I remember a Jola work song recorded during the cultivation of the peanut fields. It was about a man who lamented that all the young women had gone to the city. The lyrics, as I remember them now, focused on a young woman, who, the singer complained, was absorbed by her appearance. She had gone to Dakar, the capital of Senegal, to work as a domestic so that she would have the money to buy clothes and cosmetics.

The song was one of many expressions of male anxiety over female migration that I encountered during my research. This anxiety was not new. It inspired several attempts in the Senegalese village of Baland 1 over the past 50 years to control female migration. During the 1940s and 1950s, in what was apparently a nationally orchestrated effort (Soleil, 4 September 1989, p. 14), a regional men's association maintained a vigil at Dakar’s port, the point of entry to the city. As self-appointed border guards, they checked to see if the women of the Casamance, Senegal's southernmost region, had secured their parents’ approval to leave the Casamance. These men abandoned the plan, which had not met much success, in the late 1950s. Less that fifteen years later, a village-wide association banned female migration. Though this created quite a stir, it, too, proved ineffective. In addition to collective efforts, there have also been efforts at the level of households to control the movements of women. In 1989, a young woman was forcibly removed from the city by her father, who had arranged a marriage for her in the village. Six months after the marriage her husband died, and she fled to the city. Villagers were convinced that she had killed him. On a rainy night less than a year later, the father of a thirteen-year-old girl vehemently protested his daughter’s plans to spend the summer in the city. Several hours later, she boarded the bus for Dakar. While there have been a few isolated incidents in which individual women have been prevented from leaving for the city, men have been largely unsuccessful in their attempts to control female migration.

As the song suggests, female migration among the Jola is about labor, commodities, and gender relations. Since anthropology discovered Friederich Engels’ The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State much has been made about the relationship between the development of capitalist relations of production and the subjugation of women. Much of this literature, and certainly that on Africa, has documented how commoditization has gone hand-in-hand with greater gender inequality (Etienne 1980; Linares 1985; Mackintosh 1977, 1989; Walker 1990). The case of commoditization and female migration among the Jola reveals that commodities, specifically female goods, provided openings for women to free themselves from the control that men had historically exercised over their labor. At the end of this essay I will address a related question: whether this victory is all that meaningful given that, while winning it, many of these women have found themselves stranded on the margins of Senegal's urban economy.
Commodities and migration in Baland

I collected the materials presented in this essay through interviews, archival research, and participant observation in rural and urban locations during a total of three years of research in Senegal between 1987 and 1998. I conducted the rural component of this research in Baland, a Jola village in the Department of Bignona in Senegal's Basse-Casamance region. This village lies at the heart of a region known as the Boulouf, an insular area west of the town of Bignona (the administrative center of the Department), north of the Casamance river, west of the coastal swamps, and south of marigots and the main road that runs from Bignona to The Gambia. Like other villages of the Boulouf, Baland is nestled on a small hillock surrounded by a lowland flood plain. Rice, the principal subsistence crop, is grown on the lowland surrounding the village. Peanuts, the principal cash crop, are grown on high lands northwest of the village. Roughly two thousand people live in this large village that is divided into eight semi-autonomous residential sections. By 1987, however, not everyone from Baland was living in the village. Baland had become a translocal community dispersed throughout Senegambia.²

In comparison to women of Senegal's other ethnic groups, Jola women are popularly viewed as enjoying considerable power and autonomy from men. Yet Baland's women have not always expressed their autonomy through migration. Indeed, it has only been during what I refer to as the third and current phase of female migration that female mobility has become progressively autonomous of the movements of men. In the two earlier phases, female migration was predominantly associational. That is, marriage was the most common reason women left Baland. Moreover, during the first two phases the labor and earnings of women remained largely under the control of men. It was only after the second World War that women were able to break the lock that men had over their labor.

The first phase of female migration dates to at least the turn of the century, long before the ascendancy of urban Senegal. During this phase most migrants were pushed by the region's historically high population density from one rural location to another.³ Rice fields were the most important economic resource and frequently became objects of bitter and violent inter-village disputes. Land was often so scarce, in fact, that first born sons were expected to leave the village in search of new lands to cultivate. Still, these sons did not sever their ties with Baland. Most initiated their own sons into Baland's sacred forest, a potent expression of village identity, and most forged ties of alliance with other lineages in their home village by marrying women from Baland.

