

Review

Gender and power interrelationship: A review of the Jola indigenous socio-political organization of The Gambia

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Matters relating to the rights of men and women in our contemporary African society have been a major concern to academia. Thus, this article examines the indigenous Jola society with the aim of identifying the issues involved in gender and power relationship in their socio-political space. It locates the position of men and women in their socio-political system and identifies how power is distributed in the inter-personal relationships that exist among them. This study argues that power in indigenous Jola society is multifaceted, elusive and hence notes the different forms it possesses and the application it assumes in the Jola socio-political space. Hence, power is not concentrated on an individual or group but diffused within the system. Space in this regard, epitomizes the setting and means of negotiating and accessing power on a one-on-one basis for men and women. Thus he observes that teamwork and gender symbiosis characterize the indigenous Jola ethnic group of The Gambia. The author feels that the gender balance or mainstreaming as depicted in the traditional Jola society is a worthy practice which enhances checks and balances in any given polity. The complementary role of women in this ethnic group should be emulated by other ethnic groups which disparage the women folk.

Key words: Socio-political organization, indigenous Jola society, relationships, The Gambia.

INTRODUCTION

The Jola are one of the ethnic groups in The Gambia and are mainly found on the Atlantic coast around the southern banks of The Gambia River, the Casamance region of Senegal and the northern part of Guinea-Bissau. Their settlement is believed to have preceded the Mandinka and Fula peoples in the riverine coast of Senegambia and may have migrated into Casamance; their original homeland before the 13th century.

The indigenous socio-political organization of the Jola just like the Igbo of Nigeria has been variously described by writers as stateless, egalitarian, gerontocratic, etc. (Basden, 1938). Suffice me to say here that they do not have a centralized government where the leader has absolute authority over his people. Any leader in this society assumes a temporary position to carry out a particular assignment after which he resigns. For instance, the *kanda* (a strong personality in Jola traditional society) has always been at the forefront of Jola wars with their

Mandinka neighbours, after which he quits the position. This research examines the socio-political organization of the indigenous Jola society; with focus on gender and power distribution over time in the social web from where they derive their power and influence. The status of women in the Jola socio-political system in the past has been treated superficially. And also fewer other studies which attempted to look at the place of women in the indigenous Jola society do so in exclusion of the position of men in the Jola socio-political space. This has been the core of feminist research; which tend to lay emphasis on women at the expense of men and as a result, lacks the balanced platform where gender relationship can be weighed with even hands. This research therefore offers an opportunity to project the overall picture of this exciting ethnic group which has somewhat remained traditional even in the face of western civilization and modernity. It is in this respect that gender study has become commonly

acceptable due to its comprehensive nature; as both men and women are brought into fore. This piece therefore focuses on gender and the socio-political organization of the indigenous society: the nature of the Jola traditional society and its ancestral system as well as their implications on power relations between men and women. It examines some questions like: How are men and women typified and perceived in the socio-political network and how their representation transmutes into access to power for both or either of the sexes? In what numerous ways does the Jola kinship system for instance, allow men and women in the culture in space exploitation? In what form does the position of men and women in their kinship system for instance, constitute space for power negotiation for the sexes? What role does gender play in group and intergroup relationship in the kinship web? In answering these questions, this research intends to give an analysis of the Jola socio-political organization and its associated gender implications. In the undertaking of this subject matter, the lacuna created by the earlier researches will be filled. This study adopts multiple analyses as a strategy of inquiry and qualitative data collection methods, which allows for the use of selected cases to explore a social, political, and cultural phenomena of interest based on the researcher's curiosity (Yin, 1994). Additionally, it seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of a particular population. Data collection method was essentially phenomenology, which consisted of interview protocols involving randomly drawn groups of very elderly persons in the Jola ethnic group of The Gambia. Though, secondary data sources including archival and already published works in related literature were also used. This multiple analysis is intended to describe, understand and explain a research phenomenon. However, unlike quantitative research, the findings of a research of this nature may not usually be generalized to the rest of the population, though using critical reflexivity theory testing framework, this paper treating the case as having critical relevance to dominant theoretical position in literature, established generalizable conclusions. The study objective is also theory testing, which aims at confirming the general theoretical stance in literature that establishes socio-political and cultural nexus in the Jola ethnic group of The Gambia. Thus, the number of participants in a study does not matter in this kind of study to be considered acceptable, provided the study has met its objective of describing the phenomenon being studied (Tellis, 1997). The research tools used, namely interview and observation (of transitional rites and festivals), made it possible to explore both the socio-political and cultural history of the people, which existed, mostly in oral tradition. In this regard, one of the effort becomes more relevant as the potential for losing this important aspect

