

AFRICA

Rivista semestrale di studi e ricerche

N.S. VII/2, 2025



VIELLA

AFRICA. Rivista semestrale di studi e ricerche

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N.S., VII/2, 2025

ISSN 2612-3258 ISBN 979-12-5701-250-2 (carta) ISBN 979-12-5701-251-9 (e-book)

DOI 10.52056/9791257012519

Volume pubblicato in open access su www.viella.it/catalogo/rivista/126



Registrazione presso il Tribunale di Pavia n° 2/2019 dell'8/4/2019

La rivista è pubblicata anche grazie al sostegno dell'ISMEO - Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l'Oriente/Il Novissimo Ramusio

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amministrazione administration	Viella s.r.l., Via delle Alpi, 32 - 00198 Roma tel. 06 84 17 758 - 06 85 35 39 60 abbonamenti@viella.it info@viella.it www.viella.it
abbonamento annuale annual subscription	Italia € 70 (carta/print) Abroad € 85 (carta/print)
modalità di pagamento terms of payment	c/c bancario IBAN IT82B0200805120000400522614 c/c postale IBAN IT14X0760103200000077298008 carta di credito Visa / Master Card

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Elia Vitturini

MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT.
NEXUSES AND DETACHMENT PROCESSES IN RURAL GAMBIA
*(FROM THE LATE COLONIAL PERIOD TO THE 2020s)**

Abstract

Migration and development are historically interrelated in Senegambian societies. Following the gradual consolidation of colonial economies, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the introduction of large-scale development schemes in rice cultivation areas along the Gambia River. While promoted by external actors with an agenda of social and economic engineering, these initiatives were appropriated into localized cultural, moral, economic and micro-political apparatuses of ideas and practices. These frameworks evolved as forms of village-level management of social transformations, in particular of different types of mobility from and to the area. Combining ethnographic research with the analysis of secondary sources, this article outlines how the prolonged agricultural crisis, the decline of external development interventions, and the twenty-first century consolidation of disadvantaged migration trajectories – the so-called “back-way” migration to Europe – have deeply reconfigured these inherited forms of representing and governing development.

KEYWORDS: MIGRATION-DEVELOPMENT NEXUS; MIGRATION-DEVELOPMENT DETACHMENT; AGRICULTURAL CRISIS; BACKWAY; THE GAMBIA

Introduction

The interconnection between migration and development has long been a central focus of research, particularly regarding how mobility and economic change influence each other within the framework of global capitalism¹. The “mi-

* The research was supported by the following projects: Testing the Impact of Development Interventions on Migration Choices – MigChoice, University of Birmingham; MESAO-Ethnological Mission in Senegal and West Africa 2021 and 2022, University of Milan-Bicocca; Genealogies of African Freedoms, University of Milan-Bicocca 2020–2024; Navigating Returns: West African Experiences of Difficult Homecoming (2023–2025).

1. M. Kearney, “From the invisible hand to visible feet. Anthropological studies of migration and development”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 15, 1986, 331–361, 332.

gration-development nexus” is one of the concepts employed to define the totality of mechanisms through which these two dynamics interact². However, rather than a unidirectional process, this relationship is a dynamic and conjunctural phenomenon where multi-scalar processes – from global economic shifts to local social transformations – produce complex combinations of displacement and change³. For the residents of rural Gambia, these dynamics are not viewed as abstract concepts but as deeply rooted in their “historicities”: the ways in which individuals and groups situate themselves in time and give meaning to the experience of social change⁴.

The local migration and development dynamics are framed under The Gambia’s broader political trajectory. The Gambia was a colony and protectorate until it achieved independence from United Kingdom in 1965 and, in 1970, became a Republic within the Commonwealth. Since then, the nation has navigated distinct political eras. The country was led by Dawda Jawara from 1965 to 1994 (first as Prime Minister and then as President), when he was overthrown by a military coup. One of the coup leaders, Yahya Jammeh, subsequently ruled for over two decades (1994–2017), an era marked by authoritarianism and significant economic shifts. Discontent amongst the population and the diaspora mounted constantly, though not entirely visibly, while poverty was endemic in the society, the relationship with neighboring Senegal was degraded, violent repressions were commonplace and huge numbers of Gambian youth were risking their lives on the route to Europe⁵. Under these circumstances, in the 2016 elections, opposition parties managed to form a united coalition, and the opposition candidate Adama Barrow surprisingly defeated Jammeh and became President⁶. Since 2017, the new Government has attempted to address the problematic legacies of the previous regime, and Barrow also won the 2021 elections.

The article discusses the case of the Jahaly-Pacharr area, which is included in The Gambia’s Central River Region (CRR), one of the five regions derived from colonial divisions. Spanning both the northern and southern banks of the Gambia river, CRR covers an area of 2,895 square kilometers and, according to the preliminary 2024 census report⁷, has a population of approximately 265,516.

2. J. Carling, “Thirty-six migration nexuses, and counting”, <https://jorgencarling.org/2017/07/31/thirty-six-migration-nexuses-and-counting/> (last accessed 12 August 2025), 2017.

3. N. Glick Schiller, “Migration and development. Theorising changing conditions and ongoing silences”, in T. Bastia, R. Skeldon, eds., *Routledge handbook of migration and development*, London, Routledge, 2020, 32-42, 37-38.

4. F. Hartog, *Regimes of historicity. Presentism and experiences of time*, New York NY, Columbia University Press, 2015 [2003], xv-xvi.

5. N. Hultin, B. Jallow, B.N. Lawrence, A. Sarr, “Autocracy, migration, and The Gambia’s ‘unprecedented’ 2016 election”, *African Affairs*, 116, 463, 2017, 321-340.

6. D. Perfect, “The Gambia’s presidential election, 2021”, *The Round Table*, 111, 2, 2022, 153-168, 154.

7. Gambia Bureau of Statistics, *The Gambia 2024 population and housing census: preliminary report*, Banjul, The World Bank, UNECA, UNPFA, 2024.

The region contains two Local Government Areas (LGAs), Janjanbureh and Kuntaur, and has historically been a focal point for agricultural interventions due to its proximity to the river. Specifically, the Jahaly-Pacharr area is located in the Fuladu West District, within the Janjanbureh LGA (147,412 inhabitants in 2024)⁸. Jahaly (2,066 inhabitants in 2013) and Pacharr (1,329 inhabitants in 2013) are the two villages delimiting this territory to the West and East⁹, while its northern and southern boundaries correspond, respectively, to the Gambia River and a sparsely populated strip of land with scattered settlements running down to the border with Senegal. The area has a diverse ethnic composition; each settlement has a dominant component, demographically or in terms of founding priority, which is defined on the basis of patrilineal genealogical affiliations. Brikama Ba has long been the main center; it is a large village which in 2013 had 4,238 inhabitants.

Agricultural production, development and mobility have been intertwined in the concrete life of Gambian rural communities and the long history of the global factors' impact on the society. Under this general framework, since the late colonial period the Jahaly-Pacharr area has become synonymous with ambitious social engineering projects aimed at transforming rice cultivation. The planners often ignored the social organization of rural villages, the historically consolidated farming system presiding over land access, labor allocation and harvest control, and the farmers' livelihood strategies balancing food and cash cropping. A fundamental and diachronic element of this story is the dynamic adaptations of local groups to the external interventions¹⁰. Here, as in many other parts of Africa, there is abundant evidence that social engineering has produced a range of knock-on effects: the "revanche des contextes", or the discrepancy between the interventions' expected and unexpected effects within the spatiotemporal context in which they take place¹¹. In order to understand this process, it is important to track how, in Jahaly-Pacharr, "development" refers not just to external technical interventions but to the local negotiation of welfare and social reproduction.

