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PETER MARK

RANSOMING,  
COLLATERAL, AND  
PROTECTIVE CAPTIVITY  
ON THE UPPER  
GUINEA COAST  
BEFORE 1650:  
COLONIAL  
CONTINUITIES,  
CONTEMPORARY  
ECHOES

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Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, PO Box 110351,  
06017 Halle/Saale, Phone: +49 (0)345 2927-0, Fax: +49 (0)345 2927-402,  
<http://www.eth.mpg.de>, e-mail: [workingpaper@eth.mpg.de](mailto:workingpaper@eth.mpg.de)

# **Ransoming, Collateral, and Protective Captivity on the Upper Guinea Coast before 1650: colonial continuities, contemporary echoes<sup>1</sup>**

*Peter Mark<sup>2</sup>*

## **Abstract**

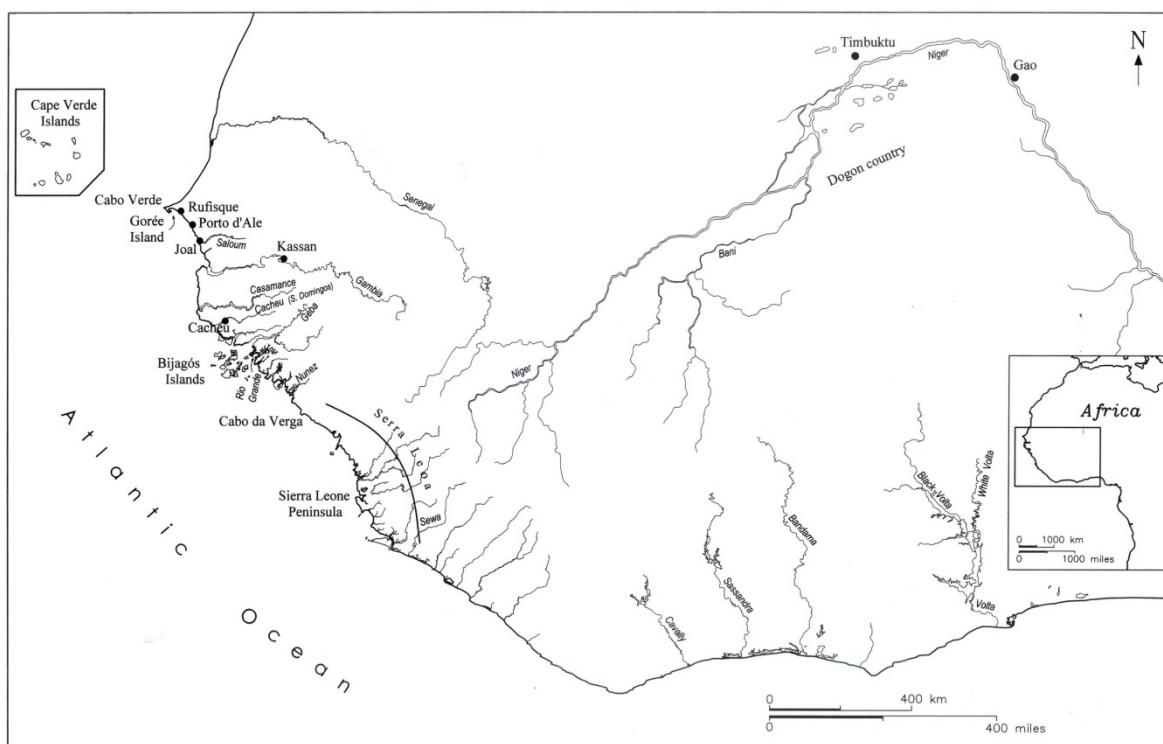
This paper investigates the origins of pawning in European-African interaction along the Upper Guinea Coast. Pawning in this context refers to the holding of human beings as security for debt or to ensure that treaty obligations be fulfilled. While pawning was an indigenous practice in Upper Guinea, it is proposed here that when the Portuguese arrived in West Africa, they were already familiar with systems of ransoming, especially of members of the nobility. The adoption of pawning and the associated practice of not enslaving members of social elites may be explained by the fact that these customs were already familiar to both the Portuguese and their West African hosts. Vestiges of these social institutions may be found well into the colonial period on the Upper Guinea Coast.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Mark is Emeritus Professor of Art History at Wesleyan University (CT); he is Invited Cathedratric Professor of History, Faculdade de Letras (FLUL), Universidade de Lisboa, and ‘chercheur invité’ at the Institut National d’Histoire de l’Art, Paris, e-mail: pmark@wesleyan.edu.

In sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Upper Guinea, diverse forms of servitude and limited or temporary un-freedom existed. Several of these varieties of subordination and coercion were adopted by indigenous peoples, by Luso-Africans, and by Europeans. These practices included pawning (and ransoming) to secure a debt, protective custody, which was frequently used to secure a treaty, and panyarring, or forced subordination to pay an unredeemed debt. Each of these practices was based upon kinship relations, real or fictive. They differed from the chattel slavery that became normative with the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade. Furthermore, West African nobility – who themselves would have profited from, but rarely suffered under, forms of subordination based on kinship – only infrequently experienced captivity at the hands of Europeans. This early Portuguese practice was influenced, in part, by the experience of captivity/ransom of Portuguese nobility in Muslim North Africa.



