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# MATRIARCHAL DOMINANCE IN THE KINGDOMS OF KOMBO AND NIUMI IN PRE-COLONIAL SENEGAMBIA

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A thesis submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts in History



OCTOBER 21, 2025  
BY JEAM SARR  
**University of The Gambia**

**MATRIARCHAL DOMINANCE IN THE KINGDOMS OF KOMBO AND NIUMI IN  
PRE-COLONIAL SENEGAMBIA**

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**A thesis submitted to the  
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**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the  
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# CERTIFICATION

**DIVISION OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES**



**UNIVERSITY OF THE GAMBIA**

I certify that this thesis entitled *Matriarchal Dominance in the Kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi in Pre-colonial Senegambia*, was undertaken by **Mr. Jeam Sarr**, in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in History.

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JEAM SARR

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my two daughters Hawa Sarr and Aminata Sarr in reflection of the life and achievements of my late mother Mrs. Hawa Nduur (1963 – 2021), the fallen matriarch of my family.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores matriarchal dominance in the pre-colonial kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi in the Gambia Valley, Senegambia. It aims to examine the scope of female political authority, identify the major queens of both kingdoms, and explain the factors that led to the decline of matriarchal rule. The study focuses on Kombo on the southern bank and Niumi on the northern bank of the Gambia River, covering the period from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries.

A qualitative historical approach was used, relying mainly on oral traditions supported by documentary sources. Oral data were gathered from interviews with seven elder informants and archival recordings at the National Centre for Arts and Culture. These were complemented by relevant secondary historical and linguistic sources.

The findings show that matriarchal governance was widespread in pre-colonial Senegambia. In the north, among the Serer and Wolof, women held political power through the title *Linguer*, while in the south, among the Bainunk and Jolaa, women combined political and spiritual leadership. Within this setting, Kombo was ruled by Queen Wulending Jassey, daughter of Kambi Jassey, and Niumi by twelve successive queens of the Jammeh lineage, whose reigns spanned more than a century.

The study concludes that the rise of the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century and strategic marriages gradually ended matriarchal rule. The unions of Queens Wulending Jassey and Musa Mamakimereng transferred power to patriarchal rulers, marking the transition from female-led governance to male political dominance in both kingdoms.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

### 1.1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout modern history, Afrocentric scholars from both humanistic and social scientific traditions have employed multidisciplinary approaches to support the monogenetic theory of human evolution. This theory reinforces the idea that Africa is the birthplace of humanity and human civilization. Additionally, matriarchy, a political system in which women hold dominant roles, was the oldest socio-political institution first practiced in Africa before any other part of the world. From ancient times to the later pre-colonial period, matriarchs and women rulers occupied the highest positions in traditional African political systems.

It is important to note that the concept of matriarchy has roots in the early stages of human civilization, particularly in ancient African societies such as Egypt, Nubia, and Axum. Scholars like Diop have suggested that matriarchy was a characteristic of the African origin of civilization, particularly in ancient Egypt.<sup>1</sup> This matriarchal system involved women passing down political rights through matrilineal descent. Consequently, matriarchy is seen as a unique feature of the African world in contrast to the Western world.

Queen Hatshepsut, from the 18th Pharaonic dynasty of Egypt, is considered to be the first queen in history.<sup>2</sup> She was the only living child of Queen Ahmose and Thutmose I, who were both children of Amenhotep I and his sister Akhotpon II. Her father crowned her and married her to

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<sup>1</sup> Okafor, V. O. (1990). "Diop and the African Origin of Civilization: An Afrocentric Analysis." *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 22, No. 2. Sage Publications, Inc. Pp. 266

<sup>2</sup> Diop, C. A. (1989). *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Karnak House, London. Pp. 103

Thutmose II, his son from another wife, as per the ancient Egyptian tradition of matrilineal consanguinity, involving marriage between blood relatives. In a similar example, ancient Egyptian records reportedly mention Queen Khentkawes from the 4th dynasty, who was the mother of the first two kings of the 5th dynasty and had a grand tomb. These records also confirm the existence of four to seven female pharaohs who ruled independently.<sup>3</sup> While these evidences do not definitively indicate the status of Egyptian women, most sources suggest that ancient Egyptian society was matrilineal, as a man identified himself as the son of a specific mother. In the same way, property was inherited through the mother line. Moreover, the right to become a pharaoh was determined through the mother's lineage.

Like Egypt, historical evidence has it that in Nubia, especially in the Bronze Age, ruling was based on matrilineal descent.<sup>4</sup> Nubian queens are said to have raided a number of powerful neighboring kingdoms and empires in those days, thus showing the extent of ancient African matriarchal achievements. For instance, Queen Amanirenas clashed with the Romans in 24 B.C., eventually defeating them. She famously defaced a statue of Caesar and buried it in Nubia.<sup>5</sup> Another queen, Shanakdakheto, is depicted in a bas-relief in battle armor.<sup>6</sup> These instances, aside from showing Nubian queens leading battles, symbolize the importance of matrilineal descent in Nubian society.

The ancient Axumite Empire, located in present-day Ethiopia, was a dominant force in the Red Sea and the Nubian Nile area around 100 BC, surpassing Egypt and Nubia in magnificence and power. The people of Axum initially followed the old Eastern Kushite religion, but in the early

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<sup>3</sup> Saidi, C. (2020). Women in Precolonial Africa. Department of History, Kutztown University. Pp. 9-10

<sup>4</sup> Hakem, A. A. M. (1979). "The Matriarchs of Meroe: A powerful line of Queens who ruled the Kushite Empire." *The UNESCO Courier: a window open on the world*. Pp.59

<sup>5</sup> Kneller, T.L. (1993). "Neither Goddesses Nor Doormats: The Role of Women in Nubia." Syracuse University. <https://www.africa.upenn.edu>

<sup>6</sup> Saidi, C. (2020). Women in Precolonial Africa. Department of History, Kutztown University. Pp. 9

400 CE, the elites of Axum converted to Christianity, paralleling the same period of Christian conversion in Europe. Among the Eastern Kushites, the Agaw, who resisted the conversion to Christianity, was led by a matriarch named Queen Gudit. She is believed to have conquered Christian Axum around 950 CE and overthrew the Axumite ruling dynasty as well as destroyed churches and Christian monuments.<sup>7</sup> The fame and glory associated with Queen Gudit also stands testimony to the extent of matriarchal dominance in the ancient African world.

In the Horn of Africa, lies the ruins of the Tuareg people, a group with a matriarchal system where women inherit political power. For example, the area of the Hoggar Mountains, in present-day Algeria, was ruled by powerful Tuareg queens known as "Tamenokalts," the most prominent being Tin Hinan.<sup>8</sup> She hailed from Tafilalet in South Morocco and is believed to be the original ancestress of the Tuareg people. Archaeological excavations of her tomb, which dates from 300 C.E., reportedly revealed that she was buried with a great deal of gold and other valuable items. Again, the case of Tin Hinan of the Tuaregs confirms the prevalence of matriarchal dominance in ancient Africa.

In East, Central, and Southern Africa, historical evidence suggests that matriarchy and matrilineal descent were prevalent in the social structure of the native peoples, since, for example, among the Swazi in the region, the relationship between a son and his mother encompassed both protection and affection.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, matriarchy and matrilineal descent were ancient social phenomena among the Bantu people. Recent linguistic and genetic studies indicate that as they migrated, they organized into matrilineal clans, practiced male circumcision, and

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<sup>7</sup> Saidi, C. (2020). Women in Precolonial Africa. Department of History, Kutztown University. Pp. 10

<sup>8</sup> Matriarchal History and Archaeology. (2015). "The Tuaregs: Doomed genuine Berber civilization." <https://www.myrine.at>

<sup>9</sup> Diop, C. A. (1989). *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Karnak House, London Pp. 62

held male and female initiation rites at puberty.<sup>10</sup> This dominant matrilineal custom of the peoples in this region is said to have led to the area being referred to as the matrilineal belt.

Finally, in the ancient Western Sudanese empires of Ghana and Mali, matriarchy and matrilineal descent dominated the socio-political structures. According to Arab chroniclers, succession to the throne in Ghana was based on matrilineal descent. Similarly, matriarchy and matrilineal descent were prevalent among the Malinke of the ancient Mali Empire.<sup>11</sup> These evidences, therefore, demonstrate the widespread presence of matriarchy in the ancient societies of West Africa.

Based on this evidence of matriarchal dominance in the ancient African and West African societies, it was necessary to propose a study on the existence of the same phenomenon in the Gambia Valley area of pre-colonial Senegambia. The twin matriarchal kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi, therefore, were used as the core of this proposed inquiry.

## **1.2. STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

It is widely believed that, before the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, matriarchal rule had been a dominant phenomenon in the states and kingdoms that sprang up in the Gambia Valley area of pre-colonial Senegambia. Oral tradition, supported by references in written records, indicates the presence of powerful queens in the various states and kingdoms, suggesting widespread matriarchal dominance in the communities that thrived on both the northern and southern banks of the Gambia River.

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<sup>10</sup> Saidi, C. (2020). Women in Precolonial Africa. Department of History, Kutztown University. Pp. 12

<sup>11</sup> Diop, C. A. (1989). *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Karnak House, London. Pp. 60

However, the stories of pre-colonial queens have not received much attention from Gambianist scholars and historians, both at home and abroad, despite the fame and glory associated with them. Until recently, most studies focused mainly on the history of patriarchy and patriarchs. This has created significant gaps in scholarships regarding the lives and times of these matriarchs, as well as other important issues surrounding them. These issues include the social order of the time that may have facilitated their rise to political prominence, their spiritual, religious, and economic potential and possessions, and the various contributions they might have rendered toward the growth and survival of the pre-colonial kingdoms and societies they led.

Thus, the little attention shown by Gambian historians towards the history of matriarchy in the historiography is a clear example of gendered indifference. Therefore, this thesis was seen as an important and timely scholarly effort.

### **1.3. THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following were the specific questions designed to ensure an in-depth exploration of the history of matriarchal political rule in the kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi, during the pre-colonial era:

- a. What was the scope of matriarchal dominance in pre-colonial Senegambi?
- b. Who were the queens of Kombo and Niumi and how did they emerge?
- c. What factors caused the decline and fall of matriarchal rule in the kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi?

#### **1.4. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study utilized the following specific objectives:

- a. To examine the scope of matriarchal dominance in pre-colonial Senegambi.
- b. To uncover the identities, lives and times of the queens of Kombo and Niumi, and determine the process of their emergence into prominence.
- c. To exemplify the decline and fall of matriarchal rule in the kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi.

#### **1.5. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

In light of the renewed scholarly interest in the topic of matriarchal dominance in the Gambia Valley area of pre-colonial Senegambia, and the growing public attention it is receiving, this study provided a comprehensive examination and documentation of this overlooked subject. This pioneering study holds significant relevance for different sectors of present-day African and Gambian society.

This thesis sought to challenge the academic misconception of Africa as a continent of patriarchy and address the historical neglect of Gambian scholars. It provides new insights into resolving contemporary gender problems through historical analysis.

The extensive research efforts aimed at acquiring historical facts will significantly alleviate the existing scarcity of information. While not serving as a direct reference on the socio-political role of women in pre-colonial Kombo and Niumi, this study will provide a valuable roadmap for future scholars delving into the history of matriarchal rule in the Gambia Valley.

Outside of the field of historical studies, this thesis proposed to attain an interdisciplinary potential. In this sense, its findings will be of interest to scholars and activists in other fields of scholarship. This is especially so for feminist scholars and researchers, for instance, who, in dispelling the widely acclaimed fact of patriarchal dominance, argue in support of the fact that women had an up-ward socio-political status in the traditional African society. In that quest, it will serve as a reference in such Afro-feminist quest to repudiate the notion of patriarchal dominance of the traditional African society as opined by some Western scholars and their African counterparts, who are gullibly inclined to the belief that society has ever been under the domination of men.

The study will provide substantial value to historical enthusiasts by offering insights into the significant power and authority that Gambian women once held within traditional society. These findings will play a critical role in documenting the history of Gambian women and will constitute an essential component of the national memory.

## **1.6. THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This study focused on the twin kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi, both of which are situated within the context of the Gambia Valley region of pre-colonial Senegambia. Forming a narrow strip of land on both banks of the Gambia River, the Gambia Valley is situated at the intersection between northern and southern Senegambia. This is because the Gambia River served as the geopolitical border between the northern and southern habitats of Senegambia.

The spatial scope encompassed the territories of the Gambia Valley, delineating the limits of the two pre-colonial kingdoms. The town of Sanyang, situated in the present-day West Coast Region, is believed to have been the administrative hub of the kingdom. The investigation into

the existence of matriarchy in pre-colonial Kombo, therefore, centered on the Kombo area of the region with Sanyang as the focal point. Bakindiki, on the other hand, situated in the present-day North Bank Region, is equally acclaimed as the administrative capital of the matriarchal kingdom of Niumi. As such, the inquiry into the matriarchal history of Niumi was confined to the Niumi area of North Bank region, with the town of Bakindiki as the primary focus.

The historical period spans from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, which symbolizes the height of the Ghana Empire and its political, economic, and cultural influence over the states and kingdoms in the Gambia Valley. The mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, on the other hand, marked the rise of the Mali Empire and the expansion of its political influence, leading to the decline of matriarchies and the rise of patriarchal dominance in the political, economic, and cultural spheres of the native communities of the Gambia Valley. Therefore, the periodic scope was limited to the mid-13th century.

## **1.7. CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE AND RESEARCH**

This study has the potential to contribute to knowledge in numerous ways. This is undoubted, considering the nature and focus of its inquiry regarding the existence of matriarchs in pre-colonial Gambia.

First, it will help to discover critical historical facts on the emergence and existence of matriarchy in the traditional societies of the Gambia Valley. These valuable facts include the historical origins of the two matriarchies, how they established their political legitimacies, the administrative method adopted in each matriarchy, and how the mid-13th-century expansion of the Mali Empire impacted the political decline and transition to patriarchal dominance of the two kingdoms. Therefore, the discovery of these details will serve as a significant contribution to the body of knowledge about the existence of matriarchs in traditional Gambia.

Secondly, in consideration of the prevailing oral narratives, along with the limited number of published works on the subject, this study aims to ascertain or validate the proposed particulars regarding the existence of matriarchy in traditional Gambia. This validating potential will further enable it to function as a reference source for future academic historians, as well as students, educators, and general historical enthusiasts.

In addition to its capacity to uncover new insights and validate existing knowledge, this study aims to enhance the comprehension of the emergence and existence of matriarchy in traditional Gambia; a topic that has been previously identified yet has received limited attention from Gambianist scholars and historians. Consequently, the advancement of this previously established knowledge will also facilitate further research on related issues concerning matriarchy and gender diversity during the pre-colonial era.

## **1.8. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is well positioned within the frameworks of both the Afro-feminist theory of gender dynamics and the “Two Cradle” Theory of human evolution as proposed by Cheikh Anta Diop. Afro-feminism serves as a feminist theory and a form of rhetoric that offers a multitude of arguments intended to validate the experiences of African women and individuals of African descent, in contrast to the mainstream (Western) interpretation of feminism.<sup>12</sup> It represents an African feminist adaptation of the Black Feminist Theory articulated in the United States during the mid-19th century, which gained prominence in the latter part of the 20th century.<sup>13</sup> The advent of Afro-feminism is associated with the legacy of the Second Wave of mainstream

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<sup>12</sup> Goredema, R. (2010). “African feminism: the African women’s struggles for identity.” *Sabinet African Journals*. Pp. 34

<sup>13</sup> Weida, K. (2023). “Black feminism.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-feminism>

feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which have been criticized for marginalizing black women by predominantly excluding them from leadership roles within women's rights organizations.<sup>14</sup> The theory reportedly encompasses three principal themes: firstly, the establishment of an identity by black women; secondly, the varied experiences of oppression faced by black women in comparison to other women; and thirdly, the illustration of parallels and differences among black women regarding sexual identity, socio-economic status, and ethnicity.

The Afro-feminist theory critiques Western feminism for its perceived anti-male stance, thereby contravening the fundamental values associated with marriage, childbearing, and the preservation of the family unit.<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, this thesis counters such biased interpretations of feminism by striving to unveil how familial structures in both Kombo and Niumi fostered a harmonious and complementary relationship between men and women, which significantly contributed to the survival and continuity of these two pre-colonial kingdoms within the Gambia Valley.

Afro-feminists endeavor to explore a new dimension of feminism by dispelling previously adopted tenets of Western feminism.<sup>16</sup> It is deemed necessary to re-conceptualize the need for more applicable methods to address the marginalization of black women. Consequently, this thesis highlights the intellectual pursuit of re-conceptualizing and addressing the various forms of marginalization encountered by African women through the delineation of the achievements of the matriarchs of Kombo and Niumi.

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<sup>14</sup> Johnson, L. (2023). "Black Women and Theoretical Frameworks." *The Scholarship without Borders Journal*. Vol. 1: Iss. 2. Article 1. Pp. 8

<sup>15</sup> Stuhlhofer, E. W. (2004). "Navigating African Feminisms: Wangari Maathai as a Portrait." *Paper for the Africa Knows! Conference; Panel G42 (Nobel Foundation 2004)*. Department of Philosophy, University of South Africa. Pp. 1

<sup>16</sup> Tamale, S. (2020). *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Daraja Press, Ottawa. Pp. 40

According to Afro-feminists, the Western educational system perpetuates racist and sexist stereotypes regarding the superiority of Western concepts and patriarchal beliefs centered on male dominance.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, they critique frameworks predicated on polarized dualisms such as male versus female and husband versus wife, which only serve to exacerbate antagonistic divisions. They advocate instead for a paradigm of “transformational feminism” that aims to reconstruct the traditional barriers separating men and women, or masculine and feminine.<sup>18</sup> In alignment with this endeavor, the exploration of the matriarchies of Kombo and Niumi is intended to dismantle such gender biases and antagonisms, as it seeks to elucidate the nature of complementarity within the gender dynamics of these two matriarchal kingdoms in the Gambia Valley region of pre-colonial Senegambia.

The Afro-feminists underscore the necessity of exploring the continent’s history to avert distorted interpretations of the African past. In this manner, they aim to significantly enhance the field of African political studies, particularly in relation to the state and statecraft, by providing gendered analyses of political structures, institutions, and practices.<sup>19</sup> In accordance with this Afro-feminist perspective, this thesis seeks to explore the intricate historical context of matriarchy within the traditional communities of Kombo and Niumi.

The subject of the matriarchies of pre-colonial Kombo and Niumi aligns seamlessly with the framework of Diop’s “Two Cradle” theory. In his seminal work, *Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, Diop critiques the prevailing theories of human origin, particularly those proposed by Bachofen, Morgan, and Engels, and posits that humanity originated from two geographically distinct

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<sup>17</sup> Tamale, S. (2020). *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Daraja Press, Ottawa. Pp. 40

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Pp. 40

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Pp. 41

cradles, namely, the Southern Cradle and the Northern Cradle.<sup>20</sup> He asserts that the Northern (or Indo-European) Cradle has exhibited a patriarchal character from its inception, whereas the Southern (or African) Cradle has demonstrated a matriarchal character, with women serving as the most crucial components in the social organization.<sup>21</sup> In alignment with this assertion, this thesis is contextualized within the Southern Cradle, as the dual matriarchal kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi, both located within the Gambia Valley region of pre-colonial Senegambia, are integral to the Southern or African Hemisphere.

In a comprehensive analysis of critical comparative arguments, Diop elucidates how the geographical distinctions between the Northern and Southern hemispheres prompted each region to develop a distinct social structure. Consequently, whereas the Eurasian Steppes of the North favored a nomadic lifestyle, the Southern Hemisphere supported an agricultural and sedentary lifestyle. He posits that Comparative Linguistics provides evidence of the exclusive presence of a patriarchal family structure among the Indo-European tribes of the North prior to their subdivision into the Aryans, Greeks, and Romans, asserting that this nomadic lifestyle was characteristic of them all.<sup>22</sup> He contends that both Herodotus and Diodorus of Sicily affirmed that the Scythians resided in “wagons,” akin to the Germans during a subsequent period.<sup>23</sup> This observation indicates that these groups functioned as nomadic migratory tribes. This conclusion is further corroborated by the absence of a generic term for the word “city” within any of their languages.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, this divergence in lifestyle elucidates significant insights concerning the understanding of gender diversity in relation to the complexities of the socio-economic environments of the two regions.

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<sup>20</sup> Diop, C. A. (1989). *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Karnak House, London. United Kingdom. Pp. 21

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Pp. 21

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Pp. 21-27

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Pp. 21-27

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Pp. 21-27

It is contended that, due to their perpetually nomadic lifestyle and the predominant “patrilineal regimes” in the North, the Indo-European woman had lost her productive value, reducing her to merely a burden that was dragged behind the man. Aside from her frustrations related to childbearing, she held no other functional role in such a nomadic society.<sup>25</sup> In the context of marriage, due to her limited economic value, it was the woman who was obliged to depart from her family to join that of her husband.

In contrast to this diminished status of the Indo-European woman, the sedentary societies of the South adhered to “matrilineal regimes” wherein the woman was regarded as the most valuable entity. Women possessed substantial opportunities to grow and thrive within the socio-economic environments. The social structure mandated that it was the man who left his clan to reside within that of his wife. In this manner, the African woman significantly contributed to the economic life of society.<sup>26</sup> The elevated status of women in ancient African society resonates with the esteemed position likely acquired by each of the matriarchs of Kombo and Niumi during that period.

According to Diop, the Indo-European society denied women their natural rights to inheritance: a woman who departs from her own *genos* (gens) to join her husband’s gens becomes attached to her husband and ultimately lost the chance to inherit from her family of origin. She loses the right to participate in her family’s worship, which further isolates her from all other vital relationships within her clan. Furthermore, she must compensate for her economic non-viability by remitting a “dowry” to her husband.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Diop, C. A. (1989). *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Karnak House, London. United Kingdom. Pp. 27

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Pp. 27

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Pp. 23

In contrast to such a biased custom against women, the sedentary societies of the South recognized inheritance through the female line. For instance, a child does not inherit from his father; rather, he inherits from his mother's brother, who is responsible for marrying him to his daughter to ensure that the latter is not entirely disinherited. In this manner, all political rights were exclusively transmitted through the mother line. Except in circumstances of the forceful seizure of power, princes whose mothers did not hold the title of princess could not ascend to the throne in the African South.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the unencumbered right to inheritance, bestowed upon African women, is regarded as significant in examining the political legitimacies granted to the matriarchs of pre-colonial Kombo and Niumi.

In the absence of any customary practice of descent, the Indo-European patriarchal society resorted to inhumane practices against women, such as female infanticide and the sale of women, since they possessed an unrestricted right to engage in such actions. The man held authority over the life and death of the woman. Even in circumstances where the husband faced the imminent specter of death, he retained the right to sell the woman or designate a future husband for her.<sup>29</sup>

Conversely, women in sedentary African societies enjoyed a superior social standing and significant economic viability. Their fertility was equally crucial for the survival of their communities, as childbearing ensured continuous livelihoods. The larger the family unit, the greater its agricultural productivity. Furthermore, Southern societies were structured according to kinship ties, which allowed both men and women to play equally vital roles within the community. Consequently, descent was traced through the maternal line. A woman even possessed the right to expel her husband at her own discretion should he fail to fulfill his marital

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<sup>28</sup> Diop, C. A. (1989). *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Karnak House, London. United Kingdom. Pp. 23

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Pp. 23

obligations satisfactorily.<sup>30</sup> The elevated status of African women represents a critical point of reference in the investigation concerning the upward socio-political standing attributed to the matriarchs of pre-colonial Kombo and Niumi.

Historical accounts maintain that throughout antiquity, the Indo-European societies positioned the father at the helm of domestic and societal affairs. Children of two sisters were required to belong to their fathers' respective clans. Their mothers, in turn, were not permitted to inherit from one another. Only the eldest male child was eligible to inherit from the father. In the absence of any male offspring, it was the brother of the deceased who was entitled to inheritance, rather than the sister. Should there be no brothers, a male ancestor from the nearest collateral branch would be identified, and one of his male descendants would be chosen as the head.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to this nomadic custom, matrilineal consanguinity was predominant in African society. All matters relating to the mother were regarded as sacred. She possessed unlimited voice, power, and authority. Moreover, she had the right to select a suitor for her child without the necessity of consulting the suitor's family.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, this agrarian custom of matrilineal consanguinity ensured that children were wed to their close relatives. This practice reinforced the stability of African society from ancient times through the later pre-colonial period. Thus, this backdrop of matriarchal dominance in traditional Africa serves as the foundation for the study of the history of the matriarchs of Kombo and Niumi, located in the Gambia Valley.

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<sup>30</sup> Diop, C. A. (1989). *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Karnak House, London. United Kingdom. Pp. 28

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Pp. 30

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Pp. 30

## 1.9. THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse regarding the existence of matriarchs in pre-colonial Kombo and Niumi can best be understood within the framework of the Afrocentric approach to the history of human evolution. Afrocentric scholars from both within and outside of the continent delved significantly into the African origin of humanity and pointed out that the ancient African family, with its inherent matrilineal custom of social heredity, was the primordial family form. This African family gave rise to the emergence and dominance of matriarchy in various parts of the continent's ancient and later pre-colonial societies.

### 01. Literature on Traditional Senegambian Matriarchal Dominance

The study of West African history has traditionally emphasized the patriarchal systems of large empires like Ghana and Mali. Foundational works such as Levtzion's *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, published in 1973, and Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, 1965, focused on male rulers, warriors, and lineage heads.<sup>33</sup> Ajayi and Crowder's *History of West Africa*, published in 1985, provides a broad survey, yet, too, largely overlooks women's authority.<sup>34</sup> These works remain important for contextualizing the rise of the Mali Empire, which played a decisive role in weakening matriarchal governance in Senegambia, but they do not address queenship or female-led political systems.

In contrast, oral and ethnographic traditions suggest women exercised significant political influence. Vansina's *Oral Traditions as History*, published in 1985, makes a methodological

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<sup>33</sup> Levtzion, N. (1973). *Ancient Ghana and Mali*. Methuen & Company Limited, London. <https://sahistory.org.za>

<sup>34</sup> Niane, D. T. (1965). *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. Forum Series. Longman African classics. <https://books.google.com>

case for treating oral traditions as valid sources of history, emphasizing their ability to preserve pre-colonial institutions that has not been well documented by earlier Arab and European texts.<sup>35</sup> Gamble's work *The Wolof of Senegambia: Together with notes on the Lebou and the Serer*, 1957, documents matrilineal inheritance and female political roles among Wolof and Serer societies, which parallel the oral accounts of the queen's of Niumi.<sup>36</sup> These works demonstrate the importance of re-centering oral data in historical reconstructions.

