

# **Mansa Koli Bojang, the Last King of Kombo and his British Ally: Loyalty meets Neutrality**

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## **Abstract**

This article reconstructs the pre-colonial intercultural encounter between the warrior-class of the Soninké and the first British settlement in West Africa situated at the mouth of the River Gambia. By framing the vast topic with the diplomatic endeavour of king Koli Bojang to win the British as an ally in his war against the Muslims and with the response of the administration of the settlement to it in the first half of the 1870s, I will show in reference to the letter-correspondence between the king and the administrators, and by analysing the colonial records and oral traditions that honour based loyalty clashed with biased neutrality. In detail, the Soninké were loyal to their British neighbours, because they considered them as friends in the Manding-meaning of the term; the British on the other hand were disloyal to their long time partners, due to their foreign policy of neutrality, even though the reality proves that the officers on the spot were partial, at their own discretion, being driven by sympathies and ideologies. This biased neutrality though contradicted the warrior ethics of the Soninké, resulting in their rejection of the British offer to mediate, since a mediator, through their prism, had to embody high moral values, e.g. honesty and truthfulness.

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In West Africa, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an age of manifold transitions. In the political sphere two salient processes of change can be observed, firstly from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards in the course of numerous jihad movements from localized forms of kingdom to Islamic state-structure, and secondly by the end of the century in the course of imperialism from European presence to colonial control. Zooming in on the pre-colonial history of the Mande-speaking people, the Kaabu-Empire moves into the focus; because of two reasons:

(1) Kaabu had been the political and cultural centre of the Western-Manding after the decline of the Mali-Empire for several hundred years. Thus Kaabu's fall in 1865, caused by a Muslim-uprising, had a great impact on the whole Senegambia-region, leaving its more than forty vassal-states in this times of transitions without its political overlord and cultural protector.

(2) The oral traditions of the Kaabu-Empire are well documented, providing a rich source of information from within about migrations of Mande-families, the founding of villages and states, their relations, their societies. Since in the age of imperialism the territory of the former Kaabu-Empire was divided up between the British, the French, and the Portuguese, they give glimpses into the pre-colonial presence of three European powers and their different ways of setting roots in West-Africa as well.

After decolonization, in 1971 Bakari Sidibe, a Gambian linguist and historian,<sup>2</sup> started to record the remembrances of griots and family-elders of the Senegambia-region, aiming in the preservation of the oral history of the region.<sup>3</sup> The potency of this collection lies in its vast regional coverage and its multiple perspectives, its weakness, by the very nature of oral traditions, in the lack of exact dating and the intricacies to come to some kind of reliable chronology. Following Jan Vansina (1985), "history must have chronology. Chronology need to be based on an absolute calendar, it can be a relative sequence of events and situations only. But chronology there must be, if there is to be history" (Vasina 1985: 173). In his pioneering work 'Oral

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<sup>2</sup> To learn more about Bakari Sidibe's influential life, progressing from a student at SOAS in London during colonial times to the founder of the PPP, the first political party for the people in the protectorate, to the central figure in the post-colonial endeavour to preserve the history of the Senegambia-region, read Sidibe's biography by Ulla Fels (2017).

<sup>3</sup> From 1971 to 1982 Sidibe collected about 4000 audiotapes, which were stored, partly transcribed and translated from Mandinka to English in the Gambian Oral History Archive (nowadays Research and Documentation Department). Sidibe's Private Archive (PAS) though provided the sources used in this article.

Traditions as History' he discusses different ways for reorganising the collected data into the chronologically correct sequence of events; the most exact method is to compare the remembered happenings with external reports, like colonial records and written accounts of contemporary witnesses such as missionaries and European, likewise Arab travellers. Sidibe's collection increases in value, since three future colonial powers were present in the Kaabu-Empire, having produced, particularly for the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an immense corpus of external information in English, French, and Portuguese, which are reflecting not only their often divergent strategies in building up their spheres of influence but also their varying prisms of the cultural other. In the English historiography Justice Gray (1966) laid with his detailed reconstruction of the Gambian history the foundation for further studies, offering the essential chronology of happenings from the first Portuguese account in 1455 until the country's decolonization in 1965. While Gray was working exclusively with British records, Donald Wright (1987, 1997) enriched the big picture with oral traditions and French colonial records, and Joye Bowman (1980) with Portuguese records. Assan Sarr (2016) opened up another dimension by focusing the influx of the first Manding-settlers, which had emigrated from the great Mali-Empire and the following formation of Kaabu's vassal states in the Gambia River basin, framing the topic with the western Mandings' spiritually defined concept of land tenure and land control, and the concept's transformation in the course of their Islamization during the 19<sup>th</sup> century jihad movements.

The kingdom of Kombo, one of these vassal states in the Gambia River basin, situated at its mouth on the south bank, proves itself to be the perfect case study to show the significance of the transitions to Islamic state structure and colonial control; mainly because of Kombo's location, since the kingdom was the direct neighbour of the first British settlement in West Africa. The outcome of this regional constellation is a wealth of written reports on the rapidly progressing Islamization of the country next to their settlement, since it meant the endangerment of the known order and thus in the context of their pre-colonial lack of military power a great threat to their very existence. These colonial records offer a complementary perspective to the oral traditions, which draw, regarding the militant Islamization of their region, a rather romanticized picture of their past, as the jihad movement in Kombo was a revolution from within, Mande versus Mande, remoulding

the recently segregated ethnical community, which had existed since the founding of the Kaabu-Empire, to a strong unity by partly free willed and partly forced conversion to Islam.

Giving the conflict in Kombo a face, on the 29th September 1875, after twenty-five years of bloody *jihad* against the dynasty of the Bojang, which had controlled the political affairs of the region for about two hundred years, Ibrahima Touray proclaimed the Islamic State of Kombo. Mansa Koli Bojang from Brikama happened to be the Muslims' counterpart in their struggle for political power, and thus in his role of the last non-Muslim king of Kombo a symbol of a dying order. Since most of the Bojang converted to Islam and therefore are remembering the loss of their power through the prism of Islam, Mansa Koli's motivations behind his resistance likewise his strategies, which were built upon pre-Islamic Mande-values, are not only left aside in the oral traditions of the Touray-family but also in those of the Bojang-family. But in Kombo's case, the lost remembrance of Mansa Koli's view, which is mirroring strongly the consequences of Kaabu's fall to its vassal states, can be reconstructed; again due to the regional connection with the British settlement. The reason: The authorities of the neighbouring Mande, no matter their religious identity, considered the British, their inferior military strength notwithstanding, as complementary player in this time of manifold transitions and most of them were therefore frequently communicating with the administration of the settlement, aiming in gaining an advantage in the ongoing civil war. In this sense, on the 24<sup>th</sup> July 1872, shortly after the outbreak of the second and final phase of the Soninké-Marabout War, as the Islamic revolution in Kombo is called, Mansa Koli sent a letter to the settlement, resulting in a meeting between him and administrator Simpson on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August ditto. Following Sidibe's academic papers, which are founded on oral traditions and his socio-cultural know-how of the Senegambia-region, Mansa Koli's diplomatic letter turns to a rare manifest of *soninkejaa*, the way of life of the Soninké, who were appreciating overall loyalty. By adding a selection of statements, which were filtered out from the detailed letter correspondence between the settlement and the colonial office or the headquarter in Sierra Leone, the answer of the British to Mansa Koli's apply for assistance, being documented in the written record of the meeting, clearly indicates the British pre-imperialistic policy of neutrality, refusing the king's request with reference to their policy of non-interference in the clothes of peacemakers.

