VIOLENCE AND THE WAR OF WORDS: ETHNICITY V. NATIONALISM IN THE CASAMANCE

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In the spring of 1990 the Casamance region of Senegal erupted with violence. Atika,1 the military wing of the Mouvement des forces démocratique casamançais (MFDC), carried out a series of terrorist attacks against government and public transport vehicles, and village shops. This round of political violence, which continued over the next seven years, was not the first the Casamance had seen. Eight years earlier MFDC supporters raised their flag over the Gouvernance in Ziguinchor, the regional capital of the Casamance, in an uprising ultimately suppressed in a violent confrontation with the Senegalese military.

Atika was formed in the wake of this event. Even though the movement restricted itself to sporadic and isolated incidents of terrorism throughout the 1980s, by the decade’s end its military wing had become a well trained and disciplined army of an estimated 300–600 soldiers. As the tenth anniversary of the 1982 uprising approached, the MFDC pressed its demands for the independence of the Casamance: in November of 1989 its leaders distributed a tract stating that they would declare the region’s independence from Senegal on 25 December. Christmas passed without incident. But shortly thereafter the MFDC made its presence known through a vigorous and bloody military campaign.2

The ensuing violence has had a considerable impact on the region.3 Hundreds of lives have been lost, and thousands of Casamançais have sought refuge in the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. The region’s economy has been seriously affected. At times the violence has ground the lucrative tourist industry to a halt. It would be hard to find a Casamançais village that has not been directly touched by the conflict. When I returned to the Casamance in the fall of 1990 to visit the village where I had conducted research the previous year, I was assaulted with accounts of a nearby battle and the fear it had inspired. I also learned that, the night before my arrival, all the men in a neighbouring village had been detained by the Senegalese government. They were suspected of supporting the MFDC. The hardships endured by another village, Kaguith, in which the Senegalese government had established a military base, were also recounted to me in great detail. Two years later this village would become the site of one of the war’s fiercest battles. After the 1989 Senegal–Mauritania conflict, a conflict in which roving Senegalese bands murdered at least forty Mauritanians and pillaged the homes and businesses of many others, a Jola4 friend in Dakar told me that he slept with his bags packed, out of fear that the Jola would be next.

At the time what he said made perfect sense. Now, years after the incident, I find myself intrigued by my friend’s choice of words: ‘the Jola would be next’. I am convinced that he was not involved in the movement. If anything, he was decidedly apolitical. By 1996 his apoliticism had hardened him into a staunch, if not activist, opponent of the MFDC. Why, then, did he see himself as the possible victim, because he was Jola, of a potential ‘backlash’
against the MFDC? Why did he, as did so many others, myself included, slip so easily into seeing the MFDC as an ethnic movement? Why was it so easy to see the conflict as that of a marginalised minority ethnic group resisting state power?

Most non-Senegalese journalists adopted this ethnic understanding of the conflict (see Andriamirado, 1992, 1993; de Costa, 1991a, b, 1993). Yet the evidence strongly suggests that the Jola people and the independence movement are far from coterminous. Not only has the MFDC denied that they represent an ethnic constituency, but also, perhaps to the MFDC’s chagrin, partisans of both sides are found in villages of the Casamance and among those Jola who live in the residential quarters of Ziguinchor and Dakar. During my research in 1990 I knew many Jola who sympathised with the MFDC position, but I knew just as many who did not. At times Jola opposition to the MFDC has been violent. In May 1992 a village paramilitary group in Coubanaou engaged Atika in a military confrontation that reportedly claimed the lives of twenty rebels. Another village chased representatives of Atika out of the village when they arrived to collect a revolutionary tax. While I was conducting research in Dakar a Jola explained to me some of the tactics used by the Senegalese army to combat the rebels. Indeed, many of the soldiers who have been fighting to suppress this movement are from the Casamance. Although most Jola I knew believed that certain political and economic inequalities had to be addressed, many argued that the ‘Casamance question’ should be resolved without violating Senegal’s territorial integrity.

This ‘Casamance question’ has long plagued Senegal. For a variety of reasons the Casamance has been considered socially, politically, economically, and culturally different from the rest of Senegal. Few in Senegal would argue that the Casamançais do not have a valid claim to a distinct identity within the Senegalese nation. The spiral of violence that began in 1990, however, transformed the benign fact of Casamançais regionalism into an idea that threatens the geographical and ideological integrity of the nation. This violence brought the ‘Casamance question’ to the attention of the Senegalese public. Senegal’s independent press took to the story with vigour, casting into the public domain an active debate over the meaning of political violence, the region of the Casamance, and what it means to be a member of the Jola ethnic group. Before the heat of the initial confrontations had cooled, the MFDC and the Senegalese government found themselves actively involved in a rhetorical war through which they were attempting to persuade their partisans, the opposition, and those who live in the region that theirs was the most accurate and just reading of the situation. Indeed, the military skirmishes fought in the villages and forests of the Casamance mirror a battle being waged over the history and meaning of political violence, a battle that is ultimately about what it means to be a supporter of the MFDC, Jola, and Casamançais.

