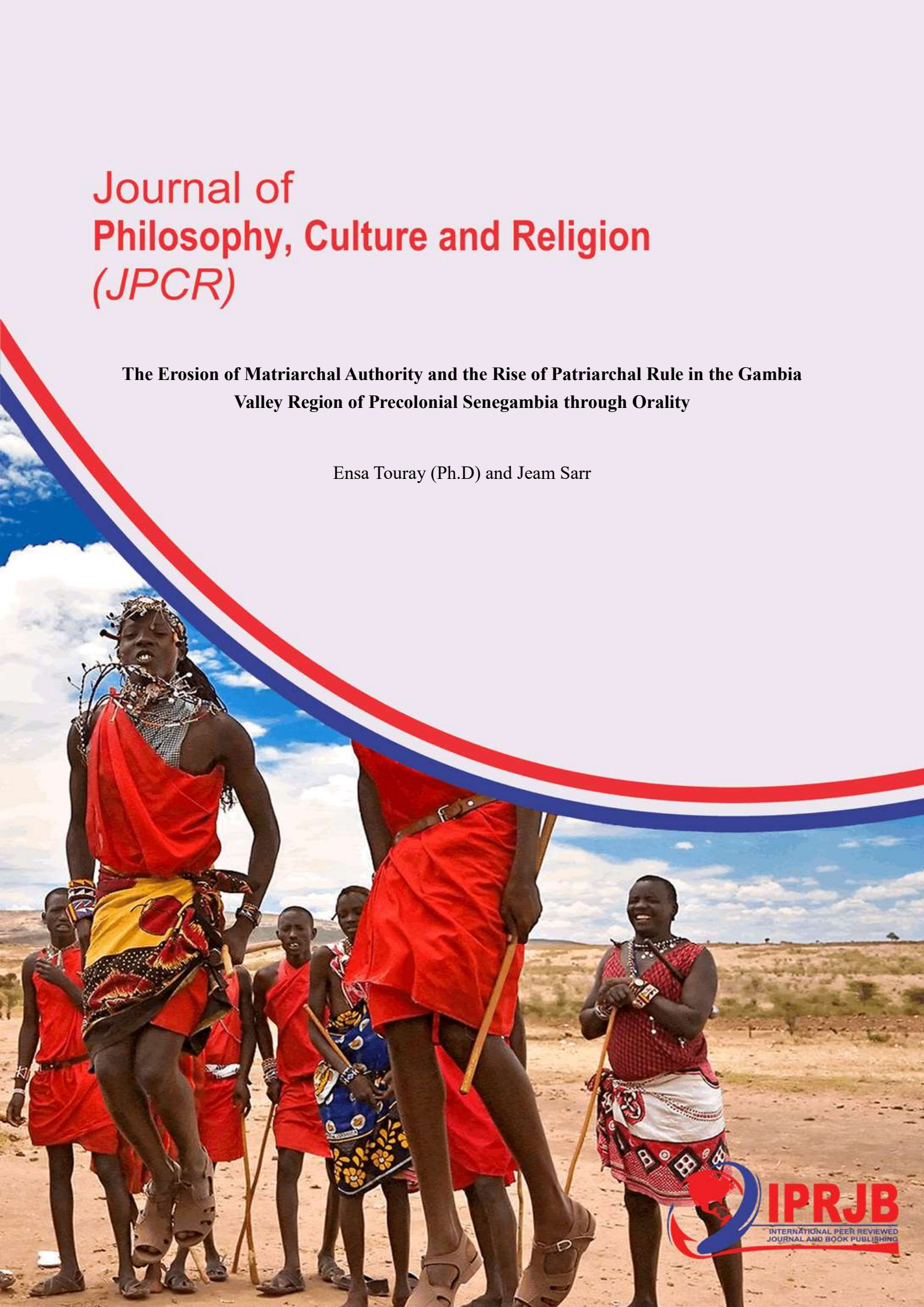
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The Erosion of Matriarchal Authority and the Rise of Patriarchal Rule in the Gambia Valley Region of Precolonial Senegambia through Orality

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the decline of matriarchal governance in precolonial kingdoms of the Gambia Valley region within Greater Senegambia. However, 21st-century scholars have isolated the matriarchal kingdoms of Niumi and Kombo in the historiography of Senegambia due to a lack of written, archaeological, and sufficient oral memory. The study compellingly demonstrates the existence of a dual geopolitical sphere and a hereditary constitutional electoral system in precolonial Senegambia, characterized by both matriarchal and patriarchal, as well as matrilineal and patrilineal systems and states.

Methodology: Employing a qualitative historical case-study design, it integrates oral interviews with genealogical custodians, documentary review, and archival data to reconstruct matriarchal institutions.

Findings: It reaffirms that by the 13th century, patriarchal structures began to emerge following the influence of Mali. Internal resistance, highlighted by events such as the Jaara Incident, along with external pressures from the expansion of the Mali Empire and the spread of Islam, significantly contributed to this decline.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Furthermore, the findings revealed that intermarriages between matriarchal queens and Malian princes deepened the dominance of patriarchal structures, leading to the exclusion of women from political participation.

