

Chapter 1

PEASANTS BY OTHER MEANS

(Im)mobility and the Making of a Village Mooring



In 2006, when I first visited the village, Sabi conjured up contrasting sensations. On the one hand, I encountered a village immersed in its slow rural tempo and sociality at quite a remove from the hustle and bustle of metropolitan centres along the Atlantic coast, while on the other, a community palpably entangled with the wider world and striving to follow the unrelenting course of infrastructural development and social change in the Gambia. After leaving Basse, the provincial capital of the Upper River Region, and driving beyond its outskirts, the collective taxi – an old rusty van – began to manoeuvre laboriously in and out of or around the large potholes that pitted the road to Vélingara and filled up with knee- or even waist-deep brown water in the rainy season. The roadside was closely flanked on either side by a thick line of trees and bushes that lashed the vehicle and sometimes made the passengers squeeze together, as the driver sought a better passageway on one side or other of the road. Soon after the van had approached the last downhill drive before the village, however, the feeling of venturing into the wild African savannah gradually disappeared. Sabi was announced by the recently built Upper Basic School and, past the bridge over the seasonal stream, there appeared the first mansions of the village, enclosed within brick walls and topped by iron roofing that shone in the sun. Half a mile ahead, the border post became visible, and then, at some distance from each other, two large buildings under construction: the Sabi hospital sponsored by the Sabi association in Spain and a *madrassa* built by Sabinko in Serekunda.

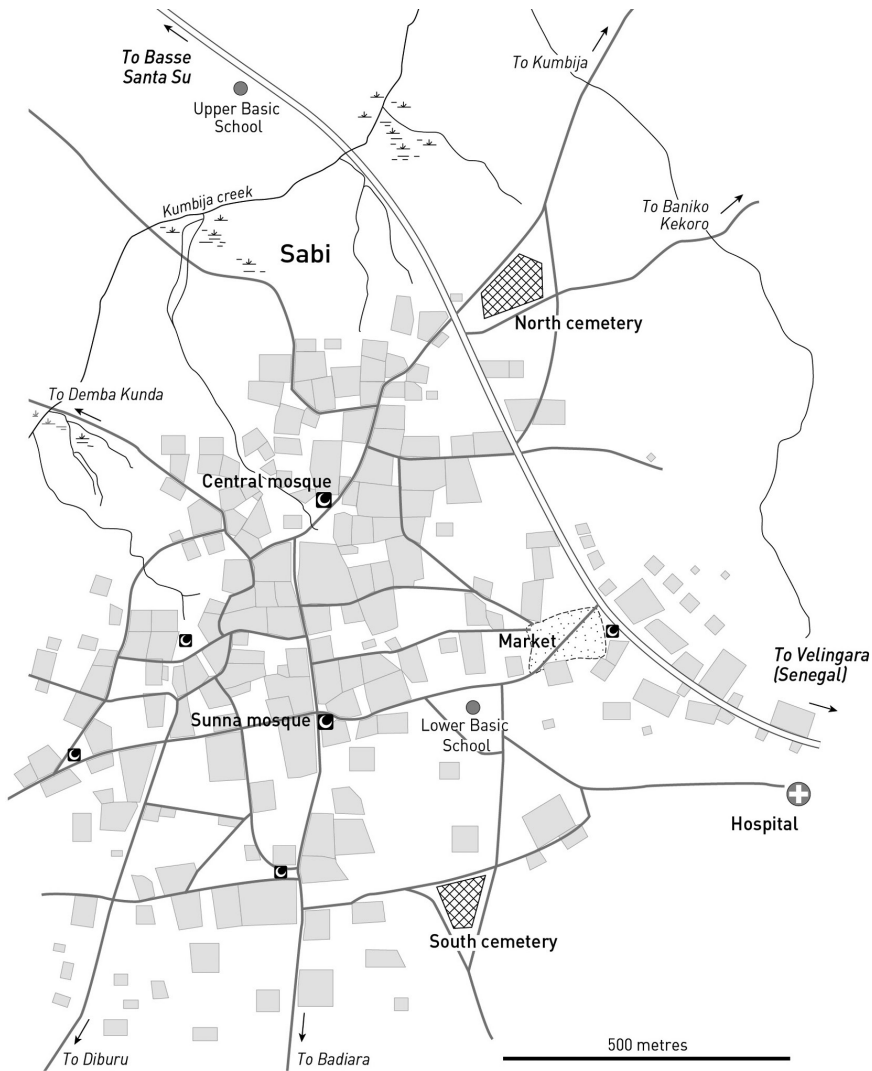


Figure 1.1 Sabi in 2008 (map produced with the assistance of Erik Brohaugh)

At the marketplace or *lumo*, the van stopped and the passengers got off (Figure 1.1). Here, one might well doubt whether this was a Soninke agricultural village at all. A mix of Gambians, Mauritians and Guineans ran all sorts of stores, large and small; Senegalese tailors worked feverishly on the verandas of their shops or inside them, where the interiors were adorned with fabrics of the most varied hues and designs. Some Guinean families, who had settled on the fringes of the *lumo*, worked as

mechanics and fitters.¹ A Nigerian pharmacist catered for patients nearby. Among the few Sabinke-owned businesses, a video club screened football matches from European leagues and other major cups. Before 2007, when rural electrification reached several neighbourhoods in the village and made watching TV at home a popular pastime, villagers would come here at night to watch Bollywood and Nollywood movies, and for an older audience, Soninke comedies produced in Senegal and Mali.

Leaving the market for the town centre, the impression of a rapidly growing village remained with me. In the family compounds along the route, fences of millet canes and wooden sticks had been replaced by concrete walls, while round huts with thatched roofs had given way to concrete buildings topped by corrugated iron sheets. As the villagers remarked: 'All the buildings that you see in this village, it is travelling that brought them'. Some houses sported a flat concrete roof and a decorated ledge, or were decorated with colourful stripes of red and yellow paint; sometimes the patronym of the household and the year of construction were inscribed in the concrete (Figure 1.3). Solar panels could be spotted here and there, though the arrival of the electrical supply had made cash meters a more usual sight.

At the central square, the weight of the village social history became decidedly more visible, albeit still traceable to an elsewhere. A mostly empty and sandy square was dominated, on the northern side, by the central mosque, a plain but gracious white building with two small minarets and a dome. Originally built by Sabi-born magnate Bassiru Jawara – allegedly the richest man in the Gambia – the mosque was later refurbished and equipped with solar panels and loudspeakers by various Sabi hometown associations (Figure 1.2). Following the customary principle of inheritance, prayers at the mosque were led by a learned man from a branch of the Silla family. The same rule applied to the village chief – a state official – the eldest genealogical male of another branch of the same Silla family, who governed the village from the large residence just across the square from the central mosque. Whether featuring the latest architectural style or in urgent need of refurbishment, at a closer look the families around the chiefly household reflected the social order of the village from the time of its foundation. Neighbourhoods of *nyaxamalo* (casted artisans), divided according to their profession, surrounded Silla-kunda.² The Sumbunu (leatherworkers) and the Kante (blacksmiths) were among the founding families of Sabi, and they built their family compounds here; whereas the Kamara (Islamic praise-singers) had settled between the chiefly Silla and the imam Silla, to the southwest. In this area, called *kammunun-kanu* (uphill quarter), one found many households of *hooro* (nobles). At the opposite end of the village,



Figure 1.2 Sabi Central Mosque: Generations of Migrant Transnationality



Figure 1.3 Kaba-kunda, 2007

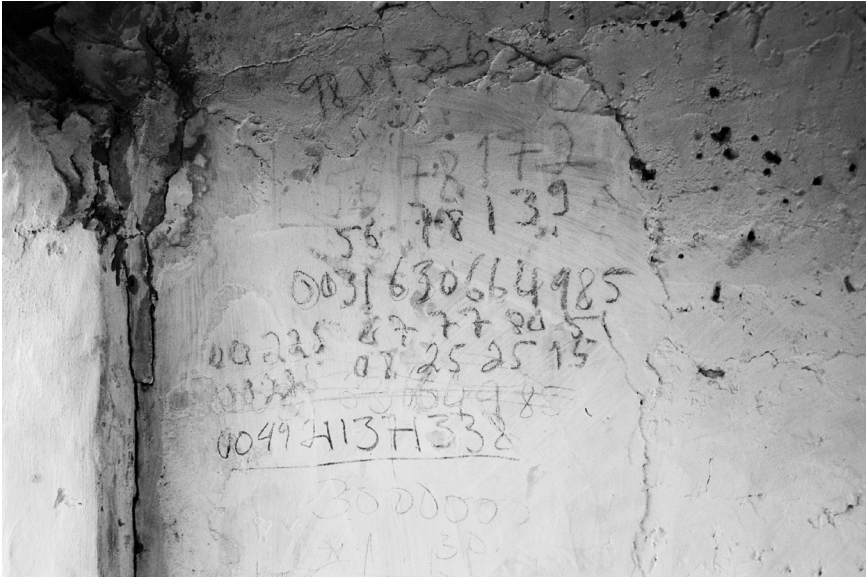


Figure 1.4 Staying Connected: Phone Numbers on a House Wall

there extended the *komon-kanu* (slave quarter), hosting villagers of slave descent (*komo*).

