

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF MIGRATION:  
CASE STUDY OF A SONINKE VILLAGE IN MAURITANIA

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of BENJAMIN RYAN BURGEM find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Chair

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CASE STUDY OF A SONINKE VILLAGE IN MAURITANIA

Abstract

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Return migration for economic reasons is a deeply rooted phenomenon in Soninke culture. As a people whose homeland straddles a transition zone of environmental and cultural regions the Soninke have always been involved in supra-regional economic exchanges. Soninke traders played an important role in the development and evolution of Trans-Saharan trade in West Africa. With the arrival of Europeans, Soninkes were once again well placed to gain from an expansion of economic possibilities. As European influence became more pervasive in West Africa and industrialization reshaped the balance of power and trade globally, Soninkes became wage laborers in colonial centers and ultimately in the colonial metropole. Today, there is a well established Soninke presence across Western Europe centered in Paris. These migrant communities maintain a great deal of economic and social influence upon the Soninke homeland.

To understand the Soninke migratory phenomenon it is necessary to view it as a social phenomenon that is widely celebrated in Soninke communities as a form of ethnic non-reliance upon the state. At the same time, it must be recognized that certain pathways to economic migratory success taken by individual migrants, families, and lineages are viewed by the wider community as socially destructive. Concerns about the social implications of migration have

grown with its economic importance to the point where there is a distinct set of mores migrants are supposed to adhere to and clear expectations that they are judged by.

Increasingly, migration has come to provide an almost necessary input in order to maintain rural village life in a decreasingly productive environment with an increasing population. As the risks of migration become greater and the environment continues to become less productive rural Soninke villages will have to develop new strategies of economic survival in order to maintain the unique social environment of their traditions.

Economic return migration is one rational method of getting the most out of a globalized economy with varying levels of risk and reward at the different levels of social distance from home. However, migration alone is not a viable path to sustaining traditional households in the long term.

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## INTRODUCTION

### General Theme

Throughout the world, governmental and non-governmental organizations work in rural villages to improve infrastructure and make life better according to checklists of criteria they have developed at the global level. This diverse range of organizations strikes forth every day to develop places that they see as un- or underdeveloped, to educate those that they see as un- or undereducated, to provide for the needy, and to make life better for those they serve. Often this noble cause appears fairly straightforward to implement, as in the case of delivering food aid to the hungry people of the world. However, for more ambitious or ambiguous projects addressing infrastructure, resource use, or changing cultural conceptions and norms, careful consideration and understanding of the cultural and historical contexts within which these changes are being pursued is crucial.

Simultaneously, there is another form of international exchange and development occurring. This is the process carried out by countless individuals striking forth into the “developed” world, from their homes in “un- or underdeveloped” regions. These people disperse around the globe often building their own networks to find work, education, and experience. They also bring resources and new perspectives back to their home communities fueling change and development in personalized ways.

Today discussions of globalization and migration are expanding realms of scholarship within the frameworks afforded by the social sciences, but are also widely seen as pertinent topics in discussions of national policy dealing with inclusion, exclusion and economics. Indeed, in the world of global market capitalism in which we find ourselves today, migration has become an increasingly political and polarizing topic. As the movement of goods and capital at a global

scale is widely accepted and expedited by a set of agreements and institutions (WTO, IMF, World Bank, etc.), the movement of people across international borders has become increasingly prone to restriction and controversy. The popularity of studies on migration has led to a large number of papers focusing on the peoples of the Western Sahel, as it is they who are the most numerous African migrants to be found in continental Western Europe. While in the early post-colonial era most of these studies, and migrants, were centered on France. Today more American researchers are becoming involved.

### Thesis Statement

This thesis will address the spectrum of global and transnational issues wrapped up with migration from the perspective of a small, migrant-sending community on the fringes of the Sahel in West Africa. By seeking to understand the push and pull forces driving this movement of people and the social and economic impacts this movement has on society, one place's involvement in this global phenomenon will be contextualized.

The specific ethnic context for the research is that of one of the most prolific African migrant groups of the post-colonial era. Soninkes were the early dominant Sub-Saharan African ethnic group in France and are an increasing presence in Spain and the rest of Western Europe. They can also be found as well-established merchants in major cities throughout the African continent. While research attention is generally focused on either western aid agency impacts in non-western locales or on non-western peoples' impacts in western societies this research will attempt to address primarily the cultural and economic impacts of Soninke migrants in their places of origin.

The overall objectives of this thesis are threefold. First, is a synthesis of the historical precedents leading to the development of modern economic migration, from the pre-colonial era

through the time of the fieldwork, among the Soninke of the Guidimakha region of Mauritania. Second, the modern migration phenomenon will be related to the Soninke spirit of self-reliance and self-determination in opposition to the Mauritanian state, which is seen unfavorably for a number of reasons. Next, the perspectives of villagers will be given through their own voices, both migrant and non-migrant, on how this phenomenon is changing local society. These three sections will then be followed by my appraisal of the near future of this trend and an interpretation of the underlying implications for Soninke social and economic reproduction.

### **Topical Foundations**

#### **The Migratory Phenomenon in Social Science Perspective**

Migration has been a focus of social science research since the 1940s. The early period of migration research focused on urbanization in the late colonial era and early post-colonial states. Research undertaken under the auspices of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute by anthropologists such as J. Barnes and J.C. Mitchell in the post World War II period showed the importance of social networks in the lives of migrants. Their works helped to show how these networks sustained and regulated migration in the copper belt of Southern Africa. Before long, anthropologists such as J. Watson in Britain began looking at migrant groups in their own societies (Barnard and Spencer 1996:370-371).

Beginning in the 1970s migration studies expanded to look at the wider phenomenon of international migration. At this time studies of return migration began to appear (Levinson and Ember 1996:793-796). George Gmelch was an important contributor to this attempt to bring anthropological research up to speed with migration practices in the post-colonial world. He defined return migration as, “the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle.” (Gmelch 1980:136). He also coined definitions for other migratory patterns which will fall

under the general term return migration in this work (e.g. remigration and circular migration). While not using examples of African populations Gmelch typified the return migrant as someone moving from a rural, developing region to an industrialized urban center (137). However, in his typologies Gmelch focuses on push factors driving migrants to return (138-140). In my case study migrants make it clear that their intent to return home is primarily driven by pull factors. Nevertheless, Gmelch discusses the complexities of reintegration and the social and economic impacts this has on the home community. These topics are central to this thesis. Gmelch also extended a call to further participant-observation efforts to develop the study of this phenomenon (142-156).

### The Rise of Transnationalism

More recently, discussions of transnationalism have become pervasive themes in the development of anthropological theory on migration. This perspective incorporates an understanding of the role of the household and especially the social network as forces mediating between the individual and the global system (Levinson and Ember 1996:795). Nina Glick Schiller was at the forefront of transnationalism theory and its implications for migration. She and her co-authors define transnational migration as, “a process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.” (Schiller et al. 1995:48). Their main point is that transnationalism encompasses the regular activities and general mentalities of people involved in a disparate cultural realm. These individuals do not fully integrate into their adopted countries either by choice or political reality. Schiller considers migrant organizations that function in the transnational space to be both assistants in adaptation and structures that preserve traditional practices and values (54-56). The migrants discussed in this thesis generally refuse to integrate into the countries where they work,

but those who do make attempts at integration are working towards integrating into the wider Islamic migrant community of their adopted nation. The important role played by migrant associations in the case study community will be discussed in relation to the tasks ascribed to them by Schiller and her co-authors. These theorists also emphasized that transnational migration is not only a social strategy, nor simply an economic strategy, but also includes maintenance of social position as an integral component (54). These intentions are cited by migrants and non-migrants alike as reasons for migration in the interviews presented in the findings, in Chapter 6.

Many more researchers have taken up the effort to further develop the concepts of return migration and transnationalism in the social sciences. Among them Thomas Faist worked with transnationalism to describe the mechanisms which sustain it. He also developed a typology differentiating between transnational kinship groups, transnational communities, and transnational circuits (Faist 2000:4). According to this typology the form of transnationalism practiced in my case study community is based on kinship groups. Steven Vertovec performed further work attempting to delineate the possible structural transformations implicated by transnational migration. In his essay, he named three structural sets of change: migrant outlook bifocality, challenges to identity, and economic development (Vertovec 2004). All three of these types of structural change can be observed in the case study.

With the burgeoning of the concept of transnationalism came also many problems of definition and questions of applicability. Many of these issues were addressed in an essay by Alejandro Portes in 2001, where he attempted to clarify the concept (Portes 2001). Regardless of problems in delineating what is and is not transnational migration my Soninke case study example fits even the strictest definitions of this term and exhibits key traits.

### Recent Research Close to the Topic

Efforts to understand migration and its implications in its present form have led to many new scholarly works pertinent to this thesis. Two monographs on the phenomenon look at neighboring ethnicities' migration patterns to Europe focusing on Italy (Elia 2006; Carter 1997). Questions of the economic and developmental impacts of remittances are addressed by J.P. Azam and F. Gubert who use example data from a Malian portion of the Soninke homeland (Azam and Gubert 2005). A study by Daum also investigated the complexities of remittance driven development in Mali (Daum 1995). Dolores Koenig studied social stratification in terms of network membership and the resources provided through them among Malinke and Fulbe farmers to the south of Malian Soninke regions (Koenig 2005). Additionally, Saido Traore looked into the ethnic differentiation of migration in the Senegal River Valley (Traore 1994). Another contemporary work by Abdoulaye Kane addresses generalizations on the economic organization of West African migration (Kane 2000).

Many other works address specific questions about migration through research in the Soninke homeland which do not directly relate to topics discussed in this thesis (see: Findley 1994; Gubert 2002 and 2007; Lalou and Piché 2004; and Swindell 1978). Other researchers working in the vicinity of the Soninke homeland addressed economic and development issues without focusing on migration (see: Adams 1977; Connor et al. 2008; Lagoutte 1988; Warm's 1994).

### Literature on the Soninke

Numerous scholars have written on the Soninke specifically. Many historical works deal with the medieval-era Empire of Ghana. Other historians have published on colonial era issues relating to the period's migratory undertakings by the Soninke and their economic motives (see:

Clark 1994; Manchuelle 1989; Moitt 1989; Roberts 1980; Roberts and Kline 1980; and Swindell 1980). The most influential work on the Soninke in English is the book by François Manchuelle published in 1997. This historical work spans from the mid-nineteenth century to 1960 and argues that colonial era Soninke migration was not driven by environmental or economic hardship but rather by a quest for increased prestige in the home communities through economic wealth (Manchuelle 1997). Manchuelle's dissertation covers a wider period of Soninke migration but its argument does not differ from that of the later book (Manchuelle 1987).

In the social sciences most of the works on the Soninke have been produced by French authors dealing with the migrant community in that country. The most well known is that of Mahamet Timera published in 1996. Timera deals exclusively with social issues in France itself. His work most often addresses issues pertinent only to permanent migrants (Timera 1996). Because of this, his work remains peripheral to this thesis and will not be discussed here in detail. Monique Chastanet, herself a historian who has published articles on the Soninke, provides a useful discussion of the works of Manchuelle and Timera (Chastanet 1999). Other works deal with the specific issues for the West African migrant community in France (see: Hémard-Fournet 1994; Sargent and Cordell 2003). Another work addresses linguistic and identity aspects stemming from migration (see: Van Den Avenne 2004). The question of polygyny for West African migrant families was addressed in 1988 by French anthropologists (Fainzang and Journet 1988). The wider implications for bringing up a family in a transnational space are summed up in a 2005 work by Parreñas.

### Ethnographic Precedents

The earliest ethnographic writings directly focused on Soninke culture come from Saint-Père, a French colonial administrator posted to Selibaby, Mauritania in the 1920s. In this work,



based in the case study region of the Guidimakha, Saint-Père undertook to explain the historical arrival of Soninke people to the region, the political implications of this arrival, political organization, economic activities in detail, social organization, and cultural mores (Saint-Père 1925). This work is clearly written with an eye towards colonial intentions. This is evinced generally by a focus on possible spheres of economic expansion. This perspective is more subtly expressed through the inclusion of a short yet involved explanation of the complex Soninke political divisions in the region and what would or would not be considered a legitimate candidate for investiture of colonial power according to traditional precedent (Saint-Père 1925:16-17). Nevertheless, Saint-Père's thorough explanation of the arrival and establishment of Soninke in the Guidimakha has never been surpassed and much effort is put forth to describe the full gamut of social practices (Saint-Père 1925). In the 1950s Charles Monteil authored another work on the Soninke providing translations of collected oral legends given in both Soninke and French, a 2000 word vocabulary, a brief grammar, and some historical background to the legends put forth (Monteil 1953).

Another ethnographic study carried out in Soninke region of Dyahunu, Mali was published in 1971 by Pollet and Winter following their fieldwork in 1964-5 (Pollet and Winter 1971:11). While carried out in a different region from the present case study, this wide-ranging work provides a perspective of Soninke culture at the beginning of the great migratory push to France. Nevertheless, the work does not give much weight to the issue of migration with under two pages summarizing the topic in the chapter on economy (140-142). In this brief sketch of Soninke migration to France, the authors admit that they lack necessary temporal distance from this new phenomenon to accurately describe its implications. Yet they note that there had not yet appeared any "culture shock" for these migrants nor any social or psychological impacts in

Soninke villages (141). The authors' description of economic realities focuses heavily on the agricultural sector and implies that there had as yet been very little economic impact from migration at the time of their fieldwork (148). However, the work makes note of some social perspectives on migration that are similar to those expressed by people who I interviewed in 2007 (141-142).

In the late 1960s and 1970s, because of their visible presence in urban France, early post-colonial era West African migrants began to receive academic attention (see: Bergues 1973). This attention also led to one study on the economic and social impacts on the Mauritanian Guidimakha of the highly visible migratory effort. This study took a survey approach and focused mostly on quantifiable economic indicators, for example the study noted that migration had more than doubled the region's GDP (Dussauze-Ingrand 1974:254-255). On the topic of social impacts this study shows that at the beginnings of the 1970s migration was widely seen as beneficial and several basic infrastructural and subsistence improvements were noted while traditional organization remained fully intact, however there is mention of a decrease in agricultural productivity (249-254). Another book, by Phillip Bradley et al., specifically quantified the ecological and economic realities in the Mauritanian Guidimakha in 1975 (Bradley et al. 1977:vii). This broad survey attempted to enumerate these factors in order to provide the data needed to pursue a thoughtful development strategy in the near future. Primarily an environmental survey, the work nonetheless devotes two chapters to discussing migration. In its discussion of migration the work points to the phenomenon as a cause for a decline in agricultural production (51-63). It gives some statistics of migrant percentages by village which show a general differentiation between river bank villages sending large numbers of migrants and inland villages with much smaller proportions of migrants (53). The study also notes a

nascent financial individualization of migrants in contrast to the traditional household economy (51-63). While Bradley's work is an excellent source of data, the developments he proposed never came to fruition.

More recently, there have been works on contemporary Soninke migration by new anthropological researchers. Moussa Konate, himself a Malian, defended a Ph.D. dissertation at UCLA on Soninke migration from the Yelimane region in 1997 (Konate 1997). Bruce Whitehouse at Brown University presented a M.A. thesis on Soninke migration in 2003. This case study is also focused at the eastern end of the Soninke homeland in Mali (Whitehouse 2003:5). Whitehouse is currently working on his Ph.D. research at Brown on Central African Soninke trading communities.

While both of these anthropological works are quite similar to this thesis topically, it should be pointed out that both were carried out several hundred miles to the east of the present case study village in distant Soninke regions in Mali. Konate's work is centered on the Yelimane region of Mali (Konate 1997:22). Whitehouse's case study site is an unnamed village several hundred miles further east (Whitehouse 2003:5). This difference alone provides the impetus for further study of Soninke migration. The migrant sending community fieldwork for both studies was also carried out in a much shorter time frame, six months for Konate and two months for Whitehouse (Konate 1997:22; Whitehouse 2003:2). Beyond geography and time frame, there are also differences of theoretical perspective and methodological practice between the mentioned works and this thesis. The two studies differ from this thesis through their more exclusive focus on migrant perspectives and practices.

Theoretically Whitehouse's work is more concerned with quantifying social distance, describing practical economic ties, and developing a normative definition of migration in the

community where he worked. He attempts this without questioning the more profound social and organizational implications of the migratory network on the home community. His general organization of the phenomenon is dichotomized into “centripetal” and “centrifugal forces” (Whitehouse 2003:2). This leads Whitehouse to different conclusions from those presented in this work. Specifically that the migrants from his case study community are “probably not” transmigrants and that they do not exhibit traits of cultural bifocality (55-56).

Konate’s method is a regional survey approach rather than the community case study format. His interviews include important numbers of NGO leaders and government officials (Konate 1997:22-25). The work, entitled “Tunga,” analyzes the topic of Soninke migration through a primarily historical-structuralist lens to explain the rise of Soninke migration during colonialism and its continuation through the present day (204). At the same time, the work brings in the issues of transnationalism and attempts to quantify the structural forces impinging upon Soninke migrants’ economic possibilities in France during the late 1990s (10-17, 205-206). Nevertheless, this attempt is less profoundly investigated with the author quickly returning his focus to historical causal factors (203). Throughout this process, Konate attempts to implicate development initiatives into a possible way forward for the region of his study, yet admits that development “success” will require dramatic shifts both in the perspectives of Soninke people and in the organizational frameworks of development agencies (198-202).

The significance of the present case study is in its application of a solid foundation of traditional cultural anthropological immersion research allowing a quality of breadth and nuance difficult to grasp in the context of a shorter fieldwork time frame. Additionally, rather than fusing to one wide-ranging theory of social power, this research is built upon an application of several important social power theories merged syncretically to more distinctly elucidate the

matrix of social power forces present in the case study village. In so doing, this case study is a call back to the practical methodology of an earlier ethnographic era while remaining abreast of the conceptual innovations of the past 30 years.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

#### **The Pragmatic Syncretism of Cultural Incorporation**

The networks of meaning that create a shared web of public symbolism described by Clifford Geertz emphasize an effort carried out by individual actors in concert who have inherited the same cultural universe. Geertz's concept of the "symbolic template" underscores the necessity of understanding the ways in which people interpret their own actions (Wolf 1999:59). In looking at the pragmatic incorporation of new technology among the BaKongo, John Janzen showed how this symbolic structure must be understood to elucidate the development of a pluralistic approach to problem solving which maintains cultural coherence while taking advantage of new opportunities (Janzen 1978:223-229).

#### **Social Power Dynamics in Theory**

Dynamic forces affecting social power balances in nations, cultures, and communities have been a topic of theoretical debate in socio-cultural anthropology since its beginnings as a field. Edmund Leach recognized the fluidity of these forces (Erickson and Murphy 1996:97-98). Victor Turner emphasized the importance of symbolism and symbolic logic in maintaining a cultural framework for interactions between people (Erickson and Murphy 1996:137-138; Barnard and Spencer 1996:536). Eric Wolf describes four modes of power each correlating with different scales of interaction: potency or capability, interactional or transactional, tactical or organizational, and structural (Wolf 1990:586-587). He also advocated the utility of these categorizations and the need for anthropological research in seeking explanations of the levels of

structure and their interactions (586-594). Wolf also emphasizes the importance of looking at power relations over a longer time scale and in times of social strife to bring to the fore its structures (590, 593).

### Anthropological Political Economy

With the rise of political economy as a theoretical issue in anthropology, economics and globalization moved to center stage. Inequality was recognized as a driving force; both in terms of wealth and of power. However, the perspective emphasized the agency of local peoples and cultures in melding any manifestation of global capitalism in their cultural space according to their own culture-history and social traditions (Erickson and Murphy 1996:1152-1153). Michael Taussig focused his studies on local interpretations of the diversity of encounters between radically different societies. Here he argued that the local culture plays the primary role in creating meaning from this encounter (154).

### Bourdieu and Beyond

The works of Pierre Bourdieu center on the power over production. In this perspective, power over economic production allocates control over the production of knowledge itself. In this sense, the prevailing “doxa” reflects the perspective and interests of the dominant group. The accumulation of symbolic capital by individuals or groups is ultimately shaped by the existing symbolic framework. This is sometimes circumvented by groups in society who create and subscribe to alternative symbolic taxonomies (Erickson and Murphy 1996:161-162).

As mentioned above (in The Migratory Phenomenon in Social Science Perspective) Nina Glick Schiller and her peers worked to develop the concept of the transnational migrant. Her description of “simultaneous multi-stranded social relations” was an idea that moved migration

research beyond focusing on one place at a time and into an amorphous research sphere more congruent with many modern migrant realities (Schiller et al. 1995:48).

### Fitting the Pieces Together

The aforementioned power traits each specify different interactional foci. Nevertheless, all center on the nexus of power with that of the symbol. These ideas can be used to provide insight into realities existing in the case study community. Ultimately, this work describes and explains the dynamic forces shaping the social power framework in this community by calling upon pieces of the works of these theorists. It is from the perspective of anthropology as a cumulative, experimental effort that this work takes its theoretical bearings (Wolf 1990:594).

The community upon which this case study is built is experiencing an assault on its traditional economic and political power structures. This confrontation is expressed by structurally conservative individuals' through a symbol-rich dialogue affirming their allegiances to the incumbent edifice of power. Those who seek to create a new structural order have already largely disengaged from the traditional community structure and pursue their interests in a transnational cultural space which blossomed over the past 50 years. The conflict between the traditionalists and revisionists is most contentious where the two meet. That is, in the ancestral village where the cultural symbols of identity and belonging are forged and tested. In this arena, where traditional cultural structure still holds sway it is organizational power between groups that takes the most open form of conflict. This conflict is carried out using symbols to express the power behind the construction and maintenance of identity leading to prestige.

In this case study I show how by looking at power through the scale-based functional delineations described by Wolf, the power framework in contention can be visualized. From this starting point, by following the lead of Schiller and other transnational theorists, the set of

transnational characteristics exhibited by the case study village can be understood in terms of its economic, social, and identity-based aspects. Then, focusing on these key traits, by looking to theorists such as Taussig and Bourdieu, the functional motivations for and organization of migrant-related actions can be understood through the symbolic superstructure of the culture itself.

### **Roadmap**

This thesis will proceed in five general chapters. After this introduction to the thesis, Chapter 2, Setting: Historical and Regional Dimensions begins with an overview of Soninke involvement in the ancient West African empires and proceeds to a discussion of the colonial effort in Mauritania and its implications for Soninke communities. This section then proceeds to a timeline of Mauritanian political developments from its formation through the present including some brief social parameters for contextualization. The setting then transitions to a description of the Soninke culture beginning with a review of previous ethnographic works continuing on to an environmental description followed by self-perceived identity markers and aspects of modern social reality not addressed in other works. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of recent developments across the themes discussed.

Chapter 3, The Case Study Site, describes the village where fieldwork was carried out. Beginning with a short description of the village's initial settlement, it proceeds to describe the community's development to the present time. This is followed by a description of environmental change over the period of habitation, its implications for people living in the area, and a brief description of current farming practices. The chapter concludes with an outline of the village's general economic and political parameters.



Chapter 4, Globalism and the National Scale maps out the economic realities of Mauritania. This is done by beginning from the greatest distance and then focusing in closer and closer. Global indices and institutions are enumerated followed by national economic indicators and government involvement in international economic interactions. Next come sections describing industry and infrastructure preceded by a summation of these development spheres in relation to national politics. This is followed by a transition to regional scale implications and the influence of individual migrants and associations on the economy and development of the Soninke homeland. The chapter continues with a description of the case study village's power structures. Finally, a set of sketches of families from the case study illustrates the spectrum of economic realities to be found in the study village today.

The methods are described in Chapter 5. Peace Corps service in relation to the research is explained. This is followed by a description of the participant-observation environment and the extent of integration into the village. Next is an outline of interview techniques and questions used in the village. A similar format is used to then describe research performed in the migrant setting.

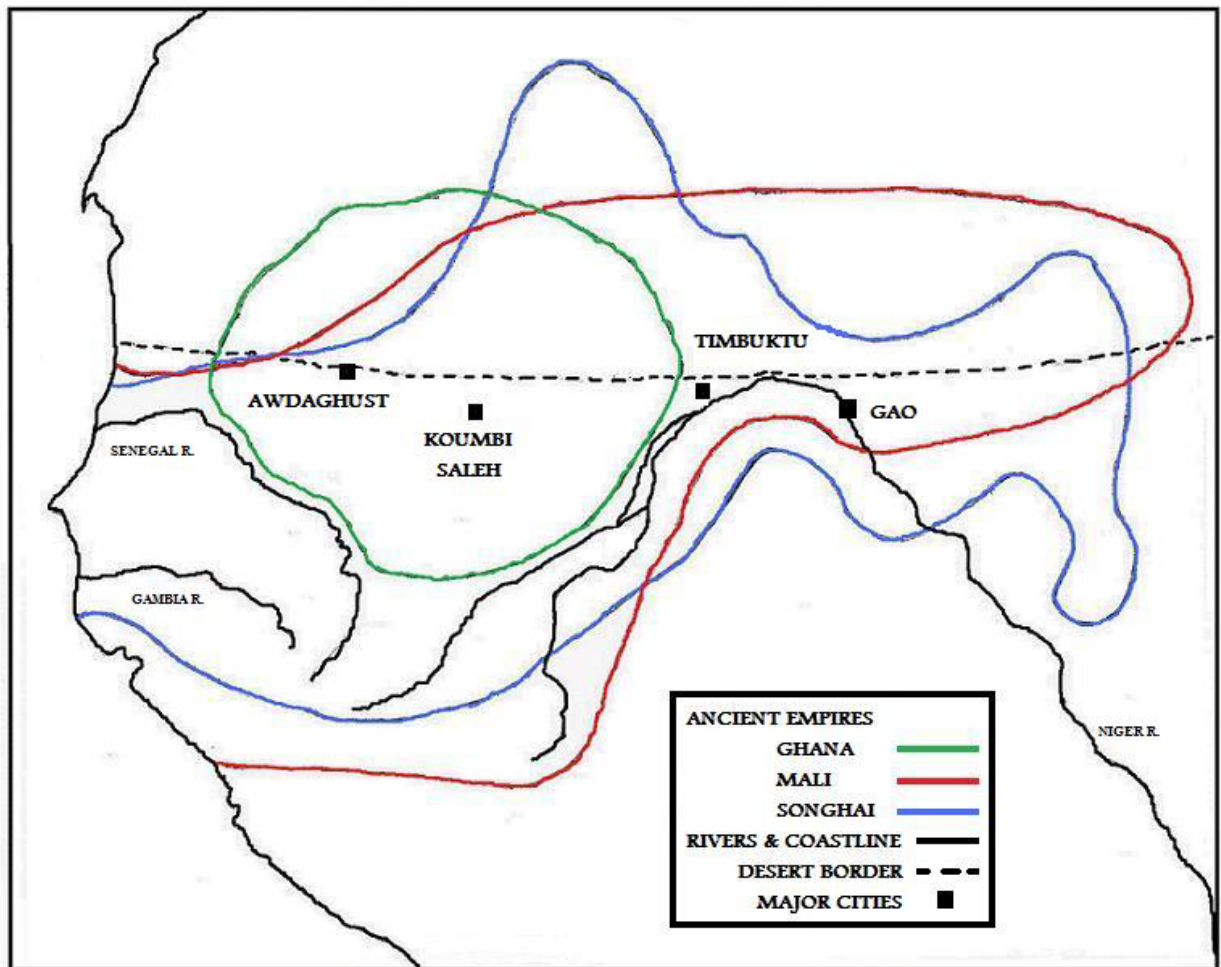
Findings are enumerated in Chapter 6. This chapter gives voice to the perspectives of interviewees. It is organized into sections according to age groups and interview location. In the village setting it is divided between non-migrants, aspiring migrants, and experienced migrants. These opinions are contextualized with a description of village realities. This is followed by the migration histories and perspectives of migrants encountered away from home. Next, observations on divisions between various migrant situations are discussed.

Finally, Chapter 7 provides a brief conclusion. In it I summarize my insights and thoughts on the phenomenon of Soninke migration, and discuss possible directions for the future

economy of the Soninke homeland and the evolution of the migrant community. Lastly, opportunities for further research are outlined.