Keywords: *Matriarchal Authority, Patriarchal Rule, Gambia Valley Region, Precolonial Senegambia*

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INTRODUCTION

Across Africa, the pre-colonial era was marked by a variety of governance systems that mirrored the social, spiritual, and political structures of indigenous communities. In contrast to the prevailing Eurocentric historiography, which tends to portray Africa as predominantly patriarchal, many African societies actually employed governance models that were matriarchal or at least strongly matrilineal in nature (Amadiume, 1997). Within these frameworks, women wielded significant political power, frequently taking on roles as rulers, priestesses, and guardians of communal welfare (Oyěwùmí, 1997).

In the Senegambian region, especially along the banks of the Gambia River, matriarchal governance played a crucial role in traditional political structures. Oral traditions indicate that before the expansion of the Mali Empire and the advent of Islam, numerous communities in this area were led by influential queens who gained their legitimacy through heredity, spiritual power, and territorial authority (Ajayi & Crowder, 1976). Queens like Wulending Jassey of Kombo and Mama Adame Jammeh of Niumi represented a political culture based on maternal lineage, spiritual mediation, and community harmony (Boahen, 1987).

The 13th century represents a crucial historical period for understanding the context of Malian imperial expansion into the western Atlantic regions of Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. This expansionist policy reached its peak with the expedition led by Tira Makhan, alongside other Manding warriors, which contributed to the adoption and adaptation of patriarchal systems. As patriarchal ideologies spread through the processes of Islamization and Malian expansionism, matriarchal systems began to wane. Over time, male chiefs increasingly gained political dominance, while the roles of women became more restricted to domestic and ceremonial spheres (Amadiume, 1997).The matriarchal foundations of governance, once robust and authoritative, were systematically supplanted by patriarchal institutions that favored male succession and lineage (Aidoo, 1994). This historical shift not only signifies a change in gender dynamics but also represents a broader transformation in the socio-political and spiritual identity of Senegambian societies. Consequently, this study investigates the factors that led to the decline of matriarchal dominance in the Gambia Valley, aiming to reconstruct a neglected aspect of Gambian and African political history.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative historical research method as the roadmap to achieving its main objectives. It draws upon oral traditions, archival records, and secondary historical sources to reconstruct the factors that led to the decline of matriarchal political, spiritual, and socio-cultural structures that once sustained female-led governance in the region between the 11th and 13th centuries.

The study covers the geographical region known historically as pre-colonial Senegambia, encompassing present-day The Gambia, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and parts of Guinea-Conakry and Mauritania. Within this broad region, the focus is placed on the state that kingdoms that thrived within both the northern and southern banks of the Gambia River. The chronological framework spans from the 11th to the mid-13th century. This period marks the post-Ghana era following the Berber-Arab incursion of 1076, which led to major migrations and political reconfigurations in the western Sahel. It also corresponds with the rise of the Mali Empire, whose patriarchal political culture gradually penetrated and transformed indigenous governance in Senegambia. The timeframe is therefore significant for understanding both the maturity and decline of matriarchal authority in the region.

To ensure a rich and credible historical reconstruction, the study employed both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary sources included oral interviews and field visits to Kombo, Fonyi, Jaara, Niumi, and Baddibu. These sites were selected because of their strong association with royal genealogies and matriarchal traditions. Oral testimonies were obtained from elderly custodians, local historians, and descendants of royal families. Their narratives provided insights into traditional leadership structures, succession systems, and the socio-political factors that led to the eventual decline of matriarchal rule. In addition, the study utilized materials from the Research and Documentation Division of the National Centre for Arts and Culture (NCAC) in Banjul, The Gambia. The NCAC oral archives contain recorded interviews dating back to the 1970s, which preserve indigenous accounts of pre-colonial kingdoms and their leadership dynamics. These records were cross-checked against contemporary oral evidence to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Secondary data were derived from books, journal articles, theses, monographs, archival records, and reliable online publications. Key works by African historians and gender theorists were consulted to provide theoretical and comparative perspectives. Archival materials and historical maps were also reviewed to contextualize territorial and political developments in the Gambia Valley during the 11th to 13th centuries.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study suggest that the decline of matriarchal rule in the Gambia Valley region of Senegambia was not the result of a single cause, but of a combination of interrelated political, religious, and cultural processes.

First, the expansion of the Mali Empire introduced patriarchal systems of governance into the region. These systems privileged male-centred models of authority, redefined political legitimacy through patrilineal descent, and valorised militarised forms of leadership. In so doing, they progressively displaced the matrilineal principles upon which female rule had previously rested.

Second, Islamisation emerged as a significant factor in the erosion of matriarchal political and spiritual authority. As Islam spread across the kingdoms of the Gambia Valley, it reinforced patriarchal norms that placed male authority at the centre of both spiritual life and social organisation, thereby limiting the public roles previously available to women.

Third, internal dynastic conflicts contributed to the weakening of matriarchal institutions from within. Rivalries and succession disputes among royal families, as exemplified by the Jaara Incident, fractured the cohesion of matriarchal courts and created opportunities for patriarchal interests to assert control.

Fourth, marriage alliances played a crucial role in the transfer of power from women to men. Strategic unions between matriarchal queens and patriarchal princes, often presented as instruments of political consolidation, in practice facilitated the gradual absorption of female authority into male-led dynasties.

