

VERBAL AND VISUAL EXPRESSIONS OF WOLOF CULTURE

Edited by David P. Gamble

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SOURCE MATERIAL ON THE FANAAL (LANTERN) IN SENEGAMBIA

In The Wolof of Senegambia, London: International African Institute, 1957 & 1967, p. 78, I included a brief paragraph on lanterns (fanaal) used by the Wolof. Many years later, Judith Bettelheim began making a comparative study of lantern festivals, particular in the West Indies, which culminated in her doctoral thesis, and the publication of an article "The Lantern Festival in Senegambia," in African Arts, February 1985. The same issue also contained an article by John W. Nunley on "The Lantern Festival in Sierra Leone".

The word fanaal itself is of European origin, ultimately derived from the Greek words phanos or phanarion. In European usage it meant a fire or a lantern put on a high place to serve as a landmark or signal during the night, and the word was also used for a lantern hoisted on a ship to show its position, the light here often being in a grilled cage. The word is found in medieval Latin as fanarium (1283 AD), In Italian as fanale (1308 AD), in French as phanal (1548 AD), fanal (1554 AD). It occurs in English as fanell (1471 AD), and fanal (1632 AD). The same form - fanal - is also found in Portuguese. In Senegambian languages it became fanaal in Wolof, and fanaano in Gambian Mandinka. In the Krio (Creole) language of Sierra Leone, on the other hand, the fanaal is referred to as a pepalantan (paper lantern).

In the following pages I have set out in chronological order the major articles and references that I have been able to trace on the fanaal in West Africa.

Source: W. Winwood Reade: Savage Africa.... 1
 New York: Harper...1864.
Sedhu, Casamance

- 317 The following morning I started before daybreak, and rode the whole distance, reaching Sedhu at eight o'clock P.M.....
- 318 But it was Christmas Eve.... I was well rewarded by my haste with the sight of a most singular ceremony. We English once possessed the Senegal, and there, every Christmas Eve, the Feast of Lanterns used to be held. The native women had picked up the words and airs of the carols; the custom had descended to the Gambia, and even to the Casamance, where it is still preserved. A few minutes after I had ridden up, sounds of music were heard, and a crowd of blacks came to the door, carrying the model of a ship, made of paper, and illuminated within, and hollowed pumpkins also lighted up for the occasion. Then they sang some of our dear old Christmas carols, and among others one which I had heard years ago one Christmas Eve at Oxford.

"Nowel, Nowel, the angels did say

To certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;

etc.

The illustration that is given in the book is the earliest representation of a fanal that I know. However, it is not clear whether it is based on a sketch by Winwood Reade himself or by an unknown illustrator from Reade's verbal description. Some of the other sketches in the book are based on du Chaillu's material, and the illustration "A flood in Senegal" obviously owes a great deal to the imagination, rather than to a real situation. On balance I feel that the sketch was done by an illustrator, and one cannot rely on it for accuracy of detail.
 (DPG)

- 1 Different paging in edition published in England, p. 399.
- 2 Early traders in the Casamance would have come from such places as Goree, and perhaps St. Louis. (DPG)
- 3 Thanks are due to Linda K. Salmon for drawing my attention to the illustration.

Winwood Reade's account is also given in W. F. Dawson: Christmas: Its Origins and Associations... London, 1902, quoting from Chamber's Journal, December 25, 1869.



CHRISTMAS EVE IN THE CAEMANOE.

LA TABASKI

St.Louis (Senegal)

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LA FETE DES NOIRS AU SENEGAL

Saint-Louis du Sénégal, 1er. février 1877

Monsieur le directeur,

J'ai l'honneur de vous envoyer un croquis de la grande fête des noirs du Sénégal (la Tabaski). A vous, monsieur le directeur, de juger s'il est digne d'être reproduit dans votre estimable journal.

Voici en quelques mots en quoi consiste cette fête, qui a eu lieu dans la nuit du 24 décembre dernier.....Dans l'intérieur, les chefs de village, armés de longs fusils, se rassemblent et organisent, à la lueur d'immenses feux, une fantasia dans laquelle ils simulent l'attaque d'un village ou un combat corps à corps. Mais à Saint-Louis il en est autrement. Les noirs préparent, longtemps à l'avance, de petits édifices ou des navires de différentes dimensions, le tout en papier de couleurs variées et découpé à jour. Ces petits constructions sont de vrais chefs d'oeuvre de patience. Le soir du 24, ils en illuminent l'intérieur et les promènent dans les rues de Saint-Louis. De plus, chaque indigène est porteur d'une lanterne, également de papier de couleur, représentant des maisons, des cases et des têtes de morts....

p.127 Voici dans quel ordre marche le défilé: en tête, un griot ou musicien, qui joue du tam-tam, instrument assez disgracieux comme chacun le sait; puis vient un petit navire brillamment illuminé et traîné par des noirs. Deux files de diguennes ou femmes du pays suivant à quelques pas en battant des mains en cadence, dansant et hurlant d'une façon effroyable; derrière ces négresses vient un petit édifice, toujours en papier, représentant une sorte de maison chinoise, puis des navires, des cases, etc., etc., et, derrière chacune des immenses lanternes, des groupes de diguennes et des joueurs de tam-tam faisant un vacarme épouvantable...



LA TABASKI

GRANDE FÊTE DES NOIRS À SAINT-LOUIS (SÉNÉGAL)

Dessin de notre correspondant du Sénégal, M. Eugène BLANCOUBRON. — Voir l'article explicatif, page 126.

Enfin la foule des nègres, armés de long bâtons où sont suspendus les fanaux dont j'ai parlé plus haut.....

On ne peut se faire une idée du spectacle que présente la ville cette nuit-là : tous ces noirs, les uns presque nus, les autres vêtus de longs boubous blancs: toutes ces négresses dansant la malis-fourbine (danse impossible à décrire pour plus d'une raison), forment un tableau vraiment féérique. Ces saturnales rappellent les descriptions de l'enfer du Dante....

Impossible de songer à dormir dans Saint-Louis cette nuit-là, car cette fête dure jusqu'au lever du soleil, moment où, après un dernier tam-tam formidable, chaque nègre se retire dans sa case pour manger le mouton, ce qui ne lui arrive que dans des circonstances exceptionnelles.....

Telles sont les singularités de cette fête, curieuse à plus d'un titre pour un Européen.

