

Land, Power, And Dependency along the Gambia River, Late Eighteenth to Early Nineteenth Centuries

Assan Sarr

Abstract: The role of power over people and over land is an important issue in West Africa, with important implications for relationships between commoners and elites. Along with conquest, slave raiding, marriage, and procreation, control over land has enhanced the ability of chiefs and other elites to gain control over people, thus increasing their production and reinforcing social hierarchy and centralization of power. This article utilizes oral evidence and European documentary sources to examine the importance of the concept of “wealth-in-people” for understanding the significance of land in African societies. By focusing on the Gambia region, where both paddy and upland rice farming were practiced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the article contributes empirical observations to support the argument that control over both land and people played a central role in the accumulation of wealth in many African societies.

Résumé: Le rôle du pouvoir sur les gens et sur la terre est une question importante en Afrique de l'ouest, ayant des implications décisives pour les relations entre les roturiers et les élites. Avec la conquête coloniale, les raids d'esclaves, les traditions du mariage, la procréation, le contrôle des terres a renforcé la capacité des chefs et des autres élites à prendre le contrôle sur les gens, augmentant ainsi leur production et renforçant la hiérarchie sociale existante et la centralisation du pouvoir. Cet article utilise des preuves provenant de la tradition orale et des sources de documentaires européens pour examiner l'importance de la notion de “richesse en peuple” afin de comprendre la signification du rôle joué par le contrôle des terres dans les sociétés africaines. En se concentrant sur la région de la Gambie, où la culture du riz en

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Assan Sarr is an assistant professor of history at Ohio University. His research interests include oral history, slavery, and agrarian change and transformations in African land tenure systems. Some of his previous work has appeared in the *Journal of Mande Studies* and *Childhood in Africa: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Email: sarr@ohio.edu

paddy et en élévation était pratiquée à la fin du 18^{ième} et au début du 19^{ième} siècle, l'article contribue des observations empiriques pour soutenir l'argument selon lequel le contrôle des terres et des gens a joué un rôle central dans l'accumulation de la richesse dans de nombreuses sociétés africaines.

Key Words: Aristocratic rule; dependency; land control; Muslim clerics; wealth-in-people

Introduction

A story narrated by the Scottish traveler Mungo Park states that in the Gambia, in 1795, a man named Karfa rented “huts for the accommodation” of his slaves and a piece of land on which to use them to cultivate maize and other crops for their maintenance (1858:330). Karfa rented the land from the chief of Jindey—a settlement located somewhere along the banks of the Gambia River. While it is not clear in Park’s writing how many people depended on this chief for access to land, other sources suggest that across the Gambia River region chiefs and members of prominent lineages controlled access to land because political and social power rested with them. They also indicate that controlling access to land provided a means through which lineage or personal wealth was augmented, and that not all Africans enjoyed equal access or rights to land.

Karfa’s story is an early example of a well-studied phenomenon: the ability of landowners in many parts of Africa to collect rents from strangers seeking land favorably located in relation to export markets. The story highlights the broader significance of land in creating a system of dependency that gave elite families their privileged lifestyles. Before British authority began altering African customs, land in the Mandinka-dominated states of the Gambia, as in other parts of the Senegambia, could not be acquired as a simple commodity; nor could it be traded in such a way as to divorce it from the social and political context that gave it value (see Barry 1998). As in other African societies, land ownership was tied to the production and reproduction of social and political relationships, which social scientists have called landlord–stranger relationships. Such relationships were one “of dependence and protection [and] involved power [which] was durable and regular” (Beedle 1980; interview with Fafa Jobe, Kumbija Village, Sabach-Sanjaj, Dec. 14, 2008). Before the mid-nineteenth century, the region’s landholders carried with them the title *bankuttiyolu* (meaning “owners of the land”). The *mansolu*, or chiefs, and their courts used their political power and monopoly control of the land along the river basin of the Gambia to keep many people as dependents, not just slaves.

The strategies employed by aristocratic lineages in their effort to control land speaks to the importance of “wealth-in-people” as a basis for political power and material wealth. Over the past couple of decades many Africanists

have creatively employed this concept of “wealth-in-people” to analyze the complex relations between African elites’ and commoners’ considerations of economic, social, and political dimensions of land use and labor relations. In fact, wealth-in-people, which has been perceived as a distinctive feature of African economies, has been part of the literature on West Africa for quite some time. It has featured prominently in the literature on African slavery, and students of postemancipation economies have taken it up as well (see Berry 2001).

The slave studies have popularized the view that in Africa, people (i.e., women, sons, and slaves) were the primary measure of wealth.¹ Much of this scholarship claims that powerful individuals exerted social and political control only over other people, not land. For instance, Martin Klein (1980) argued that because in Africa land was in abundance, people had no trouble gaining access to it. While John Thornton (1998) rejects claims that precolonial African population densities were low, he also claims that control was exercised more over people than over land. He says that slaves were the only form of private, revenue-producing property recognized in African law, and owning land in Africa meant nothing more than owning a piece of dirt. The anthropologist Jack Glazier (1985) also asserts that among the Mbeere of western Kenya land control was not a basis for socioeconomic differentiation because there was plenty of land available for everyone.

