

## NOURISHING A STATELESS SOCIETY DURING THE SLAVE TRADE: THE RISE OF BALANTA PADDY-RICE PRODUCTION IN GUINEA-BISSAU\*

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay examines the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on stateless societies, focusing on Balanta populations of present-day Guinea-Bissau. It demonstrates that some decentralized groups located on the ‘slaving frontiers’ of states managed not only to survive but also to thrive. In so doing, it shows how Balanta changed their settlement patterns and crop production techniques in response to threats posed by the slave raiding armies of Kaabu. From the mid-seventeenth century, Balanta produced and traded large quantities of paddy rice by organizing workers into age grades.

**KEY WORDS:** Guinea-Bissau, slave trade, agriculture, decentralized societies.

RESEARCH on the pre-colonial history of populations of the sunken or *ria* coast between West Africa’s Saloum River and northern Liberia remains, as Boubacar Barry notes, ‘an unfulfilled task’.<sup>1</sup> Submerged by geologic activity, this marshy and mosquito-infested area is a difficult and, at times, uncomfortable place to live and to work. Its many rivers are subjected to tidal surges of brackish ocean water for tens of miles inland, making the farming of their mangrove-covered banks a challenging task. It possesses a great variety of ethnic groups, languages and political configurations and is home to a large number of decentralized and stateless or acephalous societies. Though a handful of scholars have sketched the broad outlines of the region’s historical landscape, they have typically placed the relatively homogenous populations of the great states that controlled the savanna-woodland interior, which is beyond the *ria* coastline’s edge, in the foreground of their studies.<sup>2</sup>

This essay begins to detail our understanding of West Africa’s sunken coastal zone. It arose from two contradictions that I encountered while conducting research in the stateless Balanta territories of Guinea-Bissau. First, in oral narratives and written sources dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Balanta are described as yam and maize farmers. Yet

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<sup>1</sup> B. Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1998), 317 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Among the best studies of the pre-colonial period are G. E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000–1630* (Boulder, 1993); C. Lopes, *Kaabunké, espaço, território e poder na Guiné-Bissau, Gâmbia e Casamance pré-colônias* (Lisbon, 1999); Barry, *Senegambia*; R. A. Lobban and P. K. Mendy, *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, 1997); J. Bowman, *Ominous Transition: Commerce and Colonial Expansion in the Senegambia and Guinea, 1857–1919* (Aldershot, 1997); and W. Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545 to 1800* (New York, 1970).

scholars have assumed that long before the arrival of Europeans in the region Balanta grew large quantities of paddy rice, a crop that is central to their lives today.<sup>3</sup> If their paddy-rice monoculture is not as old as scholars have thought, how, when and why did Balanta begin to cultivate the crop?

Second, in the nineteenth century, European observers said that Balanta territories were the most densely populated in Guinea-Bissau. Yet these territories were part of the 'slaving frontier' of one of West Africa's most powerful states, Kaabu.<sup>4</sup> According to conventional wisdom the violence associated with the slave trade should have severely limited the ability of acephalous groups in such areas to produce food crops. This notion is summed up by Albert van Dantzig who writes that 'the often mentioned negative effects of the slave trade, such as depopulation, decay of agricultural and general civilization and general insecurity must have been felt chiefly in those areas which were regularly the object of slave raids'. That is, famine must have been common in areas that failed to develop 'elaborate and highly centralized' systems of government, which were capable of directing armies to raid for slaves and to defend against attacks.<sup>5</sup> Speculating that coastal Guinea-Bissau was just such an area, Barry argues that decentralized populations in that region were 'decimated' by Kaabu, which possessed 'a powerful war machine devoted exclusively to manhunts'.<sup>6</sup> If Balanta populations were dense and growing in the nineteenth century, how had Balanta managed to defend themselves and to produce food crops for increasing numbers of people?

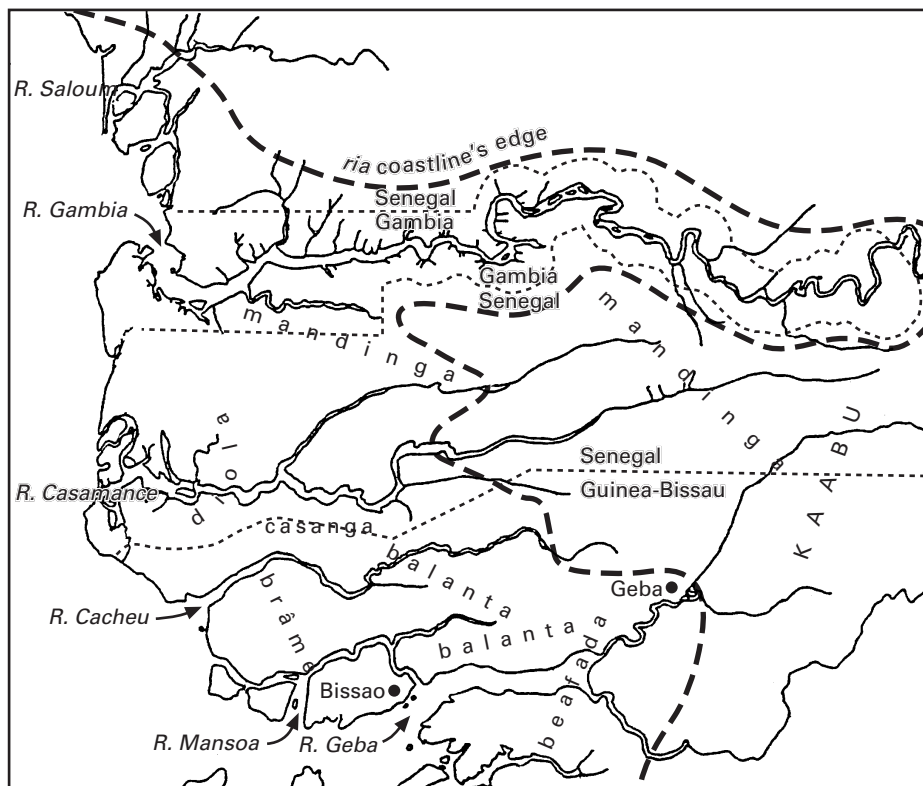
In reconciling these contradictions, this essay demonstrates that in the sixteenth century Balanta were dispersed across upland areas upon which they produced yams and other crops that required relatively small inputs of labor. Unable to afford large quantities of the expensive iron that was imported from the interior via long-distance trade routes, Balanta farmed largely with stone and wood tools. At the end of the sixteenth and start of the seventeenth century, the patterns of life in coastal Guinea-Bissau changed dramatically as violence associated with an expanding Atlantic slave trade proliferated. As Kaabu produced and traded captives over the course of the century that followed, Balanta began a long process of refashioning their social structures and agricultural practices to meet the challenges of a new

<sup>3</sup> W. Rodney, 'The Guinea Coast', in Richard Gray (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa, Vol. 4: from c. 1600 to c. 1790* (Cambridge, 1975), 223–334; Brooks, *Landlords*, 118; A.T. da Mota, 'A agricultura dos brames e balantas vista através da fotografia aérea', *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa*, 5 (1950), 154–5; D. L. Handem, 'O arroz ou a indentidade balanta brassa', *Soronda*, 1 (1986), 55–67; E. J. Santo, 'Notas sobre a cultura do arroz entre os balantas', *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa*, 4 (Apr. 1949), 197–232.

<sup>4</sup> Also written as Kaabú, Cabo, Gabú, Guabbu and Kabú.

<sup>5</sup> A. van Dantzig, 'Effects of the Atlantic slave trade on some West African societies', in J. E. Inikori (ed.), *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies* (New York, 1982), 187–201. Also, see H. A. Gemery and J. S. Hogendorn, 'The economic costs of West African participation in the Atlantic slave trade: a preliminary sampling for the eighteenth century', in Gemery and Hogendorn (ed.), *Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1979), 143–61; M. A. Klein, 'The impact of the Atlantic slave trade on the societies of the Western Sudan', in J. E. Inikori and S. L. Engerman (ed.), *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe* (Durham, 1992), 39–40.

<sup>6</sup> Barry, *Senegambia*, 81.



Map 1. Distribution of populations between the Rio Geba and Rio Gambia, c. 1650. After A. T. da Mota, *Mar, Além Mar* (Lisbon, 1972), 206-7.

era. That is, Balanta retreated to isolated and riverine areas near mangrove swamps. There they established defensive villages or *tabancas* and, for reasons inexorably linked to slave raiding and to an increased circulation of iron, developed and refined highly sophisticated paddy-rice production techniques. These techniques were being applied widely in the Rio Cacheu region by the mid- to late seventeenth century and in the Rio Geba region in the eighteenth century. In sum, although the Balanta resided near a powerful slave trading state, they were able through their households to maintain political independence. They were also able to adopt new crops and new methods of farming the land. As they did so, they refashioned the structures that patterned their daily lives and found ways to resist and to adjust to the demands of broad and transforming regional and global forces. In the era of the Atlantic slave trade, the stateless Balanta managed not only to survive but to thrive. West Africanists, who have largely focused on problems of state formation and function, have generally failed to explore adequately the resilience and dynamism of such acephalous societies.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Most work on the history of stateless and decentralized societies in the pre-colonial period has focused on Central, East and South Africa. See especially J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, 1990); R. Harms, *River of Wealth, River of Sorrow: The Central Zaire Basin in the Era of*

## POLITICAL STRUCTURES AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

Before examining the sophisticated rice-production techniques that Balanta developed in the era of the Atlantic slave trade, we should first sketch a picture of their society in the preceding period. Oral narratives<sup>8</sup> and early written records indicate that Balanta have long occupied a swath of territory between the northern bank of the Lower Rios Geba and the Lower Rio Casamance. Like other coastal groups, they were pushed from the hinterlands to the coast as the result of the Mandinga expansion.<sup>9</sup> From approximately the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, Mande-speaking people gradually spread from the Niger River Basin toward the Atlantic in a movement led by merchants and smiths. Mandinga exchanged iron, gold, cloth and other items that were abundant in the savanna-woodland interior for kola, salt, *malagueta* pepper and other items produced efficiently on the *ria* coast.<sup>10</sup> Beginning in the thirteenth century, Mandinga horse warriors followed established commercial routes toward the south and west. George Brooks

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*the Slave and Ivory Trade, 1500–1891* (New Haven, 1981); J. Tosh, *Clan Leaders and Colonial Chiefs: The Political History of an East African Stateless Society, c. 1800–1939* (Oxford, 1978); T. Spear and R. Waller (eds.), *Being Maasai: Ethnicity and Identity in East Africa* (Athens, 1993); J. Lamphear, *The Traditional History of the Fie of Uganda* (Oxford, 1976). For West Africa, see especially R. Horton, 'Stateless societies in the history of West Africa', in J. F. A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds.), *History of West Africa* (2 vols.) (London, 1976), II, 72–5; D. Northrop, *Trade Without Rulers, Pre-Colonial Economic Development in South-Eastern Nigeria* (Oxford, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Having learned *Graça*, the Balanta language, on two previous trips to Guinea-Bissau, I conducted oral interviews in Balanta regions in 1994 and 1995. Balanta society does not have 'specialists' trained in the art or science of remembering oral narratives about the past, but it does have a rich body of narratives, many of which are told in everyday settings by household heads. See W. Hawthorne, 'The interior past of an acephalous society: institutional change among the Balanta of Guinea-Bissau, c. 1400–c. 1950' (Ph.D. thesis, Stanford University, 1998), 40–8. For other analyses of the place of oral narratives in stateless societies, see Tosh, *Clan Leaders*, 5; Harms, *River*, 6–11; J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago, 1965), 31 and 170–3.

