

Introduction

In April 1989, a conflict erupted between Mauritania and Senegal, two sub-Saharan African countries. The conflict, prompted by disputes on the borders between Senegalese and Mauritanian farmers and herders, caused further racially motivated clashes between the immigrant populations living in both countries, with long-lasting consequences. A military confrontation loomed as both countries deployed their troops to the shared borders. Yet, these countries shared more than their borders. Common cultural, religious, political, and economic traditions bound them together, fostered by the historical trans-Saharan trade dating back several centuries. Post-colonial crises, like that in 1989, have all too often shaken African countries, stemming primarily from postcolonial constructed ethnicities. And yet, from a precolonial standpoint, ethnicities could not be seen as discrete, but were fluid. All three elements at the heart of the Senegalese–Mauritanian conflict – that is, territory, borders, and ethnic identity – operated differently in the precolonial era. In West Africa’s precolonial era, ethnicities and cultures always transcended borders and communities, with the result that ethnic and religious conversion was possible in the precolonial circle of identity.¹ As such, the way in which the varied history of most Senegalese and Mauritanian families was built upon a chain of different lineages and intermingling between Mandinka, Fulbe, Arabo-Berbers, and Wolof on the banks of the Senegal River, is quite like how the precolonial trans-Saharan cross-cultural encounters between light-skinned nomads from the Sahara and dark-skinned sedentary farmers from the river’s banks led to the formation of communities and individuals with multiple identities.

¹ References throughout the book to precolonial Africa, Africans, West Africans, or East Africans, should be understood as terms conveniently picking out a geographical area. My use of such terms should not be construed as an indication that an African identity or African nation developed and existed during the time under consideration in this book. The ideas of Africa and Africans did not exist in the precolonial era and considering otherwise would be anachronistic.

In this book, the themes of ethnicity and resistance to the slave trade in the stories of the Soninke of Gajaaga shed light on their perceptions of slavery and how they dealt with it in the trans-Saharan and transatlantic systems. The story of Gajaaga allows us to see how contemporaneous populations relied on their social, political, religious, and diplomatic capital to respond to their situation, that is, to reject Arab and European merchant slavery. By doing so, they demonstrated their relationship to, and conception of, slavery in a way that should cause us to question our own understanding. By asking how individuals and communities in North and West Africa perceived merchant slavery, we may come to understand how they conceived of the relationship between their own society and social stratification and slavery. How did they use ethnic identity and resistance to assert power over merchant slavery?

The 1989 Senegalese–Mauritanian border crisis and its impact on ethnic identity mirror, in many respects, the slave trades and resistance to them, as described in this book, which may indeed remind us of some working aspects of ethnicity in precolonial Africa. To protect ethnic groups, physical borders were constructed within the Atlantic slave trade, hardening the existing ethnic distinctions. In precolonial Africa borders did exist, but were not precisely as they were during the trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave trades or, later, during the colonial and postcolonial eras, when they were shaped by European colonization with its collateral consequences. The story of Gajaaga sheds light on the exclusiveness of ethnicity in precolonial Africa, especially during the trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave trades. From these various experiences, the book, *Slavery, Resistance, and Identity in Early Modern West Africa: The Ethnic-State of Gajaaga*, reveals the story of Gajaaga’s ethnic communities, of individuals, free people, and captives from elsewhere, who took refuge in and integrated into the Soninke community of Gajaaga.

