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A short ferry ride from the busy capital city of Dakar, Gorée Island was, from the 15th to 19th centuries, a prominent location in both the transatlantic and domestic slave trade.



Senegal's Forgotten Slaves

The untold story of Gorée Island

by ROGER ATWOOD

SITTING LIKE A MOORED BARGE in Dakar's harbor, Gorée Island lies so close to the mainland that, on quiet nights, people there can hear the busy capital city's car horns. A 25-minute ferry ride and a world away, the car-free island's 1,000 residents live in rambling old houses made of clay and timbers, and stroll through alleyways and shady plazas. In 1853, Senegalese-born French-educated priest David Boilat wrote about Gorée, "Its location is most agreeable," noting the island's uninterrupted view of the African coast to the north and east, and "to the south, the immense ocean stretching unbroken to the horizon." Yet Gorée's scenic appeal and relaxed pace has an uneasy, haunting edge, for everywhere there are reminders of its much darker past.

For four centuries, from the mid-1400s to the time of the American Civil War, this 42-acre island off Africa's westernmost tip was a port of call for European slave ships and a bargaining chip among the nations that controlled the slave trade. The very first Europeans known to have sighted Gorée were Portuguese explorers who came in search of slaves and other commodities. Among these was ship's captain Lançarote de Freitas, who arrived in 1445. De Freitas sent a crewman ashore in a canoe to leave some tokens of friendship: a cake, a mirror, and a piece of paper upon which was drawn a cross. When a crewman ventured back to the island,

the inhabitants had destroyed the cake, broken the mirror, and ripped the paper in two. The two sides then exchanged fire—the islanders with poisoned arrows, the Portuguese with guns—according to Portuguese colonial accounts cited today at the island's historical museum.

Thus began the islet's traumatic relationship with the West. Around 1627, the Dutch bought Gorée from local fishermen in exchange for bags of trinkets and nails. And later, the British and the French swapped rule over the island at least nine times before the French took definitive control by 1800. A jumping-off point for the Atlantic slave trade, the island was the last stop for what archaeologists estimate were tens of thousands of enslaved African men and women. They were a small portion of the roughly 9.5 million people sent against their will to the Americas from all over Africa between 1451 and 1870, according to a widely cited census published by Johns Hopkins University historian Philip Curtin.

Gorée has become a living symbol of the horrors of slavery, and thousands of visitors, including such dignitaries as Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Nelson Mandela, and Pope John Paul, have come somberly to face the past. Slavery has a complex and multilayered history on the island, made up of interwoven types of bondage that met different needs at different times in its history. Island merchants staffed their mansions with household slaves who cooked their masters'

food and often ate at their tables. Early colonial administrators dragooned slaves into the arduous work of quarrying stone, laying flagstones, and building the island's two forts, both of which still stand. Some slaves were more like independent tradesmen, lending their labor to a shifting cast of masters but never free to leave the island. Still others were sent as scouts on slaving expeditions down the coast and into the interior. Slaves might move between these categories over their lifetimes, and any of them could, at their master's whim, be sold to visiting merchants and shipped across the Atlantic.

"Gorée was a colony where Europeans, Afro-Europeans, and free and enslaved Africans lived side by side," says Ibrahima Thiaw (pronounced "Chow"), chief of archaeology at Senegal's Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire and one of



Recently uncovered 19th-century French liquor bottles, evidence of Gorée's wealthy inhabitants, sit on exhibit (above) at the "House of Slaves." Mementos of celebrity visitors and historical engravings line the walls of the house, which has become a symbol of slavery on the island.



Archaeologist Ibrahima Thiaw has excavated on Gorée Island and studies artifacts from all over Senegal in his conservation lab in Dakar, looking for the sometimes elusive evidence of slavery.

a growing, multinational group of researchers looking at the slave trade's effects in Africa itself. "There were various modes of slave-holding on the island, and one of them was the export variety, that is, slaves transiting to the Americas," he says, "but a much more common type was domestic slavery." As the Atlantic trade reached its height in the mid-1700s, slaves accounted for over half of Gorée's population, according to colonial censuses. Most slaves worked in affluent households headed by merchants or by the locally born, mulatto wives of European ship captains. These women, known as *signares*, lived on the breezy upper stories of their oceanfront mansions, some of which survive, while slaves inhabited the ground floors.

