



An exploratory study of the Jola Ethnic culture and tourism promotion in the Gambia

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to analyse the Jola tribe by examining its cultural dimensions, way of life, and key socio-cultural characteristics that shape communal associations, as well as to explore its potential within cultural tourism development.

Design/Methodology/Approach – This research adopts a descriptive approach, drawing on conceptual definitions and cultural analysis to examine the fundamental elements that define the lifestyle and social organization of the Jola people.

Findings – The findings reveal that the Jola ethnic group possesses a rich and distinctive cultural heritage, reflected in core lifestyle components such as the FUTAMPAF initiation ritual, traditional food and beverages, and unique entertainment practices. These elements play a significant role in sustaining communal identity and offer strong potential as cultural tourism assets for both local and international engagement.

Originality/Value – This study contributes to the discourse on cultural tourism by highlighting the underexplored heritage of the Jola tribe and emphasizing its value as a cultural resource that can support tourism promotion and marketing in the contemporary tourism and hospitality industry.

Keywords: Tourism, Tradition, Culture, Jola ethnic

Introduction

The Gambia: A Brief Background

The official designation for The Gambia is the Republic of The Gambia. The country is named after the Gambia River, which runs the full length of the country, spanning three hundred miles from east to west. The Gambia, a West African country gained independence from British colonial rule in 1965, this makes the country the last British colony in West Africa to obtain freedom (Edie, 2000). This region is characterized by the fusion of civilizations coming from several ethnic groups, including (in no order), the Mandinka, Serahuleh, Wolof, Fulani/Tikular, and Jola/Karoninka among many others. Moreover, the religious makeup of the nation comprises 90% Islam, 8% Christianity, and remaining 2% traditional religion worshipers (Sanneh, 2017).

The Gambia shares borders with Senegal on three sides and is situated on the western coast of Africa. Banjul, the capital city, was founded by the British in 1816 as Bathurst. It is situated on a sandy peninsula where the Gambia River meets the Atlantic Ocean. The primary objective of this establishment was to function as a fortified base for effectively countering the practice of human trafficking. In 1973, The Gambians, who had gained independence eight years prior, made the decision to change their name to Banjul. The Gambia, encompassing a land area of 4,363 square miles, makes it the smallest country in Africa (Arnold Hughes and David Perfect, 2006).

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Tourism in The Gambia

Tourism has been a significant contributor to the Gambian economy since the country gained independence in the 1960s (Dieke, 1993a). As an industry, it possesses the capacity to generate larger levels of income, a greater number of wage-earning jobs, and enhanced tax revenue for the government. Residents are also employed in the tourism and transportation sectors. Additionally, it promotes infrastructure development through the construction of high-quality roads, hotel sector facilities, and other beneficial activities related to tourism. The Gambia is officially recognized as the tiniest nation in mainland Africa, spanning an estimated area of 11,000 square kilometers. The Gambia is bisected by the river Gambia, dividing it into two nearly equal parts along its length. It is bordered by its sole neighbour, Senegal, on three sides: the North, South, and East. The western region of the country is adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean. The Gambia has a population of about 2.4 million residents, as reported by The Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBoS) in 2024. With the youth comprising 56.2% of the population, the Gambia possesses a significant reservoir of skilled labor that can be tapped into through government investments in education and skill development. The Gambia's economy was negatively impacted by external factors such as the regional Ebola outbreak and unpredictable rainfall.

The tourism sector is significant in the Gambia's economy playing a major role by representing 16% - 20% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and providing employment for around 41,800 individuals directly and 65,500 individuals indirectly. This accounts for 18% of the total employment in the country (WTTC Gambia 2018). The tourism industry in The Gambia has seasonal fluctuations. In recent years, The Gambia saw consistent economic development (prior to the outbreak of the Corona Virus Pandemic). The relationship between culture and tourism is mutually advantageous, as it enhances the appeal and competitiveness of various locations, regions, and nations. Culture plays a crucial role in the tourism industry by providing uniqueness in a highly competitive global market. Simultaneously, tourism serves as a significant avenue for enriching culture and generating revenue that can bolster and fortify cultural heritage, cultural production, and creativity. Culture is a comprehensive concept that includes the collective patterns of social conduct, organizations, and standards observed in human communities, as well as the intellectual understanding, convictions, artistic expressions, legal systems, traditional practices, abilities, and routines of the individuals within these communities. Culture frequently emerges from or is ascribed to a particular region or locale.

