

The Road to “Roots”: A Personal Journey

The ride to Juffureh was long and arduous - my first ride in one of the mini-bus transports. I couldn't imagine it would be able to make the trip, it looked (and sounded) like it might fall apart at any moment. But I soon learned those things are built to take a beating. The road (if you want to call it that), to Juffureh, like many roads throughout the country, gets washed out during the rainy seasons. Somewhat paved in some areas, it's easier for the vehicles to ride in the dirt alongside the road than to traverse the many ditches and potholes, some of which are large enough to swallow a whole car. So we spent about 2 hours (or more so it seemed) airborne! I could barely walk when we got out. But I must give myself (a creature of extreme comfort that I was) kudos because I got very used to the transportation and even learned to love it! When we got there, Pierre “negotiated” with a guide who gave us the grand tour.



I must admit, I had different pre-conceived ideas about what I would see. Hearing about the place from the “Roots” story and believing that the Alex Haley group had brought furor and notoriety to the small village, I was expecting to see a “re-creation” of the village we saw in the movie, or something like it. But what we found was kind of sad, considering the market value it has in the United States.

Today, it is a real place, and the people there call it home, as they have for generations, but they still seemed to me to be living in poverty like most of the rest of the country. I am



sorry to say we didn't stop and see the chief of the village, as is customary when visiting, but we did walk around and see some of the people going about their every day lives; women cooking on the outdoor stoves, children playing, and of course many craftsmen and women selling their arts, crafts and clothing to all the tourists.





In the main gathering place of the large compound, our guide asked if we could visit with the elder of the village, Kunta Kinte's oldest living relative. She came out and sat with us as our guide told the story many of us have known since 1977, the story of Kunta Kinte. It was fascinating to hear the story told from the African side of the family, learning about what was going on there after Kunta Kinte was taken by the slavers.

Just as bits of the story were passed down from generation to generation in the United States by Kunta and his descendants, the family left in Africa was telling the same story of the boy who was taken one day while off in the woods. While our guide was telling us the story, I couldn't help looking at the very old woman sitting there with us, and feeling like she was part of my history too, like we were family. Because somewhere down the line, far back through many generations, there probably was someone related to me who was taken from his or her village, chained and shackled, herded onto a ship, forced on an almost endless voyage to some unknown territory far away from anything or anyone they knew, never to return to their homeland again. That is one part of history many African American share.

