

The Missing Piece:  
Uncovering Women's Effects on Senegambia from 1400 to 1800

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with  
History Department Honors  
University of Colorado at Boulder  
April 3, 2015

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## Introduction

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From the late fifteenth to the nineteenth century, British, French, Portuguese, and Dutch men in Senegambia married Wolof women because these women were “belles & bien faites, d’une intelligence singulière. Elles apprennent avec la plus grande facilité” (beautiful and well made, of a unique intelligence. They learn with great ease).<sup>2</sup> These marriages solidified Europeans’ economic and political ties with Senegambian peoples. Wolof women also took advantage of these marriages by initiating trade and assisting with political mediation.<sup>3</sup> These women were *signares*.<sup>4</sup>

Utilizing their as Europeans’ wives, *signares* were mediators and traders who gained independent wealth, prestige, and shaped Senegambian history. Anne Pepin, a mixed race *signare* and ex-wife of the French governor Chevalier de Beufflers, remained affluent and esteemed in Gorée after her marriage ended.<sup>5</sup> *Signares* were independently powerful and through

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<sup>2</sup> Antoine Edme Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie* (Amsterdam: Chez Maradan Libraire, 1789), 28. George Brooks, “The *Signares* of Saint-Louis and Gorée: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth-Century Senegal,” in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 28. Samba Diop, *Oral History and Literature of the Wolof People of Waalo, Northern Senegal: The Master of the Word (Griot) in the Wolof Translation* (Lampeter, UK: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 221-227. Senegambia is the region of modern day Senegal and the Gambia. This region is only separate due to colonial borders and remained linked and interdependent throughout history. Wolof is the primary ethnic group in the Senegambian region. Wolof in this thesis encapsulates those living within communities controlled by the Jolof Empire as well as those communities who became independent but retained Wolof culture. This ethnic group will be the focus of the thesis. Thus, “Senegambian peoples,” signifies the Wolof.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks, “The *Signares*.” George Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003). These communities centered on European trading ports such as Gorée, Saint Louis, Rufisque, Thiés, and other ports within the primary chiefdoms that traded with Europe - Cayor, Baol, Waalo, Siin, and Saloum.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 106. David Gamble, *The Wolof of Senegambia: Together with Notes on the Lebu and the Serer* (London: International African Institute, 1957). *Signares* were freed *jams* (slaves) or *guelwels*. *Guelwels* were bards, diplomats, genealogists, promoters, and historians. Senegambian elites utilized marriage to solidify relations with “strangers” or peoples foreign to Senegambia. However, African noble men granted Europeans permission to marry only lower caste women. *Guelwel* women were of the *nyamakalaw* (occupational) caste the second lowest caste in Senegambian society. *Jams* were the lowest caste in society.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Hinchman, “House and Household on Gorée, Senegal, 1758-1837,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65 (2006): 166-187.

their own agency led to the development of Eurafrican culture (a mixture of European and African) in Senegambia. Signares forged expressions of Eurafrican culture with new fashions in clothing and gold jewelry. Their extravagant clothing was a mixture of European fabrics, Senegambian draping, and colorful turbans. They were “arbiters of taste” hiring téggs (smiths) to create unique jewelry that represented Senegambians’ cultural expressions.<sup>6</sup> They integrated Wolof culture into their weddings and folgars (balls) and provided European foods and homes to comfort Europeans. Signares solidified an intermediary culture encouraging Europeans to live in Senegambia and promoting Senegambians’ acceptance of Europeans.

*Question: The Missing Piece*

Although historians have examined particular castes, Senegambian women lack a cohesive historical study of their effects on the Senegambian region prior to 1800. Historians once ignored African women. Now they have become a historical focus.<sup>7</sup> This academic pursuit began in earnest during the 1970s when historians recognized and remedied previous European and male bias.<sup>8</sup> Rather than ignoring or barely mentioning women, even historians with different specializations increasingly integrate women as a factor.<sup>9</sup> Despite these improvements, focus on

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<sup>6</sup> Marian Ashby Johnson, “Gold Jewelry of the Wolof and the Tukolor of Senegal,” *African Arts* (27) 1994: 38-39.

<sup>7</sup> Hilary Jones, “From Mariage à la Mode to Weddings at Town Hall: Marriage, Colonialism, and Mixed-Race Society in Nineteenth-Century Senegal,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* (38) 2005: 27-48. Thomas Hale, “Griottes: Female Voices from West Africa,” *Research in African Literatures* (25) 1994: 71-91. George Brooks, “Artists’ Depictions of Senegalese Signares: Insights Concerning French Racist Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Swiss Society of African Studies* (18) 1980: 75-90. Ghislaine Lydon, “Droits Islamique et Droits de la Femme d’Après les Registres du Tribunal Musulman de Ndar (Saint-Louis du Sénégal),” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (41) 2007: 289-307.

<sup>8</sup> Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay ed., *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976). Bertha Eckstein-Diener, *Mothers and Amazons: The First Feminine History of Culture* (New York: Julian Press, 1965). Deborah Pellow, “Recent Studies on African Women,” *African Studies Review* (20) 1977: 117-126. C. S. Lancaster, “Women, Horticulture, and Society in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *American Anthropologist* (78) 1976: 539-564. Nancy Rose Hunt, “Placing African Women’s History and Locating Gender,” *Social History* (14) 1989: 359-379.

<sup>9</sup> Hilary Jones, *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013). Hinchman, “House and Household,” 166-187. George Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993). Brooks, *Eurafricans*. Martin A. Klein, “Slaves, Gum, and Peanuts: Adaptation to the End of the Slave Trade in Senegal,

pre-1800 women in Senegal declined; the few studies that exist examine only certain castes such as female guewels or signares.<sup>10</sup> Senegambian society consisted of four rigid castes with little to no mobility between them. These castes were the nobles, jambors (free persons), nyamakalaw (occupational workers), and jams (slaves). Guewels (bards) were part of the Nyamakalaw.<sup>11</sup> Guewels were only a small part of Senegambian female society and their lives were rigidly separated and different from women of other castes. Europeans' arrival expanded this caste system and created new categories of women such as signares. Although jams and guewels could become signares, signares lived distinctly separate lives from the customary castes due to their mixed race relationships and heritage.<sup>12</sup> These two castes do not fully reveal women's experiences and effects on Senegambian history.

The lack of research concerning Senegambian women from 1400 to 1800 constitutes a gap in historians' understanding of Senegambian history. How did the period's climatic changes and slave raids affect jambor women? How did jambors' responses affect communities? What informal influence could noble women exert over their male relatives? How did female tēggs'

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1817-48," *The William and Mary Quarterly* (66) 2009: 895-914. Lucie Gallistel Colvin, "Islam and the State of Kajoor: A Case of Successful Resistance to Jihad," *The Journal of African History* (15) 1974: 587-606.

<sup>10</sup> Brooks, "Artists' Depictions," 75-90. George Brooks, "The Evolution of 'Nharaship' in Senegambia," chap. 5 in *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observances from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003): 122-160. Hale, *Griots*. Hale, "Griottes: Female Voices," 71-91.

<sup>11</sup> Brooks, *Signares*. Brooks, *Landlords*. Charles, *Precolonial*. Gamble, *The Wolof*. Klein, "Slaves, Gum, and Peanuts," 895-914. Senegambian society maintained rigid distinctions between castes through endogamy and each caste maintained markedly different lifestyles. Even sections of Nyamakalaw (guewels, tēggs) were endogamous to protect their customs. Therefore, this study assumes that nobles', freepersons', nyamakalaws', and jams' lives were distinct from each other. Signares and Eurafrikan women also experienced different lifestyles as society segregated them due to their mixed race relations and heritage. The thesis treats these women as distinct as well.

<sup>12</sup> Brooks, "'Nharaship,'" 122-160. European and African marriages created new "pseudo-castes" or communities of people during this period. Luso-Africans, initially blended into African society, like their Portuguese tangomas (renegades) fathers. Later Senegambian society rejected Eurafrikan, of general European and African descent, because they maintained European customs. Signares, as prominent, wealthy, and influential leaders, shared nobles' lifestyle. However, signares never integrated into Senegambian nobility because of their mixed race heritage. Other Eurafrikan women, such as grummets, were low-level traders and ship hands. They were similar to the nyamakalaw caste; however, due to their mixed race heritage Senegambians considered them strangers who were largely separate from Senegambian society.

and guewels' roles contract and expand through European interaction? To what extent did signares encourage European expansion and settlement? How did the women who were signares' foundations affect Eurafrican relations? Ultimately, the question of how the various groups of Senegambian women shaped history remains unanswered. These unanswered questions present a clear gap in the historiography that this study fills.

### *Argument*

The study, addressing this gap, demonstrates that women encouraged European trade, aided European settlement, and contributed to Senegambian stability from 1400 to 1800. Women were active during this period, despite their absence in written history. They responded to Europeans' arrival, Senegambian conflict, and climatic changes just as men did. Like men, their actions affected trade relations, political dominance, community stability, and productivity in Senegambia. Even when women did not have direct influence, but rather shaped men's actions, examining their reactions reveals new historical patterns. For instance, guewels and Eurafrican women bridged differences between Europeans and Senegambians through mediation and the creation of Eurafrican culture. Meanwhile, noble women helped chiefdoms remain strong despite European growth by affecting their male relatives' actions or control of their own lands and resources. Jambors, facing drought and slave raids, strengthened the stability of their communities as productivity collapsed. This study will demonstrate that recognizing women as factors improves historical understanding of pre-1800 Senegambia.

### *Methodology*

This study will accomplish its goals by focusing its analysis directly on Senegambian women, not transitioning between the sexes or Europeans and Senegambians. An issue with

studying the “pre-colonial” period is that even the term itself emphasizes European bias.<sup>13</sup> The second issue is that women are nearly invisible in primary sources as Europeans are the primary authors. These issues obscure Senegambian women as contributors during this period. However, by consistently examining Senegambian women’s actions above all, this study will accomplish its goal. For instance, slave raids became common from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century due to a confluence of European trade demands, climatic pressures, and Senegambian elites’ corruption. Many studies only examine how these factors affected Senegambian communities. This study will instead examine how women dealt with this tumult and changed their communities. Meticulously examining women’s experiences will enable the study to remedy the issues that distract from women.

Issues also exist with the available primary sources; however, secondary sources will substantiate and mediate European travel accounts’ and Senegalese oral histories’ bias. These sources’ bias can easily obscure their truth. Guewels may overemphasize cultural elements due to modern sociopolitical motivations obfuscating the realities of women’s experience. Europeans’ misunderstanding and Western norms obscure the people they observed. Both sources’ cultural bias compounds their gender bias. For instance, European travelers interpret women’s cultural roles through European gender norms. A male guewel’s perceptions of Senegambian gender norms influence his performance. However, consistent comparison of primary sources and substantiate secondary sources reveals these inconsistencies and biases. Therefore, this thesis will be able to glean a clearer picture of Senegambian women despite these accounts’ biases.

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<sup>13</sup> Emily Lynn Osborn, *Our New Husbands Are Here: Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State from the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011), 8.

## *Outline*

Each chapter examines shifts in European presence, climate, and conflict and how women's reactions affected European presence and Senegambian communities. Chapter one focuses on how women's positions in their communities and interaction with Europeans helped shaped the Jolof Empire and trans-Atlantic trade from 1400 to 1550. Women supported the Jolof Empire's slow expansion from 1400 to 1450 through political mediation, influencing male relatives, and economic productivity. They continued to support Jolof's rise to prominence in the Senegambian region from 1450 to 1500. Guewels, nobles, and Luso-African wives (Portuguese traders' African wives) mediated trade conflicts and promoted Europeans throughout the Empire. This increased trade helped the empire fund rapid expansion. It also created economically strong chiefdoms, such as Waalo, that began breaking from Jolof in the mid to late sixteenth century. Women encouraged chiefdoms' expansion and independence as they had supported Jolof's expansion. Women's responses to European arrival helped shape an empire, grew the trans-Atlantic trade, and maintained their communities' stability.

Chapter two illustrates how women's pursuit of European marriages and trade increased European competition and maintained Senegambian power from 1550 to 1700. Women contributed Senegambia's dominance in trans-Atlantic trade and helped maintain a measure of stability while tumult shook Senegambia. Droughts created famines across chiefdoms and the Senegambian region's nobles raided for slaves to maintain their chiefdoms' economies.<sup>14</sup> This tumult wilted agricultural productivity; still, jambor women maintained a measure of stability in their communities. Jam, guewel, and Eurafrian women (mixed race descent) married

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<sup>14</sup> Slave raiding conflicts are "requisite" to slavery because Africans did not sell their own peoples into slavery. This practice was because with so little natural resources, even in the more plentiful coastal societies, people became the most important resource. Agriculture was extremely difficult in the best of conditions and required numerous people to work the land.

Portuguese, French, Dutch, and British men. Through marital homes, these women created a new culture that encouraged Europeans to settle. This culture increased European nations' access to Senegambian trade networks. This increased European competition. Access to multiple markets helped Senegambia remain economically dominant despite tumult. Women helped create Eurafrican culture, contributed to Senegambian trade, and aided Senegambian dominance.