This article will document a small piece of this debate. My object is to outline several ways that Senegalese and Casamançais political actors have attempted to interpret the meanings of the independence movement for the Senegalese public during initial stages of the resurgence of this conflict in 1990. This debate over Casamançais nationalism speaks directly to larger
issues concerning ethnicity and nationalism in Africa. A striking feature of this debate is that the proponents of Casamançais independence have doggedly maintained that theirs is not an ethnic movement. Conversely, the MFDC’s opponents, in particular the Senegalese government, have tended to argue that the MFDC represents an ethnic (Jola) constituency and that the MFDC aims to establish what they refer to as the ‘Jola Republic’. This republic, it is claimed, would encompass portions of Senegal, the Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau.

The sides taken by the MFDC and the government can be explained in terms of an underlying distinction in African political ideology between nationalism and ethnicity. During the founding of the Organisation of African Unity African leaders self-consciously adopted a territorial model of nationalism (see Smith, 1986: 137). The ethnic model was delegitimised. In Senegal this territorial approach to nationalism has had a tremendous impact on politics and in the public imagination. The narrowly defined interests of ethnic groups are not considered a legitimate foundation for political mobilisation. To be legitimate, political groups should represent an ethnically plural constituency. This commitment to plural nationalism and plural political interest groups has informed efforts by the Senegalese government to ‘play the ethnicity card’ in an attempt to delegitimise the political goals and aspirations of the MFDC.

THE CASAMANCE: A REGION APART

I first encountered this sentiment of Casamançais regionalism shortly after I arrived in Senegal in 1987 to conduct research on rural–urban migration among the Jola of the Basse-Casamance. I climbed aboard a bus and struck up a conversation with a young soldier smartly dressed in a Senegalese military uniform. Several minutes into our discussion I asked him where he was from. Without hesitation, or any apparent sense of contradiction, he proudly proclaimed, ‘Je suis Casamançais’ (I am Casamançais).

This was not the last time I encountered expressions of Casamançais identity. It is ubiquitous in the daily life of the Jola, whether they live in the Casamance or in Dakar, Senegal’s capital. Expressions of this identity, be they regional or ethnic, can be seen, for example, in the social distance many urban Jola maintain between themselves and their non-Jola and non-Casamançais neighbours. The community among whom I conducted research were acutely aware of their status as ‘strangers’ in urban Senegal. They were aware of the economic niches they filled in the urban economy: many of the women worked as domestics, and men worked in the military or in factories. Many believed that they were relegated to lower-status jobs because urban Senegal, and Dakar in particular, is culturally, politically, and economically dominated by the Wolof, a ‘northern’ Senegalese ethnic group.

These urban expressions of difference are inextricably tied to, as the Senegalese put it, the region’s ‘particularism’. Casamance is unlike Senegal’s other regions, in the opinion of many Senegalese. Most Senegalese considered this ‘particularism’ intelligible, given the region’s experience under colonial rule and, most important, the way in which the scramble for Africa unfolded in this part of the continent. On the eve of the Berlin
conference the French attempted to unify Senegambia by acquiring the areas then under British and Portuguese control. The Portuguese ceded the Casamance to the French in exchange for Rio Cassini in what is today Guinea-Bissau. But the French had less success with the British. They rejected French offers to exchange Gabon or the Côte d’Ivoire for the Gambia. At independence this left Senegal in the uncomfortable position of being virtually bisected by the Gambia—a country just 30 km wide that stretches 300 km from the coast into the interior of Senegal. The Casamance is the region of Senegal located south of the Gambia.

The way in which the Gambia bisects Senegal throws the socio-cultural differences between ethnic groups north and south of the Gambia into sharp relief. Ethnic groups historically located north of the Gambia, such as the Wolof and Halpulaar, are generally viewed as hierarchical. That is, they are casted, centralised societies which are in many respects similar to other groups of the Sudan such as the Manding, Peul, and Bambara. In contrast, the Jola are viewed as having had segmentary societies which, to an extent because of this feature, are seen to share more cultural similarities with people in Guinea-Bissau than with the other peoples of Senegal.

The ancient cultural affinities between the Jola and the peoples of Guinea-Bissau are believed to have been reinforced during the colonial era. As late as 1886 the Casamance, similar to Guinea Bissau, was largely under Portuguese control. The lusophone influence remains a characteristic of Ziguinchor. It presents a sharp contrast to the heavy francophone influence of northern Senegal. To this can be added the vast movements of peoples that have historically occurred, and continue to occur, across the Senegal–Guinea-Bissau border.

Since the 1982 uprising the Senegalese government has had good reason to be alarmed by the separatist aspirations of the MFDC. The economic stakes are high. The Casamance covers one-seventh of Senegal’s land mass and is the nation’s most verdant region. The Casamance is the destination of choice for tourists who visit Senegal, it has considerable potential for the development of commercial agriculture, and is estimated to have roughly one billion barrels of unexploited oil reserves (Reuters, 1992). In addition to being anxious about losing the economic wealth of the region, as well as setting a precedent for border changes, the Senegalese government, some have speculated, fears the emergence of an economic union between the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and an independent Casamance, a union which might challenge Senegal’s regional economic hegemony.

Before 1990 the subversive side of Casamançais regionalism, the Casamançais nationalist position, was concealed from public view. It was disseminated by word of mouth and through banned publications. During my fieldwork, prior to the resurgence of violence in 1990, I heard informants speak of the alleged agreement between Emile Badiane and Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal’s first President, that promised independence to the Casamance. One informant showed me some of the banned publications that set forth the MFDC’s positions. With the outbreak of violence, discussions over why the Casamance should be independent moved out of informal, at times clandestine, conversations and into the public arena. The violence drew national attention to Abbé Diamacoune Senghor, leader of the
MFDC’s political wing, and gave him the opportunity to present the MFDC’s reading of the history of the Casamance.

