BEYOND MIGRATION AND CONQUEST:
ORAL TRADITIONS AND MANDinka ETHNICITY IN SENEGAMBIA*

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I

One of the most prevalent and widely-accepted themes in
the history of the Mandinka of Senegambia concerns the great
Mandinka migrations—the westward movement of large groups of
people that included the distant ancestors of today's Senegam-
bian Mandinka population. The migrants are supposed to have
come from traditional Manding homelands east and southeast of
present locations of Mandinka peoples in Senegambia; conquest
and longterm settlement were the usual results of these migra-
tions.

For over a century scholarly (and not so scholarly) works
dealing with the western Mandinka have shown acceptance as fact
and included discussions at varying length of the early westward
migrations. At a 1980 conference in Dakar, which historians,
linguists, anthropologists, traditionists, and others from four
continents attended, considerable time actually went toward dis-
cussing and disputing the specific routes the major migrant
leaders took and toward attempting to work out paradigms of the
various "waves" of Mandinka migration. And lest I appear too
smug in my implied criticism of studies of these migrations, I
should admit that I, too, have written of the phenomena in ways
that could be interpreted as scholarly discussion of their
causes, timing, and (gulp) even their "flow."

The major reason for the widespread acceptance of early
Mandinka westward migrations and subsequent conquest and settle-
ment—aside from the present ethnic and linguistic arrangement
of the western Mandinka—is, of course, the frequency with which
one hears tales of such in Senegambian traditions of origin.
It is a rare Gambian Mandinka oral narrative—whether focusing
on the history of a state, a village, or a separate lineage—
that does not begin with where the ancestors originated. Direct-
ly or indirectly, the place of origin is always tilebo, the land
where the sun rises, which is the local word for the eastern
heartlands of the Mandinka. Most Senegambian oral traditionists
note something about the route of migration and the individual
migrant leaders. Some include stories of conquest as well.5

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A few examples of traditions of origin from Senegambian Mandinka, condensed from the originals, can provide a sense of the large body of oral data that make up those traditions.

One of the most widely-recited traditions of origin among the western Mandinka is that involving leadership of large numbers of migrants by Tiramakan Traoré. Many Mandinka of Senegambia and Guiné-Bissau say their ancestors came west with Tiramakan. According to this tradition, Tiramakan was one of Sundiata Keita's most trusted lieutenants during the years of the consolidation of the Mali empire. In reward for Tiramakan's suppression of rebellion of the Jolof Empire in central Senegal, Sundiata gave him the lands of the west. Tiramakan migrated to his new lands with thousands of Mandinka, settling families in villages along the route. Descendants of migrants with Tiramakan are said to populate much of the region from the upper Gambia through the upper Casamance and on into the old Kaabu regions of Guiné-Bissau.

Another prominent figure in Mandinka traditions of western migration is Sora Musa. Once a ruler of Mali and a famous Muslim pilgrim, Sora Musa, like Tiramakan, was a lieutenant of Sundiata. After Sundiata defeated his major rivals he gave Sora Musa access to his magic and Sora Musa set off with forces loyal to him to the west. His roundabout travels took him and his followers through northern Senegal, but he ended up in the lower Gambia, where he married the woman ruling the state of Baddibu and so assumed the right to rule that state. Descendants of Sora Musa moved on to the west where, through a similar process of intermarriage, they became rulers of the state of Niumi at the Gambia's mouth.

Fitting into the same mold as Tiramakan and Sora Musa is Amori Sonko. Some say Sonko was the leader of Malian forces that subdued Djolof (or Bondou) and for his efforts Sundiata gave him certain westward lands. Sonko took his followers to the middle Casamance, establishing the Mandinka state of Sankola; to the middle and lower Gambia, establishing the states of Jarra and Niumi; and to the Bafing-Bondou area of Senegal.