The residents of this area have produced a rich repertoire of ideas and practices around the interconnection – and the detachment – of migration and development. For decades, migration was an organic part of village development, used to manage the side effects of agricultural projects or to diversify family income. International emigration was part of this story as, already since the 1950s, Gambian society has experienced rounds of long-distance mobility. Subsequently, the phenomenon was related to the post-independence trajectory of agricultural decline – affected by climate conditions, the dependency on global markets and the

8. Gambia Bureau of Statistics, *The Gambia 2024 Population and Housing Census*.

9. The Republic of The Gambia, *Population and Housing Settlement 2013. Directory of Settlement*, 2013, Banjul. The disaggregated data of the 2024 census are not yet published.

10. J. Dey, "Development planning in The Gambia: The gap between planners' and farmers' perceptions, expectations and objectives", *World Development*, 10, 5, 1982, 377-396, 390-391.

11. J.-P. Oliveir De Sardan, *La revanche des contextes. Des mésaventures de l'ingénierie sociale en Afrique et au delà*, Paris, Karthala, 2021, 7-11.

policies of national elites¹². For instance, the 1985 Economy Recovery Plan (ERP) promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund was intended to stabilize The Gambia's struggling national economy and public finance, and was considered successful by international and donor institutions¹³. But after the 1980s it produced far-reaching mixed effects on rural groups by depriving them of important subsidies for agricultural production¹⁴. During the authoritarian rule of Jammeh, the Government attempted to intervene in the agrarian sector by restoring state control over crop purchasing¹⁵, but its erratic and predatory policies failed to revitalize agricultural production or improve rural livelihoods. Agricultural decline, coupled with increasing levels of political repression, left young people with few alternatives. Since the 2000s, the emergence of the "backway" – as undocumented migration to Europe has been known over the last two decades – has signaled a radical rupture. During Jammeh's years, unprecedented numbers of young men sought asylum in the European Union (EU). In 2016, 11,929 Gambians (6.6 percent of the total arrivals) reached Italy from Libya, and The Gambia was in the top ten nationalities of undocumented migrants in Europe¹⁶. A wide literature has explored the existential consequences, and the combination of short- and long-term factors, such as economic decline and political repressions, that shape the "backway"¹⁷. A crucial factor that has influenced the forms and modes of this migration was, from the 1990s onwards, the strengthening of the European migration regime and of the EU's southern borders¹⁸. This has made it more difficult to enter Europe in a regular way and has also affected Gambian mobility patterns. The specificity of the age of "backway" migration can be observed through interconnected actors, idioms of legitimacy and discontent, and the underlying stakes that have shaped this recent phase in

12. D.R. Wright, *The world and a very small place in Africa. A history of globalization in Niimi, The Gambia*, New York NY, Routledge, 2018, 247-249.

13. T.M. Sallah, "Economics and politics in The Gambia", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 28, 4, 1990, 621-648, 628-631; M.F. McPherson, S.C. Radelet, eds., *Economic recovery in The Gambia: Insights for adjustment in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1995, 8-9.

14. Wright, *The world and a very small place in Africa*, 207, 232.

15. T.M. Sallah, "'Strange farmers' and the development of The Gambia's peanut trade", *African Economic History*, 47, 2, 2019, 117-138, 134.

16. G. Faal, "Civil Society Input to EU-AFRICA. ECRE Working Paper 12", 2020, <https://www.ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Working-Paper-12-The-Gambia.pdf> (last accessed 12 August 2025), 3. N. Hultin, F. Zanker, "Responding to the 'backway'", V. Fynn Bruey, S.W. Bender, eds., *Deadly voyages. Migrant journeys across the globe*, London, Lexington Books, 2019, 19-36, 20.

17. C.T. Conrad Suso, "Backway or bust. Causes and consequences of Gambian irregular migration", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 57, 1, 2019, 111-135; P. Gaibazzi, "Moving-with-others. Restoring viable relations in emigrant Gambia", *Migration and Society*, 2, 1, 2019, 26-39; M. Brzezińska, "'Emigration is luck'. Destiny, witchcraft and uncertainty in migratory journeys from the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau", *Ethnos*, 2024, 1-14.

18. M.J. Aucoin, "'You can make it here!'. Producing Europe's mobile borders in the New Gambia", *Political Geography*, 97, 2022, 1-11, 4.

Gambian national and local political arenas¹⁹. From the standpoint of the Jahaly-Pacharr area, local actors interpret it as being identified by the rupture of certain moral, cultural, social and economic patterns of sociality: the “backway” stemmed from the collapse of a collective horizon of rural development and, in the 2020s, is described as the fundamental arbiter of a development detached from that past horizon. Whether and how the migrants themselves or the transnational migration regimes will concretely control this function is yet to be experienced by local actors. In the meantime, they have outlined the contours of this fundamental historical shift.

This article draws on ethnographic research into the migration-development nexus carried out between 2020 and 2022 across five localities in The Gambia. During three research periods, a total of around two hundred interviews and participant observations in everyday situations and social events were conducted. The interlocutors belonged to different gender and social categories, economic and political roles, including regional authorities, district chiefs (*Seyfou*), village heads (*Alkalo*), elders, members of Village Development Committees (VDCs), Government officers, youth leaders, local farmers and returnee migrants. A number of these interviews was conducted in Jahaly-Pacharr area, in particular in the settlements of Boiram, Brikama Ba, Jahaly, Kerewan Samba Sira, Madina Nfaily, Sapu and Sinchu Magai²⁰. In relation to the other project localities (Bakau, Kanifing Municipality; Gunjur, West Coast Region; Kerewan, North Bank Region; Mansajang, Upper River Region), Jahaly-Pacharr served as a paradigmatic case of a historical laboratory where local groups produced their form of migration-development nexus in relation to massive social engineering. It thus provides a distinctive socio-historical background to the current reformulation of the migration-development nexus.

Histories of settlement and development in the Jahaly-Pacharr area

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the local groups in the Jahaly-Pacharr area had to deal with a shared framework of historical factors, but they adapted to them in heterogeneous ways. This has affected the settlement process, the socio-economic evolution of the different villages and the plurality of “tem-

19. A. Bellagamba, E. Ceesay, E. Vitturini, “The political energy of the backway. Government, migration, and youth in The Gambia (2010s-2021)”, *Africa Today*, 71, 3-4, 2025, 155-177.

20. All interlocutors have been anonymized or protected by pseudonyms. The research was conducted in collaboration with Alice Bellagamba. The research was supported by the Research and Documentation Division (RDD) of the National Centre for Arts and Culture (NCAC), under the Ministry of Tourism and Culture of The Gambia, and especially by Siaka Fadera, director of RDD, and Hassoum Ceesay, director general of NCAC.

poral positions” which shape the memory of, or in some cases the nostalgia about, past periods of development²¹.

