

## ■ GAMBIA

### Contact and Exchange during the Era of the Atlantic Trade: Preliminary findings from Archaeological investigations in the Gambia

Liza Gijanto  
 Department of Anthropology  
 Syracuse University  
 Syracuse, New York  
 USA, 13244-1090  
 E-mail: lgijanto@maxwell.syr.edu

## Introduction

Archaeological fieldwork was conducted in Niimi, The Gambia, over a 10-month period beginning in January 2006. The project was part of an ongoing project initiated in 2004 by Dr. Bill Roberts of St. Mary's City University. Archaeological survey and excavations are geared toward an analysis of the impact of shifts in regional trade on local social dynamics as a result of the Atlantic trade. The incorporation of the Gambia River into the Atlantic world had a profound impact on the local economy and population on several levels. Numerous archaeological projects in West Africa have addressed the impact of the Atlantic Trade and subsequent interactions between various European and indigenous populations, most notably DeCorse (2001a, 2001b), Stahl (2001), Kelly (2002), and de Barros (2001). However, previous archaeological research in The Gambia is largely focused on the megalithic sites of the Central River Division (Hill and Stroud n.d.; Hill 1977, 1980; Lawson 2003). Consequently, the period of the Atlantic Trade and shifting socio-economic systems have not been adequately addressed. This research project is an attempt to resolve this, and is specifically designed to recover information related to change in settlement, subsistence, trade and material culture patterning following European contact.

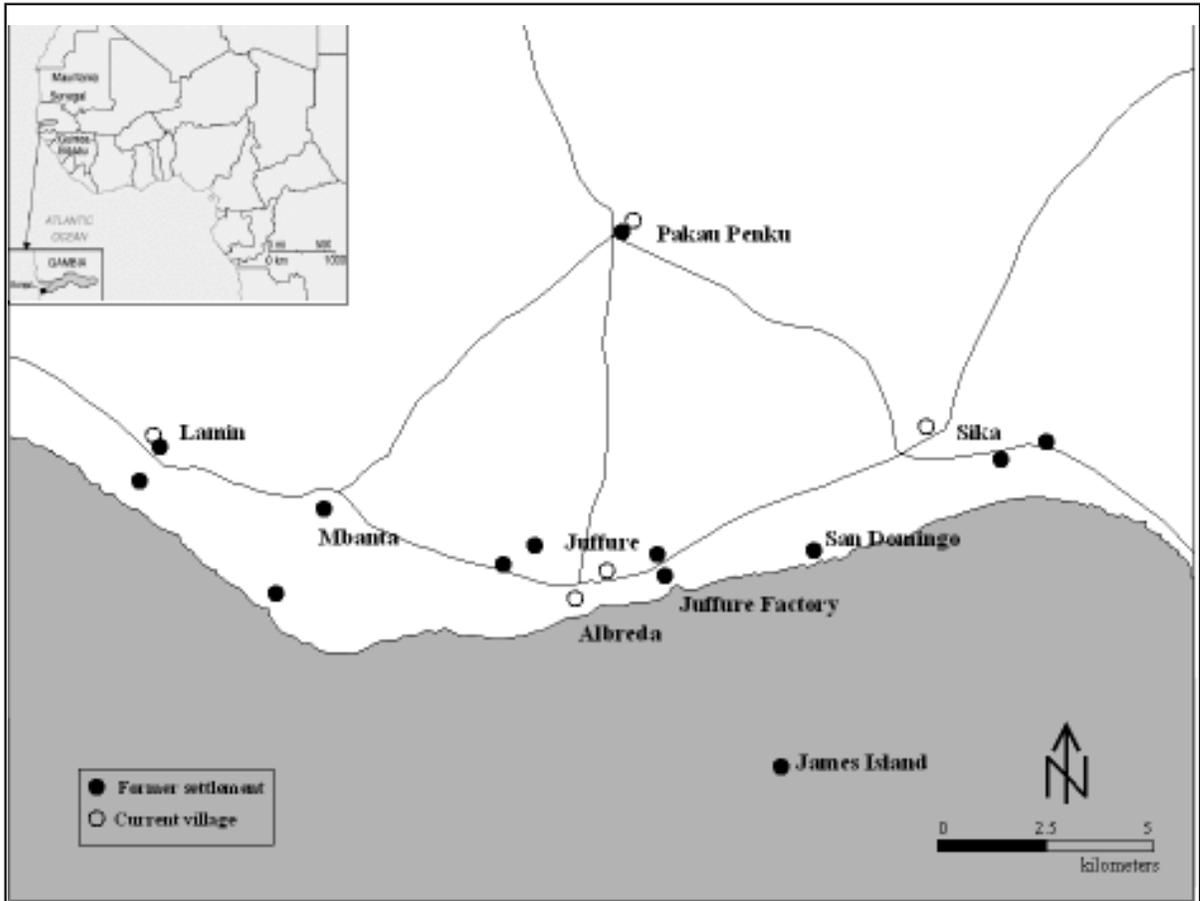
During both the 2004 and 2006 field seasons, work was concentrated within a 12 x 10 kilometer area<sup>1</sup> that comprised the former Niimi commercial center that included the villages of Sika, Juffure, San Domingo and Albreda. The objective of the survey was to locate sites with known or potential links to