Map 1: The Upper Guinea Coast. © Peter Mark and José da Silva Horta

Portuguese documents (Almada 1964 [1594]; Donelha 1977 [1625]; Álvarez 1733 [1615]; also Lisbon Inquisition Archives) indicate that before 1600 the few African nobility who were enslaved could often regain their free status. Remnants of this status may, in fact, have persisted into nineteenth-century Sierra Leone: *grumetes*, who by this time were often unfree laborers, were not sold into Atlantic slavery and, if dissatisfied with their work conditions, could sometimes simply walk away. But why was this practice initially adopted when Europeans and West Africans first met and interacted, primarily through commerce?

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Richardson and Lovejoy have shown in their ground-breaking work, pawning, or the holding of human beings as security for debt or to ensure

that treaty obligations be fulfilled, was common practice in West Africa.<sup>3</sup> The origins of pawning and of related practices in early European-African commerce, however, remain obscure. Lovejoy and Richardson argue that pawning was not common in Islamic regions such as Senegal,<sup>4</sup> although Lovejoy has recently amended this view, citing pawnshop practices in the Gambia (Lovejoy 2014).<sup>5</sup> I shall return to this point. Richardson and Lovejoy further observe that documentation of pawning before the nineteenth century is rare. They suggest, however, that pawning was indigenous to western Africa (ibid.: 72). This is consistent with the consensus among historians that European and Euro-African merchants were constrained to accept established African practices.<sup>6</sup>

A close reading of sixteenth-century Portuguese sources, complemented by seventeenth-century Dutch legal records, confirms the broad outline of Lovejoy and Richardson's argument. Nevertheless, close consideration of the period of the earliest European-West African contact during the era of Portuguese and later Luso-Spanish<sup>7</sup> ascendancy in Upper Guinea (late fifteenth century – ca. 1640) necessitates a revision of their thesis. Portuguese eyewitness accounts, written by Portuguese and Luso-Africans living in Upper Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands, afford the historian some clues about local practices related to pawning or protective refuge, as well as information about who could or could not be enslaved. In addition, the context of the sixteenth-century Portuguese experience of captivity helps to explain the development of Portuguese practices in Upper Guinea.

When the Portuguese arrived in West Africa, they were already familiar with systems of ransoming and with the associated practice of differential treatment of social elites. Europeans were themselves often captured, enslaved, and/or held for ransom in Muslim North Africa, especially after the disastrous Battle of Alcazar-quivir in 1578. I focus on the connections between the enslavement of West Africans and the coeval phenomenon of European captivity in Muslim North Africa.<sup>8</sup> One needs to consider the impact of Portuguese and Dutch captivity in Morocco and the Ottoman Empire on early attitudes of Europeans towards their own African captives. Ultimately, one may observe that both parties – Portuguese and West Africans – had experience with similar, if not identical practices of differential and temporary captivity. Thus, while Europeans who traded and settled on the Upper Guinea Coast did have to conform to African commercial practices, they may have been selective about which specific practices were followed: customs and practices that were already familiar to both parties were the most likely to be adopted and retained.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See, *inter alia*, Lovejoy and Schwarz (2015), especially the contributions by Bruce Mouser and Sean Kelly. See also Lovejoy and Richardson (2001). On the related practice of captive redemption by substitution, see Diouf (2003b). For historical context, including related practices among various Senegambian populations, see Klein (2003, 2009); see also Lovejoy and Richardson (2003). For an economic analysis of early Portuguese and Dutch commerce in Upper Guinea see Ribeiro da Silva (2011). For a conceptual model that encompasses varieties of free and unfree labor, see Steinfield and Engerman (1997). For a comprehensive and detailed history of slave trade, captivity, and ransoming in the Rio Pongo and Rio Nunez region, see Mouser (1971, 2002, 2007, 2015, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Lovejoy and Richardson (2001: 68) argue that, as pawning was not consistent with Islamic law, this practice was not important in Senegambia.

<sup>5</sup> George Brooks (1993: 135) articulates this thesis for the Upper Guinea Coast, which he summarizes: "Europeans were obliged to adapt to African trading patterns and modes of social intercourse (...)."

<sup>6</sup> See for example Kelly (2015: 101); Brooks (2003: xix, 49ff.); Mouser (2016). Horta (2014: 25) writes, referring to the Upper Guinea Coast, that the rivers of Guinea "são controlados pelos autóctones e a quem chega de fora é necessário respeitar as regras locais e regionais do comércio e da convivência."

<sup>7</sup> Portugal was annexed to Habsburg Spain from 1580 to 1640.

<sup>8</sup> This study responds to the challenge issued by Stella and Botte (2012) that historians whose interest centers on Atlantic servitude should pay closer attention to Mediterranean slavery. See also Diawara (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Mouser (2016: 22) has made a similar observation with regard to European merchants in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Rio Pongo (Guinée).

From the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries, many thousands of Portuguese became captives in the Muslim city-states of North Africa or – especially after King Sebastian’s disastrous invasion in 1578 – in Al-Mansur’s Morocco (1578–1603).<sup>10</sup> These captives were either ransomed, by the Church or by their own families, or they faced a lifetime of labor. Captives who were not from the nobility had little prospect of being ransomed. Were these Portuguese ‘slaves’? We may define ‘captives’ as those prisoners who were held primarily for their ransom value and ‘slaves’ as those used primarily for their work value. This distinction between different forms of unfree labor based upon degrees of coercion is necessarily arbitrary and may be situated within the broader, and equally arbitrary, conceptual model of free vs. unfree labor.<sup>11</sup>

Captivity was similarly constructed among Guinea Coast societies. While little direct historical evidence for the pre-contact period exists, indirect evidence strongly suggests that forms of kinship-secured ‘loaning’ of individuals – effectively constituting temporary captivity, as in the case of pawning or captivity as collateral for on-going commercial transactions (see below) – were widely practiced and were undoubtedly indigenous. Indirect evidence includes the apparent willingness of local rulers to entrust members of their own entourage, even family members, to Portuguese ships. This is probably how the first translators developed their skills. In a related episode from 1486, Bemoin Gilem (“Buumi Jeleen”), a claimant to the Wolof throne, traveled personally to Lisbon to seek military assistance from King João II.<sup>12</sup> Bemoin was treated as a political refugee – until he was murdered by the Portuguese captain returning him to Senegal.

