



# Journal of Social and Political Sciences

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**Touray, E. (2022). Southern Senegambia in the World System Dynamics: from Medieval to the Atlantic Era. *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, 5(3), 158-165.**

ISSN 2615-3718

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1991.05.03.372

The online version of this article can be found at:  
**<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>**

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Published by:  
The Asian Institute of Research

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# Southern Senegambia in the World System Dynamics: from Medieval to the Atlantic Era

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to identify the shift in the focus of academic scholarship in the use of theoretical and conceptual tools of inquiry in the examination of restructuring world economy within the framework of world system analysis. It further focuses on the rapid social, political, and economic transformation and change as consequence of the Malian political hegemony that led to the reinforcement of Mandinka-speaking cultural and political domination through the establishment of Kabu and other Manding principalities along the banks of The Gambia River prior to the expansion of European capitalist economic advancement in the fifteenth century. It also demonstrates the manifest transformation after the withdrawal of the Malian imperial control and the subsequent rise of the Atlantic trading system, which facilitated the establishment of capitalist world economy that also gave rise to European competition over the control of strategic viable commercial sphere of influence in Southern Senegambia.

**Keywords:** Atlantic, Capitalist, Dynamics, Global, Periphery, Slave Trade, World system

## 1. World system dynamics and the Expansion of Medieval Malian Hegemony

Over the past years, scholars of humanistic and social science disciplines have been studying and examining the various forms of global economic interdependence and linkages in varying sizes and scopes. This existing dynamics of world economic and commercial relationship is what is identified as world system (Wright, 2004). The phenomenon had been in existence well before the emergence of modern European capitalist economic advancement in the fifteenth century. The argument forwarded by Janet L. Abu-Lughod, on the existence of world system before the European hegemony, has been clearly elucidated by George Von-der-Muhl:

Never before, she contends, "had so many regions of the old world come in contact with one another." In the evidence now available to historians she finds numerous indications that by the end of the thirteenth century the Eurasian landmass from the Flemish artisanal entrepots of Bruges and Ghent to the glittering imperial city of Hangzhou had become effectively tied together through commerce. Trade between northwestern Europe and the Mediterranean Basin had fully developed by this point (Von-der-Muhl, 1993, page. 2).

Therefore, rationalization of world system needs to be encapsulated within the framework of its evolutionary and restructuring context. Owing to this dynamic situation, it is categorized according to the epoch and spatial degree of integration. It is significant to note that the Roman Empire was part of the world economic system linking modern England and Spain in the West, as far as Mesopotamia and Egypt in the East. However, the downfall of the Roman Empire after fourth century AD marked the beginning of global isolation of Western Europe (Wright, 204).

The growth of the World System for a period after the mid-seventh century and before the fifteenth century was related to medieval old world system. Accordingly, the existence of dual global systems dynamics (exogenous and endogenous) rationalised within the framework of centric and multi-centric perspectives helped to enhance our understanding of global interconnections during the Medieval period (Fernand Braudel, 76). This epoch witnessed the expansion and dominance of the Muslim world in the Middle East (Von-der-Muhl, 1993).

In their quest for sustainable commercial expansion and to gain a political advantage, controlling the Middle East, and Africa, south of the Sahara became strategic for gold. With the arrival of Arabs and Berbers, the history of West Africa, in general and indeed that of Western Sudan changed radically. It is important to understand that the establishment of wider territorial polities in Ghana and Mali in the Western Sudan from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries was actually in response to this global system. With the use of camel as a means of transportation, Arabs were able to establish links with West Africa, south of the Sahara Desert. This connected West Africa into the growing world system. In this complex commercial interaction, Arabs supplied salt from mines in the desert north to the salt-starved inhabitants of the savannah, along with dates, figs, woven cloths, and copper articles. They carried gold from the west towards the north. West Africa, through the period of medieval old world, was the greatest supplier of gold. With the penetration of Mali into Southern Senegambia and the subsequent Malian political expansion, Southern Senegambia became part of a complex commercial network of medieval old world system through the intervention of Medieval Western Sudanic Empires until the second half of the fifteenth century (Wright, 204).