‘THE FRENCH MADE THE CASAMANCE’: THE ARGUMENT FOR INDEPENDENCE

One puzzle of the MFDC’s struggle for independence lies in the way in which it defines Casamànçais nationalism. Many scholars suggest homogeneity of belief, practice, and/or culture as one of the most important dimensions of nationalism (see Connor, 1994; Gellner, 1983; Herzfeld, 1992; Smith, 1986). This cultural homogeneity can be used to feed the irredentist argument: ‘We are different from them, we have a right to govern ourselves, they have no right to rule us.’ This is indeed true of many separatist movements: the Catholics of Northern Ireland, the Basques of Spain, and the Palestinians of Israel, to mention a few. On the surface the situation in the Casamance lends itself well to this type of argument. Various arguments in favour of independence could be built around an assortment of apparent oppositions, Jola–non-Jola, Catholic–Muslim, Luso–Franco. This is indeed how many observers (see Darbon, 1985, 1988; Geschiere and van der Klei, 1987, 1988; Glaise, 1990; Diouf, 1994) and the Senegalese government have chosen to interpret the situation.

Yet the MFDC has consistently used a different strategy. It has downplayed the relevance of cultural difference and highlighted a territorial and historicised understanding of the nature of Casamànçais nationalism (see Anderson, 1983; Smith, 1986). For Abbé Diamacoune Senghor (hereafter referred to as ‘Senghor’), whether or not the Casamànçais share any cultural similarities with each other or differences from other Senegalese is simply irrelevant. People and their culture, according to Senghor, are not the issue. The issue is land—the land that is the Casamance, and the history of that land. In Senghor’s view, Casamànçais nationalism is about the intentions of the early twentieth-century political authorities, authorities which ceased, in any meaningful sense, to be Casamànçais in 1960.

Those authorities were French. Central to Senghor’s argument for independence is his claim that the Casamance itself, and not just the ‘Casamance problem’, is a product of French colonial rule. Senghor is explicit in his claim that the French made the Casamance (Sud Hebdo, 1 February 1990, p. 3). In his view the French intended to administer the Casamance as an independent colony, not a region within the colony of Senegal. Senghor contends that it was an administrative oversight, a mere technicality, that the French failed to officially recognise the independence of the region.

Senghor’s position is partially supported by historical documents. From the late 1800s until just after the Second World War the administrative status of the region was fraught with ambiguity: although the French considered the Casamance as part of Senegal on paper, in practice the Casamance experienced a great deal of autonomy. In 1908, for example, the Casamance’s Administrator Superior exercised powers equal to those of a Vice-governor. The scope of his control matched that of Senegal’s highest colonial official.
The French treated the Casamance as though it were autonomous partly because the lack of infrastructure connecting the Casamance with the rest of the colony made it expedient to do so. Unlike Senegal’s other regions, until the waning years of colonial rule, produce and goods were traded directly between the Casamance and France instead of first passing through the port of Dakar (Seck, 1970: 435, 448). It would not be until the completion of the Transgambian highway in the late 1950s, which provided an overland route between the Casamance and Dakar, and Senegal’s independence in 1960 that Dakar would establish control over mediating relationships between the region and foreign interests.

The isolation of the Casamance and its de facto autonomy inspired a movement dating to the early years of French rule for the official recognition of the region as autonomous from Senegal. One of the first Administrators of the Casamance advocated autonomy. By the first decade of this century there was already popular support for that position. In 1914 Blaise Diagne, Senegal’s first African Deputy to the French Assembly, met with opposition in the Casamance over his military recruitment policy. That same year, William Ponty, the Governor of Senegal, was greeted in Ziguinchor by protesters demanding a split from Senegal. He met with similar demands during a 1918 visit to the city (Roche, 1985: 323). Abbé Diamacoune Senghor cites this movement, a European movement for regional autonomy, as the precursor of his movement for independence. Coinciding with this push for autonomy, however, was another movement, one characterised by active resistance on the part of Africans, particularly Jola, against French colonial rule. Rather than associating the MFDC with this African resistance, Senghor has chosen to trace the history of the MFDC to a movement which, until the late 1940s, was overwhelmingly European. The protesters who greeted William Ponty in 1918, for example, were organised by a man who was a European merchant and a member of a French municipal commission which advocated Casamançais financial autonomy. Later, following the Second World War, it was European residents in the Casamance who demanded that France should seriously consider disengaging the region from Senegal.

Claude Michel, the colonial Administrator Superior of the Casamance, included in his annual report of 1944 an ‘opinion’ which spoke directly to the separatist sentiment in the region. He begins by stating that ‘Particularism, regionalism, dominate in all locations. One is Casamançais and French first, Senegalese with misgiving’ (Archives nationales, 1944: 11). Michel explains that, in the past, the colonial government was encouraged to cultivate this attitude, particularly with local chiefs. He speaks of how the European community in the Casamance was growing resentful of the colonial government in Dakar. The half-century of de facto autonomy had allowed the few private enterprises in the region to grow accustomed to certain rights, rights which were slipping away as improvements in the infrastructure increasingly drew the Casamance into the orbit of Dakar. By 1944 these businesses had become acutely aware of and sensitive to the differential treatment that Senegal’s colonial capital gave Senegal’s other regions. Michel emphasises that the separatist sentiment was restricted to Europeans, who for the most part resided in ‘urban’ areas of the Casamance,
such as Ziguinchor and Bignona. According to his account these feelings were not shared by the local people, who were primarily Jola and who, for the most part, lived in rural villages.