Regional studies of Senegambia also provide relevant context. Barry's *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 1998, positions the region within Atlantic and trans-Saharan networks, noting the resilience of local institutions, though his emphasis is on trade rather than governance.<sup>37</sup> Curtin's *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 1975, focuses on economic change and external influences, which helps explain the structural pressures that may have undermined matriarchal authority.<sup>38</sup> Conrad and Fisher provide insights into Almoravid Muslim expansion in their 1982 work, *The Conquest that Never Was: Ghana and the Almoravids, 1076*, helping explain the migrations of ethnic groups like the Serer and Jolaa into Senegambia during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a process that shaped the demographic and political foundations of Niumi.<sup>39</sup>

Despite these contributions, Gambian and wider African historiography still show more attention to patriarchal rulers. Oral traditions collected in the 1970s and preserved at the Research and

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<sup>35</sup> Vansina, J. (1985). *Oral Tradition as History*. UNESCO Digital Library, UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org>

<sup>36</sup> Gamble, D. P. (1957). *The Wolof of Senegambia: Together with Notes on the Lebou and the Serer*. Vol. 1, Part 14. International African Institute. <https://books.google.com>

<sup>37</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom.

<sup>38</sup> Curtin, P. (1975). *Economic Change in Pre-colonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>39</sup> Conrad, D. & Fisher, H. J. (1983). "The Conquest That Never Was: Ghana and the Almoravids, 1076. II. The Local Oral Sources." *History in Africa*. Vol. 10. Pp. 53-78. <https://www.jstor.org>

Documentation Division (RDD) of The Gambia's National Center for Arts and Culture include detailed accounts of queens, succession disputes, and female-led kingdoms and institutions. Similarly, a number of elder-geneological members of the descendant families of the queen of Kombo and the queens of Niumi, still live, the likes of Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh of Sitanunku village, Alhagie Jung Conteh of Faraba Banta village, and Alhagie Fa Ceesay of Mandinaring village, whose accounts, originating from Arabic chroniclers who lived in the area in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, have not been documented and systematically analyzed.

## **02. Literature on the Wider Traditional African Matriarchal Dominance**

In his work *The Ancient Egyptian Family, Kinship and Social Structure*, Allen emphasizes the peculiarities of the traditional family customs as the foundation of matriarchal dominance in the continent. For instance, he claims that marriage in ancient Egyptian society seemed to have been a private act between families that was culturally recognized. For this reason, he observes that words like mother-in-law, father-in-law, brother-in-law, and sister-in-law lack the inherent cultural foundations to describe the ancient Egyptian family. He cites the "Instruction Texts" of the ancient Egyptians, which dates to the Old Kingdom, and gives candid advice on marriage, morality, fidelity, and the importance of family. In the texts, Prince Hardjedef advises his son that, when he prospers, he should find a "household," and take a hearty wife; if he does, a son will be born of him, for whom the house is to be built. According to him, the ancient Egyptians used the term *grg pr*, which was translated to mean "to 'found or establish your household.'" In

this manner, a man and woman married by erecting a “house” together.<sup>40</sup> This, therefore, shows the peculiarity of the ancient Egyptian family.

Allen notes that the ancient Egyptian husband and wife were often from close family groups. The primary function of this blood-related marriage was to reproduce children and perpetuate the family.<sup>41</sup> Diop, in his *Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, corroborates this fact. He associates this blood-related marriage ties with the dominance of the Egyptian principle of matrilineal consanguinity. He notes that marriage with a sister was a product of the dominant matrilineal law. According to him, the woman transmitted all rights, political and otherwise, since she was the stable element in such an agricultural society. Unlike the woman, the man was relatively mobile since he often traveled and emigrated.<sup>42</sup> Thus, like Allen, Diop emphasizes that the woman's primary role in ancient Egyptian society was to reproduce and sustain the children.

Diop adds that this blood-related form of marriage was also propagated to prevent succession crises between cousins, specifically the sons of brothers and sisters. Within the framework of the royal family, the Egyptians upheld the marriage tradition that their gods, Isis and Osiris, are believed to have instituted. Isis was the sister of Osiris. Based on the marriage between these two divine siblings, a more significant percentage of inheritance was often designated for the woman. The child of the sister (wife) alone can inherit the throne. The child of the brother (husband) can only rule in his mother's land if such a matrilineal law existed there. He could not become king without such a law unless he usurped the throne.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the pharaoh retained his dynasty's control over political power while preventing succession crises. Diop emphasizes that the

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<sup>40</sup> Allen, T. D. (2008). *The Ancient Egyptian Family, Kinship and Social Structure*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis e—Library. Pp. 29

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Pp. 29

<sup>42</sup> Diop, C. A. (1989). *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Karnak House, London. United Kingdom. PP. 53

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. PP. 53

pharaoh who marries his sister is simultaneously his son's uncle. Only the pharaoh's nephew could inherit his possessions, excluding his son. This matrilineal marriage tradition played a key role in ensuring the stability and continuity of the African family.

Allen highlights that the ancient African family promoted peace by valuing women greatly. He describes the ancient Egyptian marriage as being built on love and respect. He references advice on treating a wife, which is attributed to *Any*. This ancient text cautions men against controlling their wives at home, particularly when her abilities are known. Instead of asking, "Where is it?" A man should take initiative by saying, "Get it!" Furthermore, when she has organized things correctly, he is advised to observe her efforts quietly to appreciate her skill.<sup>44</sup> The text reportedly continues:

It is joy when your hand is with her,  
There are many who don't understand this,  
If a man desist from strife at home,  
He will not meet its beginning.  
Every man that founds a household  
should hold back the hasty heart.<sup>45</sup>

Diop presents similar arguments regarding the peaceful nature of the ancient Egyptian family. According to him, there is no evidence, either in literature or historical records, Egyptian or otherwise, of the systematic ill-treatment of Egyptian women by their men. Ancient Egyptian women were respected, moved about freely, and unveiled, unlike certain Asian women. He notes that the affection for one's mother, especially the respect with which it was necessary to surround her, was the most sacred of duties.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the essence of ancient African marriage was fundamentally peaceful.

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<sup>44</sup> Allen, T. D. (2008). *The Ancient Egyptian Family, Kinship and Social Structure*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis e—Library. Pp. 30

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Pp. 30

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Pp. 54

The rise of queens and queen-mothers to the helm of the political affairs of most ancient African societies can be attributed to the dominance of the matrilineal custom of descent and social heredity. Hakem, in his article entitled “The Matriarchs of Meroe: A powerful line of Queens who Ruled the Kushite Empire,” cites evidence regarding the nature of the Nubian royal right to the throne, which he accentuates was predominantly based on maternal claims rather than paternal ones.<sup>47</sup> These matrilineal claims, therefore, served as a principal catalyst for the political role and influence exerted by the Queen- Mother in this ancient African society.

The ancient Egyptians are said to have referred to the Upper Nile region as *Kush*, which subsequently became a province under the broader Nubian kingdom. Lower Nubia remained under Egyptian control from 1550 B. C. to 1100 B. C.<sup>48</sup> Classical authors, such as Herodotus, are reportedly noted to have referred to the inhabitants of Kush as the *Aethiopians*.<sup>49</sup> Modern Ethiopia, which formed part of the extensive Kushite Empire, is considered to have derived its nomenclature from this term. By the commencement of the 18th Dynasty, Egypt is reported to have acquired full control over both Lower and Upper Nubia, with only Southern Nubia retaining its independence.<sup>50</sup> Thus, given the substantial similarities shared between the ancient Egyptians and Nubians, it comes as no surprise that a significant number of ancient Egyptian queens were of Nubian descent. For instance, Queen Nefertari, who was designated as the queen of peace and married Rameses II in 1225 BCE, is believed to have been a Nubian woman.<sup>51</sup> The level of authority wielded by these Egyptian queens of Nubian origin is traditionally symbolized

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<sup>47</sup> Hakem, A. M. (1979). “The Matriarchs of Meroe. A powerful line of Queens who Ruled the Kushite Empire.” *The UNESCO Courier: a window open on the world*. XXXII, 8/9. UNESCO Digital Library. Pp. 58

<sup>48</sup> Kneller; T. L. (1993). “Neither Goddesses Nor Doormats: The Role of Women in Nubia.” Syracuse University. <https://www.africa.upenn.edu>

<sup>49</sup> Hakem, A. M. (1979). “The Matriarchs of Meroe. A powerful line of Queens who Ruled the Kushite Empire.” *The Unesco Courier: a window open on the world*. XXXII, 8/9. UNESCO Digital Library Pp. 58

<sup>50</sup> Kneller; T. L. (1993) “Neither Goddesses Nor Doormats: The Role of Women in Nubia.” Syracuse University. <https://www.africa.upenn.edu>

<sup>51</sup> Saidi, C. (2020). *Women in Precolonial Africa*. Department of History, Kutztown University. Pp. 9

through statues and tomb art that are of equivalent dimensions to those of the Pharaohs. This, in the Egyptian perspective, reportedly indicates that they possessed equal political status to that of the Pharaohs.<sup>52</sup> Thus, Nubian women, like their Egyptian counterparts, attained substantial political power and authority.

Hakem claims the existence of three distinct queens from the later Nubian period, whom he suggests were either mothers or wives, and who assumed political power. According to him, these queens proclaimed themselves rulers and even adopted the royal titles *Sa Re, neb Tawy* (Son of Re, Lord of the Two Lands) or *Sa Re, Nswbit* (Son of Re and King).<sup>53</sup> He further explains that the Nubian term for a female ruler derives from the Meroitic word *ktke* or *K(d)ke*, which means either “queen-mother” or “queen.” Another royal title, *qere*, meaning “ruler,” also existed but was utilized only after the advent of the Meroitic script. Saidi confirms that the modern English name *Candace* is derived from this term (*ktke* or *K(d)ke*) for a Nubian female ruler.<sup>54</sup> Thus, this evidence attests to the political role played by the Queen Mother or Queen within the social structure of Nubia.

Notably, only four queens are recognized as having been referred to as *Candace*. These individuals were Amanirenas, Amanishekhete, Newidemak, and Maleqereabar. Consequently, the term *Candace* functioned as a generic designation applicable to various Nubian queens or regents. He further states that Shanakdekhete is documented as one of the earliest ruling

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<sup>52</sup> Saidi, C. (2020). *Women in Precolonial Africa*. Department of History, Kutztown University. Pp. 9

<sup>53</sup> Hakem, A. M. (1979). “The Matriarchs of Meroe. A powerful line of Queens who Ruled the Kushite Empire.” *The UNESCO Courier: a window open on the world*. XXXII, 8/9. UNESCO Digital Library. Pp. 59

<sup>54</sup> Saidi, C. (2020). *Women in Precolonial Africa*. Department of History, Kutztown University. Pp. 9

*Candaces*. She resided during the 2nd century BC and was afforded a complete royal burial. She was succeeded by subsequent *Candaces*, the initial one being Amanirenas.<sup>55</sup>

The Nubian Queen Mother reportedly played a significant political role during elections and coronation ceremonies of her son as king. This trend is believed to have been prevalent among most other African societies. Hakem references inscriptions detailing the coronations of Taharaqa (690—664 BC) and Anlamani (623—593 BC), which, he contends, elucidate the Queen Mother's pivotal influence and distinctive status. Furthermore, he asserts that she wielded political influence through a convoluted system of adoption, in which she, referred to by the title of *Mistress of Kush*, adopted her son's wife.<sup>56</sup> This close ties between the king's first wife and their eldest son, prevalent in Nubia during the 1st century BC, suggests a specific form of co-regency. Thus, the wife who outlived her husband frequently ascended to the role of ruling *Candace*. This system reportedly persisted for three generations, concluding after the reigns of Natekamani, Amanitere, and Sherkaror, in the first half of the 1st century AD.<sup>57</sup> This signifies the profound political ties between the Queen Mother and her son's wife.

This evidence, therefore, elucidates the considerable influence exerted by women within the social structure of Nubia. The association of the close ties between the Nubian queen-mother and her eldest son is linked to the internal evolution of a social institution that did not replicate any foreign systems, such as that of the Ptolemies in Egypt. It is posited that this kin-based system proved significantly advantageous compared to the rigid framework of strict direct succession, as it mitigated the risks associated with an unpopular claimant to the throne. Put differently, the infusion of new blood into the royal family was ensured by the tradition of adoption. The diverse

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<sup>55</sup> Hakem, A. M. (1979). "The Matriarchs of Meroe. A powerful line of Queens who Ruled the Kushite Empire." *The UNESCO Courier: a window open on the world*. XXXII, 8/9. UNESCO Digital Library. Pp. 59

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Pp. 59

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Pp. 59

checks and balances inherent in this custom, along with the prominence afforded to the queen-mother and the insistence on rightful descent, guaranteed the sustained rule of a particular royal dynasty.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, it is suggested that these factors may have contributed to the continuity and stability witnessed by the notable Nubian cities of Napata and Meroe over an extended duration.

Finally, in her groundbreaking publication, *Women in Precolonial Africa*, Saidi claims that gender history, like humanity itself, originated in Africa around 200, 000 BCE, earlier than anywhere else on the planet. She highlights that the most successful family structures of ancient times revolved around units where grandmothers played a central role. This idea stems from the Grandmother Hypothesis, which posits that a family unit led by an elderly grandmother, who had surpassed child-bearing age, along with her daughters and their offspring, formed the most resilient family model in ancient Africa. Saidi points out that since grandmothers had moved past menopause, their primary focus shifted to ensuring the children's wellbeing. They often took on the responsibility of nourishing and caring for younger children. The grandmotherly institution was crucial for the survival of African children and their growth into adulthood, contributing significantly to modern human DNA.<sup>59</sup> Thus, this traditional feminine role underscores the essential impact of women, particularly grandmothers, within the social framework of ancient African societies.

Therefore, this thesis is situated at the intersection of three strands of scholarship: (1) the macro-histories of West Africa that emphasizes empires and patriarchal rulers, (2) oral historiography that validates local traditions of queenship, and (3) ethnographic and regional studies of

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<sup>58</sup> Hakem, A. M. (1979). "The Matriarchs of Meroe. A powerful line of Queens who Ruled the Kushite Empire." *The UNESCO Courier: a window open on the world*. XXXII, 8/9. UNESCO Digital Library. Pp. 59

<sup>59</sup> Saidi, C. (2020). *Women in Precolonial Africa*. Department of History, Kutztown University. Pp. 3

Senegambia that hint at but do not fully explore matriarchal governance. By synthesizing these strands, it will contribute to filling the gendered gap in the historiography of Gambian state and state formation.

### **03. Literature on the Afrocentric Approach to the Study of Traditional African**

#### **Matriarchal Dominance**

Afrocentric scholars and historians generally endeavor to examine the subject of traditional African matriarchal dominance independently from Western methodologies and paradigms. This inclination arises primarily from the conviction that the Western interpretation of feminism is insufficient for accurately depicting gender roles in the ancient African context. In other terms, the gender roles that prevail in the contemporary post-colonial state diverge significantly from those that were established in traditional African societies. Thus, the demand for more appropriate methodologies to investigate pre-colonial African gender dynamics has, over time, garnered substantial interest within the Afro-centric school of thought.

Isife identifies two principal methodologies for examining gender dynamics within traditional African societies. One of these methodologies entails an investigation into the roles occupied by royal and aristocratic women in pre-colonial African society. He states that numerous scholars have utilized the case studies of such influential women or queens within traditional Africa to establish the presence of matriarchy in pre-colonial African societies. The second methodology he addresses necessitates an exploration of the social statuses and political authority granted to women throughout traditional Africa in its entirety.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, he concurs with Farrar that this latter methodology holds considerable significance for Afro-centric research. He asserts that

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<sup>60</sup> Isife, E. E. (2023). "Matriarchy in Traditional Africa and its Relevance to Contemporary Feminism." *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 9. No. 4. Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Namdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. Pp. 7

the primary focus should be to ascertain the political influence and variety of social statuses conferred upon women in both ancient and subsequent pre-colonial African societies. Consequently, this study endeavors to adopt this approach by investigating the extent of social status and political legitimacy granted to the queen of Kombo and the lineage of queens of Niumi.

Isife underscores the necessity for Afro-centric scholars to comprehend the concept of matriarchy apart from the conventional 18th and 19th-century evolutionary interpretations of the term, which, he contends, depict matriarchy as being in opposition to patriarchy.<sup>61</sup> In essence, the Western perspective of gender dynamics presents matriarchy and patriarchy as conflicting realities, with patriarchy considered the foundation of civilization, and matriarchy viewed as the root of savagery. Therefore, he posits that matriarchy and patriarchy were, in fact, complementary realities within traditional Africa. Sounding similar views, in the article titled "Diop and the African Origin of Civilization: An Afrocentric Analysis," Okafor observes that one of the most critical challenges in Afrocentric research is the manner in which gender relations have been conceptualized by the researcher. He asserts that due to the African ideal of harmony and the survival of the human species, the Afrocentric researcher should endeavor to evade the Western predicament of framing gender relations based on antagonism or depicting one sex as an adversary of the other.<sup>62</sup> As such, this understanding represents a significant advancement in the examination of traditional African gender roles.

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<sup>61</sup> Isife, E. E. (2023). "Matriarchy in Traditional Africa and its Relevance to Contemporary Feminism." *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 9. No. 4. Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Namdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. Pp. 7

<sup>62</sup> Okafor, V. O. (1990). "Diop and the African Origin of Civilization: An Afrocentric Analysis." *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 22, No. 2. Sage Publications, Inc. Pp. 255

According to Isife, when examining matriarchy in traditional Africa, Afro-centric researchers must diligently liberate themselves and their scholarship from the biases that characterize Western worldviews and historical models.<sup>63</sup> This assertion strengthens the argument that a complementary relationship existed between matriarchy and patriarchy in traditional Africa, as is true for numerous other phenomena in the distant past. Therefore, matriarchy in pre-colonial Africa cannot be fully understood in isolation from patriarchy; rather, neither can be disassociated from the other.

Unlike Western society, this amicable connection between matriarchy and patriarchy was facilitated by the distinctive qualities of the family structure within the ancient African context. In support of this, Okafor argues that the family is one of the traditional African institutions that has withstood the test of time.<sup>64</sup> Speaking in general terms, the African man and his wife experienced a more harmonious relationship than their Western counterparts, despite the relative affluence of the West. He posits that this phenomenon is exemplified by the deteriorating condition of the family institution in the Western context. Thus, he admonishes that African families must take measures to protect themselves against cultural aggression to ensure the preservation of the African family structure. To achieve this, they must remain vigilant against the array of Western values, practices, and sexual norms that threaten to undermine the integrity of the family institution.<sup>65</sup> This understanding is also regarded as crucial in the efforts to investigate gender dynamics within traditional African society.

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<sup>63</sup> Isife, E. E. (2023). "Matriarchy in Traditional Africa and its Relevance to Contemporary Feminism." *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 9. No. 4. Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Namdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. Pp. 8

<sup>64</sup> Okafor, V. O. (1990). "Diop and the African Origin of Civilization: An Afrocentric Analysis." *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 22, No. 2. Sage Publications, Inc. Pp. 255

<sup>65</sup> IbidPp. 255

While matriarchy and patriarchy existed as parallel phenomena, each having its unique sphere of influence, it is imperative for the Afro-centric researcher to comprehend that sex distinction played a significant role in institutions of leadership in traditional Africa. This indicates that men also occupied a place in this reciprocal relationship. The complementary roles of men and women have ensured the stability of traditional African society for several centuries. In alignment with Dine's perspective, Isife characterizes the separation of male from female, particularly in leadership matters, as sex distinction.<sup>66</sup> He acknowledges that leadership roles have often been assigned to individuals based on sex differences.<sup>67</sup> In this context, the roles designated for women are executed within the framework of matriarchal leadership, particularly in religious and ritualistic affairs.

The Afro-centric researcher must understand that the Western feminist notion of gender parity, as it is applied in modern-day society, did not exist in ancient African societies. In this regard, while Isife concedes that not everything practiced by ancient Africans was commendable, he argues that to be fair to Africans and their historical context, the present definition of gender equality cannot be adequately applied to traditional African societies.<sup>68</sup> In support of this claim, Saidi elucidates that, throughout the continent's traditional history, African societies tended to be hierarchical, possessing multiple centers of authority.<sup>69</sup> This was particularly true for gendered institutions, as most African societies endeavored to create a degree of gender equilibrium.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Isife, E. E. (2023). "Matriarchy in Traditional Africa and its Relevance to Contemporary Feminism." *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 9. No. 4. Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Namdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. Pp. 8

<sup>67</sup> Isife, E. E. (2023). "Matriarchy in Traditional Africa and its Relevance to Contemporary Feminism." *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 9. No. 4. Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Namdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. Pp. 8

<sup>68</sup> Isife, E. E. (2023). "Matriarchy in Traditional Africa and its Relevance to Contemporary Feminism." *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 9. No. 4. Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Namdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. Pp. 8

<sup>69</sup> Saidi, C. (2020). *Women in Precolonial Africa*. Department of History, Kutztown University. Pp. 2

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Pp. 2

While men and women may have had distinct roles and responsibilities, the contributions and social statuses of women were often regarded as equal to those of men.

Researchers focusing on Afrocentrism must exercise caution in interpreting African gender diversity solely through the lens of biological characteristics. In this discussion, Saidi articulates that the true definition of African gender dynamics posits that women were not regarded as inferior as a consequence of their biological sex, and conversely, men were not inherently regarded as superior based solely on their biological sex.<sup>71</sup> According to her analysis, African women have historically occupied commendable positions within socio-political and religious leadership roles. They have achieved this while concurrently fulfilling their responsibilities as grandmothers, mothers, sisters, potters, farmers, healers, and religious leaders. Thus, she emphasizes that in traditional Africa, particularly prior to 1900, factors such as seniority, lifestyle, family, and capability served as the determinants of social status, rather than gender.<sup>72</sup> In light of these observations, it is reasonable to assert that women achieved a higher social standing and significantly contributed to domestic roles within traditional African society.

The upward social status acquired by traditional African women represents a pivotal argument for Afro-centric researchers, as it serves as a distinguishing factor in delineating the differences between African traditions of civilization and their Western counterparts. Allen regards this elevation of ancient African women's status as a fundamental criterion that differentiates ancient Egypt from ancient Semitic civilizations, such as Mesopotamia and Babylon, as well as ancient Indo-European societies including Greece and Rome.<sup>73</sup> He amplifies Diop's perspective, positing that the trend has remained consistent since ancient times, where the couples depicted on the

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<sup>71</sup> Saidi, C. (2020). *Women in Precolonial Africa*. Department of History, Kutztown University. Pp. 2

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. Pp. 2

<sup>73</sup> Allen, T. D. (2008). *The Ancient Egyptian Family, Kinship and Social Structure*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis e—Library. Pp. 28

monuments of ancient Egypt are characterized by tenderness, friendship, and an intrinsic common life, qualities not found in the contemporary Eurasian world, namely Greece, Rome, and Asia. He elucidates that Egyptian civilization was not Semitic, as the Semitic tradition, upheld in the biblical narrative of human evolution—the tale of Adam and Eve—commences with the fall of mankind, attributed to a woman—Eve.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, this thesis aims to examine the matriarchal history of Kombo and Niumi based on the salient points discussed above.

#### **1.10. THE METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES**

This thesis advocated for the utilization of the historical case-study method in the pursuit of investigating the phenomenon of matriarchal dominance within the twin Gambian Valley kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi. This approach was designed to delve into the intricacies of matriarchal governance in these two kingdoms, contributing to the understanding of the matriarchal dominance that is believed to have flourished in the broader Senegambia region prior to the 13th century.

The study employed qualitative methods for data collection and processing. This methodology acted as the framework for achieving the study's objectives. The research intended to provide qualitative analyses primarily of oral and textual data concerning various dimensions of the principal inquiry. Consequently, the study proposed utilizing both primary and secondary historical sources.

The primary source utilized was oral tradition. This entails the execution of planned visits to each of the designated sites: Kombo Sanyang and Niumi Bakindiki. At each location, oral data

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<sup>74</sup> Allen, T. D. (2008). *The Ancient Egyptian Family, Kinship and Social Structure*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis e—Library. Pp. 28

pertinent to the objectives of the study were gathered, preferably from elder genealogical members of the descendant families associated with each of the two matriarchies, who were regarded as the rightful custodians of such significant cultural knowledge and heritage. The collection of this oral data took place during organized interview sessions, primarily employing digital and electronic devices, particularly mobile phones and tablet recording applications. Subsequently, the necessary processing, transcription, and extraction of relevant facts was conducted. Furthermore, the study utilized the oral archive of the Research and Documentation Division of The Gambia's National Center for Arts and Culture. This institution possesses various recordings containing oral narratives of the histories of the numerous pre-colonial Senegambian kingdoms and societies, documented since the 1970s.

Secondly, the study utilized a multitude of secondary sources. This encompassed both printed and digital literature, including archival documents, textbooks, research papers, scholarly articles and reviews, academic theses, web content, newspaper articles, leaflets, and monographs published concerning the matriarchies of Kombo Sanyang and Niumi Bakindiki.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MATRIARCHAL DOMINANCE IN PRE-COLONIAL SENEGAMBIA

#### 2.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to delineate the geographical extent of matriarchal dominance in the Senegambia region prior to the establishment of Malian suzerainty. It reveals the spatial scope of matriarchal states within the modern geopolitical boundaries of Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, as well as sections of Mauritania and Guinea-Conakry. To provide historical context, the chapter commences with a description of the geopolitical and sociocultural characteristics of pre-colonial Senegambia. This is subsequently followed by an analysis of matriarchal dominance through the lenses of ancient Nilotic, Kushite, and medieval periods of matriarchal influence. Furthermore, it reflects on the matriarchal regimes of Senegambia, elucidating the phenomenon's scope within both the region's northern and southern communities. Finally, it emphasizes the extent of this phenomenon within the Gambia Valley.

#### 2.2. PRE-COLONIAL SENEGAMBIA: GEOGRAPHY AND SOCIETY

Pre-colonial Senegambia is geographically located within the West African sub-region. Barry has noted that Senegambia features two strategic locations: first, between the Senegal River and the Gambia River, distanced from the Niger Bend; and second, situated between the Sahara Desert and the tropical forest zone. According to him, these two locations ensured the region's dependence on the Sudanic and Sahara Desert states for its sustenance until the 15th century.<sup>75</sup> It

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<sup>75</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 5

is acknowledged that the area was inhabited by a diverse array of ethnicities, including Wolof, Peul, Tukolor, Manding, Serer, Soninke, Susu, Joola, Nalu, Baga, Beafada, Bainuk, and Basari.<sup>76</sup> However, amidst this ethnic diversity, there existed a cultural unity that resulted from long-standing inter-ethnic coexistence. Similar to other West African states, the foundation of Senegambian political life was the family. The family served as the cornerstone upon which a constitutional principle was established and determined an individual's eligibility for public office.<sup>77</sup> Family ties, therefore, served as a crucial element in the social structure of pre-colonial Senegambian societies.