The Arabs-dominated Middle East, as a core area in the medieval world system, reached its climax in around 1300 AD (Von-der-Muhl, 1993). Prior to its resurgence as an active participant in the world system, capitalist development in Western Europe was confined to feudal system. Therefore, the expansion of commerce was also limited within the confine of feudal system. However, from the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries, Western European commercial expansion was constrained owing to low agricultural productivity due to the adverse climate change that caused an increase in epidemics within the population, and the exhaustion of land as well as technological constraints. In addition, the economic cycle of the feudal economy had reached the limit of its capacity to extract surplus from their peasants, and the peasants were generally becoming burdened (Immanuel Wallerstein, 1974).

Another factor which was related to this condition was that Europe needed huge capital to finance Eastern trade, and the Arabs continued to have monopolistic access to West Africa's gold. Though these factors caused a severe economic crisis, it also served as lure for European expansion. According to Donald Wright:

Some Europeans began to wonder if expansion away from the continent, into the new lands where agents of European lords could produce cheap foodstuffs, fuel, and new surpluses, might solve these problems. Such expansion might indeed enable the Europeans to outflank the Muslims and get direct access to West African gold (Wright, p.28).

Western Europe embarked on a path of capitalist development after the middle of the fourteenth century. In their drive to emerge from their provincial confinement, Europe had to seek alternative commercial ventures to ensure sustainable economic growth centred on the establishment of World Capitalist Economy (Immanuel Wallerstein, 1974). Since it entails the geographical scope of the world in question theoretical and conceptual discourse shift from the use of nation-state to the use of the world as a unit of analysis. In seeking to understand the dynamics of the capitalist world economy as a total social system, the focus of sociological analysis has also been shifted from the dimension of micro-sociological analysis that seeks to understand the behaviour of an individual within the framework of the sociocultural system in which he or she is a member, has been shifted to the macro-sociological

perspective that seeks to understand societies and nation states within a broader economic, political, and legal framework known as world system (Robinson,2005). Since this perspective constitutes the understanding of the historical changes leading to the rise of the modern world, it is modelled in a theoretical framework called modern world system theory (Immanuel Wallerstein,1974).

World system theory is conceptually centred on the Annales school, Marx and dependency theory. These schools shape Wallerstein's experience and his exposure to various theoretical issues and phenomena (Frank,2000). Through Braudel's historical examination of the evolution of capitalism within Annales tradition, Wallerstein was inspired to propose more complex understanding of capital flow and capitalist relation in the world. The theory is also built on dependency theory to conceptualize the existence of a single world economy and a single, axial division of labour (Clayton, 2004).

From Marx, Wallerstein was conceptually shaped to understand the fundamental reality of social conflict among materially-based human groups. This conflicting reality constitutes the basis of understanding the world-system theory as an adaptation of dependency theory. Wallerstein draws heavily from dependency theory, a neo-Marxist explanation of development processes in which the early capitalist system was the establishment of world economy based on extremely unequal division of labour between European states and the rest of the world(Robinson, 2005). It should be understood that dependency theory is a representation of Marx's version of classed society to an international level in which core or capitalist world controls the means of extracting the surplus production. The periphery which epitomizes the proletarian class is positioned to have limited control over labour (clayton,2004).

## **2. The Rise of the Atlantic Trade**

The dynamics of World System within evolutionary and restructuring context have been clearly demonstrated in the work of Janet Abu-Lughod. Her analysis outlines the conditions that constitute the rise and the decline of the world systems. She argues that the rise of the world systems should be understood on the basis of consistent increase in integration and uninterrupted flow of goods, while the decline occurs when the vigour that enhances the previous dynamic of integration disappears (Von-der-Muhl, 1993). In this situation, the restructuring of world systems takes place when the former peripheral zones began to occupy key positions, and became active in intense interactions (Wright, 2004).

Mid-fifteenth century is a significant epoch that witnessed the fall of the East and the subsequent expansion of capitalist world system as a result of intense quest for capital accumulation. This process of expansion was meant to link the entire globe to the capitalist world system. West Africa, within the context of restructuring world system, was opened up to European competition (Barry, 1998).