The second phase also dates to before the turn of the century. Unlike the first phase, whose logic was rooted in actions oriented toward self-sufficiency, this phase centered on trade. It witnessed the migration of women with men not only as their wives but also as their co-laborers. Alice Hamer (1981, 1983) and Peter Mark (1976, 1977) document the migrations of Boulouf-Jola women, who journeyed with men as far as The Gambia during this period to collect rubber, palm oil, and other forest products for trade with European and Manding traders.

In the 1920s this seasonal labor migration began to change. The rubber market collapsed, and men turned to peanuts as a source of cash (Mark 1977; see also van der Klei 1985). Rather than exploit the highlands surrounding Baland, these men left Baland during the rainy seasons to
cultivate in other villages as tenant farmers. Initially, women did not accompany men during these seasonal migrations (referred to in French as navetaine). By the 1930s this changed, and men began bringing along their sisters who helped in the fields by planting the peanut seeds, and in the household by cooking and tending to other chores. The compensation women received for this work was meager. Some women with whom I spoke claimed that their brothers gave them a few pieces of cloth after the crop had been sold. Others said that their brothers let them gather the peanuts that remained on the ground after the harvest. Men firmly controlled the earnings.

During the first two phases, men controlled female labor. This began to change during the third historical phase when men and women began pursuing economic opportunities in urban Senegal. Post-World War II changes in French colonial policy created more attractive and lucrative ways of earning a cash income. France transferred some of its industries to Dakar and later promoted the development of Senegal's urban economy by increasing its investments in the urban infrastructure, including public education. France also began expanding opportunities for Africans in the military, the civil administration, and Senegal's industries (Manning 1988: 119-130).

Men were the first to take advantage of these opportunities. In the 1940s several young men from Baland enrolled in school, earned their primary school certificates (Certificate d'etudes primaire), and ventured to Dakar and Ziguinchor in search of jobs. They graduated at a time when finding urban employment was comparatively easy. All these men found jobs in Senegal's burgeoning urban sector. Other men were to follow, but during the 1940s and 1950s, only those who had attended school left for the cities. It was not until the 1960s that all men, regardless of educational attainment, began venturing to Dakar in the hope of securing permanent employment. These men hoped to settle, marry, and raise their families in one of Senegal's urban locations. From early in the development of urban migration men explicitly pursued the goal of long term migration.

Commodities, 'targets', and female migration

By the 1950s Baland's women had also begun to take advantage of post-war opportunities in urban Senegal. By then, women learned that they could earn more working as domestics in urban locations than they could on the navetaine. Initially, not all women took advantage of this opportunity, and pressure was not brought to bear on them to do so. One woman told me that she had gone to Ziguinchor for one season but decided not to return to the city. She did not understand why she should work for a 'stranger' instead of remaining in the village to help her mother. Other women, however, began migrating to Ziguinchor or Bathurst (now called Banjul, The Gambia) in the dry season to work as domestics. Like male migrants, they retained close ties to the village. Though a few eventually married men employed in the city (most of whom married men from Baland), most of these women returned to the village where they married men who lived in the rural village.

By 1960, however, the lure of urban migration had become irresistible. By then nearly all women had abandoned the navetaine in favor of seasonal urban migration. This shift was due in part to the completion of the Transgambian highway. This road, which connected the Casamance overland to Dakar, rendered Dakar, Senegal's most lucrative labor market, easily accessible to Baland's women. This shift was also due to the fact that, by then, commodities
such as manufactured cloth and cooking utensils purchased by women who chose to work as domestics had become commonplace in the village. As the demand for these goods increased, women realized that the few pieces of cloth their brothers had sometimes presented them after the navetaine was not enough. Moreover, they knew that they could not depend on their rural-based husbands to provide these goods.