This cursory presentation of Sabi should be enough to give a sense of the marked spatial and temporal bi- or multi-focality (Vertovec 2004) that has characterized the physical and social environment of Sabi for many decades and until at least the time of writing (Figure 1.4). These juxtapositions are certainly not unique to this Gambian community. Most villages in the region have, in one way or another, contributed to waves of rural-urban and international emigration in the course of the twentieth century, progressively weaving the fabric of local, peasant life along the threads spun by migrant and non-migrant villagers as they have sought to remain connected across a distance (e.g. Quiminal 1991; Lambert 2002; Riccio 2007: 50–55). Housing investments financed by migrant money are probably the most visible sign of this long-distance interaction, standing as tokens of belonging as well as signs of upward personal and social mobility which have transformed the urban landscape in the countryside as much as that of metropolitan areas (Tall 2009; Melly 2010).

To the scholar of migration, Sabi would appear, in brief, as a typical example of a ‘transnational village’ (Levitt 2001). However, concealed in the multi-stranded connections and flows that straddle ‘here’ and ‘there’ is a less visible historical process of disconnection (Ferguson 1999: ch. 7) or reconfiguration of the nodes and networks of the Upper River

economy (cf. Howard and Shain 2005). Sabi did not pass from being an isolated farming village to becoming a transnational village by progressively opening up to the world. On the contrary, as will be shown in the first part of this chapter, the founding of Sabi was already the product of epochal political and economic transformations in the Senegambia and the world system during the second half of the nineteenth century. What has conferred a transnational colour on this Upper River settlement in the subsequent decades is a trajectory that, while turning the village into a centre of a worldwide diaspora, has decentred it as a vital node of economic activity and accumulation.

In several respects, Sabi residents are more like peasants today than they were in the past. Until the Second World War, the villagers combined trade and labour migration with agriculture in a synergic manner. Thereafter, regional trading networks provided the basis for a rapid expansion of long-distance travel within and without Africa. While this ongoing phase of migration reveals continuity with the past ones, this chapter will show that it is characterized by discontinuity in the way in which movement and stillness are related. The trade–agriculture nexus has withered among the Upper River Soninke, leading to a greater bifurcation of mobile and immobile livelihoods in a context of growing diasporization and simultaneous curtailment of the freedom of movement. By describing the economic, political and environmental transformations that have shaped this separating of life careers, this chapter sheds light on how a social field of (im)mobility has emerged in Sabi, and with it a geo-social ‘sitting’ space for rural young men to occupy.

‘Sitting’ Sabi, Creating Movement, 1902–c.1945

According to colonial records, Sabi was founded or ‘sat’ in 1902, only a year after the British Protectorate of the Gambia (established in 1894) had been extended to the Upper River Province.³ Sabi was a resettlement from Sabi Xase (lit. Old Sabi), a village in the precolonial kingdom of Bundu, which was an area stretching from the upper Gambia River valley to the upper Senegal one (see Clark 1996). Sabi Xase belonged to a cluster of mostly Soninke villages in a valley where the Nieriko, a tributary of the Gambia River, flows through, and was connected to Soninke settlements in the northeast of Bundu, close to the Senegal River and the historical Soninke lands of Gajaaga. Across Bundu ran one of the most important commercial routes in the region since at least the times of the Atlantic slave trade. The Soninke, among other indigenous Muslim traders, led caravans of slaves, gold and other merchandise from the Senegal

valley and the Western Sudan to the Gambia, and returned back with salt and European goods. Philip Curtin (1975: 68) has described Soninke villages in the Nieriko valley as ‘clerical-commercial communities’, where students could learn Islam, and where traders and travellers could stop over before or after crossing the wilderness area between Bundu and Wuli, the easternmost kingdom in the Upper River. Sabi Xase was known to early nineteenth century European explorers as a relatively prosperous place which, in addition to trade and Islam, thrived on a flourishing agriculture (Gray and Dochard 1825: 102–3).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the upper Senegal River valley became the theatre for internal and regional conflicts, due to succession struggles, so-called jihadist movements and expanding French colonial interests in the area. Warfare and raids, together with epidemics and droughts, caused the Soninke and other peoples to leave the region, with Wuli and the rest of the Upper River being one of the main destinations (Gomez 1992: 122, 149; Clark 1999: 99–107; cf. Sanneh 1979: 63–64). Entire villages were resettled in the nearby upper Gambia River valley, especially on the relatively unpopulated southern banks, where the king of Fuladu, Alfa Molo Egge, and later his son Musa, offered protection to men of trade and religion like the Soninke elites (Bellagamba 2000: 51).⁴ The wealthy among the refugees would in fact take some slaves and cattle along, and some clerics were reported to have moved with their entire followings. On the north bank, long-standing commercial relations with *juula* families in the Mandinka kingdoms of Wuli and Niani hosted waves of Soninke settlers and eventually helped them find new land for settlement.⁵ In spite of their growing presence, rapidly forming the largest ethnic group along the Upper River, as late-comers the Soninke in the south did not generally object to being ruled by Mandinka or Fula kings, or, after the colonial takeover, by district chiefs.

The Silla and their followers from Sabi Xase thus moved to Darsilami, on the north bank, where they stayed for a generation or so. Pressed by land scarcity, however, they then crossed the river, together with their slaves and clients. The Sumbunu (leatherworkers), the Kante (blacksmiths) and the Kaba (noble clerics) followed suit from Darsilami, helping to reconstruct Sabi Xase’s social structure in the new Sabi.⁶ The village grew rapidly, and within a generation reached the size of almost one thousand inhabitants, among whom were relatives and fellow Soninke from the east, as well as clerics and, especially, farmers from other communities in the interior. A small Jakhanke neighbourhood was eventually established in the village around the household of a Quranic teacher.⁷

What drove demographic growth in Sabi and other recent Soninke settlements was, in fact, the expansion of commercial groundnut

agriculture. Since the mid nineteenth century, the commercial exploitation of groundnuts along the Gambia River valley had attracted what Swindell and Jeng (2006: 44) have called ‘pioneer-famer-traders’ from the interior, among whom the Soninke men again featured prominently. Groundnut cultivation was subsequently integrated into household production, assisted by slave labour, and increasingly, by seasonal migrant workers known by the British as *strange farmers* (i.e., stranger farmers; known in Senegal as *navétans*). *Strange farmers* farmed around three mornings for their host, who in exchange provided them with accommodation, food and a plot of land for them to grow groundnuts for sale. Seasonal immigrants gradually replaced slave labour as slaves became progressively emancipated from their masters in the first half of the twentieth century (Weil 1984; Bellagamba 2005). Relatively few slaves fled, and those who remained were rather integrated into the bottom of the social hierarchy as an endogamous group on a par with the nobles and the casted artisans; as newly autonomous farmers, they too contributed to the expanding agricultural frontier. By the 1920s, the Upper River Province had become the main exporting region in the Gambia basin, overtaking the historical boom areas in the North Bank Province. Basse became the main market town in the Protectorate, attracting European firms, Lebanese entrepreneurs and indigenous traders (Barrett 1988: 105–6).

After their arrival in the Upper River, Soninke immigrants also quickly recreated their clerical-commercial communities in the area. Although European commercial companies and the arrival of Lebanese traders led to a progressive marginalization of African trade (Mbodji 1992), there remained niches in the market where *juula* traders continued to thrive. During the whole colonial period, regional trading networks remained central for the Gambian Soninke. Upper River traders ranged from the upper Senegal River valley and Mali to Guinea Bissau and Futa Jallon (Guinea Conakry) (Figure 1.5). Some kinds of handmade cloth were cheaper than those imported by Europeans, and tie-dye textiles produced in Gidimaxa and Gajaaga (upper Senegal River valley) were used as prestige items and for ceremonial dressing (Clark 1999: 71–72). Sabi traders also travelled south to Futa Jallon, particularly to Labe and Kindia, where a similar kind of cloth called *kindia* could be found.⁸ Along the same route, traders would buy cattle, which were highly sought after by Gambian farmers wishing to convert their groundnut sales into livestock wealth.⁹ As ancient as the cloth trade was that of gold, imported from Mali into the Gambia to be made into jewellery, which also served as a form of savings for women (Shipton 1995).¹⁰ Sabi men were involved in seasonal and occasional forms of labour migration, especially as *strange*

farmers, to the groundnut basin in north-western Senegal and as labourers and hawkers in wharf towns along the Gambia River.

The Farmer-trader

In Sabi, agriculture and economic migration were symbiotic. The farmer-traders who pioneered groundnut cultivation along the Gambia River remained the dominant figures of (im)mobility until the mid twentieth century, at least in Soninke villages. Some traders eventually became full-time producers, deploying householders, clients and migrant labour to produce surplus; others used commercial agriculture to recapitalize their trade. The farming of groundnuts also provided an opportunity to start trading from scratch. Groundnut cultivation, like most agricultural activity, was a seasonal activity (June–November), which conveniently integrated with dry-season activities, especially trade. In 1946, an agricultural officer visiting Koina, the easternmost Gambian (Soninke) village, wrote: ‘Trading is carried on in any commodity in demand in French territory, and groundnuts are sold as soon as the trade season opens in order to obtain cash to buy such commodities’.¹¹ Although commercial agriculture could result in poverty and chronic indebtedness, the social base of trade remained rather wide, especially for seasonal and short-range trade such as the smuggling of European merchandise, including gunpowder, into French territories. Even long-distance trade was not restricted to clerical and other freeborn families, though it must be borne in mind that these generally maintained a prominent position as traders.