atonement while glossing over the island's history of domestic servitude. At the core of this embellished history is the late-eighteenth-century signare mansion and UNESCO World Heritage site known as the *Maison des Esclaves* ("House of Slaves"). There, some 150,000 visitors each year come to see what are billed as slave pens and a "door of no return" through which slaves supposedly passed on to ships. Slaves did indeed live in the house, but, according to Thiaw, they were domestic slaves and not the type sent to the Americas. "The house would not have been a commercial point or processing center for slaves," says François Richard of the University of Chicago, who has excavated sites associated with the slave trade in the United States and in Africa, and has also worked with Thiaw on Gorée. "Rather, the *Maison des Esclaves* has become a memorial and acts as a kind of placeholder for people for the whole issue of slavery."

SINCE 2002, THIAW AND Raina Lynn Croff, at that time a Yale University doctoral candidate, have separately excavated a rich array of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century consumer goods at sites all over the island—Wedgwood china, smoking pipes, glass beads, gin bottles, Chinese porcelain, and French faience. These artifacts speak of globalized trade and prosperity. The writer Boilat, after returning to Gorée from France in 1842, was struck by the variety of objects he saw at its markets and homes. In his classic study, *Esquisses Sénégalaises* (“Senegalese Sketches”), he described seeing “textiles made in Rouen, handkerchiefs of all colors, men’s vests, shoes for both sexes, ... gunpowder, lead pellets, bullets, rifles, good wine, liquors, and beer for the overseers.” That list could serve as a partial inventory for what archaeologists are finding today. “Gorée had a class-based, not



Thiaw and an assistant, Saïdon Camara, sort through boxes of recently excavated dinner plates, liquor bottles, and ceramic jars once used by Gorée’s slave-owning elite.

race-based, slavery system. African-born masters owned African slaves, although there were also European-blood masters,” says Croff, currently a researcher at Oregon Health and Science University. “The domestic and transit slavery markets were all linked, and the huge profits as reflected in the archaeological record were derived from the forced labor that slaves provided.”

Slavery on Gorée was constantly evolving to suit the needs of Europeans who came to the island as traders, sailors, colonial administrators, and inland slave-hunters. Thiaw and Croff have both excavated in a neighborhood in the center of the island still known today as *Village des Bambaras*. The Bambara people were from inland Senegal and Mali and had an unfortunate reputation for being excellent slaves. Boilat wrote that they “have a strong constitution and love to work.” The term “Bambara” later came to mean any Gorée resident slave of any ethnic group. Those shipped to America were called *captifs* (“captives”) and, in the social hierarchy of slavery that developed on the island, had lower status than Bambaras. The French brought Bambaras en masse to the island around 1700 to build forts, roads, and houses. “They were marched to the coast. Many of them had never seen the ocean before, and then they were brought to this island to do backbreaking labor building public works,” Croff

says. They were essentially trapped on the island, “a kind of Alcatraz,” she explains, with sharks and strong currents ensuring they stayed put. Some Bambaras were brought to the mainland in work gangs—a French engineer in 1767 reported that 10 men, “well-managed and the elite among the slaves,” made 10,000 pounds of lime a week for use as a building material on Gorée. Bambaras were sometimes sold into the America-bound slavers that passed through, already stocked with human chattel from coasts further south, according to period accounts.

The neighborhood of the Village des Bambaras today is a dense warren of lime-and-mortar houses, bougainvillea bushes, and shady squares where boys play soccer under the shadow of an 1830 French church. But in layers corresponding to the early and mid-1700s, Croff has found dozens of postholes and sandy floor surfaces, leading archaeologists to conclude that at that time the area would have been covered in African-style round huts with thatched roofs. From that period, on this part of the island, there are no signs of European-style buildings. The ceramics Croff found dating from the same period are almost exclusively African, as are a rich variety of delicately carved pipes. Interestingly, Thiaw also found European perfume and alcohol bottles in the same layers, suggesting slaves had access to European liquor and niceties even while living in a separate slave district. Thiaw says he does not know whether the slaves took these items from their masters’ pantries or if they were given them as gifts, but he believes they provide more evidence that slaves lived fairly autonomously in the Village des Bambaras.