Recevez, monsieur le directeur, l'assurance de mes sentiments les plus distingués.

Eugène Blanguernon

My attention was first drawn to this article by a reference in William H. Schneider: An Empire for the Masses. The French Popular Image of Africa 1870-1900. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982, p. 94.

Translation

The Festival of the Blacks in Senegal.

Saint Louis, 1st February 1877.

I have the honor to send you a sketch of the great festival of the Blacks of Senegal (Tabaski). It is up to you, Sir, to judge if it is worthy of being reproduced in your admirable journal.

Here briefly is what the festival, which took place last December on the night of the 24th, consists of... In the interior, the village chiefs, armed with long guns, gather and organize, by the light of immense fires, a display in which they imitate the attack on a village or hand to hand combat. But at Saint-Louis it is very different. The Blacks prepare, long in advance, little structures or ships of different sizes, all of paper of varied colors and cut exactly. These little constructions are true masterpieces of patience. The evening of the 24th, they light up their interiors, and parade them through the streets of Saint-Louis. In addition, each native is the bearer of a lantern,¹ also of colored paper, representing houses, huts, and the heads of the dead.

127 Here is the order of the procession; at the head is a griot or musician, playing the drum, an ungraceful instrument as everyone knows; then comes a little ship brilliantly lit up, and drawn along by the Blacks. Two lines of local women follow several paces behind clapping their hands in rhythm, dancing and yelling in a terrible way; behind these women comes a little building, also in paper, representing a sort of Chinese house², then ships, houses, etc. etc. and behind each of these immense lanterns, groups of women and drummers creating a terrible noise.

Then a crowd of Blacks, furnished with long sticks from which are hung the lanterns I spoke of above...

One cannot imagine the spectacle that the town presents on this night.

1. I can't recollect having seen any fanaal shaped like heads. (DPG)

2. Surely a Mosque in the illustration.

All the blacks, some almost naked, others clothed in long white robes, all the women dance the malis-fourbine¹ (a dance impossible to describe for more than one reason), form a truly magical tableau. These saturnalia recall the description of Dante's Hell...

It is impossible to think of sleeping in Saint-Louis on this night, for the celebration lasts until sunrise, when, after a last terrific burst of drumming, everyone goes back to his house to eat mutton², something which happens only in exceptional circumstances.

Such are the characteristics of this festival, strange in more than one aspect for a European.

(1881 ?)

1. Pierre Loti in Le Roman d'un Spahi, /refers to this dance on page 111. He calls it Anamalis fobil, and indicates that the translation would 'burn these pages.' He calls it a "chant endiablé, ivre d'ardeur et de licence...hurlement de désir effréné ...etc."
2. Traditionally each family that can afford it kills a sheep for Tabaski. This commemorates the substitution of a sheep by Abraham for his son Isaac. I have also seen French families in Senegal roast a whole sheep on Christmas Eve. (DPG)

It seems that in 1877 Tabaski, which is determined by the lunar year, coincided with Christmas Eve, which was traditionally the time of the lantern parade, and that Christians and Muslims joined in one glorious celebration. (DPG).

Source: L.-J.-B. Bérenger-Féraud: Les Peuplades de la Sénégalie.
Paris: Leroux, 1879, p.24.

Goree and Saint-Louis

p.24 " Ils font à Gorée et à Saint-Louis mais surtout à Gorée une fête qui ne manque pas d'originalité: la fête des lanternes pendant la nuit de Noël.
- Tout bon nègre se promène cette nuit-là avant et après la messe de minuit avec une lanterne à la main; cette lanterne a les formes les plus originales et celui qui a pu se procurer ou fabriquer le modèle le plus étrange est assurément le plus heureux ce soir-là. - Les jeunes gens se réunissent un mois au moins à l'avance, se cotisent et se mettent à l'oeuvre pour faire une lanterne monumentale qui est portée par huit hommes ou traînée sur un petit camion à bras; l'effet de cette lanterne est assez joli quelquefois.

On comprend que tout ce qu'il y a de désœuvrés dans l'île, hommes, femmes et enfants, suit la lanterne monumentale pour l'admirer sans se lasser un seul instant; - les promoteurs de la fête s'arrêtent devant chaque débit pour solliciter un don de sangara et toute la suite chante des refrains divers dans lesquels on entend revenir d'une manière assez monotone et surtout très-fréquente les paroles suivantes:

Réveillo bo maté,

Réveillo à mosé baillo.

(Réveillon bon matin, - réveillon à M. be bon.) Dès dix heures les gens ivres ne se comptent plus autour de la lanterne; passé minuit c'est un charivari qui nécessite souvent l'intervention de la police et qui prend fin par l'envoi au violon d'une demi-douzaine de tapageurs. "

(The main Christmas meal is called un reveillon, and is eaten on Christmas Eve in the late evening. Traditionally it is the meal which families have after returning from Midnight Mass.)

Translation.

They hold at Goree and at Saint-Louis, but above all at Goree, a festival which does not lack originality- the festival of lanterns during Christmas Eve. Every Black walks about that night before and after midnight mass with a lantern in his hand; this lantern has the most original forms, and he who has been able obtain or make the strangest model is assuredly the happiest this evening. The young people join together at least a month in advance, subscribe for expenses, and begin work to make a gigantic lantern, which is carried by eight people or drawn on a low hand cart; the effect of this lantern is sometimes very pretty.

One should understand that everyone not at work in the island, men, women, and children, follow the monumental lantern to admire it without becoming tired for a single moment. The promoters of the festival stop before each shop to ask for a gift of brandy and immediately sing various songs in which one hears reoccur in a fairly monotonous and above all very frequent fashion the following words:

"Good Christmas Eve,¹ Good Christmas Eve to good Mr. So and So."

From ten o'clock one cannot count those who are drunk around the lantern; past midnight, it is an uproar which often necessitates the intervention of the police, and which ends with the sending of a half dozen of the rowdies to the lock up.

(See note on previous page.)

Source: Dr. A.T. De Rochebrune: "Etude morphologique, physiologique et ethnographique sur la femme et l'enfant dans la race Ouolove," Revue d'anthropologie, 1881

Saint-Louis

On page 285, where he is discussing the frequency of abortions in Saint-Louis, he gives a list of festivals which includes "le fête des lanternes (nuit de Noël)...

