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## **Faded Grandeur, unstable present, uncertain future**

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**UNIVERSITEIT LEIDEN**

***“FADED GRANDEUR, UNSTABLE PRESENT, UNCERTAIN FUTURE”***

***Or,***

**The causes and consequences of rupture dynamics in the processes of identification of the Guidimakhan Soninke of Mauritania: a narrative-based study.**

by

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Under the supervision of Professor Mirjam de Bruijn

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## **Abstract:**

Ce mémoire est une tentative de compréhension de la dynamique de rupture au sein de la société des Soninkés du Guidimakha Mauritanien, en écoutant les récits de ceux qui la vivent. Ancrée dans les théories de Barth et Ricoeur sur l'identité — conçue comme une construction en relation à l'Autre et exprimée à travers les récits, j'ai exploré la manière dont les processus d'identification chez les Soninkés ont été ébranlés depuis les années 1960. Mon objectif a été de rester au plus près de ce que les Soninkés disent eux-mêmes de leur identité, même lorsque leurs discours semblaient se contredire. Si les participants estiment que leur « soninkéité » n'est plus celle de leurs aînés, alors il s'est produit un changement, aussi impensable soit-il face à la rigidité de leurs traditions. Au fil de cinq chapitres, j'ai remis en question la supposée continuité de deux piliers identitaires — la hiérarchie et l'émigration. Ce qui est apparu, c'est que ces piliers, bien qu'apparemment intacts, sont devenus des vecteurs de rupture. L'émigration, autrefois destinée collective, est désormais vécue de manière fragmentée et individuelle, tandis que la hiérarchie est devenue la cible d'une critique interne, notamment depuis l'émergence de mouvements comme Ganbanaaxu. Pourtant, sous les conflits et les fractures, je défends l'idée que les Soninkés ne perdent pas leur identité ; ils sont en train de la renégocier, naviguant entre ruptures et continuités. Le véritable enjeu, comme le souligne un groupe d'intellectuels soninkés, n'est pas de résister au changement, mais de réécrire des récits capables de préserver l'unité à travers un sentiment de continuité. En ces temps de rupture, ceux qui réussiront à retisser ces récits façonneront l'avenir du Soninkara. D'aucun pourrait considérer ce mémoire comme une contribution à cette conversation

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This thesis is an attempt to understand the dynamic of rupture within Soninke society of Guidimakha by listening to the narratives of those who live it. Grounded in Barth's and Ricoeur's theories of identity—as something constructed in relation to another and expressed through narratives—I explored how processes of identification among Soninkes have been shaken since the 1960s. My aim was never to impose a grand theory, but to stay close to what Soninke individuals are saying about their own identity, even when these accounts carried contradictions. If they feel their “Soninkeness” is not what it once was, then something has shifted, however improbable that may seem given the rigidity of their traditions. Through five chapters, I questioned the supposed continuity of two identity pillars—hierarchy and immigration. What emerged is that these very pillars, though

seemingly unchanged, have become tools of rupture. Immigration, once a shared destiny, is now experienced in fragmented, individual ways, while hierarchy has turned into a target for internal criticism, particularly since the rise of movements like Ganbanaaxu. Yet, beneath the conflicts and fractures, I argue that the Soninke are not losing their identity; they are renegotiating it, navigating between rupture and continuity. The real challenge, as voiced by a group of Soninke intellectuals, is not to resist change, but to rewrite narratives that preserve unity through a sense of continuity. In this time of rupture, those who manage to reweave these narratives will shape the future of Soninkara. One might see this thesis as a contribution to that conversation.

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The quality of this thesis, I believe, lies in the central place given to interactions with the interviewees. My fieldwork in Mauritania would have been impossible without the help of Mr. Michel and those who accompanied me during those three months. I am thinking especially of Jonathan, Ode, and their children, who so kindly supported me in my research and their adventures! I also think of Joseph, Marie, and their son, who have been by my side for a long time.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Preliminary perspectives:**

The Soninke ethnic group resides in West African countries such as Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Gambia, and Burkina Faso. Depending on the languages of the regions they have settled in, their name changes, but, in Mauritania, they are referred to as "Soninke", and it is the name they give themselves. They speak Soninké, a Mande language and are Muslims. Their society is structured in a three-levelled endogamic and hereditary hierarchy. This implies that Soninkes "racially" belong to the caste they were born in: noble-men, craftsmen or slaves. In my interview with the elders of Diogountouro, a Guidimakhan village, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2025, the interviewees said that this signifies that a stranger of any origin cannot be a Soninke. Botte's claim that "*la "qualité" d'esclave ou d'homme libre fait partie du patrimoine génétique de l'individu*" perfectly represents this aspect of the Soninke identity (Botte, 2010, p.234). The hierarchal belonging is central in the identification of a Soninke person to the Soninke identity. When studying status-based divisions of the descendants of slaves in Mauritania's Fuuta Tooro region, Kamara states that it is not uncommon to meet people who, by law, are free men but continue to call themselves "slaves" (Kamara, 2000, p.266), and in chapter 6 of *Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd'hui*, sociology Soninke professor Ousmane Wagué says that "*la société soninké apparaît (...) comme l'une des plus conservatrices*" (Soumaré, et al., 2020, p.113).

They have an old tradition of immigration, namely towards Europe. François Manchuelle is a French researcher whose theses (published in French in 2004) added a lot of new aspects to the understanding of this practice. He states that Soninkes started heading towards Europe as early as the 1940's and were the first African migrants that arrived in France (Manchuelle, 2004). They reached different cities in great numbers. In the introduction of his thesis, *Les diasporas des travailleurs soninké (1848-1960)*, Manchuelle approximates, by using official and non-official estimations, that the Sub-Saharan community in France would have multiplied by ten in the lapse of 20 years and gone from 2 000 worker in 1953, to 660 000 in the 1996. Cheikhna Wagué, a contemporary Soninke researcher who has been producing numerous papers for the past 20 years on his ethnicity, approximates that in France, 70 % of the Sub-Saharan-native immigrants are Soninkes (Wagué, 2006). A large part of my thesis focuses on this rapid growth of Soninke migration towards France and Europe. Indeed, I aim to explore the causes and consequences of the dynamic of rupture in the identity of Mauritanian Soninkes of Guidimakha, through the study of their narratives.



To do that, I went to Mauritania between the 8th of January 2025 and the 12th of April 2025, with the objective of working on the Soninke's processes of identification.

### **Early observations:**

There are more than 2 million Soninkes across the world. Their historical common reference and “birthplace” is the Wagadou (or Ouagadou, or Ghana) empire (6th-13th C.) (Yatera, 1997). It was located at the meeting point between nowadays Mauritania, Mali and Senegal. The collapse of this political structure caused a general dispersion. Soninkes spread out across West-Africa. Some eventually settled in what is today a southern Mauritanian region: Guidimakha. My work is about the Soninkes of Guidimakha. Djibril Diallo Cheikh Bouye, a Soninke of Guidimakha and author who published a personal reflexion on Soninkes in 2017, told me in an interview on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2025, that the Wagadou’s downfall also called on the Soninkes to be “*éternellement nostalgique*” of this glorious period. “Nostalgic” because the Soninkes, albeit sedentary in many countries, are always a minority in terms of number. Sociology professor Samba Yatera, in his study on immigrant's associations adds that they are also underrepresented in the policy, political or power circles (Yatera, 1997). Sidi N’Diaye, a political scientist and one of the three directors of *Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd’hui* (Soumaré, et al., 2020, p.166), describes this phenomon by using the words “*relative invisibilité de la communauté soninké, en tant qu’acteur collectif*”. Nevertheless, they are considered by everyone (including themselves) as serious, calm, and obedient, said professor Ousmane WAGUE, interviewed on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2025. Many participants and individuals I talked with (in the streets or in taxis) said that Soninkes never steal. They were presented as very conservative and inward looking. As these few Soninke sayings go: “*Odo sarano xasso gny biréné koudouya*”, “We found our ancestors living this way”. “*Soninkaxu méfé*”, “There is nothing better than being a Soninke” (Cheikh Bouye, 2017).

At this point, the Soninke identity appears to be very homogenous and strict. Indeed, when I asked, “what is a Soninke?”, non-Soninkes generally answered “a very conservative people”. But Soninkes usually started with the same claim before adding “a Soninke of today or of yesterday?”. I thought that this was an interesting answer to explore. It led me to focus on the processes of identification of the Soninke. If this ancient ethnicity is notorious for being very defined and having clearly outlined what is not a Soninke, why did members express that present day Soninkes differ from those of the past?

### **Grounding the study:**

Soninke identity, or “Soninkeness”, as I have presented it, seems to resemble a ready-made package... Cheikh Bouye does write that “*La société Soninké se reconnaît comme un cas historique sédentaire (...) proche de la perfection dans son fonctionnement. Ainsi la satisfaction de cette perfection a engendré son immobilisme (...) les familles royales se sont succédées en renforçant cet esprit et l’Islam a permis de transformer le style de vie en morale sacrée*” (Cheikh Bouye, 2017, p.99). He also says that there are 3 guarantees maintaining cohesion in the Soninke society: Hierarchy, submission to the ancient order, and the complete absence of mobility. This “mobility” is defined as any type of change in the society. In this “ready-made package”, I identified two “pillars” of Soninkeness myself: hierarchy and mobility (this mobility is not the same as Cheikh Bouye’s; mine signifies immigration). I established these “pillars” because they seem essential to the defining of Soninkeness. Indeed, if Cheikh Bouye’s three guarantees could be considered as pre-existing “pillars”, it strikes me that the second and third stem from the first: it is the hierarchy that allowed for nobles to maintain the order and their domination through a strict discipline of absence of change. Thus, I see them as “sub-pillars” of the identity. The second, mobility, came back in interviews as the main accomplishment asked by Soninke society of its men, and this throughout the ages. That is why I am inclined to think that these two practices are the two pillars of Soninkeness. This small theory now established, hierarchy and mobility are supposed to be a permanent element of Soninkeness. And indeed, they were recurrent in most interviews, whether participants spoke of Soninkes of today or of yesterday.

Why would participants say they differed from past Soninkes? The two pillars are common to both the Soninke of today and of yesterday. So, if it is true, “change” or “rupture” must have taken place in other aspects of the identity. This deduction flouts the idea of the “ready-made package”; if there are Soninkes of today and of yesterday, then which one is “real” Soninkeness? If they identify as Soninke despite admitting they are different from their ancestors, this means they identify to something that adapts. In his thesis on Soninkes of the Fouta Toro region published in 2023, Cheikhna Wagué stresses that the identity is not frozen, neither natural, neither transcendental, but rather contextualised and part of a dynamic (Wagué, 2023, p.30). Admittedly, culture, as well as identity, is a living thing.

I wish to link this to Fredrik Barth’s *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). He formulates identity as constructed through a process of differentiation to another group. The

pressures put by a population on another, as well as cultural differences, allow for identities to affirm themselves (Barth, 1969). Thereby, if it is confirmed that Soninkeness is not a ready-made package, but an active dynamic, it also implies that “original” Soninkeness does not exist. Depending on their place of settlement after the collapse of the Ouagadou (13<sup>th</sup> century), and keeping in mind Barth’s idea, they hence have been influenced by different social, political and material contexts... The Soninke communities of West-Africa have the same rigid structure despite local characteristics. Besides the external influences, there also are internal changes. Some “typically Soninke” practices are forgotten, change with time, or are abandoned. This does not make the Soninke any less Soninke: a hundred years ago the Soninke were farmers, yet today they no longer grow the land as a community (interview with Kisma TRAORE, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025). Yet, they are still Soninke. So, with the next generation, if aspects of Soninkeness disappear, younger generations will see them as things of the past. They will have purposely, or not, been left out. “Purposedly”, because there are Soninkes who long to see parts of the identity be discarded. Many Soninke characteristics have been actively denounced for years by different actors or groups. But let me present what I perceive as the most important one: Ganbanaaxu.

Circa 2015, massive uproars of protest against slavery were relayed by migrant communities of servile descent in France. WhatsApp groups, with hundreds of people were created in a few days. They were named “Ganbanaaxu”, which translates to “together and equal”. Progressist ideas such as the abolition of slavery and the hierarchy circulated via them, throughout the Soninke communities. Ganbanaaxu gradually became the name of a social movement –Ganbanaaxu Fedde, with a political turn. As the townhall of the Guidimakhan village of Diogountouro was won over by Bakary DIARA, who adhered to Ganbanaaxu early on. Of course, some Soninkes support Ganbanaaxu whilst others despise it. Less vindictive but not less radical calls to change have been made. Cheikh Bouye calls for a collective effort to build a “new” Soninkara (Soninke community) (Cheikh Bouye, 2017, p.106). As well, Sidi N’Diaye, in chapter 9 of *Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd’hui* suggest strategies of “*retour au monde*” of the Soninke (Soumaré et al., 2020, p.167).

Soninke identity has experienced internal changes, as well as external influences that it builds itself with. But I must now reflect on the nature of what has led me to this point. This thesis mostly relies on the 40 interviews I conducted during my field work. Participants all had different opinions: different narratives. Said narratives do not solely rely on personal views. They are influenced by factors such as external pressure, social status, education level... Despite their differences, participants had one thing in common: Soninkeness. All the changes

and transformations reported in this thesis experienced by this group are integrated in the sense of belonging. This sense persists, despite the fading of typically Soninke behaviours. For example, such a typical behaviour is “vivre ensemble” (interview with Negue DOUKOURE, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025). Meaning “living in a community”, it allowed the education of children in accordance with Soninke principles, and the maintaining of the customs and tradition throughout the whole community (interview with Kisma TRAORE, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025). Most interviewees residing in Guidimakha said it had disappeared. Yet, they still call themselves Soninke. Soninkeness hence does not depend on them. When hearing about the changes, it became clear that Soninkeness was not engraved in marble. Rather, the identification to something named “Soninkeness” is. Whatever the changes are, it seems they must not stop this group from keeping the name “Soninke”. I tackled Soninke identity by mainly relying on interviews, but none of the interviewees gave me an ultimate truth about impacts of changes on the identity. Instead these narratives were proof of their efforts to integrate changes in a coherent vision of belonging. That is what thinks Paul Ricoeur, a major figure of narrative theory. His concept of “narrative identity” is a good lens to understand how the Soninkes of Guidimakha aimed, through my interviews, to present their identity. Ricoeur’s theory suggests that identity is constructed through narratives. It is not “frozen”, but a process (Ricoeur, 1992)<sup>1</sup>. For Ricoeur, individuals and groups make sense of themselves by telling stories. They include their origins, practices, morals and experiences in logical wholes. These narratives rely on two modalities (Ricoeur, 1992): idem-identity –sameness-, which refers to stable elements and ipse-identity –selfhood, which concerns agency and ethical responsibilities. For Soninkes, for example, the former modality could be lineage and social status whilst the latter could be the personal consideration of slavery. The identity of the self “*doit être pensée en termes d'une dialectique entre l'idem et l'ipse.*” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 116). Hence, the narratives I have collected are stories adapted by individuals to hold on to their community in a time of upheaval and rupture. The interviewee had taken ownership of the events that the community and him had experienced and presented them to me as stories. They were an attempt to understand, justify and grasp what was happening and to make sense of who they are, personally and collectively (Ricoeur, 1992). This idea complements Barth’s (1969) conception of identity. For the Soninke of Guidimakha, identity is also constructed by isolation and differentiation from surrounding groups such as the Moors (interview with KD, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025) or the Fulani. In this regard, Soninke seemingly had to partially rebuild their identity after the failure of a common denominator. Part two of Wague’s chapter 1 (2023) titles

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<sup>1</sup> These exact words were used by Cheikhna Wague for his description of the identity of Soninkes of Fouta Toro cited earlier (Wagué, 2023)...