of this ethnic group which has remained purely traditional and animist. And with the older generation passing on from this life, there is a crying need to acquaint the younger generation of this important aspect of the Jola culture.

The pattern of the Jola indigenous political system

In the Jola ethnic group, there are numerous communities or village groups. Their communities are based on extended clan settlements normally large enough to be given independent names such as the Jola Karon, Jola Mlomp, Jola Elinnkin, Jola Caginol, Jola Huluf, Jola Jamat, Jola Johey, Jola Bayot, Jola Brin, Jola kassa, Jola Seleky, Jola Kabrouse, Jola Jiwat, and Jola Foni (Sonko-Godwin, 1985). This clan settlement is each run by a strong personality known as the *kanda* as the case may be. It should be noted that the idea of district chiefs (*Seyfo*) that cuts across all Jola societies today is due to European contact; as there were nothing like traditional chiefs in their pre-colonial society. The village group is the highest political unit of the Jola traditional society. Each community is segmented into smaller groups known as villages (clans). The villages are in turn, segmented into *hubukau –hanorou* (patrilineage or literally meaning children of the same father). The *hubukau –hanorou* is the central and the most influential and the basic socio-political unit of the Jola indigenous society. It comprises the descendants in the male line of the founder ancestor by whose name the patrilineage is sometimes called. The *hubukau –hanorou*, an equivalent of the *Igbo Umunna* (children from the same distant father), has aptly been described as "the catalyst of political behaviour and attitude; the main controlling factor that regulates and conditions its citizens. It is the authority and reason for political and social participation in the town-state government" (Njaka, 1974).

The *hubukau –hanorou* is a corporate group which holds allegiance to an ancestral father, one shrine and a common *aluweyee* (a large open square where the patrilineage members meet to attend to issues of common interest to the group). It is an exogamous group but there could be intermarriage among members of the same *hubukau –hanorou*. Nevertheless, in a situation where the lineage has become larger indeed, the lineage within the patrilineage may separate themselves from the main body to found a new patrilineage.

The *hubukau –hanorou* is again divided into *hilhakon* (literally meaning children of the same father) that is the extended families. The members of *hilhakon* are closely related, blood-wise and the founding father is traceable within the generations. The position the *hilhakon* occupies in the Jola political arrangement underscores the significance of the position of the woman in the culture of the people. Motherhood is perceived as a binding force in intra-group relations. For this reason a person is never

rejected in the mother's patrilineage (maternal home). In Jola culture, a man who has problems in his paternal home or with his *hubukau -hanorou* can escape to his mother's patrilineage where he finds solace in times of trouble and or oppression. He is never rejected. The family as the domestic organization is made up of the man, his wives, children and his sons' wives. With time these sons, except the first son known as *anyil - anifanon* move out of the compound to establish his individual compound. While the family head resides at the *aluweyee* which is located most often at the centre of the compound, the wives' houses are situated as corporate buildings within the compound each designed as an enclosure where each wife and her children reside. The political implications of this household organization will be surveyed under the section Space and Authority in the indigenous Jola Society.

In their traditional society hamlets are made up of many compounds whose residents constitute members of several patrilineages from the same village. This is just a geographical unit providing some considerable solidarity based on neighbourhood rather than an immediate blood relationship (Olisa, 1971). Among the Jola people for instance, settlement is based on patrilineage relationships as members of the same extended family tend to reside closer to one another than with members of other unrelated patrilineages. The reason for this kind of settlement structure is as a result of the fact that each nuclear family shares its land which is usually a large expanse among the male children. As residence is patrilocal, ultimately members of the same *hubukau - hanorou* reside closer to one another than to people of other patrilineages. The system of relationships built through blood ties and everyday interactions cultivates closer fraternity amongst kinship groups. It further inculcates support from kinsmen. For the Jola ethnic group, a gift in either cash and or in kind is an obligation to the distressed or needy and an essential part of social relationships within the kinship network.

