

# From “cosaan” to colony: long-term settlement history and political-economic change in Siin (Senegal), AD 500-1900

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## Situating Siin’s history, between migrations and typical peasants...

One of the confounding ironies facing those who study the history of Siin (Figure 1), a small province in Senegal is that, depending on the sources, the region variably appears as a dynamic and creative crossroads, or as a conservative backwater, with an acute reluctance for change.

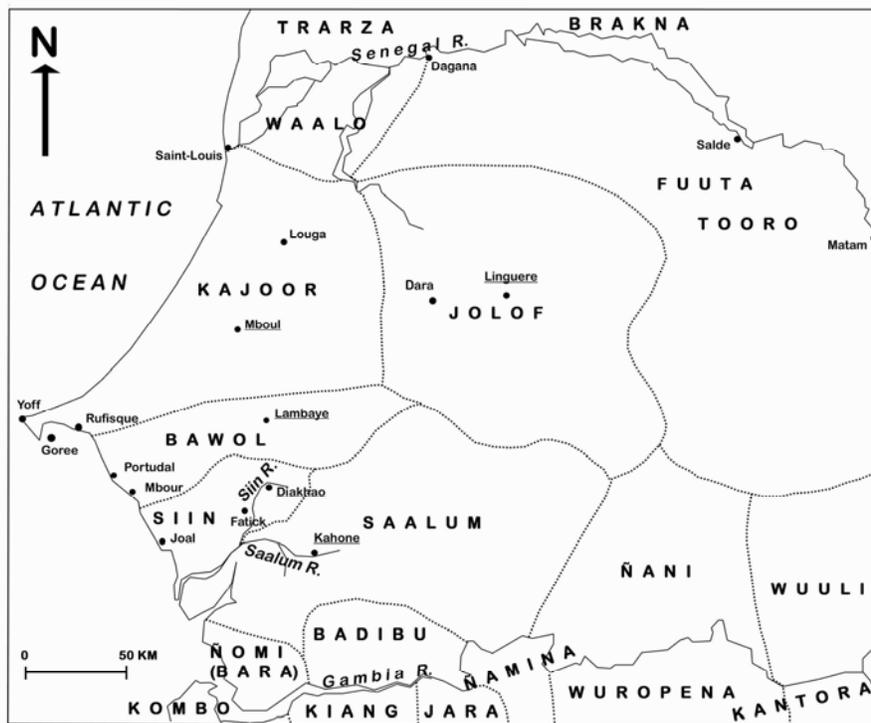


Fig. 1. Northern Senegambian kingdoms, c. 1850.

The second view – that Siin was home to ‘typical African peasantries’ (Galvan 2004) – arose in the minds of French administrators who throughout the colonial era consistently portrayed local Serer populations as callous and stuck in time (e.g. Bourgeau 1933; Carlus 1880; Lasnet et al. 1900; Pinet-Laprade 1865). A sentiment shared by Bérenger-Féraud (1875: 279, 274), for instance, who described local Serer populations as “peaceful, [they] live off the soil to which they are extremely attached, and also have little taste for migration” before opining that “[their] lack of industry fail[ed] to trigger sustained relations with the outside.” These views propagated through the colonial era, and are echoed several decades later in the writings of Aujas (1931: 293-294), for example, who stated that “[d]espite the blending, unions, alliances with neighboring tribes, the Serer constitutes today for the foreign observer a

very primitive individuality which has jealously retained its customs, beliefs, language, religion. He did not let civilization cut into him a lot. His local evolution itself has varied little throughout the centuries. There is then in him a type of humanity whose originality is undeniable.” Incidentally, the myth of the timeless peasant has permeated the post-independence period and continued to frame subsequent writings on the region. Thus, the trope recurs with eerie resonance in Paul Pélissier’s authoritative study of Senegalese agrarian societies, which describes precolonial Siin as “the very model of egalitarian and anarchic peasantry,” as “a society which up to now has derived its strength and persistence from its fidelity to the past, from an essentially defensive political organization, from eminently conservative social structures” (Pélissier 1966: 198, 224). Similar views inhabit the popular imagination in today’s Senegal, where the Siin is often portrayed as the ‘traditional’ rural area *par excellence*, a Serer ethnic enclave providing a convenient foil for the country’s urban and Wolof modernity.