*“le rejet de la “fulanisation” come base de consolidation identitaire”*. The Soninkes of Kaédi for example, having in some way assimilated with the Fulani majority of the city, have somewhat diluted their Soninkeness in Fulaniness (interview with Zakaria SOUMARE, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2025).

So far, I have understood Soninkeness as a dynamic identity constructed through narratives (Ricoeur) and built in relation to the other (Barth). This does not contradict the original statement I made in my preliminary perspectives; the elders of Diogountouro, and many other interviewees expressed a sense of automatic belonging... A race. These two stipulations –race and constructed identity, are not opposed. Indeed, the “race” is constructed. It can be only so, because the narratives present the race as an existential tool to be Soninke. This links to Jakson’s (2002) idea that stories are told to survive and locate oneself amid social fragmentation; as long as one is called a Soninke, then the aspects and characteristics of the race can change extensively... That is, what I believe to be the relation between the automatic belonging to the Soninke community and its construction. And through this lens, I tackle the question of causes and consequences of the dynamic of rupture in the identity of Mauritanian Soninkes of Guidimakha, through the study of their narratives.

### **Literature review:**

This thesis mainly relies on interviews. All the same, it needs to be reinforced by the existing literature on the Soninke. I distinguish two categories: the rather “old” literature (between 1920’s and 2000’s) and the more recent literature (since the 2000’s). The former was mainly written by European researchers, whereas the latter in majority by Soninke or Africans authors. I read most of the “old” literature in Europe before my field work and focused on the newer works after arriving in Mauritania. Most of these papers were written in French. In this thesis, quotes are written in italic and in the language of the paper in which they are edited, whilst citations are in English.

Saint-Père seems to be the first to publish about the Guidimakhan Soninke, with his paper *Les Sarakollé du Guidimakha* (1925). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, authors gradually added to the literature on this ethnicity. Abdoulaye Bathily and Claude Messailoux’s *Lexique soninké (sarakolé)-français* (1975), as well as Bathily’s second similar contribution (2008), and Ousmane Moussa Diagana’s (2011) dictionary allowed for a better access to the language. Moreover, Diagana’s *Chants traditionnels du pays soninké* (1990) -amongst others, laid on paper what had mostly been oral up until then. These works stood out as a new access to the ethnicity's culture, especially the language and its arts. Many refer to them in their writings.

Monique Chastenet, whose anthropological and historical work on the Soninke combines a long-term approach with a careful reading of diverse practices, also contributes to the migratory dimension of Soninke studies with *Les migrations soninké dans la longue durée: stratégies et identités* (1999). François Manchuelle, in turn, allows for a clarification of Soninke migration with *La diaspora des travailleurs Soninkés en France entre 1846 et 1960* (published in 1996, republished in French in 2004). Samba Yatera's *La Mauritanie : Immigration et développement dans la Vallée du fleuve Sénégal* (1997) brings an analysis of the social organization, land tenure system, and production modes of the Soninke and Halpulaaren. All these readings create a solid literary corpus on the Soninke. Their lifestyle (Chastenet, 1988 & 1992), their immigration (Manchuelle, 2004 ; Chastenet, 1999), their language (Bathily & Meissailoux, 1975; Bathily, 2008; Diagana, 2011) and mythical and oral culture (Diagana, 1990), as well as the social and political organizations (Yatera, 1997) have been extensively studied for the past hundred years. These papers are of major importance in this thesis. But being rather old productions, some aspects are out of date or missing. Indeed, the “newer” generation of authors incorporate “newer” aspects of the Soninke society.

The author that adds most to the scientific corpus on the Soninke is, according to me, Cheikhna Wagué. Diverse papers preceded his thesis, but the latter, *Histoire des Soninkés dans le Fouta Toro* (2023) is an advanced study of Soninkes throughout the contexts they have known since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The analyses of the rejection of “Fulanisation”, or the impact of colonisation on the hierarchy, as well as the impact of sovereign states or social media all added to the older literature. This is a History paper where he adopts a certain tone of neutrality. This is the most recent piece of literature that this paper builds upon, but slightly less recent writings are also necessary, as they do not always burden themselves with such a neutral tone. For example, Cheikh Bouye's *La société Soninké, hier, aujourd'hui et demain* (2017) is a great introduction to Soninke culture, but not only. Indeed, it was the first book I read that called for a change in the Soninke society: I read it in the first few days following my arrival in Mauritania. But I had not yet, in the scant interviews already conducted, perceived the tensions caused by Ganbanaaxu. Hence, his discourse was a bit of a surprise: why would he call for a change to regain unity in an ethnicity that had been presented as rigid and united by the “older” studies. Cheikh Bouye adopts a prudent stance; he does not mention Ganbanaaxu directly. In fact, this book is rather shy at clearly presenting the causes of the necessary change it presents as “vital” (Cheikh Bouye, 2017, p.106). From what I have gathered in my interviews, the impacts of Ganbanaaxu's discourse on the social tissue was rather traumatic... In our interview on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2025, Cheikh Bouye said it was his passion for “*ma (his) communauté*”,

that pushed him to write this book. I realised that other recent writings had similar traits, such as resembling titles, a matching discretion about Ganbanaaxu's trauma, or equivalent messages of change. Indeed, the same year, Zakaria Soumaré published *La société soninké entre hier et aujourd'hui* (2017). Then in 2020, alongside Cheikhna Wagué and Sidi N'Diaye, he directed a collective publication of 13 Soninke scholars or influential figures, called *Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd'hui*. All these brilliant authors include Ganbanaaxu's consequences in their writings, but they do it in a rather very "diplomatic" way. Some sort of bias seems to push them in eluding naming, or dissimulating, the direct impacts of this revolutionary step of their history. Of course, all of them are not calling for such radical a change as Cheikh Bouye's... But they all felt it was time to produce a paper aiming to define what a Soninke is, today... So not a Soninke of yesterday, and not a Soninke of tomorrow. In a similar way, and by quoting Outouma Soumaré (who is amongst the list of interviewees in Annex 1 and a participant of the collective publication), I chose to incorporate this theme in the title of my thesis. Additionally, I decided to present narratives that Soninkes had told me. I will touch upon my positionality further on, but I believe that this paper adds to the understanding of the dynamic of rupture. Precisely, because it does not only include peer-reviewed (or new) conclusions on the immediate and long terms impacts of the causes of this "change", but also because it recounts what a certain number of Soninkes say these impacts are....

Drame's *Ajar-Paris* (2022) is a biography of the author's father. He has gone through the whole process of monetary and familial migration and experienced everything that the Soninke diaspora as known. The book partly adopts the format of the restitution of a "life-story" interview. The author having had a such a long time to listen to her "subject", she provides what I see as another interview on which I can base my points.

Despite this last book, which differs in the subject from the others, all these recent publications suggest what I have heard in the interviews: there is a dynamic of rupture in the which impacts the processes of identification of the Guidimakhan Soninke. This dynamic seems to still be happening right now. Or at least a phase of it. Indeed, and I express it in this paper, it seems to me that it has been developing since the 1940's and has been effective since the 2000's. This is what I will explore in thesis, which aims to perceive, through the analysis of these narratives, the causes, the dimensions, and the consequences of the dynamic of rupture experienced by the Soninke of Guidimakha.

## **Outline:**

The analytical foundation of this thesis rests on a set of relationships between pairs of chapters: Chapters 1 and 2 and Chapters 3 and 4. I place my discussions in Chapter 5. A first chapter's goal is to identify, and a second's aim is to demonstrate. Both are firmly grounded in the knowledge I have accumulated on the Soninke through the two core components of (primarily) the set of interviews and (secondly) the literary corpus.

Chapter 1's intention is to better present the Soninke of Guidimakha. I add elements on their behaviour, tendencies and position in Mauritania. I will be expanding on the Soninke identity as I learned about it in the interviews.

Chapter 2 is closely connected to Chapter 1. I explore this central theme of "Soninke of today" and "Soninke of yesterday" and seek to expose the extent of these differences. Towards the end of this section, I notify how several participants suggested shifts in immigration patterns were the cause of this change. This hypothesis is explored in the next chapters.

Chapter 3 offers an overview of Soninke immigration, between the 1940's to the present day. I examine multiple aspects, concepts, and historical facts learned during my fieldwork and research, to have the necessary tools for chapter 4.

Chapter 4 analyses this immigration over time. I explore the participant's idea that the significant shifts in Soninke identity are tied to immigration. I ultimately reach the conclusion that immigration does, in fact, play a major role in the dynamic of rupture in Soninke identity.

Chapter 5 presents a more personal analysis on the relationship between the Soninke and the Mauritanian State, and the narratives stemming from it. While still being firmly grounded in the same material as the other chapters, I share my own interpretive insight. Being that there exists a latent interrogation about the place of the Soninkes in the Mauritanian context, more specifically, about their relationship with the central State. After exploring this strained relationship since the 1960s, I focus on a dual and mutually reinforcing movement that defines it. Contrasted with narratives, I explore this dual movement to eventually share my thoughts on the attempts to instore new narratives.

I then conclude the thesis. But before I dive in the first chapter, I wish to elaborate on my methodology of interviews and on my positionality.

### **Methodology of interviews:**



I set off to Mauritania to study the evolution of the Soninke identity and the influence of other Sahelian countries and social groups. During the first ten interviews or so, I gradually noticed hints that my original idea was out of touch and that the real issue lay elsewhere. I shifted focus but kept the same interviewing strategy: semi-structured interviews that allow a better understanding of the interviewee's narratives. Lasting between 1 hour / 1.5 hours up to 3 hours, discussions were very open. I would usually hear two very distinct perspectives. The first came from non-Soninkes (or from those who knew little about the ethnicity), and the second from Soninkes (or from experts on the subject). I often started with the question: "*What is, according to you, a Soninke?*" The former would often answer with: "*A very conservative people, rather inward-looking, they migrate a lot, they are very respectful and hard workers*". Whilst the latter would say similar things and then ask whether I was asking about a Soninke of today or a Soninke of the past. That was one of the recurring questions I would ask, others were, for example: *what makes it that you are a Soninke, and I am not? Can I ever become a Soninke?* Then I would expand the discussion by building up on these first answers. A few times, I asked my interviewees if they could give three words to describe the Soninke. But I stopped as I did not want to come off as reductive by asking for such a summary after long discussions. I would mostly take notes by hand. By speaking with all these Soninkes, and relaying majorly on what they say, I exposed my research to a few hurdles I will address in my chapters. Indeed, a quick reflection on my interviews is decisive to understand that narratives are not "hard truths". For example, interviewees would sometimes answer my questions with what they thought I wanted to hear, rather than their personal conviction. In **Annex 1**, one can find further explanations on the interviewees and interview, as I now must reflect on my positionality.

### **Positionality:**

As indeed, what position to take when studying, in barely a year, an entire identity and culture, which moreover is known for its complexity?

The first point to address is the biases is my identity. I am European, French, a Masters's student and not a recognized Soninke specialist. I reached them through the top layers of the residents of the country (cultural centres and expats). I am aware that my outsider status affected both access to participants and how they interpreted my intentions. Yet, my background in political science, the dedicated courses attended throughout this degree and the

peer feedback as well as the means I put in place during my fieldwork have, I believe, allowed me to strive as much as possible toward an understanding as free from judgment as possible. I remain conscious of the power dynamics, dilutions (such as the use of different languages in literature, interviews and the writing of this thesis) and biases that have influenced my interpretation and presentation of the data.

The second point to address is the way I directed my research. I arrived in Mauritania and stayed with European friends in Teveragh Zeina. I benefited from European-level comfort in a city where that is, clearly, not the standard. In the south, the interviewees told me I lived in the neighbourhood of the Whites and politicians. I was introduced to my first Mauritanian contacts (Soninke or others) either through European contacts from embassies or NGOs, or in the context of the French Institute in Nouakchott, where certain cultural events were relevant to my research. At the end of each interview, interviewees would give me numbers to contact. In this way, I was able to build my contact book.

I therefore mainly built relationships with the upper fringe of the Soninke social classes: those who had been educated and had succeeded in the Mauritanian context. In a timely manner, Ousmane Wagué's contribution in *Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd'hui* (Soumaré, et al., 2020, chapter 6), warns of a pitfall: one risks, by force of circumstance when working with Soninkes, of only interviewing members of the upper society, religious or political notabilities. And thus having a biased view, by limiting oneself to a single layer of society. It is true that most of the Soninke I met were part of a certain social level. But it is common knowledge that every research has biases –I already addressed mine. Beyond that, I want to present the means I put in place to avoid this pitfall to the greatest extent possible.

The first is the necessity of perspective. The second is the diversity reached despite the same social layer.

Regarding the first, even though any Soninke could answer the questions I asked, not all of them could have answered with the knowledge and perspective required. By perspective, as in "*hauteur de vue*" in French, I mean a nourished capacity for reflection, offering constructed and tangible answers. The educated layers of Nouakchott therefore seemed to be the most able to provide answers to my questions within the given timeframe. But, hence thus limited to a single group, one might think that I only recorded a single narrative. This is disproved by the second aspect.

Indeed, I still tried to reach a true diversity of opinions. First off, people with a certain perspective do not only focus on their opinion. So, speaking to a politician (Outouma Soumaré, BS, or others) allowed me to hear complete versions of things that consciously included opposing theses. As well, addressing researchers or professors (Ousmane Wagué, Mohamedou Wane, Fatoumata Diagana...) allowed for exchanges with people who consider perceptions with which they disagree, because they have had to contradict or move beyond them. Moreover, even within this upper fringe, opinions differed. I met notables from Diaguili and Diogountouro. The former were hostile to Ganbanaaxu, the latter were loyal supporters of it. Ultimately, if most participants were educated/upper class people, the communication established with high-level Ganbanaaxu representatives allowed to have numerous interactions with people of other classes, backgrounds and opinions, such as Kelly of Fofana (see Annex 1).

## **CHAPTER I – A Thorough presentation of the Soninke of Guidimakha.**

To better present the Soninke of Guidimakha, I add key elements and aspects of their behaviour, tendencies and position in the Mauritanian Context. I will be presenting the Soninke identity as I learned about it in the interviews, as my goal is to mostly rely on participant's narratives.

I will also heavily rely on Cheikh Bouye's *La société Soninké, hier, aujourd'hui et demain* (2017). It is a good introduction to Soninke culture and it allowed me to contextualize the narratives of interviewees. Samba Yatera' *La Mauritanie : Immigration et développement dans la Vallée du fleuve Sénégal* (1997) is a scientific paper on which I can count to structure my thoughts. As my theoretical framework relies on Ricoeur (1992) and Barth (1969), I will be referencing them throughout the chapter. I will also call upon different studies produced by Cheikhna Wagué; he is the major reference in contemporary studies of the Soninkes. As well, Dramé's *Ajar-Paris* (2022) offers a written clearer, longer and better organised narrative. Often, this book, as well as the other studies, analyses or theses, are cited to provide a "scholar" justification of what I write. This permits to legitimize what only a small number of interviewees told me, or to reinforce a point made by the people I met. For example, Razy's article (2006) on the theme of "return" of Soninke men to their village adds a scientific gaze to my statements.