In Senegambia, Portuguese and Luso-African merchants treated local African rulers and their families and entourage similarly to members of their own social elite. During the first 150 years of Portuguese presence, members of local African elites rarely became captives. When captured, they could reasonably hope to regain both their freedom and their prior social status. We may call this ‘elite captivity.’ José Horta describes the status of African elites who found themselves in the Cape Verde Islands; generally their free status was retained, but even when this status was temporarily not respected, they would regain their freedom when they returned to the African coast.<sup>13</sup>

Just as pawns – to use Sean Kelly’s (2015: 94) formulation – “could legitimately expect humane treatment, to say nothing of redemption,” so, too, were Portuguese captives remarkably well-treated in Marrakesh under Al-Mansur. Antonio Saldanha (1997), himself a captive for fourteen years, lauded the Moroccan ruler for his humane treatment of European captives.

For both Portuguese and West Africans, ‘elite captivity’ often entailed the active engagement of near kin in order for the individual to re-attain their freedom. Portuguese captives in Morocco obtained freedom when relatives paid ransom. African pawns in Upper Guinea obtained freedom when the relatives for whose financial transactions they were serving as collateral redeemed their debt. African ‘elite captivity’ might also serve to guarantee a treaty or agreement between two polities. A relatively early example occurred in 1683 at Great-Friedricksburg (Gold Coast). Seeking to entice the Brandenburgers to establish a trading fort in their territory, people of Akwida

<sup>10</sup> See Mark (2018). At the Battle of Al-Kasr Kebir [Alcazar-quivir] in August 1578, 2,500 Portuguese were taken captive by the forces of Ahmed Al-Mansur.

<sup>11</sup> The question “How free is free labour?” is articulated by Behrendt, Eltis, and Richardson (2001: 474). The authors write: “all labour is forced in the sense that all decisions to work for someone else result from an evaluation on the part of the worker that working is less unpleasant than the alternative – which for a slave would be physical violence and for a ‘free’ worker would be starvation. The choice of the latter emerges from a state-enforced system of property rights and the unequal distribution of the resulting property.”

<sup>12</sup> On Bemoin and his kin and followers, see Horta (2014).

<sup>13</sup> Horta (2014: 26) writes: “O estatuto social e político próprio das elites africanas da costa podia ser conservado e respeitado no meio cabo- verdiano e, no limite, ser recuperado de facto no regresso ao continente.”

sent an emissary, who offered three of the local ruler's own family members as security to encourage negotiations (Jones 1985: 50–51). Sometimes this practice of treaty-hostages implied extended residence in the other polity's capital.

In 1694, the King of Bissau engaged in a complex sequence of diplomatic and religious arrangements secured by the pawning of his family members. King Becampolo Co entrusted no less than six of his own sons to others: the eldest to the King of Cabo (Kaabu) and five younger sons to the Bishop of Bissau. Upon the return of the oldest son from Kaabu, he then promised the youth to Bishop Portuense. This young man's travels as a pawn thus embodied his father's multiple relationships of symbolic subordination.<sup>14</sup>

Such protected captivity could be prolonged. Arcin (1911) cites a late instance of this practice in Futa Jalon ca. 1840, where the Soso (Susu) ruler Balla Koumba had to send his son Yusufu to be raised in Timbo.<sup>15</sup> The son thereby served as guarantor for the treaty between his father and the Almamy of Futa Jalon, to whom Bella Koumba was most definitely subservient. Timbo was a center of religious learning in the Muslim state of Futa Jalon. The son's presence there implies his adherence to Islamic norms and practices. This may have had further religious implications if indeed he eventually returned home to claim his father's inheritance. Trajano Filho (1998: 64) cites another, roughly contemporary instance of the subordinate ruler ensuring that he would observe a treaty by entrusting a relative as a pawn to live in the dominant state's court: a Papel king sent his son to live in Kaabu.

The practice of confiding one's offspring to another family was not limited to just formal treaties. It was also a means of solidifying close relations among family groups, or even a means of incorporating outsiders, or 'strangers,' into the local community. As Allen Howard (2000: 20) has observed, Mande men and women of high social rank could facilitate political and commercial connections by sending younger family members to live with other kin groups. Marriages were the ultimate expression of such exchange of group members.