Jahaly and Madina Nfaily, for instance, are villages founded and controlled by Serahule groups. According to senior figures in the village, they were founded by their direct patrilineal ancestors who arrived at the end of nineteenth century from what is now the Casamance region of southern Senegal. The founders were searching for lands suitable for settlement and agriculture. As elsewhere in Senegambia, many villages were established as socio-political units by groups seeking to take advantage of the favorable period of commercial groundnut cultivation that developed after the 1850s²². The village functioned as a “land tenure unit of control”, with the genealogically interrelated groups that inhabit it and its political structures overseeing land distribution and management²³. New villages sprang up from old ones through a dynamic that produced new waves of settlement until the mid-twentieth century. This is the case of the Wolof village of Sinchu Magai, founded in 1948 by groups from the nearby village of Boiram. The different historical “generations” of villages in the Jahaly-Pacharr area are clearly recognized by local residents. Local oral history affirms that Kerewan Samba Sira and Brikama Ba are amongst the oldest settlements and were probably founded in the eighteenth century. The ethnic mosaic of the villages has historical roots in the precolonial dynamics of mobility and formation of local elites that mobilized ethnic labels as ways to consolidate their control over paramount resources such as land²⁴. Since the 1940s, the villages have also shared a framework of infrastructural and development interventions guided by external actors. These settlements are separated by a few kilometers and are closely interconnected by a daily circulation of people, services and goods. At the same time, it is also possible to identify their specific trajectories of participation in and appropriation of the external interventions.

The local memories of development and economic change have evolved into a plurality of village perspectives on the history of Jahaly-Pacharr. Members of the village authorities of Brikama Ba, since the 1980s the biggest and commercially most active village, presented an equation between development and spatial and demographic expansion, a process initiated, according to them, by the reorganization of transportation infrastructure in this portion of the Gambia. Until the late 1970s, the river was still, as in the nineteenth century, a key communication and transportation route between the hinterland and the coastal urban centers of the Gambia. The river port of Wali Kunda, about 5 kilometers north of Brika-

21. G. Lachenal, A. Mbodj-Pouye, “Restes du développement et traces de la modernité en Afrique”, *Politique africaine*, 135, 3, 2014, 5-21, 14-15.

22. K. Swindell, A. Jeng, *Migrants, credit and climate. The Gambian groundnut trade, 1834-1934*, Leiden, Brill, 2006, 244-245.

23. M. Chastanet, “Survival Strategies of a Sahelian society. The case of the Soninke in Senegal from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present”, *Food and Foodways*, 5, 2, 1992, 127-49, 131.

24. A. Sarr, *Islam, power and dependency in the Gambia river basin*, Rochester, NY, University of Rochester Press, 2016, 57-58.

ma Ba, was an important center where farmers from neighboring villages would converge to sell their harvest and buy consumer goods, such as clothing. Its abandonment was rapid, coinciding with the modernization of the road through the southern part of the Central River Region and the rise of Brikama Ba. One of the village's elderly authorities emphasized this during an interview:

The road gave us the opportunity to expand the village, to attract more people. [...] It has brought a lot of development for us! [...] And because of the position [of Brikama Ba] along the highway, it has attracted other people from the villages of region to converge and have their business here. [...] People from Jahaly, Madina, Boiram, Kerewan Samba Sira, Pacharr... came, got plots here and settled. Some people came all the way from Guinea-Bissau and Senegal²⁵.

The new family compounds that sprang up are, in his view, an indicator of "development" that has been taking place since the 1970s. Transport infrastructure, also considered by many Gambians "a barometer of development"²⁶, triggered an expansion of Brikama Ba's commercial activities that still in the 2020s marks a difference from the other villages in the area.

A handful of kilometers from Brikama Ba, one of the elderly authorities of Madina Nfaily explained the economic and "development" history of his village, outlining the same but also different elements. By the mid-twentieth century, his village was already marked by a clear internal division between the cultivators and "those who had the money: the Jula", or traders. The latter supplied village residents with goods such as bread, oil and clothing bought in the river ports or the colonial capital of Bathurst (today Banjul)²⁷. The interlocutor himself had a shop and, until the new road was built in the 1970s, would ride his bicycle to Wali Kunda. He agreed that the construction of the new road had a profound impact on business activities, making connections to the coast faster and more frequent. However, both he and a prominent elder from Jahaly emphasized other factors: international migration from the village was the beginning of the era of development. Migration began in the early 1960s, before Gambian independence in 1965, and was initially directed towards Sierra Leone, whose mining industry had been attracting workers and adventurers from the region²⁸ for at least the previous decade. The elder from Madina recalled how in the 1970s the village diaspora already had a stable organization and supported several families. In the early 1990s, this organization collected funds to invest in community infrastructure: for instance, a school, that in the early 2020s had around 500 students and also served neighboring villages, and a new health center, built in the 2010s. These interventions compensated for the absence of government investment,

25. Interview in Brikama Ba, 14 March 2020.

26. Wright, *The world and a very small place in Africa*, 238.

27. Interview in Madina Nfaily, 17 February 2020.

28. A. Bellagamba, "Solo Darboe, former diamond dealer. Transnational connections and home politics in the twentieth-century Gambia", in J. Knorr, C. Kohl, eds., *The upper Guinea coast in global perspective*, New York, NY, Berghahn Books, 2016, 280-298.

which was limited to the construction of a well in the early 2000s and the recent connection to the electricity grid. The funds are now managed by traders originally from the village but settled in coastal urban areas; they have access to banking services (such as the account fed by the diaspora association) and goods that they can ship to the village, for example food distribution during Ramadan. However, decisions about investment targets and methods are taken collectively under the guidance of the village authorities and the village head, the *Alkalo*.

The historical analysis of Serahule migration by François Manchuelle shows the long-term legacy of mobility²⁹: it has manifested as receptivity to changing forms of participation, through labor migrations, in transformations of regional and global economies, and has produced social institutions (such as strong networks and communal collaboration at the village level) that have become not only channels but also causes of migration trajectories. Migration and staying put in the village are interconnected and interdependent models of life pathways that shape the social maturation of individuals and the “permanence” of the rural settlement through the various phases of its “spatiotemporal extension”³⁰. The prominent elder from Jahaly spent more than two decades since 1971 in Sierra Leone, Saudi Arabia, and the United States before returning to the village. He explained that the migration flow has never stopped in the decades since the 1960s and has not been significantly affected by the massive development interventions implemented especially in the 1980s. He commented: “The people who migrated are the first people who started development in this area! They bought food... sugar... and started construction. That’s how development started. Then the project came. [...] For the Serahule... this is the way they live since long. Even before the project, they liked to travel, look for money and come back to their place”³¹.

For the two Serahule interlocutors, development is remembered as a history of village development and begins with the era of migrations that covered long distances and large portions of individual life trajectories. The project mentioned by this interlocutor is the Jahaly-Pacharr Smallholder Project, which, as argued below, was crucial for the entire area. Their words underline that the culturally and economically heterogeneous trajectories and representations of development of the villages in the Jahaly-Pacharr area integrated the project in different ways.

The Jahaly-Pacharr Smallholder Project in the 1980s

In the 1940s, internal transformations within their colonies and the new context of international relations forced the European empires to redefine the ideo-

29. F. Manchuelle, *Willing migrants. Soninke labor diasporas, 1848-1960*, London, James Currey Publishers, 1997, 221-227.

30. P. Gaibazzi, *Bush bound. Young men and rural permanence in migrant West Africa*, New York NY, Berghahn Books, 2015, 8-20.