The Soninke are quite attached to their history and to the respect of their identity, they do not have the hope nor the ambition of changing their lifestyle (Cheikh Bouye, 2017, p.100). To them, their identity was shaped by ancestors who were more intelligent than them. There is no reason to think of evolution, despite that these ancestors constructed a model without any superior inspiration, but rather in the light of the context that surrounded them (Cheikh Bouye, 2017, pp.102-103). Cheikh Bouye here, proves the pertinence of using Ricoeur's (1992) theory of "narrative identity".

## **1. Further explanations of the Soninke Hierarchy.**

Hierarchy stems from what Yatera calls "*le cadre de référence des soninkés*" (Yatera, 1997), the Ouagadou Empire. Since its downfall, the Soninke have preserved the hierarchical structure in three castes (Cheikh Bouye, 2017).

The Soninke hierarchy has 3 levels. According to Fatoumata DIAGANA, interviewed on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025, to each social status, there is a specific function. These three levels are composed of different groups and sub-groups. It is rather complicated, and I only present what I need for this thesis. This quick presentation is better explained by Cheikh Bouye in the first chapter of his book (Cheikh Bouye, 2017), or by Zakaria Soumare<sup>1</sup>, in his article "*La hiérarchisation sociale en milieu Soninké*"<sup>2</sup>.

The first group is the nobles. The nobles include village chiefs, marabouts and warriors. The second group is composed of two sub-groups: the people in charge of speech (griots, instruments) and the people in charge of craftsmanship (blacksmith, cobbler...) The people of this second group are said "of cast". The third group is composed of slaves of different natures. In the present, day, the last category is referred to as servile extraction or servile descent (interview with Ousmane WAGUE, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2025). Each stratification is hereditary and endogamic. As explained, the notion of "race" is omnipresent: a Soninke slave is not of the same race as a Soninke noble. Today, their descendants are deeply marked by this racial heritage, both in how they are perceived by society and how they perceive others. The residues of slavery are called "*séquelles de l'esclavage*" said with Ousmane WAGUE. These grey zones, remnants of the time where slavery officially existed, hinder the people of servile descent's access to equality. The Soninke communities in the middle valley of the Senegal River have a social structure based on inequalities. Today, this translates to the existence of two factions in the political field: The descendants of slaves, and the others (Wagué, 2007).

Across time, larger political contexts have somewhat undermined this structure, particularly regarding the servile class. The successive laws aimed at ending slavery (in 1905 and 1981) and reinforcing the severity of penalties (in 2007 and 2015) offered a larger context to which Soninkes were compelled to submit. Participants of other social layers expressed their respect for people of servile descent, “*moi j’aurais honte de dire le mot esclave à une personne d’extraction servile*” (interview with Silly DEMBA DIABIRA, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2025). Still, there remains these “*séquelles de l’esclavage*”. They are twofold: the impossibility of access to religious notability and to land ownership, said Ousmane WAGUE, during our interview on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2025.<sup>3</sup> These two grey areas obstruct the Soninke’s social role and position in Mauritania. In Kaédi (Gorgol), in 2020, a brawl broke out in a mosque when noble-born worshippers noticed that the prayer leader was of servile descent (interview with an anonymous Soninke from Kaédi, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2025).

Cheikh Bouye writes: “*Cela justifie la richesse culturelle d’un groupe ethnique qui a eu par le passé les reines d’un empire et qui par nostalgie ou obsession souhaite conserver son modèle d’organisation*” (Cheikh Bouye, 2017). In my interview with him on 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2025, he said that Ganbanaaxu reopened old wounds, propelling the question of lineage to the heart of current youth conversations. Professor Fatoumata Diagana, recounted in our interview on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025, that her nephew, born in France to immigrant parents, had called her to ask about his lineage to compare himself to his friends.

Silly DEMBA DIABIRA, a Guidimakhan resident interviewed on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2025 told me that, thanks to the education system, the distinctions based on lineage had started to slowly disappear. Yet Ganbanaaxu, which seeks to fight against this caste-based system by calling for a *tabula rasa*, rekindled the topic between 2015 and 2017, triggering extremely tense conflicts across the Soninke territory. In Guidimakha, clearly, several villages have (or had) two soccer teams, one consisting of slave descendants and the other of the others, explains Silly DEMBA DIABIRA.

Kelly, Ganbanaaxu activist and IRA<sup>2</sup> section head in Guidimakha, stated on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2025, that Ganbanaaxu’s aggression toward hierarchy is due to the perception that the slow erasure of distinctions is a lie used to continue the submission of slave descendants.

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<sup>2</sup> The “Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste” is an activist movement founded in 2008 to combat slavery and racial discrimination in Mauritania. Led by Biram Dah Abeid, it is known for its peaceful activism and outspoken stance against systemic inequalities affecting the Hratin community.

Suddenly reviving these tensions would expose the lie and, after a period of unrest, bring new peace based on truth. From what I heard, it is safe to say that Ganbanaaxu has torn apart the social fabric of Guidimakha for the past ten years.

## **2. Economic immigration as a lifestyle.**

There is a difference between the Moors' mobility and the Soninke's. The former are nomads. They would move from place to place, usually in search of food, pasture for livestock, or trade opportunities. Whereas the Soninke are sedentary in Guidimakha. Yet, they're mobile; they immigrate. The demise of the Ouaghadou Empire is recognized as the cause of the Soninke diaspora. *"L'émigration est donc générale à toute la zone et peut apparaître comme la conséquence de la dispersion de l'empire du wagadu qui a fait à jamais des soninkés un peuple voué au voyage"* (Barou, 1878). For the Soninke, mobility means migration. Many traditional sayings, such as *"la fortune ou une tombe lointaine"* (interview of a Soninke wishing to stay anonymous, due to this position in high political circles on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2025) emphasize the importance of earning money. For the Soninke, wealth is built far from the village; Soninke immigration is an "economical migration" (Razy, 2006).

Historically, Soninkes would migrate for several months each year to work, then return to the village for a few months. Migration is strategic. Soninke move in numbers where friends or cousins say it's easy to earn money. The ones that have left hope to attract their cousins and brothers in the new and lucrative city they have reached says Fatoumata DIAGANA, interviewed on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025. Whether it was in Senegal or Gambia for the "navetane", a seasonal immigration during the rainy season to harvest peanuts or rice. Or towards diamond-producing countries, such as Zaïre or Sierra Leone. From the 1940s onward, Soninke began migrating to France. Razy states that they would often come back and spend time in the village; to marry or to spend time with their families. Migration was based on rotation of the workforce; men spending some time home would be replaced in their job by a relative or a friend (Razy, 2006). Most left illegally, hidden in ship holds just like Dramé's father (2022). Contracts in France were stricter and offered fewer holidays. Those who had migrated legally had no time to return on vacation, and those who had come lacked the necessary papers (interview with AS, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2025). Gradually, a gap widened between the men in Europe and the rest of the family. So, wives and children started joining their fathers in France and Europe. This was intensified by the 1990's and resulted in a "familial

migration” that did not however render “economical migration” void (Razy, 2006). Familial immigration was not active migration; women did not leave to earn money but to accompany their husbands. According to Seyre SIDIBE, interviewed on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 2025, it wasn’t until the 2000s that women began migrating independently to earn money.

This economical migration is strategic. But it seems that the tendency to increasingly leave for Europe also has negative impacts. Such as the depletion of the active population. In Kaédi, this is increasingly felt, especially in the declining political influence of the Foutanko<sup>4</sup> (interview with the Soninke Chief of Kaedi, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2025). But in Guidimakha, locals are used to it. The young men are gone. Left behind are their sisters, who are now starting to leave as well (interview with the elders of Diogountouro, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2025), and their wives, who may be widows without knowing it, since travel by boat is often fatal. The elders remain and enjoy their retirement. Indeed, returning home is a major aspect of emigration (interview with Negue DOUKOURE, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025). Many return to die or be buried on their native land. A dedicated fund was developed in the Soninke diaspora to finance body repatriation (interview with OD, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2025).

Thus, if mobility is now further understood, I will eventually focus on its other. But let me explain for the time being, what completes the two aspects we have developed.

### **3. Soninke values and sense of belonging.**

Soninkeness is recounted as being a traditional and behavioural heritage (interview with Negue DOUKOURE, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025). Some participants deemed it was a lifestyle of dignity, acceptance, and valorous behaviours such as no stealing or no lying... (interview with Fofana, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2025). But that was always in complement of the natural belonging to the ethnicity. The chief of Kaédi had another perception of identity. Indeed, during our interview on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2025, he told me I could become Soninke too, if I learned the language. By remembering that identity is constructed in relation to the other (Barth, 1969), it allows me to underline that Soninkes of Kaédi have a different relation to the other. One can find a longer focus on the Foutanké in **Annex 2**.

A/ A quick note on the Foutanké.

The Foutanké I refer to are the residents of the Soninke parts of the Gorgol region, as the vaster region's historical name is Fouta Toro. There are 3 Soninke villages in Gorgol. Two are administered by the Gorgol region but are considered, culturally, as part of the Guidimakha region. All the Gorgolian-related specificities related in Annex 2 led the local Soninkes to have a different and more open behaviours. Their relationship with the Fulani has impacted their Identity in the way Barth considers the other as central in the defining of self (Barth, 1969). As the “borders” they have set between them and the Fulanis are less important than the ones dressed by the Guidimakhan Soninke. Moreover, their *Ipse* (Ricoeur, 1992) has been met with variations of a few same principles: urbanisation was faster than in Guidimakha, immigration had other ends... These differences have an impact on their narratives of identification (Ricoeur, 1992). And the difference with their Guidimakhan neighbours that most struck me is the conception of how one becomes –or is, Soninke. This leads me to address Soninkeness to the Guidimakhan Soninkes.

#### B/ Impermeability of belonging to the Guidimankhan Soninkes.

Soninkeness is not only defined by hierarchy and mobility. But also, by values, such honesty, represented by their abhorrence of stealing. Which came back regularly throughout the interviews and is one of the most important values of the Soninkes (such as interview with Silly DEMA DIABIRA, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 202). To the Guidimakhan, Soninkeness is a strict ethnicity, one could say a race.

I already mentioned the answer that the elders from Diogountouro gave me. And in our interview on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025, Outouma Soumaré (who is Soninke and half Dutch & half Mauritanian) told me how his Dutch descent was constantly reminded to him by the others, who did not perceive him as “fully” Soninke. Thus, a Peul (or a French person) cannot become Soninke, even if he fully embraces the culture. The notion of “race” is omnipresent. A Soninke slave is not of the same race as a Soninke noble. Negue Doukoure (interviewed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> off April 2025) introduced a man in the street to me as follows: “*This one is a slave. He says it himself. We could try and talk to him later*”. We, eventually, did not talk to him. In chapter 6 of *Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd’hui* (Soumaré, et al., 2020, p.117), Ousmane Wagué says that “*les descendants des gens de couches de couches serviles et de celles intermédiaires ont tendance à valoriser à tort ou à raison leurs statuts respectifs*”.



#### **4. Discussions and transition to chapter 2.**

Thus far, I have confirmed what I stated in the introduction: the Soninke of Guidimakha are a people of race and values, they are very conservative. But the fact that they have such differences with their Gorgolian neighbours supports that they constructed their identity in relation to the other (Barth, 1969). The Guidimakhan are known for their conservatism, whereas the Foutanké, not so much. This shows the different relation to the others, and hence the differences in identification. Let's explore the arguments and reasons they used to oppose Soninke of today and Soninke of yesterday.

### **CHAPTER II) The differences between a Soninke of today and a Soninke of yesterday.**

This ethnicity is notorious for being very defined, and I have seen how they have very clearly outlined what is not a Soninke. But most members could not speak of the identity without saying that there were changes. The first explanation I was often given was the loss of a feeling of community. In this chapter again I mainly rely on interviews all the while often citing Cheikh Bouye, Ricoeur, Barth, Wagué and Dramé's writings. Other authors are cited punctually.

#### **1. The lost Soninke Community: "Soninkara"**

Soninkara means Soninke community. It can be used to define the entirety of the Soninke community of West Africa and of the diaspora (Clouet, 2019), but I use it in the sense of the Idea of a Soninke community (Cheikh Bouye, 2017). It then defines not only the group of people, but their culture. Cheikh Bouye, in his book, promotes the idea of a "new Soninkara" (Cheikh Bouye, 2017, p.106). Soninkara is hence not only a people, because by linking Barth's (1969) and Ricoeur's (1992) it is clear that it also is a number of behaviours adopted by a group.

Following this theoretical framework, we can say that Soninkara is the recipient of Soninke identity. As in fact, I recognize it as a behaviour (in relation to the other) and a narrative (between constant obligations and personal ethics).

#### A/ The end of “même marmite”.

“If you go in a Ka, these days, and you see many stew pots, you know then that the family is not united”, told me Negue DOUKOURE, interviewed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025. I spent two days with him. He was from Sélibabi, the capital city of the Guidimakha region. We had on two to three hours long semi-directed interview. And then we talked more trivially. To him one strong marker of difference between the Soninkes of today and those of yesterday was that the women of the Ka (a Soninke household), nowadays, most often cooked in different stew pots. This is contrary to basic Soninke tradition. Soninkes live in a Ka, which is a concession where brothers and fathers live together with all the wives and children of the family. Most often, a Ka holds many people (easily 150 people, I heard a few times). Nowadays the numerous stew pots are an indicator of change: Women do not cook outside and all together anymore. The disappearing of this tradition is part of wider situation: the loss of the “vivre-ensemble”.

#### B/ The disappearing of “Vivre ensemble”

Translatable to “living in a community”, “Vivre ensemble” can be considered as the long-lost quality of the Soninke community according to Negue. The Ka is part of a wider system of education. “Vivre ensemble” is, namely, an education method (Silly DEMBA DIABIRA, interviewed on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2025). Every child respects every adult. And any adult has authority on any child. The child’s authority figure is not only his parents, but the whole community. Also, “Vivre ensemble”, according to Negue and KT, both interviewed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025, allowed social cohesion and the maintaining of values. It permitted peaceful discussions as well as collegial and quick resolutions of problems.

Silly DEMBA DIABIRA’s memory of being hunted down by women and elders of the village when he once pretended to be sick in the hope of skipping work, is a display of “vivre ensemble” as they all understood that he was slacking off, and all had the reflex to punish him for lying and to try and send him to the field. “Vivre ensemble” was the collective effort to maintain ancestral traditions and customs (Koita & Soumaré, 2013).

But nowadays, this tradition seems to be disappearing. What I heard from people from the cities of Diaguili and Sélibabi tend to prove it. But if “Vivre ensemble” is considered to

have disappeared<sup>5</sup>, one could argue that it is an idealized quality, that pessimist young people believe to have lost. In chapter 5 of *Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd'hui* (Soumare, et al., 2020, p.109), Kébé Hassane (Doctor “ès Lettres” in the academy of Versailles) states that, amidst the crisis the Soninke are experiencing, the loss of these values can be perceived as a desacralisation.

