



# When the Evidence Changes: Scholarship, Memory, and Public Culture at the Maison des Esclaves, Gorée Island

by Deborah L. Mack, Ph.D

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The Maison des Esclaves on Gorée Island, considered the premiere “must see” for visitors to Senegal, is a seminal interpretive site that confronts and addresses the undeniable presence of the transatlantic slave trade. The first of its kind, it remains an important model and point of reference for numerous interpretive sites associated with the transatlantic slave trade that have developed not only along the western (Ghana, Benin, Sierra Leone, Nigeria), southern (South Africa) and eastern (Kenya, Tanzania, Mauritius) African coasts, but in Europe and throughout the Americas. At the same time new scholarship is calling into question some of the predominant beliefs and understandings about the Maison, its origins, and uses at the time of the slave trade.

Gorée Island, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1978, was the first such site recognized for its historic involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and its intentional connection among African and

African descendant populations (UNESCO, 2004-2005). Among the earliest Afro-European settlements in Western Africa, the island developed into a European colony where Europeans, Afro-Europeans, free Africans, enslaved indigenous (among them “esclaves de case” or “house

slaves” (Barry, 1998; Searing, 1993) and transit Africans resided.

## Creating the Maison des Esclaves

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century family members of native Goréan Boubacar Joseph Ndiaye acquired an 18<sup>th</sup> century residence that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the home of wealthy Senegalese business woman and *signare* (a free African or Afro-European woman), Anna Colas Pépin (de Benoist & Camara, 2003). Ndiaye lived in this residence for several years of his childhood. In 1960, the year of Senegal’s independence from France, and with the personal encouragement of Léopold Sédar Senghor, distinguished poet and the first president of independent Senegal from 1960 to 1980, Ndiaye began his research on the residence. Using his own funds and donating his time he began his exploration of the architectural and social history of the Pépin residence.

The resulting interpretation of the residence that he renamed the Maison des Esclaves (the House of Slaves) drew on the singular “power of place” of the site, as well as on early scholarship and popular writing on the transatlantic slave trade. Ndiaye first served as volunteer curator, then as museum founder and head curator until his death in 2008.

Ndiaye created an original interpretive concept—that of a *Door of No Return*—referencing a ground floor door of the house that opens out onto the Atlantic Ocean and positioning it as a symbolic last point of departure from the African continent for the transit enslaved. The *Door of No Return* concept has since been repeated at numerous sites in Ghana and beyond. Wood doors from colonial



Staircase, the Maison des Esclaves. Image courtesy of UNESCO.

forts and comparable sites in Ghana and Nigeria have been sold to collectors and to museums as “authentic” *Doors of No Return*. Ndiaye’s interpretative narrative is indelibly linked to the Maison des Esclaves, and his seminal work represents the first generation of activism that links the global episode of the transatlantic slave trade with its legacy and impact in social inequities (Camara, 1992).

A Founding Member of the International Coalition of Historic Sites of Conscience In 1999, the Maison des Esclaves was the first African member of the Coalition (Ševčenko & Vaimont, 2005). The Maison des Esclaves is also a member of the recently formed (2011) regional African Sites of Conscience Network.

**The Visitor Experience**

Deputy curator Eloi Coly assumed the role of head curator in 2008 after Ndiaye’s passing. But even today the existence of the Slave House museum on Gorée is intimately connected with Ndiaye’s work of some nearly 50 years. The interpretive script, an emotionally powerful narrative, remains largely unchanged. The Boubacar Joseph Ndiaye Socio-Cultural Center—a community-centered performance theater—opened on Gorée to the public in 2008. Everyday life on the small island of fewer than a thousand permanent residents is transformed daily by the massive influx of visitors it attracts from around the world. With some 12 ferry departures daily from the centrally located passenger port in Dakar, the 20-minute ride transports thousands of tourists and residents to and from Gorée every day, with thousands more converging on the island for special events. The site is a three-minute walk



Portrait of a signare. From Boilat D. (1852, 1984). Esquisses Sénégalaises. Paris: Editions Karthala.

from the harbor, and visitors proceed along a cobbled and sandy street. As visitors approach, the Maison des Esclaves does not appear different in scale or style from the neighborhood of family residences that surround it. The entry and lower floors have been architecturally altered and adapted to create a late 18<sup>th</sup> century period ambiance. Furnishings and ornamental elements of the residence have been completely removed to deliberately focus the visitor experience on the contrasting upper and lower levels and the architecture of the interior spaces. Upon entering, most visitors are surprised by the “normal” and almost intimate scale of the residence, a stark contrast to the massive fortifications found along Ghana’s “Castle Coast.”

Because of the fragility of the structure and site, tour groups are scheduled on the hour, with a scripted presentation that can be delivered in French, the Senegalese language of Wolof, or in English by the head curator. Visitors are provided limited

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Entry sign at the Boubacar Joseph Ndiaye Socio-Cultural Center, opened in 2008 on Gorée. Courtesy Deborah Mack.

