

Chapter 6

## CIVIC LEADERS?

### Reviving the Age Groups, Recapturing Permanence



While young men may seek recognition as ‘sitters’ by becoming established as household authorities, they also do so by collectively assuming responsibilities for the entire village community. Around the mid 2000s, young men stepped up their participation in the public life of Sabi. Acting under the aegis of the Sabi Youth Committee (SYC), a number of vocal young men promoted initiatives aimed at what they claimed to be the progress of the village and its people. They raised funds for small-scale public works, drafted new regulations in order to reinforce the civic sense of the villagers and committed themselves to reforming certain ceremonial etiquettes they deemed costly, ostentatious and ultimately generative of inequalities. This burst of civic activism did not last long, and it was not explicitly aimed at mobility issues. This chapter will nevertheless show that young men’s attempt to ‘sit’ or become established as civil and political agents in their community can only be understood in the light of translocal mobility and relations as well as the degrading conditions of rural permanence.

The SYC was built on the legacy of the age groups. In the past, these were a key social institution of the Mande world as well as one way in which the colonial and postcolonial state was grafted onto local structures of power. This kind of ‘decentralized despotism’ (Mamdani 1996), so widespread in the African postcolony, contributed not only to the reproduction of ‘tradition’, but also to its erosion and loss of legitimacy (for a Gambian example, see Bellagamba 2004). As these forms of government

have undergone significant transformation in the neoliberal era, West African citizens have found new avenues of participation in public life, often in ways that break with the past and project them towards the future (Piot 2010). Chapter 4 focused on some of these emerging horizons of self-fashioning. In contrast, this chapter features the ongoing relevance and adaptability of ‘traditional’ agrarian institutions, both as a means of social control and as vehicles of emancipation. By revitalizing the age group, SYC members agreed to operate within the gerontocratic order holding sway in Sabi. In this way, the young men responded to the onus of making their stay in the village purposeful by executing, as juniors, public works and activities. The spirit and organizational form of age groupings had, however, changed and adapted to the discourses of the Gambian government and transnational non-governmental actors, including migrants’ associations, which envisioned youth as a more autonomous category of (implicitly sedentary) citizens. Through the SYC, young men thus sought to overcome their subordinate status as juniors and to become protagonists of the civic reforms in Sabi.

What interests me in this chapter is how long-standing forms of civic participation and organization serve not only to position sedentary young men in a translocal sociopolitical field but also to recapture the meaning of rural permanence. Young men’s collective action refracts, like a prism, widespread concerns with social presence and regeneration in Sabi. By trying to reform ritual exchanges and other principles of communal life, young men clearly addressed the norms and mores of both social cohesion and male respectability. As acquiring wealth by emigrating had become increasingly unviable, the SYC can be viewed as an attempt to bring expectations of propriety and maturity in line with the new reality. What is more, in the very act of seeking change by consolidating ‘tradition’ (Barber 2007: 26), young men identified Sabi and its agrarian order as a repository of continual renovation and progress in a wider world of possibilities. In other words, they sought to determine what they can be and do as ‘sitters’ in the village by, as it were, ‘sitting’ Sabi anew, in the sense of reconstituting the foundations of agrarian sociality.

### The *Sappanu*

As I was strolling by the central mosque one night in late October 2012, a drowsy voice called out to me. Baidi, a man in his sixties, slowly emerged on the *kora*, the seating platform, struggling with his back pain to sit upright. When I sat down next to him, he scanned the deserted space between the mosque and the chief’s compound, chuckled and then

signed to me with his chin, inviting me to look too. Once upon a time, Baidi began to narrate, on nights with a full moon, like this, every youth was out and about in the main square. Groups of youths would sit on this or that side of the square, chatting and playing games. At times the *komo* or the *nyaxamalo* would bring along their drums and urge people to display their dancing skills. Girls would also come to the square and mix freely with the boys; nobody would dare to approach the girls for anything more than a chat, lest young men from the older *sappanu* (age groups system) shamed them in public and gave them a lesson they would not easily forget. Everybody was there together, and everybody knew their own place in the square. On that night in late October, however, the square was empty, the full moon rendering the desolate area both more peaceful and more spectrally grey than usual. The time of the *sappanu* was gone, and the large congregations of youth had given way to smaller and more intimate *ghettos* scattered across a now much more spread-out village. The girls stayed in their compounds or took advantage of the safety granted by the moonlight to stroll up and down their street with a few female friends.

Elders like Baidi as well as younger adult men recall the time of the *sappanu* as a time of orderly, rigid relations between people of different ages, but also one of moral security and communal sociability. Whereas the term *sappa* refers to any voluntary association often recruiting and operating at the village community level, by *sappanu*, in the plural, Soninke speakers refer uniquely to a system of age groups which for men was until the mid 1980s systemic, compulsory and self-perpetuating. At any given time there were four age groups in the village: Jarra, Bakeli, Jiharu and Karantaba.<sup>1</sup> These were ranked according to seniority and mainly served as a tool for both the socialization of the younger villagers and the management of the community. Decisional power was concentrated within the top *sappa*, while the younger men were charged with the more labour-intensive activities, such as cleaning ditches, clearing the village squares and the cemeteries, controlling bush fires and so on. Relations between and within the *sappanu* were reportedly disciplinarian in nature, especially during the formal meetings. Each *sappa* had a leader (*yimanke*) selected from the *hoore* class and advised by *nyaxamala* and *kome* age mates. On the other hand, the *sappanu* was an institution cutting across affiliations of status and family, and thus it provided, within limits, a space for people to interact as peers. Participation in the age groups was compulsory and actually enforced, meaning that all initiated men would belong to a *sappa* until old age. When one or more groups of boys 'took the trousers' by going through the initiation ceremony, they would form a *sappa*, first informally and then, when ready to enter the system, they

would offer a cow and other smaller gifts to the oldest *sappa* for them to agree to disband and pass the name on to the new entry.