Even if this is true, Soninkes have changed. Whether it is because they do not know how to harvest crops anymore (interview with Kisma TRAORE, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025), or because they live in hard-built-homes (interview with OD, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2025) or because youngsters seem to be disinterested by their families' History (interview with Fofana, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2025). Moreover, the relation between the classes is described by Cheikhna Wagué as having been relatively idealized and then been severely damaged by the social mutations of the 21st century (Wague, 2027, p.226). This brings evolutions of narratives. This last aspect, about the younger generation, repeatedly came back.

### C/ The change of values and growing insecurity

When I interviewed people living in Soninke cities such as Kaédi, Sélibabi, Diaguili or Diogountouro, they usually had a more pertinent discourse about life over there than residents of Nouakchott or other cities –even if the latter frequently came back for holidays. Hence, from the local's point of view, there seems to be a change. Some call it a fracture, like Fofana, interviewed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2025.

Kisma Traore's told me in our interview on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025 that his son had recently left jail, where he had spent some time for dealing drugs. When Kisma Traore was young, under the French colonizers' administration, Soninkes were trustworthy and were entrusted with sensitive jobs. But this has changed. Back then, it was preferable for Soninkes to die rather than to go to jail. They had a very firm work ethic. Kisma could not understand why Soninkes now had problems.

Just as many Guidimankhan Soninkes I met, he could see the change of values in the behaviour of the people around them. This had an impact on the security. For example, Silly DEMA DIABIRA (interviewed on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2025) said that his village had become a dangerous place. Its proximity with Senegal and Mali made contraband and smuggling easy, and the three policemen did not leave their home after 6 p.m. as they were afraid. The village has changed, and its atmosphere as well. These different accounts gave a clear message of change of atmosphere, values and security, he said.

These changes were mostly presented by people from older generations, except from Negue, as he was in his thirties. Most participants from Sélibabi, Diaguili or Diogountouro, were rather old. I did not manage to interview younger people. The ones I met and tried to talk to deflected my questions by saying the elders had answer better. Moreover, they tend to be in immigration rather than in the village.

## **2. The collateral impacts of Ganbanaaxu: Internal changes and intensification of tensions in dynamics among the Soninke.**

Beyond the loss of the educational aspect of “Vivre ensemble”, the whole social life appears fractured (interview with Fofana, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2025). The disappearing of vivre ensemble is not the only phenomenon that had an impact on dynamics between people. Nor is it the only custom that seems to be a part of the past. Let me further present Ganbanaaxu and the impact it had when it first arrived in Mauritania.

Ganbanaaxu is not the first group to call for the end of slavery in Mauritania nor Guidimakha. In Mauritania, Hratins related movements (IRA, for example) are part of an effort sustained over time to erase the legacy of slavery. Moreover, Cheikhna Wague (2007) talks of a revolutionary movement of young komé named “*Balagoss*” born in 1948 in Kaédi. But concerning Guidimakha, Lucie steinkampf-ferrier (1983) showed that people of servile extraction had tried to access the religious notability. Social conflicts had erupted and had been resolved by authorising the slave descendants to build their own mosques (Ould Salem, 2013). Beyond that, the ARMEPES, which we can consider as the mother of Ganbanaaxu, was created circa 2010 (according to Djibrill Diallo Cheikh BOUYE, interviewed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2025).

As I have just established, voices denouncing the “*séquelles*” were raised early on but were mostly isolated until 2017, told me Bakary DIARA, mayor of Diogountouro, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2025. Masses joined in suddenly in 2017, as it was suddenly a widespread, viral and accessible fight. Djibrill Diallo Cheikh BOUYE, interviewed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2025 says that discussions were very active because of vocal messages, they allowed for illiterate people<sup>6</sup> to understand others and express themselves.

Ganbanaaxu has become a movement that a part of Soninkara follows and that some other aim to beat. Other groups have been put in place to try and preserve the tradition and “fight” against the influence of Ganbanaaxu. I have heard of two groups: “Tounkallemu”<sup>7</sup> (interview with Seyre SIDIBE, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 2025) and “Démocratie Islamique” (interview with Salihina Moussa KONATE, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2025). Yet, the fight against slavery was considered as noble by most participants (whether they lived in Guidimakha or Nouakchott). What was heavily criticised was the way they spread their word and the damage it caused in social relations across all the villages of Guidimakha<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, vocal messages were very insulting. The fight being a popular one, tangible arguments were scarce, people reverted to heavily insulting nobles said Djibril Diallo Cheikh BOUYE, interviewed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2025. Hate speech was poured on social media and everybody had access said Outouma Soumaré, interviewed on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 2025. This resulted in strong hostilities in villages. Some were practically split apart, with two football teams with the name of the village. One for the slave descendants, one for the people of other descents, informed Silly Demba Diabira on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2025. The tensions were so palpable, that the State even suggested Ganbanaaxu communities to build new villages next to the historical villages, he adds. Djibril Diallo Cheikh Bouye told me in his interview that personally, he thought things calmed down thanks to the intervention of the state. Ganbanaaxu’s way of spreading their message provoked a climate of extreme tensions and of violence. Sometimes, the Ganbanaaxu sympathizers interviewed would be ashamed of that, such as Djibril Diallo Cheikh Bouye or Fatoumata Diagana. Sometimes not too much, like Kelly... Despite ripping the society in half maybe not being Ganbanaaxu’s main objective, he did not express remorse about that. This proves rupture in the dynamics between Soninkes.

### **3. Women as visible proof of generational determination and changes**

Participants recounted how certain traditions seemed to be increasingly dismissed by younger generations (interview with CS, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2025) and one marker of this phenomenon is the evolution of Women’s role.

Immigration is considered a man’s activity. Women’s access to immigration hence comes in as a marker of change. Until the 1960s, only men would set out on boats for France or Europe. Nowadays, women leave as well (interview with AS, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2025). In the 1960’s, it was still not considered a woman’s practice. Their role was to maintain a family for the men that had established themselves in France. A Soninke man would arrange for his wife to join him and leave a second wife in his Ka. This was already a complicated

procedure, as women could not possibly make the trip like the husbands. In *Ajar-Paris* (2022), Dramé writes about her dad's immigration to France. He is a Soninke, and cannot bring his wife over in France, as "*c'était une épreuve d'homme et il n'allait pas l'imposer à sa femme*" (Dramé, 2022, p.166). The arrival of these first women eventually led to the growing awareness of the possibility for personal enrichment. Which in turn, motivated other women to leave, says Seyre SIDIBE, interviewed on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 2025. To him, the fact that women, whether married or not, have started to set out on their own with the objective of building wealth is proof of change.

Furthermore, there is a change of consideration of FGM by women (interview with CS, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2025). If Negue DOUKOURE, interviewed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025, told me "I do not know one father who does not consider FGM as mandatory for his daughters", an elder woman told me it was slowly fading (interview with the Old Woman, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025). But CS told me she had decided not to have her daughter excised. And that was, to her, the main difference between her generation and her daughter's. Said daughter had divorced the husband she had chosen herself, with no interference of the parents and did not either, plan for her own daughter to excised.

Lastly, regarding weddings and virginity, Magnon's study (2007) of early weddings in Soninke immigrant communities in France show there is a tendency of conformity to tradition in the choice of a husband and in the procedure of wedding. But prior to their wedding, the Soninke women born and raised in France interviewed all had sexual intercourse either with their fiancé or earlier, with another man. Their perception of virginity, as "outdated", noting that "especially in France, no one does that anymore" (Magnon, 2007, p.3) shows a change compared to their parent's perception as well as compared to the perception in Guidimakha. Where, as well, interviewees do admit change compared to the past even if some, namely Negue, express nostalgia or discomfort on that matter. "*Avant, jamais tu ne voyais une femme de 25 pas mariée, et jamais tu ne voyais une femme arriver au mariage sans être vierge*".

These few examples prove progressive and generational changes regarding Soninke women practices. To note, the influence of the immigrational factor in all these examples.

#### **4. Discussions and transition to chapter 3.**

I have now exposed a few internal and external conflicts of the Soninke society as well as some of their causes. The gradual disappearing of traditions, such as life in community, coupled with the changing of values and growing insecurities have led to a sentiment of

“difference” between today and what one could call “the good old days”. Whilst the narratives I heard on these good old days are particularly idealized, I have shown numerous changes that do not stem from this nostalgic gaze. The evolution of Soninke women in their society or in the diaspora, as well as the shockwave of Ganbanaaxu Fedde’s actions tend to show that the participants are right when they say that Soninkes of today are different from the one of the past. Cheikh Bouye (2017), already states how the Soninke identity has evolved, and Wagué’s words (2023) on Soninkeness being a dynamic backs Ricoeur’s (1990) theory. But what the narratives seem to add is the placing of immigration, modernity and technologization as the cause for this change. I shall now further explain mobility.

### **CHAPTER III) – A focus on Soninke immigration since the 1940s.**

In this chapter, I aim to offer a comprehensive overview of Soninke immigration, and the reasons for departure. I examine multiple aspects, concepts, and historical facts learned during my interviews and my readings, to clarify the lengths of Soninke mobility between the 1940’s and the present day. Like in the first and second chapter, I will heavily rely on interviews and on Cheikh Bouye’s (2017), Yatera’s (1997), Wague’s (2007 & 2023) and Drame’s (2022) texts. I shall also continue referencing Ricoeur (1992) and Barth (1969). François Manchuelle’s study (2004) of Soninke diaspora between 1846 and 1960 is an analyse of Soninkes in France, allowing to enlarge the scope of presentation to the diaspora. But as it focuses on a time frame that finished 65 years ago, I hence rely on more recent articles. Hence, Timera’s (1997 & 2001) articles on Soninkes in the diaspora, or on the way the hierarchy and the social structure established itself provide closer references.

#### **1. Soninke’s History of mobility.**

Soninke mobility is characterised by its economical objective (Razy, 2006). The idea was to earn money far from the village. Immigration is embedded in the identity and the culture. In Mauritanian streets, Soninkes are nicknamed “Ndaga France”, which means “I am going to France”, as their capacity to leave for Europe is so well known. Everybody calls them that, even if they plan to go to Germany, added Fatoumata Diagana during our interview, on the 21<sup>st</sup>

of March 2025. But mobility has evolved over time; changes have motivated decisions. Thorough explanations must nuance and strengthen the comprehension of their mobility.

#### A/ Before the generalisation of going to France

According to Yatera (1997), the Soninke mobility is an aftermath of the downfall of the Wagadou empire (6th-13th C.). When it collapsed, the Soninkes lost their territorial attachment and peregrinated throughout west-Africa. That is why they are in 6 or 7 West-African countries (Yatera, 1997). Up until the 1940's, Soninke would migrate to other African countries, in search of a lucrative activity (Interview with AS, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2025). The other months of the year, they came back to the village and produced crops for a comfortable life (interview with HD, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2025).

With the arrival of French colonizers in the 1900's, the usage of the French language and their participation in the two world wars, links were tied between France and the Guidimakha region (interview with Kisma TRAORE, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025). Immigration towards France seemed logical, Soninkes increasingly started heading there. This is visible in *Ajar-Paris* (Drame, 2022, p74.), where the author explains her father's choice of country to leave to in her book. *“Alors il opta pour ce qu’il croyait être la facilité, il ferait comme ceux qui l’avaient précédé : C’est en France qu’il tenterait sa chance.”*

Between the 1940's and 1960's, Soninke immigration gradually focuses itself on this country and the rest of Europe. In 1974, with Chirac's decision to shut the borders, rotations become less feasible. By the 1980s, especially with Mitterrand's policies, allowing regularisation of immigrants and family groupings (Dramé, 2022), women began joining their husbands in migration (interview with AS, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2025). This is the “familial migration”, previously mentioned (Razy, 2006). From the 2000's on, Soninkes started leaving for France in great numbers and mostly illegally on boats.<sup>1</sup>

With the money made in France and Europe, people started to follow the pace. On obstacle to leaving is the cost of the trip. That is why often nowadays, to sponsor the trip, mothers sell their jewellery (interview with Fatoumata DIAGANA, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025), or members of family sell plots of lands or a car (interview of a Soninke wishing to stay anonymous, due to this position in high political circles on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2025). Some even seem to take loans from the bank (for schooling for example) and use the money to finance the trip (interview with someone wishing to stay anonymous, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2025). But once that barrier was crossed, and they had enough money to leave, they headed to Europe and in majority to France. As Dramé (2022, p.74) explains it: *“D’autres l’avaient fait avant*



*lui, peu étaient revenus en ayant échoué, ce qu'ils s'interdisaient, préférant mourir en ayant tout essayé plutôt que de rentrer et de voir la honte et la déception dans les yeux de leurs proches finir par les tuer”.*

Upon arrival in France, any Soninke could head to a host house, such as the 24, rue Rochebrune 93100 Montreuil. A mythical “foyer” where they would be taken in charge by the Soninkes that had arrived sooner (according to AS). Many Soninkes that I met across the country knew this address by heart, it still is a host house for working Immigrants to this day.

#### B/ Easy immigration: Soninke hostels and organisation.

From the 1960's onward, immigrants would usually live in such hostels. That is up until the 2000's where government plans to transform these hostels were gradually put in place, according to Guérin (2019) and his study on Living spaces of migrants' workers' and “foyers” in the Paris region. Montreuil is renowned for its Soninke population and hostels, up to 9 according to some (interview with OD, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2025)! It is nicknamed “Bamako sur Seine”. Timera (1996) who studied Soninkes in the diaspora, also describes how secondary settlements were added in another hostel in other places in Paris, in the provinces (Lille, Amiens, Reims), and in Cologne (Germany). Hostels hold a very important place in the Soninke immigrational strategy. From what I have gathered, they have three main roles.

The first, is to be a place of life for the immigrants. They are welcomed and given a rest before starting work (Dramé, 2022). It is their space of life.

The second role is to be an economical centre. To quote Dramé (2022, p.110): “*à la fin du mois, lors du versement de son salaire, il ne gardait pour lui que ce qui lui permettait de payer son loyer et de se nourrir. Puis les francs français qui lui restaient étaient convertis en francs CFA et envoyés à sa famille restée au pays. Il ne restait plus grand-chose pour ses loisirs ou autres plaisirs, mais de toute façon, là n'était pas la finalité de son exil*”. For Soninkes that lived in these houses, rent was cheaper and transactions of money back to their country was cheaper. The money would be stocked in a “Caisse”, a cash register (Interview with AS, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2025). Mandatory contribution was minimum €80/year (interview with OD, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2025). The money collected could be used for three things (says AS): The first is for the Ka, or the family. The second one is for the village and the larger community. The third one is to ship the bodies of those dead in immigration back to Mauritania. All was very well organised, the money would be sent back and used to finance projects.

The last role of the hostel seems to be to provide a means of maintaining the links with the village and the traditions back home. Indeed, they had recreated the community's organisation in the country of migration (Timera, 1997), the traditions were implemented in Paris (interview with Zakaria SOUMARE, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2025). As an anonymous interviewee from Kaédi, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2025 told me, "*En France, tu es au village*". Before the internet, the frequent arrivals and departures allowed for mail to travel, according to AS, interviewed on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2025. To him, being surrounded by the elders, maintaining the same social structure and constantly talking the same language allowed for its continuous practice, preventing it from being left out or forgotten. This hostel organisation was hence very practical and very effective on several scales<sup>2</sup>.