## SETTING: HISTORICAL AND REGIONAL DIMENSIONS

### Pre-Euro Contact Politics



Map 1 : Early West African Empires. Adapted from: (Dieterlen 1992 ; Monteil 1968 ).

### Times of Empire

The Soninke people, of the wider Mande culture/language group, were involved in wide-ranging economic exchange long before the arrival of Europeans. Written accounts begin with the Empire of *Ghana*, an ancient Soninke empire known to these people as *Wagadu*. Our only descriptions about it come from Arab chroniclers. Writing in the 11<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the best know of these is Abū ‘Ubayd ‘Abd Allāh Al-Bakrī who, while never seeing the kingdom

himself, compiled knowledge brought back by *Almoravid* voyagers, traders, and warriors from his home in Cordoba (Davidson 1987:83). The fragmentary writings of Al-Bakrī that remain describe great wealth in gold and impressive armies. The king was richly clad in gold and surrounded by advisors nearly as richly dressed. Even the king's guard dogs, "wear collars of gold and silver studded with a number of balls of the same metals." (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:80). The king's wealth was based on taxation of trade as well as secretly located gold mines. Al-Bakrī gives us a glimpse of the taxation system, "on every donkey-load of salt when it is brought into the country their king levies one golden dinar, and two dinars when it is sent out." (81). Beyond taxation, "The nuggets found in all the mines of his country are reserved for the king, only this gold dust being left for the people." (81). Indeed, Ghana's wealth was famed from even earlier times in the Arab world. Writing in the eighth century, Abū Muhammad Al-Hasan Al-Hamdānī, states bluntly, "the richest gold mine on earth is that of Ghāna." (29).

Ghana is the first known large-scale power managing the southern frontiers of Trans-Saharan trade in West Africa. While we do not know when it began, it was already a large organized kingdom by the time of our first written evidence at the turn of the ninth century (Davidson 1987:79). It controlled the *Sahel*, the forest/desert interface, including all of southeastern Mauritania, northwestern Mali, and eastern Senegal (Fage 2002:68). Trade centered around the exchange of desert salt for gold from mines in the forests among other goods (Davidson 1987:87; Fage 2002:56, 69).

The empire was effective because of its mastery of iron for weapons and agricultural implements (Davidson 1987:81). Evidence of superiority through iron weapons is found in the work of Abū 'Abd Allāh Muhammad Al-Zuhrī, writing in the twelfth century and discussing relations between the people of Ghana and one of their neighbors. "The people of Ghāna make

raids on them every year... These people have no iron and fight only with clubs of ebony. For this reason the people of Ghāna overcome them, for they fight them with swords and spears.” (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:98). Ghana was successful in maintaining power for several centuries because of its centralized power over a hierarchy of enfeoffed nobles and cavalry forces which controlled and guaranteed the southern reaches of the western Trans-Saharan caravan routes into the desert (Fage 2002:57). At its height Ghana controlled Awdaghust, a southern trading town of the regional desert nomads, the *Sanhaja* (71). This massive empire was defended, according to Al-Bekrī, by a formidable army capable of putting: “200,000 men into the field, more than 40,000 of them archers.” (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:81).

Ghana’s capital was *Koumbi Saleh*, north of the modern-day Soninke homeland, in Southeastern Mauritania. It was a double town with Muslim traders living in a separate stone town six miles from the town of the king with the distance between filled with dwellings. (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:79-80; Fage 2002:57). Modern excavations at the site show that the stone town covered 200 acres (Fage 2002:65). At this time the Sahelian region extended much further north than it does today. That the Sahara has been expanding and desiccating for several centuries is widely accepted. The archaeological record shows that in prehistoric times the Sahara was a well-watered grassland. Prehistoric engravings of charioteers have been found on rock formations deep in the Sahara (Fage 2002:45). At the time of Ghana the Sahara was already a formidable desert, yet general climatic shifts have consistently expanded the desert southward since those times. In the more immediate past a variety of human driven activities have accelerated this expansion to the point where the Sahara is estimated to move an annual average of two kilometers southward. Indeed, the imperial capital Koumbi Saleh whose ruins now sit on the fringes of the desert would have been deep in the *Sahel* during the time of Ghana’s

prominence. It is described by Al-Bakrī as having many “groves and thickets” of trees (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:80).

The Empire of Ghana flourished until midway through the 11<sup>th</sup> century. While it depended upon the trade routes for prominence, it may have also met its end through them. The armies of the Almoravids moved southwards along the caravan routes in a quest to expand their own empire and the scope of Islam. In the descriptions of Abū Zayd ‘Abd Al-Rahmān Ibn Khaldūn from the fourteenth century: “the authority of the people of Ghāna waned and their prestige declined as that of the veiled people, their neighbors on the north next to the land of the Berbers [the Almoravids], grew (as we have related). These extended their domination over the Sūdān [land of the blacks], and pillaged, imposed tribute and poll-tax, and converted many of them to Islam. Then the authority of the rulers of Ghāna dwindled away and they were overcome...” (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:333).

In 1042 the Almoravid movement mentioned above was born among the Sanhaja desert tribes, followers of ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Yassin, who launched a jihad against nonbelievers and war of conquest against the wealthy Islamic lands of present day Morocco, Algeria, and Spain from the regions of the Western Sahara. The term Almoravid itself derives from al-Murabitun, which in Arabic means literally ‘people of the fortified monastery’ or as more recently deciphered ‘people of the persuasion’ (Fage 2002:71). The implication is that these people practiced a form of Islam which was both puritanical and militant. In the north, the Almoravids were consolidating their power across western North Africa from their newly founded capital at Marrakech (168). In the south, their drive to control the southern terminus of Trans-Saharan trade and to expand the reach of Islam pushed Ibn Yassin to launch a jihad against Ghana in 1054 quickly retaking Awdaghust (Fage 2002:71; Davidson 1987:83, 88). As implied above by Ibn Khaldūn, the war climaxed

under the subsequent Almoravid ruler Abu Bakr with the capture of Koumbi Saleh in 1076, marking Ghana's decline (Davidson 1987:84). The account of Ghana's demise at the hands of the Almoravids given by Ibn Khaldūn had been widely accepted among historians for many years. However, beginning with the publication of an article in 1982 this account has been refuted by a pair of historians. Their detailed, and now widely accepted, research into the Arabic chronicles and more recent oral sources of West African history delves more deeply into the issue than this overview warrants. Suffice it to say that these authors assert with no small amount of evidence that: Ghana peacefully and voluntarily converted to Islam around the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the Almoravid presence in the region of Ghana was a cooperative one (Conrad and Fisher 1982:44-45). Whether Ghana's supremacy was quashed by northern invaders or the empire slowly passed to a more peripheral role as Almoravid control pushed traders towards more easterly Trans-Saharan routes and agriculture suffered with the increased presence of Sanhaja herdsmen and drought as put forth by others (Fage 2002:72-73) is of little consequence to the story that follows.

There is no dispute over the fact that the Almoravids did not rise to imperial power in the *Sahel* themselves. Their power was dissipated following the deaths of strong leaders near the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and rekindled rivalries between the Sanhaja factions (Fage 2002:73). Following this, a reformist conquest by the *Zenata Almohads* in the middle 12<sup>th</sup> century finished off the brief but spectacularly extensive power of the Almoravids (171-172). Instead it was *Mali*, a *Malinke* (another *Mande* group closely related to the Soninke) dominated empire recently converted to Islam and more tightly organized and centered further to the east, which began to consolidate power in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Davidson 1987:89). Under the leadership of Sundiata Keita, Mali expanded beyond the former frontiers of Ghana in 1240 (89). From the

writings of Ibn Khaldūn, “Later the people of Mālī outnumbered the peoples of the Sūdān in their neighbourhood and dominated the whole region. They vanquished the Sūsū and acquired all their possessions, both their ancient kingdom and that of Ghāna as far as the Ocean on the west. They were Muslims.” (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:333). Mali’s capitals were many, but most famously at Timbuktu on the Niger bend. This state had closer ties to both the forests and the larger Muslim world. At one point it stretched from the Saharan trading ports to the borders of the tropical forests (Fage 2002:74). It became legendary in the Muslim world with the pilgrimage of the King Mansa Kankan Musa to Mecca in 1324-5, passing through Cairo with an impressive entourage (Davidson 1987:91; Fage 2002:75). Ibn Khaldūn cites accounts of the famous king’s passage. “His equipment and furnishings were carried by 12,000 private slave women... Mansā Mūsā came from his country with 80 loads of gold dust.” (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:335).

Mali managed trade in a similar fashion to that of Ghana. However, it is often considered more successful as an empire due to its more firm grasp of control on the caravan routes themselves, thereby increasing prosperity (Davidson 1987:87, 93-94). Indeed, the great traveler Shams Al-Dīn Abū ‘ Abd Allāh Muhammad Ibn Battūta, spoke of Mali saying that there was, “security embracing the whole country, so that neither traveler there nor dweller has anything to fear from thief or usurper.” (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:296). During this period the Soninke homelands continued as vassal states to the new empire and retained local power structures.

After less than two centuries of dominance Mali began to decline at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and in its place rose the *Songhai* Empire of the Songhai people centered even further East in Gao of present day eastern Mali (Davidson 1987:89, 101). Under the leadership of Sonni Ali beginning in 1464, Songhai expanded westward through the heartlands of the former Empire



of Mali (101). By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century with power in the hands of Mohammed Turé Askia (himself a Mande, probably of Soninke origin) Songhai power had reached the Soninke homelands of the Senegal River Valley (102). This put Soninke states on the very farthest western fringes of the last great Sahelian empire.

Following a century of dominance Songhai too was felled in 1591 with the capture of Timbuktu and Gao, this time by the 4,000 strong Moroccan forces of El Mansur equipped with modern firearms (Davidson 1987:103; Hargreaves 1967:28). The Moroccans made Timbuktu and the surrounding region a political subordinate. With the fall of Songhai in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century came the end of the era of West African empires. However, by 1660 the region was acting independently (Hargreaves 1967:28-29). At this point, Trans-Saharan trade became centered even further to the east, effectively out of range of the Soninke homeland's involvement (Fage 2002:79).

It is important to note that each of these empires was controlled by Mande peoples excepting the early period of Songhai (Fage 2002:71-79). The Mande comprise several ethnicities whose traditions revolve around farming and caste-based village life. They share a language family which includes Soninke, Bambara, Malinke, Khassonke, and Dioula (Girier 1996:45). These empires were organized into largely independent vassal states outside of the imperial core (Fage 2002:56). Descriptions of the king's court in Ghana mention ranks of princes of the various lands as in the work of Al-Bakrī (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:80). The essential impetus of the empires was economic: the management of long-distance trade (Fage 2002:69-70). In the case of each of these empires the Soninke, after falling from power with Ghana remained incorporated as vassal states in the two later empires thus retaining important relationships within the larger imperial context and wider trading world. Ibn Khaldūn evidences

this by stating, “Ghāna has become subject to the sultan of Mālī.” (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:320). It is not that Ghana had been destroyed, but supplanted.

During this time Ibn Khaldūn is told by his sources that one caravan town saw at least 12,000 camels pass through in a year on their way to Mali. (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:339). All throughout this period the Soninke homeland sat as the southern terminus of the westernmost Trans-Saharan trade routes meaning that as a whole they partook in a greater volume of trade yearly than that described by Ibn Khaldūn. Thus, the Soninke people remained deeply involved in the workings of Trans-Saharan trade and commerce throughout the imperial phase of West African history (Davidson 1987:88).

Despite the wide-ranging connections forged through commerce and trade it is clear that cultural differences and political conflict has plagued the region which became Mauritania. As can be seen in the preceding history of imperial struggles, the region is at the confluence of two distinct civilizational complexes; that of North Africa and Arabia with that of the West African Mande peoples. This confrontation, played out all along the breadth of the African Sahel, has always been vibrant. Yet, there is also another distinct civilizational group which became implicated in the area from the last days of the imperial era: the Europeans.

### **France and the Invention of Mauritania**

#### **Frontier Shift**

With the dawning of the era of European exploration a great shift came about for trade in West Africa. The largely static technologies and organizational methods of the great West African empires were doomed to come to an eventual end. This was perhaps accelerated by the arrival of Europeans to African coasts in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. However, our discussion here will only peripherally touch upon this issue.

From their earliest voyages, the European powers were motivated to outflank the Trans-Saharan trade in gold to the Arab world. Through their experiences in the crusades and the Christian conquest of Iberia they had heard of the great sources of gold to be found in the heart of the Sahel from the same Arabic chronicles cited in the previous section. Since, usurping the actual Trans-Saharan trade through North Africa from the Muslims was beyond their power, they turned to the sea (Fage 2002:222-223). While European navigational skill advanced quickly under the leadership of the Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the European powers seemed satisfied to seek profit along the margins of the continent (Fage 2002:222-224). The Portuguese built a fort on Arguin Island along the Mauritanian coast in 1448 in order to pursue the gold trade (Hargreaves 1967:34). This trade initially was pursued in a manner wherein existing African market structures and traders were co-opted by the Europeans (Fage 2002:241). However, it became apparent as early as 1455 from the Portuguese post on Arguin that the trade in slaves was the primary mercantile venture to be pursued (Hargreaves 1967:35). At this time the Portuguese claimed to be exporting 1,000 slaves a year from the fort (35). Nevertheless, even within the 15<sup>th</sup> century as the horizons of European experience along the African coast expanded Arguin and its trade quickly diminished in importance. Slave trade figures from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the most prolific era of slave export, show that the nearest coastal regions adjacent to the Soninke homelands, known as the *Senegambia*, shipped out on the order of 180,000 slaves across the century, an average of 1,800 per annum, or about eight percent of the total West African trade (Fage 2002:266). In relation to the whole African trade for this century it comprised about two and a half percent of the whole (328). In fact, it is estimated that while the slave trade may have halted overall regional population growth, it would not have caused a population reduction (263). Beyond this point, it is important to note that the coastal African

powers in the vicinity, the *Maure* north of the Senegal River and the *Wolof* to the south, were strong enough to resist manipulation of trade by Europeans (Hargreaves 1967:37). The caravans of slaves which did arrive on these coasts for trade were probably quite similar to those who in previous times would have crossed the Sahara, and the slaves for export were most likely from groups along the forest margins in central Mali or beyond (37). The Soninke themselves were involved in the slave trade as merchants, providing both slaves and provisions (Manchuelle 1997:42; Hargreaves 1967:48). Nevertheless, it seems, as shown statistically, that the vast majority of slave exports came from the forested coastal regions in the Gulf of Guinea (Hargreaves 1967:28).

Trade with Europeans in the famed commodity of the Sahelian kingdoms, gold, also became focused in a region beyond their sphere of influence. Most prominently, the gold trade developed in the rich trading grounds of the Ashanti Kingdom along the coast of what became modern Ghana (Fage 2002:232). Here, as early as the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Portuguese were acquiring annual averages of 13,000 ounces of gold (224). While much can be said about the shift of forest products, such as gold and slaves, from Saharan trading ports to the southern and western shores of West Africa with the arrival of European traders on these coasts our focus lies elsewhere.

The arrival of the French at the mouth of the Senegal River and establishment of St. Louis as a trading post and fortress bear a more primary relation to our story. The Senegal River is the first perennial waterway encountered on the West African coast south of the Sahara Desert. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that European involvement began very early here. French merchants began to appear along the coasts of Mauritania and Senegal in the 1520s (Hargreaves 1967:59). However, there being Papal Bulls giving monopoly to Portugal these

traders operated clandestinely (Fage 2002:223). A century later, with the blessings of Cardinal Richelieu, merchants from France began more earnestly to pursue trade near the mouth of the Senegal River. In 1659, they founded the fort of St. Louis on an island in the Senegal River near its mouth (Hargreaves 1967:59). They consolidated regional coastal power by taking the Island of Gorée, in the harbor of present day Dakar, and Arguin from the Dutch in the 1670s; the Dutch having taken over all of the major Portuguese posts along the coasts of West Africa, including Arguin, between 1637 and 1642 (Fage 2002:244; Hargreaves 1967:60).

The French began attempts to navigate up the Senegal River in the 1680s searching to expand their resources and trade, expecting inland goldfields and slave markets (Hargreaves 1967:63). For the period up until the 1850s, however, the primary commodity traded with Europeans along the lower Senegal was *gum arabic* (64). This sap collected from several species of Acacia tree was used in several early industrial processes including printing and textile manufacture. During this time, a significant amount of world supply came from the forests of southern Mauritania which were controlled by large Maure emirates. Regardless of their control of river access, the French were not able to monopolize this trade as the Maures also traded with the vessels of other nations along the coastline when the terms offered were more favorable (Hargreaves 1967:64-65; Manchuelle 1997:43-44).

The French efforts along the Senegal were often interrupted by their global conflict with the British who had a similar trading situation at the mouth of the Gambia River a relatively short distance to the south. There was much back and forth fighting between 1689 and 1713. Later conflicts resulted in the extended British occupation of Saint Louis from 1758 to 1778 and 1809 to 1817 (Hargreaves 1967:64, 69).

#### The French in the Soninke Homeland

In 1817, upon regaining Saint Louis, the French made renewed efforts at expanding trade up the Senegal River. This was now a new era in colonial involvement as both the British and French had now formally banned the slave trade (Hargreaves 1967:78). Unlike other regions of West Africa, the blockade here was more sustainable due to control of river access by the European powers (79). With a new mission to transform the Senegal valley into a flourishing plantation zone the French optimistically pushed up the river (Kanya-Forstner 1969:24; Manchuelle 1997:43). They quickly reached the Soninke homeland in the upper river valley and finding it a favorable zone for trade, with rich agricultural production, they built a fort at *Bakel* in 1818 (Kanya-Forstner 1969:25; Manchuelle 1997:43). However, the ideal of European organized plantation-style agriculture was never meaningfully pursued. By the 1850s the Soninke organization of agriculture and volume of production had impressed the French and they did not interfere beyond encouraging an influx of people to further expand the region's agriculture (Manchuelle 1997:52-53). Thus the Soninke found themselves once again intensely involved in trade, only now primarily with the French. No doubt, Soninke traders had participated in all manner of trade with the French and other European powers in the preceding centuries, but now the French had arrived on their doorstep. During this period Soninke farmers traded agricultural produce, primarily millet and peanuts, with the French (48). This was anything but a novelty for the Soninke as they had been doing the same with Maures along the desert frontier for centuries. Indeed, during this period, the increasing Maure fortunes due to their trade in gum along the coast allowed them to purchase more grain from the Soninke as well (45-46).

Beyond the trade of agricultural commodities in the upper river valley this interaction led to an initially small number of job opportunities for men to work with the French boats. More

and more young Soninke men from villages along the river began taking jobs with the French in order to earn money. They became laborers on the French boats, known as *laptots*, moving goods back and forth on the river (Hargreaves 1967:66). The wages received by these men were far greater than could be earned by agriculture. As the benefits of this activity became more widely known, more and more young Soninke men sought out jobs with the French (Manchuelle 1997:59-65). Some became established in St. Louis as traders or moved into the French merchant marine. Eventually, the French, tired of dealing with the difficulties of navigating the middle and upper reaches of the Senegal River, built a railway from Thiès through *Kayes*, another of their colonial administrative centers in the Soninke homeland, between 1907 and 1912 (141-142). This pushed the center of export agricultural trade further East, but also expanded it. French colonial agricultural production was strongly linked with the Soninke, who expanded their own production to meet these export demands (183).

These early connections through trade and agriculture translated into a disproportionate number of Soninkes in paid employment of the French colonial powers as sailors, dock workers, soldiers, railroad workers, and occasionally as clerks and cooks. These men from the earliest involvement in the colonial wage economy remained organized in family and village association, living cooperatively and soliciting jobs for relatives and friends from their villages of origin (Manchuelle 1997:124). This aspect of Soninke migration remains central to the phenomenon today. Other Soninkes became involved in the colonial military and were sent to Central Africa to fight for the French (121). However, a great number stayed in the region migrating seasonally to the Gambia and what is present day central Senegal to cultivate peanuts to sell to the French or English before returning home to their native villages with the profits (53-59).

More generally, the arrival of the French in Soninke lands led to a frontier shift in trading patterns and a power shift southwards and westwards to the river valley. This shifted the regions' power towards formerly peripheral zones along the new axis of trade, centering first on the Mauritanian *Guidimakha* (home to the case study village) and later upon the area surrounding Kayes in current day Mali. The French presence also brought about minor social changes in addition to the economic forces they wielded. This was most strongly pronounced in the decline of slave raiding and trading. By the time that the French were well established in Bakel they were pursuing policies aimed at discouraging slavery. Freedom villages sprung up around the forts where slaves were assured their freedom, but this was more a European political move than a concrete social movement (Manchuelle 1997:130-140). By and large slavery persisted in-situ with nuanced forms of traditional slavery persisting well into the twentieth century throughout the region. The primary change was that former slaves were free to move about as they pleased, but as the land was still controlled by their former owners a degree of submission was required if they were to remain farmers (142). The implication of this change was an opening of new opportunities for former slaves, specifically economic migration (118).

#### Political Implications of Colonial Involvement

An important facet of this colonial era involvement is that the majority of the Soninkes implicated in the French presence were working in what is today Senegal, slowly gaining a toe hold in France with rapidly growing numbers in the post World War II era. Soninke migration experienced a further boom during the Algerian war for independence, due to a widespread withdraw of the Algerian presence in continental France and the subsequent need for laborers in the factories of France's industrializing post-war era. One implication of this is that



regardless of their disproportionate involvement in the colonial economy, Soninkes were largely excluded from the political formation of an independent Mauritania.

Mauritania was shaped by French colonial administrative divisions which lumped the people of the northern bank of the Senegal River with a vast region of savannah and desert encompassing over one million square kilometers. The modern state extends over 1200 kilometers south to north (Ould-Mey 1996:65). The heart of the western Soninke homeland on the north bank of the Senegal River is thus politically connected with the deep Sahara. In the French colonial political administrative divisions that emerged sliced the Soninke homeland into small minority groups within three much larger geo-political regions: Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal. Perhaps it was simpler having rivers as boundaries; perhaps it was due to the intensity of early colonial involvement in this area that made it convenient to create boundaries here. Regardless, the consequences of these political divisions continue to create distinctions between Soninkes in all three post-colonial states to this day.

#### The Formation of Mauritania as a Political Entity

While in the heart of the Senegal River valley the French had a steady presence over time, this was not the case for the majority of the area that became Mauritania. Beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> century European involvement in the region was centered around the gum arabic trade along the coast (see Frontier Shift). In the Early period European competition was the norm. France secured its diplomatic dominance over both the Mauritanian coast and the Senegal River in 1814 through the Treaty of Paris, restoring colonial lines between France and Britain to those of 1783 (Hargreaves 1967:78). However, significant French efforts to penetrate the region north of the Senegal River valley did not begin until the mid-1800s. In fact, the French had to abandon their

primary method of direct rule throughout the vast desert regions and make deals with the traditional emirs in order to maintain a semblance of control.

Disinterested involvement by the French ended in November 1854 when Louis Faidherbe became the governor of Senegal (Kanya-Forstner 1969:28). At the time the Maure Emir of Trarza, Muhammad Al Habib, was accused of attempting to manipulate the gum trade to the detriment of French traders (Gerteiny 1967:40; Kanya-Forstner 1969:30). Al Habib had expanded his control to the Walo region south of the river, too near the British Gambia for French trading comfort. Faidherbe, a military man, was bent on using force to check the power of the Maures. With the use of limited military forces Faidherbe pushed the Maures out of Walo. In 1855 the Maures attacked the colonial capital of St. Louis, but were soundly defeated. On May 20, 1858 Al Habib signed a treaty making the Trarza a French protectorate, banning Trarza Maures from crossing the river to the south without French permission, and cancelling previous tributes from the French for rights to the gum trade along with other economic stipulations (Gerteiny 1967:41; Hargreaves 1967:93-94; Kanya-Forstner 1969:30-31). Less than one month later, on June 10, the Emir of Brakna, further to the east agreed to a similar arrangement (Gerteiny 1967:42).

After this period of violence, things were once again relatively calm until the arrival of Xavier Coppolani in 1901. While Coppolani was in Mauritania he worked to peacefully gain political control over the Maures by exploiting divisions between groups and factions with the veiled threat of military intervention (Gerteiny 1967:102). By the end of March 1905 the French had conducted a series of successful military campaigns and political moves (103-108). There were now French military posts across central southern Mauritania and it looked like further progress was eminent. However, Coppolani was assassinated on May 12, 1905 and the French

bureaucratic will floundered (108). At this point, the powerful Maure religious leader of Atar, Shaykh Ma' El- 'Aïïñ, took the opportunity to rally support based on links to Morocco, with political and ethnic overtones recalling Almoravid glory, and calling for a jihad to push the French back across the Senegal River (108-111). These efforts were quashed when an experienced colonial military leader, Colonel Gouraud, captured Atar on January 9, 1909 and proceeded to engage the forces of El- 'Aïïñ at every opportunity. The campaign climaxed with the French occupying the region's date palmeries before harvest forcing a battle beginning on July 28 and ending in French victory (111-112). Maure resistance was then largely subdued by 1912 (112-114). Nevertheless, even with widespread de al-making, and various military campaigns the French did not claim to have "pacified" the territory until 1920. French "police action" did not end until 1934 (114). Because of this, the majority of Mauritania never really experienced colonialism to the extent or duration that many other West African regions did.

The territory contained within modern day Mauritania was not stably unified between the imperial and late colonial eras. Indeed, as far as we know, from earliest contact between the Maures, historically pastoralist desert nomads who expanded south across the Western Sahara, and the peoples of the Senegal River valley, currents of competition and animosity have been present. Sometimes this tension boiled to outright armed conflict, but most often it shows up as a deep mistrust between neighbors and trading partners.

#### Ethnicity and Geography in Mauritania

From its inception, the geographic region dubbed Mauritania was envisioned as a country of and for the Maures. The name alone attests to this idea. However, much more telling evidence can be found in the methods used by French colonial agents. These actors never attempted to assimilate the Maures as they had done in urban Senegal. Instead, the French made

an inventory of Maure tribes and formally legitimized a set of obligations for each according to their traditional social role (eg. warrior tribes ensuring peace, tribes of religious clerics acting as judicial and administrative leaders), essentially changing very little (Gerteiny 1967:112). In practice, these political and administrative specializations/inheritances remain to this day.

Maures are indeed the numerically superior group in Mauritania, when including their former racially separate slave caste, the *Haratine* or black Maures, who are culturally homogeneous with their former masters, the *Bilani* or white Maures. This group is the only ethnicity to be found throughout all geographic regions of Mauritania today. All other ethnicities are environmentally confined to the extreme southern region of Mauritania outside of the rapidly growing urban center and capital of Nouakchott and to a lesser extent the primary port city of Nouadhibou. However, this modern reality of broad geographic distribution is tied to the group's political dominance as is the case to some extent in neighboring countries. This expansion is simultaneously being pursued by the Wolof in Senegal and the Bambara in Mali who have each extended their ethnic distribution with the unspoken support of national bureaucracy and infrastructure dominated by their ethnic brethren.

However, the territory within the boundaries of this new geopolitical unit was not exclusively the traditional realm of the Maures. In the extreme south of the country there was and continues to be an important presence of other ethnicities. The most numerous of these groups is the *HalPulaar* (Human 1994:7). This group is made up of two main distinct groups distinguishable primarily by their differing foci of economic production. *Peuls* are the subgroup whose economy is centered on herding. They are spread widely throughout all of southern Mauritania as well as Senegal, Mali, Guinea, and as far east as Niger. Throughout West Africa these people are known as the dominant herdsmen group. The *Tukolor* are the other subgroup,

they are sedentary farmers and are geographically centered in the middle Senegal River valley, both in Mauritania and Senegal.

The lower Senegal River valley of Mauritania has a small population of Wolof farmers. The vast majority of Wolofs live in Senegal where Wolof culture is dominant, especially in the west and urban centers of St. Louis and Dakar. Additionally, as has been discussed, the Soninke culture traditionally dominated the upper Senegal River valley and the Guidimakha region in extreme southern Mauritania and adjoining regions in both Senegal and Mali. While noting these geographic generalities it must be emphasized that all of Southern Mauritania is and has been pluriethnic since long ago. Most adults speak more than one language and all towns of size have several ethnicities present.

