

GAMBIAN CULTURE NOTES

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Cultural Guide is to identify and describe the main cultural issues in Gambian society with a view to helping foreigners acquire cross-cultural skills, which are essential to their stay and work in The Gambia.

Many ethnic groups are found living in The Gambia but they share enough cultural patterns that this cultural guide generally applies to the majority of the country's people. When you choose to come and live in The Gambia for sometime, you also choose to grapple with a whole new society whose values, priorities and goals are quite different from those you have been brought up with, have believed in and have defended for many years. Consciously or unconsciously, you are affected by the ideals of your own society.

Gambian society, like your society, can be viewed as a system composed of elements that work together to reinforce the basic goals of the society. However, because these goals differ from those of your society, the dress code, eating habits, work ethics, attitudes towards money and material possession, ideas about equality, the structure of language, holidays, religion, education, sex roles, and the importance of time and space all reflect different priorities.

You do not have to change your beliefs and values to interact meaningfully with Gambians. However, you can make your life and work easier by understanding and using the system rather than trying to challenge it by imposing your own priorities and expectations. You can achieve the goals you have set for yourself by integrating positive Gambian values and traditions with compatible techniques from your own society.

ETIQUETTE

GREETINGS

It is not an accident that the first dialogue of your local language lessons begins with greetings, for greetings are a most essential aspect of Gambian culture. Many foreigners who have lived in a village can attest to the amount of time spent going through the greetings when one Gambian meets another during the day.

The exchange of greetings is the key to successful interaction with Gambians at every level, whether in the market, on the street, in the office, or over the telephone. People are taken aback if you do not greet first before beginning a conversation even if you just want to ask a question. Greeting serves as an icebreaker and will make the person you greet feel better disposed toward you. Greeting in a local language is recommended (*salaam alekum*), but an English "Hello" will do.

For foreigners, these greetings may seem a meaningless waste of time because they are always the same and quite lengthy. You may also be baffled to see a Gambian doing something you consider "really important" stop everything to spend ten minutes greeting a friend he has seen just hours ago. But once again it is because greeting acknowledges the existence of another human being and taking the time to relate to him or her in a personal way is a priority in Gambian society which helps achieve the goal of harmony and peace in the community.

Every member of the community is expected to greet every other member of the community regardless of status or wealth. Indeed, the greetings are a way for the Gambian to show respect for every member of the community whether they are rich or poor, noble or of slave origin, because every member has an important role to fulfill.

Shaking hands is also a part of the greeting process. People shake hands as often as they see each other during different times of the day. Women, especially in villages, are not normally expected to shake hands when greeting. When greeting a group of people or someone from a distance, raising clasped hands will take the place of a handshake. When one is working or eating, the arm may be offered instead. Gambians follow a certain protocol for greeting elders: a younger person greets an elder first and avoids direct eye contact.

Also, physical affection for a loved one or emotion in general is not openly shown in public. Note that in shaking hands the right hand is used. The left hand denotes something else and is explained elsewhere.

It is also interesting to note that Gambians often express anger, not by hostile words or threats, but by refusing to greet the person. This is considered a great insult denoting a lack of respect or outright contempt for the individual. This is important to remember since in other societies a “hello” and a wave of the hand are enough to show the pleasure you get from seeing someone.

If a Gambian villager is asked why he spent so much time greeting, repeating the family name over and over, he would reply that he is not only saying the name of the individual with whom he is speaking, but that he is also acknowledging that person’s entire family, and the history of the family, the ancestors as well as the living.

Foreigners living in The Gambia (especially in a traditional village) must realize then that they may hurt people’s feelings by not greeting every individual with whom they come into contact even if the other is in the middle of a business transaction, a discussion with someone else, reading, etc. This can be exasperating if the foreigners think that Gambians have the same priorities as they do (respect of privacy, work, time, etc) and don’t understand the capital significance the greeting ritual has in Gambian society for showing concern for the well being of the individual and his family circle.

The foreigner may think nothing of walking into an office and saying point blank “I need this or that”, because in his society he is trying not to waste the other person’s time and to get straight to the point. This foreigner may wonder why Gambians are so slow to help him out (or even seem a bit hostile) even though it may be their job. However, the Gambian feels he has not been acknowledged before getting down to what he considers secondary matters.

It is obvious that a Gambian will fare better in another society if he learns the polite way to approach people according to that society’s standards. So when the foreigner in Gambia does learn the Gambian greetings and uses them, this indicates to the Gambian that the person is one who has taken the time to learn what is important in Gambia and feels the person respects him and the customs of his society. He is therefore much more eager to aid this individual. It is also interesting that most foreigners who learn Gambian languages participate with sincerity and learn to value this ritual, finding it difficult to return to societies whose priorities make it impossible to devote time to this type of interaction.

After you have learned the basic greetings in the local languages as presented in your lessons, have fun by using them.

EATING

In Gambian society it is not necessary to be invited to eat at any meal. You are always welcome. It’s true! Don’t worry that there won’t be enough to eat, whatever there is will be shared with everyone and the more the merrier! The important thing is being able to share. This may be hard for you, as a foreigner, to get used to since you feel you may be imposing on people if you show up at lunchtime without being specifically invited.

EATING AROUND THE BOWL

The most common way of eating in The Gambia is from a communal bowl. A mat (or mats) is spread and the bowl is centrally placed on the mat. Before you sit on the mat it is polite to take off your shoes (as you always do before stepping on a mat). Look to see how the men and women sit and do likewise. In an average compound, especially in rural areas, men eat from one bowl and women from another. Children are divided between bowls according to sex; at times boys eat with the men. If you arrive when people are eating you are immediately invited to join them. It is considered polite to wash your hands and “taste” the food even when you don’t feel like eating. If you do not want to continue eating you should leave the eating area and wait until they are through as it is considered impolite to watch people eating. If you are visiting a village or compound for the first time, you may be served in a separate hut all by yourself, as a compliment to show the importance they give to you! The meal is usually brought out in a large bowl and if there is sauce, it is poured out from a second bowl by the female head of the house.

Hands are washed before and after a meal from a communal basin. Even if one is left-handed, the right hand is used for eating. Usually you will be offered a spoon, which you should not hesitate to use although joining the group in eating with one’s hand is a welcome gesture. It is best to wait for the host to begin the meal by saying “*Bisimillah*”. This is the equivalent of saying “Grace before the meal” and means “in the name of God” in Arabic, the official language of the Moslem religion. Hosts are expected to distribute the pieces of meat, fish, or vegetables to the rest of the group. The bowl is invisibly divided into sectors with each person eating from the portion directly in front of him/her. You can also reach out for the meat, fish, or vegetables that are usually in the center of the bowl.

It is considered rude to take food from someone else's sector. However, if you see a certain type of vegetable, fish or meat you want in the middle of the bowl, break off a piece and place it in front of your place first, don't just put it in your mouth. If you need help breaking a piece of meat or vegetable, you may ask the person next to you to help you out.

Talking while eating, especially by children, is suppressed because it is considered disrespectful (and may also cause choking) to the food and is against certain superstitions. Adults may, however, occasionally comment on the hotness of the food. Note that when a Gambian says food is "hot" he means temperature-wise! It is not considered rude to belch; on the contrary it is an indication that you have eaten well and your host will be pleased.

Eating with one's hand is quite a skilful operation! A Gambian takes a handful of rice, punches it up along the side of the bowl in a swerving back and forth motion, and then forms it into a small ball in his hand. Watch how it is done! Don't squeeze the rice too tightly or you'll have difficulty forming the ball. Bones and rice falling from your hand are placed on the cover of the bowl and never back in the bowl.

People usually do drink during the meal. Whenever you finish eating, you get up from the bowl, lick the rice off your hand and wash it with soap (if available). At the end of the meal you express your appreciation by commenting on its "sweetness" and in the amount one eats. The host normally says "*Alhamdulillah*" meaning "Thanks be to God".

Some superstitions connected with eating are:

- .. One should avoid making the bowl slide, for this is believed to cause stomachache.
- .. Wood should not be touched before washing the hands after a meal; this causes a sore throat. If it is done one touches one's neck to prevent the sore throat.

Main points to note:

- .. Hands should be washed before a meal but only the right hand is used for eating.
- .. Shoes must be removed when sitting around the bowl.
- .. Talking should be minimized.
- .. Before beginning to eat, the eldest present gives the signal and the word '*Bisimillah*' is pronounced.

A Gambian does not like to be watched eating by someone he does not know. There is the fear of the "evil eye"; consequently anyone nearby is invited to join. If one does not want to eat one should say "thank you" and avoid watching those eating. Occasionally your host will insist that you eat despite your repeated declining of the invitations. He is just being polite and will leave you alone if you are adamant, but remember to either leave the area or occupy yourself with something else, e.g., reading a book. Depending on the familiarity with your host and the practicality of the situation you may not actually leave the eating area.

