

Building Bridges for Creative Learning

From the Bay to the Bantaba

Bill Roberts

Since 1996, St. Mary's College of Maryland has sponsored three field study programs to The Gambia, West Africa. Ten students joined me for the first program in the summer of 1996. They stayed in Gambia for a period of either four or six weeks. Each student selected a research topic and, with help from me and the Gambians or expatriates I knew, collected original data for a report on their topic. We published the reports together in a volume titled *Tubabs Under the Baobab: Study and Adventure in West Africa*. We sent our friends and colleagues in The Gambia copies of the volume, and gave another 20 copies to the Methodist Bookstore where they were sold for 100 dalasis apiece. They sold quickly, but not long thereafter, the bookstore closed.



The first group of St. Mary's students to live and study in The Gambia for a six-week period in 1996.

Seven St. Mary's students, about half of whom wanted to attend medical school, came to The Gambia in 1998 for a six-week period. Because of their strong interest in medicine and health, we worked closely with Gambian health officials that summer. Their work was published under the title *Tubabs Two: From the Baobab to the Bantaba*. As before, we sent copies to colleagues who worked with us, and sold a handful through our friends at the St. Mary's grocery outlets. On the one hand, I was glad to see that Gambians, expatriate residents, or tourists were interested in the work St. Mary's students produced. However, we had not yet set in place a mechanism so that the proceeds from the sales could be used to generate additional benefits for Gambians or Gambia. But we do have a plan to break this unfortunate 'tradition' that I will describe later.

The remainder of this volume is based upon the work of nine students who came with me to The Gambia in the



The 1998 group on the bantaba at Tanje village museum.

summer of 2000, and spent over six weeks in West Africa. Joining me were faculty advisers Professor Lawrence Rich (foreign languages) and his wife Celia, a professional photographer and social activist. For me, the third occasion of the field program was highly symbolic and meaningful. Our return demonstrated continuity in our growing commitment to create a collaborative program of learning, research and service. St. Mary's field program in Gambia has evolved towards a 'mutualism' model of collaboration that generates benefits for all participants, U.S. Americans and Gambians alike.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the 2000 field program for me was that for the first time African American



Picture of St. Mary's College participants after one week in the 'provinces' or interior of the country in 2000.

students participated in the field program. If the ‘third time is the charm’ as we often hear in the United States, meaning that it is usually ‘right’ on the third occasion, then it was the participation of these three students and their perceptions and perspectives that enriched the trip and made it ‘right[eous].’ I consider it a special privilege to have been a guide for these students and witness them reconnect spiritually, intellectually and emotionally with their ancestral homeland. They engaged their African experiences with a vigor and enthusiasm that affected us all, and to some degree, served as a positive model for other students.



SMCM students with administrators from the University of The Gambia. Let’s look out for one another, SMCM & UTG.

The identity label for our group, for the first time in all the years I’ve brought students to The Gambia, became an issue. Not all of us in the group identified with the term tubab (tubab means either foreigner or white person). No, there could be no Tubabs Three 2000 as a title for the next book, no way. But as our stay in The Gambia drew to a close, and we prepared to return to the U.S., we considered a variety of possible names for this volume. We finally agreed on the title *Together in Friendship: mbe karafaring nyola*. It seemed perfect. Our home in The Gambia had been the Friendship Hotel for six weeks. Many of the friends we had made worked in the hotel, and they certainly took good care of all of us during our stay. So, a book title that was part English, part Mandinka, symbolized what had happened during our stay. Gambians and U.S. Americans had lived together at the Friendship Hotel, forming or strengthening friendships that, in some cases, may last a lifetime. We all looked out for one another, which is the translation of the subtitle, *mbe karafaring nyola*. Gambians and Americans, looking out for one another, together in friendship. And as any Gambian will tell you, there is nothing more important or meaningful than the quality of the relationships we develop with our fellow human beings. Now, there are a few more young Americans who’ve learned this important lesson.

