REVIEWS OF BOOKS

SPATIAL HISTORY AND THE *LONGUE DURÉE* IN SENEGAL

Reluctant Landscapes: Historical Anthropologies of Political Experience in Siin, Senegal.
By François G. Richard.
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Reluctant Landscapes is an ambitious book. Its temporal scope covers 500 years of Siin's history, its interdisciplinary approach draws from historical, anthropological, ethnographical, and archaeological epistemologies, and its capacious source base ranges from material culture to written documents to oral history. The book is a welcome addition to Senegalese historiography, but what makes *Reluctant Landscapes* particularly valuable is its focus on the history of the Sereer of Siin, a people that has attracted little scholarly interest compared to other Senegalese communities. Senegal is, arguably, the most widely studied French-speaking country in sub-Saharan Africa. There is an extensive literature on diverse aspects of Senegalese history in a variety of languages, but this scholarship is mostly concerned with the Wolof and Haal Pulaar communities on the Atlantic coast, in the Senegal River valley, and West Central Senegal. These communities have come in contact with Islam since at least the ninth century; they have traded with Europeans since the fifteenth century and have been gradually transformed in the process of their encounter with Islam and Christianity. They inhabit the regions where the colonial modernizing project has had its most significant impact and which are the sites of the largest urban centers, ports, schools, and civil politics. Because of their centrality to the colonial enterprise, these communities and their leaders figure prominently in the 'colonial library' and archives and in homespun nationalist counter-narratives.

François G. Richard is among a handful of scholars specializing in the study of the history and culture of the Sereer of Siin. He set for himself the formidable task of reconstructing half a millennium of Siin's history, from the precolonial era to the postcolony through the Atlantic slave trade and French colonial rule, focusing on spatial relations. Richard conceives of landscapes as sites where larger-scale commercial and political forces wrought by capitalism and colonialism intersect with local political and economic processes. By looking at the colonial encounter from a spatial perspective, he seeks to move away from 'totalizing portrayals of colonial statecraft' (of which historians seem to have been mostly guilty of) to unveil 'the micro dynamics of colonial world making' and offer a ground level view of colonialism (236). *Reluctant Landscapes* is an effort to chronicle *longue durée* economic, social, and political change among Siin Sereer peasants by unearthing and stitching together debris and fragments of past encounters buried in the landscape.

The book is divided into four parts, and each part is composed of two chapters. Chapters One and Two lay out the book's conceptual scaffolding. Chapter One is mostly

concerned with theory. The author proposes a relational approach to landscapes. In the tradition of Henri Lefebvre, he sees space as constructed reality that is made meaningful by people's meaning-making activities. Richard imagines landscapes as archives, albeit ones that are always in the making, never complete. Because they are repositories of conflicting experiences, landscapes convey competing narratives that at the same time enshrine power but also resistance to it.

The second chapter is a critical examination of Senegambian historiography. For Richard, this historiography stands as a unique genre of history-building specific to the region. The uniqueness, we are told, rests on an unrecognized shared episteme that unites historians beyond their interpretive idiosyncrasies. This episteme derives from historians' sources, arguments, and narratives and is bounded up with genealogies of thinking deeply framed by 'north Atlantic representation of otherness' (50). In sum, Senegambian historians' effort to decolonize African history yielded nothing more than a tropical version of the 'colonial library'. Richard is enthusiastic about the lessons that archaeologists can teach historians who are misguided by their sources and method, but there is little evidence in the book to support his sweeping conclusion about Senegambian historiography. In the absence of serious engagement with the historiography beyond some general theoretical statements, one is left guessing who these Senegambian historians are (Senegalese historians or historians interested in the study of Senegal and the Gambia), what Senegambia means to them (greater Senegambia defined by shared cultures or smaller Senegambia shaped by colonial boundaries), and what distinguishes the body of historical knowledge they produced from histories produced elsewhere on the African continent (the universities of Dar es-Salaam, Makerere, and Legon, for example).

More problematic is Richard's underlying assumption of a lack of originality and creativity in the work of Senegambian historians. Senegambian historians are conflated with the Dakar School and lumped together as a monolithic group regardless of fields of interest, ideological orientation, methodological approach, or temporal focus, united by their common subservience to the paradigmatic Eurocentric episteme. This depiction of Senegambian historians resulted in the paradoxical situation where the works of Egyptologist Cheikh Anta Diop, perhaps the most influential scholar of the Dakar School and an iconic figure of the Afrocentrist movement, and that of Boubacar Barry, a student of slavery that has drawn much criticism from scholars outside Africa, find themselves on the same shelves of the 'colonial library' as those of their Eurocentric contradictors. Richard's call for epistemic humility and awareness of the limitations of historical sources is laudable (60), but there is nothing humble in his dismissive assessment of Senegambian historiography.

Part Two of the book hones in on the production of Sereer ethnicity. Chapters Three and Four draw from textual and material evidence to uncover changing discourses about Sereer ethnicity from the sixteenth century to the colonial era. Richard offers a critical analysis of French ethnographic construction of the Sereer as the quintessential African peasant, wedded to his *terroir* and custodian of timeless traditional religious beliefs and farming practices. He challenges the perennial colonial stereotype of immemorial Sereer ethnicity. Without rejecting the accuracy of colonial writers' portrayals of the Sereer at some level, Richards warns against the danger of 'extending notions of Sereer peasant traditionalism as historical generalizations valid for both the past and the present' (130). Instead, he

conceives of Sereer ethnicity as a historical category that gradually emerged, transformed, and consolidated in the context of *longue-durée* Senegambian historical processes. Here Richard does an excellent job drawing insights from his field work combined with alternative readings of ethnographic accounts to uncover the underlying dynamics that undergird changing representations of Sereer identity over time. He uses migration stories, settlement patterns, and ceramics to document the trajectory of historical change among the Sereer. While recognizing evidence of the stability and continuity of Sereer social structures in the recent historical record, he also points to significant transformations in land management, economic organization, kinship, and family structure that belie the dominant narrative of 'Sereer stubborn conservatism'.