<sup>9</sup> Interviews with Mbunh Nanful, Mato-Farroba, 6 Dec. 1994; Fô Kidum, Quinhaque, 7 Jan. 1995; Tchuta Mbali, Patche Ialá, 8 Jan. 1995; Bisi Binhaga and José Gomes, Patch Ialá, 31 Jan. 1995; Cubumba Sangê, Bletê, and Chefe Lima, N'Tin, 5 Apr. 1995. Also see A. Á. de Almada, *Tratado breve dos rios de Guiné*, trans. P. E. H. Hair (University of Liverpool, 1984), 92; B. Barreira, 'Description of the islands of Cape Verde and Guinea', in P. E. H. Hair (ed.), *Jesuit Documents on the Guinea of Cape Verde and the Cape Verde Islands, 1585–1617* (University of Liverpool, 1989), doc. 13; A. J. D. Dinis, 'As tribos da Guiné Portuguesa na história', in *Congresso Comemorativo do Quinto Centenário do Descobrimento da Guiné* (Lisbon, 1946), 250–2; Lopes, *Kaabunké*, 90–1; Rodney, *A History*, 6; C. Giesing, 'Agricultura e resistência na história dos balanta-bejaa', *Soronda*, 16 (Jul. 1993), 128.

<sup>10</sup> Barry, *Senegambia*, 6–10; J. Bowman, 'Conflict, interaction, and change in Guinea-Bissau: Fulbe expansion and its impact, 1850–1900', (Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1980), 53; D. T. Niane, 'Mali and the second Mandingo expansion', in D. T. Niane (ed.), *General History of Africa: Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1984), 117–71; Y. Pearson, 'The coastal peoples: from Casamance to the Ivory Coast lagoons', in D. T. Niane (ed.), *General History of Africa*, 301–23; C. Wondji, 'The states and cultures of the Upper Guinea Coast', in B. A. Ogot (ed.), *General History of Africa: Africa from the Sixteenth Century to the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1992), 368–98.

writes that the Mande-language ‘diffused among conquered groups’ and that Mande-speakers instituted ‘tripartite hierarchical social structures comprised of ruling elites and free people, endogamous occupational groups, and domestic slaves’.<sup>11</sup> From Mandinga-dominated states such as Kaabu, warriors staged raids on both coastal and interior peoples, supplying Europeans with slave exports beginning in the late fifteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

Though the nature of the relationship between Balanta and Mandinga is not well documented, oral narratives of migration in conjunction with other evidence point to the conclusion that Mandinga found it difficult to take Balanta slaves and to establish suzerainty in Balanta territories. To be sure, many Balanta were influenced and others absorbed by Kaabu. As Bertrand-Bocandé observed in the early nineteenth century, many ‘Balanta closest to the Mandinga’ submitted to Mandinga rule, intermarried with Mandinga and adopted various Mandinga cultural practices.<sup>13</sup> Lusophone scholars have described this process as *mandingização* and have noted its effects in the Casamance and northern Guinea-Bissau among Bejaa, who are also known as Balanta-Mane. The political structures of the Bejaa are more hierarchical than those of other Balanta subgroups, they have oral narratives that link them directly to Kaabu, and in certain aspects of dress and religion they resemble Mandinga.<sup>14</sup> However, when threatened by Mandinga cultural and political domination, many Balanta were recalcitrant. Balanta oral narratives speak of staunch opposition to Mandinga advances.<sup>15</sup> Further, the fact that in the language of the Mandinga the word *balanto* means ‘those who resist’ indicates that they were not easy to seize or to incorporate into expanding states.<sup>16</sup>

Outsiders found it difficult to dominate Balanta largely because of the nature of their political structures.<sup>17</sup> The earliest European observers indicated that Balanta governed themselves through institutions controlled at a very local level. That is, they made clear that these coastal farmers were not organized in states. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Fernandes said that he observed no stratification in Balanta society. Everyone worked in the fields, no ruling class or families managing to exclude themselves from daily labor.<sup>18</sup> In 1627, Alonso de Sandoval wrote that Balanta were ‘a cruel people, [a] race without a king’.<sup>19</sup> Later that same century, Francisco de

<sup>11</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Barry, *Senegambia*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> E. Bertrand-Bocandé, ‘Notes sur la Guinée-Portugaise ou Sénégalie Méridionale’, *Bulletin de la Société Géographie de Paris*, 12 (1849), 324.

<sup>14</sup> Also *malinkizão*. A. T. da Mota, *Guiné Portuguesa* (2 vols.) (Lisbon, 1954), 1, 141, 155, and 290; Lopes, *Kaabunké*, 90; Giesing, ‘Agricultura’, 125–76; D. Handem, *Nature et fonctionnement du pouvoir chez les Balanta Brassa* (Bissau, 1986), 10–19; Bowman, ‘Conflict’, 65–6.

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with Mbunh Nanful, Mato-Farroba, 12 Dec. 1994; Estanislau Correia Landim, João Landim, 2 Feb. 1995. Also Giesing, ‘Agriculture’, 128.

<sup>16</sup> Dinis, ‘As Tribos’, 252; A. Carreira, *Vida social dos Manjacos* (Bissau, 1947), 4; Handem, *Nature*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> In the twentieth century, the Portuguese colonial state faced some of the same problems that would-be conquerors of previous centuries had faced in Balanta territories. Hawthorne, ‘Interior past’, 270–332.

<sup>18</sup> Rodney, ‘The Guinea Coast’, 292; Dinis, ‘As Tribos’, 250.

<sup>19</sup> A. de Sandoval, *Naturaliza, policia sagrada i profana, costumbres i ritos, disciplina i catechismo evangelico de todos etiopes* (Sevilla, 1627), 39.

Lemos Coelho said that the territory of the Balanta ‘has not been navigated, nor does it have kings of consideration’.<sup>20</sup>

Though the earliest written texts do not describe how Balanta organized their stateless society, linguistic evidence provides some clues. Today an *alante ndang* or respected male elder heads each Balanta household. In *Graça*, the Balanta language, *alante* means ‘man’, and *b’alante* is the plural form; *ndang* means ‘big’, and *b’ndang* is the plural. Hence, *b’alante b’ndang* translates ‘big men’. A male Balanta is not recognized as an *alante ndang* and cannot head a household until he is circumcised, which generally occurs sometime after the age of twenty, depending on the region. It is evident that the ethnic group name ‘Balanta’ was derived from the word *b’alante*.<sup>21</sup> As a show of respect – an acknowledgement of social position and authority – *b’alante* is part of most greetings and comes up repeatedly in conversations among ‘big men’. Hence, it is likely that Europeans, Mandinga and other visitors to coastal territories in the Guinea-Bissau region heard the word frequently and dubbed those using it ‘Balanta’. Significantly, Balanta do not typically refer to themselves as ‘Balanta’ but as *B’urassa*, *Urassa* in the singular. For our purposes, this linguistic confusion is important for one reason: the fact that the earliest written records make frequent reference to a group called ‘Balanta’ and ‘Balante’ and emphasize that this group did not have ‘kings of any consideration’ indicates that *b’alante b’ndang* have long occupied prominent positions within Balanta political and social structure. Early Balanta society was, then, decentralized and gerontocratic. Male elders held power, but regionally and within broader society this power was not concentrated in a single household or ruling class.

For would-be conquerors, the acephalous nature of Balanta political structures posed a problem. In her analysis of how Kaabu established itself over vast tracks of land, Joye Bowman explains the reason for this. In Kaabu, the Mandinga ruling class gained legitimacy by marrying into some ruling families and conquering others. ‘The oldest family in any given area was entitled to rule at the village level, and the larger territorial level’.<sup>22</sup> However, when attempting to establish authority in Balanta areas, Mandinga found that there were simply too many independent centers of power into which to marry. Each Balanta household would have to be subdued, one after the other. Further, had conquest proved possible, Balanta had no ruling families through whom Mandinga could have exercised authority.

What else can be said about Balanta in this period? With respect to stateless societies, Robin Horton and others suggest that ‘in precolonial times, the dispersed settlement pattern was characteristic of peoples who were expanding or maintaining themselves territorially against negligible or relatively uncoordinated resistance’.<sup>23</sup> Dispersion was often the result of

<sup>20</sup> F. de L. Coelho, ‘Descrição da costa da Guiné desde o Cabo Verde até Serra Leoa com todas as ilhas e rios que os brancos navegam’, in *Duas descrições seiscentistas da Guiné*, ed. D. Peres (Lisbon, 1953), 81.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Balante’ appears frequently in early European texts, particularly French ones. ‘Balanta’ was perhaps a Portuguese or Creole adaptation.

<sup>22</sup> Bowman, ‘Conflict’, 65–6.