For most of the colonial period, the farmer-trader remained the emblematic figure in migratory–sedentary dynamics in Sabi. The farmer-trader typically invested in both mobile (trading) and sedentary (groundnut) activities, engaging in a sort of positive feedback system of capitalization between seasonally complementary activities. Wealth acquired in farming and trading was thus used to build prestige and local social networks. Such localizing strategies could serve the interests of farmer-traders, such as accessing food and implements distributed on behalf of the colonial government by district chiefs and other agents. Some of these goods, such as gunpowder in the early colonial period, would then be smuggled across the border.

The Sabinko still vividly remember two wealthy farmer-traders. One is Biagi Sirandu Kaira, a man from an important noble family (*hoore*) who used to run Quranic schools and probably had a trading past before settling in Sabi. Beginning his career in the late 1920s, Biagi was involved

in the gold trade. He used to travel to Gajaaga and Mali, and as he made money, he began to commission other traders to buy gold on his behalf and bought from the foreign gold traders he hosted.¹² Biagi also traded in groundnuts, a business to which he became more and more dedicated as he grew older and gave up travelling. Apart from selling groundnuts to wharf town agents, he would give bags out on credit to people in need of seeds or food. He applied a harsh two-for-one interest rate, usually to be paid after harvest. This was a widespread arrangement for the time, which surely increased indebtedness among the poor; it was later dismissed as illicit (*riba*) on Islamic grounds. Biagi was nevertheless known as a prominent man. He was the first villager to build a brick house with a corrugated iron roof, around the 1940s. It is said that each of his twelve sons had a horse which wore gold bangles round its ankles.

The other farmer-trader is Musa Jabu Konte. A contemporary of Biagi, Musa Jabu came from a lower status family, his father being a stranger with no connections to Sabi families but who nonetheless decided to settle down in Sabi. Musa Jabu's story is one of a self-made man, and, perhaps better than Biagi's, it shows the mutuality between mobility and immobility. Despite starting as an outsider, Musa took advantage of a growing rural economy in the 1920s and 1930s, and of Soninke trading networks, to achieve great social and economic success. He worked hard on groundnut fields and used the sales profits to go and buy cloths in Futa Jallon or in Mali to resell them in the Gambia. He then used the profits from the cloth trade to employ *strange farmers*, and hence produce more groundnuts, and hence recapitalize his commerce, until he became a semi-permanent groundnut producer and trader on a par with Biagi.¹³ He married four wives and had many children. He eventually became respected among the nobles and established close ties with Islamic scholars. He is remembered as a generous patron, and one of the first people from the Upper River to go on pilgrimage to Mecca by travelling on a plane (in the 1950s).

After the generation of Musa Jabu and Biagi Sirandu, the last Sabi trader-farmer of some renown was Sambu Kamara, a *fina* (Islamic praise-singer group). Known as a generous man surrounded by praise-singers (*jaaru*) and the first man to afford meat on a daily basis, Sambu amassed wealth by trading gold in the 1950s and early 1960s, while farming groundnuts in the rainy season. He later invested in cotton, and then began planting mango trees and cassava for commercial purposes. Following his death, the plantations were gradually abandoned, although the mango orchard still thrives on the outskirts of Sabi. Some of Sambu's, Musa Jabu's and Biagi Sirandu's younger brothers and sons took over their

trading ventures, but most of them retired soon afterwards or ended up joining their kinsmen travelling to Sierra Leone and other West African countries.

By the mid 1950s, in fact, other migratory routes and opportunities were attracting young men away from the village, and away from groundnuts. Musa Jabu directly advised some of his sons to do so and paid for their fares. The exodus from Biagi Sirandu's household was even more drastic, with all of his sons gone to seek fortunes in foreign countries. That first brick building in Sabi still towers above the courtyard in the Kaira residence, a symbol of a glorious past; however, only a few of the family members have chosen to stay in Sabi today.

New Routes and Roots in the Post-war Period

Having survived by adapting to marginal niches, Soninke and other Upper River traders came out of the shadows and developed in a rather impressive way after the end of the Second World War. They followed what Kate Meagher (2005: 229–30) calls a strategy of diversification and globalization, reaching more and more diverse and distant destinations. They spread across West and Central Africa, occupying and intersecting market opportunities in the diamond and African art export trades, as well as in other merchandise. Meanwhile, expansion and diversification took place in agriculture as well. But as regional trade waned, and the centres of commercial activity became more removed from the village, this period of transition sowed the seed for a deeper transformation of the nexus between migrant and sedentary livelihoods.

Although trade migrants bought and sold a plethora of other merchandise, diamonds and, to a lesser extent, African art objects became the true emblems of the expansion and diversification of migratory routes. In the 1940s, experienced traders travelling south to Futa Jallon eventually continued on along the route, reaching Sierra Leone, as the diamond sector there was quickly developing.¹⁴ In the 1950s, an authentic diamond fever attracted thousands of men from the Senegal valley and the Gambia valley to the mines of Sierra Leone (Bredeloup 2007: 65ff). Even young men with no prior experience of trade sold their groundnuts, a cow or their mother's jewellery to go to Sierra Leone. In the 1960s, the *diamantaires* spread to Ivory Coast, Liberia, Guinea Conakry and to the Belgian and French Congos. Soninke migrants operated as mining entrepreneurs, traders and intermediaries alongside other groups and nationalities in a complex network that crisscrossed West and Central Africa, supplying diamonds, sometimes illicitly, to the most important markets beyond the

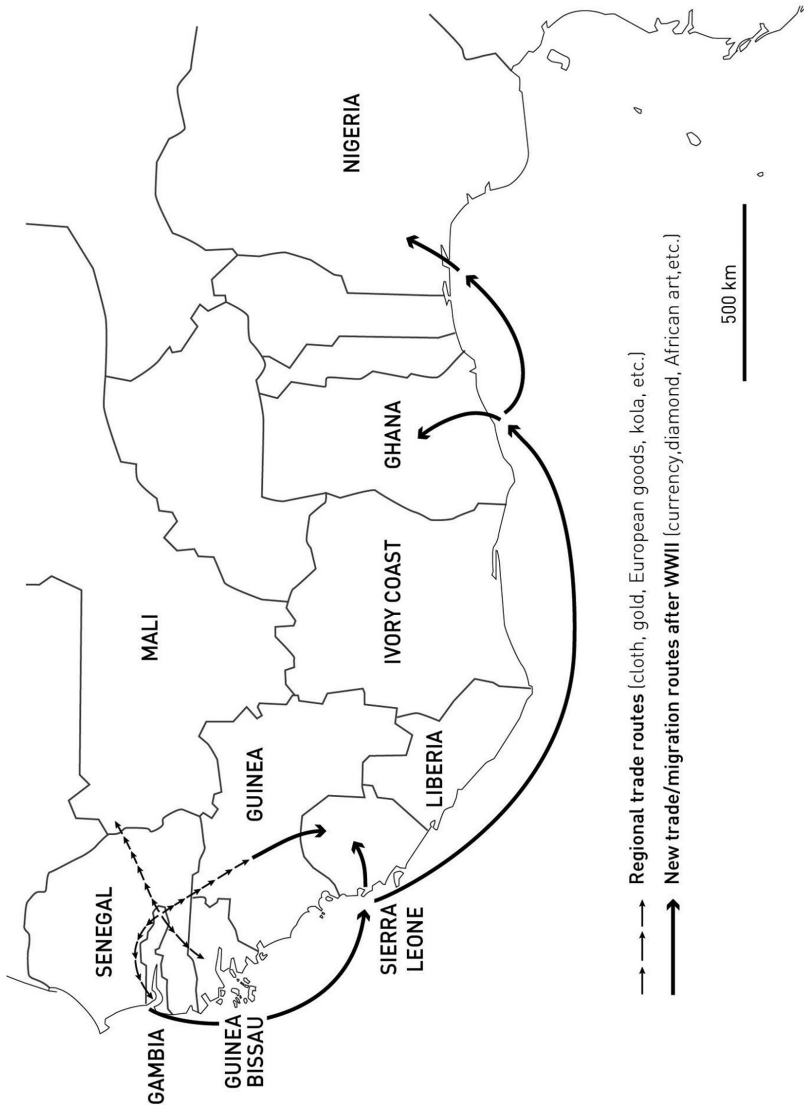


Figure 1.5 Soninke Trade Routes in the Colonial Period

region, such as Antwerp, Tel Aviv, Beirut and Bujumbura (in Burundi) (Bredeloup 2007: 24–25, 96).

Meanwhile, sea transport facilitated the emergence of the new migratory routes. For the Soninke of the Upper Senegal, the transport system on the river and then at sea had provided an important labour market, which in the post-war period eventually paved the way, via Marseille, for the well-known Soninke labour immigration to France (Manchuelle 1997: 197–203; Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2004: 19–33, 91ff). For the Gambian Soninke, in contrast, sea transport brokered not labour opportunities but commercial routes to West Africa. In addition to Sierra Leone, traders travelled further south to the Gold Coast. In the late 1940s, they went to buy kola nuts and exchange British and French currencies at advantageous rates (cf. Rice 1968: 216). Some time later, traders found out that African art objects were a growing market, and in particular focused on old European beads (*xanyo*), an item of trade dealt in by their forefathers during and after the Atlantic slave trade (Curtin 1975: 229–30). As Christian Steiner (1994: 7) has shown, the African art trade boomed in the 1960s, fuelled not only by collectors but also by tourists, peace corps, civil rights movements and African nationalist movements. Muslim traders from West Africa generally controlled the trade in Ivory Coast, Ghana and Nigeria, the last two being the main destinations for traders from Sabi and the rest of the Upper River.