31. Interview in Jahaly, 15 February 2020.

logical foundations and economic structures of colonial rule; it was the beginning of the age of development as social engineering. For Gambian rural groups, the risky struggle of balancing food and cash crop cultivation, coping with climate volatility and the oscillation of prices in the global markets, was a crucial historical challenge³². The villages in Jahaly-Pacharr attracted the attention of British colonial authorities because of their favorable position for taking advantage of the Gambia river's floods, and thus their potential contribution to the national supply of rice, a key food crop³³. In 1949 colonial authorities launched the ambitious and expensive Wali Kunda Rice Scheme. Under the leadership of the Colonial Development Corporation (CDC), an area located between the villages and the river already used by women from nearby communities, who in Mandinka contexts controlled rice farming, was designated. The project authorities demarcated and allocated plots and planned the construction of irrigation infrastructure. The CDC hoped to include numerous villages in Fuladu West district and to transform women farmers from "customary" holders of family rights over access to land and control of the product into waged laborers³⁴. A government experimental farm, Sapu, was built as part of the project. However, the irrigation system did not achieve the expected results, the participation of farmers was limited, as was the harvest³⁵, and in 1953, after spending the considerable sum of £1.1 million, the project was terminated and considered an expensive failure³⁶.

In 1966, one year after The Gambia's independence, development projects began which were intended to boost rice production in order to reduce the national dependence on food imports. These were mostly local-scale projects funded first by Taiwan (1966-74), then by the World Bank (1973-79) and the People's Republic of China (1975-79)³⁷. These initiatives provided agricultural inputs (such as seeds and fertilizer) and improved irrigation infrastructure, leaving access to land to the village-based tenure customs³⁸. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, rice production was a space of productive autonomy for women as a consequence of the commodification of agricultural production and the specialization of the men of family units in commercial groundnut cultivation³⁹. Access

32. D.R. Wright, *The world and a very small place*, 162.

33. J.L.A. Webb, "Ecological and economic change along the middle reaches of the Gambia river, 1945- 1985", *African Affairs*, 91, 365, 1992, 543-565, 550-554.

34. J.A. Carney, "Women's land rights in Gambian irrigated rice schemes. Constraints and opportunities", *Agriculture and Human Values*, 15, 4, 1998, 325-336, 328.

35. J.A. Carney, M. Watts, "Disciplining women? Rice, mechanization, and the evolution of Mandinka gender relations in Senegambia", *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 16, 4, 1991, 651-681, 666-668.

36. D. Perfect, *Historical dictionary of the Gambia. Sixth edition*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2024, 584.

37. Carney, Watts, "Disciplining women?", 668-669.

38. Carney, "Women's land rights", 330.

39. Carney, Watts, "Disciplining women?", 657. J.A. Carney, "Converting the wetlands, engendering the environment. The intersection of gender with agrarian change in The Gambia", *Economic Geography*, 69, 4, 1993, 329-348, 339-340.

to rice fields was managed by the women of each unit who, in the context of polygamous extended families, also autonomously controlled the harvest. However, under the irrigation schemes of the 1960s and 1970s, women were marginalized. The development technicians ignored the complexity of the farming system and assumed that it was male family heads who should be their interlocutors; this transformed the women into dependents – who, however, resisted their full assimilation as a labor force controlled by male family members – and sidelined their expertise in rice cultivation⁴⁰.

The devastating and prolonged effects of the late 1960s-1970s droughts, the oscillation of the prices of cash crops in the global markets and a sustained rural-urban migration of young men that drained the agricultural labor force were powerful factors redefining the livelihood strategies of Gambian farmers and fueling political frustration with national elites⁴¹. At the beginning of the 1980s, The Gambia saw a drastic deterioration in public finance and the state's ability to support agricultural production⁴², and important production areas, such as Niumi, were in a situation of consolidated agricultural decline. In the same period, in the Jahaly-Pacharr area an ambitious new rice farming development project began. This was the Jahaly-Pacharr Smallholder Project, which was approved in 1981 and started in 1983. It was financed by a \$16.5 million loan provided by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), other international organizations, and some European countries such as the Netherlands and the Federal Republic of Germany⁴³. The project established centralized control over every stage of production, from the allocation of agricultural plots, through the supply of agricultural inputs and irrigation, to the marketing of the product.

The history of the Jahaly-Pacharr Smallholder Project was accurately analyzed by Judith Carney as an exemplary trajectory of development intervention with an agenda devoted to the intensification of agricultural production and of labor, absorbed into concrete social and cultural contexts. In particular, the intensification of work generated sharp tensions in the domestic sphere where labor duties, rights over resources and income were allocated⁴⁴. The Jahaly-Pacharr Smallholder Project's leadership wanted to promote full employment for local community members so that the new technological infrastructure would be fully exploited. Carney focused on these frictions with local forms of distribution of

40. J. Dey, "Gambian women. Unequal partners in rice development projects?", *The Journal of Development Studies*, 17, 3, 1981, 109-122, 120-122.

41. Wright, *The world and a very small place*, 213-215.

42. Sallah, "Economics and politics", 628.

43. J.A. Carney, "Struggles over crop rights and labour within contract farming households in a Gambian irrigated rice project", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 15, 3, 1998, 334-349; IFAD, *Jahaly and Pacharr Smallholder Development Project. Completion evaluation report*, 1994.

44. Carney, Watts, "Disciplining women?", 653.

workloads and profit control that were based on the prestige structures and gender roles of patriarchal family production units⁴⁵.

Still today, the year 1981 occupies a special place in the local memory of development. In recalling this historical phase, an important interlocutor in our research was one member of Brikama Ba's Village Development Committee (VDC). The VDC or analogous institutions have been operational in Gambian villages since the 1970s. They were reformed in the early 2000s and acquired the function of attracting and promoting at the village level development projects supported by both national agencies and external donors. According to this interlocutor, the project management began to summon the family heads and assign the usufruct of portions of land within the delimited area; the size of the portions was determined based on the number of women in the family. After some tension surrounding the registration of the land plots, it was agreed that the family production units would be assigned the title⁴⁶. Almost 2.000 hectares of land were involved, of which more than 500 were irrigated by new pumps and networks of canals. Producers had to comply with the stages of the production cycle, and benefited from plowing services and other agricultural machinery provided by the project, and received seeds and fertilizers. The interlocutor explained: "They gave you all these things. [...] Then you paid them back after the harvest. If you cultivated one hectare, you could produce more than a hundred bags of rice. So you paid 12 bags to the Jahaly-Pacharr Company for plowing, fertilizers, and herbicides. They had large warehouses where farmers brought their rice"⁴⁷. He added that, by the mid-1980s, many villages in the Jahaly-Pacharr area were overflowing with sacks of rice. Thanks to the project, and in particular to artificial irrigation, the harvest cycle had been reduced to four months. However, the project and the Government were unable to purchase the entire harvest; the family units' warehouses were constantly full. Residents donated sacks to their relatives in urban areas as their commercial value had become negligible. Young household members secretly stole sacks of rice with impunity to sell at distant markets and earn some cash. The first five years of the Jahaly-Pacharr Smallholder Project were remembered as a watershed but, again, in different ways depending on the memories of village development. Many elders from different villages, *Alkaloes*, VDC chairmen and the *Seyfou* – the district chief of Fuladu West – emphasized how those years marked the attainment of food security. Even one village elderly authority of Madina Nfaily admitted: "The arrival of the Jahaly-Pacharr project drove away hunger. We had enough rice for our annual needs. Our diet was much better than in the past! And thanks to the pumps, the work was much less tiring and time-consuming"⁴⁸. He added that the increase in rice production also gave a

45. J.A. Carney, "The social history of Gambian rice production. An analysis of food security strategies", PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1986, 301-312.

