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Between a Weberian and historical understanding of economic dominance among pious Muslims in francophone West Africa

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to explain why the two most pious Muslim groups in West Africa – the Mourides of Senegal and the Pula Futa of Guinea – are also the most economically dominant.

Design/methodology/approach – This question has typically been explained using the ideas of Max Weber, who suggests that the capitalist spirit arose because of the personal characteristics created by Calvinism. This paper looks at a Weberian explanation, adopted to Islam, and also an explanation that is rooted in pure political and economic history.

Findings – It is concluded that the Weberian explanation is germane to the case of the Mourides in Senegal, but does a poor job explaining the economic dominance of the Pula Futa. By contrast, while the economic and political history is important for the economic rise of the Mourides, it seems to account for almost the entire success of the Pula Futa.

Originality/value – These findings are important because they are a reminder of the heterogeneity between both ethnic and religious groups, both in their religious practice and in their economic affairs. The effects of religion, politics, and culture are not uniform for different sects, nations, and ethnic groups. If there is a desire to market to Muslims, develop programs for economic development, or engage in any economic work within Islamic cultures, there is a need to take such heterogeneity into account.

Keywords Islam, International business, West Africa, Applied economics, Social groups

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Francophone West Africa has long been characterized by its Muslim traditions. From the first nomadic Muslim traders coming across the Sahara to present-day cosmopolitan, urban youth, Islam has imparted a quite particular image on West Africa. To some, the region – bound up in its Islamic identity – has become a paragon of religious tolerance, an ideal of open-mindedness and tolerance for the Islamic world. To others, it is a degenerate Sufi region that has lost touch with the particulars of scripture by clinging to traditional beliefs[1]; it has bastardized and fetishized Muslim faith through idolatry and the commodification of belief. Regardless of the moral characterization one chooses, Francophone West Africa is a diverse region of many intact ethno-linguistic groups. And it is a region that is in great economic, political, and cultural flux, particularly since the end of the colonial era. Some states, like Senegal, are on the path to becoming what we in developed countries call “emerging economies.” Other states, like Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Niger are floundering in a pool of poor infrastructure, weak institutions, and low per capita incomes.

Amid this economic and political dispersion, two groups stand out. They are the Pula Futa of northern Guinea and the Mourides of Senegal, the former an ethnic group,



the latter a religious brotherhood composed mainly of members from the Wolof ethnicity. These two groups have managed, relative to other collections of individuals in the region, to stand out in their economic performance. They are the chronic stewards of businesses that exploit or exist in spite of the political situations in the region. They are lenders of money. They have managed to carve out their economic niche in a region that often seems depleted of opportunities. But these two particular groups are more than just economically successful. Quite interestingly, they are also commonly regarded as two of the most pious groups of Muslims in Francophone West Africa. The Mouride tradition is followed by millions of people around the world. Many followers devote their lives to prayer and the close following of God. The Pula Futa were one of the first ethnicities to welcome Islam in West Africa. Their locality, the Fouta Djallon, was for sometime seen as a center of Islamic learning, nearly on par with Timbuktu. The simultaneous economic dominance and religious devotion of these two groups raises the strikingly Weberian question: is there something about their religious beliefs, practices, or institutions that are responsible for bringing about their economic dominance?

A great deal of intellectual work could be done to develop Weber's ideas to explain the economic resilience and flourishing of the Mourides and the Pula Futa. Specifically, much could be drawn from Weber's seminal *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, as well as some later, less directly applicable writings on Islam. In fact, such heavy lifting could enrichen a somewhat elderly, though still relevant, sociological perspective. It could also do much to improve our understanding of the workings of a region in flux. But crossing the road without looking both ways is ill-advised. And embarking on a Weberian exploration may not lead us to the destination we seek. This paper is aimed at charting the waters, so to speak. It is a fact finding mission, an attempt to investigate to what extent the Weberian hypothesis makes sense in the particular context of the Mourides and the Pula Futa. I aim to answer: could the economic dominance exhibited by the Mourides and the Pula Futa be explained by a Weberian analysis or does the answer to their success lie more in the political and economic history of their respective countries and ethnic groups? I will not address more substantive issues related to the plausibility of Weber's work and try to adapt it to this context.

I will divide this paper into two sections. The first will treat the Mourides in Senegal and the second will address the Pula Futa in Guinea. For each group, I will explore both the religious and political dimensions of their economic strength in order to try to paint a picture of what might be the underlying mechanisms. My thesis is that the Mourides in Senegal are driven by the interaction of their particular religious ideology in the context of an economically and politically successful country that has allowed them to flourish. The Pula Futa, I argue, have come to their economic dominance not through privilege, but through persecution at the hands of their own government. I will conclude by arguing briefly that understanding group dynamics in a broader-than-Weber sense is particularly important in Francophone West Africa under the present political and development climate. First, I will give a brief background of Weber's thesis of religious belief and economic activity.

Weber and his economic hypothesis of religious asceticism

In *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* Weber notes an apparent relationship between being Protestant and being involved in economic activity. He lays out what

has become a common-sense argument for the role that religion plays in encouraging economic activity. Weber's focus, as the title suggests, was on Protestantism, particularly Calvinism. His aim was to draw a contrast between Calvinist and Catholic religious ideals in order to explain the emergence of the capitalist spirit.

What Weber argues is that the character traits inculcated by the Calvinist faith, rather than the dictums of the faith *per se*, were what drove the Calvinists in their economic ascendancy. Based on Calvinist theology, a congregation of Calvinists consumed by their ascetic devotion to God emerged over time. Weber exploits this historico-religious fact to explain the rise of Calvinists to economic success. The asceticism, he argues, that they acquired in their piety is precisely what allows them to thrive in the economic world.