Finally, cultural reinterpretation helped to consolidate patriarchal dominance. Over time, oral narratives, rituals, and collective memories were reshaped to celebrate male heroes and to marginalise female rulers. This process gradually rewrote the gendered political memory of the region, rendering matriarchal governance increasingly invisible in historical consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory

From a feminist perspective, the fall of matriarchal rule should not be understood merely as a change in leadership, but as a structural transformation of gender relations. It represents a shift from a system of gender complementarity to one of male domination, a historical process through which patriarchal authority was systematically established (Amadiume, 1997).

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory interprets this decline as an early form of cultural imposition. The Mali Empire, in this reading, functioned as an agent of cultural imperialism, exporting patriarchal models of governance that redefined gender and power in Senegambia according to external hierarchies (Said, 1978).

Oral Tradition Theory

Oral Tradition Theory validates myths, genealogies, and legends as credible sources of historical evidence (Vansina, 1985). The symbolic accounts surrounding the queens and their male successors are therefore not to be dismissed as mere folklore. Rather, they constitute encoded historical memories of social transformation and gender reordering.

MATRIARCHAL DOMINANCE IN THE GAMBIA VALLEY

The Gambia Valley lies in the center of Senegambia. It formed the natural frontier between the zone's northern and southern habitats. Geographically, it constitutes a strip of land on both the northern and southern banks of the Gambia River. There is considerable historical evidence pointing to the fact that matriarchal dominance had been a common phenomenon among the peoples who inhabited this area. This has primarily been attributed to the matrilineal nature of the social structures of these peoples. However, other socio-economic factors seem to have equally facilitated matriarchal dominance in the various communities.

The strategic geographical location of the Gambia River, at the center of Senegambia, enabled it to serve as a significant gateway for trade and commerce between the peoples on both its northern and southern banks and their neighbors within and beyond Southern Senegambia. For instance, it provided an opportunity for local traders to reach the interior regions away from the Atlantic Ocean (Barry, 1998). This was made possible by the existence of the canoe and the navigability of the Gambia River, particularly from its mouth at the Atlantic Ocean to a considerable distance to the east, around the Barrakunda Falls (Barry, 1998). The strategic location of the Gambia River further allowed traders to traverse the forested areas in the south, along the Southern Rivers, the Sahelian region north of the Senegal River, and the area towards the Niger Bend in the east without interruption (Barry, 1998). These economic conditions, therefore, provided the kind of environment that was conducive to the growth and prosperity of countless individuals and groups, such as women.

Evidence suggests that the native inhabitants of the Gambia Valley first established small-scale political structures under the leadership of community headsmen. The accounts of Alhagie Jung Conteh give a vivid picture of the social structure of the Gambia Valley states in those days. He revealed,

> *Each community comprised several tiny villages, inhabited mainly by a single extended family. The social structure allowed various men and women to attain lofty socio-cultural positions within the community. While men headed some of these communities, women ruled others (Conteh, 2024).*

Earlier sources specifically revealed that states such as Baddibu, Kombo, Jaara, Wuli, and Niani were ruled by queens during this period (Wright, 1974). This evidence, therefore, demonstrates the widespread nature of matriarchal dominance in the pre-colonial Senegambian society.

While social ranking seemingly existed in the states on the northern bank of the Gambia River, some of those on the southern bank predominantly maintained a caste-free social structure. However, in almost all communities, there were no enslaved people or nobles (Ceesay, 2024). Positions such as religious leadership were accorded to special men or women, whose families had been the custodians of the people's ritual possessions (Jammeh, 2024). Specific families were also associated with certain socio-professional specializations, such as hunters, blacksmiths, healers, and fishermen (Conteh, 2024). Thus, this traditional character of the area's social structure served as a major catalyst for the rise of matriarchal regimes in the socio-political spheres of the various states.

One of the states where matriarchal political rule has been an entrenched phenomenon is Baddibu. Situated on the northern bank of the Gambia River, some of the original villages in Baddibu are linked to successive generations of queens whose reigns are recounted with great pride. Jumansari, one of the area's pioneering villages, is believed to have been first ruled by a queen named Maama Fari Mansa Nyeling or Kulentunga Nyeling Jiiling (NCAC/RDD, 1975). Until the reign of Mansa Sankalang Jaadama/Marong, the first patriarchal ruler of Baddibu, Jumansari had several other queens, whose names were not mentioned. The oral tradition suggests that the town of Illiasa was ruled by several queens, with Kundaa Jeenung being the first. She was succeeded by Kulumakaci, who was followed by Bandee Jeenung (NCAC/RDD, 1975). While the name of the fourth queen remains unknown, tradition holds that before the reign of Saara Jiimang, the first king of Illiasa, the kingdom experienced a succession of four queens.(NCAC/RDD, 1975).

Jaajari, another of Baddibu's oldest towns, is also said to have been governed by queens. Nnyang Marong was the first among them, followed by Njaa Marong, and then succeeded by Ndeyi Njaayi Marong (NCAC/RDD, 1975). Accordingly, these were the three known queens of Jaajari.

Niumi, located on the northern bank of the Gambia River, along with the islands at the southern reaches of Siin and Saalum in the Senegal Valley, is similarly thought to have been ruled by a succession of twelve queens (Jammeh, 2024; Saliu, 2021). Some sources suggest that these matriarchal regimes were extensions of the Bainunk matriarchal tradition, which stems from the Serer matrilineal custom (Jammeh, 2024). Despite differing views on the origins of this lineage of queens, there is a broad consensus that the queens of Niumi established the foundations of political governance in the kingdom.