Most significantly, non-royal Mandinka clans have their own traditions of origin that include the migration of family ancestors from the Mandinka homelands. Typical of a great number of these traditions is that of the Gambian clan named Darbo. As Darbo elders tell it, their ancestor came from a village in the Mandinka homelands twelve generations ago. He brought with him a cutlass, a copy of the Qur'an, and a gold bracelet, each of which symbolizes one of the three primary branches of the Darbo family in the west: warriors, Muslim clerics, and merchants. This ancestor settled in a village on the middle Casamance and from there his sons left to found their own villages. The warrior branch came from a son who settled in one of the states of Kaabu. The clerical branch moved northward toward the Gambia, separate lineages founding three villages near the river that remain noted for being centers of clericalism. The merchant branch of the clan moved to the upper limits of Gambian navigation, founding villages there and at several locations.
between there and the Atlantic coast, where for years they participated in the iron, cloth, and slave trade of the Gambia River and its hinterland.

These traditions, and dozens more like them, constitute the body of oral data relating to western Mandinka origins. The large number of traditions and their structural similarity have prompted most students of precolonial Senegambian history to accept the role of mass movements of populations from the Manding regions of the Western Sudan in the peopling of the Mandinka areas of Senegambia.

III

In recent years I have come to consider several factors that lead me to doubt that Mandinka migrations (whether in waves or phases) are widespread conquest (with the effect of replacing one population with another) ever took place. I harbor these doubts in spite of the overwhelming acceptance of the migration/conquest/settlement theme and the existence of such a vast amount of Mandinka (and non-Mandinka) oral data supporting the existence of these historical events. If these doubts are borne out by investigation in the years to come, there will be important implications for the study of early Senegambian Mandinka history, of course, but just as importantly, there will be reason to think again about our perhaps out-of-date concept of Mandinka, and other African and non-African ethnicity. If my reasons, taken singly, appear simple and less than convincing, when added together they strike me as forming a compelling argument.

First, a growing number of studies from other parts of Africa has shown that cultural transferral rather than mass migration, conquest, and settlement best explains links between two populations. This turns out to be the case even in societies that have full stories of migration in their traditions of origin. Miller believes traditions of migrations are best understood as "clichés denoting a variety of different historical circumstances by means of personalized images of movement of real people." Thus, much African oral history, it seems, is full of migration tales that explain symbolically what cannot otherwise be explained—the emergence of a present ethnic identity. African traditionists cannot explain this phenomenon because they do not relate history as a dynamic process. Instead, to them history can only be explained as a series of cataclysmic events. The long process of what might have been cultural transferral, Miller explains, is related to the cliché of migration and conquest. If this is the case in a number of African societies, one has to ask if western Mandinka traditions of origin are similar. Do they accord to migration and conquest the longer process of cultural transferral from the Manding civilization of the upper Niger to the acephalous peoples of the lower Senegambia in the distant past?

Second, even the most general acquaintance with Senegambian
society today enables one to recognize that a process of cultural assimilation and inter-ethnic transferral is occurring. On a simple, personal level, I can provide examples. In 1982 I came to know a woman, Jarra Sanneh, who was the cook of a friend in whose house my son and I were staying in Serekunda, outside Banjul. She was married to a Mandinka man and largely for this reason she considered herself Mandinka. She spoke Mandinka and had a child people thought of as Mandinka. However, both her parents were Jola. She had passed through the permeable membrane of ethnicity by the relatively simple act of marriage and she had brought her child along for the transition. Adopting Mandinka traditions of origin would be only a further step in acquiring a new ethnic identity.

Another person I know, B.K. Sidibe, who directs the Gambia's Oral History and Antiquities Division, is one of the country's most devout Mandinkaphiles. No one has worked harder to collect the enormous body of Mandinka oral traditions that exists in Senegambia. But Sidibe's ancestors were Fulbe, people say, and his name, Sidibe, is traditionally a Fulbe name. And Sidibe's third wife, Binta Jammeh, is Mandinka, owning the reputation around Banjul as the first Mandinka woman to have studied in America, though she admits that people back in her father's up-river hometown--people who "really know," she says--recognize she has roots among the Serer. Sidibe, the "Mandinkized" Fulbe, had to obtain special, magical dispensation from a marabout to marry Jammeh, the "Mandinkized" Serer, though both consider themselves Mandinka today. Thus, people of different ethnicity are today marrying and adopting new concepts of their ethnicity. It would be naive to think that this sort of ethnic transferral or ethnic adoption has been going on only in recent years. In fact, this sort of process may be at the heart of much cultural transferral that has long been going on in much of the Upper Guinea Coast and probably far beyond.14