Yet a closer look at other sources sheds a more nuanced light on Siin’s deeper past, with implications for its more recent history. Archaeology, for instance, suggests links with neighboring tumulus- and megalith-building societies, and trans-Saharan trading spheres beyond (S. K. McIntosh and R. J. McIntosh 1993; S. K. McIntosh 2001). Next, historical memory paints the region as a vibrant cultural frontier, shaped by migrations and cultural fusion. Oral traditions are rife with narratives of sweeping population movements from the north and the south, and trace the emergence of a kingdom to Mandinka migrations in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Becker et al. 1991; N. Diouf 1972; Gravrand 1983; Sarr 1986-1987). When documentary sources pick up the story, they depict the Siin as an active participant in Atlantic exchanges early on, and a more modest player after the 17<sup>th</sup> century, though one increasingly influenced by changing political-economic conditions and dependent on imported goods for political stability (Boulègue 1987; de Moraes 1993, 1995, 1998). Some historians have interpreted these clues as evidence of the brutal subjection of local societies to an expanding world system, while others suggest that Siin’s centralized monarchy and cultural homogeneity sheltered it from the massive disruptions experienced elsewhere on the coast (Barry 1998; Becker 1988; Becker and Martin 1975; Curtin 1975; Klein 1992). This period of rapidly changing socio-economic relations was the prelude to more dramatic changes prompted by Senegambia’s immersion into France’s colonial empire and world capitalism (Galvan 1997; Gastellu 1981; Guigou 1992; Klein 1968, 1979; Lericollais 1972, 1999; Mbodj 1978; Reinwald 1997a, 1997b).

These various historical threads do not make for easy historical synthesis. Each narrative conjures a wealth of unanswered questions about historical identities; the nature of migrations and cultural contact; rhythm and character of political complexity; involvement with regional and continental economic networks; the impact of Atlantic exchanges; as well as change in social practices over time. More centrally they circle back to the question with which I began this presentation: How can the region embody a dynamic history and yet be a bastion of conservatism? This is the apparent contradiction which I will explore here.

Clearly, these fractious accounts underscore the disjunction between different sources and interpretations, between evidence and ideology, between past realities and their representations (Cohen 1994; Cooper 2005; Trouillot 1995, 2003; also Stahl 2001; Stahl et al. 2004). Yet, following recent scholarship (David and Sterner 1999; MacEachern 1998; R. J. McIntosh 1998, 1999, 2005; S. K. McIntosh 1999b; Mitchell 2005; Reid and Lane 2004; Stahl 1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2005; also Crumley and Marquardt 1987; Ehrenreich et al. 1995; Paynter 1989; Yoffee 1993, 2005), I would suggest that they also reflect the discomfort of conventional epistemologies with ‘unconventional’ histories – those of cultural frontiers whose shifting paths along the scale of complexity cannot be easily accommodated (Amselle 1998; Kopytoff 1987). Thus, speaking of movements or inertia, history or tradition, politics or culture, does not frame the questions and inquiries in useful ways for the Siin. It tends to present migrations, traditions, culture, and states as one-dimensional processes, when the regional past appears to have unfolded against the grain of historical expectations – flowing back and forth between a variety of social arrangements over the past 1500 years, giving rise to an ‘ambiguous’ kingdom underwritten by a variable