Age groups were an important component of village society in Mande groups. In a review paper, Peter Weil (1972) built on his fieldwork among the Mandinka in Wuli, an Upper River district, to describe general features of what he called 'the Mande age grade'. In contrast to the Soninke, the Mandinka organized three grades (*kafolu*) only, distinguishing men essentially along generational lines between unmarried men, married men and elders. Diversity notwithstanding, Weil showed that the structural simplicity and the capacity for mobilization of the age grade provided the village with an effective tool for socialization and management. Although one may sense in Weil's review the influences of structural-functional analyses of the age grades in East Africa (Eisenstadt 1956), his general points are not without a foundation. In a more recent study in southern Mali, Tamba Doumbia (2001: 17, 67–68) has shown that the age groups played an important role in the socialization of youths because they placed emphasis on the spirit of egalitarianism and unity, cross-cutting affiliations of kin and status, as well as mutual assistance and conflict resolution. For Doumbia, some of these characteristics are adapted to classes of pupils in state schools. Indeed, the 'social persistence and cultural flexibility' of age groups was also stressed by Weil (1972), who in the 1960s observed how state agents and political parties such as the PPP exploited the potentials of the age groups for organizing communal works as well as for mobilizing support during election time.

Not all types of age groupings were (and are) subsumed within an overarching structure. Writing about Jafanu (Mali) in the 1960s, Pollet and Winter (1971: 261–65) described the *iire* as an age-based association involved in collective activities as well as assisting its members especially during rites of passage. Although the term *iire* does not resemble any Soninke term in use in Sabi, its characteristics largely overlap with the *lappe*, a group of age mates often set apart by no more than two or three years, but also open to younger or older contemporaries. Internally organized as a *sappa*, the *lappe* is by contrast a voluntary association; nevertheless, the majority of men who have grown up in Sabi (including expatriates) belong to a *lappe*. When a man marries, for instance, his *lappe* will provide labour for the bride service and perform several other tasks, such as issuing the *manyon-tole*, an elaborate pole, at the couple's house. The *lappe* may also contribute to public works in the village.

In contrast to the *lappe*, the *sappanu*, as an overarching, inclusive system, has withered. Evidently nostalgic, Baidi's memories of a square swarming with people in the moonlight are an implicit commentary on the key changes and events that eventually fractured it as a unified space

of socialization. The *sappanu* collapsed in the mid 1980s, a time where cultural and political shifts, including outmigration, had changed village life in profound ways. Male initiation rituals had become obsolete as circumcision was progressively carried out in the early months or years of a man's life in accordance with the Islamic etiquette. Amara (37), one of the last men who attended the ceremony, recalled that at that time children would come back from Sierra Leone, where migrants were exposed to *Sunna* Islam, already circumcised at an early age. Young men from Sierra Leone or from Serekunda would also visit the village sporting shiny clothes, playing music cassettes and sharing experiences of urban youth culture learned in the *vous* or *ghettos* in Serekunda.

A point of no return in the history of age groups was when some *hoore* families began to withdraw their sons from the *sappanu*. Among the men, a vivid memory of the *sappanu* is the harshness of punishments and tasks imposed on boys by the older young men. Though they did not disdain the disciplinary environment of bush life, parents became more wary of such forms of bullying. Since some members of the chiefly Silla championed the withdrawal, the villagers took this as an implicit statement that participation was no longer mandatory and thus began to follow suit. Besides concerns about socialization, there were probably other reasons behind this shift, which many elders were somehow unwilling to discuss, perhaps to avoid reviving unhealed frictions within the village nobility. It appears that party politics, often seen as a divisive factor in the community, played a role in the breakup of the age groups system. In 1984, Nene Fatumata Silla 'sat' on the chiefly stool and took a more overt stance in favour of the ruling party, apparently toying with the idea of using the junior age groups as youth wings of the PPP. However, by the late 1980s youths and Gambians in general had grown resentful towards the long- and self-serving politicians of the Jawara regime and their local allies (Bellagamba 2008: 252). Moreover, international migration to the West was still relatively accessible and West African countries were still popular at that time. Youths were probably more attracted by the idea of leaving the village than of joining age groups. By the 1990s, Sabi youth participation in age-based associations had reached a low point, marking the end of the *sappanu* as known in the past.

### Youth, in the Active Voice

The end of the *sappanu* was not the end of age groupings, let alone of the *sappa* as a blueprint of associational life. Not only has the *lappe* survived till the present, but attempts were made in the mid 1990s and in the early

2000s to mobilize young men in a *sappa*, eventually resulting in the Sabi Youth Committee. The disappearance of a system of compulsory recruitment did not in fact invalidate other reasons for forming voluntary youth associations. Ironically, precisely at a time when the capacity of age-related institutions to aggregate and socialize was declining, the discourse on youth, civic participation and associational life became an important aspect of national politics and transnational governance. In order to understand the reasons that led to the emergence of the SYC, therefore, some contextual factors must be outlined.