Each of their community protectively values and upholds a high degree of independence and therefore performs as a self-contained entity in carrying out its internal activities and in its overall relationships with its neighbouring communities. Before the European contact, the *kanda*, warriors, priests, heads of component families etc for instance, exercised influence and authority at the village- group level. They were the elites of Jola traditional society. Their duties were to direct discussions and recapitulate decisions in the assembly of the whole village-group and carry out other socio-political and economic activities like settlement of disputes and conflicts that may arise amongst kinsmen. The *kanda*, warriors, priests etc are the watch-dogs of the customs, norms and traditions of the society. However, as is today some of their traditional past roles have been usurped by the contemporary leaders; cabinet members and the district union executives. It should be noted that this

power shift has not gone without any challenge from the traditional and modern leaders; usually appointed or elected by the government of the day.

From the *hubukau-hanorou* (patrilineage) level down to the extended family; *hilhakon*, the *anyil- anifanon* (first son who is usually the eldest in the patrilineage) of the applicable constituent family units, occupies a leadership position. His headship is based on his being the eldest man in this patrilineage. He is accordingly, the living representative of the ancestors and the holder of the sign of authority and justice. Although, the *anyil- anifanon* occupies a leadership position, that position is basically a moral one; as a result, he cannot take unilateral decision nor implement decisions taken by his kinsmen with force. The eldest son plays the role of the coordinator of the lineage or family affairs for the general interest of all. Similarly, the *anyil anifanon's* position is entrusted with a lot of other duties such as presiding over the sharing of family or patrilineage lands. He is also the principal host in traditional marriage ceremonies in the unit that he leads, among other responsibilities. Every *hubukau - hanorou* (patrilineage) has its own meeting square called *aluweyee*, which doubles as a meeting place and also the residence of the *anyil anifanon* of the founding father of the patrilineage.

In the indigenous socio-political organization of the patrilineal Jola society, women's institution of *kurimanak* (institution for daughters both married, unmarried, divorced or widowed) pose a strong force for women to have access to both social and political powers. Their decisions are supreme in conflict resolutions. They function as the custodian of public morality. Thus, the women have different assemblies of their own which liaises with different units that make up Jola socio-political structure. For instance, each *hilhakon* (extended family), *hubukau -hanorou* (patrilineage), village and village-groups have similar women's groups and associations. In such meetings, the women address issues affecting the women folk of that particular patrilineage and the community in general for the mutual benefits of all. For instance, the share to a great extent in the social life of their natal homes when married. The system of exogamy as practised in most Jola societies ensures that a woman who marries outside her patrilineage in the patrilineal Jola society is a peace advocate and a role model.

One outstanding cultural rites that distinguishes gender in the Jola socio-political and cultural setting is the '*Futampaf*', an initiation to manhood and rites of passage. It is exclusively the only traditional method of formal education in preparing young men and women to take their place in the society. Rites of passage play a central role in the Jola socialization, demarking the different stages in an individual's development (*gender and otherwise*), as well as that person's relationship and role to the broader community. The major stage in African life is the transition from child to adult when they become

fully institutionalized to the ethics of the group's culture.

Rites of passage thus serve a double purpose; preserving the on-going community as a symbol of collective immortality and permanence as well as providing a clear and guided means for transition from one life stage and sphere of responsibility to another. They thus confirm the hierarchies of values of the community and project an ideal sequence of personal development the individual can look forward to and upon reaching each stage, evaluate his or her maturation against a collective standard.

Another existing institution in the indigenous Jola socio-political structure is the age grades system or age regiment. The regulation of political relations and rules in the village is the duty of age-based associations. These age-based associations for the male group of the society are viable and strong groups which carry out community based works and implement local laws made in the village interest. Through the principle of age and selection, the associations are constituted. Among the Jola sub-cultural group also exists a women's association that is equivalent to the most powerful of the male. The main feature of this association is its total independence in the affairs of the village women folk. It can pursue a strong and sustained disapproval against any exploit or resolutions reached by the men. Moreover, recruitment into the women association is evidently non-lineage constructed as a greater number of the women are married.