Senegambia comprises two distinct geographical sub-zones, namely Northern Senegambia and Southern Senegambia. Each sub-zone is characterized by its unique physical and sociocultural attributes. Northern Senegambia refers to the Sahelo-Sudanese territory that borders the Senegal River to the north and the Gambia River to the south. Barry has noted that, encircled by the western lowlands of the Western Sudanic corridor, the Senegal Valley is endowed with several oases that have played significant roles in the livelihoods of the local populations. The flat and arid savannah grassland of the region facilitates year-round agriculture, particularly the cultivation of cereal crops, alongside the rearing of cattle, sheep, and goats. The land's topography has also been conducive to the domestication of horses, which have historically served as a reliable mode of transportation that has facilitated trade, communication, and territorial conquests in this region for centuries.<sup>78</sup> Since the 11th century, Northern Senegambia has been inhabited by the Fulani (Peul), Wolof, and Serer peoples. Due to the geographical

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<sup>76</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 5

<sup>77</sup> Curtin, P. (1975). *Economic Change in Pre-colonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. Pp. 37

<sup>78</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 10

openness of their homelands, these groups have been inevitably subjected to the dominant influences of various kingdoms, first by Ghana and Tekrur, followed by the kingdoms of Futa Toro and Gajaaga, and ultimately, the empire of Jolof.<sup>79</sup> Northern Senegambia, therefore, had been a center of inter-ethnic and cultural convergence.

Southern Senegambia, conversely, denotes the humid coastal strip that stretches from the Gambia River to the forests of Guinea-Conakry. This region encompasses the banks of the Southern Rivers and the Futa Jallon plateau. According to Barry, the Southern Rivers, specifically the *Cassamance*, the *Cacheu*, the *Grande*, the *Geba*, the *Nunez*, the *Pongo*, and the *Mellakure*, which share a common source in the Futa Jallon plateau, are characterized by the presence of mangrove swamps. Notably, the dense network of mangroves along the banks of these rivers, which isolated the local populations, in conjunction with the communication challenges they encountered in the mountainous region of the Futa Jallon plateau, elucidates the existence predominantly of small-scale political entities in Southern Senegambia.<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, as evidence of their resilience in such an environment, the Joola, Bainunk, Beafada, Balante, Felupe, Cocoli, Landuma, Nalu, and the Baga of Southern Senegambia have, since the 11th century, established caste-free and politically decentralized societies, wherein the village has served as the central political entity.

Similarly, as a testament to their adaptability to their natural surroundings, these communities have flourished through the cultivation of rice in the swamps adjacent to the dense mangrove network since those historical periods.<sup>81</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh, former chief of Kombo East,

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<sup>79</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 10

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. Pp. 10

<sup>81</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo & Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024)

confirmed this, giving hints about the importance of rice cultivation to the inhabitants of the southern bank of the Gambia River. He revealed,

“The people who inhabited the southern banks, like their neighbors on the northern banks, depended on rice cultivation for survival. They grew it both during the rainy seasons, in the mangrove swamps along the river, and during dry seasons, on the wet upland fields. They consumed the harvests and even traded some for other needed goods from the north.”<sup>82</sup>

Thus, the natural environment of Southern Senegambian habitats, therefore, had been a crucial element in the livelihoods of the local inhabitants.

Moreover, traditional religious beliefs and practices have also been pivotal towards the growth and stability of the native societies of Southern Senegambia. In support of this, Alhagie Jung Conteh recounted,

“Throughout the communities of Southern Senegambia, religion had functioned as a crucial rallying force that has ensured the unity and continuity of these communities throughout the ages.”<sup>83</sup>

Based on this fact, it is plausible to assert that religion had played a crucial role in ensuring the stability and continuity of Southern Senegambian societies for over a long period.

### **2.3. EGYPTIAN AND SUDANIC ROOTS OF SENEGAMBIAN MATRIARCHIES**

The extensive array of sources concerning the pre-colonial history of Senegambia appears to indicate that matriarchal political governance in this region has its origins in the ancient Egyptian and Sudanic (Nubian/Kushitic) matriarchal traditions. Prominent Afrocentric scholars, such as Diop, correlate the genesis of nearly all Senegambian ethnic groups with these ancient African

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<sup>82</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo & Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024)

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

societies, particularly those situated in the Nile Valley and around the Great Lakes region.<sup>84</sup> This assertion is substantiated by the evident cultural similarities that exist between Senegambian civilizations and those of ancient Egypt and Sudanic regions.

Such cultural unity is clearly illustrated in the linguistic resemblances observed among them. For instance, the title *Kandaka* (or *Candace*, which was ascribed to ancient Nubian queens (the first of whom coexisted with Augustus Caesar of ancient Rome), was likewise the designation given to the initial kings of the Western Sudanic city of *Kan* or *Gao*.<sup>85</sup> This evidence was reportedly corroborated by the Arab chronicler, Al Bakri, who noted that these kings were referred to as *Kanda*.

Additionally, in the Egyptian language, the inhabitants of Upper Egypt were designated as *Kau-Kau*. This term is also believed to have inspired the name of *Kan*. Moreover, in contemporary times, the populations residing in Central Senegal's regions of Cayor and Baol are still referred to as *Kau-Kau*.<sup>86</sup> These linguistic similarities, therefore, ascertain the cultural unity between the Senegambian peoples and their Egyptian and Sudanic ancestors.

Furthermore, insights into the similarities in clothing between the Western Sudanic peoples and their Egyptian and Nubian ancestors further affirm the cultural unity between them. It has been noted that, as early as the 10th century, Western Sudanic women donned a specific type of wig reminiscent of those worn by Egyptian and Nubian women.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, these pieces of evidence substantiate the assertion that Senegambian social structures, particularly matriarchal and matrilineal traditions, have direct roots in the cultures of ancient Egypt and Nubia (Sudan).

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<sup>84</sup> Diop, C. A. (1987). *Precolonial Black Africa. A Comparative Study of the Political and Social Systems of Europe and Black Africa, from Antiquity to the Formation of Modern States*. Laurence Hill & Company, Westport, Connecticut, USA. Pp. 215

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. Pp. 215

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Pp. 215

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. Pp. 215

Historical evidence has it that, prior to the year 1000 AD, a majority of the ethnic groups residing in Senegambia began migrating from their ancestral homelands situated in the Nile Valley and Great Lakes regions, in order to inhabit the towns of the Western Sudan.<sup>88</sup> For instance, the Serer, which is one of the Senegambian groups of Egyptian origin, are considered to have been a people endowed with extensive knowledge of land and survey skills, as well as the artistry involved in constructing monumental structures such as pyramids and boats. Under the divine guidance of the ancient Egyptian deity, Ra, they undertook a migration from Egypt to the Sahel region of the Western Sudan.<sup>89</sup> Upon arrival, they initially settled in the kingdoms of Wagadu and Audaghust, where they coexisted with the Fulani and the Soninke.<sup>90</sup> Their stated reluctance to embrace Islam is reported to have compelled them to retreat into the forested regions of the Senegal valley, where they established the twin communities of Siin and Saalum.

In the Western Sudanic towns and chiefdoms, these groups developed shared cultural patterns that emerged from years of cohabitation. By the 8th century, the Ghana Empire emerged as the first unified political organization in the region, and it maintained its status as the most formidable Sudanic Empire south of the Sahara Desert until the 12th century.<sup>91</sup> Arab chroniclers, such as al-Yaqubi, have been cited to describe the empire's power, splendor, and glory in intricate terms. The empire is reported to have been governed by a Soninke dynasty whose authority was derived from its control of the trans-Saharan gold trade, centered in Bambuk and Bure, and connected to the desert towns of Awdagost.<sup>92</sup> Thus, since the eighth century, following

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<sup>88</sup> Diop, C. A. (1987). *Precolonial Black Africa. A Comparative Study of the Political and Social Systems of Europe and Black Africa, from Antiquity to the Formation of Modern States*. Laurence Hill & Company, Westport, Connecticut, USA. Pp. 215-216

<sup>89</sup> Horseback Riding-La ferme de Serene-Senegal. "The Serer." <https://lafermedescarene.com/general-information>

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Conrad, D. (2005). *Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghanam Mali, and Songhay*. Storeline Publishing Group. LLC, USA. Pp. 11

the rise of the Ghana Empire, the ancestors of the Senegambian peoples have engaged with Northern Sudanic civilizations through the trans- Saharan caravan trade routes.

The spillover of religious forces into their Sudanic towns during the eleventh century compelled these peoples to retreat further into their homelands in northern and southern Senegambia. This period saw the Ghana Empire beset by a succession of instabilities resulting from its dominance over the southern routes of the Trans-Saharan Trade.<sup>93</sup> The Sahelian zone of Senegambia subsequently came under mounting pressure from the Sanhaja Berber confederations, known as the Almoravids, who controlled the markets of Awdaghost.<sup>94</sup> In 1076, they launched a significant assault on Ghana, which severely weakened it and diminished the authority of its rulers. They pillaged Awdaghost, Ghana's metropolitan city, and established Islamic rule in the region. They subsequently rerouted the nomadic desert clans of the area and consolidated them into a formidable Muslim force in the Western Sahara.<sup>95</sup> This religious movement, therefore, served as a major push factor for large numbers of groups and peoples to the Senegambia zone.

Faced with the pressures of this Muslim incursion upon their communities, the ancestors of the Senegambian peoples began to depart from the Sahelian zone of the Sudan and migrated further to the valleys of the Senegal and Gambia rivers. Notably, the Serer, Wolof, Fulani (Peul), and Tukulor are reported to have left Adar in the Sahelian north and settled collectively in the Senegal valley.<sup>96</sup> There, while some established themselves in the northern territories of the zone, others moved further south, where they displaced or subdued the *Soce*, who are believed to

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<sup>93</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 6

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. Pp. 6

<sup>95</sup> Conrad, D. (2005). *Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghanam Mali, and Songhay*. Storeline Publishing Group. LLC, USA. Pp. 12

<sup>96</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 6

have been the earliest inhabitants of northern Senegambia.<sup>97</sup> While the Trans-Saharan Trade continued to function as a significant source of commerce and interethnic coexistence, it also exposed the region to the inevitable influences of dominating groups and kingdoms. For instance, this trade is said to have connected the northern reaches of Tekrur and Silla to the Mediterranean, thereby facilitating Muslim infiltration.<sup>98</sup> Thus, Senegambia has frequently been subjected to Sudanic influences throughout its history.

## 2.4. MATRIARCHAL REGIMES IN PRE-COLONIAL SENEGAMBIA

### a) Northern Senegambian matriarchal regimes

Matriarchal regimes appear to have developed in Northern Senegambia since the 11th century, following the settlement of various groups in the region. For instance, it has been observed that upon the arrival of the Serer and the Wolof in the northern territories, they formed similar centralized political entities characterized by a hierarchical structure. However, this hierarchical social framework did not impede the rise of women to prominent positions of socio-political responsibility. The Serer, on one hand, represent a peasant population that inhabited the twin communities of Siin and Saalum, located in the southern reaches of the Senegal Valley.<sup>99</sup> They established these communities following a series of migrations to the area, organized into large clans, each led by a patriarchal figure known as *Laman*.<sup>100</sup> Each Serer *Laman* served as the political leader of his community, which comprised multiple villages, as he was the first to claim

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<sup>97</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 6

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. Pp. 6

<sup>99</sup> Diop, C. A. (1987). *Precolonial Black Africa. A Comparative Study of the Political and Social Systems of Europe and Black Africa, from Antiquity to the Formation of Modern States*. Laurence Hill & Company, Westport, Conneticut, USA. Pp. 215-216

<sup>100</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 16

ownership of the surrounding woodlands.<sup>101</sup> The accounts of Ndeneh Njay, a senior member of the Njay family of Njaffeh village in Senegal, sheds more light on the way the Serer social structure permitted both men and women to grow and prosper within the community. He reveals,

“Each family possessed unrestricted access to land, which was inheritable by their descendants. Nonetheless, each family was required to pay annual taxes to the *Laman*. Migrant peasants contributed land rents to the *Laman*, who, in return, provided them with security to settle and assimilate into the local communities.”<sup>102</sup>

Since women occupied a central position in Serer family life, owing to the dominant custom of matrilineal heredity, the Serer social structure, despite its hierarchical characteristics, evidently allowed numerous women to flourish and thrive within the community.

Again, owing to the dominant matrilineal culture of the Serer, it is revealed that women wielded considerable political and economic authority. Biram Nduur, a senior member of the Nduur family of Njaffeh village in Senegal, corroborated this fact. He narrated the tradition as follows:

“The senior wife of a Serer *Laman* often held the status of community heads-woman, known as *Linguere*. The *Laman* of each community could only seek a wife from among the *Gaami*, which was the class to which he himself belonged.”<sup>103</sup>

This evidence therefore confirms the lofty socio-political status enjoyed by Serer women. However, it also implies that this was facilitated by the dominant custom of matrilineal descent since each *Laman* married his niece, specifically, a daughter of his mother’s brother.

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<sup>101</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 16

<sup>102</sup> Ndeneh Njay. An Account on the Early History of the Serer States of Siin and Saalum. Oral interview held on 14 April, 2024.

<sup>103</sup> Biram Nduur. An Account on the General History of the Serer People of Senegambia. Oral interview held on 21 May, 2024.

Evidence has it that in both Siin and Saalum, it was the king himself who accorded the royal feminine title of “*Linguere*” to his senior wife on the day of his own coronation. Rog-Musi Sarr, an informant from the Sarr family of Mbasis in Senegal, narrated the custom in broad terms. He revealed:

“When a *Laman* died and was succeeded by his eldest son, a coronation ceremony was conducted on a specific day, with full attendance of the community members. On this occasion, this son was officially declared the “*Laman*” of the community and the guardian of the religion and ancestral spirits of the people. His mother, the Queen-Mother, who had served as the *Linguere* during his father’s reign, continued to play an important role in the ruling family, often acting as a guardian to the new *Linguere*, who was her son’s wife and her brother’s daughter. Following this declaration, the new *Laman* would then proclaim his wife as “*Linguere*,” a decision that was endorsed by the entire community.”<sup>104</sup>

This feminine political office, therefore, was undoubtedly one of the functional components of traditional Serer society.

Politically, the *Linguere* exerted considerable influence in the socio-economic lives of the peoples within her dominion. According to Ndeneh Njay,

“She governed a number of villages under her direct control, situated within the larger dominion of a *Laman*. The extent of authority she wielded, particularly in the socio-economic realms of the villages under her jurisdiction, was comparable to that of her male counterpart, the *Gaami*.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Rog-Musi Sarr. An Account on the Early History of Siin and Saalum. Oral interview held on 6 May, 2024.

<sup>105</sup> Ndeneh Njay. An Account on the Early History of the Serer States of Siin and Saalum. Oral interview held on 14 April, 2024.

Based on this assertion, it can be emphasized that the title of *Linguere* was indeed a pivotal feminine political office among the Serer.

Economically, she possessed significant productive potential, which has ensured the continuity of feminine political dominance for centuries. Ndenh Njay confirms this, stating:

“Similar to a *Laman*, all migrant families granted land for settlement and agriculture in the villages under the *Linguere*’s jurisdiction were obligated to pay annual levies to her, in the form of grains and domestic animals. The *Linguere* maintained her own farms, which were cultivated by men on her behalf. She owned herds, particularly cattle and sheep, which were raised under her oversight and were inheritable by her descendants. Members of her family, especially her brothers, managed the sale and administration of her assets.”<sup>106</sup>

This evidence, therefore, ascertains that the *Linguere* indeed wielded considerable economic influences.

It is reported that other Serer families residing within the *Linguere*’s dominion provided assistance to her in various profitable manners. For instance, Njay revealed:

“Many families sent their daughters to her royal household, where they served as her maidens, aides, and attendants during social functions. As the head of all the women in the villages under her authority, the *Linguere* was often able to rally the support of women in initiatives aimed at improving the lives and livelihoods of the entire community. This is evident in her role in mobilizing support for cultural and religious celebrations.”<sup>107</sup>

These instances reflect the nature and extent of matriarchal dominance within the socio-cultural spheres of pre-colonial Serer society.

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<sup>106</sup> Biram Nduur. An Account on the General History of the Serer People of Senegambia. Oral interview held on 21 May, 2024.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

It was not until the 14th century that Mansa Wali Jon, a member of the *Gelewaar* dynasty, transformed the social order of the Serer by merging Siin and Saalum into a unified monarchical state under his rule.<sup>108</sup> The *Gelewaar* were the offspring of a union between a migrant patriarchal class of Manding origin and the daughters of the former Serer *Lamans*.<sup>109</sup> Their acquisition of royal status emerged as a result of a gradual process of cultural assimilation and inter-ethnic coexistence between their Mandinka fathers and the Serer, which commenced upon their initial arrival in Siin and Saalum from Kaabu.<sup>110</sup> In the pursuit of further consolidating their aristocratic dynastic control over the entirety of the Serer society, Mbegaan Nduur, the grand-nephew of Mansa Wali Jon, also established Saalum as a separate monarchy in the late 15 th century.<sup>111</sup> Thus, this period marked a turning point in the political history of the Serer people represented by the introduction of the monarchy.

Yet, despite this new monarchical order, the Serer from both kingdoms endeavored to preserve the essential elements of their culture. A notable example of such vital cultural elements was their matrilineal custom of descent and social heredity. According to Biram Nduur,

“Mansa Wali Jon ascended to the throne of Siin by virtue of being able to trace his royal descent through his mother's royal lineage. Mbegaan Nduur, likewise, was a descendant of the royal dynasty of Saalum, based on his mother's lineage, which qualified him for the position of king.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 16-17

<sup>109</sup> Ndeneh Njay. An Account on the Early History of the Serer States of Siin and Saalum. Oral interview held on 14 April, 2024.

<sup>110</sup> Biram Nduur. An Account on the General History of the Serer People of Senegambia. Oral interview held on 21 May, 2024.

<sup>111</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 17

<sup>112</sup> Biram Nduur. An Account on the General History of the Serer People of Senegambia. Oral interview held on 21 May, 2024.

Thus, in accordance with this matrilineal principle, Mansa Wali Jon was compelled to marry Faatim Beye, who was a descendant of a former *Laman* of Siin, approximately in the year 1335. In observance of their pre-*Gelewaar* customs, on the day of his coronation, after being proclaimed ‘Maad-a- Siin’ (king of Siin), he in turn proclaimed his wife ‘Linguere-Siin’ (Queen of Siin). Up until the late 15th century, when Mbegaan Nduur was crowned “Maad-a-Saalum” (king of Saalum), the office of *Linguere* flourished within Serer society, with numerous queens ascending to the highest echelons of the political strata of both kingdoms.<sup>113</sup> The Serer matriarchal dominance, therefore, can be said to have thrived side by side with the new monarchical order.

The dominance of the matriarchal system, operating under monarchical governance, is reported to have transcended the confines of the Serer society, deeply embedding itself within the core of the Wolof monarchical state of Waalo, represented by Linguere Ndoeye Demba, a granddaughter of Queen Faatim Beye. Born in the mid-14th century, Ndoeye Demba held the title of Princess within the royal *Joors* dynasty of Siin.<sup>114</sup> In 1367, she entered into matrimony with *Brak* Caaka Mbaar Mbodj, the reigning king of the Wolof kingdom of Waalo, thereby qualifying for her position as *Linguere* of the kingdom. However, this matrimonial union was met with significant dissent among the Wolof populace, and the subsequent years following her ascension to the kingdom’s highest political hierarchy were marked by a series of inter-ethnic and inter-dynastic rivalries, particularly between the *Teejek* and *Joors* maternal lineages.<sup>115</sup> In light of the prevailing hostility directed towards her authority, it is reported that she successfully governed as

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<sup>113</sup> Biram Nduur. An Account on the General History of the Serer People of Senegambia. Oral interview held on 21 May, 2024. .

<sup>114</sup> Marsden, H. “Queen Ndoeye Demba.” *Team Queens*. <https://www.teamqueens.net>

<sup>115</sup> Barry, B. (2012). *The Kingdom of Waalo: Senegal before the Conquest*. Diasporic African Press, New York. Part-2. Chapter 11

the sole ruler over several vassals directly under her control, thereby emerging as the progenitor of the *Joors* dynasty (of the Serer of Siin) within the Wolof kingdom of Waalo.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, the endurance of the Serer matrilineal principle of descent and social heredity, along with their preservation of the office of *Linguere*, serve as testament to the significant matriarchal dominance of the Serer people, which persisted until the conclusion of the pre-colonial era.

From the late-14<sup>th</sup> century, following the rise of the Jolof Empire, to the later pre-colonial period, close to the colonial conquest of Senegal by the French, the Wolof societies of Jolof, Waalo, Baol, and Kajoor witnessed the rise of various queens whose matriarchal success left a lasting impact on the lives of the people of northern Senegambia. The Wolof, like their Serer neighbors, had established centralized societies in the Senegal Valley since their first arrival in the area, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In those days, each Wolof community was headed by a chief, which, like in the Serer community, was known as *Laman*. Each chief controlled all the lands in his community.<sup>117</sup> Again, like in the Serer society, individual Wolof families had free access to land, although they paid annual land rents to the *Laman*. Migrant families, too, had access to land, especially for settlement and farming purposes, which could be passed down to their descendants, after they had paid a settlement fee, in addition to regular rent payments, to the *Laman*.<sup>118</sup> Across the Wolof society, this new class of *Lamans* became the area's major political players until the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, following the establishment of the Jolof Empire, when the office of *Linguere* emerged as a pivotal element in the political pendulum of the Wolof society.

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<sup>116</sup> Ndeneh Njay. An Account on the Early History of the Serer States of Siin and Saalum. Oral interview held on 14 April, 2024.

<sup>117</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 15

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. Pp. 15

Like in the Serer society, the introduction of the monarchy did not totally erode away the functional elements of the Wolof culture. For instance, kinship or lineage ties continued to serve as the basis for the constitutional order of governance. Family tie was the basic determinant of one's eligibility for political office. Often, there existed a single royal lineage from which the ruler was chosen.<sup>119</sup> Most of these oligarchical, monarchical kingdoms later adopted a double-descent system of socio-political heredity. This system took center stage among the Wolof since their principle of succession required that while the office of king or emperor was passed down through the male line, however, biological heredity, such as blood-based descent, was reckoned through the female line.<sup>120</sup> Therefore, with such a gravity of importance attached to one's mother-line in the acquisition of the highest political positions on the land, it is evident that matriarchal political dominance was equally an inevitable reality down the ages.

Queen Fatumatta Sall is acclaimed as the first Wolof *Linguere* under the monarchical system. She was the mother of the legendary ruler, Njaajan Njaay, who, around the 1360s, was crowned as first emperor of Jollof.<sup>121</sup> The advent of this monarchy, therefore, further entrenched the Wolof social caste, which was hierarchical to the core.<sup>122</sup> However, like in the Serer society, the office of *Linguere* survived under the monarchy up to the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The office was accorded to the king's wife, often the most senior of his wives. Being the matriarch of the royal courts, the Wolof *Linguere* equaled her Serer counterpart in terms of her socio-

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<sup>119</sup> Curtin, P. (1975). *Economic Change in Pre-colonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. Pp. 37

<sup>120</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 28

<sup>121</sup> Barry, B. (2012). *The Kingdom of Waalo: Senegal before the Conquest*. Diasporic African Press, New York. Part-2. Chapter 11

<sup>122</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 16

economic potentialities.<sup>123</sup> Similar to the office of king, matrilineal reckoning had been the basic constitutional principle of eligibility for the office of *Linguere* among the Wolof. The king could only marry a wife from among the daughters of his mother's brother, in other words, his uncle's children. This matrilineal custom, therefore, had catapulted countless women to the highest positions of socio-economic responsibility in the Wolof society.

### **b) Southern Senegambian matriarchal regimes**

Like in Northern Senegambia, matriarchal regimes rose in Southern Senegambia since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, after the various local inhabitants had established settlements on the banks of the various rivers in the area, from the Gambia River to the rainforests of Guinea Conakry. Like the Serer and Wolof of Northern Senegambia, the Joola, Bainunk, Beafada, Balante, Felupe, Cocoli, Landuma, Nalu, and the Baga of Southern Senegambia, had, since their arrival in the area, established decentralized societies in which men and women played complementary socio-cultural roles and responsibilities.<sup>124</sup> These peoples had thrived on the cultivation of rice, in the swamps connected to the dense mangrove network, along the various rivers, alongside religious spirituality.<sup>125</sup> Here, age groups had been the main basis of social organization. The revered custom of initiation had also been the main form of education that ensured social cohesion through a unified religious affiliation. Thus, customary bonds, such as the "Simo," among the Baga, Nalu, or Landuma, and also, the "Bookin," among the Joola, reportedly knitted these various peoples, and also ensured the continuity of their societies, since those olden days.<sup>126</sup> Based on these egalitarian social structures, it is reasonable to suggest that most Southern

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<sup>123</sup> Barry, B. (2012). *The Kingdom of Waalo: Senegal before the Conquest*. Diasporic African Press, New York. Part-2. Chapter 11

<sup>124</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 27

<sup>125</sup> Ceesay, A. F. (2024)

<sup>126</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 27

Senegambian communities permitted the growth and prosperity of countless individuals and groups, such as women.

In these caste-free communities, the village had been the central political unit, often headed by a village heads-man.<sup>127</sup> Political and religious leaders are said to have been the most revered people in these communities.<sup>128</sup> Traditional sources maintain that, prior to the Manding incursion in southern Senegambia in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, much of Southern Senegambia had been under the political control of the rulers of the Kassa-Bainunk Empire.<sup>129</sup> With its capital at Birikaama, in present-day Guine-Bissau, this empire dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century following the settlement of the various groups in Southern Senegambia. It is believed that, at the height of its glory, a number of Bainunk women had risen to the position of village heads-women, in their communities, who wielded equal amount of political authority, as their male counterparts.<sup>130</sup> Notably, these women were responsible for the allocation of rice-fields to the peasants.<sup>131</sup> This, therefore, demonstrates their possession of political authority.

Alhagie Fa Ceesay, village heads-man of Kombo Mandinaring, gave a clear picture of the religious and spiritual functions played by some Jolaa and Bainunk women in Kombo during those olden days. He revealed:

“Prior to the coming of Islam, some Jolaa and Bainunk women in Kombo served as religious and spiritual leaders who mediated between the peoples and their gods. These women, alongside their male counterparts, had

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<sup>127</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 27

<sup>128</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>129</sup> Touray, E. (2013). “History of Kombo.” *YouTube* (video documentary). [www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921](http://www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921)

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>131</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024.

been the saviors of the peoples, especially in times of adversities, like an impending war, or during natural upheavals. They oversaw all offerings and sacrifices to the deities during ritual events. They were also the guardians of new-born babies, and also boys and girls, especially during the observance of circumcision and initiation rites, especially against evil spirits.”<sup>132</sup>

Thus, the religious and spiritual role of these women demonstrates the extent of matriarchal dominance in Southern Senegambia.

