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Karafoo ye jotentung saabang (‘entrustment precedes cowardice’): in the Mandinka language, as spoken along the River Gambia and in the nearby area of Casamance, this idiomatic expression asserts the importance of trust in the articulation of society.1 Its sense could be explained like this: ‘even the man who runs away when in danger should be brave if the person entrusted to him gets in trouble’.

The Mandinka word that I translate as ‘entrustment’ is karafoo. Elsewhere (Bellagamba 2000, 2002a), I have analysed some of its layered meanings, which include the care of valuable things, the practice of child-fostering, and the ties of confidence and reciprocal assistance built up between a stranger and his host. ‘Ngakarafaaima’ (‘I entrust myself to you’) is a ‘voluntary declaration of allegiance’ for the sake of protection (Goody 1970: 5), one which the historical memories related to the development of local communities and pre-colonial polities in this area of West Africa put at the core of host–stranger relationships. In the longue durée, ‘entrustment’ speaks indeed of the patterns of trade and mobility, which for centuries characterised the River Gambia, linked as it was by long-distance trade routes to the interior of Senegambia, to the Sahara and, since the late fifteenth century, to European commercial interests and the Atlantic markets as well. Seasonal and more stable forms of migration interested the riverside even before the nineteenth century, a period in which the development of commercial-scale groundnut cultivation attracted a flow of labourers towards Senegambia. People joined caravans on a temporary basis. They were looking for pastures, commercial opportunities and land to settle on, and at times they were also escaping the attacks from more aggressive neighbouring polities (Swindell 1981: 86–87). During the dry season, professional merchants, known as ‘julas’ (Mandinka: sing. jula; pl. julalu), came from the interior and asked for the protection of other traders, who would

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1 Mandinka is one of the languages spoken in the Republic of The Gambia. It belongs to the group of Mande languages and is similar to Baman (spoken in Mali), Malinké (Guinea) and Dyula (Ivory Coast). Mande languages emerged in the geographical area between the Rivers Senegal and Niger around 900 BC. This wide linguistic space was crossed by trade routes which linked the Sahara to Sahelian gold regions. The diffusion of Mande languages was then re-enforced by the emergence of centralised politics, first of all the ancient kingdom of Mali, whose apogee one can approximately locate between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. See, for instance, Amselle (1990) and Brooks (1993).
represent them in their dealings with the local authorities and also give them precious information on the dynamics of commercial transactions along the Gambia. As strangers (sing. luntango; pl. luntangolu), they became embedded in patronage relationships, which shaped their access to political power and economic resources in the local communities. In the Mandinka idiom of power the host (jaayitiyo) was said to be ‘in front’ and the stranger (luntango) to be ‘behind’, as he was morally compelled to make a public display of consensus with the political decisions of the former (van Hoven 1997: 81). In times of war, famine, and during the bottlenecks of the agricultural season, strangers acted as supporters of the extended families they were related to, although their condition of dependency varied according to whether they were scholars or seasonal workers, nobles or fugitive slaves, merchants or artisans.

It was also renegotiated over time, from the complete attachment that the strangers had to their patrons in the beginning, when they were often fed and sheltered with other members of their host’s family, to growing confidence which developed as they gradually became accepted members of the wider social and political community. The politics of marriage facilitated a process of gradual assimilation: the stranger willing to settle definitively in a locality received a wife from his host; conversely, giving away one’s daughters to strangers made it possible to extend the network of one’s own relationships at a regional and trans-regional level.

Deeply woven into the social fabric of the communities along the River Gambia, the practice of karafoo was reappropriated by different historical subjects during the twentieth century in order to construct networks of political confidence and mutual assistance at a local and national level. British administration, for instance, legitimised the hierarchy between ‘hosts’ and ‘strangers’ as customary, and used it as the basis for land distribution within the rural communities, creating

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3 Historical and ethnographic literature related to Senegambia, and to West African cultures in general, extensively highlights the importance of attracting strangers in pre-colonial settings, as a strategy to strengthen the human resources of kinship groups, communities and even kingdoms. See Dorjahn and Pyfe (1962), Skinner (1965), Hill (1966), Quinn (1972), Fortes (1975), Galloway (1975), Wright (1977), Launay (1979), Mouser (1980), Peel (1983), Brooks (1993) and Richards (1996). Host–stranger relationships in the Mande world have been commented upon also by Amselle (1996) and Jansen (1996). In the ethnographic literature this kind of alliance is also known as jaatiyaa, a Mande word which could be translated as ‘the condition of being a host’.

4 Mande societies consider the tripartite social stratification into forolo (freeborn), nyamalu (artisan groups: bards, blacksmiths, leatherworkers, potters), and jongolu (former slaves) as an essential part of their cultural heritage. In pre-colonial times these distinctions differently shaped access to political power, and determined also a division of labour, there being specific activities and professional skills attached to nyamulu identities. Only the freeborn was entitled to political responsibility, while artisans and slaves acted as dependents and supporters. See Hopkins (1971), Conrad and Frank (1995), van Hoven (1997).
the conditions to keep strangers permanently in the position of minors (Haswell 1953; Gamble 1955; Weil 1968; Berry 2002: 644). Land Acts and Regulations stated that Protectorate lands were controlled by native custom, and native custom asserted that within a village the headman was in charge of distributing land to latecomers, taking into account the advice of the first families who had settled within the community (Hailey 1951: 346).

Rather than focusing exclusively on the pre-colonial significance of entrustment, this article therefore questions the continuity and the transformations of this practice into colonial and post-colonial times and contexts. In so doing, it will adopt a ‘transformative’ and ‘historicising’ approach (Werbner 2002: 2f; see also Peel 1983; Fardon 1987; Bayart 1989; Amselle 1990; Feierman 1990; Richards 1996; Pels 2002; Bierschenck and Olivier de Sardan 2003), one which takes up the challenge to account historically for shifts and changes ‘in meaning and significance’ (Spear 2003: 24). The analysis will be contextualised in the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of Bansang, a commercial settlement on the Gambia River about 350 kilometres from the Atlantic coast in the District of Fuladu West, Republic of The Gambia. Eventually the discourse will extend to the surrounding regions, given that the history of Bansang, as a locality of communication and commercial transit, also encourages a sustained contemplation of broader spaces of regional and trans-regional relationships.

In 1992, when I began my field work in The Gambia, Bansang had approximately 5,000 inhabitants and was one of the most politically and economically important urban centres in the middle and upper river, the others being Brikama Bah, Georgetown and Basse. Despite its multi-ethnic composition, Bansang was considered a Mandinka settlement, because the families of its first-settlers spoke Mandinka and claimed a Mandinka identity. Fulbe from the Republic of Guinea began to migrate to the town in the 1970s, and by the 1990s they outnumbered the families of the original settlers. Most of the Fulbe were related to the Imam, who had settled in the town in 1939 as the stranger of the founding families and had gradually become one of the most prestigious and wealthy religious men in the whole area. Finally, Wolof from the north bank of the river and from the surrounding villages populated an entire section of the town. In the early 1990s, they still kept aside from town politics and administration and maintained citizenship in their home villages. A Lebanese trader, with his retail shop, and a few Mauritanians operated in town, and trade itself languished in sharp contrast with the colonial period when Bansang was an extremely lively commercial centre, as the elderly I knew constantly remarked with a deep nostalgia for the prosperous times of their youth.