There are more than eight known ethnic groups in the country, but the major ones are the Mandinka, The Wolof, The Serer, The Fula, The Serahule, The Aku (Krio), and The Jola. The focus of this paper will be on the Jola (Diola). Cabral (2023) statement reinforces the notion that culture serves as the fundamental basis of society, and any efforts to undermine the structure of society necessitate a methodical dismantling of its culture. The field of culture is extensive and complex, containing several intricacies that require thorough investigation. Culture is a comprehensive phrase that encompasses several things such as lifestyle, beliefs, etiquette, tastes, and behaviours (Mirfenderesky, 2002). According to cultural theorist Williams (1976), culture can be broadly defined as "a specific way of life, whether it pertains to a people, a specific time period, or a particular group". Furthermore, culture is commonly understood to encompass the artistic expressions such as literature, music, film, theater, paintings, and sculpture created by a particular group of individuals. Religion plays a significant role, and this forms a fundamental basis of society by guiding society in discovering its identity (Beyers, 2017).

Drivers of Culture in The Gambia

Religion and tradition are the primary movers of Gambian culture, encompassing a diverse and intricate range of influences. The cultural practices and customs in The Gambia are predominantly influenced by the Islamic religion. The statement was made by the ex-President Jammeh of The Gambia, asserting that The Gambia would transform into an authentically Islamic nation, with the Quran serving as the basis for the country's constitution (Sanneh, 2017).

Origin of the Jola Ethnic Group

Conversely, the Jola ethnic group is one of the indigenous communities residing in The Gambia. They primarily inhabit the Atlantic coast along the southern banks of The Gambia River, as well as the Casamance region of

Senegal and the northern portion of Guinea-Bissau. According to historical evidence, the Jola settlement existed before the Mandinka and Fula peoples in the river-line coast of Senegambia.

It is believed that the Jola people may have migrated from their ancestral homeland in Casamance, which happened before the 13th century. The Jola ethnic group has a multitude of communities or village groups. These communities are formed by extended clan settlements, each of which is significant enough to have its own distinct name. Examples of these communities include Jola Karon, Jola Mlomp, Jola Elinnkin, Jola Caginol, Jola Huluf, Jola Jamat, Jola Johey, Jola Bayot, Jola Brin, Jola Kassa, Jola Seleky, Jola Kabrouse, Jola Jiwat, and Jola Foni (Reynolds, 2015).

The Jola ethnic group spans from the southern banks of the Gambia to the Casamance Region of Senegal and the northern section of Guinea Bissau, and predominantly concentrated along the Atlantic coast (Nnaocha, 2013). The Jolas (Diolas) have limited historical records on their beginnings, as they lack the traditional griots who often transmit their ancestors' history throughout generations. Nevertheless, they do possess musical performers who recounted their history, but unfortunately, this knowledge was not transmitted to future generations, resulting in a decline in their shared historical recollection. They frequently construct obstacles to defend against actual or perceived adversaries. Additionally, they have been shielded from European impact for an extended period because of their preference for residing in dense forested or swampy regions, which posed challenges for outsiders attempting to enter. One of the factors contributing to the limited knowledge regarding their origins is the explanation for this.

The Jolas are one of the oldest tribes in The Gambia. Their existence, along with that of other ethnic groups like the Balanta and Pepel, may be dated back to the 13th century in Senegal's Casamance region, before travelling north to Foni. Their migrations were sporadic, happening at specified seasons and on a lesser scale than the Mandinka, for example. Many migrations evolved into long-term settlements, with some of them establishing in Baddibu, Niimi, and Bathurst (now known as Banjul). Between 1850 and 1890, these migrations took place during the Soninke-Marabout conflicts, when they were targeted by Islamist jihadists such as Foday Kabba Dumbuya, Ebrima Njie, and others. The Islamists were determined to turn the area's residents away from their animist beliefs and customs. The Jolas presented the greatest challenge in terms of religious conversion. Despite this, the majority eventually embraced the new faith, although a persistent minority continued to resist. Even today, many Jolas who identify as Muslims nonetheless engage in animist rituals Thomas, Doug.