It is understood that the Muslim-dominated Eastern realm of the old world commercial system was sending trade goods westward. However, its intense vigour began to dissipate due to irregular, expensive and insufficient flow of goods. This condition enticed the European kings and persons of means to find viable zones to enhance economic, political and spiritual recovery (Wright,2004). The ultimate expansion of European commercial system and quest for precious minerals such as gold and locating sea route to the East served as push factor for Portuguese explorers towards the West coast of Africa. In West Africa, Portuguese desire to draw the Trans-Saharan gold trade towards the Atlantic resulted in direct European encounter with Senegambia (Bredwa-Mensah, 1999).

However, European effort to locate West African gold deposit against Arab's trading monopoly could only be realised through ship building and ocean navigation. Prince Henry, the son of King John I of Portugal brought the revolution in ship building and navigation (Gray, 1966). He opened his scientific school for navigators at Sargos to study construction, guidance and map making. He encouraged Portuguese and other mariners to sail south in the Atlantic Ocean in search for the reputed wealth chronicled by Arab geographers and cartographers of Africa.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to explore the West African coast (Bredwa-Mensah, 1999). Since in 1420, they sailed Madeira and passed through Cape Bajador and Cape Blanco from 1434-1441. They established the base for their fleets and coastal traders at Arguin Island. In 1445, they went up to Senegal valley and The

Gambia River so as to get direct access to the Trans-Saharan gold trade from Western Sudan. Since The Gambia was geographically situated as a major outlet for the declining Mali Empire, Southern Senegambia's strategic commercial centres of Wuli, and other Manding principalities and trading centres became important for Portuguese traders. The Upper Gambia valley also served as a point of departure for caravans that linked The Gambia northward with Upper Senegal and eastward with the Niger Bend. The Portuguese establishment in the coastal zones of the Southern Rivers shaped the gradual formation of cosmopolitan centres along the riverside villages (Wright, 2004).

The Portuguese were successful in diverting the trans-Saharan gold trade through trade links with gold mining areas of Bambuk and Bure in the upper Senegalese valley. The inhabitants of the gold mining regions of Bambuk and Bure were very secretive about the sources of gold. They constrained all forms of direct communication with foreign traders. The Europeans and early Arab traders were prevented from going near the gold mining region. They organized the trade in such a way that minimal contact was required between the two sides (Sanneh, 2016). Gold and salt were swapped in heaps. It is confirmed that each heap of gold was equivalent to a heap of salt (Sanneh, 2016). The Portuguese' intense quest for West African gold was linked to corresponding increases in the demand for the use of gold coin in the growing capitalist monetary economy in Lisbon (Rodney, 1972). A. Teixeira da Mota, who mentions the tradition which refers to the subject of gradual influx of people, indicates the ancient Mandinka-type gold-digging in the Geba valley in Guinea Bissau (Teixeira da Mota, 1954).

It is still difficult to obtain any statistical data to indicate the estimated quantity of gold traded in the Senegambia gold mining region of Bambuk and Bure in the Upper Senegal. The estimate forwarded by Philip Curtin from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries indicates that the annual gold exported from Senegambia to Lisbon was 35kg. However, a story by Victorino Magalhaes Godinho recorded 4,709 gold doubloons between 1499 and 1501 (Barry, 1998). In the southern Senegambia, apart from gold, Portuguese traders also exported 6000 to 7000 hides annually. With high European demand in 1660, 150,000 were produced in Southern Senegambia area. In addition, Wax and Ivory trade was renowned in Cokoli and Landuma areas.

Christopher Columbus discovery of America as the new world for Europeans in 1492 is another turning point in the history of West Africa and Southern Senegambia in particular. Columbus's discovery helped the Spanish to gain control of the land with huge quantities of silver and gold. On his second voyage in 1493, Columbus took sugarcane to northern America in an attempt to experiment the crop. In the sixteenth century, sugarcane production was constrained due to the fact that the local Arawak Indians were less productive as labourer in the plantations because of their inability to withstand the captivity and tropical diseases brought to the new world by the Europeans. However, Africans living along the Atlantic coast had hereditary immunity to tropical diseases like malaria and yellow fever. So Africans can serve long in tropical American environment (Wright, 2004).