Early Portuguese sources present highly ambiguous and at times seemingly contradictory descriptions of the social status of individual members of local African elites. In one notable early seventeenth-century source, the Cape Verdean merchant André Donelha (1977 [1625])<sup>16</sup> describes a young Cape Verdean neighbor of his, Gaspar Vaz, in two totally different contexts. When they first knew each other, Vaz was as a Christian, a tailor, and 'slave.' Later, while on a trading voyage to the Manding village of Casão in the Gambia River, Donelha encounters the same Gaspar Vaz. Now, however, Vaz is a Muslim, a merchant, and, as the nephew and potential heir of the local Manding chief official, or *sandegil* [*santigi*], he is clearly a member of the local elite.<sup>17</sup> I have been puzzled by this seeming contradiction for years. I now suspect both that Vaz may be one of the

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<sup>14</sup> Avelino Teixeira da Mota (1974: 73–74) "Carta do Bispo de Cabo Verde D. Fr. Vitoriano Portuense para sua majestade el Rei D. Pedro II, em que dá conta da missão e visita ao sertão, Cacheu e reino de Bissau – 1694." The original is preserved in two copies in the Biblioteca Geral da Universidade de Coimbra (cód. 504, fl. 204–207; cód. 620, fl. 266–274). I am indebted to Wilson Trajano Filho for calling my attention to this passage.

<sup>15</sup> Yusufu was subsequently named chief of Ouantanbakiri; see Arcin (1911: 159).

<sup>16</sup> For the Portuguese-French edition, see André Donelha (1977 [1625]: 145): "Achei um negro mancebo Mandinga, por nome Gaspar Vaz, que fora escravo nesta ilha de um vizinho meu em São Pedro, alfaiste (...)."

<sup>17</sup> *Sandeguil* [*santigi*] may be translated, according to David Skinner (1978), as 'village chief' or 'subchief.' Allen Howard (2000: 25), by contrast, argues that *santigi* is, more precisely, the counselor to the Alkali. 'Al-cadi' (Portuguese, from Arabic) may, in turn, have referred either to the civil authority or to a local judge. Either interpretation would be consistent with the context of Vaz' use of the term. Donelha reports that Vaz referred to his uncle as "Sandeguil, senhor esta aldeia, o qual os tangomaos chamam duque, por ser a segunda pessoa do rei" (Donelha 1977 [1625]: 148). Vaz took Donelha to visit the courthouse, where his uncle worked (ibid.: 150). I am indebted to Anita Schroven for calling my attention to these varying interpretations.

cases that led Lovejoy to revise his view and conclude that there *was* pawning in the Gambia, and that Vaz had been not so much a slave as a pawn. The seeming discrepancy can thus be explained: Vaz may well have been serving as a pawn when Donelha first encountered him in the Cape Verde Islands; he was subsequently redeemed. Upon their meeting in the Gambia, Vaz emphasizes that he expects to inherit his uncle's position as 'Sandegil.'<sup>18</sup> He thereby confirms that he is close kin, a fact that would be consistent with his previously having been pawned.

One may, however, hypothesize several other explanations, both consistent with local practices that were closely associated with kinship ties. Vaz may indeed have been captured by slave raiders but, as a close relative of the Manding ruler in the most important trading port of the middle Gambia, he would have been a prime candidate to be ransomed. Or, once his high status was discovered, he would simply have been freed. Another, less likely possibility is that he had sought and received a form of political refuge among Portuguese merchants. However, since we have no sources that mention civil strife at that moment in the Casão region of the Gambia, this hypothesis is highly unlikely.

Muslims, as Lovejoy argues, may not have practiced pawning. However, they most certainly did practice ransoming of captives. Indeed, in Morocco after 1578, it was the ransom paid to free Portuguese nobility after the Battle of Alcázar-quivir that provided Ahmed Al-Mansur with the infusion of capital necessary to purchase armaments and then to set up a local weapons industry in Marrakesh.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, European merchants in West Africa on occasion had to ransom their captured colleagues. At Cape Mount in 1683, Otto Friedrich von der Groeben (having just mentioned an incident of French ships kidnapping Africans and transporting them into slavery) observes: "But we were not willing to trust them [the Africans]; for they are so wicked that they often keep Christians as their prisoners until the Christians are obliged to ransom themselves with goods to the value of a few thousand rix-dollars."<sup>20</sup>

One way for both parties to protect themselves against kidnapping was to exchange hostages. These individuals would then be returned at the end of the commercial dealings. This was a useful practice when the parties either did not know each other, or when they did know and had reason to distrust each other. Von der Groeben, not surprisingly, engaged in such an exchange of hostages.<sup>21</sup> Brooks also refers to late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century instances of Europeans being required to leave hostages with their African trading partners along the Petite Côte (Brooks 2003: 205).

Two centuries later, the English made an abortive attempt to establish a settlement at Bolama in present-day Guinea-Bissau. As Phillip Beaver, the leader and the chronicler of this failed settlement recounts, the English were subjected to raids by the neighboring Bijogo peoples. The Bijogo inhabited a group of adjacent coastal islands and they were feared as slave raiders. They did not hesitate to take Europeans as their slaves (or captives), including one of the English women who had accompanied Beaver. Beaver had no option other than to negotiate and pay her release.

Local West African rulers and their immediate family members were likely to experience only temporary captivity, whether they were taken captive against their will or renounced their freedom voluntarily. One might term this second condition 'subordinate political asylum'. André Donelha's

<sup>18</sup> On Gaspar Vaz, see Mark (2002).

<sup>19</sup> See Saldanha (1997); see also Mark (2018).

<sup>20</sup> What's sauce for the goose, is sauce for the gander. See Jones (1985: 29).

<sup>21</sup> "[W]hereupon the Negroes first brought a Black to the boat and asked that one of us should go ashore as a hostage." Cited in Jones (1985: 29).

account of several Sape/Temne rulers (from Sierra Leone and Guinée) who were forced to flee their homeland in the aftermath of the Mane ‘invasion’ (1550s) and to seek refuge among the Portuguese is a case in point. This episode is carefully analyzed by José Horta.<sup>22</sup> The Temne rulers Caia and Bure were welcomed as refugees, along with their wives and children, at S. Domingos. Several of their offspring were subsequently educated at Ribeira Grande on Santiago Island. Ultimately, one of them, Ventura de Sequiera, returned to his home community as *beca* (ruler).