Dr. De Rochebrune seems to have spent a long time in the medical service in Senegal, but it is not clear to what year his remark above refers.

Source: The Gambia Intelligencer, 31 December 1893. (Newspaper)
Bathurst (Banjul)

p. 3 "There were athletic sports and the usual lanterns made in different shapes and sizes embellished with tissue papers of the most brilliant colours. It pleased the eye of almost everyone both native and foreigners. But there were a few which it did not please and in that few were perhaps the Administrator; for unlike his predecessors, he limited the number of days and hours allotted for its enjoyment.

....we must not put much blame on him; may be he was not aware that the lanterns were precious luxuries of the Jolloffes and that the public enjoyed themselves by them."

Source: Mélila, Jose: "La Vie des Colonies: Saint-Louis et Dakar,"
Bulletin de l'Enseignement de l'Afrique
Occidentale Française, 47, avril-sept. 1921,
 p.100.

Saint-Louis:-

"A la nuit du 24 au 25 décembre, les rues de la cité sénégalaise sont autant de fleuves de feu qui charient dans une foule joyeuse une suite de navires éclairés, enguirlandés, et montés sur roues. Pour cette population plus jeune de civilisation, la Crèche de la Noël du Monde Blanc est le vaisseau libérateur chargé d'affranchissement et de lumière. Et se multipliant en autant d'unités que de bateaux l'Etoile dominant les autres feux, stationne sous les fenêtres de l'habitant à qui est dédié le navire. Aux balcons, les familles s'égaient du spectacle de déposent dans la boîte, surmontant les perches, l'obole que réclament les premières offrandes. - "

Translation: "On the night of the 24/25 December, the streets of the Senegalese city are so many rivers of fire in which circulate in a joyful crowd, a procession of ships, lit up, decorated, and mounted on wheels. For this newly civilized people the Christmas manger of the white world is the liberating ship loaded with freedom and light. And multiplying by as many units as the ships, the Star dominating other lights, stands under the windows of the dweller to whom the ship is dedicated. On the balconies the families enjoy the spectacle, and put in a box, attached to a pole, small coins which reflect (?) the first offerings. (DPG)

Source: Article by Rev. H. Whiteside, S.S.Sp.
 "Gambian Christmas,"
The Gambia Echo, 20 December 1937, p. 7-9 .
Bathurst (Banjul)

.... "Spend Christmas at Bathurst and go to Midnight Mass; sing with the congregation, and you'll catch their conviction; watch the native dances (the authentic ones which only Africans can do with dignity and grace) ; forget plum pudding and eat a dish of "couscous" -even if you have to put your hand in the dish; follow the "Fanals" instead of the carol singers; then come back and tell me if Christmas cannot be Christmas in the tropics.

"Follow the Fanal"demands an explanation. It is a custom peculiar to the Wolofs, and quite unknown in other parts of Africa; a custom which is definitely native and, what is unique out there, one with a purely Christian origin centred round a purely Christian feast. It is the "Fanal" that makes the Wolof Christmas really Christmas and really Wolof. So let me tell you what it is by describing an experience of mine in 1926 !

I had been led to believe that the boys I was asked to teach soon after my arrival in Africa were the best it was possible to get in a land where education was in its infancy. They were said to be the disciplined crowd of youngsters in Bathurst; the most regular at school, the smartest at work. And my own first impressions were good. But as Christmas drew near I began to feel that there had been a mistake somewhere. The school registers showed more absences than usual, and I found myself wondering if in Africa "regularity" were only a relative term. Lessons were not well known; exercises were neglected; and I sought in vain for the flashes of intelligence I had been led to expect. The school was becoming more untidy every day. Slips of coloured paper could be seen fluttering about the classrooms and the playground; wood-shavings were blown about the Mission "compound" and lay strewn about the school floor under every bench.

When I went out I would spy some of my youngsters coming in from the bush with bundles of white wood which I knew was not for the fire; and before I

would have time to rehearse the frown indicated in the circumstances they would have darted round the nearest corner, winged on by a guilty conscience.

The position was serious. I passed many anxious moments wondering whether I had not been duped; whether my boys and my work had not been deliberately painted in glowing colours to induce me to accept more readily the schoolmaster's desk. And I did not know whom to blame, the boys, my Superiors, or myself. But soon the mystery was solved. On Christmas morning first after Midnight Mass, I was accosted in the Mission by one of the works defaulters from school. He was carrying a huge lantern in the form of a doll's house made from the aforementioned white wood, complete with coloured paper windows and decorated balconies, and gaily lit up with candles no doubt the contribution of a friendly Sister Sacristan or, shall we say, handy altar boy. I was sufficiently curious about the lantern to forget I had a little account to settle with its bearer, and he, of course, knew that on a Christmas morning bygones must be bygones even to a schoolmaster in presence of a truant.

And, as if we had ever been the greatest of friends he proceeded to show me his lantern and explain design. He told me how the drawings had been made, the paper cut out, the wood split into strips, and how long each artist had taken to complete his share, and with what care and precision the whole had been assembled. He did not know it, poor lad, but he was explaining at the same time just what I had been wanting to know why so many grandmothers had been sick of late, why so many wash-days had been occurring every week, why the market opened so much later in the morning than of yore, why, in fine, there had been a general falling-off at school. And to show that his confidence in me was unlimited (for, "After God," said he, "none in the world counts but you") he asked for his Christmas box. "suma krismis". What could I do at 2 a.m. on Christmas Day? I gave his "krismis" with the effected good grace of one who has had his leg properly pulled.

But that stifled my curiosity about his lantern, and I began to seek

a fitting conclusion to our interview. It ended rather more abruptly than I intended, for when I saw a procession of lantern-bearing truants swarming through the Mission gates with an eye to business rather than repentance, I hurriedly froze and remembered who was who, and with eyebrows well knit and authority in the voice, I saved further drain upon my funds by announcing with all the dignity I could muster that it was high time little boys were in bed.

It would have been expensive to manifest too close an interest in all the fanals I saw on that and the ensuing days, so I waited until the season was over . And when I did examine them I was astounded. There were fanals of all shapes and sizes from the smallest native hut to the modern giant liner.