#### Ethnicity and Politics

In Mauritania, the three minority ethnicities have been increasingly excluded from major political activity or government administration since independence (Human 1994:8). Independence was officially declared on November 28th 1960 with Moktar Ould Daddah as President (8). Daddah was quick to consolidate his power, effectively creating a one-party state. The early bureaucracy was problematic due to a polarity between the multitude of French-speaking non-Maure functionaries, a carry-over from the late colonial era and the white Maure leaders who controlled the government (see Political Implications of Colonial Involvement and The Formation of Mauritania as a Political Entity). This conflict resulted in a policy of *Arabization* by the state which progressed quickly. The effort began in 1966 with the institution of the Arabic language as an educational requirement (8).

Today, especially amongst Soninkes, the state apparatus is seen as the monopolized territory of Maures. However, among the HalPulaar there is a more active heritage of political

involvement as well as participation in the state bureaucracy as teachers, police, and functionaries. Nevertheless, throughout the post-independence era the vast majority of nationally directed development and aid monies have been funneled to the Maure dominated regions and constituencies.

## **The Islamic Republic**

### Post-colonial Era

Upon independence, the Soninke of Mauritania found themselves separated from the majority of their ethnic brethren and under the administrative control of a Maure state. Deeply mistrusting Maure culture, Soninkes mostly shied away from involvement in national politics even declining to have administrative centers in their villages in some cases. Instead, Soninke villages and the rest of Mauritania progressed separately. While Soninke villages relied upon their agricultural prowess and financial injections to their communities from village members working in West Africa's growing cities and in the former colonial metropole, the wider nation state of Mauritania advanced industries with foundations in the colonial period, primarily iron mining deep in the desert and industrial ocean fishing in the productive waters off of the Mauritanian coast (see National Industry and Economy, Chapter 3).

However, the vast majority of Mauritians remained unaffected by these industrial forces. The traditional economy which most Mauritians relied upon for their livelihoods was that of rain-fed agriculture in the south, nomadic herding in the sparsely watered Sahelian regions, and camel herding and oasis date production deep into the desert, with trade between all groups redistributing these resources. Nonetheless, this economic system, which had been stable for centuries, greatly deteriorated with the massive droughts which hit the western Sahel in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Human 1994:8). Pastoralists were most dramatically affected as

herds died and famine struck. This produced a rapid urbanization as tens of thousands of destitute nomads converged on the national capital in order to receive food aid and the chance of a job. It is estimated that from 1965 to 1987 the proportion of people practicing a nomadic lifestyle in Mauritania shrank from 83 to 23 percent (8).

Through these hard years, the Soninke of Mauritania, whose wealth was less dependent on livestock largely stayed in place, but found themselves more and more surrounded by other groups moving southward in hopes of finding more fertile and better watered open lands within Mauritania (Human 1994:8). Nevertheless, even as populations concentrated in the south, it remained largely neglected by the state apparatus with sparse infrastructure and very little investment. This was, and remains, especially true for the upper Senegal River valley. In the middle and lower Senegal River valley some semi-industrial exploitation of paddy-style rice farming has developed with the cooperation of the state and foreign development investors. However, a look across the river at the agricultural and commercial infrastructure established along the Senegalese bank makes apparent the low priority of these developments in the Mauritanian political agenda.

Infrastructural realities make evident that among the list of leaders Mauritania has had, none have so far expressed any sincere interest in developing the south of the country. All political leaders of Mauritania have been ethnically white Maures (Human 1994:7). Investment has reflected this reality with better roads, schools, and infrastructure funneling to Maure regions and a near absence of development in predominantly black African zones.

Another insidious aspect of the Moorish political monopoly has been the Arabization of the state apparatus and school system (Human 1994:2). Essentially, students from the beginning of primary school are taught in Hassaniya, the Arabic dialect spoken by Maures. This creates a

gulf of initial aptitude between students who are native speakers of this language and other children who speak other tongues. Proficiency in Arabic (*Hassaniya*) is required for not only academic but also bureaucratic advancement, creating another barrier to keep non-Maures out of power. This ethnic imperialism within the modern nation is practiced in a rather blunt fashion.

### Post-Colonial Politics

Given the pro-Maure bias of political control we should be careful to avoid implying that Maure politics is a unified force. Looking at the political timeline of Mauritania it is clear that factions and backroom dealings dominate this history. The War of Western Sahara provides an example of some major divisions. In 1975, as Spanish colonial control of the Western Sahara ended, Morocco and Mauritania made a diplomatic deal with Spain to divide the territory. This agreement was opposed by many of the people of the Western Sahara who organized a guerrilla war for independence. Between 1975 and 1980 Mauritania fought an unsuccessful campaign which practically bankrupted the impoverished state. Today Morocco still occupies the territories of Western Sahara. The difficulties of this period provoked a series of military coups beginning with one in July 1978, followed by another in April 1979, ending with a power transition in January 1980 and Mauritania's withdraw from the conflict. This was followed by an unsuccessful coup attempt in March 1981 and a subsequent consolidation of political power in the hands of military leaders under Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla (Human 1994:9-10). Over the course of these events there were many divisions within the powerful white Maure groups; some were political: pro-Moroccan, pro-Saharan, or national expansionist; others were rooted in tribal or personal enmity.

Until elections in 2007, no president had risen to power through free elections since 1960. A long series of coups by military leaders has dominated political transitions until this time. The



maintenance of this de facto ruling class of powerful military men with the support of their tribal alliances and the threat of violence has shaped national politics since independence. This heritage has also created an opaque political culture and a sorely deficient media infrastructure, with state controlled radio and television which remains to this day (Human 1994:3). For Soninkes this has meant a general absence of government from their daily lives outside of the presence of primary schools and poorly equipped health posts in their communities. However, on one occasion the state became violently present in the middle and upper Senegal River valley.

#### Maaouiya and “The Events”

The most flagrant example of ethnocentric/racist intentions by the state was in 1989-1990 during the dictatorship of Colonel Maaouiya Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya. Taya seized power in a bloodless coup in December 1984 (Human 1994:2, 10). During the late 1980s Taya was allied with Saddam Hussein and subscribed to the pan-Arab racist overtones of Baathist politics (10). An opportunity to rid Mauritania of non-Maure ethnicities was found in the event of a minor trans-border dispute between farmers and herders along the Senegal River. On April 9, 1989 a Mauritanian military officer shot and killed two Senegalese farmers seeking remuneration for crops destroyed by Mauritania animals (11). This sparked protest and riots in Senegal with Maure merchants targeted for retribution with the destruction of their shops and numerous killings. This, in turn, provoked anti-Senegalese violence in Nouakchott with the destruction of property, beatings, and killings extending to some Mauritians of ethnicities other than Maure. As the violence continued many “repatriation” flights were organized between the capitals of the two nations (11-16).

In a cycle of escalating violence the Mauritanian military, tortured and killed many within their own ranks, purging those who were not ethnically Maure. They also accused many

non-Maure southern Mauritians of being Senegalese and either executed them or forced them to flee from their homes and across the river to Senegal leaving the majority of their possessions and property behind. In the Guidimakha region alone 25 small villages were wholly evacuated by force with all livestock confiscated (Human 1994:18, 20-22).

An important implication of “the Events” has been a demographic shift in the regions bordering the Senegal River. Lands forcibly vacated during this conflict were soon colonized by poor black Maure families. Many small communities of HaIPulaar were replaced by black Maure villages. Soninke villages were also affected. One quotation given in the work by Human Rights Watch exemplifies the blatant objectives of this effort and the brazenness with which it was carried out. An informant states, “In the region of Guidimaka, many Soninkés refused to give up their land. The authorities tried to force them to sell it and to work for the new owners. The only solution was to expel them. Haratines [black Maures] now work that land. I can see them working in the fields on the other side of the river [from Senegal].” (Human 1994:32).

Additionally, in major towns and cities, non-Maure civil servants, political activists, and other educated businesspeople were selectively expelled or executed; even including a number of Mauritanian diplomats (Human 1994:22-28). This clearly implies an effort by the Mauritanian state to not only forcibly shift the ethno-demographic balance in their favor and requisition the most fertile lands in the nation, but also to weaken all non-Maure political will in the nation. By mobilizing black Maures in the violence and pillage, the state also increased the social distance between black Maures and non-Maure black groups (32). Taken together, this complex of actions known only as “*the Events*” is reminiscent of earlier white Maure efforts to forcibly

construct an exclusive cultural zone extending to the banks of the Senegal River (see The Formation of Mauritania as a Political Entity).

With the American invasion of Iraq in August of 1990 Taya's military support from Iraq dried up and the frantic persecution of non-Maure Mauritians tapered out. However, the cycle of violence continued, albeit in a more sporadic manner through 1992. Life has now re-established its normal routine. Still, for the people directly affected by what is referred to in Mauritania as "the Events" life will never be the same. If anything, mistrust between ethnicities has only grown.

This is not to say that friendships, cooperation, or even the occasional marriage across ethnic boundaries does not occur today. Instead, it is important to underline the fact that over the long scope of history, each of the ethnicities present within the modern nation remembers proudly a period wherein their group was dominant and successful. This fact renders inter-ethnic cooperation less likely beyond a superficial level and pushes many to focus the construction of their futures within the ethnic context rather than the national one. This urge seems strongest among the smaller entities within the state. For Maures, often aspirations of national scope remain within the ethnic framework. However, for the Soninke, the people of this study, ambition remains within the ethnic domain while the nation is disengaged to the fullest potential; it is seen as a source of discrimination rather than of opportunity. In fact, the level of disengagement practiced by the Soninke is unique among ethnicities in Mauritania. I would propose that this is because of both their lack of national power, as in the Maures, and also their lack of alliance with a sizeable ethnic power base beyond the frontiers of the state, as in the Wolof and HalPulaar. The Wolof, with a small minority population in extreme south-western Mauritania, as has already been mentioned, share an alliance and proximity with their ethnic

brethren who dominate the Senegalese state (see Ethnicity and Geography in Mauritania). In the case of the HalPulaar, Mauritania's largest minority, they are a widely recognized power throughout West Africa and across the Western Sahel as the dominant nomadic cattle herding people of this region.

### Visions of Democracy

Over the past few years many developments have come quickly to Mauritania. However, politics at the national level remain rocky. A bloodless coup on August 3, 2005 led to the first truly democratic national elections since independence held in March 2007 (British 2005; British 2007a; British 2007b). The coup took advantage of Taya's attendance of Saudi King Fadh's funeral, making it possible for him to be ousted in absentia (British 2005; British 2007a). While there was initial condemnation of the coup by the international community it did not translate into any real repercussions for the coup leaders or Mauritania's wider international relations or aid receipts (British 2005). Throughout Mauritania itself there was widespread support for the coup as Taya's heavy handed dictatorship had produced widespread dissatisfaction, especially in the southern regions left to desiccate under his leadership.

Under the leadership of Colonel Ely Ould Mohammed Vall the Military Council for Justice and Democracy (CMJD) organized elections in which the coup members were not allowed to stand for office. This resulted in the election on March 25<sup>th</sup> 2007 of Sidi Mohammed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, a former cabinet minister under Taya who had a falling out with the former dictator in the 1990's (British 2007c). Abdallahi began his presidency positively with an inclusive cabinet and the third place presidential contender, Zeine Ould Zeidane, as prime minister (British 2008a).

With the widely touted success of the democratic process there was a windfall of international aid and cooperation for the Mauritanian state. Nevertheless, for most Mauritians life was becoming more difficult. The global rise in energy and food prices hit ordinary citizens very hard and led to widespread discontent, including protests in November 2007 (AlJazeera 2008).

### Return to Military Rule

Disenchantment with Abdallahi blossomed with the resignation of Zeidane in May 2008 and the reformulation of the government incorporating a previously marginalized Islamic party (British 2008a). The government did not turn out to be as stable as Abdallahi would have hoped. Further efforts to consolidate state power were made by Abdallahi in July and early August 2008. Finally, Abdallahi sacked the four generals at the top of Mauritania's armed forces on August fifth. They responded by arresting him, his prime minister Yahia Ould Ahmed El-Waqef, and several cabinet ministers on the morning of August 6<sup>th</sup> in a bloodless coup (British 2008f). This put in charge General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, head of the Presidential Guard, who had also taken part in the 2005 coup (British 2008b; British 2008d).

The coup was met with support by the majority of parliamentarians and the population, but it also met with widespread international condemnation (British 2008e). Nevertheless, the coup leaders remained unfazed by the international reproaches. Abdel Aziz is promising the organization of democratic elections as soon as possible. Until elections can be organized an 11 member state council is managing the government (AlJazeera 2008).

However, for the region containing our case village there have not been any direct effects of these industrial or political developments on daily realities. The most important changes have been the demographic shifts brought on by "the Events."

## **Soninkara: The Place**

### Spatial Definition

Sooninkara, translated as the place of the Soninke, is a roughly rectangular region spanning the Sahel from 6 to 13 degrees west between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> parallels north. This region encompasses small portions of Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal. The vast majority of Sooninkara rests within the boundaries of Mali. In each of the three states there is one major Soninke town which is also an administrative and market center. Nevertheless, the majority of the Soninke population remains dispersed across the landscape in their traditional villages. These occur most densely along the rivers, for each village's location is tied to accessible, fertile farmland. The general climatic characteristics and seasonal pattern are uniform across this region. However, there is a great deal of microclimatic difference between specific villages and even greater variation from North to South in crops grown as well as living natural resources.

### Diversity across the Homeland

There is also a great deal of social diversity across the Soninke homeland. Between the Soninke villages, and adjoining many of the larger ones, are communities of other local ethnic groups. HalPulaar communities neighbor Soninkes in all three states. In Mauritania there are also Maure villages; in Senegal there are also Wolof communities; and in Mali there are various other Mande groups: Bambara, Khassonke, etc. However, in crossing the borders the most noticeable distinctions are in infrastructure and environmental stewardship policy. These differences primarily reflect the political realities of the nations. Other less visible distinctions flowing from these realities are in health care, education, and political representation.

In aspects of infrastructure, the divergences across the Soninke homeland set Mauritania distinctly apart. There are no paved roads in the Guidimakha, nor is there electrification beyond

the regional capital. Health posts are scarce and educational institutions beyond the primary level are scarcer still. The many factors leading to this near absence of infrastructure will be discussed in a later section.

### Environmental Stress in Mauritania

Mauritania, being a largely desert state, has borne severe environmental stresses for as long as can be remembered. However, the Guidimakha region in the extreme south of the country which forms a part of the larger Soninke homeland suffers more severely from environmental stress than the adjacent Soninke homelands in Mali and Senegal. Acute erosion problems coupled with sand encroachment and a denuded landscape make continuation of the traditional Soninke economy increasingly tenuous. However, these environmental developments do not solely impact the farmers of the extreme south, but carry extensive national implications which have brought about many secondary changes further effecting local realities in Soninke communities.

To understand the environmental changes happening in Mauritania we must first know the climatic, geographic, and ecological parameters. Climatically, southern Mauritania sits at the northern reaches of the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) which brings a rainy season with the northward shift of the West African jet stream. Essentially, as this air current shifts it pulls the barrier between dry desertic air and humid tropical air with it. As the ITCZ passes it brings sand storms followed by rains after a few weeks. The ITCZ shifts back southward at the end of the cold season and southern Mauritania experiences an intensely hot and dry season. The timing and extent of ITCZ movement varies from year to year for reasons that climate scientists do not yet fully understand. Because of the highly flexible aspect of this climatic effect rainfall amounts vary greatly between years and within years. The temporal distribution of the season's

rainfall is also highly variable. Frequent droughts have always been a characteristic of this environment. Nevertheless, the 1970s and 1980s saw extended multi-year droughts which had extreme effects on the people of Mauritania. What had been up until that time a majority nomadic population of Maures and HaPulaar who lost their herds during the droughts and found their way to the capital to receive food aid. This transformation dramatically affected the distribution of people across the Mauritanian landscape.

In the extreme south of the country, including the Soninke homeland, these extreme droughts desiccated large amounts of the forested lands. Wildlife moved out of the region. These catastrophic effects irreversibly transformed the landscape. With a loss of forests and extensive drying many other plant species became scarce. Starving herds of livestock stripped the ground surface bare. This led to extensive loss of topsoil through wind erosion and water erosion during the early violent rainstorms of the rainy season. The Mauritanian environment became impoverished. Nevertheless, the Soninke of the Mauritanian Guidimakha were not defeated. If anything their love for and hold on their native villages only became more tenacious.

### **Sooninkaaxu: Identity, Social Realities, and Observations**

#### **Myth of Ethnic Foundation**

To begin looking at what it means to be Soninke, there is no better place to start than the myth of ethnic foundation, that is, the story of the founding of Wagadu, or Ancient Ghana. This task is complicated by the fact that this ancient tale now manifests itself in many disparate forms. Nonetheless, there is a core of commonalities between the many versions which can be found to hold much symbolic capital in the formation of the Soninke historical memory and the bases of their social organization. For this reason, one abridged version of this tale will be related.



Various versions of the full legend can be found in works by both folklorists and ethnographers of the Soninke (Belcher 1999:79-82; Agence 1987:117-126; Girier 1996:19-20; Monteil 1953:369-374; Pollet and Winter 1971:22-25).

The Soninke claim to be the descendents of Dinga Cissé. Dinga was a prince who came from the east who had magical powers. He was looking for a good place for his people to settle. He is said to have defeated a powerful sorcerer who confronted him during his travels and was rewarded with the sorcerer's three daughters, which he took as wives. The three sons of these three women are the founders of the three primary castes in Soninke society. The son of the first wife being the progenitor of the Karo who were to succeed Dinga as rulers of the people but eventually became the *Nyaxamala*, or tradeskill castes. The son of the second wife became the ancestor of the Wago who used trickery to usurp the leadership and eventually became the *Xooro*, roughly translated as nobles. The son of the third wife, sometimes described as a servant of the sorcerer rather than a third daughter, founded the Koussas who eventually became known as *Kome*, or slave caste, today called *Jonkorunku*, or freemen.

Eventually Dinga and his wives settled in the fertile land which was the future site of Koumbi Saleh. In this place a mystical giant serpent called *Biida* which lived in a well caused plentiful rains and gold to appear upon the land after the rains. In return, Biida required the sacrificial gift of the most beautiful virgin girl of the land every year. For many years this situation was continued. The harvests were plentiful and the people were prosperous. During this period Dinga grew old and blind. He had begun to initiate his son the Karé (singular of Karo) in the secrets of his magic. When the day came for Dinga to relay the remaining essentials of this power to the Karé he had gone hunting. The mother of the Wagé (singular of Wago), pushed her son to go to his father where he imitated the voice of his half-brother and learned the

most powerful magic and became ruler after Dinga's death. However, the Karo retained some of the magical secrets and the Wago never attained the full power of Dinga.

Still, the prosperity and the annual sacrifices to Biida continued for many years. That is until one year the young noble man, Mamadou Saxo, engaged to the girl selected for the sacrifice, Siya Yatabara, could not bear to see her taken. As Siya was being presented in her finery at the well where Biida lived, Mamadou rode up and beheaded the mystical serpent. As it died, the snake uttered a curse and from that time the rains and the gold stopped and the land dried out. This caused the people to disperse and found the many small Soninke kingdoms.

The portion of the legend describing the death of Biida and the dispersal of the people is often interpreted by scholars and historians today as an allegory for the downfall of the Empire of Ghana and its population's dispersal. Discussion of possible historical inferences in the story of Dinga Cissé and the founding of Wagadu can be found along with many of the versions of the tale. A useful overview of these arguments is found in (Conrad and Fisher 1983).

#### Traditional Social Organization (Caste, Age, Gender)

From the creation myth we begin to see the primary divisions of Soninke social order. The castes are laid out from earliest times as a united yet hierarchically ordered and separated system. Traditionally, the variety of tasks and skills needed to complete a functioning independent community are all segregated by caste very specifically. The *Xooro* consist of the chiefly family whose household head is the *Debegume*, or village chief as well; there are also other general *Xooro* families which consist of *Mangu*, or warriors; councilors; and *Moodi*, or spiritual leaders and healers. In the caste-based hierarchy the *Nyaxamalu*, or trade skill families, come next and are separately divided into separate sub-castes based on the family's trade. This group is respected and as craftsmen do retain special knowledge not available to the other castes

as implied in the myth. These trades consist of *Gesere* and *Jaaru*, different types of praise singers and storytellers; *Tago*, blacksmiths; and *Garanku*, leatherworkers. Finally come the *Kome*, or slave cast, now known as *Jonkorunku*, or freemen. Marriage between members of different castes is forbidden. However, friendships between members of all castes in a community is almost universal. The idea of caste is used to define roles in community political organization, but it does not factor heavily into the casual daily relations, especially between people of the same age.

Functionally, this caste system is organized to provide for all members while maintaining the social hierarchy indefinitely. It is based upon farming as the primary economic activity with the distribution of land being the exclusive right and obligation of the chief. Furthermore, the right to practice certain trades essential to an agricultural society (e.g. the forging of hoes and axes) is hereditary. Therefore, farming was traditionally the most viable economic avenue for the vast majority the population. This makes farming the foundation of much of the culture and aspects of identity. The head of household, or *kagume*, sows the first seeds in his family's primary millet field and organizes family labor, and in the past the labor of the family's slaves. Expertise in agriculture is highly respected and teaching children the nuances of it is seen as central to their home based education. Agriculture remains the most pervasive aspect of Soninke village life. All families farm multiple plots suited to the range of traditional crops. All able-bodied youths and adults are expected to participate and young children are even given small roles to support the overall activity.

Farming begins with the first rains in late June or early July and continues until the harvest of flood-recession fields is completed in February, essentially occupying all of the rainy season, *xaaxo*, and cold season, *mulledu*. During the beginning of the hot, dry season, *kineye*,

some small-scale gardening takes place. Otherwise the dry season is time to repair buildings or carry out new construction and collect fodder on the sparse landscape for livestock, primarily male activities; to visit relatives in other villages or cities; and to make traditional soap, a very labor intensive female task.

Gender is the primary division for social relations and roles within Soninke society. Practically all tasks are divided between the genders including the cultivation of crops where men are responsible for the base of the meal and women for the sauce (e.g. men grow millet, women grow peanuts). The majority of household tasks are performed by women. Livestock are tended by men. Men hold sway in society and make most political and financial decisions. However, this is not to say that women live as subordinates in all aspects of their social and private lives. There is a vibrant community of women and because many women are married to men in their community of birth sisters and cousins often cooperate in a wide range of female tasks.

Age grade associations, or *fedde*, are a way to organize children born in the same year as a social group. Starting as toddlers, the boys of the same *fedde* play together, especially on holidays, and girls of the same *fedde* do the same. This creates an intense camaraderie between peers and continues on to shape the social relations of adult life in the community. The *fedduni*, plural form of *fedde*, also make apparent even to young children their place in the age-based hierarchy of the community. Age is an important factor in the social hierarchy of Soninke life, as it is for most West African peoples. Respect for elders is a foundational value in society. Even amongst people of similar ages a distinct pecking order is to be found based on age.

#### Household Representation in the Community

In the Soninke community, while decisions are ultimately made by the village chief, all household heads participate in *botu*, or council meetings of sorts, and are allowed to state their opinion on the issue at hand. The chief has an officially appointed spokesman, from a specific family which inherits the post, and he speaks last making the final judgments. In practice, decision making resembles an effort at achieving consensus.

### Household Organization

In the household, the oldest male of the oldest generation is known as the *kagume*, or household head, he is responsible for the well-being of all family members. In cases where the oldest man is senile the next oldest male carries out the duties. Financially, all money made and agricultural produce is supposed to go to him. He, in turn, is responsible for seeing that all needs of the family are taken care of. In practice, some money and produce is allowed to be kept by the individuals which worked for it but most is surrendered to the *kagume*. One important exception to this rule is that women keep the profits of their own agricultural harvests that exceed the needs of the family. Traditionally, women purchased gold with this money to add to their earrings. Starting out as teenagers, girls begin with small gold hoops and successful farmers will have thick solid gold earrings by their 40s. These function both as status symbols and as personal reserves of wealth for women. Agriculture and petty commerce are essentially the only acceptable economic activities for women as their many duties in the home keep them otherwise occupied. Men not of the tradeskill castes traditionally focused on agriculture but could also be involved in trade or livestock beyond maintenance of household structures and goods.

Age and gender hierarchy is observed in the family as it is in the community at large. Tasks are divided by gender and are distributed by the household head. Adults then distribute

smaller tasks to children and adolescents accordingly. It is not unusual to see children as young as four or five working on simple gender appropriate tasks, learning how things are organized and done.

### Modern Social Realities

It is certain that Soninke social order has never really been static. However, the dynamic forces from both inside and outside of the culture itself which have influenced the perspectives of Soninkes today are creating an accelerated diversification of perceptions. This, in turn, is changing social realities. Caste identity is one aspect of Soninke culture which has had a decreasing importance since the time of colonialism. While marriage is still caste exclusive and traditionally caste-specific tasks and roles remain in place, people downplay the role of caste in their daily social lives. A wide range of skilled jobs which did not exist deeply into the past such as cement mason, electrician, or taxi driver are practiced by people of all castes. Migration is also practiced by members of all castes.

The factor that has eroded the importance of caste most is the deterioration of agriculture. The Soninke homeland has become increasingly arid. Especially in the Guidimakha region, the land is denuded early in the dry season by livestock, and soil erosion coupled with a scarcity of good, open farmland has created a less productive environment, resulting in a less reliable agricultural economy. This, in turn, drives more men to migrate and necessitates some degree of economic diversification in all families.

Minimalization of caste-related economic segregation has led to widening economic disparities between families along new lines. This aspect can be seen as a cause for reduced caste importance and itself drives other associated factors. Urbanization is a possible side effect of new economic activities which led many Soninke to the regional capital, national capital, or

abroad. When children are brought along they experience a very different caliber of formal schooling than can be acquired in the rural villages. In the villages only the primary levels of formal education are typically offered, and education in the home focuses on traditional skills and knowledge. Children in families with successful migrant relatives in the capital may be sent there for schooling, especially once they have completed the primary levels. This discrepancy leads to a wide-range of career opportunities for those who successfully continue their education in the capital. Children raised in Europe or with European citizenship also have a distinct set of economic advantages which will be discussed in a later section.

Changes in Soninke life have also come with new technologies and other imported goods. Among imports, rice from Asia is the most significant. It has generally replaced millet couscous as the primary staple food. As was mentioned in a preceding section, the men of the household are responsible for the base of the meal. This shift to imported rice from locally grown millet exemplifies the movement of primary reliance from household agricultural production to earning power based on wage labor.

Technologically, radio and cellular phones have had the most impact. While radio is a well established part of Soninke life, cellular phones have only recently reached more remote villages such as the case study village. During the end of the research period potty phone service began, but was not consistently functional. Nevertheless, it has dramatically increased the speed and frequency of migrant households' communication with family members away from home. This is seen as the primary utility of cellular phones and keeps both parties more firmly planted in each others' lives.

#### Radio as Cultural Medium

Radio, or more specifically portable battery powered transistor radios and Soninke language radio stations, play an important part in culture-wide discourses, politics, and general information. This cultural medium functions significantly to create a more tangible and immediate group identity across wide swaths of the Soninke homeland.

Jiida 88.0 FM radio out of Bakel, Senegal is a primarily Soninke, but also broadcasts in Pulaar and, one evening a week, in Wolof. It is practically the only radio station listened to in Soninke households. The exceptions to this rule being the daily Soninke language news and events broadcast on Radio Mauritania and the occasional francophone man listening to Radio France International. For more on Mauritanian radio culture see (Chad 2008).

A remarkable aspect of faithful Jiida listeners is the fact that if the station is broadcasting and there is reception in the village, not always the case, invariably the radio will be on and turned up so that the entire household can hear. If the compound is too large for one radio to broadcast throughout, as is often the case in large Soninke families, several radios strategically placed throughout the compound will be turned on and tuned in. Additionally, if someone is going to the fields, to the bush to collect grass or firewood, or to wash clothes at a pool, stream, or well in the periphery of the village, a radio will be brought along so that Jiida can be heard.