Matriarchal political and religious leadership is also believed to have characterized the Southbank kingdoms of Kombo and Fonyi. Prior to the arrival of Manding families in these regions, both kingdoms were part of the Kassa-Bainunk Empire, with the local population primarily comprising the Jolaa and Bainunk peoples (Touray, 2013). The matrilineal structure of these kingdoms facilitated the rise of several women from the Karoni and Bainunk

communities to leadership roles, particularly as village heads (Ceesay, 2024). During the height of the Jolaa and Bainunk Empire, it is believed that Lower Kombo was a matriarchal kingdom governed by a powerful queen, with her administrative center located in Sanyang (Touray, 2013). As a result, women held significant positions in both political and religious leadership throughout Kombo and Fonyi.

THE WESTWARD EXPANSION OF THE MALI EMPIRE

The political influence of the Mali Empire on the states and kingdoms of Senegambia was the primary external factor that contributed to the decline of matriarchal authority in the region. The Mali Empire succeeded the Ghana Empire as the second most powerful West African empire, located south of the Sahara Desert, in the 13th century.

Before the rise of the Mali Empire, the Manding chiefdoms, which later became its core, were vassal states under the emperors of Ghana. Situated considerably to the south of Ghana, the inhabitants of the Manding chiefdoms are believed to have shared cultural ties with the Soninke people of Ghana. Until the decline of Ghana's authority, the Manding chiefdoms remained ununified under a central political entity. As Ghana's power waned, a vast area north of the Upper Niger River came under the control of the Susu, a southern group within the Soninke ethnic community (Conrad, 2005). By the late 12th century, Sumanguru (or Suma woro) Kante, a tyrannical Susu king, had ascended to power and began ruling the territories of Ghana, including the Manding chiefdoms, with an oppressive hand.

Mali's ascent to prominence is primarily attributed to the bravery and personal achievements of Sundiata Keita, the son of Nare Fa Maghan and Sogolon Conde. In the mid-13th century, during his exile in Mema due to Sumanguru's ruthless reign, Sundiata unified the Manding chiefdoms and instigated a rebellion against him. At the Battle of Kirina, located between Bowako and Kangaba on the left bank of the River Niger, Sundiata and his rebel forces defeated the Susu and killed Sumanguru. Subsequently, he and his allies laid the groundwork for the Mali Empire. Empire. Located considerably to the south of Ghana, the inhabitants of the Manding chiefdoms are believed to have shared cultural ties with the Soninke people of Ghana. Until the decline of Ghana's authority, the Manding chiefdoms remained unified under a central political entity. As Ghana's power waned, a vast area north of the Upper Niger River came under the control of the Susu, a southern group within the Soninke ethnic community (Conrad, 2005). By the late 12th century, Sumanguru (or Suma woro) Kante, a tyrannical Susu king, had ascended to power and began ruling the territories of Ghana, including the Manding chiefdoms, with an oppressive hand.

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marriage of his parents, the assembly made it a law that the heirs to the throne must acquire their first spouses from among the *Conde* alone, which was the clan of Sogolon Conde, Sundiata's mother (Niane, 1979). Evidently, this period marked a turning point in the socio-political life of the Senegambian peoples as their ancestral homelands would become the subject of Mali's westward expansion agenda, in the quest to turn the zone's economic potentialities to its favor.

The newly established Malian constitution was modeled after that of Ghana, allowing for the individuality of each province or kingdom within the empire. Consequently, these provinces retained a considerable degree of autonomy. Al-Omari, an adviser and secretary to the Sultan of Cairo and Damascus, reportedly identified twelve provinces and fourteen towns that were part of the Mali Empire during that period (Niane, 1979). At the height of its splendor and prominence, the empire spanned the Western Sudanic territory, extending from the saltpans of Teghaza in the Sahara to the Ivory-Guinea forest to the south, and from Tekrur, Gambia, and Bambadinka (Guinea-Bissau) on the Atlantic coast to the copper mines of Air in the Es Souk region (Niane, 1979). Mahmoud Kati, a 16th-century historian, is said to have noted that Mali boasted around four hundred towns and had a significant population, particularly in the Niger Valley, between Djenne and Timbuktu (Niane, 1979). Similarly, the provincial regions of Tekrur and Cassamance were also described as having large populations (Niane, 1979). At the zenith of Mali's greatness in the 14th century, its capital, Niani, along with surrounding towns, is believed to have housed a population nearing one hundred thousand people (Niane, 1979).

In the ensuing period following the ascension of Sundiata to the throne of Mali, in the mid-13th century, several Manding patriarchal father-figures, most of whom were warriors and trusted generals of Sundiata, together with their families, and several other families, embarked on a series of migrations from their ancestral homelands in Manding to the Senegambia zone. These waves of migration are deemed to have been inspired by the desire of these generals and members of the royal family, who could not rule in Mali, to establish new settlements under the protection of the emperor. Coinciding with his new Malian economic and imperialist agenda, the emperor reportedly blessed their ambition to migrate to the western territories. More specifically, this economic and imperialist agenda of Mali is demonstrated by the emperor's ambitions to possess total control of the Trans-Saharan Trade routes, which connected the Western Sudan to the trade network of the archaic global economic system that flourished in that era. As a result of these waves of migrations, the larger proportion of the territorial landmass of Senegambia, from the upper Gambia through the upper Cassamance and on into the old Kaabu regions of Guinea-Bissau, became gradually inhabited by descendants of these migrant families (Wright, 1985). In the years that followed, these migrant families intermarried with members of the various native groups thereby diversifying ethnic and cultural identity across the zone.

