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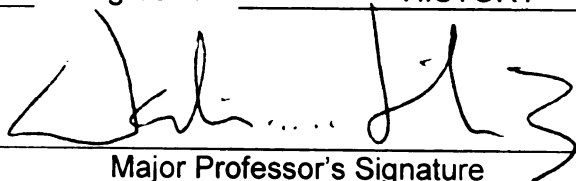
LAND AND HISTORICAL CHANGE IN A RIVER
VALLEY: PROPERTY, POWER AND DEPENDENCY IN
THE LOWER GAMBIA BASIN, NINETEENTH AND
EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

presented by

ASSAN SARR

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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By

ASSAN SARR

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ABSTRACT

LAND AND HISTORICAL CHANGE IN A RIVER VALLEY: PROPERTY, POWER AND DEPENDENCY IN THE LOWER GAMBIA BASIN, NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

By

Assan Sarr

This dissertation uses oral and written sources to explore changing concepts of land tenure along the banks of the lower Gambia River basin. It argues that landholding customs and land use practices in this region were constantly changing under the impact of new conditions, often related to major historical developments in the area and forces associated with the region's relationship with the wider world, particularly Europe and the Islamic world. The most important matters affecting land tenure systems were the outbreak of Muslim Revolutions and the development of cash-crop production. These occurred following the ending of the Atlantic slave trade and, over several decades following 1830, resulted in the overthrow of a Mandinka aristocracy and rejection of royal control over the land.

DEDICATION

To Momodou Sarr, Donald R. Wright and Doris Wright

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Introduction

In 1795 an English factor by the name Mungo Park traveled to the Gambia looking to discover the sources of the Niger River and to trade in gold and other merchandise. In the course of his travels he met a “wealthy” Mandinka slave trader in the upper reaches of the Gambia River. The trader’s name was Karfa. Park travelled with Karfa, visiting several towns and villages along the banks of the Gambia River. They bought slaves and provisions, and held palavers with ruling elites. Karfa however was unable to find a market for the slaves he bought. As a result, he “hired from the chief . . . of Jindey huts for their accommodation, and a piece of land on which to employ [these slaves] in raising corn and other provisions for their maintenance.”¹

Park’s observations raise a number of questions: what made it possible for chiefs like that of Jindey to exercise the right of renting land to individuals such as Karfa? What sort of relationship developed between the chief and Karfa? Did the relationship change over time? With a focus on the Gambia River region, this study answers these questions. More specifically, it explores why land was important in the political and social history of the people living along West Africa’s Gambia River. It charts how broad transformations in the regions’ political and social arrangements affected land tenure in the Gambia’s lower basin, across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These include the rise of the nineteenth century militant Islamic revolution, the development of cash crop production and the establishment of colonial rule. In other

¹ Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa First Journey -1795 -1797* (Edinburg: Adam and Charles Black, 1878), p. 330.

words, the study documents the impact of islamization on land tenure as well as the development and expansion of peanut production and export and implementation of the colonial regime at the turn of the century.

By analyzing the effects of these broad transformations in lower Gambian history, the dissertation makes a number of general arguments. First, it contends that in considering land tenure in the lower Gambia River the peoples' social, political and religious considerations are no less important than the purely economic ones. It further argues that to emphasize on the productive uses of land is to overlook the value Africans placed on land. This is because Africans' own social and political way of thinking and operating were as important as the economics in shaping how people perceived or claimed land.

Second, it argues that continuity and change in systems of land tenure can be explained through the confluence of significant changes occurring in late "pre-colonial" and early colonial lower Gambian society. The transformations mentioned above occurred following the ending of the Atlantic slave trade and resulted, in the severed decades after 1830, in the overthrow of the Mandinka aristocracy and royal control of land. Many lower Gambian village residents only had the right of use to the farmlands they cultivated and newcomers had to seek permission from those in authority before they could establish their own settlement on the land or to use part of the land to cultivate crops.² It was in the mid nineteenth century when the aristocracy's monopoly control of land was challenged and brought to a final end in a series of jihads.

² NRS, CSO 10/71-Native Land Tenure, 1939

Third, it also argues that the expansion of cash crop production (i.e. peanuts) in the mid nineteenth century did not lead to the growth in the market for land in rural communities. In most Gambian villages, until the end of colonial rule, local customs continued to forbid the transfer of land that involved some form of monetary exchange. In fact, Western influence on local attitudes toward property was minimal in most Gambian villages. Although native tribunals – comprised of men appointed by the European district commissioners – were created and empowered to deal with matters of land tenure, but these councils hardly altered the “customary” rules used to claim ownership to land. As a matter of fact, the position of the colonial administration with regard to land tenure practices was often contradictory. While it frequently advocated for a policy of non-interference in so-called customary tenure, it declared that all unused land in the colony and protectorate was taken over by the colonial state.

Historiography

Landholding and land use practices in West Africa have become important topics of study for many anthropologists but not much for historians. In fact, anthropological studies of African land tenures began in a thorough way in the work of mainly British social anthropologists in the years immediately after the end of the Second World War.³ But as anthropologists were developing interest on African land, historians sought to study changes in other forms of property rights especially slavery and slave trading. Consequently, as Anthony Hopkins writes, historical research on property rights in West Africa has concentrated very largely on studies of slavery and

³ R. E. Downs and S. P. Reyna (ed.) *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1988), p. ix

its compliment, wage labor.⁴ A major reason for this bias in the historiography could be the popularity of slavery and slave trading among modern historians of West Africa.

While slavery and slave trading continued to draw the attention of many historians, it is probably the topic that generated the most controversy in African history. Even today, issues of slavery and the slave trade continue to generate ferocious debates among scholars. One of the consequences of this is that over the past several decades, dozens of books and articles have been published on this topic. These debates have no doubt made enormous contributions to West African history. But the narrow emphasis on “slaves as property” appears to reinforce the view that slaves were the most important form of property in West African societies especially before the colonial era. Some historians even went much further to argue that African societies have generally valued people more than land, and suggest that the sense of ownership was a colonial and modern imposition.⁵ Notable among these are Martin Klein, John Thornton and Joseph Miller. For example, in *Peasants in Africa*, Klein gives the impression that across Africa, overtime, slaves, rather than land, were the primary forms of investment. For him, land was not short in supply in pre-colonial Africa and the only challenge Africans had to overcome was the shortage of dependents and/or labor.⁶ R. E. Downs and S. P. Reyna suggest that the shortage of labor made it possible that if an individual wanted land, he asked for it; and he is assured of getting it. “In the case of virgin land it

⁴ Anthony G. Hopkins, “Property Rights and Empire Building: Britain’s Annexation of Lagos, 1861” *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1980), p. 797

⁵ For example, see the works of John Thornton *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Martin Klein (ed.) *Peasants in Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Beverly Hills, London: Sage Publications 1980), pp. 20-22; Joseph C. Miller. *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade 1730-1830* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), pp. 43, 44.

⁶ Klein, *Peasants in Africa*, 13; Miller, *Way of Death*, p. 43

might not even be necessary to ask for it.”⁷ In a similar argument, Joseph Miller claims that in Western Central Africa, wealth was people and “land was cheap, often free to its first occupants”⁸ and John Thornton suggests that from around the 1400s to the 1800s, and in all of Africa, control was exercised more over people than over land.⁹ Thornton writes that African law recognized the ownership of slaves rather than through the fiction of landownership.¹⁰ For him, slaves were the only form of private, revenue-producing property recognized in African law and owing land in Africa meant nothing more than owning a piece of dirt.¹¹ Hence, land, he claim, was not a matter of importance in Africa.

Also, for many of these scholars, African societies did not value land because they had small populations and abundant supply of land. People like Klein argue that pre-colonial Africa was characterized by low population densities and because of that there was free land for everyone. This is echoed by R.E. Downs and S.P. Reyna and Jack Glazier. Glazier for example claims that “traditional societies of Africa experienced no land shortages because land to population ratios were consistently high in traditional Africa.”¹² Similarly, in writing about the Tswana of Southern Africa, John and Jean Comaroff claim that the Tswana did not buy into notions of private landed property because neither arable fields nor pasture was scarce in Tswanaland. These scholars suggest that until the turn of the twentieth century Africa experienced no land

⁷ Downs and Reyna (ed.), *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa*, p. 13

⁸ Miller, *Way of Death*, p. 44

⁹ Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*, p. 78

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 76

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 74

¹² Jack Glazier, *Land and the Uses of Tradition Among the Mbeere of Kenya* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), pp. 1-2

shortages, and because of this land *ownership* or control was not a basis socio-economic differentiation in Africa.¹³

Thus, some historians only traced significant transformations in land ownership in Africa from around the time of the onset of colonial rule, when Europeans brought their notions of property rights formed through long experience with mercantile and industrial capitalism.¹⁴ For instance, many scholars have traced the growth of land markets in various West African societies to the development of cash cropping in the middle of the nineteenth century. Notable among them is Anthony Hopkins who claims that in Lagos, land values jumped sometime in the nineteenth century in part because of the commercialization of agriculture.¹⁵ Sara Berry, Polly Hill and Julian Clarke also make similar arguments.¹⁶

As with most African historical study, Senegambian historiography generally neglects the study of land ownership. As will be discussed, the major exception is the literature on the middle Senegal valley. Even in dealing with an area some three hundred miles from the lower Gambia and in a very different ecological and cultural region, the literature on the middle Senegal valley do not explore changes in practices of property ownership or how these changed over a significant time period. Therefore,

¹³ John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff. *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, Vol. II (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 369

¹⁴ Glazier, *Land and the Uses of Tradition*; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, p. 369; Douglas R. Egerton, Alison Games et. al., *The Atlantic World: A History, 1400-1888* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2007), pp. 33-36; Klein (ed.) *Peasants in Africa*, p. 22-23

¹⁵ Hopkins, "Property Rights and Empire Building," p. 790.

¹⁶ Sara Berry shows that conflict over land intensified in much of Western Africa (e.g. in the Nigeria and the Gold Coast) due to the "new" value agricultural land acquired as a result of expansion in cash crop production. [For more see Berry. *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p. 16. See also Julian Clarke, "Peasantization and Landholding: A Nigerian Case Study" in *Peasants in Africa* (edited by Martin Klein), p. 197; Klein, *Peasants in Africa*, p. 21 and Polly Hill. *Rural Capitalism in West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

by exploring the changes to systems of land tenure in the lower Gambia basin and focusing on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this study aims to examine some of these problems in the study of land in West African history.

While its goal is not to diminish the importance of slavery in West Africa, the study suggest that it is misleading to assume that Africans did not value land because they valued slaves more. It shows that emphasis on “wealth-in-people” or the notion of “property in slaves” ignores the political and social value pre-colonial Africans placed on land. Politically, in the lower Gambia valley, controlling land was often critical in the creation of the many forms of dependency in African societies – not just slavery.¹⁷

One of these forms of dependency is the landlord-stranger relationship. In his study of pre-colonial West Africa, George Brooks shows that landlord-stranger relationships often played a critical role in shaping interactions between European strangers and African landlords in the Upper Guinea Coast, of which the lower Gambia was a part of.¹⁸ He shows that the willingness of Africans providing land to Europeans sailors and

¹⁷ For more detailed discussion of this, see Sara Berry “Access, Control and Use of Resources in African Agriculture: An Introduction” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 59, No. 1, Access, Control and Use of Resources in African Agriculture. (1989), pp. 1-5; Berry “Hegemony on a Shoestring: Indirect Rule and Access to Agricultural Land” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 62, No. 3, Rights over Land: Categories and Controversies. (1992), pp. 327-355; Berry. *Chiefs Know Their Boundaries: Essays on Property, Power, and the Past in Asante, 1896-1996* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; Oxford: James Currey; Cape Town: David Philip, 2001); Berry *No Condition is Permanent* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

¹⁸ George E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1993). Other studies which deal with the importance of landlord-stranger relationships in West Africa include: Bruce L. Mouser’s “Landlords-Strangers: A Process of Accommodation and Assimilation” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1975), pp. 425-7; V. R. Dorjahn and Christopher Fyfe. “Landlord and Stranger: Change in Tenancy Relations in Sierra Leone” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1962), p. 392; Wyatt MacGaffey, “Changing Representations in Central African history,” *Journal of African History*, 46 (2005), pp. 193-95. Paul Julian Beedle “Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town” Thesis (doctoral)--University of Cambridge, 1980; Kenneth Swindell. “Migrant Groundnut Farmers in the Gambia: The Persistence of a Nineteenth Century Labor System” *International Migration Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter, 1977), pp. 452-472; Kenneth Swindell. “Family Farms and Migrant Labour: The Strange Farmers of the Gambia” *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*,

merchants were often critical to the success of European commercial interests along the West African coast.¹⁹ But unlike Brooks, this study will show how interactions between African landlords and other African strangers shaped their societies. By emphasizing the importance of landlord-stranger relationship, it shows that power was at the heart of the privileged existence of West African landlords. Like anthropologists Parker Shipton and Mitzi Goheen have demonstrated, people use land not just to produce the material conditions of survival and enrichment, but also to gain control over others, and to define personal and social identities.²⁰ Accordingly, this dissertation suggests that employing a purely materialist interpretation of land in Africa could and is indeed misleading.

The study also shows that it is misleading to assume that in pre-colonial Africa, because land was plentiful and populations small, land ownership was not a matter of importance.²¹ Low population density does not necessarily make land less important. In the nineteenth century lower Gambia region, land also possessed spiritual value. In fact, belief in spirits shaped local attitude toward land. As stated by Arjun Appadurai and William H. Davenport in their work on commodities and value, value is not solely determined by material constituents.²² Mystical and spiritual attributes, they argue, can

Vol. 12, No. 1 (1978), pp. 3-17; Ken Swindell. "Serawoollies, Tillibunkas and Strange Farmers: The Development of Migrant Groundnut Farming along the Gambia River, 1848-95" *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1980), pp. 93-104

¹⁹ George E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers*, pp. 38-9.

²⁰ Parker Shipton and Mitzi Goheen, "Introduction. Understanding African Land-Holding: Power, Wealth, and Meaning" *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 62, No. 3, Rights over Land: Categories and Controversies. (1992), p. 307. See also Shipton "Land and Culture in Tropical Africa," pp. 347-377

²¹ For a more succinct criticism of this assumption see Gareth Austen's "Resources, Techniques, and Strategies South of the Sahara: Revising the Factor Endowments Perspective on African Economic development, 1500-2000" *Economic History Review* (2007), p. 1.

²² Indeed, Anthropologists and economic historians take much of the credit for improving our knowledge of West African land tenure systems. [Notable among them include Paul Bohannan and Laura Bohannan. *Tiv Economy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 87; See also Bronislaw Malinowski,

also become attached to almost any kind of goods as a result of social activity, increasing their value beyond any strictly utilitarian logic and eventually removing them altogether from the realm of economic commodities.²³

As suggested earlier, a good number of the studies on land in West Africa focused on West Africa's river regions. For example, the work of Michal Tymowski and Maurice Delafosse on the Niger River valley shows that in that region, in the past, certain individuals had special rights to the lands situated near the river and the elites often charged a tax on the tenants.²⁴ Focusing on the middle Senegal River, David Robinson shows that land was important in Futa where the middle Senegal valley constitutes a rich floodplain, allowing its farmers to grow a dry season crop and thus provide important insurance against the uncertainties of rainfall agriculture. This asset, according to him, has made Futa the bread-basket of the region, and has attracted herders, traders, and settlers to its soil throughout its history.²⁵ Land in the middle Senegal valley also served other functions. Youssouf Guèye and Oumar Kane for

Coral Gardens and Their Magic: A Study of the Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands. (New York, American Book Co. 1935); G.B. A. Coker, *Family Property Among the Yorubas* (London & Lagos: Sweet and Maxwell, African Universities Press, 1966), pp. 25-6; Polly Hill. *Rural Capitalism in West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. xiv; Polly Hill. *The Migrant Cocoa-Farmers of Southern Ghana: A Study of Rural Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963)].

²³ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 108. For more on land and spirituality, see Robin Horton "God, Man and the Land in a Northern Ibo Village Group," In *Africa*, 24, (1956), pp. 17-28; Jack Goody *Death, Property and the Ancestors: A Study of the Mutuary Customs of the Lo-Dagaa of West Africa* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1962); Edward Tengan's *The Land as Being and Cosmos: The Institution of the Earth Cult among the Sisala of Northwestern Ghana* (New York and Paris: Peter Lang, 1991)

²⁴ See for example, the work of Michal Tymowski, *Le Développement et la Régression Chez les Peuples de la Boucle du Niger à l'époque Précoloniale* ([Varsovie] Wydawni twa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1974), p. 13; Maurice Delafosse. *Les Civilisations Nègro-Africaines* (Paris : Librairie Stock, 1925) and Maurice Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (Soudan français) [microform : séries d' études pub. Sous la direction de M. Le gouverneur Clozel (Paris : E. Larose, 1912).

²⁵ David Robinson, "The Islamic Revolution of Futa Toro," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1975), p. 185

example show that the Islamic Regime of Futa Toro and its elites took special interest in controlling land because the land was considered valuable.²⁶ For instance, in *La Première Hégémonie Peule*, Oumar Kane connects land ownership in Futa Toro to political power by describing the *jaaltaabe* of Futa as the “chef de terre.”²⁷ Elsewhere, also in the Senegal region, Boubacarr Barry, Abdoulaye Bara Diop and Mamadou Diouf show that land rights in Waalo and in Kajoor were equally linked to political or religious power under the authority of a territorial chief, who functioned as a community head whose title was *laman*.²⁸

Even though studies focusing on other river regions of West Africa seem to constitute an exception to the assumption that the key resource in Africa is people, not land, lands situated along the banks of the Gambia River have been rarely placed in this historical reality. Hence, this is a study of a riverine region. By charting changes in land tenure across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this study shows that African customs and practices of land tenure were far from static and that not all of the influences on land tenure were coming from Europe. Local forces were important in altering family structures and unity as well as communities, and the ways people exercised control over land. Moreover, it also shows that while the development of commercial agriculture played a significant role in altering local attitudes toward land in

²⁶ Youssouf Guèye, “Essai: Sur Les Causes et Les Consequences de la Micropropriété au Fouta Toro,” *Bulletin de l’I. F.A.N. T.XIX, sér. B, No. 3 1-2*, (1957); p. 98 and Oumar Kane *La Première Hégémonie Peule: Le Fuuta Tooro de Koli Tengella à Almaami Abdul* (Paris: Karthala; Dakar-Fann: Presses universitaires de Dakar, 2004).

²⁷ For more on land in Futa, see the work of Aboubacry Moussa Lam, *La Fièvre de la Terre* (Paris, L’Harmattan, 1990) and Maïga, Mahamadou. *Le Bassin du Fleuve Sénégal: De la Traite Négrière au Développement Sous-Régional Autocentré* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 1995)

²⁸ Abdoulaye-Bara Diop. *La Société Wolof, Tradition et Changement: Les Systèmes D’inégalité et De Domination* (Paris: Karthala, 1981), pp. 120-131; Mamadou Diouf. *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle: Pouvoir Ceddo et Conquête Coloniale* (Paris: Karthala, 1990), pp. 23-25; 32-41; Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 11-33; 304

West Africa, circumstances in most of the lower Gambia did not encourage the growth of land markets as in other societies in West Africa. In sum, my study seeks to contribute to this slow but growing recognition that Africans valued land just like they valued people. It does so by focusing on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lower Gambia basin.

Sources and Methodology

The existence of a relatively rich body of historical documentation and oral sources allows for a study of this nature. But analyzing the evidence could present many challenges. In the first place, in existing archives, virtually all reports were written by outsiders, nearly all Europeans, who brought with them their ideas about property ownership. What they wrote often contained assumptions that were not necessarily accurate. For this reason, one needs to read materials carefully in an attempt to infer what the situation was like even when things are not stated directly. This is often slow going, requires patience and other sources as well as cultural knowledge.

The use of oral sources (in the form of individual and group memories of past attitudes towards property and property ownership) is crucial to a study of this nature. In many remote villages located along the banks of the Gambia River one can find people who can speak to changing notions of property (land) ownership that they have witnessed or have knowledge of. However, like the written sources left behind by Europeans, these oral sources have to be approached with care. In fact, one might find it difficult to tap them given the present economic, social and political circumstances facing Gambian society in general and the lower Gambia in particular. For the interest of preserving unity in their communities, for instance, elders are in most cases careful of

what they tell their audience. A case in point is when the author pressed an elder griot named Sheriff Jobarteh to explain to him why in Banni and in Saba landownership was such a contentious issue in the past. Jobarteh's only answer was "not all history must be told."²⁹ Jobarteh was mindful of what he would say that could jeopardize the harmony that his community enjoys. Certainly, he did not want to reveal anything that will hurt or anger a member of his community. Moreover, Jobarteh's fear is also compounded by the growing conflicts as well as the unfavorable political atmosphere in the country over land in several communities in recent years adds to the difficulty.

Written Sources

Before the advent of colonial rule, the peoples of the Senegambia in general and those of the lower Gambia in particular produced less of the materials historians traditionally consider as evidence – i.e. letters, dairies, travel logs, wills, property records, organizational papers, and government documents. However, Europeans who either lived or visited the area in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have produced a considerable body of evidence vital in understanding African systems of land tenure. These documents were in the form of European (in both English and French) travel accounts, letters, court records, scattered government circulars, annual reports, reports from special (land) committees, colonial correspondences, and most importantly commissioner's reports.

The largest body of sources about most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Gambia region, however, is the English documents. The French, as Charlotte Quinn writes, were primarily concerned with districts under their sphere of influence,

²⁹ These two middle-sized Gambian villages are located in Baddibu (an old Mandinka kingdom located on the northern bank of the Gambia River).

which means administrators of French trading establishments and their merchants paid relatively little attention to institutions along the banks of the Gambia River beyond Albreda and its immediate surroundings.³⁰ In fact, by the turn of the nineteenth century they were primarily confined in their Albreda post, opposite James Island.³¹ Accordingly, this study relies primarily on the English sources to chart changes in practices of land landownership in the lower Gambia River. The annual reports provide a valuable year-to-year chronology of developments during the period under study whereas the commissioner's reports provide rich ethnographic descriptions of local populations, as well as their customs and practices.³² While a great majority of these reports focus on colonial affairs, the English travel accounts were especially useful for the "proto-colonial" period – the period leading to the beginning of British colonial rule in the Gambia.

For period before 1860, the study draws from the writings of individuals such as Richard Jobson, Mungo Park, Gaspard Mollien, and missionaries such as John Morgan, William Moister and William Fox to describe the centrality of land in the lower Gambian political culture. Since most of these Europeans were strangers themselves (who wanted land to settle to trade or to proselytize), their accounts provide essential clues showing how strangers could acquire land from the local aristocracy that controlled the land. The author also supplements the evidence from these accounts with

³⁰ Charlotte A. Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia: Traditionalism, Islam, and European Expansion* (Evanston [Ill.] Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. xv

³¹ Though French merchants would remain important in the area until much latter than this date. Evidence indicates that few French merchants were active in the area until the last decades of the 1800s.

³² In part, the records helped me to establish the basic chronology of this study. Some of the reports point to important markers in the transformations in lower Gambian society – e.g. the decaying powers of Mansa, the waging of holy wars by Muslims and the demographic shifts in the region's social landscape as well as their implications.

insights from dispatches and correspondences between Europeans in the Gambia and their respective counterparts in Europe or Sierra Leone.³³

Between 1860 and the early 1900s various European documents in the form of reports and correspondences appeared describing the general situation in the lower Gambia River. This period coincided with various religious wars and increasing British presence in the area. Some of the correspondences help shed more light on the circumstances that led to the outbreak of the jihads as well as the growing importance of the peanut economy in the communities along the banks of the Gambia River. Similarly, the travelling commissioners' reports which began emerging during the last decade of the nineteenth century contain rich evidence concerning local ideas about landownership in the Gambia. Since the appointment of the first travelling commissioners in 1893, commissioners were expected to travel "through the country and ascertain what there was either in shape of towns, or people or anything else, within the boundary."³⁴ During "the ordinary course of official duties, hearing complaints, reviews of native tribunal cases and so forth," they obtained critical information useful to historians of land tenure. They also obtained information during "enquiries carried out for the Intelligence Report on the north and south bank districts" and also from the

³³ I also make up for this lack of written documents by using oral history derived from oral history collection at the Research and Documentation Center and also from interviews.

³⁴ NRS, ARP 35/2, 1894 Colonial Reports (Annual) No. 143 (Annual Report for 1894). Alice Bellagamba "Slavery and Emancipation in the Colonial Archives: British Officials, Slave-Owners, and Slaves in the Protectorate of the Gambia (1890-1936)" *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* Vol. 39 No. 1 (2005), pp. 13-14. The first travelling commissioners were appointed in January 1893. Initially, there were only two of them, one for each bank of the river running 300 miles in the interior from the Atlantic.

“informal talks with natives of all kind.”³⁵ The first set of travelling commissioners’ reports covers the period 1893-1899. The second set covers the period from 1902-1921 and the third deals with the years 1923-1933.

Basically, the very nature of colonial rule in West Africa, like elsewhere in Africa, encouraged the production of archives of this sort. As David Conrad observed in the Malian archives, it was a matter of colonial policy for officials at regional offices to inquire into the historical background of local cultures though some administrators were more interested than others in pursuing this policy.³⁶ Similarly, in Senegal, David Robinson writes that “administrators were charged with establishing a survey of relevant information about local chiefs, their attitudes, competence, and influence; the economy of production and distribution, religious affiliations; land tenure and demographics.”³⁷ In the Gambia, as Alice Bellagamba notes, the establishment of British rule coincided with reconnaissance to gather information, who would legitimize later political choices.³⁸

While many of the European colonial officers have performed this duty with utmost dedication, and have produced telling reports of what they saw, African interpreters and cultural guides often played a critical role in the overall process. With their help, for instance, commissioners’ traveled widely and in every district, meeting with village and district elders and discussing wide ranging issues that were of interest

³⁵ NRS, CSO 10/71 Colonial Secretary (Sgd) R.H. Gretton Governor Sir Thomas Southorn, Confidential Dispatch to the Colonial Secretary in Bathurst from the Commissioner’s Office South Bank Province, Cape St. Mary, April 30 1940.

³⁶ David C. Conrad, “Oral Sources on Links between Great States: Sumanguru, Servile Lineage, the Jariso, and the Kaniaga” *History in Africa*, Vol. II (1984), p. 37

³⁷ David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920* (Athens and Oxford:: Ohio University Press and James Currey, 2000), p. 52

³⁸ Bellagamba, “Slavery and Emancipation in the Colonial Archives,” p. 14

to them and their European superiors in Bathurst and in London. Some of these issues include but not exclusively the subject of slavery, trade, local politics, customary practices, religion, law and order, levels of productivity, and social organizations.

Around 1900, the colonial administration in the Gambia saw the need for documenting the “laws and customs of the people.” Consequently, reports on land tenure practices grew during this period. Two of the major proponents of this were one Mr. Russell, the then Chief Magistrate of the Gambia colony and Governor George C. Denton (1901-1911). They both called for the need to develop and write down not only “knowledge of land tenure systems but also African customary laws in general.” They argued that the purpose of such exercise was to enable the administration of justice, to resolve disputes as well as develop “knowledge of native customary law.”³⁹

Precisely, in 1906 the commissioners came up with an important document called “the laws and customs” of the various African groups, which was similar to the French administration’s 1902 publication in Côte d’Ivoire called the “Les Coutumes Indigènes de la Côte d’Ivoire” and also John Mensah Sarbah’s “Fante Customary Law” published in 1905.⁴⁰ This document gives a detailed description of African customary law as was practice in the newly created Gambia colony. The document provides a rich ethnographic description of the lower Gambia River, describes local attitudes towards property and property ownership, inheritance rules, family structures, and history. The commissioners who collected the data for these report were pretty much guided by earlier reports which existed in other parts of colonial West Africa. For example, they used questions formerly employed by the French Government in Côte d’Ivoire as well

³⁹ NRS, CSO 2/94, Laws and Customs of the Various Communities in West Africa, 1906.

⁴⁰ NRS, CSO 2/94, 1906

as those from the “Notes and Queries on Anthropology” prepared by the British Association in the nineteenth century.⁴¹

In the late 1930s and 1940s other sets of reports appeared. These were the reports from special (land) committees. For example, on November 29 1939, the Secretary of state for Colonies in London issued a confidential dispatch to all colonial governments in British Africa emphasizing the importance of investigating “native” land tenure systems. This soon gave birth to the establishment of a Land Tenure committee under the chairmanship of Lord Hailey. Other members of the committee included Sir Allen Pim, Dr. H. M. Leake, Dr. C.K. Meek, Mr. H.B. Thomas, Dr. A.I. Richards, and several other members of the colonial office staff. The main duty of this committee was to investigate issues of land tenure not only in the Gambia but British Africa as a whole. After their investigation was concluded and a report submitted to the office of the Secretary of State for Colonies in London, their recommendations soon reached officials in the overseas territories like the Gambia. Part of the recommendations put forward in the Lord Hailey Report was the need for the creation of land tenure panels in all English colonies in Africa. Officials in the Gambia worked tirelessly to implement this recommendation. On the March 2 1946, C.F.T. Colby, the Governor’s Deputy in the Gambia, wrote that it was necessary to establish a “machinery . . . for the study of the problems of native land tenure.”⁴² He recommended that a Land Tenure Advisory panel be established whose sole function would be to assist government in undertaking a detailed investigation into matters of land tenure. Soon

⁴¹ The British Association, established in the 1830s, prepared a set of guidelines for travelers to use as they set out to study a non-Western society.

⁴² NRS, CSO 10/71, Native Land Tenure, Dispatch no. 224, December 1939.

after this, the government appointed two officers who were charged with the responsibility of studying local systems of land tenure. One of these officers subsequently became the head of the Gambia's Lands Department.

Even in the 1940s some colonial officials kept complaining that there was a lack of "knowledge" on matters of land tenure in government circles. As one report stated, "information on land tenure in Gambia, either from official investigation or anthropological studies, is exiguous." The field is almost untouched. It was only in 1945 that Professor Daryll Forde reported on the need for investigation of indigenous economic organizations in village communities. In spite of this, however, Forde focused mostly on the Mandinka, Wolof, Jola, and Loro (a Fula sub-group) in his report.⁴³

Relying on these European documents certainly give an incomplete, if not a biased, picture of local societies and their institutions.⁴⁴ David Robinson and Gary Wilder remind us of the colonial context in which these documents were produced. For Robinson, the colonial reports were tools relevant to the day-to-day operation of colonial rule. He states that they gave colonial administrators the confidence that they knew, and thus controlled, the local situation.⁴⁵ For Wilder, the "colonial ethnologies" were entwined with imperialism and their main objective was to "reproduce native society." Hence, for him, they projected a false image of African societies: emphasizing primitivity, backwardness, and tribal organization. All over French West Africa, he

⁴³ CSO 10/71 Enclosures to Gambia dispatch no. 96 of the 24th June 1948

⁴⁴ Cited in Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. xv.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*

posits, colonial subjects “became a newly marked social category,” often treated as different and having “prelogical thoughts.”⁴⁶

Further criticisms of these colonial archives include questioning what went into these documents and what did not. In the first instance, one can claim that the makers of these archives brought with them their ideas of property and property ownership to bear on their writings. Also, they described local customs and land tenure systems in the Gambia as if they were the same in other African colonies. What is implied here is that, as both Robinson and Wilder suggests, the content of these European documents have been distorted, filtered and shaped by circumstances of colonial rule.

Since most colonial officials could not speak the languages of the area (Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, or Jola), they were forced to use African interpreters who either added their voices or filtered the information that they were transmitting.⁴⁷ While the use of interpreters could enhance the quality of the information, it may well present some problems. For example, in 1901 a colonial official in Bathurst complained that there was a difficulty in obtaining efficient interpretation. He wrote that “...the main trouble [was] that so few of those of the class from which interpreters should be obtained know Mandingo really well, and when they are thoroughly acquainted with it and the different dialects their English is frequently defective . . .”⁴⁸ It seems that

⁴⁶ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-state: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 65

⁴⁷ Several scholars have discussed the limits of translation in any form of qualitative research. Most, however, agree that the process of interpreting important information might be lost.

⁴⁸ NRS, ARP 35/2, 1901-- Colonial Report, No. 355, 1901

getting good interpreters was a problem which no doubt affected the quality of what got recorded.⁴⁹

Certainly, not everything was on record. For example, at an individual, family or group level, rarely did most people take their claims to land to court. In many instances, people preferred to settle their problems outside of the European courts and rarely kept records of the ways in which they resolved them especially in rural communities. Besides, nineteenth century archival sources are weak in quality particularly as it concerns statistical data. They were most of the time based on mere guesses. As Commissioner J.H. Ozanne wrote in 1894, nineteenth century statistics “must not be taken as anything like an exact census . . . it will [only] give some idea of the number of people we have to deal with, which is better than nothing.”⁵⁰ Colonial officials like Ozanne could not effectively keep track of the internal movement of people, which in many ways tended to be seasonal.⁵¹ Similarly, several colonial administrators repeatedly admitted that conditions of registers were poor — a problem that increased the phenomenon of encroachments into public and private property.⁵² As one official lamented, encroachment was a very difficult issue to resolve owing to the unsatisfactory

⁴⁹ Perhaps the only exception to this weakness is that some of the earliest travelling commissioners and Governors were experienced people. For example, George C. Denton, Governor of the Gambia in 1901, wrote that he “lived amongst Mohammedan peoples for the greater part of the last 28 years, and have for the most part been on intimate and friendly terms with them (see ARP 35/2 Colonial Report, No. 355, 1901). But even that it is not clear whether he spoke the local languages or used African interpreters.

⁵⁰ The commissioners relied heavily on what community elders told them. They enjoyed the luxury of confirming their estimates. In fact, Commissioner Ozanne discussed this problem. See NRS, ARP 32/1, Travelling Commissioner’s Report for 8 May 1894

⁵¹ For instance, between November and June Bathurst was frequently flooded a large number of temporary migrants and in the north of April it appeared abnormally empty. The fact is that people in the Senegambia region moved around a lot. In fact, griots and oral traditionalists in the lower Gambia speak a lot about frequent relocation of families and even villages. See NRS, ARP 25/1-Annual Report for 1892 No. 80

⁵² This phenomenon was concentrated mostly in urban areas since these land grants and registers mostly pertained to the town of Bathurst, British Combo, the ‘Ceded Mile’ and McCarthy Island.

condition of registers: “so many measurements being missing and others inaccurate and as mentioned no sketches at all in some cases. I was handicapped as many had lost their grants by fire and various other causes. It is regrettable that the matter was not attended to at the time as now one does not know how many more of these cases there are to come forward in the absence of a correct list...”⁵³ This concern was re-echoed later in another dispatch citing that “it will be found already that two different persons hold grants for the same allotments and in others that the title deeds are not duly recorded or registered.”⁵⁴

Another challenge of relying on European documents, especially travel accounts and missionary sources, to chart changes in practices of landownership for the period before the 1860s is that European merchants and missionaries generally paid more attention to the political and economic factors relevant to the needs of their trading and missionary activities. On the one hand, they were quick to report on trade, levels of productivity, procurement of labor, conquest of an African region by another, difficulties and prospects of maintaining law and order, the so-called backwardness of Africans and their religious beliefs and so on. On the other hand, they did little to solicit a thorough understanding of African customs and practices and more especially land tenure customs. Thus, their writings tell us little about ownership and the management, and distribution of land in the various African communities they were writing on.

⁵³ Record keeping was a major problem both for the people and the government. As for the people, many may have lost their *titles* on fire or physical damage caused by insects. [See National Records Service of The Gambia ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-Annual No. 195(Report for 1896)]

⁵⁴ This is indeed a problem which limits the evidence for any study on property in Bathurst. See NRS, CSO 1/2 1824

The problem of access to some of these documents is also worth noting. In the Gambia, the Court Record collection of the Department of State for Justice in Banjul is not only in a poor state but is not also open to scholars. This archive houses a wealth of civil, police, and criminal records and includes a body of documents produced by the Mohammedan (Islamic) Courts of Bathurst and Kombo St. Mary created by the colonial government in 1905. The documents are not catalogued, are rapidly deteriorating and one needs permission from the Judicial Secretary in the Justice Department to access them. The author made several unsuccessful attempts to get access to this largely untapped archive.⁵⁵ Hence, the legal (court) records used in this study are admittedly scanty.

Despite all these problems and challenges, however, the European documents offer relatively good information about the past, however, limited they are. In first place, and as Charlotte Quinn indicates, European observers in the nineteenth century regularly tapped from African oral history, which implies that the latter often shaped the views of Europeans. Indeed, there is no denying of the fact that Europeans habitually wrote down erroneous accounts describing the African societies they encountered. But it is impossible to also dismiss the reality that in many instances they also solicited “local knowledge” from their African servants and interpreters as well as elders.⁵⁶ For example, as the author read the travelling commissioners’ reports, he grew to have at

⁵⁵ I was granted access to the archive only thrice. I asked to write to the Judicial Secretary of the Justice Department who never replied to my letter in spite of my numerous attempts to follow-up on my request. But when I spoke with one of the staff in the Records Unit of the Department he provided me access out of favor. Three afterwards the man, however, asked me write

⁵⁶ Ibid; See also Tamba Mbayo’s dissertation for more on the role of interpreters in the Senegambia. Mbayo, “African Interpreters, Mediation, and the Production of knowledge in Colonial Senegal: The Lower and Middle Senegal Valley, ca. 1850s to ca. 1920s” PhD. Dissertation, Michigan State University, 2007. See also the NRS, ARP 35/2, Colonial Report, No. 355, 1901.

least selective respect for some of the commissioners: the traveling commissioners were bright, observant, and often curious. Many of them were people who devoted themselves fully to what they thought (however misguided some of their assumptions) was an operation that would benefit their subjects. The reports they wrote, as Bellagamba states, “take on a historic and ethnographic nature.”⁵⁷

More importantly, it was my readings from these archives that opened up the way for my research. During the initial phase of my investigation several individuals and communities could not tell me much about their history as it relates to land. But by noting few events (especially past conflicts over land) described by Europeans in their writings the author was able to ask specific questions about the past that people could easily remember.

Oral Sources

Given the problems associated with using documented sources to examine changing concepts of land tenure in West Africa’s Gambia River region, this study argues for the contribution of oral history or data in writing African history. In several of the remote towns and villages the author visited there exist people (men and women) who can speak to changing notions of property ownership that they have witnessed or know of. Many of the elders interviewed for this study spoke about some of the region’s main social and political transformations of the last two centuries. Many of them also reveal important details about inheritance practices, the importance of gender in shaping property rights, local conflicts and above all how power determined access to land.

⁵⁷ Bellagamba, “Slavery and Emancipation in the Colonial Archives,” p. 14

African oral sources are critical in reconstructing the African past since they give a much wider voice especially to those who were once marginalized. In other words, they bring recognition to the voices of substantial groups of people who had been ignored. Oral history complicates historical narratives by adding diverging views and opinions about an event in the past. Thus, this study demonstrates that oral history could be a powerful tool for discovering, exploring and evaluating how people led their lives.⁵⁸

This dissertation makes use of two forms of oral sources. The first consist of oral (audio) tapes in the depository of the former Oral History and Antiquities Archive (OHA), now called the Research and Documentation Center (RDD).⁵⁹ This oral history archive houses tapes of interviews conducted by a generation of researchers such as David Gamble whose work in the Gambia dates back to the 1940s. The archive also has audio recordings of interviews conducted by “Gambianists” whose work dates back especially to the 1970s. These include Donald R. Wright, Winfred Galloway, Peter Weil and Bakary Sidebe. The second type of oral sources is from personal interviews conducted between 2006 and 2008. Interviews were conducted in more than a dozen towns and villages and the author spoke to men and women, Alkalos, chiefs and ordinary people on what they know about landownership in the Gambia particularly in the last two centuries.

But like the written documents, drawing from oral history presented new challenges to my research. These challenges range from the current socio-political

⁵⁸ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 2-3

⁵⁹ The RDD is now under the National Council for Arts and Culture, which also under the Department of State for Tourism. Few decades ago, it was under the direct supervision of the President’s Office.

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circumstances in the “New Republic,” the tendency for potential informants to conceal essential details of their history as well as the inclination of some to attempt to glorify the past. Apparently, it could be difficult to conduct interviews on landownership because conflicts over land have seemed to amplify across the Gambia particularly in recent years. There are several cases in court involving individuals, families and sometimes villages claiming what each of them maintains are their rightful property.⁶⁰ In addition, especially in years, the Gambian government has dispossessed several individuals and communities vital parts of their land. With the expansion of tourism since the 1970s, communities near the Atlantic (particularly the settlements of Sukuta/Sabiji, Brufut and Tujenreng) have lost a great deal of their land partly due to the implications of rising cost of land and government’s strategy of grabbing land from the people. The Department of State for Lands and Survey and the Social Security and Housing Finance Corporation (SSHFC) have recently embarked on establishing housing estates earmarked for civil servants and private citizens. Within a period of a decade or so numerous housing projects have sprang up but the major beneficiaries were mostly wealthy foreigners and Gambians, as well as senior government officials.⁶¹ These estates were all created on farmlands families and communities had claimed for several decades if not centuries. Clearly, many of the people interviewed, especially those in the urban and peri-urban areas, were embittered of this and have developed negative feelings against the government. However, most of the informants did not feel very comfortable discussing this matter. They fear facing arrests or being reprimanded

⁶⁰ Few of the disputes include the Makumbaya-Babylon dispute, the Passamas Fulakunda and Passamas Mandinka dispute and the disputes between Sikunda and Toniataba around the 1950s and 60s.

⁶¹ Among the housing projects that were created include the Brusubi estate, Makumbaya, Tujenreng, and Brufut.

especially by a government that does take criticisms lightly. The author sensed such fears among several Alkalos (village heads) whose position and fate depends on their ties with the government.⁶² In short, getting people to talk about land is a hard thing to do.⁶³

Another challenge in using or soliciting oral data – a difficulty several historians have discussed at length – is the problems associated with memory.⁶⁴ During my interviews I observed that in peoples' memories of landownership there is an acute tendency to attempt to “glorify” the past, and part of this glorification of the past includes the argument that “ancient” Africa was characterized by the custom of sharing of whatever resource or property one had. As opposed to the West, African societies, the argument goes, were generous and based on reciprocity. People lived in one unit,

⁶² Gambian President Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh's so-called “Back to the Land call” seems to have added to the difficulty. Shortly after he establish a grand farm in his home town of Kanilai, on the river's south bank, a number of village Alkalos and Chiefs have given presents of village land to him so as to win his recognition. It now is as if the president has a farm in every district in the Gambia. Some of his close associates are also given land –lands previously belonging to families. A man told me that Jammeh's associates are not only given the best lands, but the gifts are against the will of the people. A good example is the case in Sifoe and Kiti (near the Atlantic) where most of the arable land was given to Jammeh and is covertly opposed by the residents of the villages. A similar issue is also going on in Central River Region where a certain chief has granted a rice field belonging to a certain family for generations to the Gambian president. The president, said one of my informants, “has land in every district or corner of the country and these lands were owned by individual families for several generations.” [Source: the identity of this person is concealed].

⁶³ I made several attempts to interview the Alkalos of Farato and Farato Bojang Kunda but without success. For instance, the Alkali of Farato Bojang Kunda told me that he did not trust me. He said I was being sent by the government to investigate him and hence he will not talk to me. Even though I tried to show him my Michigan State University ID, but since I was a Gambian it was understandably hard for him to believe what I was saying. I also could record the interview I had with another Alkali who pleaded with me never to mention his name in my writings.

⁶⁴ See Donald R. Wright, “Beyond Migration and Conquest: Oral Traditions and Mandinka Ethnicity in Senegambia” *History in Africa*, Vol. 12 (1985), p. 335; Wright, “Requiem for the Use of Oral Tradition to Reconstruct the Precolonial History of the Lower Gambia” *History in Africa*, Vol. 18 (1991), p.p. 401-402; Martin A. Klein “Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget: Oral History and the Experience of Slavery” *History in Africa*, Vol. 16, (1989), pp. 209-217; Ralph A. Austen “The Slave Trade as History and Memory: Confrontations of Slaving Voyage Documents and Communal Traditions” *The William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 58, No. 1 (Jan. 2001).

usually a big compound, eating, drinking, working and playing together. The same was for any kind of property. In such a close-knit society, land could not be owned by an individual; it was shared by the whole community and no one fought for anything because the menace of greed was absent. Western society, a number of Gambians and Africans will often argue, is individualistic and selfish, lacking a culture of sharing. These contrasting images of the 'Old' Africa and Europe is so widespread in popular memory (as well as in certain intellectual circles) that anyone bent on researching changes in African conceptions of landownership must be aware of these ambiguous constructions. They are less useful in that they do not tell us anything significant about the past.

Part of this tendency to glorify the past is the inclination for oral informants to emphasize in their narratives acts of bravery and/or heroism associated with war while overlooking important social and cultural details vital in understanding such events. The author realized this not only during his fieldwork but also when he began working at the oral history archive.⁶⁵ While the RDD collection contains a rich archive of audio tapes on various aspects of Gambian history and culture, many of the interviews were centered on impressive performance (i.e. heroism) in battles.⁶⁶

The author tried to overcome some of these problems by relying heavily on a well-known oral traditionalist/historian whose experience with Gambian oral history

⁶⁵ For example, significant part of my interview with Sheriff Jobarteh focused on President Yaya Jammeh even though I was not interested in him. Jobarteh wanted to impress me that he knows Jammeh's history of which I cared less about.

⁶⁶ Here, I am referring specifically to the recordings on the Sankandi-Jataba land conflict of 1900. Both the interviewees and the interviewees seemed to have been more interested in what occurred during the fight rather than the deep social and cultural factors that caused the misunderstanding. Another possible of this oral history archive is the fact that their collection is biased heavily towards the Mandinka. There are very few recordings on Fula, Wolof, Jola and Serahule communities and very little, if any, on the Serer and other minority groups.

goes back to the late 1940s and the early 1950s. Bakary Sidebe, a retired civil servant and former Director and co-founder of the Oral History and Antiquities Bureau have worked with several intellectuals on collecting and interpreting various aspects of Gambian history and culture. The author benefited greatly from his knowledge and connection especially in the area of identifying individuals that he needed to talk to. In many cases where he had difficulty interviewing someone he would call him and he will talk to the person on my behalf.

Another important strategy he employed was the use of intermediaries – most of whom are intimate or childhood friends. Virtually, in every community where the author conducted interviews he ensured that he was accompanied not only by a close friend but also a person who either knows the community or at least someone from there, or else whose family is known in that community once mentioned. The intermediaries served in some instances as translators, particularly where my language skills were not quite sufficient.

Summary of Chapters

The study is comprised of five chapters. The first chapter provides the ecological, political and social context for the lower Gambia River basin. By providing the context, it outlines the region's diverse population, ecology, political systems as well as the religious changes that characterized the last two centuries of its history. Also, the chapter shows that just as this is a study of a Savanna region, it is also focuses on a riverine area – a study focusing on an area covering a few couple of miles around and along the banks of the Gambia River.

