

Chapter 14

Solo Darboe,
Former Diamond Dealer

*Transnational Connections
and Home Politics in
the Twentieth-Century Gambia*

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British colonial sources of the 1930s make reference to diamond smuggling in the Colony and Protectorate of the Gambia. However, only in the 1990s did the key role of the Gambia in the diamond trade begin to receive attention due to international efforts to regulate the rough-diamond market and disband the illicit commercial networks that supported conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Conakry (Gberie 2009: 75; Smillie 2010: 189–90).¹ Published in 2004, the bestseller *Blood Diamonds* by journalist Greg Campbell mentions the resettlement of major Gambian diamond dealers in their home country after Charles Taylor toppled the Liberian regime of Samuel Doe in 1989. What Campbell and other analysts left undiscussed is how this return migration of the 1990s followed well-trodden paths laid by the movement of trade and labour forces between the Gambia River and Sierra Leone in earlier decades.

Pervasive Mande surnames such as Ceesay, Fofanna, Dumbuyaa and Darboe (Howard 1976; Skinner 1978; Howard and Skinner 1984) betray the common precolonial history of these two regions, whose socioeconomic and political integration was consolidated by the development of the cola trade in the nineteenth century (Curtin 1975: 228–29; White 1981) and by the fact that for several decades British possessions along the Gambia River (the most important of which was Bathurst, established at the river mouth in 1816) were administered as a dependency of Sierra Leone (Gray 1966: 366–78, 457–65). Some of the Bathurst African traders had strong ties to Sierra Leone. One was Joseph D. Richards (Hughes and Perfect 2008: 189–90), who was born in Freetown in 1843 and became a crucial actor in the development of commercial networks between Bathurst and the interior of the Senegambia in the second half of the

nineteenth century (Mbodji 1992: 216–17). The migration of the 1950s, in which thousands of rural Gambian youths sought their fortune in the diamond fields of Sierra Leone, was another phase in the long-term history of economic, social and political connections between the Gambia River and Sierra Leone. During that period, news that the Sierra Leonean government had opened up diamond-mining activities to small-scale operators (Swindell 1975: 182) spread rapidly throughout West Africa (Bredeloup 2007: 65ff.). As for the Gambia River area, the rush to the diamond fields marked the beginning of the international diaspora, as many of the men who arrived in Sierra Leone in the 1950s then travelled to Congo, Zaire, Liberia and finally Angola in the following decades (Gai-bazzi 2010). This chapter takes its cue from the life trajectory of Solo Darboe, a former diamond dealer born in the upper Gambia in the 1930s, to illustrate this early transnational aspect of twentieth-century Gambian history. I collected Solo's life reminiscences in 2008 with the help of Bakary Sidibeh, who for many years was my mentor and research partner in the Gambia. In the years that followed, I met many of Solo's mates (elderly men such as Omar Suso, a close friend and working partner of Solo) and supplemented oral sources with the available written evidence. Such an exercise of historical reconstruction has broader methodological implications. Philip Curtin (1975) and Boubacar Barry (1998) have promoted the integrated analysis of precolonial Senegambia in terms of its commercial and cultural relationships with Europe, the Americas and the regions that are today part of Mauritania, Mali, Guinea-Conakry and Guinea-Bissau. Historians of the colonial and postcolonial period have instead opted for 'methodological nationalism' – i.e., the tendency to frame the analysis mostly in terms of national boundaries (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2003). By probing into the micro-level of Solo's life trajectory, this chapter attempts to introduce a transnational dimension into the study of the late colonial and postcolonial Gambia, a country that many scholars tend to overlook precisely because of its small size. In so doing, the analysis touches on the crucial role of the first twentieth-century waves of international migrations in the very process of African nation-building.

As a Beginning: Family Ancestry

My conversations with Solo took place in Bakau New Town. The desirable location and comfortable solidity of his house testified to the wealth of its owner. Bakau is an old coastal village that the British brought under their control during the 1840s. Like other peri-urban areas around the capital city of Banjul, Bakau New Town evolved in the 1970s thanks to increased rural-to-urban migration and investment by the first generation of Gambian civil servants and rich businessmen like Solo. Both Solo and Bakary Sidibeh, who was the intermediary for our encounters, were important actors in the decolonization process. Even if the political historiography of the Gambia barely mentions this detail (Hughes and

Perfect 2006: 136–38), Sidibeh was among the founders of the political movement that brought about the establishment of the Protectorate People's Party in 1959, whose name was changed to the People's Progressive Party (PPP) shortly before the first national elections of 1960. Its leader was Dawda Jawara, son of a wealthy rural trader. With support from the colonial government, Jawara was educated in Scotland, and when he returned to the Gambia he was appointed head of the veterinary service. After the 1962 national elections, the PPP assumed leadership of the country (Hughes and Perfect 2006; Bellagamba 2008), and in October 1963, upon the attainment of self-government, Jawara was appointed prime minister. That year Solo married Jawara's niece, Fatouma Almami. With the Republican Referendum of 1970, Jawara became the first president of the Gambia. He remained in office until the 1994 military coup that led to the election of Yaya Jammeh, the coup's leader, as the new president of the Gambia in 1996.