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5 According to the 1993 population census, Bansang counted 5,405 inhabitants. Fuladu West District numbered 194 villages, and the total population of the area saw a majority of Fulbe, followed by Mandinka, Wolof and Serrahuli. Urban centres, like Bansang and Brikama Bah attracted people during the dry season. See Population and Housing Census (1993).
My treatment of the subject will be divided into three time slots which I consider symptomatic of quite different periods in the history of the River Gambia. The first will address the years immediately preceding the imposition of British rule, when Bansang and its surroundings were included in a large kingdom of relatively recent formation called Fuladu. Fuladu extended from the southern bank of the river to the border of present-day Guinea Bissau. In 1893, the Protectorate of Gambia was formed. In 1901, Mussa Moloh Baldeh, who was the last independent ruler of Fuladu, formally ceded his possessions along the riverbank to the British Protectorate, and the present district of Fuladu West came into being. During this same period, Bansang transformed itself from a seasonal landing place, as it was in Mussa’s times, to a wharf town where the representatives of European trade companies shipped the groundnuts cultivated in the upland villages to the coast for export.

The second time slot will examine the emergence of a first-settlers’ elite in colonial Bansang, and its relations with trade and colonial administration, while the third comments on the political developments at the eve of and after Independence, when the town became the centre of the electoral campaigns for the newly formed constituency of Upper Fuladu West. In this third part, I shall return to an already well-documented aspect of Gambian political history concerning the People’s Progressive Party (PPP). Created in the late 1950s by a group of young Mandinka intellectuals and led by Dawda Jawara, the PPP rapidly established itself as the majority party at the national level. Dawda Jawara brought the country first to self-government and then to independence. On the 22 July 1994, a military takeover definitively ended his presidential hegemony.6

The point I want to stress is the PPP’s ability to manipulate local political traditions in order to build consensus in the rural areas. The PPP’s strategic defence of Mandinka customs facilitated the co-option in national politics of the structures of patronage and mutual assistance that had been consolidated in the Protectorate during colonial times. It nonetheless produced their fragmentation into competing factions, as the post-colonial history of Bansang helps to illustrate (Bayart 1989: 209; Berman 1998: 337). My discussion ends in 1994 because the subsequent events must be read in the context of the military takeover, which profoundly reshaped the political life of The Gambia. Since then the elderly people whose testimonies had been essential in the elaboration of this discussion have died and it is to their memory that I dedicate this essay.7

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7 The evidence I use in this article consists of colonial documents and a set of historical recollections on the history of Bansang and its surroundings between the end of the nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries. In the last section, where I address post-colonial political developments, I will also refer to the testimonies of men and women who participated in the initial campaigns of the PPP during the late colonial period.
In 1902, Mussa Moloh Baldeh still lived in the Casamance region of present-day Senegal, in the village of Hambdallay. The following year he moved to Gambia and eventually settled in the district of Fuladu West. He maintained a correspondence in Arabic with the Governor of The Gambia regarding the thin strip of land located between the river and the Anglo-French border, which he had ceded to the British Crown only a year before (Roche 1985: 256). In one of these letters he clarifies to the Governor the kind of relationship that tied him to the people of Gambissara, a village built by Serrahuli families within the British portion of Fuladu and dedicated to commerce, groundnut farming and handicrafts.

What he is going to say about the Gambissara people, when the Gambissara people came from Bundu, they came to him alone and not to anyone else, they asked him a place to live in, they said before they made their houses, they would tell him a few words. They said they would not live under any chief except him, Mussa Moloh, and since then they have lived under no one else. He now begs the Governor will leave them in the same way.8

In the same letter, a few lines below one reads: ‘Gambissara people are strangers’. Even if the word karafoo does not appear in the English text, Mussa Moloh’s words clearly evoke this sort of relationship between him and the inhabitants of Gambissara. Mussa ‘owned Fuladu’, according to the local political idiom, and the kingdom’s most valuable resource consisted of people: men to assist in waging war; wives to have children with; slaves to farm his fields of millet and groundnuts; and strangers from whom to receive revenue. The inhabitants of Gambissara had asked him for permission to settle on his lands, agreeing to an annual tribute to be paid in fabrics, slaves, livestock and foodstuff. In exchange, Mussa guaranteed them the chance to live in peace, as part of his community of subjects, protected from wars and raids which he was continually involved in, and safe from the attacks of the slave hunters. Conversely, whoever crossed the people of Fuladu had tasted Mussa’s revenge.9

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8 Public Record Office, London [hereafter: PRO], CO 87/166, Enclosure 7 in Gambia Despatch n. 24 of 15.2.1902, From Chief Mussa Moloh to His Excellency the Governor. Bundu is an area located in the north-east of contemporary Senegal, densely populated by Serrahuli groups who fled towards the Gambia during the late nineteenth-century because of its political instability. On Serrahuli migrations see Manchuelle 1997. Other details are in Quinn 1972 and in the materials available in the National Record Office, Banjul [hereafter: NRO Banjul], CSO/76, Dr. Gamble’s files. For an overview of the history of Bundu see Gomez (1992). At the beginning of the twentieth-century Gambissara, along with Nyumuelle, was a district of its own, between the two districts of Fuladu West and Fuladu East, even though in the course of a few years it would lose its independence. See NRO Banjul, CSO 2/45, ‘Report by Travelling Commissioner, Upper River Province for the year 1903’. Archer (1906) describes the political situation of the Protectorate in the early twentieth century. Gailey (1964) describes its organisation in different colonial periods.

9 See for instance PRO, CO 879/29/360, n.75, Enclosure, 1889. The Enclosure contains a letter that Mussa Moloh sent to a British trader at MacCarthy Island in 1889. The text mentions Fodey Kabba, one of the most important late nineteenth-century religious and
Fuladu was indeed of recent political formation, emerging around 1860 from a rebellion that his father, a hunter of Fulbe origin, had led against the Mandinka elite who governed the areas between the middle and upper courses of the Gambia River and present-day Guinea Bissau. This new polity, which by 1895 reached the riverbanks, developed in a period of intense social and economic change. The transition to legitimate trade and the expansion of the groundnut economy profoundly affected Senegambian societies. European powers, moreover, tended to intervene in native political developments in order to protect their commercial activities. They assisted one Senegambian military leader against the other with the aim of creating their own networks of political alliances and supporters.

For at least two decades, Mussa Moloh proved extremely able in manipulating these conflicting interests to increase his own political prestige in Fuladu. He gained the military help of the French to fight against other members of the Baldeh family, who also claimed the right to govern, and he used his amicable relationships with the British to minimise the interference of the French government within the boundaries of his own kingdom. Early twentieth-century colonial reports were indeed right when they stated that the population living in British Fuladu was happy to have changed masters. Mussa built up his power with war, eliminating rivals and other opposition, and then enslaving their families, followers, and whoever else had tried to support them. Women and children captured during his military campaigns were distributed among his following or became part of his personal entourage to cultivate his lands and to attend to the everyday management of his court in Casamance. The men were sold off along

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11 See for instance PRO, CO/87 166, Governor Denton to Secretary of State for Colonies, 10.2.1902, ‘Tour on the Upper River’.

