

# Senegambia and the Atlantic slave trade

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**Boubacar Barry**

*University Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar*

*Translated from the French by Ayi Kwei Armah*



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# 1 Senegambia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: dependence on the Sudan and the Sahara

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A defining feature of the Senegambian zone is its geographical location between the Senegal and the Gambia Rivers, far from the Niger Bend. A second is its position between the Sahara desert and the tropical forest zone. This dual intermediary location made Senegambia dependent on the states of the Sudan and the Sahara until the fifteenth century. Only later, with its opening out onto the Atlantic seaboard, did the region begin to play its pivotal geographical role in full. To this day it continues to play that role, serving the West as a gateway for economic and political penetration into the African hinterland.

The zone is home to a great diversity of peoples: these include Wolof, Peul, Tukulor, Manding, Sereer, Soninke, Susu, Joola, Nalu, Baga, Beafada, Bainuk, and Basari. The cultural unity underlying this diversity comes from centuries spent living together. The organization of economic, political, and social life here bears strong traces of influence from old Mali and the Muslim religion. These influences were decisive in the transition of Senegambia's societies from kin-based political forms such as the *lamanal* or the *kafu* to the organization of monarchical states.

Geographically, Senegambia lies wholly within the tropical zone between the Sahel and the forests of Guinea. Two rivers, the Senegal and the Gambia, both underpin and symbolize the region's geographical unity. Both spring from the same upland mass, the Futa Jallon plateau. They flow through similar geological formations, tectonic structures, and climatic zones. And they flow into identical tidal regimes in the same Atlantic ocean, a few hundred kilometers apart.

The countryside presents a richly varied aspect that in no way detracts from its overall unity.<sup>1</sup> Lifestyles here often reflect regional variations due to local geographical conditions. This gives northern and southern Senegambia discernibly different flavors. The Gambia River, the main route of penetration into the Sudan, is the divide between northern and southern Senegambia. It is also a magnet for all the zone's populations. In former ages the Gambia, given its central location, symbolized the diversity and unity of Senegambia's civilization, the reality that connected it to, but also

distinguished the region from, the Sudan to the east, the Sahara to the north, and the forest zone to the south. In time, the Atlantic added its pull to the sum of influences.

### **A. The states of Senegambia**

Seen from the Sudanese sahel, Senegambia before the fifteenth century was a dead end. Starting to the east, in the Manding heartland, waves of cultural influence radiated into the zone. Westward lay the ocean, leading, apparently, nowhere. As early as the eighth century, influences from the Sudan encountered reinforcing currents from the Sahara. The desert caravan trade opened up Senegambia's northern reaches (Tekrur and Silla) to the Mediterranean, while facilitating Islamic penetration. Sudanese influences were felt mainly in the Upper Valley region under the Ghana empire, while on the Futa Jallon plateau and in the southern river valleys, they came through the Mali empire. At its peak that empire dominated most of Senegambia.<sup>2</sup>

In the eighth century the Upper Senegal valley was part of the Ghana empire. Ghana was ruled by a Soninke dynasty that drew its power from the trans-Saharan gold trade centered in Bambuk and Bure, linked to the Sahara towns of Awdagost. Alongside the influence of Ghana, radiating over a large part of the Sahel, the region faced pressure from the Sanhaja Berber confederations, controllers of the market at Awdagost. This is the context that, with hindsight, explains the migrations of Sereer, Wolof, Peul, and Tukolor populations from Adrar in the north into the Senegal valley, at a time of steady desertification in the Sahel. The migrants settled down or moved farther south, where they displaced or overran the Socé, considered the oldest inhabitants of northern Senegambia.

Given its special geographical location at the edge of the tropical world, the Senegal valley became the site of two cities, Tekrur and Silla, oriented toward the trans-Saharan trade, at a very early date. As early as the tenth century, the king War Jaabi converted to Islam, creating the first political center known as Tekrur, whose sphere of influence extended over the greater part of the Senegal valley. Here also were the origins of the eleventh-century Almoravid movement. In its passage, this movement left a lasting imprint on the banks of the Senegal River in the form of a militant strain of Islam, on its way north to conquer Morocco and the Iberian peninsula.