Chapter two, which focuses on the early nineteenth century, explores the close link between power and control of land. It examines the way in which the Mandinka ruling aristocracy—comprising of the *mansa*, the *alkalo* and *kabilo* head—monopolized the ownership of the land and kept the other segment of the population as dependents. Throughout the chapter, the author attempts to show the centrality of land in lower Gambian political culture.

Chapters three and four examines major transformations that took place in the Gambia region from the mid-nineteenth century and how they affected land tenure systems. Chapter three, for instance, looks at the way in which the *Soninke-Marabout* wars (i.e. the forces of reform) led to the end of the aristocracy's monopoly ownership of the land. It shows that a root cause of the holy wars of the nineteenth century was the aristocracy's loss of control over their subjects, who rose against their rulers to end the excessive taxation and exclusion from owning good land as well as the economic, social, and political assets associated with landownership.

The fourth chapter explores another transformation, which came with the development of peanut production. It shows changes brought to ideas of property ownership because of the change to cash-crop (peanut) production through the middle of the nineteenth century, ideas affected largely by the growth of commercial agriculture and the entrance of strange farmers and their need of land for growing crops. It argues that while the growth of peanut production had far-reaching consequences on lower Gambian society (such as demographic changes), it hardly created well-developed rural credit (land) markets.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 deal with the lower Gambia region at a time when it is not quite yet, a British territory. In fact, it is possible to call the nineteenth century, or more than a half of it, a “proto-colonial” period, in which the British are present, and were the pre-eminent European authority, but not in control. Thus, it is important to note that the boundaries that get drawn by the end of the nineteenth century are not yet there before – which also suggests that one should not read the modern boundaries and the colonial entity back as what the lower Gambia was. Rather, the emphasis is placed on both the changing political boundaries of the Gambia and geography or territory that occupied the Gambia River basin.

The last and final chapter focuses on the impact British rule had on land tenure systems. It deals with the introduction of British-inspired land legislations and the extent to which they changed local practices pertaining to land and how the impact of British-induced “land” policies had different effects in the rural and urban parts of the country. The chapter shows that the changes (to land tenure) that were occurring during the colonial period were part of ongoing transformations that began long before the onset of colonial rule. These changes include the increasing individuation or disaggregation of family land into smaller plots owned and controlled by smaller household units. However, what was new was the codification of the laws governing the management and ownership of land.

The conclusion emphasize that land occupies an important place in the political and social history of the Gambia River. Its importance is explained not solely by its economic value, but also by its social and political importance. Africans conceive of

land as both a political and a social resource. In short, land was a means by which some individuals, families and communities created dependents.

While the general movement in the dissertation is chronological, it is also thematic and that the militant Islamic movements of chapter 3, the cash crop production of chapter 4, and the early colonial rule of chapter 5, will be overlapping considerably, and in effect covering the same time periods.

Chapter One

The Political, Ecological, Social and Economic Configuration of the Lower Gambia Basin

The kingdoms and villages of the lower Gambia River constitute a logical subject of historical study for a variety of reasons. One important reason is that the lower Gambia was historically more populated than the upper reaches of the Gambia. Several documentary sources have commented on how sparsely populated the interior of the Gambia was. Even Lady Southorn noted “the loneliness of the upper reaches” of the Gambia, which she notes “is striking.” In the Upper Gambia, she writes, the river seems absolutely deserted.¹ Also, John Gray remarked that “in the higher reaches of the Gambia towns and villages are few and far between.”² In addition to the demographic rationale, the lower Gambia was the area that was frequented the most by European visitors. As such, the quality of the European documents for the lower Gambia appears richer than those of the Upper River.³

For centuries, the Gambia River proved to be one of the major avenues that provided Europeans access to the West African hinterland. Modern European commercial and political interactions with the Gambia can be traced back to the expansion of the trading activities of the Portuguese in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who came purposely to trade in gold and slaves.⁴ Later, from the mid-seventeenth century, the British established a base on James Island. But private traders

¹ Lady Southorn, *The Gambia: The Story of the Groundnut Colony* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952), p. 32

² John M. Gray, *A History of the Gambia* (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1966), p. 1

³ *Ibid*, p. 64.

⁴ Donald R. Wright's *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niimi, The Gambia* (New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 89

from England, whose main rivals were the French, were scattered along the river. As far as the French were concerned, their interests in the Gambia were generally confined mostly in Albreda, a commercial town located on the north bank just below James Island. Despite the expanding European commerce in the region, until the early nineteenth century, the lower Gambia River was both an independent entity and a commercial entity under a British “sphere of influence.”

Like the Portuguese and the French, British merchants acquired land from the Mandinka *mansas* and on these lands they built their trading stations (commonly referred to as factories). In return, the *mansas* levied duties on Europeans trading in the area and charged them rents for the land they received. Some of the most prominent factories were found in Brefet, Geregia (situated near Bwiam), Tendaba, Kaur and in numerous smaller trading ports along the river. Their control over the region was only commercial and the English monopoly of the Gambia trade was mostly exercised by the Royal African Company and the Gambia Adventurers (under the Royal Adventurers).⁵ In fact, the Gambia of the pre-nineteenth century was more or less the several hundred towns and villages that dotted landscape of the banks of the Gambia River. It also was comprised of numerous states and/or kingdoms.

British privateers continued to enjoy the relative monopoly over the Gambia trade until 1807 when the slave trade along the river was finally abolished. The illegalization of the slave trade along the West African coast brought about a major transformation in Gambian history. Between 1807 and 1888, Britain acquired a number of settlements in lands located along the banks of the Gambia River partly to

⁵ Gray, *A History of the Gambia*, p. 69

consolidate its influence in the region and to suppress the slave trade. These include Saint Mary's Island (also known as Bathurst) which they acquired in 1816, the "Ceded Mile" (acquired in 1826), Cape Saint Mary (acquired in 1827) and MacCarthy Island. In 1840, they acquired new land from the Mansa of Kombo and remained it Kombo Saint Mary. Unlike the pre-1807 era, the British now exercised direct control over these settlements. However, taking as a whole, this "colony" was no more than an undefined British sphere of influence.

The year 1889 however brought about another major change with the demarcation of the modern boundaries of the Gambia, which were laid down (in the Anglo-French Convention of 1889) by English and French delegates in Paris. This boundary is completely artificial having nothing to do with the natural ethnic or geographic lines of demarcation. In addition, it distorts the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries political and historical map of the region. It also presents a major challenge of charting changes across the nineteenth century. As noted by Harry A Gailey, the present day boundaries of the Gambia present specific problems for historians dealing with the pre-1889 agreement. This is because it could force historians to limit their analysis to areas that constitute the modern Republic of the Gambia. But obviously the history of the lower Gambia region was not confined to the stretch of land that is now called the Gambia. Rather, it extended over the broad savanna and sahel areas that today are in Senegal. It also constituted the lands that were formerly claimed by the *mansas* of the several River States that once flourished along the banks of the Gambia River.

The Physical and Environmental Setting

The lower Gambia basin roughly covers the narrow strip of land on both banks of the Gambia River's lower reaches. It extends from the Atlantic coastline to about 120 kilometers inland.⁶ The river is wider near the coast, enabling larger vessels to sail into the interior towards the island of Georgetown (today's Janjanbureh).⁷ The territory as a whole owes its importance to this river, which is often described as one of the finest and the most navigable waterways in West Africa. The river flows from the Futa Djallon plateau in the modern Republic of Guinea and empties into the Atlantic Ocean.⁸

The Gambia is a tiny riverine enclave and "most of the villages are scattered within easy reach of its banks."⁹ Dense mangrove swamps line up along the river's banks and the *bolongs* (i.e. tributaries).¹⁰ Some of these mangroves grow to the height of forest trees.¹¹ Very little agricultural activity takes place in this mangrove belt. This is because the mangroves are often flooded by the river's salt water, rendering the land acidic for growing crops. As Judith Carney writes, saltwater constantly menaces the downstream reaches of the Gambia River.¹² The advance of saltwater in coastal estuaries, however, failed to discourage lower Gambians from adapting rice cultivation. In the past, lower Gambians, especially Mandinka and Jola communities, built elaborate

⁶ Harry A. Gailey. *Historical Dictionary of The Gambia* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975), p. vii. NRS, PUB 11/17 Report of a Socio-Economic Survey of Bathurst and Kombo St. Mary in the Gambia. 9th February 1956, p. 4

⁷ Arnold Hughes and David Perfect. *A Political History of The Gambia 1816-1994* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006), p. 6; NRS, PUB 11/17, 1956.

⁸ NRS, CSO 1/2, 1 November 1824

⁹ Southorn, *The Gambia: The Story of the Groundnut Colony*, p. 36

¹⁰ Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, p. 6

¹¹ Southorn, *The Gambia: The Story of the Groundnut Colony*, p. 28

¹² Judith Carney. "Landscapes of Technology Transfer: Rice Cultivation and African Continuities." *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Jan. 1996), p. 10

network of embankments, dikes, canals, and sluice gates to prevent marine water from intruding into their fields while capturing rainwater to support the plants.¹³

Lying behind the mangrove belt, on slightly higher ground, are the *faroos* and the *jeeri* lands. The *faroos* were often places where people grow rice. They are often located in areas near Greeks, marshes and swampy.¹⁴ There is usually enough water in these areas even in the long dry seasons. The *jeeri* lands are flat and consist of dry, open woodland with well-spaced trees of moderate height and tall grasses. They are also interspersed with many tall silk-cotton and fat baobabs trees. The major economic activity carried out by people living in this area is peanut and millet cultivation and the domestication of livestock.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ ARP 28/1 Traveling Commissioner's Report SBP, 1894

¹⁵ The most common crops that people grew for subsistence food were not so varied. Mungo Park mentioned a list of grains which include corn (maize), *sanio* and *basso*, millet and rice. He noted that these were cultivated in "considerable quantities." People mostly used the harvests from these grains to feed themselves and their families. With the development of peanuts farming, however, more cash crops were grown for the purposes of securing cash. From the second half of the nineteenth century, most agricultural families would allocate most of their land and labor to growing peanuts than food crops – the consequences of which had been remarkable especially over the few decades [Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa First Journey -1795 -1797* (Edinburg: Adam and Charles Black, 1878), p. 9].

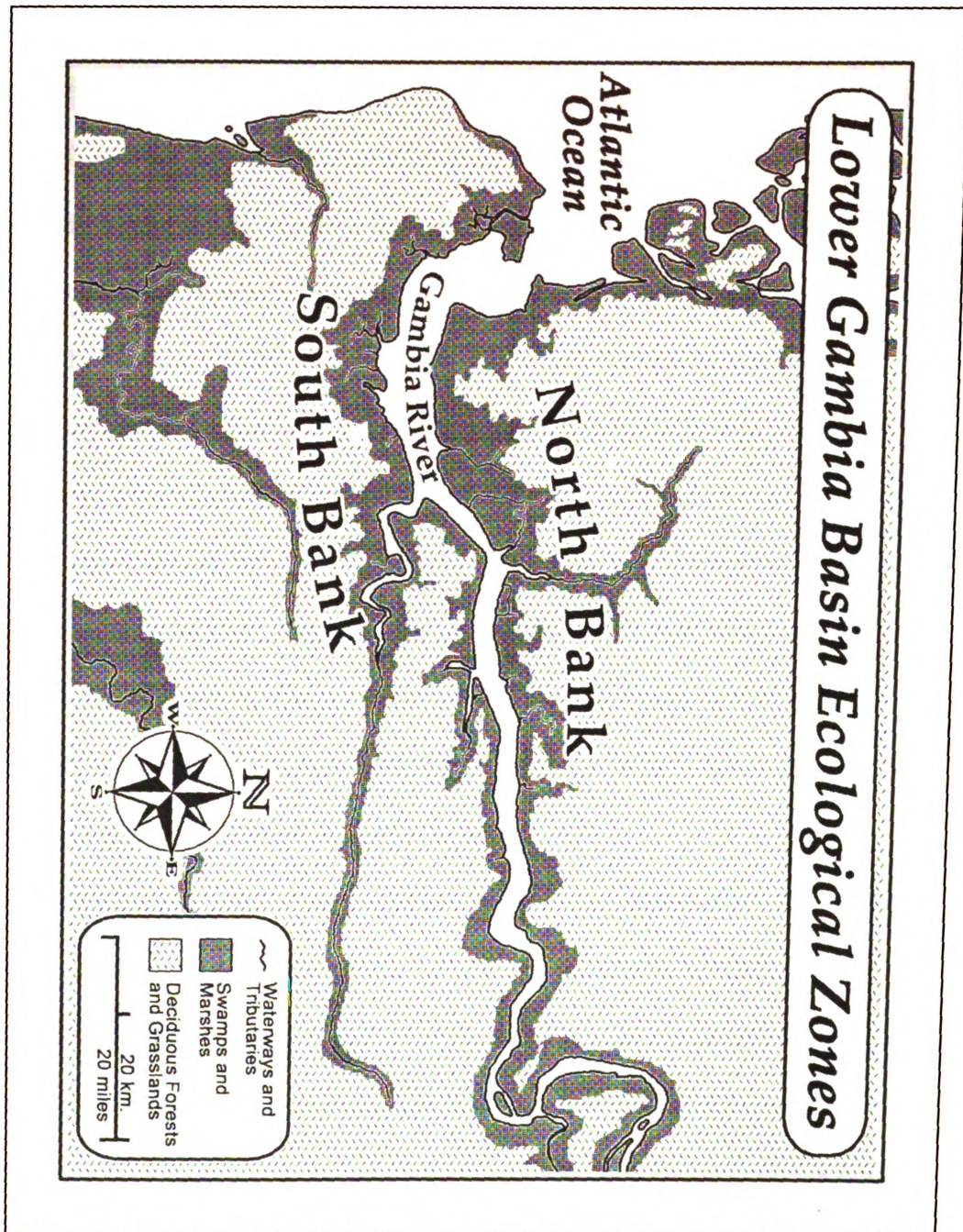


Fig. 1: Map showing the lower Gambia Region's different Ecological Zones

Critical in shaping its history is the Gambia's climate and geographical location.¹⁶ The lower Gambia valley is located in the westernmost extension of the savannas stretching out across the entire Western Sudan. In the first place, across the savanna, agriculture is generally rain-fed and consequently it is seasonal. Like many parts of tropical West Africa, the Gambia experienced two seasons in a year: the rainy season and the dry season. Typically, the rainy season starts around the month of May or June and ceases in September. During the rest of the year, Gambians experience the dry season. The annual rainfall of the Gambia region is by no means heavy for the tropics. On average the annual rainfall in a year was about 45.31 inches. According to John Gray, past records suggest that the wet period of the year had been slightly different to what it was in the first half of the twentieth century when rains began in June and heaviest in July and August, often raising the river's water level with increased chance of flooding. During these months the rains continue very violent, coming down with great winds, and much thunder and lightning.¹⁷ These are followed by lighter falls of rain in September and October.¹⁸

Communication – including the movement of troops engaged in warfare– was especially difficult during the wet season.¹⁹ Much of the merchandize that was traded were transported to the interior through the river. Until the late nineteenth century, there were no good roads linking lower Gambian villages to Bathurst and its environs. Often, people trekked, used canoes or rode their donkeys or horses to wherever they wanted to go. In addition, the wet season was also the period when the incidence of malaria,

¹⁶ Gray, *A History of the Gambia*, p. 1

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 11

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 3

¹⁹ Ibid

yellow fever and sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis) hiked because it was a perfect time for the breeding of mosquitoes and tsetse-flies, which transmitted the malaria and sleeping sickness respectively. People, cattle and horses more especially suffered from the effects of malaria and sleeping sickness.²⁰ This was also a time when people participated more fully on commerce, wrestling competitions, participated in wars or even slave raids.

Farming in much of the lower Gambia region is based on shifting cultivation, where the cultivation system is characterized by a cycle of clearing and burning vegetation, planting crops, weeding, harvesting and fallowing. If a land was cultivated until its nutrients were depleted, such a field was then permitted to return to fallow under forest cover and the farmer shifts to another plot in the forest to begin the cycle again.²¹ Due to this practice, much of the Gambia's vegetation has disappeared especially over the last century or so. Just few centuries ago, precisely in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European travelers to the area described the land as "generally covered with woods,"²² especially in the southwest where palm trees dotted the landscape.²³ However, the growth of commercial agriculture since the middle of the nineteenth century has led to the destruction of much of this forest cover. Since then the cultivation of peanuts had occupied the lives of majority of the people living along the river.

²⁰ See James Webb's *Desert Frontier: Ecological and Economic Change Along the Western Sahel, 1600-1850* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, p. 44

²¹ But usually the person would seek permission from the elders of the community, comprised of families of founding lineages that established the settlement or were ruling the state. In other words, land was not free for taking.

²² Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa*, p. 8, 324.

²³ Donald R. Wright, "Oral Traditions From the Gambia" Vol. 1 Mandinka Griots. *Papers in International Studies*, Africa Series No. 37. Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1979, p. 16

European travelers visiting the region several centuries ago have also commented on the quality of the soils, stating that “The soil upon [the] banks [of the Gambia River] and numerous islands as relatively fertile.”²⁴ For example, Mungo Park wrote that nature has blessed the region’s people with abundant and fertile lands and in 1824 another report described the fertility of the soil as “so great as to render very little labor necessary in its tillage a bountiful providence having here lavished the seeds of all natures blessings which require only the industrious hand of man to bring into full perfection.”²⁵ The soils are generally sandy and in some areas it is comprised of a mixture of clay and sand. The latter report compared the quality of these soils with those of the Senegal Rivers and concluded that it was generally more suitable to grow rice and peanuts in the Gambia than in northern Senegal.²⁶ However, recent evidence points to soil exhaustion due to intense agricultural activity. One report, for example, noted that “the old soils, with the exception of the old mangrove forests and some swamps, are deficient in minerals needed for cultivation.”²⁷

Agricultural practices – such as slash and burn methods, the change from *kongko* methods of farming to plough agriculture as well as the changing perception of “spirit” lands – have equally contributed to the rapid depletion of the region’s forest cover as well as the quality of the soils. Productivity is however affected by frequent droughts and locust attacks, which were common occurrences in the lower Gambia

²⁴ CSO 1/2, November 1 1824

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ PUB 11/17-1956, p. 9

region. While John Morgan witnessed an “annual (seven months) drought” in 1821,²⁸ the missionary, William Fox, commented on the locusts stating that a nineteenth century traveler to the Gambia could observe “passing armies of locusts [which would] frequently obscure the sun like clouds.”²⁹

Consequently, brief periods of hunger were a common occurrence in the several communities located along the banks of the Gambia River. These often resulted from droughts and locust invasions, which frequently decimated crops already planted leaving farmers incapable of feeding themselves. Gambians called this the “hungry season” – a time when food from the harvest was running low. Senegambians responded repeatedly to natural disasters in a variety of ways – including relocation and migration as well as embarking on wars of expansion and taking advantage of trading possibilities.

The Land and People

Just as the region is characterized by a diverse ecology, it is also comprised of great diversity of people. In fact, the Gambia River has never been a “tribal” boundary. As Boubacar Barry writes, it has long served as a “magnet for all of the Senegambia’s zone populations.”³⁰ Historical sources about the Gambia region are rich in stories of migration. The movement of people back and forth has made this region linguistically and ethnically diverse---comprising of several principal groups with their customs, religious beliefs and social hierarchies.

²⁸ John Morgan, *Reminiscences of the Founding of a Christian Mission on the Gambia*. (London: Wesleyan Mission House, 1864), p. 115

²⁹ William Fox, *A Brief History of the Wesleyan Missions on the Western Coast of Africa* (London: Aylott and Jones, 1850), p. 235

³⁰ Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 5

The Mandinka were and are still the largest group. To this day, they comprised the bulk of the population in the north bank and south bank provinces and were the most numerous group. In 1911, they accounted for forty-nine percent of the total population of the Gambia.³¹ Arnold Hughes and David Perfect claim that the Mandinka first moved into the Gambia in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries as the Mali Empire expanded and slowly they settled in all parts of the Gambia basin. But as Paul Julian Beedle notes, one part of the country – Kombo – remained sparsely populated by coastal groups beyond the extent of Mandinka domination until the seventeenth century.

The Mandinka were certainly fully established on both banks of the River Gambia when the first explorers from Portugal arrived in the fifteenth century and by 1800, they provided the ruling class and comprising most of the inhabitants of the region.³² Among others, the Mandinka ruling elites exercised control over the Fula. The Fula had been present in the area for centuries. For instance, Donald Wright mentioned a prominent Fula Muslim family that settled in one of the north bank villages around the beginning of the sixteenth century and a significant number of these migrants were strongly Islamized. Wright believes that this Muslim clerical lineage settled in Juffure to take advantage of the already expanding trade with Atlantic merchants.³³ Ever since their arrival to the Gambia, the Fula accounted for a substantial proportion of the population of the Mandinka controlled kingdoms. In fact, by 1911, they comprised up

³¹ Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, p. 13; Paul J. Beedle "Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town" Thesis (doctoral)--University of Cambridge, 1980, p. 21

³² Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, p. 13. For more on the Mandinka migrations and conquests, see George E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1993), pp. 97-115.

³³ Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, p. 77

one-fifth of the population of the Gambia's rural villages.³⁴ Most Fula were semi-nomads, who tended the cattle of their Mandinka overlords in return for the land.³⁵ Until the nineteenth century, the wealth of a Fula was measured by the number of cattle he or she owned.

Indeed, not all Mandinkas were interested in politics. Some, like the Darboe-Jula, were long distant traders.³⁶ The Darboe-Jula shared this trait with the Serahule, who are believed to be among the descendants of the founders of the Ghana Empire, which flourished between the eighth and eleventh centuries AD.³⁷ As early as the 1840s, several Serahule Muslim families were growing peanuts in the Gambia. Several of them were also growing peanuts for their Mandinka landlords as "strange farmers."³⁸ In the nineteenth century, the lower Gambia has never been an important home for the Serahule, at least population wise, except those settling as "strange farmers."

The Wolof were firmly established in the Gambia by the fifteenth century. It is believed that they entered the Gambia valley from Senegal and established a kingdom in the Gambia's north bank. By the 1800s, this state, Saloum, was the only non-Mandinka kingdom below the Barrakunda Falls.³⁹ However, over the past few centuries, the Wolof were relatively fewer than the Mandinka. According to Hughes and Perfect, in the 1911 census they made up sixteen percent of the Gambia's rural

³⁴ Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, p. 15

³⁵ Richard Jobson, *The Golden Trade: or, A Discovery of The River Gambia, and the Golden Trade of the Aethiopians* (London: Printed by Nicholas Okes, 1623), p. 34; Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, p. 16

³⁶ For more on the Darboe-Jula, see Donald R. Wright's article, "Darbo Jula: The Role of a Mandinka Jula Clan in the Long-Distance Trade of the Gambia River and Its Hinterland" *African Economic History*, No. 3 (Spring, 1977), pp. 33-45

³⁷ Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, p. 18

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16

communities. They also occupy roughly the same area now that they did in the fifteenth century when they were described in the writings of the explorer Alvisto Cada Mosto⁴⁰ and were mostly found in the Gambia's north bank, especially in the Rip (Baddibu), Saloum and in Bathurst. Communities of Wolof are also numerous on the south bank of the Gambia as people have migrated, mostly as a result of the religious warfare of the late nineteenth century, but generally in search of better farming land.⁴¹ Since the end of the nineteenth century, most rural Wolof have been Muslims and the male folks living in the rural areas became peanut and millet farmers. They took up peanut farming in the nineteenth century and the Wolof women tended to grow food crops.

In the south bank, especially in the districts of Foni, the land is occupied mostly by the Jola. In 1911 the Jola comprised seven percent of the national population. As a small-scale, relatively decentralized society, they lived mainly in small isolated communal groups in the forests and swamps along the banks of the Gambia River. As agriculturalists, they cultivated rice, domesticated cattle, pigs and palm trees, and traded in bees wax rather than growing peanuts. Moreover, unlike other riverine peoples, the Jola were very slow to convert to Islam in the nineteenth century and many remained "animist" as late as the twentieth century. However, most Jola are now Muslims, with a minority being Roman Catholic.⁴²

A group that is culturally and linguistically related to the Jola is the Bainunka. Oral traditions claim that among the earliest settlers in the Gambia's Kombo districts identified themselves as Bainunkas. The traditions also traced their origins to a mythical

⁴⁰ David P. Gamble and Linda K. Salmon, "Peoples of the Gambia: The Wolof" *Gambian Studies* No. 17. San Francisco. 1985, p. 1

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, p. 18

figure called Ngana Sira Banna who is believed to have come from Manding.

According to one Bainunka elder, Ngana Sira Banna was the ruler of the Bainunka. “He ruled from here [Kombo] to La Guinea and Portuguese Guinea where the Kooli River is found. He also ruled from here to the ocean. This made the Bainunkas the owners of the land. They are the first people to come.”⁴³ But if the Bainunkas were the oldest settlers in the Gambia’s Atlantic coastline, certainly their power and influence on the land had diminished by the nineteenth century. In fact, by this time they were already a small population.

Another group is the Manjago (also known as the Manjaco in Guinea Bissau). However, it is certain that most of them were not Muslims as late as the twentieth century. As agriculturalists, living in Kombo, they cultivated crops, tapped palm wine and raised pigs. According to Hughes and Perfect, in the late nineteenth century, several Manjago migrants from what became a Portuguese colony, Guinea Bissau, arrived in the Gambia.⁴⁴ Other important groups that came as migrants include the Masuankas.⁴⁵ In the year 1894, the commissioner of the North Bank Province noted that about twenty strangers from the Masuwanka group rented farms from the head of the village of Bambally.⁴⁶ Oral sources suggest that many of these Masuwanka came from the Guinea-Bissau region. Another group that is worth mentioning is the Bambara, whose numbers increased with the expansion of peanut production as well as the outbreaks of

⁴³ Unknown informant, “History of Kombo,” interview by NCAC staff, tape recording. Trans. available at the RDD collection in Fajara as Tape # 321.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 19

⁴⁵ ARP 32/1 Travelling Commissioner’s Report for the North Province, May 1894; Tida Touray and Momdou Fatty, interview by Assan Sarr, tape recording, Bambally, North Bank Region, May 1 2008.

⁴⁶ The Masuwanka are a group of people who borrowed from Mandinka and Balanta. They are mostly found in the Guinea Bissau region.

the First and Second World Wars.⁴⁷ In the Gambia, the Bambara are also commonly referred to as the Tillibunkas, meaning the people from the east.

The lower Gambia region is also comprised of other small-scale groups. The Serer are one of them. Although they comprise a higher share of the modern Senegalese population, this group has been present in the Gambia River area for many centuries. Arnold Hughes and David Perfect claim that in the early nineteenth century most Serer lived north of the river in the kingdom of Saloum, but in 1863, an estimated 2,000 fled to the Crown Colony (Bathurst area) to escape from the fighting in the interior.⁴⁸ Oral traditions also claim that several of them lived in Niumi's north bank kingdom, near the Atlantic coastline. In these areas, they engaged in farming and fishing. During the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, the majority of the Gambian Serer remained "animist," but in recent decades, most have become Muslims. Few also became Catholics.⁴⁹

The Aku (Liberated Africans) formed were a distinctive group within lower Gambian society. They were the descendants of African slaves who were freed by the British naval squadron after the abolition of the slave trade throughout the British Empire. Because of this, they were also called the Recaptives. Many of them were settled in the Gambia around 1818 and the 1820s. However, most immigration occurred between 1832 and the 1840s. In 1841, their population in Bathurst was estimated to be around 1,400. Few of these became merchants and many of them gained employment in

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 19

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 19

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 19

the colonial civil service, as they became better educated and many of them became enterprising landowners in the colony especially Bathurst and British Kombo.⁵⁰

The long histories of interaction between these diverse groups have encouraged exchanges of a variety of cultural elements for centuries. For instance, as George Brooks notes, just as the Mandinka were influenced by other groups, they also imposed Mande tripartite social structures wherever they settled. These Mande social structure comprised of elites and free people, the endogamous occupational groups and slaves.⁵¹ It was also not unusual for intermarriages to occur. Thus, while the ethnic classification provided above is accurate, it is equally drawn for convenient sake. Yet, people who identified as Mandinka were for centuries politically dominant in the River States. Ethnic boundaries also remained important in the competition for the control of the valley's resources.⁵²

Political Organization and Structure

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the politics of the region was mostly dominated by prominent Mandinka lineages that imposed itself as the rulers of the Gambia through a series of conquests.⁵³ As they conquered the area, these warrior families established a number of kingdoms,⁵⁴ which a nineteenth century missionary,

⁵⁰ Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of the Gambia*, pp. 20-21

⁵¹ Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers*, p. 2; Donald R. Wright "Beyond Migration and Conquest: Oral Traditions and Mandinka Ethnicity in Senegambia," *History in Africa*, Vol. 12 (1985), p. 338

⁵² Beedle, "Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town," p. 23

⁵³ Jobson, *Golden Trade*, p. 28. As late as 1841, a missionary who visited the area noted that "Along the . . . bank of the River Gambia, the reigning power is now the Mandingo." *The Christian Traveller. Western Africa*. (London Charles Knight and Co. 1841), p. 149

⁵⁴ Quoted from K.W Blackburne's *Development and Welfare in the Gambia*, June 1943, Chapter V. Political Development (Local Government; Native Administration)

William Mositer, described as “independent states.”⁵⁵ Each of these states had more or less a well-defined boundary and had loose ties with the Mandinka state of Kaabu.⁵⁶

They each enjoyed their individual autonomy although all of them shared certain characteristics. In these kingdoms, for instance, the basis of administration was the hierarchical system of Mandinka polities involving family, village and kingdom.

The *mansa* (Mandinka word for king) was the head of the kingdom. He represented the figure of leadership of all the kingdom’s separate lineages and the formal link with their collective group of ancestors. Donald Wright states that the *mansa* was the embodiment of the state.⁵⁷ As head of the kingdom, the *mansa* had a variety of responsibilities. His primary duty was to keep order. Supporting the *mansa* was an army that helped him defend the kingdom while settling disputes between lineages or villages. As the chief landlord, he coordinated planting and harvesting, oversaw relations with strangers, and interceded with the ancestors or spirits of the land. Each *mansa* had a royal field. These royal fields were notoriously the largest within the kingdom. Harvests from these fields and contributions from his subjects enabled him to keep a granary. Like the royal fields, these granaries were the most numerous, the first filled, and the last emptied.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the *mansa* could call on the young men to

⁵⁵ William Moister, *Memorials of missionary Labours in Western Africa, The West Indies and the Cape of Good Hope* (London, Paternoster Row, 1866), p. 34.

⁵⁶ Kaabu, a precolonial Senegambian state, stretched from modern Guinea Bissau and Gambia. Kaabu was a confederation that eventually encompassed a vast amount of territory. See Walter Hawthorne, *Planting Rice and Harvesting Slaves: Transformations along the Guinea Bissau Coast, 1400-1900* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003), p. 31

⁵⁷ Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, p. 102

⁵⁸ It was important for the *mansa* to keep and have a filled granary because this was not a time when a person lacking food could go to the store and buy rice. Part of the Mansa’s role was to take care of his people, and that meant that he needed to have lots of food in storage for when drought came along. *Mansas* weren’t all bad; part of their deal was that they could lead a privileged lifestyle more or less in exchange for protection from danger and bad times.

work on the royal fields. Typically, he also commanded the most slaves and kept a sizeable population under a state of dependency. Theoretically, he claimed *territorial* ownership to all the land within his kingdom. As such, he gave permission to strangers who wanted to establish their own village in his kingdom.

The powers of the *mansa* were by no means unlimited even at its height. As Charlotte Quinn writes political competition within the states centered largely on the sharing of taxes and other revenues from the use of the land. These were divided between the *mansa* and his family and the leaders of other prominent lineages. In addition, the *mansa* was constitutionally required, at least theoretically, to follow the advice of leaders of the principal lineages of towns and villages in his kingdom. However, seniority and putative lineage relationships together with the distribution of power seems to have had critical influences on determining access to land and traditionally they favored the *mansa*, and certain clans.⁵⁹

Each kingdom was subdivided into villages. A village was a collection of between four and a dozen extended families. The village in lower Gambia has been from early times the unit which formed the basis of social life. The village was also the venue where the population organized themselves for economic and political co-operation. This importance of the village as the unit in rural life has persisted through the nineteenth century down to the last century and it is important to note that agriculture and the land are the basis of life in the village.

Each kingdom was comprised of core villages that were sometimes referred to as "royal towns." For example, in Kombo such villages included Busumbala, Yundum,

⁵⁹ Charlotte A. Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia: Traditionalism, Islam, and European Expansion* (Evanston [Ill.] Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 45

Jambur and Brikama. The Niimi *singkilos* (or royal towns) constituted Essau, Berending, Bakindiki, Sitanunku and Tobabkolong. The core lineages from these towns played an active role in state affairs. One of the eldest male members of the village's founding lineage was normally the village head (Alkalo);⁶⁰ heads of the other prominent lineages in the village served as his council.⁶¹ (In Wolof his title is *borom dekk* and in Fula it is *jom leidi* or *Jom sare*).⁶² But the Alkalo was the *mansa's* representative at the village level. He, too, had recognizable authority in the allocation and distribution of land, especially to strangers. With the consent of the council of "free" compound elders of the village, the Alkalo could assign to strangers usufruct rights to any uncultivated land within his village. In some instances, the Alkalo's family was the biggest landowner in a village. His title was derived from his ties to the land. In fact, the very idea of Alkaloship is founded on the notion of first founding lineage to settle in a village.⁶³

The Alkalo mediated disputes between individuals and families. Disputes settled by the Alkalos usually ranged from land disputes, to theft or marriage feuds. He worked with, though not specifically for, ruling lineages in collecting taxes, summoning manpower for military pursuits, policing the village, and taking other actions that would help maintain peace and state security.

⁶⁰ Before the middle of the nineteenth century, the Alkali's Mandinka title was *sate-tio*, which literally means the "owner of the village."

⁶¹ Among the Fula, the title of the village head is *jom leedi* or *jom sare*. For more, see Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*, 1975, p. 23, 25

⁶² Michael Anderson, *A Voyage to Senegal, the Isle of Goree and the River Gambia, 1727-1806* ([London, 1814?]), p. 48; Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*, p. 23,

⁶³ These families carried with them the title *Jaiti* in Mandinka which means "landlord." William Fox refers to the word in his account (see page 471). See also Beedle, "Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town," p. iv

Another primary level of segmentation in the lower Gambia valley was the family compound, which formed the village. In fact, as Wright mentioned, the states were a collection of lineages in a group of villages. As extended-family groups their members farmed land assigned to their use. A village's founding lineage had its own land, which they acquired originally through permission from the kingdom's rulers and clearing a forest (or unused land) on which they established the village. In every village, particularly in Mandinka communities, family groups were gathered into wards commonly referred to as *kabilo*.⁶⁴ People in the same *kabilo* generally had the same clan name, though, as Quinn writes, in large and complex *kabilos* there were also a number of strangers and slaves, unrelated to the founding lineage. Most of these strangers and slaves held inferior status within the social unit.⁶⁵ Typically, each *kabilo* had its own head (the *kabilotiyo*). The oldest man in the founding lineage often became the *kabilo* head. He arbitrated internal disputes and represented his unit in the lineage council, which was comprised of prominent lineages of the village. Like the *mansa*, it was he who sacrificed to the ancestors and other spirits on behalf of his extended family/clan. *Kabilo* leadership was, therefore, associated with rights to the land and was passed collaterally within the lineage segment claiming to have first received these rights.

⁶⁴ In Mandinka societies where there existed a *kabilo* system (i.e. the grouping of extended family members into wards), the eldest male member of that extended family became the proprietor of that land. He oversaw its distribution and settled any other dispute associated with it. In non-Mandinka communities, however, the *kabilo* system did not exist. In such communities the compound head – usually the eldest male in the compound – assumed such responsibilities. Besides, the family that founded a village claimed ownership of most of the land in that village. They also assumed the leadership of the village, and were frequently answerable to the kingdom's ruler (i.e. *mansa*).

⁶⁵ Quinn, *The Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 12; NRS, Banjul CSO 2/94-The Laws and Customs of the Mandingoes, 1906

Moreover, in most cases, “village” land could only be assigned to newcomers with permission of *kabilo* leaders.⁶⁶

Philip Curtin confuses *kabilo* to the notion of *gale*, which is the Fula word for compound.⁶⁷ Even though both had an active head, normally the oldest member who represented its interests to higher officials, settled internal quarrels, and sometimes acted as a central agent for receiving and redistributing income from the group’s economic efforts. But the *kabilo* often comprised of multiple *gales* or *kerrs* (compound in Wolof).

Not all members of the *kabilo* enjoyed equal rights to the land. Just like strangers, slaves could never become *kabilo* head in his owners’ household. In Mandinka, Fula, Wolof and Serahule households, until the late nineteenth century, there was often an important distinction made between the freeborn and the slave class belonging to a *kabilo*.⁶⁸ Indeed, as Martin Klein notes, like other dependents, the male

⁶⁶ The Mandinka held a broad notion of ‘stranger-hood.’ Just as an individual or a family living in a village could be regarded as strangers, so also was an entire village that was hosted by the elders of another village would be regarded as strangers. In other words, if a community was granted permission by the “headman” of another town or the Mansa (Mandinka word for King) to settle on a land, the new community became ‘strangers’ of the old settlement that gave them the land. Several villages in Niimi and the Sabach-Sanjal districts, for instance, held stranger status because they settled on other peoples’ land. Once the land was allocated, these communities could use the land as long as they wanted, but their status as strangers hardly changed. By virtue of their *dependency* on others for land, they, too, were excluded from politics.

⁶⁷ Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*, p. 31

⁶⁸ In 1893 Commissioner JH Ozanne of the North Bank Province reported that the Alcaide of Jabbakunda said he had a son in slavery and he could not bear to think of him. He spoke very sadly to me on the subject, and said he was not sure where the young man was; he was afraid to cross the frontier, but if there were any hope of help from us, he would send messengers to find one. He also reported that at Kaur where there are more old people than elsewhere they expressed their thanks to your Excellency for not depriving them of their servants in their old age. [The] slavery question which a few months ago threatened to upset all the good results likely to be derived by a British protectorate. In the whole of my district every headman has one or more slaves who he feeds but does not cloth. Five days in the week, the slave works for his master from 5am to 3.30pm. The remainder of the time he works for himself having a much land given to him to cultivate as he can manage. By these means he often manages to save a little money. . . They are treated well on the whole but I am told that the women are worked very hard.

slave generally had his own piece of land, and as he grew older, he devoted more of his time to his own plot. A slave owed his master five days of labor a week, a working day being considered to run from sunrise to about 2:00pm. An unmarried male (and of a freeborn origin) had the same obligation to the head of the compound. Some freeborn families had many slaves.⁶⁹ But the distinction between freeborn male member of the household and a male slave is that the former could eventually rise to the position of *kabilo* head and the slave could not.

One of the few groups that lacked this type of political centralization is the Jola. As late as the 1890s, a European could comment that in “Fogni . . . the people will not recognize any head chief over them or even headmen of towns, or groups of stockades.”⁷⁰ However, each Jola community recognized the *Alefanow* (or the ‘big man’) as their leader. The people “living in his stockade obey him only as their superior.”⁷¹ But here, too, the *Alefanow* “seems to be the one that all the cattle, money etc. belongs to and when this man dies the next “big man” takes charge.” Thus whoever was *Alefanow* inherited from his predecessor.⁷²

These different degrees of political control were no doubt important in determining the nature of the property regimes that shaped interactions between social groups and among members of a family or families. It must be stated that while the land

Slaves do not have an opportunity of running away, as all the Alcaide are interested in stopping them and returning them to their owners. Ozanne described the Alcaide of Sallikene was the ring leader of slavery in Badibu and I thought it might be as well to have a little private conversation with him before meeting the other Alcaide.

⁶⁹ Martin Klein “Servitude among the Wolof and Sereer of Senegambia” in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (ed.) *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), p. 346

⁷⁰ NRS, CSO 2/94-The Laws and Customs of the Jolabs of Fogni, 1906

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid

tenure customs practiced by the various groups living along the banks of the Gambia River were often similar, sometimes there were differences. For example, as indicated in an important colonial “ethnographic” report dating back to the 1930s, “Jola customs and the customs of the Mandingoes of the Kiang and Jarra districts . . . differ only in detail.”⁷³

Religious Beliefs and Spiritual Power

Most of the people living in the lower Gambia basin, in the nineteenth century, viewed themselves as Muslims.⁷⁴ In fact, some lineages had adopted Islam for several centuries already, some more recently. Moreover, by the mid nineteenth century, several Muslim clerics immigrated to the river banks and set up villages on lands provided to them by prominent families including the Mandinka ruling elites. Many of these recent settlers were Fula speaking peoples commonly referred to as Toronkas.⁷⁵ Several of them came from the Futa Toro area with cattle, students, slaves and followers. The villages they established eventually became Islamic centers where over a

⁷³ Confidential Dispatch to the Colonial Secretary in Bathurst from the Commissioner’s Office South Bank Province, Cape St. Mary, 30 April, 1940, CSO 10/71 Colonial Secretary- (Sgd) R.H. Gretton Governor-Sir Thomas Southorn

⁷⁴ In fact, a significant number of Gambians were already Muslims by seventeenth and the late eighteenth centuries. For example, in the 1620s, English trader Richard Jobson observed that the “Marybuckes [referring to the Muslims] are separated from the common people . . . their houses or dwellings are separated from the common people, having their towns and lands set out in several within themselves, wherein no common people having dwellings except such as are their slaves, that work and labour for them” [Richard Jobson. *The Golden Trade, 1620-23*, p. 78]. A little over a century after Jobson, Mungo Park wrote that [The people of the Gambia were] divided into two sects, the Mahometans, who are called Bushreens, and the Pagans, who are called Kafirs . . . the Pagan natives are the most numerous, and the government of the country is in their hands. . . . Among all these nations the religion of Mohamet has made and continues to make, considerable progress, but in most of them . . . both free and enslaved, preserve in maintaining the blind but harmless superstition of their ancestors, and are called by the Mohammedans kafirs or infidels. . . . The uncharitable maxims of the Koran have made them less hospitable to strangers . . . they consider [other groups] as their inferiors . . . Their government is influenced by the Mohometan laws [Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa*, pp. 13, 29 49]

⁷⁵ Of course there were other non-Fulbe Muslim clerics in the region. For more on these see Lamin O. Sanneh *The Jakhinke Muslim Clerics: A Religious and Historical Study of Islam in Senegambia* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1989)

dozen, if not hundreds, of students were taught how to read the Quran and practice their faith.

Donald Wright explains that over the several centuries following the demise of the Mali and Jollof empires, Islamic cultural influences, particularly from the Senegal River valley, continued to bear, and more heavily still, on the lives of people in all levels of lower-Gambian society.⁷⁶ As Martin Klein indicate, when the Portuguese arrived in the area in the fifteenth century, there were marabouts attached to most of the Senegambia courts.⁷⁷ These marabouts prayed for the chiefs and handled correspondence. As a reward for their services, they received land and were permitted to form villages. By the seventeenth century their villages had become substantial islands of Islam. The Muslim communities supported Quranic schools, kept the fast of Ramadan, and followed the Muslim dietary laws.

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⁷⁶ Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, p. 98

⁷⁷ Martin A. Klein, *Islam and Imperialism in Senegal: Sine-Saloum, 1847-1914* (Stanford, Calif., Published for the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace by Stanford University, Press, 1968) p. 63

⁷⁸ Jobson, *The Golden Trade, 1620-23*, p. 78

progress, but in most of them . . . both free and enslaved, preserve in maintaining the blind but harmless superstition of their ancestors, and are called by the Mohammedans kafirs or infidels⁷⁹

Moreover, John Morgan described the existence of “Muhammedan missionaries.”⁸⁰ The islamization of the area had influenced the land tenure system in the lower Gambia valley. As believers, Muslims are obliged to follow the basic precepts of *sharia* especially regulations that deal with inheritance, trade and other aspects of family law. As a matter of fact, the Qu’ran has created a set of rules that define inheritance to property from father to son. It also established equality among the male heirs particularly over succession.⁸¹ In the Gambia, the “disaggregation” of land was sometimes done through prescriptions given in the Quran, especially when people making the claims to the property were in disagreement with one another. In addition, the Gambia region was subjected to considerable unrest in the second half of the nineteenth century, which eventually led to the rejection of the Mandinka aristocracy’s control over the land.

But while nineteenth century lower Gambian society was predominantly Islamic, many of its residents continued to believe in the spirits of the ancestors and of forces in the soil, rocks, and trees of the area. In other words, “pre-Islamic” beliefs in the power of spirits and *jinns* to control space remained important even well into the twentieth century. As part of their complex belief system, several people believed in one supreme-being. According to Mungo Park, many of the people whom he came into

⁷⁹ Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, p. 49, 13

⁸⁰ John Morgan, *Reminiscences of the Founding of a Christian Mission on the Gambia*. (London: Wesleyan Mission House, 1864), p. 7

⁸¹ Youssouf Guèye, “Essai: Sur Les Causes et Les Consequences de la Micropropriété au Fouta Toro,” *Bulletin de l’I. F.A.N. T.XIX, sér. B, no 3 1-2*, (1957), pp.29-42

contact with believed that the supreme-being was “the creator and preserver of all things” but they considered “him as a Being so remote.⁸² Matters concerning worldly affairs – such as the ownership of farmland – were thought to have been controlled by subordinate spirits, “over whom they suppose that certain magical ceremonies have great influence. A white fowl suspended to the branch of a particular tree, a snake’s head, or a few handfuls of fruit are offerings to appease the displeasure of these tutelary agents.”⁸³

One of the most important of the spirits were the *jinns*. A *jinn*, which is an Arabic word, is an animate spirit. People living along the banks of the Gambia River believed that it is a spirit that comes out as a “devil” and causes evil. *Jinns* are supposed to be invisible spirits, immortal, some good and some bad. It is also believed that they have their own dwelling places and it is extremely dangerous to settle in a place already inhabited by “bad” devils. But not only did the *jinns* have their own places to live, they had their own favorite times of day: the time before dawn and dusk, two o’clock in the afternoon, the hottest part of the day, and mid-night. These were the most dangerous hours, when *jinns* were most likely to be out and about and it was dangerous for ordinary people to be out – though marabouts and gifted individuals liked to conduct much of their own business at these effective times.

Another frightening spirit is the *ninki nanka*. The *ninki nanka* is a dragon-like creature, and is often believed to inhabit swampy forests and has the attributes of a “devil.” As Southorn notes, “the people are dogged by fear of devils and chief among

⁸² Ibid, p. 194

⁸³ Ibid, pp. 194-195

these is the Ninki Nanka . . . [If] seen by a man is a sure sign of approaching death”⁸⁴ If anyone unwittingly builds his house across a pathway of *jinns*, he ran the risk of numerous deaths and illnesses, houses falling down, fires, or other disasters. Thus, when people were thinking of settling a particular site, they sent seers in first to check whether or not the site was truly uninhabited.