Croff’s excavations in the quarter—where she believes free Africans may also have lived—revealed up to nine different



Village des Bambaras, once the site of a domestic slave community, may have been destroyed by fire in 1761.

floor surfaces, each a bit more solid and less porous than the one before. Floors that were first made of compacted sand were eventually replaced by solid lime-and-clay surfaces, indicating continual home improvement. African ritual practices may also have persisted in the village. Thiaw found a metal can containing chunks of charcoal and quartz and a folded piece of paper—a pagan ritual offering—that had been buried in front of a house that no longer exists. And Croff found four empty, open, intact wine bottles beneath the floor of a dwelling. That discovery puzzled her until a local member of her team explained that even today rural Senegalese bury bottles beneath floors as a way of protecting the household from malevolent spirits.

YET THE BAMBARA SLAVE QUARTER did not last long. By 1784 it seems to have disappeared, possibly wiped out in a catastrophic fire that swept the island in 1761 or crowded out by the island's growing population of European and free African settlers. At this time, the island underwent what Croff calls "an urban transformation." In the former slave quarter, the African-style homes were replaced by square, European-style houses, with stonework and clay floors, where slaves and masters lived under the same roof. The French director of the island's hospital, Citoyen Prelong, reported in 1793 that the number of stone-and-mortar houses on the island went from fewer than six in 1772 to over 50 by 1789. Slaves were forced to live on their masters' ground floors, becoming live-in cooks, maids, and workmen. Some may have lived in the mansions' courtyards—an 1839 engraving shows round, thatched huts used as slave quarters in the courtyard of a Gorée home. The slaves' ceramics gradually switch from African to European style, hinting at cultural change as slaves moved from their own, African-style homes, with their own types of objects, to living within the walls of their masters' new mansions. A 1785 census put the island's population at 1,840, of whom 1,044 were domestic slaves and a further 200 were "slaves who circulated as articles of commerce," wrote French colonial officer Xavier de Golberry. Whether those "articles of commerce" were transit slaves or some other category is unclear, but it is evident that the island had a large slave majority. The advent of French property law also meant that free African and mixed-race people could pass on their property—including slaves—to their children. Previously, inheritance had not been allowed under prevailing African customs, and this change had the effect of further entrenching domestic slavery.

Gorée's domestic slavery regime had a kind of flexibility unknown in the Americas. Slaves and masters often ate at the same table, and lucky ones could marry or be baptized out of slavery. Boilat, in 1853, remarked that masters treated their slaves like children, and most had crafts or professions. "If you read accounts of the domestic slave population from that time," says Thiaw, "they are referred to by the particular skill they had. Women are called 'clothes-washers,' men 'bricklayers,' and so on." One male slave was known for his skills in salvaging shipwrecks, suggesting how specialized slave labor became and how slaves were given the riskiest, most physically demanding jobs.

WITH A MILD CLIMATE, a constant flow of ships bearing European finery and, of course, plenty of slaves, Gorée became an extremely popular place for the French powdered-wig set. Senegal's colonial governor Stanislas-Jean de Boufflers moved his seat to the island from the mainland city of Saint-Louis in about 1785 and married Anne Pépin, one of the signares for which the island was famed. Madame

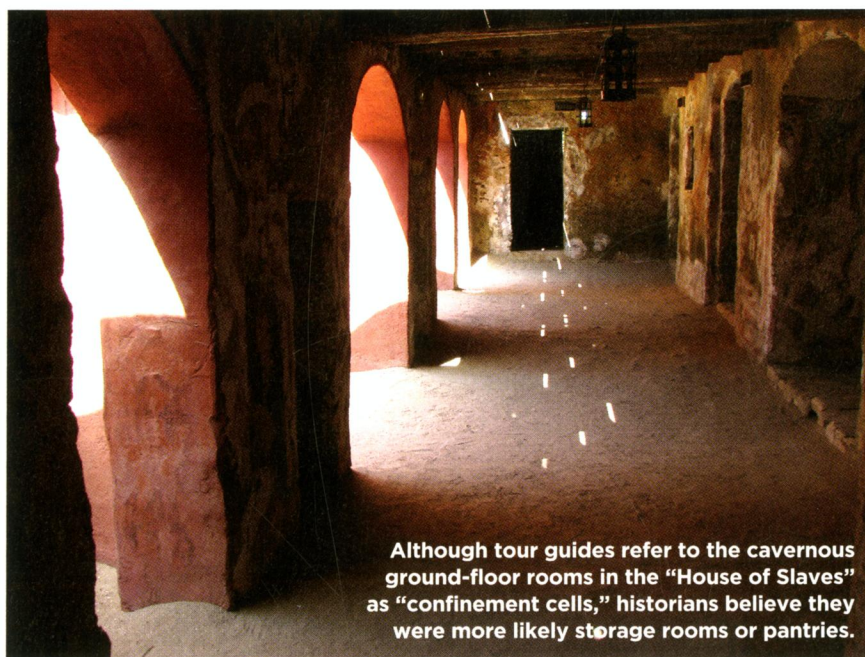
Pépin was the grandest of the signares, a mixed-race woman who married at least three times and whose family owned one mansion that was later demolished and one that is now the Maison des Esclaves, which was built in about 1775. Since the 1960s, conservationists have worked to preserve the surviving mansion. Today it bustles with tourists jostling into the small cubicles that guides describe as "confinement cells" but which



