSA, began their fourth international conference at the Senegambia hotel towards the end of the second week. A number of us attended sessions at this



*At Lamin Lodge setting out to explore mangroves*

meeting, and thereby met some of the prominent anthropologists and historians from other West African countries, Europe, and the Americas.

The conference ran from June 13-17, and we were unable to fully participate, since it overlapped with our trip 'up-country.' During the third week of the study tour we traveled the length of the country, visiting sites of historical and contemporary interest along both the north and south banks.



*On the bus for our trip up-country*

By the end of the third week, the students had met many wonderful people living in The Gambia. They had experienced a bit of the up-country heat while visiting the stone circles, Jangjangbureh (Georgetown), Bansang, Basse, and Tendaba Camp again.

Now I expected them to carry out their own research projects for the remainder of the two-plus weeks we had left in The Gambia. Their chapters follow. Each chapter describes the topic selected by the student for study. But each chapter also contains evidence of the inevitable self-study that takes place, and reveals new personal insights and personal growth that is a highly desirable but unmanageable goal that often results from these types of experiences. While learning about

another society and culture, students also come face to face with themselves and their social backgrounds in new ways. In the process of self-examination and the search for explanatory truths that ensues, each individual has an opportunity to examine and modify his or her values, which, in turn helps guide their future aspirations and actions.

In the remainder of this chapter I want to first explain why I think the study tour is important, and in so doing include some of the assumptions on which the course is based. The SMCM study tour is unique among all the college and university summer experiences currently offered in The Gambia.



*Stone circles at Wassu*

Secondly, I want to describe specific areas where SMCM can expand its activities and build upon the results of what we already have accomplished with our Gambian partners over the past two years. The important thing to keep in mind is that the model for the program be mutually beneficial to all participants. We need to build a program upon the strengths of what each partner does best, and in a collaborative



*Our accommodations at Jangjangbure tourist camp*

effort, strengthen and enrich one another. Finally, I briefly summarize the student contributions to this book.

### Rationale and Objectives for The Gambia, West Africa Study Tour

One compelling reason for designing The Gambia, West Africa Study Tour course is helping, however modestly, to fill a huge void in young Americans' knowledge of the world in which they live. Most U.S. Americans acquire their knowledge about the African continent through public media (television and newspapers) and entertainment (movies). The African

ambassador to The Gambia is George Haley, Alex's younger brother). The story of Haley's famous ancestor, Kunta Kinteh, became a television mini-series in the 1970s. According to the story, Kunta Kinteh was brought to Annapolis and sold into slavery, perhaps even to a planter in southern Maryland, where today St. Mary's College of Maryland is located. For a number of years after *Roots* was shown on television, special tour groups of African Americans visited Senegal and The Gambia looking for their own family roots. For several years now the Gambian government has attempted to capitalize on the Roots phenomenon. The government sponsored its first annual International Roots Festival