Age relations in Sabi underwent a peculiar phase during the 1990s. After the breakup of the *sappanu*, communal works were carried out by ad hoc groups of men, usually formed on the basis of neighbourhoods, to which each household had to contribute one unit. At the same time, after the 1994 coup, age politics became a prominent aspect of the new regime, further delineating the idea of an autonomous youth in local societies. Led by a thirty-year-old man of humble origins, first the military junta and then the elected civilian APRC government envisioned youths as the protagonists of a new dawn after the dark ages of long-serving politicians who had short-sightedly squandered the country's resources, leaving none for the future generations (Bellagamba 2008: 255). Youth mobilization, under the banner of the 22nd July Movement, was aimed not only at ousting old politicians and eradicating their allies in local constituencies, but also at recasting the prospects of young people whose hopes of becoming respectable members of their society were more and more centred on leaving the country (see Bellagamba 2008). The movement appropriated symbols of renovation such as the *set setal* – collective cleaning operations of public places – which in Senegal had been pioneered in the late 1980s by civil society organizations to counteract urban degradation (Diouf 2002). Through 'cleaning the nation', youth paraded (and still parade) in the streets of the cities and villages, expressing responsible citizenship and spectacular, almost ritualistic support for the new regime. Emboldened, supporters of the movement kindled disputes in some localities and openly confronted local dignitaries and leaders affiliated with the fallen regime. No longer were the youth merely a workforce at the disposal of the elders: they now commanded respect and were determined to take over decision making.

In Sabi, generational tensions never escalated to an alarming degree. Although Sabi's dignitaries were supportive of the PPP, reliance on business and travel allowed them a significant degree of autonomy from state patronage. In the same year as the coup, a less politicized chief replaced the late Nene Fatumata, and the village swore allegiance to the new regime without much ado. Some of the young Sabinko participated in the

movement and brought back ideas about how young men could acquire respectability and demonstrate civic maturity in the village. Some attempted to form a group, but internal dynamics and, allegedly, mismanagement of funds led to its failure.

In 1999, the 22nd July Movement was outlawed and the regime began to work towards reconciliation and patronage with local dignitaries, pragmatically ensuring governance in the rural areas (see Bellagamba and Gaibazzi 2008). When in April 2000 the army opened fire on a student protest, leaving twelve youths dead on the ground, it became apparent that the time for radical change was over. The political space for youth activism has since been reduced and channelled towards much more controlled and institutionalized forms. In addition, the wane of spontaneous youth mobilization, the government's attack on youth attitudes and in particular the persistence of youth disenfranchisement seem to have undermined young men's confidence in the APRC regime and the idea of staying for the sake of the nation. Although Soninke youths need little external prompting to go back to the land and to *hustle* in their own country, few aspire to solve their employment problems by linking up with party politicians.

Even if its impact on livelihoods remains limited, as a frame for civic engagement the government's discourse on youth resonates with the agenda of transnational organizations working in Africa. As we saw in the case of agriculture, Gambians are not new to campaigns on self-help, which have found new vigour in the wake of Europe's fight against illegal immigration. Similarly, while concerns about the participation of youth in public life have a longer history, since the 1990s donors and international non-governmental organizations have increasingly targeted African children and youth as both a vulnerable category to be empowered and a harbinger of democratization and human rights (De Waal and Argenti 2002; Englund 2006; Durham 2007). In the Gambia, the result has been a mushrooming of youth organizations that seek to link up with foreign philanthropists and organizations. Having in general too poor a Western education to be able to liaise with international interlocutors, however, Soninke youths have belatedly reaped the benefits of these opportunities. This does not mean that the Soninke have been impermeable to the discourse on youth empowerment. Between 2010 and 2012, two Soninke-based associations – the Serahulleh Youth Development Organization (SYDO) and the Dynamic Association – finally became visible at the national level and were even invited to some international summits in neighbouring countries. Both of these Soninke youth associations are based in Serekunda and have adopted 'modern' models of internal organization and public relations strategies.

Development policies have also sustained ‘traditional’ associations in the rural areas. In the 1990s, as international and national NGOs flooded the African continent to allegedly deliver aid directly to communities, having grassroots organizations as partners in development became an established praxis. In the Gambia, the *sappa*, better known by the Mandinka equivalent term *kafo*, served as a ready-made template for organizing beneficiaries into interest groups, whether around agricultural development, women’s rights, youth empowerment or other agendas (Sall 2004: 605–7). Sabi did not experience much interaction with international NGOs, except for the local branch of Youth With A Mission (YWAM), an international Christian youth movement. In Sabi, most networks with donors and development organizations were actually established by hometown associations in the diaspora, one of the main sources identified by donors to tap migrant remittances for local development (Mercer, Page and Evans 2008). Soninke hometown associations, a type of *sappa* with a long history (Manchuelle 1997: 123–28), are known in France as an early example of co-development, being partnerships between immigrant associations and municipalities geared to financing development projects in the immigrants’ home communities (Timera 1996: 65–73; Daum 1998). Among the most important projects in Sabi in the course of the 2000s were the construction of a clinic built by the Sabi *sappa* in Spain with the financial support of the Council of Mataró (Catalonia), and a *madrasa* entirely self-funded by the Sabi *sappa* in Serekunda.

In addition to reproducing forms of associational life, migrant transnationalism has reinforced the call for civic engagement. Writing about the Eastern Soninke in France, Timera (1996: 71–73) has argued that participation in hometown associations has been a way for migrants to express patriotism and a commitment to developing the homeland. Likewise, migrants’ initiatives are welcomed and commended in Sabi,<sup>2</sup> and hopes of further development projects are often entrusted to expatriate villagers connected to state institutions and civil society in the country of immigration.