Weber begins by pointing out that many Protestant teachings imbue followers with a sense of "calling." This calling gives a spiritually approved significance to quotidian activities, particularly, in this Weberian case, the economic. Weber, 2001 writes:

The elected Christian is in the world only to increase this glory of God by fulfilling His commandments to the best of his ability. But God requires social achievement of the Christian because He wills that social life shall be organized according to His commandments, in accordance with that purpose[. . .] This makes labor in the service of impersonal social usefulness appear to promote the glory of God and hence to be willed by Him.

This expresses the spirit of the calling: that it is the individual's duty to live socially (and economically) in such a way that maximizes the glory of God and arranges the world according to His vision. Wasting time that could be spent glorifying God is the deadliest of sins for the Protestant. In the Franklinit sense of "time is money," "every hour lost is lost to labor for the glory of God" (Weber, 2001).

But this notion of "calling" is not sufficient to bring about the emergence of capitalist spirit. In order to complete his tale, he turns to the Calvinists. The Calvinists had a peculiar theology that stated that destiny was predetermined. In other words, your actions in this world were, to some extent, rather independent from whether or not you were to be saved or damned. Understandably anxious about their eternal fortunes (or misfortunes), Calvinists began to look for hints as to their future through the benefits that accrued to them in daily life. Happiness, health, and wealth were, therefore, thought to be indicators of being blessed. As a result, Calvinists worked hard so that such blessed results would be bestowed on them. The acquisition of wealth, then, was a direct sign of God's blessing. This encouragement of wealth accumulation was not only important for the congregation, but also for the clergy. Contrasted with other European religious movements of the time, Calvinism saw the accumulation of wealth on the part of their clergy as a sort of prestige-granting activity. Capitalism – and this the transformative moment – became a religiously sanctioned ends-in-itself. The capitalist spirit was really a religious spirit. The acquisition of wealth was sanctioned because economic success indicated a blessing from God. Economic activity, in some way, was inseparable from religious activity.

Weber makes two qualifying points to this general theory. First, he acknowledges that capitalism and religion might be more jointly determined than the content of his account lets on. In other words, while religion certainly affects the capitalist spirit, it is also the case that the capitalist experience affects and modifies the content of a religion. Second, he offers that religiosity is not a sufficient mechanism to cause the emergence of the capitalist spirit[2]. Rather, there are a number of historical factors that drive such an emergence that are quite significant. Nonetheless, it plays an important role in the

European setting of Weber's analysis. These two admissions frame the motivation for this paper. Specifically, I will argue that a-religious factors (e.g. politics and economics) play a significant role – perhaps one that dwarfs religions – in the emergence of the capitalist success for the Pula Futa and the Mourides. Similarly, I will argue that the capitalist spirit shows its face in the content of the Mouride religious experience. The Islam of the Pula Futa, however, has remained rather unaffected by this codetermination effect.

The Mourides and Senegal[3]

Economic and political history

Senegal, from the beginning of the colonial era, was important and strategic for its European occupiers. The Portuguese were the first to establish a presence in the mid-fifteenth century, mainly on Cap Vert, the peninsula and western-most point of the continent, which is now known as Dakar. This hub was used for slave trade purposes. In the mid-seventeenth century, the peninsula was turned over to French occupation. In the mid-nineteenth century, Dakar became a French commune. This classification solidified Senegal's intimate relationship with the colonial power. Citizens of the commune were allowed to elect their own local government as well as chose a representative to be sent to the French National Assembly. Dakar, beginning in the twentieth century, was the capital of French West Africa. The previous capital, Saint-Louis, is also in Senegal. As France's economic and political interests were solidified, Senegal became more and more represented in the French political structure, with more elected officials representing Senegal and its interests.

In the mid-twentieth century, following the independence movement led by Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, France scheduled its departure from Senegal. In 1960, France transferred power to the first elected President of Senegal, Leopold Senghor. Senghor was born in Senegal and his intellectual talents were quickly acknowledged by the colonial administration. He was awarded numerous scholarships to pursue his studies in France. He completed not only middle and high school, which was uncommon for a Senegalese national at the time, but he also went on to complete his university-level studies in France. He subsequently became a professor and had a career as perhaps the most accomplished African poet and philosopher[4] to emerge from the French colonies. Senghor was so accomplished that he became the first African to be appointed to l'Académie française, the official body charged with maintaining the integrity of the French language. In addition, Senghor was awarded the Grand croix de Légion d'honneur and the Grand croix de l'Ordre national du mérite, two of the highest decorations given by the French Government. All in all, this is to say that Senghor emblemized Senegal's close relationship to France.

Not only was Senghor a symbol of a cultural closeness that persists to this day, but also he maintained a political and economic closeness with the former colonial power that allowed for a great deal of French goodwill towards Senegal. Senghor's macroeconomic policies reflected this closeness. He pegged the Senegalese currency to the French franc as well as encouraged investment by French businesses. France responded by offering Senegal economic-aid packages. They also invested in infrastructure development for the country. France has also provided a number of opportunities and scholarships for talented young Senegalese, in all sorts of different fields, to receive their training in France. This has created a couple of generations of intelligent, well-educated, privileged,

and cosmopolitan Senegalese, many of whom have gone on to leadership in the Senegalese administration.

Senegal has also maintained close political relationships with France throughout time. Senegalese heads of state and ministers of parliament are often educated in France, live in France, and have close contacts in France. A small number of French politicians are naturalized Senegalese. All of this is to show that even though Senegal received its independence from France in 1960, it continued to shadow the French system and benefit economically from France, through direct investment, government-to-government assistance, as well as indirectly through the provision of scholarships to French youth. Many of those who benefitted were not just political leaders and aspirants, but religious leaders who have strong influence in Senegalese activities. Perhaps, the greatest religious beneficiaries were the leaders of the Mouride brotherhood.