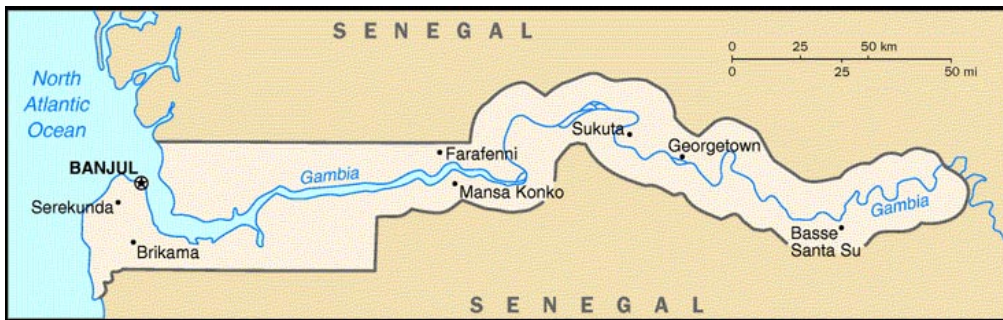


Figure 1.2 Tourist map of The Gambia

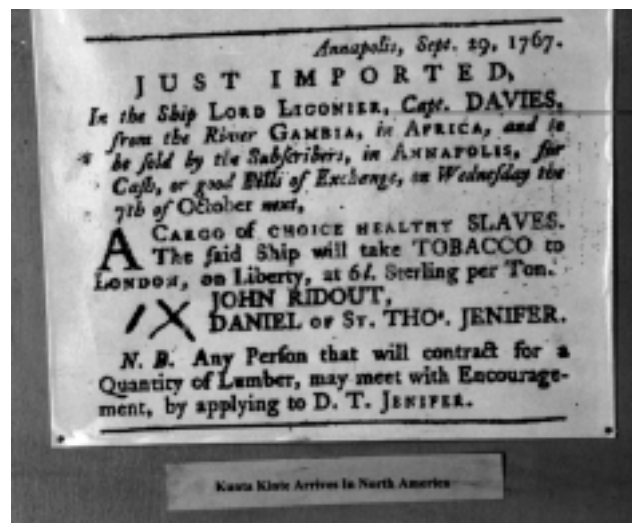
stereotype plays on images of savage and unpredictable nature, exotic tribal peoples, and unbelievable degrees of human suffering and degradation. Not surprisingly, few people know much about the tiny West African nation of The Gambia. Stories from this corner of the world considered newsworthy by the international media network are rare, and it is extremely easy to overlook the country even with a map or globe in hand.

Looking at a map, The Gambia resembles a 'long, thin finger in the belly of [its much larger neighbor] Senegal.' This country is an excellent example of how arbitrary, artificial boundaries constructed by the major European colonial powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century imposed another, a different reality on Africans throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Those different colonial realities continue to play themselves out today. West African nations differ in their official (government) languages; the structure, organization, and content of the public education system; and the characteristics of a 'national personality' that people from one African nation attribute to individuals from another African country.

Because the media provides most of what is available to the U.S. American public to construct its image of African countries, some people recognize The Gambia. Many people remember Alex Haley's famous story *Roots* (the new U.S. American

in June, 1996. One of the goals of the Roots Festival is to attract members of the African diaspora to The Gambia to learn about their African heritage. Part of their visit includes an award of an honorary citizenship and the invitation to join hands with their Gambian brothers and sisters and invest in whatever way they can to help develop the society.

I led the first study tour from St. Mary's College to The Gambia in 1996, the same year as the first



Notice about sale of slaves, including Kunta Kinte, in Annapolis

International Roots Festival. That same year another group of students from several universities in Tennessee and Texas, led by a political scientist from Austin Peay State University, came to learn about life in The Gambia. Although St. Mary's College did not send a study tour to The Gambia in 1997, other universities and organizations continued to send even larger numbers of students, particularly African Americans, to The Gambia. When I returned to The Gambia in 1998 with another group of SMCM students, we found groups from Austin Peay State and associated universities, Middle Tennessee State University, and a New York-based educational foundation, all pursuing studies of Gambian life from various hotel facilities in the Greater Banjul Area. Although it appears that there are increasing numbers of colleges and universities doing good by bringing students to The Gambia, none of these universities



*Momadou Yahya Bajaha and Bilali Sankareh join us for breakfast in Basse*

has a program that compares with that of St. Mary's College. Let me explain why. I have been living and working on and off in The Gambia and with Gambians for twenty years. The Gambia is, in many ways, a second home for me. I decided to create the study tour course so students could have an opportunity to learn about Africa through personal experience. When I was an undergraduate anthropology major, I spent eight months abroad between my junior and senior years carrying out primate research. The experience 'transformed' me both professionally and personally. I have learned a great deal from Gambians and other Africans over the years, and wanted my students to have an opportunity for similar experiences.

From a pedagogical viewpoint, I know that I am most effective as a teacher when I am able to instill in students some of my own enthusiasm for learning.

The Gambia course is designed in such a way as to stimulate the students' curiosity and generate sufficient enthusiasm for them to gather their energy and focus on a set of issues or topics they identify. The group lives in a very comfortable learning environment, where I am able to draw upon many resources for teaching. An important resource is my personal network of friends and professionals. As I develop a mentor relationship with students, we work out a personalized learning strategy that includes the expert informants to whom I introduce them. For six weeks, we live, learn, and work together. My colleagues say you teach best what you know best, which, in the case of The Gambia, is all the more enjoyable because I continue to learn along with the students.