But by doing so, the British were covering their true motivation: the imperceptible transition from their presence in West Africa to colonial control, a process, which went hand in hand with the institutionalisation of the scientific racism leading to the downgrading of non-Europeans along biological and thus insurmountable lines of exclusion.

This paper intends to reconstruct the encounter between the ancient warrior class of the Soninké, built upon high moral values like loyalty, and their British neighbours, who were underrating non-European societies generally due to their paternalistic stance, and playing a hypocritical game in the name of (partial) neutrality and (self-interested) peace.

### **I. The warrior-ethics of the Soninké**

In 1872, the starting point of the final phase of the Muslim uprising, Mansa Koli Bojang, the last king of Kombo, was left with one option: to turn the fate of his family's dynasty, he had to win the British as an exclusive ally. The king's tactic was unhidden by reminding his long time partners of his loyalty shown to them in the past, asking them loyalty now in return:

“Finding that we are not strong enough to drive these Marabouts out of our lands by ourselves, we respectfully apply to YE for that assistance which we have never failed to render you when required.” (NRO, Des. 56, July 24, 1872)

The allegiance of the Soninké to the British is already evident in the 1850s in the war between the British and the Muslim stronghold Sabiji, which would have resulted in the invasion of the first British settlement in West Africa, if the Soninké had not rendered assistance to their neighbours from Europe. Since this conflict is of great value for understanding the happenings, motivations, and relations in that time and space, it makes sense to bring a detailed summary of the Sabiji-War, which was in its foundation not a conflict between the British and the Muslim, but the peak of the first phase of the Soninké-Marabout War, having found its outbreak in 1849. Following Gray's (1966) reconstruction of the history of Gambia, by 1851 Mansa Suling Jatta, Mansa Koli's predecessor, was pushed seriously to the defence, being encircled by the two main Marabout-towns, Gunjur in the north of Kombo and Sabiji in the south, bordering the British settlement. The British officers and traders for their part were observing the happenings right in front of

their settlement with anxiety, and took the side of the Soninké, their policy of neutrality notwithstanding, even though they “were under no treaty obligation to give any aid” to them (Gray 1966: 389). Against the background of neutrality, the only solution to pacify the disordered area was to place parts of it under the British flag, meaning British jurisprudence backed by its police force and superior armed soldiers inclusive of modern gunboats. On the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1853 a strip of land including the Muslim-stronghold Sabiji was officially annexed through a treaty between the king of Kombo, the British and some elders from Sabiji.

As the majority of the inhabitants of Sabiji were against being placed under foreign rule, the colonial office decided to forestall a rebellion by launching preventative strike in the form of arresting the Marabout-leaders of Sabiji, in a massive military action, sending three West Indian Regiments, the Gambia Militia, and some pensioners. The strike was successful, but the power vacuum was filled instantly by an Algerian jihad-fighter, who had taken part in the previous uprising in Algeria against France’s attempt to colonize his country, and who had settled in Sabiji without the knowledge of the British. Omar, as the well-trained and strategically talented warrior was called, prepared a counter-strike aiming to invade the British settlement. However, Omar’s plan could not be put into operation, because in July 1855, shortly before the invasion, British authorities came to Sabiji, now under their jurisprudence, to arrest a kidnapper. When they reached the town, armed men welcomed them, wounding two officers and chasing the party back to British Kombo. In the settlement all available soldiers set out for a punitive expedition but finding Sabiji to be well fortified due to Omar’s military experience and skills. The British were driven back calling for help from their military base in Sierra Leone and from the French in Gorée. Until the backup reached, the British depended fully on the help of the Soninké (Gray 1966: 389-95). As Gray puts it, “during the next few days very gratifying proof was given of the loyalty of the surrounding natives.” (ibid.: 394) On the 15<sup>th</sup> July 1855 Sabiji was destroyed involving heavy losses on both sides. (ibid.: 395)

The result of the collective strike against, and the destruction of the Muslim stronghold, Sabiji, was, first of all, the suppression of the Muslim uprising in a sustained manner as the Marabouts could not regain strength until the early 1870s, and secondly that the Soninké considered themselves from that day on as a buffer zone between the British settlement and the Muslims,

whose power had shifted to the south to the Marabout-town of Gunjur, placing the task to re-conquer Sabiji at the top of their agenda. In his diplomatic letter to the administration of the British settlement, Mansa Koli voiced out the importance of the Soninkés' role of a buffer zone:

“It is known to every inhabitant of Bathurst that the Marabouts of Gounjoor have sworn to reconquer Sabbagee, now a portion of British Combo, which was taken from them in war by Governor D’Arcy. The sole barrier that has restrained them from attempting to do so, was the knowledge that in such a case we the sworn Allies of the British lay between them and their aim, [...]” (NRO, Des. 56, July 24, 1872)

The alliance between the Soninké and the British was a win-win-situation in the true sense of the word. Without British partiality, the Soninké would have lost their ruling power already in the 1850s to the Marabouts, and vice versa; without the loyalty shown by the Soninké the British settlement would have been invaded at a very early stage of their colonial presence in West Africa. Respectively they would have lacked a strong-willed and loyal ally in the following years protecting their partners as a buffer zone against the Marabouts who were regaining strength now in the southern part of Kombo. Overall, the re-empowered Soninké-king kept on securing the trading routes in his dominion, as used to be his duty to his former overlord, the emperor of the declining Kaabu-Empire, and by this he kept the British legitimate trade<sup>4</sup> flowing; and Mansa Koli Bojang who ascended leadership sometime between 1855 and 1863 became a powerful man collecting tolls, taxes, and gifts connected to the trade and his relationship with the settlement (Sidibe 1976: 9).

