

# My Elderly Friends of The Gambia

## Masculinity and Social Presence in the Later Part of Life

“It was going to be a beautiful day, but his heart was heavy [...] as head of the family with so many sons, daughters and his wife looking up to him for strength and support he must not betray his sadness. [...] He was renowned throughout the region for his warrior spirit, though warriors were now a thing of the past, and he had earned the nickname ‘Jambarr’, the brave one”  
(Ebou Dibba, *Chaff of the Wind*, 1986)<sup>1</sup>.

Though, by all criteria, The Gambia is a male-dominated and gerontocratic society (Chant & Touray 2012; Saine 2012) most Gambians acknowledge that the dominance of elderly males over women and youths has been a matter of increasing controversy for a long time. In the 1980s, the struggles of Gambian peasant women against patriarchal control over land, labour, and agricultural income became a classic case-study in gender and development, along with the intra-household conflicts that accompanied the spread of market gardening during that period (Carney & Watts 1991; Schroder 1999; Carney 2008; Kea 2010). Recently, a growing concern for gender equality has stimulated discussions among Gambian intellectuals and civil society on long ranging gender issues such as polygamy, female genital mutilation, women’s access to education, women’s political positions, and the role of Islam with regard to women’s rights and emancipation (Touray 2006).

That female-centric debate has eclipsed discussion of the multiple and often contradictory experiences of Gambian men. Apart from an interest in youth masculinity (Gaibazzi 2010) and intergenerational conflicts (Bellagamba 2006, 2008a), men are still “too visible, too much part of the world, too

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1. *Chaff of the Wind*, the first novel by the Gambian writer Ebou Dibba, is set in the 1930s and narrates the migration of a rural young man to Bathurst, the capital of the colony of The Gambia.

naturalized to be studied with any ease” (White 2003: 250). This exploratory essay attempts to fill the gap by drawing on the life trajectories and the ordinary strategies of three elderly Gambian men, Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff, whom I have known for many years because of my research in the fields of social memory, colonialism and the legacy of internal slave-dealing and slave-holding along the Gambia river<sup>2</sup>.

Born in the heyday of British colonial rule, Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff lived through the period of vibrant enthusiasm and optimism at the end of colonialism, and the birth of new African nations (Cooper 2008). All three established their residence in the urban area. They all witnessed, and were directly affected by the effects of the first economic crisis of the 1970s, the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s, and the uncertainties that followed the political transitions of the 1990s. Like most African countries of that era, The Gambia underwent a military coup which offset the democratic and political equilibrium that the country had established and enjoyed since its independence in 1965.

For a while, disaffection with the previous PPP government fed the hopes of Mamadi and other members of that generation that they could reenact the political experiences and activism of their youth. But, despite the initial euphoria, their political ambitions and sense of vigour proved ephemeral. In 1996, a return to electoral democracy saw the leader of the coup becoming the President of the Second Republic of the Gambia, a position he still occupies (Hughes & Perfect 2006; Saine 2007; Bellagamba 2009). It soon became clear that the government leaders were not suited to grappling with the rigors of power. In a bid to curb dissent, meaningful political discussions and democratic participation, they resorted over the following years to the use of repression, repeated violations of human rights and the public humiliation of many respectable elders (Bellagamba 2008b).

In 1992, when I started fieldwork in The Gambia, although Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff were solidly established adult men, they were not yet considered as seniors on the social ladder. Other elderly men, who were born at the beginning of the twentieth century, were in charge socially as family heads or religious and political leaders. So the last twenty years has offered me the opportunity to witness the entrance into old age of my three elderly friends and their generation.

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2. Research in The Gambia started in 1992 in preparation for my doctoral dissertation. Since then, I have conducted fieldwork at regular intervals, the last time in 2011. In the last twelve years, research was carried out through the MEBAO (Missionne Etnologica in Bénin e Africa Occidentale), a research network on West Africa that I have directed since 2000 and which is sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This essay was planned and in part written during my 2011-2012 EURIAS Fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies of Berlin, to whom I hereby give thanks. Thanks also to my friend Sheriff Kora for his thoughtful comments and to the editors of this special issue of *Cahiers d'Études africaines* for their encouragement.

Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff belonged to the minority of rural youths who had access to colonial education in the 1940s. They attended the same school, one of the few in the rural areas, and later served the colonial and the postcolonial state. They were also among the first cohorts of transnational migrants that moved to other African countries and the United Kingdom in the late 1950s and 1960s. For a good part of their lives, all three fostered the self-image of a modern man, aware of other places and styles of life. Their generation came of age in the progressive climate of the late 1950s and 1960s, when the Gambian economy was growing steadily, and modernity was assumed to be a universal human aim which sooner or later would reach every corner of the world (Ferguson 2006: 177-178). At the time, the United African Company (UAC), one of the big European commercial enterprises operating in colonial Gambia, used to fill the newspapers of the Colony with images of young employees dressed in Western style. The titles of those stories spoke of: “men of tomorrow” (fig. 1). The expression catches the spirit that Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff tried constantly to maintain. This is what gave these men a sense of life and hope as a promise of the future: a sense which they never lost even as they saw their former dreams of progress crashing up against the failures of independent African governments that were succumbing to the burdens of political corruption and permanent economic crisis.

In what follows I illustrate my three friends’ daily struggles for social presence in the later part of their lives by using pieces of our conversations, participant observations and the recollections they shared with me on their youth and that of their fathers and grandfathers. This ethnographic exercise reveals processes also underway in other African contexts: though the care of elders is a core value of Gambian culture, when their turn for male elderliness eventually came, these friends of mine learnt that patriarchy is more a contested project and process than a condition taken for granted (Butler 1999; Perry 2005: 208). Both within and without the household, the limits of their ability to attract and redistribute resources were marked by an unspoken—though perceptible—line between, on one side, being seen as a male elder who deserved respect and attention and, on the other side, as just an old man behind whose back other people whispered: “he does not want to go”.

Drawing on a larger body of discussion on men’s self-perception and changing role in contemporary Western societies, the idea of a “crisis of masculinity” has been extended to the analysis of African contexts, starting with South Africa (Walker 2005; Ratele 2008). I will not, however, discuss the experiences of Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff in these terms. During their younger days, my three friends fully enjoyed the privileges that resulted, culturally and socially, from their dominant male positions in society. Their wives, conversely, were struggling to make ends meet, and to raise the kids to be responsible adult men and women. This male chauvinism and the imbalance of privilege were sustained under the umbrella of patience (*sabaro*)

and socially imposed restraint (*munyoo*). *Sabaro* and *munyoo* are two virtues Gambian women cultivate intensively, sensitive both to the need not to show in public their husbands' weakness and the humiliation of their true male identities.

FIG. 1. — THE GAMBIAN ECHO FOR KING & COUNTRY, CA.1960



(Gambian National Archives, Banjul, The Gambia).

Looked at this way the troubles of my elderly friends contrasted sharply with the years of their triumphal masculinity when they used their earnings, education and positions to assert their will over their wives, and to cultivate their public image of socially attractive men. Nobody could say that as they aged Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff were disrespected or not loved enough<sup>3</sup>.

3. I here draw comparative inspiration from V. DAS (2007), where she describes the last years of a Punjab man who severely mistreated his wife and the son when he was young.

However, their past actions had bred a silent resentment that gave their wives and children leverage against their attempts to assert their patriarchal authority. From the perspective of age, gender prerogatives might change over the course of a life (Miescher 2007: 253). For Gambian women, maturity is often a time of increased suffering, and when they lose the capacity to sexually attract their husbands in competition with younger spouses, they feel increasingly marginalized within the household (Touray 2006). Yet, thanks to the success of their economic activities or to financial assistance received from sympathetic grown up sons and daughters, age might bring women a late emancipation while some men go through forms of dependence they did not conceive of at earlier stages of their lives. To understand this fully we need both an account of individual lives, and of the broader processes of socio-economic and political change which are at odds with the models that shaped the socialization of the person in another historical period (Miescher & Lindsay 2003: 8). In her study of ageing in the context of the contemporary Indian diaspora, Sarah Lamb (2009: 268-269) has shown that seniority can be a time of innovation as much as youth can. In their late years, Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff learnt to cope with the fact that their hegemonic male role was giving way to a more subordinated form of masculinity, a transition of which they were acutely aware.

### Mamadi

Mamadi, who was born in the late 1920s in a commercial settlement along the river Gambia, was the son of a prominent trader. His father had a large polygamous household hosting dozens of children and dependants. Mamadi was a brilliant and motivated student who furthered his education abroad thanks to a scholarship from the colonial government. Between the early 1950s and the late 1960s, he spent several years as a student and junior scholar in the United Kingdom. His first marriage took place in the 1950s and was arranged by his mother and grandmother, following the insistence of the latter that she could not rest in peace if the grandson did not marry before her death.

That marriage never worked, and after years of irreconcilable differences, Mamadi and the lady divorced. Having failed with the modern option of monogamy that he had tried to practice as a young man, Mamadi decided to embrace his father's advice; in his own words: "If you take more than one wife, one would limit the control that the other exerts on your life." In the same year, Mamadi married two girls who were almost the same age. Then, he fostered their university education out of The Gambia so that they could establish themselves as high-profile educated women of the capital city, where Mamadi had chosen to live.