In 2002, the Gambian government adapted to the decentralization agenda of donors by passing the Local Government Act. In the 1970s, the Jawara regime had instituted the Village Development Committees (VDC) as agencies for promoting local initiatives and as linchpins for the local government and development organizations. Whether decentralization has resulted in devolution of state functions or in extending the state’s control over the rural areas is an open question (Davis, Hulme and Woodhouse 1994). Be that as it may, the 2002 Act revitalized the VDC in Sabi, and with it the typical organizational patterns of village



associations. In the late 2000s, the VDC basically consisted of a council of adult and senior men chaired by a member of the chiefly lineage. It coordinated other groups, such as the women's group, the football committee and, as we shall see, the Sabi Youth Committee.

Finally, some faith-based organizations working in the Gambia have generally reinforced the idea of youth as active civic agents. Marloes Janson (2013) has shown that the Gambian branch of the Tablighi Jama'at has recruited young people in particular, for it promotes reformist Islam as an avenue to modernity and respectability. The Soninke umbrella association Sunpo do Xati has also been strongly influenced by reformist ideas. As noted, however, whereas the *Sunna* is popular among Soninke youths, it is not necessarily patterned along age or generational lines, and it has not coalesced into an association. Ironically, the only faith-based organization in Sabi has been YWAM, whose missionary work in the village has been very low-profile and mainly articulated through their small-scale development agenda. Notwithstanding the limited impact of Islamic organizations on Sabi's associational life, it should be said that religion is an important aspect of village life and thus implicitly pervades the notions of well-being and development. For example, the *Sunna* has consolidated the value of formal education and knowledge as a form of progress.

It is difficult to predict whether the grafting of large governance organizations onto village-based forms of organization will strengthen or weaken them, or both. In the past, the PPP regime mobilized age groups for electoral purposes; it both reproduced local power structures and contributed to the decline of the *sappanu*. In spite of its calling on youth, the APRC regime was thus unable to mobilize Sabi young men within the same structures. It nonetheless entrenched understandings of youth as an autonomous, empowered category of political actors. While migration and the prospect of migration have possibly undermined the participation of youth at the village level, migrant initiatives framed within an international developmental agenda have come with the message that villagers can and should do something to help themselves, and that the *sappa* form is a suitable way to do so. It is at the nexus of these different discourses of empowerment, civic commitment and voluntary association that young men's involvement in local affairs resurged in the course of the 2000s.

### The Sabi Youth Committee

If anyone in Sabi embodies the ideal of the committed, village-based youth, it is Musa 'Degume' Silla, the eldest son of the current chief of

Sabi and the leader of the Sabi Youth Committee. In his youth, Degume travelled throughout West Africa before returning to Sabi and sitting in his *ghetto*. Tired of wasting his time with the usual ‘lies and jokes’, as he put it, he began to consider cultivating a horticultural garden. He cleared some land by the swamp, and little by little he planted bananas, mangoes, papaya and vegetables. YWAM supported him and advised him throughout, as they too experimented with banana gardening in the village. Degume’s brothers in Spain provided him with financial support to buy water pumps and fencing materials, but the rest came from his own sweat and effort. Degume, who was in his early forties in the late 2000s, spent most of the day in what he ironically called ‘my house’. In 2008, only his two older sons (in their early teens) and a Guinean guest worker staying at his compound helped him out. Although by 2012 some villagers had followed in his footsteps and started horticultural projects, Degume’s remained the most developed and productive plantation in Sabi.

In addition to pioneering ways of *hustling* on the land, Degume tried to spread his conviction that young men should pull their socks up and help the village move forward. In the early 2000s, he began to discuss with some age mates the idea of revitalizing the *sappa* of the village youth. The initiative gathered consensus, and a number of young men became involved and contributed to the development of the group. Having the titles and family credentials to head it, Degume assumed leadership and promoted initiatives and external relations.

The institutionalization of Sabi youth as the Sabi Youth Committee did not occur, however, until 2002, when the APRC government passed the Local Government Act. There is evidence that the creation of the SYC was influenced by the VDC and local APRC representatives who possibly thought of resorting to the well-worn strategy of manipulating age groups so as to mobilize youths in support of government initiatives. This would seem to confirm Chauveau’s (2005: 22–23) point that the emergence of youth organizations in rural West Africa reveals less the absence of the state and more a pragmatic form of governance negotiated between the government and the rural authorities. On the other hand, though it has flirted with party politics, the SYC has been neither a client nor a wing of any party, and during my time in Sabi it perceived its involvement with party politics as a temporary and instrumental activity only. In 2006, the SYC campaigned for President Jammeh during the presidential elections, yet only four months later it voiced its dissatisfaction with the unpopular Basse MP, whom the APRC had chosen again to stand for the parliamentary elections. Most SYC members rallied behind the opposition candidate (UDP party), though they maintained cordial relations with the local sections of the APRC.

