

THE CROCODILE POOLS OF THE NORTH BANK DIVISION, THE GAMBIA, WEST AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

In 1994 we reported on the Crocodile Pools in the Western Division of the Gambia (Moiser and Barber, 1994). It had been hoped to return to the country later in 1994 to visit the sacred crocodile pools at Berending in the North Bank Division. Unfortunately, due to the developing political situation we were prevented from visiting the country again until early 1996. At this time we again visited with a group of students.

THE NORTH BANK DIVISION

The majority of European tourists who visit the Gambia will probably never bother to visit the North Bank Division. This is mainly because of the large number of tourist attractions in the Western Division, and the greater difficulties and expense in getting to the North Bank Division from the tourist hotels in the Western Division. The majority of those who do visit the North Bank Division will probably do so in order to see the village of Juffure, the legendary home of Kunte Kinte in Alex Hailey's book 'Roots'; or to see the former slave houses at Albreda. Local traders and others passing through the Gambia will also pass through the North Bank Division on their way North to Dakar in Senegal.

For the visitor to The Gambia there are two means of getting to the North Bank Division; both necessitate crossing the Gambia river. The easier, and possibly safer, way is to cross the river by the main ferry which runs from Banjul to Barra, (see fig. 1). This is a large vehicle carrying ferry which runs every two hours during the day, and by which it is possible to take a tourist taxi across the river with you. The alternative is to hire a local pirogue at any suitable point along the river. This latter method of travelling is more exciting than using the scheduled ferry but is probably less safe, and would leave the visitor without any form of transport other than the local bush taxis, which are notoriously unreliable.

BERENDING 13° 29' N 16° 28' W

From the ferry terminal at Barra the village of Berending is about 12 kilometres due east along a passable, but at times poorly maintained road. At the village of Berending the crocodile pool is set a little distance from the road, at the edge of agricultural land, south of the village. The pool is not signposted in any way and might be difficult to find without local knowledge.

The pool is in fact a series of three to four, connected, naturally occurring, grassy edged pools that cover an area of about 100 square metres in an area of open savanna scrubland. The surrounding vegetation is mainly the natural vegetation for the area with some encroachment of introduced plants from the neighbouring farmland. The dominant trees are Oil Palms, (*Elaeis guineensis*) and Gingerbread Plum (*Neocarya macrophylla*).

The area around the pools is used for cattle grazing, and the cows frequently drink from the pools. Plant life within the pools seemed to be restricted to a less than 50% cover of Water Lily (*Nymphaea lotus*) when we visited. It was difficult to establish the depth of the pool, and there were some obviously man-made embankments.

The birds observed in the area included African Darter (*Anhinga rufa*), African Lily-Trotter (*Actophilornis africana*), Grey Plantain Eater (*Crinifer piscator*) and Red-Billed Hornbill (*Tockus erythrorhynchus*).

The local population use the pools as a water source for crop irrigation, and show no fear of the crocodiles, which are clearly very timid. A local cattle herder described the crocodiles, and from pictures identified them as Nile Crocodiles, (*Crocodilus niloticus*). He was of the opinion that there were two large animals of just over 2 metres in length, and a number of smaller ones. The larger ones were said to immediately move into deep cover when either humans or the cattle arrived. The presence of the Nile Crocodile is hardly surprising as this is the only species of crocodile now thought to be extant in the Gambia outside the Abuko reserve (Jones, 1991).

Over the last ten years this area has become drier than it was previously and the pools are said to be reducing in size. Since this reduction in size the crocodiles are said not to wander so far from the pools.

THE ROLE OF THIS SACRED POOL

The village of Berending and the surrounding area, including this pool, belong to the Sunka family, who are of the Mandinka tribe. When they first arrived in the area they were Pagan and prayed regularly at the pool. Despite now following Islam they are said to still pray at the pool occasionally. Many other people also pray at the pool, and sometimes tourists visit it.

Those who pray at this pool are said to do so for one of two main reasons. The first reason that was given to us was praying for a good harvest. Interestingly this reason has

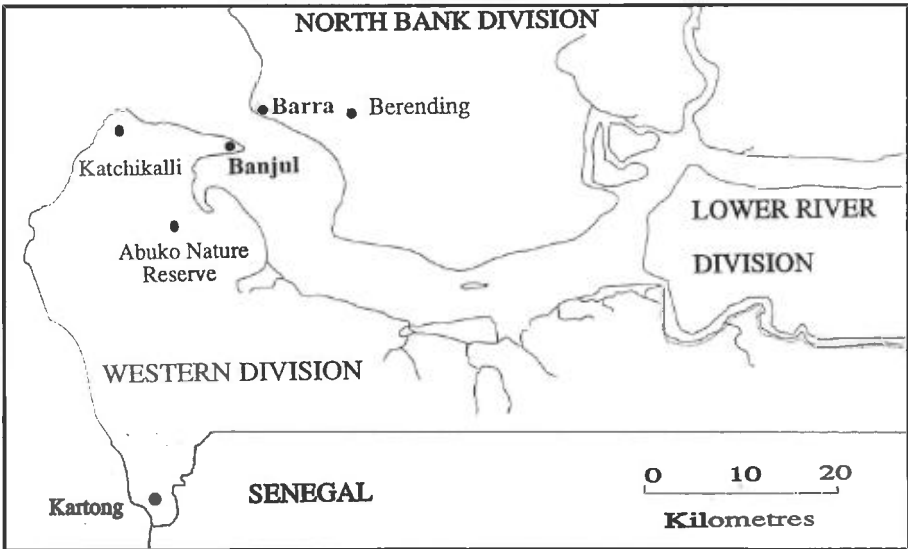


Fig. 1. Map of Western Gambia

not been suggested at either of the other sacred pools that we have visited previously. However as the other two pools are both in the Western Division where there is a much greater tourist presence, and correspondingly less reliance on farming, this is possibly not so surprising.

The second reason that we were given for people praying at the pool related to fertility. As with the pools at Katchikalli and Kartong (Moiser and Barber, 1994) it seems that women who have problems conceiving will come here to pray for a child. Unlike Katchikalli and Kartong there are no facilities to bathe in the pool here, nor, when we visited, was there any suggestion of bathing here, only praying.

Visitors who come to pray often bring Bonga fish for the crocodiles. These have been previously established to be *Ethmalosa fimbriata* (Lesack, 1986). In addition some visitors bring Tilapia, and a similar type of fish to the Tilapia were said to exist in the pool.

CONCLUSION

Unlike Katchikalli and Kartong, the two pools previously described, Berending is a natural pool with no retaining concrete block walls or fencing. There is no apparent regular income from tourists, although the local farm staff do seem to expect a tip if they are of particularly service. As the area has a much lower population density than the area around the pools in the Western Division, and it is only a short distance from the main Gambia river, it is quite possible that the crocodiles here may have contact with other crocodiles.



Plate 1. The Crocodile Pool at Berending

Despite the lack of income from tourists this crocodile pool is clearly retained by the locals as a centre for worship. In addition they seem happy to have both Gambian visitors and tourists visit the site.

FURTHER WORK

We would hope to visit the Gambia again during 1997 to revisit the pool at Katchikalli and continue to study the husbandry and history of the crocodiles there.

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