However, in 1872, at the outbreak of the second and final phase of the Soninké-Marabout War, the king's power had diminished to the extent that he was in the embarrassing position of asking help from the British. Building on the request for assistance in return for his own loyalty, Mansa Koli's further tactic as can be deduced from his diplomatic letter was to

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<sup>4</sup> The British introduced the trade with “legitimate goods” such as palm-oil, shea-butter, groundnuts, etc. in exchange with British articles of importation, being clothes, alcohol, guns and powder, etc. to open a new source of income, since the trade with slaves was still too lucrative to be suppressed effectively.

promise his British partners an advantage, which the settlement would gain in future for rendering him support in any form:

“By assisting us now you will stop the war at once (as our forces are nearly equal and your power will bear down the scale) and make us your devoted Adherents, and you shall find us not ungrateful for thus saving us, and always ready when you require us. If it is not permitted to you to interfere directly in such a war as is now destroying our Country still your assistance in money and your private countenance to our plans and schemes would save us.” (NRO, Des. 56, July 24, 1872)

As Mansa Koli is considered a ‘true Soninké’, being one of the last men representing their warrior ethics, his word given to the British that they would win an ever-loyal ally for the future can be understood as an unbreakable promise. According to Bakari Sidibe, the Soninké warriors conceived themselves as a symbol of manhood, namely courage, forbearance, endurance, enterprise and wisdom. *Soninkeyyaa* as a way of life was aiming to surpass the human possible, by the powers of the will and was by doing so strongly connected to the pre-Islamic religious concepts of the Mande. The moral qualities connected to *soninkeyyaa* were loyalty, diligence, honesty and truthfulness (Sidibe n.d.: 17f.). Referring to the long-time rulership of this elite warrior class, Kombo was called in that time and space the ‘home of warlords’ (PAS 449C). But in the first half of the nineteenth century Islam grew rapidly, due to the increasing conversion of the Mandinka, and the home of the warlords more and more became the home of Muslims too, who consequently started to claim access to political power to rise into the position to organise the country by themselves in ways more in accordance with their Islamic value system. As a result, the term Soninké changed its meaning, describing now a Mandinka-individual who refused to convert to Islam (Sidibe n.d.: 18). The last king of Kombo was one of these individuals holding up the *soninkeyyaa* as an ideology and way of life. As “a true Soninké” in the original sense of the term, Mansa Koli would never give up the fight. But being pushed onto the defensive by the Marabouts facing the loss of the country of his dynasty, the king’s only way out was to win his British neighbours as allies to push down the Muslim uprising.

The fact that Mansa Koli was ready and was also able to extend the aspect of loyalty as a strong unifier to “strangers”, not only coming from another continent but not showing any will to integrate in the West African way of life neither (the British were on the contrary even trying to implement an uncommon value system including a new political and social order) raises the question, on which social foundation the partnership between the Soninké and the British was built upon. In the course of the following discussion putting light on the soul of Western Manding-society, I will show that the crucial way to fit the British in their society was by *teriyaa*, the class-and-kinship-trans-cutting notion of Manding-friendship, deeply connected to the values of *soninkejaa*. The British for their part entered this niche in the society, which was opened by *teriyaa*, redefining it in their way by accepting its advantages and rejecting its duties.

As a branch of the ancient Mali-Empire, the society of the western Mandinka was stratified in three classes, namely the freeborn, the castes and the slaves; subdividing the freeborn into a ruling class and commoners. While the Marabouts, as the Muslim clerics were called, were commoners, the Soninké embodied the ruling class, legitimating their right to rule through their exclusive abilities to protect the society (Sarr 2016: 73). Seen in this light, the Soninké-Marabout War marked not only the shift of political power from one religious background to another, but – as both Muslim and non-Muslim were of Mandinka ethnic background – also the challenge to the class structure which, following Tal Tamari, had existed since the spread of the Manding in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Tamari 1991: 221) and which had defined the social and political life of Kombo since two centuries. According to Davidson (1966), the process of centralisation of political power triggered the horizontal hierarchization of the society along class-lines. In his exact wordings, the society “became stratified, as social position became determined by one’s degree of power and authority. Some men had the right to become chiefs. Others could not become chiefs, but had the right to elect them. Others again could not elect chiefs, but only had the right to say how chiefs ought to behave. Still others were pushed down into a lowly position where they had to obey their masters without question” (Davidson 1966: 174).

Since the British due to their supreme military technology definitely represented authority, they could have been added to the Manding-class of the freeborn, but only in theory because of two reasons. Firstly, as the term

freeborn implies, class affiliation was defined by the individual's status of birth and such being linked to a certain lineage. Obviously the strangers from overseas did not have any link to any lineage in the area, though in the case of the repatriated Afro-Europeans and Afro-Americans – namely the Black Poor from England, the Maroons from Jamaica, and the Nova Scotians from Canada, who after all constituted the majority of the settlers – it would have been theoretically possible to trace back the roots of some individuals to that region, since at least 755,512 enslaved Africans had left the continent by the Senegambian area in the years 1501 to 1867 (Füllberg-Stolberg 2010: 92). But, as these repatriates embodied British culture and values, the Africans did not consider them as part of their own any more, their African roots notwithstanding. They were referred to as 'British subjects', the term also used by the British having been designed by the end of the eighteenth century to include freed slaves and black loyalists in the British polity (Peterson 2010: 14). In this context the British settlement was called by the local population *tubabo banko*, the land of the white, 'white' being less a racial label than a cultural marker describing the European way of life, including its customs, laws, and values framed by Christianity.

The aspect of values leads to the second reason why the British could not have been integrated in the class of the freeborn, since the Western Manding-societies also chained their classes to a definite character. In detail, *foro* is the Mandinka-term for freeborn, the expected character of a freeborn *foroyaa*. Winifred Galloway describes *foroyaa* as "the quality of being a freeborn. In traditional society, being 'free' did not mean freedom from responsibility for everyone but oneself. For a true freeborn, 'freedom' included the freedom to do what one *ought* to do, not merely what one wanted to do." (Galloway in Sidibe 2014: 19) The 'ought' implicates the cultural dimension of these qualities expected of a freeborn, being loyalty, diligence, honesty, and truthfulness which were moulded by the ruling class to the above mentioned *soninkejaa*, the way of life of the Soninké. Principally these moral qualities were also a token of the Victorian Gentleman. In this sense the British administrator was portrayed as a truthful person, who "said what he meant and meant what he said" (Parchami 2009: 66), but - since it was not easy to meet their own high moral demands on themselves in the foreign field, being confronted with warring values and interests, their prism of the cultural other also being steamed over by the reality distorting scientific racism – the Victorian Gentleman, as

a matter of fact, could barely be recognized as such by their African counterparts, not to mention being included in the highest class of their society.

Even though the horizontal hierarchization of the society in freeborns, castes and slaves was of great impact, Basil Davidson points out that the “ancient” vertical division in lineages, villages, and ancestry stayed more important (Davidson 1966: 174f.). Bakari Sidibe and Winifred Galloway give us a highly informative account of the structure of western-Mande families and the founding and organisation of compounds and villages in the Senegambian sub-region. They demonstrate in detail that the smallest political unit was the compound, which was founded by one nuclear family and increased in residents by the influx of other nuclear families standing in patrilineal relation to the founding family. Thus the majority of the inhabitants of a compound were of the same extended family, called *kabila* in Mandinka, living together as an economic unit ruled by the supreme authority of the compound-head, who was under normal circumstances the eldest male member of the founding-family. Moreover a compound formed the identity of its inhabitants, generating a feeling of responsibility for and loyalty to all its members, who were in its foundation of the same *kabila* (Sidibe/ Galloway n.d.: 2-7).