<sup>23</sup> Horton, ‘Stateless societies’, 91–2; M. Sahlins, ‘The segmentary lineage: an organization of predatory expansion’, *American Anthropologist*, 63 (1961), 326–7; P. Bohannon, ‘The migration and expansion of the Tiv’, *Africa*, 24 (1954), 79–80; R.

fission, a strategy that acephalous societies pursued when resources in one area were insufficient or when intra-group disputes could not be resolved. Further, by dispersing settlements, people maximized efficiency. They did not have to travel far to reach their fields and could protect crops from hungry animals and humans. In the period before the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, Balanta typically pursued a similar strategy. At times, their households were probably forced to agglomerate for defensive purposes, and there may have been ceremonies – marriages, funerals, and rites of passage – that brought the members of dispersed households together for some period of time. But when peace prevailed and when populations were expanding, sons sought to establish their own households, typically some distance from those of their fathers.

The earliest written sources dovetail nicely with this analysis. They indicate that, in general, populations on the *ria* coast tended to disperse themselves. Though he was speaking broadly about coastal peoples and not specifically about Balanta, Baltasar Barreira noted in 1606 that households were established close to the lands that their members farmed. It was very difficult to spread the ‘Holy Faith’, he complained, in part because

in only one quarter of the year are they engaged in their villages; and for three-quarters they are engaged in cutting the bush in the lands they are going to sow that year, because they always cut the bush anew, and in sowing the lands and weeding and harvesting the crops. For this reason they make thatched huts there, in which they spend this period, and they leave empty the houses they have in the villages, which they generally build anew each year after they have finished harvesting the rice and other staple foods.<sup>24</sup>

Further, many Balanta speak of dispersion when peace prevailed. Their narratives explain that with the start of ‘wars’ with Mandinga and Fula from the interior, Balanta began to concentrate households into defensive units.<sup>25</sup>

#### YAMS, UPLAND RICE AND PADDY RICE

Given what is known about the early political structure and settlement patterns of Balanta society, what can be said about their agricultural practices? Though the precise mix of agricultural production is unclear, it is apparent that, before the seventeenth century, Balanta were mainly yam and not paddy-rice farmers. André Álvares de Almada emphasized that Balanta

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Cohen, ‘Evolution, fission, and the early state’, in *The Study of the State*, ed. H. J. M. Claessen and P. Skalnik (The Hague, 1981); A. W. Johnson and T. Earle, *The Evolution of Human Societies: From Foraging Group to Agrarian State* (Stanford, 1987), 177.

<sup>24</sup> As will be explained below, Barreira likely observed ‘dryland’ or ‘upland’ rice cultivation and not paddy-rice cultivation since the latter requires the concentration, not dispersion, of laborers. Barreira, ‘Description’.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews with Cabi Na Tambá, Mato-Farroba, 6 Dec. 1995; Isnaba Nambatcha, Cufar, 3 Mar. 1995; Adelino Bidenga Sanha, Quinhaque, Jan. 1995; N’terra Siga, Patch Ialá, 25 Jan. 1995; Fona Benuma, Encheia, 13 Jan. 1995.

traded yams to Beafada.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in the seventeenth century, Coelho was struck by the quality and quantity of Balanta yams offered for sale to Europeans on the Rio Antula (Imperial). He said that

the Balantas...come tamely to your ship to sell what they have, namely, staple foodstuffs, which they have in large quantities. They also have a plant they cultivate called 'yams', which grows underground like turnips. They have many of these, and those from here are the best in all Guinea, so the ships buy quantities of them, which they carry both as a regular food and as a treat.<sup>27</sup>

With Europeans actively seeking rice to feed ships' crews and captives, it is clear that, if Balanta had been major paddy-rice producers, they would have marketed it along with yams.<sup>28</sup> However, in the earliest European accounts, Balanta are not mentioned as important paddy-rice producers or traders.

This is not to imply that paddy-rice technologies were unknown in West Africa before the arrival of Europeans. Roland Portères figures that rice has been grown in the region for thousands of years. The earliest area of cultivation of a variety of indigenous African rice, *Oryza glaberrima*, was the interior Niger delta. From there production spread to the 'second cradles' of *O. glaberrima* cultivation, the Lower Gambia River and the mountains of Guinea, and then throughout the immediate coastal region. According to Portères, Portuguese merchant-sailors introduced the Asiatic *O. sativa* variety of rice in the early sixteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

African farmers have long utilized varieties of both *O. glaberrima* and *O. sativa* in different types of cultivation. The first type, upland- or dryland-rice cultivation, was adopted in areas that lacked free-standing water but still received at least 1000mm. of annual rainfall. In West Africa, some savanna-woodland peoples were producers of upland rice.<sup>30</sup> The second type of rice cultivation, wetland cultivation, was practiced in areas where the water table was naturally higher than the land or where man-made dykes kept the

<sup>26</sup> Almada, *Tratado breve*, 92; Hair translates this passage as follows: 'These blacks [Balanta] provide the land of the Beafares with some provisions in the form of rice and yams'. However, there is no reference to rice in the A. Brásio's 1964 edition, which is in Portuguese. Brásio's edition reads '*destes Balantas se provê a terra dos Beafares de inhames e outros mantimentos*'. See, A. A. d'Almada, *Tratado breve dos rios de Guiné do Cabo Verde dês do rio de Sanagá até os baixios de Santa Ana de todas as nações que há na dita costa e de seus costumes, armas, trajos, juramentos, guerras, ano 1594*, ed. A. Brásio (Lisbon, 1964), 81. All references to *Tratado breve* are from Hair's edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>27</sup> F. de L. Coelho, *Description of the Coast of Guinea*, trans. P. E. H. Hair (University of Liverpool, 1985), chs. 5 and 8.

<sup>28</sup> On European rice purchases, see Barry, *Senegambia*, 117–8; J. J. Lauer, 'Rice in the history of the lower Gambia-Geba area' (M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1969), 42–8.

<sup>29</sup> R. Portères, 'Vieilles agricultures africaines avant le XVIe siècle', *L'agronomie tropicale*, 5 (1950), 489–507; R. Portères, 'Taxonomie agrobotanique des riz cultivés', *Journal d'agriculture tropicale et de botanique*, 3 (1956), 341–84, 541–80, 629–700, 821–56; R. Portères, 'Berceaux agricoles primaires sur le continent africain', *Journal of African History*, 3 (1962), 195–210; R. Portères, 'African cereals: eleusine, fonio, black fonio, teff, brachiaria, paspalum, pennisetum, and African rice', in J. R. Harlan and others (ed.), *Origins of African Plant Domestication* (Paris, 1976), 409–52.

<sup>30</sup> R. Chabolin, 'Rice in West Africa', in C. L. A. Leakey and J. B. Willis (ed.), *Food Crops of the Lowland Tropics* (Oxford, 1977), 9–15; also A. Castro, 'Notas sobre algumas variedades de arroz em cultura na Guiné Portuguesa', *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa*, 5 (Jul. 1950), 347–50.



ground submerged. Lowland farming can be subdivided into two categories depending on the depth of the water. 'Deep-water cultivation' refers to rice production in water that is 0.5 to 1 meter deep. When water is deeper than 1 meter, the term 'floating-rice cultivation' is used.<sup>31</sup>

The techniques that farmers have adapted for deep-water cultivation have varied with topography and technological innovations. First, flood-water rice cultivation involved the transplanting of seedlings into fresh-water pools, which remained as rivers receded after seasonal flooding. Second, with controlled submersion, farmers erected dykes, often fitted with valves to control water flow. Third, mangrove-rice farming required the clearing of coastal mangrove forests and leaching of salt from the soil before rice could be produced. This was accomplished by introducing a large quantity of fresh water onto the soil so that salt levels could be dissipated enough to permit cultivation. Mangrove farmers on West Africa's *ria* coast typically constructed dykes and paddies to capture fresh water and to hold back the tidal surges of brackish rivers.<sup>32</sup>

There are three important differences between mangrove- and upland-rice farming. First, yields with mangrove cultivation are considerably higher. According to 1970s' estimates, mangrove paddies yield 1–3 tonnes per hectare. Upland cultivation, on the other hand, yields only about 600–800 kilograms per hectare. Hence, in paddy-rice producing regions, population densities may be higher than in upland-rice producing ones.<sup>33</sup> Second, upland- and mangrove-rice cultivation require different levels of labor organization. Upland-rice cultivation can be successfully undertaken by small groups of workers. However, paddy-rice cultivation, particularly in mangrove-swamp areas, requires very large and well-organized inputs of labor for the clearing of mangroves and building of dykes.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, comparing Mandinga millet, sorghum and upland-rice cultivation techniques to Diola, Balanta and Beafada mangrove-rice techniques, Brooks emphasizes that 'paddy rice ... demands more intensive labor and binds men and women together for many months in an intense relationship with the spirits of the soil and water'.<sup>35</sup> Third, paddy-rice cultivation in mangrove-swamp areas could only be undertaken with iron-edged tools. Before iron circulated widely, coastal people, using 'punch-hole-planting' techniques and clearing trees by girdling with stone tools, may have farmed some amount of upland rice. But the twisted branches and roots of mangroves could not have been efficiently cut with stone and wood. Iron tools were required.<sup>36</sup>

In sum, paddy-rice cultivation should be found only in societies that displayed relatively compact settlement patterns, possessed structures

<sup>31</sup> Chabolin, 'Rice in West Africa', 9–10 and 15–24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*; Castro, 'Notas', 350.

<sup>33</sup> Chabolin, 'Rice in West Africa', 9–15; Mota, *Guiné Portuguesa*, I, 208; P. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison, 1975), 28–9.

<sup>34</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 89.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 118. For a look at the ways in which a variety of rice-producing societies in coastal Africa organize themselves, see O. F. Linares, 'From tidal swamp to inland valley: on the social organization of wet rice cultivation among the Diola of Senegal', *Africa*, 5 (1981), 557–95.

