

Roots/Heritage Tourism in Juffureh and Kunta Kinteh Island, The Gambia: Experiences of U.S. Study Abroad Students

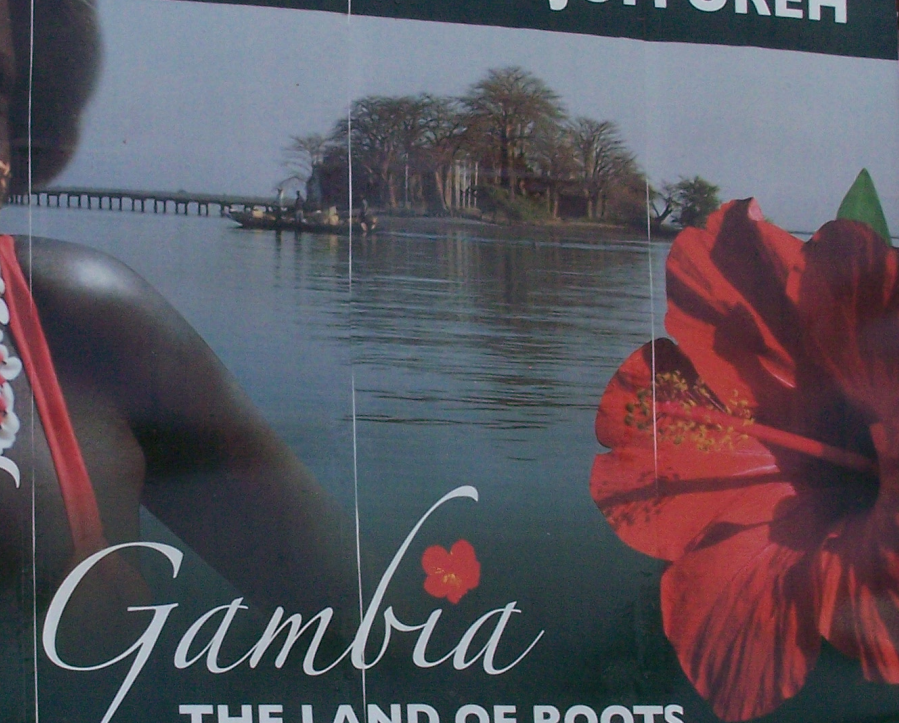
Jean Muteba Rahier
African & African Diaspora Studies
Global & Sociocultural Studies
Florida International University

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- Many in The Gambia, and particularly those employed by the Gambian Tourism Board (GTB) or by the Gambian Ministry of Tourism, are convinced that the globalized formation called “roots/heritage tourism” began its existence in their country.