By the time strangers started to move in, asking the compound-head for temporary or permanent stay, which was welcomed since people meant wealth in a moneyless society (Wright 1997: 50). If the stranger decided to stay permanently, he told his host, according to oral tradition: “I want you to give me a place where I can stay.” (Alhaji Kemo Kuyate, PAS 240C) In this way, or because of the lack of space in the compound, forcing a member of the *kabila* when deciding to get married to create space for his own nuclear family, a new compound was found and by this a village. The formation of a village went hand in hand with the stratification of power, the village-head being now placed over the compound-heads exercising the supreme authority in village affairs, but it also caused the redefinition of the people’s sense of belonging, as a *kabila* was now extended to other compounds. Following Sidibe and Galloway, the inhabitants of a village “saw themselves in relation to their whole lineage, not just to their individual compounds. Their feeling of responsibility extended not just to their compound family – though this had first claim on them – it also extended to all the members of their lineage, first from their own village,

and secondly from those members residing in other villages, and even in other countries". (Sidibe/ Galloway n.d.: 7) Thus we can conclude according to Donald Wright that not class affiliation but mainly kinship formed the individual's identity, giving families the feeling of belonging to a greater group (Wright 1987: 297; 1997: 45f.).

Having reconstructed the western-Manding social structure, it is evident that the British did not fit in any class nor were they related to any kin. It might have been possible though at first glance that the British were seen and absorbed as strangers since they were asking, in 1830 in the above-mentioned manner, Mansa Koli's grandfather, underlined in a letter of the last king of Kombo to the Queen of England, for land to settle and farm. Even though the king gave the required land to them in the same way as it used to be transferred to African strangers<sup>5</sup> in form of the right of usage but without permanent ownership (Gray 1966: 437f.), it doesn't appear that the Soninké could have considered the British as strangers in the Mandinka-meaning of the term, since the relations between a host and his stranger were strictly regulated, being based on duties for both persons involved. Donald Wright explains that the host was responsible for his stranger and his link to the society, and in return the stranger was obligated to work on his host's farmland some days per week, and in particular to fit himself into the system of his host (Wright 1997: 52f.). As remembered in an oral account, any opposition against the host's modus vivendi was penalised with physical punishment (PAS 406C). The British though did not show any will to adapt themselves to the values and the culture of their Soninké-hosts from the first day of settling in Kombo, their cultural-imperialistic actions being motivated by their aim to abolish the slave trade and to spread Christian values in Africa. The Soninké for their part, instead of punishing them or at least warning them off, condoned the British cultural ignorance, which strengthens the assumption that the British were not seen as common strangers.

It is tempting to assume though that the Soninké kings were willing to change the parameters of the host-stranger relation exclusively for their powerful stranger from Europe, seeking firstly material profit and secondly

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<sup>5</sup> It is of interest to mention that the Soninké gave their strangers from Europe an area loaded with negative spiritual energy called "Banjul", meaning "the devil's head", and thus impossible for human settlement through the eyes of a contemporary West African (Sarr 2016: 91).

to maintain power in the era of power struggles. The first hypothesis is supported ostensibly by the fact that the legitimate trade with the British was a way for the kings to maintain their wealth after the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Davidson 1966: 306f.); this presumption getting even stronger by Assan Sarr's statement that rich strangers were more welcome than poor strangers (Sarr 2016: 78). But material wealth, though necessary to the Soninké kingship, was still not placed on such a high level of importance as to have been a reason to redefine the deeply rooted relationship between hosts and strangers. First of all, the Soninké kings never sought to accumulate material wealth. On the contrary, they kept their material surplus flowing, aiming to tie their subordinates to their kingship (Davidson 1966: 158). Secondly, richness principally contradicted the *soninkejaa*, the way of life of the Soninké, which – as Sarr (2016) underlines – was rooted in the warrior-ideology of the *nyancho*, the warrior-class of the Kaabu-Empire. Even though the kings of Kombo were not genetically *nyanchos*, they still saw themselves as such, trying to embody their ideals (Sarr 2016: 61f.). Sidibe points out three things that a *nyancho* detested most: weakness, old age as a symbol of cowardice, and wealth as a source of decadence and corruption (Sidibe n.d.: 16, 29).

In general, opportunism does not fit in the class of the *foro*, since it was in clear opposition to *foroyaa*, the qualities of the character of the freeborn. In the final phase of the Soninké-Marabout War though, when Mansa Koli had already lost his capital, his attempt to hand over his country to the British can be interpreted as an opportunistic move by which he intended, as analysed by a contemporary witness, to “awe the Marabouts and enable the Soninkees to attack them from protected territory” (NRO, Des. 51, May 6, 1874). It might have been possible too that the purpose of this strategic move was not mainly to hand over his country, but its problems, to the British so they could have solved them with their supreme military power. Still, political opportunism cannot be seen as a reason for the Soninké to have changed the parameters of the host-stranger relationship neither, because of two reasons. First of all, we have to highlight again that Mansa Koli was about to lose the kingdom, which his lineage had ruled for about two centuries, forcing him to take diplomatic measures though, contradicting *foroyaa* and *soninkejaa*, but aiming for the survival of the dynasty of the Bojang and by this also preserving the way of life of the Soninké. Secondly in 1830, when the British asked for land to settle in

Kombo, the British already denied the duties demanded of a stranger. But at that time the Soninké were still the undoubted power holders, far from the imagination, to be, in twenty years to come, in such an inferior position, to depend on help from others rather than their own kinship-network, which was connecting all states of the Kaabu-Empire through the ties of loyalty. Hence the Soninké did not have any reason to compromise their high moral demands by showing political opportunism in their relationship with the British.

Since class-structure, kinship and host-stranger relation were not flexible enough to integrate an inflexible stranger like the British were, there was only one niche left open to allow the relationship between the Soninké-kings and the British to be formed, namely *teriyaa*, the class-and-kinship-trans-cutting friendship-relation of the Manding. This 'friendship' founded on Manding-definition, but being redefined by British opportunism, turned to be a relationship between hopeful loyalty and biased neutrality, being illustrated clearly by Mansa Koli's second letter, written in 1874 after the fall of his capital, and the administrators' way of using the term friend. Mansa Koli's closing sentence "I have the honour to be your faithful friend" (NRO, Des. 51, May 5, 1874) indicates the deeper meaning of *teriyaa* defying its translation with 'friendship' in the western sense as a relation based mainly on emotional sentiments like sympathy and trust. Analysing *teriyaa*, we have to put in consideration that the Manding-friendship did not only mean the close relationship between two individuals, but also the duty of loyalty. Once a friendship was established, it did not only imply the commitment to assist each other but was also deemed to be a matter of honour and could thus – remembering the great value of honour in the ideology of *soninkeyyaa* – not be broken up without great shame. A good reason for two individuals being bound by *teriyaa* was common problems, often being the case among neighbours. Thus we can assume that the Manding-friendship between individuals was, as a result of the intensified contact with the British gaining ground in the Soninkés' sphere of influence, extended to two neighbouring cultures sharing common problems and interests.