In 1947, several years after Claude Michel had forwarded his ‘opinion’, the European movement for regional autonomy was replaced by the MFDC, that is, the original MFDC. This organisation was founded by Emile Badiane, Victor Diatta, and Ibou Diallo, all of whom were schoolteachers and also, not surprisingly, ‘urban’ Casamançais. Unlike the movement for regional autonomy, though, this organisation was led by Africans.

Today arguments rage over what the founders of the original MFDC hoped to achieve. The current MFDC maintains that the original MFDC wanted nothing less than the independence of the Casamance from Senegal (Darbon, 1985: 132–3). Its opponents argue that the original MFDC simply sought to promote Casamançais interests in the context of a greater Senegal.

The original MFDC was founded during a time of struggle in Senegalese national politics between Léopold Sédar Senghor (hereafter referred to as ‘Léopold Senghor’) and Lamine Gueye. Léopold Senghor challenged Gueye, whose support was based on an urban, specifically Dakar constituency, by cultivating a rural political base. Although the original MFDC was formed as a non-aligned group, several of its members were drawn to Léopold Senghor because he presented a viable line of defence against the centralisation of power by Dakar-based interest groups. In Léopold Senghor they saw someone who could work with them to protect the Casamance from Dakar’s powerful political machine. When, in 1954, one of the original MFDC’s founders and leaders, Emile Badiane, joined Léopold Senghor’s party, the Bloc democratique sénégalais (BDS), the original MFDC was dissolved. The original MFDC had been founded to represent the interests of the Casamance independently of Senegalese party politics. Evidently this group could not withstand the internal tensions that arose when its members began to align themselves with Senegal’s political parties (Diouf, 1994: 123; Barbier-Wiesser, 1994: 280).

No one knows why Badiane joined the BDS. Those against the independence of the Casamance claim that his actions reveal that he considered himself first and foremost Senegalese and thus did not support the separation of the Casamance from Senegal. The current MFDC, however, understands the union differently. It claims that Badiane, who had risen to the forefront of Casamançais politics by the 1960s, had struck a deal with then Senegalese President, Léopold Senghor. Badiane, it is alleged, agreed that the Casamance would enter the post-independence era as part of Senegal provided that Senegal would recognise the independence and sovereignty of the Casamance in twenty years. Today many Casamançais believe that this agreement was put into writing. Some of my informants claim that Badiane, who died in 1972, was murdered by officials of the Senegalese government and that the Senegalese government subsequently destroyed the accord signed by Badiane and Léopold Senghor.

The independence of the Casamance did not become an issue again until the presidential election campaign of 1978. Resurrecting the alleged Badiane–Senghor agreement, Senghor pressed Senegal’s ruling party to fulfil its conditions. When the twentieth anniversary of the Senegal’s
independence passed without action on the part of the government to recognise the Casamance as a sovereign nation, the MFDC was resurrected. As mentioned earlier, this incarnation of the MFDC seized the pro-independence narrative of the organisation’s history as its own. In December 1982, after a meeting in a sacred forest, the separatists marched on Ziguinchor, marking the beginning of an armed struggle to eject what they see as the colonial Senegalese presence from their region.

Abbé Diamacoune Senghor bases the Casamançais claim to independence on a historical argument that the French made the Casamance. Although his contention that the French intended the Casamance to remain independent of Senegal is debatable, the historical evidence indicates that, during the colonial period, the pro-independence sentiment among Europeans in the Casamance was strong. From this perspective the French did make the Casamance. Not only is the argument for Casamance independence legitimated in terms of the political, social, and economic history of the region, but also it traces its origins to Europeans who lived and worked in the Casamance during the colonial period.

In promoting an argument for the independence of the Casamance that is contingent on a particular reading of colonial history, the current incarnation of the MFDC has sought to distance itself from ethnic and cultural understandings of Casamançais nationalism. Even so, the organisation has not been able to eliminate the ethnic and religious overtones that the movement has for many Senegalese. The MFDC and Atika are probably overwhelmingly Jola. And although many Muslims, including leaders such as Sidy Badji, are among their ranks, it is widely believed that the supporters of the MFDC are primarily animist and Catholic. Dominique Darbon has pointed out that in the 1980s the Jola and the Casamance are conflated in MFDC documents (Darbon, 1985: 126). Even Senghor has on occasion made reference to ethnic difference when presenting his historical argument for independence. For example, in an interview he claimed that Badiane should have known not to trust the Senegalese politicians because they, unlike the Jola, had not been initiated into the sacred forest (Sud Hebdo, 1 February 1990, p. 6).