I designed the Gambia course according to a number of 'principles' that have increasingly shaped my own approach to teaching. Foremost is the principle that experience is the best teacher. When learning experiences are structured appropriately, individual students identify, examine, and adapt new cultural traits (e.g., knowledge, beliefs, and values) that they encounter into their personal lives. They also have a chance to recognize previously unknown cultural assumptions that shape how they see and act in the world. I also encourage skills development: communication skills for self-presentation, interviewing and networking, research skills for their work.

Students who participate in The Gambia, West Africa study tour course don't see the world in quite the same way once they have returned from Africa. In some cases their short-term goals and related actions change in ways directly attributable to their Gambian experience. What students learn in The Gambia helps expand personal and even professional horizons.



*Our friend Yaharr Jallow with her granddaughter and namesake or "toma" in the Mandinka language*

Students acquire ‘new cultural capital’ they can draw upon in the future as they meet new people from other walks of life and areas of the world. But knowledge is not acquired in a social vacuum. The quest for knowledge should be purposeful, because knowledge itself is powerful and carries obligation. While in The Gambia, students are encouraged to explore topics of interest and relevance to Gambians. In many cases the learning strategy we develop allows students to ‘pitch in’ and help accomplish something concrete that is directly beneficial to our Gambian hosts. This active, experiential approach to learning, while offering a service to others, makes a powerful psychological impression on student participants. Students enjoy a tremendous sense of satisfaction from activities that benefit others as well as themselves.

No other U.S. university offering a program in The Gambia is able to place students in such a meaningful and personalized learning environment as St. Mary’s College of Maryland. St. Mary’s students meet and work with a wide range of people throughout the country. For example, students have worked closely with the museum and research staff of the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC), part of the Department of State for Tourism and Culture, since 1996. That was the year we first met with the Minister of Education, Ms. Satang Jaw, and other members of her administrative staff at the Department of State for Education. We have friends at the Bakau Primary School, The Gambia Teacher’s College, Nyakoi Junior High School, and are well aware of the shortage of qualified teachers and the growing number of school-aged children. Several of the students in the 1998 group worked closely with maternal-child health care medical teams in the Greater Banjul Area and rural communities near Bansang in the Central River Division. Other students with an interest in biology have carried out their studies at Abuko Nature Reserve under supervision from people working at the Wildlife Department. We have established good relations with people at the National Environment Agency, an organization whose creation was supported largely by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

### **The Need for an Expansion of St. Mary’s Activities in The Gambia**

Since The Gambia’s independence on February 18, 1965, its people have lived in a peaceful country currently portrayed as ‘The Smiling Coast of West Africa.’ Gambians justifiably pride themselves on their generous hospitality. One of the most common

phrases visitors hear to any question or request is ‘No Problem.’ Although pleasant and reassuring, the Gambians’ smiling faces cannot mask the fact that this is a society that faces critical and potentially problematic internal issues as the new millennium approaches. For example, the current annual population growth rate is 4.1%, which means that Gambia’s current population of just over one million people can be expected to double by as early as 2015. The Gambian government has limited human and financial resources with which to provide basic social services to its rapidly growing population. Two areas of particular concern are education and health care. Many Gambian youths, after finishing school, find it extremely difficult to obtain gainful employment since the opportunity structure is evolving and diversifying very slowly. One of the options many Gambians pursue is international migration. I have heard informal estimates that 10% of all Gambians, in other words over 100,000 people, live abroad, mostly in the countries of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

It is easy to imagine the potential for increased social strain given the conditions of rapid population growth and limited economic opportunity. This strain is further exacerbated by the violence that has plagued neighboring countries in the region. For example, The Gambia borders a region in southern Senegal known as the Casamance where Jola separatists have periodically battled the Senegalese army for the past 20 years or so. Refugees from this region recently have settled in The Gambia. Civil war erupted in nearby Guinea-Bissau this past summer (1998), and The Gambia hosted refugees while trying to help broker a cease-fire between the opposing factions. The Gambia’s closest English-speaking neighbors, Sierra Leone and Liberia, have been embroiled in bloody civil wars over much of this decade in which tens of thousands have died, and hundreds of thousands have fled these countries and live as refugees in Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Cote D’Ivoire. Large numbers of Sierra Leoneans and Liberians live in The Gambia. In fact, it was members of Gambia’s contingent to the ECOWAS peace-keeping force in Liberia, ECOMOG, that led the overthrow of the Jawara government in 1994. The young military officers who took control of the Gambian government justified their actions by stating their mission was to stamp out corruption in government before returning power to a popularly elected government.