The studies of the decline of slavery and the growth of cash cropping in nineteenth- and twentieth-century West Africa contradict the above interpretations of African attitudes to land and labor. In fact, this literature offers a more nuanced analysis of the changing values of land and labor. It shows that population growth, urbanization, cash cropping, and colonialism resulted in the commoditization of both land and labor (see Berry 1975; Hill 1963; see also Austen 1995 for a somewhat different view about the Asante region of Ghana). The growth of cash cropping, for example, involved large-scale migration of farmers into scarcely inhabited territories. Using money they acquired from selling cash crops, migrants would buy land, clear new farmland, or enter into agreements with landlords, “paying [them] a share of the crop at the end of the season” in return for land allocated to them. At times they would pay “tributes” to local chiefs (Swindell & Jeng 2006:47). But in some areas, as Kristin Mann (1995) demonstrates, the growing of cash crops allowed individuals (including slaves) to invest in land and dependents. Historical research on this period further reveals that African attitudes to controlling land and people were far from static and that African elites adapted their strategies of accumulating dependents. At the same time, the literature appears to assume that the abundance of “vacant” land limited the exploitative powers of prominent families. Sara Berry (1975), for example, claims that in western Nigeria laborers with access to land could negotiate reasonable terms from employers.

The article is not necessarily a refutation of the wealth-in-people theory. But as a case study, it suggests that some scholars have interpreted African

understandings of the concept of wealth-in-people narrowly by limiting it to the condition of owning people. When African oral informants say that people constituted wealth, they probably do not mean that people only were the wealth. The evidence from the Gambia region seems to indicate that they also are referring to the tangible social and material things dependents bring to their hosts, masters, kin/community, or families. Thus, while much has been written on the relevance of the concept in understanding West African societies, it still remains an important topic to discuss, since control over both land and people has played a central role in the accumulation of wealth in many African societies. Although this article engages critically with the historiography of land tenure in Africa, it has been inspired by the fact that Senegambian historiography generally neglects the study of land. Here, landholding and land use practices have been an important topic of study for anthropologists and other social scientists but not much for historians (see Galvan 2004; Kea 2010; Watts 1993). Further, this research calls for more attention to the nineteenth-century Mandinka aristocracy and their interactions with their subjects. Unlike in northern Ghana, where, as Wyatt MacGaffey claims in regard to Nanun, “chiefs had very little authority over the people” (2013:21), evidence for the Gambian states is consistent with the familiar argument that chiefs and lineage heads exercised control over land principally by allocating it to others—e.g., followers, junior relatives, and subordinates as well as strangers—to settle on and use to support themselves and their dependents.

Because the lower Gambia basin is a riverine area, where the Mandinka engaged in rice farming, it is a perfect location to examine this topic. Rice, and specifically paddy rice, is grown on the same plot year after year. This is different from the swidden model of agriculture found elsewhere in Africa. Since paddies are productive for generations, Africans attach a great deal of value to them. Although the European sources for the Gambia do not reveal much competition for land, systems of land tenure were considerably integral to the people’s social, political, and religious institutions. Land control was at the heart of the privileged existence of the elite families.

Overview of the Region’s Political and Social Organization

The lower Gambia basin comprises the tiny stretch of land on both sides of the Gambia River from the Atlantic coastline to about one hundred miles into the interior. Historically, its land is well watered and ideal for paddy and upland rice cultivation. As such, this area was mostly an agricultural region, with several small villages standing within a short distance from the River Gambia. Until the mid-nineteenth century this region was dominated by prominent Mandinka lineages that imposed themselves as the rulers either through a series of conquests or through alliances they built with other groups. These lineages established a number of small states described by the nineteenth-century missionary William Mositer as “independent states” (1866:34). Some of these states were Kombo, Kiang, and Jarra—all

three located on the south bank of the Gambia River. Niumi, Jokadu, Baddibu, and Saloum were established on the north bank. Each of these states had a diverse ethnic population and loose ties with the Mandinka state of Kaabu, which was located south of the Gambia River (see Barry 1998; Hawthorne 2003, 2010; Green 2009, 2012). The basis of administration was the hierarchical system involving family, village, and state.

Until the late nineteenth century chiefs ruled the area without significant interference from English traders and colonialists, on the one hand, or from militant Muslims, on the other. The *mansa* (Mandinka word for “king”) was the head of the state. He represented the figure of leadership of all the state’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” (2010:94). As head of the state, he had a variety of responsibilities. His primary duty was to keep order (see Quinn 1972; Gamble 2006). Supporting the *mansa* were an army and a group of specialists such as hunters and Muslim clerics who helped him defend his family and territory. The Muslim clerics were attached to most of the Senegambia courts (Klein 1968). The powers of the *mansa* were by no means unlimited. The *mansa* was required, at least in theory, to follow the advice of leaders of the principal lineages of towns and villages in his state. Also, in these states political competition was not uncommon and posed challenges to the *mansa*’s authority. While succession disputes were probably rare in the Gambian Mandinka states, the sharing of taxes, tolls charged on traders, and other revenues from the use of the land sometimes caused friction between competing lineages (Quinn 1972).