THE SEPARATISTS ARE JOLA, THE CASAMANCE IS SENEGALESE

One of the strongest arguments against Casamançais separatism locates Casamançais nationalism in Jola culture. It constructs the Jola as a people who, because of their culture, reject any type of hierarchical political institution. This became clear during the summer of 1990 when Senegalese politicians began addressing Casamançais separatism. While they agreed with the Senegalese President, Abdou Diouf, that Senegal must maintain its territorial integrity, many sympathised with the plight of the Casamançais. In so doing they framed the ‘Casamance question’ not in terms of how the Casamance was colonised but rather as a result of ‘urban bias’ and political centralisation. In their view, the violence spreading through the Casamance should be understood as the region’s response to economic inequities—in-
in the Casamance, these political leaders appealed to cultural explanations. Ousmane Ngom, a prominent politician and opponent of Senegal’s ruling party, claimed that the rebellion made sense in terms of Jola *tempérament* (1990: 4).

The resistance of European residents of the Casamance to the colony of Senegal is one story of the region’s resistance to the political structures of colonialism. Another is Jola resistance to French domination. More than other peoples of Senegal, the Jola actively resisted French colonial rule. Unlike the peoples north of the Gambia, Jola pre-colonial history is notable for the absence of centralised political institutions. Until the establishment of French rule in the 1920s and 1930s Jola polities rarely extended beyond the boundaries of individual villages. When the French arrived in the Casamance in the 1800s they stepped into a confusing and violent political situation. Not only did the Jola resist the French (particularly their efforts at tax collection) but neighbouring villages also frequently engaged in violent battles over ricefields. Frustrated in their efforts to establish direct control over the Jola, the French relied heavily on outsiders—such as immigrant Muslim marabouts—to mediate relations with the region’s villages. This strategy succeeded: by the second and third decades of this century the Casamance was subject to direct rule by the French. (Lambert, 1994: 23–52).

Many who oppose Casamancçois independence explain the recent bloodshed in terms of the long history of Jola resistance to hierarchical political systems. This history of violence antedated the arrival of the French, they contend, pointing out that when the Jola migrated into the Casamance they gradually dismantled a Bainouck kingdom. The current violence is thus, in their view, simply yet another instance of Jola violence, violence that dismantled the Bainouck kingdom, then sparked intense inter-village warfare, and finally resisted French rule. An article published in *Jeune Afrique* in May 1993, recalling this legacy of violence, referred to the recent outbreak of violence as the ‘war of seven hundred years’ (Andrâmirado, 1993: 26–30). According to the author, the struggle even antedates the dismantling of the Bainouck kingdom. It can be traced to the 1200s, he contends, when the Jola resisted the rule of the Manding kingdoms. By locating the roots of the current movement in the violent history of Casamance, attention is drawn away from questions about the relationship of the Casamance to Senegal while under French rule and toward a particular Jola cultural trait, a temperament that Ousmane Ngom calls an allergy to central authority.

Using concepts such as *tempérament*, or *mentalité*, to explain political violence dates back to the 1959 publication of Louis-Vincent Thomas’s seminal study of the Jola. To explain the perceived absence of hierarchical political institutions in Jola society, Thomas employed the French anthropological concept of *mentalité* and followed an imperative of isolating essentialised attributes believed to inhere in the people. He believed that there were characteristics of Jola personality, such as ‘egalitarianism’ and ‘individualism’, that created and reproduced decentralised political institutions (Thomas, 1961). His work has helped stereotype the Jola as not only unwilling but unable to accept any hierarchical forms of political
organisation, whether they are their own, Bainouck, Manding, French, or Senegalese.

Resonances of the model Thomas presented in the late 1950s are found in most subsequent French scholarship on the Jola. For example, Christian Roche (1985: 36), an historian, has written that Jola culture resulted in a society which was ‘hostile to all external authority’. And Dominique Darbon (1988), a political scientist, has argued that the incidents of violence in 1982 were the result of incompatibility between an anti-state culture and a rigid hierarchical state.

Opponents of Casamançais independence appeal to these stereotypes. For example, Le Soleil, the official newspaper of the Senegalese government, promotes understanding of the separatist movement as an ethnic conflict. On 11 October 1990 the newspaper reported that the Senegalese government had seized a map that purportedly demarcated the boundaries of what is referred to as ‘the Jola Republic’ (p. 9). An article published in July 1990 carried the headline ‘The dream of the Jola: to conserve their sacred forest’ (Diagne, 1990: 11). The article begins with a Jola man in Dakar attempting to articulate what it means to be Casamançais. He is at a loss for words. His inability to express the sentiment, we are told, is not surprising, given that he, like others living in Dakar, is far removed from the ‘Jola experience’. Understanding it requires a return to Jola villages. There, we are told, exist villages marked by a ‘strong sense of individual autonomy’. The picture of Jola society that emerges from the article is of local communities insulated from the outside world. Even Jola who have lived in Dakar and returned to the village, he continues, are forced to conform to tradition, thus eliminating the potential vector of ‘progress’ that urban migration represents.

According to this view, the Jola are victims of a self-imposed marginalisation. They are victims of their culture, which first, prevents the emergence of hierarchical political institutions and, second, impels the Jola to reject such institutions when they are imposed from without. Not only does this understanding of Jola society deny the importance of history in understanding political violence, but also it sees the recent violence as the product of communities which reject history and retreat from its effects. The article concludes that, in the face of a strong northern economic presence in the Casamance, atomised Jola villages are fighting to preserve their culture and, by implication, their self-imposed exile from change and the world.

According to this reading of the debate, part of what the Jola are attempting to preserve is their religion. To be sure, the sacred forest is central to indigenous Jola religious practice and there is little question that this institution has had its place in organising the Casamançais resistance movement: it was in the sacred forest, for example, that the separatists gathered in December 1982 shortly before they descended on the Gouvernance in Ziguinchor (see Geschiere and van der Klei, 1988).