The Mouride Brand of Islam

The Mourides emerged as a distinct brotherhood, or group of Muslims, in the late nineteenth century, though the system of brotherhoods is one that dates back to the emergence of Sufi Islam. These brotherhoods are characterized by their focus on their religious leaders as links between the individual and God. The first brotherhood to take hold in West Africa was the Tidiane brotherhood, which was brought by Umar Tall after his pilgrimage to Mecca. Most people occupying the present-day Senegalese state were, at that time, followers of the Tidiane brotherhood.

In the late nineteenth century a new religious leader, Cheikh Amadou Bamba, emerged from the town of Mbacke in central Senegal. Bamba had collected a number of followers because of his reputation for being able to communicate directly with God and perform supernatural feats. Bamba and his followers created a new brotherhood, called the Mouride brotherhood. The Mourides differed from the Tidiane in the sense that they worshipped, almost as a God, Cheikh Amadou Bamba. The Tidianes revered their leaders, but rejected the notion that individuals can have God-like qualities – Allah and Mohammed are the only objects of proper Muslim worship.

The Mourides^[5] are not an ethnic group in Senegal. They are the most prominent Muslim brotherhood, of which there are five. Though Amadou Bamba was of the Tukulor ethnic group – a subgroup of the broader Fulani ethnicity – the Mourides mainly consist of the Wolof ethnic group, which is the dominant ethnic group in Senegal.

Over time, Cheikh Amadou Bamba only grew in religious significance within Senegal. By the mid-twentieth century, most Senegalese belonged to the Mouride brotherhood. The Mourides have an annual pilgrimage to the Senegalese town of Touba, the capital of the Mourides, which draws around three million participants every year. As Senegalese have spread abroad and formed diaspora communities, they have spread the particulars of the Mouride brand of Islam. Now, you can find Mouride ceremonies quite easily in places such as New York City and Paris.

One of Amadou Bamba's main teachings was the importance of asceticism and worship. Though he did not impose practice requirements on his followers, this theme featured prominently in his interpretation of Islam. Amadou Bamba's most famous disciple was the one who made explicit this value of asceticism. His name was Cheikh Ibrahima Fall and he came into religious prominence not so long after Bamba. Fall is best known today as the founder to the Baye Fall sect of the Mouride brotherhood.

Fall and the Baye Fall believe that the best way to worship God is through work and prayer. Everything that inhibits devotion qua work should be foregone. This, intuitively, is a rather benign religious interpretation, but has quite serious implications for the Muslim faith. For instance, the Baye Fall refuse to fast during the month of Ramadan – one of the core requirements of Islam – for the reason that it diminishes their ability to labor for God. Spirituality emerges from devotion to God and you are devoted to God through your labor.

The Baye Fall spend their days praying and laboring. They believe in asceticism and will not have new clothes made. If they need clothing they will go to a tailor, ask that the tailor save scraps from other projects and then piece together an outfit for the Baye Fall with those scraps. This habit has created a distinctive, quilt-like style of dress that the Baye Fall continue to this day.

The Baye Fall, and the Mourides in general, are also quite focused on the notion of individual salvation. While some religions have moral doctrines that prohibit, say, certain acts for the collective good, the focus of Mouridism is on the salvation granted to the individual by God. Many Mourides today wear amulets and charms that have their provenance in traditional beliefs in order to gain personal protection and benefits from God.

These two central tenets of Mouridism – a firm belief in spiritualism qua work and commitment to individual, rather than community salvation – seem to reflect quite well the description of Calvinists given by Weber. What was central in Calvinism to the creation of the capitalist spirit was that destiny was fixed and that the acquisition of wealth was, therefore, seen as a blessing. This notion of wealth as a blessing is conceptually quite close to the idea of labor as a blessing, or labor as worship. Following from the Calvinist belief in wealth as a blessing is the notion of individualism. For the Calvinist, it's not the blessing of the community that is important as much as it is your own personal salvation. Likewise, for the Mourides. Thus, the Calvinist and Mouride religious ethics are quite close in concept.

The economic role and history of the Mourides

For the Calvinists, their search for wealth came about in the form of participation in the capitalist world of business. The Mourides have a similar engagement in business activity, but where the Calvinists sought their salvation, seemingly, by testing their bootstraps, the Mouride economic dominance emerged, in large part, due to political favoritism and broader economic advantages conferred, either directly or indirectly, by Senegal's close relationship with France.

This closeness of Mouride faith and followers and the wealth of France goes back into the early twentieth century, as the Baye Fall sect was taking form and the French colonial interests were in full swing. At the time of Ibrahima Fall, and well after into the twentieth century, the main form of labor practiced by the Baye Fall in their devotion was agricultural. Baye Fall laborers could be found in peanut fields all throughout the peanut basin of Senegal. Peanuts were the dominant export crop of the colony of Senegal, under France's administration. The peanuts were brought back to France, where they were turned into peanut oil. Totally, 40 percent of export revenues from Francophone West Africa came from Senegal's peanut industry. So, from the beginning, the religious and economic spheres in Senegal were tightly linked. France had an interest in increasing agricultural production, thus it directly benefitted

from all of the agricultural labor provided by the Baye Fall. And the Mourides had a great deal to benefit from the French – the French never forgot to return favors to Mouride leaders. Thus, the Mourides quickly became economically advantaged and favored under the French colonial administration. Their wealth, perhaps in a Weberian way, made them appear to their followers as all the more important and blessed. This only sped up the conversion of most of Wolof Senegal to the Mouride brotherhood.