A person already gifted with supernatural abilities can expand one’s spiritual force, *nyamoo*, greatly by magical means such as amulets. It was believed that *nyamoo* was obtained from benign spirits or *jinns* or other supernatural agencies. Adults who spent much of their time alone in the bush –especially hunters believed to have developed special relationships with *jinns* and could learn their secrets.⁸⁵ Hunters – who were often part of the ruling elites’ warrior class – were people who knew the secret(s) of the spirit world. These specialists were thought to possess *nyamoo* (which implies spiritual force). *Nyamoo* is a vital protective force that only hunters, warriors and marabouts had. These people, it is believed, could turn into an animal because they possessed spiritual and mental qualities. This made their worlds strange – i.e. where the lines between human beings and the great animals are shadowy and fluid. These individuals had the ability to communicate with *jinns* and other spirits.

The histories of several villages in the Gambia often credit the role of hunters (or people with spiritual powers) in their establishment. For instance, oral traditions claim Sora Musa’s hunting for a place to settle brought to the Gambia region from Mali. Upon arriving in a place called Kande Kunola, he spent a night under a *timpo* tree. In

⁸⁴ Southorn, *The Gambia: The Story of a Groundnut Colony*, p. 250

⁸⁵ Bakari Kamara, *Two Hunting Tales of the Senegambia*. Oral History and Antiquities Division, Banjul, 1980, pp. 2-3

that timpo tree were two male *jinn*s. The *jinn*s warned not to settle there because they were the owners of the land. They however showed him a place where he would be able to stay. The *jinn* told him that “there was a creek he must cross. Once he reached and crossed it, he then went upland to a place where there was a big *taba* tree. The *jinn* told him that he could look there and build a fence and have that for his area of settlement.”⁸⁶

Also, oral traditions of Bambally claimed that sometime before the late nineteenth century the village’s founder, Sainey Darboe, from the Foday Kunda *Kabilo* in Jarra Bureng was a hunter. According to the tradition, he discovered the site during one of his hunting trips. Other sources indicate how the village of Sarrakunda was discovered by a man “whose black cow would often lead him to a pond where it would drink whenever he took it into the forest for grazing. One day, upon his return to the village, he told the people what he observed about the place. He found the place to be suitable for a settlement.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Abdoulie Samba, interview by Donald R. Wright, tape recording, Gambia, November 12, 1974. Interview in Wright’s “Oral Traditions From the Gambia” Vol. 1, p. 132

⁸⁷ Mba Neneh Sabbally, interview by author and assisted by Abdoulie Jafuneh, tape recording, December 14, 2008, Sarrakunda, North Bank Region, Gambia. Also, sources on the history of the Kiang village of Dumbuto claim that “the elder of Dumbuto was a hunter” [Alkalo Tonyonding Darboe and Imam, interview by Bala Saho, Lamin Yabo and Lamin Nyagadou, tape recording, Sankandi, Kiang, Lower River Region, November 3, 2001. trans. available on file as RDD Tape# 5162 in Fajara]. Similarly, it is asserted that Mbemba, the founder of Jattaba was a hunter from Jenier. “The present site where Jattaba is located was often the place where he rested after a long trek in the forest where he hunted for game. In that forest there was a big *tabo* tree. When he killed an animal he would dry its skin under the tree. That is why the tree got its name ‘dry-skin tabo tree.’ It was later that he decided to settle there” [Alkalo Bunang Sanneh, interview by Bala Saho and Lamin Yabo, tape recording, Kiang, Lower River Region, November 3, 2001. trans. available at the RDD collection in Fajara as Tape# 5177]. Alhagie Bai Konte, interviewed by NCAC staff, tape recording, Kombo, June 28 1976. trans. available at the RDD office as Tape Catalogue # 612. Bakary Kutu Jatta, Alkali of Busumbala “History of Kombo, interviewed by NCAC staff, tape recording, Kombo North, West Region, August 28, 1973. trans. available at the RDD office in Fajara as Tape # 223C: 50-70. Oral sources connect the “early” history of Kombo to the famous hunter from Busumbala, Karafa Yali Jatta. Lastly, Oral traditions repeatedly explain how a famous hunter and blacksmith, Hamadadu Segani Demba from Jokadu Tambana, was taken by *jinn*s when he was a baby. It is said that when Segani was young he had no babysitter and so his mother took him to the rice fields with her. She placed him under a tree and always glanced at him while working. Then, a female *jinne* came and took him away. When the woman came she found that her baby was taken away. Segani lived with the female *jinn* and her husband until he became grown. They gave

Thus, while there are bad *jinn*s, each compound and every person is said to “have a good jinn,” a protector. In his *Oral Traditions from the Gambia*, Donald Wright indicates that it was customary among many Mandinka that the “original settlers of an area and their descendants [develop] special relationships with the *jinn*s, or spirits of the region.”⁸⁸ This, he writes, accorded the original family usufruct rights to the land and water within some generally specified bounds. New settlers in the area had to receive permission from the original family to clear land for new villages and to use the surrounding land for farms.

These religious ideas, therefore, had an important bearing on local attitudes toward land. Historically, lower Gambians made two distinctions between lands occupied by spirits and lands identified as ideal for humans – which means distinctions were often made between lands occupied and “owned” by spirits and lands used by humans for agricultural purposes and for dwelling.

Overview of Land Tenure Systems

Ownership of “Spirit” Lands:

As shown above, local attitudes towards certain land and its ownership hinged on complex mystical and spiritual attributes such as the belief in spirits and *jinn*s. As late as the 1920s, Colonial Commissioner Emilius Hopkinson could write that a significant portion of Niimi’s land was wooded and uninhabited, and that the resident Mandinka “think of [that] land as being inhabited by bad devils and spirits.”⁸⁹

him a gun, taught him how to hunt, and allowed him to return to his home. Hamadadu’s grandson, Kekoto Sengani, was also a hunter and a marabout. Sheriff Jobarteh, interview by Donald R. Wright, Baddibu Banni, January 1, 1975. Interview in Wright’s “Oral Traditions From the Gambia” Vol. 1, p. 101

⁸⁸ Wright, “Oral traditions From the Gambia” Vol. 1, p. 42

⁸⁹ PRO 60/2, E. Hopkinson. Traveling Commissioner’s Report, North Bank Province, 1921.

Hopkinson noted that settlements on this land “always died out after 2 or 3 years” and that most residents of Niumi “had never been through this area.”⁹⁰ *Jumankari*, as this particular land was called, was only five miles away from the village of Sami. The *Jumankari* forest was believed to be a place where *jinns* or evil spirits lived and would ruin the lives of anyone attempting to farm there or settle on the land.⁹¹

Since the decades before the 1850s missionaries who were often intrigued with the religious beliefs of the Africans they encountered observed the close relationship between beliefs in spirits and local attitudes towards certain lands. For instance, William Fox mentioned a land on the banks of the river that the “natives” called “Devil’s Point.” The people believed that the “prince of darkness is said to have a residence under that point of land.” As a result, “In passing this place, the natives are in the habit of [giving something to the devil].”⁹² Few years before Fox made this observation, John Morgan wrote that the “native name of the island of [Bathurst] was Ben-joul, or Pen-joul, a word . . . meaning the ‘devil’s head.’”⁹³

⁹⁰ William Fox, *A Brief History of the Wesleyan Missions*, pp. 245-246; Wright., *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, p. 43

⁹¹ Oral traditions indicate that the sites where the present villages of Bantang Kiling and Medina Bafuloto are located were also believed to homes of dangerous devils and spirits. The same, it was believed, was also true of *Bangali* and *Nambu* (two other dangerous forests located in the center of Niumi, near Medina Sereign Mass and Medina Bafuloto). Accordingly, there seems to be abundant evidence to suggest that most of Niumi’s land as it existed elsewhere in lower-Gambia region before the twentieth century was in one way or the other areas deemed not suitable for settlement or agricultural activity. Oral traditions further explain how the old villages of Tambana, Bambally and Busra were abandoned because the evil spirits attacked and killed many of the people. Daily, people were dying mysteriously because the spirits would appear before them at night or when they were in their fields. The spirits came in the form of monkeys, antelopes, *ninki nankas* (or dragons) and occasionally in human form. While to outsiders this “spirit” land appeared merely to be vacant, to the Africans living along the banks of the Gambia they were not.

⁹² “Devil’s Point” was used to describe the area near Balingho, near Elephant Island. See William Fox, *A Brief History of the Wesleyan Missions*, pp. 245-246 and David P. Gamble, “The Gambia: Place Names on Maps and in Travellers’ Accounts Up to 1825” (Brisbane, Ca., April 1999), p. 9

⁹³ Morgan, *Reminiscences*, pp. 1-2. In the past, almost every major village had a shrine and these shrines were often established on sites that were isolated from most of the people (i.e. on Islands or “distant”

The implication of this belief in spirits on notions of land ownership is by no means trifling. These sorts of beliefs determined the sites people considered habitable or suitable for agriculture. In essence, they helped establish the value people attached to the land itself. For many people, a land that was home for spirits and *jinn*s was not a valuable piece of land. For example, the region's Wolof communities, like their Mandinka and Fula counterparts, believed in the usefulness of enforcing this strict spatial boundary between the human settlements and those of the spirits. In fact, as one man mentioned in an interview, a potential farmland close to his village was called *mbay dee* (meaning cultivate and die). Anyone who tried to farm on that land died because the spirits would kill him.⁹⁴ An informant claimed that in the past these lands were numerous in the area because there were many spirits and *jinn*s in the area and that these spirits outnumbered the people. Obviously, it is impossible to confirm the authenticity of this claim from both the written and oral sources. In fact, that is beyond

forest). A good example of this was Jerre Kung Sito, an island near one of Niumi's royal villages, Sitanunku. Jerre, which the British called Dog or Charles Island, was the place where the people of Sitanunku kept some of their shrines and jujus. In fact, an 1830 English source indicates that Jerre, was Sitanunku's "fetish" place. The place was opened only to elders of the village and hence no one was allowed to settle there. As a result, when in the 1830s, the Agricultural Society of England wanted to settle pensioners and Liberated Africans on the island so they could grow hemp on this Island, the Alkalo of Sitanunku objected to the idea. Although the British had promised him that they would give him annual customs in return for the use of the land, the Alkalo insisted that "they would rather give up custom than have the British on the Island." Consequently, the young men of Sitanunku "went to Dog Island and threatened some pensioners and others residing on the Island with destruction of their farms." This incident occurred a few days before the British attacked Barra Point, where the "King of Barra . . . assembled all fighting men from neighboring village[s] [Source: PRO CO 87/5, 41, Lt. Governor Rendall to R. W. Hay, Government House, Bathurst, July 30 1831; PRO 87/5, 46 Barra War-Lt. Governor Rendall to Lord Vincent Goderich, Bathurst, August 24 1831; PRO CO 87/5, 41- Lt. Governor Rendall to R. W. Hay, Government House, Bathurst, July 30 1831]. For more on the Barra War and the Dog Island incident see For more on this see Donald R. Wright's *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, pp. 138-139. It is written about in Paul M. Mbaeyi, "The Barra-British War of 1831" in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, (June 1967), 617-631, and in less detail in Mbaeyi's book, *British Military and Naval forces in West African History, 1807-1874* (NY: Nok, 1978), p. 76. Finally, see William Moister (visited 1831) *Memorials of Missionary Labours*, p. 206. George Rendall, the governor of the English settlement of Bathurst, was forced to stop paying the annual custom to the *mansa* until "they would comply." For more information, see Lt. Governor Rendall to R.W. Hay, Government House, Bathurst, July 30 1831 CO 87/5, 41

⁹⁴ Alkalo Dawda Sowe, interview by author, Baffuloto, Upper Niumi, North Bank Region, July 23 2006.

the realm of historical enquiry. But what historians should be concerned with is the extent to which such beliefs were rampant and how they influenced local attitudes towards land and its ownership. Both the oral traditions and travelers' accounts left behind by Europeans shed-light on these questions. Thus, belief-systems in lower Gambia basin were just as important in determining where people would settle or farm. Also, it seems that the association of certain religious and spiritual powers to certain groups of people (especially marabouts) and their ability to utilize "spirit" lands was a means of social control. Furthermore, some "vacant" or preserved land was necessary. It provided protection from threatening outsiders, a place to hunt, gather fruits and medicines, and a place for water run-off. In short, "spirit lands" served an ecological function.

Lower Gambians believed that even though the areas *jinns* and "devils" occupied were for the most part made up of fertile soils, the harvests from these lands may not be good because of the spirits that would destroy the crops. In addition, this belief in "spirit" lands was also one of the reasons for the marked difference between European and African understandings of what a vacant land was. While Europeans were looking at lands that were actively put into productive use, Africans were thinking beyond production. In fact, to many Africans, these lands belonged to the *jinns* and powerful spirits. Therefore, the land, which was left vacant, was not just untouched because people believed that it was owned by some invincible spirits.

This belief in spirits and their ability to occupy some land is one of the major reasons why the abandonment of settlements is a recurring theme in lower Gambian oral and documentary sources. As Southorn writes,

The number of abandoned settlements on the banks of the river is a curious feature of Gambian history. Time after time settlements, which are mentioned by the earlier writers and seem to have been of some importance in their day, have vanished completely . . . Trade routes changed, towns and villages were destroyed in tribal wars, localities acquired a bad reputation for unhealthiness or the malign influence of evil spirits.”⁹⁵

Like Southorn, David Gamble described Wolof villages as “small and constantly waxing and waning, [and] breaking up.” He also writes that “Wolof families move about a great deal.”⁹⁶ When people unknowingly settle on a land where they believed evil spirits lived, they would eventually be forced to move to a different, more ideal site.

Indeed, villagers were always liable to pick up and move for a variety of reasons, not just the fear of spirits. Soils could lose their fertility (especially in those days when there were no commercial fertilizers and much less was known about the necessity of crop rotation); wells could run dry over long periods of drought or become spoiled by runoff from latrines or garbage heaps; soothsayers could predict prosperity at another site; or villages could be entirely destroyed—by bush fires or strong enemies, bringing elders to decide to relocate rather than to rebuild on the same spot.⁹⁷

Nonetheless, oral traditions from the many villages located along the banks of the Gambia River seem to suggest that most villages were deserted because of the spirits’ interference.

As will be shown in the fourth chapter, in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, most of these “spirit” lands began to be cleared for

⁹⁵ Southorn, *The Gambia: The Story of the Groundnut Colony*, p. 33

⁹⁶ David P. Gamble, “The North Bank of the Gambia: Places, People and Population (B) The Wolof Area: Sabah and Sanjal, Lower Saalum, Upper Saalum” (Brisbane, Cal., April 1999), p. 10

⁹⁷ Donald Wright and Assan Sarr, “*Cherchez la Tata*: Can We Locate the Old Royal Villages of the Gambian Mandinka States, and What Might Excavation at These Sites Reveal About Life in Precolonial Gambia?” “Unpublished Paper presented at the “Common Ground, Different Meanings: Archaeology, History and the Interpretation of the African Past” Syracuse University, October 8-10, 2009.

growing peanuts. Part of the reason for this had to do with the expansion of cash cropping and the changing religious dynamics taking place across the banks of the Gambia River.

Controlling Human Settlements and Farmlands

If “spirit” lands were “owned” by spirits and could be acquired by religious specialists such as marabouts, lands earmarked for agriculture and settlement were also managed by powerful individuals through a body of customs. Before the mid-nineteenth century, available land that was typically under the territorial jurisdiction of a chief, was deemed to be “own” by the *mansa*. But these lands were then subdivided among villages, *kabilos* (families) and individuals –all often within the jurisdiction of a polity.⁹⁸ Any person or group who wanted a land where he could set up a village had to seek permission from the *mansa* and his subordinates or elsewhere acquire the land by means of conquest.⁹⁹ Through conquest, a number of lineages were reduced to the status of strangers albeit in their own land.

At the village level, families acquired use rights to plots of land they cleared themselves at a time when no one laid claim on that land. That land became the property of the family of the person that first cleared it. However, they must be granted permission by those in authority to clear the forest. Rights to land were sometimes claimed by hunters on the grounds of their initial occupation or utilization of sections of a forest. These remained the most important means of laying claims to any piece of land after the middle of the nineteenth century when *mansas* lost their power.

⁹⁸ But often it was the first chief that settled in an area or the power-holder who usually gave permission to migrants to create new villages – a practice that disappeared during the second half of the nineteenth century.

⁹⁹ In all of these instances, however, immigrant groups had to seek permission from these *initial* settlers to settle, hunt, farm, or practice their particular trade.

Historically, the value of land was not so much based on its market value except in some quarters of the Crown colony established by the British in the 1820s. In fact, family land cannot be sold. In these areas the value of land was largely determined by political and social capital it provided to the ruling elites and prominent lineages.¹⁰⁰ Land ownership patterns/rules ensured that a sizeable group of the population could not claim land as “first-settlers.” Individuals and families used land to attract and create dependents, collected rents from it and used it to justify their social and political standing in society.¹⁰¹ This was especially true with the thousands of young men that migrated to the Gambia during the second half of the nineteenth century to work as “strange farmers” in the peanut industry. Strangers usually presented gifts to their hosts, occasionally marrying into the landlord’s lineage if they wanted to strengthen their land rights, and social status in that society.¹⁰²

Just as an individual or a family living in a village could be regarded as strangers, an entire village that was hosted by the elders of another village would be regarded as strangers. In other words, if a community was granted permission by the “headman” of another town or the *mansa* to settle on a land, the new community became ‘strangers’ of the old settlement that gave them the land. Several villages in

¹⁰⁰ Elsewhere I show that land was an important political and social resource for the people living along the banks of the Gambia River. Before the wars of the second half of the nineteenth century, the *Soninke* ruling class used its political power to prevent stranger groups from owing the best land and from having access to the economic and political privileges which the land provided.¹⁰⁰ Beyond their villages, stranger-groups were treated as ‘outsiders’ and people with less ‘voice’ in state matters. Stranger-villages, like the individual stranger living a village or *Kabilo*, had less power and influence over how the kingdom’s affairs were to be conducted. Their primary duty was to pay tribute (taxes) to the ruling class who supposedly provided them security.¹⁰⁰ But stranger-groups shared this fate with the many peasant communities in the lower Gambia valley. In many of the Mandinka-led kingdoms, the distinction between a stranger and an early settler who was politically marginalized was often slim.

¹⁰¹ CSO 10/71 Confidential Dispatch from Governor of Sierra Leone, Douglas Jardine, to the Secretary of State for Colonies, April 1940. See also NRS, Banjul, CSO 2/94 Laws and Customs of the Jolas, 1906

¹⁰² V.R. Dorjahn and Christopher Fyfe, “Landlord and Stranger: Change in Tenancy Relations in Sierra Leone,” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1962), pp. 391-397.

Niumi and the Sabach-Sanjal districts, for instance, held stranger status because they settled on other peoples' land.¹⁰³ Once the land was allocated, these communities could use it as long as they wanted, but their status as strangers hardly changed. By virtue of their *dependency* on others for land, they, too, were excluded from politics. Before the mid-1800s, a village's founding family and its "stranger" populations would normally pay some form of tribute to the state authorities.

One unit that "incorporated" several outsiders as *dependents* is the *kabilo* grouping, which existed in Mandinka. Under leadership of the eldest male member and proprietor of that land in that extended family, as mentioned earlier, the *kabilatiyo* oversaw the distribution of land and settled any other dispute associated with it. In non-Mandinka communities, however, the *kabilo* system did not exist. In such communities the compound head – usually the eldest male in the compound – assumed such responsibilities. Besides, the family that founded a village claimed ownership of most of the land in that village. They also assumed the leadership of the village, and were frequently answerable to the kingdom's ruler (i.e. *mansa*).

A type of land that was particularly valuable to people living along the banks of the Gambia River were the rice fields (swamps) known as *faroos*. Rice, as noted by Judith Carney and Michael Watts, was cultivated both as an upland rain-fed crop (*tendako*) and, more extensively, as wet or paddy rice in tidal saline and freshwater

¹⁰³ Few examples include Sanchi Paalen, Bamballi, Kerr Chickam.

swamps (*bafaro* and *wamifaro*), on periodically inundated floodplain flats (*leofaro*), and in riparian depressions (known in Mandinka as the *bantafaro*).¹⁰⁴

The desire for lands near the river was even further exacerbated by the expansion of cash cropping. This further encouraged growth of wharf towns. The wharf towns were “the centers of life on the river.”¹⁰⁵ As Southorn wrote, there is a market in every wharf town – peanuts were assembled in these wharf towns in the trading season.¹⁰⁶ In more recent years, however, many villages which once were linked to particular wharf towns as trading centers have now moved to the new roads, to gain access to relatively fast transport.¹⁰⁷

In sum, different lands had different value attached to them. Among other factors, size and location influenced the value people attached to certain land. By the close of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century lower Gambians held complex notions of land ownership. Ethnographic documents point to the fact that the Fula, Mandinka, Wolof and Jola all recognized both a collective and an individual form of property system –all forms of ownership existing simultaneously.¹⁰⁸ While there were lands that belonged to the “whole” community (e.g. cemeteries, mosques or shrines), most of the land were however either claimed by individuals or prominent families instead of all members of the community. Moreover, in Mandinka

¹⁰⁴ Judith Carney and Michael Watts. “Disciplining Women? Rice, Mechanization, and the Evolution of Mandinka Gender Relations in Senegambia” *Signs*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Women, Family, State, and Economy in Africa (Summer, 1991), p. 654

¹⁰⁵ Southorn, *The Gambia: The Story of the Groundnut Colony*, p. 33

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 34

¹⁰⁷ Beedle, “Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town,” p. 3

¹⁰⁸ NRS, CSO 2/94-The Laws and Customs of the Mandingoes of the North Bank, 1906. Bakary Sidebe, interview by author, Churchill Town, Serrekunda, August 5 2008. Modi Sanneh, interview by author, Sapu, Central River Region, August 8 2008

communities, if family members undertook the clearing of the forest collectively, the land is designated *maruo* and as such is inalienable from the residence group. In this system, residents of a household were obliged to cooperate in production for use and exchange. In return for the labor committed to household subsistence, family members were allocated rights to a portion of family landed property. Property rights and labor claims then, as Carney and Watts argue, constituted the fundamental pillars of Mandinka production relations. Individual women and men, however, could establish land ownership rights by clearance under their own labor (*kamanyango*). In the first half of the twentieth century, a colonial official suggested that the “ownership” of rice fields nearly approximated lands held as freehold property. He wrote, “. . . the right of use [exercised over these rice fields] seems to be more or less perpetual.”¹⁰⁹ Although the earliest references to these individualized plots of land dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of oral sources suggest that individual ownership of *kamanyango* fields has been a part of Mandinka landholding customs for a long time. In fact, as Robert Baum argues for the Jola living in the Cassamance area, paddy rice was individually owned but was often worked by brothers, together with their wives and children. Most rice paddies were passed down from parent to their children.¹¹⁰

As opposed to Wolof, Jola and Fula communities, in Mandinka villages, women often played a key role in this landholding system.¹¹¹ In almost all Mandinka villages,

¹⁰⁹ Letter from CNBP to Colonial Secretary dated 26.6.42 CSO 10/71

¹¹⁰ Robert M. Baum. *Shrines of the Slave Trade: Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 29

¹¹¹ Among the Jolas no female owned any lands in her own right even though women always worked the rice fields. They could not claim the land or its fruits as their personal property; all was considered the

the “right of use [for several of the rice fields] descends in the female line.” If a woman married out of the village where she was born and if her new home was not too far away, she would continue to cultivate her own rice farm in her natal village).”¹¹² The ownership or control of these rice fields was often “jealously guarded.”¹¹³ This is because the rice swamps were regularly cultivated more or less on permanent basis. The vast majority of them had been cleared from lowland swamps, and typically devoted to labor-intensive rice production. They were well-watered and had boundaries that were well-marked.

Nevertheless, disputes often broke out among co-wives, families and communities over the control or ownership of these rice fields. In Mandinka households, as in other groups, there was always a head wife who was in charge of the rice fields belonging to her husband’s family. As the senior wife, she also managed the stores of rice and other grains. In some instances, the other wives even worked three days a week in her rice farm and the other days in their own farms. The senior wife also took charge of the husband’s house when he traveled.¹¹⁴ But in the lower Gambia region, it was not uncommon for one to see tensions in families where polygamous

property of the husband. Anyone may buy and sell his own property and is under no obligation . . . However], land was not rented or lent to anyone. Moreover, no woman was acknowledged as head of a family. The head of the family was always the oldest man [ARP 28/1 Traveling Commissioner’s Report SBP]. Similarly, in another ethnographic document, a colonial commissioner noted that among the Fula females and infants may not hold any land but were allotted land by their parents. [Source: Report from the commissioner of Kombo to the Acting Colonial Secretary, WB Stanley. No. 767/1906 dated May 10 1906]. It is also noted that among the Wolof, women may only hold farming land when given by their male relatives. They could not actually take the land themselves. [Report from Commissioner McCallum to the Colonial Secretary dated March 25 1906]. For more, see CSO 2/94-Laws and Customs of the Various Communities in West Africa, 1906.

¹¹² Letter from CNBP to Colonial Secretary dated June 26 1942 CSO 10/71

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ CSO 2/94 The Laws and Customs of the Mandingos 1906

marriages existed.¹¹⁵ Competition among co-wives and or their children often provided a fertile ground for conflict over the “ownership” or control of rice swamps.

Competition such as these even led to difficulties in deciding inheritance questions.

As Judith Carney and Michael Watts writes, *maruo* and *kamanyango* are also Mandinka terms that are used to distinguish between fields employed for food crop or use value production, and plots planted for cash cropping or exchange. The land on which members of the same family labor for their collective subsistence needs is referred to as *maruo* – meaning household fields. *Maruo* land constitutes family land or property. Crops produced for domestic consumption fell under the jurisdiction of the male household head, who controlled storage, distribution, and profits in the event of sale.¹¹⁶

In return for the provision of *maruo* labor, the household head conferred to family members usufructory rights over a small portion of household land. To the extent that the cultivator remained a resident and able-bodied family laborer, control over the plot use and crop rights was guaranteed in perpetuity. These individual fields devoted to production for exchange were also referred to as *kamanyango*. Men generally cultivated peanuts on their individual fields; women typically grow rice for sale.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

In sum, in discussing the forms of property ownership, it is important to note that the idea of the “individual” and “community” are not always in sharp contrast and

¹¹⁵ Virtually, all this historic documents from the 1790s to the late 1920s stressed the importance of multiple marriages in Mandinka, Wolof, Fula, and Jola communities. Both Muslim and non-Muslim males tended to marriage multiple wives. There are also several oral traditions that claim that wealthy and powerful elites often had over a dozen women they called “wives.” Ethnographic data dating back to the colonial era also show that Muslim men often had between 1 to 4 wives.

¹¹⁶ Carney and Watts, “Disciplining Women,” p. 654

¹¹⁷ Ibid

opposition to one another. In other words, in the lower Gambia region, especially during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the binary between what was public or private was not so clear in that spatial boundaries were kept and maintained by naming one's property.

The belief that Africans value people and not land is a widely held view. But this chapter shows the value Africans placed on land and the different elements that influenced peoples' attitude to land. It summarizes how controlling land on the one hand and exercising control over people on the other hand tended to reinforce one another. It does so by looking at the lower Gambia region, which was inhabited by a diverse group of people. As noted by Southorn, the banks of the Gambia River did not constitute a "tribal" barrier.¹¹⁸ It hosted diverse groups of people among them include the Mandinka, Wolof, Fula and Jola. However, until the late nineteenth century, the Mandinka held power over large portions of the north and south banks and the Wolof kingdom of Saloum formed a large enclave in north bank area. Yet, the Jola, Fula as well as the others, settled in villages of their own but under the control of region's ruling aristocracy, and many of them concentrated on farming and had local elites who controlled land and determined access to it.

Each group had its own language and sometimes unique customs. Yet, for all the groups, the value of land was influenced by power, and belief. Hierarchy (or one's social standing in a community) was often important in determining access to land and it also determined the nature of the interactions between first settlers and strangers. Just as individuals could be regarded as strangers, it was not uncommon for entire

¹¹⁸ Southorn, *The Gambia: The Story of the Groundnut Colony*, p. 39

communities to be viewed as strangers to a nearby village or town. As Beedle notes, the landlord-stranger institution was common to the Mandinka, Wolof and Fula.¹¹⁹

Each of these groups had complex religious beliefs. But belief-systems in lower Gambia basin were just as important in determining where people would settle or farm. Such beliefs were probably a means of social control – i.e. to deter people from utilizing certain lands. They could also have been just a part of the people’s religious worldview. In any event, local attitudes towards land were shaped by these sorts of beliefs. Consequently, some "vacant" or preserved land provided protection from threatening outsiders. They also served as places to hunt and gather fruits and medicines. In short, many "spirit lands" served an ecological function.

Land was also the primary means of attaining a livelihood as farmers. Historically, lower Gambian farmers produced several types of grains of their land in “considerable quantities.” Some of these grains include corn (maize), *sanio* and *basso*, millet and rice. However, from the middle of the 1830s onwards, peanuts became the most important crop grown by farmers living along the banks of the River Gambia, a transformation explored in chapter 4.

¹¹⁹ Beedle, “Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town,” p. 23

Chapter Two

Landlords and Strangers:

Land, Power and Dependency in the Early Nineteenth Century Lower Gambia Basin

The concepts of power and domination are important in understanding systems of land tenure as were practiced along the banks of the Gambia River in the early nineteenth century. In this region, the Mandinka ruling aristocracy managed through the use of political power to maintain monopoly ownership of the best land along the river, except for the narrow area where the kingdom of Saloum reached the river bank.¹ This does not fit with what few scholars have argued for some other parts of pre-colonial Africa: that African kings or chiefs were only nominal custodians of communal land.² Circumstances in the lower Gambia suggest that this was not everywhere the case. The ruling class used land to increase its wealth and to demonstrate its political power. In fact, before British authority began altering African customs, land in the Mandinka-dominated kingdoms of the Gambia could not be acquired as a simple commodity; nor

¹ Charlotte A. Quinn. *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia: Traditionalism, Islam, and European Expansion* (Evanston [Ill.] Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 27; Paul Julian Beedle, "Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town" Thesis (doctoral)--University of Cambridge, 1980, p. 24. Fafa Jobe, interview by author, Kumbija Village, Sabach-Sanjal, The Gambia, December, 14 2008.

² G.B. A. Coker. *Family Property Among the Yorubas* (London & Lagos: Sweet and Maxwell, African Universities Press, 1966), p. 31. In writing about Yoruba systems of land tenure, G.B. A. Coker writes that "The chief holds on behalf of the whole community in the capacity of a caretaker or trustee only but he allocates portions of land to family heads according to need and these in turn reallocate among their members." See also Rev. Samuel Johnson. *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (C.M.S. Nigeria, Bookshops Lagos, 1921). Johnson writes that theoretically and traditionally Yoruba land belonged to the Alafin of Oyo as the supreme head of the Yorubas. Also, Dickson A. Mungazi and George B.N. Ayittey have made similar arguments about land tenure systems elsewhere in Africa. See also Dickson A. Mungazi. *The Struggle for Social change in Southern Africa: Visions of Liberty* (New York, Crane Russak, 1989), p. 34; George B.N. Ayittey. *Africa Betrayed* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1992). The general point made by all these scholars is that as head of the group, the king or chief had no power to sell or distribute land at his disposal. As such, he was bound by 'native' law and custom to allocate use rights to the land to families and strangers after due consultation with the 'elders of the land.'

could it be traded in such a way as to divorce it from the social and political context that gave it economic and use value.³ This implies that in these polities, land ownership was tied to the production and reproduction of social and political relationships.⁴

This chapter focuses on the early nineteenth century and explores the close link between political power and access to land. It argues that control of land depended on the constructs of “landlords” and “strangers.” In the early nineteenth century, landlords in the lower Gambia region carried with them the title *Soninke* – meaning the owners of the land. As opposed to the “recent” settlers who were commonly viewed and treated as “strangers” (*luntango*, in Mandinka), the *Soninke* generally consisted of the ruling party of aristocratic families and their followers; they were the principal lineages in territories under their domain. The stranger populations regularly depended on this aristocracy for access to land, for which they paid tributes. “Strangers” were also barred from holding important political offices, partly because of their lack of strong ties to the land. Yet, even families that were poor and politically marginalized but traced their descent from the principal lineages could enjoy those privileges – such as hosting strangers – that the former could not enjoy. Despite their material deprivation, they were still part of the principal families of a village. As a result, they took pride more on the number of their dependents (including women and slaves) and their status in the community rather than solely basing it on the size of their material wealth.

Although in recent decades several scholars have examined the importance of the landlord-stranger relationship in some African societies,⁵ in general the scholarship

³ Boubacar Barry argues this for the Senegal River valley. But similar arguments can be made about the land situation in the Gambia region. For more on land in Senegal, see Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 30

⁴ Parker Shipton, *Mortgaging The Ancestors: Ideologies of Attachment in Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)

on land tenure in pre-colonial Africa tends to dismiss the centrality of land in shaping social and economic differentiations among individuals and groups. As discussed earlier, in *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*, historian John Thornton argues that in all of pre-colonial Africa land was collectively owned and that no individual exercised the role of a landlord because African law made land available to everybody (free or slave).⁶ Similarly, Jack Glazier and Martin Klein argue that patterns of political domination in pre-colonial African societies were not predicated on a ruling stratum's control over access to land because land was in abundance.⁷

While it is true that most pre-colonial African societies were characterized mostly by strong kinship structures and that accessing land was relatively easy in these societies, these scholars under-estimate the other forms of political and social differentiation that came along with landownership. An important factor is the distinction between "landlords" and "strangers" – a practice that emerged out of the "politics" of accessing land.⁸ The landlord-stranger relationship, as Paul J. Beedle states, was one "of dependence and protection, involved power, was durable and

⁵ For example, see Dorjahn and Fyfe. "Landlord and Stranger: Change in Tenancy Relations in Sierra Leone" *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1962), pp. 391-397; Bruce Mouser. "Landlords-Strangers: A Process of Accommodation and Assimilation" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1975), pp. 425-7; George Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers*. For more on the importance of the firstcomer/latecomer opposition see Wyatt MacGaffey, "Changing Representations in Central African history," *Journal of African History*, 46 (2005), pp. 193-95. Most of these, however, focused on Euro-African interactions or deals with societies outside of the Senegambia region.

⁶ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 87

⁷ Jack Glazier, *Land and the Uses of Tradition Among the Mbeere of Kenya* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), pp. 1-2; Martin A. Klein, *Peasants in Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Beverly Hills, London: Sage Publications 1980). These works suggests that most African societies lacked a well-defined landowning class and thus the antagonistic relations that sometimes result in peasant-landowner conflict.

⁸ Landlord stranger relationship was an age old custom of hosting and providing food, shelter and land to strangers. It was common throughout the Gambia as it was to other parts of Western Africa.

regular, and was supported by a framework of moral values.”⁹ Generally, in the Gambia region, the practice enabled landlords to continue monopolizing political power particularly at the village level while strangers remained dependents. One could become a landlord by: 1) belonging to a founding lineage that first settled in a village or has authority over a kingdom or 2) by launching a successful military campaign and succeeding in annexing a group and its land. This chapter attempts to contribute to the understanding of the importance of this practice and how power shaped the way in which land was allocated.

The land situation in the societies along the banks of the lower Gambia River in the nineteenth century is described because this period was the last time the *mansas* ruled the area without significant interference from English traders and colonialists on the one hand, or from militant Muslims on the other. In discussing land tenure, however, the study gleans from oral sources and written observations by Europeans showing the importance of land in lower Gambian political culture. Sources (both written and oral) from the region point to the centrality of land in shaping the region’s political culture. The written sources include observations made by English administrators and missionaries dating back to the first half of the nineteenth century. Also utilized is the oral history collection at the RDD, formerly called the Gambia’s Oral History and Antiquities bureau. Together, these sources offer valuable insights into the region’s past, and especially, how matters of land fit into its broader history.

⁹ Paul J. Beedle, “Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town” Thesis (doctoral)--University of Cambridge, 1980, p. iii

Land, Power and Dependency

In *Senegambia During the Atlantic Slave Trade*, Boubacar Barry writes that pre-colonial Senegambia contained two types of societies. One was egalitarian in outlook. These were the decentralized societies of southern Senegambia: the Jola, Balanta, and some Serer communities living in the north. The other, which was hierarchical in outlook, imposed monarchical power upon a lineage-based system often supported by the rigid framework of *Kafu*, *Ado* or *Lamanat* authority. Under the *Kafu* and *Lamanat* systems, he argues that land rights were linked to political or religious power under the authority of a territorial chief, who functioned as a community head.¹⁰ Barry further shows that throughout its pre-modern history, the Senegal valley seems to have been a cradle from which populations spread out into the rest of northern Senegambia. The valley played this role because of its river, which he argues “is a life sustaining gift.” The river basin had the ability to support what he calls “flood recession farming.” Given the importance of flood recession farming, land was central to economic, political, and social life in the delta.¹¹ In order to demonstrate this, Barry draws examples from the pre-colonial Senegambian states of Jollof, Futa Toro and Waalo. In Jollof, where a land tenure system of the *lamanal* type developed, land rights belonged to kin-based communities and were managed by the community head or *laman*.¹² Farms were worked by families paying land rent to the *laman*. Under this system, it was possible for outsiders to settle on such land with their families, provided they paid settlement

¹⁰ Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, p. 26

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 10

¹² For more on the discussion of *lamanal* land tenure system in Kajoor and in other Wolof societies, see Mamadou Diouf's *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle: Pouvoir Ceddo et Conquête Coloniale* (Paris: Karthala, 1990) and Abdoulaye-Bara Diop's *La Société Wolof, Tradition et Changement: Les Systèmes D'inégalité et De Domination* (Paris: Karthala, 1981).

dues/taxes to the *laman* along with regular rent, in return for permanent, inheritable farming rights. Even with the decline of the Jollof Empire, this *lamanal* land tenure system did not change fundamentally. Landed property continued to be used as a basis of monarchical authority.¹³ Similarly, in Futa Toro the Denyanke dynasty had consolidated landownership structures by letting the aristocracy distribute holdings to the most faithful of their entourage. The result was the creation of extensive landholdings side by side with small family plots. Such a system indicates the existence of a class of major landowners, with Denyankobe taking the lion's share. The history of Futa Toro is principally a record of the continual reconstitution of landholdings to the benefit of its ruling class.¹⁴ Also, Barry notes that in Waalo land was a crucial political and economic resource, even if competition for it was not as acute as it always was in Futa Toro.¹⁵

While Barry accurately demonstrates the importance of land in the Senegal River valley, he does not recognize its significance in the political and social history of the Gambia River area. For him, the Gambia, unlike the Senegal valley, owed its importance primarily to trade.¹⁶ Indeed, it is possible that competition for land in the Gambia may not have been as intense as it was in the Senegal valley. However, in the Gambia, systems of land tenure were very much an integral part of the people's social, political, and religious institutions. At least in the early nineteenth century,

¹³ Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, p. 15

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11; Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), pp. 22-23; Oumar Kane, *La Première Hégémonie Peule: Le Fuuta Tooro de Koli Tengella à Almaami Abdul* (Paris: Karthala; Dakar-Fann: Presses universitaires de Dakar, 2004)

¹⁵ Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, p. 11

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18

landownership was at the heart of the privileged existence of the ruling lineages. As in Futa Toro, land was one of the bases of political power.¹⁷ It was the basis that was used to decide leadership at the village and *kabilo* level, in addition to providing some people with a voice in their communities. Most often, individuals from lineages that claimed to be the original founder-settlers assumed the leadership of a village. As opposed to the stranger families and conquered populations, who generally held inferior status in their *kabilos* or communities, the Alkalos and *kabilo* heads always came from original founder-settlers. As “elders of the land,” the *kabilo* heads and Alkalos presided over the distribution and allocation of land and settled disputes in their communities. Also, “village” land could only be assigned to newcomers with the permission of the Alkalo and *kabilo* heads. Control of land, therefore, ranked society: virtually everyone was considered and treated as either a “landlord” or a “stranger.” Together, the *mansa*, the Alkalos, and *kabilo* heads of the states’ core lineages formed the most powerful landowning class (i.e. *Soninke*). The *Soninke* used their land-based political power to dominate their subjects. By controlling the land, they monopolized the best lands along the banks of the Gambia River. This implies that, generally, two levels of authority often exercised power over the distribution and allocation of land. The first was the state level, exercised by the *mansa*. The second was at the village and compound level.

The Mansa’s Land Was His Kingdom

Mungo Park wrote in the late 1790s and early 1800s that

Concerning property in the soil, it appeared to me that the lands in native woods were considered belonging to the king . . . When any individual of free condition had the means of cultivating more land than he actually possessed, he applied to the chief man of the district, who allowed him an extension of

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 30

territory on condition of forfeiture if the lands were not brought under cultivation by a given period.¹⁸

Here, Park explains one important feature of land tenure before the mid nineteenth century, which is the *mansa's territorial* ownership of the land. As territorial head and chief landlord of the kingdom, it was his prerogative to be consulted in matters of land allocation. (This role performed by the *mansa* is widely acknowledged by many contemporary European sources). This was especially true when individual settlers wanted land on which they wanted to set up their own village. As one report notes, "If the land required was vacant, the *mansa* in whose kingdom it was located was approached by those wanting to settle and build a village. After due formalities, the *mansa* would allocate to the new village sufficient land for its needs. If necessary, boundaries would be fixed with its neighbors."¹⁹ At times, if the land requested was land over which another village was regarded as having right of use, the village head (Alkalo) of that village "was approached and after due formalities he would allocate to the new village sufficient [land] for its needs and fix a boundary between the two villages."²⁰ Subsequently, the Alkalo would inform the *mansa* of what he had done and obtain formal approval. In this way, the new village would acquire land but it acquired

¹⁸ Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa First Journey -1795 -1797* (Edinburg: Adam and Charles Black, 1878), pp. 241-42

¹⁹ NRS, Banjul, CSO 10/71-"A memorandum on Native Custom Regarding Land Tenure in the Kombo Districts of the South Bank Province" in Confidential Dispatch to the Colonial Secretary in Bathurst from the Commissioner's Office South Bank Province, Cape St. Mary, Gambia, April 30 1940.

²⁰ Ibid, NRS, Banjul, CSO 10/71 See also Peter Weil, "Mandinka Mansaya: The Role of the Mandinka in the Political System of the Gambia." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oregon, 1968, p. 68 [Anthropologist Peter Weil explains the process by which sites for new villages were determined. He writes that before anyone can settle on a land, he must seek final permission from the person who controlled]. Finally, See David Gamble. *Traditional Mandinka Agriculture*. Gambian Studies, No. 49. Brisbane, California, February 2006, p. 20.

only the right to use this land; it did not acquire full ownership – meaning it was still perceived as a stranger community.²¹

The *mansa's* right to dispose of land allotted to strangers is noted in many other European accounts. A traveling commissioner's report of the 1890s for the South Bank also noted that in Kiang, on the founding of a new town "the people went to the king and asked him to allocate land on which they farm and build houses. The king then apportioned a certain amount of land . . . according to the number of people building, which included town site and farming land. When the town increased in size the people then asked for more land."²² The same report states that among the Mandinka the right of disposal of the use of any vacant land for the establishment of a village "lay with the king after due consultation" with those who had a right by custom to be consulted in the kingdom's affairs. Theoretically, the ownership of the whole of the land—whether vacant or occupied—was considered to be with the *mansa*.²³ The same report concluded that the *mansa* had such rights "either by conquest or occupation."²⁴

A number of missionary sources also suggest that in the past, there was a close link between the *mansas'* authority and access to land. For instance, in December of

²¹ Ibid, NRS, Banjul, CSO 10/71

²² I have argued in the introduction to this dissertation that much of what the first traveling commissioners know about the history of the people they were dealing with came from oral history and involved processes that took place before the 1890s. Certainly, the migration and conquest of parts of the lower Gambia region by the Western Mandinka took place well before the 1890s because the eighteenth and early nineteenth century European travel accounts such as Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior of Africa* mentioned these Mandinka states. NRS, Banjul, ARP 28.1-Travelling Commissioner's Report, South Bank Province 1893-1899

²³ NRS, Banjul, ARP 28/1 Traveling Commissioner's Report, South Bank, 1893

²⁴ Ibid. By definition, conquest is the taking of possession of enemy territory or land through force, followed by formal annexation of the defeated territory by the conqueror. Elsewhere in Africa, notably among the Lunda and Shona, as Allen Isaacman states, "kings were considered divine with power over the fertility of the land. He was the sole custodian of land and he possessed the exclusive right to allocate it. In return he extracted from his tributes, services and other resources." J.F. Ajayi (editor) *General History of Africa VI Africa in the Nineteenth Century Until the 1880s* (James Currey, California; UNESCO, 1998), p. 182

1823, soon after members of the Society of Friends (a Christian missionary society) arrived in Brikow (mostly Bakau, a town situated at the Cape St. Mary in the territory of the *mansa* of Kombo), a piece of land was given to them after seeking permission from the *mansa*.²⁵ Also, in Kombo, in the 1820s, the *mansa* told missionaries from the Methodist church to “look around, and in any place [they] liked to sit down (i.e. settle).” The missionaries identified the “choice of the spot . . .and [the] choice was approved by the king, who in another interview, formally gave them permission to cut down what trees they pleased, whether for building or clearing the land, and expressed his content at [the] proposed annual tribute of twenty dollars.”²⁶ Another missionary document corroborates this role performed by the Mandinka *mansas*. In his 1821 account, Reverend Morgan wrote after he returned from Tendaba that the *mansa* was willing to give him as much land as he wanted. But he pondered the extent to which “grants of land [were] secured” in that kingdom.²⁷ He sensed that “the king’s word will doubtless be sufficient during his life but the next king may deny the [stranger’s] claim to that land.”²⁸

Granting permission was an important means for the *mansa* to exercise control over settlers. In other words, land provided the ruling aristocracy a means of social control because controlling land enabled *mansas* to keep people as dependents. But the control of land and the control of people tended to reinforce one another. In other

²⁵ Cited from *The Christian Traveller in Western Africa*. (London Charles Knight and Co. 1841).

²⁶ Ibid, p. 170.

²⁷ John Morgan, *Reminiscences of the Founding of a Christian Mission on the Gambia*. (London: Wesleyan Mission House, 1864), p. 15

²⁸ Ibid

words, with more dependents greater amounts of land could be brought under use.

Similarly, with land, people can attract more settlers.