Chapter three demonstrates signares' prominent role in entrenching European settlements and culture as well as women's encouragement of Senegambian stability in the eighteenth century. European competition decreased as the French increased their trade power through marriage and settlement. Signares' savvy, prominence, and opportune position between European and Senegambian society meant they were a crucial factor in the increase of European settlements. They also encouraged international trade and entrenched Eurafrican culture. Europeans' growing presence increased conflict and jamboir women's effects on communities' stability. Events during this period affected Senegambian women; however, Senegambian women's reactions changed the result of these patterns throughout history.

### *Conclusion*

The significance of this study to Senegambian history derives from the gap that it fills and the new perspectives on Senegambian history that its argument reveals. To date, there is no cohesive study to illustrate the importance of the numerous caste women in Senegambia from 1400 to 1800. This thesis illustrates women's effects on cultural, economic, international, and domestic patterns. Historians, by neglecting to examine the "other half," have failed to illuminate these patterns. Thus, historians can only understand Senegambian history when they have recognized the entirety of the female populace.

## I. The Rise and Fall of the Jolof Empire: 1400 to 1550

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“You shouldn’t marry a man whose body you would see when he’s washing himself. You shouldn’t marry a man whose body you would see when he is in the outhouse. If the man asks you to sleep with him, the mattress must fall first on the floor before you sleep with him... Fatumata said to her husband: “These are things you want me to do before marrying any man?” “Yes,” replied Bubakar.<sup>1</sup>

The guewel Sèq Ñan’s oral history of the Jolof empire’s establishment illustrates Wolof cultural trends that inform historians’ understanding of women’s sphere of influence.<sup>2</sup> Bubakar, a leader of the Waalo chiefdom, upon his death instructed Fatumata, his wife, not to remarry unless a man met the above guidelines. Following her dead husband’s parameters, Fatumata “refused to marry all the men who courted her for none of them fulfilled the conditions.” However, Mbaarik, a friend of Bubakar, overheard Bubakar’s guidelines and decided to trick Fatumata into marrying him. He began by traveling “very far from the village” to wash himself and “relieve himself” so she could not see.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, Mbaarik created an unnoticeable wooden frame under Fatumata’s mattress that lifted it off the floor. That night Mbaarik asked to marry Fatumata. At the same time, he “gave a quick and unnoticed push to the mattress” breaking the frame and causing the mattress to fall on the floor. Fatumata “bewild[ered] that Mbaarik fulfilled Bubakar’s guidelines agreed to marry him.<sup>4</sup> Her betrothal to Mbaarik was a source of mockery for her son Njaajan Njay. Njay’s friends ridiculed him until he ran away. Njay’s shame, created

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<sup>1</sup> Samba Diop, *Oral History and Literature of the Wolof People of Waalo, Northern Senegal: The Master of the Word (Griot) in the Wolof Translation* (Lampeter, UK: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 103.

<sup>2</sup> Diop, *Oral History*, 11-38, 221-227, 307-313. Guewels were historians, performers, diplomats, advisers, praise singers, and ceremonial officiators who were part of the Nyamakalaw (occupational) caste. Guewels have passed on the oral history of Senegambia through generations of meticulous study. Samba Diop recorded, translated, and analyzed this performance for historical accuracy and bias. Diop found that while the oral history was mythical in nature and biased in some regards towards modern cultural influences it largely reflected correct cultural patterns and genealogies for this time.

<sup>3</sup> Diop, *Oral History*, 104.

<sup>4</sup> Diop, *Oral History*, 105-106.

by Fatumata's actions, propelled him towards the Jolof region where he established the Jolof Empire in the fourteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

Fatumata's obedience, resistance, and naivety illustrate the complexity of women's reactions; her role in the creation of the Jolof Empire demonstrates women's contribution to Senegambia.<sup>6</sup> The oral history's contradictions reveal Fatumata's complicated responses to her husband's death. Fatumata demonstrates total obedience to her husband by refusing to marry men who did not fit her husband's guidelines. However, her obedience also shows independence as she consistently refuses to marry men despite her community mocking her and Njay.<sup>7</sup> Alongside these contradictions, the oral history also indicates that Fatumata helped establish Jolof. Shame due to his mother's refusal to marry motivated Njay to drown himself, failing he withdrew from society and traveled towards the Jolof region. Fatumata's actions contributed to the circumstance that created the Jolof Empire.<sup>8</sup> Fatumata's complex actions and vital influence lie at the core of this thesis. Custom and circumstances affected women and often seemed to dictate their lives. Yet, women demonstrated independent action and shaped their lives and Senegambian history.

This chapter explores shifts in the Senegambian region's 1400 to 1550 economics, the Jolof Empire's rise and fall, and how women's responses supported these changes. During this period, the Jolof Empire slowly expanded until Europeans' arrival grew Jolof's economy allowing the rapid expansion of the empire. Women responded to Europeans and the Jolof Empire's growth by marrying Europeans, mediating conflict caused by the empire's expansion, and promoting

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<sup>5</sup> Diop, *Oral History*, 107-115.

<sup>6</sup> Diop, *Oral History*, 182, 184-5. The death of Bubakar and Fatumata's remarriage occurs prior to the establishment of the Jolof Kingdom while Njay Njaajaan was a child. Therefore, these cultural patterns date back to the fourteenth century. Additionally, Samba Diop's extensive research substantiates the genealogies, history, and cultural patterns presented in this oral history. It is clear that the oral history has mythical and modern qualities. However, Diop has illustrated that this telling, for the most part, accurately presented Wolof history and culture.

<sup>7</sup> Diop, *Oral History*, 105-107.

<sup>8</sup> Diop, *Oral History*, 107-115.

trade in their communities.<sup>9</sup> They also taught Europeans Senegambian customs smoothing Europeans' access to Senegambian markets by helping them adapt to "African trading patterns and modes of social intercourse."<sup>10</sup> Women's actions increased Senegambian wealth, solidified trade relations with Portugal, and expanded Jolof's and its chiefdoms' power.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, women's promotion of trade allowed chiefdoms to gain more power and the chiefdoms of Waalo, Cayor, Siin, Saloum, and Bayor became independent from the empire. This chapter will begin by tracing women's influence from 1400 to 1450 while Jolof was slowly growing. It will examine women's interactions with Europeans and the rapid rise of Jolof from 1450 to 1500. Finally demonstrating how the fall of the Jolof Empire from 1500 to 1550 in women's lives and, in turn, how women affected the Senegambian region's future.

#### *Women in Early Jolof: 1400 to 1450*

Noble women's informal political influence increased as the Jolof Empire slowly grew bolstering their male relatives' power and the few formal political positions they held. The noble women of Jolof largely lacked formalized political power. They were either wives, mothers, sisters, or maternal aunts of Jolof's buurbas (kings), buumis (princes), and chiefs in the outlying chiefdoms. However, as relatives, they had the ability to influence those who had formal power and the effects spread across the Senegambian region as buurbas expanded Jolof.<sup>12</sup> For instance, buurbas had a "number of wives" who were "distribut[ed] in several villages or places of his

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<sup>9</sup> George E. Brooks, "The *Signares* of Saint-Louis and Gorée: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth-Century Senegal," in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 19-44. George Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 127, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Brooks, *Signares*, 19. Lancados were European men who had assimilated to Senegambian customs.

<sup>12</sup> Alvise de Cada Mosto, "First Voyage of Alvise da Cada Mosto.... Second Voyage of Cada Mosto, 1455" in *A General Collection of Voyages and Discoveries Made by the Portuguese and Spaniards During the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, (London: Published by W. Richardson, 1789), voyage, British Library, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, <http://0-find.galegroup.com/libraries.colorado.edu/>, (Accessed August 8, 2014), 61.

domain.”<sup>13</sup> The chiefs and “wealthier part of [the buurba’s] subjects” within villages sought favor from these wives because of their proximity to buurbas.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, a few women had formalized political powers that strengthened this influence by granting them official duties and greater contact with noble men. The awo (buurbas’ first wives) lived in his main residence and held a prominent position managing his other wives’ grain and responsibility.<sup>15</sup> The Awo’s proximity to the buurba increased her ability to influence his character and actions; her formal role allowed her to control his other wives’ lives. Awos were powerful; however, lingeers (buurbas’ mothers or maternal aunts) managed buurbas’ households and controlled villages “that cultivated farms and paid tribute to [them].”<sup>16</sup> They also greatly shaped their sons’ lives as Fatumata’s role in the creation of Jolof indicates. Therefore, women could attain this power by utilized their motherhood to raise buumis who the council would select.<sup>17</sup> If the council did not select a buumi, they still owned villages, could tax communities, and order raids while mothers affected their decisions.<sup>18</sup> Women’s responses opened opportunities to alter Senegambia’s politics.

Noble women remained more formally powerful and respected in the exterior chiefdoms of Jolof despite buurbas’ attempts to unify Senegambian political institutions and customs. Women in Waalo, an outlying chiefdom in Jolof, could gain formal political power. Like the Jolof Empire, Waalo operated on a succession system of lineage and selection. Unlike in Jolof,

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<sup>13</sup> Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 61.

<sup>14</sup> Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 61-62.

<sup>15</sup> David Gamble, *The Wolof of Senegambia: Together with Notes on the Lebu and the Serer* (London: International African Institute, 1957), 54.

<sup>16</sup> Eunice Charles, *Precolonial Senegal: The Jolof Kingdom, 1880-1890* (Brookline, MA: Boston University, 1977), 9. Gamble, *The Wolof*, 58.

<sup>17</sup> Valentim Fernandes, “Description de la Côte Occidentale d’Afrique” in *France and West Africa: An Anthology of Historical Documents* ed. John D. Hargreaves (London: Macmillan, 1969), 15. Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 61.

<sup>18</sup> Gamble, *The Wolof*, 58.

the council could select females to become burs (queens). Their husbands then became marossos, a rank below burs.<sup>19</sup> Jolof's decentralization and religious syncretism undermined buurbas' attempts to enforce a more patriarchal Islamic system on the outer chiefdoms.<sup>20</sup> Because records are sparse for the outlying chiefdoms, the extent of patriarchal political systems' spread is not completely clear. However, women's ability to gain political leadership remained and decentralization significantly weakened cultural assimilation efforts; therefore, noble women in the chiefdoms largely maintained their formal direct power. This supported, along with slow growth and decentralization of Jolof, Senegambia's political stability.

Through Jolof's steady solidification, Senegambian nobles utilized women as diplomats to strengthen political relationships between chiefdoms and the Jolof Empire through marriage.<sup>21</sup> In Senegambia, marriage was the primary method of establishing connections with "strangers" or foreigners. "The fundamental social unit was the extended family" not abstract ideas of ethnicity or nationality; therefore, marriage with a "foreigner" created a "clan affiliation" and promoted relationships.<sup>22</sup> When Jolof was expanding and conquering the outlying chiefdoms, it was vital to integrate the elite of Jolof with the conquered to create an united identity and peace. This custom granted women a central position in creating communities and supporting the expansion of Jolof.<sup>23</sup> Their integral position granted them opportunities, as wives, to influence diplomatic relationships.

Guewel (bard) women as advisors and diplomats also increased as Jolof buurbas sought to solidify their power through guewels' verbal social influence.<sup>24</sup> Jolof buurbas believed

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<sup>19</sup> Gamble, *The Wolof*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Gamble, *The Wolof*, 47. Diop, *Oral History*, 177. Charles, *Precolonial*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Diop, *Oral History*, 198-199. Gamble, *The Wolof*, 16. Brooks, *Landlords*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 38-39.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 106. See Appendix A for a drawing of female guewels otherwise called griottes within Hale's monograph.

guelwels' use of voice was a manipulation of "the essence of a being." They believed nothing was more dangerous because voice could "convey curses and praises, denigrate and uplift, and arouse and mediate conflict."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, they feared guelwels because of their power over society. This was particularly harmful to buurbas because kings were "dethroned...when they seem no longer inclined to flatter their promoters."<sup>26</sup> Buurbas relied on positive reputations and guelwels could either aid buurbas' reputation or harm it irreparably. Therefore, buurbas lavished wealth and respect onto guelwels encouraging guelwels to promote them throughout Senegambia. As the empire gradually expanded, guelwels increasingly travelled throughout Senegambia promoting the buurba, carrying out his message, diplomatically paving the way for empire, and mediating disputes between Jolof and the conquered.<sup>27</sup> Guelwels ability to destroy buurbas' reputations also allowed them to manipulate buurbas into listening to their advice.<sup>28</sup> Female guelwels were also nobles' hairdressers allowing them to access privileged gossip increased their ability to manipulate nobles.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Women and the Rise of Empire: 1450 to 1500*

Jolof noble women's formal and informal effects on Senegambian politics and society increased as the Jolof Empire swiftly expanded. Jolof rapidly grew during this period due to European trade in horses, the receding tsetse fly line, and their demand for people and resources during this period of drought and famine.<sup>30</sup> These climate pressures drove buurbas to expand Jolof.<sup>31</sup> Europeans enabled Jolof's spread by selling the empire horses. Senegambians "eagerly fought for [horses] in that country" because they enabled long distance travel and cavalries were

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<sup>25</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Hale, *Griots*, 31-35.