12 For an analysis of slavery along the River Gambia see Klein (1977, 1998). In colonial times, Mussa Moloh chose to incorporate his slaves within his domestic entourage and forbade the use of the word ‘slave’ among the members of his extended family. Nonetheless, in 1919, the British administration accused him of illegal detention of women in a condition of slavery. Mussa was exiled to Sierra Leone, where he remained till 1922 (Quinn 1972, Bellagamba 2002a). Weil (1984) analyses the effects of the commercialisation of groundnuts on the conditions of slaves in Upper River, particularly in the Wuli area.
the trade routes, which crossed the kingdom. Since the mid-nineteenth century, farming groundnuts had become a good source of income for chiefs, military and religious leaders, merchants and common people. This generated a "hunger for labour" (Klein 1998: 68), which in the beginning at least increased the purchase of slaves in the local society. 

Late nineteenth-century Fuladu was therefore quite an insecure context where warfare and the expanding commercial economy forced people to move, even against their will. The practice of karafou protected people from the ever-present risk of enslavement. It was the main strategy which guaranteed strangers their own niche within society, assimilating them to their host’s extended family.

First of all, entrustment offered people fleeing from other areas—something rather common given the political instability of the entire sub-region during the second half of the nineteenth century—the chance to settle elsewhere, as in the case of Gambissara. In such circumstances, karafou expressed almost an act of political submission to the ruler of the land, one extended not only to refugees but also to the defeated opponents of Mussa Moloh, who subsequently declared their allegiance to him. Shepherds and merchants alike seasonally crossed Fuladu grasslands and searched for the protection of local communities and powerful big-men, who could intervene in their behalf with Mussa and his entourage. In the years to come merchants would return and count on the confidence already established with their hosts. European traders and their African representatives as well followed the custom—one consolidated in centuries of commercial transactions along the River—of offering gifts to rulers and their governors as a sign of respect; in exchange, they received an allocation of land on which to construct their stores and conduct their business unhindered. Commerce, after all, was an important source of revenue for the economic life of Fuladu, and maintaining good relationships with merchant families and European trading companies was in Mussa Moloh’s interest.

Lastly, one cannot ignore the growing presence of migrants related to the expansion of commercial-scale groundnut farming along the River Gambia and in Upper Casamance. Fuladu historical narratives note

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13 Claude Meillassoux (1986) noted the role performed by voluntary alliances in pre-colonial Mande and neighbouring societies as a protection against enslavement: he underscores, for instance, the importance of the ‘joking relationship’, a historically stipulated bond between descent groups that cannot marry because they are, say, of freeborn origin on the one hand and artisans on the other. Here I extend Meillassoux’s considerations to ‘entrustment’, and see karafou as a voluntary pact stipulated between people of diverse social and political condition. Fuladu historical memories clearly differentiate karafou from slavery. Slavery is seen mainly as a social bond established through violence and abuse. See for instance the collection of narratives on Fuladu in Innes (1976). Person (1968) describes a practice similar to karafou in Samori Toure’s empire, while Cissoko (1969) and Galloway (1975) comment on the importance of extended families as a form of protection against slave-raiding and economic insecurity during the nineteenth century. Theoretically, the use of entrustment, as an act of submission, recalls the debate on ‘feudalism’ and ‘clientship’ of the 1950s and 1960s summarised in Goody (1970). See also Feierman (1990: 53 ff.) for an analysis of personal dependency in an East African pre-colonial setting.
the presence of so-called Tillibunkas (a Mandinka term used to refer to people from Tillibu, 'the East'), settled in small villages along the banks of the Gambia and dedicated to farming in the late nineteenth century. They paid a tribute to Mussa Moloh and would stay for a few years, accumulating wealth and goods, with which they would eventually return to their home villages (see also Swindell 1981; Klein 1998: 69 f.). By then the riverbanks were relatively underpopulated and migrants could easily find an empty place to establish a new village. Mussa himself had sent some of his followers and mercenaries to the area, so that they could collect customs from the populace on his behalf, and mobilise the local youth for his military campaigns. In the colonial period the Gambian rainy season would be associated with a marked increase of seasonal migrant labour, an influx which reached an average of 14,000 per year between 1917 and 1951 (Hailey 1951: 347). This seasonal manpower, known in colonial documentation as 'strange farmers', came from other areas of The Gambia or from the regions of Upper Senegal, present-day Mali and Guinea Conakry. They negotiated a relationship of hospitality and, in exchange for lodging, food and land on which to grow groundnuts; they also cultivated the plots of their hosts for a certain number of days a week. The agreement varied according to region and village. It based itself on the rules of hospitality, which for centuries had characterised the communities along the River Gambia, even if colonial documentation and the historical analysis concerning this phenomenon do not give enough hints to discuss how the rising tide of commercial groundnut cultivation seeped into the cultural language of entrustment, and possibly reshaped it significance.

To be sure, the incorporation of British Fuladu in the Protectorate of the Gambia changed the political framework in which the practice of entrustment found its meaning, as a new actor—the colonial state—made its appearance on the scene. Mobility became easier as the insecurity provoked by slave-raiding and warfare gradually disappeared (Colvin 1981: 59). The tributes which Mussa used to collect from the

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14 See, for instance, PRO, CO 87/166, Governor Denton to Secretary of State for Colonies, 10.2.1902, ‘Tour on the Upper River’.

15 For example, Dembo Dansoe, who became the first head chief of Fuladu West or Lamarang Sannoh of Sololo after having fought with Mussa Moloh. Mussa’s following settled in many other areas of Fuladu West, Fuladu East, MacCarthy Island and even on the north bank of the river, thus enabling him to control the whole area even in colonial times.

16 Swindell (1981) illustrated the close relationships between the ‘strange farmers’ system and the arrangements made between domestic slaves and their masters. Domestic slaves worked on the master’s fields for a certain number of days a week, and dedicated the other days to their own fields. See also Weil (1984). One of the first systematic colonial reports on ‘strange farmers’ is in the notes of J. H. Palmer, Agricultural Officer (PRO, CO 89/26, Notes on strange farmers, by J. H. Palmer, 1946). Palmer mentions the disputes between landlords and their strange farmers brought before the Native Courts. A careful examination of court records could help to illustrate the changes that occurred in the agreements between landlord and seasonal workers over time. Unfortunately, court records have not yet been centralised in the National Record Office of the Gambia. They are still kept in the Provincial Commissioner’s Office and in many cases they are closed to consultation. For a history of migrant farming in Senegal see David (1980).
strangers became a prerogative of the colonial state. British officers in service in the Protectorate were responsible for tax collection. They also issued trading licences and trading plots. The administration set a tax on every strange-farmer, and then gave a fixed percentage of the amount collected to the head chiefs (Hailey 1951: 347; Swindell 1981: 83 ff.). The Gambissara case, quoted at the beginning of this section, epitomises the shifts in the balance of power and authority, which characterised the early twentieth century. Trying to sever their links of submission to their old host, and sure that Mussa could not repress their attempt, the Gambissara people pledged to depend directly on the colonial government, instead of being ruled by Fuladu West’s first colonial head chief, one of Mussa’s closest collaborators (Roche 1985: 256). Mussa wrote to the Governor and the letter clarified not only the dependent status of the Gambissara village but also the political structure of the whole area, one which the Governor would find it useful to rely on in the years to come. Eventually, the Gambissara people lost their administrative independence to be absorbed into Fuladu East district, while Mussa Moloh’s descendants, as those of his loyal following, re-established a political supremacy in Upper River, which would last well into post-colonial times.