When I encountered Solo, the news that Jawara (2009) was working on his autobiography had just spread among his former supporters and age-mates. Solo, who had switched his allegiance to the opposition in the early 1970s after years of providing financial support to Jawara and the PPP, felt that his experience also deserved attention. His self-narrative started with the assertion 'We are people with history'.² That statement was instrumental in re-marking the boundary between Solo and other members of the twentieth-century Gambian elite, who unlike him could not so easily claim high birth and a historical pedigree. Such was the case of Jawara, whose affiliation with the professional endogamous group of leatherworkers was rumoured from the beginning of his political career (Hughes and Perfect 2006: 136–37).

Similar to the Bayo, Ceesay, Danso, Fofanna and Signateh, the Darboe are *jula*, which means they belong to the precolonial elite of freeborn traders, Islamic scholars and warriors (Curtin 1975: 68–75; Galloway 1974). The Darboe family trace their history to their roots in the Casamance village of Tendindi, where their Malian ancestors are said to have first settled during their movement towards the Atlantic coast (Wright 1977: 38). The settlements established by the Darboe in the Gambia River Valley strategically intersected with the indigenous and Euro-African trading networks that crossed the Senegambia from north to south and from east to west.

Solo's home village is Brifu, in the Gambian area of the precolonial kingdom of Wuli, not far from the wharves of Wuli Passimass and Yarbutenda, which are mentioned by early European sources on the upper river (Reeve 1912: 131–32). The wealth of Solo's great-grandparents was derived as much from agriculture as from the slave and gold trades, whereas his father, Saloum Darboe, engaged in groundnut cultivation and the cattle trade, as was typical during the early colonial period. Solo grew up in the trading tradition of his family. In accordance with customary values, he was raised to be self-disciplined, hardworking and forward-looking. In that conception of life, a young freeman such as Solo

had to be physically and morally strong as well as ambitious and adventurous to carve out a livelihood. Economic responsibility towards the extended family was a priority, as was the cultivation of leadership aspirations. Like other rural boys, Solo learned to farm and to respect his elders. As befitted his ancestry, he was also initiated into the ways of trade.³ When he was fifteen, his father supported his first commercial venture by entrusting him with a small amount of capital with which to enter into petty trade. Solo travelled to Bathurst and headed homeward with a stock of cigarettes, mints, biscuits and other easily transportable items, which he meant to smuggle across the Senegalese border. His first trip, however, was a failure – customs officers confiscated all of his goods. When he decided in 1953 to travel to Sierra Leone, his father denied him further financial support because Solo had lost the initial investment to the customs officers. Money came instead from his mother, who sold some of her cattle in order to help her son. Thus began Solo's transnational life, during which he visited and lived in several African countries as well as Belgium and Israel.

Early Sierra Leonean Adventures

Colonial sources on the Upper River Division of the Gambia reported the attraction the Sierra Leone diamond fields held for young men in the 1950s.⁴ To be sure, poverty was one of the factors driving them out of their villages. In many areas of rural Gambia, a 'hungry season' before the new harvest was the rule (Swindell and Jeng 2006: 59; David 1980), and one of Solo's age-mates once explained to me how 'difficult it was to stay in the village, if you had nothing'.⁵ Family members, friends and other villagers expected young men to contribute to the betterment of the community. Those who could not, or did not show adequate commitment to hard work, were quickly isolated and treated with contempt. Meanwhile, many young men resented the strict social control typical of village life and the labour demands that the government and chiefs imposed on them, such as the maintenance of roads after the rains. Places like 1950s Sierra Leone, or 1960s Congo Brazzaville and Kinshasa, which many international migrants reached after leaving Sierra Leone, were seen as gateways to a more cosmopolitan lifestyle (Abdul-Korah 2008: 2; Hannerz 1992: 228).⁶ After successfully obtaining a travel permit from the British official in charge of the upper Gambia River, Solo left his home village. At that time, migrants reached Sierra Leone by either riding the postal service ship between Bathurst and Freetown or following the old commercial routes connecting the Upper Gambia to Sierra Leone across the plains of Fouta Djallon. Travellers did not like to cross Guinea-Bissau; the despotic nature of Portuguese colonialism and the regime of forced labour it had in place were notorious throughout the region. Solo followed the road through Fouta Djallon to reach the eastern part of Sierra Leone, not far from the border with Liberia. The town was Baima, a locality on the 'Mende

Line' railway that connected Freetown to south-eastern Sierra Leone. For trains headed eastward, Baima was the last station before Pendembu, which was located at the intersection of the roads leading to Guinea-Conakry and across the Liberian border. In the span of a few years, the population of the nearby diamond areas of Kono, Kenema and Bo districts grew fifteenfold, from five to seventy-five thousand inhabitants (Stevens 1984: 164). The economy was vibrant; shops full of goods, new houses and cars were evidence of the prosperity linked to the diamond industry.