Often, in the villages of Northern Gidimaxa the reception of Jiida FM fades in and out. During these times, a member of the household will periodically turn on the radio to check for reception after moving the radio to the prime reception spot in the compound, often attaching a homemade antenna extension. Eventually, one of the households of the neighborhood will get reception, and in the relative quiet of a village without its radios on, neighbors will hear and within a few minutes all of the radios of the village will be on and broadcasting in force. During



the times when Jiida is broadcasting, it is quite simply an omnipresent force in the Soninke households and villages.

Jiida FM broadcasts a variety of programming. By far the most anticipated broadcast is the reading of telegram-like notices which are paid for and dictated to station representatives in major Soninke towns within the listening area and also in distant cities with a large Soninke presence. This broadcast which takes place both in mid-morning and in the evening is broken up into sections by region and town-groups. When it comes on, conversation stops and people listen closely. This broadcast is basically the only information service for people beyond the telephone network and also an easy way to inform a dispersed extended family where no other means of communication is reliable. The majority of these notices are for people moving (e.g. Mr. X goes to France, Mr. Y goes to Selibaby, Mrs. Y goes to Selibaby). Another important information is the reporting of deaths by this broadcast. Finally, there are also notices of thanks, of lost items from cattle to wallets, and for events. Another interesting and closely listened to broadcast is the news, which gives a very brief summary of world events. Then there is African and regional (Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal) news followed by more local political happenings.

Beyond these programs, there are weekly updates and discussions with migrants in other countries (e.g. Spain, USA, China), call-in debates about aspects of modern life, radio dramas, health and hygiene service announcements, history lectures, political commentaries, religious sermons, riddles, advertisements, and music. Practically all of the programming has an interactive feel and encourages callers to participate. The station's practical regional monopoly makes it a force encouraging further conversation in the villages on ethnically pertinent topics and promoting a collective ethnic consciousness across the three nation-states where Soninke villages occur.

## Self-Defined Identity

Now that Soninke culture has been outlined it is important to ask what the Soninke themselves claim for their identity. When questioning villagers about what it means to be Soninke, invariably they respond that it means they are farmers. As mentioned above, agricultural labor dominates two-thirds of the annual calendar in village life. A Soninke who does not know how to farm or does not participate in agriculture is widely looked down upon. This aspect of identity for Malian Soninke is further explored by the work of Bruce Whitehouse (Whitehouse). In the Mauritanian Guidimakha the Soninke are the only farming group with a long-term heritage in the practice. Other groups who have taken to agriculture recently are traditionally pastoralists. This fact sets the Soninke apart from their neighbors and is generally a point of pride for them.

On a more philosophical level, Soninke men will often reference the ancestral times of imperial power when talking about what it means to be Soninke. Wagadu, or Ghana, is referred to as a point of pride. Additionally, every *Janmu*, or clan name, has legends of great warriors of the past connected to it. This prompts Soninke men to connect their identity to historic warriors and conquerors emphasizing resilience and fierceness.

Finally, another widely mentioned aspect of self-identity is a sense of general ethnic unity and cooperation. The Soninke word *marenmaaxu*, literally translates to a closeness of sharing the same mother. This idea is conjured up to exemplify the spirit that binds Soninkes together. Hospitality, camaraderie, and social responsibility towards community members are manifestations of this idea that runs through social life.

## The Neighbors' Perspectives

The opinions about Soninkes held by many in adjacent ethnic groups are not always so flattering. One widespread conception is that all Soninkes are wealthy. This stems from the high profile of wealthy Soninke families in the region and their taste for conspicuous consumption manifested in fine clothes, jewelry, and especially in enormous brightly painted cement compounds. This is in contrast to the average wealthy Maure or HalPulaar who often live more humbly and invest their funds in commerce and livestock. Some blame wealthy Soninke for driving up prices in the regions where they dominate because of accursedly spend-thrift attitudes. However, this opinion is in contrast to another prevailing view that Soninkes are notoriously tight-fisted. This perspective portrays Soninkes as shrewd business people and bargainers, using any available possibilities to turn a profit. These seemingly contradictory generalizations probably stem from the inclusive/exclusive divisions and tensions or mistrust between ethnic groups.

These suspicions are exacerbated by two other aspects of the Soninkes' neighbors' perspectives. Soninke are seen as secretive. This is in large part due to their tight-knit community life. However, it is primarily a result of the simple fact that very few outsiders speak any significant amount of the Soninke language. Maures and HalPulaar often say that it is a difficult language to learn. Additionally, practically all Soninke are plurilingual and speak either Pulaar, Hassaniya, or both. Lastly, Soninke are often cited as racist by their neighbors. The oft-cited proof of this is that Soninke fathers unanimously refuse to marry their daughters to any non-Soninke man. There are of course always exceptions, but I know of only one case. On the other hand, many Soninke men have second or third wives of other ethnic origins.

### **Guidimakha: the Regional Scale**

The Mauritanian Region which concerns this study is the Guidimakha. It was one of several Soninke kingdoms in the pre-colonial era and for most of its history was populated mostly by small Soninke farming communities. It is the extreme southernmost region of Mauritania and has the upper Senegal River as its southern border to the southeast and the Khollebinne River to the southeast. Ironically, due to its relatively fertile and productive environment, the Guidimakha has come under more and more intense environmental exploitation. As was discussed in a preceding section, “the Events” of the early 1990s along with widespread environmental hardships have led to increasing population pressure in this region. This in turn has led to further environmental degradation as more wood is chopped for more cooking fires, ground cover becomes scarcer as more domestic livestock must be fed, and soil mining and topsoil loss intensifies with the expansion of farming to more marginal lands. These land use changes have been perpetuated primarily by newly sedentarized nomads of Maure and Pulaar ethnicity trying their hand at farming and the stationary lifestyle. For Soninkes, their relationship to this environment remains relatively constant. What has changed is the number and size of other communities in their vicinity.

### **The Story of Maxa**

As in the case of the general Soninke homeland, the Guidimakha region also has a specific myth attributing the arrival of the Soninke in this place to a heroic conqueror. The founder of the Guidimakha is Makha (or Maxa) Malé Douo Soumaré, as pronounced in Soninke *Gidimaxa*: a construction of *giri*, to come from, and Maxa, the founder’s name. The tale tells simply that Makha arrived from the east and installed himself in the region’s hills ruling for over

40 years. Later another noble group the Kebinko joined the Soumaré and the region prospered in an environment of peace and plentiful harvests (Saint-Père 1925:1)

### Colonial Footprint

During the colonial era the French presence did not extend very far beyond the immediate river valley (see Frontier Shift). Beyond factors previously discussed it is important to note that during this time the colonial center at Selibaby, the current regional capital, was set-up inland.

### Post-Independence Change

Since independence, as has been discussed in other sections, the Guidimakha region has not seen a great deal of attention from the government for development. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of this region have brought about much change by their own efforts. Through efforts in migration large sums of money have funneled into the region bringing about massive amounts of construction and a larger market presence (see Chapter 3).

With widespread desertification and a general drying of the whole Sahel region the Guidimakha has seen increasing demographic pressures as natural population growth is coupled with an influx of Mauritians from further north. These climatic factors have also made the region a more dry and dusty place.

### Demographic Shifts

Because all available census data dates from before “the Events” there is no quantified record of population movements in the last twenty years. However, three main changes can be inferred from observations on the ground. First of all there has been an influx of poor Black Maures from other regions of the country who settled in small communities across the open spaces in the landscape. Secondly, former nomads, including some of those who fled the violence in 1989 and have returned, have settled increasingly in towns especially in Selibaby, the

regional capital. Lastly, there is the very unsurprising observation that all longstanding towns and cities are expanding because of rapid population growth.

### Variation Between Villages

While several general conclusions can be taken from a discussion of the region in which the case study village sits, it must be emphasized that there is a great amount of diversity between the various villages. First and foremost there is a great difference to be observed in villages of different ethnic makeup. Each ethnic group has distinctive dwelling styles and village layout. Maure communities tend to be spread out, with traditional tents, called *khimas*, scattered about surrounded by large open areas. Pulaar herding communities are small and have large compounds of small round huts attached to corrals for keeping livestock at night. Soninke communities are tightly packed with walled compounds adjoining one another around and extending from a square surrounding the primary mosque. In communities comprising more than one ethnicity, separate neighborhoods conforming to the general ethnic settlement style is the norm. The regional capital, Selibaby, is distinct from this settlement pattern as it is an urban center with mixed neighborhoods.

Amongst Soninke villages, another important aspect differentiating villages is the type and distribution of adjacent agricultural resources. There are two general zones here. First are the villages immediately on the river. These towns are generally larger and have existed longer. Due to the river there is more cultivable land. Here the floodplain is the primary agricultural zone, supplemented by rainfed lands. The other general zone is the inland areas. The case study village is in this category. In this zone there is also a great deal of variability. This is due to the variable proportion of seasonal floodplain versus rainfed agricultural fields. These differences

denote different proportions of the crops cultivated as corn flourishes in the floodplain and millet is farmed on rainfed lands. Agricultural details will be further discussed in a later section.

Two final sources of variation are proximity to major roads, and migratory heritage. Simply put, villages along the main roads often have more developed commerce than those located more remotely. The topic of migratory heritage is much more complex. In this case, it is important to note that the trailblazers of migration have a continuing influence upon the aspiring migrants of their community. While migration is organized at the family level first, contacts within the community greatly influence the destinations that young migrants set out towards. The village network is relied upon at all stages to support travel financing, job search, housing, and maintaining contact with home. Because of this there are pronounced differences between villages funneling new migrants to different places according to their networks. Indeed, there are visible differences between villages in the proportion of men who are migrants. This too has to do with the existence and extent of village-specific networks. The riverine villages were the forerunners in migration, due both to their proximity to colonial interests and their larger populations. In the studies that exist there is a markedly higher percentage of adult men participating in migration from these communities.

## THE CASE STUDY SITE

### Early History

The community upon which this study is built is situated in the northwest of the Mauritanian Guidimakha. A Soninke village, it was founded about 100 years ago as a seasonal cultivation colony of a larger village along the river to the south. This practice still occurs in Soninke villages when good land has become scarce. The story of the village's founding has two versions. One states that as the farmers wandered in their search for good land their search became more urgent as some of the women were about to give birth. When the women could no longer travel they found themselves at the site of the future village. A second, less dramatic, version of the story says that when the travelers found the spot where the village was begun they saw that any crops they planted gave fantastic yields and they resolved to stay. By all accounts, when the Soninke first arrived, the land was very fertile with a large seasonal river nearby and a diverse forest. The village sits at the heart of a large depression and therefore has many more trees than adjacent areas. It is also said that this geography makes the area more humid.

After a few years, the seasonal inhabitants of this place decided to stay permanently. Care was taken to replicate the social hierarchy of the parent village, with 20 families representing all of the castes and roles within the Soninke social hierarchy. While the immediate area of the village and its fields was previously uninhabited, a HalPulaar village a few kilometers away had been established earlier. Nevertheless, there was no initial conflict between the two communities. As the village was new, it was quite small. However, as time progressed it flourished and the families grew.

### Spatial Parameters



After independence in 1960, as the village gained in importance as a *chef lieu de commune* (county seat), and as a school was built in 1963, families from other ethnicities began to settle on the fringes of the community. Later, a health post was built with migrant financing. Increasingly, the village became a market center for the very small nearby villages with several small shops selling foodstuffs, plastic sandals, fabric, pots, and diverse simple household wares. In 2006 a large new, brightly painted, cement mosque was completed, financed by migrants and constructed by professional masons with additional labor provided by the men of the Soninke community. It now dominates the town's central square. As of the time of this study there were over 60 small shops selling essentials in the community. This commerce is dominated by Maure traders with less than ten Soninke run shops. Tailors, leatherworkers, and jewelers, in addition to the traditional Soninke trade skill caste families, set up shop as well. These trades are also dominated by other ethnicities, with an important minority of Soninke artisans. Nevertheless, the Soninke artisans and shopkeepers receive the majority of Soninke business.

Over time large numbers of ethnic Maures settled adjacent to the village working as merchants and farming alongside the Soninke, as did a handful of HalPulaar families. Each ethnicity lives in basically separate but adjoining neighborhoods. Today, the original Soninke community, while still functioning as the economically and socially dominant group of the village, is outnumbered by the Maures who settled next to their community. As of 2007 the village comprised some 2,500 to 3,000 inhabitants with around 1,000 to 1,200 Soninke. During the 100 years of the village's existence many important factors contributing to the social and economic reproduction have been in flux. The next section attempts to address these factors.

#### Changing Human/Environmental Relationship

As we saw in the preceding section, the population of the village has grown dramatically. This growth stems largely from new settlers, of both HalPulaar and Maure ethnicity. The Soninke community itself has also grown rapidly in numbers while the number of family lineages has remained constant, because of the widespread practice of polygamy, high birth rates, and improved healthcare.

These demographic realities have only made pressure on the natural resources more acute. However, other climatic factors are widely recognized negative drivers. A series of severe droughts took place in the 1970s and 1980s causing severe stress on people, their livestock, and the wider natural environment.

Because this is an environment watered by the highly variable Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) the people of this region are not newcomers to environmental uncertainty. However, global warming has been shown to have an overall drying effect on this already marginally productive eco-zone.

The pressure of population growth paired with climatic factors has exacerbated local environmental problems. More people farming more marginal, less regularly watered lands has increased topsoil loss through wind and water erosion of already denuded and cultivated lands. Because of the scarcity of farmland, fallowing periods have been reduced or even abandoned. These destructive forces have indeed struck the whole environment as overgrazing in pastoral areas, caused by larger herds, combined with intense early rains has led to soil crusting which inhibits rainwater from penetrating the surface. Tree cover has also grown more scarce as more families scour larger areas to look for fuelwood. All of these factors have had the impact of creating an acute environmental strain felt by all members of the community. Farmers fully

recognize these difficulties, but continue to pursue their traditional methods of cultivation, supplementing this economy when they can.

### Farming as a Key Aspect of Life

As has already been discussed, being a farmer is an essential aspect of what it means to be Soninke. An adult or adolescent who does not partake in this seasonal aspect of life is seen as lazy or uncooperative. Indeed, as the rainy season begins the study village becomes a virtual ghost town during daylight hours with only the elderly, ill, and very young Soninke staying in town. The full set of productive-aged villagers spend their days in the fields, from the moment of sowing through harvest. The village fields, which used to be immediately beyond the town now begin at a distance of approximately two miles to the north and northwest. They cover an area of about four square miles with the Soninke fields closest to town and Maure and HalPulaar fields adjoining along the further three sides. The zone is dominated by rainfed cultivation with an emphasis on millet for men and peanuts for women. Nevertheless, many women with access to shallow depressions also cultivate rice and all families cultivate corn and cowpeas in a portion of a smaller flood recession zone along the seasonal river. However, many men in the village are absent during this process due to migration.

### Other Economic Forces in the Village

Beyond farming, migration carries the highest economic impact upon the Soninke community. The majority of Soninke households receive some form of supplement from migrant family members. This discussion will limit itself to a description of the breadth of other economic forces in the Soninke community exclusively. This comprises a strong commercial force and several small scale artisans. The blacksmith caste family produces most of the agricultural implements used by local farmers and has expanded to offer soldering services when

there is enough work to pay for gasoline for the generator. The leatherworking caste family produces a variety of goods from fancy shoes to key chains and the women of this family tie-die fabrics. The town's religious leader is a well-known healer specializing in mental disorders and takes on patients from around the region. There are at least two Soninke tailors working in the village at any one time. Two of the four trucks shuttling people and goods to and from the regional capital are managed by Soninke families. Six small shops are run by Soninke families and receive the majority of Soninke business. One of three town butchers is Soninke. There are also several Soninke men from the town who work as concrete masons in the vicinity. Unspecialized Soninke men often work as laborers for the masons during the agricultural off-season.

## **Environment and Economy**

### **Environmental Setting**

In order to accurately present the context of a contemporary Soninke village of the Mauritanian Guidimakha we must discuss in more detail the environment and related traditional aspects of social organization. First we will look at Soninke agricultural production which is essentially the backbone of the local economy and the root of village social organization. The Soninke agricultural complex of villages which do not lay upon the river itself, such as the case study village, consists of two types of field-based production: *jere* or rain-fed farming of primarily millet, peanuts, and rice, along with some sorrel, pumpkins, okra, and cowpeas interspersed; and *folo* or flood-recession cultivation of intercropped corn, cowpeas, and pumpkins along seasonal river courses. In addition to these methods of cultivation gardens make up an important part of the agricultural complex for many families, with more cowpeas, okra, sweet potatoes, manioc, bitter tomatoes, tomatoes, lettuce, onions, carrots, turnips, cabbage,

eggplant, peppers, and mint. However, this is very labor intensive as water must be drawn by hand from wells daily both morning and evening to keep gardens productive. Thus the practice is mostly restricted to the cold season, after heavy agricultural labor has begun to taper out, and extending into the early hot season.

Beyond cultivation, some exploitation of wild plants for food and medicines is an important aspect of the Soninke economy. There are many wild tree species which provide edible fruits or other useful products which remain in the vicinity of the study village. The most important are *fa*, or jujube, which produce a small fruit high in vitamin C; *sexenne*, or desert date, which has a gummy sugary fruit that children enjoy and which is also the primary ingredient in traditional soap; and *kiide*, or baobob, which has a high protein fruit, but does not often produce due to the fact that it is stripped of early leaves which are dried and used in couscous to produce an agreeable texture. Regional tree products that are now imported include the fruit of the aforementioned baobob and leaves of the *kinkileba*, which makes a coffee-like drink when boiled. Many other wild plant species are occasionally exploited as food or medicine sources but do not factor into any regular usage today beyond snacks for children who quickly become effective foragers in their local environment.

Faunal resources are also exploited as food. However, the wild areas around villages are eerily empty of wildlife. Traditionally, the Soninke hunted many types of large and small game to supplement their diet, but today *boore*, or wild dove, is practically the only game taken. Alternatively, fishing remains a very important protein source in the late cold and early hot seasons as the seasonal rivers break up into scattered pools, making fish much easier to catch. The two varieties to be found in these pools are *fuure*, or tilapia, a small perch-like fish and the more prolific and much preferred *talaxe*, or silmuds, a catfish-like lungfish which can grow to

over two feet in length. Fishing is only acceptable by tradition on Mondays and Thursdays. It is a communal male effort with each man pushing two hand-held nets to scoop up fish. It is a big social spectacle with everyone comparing catches at the end of the effort. A good fishing day by a couple men can produce several days worth of protein for their dependents.

Domestic animals are also kept. Most families have some sheep and goats which are kept tethered within the compound. They are brought grass and given the scant household scraps. During the greener periods of the year young boys watch over them as they graze on the outskirts of the village. However, these animals are slaughtered only on holidays or as a last resort. They are seen as a form of investment on-the-hoof, but generally only provide a small amount of milk for household consumption. Animals for traction are also kept within the household compound. Horses and donkeys are kept to pull carts and plows. It is seen as essential to have at least one horse, as horse carts are the standard mode of transport. Cattle are also owned by some families, but are often kept by HalPulaar herders who travel with the herds. Because of this, cattle, while being owned by many Soninke families, are not numerous in the village and are seen mostly as a form of long-term investment.

#### Local Environmental Stresses

However, in a degraded environment these resources have become more scarce and peripheral. Indeed, all aspects of the traditional agricultural and wild resource exploitation complex have grown more tenuous with larger populations and a less productive environment. This has led to an increasing dependence on cash to pay for imported foodstuffs, primarily rice, wheat, and palm oil.

## **Economics Beyond Agriculture**

### **Economic Return Migration**

Often young men in the community leave the village and attempt to migrate in an effort to fulfill their families' economic needs as well as their personal ambitions for success and adventure. By now migration is a well-worn path for young men to attain the means to secure their family's wellbeing and to acquire the money needed to obtain a bride. Nevertheless, as the agricultural economy suffers further more men are driven to look for wage labor elsewhere.

### **Caste-Based Society**

The two paths of economic production, agriculture and migration, exist within a traditionally organized social reality. Caste exclusive marriage restrictions remain strictly enforced. Reciprocal inter-family relationships are maintained. Above all, the patriarchal gerontocracy maintains a secure hold on the decision making processes at the household and village levels.

### **Economic Stratification**

While village organization and decision making remains traditional, new disparities between households have developed as the history of migration lengthens. Caste is no longer a primary determinant of economic means as some households have built up substantial amounts of capital through successful migration while others have remained exclusively entrenched in the local economy and continue to be subsistence farmers without much expendable cash income.

### **Migrant Community**

No discussion of the local Soninke community would be complete without a discussion of their migrant offshoots. As we have seen, these extensions of the village play a central role in shaping the economic realities of the home village. This setting can be divided into two largely

exclusive subgroups. These are the communal all male and the family-based migration paths. Migrants following these different paths have very different types of social and economic experiences in both their community of origin and their adopted land. The specifics of these differences and their implications will be discussed in a later section.

### Local Politics

As we have seen in a preceding section, Soninke social organization is centered on reciprocity and redistribution under the principle of community solidarity. The caste system of organization is complimented by equally static interfamilial relationships of mutual responsibility crossing caste lines. While this method was founded in the context of a traditional agricultural economy it continues to be important today. Ideas of social responsibility in the Soninke community are based on this system. Traditional power structures are consensus based and continue to function largely unchallenged. Any political issue the community faces is ultimately decided by *botu* as described in a previous section.

However, within this context there are other players and factors which complicate the system's smooth workings. To understand the workings of power and politics in village life it must be seen that political and social support flows through channels of patronage. These networks show themselves subtly in the formal *botu*. For all practical purposes the ethnically based community is unified for issues that supersede the local, but internal political wrangling can pit people in different patronage hierarchies against one another. As transnational aspects of village society become more prominent in local politics, new patronage networks spring up and community solidarity can be shaken.

Migrants and their associations make up one set of players in the political scene, but local big men connected to the national political scene play equally important roles. In the



environment of “development” politics there are big men who exert influence to the extent that they can solicit and materialize aid money or materials from the government or aid agencies to be redistributed in the community. This selective redistribution is always political. Who receives what influences the balance of power within hierarchies of prestige and determines who supports which networks and how vigorous that support is. Local political representatives are constantly involved in negotiations between the different local ethnic communities to maintain their grasp on power and control of the government funds. Other big men specialize in working with non-governmental organizations to bring funding and projects to their communities and can make a living through redirecting this “development” funding to supporters.

Due to the intensity of migrant individual and association-based economic presence in the community they are always involved in local political dealings. As financiers, they influence local public infrastructure and public holiday celebrations. These activities are collective, therefore not generally controversial, and afford the migrants a great deal of prestige. Conflict springs from disproportionately successful migrant families using their wealth to loosen their connections to the reciprocal system and follow a more independent path to short or medium term economic stability. This causes whisperings of selfishness and abandonment of tradition by those not included.

## GLOBALISM AND THE NATIONAL SCALE

### The Implications of Large Scale Forces on Local Realities

To better understand the transnational and global processes affecting the individuals discussed in this work and the case study village itself, it is useful to step back and identify the wider national realities which are seen by local people to be an inherent background. Reflection on these realities will allow us to place Mauritania in the family of nations according to its commercial and political prerogatives. Following these identifications, we will be able to more clearly link supranational forces to the internal economic and political realities of the nation, building from these foundations a richer contextual setting for the actors in this study and a refined understanding of the constraints to individual and community actions which are rooted in realities beyond the ethno-cultural sphere.

### Global Indices

Mauritania is consistently ranked as one of the least developed countries in the world. National infrastructure is rudimentary, the natural resource base is not impressive, and with only three million inhabitants Mauritanian cultural presence is very limited beyond its frontiers. Only a coup d'état can put Mauritania in the global headlines and even then only for a few days. It is what one might call a peripheral state (Ould-Mey 1996). Nevertheless, the very nonchalant lack of interest of the official institutions of globalism that keeps Mauritania in the shadows of international affairs has afforded it a measure of political freewill often absent in impoverished states. While recognizing the lack of detailed attention of the global institutions to more local specifics, we can place Mauritania in the global context as it is perceived by international organizations and policy groups by considering how perspectives are reached in internationally recognized indices.

Our first index comes from the United Nations. The Human Development Index (HDI) is calculated by UNDP and claims to be a “prism for viewing human progress and the complex relationship between income and well-being.” (UN 2008). HDI rankings for 2007/2008 place Mauritania 137<sup>th</sup> out of 177 nations. This places the state in the category of medium development with a value of .550 out of a possible 1.0. This value was calculated from a set of four variables: life expectancy at birth in years (63.2), adult literacy rate for ages 15 and over as a percentage (51.2), combined gross school enrollment ratio (45.6), and GDP per capita in PPP US dollars (2,234) (UN 2008).

A sub-index of HDI is the Human Poverty Index (HPI-1) which will be useful in quantifying the dimensions of poverty in Mauritania. Of the countries measured, Mauritania ranks as the 22<sup>nd</sup> most impoverished nation globally. Literacy, access to improved water sources, and childhood malnutrition rates factor heavily in this calculation (UN 2008). Indeed, were it not for the very light known impact of AIDS in Mauritania, it would probably be further down in the rankings. The Gini Coefficient is also useful in telling us about the distribution of wealth in Mauritanian society. A value of .390 is given in most current sources (CIA 2008). This shows that wealth is more equally distributed than in most countries today.

The Happy Planet Index (HPI) of the New Economic Foundation, seeks to show, “the ecological efficiency at which human well-being is delivered.” (New 2008). It ranks Mauritania 124<sup>th</sup> out of 178 nations with a composite score of 37.3. This is made up of a life satisfaction score of 5.3 out of 10, a life expectancy of 52.7 years, and an ecological footprint of 1.1. This index ranks Mauritania as poor overall and in every category except footprint (New 2008).

The Environmental Performance Index (EPI), produced by a consortium led by Yale University, lists Mauritania near the very bottom with a rank of 146<sup>th</sup> out of 149 assessed

countries and a score of 44.2, with only three other Sub-Saharan African nations lower. This index is based on a wide range of environmental, ecosystem, and human health indicators. Yet its rankings are based on a “proximity to target methodology,” which causes the rankings to reflect the national administration’s adherence to their own policy statements than actual environmental stewardship (Yale 2008).

The Failed State Index (FSI) is created by the Fund for Peace and Foreign Policy Magazine. The index’s purpose is to, “provide a clearer picture of the world’s weakest states... in order of their vulnerability to violent internal conflict and societal deterioration.” (Fund 2007). It ranks Mauritania 45<sup>th</sup> with a score of 86.7 overall, putting it in the borderline category. The most troubling aspect of the nation according to the index was demographic pressure, scoring an 8.7 on a scale of 10 with 10 being alarming (Fund 2007).

Finally, Transparency International ranks Mauritania 123<sup>d</sup> out of 180 in its Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) with a value of 2.4 out of 10 (10 being not corrupt and 0 being extremely corrupt). This index is calculated by “expert assessment and opinion surveys.” (Transparency 2007). The straightforward goal of this index is to simply show the level of corruption endemic in a country in relation to other nations.

### Implications of the Indices

So, what do these global rankings and descriptions tell us? Clearly, they are intended to help global policymakers put nations in order according to the global/political issue at hand. But are they useful when looking at just one nation? Taking a closer look at the variables which make up these indices we can see the biases which shape many of these rankings. Global institutions built on western ideals are the foundation of this complex of judgments passed. It is also important to note that these statistics are only very indirectly connected to on the ground

realities. They are abstractions. Their utility is primarily comparative. In this sense, HDI tells us that Mauritania lies in the middle category of nations when thinking of development along lines of human wellbeing. HPI-1 tells us that whereas Mauritania may be moderately developed, its population is one of the most impoverished in the world. HPI tells us Mauritania, although maintaining a very low ecological footprint, provides a low level of life satisfaction according to global standards. EPI states that Mauritania is one of the most underachieving states in terms of politically sanctioned environmental protection. FSI ranks Mauritania as mediocre in terms of political and social stability. Lastly, CPI shows that Mauritania is among the most corrupt states in the world.

Beyond comparative analysis, value comes from the indices formal identification of important factors for the success, or at least the perception of success, of a nation. Would these judgments surprise Mauritians? Probably not. Are these factors even seen as important by the citizens of Mauritania? I find it doubtful that many Mauritians would consider this set of conceptual factors beyond the implications that they have on their individual lives. It is therefore the task of the researcher to tie the index to the set of realities drawn upon for their formation. To this end, I will explain the Mauritanian context of life expectancy; education and literacy; economy; environmental production, protection, and use; and corruption.

