Introduction

In precolonial Senegambia from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth century, the construction of social and cultural identities and the construction of houses constituted two intimately related processes. These processes led to the creation, on the one hand, of abstract and flexible social concepts and categories and, on the other hand, of physical structures. The buildings and the social concepts were, however, closely interrelated. The houses that people build serve not only to provide shelter but also to symbolize or to articulate the owners' social and cultural identity. Along the Upper Guinea Coast, from the Petite Côte south to Cacheu, domestic architecture constituted an important element in the expression of social status, economic position, and material culture.

The geopolitical situation in Senegambia was complex. North of the Gambia River, the medieval state of Jolof extended over a vast area from the Senegal River south to the Gambia. But during the sixteenth century, Jolof ceded autonomy to the component Wolof and Serer (Sereer) states of Kajoor, Baol, Waalo, Siin and Saloum. Islam, which had been present in the region since at least the eleventh century C.E., was widely disseminated, although it was also frequently mixed with local religious practices.

The population of the lower Gambia was a mixture of indigenous Serer, Wolofs, and the descendents of Manding traders and warriors who had migrated west from the heartland of the Mande-speaking peoples. Many of these long-distance merchants were Muslims. This Manding migration and the accompanying cultural assimilation of local populations probably had begun by the fourteenth century.

The coast from the Gambia south through present-day Guinea-Bissau is a region of low-lying plateaus and tidal swamps bisected by numerous coastal waterways. It is also a region of significant linguistic and cultural diversity. Early Portuguese sources suggest the existence of Bainunk- and Mande-dominated states along the Casamance River. The largest and most powerful of these states was Kaabu, situated southeast of the Casamance between the coastal lowlands and the interior. In the sixteenth century, this Mande-dominated state exerted commercial and limited political influence north to the Gambia. In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sociopolitical organization in the Casamance probably did not surpass the level of intervillage alliances. Throughout the Casamance-Bissau coastal region until the end of the nineteenth century, Islam was
limited to a few long-distance merchants (Dyulas). Each local group had its own particular religious practices.

Identity has been defined as the dynamic product of a dialectical interaction between self-definition and ascribed or imposed definitions.7 No community, no social group, can articulate its identity independently of the outside world. Those who are not members of a given group may help to create and revise the identity of the group. Identity thus entails a dia-

logue or discourse between members of the group in question and members of other groups with whom they enter into contact.

Architecture, the most visible and durable component of material culture, influences the creation of images pertaining to that culture. These images are articulated not only by those who build and live in the houses but also by outsiders. The images outsiders form of members of a group eventually define the group's ascribed identity. These images become part
of the discourse and, ultimately, they may be integrated into the group’s own sense of who they are. When these external images differ significantly from the group’s sense of being, they may engender a countervailing assertion as group members seek to deny the ascribed identity. Inevitably, however, members of a society have to respond to the manner in which they are perceived and defined. This is particularly true where the outside world exerts local political and economic influence, as was the case with European colonial powers in nineteenth-century Senegambia.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

Along the northern Upper Guinea Coast and in the immediate hinterland from the Gambia River south to Cacheu (Figure 1, Figure 2), the buildings people lived in and the physical layout of their communities served as important elements in the articulation of their cultural identity. In this region of extensive long-distance trade, architecture reflected contact among the different populations. In the constantly changing constellation of diverse populations, identity was in part a measure of material culture, of language, and of local traditions of origin. At any given moment, a group’s identity was the dynamic product of ongoing cultural interaction and assimilation.

Among the groups inhabiting this region were several thousand Luso-Africans, or “Portuguese,” as they were widely known. The local African populations of West-Atlantic speakers—Floup, Bagnuns, Bijogens, Papels, Balantas—were for the most part organized into small-scale, decentralized societies. Mande-speaking peoples inhabited the small states of the lower Gambia and the more important state of Kaabu in the northeastern part of modern-day Guinea-Bissau. By the nineteenth century, Fulbe migrants from the Futa Jalon had also established communities in the Middle and Upper Casamance.

From the perspective of the Mande-speaking Juula (dyula) merchants whose caravans connected the Gambia and Casamance Rivers with the regions to the east, the Upper Guinea Coast represented the western limit of the Mande commercial diaspora. The associated Mande cultural zone extended nearly 1,000 miles, to the inland delta of the Niger River in Mali. From a European perspective, on the other hand, the coast was itself the center of commercial activity and the focal point for contact with the cultures of West Africa.

HISTORICAL QUESTIONS

From an historical perspective there are fundamental questions about precolonial identities in Senegambia. How did these identities change between the time of first contact with Portuguese traders in the fifteenth
Introduction

The question of identity articulation is crucial not only in the study of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world, but also for understanding the histories of both European and African peoples during that period. This study examines the ways in which individuals and communities defined and maintained their identities in the face of colonial and post-colonial influences. The focus is on the Gambia-Casamance-Cacheu region, where the interaction of European, African, and mixed-Race populations has shaped the cultural landscape.

The introduction sets the stage for the subsequent chapters, outlining the research questions and objectives. It highlights the significance of identity in the context of colonialism and post-colonialism, and the need for a more nuanced understanding of identity formation. The introduction also provides a brief overview of the historical and cultural context of the study area, including the role of the Atlantic slave trade and the impact of European colonization.

The introduction concludes with a statement of the research questions, which are: What were the processes of identity articulation and change in the Gambia-Casamance-Cacheu region? How did these processes differ from those in other Atlantic contexts? How did the interactions between European and African peoples influence the development of new identities?

The introduction also sets the stage for the following chapters, which will explore these questions in greater detail, drawing on a range of primary and secondary sources, including oral histories, colonial archives, and contemporary accounts.

The introduction concludes with a brief overview of the research methods and data sources used in the study. It highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the research, drawing on the fields of history, anthropology, and cultural studies. The introduction also provides a brief summary of the research findings, setting the stage for the subsequent chapters, which will delve more deeply into the processes of identity articulation and change in the Gambia-Casamance-Cacheu region.
of earlier inhabitants by more recent arrivals have altered the local cultural map. This is the case with the formerly “Bagnun” populations of the Gambia-Soungrougrou region and of Fogny, north of the Casamance River. In other instances, the labels associated with particular groups have changed, a process that also reflects the gradual coalescing, on the level of group identification, of several local populations (“peuples,” or “races,” as they were sometimes designated in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French sources) into a geographically more extensive group. This is the situation with the Floop of Fogny, who in the course of the nineteenth century came to be identified as “Yolas” or “Diolas” (English: Jolas). Today the Jolas are described as an ethnic group. Members of this group now widely assert Jola identity. The term Diola is a nineteenth-century concept that is closely tied to the French colonial presence (administrators, missionaries, and anthropologists); before about 1900 the ancestors of the Diolas would not have considered themselves as such. The ancestors of the present-day Diola were formerly often called the Floops. No one calls them that today, least of all themselves.

There are as many as ten subgroups of Diolas, distinguished mostly on the basis of language dialects. The national dialect of the Diola language is Diola Fogny; the people who live in Fogny, north of the Casamance River and south of The Gambia, are also called Diola-Fogny. Their neighbors to the west, in Buluf, are, not surprisingly, the Diola-Buluf. When I use the term Mlomp-Buluf, I do so to refer to the village in Buluf called Mlomp and to distinguish it from the village in Kasa, south of the Casamance River, also called Mlomp.

So, in brief, many or most Diolas have Floop ancestry. One would not distinguish between Floops and Diolas. A few mid-nineteenth-century sources do that, but those writers existed at an historical moment when the appellation “Floop” was just being replaced by the term “Diola.” By the turn of the twentieth century, the term “Diola” had taken on a broader meaning that included all the speakers of Diola dialects, and approximated what we would perhaps call an ethnic group.

Given the recent creation of Jola ethnicity, how does one refer to those seventeenth-century ancestors who themselves had no sense of being Jola? It is clearly advisable to avoid the proleptic use of later ethnic labels. However, alternative appellations, such as “the ancestors of the Jolas,” are awkward, and they oversimplify the complex interactions that led to the creation of the present cultural and linguistic group. Nevertheless, the admittedly awkward circumlocution “ancestors of” is preferable because it is less ahistorical than the anachronistic use of contemporary ethnic labels.

The history of cultural interaction and evolution of cultural identity evokes a related question: Do contemporary identity concepts have meaning when applied retroactively across four centuries of time? The concept “ethnic group” is a relatively recent creation. The development and application of ethnic labels was often, as is now widely recognized by histori-
Introduction

The concept of ethnicity is itself problematic, especially if one attempts to apply it to cultures separated by four centuries. For the concept is not immutable in time and space. As Carola Lentz observes, ethnicity is not a strict analytical category that has a single and precise meaning. It is, instead, a rather vague concept: “I do not employ the concept of ethnicity as a strictly analytical category that lends itself to a single precise definition. Ethnicity is perhaps an imprecise concept.”

Both precolonial and colonial identity formation entailed a dialectical interaction between the Luso-Africans, their African neighbors, and European merchants whose understanding of who was “Portuguese” differed from the Luso-Africans’ own sense of who they were. Pre-nineteenth-century identities were not, however, a product of the same power relationships that characterized the colonial period. This factor suggests an important distinction between precolonial and colonial identity formation. The observations of Carola Lentz are again pertinent: “The processes of ethnic identity creation are historically and regionally specific.”

In the chapters that follow, I seek to elucidate the processes by which “Portuguese” identity was formed and subsequently re-formulated from the sixteenth century to the advent of French colonial administration in southern Senegambia in the second half of the nineteenth century. While the focus is on the region comprising the Petite Côte, the lower Gambia,
the Casamance, and northwestern Guinea-Bissau (S. Domingos-Cacheu),
historical reference is also made to “Portuguese” communities farther
south along the Atlantic coast. While I endeavor to define the historical
factors that were specific to the “Portuguese” experience, it is nevertheless
my hope that this work may prove useful to scholars investigating the for-
mation of precolonial identities elsewhere in West Africa.

The richness of pre-nineteenth-century documents covering the region
from the Petite Côte to Cacheu makes it possible to trace the history of
Luso-African identity with a depth unmatched for any other group in
West Africa. Neighboring peoples—including the Manding and Floupss—
also figure in this historical record, but without the detailed attention ac-
corded the Luso-Africans. Furthermore, only the Luso-Africans left written
records. Two important Portuguese sixteenth-century chroniclers,
André Alves de Almada and André Donelha, belonged to the Luso-
African community in the Cape Verde Islands. The seventeenth-century
writer Francisco de Lemos Coelho also belonged to the Luso-African
trading community. These sources offer a “Portuguese” perspective on
local culture.

Pre-nineteenth-century sources offer only sporadic glimpses of iden-
tity formation and reformulation among other Senegambian peoples. I
endeavor to weave these brief, sometimes anecdotal references into the
more complete narrative of “Portuguese” identity. This is crucial, because
“Portuguese” identity was itself negotiated or articulated in accordance
with prevailing Senegambian models of group identity. The nature of Luso-
African identity can be understood only within the context of these local
social and cultural templates.

In discussing the evolution of precolonial identities, one needs to con-
sider which specific terms to employ. Do these terms imply an outsider’s
definition of the group in question, or were they used by members of the
group? It is clearly preferable, where possible, to use indigenous terms
that best reflect the underlying concepts that were part of the local dis-
course on identity.

Historical sources for Senegambia limit our knowledge of local iden-
tity terms and concepts, except in the case of the “Portuguese.” European
and Cape Verdean chroniclers refer to the Luso-Africans as “Portuguese”
in a context that clearly indicates this was the term used by both the Luso-
Africans themselves and their Senegambian neighbors. In referring to this
group as “Portuguese,” the chroniclers were conforming to local usage.

These sources do not place the term Portuguese in quotation marks. I
have chosen to do so in order to differentiate for the reader between Luso-
Africans (“Portuguese”) and those Lusitanians who were born and lived
most of their lives in Europe (Portuguese). This distinction was admittedly
not made, so far as we can know, by members of the Luso-African com-
munity. Nor does it correspond to the Senegambian understanding of
identity as fluid, contextually defined, and generally based on cultural pa-
rameters. To have avoided the use of quotation marks would, however, have risked confusing what are today generally considered to be two separate categories: Luso-Africans and western Iberians. The discerning reader will recognize that “Portuguese” does not imply, on my part, either rejection of or skepticism toward the Luso-Africans’ understanding that who they were was Portuguese.

Written sources offer a detailed and more or less continuous record of the Luso-African community and of the attendant historical evolution of “Portuguese” identity from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Early sources also provide information about the movement of individuals between two or more identities. These instances provide important insight not only into the process of identity change but also into the nature of identity in precolonial Senegambia and Bissau. The result is an historical tableau, unique for its detail and its depth of time, of individual and group identity creation and transformation throughout the Upper Guinea Coast in the nearly half-millennium that preceded European colonial expansion.

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY: ARCHITECTURE

The buildings that individuals and groups construct tell much about their lives, their professions, their economic position, and the image of social status they may wish to project. In Senegambia and Bissau, as elsewhere in West Africa, architectural style and building technology show responses to challenging local climate conditions and environments. The existence of similar elements in the architecture of two groups may constitute evidence of contact and borrowing; alternatively, similarities may reflect the independent evolution of parallel solutions to building in that environment. The historian is not always able to determine which of these historical processes was at work.

Buildings also have a history or, rather, histories, that are more subjective. The important role architecture plays in the construction of images of a given society derives in part from the obvious fact that architecture is often the most salient feature of material culture. The manner in which members of a culture view and interpret their own buildings, or the symbolic meaning imputed to the structures, reflects the self-image of the group and of its individual members. The same buildings, viewed differently by outsiders, play a significant role in the articulation of external images of that society. Hence, a given architectural style may have multiple histories and multiple meanings. Each of these histories reflects discrete attitudes toward the culture whose members built and lived in these buildings.

The history, or the sequence of histories, associated with the architecture of the Luso-Africans and their neighbors on the Upper Guinea Coast
reflects the changing status of the Luso-Africans in West African society and economy. Part of a worldwide commercial network and a hemispheric trading diaspora in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Luso-Africans were associated with “Portuguese”-style architecture, or maisons à la portugaise, variants of which were found in communities as far away as Brazil. Descriptions of Luso-African dwellings and seventeenth-century illustrations of Afro-Brazilian architecture offer graphic evidence of the movement of people—European and Euro-African traders as well as African slaves—between the Guinea Coast and Brazil. However, by the second half of the nineteenth century, French colonial observers in Senegambia had redefined “Portuguese” architecture. The buildings were now seen as evidence of both Portuguese and West African cultural decadence. This process of redefinition was part of a widespread colonial reading of African culture and history in a manner congruent with European preconceptions about the superiority of European culture (and the concomitant inferiority of African culture).

Ultimately, the history of architecture is about more than the structures themselves. It is about the meanings ascribed to these structures, both by those who built them and by outsiders. In the case of precolonial architecture in southern Senegambia and Bissau, all of the groups concerned—Africans, Euro-Africans, and Europeans—viewed the buildings as symbols of who lived in them and what sort of people these inhabitants were. Architecture served both as an instrument of self-definition and as an instrument of externally imposed definition. Furthermore, architecture was both a symbolic and a subjective marker of identity.

The buildings that constitute a focus of this study were, with very few exceptions, constructed of sun-dried clay or earth, generally with thatched roofs. These structures, of course, no longer exist. Many of the villages, too, have either disappeared or changed location. Some have succumbed to warfare, others to changes in the courses of the river channels beside which they were built or to the disappearance of the trade routes that gave them economic life. Perhaps some day archaeologists may study the sites of these former villages. But archaeology has barely been undertaken in southern Senegambia. Until it is, the history of local architecture before 1850 will remain a history without the buildings themselves.

Precolonial architectural history is also largely lacking in visual representations of these vanished structures. To reconstruct the history of Senegambian housing forms, one is constrained to use primarily written descriptions. These descriptions exist in travel narratives, as incidental references in Portuguese records from the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and in occasional missionary records. With the exception of the Cape Verdean authors cited above, these sources are almost all written by Europeans. How reliable are they? Travelers’ descriptions of houses, mosques, and fortifications tend to be straightforward. Usually, the raw data of visual description can be separated from ethnocentric bias. The cultural bias
that characterizes many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century narratives does not often lead to significant distortion in descriptions of the physical form of dwellings of local political leaders or of defensive structures or of the few monumental buildings that existed in Senegambia.

Nevertheless, visual images of pre-nineteenth-century architecture from the Gambia-Bissau region are quite rare. At the end of the seventeenth century, Jean Barbot illustrated forts and other buildings, but Barbot did not have firsthand experience of this part of the coast. A small number of late-seventeenth- or early-eighteenth-century maps incorporate schematic images of houses and of village walls. Two maps in particular (see Figure 3 and Figure 4, discussed in Chapter 2) associated with the travel narrative of Michel Jajolet de la Courbe may include images that derive from personal observation. Yet here, too, the images are schematic and tend to be generic.