The peregrinations of another self-exiled Bulom ruler who took the name Pedro are also analyzed by Horta. This man, his royal status somehow overlooked, was enslaved and brought to Lisbon. As his name suggests, Pedro most probably was or became a Christian. Upon subsequently returning to Santiago Island, he could have reclaimed his free status, but apparently, he chose not to do so.<sup>23</sup> Pedro’s reasons are unclear but his decision suggests that captivity may have been, for him, less onerous than the prospect of returning to the Sierra Leone community whose leadership he had lost.<sup>24</sup> An individual of high status might be captured, or a local ruler could, in a time of civil war, give himself over to the Portuguese into a form of protective custody. Ultimately, however, the individual and their immediate family members could expect to regain their prior status as free men and women. Significantly, this was similar to both the almost deferential treatment meted out to members of the Portuguese social elite who were captured in sixteenth-century Morocco, and the fate of many of that nobility, who were ultimately ransomed and returned to Portugal.

The fact that both Ventura de Sequiera and the other exiled heir seem to have been Christians certainly influenced the reception and support they received from Portuguese authorities. Gaspar Vaz, too, presents himself to Donelha as Christian, despite his obvious Muslim identity in the Gambia. For these individuals, their ostensible religious affiliation facilitated alliances, commercial as well as political, with the Portuguese.

In late sixteenth-century southern Europe, the Ottoman Empire represented an enduring military threat. European rulers, notably the Habsburgs, sought African Christian rulers who might serve as allies against this perceived threat. They were encouraged in this search by the image of the African Christian monarch – with its origins in the late medieval legend of Prester John. The figure of an idealized African Christian monarch also appears frequently – and with direct reference to the Ottoman threat – in sixteenth-century Iberian and German paintings of the “Adoration of the Magi.” Local rulers from Upper Guinea, men such as Ventura de Sequiera, appeared to fulfill this promise of the part legendary, part biblical ally.

On 4 April 1612 Joshua Israel, a Sephardic merchant living on Senegal’s Petite Côte, wrote a letter to D. Sebastião, the King of Bussis, a principality located at the mouth of Rio Geba, south of Cacheu. This king was the largest slave trader in Upper Guinea, and Israel hoped to acquire captives from him. The autograph letter survives in the Portuguese archives.<sup>25</sup> Israel signed not with his Jewish name, but with his Portuguese Christian name of Luís Fernandes Duarte.

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<sup>22</sup> For a clear and detailed account of the Sape rulers and their offspring who sought refuge among Portuguese merchants in Cacheu and S. Domingos in the second half of the sixteenth century, see Horta (2014); see also Mark and Horta (2013). The Mane invasion is now understood by historians to have been more of a civil conflict than a holocaust. It was certainly violent, but just as certainly not a culture-destroying invasion. Within a generation, Manes and Sapes – presumably members of the elite – had intermarried to a significant degree.

<sup>23</sup> See Horta (2014: 31–32); citing Almada (1964 [1594]: 138).

<sup>24</sup> Wilson Trajano Filho suggests (personal communication, January 2019) that Pedro may have reasoned it was better to be the dependent of a powerful individual than to be a minor ruler with few dependents. This may imply some linguistic (and conceptual) inconsistency between the Portuguese ‘escravo’ and the Bulom (or Sape/Sapi) understanding of subordinate status.

<sup>25</sup> Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, Inquisição de Lisboa, livro 205, fl. 554. See also Mark and Horta (2011: 174).



Duarte proposes that the King of Bussis send him a boat filled with young boys, men, and women “of appropriate age” as captives to be sold; in return, Duarte will send him Moorish horses, iron bars, fine cotton textiles, and other goods. Duarte also asks that the king send his own son, whom Duarte will raise as a Christian. (Much is going on here in terms of identity.) Nothing came of this initiative. Nevertheless, we may ask, why should the king entrust his son to this European merchant? What role would the boy have played? He was certainly not to have served as a pawn, since Duarte is asking the king to send him the slaves first, meaning that Duarte, not Sebastião, would have incurred the debt.

The chronology is important. 1612 is barely a generation after the Sape princes had been raised and educated in Santiago. In the middle Gambia, Gaspar Vaz may still have been active as a trader (or perhaps even as the *satigi* in Cassão). And on Santiago Island, António Tinoco, as ‘Capitão-Corregedor,’ had recently freed several Bulom captives, presumably because, as African royalty, they should not be enslaved (Horta 2014: 31–32). The status of royal heirs apparent, associated with their important economic role as intermediaries with the Portuguese, was securely established. This was most likely the role that Joshua Israel was proposing for the son of King Sebastião.

Other questions arise: Might Duarte’s proposal to King Sebastião offer a clue to the origins of the *grumetes* (or *gourmettes*), those free Africans who served as cultural brokers, as boat pilots, and as interpreters, and who were Christians? The category probably comprised several sub-groups of Africans who had adopted, to a greater or lesser degree, Euro-African (or crioulo) culture. And the meaning of the term *gourmette* – used rather too loosely by some historians – was also fluid across time, changing radically by the early nineteenth century. Further research may shed additional light on the origins of the *gourmettes*.