Life expectancy, education, and economy are all closely tied to the historical and political realities of the Mauritanian state. Essentially, Mauritania as a colonial territory and later as an independent state has always been conceived of and organized around the political domination of the Bidan, or white Maures. At various times, this effort has been a more or less overt form of domination (see Ethnicity and Geography in Mauritania, Chapter 2). The most flagrant case since the pre-colonial era took place from 1989 to 1991, under the former dictator Maaouiya, and

is known to Mauritians as simply, “the Events” (see Maaouiya and “the Events”, Chapter 2). The political state following the coup of 2005 stressed equality and participation. The 2008 coup leaders have also expressed their commitment to these principles. Nevertheless, just as racist policies in the American past have kept minority dominated areas from thriving and receiving the same level of state infrastructure, so have white Maures received the great majority of national infrastructure and political attention pushing them ahead of their countrymen with different ethnic and racial identities. This reality is far from hidden, yet it is accepted by the majority of the members of other groups with a stoic fatalism rooted in their strong faith in Islam.

Life expectancy is a statistic created as a summation of several health factors. What is visible to an observer in Mauritania is that access to western medical treatment, especially in rural areas is unreliable at best. Most people continue to rely on traditional healers as a first step in dealing with sickness. Nevertheless, a standard set of vaccinations has become nearly universal for infants and young children, and progress is being made especially on the front of preventative medicine for the masses. Still, it is obvious that sophisticated western medical expertise and technology are only for the wealthy and only available in the capital, with northern white Maure dominated areas better equipped with health facilities than those in other areas. This results in a de facto life expectancy stratification, providing wealthy families in the capital and Northern white Maure with state of the art medical service and the most impoverished, especially the rural poor in the South, with only their traditional healers. This range of realities is not shown in the index.

Economy is also tied to these ethnic and geographic strata. The ethnic division can be teased out by looking at the concentration of industry in the north. Yet it could be argued that

this is more the fault of geography than of ethnic politics. Still, the political focus of the state on non-agricultural development can be connected to the dominant ethnicity's pastoralist tradition. Even agricultural development has been diverted to date palmeries deep in the desert as often as it has been to the Senegal River basin.

The environment is one area where ethno-political realities are mostly peripheral. This is due in a large part to the fact that most of the more environmentally productive and diverse environments of the state are to be found in the extreme south, the ethnic strongholds of Mauritania's minorities. Most of the indices low valuation of the national environment comes from the marginal productivity of Mauritanian pasture and farmland, in addition to the fact that the vast majority of the state's area is comprised of Sahara desert. To support a population of any size in this environment requires a great deal of collective cultural land management knowledge and an acute awareness of seasonal variations. I would argue that the two great challenges to environmental sustainability in this context are the mass sedentarization of nomadic peoples and the increasing densities of people in the extreme south, along roadways, and in urban centers. These problems are exacerbated by the passivity of the state in environmental issues. This is demonstrated by the EPI. The lack of political will for environmental protection goes hand in hand with the influence of wealthy livestock owners bent on continuing the free-range style of pastoralism which often leaves behind a dramatically denuded landscape. These pressures are also exacerbated by the widespread desire to manifest any accumulated wealth through materialism evinced by a boom in cement construction, electrification, and consumption of imported goods.

Nevertheless, the Gini coefficient shows that wealth distribution in Mauritania is not as severely skewed as it is in many other modern states. This is probably due to a general absence

of fantastically wealthy citizens coupled with a strong traditional emphasis on solidarity through redistribution to group member and the Islamic practice of charity. However, as the HPI-1 helps to demonstrate, poverty is an issue in Mauritanian society. This is further shown by the statistic that 63.1% of the population lives on less than \$2 US/day and that 32% of children 5 years and under are underweight (UN 2008). Environment and health are intimately connected for the poor of Mauritania. A large percentage of the environmental degradation taking place in the country is caused by very poor people who have no other options beyond exploiting their local environment to survive.

A tragic example is that of the destitute black Maures who settled in southeastern Mauritania shortly after “the Events.” These former slave caste peoples came to a new, semi-forested environment with very little means of production and little experience in the local ecosystem. They set about making money through an avenue that was open to them: making charcoal. In one small village that I visited along the Senegal River the Pulaar population had reestablished itself alongside the new black Maure population. When asked about their environmental problems the Pulaar population said that acute local deforestation was their most pressing problem. They proceeded to enumerate the implications of this process: erosion, loss of useful species, desertification, etc. However, the palpable tension leftover from “the Events,” even in 2005, led to them never specifying that it was their new neighbors, the black Maure community, who were cutting down the trees. Because of the emotionally charged atmosphere and the de facto ethnocentric stance of state authorities even a local dialogue on environmental stewardship was avoided. Needless to say, this region is much more barren today and the people remain impoverished.

#### National Politics



The political realities of Mauritania have dramatically changed over the past few years. With a newly established democracy and an amended constitution the government bureaucracy seemed to be moving towards positive goals. The Mauritanian constitution was revised by national referendum in 2006 with prompting by the Conseil Militaire pour la Justice et la Democratie (CMJD), who made clear their intentions of constitutional reform on August 8, 2005, just days after the August 3<sup>rd</sup> bloodless coup they staged to overthrow the sitting dictator since 1984, Maaouiya Ould Taya, during his visit to Saudi Arabia for the funeral of King Fahd. This national constitutional referendum passed with an overwhelming 96.96 % yes vote in national polling with over 75 % voter turnout. The key change in the constitution was the limiting of presidential service to two five year terms, a change from unlimited six year terms (Middle 2006). With this gesture, the CMJD came closer to fulfilling its promise to return the country to democratic rule.

Following the constitutional reform, local, regional, and national elections culminated in March 2007 ending CMJD rule, fully replacing it with a democratically elected government (British 2008c). The new president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, espoused a politics of national unity and attempted to heal the wounds of the early 1990s by officially inviting refugees back. The government is also commissioning programs to involve the state in reducing poverty in coordination with global aid agencies. Nevertheless, these initiatives were more cosmetic than profound. The Abdallahi government benefitted greatly from international goodwill extended due to the democratic transition (see Visions of Democracy, Chapter 2). Soon the optimism began to deteriorate in the climate of rising global prices, especially for food commodities. Politically, after a little over one year Abdallahi's reformulation of the government was seen as a hostile political move by those not included, leading to widespread tension in the elite power

circles. On August 6<sup>th</sup> 2008 the conflict came to a head with another coup led by General Abdel Aziz (see Return to Military Rule, Chapter 2).

Nevertheless, the bureaucracy itself remains firmly in the hands of the white Maures. Almost all members of the cabinet are white Maure. Additionally, the military and police are dominated by white Maures in the upper posts and both are almost exclusively Maure, with the former slave cast (black Maures) making up most of the rank and file soldiers and policemen. It is in this reality that we can see the manifestation of ethnic domination. This uninclusiveness is less extreme in other branches of the public service such as health posts and schools, however as one looks to the higher echelons of these branches white Maures are universally found. Certainly, this is a generalization, but members of other ethnic groups in high office continue to be rare enough to be considered exceptions.

The dynamics of slavery and racism continue to provide societal tensions across the Mauritanian landscape. While the governments from 2005 through the present have put forth public statements denouncing social divisions and have put forth minor efforts to publically promote pan-Mauritanian solidarity, the structural roots of racial and ethnic discrimination remain unaddressed.

Further urbanization provides the possibility of creating a more inclusive national character. However, this has not taken place because village and tribal identities continue to shape the urban social reality. I posit that this is due to a severe lack of development towards an educated merit-based business and industrial class coupled with the absence of a coherent working class. These deficiencies are the result of a wide spectrum of historical events from the repression of protest organizations, the strategic removal of non-Maure elites and intelligencia in 1989-90 (see Maaouiya and “the Events”, Chapter 2), to the reliance of individuals on traditional

alliances and divisions for the ordering of their economic and political lives. All of these factors inhibit the flowering of an inclusive nationalism beyond the superficial press releases of the government.

### **National Industry and Economy**

In looking at the national economy we can divide it into export and domestic sectors. Practically all industrial production is devoted to export, with only a frail aging import replacement industry continuing to manufacture cement, sea biscuits, and mint candies. The vigorous industrial production is centered around resource extraction.

#### **Export Focus**

The Mauritanian mining sector got its start in the late colonial period. Prospecting and construction of iron extracting infrastructure began in 1952. However, it wasn't until after independence that iron production began in 1963. The industry was nationalized in 1974. Over the last two decades ore quality has decreased. Today, over 78% of the company which controls the iron mining industry SNIM (Societe National Industrielle et Miniere) is owned by the Mauritanian government. Total capital was only \$50.75 million in 2006. Similarly, annual revenue was \$360 million in 2005. Export is almost exclusively to Europe with some delivery to North Africa, and consists of around 12 million metric tons per year, making it the 12<sup>th</sup> largest iron ore exporter globally (Embassy 2005). The trade with Europe is explained by proximity for delivery of the ore for manufacturing (Societe 2008).

This industry represents 12% of national GDP and 13% of the national budget shares, all while only employing 4000 people in a country of approximately 3 million. With a total of 7 subsidiaries, SNIM is by far the largest corporate business entity in Mauritania. However, most of the subsidiaries deal with either other forms of mining (stone, gypsum) or with services

required by the mining industry (industrial machines, ore processing, ore transportation). These services include the nation's only railway and deepwater port. The railway runs from the mining center in Zouerat to the port of Nouadhibou. Additionally, SNIM controls a hotel and tourism corporation and a road building corporation (Societe 2008).

Beyond the activities of SNIM more mining projects have sprung up in the past few years. At Akjoujt, northwest of the capital in the desert, exploitation of copper and gold began in 2005 (Afrol 2006). Commercial production began in October 2006 (First 2008). This enterprise is 20% owned by the Mauritanian Guelb Moghrein Mines d' Akjoujt, but controlled by the 80% stake held by First Quantum Minerals based in Vancouver, Canada (Afrol 2006). The operation produces around 30 to 35,000 metric tonnes of copper and 65,000 ounces of gold annually (First 2008). The project employs around 200 Mauritians permanently (Afrol 2006). This production is relatively small in scale compared to SNIM operations, but is significant in the sparse industrial realm of Mauritania. Unfortunately, documents indicating the government revenue and export value implications of these operations have not yet been published or listed by the government.

Another essential industry of the Mauritanian economy is ocean fishing. The waters off of Mauritania's 754 kilometer long coastline are some of the richest in the world due to cold water upwellings. Mauritania controls an Exclusive Economic Zone of 200 nautical miles (Embassy 2005). The fishing industry functions on two levels. First in order of magnitude is large-scale commercial fishing primarily by international ships. Ninety percent of the volume of fish is taken in this manner (Embassy 2005). These catches are often processed on board ship or in other countries and never touch Mauritanian soil, being directly exported to major world markets after processing. However, 10% of fish processing is carried out in Nouadhibou and

Nouakchott before export. This represents some 30,000 jobs or 36% of “modern sector” employment in Mauritania (Embassy 2005). With a 95 % export of catches the national budget gets between 20 and 25 percent of its revenue from the sector, which comprises from 4 to 6 percent of GDP. This places fishing second in importance of national industries (Embassy 2005). However, most of this revenue comes from licensing and joint companies partially controlled by the government without any significant involvement in the actual process by Mauritians.

The local market is supplied by the Mauritanian fleet and artisanal fishermen (Embassy 2005). While representing only 5 percent of catches, the supply of fish across Mauritania has an important impact on the diet of Mauritians, especially the major cities along the coast and in the south. While fish never really penetrated the cuisine of the Maures, the other ethnic groups take advantage of available ocean fish as an important part of their diet. Dried fish reaches even the most remote settlement and is widely used. Fresh fish are delivered daily in refrigerated trucks to all major cities along the river valley and is the primary source of protein for non-Maure groups when available. It is important to note that fish is significantly cheaper than meat and therefore is economically beneficial, even several hundred kilometers from ocean and port (in the Guidimakha region).

Beyond the benefits in government receipts, jobs, and cheaper protein for Mauritians the fishing industry has some negative implications. Primarily, the problem is that the environmental wealth taken from Mauritanian waters does not provide remuneration on a par with that kept by the foreign fleets. This stems from two issues. A poor port infrastructure in terms of available freshwater and electrical sources and storage problems stemming from the extreme heat of the region has hindered efforts to expand processing on shore to match the

catches made in national waters. Secondly, the lack of an adequate number of ships to monitor international fishing fleets has created an environment where the government lacks the ability to verify that foreign ships are taking only as much as they claim under the licensing agreements. Most importantly, these productive waters are being dramatically over-exploited with nearly five times the sustainable catch may be taken annually (Fishprint 2007). The impoverishment of these waters will only lead to a dwindling of nutritional resources, jobs, and government funds from this sector in the coming years.

In recent years an emergent oil industry has sprang up. Extraction has started in the offshore fields, but reserves are modest and the majority of extraction work is performed by skilled foreigners and is controlled by Petronas, a Malaysian firm, which bought out Woodside, an Australian firm and the initial company involved in extraction. With the small scale of the Mauritanian economy even modest oil extraction has a visible impact on government balance sheets. In 2006 Mauritania exported over 11 million barrels of oil which accounted for a more than 260% increase of government receipts in that year (Office 2007). Nevertheless, the impact of oil exploitation has disappointed the hopes of many due to the paucity and ephemerality of this resource and the subsequent absence of more than a fleeting impact on the national balance of trade.

#### Industrial-National Production

Beyond the extraction sectors industry is limited to the smaller scale national industries and infrastructural services, primarily electricity. SOMELEC (Societe Mauritanienne d'Electricite) has a capital of \$36 million and annual revenues of nearly \$59 million. This organization is the sole provider of electricity in Mauritania, yet serves only 23 cities and towns. Power comes from either diesel generators or from the hydroelectric dam at Manantali on the

Senegal River. For the moment only the national capital and three regional capitals along the river are connected to hydroelectric power. SOMELEC is controlled exclusively by the state. The hydroelectric dams along the Senegal River are managed by the supranational OMVS (Organization pour la Mise en Valeur du Fleuve Senegal) which has Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania as member states.

An expanding infrastructural service sector is that of the telecoms. The number of cellular phones nearly doubled between 2004 and 2006 to over one million (Office 2006). It is certain that this number has further grown since that time as towers have multiplied and service coverage has improved with increasing competition between the three providers. However, pertinent financial information on these private enterprises is not publically available.

It is also important to mention that national-level industries supply a small range of goods to the Mauritanian market. Cement is manufactured in Nouakchott and supplies much of the internal construction needs. Also in Nouakchott the remnants of the aging import-replacement industry still successfully manufactures sea biscuits and mint candies, both ubiquitous in the prolific small shops scattered about the country. However, once again, financial and statistical information on these industries is unavailable. These are by no means the only national industries which supply the state. There are also small scale industrial efforts in fencing, foam mattresses, recycled metal pots and cookware, etc.

No discussion of the national economy would be complete without talking about agriculture. In Mauritania, despite the harsh climate agriculture accounts for around one-fourth of GDP and occupies an estimated 65 percent of the national labor force (International 2007; WARDA 2003). In the industrial agriculture sector the primary product is rice. Rice is a traditional crop in Sahelian West Africa and was independently domesticated here in the distant

past. However, rice varieties used in non-traditional cultivation are modified versions which require irrigation and chemical fertilizers for maximum yield (FAO 2008). Neither of these inputs are used in the traditional cultivation of rice which continues on a small scale.

Industrialized rice production takes place exclusively along the Senegal River in constructed paddy-style fields (FAO 2008). However, this production, although industrialized, is not thoroughly mechanized as most farmers perform all labor by hand with the assistance of animal traction. Indeed, the total number of agricultural tractors in the country for 1998, the most recent figures available, shows only 380 in use (International 2007). Rice production accounts for about half of all cereal production in Mauritania (WARDA 2003). The majority of this production takes place in the middle and lower Senegal River Valley. In the Guidimakha region, this style of rice production accounts for just over 10 percent of cultivated lands by area (FAO 2008). The vast majority of the remaining 90 percent is cultivated traditionally, without irrigation or inorganic inputs. Figures for 2000 show a national gross production of just over 100,000 metric tons of rice (FAO 2008; International 2007; Office 2007). However, this number, as well as the total cereal production numbers, fluctuates widely depending on many climatic factors. Indeed, even the area under cultivation fluctuates greatly from year to year. To appreciate the annual variability of even industrialized agriculture in Mauritania one needs only look at the range of values for paddy rice production nationally between 1995 and 2005. The area under this type of cultivation varied from 13 to 25.1 thousand hectares and net rice production ranged from 31,691 to 61,151 metric tons annually. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this production, even in an exceptionally good year falls short of the country's grain needs (WARDA 2003).



## National Services Economy

Probably the most dynamic section of the Mauritanian economy is not one you will find listed in national statistics, nor is it intimately linked to the traditional lifestyles of the people of Mauritania. It is all of the space left in between. In all of the cities of the nation as well as many larger villages people can be found engaged in all sorts of enterprises either for themselves or in the employ of small-time entrepreneurs. The work that these people carry out exploits the wide gap between industrially manufactured goods and what is caste-specific work by tradition. Think of it as a sector combining the mass of specialized tradespeople not subject to traditional sanctions and the broadly defined informal service economy with some overlap in the middle.

The object of enumerating the major categories to be found in this section of the economy is to underline its chaotic vibrance. These economic activities are the ones that surround Mauritians and visitors alike all across the landscape. They show a particular way of adapting available technology to the needs of the people. Collectively, they demonstrate how global influences are adapted locally in an environment with structural limitations, but lacking meaningful regulation.

## Cars and Trucks

The most visible of these sub-sections is that dealing with automobiles. In Mauritania, the only efficient and relatively expedient way to cross the great spaces is by automobile. However, even in the capital the vast majority of Mauritians do not have the resources to own their own car. In Nouakchott, there are hundreds of bright green taxis of all ages and conditions and many more unmarked taxis ferrying people across the sprawl. The taxis will take you to any of the several garages where you can buy a seat in a car to get you to any of the regional capitals

across the country. Then you will find smaller garages in the regional capitals serving all of that region's major villages at least once a day, road or no road.

Beyond the transport of people, there are also a great number of large trucks which distribute consumer goods across the nation. The majority are old Mercedes tractor-trailer combinations that can travel even the dirt tracks of the south. These trucks carry everything from plastic sandals to watermelons, and are essential to the supply of remote regions especially for food essentials. This chaotic network of transportation employs a massive number of people in a variety of functions making the journeys possible.

The most obvious essential job for this network to function is that of driver. Driving, except in the capital, is a specialized skill not practiced by ordinary people. Travel beyond the thin line of pavement stretching across much of the expansive country requires a truck with serious off-road experience to get everyone safely and efficiently to their destination. Driving is a male dominated field and drivers go through several years of apprenticeship.

In the Guidimakha region where there are as yet no paved roads four-wheel drive vehicles are used almost exclusively. Toyota pickup trucks are the norm. The bed of the truck is loaded with cargo, covered with netting, and then passengers ride on top. As many as 30 people may be packed onto a truck at one time. Needless to say, these vehicles do not travel at excessive speeds. An experienced driver who knows the path and his truck by heart is essential to avoid delays, discomforts, and especially accidents. Appropriately, boys who apprentice with the trucks learn the roads, driving conditions and detour variation related to the season, appropriate driving techniques, on-the-spot maintenance, how to load cargo appropriately, as well as how to tie a goat in a bag on the side of the truck. The apprentices also solicit passengers

and function as errand boys for the driver at the garage, they load the baggage, repair and replace flat tires, and collect money from the passengers.

Mechanics are another essential group of skilled workers associated with automobiles. These men also go through an apprenticeship period and are an ubiquitous part of the general garage where passengers pass through. However, in the garage setting the center of everyone's attention is the garage boss referred to as the *kokser* or *samsar* depending on the national language you prefer. This is the man in charge of selling tickets for the various cars. It is really only an important function in the larger garages where there is more than one automobile going to a specific destination. Beyond selling tickets the garage boss negotiates between all parties to arrive at acceptable prices for baggage transport (passenger rates are fixed) and to settle disputes between drivers over departure times and who gets what passengers. The garage boss gets a cut of the passenger's payment.

Also in the garages are what could be described as the Mauritanian version of the American interstate highway rest-stop. In the indeterminate wait for departure, most passengers choose one of the many small thatched patios to lounge under where the matron of the specific patio will sell you tea, *zrig* or milk mixed with sugar and cold water, or a helping of lunch or dinner. These patios also serve as over-nighting spots for long distance travelers. This is one of the few commercial activities where women are involved (see Market Women and Mobile Vendors). There are also numerous small shops selling a wide variety of goods and consumables as well as mobile refreshment vendors in the garages (see Commerce and Trade). The final and often invisible, but essential, participant in the transport network is the auto owner. Very few drivers own the vehicle they drive and must pass profits along to the owner.

### Women's Work

In Mauritania almost all possible tasks are gender-specific. While this preempts women from many of the diverse types of economic involvement, it also opens up a few areas for their exploitation. Laundry services are often offered by women or girls in the larger towns, but this is on an informal basis. Businesses which specialize in laundry services in the capital are run and staffed by men. However, for most people this sort of service is seen as the responsibility of the women of the household and is not contracted out.

In the larger cities there are small lunch restaurants serving traditional fare. Similar to the garage resting places, they are exclusively run by women. Here meals such as fish and rice are served for about one US dollar. These places cater to travelers in the regional centers and businesspeople in the capital. However, the ordinary resident finds them expensive and does not patronize them. There are also more formal restaurants in the main cities. These are more expensive, offering more diversified fare, and are usually staffed by both men and women. A more common and economical source of meals is the street vendors. These people, usually but not always women, sell sandwiches along the road in markets.

### Bread and Water

Bread does not have a long history in West Africa. Wheat is not grown in the region and millet, the staple grain, does not contain the necessary gluten to make bread. Instead, couscous serves as the base for traditional meals. However, the colonial legacy of bread has become pervasive. In all villages of 1,000 or more inhabitants there are bakers who work through the night at their mud-brick wood-fired ovens to prepare small French loaves for the morning. Each loaf costs only a few cents and is often consumed with breakfast or mid-morning tea or along with certain cuisines. This craft is practiced by specialized men. In the largest cities there are

electrified bakeries which produce a different variety referred to as “machine bread,” but wood-fired oven bread is found everywhere. Most households consume bread daily.

Water plumbing systems are only well developed in the most affluent parts of the country. This has created a business opportunity for men and boys, especially in the larger cities. Under the diversity of circumstances these individuals equipped with a donkey-cart and a large barrel deliver water to households for a small fee. In the capital they fill up at public water-pumps and share the road with the heavy traffic. In the regional capitals of the river valley they often pull the water by hand at common wells and navigate the gullied alleyways. In smaller villages, such as the case study village, there are only a few who pull water from a preferred public well and deliver it to the wealthy. In most households the women and girls fetch the family’s own water from public wells.

#### Spectacles, Memories, and Recorded Sound

Another important sub-sector is that of the technologies associated with holding and preserving celebrations. Photography and video filming are specialties requiring equipment. For celebrations, especially weddings and holidays, people rely on these individuals to record these important moments. Photographers have shops in the cities which offer the range from passport photos to exotically backgrounded group photos for wedding parties. Video “cameramen” often operate out of the same shops and are contracted to record the important celebrations of the wealthy. In the electrified cities, there are many self-styled disc jockeys, they also cater to the wealthy who employ them to augment the sound of their celebrations.

Closely related to these services are those of the audiovisual pirate. All music and video is pirated in Mauritania. The entrepreneurs in this field range from the humble man who dubs his collection of cassettes on his dual cassette boom box by request for a fee to the computerized

young man who gets shipments of dvds from Mali and Senegal and downloads music from the internet. Boom box pirates are by far the most prolific, being found even in mid-sized villages without the benefit of electricity. The most sophisticated pirates are found in the regional capitals and have multiple computers in various states of functionality. They rent dvds and burn cds to order.

### Communication and Electronics

Internet access itself is very limited in Mauritania. Because most computer-literate Mauritians do not have their own computers let alone internet access, internet cafes are found in all regional capitals and large cities. Nouakchott has several in the central business district alone. In the Senegal River Valley cities that also serve as regional capitals there is always one functioning internet cafe. An older pioneer of communication technologies to be found in these cities is the phone booth. These still serve the many Mauritians who do not own cellular phones. They are essentially small shacks with a land-line phone and an attendant who charges rates according to the destination and the duration of the call. Some of these booths also offer fax services.

Staying on the topic of communication, radios remain a central method of conveying messages in Mauritania (see Radio as Cultural Medium, Chapter 2). Therefore, a functioning radio is a prized part of any household. For the vast majority of Mauritians who have limited resources, a new radio is a large investment. This has opened up a market for self-styled electronics repairmen who fix everything from radios to watches for significantly less than a new purchase. Their shops are filled with the carcasses of broken gadgetry which they cannibalize for parts. Due to the paucity of formal or technical education outside of apprenticeship in the majority of Mauritania mechanical skill is highly prized and rewarded.

## Construction

Electricians, however, go through apprenticeship and often technical training. They are highly sought after and well paid. While they are concentrated in the capital, they can be found installing solar panels in the homes of the wealthy in the far flung Soninke villages. While electricians' specialization keeps them primarily in the cities, masons can be found wherever construction is funded. Master masons contract large jobs and if not in the city they already inhabit often move to the town of the job-site for the duration of the project, staying with a host-family. Large-scale cement constructions such as mosques or extensive housing compounds can take over a year to complete and cost tens of thousands of dollars. Cement masonry is specialized, but also requires a large number of laborers and apprentices to move the work along because even cement blocks must be made manually at the job site. The laborers involved in this process are either paid daily wages or if making bricks, by the brick. The significance of this laboring, especially during the non-agricultural periods of the year, should not be underestimated. It is hard work, but can be essential to shoring up a family's finances where there is little diversity of economic opportunity for those without capital.

## Hand Made Fashion

Tailoring is still widespread among the peoples of the Senegal River Valley. While ready-to-wear clothing can be purchased, it is not seen as appropriate for adults except for while laboring. Traditional dress styles have changed little over the years, but new wax-print designs are always admired. Holidays and celebrations require newly tailored clothes. Customers bring their own fabric and discuss design with their tailor. In major market centers quick alterations can be made to purchased garments immediately by tailors on site. In these places some electrified shops specialize in intricate embroidery and garments can be ordered to be finished in

a week. In the smaller villages, tailors use foot-pedal machines and work busily supplying the townspeople for their special occasions. In the weeks leading up to major celebrations the tailor's shop is constantly abuzz with the sound of the machine. To have a simple outfit tailored costs about four dollars, separate from the price of fabric, or nearly a day's wages for a laborer. Tailoring is almost exclusively practiced by men. Young boys apprentice to learn the trade.

### On the Margins of Caste-Specific Skills

In traditional Mauritanian society blacksmithing and carving are among the traditional caste-specific skills (see Traditional Social Organization (Caste, Age, Gender)). The traditional objects these craftspeople make (e.g. hoes, axes, large mortar and pestle, stools, and jewelry) remain their exclusive business realm. However, metal- and wood-working are much more diverse crafts today. Carpenters are needed to build furniture. Welders are needed to build horse carts, doors, and other diverse metal manufactures. These tradesmen today are sometimes of the caste that traditionally works with the same medium even using the same workshop. However, these trades are far from exclusive. As technical trades, apprenticeship is necessary but the work is not caste exclusive.

### Commerce and Trade

As can be seen in the previous section the Mauritanian economy is full of small scale entrepreneurs and craftspeople providing diverse services. Another important aspect of the national economy that is not apparent when looking at figures is the omnipresent network of traders. These traders range from large scale importers of satellite television systems and automobiles to small village merchants selling agricultural commodities, cigarettes, and plastic sandals. Business regulation is absent at the lower levels and for the higher levels cannot be known without a far reaching, intensive, on the ground assessment. The vast majority of



business in the country is carried out between individuals without the large commercial standardization which dominates most of western retail. Complex networks certainly exist but are not visible on the surface.