The most accurate depictions of seventeenth-century African domestic architecture may, in fact, come not from Africa, but from Brazil. During and after his seven-year residency in Brazil (1637–1644), Dutch artist Frans Post made numerous sketches and paintings of the houses of Portuguese settlers. Close commercial ties and an active slave trade linked Brazil to the Luso-African traders of the Upper Guinea Coast. Post’s illustrations (see Figures 12–14, discussed more fully in Chapter 3) depict a few settlers’ homes that appear to incorporate elements of the “Portuguese” style, a style likely brought to the New World by Luso-African traders and African slaves. Even more significant, Post’s scenes of slave life depict dwellings that had clearly been built by Africans and that appear to reflect West African prototypes. These paintings provide indirect but detailed visual evidence of architectural forms from early- to mid-seventeenth-century West Africa.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, several French visitors to Senegambia made sketches of the region and of some buildings. The most extensive artistic representations are those by Hyacinthe Hecquard, who traveled from the Casamance to the Futa Jalon in 1850–1851 and who depicted the trading posts of Ziguinchor and Carabane (Figure 18, Chapter 5, and Figure 21, Chapter 6). Thirty years later, the Bayol expedition from Rio Pongo to Futa Jalon was abundantly illustrated by a professional artist named Niorit. In both instances, however, the main visual record is that of the Futa Jalon, an area which lies outside the focus of the present study. Only at the very end of the period considered in the present study, beginning in 1889, was southern Senegambia documented by photography.

The last two decades of the nineteenth century constitute a watershed in the history of southern Senegambia. In 1886, France acquired the Casamance and its administrative post, Ziguinchor, from Portugal. The Luso-Africans who had inhabited the region since the sixteenth century lost both their political autonomy and the remnants of their formerly dominant economic role as traders. The establishment of French colonial
administration marginalized the few remaining Luso-Africans. Drawn into a discourse on identity whose parameters were determined by Europeans, the “Portuguese” were effectively redefined as Africans. By the end of the century, virtually all that remained of their former identity was a vague memory of their reputation as master builders. Yet even this memory was subsumed by an ethnocentric discourse that disparaged African culture and essentially redefined “Portuguese”-style houses as European-inspired dwellings.
The Evolution of "Portuguese" Identity: Luso-Africans on the Upper Guinea Coast from the Sixteenth Century to the Early Nineteenth Century

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF EARLY PORTUGUESE COMMUNITIES

During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Portugal established a trading presence along the Upper Guinea Coast, that part of the Atlantic coast extending from Senegal to Sierra Leone. Portuguese ascendancy in the African trade began with fifteenth-century seaborne explorations. By the early 1600s, however, the joint Spanish-Portuguese monarchy's financial difficulties, combined with the rise of Dutch commerce, had begun to undermine Portuguese supremacy. This process was abetted by the Dutch conquest of northeastern Brazil beginning in 1630 and by the establishment of a Dutch trading post on Gorée Island off the Senegalese coast in 1621. A generation later, the French establishment of St. Louis at the mouth of the Senegal River in 1659, followed by the capture of Gorée in 1678 marked a growing French commercial presence. Britain became an important player at about the same time. The establishment of an English garrison at James Fort in the lower Gambia River, shortly after mid-century, marked the beginning of a military and commercial rivalry in the region between the French and the British that would continue until the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815.

Emigrants from Portugal (some of whom were Jews seeking to escape religious persecution), who were known as lançados, settled along the coast, where many of them married women from local communities. By the early sixteenth century, the offspring of these unions, Luso-Africans, or "Portuguese," as they called themselves, were established at trading centers from the Petite Côte in Senegal to Sierra Leone in the south (Figure 1, Figure 2). Descendants of Portuguese emigrants, of Cape Verde Is-
landers, and of West Africans, the Luso-Africans developed a culture that was itself a synthesis of African and European elements. Rich historical documentation allows a case study of the changing ways Luso-Africans identified themselves over the course of three centuries. Several “Portuguese” Cape Verdean merchants, including André Alvares de Almada (fl. 1590) and André Donelha (fl. 1570–1625), wrote accounts of the coastal trade; their descriptions present Luso-Africans from the perspective of the Cape Verdean elite.

The earliest lançados established themselves along the coast as commercial middlemen between African and European traders and as coastal traders between Sierra Leone and Senegambia. In 1623, Dierck Ruitters, a Dutch merchant who had traveled to Guinea in the first decade of the century, described Luso-African trade at Cacheu: “The trade of the Portuguese in Cacheu is of two kinds, first, trade from Portugal, second coastal trade … mostly undertaken in small ships, pinnacles, and launches, by Portuguese who live on Santiago Island.” The lançados’ commercial activity was formally discouraged by the Portuguese Crown until the second decade of the seventeenth century. They nevertheless played an important role in trade between Portugal and the Cape Verde Islands. Lançado communities were permanently settled on the Petite Côte, while in Sierra Leone and the Rio Nunez of Guinea much early commerce was in the hands of the lançados who sailed there regularly from S. Domingos, in present-day Guinea-Bissau, north of the city of Bissau. The offspring of these lançados and African women were called filhos de terra [sons of the land] and were generally considered “Portuguese.”

Throughout the sixteenth century, the descendents of the lançados maintained close commercial ties with the Cape Verde Islands. Many Cape Verdians were themselves the offspring of mixed Portuguese and West African marriages. By the late sixteenth century, the island of Santiago, whose population was overwhelmingly of African origin, constituted a Creole society. Sharing elements of a common culture and united by marriage and economic ties, the mainland Luso-Africans and the Cape Verdians represented a socially complex and geographically dispersed community. Cape Verdians, like mainland Luso-Africans, resolutely maintained that they were “Portuguese.” Both populations used the same criteria, which were essentially cultural, to identify themselves as subgroups.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LUSO-AFRICAN IDENTITY

Throughout the sixteenth century, membership in the Luso-African community was not associated with physical features. Rather, the “Portuguese” were defined, broadly speaking, by cultural and socioeconomic characteristics. The first defining characteristic of “Portuguese” identity
was occupation: to be “Portuguese” was to be a trader, much as to be Juula in Senegambia implied that one was a long-distance merchant.  
Another important way “Portuguese” identified themselves through language. Initially they spoke Portuguese, but over time the language they used gradually developed into Creole, or Crioulo. Crioulo, which conjointly vocabulary derived from Portuguese with a grammatical structure derived from West Atlantic languages, is the result of cultural assimilation. “Portuguese” language thus emphasized the hybrid aspect of the community and characterized the assimilative nature of the culture with which it was associated.

The development of Crioulo was a long process, which historical sources do not permit us to date precisely. Regional variants may have formed at different times. Written sources clearly attest to the existence of Crioulo in Bissau, but only toward the end of the seventeenth century.  
In 1582, Francisco de Andrade, sergeant-major of Santiago, wrote that African traders on the Petite Côte spoke French and Spanish; he mentions no trading language. Twelve years later, “Portuguese” traders reported that Africans had mastered their language; in 1594, André Alvarès de Almada observed that the Bainunks of the Cacheu region, “because of the close contact they have always had with our people, speak Portuguese very well.” And in 1600, Soares de Albergaria reported that many Africans along the Rio de S. Domingos near Cacheu also spoke Portuguese. Likewise, in 1606, the Jesuit Balthasar Barreira wrote of a Sierra Leonian king who, “having been brought up with the Portuguese, understands and speaks our language quite reasonably.” For extended conversations, the king could meet with Portuguese who were fluent in his language. That conversations were in Portuguese or in the local African language strongly suggests the absence of a common trading language, such as Creole, in Sierra Leone.

However, it is likely that a form of Crioulo had evolved in the Petite Côte–Gambia region by the first half of the seventeenth century. In 1602, at Portdale on the Petite Côte, Dutch trader Pieter de Marces noted that local people “have their own language, a mixture of many different languages.” This reference strongly suggests the existence, at an early date, of a hybrid or trading language along the Petite Côte. Given the preponderance of Luso-Africans and lançados along this part of the coast, such a language would surely have incorporated Portuguese.

Further south, in The Gambia in 1661, English traders relied on an African marabout who spoke Portuguese to act as their interpreter. By this date, Gambian Portuguese may already have been transformed into a nonstandard version of the language; this is suggested by a 1646 report from an Andalusian Capucine mission. At Jufure in the North Bank kingdom of Niumi, the missionaries reported “many Christians . . . who have never taken Confession and who speak a little Portuguese, by means of which they express themselves as best they can” (italics mine).  
This
reference to Luso-Africans, together with de Marees's earlier report, implies that a form of Crioulo or nonstandard Portuguese was spoken on the Petite Côte and along the lower Gambia River by the middle of the seventeenth century.21

Another characteristic of “Portuguese” identity was religion, as it was for other ethnic groups in the region. They were Catholics. Along the Upper Guinea Coast, it was common for each group to be characterized by its own religious practices. Thus, Floups (Jolas) and Bagnums (Bainunks) had their own shrines and associated rituals, although a powerful and efficacious shrine might well be acquired by one group from another.22

Luso-African religion was actually an amalgam of Christian, Jewish, and African practices. Among the lançados settled on the Petite Côte in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were Jews and “New Christians” (recently converted Jews).23 Few priests visited the coast, so Christians did not have regular access to the sacraments. Partly as a result of this isolation, some “Portuguese” participated in African religious rituals. However, unorthodox Christian practices are poorly documented. This is hardly surprising, as “Portuguese” who followed syncretic rituals would not have broadcast that fact to mission priests, the major chroniclers of the everyday life of Luso-Africans during this era.

In 1601, Portugal briefly granted New Christians the right to settle in Portugal’s overseas possessions.24 Additional New Christians came to the Petite Côte until 1610, when Philip II, king of the recently united Spain and Portugal, revoked the right of former Jews to leave Portugal.25 At Portudale in 1606, Father Barreira noted “a village of 100 Portuguese who follow the laws of Moses.”26 Some of these Jews had lived in Amsterdam after fleeing the Inquisition and had established ties with Dutch merchants.27 In Senegambia, many New Christians profited from the distance from Portuguese secular and religious authority to return to their ancestral religion. They maintained discretion, however, as Portuguese reprisals in response to their commerce with the Dutch were a constant threat.28 Hence, “Portuguese” Jews may well have been content to be perceived by outsiders as Christians.

The Jewish presence on the Petite Côte gradually diminished after the first quarter of the seventeenth century; but the number of “Portuguese” Christians whose religion was mixed with African rituals increased over time. References describe both Africanized “Portuguese” and Christianized Africans. In 1607, Father Barreira decried the presence in Sierra Leone of “Christian Blacks who . . . by contact with the heathen had so forgotten the obligations of our holy faith that either they possessed chinas29 themselves or they allowed their slaves to do so and they had dealings with these chinas and made them offerings.”30

There is a centuries-old tendency among non-Muslims in the Casamance and northern Guinea Bissau for each group to have its own religious shrines and rituals.31 The neighbors of the Luso-Africans clearly


understood “Portuguese” religion from an African perspective of “to each
his religion.” This is unwittingly indicated in a 1606 report by Father Bar-
reira that when the Bijoys “see images of Christ or of Our Lady, they call
them ‘white man’s china,’ or ‘Christians’ china.’”

Elsewhere, Barreira observed “Portuguese” “turned wild, whose very
way of life is more heathen than Christian, men who go many years with-
out sacraments or mass.” These individuals, merchants who lived in
coastal West African communities rather than among other Europeans,
were referred to as “tangonaos.”

Initially, the Luso-Africans’ religious affiliation called attention to
family ties and cultural connections to Europe. Yet if Christian identity
served to distinguish and differentiate its practitioners, this exclusivist
aspect was counterbalanced by the religion’s claims to universality, a stance
intimately tied to the missionary ideology that was an important factor in
Luso-African and African relations. Ironically, missionary activity served
to efface the very distinction the Christian religion created between mem-
bers of the “Portuguese” community and their African neighbors. When
the pitifully few Catholic priests sent to Senegambia converted members
of local African communities, the cultural boundaries between Luso-Afric-
ans and their neighbors became less clearly defined. A case in point may
be the Floup (Jola) village of Bolole, adjacent to S. Domingos, in present-
day Guinea-Bissau. By the late seventeenth century, many villagers had
Christian names; some may have converted. On an individual level,
conversion to Christianity, an important factor in cultural assimilation,
opened the possibility of further cultural transformations. In such cases,
conversion was a first step in the process of becoming “Portuguese.”

The final parameter that defined membership in the “Portuguese” com-
unities of the Senegambia and Guinea was material culture. The Luso-
Africans were identified by the distinctive architecture of their houses.
These houses had a vestibule at the entrance or, alternatively, were sur-
rounded by a veranda or porch, known as an alpainted. The dwellings
were rectangular, and their exterior walls were whitened either with a
wash of clay or with lime. Along the coast from Senegal to Bissau, this
style came to be called architecture à la portugaise. Indeed, the sobriquet
was employed in the eighteenth century for buildings as far away as the
island of Réunion. “Portuguese”-style dwellings were ideally suited both
to the climate and to the Luso-Africans’ role as commercial middlemen.
The owner could receive traveling merchants in the vestibule. A clear de-
scription of the style, together with an illustration of its function, is pro-
vided by La Courbe in 1685. As he traveled south from the Gambia River,
he was welcomed by a signare: “She received us most civilly in a Por-
tuguese-style house, which is to say having walls of whitened earth and a
small vestibule in front of the entry where we were seated upon mats, in
the fresh air.” Architectural style could, of course, readily be appropri-
ated by neighboring populations. It is significant that the sobriquet “mai-
"sous à la portugaise" does not necessarily indicate that this building style originated either in Portugal or among the Luso-Africans. Rather, the spread of architectural elements both from "Portuguese" to Africans and from Africans to "Portuguese" was characteristic of public and vernacular architecture in the Gambia-Bissau region from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

Each of the defining characteristics of the "Portuguese" community could be shared by members of adjacent populations. The more isolated a Luso-African community became from the Cape Verde Islands and from the few centers of Luso-African population on the coast, the greater the likelihood that its members would lose their culturally defined distinctiveness. Consequently, identity transformations in both directions were undoubtedly rather common. Just as "Portuguese" and their descendants could become, for instance, Manding, so too individual Africans could become "Portuguese." The isolation of smaller Luso-African communities increased after about 1700 as the Portuguese mercantile economy continued to weaken. It is precisely under such conditions of isolation and impending loss of cultural specificity, however, that one might expect the "Portuguese" most emphatically to assert the exclusivity of those few cultural markers they could control.

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Luso-African communities along the Upper Guinea Coast were closely linked to the Cape Verde Islands by seaborne commerce. From the early sixteenth century, Islanders carried out extensive trade with the mainland, from the Petite Côte to Sierra Leone. In 1582, Andrade wrote that along the entire coast from Sierra Leone to S. Domingos, "There are many Portuguese who carry out trade with the Negroes of the land and send out the ships and armaments that go to the island [of Santiago]." At trading centers along the Rio Grande, as many as twenty or thirty ships might be seen trading for ivory, gold, and slaves from the interior.

Andrade's report is confirmed by the more detailed observations of the Cape Verdan trader André Donelha, whose account, written about 1625, was based upon firsthand knowledge of the coast obtained primarily in the decade before 1585. Donelha, a member of the mercantile elite of Santiago, was probably Cape Verdan by birth and, according to José da Silva Horta, he may have been mulatto. Donelha described lança-dos—both Christians and Jews—living among the Wolofs of the Petite Côte.

Both Donelha and Almada present a nuanced picture of the complex relations that prevailed between the Cape Verde Islands and the mainland. This situation was characterized by two-way migration of individuals and by an active process of cultural interaction and borrowing between the various Portuguese groups and their African trading partners,
as well as a continuing process of intermarriage between Cape Verdians, Africans, and the descendants of the lançados.

Two Sapes rulers from Sierra Leone exemplify cultural assimilation and, perhaps, ethnic transformation. Donelha recounts that these rulers had fled the Mane Invasion in about 1550. The daughter of one king became a Christian and moved to Santiago. During the 1583 famine, however, she returned to Guinea. A son of the other ruler also converted, taking the name Ventura. During the 1583 famine, Ventura also returned to the mainland near Cacheu, where he and his fellow Sapes refugees established their own settlement. Almada describes their community: "They live together in a separate section of the town, with a king... a Christian called Ventura de Siqueira. He can read and write, as he was brought up in Santiago Island. All the other Blacks of this settlement are Christians and he has all the babies who are born there baptized." The movement of individuals back and forth, both between the physical spaces of Sierra Leone, S. Domingos, and the Cape Verdean island of Santiago, and, more significantly, between the cultural spaces of African, lançado, and Cape Verdean "Portuguese" society suggests a crucially important characteristic of mainland Luso-African society: it was not firmly bounded, nor was it exclusionist with regard to those of African origin. Rather, at the margins, Luso-African culture was open to individual assimilation.

The Portuguese maintained an active commercial role in the flourishing Gambia River trade in the 1620s, in spite of growing competition from other European nations. The most important Portuguese trading center in the Gambia was Casăo, located sixty leagues upstream from the ocean, on the north bank of the Gambia River. There, Donelha, writing of his own trading experience at the end of the sixteenth century, reported, "I found many well-known tangomasos." The tangomasos traded with Manding merchants, "the best traders in Guinea." These Muslims, or bixiis, sometimes traveled as far as S. Domingos and the Rio Grande.

The free movement of individuals to Sierra Leone, Rio S. Domingos, and Casăo linked the Cape Verde islands to the coast. At Casăo, Donelha found nine ships (likely from Santiago). In this trading town, Donelha came upon Gaspar Vaz, a tailor whom he had known in Santiago as the slave of his neighbor. At the time they met in Casăo, Vaz was wearing Muslim robes. Vaz, observing Donelha’s discomfort, took him aside and, lifting his robe, disclosed a crucifix around his neck. Then he assured the Cape Verdean that once he became sandegil, or chief of the local trading community, he would reassert his underlying Christian faith. Thereupon, Donelha and he became trading partners. Vaz may in fact have understood his Cape Verdean counterpart better than Donelha understood him.