- .. The host may plunge his hand in the bowl and stir it to cool it as an act of politeness.
- .. The host pours on the sauce, eats the first handful and invites the guests to follow his example.
- .. Women eat separately from the men.
- .. If the guest is an honored guest (like yourself going to the village for the first time), a chief or powerful man, the food is sent to his house and the host does not presume to eat with him.
- .. Restrict yourself to your own sector of the bowl.
- .. Bones and spilled rice should not be put back in the bowl.
- .. Express your appreciation at the end of the meal.

REMEMBER:

YOU'RE NOT OBLIGED TO USE YOUR HAND FOR EATING. ON THE CONTRARY, YOU MAY BE OFFERED A SPOON AND UNLESS YOU WISH TO "PLEASE" YOUR HOST BY USING YOUR HAND, DO NOT HESITATE TO USE THE SPOON!!

FORMS OF ADDRESS AND COMPLIMENTS

Polite, respectful and formal ways of addressing other people are an important part of everyday life in this society. In an official situation people are sometimes addressed - Mr., Boss, or the surname of the person. Traditionally, a person may be addressed by a junior using the appropriate term of relationship. If the person being addressed is a senior sibling, he or she shall be called "senior", "uncle" if an uncle, and "aunt" if an aunt. When a person is old enough to be your parent then such a person shall be called "father" for male and "mother" for female, followed by the name. A boy or girl can be called "kambaano" and "sunkuto" respectively. Gambians will sometimes address you with the following terms: my friend, my brother, or my sister.

Compliments are often made when a job is well done, when one dresses well or achieves success, etc.

DRESS CODE

Dress is very important in The Gambia in both rural and urban settings. This is evident by the large number of tailor shops along the sidewalks, as well as by the wide variety of cloth sold in Banjul and local markets. The bright colors and prints of imported cottons, local tie-dye and batik are stylishly and elegantly worn. In traditional Gambian society, a garment should cover most parts of the body. The garment should fit loosely so that the shape of the body is not revealed. Men wear "haftaans and warambas," which are long gowns with elongated armholes worn over baggy trousers. Women also wear haftaans as well as warambas worn with a wrapped skirt or blouse underneath. Younger women can be seen wearing a distinctive close fitting tunic with a plunging neckline and matching wrapped skirt made from cotton prints. In the urban areas, European style clothing is commonly worn. Although certain dress styles may be unique to one ethnic group, these clothing styles are worn interchangeably by everyone.

Much of the imported cloth comes from Asia and Europe. Warambas and haftaans are often made from tie-dye or batik damask and are embroidered in elaborate designs. Sarongs as well as shorter warambas are also made from the locally woven strip cloth that comes in multi-colored strips between four and eight inches wide. The white strip cloth woven up country is made with local cotton or imported thread.

While women usually wear head ties that match their dresses, men often wear wool hats, skullcaps or a fez, especially on religious occasions. Hairstyles are a work of art in The Gambia. Women braid and plait their hair, often using fiber extensions in intricate and ornate designs. Relaxed or straightened hairstyles will also be seen in the urban areas. Gambian women wear earrings, necklaces and pearls. Gold and silver ornaments are also popular.

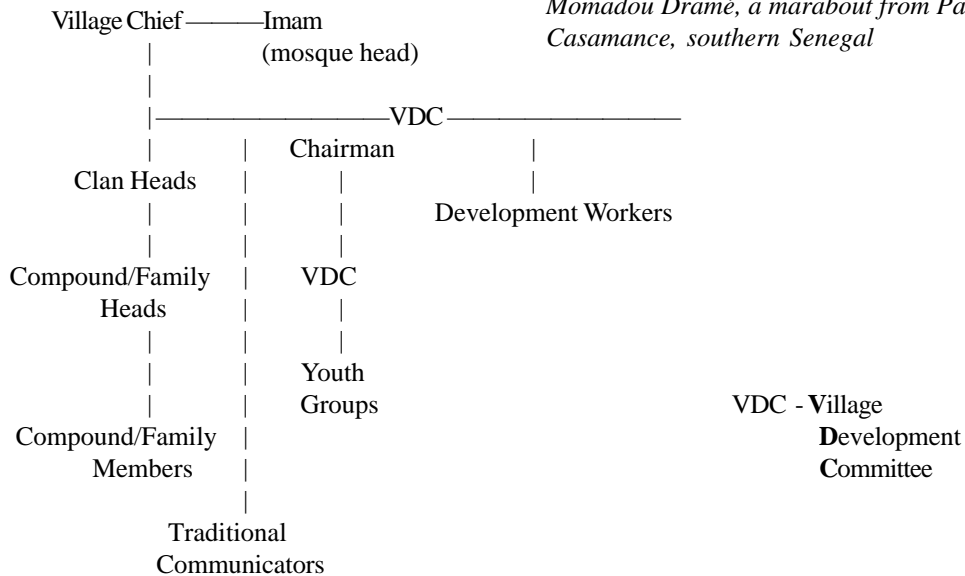
Gambian women are as modest as they are elegant. Modesty in dress is very much an influence of Islam. The thighs of a woman are to a Gambian man what the breast is to a foreigner (*tubab*), and thus not exposed. Wearing pants, even long ones, is considered inappropriate by tradition. Although bare breasts are not considered immoral or provocative among Gambians, women do not normally walk with bare breasts outside their compounds unless they are working or breastfeeding.



Keisha with some of the students at a fabric shop for tourists in Bakau.

VILLAGE STRUCTURE

Diagram of village leadership and authority structure



Momadou Dramé, a marabout from Pakao in the Casamance, southern Senegal

The Gambia is traditionally a stratified and patrilineal society. Despite the gradual erosion of traditional culture through urbanization, The Gambia's social organization still retains much of its traditional character, especially at the village level. The following discussion of village structure and traditional social and economic relationships is presented as a basis for understanding the nature of Gambian society.

The basic social unit in the village is the family that lives together in an area called a compound, hence, compound family. It consists of a compound head, his wives, children and other younger males with their wives and children. The head of the compound is the eldest male and is legally responsible for everyone in the compound. He is also the chief mediator of all disputes and the first to be consulted on any major event or responsibility involving the family. Every compound family belongs in a clan or ward in the village of related compounds built near one another, forming a small neighborhood. The head of the clan is also the eldest living male of the related families.

The eldest male of the founding family of the village becomes the chief or *Alikaaloo*. The leaders of the clans who are responsible to the Alikaaloo form the council of elders, which serves as the village's governing body together with the Alikaaloo. Some of the duties and responsibilities of the Alikaaloo include:

- he collects yard, market and cattle taxes;
- he is a middle man between the village and all NGOs and government agencies working in the village;
- he takes care of disputes but has no judiciary powers;
- he takes a leading role in the development affairs of the village;
- he allocates land for community projects and personal residences.

The Alikaaloo is sometimes appointed through elections and his office is for life. He can be removed if he seriously abuses his office.

All visitors on official trips to a village or town are expected to contact the village head first to introduce their mission. The Alikaaloo also gives shelter and hospitality to strangers who know no one in the village. In the case of an official mission he informs the elders and other relevant village members of the issue to solicit their cooperation. The offering of kola nuts to the Alikaaloo and hosts is the traditional way of introducing oneself and is a gesture of respect.

The Imam is the religious leader and he leads all prayers in the mosque. He is also a member of the council of elders. His role is usually advisory. He attends ceremonies to take care of any religious rituals. Sometimes the Imam is also a Koranic teacher and a *marabout*. A marabout is a Muslim holy man who offers prayers and can make charms that have a variety of functions.

The village development committee (VDC) is headed by a chairman or president who is responsible for coordinating all development work in the village. They are accountable to the Alikaaloo and work hand in hand with the youths who provide the labor for community projects. The VDC also works with development assistants posted in the village or district. Traditional communicators help with the spreading of messages and information in the community by announcements, drama, singing, music, etc.

Emergencies are handled at the village, clan or family level depending on their magnitude. These can range from community disasters caused by fire or flood, to family calamities such as sickness. Plans are usually in place to provide assistance to those in need in the form of communal food stocks, emergency funds, or labor. Sometimes outsiders are invited to intervene and provide assistance.

CEREMONIES AND GIFT GIVING

Most Gambian ceremonial occasions, such as weddings, naming ceremonies, initiation ceremonies, and other special Muslim and Christian ceremonies, are celebrated by lavish feasting, drumming and dancing. These special occasions are also a time for having new clothes made and dressing elegantly. As these ceremonies can be very costly, it is customary for Gambians to make contributions to the host family in the form of money or food. Anyone invited to such a celebration is expected to bring something. In addition, *griots* (praise singers or musicians) attending these events are traditionally given presents or money for their songs.