Hostels are part of an organized system optimized for a more effective immigration. Yet, they tend to be increasingly less populated. On one hand, since the 2000's, French regulations have partially halted to these hostels (Guérin, 2019). Back in the days, the overcrowded rooms allowed a great many soninkes to live there (interview with OD, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2025). But it has become impossible to maintain such a system<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, it seems that young peoples' tendencies have changed, as hostels were said to be less and less filled with Soninkes<sup>4</sup>. They rather move in other accommodations (according to AS, interviewed on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2025). The remarks I heard on this conclusion are twofold. The first impact is the fading of the usage of the Soninke language, thought AS. We can imagine that other aspects of the culture fade as well. The second being that this is an example of Soninke solidarity. Even though the hostels are harder to get into, everyone has a roof; in Paris, like in Nouakchott, one apparently would have a very hard time finding a homeless Soninke (interview with CS, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2025).

## **2. Duality of Soninke departure: an objective and a necessity.**

I have already covered how immigration became such an important aspect of the ethnicity's practices and how it is organised. But information from the field explaining why they leave, suggests it is both an objective, and a necessity.

### A/ The general Soninke effort to send their children out in immigration

It is established that money is the central objective of Soninke immigration. Yet, François Manchuelle (2004) emphasizes on motivations such as individual initiative or internal logics of Soninke society. He goes beyond the economic explanation to explain migration as a

strategy for preserving status and seeking honour. And that seems to be true, as I will address the immigrant's status in narratives in a short while. From what I heard repeatedly in interviews, to the Soninkes success is money<sup>5</sup>. And culturally, money is found in immigration, because migration towards France allows for an economic power and a social status that an activity in the village or in another African country can hardly offer, says Timera (2001) in his study of self-affirmation and emancipation of young Sahelian migrants. Communities in Guidimakha told me they were dependent of the immigrants' money. I will explain that further on. But it seems important to at least mention it now, because beyond this need for money, immigration is embedded in the identity and the culture. Here is a list of a few sayings or quotes<sup>6</sup> from field interviews:

- “To leave and to make it or to die does not matter, the important is to leave” (interview with HD, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2025).
- “Better a distant tomb than not leaving” (interview of a Soninke wishing to stay anonymous, due to this position in high political circles on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2025).
- “If we cannot leave, we might as well die” (interview with Fatoumata DIAGANA, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025).
- “Better to die in the sea than stay here” (interview with Fofana, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2025).
- “He's in school but we (the Soninke community) prepared him to leave. So, he leaves.” (interview with Yakhoub BAKHAYOKHO, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2025).
- “We plan ahead; immigration allows investments” (interview with the Soninke Chief of Kaedi, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2025) (concerning Fountako immigration, which, as a reminder, is slightly different)

Setting out is hammered in the young children's consciences; everyone actively takes part in inscribing it further. Here is an extract from an interview of Professor Fatoumata Diagana I met in the University of Nouakchott Al Aasriya on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2025. She told me:

“Every parent is eager to see their son leave — especially the mothers. Muñu. This word is said in several languages<sup>7</sup>. For them, it is the beginning of success; women are expected to endure. A woman's value is measured by her ability to endure. When you endure today, you sow baraka for your children tomorrow — and also future reward (a successful immigration). When she sees her children leaving, she leans on the endurance of her past.

The young man will do everything he can for his brothers and cousins to follow him. Even from the perspective of marriage, in society, among the Soninké of Guidimakha, girls prefer migrants. They have more hope. No matter the conditions, it's status that counts (...) it has become a matter of prestige.”

These citations prove how embedded the immigrational project is. The last one expresses –just like Manchuelle (2004) suggested it, how immigrating is also a statutory action! M, interviewed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2025, also said that this status can play a role in the choice of marriage partner fathers will want for their daughters. A status that appears to give more prestige to minimum-wage illegal worker in France than a civil servant in Nouakchott, adds professor Diagana. We can expect young men to fight for this status, as to them it seems, immigration (and especially illegal immigration) is considered as a test of virility, states professor Diagana.

At a conference<sup>8</sup> he gave at the French Insitute in Nouakchott on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 2025, Zakaria Soumare, a renowned Mauritanian and Soninke author invited the audience to reflect on “*how (they –being the Soninkes) distributed this tale, that (they) constructed, of an Eldorado that does not exist*”. The audience generally approved. This shows that some soninkes wish for a change concerning mobility. This allows me to bring attention on the second aspect of Soninke immigration.

#### B/ The feeling of being pushed and forced in immigration by the state.

To open this subsection, here are citations about feeling pushed out to immigration by the state that I heard throughout my interviews<sup>9</sup>:

- “Youngsters are forced to leave. Since the antiquity, young men have been leaving, we have left, they are leaving... We cannot stop immigrating because it is thanks to that that the village still stands. Thanks to immigrant's money, not locals. There are no schools, no wells, no life... The government does not do a single thing for the Soninkes. Even more in the Guidimakhan case. As we find nothing to do here, we are forced to go find it elsewhere” (interview with the elders of Diogountouro, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2025).
- “Now Soninkes set out to immigrate. They have no choice but to leave, as there are no jobs for them in Guidimakha” (interview with Kisma TRAORE, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025).

- “The State has a segregationist politic. When Negro-Mauritanians leave university and school, their access to jobs is restrained” (interview with Silly DEMBA DIABIRA, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2025).
- “This immigration is due to inequality, absence of opportunities and rigged entrance exams” (interview with M, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2025).
- “What a lot of people do not understand, is that immigration is not a choice. We leave because we must” (interview with OD, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2025).

Please note that the cited participants above all are Guidimakhan residents. One of them brought another aspect to the table. To him, youngsters leave “*because the immigrants over there do not send their money anymore. So, we do not receive any. So, we go and fetch it ourselves. So, we set out*” (interview with HD, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2025). To him, it would be a very hard task to change this whole phenomenon. Despite his critics of immigration, he recognised how lucrative it was and thought it made sense so many left. To him, France was an eldorado<sup>10</sup>.

As Soninke are culturally mobile, one could think that they always left voluntary. But participants accused the state of being one of the reasons of departure. It hence seems that they also are victims pressured and pushed out. The participants who said that were all Guidimakha residents at the time of the interview. One could wonder if they have a distorted vision of the state’s politics towards them. As I met all these participants at the end of my fieldwork, I was unable to confront their narrative to others. It is possible that other Soninkes think differently, but for the time being, one thing seems clear: Soninkes of Guidimakha seem to be shifting the weights in the narrative of reasons for migration. Importance is gradually put on “victimhood” from the state.

### **3. Discussions and transition to chapter 4.**

In this section, I aimed to clarify the lengths of Soninke mobility: How? Why? When?... The goal was to understand the reasons of departures and introduce that Soninkes of Guidimakha say to be pushed out in immigration. In this sense, migration is not always a matter of pure volition, and they seem to partly endure more than embrace it. This ambivalence is linked to Ricoeur’s narrative identity (1990). The Soninke seek to make sense of these experiences, including the “imposed by others” aspect, in their narratives on immigration. And that is a direct link to Barth’s idea (1969) of construction in relation to other. Further analyse immigration narratives in the next chapter will allow me to explore the role of the maintaining

of relations across borders, in the dynamic of rupture. Chapter 4 unpacks the impacts of Soninke mobility in Guidimakha and abroad.

#### **CHAPTER IV) An analyse of the (negative) effects of Soninke migration in Guidimakha and in Europe.**

In his introduction to *Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd'hui* (Soumaré, et al., 2020, p.10), Cheikhna Wagué expresses how in this era of globalization and uniformization, sociolinguistic groups –such as the Soninke, are exposed to existential menaces. My goal in this chapter, is to link this evocation of problems and menaces with their source. Most participants framed immigration as that source. They highlighted the negative impacts it had on their society. I will first present the impacts of the distance bridged by communication, and then further analyse the contemporary immigration. I define “contemporary immigration” as the swift increase of number of immigrants leaving for France and Europe with modern means of transport since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Because this chapter is closely linked to the third, it mostly relies on Cheikh Bouye's (2017), Yatera's (1997), Soumaré (2017), Wagué's (2007 & 2023), Drame's (2022) writings and on Soumaré's, Wagué's and N'Diaye joint publication (2020). Some are cited frequently whilst others, more punctually. Albeit Nyamnjoh's (2013) study of communications between immigrants and their family focuses on Cameroonians; her thesis gives me the opportunity to talk about the same subject regarding the Soninkes. I link the two groups with Timera's study and it's analyse crossed with Manchuelle's writing offered by Chastenet (1999).

##### **1. Communications in migration.**

In her cross-reading of Manchuelle's (1996) and Timera's (1997) studies, Chastenet claims immigrants are depositary of a “double citizenship”: their mobility is based on traditional hierarchies and a durable situation, asking of them to take root in their new country *and* invest in their home country (Chastenet, 1999). This hinted me to focus on these two “places of life”. As immigration is economical (Razy, 2006), Soninkes do not (supposedly) aim

to fully establish in their place of immigration but rather wish to come back home eventually. Distance goes hand in hand with communication.

#### A/ Choreographies of expected communication.

Immigration propulses Soninkes in a different context. Even if the whole process is organised, migrating comes with new aspects, such as keeping in touch with the family back home. Timera (2001), in his study of self-affirmation and emancipation of young Sahelian migrant, says Soninke migrate to places where others already are. It is widely admitted in Soninke communities, as joining elder or family members in their place of immigration was recurrent in interviews<sup>11</sup>. But, if ever a Soninke was to establish himself in an unprecedented location, he would have communicate his success and invite the others to follow him. One would do anything to pay for his brothers and cousins to join them, said Fatoumata Diagana, interviewed on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2025. Hence, communication allows for a reinforcing of the network of migrants (Nyamnjoh, 2013). Also, communications must be maintained because of the immigration “double citizenship” (Chastenet, 1999). Hence, whilst it is a personal endeavour, any success in building a fortune would lose its sense if the links with the family had been severed (Timera, 2001).

Links maintained through communications are also ensured by the Soninkes as members of a community. This, amongst other aspects of communication, creates a certain form of control of the individuals; such a dynamic can be ensured by communications, which can act as a *“leash on migrants dragging them back into the family circle if they begin to stray too far away”* (Nyamnjoh, 2013, p.270). But also, it seems, by other members of the community. In this extract (Dramé, 2022, p.149), the coworker of the author’s father blames him for applying to regularization processes initiated by Mitterrand: *“Si tu régularises ta situation, tu risques de t’oublier ici. Et garde à l’esprit qu’ici, ce n’est pas chez toi. Ce n’est pas chez nous.”* This shows just how much communications are mandatory. The distance created by immigration is not supposed to “change” the immigrant’s mindset, as he is expected to invest in his home-country and ultimately, return. These communications are carefully *“natured and choreographed, with family reunions and imminent visits (that are) much anticipated”* (Nyamnjoh, 2013). Outouma Soumaré and Aboubakar Soumaré, interviewed on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025, told me that old Soninke in Europe still see the village as it was when they left it. The image of the village suffers from a similar distortion to the one experienced by the image of the lifestyle in immigration. The duality of this phenomenon tends to prove that the respective images that Guidimakhan residents have of immigrants, and vice-versa, are blurred. This brings me to my next point.

## B/ Pixelated images of migration.

Seeing how choreographed these communications are, it is more pertinent to use the term “pixelation” rather than “blurred” images. Seyre Sidibé, interviewed on the 18th of March 2025, told me he once saw an immigrant come back to the village for the holidays. At some point, the immigrant decided to buy every single piece of meat available at the local butcher’s shop (neighbours watched in awe). Dramé (2022, p.125) explains how her father bought additional suitcases filled with bits and bobs he never used to bring back as many gifts as possible. These two examples shed light on the shows of success that accompany a Soninke back in Guidimakha for the holidays. The images that Guidimakhans have of the diaspora’s life are pixelated by these behaviours. Immigration does not always come with immediate success. So, part of the communication when abroad can be dedicated to hiding the truth and painting one’s situation as better than it really is (Nyamnjoh, 2013).

The truth is that immigration is an objective. And communications to promote it, or to simply live through it, provoke rather negative effects on Soninkes in Guidimakha and in the diaspora. Beyond these effects, many participants could not run out of words to express how bad migration had become.

## **2. The harsh verdict of contemporary immigration.**

“It is illegal migration for the past years that is bad” (interview with the elders of Diogountouro, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2025). If “modern immigration” can characterize general immigration since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what I present as “contemporary immigration” relies on three major aspects: the increasing numbers of migrants, the means used to migrate, and the overall change in the diverse processes of migration highlighted by the participants (such as women setting out). The combination of these factors has many impacts on the Soninke society.

## A/ Negative impacts on the Guidimakhan people

When speaking for the Soninke of Kaédi, their chief, interviewed on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2025, told me that their growing tendency to set out in immigration provoked a “*rupture*” in the social fabric... “*Il n’y a pas de relève*” he added. Considering that Foutanké have only started economical migration recently, what should one think about the deprivation of forces in Guidimakha? Many Guidimakhan interviewees stressed how villages were empty: young men are gone whilst women, widows and daughters are left behind, said the elders of



Diogountouro. Anyone who goes to Guidimakha will see how empty it is (interview with an anonymous political official, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2025). This brain and workforce drain causes the streets and the Kas to be mostly empty (personal observations). This can lead to problematic situations for families. For example, Negue Doukoure, interviewed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025, told me that his family was taking care of two young boys. Their parents, residing in France with their other children, had not yet managed to obtain visas for them. But, less specifically, the general flight towards France or Europe further embeds, in the youngster's mind, that immigration is the only way out (interview with Outouma SOUMARE, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025). The departure of so many active people also comforts the already established dependence on the immigrant's money. Everything in Guidimakha is built with this money (interview with HD, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2025), wells, roads, houses... Sélibabi local school's water tank was constructed thanks to this money a short while before my field research, added HD. The Diaguili mosque, which is very big, was also entirely financed by the immigrants' money (interview with Silly DEMBA DIABIRA, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2025) over many years... Back in the days, one family's needs could be covered by one immigrant, but now the Soninke have settled in the comfort brought by this money. They need more money to sustain their lifestyle (interview with the elders of Diogountouro, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2025) ... 90% of the money comes from immigrants, estimated Bakary DIARA, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2025. That is also because, according to Silly Demba Diabira, Guidimanké gradually stopped their activities to rely more on the immigrants. He says that around the 1990's, the CFA franc was devalued, and a lot of immigrants suddenly became very richer. Guidimakha residents then stopped harvesting. Before that, harvesting was a pillar of Soninke Society. With this seeping out of the driving force, there are ever scarcer alternatives to the established dependence. The departure of the workforce is accompanied by the fading of skillsets (such as harvesting) and the loss of the "entrepreneur" state of mind... Silly Demba Diabira, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2025, told me that no youngster wanted to "get a move on" and start harvesting, despite hundreds of kilometers of unexploited land.

Moreover, the constant link with the western world through communications and holidays, and the maintenance of the "*eldorado*" that allows immigration (interview with HD, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2025) changes the attachment to the Soninke culture under its contact with globalization.