From the twelfth century onward, after the fall of Ghana, the entire Senegambian zone fell increasingly into the direct orbit of the Mali Empire, which exerted a decisive influence until the fifteenth century and even beyond. It was Mali's impact that catalyzed the transformation of the region's kinship-based societies into states. It also helped to integrate the

whole of Senegambia into the long-distance trading system reaching northward across the Sahara, eastward along the Niger Bend, and southward through the mangrove belt skirting the forest zone. For the Manding, who already controlled the gold mines at Bure and Bambuk, also tried very early on to gain control over the salt-producing regions of the coast. At the height of its power, Mali undertook nothing less than a westward colonizing mission, thrusting past the Futa Jallon plateau, then following the river Gambia and the upper valleys of the Casamance, the Rio Cacheu, and the Rio Geba. In the process, the Manding founded the Kaabu kingdom in the south, along with the principalities of Noomi, Badibu, Niani, Wuli, and Kantora, on both banks of the Gambia River. They did this by displacing or absorbing indigenous populations from the Bajar group, together with Jola, Beafada, Papel, Balante, Bainuk, Baga, Nalu, Landuma, and others, whose descendants today live in the Southern Rivers area between Gambia and Sierra Leone.

The Manding were also the ancestors of the Gelwaar, who founded the Siin and Saloum kingdoms in the Sereer regions. In northern Senegambia, however, the influence of the Mali Empire seems to have been less solid. For that reason, as from the mid-fourteenth century, the succession crisis that followed the death of Mansa Suleiman in 1360 facilitated the creation of the Jolof Confederation, which brought together the Wolof provinces of Waalo, Kajoor, and Baol. Within a context of decentralized political institutions, the Jolof kingdom, founded by Njajaan Njaay, thus dominated northern Senegambia, forcing the waning Mali Empire to retreat toward southern Gambia.

Jolof hegemony was shaken quite early, before its final break-up in the sixteenth century, by an invasion led by Koli Tengela. The invasion began as a spillover from events in western Sudan, and ended up entirely upsetting the balance of political power in Senegambia.<sup>3</sup>

For, beginning in 1450, Peul populations from the Sahel, crisscrossing Senegambia, settled temporarily on the high plateaux of the Futa Jallon range. From there, in 1490, the Peul, led by Tengela and his son Koli Tengela, crossed the Gambia River, making their way back north. On their way they ravaged the Manding of Wuuli and other satellites of the Mali Empire before going on to conquer Gajaaga and the middle valley of the Senegal River, which then became known as Futa Toro. This was one of the largest internal population shifts in Senegambian history after the fifteenth century. Alvares de Almada has left a vivid description of this "Peul invasion crossing the Gambia from north to south, destroying everything up to the Rio Grande, where the Beafada defeated the Peul. So numerous were the invaders that at one point on the Gambia River, twelve leagues above Lamé, they filled the riverbed with stones so as to cross over. The place is

now called 'the Peul Ford'.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Koli had an impressively large following, further swollen at each stage by people from the areas they marched through, is confirmed by Lemas Coelho and Barros. The sheer size of this invasion changed the population map of Senegambia. For, beginning in the Sahel and the upper Niger valley, it flowed successively over the Falémé, Bundu, Futa Jallon, the Rio Grande, the Gambia, the Ferlo, and the Senegal valley. At every stopping-place it left behind many of Koli's followers.

By the end of the fifteenth century, then, Senegambia was home to several political units of varying sizes. The Denyanke kingdom dominated the middle and upper valleys of the Senegal River, while the rivermouth along with the entire region between the Senegal and Gambia Rivers remained within the Jolof Confederation. The area from the Gambia valley past the Southern Rivers all the way to the foothills of the Futa Jallon mountains was still under the influence of the Mali Empire. Here, the Kaabu constituted the biggest of the major political units that coexisted with kinship-based states forming a patchwork of population groups: Joola, Tenda, Bajaranke, Nalu, Baga, Jallonke, plus the Cocoli south of the Gambia.