46. Carney, "Struggles over crop rights".

47. Interview in Brikama Ba, 14 February 2020.

48. Interview in Madina Nfaily, 17 February 2020.

major boost to trade in the village. Some residents invested their initial earnings from the rice surplus in purchasing goods in favorable regional markets – such as palm oil or clothing in Guinea-Bissau – or in a motorcycle that allowed them to engage in itinerant trade between villages. However, the interlocutor from Jahaly, as we have seen above, strongly underlined that “the project came later”, after “development” had already started: according to these interlocutors from Serahule villages, migration choices were not significantly influenced by the project. Migrants did not return to the village and young men did not renounce leaving as the income generated by the rice cultivation could not compete with expatriate remittances.

At the same time, numerous workers arrived in Jahaly-Pacharr attracted by work opportunities. In the retrospective accounts of our interlocutors, this flow followed mobility and social patterns inherited from the circulation of seasonal workers in colonial times. They were referred to as “strange farmers”, migrants who converged in agricultural production zones, often originating from areas with similar socio-economic structures, who negotiated work conditions and access to agricultural production with host groups⁴⁹. This form of circulation of labor, rather than a relic of colonial economy, had proved to be an extremely flexible tool used by both landholders and workers to adapt to the unpredictability and precarity of cash cropping⁵⁰. The mobility of “strange farmers” is a social mechanism that through “bilateral negotiations” has allowed mutual benefices to be distributed between labor- and income-hungry economic actors⁵¹. In many cases, these workers gradually gained social and economic integration into the host communities in Jahaly-Pacharr. According to local memories, many arrived from Guinea-Bissau and the Casamance region. A government official currently stationed in Sapu recalled that, during the expansion phase of the project, numerous cultivators came from Casamance, then affected by rebellion against the Senegalese central Government. Many were members of the Jola ethnic group, traditionally familiar with rice cultivation⁵².

According to local accounts, “strange farmers” were hosted by local cultivators and compensated with several kilograms of rice per working day (typically from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.). After the harvest, villages across the area became frenetic as cars and trucks were loaded with rice, which the migrant workers transported back to their places of origin. According to the VDC member of Brikama Ba, rice yields were so abundant that the market could not absorb the surplus. This context marked the onset of a profound historical transformation in Brikama Ba.

49. K. Swindell, “Serawoolies, Tillibunkas and strange farmers. The development of migrant groundnut farming along the Gambia river, 1848-95”, *Journal of African History*, 21, 1, 1980, 93-104. Swindell, Jeng, *Migrants, credit and climate*, 56-61.

50. A.F. Robertson, *The dynamics of productive relationships. African share contracts in comparative perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, 261-264.

51. Sallah, ““Strange farmers””, 120.

52. Interview in Sapu, 14 March 2020.

During our conversation walking along the main road, he reflected on the vibrant mixture of roadside shops, artisans, telecom and remittance agency branches, street vendors and local transport. Smiling, he remarked that prior to the project, the area was nothing but road and bush. According to his account, by the mid-1980s the influx of laborers grew significantly, and many chose to settle permanently in Brikama Ba. The role of the host was critical to this process. More than an employer, the host acted as a socially recognized sponsor for the stranger within the community. This form of personalized patronage – central to the historical expansion of commercial groundnut cultivation between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries⁵³ – was equally relevant here. When a “strange farmer” sought permanent residence, the host would appeal to the council of elders who represented the *kabilo*, a group of residents who recognize mutual genealogical ties or affiliation bonds, has representatives, and common decision-making bodies⁵⁴. The host would state: “This is my stranger, and he wants to remain here; now you must grant him land”⁵⁵. Land was provided free of charge – for both residence and cultivation – in exchange for a symbolic offering of kola nuts, marking entry into land tenure and community life. Subsequently, through clientelistic ties with the Land Allocation Committee of the project⁵⁶, they would also apply to be allocated rice plots. Based on the host’s genealogical standing, the migrant would be placed within a *kabilo*, whose head determined the location and size of the assigned land: one portion for a house and garden, and another in the upland bush for cultivating dry crops such as groundnuts, millet, sesame, etc. The words of the VDC member confirmed the importance of the historical reproduction in dynamic circumstances of the institution of “entrustment” of the stranger as a cultural and socio-economic pattern of managing, through population expansion, the wellbeing of the village⁵⁷.

Land allocated to a foreigner could not be alienated: it could only be inhabited and cultivated as long as the individual resided in the village. The process of social assimilation could culminate in marriage to a local woman. Through this dynamic, the village of Brikama Ba underwent rapid and significant demographic expansion. Those recognized as “original” inhabitants eventually constituted a small core. The collective memory of the decades of rice development projects in Brikama Ba underlines this form of instrumentalization of their “side effects”.

53. Swindell, Jeng, *Migrants, credit and climate*.

54. The *kabilo* is a patrilineal descent group. Based on this membership, the group claims and exercises control of resources (such as land), has an internal organization (for example, a council of prominent members) and participation in the political life of the village. See also P. Kea, “The complexity of an enduring relationship. Gender, generation, and the moral economy of the Gambian Mandinka household”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 19, 1, 102-119, 105.

55. Interview in Brikama Ba, 14 February 2020.

56. Carney, “The social history of Gambian rice production”, 297-298.

57. A. Bellagamba, “Entrustment and its changing political meanings in Fuladu, The Gambia (1880-1994)”, *Africa*, 74, 3, 2004, 383-410, 384-385.

Confronted with the challenges of limited market absorption of rice surpluses⁵⁸, local actors mobilized strategies to capitalize on them by drawing upon culturally situated conceptions and practices of development inherited from earlier historical periods: the governance of inward migration and of the demographic expansion of the village. This has been, for them, the enduring development legacy and afterlife of the project.

The long-term effects of the Jahaly-Pacharr Smallholder Project

In its initial phase, the Jahaly-Pacharr project was considered a success, including from the donors' perspective. According to a former project official, IFAD was so impressed by the fact that by 1988 the loan had already been repaid that it donated an additional 14 million Dalasi to the project (equivalent to nearly \$ 2 million at the time)⁵⁹. The different ways the villages in the area participated in the process of agricultural intensification contributed to broader processes of social and economic diversification there. This diversification gradually took the form of functional specialization of the various villages. Interlocutors consulted across different settlements tended to agree that Brikama Ba was the village that had undergone the most radical transformations. Commercial activities were previously minimal, while in the 2020s it is considered one of the main commercial hubs of the Central River Region. In local memory, the village's ability to attract outsiders and provide favorable conditions for their settlement played a central role.

At the designated conclusion of the project in 1991, according to an official employed by the project, the financial situation was stable: there were 9 million Dalasi in the administrative structure's coffers, allowing the management structure to remain operational⁶⁰. However, the project delivered a legacy of gender-based tensions and conflict over the allocation of workloads within households. The rigid calendar shaped by the irrigation infrastructure and the overall goal of work intensification clashed with the women's claim to maintain autonomous control over part of the production; their various forms of resistance caused workforce fluctuations that also resulted in households not complying with the production calendar⁶¹. After 1986, the implementation of the structural adjustment program, the ERP, substantially eliminated rice import substitution policies; the removal of subsidies for purchasing fertilizers had a devastating impact on rice producers⁶². As acknowledged by IFAD itself, the design of the project and

58. J.A. Carney, "The bitter harvest of Gambian rice policies", *Globalizations*, 5, 2, 2008, 129-142, 131.

59. Interview in Sankuli Kunda, 13 February 2020.

60. Interview with former officer of the project in Sankuli Kunda, 13 February 2020.

61. Carney, "Women's land rights", 332.

62. Carney, "The bitter harvest", 137.

that of its irrigation component were extremely rigid, requiring perfect coordination of both the management of water infrastructure and farmers' work activities. This led, as early as the late 1980s, to a rapid deterioration of the impact on the production cycle as environmental factors and macroeconomic dynamics pushed the farmers to reassess their investment of physical effort and resources in rice cultivation⁶³. Then, in 1994, there was the coup d'état which brought Yahya Jammeh to power and inaugurated a difficult phase for the management that inherited the entire Jahaly-Pacharr rice system from the project. The irrigation machines and equipment required constant maintenance and spare parts, which quickly became unavailable. Changes in management undermined administrative efficiency. With the loss of functionality of the pumps around which a significant part of production had been organized, the harvest collapsed drastically⁶⁴.