GROUNDNUTS, TRADE AND OFFICE: BANSANG DEVELOPMENT IN COLONIAL TIMES

Bakari Darboe, as he became powerful, built a compound in Bansang. This was how he settled in Bansang. He also built a shop there. He became very friendly with the whites. He became very rich. He had lots of money. Women were married from this money. Relatives came at this time. Bansang became Bansang. [Alieu Sisawo, interview, Talinding, Kombo, 12 December 1994]

The pacification of Upper River, as well as Mussa Moloh’s decision to settle with a following of at least 2,000 people in Fuladu West district in 1903, increased the production of groundnuts in the whole area. Commercial settlements and landing places along the river expanded rapidly in the early twentieth century, while there was a progressive decline in the trade networks which in previous centuries connected the Eastern Gambia with present-day Guinea Conakry, Senegal and Mali. Indigenous merchant families—julas like the Darboes, the Dansoes, the Ceesays—who had controlled the trade diaspora in Mussa’s times, and well before, faced competition from a new class of traders, consisting

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17 See for instance PRO, CO 87 225/4, Reports on Provinces for 1925, Governor Armitage to The Secretary of State for Colonies.
18 See PRO, CO 87/176, 10.10.1906, Acting Governor to Secretary of State for Colonies, Visit to the Upper River.
19 See PRO, CO 87/179, 15.4.1908, Governor Cameroon to Secretary of State for Colonies, Tour in the Protectorate; CO 87/200, 3.5.1915, Governor Cameroon to Secretary of State for Colonies, Enclosure, Special Report from Dr. E. Hopkinson on conditions in Upper River.
at first of anglicised coastal Africans, working as representatives of the European trading companies. Colonial rule also stimulated the migration of Syrians to the Gambian Protectorate. Before World War I these completely supplanted the coastal Africans in their role as middlemen between the companies and local trade networks (Barrett 1988; Mbowji 1992: 218 ff.).

As Mbowji (1992) has shown, the expansion of European commercial interests in the Eastern Gambia from the mid-nineteenth century onwards seriously affected the jula families and by the 1970s had reduced most of them to the position of petty traders and small shopkeepers. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the julas still relied on their large households of relatives, junior men, dependants and slaves to develop the production of cash crops successfully. Their involvement in the cultivation of groundnuts for export dated from the second half of the previous century, when the progressive decline of the slave trade along the Gambia drove them to develop alternative sources of income (Curtin 1975; Swindell 1981). Renowned as trustworthy commercial partners, the julas received goods on credit from the coastal African and Syrian merchants as well as from the Europeans, and in their turn acted as moneylenders in the rural areas.20 Their youth moved to places like Bansang where they could escape the labour obligations binding them to their elders in the home villages.

Farming land was still relatively abundant in Upper River and it could be borrowed seasonally from local landlords, either on a 'strange farming' agreement or by claiming an uncleared portion of bush to build a small compound and develop one's own groundnut farm.21 This choice was reserved to those who had already accumulated enough social and economic credit to enter into the system as independent producers. During the dry season, these same young men returned to the riverside, where they could get jobs as metilankoo or 'propaganda boys' (from Mandinka: metilankoo 'propaganda') employed by the bigger merchants and the companies to organise the flow of groundnuts towards the commercial outposts located along the river.

Fuladu farmers had been selling their products in the British area ever since Mussa's times, and the old nineteenth-century commercial connections were now used to convey the crops from the French territories to the Gambia. The new administration paid particular attention to the maintenance of roads leading from the river to Upper Casamance, and rewarded those head chiefs who followed

20 See Benini (1980) and moreover PRO, CO 87/225/4, Reports on Provinces for 1925, South Bank Province, where the julas are described as 'money-lenders' and exploiters of the native farmers.

21 Jeng (1978), Swindell (1981), Benini (1980) and Barrett (1988) widely analysed the effects of the commercialisation of groundnuts on the subsistence economy of the River Gambia. Colonial correspondence related to Upper River in the early twentieth century shows a relative abundance of land. This situation would rapidly change in the following decades due to a dramatic increase in the influx of strange farmers migrating to the Upper River regions.
its recommendations. Reaching inland villages with a caravan of donkeys, the ‘propaganda boy’ would persuade the farmers to sell their groundnuts to the trading company. He would explain to the farmers the economic advantages of developing a relation of confidence in him and his patron, as far as credit in seeds, rice and imported goods was concerned. In fact, in the early twentieth century the ‘strange farming’ system offered a chance of economic advancement to former slaves who were trying to emancipate themselves by grasping the opportunities offered by the colonial state. ‘Strange farmers’ were thus easily seen as ‘slaves’ in the Upper River society of the time, a point stressed both in colonial correspondence and in oral sources, which describe them as sanalaa jongolu (‘slaves of the rains’). Metilankoo activity, instead, suited those belonging to renowned families, men who were either julas or relatives of the ruling elite, i.e. members of Mussa Moloh’s entourage. Family name worked as a guarantee of honesty and accountability in trade transactions.

Bakary Darboe, who is remembered as the founder of Bansang, having built what was probably the first permanent compound there, started his career exactly like this, as a young jula determined to establish his own commercial activity. This was during the second decade of the twentieth century, a period in which commerce was beginning to develop in Bansang. For some years, Bakary relied on farming in the villages as his first source of income. He then reinvested his earnings in acting as a middleman between the other farmers and the companies operating at the riverside. By 1924, when Cherno Kady Baldeh, Mussa Moloh’s son, became the head chief of Fuladu West district (Bellagamba 2002b: 21), Bakary had a shop in Bansang stocked with sugar, seeds and bags of imported rice, which he lent to the farmers during the rainy season. At the time of the harvest the farmers would sell their groundnuts to him and repay with interest. The expansion of cash crops had in fact radically reduced the amount of land devoted to the cultivation of early millet, a crop which traditionally helped to reduce the incidence of food shortages during the rainy season.

Colonial officers carefully monitored Bansang’s development. The town needed a chief, as the first one, a certain Yugo Fall, had absconded

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22 See PRO, CO 87/179, 10.7.1908, General Report on Upper River Province for 1908, Cap. W. B. Stanley.
23 See PRO, CO 88/4, n.12, 1894, An ordinance for the abolition of slave-dealing in the protected territories adjacent to the Colony of the Gambia; CO 88/5, n.5, 1906, An ordinance to amend the law relating to slave-dealing in the Protectorate.
24 KS, interview, Talinding, Kombo, 3 May 2000. See also PRO, CO 87/219, 7.7.1923, Governor to Secretary of State for Colonies, Enclosure, Report on Agricultural position and requirements of the Gambia, by M. A. J. Brooks, Director of Agriculture.
25 Bansang is mentioned as a tenda (‘landing place’) in a letter sent by Mussa Moloh to the Manager of MacCarthy Island in 1889. See NRO Banjul, CSO 54/7, Papers related to the boundaries of the Gambia Colony and Protectorate, p. 88, Mussa Moloh Baldeh to the Manager of MacCarthy Island. In the 1920s the locality is already described as a wharf town. See PRO, CO 87/227/7, Report on Provinces 1927, South Bank Province.
to Casamance with the tax money he had collected. Bakary Darboe seemed the most suitable candidate for the position. He chose to assign the office to one of his younger brothers, but the family of the head chief, Cherno Kady Baldeh, would soon outshine the Darboes’ influence on the administration of the town. In the 1930s, Bansang and the surrounding area was included in the jurisdiction of Fuladu West, and Cherno Kady immediately nominated as village chief his younger brother, Farli Baldeh. Farli Baldeh was soon accused of corruption by the colonial administration, and left the post which then passed to Boubacar Kora, born of the marriage between one of Cherno’s sisters and Farli Kora, who had been another loyal supporter of Musa Moloh and the first head chief of Fuladu East district. Boubacar Kora had grown up in Musa Moloh’s compound and worked as a badge messenger for Cherno himself. He had also married Cherno’s daughter and lived in Bansang in the compound that Cherno had built.