WELCOME TO JUFFUREH

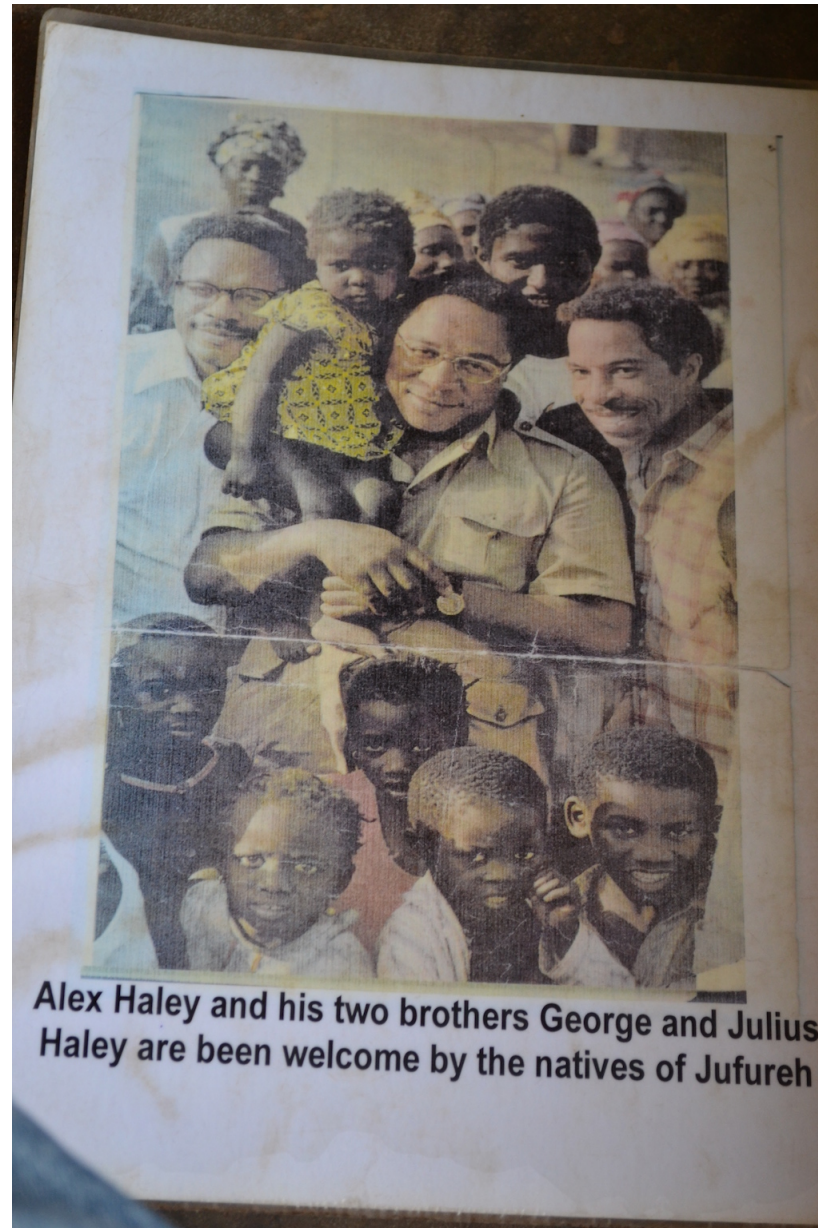


The Gambia

THE LAND OF ROOTS

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- This would have been when in the early 1970s Alex Haley—the author of the fiction *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976)—visited the villages of Juffureh and Albreda, 30 km inland on the north bank of the Gambia River, and the ruins of Fort James located on the nearby James Island in the River Gambia.



Alex Haley and his two brothers George and Julius Haley are being welcomed by the natives of Juffureh

A photograph of Alex Haley and his two brothers kept at the Kinteh compound at Juffureh, which is shown to visiting tourists.

- James Island was renamed Kunta Kinteh Island on February 6, 2011. The renaming ceremony took place at the direct request Chaz Guest, a New York African American artist, made to His Excellency the President Sheikh Professor Alhaji Dr. Yahya Abdul-Azziz Jemus Junkung Jammeh of the Republic of The Gambia. Guest has painted the portrait of the Gambian president and has met with him at several occasions. Guest's argument was that such a European name, "James," should not be used to call this most significant of African places.

- The choice of “Kunta Kinteh Island” to replace “James Island” was almost natural, following the global popularity of Alex Haley’s book, and most importantly of the TV miniseries produced from the book, and their translations in many languages. The move from “James” to “Kunta Kinteh” Island illustrates the importance given by the Gambian authorities to the African American perspective on the slave trade, in their preoccupation to diversify the tourism products offered to international tourists in order to hopefully increase international arrivals and receipts.

- The 2006 “The Gambia Tourism Development Master Plan” reveals The Gambian government’s objective to diversify the tourism offerings. After arguing about the great value there is to develop “market niches” such as Adventure Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Wellness Tourism, Sport Fishing Tourism, and Golfing Markets, you can read:

The USA offers potential in the special Roots market. This merits highly targeted promotion among those of African descent resident on the eastern seaboard and the New York Metropolitan area. The GTA should facilitate co-operation between Gambian ground handlers and their counterparts in Senegal to give an impetus in promoting the Gambian product using direct flight access. (30)

- Alice Bellagamba has written about roots/ heritage tourism in The Gambia, and about the bi-annual Roots Festival organized by the Gambian Ministry of Tourism that specifically targets African Americans, offering them a homecoming experience. The ministry is obviously aware that African Americans are also being targeted by other West African states' tourism agencies (particularly from Senegal, Ghana, Benin, ...).

- This second life of the work of Haley's fiction *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* as quasi-history is certainly one of the most fascinating aspect of this research. Government officials, radio hosts, journalists, the Gambian public in general, and many African American and other tourists—including the guides who accompany tourists in Albreda, Juffureh and Kunta Kinteh Island—operate as if Haley's narrative was grounded on hard historical facts, and as if the actors who played the characters in the TV series were in reality no one else but the individuals they represented. *Roots* provides the Gambian government with a major argument in the competition for African American attention when they plan homecoming tourist experiences.

- The paper is divided in two parts. In the first, I propose a brief interpretive description of the actual itinerary of what is considered to be the “usual visit” of tourists in these three adjacent sites. The paper then discusses the journal entries written by U.S.-based study abroad program students following a visit of various sites, including these. The paper also takes into consideration the texts that a few of the participating students posted on their personal blogs about their visit to The Gambia in general, and about their visit of Juffureh, Albreda, and James/Kunta Kinteh Island in particular.

- My intent is to contrast the constructed itinerary—constructed by the Gambian ministry of tourism and GTA officials, who have provided a training to the guides on site (male inhabitants of Juffureh and Albreda)—with the feelings and reflections the visit left among the students. I have directed a study abroad program entitled “Senegal and The Gambia: Traditions, Globalization, and Tourism in West Africa” in the summers of 2010, 2011, and 2013.

- Students who elected to enroll in the program had to enroll in two three-credit courses: one was entitled “Introduction to the Wolof Language and Culture,” and the other one, which I taught, was entitled “Anthropology of Globalization” and had for subtitle “Senegal and The Gambia: Traditions, Globalization, and Tourism in West Africa.” During that course, we mostly focused on roots/heritage tourism in Senegal and The Gambia, and on sex tourism in The Gambia.

- Enrolled students had to write diary entries at key moments during the trip, following specific site visits. For the research presented in this paper, I have interviewed key stakeholders (inhabitants of Juffureh and Albreda, tour guides, officials from the GTA and the Gambian Ministry of Tourism, etc.) and conducted participant-observation during my visits of Juffureh over 5 years, either alone or as the leader of the above-mentioned study abroad program (2009, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015).