In the 1960s and 1970s, some art traders began to travel to the U.S. to supply regular clients; others thought that by going to where most buyers came from, their goods would fetch higher prices.¹⁵ Paul Stoller's (2002) ethnography of the African art market in Harlem (New York) is testimony to the current vitality of West African traders who arrived along this route. Once on American soil, however, migrants found other opportunities. Cheap unskilled labour was needed in shops, restaurants and hotels; West Africans also worked as deliverers, watchmen and taxi drivers (Tall 2008: 45–47). On the other side of the Atlantic, some of the *diamantaires* began to travel to Belgium and the Netherlands in the 1970s. During their stay, traders looked for other commercial opportunities, such as second-hand car markets, particularly in Germany. Here, too, other labour opportunities became available.¹⁶ In the late 1970s, the airline company Iberia inaugurated a route between Lagos and Madrid, and some migrants already in Nigeria took the flight (see Kaplan 1998: 96). No visa was required before 1985. Migrants did not stop in Madrid, they went on to Catalonia, especially the Girona Province. By the early 1980s, many migrants were working in the *campo*, Catalonian farms and orchards, picking fruit and vegetables during the spring and summer (Kaplan 1998: 96). Eventually some found work as labourers in the

construction and service sector, and later in factories near Barcelona, Gerona and Mataró.

Agricultural Innovation in a Time of Emigration

The boom in international migration, back in the 1950s, was not due to a sharp decline in agricultural production. The end of the Second World War in 1945 had restored market confidence, prices had gone up and Gambian farmers had responded by producing ever more groundnuts. Good rainy seasons did the rest. The 1950s were less favourable (Gailey 1964: 162–63) than the post-war years, but production continued to expand, breeding mild optimism for the transition to national independence, in 1965. Late colonialism was marked by developmentalist policies, which took some steps towards improving infrastructure and agricultural production – even though such policies had only marginal impacts on the Upper River compared to the urban areas and other British territories. In 1949, the government had established the Gambia Oilseed Marketing Board (GOMB) to centralize the groundnut trade and to provide development funds for farmers’ activities and communities. From the late 1940s, the Wuli agricultural station ran demonstrations of ox-ploughing and in the 1950s ploughs began to be taken to the fields and sold to the farmers.¹⁷ New seed varieties were introduced, together with new implements (Sallah 1990: 626). A small warehouse to organize seed storage was built in Sabi.

In 1968 the run of good rainy seasons came to an abrupt halt, inaugurating a period of droughts which would permanently transform the climate across the Western Sahel. The meteorological station at Basse measured an average of 1055.7 mm of rain between 1959 and 1967, falling to 876.4 mm in the 1972–80 period (van Dokkum 1992: 63–64). Baker (1995: 73) has found that in the western regions the rainy season has become one month shorter, while Webb (1992: 561) states that ‘the rainy season in the Gambia has become increasingly bi-modal, with a mini-drought of several weeks occurring in the middle of the wet season’, causing germinating plants to dry up. Sabi elders and adults have seen the nearby stream becoming drier and drier, and women have progressively given up cultivating rice on its swampy banks.

In spite of the worsening climate, however, the Sabinko remember the 1970s as years of agricultural intensity. The policy of the Marketing Board (transformed into the Gambia Produce Marketing Board – GPMB – in 1973) shifted from supporting farmers with food supplies to subsidizing production. The Gambian Cooperative Union (GCU), known simply as the *cooperative* by the Sabinko, represented the main licensed agent

on behalf of the GPMB and main governmental actor in the region, distributing tools and implementing credit schemes for the farmers. The GCU effectively became a tool for state patronage and control of the rural population (McNamara and Shipton 1995: 105), but this did not prevent Sabi farmers from eagerly responding to new opportunities and subsidies. Animal traction was significantly expanded in the 1970s, with farmers quickly adopting the versatile Sine Hoe, a multipurpose frame (plough, seeder and weeder) manufactured in Senegal. In the middle of the decade, cotton cultivation was also strengthened to diversify agricultural production. In Sabi, Sixu Nyuma Silla (not the chiefly Silla) was one of the first cotton farmers of the Gambia Cotton Project in the eastern part of the country, and he became a Producer Director on the GPMB board. Cotton production caught on quickly among Sabi farmers, often replacing groundnuts. Thanks to the high profile figure of Silla, the villagers could secure regular access to machines, fertilizers, pesticides and tools. Although the Cotton Project was progressively dismantled in the 1980s, leaving Sabi farmers no choice but to abandon the new cash crop, this clearly shows that the pioneers were not only abroad.¹⁸

Shifting Geographies of Trade

If the migration boom was thus driven by opportunity rather than by constraint, nevertheless regional trade networks called for greater diversification. The establishment of the Marketing Board in the 1950s meant greater expansion and centralization of the marketing system to the advantage of licensed agents, thereby continuing the trend of the marginalization of indigenous traders (Mbodji 1992: 223–24). European companies progressively pulled out of the country but the monopoly of imported merchandise and foodstuff continued under the public National Trading Company, created in 1973 (Barrett 1988: 80). The headquarters thus remained in Banjul, whose commercial vitality increased in the 1970s.

In response to the vagaries of climate and agriculture, the government began to turn the small size of the country into an advantage, dreaming of transforming it into the ‘Singapore of Africa’ (Sall and Sallah 1994: 128). Rice, sugar, textiles, tomato paste and other goods imported at low customs tariffs were thus re-exported to Senegal and the countries of the interior that had no seaports or were keeping import duties high to protect their industry. The re-export trade left room for African traders; still, however, the major stakeholders were a restricted number of Banjul-based importers with sufficient capital and connections with the government (Lambert 1994: 85–87). Some Soninke returnees from West Africa managed to become prominent importers in Banjul, but few of them participated in

the transport and commercial networks – mostly controlled by Senegalese and Mauritanian immigrants – linking the coast with the Upper River.

In sum, by the 1970s, the centres of trade and capital accumulation had shifted location. The earlier trading networks in Senegambia and Western Sudan had morphed and shifted away from the Upper River. Meanwhile, agriculture remained buoyant, though innovation and diversification were driven as much by opportunity as by growing constraints, especially those connected to climate change. In fact, while the frontier of international migration was rapidly expanding in geographical scale and economic significance, the signs of an imminent halt and retrenchment on the Upper River agricultural frontier had already become apparent.

Parting Sedentary and Migrant Livelihoods: 1970s–Present

Starting from the 1970s, the model of the farmer-trader becomes increasingly inadequate to describe patterns of (im)mobility in Sabi. Circular migration between Sabi and new trade destinations remained popular for some time – ‘*I de go, I de come*’ as many former *diamantaires* used to describe their travelling between Sabi and Sierra Leone, in the Krio language. But cycles of circular migration became progressively longer, and destinations more distant and more expensive to reach. Funding emigration through groundnut sales alone became increasingly hard, while other forms of savings linked to agrarian economy deteriorated. The subsequent three sections describe, in turn, three simultaneous processes which, in continuity with the post-war migration boom, have contributed to driving a wedge between mobile and immobile livelihoods: 1) the decline of the rural economy; and the juxtaposition of 2) momentous international labour migration and 3) rising barriers to transnational mobility.

Bush Troubles: The Decline of the Rural Economy

The drought years in the 1960s and 1970s, combined with growing urbanization, provoked a sharp rise in the demand for food supplies, and hence in imports from abroad. The Gambian government responded by promoting endogenous development and agricultural diversification policies under the Tesito programme, a Mandinka word evoking a hard-working farmer hitching up his trousers before bending down in the field to farm (Saho 1979). With the backing of international donors, irrigation projects to boost rice production were launched, notably in the Jahally-Pacharr area (Central River Region), alongside smaller-scale ones further east along the river (Carney and Watts 1990; P. Webb 1991). Too

far from the river and well-watered creeks, Sabi was not part of these programmes. Also limited in Sabi was the advent of horticulture and orchards, which in the 1980s developed rapidly especially in the western part of the country (Schroeder 1999; Baker and Edmonds 2004). In the late 1990s, Youth With A Mission (YWAM, an international Christian organization) created a small local branch in Sabi. One of their projects has been to improve fruit and vegetable cultivation, for both income generation and nutritional purposes.¹⁹ But commercial horticulture requires considerable investment as well as a regular water supply – again a major problem in Sabi, where only a few gardens stand out in a panorama that is definitely more yellowish than in neighbouring villages like Numuyell and Dembakunda, located near permanent creeks.

Save for horticulture, the dynamism of Gambian farmers was progressively put to the test in the 1980s. By this time, it had become abundantly clear to farmers that a policy change would be unlikely. Development projects and public spending concentrated on the urban areas, while the monopoly of the patronage-ridden GPMB reaped profits from groundnuts, and farmers received low prices. In 1984, groundnut growers were paid only 23 per cent of the international market price (Wright 2004: 220). However, the liberalization of farm-gate prices under the auspices of the Economic Recovery Programme (ERP) (1985), the structural adjustment programme promoted by the IMF and the World Bank, initially favoured Gambian farmers. In 1990, the already erratic state subsidies were stopped altogether, so that farmers would allegedly benefit from the liberal market and negotiate the price of their produce directly with traders (Sallah 1990). However, Gambian farmers experienced once more their fate of being weak price setters in the world market, as they competed with heavily subsidized groundnut producers in countries like the U.S. (Wright 2004: 217–18).