In 1995, Jammeh, in search of international partners, re-established diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and from 1997 a new project was sponsored in the area. This involved converting the irrigation system from artificial to being based on river flooding during the rainy season. According to an official from the Sapu government station who, during his professional career, experienced several phases of intervention in rice production in the area, the years of the Taiwanese project were marked by great opacity: the expatriate staff reported directly to the Office of the President and, from a financial and organizational point of view, managed the project, apart from the staff employed by the Ministry of Agriculture based in Sapu.⁶⁵ There were further demarcations of land plots, but the flood-based system had a decisive impact on the production cycle: it shifted to one cycle per year, and production was drastically reduced compared to the years of the previous project.

According to some interlocutors, in specific portions of the Jahaly-Pacharr area, the impact of the Jammeh regime was more direct. A prominent elder of Kerewan Samba Sira reported that Jammeh seized numerous plots of land, forcing the assignees to work for him:

Jammeh seized the lands and forced people to work for him for a meager wage, or sometimes in exchange for a little food. People accepted it for fear of being arrested, and this increased poverty and frustration. For example, if you had two plots assigned, he would take one and leave you with the other. With the loss of machines, it became difficult to feed the family. Many families were forced to sell their animals or other valuables to pay for their children's migration expenses. [...] Over time, many families sponsored their children's backway, which has caused so many tragic deaths⁶⁶.

63. Independent Office of Evaluation IFAD, Jahaly and Pacharr Smallholder Development Project. Completion Evaluation Report Summary, 1994, <https://ioe.ifad.org/en/w/jahaly-and-pacharr-smallholder-development-project-1994-> (last accessed 27 September 2025).

64. Interview with a former officer in Sapu, 14 March 2020.

65. Interview in Sapu, 14 March 2020.

66. Interview in Kerewan Samba Sira, 13 March 2020.

The Janneh Commission, established in 2017 by President Adama Barrow to investigate on the accumulation of public assets by former President Jammeh and his family members, clarified that in 2015 Jammeh officially acquired control of more than 1,300 hectares of rice fields in this area and around 660 hectares near Sapu. This happened through the granting of a 99-year lease approved by local district authorities, the governor of CRR region and the Ministry. According to the investigation conducted by the Janneh Commission, the village head (*Alkalo*) of Pacharr declared that “rice fields up to Cassamance were cultivated for the benefit of the Ex-President”, but neither he nor the community ever ratified any formal approval of the lease⁶⁷.

In 2013, Jammeh abruptly broke off diplomatic relations with Taiwan and ordered the expulsion of the expatriate staff. According to the officer from Sapu, that was the final blow to rice cultivation in the area: the farmers lost access to essential aid, suffered even more substantially from uncontrollable floods, and a rapid and significant loss of labor occurred: “The farmers said: ‘I have worked all my life in Jahaly-Pacharr and now I have nothing. I can’t maintain the house, I can’t give anything to my children, and I can’t even continue to grow rice’”⁶⁸.

Since 2017, the new Government led by Barrow has repeatedly expressed the need to return the plots to local farmers and to provide new support for rice production in the area. During a visit in that first year of the Barrow administration, the Minister of Agriculture, Omar Amadou Jallow, in addition to reiterating the intentions of the new Government in this regard, denounced the disaster that had taken place during the Jammeh years and, like the elder from Kerewan Samba Sira, emphasized the connection between the collapse of production in Jahaly-Pacharr and the unprecedented scale of youth migration from these rural areas⁶⁹.

In 2017, the new Government established the National Seeds Secretariat (NSS), which introduced a seed certification system. Certified agricultural products can now be purchased by international organizations, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). According to a NSS official, in 2019, the FAO spent 30 million Dalasi (approximately \$ 603,000) on the purchase of certified seeds in The Gambia, which were distributed to farmers in

67. Commission of Inquiry (Janneh Commission), Volume 3 Special Landed Properties, 2019, 213, <https://www.moj.gm/downloads> (last accessed 26 September 2025).

68. Interview in Sapu, 14 March 2020.

69. “Jahally Pacharr rice field to be handed to communal owners”, *The Standard*, 6 November 2017, standard.gm/jahally-pacharr-rice-field-handed-communal-owners/ (last accessed 26 September 2025). The development contribution of China in this sector has recently consolidated. In March 2026, the FAO, the Government of The Gambia, and the People’s Republic of China launched a \$ 1.5 million project aimed at transforming rice and millet food systems in the country. The project will work on the introduction of hybrid seed varieties, the improvement through technology and training of production, processing and marketing capacity of Gambian farmers. See www.fao.org/gambia/news/detail/fao-and-china-launch-usd-1.5-million-project-to-transform-rice-and-millet-food-systems-in-the-gambia/en (last accessed 13 April 2026).

vulnerable conditions, with other forms of humanitarian aid⁷⁰. Moreover, the new Government launched a cooperation project with China (with which Jammeh had already restored diplomatic relations in 2016) that promised to revitalize rice production in Jahaly-Pacharr. This was a collaboration with the Chinese Agency for International Economic Cooperation; since 2019, a pilot project had been active in Sapu that had among its objectives the introduction of hybrid rice varieties, with higher yields and more disease resistance. A Chinese mission based in Sapu collaborated with local experts and farmers and financed the infrastructural rehabilitation of part of the 15 hectares of experimental rice farm in Sapu. The implementing actors were the Central Project Coordinating Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Chinese company, Yuan Longping High-Tech Agriculture Co., Ltd. The initial phase was declared completed in August 2023 following training and experimentation with the use of hybrid varieties of various crops⁷¹. Rice cultivation has obtained dedicated attention from Barrow-led cabinets and, under the current minister of agriculture Demba Sabally (in charge since 2022), The Gambia National Rice Development Strategy (NRDS II 2022-2030) was published. In the post-Jammeh era, large private investors have also become prominent actors in rice production, particularly in CRR. In 2018, a Gambian diaspora investor established a company, started to collaborate with Chinese partners and international organizations, and involved local farmers in innovation and mechanization initiatives⁷²; in 2024, Jah Oil, the largest fuel company in the country, established a huge agrobusiness in an area north-east of Jahaly-Pacharr, in CRR⁷³. These actors have invested significant capitals and rely systematically on efficient inputs and machines. How small producers will benefit from these evolutions is still unclear; in September 2025, small producers in CRR lamented the fact that the Government concentrates efforts and resources on large projects and on supporting the big private enterprises rather than them⁷⁴.

Whether development is reappearing at the door of the agricultural communities of Jahaly-Pacharr and the agricultural history of this region is being set in motion again is still an open question. In the meantime, local actors are dealing

70. Interview in Sapu, 14 March 2020.

71. "China-Aid project of agricultural assistance phase 1-2 objectives achieved", *The Point*, 31 August 2023, <https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/national-news/china-aid-project-of-agricultural-assistance-phase-1-2-objectives-achieved> (last accessed 26 September 2025).