MARRIAGE

Marriages are traditionally arranged by families in The Gambia, although this practice is less frequent among people in the urban areas. Kola nuts are formally sent by the suitor's family to the parents of the bride-to-be and, if accepted, the courtship begins. In Islamic law the parents have no right to marry off their daughter without her consent. The father will usually consult his daughter and her mother, and if they raise no objections he will give his consent by sharing the kola nuts with relatives, friends, and neighbors. Large sums of money and kola nuts pass from the suitor's hands to his fiancée and her family before the marriage takes place. In the urban areas, the man may offer expensive gifts such as a fancy bed, wristwatch, radio, or television set. If the suitor is not considered generous enough, the daughter and her mother may begin to encourage other suitors. In addition, a "bride price" determined by the bride's parents is paid to the bride and her family. Once this price has been negotiated, the suitor has the sole right to court the girl. In turn, a dowry is provided by the bride's parents. This usually consists of clothing, jewelry, and all the cooking utensils and equipment the bride will need to set up her new home. Sometimes there are forced marriages even though it is against the will of the boy or girl.

The legal consummation of a Muslim marriage (called "tying the marriage") is performed by a religious leader in the bride's compound in the presence of the father or guardian of both the bride and groom. The couple is usually absent during this ceremony. After the formal ceremony, feasting, drumming and dancing take place. Wedding guests are expected to contribute food or money to the couple, the bride's parents and the griots. If the full bride price has been paid on the spot, the husband may take the bride back to his compound or village immediately. However, there is usually a delay of several months between tying the marriage and taking the bride to her new home.

Another ceremony is held at the bride's compound at the time of the transfer when she is counseled about the hardships and responsibilities of marriage by the neighborhood elders. A ritual braiding of her hair also takes place, followed by feasting and dancing into the early hours of the morning. The party then moves to the groom's house where he has been

waiting for his bride to be formally handed over to him. The next few days involve various rites and ritual feasting marking the bride's official membership in the husband's compound.

CHILDBIRTH AND NAMING CEREMONIES

A great deal of mystery surrounds pregnancy and birth in Gambian society. People do not talk about the fact that someone is expecting a baby; complete discretion is observed during the entire pregnancy. Gambians believe that talking about the pregnancy could endanger the life of the baby. After a baby is born, numerous ritual precautions are taken. Sometimes a fire burns continuously in the house for the first week during which time the mother remains indoors. One week after the birth a ceremony takes place when the baby is named. Children are usually named by the father's side of the family after relatives or friends. The father is normally responsible for making arrangements for the naming ceremony and informing family, friends, and relatives. The ceremony is performed in the morning (around 10:00 am) by an elder who either shaves the baby's hair or cuts a lock and says a silent prayer. He then whispers into the infant's ear the name the parents have chosen which is proclaimed aloud by a griot. While the name is being whispered, a chicken, goat or sheep is being slaughtered. A charity offering of kola nuts, cakes or other special foods is distributed to the guests, and the tuft of hair is buried. Guests bring small gifts for the infant and the griots as well. Later in the day, a large meal is prepared followed by drumming and dancing. Nowadays western style music and parties are part of the ceremony, especially in urban areas.

INITIATION CEREMONIES (CIRCUMCISION)

Circumcision in many West African societies is a rite of passage that is part of the life cycle that mark the beginning of adulthood. Boys and girls are circumcised separately in groups between the ages of 8 - 12, although some participate in the practice at even an earlier age. Circumcision of girls is still practiced among the Mandinkas, Fulas and Jolas, but not among some Wolofs. Children would traditionally spend several months in the bush with a special guardian for general training after the operation.

During their healing period in the bush, they are taught about their adult social responsibilities and rules of behavior. While boys wear distinctive white robes with a triangular hood, girls wear a special dress adorned with strings of beads. Great preparation is made in the village for the returning children. Parents make beautiful clothes and decorations for the new initiates to wear for several days after their return. The ceremonies associated with initiation are marked by much feasting, socializing, and special dancing with masquerades, e.g., "*kankurangs*" (this is a masked figure that appears during important ceremonies). Today most people in the urban areas take their children to the hospital or clinic for the actual operation and the bush school lasts for a shorter period.

FUNERALS

Loud wailing and sobbing - mostly by women, is a common way to express sympathy to a mourning family in The Gambia. When a person discovers a death in the village, he or she will alert the rest of the community with a loud death wail. Elders will make burial arrangements and send messages to inform kin folk and friends. The body is washed and clothed in a white shroud and is rolled in a mat or placed in a coffin. The body will either be brought to the mosque for prayers or will remain in the compound before the burial, which usually takes place after the prayers. The men take the corpse for burial. After that, charity is also customarily given to the mourning family in the form of money or food. Another charity by the family of the deceased takes place on the third, seventh and fortieth days after the burial. The mourning period for a widow in traditional Muslim practice is four months and ten days. During this time, the widow is supposed to remain inside the compound and not dress fashionably. This practice is to ensure that if the widow is pregnant, the husband's family will know that the child belongs to their lineage. A widower, however, does not follow a mourning practice.

GIFT GIVING

Gifts are given in cash or kind during all the above-mentioned occasions. Gifts range in value from any amount of money, soap, rice, sugar, fabric, kola nuts, or drinks, for example, depending on what would be helpful. Gifts are also given at holidays such as Tobaski, Koriteh, Christmas, and birthdays. People take gifts for hosts when they travel or for their families when they travel back home. In times of disaster support is also given in cash or kind.

VALUES

The Gambia, despite the intrusion of western culture, is still a highly conformative society where values are influenced by the people's tradition or religion. But culture is dynamic and values today are not only influenced by tradition, Islam, and Christianity, but also by colonialism, western influences through tourism, television, movies and music, and capitalism. Some values are universal and some relative, depending on one's age, education, culture, thinking and other life experiences. Many Gambians are concerned that useful traditional values are being threatened by the increase in delinquency, lawlessness, drug/alcohol abuse, promiscuity, illegitimate childbirth, and individualism. Also an increasing number of teenagers and kids are getting access to blue films, violent films, tourists and reading materials that are in conflict with Gambian values and expected behavior.

The following are still highly valued:

family, kinship, lineage	wealth/traveling
marriage (polygamy/monogamy)	age (elders accorded higher status)
children (legitimate)	long life
medical care (modern/traditional)	friendship
benevolence, empathy	association, communalism, sharing
religion, holiness	cleanliness, sanitation, health
skills, work, employment, income	good conduct, modesty, honesty
justice, peace, being law abiding	education (formal, informal)
stability	privacy
dress	democracy - good governance
bravery	shelter
sports	status
information/communication	food
wisdom	equality
time	respect for authority
respect and care for parents	succession, inheritance
parental blessing	history
good home training (morals) and parental care	infrastructure
the environment	trade
ceremonies (traditional, religious)	recreation, music, entertainment, hobbies

A lot of Gambians still strongly believe in the above-mentioned values and their lives are largely directed by them. The values shape their thinking and behavior. As a foreigner one needs to know this to understand and relate well with Gambians.

THE DO'S AND DON'TS

- .. always greet people
- .. you are free to ask questions and borrow things in the compound from neighbors, friends, etc.
- .. dress appropriately if you want to visit a mosque
- .. pay your bills regularly
- .. get off the road when the police are escorting an important person
- .. be on the right hand side of a road when looking for a taxi
- .. giving gifts in cash or kind is not offensive
- .. complain to parents when you are offended by a child
- .. turn down beggars politely
- .. separate your neighbors or friends when they are quarrelling or fighting
- .. be with your family when there is a ceremony or funeral
- .. you can mediate without being asked when there is a problem between friends
- .. you can beg for some pepper, salt, or sugar from a neighbor
- .. recognize your neighbor's privacy rights
- .. you can drink from your neighbor's water jar
- .. Gambians judge people by their friends and attitude

- .. you can discipline (whip) your brother's child
- .. avoid arguments about politics
- .. tell your family or colleague first when you have a problem
- .. do not greet people with your left hand
- .. do not receive gifts with your left hand
- .. don't visit circumcision camps if you are not circumcised
- .. do not swim during late hours
- .. do not walk alone in isolated places during late hours
- .. do not smell food in the presence of the giver
- .. do not eat with your left hand
- .. do not criticize people's beliefs
- .. do not visit shrines without permission
- .. don't get too close to people's spouses
- .. don't bring alcohol to a Muslim compound
- .. do not give gifts and later ask for them back
- .. do not point at people
- .. do not take photographs of shrines/sacred places without permission
- .. do not openly talk about other people's taboos especially in the rural areas
- .. don't display affection in public
- .. do not tamper with people's fruit trees or other property without permission
- .. do not drink open well water during your stay in villages
- .. do not enter a religious elder's house with your shoes on or without permission
- .. do not enter in someone's house without knocking on the door first
- .. do not give out your under wear for laundry

ETHNIC GROUPS AND THE CASTE SYSTEM

Officially, The Gambia consists of eight ethnic groups (Mandinka, Fula, Jola, Wolof, Serer, Serahuli, Manjago, Aku). There are other small groups (Mansuwanka, Mankaan, Papel, Susu, Lebanese, Balanta, Jalunke) that do not appear on the official list. It is probably because these people migrated to The Gambia relatively recently. Bayinunka, which was one of the oldest tribes in the sub-region, is almost dead in The Gambia because the language is no longer spoken. People who identify with the group now speak either Mandinka or Jola. The language is still spoken in Casamance and Guinea Bissau.

