

# Conflict in the Senegal River Valley

---

December 1998

**Author**

**Fall**

**Aziz Salmone**

In 1989, a conflict erupted along the Senegal River Valley, which forms the border between Senegal and Mauritania, on the Atlantic coast of Africa. A dispute between Mauritanian herders and Senegalese farmers that led to two people being killed and scores injured unleashed a wave of violence that spread as far as the two capital cities, Dakar and Nouakchott. Selective killings, expulsions, and expropriations followed. In addition to thousands of dead and wounded, over a quarter of a million people were affected, as entire communities were expelled on both sides of the border; Mauritanian merchants were forced out of Senegal and around 80,000 of their Halpulaar-en, Soninké and Wolof compatriots were deported from the right bank of the river and lost everything, including their nationality.

The conflict between Mauritania and Senegal is rooted in land tenure issues and rural conditions found in the Senegal River Valley. The area where the conflict is centered has been deeply affected by the construction of dams built upstream and downstream. These expensive dams are at the heart of regional integration strategies and the plans of the OMVS (The Senegal River Development Scheme). However, they have exacerbated problems in regional land tenure that has often led to tragic consequences for the area's residents.

## Traditional Tenure Regulations and Rural Conditions

Prior to the construction of the dams in the 1980s and significant land reforms, the region's population abided by modes of tenure regulation and occupation specific to each ethnic group. The Halpulaar-en (commonly known as Fulani), Soninké, and the Maures (or Moors), and Wolof -- all ethnic groups stratified by caste -- relied on subsistence farming, pastoralism and some fishing. The gum trade and Western urbanization of Saint Louis opened up small valley communities along the Sénégal River. Gradually, groundnut monoculture,

transferring the capital from St. Louis to Dakar, successive droughts, and emigration further marginalized the river zone and overshadowed the severeness of the region's land problems.

Traditionally, communities on both sides of the river practiced forms of cultivation that integrated agricultural, pastoral, and fishing activities. Flood plain and rain-fed agriculture were practiced on different types of lands. Harvests were very unpredictable due to the vagaries of rainfall and flooding. Each plot was subject to complex modes of appropriation and exploitation. While the jeeri, or drier lands, were less coveted, the waalo, or rich recession lands, were subject, among the Halpulaar-en, to the levré authorizing the use of the land in any of a number of land-use arrangements including rental, sharecropping, or the loan of a parcel of land in return for nominal compensation.

Another tenure arrangement involves usufruct rights with payment of a title to the 'landowner' who is in fact more of a traditional guardian than the owner of this inalienable land. The subtle overlapping of properties and their uses according to lineage, household, inheritance, transfer, rental, or sharecropping arrangements, are clearly understood by residents. The hierarchy of access to different types of land depends on one's social position within the caste system. Social relations among the Halpulaar-en, for example, are greatly influenced by access to land. For instance, on flood plains, there are areas where 'landowners,' landholders, and farmers all have land rights. Each one possesses different prerogatives as a result of their tenure, lineage, caste, or status. Potentially confrontational land disputes have been generally resolved locally through traditional arbitration mechanisms.

Despite their economic differences, there existed complimentary relationships between herders and farmers. For instance in the leydi, or landholders lands, once the harvest was complete, cattle was permitted to graze in the basin, thus enriching it with its manure. Exchange relations regarding camels and cattle fostered commercial interdependence between herders and farmers and even resulting in herders becoming semi-sedentary and farmers becoming semi-nomadic. The Maure nomads traveled in tribal and pastoral routes at the end of the 19th century which proved to be an asset during the drought between 1984-1985; thanks to Wolof hospitality and solidarity in the region they were able to save some of their livestock. These complimentary relationships, however, are being eroded. Changes have prompted many herders to abandon their nomadic way of life and become farmers or significantly reduce their herds.

Transhumant pastoralism, subject to the vagaries of nature and dependent on the river to water livestock, also underwent fundamental transformations following

land reforms in both Senegal and Mauritania. Boring wells and other forms of water development led to an increase and concentration of livestock, overgrazing, and deforestation. During the drought in the 1970s, herders became even more sedentary while prompting peasants to emigrate to urban centers or to European metropolises on a seasonal, and increasingly permanent basis. While the migration of younger members of the community helped offset the worst effects of the agricultural crisis through the transfer of their wages back to their communities, it has also put a strain on the remaining labor force and the land-based power of community elders.