Written sources indicate that this matriarchal dominance was the order of the day in Cassamance and parts of Kedougou.<sup>133</sup> These areas of Southern Senegambia were, and are still, predominantly inhabited by egalitarian societies, with the Jolaa, Bainunk, Balante and Mankagne in the Lower Kassamance, and Guinea-Bissau areas, and the Bassari, Bayedik and Coniagi in the Kedougou region, and in Guinea.<sup>134</sup> The egalitarian and matrilineal culture of these peoples, like in the other areas, had, therefore, served as the main catalysts to the rise of women-leaders in the political and religious domains of their societies.

Alhagie Jung Conteh, former Chief of Kombo East, narrated the economic activities of Southern Senegambian women, thus revealing the economic dimension of matriarchal dominance in this area of pre-colonial Senegambia. He narrated:

“These women excelled in the area of commerce during those olden days. Dealing mainly in the exchange of rice with goods from other societies, Bainunk women, for instance, are believed to have played

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<sup>132</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024.

<sup>133</sup> Bocande, U. G. (2013). “Women in Senegal’s Politics and Society. Priestesses, Princesses, Presidents?” *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung International Journal Report*. KAS (2013). Pp. 27

<sup>134</sup> Bocande, U. G. (2013). “Women in Senegal’s Politics and Society. Priestesses, Princesses, Presidents?” *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung International Journal Report*. KAS (2013). Pp. 26

a major commercial role in the inter-regional trade that trended during that time. This trade catalyzed the evolution of a number of trading posts throughout the area. This was made possible thanks to the introduction of the canoe.”<sup>135</sup>

Evidently, the canoe had been a decisive invention that facilitated the trade between the local inhabitants and their northern Senegambian neighbors. Barry notes that, aside from being the most reliable means of transport, the canoe ensured that traders carried various goods, such as cola, indigo dye, and iron goods, from the forest belt, which went on exchange in the Sahel zone, in the north, and up to the Southern Rivers, more cost effectively, than going through land routes across the Futa Jallon plateau.<sup>136</sup> Thus, the invention of the canoe had served as a decisive factor for matriarchal economic dominance in Southern Senegambian states.

Barry notes further that the Bainunk, Beafada, and Manding trade networks had served as the nerve of the area’s economic life. According to him, the Bainunk network linked the Lower Cachew, Cassamance, Sungrugru, Bintang, and Gambia valleys. This was paralleled to the Manding trade system that ran eastwards, connecting the River Grande, Corubal, upper Geba, Cacheu, and Cassamance rivers with the middle and upper valleys of the Senegal River and the upper Niger valley.<sup>137</sup> With respect to the lofty socio-economic statuses that Southern Senegambian women had enjoyed, it is possible that they had been very much involved in these trade networks. This is evident in the pivotal role they played in the production of the key goods involved, such as rice. Thus, in addition to the leadership roles they had played in the political

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<sup>135</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo & Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024)

<sup>136</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 20

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. Pp. 20

and religious spheres of their communities, this viable commercial role demonstrates the height of matriarchal socio-economic dominance in pre-colonial Southern Senegambian communities.

As happened in most of Northern Senegambia, Southern Senegambian societies were brought under the political orbit of the Mali Empire, in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. This period witnessed the fall of most of the area's matriarchal regimes and the rise of patriarchal rulers, whose rise to the new office of king had been largely influenced by the empire-state building ambitions of the patriarchs of Mali. This Malian influence, therefore, became a crucial force that shaped the social order and political systems of these native societies, from kin-based to monarchical state structures, characterized by a tight system of social caste.<sup>138</sup> However, these foreign forces could not totally erase the socio-cultural customs of these peoples. This, like in the Serer society, is evident in the retention of the matrilineal principle of descent and inheritance.

## **2.5. 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 the strip of land area 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.

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<sup>138</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 5

The local inhabitants of the Gambia Valley reportedly thrived on farming and fishing for generations. These indigenous industries have been seen as important factors for economic stability and prosperity of women across the valley. Alhagie Jung Conteh corroborates this, stating:

“In those days, the people grew cereals, especially millet and sorghum during rainy seasons. Rice was also a significant crop, cultivated both in the freshwater swamps of the river and on the wet upland fields. These cereals were the staples of the local peoples.”<sup>139</sup>

Thus, many women possibly excelled in the area’s commerce, exchanging rice, millet, and sorghum for goods from other areas. These exchanges occurred in port towns located along the riverbanks.

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.<sup>140</sup> 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.<sup>141</sup> 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

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<sup>139</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024)

<sup>140</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 18

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. Pp. 18

without interruption.<sup>142</sup> 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 gives 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.”<sup>143</sup>

Earlier sources specifically revealed that states such as Baddibu, Kombo, Jaara, Wuli, and Niani were ruled by queens during this period.<sup>144</sup> 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.<sup>145</sup> Positions such as religious leadership were accorded to special men or women, whose families had been the

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<sup>142</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 18

<sup>143</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024)

<sup>144</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 75

<sup>145</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

custodians of the people's ritual possessions.<sup>146</sup> Specific families were also associated with certain socio-professional specializations, such as hunters, blacksmiths, healers, and fishermen.<sup>147</sup> 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).<sup>148</sup> Until the reign of Mansa Sankalang Jaadama/Marong,<sup>149</sup> the first patriarchal ruler of Baddibu, Jumansari had several other queens, whose names were not mentioned in the oral tradition.

The town of Illiasa is also said to have been ruled by several queens, the first of whom was Kundaa Jeenung. She was succeeded by Kulumakaci, followed by Bandee Jeenung.<sup>150</sup> Although the name of the fourth queen remains unknown, tradition holds that prior to the reign of Saara Jiimang Jammeh,<sup>151</sup> the first king of Illiasa, the kingdom had four queens who ruled in succession.

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<sup>146</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>147</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024)

<sup>148</sup> NCAC/RDD. (1975). An Account on the History of Niumi and Baddibu (NCAC-RDD-TAPE: 0025A+B EN-SPO1)

<sup>149</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>150</sup> NCAC/RDD. (1975). An Account on the History of Niumi and Baddibu (NCAC-RDD-TAPE: 0025A+B EN-SPO1)

<sup>151</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

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.<sup>152</sup> Accordingly, these were the three known queens of Jaajari.

Niumi, also situated on the north bank of the Gambia River, including the islands on the southern reaches of Siin and Saalum in the Senegal Valley, is equally believed to have had a succession of twelve queens.<sup>153</sup> Other sources suggest that these matriarchal regimes were extensions of the Bainunk matriarchal tradition, which has roots in the Serer matrilineal custom.<sup>154</sup> In spite of the divergence regarding the genesis of this lineage of queens, it is unanimously believed that the queens of Niumi laid the foundation of political governance in the kingdom.

Matriarchal political and religious leadership is also believed to have been the trend of the time in the southbank kingdoms of Kombo and Fonyi. Before the incursion of Manding families into these communities, both kingdoms had been part of the Kassa-Bainunk Empire, with the local populations primarily consisting of the Jolaa and Bainunk peoples.<sup>155</sup> Due to the matrilineal character of these kingdoms, this period saw the rise of various Jolaa and Bainunk women to positions of village heads.<sup>156</sup> Notably, during the heyday of the Jolaa and Bainunk Empire, Lower Kombo is believed to have been a matriarchal kingdom under the control of a powerful queen, whose seat of government was located in Sanyang.<sup>157</sup> Thus, women had played pivotal roles in political and religious leadership in both Kombo and Fonyi.

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<sup>152</sup> NCAC/RDD. (1975) An Account on the History of Niumi and Baddibu (NCAC-RDD-TAPE: 0025A+B EN-SPO1)

<sup>153</sup> Saliu, Y. S. (2021). "Niumi Dynasty: 12 females ruled for 122 years." The Point Newspaper. <https://www.thepoint.gm>

<sup>154</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>155</sup> Touray, E. (2013). "History of Kombo." *YouTube* (video documentary). [www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921](http://www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921)

<sup>156</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>157</sup> Touray, E. (2013). "History of Kombo." *YouTube* (video documentary). [www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921](http://www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921)

## 2.6. CONCLUSION

Senegambian matriarchal regimes were replicates of the ancient Nilotic and Nubian/Kushitic matriarchies. This is evident in the similarities in the socio-political patterns of the Senegambian peoples and their Egyptian and Nubian ancestors. The various peoples lived together and coexisted in their Sudanic homelands for long periods. The Muslim attack on the Ghana Empire, in 1076, led by the Berber Almoravid group, forced most of the peoples from the various towns of the empire to the Senegambia zone. While some inhabited the zone's northern territories, others settled in the valleys of the Southern Rivers.

Matriarchal regimes rose in both the zone's northern and southern communities. In Northern Senegambia, on one hand, a royal female title known, as *Linguere*, existed among the Serer and Wolof since the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. This political position was accorded to the wife of a *Laman*, head of the Serer community. She often had several villages under her direct control, and the degree of authority she wielded equaled that of a *Gaami*, a male heir to the office of *Laman*. In Southern Senegambia, on the other hand, matriarchal regimes existed among the area's inhabitants since the 11th century. These were politically decentralized and caste-free communities that were matrilineal at their core. Religion had served as the central rallying force among the natives of the community. Therefore, the egalitarian nature of these communities' social order is believed to have propelled countless women to the highest positions of social and religious responsibilities.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE IDENTITIES, LIVES AND TIMES OF THE MATRIARCHS OF KOMBO AND NIUMI**

#### **3.1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter delves into the lives and eras of the royal queens of Kombo and Niumi, framing their political geographies along the northern and southern banks of the Gambia River. It emphasizes the legitimacy of each matriarchal government by highlighting their distinct genealogical histories, which provide a biographical overview of Queen Wulending Jassey of Kombo and the lineage of queens from Niumi. Following this, the chapter explores the ancestral origins of both matriarchal kingdoms. Additionally, it investigates the circumstances that facilitated the rise of Queen Jassey, Queen Mama Adame the first queen of Niumi and other queens of the Jammeh lineage. Finally, the chapter analyzes the state structures that defined both matriarchal kingdoms.

#### **3.2. A BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW OF THE QUEENS OF KOMBO AND NIUMI**

##### **a) A biographical overview of the queen of Kombo**

The Senegambian kingdom of Kombo is believed to have been ruled by a queen known popularly as Wulending Jassey. Nearly all sources on the history of Kombo indicate that she initially governed the kingdom before the emergence of the first king in the area. No specific date is mentioned in the accounts regarding her birth year or the duration of her life. Alhagie Fa Ceesay stated that she is also referred to by different names in the accounts. He explained,

“While she is commonly called ‘Wulending,’ others refer to her as ‘Wuleng-Baa’ or ‘Wuleng-Wuleng.’”<sup>158</sup>

These varied names seemingly suggest the fairness of her complexion, as the Mandinka term “Wuleng,” present in each of these names, means “fair” regarding skin tone. Therefore, it is probable that she had a light complexion.

This is corroborated by accounts of her first encounter with Karafa Yali Jarra, the nephew of the *Conde (Bojang)* brothers from Mali, who would later become her husband. According to Alhagie Fa Ceesay, when Karafa Yali returned to Brikama from one of his hunting trips, he informed his uncle about a queen he met in a coastal town, residing with her family and other residents. Thus, in his description of the queen, he emphasized that she had a completely fair complexion: “abaloo-be wuleng-wuleng-ta-le” (her body is all fair).<sup>159</sup> Thus, while “Wulending” was not her birth name, however, it became her most widely recognized name in the accounts.

Despite the divergence regarding her first name, all sources concur on her last name, *Jassey*. This patronym, found among the Mandinka, Karoninka, Serer, and other ethnic groups, has been associated with a priestly role during those pre-colonial times. According to the account, the phoneme “Ja” (in Mandinka) is derived from the root word “Jalang,” which means “oracle.” Accordingly, it is used as a prefix in the patronyms of the Senegambian clans, such as *Jassey*, *Jarju*, and *Jabang*, whose members served various religious roles in the worship of the oracles and spirit gods of the people. In this way, the *Jassey* clan was responsible for installing the oracles, as in Mandinka: “Ka-Ja-sin-di” (to install the oracle).<sup>160</sup> In light of this evidence, it can

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<sup>158</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. (2024)

<sup>160</sup> Touray, E. (2025). “The History of Kombo: Mandinaring.” History Hour (“Nna Taarikoo”). Sky Power Radio & TV Services. United Kingdom. YouTube. Skypowerradioandtvservices5865.

be concluded that Queen Wulending Jassey originated from a priestly family whose role was to link the people and their spiritual gods. This is supported by the accounts regarding the queen's display of spiritual potential.

### **b) A biographical overview of the queens of Niumi**

The kingdom of Niumi was reportedly ruled by a lineage of queens, all of whom belonged to the *Jammeh* clan of the town of Bakindiki, before the advent of patriarchal rule in the area. Each queen succeeded her predecessor on the kingdom's throne without interruption. These queens, referred to as "Mama Mansas" in European literature, are believed to have laid the foundations of political rule in Niumi.<sup>161</sup> Similar to Queen Wulending Jassey of Kombo, the sources on the history of the queens of Niumi neither provide a precise date for the birth of each queen nor mention the date of their death. Given these gaps, it is necessary to provide a comprehensive biographical summary of each queen to reveal the personal details reflected in the lists provided by each source.

It is widely accepted that Niumi had twelve queens, although some sources identify fewer by name. One account specifies nine queens,<sup>162</sup> while another mentions eleven.<sup>163</sup> Only a single source lists the names of all twelve queens.<sup>164</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh, an elderly clanshead of

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<sup>161</sup> Saliu, Y. S. (2021). "Niumi Dynasty: 12 females ruled for 122 years." *The Point Newspaper*. <https://www.thepoint.gm>

<sup>162</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 75-78

<sup>163</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

<sup>164</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024

the *Jammeh* of Bakindiki and Sitanunku, revealed that these historical accounts originate from Arab chronicles dating back to the 15th century. He emphasized,

“These sources assert that matriarchal governance flourished in Niumi for over one hundred and twenty-two years, six months, and one day.”<sup>165</sup>

This claim is substantiated by written records indicating that the queens of Bakindiki reigned for the same duration.<sup>166</sup> Thus, it can be concluded that matriarchal governance thrived in Niumi for over a century.

Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh further revealed that this remarkable matriarchal legacy spanned three distinct generations. He narrated,

“The first generation consisted of four queens, the second included five, and the third contained three. The first four queens of the initial generation were sisters of Biram and Musa, the two brothers from Siin who founded Bakindiki and Sitanunku. These four sisters served as the mothers of the five queens in the second generation, though specific details regarding the mother of each daughter remain unspecified. These sisters became grandmothers to the last three queens from the third generation.”<sup>167</sup>

While the names recorded in this tradition may vary slightly from those in other accounts, it is evident that matriarchal political authority was firmly established in Niumi. This authority was consistently passed down from the queens of the first generation, through the second, and concluded with the third generation, after which patriarchal rule emerged.

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<sup>165</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024

<sup>166</sup> Saliu, Y. S. (2021). <https://www.thepoint.gm>

<sup>167</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024

The sources concur that Mama Adame Jammeh was the inaugural queen of Niumi. According to Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh,

“She is recognized as the eldest of the first four sisters who ruled Niumi as queens, eldest of the mothers of the next five second-generation queens, and the eldest grandmother to the final three queens of the third-generation (her granddaughters).”<sup>168</sup>

In this context, Mama Adame emerges as a pioneer of matriarchal dominance in Niumi, often regarded as the cornerstone from which the subsequent queens of Niumi have flourished, drawing strength from her enduring legacy.

Similarly, there is a consensus regarding the identity of the second queen and Mama Adame's successor, Mansa Wame. Although her name is commonly rendered as “Wame”<sup>169</sup> in the transcribed accounts of Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh, it is alternatively spelled as “Wami.”<sup>170</sup> According to him,

“She was the second-oldest sister among the *Jammeh* siblings of Old Bakindiki, who were the sisters of Biram and Musa.”<sup>171</sup>

Notably, these two names exhibit very close phonetic similarities. Aside from the minor difference in the ending vowels—[e] in “Wame” and [i] in “Wami”—it is likely that the names refer to the same person. The variation in spelling may have arisen from a subtle alteration in the pronunciation of her name. Furthermore, an alternative version of the tradition reveals intriguing insights into the origin of this name, indicating that “Wame” is derived from the Mandinka noun

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<sup>168</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024

<sup>169</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). Pp. 76-77

<sup>170</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

“Wamo.” This term, meaning “the trend of the time,” specifically refers to the days when an abundance of fish is found in the sea. On such occasions, the women would often exclaim in Mandinka, “Baa ye wamo le dung.”<sup>172</sup> Consequently, as her reign coincided with a period of plentiful fish in the sea, the people named her Mansa Wame.

The identity of the third queen, who succeeded Mansa Wame/Wami, is a subject of contention among various historical accounts. In some versions, she is referred to as Mansa Kuru,<sup>173</sup> while in others, she is commonly known as Mansa Furu.<sup>174</sup> In the accounts of Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh,

“Mansa Furu was the third-oldest sister among the *Jammeh* siblings. Her name “Furu” is derived from the Mandinka word “Furo,” which signifies a type of freshwater fish that is regularly fished and consumed by the local community.”<sup>175</sup>

Despite the differences in her first name, she, like her fellow queens, belonged to the *Jammeh* clan. It is also worth mentioning that “Kuru” and “Furu” exhibit a close phonetic similarity, suggesting that “Kuru” could be a corrupted form of “Furu.”

The identity of the fourth queen, who succeeded Mansa Kuru/Furu, remains a subject of debate among various accounts. One source refers to her as Karoko.<sup>176</sup> Another account claims that

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<sup>172</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 76-77

<sup>173</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

<sup>174</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>175</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>176</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

Mansa Furu was succeeded by Mansa Kabulyadi.<sup>177</sup> Conversely, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh asserts,

“Mansa Furu’s successor was Mansa Karunku. She was the youngest among the first four sisters of the initial generation, siblings of Biram and Musa.”<sup>178</sup>

Aside from the name Kabulyadi, there is a notable phonetic similarity between the names Karoko and Karunku. It is plausible that Karoko was her original name, with Karunku representing a corrupted variation.

Various sources present differing accounts regarding the identity of the fifth queen who ascended the throne of Niumi. In one narrative, Jeke is said to have succeeded Karoko as the fifth queen.<sup>179</sup> Another account claims that a queen named Mansa Nyunturangjang Jammeh succeeded Kabulyadi.<sup>180</sup> Yet, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh narrated,

“Mansa Musu Kambiat ascended the throne after Mansa Musu Karunku. She was the oldest daughter and first queen of the second generation.”<sup>181</sup>

In spite of these variations, one of these names represents the queen's birth name, while the others may be nicknames or titles associated with her. This is further supported by the second account, which traces the etymology of her name, Nyunturangjang, to the Mandinka noun for “long stick,” traditionally used by local fishermen to propel their canoes into the river. This detail reveals that Nyunturangjang's mother had endured the anguish of infant mortality for many

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<sup>177</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>178</sup> Jammeh, A. E. (2024)

<sup>179</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

<sup>180</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>181</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

years. Consequently, when Nyunturangjang was born, her mother chose to name her after the “Nyunturangjang,” the long stick that her husband used for navigating his canoe.<sup>182</sup> This custom of naming, particularly among mothers who have experienced the loss of children, remains a common practice among the Senegambian people.

The various sources present conflicting names concerning the identity of the sixth queen in the chronology of the queens of Niumi. According to one source, Kabule succeeded Jeke as the sixth queen.<sup>183</sup> However, a second account asserts that after Nyunturangjang's death, Mansa Kalamakoi ascended to the throne.<sup>184</sup> Yet Alhagie Eduwar's version lists a different name. He revealed,

“Mansa Musu Kangengkih was the sixth queen who ruled Niumi. She Succeeded Mansa Musu Kambiat. She was the second-oldest daughter of the second generation.”<sup>185</sup>

Observably, some of these differing names may actually be nicknames attributed to her. For instance, the second version reveals that her name, “Kalamakoi,” translates to “white calabash tray” in Mandinka. It is believed that she was named after the white calabash tray her family used for consuming wine.<sup>186</sup> This does not rule out the possibility that she may have had a

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<sup>182</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>183</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

<sup>184</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>185</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>186</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

different birth name, which is not uncommon; traditional names are often given to newborns due to the high mortality rate of their siblings at birth.

The identity of the seventh queen on the throne of Niumi remains a subject of debate among various historical sources. One account mentions a queen named Yaidi as the seventh ruler.<sup>187</sup> Another source lists Mansa Yayando Jammeh as the seventh queen and successor to Mansa Kalamakoi.<sup>188</sup> Meanwhile, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh presented a totally different name. According to him,

“Mansa Musu Kambuling Jammeh was the seventh queen and a successor to Mansa Musu Kangengkih. She was the third eldest daughter of the second generation.”<sup>189</sup>

Despite the variations regarding the identity of the seventh queen, the name Yaidi, as noted in the initial account, seems to be derived from the term Yayando mentioned in the second account. Therefore, Yaidi may represent a more localized version of Yayando. It is also possible that Kambuling was her actual name, as Yayando is described as a nickname popularized by her nanny during her infancy. According to the tradition, “Yayando” is a Mandinka term meaning “roaming around with.” Thus, during her infant years, her nanny would carry her on her back while wandering through town, singing lullabies. When inquired about the child’s name, the nanny would respond, “Her name is Yayando,” referring to the one she frequently “roams around

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<sup>187</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

<sup>188</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>189</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

with.”<sup>190</sup> Consequently, this name became her most recognized identity until she ascended to the throne of Niumi.

The accounts regarding the name of the eighth queen who ruled the kingdom of Niumi differ significantly. In one version, Kabulyadi Ngongirant is designated as the eighth queen and successor to Yaidi.<sup>191</sup> In another, Baki-Juwana is said to have succeeded Yayando as the eighth queen.<sup>192</sup> Additionally, Alhagie Eduwar’s account provides a different name. He noted,

“Mansa Musu Nyoiteren-Jan Jammeh succeeded Mansa Musu Kambuling Jammeh as the eighth queen. She was the fourth eldest daughter of the second generation.”<sup>193</sup>

Thus, one of these names must have been her birth name, and the others were nicknames as such was common in those days.

The identity of the ninth queen remains a topic of debate among various sources. One account named Bakijuwana as the ninth queen and the successor to Kabulyadi Ngongirant.<sup>194</sup> In contrast, Alhagie Eduwar’s version identifies the ninth queen with a different name. He revealed,

“Mansa Musu Kalamacoei Jammeh was the ninth queen and successor to Mansa Musu Nyoiteren-Jan Jammeh. She was the fifth eldest daughter of the second-generation queens who ruled the kingdom of Niumi.”<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>191</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

<sup>192</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>193</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>194</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

It is possible that one of these two names was her actual birth name, and as applies to the earlier queens, the other was a nickname associated with her.

Among the sources reviewed, the name of the tenth queen of Niumi is noted, although there are variations in both spelling and pronunciation. In one account, Queen Kalamakoi succeeded Queen Bakijuwana as the tenth queen.<sup>196</sup> In the narrative of Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh,

“The reign of Mansa Musu Kalamacoei Jammeh, the last eldest daughter of the second-generation queens, signified the conclusion of the second generation of matriarchal rule in Niumi. This period coincided with the coming of age of the daughters of the third-generation queens...the granddaughters of the first-generation queens. The first granddaughter to ascend to the throne of Niumi was Mansa Musu Yayadou Jammeh. She was the eldest granddaughter of Queen Mama Adame, the founder of the matriarchal lineage in Niumi.”<sup>197</sup>

Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh further revealed the name of the eleventh queen in the lineage of succession. According to him,

“Mansa Musu MbakiJuwanda was the eleventh queen and the successor of Mansa Musu Yayadou Jammeh. She was also the second granddaughter of Mama Adame.”<sup>198</sup>

While this name resembles the name of the seventh queen in one account,<sup>199</sup> and the ninth queen in another source,<sup>200</sup> it is hereby considered as the name of the eleventh queen of the matriarchal kingdom of Niumi.

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<sup>195</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>196</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

<sup>197</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>198</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

Finally, it is unanimously agreed that Musa Mamakimereng Jammeh succeeded Mansa Musu MbakiJuwanda as the twelfth and final queen of Niumi.<sup>201</sup> Some sources refer to her as Musa Mama Nkemere,<sup>202</sup> while others know her as Musa Mama Ndang.<sup>203</sup> Despite this variation in names, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh emphasized, “She was the third-oldest granddaughter of Mama Adame.”<sup>204</sup> In summary, it was after her reign that matriarchal rule came to an end in Niumi.

It can be seen that there is a clear chronological inconsistency in the identities of the queens as recorded by various sources in the succession chronology. Each source presents one or two names that share similarities with names found in other accounts, albeit in different numerical order. For instance, one source identifies Mansa Kabulyadi as the fourth queen,<sup>205</sup> while another source aligns this name with the sixth queen, Kabule, the seventh queen, Yaidi, and the eighth queen, Kabulyadi Ngongirant.<sup>206</sup> Despite minor variations in the structure of these names, it is noteworthy that "Kabule" and "Yaidi" are syllabic components of the name "Kabulyadi." This close phonetic resemblance indicates a significant connection among these names.

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<sup>199</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15· 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>200</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

<sup>201</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>202</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15· 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>203</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

<sup>204</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>205</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15· 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>206</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

In one chronology, the fifth queen of Niumi is identified as Nyunturangjang Jammeh.<sup>207</sup> Intriguingly, this name bears a resemblance to Nyoitere-Jan Jammeh, the eighth queen in an alternative account.<sup>208</sup> While these two names reflect different numbering systems and exhibit slight variations in spelling, they demonstrate notable phonetic similarities in pronunciation. Despite the discrepancies in the accounts, the close sound patterns of these names are evident.

One account identifies Kalamakoi Jammeh as the sixth queen of Niumi,<sup>209</sup> while another source designates her as the tenth queen.<sup>210</sup> Additionally, a third account refers to a similar name, Kalamacoei Jammeh, as the ninth queen.<sup>211</sup> These names are ranked differently across the sources, and their spellings (Kalamakoi and Kalamacoei) also vary. Nonetheless, despite these discrepancies, both names share a common root, as evidenced by their similar pronunciation patterns.

In addition, one of the accounts identifies Yayando Jammeh as the seventh queen of Niumi.<sup>212</sup> According to another source, this name bears a notable resemblance to Yayadou Jammeh, the

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<sup>207</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>208</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>209</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>210</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

<sup>211</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>212</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

tenth queen.<sup>213</sup> Thus, the phonetic similarity between the two names indicates a likely connection between them.

Ultimately, one of the accounts identifies Baki-Juwana as the eighth queen of Niumi.<sup>214</sup> This is reminiscent of Bakijuwana, who is listed as the ninth queen in the chronology of another account.<sup>215</sup> Interestingly, according to a third account, both names are similar to MbakiJuwanda, the name of the eleventh queen.<sup>216</sup> Despite the variations in spelling across the different sources and slight differences in their pronunciation, these names share notable phonetic characteristics.