The only major changes in the configuration of the area's states during the sixteenth century were the decline of Malian influence and the break-up of the Jolof confederation. These changes were related to the influence of the Atlantic trade. The gradual withdrawal of Mali's authority gave back their autonomy to the expansionist Manding states. Kaabu was particularly successful in taking advantage of the changing situation: it extended its authority over the principalities on both banks of the Gambia River, and gradually gained control over the Southern Rivers. The break-up of the Jolof confederation resulted from the rebellion of the Kajor, Waalo and Baol provinces against the authority of the Jolof *Buurba* in the mid-sixteenth century. Each province then became an independent kingdom. Kajor was ruled by the *Damel*, Waalo by the *Brak*, and Baol by the *Teeñ*. The new configuration restricted the *Buurba's* authority to the Jolof kingdom. By the same token, Jolof authority over the Sereer kingdoms of Siin and Saalum was loosened. Henceforth, each of these kingdoms was ruled by its own *Buur*.<sup>5</sup>

Up until the mid-fifteenth century, Senegambia lived under the influence of the Sahara and the Sudan. Then came the invading Portuguese traders, bringing a new factor into the regional equation. Before moving on to a study of this decisive stage in which the Atlantic trading system became dominant, let us pause to describe the landscape and its inhabitants, providing a profile of the economic, political, and social structures of the



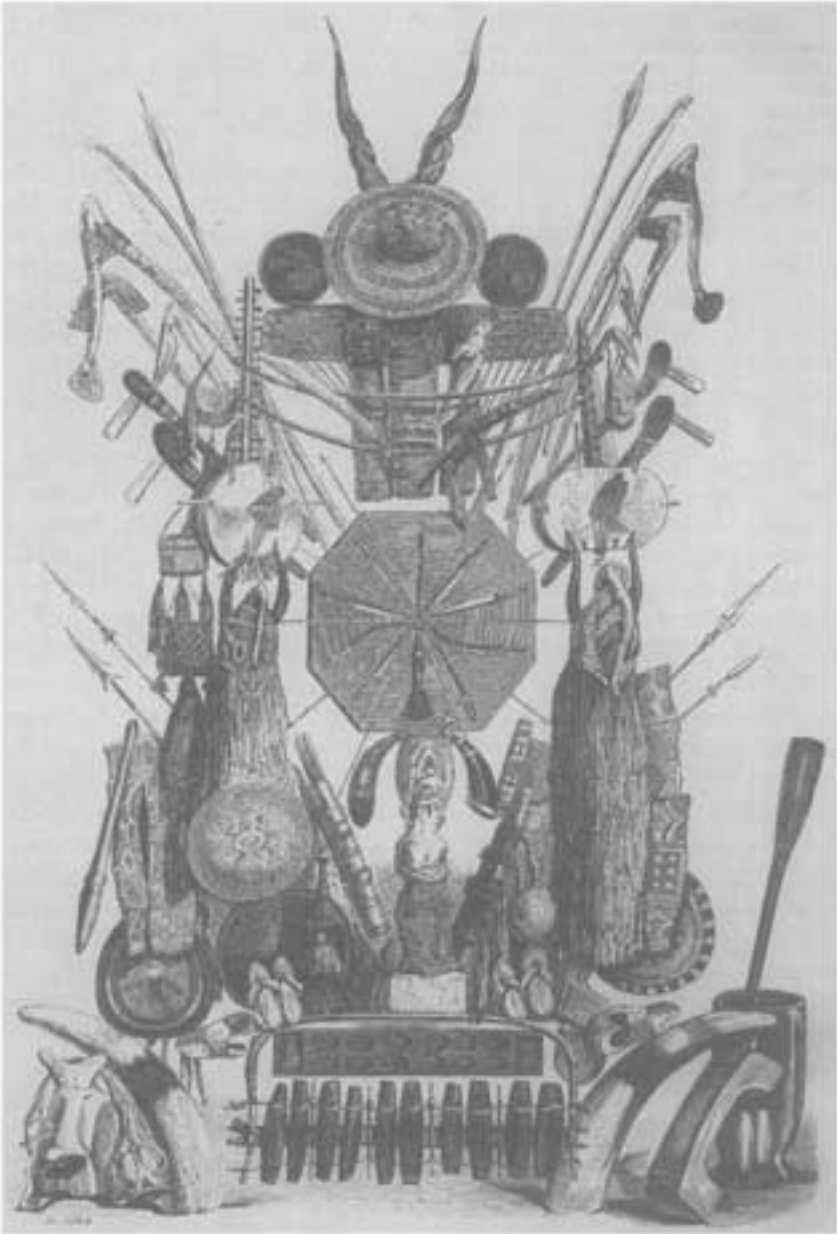


Plate 1 Battle trophy comprising weapons and utensils of the peoples of Senegal

Senegambian states prior to the far-reaching changes of the coming centuries.