Each Mandinka state was subdivided into villages, with each comprising between four and a dozen extended families. Each state was composed of core villages that were sometimes referred to as “royal towns.” In Kombo such villages included Busumbala, Yundum, Jambur, and Brikama. Niumi’s royal villages were Essau, Berending, and Bakindiki. The lineages that controlled these villages played an active role in state affairs. They had their own land, originally acquired through permission from the state’s rulers, or by conquest or being the first to clear a forest (or unused land) on which they established the village.

In the past a village could have multiple elite families that shared power and enjoyed similar privileges, including greater access to land and participation in other matters involved in the day-to-day running of the village. When this occurred, the position of *alkaliyya* (village head) normally rotated between the different families that founded the village. If one family founded the village, the eldest male member of that lineage was normally the *alkalo* (pl. *alkalolu*) or *satetio*, which literally means owner of the village; heads of the village’s other prominent lineages served as his council (see Curtin 1975).² Initial occupation or evidence of the utilization of sections of a forest by farmers and/or hunters was usually enough of a basis for claiming land ownership. However, a few *alkalolu* acquired their positions from appointment by a reigning *mansa*. As commissioner of the South

Bank Province of the newly created Gambia colony was told in 1893, “it was the custom on the founding of a new town for the ‘king’ to appoint the alcaide [alkalo]; 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” (ARP 28/1,1893). However, the very idea of alkaliyya was founded on the notion of being the first founding lineage to settle in a village.³

The alkalo mediated disputes between individuals and families, ranging from land disputes, to theft, to marriage feuds. He worked with the chief and other community leaders in collecting taxes, summoning manpower for military pursuits, drafting labor from the village to work on the mansa’s farms, policing the village, and taking other actions that would help maintain peace and state security. The village had been from early times the unit that formed the basis of social life, with this importance persisting throughout the nineteenth century and down to the last century. As in other regions of the Senegambia, agriculture and the land were the basis of rural life in the lower Gambian villages.

Another level of organization was the family compound, which formed the village. In every village, particularly in Mandinka communities, family groups were gathered into wards commonly referred to as *kabilo* (extended family). Such families “may not even share a common ancestor,” although they could decide to live together and share the land among themselves (interview with Alkalo Dawda Sowe, Baffuloto village, Upper Niumi District, July 23, 2006). Accordingly, it was from these founding lineages that alkalolu and kabilo heads were chosen (see Gamble 2006). It was more common in some villages for people in the same kabilo to have the same clan name, though, as Quinn (1972) writes, in large and complex kabilolu there could be many strangers and slaves, unrelated to the founding lineage. Most of these strangers and slaves held inferior status within this social unit (also see CSO 2/94,1906a).

If family members undertook the collective clearing of the forest, the land was designated *maruo* (in Mandinka) and as such was inalienable from the members of the group or family. 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 use rights to a portion of that land, which belonged to the whole family (Carney & Watts 1991). Individual women and men, however, were able to establish land-ownership rights by clearing land with their own labor. This was especially true in areas where paddy rice was grown. The Mandinka called this type of land *kamanyango*. Although the earliest references to these individualized plots of land date back only to the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of oral sources suggest that individual ownership of *kamanyango* fields has been a part of Mandinka landholding customs for a long time. For the Jola, too, a system of individual ownership existed (CSO 2/94,1906b). Robert Baum (1999) argues that 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 children.

As “elders of the land,” the *kabilo* heads and *alkalolu* presided over the distribution and allocation of land and settled disputes in their communities. This was probably the most important function of the *kabilo* head since polygamous households, as Emily Osborn (2011) writes, can be antagonistic due to competition among co-wives, brothers, and children of different mothers. Also, “village” land (which essentially means uncleared land controlled by the village’s prominent families) could only be assigned to newcomers with the permission of the *alkalo* and *kabilo* heads. Like land, agricultural production was organized around the family units, called *dabadalu* (sing., *dabada*) by the Mandinka (see Kea 2004). Each year members of the same *dabada* undertook the clearing, weeding, planting, and harvesting of farmlands together. A compound might contain one or more *dabadalu* (interviews with *Alkalo* Dawda Sowe, Bafuloto Village, North Bank Region, July 23, 2006; Musa Konateh, Bafuloto village, North Bank Region, July 23, 2006). One 1940 land report summed this up nicely: “In the old days each [family] made one communal *koos* [millet] farm which supplied food (with the women’s rice farms) for the whole [compound]. Permission must be asked every year from the *kabilo* head, but the use of the land [was often not denied] except for very good and exceptional reasons” (CRN 1/10,1940).⁴