I could not have believed that native boys could invent such things, that they could work so neatly, so accurately. They had cut to the fraction of an inch the soft "tara" wood to be used for the framework, split it into strips of regular thickness, and joined the whole together by piercing it with little "nails" made from pieces of stout grass. Also, with cunning artistry, they had clothed this frame with a fairy garment of paper in all the colours of the rainbow, cut out in designs as delicate as the finest lace. Hours, days, must have been spent in planning, drawing, cutting out. It could only have been done in Africa, where patience is unlimited, and time, thank God, is not money.

I have said that the fanal is Christian in origin, and that its use has become a native custom. It dates, in fact, to the time of the earliest missionaries in West Africa, where the first church was opened at St. Louis, the capital, in 1828. St. Louis -or nDar, as the Wolofs call it - was the home of the mulatto and native aristocracy, whose social standing in those pre-Wilberforce days was reckoned by the number of slaves they owned. Even when going to church the stately St. Louisian matrons would be escorted by slaves, and thus, when they went to Midnight Mass at Christmas, they were preceded by

their attendants, whose duty it was to carry their mistress's prayer-book and light her way with a lantern through the sandy, winding streets. Midnight Mass was only an annual celebration, hence the lanterns came to be associated with Christmas, and, as they served chiefly for a religious function, they became more decorative as time went on. Slavery was abolished, but not the lantern-bearers./ It mattered little that the brilliant African moon was at its full on Christmas night, the lanterns were still used. And so throughout Senegal and down to Bathurst wherever there were Wolofs and Christians, the fanal became an integral part of the Christmas celebrations.

When I first heard the origin of the fanal I was positively thrilled. I had heard and read of so many native customs which were pagan in origin and immoral in practice and here I was in presence of an authentic custom, purely African and purely Christian. I was even told that the lantern represented the Star which guided the Magi to Bethlehem and though this was probably untrue, it would no longer have surprised me. I was proud of the Wolofs, and I wondered why we in England had never thought of anything so natural and so exciting.

Still, I was puzzled. I did not tell you before that the little schoolboy who first brought his fanal to me in the Mission was a Mohammedan. Even at that time I knew enough about Islam to be surprised at the idea of a disciple of the Prophet joining in Christmas celebrations. The frequent demands for "suma krismis" by the fanal-bearers provided the explanation.

My enthusiasm about fanals received a shock but I cannot say I was surprised. Human nature is the same everywhere so why should Africans prove the exception? Are there not in Europe many people who live on the sale of Christmas cards and festive decorations, without ever asking themselves why around the 25th of December, greetings are exchanged and houses adorned?

Do all the bakers of Good Friday hot cross buns know or care that the bun represents the alleviation of the Lenten fast, or its cross the Cross of Calvary ? My little Gambian friends are shrewd business men too. They will not let slip any potential money making "stunt". And so the fanal has been developed. It is no longer required to light the Wolof "signara" to Midnight Mass, but it shows the way to make a rollicking Christmas feast. Boys pool their pennies, form 'syndicates', appeal for capital and promise share in order to construct a fanal which will be the biggest ever. Five or six sturdy youths are required to carry it through the streets; crowds gather and follow night after night and, like David before the Ark, dance their way with tam-tams through the town. No self-respecting notable can refuse a gift, and when the festive season is over the fanal is presented with much deference, to one of the most eminent citizens. His eminence, in the circumstances, is estimated by the depth of his purse, his appreciation of the gift is taken for granted, and it is his privilege to pay and look pleasant.

As , on a bleak November day, I pen these lines, my thoughts are with the Wolofs in Africa. Here at Castlehead I am frost-and fog-bound, cut off from the world as truly as ever I was on St. Mary's Island by the waters of the majestic River Gambia. Below my window flows the Winster, tiny river whose waters I fondly imagine mingling somewhere -far away in mid-ocean - with the silt and red mud of the great West African rivers, the Gambia, the Niger, the Congo. And with the Winster my thoughts flow on till they reach the land where fog and frost give way to sunshine and warmth.

On the banks of the Gambia the children I knew are again preparing for Christmas, thinking, talking, dreaming only of their fanal. I can picture other teachers frowning gravely as they mark the School register,

or solemnly ordering the floor to be swept clean of its shavings and coloured paper. I know chips about the floor mean whips over the hand, and crosses on the register lead to strokes somewhere else ! And my sympathy is with the teacher. But the fanal is worth it all. It means so much more than it is. It is far more than paper and wood; it is truly an institution, a symbol of a people's faith, a link with early West African Church. It speaks of the heroism of countless priests and nuns whose bones lie buried in the hot African sand. It recalls the names of Libermann, Javouhey, Bessieux, Kobes.... It tells of shipwrecks and fever, fruitless efforts and disappointments, imprisonment and barbarous chiefs, hindrance, expulsion, and anti-clerical governments. But, more than all this, it proclaims the triumph of the Gospel. That among the tribes of West Africa Christmas should be a feast of lanterns and of light shows to what extent Bethlehem has been understood. It denotes a victory over those powers of darkness which have so long given to a whole continent the name of "Dark Africa."

The work goes on, and Christians increase in numbers. But there are yet so many souls to save. God grant that the pagans and Mohammedans who now follow the lantern will one day see the light, the true Light, the Faith which leads to the Crib.

The editor adds a note: "The Fanal Custom is observed only in Bathurst throughout West Africa."

Source: The Gambia Echo, 8 January 1940, p.2.

Bathurst (Banjul)

....Incarnation Vigils at the Roman Catholic Church and St.Mary's Pro Cathedral...No less effective was the Methodist New Year Vigil Service....The time honoured fanal processions formed the climax of the celebrations...

Like the past administrators of such a sentimental but sensitive people, His Excellency the Governor and Lady Southorn spared no effort in according their patronage and reciprocating the traditional good cheer and goodwill in connection with the celebrations.

At 9.30 on New Year's night the Marina swarmed with these illuminated showboats of every description, and size, waiting each her turn to "steam" past His Excellency the Governor and suite in front of Government House.

...The community is indeed grateful to the authorities for permitting the illumination of roving lantern-bearers, and "Fanals" in general, about the streets in spite of the "black-out."

Source: The Gambia Echo, 29 December 1941, p.1 .

Bathursi (Banjul)

The Jolloff Progressive Circle at Our Xmas festivities.