My first destination was Baima Station on Mende Line. I had one hundred pounds, and I gave fifty pounds to my 'brother' to keep so that I could invest the rest in diamond mining. After one month, there was no positive result. I returned to my 'brother' to collect my money, as I wanted to start a small business. But the man was twisting and turning me around by saying 'come tomorrow', until I realized he had 'chopped' [misused] my money. I took up *barañini* work to survive. I was then told that somebody was looking for help to cut two hundred trees and that he was ready to pay six pounds for the job. I went and asked for a cutlass. I worked hard to cut all the two hundred trees as fast as I could and I carried them on my head. The man was surprised and asked me whether I had gone crazy. He had another labourer whom he used to pay three pounds per month. So, the man continued, how could I pretend to do the job so quickly and be paid the equivalent of two months' salary? He gave me only three pounds and I said: 'If you want to pay me only three pounds, it is up to you! I will leave it with God!'⁷ With these three pounds I bought cigarettes to resell. I continued to serve as a porter, carrying bags of rice on my head. They used to pay me three pence. I made gradual savings until I rebuilt my initial capital of fifty pounds.⁸

Barañini (literally 'job-seeker') is a Mandingo and Bambara word used primarily in the colonial Sahel to identify migrant unskilled labourers (Meillassoux 1965: 140). In the Gambia, it described the young men who served as porters along the river and at the Bathurst harbour during the trading season, from November to May, when the harvest was over and people moved out of the villages in search of labour opportunities. Young Gambians were ready to work hard to earn money to support their families and achieve social autonomy; however, they preferred to do it far from their home communities, where menial jobs were often viewed as those filled by the lowest strata of society, such as former slaves and people of slave ancestry. Seasonal farming during the rains or working as *barañini* in colonial centres after the end of the agricultural season helped overcome status barriers and related behavioural codes: 'the foreign land', a local proverb goes, 'does not know about your good origins, but it can recognize a man of value'.⁹

This wisdom applied to freed slaves and slave descendants, who desired to hide their ancestry far from their communities, as well as to freemen like Solo, who in Sierra Leone had to endure forms of humiliation that would have been unacceptable at home.

As a newcomer, Solo relied on the help of a ‘brother’, a very loose Mandinka expression that may be used to identify a blood relative or simply a person hailing from the same village. Relationships between immigrants and Sierra Leoneans were structured along the principles of the landlord/stranger relation, which had dominated long-distance trading diasporas for centuries. Upon arriving in a new area, an immigrant (or a trader) had to find a landlord who could provide him with lodging, protection and advice in exchange for labour, material support and loyalty. The system was based on trust (Zack-Williams 1995; Bredeloup 2007), but agreements were not always honoured, as Solo rapidly discovered. Newcomers had to adjust to the dynamic, rough-and-ready environment of diamond-mining areas full of unscrupulous middlemen and hundreds of thousands of equally ambitious young men. Selfish and opportunistic behaviour was the rule more than the exception. Anything could happen, from death – as when men illegally dove into creeks at night in search of diamonds¹⁰ – to unexpected strokes of luck. Solo continued to seek out opportunities. The story of how he got his first diamond – one he surely has told time and again to friends and relatives – clearly refers to the diamond-smuggling networks between Sierra Leone and Monrovia, the capital of Liberia.

As I did not know diamonds, I established connections with a man in the bush. One day this man showed me a diamond, which according to him was worth fifteen hundred pounds. I bargained and bargained until I obtained it for thirty-five pounds, but I was not sure of the real value of the stone. In town, I sold it for one thousand and five hundred pounds to a man, who gave me five hundred pounds in advance, and said he would bring the rest after having resold the diamond in Liberia. After two, three days he was back and gave me my money. With that, I started buying and selling diamonds until I had about thirty-five thousand pounds in Monrovia.¹¹

After the discovery of Sierra Leonean diamonds in the 1930s, Liberia became a major diamond exporter, although its government never published reliable statistics on its internal production (Greenhalgh 1985: 204). The stones came mostly from Sierra Leone, following the nineteenth-century patterns of trade between the two regions (Rosen 1973: 99–100). Omar Suso, Solo’s best friend in those days, took on the risky activity of transporting diamonds to Monrovia, which he recalled in 2008 when I asked him to talk about his early days with Solo in Sierra Leone:

Solo used to tell me: ‘You know the place where we can sell this diamond. We got it for two thousand dollars, go quickly to Monrovia’. That was how I smuggled diamonds into Monrovia. In those days, the police were vigilant, especially when they saw a person travelling to Monrovia. Most of the diamond buyers were in Monrovia. There was a thick forest along the road, and a small hamlet in the bush called Foday Camara, which was already in Liberia. The last Sierra Leone village towards that area was located near a river at the border between Sierra Leone and Guinea. When you reached there, you would board a Land Rover; but only few traders ventured to Liberia by land as they would be searched ‘from head to foot’. Police would take off your trousers to search for diamonds. If they found any, you would be arrested. For me, I always pretended to be the drivers’ apprentice. Both Solo and I were very young at the time. I used to dress like an apprentice. When we reached the police station I would hold on to the back of the vehicle without taking a seat inside. I used to do this with diamonds on me. I would then jump down and say to the police: ‘Quick, we want to go!’ They would push me aside and say: ‘Go away!’ Sometimes, I made two, three trips like this in one month, leaving people behind to spend several days before they could reach Monrovia.¹²

According to Omar’s account, stones were acquired directly from miners or from small-time intermediaries who commuted between the forest areas and the town of Bo, where Solo eventually settled: ‘When he took the diamond, he would say: “I will be back with your money soon”’. Diamonds were resold in Monrovia, where, Omar said, there were only three diamond-buying offices, one of which was owned by the Diamond Corporation, the De Beers branch established in 1929 to manage the supply and trade of rough diamonds (Bredeloup 2007: 36ff.). Money paid to Solo was immediately transferred to his London bank account, and from London it then wended its way back to Sierra Leone. This strategy helped circumvent police investigations: as Omar explained, ‘The government of Sierra Leone did not enquire about the source of money coming from London’.¹³

In addition to those who obtained a license to sell and exchange diamonds after the partial liberalization of the diamond market by the Sierra Leone government in 1956, the diamond trade made use of innumerable unlicensed diamond diggers, supporters, distributors and intermediaries (Bredeloup 2007: 108). The Lebanese and Jewish trading diaspora played an important role in the system. Beirut wealth during the late 1950s and 1960s was ‘rumored to derive from Sierra Leone profits’ (Greenhalgh 1985: 248). Tel Aviv was another important node in the world diamond-trading network, as was London, where many of the Jewish diamond dealers of Antwerp had moved after the outbreak of World War II (Bredeloup 2007: 108–10). Solo’s ability to recognize good stones rapidly

attracted the attention of Jewish intermediaries linked to the Diamond Corporation. 'I was not employed', Solo emphasized in our conversations, 'but only incorporated as a consultant because of my lack of Western education. I dealt with the Corporation for over forty years. They were buying from me and I was advising them on the values of the diamonds coming to their office'.¹⁴

In only a few years, Solo became a grass-roots agent able to gain the trust of African diamond dealers and pass the rough diamonds over to the legal market. His stay in Sierra Leone, however, turned out to be short-lived. Solo and Omar were lucky to escape the 1956 'Operation Parasite', which drove some forty-five thousand foreigners from Kono, one of the major diamond areas (Rosen 1973: 85ff.). But in 1961, Milton Margai's government expelled them along with Bassirou Jawara, another Gambian diamond dealer and a friend of Solo, who like Solo was to become a diamond magnate. Solo, Bassirou and Omar returned to the Gambia, where the political struggle for independence was escalating.

Stranger or Citizen? National Politics on Stage

According to Omar, the arrest of Solo and Bassirou happened at the same time as the arrests of Siaka Stevens and many of his supporters on the eve of Sierra Leone's independence (Cartwright 1970: 70–71). Stevens was the leader of the All People's Congress and an opponent of Milton Margai's government. For some years he had served as minister of mines, land and labour, and his intimate knowledge of miners and diamond dealers had alerted him to the political potential of the many immigrants who were living in very difficult conditions in the diamond areas, a detail that is also mentioned in his autobiography (Stevens 1984; Smillie, Gberie and Hazleton 2001: 41–43). When recalling the story of his arrest, Solo described himself as among Stevens's many followers:

In 1961, Milton Margai, first Prime Minister of Sierra Leone, deported me. Because I am not a Sierra Leonean, I did not like politics. I like one man only ... a retired police sergeant, who formed a party, Siaka Stevens, I gave him so many Land Rovers, so much money, that Milton said, 'Solo, you cannot stay in Sierra Leone' and he deported me. When Milton died and Siaka Stevens's party won, then I was in Israel, and Siaka brought me back to Sierra Leone.¹⁵

Milton Margai died in 1964 and was succeeded by his brother, Albert Margai. Stevens won the 1967 election but was then deposed in a coup aimed at reinstating Albert Margai. However, in 1968 Stevens was able to regain power. The expansion of the illicit diamond networks during his government, which lasted until 1985, and his ability to cultivate personal connections with major diamond dealers are a well-documented aspect of Sierra Leonean history.