The 1973 drought intensified the irrigation craze in the valley, leading communities to question traditional agricultural practices, become more dependent on equipment and inputs, and accelerated the monetarization of social relations. In Senegal, a portion of the money sent home by youths is being spent on motor pumps and other accessories, while the state, through the SAED, the development corporation for the exploitation of land in the Senegal River delta and the valleys of the Senegal and Falémé Rivers, provided central control of rural development and financing. This was the context in which land reforms took place.

#### Modern Principles of Land Ownership, Irrigation, and Land Speculation

In 1905, France established the boundary down the middle of the river that flowed between its two colonies. Twenty-eight years later, another decree imposed a border along the right bank. While communities were scarcely aware of this border, as well as colonial land expropriations carried out under the civil code of July 16, 1932, the fathers of independence and the Organization for African Unity (OAU), maintained the existing colonial borders.

By 1964, legislation on national property was rigorously applied in Senegal, but ignored by traditional rights holders. It divided national property into four categories: urban, wildlife and forestry reserve, pioneer (under the management of development agencies), and agricultural territories. In 1980, this law was applied to the valley, thus cementing the state's rights to unclassified lands. More than the decentralization of 1972, enforcing users' rights combined with land development, transferred authority to elected rural counselors who enjoyed greater powers than traditional rights holders, and assigned land to those who "had the means to develop it" (to the detriment of subsistence farmers).

'Landowners' adapted to these changes by being elected, or co-opting existing counselors. Another gain for area residents in 1986-87 was the addition of pioneer lands in the Delta to their territory.

In 1983, Mauritania overhauled tenure legislation, claimed lands on the banks of the rivers, and abolished traditional tenure. The largely Halpulaar-en communities experienced large-scale expropriations of land by the sudden arrival of farmers from the north who wanted the prime lands created by the dam construction and irrigation projects for rice production. As rice production soared on both sides of the river, elders became nostalgic for the old days of sorghum, fresh fish, and milk still hot from the cow.

Land expropriations were carried out through patronage and business and political networks, but also through the influence of castes and hierarchies that favored the noble classes and their protégés. Those with money had privileged access to irrigated zones. There is no question that the first to suffer from land reforms were those who traditionally worked both sides of the border, namely the peasants who cultivated according to season and who had access on both sides of the river; sometimes they lived on one bank and farmed on the other; raised cattle or shared land with a relative on the other side of the river, etc. In the new context, it was precisely these groups, only marginally sedentarized and whose nationality was open to question, who found it difficult to protect their traditional tenure rights.

Structural adjustment programs, disengaging the state, and liberalizing the economy contributed to exacerbating land hunger and speculation. Producing rice was as costly to the state as it was to the producers, since it requires a lot of land and water and it impoverishes the soil. Improvised development has increased the salt content of the river and depleted over half the lands in the Delta (which have subsequently been abandoned). But both countries are determined to produce rice and are attempting to transform peasants into agricultural laborers (to the debatable benefit of large-scale producers and corporations). If household production and small-scale cultivation had intensified, it could have benefited the communities. Instead, they are being pushed to the brink of extinction.

The multiplication of PIVs (village irrigated perimeters) for rice production cannot keep up with unsatiable producer needs and is exacerbating land hunger and generating ever greater mega-projects. Better rainy seasons encouraged some peasants to return to flood recession lands as agricultural wage laborers, but they came into direct confrontation with developers and business interests. Scarcity of money and land and the growing frustration caused an increase in land disputes between farmers themselves and between farmers and herders. Incidents multiplied in 1988, forcing both countries into some form of reconciliation.

Fratricidal Violence Syndrome

An accord was signed in Aleg, Mauritania in August, 1988. This accord mandated that a detailed report of the lands cultivated by nationals of both countries be produced, that the lands and their users in zones that had undergone country planning were to be protected; and there was to be a freeze on development in the zones where no development had previously taken place. But the accord has gone unheeded. In an incident at Diaw, on the small island of Dundu Khoré (at Diawaraon the Mali/Mauritania/Senegal border), a dispute arose between Mauritanian herders and Senegalese farmers. As previously described, people were killed and injured, stimulating subsequent violence as far as the two national capitals. Economic frustration, as well as latent superiority and inferiority complexes present in the communities found a convenient outlet. The selective killing of Maures in Senegal, and Soninké, Halpulaar-en and Wolof in Mauritania, in a cycle of revenge, foreshadowed expropriations to come.