Third, and related to the above, is the fact that there are few patronyms among today's Senegambian population that are considered traditional Mandinka surnames. This is true even among the old ruling families of the Mandinka states, who maintain the strongest traditions of being descendants of the Mandinka migrant leaders. Sanneh, Manneh, Wali, Jammeh, Sonko, Bojang, Jadama, Marong...all are patronyms of traditional Mandinka ruling families in Senegambia, yet all are names normally associated with one of the ethnic groups thought to be indigenous to the western coastal region of Senegambia or Guiné-Bissau. If Mandinka migrants came westward in waves or even merely in significant numbers, then descendants of the migrants would almost surely have the migrants' patronyms—unless something particularly unusual happened. Several authorities have attempted to explain that "something unusual." As early as 1849 Bertrand-Bocandé suggested that the Manneh surname was originally a Balant patronym. As the Balant were brought together with Mandinka to a degree that saw them adopt the Mandinka language and customs, they made sure they kept the Manneh surname of their ancestors because of what Bertrand-Bocandé referred to as "lingering family
obligations." More recently Sidibe notes how many of the Mandinka immigrants, who retained most aspects of their culture as they came west, including their language, "oddly adopted important features of the indigenous cultures, such as the use of maternal rather than paternal surnames for their children and the inheritance of rulership through the female line." Neither explanation is satisfactory nor grounded in solid evidence, for it remains difficult to explain the change of patronyms if one assumes there were indeed massive migrations of people who conquered indigenous populations and brought with them a strong cultural identity.

Fourth, written sources from several centuries ago provide clues that ethnic identity may have been different in certain areas and at certain times than it is now. Of course, one has to be wary of details on ethnicity found in early written sources. Many British, French, and Portuguese travelers had only the haziest knowledge of the variety of local cultures and they brought with them stereotypic ideas of ethnic and national make-up that may have applied to Europe of that time, but probably did not apply at all to Africa. Still, such accounts might shed light on the evolution of ethnicity in Senegambia. Compar- ison of the fifteenth-century texts of Alvise Cadamosto and Diogo Gomes on the one hand with those of Duarte Pacheco Pereira and Valentim Fernandes of the sixteenth century on the other, for example, suggests that the areas along the lower bank of the Gambia River in the 1450s had a population that the Europeans considered Wolof, but the same area a century later was populated by individuals who at least acknowledged Mandinka po- litical authority.

In 1976 I used this evidence to support conclusions about the timing of migrations to the lower Gambia. Now I wonder if the sources do not suggest more clearly a century of waxing Mandinka influence and cultural adaptation rather than migration and conquest. The timing would have been right for such a process: the period after 1450 was when merchants of the Western Sudan began reorienting their trade routes to the western rivers; was when Mandinka traders would have been venturing to the lower Gambia in significant numbers, perhaps setting up commercial communities for the growing African/Eurafrican/European trade that became cultural as well as commercial centers for hinter- lands of reasonable size. It would require minimal imagination to construct a process, involving waxing prominence of certain lineages and broad intermarriage with careful selection of marriage partners for political and economic reasons (as is done today), that would lead fairly rapidly to linguistic and cultural adaptation and the altering of ethnic identities.

In addition, as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century, J.B.L. Durand, who came to know the lower Gambia region fairly well, differentiated between "the natives of the country," who were "few in number," and the much larger Mandinka population that ruled and seemed to dominate politics and society of the Gambian states. What Durand was observing may have been pockets of individuals who had yet to adopt the Mandinka culture,
even after generations of intercultural contact and influence. Indeed, to this day through much of the Mandinka area of Senegal there are pockets of sub-ethnic identity. People who are identified as Mandinka because of their primary language and general social customs maintain weak, but still evident, identities with ethnicities of long ago. Some regions of the uppermost Casamance and east and south of there may be places where the sub-ethnic identity is most noticeable. The Pajadinka of southern Senegal or the Mansuwanka of west-central Guiné-Bissau are examples of Mandinka who maintain a sense of their pre-Mandinka heritage.