the Atlantic Trade (Figures 1 and 2). Of the numerous sites identified, the four selected for intensive excavation—the Luso-African village of San Domingo, the village and trading factory at Juffure, and Mandinka village of Lamin—are discussed in European written accounts and trade company logs, with a particular focus on the villages and commercial centers located along trading routes (see Moore 1738; Hair 1984; Coelho 1985; Jobson 1968; Donelha 1977; Cultru 1913; PRO T70 series. Oral traditions from Niimi collected by Donald Wright (1979) have provided further information regarding settlement and relations between local rulers and European traders. As such, it has been possible to utilize both excavations and historical (documentary and oral) research to investigate socio-economic change and group interaction tied to the onset and decline of the Atlantic Trade.

## Project Area

Niimi is the westernmost province of The Gambia's north bank region and roughly corresponds in area to the former kingdom of the same name<sup>2</sup>. The Niimi Kingdom is believed to never have been larger than 400 square miles, with the major areas of settlement concentrated along the Gambia River and Atlantic coast according to oral and documentary sources (Gomes 1999; Wright 1997:3-4). Prior to the arrival of Europeans, commerce in the region was oriented toward internal networks tied to the Saharan trade. It has been argued that a shift from land-based to water-based trade occurred after the mid-15th century and led to the increased settlement along the riverbank as a direct result of the regions incorporation into the Atlantic Trade (Quinn 1972:7-8). These predominantly Mande villages subsequently became home to European trading factories and Luso-African merchants. Evidence of settlement by the Portuguese, English, and French on the Gambia River, and documented Mande villages associated with commercial activities make the Niimi province provide an ideal setting for this study due to its emphasis on the immersion in the trade and group interactions between those both directly and indirectly involved within this former commercial center (Quinn 1972; Wright 1997). To achieve this end, four sites representing distinct levels of involvement in the Atlantic Trade related to the communities' standing in the region were selected for intensive study: the

Figure 1: Archaeological sites and associated present-day villages identified during the 2004 and 2006 surveys.