In present day Senegal, this political favoritism of the Mourides still occurs, though now it originates in the Senegalese national government, rather than the French colonial government. Abdoulaye Wade, who defeated the incumbent Mamadou Diouf in the 2000 presidential elections, has become notorious for favoring the Mourides. Wade, a Mouride himself, made a trip to Touba, the Mouride capital, immediately after his 2000 election to give thanks to Serigne Saliou Mbacke, the present Leader of the Mourides. Mbacke, and all Mouride leaders before him, yield enormous political sway. With so many followers, they essentially command the vote of the entire country. Politicians, notably Wade, are infamous for pampering the Mourides in order to secure this aspect of the vote. Senegal has become a country in which “politicians are responsible for their clans in that they cannot forget to obtain advantages for them” (Behrman, 1970).

It is not only the high-up religious leaders that command this level of respect from followers. Even village- and sub-regional-level religious leaders demand a sometimes surprising amount of respect from other community members as well as people who are higher up on the social and economic ladder. In 2005, I observed the visit of two socially elite Dakarais to a small village in the Kaffrine region of deforested central Senegal. These two visitors worked in the natural resource management field for a major international NGO. They had come to observe the reforestation efforts of a local community members. They met with the village chief and religious leader in the morning. He showed them all of the trees that had been planted in the last six months and they were finished by 10.30 a.m. The religious leader, a deep believer in the Senegalese tradition of hospitality, wanted them to stay for lunch, which was still two hours away. Since he knew that the two visitors would want to say goodbye and go back to Dakar, he excused himself for a minute and did not return for another two hours, until lunch was finished. The two social elites, high-ups in international NGOs, sat around for those two hours, waiting for him to return, because they could not leave the community without saying goodbye to him; it would have been inappropriate given his status as a religious leader. So, although Mourides do command respect for their political influence, there is also a quite strong cultural-religious dimension to the reverence of the Mouride leaders.

This political and cultural importance of Mouride leaders brings along with it not only personal favors but access to sources of capital for large business endeavors. As a result, the Mourides have come to control almost all business and economic activity, both formal and informal, in the country of Senegal. If you visit the capital, Dakar, you will see buses and taxis covered with text from and images of Mouride spiritual leaders. Baye Fall walk the streets in their characteristics dreadlocks, thick prayer beads, and patchwork *boubous*. You can buy stickers proclaiming that “Allah is one” or displaying the face of your own spiritual leader. Images of imams are on necklaces, wallets, walls, 18-wheel trucks, posters, and television. But the Mouride economic dominance is not just cultural or symbolic. It is also quite real. The Mourides control some of the largest sectors of the Senegalese economy, both in terms of export revenue and internal significance.

First is the peanut industry. As previously mentioned, the Mourides played a quite important role in the success of the peanut industry under French rule. After the French abandoned their public control of the peanut industry, it was taken over by the Mourides. France was still the main buyer of the peanut crop, but the Mourides controlled almost all factors of production. They controlled the labor, they sold the crop domestically and internationally, they processed the crop, and they sold the processed product. Because of their religious significance and political influence, they were able to collect the needed capital to run such a large-scale operation. They also were able to minimize their costs because of their religious manipulation of their followers to work for little to no wages in the name of spiritual salvation. The economic success, in this case, of the broad Mouride industry was the Weberian reflection of salvation. The individual salvation, in other words, came from the success of the corporation, from the wealth that was accumulated by spiritual leaders and their lackeys that ran businesses in their name and interest.

Another major Mouride endeavor is the transportation industry. Dakar, being the most active port in West Africa, is a center for international, overland transport. Trucks carrying all types of commercial and industrial goods leave Dakar regularly en route to Bamako in Mali and other regional capitals. Not only are many of these import and export businesses run by the Mourides, but also are the transportation companies responsible for shipping these goods across the regions. Almost all goods leaving Senegal by ground – and traveling within Senegal – are controlled by the Mourides. This, again, feeds back into their political power and the need for politicians to cultivate their favor.

The Mourides have also come to dominate the personal transport system. The entire system of “public” transportation, operating between any locations in the country, is run by Mourides. Each city has a car park with a pride of Peugeot station wagons from the 1970s and 1980s, bought in Belgium and resold in West Africa. The Mourides run these car parks, own the cars, and have their finger on the pulse of the movement of all people throughout the country. Magal, the pilgrimage to Touba, shuts down the transport industry for four days because all of the Mouride-owned cars are re-routed to take passengers to, from, and around Touba.

Like the peanut industry, the transport sector required a level of capital investment that no other group in the region had access to. The Mourides have not only done well by their transport industry, but also have imparted their own particular brand of religious belief on their capitalist activities. Should you be driving on the main road between Dakar and Bamako, you are likely not to only see large trucks filled past full with consumer goods, but you will notice that these *camions* are tattooed with the religious imagery and symbolism of the Mouride sect: paintings of Amadou Bamba, Arabic phrases, passages from the *Koran*, Wolof- and French-language quotes expressing faith in God, as well as names of present-day religious leaders, and landscapes featuring the minarets of the great mosque in Touba. Again, we see an inextricable link between the capitalist and Islamic among the Mourides in Senegal.

Though the Mourides dominate these large economic sectors, their presence is most felt, day to day, on the streets of Dakar, Kaolack, Touba, or Saint-Louis. There are a small number of extremely wealthy Mourides, but the majority of Mourides are offering their labor as inputs in the large, Mouride economic machine. It is they who, in giving their labor, form the essence of the capitalist spirit in Senegal, though they may not be the ones who are receiving the benefit. As Weber (2001) said:

It was by no means the capitalistic entrepreneurs of the commercial aristocracy who were either the sole or the predominant bearers of the attitude we have here called the spirit of capitalism. It was much more the rising strata of the lower industrial middle classes.