Cultural wonders, cultural challenges

Gambia is a beautiful country with wonderful, warm, and friendly people. It’s known as ‘The Smiling Coast.’ Its beaches beckon to European tourists who visit in large numbers during the winter. Many tourists never leave the tourist scenes on the coast. They don’t realize you can travel from the coast to the eastern border with Senegal by the river Gambia. For centuries this river was the primary means for transporting people and goods from one region to another. The river was the lifeline of the country and its people, and served as a vital artery for both commerce and communication. Evidence for chapters of the unwritten history of early European-African contact line its shores. Some, such as Juffure/Albreda, and James Island are relatively well known. Others, such as Brefet and Bintang, are among the more numerous sites that remain largely unexplored. History, tradition, and the spirit of the Gambian people can still be found along the river. The river also provides habitat for what remains of Gambia’s once extensive inventory of wildlife, including hippos, crocodiles, manatees, and even chimpanzees.

But The Gambia can be a challenging place to live and work, particularly for young U.S. college students who have never been to Africa. Once the initial honeymoon phase captured by the phrase “Oh wow, Africa!” wears off, young college students confront adjustment to the occasionally oppressive heat, the drone of ever present, malaria-carrying mosquitoes, and the realization that “we’re not in Kansas anymore.” Culture shock has a hard edge. Lively colorful marketplaces where you might enjoy a bit of bargaining with vendors are also congested mazes of stalls where the strong smells of dried and fresh fish, overripe fruit, and stale urine engulf you. Add to this the pressure created by hustlers, potential pickpockets or aggressive merchants who reach out for you as you walk by. It takes time to realize that even poor U.S. college students are wealthy by Gambian standards.



Students in a silversmith’s shop in Basse, Upper River Division.

Being able to anticipate difficulty when adjusting to a new culture is already a step towards successfully dealing with problems as they arise. The urge to recreate the socially familiar is subtle but strong. Student conversations tend to review events from the past academic year among common friends and acquaintances. Email becomes a lifeline to friends and loved ones thousands of miles away. Elements of U.S. American identity, food, music, friends and family become a rallying point to find the strength and serenity to continue along the path of adaptation. Six weeks is too short to completely adjust to life in another country and culture. But the St. Mary's College field program with the help of our Gambian friends and colleagues provides students with the cultural capital and support to make the adjustment. Much of the students' success in adjusting to Gambia and completing a research project and other good work can be attributed to their own strength, determination and commitment to the Gambian experience.

The St. Mary's Field Program in The Gambia

St. Mary's field program continues to evolve as the number of our Gambian partners increases, and the variety of Gambian groups and organizations with which we collaborate expands. Our goal is simple: build bridges for learning between the College's home on the Chesapeake Bay and the Gambian bantaba (a central public meeting place in Gambian villages). Further, our learning should be practical, relevant and useful to everybody involved. Challenges abound: time, distance, money and uncertainty to name a few. But the Wolof people have a proverb, "Ndanka ndanka moo japa goolu." The literal translation is "slowly, slowly catches the monkey." I've always thought of this as meaning "persistence and patience pay off." Remember the story of the tortoise and the hare: it's not how fast you start the race, it's how you finish it. Our vision and commitment to The Gambia is for the long term.

Although English is the official language for The Gambia, most Gambians speak either Mandinka, Wolof, Fulfulde, Jola or Serahulie as their first (mother) language. St. Mary's participants study Mandinka language and local cultural customs four hours each day (except Sundays) during the first two-weeks. Ebrima Colley employs his extensive experience as a language and culture teacher to guide students to at least minimal proficiency in this language. Students create very favorable impressions with Gambians they meet when they are able to perform the highly ritualized set of Mandinka greetings. In addition to studying Mandinka, daily field trips to sites such as a health center, marketplace, school, television station, national museum or the nature reserve, help orient everybody to getting around the Greater Banjul area (Banjul city, Bakau, Fajara, Kanifing and Serekunda). Many students meet their Gambian mentors during this time.

Most of our meals are eaten together, family style, during the first two weeks. We invite Gambians, other Americans and expatriates to come by and join us for a meal or a drink.



Chef Ibrahim Sowe took care of most of our food needs at the Friendship Hotel. He is preparing to serve the fish for our sendoff party during our final night in The Gambia.