The two men quickly established a close commercial relationship. Vaz served as Donelha’s host and facilitated his guest’s commercial ventures. He helped Donelha purchase merchandise at the prevailing price for ex-
changes between Manding traders rather than at the significantly higher prices they charged the tangomans.⁴ It is not evident from Donelha’s account precisely how Vaz had come to be a slave in Santiago or how he reestablished his earlier, elevated social status in The Gambia. For in addition to being a tailor and a merchant, Vaz claimed to be the nephew of the sandégil (satigi) of Casão (a term Donelha translates as “duke”).⁵

It is clear that Gaspar Vaz—like Ventura, the son of the exiled Sierra Leonean king—was able to move back and forth between Cape Verdean “Portuguese” and African societies. When he returned to The Gambia, he brought with him professional skills that he had refined in Santiago. He spoke Portuguese, which enabled him to serve as interpreter for Donelha and, presumably, for other visiting merchants. Vaz, like Ventura, was able to navigate in the social and economic spaces of two cultures.⁶ In the process, these men undoubtedly served as conduits for the transmission of cultural traits between “Portuguese” and African society.

In early-seventeenth-century Sierra Leone, too, European traders relied on individuals who, by their economic and cultural position, served as a bridge between European, “Portuguese,” and African society. Dierck Ruiters mentions two such traders, one named Mathew Fernandos and the other Francisco Mendes.⁷ Even contemporary descriptions do not always clearly indicate whether such men as these were Luso-African or African. Indeed, the distinction was probably blurred.

Material culture in Casão reflected extensive intercultural contact. The remarkable architecture there attracted Donelha’s attention. Most houses were round and made of whitewashed adobe bricks, although a few were rectangular.⁸ In a subsequent passage Donelha describes the courthouse, or tribunal, which, in addition to having a two-story elevation and whitewashed brick walls, was rectangular.

It is noteworthy that in late-sixteenth-century Casão, the tribunal and the houses associated with the sandégil—the preeminent expressions, respectively, of public and private architectural space in this Manding community—incorporated the elements that Europeans would later associate with Luso-African vernacular architecture. Some elements of the “Portuguese” style probably developed independently among both West African and European builders as logical responses to the challenge of constructing houses that would provide a cool interior in a hot climate. But Donelha’s description of Casão suggests that Mande public architecture served as an important source of inspiration for the development of the “Portuguese” style of domestic architecture.

Gaspar Vaz personifies the fluidity of ethnic identity on the Upper Guinea Coast in the sixteenth century. He traded with Luso-African merchants. He had lived in the Cape Verde Islands and he spoke Portuguese; in addition, as his name indicates, he was a Christian (at least when not in Casão). As a (sometime) Christian in Mande society, his position was
highly unusual." One has the impression that Vaz switched identities almost as readily as he switched robes. He and others of comparable stature who likewise lived in both African and Portuguese society served as conduits through whom elements of material culture were exchanged between the two societies. In The Gambia and Bissau in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, architectural style, like religion and language, reflected the extensive contact that linked the populations of the region.

AN INDIGENOUS MODEL OF IDENTITY FORMATION

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Luso-African identity was consistent with the historically fluid and contextually defined manner in which ethnic identity was established throughout the Gambia-Bissau region before the colonial period. The history of ethnic identities in West Africa has attracted significant scholarly attention in recent years. Jean-Loup Amselle's seminal 1990 study, Logiques métissées: Anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs, articulated the position that fixed ethnic groups or categories—les ethnies—were the invention of colonial administrators and ethnologists. The effect of colonial officials' work was to rigidify and thereby transform preexisting identities. Often, as in the case of the "Bamana," a purely descriptive toponym was transformed into a race, or an ethnic group.

More recently, historians have turned their attention to the history and the nature of identities elsewhere in the savanna and in the forestland of the Upper Guinea Coast. These studies provide mounting evidence that throughout this geographical space, precolonial identities were complex and fluid. In their introduction to a series of articles in Mande Studies, Mirjam De Brujin and Han van Dijk argue that "from the perspective of mobility... ethnicity becomes something fluid, a creation arising out of the interaction with others and thus something without clear borders." Allen Howard, in an accompanying article, articulates the position that "ethnicity is situational and relational." Drawing on his own work with Mande and Fulbe identities in Sierra Leone, he concludes that "Mande and Fulbe have repeatedly differentiated and merged in various ways in particular contexts." Individuals of Fulbe and other backgrounds could become Mande through intermarriage and by becoming traders.

In his contribution to the same volume of Mande Studies, Martin Klein cogently argues that "the savannah zone of West Africa is marked by intermixture of ethnic groups." Identity changes were consummated by the adoption of new names and a new genealogy. Klein enumerates multiple instances where Serers and Wolofs interacted, eventually assuming shared identities. In Wolof and Serer society, he argues, "movement was easier between states than across the rather rigid lines between castes
and orders.” The historical fluidity of identity leads Klein to ask, “Was Saluum a Wolof or a Serer state?”

The region of Cacheu, too, as Eve Crowley demonstrates, was characterized by a complex mixture of cultural and linguistic traits. There, “an unusually fluid social structure . . . facilitated the incorporation of temporary and permanent guests.” Crowley’s observations about Cacheu are supported by Walter Hawthorne’s work among the neighboring Balantas. He observes that some Balantas intermarried with Manding neighbors to create a new identity, one “neither Balanta nor Manding.” Writing about nineteenth-century Guinea-Bissau as a whole, Joshua Forrest observes “the relatively malleable, multiple-identity character of ethnic group formation.”

Throughout the Senegambia and Cacheu region of Guinea, as the work of these scholars shows, movement across ethnic frontiers was a widespread phenomenon. The resultant incorporation of individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds was characteristic both of local communities and of states. Among the African populations of the Gambia-Casamance region, even today, oral traditions reflect a long and complex history of migration and of identity transformations. In this matrix of local identity, identities have historically been fluid and individuals have often held multiple identities.

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Senegambia, the permeable nature of “Portuguese” identity reflected the fact that many of the lançados and their descendents had married local African women. Luso-Africans maintained an understanding of group membership based essentially on cultural characteristics, and this facilitated the assimilation into “Portuguese” society both of filhos da terra and, as is suggested by the lives of people like Vaz and Ventura, of individual creolized African men and women.

I argue that sixteenth-century “Portuguese” and other Senegambian peoples illustrate a process of identity formation that does not accord with the standard bipolar (or “us/then”) model. I find remarkably few indications that sixteenth-century “Portuguese” had recourse to a sense of boundaries in establishing and maintaining their community or that they discouraged assimilation into their society. Implicit contrasts certainly existed (free men versus slaves; Christians versus Muslims). Yet even here the boundaries were fluid (Vaz was evidently both slave and noble, Christian and Muslim). Boundaries were not fixed indicators of the “otherness” of neighboring populations. In this respect, Luso-Africans appear to represent a model of identity formation that one might term a nonstandard model.

Luso-African identity construction stands in contrast to Barth’s bipolar model of identity formation. Where Barth, focusing on “the boundaries that define groups,” rightly observes that boundaries persist in spite of the movement of individuals across them, he overstates—or over-
schematizes—the distinction between group members and others when he writes of “a dichotomization of others as strangers.” Not all boundaries are alike; some are more permeable than others. One is led if not to deny that coastal Luso-Africans conceptualized “otherness” in the construction of their own sense of being “Portuguese,” then at least to suggest that this sense of the “other” played a relatively circumscribed role in creating their images of who they were.

As the growing body of ethnographic and historical literature on the Upper Guinea Coast demonstrates, Luso-Africans constructed their identity or identities in a manner that conformed with Senegambian culture. This model of identity formation—flexible, malleable, and based on cultural and socioeconomic factors—is characteristic of the manner in which local societies along the Upper Guinea Coast perceived themselves. To posit a simple bipolar model is to overlook the fact that the “Portuguese” were closely related culturally and physically to their African neighbors—at times they were virtually indistinguishable from them—and that individuals could move back and forth between Luso-African and African society. A bipolar model presumes a later, essentially Western, approach to identity, one that is not appropriate for the sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century Upper Guinea Coast.

In this respect, seventeenth-century Senegambian society was similar to Creole society in the New World. Writing about both the French Caribbean islands and Chesapeake society in the first half of the seventeenth century, Ira Berlin notes “the fluidity of colonial society, the ill-defined meaning of slavery, and the ambiguous notions of race.” Caribbean Creole communities, where “the lines between free and slave, black and white were porous,” did indeed, as Berlin observes, follow a West African model of cultural identity. Berlin further observes that Black people in the Chesapeake did not themselves begin to emphasize their separateness from “those who would deny their birthright” until the imposition of rigid social and racial categories.” Here, too, one may observe a parallel to the situation of the Luso-Africans in Senegambia, who only began to define themselves in terms of what they were not as a response to the imposition of rigid identity categories.

THE LATE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEEN CENTURIES: THE “PORTUGUESE” REDEFINED

During the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, three significant historical developments had a profound impact on Luso-African communities, affecting not only their economic livelihood but also the manner in which they defined their individual and group identity. The first factor was the rapid expansion of commercial competition by Dutch, French, and English trading companies. Portuguese commercial ascendancy along
the Petite Côte and the Lower Gambia was only a memory by the time the French captured Senegal’s Gorée Island from the Dutch in 1677. In The Gambia, English commercial dominance may be roughly dated to the capture of James Island in 1661. Second, these Europeans, several of whom left written accounts, brought with them a conception of identity that contrasted with the fluid, culturally based sense of identity characteristic of the “Portuguese” and their West African neighbors. Finally, outside of Bissau, Cacheu, and The Gambia, Luso-Africans, deprived of their economic base and increasingly isolated from the Cape Verde Islands, began to lose the cultural traits that had been the foundation of their identity.

These developments had several consequences: many smaller, isolated “Portuguese” trading settlements south of Bissau and along the Petite Côte disappeared as their inhabitants either left or were assimilated into neighboring African cultures. The more remote Luso-African communities that survived seem to have gradually altered the manner in which they defined their identity in order to stress their distinctiveness from their African neighbors. Along the Petite Côte, for example, religion took on an increasingly important role as a marker of cultural difference. Finally, the “Portuguese” in The Gambia and Bissau were brought into the European discourse on identity.

“Portuguese” responses to this challenge are not directly recorded by Luso-African chroniclers; the last important Cape Verdean source is Lemos Coelho, dated circa 1684. One can nevertheless partially reconstruct their side of the confrontation between contrasting discourses on identity by means of careful comparison and interpretation of European sources.

A distinction between European and Luso-African parameters of identity is already evident in some early-seventeenth-century sources. In 1620 in The Gambia, English traveler Richard Jobson observed

another people . . . as they call themselves, Portingales, and some few of them seem the same; others of them are Molatoes . . . but the most part as black as the natural inhabitants. . . . They do generally employ themselves in buying . . . commodities . . . still reserving carefully the use of the Portingall tongue and with a kind of affectionate zeal, the name of Christian, taking it a great disdain, be they never [sic] so black, to be called a Negro."

For Jobson, the salient characteristic of the Luso-Africans was their skin color, which did not coincide with his own conception of what European Portuguese should look like. At the same time, his rather indulgent tone—“affectionate zeal”—betrays no strongly negative reaction to their self-identification. In fact, Jobson cites three criteria widely accepted by the “Portuguese” themselves as defining their Luso-African identity: their profession, their language, and their religion. This suggests that the Englishman may have been aware of the importance of these parameters in
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defining who was “Portuguese” and even who was “white.” As for the “Portuguese,” the refusal to accept the label “Negro” or “Black” would remain central to their sense of identity for over 200 years.

In 1685, La Courbe expressed the conviction that a people who were not white could not, a priori, be Portuguese. He described the Luso-Africans in The Gambia as “certaines nègres et mulâtres qui se disent Portugais, par ce qu’ils sont issus de quelques Portugais qui y ont habité autrefois” [certain Negroes and mulattoes who call themselves Portuguese because they are descended from some Portuguese who formerly lived there]. The Frenchman shows a more judgmental attitude (‘who call themselves Portuguese’) than did Jobson.

Significantly more pejorative was Jacques Le Maires 1695 definition of the Luso-Africans of the Petite Côte:

a species of Portuguese, people who refer to themselves this way because they used to serve, and are descended from, those who first lived along this coast. . . . From the Negresses whom they married, were born these mulattoes, from whom in turn came even darker ones.41

Dark skin is here associated with lower status; it reflects, in Le Maire’s view, a presumed heritage of servitude. The association of skin color with social inferiority undoubtedly reflects the growing influence of the Atlantic slave trade, which in turn influenced European attitudes about race.

Eighteenth-century European descriptions of Luso-Africans betray a progressively more negative judgment, frequently tinged with irony or sarcasm. The English factor in The Gambia, Francis Moore, whose extensive contact with Luso-Africans during his 1732 stay seems not to have engendered much respect for them, described the “Portuguese” as speaking “a sort of bastard Portuguese language.”42 Moore refers presumably to a form of Creole, but in a manner that conceptualizes a cultural equivalent to the physical mixture of Portuguese and Manding, whose result was that “they are now very near as Black as [the Africans].”43 His ironic view of the Luso-Africans is expressed bluntly: “They reckon themselves still as well as if they were actually white.”44 To Moore, light skin color confers elevated standing. In his construction, complexion serves—and this is significant—as the primary marker of identity. Moore’s words were cited almost verbatim by Thomas Astley in a 1745 compilation of travel narratives. Astley’s compendium, which also cites Jobson and Labat (who plagiarized La Courbe), reflects the spread in England of a popular image of Luso-Africans. This image clearly contests both their identity and the criteria with which the “Portuguese” based their sense of self: “Nothing angers them more than to be called Negroes. This proceeds from their not understanding the true meaning of the word, which they use only for slaves.”45 A generation later, John Mathews, traveling among the isolated descendents of Luso-African traders in the Rio Pongo, voiced an even more sarcastic and pejorative image of the “Portuguese”: “The principal
people call themselves Portuguese . . . though they do not retain the smallest trace of European extraction; but having had a white man once in the family is sufficient to give them the appellation. They also profess the Roman Catholic religion . . . yet the most enlightened among them are merely nominal Christians.” 99 Not only is Mathews’s conception of identity based on physical characteristics, but these traits determine status in a hierarchical order in which to be European is to be superior. The connection Moore implied between physical appearance and level of cultural development is here made explicit. Furthermore, religion, specifically the Luso-Africans’ departure from European Christian norms, becomes a measure of “Portuguese” decadence, commensurate with the darkening of their complexion over the generations.

The origins of the Luso-Africans’ use of “white” and “black” may be traced to the sixteenth century. 98 Almada uses the term “black” to refer to Africans and “white” to refer to “Portuguese” and Cape Verdians. His use of the terms likely reflects attitudes about color prevalent in late-sixteenth-century Portugal. 99 At the same time, however, Almada’s terminology does not follow a simple binary oppositional model, and it transforms the pre-existing Iberian terminology. Already in the sixteenth century, Cape Verdean society was widely intermarried; Almada himself was apparently a mulatto. 99 Nevertheless, he places himself in the category “white.” That his family belonged to the Island elite and that they owned slaves suggests that “white” and “black” referred not to skin color but, at least in part, to social class.

A sense of the Luso-Africans’ early use of color terminology can also be inferred from Jobson’s observation that they objected, “be they never so black,” to being called “Negroes.” 99 To the “Portuguese,” many of whom were professional slave traders, “Negro” meant “slave.” As social status remained relatively fluid in southern Senegambia in the seventeenth century, the distinction between free and slave did not imply the adoption of a rigid system of identity categories by the “Portuguese.”

A century after Jobson, Francis Moore’s 1732 observation confirms the association of social status with the terms “white” and “black.” And in 1818, at the Luso-African trading community of Geba in present-day Guinea-Bissau, Gaspard Mollien observed “blacks and mulattoes who are nevertheless called white, because all who are free claim this title.” 99 From the late sixteenth to the nineteenth century, one perceives a consistent system of ascribed meaning, whereby “white” implies both social status (slave trader, free man) and references to cultural and blood ties to Portugal. 99

In this system of meanings, there exist similarities to the language of identity of the Maures of southern Mauritania. There, as James Webb has demonstrated, the term “white”—bidan—implied not skin color but rather cultural identity and social status; they were free. 99 Like the “Por-
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John Mathews's reference to “merely nominal Christians” elicits the question, What was the nature of Luso-African religion in remote areas at the end of the eighteenth century? The syncretic nature of nineteenth-century Luso-African religious rituals in Guinea-Bissau is the subject of George Brooks's case study of All Souls' Day.9 Analogous syncretism in day-to-day practices may be observed in late-eighteenth-century Sierra Leone, where Swedish naturalist Adam Afzelius described a characteristic instance of religious syncretism in 1795. Near Freetown, Afzelius witnessed the poison ordeal of a man who had been accused of witchcraft. The principal accuser was an elderly merchant named Domingos. Domingos had a vested interest in the outcome of this trial, for those individuals found guilty were sold into slavery and he, not coincidentally, was the main slave trader in the region. The old man was fluent in Portuguese, and he prayed every day using a Portuguese missal.99 In addition, he always wore a string of prayer beads given to him by a Portuguese priest, and “he [had] expressed great concern that for some years past he had seen no priest. . . . He has left orders that as soon as he dies, two slaves shall be sent to Santiago to a priest there, who may intercede for him.”

Domingos was one of the few remaining Luso-Africans along this part of the coast. During the poison ordeal, some local Temnes placed their gris-gris on the ground as a public invocation in order to ensure a guilty verdict. Then Domingos, “not being satisfied with the Timany Grisgris, or thinking them not powerful enough, let his own Portuguese Grisgris be brought forward and put near to the former.” Notwithstanding this intercession and the prayers of Domingos, the accused survived his ordeal and was found innocent.