In summary, the Mouride theology is not so far off from the one we see in Weber in his description of the Calvinist ethic. As is illustrated in the story of the social elites in the small community in Kaffrine, there is a uniquely religious component to the significant role Mouride leaders have come to play in Senegalese society. But, as Weber points out, there are also quite important a-religious factors that affected the Mourides' ability to perpetuate the capitalist spirit and achieve their level of economic dominance. These effects go back to Senegal's close political and economic relationships with France that persisted even into the post-colonial era. The story of the Mourides, then, quite closely follows Weber's account that the theology is what creates the capitalist spirit while the broader political and economic structures and conditions allow the spirit to flourish. While in Europe this flourishing came, presumably, mostly from the hard work of the lower middle classes, in Senegal it was based on the labor of these lower classes, but propelled along by the initial and regular advantage given to the Mourides by politicians and leaders in order to preserve their own standing in the society.

The Pula Futa and Guinea

The Fulani[6] are one of the most well-known ethnic groups in West Africa. They can be found in almost every country between Mauritania and Cameroon. The Fulani are commonly thought of as a pastoral people, a reputation with justified historical provenance. But in the last couple of 100 years, almost all Fulani have settled into a stationary agro-pastoral lifestyle, though there are still a number who pursue quasi-nomadic herding. In the highlands of northern Guinea known as the Fouta Djallon, the Fulani have established an inclusive region. Their region has become so densely populated that they now compose an ethnic majority in Guinea. They are a pious group of Muslims and their demographic growth in the Fouta Djallon occurred concomitantly with their conversion to Islam. Both these demographic and religious characteristics of the Pula Futa can explain the economic dominance that they have come into in the present day.

Religious history[7]

The islamization of West Africa first began around 1200, with an influx of merchants trading across the Sahara from Mediterranean zone to the Songhai Empire and the Malian Empire that replaced it. Some ethnic groups were quickly converted and became proselytizers for Islam throughout the region. The Fula were one of these people. Starting in the Senegal River valley, they quickly spread religious influence throughout present-day Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Guinea, and further.

The Pula Futa are the Muslim Fula that landed in the Fouta Djallon highlands of northern Guinea. The name for this region is derived from the original occupants, the Djallonké, who were chased out of the region when the Fula moved in. A number of scholars consider this dislocation event an instance of jihad carried out by the increasingly Muslim Pula Futa population.

At the time that Islam began to wax in the region, the Fula in West Africa were centered in three areas: the Senegambia area of present-day The Gambia and northern

and central Senegal; the present-day stretch of southern Senegal running along the borders of Guinea-Bissau and Guinea; and the Macina area, which is Mopti region of present day Mali that is found along the Niger River and includes the famous town of Segou and Jenné. At this point in time, around the fourteenth century, the Fula were still largely semi-nomadic pastoralists. The Fula had not yet universally adopted Islam. These pre-Islamic Fula are known as the Pouli. Presumably in response to changes in the environment or increased population pressure, the Pouli of Senegambia moved further south in search of better pasture for their cattle. They arrived in the Fouta Djallon and established the Kolianké kingdom, which had its center in the Kedougou region of present day Senegal. Koli Tégouella, the Leader of the Kingdom and the Pouli, established a formidable army during this period, though the Djallonké and Pouli lived cooperatively in the Fouta Djallon. The Pouli herded cattle and were able to exchange the milk from their livestock for the grains cultivated by agriculturalist Djallonké (Diop, 2001). As the kingdom grew, it began to fray and the Djallonké became frustrated with Pouli rule. Koli led an attack on the Djallonké and pushed them towards the coast of present-day Guinea.

Just as the Pouli of Senegambia and the later Kolianké Kingdom clutched their traditional beliefs, the Fula of Macina quickly converted to Islam, a religion that was taking on more influence through jihads waged on and, later, by the Mali and Songhai empires. Around the seventeenth century, the Macina Empire began to divide, with a number of Fula moving towards Wassolou in the south of Mali and the rest into the Fouta Djallon. This infiltration of the Fouta Djallon by the Muslim Fula, which I will henceforth refer to as the Pula Futa, lasted for a couple of centuries.

The Pula Futa arrived and found the vestiges of Koli's Pouli Empire. They established themselves, quickly, as dominant in the region and established a clear social hierarchy based on *rundebe* (slave caste) and *fulbe* (elite caste). This caste distinction exists in the present day, though in dampened form. But it is one of the important factors in defining the internal structure of Pula Futa society.

The Pula Futa did not just establish a caste distinction within their own ethnicity, but also enslaved the Djallonké and non-Muslim Fula around the Fouta Djallon. These slaves have since become incorporated into the Pula Futa ethnicity and now speak Pula Futa as their first language and even consider themselves Pula Futa. Similarly, the Pula Futa brought slaves from elsewhere in the region – mainly Mali. These slaves keep their distinctive Malian names to this day, but, similarly to the Djallonké and non-Muslim Fula slaves, consider themselves now Pula Futa and speak the language natively. This demographic phenomenon allowed the Pula Futa to grow in numbers to the point where they are now the dominant ethnic group in Guinea. This directly affected their treatment by successive Guinean presidents and directly influenced their economic dominance.

Economic and political history[8]

While Senegal was the shining star of the Francophone countries in the post-colonial era, Guinea was the black dwarf. As a result of the 1958 independence movement in Ghana, France was beginning to face public pressure regarding their colonial interests. Their response was to hold a referendum on their presence in all of the countries that they occupied. If the countries wished, France would pick up and leave immediately. If not, they would stay and have a smooth transfer of power over an unspecified period

of time. Guinea was the only country in Francophone Africa that chose the former. And so, in 1958 France abandoned Guinea. Their departure was particularly shocking and left the capital, Conakry, and country decimated. There was absolutely no attempt to transfer leadership to any established Guinean, let alone hold elections. There are numerous stories of papers being burned by colonial administrators before returning to France. Some people say that, out of spite, the French removed everything down to office furniture and light bulbs (Meredith, 2005). Having no mechanism for transferring power or maintaining infrastructure – either civil, political, educational, medical, etc. – throughout the whole country, Guinea was left as a shell of a state.