During the period of Columbus, the Portuguese concentrated on four major areas of the West African Region. These areas include Senegambia, Upper Guinea, Gold Coast and Benin. They linked West Africa with the Atlantic until the middle of the seventeenth century (Manning, 2006). The expansion of the Atlantic complex was the consequence of the growing demand for sugar that was also linked to corresponding demand on the new world plantations for labourers. This raised demands for commodities from Europe in West Africa. Owing to this situation, the incorporation of West Africa and Southern Senegambia area into the Atlantic economic system was inevitable. It is therefore confirmed that Africa as a continent formed an extension of the European Capitalist market (Wright, 2004). It is necessary to know what position Southern Senegambia occupied in this complex commercial relationship. To conceptualize the existence of power hierarchy within the framework of capitalist world economic relations, Immanuel Wallerstein adapts dependency approach to identifying global class relations in the form of core and periphery (Robinson, 2005). In the capitalist world economic relation, technology is identified as a key factor in the positioning of a region into core and periphery (Martinez, 2001). With technological sophistication in the sixteenth century, Europe assumed a dominant position. Therefore, Africa's role in its involvement was to be determined by European capitalist agenda (Rodney, 1972). Barry argues that:

It tended to dominate various levels of African economy, assigning it specific roles within the global production system of eminent capitalism. From that point on, all internal transformations within Senegambia's societies would be

governed by the context of increasing subordination to capitalist system (Barry, 1998: p. 42).

It should be understood that Africa's connection to the capitalist world in the sixteenth century revolved around slave trade. This relationship resulted in the consolidation of states who served partly as procurers of export commodity. In addition, it led to the emergence of a coastal trading class who also served as middlemen between the inland procurers and European purchasers who arrived with their boats (Wallerstein, 1986). In the Southern Rivers area, the inter-regional trade initiated by indigenous Bainunkas, Papels, Mandinkas and *Bijagos* shifted to the Portuguese who settled along the north-south coastal trading circuits. The Portuguese relegated these early indigenous populations to lowly work of hunting slaves or serving as intermediaries in the Atlantic trading system with the hinterland (Barry, 1998).

Owing to its proximity to Europe and America, the Senegambia region became one of the first major sub-Saharan regions to export slaves into the Atlantic. Its contribution in terms of the number of slaves exported, and Senegambia's role in trade could be explained more than the effects of its participation in trade (Keynolds, 1985). After the beginning of the Atlantic slave trading system in the sixteenth century, the trading circuits that were oriented towards the Trans-Saharan trade through Niger had been shifted and drawn towards the Atlantic coast (Barry, 1998).

In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese were the leading slave traders, and their sphere in the Southern Senegambia Upper Guinea coast constituted one third of the slaves exported overseas. In 1447, Tristao led an expedition to explore the coast South of Cape Verde but failed to discover the mouth of The River Gambia. He and his crew members on the Senegambia coast initially obtained slaves through banditry and kidnapping. In their attempt to enter into the territorial areas of the Gambian kingdoms, Nuno Tristao and his crew members lost their lives (Bredwa-Mensah, 1999).