### **3.3. THE ANCESTRAL HISTORY OF THE QUEENS OF KOMBO AND NIUMI**

#### **a) The ancestral history of the queen of Kombo**

There are two distinct accounts in Senegambian oral tradition regarding the ancestral history of Queen Wulending Jassey, the queen of Kombo. In the Accounts of Alhagie Fa Ceesay, “she originated from the Mandinka ancestral homelands in ancient Mali.”<sup>217</sup> A similar narrative recounts her migratory journey to the Senegambia region, during which she traversed the kingdoms of Kaabu, and also Kumbalulu in Karouni. In her pursuit of a destined land, she consulted an oracle, which advised her to continue her migration, indicating that she had not yet arrived at her ultimate destination.<sup>218</sup> Following the riverbank, she eventually reached Bakefeti in

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<sup>213</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>214</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 77

<sup>215</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31

<sup>216</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>217</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>218</sup> Touray, E. (2013). “History of Kombo.” YouTube (video documentary). [www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921](https://www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921)

Sanyang, recognized as her prophesied home, where she established her kingdom. She is said to have named her royal residence “Kobi Sala,” a term derived from the Mandinka word for the tree known as “Kobo,” the very tree that transported her and her entourage across a nearby lake during their journey. According to this account, Queen Jassey traveled with family members, servants, and close relatives, including her three daughters, Kutu, Banna, and Kani, all sharing the surname *Janneh*.<sup>219</sup> Thus, this narrative suggests that Queen Jassey’s migration represents one of the earliest waves of movement from the Sudanic homelands of Manding in the east to the Senegambia region in the west.

Another account of the oral tradition links the ancestral origin of Queen Wulending Jassey to the Bainuk of pre-colonial Senegambia. This narrative asserts that Queen Jassey was the daughter of Kambi Jassey, a patriarch of the Bainuk who hailed from the village of Abene in present-day southern Senegal's Casamance region.<sup>220</sup> Kambi Jassey is widely regarded as the first known inhabitant of Kombo Sanyang. It is believed that the Gambia River derived its name (“Kambi Bolong”) from his name, “Kambi,” and similarly, the modern state of The Gambia is named after him. During that period, the Bainuk communities in Kombo, Fonyi, Casamance, and Guinea-Bissau formed part of the expansive Bainuk Empire, known as Kassa-Bainuk. With its capital in Brikama, situated 53 kilometers from present-day Ziganchor, Kassa-Bainuk was invaded in the mid-13th century by Manding migrant families from Mali.<sup>221</sup> Kambi Jassey is thought to have founded Sanyang, likely the first human settlement in the Lower Gambia Valley, governing it as an extension of the vast Bainuk Empire.<sup>222</sup> This perspective appears more plausible, as it affirms

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<sup>219</sup> Touray, E. (2013). “History of Kombo.” YouTube (video documentary). [www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921](http://www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921)

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

that Kombo was initially settled by the Bainuk people, who thrived in the region for centuries before the arrival of the Manding migrants.

The kingdom of Kombo was situated within the western south bank territories of the Gambia River, which formed part of the Southern Rivers in Southern Senegambia. According to Alhagie Fa Ceesay, “The kingdom's territory reportedly extended from the Atlantic coast, stretching eastward to the border with the kingdom of Fonyi.”<sup>223</sup> Also in the accounts of Alhagie Jung Conteh, “In those days, Kombo, like Fonyi, was primarily inhabited by the Bainunk and Jolaa clans.”<sup>224</sup> These communities likely settled in the area around the 11th century, following the Almoravid attacks on the territories of the Ghana Empire. This era is believed to mark the establishment of most native settlements in Southern Senegambia, particularly within the creeks and jungle dens along the banks of the Southern Rivers. This region was strategically significant for the sustenance of the local peoples, who were hesitant to abandon their traditional religious practices. Alhagie Jung Conteh further revealed,

“Until the period when the emerging Mali Empire began to exert its influence over the Senegambian territories, the matrilineal rice-growing communities of Kombo and Fonyi had developed decentralized social structures characterized by lineage-based political units, where hereditary status was traced through the maternal line.”<sup>225</sup>

This Malian occupation of Senegambia, which subsequently transformed the political landscape and social dynamics of the region, giving rise to monarchical kingdoms governed by kings,

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<sup>223</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>224</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024).

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

famously occurred in the mid-13th century.<sup>226</sup> The resultant interaction between the native peoples and the Manding migrant population evidently contributed to the fluidity of ethnic identities in the area. For instance, Alhagie Jung Conteh noted,

“Many native Bainuk families, particularly those with the surnames Kambi, Bajinka, Colley, Sambou, and Kombo, adopted Mandinka identities through intermarriage and coexistence with Manding immigrant families.”<sup>227</sup>

This context clarifies the differing narratives regarding Queen Wulending’s ethnic identity. It is plausible that the *Jassey* surname initially belonged to the Bainunk and, over time, became prevalent among both the Bainunk and Mandinka through intermarriage. This phenomenon mirrors the experiences of other ethnic groups, such as the Jolaa-Karoni and the Serer. Consequently, the matrilineal and egalitarian characteristics of the predominantly Bainunk and Jolaa society in Kombo likely provided a foundation for Queen Jassey’s rise to power as the ruler of the area.

The town of Sanyang is thought to have served as the first capital of Kombo and was the primary seat of administration for the queen. Known as the first human settlement in the Lower Gambia, various narratives exist regarding its actual founder. One such narrative claims that Sanyang was established by a man named Sanyang-Ba Jassey, after whom the town was subsequently named. Yet, in another version, Sanyang was founded by Kambi Jassey, the father of Queen Wulending Jassey.<sup>228</sup> This account claims that Kambi Jassey established Sanyang many years before Queen

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<sup>226</sup> African Union Common Repository. (1980). *Kaabu Oral History Project Proposal*. The Republic of The Gambia Oral History and Antiquities Division, Vice President’s Office, State House, Banjul. Pp. 1-5  
<https://www.archives.au.int>

<sup>227</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024).

<sup>228</sup> Touray, E. (2013). “History of Kombo.” YouTube (video documentary). [www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921](http://www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921)

Jassey arrived in the area.<sup>229</sup> Despite this discrepancy between the two accounts regarding the founder of the town, it can be argued that Sanyang-Ba Jassey was indeed another name for Kambi Jassey. This conclusion arises from the alignment in both accounts concerning his surname (Jassey), as well as the possibility that Sanyang-Ba was an informal name reflecting his status as the town's founder.

#### **b) The ancestral history of the queens of Niumi**

Like the case of Queen Wulending Jassey of Kombo, there exist various accounts within Senegambian oral tradition concerning the ancestral history of the queens who ruled Niumi. One prominent narrative claims that the queens of Niumi are descendants of Sora Musa Jammeh, a Mandinka warrior and migratory leader from Mali.<sup>230</sup> As a Soninke prince, Sora Musa's fame as the progenitor of the *Jammeh* clan stemmed from his accomplishments as a warrior under Sundiata Keita, the founding emperor of the Mali Empire.<sup>231</sup> After joining Sundiata's allied forces, which triumphed over the tyrannical Susu king Sumanguru Kante in the historic battle of Kirina in 1235, Sundiata is said to have endowed Sora Musa with the spiritual legacy of Manding, granting him royal permission to establish a settlement in the western regions of Senegambia. Sora Musa then set off on a westward journey to the Senegambia region, accompanied by family members, warriors, and fellow Mandinka clansmen. He ultimately arrived in the Lower Gambia area, which is now part of the North Bank Region of The Gambia, where he founded Old Bakindiki along with four other villages. At that time, Bakindiki was under the political influence of the rulers of Siin and Saloum, who imposed annual taxes on the

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<sup>229</sup> Touray, E. (2013). "History of Kombo." YouTube (video documentary). [www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921](http://www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921)

<sup>230</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974) An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 30

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

residents of Niumi. He subsequently moved on to Baddibu, where he established the villages of Iliassa and Juwala, leaving Bakindiki in the care of his daughter, Mama Adame Jammeh.<sup>232</sup>

In addition to this version, other sources suggest that the lineage of the *Jammeh* queens who ruled Niumi has its origins among the Serer of Siin and Saalum. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh corroborated this claim, linking their migration to the initiative of pairs of siblings who migrated to different destinations in pre-colonial Senegambia. According to him,

“The *Jammeh* family’s original Serer surname was *Bobb*. Migrating in pairs, the Bobb brothers departed from Siin and Saalum during a period marked by internal political turmoil, spurred by the growing influence of Islam in the region. To forge their own kingdom, two of the brothers, Biram and Musa, along with their close relatives and warriors, migrated from Siin to the Niumi area of Lower Gambia, where they established Old Bakindiki and later Sitanunku.”<sup>233</sup>

He further revealed that upon their arrival, they found the region completely uninhabited. After spending three days exploring and surveying the land, Musa, the younger brother, advised Biram, the elder, that they had found their ideal location. He expressed this sentiment in Mandinka, saying, “Nga- Yoomi- Jang,” which translates to “let us reside here.” It is from this phrase that the name “Niumi” is derived.<sup>234</sup> Biram and Musa reportedly settled in this new land for three years. By the end of that period, Musa proposed that they should establish a second home at a different location within the area. While both brothers agreed to this idea, they raised concerns about who could serve as a trustee to oversee their newly established home of

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<sup>232</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 30

<sup>233</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

Bakindiki. During their deliberations, they recognized their older sister, Mama Adame Jammeh, as the most suitable trustee and ruler for Bakindiki.<sup>235</sup>

The tradition further indicates that before establishing Sitanunku, Biram and Musa initially settled in what is now known as Jokadu. As a hunter, Musa often ventured into the nearby bushes to pursue wild game. He would frequently take his rest beneath "a small but robust baobab tree" known as "Sitanding-Nunko koto." On one occasion, while lost in a daydream, he received a revelation that this location was his destined home.<sup>236</sup> After sharing this insight with Biram, they decided to make it their permanent residence. In this way, the *Jammeh* of Bakindiki and the *Jammeh* of Sitanunku are linked by a shared ancestry.

It can be argued that the indigenous people of Niumi possess a diverse ancestral background due to the enduring influences of both the Serer from the north and the Manding from the south. As a result, the *Jammeh* are a hybridized group descended from both Serer and Manding lineages. The area's enterprising potential has catalyzed Niumi's evolution into a cultural convergence center, particularly between the millet-based communities of northern Senegambia and the rice-based communities of southern Senegambia.<sup>237</sup> This provides a foundation for the assertion that the *Jammeh* of Niumi originates from the intermarriage of individuals from both Serer and Manding backgrounds. The inter-ethnic coexistence between the Serer and Manding was primarily facilitated by the complex commercial activities thriving in Niumi at that time. The Serer of Siin and Saalum traded salt from the Saalum River plains in exchange for rice or millet brought by

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<sup>235</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU; United Kingdom. Pp. 17

the Manding from the south.<sup>238</sup> Additionally, local Niuminka fishermen contributed to this exchange by trading fish for salt from Saalum and rice from the southern regions.<sup>239</sup> The intricate socio-economic fabric of Niumi, which has fostered inter-ethnic connections for generations, thus complicates the task of linking the ancestral background of the *Jammeh* queens to a single indigenous group.

### **3.4. THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED TO THE RISE OF THE QUEENS OF KOMBO AND NIUMI**

#### **a) The rise of the queen of Kombo**

There are no specific dates in the accounts regarding when Wulending Jassey became the queen of Kombo. However, the accounts provide hints about the circumstances that led to her ascension to the kingdom's throne. One of the accounts mentions that after Queen Jassey arrived in Sanyang, Kambi Jassey, her father, decided to relocate to Folonko, a sacred place in Kartong, where he ultimately settled.<sup>240</sup> According to the accounts, he named this place "Folonko" after his son Folonko Jassey. From that point onward, Wulending, who remained in Sanyang, continued to rule as the queen of the area.<sup>241</sup> Thus, in line with this account, Wulending Jassey inherited the throne of Niumi from Kambi Jassey, her biological father.

Alhagie Fa Ceesay, on the other hand, confirmed that Wulending Jassey's father was, in fact, the ruler of Kombo. He related her rise to power to the decision of her father who perhaps had no male heirs. As a result, he decided to entrust her with his kingdom at a time when he needed

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<sup>238</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>239</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edimburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU; United Kingdom. Pp. 17

<sup>240</sup> Touray, E. (2013). "History of Kombo." YouTube (video documentary). [www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921](https://www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921)

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

someone to oversee his kingdom as he planned to go to war in support of his Bainunk relatives. He revealed,

“At one time, his relatives in a distant land were under urgent attack by a neighboring kingdom. As such, he, along with most of the warriors, went to fight in that war to support his relatives. Since he left, he has not returned. However, before he departed for the war, he entrusted the kingdom's protection to the queen.”<sup>242</sup>

This account, therefore, maintains that Queen Wulending Jassey acquired the throne of Kombo by way of trusteeship.

Interestingly, both accounts seem to suggest that Queen Wulending Jassey inherited the throne of Kombo from her father. She ruled the kingdom in what can be understood as a peaceful and successful reign that lasted until the arrival of the *Conde* clan in the region, who would later be surnamed *Bojang*.<sup>243</sup> Her reign appeared to be organized around a centralized political authority. Additional sources indicate that during her rule, both Tujereng and Kartong were part of her kingdom's territorial influence, which formed a part of the larger pre-colonial Senegambian province of Pacholing.<sup>244</sup> The emergence of patriarchal monarchical rule in Kombo became apparent with the rise of a series of patriarchal rulers of Manding origin, who governed the kingdom as an extension of the Malian political hegemony that prevailed across Southern Senegambia in the mid-13th century. According to Alhagie Fa Ceesay, “this Manding occupation

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<sup>242</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Touray, E. (2013). “History of Kombo.” YouTube (video documentary). [www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921](https://www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921)

of Kombo occurred after the end of the queen's reign."<sup>245</sup> Thus, she presided over the early towns and villages that existed in the area prior to the arrival of the *Conde/Bojang* family.

#### **b) The rise of the queens of Niumi**

The various accounts do not provide exact dates for the ascension of each queen of Niumi to the throne. However, it is probable that Mama Adame, the first queen, rose to power around the 11th century. This period followed the Almoravid Muslim occupation of the Ghana Empire, which prompted further migration of the native peoples to the Senegambia region. She likely assumed royalty during this transformative time. The kingdom remained under the continuous rule of queens until the reign of the last queen, Musa Mamakimereng (Musa Mama Nkemere), which ended in the mid-13th century.

The accounts regarding the circumstances surrounding Mama Adame's ascent to the throne of Niumi vary. One version associates her rise to a conflict she had with her brother over the throne of Illiasa. After losing her claim to power, it is said that she departed from Illiasa accompanied by a man and a woman, making her way to the Niumi region, where she established Old Bakindiki. According to this narrative, the name "Bakindiki" derives from a phrase she uttered during an interaction with a group of men sent by her father to persuade her to return to Illiasa. When they attempted to convince her, she reportedly replied, "Mbandunke," meaning "I refuse." As a result, "Bakindiki" emerged as a derivative of "Mbandunke," a term popularized by the

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<sup>245</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024).

Kasinka people residing on the nearby islands.<sup>246</sup> Thus, according to this account, Mama Adame was the sole founder and first ruler of Niumi.

Another account indicates that Mama Adame inherited the throne from her father, Sora Musa Jammeh, a renowned Mandinka warlord and close ally of the Malian emperor. According to this version, he chose to transfer power to Mama Adame out of trust and confidence in her leadership abilities, particularly at the time of his resettlement in the Baddibu region, where he aimed to establish his *Jammeh* lineage within the local political landscape as well.<sup>247</sup> As such, in line with this account, Mama Adame inherited the throne of Niumi from his biological father.

However, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh presents a slightly different perspective, linking Mama Adame's rise to the throne of Niumi to the ambitions of her younger brothers, Biram and Musa, the founders of Old Bakindiki. He revealed,

“After arriving in the region from Siin, Biram and Musa sought to establish her as the ruler of the village. Their objective was to ensure the continuation of their *Jammeh* lineage across the newly explored territories, which required the appointment of a trustee to govern Bakindiki and other emerging villages in the area at that time.”<sup>248</sup>

This account, therefore, asserts that Mama Adame acquired the throne of Niumi from her two younger brothers by way of trusteeship.

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<sup>246</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 75

<sup>247</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 30

<sup>248</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

Despite the differing accounts, there is a consensus that the news of Mama Adame's ascension as the ruler of the pioneering villages in Niumi captured the attention of many inhabitants from neighboring states and kingdoms. According to Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh,

“The persistent Muslim infiltration in Siin compelled many individuals to seek refuge in the flourishing society established by the queen in Niumi.”<sup>249</sup>

This migration occurred during a period when the rulers of Siin and Saalum initiated a series of wars against the states of Baddibu, aiming to consolidate political and economic dominance over the local populations. As a result, a substantial number of Baddibu's residents, along with their relatives in Illiasa, are believed to have relocated to Niumi to escape the turmoil.<sup>250</sup> This exodus was undoubtedly motivated by the allure of the peaceful society that Queen Mama Adame had created. Although some ambitious individuals from ruling families in Siin and Baddibu sought to usurp her power and integrate her newly formed society into their kingdoms, there is no evidence that Mama Adame lost her reign through such efforts. According to Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh, “until her eventual passing, Mama Adame ruled Niumi for a period of two years, six months, and seven days.”<sup>251</sup> Thus, Mama Adame's reign was evidently marked by success and absolute stability.

The reign of the second queen, Mansa Wame, is equally described as successful, symbolized by the fecundity of the sea. Accordingly, during her time, countless fish miraculously appeared in the sea on their own. The queen is also said to have been a serious ruler, and her actions were

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<sup>249</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>250</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 75

<sup>251</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

often attended to by her people, who regarded them as worthy of emulation.<sup>252</sup> It is reported that Koli Tengela Bah, the founder of Berengding, came to Niumi with his large Fulani following during Mansa Wame's reign. Upon their arrival, they took refuge under a giant baobab tree, where they spent three nights. After the third day, they decided to scout the area and eventually discovered Bakindiki, with Mansa Wame as its ruler. After visiting her for three days, the queen and her entourage decided to reciprocate their visit. During this famous meeting, the queen changed Koli and his people's surname from *Bah* to *Sonko*. According to the account, when the queen asked Koli and his men about their surname, they replied, "Our surname is Bah." The queen retorted, "No," and told them, "your surname is not Bah; it is 'Sonkola-Kore,'" which means "a group of quarrelsome people."<sup>253</sup> The queen reportedly gave them this name because when she met them, they were talking and yelling among themselves.

Some sources claim that it was Mansa Wame who included the *Sonko* clan of Berending in the administrative circle of Niumi, thus legitimizing their claim to the kingdom's throne in the later century when matriarchal rule fell across the Senegambian landmass.<sup>254</sup> Other sources too assert that it was Koli Tengela who helped Mansa Wame end the annual payment of taxes to the rulers of Siin and Saalum, famously proclaiming, "It is a donkey that carries loads." This phrase had been Koli's slogan with which he launched a war of revolt on behalf of Niumi against their Siin-Saalum overlords. Koli is said to have died mysteriously after a spiritual fight against the king of Siin. Before his death, the ruler of Siin had given his daughter in marriage to Koli as a way to

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<sup>252</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 76-77

<sup>253</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 30-31

<sup>254</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

broker peace between him and his overlords. It was this woman who conspired with her relatives in Siin to plan Koli's demise.<sup>255</sup> However, with Koli's assistance, Queen Wame was able to permanently evade the annual tax levies of the rulers of Siin and Saalum. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh revealed, "Until her eventual death, Queen Wame ruled Niumi for fourteen years, one month, and three days."<sup>256</sup> Thus, Queen Wame's reign represented another period of successful matriarchal governance in Niumi.

The accounts provide limited details regarding the reigns of the successors of Mansa Wame. However, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh confirmed that both Mansa Furu and Mansa Musu Karunku, her immediate successors, were her younger sisters. According to him,

"Mansa Furu governed Niumi for a decade, passing away on the seventh day of the fifth month during her reign. In a noteworthy instance of peaceful power transfer, Mansa Musu Karunku ascended to the throne of Niumi as the fourth younger sister of Mama Adame, marking her as the last queen of her generation. Like Mansa Furu, she ruled the kingdom until her death, reigning for a total of twelve years and passing away on the fifth day of the ninth month of her twelfth year."<sup>257</sup>

Evidently, this period symbolized another era of successful matriarchal dominance in the kingdom of Niumi.

The conclusion of Mansa Musu Karunku's reign potentially signaled a pivotal moment in the history of matriarchal leadership in Niumi. "By this time," Jammeh noted, "Mama Adame's

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<sup>255</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 31-37

<sup>256</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

offspring and her sisters had reached adulthood.”<sup>258</sup> Given that the tradition of political leadership had always been passed down exclusively to women, the throne of Niumi was inevitably inherited by a succession of five queens, all daughters of the original queens.

Mansa Musu Kambiat, the eldest daughter, succeeded Mansa Musu Karunku as the first queen of the second generation. She is regarded as an industrious monarch who excelled in the art of diplomacy. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh revealed,

“It was during her reign that the Manding migrant families from Kaabu settled in the region, establishing the towns of Buniadu and Kaanuma. She was the queen who granted royal status to the ruling families of these two communities, whose members later became rulers of Niumi following the end of matriarchal rule.

Although Kaanuma was founded before Buniadu, she first granted the rulers of Buniadu royal status before Kanuma.”<sup>259</sup>

While Alhagie Eduwar did not provide a reason for the queen’s decision to recognize the royal status of the rulers of Buniadu before Kanuma, however, it is plausible that such was a calculated decision aimed at securing military and security alliances with these migrant communities. According to Jammeh, “She ruled Niumi for a period of seventeen years, four months, and a day until her death.”<sup>260</sup> Thus, Queen Kambiat’s reign evidently represented an era of productive diplomatic success for Niumi.

The account offers limited insight into the lives and times of the other queens of the second generation. However, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh highlighted,

“Mansa Musu Kangengkih, the second eldest daughter who succeeded Mansa Musu Kambiat, ruled Niumi for five years before passing away on the thirteenth

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<sup>258</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. *An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens*. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

day of the eleventh month thereafter. She was followed by Mansa Musu Kambuling Jammeh, the third eldest daughter, who ruled Niumi for ten years, dying on the eleventh day of the sixth month at the conclusion of her ten-year reign. Her successor was Mansa Musu Nyoiteren-Jan Jammeh, the fourth eldest daughter, who ruled Niumi for fourteen years, one month, and seven days before her eventual death. The final queen of the second generation, Mansa Musu Kalamacoei Jammeh, the fifth eldest daughter, presided over the kingdom for ten years, seven months, and five days.”<sup>261</sup>

In spite of the limited information regarding the reigns of these queens, it can be emphasized that they too must have led successful reigns.

The conclusion of Mansa Musu Kalamacoei Jammeh's reign heralded a significant transformation in the history of matriarchal governance in Niumi. This transition notably coincided with the coming of age of the daughters of the second-generation queens, the granddaughters of Mama Adame and her sister queens.<sup>262</sup> With their reaching adulthood and in accordance with traditional principles of political succession, royal authority transitioned to three of these third-generation queens, ranked by seniority, as the customs had been inherited from the first generation. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh narrated,

“Mansa Musu Yayadou Jammeh, the eldest granddaughter, succeeded Mansa Musu Kalamacoei Jammeh as the first queen of the third generation. She ruled the kingdom for fifteen years, three months, and one day. Following her passing, she was succeeded by Mansa Musu Mbaki Juwanda, the second-eldest granddaughter of the third generation, who governed Niumi for two years, eight months, and fourteen days until her own death. Next in line was Mansa Mamakimereng Jammeh, the third-eldest granddaughter and the final queen

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<sup>261</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

to rule Niumi, ruling for six years, two months, and seventeen days.”<sup>263</sup>

Again, despite the limited insights into their lives and reigns, these queens likely maintained the legacy of administrative of their grandmothers and mothers of the past two generations.

Like Queen Wulending Jassey of Kombo, the matriarchal era of Niumi came to an end in the mid-13th century, primarily due to the growing influence of the Mali Empire at that time. Notably, Niumi maintained a centralized political structure during this period.<sup>264</sup> With the emergence of Seneke Jammeh as the first patriarchal ruler to ascend to the kingdom's throne, a new governance dynamic took shape. His ascent to power was likely influenced by the political ambitions of Mali's patriarchs, who sought to consolidate control over the economic resources of the western territories in the Senegambia region. Consequently, a multi-dynastic succession system developed, allowing royal power to rotate among the *Jammeh*, *Sonko*, and *Manneh* dynasties—the three principal families of the kingdom.<sup>265</sup> Thus, the end of matriarchal rule in Niumi marked the beginning of increased political consolidation under subsequent patriarchal leaders.

It has been reported that during the height of matriarchal dominance in Niumi, each reigning queen's jurisdiction—beginning with Mama Adame, the first queen, and concluding with Musa Mamakimereng, the last queen—encompassed a landmass that includes present-day Barra along the Atlantic coast, as well as several islands extending towards the Saalum River area, all located at the mouth of the Gambia River. This territory concluded at "Kambi Jassey Kolongo" (Kambi Jassey's well), a name attributed to the tributary ("Bolong") that flows from the river and

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<sup>263</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> NCAC/RDD. (1975). An Account on the History of Niumi and Baddibu (NCAC-RDD-TAPE: 0025A+B EN-SPO1)

currently serves as the boundary between Jokadu and Baddibu, which was previously known as *Mini-miniang-Bolong* before the construction of a bridge. This account indicates that the region currently known as Jokadu was part of Niumi territory during the era of matriarchal rule.<sup>266</sup> In summary, it can be posited that matriarchal governance was the prevailing order in Niumi from approximately the 11th century until around the mid-13th century, when patriarchal rulers introduced a rotational kingship system in the kingdom.

### **3.5. THE STRUCTURES OF THE MATRIARCHAL STATES OF KOMBO AND NIUMI**

#### **a) The socio-political and economic structure**

The matriarchal kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi can be understood as structured within the framework of the ancient African state, which is characterized as a political entity consisting of several distinct layers or strata, ranging from basic social groups to leadership. The inhabitants within the boundaries of this African state formed its core, reflecting a rich tapestry of ethnicities and environments.<sup>267</sup> Both matriarchal administrations flourished within the context of a centralized political system. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh highlighted the origins of matriarchal political governance as follows:

“The office of the ‘Queen’ initially emerged as ‘Musu Alkaliyaa’ Over time, this position evolved into the title of ‘Musu Mansoo’ or ‘Musu Mansa.’”<sup>268</sup>

Evidently, the Mandinka phrase “Musu Alkaliyaa” means “female village-headship.” Thus, the title must have underwent a gradual process of growth until later periods when it gained wider

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<sup>266</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>267</sup> Muiu, M. W. (2008). “Africa in 2108: A Strategic Plan.” *African Journal of International Affairs*. Vol. 11, No. 2. Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2008 (ISSN 0850-7902: Introduction. Pp. 3

<sup>268</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

recognition and political legitimacy, transforming into the full-fledged office of “Musu Mansoo,” or “Musu Mansa,” which literally translates to “Queen.” Alhagie Fa Ceesay revealed,

“In the matriarchal state, the queen occupied the pinnacle of the political structure, supported by a select group of men and women from the various villages in the community.”<sup>269</sup>

This office became so widely acknowledged that it ultimately attained a nearly unquestionable or sacred status within these matrilineal societies.