Thus, resistance to the slave trades, from which a united community bound by an ethnic identity consciousness was born, can be concisely summarized in several points, which are developed at length throughout the chapters of this book. First, for the Bacili warriors, resistance meant protecting their populations against the slave trades, asserting control, and tightening a firm grip over a territory, its borders, and resources, which came from gold, farming, and trade. Second, by educating populations about the activity of Europeans and Arabo-Almoravids in Gajaaga – that is, usurping their gold and enslaving them – the Bacili

warriors elevated gold to the level of sovereignty and equated slavery to the loss of freedom. As such, ethnic identity meant a community self-awareness built on trust and loyalty for and by people who share the same language and territory. It meant a new form of space and belonging in West Africa that retracted over the years from being multiethnic and fluid to being mono-ethnic and different. The violence from the slave trades triggered this new form of ethnic identity. And such an ethnic identity was consolidated and was given shape by the politics of resistance, which the community engineered altogether in pursuit of freedom, self-differentiation vis-à-vis neighboring communities, and sovereignty. To protect this new space of belonging, the Bacili warriors introduced taxes to dissuade captive-caravan drivers from entering their territory, Gajaaga. Such a resistance to consolidate this new Soninke identity meant attacking captive-caravan drivers and freeing the captives destined to the French, dispersing them within the country, then later integrating them into the community. An internal and participative system of communication – bottom-up and top-down – was added to education on sovereignty and freedom, and served as the primary means of surveillance over the invaders. This led to the circulation of information between individuals and the authorities, fostering trust and solidarity, and cementing the bonds between political authorities and populations. Third, as a decentralized state, Gajaaga was endowed with the means to gather public opinion, which filtered through two types of assembly – one public and the other restricted to the royal authorities. The public assembly provided a platform for communities to express their views. Public assemblies also, in collective agreement, decided on the execution of invaders – or disloyal insiders – when they were arrested; hence, public executions were held in a public space and performed as a public event. This is the ultimate and most symbolic expression of the social contract, the tradition of collectivity, and group interest shaped into the notion of *dia* – that is, blood money – paid by the community to which a killer belonged. To wit, the process of Soninke identity formation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was shaped by ideals that aimed to contain the violence of the slave trades and to preserve the community.

By following this identity formation during this period more closely, the book charts the story of an identity formation that bound and united the heterogeneous communities who took refuge in Gajaaga and mounted a particular resistance to the slave trades' violence. It is a question of neither an ethnic identity that acted as a refuge nor

a meta-ethnic identity that served – momentarily – as an umbrella to several, smaller, and different units of identities. Rather, the Bacili warriors’ resistance mindset invited the mixture of communities and prompted ethnic affiliation, kinship ties, and social and cultural affinity, as well as offering security, a place in society, and a common identity. As such, Mandinka captives escaping from slave-caravans traveling into Gajaaga, Wolof and Fulbe migrants fleeing the Atlantic coast to move and settle in the hinterland of Gajaaga, Soninke farmers – from different lineages and regions – who migrated to Gajaaga after abandoning their villages ransacked by the Almoravids were all absorbed into the Soninke’s social structure in Gajaaga. Therefore, even today, it is possible to track, from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the present time, many Soninke families with names that do not sound Soninke at all, particularly in present-day Soninke society. This is the case with names such as N’Diaye, Traoré, Jaara, Kanté, or Camara, which take us back to Wolof or Mandinka heritage. And yet, community-bearers of such names can be of Soninke heritage and claim to belong to a present-day Soninke ethnic group.

The book, *Slavery, Resistance, and Identity in Early Modern West Africa* focuses on the history of the Soninke from Gajaaga and how they dealt with the imperial culture of violence inherent in the trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave trades. In the book, we will learn about the Soninke’s perceptions of the relationship between slavery and violence, and how resistance rose to the forefront of trans-Saharan and transatlantic crosscultural encounters.

Atlantic Slave Trade and African Agency

Scholarship on African history and slavery has extensively explored the Atlantic slave trade and constructed a detailed understanding of its development. One major conclusion highlights the external nature of the impetus for selling captives. As argued by Paul Lovejoy and Martin Klein, “the existence of a large external demand for slaves stimulated the development of large-scale slave ‘producers’ in Africa.”²

² Martin Klein and Paul E. Lovejoy, “Slavery in West Africa,” in Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn (eds.), *The Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 181–212. See, also John C. Caldwell, J. E. Inikori, and Patrick

While historians Lovejoy and Klein and others such as Abdoulaye Bathily and Boubacar Barry, recognize the social, economic, and political impact of the Atlantic slave trade on African societies, and the external nature of this influence, other scholars have privileged African slavery embedded in African social stratifications and rooted in African agency over the slave trade driven by European imperial violence and capitalism. As a result, this body of scholarship tends to substitute European imperial efforts and colonial expansion built on its domination of the world economic order with African domestic slavery and African agency. It has been argued that African domestic slavery was ingrained in African social and political structures to serve as anchors for the geographic and economic extension of the Atlantic slave trade.