The British for their part, having realised this as the only niche in the inflexible structure of their host-society, adapted *teriyaa* expediently by contracting friendship with any suitable party, using the term 'friend' manipulatively and leaving the honour-based duty of loyalty, framing the Manding-friendship aside. The letter-correspondence between the

administration of the British settlement and the Marabout-leader Mahmood n'Dare Bah of Badibu, situated on the north bank of the river Gambia, being rumoured planning to cross the river with 3000 warriors in May 1872, aiming to assist the Muslims of the south bank in their uprising against the Soninké, is a sign of the British hypocritical usage of the term 'friendship' in their dealings with the local authorities. In one and the same letter Administrator Simpson is calling the Soninké "my friends and neighbours in Combo" but closing it with the phrase addressing the Muslim-leader "I am your good friend" (NRO, Des. 51, June 22, 1872). Mahmood n'Dare Bah's reply shows clearly that one of Mansa Koli's enemies also saw himself as a definite friend of the British by pointing out that "it is not good for two friends to disagreed [sic] between themselves" (NRO, Des. 51, July 3, 1872). Mansa Koli must have been likewise aware of this fact, proven by the administrator's words expelled during their meeting in August 1872 telling him that the British were not only the Soninkés' friends but the friends of the Marabouts too (NRO, Des. 56, August 3, 1872). We can conclude that the British did not make a secret of being friend with both war parties. They called it neutrality, and everybody, including the last king of Kombo, knew about its double-edged character. Mansa Koli simply did not have any other option than optimistically putting trust into his long-time ally and hoping that they would still show loyalty to him.

It must be considered that in this final phase of the Soninké-Marabout War (1872-75), the former powerful kinship-network of the Soninké-kings was already broken. Under normal circumstances, following Bamba Suso, one of the last historians in the clothes of a griot, the king would ask another king for help in case of a siege or a rebellion of his own people (PAS 262C, 263C). However, the Kaabu-Empire, Kombo's protecting power since its founding time about 200 years back, had fallen recently in 1868, also due to a Muslim uprising (Sidibe 1976: 3, 10), and in Kombo itself, the three last Soninké strongholds, namely Brikama, Yundum, and Busumbala were all facing the same war of annihilation of the Muslims against the Soninké-kinship. Nyanko Sane from Brikama remembers in an oral tradition that Busumbala refused to assist Mansa Koli, because they could not leave their town unprotected (PAS 217C). Soon after the king's request for assistance, Brikama and Yundum were seized, and Busumbala sieged and starved out for more than one year and finally conquered in June 1875, marking the end of the war and the starting point of the Islamic State of Kombo.

Hence the Soninké-rulership and with it *soninkeyyaa*, the way of life of the Soninké was down, and Mansa Koli was definitely the last man standing. His only chance left was to believe in the loyalty of his British ally. *Prima facie* his hope seems naive, but, by analysing the history of the encounter, the king's optimism was founded on factual bias shown by the British to the Soninké despite their policy of neutrality. Firstly the British were favouring the Soninké verbally. During the meeting between Mansa Koli and Administrator Simpson, the British official told the king that "he knew that the Marabouts were clearly wrong in this palaver and he was aware that they were bad people [...] His Excellency then said, he knew the Brekama people were good people [...]" (NRO, Des. 56, August 3, 1872).

It is clear that these words could not have been enough to feed Mansa Koli's optimism for him, knowing the hypocritical character of his ally. But the verbal partiality was backed secondly by definite actions pro Soninké.

(1) Rewinding to the outbreak of the war in 1849, the British took the side of the Soninké in the above-discussed battles leading to the destruction of the Muslim stronghold Sabiji, despite their policy of neutrality and not being bound to them by any treaty of alliance.

(2) In the following years of uneasy peace (Skinner 2012: 99) there is at least one evidence of the British trying to mediate between the parties in the dispute, but disrespecting the Muslims by sending a lower ranked official to Gunjur while Governor D'Arcy visited the Soninké-king personally (Gray 1966: 425f).

(3) In the second and final phase of the Soninké-Marabout War Mansa Koli informed the British about the above-mentioned plan of Mahmood n'Dare Bah to cross the river with a subsidized-army, leading to its prevention by immediate diplomatic measures and by the confiscation of nine war-canoes owned by the Muslims (NRO, Des. 43, June 4, 1872; May 11, 1872; Des. 51, June 22, 1872; July 3, 1872). In contrast, the same attempt undertaken by the Marabouts informing the British about the plan of the Soninké from Kiyang to join Mansa Koli's army (NRO, Des. 51, June 25, 1872) was not checked at all.

The consequence of Mansa Koli's optimism was to demand loyalty from his long-time friends, as he had always been loyal to them. In his first letter from 1872, at the beginning of the second and final phase of the Soninké-Marabout War, when the armed forces seemed still counterbalanced and the Soninké' optimism regarding the British partiality was not yet dampened by

the happenings of the following year, Mansa Koli voiced out his demand openly, reinforcing it by a written promise from the former Governor D'Arcy:

“We can show a written promise from the Governor D'Arcy, signed with the Seal of the Settlement, promising us the assistance we now beg whenever we required it in return for the assistance which we had always afforded the British.” (NRO, Des. 56, July 24, 1872)

During the following meeting, the last king of Kombo also asked the administrator of the settlement “to express publicly that he [the administrator] knew the Marabouts were in the wrong”. (NRO, Des. 56, July 24, 1872) This call for taking a public position against his enemies expresses Mansa Koli's urge for winning his uncertain ally over to his side officially, which would have raised his strength in the eyes of his opponents.

## **II. The double-edged British policy of neutrality**

The British though refused to help their long-time friends excusing themselves with their policy of neutrality.<sup>6</sup> Administrator Simpson told Mansa Koli in their meeting clearly the reason for the British presence in West Africa:

“I am here only to make good trade and to take care of English Country not to make war. The Queen rather demands that I should be a peacemaker. Therefore it is not in my power to assist you in any way.” (NRO, Des. 56, August 3, 1872)

Following David Skinner, the order to not involve in this conflict came directly from the Colonial Office, which targeted a treaty with the victorious party (Skinner 2012: 102). To frame this prescription politically, it must be highlighted that from 1841 to 1874 the Conservative Party was holding power in the British government, having introduced a new foreign policy of non-interference in ‘native’ affairs (Law 2010: 154f). But, as Robin Law shows in his paper about the British habit in that time and space to bend the International Law opportunistically, the British were taking sides at their

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<sup>6</sup> For further information on other cases where the British betrayed their allies see the contributions in Ajayi/Crowder (1976) as well as Isichei (1977) and Crowder (1976).

own discretion, but entrenching themselves behind their policy of neutrality in cases without strategic advantages (ibid.: 161f).