Buttressing claims that the separatist movement revolves around religious, as well as ethnic, loyalties and concerns is the fact that some of the most famous Jola are religious figures who are celebrated for their acts of resistance against the French. Alinsitoe Diatta, after whom Ziguinchor’s stadium is named, returned to the Casamance from Dakar after receiving a vision. During the Second World War she led a resistance movement against
French efforts to recruit soldiers, which led to her arrest and imprisonment in Mali, where she died. Djinabo, after whom Ziguinchor’s high school is named, was an elder of a fetish and was killed in 1906 while resisting French efforts to collect taxes. Finally, in 1903 Sihalebe, a Jola ‘king’ after whom a rebel camp is said to have been named, was exiled to Sedhiou for organising Jola hostility to the French. Prohibited from eating or drinking in front of his subjects, Sihalebe was imprisoned with several of his followers and died of starvation (Roche, 1985: 280).

But instead of letting the issue rest at that, the Senegalese government has gone beyond it to argue not simply that the Casamance is Senegalese but that it is archetypically Senegalese. While wedded to the position that the MFDC is a Jola organisation, the government emphasises that the Casamance is home to a variety of ethnic groups whose rights as Senegalese citizens must be respected and protected. As an article published in Le Soleil (1990a) explained, the region’s ethnic pluralism makes the Casamance a microcosm of Senegal. According to this logic, the political status of the region should not be determined by the cultural idiosyncrasies of one ethnic group. Rather, it should represent the interests of all the region’s inhabitants.

JOLA/FOREST/REBEL: THE POPULAR VIEW

The arguments for and against independence aside, why the rebels have decided to take up arms and fight for the independence of the Casamance is a question that is not easy to answer. I find the argument that the Jola are culturally conditioned to resist hierarchical political structures problematic. It cannot explain, for example, why the Jola are overrepresented in the Senegalese military, one of Senegal’s most rigid and hierarchical institutions. On the other side, it is likely that the MFDC’s membership accepts as fact Senghor’s rendering of colonial history. An informant who claims to know several rebels assured me that the rebels believed Senghor’s version of history. Senghor himself had enough confidence in it to ask the French authorities to confirm it.\(^8\) But, taken on its own, can this particular reading of colonial history stir the passions of a people to the point of taking up arms, killing others, and risking their own lives?

These formal arguments for and against separatism unfold against the background of a diffuse local discourse concerning economic conditions in the Casamance and the region’s inhabitants. This discourse draws equally on expressions of ethnic difference and regional economic disparities. At its most mundane, when people leave their village for Dakar or anywhere north of the Gambia they are asked, ‘Are you going to Senegal?’, implying that they are not already there. While in Dakar, many Casamançais migrants produce ‘difference’ by maintaining social distance from the ‘northern’ Senegalese who live there. The community among which I conducted research maintained a tight social circle in Dakar based on their common descent from a single village in the Casamance. Some informants claimed to avoid socialising with non-Casamançais (particularly Wolof) neighbours, refused to develop more than a rudimentary knowledge of Wolof (Dakar’s lingua franca), and prevented their children from playing with Wolof
children out of fear that they would become ‘like them’, that is, as they say, ‘impolite and disrespectful’.

It is plausible that the rebel movement is fuelled by feelings of economic alienation among the movement’s partisans. This sense of alienation can be volatile, particularly when it intersects with the large number of discharged soldiers from the Casamance and the region’s particularism. It certainly has not helped that this particularism is heavily coloured by a perception that the Casamance is economically and politically dominated by northern Senegal. Research I conducted on rural–urban migration revealed that migration is often used as a metaphor for the economic oppression of the region. Casamançais youth frequently explained their migration to Dakar in terms of the lack of employment opportunities in the Casamance, for which they often hold the Senegalese government responsible. Part of the popular oral culture of the Casamance is rumours of multinational corporations, usually American, which wanted to build fruit-processing plants and oil refineries in Ziguinchor. These plans, so it is said, have been thwarted by the Senegalese government. In a similar vein, many Casamançais are quick to speak of the government projects during the 1960s and 1970s which allocated land in Ziguinchor to ‘northerners’, not Casamançais (see Gessiere and van der Klei, 1988; Hesseling, 1994). And, each year, those who remain in rural villages complain about how they are exploited when ‘northerners’, predominantly Wolof traders, arrive in the villages to transport locally produced mangoes, oranges, and peanuts to Dakar.

Even if we reject the essentialism of the government’s position, the ‘Jolafication’ of the movement has entered the local discourse as part of the mythico-history of the conflict. Liisa Malkki defines a mythico-history as a rendering of the past whose truth or falsity is less important than the way in which it is ‘concerned with order in a fundamental, cosmological sense’. In this case the order does not involve defining ‘self in distinction to other, with good and evil’ (Malkki, 1995: 55). In this case the distinction between self and other is constructed through the categories of nature and culture. The Jola, as should be apparent from the preceding discussion, stand in the array of Senegalese ethnic groups as antithetical to civilisation. This popular view renders this ethnic group, by definition, an obstacle to modern political forms, in this case Senegalese nationalism.

