The Kingdom of Jagau and the Grand Barçalo: the Character of the Land and People

Before returning to Joala, as I promised in chapter 1, in order to discuss the character of the land and people(a) in terms of the way of life throughout, I must interpolate that from the Sereno to the river called the Rio do Berbecim, which takes its name from that of the native heathen, the coast runs South East for a length of 11 leagues, in the middle of which is the very famous Port of Joala, which we will shortly discuss. To speak now of the position and character of the river of this people, the greater part of it is thickly forested. As regards its productiveness, the land is much inferior to those preceding it, and lacks staple foodstuffs, meat and other necessities of life; and there is not as much trade in merchandise among the Berbecim, though they do have a fair, which is generally held at the king’s town, and hides, cattle and cloth can be bought there.

Before we discuss the character of the people, let us state the boundaries of their lands. It (sic) meets those of the Grand Borcalo on the North, North East, and East; and the coast, after leaving the Rio de Berbecim, the true boundary of the (kingdom of) Jagau, runs South East to the mouth of Gambia.

Now passing on, let us speak of the character of our Berbecim. They have an unique disposition, being so gentle that from birth (?) they never change for the worse. Our people receive great favours from them, because they have no fear of thieves (there). They keep their personal possessions and merchandise in the most public streets since they are as safe there

(a) Jagomai, king of the Berbecims, sends a challenge.
from being stolen as if they were hidden away in the most secret places. This is a country where the town-squares serve as chests, which is astonishing, as the land is impoverished. But the reason (for this honesty) is the people's lack of commercial contact with the pirates, a contact which is excessive in the case of the people of the Cape and Porto //f.7v/ de Ale. Because the land is not very well-off, the money from Moslem mints has not reached here, and so the Berbecim do not possess this sect.

Their way of life is that general among the other heathen, they are farmers, etc. In manners and outward appearance the Berbecim is inferior to the Jalofu. But they are people of spirit and, war being frequent, they enter and attack the Jalofu (land) valiantly and retreat when they find their own land out of sight. For this is densely forested, which overthrows those who follow on horseback, the wide woods with their thickets serving them as a refuge against the enemy when they hide themselves in its secret places. The kingdom does not possess the size and character of that of Lambaia, Jagau putting in the field only 300 horsemen, more or less, and 2000 archers. I propose to conclude by expressing my gratitude to this kingdom's port of Joala, earned by the spontaneous affection with which the people there welcome our vessels in its river, which we have already described, and protect and defend them from the greed of the Flemish and French scum.

Although the neighbouring kingdom seeks separate treatment, nevertheless, since the material is brief and virtually an appendix to what has gone before, it has seemed to me better to carry on with what is here being offered. Reference to the boundaries between Jagau and the Grand Borcalo give an indication of the power (of the latter). This savage is so powerful that there is none on the coast his superior or equal, either in the
extent of land or in those other things necessary so that a
king may sustain himself in peace or in war. This chief has
subordinates among whom he has divided his monarchy, to facilitate
its direction: all of these are his tributaries, as are the other
nobles of the land, called jagras. These jagras are the sons of
sisters (of nobles), and only these, since sons of brothers are
not considered legitimate (heirs) here and hence are excluded from
the succession into the kingdom. As regards the fertility of
its situation, it is totally different from that of Jagau since
it is better provided with cattle and other stock. Similarly its
trade is greater: it has cotton cloth which the Portuguese carry
away from here in large quantities. The king possesses certain
Mandinga lands which are subject to him. From these the Fulos
make their way down to pasture their cattle, since //f.8// the
pastures are excellent: they pay tribute for these to Borçalo, but
what the jagras take when they plunder the herds at their whim is
normally larger. It may be gathered from their attitude what the
attitude of the common people is, for this is always worse when
governed by self-interest.

The affluence of the Fulos enables us to appreciate the
quality of the land. The quality of the people shows that the
way of life and its organisation are sound, so much so that it is
evident that they are only spoilt by incompetence in government.
They are idolaters like all the other heathen, and are great
witches and sorcerers, the most adept being expert in the herbs
used in their rites. This can be seen markedly in their hunting,
the stalking of elephants. Although these animals are most
frightening, a Fuló places himself underneath one with his weapons, and
kills it from there.
The land of our Borçalo is bounded on the South East by the Gambia River. The hinterland is ruled by various Mandinga kings, or rather by the native Sonequesi heathen, to whom the lands more properly belong. However we will discuss them as nominally kingdoms of the Mandingas, because of the alliance these savages have made with the natives, just as the Manes have done in the Province of Serra Leoa with the Sapes, Temenes and Boulons. Now let us discuss this people.