The fact that Portuguese as well as West Africans were familiar with such practices as ransoming and the deferential treatment of temporarily subservient elites helps us better to understand the dynamics of early European-African commercial relations in the region of the first extended contact along the Upper Guinea Coast. While Europeans certainly did have to respect and adapt to established African practices, precisely those institutions and practices which were already familiar to the Portuguese were the most readily adopted by the early Europeans on the Upper Guinea Coast.

My main two points have been historical. First, as other historians (Lovejoy specifically on the practice of pawning) have clearly demonstrated, European merchants in pre-colonial West Africa generally conformed to local African norms of exchange and credit. This phenomenon was consistent with the broader acceptance of African social norms by Europeans and their Euro-African descendants living both along the Upper Guinea Coast and in the Cape Verde Islands.<sup>26</sup> Second, in the earliest period of inter-cultural contact, which primarily took place between Portuguese and Africans along the Upper Guinea Coast, those institutions that were already familiar to both parties were most likely to be adopted by all participants in the encounter. This dynamic, I argue, characterized the practice of ransoming of captives along the Upper Guinea Coast. When Portuguese merchants arrived in sixteenth-century West Africa, they were already familiar with a range of systems of captivity, including both ransoming and protective custody.

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<sup>26</sup> To offer a related example of social categories, see José Horta and Peter Mark (2019: in press): “Significantly, local African categories, in turn, determined the approach used by Portuguese ‘moradores,’ as well as the ‘lançados’ and Luso-Africans who lived on the Guinea Coast as well in the Cape Verde Islands.”

The ready adoption of local commercial practices by Portuguese and Luso-Africans was also facilitated by the forms of social organization prevalent along much of the Upper Guinea Coast. Indigenous social structure encouraged landlord-stranger relations, in part because social organization was based on extended family units characterized by complex networks of conjugal ties, fictive kinship, and clientele relations that facilitated the incorporation of the new arrivals.<sup>27</sup>

In Senegambia by the beginning of the seventeenth century, the dynamic of adopting practices familiar to both parties helps to explain the rapid acceptance of ransoming and protective custody, and the related institution of pawning, by African, Portuguese, and ‘lançado’<sup>28</sup> merchants engaged in the Atlantic trade.

### **Historical Continuities**

So now, let me ask, can we trace the story of pawning, ransoming, and the use of human collateral to the colonial period? Today, these institutions, of course, no longer function. Might we, nevertheless, find some broader continuity in the present in the Casamance-Rivières du Sud region?

We first need to broaden our conceptual framework. From the specific practices cited here, let us ask: what are the underlying structures or concepts common to these practices? The obvious answer: reliance on extended kinship to obtain credit and to secure ransom in cases of necessity (be that among Portuguese nobility or Upper Guinea Coast elite). Protective custody implies mutual recognition of elevated social status. That, too, relates to kinship, albeit indirectly. We have no evidence that Portuguese or West Africans enslaved those of high status before 1600. This stricture, however, was not always followed at the height of the Atlantic slave trade.

Moving our focus to the role of kinship relations, first in treaties and subsequently in disputes (about credit, about charges of theft, or regarding witchcraft accusations – which often covered the aforementioned), I will cite three episodes from much later dates. These examples suggest the direction of my argument about continuity.

My first example dates to the moment of transition to colonial government in the Rivières du Sud in 1855. The episode was a dispute between British authorities based in Freetown and a Susu group with whom they were engaged in commerce. It occurred at Mellacorée and culminated in a shootout. An English boat, the ‘Teazer’, had been sent to demand restitution for a perceived injury to English parties. The French administrator and historian Arcin recounts this episode, in which a Susu counselor named Mamadou Touré, who had been sent to negotiate with the British, was taken captive by an inexperienced and impatient ship’s officer:

“Mamadou Touré, notable et conseiller influent, vint au-devant des Anglais sur le Wharf (...). Après une demi-heure d’attente vaine, les commissaires se rembarquèrent emmenant