Much popularised Jola culture celebrates the intimate relationship that exists between the Jola and the forests in which their villages are located. Two cultural events in particular are seen by Jola and non-Jola alike to epitomise their culture. The first is the dancing of the masks, and the second is the male initiation ceremony (see Mark, 1992; Mark et al., 1998, for extended discussion of these events). The first involves the dancing of masked ‘monsters’ who live in the forest beyond human control yet still in intimate contact with the Jola. Although the fiction is that the masks are not danced by people, it is understood by all, except small children, that they are. The subtext is that the Jola are the forest monsters—they are the uncontrollable and untamable forces of nature.

The second event puts an exclamation point on the subtext of the dances. The Jola youth make the transition to manhood through an initiation ceremony. This is achieved by removing youth from the village and
sequestering them for several weeks in the sacred forest. To become a Jola man, one must be separated from the everyday life of the village and learn the secrets of the men/forest. A public demonstration must be made of the intimacy that exists between Jola men and the forces of nature.

The parallels between the public image of the rebels and these representations of Jola maleness are striking, and they are not lost on the Senegalese public. The rebels are said to live in camps in the same forests where Jola villages are located. They live outside of everyday life and society. Many claim that they manage to elude the military because they have intimate knowledge of the forest. They are said to have mystical powers—the ability to survive otherwise lethal wounds, for example—that are derived from the forest. Given this, it is not surprising that some outside observers have argued that the sacred forest has provided the rebels with an institution from which to organise their activities. What is important is not whether this assessment is correct but rather how convincing the conclusion is in the light of the powerful symbolic association that exists between the MFDC and the Jola people.

This association so concerned the MFDC leadership that it has apparently been actively seeking the support of non-Jola. For political reasons the MFDC leadership has sought a membership which better reflects the distribution of ethnic groups in the Casamance. With such a distribution, it seems, the MFDC could more easily attack the idea that Casamançais nationalism is built on that which some scholars assume to lie at the foundation of all nationalism: homogeneity of belief, practice, and/or culture.

ETHNICITY AND PLURAL NATIONALISM IN SENEGAL

It is not unusual for an African separatist movement to deny that it represents an ethnically based constituency. The same was true of Eritrea, Africa’s only successful separatist movement, which based its claim to independence from Ethiopia on the fact that Eritrea, unlike the rest of Ethiopia, had been colonised by Italy (B. Selassie, personal communication, 1997). Among the many reasons why separatist movements frame their objectives in this way (see Neuberger, 1991; Touval, 1972) is that ethnicity and nationalism are considered distinct, even antithetical, types of political identity in African political ideology. The distinction can be traced back at least to the founding of the Organisation of African Unity in 1963, when the leaders of the newly independent African states overwhelming endorsed the status quo for the definition of national boundaries. Article 3 of its charter binds all member states to respect national boundaries as they were defined by the colonial powers. With the notable exceptions of Morocco and Somalia (see Touval, 1972) African leaders rejected the idea that their new nations should correspond to ancient kingdoms and other types of pre-colonial political and cultural formations. They unambiguously affirmed that African nationalism should be territorial and decidedly not ethnic (see Smith, 1986). However ambitious the task, these leaders embarked on constructing self-consciously plural nations. The challenge, as they saw it, was to build, within the boundaries defined by the European powers, a sentiment of national unity that transcended what they considered narrow ethnic concerns. The
challenge, as reflected in Western scholarship of the era, was nation building and national integration. Ethnicity emerged as a perceived obstacle to achieving this goal.

Toward this end, most African nations attempted (sincerely or otherwise) to delegitimise ethnic political mobilisation, a task at which Senegalese politicians were remarkably successful. From independence to the present, Senegal’s constitution has explicitly banned all political parties that appeal to ethnic loyalty. Senegal’s political leaders—leaders of the ruling Socialist Party and the opposition alike—as well as the Senegalese public appear to have taken the prohibition to heart. None of Senegal’s twenty-six political parties have been credibly accused of favouring the interests of a specific ethnic group. There is simply no place, either legally or in the opinion of the public, for ethnicity in the Senegalese political arena. While attaching the label ‘ethnic’ to the MFDC may appear to non-Senegalese scholars to be a neutral description, within Senegal it has political implications.

Who is to be believed, the MFDC or the government? Does the MFDC represent an ethnic or a territorial constituency? This question is not easily answered. Precious little is known about the membership and organisation of the MFDC. Over the course of the rebellion the MFDC’s leadership has even appeared to lack a complete understanding of and control over its own armed units. The rebels move like shadows through the forest of the Casamance, casting images through their violence that are readily used by political leaders in whatever way they find useful.

In this article I have focused on the ways in which the MFDC leadership, the press, and the Senegalese public have sought to interpret the violence that has plagued the Casamance region of Senegal. If nothing else I hope to have presented a cautionary tale, the lesson of which is rather simple and obvious, and one that I am not the first to draw (see Newbury, 1995), yet which is all too often lost. We should be careful about how we use the label ‘ethnic’ or ‘tribal’, particularly as it relates to situations of conflict in Africa. I believe that few scholars would be comfortable with the extent to which the category ‘Jola’ has been reified and primitivised by the official Senegalese press. Indeed, when I was last in Senegal several Senegalese journalists expressed regret and shame at the role they and their colleagues played in helping to ethnicise the popular understanding of the conflict (A. Sakho, K. Sow, personal communications, 1997).