72. FAO, "FAO West Africa Newsletter", August 2020, Issue #1.

73. The company declared to have initially worked on producing rice on 1,000 hectares, with ambitious plans of further expansion. Representatives responded to critics by saying that it is an entirely private investment which does not receive any material contribution from the Government, but they do not exclude future grant-based collaboration. See "Hydara says multi-million-dollar rice project is fully funded by Jah Oil Company", *The Standard*, 7 January 2025, standard.gm/hydara-says-multi-million-dollar-rice-project-is-fully-funded-by-jah-oil-company/#google_vignette (last accessed 14 April 2026).

74. "Rice Farmers in CRR Sound Alarm over Government Neglect", *Foroyaa*, 10 September 2025, foroyaa.net/rice-farmers-in-crr-sound-alarm-over-government-neglect/ (last accessed 14 April 2026).

with the enduring legacies of past crises and with the numbers of young men emigrating from the area. They have to integrate new forms of mobility into the material reproduction strategies of families and villages. An elder from the village of Sinchu Magai lamented the complete loss of rice cultivation in his village that started in the mid-2010s: “We have stopped growing rice, but agriculture is still our main occupation, especially millet and groundnuts. We are not like the Serahule who have their children abroad and help them, pay their cultivation expenses”⁷⁵.

Under the common framework of the deep crisis in agriculture, different village development trajectories have continued to be relevant repertoires of representations: the Serahule villages, for instance, according to this last interlocutor, were better equipped to face the crisis because of their history of international migration. According to him, only in the 2010s has the village-level response to the crisis in Sinchu Magai been mass emigration, but in different forms from the Serahule: he defined migration as essential to the “survival of the family”. Young people go to the coastal areas of The Gambia, to the city of Basse or to Casamance in Senegal; they mostly undertake temporary, daily work in the fishing sector at the ports of Tanje and Gunjur as fishermen or loaders, in the construction sector along the coast, or as agricultural workers. This relates to the fact that, for him, the 2010s were the years in which rice cultivation became an unsustainable and almost illogical activity⁷⁶. Until the 2010s, migration – whether the international migration of the Serahule or the immigration of labor to Brikama Ba – had always been an integral part of the various stories of village development in Jahaly-Pacharr. Starting from this decade, it has become something else: the matrix of representations and practices of social reproduction originating from and evolving within an epochal crisis, that of the historical repertoires which organized the individuals’, family units’ and village communities’ moral and material reproduction based on agriculture.

The age of the “backway” migration

The elder from Kerewan Samba Sira stated that with the crisis of the development project the migration of young people to the urban coastal areas of the Gambia and, later on, the “backway” began. Since the late 2000s, migration is the “most important economic activity of the village”⁷⁷. An elderly village authority of Brikama Ba cited his own experience: his polygamous family is economically

75. Interview in Brikama Ba, 14 March 2020.

76. In this period, also national data report a decrease of the total rice cultivated areas, from 68,900 hectares in 2017 to 60,414 hectares in 2019. Since 2020, the trend has been reversed. See The Ministry of Agriculture, *The Gambia national rice development strategy (NRDS II – 2022 – 2030)*, 2022, 17.

77. Interview in Kerewan Samba Sira, 16 March 2020.

supported by the six sons who are currently abroad⁷⁸. Young men of the villages ask themselves whether the path of village development has stopped permanently. Siaka, a young man, who in 2020 was in his early twenties, had returned from the Libyan route to Europe and was participating in an International Organization for Migrations (IOM) project for the socio-economic re-integration of young people from the “backway”. His paternal grandfather was a Futa from Guinea-Conakry who arrived in the Gambia in the 1960s, fleeing the regime of Sekou Toure. He settled in a Fula village near Jahaly where he obtained access to land to build a house, cultivate dry crops and keep livestock. The family’s expansion across generations aligned with the village development trajectory of Brikama Ba: the grandfather obtained land in Brikama Ba, reactivated a family work tradition already practiced in Guinea-Conakry and opened a bakery in the village. In the years of the Jahaly-Pacharr project, Siaka’s father had access to two plots and, thus, had several sources of livelihood: livestock and dry crops in the first village near Jahaly, the bakery in Brikama Ba, and rice cultivation. In the 2000s, Siaka was growing up in Brikama Ba, attending school and helping his father in the bakery. In 2010, he witnessed the end of rice cultivation in the family plots: as a child, he would bring lunch to his father in the rice fields and find him waiting for the tractor to carry out plowing. The tractor was always late, often by days, because there were very few machines, and only for rent, in the area. Often, this caused devastation to the harvest and in 2010 Siaka’s father, exhausted, gave up, saying that there was nothing to gain from rice cultivation. When Siaka was about 17-18 years old, he decided to help his father at the bakery, which remained the main activity: “I saw my father, who had a large family; he was getting old. Nothing was going as I wanted. Because what I wanted was the future. I saw that my father was always working, but what we had was only food, water and clothes for us. Then I saw my younger brothers and sisters growing up”⁷⁹.

Siaka asked his father to involve him in work, delivered bread in the morning before going to school and worked until late at night preparing bread. With the money earned Siaka paid independently for school expenses (tuition, uniform and books) and saved some money; in 2016 he had 25.000 Dalasi and left for Agadez, in Niger, heading to Libya and Europe. His departure for the “backway” had matured in the conjuncture of existential, family and historical rupture: Siaka was becoming a young man aware of the economic situation of the family. All the efforts of previous generations seemed to have led the family to the trap of daily survival.

This representation of migration as the convergence of individual-existential and collective-historical turning points is also expressed by those who stayed. Fatima is a middle-aged woman from a Wolof village, proud of her activity as a

78. Interview in Brikama Ba 14 March 2020.

79. Interview with Siaka in Brikama Ba, 16 March 2020.

farmer⁸⁰. In 2020 she was enrolled in the “seed grower” program of the NSS. She had to comply with specific rules in the production of certain crops, and in return, these were absorbed into a guaranteed and adequately compensated commercial circuit. She presented agriculture as the cornerstone of her life:

My father and mother died when I was young. It was difficult for me here in the village because I had no relatives and no one could pay my school fees. [...] I said to myself: ‘I have to go back to the land.’ Then I got married and had three children. I taught them to farm since they were little girls, and thanks to that I was able to pay for their school expenses, their food... everything. Today, thank God, three of them have graduated from Gambia College⁸¹.

In addition to the land left to her by her family in the village, in 2020 she had recently purchased another 6 hectares for dry crops; every year she rented a variable number of plots in the Jahaly-Pacharr rice-growing areas by paying around 6.000 Dalasi for each production cycle, plus 1.600 for the rental of machinery and 2.800 for fertilizers. Fatima recognized the difficulties of agricultural production but the “seed grower” program was a good economic option. She stressed that her purpose was to prepare for her old age, by giving opportunities to her children and maintaining autonomy in relation to her husband, as she is the fourth wife in the family. She controlled agricultural activities, managed a bank account and was building a large compound (which we visited), where she would move from the crowded compound where she lives with her husband and co-wives. According to her, her commitment and results demonstrated that it was possible to farm profitably in Jahaly-Pacharr by seizing the right opportunities. However, she stressed, the NSS program requires much more work than the traditional management of agricultural cycles, and careful planning of each production phase so that the rules are followed. She underlined how surprising is the fact that only eleven farmers in the village participated in the program, and six of them were women; moreover, these women, unlike their male colleagues, managed to expand their cultivated land area (by purchasing and renting new plots) and to cultivate several crops simultaneously. This is a challenging task because it requires constant activity on the different production cycles, as well as continual visits to the production sites. The prominent role played by women was striking for her: agriculture was still considered a male-controlled activity, as acquiring land for dry crops through inheritance is practically automatic for a man, while a woman must struggle to obtain it by investing savings and overcoming widespread distrust. According to her, the success of her village’s women confirmed that men have long neglected agriculture because they only think about migration; even those who stay do not struggle in the fields but live on remittances provided by migrants.