In the 1990s, the marketing infrastructure was badly affected. In 1993, the GMBP went bankrupt and was bought by Alimenta, a Swiss multinational, which renamed it the Gambia Groundnut Corporation (GGU). Meanwhile, the *cooperative* (GCU), deemed too inefficient and deficit-ridden, was disbanded in 1996. Following litigations and court cases with Alimenta, however, the Gambian government closed down the GGU and assumed direct control of the marketing network, only to find itself with a much less efficient infrastructure. In the 2005/6 season, many farmers were issued with promises of payment for their produce but had to wait until the following year before they could receive their cash.²⁰ A very bad season followed; moreover, the farmers were advised to take their groundnuts to central depots, hence they had to bear the responsibility for the transport costs (Dampha 2007). In Sabi, this resulted in middlemen and

traders with their carts and tractors buying from door to door at 350–400 Dalasi per bag, and taking bags to the Basse depot. A year later (2007/8), a collection point was issued at Sabi and cash was made available, but purchases only began in mid January, when many farmers had already taken their groundnuts to the collection point at Badiara, the Senegalese village at the nearby border.

As a response to the growing uncertainties of agriculture, the government has since offered the population another round of development campaigns, inviting citizens to go ‘Back to the Land’ and work hard to reach the goal of alimentary self-sufficiency (see Chapter 2). Although some results have been certainly achieved, this campaign employs populist overtones and – like other recent agricultural policies – it has often failed to address the plight of the Gambian farmers (Wright 2004: 235–37, 244–48; Gajigo and Saine 2011). Even if more Gambians were to go back to the land, land scarcity has become a major issue over the last three decades. Between 1973 and 2003, the population of the Upper River region more than doubled and Sabi is now at least five times larger than it was in the 1930s, hosting more than five thousand people (Central Statistics Department 1976; Gambia Bureau of Statistics 2006). A larger population tends to farm more land, but today little of it is available on the Gambian side of the border. Back in the colonial days, people used to go south into Senegal to clear new land and establish seasonal farming villages, which later became permanent settlements. The last ones were established in the 1950s, but then progressively people either settled across the border or gave up establishing farming villages. As a consequence, fallow periods have shrunk, if not altogether disappeared: farmers often alternate grains and groundnuts on the same land year after year, and they now complain that soil fertility is dramatically decreasing. Although the government has started again to subsidize fertilizer prices, this is not within reach of everybody’s pockets.

If it is true that emigration has driven numerous men away from the fields, labour shortages in the Upper River have been mainly caused by a progressive decline in the influx of *strange farmers*. Since the 1970s, young men from surrounding regions have headed to the cities to work as labourers and petty traders.²¹ Meanwhile, household heads have become wary of guest farmers because these have become more freelance day labourers than tributary farmers. Villagers pay them cash on an occasional contract basis (*sassi*) to weed, uproot and harvest according to need. Often, seasonal immigrants do not even bother to cultivate their plots; instead, they tour the countryside in search of contracts, so it has become more difficult to pin them down to work on their ‘landlord days’ (three mornings a week).

On the whole, the ecological, economic and demographic constraints on agriculture have pushed Gambian farmers back to cereal production (Gajigo and Saine 2011). In the Soninke milieu, married women still farm groundnuts on small plots, some of which they use for cooking purposes. In the past, men were also heavily involved in groundnut cultivation, especially the household heads, who relied on the younger men's labour and that of the seasonal immigrants. But over the last three decades, men have largely abandoned cash crops and concentrated on farming millet and maize to refill the household granaries.

Despite this concerted effort, however, earning a living on farms has become a strenuous enterprise in the Upper River. In the early 1990s, Seibert and Sidibe (1992: 52) found that deficient production was already a chronic problem in the Upper River Region: in 1991, only six out of seventy-five informants in their survey sample declared themselves to be self-sufficient. In 2006/7, I collected socioeconomic data on twenty households (about 11 per cent of the village total) selected randomly from each social status group (nobles, casted artisans, slave descendants).²² Though the sample was too limited for precise statistical analysis, my interviews confirmed Sieber and Sidibe's findings and served to corroborate widespread views among villagers about their economic problems. Only three of the twenty households in the sample farmed enough food crops to last the year. In all other households, grains finished before the following rainy season or lasted until the harvest only when store-bought rice was added on a daily basis throughout the year. Households would offset subsistence deficiencies through off-farm incomes, mainly through migrant remittances. All but one household had at least one migrant abroad or in Serekunda.

The Rise of International Labour Migration

Upper River peasants have responded to the ecological and economic woes of the past four decades by further intensifying and diversifying migration both in and outside of Africa. While the rural economy has been declining, international emigration has become a consolidated livelihood strategy in Sabi's households. My small-scale survey carried out in 2006/7 reveals that an average of one man in three aged 16 to 55 in a Sabi household was either abroad or in Serekunda – a conservative estimate considering that several men, and their sons, from the surveyed households have over time established autonomous family nuclei elsewhere in the diaspora and are thus no longer counted as members. Rough as it may be, this figure compares well with statistics from other Soninke milieus in the upper Senegal River valley, where over the

Table 1.1 Major Migrant Destinations in Sabi, 2006/7

Destination	n. Migrants	Per cent
Europe & America	30	58
<i>Europe</i>	24	46
<i>United States</i>	6	12
West & Central Africa	22	42
<i>Serekunda area</i>	12	23
<i>Angola</i>	5	9.5
<i>Rest of West and Central Africa</i>	5	9.5
Total	52	100

past three decades between 30 and 50 per cent of the male population have emigrated. In the Upper Senegal, France has been the top destination since the 1960s, with peaks of nearly three quarters of the male migrants choosing the European country (Kane and Lericollais 1975: 177; Weigel 1982: 24; Findley and Sow 1998: 78–81, 106–9; Jónsson 2007: 8). In the Gambia valley, where France has been less popular a destination, migration flows have been, as shown, more geographically diversified; nevertheless, since the late 1970s, labour migration to Western countries has no doubt acquired further significance, to the detriment of West and Central African destinations. Of the fifty-two male migrant householders whose destination was provided by the respondents of my household survey, more than half were in Europe or the U.S. (see Table 1.1).

In the late 1970s, migrants already sensed that it was not wise to ‘put all the eggs in one basket’, as a former diamond dealer phrased it. In Sierra Leone, diamond deposits had become scarcer and more expensive to exploit, while merchant capital came to dominate the artisanal mining sector (Zack-Williams 1995). Likewise, the supply of art objects was also becoming scarce and Western demand fell (Steiner 1994: 7). Traders thus ventured into other market niches, switching from export- to import-oriented businesses. As African markets were increasingly flooded by Asian products in the 1980s, a new commercial fervour directed West African traders eastward: electronic goods (in Dubai and Hong Kong), clothing, shoes, hardware (e.g., tiles) and kitchenware (in China, especially Guangzhou), furniture and building materials (especially in Jakarta).

Import business has continued to grow. Political instability in the 1990s dealt a serious blow to the classic destinations in Africa, especially in diamond-rich countries. Civil strife in Liberia (1989–1996) and Sierra Leone (1991–2002) put an end to diamond ventures for a great many migrants. In 1997, the political situation in Zaire (now the Democratic

Republic of Congo) deteriorated, forcing several migrants to leave the country. Angola has remained the main diamond frontier since then, although the Lunda regions have been highly insecure, first because of civil war and later as a result of the repeated expulsions of strangers (Bredeloup 2007: 122). Thus, many migrants stay in Luanda, Angola's capital city, a thriving commercial hub fuelled by the country's petrodollars. On a par with Banjul-Serekunda, other cities in Central Africa (Kinshasa, Pointe Noire) and in the ECOWAS area (Cotonou, Lomé) have promoted commercial policies, thus attracting traders (Igue and Soule 1992; Whitehouse 2012b).

Although the fervour around trade migration has not entirely evaporated, the news of commercial opportunities in West and Central Africa does not trigger the travel rush they did in the old days, with the exception of Angola. Continental migrations have certainly slowed down since the 1970s, whereas labour migration to Europe and America has concurrently gained momentum. Since the early pioneers established the first bases, waged work in Western countries has become a major alternative to the erratic diamond, art and other trades. Some established traders advised and sponsored their sons and younger brothers to go to Europe or the U.S. and search for a regular salary instead of joining their enterprise. Spain, France, the U.S. and Germany have been the most popular destinations for the Soninke. Migration to the West has attracted a much wider population than expert travellers like the Soninke: economic and environmental woes in the rural and, increasingly, the urban economy have induced many households to invest in international migration. A number of Gambians have acquired degrees and work as skilled labourers or professionals, especially in the United States, but due to their low levels of formal secular education, the Soninke mainly occupy unskilled positions in the West. Agricultural work in Catalonia has continued, though migrants have mostly shifted to less seasonal occupations, on construction sites and in factories and the service sector. The retrenchment of the European economy following the 2008 financial crisis, especially in southern countries like Spain, have partially redirected migrants to commercial routes, with Angola and Central Africa once again being among the top destinations. Notwithstanding this ongoing trend of diversification, during my visit in 2012, the ambition to go to Europe was still robust among Sabi men.