Ultimately the various understandings which have been forwarded about this conflict have to be cast against the background of current articulations of Senegalese nationalism. Diouf (1994) provides an illuminating insider’s articulation of the meaning of Senegalese nationalism. Diouf argues that Senegal’s major ethnic groups—the Halpulaar, Wolof, and Serer (all historically located north of The Gambia)—trace their origins to common racial, linguistic, and cultural roots. From this perspective the current expressions of ethnic distinctions between these groups are ephemeral surface phenomena that belie their commonalities, and this commonality is that of a nation, not of an ethnic group. Citing the research of Henry Gravrand, Diouf concludes that ‘the national unity of Senegal is based on the relatedness of the different ethnic groups . . . [and] that the Senegalese nation has been developing for two thousand years’ (1994: 32, translation
mine). Makhtar Diouf’s study forces us to reflect on the status of minority groups, such as the Moors, Lebanese, and Jola, which, according to Diouf, do not trace their origins to this proto-Senegalese group. What are we to make of an understanding of Senegalese nationalism that claims the Casamance as part of Senegal yet denies that one of its principal groups is really of the Senegalese nation?

The Senegalese government is not the first to use ethnicity to delegitimise the political aspirations of minority groups. Primordial and reified notions of ethnicity have been used by white Kenya settlers against the political aspirations of indigenous Kenyans during the Mau Mau rebellion (Berman, 1997). The British used a similar strategy in an attempt to delegitimise the political aspirations of Catholics in Northern Ireland (Aretxaga, 1993: 233). It is certainly true that ethnicity is often deployed to mobilise political opposition against nation states. But we should also be mindful of the fact that ethnicity is also a powerful weapon used by nation states to delegitimise and frustrate the political objectives of its minority peoples, however they may be construed. Jola culture is not doing anything to threaten the Senegalese nation. Rather, the idea that Jola culture is antithetical to nationalism undermines the idea that the Senegalese nation unites diverse ethnic groups on the basis of equality.

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NOTES

1 Atika is a Jola word that means ‘warrior’.
2 For an account of this conflict between 1990 and 1993 see Marut (1994).
3 Tragically, the violence that has plagued the Casamance appears to be far from over. After a lull, confrontations between the MFDC and the Senegalese government heated up, once again, in September 1997. As of this writing (May 1998) they show few signs of abating.
4 ‘Jola’ is frequently spelled ‘Diola’, particularly in the French-language literature.
5 This conflict has not been widely covered outside Senegal. Western reporters who have covered the conflict have tended to assume that it is an ethnic uprising. I doubt that Western journalists had political reasons for adopting an ethnic interpretation. Ethnicity and tribalism are simply the conventional ‘shorthand’ Western journalists often employ to understand conflict in Africa. The contrast with reports published in Senegal is sharp. At the outset the government-controlled Soleil claimed that it was an ethnic conflict. There is little question in my mind that the Soleil’s editorial staff, consciously or unconsciously, had political reasons for taking that position. The reporting of Senegal’s two major independent journals, Wal Fadjri and Sud Hebdo (currently known as Sud Quotidien), was markedly differently. Neither claimed that the MFDC was an ethnic movement. Sud focused on the violation of human rights by the Senegalese government and maintained that the violence perpetrated by the military on the peoples of the Casamance was provoking a ‘spiral of violence’. According to Sud the issue was
state-sponsored violence, not ethno-nationalism. Sud’s refusal to grant credence to an ethnic interpretation eventually provoked a reader to respond. To Sud’s credit, it published his letter (Diaw, 1990). Significantly, Sud Communication (Sud Hebdo’s parent company) has a complex and at times confrontational relationship with the Senegalese government. This would probably explain why it was quick to blame the government for the violence in the Casamance.

Abbé Diamacoune Senghor is not related to the former Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor.

Abbé Diamacoune Senghor glosses over the racial make-up of this movement. He does so to the extent of implying that, at the outset, the movement was African and not European.

In December 1993, as part of negotiations between the MFDC and the Senegalese government, the French historian Jacques Charpy (1994) concluded that there was no historical basis to the claims of the MFDC.

Most African nations have constitutions which ban ethnically based parties. Not all of these other nations have been as successful as Senegal in removing ethnicity from the political arena. Some scholars (see Webster and Boahen, 1980: 298–325) attribute the different experiences of West African countries in removing ethnicity from their policies to the policies pursued by Britain and France during the colonial era.

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ABSTRACT

Since 1982 the Mouvement des forces démocratique casamançais has been fighting for the independence of the Casamance region of Senegal. In 1989, when the Mouvement initiated a sustained military campaign, Senegal’s official and independent press began to provide intensive coverage of its activities and objectives. This article documents the arguments for and against Casamançais independence as documented by Senegal’s press in the year following the resurgence of this conflict. The Mouvement’s leadership has consistently maintained that its efforts to win independence for the Casamance are legitimate because France created the Casamance. The French, it argues, never intended the Casamance to be administratively incorporated into Senegal. Conversely, those opposed to the Mouvement have attempted to delegitimise its activities by claiming that it represents the interests of the Jola, just one of the Casamance’s many ethnic groups. It is argued that the Senegalese government and other opponents of the Mouvement have attempted to label the independence movement an ethnic movement because of a distinction in African political ideology between nationalism and ethnicity. According to this ideology, nationalism, and other legitimate forms of political mobilisation, should represent a plural constituency. Those that represent the narrow interests of a single ethnic group are not considered legitimate.

RÉSUMÉ