80. Informal conversations and interviews with Fatima and her daughters in a Wolof village, 15 March 2020.

81. Interview with Fatima in a Wolof village, 15 March 2020.

As Carney noted about the tensions during the initial phases of the Jahaly-Pacharr Smallholder Project, external development interventions become, in local contexts, arenas and factors in the negotiation of gender roles and relations. Also, the boom, since the late 1970s, in women's commercial gardening in the North Bank Region showed examples of how the appropriation of external development support brought about fundamental social changes: the renegotiation of the "conjugal contract" between husband and wife and thus the reconfiguration of the "social landscape"⁸². These tensions and changes acquired communal relevance as, through them, local actors reflected on the moral, social and material arrangements regulating the management of resources, such as land, labor and profit⁸³. Fatima's confidence in agriculture as a pathway to well-being and autonomy may be partially related to tensions and rivalries that often arise in the arena of polygamous families. However, the stage of her trajectory was also the village arena: her beautiful new compound stands at the entrance of this Wolof village; she proudly claimed also to have paid for a new public well after a child was killed by a car while crossing the road to fetch water.

These achievements of her life trajectory raised questions for the whole village community about the failure of men in their socially and culturally inherited role of custodians of village development through agriculture. As she ran her farms better than men, she deserved the benefits from the external intervention of the NSS and international organizations that support the certified seeds market. She believes, like the women gardeners of the 1970s-80s in the North Bank, that it is possible to domesticate development in the struggle for autonomy and well-being; but, differently from them, besides the negotiation to control assets, labor and income, she sees herself in relation to a broader moral economic pattern of transformation. According to Fatima, migration replaced agriculture in terms both of its economic prominence and as an attribute of masculinity. The primacy of migration represented a sort of social and economic betrayal manifested by the "abandoned fields" and the "laziness" of men in the village, but also a cultural betrayal, as the abandonment of male prerogatives and responsibilities related to agricultural activities was leading to a generalized crisis of inherited values presiding over village development. Fatima was engaged in a multilevel battle: one to build a compact consumption unit (a *sinkiro* in Mandinka), autonomous from the head and the rest of the polygamous family, which shared the same resources in order to pursue, under the collapse of the framework of village development, a project of *sinkiro*-welfare and development; another that, through the visibility of her economic efforts, also had public relevance for the entire village by interrogating the male protagonists of the age of the "backway" (both as migrants and dependents on remittances) about their present inability to combine external de-

82. R. Schroeder, *Shady practices. Agroforestry and gender politics in The Gambia*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 1999, 58-60.

83. Schroeder, *Shady practices*, 103-104.

velopment interventions and agricultural tradition into a renewed horizon of village development.

Conclusion

For a large part of the history of The Gambia, and other areas of the African continent, development was discursively associated with issues such as people's access to basic services (health and education) and the stabilization of strategic production systems (in particular, agriculture). Then, since the late 2000s, development was increasingly debated by international organizations and national and international (in particular, European) policy-makers in its relationship with migration: is the lack of development the cause of migration? Can migration-related resources such as remittances sustain development? And can development stop migration? In this period, the growing visibility both in European and African countries of certain forms of international migration, like the "backway", inflated these discourses; but the dynamics taking place in the concrete contexts were often ignored. The "backway" must be situated within the broader political history of The Gambia and the central role played by youth in the country's transition from the Jammeh era to the present. This form of mobility is imbued with a "political energy" that transcends the urban-rural divide, pervades the entire Gambian society and acts as a barometer for shifts in the national political arena⁸⁴. At the same time, the consolidation of the "backway" as a life strategy came after decades of agricultural decline in the rural hinterland. This shift poses vital questions about the social and moral systems historically built on agrarian change and development attempts in the rural communities. The resulting moral paradoxes – as migration is both a threat to village reproduction and its only perceived lifeline – signal that local institutions and moral corpuses are undergoing a profound reconfiguration. They are adapting to govern both materially and symbolically processes, such as the backway itself, which have an unprecedented impact on the future reproduction of the Gambian rural world⁸⁵.

The Jahaly-Pacharr area has seen development objectified through different historical forms: local actors have activated moral and cultural repertoires, social relations, and economic systems inherited from the nineteenth century agricultural expansion to appropriate and govern various external development interventions. In the second half of the twentieth century, migration, both to and from the area, was one factor amongst others in the different historicities of village development. Young migrants who left the Serahule villages or who flocked to Brika-ma Ba in the 1980s became historical agents of development through reproducing and renegotiating cultural repertoires, and social and economic structures inheri-

84. Bellagamba, Ceesay, Vitturini, "The political energy".

85. E. Vitturini, A. Bellagamba, "At the time of the 'backway'. Mobility rules and moral breakdown from the standpoint of a rural Gambian community", *Focaal*, 99, 2024, 41-53.

ted from the past. Through these supports of community life, migration was managed locally (in village and family arenas) as a governable process that coupled the effects of external development and social engineering – such as the projects of the Gambian State and international organizations – with localized trajectories of village development (e.g. the fruitful governance of immigration in Brikama Ba)⁸⁶. Migration, therefore, was a historical process considered organic and internal to the ideas and practices of village development: it mediated between local agendas and external historical forces, such as those embodied by development organizations. The historicity that consolidated around this localized nexus between migration and development emerged from the context's *revanche* vis-à-vis external projects.

The “backway” migration is a historical process that derived from the crisis of this historicity and, at the same time, marked its radical transformation. In order to understand contemporary migrations, it is crucial to outline their specificity in terms of background, forms and impact on the Gambian society. By situating the “backway” in a concrete context such as Jahaly-Pacharr and, at the same time, in a broader historical horizon, we can see how actors represented and reacted to the overturning of the migration-development nexus which was locally rooted. During the age of the “backway”, which started to become manifest to the Gambians during the second half of the 2000s, migration is socially acted and culturally represented as an extrinsic and autonomous element of village development. While social engineering has faded into the twilight of history and development projects have become a mirage for many, village development can continue to be imagined and practiced only as depending on migration; only with migration as a condition for it being possible. In the 2010s, governing the “backway” at the village level became impossible: migration had escaped the control of the institutions that, for example in Brikama Ba, had governed mobility in the decades of the Jahaly-Pacharr project. Having abdicated their function of governing migration processes, the discourses, practices and institutions controlling local development are limited to managing the “backway”’s effects, sometimes tragic – such as deaths along the route or its high economic costs – and sometimes positive – such as migrants’ family remittances or other forms of material support. The non-organic character of the “backway” in relation to the social and cultural worlds of local residents resonates in the words of Fatima when she describes this phenomenon as the radical negation of village development’s imaginary: those who have migrated since the late 2000s, like those who remain as dependent on migrants, have placed themselves outside a development historicity and have embraced a new age.

86. The research of Judith Carney showed that the challenges to the local actors’ appropriation of external interventions came also from other elements such gendered roles and relations of production.