### **B. Northern Senegambia: the land and the people**

By the term Northern Senegambia we refer to the region bounded on the north by the Senegal River and on the south by the Gambia River. In this Sahelo-Sudanese area, the Senegal valley forms a sort of vast oasis surrounded by the western lowlands of the West African corridor. The flat, dry landscape is suited to the large-scale use of horses, the principal vehicle of territorial conquest before the introduction of firearms. Ghana and Tekrur were the original rulers of this land. Their fall was followed by the rise of the kingdoms of Futa Toro and Gajaaga, followed by the Jolof confederation.

Throughout its pre-modern history, the Senegal valley seems to have been a cradle, or at least an antechamber, from which populations spread out into the rest of northern Senegambia. The Senegal valley, from the upper through the middle valley down to the delta, has played this exceptional role thanks to annual floods which make it a vast oasis.<sup>6</sup> The river is a life-sustaining gift in this region of single-crop cereal agriculture based on two staples, millet and sorghum, yielding two crops a year. The first crop comes in the dry season on the alluvial plains known as *waalo* land, where the farm belt can stretch as wide as 20–30 km. The second crop is rainfed, planted on higher *jeeri* land in the rainy season.

Given the importance of flood recession farming, land is central to economic, political, and social life in the delta, cradle of the future Waalo kingdom, following the break-up of the Jolof confederation in the mid-sixteenth century. Land is equally important in the middle valley, the domain of the Denyanke kingdom of Futa Toro. In the *waalo* areas, flood-recession farming is dominated by different varieties of large-grained millet. But on the *jeeri* highlands, fine-grained millet takes over as the staple. Farming cycles here are closely intertwined with a major livestock cycle. Peul and Moorish herdsmen range over the area, grazing their herds on the river banks in the dry season, heading north and south during the rainy season.

On account of this dual agricultural activity, supplemented with fishing and animal husbandry, the region grew to be a kind of granary, a permanent relay station bringing together sedentary black populations from the Senegal River valley and Berber or Peul nomads from the Chemama-Ferlo areas on both banks of the River. At the peak of the trans-Saharan trading system, Berber middlemen plied between the Senegal River valley and the trans-Saharan trade routes. Mostly, they traded horses for slaves. On occasion they also traded manufactured goods from the Maghreb and the

Mediterranean for gold. In the time of the Mali Empire, the Senegal valley lay somewhat remote from the main routes of the trans-Saharan trade. Nevertheless, the river remained a significant trading avenue all along its course. For the delta dwellers traded salt from the rich salt flats of Ganjoole (Awlil), along with salted fish, for millet sold by people from Futa Toro and the Upper Valley as far as Kayes.

Demographically, and from the viewpoint of political and social institutions, the delta was part of the great Wolof grouping of the Jolof confederation, of which Waalo remained a province until the mid-sixteenth century. Here, however, the Waalo ruler, a descendant of the foreign conqueror Njajaan Njaay, was not of *Lamanal* origin – a circumstance that set him apart from other Wolof kings. So with the establishment of the monarchy, the *Brak* paid tribute to the principal *Lamans* on the day of his enthronement.<sup>7</sup>

Land was a crucial political and economic resource, even if competition for it was not as acute as it always was in Futa Toro, given the low density of the Waalo population and the shrinkage of arable land due to saltwater infiltration in the delta area.

Njajaan Njaay's ascension introduced an elective monarchical system into the Waalo area, as indeed into all the Wolof kingdoms. At the time of the break-up of the Jolof confederation, the political power of the *Laman* Dyaw, formerly the landholder, shifted to the *Brak*. The *Brak* was elected from among three matrilineal kin groups known as *meen* (*Loggar*, *Joos*, and *Teejek*), by members of a Council of Electors called the *Jogomay*, the *Jawdin*, and the *Maalo*.<sup>8</sup> The system was originally an oligarchic compromise between different communal chiefs or *Lamans*, who as a result became either members of the Grand Council of Electors or provincial chiefs, leaving paramount power in the hands of the *Brak*. But the *Brak* also had the power to make new appointments, thus consolidating his personal support base to the disadvantage of hereditary officeholders.<sup>9</sup>