B/ The fading of Soninke culture, and the wish for the end of mobility.

In chapter 8 of *Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd'hui* (Soumaré, et al., 2020), Mady Ibrahim Kanté -a political science doctor and analyst at the Timbuktu Institute, says that Globalization has become cultural imperialism which led the Soninke to abandon their culture and language for western assimilation. Cheikh Bouye explains how through screens, the new generation is fascinated by new western concepts that they want to include in their identity (Cheikh Bouye, 2017, p.129). During our interview on the 2nd of April 2025, Negue Doukoure told me that if a Soninke “hangs out” with a white, he would whiten his behaviour and forget his origin... Other participants were less harsh, but many thought that there was a dilution of the traditions which translated to a fading of the identity<sup>12</sup>. For example, the Old Woman from Sélibabi, that I interviewed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2025, was extensive on the losses of wedding related traditions. Young women do not learn traditional wedding songs anymore. They sometimes only wear the traditional Soninke wedding dress just for photos before changing in a white dress, the European way, said CS, during our interview on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2025. Her daughter (around 30 years old), started to say that this meant nothing, but CS replied “you, yourself put it on so we could have a photograph in the corridor”. Hence, participants perceived this link with western culture and globalization as devouring their own culture. But it is not the only thing they felt was devouring the Soninke.

*“Nos fils partent mourir dans la mer”*, said one of the elders of Diogountouro. Others agreed. They were the only ones that abruptly told me they wished for the end of contemporary immigration. Some of them were against migration as a whole. One said that he encouraged the youngsters not to leave specifically because he had immigrated himself and did not want others to experience it. Others were against illegal migration, which, as Fatoumata Diagana said during our interview on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025, is privileged by Soninke men as they see it as a test of virility. Illegal immigration is tightly linked to contemporary immigration, as it allows for great numbers to travel on frail and rickety boats visible on Nouakchott's beaches. I believe that meeting more senior family members of those living abroad would have allowed me to gather more comparable testimonies. Let me now discuss what has been said in this chapter and then move on to chapter 5.

### **3. Discussions and transition to chapter 5.**

After presenting how participants framed immigration as the primary driver of change in Soninke society in Mauritania's Guidimakha region, I outlined several points. Immigration, in many of its facets, appears to directly shape these transformations. Communication contributes to a fragmented understanding of Soninkeness (experienced by Guidimakha

residents and people of the diaspora) and distorts the often-precarious realities of immigration. The vulnerability of migrants is masked, even as they recognize how Soninke identity and traditions are gradually diluted by Western customs. The community's ever-increasing dependence on migration provokes a loss of traditional knowledge and weakens its position in Mauritania.

However, calling on Barth and Ricoeur, I personally believe that this is less a loss than a redefinition of identity in relation to a new "Other": Western culture and globalization. Yet, this redefinition varies across individuals, depending on age, connectivity, and geographic location –whether in Guidimakha, abroad, or in transit. These diverse experiences push Soninkeness into a broader, more fluid space. As previously defined, following Barth (1969) and Wagué (2006), Soninkeness is an "active dynamic" that now meets a broader "Other" through migration and digital communication. Thus, I think it is safe to say that maybe, immigration is not the direct cause of change, but it is rather the contact Soninkes have with it (experienced differently depending on individuals). These uneven relationships to the "Other" translate the perceived ruptures in processes of identification: some see rupture, others continuity, while some embrace these changes. It seems to me that the difference between past and present Soninkes lies in how each person perceives the inclusion of this Other. Through narratives (Ricoeur, 1990), individuals attempt to align their origins, morals, and experiences with this Other, seeking a sense of continuity despite deep societal changes. In the next chapter I shall address the latent question that this discussion provokes. Which is no other than the one of leading narratives of the Soninke's place in Mauritania.

## **CHAPTER V) From estrangement to reclaiming: Isolation, narratives, and the hope for Soninke return to the national stage.**

My aim in this fifth chapter is to explore a more personal process of thought on the relationship between the Soninke and the Mauritanian state, and the narratives stemming from it. While still firmly grounded in interviews and the literary corpus, I build on these sources to share my own interpretive insight. Namely, that beyond the impact of immigration on Guidimakhan Soninke society, there exists a latent interrogation about the place of this group

in the broader Mauritanian context, and more specifically about their relationship with the central state. Thus, the goal of Chapter 5 is first to gather what points to a particularly strained relationship between the Soninke and the Mauritanian state since the 1960s. Then, to bring focus on a dual movement defining said relationship: a policy of isolation implemented by the state, and a movement of avoidance put in place by the Soninke. I argue that this dual movement is not parallel but mutually reinforcing. After a brief analysis of how new narratives come to be, I contrast them with this dynamic. Finally, I share my reflections on a small cohort of Soninke academics working, over the past decade, to restore unity and status through a consensual yet progressive narrative of identity. As this chapter is more of a personal reflection, I cite less authors, all the while maintaining my references to Cheikh Bouye (2017) and Soumaré, Wagué and N'Diaye (2020) and beginning my remarks by referring to Ould Daddad's memoirs (2003).

Moktar Ould Daddah, the first president of the *République Islamique de Mauritanie* (RIM), declared the independence of his country on the 28th of November 1960. In his memoirs, *La Mauritanie contre vents et marées* (2003), he states that Mauritania cannot be understood nor studied without properly understanding the "bi-ethnic" aspect of its peoples (Ould Daddah, 2003, p.151). Daddah's choice to include "Islamic" was partly made to try and put Islam, the only common decimal of all the peoples of Mauritania (White Moors, Hratins, and sub-Saharan ethnicities living close to the Senegal river, such as Wolofs, Halpulaireen and Soninkes) to the fore<sup>1</sup>. He was coupé in 1978, and the RIM has known numerous different political directions since. Despite this volition of unification, participants recounted that their society had a strained relationship with the central State. It indeed seems that the context in which was founded the RIM set the base for an ambiguous relationship with the central power and the rest of peoples.

## **1. An ambiguous relationship with the central state**

### A/ Historical predisposition.

First off, the Mauritanian flag unites people that used to in conflict with each other. For example, after the demise of the Ghana Empire, whilst the Soninke people were thrown in a process of peregrination, some faced dangers such as Moorish raids (Cheikh Bouye, 2017). Secondly, during French colonisation, the colonizers had a specific relationship with the Soninke, told me Kisma Traore, interviewed on the 2nd of April 2025, who remembered quite well the colonial administration. According to him, the sedentary Soninke were easy to get a

hold on, whilst the nomad Fulanis and Moors were constantly moving around the bush, or the desert. The Soninke had put up quite a fight to try and resist the French colonization (see Ould Boye, 2013). But the French quickly started enrolling them in the colonial army, employing them, or placing them in the "modern" school. As the numerous Soninke rapidly appeared to be trusty and loyal, the French gradually assigned them to the administration. But, as Soninkes had administrative skills, they were given most positions in the RIM's administration, said Kisma Traore. Eventually, ethnic politics, as well as the process of Arabization of Mauritania led to their progressive yet massive destitution. This was shared by participants such as M, interviewed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2025, and Silly DEMBA DIABIRA, interviewed on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2025. Kisma seemed to fully despise the white moors. He said that the white French colonizers left the powers in the hands of other white colonizers (meaning the Moors), and that the process of Arabization, was in fact a process of Hassaniyazation (the Moors speak Hassaniya, which is not Arabic). 10 out of 14 interviewees residing in Guidimakha expressed how schooling was increasingly complicated, partly due to the Arabization of programs, and because access to diplomas (or employment after graduation) is rigged by the Moors. Language is a major political problem in Mauritania, but other issues characterize this relationship. Indeed, according to participants, the state's first consideration of Guidimakha was that it was the "cellar of Mauritania"<sup>2</sup>. The Soninke harvested very productive fields back then, most interviewees residing in Guidimakha stressed the fact that Guidimakhan soil was rich! But in the 1960's, Guidimakha, because it was doing so well for itself, was left out of many processes of urbanisation or infrastructures put in place by the new government. This narrative is shared both by Soninke of Kaédi and the Soninke of Guidimakha<sup>3</sup>.

These accounts seem to show that the relationship between the Soninke and the central state has been, from the start, strained and felt by the Soninke as a dynamic of marginalization by the State. This feeling has been addressed in literature as well. Outouma Soumaré, who for reminder, is a Soninke political figure in Mauritania, writes that "*dans son rapport à l'Etat moderne ; la communauté sooninké (...) se trouve marginalisée par l'absence de références à la nation sooninké dans les différentes constitutions nationales*", he adds that in Soninke populated countries, "*Les ressorts et mécanismes de la démocratie ont été captés par des forces hégémoniques qui organisent un ordre olligarchique*" (Soumaré, et al., 2020). In these diplomatic insinuations, he cleanly signifies that the political decisions are in the hands of the White Moors in Mauritania. Which is true. Every president of the Republic has been a White military Moor. What stems from interviews, is that this marginalisation is a voluntary political endeavour of the Moors. And that for the past 65 years, the State seems to have done everything

to preserve itself at the helm of the country. For many participants, the State's politics can be summarized "*diviser pour régner*", president Ould Taya's motto. His presidency, lasting from 1984 to 2005 is characterized by the implementation of the Arabization policies.

### B/ Soninkes in a Moorish Mauritania

It is now clear that the relationship between the Soninke and the State is rather strained. But I wish to explore another side of it. Indeed, throughout my research and fieldwork, I have been confronted to the question of stance of the Soninke Community. They have an ambiguous footing in the country's panorama. Indeed, they claim to be voluntarily isolated by the government. Yet, one could think that, past the contempt, they do not care about the impacts on their footing. Indeed, the whole community is turned towards immigration. It's true! To summarize this paper: Immigration is hammered in the youngster's minds. Social ambitions are focused on immigration. Professional aspirations as well. Social relations (such as weddings) are influenced by immigration. Social success is immigration. Economical support of one's family comes from money made in immigration. Infrastructures are built thanks to immigrant's money... All of this throws a doubt on the elders of Diogountouro's narrative: they say they are victims of the state, and that this why they leave. It rather seems that they have no other choice but to leave. The Soninke society of Guidmakha fully relies on immigration! The one constant link they keep with Guidimakha is that they return there to be buried. But even that falls under the "sacred" rules of Soninke mobility. Dramé (2022) recounts how the village chief pressured the author's father to have his mother buried in the village, despite her dying wish to be inhumated in Senegal.

Participants told me that their community's place in Mauritania is consistently reduced by hostile politics. If this seems to be true, one is forced to also acknowledge the fact that they built their whole societal functioning on immigration. They freely started to leave for France before the RIM existed, and have since been growing increasingly dependent. That is why I think that this relationship functions on a dual dynamics: the state actively isolating the Soninke and the Soninke consistently leaving Mauritania. This duality is evidently reinforcing itself, as the State's effectiveness increases under the effect of the Soninke's growing departures, which, at the same time, are ever more numerous under the effect of this politic of isolation...

From the way Soninkes told me, immigration is at the centre of things. But the least we can say, is that it is at the centre of narratives. I would like to reflect on these narratives.

## 2- A few thoughts on narratives in Soninke society, yesterday, today...

Some participants would say that immigration is good, others would say it is bad... But all of them spoke about immigration. Every narrative shared this aspect amongst others. For narratives to have this “commonness,” they need common ground. Because it, precisely, allows “identity” to characterize a whole. By focusing solely on Barth's and Ricoeur's theories, I insisted on the rigidity of the Soninke identity. Indeed, as they're very inward-looking, they all share the same narratives. And, as they construct themselves in relation to the other by sticking together and sharing narrative, this construction is very similar across the whole group. Hence, we can suppose that, with the appearance of a new other, the appearance of new narratives has always been adopted by a vast majority of the Soninke. Ciré Kamara, interviewed on the 25th of March 2025, told me he had been learning heaps of "Historical facts" that changed his perception of the Soninke on WhatsApp groups, especially during the covid lockdown. He now had rather astonishing beliefs that left me rather doubtful. But this proves one interesting aspect: newness in his narrative on Soninke identity came from social media. Many articles or papers have extensively analysed the place of these technologies of communication in the Soninke community, and their impacts. For example, Wagué (2023) and Tandia (Soumaré, Wagué, N'Diaye, 2023, chapter 9)<sup>4</sup> have presented social media's role and its influence on masses, as well as its role on the Soninke identity. Tandia, who speaks of these communications as part of a general cultural renewal in the Soninke society, talks of a “*prise de conscience et de (...) volonté qui est aujourd'hui celle des soninkés de réformer ce qui a trop longtemps attendu d'être réformé*”. To him, progressively through radio stations at first, then websites, then social media, and even through rap (Soumaré, et al., 2023, p.166), there has been an “*evolution de manière d'être et de faire*”. Hence, if narratives integrate all the means of communications that fuel it, let's note that social media has had tremendous impacts on Soninke narratives of their identity.

In his paper, Tandia writes that he wants his message to prove the optimism of this renewal, yet participants I know would probably tend to disagree. The Soninke social tissue was presented as "torn" by many participants such as Silly Demba Diabira, interviewed on the 4th of April 2025 who described villages as split apart between “*conservatives*” and “*progressist*” groups. Even if claims and fights close to the ones Ganbanaaxu wages had existed before 2017, it was the sudden emergence of this group on WhatsApp that propelled these claims at the very centre of social relations, provoking the tear. Social media was hence what allowed this discourse to embed in the common narrative. Apart from these new technologies and means of communication, other ways of influencing the Soninke general idea of their

identity have been put in place. For example, the “*Festival International Soninké*” (FISO), occurs every two years in a Soninke-populated country. Celebrating “Soninkeness” is honourable, but it is also a way of presenting Soninkeness in a certain way. It is evident that the visions and narratives of Soninke Identity presented in the festival, influence the spectators and somewhat “corrects” them in their understanding of the group they belong to. I do not deem it to be a bad or manipulative strategy, but clearly, those who present the FISO in fact present narratives that aim to be adhered to. Thus, those who control the way the narrative is presented –as well as those who control who the “other” is perceived, have the capacity to adjust the definition of Soninkeness. In the introduction I said that with the next generation, if some major aspects of Soninkeness disappear (...) it will be because they will have been purposely, or not, left out. Up until recently, that which “defined” Soninkeness was, to me, a reference point of authority. So those that maintained the narratives and the relationship with the other, whether they were nobles, griots, religious men... But nowadays, examples such as social media or FISO are new reference points. The torn social fabric seems to in need of a new start, and the ones defining it could tailor a new position of the Soninke society in West Africa.