Wolof, Mandinka, and Fula family structure sometimes reflected a tripartite social arrangement, in which there were the freeborn, those belonging to the endogamous occupational groups such as griots, smiths, and woodworkers, and slaves.⁵ Although in these societies domestic slaves enjoyed certain rights, they still worked in the fields to produce the wealth that the elders enjoyed. Along with other male members of their master’s family they grew crops, raised animals, fetched wood from the forest, and ran errands for their elders. Masters also granted their slaves land. As Martin Klein writes, “like other dependents, the male [slave] generally had his own piece of land. As he grew older, he devoted more of his time to his own plot” (1977:346). But Mandinka elders insisted that such land would not be considered his property. Rather, it belonged to the master, the head of the family. That means that not all members of the *kabilo* enjoyed equal rights to the land. Just like strangers, a slave could never become *kabilo* head in his owner’s household.⁶

Obviously, not all lower Gambian ethnic groups developed this form of social and political stratification. One of the few groups that lacked the type of political centralization described above was the Jola.⁷ Among the Jola of Foni, power was relatively well dispersed. The Jola did not have chiefs until at the turn of the twentieth century. Instead, like their Balanta neighbors, they displayed many elements of gerontocracies (see Hawthorne 2003). In Foni, the Jola territory on the south bank of the Gambia River, political power and access to land were based on gerontocracy. Elders controlled the means of production and access to women.

The concepts of power and domination are important in understanding systems of land tenure as they were practiced along the riverbanks of the Gambia during the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. Though eighteenth-century European documents are generally silent about the importance of land in Senegambian society, oral sources indicate that the ruling class exercised much power and influence in matters of land allocation. For chiefs, village heads, and heads of prominent lineages, more land under cultivation meant more taxes, more gifts, and more hands to work the chief's field (Klein 1998). Ties to land were the basis of leadership at the village and kabilo level. At the local, family, or village level, people generally held authority and claimed power by virtue of their age and descent status. Access to land, therefore, divided society into "landlords" and "strangers," "first-comers" and "latecomers," or "aristocrats" and "nonaristocrats."

The Relative Importance of Land and People: Lower Gambia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries

Juffure was an important village in the small precolonial Mandinka state of Niumi. Located on the banks of the Gambia River, Juffure had long attracted European and African traders who exchanged slaves and a long list of commodities from around the Atlantic world. Oral traditions indicate that an elite family, the Taal, founded Juffure. As Donald Wright (2010) explains, this family, as early as the 1760s, became a recognized clerical family. Descendants of this family say their ancestors came from Futa Toro, in the middle Senegal River valley, and built their settlement on the Gambia's riverbank in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The Gambian Mandinka called them *Toranko* (i.e., Fula speakers with origins from Futa Toro). Elders of this family claim that their ancestors settled on the land where Juffure is now located at the request of mansa Jenung Wuleng Sonko so they could be near enough to do divining work for him.⁸ Niumi's elders also say that the same Sonko lineage that gave land to the Taal of Juffure rewarded another important clerical family, the Fatty of Aljamdu, with land on which they founded their village.

A few miles away from Niumi, across the river, in Kombo, oral traditions indicate that Modiba Ceesay, the founder of Mandinari, migrated from Pakao to settle along the banks of the Gambia River. According to the story, he was given permission to found his own village by the mansa of Kombo, who at the time was based in Yundum. Like all strangers, Moriba had to pay taxes to the chief.⁹ But when the chief's daughter, Madibba Bojang, got sick, she was taken to Moriba (who allegedly was a renowned cleric) to be treated. After this happened, the ruler gave his daughter to Modiba and declared that he would exempt Mandinari from paying any taxes or tributes for using the land. Moriba continued to offer his services to the mansa and his family. When one of Bojang's uncles later decided to move to Madinari, he was warned by the reigning mansa never to claim the

alkaliyya. In addition, as early as the seventeenth century Senegambian courts had Muslim clerics serving as advisers, scribes, and spiritual guides to the nobility (Jobson 1904; Park 1858; Klein 1968). Many of them were allowed to create their own settlements, which they called *morokundas*. These Muslim communities had Quranic schools and believers who fasted during the month of Ramadan and followed Muslim dietary laws. Initially many of these clerics were probably Fula and Jahanke, as they were among the first to be attracted to Islam (Sanneh 1989; Wright 2010).

These stories are snapshots of a larger process that was already occurring in the lower Gambia region. The stories are about elites (chiefs, alkalulo, and clerics) who controlled both land and people. Unlike other West African societies where a distinction existed between “chiefs of the land” and “chiefs of the people,” this distinction did not exist in the lower Gambia region. Historically, the Mandinka aristocracy managed to maintain monopoly ownership of the best land along the river (Quinn 1972). Niumi’s mansa, like Jindey’s ruler, controlled both land and people because these provided him with concrete material and political benefits. It is not a concern here whether this kind of authority over land amounts to ownership in the modern sense of the word. Rather, emphasis is placed on how controlling land was particularly useful in the formation of the kinds of personal dependency upon which African societies were based.