This incident illustrates several points about the Christianity of Domingos. His use of the prayer beads demonstrates a local West African ritual emphasis on instrumentality; the gris-gris served the specific function of achieving desired ends. The fact that Domingos was actively involved in witchcraft trials also strongly suggests that he had assimilated
an important aspect of local metaphysical concepts concerning the interrelationship of the physical and spiritual realms. The diminished ritual and metaphysical distance separating Domingos from his Temne neighbors did not, however, deter him from using his Christianity as an important identity marker. His religion evoked ties (religious, economic, and cultural) to the Cape Verde Islands, where a priest would pray for his soul after his demise.

THE "PORTUGUESE" RESPONSE: IDENTITY DEFENDED ON THE PETITE CÔTE

Eighteenth-century Europeans articulated a view of “Portuguese” identity that was based on a priori characteristics, primarily skin color, rather than upon cultural traits. Luso-Africans were forced to respond to this ascribed identity at a moment when their increasing isolation was eroding the cultural markers upon which their own sense of identity had been based. In response to the intrusion of an a priori identity model, they began to articulate a more assertive self-identification; consequently, an important change ensued in their self-conceptualization. Precisely because the dominant European model denied their distinctiveness from other African populations, the “Portuguese” came increasingly to define themselves by reference to who or what they were not.

An illustration of this process may be seen among the Luso-Africans of the Petite Côte. There, 200 years of Dutch and French commercial dominance had largely isolated the remaining “Portuguese.” By the nineteenth century, the Jewish community had disappeared, and the remnants of the “Portuguese” at Joal in The Gambia based their identity upon an oppositional model. They distinguished themselves from their Serer (Serere) neighbors on the basis of religion and “color.” These “Portuguese” no longer spoke either Portuguese or Creole, yet they continued to give their children Portuguese names and they resolutely continued to call themselves Christians. And as the Abbé Boilat explained, they steadfastly maintained that they were white:

Although they are as black as the purest black Africans, they make the most claim to be pure whites, and it is a great insult to consider them Negroes or Serers. They want to be called the whites of Joal, the Christians of Joal, because they are the direct descendants of the Portuguese. . . . Succinctly stated, to be Christian is to be white; to be white is to be free. For these Luso-Africans, to call themselves “blanc” was specifically to differentiate themselves from other local populations. To be white was to be nonslave, recalling that their ancestors had been slave traders. Although their distinctiveness no longer resided in a unique Luso-African culture, the loss of cultural and physical markers of separation did not diminish their status and identity.

Their response was one of oppositional assertiveness and a defense of their identity.

The “Portuguese” identity was based on the priori characteristics of skin color, rather than cultural traits, as articulated by eighteenth-century Europeans. Luso-Africans were forced to respond to this identity at a moment when their increasing isolation was eroding the cultural markers upon which their own sense of identity had been based. In response to the intrusion of an a priori identity model, they began to articulate a more assertive self-identification; consequently, an important change ensued in their self-conceptualization. Precisely because the dominant European model denied their distinctiveness from other African populations, the “Portuguese” came increasingly to define themselves by reference to who or what they were not.
their sense that they constituted a discrete group. Their dual identity—
"être chrétien, c'est être blanc"—implicitly required the existence of its
opposite number: non-Christian and black, a classical bipolar model of
identity formation.

The formation in Joal of an exclusivist "Portuguese" identity differed,
however, from the later process whereby, under the impetus of colonial ad-
ministrators and ethnologists, "ethnic" boundaries were established and
subsequently accepted by the Africans themselves. The redefinition of
Luso-African identity took place essentially before the colonial period.
Furthermore, the "Portuguese" had borne the brunt of the precolonial Eu-
ropean discourse on identity, which largely spared other Senegambian peo-
ple. The reason for this is clear: only the "Portuguese," whose very exist-
ence was testimony to cultural and physical assimilation between Africans
and Europeans, posed an ontological challenge to European identity
which was based on the premise of a non-white, non-European "other" by
the time of the Enlightenment.

Groups that do not fit comfortably into any single category, or those
whose members may lay claim to one category while the outside society
assoces them to a different one, are a focal point for particularly intense
contestation. The existence of such ambiguous or liminal groups may call
into question the entire categorical structure. To apply the label "Portu-
guese" to the dark-skinned descendents of the Luso-Africans would have
had direct implications for the broader, socially constructed category into
which the group was to be situated. By denying the Luso-Africans' self-
definition, eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century observers were defend-
ing what subsequently evolved into a racially based definition of peoples
and cultures. In order to maintain their sense that they constituted a dis-
crete group, the "Portuguese" were forced to adopt a model that stressed
their differences from their African neighbors.

With this historical development, religion became the crucial param-
eter by which Luso-African communities defined themselves. Whereas in
the sixteenth century, missionary activity had stressed the universality of
the Christian faith, by the early nineteenth century, Christianity had be-
come, for the "Portuguese," both an exclusivist and a marker of the
boundary between themselves and other Africans.

Amanda Sackur observes that "the creole identity ... required defini-
tion against two competing 'others': Europeans and Africans." I would
argue that until the eighteenth century, this was not the case. However, for
the nineteenth century, Sackur is quite correct. The need to redefine them-
selves in a manner that emphasized their distance from other African so-
cieties led the "Portuguese" to an exclusivist approach to their religion.

In 1846, when the Abbé Boilat visited the fishing village of Joal, he
found that the villagers defined themselves as Christians, although local
religious practices were then an amalgam of Christian prayer (the two el-
ders who led communal prayers knew only the "Ave Maria") and local
rituals. One powerful shrine, called haton, attracted clientele from Saint-Louis, the Isle of Gorée, and The Gambia, while the spirit of another powerful shrine, named Mamangué, had formerly appeared in broad daylight in the guise of a uniformed naval officer.86

Despite their Africanized religious practices, the people of Joal were distinguished by their religion from the surrounding populations. Non-Christian neighbors who wished to be baptized and whose parents were either Muslims or “idołàres” had to pay the price of one iron bar.89 The distinction between Christian and non-Christian was religiously maintained. In Joal, no parent would permit their offspring to marry a non-Christian:

In practice, none of the inhabitants of Joal would ever . . . allow their children to marry the children of the neighboring village, because the latter are fetisists [sic]. They would never permit a Muslim or a fetisist to be buried on their land.89

Ultimately, it was by means of the creation of ritual prohibitions—against marriage with non-Christians and against the burial of outsiders in the local cemetery—that the people of Joal were able to give concrete expression to their distinctive identity. Christianity was thus central to that identity, which was based upon an oppositional relation between Christians and everybody else, including both Muslims and “idołàres.” Boilat, himself a missionary, also observed that this attitude led the people of Joal to oppose missionary activity among their non-Christian Serer neighbors.90 The Christians of Joal thus exhibited an exclusivist approach both to religion and to identity, an approach diametrically opposed to that of the early Luso-Africans.

LUSO-AFRICANS ON THE EVE OF
THE COLONIAL ERA

A somewhat different attitude toward religion prevailed among the nineteenth-century “Portuguese” of the Casamance region, just south of The Gambia. Like the inhabitants of Joal, the “Portuguese” of Ziguinchor, a trading center on the south bank of the Casamance River, asserted a Christian identity. As with the “Portuguese” of Joal, the inhabitants of Ziguinchor had assimilated elements of local religious practice. The emphasis placed by their Floup neighbors on instrumentality, on the use of protective charms (called “hubenben” or “husukub” in the Jola language),10 found a close parallel in the “Portuguese” use of Christian medals: “All the inhabitants call themselves Christians, although they fulfill none of the obligations of this religion. . . . They deeply venerate images, medallions, and [medals of] Christ, to which they ascribe the power to protect them from all accidents.”11
Unlike the inhabitants of Joal, however, the “Portuguese” of Ziguinchor maintained religious interaction with their non-Christian Floup neighbors. In the early nineteenth century, the “Portuguese” sold some of these Christian charms to the Floup. This commerce is reminiscent of the commercial activities of Muslim marabouts. Since the Floup, too, had faith in the power of Christian medals, the Portuguese carried out a thriving trade, exchanging crucifixes for slaves. The “Portuguese” community of Ziguinchor, more numerous and less isolated from other “Portuguese” than the Luso-African settlement of Joal, could maintain such interaction with their neighbors without losing their cultural identity.

It is significant that although numerous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French and English narrators questioned “Portuguese” identity, members of local African communities continued to accept the Luso-Africans’ self-identification. In their interactions with African traders, nineteenth-century Luso-Africans continued to be identified by profession, religion, and, to a lesser degree, by material culture. Muslim merchants from as far away as the Mande heartland in present-day Mali understood that their “Portuguese” counterparts maintained their own religion. To Muslim traders, religion was a primary marker of “Portuguese” identity. Just as to be a Juula was to be a professional trader and a Muslim, so to be “Portuguese” was to be a trader and a Christian. Mungo Park reported that he met a wealthy salt trader along the Niger “who had traveled to Rio Grande and spoke very highly of the Christians.” Although Europeans were often skeptical of the Luso-Africans’ religious affiliation, the Muslims with whom they did business identified the “Portuguese” primarily as Christians.

To some African trading partners, material culture, too, appears to have remained one of the markers of “Portuguese” identity. In 1850, the French explorer Hyacinthe Hecquard described a “Portuguese” Christian who was a respected merchant and architect in the Futa Jalon. The man, named Wolli, had constructed the interior of the mosque at Timbo. That this “Portuguese” Christian, who reportedly had lived for many years in the Futa, was entrusted with such a project reflects the respect with which he was regarded by his Muslim peers. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African trading partners continued to view the Luso-Africans according to long-established parameters of identity that were common to both the Upper Guinea Coast and the Mande diaspora.

Historical sources for Senegambia and northern Guinea-Bissau afford the unique opportunity to trace 250 years of changing discourse on “Portuguese” identity. Challenged by Europeans’ denial of their identity, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Luso-Africans were forced to redefine themselves. Contact with a model of identity based on a priori physical characteristics led the Luso-Africans to move from a local discourse
marked by flexible and inclusive identities to a more rigid paradigm based on an oppositional and exclusivist understanding of identity. This historical process constitutes the earliest documented confrontation between West African and European models of identity. It also serves as prologue to the widespread imposition of more rigid ethnic categories during the colonial period.
"The People There Are Beginning to Take on English Manners": Mixed Manners in Seventeenth- and Early-Eighteenth-Century Gambia

Precolonial West African trading centers were characterized by complex and often intimate relations between Africans, Europeans, and Afro-Europeans. These relations were reflected in the manners and customs of local populations. Since etiquette and manners directly concerned merchants who visited these communities, customs often figure prominently in accounts written by visiting European traders. These detailed descriptions of local manners portray a microcosm of social relations in coastal communities as early as the seventeenth century. On the basis of these accounts, it is possible to reconstruct and analyze intergroup relations and patterns of cultural assimilation between members of different groups.

One region of early and sustained commercial contact between local African populations, European merchants, and locally settled Luso-Africans was the lower Gambia River and the adjacent mouths of the Casamance River, Rio Cacheu, and Rio Geba to the south. By 1700, these waterways had been part of the Atlantic trade for more than two centuries. Trading centers along each of these rivers were home to Luso-African communities and were frequented by European merchants. Local society was characterized by extensive commercial and cultural interaction; intermarriage further facilitated the movement of individuals back and forth among African communities and between African and Luso-African society. Indeed, the many different groups that lived in this region, which included Manding, Bagnuns, Papels, Manjaks, Floupas, and Luso-Africans, were not clearly bounded. Free movement of cultural traits and of identities typified this zone of extensive long-distance commerce. Individual identities were extremely fluid, and cultural characteristics were extensively shared among the different peoples. The result was an extraordinary degree of cultural admixture and assimilation.
In the late seventeenth century, three trading centers along and adjacent to the lower Gambia River—Albreda, Geregia, and Vintang—exhibited diverse forms of cultural mixing to a degree that may have been unusual even for the Upper Guinea Coast. Two specific aspects of local culture in these communities—religion and social etiquette—illuminate the open nature of the societies as well as their extraordinary diversity and extensive intercultural borrowings. These Lower Gambian communities are documented in narratives written by, or based upon the reports of, contemporary European and Cape Verdean merchants. Additional information referring to the nearby trading communities along the Rio de San Domingos and the Rio Grande complements the documentation of the Gambian communities, providing a more complete image of these multicultural trading centers.

The most detailed information about late-seventeenth-century trading communities in The Gambia, Casamance and, to a lesser degree, Cacheu is provided by Michel Jajolet de la Courbe’s account of an overland journey from Albreda to Cacheu that he made during his visit to Senegal from July 1686 to February 1687. La Courbe was inspector and, from 1689 to 1693, director of the French concessionary company in Senegal. The part of La Courbe’s manuscript describing the Casamance has been lost. This passage, however, formed the basis for Père Jean-Baptiste Labat’s travel narrative, which he plagiarized from La Courbe and falsely attributed to André Brue. Labat’s version, as Jean Bouletge has demonstrated, appears to provide a faithful copy of La Courbe’s description of Casamance peoples and villages.

I refer to the cultures and society of seventeenth-century Gambian trading centers as “mixed.” The term may be read as roughly equivalent to the French métis. “Mixed,” however, has the advantage of being free of the complex connotations that have grown up in French ethnography around the concept of métis. Recent French anthropological theory uses métissage to describe the formation of cultures that are the product of interaction and assimilation between two or more societies. This usage does not refer to the historical situation in seventeenth-century Lower Gambia. A problem with the concept of cultural métissage, however, is its lack of a consistent and clear definition. Métissage can connote many different processes. To group what may be disparate historical processes under the rubric of métissage culture is to risk presenting a false sense that these cases are the same. For example, in his highly stimulating, superbly documented, and detailed study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish-AmericanIndian-African interaction in Mexico, La Pensée Métisse, Serge Gruzinski refers to “les métissages” as if they constituted an objectifiable cultural process, implying by extension that “culture métisse” is likewise a category of culture that can be objectively defined. Gruzinski refines his use of the term “métissage” by means of synonyms or comparable terms, including “les mélanges,” “les brassages,” “adaptation,” “des mécanismes
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d'association et d'imbrication," and finally, "ces emprunts et ces appro-
pritions" [these borrowings and appropriations] that occur because they are
"dans l'air du temps" [in the air at the moment]. Ultimately, how-
ever, there is no specific and clearly defined definition of métissage. By
contrast, he uses "hybridation" to apply to mixtures that develop within
a single civilization. But since human civilizations are all the product of
prior and ongoing intercultural contact— that is, métissage—one fails to
see a fundamental distinction between "hybridation" and métissage.

In brief, métissage is a useful descriptive term but is of only limited use
as an analytical category. The vagueness of the concept limits its useful-
ness. Hence, in this chapter, I use the term only as a descriptive adjective,
akin to "mixed." Neither "métis" nor "mixed" is to be understood, as in
the pages that follow, as an analytical category.

In 1686, when Michel Jajolet de la Courbe visited the trading villages
of the Lower Gambia and then journeyed overland through the Cas-
amance to Cacheu, a century had passed since André Donelha's visit. The
cultural contact and assimilation described by Donelha and exemplified
in the person of his trading partner, the Manding–Cape Verdean Gaspar
Vaz,^ continued to characterize the elite in Gambian society. Men and
women like Vaz moved between African and Luso-African society, bring-
ing with them cultural traits that soon spread among the different groups
living in those trading centers.

The effects of a century of continuous interaction are clearly apparent
in La Courbe's account. The Lower Gambian trading communities that he
visited in 1686 represented more thorough cultural assimilation than
Casão had in 1585. Part of the difference may be due to the fact that Gre-
egia and Vintang had mixed Manding-Bagnun populations under Bagnun
political authority, whereas Casão in 1585 was a Manding community
under Manding authority. The more centralized and hierarchical nature
of Manding society very likely limited intercultural assimilation. How-
ever, the passage of a century of trade, intercultural contact, and result-
ant assimilation (e.g., Gaspar Vaz) had surely left its impact on the communi-
ties La Courbe visited.

Vintang Creek, which today is of virtually no economic significance,
was then an important commercial route. It was the northern terminus of
a north-south trading corridor that connected The Gambia to the fertile
Casamance and, south of that, to the slave-trading center of Cacheu. Vin-
tang Creek lay a league upstream from the French trading post at Alberda
and the nearby English fort at James Island. The English regularly sailed
up the creek as far as Vintang village. La Courbe describes his arrival by
boat:

This entire country, along the river, appeared to us quite beautiful; on the
right was the heavily forested kingdom of Fogny. . . . Bentam [Vintang] ap-
peared from a distance to be a rather large town; it is located on the slope of a hill, with many trees, and several Portuguese-style houses, which surpass those of the Blacks, looked like churches; but as we drew near, we recognized that all that was only made of thatch, except for those of the Portuguese, which were built of earth and covered with palm fronds as large as tablecloths."

A physical description of Vintang and Geregia is also provided by Francis Moore who, in 1732, was the Chief Factor for the English trading company in The Gambia:

The river Vintain [Vintang], whose mouth is about a mile out ... is navigable a great many leagues. About three leagues from the mouth is the town of Vintain, situated in Fonja [Fogny], and above that, on the same side of the river, is Geregia, at each of which places the Company have a factory, chiefly for elephants' teeth, bees-wax and other dry goods."

Moore further describes Geregia as "a small town ... inhabited by Portuguese and Banyoons [Bagnuns]." The town had already diminished in size and importance since La Courbe's visit fifty years before.