Prior to the coup, The Gambia for many years enjoyed the privilege of receiving one of the highest per capita rates of foreign assistance in West Africa. As in other areas of the world where governments



*Gambian girl with US American t-shirt at Wassu market*

found themselves increasingly ineffective or limited in providing services to their citizens (often as a result of structural adjustment policies), a wide variety of international, national, and local/community-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) grew as they assumed these functions. NGOs thrive in The Gambia and are a vital employment sector in the country. But with the bloodless coup that overthrew the Jawara government, the United States hastened its decision to close down the United States Agency for International Development mission in Banjul (the U.S. embassy and U.S. Peace Corps continue to operate). This created a substantial gap in U.S. American-Gambian relations, since there is now no organization with a long-term interest in developing collaborative programs for development in The Gambia.

The collaborative education and development program I initiated in The Gambia has the potential to expand and increase benefits for all involved. The anthropology/sociology department at St. Mary's College of Maryland is ready to lead the way for such an expanded program. The program would focus primarily on building human resource capacity and assisting with the creation of information exchange networks among Gambian organizations. In time the networks would be expanded to include other organizations with similar objectives and interests in the region and beyond. The long-term hypothesis is rather simple and straightforward. A peaceful and prosperous future for Gambians is dependent upon continuing efforts to improve access to quality educational experiences for people from all sectors of society. A critical condition that will affect the outcome is whether Gambians will have sufficient resources to use their newly acquired knowledge and skills. In other words, would Gambian entrepreneurs

have sufficient support in their efforts to develop activities in the public and private sectors.

In brief, the St. Mary's program, as envisaged, recognizes the fact that education is a life-long process, and seeks to expand the types of educational opportunities for both traditional and non-traditional students from Gambia and the U.S.A. Further, the program would seek to strengthen the connection between education and social service activities.

### **Future Steps for St. Mary's College**

The Gambian government is committed to creating a university in the Greater Banjul Area, and they could use our help. It's rather exceptional that the Gambians are making this attempt, given that the international donors who finance this sector emphasize primary school education and increasing the enrollment of girls. If you look at the institutions of higher education in other West African countries, it is readily apparent they suffer from a lack of resources. Their infrastructure is deteriorating rapidly, and they lack adequate information technology so commonly available to the college students of wealthier nations. St. Mary's, however, is uniquely positioned to make a tremendous positive impact on Gambian society through collaborative learning and development. In this process, St. Mary's could enrich its own community culture. Other academic departments at the College, if provided with the resources, could work together with anthropology/sociology faculty and explore long-term research possibilities in The Gambia. One place to start is to identify sites for seniors to carry out their St. Mary's projects. Whenever possible, combining educational programs with social service is a powerful strategy for contributing to long-term positive change in society.

In more general terms of education and capacity building, teacher exchange programs and teacher training opportunities hold enormous potential. There are a staggering number of Gambian children already in high schools, junior high schools, and primary schools (Ministry of Education 1996). The government has built a significant number of new schools, and Gambian teachers at all levels would benefit greatly from additional opportunities for high quality, teacher development training. St. Mary's College could create innovative, short-term summer or academic year learning experiences for Gambian teachers at the College, in the county, or elsewhere within the state. High school teachers in both countries could visit each other's classrooms and learn about their counterpart's country, society, and culture. Further, Gambian schools would benefit

from any assistance that could be provided by St. Mary's-sponsored teachers, teacher assistants, or student-teachers from the U.S.A. Short-term internships could be developed for other Gambian professionals, and thus provide them with opportunities for continuing their education and enhancing their skills.

In addition to formal education, the College is in an excellent position to help contribute in the areas of organic food production and environmental enhancement. Although SMCM is a liberal arts college, members of the biology, chemistry and political science faculties have expertise in topics such as watershed evaluation and monitoring, and livestock and compost production. Further, since 1994 three SMCM students have completed internships with Rodale International Senegal (RIS), a Senegalese NGO that provides training in regenerative agricultural techniques to both professionals and small-scale rural farmers. Rodale has an extensive network of partners working in the agricultural sector, although primarily in Francophone West Africa. One response to Gambian concerns about the social, environmental, and financial costs associated with the widespread (mis)use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides would be to engage RIS as a partner to train selected individuals from Gambian NGOs, government services, and rural communities in soil fertility enhancement and pest control techniques. A well designed set of education and development activities in the agricultural sector would increase social capital by initiating collaboration and the potential for creation of a Gambian and Senegalese

network for organic food production. Gambian farmers who adopt organic techniques may soon appreciate the fact that they are spending less money on farm inputs while producing better tasting and healthier food. Additionally, Gambians may be able to develop a higher value market for the organic food they produce. The 100,000 plus tourists who visit each year must be fed, and many may prefer an organic option. Another possibility is direct export to Europe.