<sup>28</sup> Hale, *Griots*, 24-31.

<sup>29</sup> Gamble, *The Wolof*, 45.

<sup>30</sup> Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers*, 170, 200. See Appendix B for map of the tsetse fly line. Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Charles, *Precolonial*, 4-5.

a tremendous tactical advantage.<sup>32</sup> Valentim Fernandes observed Jolof's expansion from the Senegal River to the Gambia and its powerful buurba who "is lord of 8,000 horsemen."<sup>33</sup> These factors, by expanding Jolof, also expanded noble women's sphere of influence. Jolof noble women's formal power depended on the authority of Jolof and their informal impact partly relied on the strength of their male noble relatives. Lingeers grew more powerful as Jolof expanded and more territory was conquered. Additionally, lingeers and awos grew more powerful as the men they influenced controlled more peoples. When the buurba controlled nearly the entirety of Senegambia, his wives', the awo, and the lingeer could affect that region. Thus, the factors that allowed buurbas to expand Jolof increased the opportunities available to women.

Female jams (slaves) and guewels adopted new positions as political intermediaries between Senegambians and Portuguese as they married Portuguese traders. European arrival enhanced jams' ability to influence their society and Senegambia's politics. Prior to this, jams' owners treated them like family and jams could become representatives in the Jolof political system.<sup>34</sup> Senegambians treated jams well; however, Europeans' arrival opened direct diplomatic political roles for jams. As previously noted, Senegambians commonly promoted women's marriage to "strangers" to solidify trade, women became emissaries and diplomats. When Europeans arrived, Senegambians maintained this cultural practice. However, Senegambians believed noble and free women were too high in the caste system to marry Europeans. Instead, they encouraged Europeans to buy jams' freedom and marry them.<sup>35</sup> Guewels were also married to Europeans and both castes utilized these marriages to become Europeans' primary mediators,

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<sup>32</sup> Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 63.

<sup>33</sup> Fernandes, "Description de la Côte," 15.

<sup>34</sup> Ibrahima Thiaw, "Slaves without Shackles: An Archaeology of Everyday Life on Gorée Island, Senegal," in *Slavery and Africa: Archaeology and Memory*, ed. Paul J. Lane and Kevin C. MacDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 155.

<sup>35</sup> Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 122-128.

interpreters, and promoters. Europeans also utilized guewel men and women, regardless of marriage, for diplomacy because they believed guewels were Jews, rejects who needed European opportunities.

In this country and in Mandinga there are Jews and they are called Gaul and they are black like the people of the country... And if the Jews did not know these clownish tricks [the praise singing]... they would not be tolerated among the Negroes.<sup>36</sup>

Guewels and jams became “invaluable as interpreters of language, society and culture, and as collaborators in commercial exchanges.”<sup>37</sup> Their responses to European arrival allowed them to promote Senegambian-European relations.

Tëggs’ (smiths) access to European trade increased their iron trade and strengthened their centrality in Senegambian society. Tëggs were part of the nyamakalaw (occupational) caste and feared by Senegambians because of their ability to manipulate raw materials to achieve unnatural results.<sup>38</sup> Senegambians believed tëggs were sorcerers; tëgg clans’ totems were often potent symbols of power such as serpents who “the negroes... professed sorcerers” preferred for their charms.<sup>39</sup> Female tëggs largely created pottery rather than iron. However, they “likewise transform[ed] the basic elements of earth, fire, and water” gaining as much respect in the community as iron smiths.<sup>40</sup> Societies’ respect for tëggs opened tëgg women’s opportunities. Tëgg women “presid[ed] at the most important ceremonies” in Senegambia and helped socialize young women.<sup>41</sup> They were also members of “quasi-secret” power associations and “exercised unrivaled influence in many parts of West Africa.”<sup>42</sup> However, the dry period decreased the

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<sup>36</sup> Fernandes, “Description de la Côte,” 17. As disrespected as Guewels were Senegambian society also treated them tremendously well as they feared them.

<sup>37</sup> Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 137.

<sup>38</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 68.

<sup>40</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 41.

<sup>41</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 41.

<sup>42</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 42, 46.

wood that tēggs utilized to smelt iron from rock and shape it.<sup>43</sup> Europeans reinforced tēggs' power by selling them raw iron decreasing the amount of wood needed to create the weapons and tools Senegambians relied on. Instead of needing more wood for both the extraction and shaping process, Senegambian tēggs only needed enough wood to shape the traded raw iron. European trade also increased Senegambian nobles' reliance on tēggs. European trade in horses increased nobles' demand for saddles, bridles, and other tack that enabled Jolof to spread.<sup>44</sup> In turn, Senegambian tēggs helped consolidate European trade. Europeans' trade commodities largely consisted of luxury goods such as textiles and alcohol. Yet, tēggs' demand for iron and their creation of tools Senegambians needed expanded Senegambia's demand for European trade.<sup>45</sup>

#### *Women and the Fall of Empire: 1500 to 1550*

When Jolof fell, the nobles of the Jolof chiefdom lost power; however, nobles in the coastal and riverine chiefdoms expanded their influence. Mothers' political power depended on their sons either attaining buurba or retaining control of their lands, as buumis. The Jolof council examined buurbas' "children... by several wives" and "usually choose for their ruler the son they like best."<sup>46</sup> Women still raised sons who exemplified Senegambian leaders' traits and encouraged the council to select their sons. However, as Jolof splintered in the late 1540s, Jolof's buurbas and buumis had less power over the region and less land.<sup>47</sup> Thus, lingers and buumis' mothers had less influence over Senegambia as well. Awos also lost power in Jolof as their husbands' control over Senegambia decreased rapidly. The buurbas' various other wives could no longer utilize his power to affect society. However, those noble women along the coast grew

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<sup>43</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 45.

<sup>44</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 128.

<sup>45</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 56-5.

<sup>46</sup> João de Barros, "Asia" in *France and West Africa: An Anthology of Historical Documents*, ed. John D. Hargreaves (London: Macmillan, 1969), 20.

<sup>47</sup> Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 83.

more powerful as their chiefdoms grew. These chiefdoms, through European trade, became increasingly economically and politically powerful. Their noble women had roles similar to lingeers and awos in Jolof.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Jolof women's influence precipitously fell while other women's impact increased alongside prominent outer chiefdoms.

Jams and guewels sought relationships with Europeans to increase their economic, political, and social roles encouraging European trade in their chiefdoms. Senegambian women's desire for relationships with Europeans and the advantages they represented was a prominent contributing factor to their marriages with Europeans.<sup>49</sup>

Je vis plusieurs femmes debout parlant ensemble, au nombre de 5 ou 6... je ne sais pas comment ces femmes m'ensorcelèrent, si bien que je laissai mes bassins et sortis de la maison, il me revint à l'esprit ce que j'avais fait de mes bassins et retournai immédiatement dans cet maison, entrai et n'y trouvai personne. Et voila une jeune fille qui m'aborda me demandant si je voulais choque choque et commençait à enlever son pagne (braies) pensant que je voulais faire l'amour avec elle, ce dont je n'avais nullement l'intention, tellement j'étais ennuyé de la perte de mes deux bassins qui restèrent perdus. (I saw many women standing, talking together, five or six... I do not know how these women bewitched me. So I left my bowls and left the house. It came to mind that I had left my bowls and I immediately returned to the house, I entered and no one was there. But suddenly there was a young girl who approached me asking if I wanted to "choque choque" and began to remove her pagne (breaches) thinking that I wanted to make love with her, I had no intention of doing this and was annoyed at the loss of my bowls.)<sup>50</sup>

Eustache de la Fosse's account of Cape Verde and Sierra Leone would be unhelpful for understanding Senegambian women; however, there is substantial evidence that his account reveals a popular West African trend that includes Senegambia.<sup>51</sup> Europeans believed Cape Verde, off the coast of Senegambia, and the "negroes that people it are subjects of Senegal."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Jean Baptiste Léonard Durand, *A Voyage to Senegal; or, Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs* (London: Printed for Richard Phillips, 1806), 34. This source is not from the period. However, it demonstrates the system of rule implemented over the chiefdoms and its similarity to the Jolof system.

<sup>49</sup> Antoine Edme Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie* (Amsterdam: Chez Maradan Libraire, 1789). Reverend John Lindsay, *A Voyage to the Coast of Africa, in 1758* (London: Printed for S. Paterson, 1759).

<sup>50</sup> Eustache De La Fosse, "Voyage dans l'Afrique Occidentale et Notes de Raymond Mauny," *Extrait du Boletín Cultural da Guine Portuguesa* (14) 1949, voyages, Les Archives Nationales de Senegal, Bi III 8<sup>o</sup> 309, 188 (accessed May 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Eustache De La Fosse, *L'Afrique Occidentale*, 188. De La Fosse's account places blame on the "bewitch[ing]" women who tricked him into desiring them. However, forty years after his travels De La Fosse did not include this story to reveal how deeply he cared about bowls. Instead, he accentuates African women's attraction to him and likely overemphasizes their desire for himself to flatter his memory.

<sup>52</sup> Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 71.

This demonstrates that Europeans believed these two societies were particularly similar. Osborn also indicates that general West African women in Guinea demonstrated a preference towards strangers due to the opportunities they gained through “stranger” marriages.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, Europeans believed “both sexes [were] very lustful” because Senegambian women actively pursued relationships.<sup>54</sup> Various caste women demonstrated this pursuit; however, in Senegambia nobles considered Europeans undeserving of higher caste women. Thus, the pattern was isolated to jams and gweles in practice. Regardless, the pattern illustrated that African women actively pursued relationships and then “exploited their circumstances” in order to become “commercial intermediaries and cultural brokers.”<sup>55</sup> These relationships were particularly prevalent in chiefdoms where Europeans’ wives mediated disputes and brokered a Eurafrican culture that fit the new *mélange* of peoples. These actions contributed to an increase in Europeans’ access to Senegambian trade resulting in the consolidation of relations between Europeans and Senegambians. Thus, De La Fosse’s amusing story contains truth about women’s response to Europeans’ arrival and its effects.<sup>56</sup>

Luso-African wives and children contributed to the formation of creole culture through their economic and social roles expanding the relations between Senegambia and Europe. Luso-Africans were people who had adopted a mixture of Portuguese and Senegambian culture or were of mixed descent; they were also directly responsible for the development of this culture.<sup>57</sup> Grumets were the primary group of Luso-Africans who created this intermixed culture. They

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<sup>53</sup> Emily Lynn Osborn, *Our New Husbands Are Here: Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State from the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 65.

<sup>55</sup> Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 137.

<sup>56</sup> Osborn, *Our New Husbands*.

<sup>57</sup> Eurafricans is another term for similar people. The difference being that the nationality of the father or the culture that mixed with Senegambian culture is of unspecified European origin.

were traders, translators, mediators, sailors, and often the children of Luso-African unions.<sup>58</sup> These Luso-African women, alongside men, developed and spread Crioulo language. Crioulo combined Portuguese, West Atlantic, and Mande languages and “rapidly became established as a lingua franca” for newly evolving trading societies.<sup>59</sup> This language helped tie Europeans to Senegambia. Grummets, with Portuguese sailors, also created “pirogues” which were “cut out of one piece [of wood]” from “a single tree trunk” that became the primary mode of water transport and fishing.<sup>60</sup> These enabled Senegambians to have more access to the resources off their coast and trade with Europeans. Luso-African women’s actions directly increased the development of Eurafrican communities and European-Senegambian relations.

During the dry period, jambors continued to boost Senegambian economy even while agriculture “hardly ever [seemed] able to bring any production to market.”<sup>61</sup> Jambors were freeborn men and women whose primary occupation was agriculture. Agriculture was increasingly difficult for jambors from 1400 to 1500 due to the dry period. Agriculture was dependent on rainy seasons that became less frequent and Senegambians could not have horses or oxen; instead, they utilized small tools to prepare the largely infertile soil instead.

They [beans] are sown in July, and gathered in September. This interval, which is the time of their rains, and the consequent swelling of their rivers, is also that of their labours... They go four or five together out upon a field; their tools are a kind of small instruments like spades. [...] They do not dig deeper than two or three inches.<sup>62</sup>

Communities needed numerous people to produce crops on even a small field. As the Atlantic slave trade gained momentum in Senegambia, productive members of society began to

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<sup>58</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 124.

<sup>59</sup> Brooks, *Landlords*, 136.

<sup>60</sup> Fernandes, “Description de la Côte,” 15.

<sup>61</sup> Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 67.

<sup>62</sup> Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 67.

decrease.<sup>63</sup> The slave trade sold agriculturally productive men, as well as a fewer number of women, diminishing Senegambian jambors' ability to produce crops and burdening women.<sup>64</sup>

Women's impact on their communities grew as men disappeared and women's efforts to produce enough food for their families consumed their time. Women's persistent agricultural efforts helped stabilize and maintain the Senegambian economy even though they were unable to produce many goods.

As I was for a considerable time in this country, I determined one day to see a market of fair of theirs... The people that resorted thither, came not farther distant than four or five miles... Their poverty may best be known on such an occasion, by the trifling value of the goods they convey for sale... [they] were very nearly all they had to boast of. Men and women are concerned in it.<sup>65</sup>

Women's responses, even if "trifling," helped the Senegambian markets persist. Jambor women strengthened Senegambia despite famine and poverty. Senegambian women's responses promoted Senegambia's stability.