Only a few of Gorée's once-lavish mansions from the island's era of slavery have survived.

historians say were probably storage rooms or pantries. The walls of the site manager's office are covered in mementos left by world leaders and entertainers, ranging from Stevie Wonder to Muammar Qaddafi to Jimmy Carter.

Another row of rooms facing the sea probably had a military or surveillance function, as their narrow windows attest, and what is often called the "door of no return" was probably a simple back door. The house almost certainly



Although tour guides refer to the cavernous ground-floor rooms in the "House of Slaves" as "confinement cells," historians believe they were more likely storage rooms or pantries.



had domestic slaves living on its ground floors, possibly in some of the cell-like rooms, says Thiaw, but transit slaves were unlikely to have been kept in such a house. If they were taken ashore at all, they would have been confined to the two forts. Nor was this the only house to hold domestic slaves, says Croff. “I am not saying that the Maison des Esclaves is a hoax, just that there were many, many houses of slaves on Gorée—domestic slaves,” she says.

The “mythology” of the house, as Richard calls it, has arisen partly because the physical, archaeological signs of slavery on the island are so thin. Historical accounts are full of references to slavery, but objects associated with it are maddeningly few. No one has found shackles or manacles of any kind on the island. “I can’t say that I ever found evidence of slavery, archaeologically,” says Croff. On this prison island, she said, chains and confinement were seldom necessary and, she adds, “captive populations don’t usually leave much behind.” Thiaw agrees. “Archaeologically you won’t find much evidence that Gorée was used as a transshipment center for slaves,” he says. “But it was clearly an important point in Atlantic trading patterns and, anyway, what would you expect to find? Chains? The act of transshipment does not necessarily leave traces in the archaeological record.”

The slave trade was a decentralized business, with outposts up and down the coast. Historians agree Gorée’s role was small compared to bustling slavery entrepôts such as Elmina, on the coast of Ghana. The total number of slaves shipped to the Americas from Gorée may have reached into the tens of thousands, says Croff. “But scholars agree that it’s not the quantity of people who came through that matters,” she points out.

Yet historical sources speak often of transit slaves, and it is known that they were still coming through Gorée as late as

Fisherman still gather in front of the gray stone fort where transit slaves were held before their transatlantic journey.

1846, two years before France officially banned slavery in its colonies and nearly 40 years after the United States banned the importation of slaves. Boilat recounts that, on July 2 that year, a three-masted ship named *Elizia* carrying 250 male and female slaves arrived from the Gulf of Guinea. His account suggests that slave ships had become unusual by this time. “The whole town came out to view this spectacle. What a horror to see 250 walking skeletons, all naked and barely able to drag themselves along!” wrote Boilat. He describes how the signares wept and demanded they be allowed to give the captives clothing, and how the local mayor said he could not compel the ship’s commander to accept their charity without orders from higher colonial authorities. The slaves were washed in the ocean “to have their filth removed,” Boilat wrote, and returned to the ship, which sailed off.

Compelling though Boilat’s account is, Thiaw believes it gives a somewhat misleading impression of Gorée’s role in the trade. He believes the island prospered not mainly as a slave export point or warehouse, but as a one-stop service center for European traders. “Domestic slaves on Gorée had skills the traders needed,” he says. “For raiding inland, they needed people who could canoe, provide security, interpret—people who knew the land and who could take care of them when they got ill. The slaves on Gorée were trained to provide those services.” Thus, he says, “it was those taken in the interior who were sent to the Americas, not the sons and daughters of Gorée.” ■

Roger Atwood is a contributing editor at ARCHAEOLOGY.