Tourism is the largest earner of foreign exchange in The Gambia. The Gambian government stated its intentions to diversify tourism in The Gambia by promoting ecotourism, which includes what we know in the U.S.A. as heritage or educational tourism. Worldwide, tourism continues to grow as a major component of the global economy. There are clear indications that Gambians are interested in developing tourism activities that could generate income and other benefits for communities outside the Greater Banjul Area.

In 1996, SMCM students and faculty, together with staff from the National Council for Arts and Culture, assisted members of Genieri village community with the excavation of a legendary well that contained numerous artifacts dating to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was one of the first attempts at community or public archaeology documented in The Gambia.

Since then, members of SMCM, NCAC, and Historic St. Mary's City (HSMC) have planned an ambitious collaborative project for archaeological and ethnohistorical research and submitted a proposal for support to the Wenner-Gren foundation in New York City. This project represents a first step

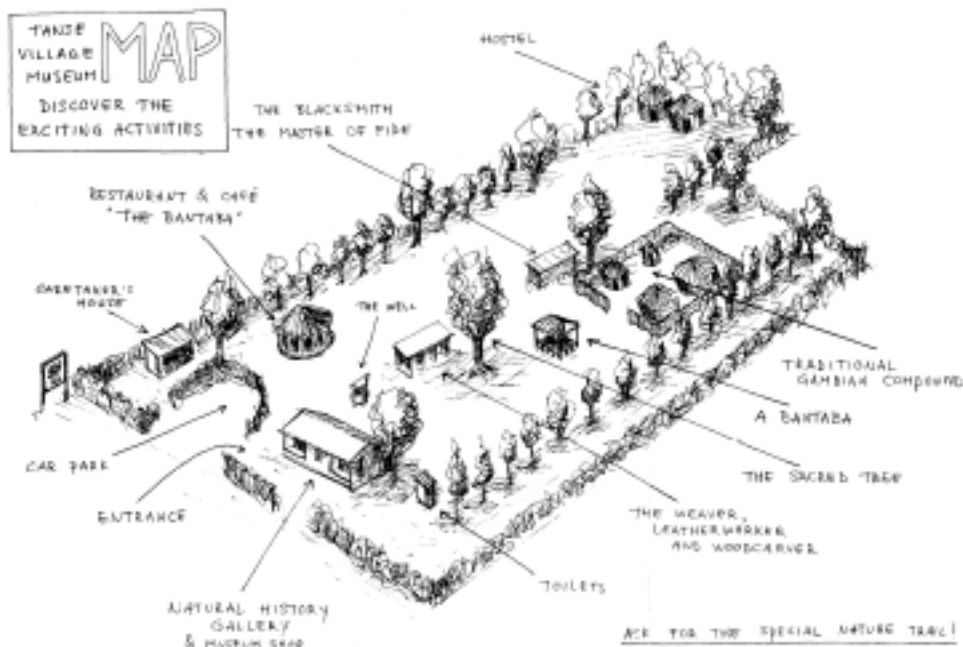


Figure 1.3 Tanje Museum diagram



towards upgrading the NCAC's capacity to carry out additional archaeological and ethnohistorical research. The results of such work have multiple uses. They can be used to improve the history curriculum in Gambian schools, increase the momentum for further development of community archaeology and ecotourism activities, and provide a basis for historical reconstruction of Gambian life from earlier periods in the spirit of the 'living museum' concept.

Transforming ideas into results requires resources. It takes the time and energy of committed people who can work together to create the necessary structures and systems to make things happen. It takes enough money to pay for equipment, materials, communication, and transportation. It means finding sufficient space for people to work, meet, and even live. If a program is positively valued and offers good incentives, then people will respond with their time and energy. A major task will be the pursuit of financial resources. Certainly the College could seek support from public organizations such as foundations or government for educational, research, and development activities. Multinational companies in the tobacco, pharmaceutical, soft drink, or even entertainment industries may contribute for reasons of philanthropy or the practical value of publicity to potential consumers or future employees. It is even conceivable that support from non-governmental organizations that intervene in other countries for humanitarian, religious, educational, or development reasons may support future College activities in The Gambia, once we have demonstrated the effect of the results of this program.