Although the new social order could not totally erase the socio-cultural customs of the native populations, the increasing political dominance of Senegambian communities by the Manding migrant families became a crucial element in the resultant transformation of the social make-up and political systems of these native societies. Accordingly, it transformed them from kin-based to monarchical state structures (Barry, 1998). The new order formed the basis for the establishment of the kingdom of Kaabu, in Southern Senegambia, by Tiramakan Traore, a famous general and trusted ally of Sundiata who led one of the first waves of migrations from Mali to the Senegambia zone. According to Tombong Saane, the custodian of the ruins of Kaabu Kansala, the rulers of Kaabu descended from the marriage between Tiramakan and his

mystical wife, Balabaa (Saane, 2024). For a long period, Kaabu remained a vassal under the protection of the emperors of Mali until the onset of the 14th century, when its administrative links with Mali were severed.

Fortunately for Mali, this situation coincided with a period when almost all the non-ruling princes of the kingdoms in Senegambia had grown bitter against the political control of their kingdoms by their sisters (Jammeh, 2024). Upon realizing the strategic advantage in aiding the princes' cause, especially towards the goal of absolute political and economic superiority in the entire Western Sudan, the patriarchs of Mali rendered the power-hungry princes both their political and spiritual assistance. This Malian backing therefore became the most influential factor that led to the gradual decline and eventual fall of matriarchal regimes in the Gambia Valley.

ASSERTIVE RESISTANCE FROM ROYAL PRINCES AGAINST QUEENS

The ambition of the non-ruling princes across various states and kingdoms in the Gambia Valley to renounce their allegiances to their sisters, who were the reigning queens, marked the beginning of opposition to matriarchal rule in the region. Multiple sources indicate that during this period, the princes became increasingly fixated on their sisters' political authority, ultimately uniting in a decision to revolt against it (Ceesay, 2024). They sought refuge in Mali, to the east, in hopes of finding a resolution to their disdain for matriarchal governance. This upheaval likely took place in the mid-13th century, a pivotal period when Malian political influence dominated Senegambia. A fierce conflict that erupted within the matriarchal kingdom of Jaara, situated on the southern bank of the Gambia River, exemplified a significant challenge to matriarchal authority.

The Jaara Incident

The famous feud between Mansa Musu Bann, the then reigning queen of Jaara, and Jassey Banna, her half-brother, was the first outright opposition against matriarchal authority in the Gambia valley. This feud is said to have been a crucial force that incited a popular resentment against matriarchal rule in the hearts and minds of the various princes in the area (Jammeh, 2024). Living together in the same extended royal household and their families, Queen Banna and Jassey Banna reportedly reared fouls as part of their personal possessions (Wright, 1974). Thus, these fouls would emerge as the forces that fanned disunity between these two royal siblings.

Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh narrated the tale in vivid terms, depicting Jassey as a recalcitrant prince who was bent on undermining the authority of his half-sister. He highlighted,

> *It happened that one day, Jassey Banna's cock had chased her sister's hen purposely to mate with it. As it pursued the hen, it ran through the queen's royal courtyard when she was in the midst of a meeting. Feeling disturbed by the cock's noisy chase of the hen, she angrily inquired about the owner of the cock. That was when someone told her that it belonged to her half-brother Jassey. After summoning him, the queen is believed to have warned Jassey that, if his cock happens to impregnate her hen, he will face a harsh punishment (Jammeh, 2024).*

Utterly ignoring the queen's warning, Jassey reportedly permitted his cock to mate with the queen's hen. Being enraged by this act of insubordination, the queen decided to summon him, before the courts of Jaara, for him to face charges for the unlawful defilement of her hen by his

cock (Wright, 1974). Ironically, this infamous decision would set the wheels of revolution in motionl within Jaara, as evident in the queen's utter defeat in this feud.

The intention behind Queen Musu Bana's decision to summon Jassey before the royal courts of Jarra should not be viewed solely through the lens of their ongoing feud. Instead, it may be understood as a desperate attempt to fully subdue Jassey, who likely harbored resentment towards her reign, an animosity influenced by the prevailing circumstances and exacerbated by the Malian expansionist ambitions in the region (Wright, 1974). This situation was further complicated by a warning from a certain marabout (seer), who had prophesied that Jassey would ultimately become the source of her downfall. Consequently, the queen's decision to seek counsel from this marabout reflects her frustration with Jassey's continual defiance of her directives. According to Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh,

> Individuals close to the queen, particularly her family members, friends, and acquaintances, had advised her to abandon the feud, arguing that they could not establish Jassey's guilt concerning the charges, as no one could prevent foul creatures from mating (Jammeh, 2024).