Albeit defunct, the *sappanu* resurfaced in the SYC in more ways than one. Tellingly, the SYC was informally known as *yuttin sappu* (youth *sappu*), a hybrid expression that aptly illustrates the mixture of old and new in its formation. Elements of continuity were also evident in the relationship with other village institutions. During SYC meetings and ordinary conversations, young men referred to the VDC as *xirisu* (seniors, elders), while in VDC meetings the SYC was spoken of as *lenminu* (children, juniors). The types of communal activities carried out by the SYC also fitted into the schemes of the age groups system. The SYC was mainly responsible for communal work (*sappan golle*) and the implementation of village policies (Figure 6.1). For example, young men were responsible for cleaning the streets and the public areas in preparation for festivals, and they built small stables where stray donkeys and horses found wandering in the village at night were kept whilst the owner was identified and



**Figure 6.1 Building Civic Responsibility: Restoring the Fence of a Stable for Horses and Donkeys Caught Wandering in the Village at Night, 2008**

fined. At the organizational level, the SYC clearly adopted the template of a typical *sappa*. Leadership was, as mentioned, accorded to the village hierarchy, and probably because of this, *kome* members did not seem to be as numerous as those of other classes. Decision making within the SYC was nevertheless diffused. *Nyaxamalo* and *komo* were often vocal participants in discussions and some of them were appointed as neighbourhood leaders.

In contrast with the age groups system, subscription to the SYC was voluntary. The register of the committee listed around 65–70 members in 2008, including myself and a member of YWAM. Openness to foreigners notwithstanding, ethnicity appeared to be a critical factor for participation: at the time of the *sappanu* as well as now, youths from the small Jakhanke neighbourhood in Sabi were absent from the SYC. The SYC included young men aged between twenty and forty-five, and there was no internal subdivision by age or marital status; the majority of members were around their thirties or above. Even though participation was on a voluntary basis, once they had subscribed, young men had to attend meetings, and unless they obtained permission ahead of time, they were fined for their absence. During the weekly meetings, a long session was usually devoted to checking the register, counting those present, administering fines to absentees who had not asked for leave, and collecting fines accumulated by members.<sup>3</sup> The money was subsequently placed in a bank account and used to finance the group's activities.

The reasons for joining the SYC were varied. Some young members were pressurized by their elder brothers to join the group. One member related to the chiefly lineage by maternal kin told me that Degume persuaded him to join up by appealing to the fact that, as a descendant of past leaders, he should actively serve the community. In contrast, a number of youths joined because their peers were already members. Others became involved simply out of curiosity. Regardless of the way they signed up for the SYC, however, a common refrain by the members was that they continued to participate because they were committed to 'doing something to bring our village forward'.

Most young men agreed that, since its revival, the SYC had boosted youth activism in the village. My argument is that the youth association was successful in recruiting members because it provided a useful institution to negotiate a role for the youth in village society under changing sociopolitical conditions and the continuing importance of seniority. Youth mobilization in the 1990s did not significantly affect the power base of the elders in Sabi, though it loosened their tutelage vis-à-vis the youths. Although during the 2000s the political space for youth was shrinking at the national level, at the local level the discourse on the

patriotic involvement of young people in self-development remained an important frame of reference. Its message was that collective action could be organized within the bounds of socially sanctioned institutions such as the *sappa*, while acquiring wider significance. For instance, in 2007/8 the SYC took to organizing the *set setal* on the 'clean the nation day' scheduled by the government. Participation in the *set setal* suggests that youths appropriated the call for patriotic participation in their localities and legitimated their activities within the larger national sphere, to some extent bypassing the intermediation of the elders.

The incentive for civic engagement through village associations was clearly also related to migrant transnationalism. Young adults admired the ethos of active involvement and self-reliance expressed by migrants' development initiatives, while migrants on a visit to Sabi often praised the dynamism of the SYC. Some SYC members saw their objective as 'playing our part' in a joint venture with the village migrants. This is important: it suggests that youths envisaged participation in the SYC as a collective form of complementarity between stayers and travellers. Cooperation with hometown associations in the diaspora was, however, infrequent; village elders usually managed the contacts with the diaspora. SYC members were nonetheless open to other foreign supporters and NGOs. YWAM saw the SYC as a potential partner, and cooperated with it on a project about soil erosion and the related problem of flooding caused by heavy rains. In 2008, the SYC and YWAM staff planted vetiver grass on the hillsides to slow down the water flowing into the village, and also produced a video in Soninke to raise awareness about the soil erosion project.

Other than migrant transnationalism, there was no direct correlation between mobility dynamics and participation in the SYC. Whereas in neighbouring countries the initiatives around undocumented boat migration to Europe created a space for civil society initiatives (Bouilly 2008), in the Gambia such initiatives were few and had limited impact on civil society. On no occasion did I hear the SYC presenting a political discourse on migration policies or migration-related issues like boat migration and repatriation. The SYC was by no means seen as an alternative to emigration. Some active members still looked for a route or planned on moving to Serekunda. If at all, travelling was said to contribute an added value to the SYC. For example, some travelled members of the SYC were seen as having wisdom and awareness (*wulliye*) which they could use for the common good. Despite the pull of emigration, however, I would still argue that the different strands of the discourse on self-reliance and on active citizenship articulated at the local, national and transnational level constituted a frame<sup>4</sup> in which youths who stayed behind could

assume a positive role in society as mature and responsible men. By participating in the SYC, young men seemed to suggest that, whilst in Sabi, they could play an active role as stayers instead of either waiting for an opportunity to travel or leaving the initiative to the migrants and other external agents. As an SYC member once put it: ‘Before you sit down all day, you can do something for your village ... We [the SYC] want to bring our village forward’.

### Quiet Ceremonies: Legal Innovation and Socio-moral Reforms

In the autumn of 2007, the SYC was busy implementing a series of new regulations for the village. This initiative had been introduced by Hamme Silla, the VDC chairman, but the SYC immediately became involved and began to amend the regulations and propose new ones. The regulations were mainly designed to ban the ‘party element’ at ceremonies and encourage villagers to organize plain ceremonies and keep ritual steps to a minimum. The excessive display of gifts was to be curtailed, while the customary distribution of money to *nyaxamalo* and *komo* was explicitly forbidden, except for those indispensable tasks, such as slaughtering the sacrificial ram and cooking, which had to be compensated (Figure 6.2).