In both kingdoms, the reigning queens lacked large-scale administrative systems with salaried staff, akin to modern political institutions. Instead, they adopted a system of participatory governance that enabled countless men and women to voluntarily render their services, skills and personal endowments to the queen and the kingdom at large. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh gave a vivid picture of this, saying:

“In that era, society did not strictly divide people into nobles and slaves; everyone contributed to the maintenance and continuity of the community. Service to the kingdom was primarily voluntary. Close family members and skilled individuals, such as warriors and hunters, took pride in their dual roles as guardians of the queens and protectors of the sacred shrines. Others found honor in their responsibilities as drummers, messengers, tax collectors, and town-criers.”<sup>270</sup>

Thus, it can be concluded that, with the support of close relatives and notable individuals from leading clans and villages, the queens governed their kingdoms based on the traditional

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<sup>269</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>270</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024).

principles of leadership inherited from their predecessors, as well as their own cultural wisdom and spiritual and religious insights.

Both matriarchal kingdoms are said to have had a form of cabinet system that comprised positions known as “Bulun-ngo” or “Bulung-daa.”<sup>271</sup> For the kingdom of Kombo, key informants, especially Alhagie Fa Ceesay reiterated this claim, although he did not specify the number of positions that composed Queen Jassey’s cabinet. However, other sources suggest that the communities of Tujereng and Kartong had had representatives in the queen’s cabinet.<sup>272</sup> This evidence, therefore, ascertains the centralized nature of the political administration of Queen Wulending Jassey.

The matriarchal kingdom of Niumi, on the other hand, is said to have had “seven” cabinet positions. Accordingly, the system first emerged during the era of Maama Adame, the first queen of Niumi. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh narrated,

“In those days, the *Jammeh* clans of Bakindiki and Sitanunku occupied all six positions. The queen herself occupied the seventh position. Down the ages, the cabinet was expanded to include the leading clan-heads of other families, who established settlements in Niumi as part of the sporadic waves of migrations in the area.”<sup>273</sup>

In support of this assertion, earlier sources indicated that, for instance, during the reign of Queen Wame, the Fulani leader, Koli Tengela, represented his *Sonko* clan of Berending in the cabinet.<sup>274</sup> In another instance, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh narrated,

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<sup>271</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>272</sup> Touray, E. (2013). “History of Kombo.” YouTube (video documentary). [www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921](http://www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921)

<sup>273</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

“The leading members of the *Manneh* clans of Buniadu and Kaanuma had served as members of Queen Kambiat’s cabinet, during the second generation of matriarchal rule in Niumi.”<sup>275</sup>

These representatives were therefore men of wisdom and repute who probably advised the queen on various matters of specific interests to their communities, and the kingdom, at large.

In both matriarchal kingdoms, the Gambia River was vital for the survival and communal life of the people. Written sources indicate that the river provided the most accessible route for traders seeking to reach the interior regions away from the Atlantic coast, thereby facilitating trade and cultural exchanges over time.<sup>276</sup> This is corroborated by traditional accounts. For example, describing the socio-economic life of the people of Kombo, Alhagie Jung Conteh highlighted,

“In those days, the inhabitants of Kombo, like the rest of the peoples living on the south bank, primarily relied on rice cultivation, growing it abundantly in the mangrove swamps along the river.”<sup>277</sup>

The Gambia River had equally served as an invaluable physical feature to the socio-economic life of the inhabitants Niumi, on its northern bank, in those days. In contrast, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh revealed,

“The local fishermen of Niumi utilized canoes, equipped with spears and baskets, to catch various types of fish. These fish were either consumed or traded for essential goods.”<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Unus Jatta, September 7, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 30-40

<sup>275</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>276</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edimburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU; United Kingdom. Pp. 18

<sup>277</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024).

As noted by Barry and other Senegambian scholars, the Gambia River had, indeed, never, in any way, served as a natural barrier between the local communities that inhabited its northern and southern banks. In support of this claim, Alhagie Fa Ceesay emphasized,

“The Kasinka people of Niumi, for instance, are known to have brought fresh and dried fish to Kombo in exchange for rice, palm wine, and palm oil—products they produced in large quantities.”<sup>279</sup>

It can be argued that the invention of the canoe, during this period, had served as a decisive factor that facilitated trade and commerce between the communities that inhabited the northern and southern banks of the Gambia River. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh noted,

“The canoe was introduced by the Kasinka people of Niumi who inhabited the islands towards the Saalum River. Kasinka is a group of people with both Serer and Mandinka blood. They are professional sailors and fishermen who depended on the river for survival. When they introduced the canoe, it became a significant relief for the community.”<sup>280</sup>

In agreement with this assertion, Barry had well-documented that canoes served as the primary means of transport in the southern regions of Senegambia. According to him, through this mode of transport, items like cola, indigo dye, and iron goods from the forest area were exchanged in the savanna to the north, extending all the way to the Southern Rivers area.<sup>281</sup> The Gambia River, therefore, had served as the nerve center of the economic base of both matriarchal kingdoms.

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<sup>278</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>279</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>280</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>281</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU; United Kingdom. Pp. 20

## **b) The legal, judicial and security structures**

In both matriarchal kingdoms, there were no formal law-making bodies as we understand them in modern society. However, historical accounts indicate the existence of a popular assembly, often composed of members from both the ruling and subordinate clans, known as the "Mansaringo-lu." Details regarding its composition and frequency of meetings are not explicitly stated in the records. Nevertheless, it is noted that this assembly was presided over by the reigning queen and her cabinet. In the case of Kombo, the accounts do not specify the exact location where the assembly convened during Queen Jassey's reign. Conversely, in Niumi, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh highlighted,

“The *Jammeh* of Bakindiki and Sitanunku met with members of the subordinate *Sonko* and *Manneh* clans at the place called ‘Mansa Jaali-Santango-koto,’ a sacred site marked by a magnificent ‘Santng’ tree, situated between Bakindiki and Berending.”<sup>282</sup>

Thus, it is plausible to assert that it was during these assemblies that significant issues concerning the kingdom and its various communities, as well as the livelihoods of the people.

Again, there were no written constitutions and codes of conduct in any of the two matriarchal kingdoms. However, the peoples understanding of what actions or behaviors are legal, and what are illegal, had been passed down from earlier generations as a form of abstract codes of customary law. Alhagie Fa Ceesay gave a luminous image of this in the following terms,

“Almost everyone in the community knew what was legal and what was not. From home, parents taught boys and girls their specific responsibilities as they grew up into adulthood. These included the norms and values of the community, abominable acts, and the punishment for those that break

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<sup>282</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

family and community laws and principles.”<sup>283</sup>

Sounding similar evidence, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh emphasized traditional institutions and festive events as some of the centers where children acquire knowledge about the laws of the land, He narrated,

“In those days, when children were circumcised, the elders taught them numerous and varied codes of behavior that were permitted by the community, and those that were not.”<sup>284</sup>

Moreover, historical evidence indicated that the queen of each matriarchal kingdom had often served as the chief arbitrars at their royal courts. For instance, Alhagie Fa Ceesay, revealed,

“In Kombo, in those days, when a serious case of conflict erupts between two families, for example, over a rice field, or when a person was deemed to have infringed on the rights of another, or when a person is found to have broken community laws or religious principles, such cases were often tried by a customary court, presided over by the queen herself, often assisted by a handful of elderly men and women of wisdom.”<sup>285</sup>

Interestingly, both matriarchal kingdoms seem to have adopted a dual-tier legal system—a lower and a higher court. This is highlighted in the traditional accounts about the early history of most of the kingdoms in the Gambia Valley. According to Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh,

“Two types of customary court existed in Niumi during the days of the queens: the first one, understood as a sub-ordinate court, was known as ‘Kiitii Bantang,’ where ordinary cases between neighbors, husbands and wives, and family members were settled, and the second, seemingly

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<sup>283</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>284</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>285</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

a superior court, was known as ‘Kaabaa Bantang,’ where treasonous crimes against the queen, herself, and also, blasphemous and sacrilegious acts against the religion of the people were tried.”<sup>286</sup>

Evidently, both courts have been referred to in the accounts regarding the feud that erupted between Queen Banna, ruler of the Senegambian kingdom of Jaara, and her half-brother, Jassey Banna. Thus, this evidence suggests that these courts existed throughout the kingdoms in the entire Gambia Valley.

In both matriarchal kingdoms, standing armies did not exist. Instead, military service was a voluntary commitment embraced by nearly all able-bodied men and women in each kingdom. Although Alhagie Fa Ceesay highlighted that during Queen Wulending Jassey's reign in Kombo, the kingdom never engaged in warfare with any other realm. However, the absence of military conflicts did not sway the people of Kombo from ensuring the security of their community against other forms of threats and natural disasters. Thus, he revealed,

“The populace took the security of their families and the broader community very seriously, particularly in the face of external threats and natural disasters. It was common for individuals to come to each other's aid during adverse situations, such as fire outbreaks, destructive winds, poor crop yields, and other calamities that posed existential risks.”<sup>287</sup>

The fact that in the matriarchal kingdom of Kombo, people came to each others’ aid during adverse situations stands testimony to the fact that such egalitarian traditional norms had ensured the stability and continuity of African societies for generations.

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<sup>286</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>287</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

In contrast, the matriarchal kingdom of Niumi is reported to have engaged in several wars of resistance against its dominating neighbors, Siin and Saalum, during the reign of Mansa Wame, although they were never able to conquer them.<sup>288</sup> In addition, Alhagie Eduwar Jmmeh emphasized that while the queens did not maintain a formal military, every man and woman in the matriarchal kingdom was regarded as a warrior. He explained,

“In the event of an invasion, men and women could voluntarily take up arms and unite with members from other communities within the kingdom, effectively creating a robust territorial defense force.”<sup>289</sup>

Thus, it can be concluded that in the need to ensure security against possible external pressures and invasions by powerful neighboring kingdoms, the queen of Kombo, as well as the queens of Niumi, were motivated to integrate leading clan members of migrant families, to rally their support against external pressure and attack. This is demonstrated in Koli Tengela’s role in helping Queen Wame and her people against the pressures of Siin and Saalum.

### **c) The religious structure**

Religion occupied a central position in the lives of the peoples who inhabited the matriarchal kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi. Alhagie Jung Conteh has noted that in those days, there was nothing like Islam and Christianity. According to him, before the advent of these foreign religions, traditional religion had been the predominant belief system of the peoples.<sup>290</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay provided similar evidence, stating that in those days each clan had its own “Jalang”

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<sup>288</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 78

<sup>289</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>290</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024).

(oracle), which they worshipped. “These ‘Jalangs,’” he revealed, “served as the links between the people and their dead ancestors.” He revealed further,

“A ‘Jalang’ could take the form of a tree, a carved wood, a stone, or a certain animal, kept in a shrine, under the control of an elderly clan member, often the wisest of men or women, who possessed all the qualifications to serve as the intermediary between the people and their gods. Every clan-based community or village also had their own priests or priestesses.”<sup>291</sup>

These evidences, therefore, stand testimony to the assertion that religion played a crucial role in the maintenance of peace and stability in both kingdoms.

Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh also gave a luminous picture of the religious life of the people of Niumi during the heyday of matriarchal dominance in the kingdom. He narrated that in those days, “Soninkeya” (paganism) defined the prevailing lifestyle of the people. According to him,

“Practices associated with this belief system, such as excessive alcoholism, were commonplace. Additionally, ritual sacrifices, often involving the offering of animals and, at times, human beings, to wild devils and ancestral spirits, were prevalent.”<sup>292</sup>

However, he revealed that despite its darker aspects, this paganism functioned as a unifying force among the peoples of both kingdoms. “As ‘Soninkes,’” he narrated, “they shared common religious beliefs and practices, including human sacrifice, idol worship, and rampant

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<sup>291</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>292</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

drunkenness.”<sup>293</sup> These shared customs fostered strong bonds among clans and individuals, as well as entire communities and kingdoms.

Furthermore, traditional sources assert that the religious dynamics of those days underscore a key reason for the smooth integration of influential members from Manding migrant clans, who established settlements within the matriarchal kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi, into the highest political circles of both realms. In support of this assertion, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh stated,

“It was an obligation for all ‘Soninke’ princes and warriors to form Military alliances with their fellow Soninke’ rulers, particularly in the face of external threats, such as impending wars from hostile neighboring kingdoms. It was on the basis of such military alliances that the Manneh from Kaabu came to Niumi and established settlements there.”<sup>294</sup>

As a result, it can be argued that the religious consciousness of the inhabitants of the matriarchal kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi emerged as a vital unifying force, playing a significant role in their stability and continuity.

It is interesting to note that traditional sources generally portray the reigning queens of both Kombo and Niumi as religious leaders and voodoo master-priestesses who utilized their spiritual and magical abilities to govern their kingdoms and safeguard their territorial boundaries. In Kombo, for example, Queen Wulending Jassey is said to have wielded formidable spiritual powers. One of the sources illustrate this through the narrative of her migratory journey to Sanyang. According to this source, upon reaching a location known as Bakefeti, where an oracle had instructed her to establish a settlement, she and her royal entourage encountered the daunting

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<sup>293</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. *An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens*. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

challenge of crossing a lake that separated this site from Sanyang. In this predicament, Queen Jassey reportedly summoned her magical abilities by commanding a tree, referred to as “Kobo,” to transform into a boat and transport her and her followers across the lake. To everyone’s astonishment, the tree complied with her command, ferrying them safely to the other side, just as she had envisioned. It was for this reason that she named her royal residence “Kobi Sala,” reflecting the crucial role played by the tree (“Kobo”) in her efforts to establish a settlement in her prophesized destination.<sup>295</sup> This tale thus underscores Queen Jassey’s possession of extraordinary spiritual means and powers.

The queens of Niumi, on the other hand, are described as master-priestesses who equally relied on their spiritual and magical potentials to make things work in their favor. The accounts of the history of Kombo, narrated by Alhagie Jung Conteh, provided an illustration of the magical powers of Musa Mamakimereng Jammeh, the last reigning queen of Niumi. The narrative revealed,

“A queen from Niumi, believed to be the last of the lineage of *Jammeh* queens, together with a handful of her royal guards, used to cross the Gambia River, from Berending to Kombo land, on horseback, and rode to Faraba, where she often abducted some children and took them to her kingdom, since, in those days, almost all the men would go out on their usual hunting trips, or in the rice fields, helping the women. So, the grandmothers, under whose care the children were often entrusted, would report such incidence to their parents upon their return home. Determined to solve this ongoing problem, the warriors of Faraba formed a vigilante group which, on each day, lay in ambush in the bushes along the route often used by the queen. One day, the queen and her guards came again to abduct children. As they entered the village, they immediately realized that they were walking into a trap. So, they decided to turn backwards and rode off. Still, determined to get hold of them, the men

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<sup>295</sup> Touray, E. (2013). “History of Kombo.” YouTube (video documentary). [www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921](http://www.youtube.com/ensatouray4921)

of Faraba pursued them as they flee. All of a sudden, in this flight, as they took a bend, the queen immediately unleashed her magical powers by vanishing mysteriously, together with her guards, from the sight of the warriors of Faraba, who were dismayed and surprised by the queen's display of magical powers.”<sup>296</sup>

Clearly, it was the queen's realization of the fact that, if she and her guards had stayed and faced the warriors of Faraba, in an open confrontation, they would be overpowered, which might mean their defeat and surrender. So it was normal that she and her men decided to flee. However, in this realization, it was clear to her that she could always escape captivity since she had in her possession potent magical powers that could serve as a safeguard for her in the event she was caught up in the heat of trouble.

Finally, traditional sources indicate that the queens had used their spiritual potentials as a means of legitimizing their grips on political power. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh confirmed this, emphasizing,

“It was the spiritual powers and magical possessions of the queens of Niumi that made their claims on the kingdom's throne unchallengeable, for over a century, since the people feared them.”<sup>297</sup>

Based on this evidence, it can be concluded that within the twin matriarchal kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi, the reigning queen's religious role and spiritual potential served as a significant source of her social recognition and political legitimacy.

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<sup>296</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024).

<sup>297</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

### 3.6. CONCLUSION

The period spanning from the 11th to the 13th centuries represented the apex of matriarchal supremacy within the twin pre-colonial realms of Kombo and Niumi, situated in the Gambia Valley of the broader Senegambia region. Kombo, on one hand, was governed by a queen named Wulending Jassey, who ascended to the throne after inheriting it from her father, believed to be named Kambi Jassey, the founder of Sanyang, the inaugural town in Kombo. Niumi, on the other hand, had twelve queens, although some sources identify fewer by name. However, matriarchal governance flourished in Niumi for over one hundred and twenty-two years, six months, and one day. This claim is substantiated by written records, indicating that the kingdom's matriarchal legacy spanned three distinct generations: the first generation consisted of four queens, the second included five, and the third contained three.

The two matriarchal kingdoms were characterized by similar state structures. Both were founded upon the framework of the ancient African state, which is described as a multi-layered socio-political entity encompassing the family unit, the basic social structure, and the leadership hierarchy. The diverse populations inhabiting the African state were its most critical elements, which ensured continued survival and progress. In both kingdoms, the position of "Queen" emerged as a form of "Alikaliyaa" or female community headship, which evolved into a fully centralized authority. Both matriarchal kingdoms established cabinet positions referred to as "Bulun- ngo" or "Bulung- daa," occupied by senior genealogical members representing the various towns and villages within the kingdom. The economic sustenance of the local inhabitants relied heavily on the Gambia River and its potentials. Each matriarchal kingdom maintained a customary legal system, and a dual-tier judicial systems, with a lower court known as "Kii-tii Bantang," and a higher court known as "Kaabaa Bantang." In addition, a form of popular

assembly existed in both kingdoms wherein significant legal and policy matters were deliberated. The military and security services represented a voluntary commitment from nearly every able-bodied man or woman residing in both kingdoms. Ultimately, religion served as the driving force for social cohesion, with the predominant lifestyle of the people being “Soninkeya” or paganism. The inhabitants of both kingdoms venerated local deities termed “Jalang” through the offering of ritual sacrifices. Finally, the queens of both kingdoms acted as religious leaders, possessing considerable spiritual potential. This spiritual capability proved invaluable in ensuring the longevity of their reigns and safeguarding the territorial integrity of their kingdoms.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE DECLINE AND FALL OF MATRIARCHAL RULE IN THE KINGDOMS OF KOMBO AND NIUMI**

#### **4.1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter aims to analyze the context of political transition in the Gambia Valley, transitioning from matriarchal governance to patriarchal dominance, facilitated by the expanding influences of the Mali Empire during the end of the first-half of the 13th century. The chapter commences by examining the motives behind this westward Malian expansion, elucidating its decisive significance to the political ambitions of various princes from Senegambian matriarchal states. It subsequently analyzes the Jaara Incident, which initiated the initial revolt of the princes against matriarchal authority in the region. Furthermore, it reveals how this initial confrontation motivated these ambitious princes to seek political alliances and endorsements from the reigning emperor of Mali, thereby acquiring the legitimate rights to contend for political office within their kingdoms. Finally, the chapter highlights the immediate circumstances that contributed to the decline of matriarchal rule in the Gambia Valley, with particular emphasis on the dual matriarchal kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi.

#### **4.2. 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 Western Sudanic 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 these Manding chiefdoms are believed to have shared common cultural ties with the Soninke people of Ghana. Up to the time of the fall of Ghana, the Manding chiefdoms had not been unified under a central political authority. As Ghana's authority dwindled, a large territory above the Upper Niger River had already fallen under the control of the Susu, a Southern group of the Soninke people.<sup>298</sup> By the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Sumanguru (or Sumaworo) Kante, a cruel Susu king, had seized power and began ruling the territories of Ghana, including the Manding chiefdoms, with an iron fist.

Mali's rise to prominence is largely attributed to the bravery and personal achievements of Sundiata Keita, son of Nare Fa Maghan and Sogolon Conde. In the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, while he was in exile in Mema, as a result of Sumanguru's callous reign, Sundiata unified the Manding chiefdoms and led a rebellion against him. Accordingly, at Kirina, between Bowako and Kangaba, on the left bank of the River Niger, Sundiata and his rebel army defeated the Susu and killed Sumanguru. Thereupon, he and his allies laid the foundations of the Mali Empire. On the occasion of his crowning, at Kurukan Fuga, Sundiata was proclaimed "Emperor," and "king of kings," of the empire, by the Great Assembly (*Gbare*).<sup>299</sup> The chiefs of the various states that were allied to him during the war were each proclaimed "Faring," which means "king," or "governor." However, only the chiefs of Mema and Wagadu are said to have been accorded the title. On this day, the assembly legalized the dynastic control of the throne of Mali by members of Sundiata's family alone. Also, in a bid to immortalize the blessed marriage of his parents, the

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<sup>298</sup> Conrad, D. (2005). *Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay*. Storeline Publishing Group. LLC; USA. Pp. 12

<sup>299</sup> Niane, D. T. (1979). "Sundiata and Mansa Musa: Architects of Mali's Golden Empire." *The UNESCO Courier*. Sales and Distribution Office, UNESCO, Place de Fontenou, 75700, Paris. Pp. 60

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, Sundita's mother.<sup>300</sup> 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 turning 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. At the height of its splendor and prominence, the empire spanned the Western Sudanic territory, extending from the salt pans 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. 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. Similarly, the provincial regions of Tekrur and Cassamance were also described as having large populations.<sup>301</sup> 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.

In the ensuing period following the ascension of Sundiata on the throne of Mali, in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, a number of Manding patriarchal father-figures, most of whom were warriors and

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<sup>300</sup> Niane, D. T. (1979). "Sundiata and Mansa Musa: Architects of Mali's Golden Empire." *The UNESCO Courier*. Sales and Distribution Office, UNESCO, Place de Fontenou, 75700, Paris. Pp. 61

<sup>301</sup> Ibid. Pp. 61

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 migrations 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 empire's economic and imperialist agenda, the emperor reportedly blessed their desire 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.<sup>302</sup> 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, however 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.<sup>303</sup> 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

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<sup>302</sup> Wright, D. R. (1985). "Beyond Migration and Conquest: Oral Traditions and Mandinka Ethnicity in Senegambia." *History in Africa*. Vol. 12. Cambridge University Press. Pp. 336

<sup>303</sup> Barry, B. (1998). *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom. Pp. 5

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 Tiramakang and his mystical wife, Balabaa.”<sup>304</sup> For a long period, Kaabu remained a vassal under the protection of the emperors of Mali until the onset of the 14<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>305</sup> Thus, motivated by the benefits that lay in their support for the princes’ cause, especially towards their goal of absolute political and economic superiority in the entire Western Sudan, the patriarchs of Mali rendered both political and spiritual assistance to these power-hungry Senegambian princes. As such, this Malian influence paved the way for the gradual decline and eventual fall of matriarchal regimes in the Gambia Valley.

### **4.3. THE INITIAL OPPOSITION AGAINST MATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY IN THE GAMBIA VALLEY**

The collective desire 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.<sup>306</sup> 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

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<sup>304</sup> Tombong Saane. An Account of the History of Kaabu. Oral interview held on 13 February, 2024.

<sup>305</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>306</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

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.

#### **4.4. 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.<sup>307</sup> Living together in the same extended royal household and their families, Queen Banna and Jassey Banna reportedly reared fowls as part of their personal possessions.<sup>308</sup> Thus, these fowls 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 in rage. 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

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<sup>307</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>308</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate). “Oral Traditions from The Gambia.” *Papers in International Studies*. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 78

impregnate her hen, he will face a harsh punishment.”<sup>309</sup>

Utterly ignoring the queen’s warning, Jassey reportedly permitted his cock to mate with the queen’s hen. 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.<sup>310</sup> Quite ironically, this infamous decision would set the wheels of revolution in motion, within Jaara, as evident in the queen’s utter defeat in this feud.

The queen's intention to summon Jassey before the royal courts of Jarra cannot be construed solely because of the ongoing feud. Rather, it may be interpreted as a desperate measure in her efforts to completely subdue Jassey, who likely harbored animosity towards her reign, a sentiment influenced by the prevailing circumstances, further exacerbated by the expansionist ambitions of the Mali Empire in the region.<sup>311</sup> This intention 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.”<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>310</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15· 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 78

<sup>311</sup> Ibid. Pp. 78

<sup>312</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 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.”<sup>313</sup> 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.<sup>314</sup> 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.

#### **4.5. THE PRINCES’ PLAN TO EMBARK ON A JOURNEY TO MALI**

The princes are widely reported to have initiated a substantial campaign against matriarchal governance in the region. This endeavor was facilitated through personal meetings, led by one of the princes, during which he successfully persuaded each participant regarding plans to travel to Mali, located in the east, with the explicit intention of devising strategies to abolish matriarchal rule in Senegambia. One narrative attribute this campaign to Sankalang Marong (Jaadama), a prince within the royal household of Baddibu Jumansari. According to this tradition, Sankalang Marong harbored a profound disdain for matriarchal political authority, surpassing any other

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<sup>313</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. *An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens*. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

prince in the Western hemisphere. Motivated by his masculine convictions, he undertook a significant campaign to dismantle matriarchal dominance in Baddibu and throughout Senegambia. He reportedly conferred with Nguma Jamme, the prince of Siin, and Waali Jiime, the prince of Saalum. His efforts continued with meetings with Seneke Jamme, the prince of Niumi, and Arijuuma Jang, the prince of Kombo; subsequently visiting Prince Danbeli Naarang 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.<sup>315</sup> This narrative, therefore, characterizes Sankalang Marong as the principal architect of the upheaval against matriarchal governance. It is evident that his political consciousness, akin to that of his fellow princes, was significantly influenced by his masculine inclinations.

Conversely, the accounts of Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh portray Prince Jassey Banna as the exclusive mastermind behind the campaign against matriarchal authority in Senegambia. He narrated.

“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 patriarchy. 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.”<sup>316</sup>

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.

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<sup>315</sup> NCAC/RDD (1976). An Account on the History of Baddibu (NCAC-RDD-TAPE: 041B-MN-EN-MB)

<sup>316</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

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.<sup>317</sup> 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.<sup>318</sup> He proceeded to elucidate that his sister had accused him of being

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<sup>317</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 78

<sup>318</sup> Ibid. Pp. 78

responsible for the mating of his rooster with her hen.<sup>319</sup> 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.