Fifth, finally, and perhaps most importantly in terms of this argument, separate levels of western Mandinka oral traditions exist in contrast, and sometimes contradiction, to one another. On one level are the so-called official narratives, the stories a traditionist recites most frequently when speaking of ethnic origins or the genesis of ruling families. These are the tales that contain elaborate narratives of migration and conquest, travels by local individuals to the Manding homelands to seek permission to rule states in the west, and other seeming forms of justification for providing the ruling class of the society. But on another level are traditions that contain mention of the pre-Mandinka heritage of the present population that identifies itself as Mandinka. These include general stories of intermarriage that imply cultural and ethnic transferral over an extended period of time. It is within this body of oral data among the Senegambian Mandinka that information on ethnic origin that comes closest to reflecting a historical process is likely to be found.

The best example I have encountered of these two levels of Mandinka traditions is that body of data that pertains to the origin of the Jammeh lineage of the lower Gambia. Branches of this lineage provided rulers for two western Mandinka states. In part to justify their position as a dominant family in states on the Mandinka model, the Jammeh have "official" traditions that see them as descendants of the Mandinka warrior and migrant, Sora Musa, who is without a doubt (at least in my mind) a mythical, composite figure. (Within these traditions the Jammeh almost seem to try too hard to show their Mandinka connections. One prominent tale is of Samake Jammeh, who went to the Manding homelands to obtain "permission to rule" in the west and, while there, impregnated and then married the daughter of the ruler of all Manding territories!) However, a large body of less formal Jammeh oral data suggests the Jammeh were originally Serer (or Niéminka—a sort of hybrid, coastal-oriented, fishing folk of the Îles de Saloum) who intermarried with Mandinka (or "Mandinkized") families along the Gambia's lower north bank, and over time assumed a share of political authority in two budding states in the region. Even these traditions seem to shorten the process of cultural assimilation and transferral that must have taken place, but they leave little doubt that they are making reference to such a process being at the root of the Jammeh lineage's present Mandinka identity.
In the face of these doubts about the specific, factual veracity of the stories of western Mandinka migration, conquest, and settlement, obvious questions arise about Mandinka ethnicity in Senegambia. First, who are the Mandinka of today? And second, what are the geographic origins of today's Senegambian Mandinka population? Of course, the Senegambian Mandinka are Mandinka because they say they are. That they have likely adopted traditions of origin to explain or to rationalize their present ethnic identity makes them no less Mandinka.

But thinking historically, much of today's Senegambian Mandinka population may well be groups of lineages with ancestral roots in a variety of ethnic groups, a number of which were autochthonous in or near their present locations. Over centuries of what may have been substantial commercial contact with Mandinka people from the Western Sudan (some or even most of whom may have themselves adopted their ethnic identity) and of political influence from the strong Mandinka polities on the upper Niger, the Senegambian Mandinka adopted as their own the Mandinka language, Mandinka political system, and many aspects of Mandinka culture. It is possible that the cultural transfer was not altogether dramatic, since the Senegambian peoples may have had cultural traits similar to those of the large body of Manding-speakers. To explain this gradual process of cultural adoption, "official" traditions of migration, conquest, and settlement have been adopted as well. They explain in acceptable terms the process that could not otherwise be explained to individuals who do not regard history as a matter of long, slow evolutionary change.

Answers to questions about Senegambian Mandinka geographic origins probably vary. Those ancestors who were not indigenous to the Senegambian region may have been participants in a gradual, uncoordinated movement of individuals or small groups to final places of settlement near their present locations. Some may have been long-distance traders, who set up commercial and cultural nodes on the trade routes far from their original homes. But conjecture eventually becomes a strong suggestion that few to today's western Mandinka population had ancestors who came west in one or another wave of migration from the upper Niger—or from anywhere else some distance away. Process, I believe, explains more about early Senegambian Mandinka history than do the more cataclysmic tales of migration and conquest.

Two points are important to add in conclusion. One is about oral traditions, the other about ethnicity. If one agrees with even part of the arguments presented here, one might be apt to conclude that the traditions of origin of the Senegambian Mandinka are without useful historical content. This is hardly so. In one sense the traditions have value in showing how the
western Mandinka view themselves. Whether or not Sora Musa led multitudes of migrants westward is not nearly so relevant in the Mandinka context as is the fact that an important Mandinka lineage, the Jammeh, views itself and its history in that particular way. The Sora Musa legend represents historical truth to the Jammeh; to them it explains how they came to be what they are and what they have been in the fairly recent past. That in itself is important as historical truth.  