Figure 6.2 Waiting for Redistribution: Women Attending a Naming Ceremony, where Coins and Gifts Will Be Handed Out, 2007

Accordingly, praise-singers were prevented from performing and asking for money. All subjects who were not directly related to the ceremony holders by kin or by other close ties should abstain from attending, so as to avoid putting pressure on the organizer to honour hospitality with gifts of money and food. The regulations also concerned the DJ-set parties sponsored by adolescents' *ghettos*. They had to be either moved to the outskirts of the village, where they would not disturb people, or abolished altogether. A complex system of fines was drawn up.

These regulations were admittedly influenced by Soninke urbanites and Islamic revivalism. Hamme Silla told me he was inspired by similar policies concerning ceremonies in Serekunda, where the association Sunpu do Xati had long tried to raise awareness about ritual proceedings and circulated a protocol of conduct, which gathered some consensus among urban Soninke households. The *sunnanko* condemn lavish ceremonies and noisy dances and music during naming ceremonies and weddings. They sanction more sober ceremonies to preserve the religious meaning of the ritual (cf. Janson 2005). In Sabi, people did not go as far as replacing praise-singers with religious preachers, as I saw happening on some occasions in Serekunda; yet the religious underpinning of the civic reforms was important for some youths in the SYC. The popularity of *Sunna* among Sabi youths played a role in catalysing interest around the legislation; moreover, as young men were at times challenged, they would resort to religious arguments to legitimize their policies. 'This is what the Prophet did', I often heard young men saying during discussions with other villagers.

On the other hand, the religious agenda was not at the forefront, not least because of the religious heterogeneity of the SYC and the politically sensitive topic of religion in the village. The 'anti-party' rules were framed rather towards resolving social inequality and unproductive squandering of resources. The rationale went approximately as follows. People are not equal in terms of wealth. The man who cannot afford to spend large sums on naming ceremonies or weddings would be forced either to contract debts or to beg from more affluent relatives. Crowds of participants demanding to be accommodated, fed and honoured with gifts have to be satisfied; otherwise the organizer will be subjected to the shame of not having granted hospitality to his guests. Money is thus dissipated for the sake of ostentation and renown. After the celebrations are over the man is penniless again, and he will struggle to provide even a basic subsistence for his wife and children.

Societal debates about ritual expenditure have a long history in the region. In Senegal, attempts by the state to regulate marriage transactions and public debates about the morality of lavish ceremonies stretch back to at least the colonial period (Buggenhagen 2012: 127–30). Similarly,

some Sabi elders recalled that in the 1950s there were concerns about the monetization and rising costs of marriages and naming ceremonies.<sup>5</sup> There has always been a tension between on the one hand engaging in ceremonial pomp and conspicuous consumption as a way to vie for prestige, and on the other showing sobriety and humility as moral virtues. By fuelling ceremonies with money, migrants have contributed to making this tension more acute, inflating both ritual expenses and expectations of the participants towards redistribution. Much as the rising costs of ceremonies were linked to the economic power of migrants, however, the new regulations were not against the latter. On the contrary, migrants were seen as potential partners in the reform because of their purported awareness and openness to change. Once, as I was accompanying a delegation of the SYC heading to a wedding held by a migrant, one of the men said that he trusted that since the groom was a traveller, he would easily understand the righteousness of the regulations.

The discourse on equality and squandering struck a chord with young men coping with skyrocketing ceremonial expenses, and certainly contributed to boosting participation in the SYC. In 2007/8, bridewealth (*manyon nabure*) ranged between 4,500 and 7,000 Dalasi (c. €130–200), a price that was considered relatively high. In addition, the groom was supposed to give money, clothes, jewellery, a radio set and other accessories to his bride as presents and as contributions to her trousseau (*manyon bagasi*), and to provide the bed and the furniture for the nuptial house (see also Sommerfelt 2013: 62–63). Though expenditures varied greatly, I estimated the minimal cost of a marriage without pomp to be around 20,000 Dalasi (c. €550–600), assuming that the groom already had a nuptial house in his compound. Today, young men are expected to find the money for their wedding and naming ceremonies of their children, but few manage to raise such an amount on their own. Unless they have a remunerative activity, young men who stay in Sabi depend on other relatives to finance the ceremonial proceedings. Receiving help is not necessarily a problem. Indeed, as villagers believe marriage to be a vital event for the family, men living and working abroad are under an obligation to help their younger brothers to find a wife. ‘Receiving a woman’, and thus the possibility of having children, nevertheless leaves the young man in debt and places him under a moral obligation to respect the authority of his older brothers with regard to other decisions too.

By mid October, the anti-party regulations were finalized. On a Friday, the village chief announced the regulations to an audience of adult men congregating in the mosque square after prayer. The regulations were spelled out and the population was warned that breaches would result in a fine. In the end, the SYC had to negotiate with the VDC for a



considerable reduction of the fines from 2,000 to 500 Dalasi, an amount that many young men deemed insufficient as a deterrent, though one that might be easier to charge (the SYC was administering the fines). After the announcement, the SYC members began to organize themselves in small patrols to preside over the ceremonies being held in the village. Some stood at the gates of the compounds, watching people going in and out and warning them that handouts of cash (*sanke*) were no longer allowed. Others ensured that the materials of the dowry would not be put on display in the courtyard of the compound.