The freedom of association given to the women folk in their indigenous socio-political system is one of the major ways of women's political influence and rise to power. Moreover, for the reason that decisions of general interest are taken at such assemblies and decisions reached, after due discussions with the men of the community; which most often than not are binding on every member of the community, whether male or female. The involvement or rather inclusion of the women folk in the socio-political scheme proves the invisibility. The people are known for their communal efforts and ethnic consciousness as well as love for their native homes; irrespective of where they find themselves.

In their traditional society the individual is a member of the village and it is the village that sets goals and determines appropriate punishment for those who breach traditional laws. In some extreme breach of traditional laws, the individual is ostracized within that village. It is also the village that sets up reward and punishment systems; 'the carrot and stick system', which means that the individual in its traditional society is immersed within the dictates and requirements of the village, the highest political unit.

The idea of communalism is all embracing and could be extended to refer to the individuals, an assemblage and an independent body, an authority, government among others which make up the wider community. Indeed, it essentially includes the dead, the living and generations yet unborn. In Jola, it is believed that the

ancestors live around the living and offers them protection. It is in this regard that they pour out libation, offer sacrifices and consult them in time of severe peril and traditional calamities like famine and drought. It is usually believed in their traditional society that natural disasters are as a result of ancestral wrath; which requires that the spiritual elders appease the gods and goddesses by offering sacrifices which are usually dictated by the gods.

Authority and space in the indigenous Jola society

This section explores certain indices which describe the Jola indigenous society, paying attention to how power is implicated in the definition of the individuals and groups in the socio-political space. Thus, it attempts to examine how authority and power are connected in respect of men and women in their socio-political system over time.

Ajala (2008), writing on 'Identity' and 'Space' in his study of Ibadan Politics, noted that space performs four major functions in Ibadan: consumption, communication, security and settlement. All these functions, according to him, are generally articulated in the political, social and economic values attached to space. He further hinted that the construction of space varies across cultures and societies. He then therefore concluded that the diverse perspectives on space are informed by a group's attitude to space, access to space and interaction with space as a resource for political power (Ajala, 2008). In Yoruba land, space is constructed from historical, symbolic and functional perspectives (Ajala, 2008). The symbolic dimension to space links a group to cultural construction of meanings, particularly as it deals with the issue of identity.

As for the Jola, space, whether spatial or figurative carries out important roles in the definition of the individuals and groups. Within the domestic framework, for example, the *aluweyee* as the abode of the head of the family, functions as a centre of power from where decisions are reached but after due consultations. Every woman in the polygamous household has her own apartment: an enclosure containing a bed room, kitchen, store room for keeping her valuables, poultry house, pen for her goats and sheep, cattle, barns for her agricultural produce as well as few economic trees like orange, mango trees among others etc. She also has a well to supply water for her immediate use. All these are walled round with a door linking her compound to the bigger family compound at the centre of which the *aluweyee* is situated. Within the woman's apartment, she lives with her children and grandchildren as the case may be. In this traditional arrangement, she is in complete control of both the economic and cultural production. Though the man as the head of the family takes certain decisions regarding the overall interest of his family, there is a limit to which such decisions can encroach on the woman's

power along the domestic line.

At the larger society, the *aluweye* of the patrilineage also doubles as an interface of decision and power negotiation. As the residence of the eldest son in the patrilineage, the *eluweyi* also becomes symbolic, as it functions as the tempo-spiritual essence of the collective identity (Ukpokolo, 2010). Within this spatiality, rituals and libations are performed using the *ekruayi* ((kolanut) and/or staff of authority, justice and peace as key objects of ritual performances invoking the earth's goddess (*mofamu- emi*) as the intermediary between the physical and the spiritual world (Ukpokolo, 2010). Within this framework, the woman becomes active participant, though in principle.

