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Summary and Keywords

A predominantly rural territory with few urban centers historically, the Gambia holds little in the way of well-known luxury resources commonly discussed in studies of western Africa. People of the region, in particular women, have exploited both riverine and oceanic food and material resources. The limited scholarship available on Gambian women reveals they have been essential to those endeavors contributing to economy, politics, society, and family institutions. Often by pursuing seemingly less-lucrative endeavors, women have been prominent actors innovating production and acquisition techniques as well as product uses in this mixed agricultural and aquatic economy, from precolonial to contemporary times. Despite few raw materials or luxury resources, and in certain contexts great limits on their authority, women of the Gambia River region were central to economic life historically, developing household food production and trading their surplus agricultural, aquatic, and manufactured goods. In different eras and contexts, Gambian women have been agricultural innovators and technologists; catchers, processors, and traders of aquatic resources; merchants of manufactured and crafted items; and educators. In essence, they created intellectual, economic, and artisanal opportunities for themselves and others in their communities. These activities allowed women to influence and propel economic and political agendas over time. In particular, women have been credited with critical developments in rice production technologies going back at least to the 16th century, though women's expertise in this realm likely has much deeper historical roots. This knowledge and set of skills related to rice agriculture made Mandinka women of the Gambia River region critical to West Africa's Upper Guinea coast and also to life in the Americas as enslaved producers. Mandinka women and men became a large demographic represented in southeastern US plantations and communities because of their well-developed techniques in rice cultivation. Gambian women significantly influenced the eastern and western Atlantic worlds.

The modern-day nation of The Gambia, which achieved independence in 1965, is a relatively small territory hugging the banks of Gambia River for a narrow fifteen miles from the north and south banks. Starting 300 miles inland to the east (upriver), the river flows west into the Atlantic Ocean (downriver). Looking back in time at this region bordering the river, it is important to consider Gambian women's lives over time in the

context of both centralized and non-centralized political units. In the orbit of centralized states such as Ghana (4th–13th centuries), Takrur (9th–14th centuries), Mali (13th–15th centuries), and Jolof (14th–16th centuries), women (and men) negotiated shifting expectations over time. Certainly Gambian women have been born into, circulated among, or married within several local cultural and linguistic traditions that include Aku, Bambara, Fula, Jola, Mandinka, Manjago, Serahulle, Serer, and Wollof. However, scholars have written more about women and gender for these groups in neighboring countries. Non-centralized political and social affiliations typically provided women a great deal of authority and autonomy. However, most positions and statuses women were privy to historically were reshaped and often greatly diminished from the 19th century onward due to processes of the slave trade, Islamization, and European colonialization. With the rise of Atlantic-world trade small numbers of coastal Gambian River women expanded their spheres of influence and wealth by forming both marital and economic alliances with Portuguese, French, Dutch, and British men. By the 20th century a number of women pursued various forms and levels of education in efforts to increase their opportunities in the social, political, and economic arenas. In essence, in each historical era women of the Gambia River have sought out knowledge, expertise, and skills in order to achieve their ambitions regardless of the political, religious, or social order dominant at the time.

Keywords: Gambia River, Phyllis Wheatley, rice, Senegambia, Signarés, Upper Guinea Coast

Gambian Women: Context and Overview

Historically the territory straddling the Gambia River was part of larger regional configurations that included a unit referred to as “Senegambia” and another discussed as the “Upper Guinea Coast.”[1] Thus determining who “Gambian women” are historically is complicated by the geopolitical realities of shifting territorial boundaries and political configurations. Thinking about Gambian women as those who reside historically and presently in the vicinity of the Gambia River’s banks provides at least a common geographic feature as a point of reference. Despite common geographic space, Gambian women come from several ethnic backgrounds, which include the Bambara, Fula, Jola, Mandinka, Manjago, Serahulle, Serer, Wollof, and those liberated from enslavement considered of foreign origins, the Aku. None of these ethnic groups exist exclusively in The Gambia; rather, they have histories that cross present day national boundaries into Senegal, Guinea Bissau, Mali, and in the case of pastoral Fula in particular, as far as Niger and Nigeria.[2]

Further complicating who constitutes a “Gambian woman” is the fact that in the 19th century, Islamic *jihad*s and religious conversions marked the political landscape and produced a good deal of migration. The *jihad*s brought new expectations and ideals for women to adhere to by the late 1800s.[3] Islam brought new legal codes and modes of operating. Layered together, women seized upon Islamic law in conjunction with local practices, customary law, traditional doctrines, and colonial law for settling struggles

over contested matters, ideas, and spaces.[4] Following quickly on the heels of the official end to the slave trade in the north Atlantic, the spread and deepening of Islamic religious doctrine and practice in the Gambia River region raised an altogether new set of ideals and aspirations for women to fulfill, including the role of prophet.[5] At the same time, the late 19th century and early-to-mid 20th century was a period in which The Gambia was administered together with—and as a lesser territory of—Britain's other important West African possession, Sierra Leone. This meant that a large number of Sierra Leonean Krio Muslims and Methodist Christians (Aku) came to The Gambia as colonial administrators. Sierra Leoneans remained in The Gambia and their children became locals. Several of these Aku and Krio women became prominent Gambian political, social, and economic leaders in their adopted nation, much like women of other ethnic groups had over the centuries. Women's roles varied across ethnic groups and over time, yet the 19th century may have witnessed an unprecedented intensity and number of changes in women's lives. This period may be matched only by the era of the slave trade in terms of the level of change; the slave trade, Islam, and colonialism each seem to have ushered in greater restrictions on women's choices and opportunities.[6]