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time to explore both the upper and lower floors of the residence, to ask additional questions of the curators and to take photographs or purchase publications.

After the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots* in the 1970s African-American tourists from the United States, growing numbers of African-descended visitors from the Caribbean, South America and Europe, and more recently African nationals from around the continent, have made the Maison des Esclaves a powerful and often psychologically charged pilgrimage site. This African diasporic “connection” is concretely incorporated into the narrative and explicitly acknowledges African Americans in the U.S., creating for these visitors an explicit shared experience of brutality and survival, as well as of shared pain and loss. The interpretive narrative is an emotionally powerful one that draws the visitor into the experience and creates empathy for the victimized—as men, as women, as children, and as family members.

#### **Challenges: Scholarship, Memory and Public Culture**

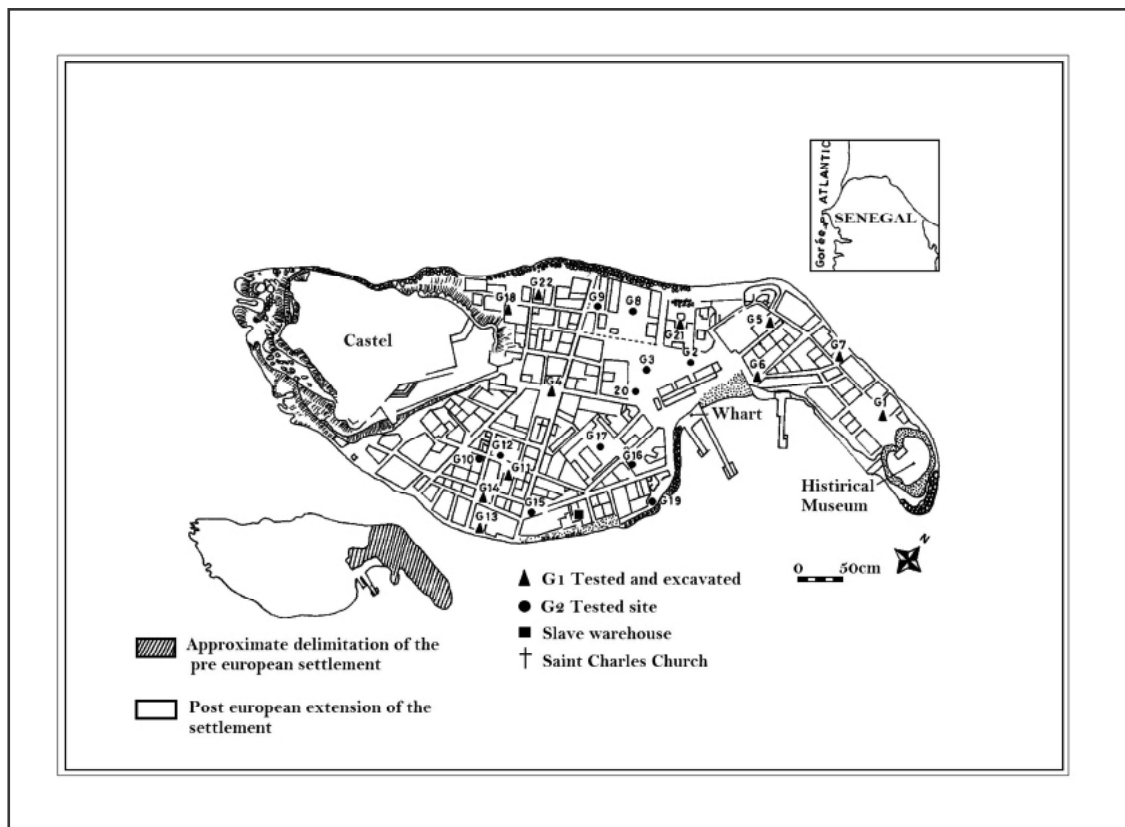
But the publication of *Roots* was also an impetus for the massive growth of academic, lay, and public culture research and interpretation on the transatlantic

slave trade in multiple arenas, in multiple disciplines, and in different places of the world associated with the African slave trade.

#### **Extensive Research, New Sources**

More than 25 years of coordinated research projects focused on the transatlantic slave trade. These include the decade-long, multi-party, and multinational UNESCO initiative *Routes de l'esclave* (UNESCO, 2010) that researched, documented, and convened a wide spectrum of stakeholder communities around its global impact. A few of the recent U.S. museum and library initiatives are the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture digital exhibition, *In Motion: the African-American Migration Experience* (2004); the growth of DAACS: the Digital Archive of Archaeological Comparative Slavery at Monticello; and the monumental Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Eltis & Richardson, 2010) that was decades in the making.