### *Conclusion*

From the fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, Europeans, climate, and conflict began to shift the power dynamics of Senegambia's economy and politics. Historians have examined the arrival of Europeans and the ensuing, rapid, rise and fall of Jolof relatively thoroughly. They have even mentioned women's involvement. However, without focusing on women's acceptance and utilization of these marriages, historians do not fully recognize how fundamental women were to the rise and fall of the Jolof kingdom and the establishment of Eurafrican communities.

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<sup>63</sup> Philip D. Curtin, "The Abolition of the Slave Trade from Senegambia," in *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, ed. David Eltis, James Walvin, and Svend E. Green-Pedersen (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 83-97.

<sup>64</sup> Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 63-4.

<sup>65</sup> Cada Mosto, *Voyage of Cada Mosto*, 69.

## II. Power and Slavery in a Tumultuous Climate: 1550 to 1700

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The Alcaty of Rufisca was also present, by chance, with a Negro lady, the Widow of a certain Portuguese, who had one of the chief places in the Kingdom: This lady had excellent features, was endow'd with a generous disposition, and of a very obliging deportment; being of a middle-siz'd stature and cloath'd after the Portuguese fashion.<sup>1</sup>

The woman that François Froger saw at a diplomatic dinner in late seventeenth century Gorée was one of the many Eurafrican women who forged the basis for Eurafrican society from 1550 to 1700.<sup>2</sup> She took advantage of Europeans' arrival by marrying them in order to access resources and gain political and economic roles such as mediator, translator, and advisor. She initially married a "certain Portuguese" man who was likely of relatively high standing. She then married a man who "had one of the chief places in the Kingdom" of Cayor, a chiefdom, and was the guest of the French governor of Gorée.<sup>3</sup> She embedded herself in trade through relationships with men of multiple nationalities. Factors such as Europeans' attraction to Wolof women for their "excellent features" and "generous disposition" and Senegambian landlord-stranger marital customs, discussed in chapter one, were beyond her control. However, this woman exerted influence through her responses. She encouraged positive European perceptions of Senegambian women and fostered relationships as an independent widow. By doing so, she and other women encouraged Europeans' pursuit of Wolof women and the growth of a Eurafrican community.

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<sup>1</sup> François Froger, *A Relation of a Voyage Made in the Years 1695, 1696, 1697, on the Coasts of Africa* (London: Printed for M. Gillyflower, 1698), voyage, British Library, Early English Books Online, <http://0-eebo.chadwyck.com/libraries/colorado.edu>, (Accessed August 1, 2014), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Eurafrican women were either children or wives of European and Senegambian unions.

<sup>3</sup> Pieter de Marees, "Passage à la Petit Côte de Pieter de Marees, 1600" in *Contribution à l'Histoire la Petite Côte (Sénégal) au XVIIe Siècle: Tome I: 1600-1621*, ed. Nize Izabel de Moraes (Paris, 1976), voyage, Les Archives Nationales de Senegal, Bi 4<sup>o</sup> 1688 (1-4), (Accessed May 2014), 43. George Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), 83. "Les sauvages, ou les noirs, se trouvent sous l'autorité de leurs supérieurs, appelés dans leur langue Algayer, qui sont des sortes de capitaines de village, car chaque village à son Algayer particulier. (The savages or the blacks, are under the authority of their superiors, in their language called Algayer, that are a type of village captains, each village has a particular Algayer.)" The Alcaty of Rufisque, Algayer, or Alcaide (arabic for governor) set tolls, fees, and managed trading ports.

This chapter will focus on women's responses to the dynamic and often strenuous environment of Senegambia from 1550 to 1700. The chapter will first explore women's responses, roles, and influences in the growing Eurafrican communities. Female grummetts (ship workers) and female traders in general responded to economic opportunities by consolidating trade relations and exploiting European competition.<sup>4</sup> Eurafrican women who were married to European traders responded by mediating sociopolitical relations and entrenching Eurafrican trade communities into Senegambia. The chapter will then analyze Senegambian women within the chiefdoms of Jolof, Cayor, Waalo, Baol, Sine, and Saloum. Noble women had political mediatory roles in the conflict and corruption that the slave trade had created in Senegambia. Tëggs' impact rose due to iron's importance as a currency and trade commodity. Guewels' ceremonial duties increased as religious syncretism combined the ceremonial aspects of Islam, such as Ramadan and Eid, with animist ceremonies. Jambor women faced instability; however, they secured Senegambian communities' survival and Senegambia's dominance in Atlantic trade. Senegambian women's opportunities in their societies did not diminish despite the conflict, climatic tumult, and shifting cultures' destabilizing effects on Senegambia.

### *The Growth of Eurafrican Communities*

Ship workers and women traders encouraged European competition and consolidated Eurafrican trade relations. Women lacking the formal position of a grummet (an official ship worker for Europeans) could become involved in Atlantic trade. For instance, Pieter Van de Broeke traded with a Wolof woman who was "comme servant (like a servant)" but assisted the

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<sup>4</sup> George Brooks, "The *Signares* of Saint-Louis and Gorée: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth-Century Senegal," in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 27, 29.

head of household with trade.<sup>5</sup> The female servant lacked the official trade position grummetts occupied; however, she secured trade for the head of an important household.<sup>6</sup> She illustrates that even if Europeans and Senegambians did not officially consider some women grummetts, circumstance still opened trade opportunities to a wide population of women. European trade companies relied on Senegambians, even demanded “every Officer” of a company “be attended with a young Negro.”<sup>7</sup> This reliance meant that plenty of women could also become official grummetts. In fact, European demand and competition meant women could choose companies with better employee rights and wages.<sup>8</sup> However, when France established Saint Louis and Gorée they controlled “the sole trade from Senega River [...] as far as the river Gambia” by 1677.<sup>9</sup> Still, this monopoly was only possible because Senegambians, including women, continued to trade with France.<sup>10</sup> If Senegambians, male or female, refused to work for a company or trade with it, the company did not succeed.

Senegambian women continued to pursue marriage with Europeans as Eurafrican communities expanded alongside trade. As demonstrated in chapter one, women did not begin to marry European men simply because “l’hospitalité règne parmy eux (hospitality reigns among [Senegambians])” and European men found Wolof women particularly attractive.<sup>11</sup> While these

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<sup>5</sup> Pieter Van de Broeke, “Les Passages de Pieter Van de Broeke 1606, 1608, 1609,” in *Contribution à l’Histoire la Petite Côte (Sénégal) au XVIIe Siècle: Tome I: 1600-1621*, ed. Nize Izabel de Moraes (Paris, 1976), voyage, Les Archives Nationale de Senegal, Bi 4<sup>0</sup> 1688 (1-4), (Accessed May 2014), 140.

<sup>6</sup> Van de Broeke, “Les Passages de 1606, 1608, 1609,” 140.

<sup>7</sup> Froger, *A Relation of a Voyage*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> John Barbot, “A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea,” in *France and West Africa: An Anthology of Historical Documents*, ed. John D. Hargreaves (London: Macmillan, 1969), 35. Froger, *A Relation of a Voyage*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Brooks, *Signares*, 19-23. John Barbot, “Description of the Coasts,” 38.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson and R. Jobson, “Les Expéditions de Thompson et de R. Jobson en Senegambie 1618-1621,” in *Contribution à l’Histoire la Petite Côte (Sénégal) au XVIIe Siècle: Tome I: 1600-1621*, ed. Nize Izabel de Moraes (Paris, 1976), voyage, Les Archives Nationale de Senegal, Bi 4<sup>0</sup> 1688 (1-4), (Accessed May 2014), 248.

<sup>11</sup> J.B Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie: Contenant une Exacte Description* (Paris : Chez Edme Couterot, 1689), voyage, Les Archives Nationales de Senegal, Bi III 8<sup>0</sup> 778, (Accessed May 2014), 47-48.

factors contributed to the creation of Eurafrican marriages, women's desire for the opportunities that came with these marriages was a more relevant factor after 1550.

Ils sont également luxurieux, chapardeurs et très portés à l'impudicité. Une homme possède autant de femmes qu'il peut en nourrir et qu'il est capable d'entretenir. Les femmes sont également très portées à l'impudicité, surtout avec les étrangers, ce qui ne le [maris] en jalouse pas, alors qu'il n'en va pas de même lorsqu'il s'agit de gens de leur propre nation ou de voisins. (They are also lustful, scroungers, and very apt to fornication. A man possesses as many women as he can feed and is capable of maintaining. The women are equally prone to fornication, especially with foreigners which the [husbands] are not jealous of, while the same is not true for those people of their nation or neighborhood).<sup>12</sup>

While Pieter de Marees, a Dutch Calvinist, paints both men and women as lustful sinners, Marees' observation that women pursued "fornication" and relationships is particularly revelatory. Senegambian women desired relationships with "foreigners" just as Eustache de la Fosse demonstrated over a century before. While Europeans likely exaggerated, it is clear that Senegambians desired them and the opportunities their arrival brought even if they did not "displa[y] extreme satisfaction at [Europeans'] arrival."<sup>13</sup> In fact, women's pursuit of relationships with European strangers continued despite the Atlantic trade's consolidation over a century. Women continued Eurafrican relationships regardless of having already fulfilled nobles' motivations to promote such marriages. The functions that Eurafrican wives played, such as mediation, diplomacy, and trade, continued as European trade communities grew.<sup>14</sup>

Eurafrican wives mediated cultural tensions between Europeans and Senegambians preserving and improving trade relationships and communities. These wives helped their husbands maintain relationships with Senegalese elites and traders by mediating rising racial tensions and cultural miscommunications. During this period, tensions increased as Europeans

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<sup>12</sup> Marees, "Passage à la Petit Côte," 41.

<sup>13</sup> Alexis de Saint-Lô, "Relation du Voyage au Cap Vert" in *France and West Africa: An Anthology of Historical Documents*, ed. John D. Hargreaves (London: Macmillan, 1969), 29.

<sup>14</sup> George Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 201. Rufisque, Cayor; Saint-Louis, Waalo; Portudal, Baol; Jaol, Siin; were all the main trading communities in Senegal with Gorée as an independent French settlement and European possession off the coast. See Appendix C.

talked about Senegambians with a disparaging tone. Europeans described Senegambians as “gluttons,” “stark naked,” “very slothful,” “scroungers,” and “fornicators,” who believed in “abominable superstition.”<sup>15</sup> Toby Green argues that Europeans’ fear of the diseases inherent to Senegambia, such as malaria and dysentery led to this increase in prejudice and discrimination. Green also argues Senegambians’ fear of Europeans due to the Transatlantic Slave Trade increased this tension as Senegambian prejudice against Europeans rose.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, Eurafrican women were in the prime position to mediate misconceptions because they lived between the two societies. They helped Europeans understand Senegambians and vice versa as they experienced both cultures, peoples, and societies. For instance, Eurafrican marriages often followed “la mode du pays (the customs of Senegambia)” due to Eurafricans encouraging Europeans to consider Senegambian marriage customs as “legitimate marriage (legitimate marriage).”<sup>17</sup> Europeans had previously believed only Christian marriage customs were legitimate but women promoted respect for Senegambian customs. Eurafrican women’s influence was as far reaching, if not more, as grumets. Men could not mediate prejudices and miscommunications as well as women because they lacked women’s intimate relationships with Europeans. Therefore, women influenced the entrenchment of European settlement and trade by actively marrying men and mediating.

### *Patterns within the Chiefdoms*

Depending on noble women’s navigation of their roles in Senegambia chiefdoms, from 1550 to 1700, women could mediate conflict more than chiefs formally did. J. B Gaby, a

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<sup>15</sup> Marees, “Passage à la Petit Côte,” 41. Froger, *A Relation of a Voyage*, 11, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300-1589* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Hilary Jones, *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013). J.B Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie*, 65.

European, wrote that men, never women, reigned Senegambia in the strict sense of formal hierarchical political roles.<sup>18</sup> Women could not become heads of state in the chiefdoms, excluding Waalo. However, another European wrote that buurba Latsukaabe's lingeer (his mother or maternal aunt) was "the one person with a real ascendancy over the king."<sup>19</sup> Brue stated that on "several occasions" Latsukaabe's lingeer sought "to restore peaceful relations between European traders and her son."<sup>20</sup> Latsukaabe's lingeer illustrates that women could have greater impacts on peace than men and could be dominant. Women did not have extensive formal power; their responses to marriage and familial connections defined their informal power. Women's influence was also increasingly important in a period of conflict and corruption. As stated in chapter one, slave raids had already increased conflict in Senegambia. However, around 1550 to 1580 the slave trade rapidly grew and the ensuing conflict lasted into the eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Conflict increased because the "slaves sold by the blacks are for the most part prisoners of war" or slaves "stolen away by their neighbors."<sup>22</sup> Female nobles helped mediate the conflict this created, as Latsukaabe's lingeer demonstrated.