Though a recent book, *Farmers and the State in Colonial Kano* by Steven Pierce, criticizes European sources for “inventing” or “fetishizing” African land tenure (2005:6), an eighteenth-century source confirms Quinn’s assertions. In the 1790s Mungo Park said 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 territory on condition of forfeiture if the lands were not brought under cultivation by a given period. (1878 [1799]:241–42)

If strangers wanted land on which they sought to set up their own village, it was customary to approach the mansa or one of his alkalolu. In 1939 a local colonial administrator was told by Mandinka elders that in times long past, “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” (CSO 10/71,1939).

Many oral sources suggest that controlling land provided a means to control people, or that the two are related and cannot be separated. Elites frequently acquired land and people by building alliances with other prominent families, attracted “wealthy” migrants, or rewarded clerics with land and/or wives for services they rendered to them. Many local narratives

repeated by local residents interviewed in 2006 and 2008 tell how a *marabout* came into the region, often on the request of a mansa, rendered his services to that chief, and received a wife and a plot of land in return.¹⁰ They tell how clerics were able to bring their particular skills into areas, persuaded the mansalu of their value, and consequently received land. They settled in villages or created their own, attracted students and followers, and performed their magico-religious work, which the Mandinka call *moriya*.

Given the vast spiritual power they had, clerics assisted prominent families in solidifying their power base. Through their help, chiefs and their lineages could get rid of evil spirits that occupied their forestlands. Clerical work (especially Islamic learning and *moriya*) represented a different kind of distinction and power, and one not necessarily under the control of chiefs. Still, sources hint that the ruling class offered many clerics land because they brought with them many people, material wealth, and spiritual power. With this land and other related privileges, clerics were able to reinforce their power and standing in society. Here, as elsewhere, 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 (Shipton & Goheen 1992; Shipton 1994; Berry 2001). With their privileged access to land, clerics like Moriba Ceesay were able to keep a relatively large number of dependents as wives, children, students (known as *talibes*), clients, and slaves (see Sanneh 1989).

In 1824 Captain Alexander Findlay, an Englishman, described clerics as “pests to society all of whom were living upon the public” (CSO 1/2, 1824). Their students and clients worked for them in return for their blessing, and with this type of free, voluntary labor they earned the reputation of being the most successful farmers in the region. However, while clerics were users of slave labor, much of their economic survival was not significantly dependent on servitude alone. There was little need to use coercion to get people to work for them or to rely exclusively on forced labor, which was comparatively more expensive to acquire. Hence, in the lower Gambia region, like elsewhere in the subregion, slavery was only one of many types of dependency and existed alongside other types of labor (Lovejoy 2000; Searing 1988).

Mandinka chiefs and prominent families occasionally transferred land to other lineages as a way to forge kinship bonds and build alliances with families to strengthen their grip on the regional politics and economy.¹¹ A popular story about the founding of Yundum and Busumbala seems to support this (NCAC/OHAD, 1973; CSO 10/71, 1939b). According to the tradition, Karafa Yali Jatta, a great hunter from Kaabu, began wandering the thick forest of Kombo called Sanyang Sutubaa in search of better land to settle. When he arrived in Kombo—at the time under the female ruler Wuleng Jabbi, a mythical figure whom some griots claimed was a *jinn* (evil spirit)—Jatta decided to stay and marry into Wuleng Jabbi’s family. By doing so, Jatta not only assumed leadership of Kombo, he also assumed the

“ownership” of Kombo’s land (NCAC/OHAD,1973,1976). He then 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 it all came under the tight control of these newly created “royal” towns. As time went on, the narrative continues, the settlements continued to expand. New villages emerged either through groups breaking off from the original settlements or from migrant populations that settled after the Kombo mansa granted them permission. Yali’s settlement in Busumbala is hard to date with precision, though Paul J. Beedle (1980) posits that Mandinka domination of Kombo did not take place until the seventeenth century. Although we may never know if this event ever took place, the story echoes the importance of marriage and alliances in either creating or maintaining the integrity of the state. It also highlights the centrality of land in the political and social history of the Gambia River basin.

From this story, it is possible to argue that if alliances were among the means through which communal bonds were forged, control of land was one of the lubricants used by local actors to grease such relationships. According to Mandinka elders I interviewed in 2006, it is these bonds that keep families intact. With a large *dimbaya* (family) and strong “ties” to the land, one can cultivate more land and achieve a higher social and political standing. As in the words of the popular Mandinka proverb, “strangers [particularly wealthy strangers] make the village prosper” (quoted in Wright 2010:38), Senegambia’s rulers were generally more enthusiastic in welcoming “wealthy” migrants into their states. Strangers with greater access to wealth attracted the most attention from the local rulers. Persons with large herds of cattle, sheep, and goats were welcomed to settle in the Mandinka-led states of the Gambia River basin, but they needed land on which to farm and graze their animals. Here livestock was highly valued (interview with Jali Kebba Suso, Wuli Passimas, Upper River Region, Aug. 12, 2008). Like land, possession of livestock was another means of measuring not only a person’s wealth, but also that of the community. If a person prospered, he shared that prosperity with the community and its leaders. This relates to the interplay between the public and private domain. In the Gambia region, individual rights to land did not mean that the individual or family was completely divorced from a communal view or rights to the land, even though individual rights to land did translate into power and wealth for those individuals. As Nwando Achebe (2005) argues for Igboland, in lower Gambian culture the individual and the community were not in sharp contrast or in opposition to each other. Yet it has been a major preoccupation in Western thought to make the analytical distinction between the public and the private, as if this opposition exists. In the Gambia region, strangers with some measure of wealth were often accorded land and protection, and were easily incorporated into the community or lineage/kinship networks. Some of the wealthier strangers would marry into the elite families that either founded the community or administered it. As a Wolof

