

Title—The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niumi, the Gambia

Author—Donald Wright

Year—2010

Categories: World History, Trade, Colonialism

Place: The Gambia (The World)

Time: 1400-2000

Argument Synopsis:

Donald R. Wright's *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa* attempts to produce a history of the world, through the lens of a small area of the Gambia in Africa called Niumi. Wright utilizes world-systems theory to underpin his analysis of globalization through its effect on Niumi, in his words a 'very small place in Africa.' In his third edition, he notes that his first edition emphasized the influence of world-systems and his second the influence of globalization, while his third edition questions how much influence these two factors have on local oppression; spurred by the tyrannical rise of 'President' Jammeh in 1994 that has continued to the time of writing, 2009.

Wright posits that Niumi entered the modern world system in 1446, the moment of contact between Portuguese adventurers and the Niumi community on the Gambia River, but provides a brief overview of the historical context of the region prior to Portuguese contact. Wright claims that from as early as the eighth century, the Gambia was a part of a commercial complex of trade, within the world system of the Muslim world. The continuity of economic practices in Niumi is highlighted by a good proportion of its residents finding a livelihood from products of the river and sea or trade that the waters facilitated, throughout its history. Wright claims that Niumi has been a periphery in the modern world system since the Portuguese encounter in 1446 and has steadily become dependent on core areas for the bulk of their goods, internally producing primarily peanuts for export. Under British colonial rule, Niumi, and the Gambia, became the world supplier for peanuts, causing them to neglect production of other goods in favor of peanuts. This dependency for basic goods is one of the main reasons, according to Wright, that independence from colonial Britain failed to change the livelihoods of people in Niumi much; Niumi continued to rely on exporting peanuts to generate revenue to import necessary goods.

His discussions of the effects of World War I and II serves to demonstrate how integrated into the world system Niumi was, with the area become a hotbed of Allied activity during WWII, due to its geography surrounded by French colonial Africa. An advantage of his approach is the detail with which he can delve into Niumi, detail that would simply be impossible if attempting to focus on the entirety of the world. As such, the connections with other areas and effects on Niumi are more compelling, because Wright has been able to establish more about the society and culture. The colonial history of Niumi also made it a good location to focus on, because colonial history inherently involves far reach places and connections.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Because of geographical focus, on the surface it can read a primarily a book of Gambian history, with world history taking a secondary place
- World historical connections are more compelling when using a methodology that focuses on one place and how the world interacted with it