Nevertheless, the queen resolutely rejected their counsel and persisted in confronting him in court. "Unfortunately for her," Jammeh revealed, "the elders presiding over the case in both the *Kiitii Bantang* (the subordinate court) and the *Kaabaa Bantang* (the higher court) ruled in favor of Jassey (Jammeh, 2024). This judgment, therefore, marked the gradual decline of matriarchal authority across the entire Gambia Valley.

Instead of restraining him, it emboldened Jassey to unite with his fellow non-ruling princes to orchestrate the downfall of all matriarchal administrations in the region. Having felt triumphant against his sister, Jassey is believed to have asserted that women's political leadership was exceedingly problematic, proclaiming that the time had come for all princes to align in their objective of overthrowing them (Jammeh, 2024). Hence, such a monumental campaign against matriarchal authority in the area could not be executed by a singular prince alone, given that, until that juncture, matriarchal rule had been an unassailable phenomenon throughout the entire region.

Expedition to the Malian Capital of Niani: Recognition and Legitimation of the Royal Authority of Princes over Reigning Queens

In the mid-13th century, Manding dominance and consolidation in the Senegambia Region were reaffirmed, leading to the integration of both northern and southern Senegambian states under Manding political suzerainty. Consequently, these states became tributary entities, obligated to the Malian Emperor. This era also marked the adoption of a patriarchal and patrilineal governance system influenced by the Mali Empire. This significant structural transformation motivated royal princes to realign their allegiances against the reigning queens.

The princes are widely reported to have initiated a significant campaign against matriarchal governance in the region. This initiative was propelled through personal meetings, spearheaded by one of the princes, who skillfully persuaded each participant of the plans to travel to Mali, located to the east, with the explicit aim of devising strategies to dismantle matriarchal rule in Senegambia. One account attributes this campaign to Sankalang Marong (Jaadama), a prince from the royal household of Badibu, India. According to tradition, Sankalang Marong harbored a deep disdain for matriarchal political authority, surpassing that of any other prince in the Western hemisphere. Motivated by his convictions, he spearheaded a notable campaign to undermine matriarchal dominance in Baddibu and throughout Senegambia. His efforts

included discussions with Nguma Jamme, the prince of Siin, and Waali Jiime, the prince of Saalum. He continued to engage with Seneke Jamme, the prince of Niumi, and Arijuuma Jang, among others.The Prince of Kombo; subsequently visited Prince Danbeli Jabang and Prince Naasira Bangna in Fonyi. He extended his outreach to Prince Fintong Wuleng in Fuladuu. From there, he proceeded to Prince Jifayang Kotoo of the kingdom of Kiyang, culminating in a final meeting with Prince Jaasi (Jassey) Banna of Jaara (NCAC/RDD, 1976). This narrative characterizes Sankalang Marong as the principal architect behind the subversion of matriarchal governance. His political consciousness, much like that of his fellow princes, was notably shaped by his masculine inclinations.

In contrast, the accounts of Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh depict Prince Jassey Banna as the sole mastermind orchestrating the campaign against matriarchal authority in Senegambia.

> Following the quarrel he had with Queen Banna, his half-sister, Jassey Banna first conferred with Prince Seneke Jammeh of Niumi, with whom he strategized regarding the revolt against matriarchy. He convened with Seneke at *Kang-Kelefaa*, in Bilinkerr Kunda, the royal *Jammeh* household in Sitanunku. After securing his agreement, he engaged with princes across Niani, Wuli, Niamina, Baddibu, Kombo, Fonyi, and Kiang (Jammeh, 2024).

Ultimately, all the princes arrived at a unified sentiment against matriarchal rule and were determined to ensure the precedence of patriarchal political authority within their realms.

Whether it was Sankalang Marong or Jassey Banna who orchestrated the conspiracy against the ruling matriarchs, it is apparent that a form of collective rallying among the eligible princes (potential heirs to their respective thrones) had, indeed, transpired in Senegambia. Moreover, this anti-matriarchal and masculinity-driven campaign materialized through personal meetings, which proved invaluable in furthering the collective objectives of these ambitious princes.

Furthermore, other sources assert that it was the reigning queens who instructed their brothers to approach Jassey, deliberately advising him to respect his sister's authority and adhere to her directives. It is reported that they instructed their brothers to confront Jassey, as they, like him, were envious of their positions as the sole rulers of their realms. "We have heard that Jassey quarreled with his sister, and if she is not present, then Jassey should assume control. "However, go and advise Jassey to act in accordance with his sister, to respect her, and to prevent any disputes from arising between them," they are believed to have conveyed. "You should await our demise before you begin to rule," they emphasized (Wright, 1974). This collective intention of the queens to dispatch the very princes who harbored criticisms of their reigns demonstrates the extent of their insecurity. Ironically, rather than successfully restraining Jassey as they had intended, he instead managed to indoctrinate them into his emotional opposition against matriarchal authority. It is reported that, upon their arrival in Jaara, Jassey expressed astonishment that his fellow princes, who should have been preoccupied with undermining the power of their sisters, had allowed themselves to be utilized merely as messengers. "I think you are all unambitious," he is purported to have remarked (Wright, 1974). He proceeded to elucidate that his sister had accused him of being responsible for the mating of his rooster with her hen (Wright, 1974). Ultimately, he succeeded in persuading them that his sister's actions were motivated by fear and jealousy.