Being a trader by choice and by family tradition, Bakary Darboe accepted the political interference of the Fuladu West chief in the management of the town. His commercial prosperity partly depended on the benevolence of the chief, and detachment from political matters was moreover entangled in the history of the jula families along the River Gambia (Galloway 1975: 139 ff.). Boubacar Kora married Bakary’s daughter and the two families thus joined together. Over time, Boubacar Kora’s and Bakary’s descendants could assert that they were ‘the same thing’, and claim a high status within the town, being connected to the town’s founder and to the ruling family of the district as well.

While the Darboes’ strategy of prestige remained strictly linked to farming and trade, the advantages of office enriched Cherno’s relatives, complementing their already established position as prosperous farmers and cattle owners in the district. In 1927 a market place was built in Bansang, and the town chief controlled the collection of market fees, hut taxes and indirectly even the running of the native tribunal, as Cherno would introduce the habit of holding court once a week in town. In 1938 the inauguration of the hospital, the only one along the upper course of the Gambia, intensified regional mobility from the rural areas towards Bansang. Young men found jobs in the hospital wards as cleaners or unskilled workers, or ran small restaurants where the relatives of those admitted could eat and rest. Women sold food and did the laundry for the unmarried men coming to town. Tailors, petty traders and religious scholars were attracted to the developing urban centre.

Land distribution was a more sensitive matter. From an administrative point of view, Bansang was classified as a wharf town, and two systems of land allocation were in effect. Part of the land was set aside for commercial purposes and directly administered by the colonial state, through the commissioner who was its local representative. The

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commissioner allocated the plots let to commercial companies,\textsuperscript{27} while a reading of custom which assigned control of land to the town chief and the first-settlers’ families governed the hillside area, where Bakary Darboe lived with his entourage. Nearby was the Fuladu West head chief’s compound and the area later occupied by the great mosque of Bansang.

Bansang was indeed a recent settlement, where the distinction between early and latecomers sounded slightly suspect. The Darboes and the Baldehs were nonetheless economically and politically powerful enough to gain and maintain the leadership, and to advocate for themselves the status of first-settlers. Strangers could entrust themselves either to Bakary or to the town chief. Even the Syrians, who could ask the commissioner directly for land, preferred to maintain good relations with the local elite and looked for their assistance and mediation in dealing with the indigenous society. Bakary Darboe and the town chief would ask each other’s advice: the town chief respected Bakary’s age and prestige, while Bakary was well aware that the town chief was Cherno Kady Baldeh’s man and behaved accordingly. Bakary, the town chief, Cherno Kady Baldeh and the British commissioner all acted with the goal of maintaining a harmonious balance in their reciprocal relationships. They needed one another. The British commissioner relied on native authorities for the daily management of the district; the town chief derived his power from the head chief, and both of them represented the colonial bureaucracy in front of the populace. Last but not least, Bakary Darboe’s word was held in high esteem in Bansang and could not be ignored, as he was, after all, a very rich merchant with a dedicated following, capable of lending money to the chief himself. The chief needed the help of Bakary and other traders to support the poor and distressed families of Fuladu West district if he wanted to be popular. Popularity was indeed one of the criteria that restrained the colonial state from abruptly removing a head chief from office in case of misconduct. For the head chief, men like Bakary Darboe were dangerous: they could easily disclose his debts to the British officers, something which would discredit Cherno in the eyes of the administration. For his part, Bakary had to be careful not to clash with either the colonial officer or the head chief and, as a subject of both, he risked experiencing first-hand the most coercive aspects of the colonial administrative structure.

At the end of the Second World War, Bansang numbered about forty compounds, and these would drastically increase in the years to come. The category of Bansang first-settlers included the Darboes, the Baldehs and those Mandinka families who had initially entrusted themselves

\textsuperscript{27} See NRO Banjul, CSO/2/168, Commissioner Diaries South Bank Province for 1912–1915, E. Hopkinson, Travelling Commissioner, South Bank. Precis of the diary of the travelling commissioner for November–December 1913. In the beginning, the rental earnings enriched the district income, and then later, after the Second World War, the Native Treasuries, so that the District Authorities, which were composed of district chiefs and their advisers, could use these funds to implement development at the local level.
either to the former or the latter. Favoured by the fact that customary law gave original settlers a privileged position in the management of cultivable lands and parcels on which to build dwellings, these families controlled a good portion of the town resources. The growth of population had already made scarce the swampy land suitable for rice cultivation around the settlement. First-settlers controlled it completely, and they had land also in the surrounding villages for their groundnut farms. Firmly established in the town’s trading networks, they were privileged at the district level because of their family connections with the head chief himself. New and old signs of prosperity mingled in their style of life. Bakary bought the first lorry in town and covered his compound with corrugated iron roofs. In the meantime, he married the daughters of other respected families, and throughout his life kept on behaving as an open-handed patron. His seasonal labourers always had enough to eat in times when feeding the strange-farmers had become a serious economic burden for Gambian landlords.

Trade, farming and office did indeed offer to the men of Bakary Darboe’s and then of Boubacar Kora’s generation the opportunity ‘to fulfil their ambitions of personal success, which was to attract a following and exercise an influence through spending money and controlling opportunities’ (Peel 1983: 140), both in town and in the upland villages. Their wealth became a point of reference for farmers looking for credit and material support in Bansang. The overall political and economic scenario was nonetheless changing rapidly. In 1949, the colonial government created the Gambian Produce Marketing Board to facilitate the collection of groundnuts and their commercialisation on the world market. In the 1950s, a network of co-operative societies was established to assist the farmers with credit schemes intended to reduce their dependence upon local merchants and trading companies (Barrett 1988: 44). Bansang big-men succeeded in controlling these institutions, and adjusted their strategies of personal success accordingly. Bakary’s sons counted on the rights to land that their father had capitalised throughout his life and established themselves as prosperous farmers able to adopt and benefit by the technological innovations reaching rural Gambia from the late 1950s onwards. Those who were educated became teachers, veterinary and agricultural officers as other young Protectorate men were doing in those days. Boubacar Kora, having already during the war lost the position of town chief, concentrated on farming and

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28 Ethnographic researches carried out in the rural Gambia of the late 1940s testify to a crystallised situation, with descendants of founding families strictly in control of the most valuable lands close to settlements. Strangers and other dependants, for instance former slaves, had no title to land (Haswell 1953; Gamble 1955). Scarcity of land in post-colonial times transformed the precedence of first-settlers over latecomers into a bone of contention, as demonstrated by the ethnographies of the 1980s and 1990s. See Beedle (1980), Beckerleg (1992), and the sociological enquiries carried out in Upper River by Seibert and Sidibe (1992). Pamela Kea’s work (2001) in Brikamah examines the dynamics of patronage from a gender perspective.

29 PRO, CO 89/26, Notes on Strange Farmers, by J.H. Palmer, 1946, p. 3.
reinvested his wealth in buildings, credit to farmers, transport and cattle. A man loyal to the Baldeh-ruled Bansang between the end of the war and the 1970s, when once again Boubacar Kora became the town chief. By then, he was well respected in the Co-operative and a good supporter of the ruling party.