Thousands were injured or killed, while hundreds of thousands were displaced and fled or were forced in both directions across the Mauritania-Senegal border. Ever since, authorities have been unable to control attempts from both sides of the river to forcefully retrieve goods and livestock, or to sabotage land development. From the left bank, displaced persons and refugees can actually see the new occupants on their lands and in their houses. The incident prompted the two countries to break diplomatic ties and brought them to the brink of war.

In 1990, the Mauritanian regime claimed that it discovered a coup plot within the ranks of the army and carried out a purge, executing 503 Halpulaar-en and Soninké Mauritanians, some of whom had limbs amputated. Suppressing accusations of anti-government plots in 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, and 1990, exacerbated the fighting and tensions in the region and drew the attention of the international community to the human rights situation in the country. The world also started to take heed of charges made by opposition parties and NGOs that slavery persisted throughout Mauritania at every level of society since the Maures held a monopoly of political, economic, and military power. The Maures retaliated, accusing the Halpulaar-en of chauvinism, as well as slaveholding of their own.

Both countries, under strong internal sociopolitical pressure, reopened their borders in May 1991 and renewed diplomatic ties two months later. Senegal announced that as compensation, it would relinquish customary lands on the right bank, although this area would remain the border. Mauritania maintained that the boundary is located down the middle of the river, and that it would consider the return of refugees only on a case-by-case basis.

In 1994, in the face of ongoing killings, both governments (joined by Mali), declared that they were prepared to cooperate in order to ensure security and to counter the proliferation of arms. Another accord was signed in November 1997 that called for joint patrols along the border. Some 25,000 Mauritians were able to return home (to Trarza, Barkna, Gorgol and Guidimakha), 16,000 of whom benefited from support from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). But their compatriots, living as refugees in Senegal in some 200 sites spread over 600 km. along the river, demanded the right to return under the auspices of the UNHCR, as well as the return of their property or compensation. To complicate matters, from 1991 to 1994, the influx of 15,000 Maure and Touareg nomads into Mauritania from the north of Mali, was mired in a simmering conflict. By 1998, most refugees had returned, with only a few dozen remaining in Mauritania. To this day, a climate of violence persists.

### Conclusion

The organized return of deportees and the restitution of their property would partially solve this crisis. But the two governments must also voluntarily adopt solutions to long-term, fundamental issues in society, such as those concerning the security of land tenure.

In the face of pending ecological disaster, increasing numbers of unresolved land disputes and a growing cycle of revenge, it may soon be too late to rectify the situation. Opting for large-scale land developments will be at the expense of household production, traditional herding, and the environment. Only powerful officials and wealthy business people who have entered agrarian capitalism stand to profit from the modernized feudalism in Senegal and Mauritania that lay behind the violence of the 1990s. Pastoralism, with large absentee owners will become more pronounced. The herders' world will continue to be disrupted by the market, politics, tenure issues, and environmental degradation, resulting in a deterioration of peasant-pastoralist, as well as inter-ethnic alliances.

Any lasting solution should also include halting arbitrary allocations of land, returning illicitly acquired property, documenting residents' land demands on both sides of the river, and finally, it must take into account a final delimitation of the national boundary. States must review certain aspects of their legislation that have neglected poorer peasants that are ill-prepared for the cutthroat competition of unbridled business where their chances of survival are minimal. It is possible to integrate agriculture and herding through the production of legumes as fodder and fertilizer, the fertilization of soils with manure, and rotating crops, while allowing for traditional Sahelian transhumanance across international borders.

At the legal level, the bodies involved in regional integration should undertake a more in-depth analysis of local traditional systems in order to adapt tenure legislation to the basic needs of the existing occupants. Tenure legislation must not only be made more comprehensible to communities, but must be democratized through land reform. Agrarian reform designed to benefit the majority would enable intensive, integrated and diverse systems of agriculture and pastoralism by independent households, cooperatives, or village units of production. In addition, greater peasant and herder participation in the decision-making process is essential to conflict resolution.