The Gambia, although notably little examined as an independent unit in scholarship, is important for several reasons that include its connections to histories of agriculture, slavery, labor, and political formations in the Upper Guinea Coast and Senegambian pasts. The Gambia River region and the people inhabiting its flanks formed a significant outlying province of the Takrur (11th–12th centuries) and Mali (13th–15th centuries) empires. Occupying a transitional point in trade between the forest to the south and the Sahara to the north, The Gambia's position in the Sahel along the Atlantic coast—and with the Gambia River and its rich mangroves and aquatic life as environmental resources—has allowed women of the region to engage in a variety of economic and social endeavors. Women have developed techniques to allow the relatively poor Sahelian soils to produce grain, and in particular, indigenous *glabberima* (rice largely produced by women). The Gambia's geopolitical role in Atlantic-era trade and the role of coastal women (Signarés) as innovators and brokers in coastal networks of social and economic exchange all make the territory and the women of the region important historical figures who were agents enacting change.[7]

Women of The Gambia are critical to understanding both western Africa's Senegambia region and the Atlantic world.[8] As the start of Atlantic era trade (1446) and its decline (1816) along with the emergence and acceleration of its momentous and devastating slave trade (1525–1807), Gambia's history provides an important case study of this form of human trafficking impacts on women, who were both agents and victims of its economic endeavors and political alliances.[9] Under the financing and at the behest of Portugal's Prince Henry, Portuguese sailors led by adventurer Nuno Tristão sailed into the mouth of the Gambia River in 1444. This expedition ended in the death of many of the ship's crew when Mandinka residents of the river's north bank launched their canoes and with precision archers outmaneuvered the Portuguese. Tristão's misadventure ushered in a new era of contact and trade along Western Africa's Atlantic coast.[10] A decade later, the Italian captain Cadamosto arrived at the mouth of the Gambia River in 1455 and was

quickly followed in 1456 by Diogo Gomes and then many others. The success of Cadamosto's expedition was that he mapped inland territory by sailing upriver. He was unsuccessful in that first point of contact in his larger goal of establishing trade relations but ultimately did get local advice on what products he might procure in the region. It was Gomes who negotiated official relations with the local leader, the Mansa.[11]

Four centuries later, in 1816 James Island at the mouth of the river became an important physical and symbolic site for the end of the slave trade under a British regime of abolition.[12] James Island is a short two miles from Juffure, the site Alex Hailey claimed as the home of his Gambian River ancestors. While Kunte Kinte, Hailey's ancestor according to his familial oral traditions, likely came from the Gambia River region, it remains unclear whether the exact location was Juffure. If this location or another one so close to the river was in fact the home of Kunte Kinte's parents, Omoro Kinte (father) and Binta Kebba (mother), his mother and grandmother (Yaisa Kinte) were likely cultivators of rice. Women of that region historically traded various foods and manufactured commodities to upriver communities.[13] As prominent traders, merchants, agricultural technologists, and innovators within the Gambia River region, women's initiatives and contributions are essential to making sense of the political economy of this area both in deep historical time as well as in processes of sociocultural invention in the Black Atlantic. As Judith Carney and others have demonstrated, women of the Gambia River region who produced rice and its technologies were central in the labor circulation that built the Atlantic system's demographics and economies. The knowledge Gambian women acquired and passed on to their descendants formed a core of the Carolina and Georgia Sea Island economies. The rice they nurtured fed these territories and, over time, other parts of the American colonies and later states.[14]

Looking at the wider Senegambia region, it becomes clear that female circumcision has long been a controversial and prominent issue of concern regarding women not only in the 21st century.[15] Local words for female circumcision in the Gambia are *niaka*, *kuyungo*, *musolula karoola*, and *bondo*. Based on a 2012 Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (GAMCOTRAP) survey, it is suggested that more than 90 percent of Mandinka and Jola women are circumcised while 88 percent of Fula girls and women undergo the ceremony and body modification. There is a spectrum of perspectives on the practice in terms of its safety, historical origins, and cultural value and meaning. Though it impacts Muslim women in particular, it has also been practiced by Christians in this region and other parts of the world as a body modification that people, in different eras and families, have seen as necessary for beauty, cleanliness, faithfulness, and religious devotion.