Until his retirement from the civil service, which took place in the early 1990s, Mamadi managed his role of polygamous husband by balancing the

conflicting aspirations of his two younger, dynamic wives. But after his retirement, the two women became the major breadwinners, thereby relegating Mamadi to the humbled position of a family head with a declining income. Both wives had enough resources to go to Mecca, while he performed the pilgrimage thanks to the assistance of the third wife. When that marriage broke up, Mamadi remained in the care of the second wife, who by this time had taken over all the family responsibilities apart from the bag of rice, which he provided out of his meager pension on a monthly basis, and some house maintenance done thanks to what he earned through small consultancies and what he received from children living abroad.

### Lamin

Lamin had an adventurous life, which he liked to recollect in stories of the days in which he was travelling the world, meeting a variety of people, and acquiring new skills and abilities. He was born in 1935 in a rural community on the border with Senegal. He was the only boy in his family who had access to Western education. Throughout his life literacy, his mediation abilities and his political sensibility earned him respect among his fellow villagers.

Lamin's father was a cobbler, and in the dry season he toured the villages and commercial centers along the Upper Gambia River in search of customers. During the rains, he farmed, as did the majority of men of that generation. He died relatively young, in the position of a junior member of the family. As an adolescent, Lamin, who felt restrained by village life after years of attending boarding school, ran to Bathurst, the colonial capital of The Gambia, where he found shelter in the house of a paternal uncle. This was the only senior male figure that he remembered with affection during our conversation. In Bathurst, he specialized as a nurse and worked for the Medical Services. Like Mamadi, Lamin married a girl chosen by his parents from their close family network. However, immediately after the marriage, he and his wife joined the droves of Senegambian youth who were moving in the 1950s to the diamond areas of Sierra Leone in search of economic opportunities (Bredeloup 2007: 82). From Sierra Leone, Lamin proceeded to Congo Kinshasa before finally settling in Liberia, where he got married for the second time, to a local woman of his choice. He worked for several years as a mine prospector and security guard in the interior of the country, eventually returning to The Gambia after the 1980 Samuel Doe's coup. By then, he had married for the third time, a young girl from Guinea Conakry whose father had been one of his workmates in Liberia.

In The Gambia, Lamin was employed as a mechanic by one of the big agricultural programs of the 1980s, and was able to build a compound on the outskirts of the capital city. When I first visited that compound in

2008, I found sons and daughters from his first and second marriages living there. The second wife had died during the Liberian civil war of the 1990s. The third was staying permanently in Lamin's home village. Some years before, the leadership of the extended family had fallen onto his shoulders, and he had taken over responsibility for the family compound his grandfather had originally built in the village.

Lamin had political aspirations. After his return from Liberia, he stood as an independent candidate for Member of Parliament for his village's constituency. That attempt failed. In 2008, he was politically active as a mediator between the village and the broader national arena. Practicality was the keyword of this more recent political engagement. Having considered the limited chances the opposition had of overcoming the incumbent, Lamin and his fellow villagers concluded the only remaining prudent option was to be avid supporters of the ruling party. In addition to the lady hailing from Guinea Conakry he had other two wives at this point in his life—the first one he had married in the 1950s, and another he had inherited after the death of a close relative. Lamin only maintained formal conjugal relationships with these two. He visited them occasionally and provided assistance and advice when required. It was the third wife and her children who took care of his rural investments: the compound, the family farming land and several herds of cattle. Lamin would spend long periods of time at his compound in the capital city, where he was well taken care of by his daughters, and he was free to deal with the small transactions which enabled him to provide for his large family.

### Sheriff

Like Mamadi, Sheriff served as a civil servant, first in the local government and then in the Gambian diplomatic corps. He later moved to the private sector, where until a few years ago he was the administrative manager of a prominent company. In that role, he earned a decent salary which he used generously to support his broader family network. Migration to the city had turned him into a truly urban man. He lived in a modern house in one of the residential areas of the capital city where he played host to a score of provincial children, whose education he sponsored. Like Mamadi and other educated member of that generation, he never thought of investing in his home town.

A few years ago, Sheriff lost his job, and he had no redundancy payment or pension. This lack of income brought in a new phase of his life, in which religion played a key role. Following a strategy of male recognition that is widely shared in the region, Sheriff started to work hard on building up a reputation as a pious Muslim. As observed by Donna Perry in her studies of rural Senegal, in the 1980s the reforms of the public sector and the reduction of state investment in agriculture curbed men's capacity to

draw on political patronage and state support to feed their families, while in the last two decades development programs have increasingly fostered female economic emancipation through micro-credit and agricultural initiatives. Many men have found in religion “solace” and “support” (Perry 2005) as their patriarchal role was undermined due to the increasing economic independence of women.