The regulations provoked some discontent in the village. When SYC members began to patrol ceremonies, threatening to fine those who entered with the intention of begging for money, some men and women began to voice their complaints and accuse the SYC and the VDC of doing away with tradition (*laada*). The regulations were gender-biased, for they hardly addressed the interests of women in the ceremonies. For women, ritual proceedings are important public events, in which exchanges of money, textiles and other gifts play a crucial role in negotiating prestige.<sup>6</sup> In addition, although the neighbours and caste people with a direct customary relationship with the family holding the ceremony were allowed to claim their shares, numerous other acquaintances, *nyaxamalo* and *komo* were excluded.

In this way, legal innovation brought to the surface all the contradictions of the SYC and the VDC in political terms. By undermining customary exchanges, in the eyes of some *nyaxamalo* and *komo* these committees showed themselves to be a 'hoore business' seeking to defend the corporate interests of the nobles (the typical patrons of large ceremonies now facing economic dire straits) while preserving their privileges in village politics. The SYC remained rather elusive in response to people's grumblings, which never escalated to overt protest, and they enlisted sympathizers across the status hierarchy and among women. For most youths, the regulations had nothing to do with status: they were meant to restore equality and thus social cohesion, on the one hand; and to ensure conditions for self-reliance and hard work, rather than begging and dependency, on the other.

Given the socio-moral nature of life rituals, attempts to change ritual proceedings are necessarily attempts to reshape the very production of societal norms. In fact, in addition to rituals, the SYC targeted specific practices deemed 'not civilized', as many SYC members put it, by proposing or passing regulations in domains as diverse as rape and the beating of wives; stray donkeys and horses entering compounds at night; cars and motorbikes speeding through town; and smoking in the streets in the dry season (causing accidental fires).

In the weeks that followed, the SYC proposed new reforms and carried out patrols with fervour. It aspired to become the main arbiter and watchman of the village, and even tried to ensure that those committing certain criminal offences should be tried and fined by the SYC before being reported to the police. I see this as a claim to maturity: the SYC were attempting to provide the village with an institution above the parties, implementing regulations rigorously, and avoiding family and status biases.<sup>7</sup> The insistence on the 'rule of law' can be read as a way to partly circumscribe the power of the elders in the mediation of conflicts and community affairs. By forcefully trying to be impartial, the SYC imposed fines on people of any status, including some leading members of the noble elite. It also took issue with the VDC, accusing it of being overly ambivalent about implementation and thus risking a reversion to nepotism when family affiliations overlapped with VDC membership.

In March 2008, a case of sexual abuse occurred in the village. The SYC wanted to take over from the usual inter- and intra-family diplomacy. They wanted to make a public case out of it and administer an exemplary punishment to the culprit, a young man from the village. However, the elders of the respective families did not wait. The father of the victim, a young married woman, reported the harasser to the police, and the family of the accused subsequently settled the matter through private transactions, allegedly with the tacit approval of some village leaders. Bypassed, the SYC pulled out of the regulations as a sign of protest, polemically leaving to the village elders and the VDC the impossible task of enforcement without the indispensable personnel provided by the youth *sappa*.

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The 2008 standoff, to which the village was unable to react, marked the beginning of a progressive decline of youth activism in Sabi. Over the following months, the SYC managed to channel young men's attention towards the reconstruction of a small bridge next to the central mosque, a self-financed project which the committee completed by 2008. But over the period that followed, attendance and participation seem to have waned. When I returned to the village four years later, Degume Silla was leading a much-downsized version of the *yuttin sappa*, and was directing his unstinting commitment to village development towards an incipient association of horticultural gardeners who had followed in his footsteps. Many youths had pulled out or simply lost touch with the SYC, and the village returned to ad hoc strategies for public works. The VDC was equally dormant. In 2012, the clearing of the central square in view of the Tobaski (i.e., the *Eid al Adha* Muslim festival) celebrations was carried out by a group of men recruited on a one-compound-one-man basis. Some

*lappe*, which by contrast were thriving as usual, offered to help by weeding the two cemeteries.

From what I gathered, internal and circumstantial factors had contributed to the decline of the youth committee. The enthusiasm that had characterized the period of legal innovation had evaporated, along with the hope of effecting real change. If back in 2008 some young men already manifested unease at the frequent and long meetings spent discussing sanctions and unimportant issues, now many more saw few reasons to attend. From weekly meetings, the committee moved to fortnightly ones, before ceasing them altogether. Moreover, some of the most charismatic and vocal members of the *sappa* had moved to the city to work and do business. As Degume could now count only on his close collaborators, some complained that decision making had become more centralized.

In neighbouring villages, the youth committee had been reportedly more long-lasting and successful. There, young men were equally at the forefront of civic and socio-moral reform. In the region, experiments in legal innovation are not new (Snyder 1978), and, more generally, civic participation at the local level seems to be an important way for young people to express active citizenship (e.g., Diouf 2002; Baller 2007). On the wings of the Arab Spring, in 2012, Senegalese youths took to the streets to protest against constitutional changes made by President Abdoulaye Wade, who was seeking re-election, and they contributed to a regime change. The momentum of youth activism in the region had little resonance in the Gambia, however, where the regime's grip on the youth and the rest of the population has continued to be firm. In truth, Sabi had its own small revolution during the 2012 National Assembly elections, in which Muhammad Mangasi, a 36-year-old man from Sabi, schooled in Senegal and founder of SYDO in Serekunda, won the parliamentary seat in the Basse district. Mangasi ran as an independent candidate after falling out with the APRC national headquarters, which disregarded popular antipathies towards the then MP Sellu Bah and chose the latter as party's candidate for the third time in a row.