Even when noble women's positions granted them few formal powers, their informal responses impacted Senegambia politically. Awos (chiefs' first wives) held more formal political power than the chiefs' various other wives spread throughout the chiefdom. However, these wives also had some political responsibilities they could utilize to affect political change. For instance, chiefs' numerous wives had diplomatic roles helping to greet and entertain foreigners.

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<sup>18</sup> Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie*, 48.

<sup>19</sup> James F. Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: the Senegal River Valley, 1700-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 21.

<sup>20</sup> Searing, *West African Slavery*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Philip D. Curtin, "The Abolition of the Slave Trade from Senegambia," in *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, ed. David Eltis, James Walvin, and Svend E. Green-Pedersen (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 83.

<sup>22</sup> Barbot, "Description of the Coasts," 39, 40.

The King resides at the distance of thirty Leagues from the Sea-Coast in a town called *Cayor*, where he had a Palace, and Apartments for his Wives, always entertaining some foreigners in his court, and more especially those of the *Portuguese* nation...<sup>23</sup>

The diplomatic meetings created by European companies feuding over Senegambian trade gave women opportunities because the chief relied on his wives to “always” entertain “foreigners.” If women disapproved of a certain trade agreement, they could utilize their interactions with the “foreigners” to dissuade such trade. Despite how little power their formal roles as entertainers granted women, their responses could shape Senegambia. Corruption in the chiefdoms also decreased the formal power women held as councils flimsily convicted Senegambians for minor misdemeanors selling them into slavery as punishment to gain wealth.<sup>24</sup> Noble women were not on councils nor married to council members; therefore, their political impact over the councils’ corruption was limited. However, when an Alcaidy sold a priest to Barbot it was “by special order of king Damel;”<sup>25</sup> because women could still influence chiefs and kings, the final authority on trade, they could still respond to corruption. Ultimately, women did not need powerful formal positions to affect politics.

During this time, tëgg (smith) women maintained power over society and trade because iron’s increased value reinforced their importance. Iron was a necessary component of war and agriculture and Senegambians’ demand for weapons and tools rose as conflict and droughts increased.<sup>26</sup> Iron’s value to Senegambians encouraged the transition of iron bars, or strips, to currency. Van de Broeke’s example of a master paying a servant with iron bars illustrates iron currency’s widespread use.<sup>27</sup> Because tëggs continued to keep their techniques secret, iron also

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<sup>23</sup> Froger, *A Relation of a Voyage*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Barbot, “Description of the Coasts,” 40.

<sup>25</sup> Barbot, “Description of the Coasts,” 40.

<sup>26</sup> David W. Ames, “The Selection of Mates, Courtship, and Marriage Among the Wolof,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Francais d’Afrique Noire. Serie B, Sciences Humaines* (18) 1956: 157. Tëggs sometimes guarded their occupational secrets to such an extent that they would violate Senegambian customs concerning incestuous relationships to preserve their endogamous caste.

<sup>27</sup> Van de Broeke, “Les Passages de 1606, 1608, 1609,” 140.

maintained its mystical quality and they remained powerful. The majority of tëgg women worked as potters; however, the fact that they did not personally work with iron did not diminish their mystique. Potters were associated with the same magic as ironsmiths because they were members of the same occupational caste; thus, as iron's value rose it increased potters' effect on society as well. As demand for tëggs' products rose, tëggs needed more raw iron from Europe.<sup>28</sup> With increased need, legitimate trade burgeoned and the high demand created by Europeans' competition allowed Senegambians to charge more for commodities and services.<sup>29</sup> Algayers (village governors), would usually “prennent autant qu'ils peuvent (take as much as they [could])” for grummets service, particularly because many Europeans were “ne connaissent pas l'usage (unfamiliar with [irons] use).”<sup>30</sup> Thus, iron currency became popular because of tëggs secrecy and demand for iron. In turn, iron currency helped Senegambians remain dominant in Atlantic trade by making trade easier and increasing Senegambians ability to manipulate Europeans.

In the period from 1550 to 1700, Islam expanded and its syncretism with animism created and expanded ceremonial roles for guewels (bard). Senegambians informed Gaby that from “le Senegal jusques a Gambie, les Negres se dissent Mahometans” (the Senegal to the Gambia, the Negroes are Mohammadens).<sup>31</sup> Senegambia, at this time, was nearly entirely Muslim and intermixed with animist customs. Ramadan was a prevalent Islamic ceremony that guewels lead in which the majority of Senegambians fasted for a month. Gaby claimed that children after ten

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<sup>28</sup> Searing, *West African Slavery*, 22-23.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson and R. Jobson, “Les Expéditions de 1618-1621.” 248.

<sup>30</sup> Marees, “Passage à la Petit Côte,” 43.

<sup>31</sup> J.B Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie*, 39-41.

and pregnant women fasted as well; this idea is contrary to Islamic practice.<sup>32</sup> Regardless, it is clear that the celebration of Ramadan involved the entire community and numerous *guelles*.<sup>33</sup>

“Cinq ou six de leurs *Guiriots* se rendent en la grande place du village en trainant a leur cote gauche leur *tambouts* foutenus par une bande de cuir” (Five or six of them *guelles* travel to the main square of the village by dragging the *tambourines* on their left side supported by a strip of leather).<sup>34</sup>

*Guelles* also conducted circumcision ceremonies a month before Ramadan; this ceremony exemplifies the intricate, more frequent mixtures of religious expression that required *guelles* leadership. Children gathered “dans la place publique du Village, parez de grandes quantités de *gris-gry* (in the public square of the village, carrying great quantities of *gris-gry*).”<sup>35</sup> These “*gris-gry*” or “*grisgris*” were part of what Europeans described was a “very much corrupted” version of Islam. They were “little leathern bags... enclose[ing] certain passages of the *Alcoran*.” These *grisgris* “secur[ed] them from venomous beasts” and Europeans referred to this practice as an “abominable superstition.”<sup>36</sup> As religious ceremonies increased in frequency and complexity, communities further relied on *guelles*. Because *guelles* shared religious expression extensively and society lacked separation between religion, community, society, and politics, *Guelles* used religion to influence these spheres.

Jambor, freeborn, women and their relationships they fostered with men were the center of Senegambian communities giving women great prominence in their communities. Wolof peoples fretted over failed marriages and relationships.

Elles ont leurs habitations séparées, et souvent elles demeurent dans différents Villages, ou elles ne voyent leurs maris qu’assez rarement, non pas parce qu’ils sont occupez au travail, mais parce qu’ils ne les aiment que d’un amour volage et inconstant, lorsqu’elles sont jeunes, en jolies. (They have their separate dwellings, and often they remain in different villages or they see their husbands

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<sup>32</sup> J.B Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie*, 39-41.

<sup>33</sup> Froger, *A Relation of a Voyage*, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie*, 43-44.

<sup>35</sup> Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> Froger, *A Relation of a Voyage*, 14.

rarely, not because they are busy with work, but because they love them with fickle and inconsistent love.)<sup>37</sup>

When married men and women lived in separate houses, did not share their lives together, and did not love each other it destabilized society. This is because people were Senegambian societies' most important resource and communities depended on unified families to support the population, produce food and goods, and fight wars.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, Wolof peoples were careful to arrange marriages between members of the same caste with consideration for how "their personal spirits [were] in harmony."<sup>39</sup> Women, in particular, were of utmost value and consideration due to their importance in childbirth and childcare. A man hoping to marry a woman paid her family compensation for the loss of these valuable contributions.<sup>40</sup> Due to women's value, society also specifically monitored women's behavior to ensure communities' stability.

... Lorsqu'elles sont dans les liens d'une legitime mariage ; [...] si elles estoient assez foibles pour commettre une infidélité, elles seroient regardées avec le dernier mépris, de toutes les personnes qui en auroient connaissance... ce crime est si rare parmy les Negres. (When in the bonds of a legitimate marriage; if they [women] are weak enough to commit infidelity, they are viewed with contempt by the last of the people who know them... the crime is rare among Negroes.)<sup>41</sup>

For instance, when a woman was unfaithful to her husband, she risked collapsing the family unit and creating conflict. Society prevented this by initially selecting appropriate partners and later persecuting offenders through social isolation and "contempt." It is unlikely Senegambians' eliminated the "crime" of infidelity. However, societies' persistent belief that women's faithfulness was fundamental enforced the taboo and encouraged stability.

As turmoil engulfed Senegambian society from 1630 to 1700, women ensured their communities' stability by assuming absent men's roles and responsibilities. During the period

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<sup>37</sup> Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie*, 66.

<sup>38</sup> Ames, "The Selection of Mates," 156-158.

<sup>39</sup> Ames, "The Selection of Mates," 156-168.

<sup>40</sup> Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie*, 64. Marees, "Passage à la Petit Côte," 41.

<sup>41</sup> Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie*, 65-66.

from 1550 to 1700, Senegambian societies underwent a dry period from 1630 to 1700 that created routine drought.<sup>42</sup> Previously, the 1550 to 1630 wet period enlarged populations. Overpopulation and drought created “dearth and famine” throughout the region. Famine increased Senegambians’ turmoil as people “sold their own children, kindred, or neighbours” or “themselves for a maintenance, and to prevent starving.”<sup>43</sup> Slavery and starvation reduced productive populations and agricultural output further exacerbating famine. Chiefs’ ability to raid for slaves continually increased as Northern chiefdoms maintained cavalries again as the tsetse fly line fell.<sup>44</sup> In the midst of this turmoil, women were key to communities’ survival. For instance, when the village experienced a smaller disturbance, such as a chief’s death, “the women of the neighborhood [were] assembled to lament.”<sup>45</sup> Women were often responsible for the burdens and strife society underwent; grieving and creating solutions were women’s duties. Similarly, in this period of widespread upset and conflict women became the cornerstone of Senegambian communities. Just as society gave women the responsibility of maintaining family units, communities relied on women to stabilize communities throughout this period.

### *Conclusion*

Eurafrican communities, slavery, regional conflict, and climate radically changed Senegambia and women’s lives. It appears that these factors were the most important changes in the Senegambian region. However, the written history often ignores how women’s responses changed their own lives and the course of history. Women encouraged trade, mediated conflict, and helped maintain the stability of rural peoples. In the end, the various external factors interacted with women and women changed how European and Senegambian factors progressed.

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<sup>42</sup> Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 83.

<sup>43</sup> Barbot, “Description of the Coasts,” 39-40.

<sup>44</sup> Brooks, *Eurafricans*. Froger, *A Relation of a Voyage*, 12.

<sup>45</sup> Froger, *A Relation of a Voyage*, 15.

### III. Signares' Prominence and European Stability: 1700 to 1800

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The women are much about the same size and make as the men. Their skin is surprisingly delicate and soft; their mouth and lips are small; and their features very regular. There are some of them perfect beauties. They have a great share of vivacity, and a vast deal of freedom and ease, which renders them extremely agreeable.<sup>1</sup>

Michelle Adanson, a French scientist, explored Senegal from 1749 to 1755 and found the Senegal Company and its “corrupt practices” associated with seductive signares repulsive. However, Adanson also thought signares, female wealthy traders, were beautiful, independent, and intelligent.<sup>2</sup> Signares’ beauty was familiar “for they have not the broad noses and thick lips” of other Africans.<sup>3</sup> They were “soft,” “small,” and “regular” “perfect beauties.”<sup>4</sup> Adanson argued these women’s seductions were dangerous to the company because of these reasons. They were able to extract “double or triple rations – whatever they wanted – from the Company’s stores” and the company fed their domestic slaves “as a general practice.”<sup>5</sup> These women responded to Europeans’ arrival by initiating relationships and using their marriages to Europeans to engage in trade. These reactions helped women gain advantages and influenced how Europeans forged political relationships, traded, and responded to them. They also shaped Eurafrican and Senegambian society and culture.

This chapter will demonstrate how signares affected Eurafrica and Senegambia as well as how other castes of Senegambian women impacted their communities. Europeans were a driving

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Adanson, *A Voyage to Senegal, The Isle of Gorée, and The River Gambia* (London: Printed for J. Nourse, 1759), 39. Signares were not a part of the noble class despite being wealthy elites with economic and political influence. They were not nobles because of their position as Eurafrican descendants or wives, lack of formal noble titles, and lack of lineage connections to Njaajaan Njay.

<sup>2</sup> George Brooks, “The Signares of Saint-Louis and Gorée: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth-Century Senegal,” in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Moore, *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa: Containing a Description of the Several Nations for the Space of Six Hundred Miles up the River Gambia* (London: Printed by D. Henry and R. Cave, 1723), voyage, Les Archives Nationales de Senegal, Bi I 8<sup>o</sup> 833, (Accessed May 2014), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Adanson, *A Voyage to Senegal*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Brooks, *Signares*, 28.

force in Senegambian society. They often created conflict, illegitimate and legitimate trade, and contributed to Eurafrican communities in Senegambia. However, women's responses to Europeans also altered Senegambia. Europeans grew dependent on Senegambian women as they forged a Eurafrican culture and helped build Eurafrican communities by caring for Europeans. Signares, the wives on whom Europeans relied, are the prime example of women's fundamental position in Senegambian society. This study cannot ignore them even though historians have studied them more than they have studied other women. Thus, this chapter first examines how signares affected politics, the economy, Europeans, culture, and jams. The second part of this chapter shifts from signares and Eurafrican communities to examine how nobles, nyamakalaw castes, and jambors responded to internal conflict in chiefdoms. It demonstrates that noble women continued their informal influence and gained greater formal powers. Meanwhile, tēggs' impact remained stable as their occupation shaped society, increased productivity, and contributed to conflict. Guewels increased signares' positive reputations and maintained their community leadership despite Europeans' disapproval. The chapter ends by illustrating that jambors' responses increased stability as environmentally poor conditions and conflict threatened communities.