These settlement data span a period of intense transformations, and yet show little internal change alluding to the massive migrations and state formation signaled in oral traditions. This stems in part from the poor chronological resolution associated with survey data, which do not reflect the diagnostic changes present in excavated ceramics during this period. Putting aside the important issue of chronology, however, we can venture a few guesses for the disconnection between space and history – or representations of history. On the one hand, the absence of drastic changes in settlements and material assemblages caused by outside intrusions could imply, as historian Donald Wright (1985: 342) believes, that the Mandinka movements reported in the region are narrative tropes that denote gradual cultural and political influence rather than large-scale migrations. Similar views could be applied to the great Serer exodus out of the Middle Senegal, though ceramic affinities between the two regions lend some support to oral accounts of migrations. Another possibility is that social transitions were not as dramatic as portrayed in historical memory. Existing political institutions (perhaps organized around a few lineage estates or protean community clusters, and grounded in a dispersed village habitat) could have mediated cultural interactions during the Iron Age. In a related vein, it is conceivable that the process of political unification leading to the Siin kingdom did not involve radical centralization but a loose political superstructure gradually integrating regional communities (e.g. Godelier 1978, 1980). The slow accretion of changes over long stretches of time could dilute their archaeological visibility. Alternatively, state formation could have occurred later than is commonly believed.

While the region was connected to the Saharan economy, material assemblages show little diversity and much homogeneity across the sites; they show some circulation of ceramics with neighboring areas, perhaps suggestive of regional trade in coastal products, but little evidence of long-distance trade. This is in sharp contrast with the imported grave good assemblages recovered from neighboring funerary mounds erected during that period (Ba et al. 1997; Descamps and Thilmans 1979, 2001; Thilmans et al. 1980). These contextual differences possibly carry cultural choices regarding the disposal, social value, and use of foreign exotics (Garenne-Marot 1993).

### **Atlantic entanglements: Material landscapes and political economy in Siin (1400s-1900)**

Following the advent of European contact (Figure 3), human densities sharply declined along the Petite Côte, although village communities persisted in the vicinity of Joal, which was Siin's principal trading post during the Atlantic era. Concurrently, settlements reoriented towards a new sphere of interaction centered on the Siin heartland. Interior areas witnessed a demographic explosion, perhaps in relation to the organization of the kingdom and growth of the Atlantic slave trade. Oral traditions credit this period with a wave of village formation as the kingdom's political center moved towards the interior after the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Becker and Martin 1972; Becker and Mbodj 1999; Becker et al. 1991; N. Diouf 1972; Gravrand 1983). At the same time, no major urban center or rigid settlement hierarchies stand out from the survey evidence, a picture supported by a few descriptions of regional capitals as *prima inter pares* (Boilat 1853: 143-145; Cadamosto 1937; Durand 1802: 56; L. Diouf 1879: 349; Mollien 1818: 40-42; Noirot 1890).

The logic of settlement organization in Siin experienced another change during the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 4). Between 1500 and the early 1700s, sites were on average larger, more concentrated, and occupied for longer periods of time. As the 18<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, sites multiplied dramatically, but the new settlements were generally smaller and formed a more dispersed landscape. These spatial changes may coincide with the intensification of Atlantic exchanges, a period portrayed in European accounts as struck by famines, insecurity, and subsistence crises. Archival documents suggest frequent wars and skirmishes between Siin and its powerful Wolof neighbors, and allude to frequent but low-intensity military violence along the borders (Labat 1728 v.4: 243; Lamiral 1789; Loyer 1714: 134-135; Thilmans 1971: 541). Exactions by slave warriors on farming communities also appear to have intensified, particularly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Klein 1977).