Analysing the British partiality one must differentiate between officially supported strategic moves and individuals in the foreign field being driven by personal sympathies and ideologies. To understand the officially legitimated partiality, it must be put in consideration that the British were having a dream, namely to civilize Africa in accordance with their own ideals – many of which revolved around abolition and anti-slavery concerns (Drescher 2009). Such a “civilizing” impact could only be realized as a joint project with the local power-holders, which was undermining their own policy of neutrality from the first day on. The foundation for their future dependency on local allies was already laid in 1839, when Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, the key player in the British anti-slavery movement after the death of William Wilberforce, introduced in his influential work *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy* a new concept for suppressing the still on-going trans-Atlantic slave trade demanding the direct intervention in African affairs not only at the coastal areas but also in the hinterland. The so-called ‘legitimate trade’ intended to undermine the foundation of the slave trade peacefully by offering the natives another source of income, encouraging them to produce palm-oil, peanuts and cotton for the international trade with the British. In addition to the economic revolution, the spread of Christianity was supposed to change Africa from inside (Law 2001). In Buxton’s words, “Christianity tend[s] to make man peaceable, honest, sober, industrious, and orderly. These, in my opinion, are the very elements of civilization, in the moral sense of it.” (Buxton 1839: 447) Parchami points out that Britain considered it as their “moral obligation to see to it that its civilization would be transmitted to the rest of humanity.” (Parchami 2009: 79) But in regard to West Africa the white man’s burden was at the same time ‘the white man’s grave’ (Curtin 1961: 94f.), since tropical sicknesses had a damaging effect on non-Africans (Forst 2013: 35). Thus the strategy was to train African agents to carry out the civilizing mission, and to sign treaties with African authorities against the slave trade and for securing the work of their agents and their trade with ‘legitimate’ goods outside the British sphere of influence. It is obvious that this system needed partiality to keep flowing, and therefore the policy of neutrality could only exist on paper but was impossible to be put into praxis on the ground.

The war with the Marabout-town Sabiji in 1852 is a perfect case example of British officially supported partiality aiming at strategic advantages. As the outbreak of the Soninké-Marabout War right in the neighbourhood of their settlement disturbed British trade due to the insecurity of the trading routes, the British decided to reset the status quo by taking the side of the troubled, but still undoubted power holder, the Soninké-king of Kombo. By this strategic interference the British could kill three birds with one stone. Not only could they re-secure their trading routes with the hinterland, but also the rapidly growing Muslim population being feared to cause the settlement problems in the future, was faced down by the destruction of the Muslim-stronghold Sabiji (Cham/ Bojang 2016: 19). Furthermore, by annexing a "strip of land, which included the town of Sabiji", the governor intended to create more space for the settlement (Gray 1966: 390). It must be pointed out, that the policy of neutrality went hand in hand with the policy of strict limitation, which – according to Seymour Drescher (2010: 139) – "became the leitmotiv of British policy in West Africa until 1874". Though the colonial authorities were allowed to sign treaties with West African power-holders, they were not authorized to annex further territories (Drescher 2010: 139). The Governor's tactic to use the flexibility of the policy of neutrality in cases of strategic advantages to reach his own goal to extend the space of the settlement shows that the officers in the field were also acting and bending the policy at their own discretion, being driven by sympathies and ideologies, which were not always identical to the official ideology of the system they represented.

Judging by his words expressed in his meeting with Mansa Koli in 1872, administrator Simpson seems to have been sympathizing with the last king of Kombo and the Soninké in general. Not only termed he the Soninké as the good and the Marabouts as the wrong in this already twenty-three years on-going war and expressed his hope that the king would be the winner in this conflict, but he also advised the troubled king how to win the war without the assistance of the British:

"And if the King would only follow his advice and call his Headmen together in council and make them swear true friendship to each other and swear to defend their wives, children and country in one body, that this war would soon be at an end." (NRO, Des. 56, August 3, 1872)

But in contrast to the Sabiji War twenty years before administrator Simpson's term of office, in the period between 1865 and 1874, it was not possible any more to get official permission for interference in native affairs; or, to express it in the administrator's words, "it was not in his power to help the King" (NRO, Des. 56, August 3, 1872).

The problem, seen through the eyes of an officer in the field, who would have been willing to bend the policy of neutrality in the name of his sympathy for one party, was that the policy of limitation got stricter from 1865 onwards. John Fage highlights one important development, as in the mentioned year a parliamentary committee recommended the British government "to refuse to extend its rule or protection over further African territories; and to urge the Africans already under its rule or protection to prepare for their own self-government" (Fage 1969: 142). Especially the new recommendation to prepare Africans already under its protection – in other words the allies of the British – for their self-government must have been a diplomatic challenge for the officers on the spot since it meant practically to declare political relations made before 1865 void. Administrator Simpson met this challenge by referring the authority of decision to the headquarters in Sierra Leone and by playing with the meanings of words, turning the document of Governor D'Arcy worthless:

"HE then asked for Col. D'arcy's [sic] paper (which was produced). After reading it, he said the King was mistaken about Col. D'arcy [sic] promising assistance that the paper only said that he [the King of Brikama] was a good friend to the English Government and had acted in a satisfactory manner [...]." (NRO, Des. 56, August 3, 1872)

It is not apparent from the sources, if the administrator was aware of the fact that to a Soninké, friendship and the obligation of assistance were inseparable as *teriyaa* was a relationship based on loyalty, and his diplomatic way out could not have changed the king's interpretation of Governor D'Arcy's document as a promise for support in times of need. As administrator Simpson is not mentioned in the list of British officials in the Gambia (The Gambia n.d.) and the correspondence between him and headquarters lasted only from May to August 1872, it might be reasonably assumed that he was not familiar with the view of his vis-à-vis, thus trying to solve the problem according to his capacity and his own value-horizon,

which projected a picture of the 'aggressive' Muslims and the Soninké as their victims.

Administrator Simpson's hostile image of Islam as the aggressor in African affairs can be traced back to Buxton's already-mentioned new concept for abolishing the trans-Atlantic slave trade through so-called "legitimate trade", demanding the direct intervention of the British as a Christian-humanitarian duty. This direct intervention could only be morally legitimated by shifting the blame for the slave trade now to Africans themselves, while in the first phase of Abolitionism, when the British were still the main actors in the business with slaves, the pioneers in the anti-slavery movement had attributed the role of the perpetrator to the British, aiming in sensitising the public against this deeply rooted institution (Brantlinger 1985: 173; Forst 2013: 57f.). The scapegoat for the still on-going trade in humans was quickly found in Islam, being not only the "traditionally well-established enemy of Christian Europe" (Sonderegger 2009: 50), but also a serious concurrence to their effort of "civilizing" Africa by Christianising its inhabitants, since Islam was already well established in mid-nineteenth century West Africa.