The *mansa* had the right to exercise control over land because his lineage was among the first to either settle on the land or to rule the kingdom. Most of the lineages which became lower Gambia's ruling families acquired their rights to the land by conquering land from other groups. Popular stories documented in both oral and written records echo this claim. For example, in his dissertation, Edouard Francois Manchuelle writes that among the *Soninke* (Serahule) of Senegambia, "Land belonged to certain lineages, whether because of their anteriority in the area or by right of conquest."²⁹ While Manchuelle's study deals with a group that lived in what is now modern Senegal, an oral history of the kingdom of Jarra claims that when the people of Jarra came to settle on the banks of the lower Gambia River, they found the inhabitants of Kiang already living in the area.³⁰ The account claims that those who established Jarra traced their origins to Doutilla (most likely Dantilla), a 'distant' home in the West African interior where most of the Senegambian Mandinka claim to have originated from – i.e. *tilibo*, which literally means the East. (Most western Mandinka living along the banks of the Gambia River claim that they came from *tilibo*. They consistently refer to the east as the place where the medieval empire of Manding once stood. Doutilla might have been one of the centers in Manding where some of these Mandinka speaking

²⁹ Edouard Francois Manchuelle "Background to Black African Emigration to France: The Labor Migrations of the Soninke, 1848-1987" Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, June 1987, p. 47; See also NRS, Banjul, CSO 10/71, April 1940. See also Confidential Dispatch from Governor of Sierra Leone, Douglas Jardine, to the Secretary of State for Colonies, April 1940.

³⁰ NRS, Banjul, ARP 28/1 Traveling Commissioner's Report, South Bank Province, November 27 1893

peoples came from. It might also be how the English heard ‘Dugu Tilibo’).³¹ Through conquest, the people of Jarra led by their *mansa* seized the land from Kiang and drove them west. Subsequently, the *mansa* of Jarra appointed “an agent” to monitor the frontier between his kingdom and those of his defeated neighbors (i.e. Kiang). Later, however, war between the two kingdoms erupted again and this time, the Kiang people were pushed much further west as Jarra expanded its territory.³² Although the oral sources do not point to an approximate date when the Mandinka conquered this land, it was certainly before the nineteenth century.

A celebrated Mandinka warrior, Amari Sonko, also descended on the north bank of the Gambia River with armed men, and fought many battles with the Bur Saloum, before helping the Jammeh ruling family to assert its independence from Saloum. It is unclear in the oral traditions when Sonko invaded the north bank, but it is certainly before the nineteenth century. Sonko’s descendants of Amari Sonko became prominent landowners in Niimi because of this role he played in “liberating” Niimi. The Sonko lineage controlled the prominent villages of Sika, Lamin, Bunyadu and Essau, which became “royal towns.” In fact, the *mansaya* (government) in Niimi rotated between the Sonko and the other lineages that had a right to govern (i.e. the Jammeh and the

³¹ Mungo Park also mentioned a place in eastern Gambia named Dentila. It was supposedly a town notorious for trading especially in cotton and iron. (See p. 329)

³² Similar narratives about Kombo explain how the Bainunks lost their land to an invading Mandinka lineage. For more on the Mandinka-Bainunk relationship, see the interviews tape with Nbalifele Janneh abd Lamin Fatty, Bakau, Cape St. Mary on Kombo history. Tape Catalogue # 027B, RDD collection, Date: 1967. Collected by S.M. Sissokho. Transcribed on May 15 1982. Also see Alhagie Bai Konte, interview by Bakary Sidebe, tape recording, Brikama-Kombo Central, April 4 1976. trans. of the tapes available at the RDD collection in Fajara as Tape catalogue # 609 and RDD Tape # 321]. RDD, interview by NCAC staff with an unknown information, March 28, 1976. Translated by Abdoulie Bayo and file stored as RDD Tape # 327B. Alhagie Bai Konte, “History of Kombo,” interview by Radio Gambia, Brikama, Western Region, April 4 1976. trans. available at the RDD collection in Fajara as Tape Catalogue # 609.

Manneh lineages of Bakindik, Tobabkolong, Sitanunku and Bunyadu).³³ In part this demonstrates that strangers have in the past laid claim to fields and became landlords through military force.

Certainly, one of the most prevalent and widely-accepted themes in Mandinka oral traditions is the conquest and long-term settlement resulting from the great Mandinka migrations from Mali.³⁴ As Donald Wright states, it is rare for Gambian Mandinka oral narrative—whether focusing on the history of a state, a village, or a separate lineage—that does not begin by naming where the ancestors originated and/or conquered. Wright criticizes these traditions on the grounds that they are shaped by modern ethnic labels, which do not hold up when considering people in the past. (In other words, oral traditionalists of today place modern ethnic constructs on peoples of the past). For Wright, using modern ethnic labels to describe peoples in pre-colonial lower Gambia is almost equal to what Frederick Cooper illustrates as “confusing the analytic categories of the present with the native categories of the past, as if people acted in search of identity or to build a nation when such ways of thinking might not

³³ Francis Moore, an eighteenth century English trader to the Gambia confirmed that although Barra (Niumi) was ruled by a Mandingo king, his kingdom was then a tributary of the king and kingdom of Saloum). See Donald R. Wright’s interview with Jerre Manneh, Bunyadu. Date: September 28, 1974. See also Donald R. Wright’s “Oral Traditions From the Gambia” Vol. II Family Elders. Ohio University Center for International Studies, Papers in International Studies, Africa Series No. 38, 1980, pp. 35-36; Farata Lamin Fatty, “The history of Baddibu and Niumi,” interview by Donald R. Wright, Niumi, Gambia, October 16 1975. trans. available at the RDD collection as Tape Catalogue # 0225 A and B. In a personal email conversion on Sunday 29 March 2009 Donald Wright told me that he thinks the Sonkos and Manneh came to Niumi sometime after slave trading picked up there, perhaps early in the 17th century. He believes the threat, and need for protection, was sufficient at that time for the mansas to strengthen themselves with more elites, and this is why the Jammehs welcomed the Sonkos and the Manneh. He further states that he has a sense that it was not a peaceful time, that lots of fighting and turmoil occurred before they ironed out their rotating succession so as to please the various families who contributed to the *mansaya* and the state protection.

³⁴ Donald R. Wright, “Beyond Migration and Conquest: Oral Traditions and Mandinka Ethnicity in Senegambia” *History in Africa*, Vol. 12 (1985), p. 335

have been available to them.”³⁵ Another criticism he advances stems from his disappointment with griots (“men of memory”). He found their information contaminated and weak especially for the pre-colonial period. In fact, he writes that neither griots nor informed elders had factual information about the pre-colonial period. The griots could not even give him good genealogies.³⁶

Wright’s criticisms are in many ways compelling. The lower Gambia region was a multi-ethnic society. Even European records have shown that there was no “tribal” boundary that separated the different ethnicities. Marriage across ethnicities, which further complicates ethnic identities, was common in the area. Moreover, Mandinka oral narratives are heavily biased toward stories of migration and conquest, which overwhelmingly center on the deeds of “heroes” and less on the contributions of ordinary people. Also, like all types of sources, there is often a question of accuracy in oral narratives.

However, these tales of conquest and/or migration are not entirely irrelevant to a historian whose aim is to reconstruct the history of land tenure in the lower Gambia region in that they provide clues to the distant past. There is no doubt that before the nineteenth century there were people who identified themselves as Mandinka, Wolof, Fula or Serer. Moreover, the *Soninke* ruling class had by this time (i.e. the nineteenth century) become defined by the region’s inhabitants as belonging to the Mandinka ethnic group. The “invention” of these traditions resulted from the Mandinka political hegemony of the region dating back as far as the sixteenth down to the mid-nineteenth

³⁵ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005), p. 18

³⁶ Donald R. Wright, “Requiem for the Use of Oral Tradition to Reconstruct the Precolonial History of the Lower Gambia” *History in Africa*, Vol. 18 (1991), p.p. 401-402

centuries. During this period, the Mandinka aristocracy controlled the territory from the Gambia in the north to modern day Guinea Bissau in the south. This is part of the Mandinka's past glory that griots take pride in narrating. Most of what griots remember is about war – i.e. wars of conquests that implant a ruling aristocracy on a land which was previously not theirs. Some of the narratives they provide also shed light on how 'title by conquest' was acquired and maintained by force.

Mansas took interest in giving or refusing permission to strangers who desired to set up new villages within their kingdoms for several reasons. Certainly, increasing one's lineage was an important reason.³⁷ As landowners the *mansas* knew that allocation of use rights was an important means of gaining followers and building a power base.³⁸ To the aristocracy, land was valued primarily as a means to attract *dependents* rather than as an asset in its own right.³⁹ Another reason had to do with power and the security of the kingdom. An oral history of Bantankilling (a town the English colonialists used to call Fitzgerald town) claims that Mansa Demba Sonko of Niumi, who at the time was residing in Berending, allocated an "undesirable" piece of land to a Wolof chief and mystic, Masamba Koki Jobe. Masamba came from Senegal to settle in Niumi, but the *mansa* assigned him an "evil forest" because he did not want

³⁷ For more on the importance of expanding one's kinship among the Mandinka see the work of S. M. Cissokho "Kinship Among the Western Mandinkas" *Bulletin I. F.A.N. XXXI*, Ser. B, No. 2, 1969. For the rest of Africa, see the work of Suzanne Miers and Igor kopytoff, "Introduction: African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality" in *Slavery in Africa*, pp. 3-78

³⁸ Anthony Hopkins, "Property Rights and Empire Building: Britain's Annexation of Lagos, 1861" *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1980), p. 784

³⁹ Sara S. Berry. *Chiefs Know Their Boundaries: Essays on Property, Power, and the Past in Asante, 1896-1996* (Portsmouth and Oxford: Heinemann and James Currey, 2001), p. 9

him to settle in his kingdom for long.⁴⁰ (The land, which was called *mbantang killing*, was under the tutelage of Tobabkolong. But the people of Tobabkolong never made use of the land because it was widely believed that the forest was home for *jinns* and evil spirits).⁴¹ Masamba was a warrior and a relative of Lat Jor Jobe of Kayor, who had the potential to create unrest in the *mansa's* kingdom by threatening his power.

Land was sometimes given to individuals or communities as a reward for special services, or for the sake of establishing an *alliance*. This was mostly applied but not limited to warriors or men with special skills.⁴² For example, in Kombo, tradition tells us that the ancestors of the “royal” towns of Busumbala, Yundum, Manduar, Brikama, and Jambur were given permission to settle on the land by female “ruler” of Sanyang.⁴³ After some time, one of the daughters of the female ruler is noted to have married one of the strangers. When the marriage took place, the ruler was considered to have resigned her position as *mansa*, surrendering the throne to her son-in-law.⁴⁴ An oral informant argued that the female ruler herself, not the daughter, married Karafa Yali.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Alhagie Mangkodou Sarr, interview by author, tape recording, Kerr Chernu Village, Upper Niumi. June 13, 2006 and August 17 2008. Mangkodou was born in Bantang Killing and is the eldest male descendant of Masamba Koki.

⁴¹ William Fox, *A Brief History of the Wesleyan Missions on the Western Coast of Africa* (London: Aylott and Jones, 1850), pp. 245-246.

⁴² Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 29; See also David P. Gamble, *Traditional Mandinka Agriculture*. *Gambian Studies*, No. 49. Brisbane, California, February 2006, p. 29; Alkalo Luntang Jaitheh, interview by author, not recorded, Bakau, June 9, 2006. Luntang was also Chairman of Rent Tribunal, KMC and member of the African Center for Peoples and Human Rights Mediation Committee.

⁴³ The Alkalo of Busumbala told a group of researchers that descendants of the ancestors of Busumbala were the Konteh and Jatta lineages [translated version of the tape recording available at the RDD as Tape # 223C: 50-70, 1973].

⁴⁴ NRS, Banjul, CSO 10/71, The Secretariat Confidential File, Gambia No. 2544, December, 24 1939. Sanyang was and is still an important coastal town located on the Atlantic coastline.

⁴⁵ Karafa Yali was the hunter who accidentally “discovered” Sanyang. He was also the younger brother of the leader of Busumbala. It is often claimed that Karafa Yali was wandering the thick forest called *Sanyang Sutubaa* when he heard a noise. He became curious and continued to search for the source of

By this act, the narrative further states, she was regarded “as giving up her group’s independence and title to the ownership of the land.”⁴⁶ After this happened, the newcomers divided up the land and created two “royal” towns, Busumbala and Brikama. The rest of the land was left vacant (used only for hunting purposes, or the gathering of wild fruits and forest produce) but technically they all came under the *territorial* ownership of these newly created “royal” towns. As their populations grew, the settlements continued to expand. Eventually, new villages emerged either through groups hiving off from the *original* settlements or growth in migrant populations settling in.

In short, this anecdote highlights a situation whereby a landlord married a stranger whose kin would later lay some claims not only to the land but also to the political power associated with it. By becoming the rulers of Kombo, the lineages that founded these “royal” towns became the territorial heads of Kombo. But there were several of these towns; the lineages established a rotating *mansaya* system similar to the one in Niimi. Anyone who became *mansa* from the Bojang or Jatta lineages of Kombo claimed *ownership* of the land as ruler. They exercised the power to distribute land to newcomers who wanted to establish their own village. Once a virgin area had been cleared and cultivated by a person or a family with the *mansa*’s permission, in theory

the noise. Subsequently, he arrived at a settlement which was at the time under the female ruler. For more on this, see translated version of the tape recording in RDD Tape# 223 C: 50-70.

⁴⁶ The informants do not seem to agree on the identity of this mysterious female ruler. While one informant argues that she her was Wuleng Jabbi, another stated that her name was Wulending Jammeh Jarsey. According to Alhagie Bai Konte’s own narration, there was a war in Karoni and because of that the ancestors who became the founders of Sanyang left with their *mansa* and settled in Sanyang Sutubaa. Others claimed that the female ruler lived in the forest, in a cave. That female ruler gave the crown to Karafa Yali and her daughter to marry. [Source: Alhagie Bai Konte, interview by NCAC staff, tape recording, Brikama, Western Region, June 28 1976. trans. available at the RDD as Tape Catalogue # 612 and Alkalo Bakary Kutu Jatta, “History of Kombo, interview by NCAC staff, tape recording, Busumbala, Kombo North, West Region, August 28 1973. trans. available at the RDD collection as Tape # 223C: 50-70.

the cultivator's family/lineage owned the rights to cultivate this farm in perpetuity and could not under any circumstances be dispossessed. But land acquired in this way carried with the ownership the obligation to pay tribute to the ruler of the land and it is about two bushels of rice for every hundred bushels the land yields.⁴⁷ Usually, no tribute was, however, paid for uncultivated areas.

The *mansas* did not claim ownership of land as their private property. They controlled land mostly because of their *territorial* ownership of the land. Furthermore, they did not only seek wealth in land but also political power.⁴⁸ In addition to being subject to the *mansa's territorial* ownership, land was also the basis of stratification at the village level. It even shaped the nature of village politics. Lower Gambian society was comprised of landlords – first-comers and power holders – on the one hand, and “strangers” – recent settlers and conquered populations – on the other.

Rights of Office Holders: Alkalos and the Kabilo Heads

In Gambian villages, lineages with traditions of direct descent from the founder-settler ancestors claimed paramount rights of land ownership in their individual settlements.⁴⁹ As part of custom, initial occupation or evidence of the utilization of sections of a forest by farmers and/or hunters was enough basis for laying claims to the ownership of land. Once these claims were established, immigrant groups had to seek

⁴⁷ NRS, Banjul, CSO 10/71: Confidential Dispatch from Governor of Sierra Leone, Douglas Jardine, to the Secretary of State for Colonies, April 1940

⁴⁸ NRS, Banjul, CSO 10/71, Confidential Dispatch to the Colonial Secretary in Bathurst from the Commissioner's Office South Bank Province, Cape St. Mary, 30th April, 1940. This is also supported by Farata Lamin Fatty, “The History of Baddibu and Niumi,” interview by Donald R. Wright, tape recording, Niumi, October 16 1975. trans. available at the RDD collection as Tape Catalogue # 0225 A and B.

⁴⁹ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 17

permission from these landowning families to settle, hunt, farm, or practice their particular trade.

It was from these founding lineages that Alkalos and *kabilo* heads were chosen from.⁵⁰ An Alkalo was the oldest man of the senior family that founded the village. Thus his position was typically hereditary. But even though most Alkalos assumed their position through succession, occasionally the *mansa* appointed Alkalos who administered their individual towns and villages on his behalf. This means Alkalos took on the role of land allocation and dispute resolution as representatives of the *mansa*. As one report states, “it was the custom on the founding of a new town for the ‘king’ to appoint the alcaide; at his death he is succeeded by his brother; at the death of all the brothers [the leadership of the village] revert[ed] back to original alcaide’s eldest son.”⁵¹

Among the Mandinka it was also common for members of different lineages to come together and set up a village. Such families “may not even share a common ancestor.” Yet, they could decide to live together and share the land amongst themselves. “They could even eat together.” As one informant told me, in such situations, when women finished cooking food they usually brought it to the head of the *kabilos*, and members of the *kabilo* met there to eat.”⁵² When this occurred, the Alkaloship normally rotated between the different *kabilos* that founded the village.

The Alkalo performed a variety of duties. As Mungo Park also wrote, “In every considerable town there is a chief magistrate, called the Alkaid, whose office is

⁵⁰ Gamble, *Traditional Mandinka Agriculture*, p. 23

⁵¹ NRS, Banjul, ARP 28/1 Report of Cecil Sitwell-Traveling Commissioner for the South Bank Province

⁵² Alkalo Dawda Sowe, “History and Land tenure in Baffuloto” interview by author, tape recording, Baffuloto village, Upper Niumi District, July 23, 2006.

hereditary, and whose business it is to preserve order, to levy duties on travelers, and to preside at all conferences in the exercise of local jurisdiction and the administration of justice.”⁵³ As the *mansa*’s representative in the village, the Alkalo settled disputes, collected fines and kept a small tax from strangers leasing village lands without having to worry about upsetting an overlord.⁵⁴ In theory, the Alkalo was regarded as having control over “village” land in relation to strangers.⁵⁵ As *lesser* landlords, the Alkalo often welcomed strangers to his village.⁵⁶ In that way he attracted many dependents to his compound and/or village and also acquired wealth by collecting revenues from these strangers. For example, Charlotte Quinn writes that the “alkali of Jillifree received twice the revenues from land leased to Europeans.”⁵⁷ The Alkalo enjoyed these privileges because of the political power that came along with his ties to the land.

By virtue of their birth-rights and status in the community, the Alkalo generally enjoyed some degree of autonomy on matters of land, particularly in Wolof and Fula communities where the notion of *Kabilo* was typically non-existent.⁵⁸ In such communities the Alkalo’s family often claimed large tracts of land. As one report noted, “The open space round a town generally belongs to the Alcaide’s family. These people

⁵³ Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa*, p.18

⁵⁴ In his *Travels*, Mungo Park mentioned that the Alkalo of Juffure was collecting customs and duties from traders, which he presumably did on behalf of the Mansa of Niimi (p. 4).

⁵⁵ Gamble, *Traditional Mandinka Agriculture*, p. 20

⁵⁶ Alkalo Luntang Jaiteh, interview by author, not audio recorded, Bakau, June 9, 2006; Alkali Dawda Sowe, interview by author, tape recording, Bafuloto village, Upper Niimi District, North Bank Division,, July 23, 2006

⁵⁷ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 65

⁵⁸ Alkali Dawda Sowe, interview by author, tape recording, Bafuloto Village, July 23, 2006

certainly seem to have a very good title to their allotments; having received them from their ancestors.”⁵⁹

Among the Madinka kingdoms, certain village leaders had more authority over a larger area of land than other Alkalos. These lineage leaders were called *suma*. In Baddibu, Jarra, Niumi, Kiang, and Kombo, the kingship rotated between certain lineages with the *suma* of a particular lineage becoming the *mansa*.⁶⁰ Hence, the Alkalos of “royal” villages (and other prominent towns) that participated in the rotating *mansaya* system often held a unique position, as opposed to their counterparts in villages with little political influence. It was common for these Alkalos to be present when the *mansa* was making key decisions such as negotiating and signing treaties with, for example, European traders. When Burungai Sonko was signing the 1826 treaty that ceded part of his territory to the British, he had with him “his chiefs and Headmen—including Seney the Alcaide of Juffure.”⁶¹ In another treaty signed on November 18, 1850, Mansa Demba Sonko was accompanied by “Amado Tall (Alkali of Jillifree [Juffure] and Mahmoudi Sankooro (Alkalo of Berending and brother of the king).”⁶²

⁵⁹ NRS, Banjul, ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898] –Traveling Commissioner’s Reports, North Bank Province 1893-1932 (60).

⁶⁰ Harry A. Gailey. *Historical Dictionary of the Gambia 2nd edition* (Metuchen, NJ & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1987), p. 133

⁶¹ NRS, Banjul, ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-Annual Report (no. 195), 1896

⁶² Parliamentary Papers (Great Britain), Select Committee on Africa (West Coast), House of Commons, Gambia Treaties. Session - February 7 to July 6 1865. Vol. V., p. 410. Similarly, on December 26, 1850 the Kombo *mansa* took with him his “council” to Jeshwang when he was meeting the Governor and Commander-in-chief of the British settlements in the Gambia, Richard Graves MacDonnell, to sign a treaty to cede British kombo to the English. Members of the *mansa*’s delegation included one Ansumana Jatta (heir to the *Mansa*), Mardy Mariama (“slate” of Yundum), Ansumana Ceesay (Alkali of Mandinari), Foday Ansumana Munang, Majiboo Ceesay, Bass Booroko, Moosa [Musa] Channang, Fody Barcarry, Janka Fatima, Kasseo Koonkong, Samba Deber [Dibba], Ansumana Jarta [chief of Bedjulo [Bijilo], Lamin Sinney [Sainey]-the *mansa*’s eldest son, “chiefs of Kombo, and head-men of Baccon [Bakau] in

In some instances, Alkalos also had the power to refuse strangers access to village land. Similarly, they also had the duty protect village shrines, cemeteries, and “fetish” or sacred land. A good example of this was the event that took place in Jerre in 1830, an island near Niumi’s village, Sitanunku. Jerre (also known as Dog or Charles Island) was the place where the people of Sitanunku kept some of their shrines and jujus.⁶³ A report dating around the same time noted that Dog Island locally referred to as Jerre, was their “fetish” place.⁶⁴ The place was opened only to elders of the village and hence no one was allowed to settle there. However, in the 1830s, the Agricultural Society wanted to grow hemp on this Island.⁶⁵ Not surprisingly, the Alkalo of Sitanunku objected to the settlement, arguing that “they would rather give up custom than have the British on the Island.” Consequently, the young men of Sitanunku “went to Dog Island and threatened some pensioners and others residing on the Island with destruction of their farms.”⁶⁶ This incident occurred a few days before the British attacked Barra Point,⁶⁷ in which the “King of Barra . . . assembled all fighting men from neighboring

the said kingdom of Kombo.” See Reports from the Select Committee on Africa (Western Coast) Session 7 February-6 July 1865 Parliamentary Papers, p. 411.

⁶³ Like Jerre, there were numerous lands that were considered to be ‘fetish’ lands or places inhabited by spirits. A good example of such land in the Gambia was “Devil’s Point.” It was located about seventy miles from the entrance of the Gambia River. A European wrote that “In passing this place, the natives are in the habit of [giving something to the devil].” The people believed that the “prince of darkness is said to have a residence under that point of land” [For more on this see William Fox, *A Brief History of the Wesleyan Missions*, pp. 245-246].

⁶⁴ PRO CO 87/5, 41, Lt. Governor Rendall to R. W. Hay, Government House, Bathurst, July 30 1831

⁶⁵ Although British power was growing in Niumi during this period, it was still fragile and limited. The British wanted to expand the prospects of the agricultural sector in the Gambia. In 1824 Sgd. George Rendall contemplated on settling one or two hundred Liberated Africans in different parts of the region. He wanted these settlers to be placed under the care of a superintendant who would also be the government agent or commandant. As settlers, the British envisioned to give them land so as to relieve the government from the expense of their support (See CSO 1/2-November 1, 1824)

⁶⁶ PRO 87/5, 46 Barra War-Lt. Governor Rendall to Lord Vincent Goderich, Bathurst, August 24 1831

⁶⁷ PRO CO 87/5, 41- Lt. Governor Rendall to R. W. Hay, Government House, Bathurst, July 30 1831. For more on the Barra war, see Lady Southorn. *The Gambia: The Story of the Groundnut Colony* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1952), pp. 159-161

village[s].⁶⁸ Again, this confirms that Alkalos of prominent villages wielded much power and authority over land, which they often used to control strangers' access to land.

In strong *kabilo*-based systems, the powers of the Alkalo were by no means unlimited. For instance, only with the consent of the *kabilo* heads could he assign usufructuary land rights to strangers wanting to settle in his village. In such societies, "village" land was held by *kabilos*, which constituted "a patrilineal lineage tracing descent from a common ancestor."⁶⁹ The only exception was when the land belonged to the Alkalo's family. In this event, he did not need to consult the heads of other lineages in the village. He only consulted the elders in his own lineage.

In most Mandinka societies, *the kabilo* was considered the most important family unit. People living in the same *kabilo* generally bore the same clan name and adult men from the same *kabilo* often cultivated the fields together. For example, as one report noted, "in the old days each [family] made one communal *koos* [millet] farm which supposed food (with the womens' rice farms) for the whole [compound]. Permission must be asked every year from the yard owner, but the use of the land [was often not denied] except for very good and exceptional reasons."⁷⁰ The *kabilotiyo* was the head of the *kabilo* and the one that granted permission to members of his extended family to use any part of the *kabiloland*.

⁶⁸ For more on this see Donald R. Wright's *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, pp. 138-139. See also Paul M. Mbaeyi, "The Barra-British War of 1831," pp. 617-631, and Mbaeyi's book, *British Military and Naval forces in West African History, 1807-1874* (NY: Nok, 1978), p. 76. Finally, see Moister (visited 1831). *Memorials of Missionary Labours*, p. 206. George Rendall, the governor of the English settlement of Bathurst, was forced to stop paying the annual custom to the *mansa* until "they would comply." For more information, see Lt. Governor Rendall to R.W. Hay, Government House, Bathurst, 30 July 1831 CO 87/5, 41

⁶⁹ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 13

⁷⁰ CRN 1/10 Commissioner's Office South Bank, April 30 1940

Not everyone was able to become a *kabilotiyo*. This position/rank was held by the oldest man of the senior branch of the line claiming direct descent from the original founder-settler of the clan. As such, the *kabilo* head was associated with rights to the land, and the position/headship was passed collaterally within the lineage segment claiming to have first received these rights.⁷¹ This implies that late-comers could not assume the title of *kabilotiyo*. *Kabilos* were also ranked hierarchically. Some *Kabilos* were more influential politically and socially. As one informant noted, "In those days if elders were not famous they would not hear the words of the Mansa."⁷²

Because of their birth rights and status in the village, the *Kabilo* heads often played a crucial role in village politics. As part of the Alkalo's council, they assist him keeping law and order within the village, and in settling disputes between members of their families and at times even beyond. They helped the Alkalo in organizing the youths of the village for community service. The *kabilo* heads from the "royal" towns performed even greater roles in politics. They usually advised the *mansa* on important matters. In theory the *mansa* was obliged to honor their views but in reality he could also ignore them.

A Story of Conflict: The Kombo *Mansa* and the Elders of Mandinari

In Kombo, in 1821, the *mansa* seized a plot of land from the elders of Mandinari and gave it to the Methodist missionaries who wanted to establish a church there. Since the *mansa* was the head of the lineage in power and had the ability to exercise more military or physical force, his authority was superior to all those living in his kingdom.

⁷¹ Ibid, pp. 12-12

⁷² Farata Lamin Fatty, "The History of Baddibu and Niumi," interview by Donald R. Wright, tape recording, Niumi, October 16 1975. trans. available at the RDD collection as Tape Catalogue # 0225 A and B. See also the "History of Niumi and Baddibu" on Tape # 276 at the RDD collection.

If people disagreed with their *mansa*, especially in matters of settling a stranger on their land, the likely option for them was perhaps to desert his kingdom.⁷³ According to the evidence, rarely did ordinary people voice their discontent with their *mansa*. In fact, abundant documentary sources suggest that the “kings [were] quite despotic” and when possible they made sure that people obeyed their authority. As William Moister noted, “the government[s] [are] almost invariably of the most despotic character. The will of the king or chief is the law of the tribe; and woe to those who dare to thwart or oppose his sable Majesty.”⁷⁴ One might be tempted to dismiss these European observations as racist and based on Eurocentric assumptions. However, there is a Mandinka proverb which states that “If a *mansa* demands a road to be made on a person’s head, it means it will cost a head but the road will be created.”⁷⁵

The 1821 dispute in Mandinari occurred when John Morgan and John Baker tried to establish a station in the town. At first the Mandinari elders opposed the *mansa*’s decision to allocate land belonging to Mandinari to the missionaries. In short, the elders contested the *mansa*’s right to allocate land to the strangers. They also demanded gifts from the missionaries and an acknowledgement of their (i.e. elders’) right to the land. They argued that “their being free men, born on the land, established their right to it.”⁷⁶ The missionaries refused to honor their request for gifts in exchange for the use of the land on the grounds that the “king would expect an annual custom” for them for the land. As a response, the town’s elders then forwarded their complaints to

⁷³ Morgan, *Reminiscences*, p. 24; William Fox, *A Brief History of the Wesleyan Missions*

⁷⁴ William Moister, *Memorials of missionary Labours in Western Africa, The West Indies and the Cape of Good Hope* (London, Paternoster Row, 1866, p. 34

⁷⁵ The proverb says “*Ning mansa ko silo ye boo kungo tema, kungo ka fara le bari silo ka boo le.*”

⁷⁶ Morgan, *Reminiscences*, p. 27

the *mansa*, “declaring that two white men had come to settle among them in opposition to their wishes, and that the strangers were ruining the neighborhood by cutting down trees of great value.”⁷⁷ For a while the *mansa* disregarded their complaints, but their repeated protests led him at last to resolve on visiting Mandinari with the goal of settling the dispute. As the missionary explained, “one morning, the king’s drum was heard a little distance from the building, summoning the chiefs and free men to the council, or rather a discussion.”⁷⁸ A messenger was sent to call the strangers. John Baker, one of the missionaries, was ill and hence could not attend. But John Morgan attended with an interpreter. Under a large tree (*bantango*), Morgan “found the king sitting on his heels, with about twenty principal men of the town in the same position forming a circle.”⁷⁹ Morgan wrote in his journal that the meeting took place on May 5, 1821 and another source indicates that about forty men attended it.⁸⁰

At the meeting the elders of Mandinari expressed their determination to drive the strangers away from their land. They disputed the *mansa*’s right to settle the missionaries near them without their prior consent. They insisted that by virtue of their being the free men of Mandinari, they deserved to be consulted by the *mansa*. As a result, the elders saw the *mansa*’s decision as a violation of custom and declared that he must withdraw it. When the elders finished, the *mansa* defended himself by stating that it was his prerogative to do as he pleased. But the elders challenged him, insisting that they would send the missionaries out of their town. As tension grew, the *mansa* finally

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 27

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 27

⁷⁹ In the past, every Mandinka village used to have a *bantango* or *bantaba*. It was the village meeting ground—a place where all important matters concerning the village was discussed. In Wolof it is called Penche. Palavers were frequently held there.

⁸⁰ Cited from *The Christian Traveller*, p. 170

spoke with authority, saying “Well go then, drive them into the River; and I’ll come over with my warriors and cut the throat of each man of you, and burn down your town.”⁸¹

Shortly after the *mansa* issued his threat, Morgan observed a change in the actions and tones of his opponents. Because of their fear of possible punishment by the *mansa*, the Mandinari subdued. They simultaneously commenced prayers for their overlord, the Mansa of Kombo, who at that time was based in Yundum. When the prayer ritual started, the *mansa* “crossed his arms over his breast and clapping his naked shoulders with his hands, at the end of every position said with a loud voice, Ah’min, Ah’min.”⁸² At the close of the prayer, the *mansa* rose, “advanced to the missionary and graciously said now white man, you may let your heart sit down, I have settled the dispute, and the people will trouble you no more. The missionary, Morgan, heartily thanked him but soon learned that something more substantial than thanks was expected.⁸³ The *mansa* anticipated some material gain after forcing the Mandinari elders to settle the missionary on their land. In the first instance, he was offered gifts of “a piece of scarlet cloth . . . and a small horse;” all items that were highly valued by the “lords” of the land.⁸⁴

This incident points to the fact that some *mansas* have in the past exploited their political power to allocate land in ways that were clearly motivated by their own self-interest and personal gain, in spite of the group’s opposition to their actions. It also

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 28

⁸² Ibid, p. 29

⁸³ Ibid, p. 29

⁸⁴ Morgan, *Reminiscences*, pp. 21-22

suggests that the *mansa*'s land "rights" were superior to those of his council because of his ability to exercise greater military and physical force.

It was not unusual for the region's rulers to interfere in matters of land allocation. Even in the Senegal River valley, as Barry writes, despite the fact that the *laman* of Waalo often acted as manager of collective property, the king still had more and more uncultivated or unused land to distribute among relatives and allies, including warriors, notables, and religious leaders in his entourage. Even though he often acknowledged the rights of the *laman* as land administrator, on occasion he was tempted to encroach on land under the *laman*'s control.⁸⁵ In the Gambia, the *mansas* used their proprietary rights (backed by political power) to extract tribute from several stranger groups and peasant communities while preventing them from access to landownership and its related privileges.⁸⁶

They Were Strangers in Their Own Land

Before the wars of the second half of the nineteenth century, the *Soninke* ruling class used its political power to prevent stranger groups from owning the best land and from having access to the economic and political privileges which the land provided.⁸⁷ Beyond their villages, stranger-groups were treated as 'outsiders' and people with less "voice" in state matters. Stranger-villages, like the individual stranger living a village or *kabilo*, had less power and influence over how the kingdom's affairs were to be

⁸⁵ Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, p. 28

⁸⁶ Landing Mustapha Janneh, interview by author assisted by Ensa Touray, tape recording, Bakau, Gambia, February 7, 2009. Alkalo Aja Takko Taal, interview by author, tape recording, Juffure, Upper Niimi District, North Bank Region, July, 23 2006. See also NRS, Banjul, CSO 10/71 Confidential Dispatch to the Colonial Secretary in Bathurst from the Commissioner's Office South Bank Province, Cape St. Mary, April 30 1940. The Colonial Secretary was Sgd R. H. Gretton and Governor was Sir Thomas Southorn.

⁸⁷ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 18

conducted. Their primary duty was to pay tribute (taxes) to the ruling class who supposedly provided them security.⁸⁸ But stranger-groups shared this fate with the many peasant communities in the lower Gambia valley. In many of the Mandinka-led kingdoms, the distinction between a stranger, a slave and an early settler who was politically subjugated and marginalized was often slim. As one missionary wrote, the *mansa*'s subjects were "little distinguished from slaves in appearance. [The kings and chiefs] make all under their power."⁸⁹ Both free and enslaved people were subjected to the similar conditions imposed by the ruling class. However, the exclusion from the privileges that came along with landownership was felt more strongly by stranger groups.

The lower Gambia River has historically served as a "magnet for all of the Senegambia zone's populations."⁹⁰ In spite of the excesses of the aristocracy, the region provided some opportunities. There was abundant land available to new-comers. Also, this period, which saw the ending of the Atlantic slave trade and the rise of legitimate commerce, saw the steady growth in cash crop production. As a result, new-comers from the Senegal River valley and beyond began arriving in the area with the aim of taking advantage of the opportunities that the Gambia valley provided. Bambara, Masuwanka, Fula (particularly the semi-nomadic and Toranka Fulas from Futa Toro) and Wolof speakers from different parts of the region settled in kingdoms of the Gambia increasing the population of the dependent groups they already found there.

⁸⁸ As George Brooks argues, strangers were compelled to adhere to landlord-stranger practices and transgressors were subjected to judicial processes (palavers). Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1993), p. 5

⁸⁹ The *Christian Traveller*, p. 97

⁹⁰ Barry, *Senegambia During the Atlantic Slave Trade*, p. 5

Many of them also migrated because of droughts, which threatened their agricultural lands and overall survival. In the Gambia, with land controlled by the aristocracy, they made a modest living.

Writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Mungo Park described the status of these strangers and/or dependents as “A state of subordination.”⁹¹ Park further commented on the conditions under which the Fula lived. Because of their powerlessness and inferior rights to the land, the Fula, for instance, were forced to work for their Mandinka overlords. One missionary wrote that “It appears that their [i.e. Fula] father[s] had no land to give them, or else they have since lost it. For not one of them claims a foot of land in that country.”⁹² Other European accounts noted that there is “no doubt that originally Kombo belonged to [the

⁹¹ Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa*, p. 15

⁹² See *The Christian Traveller*, p. 97. Elsewhere in Kaabu, the ruling dynasty (as conquerors) had seized lands belonging to the Fulas and imposed taxes on them. According to Bamba Suso, when the Sanes arrived in Kaabu, they conspired against the Fulas and seized their land but first by agreeing on the following covenant “[The Mandinka had told the Fula that since]...we [i.e. the Mandinka] have no cattle, sheep or goats, and you Fulas have all these things, you will take the things which grow on the land, while we will own the land itself.” Realizing their weakness in the face of the Mandinka, the Fula agreed to the deal. The two groups continued to live under this arrangement until one day when Mankotoba Sane, the leader of *nyancho* family, summoned all the Fulas to a meeting in which he reminded them that “the land belongs to [the ruling family] of the Mandinka.” Sane also informed the Fula that since their cattle grazed on the land, they ought to compensate the landowners. From then on, Suso explained, the Fulas all over Kaabu became subjected to the payment of taxes by the Mandinka aristocracy, the Sane, which ruled Kaabu for most of its history. [Bakary Sidibe, “The Story of Kaabu: Its Extent” An Unpublished paper, p. 3]. William Moister, another missionary, remarked that “The pastoral Foolas make no pretensions to a right in the soil, but live by mere sufferance among the Jollofs (Wolof) and Mandingoes, to whose kings or Chiefs they pay tribute for the privilege of pasturing their cattle. By these petty despots they are often severely oppressed, and sometimes robbed of all they possess.” [See William Moister, *Memorials of Missionary Labours*, p. 24]. Around the same time, an English missionary, William Fox, wrote that the Fula had “no lands of their own, but are much attached to a pastoral life; and have introduced themselves into many of the kingdoms as herdsmen and husbandmen, paying a tribute to the sovereign of the country for the land which they hold . . . Being thus dependent, the Foulahs suffer much at times.” [Source: William Fox, *A Brief History of the Wesleyan Missions*, p. 237]. Another report noted that the pastoral (nomadic) Fula had no “lands of their own.” Instead, they kept livestock, notably cattle which they feed in the territory of any chief paying tribute for the right of pasturage. [See Chamber’s Edinburgh Journal, William and Robert Chambers. Vol. XVI Nos. 392 to 417, July-December 1851, p. 275]

Jola] and part of Kiang, but slowly the Mandingoes [has] beaten them back, behind Vintang (i.e. Bintang) and Kansalla.”⁹³

In reality, the Mandinka aristocracy depended on its subjects (including strangers and slaves) for its survival. Contemporary European sources often highlight this. Several of these accounts state that the Mandinka aristocracy was “too idle to work in cultivating the ground. [They] lay on [their subjects] all the burden of the hard and laborious drudgery of raising the corn and working the fields,” usually under the pretext of defending them in war. The oppressed race submit[s] to the most arbitrary demands of the kings and chiefs, and to the wanton extortions of the king’s sons.⁹⁴ As dependents or strangers, they paid tributes “to the sovereign of the country for the land which they hold . . . Being thus dependent, they suffer much at times.”⁹⁵ The *Soninke* also survived by taking “a portion of the produce of the non-royal lineages in the state for the royal court and state soldiers.”⁹⁶ Until the end of the nineteenth century, dependents or strangers of any ethnic background paid taxes and provided services to the Mandinka aristocracy. Donald Wright states that Niumi’s “ruling lineages obtained surplus grain and cotton through taxation and slave production. Following harvest, village heads supervised collection of about one-tenth of village production and conveyed it to the *mansa*’s village.”⁹⁷ Similarly, the English described the “King of Badiboo” as a “powerful robber,” noting that the Mansa maintained himself and his

⁹³ NRS (Banjul) ARP 28/1 Traveling Commissioner’s Report SBP

⁹⁴ *The Christian Traveller*, p. 97

⁹⁵ Fox, *A Brief History of the Wesleyan Missions*, p. 237 and Chamber’s Edinburgh Journal, William and Robert Chambers. Vol. XVI Nos. 392 to 417, July-December 1851, p. 275

⁹⁶ Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, p.37

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 107

lifestyle by levying taxes on people for occupying the land and cultivating it.⁹⁸ They prospered not only by depending on tolls on the goods of traders passing through their kingdoms, but partly from the rents and proceeds from lands leased to stranger groups.⁹⁹

Clearly, the *Soninke* ruling class was more or less dependent on the labor of its subjects. While it is likely that European accounts may have been exaggerated, it is important to note that the wars of the mid-nineteenth century resulted from these sorts of excesses, which subjects and stranger-groups wanted to end. As Quinn writes, a root cause of the breakdown of the Mandinka kingdoms in this region was the loss of control over *dependent* groups as disparate complaints over excessive taxation, poor land, and exclusion from political office led to the *Soninke-Marabout* wars of the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the Soninke ruling class denied their subjects access to political offices beyond leadership of their own groups. Their subjects were also denied control over the use of the land and its revenues.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

Land was certainly not the only factor that provided individuals and families with access to power. There existed a variety of ways in which ambitious young men and women could acquire a voice in their communities. Power, for instance, could be acquired through religious institutions, age, gender, bravery, and manipulation of

⁹⁸ Parliamentary Papers Vol. XLIV December 10 1868 and 11 August 1869, p. 526

⁹⁹ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 18; 28; Paul J. Beedle, "Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town," pp. 24-25

¹⁰⁰ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 53; Beedle, "Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town," p. 25

¹⁰¹ Beedle, "Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town," p. 25

power.¹⁰² Nonetheless, land ownership commonly determined the ability to control a host of other resources, such as wild animals and the forest. Along the banks of the Gambia River, people used land not just to produce the material conditions of survival and enrichment, but also to gain control over others, and to define personal and social identities. In other words, people sought in land not only material possession, but also political power. In many ways, in this region, land was the basis of political power.¹⁰³ It provided lineages that claimed to the founding-settlers of a kingdom, a village, or a *kabilo*, with paramount rights to the land, and the political and economic privileges that came along with it. People who had power also acquired land through conquest.

As I have shown in this chapter, the relationship between landlords and strangers – a relationship that is rooted in power structures – is crucial in understanding the system of land tenure that existed in the Gambia region. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the aristocracy technically managed to keep numerous groups “landless” by acting as the “owners” of the land. They used their political power and status to demand tribute (taxes) from their dependents for using the land; this practice continued well into the second half of the nineteenth century. The relationship between landlords and strangers was one of dependence, and usually involved power.¹⁰⁴ In fact, the practice of paying customs to local chiefs was a long standing practice. British, French and African traders from the interior had to make their own agreements with

¹⁰² For example, Robert Baum’s work on the Diola of Southern Senegambia shows how religious figures among the Diola manipulated local shrines to subjugate others. See Robert Baum *Shrines of the Slave Trade: Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁰³ Barry, *Senegambia During the Slave Trade*, p. 3-0

¹⁰⁴ Beedle, “Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town,” p. III

African chiefs before they could secure plots of land where they could establish their trading posts.¹⁰⁵

Access to political power was in some ways tied to the land. The *mansas* owned land as the supreme heads of their territories. It was their prerogative to be consulted whenever vital parts of the land within their territories were to be allocated to strangers – thus the *mansa*'s permission was to be sought before new-comers could be settled on their territories. Even though families had their own land which they acquired through clearing virgin lands or by laying other claims, since those lands were located within a given kingdom, their ownership was subordinate in that the *mansa* could seize them if he liked. It is important to note that *mansas* did not claim land as their private property, in the western sense of the word. They hardly ever sold land. Yet, they had in the past allocated land to strangers even when their decisions were against the will of the “elders of the land.” Once their land-based powers were challenged, at least some *mansas* rarely hesitated to use their military power and other strategies to control land and kept their subjects dependent.

Similarly, individuals became Alkalos and *kabilo* heads because they had stronger ties to the land, as opposed to those with inferior status in a village or *kabilo*. Leadership of a village, as of the *kabilo*, was generally held by the oldest man of the senior branch of the line claiming direct descent from the original founder-settler of the community.¹⁰⁶ As “elders of the land,” the *kabilo* heads and Alkalos settled land disputes. As part of the landowning families, “village land” could only be assigned to

¹⁰⁵ Kenneth Swindell, “Serawoollies, Tillibunkas and Strange Farmers: The Development of Migrant Groundnut Farming along the Gambia River, 1848-95” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1980), p. 98

¹⁰⁶ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 13

newcomers with the permission of the Alkalos and *kabilo* heads. Control of land, therefore, ranked society based on “landlords” and “strangers.” Every community in the lower Gambia valley had a core population which considered itself as the founders and real citizens of their town, and therefore of superior status to the many Mandinka and non-Mandinka immigrants (or strangers) who had settled there since. Control of land, then, was at the heart of the ruling aristocracy’s privileged existence.

Chapter Three

Land Questions and the Fall of the Old Regimes: Jihad and Change, 1840s-1901

From the late 1840s into the early 1900s, the lower-Gambia experienced remarkable political, social, and economic change. One of the major developments of this period was the outbreak of the Muslim Revolution, known locally as the *Soninke-Marabout* wars.¹ Although an effort at reviving Islam, the wars were also a rejection of *Soninke* aristocratic rule and by consequence it was a rejection of their control of land. In fact, in the Gambia, the jihads resulted in the overthrow of the Mandinka aristocracy and their replacement, for a brief period, by leaders of different invading Muslim groups. The jihads began in the 1840s and spread all over the Gambia basin, causing widespread instability, along with interruption of trade and agricultural activity. Over the longer term, they also caused changes in local politics and systems of land tenure.

As noted in chapter two, the Mandinka aristocracy could be oppressive in their rule, levying excessive taxes, excluding stranger-groups and *dependents* from political office, and monopolizing ownership of the best land. Exclusion from land and its related privileges brought about eminent social and economic inequalities – based on idioms of landlord and stranger differences – that probably had gone on for centuries. This chapter will highlight how marginalized groups responded to what they considered a decaying social and moral order, which brought about their exclusion from land ownership, by declaring holy war against their rulers, one of the goals of which was to end the aristocracy's “traditional” control over land. When the ruling lineages were

¹ Along the banks of the Gambia River, the term *Soninke* has different connotations. On the one hand, the word is often used as an ethnic label-referring to the Serahule people found mostly in eastern Gambia and parts of Senegal and modern Mali. But *Soninke*, as used in this case, is used to refer to non-Muslims.

removed from power, an important feature of land tenure before the mid-nineteenth century—i.e. the control of land as a part of royal authority—ended. From this period onwards no one needed to seek permission from a *mansa* to set up a village because *mansas* were either no longer in power or were too weak to hold any control on land. In some areas, the leaders of different invading Muslim armies replaced the ruling elites and took over the role of distributing land, settling disputes over its ownership, and above all collecting taxes from strangers' for use of the land. The leaders of these militant Islamic movements were thought to have acquired such rights by virtue of their conquest of the former rulers, a practice long accepted in many parts of the Senegambia region.