A consistent motif of Solo's account is the place of migrants in these early 1960s political transformations. When highlighting the role of migrations in the development of Ghanaian nationalistic feelings, Meyer Fortes (1971) referred specifically to the Ghanaian elite educated in Europe. The same holds true for many other African countries, whose initial cohorts of politicians were educated abroad. Politics also impacted the hundreds of thousands of illiterate rural migrants like Solo, who experienced the on-the-ground implications of national identities while abroad in the course of the late 1950s and early 1960s. If Solo were to delineate his family legacy, Sierra Leone was rightly his second homeland: both the Upper Gambia and Sierra Leone were British territories ruled by a hierarchy of British officials and native chiefs, where there were speakers of Mandingo, Solo's mother tongue, and people bearing his surname. Travelling to Liberia, he could follow the paths of Mande-speaking commercial diasporas and integrate into the vibrant Mande-speaking trading community of Monrovia. Almost overnight, Sierra Leone's independence created a new geography of power based on national belonging. Interestingly, the first historical and sociological literature on the place of 'strangers' in African societies developed immediately after the birth of the new nations (Peil 1971; Shack and Skinner 1979), when the commercial networks and the mobile labour force that had prospered in the colonial empires had to readjust to the enforcement of national boundaries.

Men like Solo found themselves involved in a variety of political transactions. Both abroad and at home, politicians courted the social and material wealth of these businessmen, which they needed to support the emergent political machinery (Morgenthau 1979).

In addition to supporting Siaka Stevens, Solo cultivated his own social presence in the Gambia. 'Build your place first!' is a Gambian saying that has become popular since international migration became an avenue to social mobility in the second half of the twentieth century. Solo's first investment in social respectability was his father's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1958. The second was to marry Fatoumata Barro, the maternal cousin whom his parents had chosen to be his wife. Marriage was the gateway to maturity, and migration helped young men to speed up the process by earning enough to assume the marital expenses, a phenomenon that colonial officials commented upon as early as the 1890s.¹⁶ In 1959, the same year in which the PPP was formed, Solo travelled to the Gambia in order to bring Fatoumata to Sierra Leone. Political discussions, which in the first part of the 1950s had been the preserve of the educated elite of Bathurst, expanded to the rural areas, and the PPP, like Stevens's All People's Congress in Sierra Leone and other African parties of that period, cultivated populist promises of equality and progress for all, regardless of social differences.

Like other prominent families of the Protectorate, branches of the Darboe supported the United Party (UP), which had been established in 1954 by a Bathurst lawyer, Pierre N'jie (Hughes and Perfect 2008: 124). The UP was strong

in the upper river region, but the overall political situation in that area of the country was complicated by the many instances of change that criss-crossed society at various levels. The PPP's candidate for the Wuli-Sandu constituency in 1960 was Mussa Darboe, a distant relative of Solo. This explains the early interest of Solo and the Darboe of Wuli in the PPP. When Solo returned to the Gambia in 1961, the party had already gained its first victory and was preparing for the second national election of 1962. Expulsion from Sierra Leone had taught Solo and other migrants of those days that good political connections at home could serve them well in case of problems with their host countries abroad as well as in the Gambia, where they were investing the profits of their migrations and using the judiciary to defend their business interests. Successful migrants like Solo strove for a social and political presence in the capital city of Bathurst and its elite circles. Not only did cities offer the returnees those facilities to which they had become accustomed abroad, but the emergence of the new nation was turning Bathurst into a hub where national policies were decided, resources shared and contracts signed.

In 1963, as I said above, Solo took Jawara's niece as his second wife. This marriage sanctioned his allegiance with the Gambia's emergent national power bloc. Personal relationships with national political elites became an important part of his transnational life, indirectly testifying to the strict interactions between business minorities and politics in the wake of African independences (Jalloh 2007: 90),¹⁷ and to the commitment of African presidents with respect to the growth of 'shadow' states – that is, patrimonial networks interlaced with the formal institutions of the state (Reno 1999, 2000; Ferguson 2006: 39).

In that same year of 1963, Solo established himself in Congo Brazzaville. Since the early colonial period the capital had hosted an important West African trading community (Balandier 1955; Bredeloup 2007: 1959; Whitehouse 2007). Solo and other West African men coming from the Sierra Leone diamond fields used already existing West African trading networks to develop smuggling activities within the former Belgian Congo, which at the time held a large share of the world's diamond production (Bredeloup 1994: 82; MacGaffey 1987: 121–22).