Sheriff followed the same path of piety. He fasted twice a week in his new life, and consistently held long nightly prayers. During the day, he would loiter with other elderly men at the front porch of a shop located in one of the urban markets. This public domain granted him the opportunity to publicly recite and to display his prayer beads, most importantly to re-establish and strengthen his public image as an old pious Muslim, steadfast in his devotion. After the military coup of 1994, this space also served as a forum where he met with other senior men to deliberate openly on the political developments of The Gambia. But those days of free deliberation were soon over, as the increasingly repressive nature of the regime killed off any grassroots political initiatives.

Politics had played an important role in the youth of Sheriff, Lamin and Mamadi, marking their transition from subjects of the colonial state to citizens of a new nation. The optimism, the spirit of independence and nationalism, and the ability to stand up for their rights, which had all been features of their youthful years in The Gambia were sadly dampened by the events of the 1994 military coup. Sheriff and Mamadi retired from any public political involvement. Only Lamin remained politically active, but in the role of supporter of the ruling party. However, in the privacy of his home, he didn't hesitate to express his disillusionment about the course of politics in the country. “I will leave them, but gradually and quietly so that they don't realize that they are losing my support”, he once confided in me dejectedly.

### Of Memories, of Models, of Generations

Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff were in that phase of life when thoughts often linger in the past. Recollections of their time as young men, which they shared with friends and relatives willing to listen, were not a nostalgic revisiting of a long-gone world of undisputed male dominance over women (Cornwall 2000: 68-69). Rather, they involved a search for models, a way to transform past experiences into a blueprint for action. This was a new development, as in other periods my three friends had been rebellious colonial youths, ready to challenge colonial domination as much as the authority of their fathers, whom they criticized for being too conservative and backward (Waller 2006).



Through echoes of conversations, of little conflicts and of daily life, fathers, uncles and other male figures emerged from the recesses of memory. Mamadi, for instance, often recalled the way his father, a wealthy man, handled his life in the difficult years of World War II when poverty was prevalent. In those days, the few who had resources had to care for those who didn't. Like any son who grew up in a polygamous family, Mamadi could clearly remember the patience and endurance of his mother regarding the privileges enjoyed by his father's other wives. During the trading season, his father would move to other trading settlements with his second wife, leaving Mamadi's mother to look after the family compound, the rice-fields and the mother-in-law. The third wife, who was much younger, never truly contributed to the daily activities of the household, a laziness that was tolerated by the husband because of her beauty. Mamadi, who had often sided with his mother initially, has in his last years developed empathy for his father: "It was difficult for him, as he was a man who could love only one woman at a time", Mamadi often recalled during our conversations. His mother was not the type of person who would acquiesce quietly: in her role of first wife, she was close to the mother-in-law, and the two women did not refrain from reproaching Mamadi's father about his responsibilities as an adult male and family head. Mamadi admired the economic independence that his father maintained until his last days. In old age, after Mamadi's mother had moved to the urban areas to live with one of her children, the father married another young woman. He kept trading, and it was from that work and from previous investments that he raised his youngest children.

In the colonial schools, Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff were groomed to be responsible male subjects of the British Empire. They had a future that was already laid out for them by the colonial officials. As adult men, they would be serving the colonial state, and as literate men living among rural folk their contribution was deemed to be crucial to the development of rural Gambia. They were expected to serve as concrete examples of the advantages of western education, and to pass on their knowledge and skills in the areas of sanitation and modern agricultural technologies. The discipline endured at boarding school was not harsher than the one they experienced at home: since childhood, my elderly friends understood that they had to contribute by their labour to the daily running of the household. They chased birds trying to steal the ripe harvest, they tended the cattle and they farmed, under the severe supervision of adult men. School holidays were not a time of rest, but were spent on family farms.