In Jola, space is constructed in the arrangement of men and women in the socio-political structure which has implications on their access to power. In this regard, space is hypothesized as the processes through which the individual or group has claim to the right and power to make decisions, or question the decisions or resolutions that could exclude the individual or group or affect the life of the group (Ukpokolo, 2010). The institution of *kurimanak* offers women the opportunity to negotiate power by bringing into scrutiny decisions made by men which affect their lives. Power enables an individual or group to cause others to do what the individual wishes the other to do. Power can be exercised in various ways, such as through coercion when we force a person to do something he or she does not wish to do; as persuasion when we convince someone to do that which he/she does not want to do or as the construction of incentives when we make the alternative so unattractive that only one reasonable option remains (Shively, 1997). Looking at power from this perspective, it becomes so complex and elusive that it can take several forms. The nature of power distribution within the framework of the Jola socio-political system illustrates the dynamic interactions that characterize gender relations in the society. In such a system, no group can relegate the other in the socio-political production.

Both men assembly and women associations can question any decision taken by any group of individuals that affects the life of its members, especially if a group feels their rights were undermined. Thus, women have the right to contest any decision that is not in the best interest of their group. In this wise, not only do they speak for women, they also speak for men, youth and children (Ukpokolo, 2010). The inference is that it is not just one group but groups which are diverse and diffused in the socio-political network. This decentralization of power as demonstrated in the Jola socio-political system dependably reinforces the people's belief that the world belongs to all; hence the people say *waf –olela* meaning 'who can claim the single ownership of the world'. The world here is used symbolically to represent the Jola universe. Through the *kurimanak* institution and other women's associations and multiple men's assemblies within the

body polity, voices emanate questioning issues that have to do with common interests. The juxtaposition of women's groups and men's groups is not in binary opposition but within the context that reflects inter-group complementarily, which recognizes sameness in difference (Ukpokolo, 2010). The inter-relatedness of groups inherent and instituted in the body polity ensures that power is not concentrated on a single individual or group of individuals. For the Jola, power belongs to all. Everybody has the right to speak his mind or thought. The implication is that everybody in these groups has the right of his freedom of speech or object to what one believes to be unacceptable. Hence, power is not vested solely on an individual or group of individuals or solely on a particular sex group (Ukpokolo, 2010). This depicts a culture that rejects intimidation or oppression or where an individual or groups possess absolute control of power. Power serves as a main resource without which other necessities may elude the individual. With equitable access to power, justice and equity can thrive and seen to be applied. In fact, without power, according to Lawuyi, (2004), it may be difficult to access resources, retain resource or commercialize resources.

Thus, women in Jola traditional society are active participants in the socio-political life of the people, hence the idea that a woman possesses the power to influence decision making; especially the *kurimanak*. In crises situation, women's power and influence comes into play. As the custodian of community morality, women can use satirical songs such like *ekim-eteme* to criticize a young man or lady in order to caution him or her against immoral behaviour. Songs are sung to either praise or to condemn. *Ekim- eteme* (an indirect way of talking to a person of questionable character) is used to criticize the undesirable behaviours in people's lives; hence *ekim-eteme* serves as a corrective measure to the hearer. In songs of praise, the individual's positive attributes are appreciated and recommended to the people. In this way, songs remain one of the traditional instruments of peace building and hero worshipping. In this respect, the *griot* (traditional historian and praise singer) roles come into play. The griot is regarded as a traditional historian, who extols either vocally or with musical instruments, the outstanding achievements of leaders and heroes in the Jola ethnic groups.

In a stateless society like the Jola with no centralized government, such mutual approach to problem solving goes a long way in upholding the moral spirit in the community and sustaining cordial relationships among people. Eventually, the tempo of deviant behavior is reduced and protects the society from moral decay. This explains why Basden holds the view that the lives of men run on lines quite distinct from those of women (Basden, 1938). In other words, women have their own power base from where they impact the lives of people in the society. For instance, it is generally regarded as *nyinyi* (abomination) when womanhood is insulted generally, and as

such, women folk can sanction the culprit, be it a man or woman through payment of a stipulated fine or have his personal effects confiscated until such a time the fine is paid or redeemed. In the event that he could neither pay the fine nor give out of his personal effects in lieu of fine, he is sanctioned and or excommunicated. In this way, he/she can no longer participate in whatever activities the community is engaged in.