man told me in an interview, a *surga* (strange farmer) cannot refuse giving to his host" (interview with Imam Siaka Jobe, Sanchi Paalen, North Bank Region, June 1, 2008).

Until the mid-nineteenth century, chiefs were also interested in land because it enabled them to exercise control over "strangers"—both African and European—who paid tributes and taxes to the rulers for using the land (CSO 10/71c; Brooks 1993; Quinn 1972). As Karfa's relations with the chief of Jindey suggests, dependents or strangers of any ethnic background paid taxes and rents or provided services to the Mandinka aristocracy. As the missionary William Fox noted in 1850, subjects paid tributes "to the sovereign of the country for the land which they hold. Being thus dependent, they suffer much at times" (1850:237). Donald Wright states that Niumi's "ruling lineages obtained surplus grain and cotton through taxation and slave production. Following [the] harvest, village heads supervised collection of about one-tenth of village production and conveyed it to the mansa's village" (2010:99). Local rulers also prospered from the tolls they charged on the goods of traders passing through their states and from the rents and proceeds from land leased to Europeans (Quinn 1972; Beedle 1980). These taxes or tributes were sometimes exploitative. Many of Senegambia's *nyancho*, or elite warrior families, probably lived on "portions of the produce of the nonroyal lineages in the state for the royal court and state soldiers" (Wright 2010:35). Several informants claimed that less formal traditions permitted no limits to what the ruling class could demand from their subjects.¹² They claimed that chiefs and their sons could seize cattle, land, or even millet or rice granaries belonging to one of their subjects, particularly if he failed to show deference to any member of the ruling family. Elders claim that the mansa maintained himself and his lifestyle by levying taxes on people for occupying the land and cultivating it.

Owning slaves (or controlling people) had a purpose: in a predominantly agricultural society, elites and wealthy individuals sought to increase their dependents (wives, children, and slaves) in order to use them to cultivate the land. Even though owning slaves or having a large family bestowed an elevated status on the master or kabilo head, these people were mostly valued for their labor on the land, which admittedly many scholars have acknowledged, though they tend to overlook the political and social value of land to the Africans.¹³ Oral sources claim that each mansa had a royal field and needed labor to work on the land. By claiming to be the *bankutiyo* (the owner of the land), he would call on the young men from the villages under his authority to work on his fields. According to oral traditions, it was customary during the rainy season for villages to send some of their young men to work in one of the mansa's farms (interview with Jali Kebba Suso, Wuli Passimas, Upper River Region, Aug. 12, 2008). The royal fields were notoriously the largest within the state. Harvests from these fields and contributions from his subjects enabled the mansa to keep a granary, which was also an important measure of wealth. Like the royal fields, these granaries were the most numerous, the first filled, and the last emptied.¹⁴ The elites

also invested in horses and cattle. Keeping these animals required a lot of labor. Subordinates did most, if not, all of the work. My research supports James Searing's (1993:28) claim that precolonial Senegambia's monarchies were mostly "predatory"—and I must add, exploitative. As one missionary observed in the nineteenth century, 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" (Anonymous, *The Christian Traveller* 1841:97).

Although chiefs commanded the most slaves, most of those who worked for them were probably from the freeborn class. Slaves could not be acquired easily, since their acquisition involved the risky practices of raiding or declaring war against enemies. The easiest option was to turn to the lower class (*badola* in Wolof). Perhaps similar to the nineteenth-century Sangalan, a people living in what is now part of Guinea, in the lower Gambia elites and their families crafted traditions establishing their claims to control scarce resources such as land and labor (N'Daou 2005). They treated many of their subjects as if they were their own slaves. A nineteenth-century source noted that the mansa's subjects were "little distinguished from slaves in appearance. [The mansa] make all under their power" (Anonymous, *The Christian Traveller* 1841:97). A few decades earlier, Mungo Park described the conditions of the Fula, a semipastoralist group, as a "state of subordination" (1878[1799]:15). They held inferior rights to the land and were forced to work for their Mandinka overlords.