In Brazzaville, Solo had a license to buy diamonds. Omar and other Gambians he had known in Sierra Leone served as couriers across the border with Congo Leopoldville. Solo's first wife played a part as well, as Omar recalled:

Because of the difficulties of access to Congo Brazzaville we used to take planes from Leopoldville to Lagos, and then back from Lagos to Brazzaville. The president of Congo Brazzaville was named Massemba-Débat. Massemba and Solo were close friends as 'honey and honey producer'.¹⁸ Solo was so popular that many thought he was one of the President's closest associates. He was given security guards for the compound, and the key to the large safety box, where he kept the currency (franc CFA,

dollars and pounds) that was in the hands of Fatoumata, his first wife. When Solo negotiated the price of a diamond, Fatoumata would take out the money.¹⁹

At that time, West African diamond dealers were taking advantage of the weakened control over the diamond trade that followed Congo's independence from Belgium in 1960, and of the development of clandestine diamond mining in Eastern Kasai (MacGaffey 1987: 122–23). This favourable situation ended with the rise to power of Mobutu Sese Seko, who began to install those loyal to him into the system in order to gain control over it (Smillie 2010: 121–22). Solo left Brazzaville – having lost his political patronage after the overthrow of Massemba-Débat in 1968 – and added Belgium and Israel to his transnational life experience: 'I was the only African in Tel Aviv who had a diamond trading office. Usually I got to the airport, took the diamonds from my customers and declared them to customs'.²⁰ In 1972 he opened an office in Monrovia. In one way or another – he could not specifically recall how it had come about – while in Sierra Leone he had established a friendly relationship with Sékou Touré, the president of Guinea-Conakry. Once again, diamonds were the reason for that friendship, as presumably Solo was participating in the illicit diamond transactions carried out by Touré and members of his extended family.²¹ Touré introduced him to William Tolbert, the Liberian president whose favouritism towards Mande-speaking minorities is well known (Konneh 1996: 149), and Solo settled in Monrovia. With Solo's relationship with the Gambia compromised after the 1981 attempted coup against Jawara's government, and Solo himself, according to his own account, suspected of playing a role in the conspiracy, it proved a providential time to leave the Gambia and draw upon Sékou Touré's friendship. A few years before, Solo had withdrawn from the PPP to become an active member and financial supporter of the National Convention Party (NCP), an opposition party established in 1975 by Sheriff Dibba, who had been a founding member of the PPP and the first vice president of the Gambia (Hughes and Perfect 2006: 191).²²

Never Really at Home

Solo's passion for politics is revealed by the nicknames of three of his sons: Reagan, Sékou Touré and Sheriff Dibba. Solo's relations with Dibba developed in the context of popular dissatisfaction with the PPP in the early 1970s and rising concerns among the Mandinka regarding Jawara's policy of assimilation of other ethnic groups into the government (Hughes and Perfect 2006: 187–90). No doubt Solo felt and acted like a Mandingo nationalist proudly defending his culture and language. It was in the 1970s that the Gambia's economic problems started to come to the fore. Urban suburbs had swollen as a consequence of intensified mi-

gration from rural areas, and the state's administrative apparatus – despite its significant growth (Sallah 1990: 628) – could not provide enough white-collar jobs for the increasing numbers of literate youths, who looked to Europe, the United States and Libya in search of better educational and employment opportunities. Electoral politics had turned into an instrument to guarantee the continuity of the political circles established at the time of independence. No room was left for innovative thinking and action besides what the PPP and its politicians needed to remain in power.

Solo was a transnational migrant, but the rest of his family aimed at maintaining their long-term social and political influence in the Upper Gambia. One of his younger brothers had political aspirations, and apparently the PPP had withdrawn its support of his candidacy for Member of Parliament for the Wuli constituency in the 1977 elections (Hughes and Perfect 2006: 191). Solo reacted by shifting his allegiance to the NCP and provided this new party with access to a secure source of financing for political rallies and propaganda to support his brother there. At the time, Solo's material and social capital was impressive. While abroad, he kept in touch with expatriate Gambians and helped those in difficulty. Locally, his family network spread at the regional and transregional levels. Moreover, he had been investing in his home village since the beginning of his diamond-dealing career by paying the taxes of a large number of people and by providing food when they were in need. In the eyes of his countrymen, Solo came across as a hero, deftly able to tap the riches of foreign nations. His first return from Sierra Leone, in 1961, was still remembered by his age-mates as recently as 2008. Solo and his friend Bassirou Jawara were each driving a brand-new car, which stoked the imagination of their compatriots. Only a few years later, this time back from Congo Brazzaville, Solo patronized the band Super Eagles, whose music spread from Banjul nightclubs to the international stage.²³

This display of success and cosmopolitan connections was in sharp contrast to the distress of 1970s rural and urban Gambia (Nyang 1977; Sallah 1990). Recurrent droughts and badly organized government intervention had struck heavy blows to the agricultural sector, which still constituted the main source of income for large segments of the population. Inflation had turned life in towns into a never-ending struggle to make ends meet, and people were leaving the rural areas to settle in the rapidly growing urban centres.