John Thornton, for instance, argues that greater attention must be paid to African agency. “The slave trade,” he argues, “grew out of and was rationalized by the African societies who participated in it and had complete control over it until the slaves were loaded onto European ships.”³ Thornton’s argument challenged the growing influence of dependency theory, which primarily focused on the European agency at the center of the rise and development of the Atlantic slave trade as a by-product of the capitalist world-system.⁴ Building on Thornton’s work, more recent scholarship has continued to dwell on the question of African agency and its primacy driving the Atlantic slave trade. Colleen E. Kriger has argued, for instance, that the Atlantic slave trade could not have been developed “without the labor, commercial knowledge and expertise, specialized services, and well-established

Manning, “Two Comments on Manning. The Enslavement of Africans: A Demographic Model,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 16, 1 (1982), 127–139, p. 133. On the influence from outside and the impact of violence, see Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 5; Mariana P. Candido, *An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World: Benguela and Its Hinterland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 198–199.

³ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 74.

⁴ See on this topic, Joseph E. Inikori, “Slavery and Atlantic Commerce, 1650–1800,” *The American Economic Review* 82, 2 (1992), 151–157, p. 151. As well as Andre Gunder Frank, “The Development of Underdevelopment,” *Monthly Review* 18, 4 (1966), 17–31; Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications, 1972).

tastes of the [West African] men and women” living on the coast, and on the overland routes to hinterland towns and communities.⁵ Kriger’s study highlights practices of customs and charges paid annually by the British Trade Company to royal authorities, which were greater than an agent’s salary; or African entrepreneurs who “made money” using commercial strategies as suppliers in the import–export sector working with the British Trade Company.⁶ In this context, both Kriger’s and Toby Green’s analysis of West African agency focuses on Luso-African communities’ social and economic contribution to the Atlantic slave trade, which was decisive in its foundation and development. However, Green highlights more than just cycles of violence, which characterized the Atlantic world, adding greater balance and relativity to his analysis of African decision-making power by redefining what agency means.⁷

By privileging African agency in their analyses of the development of the Atlantic slave trade, the work of Thornton and others writing in the same vein, tends to obscure the larger world system in which the slave trade was rooted, while also masking the different approaches that various African polities adopted towards the slave trade. Who are the “Africans” being referred to as makers of the Atlantic slave trade and the Atlantic world? Broad-brush references to “West African agency” in relation to the slave trade gloss over the many diverse communities and ethnic states that populated West Africa during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, each with their own singular approach to the trade. It is a mistake, for instance, to speak of West Africans profiting from the slave trade, when in fact only specific polities did.

Agency, which implies the power of decision-making and latitude, was real, of course. However, the application of anachronistic geographic and identity labels, such as “Africa” and “Africans,” to analyze the notion of agency in the eighteenth century, clouds rather than clarifies our understanding of not only the ethnic diversity that characterized precolonial Africa but also the different ways that various ethnic groups positioned themselves in their encounters with Europe

⁵ Colleen E. Kriger, *Making Money. Life, Death, and Early Modern Trade on Africa’s Guinea Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), pp. 36–105.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 65–105.