As usual, our Jolloff element, predominantly Moslems, is contributing its full share in our Xmas festivities. The unique features of processions of lantern ships through our streets at night are resumed and Jolloff Progressive Circle had grandly used this long standing custom to raise funds for the Aid to Russia Fund....

Source: Lady Southorn: The Gambia: The Story of the Groundnut Colony
 London: Allen and Unwin, 1952.
Bathurst (Banjul)

p. 242 A feature of Bathurst life, which does not appear to exist in the other West African Colonies,¹ is the building of model ships called 'Fanals.' The name is supposed to be derived from the Portuguese word 'Fanal' meaning a lighthouse, lantern, signal light. The building of these ships is only recorded from about eighty years ago when Bathurst was noted for its shipwrights. The ships were originally built by rival factions - Mohammedan and Christian- to celebrate respectively Ramadan and Christmas. Later on, better counsel prevailed, the rivals amalgamated and agreed to display the ships at Christmas. The cost of the ships is borne by societies with a president and each member pays in twopence or threepence a week for the cost of the material. The work on the ships is begun in October and the construction is done in the yards of certain houses by young men and boys. The ships vary in size- the largest are twenty feet long. The hull, masts and yards are made of wood and the ships are decorated with paper cut out in the most wonderful lace-like designs, like filigree. The ships are lit by candles, and small figures representing the commander and crew are placed in suitable positions on board.

On Christmas Eve the ships are carried in procession through the streets. The Presidents and Committees assemble at Albion Square in the centre of the town ; they are dressed in fantastic travesties of naval uniforms with epaulettes and rows of medals. Cherry-coloured lanterns shine from the masts and yards. All Bathurst is crowded into the square, there is a deafening hubbub of voices and drumming- and in addition to the ships there are scores of small models of

Government House, aeroplanes, motor-cars, birdcages, zeppelins², all lit up by candles and showing the delicate tracery of the paper against the dark night. At a given signal the boys in naval dress stand stiffly to attention, they hoise the ships and the procession of Fanals, followed by the whole crowd, proceed round the town. The excitement continues at characteristic African fever pitch throughout the hours of its circuit. The crowd sings and shouts and dances to the accompaniment of furious drumming, the cherry-coloured lanterns bob against the sky like strange fruits, the ghostly ships rise and fall in rhythm - a weird picture with the seething crowd below. Some of the ships have strange names like Goswell, which is meant for 'Goes Well,' others are named after local residents, who have been approached with that sound business instinct inherent in many Gambians and have been given the delicate hint that a pound a mast would be a suitable donation for the/ suggested honour. It is well to stipulate the number of masts before agreeing to stand sponsor for the ship or the greenhorn may be landed with a ten-masted ship. A collection is made from the bystanders and the celebrations go on into the small hours of the morning. True to the orderly conduct of the Gambian, there is no hooliganism or horseplay, merely wild excitement and wholehearted enjoyment by young and old.

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Notes by D.P.G.

- 1 The tradition of the fanal did, however, spread to Sierra Leone.
- 2 German zeppelins on the South American route did land in The Gambia prior to World War II. e.g. The Graf Zeppelin on 13th November 1936, The Hindenberg on 27th November 1936.

Source: The Gambia Echo, 3 January 1955, p.10 .

Bathurst From an essay competition for children.

Essay written by Kebba Jagne, 15, Methodist Boys' High School.

"When Christmas approaches, some of the children of this little town begin to make tents where they do all the necessary work for their lanterns. These tents are made with 'Pamparang' and sometimes with palm leaves. With their keen minds and long experiences in 'Tarra' or bamboo,¹ they have secured great facility in making fine lanterns which will attract everyone. Two weeks before Christmas Day, all sorts of fascinating decorations are found in nearly every shop. The ladies and squires buy these decorations. Mostly for their houses. The lanterns are different in size, model and appearance. Some make motor boats, some houses and others troopships. All these are for the celebration of Christmastide.

[Then mentions Christmas Eve Catholic Service..Anglican and Methodist services. the Mandinka kaukurangs [Kangkurangs], Bambara Fatou Jamanna, and Jola Rump [Kumpo ?].]

During the night the lanterns play their part. They roam about until mid night for they usually have money out of it. The lanterns of litter about (sic) in every corner of the town and both boys and girls, men and women alike wander about from one spot to another, aimlessly. This celebration of the Christmas will go on for seven consecutive days. On the seventh night everything is over and the lanterns are taken to the persons they are named after. After weeks the lantern society and others stage parties using the money they obtained from both going about from house to house with their lanterns, and enjoy themselves. Soon the celebrations are over and lonesome days and monotonies creep in once more."

1. "Bambu" was used in Krio for the raffia palm stems which were used in the construction of fanaal. True bamboo is found in certain areas south of The Gambia.

Source: Elspeth Huxley: Four Guineas: A Journey through West Africa, 1954.

(Reprint Society, London, 1955 edition, p. 17.

Bathurst

"I saw in the Faye's house (Rev. J. C. Faye) several of those little paper houses, astonishingly intricate, made by Muslim children for their New Year festival. Fretted by balconies and speckled with windows, they look like miniature Victorian railway stations gone mad, and in them lighted candles are paraded through the streets at night. Round each lantern clusters a band of children clothed in white. Afterwards, the children give away these paper houses to their favourites. It is typical of Gambian tolerance that Muslim children should present them to a Christian deacon."

1. Actually they are made for the Christmas and New Year period, not the Muslim New Year. (DPG)

Note on Fanal written by L. P. Sylva, Social Welfare Office, 25/11/61
at the time of the Royal Visit. [File: National Archives 48/21..Jan 1959]

"Traditional lantern parade was a custom since ancient times in the Island of Goree. At that time, lanterns were used by slaves to show way to their owners to attend Midnight Mass on the eve of Christmas. After the service, these slaves used to visit the aristocrats of the Island asking for gifts "Suma Kristmas". [lit: "My Christmas DPG]. After the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, the lanterns were replaced by Fanals which were modelled after 'Clippers' of the 14th and 15th century type.

When the British handed over the Island to the French, the inhabitants migrated to the Gambia and settled in Bathurst. They took with them the traditional lantern parade which now takes the form of pagan festivities with dancing and revelling under the sound of African tom-tom during Christmas tide."