A strong politician named Ahmed Sekou Touré stepped into fill the gap. He established a political system in which power was centralized in the Office of the President. His regime was one of personal profit, not public good. Guinea, for example, is one of the richest countries on the continent in terms of its natural resource base, with over \$200 billion in non-energy reserve wealth (Bloomberg, 2010). Yet, there was no private investment in the country following independence and no growth of a domestic industrial or economic sector. All economic activity was exploited through the Office of the President and his close colleagues.

Sekou Touré died in 1984 and was replaced by Lansana Conté, a leader of a different name, but who led a similarly exploitative regime. This culture of personal economic benefit at the cost of the development of the country continues through to recent times, under the junta leader Dadis Camara. This culture of exploitation will be important for understanding the context in which the Pula Futa have achieved their economic dominance.

This story of a “resource curse” is, of course, not a new one. There are many countries that have had resource curses and exploitative governments that have not seen the evolution of a single, dominant ethnic group in the same a-political way as the Pula Futa. What makes their rise unique is their political treatment under the administrations of Sekou Touré and, in the present day, Dadis Camara.

One of Touré’s initial moves as a President was to strongly bias his own ethnic group, the Malinké. The Malinké are the second-most numerous group in the country, second to only the Pula Futa, which make up around 40 percent of the country’s ethnic composition. Feeling threatened in his political power by the Pula Futa ethnic majority, Sekou Touré responded with persecution.

An elderly Pula Futa woman, now living in a small village in southeastern Senegal, told me a story of this persecution from her childhood. The government and military men would come into Pula Futa villages looking for able-bodied men that they could take as slaves. They would bring them to Kankan and Conakry (Malinké and Susu-dominated areas) and use them in forced. Often times, they would never be seen again. Her first husband was taken as a slave and she did not see him again. At first, the Pula Futa responded by hiding. They realized that Sekou Touré’s men would come only in the day to look for men. They responded by moving their fields further away from the village, to which the men would flee during the day and work. In the evening, they would come back to the village. After a while, the government became suspicious and would come at any time of the day. In the case of this woman, many people from the community fled by foot across the border into southern Senegal where they would be free from persecution.

Under Dadis, the persecution of the Pula Futa remains just as explicit, but even more violent. Dadis came into power in December 2008 by leading a bloodless coup the day after the death of longtime President Lansana Conté. Dadis was initially welcomed

warmly by Guineans; he promised elections to follow soon after taking power. A year into his rule, he still had not begun to coordinate elections. Many Guineans became frustrated and started to protest. As a matter of demographic arithmetic, the majority of protestors were Pula Futa. On September 28, 2009, the Guinean Day of Independence, a collection of opposition leaders led a rally at a stadium in Conakry. Once most of the protestors had arrived, the military came to the scene, locked all of the gates to the stadium, and, under Dadis' orders, began to kill the protestors in the stadium. Particularly egregiously, the soldiers targeted Pula Futa women to rape. As they were raping these women, they jeered at them with Pula Futa epithets. They said that they Pula Futa would never have political power in Guinea (Human Rights Watch, 2009). The political persecution of the Pula Futa, thus, continues to present day.

Pula Futa fled Guinea in droves in the 1970s and have been leaving Guinea ever since[9]. Some flee purely for the civil and political reasons. Others flee because there are no educational or economic opportunities in their country. Whatever the reason, the Pula Futa have established a network of communities throughout the world, from Paris to New York, Monrovia, and Hong Kong – anywhere other than Guinea. In present day Guinea, therefore, it is common to visit a town and find it emptied of most men of working age. Many of them have gone abroad, originally out of fear of persecution and now, as I argue, to use those networks to seek economic opportunities.

Pula Futa and their economic role[10]

A number of Fula scholars argue that the present economic success of the Fula is a function of their pastoral, cattle-raising culture. Cattle, as the argument goes, have been treated as a form of capital by the Fula for thousands of years. They are, therefore, well-prepared for the modern capitalist system. The Fula have become accustomed to accumulating capital through cattle management. Riesman (1979) describes the pastoral culture of a Fula group in Burkina Faso. He points out that the Fula herder is not herding only his own cows, but the cows of many other Fula. There is a habit of “diversifying” your livestock so that if something happens to one herd, in one area, then you will not experience too great of damages. As a result, a Fula does not often “own” the cattle is herding – many are not his – he is a steward of them and collects their dairy products (Riesman, 1979). He, then, can live off of their dairy products or sell them to buy other foodstuffs. Similarly, according to Grayzel (1976), “for the Peul [Fula], cattle are capital, like stocks; something to be carefully watched and manipulated in the hope of accumulating sufficient wealth to live off the dividends”. Modern economic times have allowed for the semi-sedenterization of the Fula. This has allowed, according to Riesman-Grayzel, for capital expansion because the Fula that once were limited by labor in number of cattle can now keep their stocks in a home range and have more with the same amount of effort (Riesman, 1979).

Though this theory is interesting and may have some explanatory power, it falls quite short of meeting the needs of this paper. The Riesman-Grayzel hypothesis does a good job of explaining Fula-wide dynamics[11], but what I am interested in is not just why the Fula, as such, have done well economically, but why the Pula Futa, relative to other Fula groups and other ethnicities in Guinea, have had particular economic success. The mechanism that is likely to best explain this relative success of the Pula Futa is going to be one that is either particular to the religious, political, or economic situation of the Pula Futa in Guinea.