The schedule is fairly heavy during these two weeks, and students look forward to the freedom of sleeping late on Sunday and heading to the beach to relax. This year we were pleasantly surprised by the recent addition of a swimming pool and pool bar to the Friendship Hotel. Thank you, Dembo Badjie, permanent secretary for Youth and Sports and our constant friend and supporter, for seeing the pool was built.



Dembo Badjie (left), permanent secretary for Youth and Sports, visited with us nearly every day at the Friendship Hotel.

After two weeks everybody packs a small bag to take on the trip up-country, to the "provinces," for the experience of rural Gambian life. We spend a week traveling by small bus or by boat on the river. This year we stopped at Bintang Bolong lodge, Tendeba camp, Jangjangbure camp, and the Basse Guest House. We went all the way to Bajakunda village in Wuli district, Upper River Division. I spent two years in this village between 1979-81, working as a Public Health volunteer. Today, I can call Bajakunda village from

my office at the College. My toma (namesake), Mommadou Yaya Bajaha, wants to come to the United States. But that's another story.

After a week upcountry we return to the coast. Students talk with me about their research and/or service plan for the final three weeks of the program. I help them network with Gambians, suggest research strategies, and in some cases accompany them to their work sites. It's safe to say, I think, that students gain from their experience what they invest into it. Just about everybody surprises themselves at some point by what they accomplish during the trip. In The Gambia we not only learn more about the world around us, we learn a great deal about the world each of us carries within.



Nicole waves hello and shows the beautiful henna design on the palm of her hand.

The Participants

The Gambia field program is offered through St. Mary's Continuing Education office. Jeanne Vote helped create the program in 1996, and continues to provide support and encouragement. The 2000 field school was fortunate to have three SMCM graduates among the participants.

Keisha Reynolds was an SMCM alum. She had just completed her master's degree in communication at Towson State University. Her interest was in women writers. Keisha is also quite a writer. Her personal account follows this foreword, and her story about women writers appears later.

Nicole Morgan, another SMCM alum, had just finished her master's degree in journalism at the University of Maryland. Nicole was the investigative reporter within the group. She made unbelievably rapid progress in Mandinka in six weeks. Nicole fell in love with The Gambia, no doubt

about that. She managed to return to The Gambia only four months after she left with the rest of us. Nicole's chapter on Gambian journalism is really the tip of the iceberg about what she learned in The Gambia. I had hoped Nicole would have written a concluding chapter after her second trip to Gambia, but she's too busy as a cub reporter in Akron, Ohio.

Jen Dickson had just graduated from St. Mary's. Her study is well done, and raises as many questions as provides answers. A large francophone community lives in The Gambia, surrounded as it is by former French West Africa. Although many people living in The Gambia speak French, not many Gambians speak French. I would argue that Gambians should be conversant in French for the same reasons that U.S. Americans should be conversant in Spanish. But Gambian education continues to be constrained by lack of human and financial resources, despite the impressive growth in the number of schools.



Sitting in a restaurant on Gorée Island, Keisha's smile says it all.



Jen tries a tune on a small souvenir kora on the day of our departure from The Gambia.

Christina Santoni probably worked harder than any other student. She is a biology major, the marine corps of the majors at St. Mary's College. Many biology majors have come to The Gambia with me over the years, and I only hope the number increases. Gambia presents wonderful opportunities for biology students interested in tropical African fauna, flora and wildlife management. Christina



Christina stands in front of the Department of Parks and Wildlife Management Headquarters at Abuko Nature Reserve on her first day of work.

'discovered' never before recorded species of amphibians and reptiles in The Gambia. Further, she continued to reflect upon and work with her Gambian experience. Her St. Mary's project includes the development of educational materials for Abuko Nature Reserve. I hope Christina will have the opportunity to return to Gambia. Nicole already has.

Tristan Blanchard, another biology major, was the first person to tell me she wanted to go to The Gambia. Tristan was tough, and chose environmental education as a topic for research. This is an important topic in Gambia, where population pressure has increased on the natural resource base. When combined with decreased rainfall and the continued conversion of forest and bush to full-time



Tristan joins Jen for our first impromptu village dance at Brefet village, Western River Division.

cropland, you're left with a pretty stark landscape. Tristan first gives us an overview of environmental education in The Gambia, and the Peace Corps' role in these efforts, and then compares her findings at a rural and urban primary school.