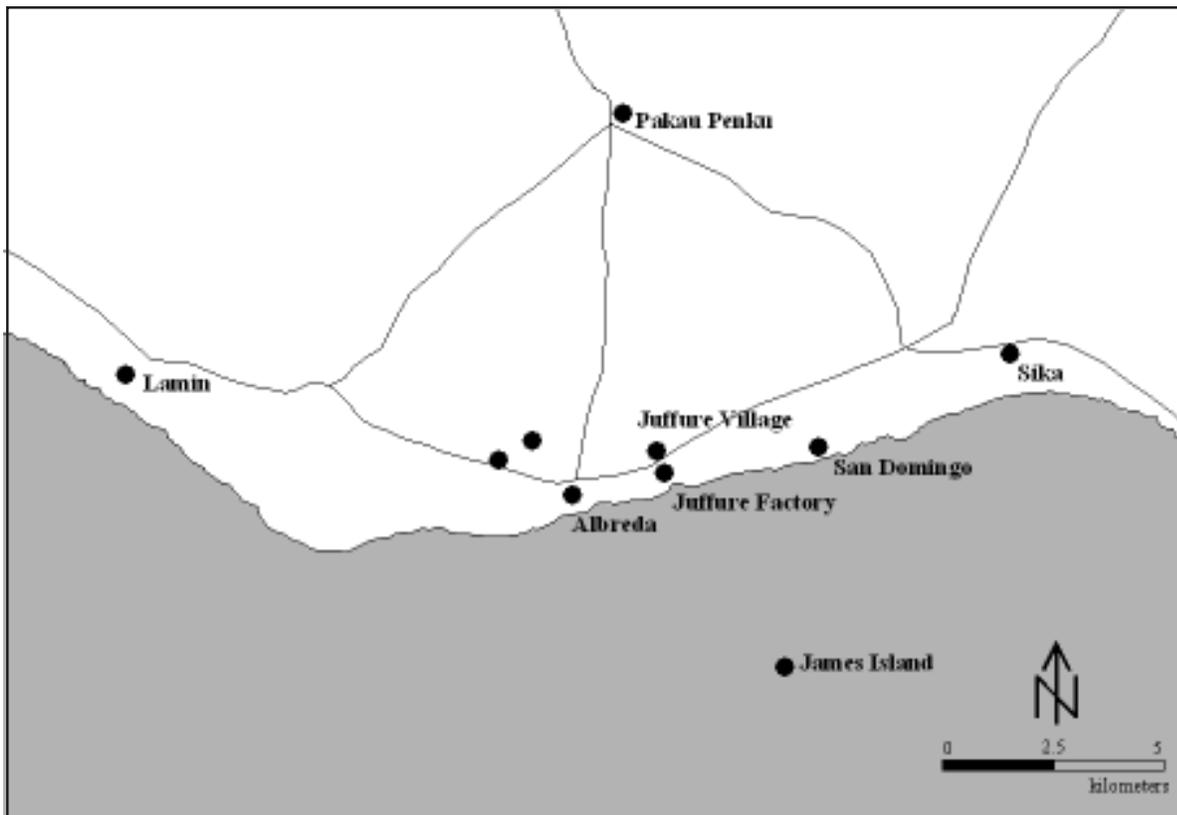
Juffure trading factory, Juffure Village, San Domingo, and Lamin.

**Juffure Village and Trading Factory**

The north bank road running west to east along the Gambia River currently divides the Juffure village and factory sites. The ruins of the former factory are concentrated between the road and mangrove, while the village area lies on the north side of the road and boundaries are marked by baobab trees. The construction and presence of the road has eradicated the southwestern edge of the Juffure Factory site and a 20-30 meter wide section between the village and factory areas (depending on the width of the road and associated drainage area) that was subsequently used as the boundary between the two sites for this project.

The original Juffure village is located less than 200 m to the west of the current settlement and is believed to have been abandoned by 1901 (Wright 1979:140). The village was settled prior to the English factory as a trading village with the permission of the Niumi mansa most likely at the start of the 16th century (Wright 1979:141). The original occupants were Mandinka and served as political intermediaries as well as tax collectors for Niumi’s mansas “playing a key role in the administration and control of the waxing commercial and social exchange among Portuguese, Luso-Africans, other Europeans, other Africans, and the people of Niumi” (Wright 1997: 112). Due to its location directly across from the British Fort on James Island and its natural landing area, it also served as ‘filling station’ by the early 17th century when the English established their presence on the river. The Royal African Company records as early as 1704 discuss trade at the village (PRO T70/

**Figure 2:** Sites identified during the survey which were occupied during the Atlantic Trade (ca 1500 to 1900).



56), as well as communication between their fort on James Island and local merchants at Juffure. Throughout the company logs there are numerous entries referring to customs paid to the “Alcade of Gillyfree” prior to the 18th century, while the first official factory was not constructed until 1728 (PRO T70/550).