### **3. ... And tomorrow.**

This was quite clearly understood by Ganbanaaxu, I believe. They tried to call out the perversity of the duality between the slaves and the others (Wagué, 2006). Because, what logically stems from Barth’s principle, is that the Soninke internal segmentation is the result of the same process of the society as a whole building itself in relation to the other. “Noble” identity was built in relation to the two others... And vice-versa. That is why some Soninke are still very attached to saying that they are from this or that descent. This shows that having an identity allows to “be” in relation to the other, just as much as this other, even if they are above in the hierarchy. Ganbanaaxu’s endeavour to break the bulwark between classes was *in fine* an attempt to redefine the identity. Sidi N’Diaye<sup>5</sup> states that “*Les “communautés” soninkés (sic) de Whatssap, de Facebook, etc., ont parfaitement saisi l’importance de la visibilité politique*” (Soumaré, et al., 2020, p.169). Yet, beyond the many negative impacts of Ganbanaaxu recounted in interviewes, it seems that their objective was largely supported. Putting an end the slavery (which despite what people say, is ongoing in Guidimakhan Soninkes internal relations) was perceived by most interviewees as necessary. Yet, Ganbanaaxu’s flaw, was the way it called for it. These few participants told me they agreed with Ganbanaaxu’s objective but disagreed or condemned their action and its consequences: Zakaria Soumaré, interviewed on the on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2025; Djibrill Diallo Cheikh BOUYE, interviewed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2025; Fatoumata Diagana, interviewed on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025 & Outouma



SOUMARE, interviewed on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025. Tidiane Diagana, interviewed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2025 did not express critics on Ganbanaaxu, but heavily criticized slavery. Ousmane Wagué, interviewed on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2025, did not condemn or criticize Ganbanaaxu either, but was extensive on the troubles experienced throughout Soninke villages. In our interview, Zakaria Soumaré said “*Quand on fait une lutte, il faut que d'abord ce soit au niveau des idées*”. He has been active in promoting his ideas.

The above-cited participants are all academics or popular figures that have, in the past years, wrote a paper on Soninkeness. Zakaria Soumaré directed *Ecrire et penser la société soninké aujourd'hui* in 2020 with Sidi N'Diaye and Cheikhna Wagué. In the book, he wrote chapter 1. Fatoumata Diagana wrote chapter 2, Ousmane Wagué (Cheikhna Wagué's brother) wrote chapter 6, Outouma Soumaré wrote chapter 10, Tidiane Diagana wrote chapter 11 and Djibril Diallo Cheikh Bouye wrote chapter 13. Let's keep in mind that Zakaria Soumaré published a book entitled *La société Soninké entre hier et aujourd'hui* in 2017, and that the same year, Cheikh Bouye also published a book entitled *La société soninké : Hier, aujourd'hui et demain*. These books are all linked in multiple ways. They were written by people of the same group, with similar titles and at the same time... To me, this is not trivial. From interviews I know that a great deal of these authors shares Ganbanaaxu's objectives but reject the rupture it caused. That is why the titles are similar and translate one thing: continuity.

At a time where the Soninke community is barely mending the disastrous consequences of Ganbanaaxu's process, the authors call for a similar thing: A new Soninkara. But this time, it is presented as reachable through education. As Cheikh Bouye writes, “*Pour bâtir une soninkara nouvelle donc, nul besoin de faire plus d'enfants (...) mais il faut mettre en place une éducation pour tous*” (Cheikh Bouye, 2017, p.166-167). “*L'école ouvre ses portes à tous et le mérite transcende l'origine sociale*” says Tidiane Diagana in chapter 7 (Soumaré, et al., 2020, p.133). “*l'école qui devait être le socle de la transformation de nos sociétés grâce à son rôle de sensibilisation et d'ouverture à l'altérité*” adds Outouma Soumaré in chapter 10 (Soumaré, et al., 2020, p.179)...The Soninke are traumatised by Ganbanaaxu's emergence. And it seems rather clear that the society, gone asunder as it has, needs rebuilding. These influential figures suggest a non-traumatic solution. As up until now, the only group that had clearly expressed the want for a modernisation of society, had done it by ripping apart the society. This group of authors promise a visible future where despite important sacrifices, unity is achieved under the safeguard of continuity between “yesterday”, “today” and “tomorrow”.

This new “start” would resolve Soninkara's problems. Generalized education would eventually stop youngsters from migrating. Once grown-up and educated, they would work in

Guidimakha or Mauritania and recenter the Soninke economical activities. The return of Soninke workforce would re-instate the group as a major actor of Mauritania's internal politics. The dual movement would be stopped. Culture would not be lost as much in translation between communications and generations. Men would stop dying in the sea. Soninkes would "live together" again. This change is presented as continuous. Continuity with the past narratives (which would maintain the feeling of belonging to the same identity as before) and continuity with Soninke History would rid this Soninkara of its "newness". The social rupture of the Soninke community gone, it would eventually simply be Soninkara... again.

#### **4. Discussions and transition to conclusion.**

In this fifth chapter, I reflected on the Guidimanké's relationship with the Mauritanian state through a personal lens. I argued that beyond migration's effects, the core issue is the community's place within the nation. I examined a dual dynamic: state-imposed isolation and Guidimakhan avoidance, seeing them as mutually reinforcing. After analysing recent narratives, I contrasted them with this dual cycle. Finally, I considered how a group of Soninke scholars seeks to restore the community's unity and status by crafting a new "empowering" narrative. Before concluding, one final aspect deserves mention. Indeed, this collective endeavour to build a new Soninkara relies on two major aspects: unification of the Soninke and the pursuit of a position of strength within the national context. One could ask oneself which motivation prevails on the other. As states Kébé Hassane (Doctor "ès Lettres" in the academy of Versailles) in chapter 5 of the collective publication, *"A l'heure de la mondialisation, les Soninkés ne peuvent pas rester en marge. Donc les structures anciennes peuvent être revues et corrigées"* (Soumaré, Wagué, N'Diaye, 2020, p.108)...

#### **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this thesis, my goal has been to perceive, through the analysis of the narratives collected on the field, the causes, the dimensions, and the consequences of the dynamic of rupture experienced by the Soninke of Guidimakha. Barth's (1969) and Ricoeur's (1990) theories of identity constructed in relation to another and through narratives, allowed me to focus my paper on the processes of identification and the shocks they have endured since the 1960's. Taken together, these chapters led me further than the initial enquiry. By rooting

this research in accounts and discussions I have had with Soninkes, I have tried to listen as closely as possible to what the members of this community were saying. Clearly, if Soninke participants felt that their “Soninkeness” was different from the one of their elders or ancestors, that meant that there had been a change at some point. Yet, this was hard to believe, given the rigidity of their identity. I explored this aspect in chapter 1.

Indeed, I presented the importance, in the Soninke identity, of what I had perceived as “pillars” in the processes of immigration. I brought forward the extent of the importance of hierarchy, and the tradition of immigration. I then reflected on the impermeability of the ethnicity, showing how conservative it is through their values and sense of belonging. What stemmed from this first chapter was the continuity of these two “pillars”: they have been part of the Soninke identity since its earliest moments. Because interviewees shared them with their elders, the rupture they described had this strange mark of continuity. This supposed continuity is what I explored in chapter two.

The goal of that chapter was to explain that, despite the continuity of the two pillars, there had been a slow disappearance of traditions, behaviours, relations, as well as ways and habits in other aspects of Soninke identity. I first spoke about Soninkara, and how the fading of traditional practices caused the emergence of a sentiment of lost unity within Soninke society. Lost somewhere between the oldest and youngest Soninkes of Guidimakha alive today, this unity had been further damaged by the sudden emergence of Ganbanaaxu. This group tried to spark internal changes in the Soninke community, but the collateral damages they caused ripped apart the social fabric. Beyond this voluntary attempt, I wanted to show that the simple evolution of things –through the example of Soninke women, proved a wider evolution of social norms and ways of life. Hence, at that point, it was clear that the “continuity-characterized-rupture” I had perceived in chapter 1 was real: while the pillars still existed, hierarchy had become the target of wide criticism, that led to the breaking of the social tissue. Continuity, in the end, was no continuity at all. Changes happened, and I felt the need to set the base for understanding them in chapter three.

I thus focused on immigration, especially since Ganbanaaxu’s emergence had made hierarchy somewhat “taboo.” Many participants accused immigration, the second pillar, of being central to this rupture. Understanding its evolution since the 1940s—its organization, embedment, and duality as both an objective and a necessity, revealed deep transformations. What I had seen as “proofs of continuity” now appeared as the very tools of rupture: immigration as the source of change, hierarchy as the target of progressives. Yet, uncertain of this intuition, I chose to explore Soninke immigration further in chapter 4.

In this chapter, I focused on the effects of immigration on Guidimakhan Soninkes, showing how many of these impacts appeared negative. Migration, elevated as the only path to success, has distorted perceptions of immigrant life, leading to youth departures and social imbalance. Though less criticized than hierarchy –perhaps due to Soninke dependence, immigration clearly drives the rupture in identification. A few progressive voices did condemn contemporary immigration’s brutal realities, calling to end mobility. However, drawing on Barth and Ricoeur, I believe this is less a loss than a redefinition of identity in relation to a new “Other”: Western culture and globalization. This redefinition varies by age, connectivity, and location. Soninkenness, as an “active dynamic,” now engages with this broader Other through migration and digital communication. Immigration is thus not the direct cause of change; it is the diverse ways Soninkes experience and interpret it. These uneven relationships shape different perceptions: some see rupture, others continuity, while some embrace change. Through narratives, individuals strive to align their origins and experiences with this Other. This reflection led me to further explore these dynamics in chapter five.

From the start, I examined the relationship between the Soninke and the central State controlled by the white Moors as a possible source of this phenomenon. Reflecting on Soninke history with the Moors and the State’s behaviour helped me position my analysis. Although the narrative of Soninke being pushed into immigration solely by the State seemed partly discredited by the fact that modern immigration began before the RIM’s birth. But, examining ethnic policies since 1960 and testimonies made it clear that the State’s actions contribute to the lack of opportunities in Guidimakha and Mauritania. I then revisited the recent ruptures experienced by the Soninke and shared my interpretations of emerging narratives. In this time of rupture, I argue that those who restore unity will shape this new chapter of Soninke history. A group of Soninke intellectuals, publishing individually and collectively in recent years, seems to have grasped this. Their call for a new Soninkara based on education and equity promises fresh perspectives, safeguarding continuity.

It is precisely continuity that, to me, must be preserved to keep unity in Soninke society. What is now evident is that Soninke society is torn apart. Examples given by participants show efforts were made by both sides to fill the gap. Yet, in the hope of stopping the enduring aftermaths of slavery, progressists created too severe a disruption: the trauma inflicted on the social tissue seems too great for conservatives to finally align with progressists. Participants told me how they condemned, sometimes despised, Ganbanaaxu. But not its cause. Moderate intellectuals and published academics have understood this. That is why they try to suggest

ways forward while staying united and continuous with the past. I personally believe that there is no return possible to social relations as they were before Ganbanaaxu's emergence.

In discussions at the end of chapter 4, I presented immigration as the source of ruptures in the process of identification because it is experienced differently depending on people. To finish this paper, I wish to say that I believe "mobility" and "hierarchy" must be kept at the centre of the new narratives and their establishment. Indeed, to preserve unity through continuity, as many are trying to do, these pillars must not be rid of abruptly. Rather, following Ricoeur, their changes must be integrated in narratives as a radical yet continuous change of direction, rather than a change of ways.

If, eventually, Soninke society was to remain fractured as it is, what will people identify to? Most academics I met in Mauritania made it clear that Soninkes would never resort to radicalization or Islamization. But the Sahelian context is one where radicalized and armed groups evolve. Mauritania went through such an episode 20 years ago (see Ould Salem, 2013), and now the Malian neighbour suffers from similar problems, namely in regions close to Guidimakha. On April 7, 2025, in Sélibabi, an incident involving a demonstration of hundreds resulted in the body of a supposedly Christian Mauritanian being dug up. It is hard to identify the people shouting Allah Akbar in the videos of the protest. Given their faded grandeur and unstable present, the future of this region and its people remains ever more uncertain.

## ANNEX 1: PRESENTATION OF INTERVIEWS.

In this presentation of interviews, I present three aspects:

- 1: A brief presentation of the people I interviewed.
  - 2: How I plan to reference these interviews throughout my thesis.
  - 3: A list of the interviews and interviewees cited in this thesis.
- 

### **1: A brief presentation of the people I interviewed.**

I conducted 63 semi-structured interviews. Around forty of these interviews were with Soninkes. Fourteen of these forty meetings were with people that were living, at the time of the interview, in towns or villages of Guidimakha. I therefore interviewed 8 people from Diogountouro (in two interviews: one with the village mayor and one group of 7 elders), 2 from Diaguili (a man and his cousin), and 9 from Sélibabi (who were all mutual friends and/or cousins), the regional capital. The others resided in Nouakchott, Atar, or Nouadhibou... These interviews were conducted in Nouakchott. I directed my first interview on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 2025, and my last on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2025.

### **2: How I reference these interviews and interviewees throughout my thesis.**

I will usually cite the code of the interview at the end of a point addressed that I recount in my thesis. The code is constructed as such: *(interview with [Name and surname or initials], on the [date])*.

For example, one could see a similar phrase in the main body of text of this thesis: *Poets have a hard time finding a spot in the Soninke Society. Even if poets are not rare, their art was mostly mastered by the neighbouring Moors (interview with Salihina Moussa KONATE, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2025)*. Other times, I include the reference directly in the sentence, such as: *Salihina Moussa KONATE, interviewed on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2025 explains how poets had a*

*hard time finding a spot in the Soninke Society. Even if poets are not rare, their art was mostly mastered by the neighbouring Moors. As well, when the interviewee has not been cited in a while, or for better context, I sometimes add a quick description of the interviewee: Salihina Moussa KONATE, a young and published Soninke poet interviewed on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2025 explains how poets had a hard time finding a spot in the Soninke Society. Even if poets are not rare, their art was mostly mastered by the neighbouring Moors.*

### **3: A list of the interviews and interviewees cited in this thesis.**

Here is the list. It shows the name or the initials of the contact (in case they asked for their identity to be mitigated), alongside the date I met them and their quick presentation -that I redacted myself. I also include the interviewee's code. I wish to share two remarks:

First of all, I tried as much as possible, to ask my interviewees for their village, city or region of origin. It seemed to me that I might find differences in narratives due different geographical origins. It turned out to sometimes be the case. Indeed, as explained, Soninkes of Guidimakha and Soninkes of Kaédi have had different dynamics of immigration, hence there were notable differences in their narratives. When I notify in this list that a specific interviewee comes from a specific village, I tend to add (when necessary) a remark on their place of life in the main text of this thesis after citing them.

Second of all, this list only comprises the 40 interviews that are truly relevant for the thesis. They also practically correspond to the 40 interviewees conducted with Soninkes. Indeed, amongst the 63 interviews completed, 23 of them turned out to be not pertinent enough, or too short, not on subject, or simply repeating what had been said previously in another interview.