These changes occurred on the backdrop of British intervention in local politics and the regional economy and the increase in the numbers of Muslim “mystics” and/or marabouts. Although the marabouts were the most influential actors in shaping lower-Gambian political and social life through mid-century, the British presence, had been growing steadily since they acquired Bathurst Island in 1816 to suppress the already illegal Atlantic slave trade along the West African Atlantic coast: Great Britain took control of the “Ceded Mile” in 1826, McCarthy Island in 1827, and “British Kombo” (including the Cape St. Mary) by 1840. They would look upon militant Muslims as a threat to their authority and control and, in places, would intervene to prop up old Mandinka ruling lineages that they could more easily manipulate. All of this affected ideas of who controlled what in terms of the land upon which local populations lived and worked.

From the time of heightening interest in the history of Africa, one of the themes that attracted most of those who focused on Senegambia was the Islamic Revolutions.² In 1960s and 1970s, a historian raised concerns that the nineteenth-century jihads were a neglected theme in the region's historiography, and since then, the subject has received considerable attention among scholars, especially those interested in the social, political, and the economic context of rapid change in the region. Consequently, the historiography illustrates the social, political and economic circumstances that led to the jihads. For example, Martin Klein's work provides a substantial assessment of the causes of the nineteenth-century jihads and his numerous publications show that the causes of the revolution were rooted in social and religious changes during the preceding centuries, along with certain economic factors, including the end of the Atlantic slave trade and the growth of legitimate commerce.³ Similarly, in *The Holy War of Umar Tal*, David Robinson shows how the Fulbe living in the Futas had "grown dissatisfied with the material conditions and religious practice at home"⁴ and in writing about the nineteenth century Islamic revolution in the Casamance region, immediately south of the Gambia, Francis A. Leary shows that the history of the area "is to a large extent that of interaction between [various] groups –of their competition for lands, of

² Some of the studies that focus on the pre-nineteenth century Islamic Revolutions in the Senegambia include: Philip D. Curtin "Jihad in West Africa: Early Phases and Inter-Relations in Mauritania and Senegal" *The Journal of African History* Vol. 12, No. 1 (1971), pp. 11-24; Michael A. Gomez. "The Problem with Malik Sy and the Foundation of Bundu (La question de Malik Sy et la fondation du Bundu)" *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. 25, Cahier 100 (1985), pp. 537-553

³ Martin A. Klein, "The Moslem Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Senegambia" in *Western African History* by Daniel F. McCall, Norman R. Bennett and Jeffrey Butler (eds.) (New York, Washington and London: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969); Klein, "Social and Economic Factors in the Muslim Revolution in the Senegambia" *Journal of African History*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (1972)

⁴ David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 3

their cohabitation, and of their partial borrowing of lifestyles, one of the others.”⁵ In Niimi, Donald Wright shows that *mansa* Demba Sonko employed mercenaries who “rustled cattle, plundered traders, and harassed Muslims in their enclave villages.”⁶ Charlotte Quinn also shows how the jihads resulted from the measures taken by the Mandinka aristocracy, excluding their subjects or stranger populations from political office and owning the best lands located along the Gambia River.

While these studies and others⁷ have shown how the jihads resulted from certain social, economic and political circumstances, still little is known about processes involving changes in land tenure. This study focuses on the centrality of land in understanding aspects of the nineteenth century Islamic revolutions along the banks of the Gambia River. While the jihads can be understood as efforts at religious, social, economic and political conflict between two social classes—the Mandinka ruling class and their courts versus their subjects—they can be understood more fully by seeing them, too, as conflicts among agriculturalists—between and among individuals, families and communities.

⁵ Francis A. Leary “Islam, Politics and Colonialism: A Political History of Islam in the Casamance Region of Senegal (1850-1914)” Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1970. p. 18

⁶ Donald R. Wright. *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niimi, The Gambia* (New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 146

⁷ For more see, David Robinson. “The Islamic Revolution of Futa Toro” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* Vol. 8, No. 2 (1975), pp. 185-221; Robinson. *The Holy War of Umar Tal*; Robinson. “The Impact of Al-Hajj ‘Umar on the Historical Traditions of the Fulbe” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* Vol. 8, No. 2/3, Special Issue: Folklore and Traditional History (Aug. 1, 1971), pp. 101-113; Charlotte A. Quinn. “A Nineteenth Century Fulbe State” *The Journal of African History* Vol. 12, No. 3 (1971), pp. 427-440; Charlotte A. Quinn. *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia: Traditionalism, Islam, and European Expansion* (Evanston [Ill.] Northwestern University Press, 1972); James F. Searing ‘*God Alone is King*’: *Islam and Emancipation in Senegal: The Wolof Kingdoms of Kajour and Bawol, 1859-1914* (Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann, 2002)

The Growing Influence of Islam

The size of the Muslim population across nearly all of Senegambia had grown slowly, but steadily over the seventeenth and eighteenth, and into the early-nineteenth centuries. Even before that, there were Muslims living along the banks of the Gambia River when the first Portuguese arrived on the Gambia's Atlantic coast in the fifteenth century. These marabouts were attached to most of the Senegambia courts.⁸ As a reward for their services, they received land and were permitted to found villages. By the seventeenth century their villages had become substantial islands of Islam. The Muslim communities supported Quranic schools, kept the fast of Ramadan, and followed Muslim dietary laws.⁹ Along the banks of the Gambia River, these Muslim communities were known as *morokundas*.¹⁰

The early growth of Islam in the region has been attributed to immigration of stranger populations, mostly from areas north of the Gambia River, and the gradual conversion of local people among whom these strangers settled.¹¹ One group that deserves special mention is the Toranka (Torodbe) from the middle Senegal River. The Toranka were not so much a tight ethnic or lineage grouping—as most belonged to the wider Fula (Fulbe) ethnic and linguistic designation, as they were related people who

⁸ Martin A. Klein, *Islam and Imperialism in Senegal: Sine-Saloum, 1847-1914* (Stanford, Calif., Published for the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace by Stanford University, Press, 1968), p. 63

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Richard Jobson. *The Golden Trade: or, A Discovery of The River Gambia, and the Golden Trade of the Aethiopians* (London: Printed by Nicholas Okes, 1623), p. 78; Mungo Park. *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa First Journey -1795 -1797* (Edinburg: Adam and Charles Black, 1878), p. 49. Morokundas, therefore, referred to “settlement of the Muslims.”

¹¹ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 65

came from the same region, Futa Toro, inside the middle Senegal River.¹² As Muslim clerics and mystics, they were allocated land and permitted by the ruling lineages to set up villages upon arrival in the Gambia.¹³

Each of the Muslim settlements they created had its own *Alkalo* (*qadi* or judge and village head) and *Almammy* (Imam). The *Almammy's* primary function was to lead congregational prayers in the village Mosque, and assist and advise the *Alkalo* in matters pertaining to village administration. Ideally, the *Almammy* was a person knowledgeable in the Quran and *sharia*. He was also a teacher — teaching children how to read and memorize the Quran. In general, the *Alkalo*, however, came from the founding-family that established the village. This implies that *Alkalos* were not expected to be experts in Islamic law. These “early” Muslim leaders prayed for the chiefs and sometimes handled records and correspondence for the royal courts.¹⁴

For the most part, the relationship between Muslims and their non-Muslim overlords before the mid-nineteenth century was ambiguous. While the Muslims preferred to live in isolated communities, it is worthwhile to remember that their relationship with the non-Muslims was generally one of a patron-client relationship — similar to the landlord — stranger relationship described earlier. It was to the advantage of both patrons and clients to have the Muslim communities settled near the royal villages and for individual Muslims to be allowed to take on the profession known as *moriya* — the the magico-religious work that served both Muslims and non-Muslims. While allowed to practice and perform “Muslim works,” many of them were at the

¹² Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, p. 132

¹³ My interview with Aja Takko Taal, Alkalo of Juffure, on the “History of Juffure,” [July 23 2006] sheds light on this.

¹⁴ Klein, *Islam and Imperialism in Senegal*, p. 63

same time excluded from the economic and political privileges that came with ownership of the best land, which remains in the hands of the royal elites.¹⁵

Gradually, beginning, it seems, after the first third of the nineteenth century, marabouts gained in strength and began, here and there, challenging the authority of the rulers. While influenced by such challenges in other parts of Senegambia and beyond, the ones in the Gambia region are mostly associated with the region's connection with a well-known Futanke cleric named Alhaji Umar Taal, who is reported in the oral traditions to have visited the Gambia just before the jihads broke out. While it is not clear when exactly Umar Taal visited the Gambia or how long he stayed in the region,¹⁶ or whether he ever visited the area, oral traditions claim that during his visit to the region he resided in Kombo Gunjur (where the Gambian oral traditions claims he met Fodi Kabba Touray) and several dozen communities along the banks of the Gambia including Jeshwang and Juffure, and met with Alpha Molloh as well as Maba Jahou Bah.¹⁷ Elders further claim that he traveled far and wide in the Gambia visiting individuals and blessing communities and leaders.¹⁸ He not only preached the message of a purified Islam while introducing the Tijaniyya *tariqa*, he also denounced any form of abuse of authority and called for strict observation of God's laws. In any event, the

¹⁵ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 18

¹⁶ Donald Wright writes that he met with Maba around 1850 (p. 144). Harry A. Gailey cited a popular claim which states that Umar Taal met Maba at the village of Kabakoto (p. 30). But in his *Holy War of Umar Tall*, David Robinson problematizes Maba's claims to affiliate himself with Umar or at least the traditions that tries to establish a link between the two.

¹⁷ Alkalo Aja Takko Taal, interview by author, tape recording, Juffure Village, Upper Niimi District, North Bank Region, July 23 2006; Malick Touray, interview by author, tape recording, Gunjur, Kombo, August 15 2008. Donald Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, p. 144

¹⁸ There is a conundrum: local sources have him coming in and giving a blessing, but according to David Robinson the Umarian ones don't mention these things. Nevertheless, whether this occurred or not, is not important, since he's the leading mujahid at the time, widely known in West Africa at least by the late 1850s.

message of jihad seemed to have appealed to many in the Gambia because from the late 1840s, a number of Muslim communities began to settle their own affairs and show markedly less respect for the authority of their *Soninke* kings. Consequently, from that period onwards, the lower Gambia region was engulfed in a series of major religious wars often referred to as the *Soninke-Marabout* wars.

The Beginnings of the Jihads: A Historical Overview

In terms of the lower-Gambia region, the post-1840 effort at political, social, and religious reform began in Kombo where the *Soninke* of Yundum, the Jatta lineage, were the rulers of the state. However, between 1853 to 1855 two warriors, Fodi Ousmanu¹⁹ and Fodi Kabba Touray of Sukuta (Sabiji) and Gunjur respectively, led forces on an invasion of Kombo. Together, they conquered a large portion of the western section of the state, burned down the royal town of Busumbala, and in June 1855 killed Kombo's ruler, *mansa* Suling Jatta. After this occurred, the marabouts took control of much of the state and almost everywhere in the region the marabouts and their growing numbers of followers attacked the vestiges of aristocratic dominance and seized control of the land.²⁰

Soon the entire south bank was to witness greater instability. In 1868, Fodi Sillah succeeded his brother, Foday Kabba Touray, as the leader of the jihad in Kombo. He attacked Yundum and Brikama, and drove the remaining *Soninke* away. Many of the *Soninke* fled to British Kombo (i.e. the portion of Kombo that was ceded to the British by the kingdom's *mansa*). Mansa Tommani Bojang (Suling Jatta's successor) was

¹⁹ Fodi Ousmanu was also known as Omar of Sabiji.

²⁰ Harry A. Gailey writes that little is known about the life of Omar before his arrival in the Gambia except that he was a Mauritanian and he had taken part in Abdel-Kader's uprisings against the French in Algeria in 1847. Omar had also invaded Jeshwang before he fled from the British and escaped arrest (Gailey, *Historical Dictionary of the Gambia*, 110)

forced to retreat to Lamin, a town near the border with British Kombo. Foday Sillah seized Brikama in 1874. When Bojang failed to secure British support against the Muslims, he later surrendered to them, agreeing “to shave his head” and become a Muslim. In return, Foday Sillah gave him and his people land where they could settle and cultivate crops.²¹ After the defeat of Mansa Tommani, Fodi Sillah declared himself the new “Master of Kombo.”²² In fact, until his defeat in 1894, the British recognized him as the chief of the part of Kombo he controlled and paid him a stipend.

While other parts of the region were trapped in these protracted civil conflicts, Foday Kabba Dumbuya was busy fighting in Foni and Kiang. Much of his fighting was directed against the Jola, raiding them for slaves, and aiding the Muslims of Sankandi in their conflict with Jataba and the “pagan” chief, mansa Koto of Batteling, over the ownership of a major rice-field.

Across the north bank, the conflict first broke out in Baddibu in 1861. That year Maba Jahou Bah, the son of N’Dougou Penda Bah, declared his holy war against the *mansa* of Baddibu who at the time resided in Illiasa. With about 11,000 fighters, he burned down a number of towns and conquered lands under the control of Baddibu and neighboring Saloum,²³ killing the *mansa* and his son and forcing large numbers of their followers into exile. Then, in 1863, Maba invaded the south bank kingdom of Kiang. Several hundred marabouts actually crossed the river from Baddibu and destroyed

²¹ John Gray, *A History of the Gambia* (London, Frank Cass, 1966), p. 455

²² Roland Oliver and G. N. Sanderson. *The Cambridge History of Africa. Vol. 6 c. 1870-1905* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 218

²³ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 117; CO/87/74 Report from Governor d’Arcy, August 8 1862

numerous *Soninke* settlements around Tendaba.²⁴ Maba's forces also invaded Kwinella, one of the royal towns in Kiang, but suffered defeat.

Maba's success in Baddibu encouraged nearly seven hundred Muslims in Niumi to revolt against the kingdom's rulers in 1867.²⁵ The rebels stormed Jokadu, forcing its Niumi-backed *Soninke* ruler to convert to Islam. The rebels were aided by Maba's brother, Abdou Bah, and a large army. That same year, the Marabouts destroyed the Mansa's town, Berending, and according to a British report, killed "the king with many others and took away many alive."²⁶ From Berending, the Muslims pushed on toward Bakindikoto, destroying the royal village, and then threatened another, Essau, where the state's traditional war leader, the *suma*, had built up a strong resistance.²⁷

Initially, the British, whose presence in the region was already growing had opted for a policy of non-interference. But quickly it had become clear to them that there was general instability everywhere along the banks of the Gambia River: hundreds, if not thousands, of refugees were fleeing from these wars, and both trade and agriculture were obstructed. As a response, the British again embarked on "punitive expeditions,"

²⁴ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 117

²⁵ Note on June 19 1826, Niumi's *mansa*, Burungai Sonko, ceded greater portion of the land in Niumi to the British. From this date onwards, the land under the Ceded Mile became the property of the British Crown. That means for anyone to live on the land must abide by English laws. This coincided with a time when many of Niumi's residents (most of whom Muslims) were already opposed to Niumi's ruling elites. They dislike the elites for several reasons: the elites had "sold off" their father's land,

²⁶ Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, p. 146, Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 114-115 and see also CSO 1/14 Report by Colonel Anthon, Acting Administrator, Essau, Barra Point, August 30 1867

²⁷ Bakindiki Koto (Old Bakindiki), which was located near the ocean, close to the modern Gambia-Senegal border, was abandoned. The force that invaded this town was related to Ma Ba's Senegambian jihad. The invasion drove the villagers south, toward the river, where they rebuilt in a safer place. Lastly, the town was part of the seven royal towns of Niumi, which participated in the rotating system of succession.

against some of the marabouts.²⁸ One of these expeditions was launched in 1866. That year, the British Administrator of Bathurst ordered an English force to bombard Tubab Kolong and forcing the marabouts to abandon Sika.²⁹

Despite their intervention it was too late to save the “old order.” The marabouts proved tenacious. In less than a year after the 1866 Tubab Kolong bombardment “the Marabouts had returned to Sika, where one Fodi Sonko had commanded his blacksmiths to rebuild the stockade and had given permission to the women of Sika to cultivate rice on “their old ground.”³⁰ In June 1867, the British Administrator, Admiral Patey, tried to summon Fodi Sonko and Cherno Say, his chief marabout, to Albreda and Bathurst for a meeting, but Sonko declined because “the chiefs and headmen are all gone to Badiboo and he cannot say anything now until their return.”³¹ His defiance eventually forced the British Superintendent at Albreda, Richard A. Stewart, to travel the four miles from British Albreda to Sika. At their meeting, Stewart reported that Sonko “said to [him] that . . . he is come back and built his country and his father ground . . . [that] he cannot [travel to see the Governor] because he is hungry and he is upon hard work—but when he is finish, he will send his man to the Governor.”³² Sonko insisted that “Sicca was the land of their forefathers [and] they had no wish to leave it . .

²⁸ Sait Matty was Maba Jahou Bah’s son. He continued to fight wars after his father’s death in 1866.

²⁹ See CSO 1/14 Colonel Anthon, Acting Administrator, August 30 1867. “Statement of John Day, Colonial Interpreter, August 30 1867; “Extracts of a Letter from Richard A. Stewart, British Albreda, Corporal of Police to Major Anthon, Acting Administrator, dated June 29 1867; “Letter from J. Johnson, Second Writer, Colonial Office, Bathurst, to Corporal Stewart, Albreda dated July 1 1867; “Letter from RA Stewart, Corporal of Police, British Albreda, to Major Anthon, Acting Administrator, Bathurst, dated Saturday, July 13 1867 and See also Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, 148

³⁰ NRS, Banjul, Administrator in Chief’s Letter, Government House, Bathurst, Gambia, August 31 1867. CSO 1/14

³¹ Extract of a letter from Richard A Stewart, Corporal of police to His Excellency Major Anton Acting, Administrator, dated British Albreda, June 29 1867.

³² Letter from British Albreda, Saturday July 13 1867, Richard A. Stewart, Corporal of Police

. [because] they valued [it so] much.”³³ Following his failure to get Sonko to comply with his orders, Stewart wrote numerous letters seeking help and intervention from Bathurst. Such defiance against the British made the chief police constable in Albreda very uncomfortable and worried. In the end, the English Governor advised the police constable “not to make any dispute but to live in peace with the marabouts.”³⁴

It is worthwhile to note that in Baddibu and Saloum, the death of Maba in 1867 and the subsequent civil war diluted the religious basis of the revolution.³⁵ The height of this civil war occurred between 1877 and 1885. After Maba’s death the Wolof ruler of Saloum, Gedel Mboge, took up arms to recover part of his territory seized by forces during one of the jihad campaigns against Saloum. Mboge attacked Maba’s son and cousin, Sait Matty Bah, and Mamur Nderri Bah respectively.³⁶ These two and Biran Ceesay, one of Maba’s generals who, after Maba’s death, had carved out a sphere of influence for himself, were also engaged in a power struggle with one another.³⁷ This confusion gave Gedel Mboge, still a non-Muslim, the opportunity of allying with Biran Ceesay against Mamur Nderi and Sait Matty. Mboge’s army captured several of Sait Matty’s strongholds in Baddibu, but this coalition was short-lived. Much of Baddibu

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Essau, Barra Point, August 30 1867 by sumar of Essau

³⁵ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 195

³⁶ Anthropologist David P Gamble writes that this period in Baddibu and Saloum is a complete tale of the political struggles between Saer Mati Ba , Biram Sise and Gedel Mboj. See David P. Gamble. “The North Bank of the Gambia: Places, People, and Population (B) The Wolof Area: Sabah and Sanjal, Lower Saalum, Upper Saalum” (Brisbane, California, April 1999), pp. 6-7

³⁷ When Maba died a council of elders had elected Mamur Nderi to succeed him as the leader of the jihad and also as ruler of the kingdom of Baddibu (Rip). Sait Matty was upset with this decision and hence he decided to take up arms to fight against his uncle. At the same time Biram Ceesay, a native of Kaur, was also trying to overthrow Mamur Nderi, and he came into conflict with both contending parties.

and Saloum, including the port of Kaur, remained under the control of Biran Ceesay,³⁸ and he began exercising power over the distribution and allocation of land in his “kingdom.”

The War and the Land Question

This state of affairs cannot be explained without analyzing the social, economic and political circumstances that gave rise to the uprisings. At the state level, increasing animosity existed between the holders of the landlord title, the *Soninke*, and “stranger” families and their subjects. As mentioned earlier, the anger against the ruling lineages can be attributed to the exclusion of a significant portion of the population from the ownership of the best land along the banks of the river. As Quinn writes, in addition to monopolizing the best fertile lands, “the Soninkes restricted the use of land and imposed heavy taxes on strangers, often stripping the latter of their possessions. [The Muslims] complained that not only did the rulers of the Mandingo states refuse to convert to Islam but they moved about the country in armed bands continually harassing the[m], stealing their wives, properties and slaves.”³⁹ David Gamble writes about the flight of Muslims and [perhaps stranger families] from their homes near the Baddibu royal town of Iliassa to the bank of the river, where they felt they would be more secure. They established themselves near Saba with the permission of the Alkalo and elders of Saba.⁴⁰ But, as they were the last Mandinka to arrive in the district, there was little land left to assign them, and what remained was of poor quality. As the village grew, the land was

³⁸ Gedel Mboge only became a Muslim shortly before his death in 1895. For more information on Mboge see Gamble, p. 7, and Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 163

³⁹ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 68; Paul Julian Beedle, *Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town*, p. 25; 68

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69

insufficient for its needs and the Marabouts remained dissatisfied with their lot. Gamble explain this by noting that the years before Maba launched his jihad were ones of arbitrary rule by the *Soninke*. He remarked that the “laws of God were nowhere observed. Any powerful person could take away your wife and property (including land) if he desired.”⁴¹ He claimed that the jihad broke out largely because of these circumstances. Thus, when Islamic clerics began to preach jihad against these powerful lineages, the young, male members of families that were excluded from the privileges associated with land ownership were the first to join the revolution.

This exclusion from land ownership or controlling the most productive land affected families in other forms: it also meant their marginalization from the political system. As argued in the previous chapter, several families could not become *Alkalos* or *Kabilo* heads or *Sumas*. Writing in the 1940s, John M. Gray notes that the marabouts of Kombo, like their counterparts living along the banks of the Gambia, were by the mid-nineteenth century embittered by their exclusion from the political system. It was because of this that they formed “a loose confederacy to contest the authority of the ruling families”: they wanted a share in local politics, of which they were hitherto denied access to.⁴² Most of them saw the outbreak of the jihads as an opportunity to end their inferior status and dependency.

Much of the oral and documentary evidence used in this study suggests that those who fought against the Mandinka states under the pretext of jihad took part mainly because of socio-political and economic considerations. Ambitious young men, eager to

⁴¹ Imam Alhajie Momodou Lamin Bah, “Maba and the History of Islam in the Gambia,” interview by author, tape recording, Serrekunda, June 30 2006.

⁴² Gray, *History of the Gambia*, p. 388.

escape parental control, saw the revolution as an opportunity to lead a better life.⁴³ In addition, John Gray also states that many of them fought because they anticipated material gains from their raids. Many of the fighters, he notes, were Serahule, Serer, and Jola mercenaries with little interest in the religious differences between the *Soninke* and the Muslims. They simply sold “their guns to the higher bidder.”⁴⁴ Contemporary English administrators in Bathurst held the same view. For example, H. L. Loyd Pryce wrote in 1906 that the aim of the Marabout fighters was not only “to convert the Soninke but really to obtain personal aggrandizement and to acquire property and slaves.”⁴⁵ Another report, dated 1867, by Colonel D’Arcy noted that all their “controversies with these [groups] have arisen out of the questions of property and plunder, and not out of any outrages upon life.”⁴⁶ Countless other reports accused the leaders of Muslim revolutions of sustaining an internal slave trade. While much of the negative characterization of Foday Sillah, Foday Kabba Dumbuya, and others in these reports is born of the racism and prejudice of European administrators against Africans, a number of elders today look back on the days of the jihads and admit that the desire for wealth and power were among the primary motivations that drove the decisions of many of the marabouts.⁴⁷

⁴³ One commissioner noted that “parents have all the ordinary power over their children, chastising them and making them work for them. In regard to the children when grown up the father never frees them to marry any man they do not wish to; as is the case with the Mandingoes and Jollofs” [NRS, Banjul, CSO 2/94-Reports on the Jolah People: Their customs and habits (From the Commissioner Kombo and Fogni, 1906)]

⁴⁴ CSO 2/94-Laws and Customs of the Mandinka, 1906

⁴⁵ NRS, Banjul. CSO 2/94: Laws and Customs of the Mandingoes of the North Bank Territory of the Gambia Protectorate, 1906.

⁴⁶ Colburn’s United Military Service Magazine and Naval and Military Journal. No. CCCCLXVI September 1867. “Settlements of the Gambia” by Governor D’Arcy, p. 4

⁴⁷ Malick Touray, interview by author, tape recording, Gunjur, Western Region, August 15 2008; Alhagie Mangkodou Sarr, interview by author, tape recording, Medina Baffutoto, Upper Niimi, June 13

In their recent book, *Migrants, Credit and Climate*, Kenneth Swindell and Aliou Jeng claim that among the Mandinka and Wolof of the Gambia, land rights were inherited without fragmentation by male successors of the deceased and despite the increasing islamization of the region, especially after the *Soninke-Marabout* wars, local customs of land inheritance were not materially transformed.⁴⁸ Although, theoretically, on the death of a man, his property—movable and otherwise—went to his children and wife (or wives), in practice, however, property was often inherited by the deceased’s brothers. Accordingly, the father’s brother (or the oldest uncle of the children) – automatically became the head of the family –and accepted the property in trust until such time as the sons attained adulthood. If the deceased man’s male sons had already reached adulthood before his death, the oldest son of the first wife could succeed as the head of the family and become the custodian of the property. If the sons were still young and none of their uncles were alive, the children and their father’s property often went to the mother’s family. Generally, as head of the family, the man who assumed the deceased male’s position as head of the family possessed considerable authority over matters concerning the family, either individually or collectively. This system of inheritance even existed among the Jola. For example, as indicated in chapter one, in 1906 Commissioners G.H. Sangster noted that the Jola, who were often organized in “stockades” had “big men” who were called *Alefanow*.⁴⁹ Each stockade had an

2006 and August 17 2008) and Imam Siaka Jobe, interview by author, tape recording, Sanchi Paalen, North Bank Region, June 1 2008.

⁴⁸ Kenneth Swindell and Aliou Jeng, *Migrants, Credit and Climate: The Gambian Groundnut Trade, 1834-1934* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), p. 84

⁴⁹ CSO 2/94-Reports on the Jolah People and See CSO 2/94-Laws and Customs of the Mandinka). Elsewhere Commissioner Pryce noted that “on the death of a Mandinka his property descends to his children. The deceased’s brother, however, takes charge of everything, the children all continue living in the same yard under their uncle. If the deceased has no brother, the eldest son would take charge of the

Alefanow who appeared to be the one that all the property (including cattle) belonged to. When he died the next “big man,” who was the next eldest in that community, succeeded to the position. This implies that whoever was *Alefanow* succeeded and inherited from his predecessor even if such a person had children.⁵⁰

Clearly, the above suggest that kinship was crucial in the control and/or ownership of land. However, it overlooks the tensions that characterized these kin-based societies. In fact, evidence suggests that some male members of families living in Gambian villages may have been dissatisfied with the way in which property was shared, inherited or even administered. In the lower Gambia, the value of community was strictly upheld. Families shared food; villagers came to the aid of their neighbors especially in times of disputes with people from other villages and members of the same *kabilo* shared farms. As one reporter noted, if the family “agreed among themselves the land is usually cultivated as a whole for the benefit of all members.”⁵¹ Perhaps this is why Sangster could “. . . find no law by which property is to be divided up into certain proportions.”⁵² However, valuing community and keeping strong bonds between families did not mean that conflicts were absent. It was not uncommon for tensions and conflicts to arise over the use of family property, and especially when questions of

property.” This was also the case among the Wolof. If a father died, his younger brother took charge of the boys and married their mother [source: NRS, CSO 2/94-The Laws and Customs of the Jollofs, 1906]

⁵⁰ A man’s property, Commissioners Sangster further noted, was disposed of after his burial. This was done at the *second* burial. The second burial took place on the fourth day after the head of the family passed away. No second burial was held for women. A woman after death was fetched by his father’s people and buried in his stockade, never in her husband’s. Nor also was it held for children. A man was always buried in his own stockade. Even if he died whilst away from home, his body was fetched and buried home. Their funerals were always great occasions and people often came from miles around to take part in them, not just the direct family of the deceased, but all friends. As Sangster noted, a funeral was always the reason for a huge [gathering], dancing and drunkenness. It is at these funerals that fights and murder take place.

⁵¹ Confidential Dispatch from Governor of Sierra Leone, Douglas Jardine, to the Secretary of State for Colonies, April 1940

⁵² CSO 2/94-Reports on the Jolah People

inheritance arose. Sometimes disagreements arose and the land was subdivided among the sons, and in some cases the daughters, in varying proportions. For example, in describing this situation among the Mandinka, Commissioner H. Lloyd Pryce wrote that if conflict occurred the children of the deceased would share the property.⁵³

In many cases, disagreements occurred because older sons who assumed their father's property on behalf of the family kept the largest portion for themselves and gave the younger brothers only portions of it. In other instances, trouble emerged when some children were prevented from inheriting their father's property. For example, among the Jola, a son who severed his relationship with his father and left the compound at a time when his father was alive could not inherit his father's property. Since he left his father's compound and set up his own, he lost his right to claim any part of his father's property. Also, an illegitimate child was often prevented from inheriting any of his father's property. Individuals considered as lunatics could not exercise rights over their property because often it was entrusted under the care of "his nearest male relation." Yet, as a son he still might be forced to contribute to "pay off all the deceased's debt whenever they are claimed."⁵⁴

Prior to the mid-nineteenth century holy wars, those who were excluded from inheritance had limited options since it was abominable to fight ones' uncle or elders. Previously, they could either accept the state and stay with their lineage or move out of the community. But the outbreak of the jihad gave another option: to fight and in the name of Allah. Young men who were either prevented from inheriting their parents'

⁵³ CSO 2/94-Laws and Customs of the Mandinka

⁵⁴ Ibid

property joined the ranks of the militant jihadists so as to put an end to what they considered forms of social and moral decay.

If there were tensions at the family and state level, the very nature of this fragile era also brought neighboring villages into direct confrontation with one another.⁵⁵ Existing tensions and jealousies among neighboring villages across the length and breadth of the Gambia contributed immensely to shaping the nature of the *Soninke-Marabout* wars. As Quinn writes, even groups sharing land and pasturage frequently found themselves divided between the opposing sides during the jihad. Even lineage ties did not always matter.⁵⁶ The wars gave villages the opportunity to side with one fighting group or the other. The uprisings intensified land conflicts in a number of areas. This is exemplified by the conflicts in Sabach-Sanjal where the villages of Kumbija and Tandaito used the occasion to appropriate land previously controlled by Sarrakunda.

The Sarrakunda-Tandaito Land Dispute, 1870s-1890s

As mentioned earlier, the bitter struggle that followed Maba's death in 1867 had less to do with fighting to convert people into Islam and more to do with a power struggle. While Sait Matty was trying to claim his father's territory from Mamut Nderri Ba, Biram Ceesay was busy fighting both of them to carve out a sphere of influence for himself. The consequences were devastating, especially when neither side gained a complete a victory in the early years of the conflict. In the end, though, as fighting continued, Biram Ceesay obtained control of the eastern side of Baddibu, leaving

⁵⁵ I also suggest that war could affect people's attitude towards property. During times of war, warriors appeared to make a more careful distinction between movable property (such as livestock, jewelry, stored grains, women and slaves) and immovable property such as fruit trees, houses and farmlands. For example, they often looted granaries and stole livestock, money, jewelry, women and slaves. But since land could not be moved or be transacted, it was often used to compensate local collaborators.

⁵⁶ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 62

Mamur Nderi Ba controlling the western side. Much of Sabach-Sanjai, the area where the towns of Sarrakunda, Tandaito, and Bambally were located, was under the control of Biran Ceesay's forces.⁵⁷

This power struggle occurred at a time when communities along the north bank of the Gambia River were already divided along such lines as kin, generation, gender, class, and religious affiliation. With the conflict intensifying between Biram and his revivals, the different communities, who had problems with one another, gradually took sides. Villages that felt that they did not have enough farmland or access to rice fields decided to side with one warlord or the other in hopes of improving their circumstances. Pakala Bati Xai supported Sait Matty, for instance, and neighboring Panchang was on the side of Biram Ceesay.⁵⁸

In one of his wars against Sarrakunda, Biran Ceesay seized rice fields belonging to Sarrakunda and gave them to the people of Tandaito. It is neither clear from the written documents or the oral sources why Biran Ceesay took these rice fields away from Sarrakunda. However, given the nature of the political conflict in Baddibu and Saloum, it seems that the land was either given to Tandaito because they fought on Biran's side or because Biran wanted to remedy the "landlessness" of Tandaito. Most elders living today in Tandaito hold a "positive memory" of Biran and what he did, whereas they described Sarrakunda as a *Soninke* town. Biran most likely took away the land and gave it to Tandaito because of a need to rescue people in the latter town for a state of "landlessness." As argued earlier, "stranger" communities along the Gambia River

⁵⁷ David P. Gamble. "The North Bank of the Gambia: Places, People, and Population (B) The Wolof Area: Sabah and Sanjal, Lower Saalum, Upper Saalum" (Brisbane, California, April 1999), pp. 6-7

⁵⁸ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 8

depended on others for access to land. Elders claim that the founders of Tandaito were strangers hosted by the ancestors of the people of nearby Dunyuto and were migrants from Niimi Sika.⁵⁹ They say, further, that the ancestors who established Bambally were hosted by Sarrakunda – meaning that Sarrakunda was among the oldest settlements in the area.⁶⁰ Given their stranger status, residents of Tandaito likely had difficulty accessing the rice fields prior to the outbreak of the wars of Biram Ceesay, and hence they sought assistance from the Wolof leader.

Whether these claims are true or not, one thing that is certain is that the two villages' rice fields and farmlands are close-by and that Biran Ceesay conquered land that was previously claimed by Sarrakunda and gave it to Tandaito. Thus, when the first traveling commissioner, J.H. Ozanne, was appointed to the area in 1893, he encountered an on-going land dispute between the towns' residents.⁶¹ In his annual report dated the same year, he writes that "The Sarrakunda people are trying to get back some of the farm at Tendito which belonged to their ancestors and were taken away from them in the war with Biram Sisi." After the demise of Biram Ceesay and the emergence of a British administration in the Gambia, the people of Sarrakunda saw the opportunity to regain their land. According to Ozanne, "The Alkali of Sarrakunda sent one of his wives to work a farm belonging to Tendito [sic] and the Alcaide of Tendito took away her hoe

⁵⁹ Mba Neneh Sabbally, interview by author assisted by Abdoulie Jafuneh, tape recording, Sarrakunda Village, North Bank Region, December, 14 2008

⁶⁰ Arfang Sainey Sanneh-Darboe, interview by author assisted by Abdoulie Jafuneh, tape recording, Bamabally Village, December, 15 2008.

⁶¹ A few years before he encountered the Sarrakunda-Tandaito land dispute, he came across the Bambally affair –which was also a land dispute.⁶¹ But these disputes were different from boundary disputes in that they involved a village's founding lineage claiming land that was seized from them during times of war. Boundary disputes, especially in regard to rice fields were rare. In Mandinka societies boundaries between farms were generally well marked. A strip from a foot to several yards wide was left between farms. Trees such as silk cotton trees were often planted along a boundary line.

and sent her back.” Unfortunately for the people of Sarrakunda, the British did not come to their aid. Ozanne “told the Alcaide of Sarrakundu that [the British] could not make the people give up lands that had been given to them by Biram Sisi and worked by them for some years.”⁶²

The Kumbija-Sarrakunda Land Dispute, 1870s to 1890s

Around the same time that Biram Ceesay seized the rice fields controlled by Sarrakunda and gave them to Tandaito, Sarrakunda was involved in another land dispute, this time with the people of Kumbija. According to documentary sources, the land in question originally belonged to the father of the Alkalo of Sarrakunda, but “in one of the small wars, this Alcaide’s father was driven out of the town and had to seek refuge elsewhere.” Subsequently, the land fell into the hands of Chief Nderri Raumi, a Wolof colonial official in French Senegal, who leased it to the Alkalo of Kumbija. When the French administration recalled Chief Nderri, the Alkalo of Kumbija appropriated the land and worked it without interference until June 1892 when the Alkali of Sarrakunda “put in his claim and they came to blows which resulted in the Alcaide of Sarrakunda retiring, leaving the Alcaide of Kumbija in possession.”⁶³ The land was about half an acre and was located outside the town of Kumbija, and two miles from Sarrakunda. Ozanne noted that it was a good spot for houses and several people were anxious to build on it.⁶⁴

⁶² NRS, Banjul, ARP 32 Travelling Commissioner Reports-North Bank 1893-1932 (60)

⁶³ NRS, ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898] Travelling Commissioner Reports

⁶⁴ Unfortunately for the people of Sarrakunda when they put forward their claim to Ozanne, he “told them to leave things as they were until May and that I should go to them sometime in February and settle the question. Both parties were satisfied to wait. [They] promised to abide by my decision.” The two communities lost the land, however, because Ozanne “settled the dispute by taking over the land for the colony. . . I told the Alcaide of Kumbija not to build houses on it or plant it until I heard from you (the Governor).” Ozanne noted that the two communities “might be deterred from [claiming the land] if rent

Probing into the history of this conflict revealed another aspect of the histories of the settlements of Kumbija and Sarrakunda. Oral traditions from the region suggest that the village of Kumbija was founded by a Wolof chief called Gumbo Gaye, a student of Maba, sometime in the last half of the nineteenth century. He founded the village during the time of a holy war because he interested in spreading Islam.⁶⁵ According to the tradition, Gaye had much distaste for the aristocracy. Hence when he destroyed the *Soninke* authority in Sarrakunda, he became the only ruler and eventually disregarded all the Alkalos in the territory he controlled. He relied on his warriors by appointing them as the leaders of the various communities under his influence. Moreover, the use of the title of Alkalo, the tradition claimed, only reappeared later, during the reigns of Biram Wudy and Mama Tamba Jammeh of Illiassa – a time that coincided with the colonial era. A similar version alleged that Gumbo was sent to Kumbija by the *Bur* (Wolof word for king) Saloum who at the time was resident in Noiro.⁶⁶ The tradition claims that Gaye was the Marabout that attacked the *Soninkes* of Bambally and Sarrakunda.⁶⁷

These claims are difficult to verify. Most likely the land in question was seized from Sarrakunda during one of the wars and the reference to a Wolof chief in the European record was probably referring to Gaye. Moreover, Gaye's activities in the

were to be charged. [He further suggested] that they be allowed to build houses on the understanding that should the ground be required by the Government at anytime, they would have to give it up.

⁶⁵ Alhagie Fafa Jobe, interview by author assisted by Abdoulie Jafuneh, tape recording, Kumbija village, North Bank Region, December 14 2008. This was also corroborated with what Bambally elders told me about the Wolof warrior who had destroyed the three *Soninke* villages that came to make up Sarrakunda in an attempt to convert them into Islam.

⁶⁶ Niore was an important town in Saloum, in modern Senegal. As a result, it became the center of French politics during the colonial period.

⁶⁷ Arfang Sainey Sanneh-Darboe, interview by author assisted by Abdoulie Jafuneh, tape recording, Bamabally Village, December, 15 2008.

region seem to have coincided with that of Biram Ceesay. One informant said that the “war” between Kumbija and Sarrakunda was caused by a Wolof Marabout warrior “who wanted them to accept Islam . . . I don’t know his name . . . but it was not Biram Ceesay.”⁶⁸ But in Kumbija, an elder said that Biran Ceesay was a contemporary of Gumbo Gaye.⁶⁹

Foday Sillah and the Land Question in Kombo, c1868-1894

In Kombo, land was also an important element in the *Soninke-Marabout* wars. One way in which the wars of the nineteenth century played a part in matters of land tenure has been summarized in the 1940s by the then commissioner of the South Bank Province. In one of his reports the commissioner wrote that “about a hundred years ago, the marabou wars started and the kingdom of Gunjur began to expand and to conquer parts of the two Kombo kingdoms.”⁷⁰

The architect of the jihad in Kombo was a man called Foday Kabba Touray.⁷¹ He attacked Kombo in the 1840s and in a series of attempts succeeded in killing Mansa Suling Jatta. However, shortly after this he disappeared from the scene and eventually, in 1868, was succeeded by his brother, Foday Buraima Touray, popularly known as Foday Sillah. Sillah intensified the jihad beginning in 1873 by attacking the royal towns of Kombo, driving their lineages into exile or killing them.⁷² When fighting intensified in the middle of 1874 the English Administrator in British Kombo concluded a treaty with Sillah, agreeing to create a neutral zone between the town of Yundum and the

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Alhagie Fafa Jobe, interview by author, Kumbija village, December 14, 2008

⁷⁰ NRS, CSO 10/71, Confidential Dispatch to the Colonial Secretary in Bathurst from the Commissioner’s Office South Bank Province, Cape St. Mary, April, 30 1940

⁷¹ His is commonly remembered in Gunjur as Kaba Touray.

⁷² Gray, *History of the Gambia*, p. 454

boundary of British Kombo. The British gave Sillah permission to cultivate the land while retaining the right of British subjects to plant peanuts there, paying customary rents to the chiefs in possession of the land. This brought peace for awhile. When this occurred, the marabouts under Sillah wanted to settle down and encourage farming, at least for that rainy season.⁷³

However, fighting was renewed again in 1875, when in June, Busumbala, the last Soninke town, fell. Tomani Bojang, the Kombo *mansa*, relocated to Lamin (a town within 400 yards of the British boundary). While he settled there, the Administrator of British Kombo offered him a piece of land in British territory, but the *mansa* rejected it.

As fighting continued, Sillah succeeded in conquering much of the *mansa*'s territory –and in the process the ownership of the soil of the conquered territory passed to the “kingdom of Gunjur.” As this process was unfolding, certain villages with a strong Muslim population also revolted against their *mansa* and established their independence. On September 29, 1875, Mansa Tomanni Baojang “agreed to shave his head, become a Marabout.”⁷⁴ He adopted a Muslim name. In return, Sillah, as the new “*mansa*,” agreed to give him and his people land where they could cultivate crops.⁷⁵

⁷³ Ibid, p. 455; Charlotte Quinn also notes that Maba encouraged farming. He claimed that he himself was setting an example in 1864 by farming, “which the pagan king hated;” “he has ordered the whole of his subjects to cultivate the ground” (p. 97).

⁷⁴ Gray, *History of the Gambia*, p. 455

⁷⁵ Land was also primary object used to entice people to either fight or help solidify a community or group's defense against its opponents. David Gamble writes that during Foday Kabba's wars, an appeal was made to a smith to settle in the village of Jenneri (a town in Kiang). In so doing, he was promised that he would receive land and a compound in return. When the fighting ended he was granted substantial areas of both upland farms, and rice fields. There were no blacksmiths to make bullets and spears, and repair guns. Also, some of the jihadists compensated their soldiers with their booty such as land, women and slaves. [David Gamble. *Traditional Mandinka Agriculture*, p. 29; For example, Sankandi elders often explain how their ancestors acquired a piece of land which became a disputed property in the late 1890s and early 1900. The accounts they frequently give explain how the original settlers on that land were the Jaamar who were fought and pursued by a more powerful enemy. Eventually, the Jaamar were believed to have sought protection from the people of Sankandi whose leader came from the Darboe clan. With

Two relevant developments occurred in Kombo during this time. One was that once the breakaway villages (with no direct ties to Sillah's forces) that rebelled against the *mansa* succeeded in establishing their independence, the ownership of land on which villages depended was considered to pass to the residents of such villages. The other was the complete defeat of Kombo including the royal towns of Yundum, Busumbala, Brikama, Manduar and Jambur. When this occurred, the villages that had previously established their independence from the *mansa* of Kombo acknowledged the new "king" of Gunjur as their *mansa*. When they did this, it was understood that they had surrendered the ownership of their lands to the "kingdom of Gunjur."

Sillah then became the new "Mansa" of Kombo. Ironically, he began to exercise his power, especially in the allocation and distribution of land, in a way similar to the way *Soninke* rulers had done for centuries. For instance, even though his lineage was not the first to settle in Gunjur, he usurped the right to allocate land not only in the town but even beyond. According to oral traditions from Gunjur, the town was founded by members of a lineage named Darboe. They were followed by Foday Sillah's family, the Touray, who were Muslims and hence did not want to live among *Soninkes*. Because of this, their leader asked for a piece of land outside of the main settlement. A marabout had also warned the leader of the Tourays that he should move and settle where the present site of Gunjur is located. He predicted that the prosperity of the town was in that location. As the Touray settlement began prospering in this new location, the Darboe decided to move and joined them. Since the Darboe's were initial settlers in area, an

this help, the Jaamar won the war and were able to defend their land. After the war, Sankandi was given land as a form of compensation. That is why when, in the late nineteenth century, a man from Jattaba put his claim of ownership to that land, the people of Sankandi refused by noting that their ancestors got that land through fighting. [for more information on this, see trans. of an audio interview of an elder of Kiang at the RDD's collection in Fajara. It is listed as Sankandi Tape, No. 5162]

arrangement was made to accommodate them. In a careful agreement, the Darboe would hold the title of Alkalo, taking care of issues dealing with land allocation and its distribution to strangers. The Touray, on the other hand, assumed the position of *Almammy* – leading the growing Muslim community in prayers. The situation remained like this until Foday Sillah’s predecessor, Foday Kabba Touray, seized the Alkaloship from the Darboe clan and administered the land himself. Like his predecessor, Sillah exercised this role until his death. He distributed land to the different *Kabilos* in Gunjur: Darboe, Touray, Manneh, and Janneh, and rewarded others with land for serving in his army. Ensa Touray of Gunjur narrated that in a recent conflict in Gunjur, a man put forward his claim to a piece of land he believed Sillah had taken from one of his victims and given to the man’s great grandfather, Bunja Janneh. It was allocated to him as reward for his participation in Sillah’s wars. According to Ensa Touray, “Foday Sillah asked Bunja, his general, what he can give him and Bunja’s response was that give me a place where I and my family can survive.”⁷⁶ But Foday Sillah ensured that the Touray clan controlled a greater portion of the land in Gunjur.