Irrespective of the debate regarding the genuine leader of the insurrection against matriarchal governance, it appears that the socio-political dynamics of the era have rendered the authority of the reigning queens significantly vulnerable to patriarchal uprisings and dissent. This is

manifest in the opportunity available to the princes to seek assistance from the patriarchs of Mali, whose economic and political mentorship of the western territories proved to be a critical factor in the subsequent removal of the queens from power.

The Purpose of the Princes' Journey to Mali

Most sources indicate that the primary objective of the princes' visit to Mali was to secure royal permission from the emperor of Mali to govern their respective kingdoms upon their return. One account suggests that during a meeting with Jassey, who was embroiled in a dispute with his sister, he persuaded the princes to join his proposed mission to Mali by assuring them that they would receive the emperor's endorsement, thereby legitimizing their claims to their thrones. According to this narrative, during this period, Mansayaa (the right to rule) in the western territories could only be obtained from the emperor of Mali (Wright, 1974). In another account, Sankalang Marong succeeded in convincing the princes to accompany him to Mali, also by providing them with the assurance of political support from the Malian emperor, which would enable them to abolish Musu-Mansayaa (the political rule of women) in their kingdoms (NCAC/RDD, 1976). The convergence of these narratives suggests that the princes' primary aim was to seek the political endorsement of the Emperor of Mali to oust their sisters from power.

Still, it can be argued that the princes harbored an ulterior motive which encouraged them to journey together to Mali, irrespective of the popularity of their political agenda. This assertion is corroborated by Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh who contends that the actual reason for the princes' travel to Mali was to seek spiritual armament, particularly at the sacred shrines of Manding. According to him, "the magical powers of the *marabouts* (seers) of Mali were regarded as the most potent and feared throughout the Western Sudan (Jammeh, 2024). The exceptional nature of the sacred shrines and spirit cults in Mali, at a time when Islam had not yet penetrated Senegambia, proved decisive for the princes' cause. With traditional religion serving as the predominant force in social action, the princes concealed their motives under the pretext of seeking political backing from the Malian Emperor to acquire competitive spiritual advantages from the shrines of Manding (Jammeh, 2024). Consequently, the princes deemed spiritual armament necessary, given that the reigning queens possessed supernatural powers that rendered them completely unchallenged by any ordinary human.

The Onward Journey to Mali

The sources differ slightly concerning the specific town or village where the princes convened to continue their planned journey to Mali. According to one account, Jassey is reported to have instructed the princes, "I want you each to go back to your countries and come with one person to Jarra and then let us join together." Subsequently, he informed them, "Let us go to Jambang Kunda" (Wright, 1974). In alignment with this account, it can be concluded that Jambang Kunda, located in Jaara, served as the central rallying place for the princes.

However, in contrast to this version, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh asserted that the princes' gathering point was Jappineh, another town within Jaara. In his narrative, Jassey is portrayed urging his compatriots, "Let us all meet here, in Jappineh, and embark on the journey to the east." As he had directed, they convened there on the designated day (Jammeh, 2024). It is evident that, despite the discrepancies among sources regarding the specific town or village where the meeting took place, there is a consensus that Jaara, the residence of Jassey Banna, served as the kingdom where the assembly convened.

The princes are reported to have participated in a preparatory event during which they showcased their masculine abilities and mystical potentials. It is narrated that, upon their arrival at the assembly point in Jaara, Jassey instructed them to chop a significant amount of dry wood logs and stack them in one location, a task they accomplished. Subsequently, he ignited the pile of wood and instructed everyone to remove their shirts and cast them into the flames, which they complied with. After some time, under his guidance, they immersed their hands into the fire and retrieved their shirts without sustaining any burns. Jassey is said to have cautioned them that they would be qualified to accompany him on his journey to the east only if they could demonstrate their spiritual capabilities (Wright, 1974). Therefore, this demonstration of spiritual potential served as a pivotal component in the preparation of the princes for this significant journey.

There exists a disparity among the sources concerning the specific method by which the princes traveled to Mali. In one account, Jassey is depicted providing frank instructions to his compatriots regarding their travel to the east. He stated, “If you want to travel, you must go on foot! One cannot use a horse from here to Manding. We must go to Manding in secret, in other words, by magical means. “If anyone cannot go that way, then he must not go” (Wright, 1974). In contrast, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh proposed that the princes traveled to Mali using horses (Jammeh, 2024). Nevertheless, irrespective of this inconsistency regarding the actual means of their travel to Mali, Jassey’s leadership role throughout the journey remains prominently evident.

The Arrival of the Princes in Mali

The particulars surrounding the arrival of the princes in Mali illustrate the extent of their political aspirations. The sources concur that they initially visited the royal palace of Mali, where they had the opportunity to meet the emperor and formally introduced themselves as princes from the western territories. Furthermore, the sources unanimously agree that the princes had officially sought the emperor’s intervention in their endeavor to assume kingship in their respective kingdoms. Consequently, they reiterated their collective pledges to govern their kingdoms as integral components of Mali, while expressing the sentiment that the realization of such an objective would be contingent upon the emperor’s support (Wright, 1974). It is plausible that the emperor recognized the necessity of endorsing these princes, given that their ambitions had the potential to enhance his empire’s westward colonization efforts. The diplomatic engagement undertaken by the Senegambian princes with the emperor underscores the political dimension of their journey to Mali.