This courageous protest vote and affirmation of the people's voice,<sup>8</sup> together with the fact that the new deputy was a young man, did not trigger another Sabi Spring of youth activism. This is possibly less a sign that 'traditional' institutions are no longer able to mobilize youths for political aims and more a symptom that party politics are not necessarily the main driver of civic participation in Sabi. Certainly, the shrinking space for political opportunities for Gambian youths after the 1990s motivated Sabi youth to opt for reform rather than for open confrontation (cf. Dea 2008). The well-worn institution of age groups served as a suitable

template for organizing young men in recognisable patterns within the bounds of local structures of authority, which Sabi hometown associations and international organizations moreover reinforced as grassroots models for civic participation and development. However, what motivated them to mobilize was not solely a wish to link up with state patronage or, for that matter, to become visible to the transnational market of development and human rights projects. While the SYC participated in political rallies and actively responded to the government's endorsement of self-help, and partly as a result of this, its actions bespoke an attempt to carve spaces of autonomous government partly outside of the state. The telos of modernization, in particular development and the idealized state (namely, citizenship and the impartiality of law) paradoxically provided a language for reforming customary authority and grassroots participation, and for creating partly autonomous regulatory institutions at the village level.<sup>9</sup>

My argument in this chapter has been that what moved young men to act were primarily their deep-seated concerns about social presence and permanence in Sabi. Albeit short-lived, the SYC belonged to a longer history of subordination and emancipation of youth in rural society (cf. Last 2005). As the age groups system faded in the 1980s, young men acquired a voice in the village, mainly by amassing wealth elsewhere and by investing it at home. Since restrictions on freedom of movement curtailed the exit option, however, young men regained their voice at home. This was framed less as an alternative to exiting, which some of its vocal members continued to practise, and more as an assertion both of young men's autonomy in decision making and of their capacity to direct change. The outcome was a youth committee seeking to position itself vis-à-vis a translocal civil society as a village-based agent, and a complementary one to the hometown associations. I do not confine 'civil society' here to its liberal-political meaning as an intermediate category between state and society; rather, I use 'civility' in the pre-Enlightenment sense as a concept that was 'equally encompassing governance and manners, state and society' (Karlstrom 1999: 116). Albeit not entirely endogenous, the agenda of civic reforms promoted by the SYC clearly revealed preoccupations with controlling the production and exchange of social values by which ideas of manhood are fashioned. The SYC did not abolish the ideal of the self-reliant, breadwinning man, but it tried to set limits to the social currency of wealth. The mundane experience of being penniless was certainly the backdrop to the notion of equality intended by the ceremonial reforms. Young men envisioned a code of respectability that was founded less on material displays and more on the higher moral ground and on civic virtues.

In their attempt to recalibrate ritual life and gendered subjectivities, the young citizens of Sabi were making a point about their capacity to produce and govern the renewal of the village by ‘sitting’. It was more than a way for young men to emerge from the social shade of the mango tree where the young ‘just sit’; weaving the threads of the committee was arguably an attempt to breathe once again some of the bygone spirit of the central square on a moonlit night. It was not so much a nostalgic return to the past as a way to recentre on the village the vital forces of regeneration that the transnational migrant economy had dispersed to other places and actors, particularly to the village migrants and migrant associations in Serekunda and abroad.

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## Notes

1. Although some of these names are possibly place names (such as Bakel, in the Upper Senegal), the elders I talked to did not know their origins and said ‘they are just names’.
2. There have also been some frictions between migrants and villagers, especially in the areas of education and infrastructure, but on the whole, migrants’ initiatives have been accepted.
3. In 2007/8, fines were: 5 Dalasi for being late, 15 Dalasi for unjustified absence, 50 Dalasi for unjustified absence on collective work days. Interestingly, absence due to travel (urban or foreign) automatically counted as an exemption.
4. The concept of frame is derived from new social movement studies and refers to an understanding of social reality together with a language to communicate and a set of strategies for action (Della Porta and Diani 1999: 69ff).
5. Esp. interview with Ba Xore Sumbunu, 12 December 2007, Sabi.
6. Buggenhagen (2012) and Sommerfelt (2013) provide a detailed description of the ritual exchanges and their significance for women in urban Senegal and rural Gambia respectively.
7. Insistence on law and order may be partly rooted in the wider political context. Some of the SYC members were using the motto ‘no compromise’, echoing the government’s ‘Operation No Compromise’, a campaign against corruption that has actually served to centralize authority. This does not mean that the SYC youths framed their

activity within that operation. Many of them were unimpressed by the politicians' projected image as anti-corruption champions.

8. The elections were boycotted by the UDP, the main opposition party. APRC candidates won all seats except five, four of which went to independent candidates, and one to the NRP. Electing an independent candidate was a courageous act because the regime often threatened to cut off disloyal constituencies from state-controlled development aid (see Bellagamba and Gaibazzi 2008).
9. As noted, rather than an anarchist project this is a form of governance in which the state is grafted onto local forms of power. However, it also reflects a profoundly ambivalent commitment to the postcolonial state, and in particular to the government and party politics. By the 1990s, the government and party politics had become regarded as a kind of necessary evil, something to show allegiance to in order to keep it at a safe distance from local matters.