<sup>36</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 89; O. Linares de Sapir, 'Shell middens of the lower Casamance and problems of Diola protohistory', *West Africa Journal of Archaeology*, 1 (1971), 49.

through which sizable bodies of laborers could be assembled, had access to large amounts of iron and occupied well-watered regions. These conditions prevailed in some coastal locations before the arrival of Europeans in West Africa. Indeed, early written sources provide descriptions of paddy-rice farming in Senegambia. In one of the first, Azurara, wrote that in 1446 that Stevam Alfonso, having gone ashore from 'a river which was of good width' some 'sixty leagues beyond Cape Verde', reported having 'found much of the land sown, and also possessing many cotton trees and many fields sown with rice... And he said that all that land seemed to him like marsh'.<sup>37</sup> Though there is no indication that local populations were clearing mangroves or building dykes, the fact that the land was 'like marsh' indicates that some farmers were producing some sort of wetland rice at this time.<sup>38</sup> It was not until the end of the sixteenth century that a traveler gave detailed description of the methods used in rice cultivation in the region. In 1594, Almada, reflecting on earlier voyages, wrote that the area of the Gambia River was 'very abundant in provisions of maize and rice'. He noted that since the fields were so close to the river, communities constructed *tapumes de madeira* or wooden fences to keep out hippopotami.<sup>39</sup> In a short passage, Almada spoke of large earthen barriers that were constructed to control the surge of the river and he said that farmers transplanted rice from one set of fields to another.<sup>40</sup>

Almada's description lends weight to a hypothesis, most recently raised by Carlos Lopes, that Mande-speakers introduced paddy rice technologies to coastal Guinea. Lopes's evidence springs from an analysis of the word *bolaña* or *bolanha*, the Guinean-Creole word for a cultivated mangrove region. A similar word, *bulon*, and derivations of it, is found in 'almost all the languages' in Guinea, from Gambia to Sierra Leone. As demonstrated above, Mandinga states and trade routes linked these territories and therefore would have been the most likely transmitters of *bulon* farming techniques.<sup>41</sup>

In sum, linguistic analyses and contemporary descriptions in conjunction with other evidence suggesting that the Gambia was one of the second cradles of African rice production indicate that Mandinga farmers were cultivating paddy-rice before the arrival of Europeans in Guinea. This evidence also indicates that Mande speakers introduced paddy-rice farming techniques to coastal people. As has been demonstrated, Mandinga possessed a hierarchical political system through which workers could have been mobilized for labor-intensive projects. Further, though iron ore is not found in abundance in Senegambia, Mandinga had access to iron from the interior. However, not all coastal groups could afford large quantities of this expensive import.

<sup>37</sup> G. E. de Azurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* (2 vols.), trans. C. R. Beazely and E. Prestage (London, 1899), II, 263–4.

<sup>38</sup> The precise location of Alfonso's landing remains unclear. Mota, *Guiné Portuguesa*, II, 369.

<sup>39</sup> Almada, *Tratado breve* (Brásio's edition), 54.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 57.

<sup>41</sup> Lopes, *Kaabunké*, 154–55; Rodney, *A History*, 16–20.

## WHY BALANTA UNDERTOOK PADDY-RICE PRODUCTION

Because their purchasing power was very limited, Balanta were among those who had limited access to the iron that was produced in other parts of the continent. Put simply, the yams, salt and other products that a given Balanta household traded brought very low prices because they could be produced efficiently by countless other households. A household could not expect that any mix of the goods that it attempted to sell would garner many imports since merchants could find more or less the same mix of goods being offered for sale by others in the same ecological zone. Thus, Balanta accumulated only very limited amounts of the expensive items shipped over long distances.<sup>42</sup>

Lacking large quantities of iron, Balanta planted and harvested yams and other crops with wooden or stone tools.<sup>43</sup> In narratives about a tool commonly used in agricultural production, the *kebinde*, which is a shovel-type plow, Balanta still speak of this process. For example, Mam Nambatcha explained:

Before the arrival of the first Portuguese in this land, Balanta did not have an iron *kebinde* since we did not have iron. Thus, our *kebinde* was made completely of wood the cutting edge being burned with fire to make it more durable. The work of the farmer was very difficult considering how rudimentary the *kebinde* was. Balanta society only gained knowledge of iron after the arrival of the first Portuguese traders.<sup>44</sup>

In other regions, Balanta relate similar narratives. Highlighting the differences between farming 'earth' and farming lowland mangrove areas, or *bolanhas*, Alfredo Neves stated:

Since Balanta did not know iron, the *kebinde* did not have an iron end. Thus, the cutting end was burned in fire to make it become strong enough to perform all of the work required in farming. Later, Balanta obtained iron. The *kebinde* without iron was for farming the earth. The *kebinde* with iron was for farming the *bolanha*.<sup>45</sup>

And in households in other regions of Guinea-Bissau, Balanta still recount how ancestors farmed without iron-edged tools. Many link iron to Europeans.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> See A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (New York, 1973), 57–8; R. Roberts, 'Linkages and multiplier effects in the ecologically specialized trade of precolonial West Africa', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 20 (1980), 140; P. E. H. Hair, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and Black Africa* (London, 1978), 14; Hawthorne, 'Interior past', 98–102.

<sup>43</sup> Coursey and Booth show, 'The cultivation of yams not only antedates European contact, but also the beginning of the use of iron tools in Africa'. D. G. Coursey and R. H. Booth, 'Root and tuber crops', in C. L. A. Leakey and J. B. Willis (ed.), *Food Crops of the Lowland Tropics* (Oxford, 1977), 84. Also see D. G. Coursey, *Yams: An Account of the Nature, Origins, Cultivation and Utilisation of the Useful Members of the Dioscoreaceae* (London, 1967), 13. <sup>44</sup> Interview with Mam Nambatcha, Cufar, 2 Dec. 1994.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Alfredo Neves, Chiguna Cluse, and Bcolof Sukna, Patche Ialá, 31 Jan. 1995.

<sup>46</sup> Interviews with Mam Nambatcha, Cufar, 2 Dec. 1994 and 3 Mar. 1995; N'Raba Na Bedanh and Imbunh Na Bedanh, Cufar, 18 Dec. 1994; N'Dafa Na Combé, Mato-Farroba, 12 Dec. 1994; Isnaba Nambatcha, Cufar, 3 Mar. 1995; Tona Na Isna and Suna

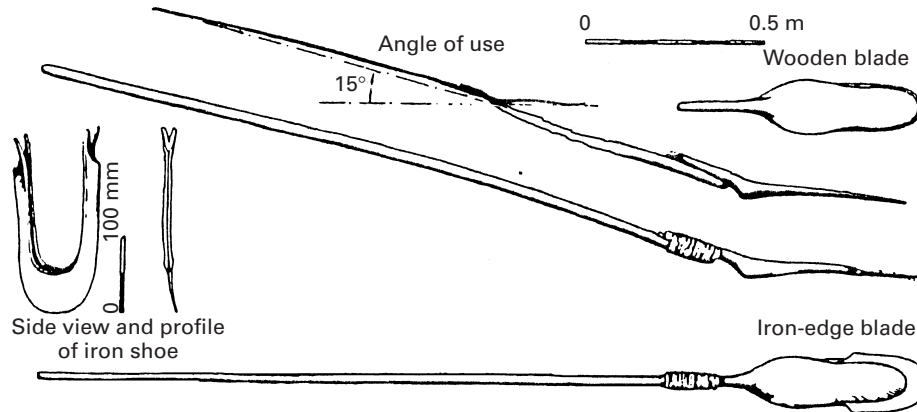


Fig. 1. The Balanta plow or *kebinde*, after J. Espirito Santo, 'Notas', *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa*, 14 (April 1949).

This evidence fits well with the findings of Joseph Jerome Lauer. In tracing the spread of rice cultivation among Manjaco, who like Balanta occupied lands between the Lower Rios Geba and Cacheu, he emphasizes that a 'metal cap on the blade of the *kadyendo* [digging tool very similar to the Balanta *kebinde*] is important in rice cultivation'. Based on oral narratives, he suggests that Manjaco probably started affixing metal tips to their digging tools sometime after 1450, when, as the result of European merchants meeting the demands of coastal dwellers, there was an 'increased abundance of iron'.<sup>47</sup>

European sources make clear that iron was in high demand in Guinea-Bissau's coastal zones. Shipping records from the late seventeenth century indicate that iron made up the bulk of imports into the Guinea-Bissau region.<sup>48</sup> Imports continued to have much the same composition in the eighteenth century, though rum and gunpowder at times filled most of ships' hulls.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the era of the Atlantic slave trade iron was in such demand that slave prices were frequently quoted in iron bars. For example, Jean Barbot said that on Bissau 'the price for one slave is 30 bars of iron'.

Na Isna, Cantoné, 5 Mar. 1995; Adelino Bidenga Sanha, Quinhaque, 7 Jan. 1995; Tchong Binhom and Wangna Sanhá, N'Talod, 25 Jan. 1995; Bitar Nabidé, Thamba Nanghasen, and Cumé Nanghasen, Oko, 18 Feb. 1995; Tchuta Mbali, Patch Ialá, 8 Jan. 1995; João Bafa, Patch Ialá, 8 Jan. 1995; Nhafede Sambe and Abna Dafa, Blimat, 28 Jan. 1995; Frós Intchalá and Ndim Mhana, Ilonde, 28 Jan. 1995; N'tera Siga, Patche Ialá, 25 Jan. 1995; Alfrede Neves, Chiguna Clusse, and Bcolof Sukna, Patche Ialá, 31 Jan. 1995; Estanislaou Correia Landim, João Landim, 2 Feb. 1995; Fona Benuma, Encheia, 13 Jan. 1995.

<sup>47</sup> Lauer, 'Rice', 18–19.

<sup>48</sup> Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (AHU), Lisbon, Guiné, 1a Secção, Caixa 3 (1681–1695), doc. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (ANTT), Lisbon, 'Registo de carregações, de entradas, de extractos, e de despesas dos navios', Livro 63 (1755–1758), doc. 83; ANTT, 'Borradores de enfardamento. Enfardamento de artigos para Bissau', Livro 73 (1760–8); AHU, Guiné, 1a Secção, Caixa 9 (1754–9), doc. 11.