The Sankandi-Jattaba Crises, 1899-1901

By the end of the nineteenth century, there had been a long-standing quarrel in Kiang between the *Soninkes* of Jattaba and the marabouts of Sankandi over the ownership of a rice field. The disputed land was located in the *faroo* between the two villages. An oral source indicates that the conflict began after a Sankandi woman,

⁷⁶ Personal Conversation with Ensa Touray, a native of Gunjur. August 4, 2008. Gunjur, Western Region.

Mariama Darboe, went to marry a man in the village of Jattaba.⁷⁷ The tradition claims that Mariama was given the land as a gift from her parents when she got married to Lang Seyfo of Jattaba.⁷⁸ Accordingly, she was expected to use the land to cultivate rice to support her new, nuclear family, especially once she got children. It is not clear how long Mariama cultivated this land or how many years she spent in Jattaba with her husband, but one thing the tradition claims is that she was not fortunate to conceive any children throughout her marriage. Thus, when she died, her uncle in Sankandi requested the land back—noting that the land was only lent to her for support of her family. Trouble soon erupted because Lang Seyfo or his family declined to return the land. They argued that they were not aware of how the rice field became Sankandi property (or to be more precise, the property of the Darboe family of Sankandi). This is what brought the two villages to a showdown. It should be noted that among the Mandinka women were often given rice farms as part of their dowry and hence marriage was another route to land accumulation.⁷⁹ But this might only be a temporary transfer of land, as in some instances, there was an understanding that such land would be returned to the wife's family after her death especially if she did not have children with her husband. Also, as Swindell and Jeng notes, rice land could be kept within a man's compound when husbands gave the rice farms of their mothers to their wives.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ In Sankandi, the Darboe *kabilo* are among the founder lineages of the village. They were the holders of the title of Alkali in Sankandi. By virtue of their position in the Sankandi community, they controlled a lot of land.

⁷⁸ Historically, intermarriage between the sons and daughters of two neighboring villages was common. Young men typically sought wives in towns around their hometown. In terms of proximity, Sankandi and Jattaba were only a few kilometers apart.

⁷⁹ Swindell and Jeng, *Migrants, Credit and Climate*, p. 84

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 85

Europeans have long observed the importance of what they called “blood” vengeance among the Mandinka living along the banks of the Gambia. Among this group, a family needing help would call to his assistance not only his immediate relations but all the people in his *Kabilo* or if possible the entire village.⁸¹ It was in that fashion that the land dispute eventually became a conflict between the two villages and not just the families that were involved.

At first, the elders of Kiang tried to engage in serious negotiations with one and another village, but without much success.⁸² The situation worsened and became more explosive as time progressed. Subsequently, the matter was reported to Mansa Koto Sanyang in Battelling, about eight kilometres from Sankandi and Jattaba and at that time the seat of the chieftaincy. British officials who reported on this incident often claimed that was part of the reason why negotiations between the two villages were difficult was because of the existing religious climate of the nineteenth century. Most of the documentary sources claim that the people of Sankandi were supported by Fodi Kabba and perceived themselves as Muslims while viewing the residents of Jattaba as “pagans.”⁸³ The British sources insist that Foday Kabba incited the people of Sankandi and they suggest that as a *Soninke*, Mansa Koto’s legitimacy was rapidly waning in the eyes of the Muslims of Sankandi.

⁸¹ NRS, Banjul, CSO 2/94-Laws and Customs of the Mandinka

⁸² Lamin Jammeh, Alkalo Ndamboy Sanyang, Siringka Sanyang and Lang Kumba Sanyang, “Sankandi-Battelling Land Dispute,” interview by NCAC staff, tape recording, Battelling, Kiang West, Lower River Region, November 3, 2001. trans. of interview available at the RDD collection in Fajara as Tape No. 5178.

⁸³ Alkalo Tonyonding Darboe and Imam, “Sankandi-Battelling Land Dispute,” interview by NCAC staff, tape recording, Sankandi, Kiang West, Lower River Region, November 3, 2001. trans. of interview available at the RDD collection in Fajara as Tape No. 5162.

“Sankandi Have Done a Big Thing”
The Killing of Mansa Koto and Commissioner Cecil Sitwell

Popular memory of the Sankandi incident in the Gambia views the conflict as a great resistance against attempts to establish British rule in the Gambia. Several Gambians – even today – believe that such incidents were bold statements of anti-colonial sentiment, such being the outlook of much of the world since the downfall of colonial rule.⁸⁴ But it is vital to note that oral data of the event, recorded a century after the incident, likely consists largely of opinions of persons from the perspective of the present on what happened in the past rather than, necessarily, what people in 1900 knew of the event. Removal of modern biases shows that the conflict was more simply an argument over land that incited emotions and got out of control. By the time that Commissioner Cecil Sitwell led a party to solve the dispute; tempers already were at a boiling point. Moreover, the prevailing climate—which was no doubt volatile – worsened tensions between neighboring villages that had longstanding problems—perhaps something that villagers have very likely argued and fought over for much of the history of mankind.

When the dispute intensified in 1899, Mansa Koto, assisted by his elders (namely Tumani Messeng and Bakary Kumba Santang) summoned a meeting, which was held in Sankandi. At that meeting, it was decided that the land belonged to Jattaba. As expected, the initial verdict was strongly rejected by Sankandi on the basis that the

⁸⁴ For example, in one of the interviews in RDD about Sankandi an informant claims that “Sankandi and Kembujeng were the only two villages where whites have been killed” and adds that Sankandi’s name became Suuma Kunda because of the annoyance their ancestors had against the whites.”

mediators were not fair or honest in their arbitration.⁸⁵ The elders of Sankandi continued to insist that the land was theirs and that they were determined to “go to war” if it was not restored to them.

Later that year, the dispute was referred to Sitwell to resolve. According to oral traditions from Sankandi, when matters reached the commissioner he again gave his judgment in favor of Jattaba.⁸⁶ Some say, however, that during his first judgment, the commissioner had ruled that the disputed property should be used in rotation between the two villages –meaning that Sankandi would use it for a year and pass it on to Jattaba for use the following year. Again, Dari Bana Darboe, Sankandi’s Alkalo, and his close associates declined to accept Sitwell’s proposal. In the end, the commissioner decided to travel to Sankandi to deal with the problem. On this trip, he was accompanied by Assistant Commissioner Silva, Mansa Koto, and six police constables. When they arrived in Sankandi, they ordered the village elders to meet them at the outskirts of the village to discuss the problem. This outraged the elders of Sankandi. For them, Mansa Koto and the European commissioner did not accord them much respect because the proper place to settle a problem was in a *bantango* or *bantaba* (i.e. the village meeting ground) and not outside of the village.⁸⁷ Hence, Dari Bana Darboe and his council declined to meet the commissioner and his entourage. In the latter’s attempt to use force against the defiant population of Sankandi, the commissioner, his assistant and the six

⁸⁵ Alkalo Bunang Sanneh, “Sankandi-Battelling Land Dispute,” interview by NCAC staff, tape recording, Jattaba, Kiang West, Lower River Region, November 3, 2001. trans. of interview available at the RDD collection in Fajara as Tape No. 5177.

⁸⁶ Annual Report for 1901 on Microfilm available at the Michigan State University Library.

⁸⁷ For more on bentang, see Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa*, p. 19

police constables were murdered. Mansa Koto also sustained severe injuries and died later.

Oral traditions from Sankandi claim that their elders were long prepared for a war. They claim that well before Sitwell traveled to Sankandi, the elders had employed a blacksmith, Bollo Jobe, who made available enough gunpowder in preparation for conflict. With the gunpowder at hand, the Sankandi army was already lying in ambush.⁸⁸ Soon after the commissioners were murdered, Foday Kabba took the advantage of the conflict. For their part, the British retaliated by launching punitive action against Sankandi. The decision to send the expeditionary force was to revenge the death of the commissioners and their guards. The force arrived in Kiang in January 1901 from Sierra Leone to “punish the towns implicated in the murder of the two traveling commissioner and six constables in the previous year.”⁸⁹ The force first invaded Dumbuto before heading to Sankandi.⁹⁰ During the invasion of Sankandi, many of the residents of the village abandoned it and sought refuge in Medina Suumakunda where Fodi Kabba had his capital at the time. But in an attempt to escape into French Senegal, Dari Bana Darboe and two others from the village of Sankandi were caught by the French and handed over to the British authorities. They were tried, sentenced to

⁸⁸ Annual Report for 1901

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ As for Sankandi and Dumbuto, an informant noted, they were closely related. “The villages were brothers: like an elder brother and his junior brother.” Others stated that “Dumbuto was a father to Sankandi.” This implies that the two villages were genealogically linked and in this way their histories were connected. (Many families who lived in Sankandi may have migrated from Dumbuto either through marriage or otherwise). Sankandi was originally called Bawdal. It had a minor lake where traders and laborers used to wash and spend days. Dumbuto’s Soninke name was Kehnokoto. Their elder (i.e. the person who founded) the village of Dumbuto was a hunter. He often would sell meat to the laborers and traders in that minor lake. According to the elders that is how the name of the village changed from Bawdal to Sankandi.

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death, and executed. This marks the end of the nineteenth century jihads. As Gray writes, the Sankandi incident was the last relic of the *Soninke-Marabout* wars.⁹¹

Conclusion

In sum, the outbreak of the *Soninke-Marabout* wars ushered in a climate that enabled villages to ally themselves with different competing groups with the goal of gaining control of vital agricultural land. Also, disgruntled people came together to end aristocratic rule and put a stop to their economic exploitation. Thus, it is important to note that many of those who participated in the holy wars did not do so purely because of religious motives. For many of them, the reasons for their participation can be understood from the social and political context that characterized the lives of the majority of lower Gambia's populations.

The consequences of the nineteenth-century Gambian jihads are deep and profound. They were characterized by competition between and among opposing individuals, groups and peoples of different social and economic classes. In some instances, they also represented a conflict between the old and the young, and peoples of different religious beliefs. It was a period when the authority of the *mansas* and their long-ruling lineages were challenged and in many cases destroyed. Despite attempts by the English to save some of these lineages, conditions in these kingdoms were no longer favorable because most of the kingdom's residents did not support the *mansas* and their continued existence. Muslim forces were determined to see the end of aristocratic rule and the abuses associated with totalitarianism. Even ordinary people joined the ranks of the jihads. The wars also brought about a widespread destruction of settlements and

⁹¹ Gray, *A History of the Gambia*, p. 473

property along the banks of the Gambia as well as in some cases interrupted agricultural activity. In one report, a European commentator noted that “. . . it has never been possible in the past for natives living on the banks of the river to quietly follow agricultural pursuits, for the country has been devastated and depopulated nearly up to the very doors of Bathurst by slave hunters [referring to the Marabouts] marauders who were attracted by the water-way.”⁹² Perhaps it was these devastations caused by the religious wars that compelled John Morgan to exaggerate his statement by noting that “Owing to the devastations of war in every kingdom, all things appeared to be in an unsettled state. From their ancestors of more than two or three generations, neither kings nor people seemed to have inherited anything. . . For hundreds of miles, a tree planted by a native for ornament or utility was not to be seen . . . what is the use of raising trees that grow too slowly to bear fruit in [ones] life time?”⁹³

While the destruction of settlements and property was one impact of the jihads in the lower Gambia region, it was not the only result of the holy wars. The *Soninke-Marabout* wars transformed the land tenure system. One of the impacts of the jihads was the ending of royal control of land, which was the most important feature of land tenure before the rise of militant Islam. In short, the jihads succeeded in dethroning the Mandinka *mansas* whose lineages had monopolized and control access to land in the Gambia for centuries. Exclusion of most people from land ownership and the political and social privileges associated with its ownership contributed to the outbreak of the jihads. In other words, a root cause of the holy wars of the nineteenth century was the aristocracy’s loss of control over “strangers,” who rose against their rulers to end the

⁹² NRS, Banjul, ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-Annual No. 143 Annual Report for 1894

⁹³ Morgan, *Reminiscences*, p. 121

excessive taxation and exclusion from owning good land as well as the economic, social, and political assets associated with landownership.⁹⁴ This adds meaning to previous interpretations that the *Soninke-Marabout* wars had been merely tensions between Muslim agriculturalists and the old, warrior elites.⁹⁵

The very nature of this fragile era brought individuals, families, and neighboring villages into direct confrontation with one another.⁹⁶ In fact, existing tensions and jealousies among neighbors, families, and patrons contributed immensely to shaping the nature of the *Soninke-Marabout* wars just as the jihads had also given rise to some of those tensions. Uncles and brothers quarreled over matters of inheritance; landlords faced rebellious strangers and as Quinn writes, even groups sharing land and pasturage frequently found themselves divided between the opposing sides during the jihad, irrespective of lineage connections.

Finally, reasons for the participation of most people in the religious wars of nineteenth century cannot all be found in their religious motivations. Young men saw the jihad as an opportunity to better their lot. Possessing a weapon during times of war was empowering and was an evidence of authority. Once a person obtained a weapon he could raid a community and loot from them. Other people held grievances against the elites and hence saw the jihads as an opportunity to avenge or revenge their anger. In addition, young men who were either prevented from inheriting their parents'

⁹⁴ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 53; Paul J Beedle, "Citizens and Strangers in a Gambian Town," p. 25

⁹⁵ Klein "Social and Economic Factors in the Muslim Revolution in the Senegambia," p. 426

⁹⁶ War could affect people's attitude towards property. During times of war, warriors appeared to make a more careful distinction between movable property (such as livestock, jewelry, stored grains, women and slaves) and immovable property such as fruit trees, houses and farmlands. They often looted granaries, stole livestock, money, jewelry, women and slaves. But since land cannot be moved or could not be transacted, it was often used to compensate local collaborators.

property or land or whose parents were still considered strangers joined the ranks of the militant jihad. Thus, it is misleading to consider the jihads purely in their religious context. As with nearly every other major event along the Gambia River prior to the most recent times, land played a major role.

Chapter Four

Land and the Growth in Commercial Agriculture: Peanuts and Change, c. 1830s to 1900s

The effects of the wars, described in the earlier chapter, on the expansion of peanut cultivation were also considerable but somewhat paradoxical. As noted by Kenneth Swindell and Alieu Jeng, the wars disrupted the peanut trade but increased the potential labor supply that allowed lower Gambian farmers to grow peanuts as a cash crop.¹ In addition to the migrant labor phenomenon, overall the wars did not disrupt the expansion of peanut production because they were “petty wars, waged on a small scale with the aid of mercenaries from other [groups]. The numbers engaged were small . . .”² and many of the destructive ones tended to occur during the dry season when it was easier to move soldiers from village to village. Consequently, the jihads did not serve as a hindrance to the growth of cash crops.

This chapter will examine the effects of cash cropping on land tenure. It shows changes brought to ideas of property ownership as a result of expansion in peanut production. It argues that while the growth of peanut production had far-reaching consequences on lower Gambian society (such as demographic changes), it hardly created well-developed rural credit (land) markets. It also demonstrates that the clearing of new land, necessitated by the need to grow cash crops, was made possible by religious specialists (namely marabouts) believed to have the ability to render “spirit” lands useable.

¹ Kenneth Swindell and Alieu Jeng. *Migrants, Credit and Climate: The Gambian Groundnut Trade, 1834-1934* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), p. 28

² Lady Southorn, *The Gambia: The Story of the Groundnut Colony* (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1952), p. 167

However, as it will be shown, this chapter relies heavily on interviews and documentary sources dealing with the north bank of the Gambia River. This overwhelming bias can be attributed to the fact that the north bank region was the principal peanut growing region for a long time and it is the region where peanut production is believed to have started from. As for the south bank, the major economic activity continued to be rice cultivation and the influence of marabouts on the area's sacred forests was minimal, especially in Foni, where conversion to Islam was slower. This bias does not in any way diminish the importance of the changes described here because similar transformations would soon take root in the south bank.

Cash Crops, Labor and Land Markets

Much of the literature explored in this chapter deals with the impact of cash crop farming on other West African societies in general and the Gambia in particular. In the Gambia, for instance, scholars have examined the impact of migrant farmers on increases in peanut exports, the role of the colonial administration in its development and how reliance on peanut production kept Gambian farmers dependent on outside market forces.³ However, so far none have examined in detail how the transformation from a relatively subsistence mode of production to a more commercialized agricultural system affected land tenure systems, and overtime.

³ For studies on landlord-stranger relationships in the Gambia, see Kenneth Swindell. "Migrant Groundnut Farmers in the Gambia: The Persistence of a Nineteenth Century Labor System" *International Migration Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter, 1977), pp. 452-472; Kenneth Swindell, "Family Farms and Migrant Labour: The Strange Farmers of the Gambia" *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1978), pp. 3-17; Kenneth Swindell. "Serawoollies, Tillibunkas and Strange Farmers: The Development of Migrant Groundnut Farming along the Gambia River, 1848-95" *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1980), pp. 93-104. The work of Donald R. Wright puts Gambians' reliance on peanut production into a global context. See his *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niimi, The Gambia* (New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2004).

Elsewhere, in West Africa, scholars have attributed the emergence of what Gershon Feder and Raymond Noronha call “rural credit markets” (as they pertained to land) to the growth cash crop production.⁴ For instance, Polly Hill found evidence of the existence of rural land sales under Akim Abuakwa customary law in the Gold Coast. She traces the practice of such sales to the period before or after the nominal abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807 and/or towards the middle of the nineteenth century with the development of commercial agriculture, combined with the growth in population.⁵ She claims that the “migration involved individual Akwapim, Krobo, Shai, Ga and other Ghanaian farmers from south of the forest belt, in buying forest land, which at the time of purchase, was hardly inhabited.”⁶ Focusing on another country several hundred miles away, Eliane De Latour Dejean shows how, among the Mawri of Niger, with the introduction of peanuts and cotton production (leading to a relative shortage of land), land acquired an exchange value and a price.⁷ Money made from peanuts and cotton, she claims, allowed those who could take advantage of such production to appropriate land very rapidly. Sara Berry shows that with the increase of agricultural production for the market in Ghana and Nigeria, struggles over land, labor, and capital intensified as well as led to an upsurge in land values.⁸

⁴ For example, see Gershon Feder and Raymond Noronha. “Land Rights Systems and Agricultural Development in Sub-Saharan Africa” *The World Bank Research Observer*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jul., 1987), pp. 143-144

⁵ Ibid, p. 138

⁶ Ibid, p. 1

⁷ Eliane De Latour Dejean. “Shadows Nourished By the Sun: Rural Social Differentiation Among the Mawri of Niger” in *Peasants in Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Vol. 4, edited by Martin A. Klein (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1980), p. 126

⁸ Sara Berry. *No Condition is Permanent*, p. 16. Like Berry and others, Michael Levin shows how the development of commercial cocoa and coffee plantations in the Bakosi region of Cameroun created not only smallholder farms but also “allowed the sale of the ‘farm.’” Levin observed records of transactions – including pledging farmlands – between baKosi and non-baKosi. The development of this “vernacular

While these developments may have occurred in the above-mentioned West African societies, circumstances in the Gambia did not lead to the development of rural credit (land) markets. In most Gambian villages, customs continued to forbid the buying and selling of land. It is however important to note that people did not object to land sales so much because of the abundance of land or because of the lack of desire on the part of strangers to own land. There is evidence showing that a sizeable number of individual strangers who wanted land that they can buy but “landlords” were more willing to exploit the landlord-stranger practices which guaranteed them maximum returns while enabling them to keep their land.

The Beginnings, 1830s-1890s

In the decades following the ending of the Atlantic slave trade, Euro-African trade relationship shifted from trading in slaves to trade in “legitimate” goods. For people living along the banks of the Gambia River, this shift meant relying more on agriculture by producing cash crops to sell to Europeans. Throughout the sub region this transformation required social, economic and political adaptation. But scholars believe that, in the Gambia that adaptation and change were relatively smooth.⁹ In fact, the lower Gambia basin is one of the first areas where commercial export agriculture took root and peanuts provided one of the earliest commodities in the West African export

land market,” he claims, brought conflict because tenants often tried to increase the amount owed by paying more until the sum became very difficult to raise and in the end these transactions worked against the marginal smallholders because it led to their losing land permanently. See Michael D. Levin “Export Crops and Peasantization: The Bakosi of Cameroun” in *Peasants in Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Vol. 4, edited by Martin A. Klein (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1980), p. 233 and p. 234

⁹ Swindell and Jeng, *Migrants, Credit and Climate*, p. 4

trade and this was a commercial transformation that preceded the “colonial conquest and one which was extended under colonial rule.”¹⁰

Just within decades after the banning of the slave trade in 1807, cultivation of peanuts on a commercial scale began spreading between 1834 and 1851.¹¹ The original encouragement for the cultivation of peanut came from the [British] who in 1838 received a number of Liberated Africans and gave them an area of land on which to cultivate the nuts.¹² This effort was aided by the Wesleyan Mission which started a “groundnut scheme” on their model farm at MacCarthy Island in 1823.¹³ Few decades after these initiatives were taken Gambians started producing peanuts in large, commercial scale. In short, people living along the banks of the Gambia responded positively to these efforts by clearing more land for the purposes of growing peanuts. Historian George Brooks points to evidence showing that prior to the 1830s peanut cultivation along the Upper Guinea Coast, of which the Gambia was a part, was of negligible importance. In the year 1834, however, 213 baskets of peanuts left the

¹⁰ Ibid, p. xvii

¹¹ George E. Brooks “Peanuts and Colonialism: Consequences of the Commercialization of Peanuts in West Africa, 1830-70” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1975), p. 32; NRS, PUB 11/17 Report of a Socio-Economic Survey of Bathurst and Kombo St. Mary in the Gambia, February 9 1956, p. 121. Although this report was written in the 1950s, its statements about the 1820s were quoted from earlier documentary sources contemporaneous to the 1820s.

¹² Southorn, *The Gambia: The Story of the Groundnut Colony*, p. 184. As early as 1824, the British Commander, Sergeant George Rendall, wrote that “one or two hundred Liberated Africans might be placed under the care of a superintendant (who would be also the Government agent or commandant) at each of the proposed settlements where they would have an opportunity of cultivating the land to such advantage as shortly to relieve government from the expense of their support.” (For more on this, see CSO 1/2 November 1 1824. [The Liberated Africans were called different names. While some referred to them as Liberated Africans, others called them Recaptives. They comprised the enslaved Africans that were freed after the British naval boats that were patrolling the West African coastline caught vessels that were illegally trading slaves after Britain abolished the nefarious trade in 1807].

¹³ In 1833 a grant of six hundred acres of land in MacCarthy Island was made by the British to the Wesleyan missionary society. This land was taken possession of in 1836. In that Rev. Fox employed between thirty to forty Liberated Africans in cultivating and clearing the land. For more see the Parliamentary Papers Reports on the West Coast of Africa. February 3 to August 12 1842, p. 186; CO 87/24, Huntley to Russell, April 22 1840



Gambia for Great Britain, but by the 1850s Gambians were exporting, on average, over 10,000 tons of peanuts a year. By the end of the century, this figure rose to about 30,000 tons a year.¹⁴

Peanut production had become tremendously successful that by the late nineteenth century European observers frequently noted that “the introduction of a cash trade [fueled by the cultivation of peanuts]. . . . in the protectorate, is bearing fruit. It has encouraged the people in the protectorate to plant, and it has attracted people into the protectorate from elsewhere.”¹⁵ For example, as late as 1903, a European observer could write that “the ground nut crop [was] the natives’ only source of revenue”¹⁶

Niumi, Baddibu and Saloum were the earliest areas of peanut cultivation. North bank chiefs were using their slaves and other dependents to produce peanuts as early as the 1840s and 1850s.¹⁷ For example, wealthy individuals and elites seized advantage of the competitive market for peanuts to establish big farms. One of these individuals was the Wolof chief of Sabach-Sanjal, Gumbo Gaye. Oral sources indicate that Gaye had “big” farms scattered in different locations. According to my sources, he had a farm in Numukunda, Kaboji, Paalen, Kumbija and Dibba Kunda.¹⁸ The marabout are the other group of people that exploited the growth of cash crops. As Charlotte Quinn notes, the

¹⁴ Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, pp. 140-141

¹⁵ ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-No. 229 (Annual Report for 1897)

¹⁶ ARP 28/2 Traveling Commissioner’s Report on the South Bank Province, 1903-1927

¹⁷ Swindell and Jeng, *Migrants, Credit and Climate*, p. 9

¹⁸ Alhagie Fafa Jobe, interview by author assisted by Abdoulie Jafuneh, tape recording, Kumbija village, North Bank Region, December 14 2008

wealthiest man in Baddibu by the middle of the nineteenth century was Jatta Jagne, a marabout.¹⁹

In fact, the first peanut farmers were able clear forest because they were members of prominent families that controlled large areas of land. They also had access to labor and many of them consulted marabouts who “healed” the evil forest so that the land can be use. While this was going on, more strangers arriving from areas that are now part of the modern states of Guinea Bissau, Senegal and Mali began settling in the Gambia in large numbers to take advantage of the expanding production and trade in peanuts.

However, this initial development of peanut farming was limited in the south bank region; Foni was principally a rice and “corn” growing area.²⁰ But Kiang and Jarra were also important peanut growing regions. For example, in describing the village of Japenni, located on the south bank of the Gambia in the kingdom of Jarra, French traveler Hyacinte Hecquard noted in the 1850s that Japenni was a strong village whose inhabitants grew “rice, millet, and groundnuts, of which the inhabitants harvest a great quantity, which they sell to the English.”²¹

Changes to Land Tenure: Land and Types of Labor Regimes

In the past, in virtually all Gambian villages, agricultural production was organized around the extended family. The Mandinka called these units *dabadas*. A dabada is a farming household, in which those living and eating together pool their

¹⁹ Charlotte A Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia: Traditionalism, Islam, and European Expansion* (Evanston [Ill.] Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 65

²⁰ Ibid; NRS, CSO 2/94, Laws and Customs of the Jolah, 1906

²¹ Hyacinte Hecquard, *Voyage sur la Cote et dans l'interieur de l'Afrique Occidentale*, 1885, p. 151; David Gamble, *The South Bank of the Gambia*, p. 78

labor and other resources together. Members of the same *dabada* undertook the clearing of farmlands and any other farming activity together. A compound may contain one or more *dabadas*.²² But because the *dabada* was part of the *kabilo*, ultimate authority was in the hands of the *kabilo* head. The *kabilotiyo* often controlled a sizeable labor force; comprising of daughters, wives, sons, grandchildren and slaves.²³ The use of slave and family labor was one of the means that allowed extended families to expand their agricultural activities.²⁴

Typically, slaves worked for their masters five days in the week and according to one report “the remainder of the time he worked for himself.”²⁵ The slave, like other dependents in the family, was also given a plot of land to cultivate on. With this land, the report further noted, “he often manages to save a little money. . . They are treated well on the whole but I am told that the women are worked very hard.”²⁶ But in general

²² Alkalo Dawda Sowe, interview by author, tape recording, Bafuloto Village, North Bank Region, July 23 2006; Musa Konateh, interview by author, tape recording, Bafuloto village, North Bank Region, July 23 2006; Swindell, “Family Farms and Migrant Labour,” p. 4.

²³ The use of slave labor did not ceased with the termination of the slave trade in 1807 by Great Britain. In fact, the transition to “legitimate” trade, which in the Senegambia meant the commercialization of peanut cultivation made slave labor (and other forms of family labor) even more economically desirable. In 1893, Commissioner Ozanne could write that “In the whole of my district every headman has one or more slaves who he feeds but does not cloth . . . The report further noted that “at Kaur where there are more old people than elsewhere they expressed their thanks to your Excellency for not depriving them of their servants in their old age.” The British feared that stopping the slave trade would “upset all the good results likely to be derived by a British protectorate.”[NRS, Banjul, ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898) Travelling Commissioner Reports-North Bank 1893-1932 (60); .Alice Bellagamba “Slavery and Emancipation in the Colonial Archives,” pp. 6, 5-41; Martin A. Klein, “Social and Economic Factors in the Muslim Revolution in the Senegambia” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (1972), p. 434.]

²⁴ John Morgan, *Reminiscences of the Founding of a Christian Mission on the Gambia*. (London: Wesleyan Mission House, 1864), p. 3; ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898) Travelling Commissioner Reports-North Bank 1893-1932 (60)

²⁵ Bellagamba, “Slavery and Emancipation in the Colonial Archives,” p.p. 15-16; ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898) Travelling Commissioner Reports-North Bank 1893-1932 (60)

²⁶ In most cases, however, the slaves failed to win their freedom, at least in the short-term, and kept working in their “own” and their masters’ fields. For instance, Ozanne noted this by noting that slaves rarely had the opportunity of running away. As one report states, “all the Alcaide are interested in stopping them (i.e. the slaves) and returning them to their owners.” [ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-

the labor that most slaves performed was not any different from what other members of the household did. Unmarried women and adult males offered five days of the week in the compound elder's farm. They even worked side by side with slaves belonging to their families.

While some of the sources exaggerate this, it clear that the fabric of the extended family (as well as the servile institution) was increasingly shaken especially at the turn of the twentieth century.²⁷ Clearly, the growth of cash crop farming had accelerated a process whereby members of the same extended family breaks off into smaller units.²⁸ This process is generally described by anthropologists as *land fragmentation* –i.e. the breaking up or shrinking of single plots, either through expropriation or inheritance by multiple heirs.²⁹ It also refers to a development whereby *kabilo* farms were broken up into smaller household units each having its own farmlands.

Just as slaves were asserting their freedom, ambitious young men were increasingly moving out of their father's compound to establish their own (which in Mandinka is commonly referred to as *banjonko*). Some even hive off and relocate to other villages, where they became strange farmers. In describing the migrant farmers, Ozanne wrote that “[Some of these men] leave their father's yards, and go to another

1898) Travelling Commissioner Reports-North Bank 1893-1932 (60); Bellagamba, “Slavery and Emancipation in the Colonial Archives,” p. 21]

²⁷ Bakary Sidebe, interview by author, tape recording, Churchill Town, Serrekunda, August 5 2008.

²⁸ But it is important to note that even though the servile institution was weakening, in many communities the distinctions between (former) slaves and the descendants of their ancient masters continued to remain important in determining access to land in many of these communities. In some villages, such as Kerewan and Saba the former slave-owning families, who claimed ownership of the land tried to prevent ex-slaves and their descendants access to the land. Sheriff Jobarteh interview, Baddibu, Banni Village

²⁹ R. E. Downs and S. P. Reyna (ed.) *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1988), p. 14

town, where they work on the same system as the other strangers.”³⁰ Also, in one of Commissioner Sitwell's reports he stated that among the major reasons why people were pursuing the migrant farming option was to avoid having to support relatives, to save more easily by being away from home, and to pay bride-wealth or to clear debt on return home.³¹ Even some fugitive slaves began using the sorts of agreement that strange farmers were using in order to begin a new life as free people.³²

One of the consequences of this process of hiving off was the acceleration of a process that can be referred to as *land fragmentation*. In fact, documentary sources based on oral traditions collected by a colonial official in the late 1930s and early 1940s states that

As a result of the undue attention to the cultivation of groundnuts at the expense of the koos farms, it is common for the members of [an extended family] to be split up into several groups, each group making its own koos farm. When this happens each group gets the use of what land it requires, every year, from the ‘yard owner’ or (if there is insufficient land, from the owner of some other “yard” in order to plant koos and grow the groundnuts of its individual members. . . [In addition] if the group breaks up and the members scatter, the [ownership] of such land is shared amongst the members. If the members all leave the village the [ownership] of such land reverts to the yard to which the group belonged, though any member of the group or his family or descendants, if they return to the village, have the right to resume exclusive use of such land.³³

But this process of *land fragmentation* or the gradual weakening of elders’ control of family and slave labor due to the “disintegration” of extended families into smaller units did not hinder levels of agricultural productivity. In fact, lineage heads were

³⁰ *Travelling Commissioner Reports-North Bank 1893-1932 (60) ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898]*

³¹ Governor R. B. Llewellyn to Secretary of State for Colonies, CO 87, no. 64 of June 16 1894, Enclosure no. 2. Also cited in Swindell, p. 99

³² Alice Bellagamba, “Slavery and Emancipation in the Colonial Archives,” p. 18

³³ CRN 1/10 Commissioner’s Office South Bank, April 30 1940

presented with another source of labor: migrant labor. With the nominal suppression of the Atlantic slave trade and the growth of peanut production, more migrant farmers began to arrive in the Gambia in search of land. Lower Gambians responded positively. Therefore, it is important to note that control of labor –whether it was the labor offered by male members of an extended family or the labor offered by migrant farmers –were means of land accumulation.³⁴ Individuals and families with access to land can and often used the labor available to them to clear new land.

The Strange Farmers: Labor and Migration

Migrant farmers are described in the literature as seasonal migrants and also as strange farmers. Locally, they are called different names (e.g. *surgas*, *nawetans* etc.). George Brooks cites the first recorded account of this practice, in the governor's annual report for 1848, which shows that the practice was already well-established-less than a dozen years after large- scale commercialization of nuts had commenced. This report noted that

The Sera-Wollies and Telli-Bunkas ... frequently coming from distances of not less than 500 or 600 miles in the interior, and on paying a small custom to the chief of the country in which they settle, are permitted to cultivate the ground under his protection for one or more years, according to their agreement, and to sell the produce to the European merchant or his trader. The greater proportion of the groundnuts exported is raised in this manner. ..³⁵

Also, Ken Swindell writes that the first specific reference to peanuts being cultivated by long-distance migrants is captured in the Annual Report of Governor MacDonnell

³⁴ Swindell and Jeng, *Migrants, Credit and Climate*, p. 84

³⁵ Cited in Brook's "Peanuts and Colonialism," p. 43 and quoted by Colin W. Newbury, 'Prices and Profitability in Early Nineteenth-Century West African Trade', in Claude Meillassoux, ed., *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa* (London, Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1971), p. 96. Newbury cites Bertrand-Bocande (1856), who observed that the seasonal migrations in the Casamance were conducted by individuals who had formerly traded to the coast with wax, ivory, and slaves. Ibid. 96-7 [It might be good to add in this note that "Tillibunka" in Mandinka means "people from the east," or, more literally, "people from the land where the sun rises."]

dated 1848. According to MacDonnell, these migrants, were young men drawn toward the river, where a stay of two or three years cultivating peanuts would enable them to acquire imported goods which could be taken back to their homes some distance inland. These long- distance, periodic movements were also matched by seasonal localized movements of young men working in the peanut sector as clerks and porters.³⁶ In a later report for 1860, Governor D'Arcy also refers to the Serahules (whom he described as a nomadic "tribe" of Mohammedan farmers from Senegambia) as being the principal cultivators of groundnuts along the borders of the river. He mentioned that these Tillibunkas and Serahules often employed the services of their women, children, servants and domestic slaves to cultivate their peanut farms. According to D'Arcy, they were also involved in general trading within Senegambia, which included making speculative purchases of cattle up-river and then driving them into the market at Bathurst. Other migrants from the interior combined farming with hiring themselves out as mercenaries to the several warring factions in Senegambia.³⁷ Swindell further notes that the presence of traders and migrant farmers from the interior is also described in a mid-nineteenth-century report on the state of the French factories and forts in the Casamance. He writes that in this report Bertrand-Bocande provided an interesting gloss on the development of legitimate commerce, and observed that the ending of the trade in slaves provided an incentive for former slavers to develop new forms of enterprise, which they found in the cultivation of peanuts. Bocande commented on the inhabitants from the interior entering into the peanut trade, and on the "caravans de travailleurs"

³⁶ Swindell "Serawoollies, Tillibunkas and Strange Farmers," p. 94

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 94-5

who came into the Casamance in the rainy season to cultivate peanuts on the land around the European trading posts.³⁸

Other sources suggest that many of these migrant farmers were coming from within the banks of the Gambia River: Saloum, Kiang, and Fulladu.³⁹ However, several others came from Pakau, Senegal, Mali and Guinea. Many of these strangers settled on small agricultural villages but several of them also stayed in major towns scattered along the banks of the Gambia River. Commissioner J. H. Ozanne, for example, found that strange farmers were particularly active in and around the wharf towns. He suggests that these migrant farmers cultivated peanuts only and chose towns that were near a wharf.⁴⁰ Many of them lived in Katchang, Kaur, Farafenni, Balinghar and Nianimaru. The border villages of Nokunda and N'Gen Sanjal also had few strangers.⁴¹ Lastly, in November 1892 a family of thirty crossed over and was provided land at Bantang Killing. In one [part of the North Bank] there were 974 farmers, 217 of these rent farms in N'gari's land."⁴²

These migrants comprised of a diverse group –comprising of Fula, Wolof, Masuwanka, and speakers of various Mande dialects. For instance, in one report, the traveling commissioner for the south bank province noted in 1893, “With reference to land and settlement I am pleased to be able to report that the Kabbada people have begun to come over the boundary and that I have given land to the Wongoro people for their town between Januba and Lau Batori, they have already begun to clear the land. I

³⁸ Ibid, p. 95

³⁹ ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898] Travelling Commissioner Reports-North Bank 1893-1932 (60)

⁴⁰ ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898] Travelling Commissioner Reports-North Bank (60)

⁴¹ Swindell, “Serawoollies, Tillibunkas and Strange Farmers,” p. 99

⁴² ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-No. 229 (Annual Report for 1897)

estimate their population from twelve to fourteen hundred and I suspect before long to have remaining towns over-I have an application from . . . to be allowed to move from Kanjuranta to build his town near Jarro[1] for two seasons.”⁴³

Normally, strangers arrived in the region without money and left their families behind. The documentary sources suggest that these migrants generally preferred to return home even though most village elders wanted them to stay. However, there is much oral evidence that hint that many of them settled as “strangers” and were allocated land. I collected several oral sources that explain how strangers who came to the Gambia initially as *surgas* (i.e. migrant farmers), settled down, and many of them marrying local women. By doing so, they acquired land from their host families and bore children that became members of the community. In theory, these migrants became landlords because by marrying into their host’s family they were given farmlands to “feed on.”⁴⁴ Even one report states how in Eliassa, in 1893, a stranger called Lamin wanted to settle in the village. According to this report, Lamin “had been 2 years in the bolong and intended bringing over his father and mother and settling down at Eliassa.”⁴⁵

For people like Lamin, settling involved looking for a good landlord who would take them in hand, give them land to grow cash crops, feed them.⁴⁶ Typically, this landlord held himself responsible for his stranger’s good behavior. Moreover, as part of

⁴³ ARP 28/1- Travelling Commissioner’s Report-South Bank 1893-1899

⁴⁴ Musa Konateh, interview by author, tape recording, Baffuloto Village, North Bank Region, July 23 2006; Haddy Mboob, interview by author, not recorded in audio, Bantang Kiling, Upper Niumi, July 23, 2006.

⁴⁵ ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898) Travelling Commissioner Reports-North Bank (60)

⁴⁶ Ba Saney Bojang, interview by author assisted by Ensa Touray, tape recording, Bakau Sama Kunda, May 26 2008 and Imam Saika Jobe, interview by author, tape recording, Sanchi Paalen, North Bank Region, June 1 2008.

custom, the landlord “supplies the stranger with a farm to work, seed if he has none, and food and receives from the strange farmer two days work per week and one dollar out of every ten that the stranger gets for his crops.”⁴⁷ In other words, a farmer took in a migrant who agreed to work for him for two or three days per week. On the remaining days the stranger would cultivate his own peanuts on a plot of land provided by the host. During his stay, he was loaned tools and given food and lodging within the family compound.⁴⁸

Cooperation between strange-farmers’ and their hosts was, therefore, always necessary because of the power landlords had in providing access to land remained strong.⁴⁹ Hence, relationship between the landlord and the stranger was more than a simple economic agreement. It was on a person-to-person basis. Among most West African groups prospective tenants were to be accepted only if they were “well-mannered,” not “ungrateful,” “honest” and “likeable.” Compatibility was, therefore, important since in some instances the tenant’s household will become virtually a part of his landlord’s household. While the stranger had obligations to his landlord, the latter too had obligations towards the former. He was often regarded as a “father-figure,” which means that an unmarried tenant frequently looked to his landlord for help in amassing the bride-wealth necessary for marriage, for advice, and for mediation in the event of a dispute. Should the tenant need material assistance (e.g. food and seeds) in a

⁴⁷ Musa Konateh, interview by author, tape recording, Bafuloto Upper Niumi, July 23 2006.

⁴⁸ Governor R. B. Llewellyn to Secretary of State for Colonies, CO 87, no. 64 of June 16 1894, Enclosure no. 2. Also cited in Swindell, “Migrant Groundnut Farmers in the Gambia,” pp. 452-472; Swindell, “Family Farms and Migrant Labour,” pp. 3-17; Swindell, “Serawoollies, Tillibunkas and Strange Farmers,” pp. 93-104

⁴⁹ Swindell, “Migrant Groundnut Farmers in the Gambia,” pp. 452-472; Swindell, “Family Farms and Migrant Labour,” pp. 3-17; Swindell, “Serawoollies, Tillibunkas and Strange Farmers,” pp. 93-104

bad year, he could ask his landlord for help. This was like a contract because should any party to the agreement die, his successor, as family head, must renew the arrangement.

Yet, this type of landlord-stranger relationship ensured that the stranger worked for his landlord and paid him ten percent of his produce. For instance, in one of Sitwell's reports for 1893, where he explained to Governor Llewellyn what he had learned of the Strange Farmer system, he observed that generally hosts would give a stranger as much land as he required, in return for which the host took ten percent of the stranger's crop at the end of the season.⁵⁰ Another report noted that even in Jola communities, a "strange farmer pays his landlord something, but it is not a recognized thing like the "laginar" of the Mandingoes."⁵¹ This is a major change in local systems of land tenure. Unlike before, this form of arrangement enabled household heads –not just the Alkalos and chiefs –to charge "rent" to other people using their land. In fact, one report, noted that this is "the only way in which land is leased."⁵² But even though landlords often collected "rents" from their *dependents*, for fear of losing their control of land, these landlords refused to sell their land to stranger-groups desiring to settle permanently.⁵³ This, however, did not bother many migrant-farmers because the arrangements they made often worked for them as well.

When the British finally took over the administration of the Gambia in the 1890s, they also introduced a local tax which strange farmers had to pay. Because of this, colonial officials, like Sitwell, the Commissioner for the South Bank, worked hard

⁵⁰ Governor R. B. Llewellyn to Secretary of State for Colonies, CO 87, no. 64 of 16 June 1894, Enclosure no. 2.

⁵¹ NRS, CSO 2/94-The Laws and Customs of the Jolah, 1906 [South Bank Province]

⁵² NRS, CSO 2/94-The Laws and Customs of the Mandingoes of the North Bank, 1906.

⁵³ NRS, CSO 2/94-The Laws and Customs of the Various Communities in West Africa, 1906

to encourage “strange farmers to settle in his district.”⁵⁴ Strange farms were now required to pay rents to the government. For example, in 1894 alone, only £130 had been collected in kind from Strange Farmer rents, half of which was returned to the Alkalos, and nothing had been collected from the indigenous farmers.⁵⁵

Similarly, in 1894 Governor Llewellyn proposed a hut (yard) tax. This was formalized in an Ordinance passed in 1895 whereby owners of yards with up to five adults who were over sixteen years were to pay four shillings per annum, which included the right to cultivate a farm. Additional adults who were members of the family were to be charged at one shilling each. The strange farmers were also brought within the Ordinance and had to pay two shillings each to the government, not to the Alkalos, though their food and lodging was to be a separate and private agreement with their hosts. These taxes were to be collected by the Alkalos and handed on to the commissioners, who at their discretion could return up to half the amount.

The Alkalos continued to perform their customary duties, which includes settling disputes, collecting fines and keeping a small tax from strangers leasing “village lands.” But they continued to perform these duties by consulting with *Kabilo* heads. As one report notes, “if any stranger wished to settle there, the headmen [i.e. Alkalos] held a consultation [with *kabilo* elders] as to the quantity of land that can be spared.”⁵⁶ Another similar report also noted that if a stranger desired to settle in his host

⁵⁴ Governor R. B. Llewellyn to Secretary of State for the Colonies, CO 87, no. 49 of 1 July 1893, Enclosure no. 1. Also cited in Swindell, p. 99

⁵⁵ Governor R. B. Llewellyn to Secretary of State for the Colonies, CO 87, no. 64 of 16 June 1894.

⁵⁶ ARP 28/1- Traveling Commissioner’s Report-South Bank 1893-1899

settlement, “the people in [the] town held a meeting . . . and decide what quantity of the outlying land can be handed over to them.”⁵⁷

Just as individuals were involved in these sorts of migrations, the movements sometimes involved families and entire villages. Some families often found relocating to another town or area more advantageous than remaining in their hometowns. Another reason is that peanut growers wanted not only good land, but land where access to the river (for transporting peanuts to market) was easier, and once they got that land, they wanted to reserve it for their offspring.

In the late nineteenth century the Fatty family left the village of Katchang, in Baddibu, to settle on a land located along the Suara Creek. Under its leader, a man named Fatty, the family founded the town of Kerewan.⁵⁸ But this family did not give up its ownership of the land in Katchang. It left the land under the custodianship the Alkalo of Katchang to rent out as he liked.⁵⁹ But according to local customs, the Fatty family had rights to lay claims on that land and it will be returned.⁶⁰ Commissioner Ozanne acknowledged it was not uncommon for a land-owning family to move to another place.

⁵⁷ ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-No. 229 (Annual Report for 1897)

⁵⁸ Travelling Commissioner Reports-North Bank 1893-1932 (60) ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898)

⁵⁹ But the Alkalo and elders of Kerewan were always called in when a new Alkalo had to be appointed in Katchang and in order to entrust “the new Alcaide or another man was appointed to let the Fati lands.” When Ozanne appointed the new Alkalo and left the town of Katchang, the Kerewan Alkalo sent his messenger to approve the appointment and gave the new Alkalo charge of the Fati lands.

⁶⁰ However, a dispute occurred because the Alkalo of Katchang gave a piece of these lands to his brother who had cleared it, and got it ready for planting and refused to return it to its legitimate owners. In the end the commissioner decided not to divide up the Fati lands. Ibid. In 1893, the commissioner reported another dispute involving land in the village of Suwareh Kunda. In his report, he states that the Alkalo of Suwarehkunda had sent one of his wives to work a farm belonging to Tendito. [Tendito was a village in Baddibu that no longer exists]. The woman was subsequently expelled out of the land. NRS ARP 28/1 Traveling Commissioner’s Report South Bank Vol. II 1893-98. In fact, according to the report, this dispute started when the people of Suwareh Kunda were claiming to get back some of the rice fields at Tendito which belonged to their ancestors and was taken away from them during the war with Biram Ceesay, a warrior in the North Bank.