Although their fathers were often absent, the household contained many other men (uncles, adult brothers and cousins, seasonal migrants) eager to assume the duty of imbuing them with a sense of respect for the senior generations, and to train them in the right path to manhood. This included the cultivation of memories associated with the late nineteenth century warring economy, when young males proved their braveness on the battlefield,

and war provided the means to enter into male adulthood. In those days, even men who chose the more peaceful careers of trade, religious scholarship and farming had to cope with the overall political instability of the river Gambia region and the ever present risk of their village being attacked, destroyed and robbed of its riches and its women and children. The core values of adult masculinity in that epoch were ambition, moral and physical strength, trustworthiness and socio-economic autonomy. Contained in the Mandinka notion of *foroyaa*—which is commonly used as the equivalent of the English “freedom”—was a sense of sustenance, social standing and honour that asserted itself through the capacity to establish a strong independent household. This often meant severing links with the paternal home by moving to a different locality<sup>4</sup>. In time, the new household would grow as a shelter for wives, children and hosts of retainers looking for protection against war and famine. This was the much sought after, rarely achieved and perilous status of the big-man, who had the material wealth to support large networks of people, and relied on the labour provided by his social networks to produce more material wealth. “I have people under my care” is the expression in oral tradition and historical narratives alluding to the strongly established men of the late nineteenth century.

The grandfathers of Mamadi and Lamin who to this day are remembered for the households and networks they established, were descended from men like this. However, not every late nineteenth century man achieved the hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Birth and wealth restricted access to the most prestigious positions, and those who strove to emerge as the big-men of their generation had to fight both the suppressive tactics of elders and the competition of their peers. As a result, many men, like Sheriff’s grandfather who left Guinea to resettle along the river Gambia in the early colonial days, learnt to be content with more subordinate forms of male identity. They settled for the role of juniors that all young men experienced, and some continued to play even when they aged biologically. The archetype of this second-class masculinity was the slave, who had no family connections besides those of his owners and, in principle, never became the father of his own children, as the control of the latter remained in the hands of the mothers’ master. Conditions of marginality persisted over generations, as men of slave ancestry continued to be considered qualitatively different from freemen, even if they had gained their emancipation and established their own household (Bellagamba 2009; Klein 2005).

Scholars of gender in West African societies have focused on the reshaping of local notions and experiences of femaleness and maleness under colonial rule (Brown 2003; Rich 2009; Osborne 2011). Proud warriors of the

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4. Mandinka is the language most spoken along the Gambia River. *Fooroyaa* designates the status and condition of the freemen versus the slave. In principle, only freeborn men achieved the status of adult males, as the others, and slaves in particular, continued to be dependent throughout their lives.

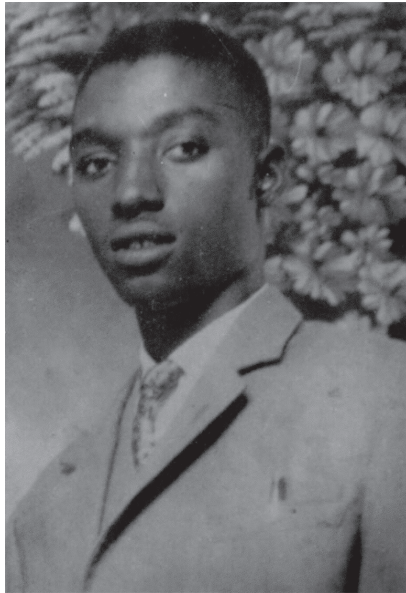
late nineteenth century put down their muskets, while the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery itself cut down the labour reserves and the social prestige of pre-colonial big-men. In the meantime, colonial armies, missionary schools and migrant labour opened up opportunities of social emancipation to men of subordinate status (Ilfie 2005; Mann 2006). In colonial conceptions, each African man should become an autonomous individual and potential household head, though always subject to the whip of the colonial state (Osborne 2011: 151). To be sure, some subjects, like chiefs, native clerks, literate Africans, ranked higher than the rest of the populace. But as a general rule, each and every native was subordinate to the political, cultural and racial superiority of white colonizers. This did not hamper the youthful aspirations of Mamadi's, Lamin's and Sheriff's fathers, who profited from the opportunities offered by the expansion of the colonial cash crop economy to farm, trade, and to assert themselves socially and economically in the first decades of the twentieth century. Memories of the violence which predated colonial rule were still fresh, and despite the loss of honour and sovereignty resulting from colonialism, the social and political order brought by the British colonizers also had its advantages.

It was in the positive economic situation of the late 1950s that the generation of Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff started to use the figure of the slave to contest the legitimacy of colonial subjugation. Raised in the shadows of their heroic grandfathers, they turned the legacy of honour, bravery, and autonomy—the core of late nineteenth century masculinity—into a resource for political mobilization. Lamin liked to recollect a phrase he used in the early 1960s while campaigning for the party that would lead the Gambia to independence: “This pen will put you down.” The pen symbolized literacy, and literacy as much as migration was the gateway to alternative ways of conceiving of life and carving out a self. In the field of sexuality, for instance, Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff had been raised conservatively. Their transition to male adulthood had been marked by circumcision, a long ceremony which consisted of at least three months of seclusion from the comforts of the home. They were placed in the company of other men, who initiated and trained them in the secrets of maleness: women and their treachery, jealousy and the risks of adultery, the ephemeral nature of love and finally the solidity of marriage, which was primarily an allegiance between families with little room for individual romantic desires. After returning home from their initiation, boys were under the increased vigilance of their mothers who worried that now their sons had officially become men, they might surrender to the allure of the senses. “My mother was terrible”, Mamadi often remarked. “She would reproach any girl she saw in my company; there was this girl I really desired, but my mother, who knew that she was destined for another man, strongly opposed our friendship.”