### San Domingo

San Domingo is located 1.5 km to the east of Juffure at a point along the river with a break in the mangrove, thus allowing access to the village from James Fort by boat. The history of San Domingo is perhaps the least detailed of all the sites incorporated in this study in terms of settlement and abandonment in the historical record. San Domingo is known one of three Luso-African settled villages along the Gambia during the Atlantic Trade. The role of Luso-Africans as middlemen in the region beginning in the 16th century led to a particular emphasis on villages that contained these individuals or dis-

tinct Luso-African communities in contemporary accounts of the region (Mark 1995:308). As a group, they formed and prospered through the 16th century, dominated the river trade in the 17th to the mid-18th century, and began to decline in the late 18th century in The Gambia.

Few references to the make-up or location of this site were found in the Royal African Company records, which are primarily restricted to trade at and between established factories. The most detailed account found is from 1734, describes brick making at the site and the possible construction of a fishing tank (PRO T70/550). While another reference from a company employee inspecting the trade on the river, Francis Moore, states four years later that it “consists only of a few round huts...” and the site was primarily used as a source of wood for James Fort being located about 1.5 km up river from the Juffure Factory (Moore 1738:54).

## Lamin

The final site investigated is Lamin Village. This site was specifically chosen because it lies outside the area of core trading area (Juffure, Albreda, Sika, and San Domingo) but was close enough by river to have contact with the British stationed at James Fort. Additionally, there are no written or oral records referring to either a Luso-African or European presence within the village throughout the trade. At this time, the earliest known documentary reference to the village by the British is from the Royal African Company ledger dated Dec 19, 1753. It states that rum was given to the villagers for bringing timber to castle slaves for use on James Fort (PRO T70/577). A second entry from August 9, 1754, (PRO T70/578) again mentions rum given to people from the village for bringing wood to the waterside. The original settlement was located on the beachfront where a clearing in the mangrove allowed for small watercrafts to land. The second and third villages have moved progressively inland on the north side of the current north bank road.

Interviews with local informants, including the current *alkhalho*, suggest that Lamin was the oldest settlement investigated. Village elders state that it was already settled when the English arrived and was abandoned by the beginning of the 19th century. At present this has been corroborated based upon the limited presence of European trade goods, none of which postdate the 18th century, while surface deposits at the second village site indicate that it was most likely established in the early 19th century. The current village is the third settlement and according to informants it is less than 80 years old; in fact several village elders still remembered the location of former family compounds.

## Methods and Excavations

Combinations of shovel testing and intensive excavations were conducted at each site. Limited surface collection was undertaken at San Domingo and the western portion of Juffure Village in 2004 and was followed by shovel testing in areas with high artifact yields. However, surface finds were largely limited to locally produced ceramics and did not reflect the density or variety of subsurface deposits. More often than not, a high density of surface finds were concentrated in areas where intact subsurface deposits were not found, or had been eradicated by