In British colonial records the hostile image of Islam is omnipresent, terming the Muslim population as a "warlike and fanatic tribe who are increasing in numbers and influence daily, whose religion teaches them that their salvation depends upon the extermination of the white man from their country". (NRO, Des. 43, June 13, 1874) Since the British authorities considered the Marabouts as "extremely troublesome if not dangerous neighbours" (NRO, Des. 51, July 5, 1872), they were in comparison with the Soninké seen as "the party least desirable as a neighbour". (NRO, Des. 56, August 4, 1872) The idea of the white man hating, dangerous, and unfortunately victorious Muslim coming closer to their border was feeding the British paranoia of an ever possible invasion of their settlement. Acting administrator Cooper reports in January 1873, that he "heard from various sources that the Marabouts declared that they would attack Combo and if possible destroy Bathurst" (NRO, Letterbook 1/33, January 25, 1873; see also: June 26, 1874).

Thus, especially in remembrance that a common problem was also the most likely reason for *teriyaa*, the friendship in the traditional Mandinka society, we can assume that administrator Simpson's sympathy for Mansa Koli was also nourished by their common enemy, the rebellious Marabouts who were

winning more and more ground in their revolution against their Soninké overlords. This presumption is backed by the view of a contemporary who did not share the historical rooted hostile image of his British fellow citizens in the settlement, as he was a repatriated African either from the Americas or from England. This very interesting individual was Mr. Brown, a leading businessman in the settlement, lawyer and an active writer of critical letters to the colonial authorities, which founded his cynical reputation in British circles that he was “the watchdog of the Gambia” (quoted in Gray 1966: 436). Though the signature of this specific memo, dated the 6<sup>th</sup> May 1874 and which was attached to a letter from administrator Kortright to the headquarters in Sierra Leone, is illegible, it is likely that Mr. Brown was its originator, as the way of writing and its character of being a mouthpiece of the settlement’s view resembles his other letters. In stark contrast to the anti-Islamic feelings of the British, it is asserted in the memorandum that not the Muslims were the perpetrators, but the Soninké-kings themselves: “However, the Soninke Kings by their tyrannous treatment of the Marabouts and other towns, which they then held in subjection drove them [the Muslims] to revolt”. (NRO, Des. 51, May 6, 1874) Through the eyes of a businessman on the spot Mr. Brown clearly states that “[w]ere it not that the Marabouts do not allow liquor or spirits of any kind to be used in their towns and territories thus causing a [illegible] loss to the revenue and great reduction in the profits made by the Marabouts, it would be preferable to have them as neighbours” (ibid.), as “[t]he Soninkees when excited by drink would frequently make raids on the nearest town and were guilty of all kinds of offences, and required continual talking to and threatening to keep in order.” (ibid.) He concludes that in his opinion “the protection we have for so long extended to the Soninkees has been in great measure the cause of the long duration of the war [...] and has been one of the great reasons that Trade [sic.] has so seriously depreciated in the settlement.” (NRO, Des. 51, May 6, 1874) To cut it short, in his opinion the main reason for the settlement’s problems was the British partiality in favour of the Soninké due to the anti-Islamic feelings of the colonial authorities.

Though the British officers in the field were greatly driven by sympathies, ideologies also played an important role as motivators for their actions contradicting the official policy of neutrality. It is to remember that the policy of neutrality meant to not interfere in foreign affairs, which required in its foundation the trust in the principal capacity of the counterpart in

running his own concerns. In the preceding centuries this essential trust in Africans was destroyed in context of their disparagement to born slaves, but was re-established by the Abolitionists since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, who were in their fight against institutionalized slavery propagating the equality of all souls in the eyes of God (Meacham 1963: 91). In the course of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this concept allowed numerous Africans a western education, who were proving by their success its validity, and led to extraordinary careers like the episcopal ordination of Samuel Ajayi Crowther in 1864, but also to the above-mentioned urge of the committee 1865 to prepare the British allies in Africa for their self-governance. In the same decade though another ideology was born and grew stronger rapidly, namely the scientific racism trying to prove scientifically the born and thus unchangeable inferiority of non-Europeans leading finally to the call for imperialism in the last quarter of the century. Since “in the 1860s racial discourse became part of everyday life framing the perception of others and oneself in racialized terms” (Sonderregger 2009: 55), but at the same time the foreign policy of strict neutrality stayed rigid until 1874, one could call the era between 1860 to 1875 an age of controversies in the colonial sphere (Forst 2013: 38), since the colonial officers were asked to promote peace and limitation, but they were in accordance with their time already dreaming of imperial control and extension of territories.

Administrator Cooper’s excusing words to the headquarters in Sierra Leone are characteristic for these controversial times. After having been criticised for using inappropriate military measures in dealing with the local people, he wrote that “it is very difficult for me at all times to strictly carry out to the very letter the peace policy required of me by the home government”. (NRO, Des. 74, July 30, 1875) In contrast to administrator Cooper, who was ‘only’ at times acceding his authority by implementing inappropriate military measures to bluff the natives concerning the British’s military strength, his predecessor, administrator Kortright, was an unhidden lobbyist of imperialism. In his term of office from 1873 to 1875 he was one of the main actors in the plan of the Colonial Office to cede the settlement to France (Gailey 1975: 84). This intended project was of imperialistic character, because firstly the British wanted to exchange Gambia for some French colonial territories to the south of the West African coast, which would have been much easier to control than their scattered settlement at the mouth of the River Gambia (Wright 1997). Secondly ‘the uncontrollable’

Muslims *per se* seem to have been a thorn in the side of imperialistic minded people like Kortright, who wrote in 1874 that “the warlike and aggressive character of the people [Marabouts] would be a strong reason for handing over the settlement to a military Power [the French] able to keep them in check”. (NRO, Des. 43, June 19, 1874) Kortright concludes his argumentation that he felt “sure that these Settlements can be safe only under the rule of a military power”. (ibid.) Finally the planned cession of the settlement to France came to nothing, because in 1874 the pro-imperialistic Benjamin Disraeli took over the British government, which can be marked as the end of the policy of limitation.

Before this strongly imperialistic administrator was promoted to Governor of Sierra Leone, Kortright happened to be Mansa Koli’s vis-à-vis in the time of the destruction of his capital Brikama and his loss of power to the Marabouts. It is interesting to see that Mansa Koli in his second letter, this time to administrator Kortright neither mentioned the long-time friendship between him and the British nor did he demand for assistance. He only reminded the authority of the settlement very shortly that he had helped the British in their war against Sabiji, which he termed as the reason for his problems with the Muslims and as a result also for his deprivation of power (NRO, Des. 51, May 5, 1874). He probably had given up his hope that the British represented by Kortright could become his exclusive ally, what the administrator’s reply must have also validated, stating that “[t]he only assistance I can afford you in your distress is to attempt, by mediation, to obtain favourable terms for you from the Marabouts”. (NRO, Des. 51, May 5, 1874)

### **III. The clash between loyalty and biased neutrality**

Since neither the Soninké nor the Marabouts made use of the British offer to mediate between the two war parties, the great significance of mediation in traditional Mandinka-society notwithstanding, and since the British were relying on mediation against the background of their policy of non-interference, the aspect of mediation proves itself to be the ideal frame for drawing the clash of loyalty seen as a synonym for the character of a Mandinka-freeborn and biased neutrality shown by the British in the colonial field.