Although scholars have identified a growing feminization of migration flows in the region (C.-O. Ba 2003; A. Ba 2008),²³ long-distance travel remains highly gendered in the Upper River. In Sabi, unmarried women migrating abroad on their own are rare. Women have usually followed their husbands, once these become established abroad and if they wish

their family to live with them. Nevertheless, women married to a migrant remain in Sabi at least as frequently as they travel to their husband's new residence. This does not mean that women are not active in other circuits of mobility, in particular rural–urban ones. Furthermore, once reunited with their husbands, women have typically been engaged in petty trade in West and Central Africa and salaried work in the West. Although men are not always willing to talk about migrant women as generators of income, it is clear that in some cases women's remittances play a role in household budgets and in financing the emigration of their younger brothers and sons. The pull of emigration among women is, in any case, nowhere near that among men. Younger men are certainly more inclined to leave for greener pastures than older men, but as migrants nowadays usually stay abroad until they retire from work or at least until their sons are old enough to migrate and remit money in their stead, there is no clear age limit for travel. Whilst they are able to work, men consider travelling as a possible livelihood option, and indeed the majority of mature and elderly men now resident in Sabi have spent some time away from the village at one point in their lives.

Barriers to International Emigration

Much as emigration is an accepted stage in a man's life, over the last three decades having an opportunity to travel has become, if not an exception, then enormously difficult. Unfortunately we lack precise quantitative data on past international emigration in Sabi and the Upper River to make meaningful comparisons with the current trends. Nevertheless, the fact that above-mentioned rates of international migration in Soninke communities in the Upper River and the Upper Senegal seem to have remained stable since the 1980s despite the growing appeal of travel among Soninke men, suggests that impediments to international emigration have partly kept the volume of international migrants from further expanding (see also Jónsson 2007). Throughout the world, though most notably in rich countries, requirements for immigration have become stricter. For the current generations of would-be travellers in Sabi and along the Gambia valley, the entry visa has assumed almost iconic status as a gateway to well-being and life chances, as well as a source of concern and frustration (Gaibazzi 2014). As the gulf between the aspiration to travel and the actual possibility of doing so has come to constitute a central element in the bifurcation of mobility and immobility, in this section I will provide an overview of the emergence of the barriers to international travel, focusing mainly on legal/political impediments, whilst also discussing other economic and social liabilities.

Spain, the most popular destination for the Soninke until the late 2000s, is an apt case in point for understanding the evolution of the international politics of cross-border mobility. Although Spain imposed an entry visa for most sub-Saharan African citizens in 1985, there was unanimous agreement among the migrants I talked to that travelling to the country remained relatively straightforward until the early 2000s. A widespread strategy to reach the Iberian peninsula has been to obtain a short-term visa and then overstay it and, while working without a permit, try to regularize one's situation through one of the periodic regularization schemes implemented by the Spanish government. The consolidation of the Schengen area in the 1990s has, however, forced Spain to adopt stricter immigration policies (Calavita 2005). Under the Schengen regime, entry requirements have been tightened at the expense of non-OECD citizens, in particular young, male and unskilled ones from low-income countries, whom consular agents target as high-risk potential illegal immigrants (Zampagni 2011).

As one of the main gatekeepers of the southern frontier of the European Union, Spain has actively participated in Europe's war against illegal migration, *de facto* contributing to the externalization of immigration controls to North and West Africa (Ferrer-Gallardo 2008). In response to legal barriers, in the 1990s, North and West Africans had brokered undocumented routes via the sea across the Strait of Gibraltar. Spain proceeded to militarize the Strait and install high-tech systems to intercept boats of migrants, pushing departure points further to the south, to southern Morocco first, then to Mauritania and Senegal, reaching the Gambia in 2006. Forced to take ever-greater risks to reach Europe, thousands of West Africans have embarked on the long journey to the Canary Islands, and the result has been a heavy death toll (Tall 2008: 47–50; Willems 2008). Both on its own initiative and through Frontex (the EU border management agency), Spain brokered joint patrols, intelligence operations against trafficking networks and readmission agreements with source countries, thereby drastically reducing the number of arrivals down to a few thousands in 2009 from more than thirty-three thousand in 2006 (Frontex 2009).

In addition to leading the concerted effort for border security off the coast of West Africa, Spain has been active in the EU's move towards a management approach to migration flows (Kabbanji 2013). Over the last ten years, the EU has mainstreamed the migration question in its policies and aid programmes for Africa (Gabielli 2007). In late 2006, Spain and the Gambia signed a bilateral agreement to cooperate on migration management. Visiting Banjul in March 2009, the Spanish Deputy Prime Minister María Teresa Fernández de la Vega reiterated that 'We have agreed that it is necessary to work towards a regularization of the

migratory flows, but we must also make efforts in the prevention of illegal immigration and in the fight against the [traffickers'] networks'.²⁴ In line with this twofold objective, new funds were issued to continue joint coastal patrolling and to provide fuel and equipment to the Gambian navy, and budgeted €840,000 for the construction of three skills centres in the Gambia specializing in construction, plumbing, renewable energy and electricity. This followed previous agreements on repatriation and aid.²⁵ In Senegal, skills training schemes were also linked to a 'mobility partnership' for sending the beneficiaries to work in Spain on a temporary visa (Ministère de la Jeunesse et l'Emploi des Jeunes 2007).

Agricultural development projects have also been part and parcel of the EU migration management initiative. In 2006, Senegal launched the REVA plan (*Retour Vers l'Agriculture*) as a response to undocumented emigration, and later received financial backing from Spain (Martínez Bermejo and Rivero Rodríguez 2008; Willems 2008: 290). Other projects have been smaller-scale and mostly funded through international and local NGOs. In 2011, for instance, the European Commission supported, via the Gambia Emergency Agricultural Production Project, the association/campaign Operation No Back Way to Europe, an initiative of the Gambian government that sought to curb illegal migration and provide youths with alternatives, especially in the agricultural sector (Janko 2012). Although migration has by now been picked out as a resource for development, these projects fundamentally respond to the well-worn logic of 'keeping people in their place' in the development sector (Bakewell 2008), and point to a mounting concern about food security and production among international organizations and donors. Doubts have nevertheless been raised regarding the effectiveness of such (cosmetic) measures to stem the exodus from the West African countryside (Cross 2013: ch. 8).

In any case, policies aimed at improving rural permanence have had no impact on Sabi, at either the practical or the ideological level. Although the Gambia has devised its own discourse on agriculture and migration (discussed in Chapter 2), the country has been relatively marginal, compared to its neighbours, in the geo-politics of migration governance and aid. Moreover, whereas in Senegal emigration has long been addressed as a development issue, this discourse has only recently been taken up by organizations working in the Gambia. As for skills training and microfinance, I am not aware of any Sabinke participating in such programmes, even though young men in Sabi are generally positive about learning a profession. In the first place, the Gambia's youth policy and, consequently, skills training programmes run by the state, set the age limit for the category of 'youth' at thirty (Government of The Gambia 1998), while in Sabi the search for potential opportunities, including emigration,

is something that goes on well beyond that limit. More importantly, such programmes require the completion of grade nine schooling, which most Sabi men lack.

In the meantime, the Soninke have responded to restrictive policies by, once again, diversifying their routes and activities. Contrary to what policymakers might expect, boat migration did not trigger a rush among the long-travelled Soninke. They have found other safer and more canny ways of obtaining travel documents – legal or counterfeited – for North America and Europe (cf. also de Haas 2008b: 1308–9). Because only the British and American Embassies issue visas in the Gambia, young men often go to other West African capital cities to look for a route (*kille*). They take advantage of the extensive migrant networks in the region and the hospitality of a fellow villager or a well-known landlord, who will often provide contacts with visa brokers too. Gambians do not need a visa for ECOWAS countries.

Of course, young men also travel through West Africa, including Serekunda, for business reasons. Compared to the golden age of trade migration, however, import commerce is much more capital intensive and stratified. The lower positions in the market and the retail stores are crowded, and not only by migrants: increasingly the unemployed autochthons revert to the booming ‘informal’ economy, the trans-border and transnational trade, to cope with the neoliberal retrenchment of the public sector and the economy as a whole (Meagher 2003: 61; Bertonecello and Bredeloup 2004: 66; Beuving 2004). The availability of start-up credit is thus a major hurdle to trade emigration. Although a number of youths still go and try to do business from scratch in other parts of West Africa, many others would not move without ensuring that they have secure contacts at their destination from whom they could obtain money to invest in business.

Finally, the capacity to migrate internationally has been unevenly distributed in Sabi society. Prominent families historically involved in trade and with wide-ranging kinship connections in Sabi and throughout the Upper River have continued to be at the forefront of more recent migration developments. Lower-status people, and in particular the descendants of slaves, have suffered from what I elsewhere called a ‘rank effect’; namely, lower rates of emigration caused by a relative marginalization in economic and social terms (Gaibazzi 2012b). Having said that, in continuity with the earlier period of farming-trading (recall Musa Jabu Konte’s story), lower-status people have eagerly taken advantage of networks and opportunities brokered by higher-status villagers. Trade and work abroad have often transformed the fortunes of individuals in unexpected ways, moreover causing as many differences within families as between

them. As some villagers like to remark, some former slaves are wealthier today than their former masters. It is therefore extremely difficult to map migration patterns onto social hierarchies in any simple way.

Diasporization, Transnationality and Urban Homes

So far I have suggested that the decline of the rural economy, the surge of international migration and its restrained access have created a gap between previously symbiotic migrant and sedentary livelihoods. A further element of disruption has been the increasing diasporization of Sabi. Although diasporas are not a new phenomenon – Sabi Xase in Bundu was a node of a wider trading diaspora – the extent to which expatriate village communities have developed over the last half century is remarkable. Countries of destination are today farther away, while transport, albeit faster than in the past, is costly. Business investments and salaried work require continual presence abroad and, as settlement in the place of immigration becomes more permanent, travellers might even bring over their wife (or wives) and children. On the other hand, migrants are not cut off from their home village; diasporization has gone hand in hand with the proliferation of social connections which, whilst underscoring the gap between home and away, simultaneously help bridging it. Migration in Sabi is in this sense transnational or translocal (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994: 7). To fully comprehend the emergence of a relational field of (im)mobility in Sabi, it is therefore necessary to further describe diasporic and transnational dynamics. As my focus is on ‘sitting’, I will show how Sabi has become a node or mooring of the different flows originating from its satellites, but also how it competes with alternative moorings such as the Serekunda area, which is no longer solely a diasporic place but also a new, urban home.