And he noted that on the Bijagos Islands a 'slave can be had for 8–10 bars of iron'.<sup>50</sup> Coelho also carried iron to the Guinea-Bissau area when he was trading for slaves.<sup>51</sup> Further, in the sixteenth century, Almada said that 'white adventurers' conducted trade throughout the coastal zone in 'cotton, cloths, cloth strips, iron and wine'.<sup>52</sup> And as late as the eighteenth century, José António Pinto indicated that iron was still among the mix of goods that Portuguese merchants exchanged for captives.<sup>53</sup>

In Senegambia, iron also comprised a significant percentage of imports from the Atlantic. Comparing seventeenth century Senegambia with other parts of Africa, Philip Curtin writes that 'iron imports were far heavier' in Senegambia, 'coming to about half the total... in mid-century'. He continues, 'The explanation in this case is easy; coastal Senegambia had no significant iron industry of its own, while most of the rest of West Africa did'. Some of the imported iron was used for making weapons, but 'most took the form of hoes and other tools for the further increase of Senegambian agricultural productivity'.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in Guinea-Bissau, iron had a very important use value. Coastal residents, and particularly Balanta, demanded iron because it strengthened farming implements and facilitated the clearing of mangrove areas for paddy-rice production.

Increased access to iron was only one of the reasons that Balanta gradually turned to paddy rice as their principal crop. There were other reasons as well. First, paddies produce yields that are comparable to those of yam fields, and rice is more nutritious than are yams; it can therefore sustain dense populations.<sup>55</sup> Second, rice can be stored easily without fear of spoilage.<sup>56</sup> Third, as European vessels began to visit Guinea-Bissau in increasing numbers and as merchant communities proliferated in coastal ports, rice became a lucrative trade item, as it would continue to be in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>57</sup> Fourth, with the introduction of new varieties by Portuguese merchants, rice could better be adapted to different terrains and soils.<sup>58</sup> The introduction of Asian *O. sativa* varieties was particularly important since they generally yield better and scatter considerably less seed on the ground than African *O. glaberrima*.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the proliferation of violence associated with the Atlantic slave trade pressed Balanta to change their agricultural practices. This violence became especially prevalent in the seventeenth century. Relatively small numbers of slaves had been exported from the Guinea-Bissau region since the

<sup>50</sup> P. E. H. Hair, A. Jones and R. Law (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea: The Writing of Jean Barbot on West Africa 1678–1712* (London, 1992), 168.

<sup>51</sup> Coelho, *Description*, ch. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Almada, *Tratado Breve*, 82.

<sup>53</sup> A. Carreira, *Os Portugueses nos Rios de Guiné (1500–1900)* (Lisbon, 1984), 71.

<sup>54</sup> Curtin, *Economic Change*, 311–2.

<sup>55</sup> Coursey and Booth, 'Root and tuber crops', 85; Chabolin, 'Rice in West Africa', 9–10; Castro, 'Notas', 347–78; D. G. Coursey and P. H. Haynes, 'Root crops and their potential as food in the tropics', *World Crops*, 22 (1970), 260–5; Mota, *Guiné Portuguesa*, 1, 208; Curtin, *Economic Change*, 28–9.

<sup>56</sup> See Coursey, *Yams*, 172–89.

<sup>57</sup> Hawthorne, 'Interior Past', 256–69 and 323–9; Lauer, 'Rice', 48.

<sup>58</sup> Castro, 'Notas'.

<sup>59</sup> Carpenter, 'Rice History', 4–5; Castro, 'Notas', 347–50; and Board on Science and Technology for International Development, *The Lost Crops of Africa, Vol. I: Grains* (Washington, D.C., 1996), 21.

arrival of Europeans on the coast in the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>60</sup> However, by the end of the sixteenth the Guinea-Bissau region had become renowned for producing ‘more slaves than in the rest of Guinea’. These slaves, one ship’s captain said, were taken from coastal populations comprised of ‘Banhuns, Buramos, Cassangas, Janundos, Falupos, Arriatas and Balantas’.<sup>61</sup> Kaabu, which reached the height of its power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, produced many of the captives. According to historian Abdoulaye Ly, the state exported between 12,000 and 15,000 slaves per year in the seventeenth century.<sup>62</sup> Historian Mamadou Mané estimates that in about 1738 it could sell six hundred slaves annually to the Portuguese alone.<sup>63</sup> Not all of these slaves were taken from coastal Guinea-Bissau, but significant numbers were.<sup>64</sup>

As armies and roving bands of slave raiders struck at decentralized coastal populations, upland areas became very vulnerable to attack. Hence, from the end of the sixteenth century or start of the seventeenth century Balanta began to abandon difficult-to-defend locations, which favored yam production, for isolated lowlands which favored paddy rice. They were able to do so in part because of increased access to iron, which was being brought to the coast by European merchants. The movement to lowlands was part of a defensive strategy under which Balanta also began to settle in compact villages. Scholars have pointed to similar defensive strategies among people in other parts of Africa<sup>65</sup> and A. Teixeira da Mota argued that it was commonly pursued in Guinea-Bissau. ‘Wars between the coastal groups (wars to which European action gave a new stimulus to hunt and sell slaves)’, he wrote,

<sup>60</sup> G. E. Zurara, *Crónica de Guiné*, ed. J. de Bragança (Lisbon, 1973), 405–6; A. Luttrell, ‘Slavery and slaving in the Portuguese Atlantic (to about 1500)’, in *The Transatlantic Slave Trade from West Africa* (Edinburgh, 1965), 61–79.

<sup>61</sup> Almada, *Tratado breve*, 86. Also see Guerreiro, ‘The mission to the Cape Verde Islands and the mainland of Guinea’, in P. E. H. Hair (ed.), *Jesuit Documents on the Guinea of Cape Verde and the Cape Verde Islands, 1585–1617*, (Liverpool, 1989).

<sup>62</sup> A. Ly, *La Compagnie du Sénégal* (Paris, 1958), 287, cited in J. B. Forrest, ‘The historical lineages of a soft state in Africa: state-society relations in Guinea-Bissau’, manuscript in progress. Most of these slaves were shipped from the coast from points outside Guinea-Bissau.

<sup>63</sup> M. Mané, ‘Contribution à l’histoire du Kaabu, des origines au XIXe siècle’, in *Bulletin de l’I.F.A.N.*, 40 (Jan. 1978), 95–128; Lopes, *Kaabunké*, 144; Barry, *Senegambia*, 92. Most of the slaves shipped from Guinea-Bissau in the eighteenth century had been taken from beyond the *ria* coastline’s edge and shipped through Geba. However, significant numbers were taken from coastal zones. AHU, Guiné, 1a Secção, Caixa 9 (1754–9), doc. 55; AHU, Guiné, 1a Secção, Caixa 10 (1770–5), doc. 6-A; AHU, Guiné, 1a Secção, Caixa 11 (1776–8), doc. 7 and 57; AHU, Guiné, 1a Secção, Caixa 12 (1780–1), doc. 24.

<sup>64</sup> Slave surveys from Peru (1556–1650) make clear that significant numbers of slaves came from Guinea-Bissau’s coastal population. Further, contemporary records make clear that decentralized and stateless societies on the coast also produced a considerable number of the slaves exported from Guinea-Bissau. See F. P. Bowser, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524–1650* (Stanford: 1974), 39–41; Walter Hawthorne, ‘The production of slaves where there was no state: the Guinea-Bissau region, 1450–1815’, *Slavery and Abolition*, 20 (Aug. 1999), 99–124.

<sup>65</sup> Horton, ‘Stateless societies’, 91–2; G. Schawb, *Tribes of the Liberian Hinterland* (Cambridge, 1947), 29; T. M. Bah, *Architecture militaire traditionnelle et poliorcétique dans le Soudan occidental, du XVIIIe à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Yaounde, 1985).

'gave rise to a type of settlement characterized by concentrations of isolated populations between which were depopulated areas. This facilitated defense'.<sup>66</sup>

Linguistic evidence supports this conclusion. In written accounts from as early as the fifteenth century, European observers typically used the word *tabanca* to denote the walls and entrenchments that surrounded villages in Guinea-Bissau and neighboring regions. This word is Mande in origin.<sup>67</sup> In the era of the Atlantic slave trade, it was incorporated into the Creole language of trade. There it took on a slightly different meaning. That is, *tabanca* came to mean 'village', which is its meaning in Guinea-Bissau's widely spoken Creole language today. The association of the word *tabanca* with villages indicates that compact settlements served one purpose: defense.<sup>68</sup>

Oral narratives provide further evidence that in the era of the Atlantic slave trade Balanta began to concentrate into defensive units on isolated lowlands that favored paddy-rice production. Fô Kidum indicated this when he recounted that 'wars' with neighboring peoples 'pushed Balanta to littoral regions that Balanta later discovered were good for agriculture'.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Adelino Bidenga Sanha said:

As for the *tabanca* of Quinhaque, the founder was Nthomba Dhata, and after him the others came because of the good agricultural conditions in the zone. Little by little the *tabanca* grew to the point where it is today. The people who came did not all come from the same blood. Some were simply friends who came to procure land. On the other hand, the *tabanca* grew rapidly because of... wars... For this, Balanta liked to agglomerate so as to make groups for war or to counter attacks of the Fula and Mandinga who at times attacked Balanta.<sup>70</sup>

And Fona Benuma stated, 'In times long past... no one had the courage to build a house far from the houses of others since it could be attacked in the night and the people killed'.<sup>71</sup> Other Balanta narratives explain how strength could be found in numbers. Smaller groups, Balanta say, were threatened and attacked by larger groups who 'used to capture some of the people... and carry them away'.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, present-day Balanta rituals and practices provide evidence that dispersed and independent households came together to form *tabancas*.

<sup>66</sup> Mota, *Guiné Portuguesa*, 1, 205–8.

<sup>67</sup> Almada, *Tratado breve*, ch. 18; Coelho, *Description*, ch. 3; A. Donelha, *Descrição da Serra Leoa e dos rios de Guiné do Cabo Verde*, ed. A. T. da Mota, (trans.) P. E. H. Hair (Lisbon, 1977), 151. Also see the comments of Mota (ed.) in Donelha, *Descrição*, 251, n.