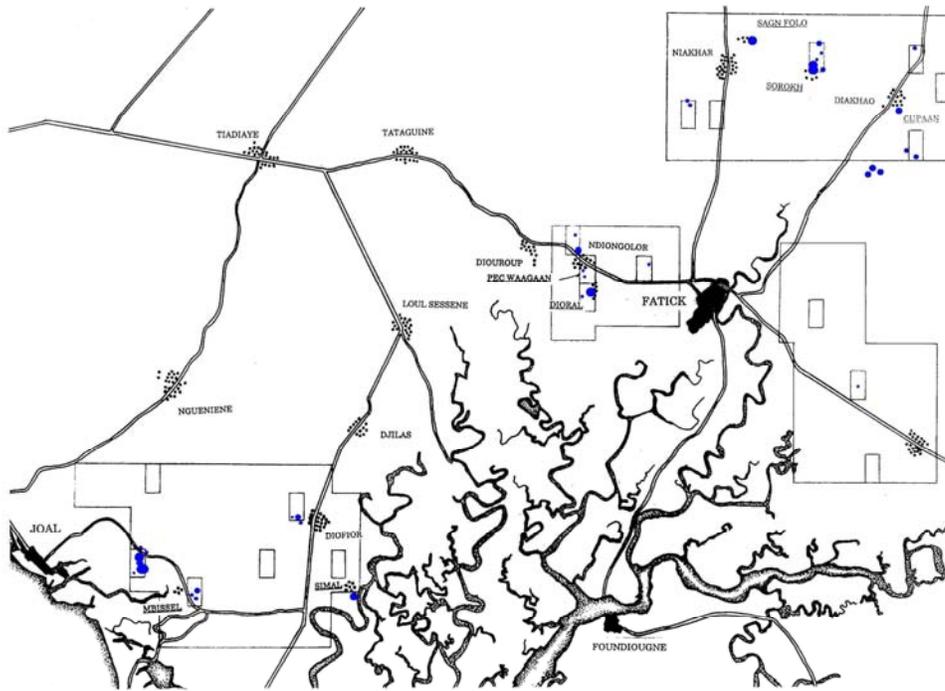


Fig. 3. Siin settlement phase Va.

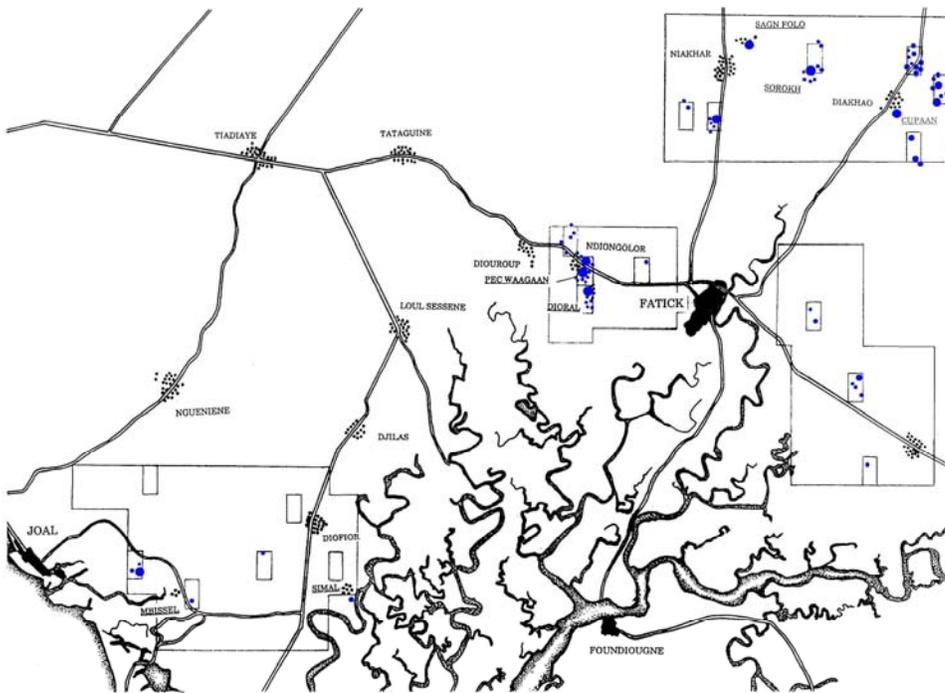


Fig. 4. Siin settlement Phases Vb-Vc.