The early 1990s marked a watershed in the human geography of the Soninke diaspora. Until then, among all destinations, Sierra Leone was a second home to many Gambian Soninke. As migrants spent more time in the diamond areas, some of their wives began to circulate between the Upper River and Sefadu, Kenema or Bo, and more rarely, Freetown. Some migrants married local women. Some of the children attended school and learnt the diamond trade from their fathers. In Sabi, some villagers sent their children to study in Sierra Leone’s Islamic schools or colleges, thanks to relatives abroad, though the opposite flow was always much greater. When in 1991 civil war broke out, the dream of a second home brutally disappeared. In December of the following year, more than two thousand Gambians were evacuated from Sefadu as the fighting approached the area

(Bredeloup 1999: 184), excluding those who had already left or stayed on. Entire households returned, either to Serekunda or to Sabi, and many Sierra Leonean refugees were also hosted in the Gambia. In the meantime, Spain was quickly emerging as the leading destination for the new generation of migrants. In 1991, when people were close to fleeing Sierra Leone en masse, Spain regularized the status of illegal aliens. Gambians holding a permit in the Province of Gerona went from 778 to 1,968 that year (Kaplan 1998: 101). Fifteen years later the Gambian presence had risen to 7,603 in the province of Gerona alone, and another 4,590 were in the province of Barcelona. With slightly more than 16,000 (regular) expatriates, Gambians constituted in the mid 2000s the third largest immigrant minority from Sub-Saharan Africa (after Senegal and Nigeria) in Spain, and the largest in Catalonia, a remarkable statistic for such a small country as the Gambia (Secretaría General de Inmigración y Emigración 2007). In 1992/3, Adriana Kaplan conducted a survey in the area around Salt (a town near Gerona) and found that 47 per cent of the Gambian migrants identified themselves as Soninke, 34 per cent as Mandinka, and 17 per cent as Fula (Kaplan 1998: 87). Farjas Bonet's (2002: 336ff) study of Gambians in Olot, Banyoles and Salt estimated that there were decidedly higher proportions of Soninke in 1998/9. This reflects in part the demographic distribution in the Upper River where many migrants come from, but also the fact that the Soninke arrived early in Catalonia and quickly deployed their networks to facilitate new arrivals.

Village membership has played a decisive role in the development of Soninke communities abroad and in the creation of transnational relations (Timera 1996: 54; cf. also Manchuelle 1997: 123–28). Spain again provides a case in point. Unlike in France, in Catalonia migrants have not lived in the *foyers des travailleurs*, the (in)famous migrants' hostels in which Soninke migrants from the Upper Senegal adopted the blueprint of the village (hierarchical) society to organize communal life (Timera 1996). Nevertheless, both Kaplan (1998) and Farjas Bonet (2002) show that chain migration and family reunions created significant clusters of migrants from the same Gambian villages. For instance, Mataró, the capital of the district of Maresme, has been a popular destination for the Sabinko. In 1983, under the leadership of Sabinke Juju Sumbunu, Gambian migrants founded the Associació Club Jama Kafo, and six years later Sumbunu led Sabi villagers alone to form the Associació Cultural Sabusire, which gathers subscriptions and donations from Sabinko across Spain.²⁶ Supported by the Mataró City Council, since 1989 the Associació Cultural Sabusire has been working to develop the health centre near the border post in Sabi (Ajuntament de Mataró 2003, 2004). Meanwhile, a plethora of Sabi hometown associations in other countries

have worked on different projects either individually or in a partnership; to mention some of the main ones: a small dam to retain water in the swamp (Sabinko in France), the Lower Basic School (Sweden), subsidized rice for low-income villagers (the U.S.) and solar panels to power the water tower (all associations).

Far from only changing the built environment in Sabi, however, migrants' remittances have also concerned the social one. Soninke speakers often compare travelling to schooling, for, by seeing the world out there, travellers acquire knowledge (*tuwaaxu*) and awareness (*wulliye*). The signs of new knowledge are perhaps most evident in the growing and thriving number of *sunmanko* or *sunnadunko* (people of the *Sunna*), believers who abide by the Islamic texts and the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed (Sunna) as a form of orthodoxy (Timera 1996; Rialland 1998; Timera 2001b). The literature refers to this as Islamic reformism, a heterogeneous movement and discourse inspired by Middle Eastern Sunni currents (Loimeier 2003; Janson 2013). Reformist Islam is hardly a coherent set of doctrines or group of adherents; what seems to be its unifying feature is a critique of maraboutism, which reformists condemned as an unlawful innovation (*bid'a*) because of the esoteric interpretations the marabouts give of Islam (see Soares 2005: 9–10).²⁷ Since the 1960s, migrants have become familiar with reformist ideas in the Congos – an early cradle of Islamic renovation (Manchuelle 1997: 176; Rialland 1998: 79–80; Whitehouse 2012b: 102) – and in other parts of West Africa, especially in Sierra Leone.²⁸ They have gone back to their communities and spread the novelties. They have begun to pray with their hands folded across their chest and to wear plain caftans in Middle Eastern style instead of West African grand, colourful robes. In the early 1990s, a returnee from Sierra Leone led a group of *Sunna* sympathizers in the construction of a second Friday mosque in Sabi, which is not far from the central mosque (see Figure 1.1). Some villagers turned up their noses at the innovators, perceiving them as introducing a 'new religion' and diverging from 'our fathers' path', but all in all the two mosques have coexisted in a rather cordial manner, particularly when compared to other villages.²⁹

Whether individually or collectively, whether to maintain the status quo or to transform it, travellers have, through their investments, acknowledged the village as the home of the diaspora. The emergence of Banjul and Serekunda as second homes is, however, diverting attention and economic flows away from Sabi. In line with the rates of urbanization in other West African countries, the metropolitan area in Serekunda (Kanifing Municipal Council) has grown significantly in the postcolonial period (N'jie 1995). Rising property prices and the lively commercial environment have attracted investments from abroad. Rather than in cattle

and jewels as in the past, today's travellers secure their savings by buying plots of land and building houses along the Atlantic coast. Alongside landed property, international migrants have invested in the tourist industry, commercial enterprises, money transfers, the construction sector and even industrial production. In Sabi, fertilizers and tractor ploughing are often paid for through remittances, and a couple of migrants have also shipped tractors precisely for hiring. But in general migrants have shunned agricultural investments, something that has contributed to breaking the complementary relation between travelling and farming.

The houses built by travellers in Serekunda also clearly indicate the making of a second home for the international diaspora. Although many properties are rented out, many others are constructed with a view to a future return. Even before they return to the Gambia, migrants might relocate their own domestic units to the city. From the 1960s onwards, returnees from other parts of West Africa have indeed settled and invested in Serekunda, bringing their families over and bringing up their children there. In the early 2000s, Upper River Soninke residents in Serekunda numbered roughly ten thousand, about 10 per cent of the total Soninke population in the Gambia, and a small but wealthy and highly visible minority in the urban melting pot. Apart from distinguishing themselves by their considerable economic achievements, Soninke urbanites have made an effort to construct a sense of community. The most articulate example of this attempt is the umbrella ethnic association *Sunpo do Xati* (which means 'navel and milk', a bodily metaphor for kinship relations and unity). *Sunpo do Xati* was founded in Basse in the early 1980s, but has effectively developed in Serekunda since the late 1980s, and the urban branch is by far the most active and resourceful one.³⁰ The association, which is led by prominent Soninke businessmen, has sought to strengthen relations among urban Soninke and to provide a setting where children born in the city can speak Soninke and learn the customs. The Soninke are culturally marginal in Serekunda, and children quickly pick up Wolof and Mandinka in the streets, while Soninke may still sound like an exotic language to their companions even after many years of neighbourly friendship. What is significant about *Sunpo do Xati* is that it can be read as an attempt to forge an urban, and 'modern', way of being Soninke. As we shall see, this is not necessarily in contrast with cherishing rural origins and connections; nevertheless, the fact that the association has attempted to solve the problem of sociocultural reproduction in situ (instead of sending the children to the village, for example – see Chapter 2), reveals that they have felt that the Soninke presence in Serekunda is mature and permanent enough to think about settling down and creating a second home in the Gambia.



Figure 1.6 Building the Urban Generation: Imam Malick Institute during the Annual Meeting, 2008

Striving to tackle cultural loss in second-generation urban settlers led to the construction in 2000 of the Imam Malick Islamic Institute, which also serves as the headquarters of the association (Figure 1.6). The institute provides an Anglo-Arabic school of the *madrassa* type and a Quranic boarding school where children memorize the Quran.³¹ Although some of the children and teachers (*ustadh*) are not Soninke, the educational policy is explicitly ethnically inflected. Soninke is the official language in the school and alphabetization and language classes in Soninke are held during the summer break. Sunpo do Xati has not espoused a specific religious doctrine, but is unmistakably oriented by reformist ideas, which have enjoyed even greater currency in the urban Soninke-speaking milieu than in the villages. Most members and teachers expressly wear Middle Eastern caftans (the men) and the *hijab* is compulsory for the schoolgirls. The head teachers, whose fathers are wealthy traders, have been trained in Middle Eastern Islamic universities.