But there is probably more useful historical content in the traditions for the Western-trained historian, too. The accepted points of origin of various Senegambian Mandinka lineages, as recited in their oral traditions, seem to suggest important political and cultural centers of the westernmost savannas at the general times when people indigenous to Senegambia first accepted their "Mandinkaness"—their adoption of the Mandinka identity. Thus, one might conclude that the leading families of the traditional Mandinka states of the upper Gambia, who trace their origins to migrant leaders coming directly from the Mali empire, came under significant cultural, political, and commercial influence from the Mandinka at times when Mali was at the height of its power and prestige—perhaps between the middle of the thirteenth and the middle of the fourteenth centuries.  

Using similar reasoning, the ruling families of the lower Gambian Mandinka states, most of whom trace their origins to migrants from the Mandinka (or "Mandinkized") Kaabu Empire of the upper Casamance-Geba River region, likely accepted their Mandinka identity more recently than their upriver counterparts, during years after 1600 when Kaabu seems to have been the most powerful political and cultural unit in the western Mandinka region.  

One could even judge the Wolof-Serer of Siin and Saloum to have come under the political influence of Kaabu at the same time, for the elaborate tales in Siin and Saloum traditions of Mandinka migrants from Kaabu to the Saloum River region, leading to the formation of the ruling guelwar dynasty of those states, suggest political and cultural influence more clearly than they do actual, large-scale migration.  

Finally, if the conclusion about oral traditions suggests that historians may know less of what they once hoped to know from a body of African oral data, there is a conclusion to be made about Mandinka ethnicity that may have valuable implications for the study of history and anthropology on a broader scale. The ethnic identity of Mandinka, and seemingly others, in Senegambia may always have been extremely plastic. Most individuals probably spoke more than one language, as so many do today. Their personal identity, if it involved identity as a member of an ethnic group as it does today, was liable to change over the course of several—or even a few—generations, depending on the strength of the process of cultural transferral that was going on at any given time. If this is true of populations in Senegambia over the centuries, it is unlikely that the same ideas do not apply to the same extent to other groups in other areas of Africa and to groups in other parts of the world.  

This being the case, assessment of historical ethnicity in Sene-
gambia may lead to our thinking again about ethnic origins and histories of select groups of people whose ethnic identities have been bases for the building of scholarship relating to their history.

NOTES

*I presented an earlier version of this paper at the 98th annual meeting of the American Historical Association, December 27, 1983 in San Francisco. I am grateful to the chair of the panel, David Gamble, and to my co-panelists, Peter Mark and Robert Baum, for helpful comments. Discussions with Mark for a year and more prior to the meeting played a role in my deciding to write down my seemingly random thoughts in the first place, and both Mark and Baum presented papers on changing ethnicity among the Jola of southwest Senegal that supported my general arguments relating to the Mandinka. See Robert Baum, "Incomplete Assimilation: Koonjaen and Diola in Pre-Colonial Senegambia;" and Peter Mark, "Conquest, Assimilation, and Change in Northern Basse Casamance." Of course, the normal disclaimer applies: I alone am responsible for ideas put forth in this paper.

1. The Mandinka constitute one of Senegambia's major ethnic groups. Persons who identify themselves as Mandinka occupy a contiguous band of territory that cuts a swath across southern Senegambia, considerably broader in Senegal's interior and narrowing almost to a point at the north bank of the Gambia River. In the east the Mandinka belt melds with the much larger Manding-speaking realm of the Western Sudan.