### *Signares' Prominence and Influence*

Signares improved political relationships between Senegambians and Europeans and helped shape Eurafrican communities' laws through intimate relationships with Europeans. Europeans desired Eurafrican women due to their beauty; however, they valued them as wives because they also had "widespread kinship affiliations" with Eurafricans, African traders, and African nobles. French and British peoples encouraged these unions because "[Europeans]

mixing with the natives settles their affections on the most lasting foundations.”<sup>6</sup> These marriages affected politics and law because signares acted as mediators who encouraged respect when racial tensions and cultural misunderstandings built tension. Europeans believed many Senegambians and Africans were “naturally lazy and wicked.”<sup>7</sup> However, Europeans who had contact with signares believed Wolof women had “a thousand times [white women’s] chastity,” were “desirable,” “belle et bien faites (beautiful and well made),” and “promising inhabitants.”<sup>8</sup> Europeans’ “marked respect” for signares despite racialized discourse demonstrates the influence signares had on maintaining political relationships and peace.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, signares’ expressions of Senegambian culture affected how Europeans understood Senegambian cultural practices. Although Europeans found some practices savage, such as the marriage consummation ceremony, they followed signares’ customs and attempted to understand them.<sup>10</sup> Europeans then utilized their understanding of “native customs” to create law in Eurafrikan settlements.<sup>11</sup> Signares changed the political landscape and laws of Senegambia and Eurafrikan settlements.

Signares had significant economic power over the success of European trade and Europeans’ individual accomplishment.<sup>12</sup> A woman’s pursuit of the economic opportunities gained through actions created a signare, not the marriage itself. The signare, Anne Pepin, carried on advancing European trade and building wealth after she was no longer married to

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<sup>6</sup> Reverend John Lindsay, *A Voyage to the Coast of Africa, in 1758* (London: Printed for S. Paterson, 1759), 78. Brooks, *Signares*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> *A Plan for Improving the Trade at Senegal* (London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1763), 2. Antoine Edme Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie* (Amsterdam: Chez Maradan Libraire, 1789), 39.

<sup>8</sup> Lindsay, *Coast of Africa*, 77-8. Antoine Edme Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie* (Amsterdam: Chez Maradan Libraire, 1789), 28.

<sup>9</sup> Brooks, *Signares*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Baptiste Léonard Durand, *A Voyage to Senegal; or, Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs* (London: Printed for Richard Phillips, 1806), 117.

<sup>11</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 118. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Mamdani established the idea of customary colonial or European law for African colonies. Europeans instituted customary laws based on created and invented customs that Africans told Europeans or Europeans observed.

<sup>12</sup> Brooks, *Signares*, 27, 29.

Chevalier de Beufflers.<sup>13</sup> She and other signares were efficient at utilizing resources to garner more wealth. For instance, they expounded their wealth by renting jams (slaves) to European companies rather than selling jams and having to accumulate more.

La plupart vivent avec beaucoup d'aisance, & plusieurs de ces negresses ont a ells trente a quarante esclaves qu'elles louent en partie comme je l'ai deja dit à la compagnie. (The majority live with ease, and several of these women have thirty to forty slaves which they rent to the Company.)<sup>14</sup>

Signares strategically responded to the market demand for labor just as Senegambian nobles' "reap an Advantage" by manipulating the market demand for horses by buying numerous at low cost and then selling them.<sup>15</sup> Signares' perceptive economic navigation in European markets differentiated them from other peoples. Signares "indisputably [...] acquire[d] wealth" through their available opportunities and resources.<sup>16</sup> These Wolof women's "aptitude à concevoir aisément (aptitude to easily learn)" economic skills also increased the trade opportunities and labor resources available to Europeans.<sup>17</sup> Signares also improved the individual wealth of European men. In 1793, Prolong described a Eurafrikan woman who married a European soldier and "gave him her only valuable possessions" so he could enter trade.<sup>18</sup> She helped him succeed when he had nothing bolstering their wealth. Signares position in society determined the success and solidification of Europeans' trade relationships.

Signares influenced Europeans' domestic lives and helped Europeans adjust, survive, and engrain themselves into Eurafrikan and trade communities. One of the most fundamental ways women helped Europeans adjust and survive in the foreign conditions of Senegambia was caring for Europeans when they were sick.

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Hinchman, "House and Household on Goree, Senegal, 1758-1837," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65 (2006): 176-177.

<sup>14</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Moore, *Inland Parts of Africa*, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Brooks, *Signares*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Brooks, *Signares*, 37.

Les femmes de cette isle [Saint-Louis] en general, sont fort atachees aux blancs, & les soignent on ne peut mieux, lorsqu'ils sont maladies. (The women of this Island in general, are strongly attached to white men, & their care for them could not be better when they are sick.)<sup>19</sup>

Signares offered knowledge about malaria, dysentery, and other illnesses common to Senegambia and foreign to Europeans. Prelong documented that one-sixth to one-fifth of all Europeans died each year in Gorée, in Saint Louis “three out of ten.”<sup>20</sup> When Europeans fell ill, signares comforted and saved Europeans with knowledge of the illnesses and treatments.<sup>21</sup> Signares not only saved Europeans, they also provided comforting and stable homes for Europeans.<sup>22</sup> Signares helped Europeans adjust to an entirely unfamiliar region and eased their lives in the settlements. Senegambian customary food had no cakes or bread but “those of their Women accustomed to Europeans [...] learnt to do both” to help their husbands adjust.<sup>23</sup> Signares by making men feel comfortable, helped Europeans assimilate to Senegambian customs and society. Signares taught men to embrace customs such as marriage “à la mode du pays” which included the laabaan, marriage night ritual, that Europeans believed was “a ridiculous farce.”<sup>24</sup> Signares even encouraged Europeans to believe these marriages were “toujours plus unis... [et] plus fidèles (always more united... [and] more faithful).”<sup>25</sup> Through signares’

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<sup>19</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Brooks, *Signares*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Brooks, *Signares*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 116. David W. Ames, “The Selection of Mates, Courtship, and Marriage among the Wolof,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Francais d’Afrique Noire. Serie B, Sciences Humaines* (18) 1956: 156-168. “If the absence of the [European] man be only for a certain time, the woman [Signare] remains single, waits with patience for the return of her husband.” Wolof customs placed extreme importance on selecting compatible mates that stayed together for life. Therefore, women were loyal companions.

<sup>23</sup> Moore, *Inland Parts of Africa*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 117. During the laabaan female guewels sat outside the door of the newlyweds door after a large celebration while the couple consummated the relationship. In the morning they and the bride’s female family members would check for blood on the sheets symbolizing the bride’s hymen being broken during the night. This blood was the only way to prove a woman’s virginity prior to her wedding night, to prove her “virtue.” The family and female guewels would then announce the bride’s virtue or shame depending on the status of the white sheets. However, Europeans believed that it was a “farce” because the “blood [was] generally that of a foul.”

<sup>25</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 6-7.

encouragement of European assimilation, women provided stability, health, and comfort for men.

Signares' example of success motivated other Eurafrican women to become signares and grow Eurafrican communities and culture. Signares provided an enticing example of wealth, prosperity, influence, and power to young Eurafrican women in the trading ports of Rufisque, Portudal, Joal, Saint Louis, and Gorée. They did so through demonstrations of success and wealth. For instance, signares often repurposed the gold they traded.

“avec cet or, ces femmes sont fabriquer une partie en bijoux, et l'autre partie est employee a acheter des vetemens (with this gold these women make, in part, jewelry, and the other part is used to buy clothes).”<sup>26</sup>

Signares hired téggs, smiths, to create unique pieces of jewelry solely for them. These pieces of jewelry were symbols of signares' power and determined designs of Senegambian jewelry, clothes, and in turn culture for centuries.<sup>27</sup> Signares also held folgars (balls) to demonstrate their wealth to the community and enjoy the rewards of their success.

Après la parure, la plus grande passion de ces femmes est pour leur bals, ou folgars, qu'elles sont durer quelquefois jusqu'à le pointe du jour (After their adornment, their biggest passion are their dances, or folgars, they sometimes last till the break of day...) <sup>28</sup>

Brooks describes these folgars as enchanting places where “girls and young women... would have watched in anticipation of opportunities to come.”<sup>29</sup> They demonstrated Eurafrican culture to young women and the signares' pleasures enticed women to follow signares' example.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Marian Ashby Johnson, “Gold Jewelry of the Wolof and the Tukulor of Senegal,” *African Arts* 27 (1994): 38-39. Signares dressed in lavish clothing with magnificent fabrics and intricate turbans. Europeans compared them to ancient Greek statues. Lindsay, *Coast of Africa*, 78. George Brooks, “Artists' Depictions of Senegalese Signares: Insights Concerning French Racist Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century” *Journal of the Swiss Society of African Studies* (18) 1980: 80-81. See Appendix D for images of signares.

<sup>28</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Brooks, “the Signares,” 40.

<sup>30</sup> Hinchman, “House and Household,” 176-177, 171. See Appendix E for an image of a signares' homes where they hosted the lavish folgars.

Signares' behavior at folgars taught young women that if they were "remarkably polite both in conversation and manners," they could also become respected signares.<sup>31</sup>

Signares also improved jam women's lives, positions in society, and opportunities. In many ways, signares' jams were better off than jambors (free women) because their masters lavished them with clothing and wealth.

Elle se sont suivre par une ou deux reparilles, qui leur servent de femmes-de-chambre, egalement tres – parees; mais un peu plus à la legere, & un peu moins modestement d'apres nos usages. (They [Signares] are followed by one or two young girls like chamber maids, equally well dress; but a little more mildly, and a little less modestly than our custom.)<sup>32</sup>

These opulent clothes marked signares' jams as members of a new influential class of women. They were also treated like family members, according to Wolof culture, which granted them more freedom to use the wealth they were given.<sup>33</sup> Signares also granted jams the responsibility of conducting trade for them:

Ces captifs font tous les ans le voyage de Galane, en qualite de matelots; ils en rapportent a leurs maitresses quinze, vingt, & jusqu'à trente gros d'or... (These slaves, once every year, make a voyage to Galam as sailors; they report to their mistresses fifteen, twenty, and even up to thirty weight of gold).<sup>34</sup>

Jams shaped trade as signares entrusted them with negotiating for the best commodities at the lowest prices. They were often successful in this role delivering large weights of gold to their signares. This encouraged signares to give them more freedom as negotiators. These benefits spread widely among jams because signares often had thirty to forty slaves. Furthermore, signares' treatment of jams encouraged Europeans, by example, to treat jams well in Eurafrican communities. Europeans began to treat jams with dignity, like family members.

Les femmes sont belles & bien faites, d'une intelligence singulière. Elles apprennent avec la plus grande facilite, ainsi que celles du pays de Cayor & de Bourba-Yolof. Cette aptitude a concevoir

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<sup>31</sup> Lindsay, *Coast of Africa*, 77.

<sup>32</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibrahima Thiaw, "Slaves without Shackles: An Archaeology of Everyday Life on Gorée Island, Senegal," in *Slavery and Africa: Archaeology and Memory*, ed. Paul J. Lane and Kevin C. MacDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 3-4. Signares had many jams who surrounded them at all times, an image of this can be seen in Appendix F.

aisement... se vend 20 ou 30 pistoles au – dessus du prix des femmes des autres contrées. Elles sont effectivement si susceptibles d’instruction, que peu de mois après leur arrive a nos isles de l’Amerique, elles savent coudre, parler francais & server comme nos domestiques Europeens. (The women are beautiful and well made, of a unique intelligence. They learn with great ease, just as the ones of the Cayor and Bourba-Yolof country. This aptitude is seen easily... one sells for 20 or 30 Spanish gold coins above the price of women of other lands. They are so susceptible to training, that within a few months after their arrival at out our American islands, they know how to sew, speak French, and serve like our Europeans servants.<sup>35</sup>

Europeans also maintained high demand for female Wolof jams because of their “domestic service,” “arts and trades” capabilities, and remarkable adaptability.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, many jams found themselves in advantageous positions as the jams of influential masters.

### *Women’s Influence Beyond Signareship*

Noble women continued to affect policies and politics through their intimate relationships with male leaders. Despite Jolof noble women losing “power and commercial influences” when the Jolof Empire fell, Jolof matched the strength of other chiefdoms and women maintained their positions.<sup>37</sup> For instance, awos (chiefs’ first wives) of numerous chiefdoms continued to impact future chiefs because their children were “legitimate” and first in the line of succession.<sup>38</sup> This gave awos’ a stronger possibility of becoming lingeers (chiefs’ mothers) and gaining strong formal political power on the chiefdom. This did not remove the potential for power from the numerous other wives. Because “the children of the second wife [also had] the right” when awos’ children failed.<sup>39</sup> This progression continued through the chiefs’ many wives. The opportunity to influence the chief of Cayor or Waalo spread. Noble women were also able to influence political relationships through their ceremonial roles in greeting Europeans. Adanson describes a courteous welcoming ceremony with a chief whose two wives “brought [him] a few

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<sup>35</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 28-29.