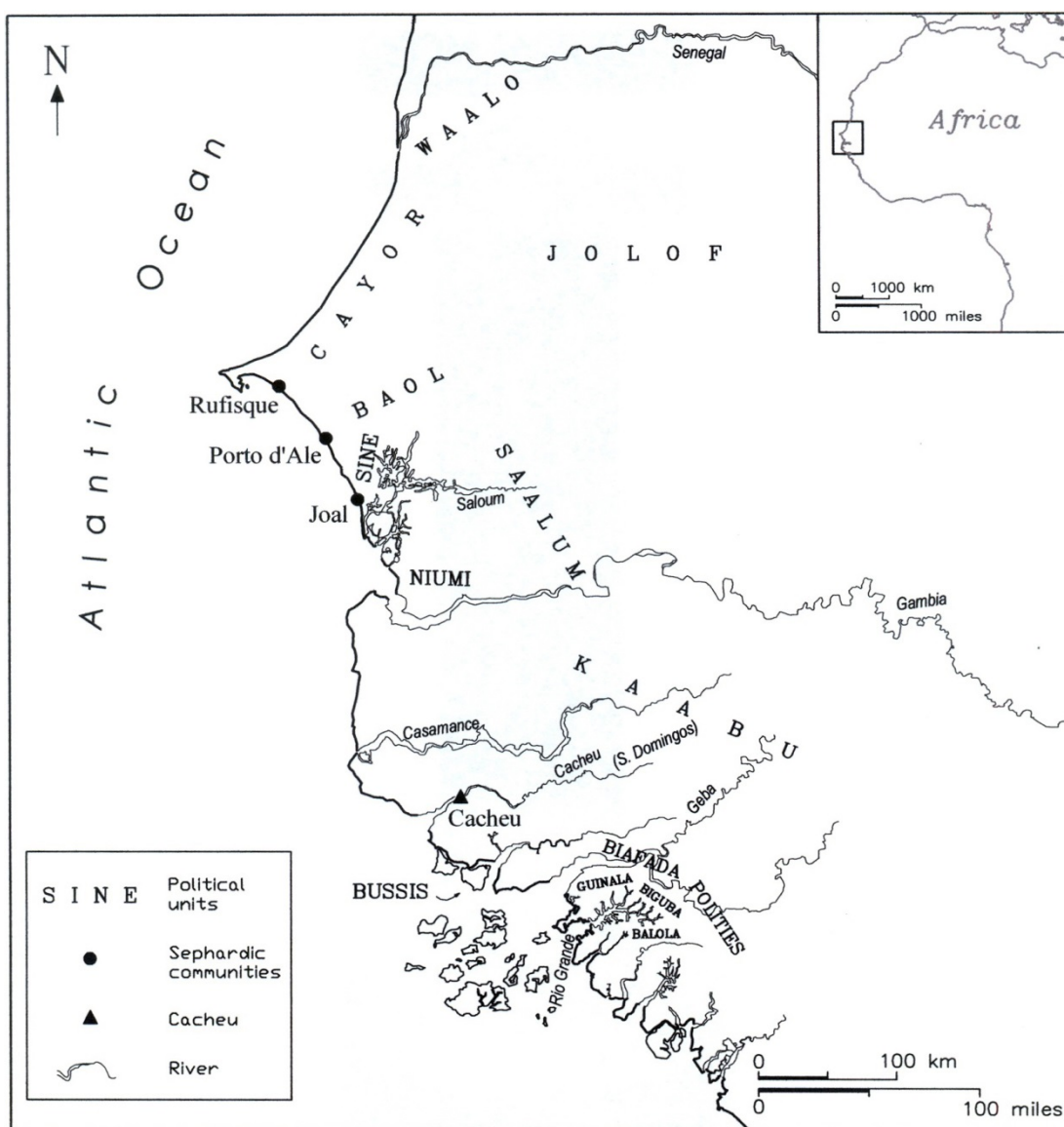
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<sup>27</sup> This social organization, along with the Creole ‘Gã’ that subsequently evolved from Portuguese and Luso-African interaction with Cape Verdean society, is described and analyzed by Trajano Filho (1998).

<sup>28</sup> *Lançados* were Portuguese who had settled among African societies on the coast and who had assimilated culturally into local society, often adopting African religious rituals – such as bodily scarification – and becoming, in the process, more or less culturally ‘African.’

Mamadou Touré comme prisonnier de guerre. Cet acte déloyal autant que maladroit allait exciter au plus haut degré la colère des populations (...).” (Arcin 1911)<sup>29</sup>

The Susu could not ignore such egregious conduct. They ambushed and attacked the English. In the fighting that ensued, 3 British officers and 72 soldiers were killed. What occurred here was seen by the Africans as kidnapping. Touré was a high-ranking envoy. One neither panyarred nor kidnapped such an individual. Taking him as a war captive was counter to all understanding of ransom, panyarring, and kidnapping that Europeans and Guineens had mutually respected through two centuries of slave-trade commerce. Even though the slave trade was not directly involved in the incident, the kidnapping became a ‘causus belli.’



Map 2: Petite Côte, Casamance, Guiné-Bissau. © Peter Mark and José da Silva Horta

<sup>29</sup> “Mamadou Touré, a high official and influential counselor, approached the English on the wharf (...). After waiting in vain for half an hour, the commissioners reembarked, bringing Mamadou Touré as a prisoner of war. This disloyal and maladroit act would enrage the [local] populations.” Translation by the author.

The second example occurred five years later and involved another case of ransoming. The French consul in Cacheu and the Casamance (see map 2) was Emmanuel Bertrand-Bocandé. Bocandé was a merchant, as well as a noted ethnographer, who had lived in Casamance for a decade. He spoke Crioulo and Mandinka and quite possibly a dialect of what would later come to be known as Jola. He had married a local ‘Portuguese’ woman and they had a small child. In 1860, while he was absent on leave in Paris, young men from Thionk-Essyl – the largest community in the Lower Casamance outside Ziguinchor, as well as my adopted home during my fieldwork – following an established local practice that is documented both in French colonial records and in oral history, arrived at Carabane by war canoe, kidnapped Bertrand-Bocandé’s wife and son, and demanded 500 francs as ransom from the French. The French were, after all, at the very least Bocandé’s fictive kin. Kidnapping was a common, if not very welcome practice among and between Jolas, Balantas, and Manding. It is likely that the ancestors of these Jolas practiced similar kidnappings, including of Europeans, in the early seventeenth century (Brooks 2003: 75).

It was not, however, acceptable to kidnap and demand that ransom be paid by the French in the newly-formed colony of Senegal under Faidherbe. The governor sent a military expedition led by the man who would become his successor, Pinet-Laprade. The Jola warriors were armed with bows – and surely muskets acquired from the British at Lincoln (Elinkine) – and with, as defensive weapons, shields made of elephant hide. These arms were no match for the French weapons. Several warriors from Thionk were killed. Bocandé’s wife and child were returned, no ransom was paid, and the raids from Thionk came to an end.