As a result, two generations of multidisciplinary and comparative scholarship have added far more information and detail to the broader sweeping stories that inspired *Roots* and an initial generation of interpretation. Multiple sources of historical, archival, and archeological research over the last decade present strong challenges to current Maison des Esclaves interpretation. Scholars now counter the present narrative that describes an in-house process in the trade in enslaved people. Researchers have also dramatically reduced the volume of trade from Gorée.



Gorée Island, survey and excavation map. Courtesy Professor Ibrahima Thiaw, Conservateur (Director), Musée Théodore Monod d'Art Africain.

### **The Indigenous Slave Trade**

Eighteenth century census records, archaeological studies, and archival sources indicate that the Pepin residence owner may have sold small numbers of slaves (kept in the now reconstructed basement cells) and may have kept domestic slaves. In addition, archival and archaeological evidence points to actual points of departure from fortified sites elsewhere on the island. But scholars concur that the importance of Gorée is as a memorial to the human cost of the transatlantic slave trade.

What new research and evidence does increasingly reveal is an issue that is still not presented in public culture—the issue of indigenous or domestic slavery—which has strongly shaped the contemporary African societies of today, including that of Senegal. Interpretation at the Maison des Esclaves centers on the issue of transit slaves destined for export. While export slaves may have been employed locally while in transit on the island, they were on the island a short time. Export slaves and indigenous slaves had very different

statuses and did not share similar lives or outcomes. Indigenous slaves have been largely silenced in both the global and local narratives. They have similarly been marginalized or ignored in public culture, despite the fact that beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century they were the predominant population of the island. And on Gorée some 75% of this population was composed of women—a stunning fact completely unknown to the visiting public.

Documentary and archaeological evidence reflects constant changes in the residential and civic plans of Gorée, where over time the social distance between Europeans, Afro-European elites, free Africans and indigenous slaves was desegregated as it grew, and social distance was reduced without regard to status, gender, identity, or race (Thiaw, 2011). Indigenous slaves were present in many households as skilled laborers and domestics. By the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the majority of land on Gorée was owned by Afro-European elites, the slave quarters on Gorée disappeared, and masters and enslaved people increasingly lived side by

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side. House-to-house census data from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century report enslaved people living with their owners in the same houses (Becker and Martin, 1980; Thiaw, 2008).

### **The Response of Maison des Esclaves and Its Continuing Role**

None of this new evidence assembled over the past decade documenting the Maison des Esclaves site—archival collections, original manuscripts, family histories, archaeological surveys, or architectural analysis (Hinchman, 2006)—has been incorporated into site interpretation.

Integrating new evidence would require the Maison to develop a different story, one that relocates the nexus of its interpretive narrative from its own site, and that might share narrative ownership by linking several sites on the island to each other, as well as to the mainland. Among the primary actors in these new stories would be fellow citizens: the descendants of the European, Afro-European, and African owners, brokers, dealers as well as the indigenous enslaved female majority on the islands. These descendants are not absent, not nameless, and not across the ocean, but live, on the contrary, in the here and now of Senegalese daily life—and beyond. Refashioning the historical narrative at the Maison des Esclaves would address a focus for which the site is admirably suited. The more recent evidence on the site's historical use as well as its membership in the Africa Regional Coalition network jointly provide a strong rationale and unique qualifications for reshaping the interpretation.

The Maison des Esclaves stands as a uniquely powerful symbol for visitors as well as for other historic sites, in that it demonstrates the public education role and the impact that the “power of place” can convey. Even if the details of the historical narrative should change (“What happened here?”), the site addresses issues related to involuntary migration and forced labor, legacies of inequity, empire and appropriation, colonial history, and post-colonial consequences. The Maison has played a profoundly influential role in creating public awareness and understanding of the transatlantic slave trade, the nature and scale of its impact in Africa, in Europe and in particular in the Americas.

The Maison des Esclaves remains an integral site of memory because it continues to inspire civic engagement and dialogue around issues that even now shape the day-to-day lives of millions of people, at home and in the world. It engages a wide range of visitors and stakeholders around issues that resonate with contemporary relevance on the meaning of citizenship and social equity. Some 50 years ago the Maison des Esclaves launched the interrogation of a historically difficult, complex, and politically embarrassing and past. An embracing of new information that may refashion the interpretive narrative would in no way diminish its unique significance. Moreover, it could provide an influential model for preserving the symbolic power of a site of conscience when the historical evidence changes. ✨

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*Film footage of the May 1992 interview with Boubacar Joseph Ndiaye on Gorée and permission to reference the interview material provided courtesy of Sedgwick Productions (Chicago IL). The May 1992 interview with Boubacar Joseph Ndiaye on Gorée was conducted by Mohamed Saliou Camara Ph.D., Associate Professor of History and International Studies at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. The author wishes to thank Professor Camara for providing both the text of the original French language interview as well as its English translation.*

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