In Futa Toro, on the other hand, the Denyanke dynasty, having incorporated Tekrur and the state named after War Jaabi, gave the middle Senegal valley its political unity and laid a lasting foundation for the area's economic and social organization. For example, it consolidated land ownership structures, especially in the rich alluvial plains, by letting the aristocracy distribute holdings among their most faithful entourage. The result was the creation of extensive landholdings side by side with small family plots. Such a system indicates the existence of a class of major landowners, with Denyankobe taking the lion's share. The history of Futa Toro is principally a record of the continual reconstitution of landholdings to the benefit of the ruling class.<sup>10</sup>

Futa Toro is the prime heartland of the Peul and the Tukolor. Nomadic

peoples by inveterate custom, their goings and comings have made the middle Senegal valley not only a gathering place, but also a point of departure for their many migratory movements throughout West Africa. On account of the great extent of *waalo* land, Futa Toro is incontestably the millet-producing granary of this whole region bordering on the Sahel.

It was after the conquest of the Futa region by Koli that the regime of *Satigis* was created. This system kept selected local chiefs in office after their defeat. One example was the *Lam Tooro*. Nevertheless, the *Satigi* himself appointed several of his own companions as local chiefs. These appointees were especially numerous among *Sebbe* chiefs, leading generals in his army. In this way, right from the beginning, the system strengthened the role of the military in the Denyanke dynasty.<sup>11</sup>

The history of Futa Toro also bears the imprint of the geographical configuration of the area. This is a narrow corridor of land, stretching for over 400 km along the Senegal River, but scarcely ever exceeding 20 km in width on either bank. Futa thus comprises three main territories: Toro in the west; Central Futa, including Haïlabe, Law, Yirlabe Hebbyabe, and Bosea provinces; and lastly the eastern Futa, with Ngenar and Damga on its remote eastern borders. Each of these provinces was governed by one or more kin-group families whose political rights were based mainly on their control over the fertile *waalo* flood plains. Thus, the Toro region was ruled by the Ardo Gede, the Ardo Edi, and the Farba Walalde; the Law was ruled by Saïbobe Peul bearing the title of *Kamalinku* in Gollere, *Joom* in Mbumba, and *Ardo* in Meri. Saïbobe dominance reached all the way into Yirlabe Hebbyabe. After that came Futa proper. The area was marked by the presence of numerous *Sebbe* from the Koli line in Orefonde and Cilone. Here also was the site of Godo, one of the spiritual capitals of the Denyankobe. Lastly, out in the east, Ngenar and Damga was the traditional settlement zone of Denyankobe and Kolyabe *Sebbe*. Here, Jowol served as the political capital of most of the *Satigi*.<sup>12</sup>

But the excessive length of the territory considerably curtailed the power of the *Satigi*, who held their hereditary power by virtue of their status as Denyankobe descendants of Koli Tengela. Gerontocracy was the order of the day, with power going to the eldest relative of the deceased sovereign, be he brother, nephew, uncle or son. The legitimate heir was known officially as *Kamalinku*. The fact that the succession was accessible to so many qualified candidates led to numerous political crises. It was also at the root of the weakness of the central authority.

Direct control over the entire country was also limited by the autonomy of provincial chiefs led by the *Ardo* from the Saïbobe, Denyankobe, and Yalalbe Rangale lines, or by the *Farba* of *Sebbe* origin. Political power was considerably decentralized. It was based on the landed property rights of kin-groups controlling rich alluvial *waalo* land, as distinct from the rainfed

lands in the *jeeri* areas. On account of the relative overpopulation of this region, still the millet granary of the Sahel zone, the history of Futa Toro is characterized by a series of territorial amputations followed by migratory waves known as *fergo*, in reaction to increasing population pressure.<sup>13</sup>

In the upper Senegal valley, around Bakel and Selibabi, the alluvial valley becomes increasingly narrow. With so little prime alluvial land available, the farming populations here have to fall back on rainfed *jeeri* land, which is more plentiful. Because of its geographical location at the entrance to the Sudanese hinterland, the upper Senegal valley contains a layered series of populations who moved into the area in successive waves: Soninke, Manding, Khasonke. This is an area where, due to the small amount of *waalo* land, land rights are not a crucial factor in political life. Extensive cereal farming on *jeeri* land is practiced in close association with trade and mining.