Lamin moved to Bathurst too early to know that type of motherly control but his family, who didn't want him to go astray, made sure that he got married as soon as he landed his first job. In the eyes of both elders and

colonizers, the city was considered a place of perdition<sup>5</sup>. To youths, conversely, it offered incomparable opportunities to enrich their cultural and social background, and familiarize themselves with new ideas of love and marriage. As a young man, Mamadi broadened his horizons by living in London for several years; Lamin enjoyed the vibrant social life of the diamond mining areas of Sierra Leone in the late 1950s, and also that of Kinshasa in the 1960s when, dressed in attractive western suits, youths like him frequented the bars and night clubs (fig. 2).

FIG. 2. — OMAR SUSO, A CLOSE FRIEND AND AGE-MATE OF MAMADI AND SHERIFF



Though rebellious, none of my three friends ever dared challenge the right of their families to choose the first wife. But they did try to change their married life in other ways. Mamadi and Sheriff, like their educated contemporaries, opted for monogamy; a choice followed in their grandfathers' and fathers' generations only by Christians or by men prevented by poverty from having polygamous marriages. Even when Mamadi ultimately turned to polygamy, he opted for two educated girls, as partners that could share in his conversations, thoughts and aspirations. Like Lamin's, Mamadi's polygamous marriage was very different from that of previous generations. Solidarity between the two young wives of Mamadi lasted

5. On young men in colonial cities see C. D. GONDOLA (1999, 2009) and A. BURTON (2001).

only a few years before spousal competition and rivalry destroyed the relationship. The two women would eventually establish two separate households. In the social world of his grandfather and father, adult men had their own hut, and the wives would share the women's quarters, and went to their husband's when it was their turn. Mamadi spent a great part of his life commuting every other day between the different houses of his two spouses. Some years ago, Richard Werbner (2005: 145) has urged scholars to appreciate the "reworking of patriarchy by elders, who themselves were once 'modern youth'". In order to meet this challenge, the rest of this essay examines the daily efforts of Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff to shape their selves as senior males in a precarious balance between their personal wish not to lose the prerogatives of earlier phases of life and the expectations of people around them.

### "I Do not Go out Much These Days"

During one of our regular phone conversations some time ago, Mamadi remarked: "I do not go out much these days." For those who have known him a long time, this act of voluntary seclusion was a sure sign of aging. In the past, Mamadi carefully maintained a car, which served both as the material symbol of his mobility and as the means by which he could visit friends and relatives, and attend ceremonies and cultural events. In those days, he was absent from home for most of the day, and rarely cared to inform his wives about his whereabouts. The wives, who feared upsetting their peaceful cohabitation, never bothered to ask. As well as being due to aging, the physical self-restraint Mamadi started to exert in his later years had both an economic reason and a social dimension to it. It is distasteful to cut down on the expensive symbols of status that had been routine earlier in life. As a first-rank civil servant, Mamadi had enjoyed a prestige far superior to that of many men of his age; he travelled supported by the government, and until his retirement, he was entitled to a government car with a driver. Despite recognizing the dilapidated state of his old car, and acknowledging the fact that he could not afford a new one, Mamadi was not prepared to suffer the humiliation of public transportation. Going out of the house also meant meeting people with pressing problems. Not having enough money to help those who begged his assistance was a source of shame. Compared with Lamin, who felt the burden of having to take care of a legion of grown-up sons and daughters who for one reason or another had not yet achieved complete social independence, or with the penniless Sheriff, Mamadi lived in relative ease. His second wife and her children were ready to contribute towards his daily living expenses, the upkeep of his health and even towards his travels abroad; their affection and care, however, made Mamadi feel even more dependent, and reluctant to ask for things he was not directly offered. There were days of frustration

when his dreams for the future and his plans to remain active collided with the basic fact that his income was not enough, and that what he had was mostly earned by his wife.