Large numbers of Mandinkas migrated to the west from the Niger River basin in search of better agricultural lands and more opportunities for conquest and settlement. During the expansion of the Mali empire in the 13th century, Mandinkas established their rule from the north bank of the Gambia river to the Futa-Jalon highlands in modern Guinea. Today, they are engaged in business and farming, especially groundnut (peanut) production. Mandinkas are spread throughout the country and in many places in West Africa. They are referred to as Malinke in Guinea Conakry, Bambara in Mali, Jula in Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso and Mandingo in Liberia.

The Fulas of The Gambia traditionally lived in small hamlets in the eastern, central and northern part of the country. They were mainly cattle herders originating in the area north of the Senegal River. As pastoralists, they followed their herds in search of grazing lands to the Niger River in the east and then south eventually coming into The Gambia. Today, most are engaged in farming as well as business and raising cattle. With ancestral ties to North African Berbers, Fulas are known for their lighter skin and straighter hair. They are also referred to as Fulani, Fulfulbe, Pulaar, or Pul.

The Wolof are thought to have originated in Southern Mauritania where droughts and desert raids forced them south into the area north of The Gambia in western Senegal. The heaviest migration of Wolof into The Gambia occurred during the religious wars of the 19th century. They established themselves in Banjul and on the north bank of the river as traders and shipbuilders. While those on the North Bank are now mostly farmers, the Wolof of Banjul are influential today in business, commerce and the civil service.

The Jolas are among the earliest settlers in the area south of the Gambia River. Certain oral sources claim that they originated in Egypt, traveled across North Africa during King Solomon's days in the 10th century BC, and eventually

settled in the wetlands of the Niger River. They continued farther south to escape from drought and wars, bringing with them palm seed, cotton, and rice. Today, many Jolas live near the coastal areas in The Gambia, Casamance, and northern Guinea Bissau. Although many have embraced Islam or Christianity, Jolas have generally retained more of their traditional religious practices and beliefs than other ethnic groups. They are rice farmers and also produce palm wine, palm oil, pigs, and other animals.

As rulers and merchants of the Ghana Empire, the Serahulis in this region have a long history. Most of those living in The Gambia today, however, arrived during the 19th century as refugees from the religious wars in Senegal. Although many are farmers living along The Gambia's eastern border, the Serahulis are renowned for their gold and diamond trading activities throughout West, Southern, and Central Africa. They are also known for their woven strip cloth, tie-dye and pottery.

The Serers are among the oldest ethnic groups in the Senegambian region. They originated north of the Senegal River and migrated south to the delta areas of the Sine and Saloum region northwest of The Gambia. Today they are found primarily along the river mouth with fishing as their main occupation. The Serers are also thought to have some linguistic and cultural ties to Fulas and ancestral links with Jolas. They also move around following fish migrations just as the Fula migrated with their cattle to better pastureland.

The Akus are descendants of European traders and African wives, or the descendants of liberated slaves from Sierra Leone. You also find native African ancestors among the Aku who lived with them and became assimilated. Because of their close contacts with the European community, they were the first to receive formal education and thus played an influential role in The Gambia's economic and government life during the colonial period. Today Akus continue to figure prominently in Gambian commerce and the civil service. Most are Christians and have European names. There are also a number of Muslim Akus living in the Banjul area having European surnames and Muslim first names. In Sierra Leone the Aku is referred to as Creole.

The Manjagos are believed to be indigenous to the coastal area of Guinea Bissau. They first arrived in the Senegambian region as seasonal migrant workers, with some settling in the coastal areas of The Gambia and Casamance. Today their main occupation is tapping the oil palms for wine, farming, producing palm oil, and rearing pigs.

Although each ethnic group has its own traditions, language, and background, the people of The Gambia share many cultural patterns due to historical connections, the small size of the country, generations of intermarriages and the unifying force of Islam. Gambians also share much of their cultural heritage with the people of Senegal and have cultural ties to the peoples of Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone and Mali.

LANGUAGE

Although English is the official language used in schools, courts of law, and the administration, local languages are widely spoken. While Wolof serves as a lingua-franca in the urban areas, Mandinka predominates in the rural areas. Fula, Jola, Serahuli, and other languages are often heard. One may also hear a mixture of English spoken with the local languages in the urban areas. This is a creole spoken by Akus. Many Gambians speak several of these local languages in addition to English. It should not be assumed however, that English is thoroughly understood by Gambians outside official and professional circles (e.g., taxi drivers, merchants, domestic helpers). A foreigner can certainly manage without knowing any of the local languages, but basic conversational skill in Mandinka or Wolof will prove to be a valuable investment in one's living or working experience in The Gambia. Indeed, only a few words in a local language will go a long way towards enhancing the quality of interactions with Gambians and will open many doors.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The functioning of Gambian society today is still somewhat influenced by the hierarchical class structure which formed the basis for social relationships in the past. Accordingly, the class into which one was born determined the individual's role and behavior in society, and defined his specific rights and obligations. Intermarriages among the different classes were uncommon, with children carrying on their family's tradition. The class structure consisted of three broad groups — freeborn, artisan and slave.

THE FREE BORN

This class includes nobles and commoners. The former were the royal lineages and great warrior families. Warfare was an indispensable activity for traditional noble families in the protection and expansion of their states. All other groups performed their ascribed roles in deference to the noble families whose patronage and protection they needed. The commoners included farmers, traders, and marabouts. While the farmers provided food for the state, traders brought in other needed items. The marabouts were the devout Muslims who were believed to bring good fortune and power through their prayers and amulets. As literate scholars, the marabouts were also useful as scribes.

THE ARTISANS

The artisans included griots, smiths, and leather workers, (some ethnic groups included woodworkers and weavers in this class). Circumcisers for male and female initiations come from the smith group.

In addition to endogamous marriage (marrying within the class), artisans married within their areas of specialization, e.g., a griot did not marry a smith. A sub-hierarchy also operated within the artisan class in which leather workers were subservient to smiths who in turn, deferred to bards. While the men specialized in their particular crafts, the women performed other specific roles. For example, women from the smith class were often potters and performed circumcision for female initiations. Bard women accompanied their men with song and percussion and artisan women in general served as messengers, ceremonial hostesses and intermediaries. Although not slaves, the artisan families were attached to freeborn families in a patron-client relationship. The artisans are also the traditional communicators and griots specialize as oral historians. They keep and transmit the history of the kingdoms, towns, and noble families.

THE SLAVES

This class included those for trade and domestic use. While trade slaves were bought and sold, domestic slaves performed household work and were treated like junior members of the family. Although slavery no longer exists and the class system is considered archaic, many Gambians are still conscious of their family origins. People of artisan or slave origins often still defer to freeborn families and people also tend to marry within their traditional class. This is not necessarily true, however, of the more urbanized and educated Gambians.

In addition to this class stratification, traditional Gambian society was based on a vertical age-grade system in which advancement to positions of power and authority was determined by age. Although this system is gradually being replaced by a merit system based in part on modern education in schools.

Age is still very much respected in all aspects of Gambian life. Adults will listen reverently to those older than themselves regardless of class. Within this system are three broad age-grades: youths, adults, and elders. Within these grades are peer groups divided by sex whose members grow up together, become initiated into adult society together, and share social and work activities. Persons of one peer group will rarely be companions of those of another, with the junior grades always deferring to those more senior.