Directly connected to the long-distance trade routes of the Niger Bend and the Sahara, the upper Senegal valley played a strategic role in the economic history of Senegambia. This was the terminus of different trade routes: from the east by horseback; from the south on donkeys; from the north on camelback. At the same time, it was a distribution entrepôt for trade along the entire length of the Senegal River. The proximity of the Bambuk and Bure gold mines gave the area a commercial boost under the monopoly of the Soninke and the Jakhanke, the precise equivalent in western Senegambia of the trading Juulas.<sup>14</sup>

There is conclusive evidence that the Gajaaga regime, sited in the upper Senegal valley, was the successor state of the Ghana empire, reduced to a rudimentary vestige in the shadow of an ascendant Mali. Quite clearly, it was in the eleventh century that the Bacili Sempera migrated from Wagadu, after the fall of that kingdom, on their way to Suela (Sokolo). In their flight they preserved the ritual veneration of Biida, the sacred snake of the Wago.<sup>15</sup> Admittedly, the Soninke had lived in Gajaaga for a long time. But the *Tunka* regime did not become consolidated until the thirteenth century, through a series of military campaigns combined with diplomatic initiatives among the local peoples.<sup>16</sup> Among the descendants of the three brave sons of Khasan Mariyam, it was the eldest Bacili selected from among the royal families of the provinces of Guey and Kammera who took the title of *Tunka Nyaaye*; the title given to the second was *Tunka Seega*. In all provinces, the *Tunkas* were assisted in their official functions by *Mangus* appointed from the Bacili Sononne, Gunjamu or Jaguraga, Jallo, Siima, Fade, and Timmera lineages, who functioned as military chiefs or *Kuru nimu*. This society was stratified along rigid hierarchical lines. At the top were free men, known as *hooro*. Below them came castes, called *namakhala*. At the bottom were slaves, called *komo*.<sup>17</sup>

The basic division here was between the ruling military class and a sub-



Plate 2 Inhabitants of Lower Senegal

jugated peasantry. But the social system was complicated by the existence, from a long way back, of old families of Muslim clergy such as the Sakho, Darame, Siise, Ture and Silla. These constituted powerful groups in religious and economic affairs. Gajaaga owed all its importance to its strategic location at the intersection of the Sudan, the Sahel, and Senegambia. And the proximity of the Bambuk and Bure gold mines reinforced the commercial power of the Soninke throughout West Africa.

It should be pointed out, at this juncture, that before colonialism, indeed until the independence process in 1960, states on both banks of the Senegal River did not consider the river a political frontier. For example, Juurbel, capital of the Waalo kingdom, remained on the right bank until the eighteenth century. And Futa Toro and Gajaaga, like Tekrur and Ghana, were very much involved in the Sahel regions to the north. By historical tradition, the sedentary populations of northern Senegambia originated from the Sahel. Adrar, in present-day Mauritania, was their gathering site before their southward migration. Reacting to climatic changes, especially the desertification of the Sahel, combined with the political pressure of nomadic Berber encroachments, settled Sereer, Wolof, Peul and Tukolor communities gradually began moving south. Their north-south migratory movement has continued to this day.

Economic and political control over the towns of the Sahara, trading

centers linking North Africa and the Sudan, was from time immemorial an important prize for kingdoms on both sides of the Sahara, this sea of sand misleadingly called the desert. Strictly speaking, the Sahara did not really become a desert until Atlantic fleets supplanted its camel caravans. This vast turnabout totally ruined the trans-Saharan trading system as from the fifteenth century. The steady rise of the trans-Atlantic system, increasingly dominant in the Senegal River valley, hastened the southward movement of Berbers from the Mauritanian Sahel through the absorption of Chemama into Senegambia.