<u><b>Name or initials of the interviewee</b></u>	<u><b>Date of interview</b></u>	<u><b>Information about the interviewee</b></u>	<u><b>Citation in the text</b></u>
Bios DIALLO	15/01/2025	Bios DIALLO is from Guidimakha. He is not Soninke. He is a researcher and author living in Nouakchott. Famous for his works on Fulanis, he is very knowledgeable on Mauritania and on "river" communities.	(interview with Bios DIALLO, on the 15 <sup>th</sup> of January 2025)
Ousmane WAGUE	18/01/2025	Ousmane WAGUE is a Soninke professor and coordinator of several master's degrees in the University of	(interview with Ousmane WAGUE, on the

		Nouakchott Al Aasriya. He gave me many directions about his ethnicity's society, and also many contacts. He wrote chapter 6 of <i>Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd'hui</i> , (l'Harmattan, 2020) which is a collective publication of Soninke academics, under the direction of, namely, his brother Cheikhna Wague, also author of <i>L'Histoire des Soninkés dans le Fouta Toro</i> (Khartala, 2023).	18 <sup>th</sup> of January 2025)
CJ	22/01/2025	CJ is the head of a European firm in Nouakchott. He is European and mostly employed Mauritians.	(interview with CJ, on the 22 <sup>nd</sup> of January 2025)
Anonymous	30/01/2025	This anonymous interviewee, non-Soninke, had a high-level political role. This is the reason his anonymity	(interview with an anonymous political official, on the 30 <sup>th</sup> of January 2025)
Salihina Moussa KONATE	07/02/2025	Salihina Moussa KONATE is a Soninke poet. I met him at a conference, and we sat down a few days later for an interview. He recently published a poetry volume named <i>Souffles d'humanités</i> (Orizons, 2022).	(interview with Salihina Moussa KONATE, on the 1 <sup>st</sup> of February 2025)
Zakaria SOUMARE	08/02/2025	Zakaria SOUMARE is a renowned Soninke scholar having studied in Nouakchott, Dakar and Limoges, where he published a Phd thesis in 2010. His books <i>Un breton chez les soninkés</i> (Édilivres, 2014) and <i>La société soninké entre hier et aujourd'hui</i> (Les impliqués éditeurs, 2017) are references in understanding the Soninke society. He is one of the three directors of the collective work <i>Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd'hui</i> (L'Harmattan, 2020). It is publication composed of 13 chapters each written by an influential Soninke author, academic, or public figure.	(interview with Zakaria SOUMARE, on the 8 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025)
MV	12/02/2025	MV is the director of a small yet influential Research Center in Nouakchott.	(interview with MV, on the 12 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025)
Mohamedou WANE	14/02/2025	Mohamedou WANE, also known as "Doudou", is the dean of the Faculty of Humanities in The University of Nouakchott al Aasriya. We met once, he gave me precious informations and contacts.	(interview with Mohamedou WANE, on the 14 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025)
Vice-Doyen FLSH	14/02/2025	He is the Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of	(interview with the Vice-Dean, on the



		Nouakchott Al Aasriya. We met briefly but he had interesting insights on the Soninkes. I did not catch his name.	14 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025)
AS	14/02/2025	AS is a Soninke renowned in Nouakchott for his knowledge and understanding of migration and weddings in Soninke society. He believes there has been shifts in the identity of Soninkes.	(Interview with AS, on the 14 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025)
Anonymous	15/02/2025	This anonymous Soninke has a PHD in Geography and is widely known for his knowledge of Soninke society.	(interview with someone wishing to stay anonymous, on the 15 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025)
Oiga ABLAY	15/02/2025	I met Oiga ABLAY in Nouakchott. He was a very experienced and rather old Soninke man. He was renowned for his knowledge of Soninke History. It was the dean of the Humanities faculty of Nouakchott University Al Aasriya that suggested I meet him.	(interview with Oiga ABLAY, on the 15 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025)
Tidiane DIAGANA	17/02/2025	Tidiane DIAGANA is an inspector of the National education in Mauritania. He participated in the collective publication <i>Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd'hui</i> (L'Harmattan, 2020) by redacting chapter 11.	(interview with Tidiane DIAGANA, on the 17 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025)
Djibrill Diallo Cheikh BOUYE	17/02/2025	Djibril Diallo Cheikh BOUYE is a Soninke lawyer, official and author who produced <i>La société Soninké, hier aujourd'hui et demain</i> (L'Harmattan, 2017), where he calls upon a change and the building of a "new" Soninke society. He wrote chapter 13 of <i>Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd'hui</i> (L'Harmattan, 2020).	(interview with Djibrill Diallo Cheikh BOUYE, on the 17 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025)
Youssouph KAMARA	19/02/2025	Youssouph KAMARA is a townhall official in Nouakchott. He is Soninke but has been living in Nouakchott for many years	(interview with Youssouph KAMARA, on the 19 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025)
Anonymous	25/02/2025	Restrained information about this interviewee. They were Soninke and had held a place in very high political circles.	(interview of a Soninke wishing to stay anonymous, due to this position in high political circles on the 25 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025)

Seyré SIDIBE	18/03/2025	Seyre SIDIBE is a Soninke journalist living in France. He extensively studied Soninke society. He was recommended to me by the dean of the Humanities faculty of the University of Nouakchott Al Aasriya.	(interview with Seyre SIDIBE, on the 18 <sup>th</sup> of March 2025)
Fatoumata DIAGANA	20/03/2025	Fatoumata DIAGANA is a Soninke Professor I met in the University of Nouakchott Al Aasriya. Soninke and originally from Kaédi, she produced a thesis that won best Thesis of the Mauritanian RMI awards in 2020: <i>"La condition féminine" en Mauritanie à travers une lecture sociologique du genre</i> ". She was very knowledgeable on Soninkes and on migration. She had herself migrated to Europe for her studies.	(interview with Fatoumata DIAGANA, on the 21 <sup>st</sup> of March 2025)
Yakhoub BAKHAYOKHO	20/03/2025	Yakhoub BAKHAYOKHO is a Ganbanaaxu adherent and activist living in Nouakchott. He is originally from the Guidimakhan village of Diogountouro, where he is renowned.	(interview with Yakhoub BAKHAYOKHO, on the 20 <sup>th</sup> of March 2025)
Outouma SOUMARE	21/03/2025	Outouma SOUMARE is a renowned Soninke doctor. Apart from his succes as a surgeon, he also has had a political journey. Indeed, he obtained 2,39% of votes in the 2024 presidential election. He is of Soninke and Dutch descent. He participated in the collective publication <i>Penser et écrire la société soninké aujourd'hui</i> (L'Harmattan , 2020) by redacting chapter 10.	(interview with Outouma SOUMARE, on the 21 <sup>st</sup> of March 2025)
Aboubakar SOUMARE	21/03/2025	Aboubakar SOUMARE is at the helm of a firm specialized in ore extraction. He is Otouma SOUMARE's brother.	(interview with Aboubakar SOUMARE, on the 21 <sup>st</sup> of March 2025)
KD	21/03/2025	KD is a Soninke journalist living in Nouakchott. He is widely known for his knowledge of the Soninke Society.	(interview with KD, on the 21 <sup>st</sup> of March 2025)
Anonymous	22/03/2025	This Kaedi born Soninke wished to stay anonymous but knew a lot about immigration and Soninkara.	(interview with an anonymous Soninke from Kaédi, on the 22 <sup>nd</sup> of March 2025)
Soninke Chief of Kaedi	25/03/2025	The Soninke Chief of Kaédi and I met once in Nouakchott. It was professor Fatoumata Diagana that arranged the meeting. As village chief, he represents a very high moral authority: he is at the	(interview with the Soninke Chief of Kaedi, on the 25 <sup>th</sup> of March 2025)

		helm of the directions taken by the Soninke community of Kaédi.	
Ciré KAMARA	25/03/2025	Ciré KAMARA is the director of a Soninke cultural center in Nouakchott. He presented many aspects of the soninke community that were new to me, but central to him. His discourse was rather different from the other interviewees I had met as he mostly talked of the Soninke as being at the source of many things: the Gizeh pyramids, the hieroglyphs, mathematics, the statue of Liberty, Yoga, the Olympics games... He seemed to adhere to plot theories and his discourse was sometimes hard to believe.	(interview with Ciré KAMARA, on the 25 <sup>th</sup> of March 2025)
Negue DOUKOURE	02/04/2025	Negue DOUKOURE is in his thirties. He lives in Sélibabi. He has two wives and two sons. He owns a small shop selling different everyday needs. He manages the shop because when he opened it, a few years back, the cousin who was responsible for it drove it into the ground. He had to drop his job as a farmer to manage the shop. He still has his fields, a few miles from Sélibaby. He never migrated to France or elsewhere, as he wanted to “make it” in his home country. He has a house apart from the family estate, with a modern kitchen. His WhatsApp profile states “tout pour moi, rien pour les autres”.	(interview with Negue DOUKOURE, on the 2 <sup>nd</sup> of April 2025)
Kisma TRAORE	02/04/2025	Kisma TRAORE was from Sélibabi. To my knowledge, he did not go to Europe but did live in Senegal. His brother had fought for France during the two World Wars, as part of the <i>Tirailleurs Sénégalais</i> regiments. He had been born in 1935. He could remember the first time he went to school: his mother mocked the institutor, saying it was a waste of time. The institutor answered that her son’s sons would regret not being able to go to school if for some reasons they were unable to.	(interview with Kisma TRAORE, on the 2 <sup>nd</sup> of April 2025)
Old WOMAN	02/04/2025	This old Woman was seen as a knowledgeable amongst the people of Sélibabi. We only met for a short while and mostly talked about Soninke women. I did not learn her name.	(interview with the Old Woman, on the 2 <sup>nd</sup> of April 2025)

Kelly	04/04/2025	Kelly is a Fulani lawyer living in Sélibabi (Guidimakha) he is very supportive of Ganbanaaxu and a direct adherent. The IRA is the “ <i>initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste</i> ”, the first initiative that placed the religious question at the center of the debate on slavery (Ould Salem, 2013, p.198). The IRA was founded by Biram Dah Abeid, the main political opposition to the current president of the Mauritanian Islamic Republic.	(interview with kelly, on the 4th of April 2025)
M	04/04/2025	M is a Soninke and Ganbanaaxu adherent living in Sélibabi. He is a friend of Kelly’s (the Fulani lawyer).	(interview with M, on the 4 <sup>th</sup> of April 2025)
HD	04/04/2025	HD is a Soninke resident of Sélibabi, he is rather old, and generally recognised as “knowledgeable”, we met once. His father had set out early, fought in World War 2 and in Indochina. Then, he had come back to Mauritania in 1986. Since that date, he received monthly amounts of money thanks to the French retirement system. When his father died in 2020, HD’s mother claimed the “retraite” and she had been receiving the money ever since. His family has been receiving money for the past 40 years uninterrupted, thanks to the 20 or 30 years or so of work that his dad completed before heading home.	(interview with HD, on the 4 <sup>th</sup> of April 2025)
Anonymous	04/04/2025	This Soninke from Sélibabi had worked in Guidimakhan medias (such as radio) for many years.	(interview with a Soninke wishing to remain anonymous, on the 4 <sup>th</sup> of April 2025)
Silly DEMBA DIABIRA	05/04/2025	Silly DEMBA DIABIRA is a family leader in Diaguili, in the Guidimakha region. He first migrated to Portugal. He worked in the harbours over there, and on ships. There were deals between Portugal and Mauritania, most boats were filled with Mauritanian workers. When Portugal joined the European Union in 1986, the minimum wage dropped. So, he left Portugal and aimed to go to Marseilles. With the wage drop, he could barely sustain his own lifestyle; it was impossible to send money back home. But he first dropped by his home in Mauritania. When seeing how many	(interview with Silly DEMBA DIABIRA, on the 5 <sup>th</sup> of April 2025)

		men had left for France and Europe, he decided to stay. Our interview lasted approximately 2 hours.	
OD	05/04/2025	OD had migrated and spent several years in France. He had also studied at the University of Nouakchott Al Aasriya.	(interview with OD, on the 5 <sup>th</sup> of March 2025)
Bakary DIARA	06/04/2025	Bakary DIARA is the mayor of the Guidimakhan village of Diogountouro. He became mayor in July 2023. He is a Ganbanaaxu adherent and hence, the mayor of the only Ganbanaaxu townhall of all Mauritania.	(interview with Bakary DIARA, mayor of Diogountouro, on the 6 <sup>th</sup> of April 2025)
Elders of Diogountouro	06/04/2025	I managed to interview a group of 7 elders from the village of Diogountouro, in the south of Guidimakha. They were all adherent to Ganbanaaxu, and very supportive of the new mayor.	(interview with the elders of Diogountouro, on the 6 <sup>th</sup> of April 2025)
CS	11/04/2025	CS is a Soninke woman I met in Nouakchott. Originally from Sélibabi, she married a man that worked in an international context.	(interview with CS, on the 11 <sup>th</sup> of April 2025)
PGT	02/04/202	PGT is a cultural actor in the Guidimakhan village of Sélibabi. He has had a successful (and rare) career in a multimedia firm.	(interview with PGT, on the 2 <sup>nd</sup> of April 2025)
Fofana	03/04/2025	Fofana is Soninke from the city of Sélibabi. A relative of Negue Doukoure, he is a respected man. He tried to emigrate to France at the end of the 1990's but did not manage to leave Africa, reaching Ivory Coast before having to turn back.	(interview with Fofana, on the 3 <sup>rd</sup> of April 2025)
BS	05/02/2025 & 19/03/2025	BS is a Soninke official living in Nouakchott. He shares close ties with the Western diplomatic presence in Nouakchott. He holds an influential position in policy circles and knows many people thanks to his position.	(interview with BS, on the 5 <sup>th</sup> of February 2025) & (interview with BS, on the 19 <sup>th</sup> of March 2025)

## ANNEX 2: A QUICK NOTE ON THE FOUTANKE.

The Gattaga Neighbourhood of the city of Kaédi, is the biggest concentration of Soninkes in Gorgol. It is a rather a small community. That is why most studies on Soninkes of Mauritania are focused on the Guidimakhan Soninkes (told me an interviewee that had a high-level political role –which is the reason for is anonymity). Originally, Gattaga was a village in

itself. Nearby, was the village of Touldé. That is how it was when the colonizers arrived, said the village chief during our interview. The space between the three villages was filled by urbanisation. It is now the city of Kaédi. That is why often, people talk about the village of Gattaga, instead of the Gattaga neighbourhood. As Kaédi is the only Soninke community considered as part of the Gorgol (both culturally and administratively), most often, the term “*Soninkes of Kaédi*” refer, in fact, to all the Soninkes of Gorgol.

The Foutanké are rather different from their Guidimakhan neighbours and the rest of the ethnicity. For example, Foutanko and Guidimanko mobilities are a bit different, and the former are generally perceived as less conservative. But here is a longer justification: Gorgol is the fourth Mauritanian region in terms of population. Due to this administrative and regional difference, they have had a different experience of the Mauritanian context. These different experiences have led them to differ from the Guidimakhan Soninke. Listed below, are summarized the differences I learned about/

- Different geographical origin (interview with Outouma SOUMARE, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025).
- Different phonological origin (interview with Outouma SOUMARE, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025).
- Different rhythm of urbanisation and infrastructures (interview with the Soninke Chief of Kaédi, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2025).
- Different presence and influence of religious communities (interview with Fatoumata DIAGANA, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2025).
- Life in a Fulani environment, less conservative behaviour regarding weddings, and overall, less conservative evolution of the community (interview with the Soninke Chief of Kaédi, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2025).
- Different rhythms and reasons of immigration; “student immigration” rather than “economical immigration” (interview with an anonymous Soninke from Kaédi, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2025).
- Later impact of Ganbanaaxu and questionings of the social structure (interview with an anonymous Soninke from Kaédi, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2025).
- Importance of student ideals in the processes of identification (interview with Ciré KAMARA, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2025).
- Different conception of who can be a Soninke (interview with Ciré KAMARA, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2025).

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