Though a heterogeneous society, Gambians of different ethnic groups live, work, and worship together in harmony. People also marry across ethnic lines. Discrimination and prejudice are rare and occur only in isolated cases. Gambia is not like other societies where there has been long-standing universal prejudice and violence among ethnic groups. Special bonds/relations exist between ethnic groups, regions, towns, families, and castes. These bonds have greatly improved and strengthened peaceful co-existence among members of different groups. People from groups that have such a bond between them would informally joke, tease, and make fun of one another wherever they meet. Great care is taken not to offend, upset or annoy the other party. Where one offends the other, an apology must follow quickly or (it is strongly believed) something unfortunate will happen to you. These bonds also play a great role in third party conflict resolution at all levels.

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

The Gambia was a British colony but prior to colonialism this area was comprised of numerous tiny kingdoms. The names of those kingdoms are now used for the various regions in the country where they used to be. On the south bank they

were: Kombo, Foni, Kiang, Jaara, Naamina, Fuladu, Jimara, Tumannaa, and Kantoora. On the north bank: Niumi, Jookaadu, Badibu, Saloum, Naani, Sandu, and Wuli. The Gambia is a secular, capitalist and multiparty republic.

The chronology for political development was as follows:

Local kingdoms before colonialism.

In 1816 British forces occupied the island of Banjul after buying it from the king of Kombo.

1823 the British bought more land (Bakau and Serekunda area) from the king of Kombo. An agreement was made for the British to protect the pagan kingdoms against Muslim invaders. Banjul and Serekunda area became the colony and the other areas became the protectorate (indirectly ruled). These regions are now split into administrative districts.

After the Second World War the move for independence started in Africa.

In 1951 and 1954 representatives were elected in the colony area.

In 1959 a constitutional conference was held in London.

In 1960 country-wide elections were held for self-rule.

In 1965 independence was granted with the Queen of England as head of state and Dawda Jawara as Prime Minister. Referendum for republican status failed.

1970 republican status obtained after a second referendum. Dawda Jawara became the first president of the republic.

Elections were also held in 1962, 1966, 1972, 1977, 1982, 1987, 1992, and 1996/97.

In 1981 there was an abortive military coup led by Kukoi Samba Sanyang.

In 1994 a successful military coup took place. Yahya Jammeh became head of state and government.

In 1996 elections were held and President Jammeh was elected. Parliamentary elections followed in 1997.

In 1996 the first independent electoral commission (IEC) was created. Voting is by secret ballot and Gambians eighteen years and above are eligible to vote.

GOVERNING BODIES

The executive is headed by a president who is also the head of state. He is assisted by a vice-president and secretaries of state (ministers) who head various departments of state (ministries).

The legislature consists of elected parliamentarians and nominated ones. The house is headed by a speaker.

The judiciary consists of the appeals court, supreme court, magistrates court and district tribunals. They are headed by judges, magistrates and district chiefs, respectively.

ADMINISTRATION

Central government is headed by the president.

Local government is headed by a commissioner at divisional level, by a chief (*seyfo*) at district level and by an alikaaloo at village level.

The country is divided into seven administrative areas:

	Administrative H/Q
Banjul City.....	Banjul
Kanifing Municipal Area	Kanifing
Western Division	Brikama
Lower River Division	Mansakonko
Central River Division	Janjanbureh
Upper River Division	Basse
North Bank Division	Kerewan

Banjul is headed by a mayor and Kanifing by a chairman. The rest are headed by commissioners.

Each administrative area has an area council that is responsible for the collection and handling of revenue in its area. Supplemental funds for local governance come from central government, donor agencies, and gifts.

The divisions are divided into the following administrative districts:

WESTERN DIVISION

Kombo North
 Kombo South
 Kombo East
 Kombo Central
 Foni Brefet
 Foni Bintang
 Foni Kansala
 Foni Bondali
 Foni Jarrol

LOWER RIVER DIVISION

Kiang West
 Kiang Central
 Kiang East
 Jarra West
 Jarra Central
 Jarra East

NORTH BANK DIVISION

Lower Niumi
 Upper Niumi
 Jokadu
 Lower Badibu
 Central Badibu
 Upper Badibu

CENTRAL RIVER DIVISION

Ñaamina Dankunku
 Ñaamina Sambang
 Ñaamina Kudang
 Fulladu West
 Saami
 Ñaanijaa
 Upper Saloum
 Lower Saloum
 Ñaani Kuntaur
 Janjanbureh

UPPER RIVER DIVISION

Fulladu East
 Kantora
 Wuli
 Sandu

Government makes money from direct and indirect taxation, parastatals, tourism, agriculture (the primary cash crops include cotton, groundnuts, cashew nuts, fish, and vegetables), and foreign aid. The Central Bank handles government revenue.

THE CIVIL SERVICE

The civil service is headed by the secretary general assisted by permanent secretaries and heads of departments and parastatals (directors and management directors respectively). The Public Service Commission assists in the appointment and promotion of civil servants.

AFFILIATION

The Gambia is a member of ECOWAS, WAMU, Shelter Afric, African Development Bank, OAU, Organization of Islamic Countries, British Commonwealth, UN, ILO, IRC, and CILSS among others.

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ROLES

The family and home are God given and highly important institutions in The Gambia. The family is involved from the beginning to the last days of one's life, and this is one reason why children are still highly valued. The family comes to the help and support of its members when one plans to marry, when one's marriage is in trouble, when one is bankrupt, jobless, sick, old, lonely, bereaved, childless, destitute, in prison, or any other problem. People are expected to be part and parcel of the family regardless of their status and location. The breadwinners are expected to share with the extended family and must not feel too self-important so as to not associate or take advice from the family, especially the elders. But family splits and disintegration are gradually on the rise and this is partly caused by forces of modernization and globalization, such as industrialization, secular education, individualism, conflict, and abuse of privileges. Despite the pressures, Gambians still believe in family closeness and are endeavoring to keep together.

Grandfather

He is the head of the family, he gives advice to the family and he tries to settle disputes within the family. He may not engage in the day to day running of the compound because he might be too old for bringing food or cash for the family, but he can act as a baby sitter. He plays and takes care of kids whilst the parents are out, especially in the rainy season. He could also represent his clan to the Alikaaloo.

Grandmother

Next to the grandfather, she takes care of the family affairs such as ceremonies. Grandmothers tell stories to their grandchildren and help with childcare. Sometimes they act as traditional midwives or birth attendants. They also prepare dead women for burial. They act as the female supervisors in ceremonies and communal works.

Father

He carries out his father's orders. He is responsible of bringing food, building houses, repairing fences. He trains the boys how to farm and he also sends them to circumcision camps. He takes care of his parents financially and materially. He arranges marriages for his children in consultation with his parents. In the absence of his father he acts as the head of the compound.

Mother

Next to the father, she is responsible for all the domestic chores. She guides her daughters as to how they should behave and whom they should marry. They work in the fields and vegetable gardens to help the family. They participate in ceremonies. They also train their daughters to be good wives.

Son

They help their parents in the fields, fix fences, houses, wells, and take care of all domestic animals if there are any. They also collect firewood for cooking. When they marry, they bring their wives to live with them and help their parents and families.

Daughter

They help their mothers with domestic chores, and in the fields. When they marry they leave to live with their husband's families. They support their brothers whenever family ceremonies are held.

Uncle (Maternal)

"Gives wives" (helps arrange marriages) to their nephews. He also helps in settling family disputes. They also help their sisters with any problems with husbands when the parents are not alive.

Aunt (Paternal/Maternal)

They help in preparing ceremonies and settling disputes. They give advice to the nieces and nephews when they are married. Gives support to nieces and nephews if their parents pass away at an early age.

Uncle (Paternal) (Also called junior father)

Acts in the absence of his brother and can inherit the brother's wives after he dies if he doesn't want them to leave the compound. He helps the brother in bringing up the children. They act as middle-men for their brothers in terms of any problems outside of the compound.

RESIDENCE PATTERNS OF FAMILIES IN URBAN AND RURAL SETTING

In the rural areas, men and women have a separate house. Men normally reside in the front part of the compound. In the urban setting the immediate family lives together in one house.

HOUSEHOLDS

Depending on the traditions of the community, young men can be on their own when they get married. That means a man can have his own granary and the wife cooks separately from the extended family. But they will continue to live in the same compound and work with parents and other members of the family on the same fields.

DECISION MAKING

Key decisions in extended families are usually made by the senior males and their female kin. This does not mean the wives are not important members of the family, but such responsibilities are reserved for the blood members. In nuclear families it is different. Wives may have more influence in decisions that affect their nuclear families.

MALE/FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships between males and females are mostly initiated by men in The Gambia. This is done directly or indirectly by using a third party. Women will only show signs of love or send love letters if educated, and often use a third party. Usually people date as teenagers, though in the rural areas it could be earlier. They will not have sex until they are physically mature. In rural Gambia, girls are expected to stay innocent until they marry. The concept also exists in the urban areas, but many lose their virginity before they marry. Some girls have illegitimate children.