While this body modification existed in limited contexts in many parts of the ancient world, there is some evidence in parts of Africa that it was reconfigured in the era of the slave trade for two contradictory reasons. One reason discussed by the 17th-century Portuguese merchant João dos Santos was to prevent pregnancy in women to make them more valuable to those who wanted slaves who would not become pregnant. The other rationale was to prevent women from being desirable to slave traders who wanted women

who would produce many children in enslavement.[16] Though circumcised women do give birth, the logic seems to imply that only men who understood the modification would be able to successfully father a child with a circumcised woman. Thus for many the practice is partly a means of controlling and diminishing the rights and authority of women.[17]

Many Gambian women, in all centuries including the 21st, have supported circumcision as an important means of beautification, wielding authority by women practitioners, and transitioning to adulthood for themselves and their daughters. Women tend to control these ceremonies, yet many others contend that this practice has diminished women's rights and ability to thrive educationally, politically, and economically. Female genital modifications may be a practice that Fula women brought from other parts of the Sahel into the Senegambia region, which may have influenced other communities. Often referred to as a "traditional practice," little evidence is available to pinpoint which Gambian community initiated the practice or precisely when the practice actually emerged.[18] The meanings and justifications people of the region give for the practice have shifted over time. By the 20th century it became associated most closely with Islam and Mandinka populations, yet it may be better explained not as ethnic or traditional practice but as cultural consumption and beauty production.[19] This general association persists in the 21st century, though it has also been cast in certain circles as a "rural" or "backward" practice of the uneducated. Large celebrations of Kankurang, a rite of passage signaling transition to adulthood that involves female and male circumcision, can be witnessed even in the second decade of the 21st century in urban Gambia. The practice has certainly increasingly come under the scrutiny of Gambian politicians like Nyimasata Sanneh-Bojang (1942–2015) and Isatou Touray (1955–) and local grassroots NGOs like GAMCOTRAP.[20]

Precolonial Women

Economically, there are some important distinctions to make among Gambian women. While there is no doubt overlap across ethnic groups in terms of influence women have had across long spans of time and in particular historical circumstances, some distinctions have been made along ethnic lines in terms of the niches women have fulfilled economically, socially, and politically. Along the Gambia River region political organization varied across time and space. In areas and historical contexts where non-centralized political organization prevailed over centralization, power was distributed across the community and not concentrated in the hands of a single ruler, nor was it exclusively the domain of men, which was true in much of the precolonial era among even patrilineal and essentially patriarchal communities like the Fula. Though there were *mansa*s, chiefs or kings, larger decisions were often arrived at through consultation with councils of elders. In non-centralized societies along the Gambia River, adult women have often wielded political, spiritual, and professional authority. In the more centralized states prior to colonial rule some groups of women also achieved and held positions of authority

and power through their familial roots, wealth, specialized knowledge, and social networks.[21]

In the Atlantic coast region, Mandinka, who constitute about 35 percent of the population, were the predominant inhabitants. Mandinka women developed the knowledge around *glaberrima* rice production in the brackish waters of the Atlantic coast to the brackish swamps in the highlands, and into the interior where they established fresh-water rice cultivation. Mandinka women were central to rice farming historically. They performed the vast majority of labor required, which included weeding, sowing, harvesting, transplanting, modifying and specializing, processing, storing, and ultimately trading when desired. In some stages of rice production and in certain regions women certainly did marshal the assistance of men in harvesting or in some of the other labor-intensive aspects of production.

Inhabiting interior regions of the Gambia River territories as well as areas further north (as far as Chad and Sudan) and south (as far as Cameroon in Central Africa), and occupying lands and utilizing resources well into the interior due to their pastoral and mobile economic activities, Fula women have established themselves as producers and traders of various dairy products. Fula people have had significant influence on the social and political economy of The Gambia historically, as they constitute approximately 25 percent of the population. The production and circulation of products Fula women controlled had an important place in the diets of the community. Fula communities constituted an important demographic in the spread of Islam in the Senegambia region in the 18th and 19th centuries. This impacted the lives of Fula women, who seem to have been less prominent in their local economies and politics than Mandinka and Wolof women. Although Mandinka and Wolof individuals also converted in large numbers to Islam by the 20th century, their conversions may have lagged behind those of the Fula.[22]

While they constitute a much smaller demographic at approximately 15 percent of the population, Wolof women have been some of the most politically and economically prominent and influential. With strong ties to the powerful and centralized Wolof (Jolof) states of Waalo, Kayor, Baol, Sine, and Saloum, Wolof women had notable impacts on trade relations with Europeans. They made up the first phase of women referred to as Signarés. While the core of the Wolof Empire historically was in the territory presently referred to as Senegal, Wolof people have inhabited lands further south for at least the last six centuries. They also held positions in powerful ruling families that gave them entry to a large network from which to draw resources from military forces and highly skilled artisan castes. Commoner women were members of the artisan castes, becoming potters, griots (*gewel*), and other specialists.