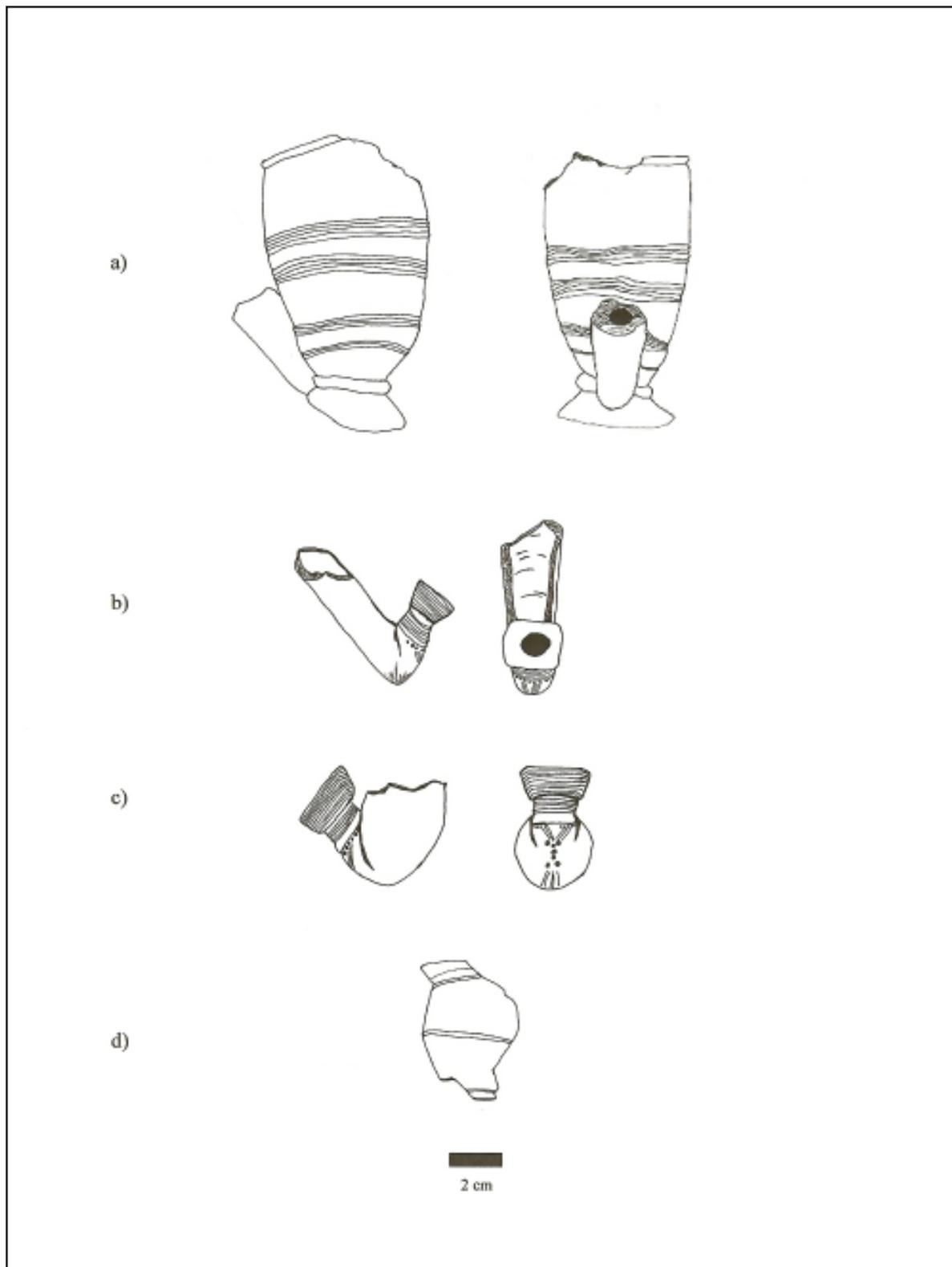
erosion, farming, or modern construction. Due to this phenomenon, surface collection was not employed in 2006 as a means to locate subsurface deposits and preliminary investigation was restricted to shovel testing. The area tested at each site was determined by access to land, the presence of vegetation indicative of former occupation such as baobab trees and opportunistic plants, and information from local informants regarding site location and former boundaries. The aim of the excavations was to identify potential domestic deposits, production areas, and habitations that would provide insight into the daily lives of residents and involvement in trade. Following the completion of shovel testing, 1 x 1 m excavation units were dug where tests uncovered potential intact deposits. At all stages of excavation, all of the excavated sediment was screened through a 1.5 mm screen; this allowed for the recovering of smaller finds such as beads and fish bone.

The deposits tested have yielded a high amount of artifacts and the assemblages from each site are dominated by locally produced ceramics. Additionally locally manufactured pipes, spindle whirrs, faunal remains, European ceramics and pipes, glass, flint, shot, musket balls, trade beads, flints, and a variety of metals were recovered. Whenever possible, charcoal and soil samples were taken from excavated contexts for flotation and possible radiocarbon dating. At this time, analysis has been geared toward acquiring approximate dates from European goods in order to assist in the creation of local ceramic and pipe typologies.