The size and wealth of Vintang and Geregia derived from commerce, the same factor that attracted their diverse populations. In addition to the "Portuguese" communities of Luso-African merchants, there was a large Manding population. Among the Manding were long-distance traders who provided commercial ties to the Upper Gambia and, very likely, to Kaabu, located to the southeast. In 1682, La Courbe's contemporary, the Portuguese merchant Francisco de Lemos Coelho, wrote that Vintang was "the best village on the river, having much trade in hides as well as in wax, ivory and blacks." The wax came from nearby Fogny in the Casamance, whereas the hides and ivory were available both near the coast and in the interior and were likely the product of local as well as long-distance trade. Slaves, too, were obtained in Fogny. La Courbe writes, for example, that the king of Fogny was frequently fighting the Floupas and that this warfare provided slaves to Vintang. But captives were also brought downriver from the Upper Gambia and perhaps also from Kaabu. For Jula merchants coming from the interior, Vintang would have been a convenient alternative market to Albreda.

At the end of the seventeenth century, Vintang was a thriving trading town where diverse groups and individuals encountered one another and intermingled. There, as in other Gambian centers of commerce, African, European, and Afro-European customs were mixed together, sometimes in a single family. In addition, all the major religious traditions of West Africa coexisted peacefully at Vintang. One might say that here, in the seventeenth century, was an early instance of mixed cultures.

At Vintang, La Courbe encountered a Spaniard who had settled and had married a daughter of the local ruler, the king of Geregia. This king also ruled over the populations of northern Fogny. He was a Bagnun and...
is described as an “idolâtre.” That is, he followed Bagnun rituals although, according to his son-in-law, he believed in God and might have become a Christian if not for political considerations.” The king’s daughter, however, was a Christian. Most of the “Portuguese” in the Vingtang area, on the other hand, were Jewish. The date of 1686 is late for the persistence of the Jewish faith among Senegambian “Portuguese”; nevertheless, corroboration appears in a contemporary account by Jacques Le Maire (1682), who asserted that the Luso-Africans of the Petite Côte were “partie Juifs, partie Catholiques.”

La Courbe did not mention a Manding presence at either Vingtang or Geregia. This is a difficult lapse to explain, especially as Lemos Coelho wrote in 1682 that “the majority of the people in the village are Mandingoes and they are Mohammedans.” Fifty years later, Francis Moore wrote that Vingtang “belongs to one of the emperors of Fonia . . . inhabited both by Portuguese and Mahometans, the latter having for their devotion a handsome mosque with an ostrich’s egg at the top.”

There were also many non-Muslim Africans, including Floup and Bagnuns. In this borderland area between the largely Manding Gambia and the Casamance with its culturally heterogeneous, politically decentralized population, there were frequent and ongoing identity changes between Bagnuns, Floup, and Manding. Local African identities were so fluid that it is misleading to speak of these three groups as entirely separate entities. Cultural traits, including religious rituals, were shared among Floup, Bagnuns, and, to a lesser extent, Manding.

A significant part of the northern Jola population of Buluf and Fogny today relates its ancestry, in part, to the Manding. At the end of the nineteenth century, some Manding migrated west and south into the Casamance, while some Jolas migrated as wage laborers or agricultural workers to The Gambia. Jola oral traditions, however, also tell of much earlier waves of Manding migration from Kaabu. While these traditions cannot be precisely dated, they clearly refer to a period before the seventeenth-century migration of Floup from Kasa north into Buluf.

Throughout Buluf, local traditions recount an ancient migration pattern from the region of Pakao in the east into Kasa, the Floup heartland south of the Casamance River. This early population movement is sometimes identified with an initial immigration westward from the Mande state of Kaabu, a process that occurred before the arrival in Buluf of the first Jola-speaking immigrants from Kasa. The latter migration occurred at least 350 years ago. As the Floup were well established in Kasa long before some of them migrated north across the Casamance River, the historical memory of Mande origins must refer to a period well before the seventeenth century.

For example, informants in Thionk-Essyl, the largest community in Buluf, maintain that the ancestors of those immigrants who long ago arrived from Kasa had in fact originated farther east at Kaour, in present-
day Pakao. Pakao was historically populated by Manding and Bagnun. The oey, the religious leader who was priest of the rain shrine, also originated in the east. The first oey is said to have been a Manding of the Mané family from Kaabu. Thus, this important Jola religious institution is associated with Manding origins.

Diola communities in southern Buluf, too, claim their origins in the east, specifically in Kaabu or in Pakao. Yet it would be misleading to posit that waves of Floup migrants arrived from the east and swept away or assimilated Bagnun inhabitants. Oral traditions tend to represent gradual processes of cultural transformation as abrupt movements of discrete groups. A more nuanced reading of these same traditions would suggest that what is actually represented is a continuous process of interaction among Mandé-, Bagnun-, and Jola-speakers. Implicit in this reading is a history of ongoing identity transformations. An awareness of this process is perhaps reflected in the interpretation offered by a local historian, Cherif Chamsedine Haidara, son of the Mauritanian cleric who first brought the Muslim religion to the Jolas. In his words, “The Jolas are said to come from the Bagnuns, who are said to come from the Manding.” As he discussed the early history of the Jolas, Haidara further observed that when the Bagnuns arrived in Buluf, “they began to become Jola.” This felicitous phrasing is, in fact, more accurate than an image of migration and conquest.

RELIGIOUS MIXING

Religion was a prominent aspect of mixed cultures at trading centers from The Gambia to Bissau. European merchants in the Vintang region included Portuguese and French Catholics and English Protestants. Indeed, there were representatives of all the religions that existed on the Upper Guinea Coast: Islam, Judaism, Catholic and Protestant Christianity, and African religions (Jola, Bagnun, Soninké). Significantly, however, seventeenth-century sources mention neither strife nor active proselytizing or competition between followers of the various sects. Peaceful coexistence seems to have characterized the extraordinary religious diversity of these trading communities in the Lower Gambia region. There is a certain irony to the Portuguese name “Geregia,” which may derive from “Heresia” [heretics], one might say that the town’s population was so diverse that no matter what one’s religious orientation, it was full of heretics.

In the Gambia-Casamance-Cacheu region, religious practices were characterized by the widespread sharing of shrines and their attendant rituals. In time of illness, even today, both Muslims and non-Muslims offer sacrifices at reputedly powerful Jola shrines. Elements of Muslim religion, too, were incorporated into local practices. A graphic example of such syncretism is the existence of an initiation mask covered with Arabic writing that invokes the name of God. This mask dates to the mid-eigh-
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The tenth century, long before the northern Jolas became Muslims. Likewise, in the early nineteenth century, non-Christian Flous sought Catholic amulets for protection against gunshots. In the seventeenth century, some southern Flous at Bolole had Christian names. It is conceivable that not only Christian charms but also some of the religion’s metaphysical concepts had already influenced individual Flous and Bagnouns. The Bagnun king of Gerega may have been influenced by such religious interaction.

Although seventeenth-century written sources do not afford a direct view of the impact of Christianity on local African ritual, there is strong indirect evidence that Christianity profoundly influenced some Africans who, nevertheless, did not convert. Following his overland journey from Vintang to Cacheu, La Courbe visited the Bissagos Islands. On the island of Cazegut, he met a wealthy local merchant. Not only had this man built for himself a “Portuguese”-style house but he had also constructed a chapel: “He invited us to enter a little church that was nearby, he rang the bell and told us that he himself had built the chapel, even though he was not a Christian, because he liked Christians.”

Perhaps this man was simply a brilliant businessman who knew how to make his European counterparts feel at home. But the chapel, complete with a bell to call to prayer, was probably not just a business investment. That this trader did not call himself a Christian means he was not baptized, perhaps because he was unwilling to give up that perk of wealthy Senegambians: many wives. He nevertheless had constructed a shrine where the most potent of Christian rituals, the Mass, could take place. In Guinea-Bissau today, powerful shrines from one society may be recreated or reproduced by members of other societies, thereby establishing a form of intercultural religious borrowing. It is conceivable that in like manner, this seventeenth-century trader, implicitly recognizing the spiritual power of Christian ritual, was attempting to gain access to the source of that power by building himself a Christian shrine. Christianity would thereby have exerted a profound impact on him, though he continued to follow his local religion. Nor was this merchant an isolated example. Other inhabitants of the Bissagos Islands were influenced by Christianity. For example, there were several chrétiens noirs who had been raised among the “Portuguese.”

For those who followed both Christian and non-Christian rituals, religious identity was quite flexible and contextually defined. Many Christians continued to offer ritual sacrifices at local shrines. Similarly, as Amanda Sackur notes, eighteenth-century Christians in Saint-Louis and on Gorée Island had recourse to Muslim and local rituals.

If some individuals followed both Christian and local rituals, others, like Gaspar Vaz had a century earlier, performed both Christian and Muslim prayers, depending on the context. La Courbe says of “certain Blacks and mulattos who call themselves Portuguese” that “most neither
pray nor offer sala while others do both; for when they are among the Negroes they perform sala, and when they see whites, they take their rosary and make like them.” The implication is that for individuals who followed ritual practices from more than one religious tradition, their choice of ritual tended to be contextually determined.

With regard to the assimilation of Christian rituals, one may ask who defined a “Christian.” There is evidence that some Africans who considered themselves Christian were not so viewed by the Portuguese priests at Bissau: “These good Fathers told me that it was almost impossible to convert these people; because when they were with Christians they attended Mass and they subsequently sacrificed to their idols or at least performed several other pagan ceremonies.”

Just as Africans could be more or less Christian while retaining more or less of their local religion, so too “Portuguese” Christians could become progressively Africanized. It is sometimes impossible to distinguish in the historical record between Africanized Christians and Christianized Africans. Upriver from Cacheu, for example, La Courbe learned that “all along the river from Cacheu to Farim were located, at intervals, villages inhabited by Portuguese gourmettes who traveled deep into the country to seek wax.” The term “gourmettes” generally refers in French sources to “black Christians.” In this passage, such a reading gives the meaning “black Christian Portuguese.” But La Courbe contrasts these “gourmettes portugais” to “les Portugais de Cacheu,” thereby implying that they are different. If the “gourmettes portugais” are not “Portuguese” but are nevertheless Christian, then they would seem to constitute an intermediate category in terms of culture and religious orientation. Are they Christianized Papels or Africanized lançados? The point is moot. In the seventeenth-century Gambia-Bissau region, individuals could not always be situated at a distinct point along the continuum describing religious orientation.

**RELIGION, PROFESSION, AND IDENTITY**

The complexity and intimacy of cultural interactions in seventeenth-century Gambia, Casamance, and Guinea-Bissau are reflected in the existence of fluid and dynamic sociocultural identities that challenge any clearly delimited classification. Thus, for example, at the trading center of Guinana on the Rio Grande, La Courbe observed “a village consisting of numerous Portuguese houses.” “Then we went ashore at the house of Signor Patrisio-Parese, a white Portuguese, the son of a Dutchman and a mulatto woman.” Parese had evidently taken his name and his “Portuguese” identity from his mother. The descriptive term “Portugais blanc” is intriguing, since his mother was mulatto and neither parent is described as Portuguese. That the son of a mulatto could be “white” did not accord with usual French or English categories. “White” may reflect the local
perception at Guinea of Pared’s mother’s identity; she was surely Afro-European and hence probably Luso-African. If she was also a trader, she may have been referred to as “white.” But if she was, then it is difficult to understand why La Courbe refers to her simply as “une mulâtresse.”

Most likely “blanc” refers to Signor Pared’s socioeconomic position; he was the first person La Courbe visited in Guinea and therefore was undoubtedly an important merchant. His social stature and his profession were likely also determinant elements in his “Portuguese” identity. Social status and occupation, rather than biological heritage or physical appearance, were the primary markers of being “white” and “Portuguese.”

Ultimately, physical characteristics were irrelevant to one’s social and economic position and hence had little or no bearing on whether one was considered “Portuguese.” This is made abundantly clear by Labat, citing Brue, who visited Bassa fifteen years after La Courbe and who described Guinea in these terms: “It is a large village of Portuguese who have long been established there from father [mother? to son . . . significant both for the number of its houses and for its inhabitants: white Portuguese, black Portuguese, mixed Portuguese, tanned, and mulatto Portuguese.”

What these Portuguese had in common was certainly not their physical appearance. Rather, it was their profession and their culture. From a Luso-African perspective, these sociocultural characteristics defined them not only as “Portuguese,” but also as “whites.” As La Courbe observes, “Although they are black, they nevertheless maintain that they are white, by which they mean to signify that they are Christians like the whites.”

Even so careful an observer as La Courbe is, however, inconsistent in his application of these labels. He refers to Manuel Alves, the “Portuguese” governor of Geba, a man who had received the prestigious Order of Christ from Lisbon, as “nègre chrétien” rather than by the expected—and appropriate—“Portugais.” This inconsistency quite possibly reflects the fact that La Courbe is himself caught between two perspectives or two discourses on identity. In consequence, sometimes he uses “white” in the European sense of physical description (by this measure Alves is “nègre chrétien”), while at other times he adopts the Luso-African definition (by which Parese is a “white Portuguese”).

MARITAL ALLIANCES

Among wealthy traders, the intercultural assimilation characteristic of Vintang society is clearly expressed in marriage patterns. These unions incorporated European and Euro-African merchants into a local kinship-based society. At Albreida, Geregia, and Vintang, “Portuguese” women, many of whom were either important traders or, like the wife of the Spaniard at Vintang, the daughters of local rulers, contracted alliances with European men. At Albreida, the famous trader and countess La Belinguère established a series of alliances with several European mer-
chants of different nationalities. Such unions served to secure the commercial interests of both partners. La Courbe, in his tongue-in-cheek, rather prissy description, alludes to the intersection of La Belinguière's personal and professional life: “She had a noble manner and a refined tongue and she spoke good Portuguese, French, and English, a certain indication of the extensive commerce she had carried on with all these nations.”

La Belinguière, like the wife of the Spanish trader at Vintang, was the daughter of a local ruler. La Courbe depicts her as having taken on the cultural markers of “Portuguese” identity. She was a successful trader, she spoke Portuguese and lived in a “Portuguese”-style house, and she dressed in cloth imported from the Cape Verde Islands. No mention is made of her religion, but in other respects, she is someone who has made the transition to a “Portuguese” identity.

Also in Vintang, a Luso-African woman, a mulatto, played a vital role in the economic integration into the community of European traders through her alliances with them. La Courbe paid her the expected social visit, too. As at Albreda, the meeting took place in the vestibule of a “Portuguese”-style house. The meal was served “à la manière des Portugais,” complete with imported red glassware. The hostess was married to an English merchant named Agis (?), who had obtained commercial benefits from this union. In fact, economic self-interest evidently led Agis to remain with his wife in spite of her public affair with the alquier [mayor] of Geregia. Such unions, at least in the perception of other European traders, brought economic advantages to both parties.

ETIQUETTE: MIXED MANNERS

Seventeenth-century society in the Vintang area may be described as mixed not only in terms of intermarriage but also with respect to the widespread assimilation and merging of material culture and social practice. While economic factors played a role in the proliferation of marriages between European merchants and women from the local social elite, a direct outgrowth of these unions was the development of a social etiquette, part of an elite material culture that merged elements of diverse societies. Housing styles, clothing, table manners, and comportment were all transformed under the influence of close contact, marriage, and mutual borrowings between individuals and groups.

The Bagnum king of Geregia shows how the most disparate elements could come together to create a royal etiquette. These syncretic manners served above all to welcome foreign guests, who were frequently traders. To host strangers well constitutes an important aspect of Gambian and Casamance social values. It is widely considered an honor, even today, to entertain visitors, and to perform this task well is a source of pride. In the seventeenth century and, indeed, even early in the twentieth century, trade
was carried on in the context of personal relations between client and patron, or host and guest. Hence, locally prescribed etiquette for welcoming strangers was imbued with both social and economic significance.

Following his 1682 visit, Jacques Le Maire wrote that the Senegambians “are hospitable and never allow any foreigner to pass through without giving them something to drink and eat, even for several days.” This passage is particularly striking in view of Le Maire’s generally pejorative view of Africans.

As a foreign visitor and a merchant, La Courbe was expected to pay courtesy calls on political leaders or officials in each community he visited. They, in turn, were obligated to receive him graciously and generously. This was the context in which he visited the king of Geregia:

The alquier led us to see the king of Geregia: we found him at the entry to his house; he was a small and robust man; he had on a Portuguese cap and an African robe; in his hand he carried a Spanish style sword upon which he leaned. After greeting us, he bade us enter his house and had us sit on wooden seats; I told him the reason for my visit. . . . I made him a present of a little iron and some schnapps and, shortly after, he invited us to enter another room, for his house is built in the Portuguese style; we found lunch waiting. . . . He joined us to eat, as did his wife, which showed me that, in this place, they have begun to take on English manners.” (emphasis mine)

The king’s clothes combined local African robes with a Portuguese hat. Such hats were frequently given to local notables by Lusitanian officials as an emblem of authority, a symbolic function that they continued to serve as recently as the beginning of the twentieth century. The sword, too, was part of the regalia that indicated his rank; one can only guess as to its provenance, which perhaps was not unrelated to the place of origin of his son-in-law. Manding rulers in the nearby state of Kaabu possessed iron staffs of office made by Mande blacksmiths; it may be that this local Bagnun ruler was inspired by Manding tradition to use his sword as an emblem of authority and power.” The European origin of his sword would also have emphasized the king’s association with long-distance traders.