Wolof women broadly were members of these networks and political councils, and female members of the royal family—sisters, wives, aunts, grandmothers, and Queen mothers (*linguere*)—held power over areas of production as well as people’s lives. They oversaw territory inhabited by people who paid them taxes; monopolized certain domains of luxury trade in the region that included ivory, wax, cloth, baobab fruit, salt, and certain types of

fishing; and collected taxes from long-distance traders including foreigners and local agents. In the Baol state *lingueres* were full members of the Diambour, the political council to elect the next *teigne* (ruler). Two well-known Wolof women, Ndate Yatta Mbodj and Njembo Mbodji, led important resistance movements in the 19th century. Njembo, the elder sister, led resistance of her people against Mauritanian Islamists who invaded Waalo. She succeeded in thwarting Mauritanian efforts. Her sister later spent seven years resisting French efforts at controlling Waalo state. Though she was ultimately exiled, her persistence is a testament to her leadership abilities. These 19th-century women provide some insight into the lives of contemporary groups of other women who scholars still know little to nothing about but who also served as political, social, and economic leaders.

Less attention has been paid to Jola, Serahulle, Serer, Banbara, and Manjago women in The Gambia than to those in Senegal, but it is likely that they too participated in and greatly contributed to social, political, and economic life. Alice Joyce Hamer's work in the 1980s reflected that Jola (Diola) women, in Senegal's Casamance abutting The Gambia's southern border, were little engaged in larger-scale trade. They were primarily involved in agriculture and only became extensively involved in larger-scale trade relations after 1875.[23] Areas of economic activity likely included trade, specialized cloth and dye production, basketry, palm wine production, peanut cultivation, some fishing and small animal keeping, and hunting.

Atlantic-Era Women

In the Atlantic era, when long-distance oceanic trade dominated economies, groups of women and individuals rose to prominence through their financial acumen in the realm of network building, product control, and movement across social spaces. One particularly well written about group are the Senegambian Signarés. These women inhabited coastal towns and cities and engaged in trade of both commodities and people from the 16th to 19th centuries. Leveraging their familial networks in the interior, they procured the products of trade desired by local and foreign consumers. They certainly gained great financial advantages engaging in the inhumane trade of humans enslaved for markets in the Americas. Despite the policies put in place by European governments to ban intercultural relationships, these women did forge romantic liaisons with European merchants, sailors, and governors, known as *lançados*, who were derided for throwing themselves among Africans.

The Signarés were critical to the successes of Portuguese and later French, Dutch, and even British merchants, who needed access to their networks in a territory controlled by a centralized state like the Jolof Empire. These women became leaders in a cosmopolitan community of Africans, Europeans, and ethnically and racially mixed people. They became renowned and were written about by poets and depicted by painters for their intellectual acuity, business savvy, and their exquisite beauty and fashion sense. Villeneuve produced idealized, highly sexualized engravings of them in the 1760s. Three

decades later, Jacques Grasset St-Sauveur produced images of Signarés in *l'Encyclopédie des voyages* published in 1795.[24] By the 19th century, Ferdinand Tugnot de Lanoye (1810–1870) wrote about Signarés. Also in the 19th century, both Stanislas Henri Benoit Darondeau and Edward Augustus Nousveaux produced images of Signarés for government officials. These are just a few of the many Europeans who depicted Signarés in words and images, revealing the social, political, economic, and diplomatic significance of these women.[25]

Several Gambian women became well known for the wealth they accumulated and the reach of power they developed. These prominent women include Fenda Lawrence and Ada Beigh. Born in 1742, Fenda Lawrence was from the upper Gambia River region, which at that point in time was within the sphere of the Wuli kingdom.[26] She benefitted from knowledge she gained watching her father maneuver in his position in a British-owned factory. At the age of twenty-two Lawrence married the employer of her mother and father, a British factory manager named James Lawrence. When she was widowed in 1780, Lawrence became the proprietor of her husband's sprawling business concerns. Her husband had negotiated numerous contracts and treaties with chiefs, yet upon his death Fenda did not benefit from her husband's reputation. Local leaders and traders challenged Fenda and ultimately seized much of her wealth. In response to challenges she faced along the Gambia River as a female trader without a husband, Lawrence migrated to Savannah, Georgia, in 1792 aboard the *New Britannica*. Profiting both from her network of merchants in Kaur along the Gambia River and from the ill fortune of enslaved individuals, she reestablished her business endeavors in Georgia where she amassed considerable wealth through cotton and slavery. Her story illustrates the ways in which women in the era of slave trading operated from a vulnerable position and had little authority without a male patron. At the same time, women were not always in search of justice for others. Some worked within the systems of power and wealth that contributed to perpetuating inhumane business practices during the 18th and 19th centuries.[27]

Another notable woman is Ada Beigh Jagne, who became a prominent philanthropist and merchant. She was born 144 years after Fenda Lawrence. Marrying an extremely wealthy local Gambian trader named Job Beigh, Ada developed her skills as a merchant in the short time they were married before he died. As a widow Ada took over her husband's business of transport and offloading cargo for foreign companies. As an intermediary between capitalists in the urban space of Bathurst a century and a half later, Ada Beigh hardly fared better with her fortune than Fenda Lawrence had with hers. Pressures from family forced Beigh to go to court to defend her property rights. There she managed to re-secure a portion of her properties, wealth, and interests.