During the 1880s, a small number of Foni Jolas were involved in the activity of extracting palm wine at Bathurst, which is now known as Banjul. By the conclusion of the 19th century, a portion of the Jola population had transitioned to cultivating groundnuts as a profitable crop. Furthermore, during the Second World War, this agricultural practice experienced significant growth and expansion. In addition, they raised animals and cultivated other crops such as sweet potatoes, yams, and watermelon (Linares, 1992). In 1894, Foni was placed under the governance of the British Protectorate System, with a commissioner and local native tribunal overseeing its administration. In addition, they appointed Mandinka chiefs to oversee tax collection and serve as intermediaries. Nevertheless, the British encountered significant obstacles in their attempts to infiltrate the society of these people and impose colonial control upon them, mostly due to their isolation, absence of a centralised leadership, and strong commitment to local autonomy. By 1900, the Jolas progressively embraced the presence of foreigners, and by 1905, their attitude underwent a considerable transformation. They started to fulfil their tax obligations and approached the commissioner's office to address disagreements and issues. The Mandinka leaders who had been imposed were substituted with Jola chiefs who had received education in France and were deemed more agreeable.

Currently, in the Gambia, the Jolas constitute approximately 10% to 15% of the population and are predominantly located in the Foni region in Southwest Gambia. Several Jola villages, such as Bulok, Ndemban Somita, Brefet Bolon, Kanilai, Bondali, and others, can be found in the region (Sarr, 2014).

Culture

The Jolas are renowned for their exemplary quality of life; they exhibit a remarkable sense of ease and charisma when interacting with unfamiliar individuals. Most Jolas identify as Muslims, yet their religious

beliefs incorporate elements of African traditional traditions. Their main occupation is farming. In Foni, the primary agricultural crops cultivated by the Jolas are peanuts and rice. Women are tasked with the responsibilities of gardening, food preparation, housekeeping, and childcare, while men are primarily engaged in the production of cash crops. They are highly esteemed throughout the nation due to their exceptional work ethic, irrespective of their gender.

The Jola Initiation Ritual (FUTAMPAF)

Like other ethnic groups, the Jolas partake in several rites, with the most renowned and esteemed being the Jola initiation ritual. According to the Jola tradition, a man must undergo initiation before he is considered a man and eligible for marriage. The initiation takes place at a festival called FUTAMPAF (Fig. 1). Exhibiting courage is a significant component of the festivities. Adult males would initially cleanse themselves in holy water that has been prepared by the marabout, a spiritual practitioner, for their safeguarding. Additionally, some individuals may carry diminutive parcels adorned with jujus or amulets that are intricately stitched onto their garments. These amulets are composed of various materials or concoctions created by a marabout. Both the water and amulets would provide protection for the guys, thereby preventing any sword from piercing their flesh. The individuals would don oversized trousers and engage in a lively dance, skilfully wielding weapons such as cutlasses or knives to vigorously hit their bodies without sustaining any visible injuries.



Figure 1. Adult men performing part of the FUTAMPAF ceremony, slicing their skins and not leaving a single mark. This could be developed, packaged and promoted as a cultural attraction for tourist. Source: Author collection, 2025

A group of women wearing garments made from identical fabric will engage in singing and dancing. The families of those who have undergone the initiation will significantly reduce their expenses to provide sustenance not just for their own family members but also for the inhabitants of the hamlet. Every initiate must slay a bull as a requirement. In Jola culture, it is prohibited for women to see the initiation process. Therefore, ladies refrain from being present once the initiates have entered the bush. The food would be placed at the entrance of the bush, and the escorts of the initiates would then retrieve the food from there and bring it into the bush.

In the late afternoon, following everyone's lunch, the initiation of guys ranging in age from 8 to 20 would commence. They will have complete hair removal on their heads and bodies, and they will attire themselves in customary garments. Afterward, the initiates are lifted onto the shoulders of individuals and taken on a procession for a period. They are then swiftly taken into the wilderness, with the ladies trailing behind at a certain distance, sprinting over dusty trails. Historically, it was customary for young boys to undergo an extended period of separation from their community, during which they would be mentored by their elder male relatives to acquire knowledge and skills pertaining to their roles and duties as adult men. Following the ceremony, young males have the option to enter matrimony and establish their own households, ideally at an early age, but only if they desire to do so.