The constellated spatial arrangement could reflect responses to the escalation of instability, in particular a move away from border areas exposed to political conflict towards the more insulated center. The pattern of disaggregation also seems to indicate that the new settlements splintered from earlier villages and rearranged. Spatial dispersion may have offered a viable defensive alternative to the larger, more easily raided habitation sites of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. Conversely, it may also have been a product of the rising political economy of violence. This pattern stands in sharp contrast to previous arguments that the rise of the Atlantic slave trade caused massive depopulation in coastal kingdoms (e.g. B. Diop 1997, 2000). Instead, we observe a demographic increase involving smaller, hamlet-sized sites, a pattern documented archaeologically in other parts of Senegal (Thiaw 1999, 2000). The near absence of overt signs of militarization (gunflints, fortified sites), which frequently turn up in other areas, could support some historians' suggestion that political instability in Siin never reached the disruptive proportions reached in neighboring polities.

More interestingly, these changes in settlement landscape suggest that the dispersed habitat believed to be an ageless feature of Serer cultural traditions (e.g. Noirot 1892) may actually be a fairly recent phenomenon associated with the escalation of social violence. By extension, it is quite possible that other Serer social features long thought to be 'traditional' – the system of land tenure, agro-pastoral management, or residential mobility (Dupire et al. 1974; Gastellu 1981; Guigou 1992; Lericollais 1972; Pélissier 1966) – took shape during this period.

Settlement transformations also appear to reflect changes in social organization. The new habitation sites largely gravitate in the orbit of political centers at Ndongolor and Diakhao, and could represent small satellite settlements associated with retainers and craft specialists working for the monarchy. European documents stress an increasing concentration of authority and centralization of power in the hands of the monarch (e.g. Becker and Martin 1974, 1977). Reading between the lines of historic archives, however, we can also discern a more subtle picture, involving variations in political power, where central authority contracted or expanded depending on the individual monarch's ambitions, kin relations, and political alliances. While the kingdom's armies appear to have kept relatively firm control over the hinterland, villagers along the Petite Côte seem to have enjoyed a variable degree of autonomy and are described as independent republics unto their own (Boilat 1853; Cadamosto 1937; Golberry 1802 v.2:111; Thilmans 1976: 25). This cycling between control and autonomy seems to suggest a fundamental dynamism built into the cultural logic of the Siin state. The juxtaposition of an ideology of centralized rule at the regional level over a more dispersed practice of authority at the local level created a certain imbalance in political power, where concentration and de-centralization were at once mutually reinforcing, as well as mutually destabilizing. Changing conjectures and political economic fortunes could tilt the system one way or the other, while reshaping the conditions of state power in the process. The maintenance of a relatively unstratified village landscape throughout the Atlantic era could indicate that royal power did indeed work through, or parallel to, local social structures and spatial forms, even as monarchies and their enslaved warriors were becoming more consolidated and politically centralized. However, because Siin's settlement patterns lend themselves to a variety of possible readings, we must await more robust correlates to conclusively pin down the cultural expressions of past political power in Siin (Smith 2003; also S. K. McIntosh 1995, 1999a).

The homogeneity in trade imports during this period is suggestive of Siin's ancillary position in Atlantic circuits, though the traces of certain pivotal commodities (cloth, gunpowder, paper) unfortunately remain beyond archaeological reach. Regional variation in classes of 'prestige items' may indicate uneven access to trade imports and differentiated consumption patterns, as certain objects regularly turn up in political centers or fiefs controlled by ruling classes. Higher concentrations of toiletry and cosmetic glass were found in the surface and excavated assemblages of two aristocratic residences, which also revealed a much richer variety and quantity of beads and European ceramics. Interestingly, these sites contained much higher proportions of wine bottles than other sites, where trade gin predominates.