The Traveller, the ‘Sitter’ and the Urban ‘Sitter’

To sum up, a multi-stranded, transnational social field connects Sabi to its expatriates. However, the changes in the geography of livelihoods, the

resulting drive towards diasporization and the concomitant limitations on mobility across borders have shaped this field in such a way that mobile and immobile segments of Sabi society are more clearly distinct than in the past. Whereas Sabi used to be an important economic node that powered commercial mobility and encouraged migrants to reinvest in agriculture, since the mid twentieth century the nexus between sedentary and migrant livelihoods has undergone significant transformation. The decline of the rural economy, that is, of agriculture as well as regional trade, has moved the centres of economic accumulation and investment elsewhere. Sabi has remained the centre of the diaspora, attracting migrants' money, but it is also one that, as will become clear in the course of the ethnography, mainly fulfils a function of sociocultural reproduction. No longer do migrants use their savings primarily to generate agricultural surplus; rather, remittances serve to supplement meagre harvests, to improve the living standards of left-behind relatives and to enhance the reputation of the investors. The transnational orientation of the migrants is reflected in the built environments of Sabi, which at the same time reveal the outward orientation of the villagers, and, implicitly, their dependence on resources generated away from the village. For almost any need or want in their daily lives, resident villagers 'reckon with the outside' (Elliot 2012), or *tunŋa* (exile) as the migratory elsewhere is known in the Soninke language.

The quantitative increase in outmigration has led to a qualitative shift in ways of thinking *and* practising (im)mobility. Many Sabinko identify the beginning of *terende* (travelling) proper with the surge of migration to Sierra Leone, while some others with the surge of labour migration to Europe and America starting from the 1980s. Not that they disregard the history of long-distance travel in their community, but the idea that migrating to earn a living and support the household is almost a permanent, life-long activity has only recently become well-entrenched. The farmer-trader has all but disappeared. Many of Sabi's young men continue to be farmer-traders, or rather, farmer-seasonal labour migrants, who go to the Atlantic coast to find work during the dry season (Chapter 3). But the two seasonal activities do not yield a virtuous cycle of accumulation and investment between farming and trade/labour migration as they did in earlier times. Since the time of the farmer-trader, this hyphen between the farmer and the trader has progressively stretched, until the two have become almost separate entities, or rather, separate stages in a man's life-course. Men might and often do become migrants and stayers at different times in their lives, but the consolidation of a documentary regime of international migration, together with the rising costs of emigration, have made straddling between mobile and immobile livelihoods more difficult. As a consequence, both the figure of the 'traveller' (*teraana*) and

that of the ‘sitter’ (*taxaana*) or stayer have become more clearly defined and consolidated. Put differently, the progressive socio-spatial bifurcation of positions and trajectories in the field of (im)mobility over the last half century has made room for an analysis of what it means and implies for a young man to undertake a career as a ‘sitter’, and this will be the main concern and focus of the rest of the book.

A third figure, or position, should be added to the field of (im)mobility, namely ‘those who sit in Serekunda’, as the villagers say. Although Serekunda is a migrant destination, its capacity to attract economic *and* social investments from the diaspora will be a recurring theme in the chapters that follow, as an element that polarizes the dynamics of ‘sitting’ in profound ways. As will be shown, men who stay in Sabi must reckon not only with the elsewhere but with an emerging second home, and the growing aspiration of their migrant kith and kin to prepare the ground to ‘sit’ in the city once they return from abroad.

Notes

1. These settlements of Guinean skilled artisans and workers are quite common. In fact, there are many of them in Gambissara, where Sabi mechanics come from.
2. When applied to patronyms (*jaamu*), the suffix *kunda* means ‘the household/compound of’ (e.g. Sillakunda = the compound of the Silla). *Kunda* also applies to names of places (‘the settlement of’).
3. Gambia National Archives (GNA), CSO 18/1, *The Records of Fuludu East District of the Upper River Province together with a short history*, 1933.
4. The main Soninke villages on the south bank are: Gambissara, Numuyell, Kumbija, Allunhare, Sudowol, Garawol, Koina. Source: Dae Sumbunu, Gambissara, 21 January 2008; Mamadu Dukure, village chief of Gambissara, 1975, cited by Treffgarne (1978: 399). Some sources – Bakoyo Suso, Serekunda, 16 October 2006; see also Bellagamba (2004: 387) – state that the Soninke swore allegiance to Musa Molo upon settlement. A few Soninke settled in Fuladu in the reign (1867–81) of Alfa Molo, Musa’s father.
5. The Dabo in Wuli, an influential *juula* family (Wright 1977), seem to have played a major role in hosting and acting as intermediaries, such as with the Bajaxa (Badjakunda) and the Sise (Garawol) (Keba Suso, 5 December 2006, Serekunda).
6. The main sources of Sabi history are: Damude Mangasi, 19 December 2006; Kau X. Kaba, 14 December 2006; Kumba Silla, 13 November and 16 December 2007; Suleyman Sumbunu, 14 December 2007 (all these narratives were collected in Sabi).
7. Jakhanke settlers have been participating in matrimonial and religious exchanges with the villagers, but as Sabi is thought to be a Soninke community, they have been marginal in sociopolitical life (see also Chapter 6).
8. Sixu Konte, 14 January 2008, Sabi.
9. Musa Mariko, 31 January 2008, Sabi.

10. Fode Kaira, 25 February 2008, Sabi; Kumba Silla, 17 January 2008, Sabi.
11. GNA NGR1/16, D.P. Gamble's file 'The Serahuli', Letter No. UP/1/46 from Agricultural Officer, Georgetown, to S.A.O., 1946.
12. Fode Kaira, 25 February 2008, Sabi; Kumba Silla, 17 January 2008, Sabi.
13. Sixu Konte, 21 October 2007 and 14 January 2008, Sabi.
14. Numuyell-born Kalilu Kamara is credited as being the first pioneer (Bunja Kamara, 17 January 2008, Numuyell; Suleyman B. Sumbunu, 29 December 2007, Sabi).
15. Abdullahi Sane, 16 October 2006, Serekunda.
16. Suleyman Sumbunu, 11 February 2007, Sabi.
17. GNA ARP 31/9-11, Annual Report of the Upper River, 1949, 1951, 1956–7.
18. Cotton is a labour-intensive crop and requires a good deal of fertilizer and of chemical treatment. Moreover, in contrast to groundnuts, cotton is not an edible plant.
19. YWAM has built a compound in Sabi, and its personnel do not usually exceed 6–7 at a time, including international volunteers. Its missionary work has been limited, but the organization has financed a number of small-scale projects, in particular installing hand-pumps, improving nutritional standards, and providing schooling and health care.
20. 'Gambia: After a Long, Tough Year Peanut Farmers Get Paid', *IRIN News*, 26 October 2006.
21. See Swindell (1982) for changing patterns of mobility and settlement, and van Dokkum (1992: table 1.2) for statistics. In Basse, there is a growing population of Guinean labour and commercial migrants.
22. The survey was a questionnaire-based inquiry, with additional open-ended questions on the history of the family, designed to gather data on the incidence of international and internal migration on the economy of the household (defined as *ka* or *folake* – see Chapter 5). The majority of respondents were household heads.
23. Marie Rodet (2009) has shown that such a trend was found in the early colonial period as well.
24. Cited in: 'España Refuerza la Ayuda a Gambia en Educación y en la Lucha Contra la Inmigración Ilegal', *El País*, 10 March 2010, my translation.
25. In 2007, Spain announced that it would make €10 million available to finance skills-training programmes and microcredit facilities in Senegal, Mali, Gambia and Mauritania, with Gambia being scheduled to receive 1 million (Junquera 2007).
26. Conversation with Juju Sumbunu, July 2007, Mataro. *Kafo* is a Mandinka word meaning 'association', and is commonly used in the Gambia; *jama* means 'people' or 'crowd' in Mandinka. *Sabusire* is a Soninke word meaning 'good fortune' or 'good omen'.
27. Marabout work is usually protective (against malignity, envy, stabbing, perforation by bullets, etc.), but it can also be used to cause harm (through charms, scaring, provoking physical harm or illness, etc.) or to bring economic gain. The nature of its esoteric practice is diverse: supplicatory prayers and formulae, amulets and other charms. Amulets or charms (*juju*, *baaxe*) are usually pieces of Arabic writing encased in leather or metal that are worn as arm bracelets, belts or rings; there are also liquid potions and powders for mixing with bathing water (*naasi*) (see also Dilley 2004; Soares 2005; Hamès 2007).
28. Interview with Mohamed Silla, Imam of Kanifing, 15 February 2008, Serekunda. The linkage between Islamic education, trade and migration has deep roots in Sierra Leonean history (Jalloh and Skinner 1997).
29. The most tense case was the construction of the Gambissara mosque, where the feud between 'traditionalists' and 'reformists' became a national political case in the mid

- 1990s. The reformists were first supported by the government and then ordered to destroy their mosque (Darboe 2007: 150–51). On a dispute in Numuyell, see Janson (2011).
30. Sunpo do Xati has branches and supporters abroad, but the Serekunda branch acts as the headquarters and all decision making takes place here (Musa Drame, secretary of Sunpo do Xati, November 2006, Serekunda).
 31. Over time, the schools have expanded, and now there are two branches, one in Kanifing and the other near Banjul.