During the Royal Visit on 3rd December 1961, the societies providing lanterns were:

	type
1 Girl Guides	London HQ
2 Mom Sa Rev (Mom Sarayou) -Section of United Party	Clipper - 9 masts
3 Group Magadan -Section of United Party	" 8 masts
4 Half Die Youth Society	" 8 masts
5 Group Neh (Nech) - Section of Democratic Congress Alliance and PPP	" 7 masts
6 Group Boka Hol - Section of the United Party	" 4 masts
7 Bashir's Social Circle Yundum Experimental Farm	A lantern depicting Queen Boadecia riding on horseback

Source: Olive Naylor: Kambi Bolongo, Bognor Regis: Anchor Publications,
1985, 50-51.
Bathurst

Quoting a letter dated December 1960.

"There is a custom peculiar to Gambia, that of building models of ships, called "Fanals", a name derived from the Portuguese word for lantern. They are made by boys and young men during the Autumn. The frames and masts are of wood and the bodies are of paper, but cut out in lovely designs like a doily. They can be up to twenty feet long. On Christmas Eve, the ships, lit by candles and lanterns on the masts are carried in procession through the town, borne should high by the members of the group. The building of these Fanals seems to date only from the 1870's, and to have been started by the local shipwrights, who were then very flourishing, but the origin of the custom must be much older. Besides the ships, they make model aeroplanes, motor cars, houses, bird cages, all in the delicate paper tracery and lit by candles. All Bathurst joins in, to the accompaniment of drumming, dancing and singing. We could hear them approaching a long way off, and had a grand-stand view from our first floor windows."

p.86 Photographs of fanal.

p. 102. New Year 1962

"At 10.25 p.m.....we had seats on the dais which had been erected at the entrance from the main street to the wharf, where there was to be a parade of traditional lanterns, the 'fanals'. The Queen and Prince Philip were delighted with them, and especially the model of the Britannia.

Independence Day CelebrationsBathurst (Banjul)The Gambia News Bulletin, #19, 23 February 1965, p. 2.LANTERNS DELIGHT GUESTS

On Tuesday evening Wellington Street, Bathurst, became a fairy land of coloured lanterns as some fifteen clubs or communities moved in procession before Their Royal Highnesses, the Governor and Lady Paul, the Prime Minister and Mrs. Jawara, Ministers and other guests, with illuminated ships made of paper and lit by candles, in one [of] the finest displays of Traditional Lanterns ever seen in The Gambia. Their Royal Highnesses and many of the other guests seated on the platform just inside the Customs gate, who were seeing Gambian fanals for the first time, were absolutely delighted with the spectacle.

Source: The Gambia News Bulletin, 24 December 1968, p.1.

Bathurst (Banjul)

THE GAMBIA CELEBRATES CHRISTMAS AND EIL-EL-FITR

Tomorrow, The Gambia will celebrate Christmas just three days after Muslims observed the feast of Eid-el-Fitr.

It is the first time within living memory that the two festivals have fallen so close to each other.

As usual, Christmas in The Gambia will be marked by the display of traditional "fanals: and lanterns at night, and "Kankurangs", "Makalo", "Kumpas" and other masquerades, during the day.

But sad to say, Christmas celebrations in The Gambia has lost much of its former splendour and glory. Most of the young generation feel that it is a waste of precious time watching fanal and other traditional Christmas displays and prefer attending dances, a western novelty.

The move towards this direction, does not show a complete break with the past, but a gradual process to this end.

Old men and women filled with nostalgic emotions about this break which they consider the "good old days", often tell tales of heroic deeds accompanying the fanal celebrations which could only be equated with the days of chivalry and knighthood in the Europe of old.

(A.A.N'Jie)

Source: The Gambia News Bulletin, 28 December 1968, p. 1.

Bathurst (Banjul)

FANALS ON PARADE

Nine 'fanal' groups parading at MacCarthy Square delighted a large crowd of tourists from the cruise ship 'Regina Maris' which paid the first of her weekly visits to Bathurst on Boxing Day.

[Dec.26th]

The fanals, part of an evening's entertainment which included tribal dancing displays, were judged by a band of five judges drawn from the tourists and Miss Doris Amponsah - The Ghana Airways Beauty Queen.

Points will be awarded every week to the groups and at the end of the tourists season a silver cup together with a cash prize of £100 donated by Mr. Kamal Milky will be shared among the top teams.

Boxing Day results were: -

Fanal League 1968/69

Groups	Points
Linean Club	37
Faithful Five	30
Vous Brigittee	27
Elizabethan Circle	25
Raelets Club	24
Creams Social Club	23
Brigham Club	20
Pleasant Club	14
Dimbalanteh Club	8

Source: The Gambia News Bulletin, 5 January 1971, p.1.

Bathurst (Banjul)

'FANAL' COMPETITION HELD IN BATHURST

The Linean Social and Sports Club, Youth Star Society and a group of Marine Department workers, were declared winners of the 'fanal' parade competition held in Bathurst on Saturday night.

The Youth Star 'fanal' was named after the Minister of State, Alhaji A. B. N'Jie. The Marine Department workers named theirs after the Director of Marine, Captain Sallah, and the Linean's was named after Mr. R. J. A. Woodley.

The three were selected by a panel of three independent judges. Speaking after the results were announced, the Minister of State said that the three 'fanals' would continue to parade in Bathurst thrice weekly, as a force of tourist attraction, until the tourist season is over in April.

The Minister disclosed that during this period Government would give financial aid to the 'fanal' owners to maintain their 'fanals'.

He thanked all the competitors for their co-operation and urged the losers to take the results with the spirit of a sportsman. Present at the parade were members of the Tourist Board and some senior Government officials.

Source: The Gambia News Bulletin, 28 December 1971, p. 1
Bathurst (Banjul)

CUP WINNERS LINEAN JUBILANT

"Fanal" cupwinners Linean Social and Sports Club were jubilant when they were presented with the Cup as winners of last season's "fanal" competition by the Minister responsible for Tourism, Alhadji Alieu Badara N'Jie.

The Minister spoke of the keen competition and thanked all those who participated for the interest shown. He spoke of the age old tradition of "fanal" which had been in existence since time immemorial. Alhadji Alieu said the tradition was now only being observed in The Gambia since Senegal had given it up, for some reason or the other, years ago, and this was why it was unique. It is this uniqueness that participants are helping to preserve. He said that as one with experience of "fanal" making, he knew the patience required.