#### **4.6. THE PURPOSE OF THE PRINCES' JOURNEY TO MALI**

Most of the sources indicate that the primary objective of the princes' visit to Mali was to obtain the royal permission of the emperor of Mali to govern their respective kingdoms back home. One account suggests that when the princes met with Jassey, amid the dispute that arose between him and his sister, he managed to persuade them to join him in his proposed mission to Mali by assuring them that they would secure the royal endorsement of the Malian emperor to legitimize their claims to their kingdoms' thrones. According to this account, during that period, "Mansayaa" (the right to rule) in the western territories could only be attained from the emperor of Mali.<sup>320</sup> In another narrative, Sankalang Marong convinced the princes to accompany him to Mali, but only after providing them with the same assurance of political support from the Malian emperor, which would enable them to abolish "Musu-Mansayaa" (the political rule of women) in

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<sup>319</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 78

<sup>320</sup> Ibid. Pp. 79

their kingdoms.<sup>321</sup> Based on the convergence observed in both narratives, it appears that the principal aim of the princes' decision was to seek the political endorsement of the Emperor of Mali to depose their sisters.

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."<sup>322</sup> 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.<sup>323</sup> Consequently, the princes deemed spiritual armament necessary, given that the reigning queens possessed supernatural powers that rendered them completely unchallenged by any ordinary human.

#### **4.7. 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

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<sup>321</sup> NCAC/RDD (1976). An Account on the History of Baddibu (NCAC-RDD-TAPE: 041B-MN-EN-MB)

<sup>322</sup> NCAC/RDD. (1975). An Account on the History of Niumi and Baddibu (NCAC-RDD-TAPE: 0025A+B EN-SPO1)

<sup>323</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

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.”<sup>324</sup> 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.<sup>325</sup> 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

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<sup>324</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 79

<sup>325</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

their spiritual capabilities.<sup>326</sup> 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—by magical means. “If anyone cannot go that way, then he must not go.”<sup>327</sup> In contrast, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh proposed that the princes traveled to Mali using horses.<sup>328</sup> Nevertheless, irrespective of this inconsistency regarding the actual means of their travel to Mali, Jassey’s leadership role throughout the journey remains prominently evident.

#### **4.8. 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

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<sup>326</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15· 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 79

<sup>327</sup> Ibid. Pp. 79

<sup>328</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

objective would be contingent upon the emperor's support.<sup>329</sup> 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,

"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."<sup>330</sup>

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.

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<sup>329</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 79

<sup>330</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

#### 4.9. 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.<sup>331</sup> 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,

“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.”<sup>332</sup>

Sounding similar views, earlier sources maintained that during this period the influence of Islam had not significantly permeated Senegambia.<sup>333</sup> 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

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<sup>331</sup> NCAC/RDD (1976). *An Account on the History of Baddibu* (NCAC-RDD-TAPE: 041B-MN-EN-MB)

<sup>332</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. *An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens*. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>333</sup> NCAC/RDD (1976). *An Account on the History of Baddibu* (NCAC-RDD-TAPE: 041B-MN-EN-MB)

patriarchs in certain kingdoms, such as Baddibu.<sup>334</sup> 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.<sup>335</sup> 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.”<sup>336</sup> Consequently, the newly established method of selecting rulers was characterized by equity and transparency at its inception.

Subsequently, the council of elders, who, like the princes, 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.<sup>337</sup> 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

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<sup>334</sup> NCAC/RDD (1976). An Account on the History of Baddibu (NCAC-RDD-TAPE: 041B-MN-EN-MB)

<sup>335</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>336</sup> NCAC/RDD (1976). An Account on the History of Baddibu (NCAC-RDD-TAPE: 041B-MN-EN-MB).

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

resentment against the political participation of women by their politically dominant male counterparts.

#### **4.10. THE FALL OF MATRIARCHAL RULE IN THE KINGDOMS OF KOMBO AND NIUMI**

There is substantial evidence indicating that matriarchal authority in both Kombo and Niumi diminished due to the establishment of marital alliances between the reigning queens and the aspiring male candidates, contrasting with the system referred to as “Alikuroo,” which is purported to have occurred in Baddibu. Through these marital unions, the queens voluntarily transferred the instruments of governance to these men, predicated upon their agreement to serve as their sole spouses. These men ascended to the position of the first kings in these two kingdoms. As previously emphasized, both individuals had established profound connections with the patriarchs of Mali, alongside a shared ambition to extend their influence within the western territories of Senegambia. Therefore, the decline of both matriarchal kingdoms is contextualized within the mid-13th century, a period during which Manding warrior-leaders and patriarchal figures undertook a series of significant migrations to Senegambia, resulting in enduring socio-economic and cultural transformations throughout the region.

Thus, given that marriage was the sole means through which political authority shifted from the hands of the last reigning queens of Kombo and Niumi, it is necessary to dwell on each case in a bid to unveil the actual nature in which marriage legitimized the claim of each of these patriarchal rulers in each kingdom.

## 01. THE FALL OF MATRIARCHAL RULE IN THE KINGDOM OF KOMBO

The marriage between Queen Wulending Jassey and Karafa Yali, a nephew of the *Conde* family from Mali, signifies the immediate circumstance that marked the conclusion of matriarchal political rule within the kingdom of Kombo. One of the written sources asserts that Karafa Yali belonged to the *Jatta* family of Busumbala. It further reveals that it was through this marriage that he endeavored to legitimize his claim to the throne of Kombo.<sup>338</sup> Supporting this assertion, traditional accounts reveal that Karafa Yali's true Malian surname was *Jarra*. It was his descendants who would later adopt the surname *Jatta*. They further reveal that the place that came to be known as Busumbala was his final destination. He relocated there following his well-documented divorce from the queen.<sup>339</sup> Thus, he first lived among his kinsmen in Manduwaar and Birikaama. Therefore, it is plausible that “Jatta” is a corrupted variation of “Jarra” that has gained prominence over the ages.

The narrative concerning this marriage is told in the tales of the *Conde* family's migration from Mali to the Gambia Valley region of Senegambia. Alhagie Fa Ceesay recounted,

“The *Conde* brothers, who migrated to Kombo, were members of the ‘Sankarang’ birth clan of Manding, which traces its lineage back to Sogolon Conde, the mother of Sundiata Keita. The family later adopted the surname *Bojang*, which emerged as a result of their encounter with the local Bainunk settlers.”<sup>340</sup>

Alhagie Fa Ceesay added that this family was recognized as a priestly lineage, having historically served as custodians of the traditional religion practiced by the Manding people.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Nabaneh, S. (2022). “Women’s Political Participation in The Gambia—One Step forward or two back?”

Chapter—6: *The Gambia in Transition towards a New Constitutional Order*. Pretoria University Law Press. Pp. 134

<sup>339</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>340</sup> Alhagie Jung Conteh. An Account on the History of Kombo, and Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 5 September, 2024).

Other sources assert that the *Conde* family had provided rulers in some of the Manding chiefdoms prior to the establishment of the Mali Empire.<sup>342</sup> Thus, they possibly acquired this surname in the later period which eventually became popularized down the ages.

Alhagie Fa Ceesay revealed further that following the blessing of their migration intentions by the Malian emperor, the brothers departed from Mali, embarking on their significant journey towards the Gambia Valley. He narrated,

“Among the Conde brothers were Sankarangka Madibaa Conde, the eldest sibling, alongside his two younger brothers, Maama Kaasa Tamba Conde, and Mansa Birang Conde. They journeyed together with their spouses, children, warriors, and close relatives.”<sup>343</sup>

Another source provided a totally different account regarding the identities of the Conde brothers of Malian origin who first established a settlement in Kombo. According to this version,

“Two of the brothers who first came to Kombo from Mali were Kolley Conde and Yida Conde. During their migration, when they reached to the place now called Kafuta, the younger brother, who intended to establish a settlement of his own, devised a plan that will prevent him from continuing the journey with the rest of the family. Knowing full well that they have not reached to their prophesized destination, and that they were to proceed on the journey the next day, he decided to wash some of his clothes during the night and hung them up for drying. When, on the next morning, the rest of the family prepared to set out, he insisted that he would stay behind, saying, ‘Nga-jaa-roo-le-ke,’ meaning, ‘I have hung my clothes for drying,’ as an excuse for him to stay behind.”<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>342</sup> Touray, E. (2025). “The History of Kombo: Mandinaring” History Hour (“Nna Taarikoo”). Sky Power Radio & TV Services. United Kingdom. YouTube. Skypowerradioandtvservices5865.

<sup>343</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

According to the narrative, this particular younger brother, from henceforth, resided at this place, naming it “Kafuta,” from the Mandinka phrase “Nkafuta daaming-to,” which means, “the place where we assembled.” Thus, Kafuta became the first settlement of the Conde (Bojang) family in Kombo. His descendants reportedly earned the title “Jaari,” often added on their newly acquired surname “Bojang,” pronounced as “Bojang Jaari,” which serves as a reflection of the infamous action (of hanging clothes for drying) done by their paternal ancestor.<sup>345</sup> Clearly, the two narratives present totally different details as being the names of the Conde brothers who journeyed to Kombo. While the first narrative mentioned three names, “Sankarangka Madibaa Conde,” “Maama Kaasa Tamba Conde,” and “Mansa Birang Conde,” as being those of the Conde brothers, yet, the second narrative mentioned only two names, “Kolley Conde” and “Yida Conde.” However, despite the divergence about the identity of the Conde siblings who first came to Kombo, there is an agreement that they journeyed together with their warriors and close family members.<sup>346</sup> Included among these relatives was their nephew, Karafa Yali Jarra, who was recognized as both a hunter and a warrior.”<sup>347</sup>

After leaving behind the younger brother at Kafuta, the older brother, together with the rest of the family, migrated further towards presentday Kombo Central. Traditional sources unanimously agree that they first encountered Manduwaar, at which point they established a settlement.<sup>348</sup> As a distinguished hunter and warrior, the narrative attributes to Karafa Yali the honor of being the primary discoverer of the family’s anticipated destination, Birikaama, through his daily hunting excursions. Again, as the family resettled in Birikaama, it was during one of

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<sup>344</sup> Touray, E. (2025). “The History of Kombo: Mandinaring” History Hour (“Nna Taarikoo”). Sky Power Radio & TV Services. United Kingdom. YouTube. Skypowerradioandtvservices5865.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

those outings that he also encountered Sanyang, along with its ruler, Queen Wulending Jassey. Alhagie Fa Ceesay corroborated this in the following narrative:

“As he traversed the bushes, he realized that the further he ventured south, the more he could perceive a peculiar noise. He pursued the source of this sound and ultimately stumbled upon Sanyang, the residence of the queen, situated at the edge of the sea, within a place known as Hawba. At that moment, he discerned that the strange noise he had detected was, in fact, the sound produced by the undulating waves of the sea. He subsequently stood upon the shore, gazing out at the water for an extended period, contemplating its infinite nature. Unable to differentiate between the heights of the sea and the sky, he concluded that he had finally discovered the end of the world, perceiving this place as one where the sea and the sky are intertwined.”<sup>349</sup>

Consequently, Karafa Yali’s discovery of the ancient town of Sanyang, therefore, would facilitate ascension to royal status.

Motivated by the sea, Karafa Yali reportedly rushed home to inform his people about his discovery. He is believed to have told his uncle, “I have come across the place where the world ends! I have seen the place where the water and the skies meet!”<sup>350</sup> Although his uncle is said to have expressed admiration about this place, he however did not wish to go there. So, he did not take him seriously. However, determined to discover the town further, Karafa Yali returned to Sanyang the next day. Alhagie Fa Ceesay revealed,

“During this second visit, he notices that he can hear human voices coming from the direction of the sea. As he explored further, he came across a town on the sea's edge. There, he saw the dwellers most of

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<sup>349</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>350</sup> Touray, E. (2025). “The History of Kombo: Mandinaring” History Hour (“Nna Taarikoo”). Sky Power Radio & TV Services. United Kingdom. YouTube. Skypowerradioandtvservices5865.

whom were women. The entire place was dotted with giant rock structures. Among the women was Queen Wulending Jassey, who sat in a royal armchair, made of gold. There was another royal armchair made of silver. The queen was adorned in a white tunic, with some prized ornaments, including two scarfs, one made of gold and another silver. He then decided to engage the queen in a conversation to quench the thirst of his perplexity.”<sup>351</sup>

In contrast, other accounts say that Karafa Yali followed a line of sorghum seeds, believed to have been dropped by a parrot, which led him to discover the town.<sup>352</sup> Whatever the case may be, Karafa Yali was undoubtedly the one who discovered Sanyang and its reigning queen.

Alhagie Fa Ceesay recounted that following a cordial exchange of pleasantries with the queen, Karafa Yali articulated his mission to her during this visit. The queen is also reported to have provided him with comprehensive insights regarding herself and her realm. According to Alhagie Fa Ceesay,

“She informed him that her father, who had served as the region's ruler, had departed many years before assisting his relatives in a conflict located in a distant land, taking most of the men with him. However, before he departed for the war, he had bestowed upon her the title of ruler of his kingdom. Since that time, neither her father nor the warriors have returned.”<sup>353</sup>

It is probable that during this or similar discussions, Karafa Yali endeavored to court the queen, articulating his aspiration for her hand in marriage- a desire that highlights the profundity of his personal ambitions. Undoubtedly, he was driven by the conviction that such a union would bestow upon him and his future descendants a legitimate claim to royal status.

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<sup>351</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>352</sup> Touray, E. (2025). “The History of Kombo: Mandinaring” History Hour (“Nna Taarikoo”). Sky Power Radio & TV Services. United Kingdom. YouTube. Skypowerradioandtvservices5865.

<sup>353</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

Alhagie Fa Ceesay further revealed that Karafa Yali returned home that day and recounted his encounter with the queen to his senior uncle. “Although he refrained from disclosing that he had already solicited the queen’s hand in marriage,” he narrated, “his uncle, to his astonishment, openly conveyed his own interest in marrying the queen during their conversation.”<sup>354</sup> Obviously, his uncle’s intention to marry the queen undoubtedly fueled a bitter conflict of interest, resulting in a significant feud between the two.

Apprehensive that his uncle might leverage his influence as the head of the clan to seize the queen from him, Karafa Yali was reportedly compelled to devise a strategy to prevent this eventuality. According to Alhagie Fa Ceesay,

“He began to contemplate the situation deeply and ultimately devised a plan. Aware that his uncles were seasoned warriors, he reasoned that if he were to announce a conflict involving their relatives, they would be inclined to participate. Thus, he fabricated a narrative stating that their cousins, the Saane and Maane of Kaabu, were facing an imminent war with a neighboring kingdom and that a messenger had been dispatched to seek their assistance. As he had anticipated, without a moment's hesitation, his uncles promptly gathered the warriors, including Karafa Yali himself, and informed them of the situation and the plan to depart for the war the following day. The next morning, they commenced their journey to Kaabu.”<sup>355</sup>

This plan, therefore, exemplifies the extent of Karafa Yali’s pursuit of personal gain and social elevation.

Having successfully removed his uncle from the presence of the queen, it became integral to his strategy to return home to marry the queen unimpeded. Alhagie Fa Ceesay revealed,

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<sup>354</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>355</sup> Touray, E. (2025). “The History of Kombo: Mandinaring” History Hour (“Nna Taarikoo”). Sky Power Radio & TV Services. United Kingdom. YouTube. Skypowerradioandtvservices5865

“During their journey towards Kaabu, as they approached a region believed to be situated between Piirang and Farabaa, Karafa Yali intentionally dismounted from his horse, feigning a stomach ailment, which necessitated a pause for all. When his uncle proposed that he should return home, he replied that he was born a warrior, expressing his readiness to risk his life rather than withdraw. They then remounted their horses and continued their journey. Shortly thereafter, as they arrived at the eastern frontiers of Kombo, near Fonyi Bulok, he fell from his horse for a second time. Upon rising to his feet, his uncle urged him to return home, noting that his condition could endanger them during battle. It was at this juncture that he returned home, while his uncles and the remaining warriors advanced towards Kaabu.”<sup>356</sup>

Thus, it can be emphasized that, at this point, Karafa Yali sensed that his plan had indeed succeeded in his favor.

It is evident that in the days that followed, prior to the return of his uncles and the warriors from Kaabu, Karafa-Yali solidified his union with Queen Wulending Jassey. Alhagie Fa Ceesay recounted,

“Although limited information is available regarding the marriage ceremony, it is widely believed that he wed the queen without any impediments, in the presence of a small number of his relatives.”<sup>357</sup>

Ironically, such an occasion would typically have been attended by his uncles, who had served as his guardians and mentors since his youth in Mali. However, despite their absence at this significant event, his marriage to the queen remains legitimate and unchallenged.

According to Alhagie Fa Ceesay, upon their arrival in Kaabu, his uncles and the warriors were astonished to discover that their cousins were not engaged in any conflict. He recounted,

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<sup>356</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024

<sup>357</sup> Touray, E. (2025). “The History of Kombo: Mandinaring” History Hour (“Nna Taarikoo”). Sky Power Radio & TV Services. United Kingdom. YouTube. Skypowerradioandtvservices5865

“They contemplated deeply the precise motivations that may have compelled Karafa-Yali to mislead them in such a manner. After spending a day in Kaabu,” they resolved to return home.”<sup>358</sup>

Thus, it is without doubts that while Karafa Yali celebrated his newly acquired status in Sanyang alongside the queen, he likely also contemplated the potential reactions of his uncles and the warriors, who might perceive his actions as cowardly and treacherous conduct.

The aftermath of the *Conde* brothers’ return from Kaabu initiated a period of intense conflict between them and their nephew Karafa Yali, culminating in his eventual departure from the *Conde* family. Alhagie Fa Ceesay revealed that they were deeply incensed upon discovering that Karafa Yali’s announcement regarding the impending war confronting Kaabu was a deceptive strategy devised to distance his senior uncle, from the queen, thus enabling him to pursue marriage with her. He narrated,

“For his uncles, this stratagem represented one of the most profound forms of treachery and disrespect that one could inflict upon one’s own family, particularly considering that he had breached the customary bond that had historically united uncles and their nephews within traditional society. Motivated by a comparable sense of betrayal and disrespect, the warriors vowed to terminate his life.”<sup>359</sup>

Fortunately for Karafa Yali, it was the same uncle he betrayed who intervened, opposing the warriors’ plan to kill him. However, his actions could not have gone without a punishment. According to Alhagie Fa Ceesay,

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<sup>358</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>359</sup> Touray, E. (2025). “The History of Kombo: Mandinaring” History Hour (“Nna Taarikoo”). Sky Power Radio & TV Services. United Kingdom. YouTube. Skypowerradioandtvservices5865

“It is believed that he referenced the familial bond, asserting that he could not permit the warriors to kill his nephew, a member of his mother's lineage. Nonetheless, due to Karafa Yali's disregard for this familial connection and his choice to disrespect and overlook his uncle resolved not to allow him and the queen to remain in Birikaama. Consequently, he banished Karafa Yali to Niani Bere, adjacent to the Makasuti forest, where their family oracles were located. Prior to his departure to this new location, his uncle is believed to have cast a curse upon him, uttering, ‘I can assure you, this marriage will not last long! You are rejoicing today, but it will be short-lived!’”<sup>360</sup>

Thus, although his uncle could not prevent him from marrying the queen, he could not acquiesce to being subordinate under Karafa Yali's rule. Therefore, he had no alternative but to enact the banishment.

Karafa Yali's relocation to Niani Bere signified the event that culminated in the eventual fragmentation of the kingdom of Kombo into two sovereign entities. His territory, extending from Niani Bere towards the north, reportedly became identified as *Kombo Affet*. Conversely, the region encompassing the easternmost boundaries, adjacent to Fonyi and extending southwards, which remained under the governance of his uncles, the *Conde (Bojang)* family from Manduwaar and Birikaama, was designated as *Kombo Proper*.<sup>361</sup> Thus, Karafa Yali's separation from his family represented the initial split in the political structure of Kombo.

Residing with the queen in Niani Bere, Karafa Yali is believed to have presided over his jurisdiction for a considerable duration, maintaining amicable relations with his uncles in the central and southern regions.<sup>362</sup> It is reported that he and the queen had several offspring, though

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<sup>360</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>361</sup> Touray, E. (2025). “The History of Kombo: Mandinaring” History Hour (“Nna Taarikoo”). Sky Power Radio & TV Services. United Kingdom. YouTube. Skypowerradioandtvservices5865

<sup>362</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

the available accounts do not detail specific names or the total number.<sup>363</sup> Regrettably, the union between him and the queen proved to be short-lived. Although no precise duration of their marriage is documented, it is widely believed that they later divorced at a time when the queen had entirely surrendered her political authority to him. Alhagie Fa Ceesay narrated,

“His uncle’s curse on him had manifested! As such, the queen had no choice but to return to her father’s home in Sanyang, together with her children.”<sup>364</sup>

Despite his divorce and the realization of the extent of the curse imposed by his uncle, it appears that Karafa Yali was resolute in his determination to make significant efforts to secure his continued presence on the throne of his kingdom.

Karafa Yali’s profound sense of loneliness at Niami Bere, following his divorce, compelled him to relocate to Busumbaala, an area to the north, which derives its name from his act of seizing his children from the queen. Accordingly, he experienced loneliness and profound heartbreak because of the separation. Unable to endure the weight of this solitude, he reportedly placed all hopes, as well as the survival of his legacy, on the prospect of reclaiming his children. Alhagie Fa Ceesay narrated that one day, armed with his royal spear, Karafa Yali mounted his horse and journeyed to Sanyang with the intent of retrieving his children. En route, some curious individuals, likely surprised to witness their king attired in body armor and wielding a spear, took the opportunity to inquire about his destination. To their astonishment, he is believed to have responded (in Mandinka), “Nka-taa-Ndingo-lu-le-Buusi-i-Baala” (I am going to seize my

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<sup>363</sup> Touray, E. (2025). “The History of Kombo: Mandinaring” History Hour (“Nna Taarikoo”). Sky Power Radio & TV Services. United Kingdom. YouTube. Skypowerradioandtvservices5865

<sup>364</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

children from their mother).<sup>365</sup> It is from this Mandinka action verb, “Ka-i-buusi-i-baa-la” (to seize them from their mother), that the nomenclature of his new settlement (Busumbala) was derived.<sup>366</sup> Thus, Karafa Yali’s expression serves as the foundation for the designation “Busumbaala.”

Consequently, the central administrative seat of *Kombo Affet* transitioned from Niani Bere to Busumbala. It was from this location that he governed the kingdom until his eventual demise. Although a specific date has not been provided regarding the year of his death, the years following Karafa Yali's passing reportedly witnessed the emergence of a profound political power struggle among his descendants.<sup>367</sup> This period represented a turning point in the political history of Kombo, as it facilitated the eventual decline of matriarchal political rule in the region and the rise of patriarchal governance, characterized by a stringent monarchical and classicist social structure.

## **02. THE FALL OF MATRIARCHAL RULE IN THE KINGDOM OF NIUMI**

Like Queen Wulending Jassey's situation in Kombo, the marriage of Queen Musa Mamakimereng Jammeh to Seneke Jammeh (also known as Samake Demba) appears to mark the decline of matriarchal political authority in Niumi. This wedding occurred after Seneke’s return from Mali with the other princes. Reports suggest that when their mission in Mali concluded, the emperor foretold each prince a sign that would indicate their future rise to power. For Seneke, he

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<sup>365</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

<sup>366</sup> Touray, E. (2025). “The History of Kombo: Mandinaring” History Hour (“Nna Taarikoo”). Sky Power Radio & TV Services. United Kingdom. YouTube. Skypowerradioandtvservices5865

<sup>367</sup> Alhagie Fa Ceesay. An Account on the Early History of Kombo, and the History of Queen Wulending Jassey. Oral interview held on 15 December, 2024.

was advised to find a dog and pursue wild game, as this would lead him to kingship.<sup>368</sup> Heeded the emperor's advice, Seneke acquired a dog upon returning from Mali and began hunting in Niumi's wilderness.

During one hunting expedition, the queen's maidens, struck by Seneke's remarkable good looks, alerted her to his presence. After securing wild meat, he would stop by Nyanafara, a small creek in Berending, where he often bathed and refreshed his dog before heading home.<sup>369</sup> This spot was also popular with the queen's maidens, and they would frequently engage in friendly chats with him before he left.<sup>370</sup> Enchanted by his charm and kindness, they decided to tell the queen and the elders of Niumi about him. Most sources assert that the queen lived in the royal *Jammeh* household in Bakindiki,<sup>371</sup> although some claim she had moved to Berending in the same region during this time.<sup>372</sup> Regardless of this discrepancy, it is widely acknowledged that she was unmarried at that time.

Seneke perceived the queen's request for an audience as an opportunity to draw closer to her. However, he did not immediately reciprocate his interest. According to the narrative, when the queen summoned him, he declined outright, citing the reason that he would be embarrassed to meet the queen in the soiled hunting attire he was wearing. Upon learning this from the maidens, the queen instructed that a new shirt, trousers, and shoes be tailored for Seneke, which was promptly executed. When the maidens presented these new garments to him the following day,

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<sup>368</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>369</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15· 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 83

<sup>370</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15· 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 83

he finally agreed to accompany them to meet the queen.<sup>373</sup> Seneke likely contemplated the prophecies of the Malian emperor regarding the reasons for his ascension to the throne of Niumi, which inspired him to seek an audience with the queen.

While it is not explicitly stated whether Seneke was the initial suitor or if the queen took the initiative, it is indicated that the queen introduced herself to him as the kingdom's sovereign and expressed her desire to transfer her royal responsibilities to him, should they be wed.<sup>374</sup> Thus, in addition to her admiration for Seneke, the queen likely felt a profound need for a male figure, which may have prompted her affection for him. This need arises from the prevailing trends of patriarchal dominance within the Political landscape of Senegambia at that time, which were influenced by the overarching political impacts of the Mali Empire. Faced with the imminent threat of losing her political power to ambitious male siblings and relatives, the queen may have felt compelled to share her royal duties with a man like Seneke, whom she had adored. Reports indicate that Seneke agreed to marry the queen but requested her consent to inform his mother beforehand. In response, his mother approved his wish to wed the queen.<sup>375</sup> Subsequently, Seneke and the queen reportedly married in the following days, as the queen had desired. Consequently, the emperor's prophecies regarding his ascent were realized.

The marriage under consideration legitimized Seneke's claim to the throne of Niumi. This legitimacy is comprehensively described in various sources, particularly emphasizing the esteem

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<sup>373</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15· 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 83

<sup>374</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>375</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15· 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 83

in which the marriage was held by the populace of Niumi. According to Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh,

“Seneke's possession of spiritual charms, which he and the other princes had acquired in Mali, ultimately contributed to his advantageous circumstances.”<sup>376</sup>

Consequently, he ascended to the kingship unimpeded by resistance. However, the extent to which these Malian charms constituted a decisive factor in his ascension to political power remains ambiguous. Nevertheless, it is clear that Seneke achieved success as the inaugural patriarchal ruler of Niumi.