Such characteristics describe a society where power is divided along gender line in the socio-political network. Women's involvement in decision making process in Jola society portrays a society that contradicts the general theory of women's invisibility in the society. In most societies in Africa, it is generally believed that women should be seen and not heard. The cultural practice of sitting on a man (Van Allen, 1972) where the *kurimanak* (patrilineage daughters) could put pressure on the male folk of the community forcing them to obey the decisions of *kurimanak* further demonstrates the power of the woman folk to implement their decision and establish peace and order in the society. Thus, amongst the Jola, the institution of *kurimanak* projects women as instruments of peace and power negotiation. This assures them a place in the affairs in their community. For the patrilineal society, the system of exogamy offers them double citizenry of their society (Green, 1947). As members of the *kurimanak* institution, they control burial rites and punish any married woman in their patrilineage who maltreats her husband or refuses to take care of him. However, the punishment may not be a physical one; but could take the form of sanctions from participating in women's activities for some time and in an extreme case, the woman could be ostracized. Ironically, married women in the village regard the *kurimanak* as their 'husbands'. In her marital home, the woman belongs to the institution of married women which is an association of wives; and here she plays significant role in maintaining peace between the wives and their husbands' relations (Ukpokolo, 2010).

One's relationship with his or her mother's relatives is also essential and forms part of the Jola kinship arrangement. They are his or her *ampa-afan* and *enya-afan* which means ancient father and ancient mother respectively (for lack of equivalent adjectives). Children are regarded as *kusonpulo* in their mother's patrilineage (maternal home). These relationships are so closely knit and integrated into the kinship system that it offers a patrilineally-organized people special rights and privileges in their mother's patrilineages; including such rights and privileges that they do not sometimes receive in their own descent group which is their father's patrilineage. Thus, the *kusonpulo* is inviolable in his or her mother's patrilineage and as such could not be harmed or maltreated in the mother's patrilineage. In a typical Jola traditional milieu, the *kusonpulo* also plays significant roles as peace-advocate in his/her mother's patrilineage. This practice gives the Jola marriage system relative stability and

further strengthens intergroup relations. Such established networks contribute in no small way to strengthening the structure of groups and kinship network.

The Jola and their kinship system

Kinship, an equivalent of the Jola *hubukau –hanorou* (patrilineage or literally meaning children of the same father) is a general phenomenon in most ethnic groups of Africa. It occupies an important position in determining and shaping human behaviour and social groups. What form the bases of kinship system in most African indigenous society is the social and cultural affinity and the symbiotic interplay it offers. This explains why most traditional economic, social and political activities are done on communal basis. For instance, the out-law of incest, enactment of rules of marriage rites, rights of the natives at the kindred level are regulated and determined by kinsmen who make up the kinship system. The kinship system maintains group cohesion and solidarity and serves as an instrument of orientation and integration of individual members into the wider social system.

The society builds kinship alliances and relationships through unilineal parentage system, which is through both the male (patrilineal) and or female (matrilineal) line. While most of the Jola societies commonly practice the patrilineal descent system, there are some noticeable matrilineal elements in the social systems. For instance, in Jola traditional system, the *kusonpulo* has a role to play in his/her mother's patrilineage. The *kusonpulo* constitute a powerful force in making and advocating for peace in the mother's patrilineage.

Records show that the Jola society is endogamous in nature; as it allows for a man to take a wife among his kinsmen, especially those not closely related. This, it is believed, fosters peace, co-operation and harmony among families. The matrilineage is also exogamous though the residential group is the patrilineage. Mostly, however, patrilineage system is more common among the Jola than the matrilineal system from where the line of descent or genealogy is traced. In a patrilineal descent system, ancestry is established by tracing descent solely through the male lines from a founding male ancestor. In fact, the fundamental principle of a patrilineal parentage is the unity of the male group. Although, both men and women are included in the patrilineage, only the male links determines successive identity and generations.