Bansang adherence to the government of the day partially compensated for the decline of the town’s economy after the mid-1970s. While the groundnut industry had experienced a boom in the aftermath of Independence, in the following decade the combination of droughts with the withdrawal of European trading interests from rural Gambia seriously affected the already precarious national economy (Sallah 1990: 625). In the early 1980s European companies closed their buying-stations in town, and the commercial expansion which had attracted Bakary Darboe and other native traders in the early twentieth century came to an end. Party politics was dominating the social and economic life of the town.

NATIONAL POLITICS AND RURAL ELITES IN LATE COLONIAL AND POST-INDEPENDENCE GAMBIA

A politician comes and tells me: ‘I entrust myself to you, I want to make politics’. This means: ‘I am here for you to help me’. If you agree, you will help. You are the same with that person. [BK, interview, Bansang, 23 December 1994]

A series of stories of a political nature circulated in Bansang in the early 1990s. The National Assembly had just been elected and an independent candidate obtained the seat of the constituency of Upper Fuladu West. The PPP (People’s Progressive Party) still held the majority of votes in the country and Sir Dawda Jawara had been confirmed as the President of The Gambia. In his political campaign, the winner for Upper Fuladu West denounced the personal advantages that the Bansang elite had gained over the years through their allegiance to the PPP. The absence of facilities in the town was visible to all, and the PPP’s chronic lack of interest in the countryside, along with the indifference of politicians towards their constituencies once elections were over, did not even merit comment. Exacerbated by debts and by political disillusion, the villagers—and many citizens of Bansang as well—welcomed the independent candidate as the man who would take care of their grievances in the national arena (BF, interview, Serrekunda, 16 December 1994).

Beside the electoral rhetoric, rumour saw the defeat of the PPP as linked to the defection of certain prestigious elders who had secretly mobilised their own social networks to support the independent

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candidate. Competing factions accused one another of having betrayed long-lasting and consolidated loyalties. The elderly described the town as a place from which unity, cooperation and solidarity had long since disappeared.31

This widespread climate of disillusionment has to be contextualised within the history of independent Gambia. One has to question PPP consolidation in the rural areas together with the mixture of patronage and coercion that the party leaders implemented to control their electoral clientele once in power. The interaction of the ruling party with Bansang social dynamics after the 1970s should also be taken into account.

In the late 1950s, two elements characterised PPP strategy towards the countryside. The party representative emphasised the marginal position of Protectorate Gambians in the emerging national contexts.32 During the first electoral campaigns, party representatives held rallies in the villages publicly presenting themselves as the ‘strangers’ of the local big-men. In community after community, the supporters of the PPP entrusted themselves to village authorities and prominent residents. Showing respect for the local hierarchies of power, they mitigated the elders’ diffidence towards the changes brought about by the political developments of the late 1950s. Entrustment compelled the hosts to help their strangers so that they could fulfil their mission. Subsequently, the party could count on the social and material wealth of the rural elite to sustain popular enthusiasm and mass mobilisation in the delicate phase of its establishment in the national arena. Furthermore the elders’ favourable commitment pushed other members of the community to

31 In the months immediately following the 22 July 1994 coup, the military stressed the need to suspend political discussion within The Gambia, as national politics, parties and elections represented a source of litigation and conflicts for families, groups and communities. This was the official justification for a ban on politics which lasted till 1996, when Gambians finally returned to the polls. See ‘Decrees 3, 4 signed by AFPRC Chairman’ (The Gambia Weekly 32, Friday 12 August 1994: 9). In 1996, Capt. Yaya Jammeh, leader of the military takeover, became the new president. His party, the APRC (Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction) took thirty-three out of the forty-nine seats in the National Assembly. The 2001 presidential elections confirmed the supremacy of the APRC. In June 2002, Sir Dawda Jawara, exiled since 1994, obtained permission to return to the country. In the last few years, the political leaders of the PPP generation have re-entered politics, a chance which was denied them in the 1996 elections. Bansang, moreover, is once again an opposition centre, being the home town of Husseino Darboe, leader of the UDP (United Democratic Party).

32 Promoted by a small group of educated Mandinka, the Protectorate People’s Party was—in contrast to the ideology of other parties—more sensitive to the interests of the westernised elite, mainly Aku (i.e. Liberated Africans) and Wolof, who were established on the coast and participating in the European life-style of the colony. See Nyang (1974) and Hughes (1975) for details on the early history of the PPP. Nyang (1974) and Nyang (1995) saw the emergence of Mandinka ethnicity as strictly linked to the incorporation of the Protectorate in the national political arena. Confronting the anglicised Africans and the educated Wolof of the colony, Mande-speaking groups in the Protectorate began to see themselves as Mandinkas and Gambians, thus reinforcing the ethnic classifications already established in colonial times. Ethnic distinctions became more relevant in post-colonial Bansang than they had been in colonial times, when the migrants to town had instead used host–stranger relationships and entrustment as a strategy of integration within local society.
follow their decision. The PPP, as Weil (1968) pointed out, purposely chose to rely on the social alignments emerging from pre-colonial and colonial history. It ‘built itself on what traditional society could offer’ (Nyang 1974: 220), both in terms of human resources and political culture.

In the constituency of Upper Fuladu West, the PPP won the majority only in the 1970s. For almost ten years Bansang and its surroundings, like other areas in Upper River, remained a stronghold of the UP (United Party). Founded in 1951 and led by a renowned lawyer from the capital, Mr Pierre Sarr Njie, the UP established itself in the 1962 general elections as the party of the colony while the PPP obtained most of the Protectorate seats in the National Assembly. The UP had nonetheless a following in the rural areas where the district chiefs feared the populist attitude of the PPP. The PPP was distributing party responsibilities to prestigious families, preferably those claiming the status of original settlers. In the long run, this could favour the emergence of rival claims to the chieftaincy itself. Additionally, the minority groups of Upper River, i.e. the Fulɓe and the Serrahuli living in Fuladu West and East districts, felt that the UP could defend their interests more than a Mandinka-biased party, as the PPP still looked in the 1960s before purposely promoting a politics of ‘national reconciliation’ (Hughes 1975: 66 ff.). Most of the educated Fulɓe in Upper River attended the Catholic mission school of Fuladu West district, and felt close to Mr Pierre Sarr Njie who was a Catholic (Rice 1968: 277). Mr Njie also brilliantly defended Cherno Kady Baldeh at the Commission of Enquiry called by the colonial state to investigate the conduct of the old chief in the early 1950s. Cherno had been one of best-loved native rulers of colonial Gambia, and the people of his district did not forget those who assisted Cherno in times of need. His successor was a UP supporter who lived in Bansang. The UP Member of Parliament for the Upper Fuladu West constituency was furthermore a respectable trader who belonged to the Darboe family. The UP control of the town and surroundings lasted till the early 1970s, when a combination of factors assured a PPP victory, the UP state of disarray being one of them.