In contrast to Karafa Yali of Kombo, the account of Seneke's coronation is presented with considerable detail. Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh revealed, “The ceremony commenced with the formal sounding of the royal drums, referred to as the ‘Jung-Jung,’ by the griots of the royal family.”<sup>377</sup> Other sources reveal that, following customary practices of coronation, a palm leaf was affixed to Seneke's waist, and he was offered wine to partake. This wine was contained within large gourds. Some griots prepared their rifles with gunpowder, while others securely attached the palm leaf to his hands. Following this, they sounded the royal drums, which was accompanied by the firing of the loaded rifles. Subsequently, he was presented with wine, served in a calabash tray. After consuming it, he also offered wine to others present.<sup>378</sup> These narratives, therefore, stand testimony to the grandeur of Seneke's marriage to the queen.

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<sup>376</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 84

The narratives further revealed how the queen was made to publicly demonstrate the actual transfer of political power to Seneke, as dictated by the custom of the people of Niumi in those days. According to Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh,

“The queen was obligated to visibly demonstrate the transfer of the constitutional instruments of authority to him, in the presence of her cabinet, the nobles, and the ordinary citizens of Niumi.”<sup>379</sup>

Another narrative added that an elder from her royal court, who presided over the coronation ceremony, dipped a calabash tray into one of the gourds, retrieved some wine, and presented it to the queen for her to provide to Seneke. Seneke consumed the wine and left some in the tray, which he returned to the queen for her to drink. Upon consuming it, she publicly proclaimed that her reign, as queen of Niumi, had officially concluded.<sup>380</sup> This coronation, alongside the queen’s formal declaration marking the transfer of political authority to Seneke, consequently legitimized his claim to the throne of Niumi.

Seneke’s ascension to the throne of Niumi signified the conclusion of matriarchal governance in this northern Gambian kingdom. Some sources assert that he had a son with the queen, although he did not live long enough to witness the child's birth. Thus, he passed away when the queen was approximately seven months pregnant. She is reported to have given birth to a baby boy, who was named after Seneke himself, as was customary.<sup>381</sup> However, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh revealed,

“Seneke ruled as the first king of Niumi in a successful reign that lasted for ten years. He is believed to have died on the fourth day of the first

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<sup>379</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>380</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 85

<sup>381</sup> Ibid. Pp. 85

month of his tenth year as king of Niumi.”<sup>382</sup>

Based on the aforementioned information, it is reasonable to infer that the queen remained childless until the latter years of Seneke’s reign, at which point she finally conceived a child with him.

Other sources asserted that Seneke originally belonged to the *Demba* of Jokadu. According to this account, the *Jammeh* of Niumi sought to perpetuate their dynastic control over the kingdom’s throne in order to prevent the political dominance of the *Demba* of Jokadu, and thus named the boy Seneke Jammeh.<sup>383</sup> Despite this assertion, Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh asserted that Seneke is indisputably a descendant of the *Jammeh* of Sitanunku, which is a branch of the *Jammeh* of Bakindiki.<sup>384</sup> This belief is rooted in the widespread understanding that Biram and Musa, the *Jammeh* ancestors from Siin, temporarily settled in an area that became known as Jokadu. From this location, Musa, the younger brother, embarked upon his daily hunting expeditions to the bushes of Niumi. The name “Sitanunku” derives from the Mandinka noun phrase: “Sita-nding-nunkoo,” which translates to “a small-fat baobab tree.” Accordingly, it was beneath this “small-fat baobab tree” that he often rested during his hunting trips. On one occasion, while taking a nap, he was told in a dream that this place was their true predestined home. After narrating this revelation to Biram, his elder brother, Biram also concurred with the decision to relocate with him to this new location. At that time, their temporary settlement (in Jokadu) was still part of the territorial domain of the kingdom of Niumi. Seneke, however, is commonly believed to have been succeeded by Mansa Tunu-warr-Koto (Tenengwari Koto)

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<sup>382</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

<sup>383</sup> Wright, D. R. (1974). An Account on the Early History of Niumi (Narrated by Kemo Kuyate, September 15, 1974). *Oral Traditions from The Gambia*. Papers in International Studies. Center for International Studies. Ohio University. Vol. 1. No. 37. Pp. 85

<sup>384</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

Jammeh, who also was a male.<sup>385</sup> Therefore, from the time of this king until the reign of the last ruler, during which the Europeans conquered the entire Senegambia, patriarchal monarchical rule prevailed in Niumi.

#### **4.11. CONCLUSION**

The political suzerainty of Mali over Senegambia, which emerged in the mid-13th century, represented a significant external factor that contributed to the decline and eventual fall of matriarchal rule in the Gambia Valley. The initial opposition to matriarchal governance is predominantly associated with the Jaara Incident. This incident encompasses the well-known conflict that arose between Queen Musu Banna of the matriarchal kingdom of Jaara and her half-brother, Prince Jassey Banna. This feud, resulting from the mating of their fowls, culminated in a legal dispute between the two royal siblings. Jassey Banna's eventual triumph over his sister in the courts of the kingdom evidently strengthened his position. Together with certain princes from other matriarchal kingdoms in the Gambia Valley, he conspired to travel to Mali to devise strategies to dethrone their sisters. Although this mission to Mali has been primarily interpreted as a political endeavor aimed at receiving the political support of the patriarchs of Mali in their pursuit to terminate matriarchal rule in their respective kingdoms, it appears that they harbored an ulterior motive as well. Therefore, in addition to their diplomatic objectives, the princes also possessed the desire to arm themselves at the sacred shrines of Manding. This was deemed necessary, as it was through such spiritual armaments that they could challenge the authority of the reigning queens, attributed to their spiritual powers and possessions.

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<sup>385</sup> Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh. An Account on the Early History of Niumi, and the Lives and Reigns of the Lineage of Jammeh Queens. Oral interview held on 28 November, 2024.

The aftermath of the return of the princes from Mali marked the commencement of the eventual decline of nearly all matriarchal regimes within the Gambia Valley. They reportedly convened a mass meeting, which was attended by princes from various Senegambian kingdoms. Ultimately, they introduced a system for selecting rulers, referred to as “Alikuuroo,” which relied on the popular consent of a council of elders. While this was the system through which the queens of certain kingdoms in the Gambia Valley, particularly Baddibu, were dethroned, it was observed that matriarchal authority diminished in both Kombo and Niumi due to the establishment of marriage alliances between the reigning queens and the emerging patriarchal rulers.

Queen Wulending Jassey is reported to have wed Karafa Yali. It has been disclosed that his surname was originally *Jarra*, which subsequently evolved into *Jatta*. He was a nephew of the *Conde* clan of Malian origin. Later came to be called *Bojang*, it is from this clan that the initial patriarchs of Kombo emerged. He arrived in the region alongside his uncles, their close relatives, warriors, and servants, as part of the migratory waves from Mali. Musa Mamakimereng Jammeh, the last queen of Niumi, is often noted for her marriage to Seneke Jammeh (also known as Samake Demba), a prince from the *Jammeh* clan of Sitanunku. Much like the case of Queen Jassey of Kombo, this union legitimized Seneke's claim to the throne of Niumi. The influence of the Mali Empire, like its impact on the decline of the matriarchal kingdom of Kombo, played a significant role in this narrative. Seneke's travels to Mali, alongside other princes from Senegambia, are regarded as a crucial factor in his eventual rise to prominence as the first king of Niumi.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

#### 5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter elucidates the findings derived from the investigation into the history of matriarchal dominance within the twin Gambia Valley kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi. Consequently, the chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the data gathered from the study, which encompasses various themes and aspects pertinent to the primary inquiry. These themes include the extent of matriarchal dominance in pre-colonial Senegambia, which gives context to the main inquiry. This is followed by a summary of the major findings: first, the identities, lives, and times of the matriarchs of Kombo and Niumi, and second, the decline and eventual cessation of matriarchal rule in the two matriarchal kingdoms.

#### 5.2. MATRIARCHAL DOMINANCE IN PRE-COLONIAL SENEGAMBIA

Matriarchal regimes emerged in both the northern and southern communities of the zone. In Northern Senegambia, historical evidence reveals the presence of the office of *Linguere* since the late 11th century. This royal feminine position first appeared among the Serer in Siin and Saalum, where it was held by the wife of a *Laman*, the head of the Serer community. The *Linguere* often had authority over several villages under her direct control. Reflecting the matrilineal culture of the Serer, the level of power wielded by the *Linguere* was comparable to that of a *Gaami*, the male heir to the *Laman's* office. The office of *Linguere* persisted among the Serer into the 14th and 15th centuries, even following the rise of the *Gelewaar* dynasty in Siin and Saalum. Historical sources indicate that the title also existed among the Wolof since the

establishment of the Jolof Confederation in the 13th century. From this period until the later pre-colonial era, various *Lingueres* exercised significant political and economic authority among the Wolof.

In Southern Senegambia, there is equally compelling evidence supporting the existence of matriarchal dominance among the region's inhabitants since the 11th century. These communities were politically decentralized and caste-free, with matrilineal structures at their core. Religion served as a central rallying force within these societies. Thus, the egalitarian nature of their social order is believed to have allowed numerous women to ascend to prominent social and religious leadership positions. For example, many women from the Bainunk and Jolaa groups are reported to have achieved the village head-women role. Through this position, they exercised significant authority over their communities' socio-economic and religious aspects.

In conclusion, it is reported that several matriarchal regimes emerged in the Gambia Valley region of Senegambia during the pre-colonial era. Various sources indicate that the indigenous peoples residing along the Gambia River's northern and southern banks maintained matriarchal systems characterized by peace and social stability. This observation holds for states such as Kombo, Niumi, Fonyi, Jaara, Wuli, and Baddibu. The prevalence of matriarchal governance in these societies is believed to have its roots in the matrilineal traditions of the local communities.

### **5.3. MAJOR FINDINGS**

#### **A) The Identities, Lives and Times of the Matriarchs of Kombo and Niumi**

The period spanning the 11th to the 13th centuries represents the zenith of matriarchal influence in the pre-colonial kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi, located in the Gambia Valley of greater Senegambia. In Kombo, a notable queen named Wulending Jassey is recorded in historical

accounts. Although her birth name is not specified, it is acknowledged that the renowned name "Wulending" was bestowed upon her by Karafa Yali Jarra, a member of the *Conde* clan, whose arrival in the region during the mid-11th century signaled the conclusion of her reign as queen of Kombo.

The accounts differ regarding the exact term that Karafa Yali used to describe her beauty to his senior uncle, Sankaranka Madibaa Condeh, who led the *Conde* family's migration from Manding, in Mali, to the Gambia Valley of Senegmbia. One version states that he referred to her as "Mansa Wulengding," while other claims he called her "Mansa Wuleng-Baa." A third variation describes her as "Mansa Wuleng-Wuleng." Despite the difference in pronunciation regarding the actual term that Karafa Yali had uttered, these differing inflectional terms highlight the queen's fair complexion. This is because the root word "Wuleng" literally means "fair," in Mandinka, particularly about complexion. However, the name "Wulending" became the most popular name given to her in the accounts.

The sources indicate that *Jassey* was the last name of the queen. It is suggested that this surname is of a priestly nature, reflecting the religious significance of her clan in the pre-Islamic era. The Mandinka phoneme "Ja" is believed to be linked to the term for oracle, "Jalang." This phoneme also appears in various other Senegambian surnames, such as Jarju and Jabang, highlighting the diverse religious roles played by these clans in traditional Senegambian society. Consequently, it is revealed that the surname *Jassey* is derived from the Mandinka phrase "mili ka-ja-sin-di," which translates to "those whose work is to install the oracle." Given this evidence, it can be concluded that Queen Wulending Jassey hailed from a priestly family that served as a vital connection between the people and their local deities.

The sources are in agreement regarding the circumstances that led to her ascension to the throne of Kombo. It is indicated that she inherited the throne from her father, Kambi Jassey, the founder of Sanyang, which is recognized as the first town in Kombo. Widely regarded as the earliest known inhabitant of the Gambia Valley, it is from his name “Kambi” that both the Gambia River and the modern state of The Gambia derive their names. He is believed to have entrusted his kingdom to his daughter, Wulending Jassey, while embarking on a journey to the Bainunk heartlands of the Kassa-Bainunk Empire, with the intention of assisting relatives involved in an ongoing conflict. Since his departure with the warriors of Sanyang for this war, he has never returned. Consequently, Wulending Jassey served as the sole ruler of Sanyang and its neighboring towns until the mid-13th century, when the *Conde* family, of Manding origin, arrived in the region.

Niumi, in contrast, is recognized for its lineage of twelve queens, all descending from Mama Adame Jammeh, the kingdom's very first queen. While various sources concur on this aspect, they present differing names based on the chronology each provides. One source identifies nine queens by name: Mansa Mama Adame Jammeh, Mansa Wame Jammeh, Mansa Kuru Jammeh, Mansa Karoko Jammeh, Mansa Jeke Jammeh, Mansa Kabule Jammeh, Mansa Yaidi Jammeh, Mansa Kabulyadi Ngongirant Jammeh, Mansa Bakijuwana Jammeh, Mansa Kalamakoi Jammeh, and Mansa Musa Mama Ndang Jammeh.

Another source enumerates eleven queens by name. These individuals are Mansa Mama Adame Jammeh, Mansa Wame Jammeh, Mansa Furu Jammeh, Mansa Kabouyadi Jammeh, Mansa Nyunturanjang Jammeh, Mansa Yayando Jammeh, Mansa Bakijuwana Jammeh, and Mansa Musa Mama Nkemere Jammeh.

Still, a third version provides a total of twelve queens, namely, Mansa Mama Adame Jammeh, Mansa Wami Jammeh, Mansa Furu Jammeh, Mansa Karunku Jammeh, Mansa Kambiat Jammeh, Mansa Kangengkih Jammeh, Mansa Kanbuling Jammeh, Mansa Nyoiterenjan Jammeh, Mansa Calamacoei Jammeh, Mansa Yayadou Jammeh, Mansa Mbakijuwanda Jammeh, and Mansa Mamakimereng Jammeh.

Despite the discrepancies in the names provided by various sources, there are notable similarities in their spellings and pronunciations. The variations in chronology can be attributed to the way this tradition has been passed down through the ages. It is widely accepted that Mama Adame was the first queen of Niumi. The sources also concurred that there were twelve queens in total, who ascended to the throne in order of seniority. Furthermore, they agree that this lineage of queens was part of the *Jammeh* clan from Bakindiki, the first human settlement in Niumi. Notably, matriarchal rule flourished in the kingdom for a duration of one hundred and twenty-two years, six months, and one day.

It is further revealed that this century-old matriarchal dominance spanned three distinct generations: the first generation included four queens, the second generation five queens, and the third generation three queens. The first four queens of the initial generation were sisters to Biram and Musa, the two brothers who founded Bakindiki and Sitanunku. These four sisters served as the mothers of the five queens in the second generation, though the specific mother of each daughter is not identified among them. Additionally, these first four sisters were the grandmothers of the final three queens in the third generation. This evidence demonstrates that matriarchal political authority flourished in Niumi for an extended period, being continuously transmitted from the queens of the first generation, through the second, and concluding with the third generation, after which patriarchal rule took precedence.

The accounts surrounding the circumstances that led to Mama Adame's rise as the first queen of Niumi vary. One narrative suggests that she inherited the throne of Niumi from her father, Sora Musa Jammeh, who was a general of Sundiata Keita, the founder of the Mali Empire. Another narrative suggests that she initially resided in her father's kingdom of Baddibu Illiasa. Following a contentious power struggle with her brother, she chose to venture into the Niumi region, where she established Old Bakindiki and gradually emerged as its sole ruler. Alternatively, another account indicates that her two younger brothers, Biram and Musa—the founders of Old Bakindiki—entrusted the kingdom to her leadership as they sought to create their own kingdoms in order to extend their *Jammeh* lineage along the northern banks of the Gambia River. Nonetheless, despite these differing accounts, it is universally acknowledged that Mama Adame was the pioneer of matriarchal rule in Niumi.

The two matriarchal kingdoms of Kombo and Niumi were characterized by analogous state structures. Both were organized within the framework of the ancient African state, which has been described as a multi-layered socio-political entity, encompassing family units as the basic social structure through to leadership hierarchies. The diverse populations that inhabited the African state constituted its most essential elements, contributing significantly to its ongoing survival and social development. Within both kingdoms, the position of *queen* emerged as a form of community leadership known as “Musu Alkaliyaa” that evolved into a fully centralized authority. The reigning queen occupied the apex of the political hierarchy, supported by members of her royal courts.

Both matriarchal kingdoms employed a system of cabinet positions known as “Bulun- ngo” or “Bulung- daa,” which were held by senior genealogical representatives of the various towns and villages within the kingdom. The economic vitality of the local populace was intricately linked to

the Gambia River and its associated resources. The people also engaged in the cultivation of cereal crops, particularly rice, millet, and sorghum, in addition to fishing, local trade, and inter-regional commerce. Both kingdoms possessed traditional legal and judicial systems. A form of popular assembly, in which significant legal and policy matters were discussed and deliberated, is believed to have existed in both realms. The laws, norms, and values of the community were safeguarded against all forms of violations, being instilled from an early stage in the life cycles of boys and girls through circumcision and initiation rites. Two types of courts are reported to have existed: one known as “Kiitii- Bantang,” understood to be a lower court, and “Kaa- baa- Bantang,” believed to be a superior court. Moreover, military and security service had been a voluntary commitment undertaken by nearly every able-bodied man or woman residing within both kingdoms. Ultimately, religion served as the driving force for social cohesion that shaped the consciousness of the local populace. The predominant lifestyle of the people was identified as “Soninkeya” or paganism. The inhabitants of both kingdoms worshipped local deities, referred to as “Jalang,” through the practice of ritual sacrifices, occasionally involving human offerings. The queens of both kingdoms were also regarded as religious leaders who possessed significant spiritual capabilities. These spiritual endowments proved invaluable in ensuring the longevity of their reigns and the safeguarding of the territorial integrity of their kingdoms.

## **B) The Decline and Fall of Matriarchal Rule in Kombo and Niumi.**

The Malian political influence over Senegambia, which emerged in the mid-13th century, served as a crucial external factor contributing to the decline and eventual fall of matriarchal rule in the Gambia Valley. The initial resistance against this matriarchal authority is primarily associated with the Jaara Incident. This incident involved a notable feud between Queen Musu Banna of the

matriarchal kingdom of Jaara and her half-brother, Prince Jassey Banna. The conflict, sparked by the mating of their fowl, escalated into a legal battle between the royal siblings. Jassey Banna's victory over his sister in the kingdom's courts undoubtedly strengthened his resolve. Together with other princes from various matriarchal kingdoms in the Gambia Valley and beyond, he conspired to travel to Mali in search of support to overthrow their sisters.

The princes' mission to Mali has often been interpreted as a political endeavor aimed at securing the endorsement of the patriarchs of Mali to dismantle matriarchal rule in their domains. However, it appears they harbored ulterior motives as well. In addition to their political and diplomatic objectives, the princes sought to arm themselves at the sacred shrines of Manding. This spiritual armament was deemed essential, as only through such means could they effectively challenge the authority of the reigning queens, who possessed significant spiritual powers and resources.

The aftermath of the princes' return from Mali marked the beginning of the decline of nearly all the matriarchal regimes in the Gambia Valley. Traditional accounts indicate that the first organized action taken by the princes against matriarchal rule was the convening of a mass meeting that included princes from various Senegambian kingdoms. The resolution reached at this meeting led to the establishment of a system for selecting rulers, known as "Alikuuroo," which was based on the popular consent of a council of elders. This system is believed to have facilitated the rise of certain princes to the office of king in various Gambia Valley kingdoms, such as Baddibu. However, it appears that the immediate catalyst for the loss of political power by both Queen Wulending Jassey of Kombo and Musa Mamakimering, the last queen of Niumi, was their marriages to the emerging patriarchal rulers of these two kingdoms.

Queen Wulending Jassey is said to have married Karafa Yali Jarra, a nephew of the *Conde* family, the first Malian migrant family to have settled in Kombo. The *Conde* family is said to have been a priestly family that descended from the lineage of Sogolon Conde, the mother of Sundiata Keita, founder and first emperor of the Mali Empire. The family later adopted the surname *Bojang* following their establishment in Kombo land, first in Manduwaar, and later in Birikaama. Thus, it was this marriage that legalized Karafa Yali's ascension on the throne of Kombo.

Upon his marriage to the queen, his senior uncle, Sankaranka Madibaa Conde, banished him to Niani Bere where he ruled his realm known as Kombo Affet. Kombo Proper remained under the control of his uncles in Manduwaar and Birikaama. This banishment reportedly resulted from his treacherous plan to marry the queen in his uncle's absence. Feeling betrayed by his action, his uncle cursed his marriage to the queen, which is widely believed to have been the cause of their eventual divorce. Although it was short-lived, this marriage, therefore, marked the fall of matriarchal rule in Kombo.

Karafa Yali's act of seizing his children from the queen, which is represented in Mandinka as "ka-i-buusi-i-baa-la," is the root of the name of the modern town Busumbala. This was the place where he relocated, and from where he ruled Kombo Affet, following his divorce with the queen. His descendants came to be surnamed *Jatta*. This surname was derived from Karafa Yali's Malian surname, *Jarra*.

Musa Mamakimereng Jammeh, the last queen of Niumi, is believed to have married Seneke Jammeh, also known as Samake Demba, a prince from the *Jammeh* clan of Sitanunku. Much like Queen Jassey of Kombo, this marriage legitimized Seneke's claim to the throne of Niumi. Additionally, in a manner akin to the influence of the Mali Empire in the decline of the

matriarchal kingdom of Kombo, Seneke's journey to Mali, alongside other Senegambian princes, played a pivotal role in his ascendance as the first king of Niumi.

This marriage appeared to Seneke as a realization of the prophecy of the Malian emperor who had predicted to each of the peinces the sign that would signal their rise to power. For Seneke, he advised him to find a dog and commence hunting wild game. Following the emperor's advice, he aacquired a dog and begn hunting wild game in the nearby bushes. It was through those hunting trips that he encountered the queen's maidens at Nyanafara, a lake where he often bath after his daily hunting dventure, who informed the queen about him. Thus, after their meeting, Seneke cemented a marriage tie with the queen, in a grand ceremony that has been described in elaborate terms. This marriage, therefore, marked the fall of matriarchal rule in Niumi.

Seneke reportedly had a son with the queen, although he did not live long enough to witness the child's birth. He passed away when the queen was approximately seven months pregnant. The queen gave birth to a boy who was named after Seneke himself, as was customary. On a final note, Seneke ruled as the first king of Niumi in a successful reign that lasted for ten years. He is believed to have died on the fourth day of the first month of his tenth year as king of Niumi.

## **5.5. CONCLUSION**

It is revealed that pre-colonial Kombo and Niumi were once powerful matriarchal societies, characterized by strong, spiritually endowed queens who led politically and religiously. Their downfall was catalized by internal male opposition and external influence from the Mali Empire, ultimately transitioning these societies into patriarchal kingdoms through strategic marriages.

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➤ INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INFORMANT	OCCUPATION/ STATUS	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	AGE (as of 2025)	ADDRESS	SUBJECT OF THE INTERVIEW	DATE OF THE INTERVIEW
Alhagie Eduwar Jammeh	Deputy Chief, Upper Niumi District, North Bank Region/ senior genealogical member of the Jammeh clan of Niumi.	General Certificate of Education	76 years old	Sitanunku Village, Upper Niumi District, North Bank Region, The Gambia	1. The early history of Niumi.  2. The history of the lives and reigns of queens of Niumi Bakindiki	28 November, 2024
Alhagie Fa Ceesay	Village Headsman (“Alkalo”), Mandinaring Village, WCR/ a custodian of the early history of Kombo.	Quranic literacy/ religious education/ Madrassa	85 years old	Mandinaring Village, Kombo North, West Coast Region, The Gambia	1. The early history of Kombo  2. The history of Queen Wulending Jassey and her	15 December, 2024
Alhagie Jung Conteh	Retired Chief of Kombo East District/ former Member of Parliament/ a custodian of the early history of Southern Senegambia.	General Certificate of Education/ O Level  A certificate in Education/ Gambia College.	75-80 years old	Faraba Banta, Kombo East, West Coast Region, The Gambia	1. The early history of Kombo.  2. The history of Faraba Village	5 September, 2024
Biram Nduur	Senior genealogical member of the Nduur clan.	Traditional education	70-80 years old	Njaffeh, Fatik region, Senegal	The general history of the Serer people of Senegambia.	21 May, 2024
Ndeneh Njay	Senior genealogical member of the Njay family.	Traditional education	70-80 years old	Njaffeh, Fatik region, Senegal	The early history of the Serer states of Siin and Saalum.	14 April, 2024

Rog-Musi Sarr	Senior genealogical member of the Sarr clan.	Traditional education	80-85 years old	Mbasis, Fatik region, Senegal	The early history of Siin and Saalum.	6 May, 2024
Tombong Saane	Custodian of the relics of Kansala, ruins of the former capital of the Kaabu Empire/ a direct descendant of Jankey Wali Saane, the last emperor of Kaabu	Traditional education/ Basic Quranic literacy/ Daara	75-80 years old	Durubali Village, Gaabu Region, the Republic of Guinea Bissau.	1. The history of the Mandinko empire of Kaabu. 2. The general history of Southern Senegambia	13 February, 2024

## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- i. Who were the rulers of Siin and Saalum?
- ii. What characterized the social structure of the Serer of Siin and Saalum?
- iii. What was the status of women in Siin and Saalum?
- iv. Who were the Gelewar?
- v. Which Senegambian kingdoms were ruled by queens?
- vi. Which groups of people inhabited Kombo during the days of the queen?
- vii. What was the name of the queen of Kombo?
- viii. What characterized the social structure of Kombo during the days of the queen?
- ix. How was the political administration of the queen of Kombo structured?
- x. What is the ancestral history of the queen of Kombo?
- xi. What economic activities did the people of Kombo do during the days of the queen?
- xii. How did she become queen?
- xiii. How did she lose political power?
- xiv. What was the dominant religious belief of the people of Kombo during the days of the queen?
- xv. Who were the first settlers in Niumi?
- xvi. What is the ancestral history of the Jammeh of Niumi?
- xvii. What characterized the social structure of Niumi during the days of the queens?
- xviii. How many queens ruled the kingdom of Niumi?
- xix. What was the name of each queen?
- xx. How did the last queen lose political power?
- xxi. How was the political administration of the queens of Niumi structured?
- xxii. What economic activities did the people do during the time of the queens?
- xxiii. Who were the rulers of the Senegambian kingdom of Kaabu?
- xxiv. Who was the founder of the kingdom of Kaabu?
- xxv. What is the ancestral history of the rulers of Kaabu?
- xxvi. What was the dominant religious belief of the people of Niumi during the days of the queens?