Women timed their seasonal urban migration so that it presented as little disruption and posed as little a threat to the community as possible. Although they did withdraw their labor from the navetaine, they usually returned to Baland to assist their rural-based relatives with the onerous tasks of rice transplanting and harvesting. They also limited their seasonal migrations to a couple of seasons before they married – when they were old enough that their parents would not be alarmed by their living in the city but before they were burdened by the considerable labor demands placed on married women.

Within a few years these female seasonal migration patterns had become institutionalized and expected, even required, of all women. According to my informants prior to this time women were not expected to collect a trousseau of any kind. Indeed when I tried to learn the Jola term for the trousseau, I was told that there was not one. During interviews women used the French word bagage to refer to the goods that they were expected to amass prior to their marriage. An older woman explained to me that, before urban migration, ‘women entered their marriages empty handed.’ The first female migrants might have purchased goods for their personal use, but by the late 1950s all women were expected to have these items on their wedding day. The trousseau comprised what had by then become gendered commodities that embodied and were used to reveal a woman’s ability to work. This bagage, at the core of which were cooking utensils, made it possible for women to fulfill their duties as wives and revealed their dedication to doing so.

Significantly, women assembled this cultural expectation behind the scenes, beyond the knowledge and control of men. Female urban migration and the trousseau developed in the tightly woven social networks that Olga Linares (1988) has referred to as kuriiman, or groups of patrilineally related sisters. Although the Jola are patrilocal, married women retain close ties with their sisters and other female members of their patrilineage. The relatively small size and larger number of these groups made it easy for them to work covertly. They could hold meetings without informing male relatives. They could secretly arrange for the migration of young women.

When women first moved to urban Senegal as associational migrants, they established networks of patrilineally related women that spanned rural and urban locations. Rural-based women used these networks to aid their daughters in collecting their trousseau. Daughters were sent to live with maternal aunts. These urban women provided young girls with lodging and employment. Some received their nieces’ salaries directly from the girls’ employers. When the time came, they helped their nieces choose their goods. The goods were then stored in the aunts’ home until her niece married. On the eve of the marriage the bride’s maternal relatives held a ceremony at which the bride displayed her trousseau to them. After the marriage the trousseau was stored by the bride’s mother. Then, as they were needed, the goods were surreptitiously moved into the bride’s matrimonial household. Several years might pass before a man even saw these goods. Once women were armed with a culturally sanctioned reason to
migrate there was little anyone could do to control their mobility. The construction of meaning surrounding female migration did not end there. Other meanings emerged that legitimized the migration of even younger girls.

Through the 1960s, female seasonal urban migration was primarily a means for young women to obtain a trousseau. Most women spent only a couple of dry seasons in the city. By the mid-1970s, however, female migration patterns had begun to change. Young school girls, some as young as thirteen, were by then expected to work in the city during the summer so as to have clothes for the school year. Most women now spend several years working in the city before they begin collecting their trousseau. I knew of some unmarried women who, in the late 1980s, had been living in Dakar for fifteen years. By then female migration was no longer a transitional activity that filled the years between adolescence and marriage.

Regardless of what men might have wanted, by their mid-twenties women were expected to have a history of migration: a history pieced together through the pursuit of a series of targets. Women claimed that once they attained their target, they would return to the village. School girls said that they would return to school at the end of the summer. Late teenage girls planned to return to Baland once they had collected their trousseau. At least this is what they claimed.

While most school girls returned to the village, many slid into pursuing a trousseau by simply not returning for the school year. As for the target of collecting a trousseau, this was particularly powerful. It legitimized female migration as a strategy by which women could enhance their future husband’s domestic situation. But are these targets really what these women are pursuing or are they a cover behind which women pursue other objectives?

Once during an interview with two young women, I asked them why they had migrated to the city. They shyly looked down and shuffled their feet. When it became apparent that they would not respond, an older married woman quickly and boldly stated what the young women were too embarrassed to admit. The older woman explained that the young women had gone to the city in the hopes of marrying there. When I asked her why they did not want to return to the village, her response was both straightforward and reasonable: village working conditions are too difficult. In the village, women must collect firewood, draw and haul water, and work in the fields. Very simply, urban wives are freed from these tasks. Whatever their reasons, by then it was understood that most, if not all, women, like their male kin, aspired to become permanent urban residents.