Keri Peterson also has an interest in the U.S. Peace Corps/ Gambia. I wouldn't be surprised if Keri joins the Peace Corps after graduation. Her interest in volunteer service seems very strong. Keri is a political science major and looked at a program that brought urban professional women together with young rural girls in an experience that focused on leadership, self-esteem, and technology in the workplace. Modeled to some degree after the 'take daughters to work' day, senior Gambian staff at the Peace Corps office were closely involved in making the program happen.

Stephanie Bonifant became an apprentice for a Gambian artist. He had been the beneficiary of efforts by two Peace



Keri styles her new look when we visit Gorée Island.

Corps volunteers in the mid-'70s who had taken him to an art school where he learned to make batik. After years of study and work, Baboukar Fall is a successful Gambian artist. He made batiks that were given to all the participants. Stephanie created some beautiful drawings that are included within this volume.



Stephanie sits with Gambian artisan Baboukar Faal in his workshop.

Rita Turner was the youngest in the group, having just completed her first year at SMCM. She is eager, energetic and enthusiastic - at least that was her approach to the topic of ecotourism. Rita managed everything with a smile. Inshallah, she will be the first student assistant for the next field season, in 2002.



Rita poses for a picture taken by a fellow student.

Shawn Jordan was the man. The only male student on the trip, Shawn was an excellent brother to all the female students. Nobody was more surprised than Shawn himself at what he accomplished during the weeks in The Gambia. Shawn has continued his good work for Gambians from Maryland. He organized a book drive for schools in the Upper River Division. Shawn has also continued to work on the topic of tourism in The Gambia after his return to the College. Shawn will graduate this May, inshallah, and I hope somebody gives him a trip to The Gambia for a graduation gift.



Shawn sits in the shade at the beach in a spot called Laybato near Fajara beach.

Another element of the charm in this third trip was the presence of Larry Rich and his wife Celia. As it turned out, a sizeable Cuban expatriate community lives in The Gambia. Larry and Celia met a number of the doctors teaching at the medical school, and invited them by the hotel. These experienced travelers left the group in Brussels on our return to the States, and continued south to Spain.

So many others enriched the life of our little community in The Gambia. Although I cannot possibly remember all of you, I want to acknowledge some of our colleagues and friends below.



Larry and Celia prepare to head to the airport and leave The Gambia.

Acknowledgements

For six weeks the staff at the Friendship Hotel at Independence Stadium did everything they could to make us feel at home. They succeeded. Hotel Manager Tijan Koritah and his fine staff responded as best they could to every request from us. Chef Momodou Sowe and his kitchen staff fed us well with a variety of Gambian and Euro-African dishes. Malick Ceesay managed the bar that helped to keep us cool by the newly constructed pool. All members of the Gambian hotel staff, whether security, pool maintenance, front desk, housecleaning, or facilities, looked after our comfort and safety. I also appreciate their help with encouraging students to speak Mandinka whenever possible. Marketing and Public Relations officer Mustapha Camara arranged a gift-giving ceremony for us at the hotel, and also provided us with wonderful entertainment on our last night in the country. Dembo Badjie, the permanent secretary for Youth and Sports, lived near the Friendship Hotel and was a good friend and neighbor throughout our stay. I will never forget his words to some of the students after we returned from our visit to rural Gambian villages. "I'm happy for you, and I feel sorry for you. You've seen things that so many Gambians living in the Banjul area have never seen, but I know it was hot and hard living conditions upcountry."