### The Pyramid of Boutiques

Mauritania is, if anything, a nation of traders. It often seems that everyone is involved in some form of petty commerce. There are over fifty boutiques, or small shops, in the case study village although it has only around 3,000 inhabitants. This is possible only because of the lack of an elevated labor value and because of a de facto standardization of prices for food goods and other essentials. Not much profit is to be had without volume, but enough can be made piecemeal to keep the owner sitting in his or her shop.

The whole system functions on one feasibly generalized distribution platform. Large scale importers in the capital sell to large wholesalers in the regional capitals who sell to smaller wholesalers who sell to shop owners who in turn sell to customers. At each level there is a slight markup as the number of units sold per seller decreases. Everyone profits enough to cover transport costs and stay solvent. Obviously this is an oversimplification, but the general structure does function to maintain a broad marketplace with well-defined and accepted price changes with unit scale. Because of this anyone with a small amount of capital can purchase something in bulk and try their hand at turning the pre-specified profit. This holds true for everything from mangos to cigarettes. The small shops scattered across towns and cities are simply diversified attempts at benefitting from this concept. Perishable or unfamiliar items are more risky. However, established patronage is the best path to success. Butchers and bakers rely on established patterns of daily purchasing by established customers in order to produce their wares

in the appropriate volume, but even the small shop owner who does not sell perishables attempts to balance his purchasing in order to maintain a steady clientele.

### Market Women and Mobile Vendors

In markets women are ubiquitous as both buyers and sellers. They dominate the vegetable and fruit markets. Another broad section of women has taken commercial scale one step below that of the boutique and sells a smaller cross-section of products sitting at small tables rather than having shops. Standard fare for these small tables is a veritable cross-section of widely used products which can be sold in very small units such as a single cigarette, razorblade, bouillon cube, or candy. Other women sell specific goods out of their household (e.g. kola nuts, laundry detergent, yogurt, mint). More engaged in commerce periodically by sending daughters from house to house with a tray of a given commodity they purchased in bulk or grew (e.g. onions, tomatoes, mangos, eggs). These efforts are taken at the individual initiative and from the savings of these women. It is considered separate from overall household wealth and therefore is a method for them to grow their savings.

### The Traditional Environmental Economy Today

While it has been shown that there is a significant breadth of economic activities being practiced in Mauritania, the fact remains that traditional agro-pastoral organization and exploitation remains the economic backbone of rural Mauritians. An estimated 65% of the labor force is employed in agriculture, which produces 25% of the nation's GDP (WARDA 2003). While there is diversity between ethnic groups in the ways that this economy is practiced, most practical concerns and techniques are universal. This is especially true in the Senegal River Valley. Because of this, the most pertinent description is that of a Soninke community (see

Environmental Setting, Chapter 2). Here, agro-pastoral activities are not caste-specific and are practiced by virtually all community members.

What is important to recognize in this economically focused discussion is that while agro-pastoral activities along with the exploitation of wild resources have important social connotations, they are also the most stable sector of the local economy. Agriculture, while variable due to climatic factors, gives a more reliable return than other forms of economic activity. People are driven to diversify their economic activities as a means to acquire new wealth and status, as a form of economic insurance, or because they cannot produce enough to maintain their household at subsistence level. However, the agricultural basis of the household is not abandoned upon success in other economic realms. Most household heads I questioned estimated that they produced about half of their food needs by farming. The other economic activities pursued by these households could be based in the community, Mauritania's urban centers, and/or abroad.

### **Infrastructure**

Infrastructure plays an important role in determining the economic possibilities of a community. Access to major roads provides more market opportunities at a lower cost. Electricity expands the scope of manufacturing and storage. Functional healthcare centers increase the productivity of individuals. Schools help to diversify opportunities by opening doors to more sophisticated bureaucratic positions.

These factors as a set create divisions between urban and rural communities. This opportunity divide grows more acute with time as major cities continuously develop their technological, educational, and infrastructural capacities. Often these disparities are lessened through the creation of the multi-local family. Members move between the urban and the rural

household according to family needs and opportunities (e.g. a young man may attend schooling or an apprenticeship in the capital yet return to the village for the agricultural season).

### **Localized Transnational Alliances**

While the home village remains central to social and economic relationships for all members it is no longer necessarily the geographic space where these relationships come to fruition. Village membership specifies heritage and solidarity, but has become an identity marker not only at home but also in the transnational space. Once individuals leave the home village they rely on the transnational manifestation of the village where they live for social and economic support.

### **Village Associations at Home**

This is not to say that the village organization and support networks do not play an important role in the life of the village. These networks work to keep individual migrants mindful of their responsibilities to the village as a whole. Social pressure is exerted to enforce conformity to social parameters established in the migrant setting through an ordained replica of the traditional village leadership in miniature. Members of families whose elders hold specific roles in the village (e.g. village chief) function in those same roles in the migrant setting. Therefore, village-based alliances and political discourse have a direct impact on and are directly impacted by the workings of village associations abroad.

The home village is in continuous contact, whenever possible, with their proxies in the international satellite communities communicating collective decisions and organizing the inflow of collective capital for village-wide initiatives. In the case study village a large new cement mosque in the town square was completed in 2006. The majority of the financing for this project came from the migrant associations. Twice annually for religious celebrations the migrant

associations of the village fund the slaughter of ten bulls for free distribution of meat to the community. These concrete acts maintain a positive visibility and fulfill collective responsibilities of the migrants as community members. These acts are only possible through the detailed collaboration between leaders in the village and those abroad. Furthermore, these acts require the mobilization of all members of the migrant community and of the home community. However, it is within their individual families that migrants make the most dramatic impacts.

#### Networking to get Work

The migrant network itself has its most dramatic effects on individuals. Because of the existence of these networks, new migrants are funneled into situations where they are put in contact with potential employers, are supplied with housing and food, and are placed within a familiar social context. All three of these aspects are essential to creating a stable migration context which functions for more than just one generation. However, without inroads to employment the system would not be possible for any period of time.

#### Solidarity Abroad: the Carrot and the Stick

There are numerous aspects of the migrant network that keep it functioning legitimately through time. Some aspects reinforce the system by exhibiting its very real potential for economic enrichment. Other aspects police the system by maintaining an inward-looking focus and threaten social sanction at home for deviance.

Economic possibilities are practically the unique factor that drives Soninke villagers to participate in migration. The examples of wealth and status that young men see in returned migrants help to crystallize their desire to migrate. The assurance of a supportive, familiar environment upon arrival abroad is also encouraging.

Once migrants arrive abroad, the network begins to work to ensure that they stay in the fold. Communal meals and living arrangements ensure that village society stays the focus of the migrant's social sphere. Talk centers on home. There is also a de facto knowledge that any transgressions from village morality will be known by others from the village. Of course there is leeway given to the young men who live in these circumstances, but one's reputation at home could be affected by what happens abroad. This leads to a moral conformity which requires little sanctioning. It keeps individuals from straying too far into new ideas or lifestyles without their marginalization by the group and ultimately by the home village.

#### Westernized Winners or Social Rebels?

Nevertheless, some people do leave the familiarity of collective living and establish their own households abroad. These are the migrants who want to have a family life in situ. Most get their start as male migrants living in the communal setting, but once established rent an apartment and have their wife and often young children join them. In order to make such a move, they hold on to a larger share of their capital and invest it in developing their life abroad. This decision makes their move either permanent, or long-term until retirement. It is not unheard of for nuclear families to never return to their village. Normally though, contact is not totally severed. The family back home stays in contact and remittances are sent, sometimes visits are made. However, the impetus for these actions is less pronounced.

Often, it is the children raised in Europe who are most alienated from the home village. This is the primary argument of village members against living as a nuclear family abroad. People who remain in the village and many migrants who leave wives and children behind say that a traditional village upbringing is invaluable for children. By the same token, villagers invariably say that they would like better educational and employment opportunities for their

children. Children raised abroad receive these benefits. Nevertheless, many of the young people I have spoken with whose parents migrated to Europe and were raised there do not wish to spend more than brief visits to their parents' nation and town of origin and feel more comfortable in their parents' adopted land.

However, the first generation migrants, especially men, who raise children abroad harbor a strong nostalgia for the village where they were raised. Many couples do return in their old age and live relatively comfortably on retirement benefits from Europe, generally reintegrating into village life. Others who cannot or will not return for good sometimes attempt to establish greater prestige for themselves and to valorize their amalgamated self-identities by bringing development projects to their childhood community which they have solicited in their adopted country. To some extent this works, but for migrants not eventually returning permanently serious reintegration into political and prestige circles is elusive.

#### Village Power Framework

Nevertheless, the object of this thesis is to describe the implications that migration has on the sending community. It is therefore necessary to return our attention to the power structures that face migrants in their village. The primary power bloc is traditional authority. Its organization and function is dictated by cultural tradition. The Soninke village is ordered into castes (see Traditional Social Organization, Chapter 2). What is pertinent to this discussion is the fact that a chiefly family is the seat of all official political discourse. Two other noble families also hold important powers with their *kagumu*, or household heads, acting respectively as the orator of the chief and the treasurer of the village. Whenever possible, representatives of these families also perform these functions for the migrant associations (see Village Associations at Home). The format for making major village decisions is the *botu*, or general meeting of

household heads. For a returned migrant to assume an important role in this process he must either assume the leadership of his extended family's household, which is traditionally assigned to the eldest sound male of the eldest generation, but by no means an absolute in the case of prolonged absence where a slightly junior male has been seen to appropriately have run the household for many years. The returned migrant may also attempt to influence the *kagume* to adopt his perspective. Unless, the migrant is retiring to the village after a long career abroad it is unlikely that he will immediately assume the responsibility of *kagume*. Even in the case that this does happen, it will take him some time to get up to speed on the political murmurings of the town and be given weight in the *botu*.

Another important, wider power bloc in the village is that of the politically elected officials. Elected officials are centers of power in their own right by having rallied enough patronage and support to get their posts. The alliances that these individuals have mobilized are generally pluri-ethnic. In the event that this individual is a Soninke, he will almost always have the official support of his ethnic group in the constituency as is true for the case study village. Government power as the mayor of a commune, the rough equivalent of a county, comes with financial resources. However, the political sphere in Mauritania is self-encapsulated even at the lower levels. While it involves power brokering, the vast majority of this takes place between a small circle of established political figures.

The governmental bureaucracy is also involved in villages through health posts and primary schools. The government ministries which oversee these services manage staffing at the regional level. Therefore, outsiders are assigned to staff these institutions. They are respected figures but remain on the periphery of local power politics.



Two less formal sets of power blocs in the community are peer associations and community groups. Community groups in this context refer to chartered non-governmental organizations with a stated goal or subject for advocacy which solicits government and/or aid agency funding to accomplish their pre-stated objectives. These commonly have to do with agro-pastoral or health-related objectives. They are often small in financial scale but involve many community members. Sometimes migrants spearhead these groups (see Westernized Winners or Social Rebels?). Yet their efficacy rarely lives up to their aspirations and they often disintegrate after a brief period. Peer associations on the other hand are investment partnerships by similar aged men or women who pool their resources to either purchase livestock for later resale or purchase a commodity in bulk to be resold for a profit. They are small groups and provide modest returns, yet are taken very seriously. Still, they revolve around established groups of like-minded friends and are more a manifestation of pre-existing solidarity than a method for creating new spheres of influence.

#### Family Type Examples

The preceding section shows that the power frameworks of the village at large are primarily static and impermeable to rapid incursions of social influence. On the household scale this is also true. However, migrants abroad maintain a necessarily more intimate association with their extended family. Their financial support also provides them with more clout in this realm, as the majority of their earnings enter household coffers. Indeed, it seems that the fortune of the migrants of a household, or absence thereof, dramatically shapes the economic and social perspectives and realities of each household. To demonstrate this observation four general household types will be described. These types are modeled after four existing households in the case study village

<b>Family Type</b>	<b>Economic Activities and Resources</b>	<b>Household Infrastructure and Technology</b>
Baseline Non-migrant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farming</li> <li>• Casual wage labor (local)</li> <li>• 1 Tradesman (regional)</li> <li>• Petty commerce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All mud brick construction</li> <li>• Transistor radios</li> </ul>
Non-migrant Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farming</li> <li>• 1 Military pension</li> <li>• 1 Tradesman (local)</li> <li>• Political involvement</li> <li>• Petty commerce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All mud brick construction</li> <li>• Transistor radios</li> <li>• 1 Cellular phone</li> </ul>
Diversified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farming</li> <li>• 2 Pensions (France)</li> <li>• 1 International migrant</li> <li>• 2 Government employees (1 regional / 1 capital)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fortified mud brick construction</li> <li>• Corrugated metal roofing</li> <li>• Transistor radios</li> <li>• Several cellular phones</li> </ul>
Successful Migration- focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farming</li> <li>• 1 Pension (France)</li> <li>• Several international migrants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All cement construction</li> <li>• Solar panels</li> <li>• Electric lighting</li> <li>• Satellite television</li> <li>• Refrigerator</li> <li>• Grain milling machine</li> <li>• Transistor radios</li> <li>• Several cellular phones</li> </ul>

Table 1: Family Economic Types

The first type to be discussed is our baseline. It is the first of two subsistence level examples. This family has no members outside of the region and maintains a focus on the traditional lifestyle. They live humbly in an exclusively mud brick compound and do not possess any electronic devices beyond battery powered transistor radios. Farming is their primary economic activity whereby they produce about half of their food needs. The balance is procured primarily by casual wage labor and careful peer association investments by the *kagume*. The wage labor performed is primarily the making of cement bricks for wealthier families construction needs during the agricultural off season. This is supplemented by the occasional

transport of passengers by horse cart to neighboring towns by the young men of the household, small remittances by another young man working in the regional capital, and the petty commerce of the household's women. Education is of a secondary concern to the family with only one young man able to speak French.

Our second subsistence example type is also non-migrant in the international sense, but is involved politically. This family also lives in an exclusively mud brick compound with transistor radios. The household grows about half of its food needs. However, the *kagume* is a former military man who spent several years in a distant part of the country with his wife and children before retiring to the village. He receives a small pension. One of the younger brothers works as an assistant mason locally during the agricultural off season. The *kagume* is also involved politically as he is fluent in *Hassaniya*, the Maure language, as well as French. As a translator and ally he assists the local mayor. This activity provides him with some unofficial income. The sum of these activities makes up the balance of the household's food needs, and has allowed the *kagume* to acquire a cellular phone. The family is favorable towards education and three young men spend the school year away attending middle school in another regional village.

Third, is the family type which is diversified, with some men acting as migrants and others attending to the village household and focusing on farming and other traditional activities. We will call them small gainers. The household compound is made of double thick mud bricks with cement plastering on the outside and corrugated metal roofing. These supplements to traditional construction were funded by two retired migrants' pensions from France. These men are both now senile and are cared for by family members. Additionally, the family gets some revenue from a man working abroad in Tunisia whose wife and children remain in the

compound, as well as support from two other men who are in government service: one as a teacher, the other as a non-commissioned military officer. One of these internal migrants has two wives and children in the compound, the other is unmarried. The *kagume* has never migrated and was charged with his duty several years ago. Beyond the family's extra-sturdy housing, and the *kagume*'s cellular phone the family does not possess much beyond the standard subsistence family. Several young men of the family attend middle school in another regional village.

The final type is that of the big gainers, or the very successful migrant focused family. The majority of this family's resources are tied to migration. The *kagume* is a retired career migrant who returned from France to manage his family's household. He spent the majority of his adult life rotating between several years working in France and returning for several month visits to the village to see his wife and children. The family compound is constructed of concrete block and is smartly painted in bright colors. Solar panels adorn the roof. The panels provide enough power for a refrigerator, satellite television, and some electric lights. The family also possesses a diesel powered grain milling machine. As this family began participating in longer-term international migration during the late colonial period, the *kagume* holds dual citizenship and a French passport. Subsequently, all of his children are entitled to the same, after some bureaucratic paperwork. Many of the household's young men are in Paris working legally and sending money back. The household does not produce agriculturally at a level equivalent to the other example families, but does produce a significant amount of its food. The household is not as politically active in the community as the other three examples.

## **Conclusions**

In looking at the Mauritanian state as a whole it is clear that white Maure domination has led to an inherent lack of opportunities for out-groups. This domination is manifested by the infrastructural development bias towards the white Maure dominated areas as well as bureaucratic exclusion of out-groups. These are important factors which have led to a lopsided industrial-national economy in both spatial and distributive terms. Partially because of this the Soninke live largely disengaged from the state apparatus and have developed an independent interface with the global economy through labor migration.

As distance from home increases so does possible returns and risk. Recognition of this reality has led many migrants to pragmatically focus on international destinations. With established networks to assist new arrivals in international destinations this method has proven more palatable and productive for many Soninkes and is celebrated as a form of both economic and social independence from the state.

The vast majority of migrants who participate in this system do so in order to return to their village with enough capital to both become influential in the community and to pursue another economic activity. The businesses or projects that migrants dream of starting in their hometown are invariably of two groups. The most widespread idea is to have enough capital to create an irrigated or otherwise novel agriculture system. On a small scale this is happening with large private gardens funded by successful migrants springing up around villages. Another set of migrants state that they want to practice a trade-skill in their village which is not possible now because of the lack of electricity or sufficient market.

The largely unregulated services and commerce sector of the economy is participated in by all and provides small-scale opportunities for enterprising individuals. However, to make this

form of development profitable sufficient start-up capital is required. This is often a stated goal of migrants, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, at present even with sufficient capital the potential for small-scale business is limited by both market and infrastructural realities. Expanded opportunities require migration from the home village to a more urban setting. Therefore, the greater part of the envisioned village business schemes have not materialized. These activities are instead currently pursued in the national or regional capital.

Nevertheless, business and investment possibilities in the village or wider nation do not provide the same scale of return as does direct migration to Europe. The division between families with successful European migrants and those without is a much more dramatic and visible economic schism in village society today. However, families exclusively focused on migration abroad, while gaining financially, often experience a loss of political capital in the home community due to their absence.

## METHODS

For the period of July 2005 through August 2007 I lived and worked in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. During this time I was serving as a Peace Corps volunteer. I performed research under the auspices of the Master's International Program, a collaboration between Peace Corps and the Department of Anthropology, Washington State University. The first two and a half months of my stay were spent in training and acclimatization. This orientation consisted of courses on the general social mores of the country, explanations of government infrastructure, integration into the bureaucratic structure of Peace Corps Mauritania, descriptions of the environmental realities of Mauritania, as well as introductory Soninke language courses. At this time I was instructed on my employer's expectations of me as a Peace Corps volunteer and was given a general understanding of the conditions and structures within which I would be working. I was an environmental education volunteer charged with helping the local primary school to provide a curriculum more richly concerned with important environmental topics relating to the local and national ecosystems. Beyond this task, I was encouraged to aid the community in other tasks such as organizing environmentally themed projects. Additionally, I was expected to function as a liaison between the community and various aid organizations with which the Peace Corps had established relationships (eg. World Food Program).

Upon completion of this training period I had a solid basic knowledge of how to operate in society and enough knowledge of the Soninke language to communicate my basic needs and sentiments. At this point I was introduced to the community where I would spend the next two years. By entering the community with an established role to fill and predetermined cooperative expectations I was quickly accepted. The general understanding of community members of why

I was present was to work with the school and to help with community development projects. For the majority of my stay this is exactly what I provided for the community.

However, the reality of my service did not strictly conform to the outlined expectations of the training period. While I was regularly at the village school, I was only able to make a few curriculum changes which were feasible. My primary responsibility at the school was the management of the school garden. Otherwise, I organized an annual community-wide battery clean-up with the children and was able to get a well dug on the school grounds with assistance from the World Food Program. In the wider Soninke community I worked with interested citizens to carry out a tree nursery, address gardening problems, and encourage environmental stewardship.

#### The Case Study Community

Beyond my responsibilities as a development agent, I pursued my interests as a cultural anthropologist. I focused on mastering the Soninke language. Additionally, I watched and learned the daily routines and interactions of people, as well as the social structures and expectations behind these actions. I visited with friends often inquiring into their explanations for how the village was organized and functioned. With my social status as a foreigner and a guest in the community I was welcomed throughout the community and was able to witness all levels of interaction: from that of elders with visiting development projects to that of mothers interacting with their children. Essentially, I worked to become recognized as a respectable and informed community member, someone no longer new and strange, but as common as the tree in the courtyard. In this way, as people became accustomed to seeing me daily around the village I was able to get a less opaque perspective on the realities that surrounded me. I worked in the



agricultural fields, danced at the community dances, and drew water for the garden at a communal well.

An important aspect of this integration was my living situation. I lived in a Soninke household for the entirety of my stay and came to be treated like, and function as a family member, or at least a slightly eccentric uncle or cousin. I had my own private room and courtyard with an entrance from the central courtyard of the family compound. This housing arrangement is typical of Soninke households. I participated in gender appropriate chores and the daily life of the household. The family I lived with was humble and respected throughout the community. They were not involved in international migration and considered themselves more traditional than some of the neighboring families.

As I was a respected guest, I was accepted into the wider community of Soninke men, excepting my non-participation in the Islamic faith. At my age (mid-twenties) most Soninke men are expected to marry their first wife within the next few years and spend much social time contemplating their possibilities. However, I did not interact with the young unmarried men of my age group as much as I did with more elder married men. My comportment and style of dress was intentionally shaped to be closer to that of the respected elders in order to garner a reputation of seriousness for myself. Socially, when I visited people out in the community I spent most of my time chatting with respected adult men. In this way I very much lived according to the social expectations of a local unmarried man and took care to respect traditional rules and avoid controversial situations in the cultural context.

This broad foundation in the practice of Soninke culture was a long and frustrating process, as was the acquisition of near-fluency in the Soninke language. However, the effort was ultimately fruitful, as language proficiency has long been seen as an important aspect of

successful ethnographic research (Naroll 1962: 89-90). Additionally, I feel that the long-term participant-observation process was essential for me to be able to truly understand the cultural developments which I address in my research. Practicing what is often referred to as “explicit awareness,” helped me to pinpoint the topic of my research (Spradley 1980:5). Indeed, my interest in the migration phenomenon was sparked initially by its apparent economic impacts, deepened with my comprehension of the regularity with which migration is discussed publically, and solidified as my understanding of the pervasiveness of its social relevance grew.

After about 18 months of social participation, and once I attained approval from the Washington State University Institutional Review Board, I began to interview villagers on the topics of change, migration, and family. I explained to these now quite familiar people that I wanted to write a book explaining current village realities on these issues. At first it was difficult for individuals to understand this shift in what I was doing. However, due to my established friendly relations throughout the community, I encountered no resistance to this project and people were very generous with their time and explanations to me (Lofland 1976:90). I interviewed a diverse cross section of village inhabitants. I performed interviews after attaining full consent and at the convenience of the informants (see Appendix A). I used semistructured interviews with open ended questions to allow informants to explain the reasoning behind their opinions while minimizing external bias (Bernard 2006:212). I had formulated a primary list of interview questions to this end covering a broad range of economic and social topics (see Appendix B). I did not ask all questions in all interviews and follow-up questions dealing with response clarifications are not fully included in the list. The order of my questions varied with the individual being interviewed.

I selected interviewees based on their willingness to cooperate. However, due to my familiarity with the community, I took care to construct a representative sample of community perspectives (in terms of wealth, amount of family migration, age, and to some extent sex) through a selective series of interviews. I recorded two interviews in the village on audiocassette. For the remainder of interviews in all settings I took handwritten notes in order to create a less obtrusive approach in order to obtain a more frank and earnest discussion environment. All village interviews were performed in a private one-on-one setting.

### The Destination Setting

Upon the completion of my time in the village I arranged to visit community members currently working as migrants both in Barcelona and Paris. I made tentative plans for these visits in the home village. In Barcelona I contacted a village acquaintance by telephone and spent four days living with and talking to members of the Soninke migrant community there, focusing on members of the community where I had lived. I conducted private interviews and recorded migration histories. Beyond this, I participated in animated discussions about migration in a group setting, which served as informal focus group interviews (Bernard 2006:232-239).

The following week I arrived in Paris at the migrant hostel where the village's migrant association is based in the city. I arrived at the address unannounced, beyond a vague correspondence relayed by village members that I would arrive some time during the month. Nevertheless, I soon encountered acquaintances from the village as well as many other village members whose families I was familiar with. There I spent one week living with and talking to Soninke migrants, performing interviews and recording migrant histories. Beyond these activities, social participant-observation was a key aspect of my learning throughout my European migrant-centered experience.

## FINDINGS

This chapter provides the reader with the actual words of interviewees on the central topics of this thesis. It bears noting that the Soninke language is full of nuance and subtly implied judgments. Powerful viewpoints are couched in metaphor and understatement in order to form a more persuasive argument. Additionally the form of discourse relies heavily on repetition to make a point. I have personally translated the perspectives expressed to me. In some cases the interviews were transcribed in the spoken language (Soninke or French) at other times they were translated to English at the time of the interview. Where possible, the original text is presented along with the English translation, in other cases pertinent words or phrases are given in italics within the translated quotation.

### **Village Voices**

In performing interviews in the case study community my effort was to enumerate the variety of perspectives (see The Case Study Community, Chapter 4). This section shows the viewpoints which I encountered in four general sub-groups of the population. The first two sub-groups include people who are not personally involved in migration. The last two sub-groups are of individuals who are thoroughly connected to the migrant networks of the village. Everyone interviewed gave thoughtful responses to my questions (see Appendix B). The open ended format of questioning allowed respondents to thoroughly explain their perspectives. It is these whole thoughts that I attempt to convey below.

### **Non-Migrant Perspectives**

As these interviews were performed in the village itself most participants would classify themselves as non-migrants. While individually diverse, this category consists solely of married adults, yet it could be further divided into those who had never travelled very far and those who

had made brief efforts at migration long ago. Both men and women were interviewed.

Nonetheless, neither of these divisions correlated with a significant difference in opinion.

The prevailing perspective of these people was that migration was a positive force. However, it was not seen as an ideal situation. Rather, for interviewees it was a pragmatic solution to the wider economic woes being experienced. A 42 year old household head expressed it well:

“Ke be ga giri ganni be go o sembunu soxo, o buru o sembunu, xa ken bire kanmen texen siri. Kanmen ga na texe on nan daga gunne, o na soxo, o na yille n kita, o nta daga I kanmu buuru n xoboŋa yi, maaro n xobo ŋa yi, ŋa xobo ŋa yi, ŋa xobo ŋa yi.

“Wacca ke xa, ke nta su pareil. Ganni n duga, ken bire n duga nani maxa; ken bire naniŋaxame, xatti, ken nan ŋa ni fo. Ken bire , ken naŋa, ŋa ni maxa fo xobo. Wacca kenni nta su pareil. Ke fe duudo. Kanmen nta xa texe lenki. A ga, a ga o naburu ga na sokken kita I na xatti n deberi, o ga fo kita. Ganni o ga yigante. ~~ka~~ mi. Xa wacca o ni soxo, toujours o ku soxo o na ku fi na mulla, *xa kanme nta xa texene!* Bon, o ga soxe mulla, o ga mulla moxo be bakka, o ga soxo n teni, xa wacca kanme n texene fonne fonne. A ga ri segemunti ken moxo? Il fallait safeerieye, o nan daga jamaane falle, o na gollina dono, o na xalisi kita, o ga xaayi, lemine n fo kita. Leminu xa I nta fo kita, a do kaara su baane.

Terinke, an ga na daga goliŋa, an ra wa fo kita, an ra wa xa birene n bakka, an ga telle.”

“In the past we got our strength from farming, we had much strength, but at that time the rain was plentiful. When the rains came we went into the bush, we cultivated, we got millet. We did not go beyond this and buy bread, buy rice, and buy and buy.

“Now, nothing is the same. Before, we had livestock; at that time cattle [provided] our dinner, milk, and things like that. At that time, under those circumstances, we did not need to buy things. Now nothing is the same. It is not like that. The rains do not come today. If you have cattle and you have grass for them they will make milk and you will get some. Before, we were well fed. But now, when we farm; always we farm, we want it to work, *but the rain does not come!* Okay, we desire farming, we want to improve our circumstances, we farm, but now the rains come little by little. How do you get beyond the situation? It requires migration, we go abroad, we get work there, we get money, we send it back, the children get something. But if the children do not get anything, nothing has improved.

“Listen, if you could go and get work, if you could go and get something, if you could increase the wellbeing of your family; you would go.”