As Mamadi's grandfather and father aged, pampered by their younger wives, they spent their days in the company of their adult sons and grandchildren. For those generations, "sitting" in the compound and welcoming people who sought the assistance and advice of elderly men was a sign of power and social relevance. To a certain extent, after assuming the leadership of his extended family, and transferring his wife and children to the village, Lamin was able to enjoy that kind of eldership. For elderly men of the urban areas like Mamadi confinement to the house had different implications. While his wife went to work for the day, he sat in loneliness and watched television for hours. Friends and acquaintances would come as often as his daughters living in other parts of the town, but the unpleasant reality was that in one way or another they would end up asking for material support, which most of the time Mamadi could not provide. Sadly, he would on some days close the gate to deter requests that he could not afford to satisfy.

### "If I Had Known, I Would Have Chosen Differently"

One early morning, when I visited Lamin's house in the capital city, I found him sitting on the floor in front of the breakfast meal prepared by one of his elder daughters. "If I had known, I would have lived a different life", he said as he slowly ate his porridge. Most of the nights were spent pondering family problems he was supposed to solve in his role of family-head: squabbles with his daughters and sons over the inheritance left by his first wife, who had died recently. Lamin felt that his children had tried to overturn his rights as husband and father. He was also consumed by worries about the licentious behavior of two daughters he had from his Liberian wife, and about his son who had married an old white woman in order to secure a visa to Europe, and now felt oppressed by the jealousy of the wife.

Most of the time, after hours of ruminating thoughts, Lamin would reach the realistic conclusion that not much could be done. Though he was ready to play his role of elderly man and to instruct his family members, he was fairly sure that his advice would not be followed. That awareness usually bred other unhappy thoughts. The last years of his first marriage had been quarrelsome; he and the lady had been arguing over the remittances of their son in Europe. After her death, the son took possession of the compound where the woman had lived and according to Lamin turned it into a centre for cannabis smokers. In addition, a silent fight was going on between Lamin, the third wife and their adult male sons. For some years, Lamin had been thinking of completing a new building he had started in the capital city. That house was meant for his last years with his third wife. In his

dreams the lady would eventually stop her commercial activity in their home village to come and live with him in the capital city. Lamin often complained about her dedication to the sons—adult men who were not supposed to depend on their mother for their daily needs. Toward those young men whom he considered lazy and unwilling to shift themselves for their own benefit and that of the family, Lamin pursued a strict personal policy. He hosted them in the village compound, and provided rice for their basic food. He would not hesitate to ask them, on occasion, to participate in the labour needed for household maintenance and improvement. They also had to farm family lands, and work their way as best they could towards becoming economically independent. Why had his third wife agreed to feed these young men and their new wives? In the end, she was spending all the profits of her commercial activity on the daily running of the village compound; this indulgence of the children, and her desire to stay in the village, were not only a challenge to his patriarchal role but a sure sign that she did not love him. Lamin's first wife was chosen by the family, and he never expected more than a warm affection on that side; but this third wife was the beloved one, the one supposed to accompany him in his last years. Recollecting his life's trajectory, and the many opportunities he had discarded abroad because of the respect he had for his family and home country, Lamin would often joke that if he were to live a second life, he would make completely different choices. He would marry one wife, instead of many, and possibly not an African wife, as old age had brought him to the conclusion that African women were too wayward and selfish to truly love their husbands.

### "I Saw Him Sitting Near Aja"

Sheriff liked to visit Mamadi regularly; the two hailed from the same hometown, and in old age rediscovered the conviviality of their childhood whenever they spent most of the day together. Sheriff often came at lunchtime, sure that he would be invited to share Mamadi's meal. When he had money, he would bring along a kilo of meat, and some soft drinks. It was clearly remembered in the house that, years before, when he had a good job, he was extremely generous not only with close relatives, but with friends generally. When Mamadi became financially stronger, he started sharing with Sheriff the little he received from his wives and children. Sheriff's wife, Aja, controlled the remittances that their sons and daughters in the US sent to The Gambia<sup>6</sup>. There was mistrust between Sheriff and the lady,

6. On the place of money in conjugal relations see the seminal remarks of C. VIDAL (1977) and the recent researches of A. ATTANÉ (2009).

one that grew from decades of his adulterous relationships. The daughters and sons, who were privy to the suffering of the mother, were suspicious that their father would spend the money they sent for the family on courting young girls, feeding his reputation as a Sugar Daddy.