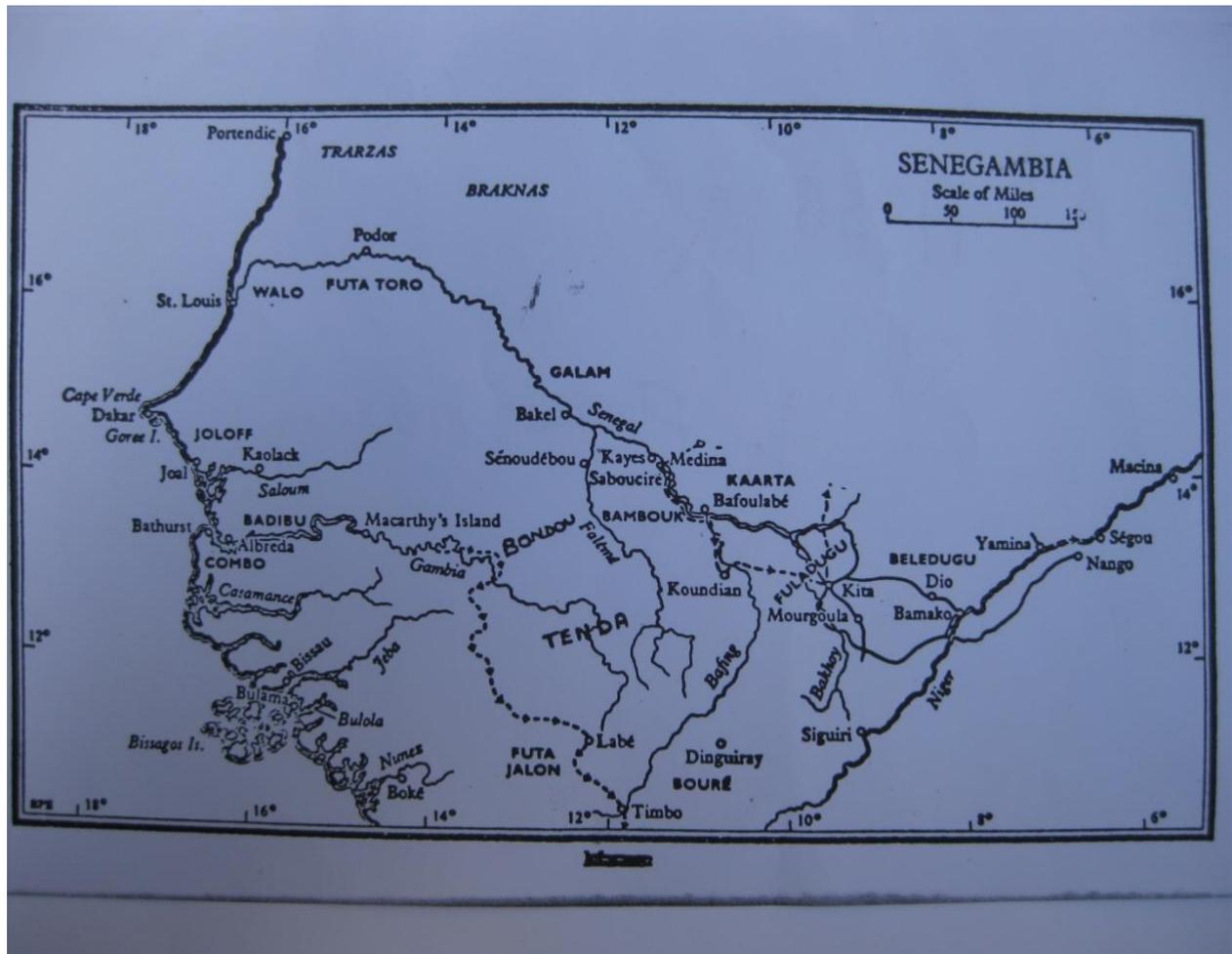
The introduction of the Atlantic slave trade by the Portuguese had long standing impact on the economic, political and social conditions of the Southern Rivers area. Prior to its being opened to the Atlantic complex commercial network, Southern Senegambia had well established political units with territorial sovereignty to foster both inter-human and international relations. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the people living along the Atlantic coast of Senegambia and its major Rivers availed themselves of the opportunity to be involved in supplying captives, gold, hides, beeswax and foodstuff in exchange for horses, cloth, metals and beads.

The Kabu Empire, which became a regional power following the withdrawal of ancient Mali, consolidated and established its hegemony over the region between the territories of The Gambia and Futa Jallon. It finally asserted its dominance over the Southern River populations of Bainunkas, Papels, Kasangas, and Beafadas. From Mandinka-dominated states such as Kabu, warriors staged raids on both coastal and interior peoples, supplying Europeans with slave exports beginning in the late fifteenth century. Kabu reached the peak of her imperial dominance under *Nyancho* aristocracy during the reign of Emperor Mansa Biran who died in 1705 (Barry, 1998). Kabu, under the administrative hegemony of Nyancho nobility patronized by various caste groups, had maintained continuity with ancient Malian pre-Islamic heritage (Sanneh, 2016). It consolidated and intensified the slave raid by positioning the provincial generals known as *Korin*, military aristocrats notorious for their excessive drinking of *doloo*, alcohol. Since power consolidation was centred on the Atlantic slave trade, it reinforced the warlike nature of the Nyancho aristocratic royal clan. By 1738, the emperor of Kabu had the capacity to export thousands of slaves from the Southern River region under Mandinka dominated Kabu. According to Mendonsa, Senegambia with the world market generated wealth and power for Mandinka-speaking aristocracies. The Mansas established trade relations and political alliance with the Europeans. This constituted the basis of the recognition of political power structures of the region by European traders (Mendosa, 2002).