Mr. Amadou Araba Bah, an official of Linean, paid tribute to Mr. Kamal Milky, who donated the cup, for helping in the promotion of tourism. He called on others to participate fully in the drive to make The Gambia the ideal tourist spot.

Runners-up were Marine Department Social and Sports Club, Youth Star Club and Latrikunda Linean Social and Sports Club whom the Minister congratulated and wished better luck next time.

"Fanal" display is put on for tourists during the season.

Source: The Gambia News Bulletin, 25 January 1973, p.5

Bathurst (Banjul)

ANNUAL FANAL COMPETITION

The preliminary rounds of the annual fanal competition will begin at 9.a.m. on Saturday 27th January. The venue as usual will be the Customs outdoor area. Tourist office sources disclose that five fanal clubs will take part in the competition. The Minister of State responsible for Information, Broadcasting and Tourism, Mr. B. L. K. Sanyang, will attend and there will be a panel of judges to preside over the competition. Four out of the five will be selected for a weekly parade around the city of Bathurst during the tourist season. The Gambia government will contribute to the maintenance of the selected fanals. At the end of the tourist season there will be the final rounds of the competition, the winners of which will be given trophies as well as cash prizes.

Source: Mylène Rémy: Senegal Today
 Paris: Editions Jeune Afrique, 1974.
Saint-Louis, Goree .

p.152 . THE FANALS

"During the second half of the nineteenth century when the wealthy mulatto women of Saint Louis or Goree went to midnight Mass at Christmas they were preceded by servants, or *Xaleels*, carrying multicoloured lamps which were called *fanals*. Little by little the fanals became artistic creations and families spent a great deal of time and effort on their design. As the crowd left church after Mass, the most beautiful fanal was given a prize.

As time went by the fanals became traditional, and there was a festival for which the youth of the working class districts formed associations to offer folklore performances or artistic displays. It was no longer enough to make a splendid lantern; now there were parades with dances and costumes specially designed for the occasion each year. The festival became so competitive that there were sometimes riots and fights; in 1953 the Fanal Festival was forbidden. In 1970, thanks to the city of Saint Louis, it was brought back.

On December 29, 1973, a great fanal competition was organized at Dakar, with costumes, dances and chants presented by various cities, each with its own special theme. This very spectacular and popular festival will undoubtedly grow and may some day perhaps rival Rio's Carnival, to which it has a curious resemblance."

Source: Amar Samb: "Folklore wolof du Sénégal,"
Bulletin de l'I.F.A.N. 37(4), B, 1975, 845-846

Senegal, Saint-Louis

845 "Tout le monde se souvient peut-être du fanaal qui jouissait d'une grande vogue dans tout le Sénégal jusqu'en 1951. Il avait été supprimé par suite des heurts entre partisans du B. D. S. et ceux de la S. F. I. O. C'est qu'il entraînait, il faut l'avouer, des dépenses folles et qu'il consommait la ruine de bien de prodiges politiques.

Depuis la fin 1968, le fanaal est remis en honneur à l'occasion des deux visites effectuées à Saint-Louis par le Président Léopold Sédar Senghor.

Une fois dépolitisé et exorcisé de son caractère trop dépensier, rien n'empêche le fanaal de jouer le rôle cultuel qui lui revient.

Il y avait dans les temps des airs dont le refrain était celui-ci:

846 *Senghor Soukka Ndêla*
Mâr Banda Mayân
Junjung Diakhâw.

Ou bien:

Lamine Koura Guèye
Bakar Wâli
Mame Koumba Moljo.

Il est facile d'identifier les noms de ces personnalités et leur généalogie.

Translation:

845

"Everyone perhaps remembers the fanaal which used to be in great fashion in all of Senegal until 1951. It was suppressed as a result of clashes between followers of the B. D. S. and those of the S. F. I. O. It resulted, one must admit, in reckless expenses, and ended in the ruin of many spendthrift politicians.

At the end of 1968, the fanaal was restored to honor on the occasion of two visits made to Saint-Louis by President Léopold Sédar Senghor.

Once removed from politics, and exorcised from its too extravagant character, nothing prevents the fanaal from playing the cultural role which belongs to it.

There were formerly songs the chorus of which was:

Senghor Soukka Ndêla,

. Mâr Banda Mayân

Junjung Diakhâw.

Or else:

Lamine Koura Guêye

Bakar Wâli

Mâme Koumba Moljo.

It is easy to identify the names of these personalities and their genealogy.

Photograph by Linda Salmon. Banjul. 1974.



Banjul

Source: Notes supplied by Hassan Njie, Radio Gambia, Banjul, Jan.1977
 based on material from Rev. J. C. Fye and Mr. Goddard [Pensioner
 and retired school-master at the Roman Catholic Mission in Banjul.]

"Fanal originated from Goree in the Republic of Senegal. Date not known.
 The family of European merchants or administrators in Goree on Christmas
 Midnight Service were led to the churches by their slaves who carried
 perforated tins with lighted candles within. This was to show the way to
 church as the nights used to be dark and there was no electricity in those
 days. These masters had their African mistresses called sinyara in Wolof
 or siniora in Portuguese¹. This was a special occasion and the masters
 and their families used to be well dressed for it. After church they
 make big feasts either with their family or at friends. During these
 festivities the same slaves go round with their lanterns asking for gifts.
 The idea developed from perforated tins with lighted candle to wood (tara)
 and perforated paper of different makes. Then the slaves started copying the
 houses or buildings of their masters on wood and perforated paper. Then to
 old naval sailing boats with masts. Then it developed to the present fanal
 with red lanterns hanging on the masts as it is today. Presently different
fanals are made e.g. modern naval ships, aeroplanes, mosques, churches,
 buildings, etc. The idea then came to Bathurst (Banjul) in those days
 when the British exchanged Goree (then a British Colony) for Albreda²
 (then a French Colony). The inhabitants of Goree who did not want to
 be transferred to French rule came to [Banjul] with their slaves and
 lanterns. But the real fanal, i.e. naval boats, started in Bathurst.
 The people who make them are the carpenters and shipwrights.

1 In the literature the usual spelling is
 in French : signares ; in Portuguese : senhora.

2 Bathurst [Banjul] was founded in 1816. Albreda was not yielded up
 by the French until 1857.

Source: Notes supplied by Hassan Njie, Radio Gambia, Banjul, January 1977.