⁷ Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–158* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 69–94.

and the Atlantic slave trade. As the work of Peter Marks, Rebecca Shumway, and Pernille Ipsen demonstrates, societies, communities, and individuals experienced the Atlantic slave trade differently. Eschewing generalizations and anachronisms, these scholars show how “African” agency can be analyzed and historicized at the level of society, community, and individual, while also maintaining a focus on European imperial violence.⁸

The archival findings for this book on Gajaaga add to the debate on agency in West Africa. Agency, whether related to the consumption of European goods or the power of decision-making, was still shaped by overarching European command and imperial power over the Atlantic world system. Precolonial Gajaaga did not need Europe, and did not invite it, for its economic production and consumption. In Gajaaga, neither the political nor the economic influences of the Atlantic system superseded the Soninke economic and political modes of operating. The production and consumption of gold and cotton, as well as traditional textile industries, were not interrupted by the introduction of European material goods into Gajaaga. During times when the violence of the Atlantic slave trade was not in play as a disruptive mechanism brought into Gajaaga by the French, the traditional industry and agricultural practices remained stable. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Gajaaga, as a Soninke ethnic state, expressed its agency through the rejection of the French imperial presence in their land, while ensuring France’s economic presence did not undermine the state’s commercial imperatives.

However, the tenacity of French colonial expansion toward the hinterland of Gajaaga in order to connect the Atlantic slave trade with the sources of captives heavily impacted the ecosystem and environment of the Upper Senegal region. As Charles Becker, Richard Martin, and James Webb have shown, the link between economic and political life, on one hand, and the aridification, ecological crises, droughts, and serious famines in West Africa between 1600 and 1850, on the other,

⁸ Peter Mark, “The Evolution of ‘Portuguese’ Identity: Luso-Africans on the Upper Guinea Coast from the Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of African History* 40, 2 (1999), 173–191; Pernille Ipsen, *Daughters of the Trade. Atlantic Slavers and Interracial Marriage on the Gold Coast* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011).

were caused by human actions.⁹ These man-made ecological crises were particularly acute in the Upper Senegal region, and in Gajaaga more specifically. The imposition of new forms of consumption from the global and Atlantic economic systems led, at a local level, to new economic practices – elephant hunting, deforestation, and fishing – to satisfy the demands of Atlantic slave markets. Cycles of violence driven by the thirst for war captives that could be sold into the slave trade led to the disappearance of villages and interrupted the traditional exchange between pastoralists (nomadism) and agriculturalists (sedentarism) in the upper and central Senegal River regions. In the same regions, these cycles of violence had a direct impact on the region’s ecology and social structures.

Therefore, what I term in this book the “European imperial culture of violence” – based on an iron-fisted diplomatic and military strategy – tempers the explanatory power that some scholars have assigned to African agency or African domestic slavery in the making of the Atlantic slave trade. For example, the Bacili princely houses’ agency was put to a harsh test by Arabo-Almoravid mercenaries (see Chapter 5), sponsored by the French and recruited from Morocco and across the Sahara, who attacked them whenever they hindered French trade and slaving activities in their own territory. In fact, French retaliation against the Bacili princely houses’ resistance was often carried out through French-sponsored Moroccan mercenaries who would invade Soninke territories, kidnap their populations, and enslave them. Driven by the capitalist demand for massive servile labor in the Americas, the European culture of imperial violence drastically limited the agency of Soninke peoples, who were now faced with navigating landscapes rendered alien to them by a voracious and all-encompassing French and Arabo-Almoravid colonizing power.¹⁰

Rosalind Shaw has cautioned against overemphasizing and celebrating the agency of those who endured this culture of imperial violence, and whose remaining strategies for surviving domination were

⁹ On this theme, see James L. A. Webb, *Desert Frontier: Ecological and Economic Change along the Western Sahel, 1600–1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Bernard C. Perley, “Indigenous Translocality: Emergent Cosmogonies in the New World Order,” *Theory & Event* 23, 4 (2020), 977–1003.

accommodation or resistance.¹¹ In order to avoid any oversimplification of the notion of agency, I heed Shaw's appeal to recognize that

those who are subject to even the worst forms of oppression, "have agency too." ... The agency of those who deploy "weapons of the weak," and of those who creatively appropriate signs and processes of dominance "from below," for example, are each very different from the agency of those whose authority allows them to act upon the world through control as an apparatus of domination.¹²