Finally, a boundary agreed upon through a referendum or international arbitration that is acceptable to all residents concerned is a precondition for true regional integration at the economic, political, and military levels. Of course, changes to tenure arrangements that would privilege self-reliant and intensive development in herding and agriculture are fundamentally incompatible with political regimes serving their own and foreign interests. It is clear that the recent conflicts impeding development in the Senegal River Valley have arisen, not from age-old animosity between different ethnic groups, (which in fact have long pursued complementary economic strategies). To the contrary, ethnic tensions and the eruption of violence have ripened as tenure and security, and small-holder production has weakened. The state, with foreign guidance and aid, has initiated costly, large-scale, and often counterproductive programs of agricultural and water development. Local resolution of conflict in the Senegal River Valley depends, then, both on mediation of particular claims and losses suffered as a result of recent violence, but also on the pursuit of self-reliant development strategies that support, rather than undermine, local lives.

## References

Badouin, Robert. 1986. "Les systèmes d'exploitation des sols en Afrique subsaharienne," in A. Rochedude and R. Vedier, *Systèmes fonciers à la ville et au village*. Paris: L'Harmattan, CNRS, p.169.

Black, R. and M. Sessay. 1995. *Refugees and Environmental Change: The Case of the Senegal River Valley*. London: Department of Geography, Project CFCE, King's College.

Chassy, F. de. 1977. *L'étrier, la houe et le livre. `Sociétés traditionnelles' au Sahara et Sahel occidental*. Paris: Anthropos.

Dia, Ibrahima, Boubacar Fall. "Dimensions socio-culturelles dans la conception des aménagements, le cas de la cuvette de Kaskas." *La vallée du fleuve Sénégal*. op.cit.

Fall, Aziz S. 1997. "Eléments d'une démarche de réflexion et d'action en matière de prévention et de gestion des conflits liés à la terre." Document de travail, Symposium de Conakry, Montréal: CECL.

Fall, Aziz S. 1997. "Pour une force africaine de maintien de la paix." in Génocides et violences dans l'Afrique des Grands Lacs: Six propositions pour une réforme de la coopération internationale. Montpellier: Coopération internationale pour la démocratie, No. 7.

Galaty, John & Pierre Bonte, eds. 1991. *Herders, Warriors and Traders: Pastoralism in Africa*, Boulder: Westview Press.

Leplaideur, M.A. 1997. "Fleuve Sénégal: Génération barrage," *Syfia*. no. 100.

Maïga, Mahamadou. 1995. *Le fleuve Sénégal et l'intégration en Afrique de l'Ouest en 2011*. Paris: Karthala, CODESRIA.

Mathieu, P., V.M. Niassé. 1986. "Aménagements hydro-agricoles, concurrences pour l'espace et pratique foncières locales dans la vallée du fleuve Sénégal: Le cas de la zone du lac de Guiers," in B. Crousse, E. Le Bris, E. Le Roy, *Espaces disputés en Afrique noire*. Paris: Karthala, ORSTOM, CNRS.

Nuttall, Christophe. 1991. "Quels types d'aménagements du territoire?" in B. Crousse, P. Matheu, S. Seek. *La vallée du fleuve Sénégal*. Paris: Karthala.

Pelissier, Paul. 1983, *Atlas du Sénégal*. Paris: Les Éditions Jeune Afrique.

Santoir, C.J. 1975. "L'émigration maure, une vocation commerciale affirmée." *Série Sciences Humaines*. Vol. 12, 2.

Seck, Sidi M. 1991. "Les cultivateurs transfrontaliers de décrue face à la question foncière." in *La vallée du fleuve Sénégal*.

Shanmugaratnam, Nadarajah, et al, "Experiences in Pastoral Institutional Building," in *Resource Management and Pastoral Institution Building in the West African Sahel*, World Bank, ATDS, Washington DC, 1992.

Traoré, Sadio. 1984. "La sédentarisation et la migration en Mauritanie, de 1965 à 1976: Mesure et interprétation." Montreal: Mémoire, Département de démographie, Université de Montréal.

1998. *Worldwide Refugee Information, Country Report Mauritania*. US Committee for Refugees. Ligue Mauritanienne des droits de l'homme, February 1997; l'Association Mauritanienne des droits de l'homme, SOS-Esclaves; Comité national pour la lutte contre les vestiges de l'esclavage en Mauritanie; Comité



pour la solidarité avec les victimes de la repression en Mauritanie; Collectif des survivants des détentions politiques et de la torture.

Article copyright Cultural Survival, Inc.