Thus, a St. Mary's-led program for education, research, and development in The Gambia requires the creation of mutually beneficial partnerships with governmental, non-governmental, and for-profit organizations concerned with community development, education, environment, food production, and health. Specific program activities will be organized along the following principles: full and equal participation among partners in the conceptualization, implementation, and evaluation of activities; reciprocal exchange of Gambians and U.S. Americans for education, research, and service learning activities; first priority to Gambian organizations in the area of human capacity-building and institutional strengthening; and Africans teaching other Africans in specific skill or content areas whenever possible. In this way, SMCM initiates a potentially highly productive educational program that can serve as a model for future collaborative programs between U.S. colleges and the governments and non-governmental and business sectors in other countries of the world.

### About this Book

I was pleasantly surprised when a sufficient number of students enrolled in the 1998 Gambia, West Africa study tour course. I had met several of the students at informational meetings during the preceding spring semester, and was encouraged to see science students interested in pursuing studies in The Gambia. The predominance of serious pre-med students in the group made it easy for me to set up the course itinerary. My colleagues in Gambia's health services arranged orientations for us at all the major health facilities, and often stopped by to 'greet us' and chat about some social topic at our digs in the Friendship Hotel, Independence Stadium. I was also very happy to have along an alum with a degree in anthropology/sociology who was a certified veteran of the first St. Mary's College study tour to Guatemala in 1996. The other students were majoring in human development and anthropology/sociology, and seemed excited about the prospect of nearly six weeks in West Africa.

I made it clear from the beginning that I expected each participant to contribute a chapter to this book, *their* book. I also encouraged students to choose a topic that potentially would provide useful information for our Gambian colleagues, and to write up their results in an interesting as well as informative manner. It is gratifying to see clear evidence in their papers that each of them enjoyed a significant learning experience in The Gambia. By living in another society that operates on different sets of assumptions from those of U.S. America, students may recognize cultural axioms of their social life normally transparent and undetected. This



*Study tour participants from left to right: Erik Jensen, Laurie Hatcher, Ryan Anderson, Paul Murphy - APSO volunteer and our guide at Abuko, Michael Sigelman, Eric Montgomery, Kristin Patzkowsky, and Jen Yates*

group learned many facts about The Gambia and life there, and everyone learned much about themselves by examining their reactions to their own experiences. We met many people over the six-week period that shared and helped shape our experiences: Gambians from many walks of life, U.S. Peace Corps volunteers, Irish APSO volunteers, students from other U.S. colleges and universities, and expatriate members of diplomatic corps and foreign assistance programs.

The next chapter is written by **Jen Yates**, a student majoring in both biology and psychology. Jen plans to attend medical school and eventually practice pediatric medicine. Her chapter is full of information about Maternal Child Health (MCH) services in The Gambia, an area in which I worked as a Peace Corps Public Health Volunteer between 1979 and 1981. I was among the first group of health volunteers, and we were part of a concerted effort to improve health status among Gambians through education and preventive medicine (immunizations). As Jen clearly points out in her paper, Gambians have much to be proud about in terms of lowering infant, childhood, and maternal mortality rates over the past two decades. However, the demographic structure of the country and population trajectory is cause for continued concern. Jen pitched in and helped the MCH staff at several clinics during her stay. The clinics are very crowded, which means nurses must work rapidly to see all the patients. It can be a very confusing scene, and one that grows hotter as the day progresses. But despite the outward appearance of 'pandemonium,' Jen was able to recognize a systematic and organized approach to providing health services. Clearly, Jen has a great deal of admiration for Gambian health professionals who work in conditions severely constrained by lack of resources. The demand for health services, as well as other social services, will continue to grow in parallel with the rapidly increasing population. For those readers who would like more information on the topic of population growth and family planning, I recommend the paper in the first study tour book by Joy Cornett (1997).