Overall, however, the same objects – beads, glass, tobacco pipes – largely turn up across the region, and no major disparities in wealth emerge in the regional settlement system. Archival correspondence suggests one possible reason for this homogeneity, namely the opening of commodity circuits to peasants and commoners. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, European observers frequently commented on rural women’s bead assortments (DeCorse et al. 2003), hinting that Atlantic commodities eluded royal monopoly to fall within the reach of Serer commoners. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, most villagers appeared to have been able to trade millet surpluses in return for imported merchandise (Lebrasseur 1776). The convergence of documentary and material patterns lends credence to James Searing’s (1993: 90) suggestion that Senegambia’s engagement with the Atlantic economy was structured by a “dual seller’s market, one dominated by consumption goods valued by the peasants, the other by aristocratic prestige goods.” French trading posts relied heavily on coastal kingdoms for food and provisioning, an economic domain that largely escaped royal control (Searing 1988; see Dubellay 1723, 1724; Desmenager 1765; Lebrasseur 1776). While the realities of political violence in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are inescapable, the convertibility between peasant goods and commodities acquired through the slave sales ensured the widespread circulation of trade imports in the local economies and the participation of peasants in external exchange on an unprecedented scale (Klein 1979, 1992). These possibilities in turn mounted a direct challenge to traditional spheres of elite consumption and mechanisms of social distinction (Mbodj 1978).

This being said, European trade goods do not become a significant material presence until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and 19<sup>th</sup> century – which raises questions regarding the extent and timing of European impact on local cultural practices (Thiaw 2003). This suggests that local societies retained considerable initiative during that period, and remained relatively peripheral to the Atlantic economy. Tobacco pipe assemblages remain exclusively local until the timid appearance of late 19<sup>th</sup> century French pipes mass-produced for the African market. Bead assemblages are dominated by Venetian beads and 19<sup>th</sup> century Czech beads, but also include a few local clay specimens. Glass comprises mostly wine and gin bottles, joined in the 1870s by *alcool de menthe* flacons and mineral water bottles.

It is only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that colonial imposition truly begins to be felt in local consumption patterns and restructuration of social space towards French commercial outposts (Galvan 2004; Guigou 1992; Reinwald 1997a, 1997b). For instance, we note a palpable increase of post-1870s deposits in the Fatick region, which could represent rural migrations as the town became an important colonial commercial crossroads in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, even in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European ceramics remained largely peripheral to local systems of taste, as the tiny invariant assemblages of utilitarian wares and refined earthenware plate fragments seem to imply. By contrast, the sheer abundance of liquor bottles recovered during the survey offers a potent reminder of the role of alcohol in processes of Atlantic entanglements, and provides undeniable support to the portrait of rampant alcoholism which 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century documents paint for the region.

## **Conclusion: Writing alternative histories of Siin’s past?**

I began this talk with a conundrum – one based on false premises, but pregnant with implications for how the past of Siin is understood. Whether traversed by waves of migrants, swallowed by the world system, or immured in timeless custom, the Siin has been forced into a kind of historical ‘packaging’ which presupposes a central plot and undifferentiated processes that do little justice to the complexity of local experiences. Sadly, the myths and silences forged in the construction of the past continue to shape how the region and its populations are viewed in the present (Trouillot 1995).

Drawing on initial evidence from the Siin, I have tried to use settlements and material culture to revisit some accepted ideas about the regional past, and explore alternative narratives grounded in landscapes, culture, and political economy. Clearly, archaeology carries its own burden of limitations – blunt chronologies, ambiguous material patterns, brittle samples, questionable legacies, etc. But when

held in productive tension with other narratives, it can help us retrieve local historical expressions, or at least those forms of cultural experience embedded in the material world. It also prompts us to remain critical of the conditions framing the histories that we and other people write. While the nascent archaeological record of Siin raises far more questions than it answers, it challenges accounts written in the idiom of immobility and sweeping change. Instead, it suggests careful empirical studies of the relations that structured local communities, and linked them with other societies and systems of interaction, historically and geographically (Stahl 2004b). The idea is to draw on Siin's past to illuminate the diversity of social trajectories in Senegambia, while retrieving the distinctive qualities of its local history (M. Diouf 2001; Stahl 1999).

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