A 45 year old household head explained what he would prefer in place of migration:

“Nke, n renme o ù n xoxone, ganni ke a dalla, xa lenki n nta a yi mulla o kani ña ga wa telle noqq u su. O ga na soxe n kita, wacca safeeri ni yere [town’s name] ni. Ke n da ke nan mulla...o na B.A.C. de beri soxe, commerce, e levage nke n di mulla siri! O ga na ku deberi yere ku be ni simja. O moxo siri ña.”

“Myself, my child or my younger brother, before, it’s been a while, [I would have wanted them to migrate]; but today I do not want people from our household to go anywhere. If we can farm successfully, we can ‘migrate’ here in town. That is what I would like...if we would get degrees in agriculture, commerce, livestock management that is what I would really prefer! If we could achieve all of that here it would be good. We would all be well.”

Many of the men interviewed in this category had attempted to migrate at some point in time. Their stories tell of the difficulties and tradeoffs involved. A 45 year old man explained why he had never become a migrant:

“Bon, soninko n nan ti: *Waxati moxo n da*. Bon, c’est a dire, c’est comment encore, je suis tombé de mal chance moi. Parce que, nke n do n giduni, n gida xoore, fana a wa travail l’ecole comme technician. Après n gida baane a wa Dakar militaire. Nka ni troisième, bon soxono sikki I maxa. Bon, n faaba a bono 83, 1983. Ken bire nke a peut près 17 ans, 16 ans comme ça. Bon, nke baawo nke mulla telle xube. Aiwa, nke n xooro n ra wa telle. Xa n ma a faayi yere, a ma selle.

“Donc, nke na ni yere. N giduni ku i nta yere. N xoxonu i xarana lecolu. Nja ni fo xoore...Ku be ga wuredu, leminu i wa xarana. N xoxonu wa yere, leminu ku n wa i deema, i ga telle lecolu ja ri. Soro i faayi i na kata lecolu. N ma, a ma selle, aiwa yaxare a yugo n kara, a renmu su daga gunne, a ma selle, a banna yere. Après ka ma butte a ma taaxu. Donc, c’est pour cela, cause, que je me suis resté.”

“Well, in Soninke we say: *It was because of timing*. That is to say, it was because I fell on bad luck. Because of me and my older brothers; my oldest brother, the first one worked as a technician at a school. After that my other older brother was in the military and was in Dakar. Me, I was the third son. So, my father died in 83, 1983. At that time I was about 17 or 16 years old. At that time I wanted to leave. I was old enough so I could go. But, my mother was here and she was not well.

“Therefore, I stayed here. My older brothers were not here. My younger brothers were studying in school. I was the big one [eldest male around]...All of the younger ones were still schoolchildren. My younger siblings that were here, I helped them and made sure they went to school. My mother, she was not well. She was a woman whose husband had died, whose children had all left, who was not well, who was here alone. After that, her liver [congruous to the idea of heart in western culture] would not be still. Therefore, that is why I stayed here.”

The preceding example shows that family obligations are seen as paramount. Given the economic circumstances of the village today, most people said that they would like their children to become migrants if they had the opportunity. This was so that the greater household would benefit. Their answers were brief but transparent. In the words of a 38 year old woman:

“I really want my children to migrate, like their older cousins who went. It is good because of money. You get some [money] and you give it to your parents.”

A 50 year old household head qualified his support for migration:



“Migration is very good, if one does not forget about what is behind him [his past/where he comes from]. If one sends things back [*a ga xayindi*]. If one leaves and forgets, it [migration] is not good.”

A 42 year old household head expressed his wish for migration, but emphasized the practical difficulties:

“We desire/like [*mulla*] migration, but we have no papers. These days [*wacca*], people are going to Spain. Some die on the way. {A play on words [*fuure*= canoe, *fure*=corpse]} Canoes/corpses are bad. {as clandestine migrants use large canoes to cross the open ocean}. Some of us would like to go to America, some of us would like to go to France, but there is no open way [*kille o nta a yi maxa*].”

At the same time, they wanted these future migrants to remain integrated into the family unit. The boys could migrate, but children and wives should remain in the paternal home. A 40 year old man put it simply:

“We the Soninke, our way is that if our son goes to migrate his wife and children stay here.”

His 66 year old father expressed it similarly:

“I want him [a migrant] to leave his wife here. If his wife goes, I have lost him. I want him to come back every year [to see his wife].”

Nevertheless, many emphasized that it was not their choice, but only their preference. In this case they stressed the added burden that supporting two people instead of one would be abroad.

A 45 year old household head said:

“If my son goes to France, he will leave his wife here because he is going to look for work. If she comes along in the beginning, he is not going to get work. Afterwards, if he makes lots of money he can come back and get her. She is his wife.”

The only discrepancies in this perspective came from women’s preferences for their daughters.

A 31 year old mother made clear her distinction between her son’s wife and her daughter:

“Your choice doesn’t rest with your daughters, but with your sons. You marry your daughter off and maybe she’ll migrate with her husband, but that has nothing to do with you. If my daughter marries a migrant I’d want her to migrate too, that’s good, but it’s not my choice. If my son migrates and has a wife, I’d want her to stay in the household. But if he wanted her to go with him I couldn’t say anything.”

Even if a man took his wife abroad with him, it was expressed that the children should grow up in the village. A 38 year old woman put it like this:

“If my son and his wife lived in France, I'd want them to send their kids back here from the moment they're weaned. Because they would grow up here, they would be from here. So that the kids can learn the habits and lifestyle [*jikku*] of here. Then when the boys grow up, their father can come back and they can go together to France because they will have papers. With the girls, when they grow up and get married their husband can go to France [because they married someone born in France]. Then if the woman wants to go to France she can, if she wants to stay in the village she can.”

A 42 year old household head expressed a similar opinion:

“If you and your wife are in France and you have children, when they are weaned you should bring them here. This is our father's house and our father's father's house. They should grow up here and learn the ways of the Soninke [*Soninkaaxu*]. France is not our home. We go there to search for means [*fo muuru*], not because we belong. If you've grown up in France you've already taken up a lifestyle [*jikku n wutu*].

If they [Soninke children raised in France] come here and you want them to take up the lifestyle of here you will wear yourself out [*an na tanpindi*]. But little children, they haven't learned a lifestyle yet. If they grow up here, they will know the ways of the Soninke [*Soninkaaxu*] forever. If they leave they will come back to here because they grew up here.”

Another household head, age 45, echoed these sentiments:

‘If there are children, from the moment they are weaned, I would prefer if they were here for me to educate, like I educated my son. Children that grow up abroad are dangerous [*dangereux*]! It [raising children abroad] can be done right, like my sister's children. She took four [children with her] to France and had two [children] there. They were well educated and they pray and act right. Only the two born in France do not really speak much Soninke. But there are some who grow up in France who do not pray, do not speak Soninke. It is not good, they are lost to us.’

A 66 year old household head and respected elder stated the issue clearly:

‘If children go [abroad] sometimes they can be lost to us. We do not want that, we are ashamed/fearful [*yaago*] of that. We want them to stay here.’

The preceding comments reflect a general uneasiness with the practice of migration. Yes, it is seen as a positive economic input. However, there is a profound fear of loss, especially of migrants’ children, that pervades the feelings of villagers on this topic. These feelings belie the social struggle over identity which the process of migration has catalyzed over the past several decades. The extra-economic forces that migration has brought to bear on the village, its members, and the wider cultural identity have provoked a debate on what it means to be Soninke.

Nearly everyone in this category reflected on the past as a more positive social environment. This idea hinged around two aspects tied to more productive farming: economic self-sufficiency and community solidarity. These traits are seen as quintessential Soninke qualities. A 50 year old woman expressed her opinion on the solidarity issue succinctly:

“Marenmaaxu n ya ni gaani. Marenmaaxu n nta yi wacca.”

“A collective ideal of community well-being and social responsibility used to exist in the village/culture. Now it no longer exists.”

A 51 year old man echoed these sentiments:

“Before, people stuck together [*Soron memugunten n ya ni*]...Before, if you had work [a project] to do everyone would come and help. Now people don't help each other. People have started to take the character of whites/Europeans [*toubob jikkun wutu*]. Everyone for themselves; its coming.”

In reference to the natural resource change and its effects on life in the village a 45 year old household head had this to say:

“Bire moxo, ganni encore nan faso wacca. Ken bire lemine I ti, ‘n ma n ma’ ti leminu, i ga na ti I ma, ‘dulleja ni.’ Yigande a gabe: fani, kiidu, sexeenu, a gabe gabe gabe. Lemine ke a ga na ri, a ga na ti ‘n ma,’ a ga na ti ‘hanmu, daga sanga.’ Mais wacca ke su a daga, an nta kiide walla, an nta fa walla, an nta sexenne walla fowofo. Il faut que xalisi. Sere ga na fo xobo. Ken bire leminu, i nta xalisi tu. Wacca o ka leminu il faut que xalisi. Wacca n lemine ri a ti, ‘n faaba nku tanfille.’ O ku ken bire, o nta xalisi tu.”

“The way we lived before was also better than now. Then a child would say, ‘mom, mom’ a child would say to its mother, ‘I am hungry.’ Food was plentiful: jujubes, baobab fruit, desert dates, lots and lots. A child would come and say, ‘mom’ the mother would say, ‘here, go and play.’ {motioning as if giving a handful of the aforementioned fruits}. But now that is all in the past. You do not see baobab fruit, you do not see jujubes, you do not see desert dates, nothing. Money is necessary. People must buy things. Before, when I was a child, we did not know money. Now the children of our household they need money. Now my child will come and say, ‘dad give me twenty.’ {a small coin} During my childhood, we did not know money.”

On farming, the same man explains that even with improved technology, farming has become more tenuous:

“Before, from the 20th of June the rain would be falling. July through October that would all be the rainy season [*xaaxo*]. Now rains start in July and end in September. Before, five or six people would spend the entire rainy season cultivating an area the size that it takes two people, with a strong horse and a plow, a week to cultivate nowadays. But now maybe the rain comes, maybe it doesn't we don't know.

“Before and now are not the same. Before, we cultivated, we got millet, we ate it. We had livestock, we milked them, we got milk. We went fishing, we got fish, we made dried fish. When we ate supper, we ate couscous and milk [*futo n do xatti*]. When we ate lunch, we ate soured milk and pounded corn [*xatti malacce n do makka necce*] or dried fish and rice or dried fish and pounded corn. But the rice we used to eat and the rice of

today are not the same. Soninke rice [the rice of before] is more delicious! We cultivated many fields of it [Soninke rice], at that time we did not much like imported rice [*toubob maaro*].”

A 50 year old woman put it more strongly:

“It is not the same. Before [*ganni*] imported rice [*toubob maaro*] was not here. Lunch was pounded corn [*makka necce*]. Before we got all of our food from the fields... Food in the past was good [nutritious]. Fish [*talaxe*] came from clean water. Millet you grew and pounded yourself. Rice was Soninke rice not imported rice [*toubob maaro*]. It [imported rice] is not good, it is [like] dry grass, the oil is not good, the dried fish is spoilt [*malacce malacce*], ocean fish [*yaiboy*] {she shakes her head and frowns}.

“We are all losing our eyesight. We are all drying out. In the past we ate well, but now with imported rice, oil, and bouillon cubes {she sucks her teeth, shakes her head, and raises her hands in disgust}.”

However, not everyone was so nostalgic. A 51 year old man described what he thought the primary difference was:

“Now, people who work, people who don't work; they all eat. Before, if you didn't sweat, you didn't eat.

Before, if there wasn't millet you would eat whatever you could. My grandmother [told me] during hard times they would pound tree leaves, even grass, into a powder to eat. Now we've had three bad harvests in a row, but look we still eat rice.”

### Young Men's Views

The perspectives of young unmarried men are another important set of opinions because they are the group most likely attempt migration in the near future. They are the class of potential first time migrants. Their views did not vary much from the older non-migrants, their parents and their aunts and uncles. They said they would migrate given an opportunity, but would prefer to support wives and children in their parents' home. A typical view is expressed by a 21 year old man in the village:

“If I worked in France and was married, I'd want my wife to stay here to help my mom and take care of my grandmother; and so that my family could protect her...but if it were just up to me I'd want her with me, but you can't ever just think of yourself.”

Many strongly expressed that migration would be exciting and adventurous; it would be a way to experience something different, something more. A 21 year old man expressed it like this:

“Je veux quitte ce pays. C'est a l'exterieur qu'on peut trouve quelque chose de plus. C'est a l'exterieur qu'on peut trouver quelque chose de mieux. Je voit les gens qui travail la-bas et je voit les gens qui travail ici. Les gen qui travail la-bas sont plus heureuse.”



“I want to leave this country. It’s beyond here that one can find something more. It’s beyond here that one can find something better. I see the people who work there [abroad] and I see the people who work here. The people who work there are happier.”

A widespread dissatisfaction with their position and opportunities in the village pervaded the statements made by young men. As polygyny is practiced, young men find their childhood female companions married off between the ages of 16 and 20. One evening in passing a group of young men gathered to chat and drink tea I asked them jokingly, “Xa yaxannun xa?” or “Where are your girls?” Their reply came back, “I da su yexi!” or “They’ve all been married!” These same young men remain in subordinate roles until they marry, usually around the age of 30. They bear the brunt of the household’s male-specific physical labor without receiving much social respect. A 26 year old man expressed it like this:

“Yere, a ma lijo. Yere biitente ŋa ni. Xa soxe a sire n ya ni. Yere gangsterini, i nta ñeme da yi. Xa gangsterini ku, i ga daga boobeye! Quand meme, n ga na xaso n faaba moxo, n na taaxu yere a do yige tan.”

“Here is no good. Here we are in darkness. But, farming is good. Here, the gangsters [other young men who aspire to have the rap star image] do not end. But the gangsters still have to go and collect dry grass for the livestock [a chore for boys]! Nevertheless, when I get old like my father [over 80 years old and senile] I will sit down here and just eat.”

A 20 year old put it more bluntly:

“Paris is more interesting. In Paris I’ll have more freedom. Because Mauritania is shit [*merde*]. {laughs}”

The village is seen as a place without much immediate opportunity, but from the young men’s perspectives, if they had economic means this reality would change. All planned on returning to the village once they had made enough money abroad. Then their children could migrate in their place. In the words of a 20 year old:

“Yes, I will want my children to migrate. I’ll rest here then.”

At the same time, they also expressed that they would prefer for the economic and infrastructural situation to support them within the country, rather than necessitating migration. A 26 year old man with training in a skilled trade felt that it was a simple issue.

“If there was electricity here no one would leave to find work. They could work here.

They could do welding here [for example]. This is our town.”

### Migrants at Home

The social views of migrants who have returned home to visit family are essential to understanding the migration phenomenon. This is because their perspectives are tangible and accessible to other community members. Many of their views are similar to those of village non-

migrants. The most salient of these views is that of developing an agricultural or business project in the village. Many migrants were concerned with their hard earned money just “being eaten” in the village (only going towards foodstuffs). A migrant in his forties told me:

"People [who migrate] need to use the money they bring back to grow food and take care of the basics of life and increase wealth here. The new mosque we're building has cost millions of Ouguiya [Mauritanian monetary unit] and it's still not finished. But, you can pray anywhere even here [under a tree]. Sometimes I can't sleep at night just thinking about the future here [in the village]. There are a lot of people and the population keeps growing. Access to Europe is getting harder. France is a catastrophe and things are not good and getting worse in Spain."

The preceding desires are stoked by an oft expressed malaise by migrants about their economic and social relationship to their paternal household. One man in his late fifties talking to me about making investments in Mauritania laid plain a fundamental issue:

"The important thing is to just buy the lots and not build a house or anything. If you build a house, maybe you could rent it, but more likely you'll have a brother or cousin to take care of it for you and he'll make it his home and then you can't sell it and you can't get any money from him for it."

These feelings of being taken advantage of are exacerbated by migrants' sense that the opportunities in Europe are becoming increasingly tenuous. A migrant in his late fifties spending a month-long visit to his paternal household told me about his uneasiness:

"I stay up late at night, and I see on television the things that they [French racists in politics] are saying and it really frightens me about the future."

### Home to Stay

Retired career migrants make up a small but important group in the village. They have completed their careers and have returned home for good. These proud men have successfully provided for their families. One man in his sixties explained to me how he provided for his family, without me asking.

"In 2000 I came back and I built this house [the large, but not extravagant cement house which we are sitting in]. I went to Nouakchott and bought the cement at the factory, but left it there until October because big trucks can't handle the road during the rainy season, as you know. And you see there's plenty of room for all of the children [in this house]."

These retired migrants express a pride in what they have accomplished and mentor their sons towards successful migration as well. A man in his late sixties describes how his family's economic focus on migration came about:

"I went to Paris in June 1960, a few months before [Mauritanian] independence. This way, because I was in France when independence came I could have French citizenship if I wanted to do the paperwork. So I did and my children, who were minors here in Ajar, also have right to French citizenship. Even my son who was born in 1985 is a French citizen."

These men also express a fond reminiscence of their time abroad and, like other villagers, lament the changes which have occurred in migration over the years. A 65 year old put it like this:

"Before, [migration] was good. Now is not good in France. Before, there was a lot of work. Now, it is hard to get. Now they made Europe bigger. Now there are robots in the factories. Now, there is just cleaning [work available]. That's not a job. That does not do anything for your mind."

### **Contextualizations of the Village**

The perspectives of individuals enumerated in the preceding sections all exist in the specific social context of the case study village. This certainly plays an important part in shaping opinions and how these opinions get expressed. As has been previously discussed, migration is a topic of culture-wide discussion for Soninke people. This is manifest in myriad forms from radio programs to local economic and social relationships between neighbors. The preceding interviewees, in large part, share a similar perspective on the topic of migration.

### **Just Visiting**

A different group of village migrants are the children who were raised outside of the village and only visit occasionally for weddings or celebrations. Their perspectives differ drastically from those of their parents who have returned for their retirement as well as from their cousins who have grown up in the village. The social distance between these individuals and the rest of the community is palpable. Nevertheless, they represent a growing segment of people from the village with an outlook which diverges from the traditional. Their feelings on remittances are summed up nicely by a 30 year old man visiting his paternal household for a wedding:

"The problem with migration is that the people who stay in the village, who have never migrated, can become lazy. They know that no matter what they do there will be money sent on the thirtieth. If they work hard or if they don't do anything but play cards, drink tea, and gossip there will be money on the thirtieth.

"The problem is that you have someone who stays in the village and he doesn't work, he gets money sent to him. He takes four wives, he's got thirty children, and that's all supported by his brother in France. When he [the migrant/brother] comes back and sees the four wives and the thirty children and he has nothing, there will be a problem.

"It's [migration remittances] not well managed. The money gets sent and then it is all spent on food and clothes. Nobody tries to do anything [economically productive] with it."

The purpose of migration takes a different angle from this perspective. When asked about what a good example of a well-managed migrant-driven village family looked like the same man responded:

"[Family X]. They have a new house, well built; they have a refrigerator, satellite television. They live normally here [with western conveniences]. They were all in France. [The eldest male] came back to run the family and he has done a good job of managing the money [turning it into durable material investments and economic benefits for the family]."

However, this perspective was antithetical to what I heard expressed by most village members in reference to the same family.

### **Safeeri: On the Adventure**

My visits to two of the primary migrant destinations for members of the case study community provided me with an invaluable window to the other side of the situation. During this experience I reconnected with migrants I had met in the village and met new villagers whose families I was acquainted with. But most importantly I was able to see their lives abroad and record their perspectives on the phenomenon of migration. In the two destination settings there were many organizational differences, yet the underlying community spirit as well as the functional reality of the economic effort were the same.

### **Barcelona: the Village of Apartments**

Spatially, the Soninke community I encountered in the suburbs of Barcelona was fragmented. However, with its small size came close ties between members. Villagers working

in Barcelona lived in an industrialized working class suburb of the city. There were many diverse migrant groups present in the neighborhood as well as a substantial Spanish population. I spent time in two boarding apartments shared by Soninke men and three apartments for nuclear families with small children. In this setting, both types of apartments functioned as the Soninke social space. However, the family apartments were open to the wider Soninke community for specific cultural functions (I attended a blessing ceremony in one apartment). Otherwise, they were a quiet private sphere. On the other hand, the boarding apartments were the site of a constant flow of Soninke men. Meals were funded and eaten communally. At other times there were always some men watching television (either a soccer match, a videocassette of a traditional Soninke function, or an African concert) while others slept, and still others were off to work. There were approximately ten men in the primary two bedroom boarding apartment I visited.

There was a distinct hierarchy among the men staying in the boarding apartments as well as in the wider community. This hierarchy was based both on village association and seniority. As this destination for migration has only a brief history, there is not as rigid of a village association here as in Paris. However, the structure is applied reasonably well and maintains a social order resembling the traditional village.

### Barcelona Expressed

Due to the short period of time I spent in Barcelona and the smaller size of the migrant community I was not able to perform as many interviews as in the case study village. Nevertheless, the thoughtful sentiments that these men conveyed to me provide an important view on the phenomenon of contemporary Soninke migration. When I asked them for their views on migration the responses were overwhelmingly negative. None wanted their children to



migrate. It was clear that economic prospects drove them to lead this lifestyle. Yet all wished for different circumstances on both sides of the migration experience. A 44 year old man stated:

“The reality is that when you work hard here, you have to support lots of lazy people back home and you don't end up with anything for yourself because of the social obligations of dispensing money and things”

A well educated articulate man in his thirties expressed similar sentiments and explained that the situation was better in earlier periods of migration, echoing some of what the non-migrants focused on (see Non-Migrant Perspectives):

"Coming back to the village in fancy new clothes with a ton of rice [literally] and a barrel of [cooking] oil in a rented 4x4 and handing out gifts and money and slaughtering a ram or even a bull is a *moral obligation*. If I went back and didn't do that, my father would demand for me to do it, my mother would demand for me to do it and the people in the village would call me a good-for-nothing.

"It wasn't always like this. Before, in the '60s and '70s someone could go on adventure and you wouldn't hear from them for a year or more. There was no calling, 'I'm sick, there's no money for medicine, send money,' 'we need money for this or that,' all the time. Before when someone came home from adventure it was a celebration because a family member came home, but now it's, 'What did you bring us?' Before if the millet granary was full and you had 3 or 4 cows to milk the family had food and everyone was content. Now it's money for rice and oil, etc."

Again echoing some of the sentiments of the non-migrants, a 43 year old migrant explained what he hoped for:

"[The case study village] does not have lots of migrants because the soil is really good and produces a lot, so people who left came back and stayed. So I think we need to find a way to really use the land of [the case study village] to build value/wealth [*valeur*] for the people so they do not leave and die in the sea [referring to clandestine efforts to enter Europe]. We need to look for friends and aid to help us do this. That idea [of building value/wealth] will give hope to the kids of [the case study village], who are the future, so that they don't have to live this difficult life we live. With trade skills and some means we can change the future of our youth and change the mentality of our people to break this cycle. I don't want my kids to live this life!"

The expression of a desire for a return to traditional village life, or at least to the village itself ran at the heart of these migrants views on their current situation. A 44 year old migrant told me:

"You asked me what about the families who don't have migrants and work very hard to feed their families; making cement bricks for others and doing all they can to take care of the household while staying in the village. Being from [the village] I know the men you're talking about and I say that's great, they are real men."

There was also the feeling that bringing a wife and building a family in the migrant setting was far from ideal. The same fears expressed by non-migrants about raising children abroad were repeated. A migrant in his thirties expressed it this way:

"Not everyone has the means to bring his wife along. It takes a lot more money because you have to pay for your own apartment and all of your other costs are doubled. Plus, she doesn't have the right to work for 5 or 6 years, because the visas are different...[Soninke] children who grow up here, they aren't African and they aren't really Spanish. It's difficult because if you can't afford to send them to the village every school break, they grow up not really understanding Soninke ways [*soninkaaxu*]...And the things that they are taught about Africa don't give them a desire [*envie*] to go there, they only hear about the bad parts, they don't speak Soninke well. Up until 4 or 5 they speak [an age appropriate level of] Soninke but eventually a day comes when their mother speaks to them in Soninke and they respond in Spanish. We have a real problem here because actually a lot of the delinquents here in Europe are exactly these kids. You know here they turn 18 and have the right and some disappear and those that disappear like that are often the delinquents."

Nevertheless, some voices explained why migration was a pragmatic option for them. A well educated man in his fifties told me:

"The uneducated migrants get mad at us for being migrants like them because they want [educated Soninkes] to stay in our country and work to make the country better, but they

do not understand the system like we do. We worked in the [Mauritanian] bureaucracy for less than we can make in a week here for a month and we know how much of a mess things are in back there [Nouakchott bureaucracies]. We blacks don't advance and the white Maures get all of the good posts and take all of the money."

Another man in his early thirties explained his displeasure at the structural reality of sending remittances home:

"A big problem with the way people [Soninkes] go about sending money and things home is that they do all of this through Maure middle men in Nouakchott. A certain Maure made 19 million [ouguiyas] {about 65,000 US dollars} last year transferring remittances. When you buy the rice and oil to have sent to your family in the village, you have it bought in Nouakchott from the big Maure merchants. When you rent a 4x4, you rent it from them [white Maures]. Think of all of the good that you could do by organizing a work/improvement project for Soninke youth with that money. Something needs to change in the organization of this process to stop giving all this money to the [white] Maures."

Regardless of the general malaise expressed by the migrants in Barcelona, all explained that they were migrants in order to provide for their families back home in the village. The option was far from ideal but did allow these men to play important roles in their larger families well-being. This was seen as a necessary sacrifice, a burden they had willingly borne. However, it seemed that these men would have gladly let someone else take the responsibility for them.

Nevertheless, they all became migrants voluntarily. Many had risked their lives on their voyage to Europe, some more than once. Perhaps, while difficult the potential payout from migration in both economic and status terms was worth it. No one would say it, but maybe it just went without saying.

### Paris: In the Workers' Hostel

Unfortunately, the circumstances in Paris did not lead to interviews beyond migration histories. Nevertheless, the setting itself along with participant-observation offered a rich picture of continuous Soninke migration to one destination over several decades. Between these layers of migrant history much could be gleaned.

In Paris, where Soninke migration to Europe has its strongest legacy the age of the connection is apparent in the domestic reality. The migrant hostel where migrants from the case study village reside is a large dilapidated apartment block built in the early 1960s. According to the migrants, it has always been an African workers' hostel. It is now surrounded by more chic and manicured looking buildings, and faces, across the expressway, a shiny new skyscraper. The building is set up dormitory style and houses only African migrant workers. Village members are concentrated on the east side of the central wing of the fourth floor. Here the rooms are referred to and owned by different families and everyone participates in the pervasive village-based social unit. Cooking takes place in a one large shared kitchen per floor and meals are collective. Rooms are each shared by two or three men and almost all contain a television; soccer matches being a key diversion.

Here, the social hierarchy is more pronounced than in Barcelona. The village association is the organizing social force. On the weekends there are village association meetings and they are used to reinforce social organization and traditional reciprocity responsibilities. These

meetings are not every weekend for every village. In Paris, the wider village association adheres strictly to the caste hierarchy and assigned roles of the village. In the hostel itself not all necessary families are represented at all times, but the form is nevertheless closely copied.

Beyond the association itself the focus on exporting funds and goods back to the home community was more overt. Some individuals offered intermediary services for sending rice or cash back home and had price lists on their doors. The hostel as a space was strictly West African and did not necessarily interact with the surrounding community, which was widely seen to be hostile. The inhabitants of the hostel looked inwards for social activities and diversions.

### **The Diversity of Migration**

In any destination setting migrants at all levels of legal status can be found: those with dual-citizenship, others with foreign worker status, and the clandestine. These designations reflect enormous differences in the possibilities and realities for men of similar ages from the same village. Migrants with dual-citizenship move freely between countries; they receive social benefits and health care in Europe; they have the right to unemployment and retirement benefits; and their children inherit dual citizenship. Other workers with legal status receive some benefits, but do not pass these on to their children. Clandestine migrants are often menaced by law enforcement, must work illegally, and face the threat of deportation every day. Clearly these distinctions bear heavily on the opportunities and realities of migrants. Nevertheless, they all participate in the same social community abroad. All of these types of can be found living together in boarding apartments or migrant hostels.