The purpose of La Courbe’s visit—to discuss the establishment of a trading post—has its place in the complex routine of social etiquette. The two men discuss business before the Frenchman makes the requisite gifts; this conversation takes place in the first room of the house. La Courbe does not specify the location but, as this was a “Portuguese”-style house, their initial meeting almost certainly took place in the vestibule or on the veranda.

After business comes hospitality; the king invites his guest into an interior room for dinner. This is an unusual practice, one unheard of north of the Gambia, where Europeans did not have access to the private interior space of their host’s house, which was reserved for family. And the
most unusual practice of all, as La Courbe observes, is the fact that the king and his wife both join the Frenchman to eat. Men and women do not eat together in either Bagnun or Floup society. The king of Geregia may indeed have been following a European example.

The social customs accompanying this international business meeting on the banks of Vintang Creek represented a microcosm of the society itself. Late-seventeenth-century trading culture, with its mixture of Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English goods and customs, not to mention the ongoing cultural assimilation between Bagnuns, Floop and Manding, illustrates the degree to which Gambian society was characterized by cultural assimilation and appropriation. The same process that led to the creation of a distinctive social etiquette among the local elite also molded religious practices. This process also defines the intercultural adaptation and appropriation that led to the development of the distinctive architectural style called "Portuguese," but which, in reality, incorporates African techniques and building materials along with (possibly) some Portuguese stylistic elements. And, while our knowledge of the Creole language before the eighteenth century is extremely limited, this aspect, too, of coastal trading societies reflects a dynamic of assimilation and adaptation. The end result was indeed a mixed culture.

A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF INTERACTION IN MIXED CULTURES

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century trading centers from The Gambia to Bissau were characterized by extensive cultural interaction that fostered fluid and sometimes multiple identities. A study of the social manners reflected in La Courbe’s account of a visit to the king of Geregia illuminates the microprocesses of cultural interaction and assimilation that were the building blocks of these flexible and fluid identities and that led to the creation of new hybrid cultural patterns. For the Lower Gambia, Casamance, and coastal Bissau, a model of essentially fluid cultural patterns that dynamically interact and mutually transform one another more closely accords with the region’s history than does the image of discrete ethnic groups. In this model, as with J.-L. Amselle’s concept of cultures that form "un ensemble mouvant" [a changing ensemble], a dynamic process rather than fixed sociocultural categories serves as the foundation for both social interaction and the formation of group identities.

A similar approach to seventeenth-century cultural interaction is proposed by Gruzinski. In his study of Spanish-Aztec interaction in Mexico, he writes: "An understanding of métissage must confront intellectual habits that tend to prefer monolithic ensembles to intermediate spaces. It is easier, in effect, to identify solid blocks rather than the spaces between them that have no name." This is a telling point. Gruzinski further associates the métisse cultures of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mexico
with Iberian expansion and the creation of a world economy under Spanish domination in the sixteenth century. Throughout part of the sixteenth century, while Portugal was under the Spanish monarchy, the Guinea Coast was part of the same commercial empire as Mexico. Indeed, Portugal’s seaborne empire was part of not only an economic but also a cultural world system.

Yet in precolonial West Africa, unlike in Mexico, European culture was ultimately submerged by African culture. The reasons for this were complex. A relatively small number of Portuguese settled in Senegambia and, by the eighteenth century, their Luso-African descendants were isolated as the Portuguese colonial empire declined. Thus, although these two cases followed a similar model of cultural interaction, the historical circumstances differed widely and the results were hardly comparable.

Another significant difference may have been the fact that African culture, particularly the religion of the Muslim traders with whom the Portuguese and Luso-Africans had extensive contact, was more familiar to the Europeans than was pre-conquest Aztec religion. Conversely, the more extensive efforts to convert the indigenous residents of Mexico after the Spanish conquest of a centralized state had a more lasting, although mitigated, Christianizing impact. In Senegambia, the strong Muslim presence, especially among traders, afforded the Portuguese a familiar reference by means of which they might incorporate Africans into their accustomed intellectual universe. Iberia had experienced centuries of Muslim occupation. No such reference existed for the Portuguese or Spanish who were confronted with Native American cultures in the New World. On the Guinea Coast, European familiarity with an important aspect of local culture and beliefs—the Muslim religion—undoubtedly facilitated early interaction. It may also have played a role in the rapidity with which two-way cultural assimilation between Africans and Portuguese manifested itself.

Cultural assimilation in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Senegambia is in certain respects similar to the cultures métissés analyzed by Gruzinski in late-sixteenth-century Spanish Mexico. Both regions, as well as the Cape Verde Islands and the sugar-producing regions of Portuguese Brazil, were important components of the Iberian commercial empire. Additional research may enable scholars to further refine the familiar hypothesis that Iberian society, with its history of coexistence and interaction between diverse cultures, was more open than northern European cultures to intercultural assimilation in both Africa and the New World.

Nevertheless, and in spite of broad similarities between cultural processes in Senegambia and Mexico, the two regions should also be viewed in their specific social and historical contexts. A more narrowly focused approach underlines those areas where each situation was unique. It is important to seek particular characteristics of Upper Guinea Coast society that may have facilitated the growth in the Gambia-Cacheu region of
the mixed cultures that are the subject of the present study. Indeed, intercultural assimilation and fluid identities were characteristic of the entire Senegambia-Bissau region.

Cultural mixing was a characteristic of societies throughout the Gambia-Bissau region before the arrival of Portuguese traders in the mid-fifteenth century. Evidence for this history, while circumstantial, is broad and convincing. First, the interactive and dynamic nature of local society has long outlasted the Portuguese presence in the Gambia and Casamance regions. Casamance society is defined, even today, by its assimilative and transformative qualities. Second, although the nature of pre-contact Upper Guinea Coast culture can only be known in its broadest outline—ironically, Portuguese written sources constitute the earliest historical documentation for this area—oral traditions in the Casamance suggest that cultural mixing and the resultant transformations in identity are a long-established dynamic that predates the Portuguese commercial presence.

Local traditions north of the Casamance River attest to the transformation of an earlier Bagnun-speaking population into the ancestors of the present Jola-speaking community. These oral traditions cannot be precisely dated, but comparison of the traditions to early Portuguese sources suggests that the cultural assimilation of the Bagnuns by the Jolas north of the Casamance River began no later than the sixteenth century.42

The history of precolonial cultural assimilation in the Lower Casamance is a central theme in my previous work43 and it is not my intention to cover the same material here. A brief outline may, nevertheless, help to date more accurately early cultural transformations in the region. In northern Fogny, the seventeenth-century warfare between Floups and Bagnuns mentioned by La Courbe was part of a progressive expansion of Floups into the formerly Bagnun territories north of the Casamance River. This expansion, resulting in the assimilation of Bagnun communities by Floup newcomers, is attested to by oral traditions among the Buluf-Diola, descendents of this amalgamation. Buluf traditions date the cultural transformation to a period more than eighteen generations ago, a chronology that is consistent with Almada's late-sixteenth-century description (ca. 1594).44 South of the Casamance River, the Bagnun or their ancestors also constituted an autochthonous population, at least in the sense that no historical memory exists of any earlier group.45 Here, too, they were gradually assimilated by other groups, including Floups, Balantas, and probably Mande-speakers in Kaabu.46 Cultural assimilation thus characterizes the entire region of Casamance and northern Guinea-Bissau from the earliest accessible oral record through the earliest written sources and throughout the precolonial period.

Historical memory among the northern Diola also asserts that they and the Manding have intermarried so much that in this borderland region individuals cannot be clearly identified as belonging to one or the other group. An earlier historical layer of Mande immigration into the
Lower Casamance is reflected in the tradition, preserved in Thionk-Essyl, that the institution of kingship (the oeye, or priest-king) was originally brought to the Lower Casamance from Kaabu by a Mande named Malamanka Kaabu. The fact that the most important institution of local spiritual authority is recognized by some Jolas as being of Mande origin speaks eloquently of the long history of assimilation between Jola-speakers and Mande-speakers.

In addition, the limited information afforded by historical linguistics and by the study of place-names is consistent with the thesis that cultural assimilation and transformation have been an integral part of regional history since the first half of the second millennium c.e. Stephan Bühnen suggests, for example, that the names “Ziguinchor” and “Geregia” both derive from Bargun terms. Taken together, this oral historical and linguistic evidence suggests that the Portuguese in Senegambia and their Luso-African successors adapted themselves to a preexisting Gambian-Casamance pattern of cultural interaction. European acceptance of local cultural patterns is all the more likely in view of the small numbers of “Portuguese” living along the coast, even as late as the seventeenth century.

La Courbe and Lemos Coelho visited Vintang at the height of its late-seventeenth-century commercial prosperity. Shortly afterward the town experienced a decline, which both Francis Moore and Père Labat chronicled. It has long been acknowledged that Labat extensively plagiarized La Courbe’s manuscript in his description of the journey from Geregia and Vintang to Cacheu. While much of the corresponding portion of La Courbe’s narrative is lost, comparison to Labat of the surviving manuscript has enabled Boulette to demonstrate that Labat complemented his unacknowledged use of La Courbe with information that can be dated to about 1705. La Courbe’s description of Vintang clearly derives from La Courbe but is prefaced by the assertion that “the town or village of Bintam was formerly larger than it is at present.” In comparing his 1705 source to La Courbe’s detailed description of the town, Labat must have concluded that the town had diminished in size. Moore’s subsequent description of Geregia as “a small town” and his cursory treatment of Vintang suggest that the commercial fortunes of the town continued to decline over the next two decades. The decline continued; by the time of Demanet’s visit to The Gambia in 1764, the French apparently no longer maintained a trading presence at Geregia.

The diminishing importance of commerce at Vintang and Geregia in the eighteenth century led to the decline of the local merchant class. This professional elite was identified with the distinctive mixed culture that had developed during the sixteenth century and that, by the late seventeenth century, was a noteworthy feature of trading centers along the lower Gambia River. When Demanet traveled upriver in 1764, the de-
scendents of the Luso-African traders still retained the memory of their Portuguese ancestors, but their family traditions were virtually all that remained of their earlier prosperity. Even these traditions were already only a dim recollection of “the time when the Portuguese were the masters of the Gambia River and maintained trading centers all along the African coast.” The period of extensive cultural mixing was already past its zenith. With the decline in their commercial fortunes and the loss of their distinctive professional role, the Gambian “Portuguese” (whatever their European ancestry) became increasingly African. Yet, even today, two centuries later, an understanding of this history and of its dynamics is crucial if one is to appreciate the distinctive cultures of the region from The Gambia to Bissau.
Senegambia from the Mid-Eighteenth Century to the Mid-Nineteenth Century

Through the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, the French imposed increasingly rigid identity categories on Senegambians. This served both to deny the Luso-Africans their identity as “Portuguese” and to contest the widespread Senegambian usage of the concept of “white” as a socioeconomic label rather than as an a priori category based on skin color. As the French extended their influence south into the Casamance in the nineteenth century, political factors played an increasing role in their identity discourse. At the same time, in this discourse, local domestic architecture became a powerful index reflecting the presumed level of civilization of different Senegambian societies.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, commerce from The Gambia south through the Casamance region became increasingly competitive as French and English traders competed with the Luso-Africans for control of the coastal export trade. Manding merchants continued to dominate the trade from the interior to the coast. In 1836, the commandant at Gorée, Dagorne, who was leading a French mission to Casamance, observed that “the Manding . . . are outstanding merchants and . . . they are the exclusive agents of commerce; it is through their intermediary role that all the products from the interior arrive at the coast and that European goods, on the other hand, circulate in the interior.” The commercial role of the Manding was particularly important in the Gambia-Soungrougrou region, near the former commercial center of Vintang. Further south, a few Wolof traders were beginning to establish themselves on the island of Carabane on the south bank of the Casamance River and in Jola villages in the Lower Casamance. The establishment of a French fort at Sedhiu in 1837, along with the development of a trading post at Carabane beginning in 1836, significantly increased commercial competition with the Luso-Africans throughout the region. Nevertheless, at mid-century, “Portuguese" traders, some based in Ziguinchor on the south bank of the
Casamance River and others based in Bissau, still played a significant role in commerce throughout the Lower and Middle Casamance.  

The Portuguese commercial and administrative post at Ziguinchor was the only significant Luso-African community north of Cacheu. From this settlement, “Portuguese” merchants carried out a limited trade with Manding traders along the left bank of the river and, on the right bank, in the Middle Casamance. On the occasion of his exploratory visit to the Casamance, Dagorne wrote of the “Portuguese,” “They send pirogues upriver to trade a small quantity of ... products in villages along the river.” In return for salt, the Luso-Africans obtained cotton, they also purchased rice, beeswax, and ivory. The “Portuguese” acquired trading goods of European manufacture from the English in The Gambia. However, high import and export duties in the Portuguese territory prevented this commerce from remaining competitive once other European nations had established trade in the region.  

In 1836, Ziguinchor itself was an unimpressive village of sun-dried earthen houses, surrounded by a barbican and four earthen bastions that housed a few old cannon:

The walls of the houses consist of dried mud. The town, if one dares use the term for such a pitiable grouping of miserable huts, is defended by a tata in the form of interlaced branches with, at each of the four corners, a sort of bastion, walled in dried clay with embrasures through which pass the volleys of a few old cannons without gun carriages. ... It is a miracle that these walls don’t simply tumble down.”  

Dagorne’s view of the “Portuguese” inhabitants of Ziguinchor was that they were as decadent as the town in which they lived. He attributed their willingness to live in precarious and decrepit conditions to a natural apathy that derived from their African heritage: “They are resigned to this by habit and by the natural apathy that derives from their origin, for they are all black, even the Povedor [local governor].” In a sense, architecture reflected the absence of motivation or initiative; indeed, it embodied the character of the town’s people. Since in Dagorne’s estimation these qualities were inborn, he viewed the buildings as a reflection of the natural apathy of the black “Portuguese.”  

The earliest illustration of Ziguinchor is a watercolor sketch of the town made thirteen years after Dagorne’s visit by Hyacinthe Heccquard (Figure 18). Heccquard, an officer in the spabis sénégalais, precursor to the military force called the trevailleurs sénégalais, arrived in the Casamance in 1830 to begin an overland journey to the Futa Jalon. He stopped first at Carabane, where he visited with Emmanuel Bertrand-Bocandé, the French résident and the most knowledgeable nineteenth-century ethnographer of the Casamance. After leaving Carabane, Heccquard stopped briefly at Ziguinchor. The watercolor that he sketched, depicting the town as seen from the river, was never published by the artist. This work is one of a se-
ties of thirty-one watercolor sketches and pencil drawings that are now preserved in the archives of the Frobenius-Institut in Frankfurt am Main.¹

Heccquard’s drawing, labeled Zéguinchor—Comptoir portugais (Cazamance),² depicts, in the foreground, half a dozen small boats with masts, plying the river. Snuggled behind a low wooden palisade that hugs the shoreline are a dozen tightly clustered rectangular houses with thatched roofs. Scattered among these buildings are six smaller round structures. The round houses are surrounded by posts, representing the forkillas that support encircling verandas. A flag flies from the roof of one building. At the left (eastern) edge of the village, one rectangular structure is crowned, not by thatch, but rather by a flat sloping roof. This flat roof calls to mind Lemos Coelho’s enigmatic seventeenth-century description of the cumbeses at Cacheu, which he describes as having mud roofs. Perhaps this is a depiction of just such a structure. Besides these few architectural features, Heccquard has provided little detail; one cannot tell, for example, whether the buildings are whitewashed. The few visible architectural elements are consistent with written descriptions of “Portuguese”-style dwellings.

This sketch is complemented by Heccquard’s published description of Ziguinchor, which indicates that he drew only a portion of the village. The community consisted of about 100 rectangular buildings. Their thatched roofs could be removed during the dry season to reduce the risk of fire, a feature that Mollien also observed in Bissau in 1818.³ Heccquard observed no hierarchy of scale among the buildings. The governor’s house was not
significantly different from any other dwelling, and the lone chapel had long since fallen into disrepair. The chapel was apparently often in ruins fourteen years after Hecquard’s visit, in 1864, Père Lacombe of the Holy Ghost Fathers passed through Ziguinchor. He observed: “For a year there has been no church; the downpours of the rainy season caused it to collapse, because here one builds only of clay-soil. Local resources do not permit the people to reconstruct it.”

The fortunes of Ziguinchor continued to decline during the final decades of Portuguese control. In 1874, Father Sene, also of the Holy Ghost Fathers, found the village to be impoverished and run down and evidently also totally unkempt: “Nothing could be sadder than the appearance of Ziguinchor.... It is only an agglomeration of huts, roughly constructed and covered with thatching. Along the quais, in the streets, everywhere, is complete chaos.... The least village of the Blacks does not show such impoverished scenes.”

In 1837, however, the situation was not yet so desperate for the “Portuguese” in Ziguinchor or the surrounding territory. Along the south bank of the Casamance River, trade was still largely in “Portuguese” hands. Returning from Sedhiu in that year, Dagorne observed pirogues belonging to Luso-Africans who were evidently trading with the Balantas. In 1857, when Bertrand-Bocandé traveled upriver to the Middle Casamance, he found this area to be frequented by “Portuguese traders who arrive there by land.” Luso-Africans from Bissau, Cacheu, and even as far afield as Sierra Leone brought kola and palm oil to Carabane to sell to the French. Ziguinchor was the base from which “Portuguese” traders acquired Jola rice in exchange for cattle and cotton cloth. Much of this rice was then traded to the French at Carabane, leading Bocandé to write, “The Portuguese of Ziguinchor have become the representatives of French commercial interests in Casamance.” These mid-nineteenth-century descendents of Luso-African traders had adjusted their activity to changing patterns of European involvement along the northern Upper Guinea Coast. Nevertheless, they continued to play the long-established commercial role, developed by their Portuguese and lançado ancestors, of intermediaries between Africans and Europeans.