In the eighteenth century, Senegambian zone, under the English and French commercial sphere, contributed 3000 to 5000 slaves exported to the new world annually. These slaves came from the interior and were sold along the coast. Significantly, James Island in the Gambia and Goree in Senegal served as stopping point, where they could pick some food and few more slaves before the long Atlantic passage (Klein, 1972). By the end of the sixteenth

century, the populations of Bijago Island in Guinea Bissau embarked on elaborate social transformation. In their effort to take advantage of the new maritime trade, they instituted a systematic organization to ensure effective participation. While their women were engaged in food production and home building, their men concentrated on making boats that served as fleet of war canoes with which they used to spread terror throughout the Southern Rivers (Barry, 1998).

When the early Portuguese mariners and traders arrived, Southern Senegambia stratified and patrilineal societies constrained their cultural infiltration into Senegambian societies as enshrined in customary landlord-stranger relationship. They were compelled to pay tolls and taxes, to visit only where they were invited to visit, and to adhere to local customs and practices. To ensure their continuous dependence on the local population for food supply, they were denied access to land rent, except for dwelling and stores (Brooks,2010).



Picture 1: The Map of Kabu States

The presence of the Portuguese traders in the Southern Senegambia areas of Casamance River and Rio Cacheau in Guinea Bissau led to massive influx of Cape Verdean traders. This critical change became advantageous for highly skilled Bainunkas and Kasanga weavers and dyers. Since they specialized on weaving and dyeing, they obtained the cotton needed for the production of their weaving and dyeing goods from the Cape Verdean traders. The Bainunkas also excelled in agricultural production that enabled them to produce food for resident Europeans as well as slaving ships (Barry, 1998). This commercial relationship enticed the skilled Bainunkas and Kasanga associates to adopt elements of Portuguese culture to sustain the benefit accruing from their interaction with Lancados (Green, 2011). Accordingly, such cost-benefits analysis served as motivation for the massive acculturation of lineages into Portuguese culture. Consequently, the influence of creole culture and language spread beyond the narrow confines of the Atlantic trading settlements, as Toby Green explains: “Naturally, the influence of the creolization spread beyond elites, as local traders willing to take advantage of the new commercial

opportunities of the Atlantic trading settlements started to reside there (Green, 2011). It should be understood that the adoption of the creole culture served a strategic advantage for local traders in gaining benefits from the direct exchange with the Atlantic traders.

However, the acephalous and matrilineal societies such as Papel, Beafada, Temne and Bullom inhabitants of south of The Gambia River were culturally receptive to the Portuguese and other Europeans who followed (Brooks, 2010). They allowed Europeans to marry local women, usually the relatives and dependents of influential community members who exploited the traders. The Portuguese induced the chiefs, kings and potentates all over Guinea with alcohol and spirit as gift and bribes. Therefore, the coastal people in most of the Southern rivers, accommodated the European traders, allocated enough land, and provided facilities to encourage them to stay (Mendoza, 2002).

In the first half of the seventeenth century, metropolitan Europe witnessed the downfall of economic dominance on nobility and the rise of bourgeoisie. They established chartered companies in Europe with the objective of concentrating on overseas trading without losing their glory in Europe. Therefore, the competition that engendered rivalries among European nations in Europe had immediate repercussion in the Senegambia region (Brooks, 2010).

### 3. Conclusion

It should be understood that Senegambia's link to the Medieval old world system through Sudanic empires facilitated the establishment of Malian political control and the subsequent establishment of Kabu and other Manding principalities situated along the banks of the Gambian River, leading to Mandinka-speaking political and cultural domination from the north bank of the Gambia River to Futa Jallon Massif.

The withdrawal of Mali over her imperial tentacles in Southern Senegambia coincided with the period of the expansion of the capitalist economic advancement as a consequence of the intense quest for capital accumulation in Europe during the middle of the fifteenth century. Consequently, Kabu, the largest Malian political unit, embarked on an intense mobilization to incorporate the other Mandinka states from the Gambia to Guinea Bissau and consolidated its position within the southern Rivers area to ensure effective participation in the Atlantic slave trading system. The expansion of capitalist economic advancement opened Senegambia to European competition over the control of strategic commercial sphere of influence. Thus, the Senegambia region was partitioned and became French, English and Portuguese sphere of influence.

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