Around the same time entire families were also relocating to areas closer to the river or to major roads so as to have easy access to areas where they could market their peanuts. Many families moved to towns like “Bambali, Tamtenda, and Kunjata [because these locations had] wharfs [supporting other towns in the] peninsula . . . [towns such as] Kumbija and Sarrakunda.”⁶¹

In order to take advantage of proximity to the river and/or the roads, sometimes a whole village could move. In other instances, as Charlotte Quinn notes, bigger villages tended to hive off, forming separate communities, often at a considerable distance from the parent settlement because of bitter rivalries over succession of leadership or because of the need for more land.⁶² For instance, in the north bank, as Commissioner Ozanne observed in the 1890s, that “The Alcaide, Almani and nearly all the people have left Panchang and made a new town (Makka or New Panchang), not far from the wharf,” writes the travelling commissioner. “Altogether the New Panchang is a decided improvement on the old one, and the people seem happy and content. The traders at the wharf were doing a good business in the French protectorate having come to trade with the chief in charge, who allowed them to trade with Parti and the neighboring towns.”⁶³

In short, in the lower Gambia region, people responded to the global market for peanuts to the extent that by the late nineteenth century Commissioner Ozanne could write that “the introduction of a cash trade, instead of barter, in the protectorate, is bearing fruit. It has encouraged the people in the protectorate to plant, and it has

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p.24.

⁶³ NRS, ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898] Travelling Commissioner Reports-North Bank (60)

attracted people into the protectorate from elsewhere.”⁶⁴ However, it is important to note that this development coincided with more intense islamization in the region. As Quinn writes, the numbers of the strangers who flooded into the Gambia states, and who raised over a third of the groundnut crop along the river were fervent Muslims from the Senegal River valley.⁶⁵

Now with more sources of labor available to the Alkalos and lineage heads – who had control over extensive acres of land – more land was brought under cultivation. This implies that “new” and “dangerous” lands were cleared and rights over its ownership established by individuals or families that were thought to have drove the spirits out from these lands.⁶⁶ Consequently, the success cannot be attributed to the desire of material benefits alone. Even if material desires pushed several ambitious people to clear more land and attracted more dependents, the process of clearing more forest was done by strictly respecting spiritual guidelines.

Conquering of the Evil Forest: Belief in Spiritual Power

Certainly, lower Gambian landlords were able to host the thousands of migrant farmers settling into their villages and growing peanuts in large quantities largely because of the existence of a class of people believed to have the ability to “conquer” spirit lands. This made it possible for powerful families and communities to clear more forests and use it the land for agricultural purposes. In the mid-nineteenth century marabouts performed this role. Through their maraboutic works (spiritual undertakings

⁶⁴ NRS, Banjul, ARP 32 [Vol. 1 North Bank 1893-1898) Traveling Commissioner Reports- 1893-1932 (60)

⁶⁵ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 65

⁶⁶ Confidential Dispatch from Governor of Sierra Leone, Douglas Jardine, to the Secretary of State for Colonies, April 1940

to heal the land) many communities were now able to exploit previously uncultivated forests. These Muslim leaders came into the region increasingly in the late nineteenth century and made Islam the dominant faith and practice in the Gambia basin. They attracted a major source of labor which helped to boost the production of peanuts – which is the labor offered by Quranic students. There are several examples of how these played out on both sides of the banks of the Gambia.

In the Gambia before 1860, the possibilities of residential Quranic study was limited. As Swindell and Jeng notes, there were only a few pockets of Islamic teaching to which students were attracted. However, there were flourishing areas of Islamic teaching across the north bank especially in Niimi and Baddibu.⁶⁷ Not surprisingly, peanut cultivation first took off in these areas. But evidence from the northern bank of the lower Gambia shows that the availability of new land cleared or “conquered” by the actions of marabouts facilitated the expansion of peanut production. According to local beliefs, this development was made possible by the lead that several of the lower Gambian marabouts took by “conquering” the spirit lands which were believed to have been inhabited by spirits. They either led the settlement into these areas or gave permission and spiritual protection to individuals that they authorized to clear such lands.

As mentioned earlier both Muslims and non-Muslims believed in spirits and the ability of hunters and marabout to be in charge of them. Like hunters, marabouts were associated with possessing knowledge that gives them to influence or control portions

⁶⁷ Swindell and Jeng, *Migrants, Credit and Climate*, p. 55

of the spiritual world.⁶⁸ As religious specialists, they prepared amulets for people and individuals and advised people – elites as well as non-elite groups – which lands to annex or settle on. For example, oral traditions indicate that when *mansa* Demba Koto of Niimi wanted to settle on Jinak Barra (an island near the Atlantic coast), before the nineteenth century, he had acted along with his marabout's advise.⁶⁹ In addition, marabouts like Sanyang Bafuloto Saidu who settled in Gunjur sometime in the late nineteenth century also extended their services to strangers and common people. Furthermore, people believed that he was able to identify a *jinne* (in Wolof, *Jinno* in Mandinka) even if it appears in a human form. Oral traditions claim that when the “jinn elders in Gunjur” sent two of their members to confirm whether Saidu was a “great marabout” he was able to spot them out with relative ease.⁷⁰ Also, elders claim that the village of Sanchi Pallen in Gambia's Saloum district was founded by a Wolof man from Kajor named Ebrima Faal. According to one informant, “The village of Pallenba was recommended by a marabout to Ebrima Faal when the place was a big jungle.”⁷¹

In other instances, marabouts looking for land where they could settle were allocated some of these “not-so-ideal” locations. This is because to take a noted marabout to a known *jinn* habitation and to tell him that this was the only available place where he could live, would seem to be as good a way as any to get rid of him, since his host probably thought the marabout would refuse to live there after he found

⁶⁸ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 55

⁶⁹ Unus Jatta, interview by Donald R. Wright, Berending, September 7, 1974. In Interview in Wright's “Oral traditions From the Gambia” Vol. 1, p. 38

⁷⁰ Alhagie Bai Conteh, “History of Sanyang Bafuloto Saidu,” interview by NCAC staff, tape recording, Brikama Kombo Central, October, 25, 1976. trans. available at the RDD collection in Fajara asTape Catalogue # 621.

⁷¹ Pa Modou Faal, interview by author assisted by Abdoulie Jafuneh, tape recording, Sanchi Pallen, North Bank Region, December 14 2008.

out what it was. Marabouts were dangerous people to offend by outright refusal. Consequently, as it occurred in Saba, the people went through the forms of hospitality and offered what he had requested: a place to live. If he chose not to live there that was his own affair. Unfortunately for them, Jane Kinteh was a very able marabout and was therefore able to clear the area of dangerous inhabitants and to build a town where he lived peacefully.

In the 1970s, an informant, Seedia Darboe, narrated to Donald Wright the history of the Darboe clan came to settle in the Gambia region. In that interview Seedia claimed that had moved to the Gambia basin after establishing the settlements of Pakao and Tendindi in Kaabu. When they arrived they established the villages of Dobo, near Bansang in Central River Region, Dumbutu, in Kiang, and Dasilami, in Jarra. The informant further claimed that his ancestors came to the Gambia because they wanted land where they could settle, farm and trade. The decisions of where they settled along the Gambia's River banks are, however, attributed to some mythical events in the past. For example, the Darboe claim that when their elder came to the Gambia region it was an animal (or a mystical figure) that helped him determine where he would settle.⁷²

Oral traditions indicate how the village of Bambally moved from its previous location to where it is presently standing because "the place became very hot. Many people were dying and frequent fire disasters occurring almost every seven years. It was during the leadership of Kebba Momodou, a close friend of the Mandinka marabout Sheriff Malign, that permission for the relocation of the village was granted. Sheriff assured them that if the village is relocated to the site he proposed, its size would extend

⁷² Seedia Darboe, Sanyang, interview by Donald R. Wright, Niimi, December 27, 1974. Interview in Wright's "Oral traditions From the Gambia" Vol. 1, pp. 28-29

up to the river and overlooking hills.”⁷³ Moreover, an elder in Medina Bafuloto told me that their village is in its second site.

There seems to be a coincidence between the growing numbers of marabouts and the expansion of peanut cultivation in the Gambia. This is because, many of the villages that were established between 1850 to 1900 have oral traditions that claimed that a marabout either established that village or gave them permission to settle there. Many of these traditions also claim that the sites of most of the villages were once homes of spirits. In other words, these traditions points to developments at the turn of the twentieth century, which brought major changes in the lower Gambia region.

The period saw the relocation of Masamba Koke Jobe to Niumi from the lower Senegal valley. While the British regarded him as a non-Muslim (or *Soninke*), the oral traditions refer to him as a “great marabout” and every year a *ziyara* (a religious gathering to commemorate the life of an individual Sufi clerics) is held in Bantang Kiling in his honor and remembrance. His true religious affiliation therefore is not clear to me. Nevertheless, Masamba Koke’s story in Niumi is valuable because it sheds light on the changes and continuities on this important aspect of the peoples’ belief-system (i.e. the belief in spirits and “spirit” lands). As a Wolof from the lower Senegal River, he came to Niumi during the time when Mansa Demba Sonko of Berending was ruling Niumi. The traditions claim that Masamba was a warrior and a relative of Latjoor Jobe from the Wolof state of Kayor.⁷⁴ It is claimed that he initially came to the Gambia to secure ammunition for his brother, Latjoor, from the British. Although I have not found

⁷³ Arfang Sainey Sanneh-Darboe, interview by author, tape recording, Bambally Village, North Bank Region, December 15, 2008.

⁷⁴ Alhagie Mangkodou Sarr, interview by author, tape recording, Kerr Cherno Village, Upper Niumi, June 13, 2006 and August 17 2008. Mangkodou was born in Bantang Killing and is the eldest male descendant of Masamba Koki.

this in any of the documentary sources, I believe the date of his arrival was in the mid 1800s. Certainly, Latjoor was *Bur Kajoor* as late as the 1860s. Also, given the fact that we know when Demba Sonko was Niimi's Mansa, it is possible to speculate on Masamba's arrival in Niimi. The English sources indicate that Demba Sonko became Niimi's *mansa* around 1834 and died in 1864.

My informants further told me that Masamba was accompanied by another brother of his, Sayerr Jobe. Once they arrived in the Gambia Masamba went to Niimi and Sayerr proceeded to Bathurst Island (now Banjul) where he later left to establish the settlement of Serrekunda. When Masamba arrived in Berending, the sources further claim, he was hosted by the *mansa*. At their meeting, Masamba asked Mansa Demba if he could allocate him land where he could settle. The *mansa* agreed but sent him to Tubab Kolong where he met the elders who showed him the land at *Banta*. At that time, the *Bantang Kiling* forest, which was situated between the villages of Albreda and Lamin, was believed to be the home of dangerous spirits and devils. But Masamba set up his village there, fought with the *jinns* and managed to drive them across the river to the town of Mandinari in Kombo. He put various forms of spells in bottles and buried them in the ground and offered sacrifices to not only ward-off the evil spirits but to fight them as well. Shortly after he settled there, his village began to prosper. He cultivated rice, tendered livestock, and attracted more strangers to settle there. Ultimately, conflict broke out between Masamba and Tubab Kolong. According to my informants the conflict arose when the Mandinka asked Masamba to return the land that was given to him presumably on the grounds that it was merely lent to him. Masamba declined, telling the elders of Tubab Kolong that he had "conquered" the land by driving away

the spirits and made it a habitable settlement for human beings.⁷⁵ For that reason, he emphasized, the land was his personal property, and not the property of Tubab Kolong. This, according to my informants, was one of the major reasons why the Mandinka went to “war” with Masamba Koke.

Two historians have mentioned aspects of this “war” between Masamba and his neighboring Mandinka communities. Writing in the 1940s, John Gray noted how one of Maba’s generals, Amara Faal, based in Tubab Kolong, raided Masamba Koke’s village.⁷⁶ In trying to defend his village, Masamba benefitted from the friendship and protection offered by the British. In return, he was appointed “headman of this portion of the Ceded Mile” – i.e. Bantang Kiling, which was renamed Fitzgerald town.⁷⁷ With Masamba as a trusted ally, in 1862, the British decided to resettle nearly 2000 refugees who fled the fighting between the Muslims and the *Soninke* in the Sine-Saloum region where Maba was busy fighting a jihad. Initially, these refugees settled in the towns of Barra and Kanuma (near the Atlantic coast). Also, as Charlotte Quinn states, that same year Gambia’s Governor d’Arcy gave him some of the cattle which Muslim invaders from Baddibu (Rip) had taken from the Niumi *mansa*’s herds. Masamba in return supplied the British settlement with fresh meat from his farm near Albreda.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Haddy Mboob, interview by author, not tape recorded, Bantan Kiling, Upper Niumi District, July 23, 2006; Alhagie Mangkodou Sarr, interview by author, tape recording, Medina Bafuloto, Upper Niumi, June 13 2006.

⁷⁶ In 1826, Mansa Demba Sonko’s predecessor, Burangia Sonko, had ceded much of Nuimi to the British in return for annual custom. So much of this area was already part of the “Ceded Mile” under the control of the British crown. The 1826 treaty therefore gave the British the right to appoint its representatives in Niumi.

⁷⁷ John Gray, *A History of the Gambia* (London, Frank Cass, 1966), p. 427

⁷⁸ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 135

But being Wolof and a *Soninke*, as Gray states, Masamba found it difficult to exercise any authority in the district.⁷⁹ Fighting was renewed in 1866 when Marabouts attacked Masamaba's village. Both Gray and Quinn state that the British responded by sending a colonial steamer, which "fired rockets over the marabout towns of Sika, Juffure, Albreda and Lamin until their populations fled into the bush."⁸⁰

Apart from this, Masamba's story lacks any historical treatment in spite of the fact that his tale could provide a window for understanding spiritual power as it relates to land. It could also shed light on some of the factors that shaped local attitudes and beliefs towards land ownership especially in a rapidly changing political and social environment. From the 1820s and 1830s, Islam and European intervention in the local politics and economy of the lower Gambia region were already intensifying. The marabouts and English administrators were no doubt the most influential actors in shaping lower-Gambian political and social life. The importance of the English (who were mostly based in Bathurst and British Kombo) was growing in prominence. They had acquired Bathurst Island in 1816 and installed an Administrator who managed the English settlement on the Island. They also acquired the "Ceded Mile" – that portion of Niumi's land that Mansa Burangia Sonko (Demba Sonko's predecessor) ceded to the British in 1826. Also, in 1830-31 Burangia Sonko went to war with the British; McCarthy Island was settled in 1827 and British Kombo (comprising Cape St. Mary) was acquired by 1840. From this time onwards the English were increasingly interfering in local matters (including land) by taking sides in African conflicts.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 427

⁸⁰ Gray, *A History of the Gambia*, p. 427 and Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 135

More importantly, however, the impact of islamization also at the turn of the twentieth century has gradually challenged some of the preexisting beliefs in spirits and “spirit” lands. For instance, oral traditions claimed that a Toranka Muslim, Cherno Mohammadu Jallow, from Futa Toro, came to settle in Niumi probably around the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth century. As a stranger and a marabout, he was hosted by the elders of Jurunku (an old Mandinka village in Niumi) who gave him land where he could set up his own village. According to the tradition I collected in Niumi, the Marabout toured Jurunku’s forest and saw “a good location for his village” even though the *farro* was the home of a wicked dragon called *ninki nanka*. But because of his knowledge and spiritual power, it is believed, the marabout drove the *ninki nanka* away into the river. He also drove the notorious spirits that were in forests of Nambu, Bangali and for many years successfully cultivated parts of *Jumankari*. Upon successfully defeating the spirits, however, he began focusing on teaching the Quran and proselytizing. He attracted a lot of students and followers in his village, which he named Medina Bafuloto.⁸¹ Building on his legacy, one of his sons, Alhagie Cherno Baba Jallow, succeeded in strengthening the reputation of Medina Bafuloto as a center of Islamic education. In fact, an English source dating to the 1920s cited Medina as an important center of Islamic education.⁸²

By this time, Medina Bafuloto was in fact not the only marabout settlement in Niumi. Other Muslim communities included Medina Serign Mass, Aljamdu, and Medina Seedia. In fact, some of these “centers” of Islam predated Medina Bafuloto and

⁸¹ Medina Bafuloto is commonly known as Sarreh (Keur in Wolof) Cherno – meaning the village of Marabouts. The village gained much of its popularity during Alhagie Baba Jallow’s reign (c.1905-1992). The religious symbolism of this village is today celebrated in the form of Mawlud Nabis and Ziyaras. The religious family of Kerr Cherno and their followers are all Tijanis.

⁸² NRS, ARP32/33, Annual Report for the North Bank, 1921, p. 37.

they all signify the rapid religious transformations that were taking place in Niumi at that time. Evidently, the area was increasingly becoming incorporated into the *Dar al-Islam*. One of the effects of this growth of Islam was that gradually the marabouts trained more disciples who felt that they could confront these spirits. As one informant told me, the youngest *talibe* (i.e. student) always felt fortified against the spirits by using various components of the Quran.⁸³ Although my oral sources have not highlighted this, it is also possible that a sizeable segment of the Muslim community were beginning to question the idea of the power of spirits and associating it with apostasy – a major sin in Islam. Of course, Islam did not overturn all preexisting beliefs. While the growth of Islam significantly brought numerous changes in the way in which the people utilized their land, like non-believers of Islam, many Muslims continued to hold some beliefs on the power of *jinn*s and the tendency for them to live in certain forests. For example, even though a number of Muslims would clear portions of land previously thought of as “spirit lands,” most did so after seeking help from “powerful” Muslim clerics. Also, many Muslims would bury powerful charms on their land and wear amulets (or charms) for protection against the evil spirits. Others became cautious of the time they would go to the fields and still others avoided felling trees likely to be the habitat of these spirits. However, these are also evidence of islamization at work.

Because of their role as teachers, mystics and religious leaders, marabouts tended to have a sizeable following whose labor they often enjoyed. For example, a report in the 1890s noted that “at Suarakunda there were 20 strangers from Pakau who had come to that town to study under the Almami. They were cultivating a small portion

⁸³ Alkalo Dawda Sowe, interview by author, tape recording, Bafuloto, Baffuloto village, Upper Niumi district, July 23, 2006 and Imam Alhagie Momodou Lamin Bah, interview by author, tape recording, Serrekunda, June 30 2006.

of land to support themselves and the Alcaide wished to know if he were to charge them rent.”⁸⁴ Although this source points to the late nineteenth century, it describes a process that began before that period. Oral traditions claimed that the marabouts of Kerr Mama, Medina Serign Mass, Medina Seedia, Aljamdu, and Baddibu Daru had numerous *talibes* (Quranic students) who worked and studied under their marabouts, working in their master’s fields, growing the cash crop, when they were not going about their learning.⁸⁵

The labor that these students offered enabled marabouts to farm large areas of land. In so doing, they accumulated wealth and power and in turn used that to attract more dependents.⁸⁶ The wealth derived from these various sources was such that the principal leaders were (apparently at least) in a position to save, to amass and invest capital on a substantial scale and thus consolidate their economic dominance. Moreover, hard work, especially in the fields, is believed to have moral and religious importance in so far it keeps the mind and body away from temptation.⁸⁷ Work performed in the service of a Shaiyhk was regarded as an offering to God, through the founder of the brotherhood.⁸⁸

Even as the nineteenth century progressed, Islam took a firmer hold in areas that were even barely touched by the religion. For example, as Swindell and Jeng writes, by

⁸⁴ Ibid, Reported by Commissioner Ozanne, 16th June 1893

⁸⁵ Dawda Sowe, interview by author, tape recording, Bafuloto Village, July 23 2006 and Imam Alagie Momodou Lamin Bah, interview by author, tape recording, Serrekunda, June 30 2006

⁸⁶ The Quranic schools under the marabouts tended to embark on economic schemes. For example, Donal B. Cruise O’Brien shows that Mouride power was based on the brotherhood’s active participation in the economic life of modern Senegal through the use of *talibe* labor among other things. The brotherhood’s principal leaders had become the biggest individual producers of groundnuts and landowners in Senegal. These notables controlled vast estates, of many thousand acres in certain cases, on which their young followers worked (with little or no immediate remuneration) in collective farms (called *daras*) Donal B. Cruise O’Brien, *The Mourides of Senegal: The Political and Economic Organization of an Islamic Brotherhood* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1971), pp. 2-3

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 90

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 91

1880 the marabouts of the south bank had formed chiefdoms which provided an emergent focus for *talibes*, who became an important source of labor in the peanut fields of their teachers.⁸⁹ Other marabout settlements that had many *talibes* among others were the villages of Siikunda and Barrow Kunda. As Quinn writes, students at these schools worked hard, tending the master's fields and his cattle by day, and studying at night or before dawn. She further states that the parents of each child were charged as much as a slave or a horse for his tuition, and the pupil could be kept at work on the marabout's farm until the fee was paid. In return the teacher was supposed to provide board and room for his students.⁹⁰

The growth of Islam coincided with the development of peanut production and growth in population due to the immigration of seasonal farmers into the Gambia basin. Gradually, Niimi's forest began to disappear in part because "strange-farmers" began arriving in significant numbers in search of farmland where they could grow peanuts and take advantage of the competitive British market for peanuts. While in Niimi, they would seek a landlord, who gave them land, food, and lodging for the rainy season. In return, the strange-farmer would provide his landlord with five days of labor on his farm and paid taxes to the village Alkalo.⁹¹

Lastly, since defeating the spirits meant a defeat for the environment, a major devastation to the natural environment followed the expansion of peanut production. Deforestation was occurring due to the clearing of new land. As mentioned in an 1884

⁸⁹ Swindell and Jeng, *Migrants, Credit and Climate*, p. 55; Annual Report, 1888.

⁹⁰ Quinn, *Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia*, p. 56

⁹¹ For more on the strange-farmers, see the works Kenneth Swindell. "Migrant Groundnut Farmers in the Gambia," pp. 452-472; Kenneth Swindell. "Family Farms and Migrant Labour," pp. 3-17; Ken Swindell, "Serawoollies, Tillibunkas and Strange Farmers," pp. 93-104

report, there was already a problem of exhausted soils because “everything is taken out of the ground, comparatively nothing is put into it. Impoverished soil[s] . . . have of late years affected the quality of the groundnut crop.”⁹²

Conclusion

In sum, the development of commercial agriculture had far-reaching consequences in lower Gambian societies. In fact, cash cropping was a major factor that contributed in altering land relations in the Gambia River valley. It was a development that served as a catalyst for the growth of seasonal, migrant labor in most of West Africa. In the Gambia basin, as elsewhere, migrant-farmers looking for land came in significant numbers from northern Senegal, Mali and Guinea Bissau to settle along the banks of the Gambia River –some temporarily and others more or less permanently.

The periodic movements of African populations was part of the indigenous response to the opportunities offered by the trade in groundnuts following the decline of the Atlantic slave trade and this continued well into the twentieth century with the establishment of colonial rule in the Gambia. This “old” practice of landlord-stranger relationships were recreated and developed to meet the needs of both the migrant-farmers and their landlords. Consequently, as Kenneth Swindell demonstrates for the Gambia, the migrant farmers helped in the early development of the peanut trade in the 1840s following the decline of the Atlantic slave trade.

The presence of migrant farmers within Gambia region led to the development of a complex set of arrangements between migrants and their hosts, which also involved

⁹² Cited in PUB 11/17-Report of Socio-Economic Survey of Bathurst and Kombo St. Mary in the Gambia, February 9 1956.

village headmen, *kabilo* heads, and eventually the British authorities. In many villages strange farmers were “renting” land from the Alkalos and *kabilo* heads. Colonial reports not only stressed the importance of strangers in the peanut revolution, but also noted that strangers were hiring land from the local chiefs, by “paying custom[s]”⁹³ In other words, many reports mentioned the practice whereby strangers paid their landlords a share of their groundnut crop at the end of the season.⁹⁴

But as landlords were seeking the services of migrant farmers, their control over the labor of the extended family was weakening. This was true in many places. In fact, the growth of cash cropping had a major impact in *kabilo* property. In many places it led to a process several scholars described as land *fragmentation*. It also served as a catalyst for the clearing of previously uncultivated or unused forest for the cultivation of peanuts. But it argues that this process was facilitated by the continuing but more intense islamization of the Gambia region.

While the growth of peanut production had increased the demand for agricultural land, in the lower Gambia region, it did not create a market for land in most Gambian villages. Both documentary and oral sources about the lower Gambia region reveal that lower Gambian customs forbid individuals and groups to buy and sell land. Although new avenues were created for people to rent land, they could not sell it. Instead, they exploited the old landlord-stranger relationship which enabled heads of landowning families to attract labor and charge rents for the strangers’ use of their land.

Finally, among the most important arrivals were marabouts who led their communities into clearing land that were previously thought to belong to *jinn*s and

⁹³ Annual Report, Governor MacDonnell. 1848

⁹⁴ Annual Report, 1851. Also cited in Swindell, p. 98

spirits and established vast farmlands where they produced peanuts. In doing so, these marabouts became prominent landlords, distributing land to people settling in their villages including their students and followers. From roughly 1830 onwards, peanut growers wanted not only good land, but land that was close to the river to facilitate the shipping of their export crop. In spite of the violence accompanying the tensions between *Soninke* and marabout, peanut production grew steadily.

Chapter Five

The Crown Colony and Protectorate Areas: Changes and Continuity in Land Tenure in the Colonial Era, c. 1880s-1920s

By the time a British administration was finally established in the Gambia sometime around the 1890s, the distinction between public and private forms of ownership were getting increasingly blurred. People living in the area ever more began to recognize aspects of both individual and private property rights. This is because lands that were previously controlled by family groupings were increasingly being fragmented. However, as the previous chapters show, the beginning of these changes predated the establishment of colonial rule. Yet, too often, historians assume that the process of *land fragmentation* only began in Africa around the time of the onset of colonial rule, when Europeans brought their notions of property rights based on the notion of private property.¹

Indeed, as John Bruce notes, in many parts of Africa colonialism and the adoption of Western property law quickened the pace of changes in land tenure by intensifying the process of *land fragmentation*.² However, in the Gambia, most of this change affected the urban areas and the wharf towns –which were often part of the

¹ For example, among these historians include Anthony Hopkins who argues that colonialism created a class of land owners [who bought into] British ideas of property [ownership]. Another is Jack Glazier whose study traces the development of privatization of land among the Mbeere of Kenya. Through a process of privatizing land, he argues, the colonial government sought to eliminate customary kinship constraints on land use, sale, and development. Under the new arrangement, each farmer would hold a consolidated piece of land that he could call his own. For Hopkins and Glazier, therefore, colonialism brought about a major transformation in ideas of ownership. For more, see Antony G. Hopkins “Property Rights and Empire Building: Britain's Annexation of Lagos, 1861,” *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1980), p. 797 and Jack Glazier, *Land and the Uses of Tradition Among the Mbeere of Kenya* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), pp. 1-2

² John Bruce, “A Perspective on Indigenous Land Tenure Systems and Land Concentration” in R. E. Downs and S. P. Reyna (ed.) *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1988), p. pp. 31-32

Colony. Lands in these areas were declared Crown land.³ Here, both Africans and non-Africans were usually given the opportunity to hold land under such tenures. But it is misleading to assume that British notion of freehold ownership was adopted and enforced across the Gambia region. In most Gambian villages, access to land continued to be determined by local factors, even where the state regarded itself as proprietor of the land.⁴ It is equally misleading to assume that processes of *land fragmentation* only began in the twentieth century with the onset of colonialism. This chapter highlights the contradictions in colonial land policies in the Gambia and shows the changes and continuity in land tenure in the colonial setting.

Government Legislations and the Expansions of Colonial Authority, c. 1840s-1914

A. Colonial Land Legislations

In order to examine the impact of colonial policies on local systems of land tenure, it is important to describe the steady expansion of the colonial rule across the length and breadth of the Gambia basin. Prior to the late nineteenth century, British authority in the Gambia was limited to its control of the Island of St. Mary, the “Ceded” Mile, Cape St. Mary and Georgetown. Kombo was acquired by the English in the 1840s and in 1862 the colonial administration passed the Kombo Militia Ordinance. That same year, a civil officer was appointed with the title of Manager and British Kombo remained under his supervision until the abolition of the post in 1903.⁵ The

³ Ibid, p. 23

⁴ John Bruce, “A Perspective on Indigenous Land Tenure Systems and Land Concentration” in R. E. Downs and S. P. Reyna (ed.) *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1988), 23

⁵ Annual Report for 1862; Colonel D’Arcy to Duke of Newcastle, August 24 1861 and July 24 1862; Annual Report for 1903 and John Gray, *A History of the Gambia*, p. 482

ordinance provided for the raising of a volunteer reserve force, the members of which were to “receive a free grant of land at Hamilton Town and Albert Town conditional upon the performance of twelve days’ annual training and serving during times of emergency.”⁶ In short, military service was an important determinant for securing tenure of any land, which might be allocated to a newcomer. Even though most of the settlers in these settlements were not Africans, they lived side by side with a number of “Mandingoes and other indigenous people, who were already in the district at the time.”⁷

This was even so when the British began to suppress the slave trade in 1807. As John Gray writes, prior to 1816, individual merchants from Europe were encouraged to settle or establish factories in the river. But each merchant was expected to make his own bargain with the local chief. If a chief gave him land for his factory, he held that land by local “customary” tenure. If he was deprived of that land or was otherwise despoiled of his property, the British government was under no legal obligation and power to render him any assistance.⁸ Gray suggests that European traders and company officials were often in a precarious position. For example, their property could be pillaged or destroyed. In many instances, they were not also in position to defend themselves against any aggression on the part of the local inhabitants.⁹

But British policy would eventually change. Between 1880 and the early 1900s, the British garrison based on St. Mary’s Island began to consolidate its power by expanding into the hinterland. Rather than continuing its commercial expansionist

⁶ Ibid, p. 481

⁷ Ibid

⁸ John Gray. *A History of the Gambia* (London, Frank Cass, 1966), p. 333

⁹ Ibid, p. 332

policy alone, it began “pacifying” the population by formally amalgamating the conquered “kingdoms” into the British Empire. This extension of British rule in the Gambia’s hinterland had numerous consequences for land tenure. One of the consequences was summarized by a European commissioner for Kombo. This commissioner wrote that when the English defeated Fodi Sillah of Gunjur, the “right to assume the ownership of the land of the “kingdom” was considered to be with the English Government.”¹⁰ However, “After conquering the kingdoms of Gunjur and driving away its kings, the British Government is considered to have given up its ownership of the land of the Kombo districts which it acquired by conquest, and given the ownership to the villages occupying the land.” For the Africans, “A gift of ownership of land [was] considered to have occurred. [The people claimed that] the white man has conquered our land and so obtained ownership of it. He appears to have given up his ownership to the villages.”¹¹ This suggests that after the conquest by Britain, the administration of “village” land was mostly left in the hands of village elders.¹²

Ever since, however, the British established a small colony in Bathurst and its environs, they managed to pass a series of laws aimed at reforming local systems of land tenure. These laws were often called ordinances. The first step in modern times with regards to crown lands was the passing of Public Lands Holdings Ordinance 1877.

¹⁰ NRS, CRN 1/10 Commissioner’s Office South Bank Province, April 30 1940

¹¹ Ibid

¹² NRS, Confidential Dispatch to the Colonial Secretary in Bathurst from the Commissioner’s Office South Bank Province, Cape St. Mary, April, 30 1940, CSO 10/71 Colonial Secretary- (Sgd) R.H. Gretton Governor-Sir Thomas Southorn

This was later repealed and replaced by Public Lands (Grants and Dispositions) of 1902.”¹³

The second major ordinance that was introduced was called the Land (Registration of deeds) Ordinance. This piece of legislation was passed in 1880 and was amended on June 30 1939. It provided for the registration of deeds, conveyances, wills, contracts, and other instruments affecting land within the colony and protectorate. Registration was however not compulsory but was actually preferred by the colonial government. But under the Public Lands Regulation of 1917 grants that were not registered within sixty days became void. This regulation tended to work against “absentee landowners” and in 1918 the sixty days requirement was extended to 120 days.¹⁴

The next oldest land ordinance was passed in 1889. It was referred to as the Supreme Court Ordinance, which aimed at applying the common law of England to the Gambia, including English law referring to the transfer of land. In fact, this was the first piece of legislation to introduce the concept of freehold into the Gambia colony. This was followed by the Protectorate (public land) ordinance of 1896. Legal recognition was first given to the protectorate system by the passing in 1894 of a Protectorate Ordinance.¹⁵ That law was repealed and replaced by a number of ordinances each successively bearing the same title with slightly different alterations in content.

Two traveling commissioners –responsible for the north and south banks of the Gambia River –were appointed in 1893. In the protectorate, law and order was put

¹³ CSO 2/373-Lands: Report by Land office

¹⁴ CSO 2/373- Report by Land Officer as to extent of Development work in Colony and Protectorate in connection with Grants, 1920.

¹⁵ Jon Gray, *A History of the Gambia*, p. 483

directly under the responsibility of these men. They regularly “patrolled” the hinterland, and were often accompanied by police constables. For the purpose of maintaining peace and security, the hinterland was divided into seventeen districts, each placed under the management of a head chief known as *seyfolu*. These chiefs were appointed by the Colonial Administrator, from whom he received orders and to whom he was responsible for the peace and maintenance of good order in his district.

That same year (i.e. in 1893) the Administrator of the Gambia, Robert B. Llewelyn presented an ordinance to the Legislative council defining the conditions under which certain lands in the “Ceded” Mile were held by a private firm called Arthur Reis – a British company based in London. This firm was issued a piece of land in the form of a grant dated April 2 1891. The land, which was surveyed by the Colonial Engineer, was located between Albreda and Sami. According to the ordinance, the 1891 Crown grant was “vague and indefinite and has not expressed with sufficient clearness and precision the terms on which the said lands were intended to be granted.” Llewelyn’s administration also thought it was “necessary to protect in their possessory rights such natives as were owners or occupiers of or entitled to rights in any part of the said lands.” The ordinance, therefore, allowed government to levy a tax on Arthur Reis. The ordinance also outlined that “neither the said grant nor [the ordinance] shall affect or diminish the rights of the persons who owned possessed or occupied any portion of the said land.”¹⁶

The 1896 legislation proclaimed that all public lands were to be placed under the control of English administrator of the Gambia colony. It is a legislation that sought to

¹⁶ Report from Robert Baxter Llewelyn, C.M.G., Administrator, October 20 1893

place the management of the public lands, especially lands where *no* legitimate owners was found, in the newly established colony and protectorate in the hands of the government. It was envisioned that this measure would encourage capitalists to take up tracts of land for agricultural purposes, as the government was now able to issue “land certificates” to persons who intended to procure and develop such lands. The government anticipated that there were large tracts of land on the banks of this river suitable for the growing of [crops] and with the cessation of the religious wars individuals could acquire “good fields” and invest their capital. However, its declaration that all vacant lands located in the protectorate would taken over by the state was challenged by some communities. For example, in Baddibu, Sabach and Sanjal the Alkalos opposed the protectorate ordinance arguing that “there [was] no unclaimed land and that all the outlying lands belong to the towns.”¹⁷ In fact, some officials were “strongly opposed to the recording of native rights in land. [According to one report it would] be a very bad thing to do anything to encourage the concept of individual ownership of land among native communities.”¹⁸ Another official added that “it would be a very great mistake for the Government in dealing with land to bind its hands by statutory regulations.”¹⁹ Other officials, like the commissioner of the South Bank Province, had problems with the protectorate land ordinance. He contested the idea of “public land” as stipulated in the ordinance because “all land was more or less occupied when the protectorate was established.”²⁰ This, according to him, “means that the Government’s right to grant leases and charge rents in wharf towns is in nearly every

¹⁷ ARP 32 Vol. 1 North Bank , Travelling Commissioner Report, 1893-1932 (60)

¹⁸ CSO 10/71 Dispatch No. 21 dated March 2 1946

¹⁹ CSO 2/373 Dispatch No. 48 of March 14 1919

²⁰ CRN 1/10 Land Grants-Confidential Dispatch, April 30 1940

instance, at the very best, dubious.” He further stated that all “person who have obtained such leases have no legal security of tenure. Thus, he reasoned that such lands at the wharf towns or elsewhere which government plans to acquire of its own use should be acquired by negotiation with the owners or occupiers of such lands.

In 1901, the public lands acquisition ordinance was passed. This ordinance concerned both the colony and protectorate. More specifically, it sought to empower the governor to acquire land for public purposes, even if it means through the use of force. The legislation also provided for the regulations of compensation and laid down procedures to deal with land disputes.²¹ This ordinance was followed by the Grants and Dispositions Ordinance, introduced in 1902. Under this ordinance, the governor was authorized by the laws of the colony to grant crown lands in the colony, and public lands in the protectorate, in freehold either in fee simple or for life, or leasehold. Although there is no evidence that grants of land were issued in 1901, this ordinance empowered the governor to retrieve land that were previously granted for public purposes and compensate holders. Under the existing framework, it was possible to “obtain land from government for agricultural purposes on conditions of payment of 2d. per acre per annum for twenty-one years.”²² This ordinance was amended in 1909.

²¹ The colony lands ordinance of 1945 repealed the colony public lands acquisition ordinance, 1901, and the public lands (grants and dispositions) ordinance, 1902. It required the Governor not to dispose of any colony land in fee simple without consent of the Secretary of State. Otherwise Governor may make grants of colony land. It is also stated that grants shall not include mineral or oil rights. If land granted remains unoccupied for more than 12 months it reverts to the crown. Rent to be revised at fixed periods in all leases on the basis of the unimproved value of the land. It describes covenants implied in grants of colony land; no sub-division or alienation without consent of Governor; all conveyances to be registered. Governor may resume land granted for public purposes. Part III provides for acquisition of land for public purposes, and compensation.

²² ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-Annual (No. 264) 1898

Even though the government had passed a piece of legislation in 1896 to take over all vacant lands in the Gambia, in 1903 it felt that it still needed a new legislation to enforce it. Even in Bathurst, as the Colonial Secretary wrote, land “owners go away . . . for rather long periods of time leaving very ignorant persons in possession and whom I have honour to regard themselves as owners under such circumstances. These people could do nothing to safeguard the estate or may not inform the absent owners of the proceedings.” Because of this, the government decided to introduce another ordinance that would empower the government to declare all unoccupied land within the colony as property of the crown. This was called the Vacant Lands (Ascertainment Title) Ordinance.²³

Given that the colonial authorities were even more concerned with introducing private forms of landownership in the colony, in 1904 an important legislation was passed to provide for the registration of title to land to private owners. This was called the Land Transfer (Colony) Ordinance 1904.²⁴ This was followed by the Mohammedan

²³ This robust legislation was repealed by the public lands (Grants and Dispositions) (Amendment) ordinance, 1944. In other words, the public lands (Grants and Dispositions) (Amendment) ordinance of 1944---repealed the vacant land (Ascertainment of title) ordinance of 1903. It laid down further conditions under which public lands may be granted and disposed of by the Governor, among them: land granted under the ordinance which has been unoccupied for a period exceeding 18 months shall revert to the crown unless the holder gives proof of intending to use and develop the land within a reasonable time; on all leases which contain no provision for rent revision specifically, the Governor reserves the right to revise and fix the rents. It repealed by the colony lands ordinance of 1945.

²⁴ This legislation was repealed by land Transfer (Repeal) Ordinance of 1918. But private forms of ownership were expanded in 1932 when the colonial government introduced the Alien (Acquisition of property) ordinance which proclaimed that aliens may hold real and personal property of every description in the same manner as natural born British subjects. In addition, the protectorate lands ordinance of 1945 laid down conditions on which non-indigenes may occupy protectorate land which entails the consent of the District authority and approval of the Divisional commissioner. It noted that every tenancy for a term exceeding three years to be created by an agreement in writing. Senior Commissioner approves of lease. Lease to be registered within sixty days in the Colonial Registry and a copy deposited for entry in the Divisional Land Register. Lease limited to twenty-one years' duration; rent subject to revision every seven years on unimproved value. Appeal against the revised rent may be made to the Governor, whose decision shall be final. It stipulated that no tenant could mortgage, sublet or dispose without the consent of District authority. Lease lapses if land unoccupied for more than two

Law Recognition Ordinance of 1905. This ordinance, which was amended in 1925 and in 1933, provided for a Mohammedan court at Bathurst to exercise jurisdiction over all cases between Muslims relating to civil status, marriage, succession, donations, testaments and guardianship. Muslim judges (known as *Qadis*) were appointed to assume responsibility of this court. Appeals from this court however laid to the Supreme Court and the jurisdiction of the court did not extend beyond Bathurst.

In 1913, the protectorate ordinance was introduced. This ordinance recognized “native” laws and customs, especially those pertaining to tenure of land. The legislation sought to strengthen local courts and “to take cognizance of and enforce native land customs.”²⁵ Under the Protectorate Lands Ordinance, “no protectorate land shall be occupied by a non-indigene unless he has first obtained the consent of the Native Authority for the district in which such a land is situated.” The ordinance further highlighted that “any non-indigene who occupies any protectorate land without the approval of the Divisional Commissioner, for a period not exceeding twenty one years,”

years. Part IV provides for acquisition of land for public purposes. Order no. 3 of 1948 delegates certain of the Governor’s powers to the Senior Commissioner. The protectorate ordinance of 1935 (amended by a series of legislations in 1935, 1944, 1946 and 1947) declared that certain areas of the colony were now included in the “protectorate system.” This included lands situated in Brefet, Bajana, MacCarthy Island, the Ceded Mile and British Komb). Henceforth, all “native” law and customs relating to succession, marriage, divorce, and the tenure of land existing in the protectorate, and which were compatible with the principles of English law, applied to these lands. But this seems to be contradicted by an earlier report, dating back to 1896, which states that by legislation those parts of the old colony known as the “Ceded Mile” and McCarthy Island were for administrative purposes, included within the protectorate. This has been done with the object of putting these outlying places under the travelling commissioners and on the same footing as the adjoining protectorate [ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-Annual No. 195 (Report for 1896)]. In January 1893 two travelling commissioners were appointed, one for each bank of the river, to travel through the country and ascertain what there was either in shape of towns, or people or anything else, within the boundary, for there was absolutely no data of any sort to work upon, with the object of establishing some form of “civilized Government and to put a stop if possible to slave-dealing within the protectorate” [Source: ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-Annual No. 143 (Annual Report for 1894)]. The protectorate is patrolled regularly for eight-months in the year by commissioners for about hundred miles (rather more on the North Bank) up the river as well as in Combo and Fogni. It has been divided into seventeen districts, each placed under the management of a Head chief, appointed by the Administrator, from whom he takes orders and to whom he is responsible for the peace and maintenance of good order in his district.

²⁵ This ordinance was repealed and replaced by the protectorate ordinance of 1935

he/she shall lose rights over such lands. In addition, the ordinance proclaimed that no land in the wharf towns shall be occupied by a foreigner unless he obtained permission from the local authorities in the district where the town was located.²⁶

The wharf towns, such as Ballanghar, Brefet, Bambally and Kaur also caught the attention of the colonial government. Even though these towns were located in the interior of the Gambia, they remained important commercial centers, especially with the development of the peanut trade. In order to take advantage of the trade along the Gambia River, several of these trading companies needed land in these towns. As a result, the government was issuing grants to private individuals and businesses in these areas. Thus, in 1919 the Wharves Ordinance was passed with the aim of regulating the process of issuing grants in the wharf towns. This ordinance stipulated two forms of grants. The first pertained to wharves already in existence and the other was earmarked for applications for approval in the future.²⁷

Problems of Land Allocation in the Colony, the Wharf Towns

What I described above refers to the “laws” passed by the administration in an attempt to regulate land tenure. However, in practice there were “irregularities in the granting of the lots by a dispatch which was sent to the Secretary of State by the Lt. Governor on the July 14 1836.” From early on, the authorities anticipated irregularities in the granting of the lots by a dispatch which was sent to the Secretary of State by the Lieutenant Governor on July 14 1836 asking for the appointment of a “Surveyor of Lands” this appointment does not appear to have been made until April 1 1914. This

²⁶ CRN 1/10 Land Grants-Confidential Dispatch, April 30 1940

²⁷ CSO 2/373 Dispatch No. 48 of March 14 1919

again was a fertile ground for conflict over who owns what. Consequently, about the end of 1913 it was decided not to dispose of any more freehold in the town as land was becoming so scarce and presumably conflicts were escalating. Even the British officials on the ground admitted that conditions of registers were poor—which accentuated the problem of encroachments. For example, a British official lamented that encroachment:

was a very difficult matter to resolve owing to the unsatisfactory condition of registers, so many measurements being missing and others inaccurate and as mentioned no sketches at all in some cases. I was handicapped as many had lost their grants by fire and various other causes. It is regrettable that the matter was not attended to at the time as now one does not know how many more of these cases there are to come forward in the absence of a correct list.²⁸

In 1824 the government acknowledged the need for “A Secretary’s office for the preservation of Records and the Registry of Grants . . . [because] there existing no means at present of securing public documents etc. which will no doubt hereafter occasion great confusion and mischief.” Indeed in several instances, the dispatch noted, “it will be found already that two different persons hold grants for the same allotments and in others that the title deeds are not duly recorded or registered. It may therefore be deemed extremely necessary to make an immediate revision of the grants before they get beyond the power of remedy. A surveyor is much required to regulate the town lot and survey the whole of the Island which he can now do as it is sufficiently cleared for that purposes.”²⁹

In addition to these poor registers, oral sources also suggest that several property holders living in the peripheries of Bathurst and British Kombo did not care to keep title

²⁸ ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-Annual No. 195(Report for 1896)

²⁹ NRS, Banjul, CSO 1/2 1824

deeds and/or written wills. One informant told me in one of my interviews that it was not the custom of their ancestors to keep title documents. According to him, no one needed to provide a document to proof that he owned something. "Paper is a white man's thing."³⁰ This claim is supported by ethnographic records dating back to 1906. As one report notes, the "Mandingos do not appear ever to make written wills. Occasionally, when dying, a man would direct his heirs to give some particular part of his property to someone outside the family but there are no rules to that effect and it is incumbent on the heirs to carry out the wish of the deceased unless they please. The appointment of executors is not customary."³¹ Some of those Africans who even procured title deeds did not guard them. This is probably because these documents did not mean much. They either lost them or gradually deteriorated because of exposure to pests and the climate.³²

Moreover, the problem of keeping record of deeds was exacerbated by the shortage of staff. Often, there were long delays in processing deeds in the Lands Office.³³ As the 1919 report indicates, the workload in the office Secretariat "continued to increase." Consequently, until 1919, the Lands Office was never able to survey all of the important towns on the River banks in the protectorate. That year, the Surveyor of Land wrote that it is vital for "Government [to] to have in its possession an accurate

³⁰ Alhagie Mangkodou Sarr, interview by author, tape recording, Medina Baffuloto, Upper Niimi, North Bank Region, , July 13, 2006.

³¹ NRS, CSO 2/94- "Mandinka" Inheritance The Laws and Customs of the Mandingoes of the North Bank, 1906

³² ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-Annual No. 195(Report for 1896); CSO 1/2

³³ CSO 2/373 Dispatch No. 48 of 14.3.1919

document whereon all the lands granted can be seen and for the purposes of improvement.”³⁴

Other problems associated with poor documentation often arose. One of the most important of these was encroachments. According to documentary sources, from Victoria Street and Clifton Road, expropriation of land and/or encroachment by the Africans became rampant throughout the town. The matter of encroachments was very difficult to deal with owing to the unsatisfactory condition of registers. Several measurements were missing and others inaccurate and as mentioned no sketches at all in some cases.