Touched deeply by her experiences in the Children's Ward at Royal Victoria Hospital in Banjul, Jen returned to St. Mary's College personally determined to do something about their lack of resources. I have included her letter to members of the southern Maryland community requesting contributions for the Gambia Pediatrics Project. In Jen's case she not only learned about Maternal Child Health in The Gambia by working alongside Gambian professionals, but she has done something that will make a more lasting contribution to Gambian society and cement some of the relations

she has developed with colleagues there. The donations are undeniably important and helpful to Gambians, but they are a sign of something even more meaningful and valuable in an African cultural context: the good and therefore beneficial relationship that exists between Jen, the College, and The Gambia.

The public health theme is picked up and expanded upon by **Kristin Patzkowsky**, a biology major who also plans to attend medical school. Kristin's introduction reminds me of Paul Stoller's book, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, in which Stoller reminds us that the ethnographic experience is not just sights and sounds, but smells, tastes, and touching. I remember early in the trip traveling with the students by taxi to several fishing villages along the southern coast. Gunjur, one of the largest of the fishing villages, is a favorite of mine. Along its picturesque shore we saw beached fishing boats from as far north as Mauritania and as far south as Ghana. Small groups of women and children gutted and cleaned the fish on the beach as the boats brought them in. Then, the fish went to the small-scale processing shops just off the beach, which smoke and dry an enormous variety of fish for export throughout the sub-region, and even to markets as distant as Nigeria and Japan for some species. For me this beach is a feast of sights, sounds, and smells – and usually somebody will offer some freshly smoked *bonga* fish (the principal ingredient for a dish that is much better than it sound – *grun soup*). As we walked along and took all this in, I noticed Kristin clearly was holding her breath – trying to take gulps of fresh air from time to time, but clearly bothered by the smells and thoughts of possible wind-borne germs. As you will see in Kristin's and other students' chapters, there were several breath-holding experiences.

Malaria continues to be a major public health issue in The Gambia and other countries in the sub-region. The Medical Research Council, Great Britain's equivalent to the U.S. Center for Disease Control, has carried out numerous malaria studies in The Gambia over the past four decades. Kristin does an excellent job in her chapter of providing an overview of the nature and scope of the problem in The Gambia, and in particular emphasizing its severity among the under-five population. Like Jen, Kristin worked alongside Gambian health professionals at several facilities, lending a hand and gaining the satisfaction of helping out while collecting data for her research paper. Kristin has continued to work with materials collected in The Gambia, carrying out a study of the sickle cell anemia allele with blood samples brought back from Bansang

hospital and Serrekunda health center. I am pleased to see that in the relatively short time of six weeks Kristin gained a great deal of knowledge about health-related topics as well as respect for those Gambians working in this sector. Kristin concludes her chapter by stating she wants to return, at some point, to a developing country like The Gambia and continue to provide much needed and greatly appreciated health services.

**Ryan Anderson**, senior chemistry major and aspiring medical school student, in his chapter provides some insight into an older, ‘traditional’ system of African medicine that developed over the millennia in this region of the world. The significance of tradition is in its power to continue providing meaningful benefits to a group of people. Each generation must renew its commitment to ‘tradition’ through its actions, or else tradition disappears. As Ryan explains, traditional African medicine encompasses a wide range of practices, everything from widely known folk remedies to the more specialized knowledge and skills held by bone setters, traditional birth attendants and herbalists, to the esoteric knowledge of spiritual specialists known as *marabouts*. According to Ryan’s analysis, part of the attraction of traditional African medicine is its accessibility – it is usually cheaper, closer, and more comfortable to obtain than modern medicine which generally involves longer travel and more money, and often entails waiting with a large crowd. Another important factor that perpetuates traditional medical practices is the local ideology, which includes beliefs in witches, sorcery, and malevolent spirits. With regard to the efforts Ryan describes to build bridges of trust and partnership between traditional and modern medical practitioners, it is still too early to tell whether Gambia can achieve results similar to comparable programs in Ghana, Nigeria, and Niger. There can be no doubt, however, that traditional Gambian healers are an important and valuable resource in local communities. They understand very well the social and psychological implications of illness, and people place their trust and confidence in them and their abilities.

Ryan also continues to build upon his experience in The Gambia. Working with samples from the local tree *Cassia sieberiana* (known in Mandinka as *Sinjango* and Wolof as *Senjen*) that I obtained for him in Senegal, he is trying to isolate and identify the organic compound responsible for its medicinal properties as part of his senior project.