<sup>36</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 120.

<sup>37</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 152.

<sup>38</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 32.

<sup>39</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 32.

bowls full of milk, with eggs and fowls.”<sup>40</sup> Women’s actions during this initiation of companionship between Europeans and Senegambians could develop communication and peaceful trade. If women responded negatively, they could create conflict. Thus, women across the various chiefdoms of Senegambia maintained an element of power over policy.

Women also had formal political control over trade and domestic labor because they possessed commodities that Europeans needed. For instance, the salt pits of Gandiole, in Cayor, were “the dowry of the wife of Damel, who is the acknowledged queen of Cayor.”<sup>41</sup> The practical implications of this role meant that the awo of Cayor, though not an official head of state, could decide who traded for salt, the tariffs involved, and the price of these tariffs. Europeans depended on salt to preserve meats they ate during the voyage to Europe. Thus, women could exploit Europeans’ nearly inelastic demand. For instance, Reverend John Lindsay described one situation where Senegambians “wou’d by no means permit of our coming ashore either for water or refreshments.”<sup>42</sup> Although these were not women, women could similarly exploit the supplies Europeans needed to return home by taxing them and restricting their access. Noble women, such as the awo of Cayor, also hired females to transport the salt onto the ships.<sup>43</sup> They increased the demand for women’s labor through policies that encouraged women to work or reserved jobs for women. Women responded to owning these resources directly affected Senegambian politics and labor.

Tëggs held their previous economic roles and encouraged Senegambian economic stability while increasing conflict. Even if women worked with pottery, not iron and gold, they

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<sup>40</sup> Adanson, *A Voyage to Senegal*, 51.

<sup>41</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 34.

<sup>42</sup> Lindsay, *Coast of Africa*, 59.

<sup>43</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 34. “The women of Gandiolle undertake to carry the salt on board the ships at the rate of half a bar per barrel.”

inherited the social prominence of tëggs because they belonged to this “magical” caste.<sup>44</sup> They also constantly interacted with men due to their constant proximity in the closed endogamous occupational group. They could affect the production of the iron weapons and tools that shaped Senegambia. These tools affected Senegambia because weapons enabled chiefdoms’ slave raids and increased regional conflict.<sup>45</sup> They also helped jambors produce crops in this difficult dry period by providing better agricultural tools.<sup>46</sup> Even signares demand for unique pieces of gold jewelry increased tëggs’ influence over literally shaping Wolof and Eurafrican culture.<sup>47</sup> This allowed tëggs, men or women, to exert influence over society as Senegambian peoples increasingly relied on them.

Guewels gained more wealth by improving signares reputation and power; this function also gave guewels the ability to affect signares’ actions as they did chiefs’ policies. Guewels increased their wealth by “ne manqué pas de marcher devant elles [Signares], en débitant à leurs louanges... (not missing the opportunity to walk before [Signares] lavishing praise).<sup>48</sup> Guewels could rapidly increase signares’ reputations through this behavior making themselves invaluable to signares. It was so important to signares that they would lavish guewels with wealth even throwing their opulent clothes to guewels when they ran out of gold.<sup>49</sup> Guewels also had the equal ability to “insult and injure those against whom they have a complaint.”<sup>50</sup> Therefore, guewels could also coerce signares, through the threat of injured reputations, into giving guewels more wealth or listening to their advice.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> George Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 31.

<sup>45</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 120.

<sup>46</sup> Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 31, 123-124.

<sup>47</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 150-151.

<sup>51</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 150-151.

Guewels also preserved cultural leadership regardless of Europeans' disapproval. Europeans considered guewels, "both men and women," "buffoons." However, Europeans also recognized that "they are very well treated during their life, and even enjoy a sort of respect."<sup>52</sup> Despite Europeans' disgust for Senegambian customs, guewels' social influence remained due to the communities' need for and respect of guewels. Every caste of society relied on guewels, male and female. For instance, these "musicians, buffoons, and mountebanks," were necessary for the laabaan, the marriage consummation. Throughout the night, guewels "attended" the bride and grooms door. In the morning female guewels would "publish the success of the bridegroom and the virtue of the bride" if they found blood on the sheets.<sup>53</sup>

Ils attachement cette pague au bout d'un long bâton, flottant en forme de drapeau; ils la promènent tout le jour dans le village, en chantant et vantant la nouvelle mariée et sa sagesse (They [family members and guewels] attach this sheet to a long stick, floating like a flag; they parade it all day through the village, singing and praising the new bride and her chastity).<sup>54</sup>

Numerous female guewels were required for this ceremony and it continued to present day.<sup>55</sup> This long lasting custom placed a high demand on female guewels and there was a "party of them for each village."<sup>56</sup> Guewels continued to lead their societies' ceremonies and gain respect.

The pressure and responsibility that conflict and droughts placed on jambor (free born) women increased their impact on communities' strength. As in chapter two, women faced increased responsibility as conflict removed productive members of the population and drought increased the difficulty of agriculture. Despite European debates concerning the slave trades' effeminacies and the rising cost of slave raids, Senegambia continued to sell slaves at fluctuating

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<sup>52</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 151.

<sup>53</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 117.

<sup>54</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Assiata G. Sidikou and Thomas Hale, *Women's Voices from West Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012).

<sup>56</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 151.

levels throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>57</sup> The slave trade's and "ascendancy" of other West African peoples continued to escalate conflict in Senegambia. Chiefs sent so many men to war, they had to rely on *tyeddos* or warriors of "slave origins."<sup>58</sup> Corrupt leaders' increased the sale of their own chiefdom's populations<sup>59</sup> Droughts and famines created "human misery and social dislocation."<sup>60</sup> Agriculture became more difficult and husbands who had once manually "tilled" the earth while women planted seeds were enslaved leaving women responsible for rigorous manual labor and men's previous responsibilities.<sup>61</sup> Alongside women's increased responsibilities the culture of conflict promoted patriarchal prejudices that taught women "to expect beatitude" only if they were "chaste, faithful, and obedient to their husbands."<sup>62</sup> Thus, women maintained their communities' survival as they had since 1400.<sup>63</sup>

### *Conclusion*

During this period Europeans' settlements, trade, and interpersonal relationships changed Senegambia. However, Europeans were not the only factor in this radical change. Women's responses to Europeans helped these men gain access to trade, settle in Senegambia, and maintain political relationships with elites. Women also influenced the conflict, turmoil, and culture of Senegambia through roles that, though connected to Europeans, Europeans' arrival did not create.

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<sup>57</sup> Philip D. Curtin, "The Abolition of the Slave Trade from Senegambia," in *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, ed. David Eltis, James Walvin, and Svend E. Green-Pedersen (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 88. The slave trade in Senegambia declined from 2,500 slaves in 1741 through 1750 to 1,210 in 1771 with a peak of 2,230 in the 1780s ending in 1,320 in 1800.

<sup>58</sup> Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 105.

<sup>59</sup> Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 105. Although these numbers remained low, around 200 to 300 slaves, Cayor and Waalo did sell Wolof women to Saint Louis to be exported to the West and Cayor, Baol, and Siin did the same with Goree. The exception to this range per year was during famine and civil war from 1753 to 1755 when it escalated to 400 to 600 slaves.

<sup>60</sup> Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 102-103. "There were droughts in each decade from the 1710s to the 1750s and in the 1770s and 1780s, and famines were frequent between 1790 and 1840."

<sup>61</sup> De Pommegorge, *Description*, 39.

<sup>62</sup> Durand, *Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs*, 158.

<sup>63</sup> Moore, *Inland Parts of Africa*, 32.

## Epilogue

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### *Tracing the Argument*

The thesis demonstrates that studies ignoring women's reactions to European and West African factors incompletely explains fifteenth to eighteenth century Senegambian historical patterns. Women's responses to Europeans and Senegambian customs shaped their experience and changed their society. A *guelwel* could choose to mediate the conflicts between Europeans and Senegambian society. A *jambor* could either stabilize or weaken their communities' as they struggled with agriculture and men's absence through their responses. A noble woman could tax Europeans at higher rates either encouraging trade or repressing it. Ultimately, women's responses shaped Senegambia as greatly as Atlantic trade affected Senegambia. Academics recognize women's responses, to a point; however, their lack of focus on women's various experiences and reactions throughout the period prior to 1800 prevents historical understanding.

### *Implications*

This study has explored women, of all castes, from 1400 to 1800 to illustrate how fundamental women are to understating this history. Prior to the 1960s, the study of African history barely existed. The history written about "Africa" was about Europeans and Europeans in Africa. Including and focusing on African people corrected these errors. However, historians by not examining women's experience have lost pieces of the Senegambian puzzle. The perspective offered by understanding women's effect can reveal useful explanations. During the early periods of colonization in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, the French "kept as their goals" the "assimilation" of their colonies. However, as the costs of "the political, cultural, and economic assimilation of twenty million Africans" made their program unfeasible.<sup>1</sup> Still, the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Crowder, *Senegal: A Study of French Assimilation Policy* (London: Methuen & CO Ltd., 1967), 1-3.

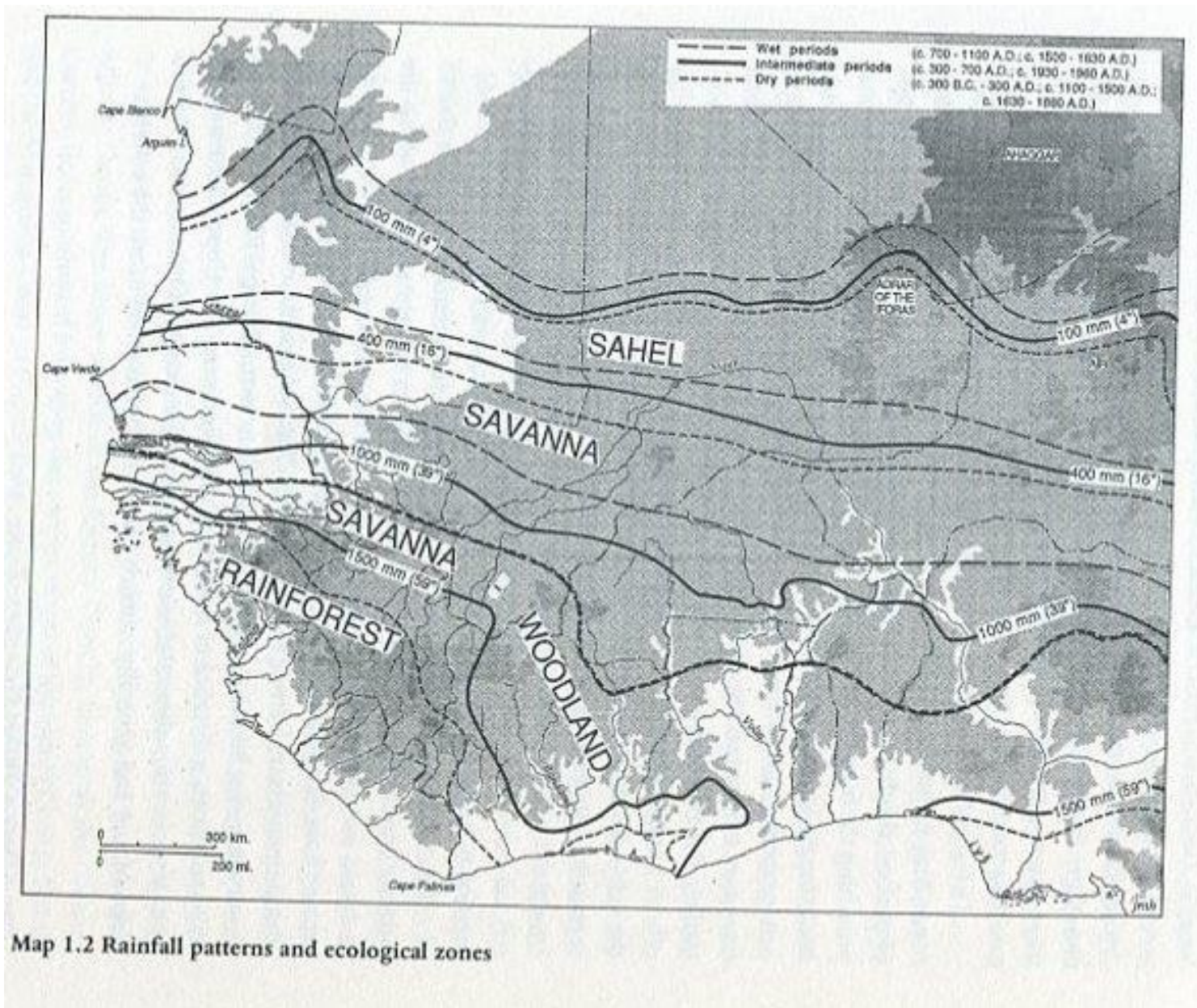
French government selected “four communes” in colonized Senegal to assimilate Africans into the French culture and civil society.<sup>2</sup> Diop argues, that “early contact with the French and exposure to European traders” were “the main factors” contributing to Wolof education and assimilation.<sup>3</sup> However, Europeans belief that Wolof women’s cleanliness, manners, intelligence, and adaptability were superior to European women also affected assimilation policy. European relationships with Senegambian women helped them understand and accept Wolof culture and the Eurafrican culture that Wolof women helped create. The extent of women’s effects on French assimilation policies in Senegal is unclear without further study. However, it is clear that women’s influence in forming French people’s positive beliefs concerning the Senegalese merits further study. These implications demonstrate the importance of understanding Senegambian women’s responses and impact during Senegalese history.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Crowder, *Senegal: A Study of French Assimilation Policy* (London: Methuen & CO Ltd., 1967), 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> Samba Diop, *The Oral History and Literature of the Wolof People of Waalo, Northern Senegal: The Master of the Word (Griot) in the Wolof Tradition* (Lampeter, UK: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 1995), 222.

