

## Back to the Source: A Gambian Journal & Memoir

Patrick Dunn



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## Prelude

When you transplant yourself due south and a little west from London approximately 3000 miles to the rural West African interior to share the life of its people for a prolonged period, you don't just move to a different place geographically and climatically, you enter a world with completely different methodologies, a different tradition of explanation with its own narratives, its own interpretation of human and animal behaviour, its own understanding of natural phenomena, its own sensitivities and values and its own *modi operandi*. It is a world not readily accessible to the post-enlightenment comprehension of our contemporary western minds. If you don't meet this world with receptivity, with modesty, with a spirit of cultural exploration – and leave didacticism behind – you will learn nothing, you will miss everything of value and you will fail to understand what they have that we have not. But be warned, if you can do this, Africa may claim a part of you as its own!

In July 1730 Francis Moore was appointed as a 'writer' [clerk] by the Royal African Company on a three year contract and left London on 2 September of that year bound for the company's trading establishments on the Gambia River. In the spring of 2010 I accepted an offer from an international development charity to serve a one year placement 180 miles upriver as an education management advisor in the Central River Region of The Gambia – departing on 12 August.

We met in a broad beam of blended light coming through the glass wall of the departure lounge in one Heathrow terminal or another ... that is the other volunteers and I. The light had been filtered through an early morning August sky filled with the shimmering exhalations of jet engines as they pushed their loads along runways or up into the infinite blue above. There were a dozen or so of us who identified one another from the memory of a face encountered during a residential, pre-departure training weekend or from having seen a participant's photo posted during an online prep course or simply by the