Southward from the Senegal River, the valley merges into the western plains of southern Senegambia. This is the veritable homeland of the Wolofs, whose political and social structures were shaped in the framework of the Jolof confederation. From the northern margins of the delta to the outskirts of the Saalum valley, the Wolof countryside is dotted with an uninterrupted network of villages. Rainy-season cereal farming is the traditional basis of economic production here. Millet and sorghum reign supreme over the productive economy and all rural life.<sup>18</sup> Prior to the beginning of the Atlantic trade, this region of subsistence farming, rather remote from the major trade routes of Senegambia, does not seem to have played an important commercial role. Nevertheless, the Jolof confederation, founded in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, during the decline of the Mali Empire, at its peak occupied most of Senegambia between the Senegal and the Gambia rivers.<sup>19</sup>

Originally, the Wolofs were divided into kin-based communities or clans. But very early in their history, these chiefs came to be known as *Lamans*, and their former functions of patriarchal heads and managers of landed property evolved into political status roles, making them clearly superior to clan or family heads. It was from this new political class that a new set of paramount *Lamans* rose to head the territorial units of Kajoor, Baol, and Jolof, before becoming vassal chiefs within the Jolof confederation founded by Njajaan Njay. The Wolofs, then, were familiar from the start with a land tenure system of the *lamanal* type, in which land rights belonged to kin-based communities and were managed by the community head or *Laman*. Farms were worked individually by families paying land rent to the *Laman*. Lastly, it was possible for outsiders to settle on such land with their families, provided they paid settlement duties to the *Laman* along with regular rent, in return for permanent, inheritable farming rights.

Once the Jolof Empire fell apart, monarchy became the rule in the remnant units. This did not change the *lamanal* land tenure system fundamentally. But management functions shifted from the *Laman* to the *Boromlew*, responsible for land tenure appointments. Furthermore, despite the importance of landed property as a basis of monarchical authority, land

did not play a crucial role in political relationships within Wolof society, because fallow land was plentiful and farming techniques remained stagnant, except in the delta.<sup>20</sup>

As from the thirteenth century, Njajaan Njay provided all the Wolof kingdoms in the Jolof confederation with the foundations of their monarchical institutions on the basis of an extremely hierarchical society. For example, the kingdom of Kajoor, an offshoot of the territorial break-up of the Jolof Empire, was from that point on ruled by the *Damel*, appointed from among matrilineal royal families known as *Garmi*, which included the Seno, Wagadu, Gelwaar, Bey and Gej, provided they also belonged by patrilineal descent to the Faal clan. In central government affairs, the *Damel* was assisted by the *Jawrin Mbul*, who acted as Prime Minister, superseding the *Laman Jamatil*, selected by his peers to defend the interests of the *Jambur*, the social category of notables. Local power remained in the hands of the *Laman*, who enjoyed considerable autonomy before the *Damel* imposed his royal agents, the *Jaaraf* or *Jawrin*. At the regional or provincial level, these agents were administratively and politically subordinate to the *Kangam* as well as to a large retinue of appointees and officials. In later centuries, indeed, the monarchy relied much more on the *Jaami-buur*, royal slaves, to force through the regime's plans.

Wolof society remained rigidly hierarchical. At its top sat the royal families, the *garmi*. Next came the *Jambur* or notables, then the *Badoolo*, the mass of ordinary people with no particular power. Below them came the *Ñeeño*, the group of handicraft castes. At the bottom of the social pyramid came the *jaam*, slaves.<sup>21</sup> This political and social structure was duplicated in the Baol kingdom, whose rulers, bearing the title of *Damel Teeñ*, were often linked to those of Kajoor. The same was true of the rump Jolof state left over from the shrinkage of the confederation. There the ruler was known as the *Buurba*. However, succession to the Jolof throne continued to be decided by patrilineal descent from the line of Njajaan Njaay's royal family. But in the sixteenth century, the Jolof kingdom, landlocked as it was, no longer played an important role in the history of Senegambia, a region undergoing full-scale transformation.

Farther south, the Wolof region shades into territory inhabited by the Sereer. The Sereer are a peasant people, originally from the Senegal River valley, where records indicate their presence up until the eleventh century. Having rejected both Islam and the domination of the Jolof, the Sereer gradually settled on the wooded highlands of Siin and Saalum, traveling in successive waves of large family movements each led by a *Laman* or Master of the Fire (Hearth). These *Laman*, who thus became the first to take possession of the woodlands, took on the functions of community heads and territorial rulers until the fourteenth century, when the Gelwaar aris-