Mangrove Societies and Rice Production in West Africa

On the Atlantic coast of West Africa, mangrove societies and their work-intensive and highly innovative rice production system caught the attention of external observers ever since the first European travelers arrived in the Casamance region in today’s Senegal. Mangroves there, as in the coastal regions between Gambia and Sierra Leone, have been used for agriculture since several centuries ago, through a complex set of techniques. These include the construction of dikes, canals, and sometimes earthen dams; the ploughing of fields with a long hand plough; and the planting of different varieties of *Oryza glaberrima* and *O. sativa*. For it to be highly productive, mangrove swamp rice farming is highly labor intensive during peak times and a continuous, year-round monitoring of the fields’ dikes is required. It demands a hard-work ethic, but it also depends on high precipitation levels and a good seasonal distribution of rain.

It was precisely in this cradle of the domestication of African rice and of hand ploughing in the mangroves of the Casamance region that the late Olga Linares (for example, *Power, Prayer and Production: The Jola of Casamance, Sénégal* [1992]) carried out an extraordinary long-term study of the sociopolitical and agricultural transformations induced by the conversion to Islam and by the adoption of peanuts as a cash crop among the Jola of Senegal. Other renowned scholars—historians, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and geographers—such as Louis-Vincent Thomas, Robert M. Baum, Marie-Christine Cormier-Salem, Lamine Diédhiou, Odile Journet, Vincent Foucher, Peter Mark, and Jordi Tomàs, also focused their attention on the Jola, despite the Jola’s minute importance in demographic terms.[1] In Guinea-Bissau, where the work of Jola scholars is much more limited than in Senegal, the ethnic group is known as Felupe, and its population is even tinier than the Jola in Senegal. This, however, does not render these mangrove farmers less important in the country’s cultural (and agricultural) landscape.

Joanna Davidson embarked on an ethnographic journey with Bissau-Guinean Jola, zeroing in on identity and social change through the lens of rice as “a total social
fact,” as she puts it à la Marcel Mauss (p. 5). Much like Linares, she adopts the classic holistic approach, but unlike her predecessor, Davidson uses storytelling to construct a beautiful and captivating narrative about the most emblematic mangrove rice producers of Guinea-Bissau and of West Africa. Indeed, among the many mangrove rice farmers, the Jola are unique in stating that rice seeds were given to them by Emitai (the high God), who established a contract with them through which he would send enough rain, provided they kept working hard. Only among the Jola is African rice sacred and its seeds still cultivated in large quantities, although it cannot be sold. Jola exclusively employ African rice varieties in certain ceremonies and rituals; they value it as more nutritious and tastier than Asian rice varieties, and they consider it as part of the substance that confers Jola personhood. This implies that, as the author tells us, a light rice mush has to be given to babies “from the moment of their birth” (p. 56).

An identity woven around a hard-work ethic and their rejection of theft make Jola unique among their neighbors, as Davidson tells us. Jola share with the Balanta—great rice farmers but also well-known thieves—an identity constructed around rice production and intensive field labor. Both Jola and Balanta elders also share their disdain for trade and other economic activities that could withdraw men from ploughing the rice fields and repairing the dikes; they also share a distrust of schooling. Among the Jola (as well as among the Balanta) some found themselves obliged to side with colonial authorities in order to avoid the destruction of their rice fields and villages. Underneath these similarities, however, there are crucial differences. The 1960s and 1970s drought struck Jola’s livelihoods more dramatically, and Jola elders started to let their children study and learn other activities and to migrate much sooner than the Balanta and many other Bissau-Guinean groups. Surprisingly, and contrary to any other senior local people with whom I talked in Guinea-Bissau, Davidson tells us, Jola elders feel pity for their children, who “now have to work harder, and start working earlier, whereas previously children had a relatively carefree existence” (p. 78). But even more surprising for me is the fact that Jola elders work and try to provide for their own sustenance until they become completely incapable. Besides, now that the levirate has almost been abandoned due to conversion to Christianity and economic change, the author tells us, many widowed women have to build their own houses and to plough the fields (typical male activities) so as to be able to shelter and feed their children and themselves. Indeed, the Jola’s work ethic makes all of them “keep [their] feet in the fire” and “fend for themselves” (pp. 156, 165).

Citing David Parkin, Davidson speaks of a “paradox of custom” (p. 98), in the sense that agricultural hard manual work became totally detached from its main purported aim—to provide sustenance. Jola elders, despite increased schooling, migration, and reduced harvests due to climate change, can still count on their youth returning during the rainy season to plough the fields and plant the rice seedlings (or send money to help hire laborers) and to do the harvest. Davidson tells us about the important role of youth associations in keeping migrants attached to their villages and to rice production. After the rainy season, Jola youth return to the cities where they work or study with a bag of African rice to nourish and delight themselves and to reconstruct their identity far from their birthplace.