"The festivities after church service was called rer i gudi mini in Wolof (supper-night-mid = Midnight Supper). Nowadays it is a National show and mostly Muslims do it. Not necessarily slaves. Slavery is out of the picture and anybody can make them. It is done by local societies of different age groups, mostly Wollofs. Other [peoples] don't make fanals (e.g. Mandinka, Fula, Jola, Serahule), but Senegal Seereers do make fanals for daylight, which is another very beautiful kind."

Source: The Gambia News Bulletin, 26 December 1984, 3 & 6

Banjul

Christmas Celebration in The Gambia

Christmas.... is celebrated in The Gambia with merriment by both Christians and non-Christians alike in diverse ways.

Varieties of masquerades ranging from 'false faces', Kankurangs, Kumpos to Hunting Devils can be seen parading the streets of Banjul, Serrekunda, Bakau and environs to the accompaniment of music and dancing. Little children and even grown-up look forward to the feast with excitement. At night, illuminated lanterns and 'fanals' are seen up and down the streets with music provided by drummers amidst thunderous clapping of hands. The organizers of these activities, visit people in their homes for the purpose of raising money.

These festivities have lost much of their pomp and glory. For instance, the organisers of the 'fanals' no longer wear knickerbocker uniforms like real sailors of a bygone era. The once popular practices of holding 'Rhulay Hutumba' the day after 31st December and 'Biraleh' (exhibition of 'fanals') in front of the then Government House, have fallen into disuse. Many a boy or a girl today has no idea what these festivities were.

But all the same the singing of Christmas Carols by Choirs of the different Christian denominations, all over the place is a constant reminder of the significance of the occasion. Christians attend masses to render thanksgiving service to God for sending his only begotten son into the world for the salvation of the human race.

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 1877 Le Journal Illustré, 15 April 1888, 128

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- 1961 Illustrated London News, 16 December 1961, p. 1049
 1960 ? Olive Naylor: Kambi Bolongo, 1985, p. 86
 1962 ?

Postcard

- 1974 The Gambia Information Services
 [The pattern with subsidiary lanterns hanging from the ship
 was characteristic of this period.]

II SIERRA LEONE

Lanterns in Sierra Leone : Freetown

Source: Freetown Vademecum Compiled and edited by Hans M. Zell with
Geoffrey Williams. Freetown: Fourah Bay College Bookshop, 1966, p.65

"Lantern parade

On the night of the Feast of Eid-ul-Fitri, marking the end of the fast of Ramaddan, a spectacular lantern parade takes place through the streets of the city. The lanterns range from small ones held aloft on sticks by small boys, to large 40 foot long models of Elder Dempster liners, carrying a smartly-dressed 'crew'. The lanterns are constructed of intricately-cut paper stuck on a wooden framework, and lit from within, usually by candles. The procession starts at the Clock Tower at the junction of Fourah Bay Road and Kissy Road, and proceeds to the west end of the city via. Mountain Cut, Circular Road, Pademba Road, and Campbell Street, returning via Westmoreland Street and the town centre. The parade begins at about eleven o'clock, and as there are often long intervals between the lanterns, goes on most of the night. Much singing and dancing. A spectacular sight, not to be missed."

Sierra Leone

Source: James R. Nicolson: The Tent and The Simbek, 1974.

Nicolson, who was in Sierra Leone during the early 1960s, describes festivities at the end of the Fast Month (Ramadan) in Buya Romende (Foredugu).

The watch night, when the old men spend the night in the mosque reading aloud from the Koran was held on the 26th night of Ramadan.

p.101. "Next morning the Ramadan parade was held, when home-made lanterns and floats were assembled outside the house of the Paramount Chief for judging. During the weeks of Ramadan groups of young men work in secrecy, behind high fences, constructing tableaux to enter in the competition. They use coloured crepe paper pasted to a frame of wood. Competition is keen, for in most districts the chief provides money prizes.....

Outside Bai Fonti's (The Paramount Chief) house was a dazzling display of coloured floats and lanterns, many of them inspired by stories from the Koran. There was a tableau showing Abraham about to sacrifice his son Isaac. An angel suspended from a wire was bringing the lamb for the substitute sacrifice while the mother sheep looked on. The special feature about the sheep was that if one pulled its tail the mouth could be made to open, and the children were queuing up to take turns pulling the tail and shoving green leaves into the mouth.

There were several crusading knights on horseback. No-one in Temne has ever seen a horse, so the models were not anatomically exact; but everyone knew what they were meant to be. One of the knights had been disarmed by his opponent and had a leg severed at the pelvis. True to crusading tradition he was belabouring his astonished adversary with the otherwise useless limb, in spite of blood pouring in red paper down the horse's flank from a crimson wound. There was also a St. George killing a very harmless-looking dragon.

In a scene from the supernatural realm a group of witches were killing a child, collecting its blood in a paper basin, while another witch was still beating the drum to summon the convocation. Sitting watching the ghastly scene were two figures representing the Paramount Chief and his head wife, while in the background stood Sokhar, the devil, who had almost made us lose our way at Makota. He had a hunter's lamp on his head and was aiming his gun at a chimp. His feet, I noted, did point in opposite directions. There were floats with more modern themes suggested by pictures in magazines. There was an aeroplane, built around a bicycle, and there was a beautiful ship which had a propellor, a rudder, several funnels, a gorgeous deck house and a crew of pink plastic dolls clambering through the rigging.

Bai Fonti was having a difficult job trying to decide which should get first prize and when he saw our Land Rover stopping he sent word to me to come and help him. Without doubt the most outstanding exhibits were the ship and the witches, but it was difficult to decide in which order. Eventually we decided that the ship should get first prize, with the second prize going to the witches. The verdict was received with cheers from the crowd, and to my surprise two attractive young women came forward to collect their reward. One of the two old men on the chief's verandah whispered to me that these girls were natives of the chieftdom, but were married and lived in Freetown. That was why they could make such a good ship. "

An article by Kofi Akosah-Sarpong, "The Lantern Parade," appears in West Africa, No. 3694, 30 May 1988, p. 1001, describing this year's lantern parade, and giving a brief history of the lantern parades in Sierra Leone, which are said to have been introduced in 1900.

Lantern parades in up-country towns (Kenema, Rokupr, etc.) were clearly introduced by people who had been in the Freetown area. (DPG).