Many of these women entered into economic endeavors that brought opportunity to their families but raise many questions about their views of justice. Certainly they faced great challenges in an era when capital centered on enslavement of people and in a milieu where competition for business of all types was stiff in light of the various competing nations sending traders to coastal West Africa, with its own robust history of local

merchants and entrepreneurs. Women also faced the challenge of patriarchy in the contexts of Islam, Christianity, and colonialism. Locally during the 18th and 19th centuries, despite the social constraints of their milieu, they owned property and held business interests both within western Africa's Senegambia region as well as in the Americas in places such as Savannah (Georgia) and Saint Domingue (Haiti). Signarés and other prominent women provided a model of success and leadership. They formed transregional and transcontinental networks during the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to create personal opportunities.

One of the most well-known women of the Senegambia region is the former slave and celebrated poet Phyllis Wheatley. Perhaps the victim of one of the savvy women who employed their talents as orators and dealmakers, Wheatley was in many respects no different from the capable women who profited from commodity trade. Born on the upper reaches of the Gambia River in the Wolof Empire around 1753, Wheatley might have become a Signaré had she not been captured and torn from all she knew as home and family at the young age of eight during the height of slave trading. As a Gambian child, she likely was targeted precisely because she was a girl, a coveted demographic in that period of slave trade. Transported to the Americas and sold to a family in Boston, Wheatley was taught, like many other domestic slaves in the northern United States, how to read. By seventeen she was writing sophisticated poetry about the Gambia River that received literary accolades at home and invited recognition and invitations abroad. By age twenty-one, Wheatley was freed by her owners and was invited to read her poetry in front of elite circles in London. Positioning herself further from her contemporaries who became well-known Signarés, she used her short life to bring about justice through the abolitionist movement. Her life as a mother and wife, who lost several children and as a spouse at a young age, reveals the kinds of life pressures women faced regardless of race. Her spiral into depression and alcoholism led to her untimely death in 1784. Her renown as a poet reveals the great brilliance women born in the Gambia River region had to offer, even in extremely stressful circumstances. Her short life is a reminder of the hardships 18th-century women faced, no doubt all compounded by her status as an enslaved person, mother who lost several children, and widow.

In the last decades before colonialism officially began in the 1880s, The Gambia became an important point of contact for anti-slavery campaigns and Britain's push for Western African cash cropping. By the 1860s, the shift to cash cropping had increasingly negative social and economic impacts on women. The Gambia was transformed into a groundnut-producing territory. Though women were central to agriculture, they were largely excluded from groundnut farming, giving men an economic advantage as the economy shifted to a cash-based system. Women's production of rice intensified. While this was more labor intensive than groundnut farming, women had little access to cash since peanuts were more critical to industrialization in Britain than rice.

Colonial-Era Women

For the colonial era a wider quantity, quality, and variety of records exist documenting the lives and achievements of Gambian women. Scholars such as Robert Baum contend that colonial-era administrators aimed to constrain Gambian women. Drawing on examples from Jola women of Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea Bissau, Baum demonstrates that these women employed religion, Islam, to contest the new confines on their lives.[28] Women employed a complex interplay of strategies to create opportunities in between administrative and policy spaces in the colonial era. One of the well-known female Jola Muslim prophets in Senegal's Cassamance was Alinesitoué Diatta. Though they faced social, religious, and colonial constraints as women, the colonial state viewed those who became prophets as yielding tremendous political and social power, because they questioned and challenged mounting social divides, erosion of societal values and norms, and marginalization of the growing class of impoverished individuals. Colonial officials often exiled female prophets to stifle their activism and social commentary.

Names that are more commonly prominent in colonial-era records are often associated with the Aku community concentrated in Banjul, the most urban space of colonial Gambia. In this historical phase the women who tended to be recorded through their own personal achievements or their marriage to prominent politicians were educated in the missionary system to the secondary level or beyond. One such woman, Lady Hannah Mahoney (1884–1974), was born at the start of the colonial administration. Educated to standard seven at the Methodist Wesley School in Bathurst, she was then trained as a civil servant typist and became the first Gambian woman to work for the colonial government. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, working in the service of the colonial administration Mahoney developed her skills as a spokesperson and public speaker, whereby she eventually was nominated to the Bathurst (Banjul) Urban District Council in 1941, where she advocated on behalf of children's and mothers' health issues. Two of her daughters became prominent government officials. One was Hannah Augusta (1924–1981), who ran for election in 1960. She married Dauda Kairaba Jawara, the first President of the Gambia, and became better known as Lady Jawara. Mahoney's other daughter, Louise Njie, also became a social leader as an elected cabinet minister in 1985.[29]

Others were pioneers in the fields of education, newspapers, and nursing. They included Rosalind Fowlis (1910–1994), Marion Foon, Lillian Johnson (1923–2005), Hannah Augusta Jawara, Rachel Palmer (1931–2000), Joana Mbye, and Florence Peters, all educated in the 1940s. The development of female teachers was critical as it was needed to facilitate and propel the education of women, which throughout the 20th century was nearly non-existent above the elementary school level.[30]