Commodities: tools for liberation, symbols of subjugation

Baland’s women have found creative ways to use gendered commodities, women’s groups, and migration ‘targets’ to resist male control over their labor. Still, it would be easy to overstate the extent to which they had managed to wrest themselves free from patriarchal domination. While women might indeed have used ‘targets’ to create opportunities to migrate, ultimately they still had to find a way to make their migration permanent. Most women have limited long-term employment possibilities. Many women quit school so as to pursue urban employment. Few have more than a sixth grade education. Almost all of Baland’s single women work in the informal sector and earn about 20,000 CFA per month. Only a few secure lucrative jobs with European employers, particularly now that the market for domestics has become saturated. Moreover, living conditions for migrant women are poor. Most share small rooms in crowded
houses with four or five friends. They might earn enough to prolong their stays in the city, but certainly not enough to remain independent for the duration of their lives. Ironically, marriage presents them with their best chance of remaining in the city and improving their economic situation. This goal of marrying a man who is employed in the city is not easily achieved, however.

Because Baland, is remarkably endogamous, the success of women in achieving this goal depends, largely, on the success of Baland's men in securing urban jobs. During the post war period, the demand for educated Africans was high. Now, Senegal's stagnant economy, together with a considerable labor surplus, make finding employment in the formal sector difficult. Most men who do not secure jobs eventually return to Baland and marry women who have failed to marry men employed in the city.

Single men I spoke with knew that the best way to strengthen their hand in choosing when and whom they married was to secure a job in Senegal's formal economy. Indeed the attempts, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, that men have made to control female migration were largely efforts to stem the flow of potential marriage partners out of the village. In the introduction I also mentioned an ill-fated marriage in which a reluctant bride was accused of murdering her rural-based husband. This event struck at the heart of these anxieties. To be sure, men, even those who fail to secure employment in the formal sector, do not expect to die at the hands of their wives. Yet this story and others that circulate in Baland are unsettling. For example, after her marriage to a village-based man, one woman quietly moved her belongings to the forest. Then one morning she disappeared. In the late 1970s, another woman, perhaps in protest against a village marriage, entered her husband's household pregnant by another man. These stories of women lashing out against patriarchy, told time and again, underline that while women might have been able to crack male domination, they are still far being completely undoing it.

When women started migrating in the late 1940s many, including men, might have viewed their short sojourns in the city as benign. They might have been pleased by the earnings and goods these women brought back to the village. They probably did not foresee how women would come to use commodities, women's groups and targets as a way to challenge the control that men historically exercised over their labor. Still the question remains as to whether we should view commodities as a tool women have used to fight for their liberation, or as a symbol of their subjugation. While women have used these tools to successfully challenge patriarchy in Baland, these same women still rely on marriage as a strategy to improve their long term economic situation. Moreover, while women might have been able to challenge patriarchy within the community, in doing so they have moved into the urban economy as domestics, a marginalized and exploited occupational niche in Senegal's national economic landscape.
Notes

1. I have changed the name of the principal community at which this research was conducted. I have not changed other location names.

2. The genealogy I collected revealed that only 25% of the members of this community lived in the rural village. Of the others, 25% lived in other rural locations; 25%, in Senegal's capital of Dakar; and 25%, in other urban locations. Although this community's members live in many different locations, their sense of community remains strong. This is reflected in high rates of endogamy (70% of women and 80% of men marry people who trace descent to Baland), the many urban and rural village associations, and intense communication between community members regardless of residence.

3. It was probably part of the Jola expansion from south west Casamance to the north east through which they displaced groups such as the Bainouk and the Manding (see Linares 1992).

4. Female migration among the Jola has received considerable scholarly attention (see Hamer 1983; Cormier 1985; Conseil National des Femmes Noire Americaines 1983; Diop 1989; Fassin 1987; Lambert 1994; Reveyard 1986a 1986b 1987).

5. The concept of target migration, of course, refers to migrants who have well defined and limited objectives.


7. Domestics who work for Europeans often earn more than 50,000 CFA a month.

8. See endnote 1.

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