People date and move freely with each other in the urban areas whilst in the rural areas things are much more controlled because the community is smaller and more conservative. Also people may hug and kiss each other more freely in urban areas than rural areas. Some relationships may last longer, especially if the couple likes each other very much. This may even lead to a marriage (see the topic on ceremonies). Other relationships may be casual due to conflicting interests. Since dating is a natural phenomenon, boys and girls throughout the country date, so don't be surprised if you come across someone who is interested in dating you. Just send them away if you are not interested. People sometimes consult marabouts to enable them to have a grip on someone they are interested in.

Don't be surprised if a man comes and tells you "I love you," that is how it is done. If a man approaches a woman no matter how long the conversation may be, love may be the last words from either side. However, other relationships may be platonic; this includes relationships between co-workers and neighbors who are friends and visit each other quite often. However this latter type may lead to a sexual relationship. Sex matters are discussed among peers of the same sex unless you are dating; then you are free to talk about it among yourselves. The female mainly expects financial and material support while the male expects sex. In a relationship involving a tubab and a Gambian, the tubab is expected to give support.

Contraceptives are widely used among students to prevent pregnancy, but again it is used more in the urban than rural areas due to illiteracy and lack of accessibility. Many girls who become sexually active before marriage become pregnant and some of those pregnancies are illegally terminated. It is not common to see unmarried couples live together.

HARASSMENT AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Harassment appears to be a universal phenomenon. The reason why an individual or a group of individuals bother, rob, belittle, bully or sexually harass others varies from boredom to curiosity to long-standing ethnic, class, political, imperial or national hostility. Sometimes it is due to poverty. The Gambia is generally viewed as a peaceful country, but it has also witnessed some harassment cases which are sometimes serious. These range from discrimination, breaking and entering, robbery, and rarely, rape.

PEOPLE OFTEN ASK “WHO IS A CRIMINAL?”

It is hard to say who is a criminal for it could be anyone in the world. Some Gambians watch for the following characters and take the greatest care when dealing with them.

- con people
- a stern looking person
- rasta people
- beach boys (bumsters)
- porters (some)
- money dealers (changers)
- voluntary helpers (intruders)
- someone who keeps following and observing you (and especially after you have withdrawn or changed a lot of money)

WATCH OUT WHEN AT THE FOLLOWING PLACES:

Beaches, ferry terminals, bus stops, slums, circumcision camps (you will be circumcised if you have not been when you visit a circumcision camp), car parks, some drinking places, markets, gambling places, brothels, and any other crowded place.

ENSURING SAFETY

- .. visiting girls could be trouble if their parents are intolerant
- .. try and have a good relationship with neighbors
- .. avoid walking alone at night or in isolated places
- .. be cautious of giving rides to people you don't know or accepting rides from people you don't know
- .. know very well the one you give your address to
- .. don't expose large sums of money publicly
- .. put money in a safe pocket or purse
- .. avoid the “kankurang” (a potentially dangerous mask that comes to circumcision camps and other important events)
- .. watch out for scorpions, snakes and stray dogs
- .. avoid confrontations, especially with security officers
- .. having sexual relationships with a married person could be trouble if the partner finds out
- .. use a third party to resolve problems or handle it yourself if you think that's best
- .. It is dangerous to ride a bike in places where traffic is busy, there are no separate paths for bikes

To make a criminal complaint against someone you can go to the village chief, district chief, police, or military, depending on who you get access to first.

OTHER FORMS OF HARASSMENT AND HOW TO COPE

Tubab

This word means white man and it is not derogatory. But the fact that people, especially kids, keep calling you ‘*tubab!*’

instead of your name, sounds discriminating and so it bothers you. You can ignore it or tell them your name. But never show your anger.

Begging and borrowing

Being a foreigner in this society means people will be begging or borrowing things and money from you. This is because people generally believe that you are rich. If you don't want to encourage that, you should ignore or send them away politely. Tell them you are not a tourist. Set your limits from the very beginning. Don't be surprised if you are asked for things, money or tips by civil or security personnel.

Friendship

Some people would like to be your friend so that they can financially or materially benefit from you. They will also expect you to help them to go to Europe, which is believed to be paradise. As a result, they would ask for your address and telephone number. If you are not interested show indifference. Tell them you have no phone. And tell them that you have no house yet. You don't have to give your address or residence to everybody who asks for it.

If you want to make friends you can look out for good people. There are signals for everything, so if you don't rush you will be able to determine whether someone is a good person or not over time.

Sexual Harassment

Whether you are male or female you will, one day, probably be bothered by someone who tries to have a sexual relationship. If you are interested make sure you are dealing with the right person. If you are not then you can walk out tactfully by demonstrating an attitude of 'not interested' or express that you are not interested. Tell them you are married or have a fiancée.

BARGAINING

Except in supermarkets and stores where the prices are marked, bargaining is the common practice when shopping in open markets and in many shops. Vendors will not generally bargain on items which are commonly sold by the measure, e.g., a cup of sugar, quantity of salt or spices, kilo of meat, cup of oil, etc.

Vegetable and fruit prices, however, will vary according to their availability. In some cases one might notice there are two price sets: one price for Gambians and another higher price for foreigners or tourists. The difference in price sets will not vary much with food items, but will for fabric, woodwork, craft and other luxury items.

Many people feel justified in asking more from foreigners given the obvious economic disparity. Being able to use a local language in bargaining and describing merchandise is a great advantage and will delight vendors. However, there is a point at which a vendor will go no further and may become intransigent, insulted or even bored if one persists in undercutting the last stated price.

Prices may vary from day to day depending on the vendor's mood as well as the approach of the customer. Bargaining can be fun and is a great way to make conversation with Gambians and practice language skills. If the effort to get beneath the tourist price is taken too seriously, a great deal of time and frustration may be wasted over a few dalasis. Vendors will also become offended if you bargain for an item with no intention of buying it.

With regular taxis, the fare is fixed but sometimes bargainable. GPTC buses have fixed fares for every destination. One can also bargain when hiring a taxi, or securing the services of a tailor, smith, carpenter, or mason. The hiring of a taxi is referred to as "town trip".

There are weekly open markets called "luumoo" and they are held in different parts of the country on different days.

SUPER MARKETS***LOCATION***

Stop Step Shop	Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline)
Sony	Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline)
St Mary's Food and Wine	Cape Point, Bakau
GSC	Bakau
My	Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline)
Atsons	Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline), Serekunda
Kairaba	Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline)
Maroun's	Westfield
Harry's	Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline)

MINI-MARKETS

AtoZ	Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline)
Happiness	Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline)
Kairaba	Serekunda
St Mary's Food and Wine	BB Hotel, Senegambia Hotel, Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline)

There are mini-markets in most major towns (Brikama, Soma, Bansang, Basse, Barra, Farafenni)

OPEN MARKETS - DAILY

Janjanbureh Market	Janjanbureh
Barra Market	Barra
Bakau Market	Bakau
Serekunda Market	Serekunda
Albert Market	Banjul
Latrikunda Market	Latrikunda, Brikama Highway
Brikama Market	Brikama
Farafenni Market	Farafenni
Soma Market	Soma
Kaur Market	Kaur
Bansang Market	Bansang
Basse Market	Basse
Brikamaba Market	Brikamaba
Kuntaur Market	Kuntaur

Shell petrol stations have mini-markets.

LUUMOO - WEEKLY MARKETS

Farafenni	Ker Paate
Brikamaba	Saare Ngaay
Bureng	Kwinella
Kaur	Wassu
Jareng	Kosemar

You can buy fabric, building materials, food (cooked/raw), petrol, diesel, utensils, furniture, spare parts, tools, cosmetics, etc., in almost all the major towns. Services like tailoring, carpentry, shoe making, car repair, masonry, radio repairs, etc., can also be accessed in the major towns.

TAXIFARES

Serekunda - Banjul	D3, D4
Serekunda - Bakau	D3

Serekunda - Sukuta	D1.50
Serekunda - Gunjur	D10
Serekunda - Tanji	D5
Serekunda - Brikama	D4
Barra - Dakar	D100
Serekunda - Ziguinchor	D60
Basse - Foday Kunda	D10
Basse - Fototo	D16
Kerewan - Farafenni	D15
Barra - Kerewan	D15
Banjul - Barra (ferry)	D3
Serekunda - Lamin	D3
Serekunda - Airport	No regular taxi, town trip only
Bakau - Banjul	D3 (no bus service)
Banjul - Brikama	D5
Serekunda - Soma	D25/D40
Gunjur - Kartong	D3
Soma - Basse	D30-40
Banjul - Basse	D70 - 100
Bansang - Basse	D10

In The Gambia, passengers travel by cars that are painted yellow and green. These are mainly for short trips within the town. Vans (14 seater), minibuses (25 seater), Benz vans (18-30 seater) and GPTC buses (MAN and VOLVO) are also used for short and long distance trips. Ferries and canoes are used for crossing the rivers and creeks. Donkey and horse carts are used in some areas. Don't be surprised if you are charged when you board an official vehicle.