In 1962, Paul Baldeh, one of the young graduates of Fuladu West, became the Second Assistant Secretary-General of the PPP (Nyang 1974: 225). His father had been a follower of Cherno Kady Baldeh and a member of the Native Tribunal. Jawara and the PPP were purposely trying to attract the minorities, both in the capital city and in the rural areas (Hughes 1975: 70). The name of the party was changed to Progressive People’s Party in an attempt to win the support of the coastal urban areas previously controlled by the UP. Paul’s

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33 Fuladu Fulɓe are different from those coming from Guinea Conakry settled in Bansang. The former are historically linked to the Baldeh family and to the political developments of Fuladu in pre-colonial times. The latter are considered instead as recent migrants (Nyang 1995; Bellagamba 2002a).
nomination gave to the Fulfé of Upper River the chance to reconsider their positions towards the ruling party. Then, the Fuladu West chief lost the office and the new chief rapidly showed his attachment to the PPP. What is more, he was the son of Cherno Kady Baldeh. The chieftancy returned to Mussa Moloh’s descendants, and the old family loyalties could be mobilised in the PPP interest. The last step, as I have already commented upon, was Boubacar Kora’s election as the chief of Bansang. The PPP representative in town was a wealthy Mandinka trader belonging to Jawara’s family. He supported Boubacar Kora’s election, and Boubacar Kora in his turn accepted a young member of the Jawara family as his karafoo. In 1970, this young man became the PPP candidate for the Upper Fuladu West constituency and the town chief personally assisted him in his electoral campaign (MB, interview, Bansang, 2 December 1994). The 1960s had been a prosperous period for groundnut farming and the first-settlers in Bansang had enough material and social capital to support the ruling party with energy. Political mobilisation could follow the confidential ties that had developed over the years through commercial transactions with the countryside. ‘Trade and politics they are the same, as far as I think what you want, groundnuts or vote is with the people, it is in their hands’ (KJ, interview, Bakau, Kombo, 22 October 1994).

During the 1970s, the political activity of the first-settler families was sustained with the sale of land to build dwellings for the flow of strangers who were migrating to Bansang. In the long run, this strategy would destroy the first-settlers’ economic supremacy and bring them to realise the disruptive effects of their entanglement with national politics. The PPP attitude towards the rural big-men had profoundly changed since the late colonial days. The official façade of The Gambia as a relatively peaceful multi-party democracy actually hid a patrimonial conception of the state (Wiseman 1985: 23). Bribery and corruption was already dominating national political life in the 1970s (Beedle 1980).

Removal from office of the district chiefs who did not support the PPP had been one of the first acts of Jawara’s government immediately after the 1962 elections (Nyang 1974: 136; Fletcher 1978: 170). Although the reason for the chiefs’ dismissal was not overtly political, this sounded
like a strong warning to the party’s opponents. Loyalty to the PPP was almost compulsory even if the respect for custom advocated by the party representatives at first proved useful in masking a reality made of opportunistic and shifting alliances. Town and district chiefs who wanted to maintain their office were called upon to obstruct the activities of the opposition in their areas of competence. They could hardly do otherwise, as the decline of the Gambian economy after the mid-1970s and the progressive impoverishment of the countryside were making their economic and social prestige dependent on state resources. Courted at the time of electoral campaigns, rural leaders were soon forgotten afterwards. The loans and other facilities distributed by the government were never sufficient to repay the personal wealth they invested in support of the party. Politicians moreover considered the local big-men not only as allies but also as potential rivals in the national arena. Historical rifts between families and the local competition for power were exploited by Jawara and his men to keep their rural supporters under control. The PPP indeed transformed the colonial practice of ‘divide and rule’ into a post-colonial predicament (Berman 1998: 315), and set relatives, allies and even friends one against the other, as commonly recollected by those who lived under its regime.

During the 1980s, the multiplication of institutions and decision-making contexts at community level, fostered by the government itself and by the activities of NGOs in the rural areas, made it increasingly difficult for Bansang first-settlers to control the links between the town and the external flow of resources, as they had been doing previously.37 Beedle (1980) describes the coastal settlement of Bakau as a community where the hierarchy between early- and latecomers broke down. The establishment of an electoral democracy empowered ‘second generation strangers’ with the same legal rights as their fathers’ hosts. This altered the previous significance of the Mandinka notion of luntango, one which assigned to strangers a long-lasting subordinate position within the local polities. Second generation strangers born in The Gambia were citizens if their fathers had been naturalised in the late colonial times and, even when that was not so, they could easily acquire citizenship. Furthermore, the development of a tourist economy during the late 1970s created a source of income alternative to land cultivation, one which Bakau original settlers could not monopolise at the expense of their strangers.

In the 1980s, Bansang was rapidly turning to a similar situation, even if many of the strangers in town still had to acquire citizenship. Classified as aliens, they were indeed in a precarious position. Their permanence in The Gambia depended not only on the good will of their local hosts

37 Several aid agencies operated in Bansang in the early 1990s. Action Aid was the most important. The NGO was based in Bansang and closed its station after the 1994 military takeover. Both the winner of the 1992 elections and the Member of Parliament who was chosen by the constituency after the return to democracy in 1996 worked in the development sector, and were thus acquainted with the needs of the farmers. For a picture of rural institutions during the 1990s, see Seibert and Sidibe (1992).
but also on the policies implemented by the central government at the level of the nation-state (Schack 1979: 4). Unlike other African countries, which forced non-citizens to leave their territory immediately after Independence, The Gambia maintained its reputation as a friendly country open to seasonal and more stable forms of migration. Aliens were indeed an electoral resource, which politicians and the President himself could mobilise to counterbalance the growing dissatisfaction of earlier PPP supporters with a new and affectionate clientele. In 1975, Sheriff Dibba, who was Jawara’s Vice-President and a leading figure in the PPP, founded the National Convention Party (NCP). The NCP coalesced the aspirations of those rural Mandinkas who felt set aside by ‘Jawara’s deals with urban elites and other ethnic groups’ (Wiseman 1985: 7). The split affected the families of first-settlers in Bansang. Some decided to follow the NCP not only for their personal connections with the leader of the new party but also because they felt bitterly disappointed by the PPP policy of resource redistribution. Their adhesion to the opposition put them aside from the main arena of decision-making related to community life. The PPP was also searching for new clients, as it felt its grasp on the rural areas was at risk. The Fulbe section of the town received voter cards. This meant citizenship, a benefit relevant to long-term strangers such as the Imam and his following. En masse, they became President Jawara’s enthusiastic supporters. The link with the President was further strengthened when one of the Imam’s sons became a minister. On the eve of the 1992 election, President Jawara publicly asserted that ‘it was illegal for non-Gambians to take part in the voting’. The opposition candidate, Sheriff Dibba, exhorted any non-citizen holding a voter card to surrender it to the authorities.

38 This kind of declaration diverted attention from the very fact that aliens played an essential role in the shadow electoral economy of the country. In the early 1990s, the Imam of Bansang was one of the few elderly in town able to afford the moral obligation of materially supporting his clients. Engagement in national politics, religious activities, cattle and orchards gave him the wealth to act as a patron for the local community. First-settlers still controlled a good portion of the rice fields on the outskirts of Bansang but these, although they were enough to live on, were not enough to get rich on. The repair of the compounds, the construction of new dwellings and the possibility of starting new entrepreneurial activities were now linked to the investment of the town citizens who had migrated to the capital or abroad. Economic distress combined with political contestation. While the Imam’s attachment to the PPP, even after the 1992 defeat, was never put in question, other elders in the town were suspected of having betrayed the cause of the party.39 Commenting on the overall situation,

39 NRO Banjul, PP. 1.3.43, Upper Faladu West Constituency, 3/05/1992, Al Haji Bo Kora to Vice-President.
and briefing me on the old significance of *karafoo*, an elderly resident in town went on to state: ‘Entrustment is very strong here and it is very different from politics. If one entrusts himself through politics, when there is a rift in the politics, there is also a rift in the *karafoo* relationship’ (HTT, interview, Bansang, 24 December 1994).