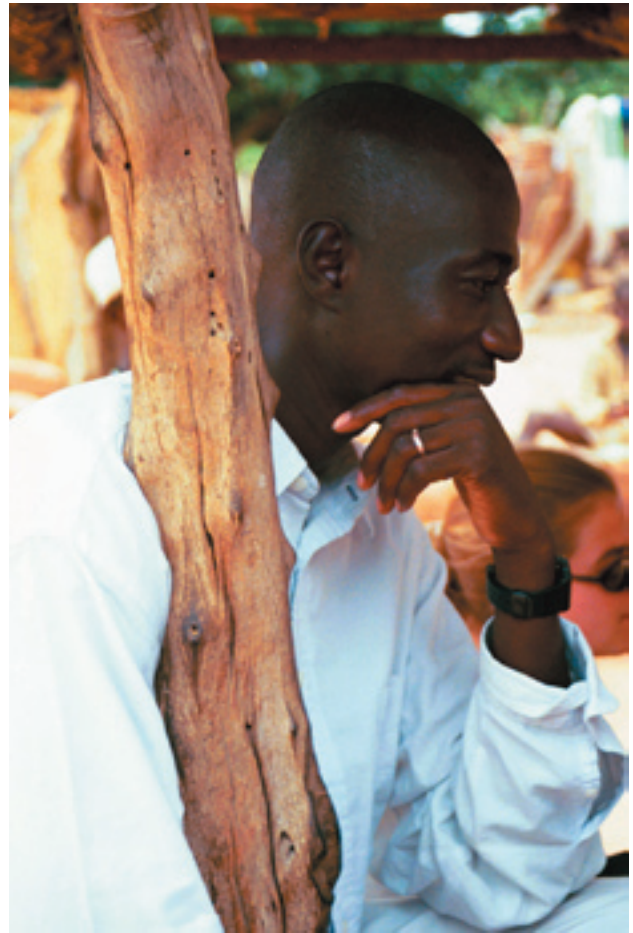
Malick Ceesay was one of our many friends at the Friendship Hotel who looked after us.

Dembo's daughter, Fatim Badjie, became friends with several students. Already an accomplished young writer, Fatim completed high school last year and is looking for a college where she can further her education. We hope to see her again soon, but next time in the United States.

Our friends at the Gambian National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) took time from their busy activities with the Millennium Roots International Homecoming Festival to guide us through recent exhibitions at the Arch 22 memorial. Executive Director Momodou Joof was especially helpful with Shawn and Keisha's projects. Bala Saho, an alumnus of the Historic St. Mary's City/St. Mary's College of Maryland Historical Archaeology Field School, spent as much time with us as he could. He is currently the Curator for the NCAC's Research and Documentation Division. We have begun a research project on the history of Banjul (St. Mary's Island), and have outlined plans for other collaborative research projects. Baba Ceesay, Curator for the Museum and Monuments Division, also helped whenever he could.

I want to extend special thanks to Bakary Sidibeh, retired Executive Director for the National Council for Arts and Culture. Bakary has incredible insight into sociocultural changes taking place in The Gambia and offered his time, knowledge, and expertise to many of us throughout the trip.

Our colleagues at the Peace Corps Gambia office helped us in innumerable ways. Barbara Kah, Peace Corps nurse, spoke with students as a group and individually on safety, health, and adjustment issues. Barbara helped keep us healthy and together as a group. Associate Peace Corps Directors Yamai Secka-Jack (education), Milan Rupert (environment and natural resources), Gebril Sumbunu (health) and resource librarian Beatrice Prom provided assistance to Tristan and Keri's projects. Yamai and Gebril were especially helpful in identifying which educational and health institutions would most benefit from the modest gift of computer hardware we made before leaving Gambia. They helped put us in touch with Peace Corps volunteers whom we met and learned from



Bala Saho sits on the bantaba in Juffure, listening to Binta Kinteh talk about her village and people.

throughout the trip. Many thanks to the volunteers we met and those we didn't meet. I was struck by how far some were willing to go to make a difference in the valuable work they are doing. Thanks also to Peace Corps director Thomas Morgan and his office staff for their support.

The Gambian government has made increasing access to quality education a national priority. I extend my thanks



Peace Corps volunteers and staff made a tremendous contribution to our learning experiences in The Gambia.

to so many Gambians and expatriates working in the crucial human services sector, and repeat my pledge to them to do what I can to strengthen collaborative learning programs between our institutions. Vice Chancellor Donald Ekong and members of his Gambia National University staff met with us to discuss their ambitious undertaking of establishing this institution. Gambia College Principal Jenung Manneh and his staff also spent time talking with us about their efforts to expand educational programs to create the human capital necessary for national growth in the next millennium. So many people from the Department of State for Education, the Management Development Institute, Nyakoi junior secondary school, primary schools in Bakau New Town, Dankunku and Bajakunda villages opened their doors and met with us to talk about education in The Gambia.