2. Although thorough discussion of the historiography of the western migrations of the Mandinka is beyond the scope of this paper, brief examination of some of the relevant works from the past century or more can show how widely accepted is the idea of eastern origins for the present Mandinka population in Senegambia. Nineteenth-century books that contain mention of Mandinka migrations into Senegambia include a traveler's account, S.M.X. Golberry, Fragmens d'un voyage en Afrique fait pendant les anées 1785, 1786, et 1787 (2 vols.: Paris, 1802); and two, more formal studies, M. Bertrand-Bocandé, "Notes sur la Guinée portugaise ou Sénégalie meridionale," Bulletin de la Société de Géographie, 3/11 (1849), 265-350, 3/12 (1849), 57-93; and L.J.B. Bérenger-Féraud, Les peuplades de la Sénégalie: histoire, ethnographie, mœurs et coutumes, etc. (Paris, 1879). Maurice Delafosse's important study, Haut-Sénégal-Niger (3 vols.: Paris, 1912), contains information on two western migrants, Amary Sonko and Sané Nianga Taraoré, the latter of whom led migrants to Niani-Wuli in the valley of the Gambia.

Through the middle years of colonial rule various
European officials collected data from Mandinka informants and wrote of the migrations. See, for example, George Lorimer, "Report on the History and Previous Native Administration of Niumiside," Gambia Public Record Office, Banjul, 2/2390, 1942. The importance of such reports of colonial agents, looking for the true "native rulers" for schemes of indirect rule, is often underestimated when considering dissemination of information on ethnic origins.

Several works in Portuguese from the middle of this century deal with the migrations. See António Carreira, Mandingas da Guiné Portuguesa (Bissau, 1947); Jorge V. Caroco, Monjur--O Gabu e a sua história (Bissau, 1948); and A. Teixeira da Mota, Guiné Portuguesa (2 vols.: Lisbon, 1954). Paul Pelissier, Les paysans du Sénégal: Les civilisations agraires du Cayor à la Casamance (Paris, 1966) probably contains more information on specific populations and their migrant origins than any other book dealing with Senegambia. Other recent studies noting the migrations as the source of today's Senegambian Mandinka are Walter Rodney, History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800 (London, 1970); Charlotte A. Quinn, Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia: Traditionalism, Islam, and European Expansion (Evanston, 1972); and Philip D. Curtin, Economic Change in Pre-colonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade (Madison, 1975).

Histories of The Gambia by J.M. Gray, A History of the Gambia (Cambridge, 1940); Lady Southorn, The Gambia: The Story of the Groundnut Colony (London, 1952); and Harry Gailey, A History of the Gambia (London, 1964) all contain information on the migrations, stated with different degrees of authority. (Southorn, for instance, writes, "The Gambia was subject to many invasions of tribes from the East. Each invader staked out a petty kingdom for himself. Of these invaders the Mandingos obtained the chief hold" [38]).

Finally, several textbooks in English and French have spread ideas of the migrations to students on various levels at different times. See W.T. Hamlyn, A Short History of the Gambia (Bathurst, 1931), a book used through many reprints in Gambian schools; Florence O. Mahoney and H.O. Idowu, "The Peoples of Senegambia" in A Thousand Years of West African History, revised edition, edited by J.F.A. Ajayi and Ian Espie (Ibadan, 1969), 132-48; and Sékène-Mody Cissoko, Histoire de l'afrique occidentale: moyen-âge et temps moderne, vii siècle-1850 (Paris, 1966). Cissoko details just which areas different migrants conquered: Gambia, upper Casamance, and perhaps even Djolof for Tiramakan Traore; Bafing-Bondou for Amari Sonko.

3. In no way do I wish to demean the value of the International Conference on the Oral Traditions of Kaabu. In fact, it was one of the best conferences I have attended and I am grateful to the Léopold Senghor Foundation for making possible my attendance. Many of the ideas for this paper germinated in discussions I had with Joye B. Hawkins, Winifred


5. Galloway, "A Listing of Some Kaabu States," provides brief summaries of major traditions of origin of all the Senegambian Mandinka states.

6. The Tiramakan story is the most popular tradition of origin of peoples living in the western Mandinka region. Stories of Tiramakan "going west" are told also in Mali and eastern Guinea. For a translated transcription of a narration of the story of Tiramakan's migration westward see Sidibe, "Tiraamakang."

7. A more complete discussion of the Sora Musa legend is found in my Early History of Niumi, 41ff.

8. Versions of the Amori Sonko story are found in Golberry, Fragmens, II, 118-20, 159ff; Thomas Brown to the Administrator, Bathurst, September 27, 1871, Gambia Public Record Office 1/29; and Hamlyn, Short History, 49.