However, as previously articulated, the princes seemingly dedicated more time to arming themselves at the spiritual shrines of Manding than merely soliciting the political support of the emperor. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh confirmed this, revealing that their initial destination was *Manding Bung-Baa* (metropolitan Manding) where they encountered the emperor. He explained,

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> Following their acquisition of the emperor's approval, they devoted a substantial period of one year and two months specifically to seeking spiritual armament at the shrines. Subsequently, they journeyed to the sacred shrines situated in various provinces of Mali. The first of these was the shrine in the town of Kenyeto, where they dedicated one month. They then proceeded to the shrine located in the provincial town of Cheeta, where they spent four months. Lastly, they visited the shrine of Biriko, where they remained for two months before ultimately returning to central Manding (Jammeh, 2024).

Based on this assertion, it is reasonable to assert that the princes allocated more time to fortifying themselves in the spiritual shrines of Mali than to merely devising a political solution to their issues with the emperor.

THE DECLINE OF MATRIARCHAL RULE IN THE GAMBIA VALLEY

The matriarchal regimes that flourished in the states and kingdoms of the Gambia Valley ultimately declined following the return of the princes from Mali. Although precise dates indicating when each prince acceded to the throne of his respective kingdom remain unspecified, various sources suggest that, subsequent to their return from Manding, a general assembly was convened (NCAC/RDD, 1976). This assembly, which included numerous political aspirants from the various Senegambian kingdoms, was organized to formulate a strategic plan for ascending to the thrones of their kingdoms. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh corroborated this fact, emphasizing that this significant meeting took place at a location in present-day Dakar, the capital of the Republic of Senegal, during a time when European presence in Africa was not yet established (Jammeh, 2024).

Sounding similar views, earlier sources maintained that during this period the influence of Islam had not significantly permeated Senegambia (NCAC/RDD, 1976). Thus, it is reasonable to assert that this meeting likely occurred in the mid-13th century, a timeframe during which traditional religious practices were at their zenith in the region. Consequently, this assembly established the groundwork for the eventual decline of the matriarchal kingdoms positioned on both the northern and southern banks of the Gambia River.

During this meeting, it is reported that the princes reached a unanimous agreement to implement the leadership selection system proposed by the emperor of Mali. This system, known as *Alikuuroo*, is believed to have facilitated the replacement of reigning queens by the first patriarchs in certain kingdoms, such as Baddibu (NCAC/RDD, 1976). The system purportedly allowed both men and women to contest for the position of ruler in each kingdom. It was mandated that the ruler of each kingdom be selected by a council of elders from among several aspirants, including princes and princesses belonging to the ruling family (Jammeh, 2024). This groundbreaking council of elders likely represents the origins of the Electoral Councils that emerged in many Senegambian states and empires following the introduction of the monarchical system during the 13th and 14th centuries. Initially, "Alikuuroo" did not discriminate against either princes or princesses seeking to govern their kingdoms. Even if the person identified was insane, he or she was considered to for the contest (NCAC/RDD, 1976). Consequently, the newly established method of selecting rulers was characterized by equity and transparency at its inception.

Subsequently, the council of elders who had already harbored grievances against matriarchal rule began to exclude women from the list of political aspirants. Although it remains unclear whether this exclusion was the method by which the reigning queens across the Gambia Valley

were deposed, it is reported that, in most of the kingdoms, the male-dominated council ensured that the emerging ruler was perpetually a man (NCAC/RDD, 1976). Therefore, from that point onward, political leadership became increasingly associated with men. The new order became further entrenched as it coincided with the arrival of successive waves of Manding migrant settlers in the area, led by former generals and allies of Sundiata, whose mission was to perpetuate the Malian form of patriarchal-monarchical rule for the cultural, economic, and political expansion of their illustrious Mali Empire. This resolution thus marked a significant turning point in the political history of the Gambia Valley, and Senegambia as a whole, as it witnessed a period of heightened resentment against the political participation of women by their politically dominant male counterparts.

Conclusion

The decline of matriarchal authority in Senegambia is commonly traced to the legendary Jaara Incident, in which Queen Musu Banna and her half-brother Prince Jassey Banna clashed over a seemingly trivial dispute, the mating of their fowl. This episode rapidly escalated into a decisive power struggle, exposing deep tensions between matrilineal and patrilineal claims. Oral traditions recount that Jassey Banna's victory in the courtroom marked the first legal triumph of patriarchy over matriarchy in the region. Emboldened, he and allied princes secured the endorsement of Malian patriarchs, traveled to Mali for political support and spiritual empowerment at Manding shrines, and leveraged these external influences to overthrow the reigning queens

Through a post-colonial lens, the Jaara Incident can be interpreted as a localized response to the expanding Mali Empire, reflecting an early instance of gendered cultural imperialism wherein imported patriarchal structures displaced indigenous matriarchal systems. This aligns with Spivak's (1988) notion of "silencing of subaltern voices," illustrating how female authority was gradually erased from Senegambian political memory.

Consequently, the erosion of matriarchal governance in the Gambia Valley was not merely an internal family feud but a pivotal moment intertwined with regional power shifts, interstate dynastic alliances, and the spread of Islam and Malian cultural hegemony. The legacy of this transformation continues to shape contemporary gender dynamics in traditional chieftaincy institutions across Senegambia.

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