North of the Casamance River, along the Sounkrougrou River, a Manding population that was expanding westward from the Middle Casamance and south from The Gambia had begun to impose political control over local Jola-speaking populations (referred to as “Yola” by French visitors). Traveling along the Sounkrougrou in 1861, a French administrator from Sedhiu accurately prophesied: “The Manding will soon take over this country.”

Attesting to the climate of instability that prevailed along this waterway, Jola villages were generally fortified against attack: “The Yolas take pains to surround their clusters of houses with a palisade [illegible] a strong resistance.” This area, virtually unknown to French officials de-
spite its proximity to Sedhiu, was still visited by “Portuguese” traders, who continued to use pirogues to navigate the shallow marigots that provided access to remote Soungrougrou villages. In 1857, Bertrand-Bocandé described the “Portuguese” pirogues, “hollowed from a single tree trunk . . . the gunwales raised by thick boards hewn with an axe.” Even today, the Jolas of Buluf north of the Casamance River continue to make pirogues from the trunks of hollowed-out busaanab (silk-cotton) trees. Similar vessels still ply the lower Casamance River (Figure 19).

The Soungrougrou River runs north from the Casamance practically to The Gambia; its northern reaches are close to Vintang-Geregia. These trading centers were largely abandoned by the nineteenth century. The influence of the earlier commerce was nevertheless still reflected in a greater openness among local peoples toward foreign traders. Trading routes followed by Manding merchants from The Gambia and from the Upper Casamance region joined near the Soungrougrou, stimulating the local production of cotton cloth for export. In 1861, the French administrator
*Photo by Peter Mark.*

At Sedhiu wrote: “This part of the Songrougrou, being close to the routes to The Gambia and the Upper Casamance, and having been often visited by [courtiers? illegible] who carried out quite a successful trade before our merchants even had the idea of sending *traitants* [traders] there, is far more civilized than the lower Songrougrou.”22 Along the Songrougrou, the “Portuguese” did their best to hinder the establishment of French commerce. In one instance, a French administrator who had traveled up the river to meet and sign treaties with local village leaders was abandoned by a “Portuguese” trader who was to have served as his guide and interpreter. Unable to communicate with the local Jola-speakers, the Frenchman was forced to abort his mission.23 Ultimately, however, France's increasing commercial and military superiority led to the extension of colonial control based at Saint-Louis and Gorée Island. The Luso-Africans who lived and traded in the Lower and Middle Casamance soon became pawns in this colonial encounter.

Farther north, along the lower Gambia River, possession of the trading *escales* at Albrede and James Fort switched back and forth between
France and England throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, reflecting the shifting fortunes of war between the two European nations. Access to The Gambia was barred to France several times before 1815. As a result of the continuing conflict, the fortunes of Albreda (Figure 20) and the trading centers along Vintang Creek declined. Even after the restitution of its Senegalese possessions in 1815, France was never able to reestablish its previous commercial importance in this region. Finally, in 1857, France ceded Albreda to England.  

FRENCH IMAGES OF THE “PORTUGEUSE” AT BISSAU

South of the Casamance, Portuguese administrative authority remained secure throughout the nineteenth century. At Bissau, a Portuguese fort built of stone and masonry dominated a town of about 100 houses that was inhabited by a population of Luso-Africans. Dagorne wrote:

The town, as it is called, consists of about 100 square houses of sun-dried earth, covered with an earthen platform in the dry season and, in the rainy season, topped with a sharply canted thatched roof. These houses are inhabited by a totally black population who are supposedly Catholic—goodness knows why—but who, with the exception of their houses, have the same customs and the same manners as the surrounding Papels, from whom they stem.

Along the river stood three or four stone houses belonging to Europeans. The description of the domestic architecture adds a bizarre twist to Mollien’s 1818 report that the roofs of “Portuguese”-style houses were removed during the dry season. An anonymous contemporary of Dagorne also described these temporary rainy-season roofs; they were so immense that they blocked the cannons of the fortress. But the most striking aspect of Dagorne’s own report is the fact that he perceives the population of Bissau as consisting of three categories—Papels, black “Portuguese,” and Europeans—each group with its characteristic architecture.

In this description, it is only the form of their houses that differentiates the “Portuguese” from the local Africans. Physically, the two groups are indistinguishable, and even if the “Portuguese” claim to be Catholics, their religious practices are the same as those of the Papels, “from whom they stem.” Dagorne does not mention language. The only marker of “Portuguese” identity that he accepts is their architecture. In every respect except their houses [au logement près] they have the same customs and traditions as the Papels. Yet ultimately Dagorne does question the Luso-Africans’ identity; in concluding his discussion of Bissau, he refers to the Luso-Africans not as “Portuguese,” but as the “noirs gourmentes qui demeurent dans la ville” [the black gourmentes who live in the town].
A few years later, in 1845, a report published in the *Revue Coloniale* develops this line of argumentation one step further. The author divides the population of the “Portuguese settlement” [*établissement portugais*] at Bissau into two components, the Papels and the *gourmettes*. The *gourmettes* are individuals of diverse nations; they are more or less Christian, and they are traders:

A people of diverse nations, all more or less Christian . . . these are the Gourmettes. They never do any agricultural labor, for their natural element is the sea. They outfit all of the numerous progreses that ply the Gêba River to acquire the products that abound in this region . . . wax, ivory, skins, palm oil. . . . Some of the Gourmettes sail with ships that travel as far as Europe; others are workmen of all sorts and they often serve as pilots for the boatmen of diverse nations.”

In this report, the “Portuguese,” or Luso-Africans, have largely disappeared, subsumed into the category of *gourmettes*. While they are “more or less Christian” and although by profession they are sailors and traders, the members of this group are not recognized as “Portuguese” or even as “black Portuguese” by their French observer. In the nineteenth century, Europeans progressively contested the Luso-Africans’ “Portuguese” identity until, ultimately, as exemplified by this French report, the “Portuguese” began to be defined out of existence.

In a precisely contemporary account, the Abbé David Boilat, himself a Senegalese from the Petite Côte, presents a less pejorative interpretation of the term “gourmette.” In his *Esquisses Sénégalaises*, Boilat imputes to the French at Gorée and Saint-Louis an openness regarding skin color that reflects his own attitude: “Color prejudice is unknown in Senegal.” Boilat proceeds to enumerate the groups that, together, constitute “les habitants.” First are “les mulâtres,” followed by “les gourmetts ou noirs baptisés . . . sont aussi traitants: leurs femmes sont appelées signares.”

Boilat further refers to the *gourmettes* of Gorée and Saint-Louis. The *gourmettes* are traders, they are Christians, and at least some etymological connection to the Creole language is implied by the term “signare.” The term is thus close in meaning to the contemporary appellation “Creole.” In its broadest sense, when applied to the Luso-Africans of Bissau, the term clearly encompasses the descendents of the “Portuguese.”

In southern Senegambia, the growing political rivalry between France and Portugal played a role in the rejection by French observers of the Luso-Africans’ self-definition as “Portuguese.” By dismissing these agents of Portugal’s commercial empire as “Africans” or “gourmetts,” French officials challenged the Portuguese claim to the territory. If Lisbon’s representatives in Ziguinchor were not really Portuguese, then Portugal’s claim to territorial sovereignty over the Lower Casamance could be challenged. Increasingly in the second half of the century, political considerations assume a central role in the determination of “Portuguese” identity.
In at least one respect, the anonymous report of 1845, like Dagorne’s perception of the absence of any distinction between Luso-Africans and their African neighbors, contains an element of truth: *there were no clear boundaries—physical or cultural—between the two groups*. Indeed, through much of the nineteenth century, as at the time of Donélha’s sixteenth-century visit to Casão, the movement of individuals back and forth between “Portuguese” and other African identities was undoubtedly quite common. Even though the “Portuguese” make only brief appearances in nineteenth-century French sources, historical evidence of such transformations of identity does exist.

**IDENTITY TRANSFORMATIONS IN POLITICALLY CONTESTED SPACES**

In 1849, a trading vessel accompanied by a French trader from Gorée was attacked by a group of marauders, evidently Bijogos from Cazegut in the Bissagos Islands. The official French report referred to the attacking party as “the people of Baje-coot [elsewhere ‘Cazegut’] who had chosen Manuel Gara as their chief.” The reasons why the Bijogos selected this man as their leader are not stated. In the report, he is referred to as “this pirate chief” and as “a Portuguese from Bissau.” Manuel Gara (or Sara) had become the leader of this group of Bijogos, a role that was aborted by the naval vessel that investigated the incident. Had the French not intervened, he would effectively have become a member of the Cazegut community where he was also the chief. Ultimately, the fact that he was from Bissau, where he was a “Portuguese,” would probably have been forgotten.

The process of identity transmutation, or of Gara adding Cazegut [Bijogo] identity to his “Portuguese” identity, was here in process but perhaps not yet completed. This was not a unique example of a Luso-African becoming the chief or leader of a local non-“Portuguese” community. In 1796, the naturalist Adam Afzelius, who was visiting the Rio Pongo, reported several instances of “Portuguese” who had become local chiefs. One of the headmen was a “white Portuguese” named Gomez, who had been educated in England. According to Afzelius, there were other local chiefs whose “Portuguese” identity was far more attenuated. Afzelius wrote disapprovingly of these men, “The Native Chiefs of Portuguese extraction are more cruel and, if they can, they catch [an adulterer] and sell him for a slave.”

Although these individuals were descended from the Portuguese, they had become local chiefs. Their involvement in the slave trade recalls the fact that one of the defining characteristics of “Portuguese” identity was to be a merchant. Perhaps they remained “Portuguese” for as long as they maintained their profession as slave traders. At the end of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, interaction between “Portuguese” and other local Africans continued to engender a blurring of distinctions.
throughout the area of the Luso-Africans’ former commercial dominance. Generally, clearly defined borders did not exist between “Portuguese” and non-“Portuguese.”

In mid-nineteenth-century Casamance, the gradual establishment of French authority marginalized the “Portuguese” and reduced their capacity to exercise a political role in rural areas. The implantation of French authority also served to underscore the fact that identity, at the dawn of colonial administration, was determined in some measure by political factors. Thus, whether a given individual was identified as “French,” “Portuguese,” or African (Balanta, Felupe, etc.) depended in part upon that person’s affiliation with competing colonial authorities. An episode from 1879 at Adeane, south of the Casamance River, illustrates the subtle and complex manner in which political considerations helped to determine “ethnic” identity.44

In that year, a French administrator visited the local chief, one Manuel Verda, to inform him that Adeane was henceforth under French jurisdiction. Verda responded that he, unlike the chiefs of surrounding villages, had not signed a treaty with France and that, like his father Fabrice Verda, who had purchased the land from local rulers, he, Manuel, was Portuguese, and so was his village.45 The administrator countered that the other local rulers had accepted French sovereignty and that therefore Verda and his entire village were also now on French territory. Verda responded that he would continue to consider his village to be Portuguese until he was informed to the contrary by Cacheu, Bissau, or Lisbon.

Verda is here claiming both Portuguese citizenship and “Portuguese” identity, whereas the administrator, of course, is arguing territorial sovereignty. But the latter claim has direct implications for the question of identity. The established cultural and professional parameters of “Portuguese” identity are being challenged and, gradually, supplanted by a sense of identity more closely in accord with European notions of nationality. Ironically, this development is exemplified in the person of the official French interpreter on the expedition to Adeane.

The interpreter was one M. Bocandé, an employee of the trading house of Maurel & Prom and a son of Emmanuel Bertrand-Bocandé. The elder Bocandé had been the French résident at Carabane from 1849 to 1867; he had married a Luso-African woman “à la mode du pays.”46 The younger Bocandé was a French citizen through his father. But through his mother he was “Portuguese.” Verda, the chief of Adeane, was “Portuguese” through his father, but he too was almost certainly a Luso-African. Thus, in this colonial encounter, some Luso-Africans are Portuguese while others are French. Increasingly, European identities based on nationality or citizenship and associated with the territorial claims of the colonizers have begun to intrude, even in Casamance. Verda in particular finds his room to maneuver limited by the expansion of French control of the Middle Casamance. By his own claim he is Portuguese and also chief of a local village;
he now finds himself redefined, against his strong protest, as "un simple particulier" [just an individual] who happens to own property located on French territory.

Adeane lay in contested territory. Long inhabited by a Bagnun-speaking population, the south bank of the Casamance River had come under attack shortly before 1850 by Balantas arriving from the south. The neighboring chiefs who had sold the village to Manuel Verda's father may have been offering him land that had been depopulated by the Balanta invasion. But the chiefs may also have sought to gain protection by attracting a "Portuguese" as a local ruler, who, they hoped, would bring Adeane and the surrounding territory under the aegis of the garrison at Ziguinchor.

The Verdas seem to constitute yet another instance of Luso-Africans who became chiefs of a community of non-"Portuguese" Africans. As at Cazegut in 1849, where the local population had chosen as their chief the Luso-African "pirate" Manuel Gara (or Sara), it appears that the local populations near Adeane consciously selected an individual of Afro-Portuguese heritage as a leader. The French report of 1879 gives no direct information about African motives for having welcomed the Verdas. However, it is likely that the transaction was related to the political upheavals that disrupted the south bank of the Casamance toward mid-century.

IDENTITY AND COLOR

One significant aspect of individual identity that did not change in the Casamance-Bissau region during the first half of the nineteenth century was the fact that whether or not an individual was considered "white" had nothing to do with their skin color. The color terminology that had begun to develop as early as the sixteenth century whereby "black" and "white" reflected social status, including profession, still existed on the eve of the colonial period. Gaspard Mollien's 1818 observation that among Rio Géba traders "all who are free" were called "white" also applied to Casamance societies.

In 1861, the French administrator at Sedhiu reported that some of the more isolated groups he had visited along the Soungrougrou were astonished to see a pale-skinned human being. He was in country inhabited primarily by Yolas (Jolas) at the time: "These good people had been under the impression until now that the 'whites' were our black traitants who visited them, and they had absolutely no idea that there were also 'whites' of another color." To these Casamancais, to be "white" was to be a trader. Just as long-distance merchants who brought captives, ivory, and other goods from the east were Juulas, so too merchants who came upstream bringing cotton cloth were "whites."

Parenthetically, one should note that more than a century later, the northern Jolas frequently use the term "Juula" as synonym for "trader." One can become a Juula by becoming a professional long-distance trader.
Not once, however, during two decades of fieldwork in Buluf, Fognya, and, briefly, along the Songmrougrou, have I heard the term *elain* (“white”) used to refer to a trader. A century of contact with Manding traders and with whites who were truly “d’une autre couleur” [of another color] has apparently effaced the memory of the earlier usage of the term. In nineteenth-century Casamance, however, the categories of “black” and “white” were not based upon skin color. Rather, the terms were associated with profession and social status.

There is evidence that this usage was not limited to the region of Luso-African commercial activity. In 1836, Anne Raffel reported on his travels through eastern Senegal along the Falémé and upper Gambia Rivers. He found that *traitants* from Saint-Louis were known as “whites.” He wrote: “By a most annoying confusion, the term white is given, in those lands frequented by our *traitants*, to any individual who lives in Saint-Louis, without consideration of their color. Hence, for this reason, my Negroes were ‘whites.’”

The use of “white” to connote professional traders was entrenched in the Senegambia region long before the colonial period. In the Senegal River valley, as James Webb has demonstrated, the term “bidan” was often associated with traders, regardless of their complexion. In view of the existence of similar color terminology from the Senegal River valley to the coast south of The Gambia, this may have been a regional phenomenon. There is some evidence that Africans who traded with both the Portuguese and the Maures referred to both groups by the same word. In 1828, during a prolonged stay at Timé in upper Guinea, a village inhabited by Manding and Bamana, René Caillié observed that his hosts “have a strong image of the wealth of the ‘whites,’ and even of the Arabs, whom they place in the same category.”

The context for Caillié’s comment, a discussion by Manding merchants about French and English traders at Albêrèd, clearly indicates that both the “blancs” and the “Arabes” in question were merchants. Professional traders, whether Arabs, Europeans, or Luso-Africans, were perceived as comprising a single category. This confirms the observation that the term “white” was not a physical description but rather a professional category. And traders were generally associated with riches. Hence, to be a trader (“white”) was to be associated with wealth.

Recently, Bogumil Jewsiewicki has characterized “white” as a synonym for “bourgeois” in urban Africa rather than as a physical description. He writes: “For many years now, in popular urban culture in many Black African societies, the term ‘white’ has served as a synonym for bourgeois, without particular regard for skin color.”

In the greater Senegambia region, the history of the use of the term “blanc” and the closely associated words “bidan” and “Portuguese” strongly suggests that here, at least, the phenomenon to which Jewsie-
wicki refers is not limited to urban settings. Indeed, it is likely that the particular usage to which he refers reflects a recent modification. The dissociation of “white” from simple description of skin color dates not to many years ago but rather to many centuries ago.