While Joana Mbye was, in the 1940s, among the first Gambian Muslim women to attend Western-style mission schools, Florence Peters became the first Gambian woman to earn a PhD. She did so only after great struggle on her own part and with her father's insistence and persuading of the colonial state that it was in their interest to educate

such a brilliant young scholar. Peters paved the way through her struggle for the next crop of women who sought education such as Joana Mbye and Harriet Ndow, who became renowned educators. Mbye studied mathematics and geography, which she taught until her reputation earned her an appointment as the first female head teacher at the Muslim primary school in Bathurst in 1966, where she served until 1980. Mbye continued to influence her community post retirement in various roles of public service. Harriet Ndow's career spanned five decades in the pre-school and early childhood sector, allowing her to impact the educational lives of thousands of Gambians.[31]

A contemporary of Florence Peters, Marion Foon made important strides in the fields of print and broadcast journalism. She took on the important role of news editor for *The Vanguard* in 1958, a critical juncture in Gambian history as the territory neared closer to independence. From 1944, British officials sought to control the production of news and information. It was World War II as well as a moment of increasing demands by African nationalists for their independence that led the British to restrict African media. Throughout the 1950s the voices of journalists continued to be constrained by laws, fees, and licensing requirements imposed by the British. Under Foon as editor-in-chief (1960), *The Vanguard* took on an increasingly anti-colonial tone. As the first woman newspaper editor in The Gambia, Foon was unabashed in her promotion of nationalism, independence, and women's rights. She did not hesitate to exercise her authority at the paper to give voice to those views. Foon employed the editorial pages of *The Vanguard* to defend Augusta Jawara as the first female candidate when she ran for political office in 1960. Foon quit her newspaper work when her own husband stepped into the political arena, but she continued to have social, political, journalistic, and educational impacts through her work in establishing many centers for children's pre-school education, a women's center, and by becoming the first woman to serve as a radio broadcaster in 1962.[32]

Education was a common arena for women of The Gambia in the colonial period to make their mark on society and contribute to developing the human capital in the territory. What is striking are the varied and creative ways in which women did so.[33] Lillian Johnson, a Banjul native born in 1923, was educated in the Catholic schools of The Gambia and Sierra Leone. In an effort to master Catholic education and to increase the reach of her own influence, Johnson ventured to Trinidad where she studied as a catechist so that she could serve as a teacher of other Gambian Catholic women. Interestingly, Johnson developed a newspaper section for *The Gambian Echo* to expose children to reading this medium and more educational opportunities. The section, known as the Children's Corner, aimed to enhance writing, literacy, and critical thinking skills in youth through trivia quizzes, articles written specifically for children's comprehension, crossword puzzles, and an immensely popular pen pal segment. Women like Johnson and her contemporaries brought innovative approaches to education by thinking about learning both inside and outside the classroom. Youth could be trained to appreciate learning and knowledge with these entertaining but educational exercises Johnson devised so that they might engage education as more fun than tedious work.[34]

The colonial state had thwarted the precolonial education system and apprenticeships to a large extent by banning, undermining, and otherwise trying to end various historically developed educational practices and apprenticeship programs while pushing for greater engagement in cash-cropping and migrant labor schemes. Additionally, the colonial infrastructure and investment in formal European-style classroom education was minimal in The Gambia, and it was even less robust for women than for men.[35] The Gambian colony had to contend with the realities of a globally integrated 20th-century industry and highly regulated professions. Thus the innovations that women (and men) brought to the discussion were incredibly significant in the drive to increase the numbers of literate Gambians who might enter vital professions like biomedicine, education (at all levels), veterinary practice, law, and political leadership at the colony/nation wide level.[36]

Significant in the field of law enforcement, Fatoumata Camara was among the first cohort of Gambian women to become an officer in the late 1950s. She worked diligently and rose through the ranks to become sergeant in charge of the Banjul Police Department in 1975. By 1976 she became the first woman to achieve the position and title of police prosecutor of Banjul, where she served until retirement in 1995.

While women of the postcolonial period are better remembered than their predecessors for entering nationalist politics and fighting for women’s education, voices, and rights, it should be remembered that many women of earlier generations also had ambitious aspirations. In certain historical moments those goals seemed to be unconventional and stridently against social norms, as often in precolonial eras labor choices were less rigidly gendered. Women in precolonial times did pursue and achieve leadership roles and economic prominence through trade, fishing, agricultural production, food preparation and preservation, as well as intellectual and artistic endeavors. It seems that people in more recent eras imposed greater limitations on women based on Muslim, Christian, and colonially constructed social and religious values and norms. Likewise, the demographic and economic pressures that emerged from the slave trade and cash cropping seem to have also created increased constraints on women’s social and economic mobility.