Despite the decreasing importance of the groundnut industry during the previous decade, in the early 1990s Bansang’s trade season was still crowded with strangers: they had to be lodged and adjust themselves to the social and political structure of the town. Hosts introduced their strangers to the traditional authorities, the village chief and the Imam, and gave them assistance in any dealings with the national bureaucracy. For their part, strangers paid for their housing and daily food and therefore substantially contributed to the family budgets of their hosts. For an old man, entrustment could be used to negotiate the kind of private transactions where confidence and interdependence among partners still had the chance to develop, despite the material difficulties in which both hosts and their strangers spent their lives. The practice of *karafoo* was nonetheless socially and morally vulnerable once appropriated by the mechanisms of party politics. Thirty years of PPP rule had shown the subordination of any form of moral commitment to electoral results. Politicians entrusted themselves to the local leaders at election times but this symbolic act never translated into the intimacy or the sincere respect for their hosts implicit in the practice of entrustment. It legitimated instead the drainage of local resources in support of the party. Local leaders patronising the PPP found themselves in the difficult position of clients who had to compete with other clients for the few material rewards that the party, and the President himself, could give. Finally, electoral politics created the very condition to destabilise the hierarchy between ‘hosts’ and their ‘strangers’ in the local polities. It seriously interfered with the patterns of ‘precedence’ and ‘patronage’ (Beckerleg 1992) consolidated in Bansang during colonial times, and it broke trust and solidarity chains within the community to privilege instead a vertical and exclusive attachment to the national political elite.

**CONCLUSION**

Commenting once more on the ‘invention of traditions’ in colonial and post-colonial Africa, Thomas Spear (2003) recently noted the importance of disclosing long-term historicity in political languages and practices: ‘Local discourse played a vital role as people continually reinterpreted and reconstructed tradition in the contexts of broader socio-economic changes’ (op. cit.: 4). Permanence of symbols and practices dialectically interacts with ruptures in the political and institutional area, as different categories of subjects engage in the process of reimagining what the past can offer to build the present.

Based on the idea that strangers were more a social and cultural resource than a menace to the local community, entrustment articulated a sense of sociality within the flexible and changing political scenario of
late nineteenth-century Fuladu. The practice was part of a ‘community of rights and obligations’ (Berman 1998: 324), a ‘moral ethnicity’ (Lonsdale 1996), which made it possible to deal honourably with strangers, while containing their influence on the local political scene. Fuladu rulers were eager to see strangers joining the polity and becoming powerful commercial, political and religious leaders. Strangers had nonetheless to adjust to the existing patterns of authority, and respect the military and political supremacy of the Baldeh family and its following. An authoritarian leader, Mussa Moloh swiftly punished whoever dared to go against his wishes or betray his confidence.

A cultural and political imperative in pre-colonial Fuladu, the need to increase the population, remained so in colonial times. Colonial officers monitored the chiefs’ ability to attract strangers to their regions. A chief was ‘good’ if he could increase the population of his district within a few years. A ‘bad’ one, instead, saw his people ‘vote with their feet’ (Berry 2002: 644) and move to other districts or even cross the border to Casamance. This was a possibility which the government constantly feared, its policy being to favour the migration of French subjects into The Gambia, while keeping a close eye on the presence of undesirable strangers such as the Fulbe of Fouta Jallon, who were considered responsible for a large share of the robberies and raids in the upper river during the first decades of the twentieth century.40

While in pre-colonial times the practice of entrustment had linked people among themselves and to a centralised polity as well, the new colonial context confined this allegiance to that limited sphere of autonomy the colonial government recognised for its subjects (Pels 2002: 2), for instance in the lodging of strangers within local communities or in the regulation of native land matters. Legitimated as customary by colonial officials, the hierarchy between early- and latecomers was indeed producing a distinction between two different categories of Protectorate subjects. ‘First-settlers’ were entitled to express their opinion on land distribution and could compete for office and its material benefits. ‘Latecomers’, on the contrary, maintained a politically dependent status. Only head chiefs like Cherno Kady Baldeh could successfully interfere with these dynamics of inclusion and exclusion at the local level. In the eyes of the administration, head chiefs were the repository of native custom and were thus in the position to rewrite it for their personal needs. The category of Bansang ‘first-settlers’ emerged as an administrative invention brought about by the Darboes and the Baldehs together, as the former complied with the intrusion of the latter into Bansang political and economic life during the 1930s. Through the culturally recognised language of *karafoo* in the years to come these families would assert their position as wealthy

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40 See for instance PRO, CO 87 225/4, Reports on Provinces for 1925, Governor Armitage to The Secretary of State for Colonies.
patrons and community leaders both in the eyes of the local community and in front of the colonial administration.

Electoral politics created yet another set of relations, such as the PPP’s manipulation of the legal boundary between citizens and aliens to its electoral advantage. Equally interesting is the radically new use of *karafoo* promoted by the party to politely co-opt the rural elite in late colonial times. In the hands of national politicians, the practice of entrustment ended up as a matter of etiquette more than substance, a rhetorical tool which at the time of elections gave the local elite the temporary illusion they were indispensable for the success of the party itself. Bitterly disappointed about their own political engagement with the PPP in town, the elderly I met during the early 1990s spoke of *politiyolu*—an adaptation of the English ‘politics’ used in Mandinka to denote the mechanism of the electoral democracy—as the negative force which had profoundly changed their world.

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ABSTRACT

The practice of entrustment is a form of voluntary allegiance for the sake of protection, one which historically lies at the core of host–stranger relationships along the River Gambia. Deeply woven into the social fabric of local communities, it was appropriated by various historical subjects during the twentieth century in order to construct networks of political confidence and mutual assistance at a local and national level. This article traces this dynamic process of re-elaboration. In so doing, it takes into account the history of a Mandinka commercial settlement in eastern Gambia from the late nineteenth century to post-Independence times, and questions the shifts that occurred in the political significance of entrustment with changing social and economic scenarios. Contextualised in the longue durée, the practice of karafoo shows its relevance as a cultural resource encouraging the creation of networks of trust and interdependence in social settings historically characterised by seasonal and more stable forms of migration.

RÉSUMÉ

La pratique du «don de confiance» est une forme d’allégeance volontaire dans un but de protection, qui repose historiquement au cœur des relations hôte–étranger le long du fleuve Gambie. Profondément ancrée dans le tissu social des communautés locales, elle s’est vue appropriée par divers sujets historiques au cours du vingtième siècle pour construire des réseaux de confiance politique et d’assistance mutuelle au niveau local et national. Cet article retrace ce processus dynamique de ré-élaboration. Ce faisant, il prend en considération l’histoire d’un peuplement commercial mandingue dans l’est de la Gambie de la fin du dix-neuvième siècle jusqu’à la période post-indépendance, et s’interroge sur les changements survenus dans la signification politique du don de confiance à l’aide de scénarios sociaux et économiques changeants. Placée dans un contexte de longue durée, la pratique du karafoo montre son intérêt en tant que ressource culturelle favorisant la création de réseaux de confiance et d’interdépendance au sein d’environnements sociaux historiquement caractérisés par des formes de migration saisonnières et plus stables.