FRENCH IMAGES OF CASAMANCE PEOPLES

Southern Senegambia and Bissau were less frequented by French merchants in 1800 than they had been in 1700. Consequently, the local populations were less well known to French writers. Late-eighteenth-century French observers sojourned in the administrative and commercial centers of Saint-Louis and the Isle of Gorée; occasionally, too, they briefly visited the French escale at Albreda on the lower Gambia River. Men such as Durand, Adanson, Pommegeorge, and Geoffroy de Villeneuve were generally familiar with northern Senegal but were largely ignorant of the peoples and cultures south of the Gambia River. For example, in his four-volume account of the peoples of Senegal, Villeneuve, who spent a total of four years in Senegal in the 1780s and served as aide de camp to the governor, Chevalier de Boufflers, has little to say about the populations south of the Gambia. He imagines these peoples as living in a perpetual state of warfare with each other, and he presents a brief and particularly pejorative view of the Flous of the Casamance. However, Villeneuve does have the distinction of being possibly the first European to record and publish the oral tradition according to which the Serers and the Jolas are descended from a common ancestor. He also is the earliest writer to use the term “Jola” to refer to the peoples who had hitherto appeared in the historical record as Flous.

Villeneuve was reasonably well informed about the Serers and he undoubtedly had this oral tradition from them, though this tradition is indeed recounted by members of both groups. He writes: “It is thought that the Serers [sic] are colonies of a nation called Guiola, who still exist along the banks of the Gambia. Similarities between these two peoples in language, customs, and common practices confirm this opinion.” This passage accurately records the Serer migration tradition that is otherwise found only in much later sources. Such early versions of oral traditions that survive to the present are rare. Not only does this passage demonstrate the continuity over two centuries of the tradition in question, but it affords the earliest known usage of the term “Guiola” (Jola, Diola). Furthermore, it suggests that the name Guiola itself originated among either the Serers or, conceivably, among their relatives, the Jolas themselves. This is highly significant, since most sources from the nineteenth century to the present have suggested a foreign etymology, ascribing the term either to Wolof traders or to the Manding.
Nevertheless, when it comes to describing the people called “Guiola,” Villeneuve not only reverts to the more common terminology, he presents a disparaging picture:

One sometimes encounters, in the land of Barra, a kind of Negro who have retained all the crudeness and customs of savagery. They inhabit a small country on the banks of the Casamance River, close to The Gambia, and they occasionally cross the latter river to sell their cattle. They are called Floupas.

The Floupas are almost naked, aside from a small skirt that passes between their thighs. They tightly bind their upper arms and wrists, their upper thighs and above the knee, their upper and lower legs with leather thongs that are dyed red. In consequence, the intervening parts of their tightly bound limbs are much thicker than normal. They scarify their faces and body, inscribing all manner of figures and weird and bizarre designs.

These Blacks have thickly curling hair that they gather on the crown of their head above the forehead, in a feather-like projection, 5 or 6 inches long. They let their beard grow to a point. They are covered with amulets or gris-gris; their weapons include bows, arrows, shields hanging from their back. In their left hand they carry several azagayes, or javelins, of various sizes, which they throw with great accuracy. Their language is crude, their pronunciation lively, loud, and gutural; though they communicate little, they are not at all fierce, and they live in peace with the neighboring hordes.

The physical description of these people, emphasizing their nudity and the transformation of young men’s bodies by means of cicatrized and bound limbs, serves to convey their supposedly rude and savage nature. Villeneuve is clearly not using the term “la vie sauvage” as a reference to some ideal state of nature gleaned from a reading of Rousseau. This image is complemented by the description of their hair, which they wear long and tied into locks, as well as of the amulets, an implicit mark of supposedly primitive religious beliefs, with which they cover their bodies. Likewise, their weapons are both quaint and primitive. To Villeneuve, their rude and guttural language gives additional proof of their uncivilized state. Of course what Villeneuve is saying is that he does not understand Jola, hence it sounds strange and incomprehensible to him. Practically the only positive observation he makes is that the Floupas are not warlike. This image of the Floupas as peaceable would soon be modified as the French tried to impose their territorial sovereignty over Casamance villages. By the end of the nineteenth century, many of the Jola subgroups had earned reputations as ferocious warriors.

ARCHITECTURE AND “CIVILIZATION”

In 1837, Dagorne, who was commanding a reconnaissance expedition that led to the establishment of the French post at Sedhiu, found the Jolas—or Yolas, as he called them—to be warlike and feudal in their political organization:
The Yolas, on the other hand, who inhabit the islands at the mouth of the Casamance and who have no ongoing relations with the continent, are rude and have no political constitution. Each village forms a separate state which is often at war with neighboring villages, and each village is a form of re-
public where each family head acts in an utterly independent manner.  

Furthermore, to this nineteenth-century observer, architecture reflected a society’s political organization: “Along the coast one might almost recognize the specific form of government by the form of the dwellings of the inhabitants.” Accordingly, Dagorne argued, the Wolofs constructed flimsy straw huts because their system of government gave total control over the individual’s property and life to the ruler. The Manding, “more advanced by reason of contact with civilization,” constructed solid and en-
during houses of sun-dried clay. The Jolas provided a more complicated study. Their dwellings were massive and enduring, yet they did not show evidence of a more advanced level of civilization.

Dagorne, who had obviously visited Jola villages, described their large farmhouses, which were characterized by solid walls of sun-dried clay, many rooms, and twisting corridors separated by narrow doorways. He stressed—not without reason—the defensive nature of these massive dwellings. However, rather than be impressed by their solidity or their scale, Dagorne interpreted these buildings as evidence of the anarchic and warlike nature of Jola society. Ironically, he overlooked the slave raiding that had necessitated such defensive architecture.

The Yola, without laws or rulers, always ready to defend his property or to invade that of his neighbor, builds a vast house of sun-dried clay, with high and thick walls, multiple narrow compartments, tortuous corridors divided by numerous narrow doors. Clearly, he seeks to defend himself to the last. In a sense, his home is—except for the construction materials and the scale and with, relatively speaking, quite as much strength—the equivalent of the cast-
tles of our warlike and frequently unscrupulous medieval lords.  

Dagorne here elaborates a theory whereby each African society has its characteristic form of architecture: one people, one style. In Dagorne’s idio-
syncratic interpretation, each style reflects the form of social organization peculiar to that group. And the social organization, in turn, corresponds with the level of civilization that Dagorne attributes to the group. The logic is circular—or at least self-confirming. The dominant image of the Floup at the dawn of the colonial period in Senegal was that they were a back-
ward, primitive people. Had observers such as Dagorne not adhered to this view, they might well have been impressed by Floup farmhouses. Instead, Jola domestic architecture, no matter how sturdy, durable, and massive, was not interpreted as evidence of a high level of cultural achievement but as indication of primitive social and political organization.

A generation after Dagorne, Vallon, who was later governor of Seneg-
al, expressed a similar disparaging attitude toward a Casamance people.
However, this image does not coincide with the description he gives of the architecture of the Baido or Bayottes, who are today classed as a subgroup of the Jolas. He refers to “Baido” as a village:

This village has an impoverished appearance. Nevertheless, the houses are built of earth, as elsewhere, and are quite as well-constructed; they are square rather than round; beside each house is a small plot for cotton, to meet the family’s needs. But the people are so ugly, so repulsive, that I was left with a bad impression.9

Vallon’s description of the houses shows them to be well constructed and rather impressive. Nevertheless, he is unimpressed by the inhabitants, if only because he finds them unattractive. Here the negative image of the Bayottes does not coincide with the description of their architecture. The people of Casamance find themselves in something of a catch-22 situation: their architecture, if impressive, is ignored in favor of less positive characteristics of their material culture. However, if the buildings are less than impressive, this fact is taken as demonstration of a lower level of civilization.

By associating each specific architectural style with a corresponding level of civilization, Dagorne was following the lead of earlier French observers of Senegalese culture. At the end of the eighteenth century, Villeneuve had reserved his highest praise for those Senegalese who built using the most permanent materials. These Senegalese just happened to be the most Europeanized, at least in terms of their houses: “The inhabitants of Dakar are the most civilized of the entire coast; they very much like the French and have begun to take on European manners and customs. In fact, several, when I was in Africa, had already constructed houses of stone.”10 This passage, with terminology that echoes La Courbe’s seventeenth-century description of the courtly (and partially European-influenced) manners of the king of Gereja, but from a more Eurocentric perspective, is founded on the assumption that lasting structures are a mark of civilization. For, in another passage, Villeneuve writes: “Nowhere does one encounter any building, nor any monument, constructed with the intention of transmitting an awareness of great deeds to posterity.”11 Monumentality and permanence are precisely the characteristics that Villeneuve finds lacking in most Senegalese architecture. These qualities are approached only in the stone constructions of the more civilized inhabitants of Dakar.

North of the Cape Verde peninsula, in the region of Kajoor (Cayor), the Wolof population also did not construct buildings in permanent materials, a fact that Mamadou Diouf attributes to long-standing policy on the part of the Damel: “The ruling class in Kajoor always prohibited the construction of any building in permanent materials on their territory. According to tradition, the Damel . . . always asserted that houses or trading
entrepos built [of stone] were susceptible to be used as a base for attack or defense."

According to Diouf, the absence of more lasting building materials—even of banco—in Cayor constituted a conscious political and military policy on the part of local rulers. This was quite different from the situation that existed from The Gambia to Bissau where, in the absence of any centralized political authority, local African communities as well as European merchants and Luso-African middlemen all built houses of banco that were solid enough to withstand military attack.  

Ironically, when Dagorne argues that the flimsy construction materials of Wolof houses reflect the control exercised over the population by their rulers, he is, strictly speaking, correct. His ethnocentric bias intrudes, however, when he asserts that people who build houses of sun-dried clay or stone demonstrate by this architecture that they are more advanced on a relative scale of civilization. And, of course, Villeneuve’s association of stone houses with “the most civilized people found along the entire coast” imposes European architectural norms on cultures that have radically different parameters for constructing buildings. Villeneuve thereby extends a French norm into a universal standard. It is a short step from Villeneuve’s argument to the articulation of a full-fledged French “civilizing mission.”
Conclusions and Observations

The history of the structures that people build and live in constitutes an important element of the broader history of culture, and it is appropriately addressed from an historical perspective. This perspective illuminates the evolving social importance and symbolic significance of architecture within the communities that built the houses. But architecture is also situated within a wider social setting: the contact among different groups that helps to determine the exchange of technologies and of styles. Like any other aspect of culture, building forms and styles do not evolve in isolation. The history of Upper Guinea Coast architecture demonstrates the central and continuous role played by contact among cultures in the elaboration and evolution of both forms of housing and the social meanings ascribed to these forms.

The history of architecture is, therefore, situated within and subsumed by broader issues of culture contact. Along the West African coast from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, local societies were characterized by extensive cultural interaction. This process created a distinctive mixed culture, particularly among a social elite composed largely of traders. The cultural métissage that defined this group is itself a proper object of study. Material culture illuminates the process of métissage.

Architecture, particularly the houses of wealthy African and Euro-African traders, was central to the formation of seventeenth-century mixed cultures; architecture also constituted an integral part of the local identity discourse. Material culture, specifically the houses built by wealthy and powerful individuals, reflects the nature of cultural interaction and assimilation.

An architectural history of seventeenth-century southern Senegambia reflects broader processes of interaction between cultures. For the Gambia-Casamance-Bissau region, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this wider process was distinctive. These cultures did not define themselves by an oppositional model of identity in which members of a specific group conceived of themselves primarily by reference to an "other" or to people or groups whom they perceived as different. Rather, local models of identity were characterized by fluidity and by the fact that different identities were not perceived to be mutually exclusive. Instead, individuals could and often did assume more than one identity, sometimes sequentially but often contextually contingent. Categories of identity were not fixed. Rather, they were flexible, allowing individuals and sometimes
Conclusions and Observations

THOREUTICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

A study of the construction of architecture and identity in precolonial Senegambia may afford insights into processes whereby material culture and cultural identity are created and reformulated elsewhere in West Africa. This study may also afford a broader theoretical and methodological perspective. The history of material culture may itself yield a wealth of information about the intellectual processes whereby members of particular societies conceptualized themselves and understood their relationship to others. Specifically, architecture plays an important role in the discourse about group and individual identities. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this discourse was of critical importance as part of the interaction between West Africans and Europeans. After 1850, the growing economic and political authority of Europeans enabled them to impose a particular identity discourse, one that contested and ultimately transformed local identity models.

Methodologically, too, it is my hope that the present study may provide a useful point of departure for other cultural and intellectual historians. To study the history of indigenous discourses on identity, given the paucity of written sources that address the issue and the dearth of sources written from a local perspective, the historian needs to find other, non-written sources. Such sources exist. They include both manners and etiquette. Seventeenth-century Gambian trading society provides a case study that illustrates the importance of manners as historical documents reflecting cultural interaction.

To reconstruct a history of discourses on identity, to observe and interpret local etiquette or manners, and to interpret the social meanings of local architecture, the historian must rely almost exclusively on written descriptions. Precolonial written sources are abundant for the Senegambia-Bissau region in comparison to what is available for other areas of West Africa. Because most of these sources were written by Europeans, however, an additional cultural filter is interposed between the African communities and the historian. Fortunately, several early sources were written by Cape Verdians, members of the “Portuguese” community. Nevertheless, caution is warranted in the interpretation of these written sources; the historian is here using written sources to document areas of human activity that would normally be accessible through direct observation.
In architecture as well as in comportment and interpersonal relations, style reflects social discourse and, by extension, attitudes. Social etiquette, or manners, and domestic architecture both serve as indicators for a history of ideas. Style, in both of these domains, reflects the intimate interaction of different groups and ultimately the establishment of common ground. This common ground constitutes the crucible for the formation of new social and cultural identities.

REFLECTIONS ON CATEGORIES

In conclusion, a short commentary may reflect my personal perspective regarding social categories and identities as well as the wider context of late-twentieth-century American society in which these chapters have been written. It seems to me that the crucial feature of precocious social and cultural history along the northern Upper Guinea Coast is precisely the flexibility or malleability of individual identity and the apparent ease with which people could assume multiple, or at least a sequence of, different identities. Historical sources strongly suggest that these characteristics were common to the many African and Euro-African groups throughout Senegambia from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. In all likelihood, a similar situation prevailed before the earliest fifteenth-century written records.

Written sources are clear on this point. Nevertheless, my interpretation of these sources is certainly influenced by my experiences living in and carrying out field research among the populations of the Casamance region, primarily among peoples who today identify themselves as Jola or Manding. Flexibility of individual identity has long been a prominent characteristic of local society. My awareness of this flexibility and fluidity was certainly conditioned by my experiences in Casamance. I recall, for example, the elderly Jola in Ziguinchor who, when he learned that I was studying Bagnun religion, informed me that he was himself Bagnun. There was also a Jola informant in Thionk Essyl who succinctly observed: “Where you see a Jola, you are actually speaking with a Manding, and where you see a Manding, you are actually speaking with a Jola.” But above all, there was my first visit to Guinea-Bissau. In S. Domingos, a young African was introduced to me as “Portuguese,” with the implication that “he is like you.” My immediate reaction was incredulity. He is only calling himself “Portuguese,” I thought, to ingratiate himself with me. Today, whenever I reread Le Maire or other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century narrators who rejected Luso-African claims to be “Portuguese,” I recall this incident and cringe. Over the years, these and similar encounters have led me to reflect on what it means to be Jola, Manding, or Portuguese.

Eventually, I realized that there was an underlying thread connecting these experiences. Identity is a product of one’s heritage but it is also something one can manipulate. This manipulation occurs, it seems to me,
not in a cynical sense. Rather, one can form one’s self, within limits, in response to one’s social environment, much as an architect works with adobe or other materials to construct his house.

This realization, in turn, made sense of disparate experiences, including the above-mentioned anecdotes. After twenty-five years of fieldwork, I finally felt that I had begun to understand the dynamics of group formation and of individual identities in the Casamance. Undoubtedly, this insight, like all revelations that one experiences during fieldwork, has its limitations. But I have yet to come upon a situation in the Senegambian historical record that was not better illuminated when recast in the light of this understanding of the fluidity and multiplicity of local identities.

My interpretation of precolonial Senegambian discourses on identity is informed by my experiences in contemporary Casamance, but my perspective is no less affected by my experience of living in American society through the second half of the twentieth century. Questions of identity, particularly “ethnic” identity, and the role of “ethnic minorities” in a multicultural society are central to American social and political discourse. It seemed to me, as I developed the present study, that my observations and conceivably my conclusions would be of direct relevance to contemporary society. Ethnic identity and “color” remain as central to American social and political discourse today as they were a century ago, when the issue was succinctly articulated by W. E. B. DuBois. Elsewhere in the world, the significance of ethnic identity has certainly not diminished either, as events in Eastern Europe, Rwanda or, sadly, in Casamance itself bear witness.

I should like to think that in the history of seventeenth-century southern Senegambia there is a message that might benefit contemporary societies. One part of the message is that plural societies that do not rigidly and methodically categorize each individual may thereby encourage sharing or métissage. As a result of this sharing or mixture, the richness of all the component cultures becomes part of a common heritage. Another part of the message is the realization that the boundaries of the categories by means of which we classify and divide individuals and communities are, ultimately, arbitrary. Change the boundaries and you create new communities. Flexible boundaries or multiple identities may lessen distinctions and create new bonds, thereby establishing a broader human community.

When I began the study, I initially intended to focus on the history of precolonial Senegambian domestic architecture. The story of the “Portuguese” seemed at first an incidental corollary. However, I soon became enthralled by the history of this community whose members, in direct opposition to my own culture’s understanding of identity, defined themselves almost exclusively by cultural and social parameters and who, moreover, steadfastly asserted their identity as “whites,” regardless of the color of their skin. I found myself rooting for them to maintain their iden-
tity in the face of European assertions that they were neither Portuguese nor white. I was even tempted to end this historical study before I arrived at the nineteenth-century denouement. My discomfort was all the greater as I recalled the episode in S. Domingos and realized my own small role in denying Portuguese identity. Perhaps, in some small measure, this book is my way of making amends for that experience.