The modern-day Pula Futa do not spend much time raising or tending cattle. Most have cattle that they let roam near their communities or they pay a small number of professional herders to take care of them for them. Most Pula Futa men now live abroad. They left Guinea, starting under the repressive regime of Sekou Touré and have continued their flight through the present day. As newcomers in foreign countries, these Pula Futa migrants were faced with taking unproductive, low-earning jobs. Pula Futa in Dakar, for example, predominately sell food on the street – food, coffee, bread, and sandwiches. In New York, Pula Futa men in Harlem and on Canal Street sell phone chargers, gloves, hats, and other assorted, low-cost items. Elsewhere in West Africa, Pula Futa men own small general stores that sell basic foodstuffs – oil, garlic, pepper, sugar – and household goods – candles, soap, etc. All of these jobs, compared with the massive commercial-scale activities of the Mourides, are small and low-earning.

Pula Futa also live in poor conditions while abroad, but they save their money and send it as remittances to their families back in the Fouta Djallon. Thus, little by little, the Pula Futa have amassed an economic success from persecution. This has happened at the individual level as well as for the collective.

Emergent diaspora communities of Pula Futa have not only benefitted from pooling their resources to help each other in their alien surroundings, but have also used their wealth to help young men in the Fouta Djallon leave to seek their own economic opportunities. Thus, where the Mouride focus is on personal salvation and personal economic growth[12], the Pula Futa emphasis is on the well-being of the community. This collective interest has been motivated by ethnic and geographic identification as well as religious solidarity. As Riesman (1979) has pithily concurred, “[...] religion is potentially the most powerful single force operating in Fulani life today”. For the Pula Futa, the historical persecution experienced under Sekou Touré and Dadis Camara is likely to have sparked the flight from the Fouta Djallon. But, once in place, religious solidarity certainly played a large role in the solidification of communities through common values and activities. These communities would then pool their resources in such a way that allowed their own economic growth as well as for the opportunities of others back in the Fouta Djallon who had not had the opportunity to seek better conditions abroad.

It is, thus, somewhat ironic that under the domestic persecution of the Pula Futa by Sekou Touré and Dadis Camara, the very people who were persecuted were able to flourish economically outside of Guinea. This economic dominance, of course, became quite apparent back in Guinea. Heads of household or sons who had made some money living abroad would send their money back to the Fouta Djallon for their families. They would construct modern-style houses with zinc roofs, as opposed to the traditional thatch huts. The Pula Futa, while still marginalized in Guinea, now played an important economic role relative to other ethnic groups in the country[13]. Because as the Pula Futa were finding success abroad, three consecutive regimes in Guinea were looting the country of its natural resources and providing very little by way of macroeconomic stewardship, job creation, or educational opportunities. The Pula Futa were persecuted and forced to flee, but those who remained behind suffered the most at the hands of three pillaging presidents.

Another interesting hypothesis, one that I will not – unfortunately – have time to explore here is that the Pula Futa developed a culture, even pre-colonially, of moving abroad in search of opportunities. At first, this took the form of Koranic education. But in contemporary times it is in the form of economic pursuits or higher, French-language education. As I mentioned previously, the Pula Futa society was based on a caste

structure in which slaves were contrasted against elites. The slave Pula Futa were kept in a lower class position by refusing them access to Islamic learning. In response, many fled abroad to receive Koranic education. This culture of education turned into a culture of wealth acquisition, as the argument goes[14]. There is a certain amount of plausibility in this argument, but it is not clear that the Pula Futa are today abroad are the Pula Futa who would have formed the habit out of the repression they experienced as slaves. In fact, it is the exact opposite. Often times the wealthiest Pula Futa are those that leave first and then help the underclass to leave later. In any case, this hypothesis is ripe for further exploration and research.

In summary, the ethnic persecution experienced by the Pula Futa forced many of them to flee abroad to seek political, civil, and educational, as well as economic, opportunities. Though they established themselves in marginal businesses – selling fruit, coffee, owning boutiques – they were able to amass enough capital to establish a sort of economic dominance, both individually and as a collective, in a country that was otherwise failing for reasons of political corruption and exploitation.

Conclusion

There is a striking difference between Mouride and Pula Futa economic dominance: the former is a dominance by a small number of high-ranking religious leaders that often exploits the labor of the common follower. The sacrifice of labor for the benefit of the religious leader is seen in the context of sacrifice for God and devotion. The collection of wealth by the religious leaders reflects their power, which, in the Mouride sect, is respected, if not worshipped. This connection between wealth and religion, on the part of the Mourides, closely resembles the mechanism Weber outlines to explain the emergence of the capitalist spirit. Wealth is seen as a conferral of religious blessing and the focus is on the success of the individual. Theology, therefore, plays an important role in the capitalist success experienced by the Mourides, though ultimately it is the macroeconomic and political culture of Senegal, through the pre- and post-colonial eras, that allowed for this potential economic energy to become kinetic.

By contrast, Pula Futa economic activity is not driven by the power of few, but by the power of many. The Pula Futa have a large number of people in economic activity that makes their group, on the whole, quite successful. Their well-being is important not in as much as the individual gains wealth, but that the group, on the whole, succeeds. The acquisition of wealth is not seen as a religious blessing. Rather, if it is seen as anything, it is a triumph against the oppressive governments that have persecuted the Pula Futa, both directly and indirectly. The particular Pula Futa theology does not contribute much to their economic success. Rather, it is the domestic political climate that forced them to search out economic opportunities that, although marginal at first, conferred on them a relative economic dominance to the rest of the country that was disadvantaged by the thievery of three autocratic regimes.