Though relationships between the aristocratic and the nonaristocratic families were often exploitative, many people sought such dependency. Families needed the protection of their hosts and especially the political elites. As Shula Marks (1986:2) contends, domination operates not simply through "coercion"; it also occurs under "concessions." Being masterless in uncertain times increased one's vulnerability, especially when faced with severe droughts, wars, and abuses from the often cruel and predatory nyancho aristocratic families. Having a landlord or maintaining affinities to a prominent lineage offered protection and survival in a relatively hostile environment. In times of hardship or political uncertainty, it would be necessary to call upon others, including distant kinspeople or a powerful lineage, for protection and support. Because of this, less privileged individuals or families developed a patron–client system with the ruling class that tended to allow the former to gain access to land and enjoy some privileges.

Because of the advantages accorded by land, the Mandinka aristocracy continued well into the first half of the nineteenth century to establish tight control over the land, especially along the banks of the Gambia River. For instance, in December 1823, soon after missionaries from the Society of Friends arrived in Brikow (Bakau, a town situated at Cape St. Mary in the

territory of the mansa of Kombo), a piece of land was given to them after they sought permission from the mansa. 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” (Anonymous, *The Christian Traveller* 1841:170). Wherever the mansa decided to settle a stranger, the person had to attach himself (or was assigned) to a local landlord—a host who would oversee the person’s dealings with others.

In the states where power rotated between two or more lineages, the reigning mansa was required to consult the heads of the other lineages that were eligible for the office of the mansa. This was the case in Kombo, where the Bojang family of Yundum and the Jatta of Busumbala took turns in ruling the state. It was also the case in Niumi, where three lineages—the Jammeh, Manneh, and Sonko—constituted the ruling class. When Burungai Sonko was signing the 1826 treaty that ceded part of his state to the British, he had with him “his chiefs and Headmen—including Seney the Alcaide of Juffure” (ARP 35/2, 1896). In another treaty signed on November 18, 1850, “Amado Tall (Alkali of Jillifree [Juffure]) and Mahmoudi Sankoor (Alkalo of Berending and brother of the king) accompanied Mansa Demba Sonko” (Parliamentary Papers, Select Committee on Africa, 1865:410–11).¹⁵ These individuals were either the oldest men of the senior branch of the line claiming direct descent from the original founder-settler of the community or were representing such men (see Quinn 1972). Thus it should not be surprising that these alkalolu were present when the treaties were being signed by Niumi’s mansa.

For sure, not all precolonial states were alike, and African local attitudes toward land differed from place to place. As McCaskie demonstrates for Asante, chiefs could actually transfer control over land and people to others in exchange for gold, but they did this when obliged to raise gold to “buy their heads”—that is, pay fines for offenses committed against the state—not as a form of commercial transaction unrelated to political imperatives (1995:38). In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Yoruba states, by contrast, it seems that precolonial chiefs exercised power primarily through military force and/or reputation, rather than allocation of land, and they accumulated wealth in the form of people and material goods, rather than collecting tribute from settlers on their land. However, in the Gambia, while aristocratic power depended on control of people, it seems that land was the foundation upon which such dependency was formed.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is not to diminish the importance of slavery (or owning people) in West Africa or to claim that no one has ever given land serious attention (although there are historians who argue that precolonial

Africans valued slaves more than land). This study seeks to analyze the important ways in which power and culture shaped land relations in the precolonial era. Any discussion of slavery or other types of dependency should take into account the subtle but larger sociopolitical and economic context in which they existed. By placing those who received permission to settle and farm in a position of obligation to whoever gave that permission, allocations of land created, or at least reinforced, relations of authority and subordination between elites and commoners, allowing the former to expand the number of their subjects and the extent of their territories. The examples of missionaries and other early European settlers who were subject to the same obligations are particularly telling examples of the way Mandinka chiefs and elites used land as a source of authority. Control of land and control of people were not mutually exclusive; they tended to reinforce each other. The ability to limit access to land provided a way for landholders to acquire people and through them, wealth or power. With more dependents (children, students of Muslim clerics, wives, or slaves), greater amounts of land could be brought under use. It was easier for people in power to claim additional land since they were successful in creating traditions that in turn entitled them to the land.

Attention to land tenure in the lower Gambia River—the intersection between land and power—also reveals that social, political, and religious considerations were no less important than purely economic ones. Africans' own ways of thinking and operating were as important as economics in shaping how people perceived or claimed land. That is, Mandinka chiefs 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. Control of land was a basis of social stratification in the Gambia River area. Distinction between “subjects” and “elites,” “landlords” and “strangers,” or “first settlers” and “latecomers” were all rooted in power structures and are crucial in understanding the system of land tenure that existed in the Gambia region. Every community in the lower Gambia valley had core lineages that considered themselves as the founders and owners, and therefore the rulers, of the land. Control of land and labor was at the heart of the privileged existence of these families.

Obviously, we may never know for sure if some of the oral traditions cited here are reliable or what really happened in the past. But we know that, as Abdoulaye-Bara Diop (1981) argued for the Wolof, lower Gambian societies were generally nonegalitarian, with much inequality and patterns of political, economic, and social domination. We also know that the land rights of some lineages were far superior to those of other families and that many Europeans who visited the Gambia region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mentioned that they paid rents and gave gifts to African chiefs in exchange for land to set up their trading posts. It is because of this evidence that I argue that if land was not the basis of political power, access to it was surely affected by local power dynamics.