The third part of the book brings the story to more familiar grounds. Chapters Five and Six focus on the Atlantic slave trade. Slavery is perhaps the most extensively studied aspect of West African history. But the scholarship has mostly concentrated on the precolonial states bordering the Atlantic Ocean. Historians have argued that participation in the Atlantic slave trade was predicated on the existence of a warrior aristocracy and a centralized form of government capable of organizing slave raids and managing trade relations with African intermediaries and European enslavers. Richard offers a fresh look at the history of the Atlantic slave trade by shifting the focus to a region that has remained on the margins of European trade networks and highlighting the role of material culture. By exploring the circulation and consumption of Atlantic goods such as alcohol, tobacco, glass beads, and ceramics, Richard is able to offer an alternative narrative of the impact of the Atlantic slave trade in Senegambia. Moving away from binary approaches concerned with identifying losers and winners, he discerns patterns of continuity and change in Siin Sereer's engagement with Atlantic commerce and points to the enduring resilience of local dynamics. The example of Siin demonstrates that there is not a uniform response of West African communities to the Atlantic slave trade, but rather a diversity of responses mediated by local political, economic, and sociocultural circumstances. Richard's insightful reassessment of the Atlantic slave trade and its impact on Siin is a welcome correction to the master narrative that tends to elevate the experience of coastal Wolof and Fulani kingdoms to the status of a universal norm generalizable across West Africa. However, if Richard is right in challenging homogenizing state-centered histories of the Atlantic trade, some of his arguments to support a Sereer Siin counternarrative raise serious questions. The suggestion that '[the Atlantic trade] did not bring anything that Senegambians did not already have, make or trade' (137) is intriguing. Tobacco, one of the most popular goods traded by Europeans, was domesticated in Mesoamerica and did not reach sub-Saharan Africa before the fifteenth century. The same can be said about firearms and liquor. Similarly, his emphasis on resilience and adaptation over disruption and trauma downplays the negative impact of slavery on African societies and does not reflect the thinking of ordinary Africans who in numerous popular songs (still heard today) bemoan the violence and destruction that slave traders meted on them.

The last two chapters of the book are concerned with the transition from slavery to so-called legitimate trade and the onset of formal colonization. In Chapter Seven, Richard looks at the origins and conditions of colonial governance in Senegal, emphasizing the materiality of colonial rule and how the practice of French colonial rule translated in the life of Sereer Siin. His exploration of the colonial moment unfolds in the 'middle

ground of colonialism, that shadowy horizon of power that engulfed French colonialists and colonized Africans' (261). By deciphering the imprints of colonial world-making etched on the Siin landscapes, Richard is able to demonstrate that colonial rule was neither a radical break from the precolonial past nor part of an untrammeled historical continuum. The transformative power of colonial rule was not limitless. Colonial sovereignty lost much of its potency when it intersected with preexisting structures of power in the countryside. Historians of colonialism in Africa are familiar with this argument that challenges the notion of an omnipotent colonial state and defenseless colonial subjects. The value of Richard's contribution rests on his granular analysis of the colonial *rapport de force* on the ground level. By focusing on the 'conduits and technologies' of colonial statecraft, Richard is able to document the bifurcation between the logics and logistics of colonial rule. There is perhaps no better illustration of the ambiguities and contradictions of colonial rule then the peanut cash crop economy. Peanuts served well the 'civilizing mission' by spurring financial independence and consumer capitalism among the Sereer, but at the same time they undermined the traditional power structures that the cash-strapped and poorly staffed colonial state relied upon to govern the colony.

Chapter Eight continues the analysis begun in Chapter Seven, but by focusing more precisely on the practical side and application of what Richard calls 'colonial *government*' (264) during the last hundred years of colonial rule. Here Richard confronts the disconnect between peasant memories of colonial rule that emphasize institutional invisibility of the colonial state in rural Siin and scholarly portrayals of an intrusive and transformative colonial power. He shows that Siin Sereer response to colonial rule is connected to a political culture deeply rooted in the past, a culture that has historically been suspicious toward state centralization. However, Richard notes that the light footprints of colonial bureaucrats in rural Siin do not signify absence of state power. Rather, he suggests that for the underfunded colonial state 'absence might feature as technology of rule' (293). Bureaucrats are not the only possible agents of state power. Power can also be exercised through proxies. Among the Siin Sereer, peanuts, native chiefs, and commodities were central as conveyors of the colonial state's transformative power. Their impacts remain visible on the landscapes and are reflected in settlement structure, village location, and demographics.

The strength of this book is not in the novelty of its findings. Scholars have long recognized the flaws of the binary, state-centered, and elite-driven scholarship that marked the earlier scholarship on the Atlantic slave trade and French colonial rule in Senegambia. Similarly, they have acknowledged the limitations that local conditions imposed on the transformative power of Atlantic commerce and colonization. The book's most significant contribution to the scholarship is its methodological breakthrough. Richard has demonstrated the value of an approach to colonialism that focuses on analyses of its material expressions on the ground. By writing the history of Senegambia from the margins and through the lenses of materiality, the book offers a new and promising avenue for writing African history. We can only hope that Richard's groundbreaking work on Siin will inspire similar projects on other communities across Africa.

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