LOCATION OF CRAFTS AND TIE-DYE MARKETS

Cape Point
 Bakau market
 Gamtel, Bakau
 Albert market, Banjul
 Brikama
 Senegambia Hotel
 Serekunda Market
 BB Hotel

BANK

LOCATION

Standard Chartered	Banjul Bakau Westfield
Standard Chartered	Basse Senegambia Hotel
I. B. C.	Banjul Serekunda Bakau Brikama
Trust Bank	Banjul Bakau Westfield Basse Farafenni

Continent	Kanifing Brikama
First Bank	Banjul Serekunda
Islamic Development Bank	Banjul

COMMUNICATION CENTERS

- “ Gamtel telecentres provide telephone and fax services. These centers are found in all major towns in the country. Gamtel also sells prepaid telephone cards for D20, D50, D100, and D200. Call 121 if you need a telephone line.
- “ Private telecentres provide mainly telephone service but charges at Gamtel centers are usually cheaper.
- “ E-mail centers are mainly in Banjul and other Kombo towns.
- “ There are post offices in all the divisional administrative towns where you can buy stamps and post letters. International mail is quickest from the airport.
- “ When there are commercial services available, you can use a telephone card or someone’s private line. Always carry a telephone card with you.

PHARMACIES, ETC.

PHARMACY	LOCATION
Banjul Pharmacy	Banjul Westfield Serekunda Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline)
Kairaba Pharmacy	Banjul Bakau Serekunda Brikama
Others	There are other pharmacies you can find in all the major towns. Some pharmacies have consulting doctors/nursing officers.
Westfield clinic	Serekunda
Lamtoro clinic	Kololi
Ndebaan clinic	Bakau
Jobot Lab	Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline)
Swiss clinic	Serekunda
Roland clinic	Serekunda, Lamin, Basse
Bremer clinic	Serekunda
BOOKS AND STATIONERY SHOPS	LOCATION
TimBookToo bookshop	Kairaba Avenue (Pipeline)
Fosters Stationery	Banjul, Serekunda, Brikama
Mandory Stationery and bookshop	Banjul, Serekunda
Others	Banjul, Bakau, Serekunda, Brikama, Farafenni, Basse

UPCOUNTRY HOTELS

Sanyang Nature Camp
Gunjur Motel
Lamin Lodge
Makasutu
Tumani Tenda Camp
Bintang Bolong Lodge
Sindola Camp
Kalagi Camp
Kemoto Hotel
Kaira Konko guest house
Apollo Hotel
Agriculture guest house
Fuladu camp
Bird Safari Camp
Bao Bolong Camp
Janjanbureh Camp
Eddi's Hotel
I.O.G.T. guest house
Barra Hotel
Jinack Hotel

LOCATION

Sanyang Village
Gunjur
Lamin Village
Via Kembujeh
Tumani Tenda Village
Bintang Village
Kanilai Village
Kalagi Village
Kemoto Village
Soma
Basse
Basse
Basse
Janjanbureh
Janjanbureh
Janjanbureh
Farafenni
Kerewan
Barra
Jinack Village

The cost for staying in these places range from fifty dalasi to three hundred and fifty. Numerous big tourist hotels, town hotels, restaurants, clubs, etc., can be found along the Atlantic coast.

TRADITIONAL BELIEFS, PRACTICES AND TABOOS

Despite the strong Islamic and Christian influence in The Gambia today, people still retain certain practices originating from past animist beliefs. "Animism" can be defined as a system of beliefs that natural objects and phenomena, such as idols or fetishes contain spiritual power. Beliefs in witchcraft belong to the "animist" tradition.

Many Gambians *still* believe in the existence of supernatural forces and individuals with powers to protect against or utilize these forces. These individuals include witch doctors, herbalists, diviners, and marabouts.

Many Gambians will be seen wearing amulets, commonly called "jujus" on their body around the waist, neck, arms, or legs. These are leather objects enclosing writings from the Koran, which have been prescribed by a marabout. Gambians consult marabouts for a variety of reasons, but the following are the most common:

- .. To protect against evil spirits.
- .. To improve one's status (i.e., getting a job, seeking love or marriage, getting a promotion, receiving a bank loan).
- .. To remedy a situation (e.g., curing a mentally or physically ill person, curing headaches or chronic pains, curing impotence or sterility, resolving disputes between people).
- .. To cast a curse (e.g., to rid oneself of a rival like a co-worker or co-wife through illness, disappearance or even death).

THE FOLLOWING LIST OF TABOOS AND SUPERSTITIONS IS NOT EXHAUSTIVE AND MAY VARY FROM ETHNIC GROUP TO ETHNIC GROUP AND VILLAGE TO VILLAGE

- .. Jars should always be filled with water to enable the dead to drink whenever they visit their families.
- .. Pouring hot water on the ground is believed to burn our ancestors who are under the ground.
- .. *Fanbondis* (this is a special type of kankurang) identify witches.

- .. Pour cold water at the door of your house first thing in the morning before talking to anyone - in anticipation of a good day.
- .. Seeing raw fish or a snake in a dream is a child or sign of pregnancy.
- .. Seeing a gun or an unused bullet in a dream means betrayal or disappointment.
- .. Seeing a horse, car, or a man in a dream means a new wife is on the way.
- .. Seeing a white cloth in a dream means you will see a dead person.
- .. Seeing a kankurang in a dream means a witch is after you.
- .. Seeing a monkey in a dream means a downfall faces you.
- .. Laughing in a dream means you will surely cry.
- .. Seeing a pregnant woman in a dream means trouble.
- .. If you put on your shirt inside out, and you discover it yourself you will have good luck.
- .. If a monkey or pig crosses your way and you don't mention it, you will have good luck.
- .. If a black cat crosses your way you will have bad luck.
- .. If you sweep the house at night and throw the trash out it is bad luck.
- .. Anything done on a Saturday would be repeated in future. So people avoid visiting the sick and making condolences on this day.
- .. If you buy shoes or perfume for a girlfriend, the relationship will not last long, so money is given instead.
- .. When cutting someone's hair you should not throw the hair away because if a bird finds it and makes a nest with it, the person would have a constant headache.
- .. If a pregnant woman looks at a baboon, her child would resemble it.
- .. A shooting star represents the death of a prominent person.
- .. If your left eye itches you will see someone you have missed.
- .. Pregnant women should not eat eggs, otherwise the baby would be deaf and dumb.
- .. People avoid doing things on Wednesdays because it is a day of bad luck.
- .. Children should not eat fish because they would develop worms.
- .. You don't cut the fingernails of babies and young children because it is believed that they would become thieves.
- .. Never sit in the doorway because evil spirits might hit you and you would die.
- .. You don't answer to a call at night because you might be answering a devil.
- .. You should not bathe with much water, if your quota of water finishes you would die.

TABOOS

- .. Do not buy or sell items like soap, needles, or charcoal at night.
- .. A widow should not go out of her home during her mourning period.
- .. Houses should not be swept at night.
- .. People should not put their hands on their heads (this is a sign of mourning).
- .. Do not visit sick people at night.
- .. Do not whistle at night.
- .. Members of the Sanyang family should not touch iguanas or eat turtle meat.
- .. Members of the Jammeh family should not eat goat meat (*illiasa*).
- .. Members of the Jobarteh and Trawalley families should not touch iguanas.
- .. Members of the Ceesay family should not touch or eat sole fish and monitor lizards.

TIME

It is safe to stay at home or the workplace during late mornings, mid-afternoon and dusk. These are times when evil spirits are most active. Everything has an appointed time - death, success, misfortune, and other life changes. Couples with merging luck become very lucky, but if they have conflicting luck they will be very unlucky.

PHYSICAL WORLD

PLANTS

Spirits dwell in trees, e.g., silk, cotton, and baobab trees. Some plants have magical or healing properties - e.g., 'kankanano' sodom apple, pig-nut, bitter tomato.

HILLS

Do not sit on ant hills because it is believed that spirits dwell in them.

WINDS

Whirlwinds are caused by spirits as they move from one place to another and so people avoid them.

ANIMALS

Witches transform into dogs, cats, owls, hyenas, and monkeys. Animals like rams and cocks are kept as scapegoats. Some clans don't kill or eat certain animals because they have an ancestral (totemic) connection with them.