In 1977 Solo organized the NCP campaign, and his younger brother contested the Wuli constituency under the flag of the new party (Hughes and Perfect 2006: 191–94). The NCP, however, never achieved the results that its founder, and Solo, expected. It proved hard indeed to undermine the popularity of the PPP as the party that had achieved independence. The PPP's patronage resources, moreover, were far more dependable than those of the NCP. In his explanation of these events, Solo mentioned a letter that Jawara purportedly wrote to him, which contained one sentence that Solo would never forget: 'You are a king without a

land!’ The meaning becomes clearer in the light of Solo’s common expression ‘I am the king of the world’, used when he boasted about his adventures abroad. By adding ‘without a land’, Jawara put things in the different perspective. Solo’s transnational life was both a resource and a hindrance. Surely, his connections to different places in the world increased his social and moral stature by comparison with those compatriots who had never had the opportunity to leave the Gambia, but his absences undermined his ability to establish roots in the thickly connected environment of home politics. It was Binta Cham, his youngest wife, who clearly spelled out this point by interjecting, during one of my conversations with Solo:

You can live with Gambians outside, they would not care about you. You will see them only when they are in need. Here, at home, they also do not care. When you return and you visit them, they will start the conversation by saying, ‘When did you arrive? When are you going to leave?’ They talk as if you do not belong to this country.

Transnational theory has shown how migrants’ investments in their home country have fed long-distance nationalism (Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001). This applies to Solo and other migrants of his generation who, while making a point of cultivating patriotism, were also subject to the tenuous nature of relationships between the Gambian state and its diasporic citizenry. The social and material capital of migrants was welcomed as long as it aligned with the incumbent leader; however, the very fact that Solo was accused of participation in the 1981 coup against Jawara shows that migrants’ use of their resources to support political alternatives prompted a much different reaction from the government. Behind the mask of an extremely successful life, Solo’s trajectory therefore betrays a feeling that he never fully belonged to his home country. Of all the political connections he established during his career as a diamond dealer, the friendship with Sékou Touré is the only one I heard him describe nostalgically; further, he evinced an enduring admiration for this man, whom he affectionately called ‘my African President number one’. For the rest, by 2008 – like many men of his generation who truly believed in the transformative power of national politics during their youth – he had reached the conclusion that politics and politicians were not worth any further financial, social or moral engagement. Both Jawara and Dibba had disillusioned him. His relationship with Dibba had ended before the 1992 national elections, when Solo was expelled from the NCP. From Dibba’s point of view, Solo’s independent attitude was undermining the cohesiveness of the party; from Solo’s perspective – which the opposition newspaper *Foroyaa* duly documented – Dibba had mismanaged NCP financial resources.

For those elections Solo backed a newly established and small political party, the People’s Democratic Party, whose existence was abruptly terminated by the

political ban proclaimed by the military junta after the 1994 coup. Solo left the Gambia again. At this time Angola was liberalizing diamond mining and trading operations (Bredeloup 2007: 43). Solo tried to become a key player once again in a new diamond frontier, but he was not as successful as he used to be. Angola marked the end of his adventures as a diamond dealer.

In one of our 2008 conversations he remarked: ‘I cannot leave diamonds; even now, if asked, I could buy one-million-dollar stones in half an hour; the knowledge is still here’. But despite this assertion, Solo also made it clear to Sidibeh and myself that his time for adventure had come to an end: ‘I do not travel much these days.’ Not only had international border security become stricter and controls more difficult to evade, but the political connections that helped him to secure his life and activities both in the Gambia and abroad were gone. Thus, after a transnational life during which he had crossed countries, territories and cultures in a way that none of his nineteenth-century *jula* ancestors could ever have imagined, Solo grew old in his home country – a common experience for many of his generation’s international migrants. Having prudently invested the proceeds of his activities in real estate, he had what he needed for a comfortable life that, although modest if compared to other periods of his life, was still out of reach for most Gambians. His children, most of whom lived in Europe or the United States, have been his major investment. Solo never went to school, but he soon understood the importance of literacy in the new world emerging out of decolonization. In his early days as a diamond dealer he had to write his name over and over to learn how to sign his first cheque. Most of his children have studied abroad, and even the one who has chosen to follow in his father’s footsteps and take up diamond dealing holds a master’s degree from a London university. In 2008, when I met Solo, this son was thinking of opening up a gold mining site in Guinea, where he could count on Solo’s relationship with Lansana Conté. That relationship had been established when Lansana Conté was serving Sékou Touré, and Solo was welcomed at the Guinea-Conakry presidential palace.