Colonial-era women became professionals, mothers, and community members, who, like their predecessors in the region, sought out opportunities and found ways to contribute to life and activity in their region. Women—who sought out education up to and beyond secondary school, engaged in newspaper writing, and participated in other public and political-sphere endeavors—initiated an important pathway for the young women just a decade their juniors. Some women continued to find niches in agriculture and fishing but did so alongside the newly opened areas that relied upon European economic, political, and educational institutions. Women like Florence Mahoney Peters, Marion Foon, Lillian Johnson, Hannah Augusta Jawara, and Rachel Palmer created models of excellence that might make the struggles and opportunities slightly better for the women after them. Gambian women in the early 21st century continue to engage in a wide variety of economic, political, and social activities that range from the practical to the philosophical precisely because their mothers and grandmothers modeled this kind of self-assurance, moxie, and resistance, while many fathers and grandfathers encouraged them to pursue

opportunities. This era of women, like those of the postcolonial period after them, can be characterized as the pioneers who accomplished many “firsts” in education, politics, journalism, publishing, medicine, and a variety of other fields. The exclusion women experienced in the centuries prior to independence combined with the erosion of local Gambian economic practices due to the myriad new institutions, technologies, and professions created by the colonial state meant that firsts for Gambian women and men were numerous in the 20th century.[37]

Postcolonial-Era Women

There is an important overlap in the experiences of women in the late colonial period and those of the early post-independence era. Following independence in 1965, women increasingly entered the arenas of national politics, commerce, and education. Nyimasata Sanneh-Bojang (1942–2015) is a significant figure as the first woman elected to the National Assembly in 1987. Before entering politics, Sanneh-Bojang contributed to her nation through two important professions in the territory, nursing and education. These two professions served her well and made her an excellent selection as the head of the grassroots Gambian NGO Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (GAMCOTRAP), focused on promoting and securing health and empowerment for women through community education programs.[38] GAMCOTRAP, a grassroots women’s rights organization, was established in 1984 as an outcome of a regional conference in Dakar, Senegal, that the World Health Organization organized.

One particularly prominent and successful campaign women’s rights activists initiated in the early 2000s was the “Dropping the Knife” program. Activists working to stop the practice of female circumcisions partnered with women who trained and worked as practitioners of circumcision. Through discussions, they learned from those who controlled and oversaw rites of passages about what might constitute viable revisions to the initiation rites and how they could be successfully implemented.[39] Jaha Dukureh became a vocal Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) activist in the 2010s while living in the diaspora. She returned to The Gambia to live and advocate for ending the practice of genital modification; she underwent infibulation as a young child. Speaking from her own experience of genital modification, experiencing marriage and pregnancy, and witnessing the varied impacts of female genital cutting, Dukureh rose to prominence for her outspoken approach and activism around this issue. Her significant impacts in The Gambia and diaspora are likely to last a generation or more due to her influences on women who educate and socialize differently their female and male children on issues of the body and sexuality. The film *Jaha’s Promise* chronicles Dukureh’s life as a Gambian woman for a wider audience.[40]

Born in 1955, a decade before The Gambia achieved independence, Dr. Isatou Touray prominently impacted postcolonial social life, politics, and economy. She studied in local Gambian schools in Bathurst (Banjul) during her primary and secondary education. Despite societal norms and government inertia in promoting or supporting education for

women, Isatou Touray continued in the post-secondary phase to study for teacher training and certification at Crab Island Secondary Technical School and The Gambia College, where she was certified as a teacher in 1977. Dr. Touray then went on for a BA degree in English and Education with honors at Usmanu Dan Fodio University, in Sokoto, northern Nigeria. Like many Gambian women and men she studied abroad, as The Gambia had no bachelors-, masters-, or doctoral-granting institutions until 2001. Despite the lack of a cohort of other women pursuing postgraduate education, Touray pursued a master's degree in development studies with specialization in women and development, from the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague, The Netherlands. Touray's determination and desire to maximize her education was not deterred by the struggles she might face abroad or by being severed for long stretches of time from family and the familiar. Rather, her perseverance reflects her own vision and philosophy that would emerge in projects designed to create new opportunities for and address challenges faced by women in The Gambia. By 2004, Dr. Touray achieved a doctor of philosophy degree in development studies with emphasis on gender, from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom. Before she completed her studies, she co-founded GAMCOTRAP in 1984 and served as executive director of the NGO from 2015–2017. Following her educational achievements, Dr. Touray articulated the rights of Gambian people through her work as secretary general and board member of the Inter African Committee, from 2009–2014.[41] This pan-African network brought together representatives from twenty-eight African countries to discuss and think through values, history, and tradition while focusing specifically on eliminating harmful traditional practices. Dr. Isatou Touray's non-partisan work led her eventually to run for President of The Gambia in 2016. Though she did not become president, Touray's grass-roots activism and national political campaign created a model for women to endeavor toward high-level national politics in the future.[42]

It is important to note that while there are far fewer Gambian women than there are men in national politics and many professional careers—like medicine, education, and law—individual women have consistently demonstrated their interest, ability, and will to serve in various public spheres. From Cecilia Cole, who became the first woman to serve as Deputy Speaker of Parliament in The Gambia in 1997, to the many market women and prolific gardener-farmers—who though unidentified in historical records did lead the "garden boom"—women did achieve economic prominence, autonomy, and positions of authority throughout the 1980s and 1990s.[43]