Davidson states that youth “work associations have become an important mechanism for the social reproduction of Jola agricultural production, in some respects more so than the previous control exerted through the spirit shrines” (p. 98). This is only one side of the story, as one of the reasons for the young returning to the villages during the rainy season is fear of witchcraft attacks. The power of the shrines may be eroded by the lack of sufficient rainfall to produce large rice surpluses needed for the rituals, but fear of witchcraft did not contribute to this phenomenon. Indeed, Davidson’s extensive ethnographic material on the explanations for infant mortality and barrenness and the way some try to avoid becoming responsible for spirit shrines illustrates how—in Peter Geschiere and Christian Fisiy’s words—“witchcraft is the dark side of kinship” in Africa.[2]

With regard to Ampa Badji’s statements that farming became “outdated” and that farmers “will never find a wife,” Davidson asks: “Will the ethic of hard work translate to endeavors beyond rice cultivation?” (p. 173). Paolo Gaibazzi’s study about how the Soninke of Gambia cultivate an “agrarian ethos” to help them succeed in their out-migration endeavors would have been helpful in explaining the Jola’s insistence on maintaining a hard-work regime.[3] Indeed, in Bissau, Jola are preferred and sought after for such jobs as guards and maids precisely because of their hard-work ethic and abhorrence of theft. But what about the success of a hard-work ethic in relation to schooling? Davidson is brave enough to point to the perverse results of the intent to promote girls’ schooling in Guinea-Bissau; after all, gender based
Interventions have been trying to promote women’s education through positive discrimination actions in the belief that it will bring more voice and more rights. Jola parents—unlike the majority of those belonging to other ethnic groups—early saw the need to support the education of their daughters to help them avoid a life of hard work with no benefits. But the result has been early pregnancies and more mouths to feed with continuing poor harvests. Unlike the parents of other groups, Jola parents have not responded to this pressure with promoting earlier arranged marriages, and Davidson tells us about the lives of many girls who have successive pregnancies without even knowing who the father is. But I suspect that there must be some silver lining, and I would have liked to hear more about the life-stories of girls (and boys) who succeeded, as the hard-work ethic could surely also be applied to study.

While reading Davidson’s book, I revisited my own experience among the Jola of northern Guinea-Bissau, as the narrative starts with the very event that made me meet the central characters—Nho Keboral and Ampa Badji—in the first instance. In 2009, I was invited and volunteered to help with the making of a documentary aimed at raising funds to help a nongovernmental organization (NGO) build wells in Jola territory. The NGO and those who funded the documentary wanted to transmit a stereotyped idea of a totally unbalanced gender division of work. In this narrative trope, African women have to run daily “marathons” to be able to accomplish all their domestic and agricultural duties. Against all odds, in my interviews, Keboral described a symbiotic relationship between Jola husbands and wives in the performance of agricultural and non-agricultural work; in Davidson’s words, “A Jola family is, in fact, a ‘united front’” (p. 152). In her rough and straightforward way of speaking—so well described by Davidson—Keboral specifically stressed the mortal dangers men had to face daily in climbing palm trees for tapping wine and cutting the fruits to get some money for household needs. I also interviewed Badji. I met their children and grandchildren, as well as their neighbors; however, only through reading Davidson’s book have I been able to fully understand Jola customs, beliefs, and practices and the way in which Bissau-Guinean Jola “society comes to define itself through the production, consumption and reverence of rice” (p. 12).

Since 2009, I became a regular visitor of Jola villages and an enthusiast of the Jola hard-work ethic and agricultural skills—with a passion that was reinforced after reading Sacred Rice. Davidson starts the book with a chapter on the history of rice and a critique of the productivist approach on research and development interventions in addressing food insecurity, and about the all-encompassing meaning of rice to the Jola. In the following seven chapters, through the lives and stories of Keboral, Badji, their parents, and their children, she explores important anthropological issues of social change, sacralization, secrecy, religious encounters and tensions, identity, intimacy, social aspirations, development, globalization, and climate change. Her writing style, closely emulating her ethnographic method, is holistic. All these themes are knitted together among themselves and with a large body of scholarship; no single chapter can be identified with one single topic. I personally would have liked to hear more about the challenge that out-migration represents for a Jola identity deeply rooted in the mangroves, as well as about the plural conditions in which such identity is performed and about the Jola/non-Jola encounters.

With this review, I hope to have enticed readers to read the book and follow Davidson’s fascinating ethnographic narrative about the struggle for survival of small farming communities in West Africa. It deftly raises readers’ awareness of a changing economic and environmental context that has entered into conflict with a livelihood and a moral and economic system centered on rice production, theft avoidance, and exchange—all of which until some decades ago characterized their identity. Although highly circumscribed in geographical terms, it is a human struggle that affects us all and that so well exemplifies the human condition in an increasingly globalizing world.

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