Economic Activities of the Jola

By the latter part of the 19th century, some Jola community members had begun cultivating groundnuts as a viable crop. Furthermore, during the Second World War, this agricultural technique experienced significant expansion and proliferation. Additionally, they raised animals and cultivated supplementary crops such as sweet potatoes, yams, and watermelons (Linares, 2003).

In 1894, Foni was subjected to the the British Protectorate System, which was overseen by a commissioner and a local native tribunal. They also assigned Mandinka chiefs to manage tax collection and serve as middlemen. Nonetheless, the British faced considerable challenges in their efforts to penetrate the society of these individuals and establish colonial dominance, mostly because of their isolation, lack of centralised authority, and robust dedication to local autonomy (Ballagamba, 2002). By 1900, the Jolas progressively acknowledged the presence of Europeans, and by 1905, their viewpoint underwent a substantial transformation. They initiated the execution of their tax obligations and reached out to the commissioner's office to address disagreements and issues. The Mandinka leaders were supplanted by Jola chiefs who had received education in France and were deemed more amenable. The Jolas of The Gambia constitutes between 10% to 15% of the population, predominantly located in the Foni region in Southwest Gambia (Juffermans and McGlynn, 2009). The area encompasses multiple Jola communities, such as Bulok, Ndemban Somita, Brefet Bolon, Kanilai, and Bondali.

The Jolas are distinguished by their exceptional quality of life, and they demonstrate a remarkable sense of ease and charisma when engaging with unfamiliar individuals. Although the majority of Jolas identify as Muslims, their religious beliefs integrate elements of African traditional traditions. Their primary occupation is farming. Peanuts and rice are the primary agricultural products that the Jolas cultivate in Foni (Sarr, 2017). The primary responsibilities of males are the production of cash commodities, while women are responsible for gardening, food preparation, housekeeping, and childcare. Regardless of their gender, they are held in high regard throughout the nation for their extraordinary work ethic.

Traditional Food and Beverage

"Pem Bem" is the customary piscine delicacy that is both prepared and consumed by the Jolas community (Fig. 2). It has a high protein content and is simple to prepare. This is being supported by a natural local drink known as palm wine. Palm wine is a beverage produced by extracting the sap from the upper part of specific palm trees. This milky white drink can range from being sweet and mildly alcoholic when freshly collected (particularly from untapped trees) to becoming sour and significantly stronger after undergoing natural fermentation for several hours. It gradually increases in strength over the following day or so, but if left for an extended period, it transforms into vinegar.



Figure 2. Jola traditional dish "Pem Bem" is white rice and either steamed or grilled fish sprinkled with palm oil and sorrel. Author collection, 2025

Entertainment Instruments

The ekonting is a three-stringed musical instrument built out of gourds. The Jola people consider it their traditional jute. The instrument has an internal pass-through body dowel stick, a round gourd, and an audible

box made of a hemispherical calabash secured with a goatskin membrane with nails. Before the invention of nails, palm tree thorns and wooden pegs were used as fastening. Currently, the three strings attached to a long neck are made of nylon fishing line. Prior to that, they were made from palm tree roots (known as kuhall kata kubekel in Jola). The neck of the instrument is a cylindrical bamboo rod that runs from one end of the calabash to the other. To assist sound emission, a perforation is constructed in the sound box. In contrast to many lutes, the ekonting's bridge is not linked to the skin. The object is both free and capable of moving in a reciprocating manner along the surface of the resonating chamber. Furthermore, it remains securely fixed in place due to the tension exerted by the strings while playing it.

Conclusion

Culture and tourism are inextricably linked due to their clear synergy and potential for growth. Cultural tourism is a well-known and rapidly growing segment of the global tourism business, with the cultural and creative industries playing an increasingly vital role in marketing tourist destinations. The increased utilisation of culture and creativity in promoting destinations is also intensifying the need to distinguish regional identities and images. Furthermore, an expanding array of cultural components are being utilised to establish and promote the brands of various regions. Culture contributes to the creation of genuine and unique characteristics in the worldwide tourism industry. It is crucial to prioritise "tourism experiences" that facilitate a connection between people and visitors with local cultures. Local community engagement is a crucial element for tourist contentment and a necessary condition for product advancement. Local communities serve as both hosts and active participants in the tourism industry, contributing to the overall feeling of place and mood of different places.

Acknowledgment

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Declaration

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request.

Competing interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding this work.

Author contributions

MKA Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft. AS Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, , Supervision.

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