The first three chapters clearly show that St. Mary’s students can successfully combine their learning objectives with social service. In this way, these students have made it relatively easier for the

next group of St. Mary’s students who wish to learn and work with Gambia’s Medical and Health department. As the number of seniors carrying out St. Mary’s projects increases, I hope more students will look for ways to combine learning with service. The task of living and working in another country is difficult, but the potential rewards are extremely satisfying.

**Michael Sigelman** is responsible for the fourth chapter, a report on the growing problem of solid waste management in The Gambia, and the initial efforts to heighten public awareness to the problem through environmental education. Mike worked with the National Environment Agency (NEA), an organization with tremendous partnership potential for St. Mary’s College, where an interdisciplinary Environmental Studies Program has recently been approved. Michael quickly learned that a study of the topic of waste management is nearly unmanageable in a six-week time frame. However, he outlines useful parts of the scope of this issue and describes some of the interesting initiatives underway to make ‘cleaning up’ the environment financially profitable. I think students who participate in future study tours to The Gambia could expand upon the study of the connections between the environment and human health, as Kristin did to some extent in her discussion of malaria.

What is left out of Mike’s chapter on the biophysical environment was his resounding success in the Gambian social environment. Michael’s friendly and outgoing nature helped him learn very well the most basic feature of social interaction: the ritualized verbal greetings. It seemed that Michael had friends everywhere; not a day went by when somebody wasn’t at the gate of the Friendship Hotel asking for Mike. I could see where Michael might adapt quickly to certain features of life in The Gambia; by the time we were ready to return to the U.S.A. Michael had ongoing jokes with a number of potential ‘wives.’

The final two chapters in the book deal with issues that are incompatible to U.S. American culture and even run counter to some of our most cherished values. Female circumcision, also referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM), was the topic studied by human development major **Laurie Hatcher**. Polygyny is the practice in which men keep more than one wife, and was studied by former anthropology/sociology major **Eric Montgomery** (Eric has since transferred to Syracuse University and is majoring in geography). To anthropologists, female genital mutilation and polygyny are examples of ‘culture traits.’ Most U.S. Americans interpret these practices and the underlying values that

support them as patriarchal and oppressive. As Jen Yates pointed out, FGM often compromises the health of women who undergo this procedure. Laurie provides details about the increasingly public debate surrounding this issue. This is an excellent example of a waning Gambian tradition. Many people think that as female education increases, the incidence of FGM will decrease. Interestingly, increases in male and female education do not necessarily appear to inhibit Gambian men from marrying more than one wife, and conversely, for women to agree to become a co-wife with another woman to the same man. Polygyny is generally viewed as a means for a man to increase his status, by demonstrating his ability to obtain and provide for multiple wives and their children. When Gambia was largely a horticultural society relying on manual labor, there were economic incentives as well as symbolic ones to perpetuate polygyny. But these reasons no longer explain why Gambian professionals living and working in Banjul or Kanifing continue to choose to marry and live in this type of arrangement. Eric provides us with some insight into traditional and contemporary justifications for polygyny, and this is clearly a topic that cries out for further research. In fact, any number of fascinating topics associated with marriage in The Gambia could be usefully studied: the prevalence of arranged and cross-cousin marriage; where people choose to live once they are married; and the strategies for dealing with children born outside wedlock, to name a few.

Although both these practices are relatively foreign to U.S. Americans, Eric clearly had much less difficulty and discomfort studying polygyny than Laurie had with female genital mutilation. Despite the difficulties they encountered in their research, both students enjoyed learning about life in The Gambia. Six weeks may sound like a long time to learn about a specific subject, but considering most anthropologists spend anywhere between six and eighteen months carrying out their initial field work, it takes both preparation and focus to complete a research project in this time frame.

I am very proud of the work produced by these students. Although the range of topics covered in this book is more limited than its predecessor, there is greater depth in their examination of a number of related issues. Most prominent is the coverage of

health concerns that affect the lives of Gambian women and children. I hope that this book will, like its predecessor, serve as an example of what is possible for students pursuing their studies at St. Mary's College. Further, I hope this book fulfills its mandate of being informative, interesting, and useful to anyone wishing to learn more about The Gambia and its people.



*Young boys delivering TV and remote control by donkey cart in Basse*

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