<sup>68</sup> Contemporary maps also show compact settlements in the Guinea-Bissau area. See A. T. da Mota (ed.), *As Viagens do Bispo D. Frei Vitoriano Portuense à Guiné e a cristianização dos reis de Bissau* (Lisbon, 1974), 40–1.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Fô Kidum, Quinhaque, 7 Jan. 1995.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Adelino Bidenga Sanha, Quinhaque, 7 Jan. 1995. For a written description of how lowlands offered protection, see A. G. Pimentel, 'Circumscrição civil de Mansôa. Etnografia', *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa*, 50 (10 Dec. 1927), 1–26.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Fona Benuma, Encheia, 13 Jan. 1995.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Cabi Na Tambá, Mato-Farroba, 6 Dec. 1994. For similar narratives, see interviews with Cubumba Sangê, Bletê, and Chefe Lima, N'Tin, 5 Apr. 1995; Mam NamBatacha, Cufar, 4 Mar. 1995; and Tona Na Isna and Suna Na Isna, Cantoné, 5 Mar. 1995.

Today, Balanta can identify the founding household of the *tabanca* in which they reside for it has certain, if very limited, rights and privileges such as deciding the start of rice-planting and grass-cutting for re-roofing houses. It is also the first to send its sons to the location of the male circumcision ceremony and it oversees certain ceremonies involving the most powerful local god.<sup>73</sup> Such rituals can be viewed as historical texts, unwritten records documenting how *tabancas* grew as households headed by *b'alante b'ndang* or respected elders concentrated in various locations on fertile, defensible and secluded lands.<sup>74</sup>

#### PADDY RICE AND ITS LABOR DEMANDS

As Balanta sought refuge from wars and raids by concentrating on lowlands, new sorts of social relations were established between the members of neighboring households. In village settings, mutual bonds, obligations and trust are necessary qualities for neighbors. To foster bonds between politically independent households, Balanta fashioned a variety of social and economic structures through which to interact with one another and the world at large. One of the most important of these was the age-grade system. It divided village males into two main bodies: elders or *b'alante b'ndang* and youths or *blufos*. (Females had a parallel age-grade system). Each of these main bodies was subdivided into various grades, the perimeters of which were roughly determined by the age of the people within them. These bound together males from the households comprising a *tabanca*. Hence, under the age-grade system, even though household identities persisted, people within a village also found themselves identifying with broader groups.<sup>75</sup> Emphasizing this, Michael Taylor argues that, within stateless societies, 'age-grades...serve to unite males irrespective of descent or residence or both. Thus, loyalties to age-mates conflict in these cases with loyalties to kin or the local community'.<sup>76</sup> Though *b'alante b'ndang* held the prerogatives of power, all male youths regardless of household affiliation hoped to attain the status of *b'alante b'ndang*.

Having been circumcised, males were recognized as *b'alante b'ndang* and began to sit on councils, *ko* or *beho*, giving them a larger decision-making role within their *tabanca*. As Labat noted in the early eighteenth century, within

<sup>73</sup> Personal observations and discussions with Balanta.

<sup>74</sup> Of West African villages, Horton writes: 'Typically, the group that arrived in the area first is regarded as the senior, and the head of the group enjoys some degree of authority over the total community'. Horton, 'Stateless societies', 94. For an example of this, see R. Harris, *The Political Organisation of the Mbembe, Nigeria* (London, 1965), chs. 5–6. On the importance of founding lineages in equatorial Africa, see Vansina, *Paths*, 78.

<sup>75</sup> Information about Balanta age grades is derived from personal observations and informal discussions with Balanta. For more on the Balanta age grade system, see Handem, *Nature*. For more general discussions of age grade systems, see especially Horton, 'Stateless societies', 93; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 'The Nuer of the southern Sudan', in M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (ed.), *African Political Systems* (London, 1940), 288–90.

<sup>76</sup> M. Taylor, *Community, Anarchy, Liberty* (Cambridge, 1982), 71–2. Also see Vansina, *Paths*, 79.



a Balanta ‘*canton*’ power concentrated in the hands of ‘*un Conseil composé des plus anciens*’.<sup>77</sup> Looking to European models, he dubbed the Balanta system a ‘*république*’. Though Labat did not specify the roles that councils served, Balanta narratives describe their duties as settling intra-*tabanca* disputes, carrying out negotiations with neighboring *tabancas* and organizing groups for war and raids.<sup>78</sup>

*B’alante b’ndang* also organized *blufos* from various age grades for large-scale and labor-intensive agricultural projects. As noted earlier, mangrove-rice cultivation required a greater amount of labor and level of social organization than perhaps any crop produced in pre-colonial Africa. Indeed, the preparation of a rice-paddy area was (and still is) a very laborious task that could take years. Examining the techniques that Balanta implement today, the remainder of this section focuses on the work demands of paddy-rice cultivation in mangrove areas. Demonstrating the critical role that the age grades have played in production, it argues that whether or not age grades existed before the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, they were central to the success of a paddy-rice monoculture.<sup>79</sup>

Residing on the *ria* coast, Balanta grow paddy rice on the flats of brackish rivers, such as the Mansoa, Geba, and Tombali. These lowland areas are covered with mangroves (*Rhizophora racemosa* and *Avicennia nitida*)<sup>80</sup> that have to be cleared before paddies can be created and the land desalinated. First, the future rice-paddy area (*thambe* in Graça; *bolanha* in Creole) is delineated through the construction of a primary dyke (*quididê* in Graça; *orique centura* in Creole). Because rice will not grow in salt water, this dyke is crucial for holding back tides. Workers build a primary dyke by cutting a path through mangroves and piling up mud to form a large bund, which is reinforced with posts. For digging, they use a long-handled wooden plow (*kebinde*) with a paddle-like end that is reinforced with an iron cutting edge.

The next step involves cutting mangroves and desalinating the soil. Once the primary dyke is completed, the mangroves are isolated from the river and begin to die. But they still have to be cut. This is accomplished with metal tools – machetes and axes. Because the wood is dense and does not rot as rapidly as other varieties, mangrove is used for supporting dykes. It is also an important fuel for cooking fires. After it is cleared of mangroves, the area is desalinated by fresh water, brought by rains and trapped by the primary dyke. The water leaches salt from the soil and is then discharged through the primary dyke and into the river.

<sup>77</sup> J. B. Labat, *Nouvelle relation de l’Afrique occidentale* (Paris, 1728), 189.

<sup>78</sup> Interviews with Ndiba Ntchala, Patche Ialá, 8 Jan. 1995; João Bafã, Patche Ialá, 8 Jan. 1995; Nhafede Same and Abna Dafa, Blimat, 28 Jan. 1995. Also see Handem, *Nature*. The Portuguese left many descriptions of the size and effectiveness of Balanta raids on communities and merchant vessels. See AHU, Guiné, Caixa 11 (1776–8), doc. 7, 30, 43, and 57; AHU, Guiné, Caixa 12 (1780–1), doc. 2 and 3; AHU, Guiné, Caixa 14 (1787–93), doc. 62; AHU, *Colleção de Livros da Guiné*, Livro 72 (1864–8), ‘Correspondência da secretaria para as diversas autoridades da provincia’.

<sup>79</sup> Information about Balanta rice production is taken from personal observations and informal interviews. For published material on Balanta labor in paddies, see Santo, ‘Notas’, 197–233; P. Sdersky, ‘As relações de trabalho numa sociedade de cultivadores de arroz: o caso dos balantas de Tombali’, *Soranda* 3 (1987), 21–38; F. R. Quintino, *Prática e utensilagem agrícolas na Guiné*, (Lisbon, 1971); Handem, ‘O Arroz’, 55–67.

<sup>80</sup> Linares de Sapir, ‘Shell Middens’, 26.

Farmers divide the newly claimed land into parcels by creating smaller secondary dykes, which separate one paddy from the next. Secondary dykes are created by piling mud into long mounds, which are reinforced with posts. Automatic water dischargers, constructed out of hollow logs into which are set stoppers on cords, are fitted into the outermost dyke. These dischargers shut automatically with the rising of the tide, keeping salt water out of paddies. They open when the tides fall and excess water brought by rains flows into the river. In this way, the level of fresh water in paddies is kept constant.

Throughout the rainy season, farmers labor in their rice fields. Before the coming of the first rains in June, they prepare nurseries on dry lands situated near their homes. With the first rains, rice is sown in these nurseries and, when it reaches a sufficient height, it is transplanted into paddies that have filled with fresh rainwater. As the rice matures, paddies have to be monitored. Periodic weeding is necessary and dykes have to be reinforced. Further, birds, monkeys and other animals have to be kept away. *N'contu*, a type of *O. glaberrima*, may be harvested in October; other types, particularly *O. sativa* varieties, cannot be harvested until December or later. Farmers cut midway down the culm with a curved knife made by blacksmiths especially for the task. They then bundle what has been cut for transportation to a cleared patch of land where women thresh (winnow) the rice to remove the grain from the culm before carrying it to their households to be first dried in the sun and then pounded to remove the hulls from the starchy endosperm. The greatest amount of pounding is in January and February although the task may continue into May.

Once rice is harvested, fields have to be prepared for the coming rainy season. Dykes have to be reinforced and nurseries prepared. As populations and markets grow, workers expand the production of rice commensurately and are constantly claiming new fields, pushing primary dykes closer to rivers' edges and clearing dense mangroves. In sum, paddy-rice agriculture requires intense, organized and year-long inputs of labor.

The organization of labor and the allocation of productive resources take place on two levels: *tabanca* and household. On the *tabanca* level, the eldest man of the founding lineage has the power to allocate to each household unclaimed land on flood plains and at higher elevations. Once a section of land has been designated for a household, the members of that household have rights to it. Sons inherit their fathers' lands, so paddies, nurseries and other fields stay with the same family for generations. Thus, once lands are allocated, the eldest man of the founding lineage has little control over how it is used apart from deciding when the households of the *tabanca* should begin to plant.

Also on the *tabanca* level, the most labor-intensive tasks such as building dykes, clearing mangroves and transplanting and harvesting rice are performed by both male and female age grades. Because the labor demands of these tasks are so great, the members of a single household simply cannot accomplish them. Hence, *tabancas* utilize age grades as a means of drawing people from different lineages together into structured work groups. For the most arduous task, Balanta have traditionally utilized young men in their mid- to late teens who form *nhaye* grades. One recent study called *nhaye* 'the motor in Balanta society. It is the *nhaye* who do the most work... A youth in

this phase should be able to endure any type of physical labor, from the working of the *bolanha* to the harvesting of rice'.<sup>81</sup> In sum, age grades have long served as institutions that cut across *tabanca* divides. That is, age grades have linked the members of the independent households that form a *tabanca* into an organic whole and allowed the politically acephalous Balanta to undertake large and complex water management projects.