Unilineal descent system's functions lie mainly on its role as an unmitigated group and as an institution of corporate entity; which customarily recruit natives based on conditions of inherited status and identity. Although, there are no well -defined objectives, the group's unity and character reflect bonds formed upon common origin and identity and are concerned with the general welfare of the members (Schwimmer, 1995). Kinship, thus understood, often constitutes a corporate group which becomes

a legal entity in itself and is assigned collective right on behalf of its members and their estates. The unilineal descent system has played an important part in the development of social organization. For instance, it is widely said in Jola local parlance that kinsmen are the basis of strength; hence communalism is the basis of Jola traditional activities; be it economic, political or cultural.

Schwimmer has postulated two major theories as the explanations for this practice. One of these theories is economic, while the other, political. The economic theory focuses on the communal land ownership system. The idea is that since land is corporately owned, individuals need the parentage system for its equitable distribution and also for allocating the economic resources that the kinsmen are endowed with. Furthermore, it serves as the basis for regulating the individual's right to productive goods and the right to call for assistance in time of need or distress.

The political reasons according to Schwimmer focus on the need for social order and cohesion in stateless societies which lack centralized political systems with formal institutions of law-enforcement. Under these conditions, strong and permanent alliances within and between large family-based organizations are necessary to establish the sanctions needed to control disruptive behaviour among their members and to assist them when violence does occur. This approach is associated with the structuralist-functional school (Schwimmer, 1995). In addition to group membership, patrilineal descent controls the course of succession and hence helps in preventing conflict that may likely emerge as a result of the absence of the principles that allocate people to such groupings. In general, therefore, the system of descent as practised in most societies helps in determining parenthood, identifying ancestry, controlling the line of inheritance and assigning people to social categories, groups, and roles. For instance, the child a patrilineage daughter bears in her husband's house is recognized in the kinship structure as *kusompulo* in her patrilineage. In this way, such children or *kusompulo* as in the case of the Jola, have some rightful social claims and share to a large extent in the membership of their mother's patrilineage. As a sharp contrast to that of Igbo of Nigeria, a child has minimal rights in her maternal patrilineage.

Aside from family property, inheritance of personally acquired assets of a man passes to his first son who will undertake the responsibility of caring for his younger ones. But if it is a polygamous family (as was often the case), the property is shared amongst the most senior sons of the deceased's wives. Each of these sons in turn goes back to his mother's children to divide his own portion with his male brothers. In some pre-colonial Jola society, the *anyil-anifanon* (eldest son) was not entitled to inherit the dead father's widow. This is regarded as *nyinyi* or an abomination in that society.

However, the widow may choose to re-marry or stay behind in the late husband's house and bring up her

children. In this case, the late husband's brothers will be helping her to perform duties that are gender-specific in the culture like climbing palm trees, clearing the bush, repairing her leaking roof etc. This helps her to have sense of belonging and hope in the family despite the death of her husband.

Certainly, such complex network of relationships and kinship ties in the Jola culture are the basis for understanding man's social consciousness, the structures of his socio-political, religious and economic organization and his adherence to the customs, ethos, and manners dictated in the culture of his people; hence he has remained traditional among other ethnic groups of The Gambia.

Conclusion remarks

The position of men and women in the traditional Jola society has been given a less attention by academics in our contemporary time. The Jola indigenous socio-political structure portrays a society that recognizes the complementary roles of both men and women in their polity. Institutions, be it political and or social reflect the unique system of power and influence balance. In theory and application, power is polarized in the society with both sex groups recognizing the indispensability of the other; hence, power is viewed as being complex and multi-dimensional and its bases defined in various ways. Therefore, men and women in the kinship maze, the family and other social and political institutions are defined based on the status from which they derive their power and participate in the sustenance of those values and norms that shape the Jola world. Thus, the position of men and women in the traditional Jola indigenous socio-political arrangement shows a clear element of gender collaboration, mutual dependence and communalism. The author feels that the gender balance or mainstreaming as depicted in the traditional Jola society is a worthy practice which enhances checks and balances in any given polity. The complementary role of women in this ethnic group should be emulated by other ethnic groups which disparage the women folk.

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