The men of Thionk-Essyl had the misfortune to carry out their kidnapping just at the moment that the French, in the course of establishing colonial control over Senegal, were effectively changing the rules of the game. The practice of ransoming had been accepted by the English at Bolama in the 1790s, but only because they were not in a position of strength. 1860 was a transitional moment in the Casamance. The balance of power had shifted. The practice of kidnapping, at least of the immediate kin of Europeans, ended rather abruptly.

For my third example, I jump forward to 1911; colonial rule was well underway to being established in southern Casamance and in northern Guinea-Bissau. There were still armed ‘revolts’ by Jola communities refusing to pay the ‘impot,’ including revolts in the village of Seleky six years later. In his annual report for 1911, the Administrateur Supérieur of the Casamance observed an explosion of witchcraft accusations. Especially among the Balantas, dozens of individuals were accused and were forced to submit to the ordeal known as *tali*, or ‘red water.’ They were made to drink a brew made from the deadly bark of the *erythrophloem guineensis* tree. Those who died were presumed to have been guilty. Those who survived, did so because the persons administering the poison added a purgative, causing them to vomit the medicine before they could absorb a fatal dose. Throughout the Balantacunda in southern Casamance, a wave of *tali* ordeals that began in April 1911 claimed massive numbers of victims. The Administrateur Supérieur of Casamance, Maclaud, asserted that mortality in some villages approached 20 percent of the population.<sup>30</sup>

French observers viewed the poison ordeal as a form of extortion.<sup>31</sup> If the relatives of the accused offered sufficient payment to those administering the poison, a purgative would be administered

<sup>30</sup> Archives Nationales-Outre-Mer, Sénégal VIII 33, report of Maclaud, 6 July 1912.

<sup>31</sup> Maclaud, *ibid.*, writes: “Cette épreuve a pu jadis être faite de bonne foi; mais il semble bien qu’il n’en soit plus ainsi de nos jours. [Celui] qui prépare le poison (...) céderait trop facilement à ses instincts de cupidité ou de vengeance.”

with the red water. If, however, kin did not come up with the necessary payment, the accused would die an agonizing death.<sup>32</sup>

What was going on here? From a broader perspective, *tali* appears as another manifestation of the marshaling of kinship ties, here in the form of a witchcraft trial. But what is witchcraft, if not the accusation against an individual that they have disregarded societal norms, often with respect to enriching themselves at the expense of others – through theft or the use of forces from the invisible world? I suggest that there was often an economic element involved. And here, as with credit and collateral, the functioning mechanism for resolving a dispute was to involve the extended kin. If we take a European commercial or capitalist interpretation, *tali* is very different from ransoming. But from a local perspective that involves both kin and the immanence of the invisible world, it is part of the same socially regulated system that encompasses both subordination and economic exchange.

My final example comes from my own fieldwork. It is something I have never written about, because it was the most difficult experience of my time in the field. During my year living in Casamance, 1974–1975, I worked closely with an assistant. He was my language teacher and guide. When I returned to the field a year later, although I did not need an interpreter, I did feel I owed it to him to offer employment again. This time, things did not work out well. Under circumstances that left no doubt as to the guilty party, about 30,000 CFA disappeared from my backpack while we were in my adopted home community of Thionk-Essyl. That week, after the assistant abruptly left, and through painful talks with my host family – who were more upset than I, and who sensed their family reputation for honesty to be at stake – I gradually accepted the fact that it was my assistant who had taken the money.

My Muslim family, meanwhile, insisted that I permit them to hold a public ceremony. There, they would implore Allah to punish the thief, who would either make restitution or go mad. This ceremony would serve primarily to clear the good name of the family. I agreed. Next, I traveled to my assistant's home village. I did not confront the man directly. Rather, we arranged to meet together with his closest relative. The relative did indeed serve as an intermediary; he told me that my assistant had been acting very strangely since returning home. Did I have any idea why? I explained the circumstances of the disappearance of the money. I also described my family's public prayer. I made no accusations. The discussion went on between him and me. Shortly thereafter, a way was found for my assistant to make restitution without ever admitting guilt. The situation was resolved in the only way possible – through calling upon the kin to adjudicate.

It was a minor episode. Yet here, too, the actors included both Casamançais and a foreign visitor. And the structure whereby the problem was resolved, or by which the dispute was settled, was fundamentally the same – by marshaling the relevant kin: first the family in Thionk into which I, a stranger, had been adopted, then my assistant's closest kin. Much in the way that pawning and ransoming were used in earlier centuries, it was only the web of kinship and family connections, both real and fictive, that led to a resolution of the issue.

The one variable that most clearly distinguishes this situation from the earlier, colonial era incidents concerns the relative power of the two parties. I did not represent, nor was I even implicitly supported by a potentially overwhelming force, such as that represented by the French

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<sup>32</sup> Archives Nationales du Sénégal 13G 381 6; 13G 474 2; see also Congrégation des Pères de St. Esprit, Archives, Journal de la Communauté de Ziguinchor 1900–1917; consulted in 1975, at which time the Archives were in Paris and the journal in question was in 'boîte 673.'

colonial administration or the military. Had my assistant and his family refused to consider any form of restitution, I would have had no recourse. Nevertheless, in other respects, we were not on equal footing. The salary I paid to my assistant represented a source of significant revenue. Being employed by a foreign researcher undoubtedly also brought him a degree of social capital. These factors undoubtedly affected the family's decision.

I do not argue that these more recent cases are equivalent to one another. Nevertheless, some elements may provide a constructive comparative exercise. The features held in common across historical eras may have implications for non-indigenous actors engaged in fostering conflict resolution in contemporary Casamance.

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