## Preliminary Findings

Numerous researchers have advocated the importance of trade materials with known manufacture and import dates such as beads in West African contexts are invaluable to the development of local chronologies (DeCorse 1989). To date, artifact analysis has concentrated on European trade goods. What has yet to be addressed is the possible variation in locally produced ceramics and pipes. One important goal of this project is to establish a preliminary archaeological sequence that will assist in determining change through time in material culture. Currently there is one typology available for local ceramics in The Gambia. Dr. Amy Lawson (2003a; 2004b) created a ceramic typology spanning from the first century of the 1st millennium AD to 1900 containing three

**Figure 3:** Locally produced pipes recovered from San Domingo.



phases determined by decoration, form, and refinement as part of her dissertation work<sup>3</sup>. This typology is a good starting point for analysis, but for numerous reasons can only serve as a guide. First, the sample comes from the Central River Division (CRD) and is associated with stone circles and other megalithic sites that are considered to be 'ritual' as opposed to habitation locales. Unlike, Niimi, the CRD did not have a strong connection to the Atlantic trade and the sites examined by Lawson were not directly connected to the major European or creole trading communities on the river. This being said, the various factors that may have potentially affected production, design, and function were not present to the same degree in both regions.

On initial inspection, numerous differences appear between the local ceramics from Niimi and the CRD assemblages. Most notably is the high use of shell as a temper as well as shell impressions as a decorative tool on the Niimi collection that has not been reported in Lawson's typology. Also, ceramics incorporated in her phase II (1300-1700 AD) component appear to continue into the late 19th century at Juffure and San Domingo and appear in the upper contexts at Lamin. The twine decorations reported by Lawson in this phase are largely limited to thin, shell tempered or grog temper finds within the Niimi assemblage, whereas those from the CRD are present on thicker sand tempered pieces (Lawson 2003a, 2004b).

Unlike the ceramics, there is no typology for locally produced tobacco pipes available for comparison. Lawson did not attempt a local typology because it was not clear if the pipes recovered from the CRD sites were locally produced or imported. The same holds true for Niimi, however a typology may prove useful in determining access to trade networks or shifts in preference over time including the persistence of local trade routes or potential increase in access as the English and French connected different points along the West African coast. The largest variety of diagnostic pipes was recovered from San Domingo (Figure 3). These pipes present a wide variety in form and design, and are similar in shape and material to those found by Lawson on sites dating from the mid-13th to late 17th century (Lawson 2003a:266). Additionally forms and designs are also present that were not recorded by Lawson including one that may have originated outside of the Senegambia<sup>4</sup>.

## European Trade Goods

European trade goods were found at all four locations, however the number for Lamin is significantly lower (12 total) than the amount recovered from Juffure Village, Juffure Factory, and San Domingo. The most numerous of these were glass and trade beads while various metals, flint, and ceramics were also recovered. At this time, a preliminary analysis of all trade material has been completed for dating purposes.

At Lamin, glass (seven) is the dominant imported material, and five of these fragments are from one context, representing a minimum of three bottles. All except three fragments have a heavy patina, yet those identifiable are from case bottles. Unlike all other sites, there were no nails or European ceramics recovered at Lamin. All trade materials were recovered from the upper 10 to 15 cm of excavation units that were only 60 to 100 cm deep.

The majority of glass was recovered from Juffure. At Juffure Factory glass formed 48% of the total imported material and 48.6% of imported material recovered from Juffure Village. In comparison, the total imported assemblage at San Domingo only contained 6% of total imports. Significantly, wine bottle glass comprises 56% of the identifiable fragments recovered from Juffure Village and only 27% of those from the factory. Wine bottles also constitute 45% of the San Domingo collection. Additionally, the most numerous occurrences of liquor bottle remains was recovered from Juffure Village (35), with only one sherd from San Domingo and five from the Juffure Factory site. Unfortunately, tightly datable fragments few datable fragments were recovered and all postdate 1760, with a closing date of 1800.

When present, English manufactured pipe stems are often used as accurate tools for dating (Harrington 1954). But if the sample is small, the results lose their quantitative value. Unfortunately, there was not a statistically reliable quantity of pipe stems recovered from any of the four sites to provide a statistically relevant date. This being the case, the dates recovered are still of interest as indicators of import trends. The smallest occurrence of pipe stems is at Lamin. The dates for the three range from 1650 to 1710. A total of 26 pipe stems were recovered from Juffure Factory yielding an average date of 1714, which predates the official establishment of the fac-

tory, whereas the average date from the village was 1734.6. The exact layout of the factory is not known at this time; at present there is one standing ruin that was most likely the main trading house and a collapsed structure the current residents refer to as the old church in the area of the trading post which is directly south from the old village site.