It is difficult to know whether all the love stories Sheriff narrated when he was in the company of Mamadi and other male friends were true, or only exaggerations of his masculine qualities. Surely, they were part of an urban male repertoire centered on the consumption of beautiful and young women (Biaya 2001: 77). Sheriff had gained a reputation as an adventurous lover among his friends, a reputation he cultivated carefully in spite of ageing. His awareness of the city's sexual economy also had some side effects. Some days, he would sit on the armchair in Mamadi's dining room and start handing all his depressing thoughts over to his friend, one especially acute example of which was the day after he had come home unexpectedly and found the young gardener that Aja had employed sitting close to her. In Sheriff's mind the two had a relationship and the wife was using part of the money their children sent from US to do what old European ladies coming to The Gambia had been doing: seeking the company of young and attractive men (Ebron 1997; Nyanzi & Bah 2010). I have no clues as to whether the Sugar Mummy's economy that has developed since the 1980s within the Gambian tourist industry has now expanded to include respectable Gambian grandmothers of Sheriff's wife's age. Sheriff, however, believed it and suffered great pain from the reversal of gender power relationships brought by old age. He, once the womanizer, now had no resources to access the flamboyant and sophisticated young girls of the capital city. Aja, the patient wife who had for years silently endured the excesses of his masculinity, now enjoyed the love and attention of a young man.



By focusing on some of the complications of the daily lives of Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff, I have tried to combine the exploration of the construction of individual male subjectivities in contemporary Africa (Miescher & Lindsay 2003: 8; Ouzgane & Morrell 2005; Uchendu 2008) with ethnographic research on aging (van der Geest 1997, 2002; Werbner 2005; Lamb 2009; Antoine & Golaz 2010). The result is a layered picture of my three elderly friends as both engendering and gendered subjects caught up in networks of social relations and expectations which to a certain extent were the unplanned outcomes of their own actions and choices. My argument has been, essentially, that only a robust ethnographic approach focusing on apparently insignificant and intimate details has the potential to shed light onto the broader predicaments of contemporary African masculinities.



For radical feminist theory, gender is as an intellectual chisel to uncover “what is unseen, under-theorized and left out in the production of knowledge” (Mohanty 2002: 510). In principle, as such a perspective stresses the epistemic relevance of margins it might sound weird to apply it to the lives of senior men in a society where maleness and seniority ensure social prominence. Yet both official representations and the over-theorized representations of human life typical of many social scientists tend to underplay the concreteness and temporality of men’s and women’s individual lives and the ongoing social transformations in which these lives are unwittingly embedded. For Mamadi, Lamin and Sheriff old age meant a transition from a phase of strong masculinity to a submissive state of dependence on their spouses that not only reversed the conventional gender relations inside the household but seriously compromised my three friends’ ability to cultivate their social presence out of the household. The backdrop of their experiences consisted of a female world which verbally supported the superiority of senior men while in practice challenging it on a daily basis. There was suffering in the disenfranchised male role that these three elderly men had to play in their later years, a suffering that they masked by deploying those same virtues of patience and silence they had imposed on their wives and other women in earlier stages of life.

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#### ABSTRACT

To be sure, The Gambia is a male-dominated society. Yet male dominion should not be taken for granted whether in the public arena or in the intimate sphere of family and gender relations. Both its negotiated nature, and the plurality of models on which the constructions and experiences of masculinity are based, are particularly evident when we take into account the variable of age. This essay is prompted, by the life-trajectories and the ordinary strategies of three elderly Gambian men, to discuss the transition from a phase of strong masculinity to a state of submissive dependence on their spouses in the later part of life. This submission not only shifted

gender relations within the household, but also undermined social presence out of it. Crucial to this argument is that only a robust ethnographic approach focusing on apparently insignificant and intimate details has the potential to shed light onto the broader predicaments of contemporary African masculinities.

#### RÉSUMÉ

*Mes amis âgés de Gambie. Masculinité et présence sociale au cours de la dernière partie de la vie.* — Incontestablement, la société gambienne est dominée par les hommes. Toutefois, la domination masculine ne doit pas être considérée comme allant de soi, ni dans la sphère publique, ni dans l'intimité des relations familiales ou de genre. Sa nature négociée, autant que la pluralité des modèles qui fondent les constructions et les expériences de la masculinité, apparaissent de manière particulièrement évidente si l'on prend en considération la variable de l'âge. Cet article s'appuie sur les trajectoires de vie et les stratégies ordinaires de trois hommes gambiens âgés, dans le but d'éclairer la transition entre une phase de masculinité puissante et un état de dépendance et de soumission à l'égard des épouses au cours de la dernière partie de la vie. Cet état de soumission non seulement transforme les relations de genre à l'intérieur de la maison, mais aussi sape la présence sociale à l'extérieur. Ce texte soutient l'idée que seule une ethnographie minutieuse focalisée sur des détails insignifiants et intimes permet de mettre au jour la situation plus générale des masculinités contemporaines en Afrique.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: Gambia, ageing, marginality, masculinities, memory-work/*Gambie, vieillissement, marginalité, masculinités, travail de mémoire.*