Around the end of 1913 it was decided not to dispose of any more freehold in the town as land was becoming scarce. Numerous land disputes in Bathurst and the surrounding areas were brought to these courts where laws guided an established institution dealt with cases instead of relying on the so-called customary procedures involving community elders. Even in the protectorate, the traveling commissioners held regular magistrate courts in the protectorate. A number of Gambians took advantage of the courts as a means to seek redress. For example, between 1916 and January 9 1917 Hannah Gaye and her brother, Charles B. Gaye, were involved in a legal battle over the inheritance of the deceased mother’s property located 2 Gloucester Street, in Bathurst. The case first appeared at the Mohammedan Court and was later transferred to the Supreme Court.³⁵ On February 2 1917, a trader from Fez, in Morocco, appeared before a judge in the Supreme Court to defend what he believed was his property.³⁶ Ben

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Supreme Court Record Book: Civil #1 December 1916-1922

³⁶ Supreme Court Record Book: Civil #1 December 1916-1922---Tuesday 6th February 1917

Abdoulie, the trader, wanted the Supreme Court to reverse an earlier judgment passed by the *Qadi* of the Mohammedan court, which presumably favored a woman named Aminata Bah. In the end, he was able to win the case by proving that the ordinance that introduced the Mohammedan court (passed in 1905) only concerned West Africans, not Moroccans.³⁷

Opposition from the merchant community also checked the extent to which the colonial government could manage land in the urban areas. Even though government adopted regulations that granted it the power to increase the yearly rent charged on grants issued to private firms, it sometimes had to listen to the merchant community.³⁸ For instance, after the Lands Officer made surveys of a number of properties in Bathurst and recommended in 1914 that the government increase the fees that merchant firms pay for using certain lands; his decision was petitioned and eventually dropped. These firms “strenuously objected to the high scale of rent which they were called upon to pay.”³⁹ Another problem was the complaints from local area merchants petitioning the

³⁷ There are countless other cases available in court records. In fact, some of them include the case of Shatta Savage and Fatmatta Jobe. The case involved a property situated on 33 Long Street and belonged to Sultan Davies who died in 1900. In 1903 another Sultan Davies entered into occupation of the property. He too died in 1936 leaving her daughters Hadi Secka, Fatmatta Jobe and ward female, Shatta Savage. These three are aged about 50, nearly 50 and about 60 years respectively. Hadi lived in the property from 1903 to 1930 when she went upriver but she drew the rents. Fatmatta lived there from 1903 to 1940 when she got married and moved to her husband's place. She also received rents. Shatta Savage also lived there from 1903 to 1930 when she got married. She also received rents from the property. No trace of any documents.

Another case involved a man named Momodou Ceesay who lived in 22 Clerkson Street---a civil servant, clerk at the Post office. Fatma Jobe is my mother in law. Hadi Secka is full sister to Fatma Jobe. Shatta Savage is half sister. 33 Long Street belonged to Sultain Davies who died around 1900 when I was 27 years of age. In 1903 another Sultan Davies went to live in the premises. Sultan Davies (2) lived there for 20 years. He died in 1936. Hadi Secka, Fatma Jobe and Shatta Savage have lived there on the premises since they were children. Shatta Savage is about 60. Hadi Secka is about 50 and Fatma Jobe is close to 48 or 49. These three lived there until they were married.

Case adjourned until the plaintiffs come down from upriver. {For more on these cases, see Supreme Court Civil #26 February 1950 – July 1952

³⁸ CSO 2/373 Dispatch No. 48 of 14.3.1919

³⁹ CSO 2/373 Report from the Lands Office, 1914

allocation of land to French traders. A notable case occurred in 1824, during the early days of the settlement of Bathurst, when local merchants complained against the government who granted land to the “French men and leave them to settle there for the purposes of carrying on trade.” French merchants and *Signares* often bought property in Bathurst. A good example is one Mr. Baudin who resided in Goree but was issued grants of land in Bathurst. Mr. Baudin built a stone store and put one of his sons in charge of the business.⁴⁰ The merchants of Bathurst did not like this but it is not clear to what extent they were successful in deterring the government from allocating land to these French traders.

B. Contradictions in Colonial Land Policies

Contradiction in colonial policies in Africa is widely acknowledged in African history. For instance, R. E. Downs and S. P. Reyna writes that “colonial land tenure policy at times worked for the preservation of indigenous land tenure systems, and other times favored the introduction of European land codes.”⁴¹ Also, in his book, *The French Imperial Nation-State*, Gary Wilder describes the “fundamental contradiction between the universalism of colonialism and its particularizing tendencies.”⁴² He suggest that while colonialism encouraged reform on several fronts, “many recognizable aspects of modernity were notably absent from or prohibited in most colonial societies; examples include free labor, private property, abstract individuality, impersonal common law, disenchanted civil society, and representative government.”⁴³

⁴⁰ NRS, CSO 1/2

⁴¹ R. E. Downs and S. P. Reyna (ed.) *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1988), p. 9

⁴² Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State*, p. 5

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 9

A number of documentary sources seem to confirm R. E. Downs and S. P. Reyna's and Wilder's claims. Colonial officials often claimed all unoccupied lands as public lands. They also frequently issued some of these lands to private firms and individuals on freehold title basis or as short and long-term leases. In fact, in the colony, the state was a major advocate of applying the common laws of England in its newly acquired colony and many colonial officials worked hard to make private ownership of property applicable. Since from a western viewpoint the proof of one's claim to the ownership of certain space was by possessing a will or a document showing the legal entitlement to that property, many of them began to advocate for the registration of land. It was widely believed that issuing "land certificates" to individuals, private firms and companies would encourage capitalists to take up tracts of land for large scale commercial agriculture or trade which would eventually prevent future conflict over land. Leases were granted to numerous individuals in residential neighborhoods in Cape St. Mary.

Elsewhere in Bathurst and Cape St. Mary's, the government also awarded numerous grants to private companies and individuals. A number of crown grants were issued prior to 1846, but this was when the administration of the Gambia was under Sierra Leone. More grants were also issued between January 20 1846 and May 19 1893. From 1893 to 1904, however, no grants were issued until the end of 1914.⁴⁴ Private firms like Maurel and H Prom, Maurel Freres, B.T. Co Ltd, S. C. de Senegambie, Cie Francaise and Barthes and Lesieur and individuals like Samuel J. Forster were awarded

⁴⁴ NRS, CSO 2/373-Lands: Report by Land office.

titles to certain land in different locations.⁴⁵ Individuals and firms, for example, were granted lands located in the “most valuable site in the town [of Bathurst] between the east of Wellington street.” As one report from the Land Office indicates, “the river bank had for years been occupied by the mercantile firms and used to a considerable financial advantage by them at no cost to themselves, as Government had never taken up the question of the rights of the firms to occupy.”⁴⁶

The government also embarked on a number of schemes, granting short and long term leases or grants of land located in the colony. In return they charged fees, which constituted an important source of revenue for the government. In addition, under the Dulton scheme, certain uninhabited lands near Half Die, in Bathurst, and in areas where the land was frequently inundated were reclaimed and filled. These were then divided into “lots of a convenient size and have been leased to the natives for periods of twenty-one years.” The office divided up the land into thirty-six lots of about 4,000 square feet in size. These were “eagerly taken up by the Africans who lived in congested parts of Bathurst.” These comprised of families that had no opportunity of obtaining land in the city. In return, the government charged them annual rent for occupying the land.⁴⁷ Prior to this, the land was used as a dumping ground for refuse. In the report, the land officer claimed that the congestion had been relieved with the reclamation of this seemingly extensive dumpsite.

In 1914 and the “various firms were given the opportunity of taking a lease on the lands they occupied. This they were pleased to do as they were then secure in their

⁴⁵ NRS, CSO 2/373 Colonial Secretary’s Office Minute papers, No. 708, 1920. See also See Manager of the Kombo’s Cash Book 1874-1890

⁴⁶ NRS, CSO 1/2 November 1 1824

⁴⁷ NRS, CSO 2/373-Lands: Report by Land office

occupation, for the time being in any case.” This area was used by a number of private firms for erection of small buildings for boat houses, storing of various kinds of materials (e.g. bricks, coal etc.) and for repairing boats and gutters. With the exception of few cases, nothing longer than a yearly lease was granted in this particular area.

The situation in the hinterland, however, was different. Here, villagers were allowed to administer land the way they deemed appropriate even though the government would occasionally interfere in local matters. Colonial administrators in some cases interfered in succession to certain political offices which people acquired through land and birth rights. Occasionally, the commissioners appointed Alkalos. This implies that they frequently tried to interfere in local politics, by altering succession/inheritance practices. For example, it was a custom that at the death of an Alkalo, who was mostly the eldest male descendant of founding family that established the village, he was succeeded by his brother and not his eldest son. At one “palaver,” in 1893, Commissioner Ozanne was puzzled by this.⁴⁸ Consequently, he informed the Alkalos that

[S]uccession by blood would now be stopped as it was contrary to English customs. [He noted] that if the Governor of Bathurst died his son would not be made Governor, but a stranger would be appointed. And so it must be with the Alkali. Any headman who was fitted for the post might now be elected as Alkali, subject to approval of the Governor. The Alkalos who were present at the meeting seemed quite indifferent to the question of their successors. However, they laughed and asked the commissioner not to talk on such matters as they did not want their lives shortened. One Alkali said laughingly “that the commander was putting ropes round their necks.”⁴⁹

The Alkalo’s expression is no doubt a manifestation of his waning political power and influence. As soon as the protectorate ordinance was passed in the 1890s the powers of

⁴⁸ ARP 28/1- Travelling Commissioner’s Report-South Bank 1893-1899

⁴⁹ ARP 32 Vol. 1 North Bank , Travelling Commissioner Report, 1893-1932 (60)

local rulers began to be checked by the colonial state. As one commissioner lamented, the Alkalos now fully understand that they have no power to settle cases – be it land disputes or otherwise – in their towns. All cases have to be referred to [the district commissioner, who was a British].⁵⁰ Moreover, the Governor wielded so much political power that the offices occupied by the Alkalos and *seyfolos* were directly under the supervision of his representative in the protectorate: the commissioner. For example, a 1902 ordinance outlined the powers of the Governor which includes appointing and dismissing any “head chief” and “the headman.”⁵¹

However, in other areas, the British could not exercise authority even if they wanted to introduce Western property regimes. These include the numerous small and isolated villages often inhabited by people that hardly came into direct contact with the colonial administration. Even though the 1894 Protectorate ordinance proclaimed that all “unoccupied” land was now public land, in these villages control of land continued to exercise by families, *kabilo* heads and Alkalos. These groups continued to do so by relying on their customs, not European legal codes. Alkalos continued to consult *kabilo* heads, give land to strangers and in return collect rents from these strange farmers. As one report states, he “either gives them vacant land or land beyond the areas already cleared.”⁵² Even in areas that were already under effective British control, Alkalos were responsible of collecting the “yard” tax, the pasturage fees and the “strange farmers tax.”⁵³ But here again, as the commissioner of the South Bank Province writes, the

⁵⁰ ARP 28/1 Travelling Commissioners’ Report for the South Bank province; ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-Annual No. 143 (Annual Report for 1894)

⁵¹ Report from Sir George Charden Denton, Governor, April 11 1902, No. 7

⁵² CRN 1/10 Commissioner’s Office South Bank, April 30 1940

⁵³ ARP 32/3 Annual Report for the North Bank Province, 1923-1933

“strange” farmers’ tax was “regarded as being similar in kind to the tax which used to be paid every year to the king by every strange farmer.”⁵⁴

Some parts of the “protectorate” were not effectively controlled by the colonial state. For example, in British Foni, which was brought under the protectorate system, early in 1897, it was difficult to implement policies there. But according to one report, Foni was

and always has been a very difficult country to handle owing to the fact that the people will not recognize any head chief over them or even headmen of towns, or groups of stockades. The big men of each stockade is his own king and recognizes no one as being in authority . . . The people living in his stockade obey him only as their superior. Thus it will be somewhat a troublesome place to administer.⁵⁵

These districts, like the rest of the protectorate, had a native tribunal “but up to date it has never sat, the commissioner always trying all cases; the people will not appeal to their own headmen . . . Kansalla district, which at present has no head chief.”⁵⁶

Furthermore, the government also attempted to “reproduce native society” by creating native authorities to preserve “customary tenure.” Members of the native authorities tried minor offenses and matters relating land disputes.⁵⁷ Created in 1892, these native authorities were established in every district. They had their own courts

⁵⁴ CRN 1/10 Commissioner’s Office South Bank, April 30 1940

⁵⁵ Later on, for administrative purposes the British had divided up the territory into two districts: Foni east and Foni west. Each district was further divided into smaller units. Foni East comprised of Bondali district, under Yanu Badjie of Kangaramba, a Jola. Foni West comprised of Brefet district under Lang Sanyang of Brefet. This identity of this man very much reflected the demographic composition of his district. He was regarded as half Mandinka and half Jola. In Vintang (Bintang) District the government had a difficult time to get successor to the chieftaincy after the unfortunately death of the head chief. Similarly, in Karrenai District, it was “impossible to find a good man to succeed Gullimandi Badjie” as head chief. [Source: CSO 2/94-The Laws and Customs of the Various Communities in West Africa, 1906].

⁵⁶ ARP 28/1 Traveling Commissioner’s Report SBP, 1893-1900s; CSO 2/94-The Laws and Customs of the Various Communities in West Africa, 1906.

⁵⁷ NRS, ARP 35/1-Annual Report for 1892 No. 80

often called native tribunals. The head chief appointed by the commissioner presided over these courts and were assisted by four “headmen” or Alkalos from other villages in the district. Theoretically, land was vested in on these native authorities. For example, an ordinance passed in 1902 empowered the native tribunals to manage land disputes within its jurisdiction.⁵⁸ In some ways, the creation of the native authorities reinforced the powers of individuals from prominent lineages and solidified their ability to exercise control over land. Paradoxically, many of the individuals that were appointed in these native authorities were descendants of the lineages that centuries ago monopolized much of the land in the Gambia River’s lower basin or descended from marabout families. Moreover, it is important to note that not all “native lands” were “administered for the use and common benefit . . . of the communities concerned,” as espoused in one report.⁵⁹ For example, a top colonial official, P. E. Mitchell, even admitted that sometimes these native courts were corrupt.⁶⁰

Colonialists had their own imagination of African societies. Many of them wanted to depict African societies and cultures as radically different from those of Europe. As result, some of them tended to exaggerate the importance of community as opposed to individual agency. This is illustrated by a report which indicates that “the most an individual can have is the right to use land and the right to alienate the right of use” to another person or group.⁶¹ The report further claim that when a new village was established, the Alkalo of this village would “roughly divide [the village land] amongst the yard owners.” However, the report continues, “it should be borne in mind that when

⁵⁸ NRS, CSO 2/373-Report from Sir George Charden Denton, Governor, April 11 1902, No. 7

⁵⁹ CSO 10/71 Report from the Government House, Bathurst, Gambia, No. 72, May 29 1946

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid

the term dividing land is used, it should not be thought of as allocation of precise piece of ground with all boundaries carefully marked and pointed out in situ. The term does not mean much more than that the Alkalo vaguely indicates the direction in which the yard might farm.”⁶²

While collectivity was important in lower Gambian societies, it was certainly not true that all members of a community had the same access to land. In fact, the above claims contradict what earlier documents show. For example, in the 1890s traveling commissioner Sitwell described chiefs as the “owners” of the land. Alkalos and their families had their own land. As traveling commissioner Cecil Sitwell noted, “The open space round a town generally belongs to the Alcaide’s family.”⁶³ These people, he concludes, certainly seem to have a very good title to their allotments; having received them from their ancestors. But as highlighted in the first chapter, in the lower Gambia basin, the *mansa* was the ultimate overlord of the land. This means that he did not always consult his “council.”

The contradiction in the attitude of colonial officials towards land tenure in the Gambia is also reflected in the documents, reports and letters they wrote. For example, in his report, a colonial officer claimed that twentieth century property regimes in the Gambia had roots in Europe. He wrote that

What really troubles me is this—how much of the native custom we read about is really native custom; i.e. has existed from time immemorial, and how much of it has grown up since the Europeans came? For example, I find it extremely hard to believe the rectangular yards in straight lines which one finds in [Bakau] and elsewhere are really native at all . . . I believe myself that the “yard” system follows a foreign model. Certainly the term “yard owner” owes nothing to native mode of thought, to which the idea of individual ownership

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ NRS, ARP 28/1- Travelling Commissioner’s Report-South Bank 1893-1899

of land is foreign and indeed repugnant. In the Kombo in particular I believe the population has largely either been planted there or settled there since the cessation of land to the crown. Until 1902, the Manager of Kombo collected rents from all people occupying lots in that area. The rent rolls exist to this day. I am certain that in the Kombo the inhabitants regard yard tax as a form of rent.⁶⁴

This official further stressed that it is impossible to discuss African land tenure without dealing with European ideas. Hence, he had “doubt if the Mandinga language” used an indigenous term for words like rent. For him, it was Europeans who introduced ideas of charging rents from the land. He also believed that the idea of an individual becoming a landowner was of foreign origin. Decades later a report from 1940 gives the impression that the Africans were gradually recognizing the possibility of charging tenants for using the land. As the report states, the “charging of rent or the payment of a sum of money to obtain the right to use a piece of land for building purposes was also very slowly been [sic] adopted in a few isolated and scattered examples. It however applied mostly in holdings by one or other of the Europeans or Syrian firms.”⁶⁵ According to these two reports, therefore, the idea of renting land to tenants was not widespread and was a European influence on Gambian society.

However, the evidence contradicts the assumption that the payment of rent or taxes on land was foreign to people living along the banks of the Gambia River. As shown in chapter two, such rights were mostly exercised by the aristocracy and not their subjects. In the late 1930s, the commissioner of the Kombo and Foni collected some oral traditions that claim that the “rent” paid to the “kings of Kombo in the early days was undoubtedly considered by native opinion (and still is) as being equivalent to this

⁶⁴ CSO 10/71 Enclosures to Gambia dispatch no. 96 of the June 24 1948

⁶⁵ CRN 1/10 Commissioner’s Office South Bank Province, April 30 1940

tax [which the colonial government levied on its subjects]” –i.e. it was regarded as a payment for “protection.”⁶⁶ For the commissioner, the yard tax was viewed by the Africans “as a payment of one sort or another for the right to own the land” and thus he claims the Mansa of Kombo regarded “the English Governor as his stranger and therefore in a measure as under his protection and this feeling continued after the annual rent ceased.”⁶⁷ The commissioner further claimed that “originally such taxes were no doubt in the nature of payment for protection (i.e. tributes), but before the coming of the English Administration they had, by all accounts, definitely come to be regarded as a regular means of public revenue (i.e. a tax).”⁶⁸

In sum, then, one could say that while the freehold notions of property rights existed in some corners of Colony, the development of private property rights in the countryside was not encouraged by the British. Colonial land tenure policy at times worked for the preservation of “indigenous” land tenure systems, and other times favored the introduction of European land codes. Colonial laws and practice had room for both systems. Obviously the ordinances brought some changes to local systems of land tenure. Generally, they had the effect of deepening a process that had long began – i.e. the development and coexistence of aspects of individual and collective forms of ownership. Prior to this period, the nineteenth century jihads and the growth of cash cropping brought about conditions whereby larger extended families broke-up into

⁶⁶ I trust the content of this report more because the commissioner noted that he relied extensively on local informants as opposed to colonial officials who only wanted to show that Africans were changing their backward customs in favor of those of Europe.

⁶⁷ CRN 1/10 Commissioner’s Office South Bank Province, April 30 1940. The kings of Kombo, Niumi, Baddibu, Kiang and Jarra all demanded a tax payment in money, cloths, gunpowder or goods from their dependent villages.” This tax, according to this commissioner, was considered as a tribute, that is to say a payment in return for protection.

⁶⁸ CRN 1/10 Commissioner’s Office South Bank Province, April 30 1940

smaller units. These units would divide up the land among themselves, each unit managing its own share. Indeed, local processes and the changing economic and social dynamics in the villages continued to further the process of *land fragmentation*.

Management of Land in Gambian Villages: A Look at the Twentieth Century

By the early 1900s, the district commissioners posted in the lower Gambian hinterland asserted that the Mandinka, Wolof, Fula and Jola all recognized individual and collective forms of ownership in their customs.⁶⁹ Sons were inheriting their parents just as families were also making decisions over the distribution and allocation of land. At a certain level, as one report notes, “the village has no rights over the property of the deceased [since] ownership of land . . . descends from father to son [and it] includes the taking of any fruit from trees that may be growing thereon . . .”⁷⁰

Yet, in most villages the management of land was not only family or individual problem. Alkalos and *kabilo* heads continued to host strangers by providing them with land just as communities were aiding their members during times of disputes. As one report indicates, “inter-village land disputes [were] commonly settle by agreement between the elders of the villages concerned. If this is not possible, the elders of a neighboring village are invited to join them and endeavor to settle the dispute.”⁷¹ The report further noted that “disputes inside the village are settled in the same way by the elders of the [compounds] concerned, who if necessary take the matter to the village elders.”⁷² It was however rare that a land dispute to be taken to court.⁷³

⁶⁹ CSO 2/94 Laws and customs of the various communities in West Africa, 1906

⁷⁰ NRS, CSO 2/94-The Laws and Customs of the Mandingoes of the North Bank, 1906

⁷¹ CRN 1/10- Land Grants North Bank, 1939

⁷² Ibid

It was this very make up of lower Gambian rural communities that sometimes made land ownership a contentious issue. However, it was also the same reason why conflicts were successfully managed by those involved in such conflicts. A case that illustrate how a community could get involved in a dispute over the ownership of some land occurred between residents of the two villages of Sami and Medina Bafuloto sometime in the first half of the twentieth century. This land was located in *Jumankari*, in Niumi. According to the informant, the land belonged to his ancestors because it was his father that cleared the land presumably during the period when the spirits abandoned parts of the forest. But the “conflict” erupted when Tillibunka from Mali began clearing the land in preparation for the start of the rainy season. This man was a *surga* (or strange farmer) hosted by another man in the village of Sami, who also claimed to be the “owner” of the land.⁷⁴

Eventually, the “conflict” involved the villages of Sami and Medina Baffuloto because it involved individuals and families from both villages. However, the fight was not physical but a spiritual one. Tillibunkas were generally feared for their powerful *jujus*. The village of Sami was also reputable for having good *mangkanoolu* but perhaps they did not match those of Medina Bafuloto –a village with a reputation having a strong marabout family of Toranka origin. As the conflict began, each side buried *gallaj* or *mangkanoolu* on the land. That year, none of them was able to farm that land but by the end of the rainy reason the Tillibunka fell ill. He was allegedly possessed by the *mangkanoolu* and he returned to Mali. Similarly, his landlord fell ill but decided to

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Alhagie Mangkodou Sarr, interview by author, tape recording, Medina Bafuloto, Upper Niumi, North Bank Region, June 13 2006

travel to Medina Bafuloto with other members of the village to apologize to the owners of land for the trouble he caused while seeking help for his illness.

Clearly, in the lower Gambia region the management of land was both an individual and a collective matter. In many instances the boundary between the individual and the community continued to remain blurred. Yet, as indicated earlier, it was a major preoccupation in Western thought to make the analytical distinction between the public and the private, as if the individual and the community are in sharp contrast and opposition to one another⁷⁵. This sharp distinction however was not recognized wholeheartedly in many Gambian villages over course of the twentieth century.

The twentieth century was another important era in the history of the Gambia, at least for the marabout. The period saw the arrival of hundreds, if not thousands, of young men from other parts of the region. Many of these young men came to study under a marabout. These students helped their marabouts to cultivate peanuts and millet for the upkeep of the marabout's family and his numerous *talibes*. While many of these students eventually returned to their homes, several of them stayed and were given land and wives to marry. This was especially common in the marabouts towns of Jarra Sikunda, Jarra Barrow Kunda, Medina Bafuloto and Aljamdu.

In reality, there was no free land available to newcomers. Even uncultivated and unused lands were often associated with some mythical figure whose descendants "claim" its ownership. Thus, when people wanted land, they would first approach an Alkalo who in turn would consult the heads of the families that "own" the unused land.

⁷⁵ Nwando Achebe, *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005), p. 197.

Sometimes it was the Alkalos' own family. In any event, the settler would have to be given permission to use the land for agricultural purposes. In some instances, permission was sought every year.⁷⁶

Local customs required that a stranger seek permission from his host before he could erect a building on a land that is given to him. The Commissioner of Kombo wrote in the 1930s and 1940s that, "by original custom a person obtaining a site for building or other purposes inside a village is entirely at the mercy of the person from whom he obtained it." The stranger "can be dispossessed at will without compensation for any buildings he may have erected. He must, however, be given reasonable notice and he [was] allowed to take away the materials of any building which he has erected." But if he planted any permanent trees on that land, these remained his property and the landlord cannot destroy them even if he wanted to use the land for building. The "tenant" could even freely sell these trees to other outsiders at anytime. The exception is if the landlord had warned him not plant any permanent trees on the land. In that case, the ownership of the trees reverted to the landlord once the tenant vacated the land.

According to oral traditions, at times the land tenure system described above tended to breed confusion and hence conflict between and among families. In such instances, however, community leaders tried to settle the misunderstanding. Disputes inside a village were often settled by the Alkalo and the elders of the families concerned. Inter-village land disputes were commonly settled by agreement between the elders of the villages concerned. If this was not possible, the elders of a neighboring

⁷⁶ Ibid

village were invited to resolve or settle the dispute. Even in the 1900s it was rare that a land dispute was taken to court.⁷⁷

Lastly, in the protectorate village elders continued to hinder transaction of land based on cash. This was even recognized, at least in writing, in the protectorate ordinance. The ordinance stated that “in no circumstances can land be permanently alienated by sale –not even to Government.”⁷⁸ As stated in the previous chapter, for the landlords keeping people dependent was far more advantageous to them than selling land and one way to attract dependents was to give land to settlers. This continuation of this tradition was made possible because of the availability of strange farmers in the Gambia’s villages. As one report noted, there were always a large number of strange farmers [in the Gambia’s districts] every year who come from French territory to plant ground-nuts.”⁷⁹ Thus, the landlord stranger relationship that developed as a result of the growth of cash cropping continued well into the colonial era. In fact, colonial administrators were highly interested in attracting migrant farmers and encouraging them to settle in the Gambia permanently.

Conclusion

In sum, this chapter draws from documentary sources to challenge the view that once British administration established itself in the Gambia, Africans shifted to private property rights. The sources themselves depict the sorts of ambiguities in the colonial land policies described earlier. While it does not seek to diminish the importance of

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ CSO 10/71 Report from the Government House, Bathurst, Gambia, No. 72, May 29 1946. Even in the colony, the market value of land was low as late as in 1901 and seldom did it even change hands by purchase. In fact, according to Annual Report of 1901 it is impossible to give a definite price for it. The rent charged by the government for lands in British Combo is at the rate of two shillings per acre. [For more see, ARP 35/2 Colonial Reports-Annual (No. 325) 1900].

⁷⁹ ARP 28/2- Report of the South Bank District, July 4 1906

colonialism on notions of landownership in the Gambia's lower river, it argues that colonial land policies were often contradictory and far from consistent. As such, the chapter explores the extent to which European notions of ownership took roots in lower Gambian communities. It highlights continuities and changes in attitudes toward ownership land in urban and rural communities, a series of colonial land policies and the contradictions in these policies.

Colonial administrators were equally committed to "reproducing native society" and in some areas of the country they simply did not have much control there, at least initially. They passed "laws" declaring that there will be no interference in "customary tenure" –meaning local customs would continue to be the basis of administering protectorate or provincial land. This also meant that English property law would not apply to the rural communities. When Britain declared the "protectorate system" over the Gambian hinterland, the newly established government passed a series of legislations. One of the most important of these, the protectorate ordinance, proclaimed that "all native laws and customs existing in the protectorate, whether relating to matters of succession, marriage, divorce, dowry, the right and authority of parents, the tenure of land . . . continue to remain in full force." This implies non-interferences in "customary tenure." Local community leaders were therefore appointed to serve in the native authorities as the "custodians" of "communal" land. They settled disputes, allocated land to strangers and collected rents from strange farmers. In short, the British "invented" their own understanding of ownership in African societies. Thus they

created the Native Authority system whereby land was “administered for the use and common benefit all members of the communities concerned.”⁸⁰

Conversely, the government exercised the right of issuing grants to private individuals and firms. In the protectorate, this mostly applied to lands located in Wharf towns. In the colony, the development of private property was encouraged.. This was done by passing a series of legislations to help protect individual rights to property. The main goal of passing these legislations was to introduce the common law of England to the Gambia, including English law referring to the transfer of land. These efforts were however undermined by bureaucratic and/or administrative problems.

Bureaucratic bottlenecks and several other factors frustrated or slowed down the appropriation of European ideas of ownership in Gambian communities. It could also be attributed to the conflicting government agendas and the response of the Africans therefore, retarded the implementation of European ideas of freehold ownership of land, where plots would be registered and individuals given title documents. Thus, it is important to recognize that the impact of colonialism on ideas of ownership varied from the colony to the more remote villages in the protectorate. The changes to land tenure in the Gambia’s lower reaches cannot therefore be attributed solely around the time of the onset of colonial rule, when Europeans brought their notions of property rights formed through long experience with mercantile and industrial capitalism.

⁸⁰ CSO 10/71 Report from the Government House, Bathurst, Gambia, No. 72, May 29 1946

Conclusion

In sum, this dissertation examines change and continuity in land and property rights in the Lower Gambia region, across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As can be seen in the previous chapters, it questions the assumptions of most of the literature that African societies have generally valued people more than land, and that the sense of property was a colonial and modern imposition. It does this by focusing on two groups of people: the *mansas* and their courts and the marabout who from the middle of the nineteenth century became increasingly influential as the process of islamization intensified. Precisely, the study discusses the historical factors that shaped the position of these lower Gambian landlords and their *dependents* and how the formal British takeover of the Gambia changed the ways in which people managed land.

Some three or four decades ago, the study of land tenure systems in Africa was an important field in anthropology but not in history. Even though many historians were interested in the changes in property rights, an overwhelming majority of them focused on slavery, the slavery trade and the development of wage labor and especially in colonial Africa. Changes in land tenure were neglected, if not overlooked. It seems land was not perceived as worthy subject of historical inquiry. Of course, there are studies focusing on other river regions in West Africa that may constitute an exception. For example, the historiography of the Niger River valley shows that the land was valued and that certain individuals had special rights to them. These people, especially the elites charged a tax on the tenants.¹ Also, in the middle Senegal valley, elites took

¹ See for example, the work of Michal Tymowski, *Le Développement et la Régression Chez les Peuples de la Boucle du Niger à l'époque Précoloniale* ([Varsovie] Wydawni twa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1974), p. 13; Maurice Delafosse. *Les Civilisations Négro-Africaines* (Paris : Librairie Stock, 1925) and

special interest in controlling land because the land was considered valuable.² This is because the middle valley constitutes a rich floodplain, allowing its farmers to grow a dry season crop and thus provide important insurance against the uncertainties of rainfall agriculture. This asset, according to him, has made Futa the bread-basket of the region, and has attracted herders, traders, and settlers to its soil throughout its history.³ But overall land in Africa has not received an important place in historical study.⁴ More precisely, the land situation along the banks of the Gambia River has been rarely placed in its historical reality.

Even for the anthropologists, they approached land tenure in such a way that suggests it never changed –and hence it was static and unchanging.⁵ They used the terms customary, communal, or corporate to describe the social arrangements governing land allocation and land use in various parts of the continent. These terms not only conjure up an image of unchanging and antiquarian customs but also imply social egalitarianism than is supported by historical evidence.⁶ Obviously, a number of anthropologists have raised questions about the presumed rigidity of local systems of

Maurice Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (Soudan français) [microform: séries d'études pub. Sous la direction de M. Le gouverneur Clozel (Paris : E. Larose, 1912).

² Youssouf Guèye, "Essai: Sur Les Causes et Les Consequences de la Micropropriété au Fouta Toro," *Bulletin de l'I. F.A.N. T.XIX, sér. B, No. 3 1-2*, (1957); p. 98 and Oumar Kane *La Première Hégémonie Peule: Le Fouta Tooro de Koli Tengella à Almaami Abdul* (Paris: Karthala; Dakar-Fann: Presses universitaires de Dakar, 2004).

³ David Robinson, "The Islamic Revolution of Futa Toro," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1975), p. 185

⁴ The exception here is East and Southern Africa where numerous historians have examined the conquest and eventual seizure of fertile lands from the indigenous by invading Europeans. However, West Africanists, in general terms, are not that interested in changes in land before the twentieth century.

⁵ Birgit Englert and Elizabeth Daley. *Women's Land Rights and Privatization in Eastern Africa* (Woodbridge, UK; Rochester, NY: James Currey; Kampala [Uganda]: Fountain Publishers; Nairobi [Kenya]: EAEP; Dar es Salaam [Tanzania]: E&D Vision, 2008), p. 4.

⁶ John W Bruce and Shem E Migot-Adholla, *Searching for Land Tenure Security in Africa* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1994), p. 4

land and they suggested that land tenure arrangements in Africa are dynamic and have historically adapted to changing political, economic and technological changes.⁷

This study shows that land tenure systems along the banks of the Gambia River did not only transformed fundamentally over time, but the conditions that shaped land tenure were flexible and dynamic.⁸ The major source of changes in land tenure in this area includes conquests, migrations, the development of cash cropping and the nineteenth century jihads. Before British authority began altering African customs and the rise of militant Islam, male members of the Mandinka ruling aristocracy managed, through the use of political power, to maintain monopoly ownership of the best land along the river's banks, which enabled them to use the land to increase their wealth and to further strengthen their political power. The tendency was for the burden of taxation and other forms of exploitation to be placed on the subjects of the *mansas* including stranger families. Initially this made the latter more dependent upon the elites, who assumed positions of authority in *kabilo*, village and state level. Chapter two shows that these elites sought in land not just wealth but also political power and access to labor. Women and outsiders, in particular, were forced to seek permission from the men of the ruling aristocracy. Also *kabilo* heads and Alkalos used their ties to the land to attract dependents around them. Arguably, this is a form of landlord-tenant relationship – a form of patron-client relationship established around the access, “ownership” and/or control of land.

The “royal” monopoly control of land was however challenged and brought to an end during the nineteenth century jihads. As shown in chapter three, the jihads gave

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

many people the opportunity to challenge their former patrons, who were in the end successfully removed from power. More than ever before, families also tried to refashion inheritance rules by allowing sons to inherit from their fathers. This development coincided with the growth of cash cropping, which likewise occasioned far-reaching economic and social changes. With the expansion of peanut production, “old” towns flourished and new ones emerged. But one major consequence of the growth of cash cropping was process of further *land fragmentation*. In many instances, large *kabilo* households broke up into smaller *dabadas* forming a *banjonko* and situating itself on the periphery of the larger extended family. A similar process frequently involved a number of families who hive-off from their village forming a new settlement on the outskirts of the old settlement.

Indeed, the continuity and changes in local systems of land tenure were striking. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the old landlord-stranger relationships were recreated to suit an emerging economic system: cash cropping. The growth of cash cropping brought about a dynamic relationship between landlords and their strangers and/or dependents. This relationship transformed strangers as well as dependents and gave them a distinct outlook. This outlook has been described as “marks of tenancy.” Strangers and/or dependents often gave their hosts “rent” or tributes to their landlords and recognize the latter’s authority. In addition, the landlord was often regarded as a “father-figure.” An unmarried tenant frequently looked to his landlord for help in amassing the bride-wealth necessary for marriage, for advice, and for mediation in the event of a dispute. Should the stranger or dependent need material assistance (e.g. food and seeds) in a bad year, he could ask his landlord for help. Thus, it is important to note

that 'landlord-stranger' relationship were more than simple economic agreements. It was on a person-to-person basis. Often, it was important for having a landlord as patron since such patrons would usually have been members of the ruling lineages of a town or kingdom – that is those who traced descent from ancestors who either cleared the bush to form original settlement or conquered the land from others. These families were often thought of as been in the position to provide protection to their dependents from warfare or raiding in exchange for a payment or their labor. By drawing from documentary and oral sources, the dissertation documents the impact of these major events on systems of land tenure in the lower Gambia region. All these changes have had direct implications for land tenure, and lower Gambian society found the social means to adjust their tenure patterns to their new circumstances.

The use of oral sources (in the form of individual and group memories of past attitudes towards property and property ownership) is crucial to a study of this nature. In many remote villages located along the banks of the Gambia River one can find people who can speak of changing notions of property ownership that they have witnessed or have knowledge of. This is even more important if one considers the fact that before the advent of colonial rule, the peoples of the Senegambia in general and those of the lower Gambia in particular produced less of the materials historians traditionally consider as evidence – i.e. letters, dairies, travel logs, wills, property records, organizational papers, and government documents. Obviously, Europeans who either lived or visited the area in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have produced a considerable body of evidence vital in understanding African systems of land tenure. These documents were in the form of European (in both English and



French) travel accounts, letters, court records, scattered government circulars, annual reports, reports from special (land) committees, colonial correspondences, and most importantly commissioner's reports.

Overall, I make three important arguments in this dissertation. First, in challenging the view that Africans generally valued people more than land, the dissertation examines the political and social uses of land. In doing so, it shows that in considering land tenure in the lower Gambia River the peoples' social, political and religious considerations are no less important than the purely economic ones. This means that to emphasize on the productive uses of land is to overlook the value Africans placed on land. This is because Africans' own social and political way of thinking and operating were as important as the economics in shaping how people perceived or claimed land. Land has been a key focus of economic and political struggle among people living along the banks of the Gambia River. Most of these struggles over land have been about power and the ability to use land to control people. In fact, the value of land lay in the ability of people to exercise power over others by controlling peoples' access to it and as Sara Berry writes, long before the era of European conquest, the allocation and transfer of authority over land served as an important avenue of political competition and control among Africans.⁹ In fact, the ability to control or claim ownership to land depended on one's identity as a woman, a freeborn, an Islamic scholar, even as a slave. As a matter of fact, differentiation among individuals, households and communities depended not only in their size and demographic composition, but also because the households of certain individuals such

⁹ Sara Berry, *Chiefs Know Their Boundaries: Essays on Property, Power, and the Past in Asante, 1896-1996* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; Oxford: James Currey; Cape Town: David Philip, 2001), p. xix

as chiefs, Alkalos and Imams could create larger farms since they were able to summon additional labor from their slaves, clients and strange farmers. In this way, controlling people was a means of land accumulation.¹⁰

Second, I argue that continuity and change in systems of land tenure can be explained through the convergence of significant changes occurring in lower Gambian society during the “proto-colonial” era –i.e. the period representing the late pre-colonial and early colonial era. The transformations discussed in the dissertation occurred following the ending of the Atlantic slave trade and resulted, in the severed decades after 1830, in the overthrow of the Mandinka aristocracy and royal control of land. Many lower Gambian village residents only had the right of use to the farmlands they cultivated and newcomers had to seek permission from those in authority before they could establish their own settlement on the land or to use part of the land to cultivate crops.¹¹ It was in the mid nineteenth century when the aristocracy’s monopoly control of land was challenged and brought to a final end in a series of jihads.

Third, I also argue that the expansion of cash crop production (i.e. peanuts) in the mid nineteenth century did not lead to the growth in the market for land in rural communities. In most Gambian villages, until the end of colonial rule, local customs continued to forbid the transfer of land that involved some form of monetary exchange. In fact, Western influence on local attitudes toward property was minimal in most Gambian villages. Although native tribunals – comprised of men appointed by the European district commissioners – were created and empowered to deal with matters of

¹⁰ Kenneth Swindell and Alieu Jeng. *Migrants, Credit and Climate: The Gambian Groundnut Trade, 1834-1934* (Brill Leiden: Boston, 2006), p. 84

¹¹ NRS, CSO 10/71-Native Land Tenure, 1939

land tenure, these councils hardly altered the customary rules used to claim ownership to land. As a matter of fact, the position of the colonial administration with regard to land tenure practices was often contradictory. While it frequently advocated for a policy of non-interference in so-called customary tenure, it declared that all unused land in the colony and protectorate was taken over by the colonial state.

Indeed colonialism quickened the pace of changes in land tenure by intensifying the process of *land fragmentation*¹² and the adoption of Western property law.

However, in the Gambia, most of these changes occurred in urban areas and the wharf towns –which were often part of the Colony. Lands in these areas were declared Crown land.¹³ Here, both Africans and non-Africans were usually given the opportunity to hold land under such tenures. But, as I indicated in the previous chapter, it is misleading to assume that British notion of freehold ownership was adopted and enforced across the Gambia region. In most Gambian villages, access to land continued to be determined by local factors, even where the state regarded itself as owner of the land.¹⁴ It is equally misleading to assume that processes of *land fragmentation* only began in the twentieth century with the onset of colonialism. This chapter highlights the contradictions in colonial land policies in the Gambia and shows the changes and continuity in land tenure in the colonial setting.

As the chapters show, my approach to land in this study is both chronological and thematic. The chapters on the militant Islamic movements, the cash crop production

¹² John Bruce, “A Perspective on Indigenous Land Tenure Systems and Land Concentration” in R. E. Downs and S. P. Reyna (ed.) *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1988), p. pp. 31-32

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 23

¹⁴ John Bruce, “A Perspective on Indigenous Land Tenure Systems and Land Concentration” in R. E. Downs and S. P. Reyna (ed.) *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1988), 23

and the early colonial rule overlapped considerably, and in effect covering the same time periods. This is important to highlight because historians often draw a sharp line between the pre-colonial era and the colonial. But the historical circumstances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Gambia region does lend itself to this sharp dichotomy. This period represent an era that is perhaps best described as the “proto-colonial” era – i.e. that era marking the transition from the pre-colonial to the era of colonial rule.

The century was marked by increasing involvement of Europeans (i.e. the British) in the Gambia. As early as 1816, the British had settled on St. Mary’s Island, built a small garrison there with a sizeable administration. Gradually, it expanded its “spheres of influence” to the Gambian hinterland by amalgamating MacCarthy Island and the Ceded Mile as well as Kombo St. Mary. But until the second half of the nineteenth century, mansas ruled the kingdoms that were located along the banks of the river although the British tended be involved either as allies or mediators in the wars that brought about their downfall.

The Gambia is a perfect place to explore changes in land tenure during the “proto-colonial” period. The presence of the British in the area made it possible to find a sizeable body of written documents. Many of these documents enables a historian to look at the evolving nature of land tenure in the early nineteenth century, from a time when most of the lower Gambia region was under the control of African chiefs (with a relatively minimal intervention by the British). It also it allows for an examination of both change and continuity in pre-existing practices and ideas well into the turn of the twentieth century – a period when the Gambia became a part of the British Empire.

The effect of this approach is to nuance or complicate the assumption about interest in people versus land and to show that lower Gambian societies value both, perhaps differently and differentially. It provides for an opportunity to challenge the assumption that “customary” rights over land ensured equal access to land all members of the community. Customs regulating access were generally discriminatory. As seen mentioned earlier, the only people that were favored were people from prominent lineages such as *mansas*, Alkalos, *kabilo* heads, marabouts and families who enjoyed the privileged of being first-settlers. Slaves, younger men and women as well as recent migrants could not compete with older men of freeborn class over the control of some land. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, land was used by the *landed aristocracy* to create dependents around them. These provided the “landlords” with the access to labor, rent and people that they can exercise some level of authority over them. Thus, even if landownership was not the basis of economic differentiation in much of Africa, in the lower Gambia valley it shaped social differentiation, and these were no less important in shaping its society and history.

Furthermore, the proposition that sub-Saharan Africa was characterized historically by land abundance and labor scarcity are broadly upheld.¹⁵ However, this study not only challenges this view but it also argues that value is not solely determined by population density or material constituents and people had a different view of which land was vacant or not. For people living along the banks of the Gambia River, “vacant” lands were not necessarily vacant. They viewed many of the “uncleared” forests as places where spirits dwell, meaning that they were often occupied by supernatural

¹⁵ Gareth Austin, “Resources, Techniques, and Strategies South of the Sahara: Revising the Factor Endowments Perspective on African Economic development, 1500–2000” *Economic History Review* (2007), p. 1

beings who will not tolerate their being disturbed. Moreover, some land possessed spiritual value, which also means that belief in spirits shaped local attitude toward land. Even in the twentieth century, farmers continued to rely on marabouts and diviners or nearby shrines to defend their property during times of conflict.

In the worldview of the people of the Lower Gambia region, there were “good” and “bad” spirits. The good spirits/gins were Muslims and the very bad ones were *kafirs*, non-Muslims. Areas that were occupied by the *ginne kafirs* did not constitute bad agricultural land or residential area. Ordinary people, who attempted to cultivate such areas either died, became impaired for the rest of their lives, secured poor harvests or abandoned their settlements forever. There are numerous abandoned sites along the banks of the Gambia River. But marabouts and diviners have in the past built a reputation of possessing the kind of power needed to drive away evil spirits from a forest or settlement. Yet, in discussing African land, many historians fail to differentiate between types of land. They often failed to distinguish between “spirit” lands, upland fields, swamp lands, and lands located in urban settlements. However, in the Gambia, as in many places, fertility, proximity to a river, and urban “space” all influenced attitudes to property ownership.

The nineteenth century changes necessitated the clearing of new land for the expansion of peanut farms. But since people believed that spirits occupied most of the uncultivated and un-cleared land, the marabouts had important role to play in this overall process. People believed that these are individuals who could convert undesirable land into a place suitable for residential or agricultural use. Marabouts were instrumental in negotiating with the invincible forces to leave the land. At times, they

managed to convert the animist *jinn*s into Islam and drive away those that refused to accept the faith and allow people to use the land.

There is a need to disaggregate property rights. For example, there is a distinction between use rights and the forms of *titular* control that was exercised by the *mansas* who accorded their dependents use rights to the land. In turn, the *mansa*'s subjects kept the land so long as they did not commit any crime warranting their banishment or failed to pay their *naamo* (i.e. taxes). Obviously, this form of right over property existed in early nineteenth century and before. A distinction between family rights and individual rights can also be made. However, the two were not always discernible. The notion of communal ownership of the land is questioned.

I hope this study will be of importance for Gambians as well as others in Africa as they struggle with ways to understand practices of landownership and property conflicts. In Gambia, as elsewhere, many conflicts during and since the pre-colonial period have centered on control of property particularly land. It is not possible to move toward long-term resolution of today's conflicts over land and resources without a deep understanding of their historical roots. This study focuses squarely on those roots, while, at the same time, exploring traditional means to resolve conflicts—means rooted in local power structures.

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