Mourides and Pula Futa are different in their levels of wealth. By many metrics, the Mourides are wealthy whereas the Pula Futa have nowhere near the level of absolute economic dominance. But what I consider here is the extent to which the capitalist spirit – to put it in Weber's terms – has pervaded in each ethnic group. It is not so much absolute wealth as it is economic activity relative to other groups to which each group is related by historical and geopolitical factors. While the explanation of the Mourides' economic success seems to conform quite well to the standard Weberian explanation,

the Pula Futa story seems much more driven by domestic political factors than by the particulars of their theology.

This paper seeks to shed some qualitative, informal light on the economic evolution of two religious groups in West Africa. Though I draw on Weber's ideas, this paper is not a definitive test of Weber's theories as applied to both the Mourides and Pula Futa, though there have been attempts to analyze whether or not his theory falls apart in different contexts (Bendix, 1962). Such a project – to rigorously analyze Weber in both of these contexts – would be worthwhile, as I feel like there is good *prima facie* reason to think that these two cases exhibits two different cause mechanisms of economic development – and is a ripe area for future research.

What this paper does accomplish is suggest that there are different mechanisms – mechanisms that are rooted in the history of nation states and nebulous ethnic groups – that affect different groups of people. While this is an intuitive and simple observation, it is one that, shockingly, we seem to forget in our age. In this era of poverty eradication campaigns we seem to have done a poor job of remembering that there's a certain subtlety associated with ethnic groups and their heterogeneous responses to exogenous factors, such as changes in political climate and macroeconomics. As anthropologists, one of the most useful things we can do is remind decision makers of these heterogeneous effects in the hopes of making better decisions and policies. This paper, I think, expresses, in however simple a way, that this heterogeneity is real in Francophone West Africa. And if economic development is something that we strive towards – and we should – then we should take these differential effects quite seriously.

Notes

1. These traditional beliefs are typically referred to as “animism” in the West and in much scholarship. I find this term to be pejorative and choose to use “traditional beliefs” in its place. Though “traditional beliefs” is more cumbersome, it better captures, in my feeling, the heterogeneity between these systems of belief.
2. It is not clear whether or not it is necessary either, in a broader, theoretical sense. Must there always be a religious component in order for a capitalist spirit, or economic dominance, to emerge, even though that religious element would not be sufficient for the establishment of such a spirit?
3. This section draws heavily on Sy (1969), Robinson (1985), Monteil (1966), Gueye (2002), Diouf (2000), Cruise O'Brien (1971), Behrman (1970), and Saglio (2005).
4. Outside of his role as first President of Senegal, Senghor is today best known for his philosophy of “negritude,” which asserts distinct African values and characteristics, as opposed to the dominant, Western values that were common at the time in the academic world.
5. Mouride is the Francophone orthography of the Muridyya, which is the Arabic word meaning “those who desire.” I will use this French orthography instead of the English alternative Muride for the simple reason that the Mourides are infrequently referred to in the English language, since they, essentially, only come from Francophone West Africa. Where Mourides are referred to in English-language scholarship, the Francophone orthography is most common and I will stick to that convention.
6. The word *Fulani* – or *Fula* – comes to English through Nigeria. Yet, there are a suite of words found across the region to refer to the ethnic group as a whole: Peul, Fulfulde, Fulbe, etc. I will use Fula to refer to the group as a whole, mostly because that is how I find

people of this ethnic group refer to themselves when speaking in English, even if they come from a francophone country. There are also a number of terms for particular subgroups, as the Fula are quite diverse across the region. In Guinea, they call themselves the Poulo Fouta, drawing on the French phonetic spelling. I will adopt this term when referring specifically to the Fula of Guinea, but will use the American English orthography: Pula Futa.

7. This religious history of the Fouta Djallon is drawn from the extremely thorough work done by Bah (2008). I was also significantly informed by Diop's (2001) work.
8. This current history of Guinea is mainly drawn from Meredith's (2005) excellent work as well as the public media over the last few years.
9. Fleeing Guinea is by no means a strictly Pula Futa story. It is estimated that almost half of Guinea's population lives abroad. Much of this, however, is made up of the Pula Futa flight, mostly because their flight was motivated not just by economic frustration – as was also felt by the Malinke, Susu, and other ethnic groups – but because of persecution, which was not common within the other ethnic groups.
10. The non-Riesman-Grayzel part of this section draws heavily on personal experience, conversations with a number of Guineans living in and out of the Fouta Djallon as well as Guinean families that fled Guinea generations ago. I also draw on the work of Diop (2000) and Bah (2008).
11. It does a good job of explaining these to the extent that they exist at all. It is not clear that the Fula, on a large-scale, are at all successful economically. The Fula of Niger, for instance, are quite poor off relatively. While the Fula of Guinea, Senegal, and Nigeria seem to be well off. This suggests that the mechanisms explaining their success are predominately local ones.
12. I consider the benefit accrued to a small number of Mourides under the labor of many to be in the self-interest of both those who are earning the riches, but also in the interest of the salvation of those individuals.
13. It is, perhaps, important to point out that the Pula Futa have never been wealthy. Many Pula Futa youth flee the Fouta Djallon to the capital, Conakry, seeking jobs and education and not finding them. Poverty in the Fouta Djallon is still quite serious. Even in the largest city of the Fouta Djallon, Labé, there is no running water or reliable electricity, though these are issues of public infrastructure as well as personal wealth. Either way, while the Senegalese Mourides enjoy almost Western lifestyles in areas of Senegal, the Pula Futa in Guinea still have living standards on par with a middle-class Senegalese. But, as I said initially, I am trying to focus on economic dominance here as a measure of relative, rather than absolute, wealth. And, *vis-à-vis* the rest of Guinea, the Pula Futa are living high.
14. I owe this insight to two people. It was first suggested to me, in its bare form, by Khalifa Drame, a Pula Futa merchant in Labe, Guinea. It was later developed and placed in its historical context by Robyn d'Avignon, a PhD student in African History at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

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