We can begin to see this complexity playing out, as Toby Green has shown, as early as the 1440s in West Africa, where encounters between the Mandinka people and the New Christian diaspora merchants hinted at what the birth of the Atlantic world would be like. Green underlines the cycles of violence and consequently the "very real constraints which the institution of Atlantic slavery imposed on both slaves and the African societies from which they come," while also accounting for African societies' agency.¹³

The arguments put forward in *Slavery, Resistance, and Identity in Early Modern West Africa* contribute to the historiography on slavery by introducing greater nuance into the study of the relationship between the systems of social stratification extant in Africa during this period and the circumstances surrounding the propagation of the Atlantic slave trade. Specifically, a close examination of how the Soninke of Gajaaga resisted the Atlantic slave trade challenges the assumption that African social stratification facilitated – and was tantamount to – the slave trade and underscores the notion that an "imperial culture of violence" underwrote such a trade. The book explores how this culture of violence introduced by French mercantile capitalism in the upper Senegal River region and its hinterland led to the creation of a supply of servile labor for the American colonies but did not trigger the institutionalization of merchant slavery within Soninke society. Rather, the presence of Atlantic slavery resulted, for Gajaaga at least, in the Soninke ethnic state's

¹¹ French National Archive (AN), Col., C⁶-6, De Saint-Robert, Senegal, March 28, 1721; AN, Col., C⁶-11-2, De la Brüe and Lejuge, Gorée, July 4, 1738.

¹² Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 19. On this discussion, see also Green, *Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp. 20–21.

¹³ Green, *Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp. 18–21.

reinforcement of two phenomena: the strengthening of the Soninke ethnic identity, as newcomers were integrated, and the reinforcement of a land-based notion of sovereignty. As such, by exemplifying an instance in which African slavery did not facilitate the institutionalization or systematization of Atlantic slave trade, Gajaaga's case challenges the perception of an existing reserve of African slaves that would later be reoriented to serve the purposes of the Atlantic trade. In this spirit, the historiographic debate engages in the discussion of the slaving system put in place by Arabo-Almoravids¹⁴ and Europeans (French and British empires), which arose from violence and markets produced by wars. Indeed, the emergence of a profitable and exportable slavery system in Africa resulted from the contact between Africa, the trans-Saharan, and the transatlantic worlds of slavery. As African societies encountered Islam through trans-Saharan trade, inequalities in these societies were reinforced. Additionally, the arrival of Europeans on the African coasts only further aggravated this transformation of African social structures.

Aligning with these approaches, the story of the Gajaaga ethnic state shows that African agency, while real, must be measured in relation to European power and agency, which produced a world wherein the ability of Africans to thwart Europe's imperial ambitions was increasingly circumscribed. Joseph E. Inikori sums this up well when he notes that "the Atlantic economic order was the nucleus of our contemporary economic order: the economic and military strength it created enabled the ... production of the contemporary world economic order."¹⁵ Inikori, thus, helps us to understand the obscene power of the system that the ethnic state of Gajaaga had to navigate through a range of diplomatic strategies towards the French Empire. The fact that the Bacili princely houses were conscious of their military weakness and recognized France's military ascendancy in Gajaaga was most powerfully symbolized by the implantation of

¹⁴ Berber is a derogatory name for people of Almoravid descent who prefer to be called Amazigh people. However, Almoravid encompasses various Berber nations between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries; therefore, I will use Arabo-Berber and Almoravids alternatively. By these concepts, I refer to the different and diverse Berber nations, such as the Sanhaja, Hassan, Brakna, Trarza, Amazigh, Oulad Delim, Dowiches, Dramakur, Orman, etc. These nations dwelled for centuries between the Sahara Desert and the Senegal River and participated in the shaping of the Senegambian ethnic states. They lived in present-day Morocco and Mauritania.

¹⁵ Inikori, "Slavery and Atlantic Commerce," p. 151.