Discussion of the Literature

Scholarship on women in The Gambia has developed slowly and piecemeal, beginning in the 1970s with studies primarily of agrarian life and contributions of women. While a comprehensive examination of women or gender in The Gambia has not been undertaken, several important ethnographic studies of Jola, Mandinka, and Soninke have been undertaken and do elaborate on women's roles within these communities.[44] By the early 2000s, short biographies of Gambian women began to emerge. There is a dearth of

scholarship specific to Gambian women and their activities. Uncovering historical, economic, social, and political developments, which women were instrumental in driving in what became The Gambia in 1965, requires thinking regionally about histories of western Africa, Senegambia, and the Upper Guinea Coast. Careful reading does reveal the rare mention of women living along the Gambia River banks. Works like Colleen Kriger's *Making Money: Life, Death, and Early Modern Trade on Africa's Guinea Coast*, if read closely, reveal that 17th-century Europeans typically turned to male leaders to negotiate economic and social deals.[45] The work's silence on women reveals a great deal about the nature of Afro-European relations, which resulted in marginalization of women in political and economic affairs. This is mirrored in scholarship; women are indirectly referenced in works on trade, economy, and politics of the region. In such works, women are not primary subjects and are overlooked almost entirely. Judith Carney undertakes a more comprehensive approach on Gambian women. In her work she examines contributions women made to agricultural production and inventions of new techniques in both the Atlantic era and in more recent decades. Similarly, Richard Schroeder expands on women's innovation in late-20th-century agriculture among Mandinka speakers along the Senegambian border in particular and the detrimental impacts women's entrepreneurship has had on marriages and the social landscape.[46] Several important works have been produced in the last half-century that have made the oddly formed, former British territory the sole focus of historical study. Women are even more gravely overlooked than The Gambia itself in the scholarship. The works of Hasoum Ceesay provide the most extensive presentation of women in the Gambia. The biographies Ceesay provides have rich detail about the lives of two dozen women. Also important, particularly in understanding Islam's impacts on women's lives in the last century, is Bala Saho's *Contours of Change: Muslim Courts, Women, and Islamic Society in Colonial Bathurst, the Gambia, 1905–1965*. Saho's work lays out both the constraints and opportunities Islam brought to bear on Gambian women's lives.[47]

Primary Sources

As an oral society well within the spheres of several large empires, much of Gambia's history is captured in the rich primary material of oral traditions that stretch from Mali to Guinea Bissau. A substantial corpus of oral history and oral tradition from The Gambia itself is available at the Oral History Archive in Fajara neighborhood outside Bathurst. Additionally, written sources about what in the 1960s became The Gambia exist in Arabic, English, French, and Portuguese for different historical periods stretching from the 1440s to the 1960s. Perhaps the largest body of material in a single location for the territory exists in written primary sources for the 19th and 20th centuries in the form of court records, government documents, and personal letters available in the Gambian National Archives in Bathurst. First-hand accounts from Portuguese, Italian, French, Dutch, British, and maritime merchants of other European kingdoms stretch back to the 15th century and continue well into the 19th century. These combined with sources from Islamic scholars both before and after European arrivals, colonial records, and writings that Gambians themselves produced in a variety of local and foreign languages provide a

rich corpus of primary sources for researchers interested in reconstructing aspects of social, cultural, political, or economic history in this geographic space. The Gambian National Archive in Banjul is an important repository of primary sources for The Gambia in the 19th and 20th centuries. Aside from early-20th-century research on slave-trading locales, little archaeology has been conducted in the region to help make sense of early history, gendered spaces, and women's roles.[48] There may be opportunities for future researchers to use satellite imaging to facilitate archaeological excavation in this arid territory, where material culture is likely relatively well preserved where the river has not repeatedly flooded over the centuries. There are several important museums in Bathurst and upriver that contain historical material that sheds light on gender in a variety of social contexts before, during, and after the slave trade. These include the National Museum in Banjul, the Tanji Museum just outside Banjul, and the Museum of Slavery in Jufureh.

This article provides a sampling of the women who have shaped the Gambia River territories over the last six centuries; it is hardly exhaustive on well-known women or even the broader contours of Gambian women's history. It does, however, point to the incredibly complex realities of women, who as a social category wielded authority but were marginalized, had economic autonomy but were among the poorest, and who found ways to use the systems that oppressed them to fight subjugation with customary practices, Islamic law, and colonial courts. Future scholars of women and gender in The Gambia have a wide spectrum of topics to engage that are valuable and remain to be covered. Future works might illuminate the importance Aku, Bambara, Fula, Jola, Mandinka, Manjago, Serahulle, Serer, and Wollof women have had in the Gambia River region from precolonial times to the present and in the wider Atlantic world since the 1440s.

Links to Digital Materials

GAMCOTRAP and Girl Generation History. This website provides background information on the origins and mission of the organization as well as an overview of its current and past initiatives. The **Girl Generation** site, a more recent initiative, also suggests resources for communities and educators looking to combat harmful cultural practices.

Signares: Artists' Depictions. This website is a repository for visual representations of Signarés as depicted by European artists, often as beautiful and fashionable women or often by government officials and policies as deceptive and depraved members of society. The images reveal that Gambian women have long occupied and negotiated liminal spaces between local cultural norms, Islamic belief and practice, European desires, and colonial policies. All of this exists in conjunction with their own aspirations and efforts to self-define and portray themselves as accomplished and capable individuals.[49]

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