Slavery, Resistance, and Identity in Early Modern West Africa

Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, more than fifteen million people were uprooted from West Africa and enslaved in the trans-Saharan and transatlantic worlds of slavery. The ethnic state of Gajaaga, located in the West African hinterland, offered a doorway to the Atlantic Ocean and played a central role in the large-scale trade system that connected the histories of Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Focusing on the Soninke of Gajaaga, Makhroufi Ousmane Traoré demonstrates how their resistance to the slave trades led to the formation of a united community bound by an awareness of identity. This original study expands our understanding of the various modes of resistance West Africans employed to stem the encroaching tide of Arab imperializing efforts, European mercantile capitalism, and the Atlantic slave trade, whilst also highlighting how ethnic and religious identities were constructed and mobilized in the region.

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The Ethnic-State of Gajaaga

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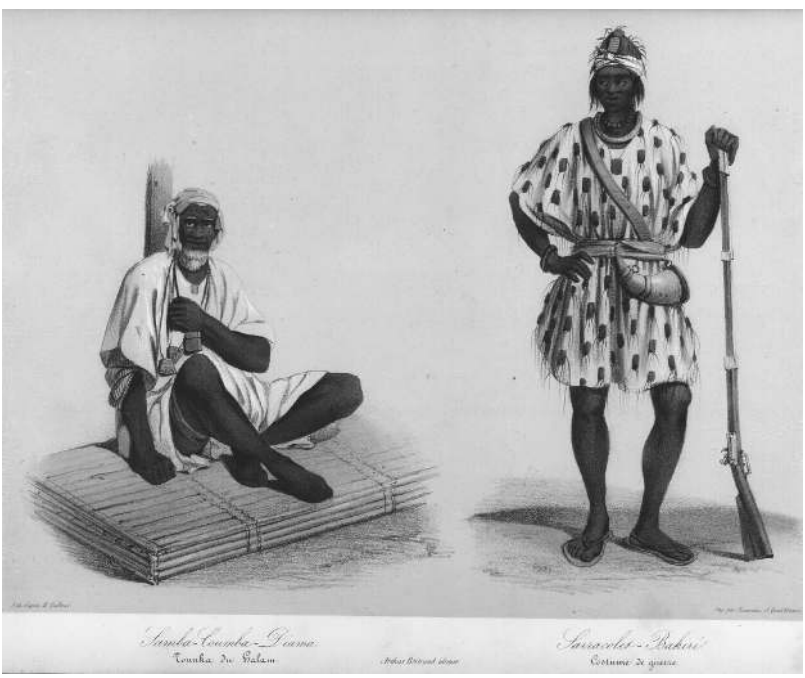

Figure 0.1 The tunka of Gajaaga, Samba-Coumba Diama, and a Bacili warrior. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

This figure depicts the *tunka* – that is, king – of Gajaaga. The *tunka* was the political leader, king, and *hhaŋkaman* – viz. "the one with power," that is, the "warrior" – and this made the *tunka* the *kiiti kuta*, or guarantor of the sovereignty and overseer of the public treasury and gold. All the Soninke from Gajaaga were ruled by the *tunka*, who was elected from one of four royal houses but still chosen from the same family: Bacili. Leadership falls to the oldest of the Bacili of Guoye. He controlled the economic activities on behalf of the whole

country. Despite the hierarchy, however, power was somewhat decentralized, allowing political rivalries to develop between the different royal houses. This rivalry was codified in the Soninke political culture, and called *faabaremmaxu*, which fostered a balance in power through the *Kafundo*, or royal assembly. The *tunka* embodied judicial power and, as leader of the army, safeguarded the territory's integrity and its sovereignty.

The reign of Tunka Samba Coumba Diama (ca. 1844–ca. 1858), shown in this picture, represented the fading of the Gajaaga ethnic state after a ten-year war (1834–1844) between the royal houses of Kanmera, in Upper Gajaaga, and those of the Guoye, in Lower Gajaaga. Under his reign, following this bitter and fratricidal war, the Guoye and Kanmera became two political entities governed separately by two *tunka* instead of choosing the oldest member of the Bathily princely houses to head the whole of Gajaaga. At the end of that war and the peace treaty that followed, Samba Coumba Diama publicly expressed his contempt for the soninkized ethnic subgroups of Gajaaga, whom he accused of betrayal for supporting, along with other foreigners, his opponents, with the sole objective of fragmenting the traditional political unity of Gajaaga. From then on, the Guoye and Kanmera became two polities administrated separately, as Samba Diama rejected any compromise to restore their traditional harmony. In other words, under Samba Coumba Diama, the homogenous approach to the ethnic state vanished: the heterogenous and multitudinous expressions of the different ethnic subgroups whose ancestors were of non-Soninke descent triumphed, triggering the end of the homogenous ethnic state of Gajaaga on the eve of the French colonization of West Africa.

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Senegambia and Europe have been inextricably linked and, since the fifteenth century, have converged. This common history is kept in archival materials that can be found in the Marais, in the middle of Paris. And, without the amazing assistance of the personnel working at the French National Archives, I might not have come across the interesting and untapped documents on the Soninké that so triggered my interest when I saw them. I also want to thank Martin Klein, who has witnessed and accompanied my work on the Soninké since our first conversation in 2006. Our conversations challenged me and inspired me to strengthen my work.

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