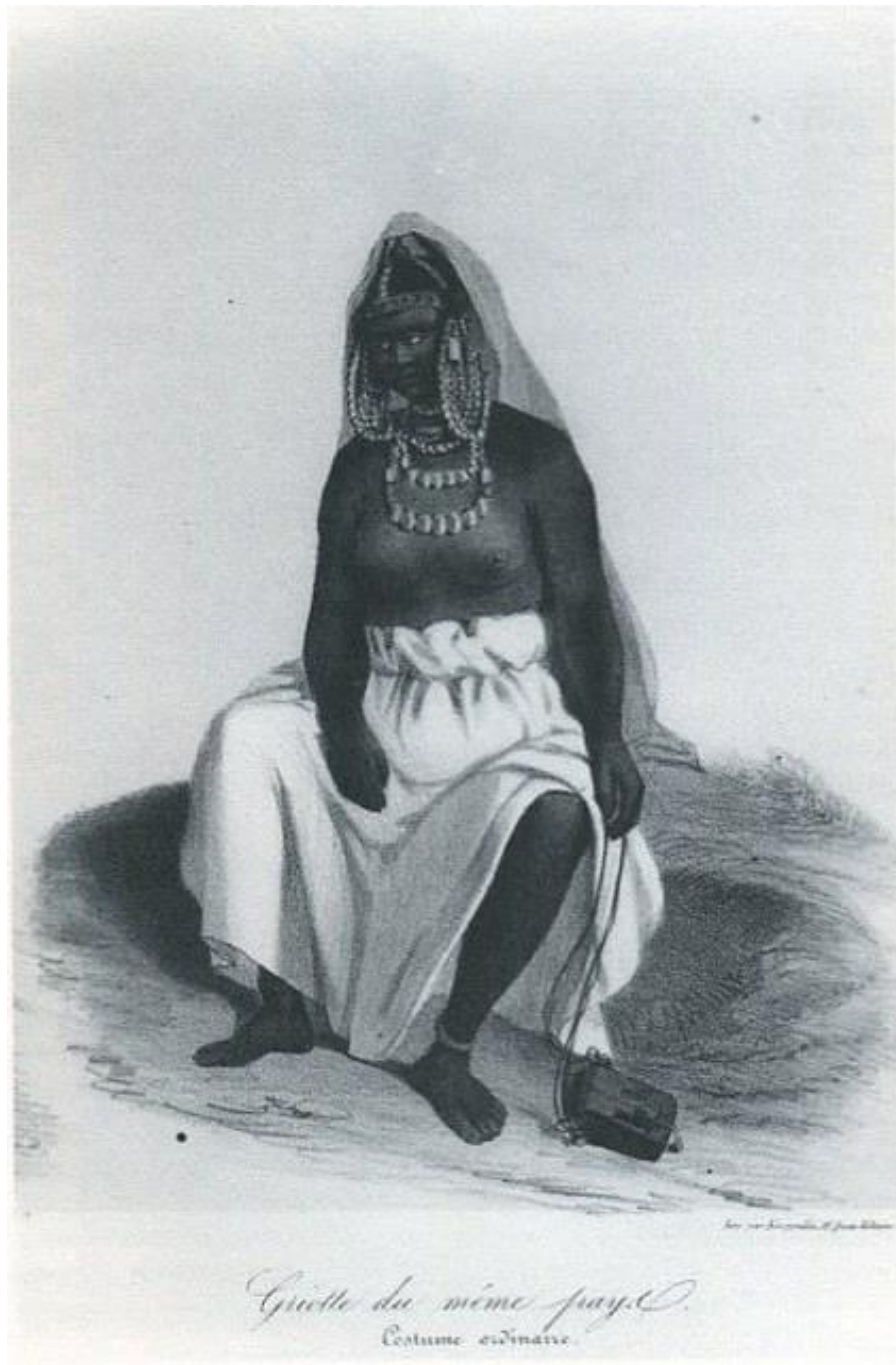
## Appendix A



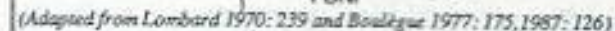
Brooks' map portrays the rainfall patterns in Senegambia during 300 C.E. to 1860 C.E. It also illustrates where the tsetse fly line existed during this period as the tsetse fly became more numerous below wet period lines.

## Appendix B

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The above drawing is a female guewel, or griotte, and her pague, customary clothing. Hale, 106.



## Appendix D

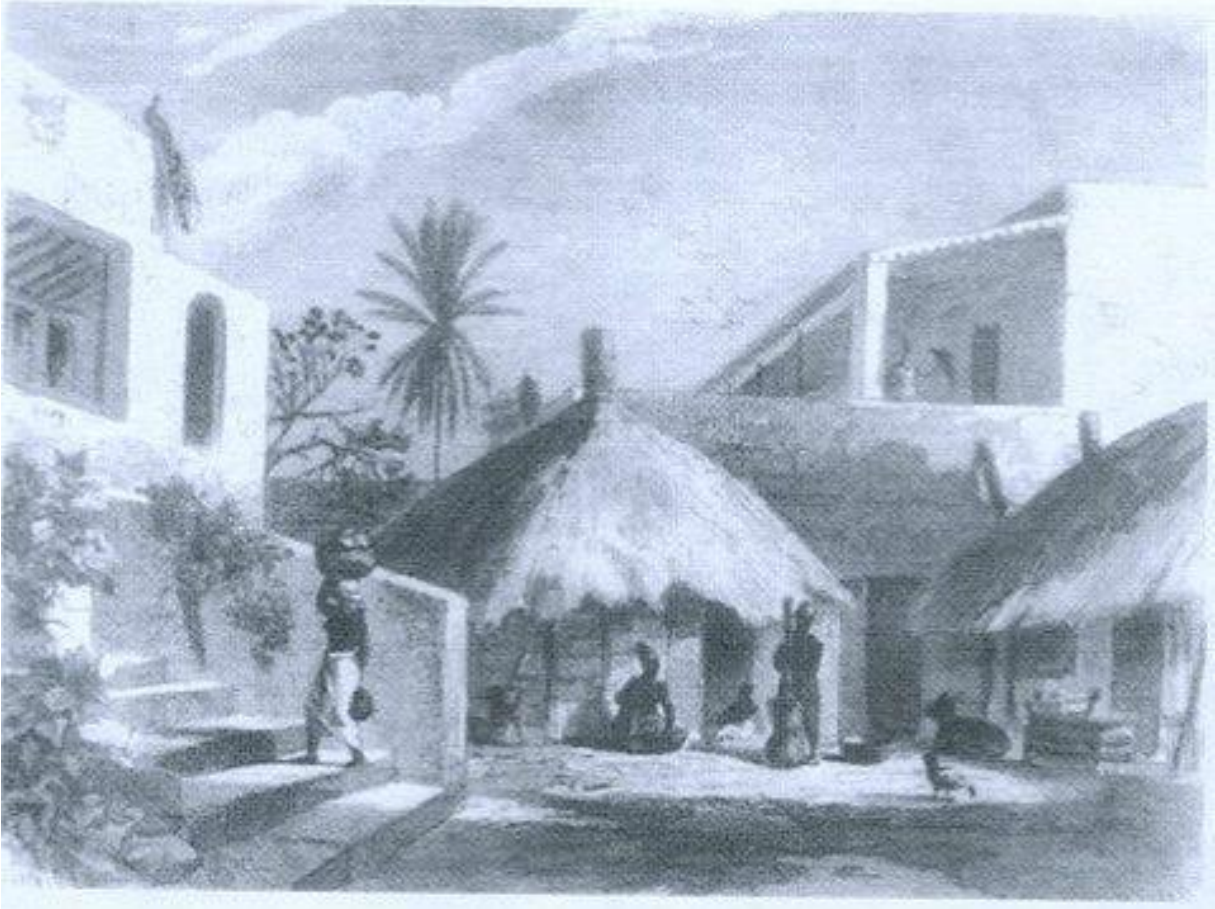
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The two European illustrations of signares above illustrate the draping clothe and the magnificently tall and intricate turbans signares wore.

## Appendix E

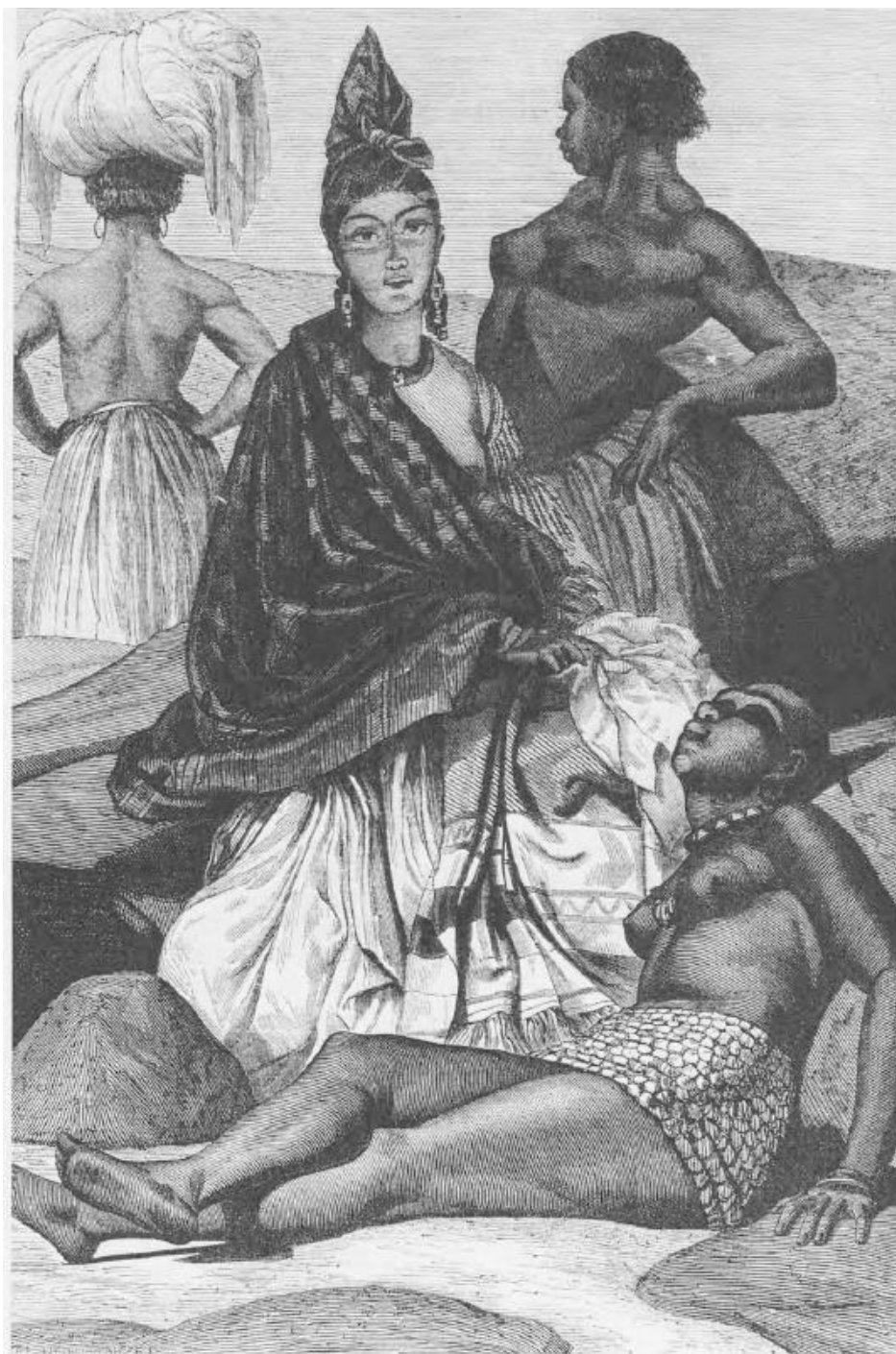
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This image of the signares' homes demonstrates the mixed Senegambian and European architecture. The signare is pictured in the upper right of the picture in her balcony while her family and the Gorée society are pictured below her.

## Appendix F

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A signare surrounded by her many female jams who signares trusted, as mentioned in chapter three, with trade responsibilities and granted significant freedoms.

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