Balanta also organize the production of paddy rice at the level of the independent household. The eldest man of a household oversees the planting, harvesting and marketing of rice from his household's paddies. Each household has claim to certain paddies and to what is produced in them. Each reaps the rewards from the marketing of its own rice or suffers the consequences of the failure of its paddies to produce sufficient supplies of grain. In sum, with the rise of the Atlantic slave trade and subsequent agglomeration of Balanta households into *tabancas*, Balanta found ways to maintain the political and economic independence of their households and, at the same time, to consolidate their resources for the undertaking of large projects. Though they never created the hierarchical structures of a state, Balanta were able to meet the needs of their own population and to adapt to broad forces being exerted on their communities.

#### THE RISE OF PADDY-RICE CULTIVATION AMONG BALANTA

The dissemination of this method of mangrove-rice cultivation among dispersed and politically independent Balanta *tabancas* was a long and slow process. As discussed above, Mande speakers in the Gambia region developed basic coastal paddy-rice techniques before the arrival of Europeans.<sup>82</sup> This section demonstrates that populations to the south began to implement these techniques on a large scale around the mid-seventeenth century when Kaabu was at the peak of its power, slave exports from the region numbered in the thousands each year, and Europeans were supplying the coast with increasing amounts of iron, which was needed to farm *bolanhas*. In the mid-seventeenth century, the threat of slave raids pushed the stateless Balanta from difficult-to-defend 'uplands' and toward more isolated areas near rivers where they agglomerated households into defensive *tabancas*. As the distance between households diminished, Balanta refashioned their stateless social and political structures to foster broader, village-wide identities. Through those structures, the heads of households, *b'lante b'ndang*, organized large bodies of laborers to exploit the environment effectively.

Indicating that Balanta grew other crops before they adopted a rice monoculture, Nambatcha stated, 'Balanta have grown rice for a long time. When they gained knowledge of rice, they started to cultivate it principally'. He said that in Anhi, the *tabanca* in the Rio Geba region where he was born, 'maize was the first crop grown'. 'After some time, Balanta in that area

<sup>81</sup> Agostinho Clode Suba, and others, 'As estruturas sociais Balantas', *Bombolom* 1 (no date), 9.

<sup>82</sup> Further research, particularly in the field of archaeology, would undoubtedly broaden our understanding of this process. See especially the explanation of archeological work on the Diola. Linares de Sapir, 'Shell middens'.

gained knowledge of rice'.<sup>83</sup> In Guinea-Bissau as in other parts of Africa, maize and other plants introduced by Europeans gradually became part of the mix of crops that farmers produced, in some cases replacing indigenous plants like yams that had been grown for generations. As yams became less important in the Balanta diet, histories about them appear to have faded from the oral record. In any case, by themselves traditions like Nambatcha's provide us with no dates or means to derive dates.

For a more detailed picture, we have to turn to written sources. As noted earlier, the earliest European visitors observed paddy-rice agriculture in the Gambia region. However, it is not until 1685 that we have a description of paddy-rice growing techniques being applied in Guinea-Bissau. That year, La Courbe noted that the land around the Rio Cacheu 'resembles prairies; I see some lagoons of rice all along the side of the river. The fields are traversed by little causeways, from space to space, to prevent the running off of the water; in the first place, after it rains they sow the rice that grows in the water'.<sup>84</sup> Here La Courbe might have been observing Balanta fields. However, Lauer argues that La Courbe was observing Manjaco (Brâme) fields, and, drawing on other data, he surmises that they were of a poor quality compared to those of the Diola to the north. 'This suggestion of mediocre rice agriculture and the fact that the Portuguese more commonly bought their rice from the Diola indicate', he argues, 'that rice cultivation was not well established among fifteenth century Manjaco'.<sup>85</sup> That is, they indicate that only in the seventeenth century were Manjaco, neighbors to Balanta who also occupied the Rio Cacheu region, starting to perfect paddy-rice techniques, probably learning them from Diola. This seems a reasonable assertion since, in the seventeenth century, the Creole name *Baiotes* or 'men of the rice nursery' was used to designate a large number of Diola who farmed near the Rio Casamance.<sup>86</sup> Whether or not La Courbe was describing Manjaco or Balanta fields, it is clear that Balanta in the region had also developed *bolanha* cultivation techniques during the same period. Indeed, in 1725, Labat, who was drawing on observations from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, reported that Balanta were marketing rice along with other commodities.<sup>87</sup>

Yet, to the south of the Cacheu, on the Geba, it appears that paddy rice was not being cultivated at this time. Indeed, while traveling along the Geba, La Courbe wrote nothing of paddy rice. And having arrived at Geba, on the Upper Rio Geba, he noted, that the country was 'replete with lagoons appropriate for the planting of rice, but the people do not cultivate it'.<sup>88</sup> Further, in the 1770s, Portuguese observers in Bissau, which is on the Rio Geba, described Sierra Leone as 'very fertile in rice' and Diola near the Casamance as 'the best farmers of rice that there are in all of Guinea', but they said nothing about Balanta, who resided nearby, being significant paddy rice producers.<sup>89</sup> As late as 1796, Bernardino Antonio Alveres d'Andrade

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Mam Nambatcha, Cufar, 2 Dec. 1994. N'Sar N'Tchala also talked of the growing of maize in the Rios Geba/Mansoa region. Interviewed in Bera, 5 Apr. 1995.

<sup>84</sup> M. J. de La Courbe, *Premier voyage du sieur de la Courbe fait à la coste d'Afrique en 1685* (Paris, 1913), 208–9.

<sup>85</sup> Lauer, 'Rice', 28.

<sup>86</sup> Rodney, *A History*, 21–2; Linares de Sapir, 'Shell middens'.

<sup>87</sup> Labat, *Nouvelle relation*, 188.

<sup>88</sup> La Courbe, *Premier voyage*, 251.

<sup>89</sup> AHU, Guiné, 1a Secção, Caixa 11 (1776–8), doc. 20 and 57.

could write that on the Rio Mansoa Balanta had ‘an abundance of all qualities of maize, beans and sesame from which they make oil with which they season [food]; and lately [*ultimamente*] they cultivate rice, cotton, and indigo, they raise much livestock and chickens’.<sup>90</sup> Here, he indicated that, in the late eighteenth century, rice cultivation was a relatively recent endeavor for southern Balanta. Alveres d’Andrade’s observation fits well with Nambatcha’s story of Balanta in the Rio Geba area switching from the cultivation of maize to the production of paddy rice ‘in times long past’. Indeed, Alveres d’Andrade makes clear that, at the end of the eighteenth century, maize was an important crop since Balanta had ‘an abundance’ of the grain.

During this same period, paddy-rice cultivation may have been a recent endeavor for the Papel of the island of Bissau as well. Descriptions of the island from previous centuries report the cultivation of rice along with a great mix of other crops. However, no early observers wrote of paddy cultivation, leaving open the possibility that Papel had long cultivated *arroz secca* or dryland rice. One of the first accounts of Papel paddy cultivation is that of Philip Beaver, who said of his 1792 trip to the island:

I had an opportunity when at Bissau, of once seeing the Papels prepare the ground for the lowland rice, in the beginning of August. With an instrument, something like that with which we cut turf, thrust about three inches under the soil, they first turned to the right, and then to the left; the soil thus turned up formed a little ridge on each side of the trench whence it was taken, and the trench was about a foot wide; when it rained, the water was retained in these trenches, and the rice sown in them; when the plants had attained a proper height, they were taken out, and transplanted in rows on the adjoining low lands.<sup>91</sup>

Decades later, Manuel António Martins reported the transplantation of rice into ‘artificial lagoons, which they call bulamhas’ on Bissau.<sup>92</sup> And in 1841, José Conrad Carlos de Chemlicki noted that Papel transplanted rice into ‘bolanhas, natural or artificial wet areas, that they make with earthen barriers that conserve the water for a long time’. He emphasized that this was not the only type of rice that Papel produced. They also cultivated *arroz secca*.<sup>93</sup> Papel, then, practiced a mixture of upland- and lowland-rice cultivation, perhaps because they were still perfecting wetland-rice techniques.

In sum, sometime before the mid-fifteenth century arrival of Europeans, paddy-rice farming techniques were developed on coastal Guinea by Mande speakers. However, it was only after coastal populations began to bear the brunt of the slave raids that fed an expanding Atlantic economy and Europeans began to supply the Guinea-Bissau region with iron that Balanta began to cultivate large quantities of rice in *bolanha* areas. Contemporary

<sup>90</sup> B. A. Alveres d’Andrade, *Planta da praça de Bissau, e suas adjacentes, 1796*, ed. D. Peres (Lisbon, 1952), 46. <sup>91</sup> P. Beaver, *Africa Memoranda* (London, 1968), 346.

<sup>92</sup> M. A. Martins, ‘Memória demonstrativa do estado actual das praças de Bissau, Cacheu e suas dependências em África, parte da história sobre sua fundação, com o plano de reforma mais acomodada às circunstâncias de Portugal’, in ‘Os problemas de Bissau, Cacheu e suas dependências vistos em 1831 por Manuel António Martins’, in (ed.) J. Faro, *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa* 50 (1958), 203–18.

<sup>93</sup> J. C. C. de Chelmicki, *Corografia Cabo Verdiana* (Lisbon, 1841), 186.

written sources indicate that for northern Balanta a paddy rice monoculture had begun to emerge by the mid-seventeenth century. However, southern Balanta in the Rio Geba area did not begin the large-scale clearing of mangroves and cultivation of paddy rice until the eighteenth century, after they had learned the techniques from their northern neighbors.