Only four pipe stems were recovered from San Domingo and thus any average date is statistically irrelevant. What is interesting is that all date to 1710-1750 and were recovered from different areas of the site. The dates reached from nails, which is arguably less accurate than pipe stem dating due to the large range of production dates if well preserved heads are not present. A total of 45 nails were recovered from this site and cut nails dominate the collection. Identifiable heads range in date from 1731 to 1890, with the bulk from 1805-1840 providing very little overlap with the pipe stems. At this time it is not known when the site was abandoned, though historians generally believe that the Luso-African presence on the river had largely dissipated by the mid-late 19th century and was directly tied to the end of the Atlantic Trade and abolition of slave trade by the English (1807) and later French (1815).

The preliminary dates from imported wares do not appear to coincide with the available historic sources—written and oral—available for each site. Not only do they not correspond with settlement or possible abandonment dates for each site, but rather appear to indicate new shifts in trade. Historic accounts suggest that the height of the English trade on the river was the early to mid-18th century peaking in the 1730's (PRO T70 series; Moore 1738), however the majority of the datable imports are from the late 17th to early 18th century and mid- to late 19th century with very few from mid 18th century. This is significant because the most detailed trade accounts from the Royal African Company are from the 1730's and 1740's and contain entries from numerous items such as brass in addition to several bead types<sup>5</sup> that were not recovered archaeologically. It is possible that the presence or absence of these items may signify individual trends; for example, dates recovered from European pipes may indicate the growth of a local pipe industry in the area, particularly since these are mainly recovered from contexts belonging to the 18th to 19th century.

## Conclusions

The above findings represent the initial phase of artifact analysis. The dates from diagnostic imported finds do coincide with the height of the Atlantic Trade in the region (mid-18th century) but also reveal potential trends in the availability or popularity of these goods. The most notable trend is the limited date range of the European pipes, and the later dominance of locally produced pipes. At this time, a more in-depth examination of beads and European ceramics in conjunction with locally produced pipes and ceramics will provide further insight into this occurrence in addition to local preferences or availability of goods. What has yet to be addressed are the results from faunal and botanical analysis that are still in the early stages of investigation. It is hoped that upon the completion of this and the above-mentioned typologies, it will be possible to recognize shifts in consumption and interaction between and within these sites in relation to the Atlantic Trade.

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## Footnotes

1. This area varies from 5 to 10 kilometers along a 15 km east-west transect based on the geography of the riverbank. The initial survey area was largely delineated using the English factor Francis Moore's 1738 map representing the trade along the Gambia River. Within Niimi he only includes villages involved in the trade within 3 to 5 miles of the river. The 2004 and 2006 surveys were designed to locate these sites and any former settlements prior to the advent of the Atlantic Trade.

2. The present province incorporates the lower portion of the former Kingdom referred to intermittently as either Niumi or Barra in documentary and oral sources (Wright 1977).
3. Lawson's typology is based upon limited excavations at three sites. The Phase I ceramics (pre-1300) are from contexts with radiocarbon dates postdating 1500, though Lawson argues that these are from modern activities such as field burning. Additionally these finds are limited to surface collections. The end date of 1300 is largely derived from radiocarbon dates from context containing Phase II ceramics. Phase II ceramics date from 1300 to 1700, though one of two radiocarbon dates obtained is 1260. The Phase III is also dated based on carbon samples and ranges from 1700 to 1900 according to Lawson's (2003a:239-260) findings.
4. In particular, figure 3a is similar to pipes founds in Sierra Leone (Hill 1976).
5. The Royal African Company logs provide detailed accounts of the large quantities and varieties of beads brought to the area as well as exchanges of these made with Luso-African merchants and traders residing at the sites under investigation (T70 series).

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PRO T70/56: Copies of Letters Sent by the Royal African Company of England to Gambia No. 2.; Sept 29<sup>th</sup>, 1737 to 1751.

PRO T70/550: Gambia Journal 172, from 1<sup>st</sup> Jan 1726/7 to Sept 12 1728.

PRO T70/577: Gambia Journal No. 6, from Nov 15 1753 to May 15, 1754.

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