Two teachers whom we've known longest are Tafsir and Yaharr Jallow. Tafsir is the Registrar for Gambia College, and Yaharr the headmistress for Bakau New Town school. Every year we visit Gambia, Tafsir and Yaharr invite us to their home and workplace and share with us their views on continuity and change in The Gambia. I value their friendship with the College and look forward to introducing another group of students to them in 2002.

Deputy Executive Director Momodou Sarr from National Environment Agency (NEA) met the group and introduced us to many new colleagues there, including Ndey Sireng Bakurin, Keba Naso and Stanley Adams. We hope to continue and even expand our collaboration with the NEA in the future.

Alhaji Cham from Gambia Telecommunications Company made sure I was able to rent the last mobile cell phone available. Director of Broadcasting Services for Gambia Radio and Television Services (GRTS) Tombong Saidy helped to bring media attention to the St. Mary's field program during our stay. Modou Ndimbalan from Sowe

Tours provided us with bus driver Karafa Badjie for our numerous near and far trips by bus. Lula LaPolice took very good care of us at the Keur Beer hotel when we visited Gorée Island in Senegal.

Therese Abraham is one of the smartest and hardest working women I know in The Gambia. She and her sons Willie and Simon took us to dinner and helped in every way they could during our stay. I am very grateful for their continued friendship and support.

Their excellencies Ambassador John Bojang and Ambassador George Haley, Gambian ambassador to the United States and U.S. ambassador to The Gambia respectively, offered their full support for the program, and have repeated their support for its growth in the future. Despite the lack of full diplomatic relations between the United States and The Gambia, a shared history and common set of aspirations among the people link these two countries. St. Mary's College, although small in size, has an opportunity to continue making positive contributions with possibly large and positive impacts in the future.

At St. Mary's College, The Gambia continues to receive strong support from President Maggie O'Brien and Provost Alan Dillingham. Director of International Education Virginia Foran-Cain and Associate Provost for Academic Services Roy Hopkins assisted with the planning phase for the program. Director of Health Services Dwight Shafer met with the group before our departure to discuss health issues and provided us with a medical kit for our trip. Division of History and Social Science associates Sandra Robbins and Lucy Myers were always willing to help with program related tasks, both large and small. My co-editors Pamela Hicks and Janet Haugaard have been invaluable in putting together this book.

So many other people deserve thanks for making the 2000 field program a success, and many of them can be



Yaharr and Tafsir Jallow standing with Bill and Celia at our farewell dinner.

found in the acknowledgement section of the student chapters that follow.

What your support means

By purchasing this book you will be helping to create a fund that will be used to sponsor a writing competition for Gambian schoolgirls throughout the country. Beatrice Prom and Yamai Secka-Jack from the Peace Corps office will help organize a committee to promote a writing competition in the near future. In this way we hope to contribute modestly towards increasing the incentive and means for Gambian girls to continue their education. At the same time, we may be helping support a future Gambian author by helping her gain the recognition and support she needs.

The next St. Mary's College field program in The Gambia will take place during the summer of 2002. We hope to initiate a faculty exchange program with Gambia College or the National University shortly thereafter. Together, in the spirit of friendship for understanding, we will build the bridges for creative learning between our bay and their bantaba.



Bill presents the gift of friendship to Tijan Koritah (left) and Mustapha Camara (middle). It is a batik made by Baboukar Faal commemorating the field school.



Binta, a young school girl who travels across the mouth of the river Gambia each day from Barra to Banjul for school, sells peanuts at the ferry crossing to contribute to her family's income. Imagine the stories she must have about tourists and Africans.



Donkey carts carry all kinds of goods and people in The Gambia, particularly in the 'provinces.' This cart is waiting for the ferry to cross from Basse to Wuli district, Upper River Division.



There aren't any bridges yet across the river Gambia, so people still take ferries, such as this one at Janjangbure, Central River Division.