Conclusion

Through life histories one can study macrohistorical processes at the microhistorical level, fleshing out the aspirations, feelings and experiences of individual men and women at specific points in time and under broader sociocultural constraints (Thomson 1999; Fog Olwig 2007: 17). The rich details typical of this kind of evidence can trigger analyses in a plurality of diverging directions. In this chapter, I have focused on two aspects of Solo’s trajectory. The first is his exemplary capacity for grasping the global opportunities created by the expansion of the diamond industry in the 1950s. Many of his countrymen tried to do the same, but few matched his success. The second is Solo’s political engagement, in that his social trajectory serves as a summary of the highly personal relationships he

was able to establish with some of the major political personalities of twentieth-century Africa. Those connections were in part instrumental to his activities as a diamond dealer, but his engagement in home politics is also representative of the aspirations and commitment of an entire African generation that saw the end of colonial rule and actively participated in the creation and development of the new nations. Men of this generation keenly desired to be recognized as active members of their home communities but at the same time also had hopes for social and political change on a national scale. This held true also for Solo, in spite of the fact that his close association with notoriously corrupt, neopatrimonial regimes and his activities as diamond dealer may give the impression that his life trajectory was determined more by opportunities for economic gain than by any idealistic motivation.

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Notes

1. Gambian National Archive (GNA), Banjul, the Gambia, CSO 4/74, Consolidated African Selection Trust Ltd. Request for Legislation Preventing Illicit Diamond Trade (1938).
2. Solo Darboe, Bakau New Town, 24 November 2008.
3. Bakoyo and Omar Suso, Dippakunda, 16 October 2006.
4. National Archives of The Gambia, Banjul, CRU1-4, *Upper River Divisional Bulletin* 8 and 9 (1956).
5. Baba Suso, Fajikunda, 18 January 2008.
6. Literature of the 1950s and 1960s on African migrations commonly stresses the importance of economic factors, such as the need to pay colonial taxes (e.g. Skinner 1960). It also casts light on the cultural significance of migration. For instance, Jean Rouch's 1956 study of migrations from Niger to the Gold Coast concerns the mobility of youth labour as the expression of a long-rooted tradition of travel and the yearning for 'adventure'. According to Isaac Schapera (1947), the same aspirations underpinned Tswana colonial migrations. See also Bredeloup (2008) and Timera (2009).
7. 'I leave it with God' is a common Gambian expression that people use when they are mistreated in order to stress their forbearance and their faith in a higher form of justice.
8. Solo Darboe, Bakau New Town, 24 November 2008.
9. This Soninke, Bambara and Mandinka proverb is widespread not only in the Upper Gambia but also in eastern Senegal and Mali (Whitehouse 2007: 301; Whitehouse 2012).
10. Junkung Sumbundu, Koto Quarry, 29 November 2008.
11. Solo Darboe, Bakau New Town, 24 November 2008.
12. Omar Suso, Dippakunda, 19 December 2008.
13. Omar Suso, Dippakunda, 19 December 2008.
14. Solo Darboe, Bakau New Town, 24 November 2008.
15. Solo Darboe, Bakau New Town, 24 November 2008.
16. Gambian National Archives, Banjul, ARP 28/1, Travelling Commissioner's Report for December 1893.
17. Alusine Jalloh (2007) refers to Fula minorities in Sierra Leone. For other comparative analyses, see Meillassoux (1965) on the relationships between Bamako businessmen and the Malian-educated political and administrative elite; Morgenthau (1979) on the place of foreigners and multinationals in African national politics; and Diamond (1987) on private business's structural dependence on government assistance in the postcolonial African state.
18. Omar Suso was a *griot*, e.g. a praise-singer and oral historian. To make his point, he often used expressions drawn from Gambian oral traditions, such as this reference to honey and honey producer, which is a common way to stress the close relationship of two people.
19. Omar Suso, Dippakunda, 19 December 2008.
20. Solo Darboe, Bakau New Town, 24 November 2008.
21. Guinea-Conakry is a diamond-producing country on a level with Sierra Leone, but mining activities were nationalized by Sékou Touré in 1961 (Gberie 2011: 6–7). Although this reduced overall production, Sékou Touré continued to encourage illicit miners and smugglers (Greenhalgh 1985: 259; Morice 1987: 13; Bah 1990).

22. Solo Darboe, Bakau New Town, 25 November 2008.
23. For more details see 'Super Eagles: Senegambian Sensation': <http://www.discogs.com/Super-Eagles-Senegambian-Sensation/release/3264679>

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