#### THE SPREAD OF *O. glaberrima* AND *O. sativa*

When Balanta began to produce paddy rice, they did so by first cultivating the *O. glaberrima* varieties, which were indigenous to West Africa. Traditions relate that 'The first type of rice that Balanta knew was *n'conto*; after that *yaka*, *sila*, *thom*, and *eatanhã* were cultivated'.<sup>94</sup> *N'conto*, also called *malu raça* (Balanta rice) and *malu mon* (black rice), is a type of *O. glaberrima*. The others are types of *O. sativa*.<sup>95</sup> *N'conto* was the first variety of rice that Balanta planted in paddies in large part because it is the easiest to grow. *N'conto* is, as one Balanta explained, 'resistant to salt water' and can therefore be planted on the least fertile land using relatively unsophisticated agricultural techniques.<sup>96</sup> Unlike *O. sativa* varieties, it thrives on the edges of *bolanhas* where soils are poor and fresh water is not very abundant.

There are other important differences between *O. glaberrima* and *O. sativa*. To the casual observer, the most striking difference is the color. *O. glaberrima* varieties are dark and *O. sativa* varieties are white. Thinking dark rice was of poor quality, European and Cape Verdean merchants encouraged production of *O. sativa*. Further, Europeans preferred *O. sativa* varieties because they are not as brittle as *O. glaberrima*, which tends to break into small pieces when milled. Hence, in part because it was more marketable, *O. sativa* has today largely replaced *O. glaberrima* throughout Guinea-Bissau and the continent. As noted above, most *O. sativa* varieties yield better and scatter considerably less seed on the ground than *O. glaberrima* varieties.<sup>97</sup> Thus, the spread of *O. sativa* across the Guinea-Bissau region must have encouraged Balanta to step up the cultivation of *bolanhas* and would have enabled Balanta to sustain growing *tabanca* populations.

This is not to imply that *O. glaberrima* production has fallen off completely. Indeed, today in Guinea-Bissau many farmers plant indigenous rice for their own consumption, preferring its stronger flavor to that of bland *O. sativa*. Further, varieties of *O. glaberrima* continue to be planted because they reach maturity more quickly than varieties of *O. sativa*; this assures that stomachs

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Tchong Benhom and Wangna Sanhá, N'Talod, 25 Jan. 1995. Also interviews with N'Dafa Na Combé, Mato-Farroba, 12 Dec. 1994; Tona Na Isna and Suna Na Isna, Cantoné, 5 Mar. 1995; Tchuta Mbali, Patche Ialá, 8 Jan. 1995; Frós Intchalá and Ndum Mhana, Ilonde, 28 Jan. 1995; and Alfrede Neves, Chiguna Cluse, and Bcolof Sukna, Patche Ialá, 31 Jan. 1995.

<sup>95</sup> Personal observations and informal interviews. For more on the vernacular and scientific names of these and other types of rice grown in Guinea-Bissau, see J. do E. Santo, *Nomes vernáculos de algumas plantas da Guiné Portuguesa* (Lisbon, 1963); Castro, 'Notas', 347–50.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Nhafede Sambe and Abna Dafa, Blimat, 28 Jan. 1995.

<sup>97</sup> Carpenter, 'Rice history', 4–5; Castro, 'Notas', 347–50; and Board on Science, *Lost Crops*, 21.

will not go empty in October, when rice stores from the previous growing season may be running low. Finally, *O. glaberrima* varieties have broad canopies, which tend to suppress weed growth.<sup>98</sup> Emphasizing many of these points, Nambatcha explained:

The first type of rice that Balanta knew was *n'contu*... Today Balanta farm, in great quantities, other varieties of rice. This is not because they are more productive or resistant to salt than *n'contu* but because they are more profitable and are good food; however, they provide very little fodder for the pigs. *N'contu*, on the other hand, has a great deal of fodder for the pigs, but [the rice itself] is yellow when pounded... *N'contu* has another importance in Balanta society: it has a short growing season. Because of this, today we cultivate *n'contu* to remedy the situation of hunger in the months of October, November, and December. It is important to emphasize that we cultivate *n'contu* only in small quantities so as to alleviate hunger in the most critical periods.<sup>99</sup>

Though *O. sativa* was introduced to the West African coast as early as the sixteenth century, local populations did not immediately cultivate it in the Guinea-Bissau region. In fact, Olga Linares found that among Diola in the Casamance region *O. sativa* was not planted until fairly recently.<sup>100</sup> Carlos de Chelmicki's 1841 statements confirm this. He noted that the Diola between the Cacheu and Casamance grow only 'an ordinary rice, very small, but with a good taste'. Its color, he reported, was dark. The planting of a whiter rice was being undertaken only in scattered locations on the edges of the Rio Cacheu.<sup>101</sup> The Gambia, Carlos de Chelmicki emphasized, was the center for cultivation of *O. sativa*.<sup>102</sup> Thus, it is likely that *O. sativa* spread south from the Gambia to the Casamance and then the Cacheu. By the mid- to late nineteenth century, it was being planted in the Rio Geba area. It was then that officials, speaking of the Papel of Bissau, said, 'The favorite work of the savages is the growing of rice (*oryza sativa*, L.) that constitutes their principal source of nutrition. The first sowing is done in May on the land made damp by the rains, and they transplant it later to the *bolanhas*, that is, dammed areas where rain water sits stagnant'.<sup>103</sup> As late as the 1830s, Portuguese observers on Bissau complained that the rice produced there had a dark color.<sup>104</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Though the rise of the Atlantic slave trade placed tremendous pressures on the stateless Balanta, they found ways to respond. Indeed, they adopted a settlement pattern that could better ensure the safety of members of independent households and developed unique, locally-based social

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Mam Nambatcha, Cufar, 3 Mar. 1995. Also interview with Tchong Binhom and Wangna Sanhá, N'Talod, 25 Jan. 1995.

<sup>100</sup> Linares, 'From tidal swamp', 558–9. <sup>101</sup> Chelmicki, *Corografia*, 136.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*; J. J. L. de Lima, *Ensaio sobre a statistica das possessões portuguezas no Ultramar. Livro I. Das Ilhas de Cabo Verde e suas dependências* (Lisbon, 1844), 24.

<sup>103</sup> L. F. de Barros, *Senegambia portugueza ou notícia descritiva das diferentes tribus que habitam a Senegambia meridional* (Lisbon, 1878), 43.

<sup>104</sup> AHU, Guiné, 1a Secção, Caixa 25, Documents without dates, doc.25 (References indicate that this document was written in the 1830s); Martins, *Memória*, 207.

structures in order to organize laborers for the production of new crops that could sustain dense populations. Balanta *tabancas* were so successful that in the 1830s they were supplying merchants in Bissau with ‘the better part of the rice that they exported to Gambia’.<sup>105</sup> They were producing such a surplus that by 1890 Balanta territories to the east of Bissau were burgeoning with people. That year, Joaquim da Graça Correia e Lança, the governor of the Portuguese possession, wrote: ‘The margins of the Rios Mansoa and Geba constitute the center of radiation of the rice culture in *Guiné Portuguesa* and possess the greatest densities of population of the Colony’.<sup>106</sup> Balanta populations had also become so large that they had begun to expand across central Guinea-Bissau. Continuing what can be seen as a centuries-long southern migration of a paddy rice culture from the Rio Gambia, to the Casamance, to the Cacheu, and then to the Mansoa and Geba, in the early twentieth century thousands of Balanta migrated to the underpopulated Rios Tombali and Cacine region where large *bolanhas* were ideal for agricultural production.<sup>107</sup> Further, perhaps more than any other food crop, Balanta rice was meeting the needs of the region’s growing urban population. In 1876, officials in Bissau said that the Rio Mansoa ‘supplies rice to the population of Bissau and Bolama’.<sup>108</sup> And in 1890, the governor wrote: ‘The Rio Geba is farmed on its right margin by Balanta, who cultivate almost exclusively rice, which supplies the market of Bissau, great quantities arriving for export’.<sup>109</sup> Balanta rice was also shipped to the drought-stricken Cape Verde Islands.<sup>110</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, observers noted that Balanta prospered despite the fact that they ‘do not have a political organization, nor do they recognize kings or chiefs of any sort. Each Balanta is the only chief of his family’.<sup>111</sup> The Atlantic slave trade was therefore important, not only ‘because it strengthened the state and shaped its nature’<sup>112</sup> but also because, in reaction to the violence associated with the trade, some acephalous societies strengthened themselves. Some stateless societies devised ways to nourish and to protect growing populations. In so doing, they shaped their own histories and the history of West Africa’s *ria* coast.

<sup>105</sup> AHU, Guiné, 1a Secção, Caixa 25, Documents without dates, doc. 7 (References indicate that this document was written in the 1830s).

<sup>106</sup> J. da G. Correia e Lança, *Relatório da Província da Guiné Portuguesa* (Lisbon, 1890).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* 51; E. J. de C. Vasconcellos, *Guiné Portuguesa: Estudos elementar de geografia física, económica e política* (Lisbon, 1917); J. T. Pinto, *Teixeira Pinto – Ocupação militar da Guiné* (Lisbon, 1917); L. A. de C. Viegas, *Guiné Portuguesa* (Lisbon, 1936), 120; A. Lytall, *Black and White Make Brown* (London, 1938), 170 and 210; interviews with Cabi Na Tambá, Mato-Farroba, 6 Dec. 1995; Tona Na Isna and Suna Na Isna, Cantoné, 5 Mar. 1995; Tchong Binhom and Wangna Sanhá, N’Talod, 25 Jan. 1995; Frós Intchalá and Ndum Mhana, Ilonde, 28 Jan. 1995; and Alfred Neves, Chiguna Cluse, and Bcolof Sukna, Patche Ialá, 31 Jan. 1995.

<sup>108</sup> Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN), Praia, Cape Verde, SGG, A1/A6.9, Caixa 351.

<sup>109</sup> Correia e Lança, *Relatório*, ch. 1.

<sup>110</sup> AHN, SGG, A1, Caixa 347, doc. 67; AHN, SGG, A1/A2.22, doc. 29, 61, and 95; AHN, SGG, A1/A6.9, Caixa 350.

<sup>111</sup> Correia e Lança, *Relatório*, 50; Chelmicki, *Corografia*, 343; Mota, *Guiné Portuguesa*, 1, 296.

<sup>112</sup> Klein, ‘Impact’, 40–1.