13. Ibid., 16.


21. One is easily reminded here of the pockets of unassimilated San, living among the culturally-dominant Sotho in hilly regions of Basutoland in the nineteenth century. Because of their hunting-gathering mode of subsistence, the San in Basutoland were no doubt more easily identified than were the culturally-similar practitioners of horticulture living among the Gambian Mandinka.


23. The more thoroughly one gets to know the oral traditions of a specific lineage, the more one is apt to become familiar with the less formal—and less organized and stylized—traditions that hint at historical process. It is not coincidence, I believe, that I knew Jammeh oral history better than I did that of any other lineage and that I also came
to know the body of less-formal Jammeh traditions. A more
thorough explanation of what I consider to have been the
process by which the Jammeh came to be rulers of the Gam-
bian states of Baddibu and Niumi is found in my Early His-
tory of Niumi, 41ff.

24. At this point it seems necessary to make a disclaimer.
Ethnicity is a concept I am uncomfortable applying to res-
idents of Senegambia of a century of more ago. As we know
of it, ethnicity, in terms of the Mandinka, Wolof, Fulbe
(or Fula), Jola, and Serer of Senegambia, may be a concept
imposed on local residents by European colonial officials
as they sought to count people and to put them into various
categories during the early stages of colonial rule. I
suspect that the sense of identity of most Senegambians of
the mid-nineteenth century was tied much more to local
levels than it is today. A Senegambian may have thought
of himself as a member of an extended family, a lineage,
a village, or even at the extreme a widely-dispersed clan,
but his concept of identity, based more on kinship struc-
tures that probably crossed linguistic lines than on a
sense of being part of an ethnic group, may not have ex-
tended in practical terms far beyond the village level.
It is difficult to reconstruct a Senegambian sense of eth-
nicity or identity of more than a century ago, but if even
part of the comments in this note are valid, then it may
be inappropriate to try to reconstruct such a sense for
Senegambians of the past.

25. Small movements of people such as these have been going on
in Senegambia throughout the ages. There is still a con-
siderable amount of population movement with permanent or
semi-permanent settlement. Certainly the nineteenth- and
twentieth-century phenomenon of "strange farming," the
movement of individuals from their homes to good farming
areas to make one or more cash crops, is an example of such
movement. Making possible small-scale, even individual
migration through Senegambia and beyond is the so-called
landlord-stranger relationship, the institutionalized hos-
pitality that enables strangers to reside in communities
for varying lengths of time with the possibility of ulti-
mate assimilation and permanent settlement. An excellent
article on this type of relationship in Sierra Leone, which
is similar to the practice in Senegambia, is V.R. Dorjahn
and Christopher Fyfe, "Landlord and Stranger: Change in

26. There is reason to suspect that long-distance traders, or
a combination of traders and artisans, had a particularly
important role in the process of cultural transferral. In
brief, there may have been a drawn-out process that involved
the movement of small groups of merchants, or merchants
and artisans to new areas where they lived among local pop-
ulations as welcomed "strangers." Once settled they may
have prospered beyond the norm and become the sorts of in-
dividuals to whom local residents wanted to gain connection
through marriage ties or relationships of clientage. Over the years these prosperous merchant families, growing in size as they assimilated indigenous people into their own cultural and linguistic practices, could have served as the focii of cultural transferral in regions of Senegambia. Jan Vansina wonders if such a process would be at the heart of much of the Bantu "expansion" in his "Bantu in the Crystal Ball, II," *HA*, 7 (1980), 312ff.


28. Descendants of the ruling families of the traditional Mandinka states of the upper Gambia--Wuli, Kantora, Jimara, and Nyani--claim their original migrant ancestors came directly from Mali. See Galloway, "A Listing."


30. See note 10 above.

31. In addition to the other historians, who have applied some of these ideas to the study of origins of several different African groups, David Henige has recently studied traditions of origin of several groups of American racial isolates. Examining traditions of Guineas, Melungeons, Lumbees, and Ramapo Mountain people, Henige has found little agreement between their traditions, mostly borrowed, and what can be determined of their actual origins. See his "Origin Traditions of American Racial Isolates: A Case of Something Borrowed," *Appalachian Journal*, 11 (1983/84), 200-213.