To western Mandinkas mediation played a key-role, since – concluding from Sidibe’s and Galloway’s reconstruction of the Mandinka-society - the

main task of a leader was to maintain harmony in his area of responsibility. The compound-head mediated between the nuclear families and individuals in his compound, the village-head between the compounds in his village, the king between the villages in his state, and the emperor of Kaabu represented by his diplomats between its vassal-states to ensure the power of the empire in the region through unity (Sidibe/ Galloway n.d.: 5,7; Sidibe n.d.: 5f.). The credo was family interests, stability, and solidarity (Wright 1987: 298), which is also evident in the fact that Kaabu never sent his state-army to solve conflicts between Mandinka-states, but mediators (Sidibe 1976: 12). Hence with the decline and the final fall of the Kaabu-Empire in 1865 its vassal-states also lost their over-mediator, who would never have allowed that conflicts between the states reached the level to affect the empire's dominance in the region (Wright 1987: 298).

At the first sight, it is tempting to assume that the British in their self-imposed duty of peacemakers could have filled up this vacuum of pacifier opened by the fall of Kaabu, but to the British disillusionment their offer was rejected by both war parties. Seen in Kortright's reproachful reply to Mansa Koli's letter, the imperialistic minded officer longing for control took this habit personally:

"Since the war broke out my predecessors and myself have offered you a good service to both parties but without avail. Our advice has been freely offered, but has been rejected or not acted on by both parties."  
(NRO, Des. 51, May 5, 1874)

Two years earlier, administrator Simpson took the rejection even as an insult, writing in 1872 to the headquarters in Sierra Leone that he had "offered them [the Marabouts] my mediation to settle the quarrel. They vex me by their obstinacy and seem to have no regard for the friendship of this government". (NRO, Des. 51, June 22, 1872)

The reason for the rejection of the offer to mediate might have been that neither the Soninké nor the Marabouts considered the administrators of the British settlement to be of the right personality to take over the central position of the mediator in their affairs. First of all we have to bear in mind that authority and with it the role of a mediator was always connected to age and to ownership of land since the eldest of the compound-founding family became the compound-head, the eldest of the village-founding

family the village-head, and so on. Britain's misconception concerning the ownership of their colonized land in West Africa notwithstanding, the Soninké never considered the British as owners of their settlement, as can be seen in Mansa Koli's letter to the Queen of England addressing the plan of the Colonial Office to cede the settlement to France. Having heard about it, the last king of Kombo wrote "that should you desire to transfer your settlement to another person, I would rather you return my territory back to me as an act of friendship". (Mansa Koli Bojang in Gray 1966: 437)

According to Sidibe and Galloway, the rule that the eldest of the land-owning family had to become the leader was rigid and could only be repealed in case of the absence of a, concerning his character, suitable person. In such a rare case, the eldest of the partner-lineage of the land-owning family would have been called to take over the authority of the community. The leader's authority was untouchable, and "only the elders of his own lineage had the right to give him unasked-for advice if they saw he had difficulties in administrating his responsibilities". (Sidibe/ Galloway n.d.: 5-7) Thus, beside age and ownership of land, also character played a central role in Mandinka-leadership and therefore for the position of the mediator as well. Since character was, in the value-horizon of a traditional Mandinka, defined as measured by *foroyaa*, the qualities of a freeborn, being: loyalty, diligence, honesty, and truthfulness, it is evident that the disloyal British, who were partial at their own self-interested discretion and not acting straight forward, using deeply rooted terms like friendship hypocritically, did not fit into the categories expected of a person being in charge of Manding-affairs.

In regard of the Soninké, one has to put *soninkeyyaa* in consideration as well, meaning that a mediator in that time and space must have acted sensitively, always bearing in mind that a Soninké would never give up, and to him an enemy would always stay an enemy, as courage and forbearance were his highest values. Thus a Soninké would have only accepted a mediator, if he was sure that the values of *soninkeyyaa* were respected. The British though did not value the culture of their counterparts in the colonial field due to their prism of embodying a superior culture and even race. In this context, mediation turned to be a paternalistic motivation, comparable with a father's attempt to bring peace between his children. Robin Law defines the paternalistic stance as a power relation between a grown-up person and a child, "that is, it was for Europeans to determine what was good for Africa

and impose it on Africans” (Law 2010: 167). This colonial-racist worldview caused general misunderstanding of the African world-views and value horizons, because they were treated as “simple”, “infantile”, “inferior”, and not really worth it to be considered on equal terms.

In the case of Kortright and Mansa Koli, the administrator’s paternalistic view made him not calculate *soninkejaa*, the warrior way of life of the Soninké, which was defining all of their actions and decisions, asking the last king of Kombo to surrender to the Marabouts. In the exact wording, the administrator complained in his reply to the king’s letter, that “in the conversation with me yesterday you seemed unwilling to make any terms with your enemies, short of surrender to you of the country and the towns they have wrested from you”. (NRO, Des. 51, May 5, 1874) Kortright should have known in his role of a mediator that it was impossible for Mansa Koli to surrender, as a Soninké-warrior regarded himself as a man, who never gave up the fight. Especially to give up the right to rule over the land of his ancestors because of fear would have been an unbearable embarrassment for him.

In 1873 Mansa Koli had told Kortright’s predecessor administrator Cooper clearly that he “would not agree to it [surrender to the Marabouts] in any manner whatever, and said that they would all sit down there until they were killed; the ground that the Marabouts were now on had belonged to his Ancestors and he would not submit to their power”. (NRO, Des. 42, March 26, 1873)

The discussion of the aspect of mediation leads to the conclusion that through the prism of a Soninké-warrior the British were graded on too low a level to take over the position of mediator in their affairs. It is not without irony that the British were depreciated due to their seemingly arrogant way in dealing with the values of their host-society, which was generated by their paternalistic and racist stance, depreciating non-European societies and people both by technological means and pretensions of superiority – by both Christian religion and European science. In other words, the ethnocentrism of the British, based on racist assumptions, had a mirror image in the ethnocentrism of the Soninké ruling class, based in Manding social norms and values. A second irony in the encounter between the Soninké and the British was that “British power was to represent in itself the highest aims of human society”, and “its providential obligation (was) to lead humanity in the arts of civilization [...], to act as trustee for the weak,

and bring arrogance low". (Parchami 2009: 79) In this respect, it is safe to say that British power utterly failed.

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- NRO, Despatch No. 43, June 19, 1874
- NRO, Despatch No. 51, May 5, 1874
- NRO, Despatch No. 51, May 6, 1874
- NRO, Letterbook 1/33, June 26, 1874
- NRO, Despatch No. 74, July 30, 1875

Bakari K. Sidibe provided the oral traditions, which he keeps in his private archive (PAS) in Churchill Town, The Gambia.

- PAS Tape 217C
- PAS Tape 240C
- PAS Tape 262C
- PAS Tape 263C
- PAS Tape 406C
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