WATER

Whirlpools are believed to be caused by a dragon or devil. Some ponds are sacred because spirits dwell in them.

STREET ROADS & PATHS

At night some streets are avoided because strange things happen there. The police never go to certain towns and regions because it will result in their down fall.

REINCARNATIONS

People believe that some people die and come back in another generation. In cases when a mother has an infant mortality problem, the belief is that the same child dies and comes back again and again.

POSSESSION

When people get sick, insane or disappear, sometimes it is believed that they are possessed by devils.

Marabouts (mystic men) have magical powers. They see and deal with spirits. With the help of spirits they can cause good luck, bad luck, tell the future, curse, help to win friends, eliminate opponents, and even heal illness. Some derive power from Satan and some are men of God and so power is derived from the Almighty. The latter never agree to carry out unhealthy or anti-social deeds.

CIRCUMCISION

During circumcision ceremonies witches become more active, consequently people make a lot of preparations before circumcising children to counter the witches. It is believed that any witch that succeeds in killing a circumcised child gets a promotion.

IMPACT

Despite the fact that most Gambians are either Muslim or Christian, superstitious beliefs still remain and govern our lives. The American who wishes to live and work with Gambians must bear the above- mentioned in mind at all times. Otherwise problems can arise during site selection for projects, project launching days and calling meetings.

RELIGION

There are four religious traditions in The Gambia.

1. Traditional African Animism
2. Islam
3. Christianity
4. Baha'i

The first settlers of this region were animists. They believed that supreme power was possessed by a pantheon of various spirits similar to those of ancient Rome. Idols were worshipped by spilling sacrifices of wine, water, milk or blood on the ground. In ancient days human sacrifice used to take place in addition to animal sacrifice. Animal sacrifice still happens. Animists believe in reincarnation, life after death, and a set of morals. Some animist related shrines are still in existence and even non-animists visit them for blessings. These include the Katchically crocodile pool in Bakau, Folonko crocodile pool in Kartong, Sanimentereng in Brufut, the crocodile pool in Abuko Nature Reserve, and the crocodile pool in Berending.

Christianity came to The Gambia with Europeans, missionary work was very active in the early 19th century. The following churches are in existence in the country today - Methodist, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Adventist, Pentecost, Charismatic, Jehovah Witnesses and the Church of Canaan.

Baha'i was founded in Iran in the 19th century. It spread to The Gambia in the 1960s, and the Baha'i National Centre is established in Banjul opposite the Royal Victoria hospital. There is also an information center on Bakau Newtown road.

Islam was founded in Arabia during the 7th century AD by the prophet Mohammed of Mecca. The religion was introduced through North Africa to West and Central Africa. Although Islam existed in pockets in this region since the days of the Ghana empire, it was the "jihad" or Muslim holy wars during the 19th century that established Islam in The Gambia as a unifying force.

The Holy Koran contains the religious laws and doctrines of Islam which are believed to be the direct words of God as revealed to Mohammed. The term "Islam" means "to submit" in Arabic, and Muslim means "one who has submitted." Accordingly, Islam directs its adherents to surrender to the will of God and follow the five guiding principles, commonly

called the Pillars of Islam.

The first pillar is to recognize that there is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet. *Lahilaha illailah Muhammadur-rasullailah* is the phrase in Arabic which is repeated many times a day as part of the daily prayer.

PRAYER

Prayers take place five times a day at dawn, midday, late afternoon, dusk, and at night. While each town or village has a central mosque where prayers are offered, Muslims will be found observing prayer at home, on the streets, and at other prayer grounds.

Prayers must be said while facing the direction of Mecca or sunrise and is preceded by “ablution”, that is, the ritual washing of parts of the body. The call to prayer from the mosque can usually be heard throughout the village or town. In urban areas, a loud speaker is used.

FASTING DURING RAMADAN

During the ninth month of the Muslim year when the Koran was supposedly revealed to Mohammed, Muslims abstain from food, water and worldly pleasures from sunrise to sunset for 29-30 days. This is to practice self-discipline and to recall the hunger of the poor. It is also believed that sins committed during the year are forgiven if one keeps fast during this holy month. The sick, young children, pregnant women, and those traveling beyond 50 kilometers from home are exempted from fasting. Except for children those breaking fast are expected to compensate for missed days.

ALMSGIVING

Muslims believe that the charity given on earth to the poor, orphans, aged, and the infirm will become one’s livelihood in heaven. Also a yearly payment (called *zakat*) of up to 10% of one’s annual income is given to the local mosque or any poor person(s) in the community.

PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA

A Muslim is expected to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca, or “Haj” at least once during his/her lifetime if it can be afforded. The “Haj” can only be made during the 12th month of the Muslim year. When a male pilgrim arrives at Mecca, he shaves his head and exchanges his clothing for two pieces of white symbolizing the equality of all believers before God. Although a woman does not shave her hair, she also wears white clothing. Upon returning from the Haj, a man may add Al-Haj to his name and a woman Aja-Ratu signifying the completion of the pilgrimage.

Other Islamic customs of which non-Muslims should be aware include the prohibitions against drinking alcohol or eating pork.

It is impolite to interrupt a Muslim’s prayer day when Muslim men put on their best clothes and gather in mosques for the Friday prayers. This is also the day when beggars congregate near the mosque to receive alms. Women generally pray in the privacy of their own homes, although women past the childbearing age will be seen in mosques.

MUSLIM HOLIDAYS

As a predominantly Muslim country, the people of The Gambia celebrate the religious holidays listed below based on the lunar calendar. Observance of these holidays usually involves special prayers and the offering of charity, followed by feasting and dancing. These are also occasions for Gambians to dress up and visit with friends and relatives.

YAWMAL ASSURRA

This is the Muslim new year which falls on the ninth day of the first Muslim month. The celebrations start in the evening when a special meal is prepared, and members of the family eat and pray together. The family head secures some holy water from a marabout and distributes it to his family. Muslims believe that all who drink this holy water will be blessed and saved from evil throughout the new year. Ideally, up to 10% of their income is given as charity to the poor and needy.

MAOLUD NABI

Mohammed's birthday is celebrated on the eleventh day of the third Muslim month. After the evening meal, all-night prayers and the singing of hymns from the Koran are organized by the various Muslim brotherhoods. Both men and women join together to sing praises of the prophet Mohammed. At different times during the night, the Imams (Muslim priests) and marabouts narrate the history of Mohammed's life to the congregations who participate by singing along.

KORITEH (ED-UL-FITRE)

Muslims welcome the end of the month long fast of Ramadan (ninth Muslim month) with a great celebration known as Koriteh in The Gambia. This is a joyous occasion with special prayers, feasting, drumming and dancing. People also visit with friends and relatives and pray together. As in most Muslim holidays, giving charity is expected on Koriteh.

TOBASKI (ED-UL-KABIR)

This is an important holiday celebrated by Muslims all over the world in honor of the prophet Abraham's attempt to sacrifice one of his sons. On Tobaski day (tenth day of the twelfth Muslim month), all heads of families who can afford it slaughter a sheep, goat, or cow and divide the meat among friends and relatives as charity. Prayers usually take place in the morning, followed by the feast, drumming and dancing. It is also during the month of Tobaski that Muslims who can afford it perform the pilgrimage to Mecca.

THE FOLLOWING SENSITIVE POINTS MUST BE REMEMBERED

- .. The eating of pork and its derivatives by Muslims is strictly forbidden.
- .. The drinking, buying, selling and serving of alcohol is strictly forbidden. Consequently when you visit a Muslim friend don't expect to be served alcoholic drinks.
- .. When a Muslim is in the act of praying don't walk in front of him, talk to him or do anything that may distract his attention.
- .. Non-Muslims are not allowed in a mosque during services, and menstruating women are never allowed in the mosque.

BUCKET BATH AND PIT LATRINE

In most Gambian homes, even in the urban areas, people use a pit latrine. It is expensive to obtain and maintain a flush toilet, so many people can't afford it. If you live in such a compound you will also be expected to use it. Showers are also taken with water in a bucket.

To make a pit latrine you need to dig a pit to a depth of two meters or more and cover it with a concrete slab with a hole in the middle. Some use sticks and mud as the slab; it then needs an enclosure. Before using the toilet it is better to take off your trousers completely or remove the things in your pockets. Squat above the hole, putting the slab between your feet. Make sure the anus is right above the hole. The latrine and shower are usually not in the same place.

For showers people use ten or fifteen liter buckets. You need a bucket of water, a cup, soap and sponge. Take water with the cup and pour it over your body from the head and then clean with soap and sponge.



A Roots festival dancer.