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Notes

1. See Fage (1969); Klein (1980); Miller (1988); Guyer and Belinga (1995); Thornton (1998); Perinbam (1997).
2. In Wolof his title is *borom dekk* and in Fula it is *jom leidi* or *jom sare*.
3. Interviews with Alkalo Dawda Sowe (Bafoluto Village, North Bank Region, July 23, 2006); Ba Sainey Bojang (Bakau, Kanifing Municipality, May 26, 2008); Kabba Jaiteh (Tankularr Village, Kiang West District, Lower River Region, Aug. 7, 2008); and Alhagie Faa Ceesay (Mandinari, Kombo, Western Region, Aug. 8, 2008).
4. Philip Curtin (1975) confuses *kabilo* with the notion of *gale*, the latter being the Fula word for *compound*. Although both had an active head, the *kabilo* often comprised multiple nuclear families.
5. See Curtin (1975); Brooks (1993); Wright (2010); Quinn (1972).
6. Interviews with Malick Touray (Gunjur village, Kombo, Western Region, Aug. 15, 2008); Jali Kebba Suso (Wuli Passimas, Upper River Region, Aug. 12, 2008); Alhagie Kebba Jaiteh (Tankularr, Kiang, Lower River Region, Aug. 7, 2008); Alhagie Faa Ceesay (Mandinari, Kombo, Western Region, Aug. 8, 2008); and Imam Alhagie Momodou Lamin Bah (Serrekunda, Kanifing Municipality, June 30, 2006).
7. See Pélissier (1958, 1966); Linares (1981); Snyder (1981); Baum (1999).

8. Located on the Gambia's north bank, Juffure was an important commercial village in Niimi. Located near Albreda and the British-controlled island of St. James, Juffure is the place that the African American writer Alex Hailey claimed as the origin of his family's ancestor, Kunta Kinteh.
9. As in other West African states, here tribute was certainly a source of chiefly revenue. For example, in precolonial Akan states, and even more so in Yoruba states, tribute served to acknowledge the authority of chiefs and lineage heads rather than representing payments based on the amount of land used or the goods produced from it. Even in Asante, strangers were obliged to give gifts and/or pay tribute to the chief(s) in whose territories they settled—including a portion of anything of value they might find on the land. Before the twentieth century this was primarily gold, game, and other naturally occurring resources; in the colonial era, this "customary" rule was applied to cash crops, especially cocoa, and did indeed become a major source of wealth for chiefs and a bone of contention between chiefs and cocoa farmers (see, e.g., McCaskie 1980, 1995; Amanor 2008; Boni 2006). However, unlike in these societies, where tributes resembled a tax on persons (or heads of households) rather than a rent on land, in the Gambia region the line between tax or tribute on people and tribute/taxes on land is blurred. One thing that seems certain is that throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries both African and European strangers were expected to pay for lands they "rented" from those that the Mandinka called the *bankutiyoulu*.
10. Interviews with Kabba Jaiteh (Tankularr village, Kiang West District, Lower River Region, Aug. 7, 2008); Alkalo Dawda Sowe (Baffuloto village, Upper Niimi District, July 23, 2006); Imam Alhajie Momodou Lamin Bah (Serrekunda, Kanifing Municipality, June 30, 2006); Alkalo Luntang Jaiteh (Bakau, June 9, 2006); and Tida Touray and Momodou Fatty Touray (Serrekunda, April 21, 2008). Alkalo Luntang Jaiteh was also chairman of the Rent Tribunal of the Kanifing Municipal Council.
11. See Searing (2002) for discussion of this topic in the context of Wolof society.
12. Interviews with Alhagie Kebba Jaiteh (Tankularr, Kiang, Lower River Region, Aug. 7, 2008); Alhagie Faa Ceesay (Mandinari, Kombo, Western Region, Aug. 8, 2008); and Jali Kebba Suso (Wuli Passimas, Upper River Region, Aug. 12, 2008).
13. But few acknowledge that not everywhere in precolonial Africa was there equality in rights to land. Most simply claim that chiefs were only nominal custodians of the land and that a council of elders could overrule their decisions. No doubt this may have been true for many precolonial African societies, but not in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Gambian societies.
14. People also measured their wealth by the size of their millet and rice granaries.
15. Similarly, on Dec. 26, 1850, the Kombo mansa took his "council," Richard Graves MacDonnell, to Jeshwang when he was meeting the governor and commander-in-chief of the British settlements in the Gambia to sign a treaty to cede Kombo to the English. The mansa's delegation also included 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, Kassee Koonkong, Samba Deber (Dibba), Ansumana Jarta (chief of Bedjulo [Bijilo]), Lamin Sinney (Sainey) (the mansa's eldest son), and "chiefs of Kombo, and head-men of Baccon [Bakau] in the said kingdom of Kombo" (PRO 1865:411).