### **Migration Histories**

To elucidate the impacts that these different legal statuses put on migrants a few examples of migration histories will be given. First there is the example of a 22 year old man

who inherited French citizenship from his father. This young man lives in the workers' hostel and has his own car.

Left the village for first time in 1993 (18 yrs. old)

Went to France by plane [1993]

Got work at McDonalds (14 yrs.) - (9 yrs.) as assistant manager

Another migrant, a 43 year old man who now works legally in Spain explained how he had come to his current situation.

Left the village for the first time in 1985 (age 21)

Went to Cote d'Ivoire (7 mo.) [1985]"My big brother was in Gabon, that's how I got papers from the Cote d'Ivoirien ambassador for Gabon."

Worked in Gabon (9 yr.) [1985-1993] first as a laborer, then as a small shop owner and merchant.

Returned to the village (4 mo.) [1993]and married his first wife.

Left again for Gabon (4 yr. 8 mo.) [1994-1998] and ran a small shop.

Returned to the village (4 yr.) [1998-2002] worked as blacksmith and farmer [*tagaxu a do soxeye*]

Married second wife [2001]

Took a canoe [clandestine] on the ocean to France (1 mo.) [2002]

Jobless/paperless in France (1 mo. 10 days) [2002]

Returned to the village (4 mo.) [2002]

Took a canoe [clandestine] on the ocean to France (1 mo.) [2003]

(1 yr. 10 mo.) [21 Feb 2003 to 3 Jan 2005] Worked in France as an undocumented worker.

Went to Spain (9 mo.) [2005] undocumented, no work "My friends and family here [in Europe] paid for me."

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(3 mo.) [2005] Worked in Spain [Barcelona] *SEAT* automobile factory.

Returned to the village (5 mo.) [2006]

Returned to Spain (8 mo.) [2006-2007] Worked in *SEAT* automobile factory.

- older brother's wife died suddenly/tragically - Returned to the village (3 mo.) [2007]

Returned to Spain (until present) [2007] Works in *SEAT* automobile factory.

A 29 year old migrant who still works illegally described how he got where he is.

Left the village for first time in 1996 (age 18).

Went to Nouakchott (7 yr.) [1996-2003]

(1 yr.) apprentice mechanic

(6 yr.) mechanic

Went to France clandestine (5 yr.) [2003-present]

- borrowed French passport from "friend, another Mauritanian Soninke" in [Jan. 2003]

and flew to Paris

Applied for political refugee status and was denied.

(4 yr.) [2003-2007] worked cleaning offices at night



Briefly [2004] worked as a dishwasher in restaurant

Currently [2007] cleans dumpsters for city of Paris when called in

These stories are typical examples of the migration histories shared with me during my stay in Europe. While migrants were not keen to discuss the legal differences between themselves, or their legal status at all, it is clear that there are great differences in the opportunities and possibilities for individual on this basis.

### Families Abroad

Another form of social and economic differentiation comes with raising a family abroad. Beyond the collective living situations are a number of nuclear families who have struck out more independently. This is not possible without legal status in a country. The primary focus of debate over this lifestyle in the traditional Soninke community is that of raising children (see Non-Migrant Perspectives). From what I encountered and observed the parents of children who grow up in this circumstance are proud of the fact that they are well educated and technologically savvy. At the same time there is an identity disconnect from the traditional which troubles some parents. However, this disconnect did not appear to be at the forefront of familial relations.

Some young adults I met in Paris whose parents had come from the village had never visited and were more interested in visiting America or getting on with their careers in France than seeing their parents homeland. This is not to say that their identity was independent of their Soninke heritage, but that they did not see a return to their parents land or lifestyle pertinent to their lives. Likewise, the parents themselves seemed settled in their adopted communities, focusing on social networks connected to the wider Islamic migrant community rather than contenting themselves with village or ethnic groupings.

This sort of social evolution is just what people in the village had feared. However, family migration remains a small segment of the whole of Soninke migration. The webs of solidarity and cooperation connecting the village with its migrant outposts remain firmly in place. Most migrants eventually return home to stay. Most leave their families in the village and center their lives abroad tightly around providing for those they left behind.

## CONCLUSIONS

### The Continuity of Change

#### Homeland

Migration was originally a way for young men to supplement their households' economy and often to obtain wealth for bride procurement. Increasingly, it has become an almost necessary input in order to maintain rural village life in a decreasingly productive environment with an increasing population (especially the population of dependents). This reality has created new rifts in Soninke society as old divisions become less pertinent to daily economic life.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that traditional roles have become obsolete or have ceded their authority in the face of changing economic realities. In fact, these structures would not have existed until today were it not for their inherent adaptability and the importance they hold in the reproduction of a distinctive Soninke culture and identity.

By its very nature migration is risky business. Some individuals have taken great risks and become very wealthy and successful. These men become heroes and are lavished with praise (by those to whom they are generous). Many individuals make several attempts to create an economically viable migrant situation for themselves, yet ultimately fail. These men return to their villages without the pomp of the successful, bringing what they can to offer their paternal household. They are welcomed home heartily, but are not indulged like the successful, and they return to daily chores quickly.

These rifts (between successful migrant families and the rest of the community) will only widen with continuing environmental degradation and increasing population pressure. Already, the village which is the subject of this case study is clearly living beyond the environmental biocapacity of its surroundings, a fact that I am told would have been unimaginable only 40

years ago. The economic stratification of households resulting from variable migratory success is blatantly apparent. This is exemplified by the different economic types of families described in Table 1 (see Family Type Examples, Chapter 4). The typology makes plain that successful migrant families are economically secure and possess diversified investments; while at the other end of the scale, non-migrant subsistence-level families struggle to make ends meet even with all able household members contributing whenever the opportunity arises in the limited local economy.

As the risks of migration become greater and the environment continues to become less productive, rural Soninke villages will have to develop new strategies of economic survival in order to maintain the unique social environment of their traditions. The Soninke are fiercely proud and protective of their rural lifestyle, yet the precariousness of their current situation is apparent to all.

The essentially robust nature of the traditional Soninke social infrastructure stems from its willingness to embrace new economic opportunities while maintaining the integrity and primacy of its socio-economic agricultural production system. Only the increasing economic strains caused by the impoverishment of the subsistence related natural resource base (primarily agricultural, but not exclusively) and rising population pressure (both intra- and extra-ethnic) has resulted in a substantial challenge to the traditional social infrastructure.

Economic return migration is one rational method of getting the most out of a globalized economy with varying levels of risk and reward at the different levels of social distance from home. However, migration alone is not a viable path to sustaining traditional households in the long term. A diversified approach would provide more stability.

As economic opportunities diminish at home, more individuals will be willing to take even greater risks in order to maintain or supplement the economic performance of their households. Increasingly, the gateways to non-migration based economic advancement (e.g. quality education, start-up funds for small-scale commerce, technical agricultural improvements, etc.) require means beyond that of families without successful migrants. Thus, migration-powered stratification grows more acute.

### **Insights**

In looking at the tapestry of social implications stemming from the realities of economic migration in the case study community, I was initially frustrated with the issues at hand because of the fact that the central phenomenon is a structural economic issue. Yet, at the same time, the community's response is primarily expressed through a set of culture specific symbolic forms. Adaptation is observable in the symbolic construction and maintenance of prestige and identity, both personal and group. Beyond this, the variety of structural pressures on the culture (locally observed and recognized) have prompted changes in social identity and configuration on levels of patronage and hierarchy as well as changes of social perceptions and actions. These changes, in turn, necessitate a reiteration and/or reinterpretation of the social infrastructural realms of participation, ritual, and ultimately symbolism. Developments in economic capacity and variation are by no means novel forces in Soninke society. This culture has faced a whirlwind of change from the beginning of the colonial era which has continued unabated through the present day. Indeed, cultural redefinition is an unending process to be found constantly, especially in a world where cultural isolation is virtually impossible.

Upon careful reflection, this dynamic is clearly intelligible within the framework of social power dynamics. Material structural causal factors led to changes in economic power and

status, straining traditional social order and its tapestry of ritual and symbolism, leading to a contentious revision of this fabric. Those failing to profitably adapt to the new structural realities, unwilling to accept symbolic change, and/or with vested interests in the maintenance of tradition are set against economically prosperous groups in the new realities who are eager to maintain their new-found status advantages, undermine traditional structures they see as archaic, or simply not in step with their economic ambitions, and/or reorient their local environment (both socially and physically) towards westernized ideals of economy (e.g. family instead of community focused).

Successful families deeply entrenched in the migration economy can be seen to be causally driven to a cultural revisionist perspective because the identity of the family no longer exists solely within the local social environment. Instead, the family has become itself a shifting transnational entity interacting in multiple, disparate social realms with diverging symbolic status indicators. Because this makes social coherence so much more unstable, to the point where it could cause symbolic vertigo for any actors without full acceptance in any one social environment, the simplified connection between accumulation of material wealth and status appears as a universal pillar narrowing the focus of social redistribution (a central feature of Soninke social reproduction in the community and beyond) to the familial group wherein social acceptance is practically assured.

In extreme situations, this could foreseeably lead to the further narrowing of feelings of economic responsibility to the nuclear family or even the individual if coherence within the extended family group (the standard unit of economic unity in traditional society) becomes itself untenable. If this were to become a reality Soninke society would cease to function in a manner recognizable to its current form.

This is why the symbolic battleground of identity (for individuals/families/communities) has become transnational itself with traditional order and meaning organized to confront and incorporate the migrant in all foreseeable destinations. Soninke culture's many tenaciously traditional aspects projected to the migrant centers are a comprehensive effort to maintain the traditional hierarchies and routes to the diverse forms of social power.

The symbolic battle is fought to maintain or diffuse (both dynamic processes) the structural cultural mechanisms which underlie and reinforce the traditional power hierarchy which is inseparable from group identity, cultural cohesion, and social order as currently expressed in the village setting. This is exemplified by the concise statement of a 50 year-old woman in the village: "Marenmaaxu n ya ni gaani. Marenmaaxu n nta yi wacca." translated literally as, "the perspective of all sharing the same mother was between us in the past. Now, this perspective of sharing the same mother is not here." or more clearly as, "A collective ideal of community well-being and social responsibility used to exist in the village/culture. Now it no longer exists."

### **Research Opportunities**

Much remains to be done to expand the academic knowledge base on the Soninke people as well as the wider West African migration trends. This case study provides but a single sketch of these dynamic patterns. A wider comparative survey of migration's contemporary footprint on Soninke communities remains to be done. The implications of national differences that exist between the three countries which encompass the Soninke homeland need to be explored. The multitude of migrant networks, the problematic issue of clandestine migration, and the cultural manifestation of Soninkes in Europe all merit further exploration as they evolve. Beyond broad-based comparative studies there are also interesting prospects for studies of the evolution of

Soninke social discourse through music and radio culture. The implications of technological changes which are in progress (expansion of cellular telephone networks, increasing access to forms of visual media, etc) provide opportunities for study. Additionally more detailed study of the female perspective in Soninke culture would vastly improve the available data.



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## APPENDIX A

### WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY CONSENT FORM

Economic Migration, Development Aid, and Community:  
A case study of change in Northern Gidimaxa Soninke villages

Researcher: Benjamin R. Burgen, graduate student, Department of Anthropology,  
+1 (785) 449-7278 or +1 222 652 6732 [benburgen@yahoo.com](mailto:benburgen@yahoo.com)

#### Researcher's Statement

My name is Ben Burgen. I am a Peace Corps volunteer in the village of Ajar. I have come from America to learn about life in Soninke villages: what people do, what they talk about, their memories of the past and hopes for the future. Specifically I would like to hear what you think about migration and development and your personal experiences related to these phenomenon. I am interested in talking with you so that I understand these things better.

I am asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read this form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of this research, what I would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When I have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in this study or not. This process is called 'informed consent.' I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

#### Purpose and Benefits

The purpose of this study is to find out more about life in Soninke villages: organization, change, and migration. Interviews will be conducted to discern your opinions and perceptions of migration and how migration affects your daily life. While there may be no specific benefit to you for participating in this study, it is proposed that the cross-cultural interaction between Soninke migrants, western development agencies/agents, and traditional Soninke communities will be better understood in the future because of this study. This will allow for people in countries receiving Soninke migrants to better understand the full implications of this exchange. Additionally this research will bring together the variety of perspectives in the Soninke community and allow these views to be seen as a collective whole.

#### Procedures

The procedure of this study involves one-on-one informal interviews with you that will last no longer than you desire. You may refuse to answer any question during the interview process at

any time. The information that you provide in the interview will be kept confidential and you will be identified by a pseudonym in the study findings.

Examples of questions that will be asked are:

Is labor migration important to the household? How?

How many people from this household are currently international migrants?

Where are international migrants from this household currently?

Risks, Stress, or Discomfort

If at any time during the interview process you become uncomfortable, embarrassed, or experience stress; the interview will be stopped in order to minimize any negative effects for you.

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Printed name of researcher

Signature of researcher

Date

Subject's statement

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have general questions about the research, I can ask the researcher listed above. If I have questions regarding my rights as a participant, I can call the WSU Institutional Review Board at +1 (509) 335-9661 or I can email them at [irb@wsu.edu](mailto:irb@wsu.edu). This project has been reviewed and approved for human participation by the WSU IRB. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

---

Printed name of subject

Signature of subject

Date

(circle your choice)

My voice may be recorded:

Yes

No

My photograph may be taken:

Yes

No

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY  
FORME DE PERMISSION

La Migration Economique, Aide pour le Developpe ment, et la Communaute :  
Un etude sur le changement culturel et economique dans les villages Soninké du Gidimaxa du Nord.

Chercheur : Ben Burgen, Etudiant, Departement de l'Anthropologie, +1 (785) 449-7278  
Ou +1 222 652 6732 [benburgen@yahoo.com](mailto:benburgen@yahoo.com)

Parole du Chercheur

Je m'appelle Ben Burgen. Je suis un volontaire du Corps de la Paix au village d'Ajar. J'avais venu des Etats-Unis d'apprendre les choses sur le mode de vie dans les villages Soninké : ce que les gens fait, les sujets de discussion, les memoires du passé et les espoirs pour le futur. Specifiquement, je voulais ecoutez vos opinions sûr les sujets de la migration et du developpement et vos experiences personnelle sûr ces sujets.

Je demande que vous participiez dans un projet de recherche. Le but de ce formulaire est de vous donnez l'information fondamentale pour decidez si vous voulez participer ou pas. Si vous plait, lisez ce formulaire attentivement. Veuillez me poser des questions sûr l'utilite de cette recherche, ce que je peux poser pour vous faisez, les dangers et les avantages de participation, vos droits si vous participez, et de tous vos questions sûr les choses qui ne sont pas clair à vous. Quand j'avais repondé à tous de vos questions, vous peut decidez si vous voulez participer ou pas. Je vais vous donner un double de cette forme de gardez.

But et Benefices

L'intention de ce projet est de comprend plus sûr la vie culturelle et economique dans les villages Soninké : l'organization, le changement, et la migration. Les questions seront poser dans la forme d'une tête-a-tête pour éviter vos opinions et perceptions de la migration et comment la migration influencer votre vie. Probablement il n'ya pas un benefice direct pour votre participation dans cette recherche. Neanmoins, c'est proposé que le savoir qui est eviter par ce travail seront utile pour l'amelioration de la connaissance des connexions entre les migres, les agences d'aide, et les villages Soninké. Aussi, c'est proposé que cette connaissance aille donne une plus profonde comprehension de la totale des impacts de la migration dans les pays qui recevoir les migres.

Procedures

Cette etude seron accompli avec la participation des individus dans les discussions tête-a-tête. Vous pouvez terminer cette tête-a-tête quand vous voulez. Vous pouvez refuser de repondre à

une question à n'importe quel moment dans les processus. Vos réponses aux questions seront secrets.

Voir suivant les exemples des questions :

Est-ce que la migration « les gens qui part à l'aventure » est important dans la maison ?  
Comment ?

C'est qui, qui va choisir qui vont émigrer ?

Quelles sont les facteurs en déterminant qui va émigrer ?

Si vous ne voulez pas m'aider, vous pouvez arrêter cette conversation immédiatement. On n'aura pas d'irritation envers vous si vous ne participez pas. Veuillez me poser des questions sûr notre discussion quand vous voulez.

---

Nom de chercheur (en majuscule)

Signature

Date

Avez vous compris ? Vous acceptez ?

---

Nom de participant (en majuscule)

Signature

Date

(cercle votre choix)

Puis-je enregistre votre voix ?

Oui

Non

Puis-je pris votre photo ?

Oui

Non

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY  
TIRINDIN XIBAARE

Safeerieye, Mukkuni Deemandeye, a do Sooninken Debu :  
Ganni n do Wacca Naxa, Tirindini Gidimaxa Saheli Soninkan Deben Yogo

Tirindaana : Benjamin R. Burgen, Tuwaana, Department of Anthropology,  
+ 1 (785) 449-7278 ma +1 222 652 6732 [benburgen@yahoo.com](mailto:benburgen@yahoo.com)

Tirindaana Digaame

N toxo ni Ben a do n jaamu ni Burgen. Nke wolonteeri Corps de la Paix n ya ni Assaren debe noxo. N giri Ameriki. N ri baawo n a mulla sooninko a do soninkaran faamundi a yi. N na mulla o nan masala siri. O wa sefene do safeerieye, mukkuni deemandeye, gollina, a do xalisin xibaare. N na mulla o na masala baawo n na mulla fo yere faamun moxo siri.

N ti, n na mulla an ga ~~de~~ n tiri ndin terinkene a do an digaame kono. N da ke kayiti kinni n ya baawo n na mulla an da ke tirindini faamu siri, ken bire a ra ~~wajadu~~ walla bara n deema. Ke kayiti xarana moxo siri. Tirindi an maxa, i kono wacca. An da fo su faamunde anke ra wa sugandi : iyo walla ayi. N wa kayiti ke kinni n ya.

Tuwaaxun Xenu

N na mulla ke tirindini deberi baawo n na mulla sooninko a do soninkara faamundi siri : bireye, golleye n do safeerieye, ganni n do wacca naxa manne ni nta baane. N wa tirindin deberi baawo n a mulla an digaamen tu. O wa tirindinin deberi baanen o baane o yinmu filli, nke a do anke baane. N da seema ke tirindi a siren ya ni baawo ke gollen falle n ra wa xa ku digaame kono n jamaane a do europe jamaanen noxo ; ken bire tubaabun ra wa soninkon i jamaanen noxo faamundi foso waaga a do siino falle Alla ga najdu

Mendu

O wa tirindinin deberi baanen o baane o yinmu filli, nke a do anke baane. An a mulla masala ñeme da yi, a ko. An nta tirindi mulla an ra wa i bara, bire su. Nke baane wa an digaamen mukku. N ga na fo safa tirindini falle, n ra nta ti ko da manne kono.

Tirindin yogo :

Safeerieye anja yi ferego ke kan noxo ba? Moxo be?

Ko ni ga na ti ke yugo wa telle safeeri a do ke yugo wa taaxu yere?

Sere ga na sugandi i na telle a do i nta telle i na manne semana?

An nta mulla n deema, haqe n nta a yi. A ko wacca wacca. Tirindin an maxa n digaamen falle, a ko wacca walla bire su.

---

Tirindaana toxo a do jaamu

« Signature »

Lenki

An da faamu ? An a duje ke tirindini terinke ?

---

Toxo a do jaamu

« Signature »

Lenki

(xabaane ro an suga n falle)

N ra wa an digaame enregistrer ba ?

Iyo

Ayi

N ra wa an foton kita ?

Iyo

Ayi

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions (English)

- What is your age?
- How many languages can you speak? What are they?
- Can you read?
- Did you ever go to school?
  - What level did you stop at?
  - Where did you study?
- Does your household farm? Do you have other work?
- What portion of your household food needs do you grow?
- How do you get the rest of the food that you need?
  - Is this different from your childhood?
- Who else supports your household economically?
  - Where are they?
  - When was the last time they visited?
- How do you define « safeerieye »?
- If someone is going to go on « safeeri » how do they choose where to go?
- Who chooses who migrates and who stays behind? How?
- Have you ever left the country? Where is the farthest away that you have ever been?
  - How old were you when you first left?
  - Were you married at the time?
  - Where did you go?
  - How did you get papers? Housing? Work?



- What do you think of migration?
- What obligations does a migrant have towards his family household?
- What obligations does a migrant have towards his village?
- What have migrants done for the village?
- What differences are there in migration between now and your childhood?
- What changes have occurred in village attitudes since your childhood?
- What changes have occurred in village lifestyles since your childhood?
- What changes have occurred in farming here since your childhood?

## Questions (Français)

- Quel age avez-vous ?
- Vous vous parlez combien de s langues ? Lesquelles ?
- Est-ce que vous pouvez lire?
- Est-ce que vous avez partir a l'école?
  - Vous avez arrêté à quel niveau ?
  - Où est que vous avez appr is?
- Est-ce que votre maison cultiver? Est-ce que vous vous avez autre travail ?
- Quel parti de votre propre nourriture est récolte par vous-même ?
- Comment est-ce que vous trouve le reste de votre propre nourriture ?
  - Est-ce que c'est différent quand vous étés enfant ?
- Il y a qui d'autre que supporter la maison économiquement?
  - Ils sont ou?
  - La dernière fois qu' ils sont ici c'était quand?
- Comment est-ce que vous définir « safeerieye » ?
- Si quelqu'un va partir pour faire le « safeeri » comment est-ce qu'il va choisir l'endroit ou il va partir ?
- Qui est il que va choisir qui part a la migration et qui reste au village ? Comment ?

- Est-ce que vous avez déjà quitté le pays ? Où est le plus loin d'ici que vous avez partir ?
  - Vous avez quel âge la première fois que vous avez partir ?
  - Est-ce que vous étiez mariées dans ce temps ?
  - Vous avez partir où ?
  - Comment est-ce que vous avez trouvé les papiers ? un lieu d'habitation ? du travail ?
  
- Qu'est que vous pensez de la migration ?
- Quelles obligations ont un migre a son maison familiale ?
- Quelles obligations ont un migre a son village ?
- Quelles projets ont été achevés par les migres pour le village ?
- Quelles différences existe dans la migration entre votre enfance et aujourd'hui ?
- Quelles changements ont passe dans les attitudes du village entre votre enfance et aujourd'hui ?
- Quelles changements ont passe dans les façons de vivre au village entre votre enfance et aujourd'hui ?
- Quels changements ont passe dans la cultivation depuis votre enfance ?

## Tirindinde (Sooninkanxanne)

- An ñi siino manne me?
- An ra wa xannu manne me mukku?
- An ñi xaramuntaja ni ba?
- An da demi telle lekolu?
  - An da wara kan “niveau”?
  - An da xarana minne?
- Xa ka, xa soxo xaaxo? An yinme, gollu nan maxa soxeyen falle?
- Xa ka bireyefo, xa da i su kita soxeye? ma taxande, ma manne?
- Ke bireyefo ga be xa soxeyefo kanma, xa da i kitta mendu?
  - Wacca n do ganni bireyefo xibaare ke ñi baana ma i nta baana?
- Est-ce que soron ya ni be ga xalis ma yokku xayir katta xa ka?
  - I ñi minne?
  - Ta legere be ga i wa yere ñi kan bire?
- Safeerieye ni manne?
- Soron ga na telle safeeri, i na noqqu sugandi moxo be?
- Ko ni ga sugandi, ke lenme wa telle safeeri a do ke wa toxo yere?
- An yinme, an demi telle jaman falle? Minne ?
- An demi telle safeeri ? Minne ?
  - An ñi siino manne me ta fana an daga jaman falle ? Safeeri ?
  - Waxati ke, yaqqe/kiine da an maxa?
  - An da an kayiti kita moxo be?

- An da an wuyira kita moxo be?
- An da golle kita moxo be?
- An da manne n do manne seema katta safeerieye?
- Safeeraano xawa manne n do manne deberi katta i ka?
- Safeeraano xawa manne n do manne deberi katta i debe?
- Safeeraanon da manne deberi debe ken noxo?
- Ganni n do waccan ñaxa, manne n do manne nta baana safeerieye xibaare?
- Ganni n do waccan ñaxa, manne n do manne nta baana deben jikku?
- Ganni n do waccan ñaxa, manne n do manne nta baana deben bireye?
- Ganni n do waccan ñaxa, manne n do manne nta baana soxeye xibaare?

## GLOSSARY

*Almoravid* – movement of puritanical Islam founded in 1042 in the Western Sahara. They carried out a series of successful jihads in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century. At the zenith of their power they controlled an empire comprising western North Africa, the Western Sahara, and Islamic Spain.

*Arabization* – the process in Mauritania of promoting the use of the Arabic language and emulating pan-Arab cultural traits throughout the state bureaucracy, media, and education system.

*Bakel* – administrative and market center of the Soninke in Senegal. Also an early French trading post and fortress.

*Biida* – mystical serpent in the foundation myth of the Soninke

*Bilani* – white Maure

*Botu* – village council meeting, attended by all *kagume*

*Debegume* – village chief

*Dinga Cissé* – hero-ancestor of the Soninke people

“*The Events*” – a series of violent acts which escalated from a minor trans-border conflict to widespread repression and eviction of non-Maures in Mauritania in 1989-91.

*Fedde* – age-grade class

*Folo* – seasonally flooded agricultural lands

*Garanku* – sub-caste of leather-workers and rope-makers

*Gesere* – sub-caste of storytellers specifically charged with keeping traditions, reciting genealogies and courtly speeches

*Ghana* – the ancient Soninke empire (c. 800-1200 CE)

*Guidimakha* – an administrative region in Mauritania and also an historic Soninke kingdom

*Gum Arabic* – key commodity of early colonial era trade in the Senegal River Valley, collected from several species of Acacia tree as a sap-like substance and used in several early European manufacturing processes.

*HalPulaar* – broad term encompassing all Pulaar-speaking peoples of West Africa

*Haratine* – black Maure, historic slave class of the white Maures

*Hassaniya* – dialect of Arabic spoken by the Maures

*Jaaru* – sub-caste of storytellers specifically centered around the role of praise-singer

*Janmu* – family or clan name in Soninke

*Jere* – rain-fed agricultural lands

*Jonkorunku* – in Soninke, free-persons, current term for former slave caste persons

*Kagume* – household head, traditionally the oldest male of the oldest generation in the family

*Kayes* – administrative and market center of the Malian Soninke, also an important colonial administrative center

*Khima* – traditional tent used by nomadic Maures

*Kineye* – hot season

*Kome* – slave

*Koumbi Saleh* – capital city of Ancient Ghana

*Laptot* – indigenous sailor in the service of the French during colonial times

*Mali* – ancient empire ruled by the Malinke (c. 1200-1400 C.E.)

*Malinke* – Mande ethnic group closely related to the Soninke centered in Western Mali

*Mande* – language family and including Soninke

*Mangu* – warrior/advisor sub-caste, within the *xooro*

*Marenmaaxu* – the concept of solidarity expressed in Soninke, literally: as being of the same mother

*Maure* – cultural and ethnic group which dominates Mauritania, identity is principally rooted to the Almoravids

*Moodi* – religious healer/leader sub-caste, within the *xooro*

*Mulledu* – cold season

*Nyaxamala* – tradeskill caste

*Peul* – Pulaar speaking nomadic herders spanning the West African Sahel

*Sahel* – from Arabic for coast, the term used to denote the geographic and environmental region to the immediate south of the Sahara

*Sanhaja* – group of Arabo-berber tribes which settled Western North Africa and Western Sahara regions. Ancestors of modern Maures

*Senegambia* – the general region encompassing the Senegal and Gambia River watersheds

*Sooninkara* – the Soninke homeland

*Songhai* – name of both a people of eastern Mali and an ancient empire (c.1400-1600)

*Tago* – blacksmith caste

*Tukolor* – Pulaar speaking farmers centered primarily in the middle Senegal River Valley

*Wagadu* – Soninke name for Ancient Ghana Empire

*Wolof* – ethnic group dominating modern Senegal, generally centered along the lower Senegal River Valley

*Xaaxo* – rainy season

*Xooro* – noble caste, literally big

*Zenata Almohad* – religious movement that succeeded the Almoravids and ruled the remnants of the Almoravid empire in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries