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A GLOBAL HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF OTTOMAN-SENEGAMBIA RELATIONS: FROM THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT IN THE 15TH CENTURY TO DIRECT RELATIONS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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Abstract: This study reconstructs Ottoman–Senegambian relations from the fifteenth-century historical context to the mid-nineteenth-century direct relations, challenging the assumption that there was no engagement between the Islamic states in the Senegambian region and the Ottoman Empire. Employing a global Afro-Ottoman perspective and integrating Ottoman, African, and European archives, alongside newspapers and merchant correspondence, the analysis reveals three phases and backgrounds of interaction. First, Ottoman corsairs were present in the Atlantic waters from the late fifteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century yet deliberately avoided West African coasts for various reasons. Second, from the early eighteenth century onward, Fulbe-led jihad movements established Islamic states in Senegambia (Bundu, Fuuta Jaloo, Fuuta Tooro), integrating the region into trans-regional Islamic networks centred in Mecca and Istanbul. Third, following the Tanzimat reforms in the 1830s and the Berlin Conference in 1884–1885, the Ottoman Empire pursued diplomatic, commercial, and intelligence-gathering outreach with the Senegambian region, establishing consular offices in Dakar while maintaining spiritual claims over the region's Muslim communities. This history demonstrates the global interplay of Ottoman and African agencies connecting two distant regions previously treated as separate.

Keywords: *Bundu, Fuuta Jaloo, Fuuta Tooro, Atlantic Ocean, West Africa*

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Introduction

In recent years, significant scholarship on Afro-Ottoman relations has illuminated previously undocumented connections between the Ottoman Empire and distant regions of the African continent. The defining feature of these relations comprised the diplomatic and administrative activities undertaken by Ottoman officials and envoys who travelled to states within the Chad Basin, including Borno and Wadai, as well as to East African islands such as Zanzibar and the Comoros, and even to South Africa (Gökgedik 2024; Duymus 2025a; Duymus 2025b; Uğur 2006; Özkan and Yılmaz 2023; Gençoğlu 2020). Beyond these direct diplomatic engagements, contemporary studies have also identified indirect linkages between the Ottoman Empire and West African polities, notably Sokoto and Agadez (Duymus 2026; Duymus 2025c).

Such indirect connections present considerable challenges for historical reconstruction, as they generated minimal documentary evidence in central Ottoman archives, unlike administrative missions which produced substantial archival records. Nevertheless, disparate fragments dispersed across various archives in multiple languages collectively reveal evidence of Ottoman connections with regions that have hitherto received little scholarly attention, including the Senegambia region.

The absence of scholarly inquiry into potential Ottoman–Senegambian connections can be attributed to several interrelated factors. Primarily, the Ottoman Empire lacked direct terrestrial access to this region, whereas, owing to Ottoman control over Fezzan, the Empire maintained reach to central Bilad al-Sudan, including Sokoto, Borno, and Wadai, from the sixteenth century onward. Although historical evidence indicates that Ottoman merchants were present in Timbuktu during the nineteenth century, no diplomatic correspondence records exist within the Ottoman archives in Istanbul. Secondly, even during the nineteenth century, when numerous East African Islamic polities, such as Zanzibar and the Comoros, sought diplomatic engagement with Istanbul, Islamic states in the Fuuta regions of Senegambia apparently demonstrated no comparable interest. Consequently, no Ottoman diplomatic missions were dispatched to these territories. Finally, Ottoman activity in the Atlantic remains a significant lacuna in Ottoman Studies, attributable to the scarcity of relevant sources within Ottoman archival collections. In this context, establishing any potential Ottoman–Senegambian connection via the Atlantic necessitates first determining whether an Ottoman presence in the Atlantic existed at all.

The objective of this article is to address these historiographical limitations through the utilisation of multiple archival collections and multilingual source materials. The methodology involves analysing diverse primary sources, including newspapers, judicial registers, and correspondence, while most critically, integrating the history of Islam in the region into this inquiry to comprehend the global character of these connections, wherein African and Ottoman agents played a significant role. Accordingly, this article applies an Afro-Ottoman perspective to narrate a global history in which the main driving actors were the African and the Ottoman agents, while historical events driven by European powers played only a secondary role.

Ottomans in the Atlantic

Period of the First Ottoman Contact with the Atlantic (1430s-1550s)

The initial linkage between the Ottoman Empire and the Atlantic realm can be traced back to the establishment of diplomatic ties with the Emirate of Granada. Historical records from Spain indicate that by 1439, certain Ottoman naval officials were present in Granada (Lopez de Coca Castaner 2005: 230). Furthermore, following the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1453, Sultan Mehmed II (d. 1481) promptly dispatched an envoy to Granada to announce his triumph (Pertusi 1983: 26). Coincidentally, this period also marked the commencement of Portuguese maritime expeditions along the West African coast, which were encouraged and legitimised by Papal authorities in the wake of Istanbul's fall (Boxer 2006: 37–39). At this nascent stage, it was predominantly the Emirate of Granada and various Muslim communities in Andalusia that captured the Ottoman Empire's attention, drawing it towards the far western regions up to the Atlantic. In 1477, the Emir of Granada formally requested military aid from Istanbul against the Castilian Kingdom (Sılay 2011: 73). However, the Ottoman Empire, still largely an Anatolian state with no significant foothold on the North African coasts, was unable to provide substantial assistance to such a distant region.

The dynamics underwent a significant transformation circa 1486. During this period, an additional emissary from Granada sought audience in Istanbul, underscoring an imperative for military intervention (Masala 1983: 122). Concurrently, the Ottoman authorities were inundated with pleas from Muslim communities in Valencia, imploring for deliverance from Castilian dominion (Meyerson 1991: 67–68). As a direct response, Sultan Bayezid II (d. 1512) dispatched Captain Kemal Reis (d. 1511), accompanied

by a contingent of warships, to extend aid to Granada in 1487. That same year, the fleets under Kemal Reis conducted naval bombardments against Castilian forces stationed in Malaga, marking the inaugural instance where Ottoman military forces ventured in proximity to the Strait of Gibraltar (Masala 1983: 126–128). Meanwhile, during the same era, Portuguese vessels reached the shores of the river Congo, thereby establishing initial trade connections with the region (Radulet 1988: 112–113).



Figure 1. Famous "Göke" Warship of Kemal Reis, built in 1495, and presented in an Ottoman marine book.

Source: Topkapı Sarayı Kütüphanesi (T.S.K.), 1495

Despite the concerted efforts of Kemal Reis, Granada succumbed to the military forces of Castile in 1492. Four years later, in 1494, a coalition of Ottoman corsairs, departing from the western coasts of Anatolia, launched an unsuccessful assault on Almería on the Iberian Peninsula with the intent to re-establish the Emirate of Granada (Meyerson 1991: 67). Subsequently, in 1495, Sultan Bayezid II entrusted Kemal Reis with the monumental task of overseeing the construction of a formidable warship, the Göke, which was among the largest of its era and intended to assert dominance over all seas (B.O.A., BA, MAD, no. 23051). Consequently, Kemal Reis was dispatched to Granada once again during 1504–1505, but not for military confrontation

and rather with the mission to evacuate Muslim populations from Andalusia to North Africa first. Notably, he took his nephew, Piri Reis (d. 1553), on this expedition (López de Mendoza 1996: 193).

During this particular mission, the naval forces under the command of Kemal Reis seized a sailor from the Castilian fleet, who had provided navigational support to Columbus during his voyages to the American continent following 1492. Piri Reis, who had received navigational training from his uncle Kemal Reis, gleaned precise and detailed information about the Atlantic, the coastlines of the American continent, and West Africa from this captured individual and the Portuguese maps he provided. Upon his return from the expedition in 1513, Piri Reis presented his renowned world map to the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II. Hence, by 1513, the Ottoman Empire possessed a map of the Atlantic with the information on the coasts of America and West Africa, despite the fact that no Ottoman vessel had ventured beyond the Strait of Gibraltar at that time (Franco Sánchez 2003; Sarıcaoğlu 2013).

Ottoman captains were, from at least the fifteenth century, instrumental in charting navigation maps for both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, with these maps playing a pivotal role in the extensive corsair operations of the Ottoman naval forces across distant regions (Sarıcaoğlu 2002: 303–312). Notably, the Atlantic coastlines of Europe and West Africa were already delineated in Ottoman cartography prior to Piri Reis. However, Piri Reis's contribution lies in his comprehensive depiction of the Atlantic. The emergence of his map coincided with a period of intense Ottoman activity around Gibraltar. For example, the Ottoman corsairs made their initial passage through the Strait of Gibraltar in 1515, mere two years after the creation of Piri Reis's map, and conducted an attack on Conil de la Frontera, situated on the Atlantic side of the Iberian Peninsula ("Crónica de los duques de Medina Sidonia" 1861). Subsequent years were marked by continuous confrontations between Ottoman and Castilian naval commanders around the Strait of Gibraltar. The outcome of these engagements led to the commencement of substantial fortress construction along the Iberian Peninsula's coasts by the Castilian forces in the 1550s (Rodríguez-Salgado 2004). Paradoxically, these newly established fortresses in the southern Iberian Peninsula redirected the focus of Ottoman captains and corsairs towards the Atlantic, steering them away from engaging in the increasingly challenging confrontations with well-defended fortresses.

Ottoman corsairs in the Atlantic (1550s-1730s)

Following the 1550s, while the official Ottoman naval forces reoriented their focus back to the eastern Mediterranean for major naval engagements, a significant number of Ottoman corsairs chose to venture further into the Atlantic rather than re-join these official naval operations (Maziane 2007). A notable example of their activities is the attack on Cadiz, located on the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula, in 1559 (Hernández Sande and Galbarro García 2018: 1–35). Following years, these corsairs extended their operations even further, reaching the coastal regions of the Portuguese Empire. A case in point is the capture of a merchant vessel originating from Lübeck near the coasts of Porto, which occurred in 1584 (A.H.W., Abt. X. 1.2, 1580).

The year 1584 marked a significant juncture in the historical trajectory of Ottoman corsairs in the Atlantic. During this period, while the Portuguese and Spanish Empires exerted substantial control over numerous ports across Africa and Asia and initiated the colonisation of the American continent, following 1584, these empires began to experience a decline in their ability to secure their own coastal regions. A notable example is the 1585 assault on Lanzarote, the capital of the Canary Islands under Spanish dominion, by distinguished Ottoman captain Koca Murat Reis (d. 1609), who had previously participated in expeditions alongside Piri Reis and the prominent captain Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa (d. 1546). This attack was so unexpected that it severely compromised the Spanish defence, culminating in the capture of the local governor by Koca Murat Reis's soldiers (Lane-Poole 2011: 172). Emboldened by this success, Ottoman corsairs increasingly targeted less fortified coastal settlements and cities across the Atlantic. For instance, in 1606, a group of these corsairs launched an attack on County Cork in Northern Ireland (Wilson 1995: 103). Although in 1617, the focus shifted back to the central Atlantic, with an assault on Madeira Island under Portuguese control (Lane-Poole 2011: 199–204), subsequent years and decades saw a redirection of their activities towards the north. By 1625, Ottoman corsairs had targeted locations such as Lundy Island and Plymouth in western England (Büyüktuğrul 1981: 42–47). Some corsairs, following trade routes to Newfoundland, even ventured as far as the American continent, capturing vessels before the port of Newfoundland (modern-day Canada) (Calendar of State Papers Domestic 1858: 320). In 1627, two prominent figures among these corsairs, Arif and Bayram Reis, extended their reach to Iceland, launching attacks on several coastal settlements (Helgason 2018: 31–50).

Until the 1640s, Ottoman corsairs remained present over the Atlantic coastlines of the Iberian Peninsula and frequently orchestrated surprise assaults along the northern English coast (Calendar of State Papers Domestic 1880: 438–450). In following years, European powers gradually reclaimed control over the central Atlantic region. Nevertheless, the maritime incursions of Ottoman corsairs persisted in the Atlantic until 1737 (Vázquez Lijó 2005: 69). After this date, the dynamics of interaction between the Ottoman Empire and European powers shifted markedly from conflict to diplomacy and commerce. Ships previously engaged in raiding European coasts for plunder began to transport diplomats and trade goods.

The Limits of Ottoman Atlantic Expansion: Legal Geography and West Africa in the Arab-Ottoman Mapping

Following the extensive presence of Ottoman corsairs in the Atlantic for nearly a century, a pertinent inquiry emerges: Why did the Ottoman corsairs refrain from venturing further south beyond the Canary Islands toward the coastlines of West Africa, while simultaneously extending their maritime endeavours as far north as North America and Iceland? At first glance, it appears that the corsairs aligned their operations with prevailing merchant activities, naturally gravitating toward the northern Atlantic. While this rationale holds for certain episodes, such as their forays into North America, it is crucial to note that the primary ramifications of these corsair attacks were not solely the losses suffered by European merchant vessels, although such losses were significant,[1] but rather the frequent incursions upon European coastal settlements. A document from the Spanish governor of Galicia in 1616 elucidates an intriguing perspective on these assaults. The governor lamented that "…*they attack our coasts in a manner similar to the Portuguese raids on the coast of Guinea and São Tomé. While the Portuguese load their ships with black captives, the Turks load theirs with Christians*…" (R.B., Sig. II/2159, doc. 71, 23 October 1619, Bayona). This statement underscores a hierarchical framework within which the presence of Ottoman corsairs in the Atlantic was perceived; and thus, must be read more metaphorically. It is indeed a fact that Portuguese did not raid Guinea and São Tomé as the Spanish governor represents, since they mainly engaged in trade with some goods and African enslaved people in those regions. Yet, what is clear in the narrative of the governor is the fact that the Portuguese, wielding their

1 For instance, only in 1621, Ottoman corsairs captured over one hundred English merchant ships (Hebb 1994).

considerable naval power, were able to create a great demand for African enslaved people, considering them legitimate targets of enslavement. Conversely, Ottoman corsairs exercised their naval power over the European Atlantic coasts, treating Christians as similarly legitimate and feasible targets, not for enslavement per se, but for ransom. These comparative views highlight a structured pattern of maritime supremacy and domination in different geographic contexts during this period.



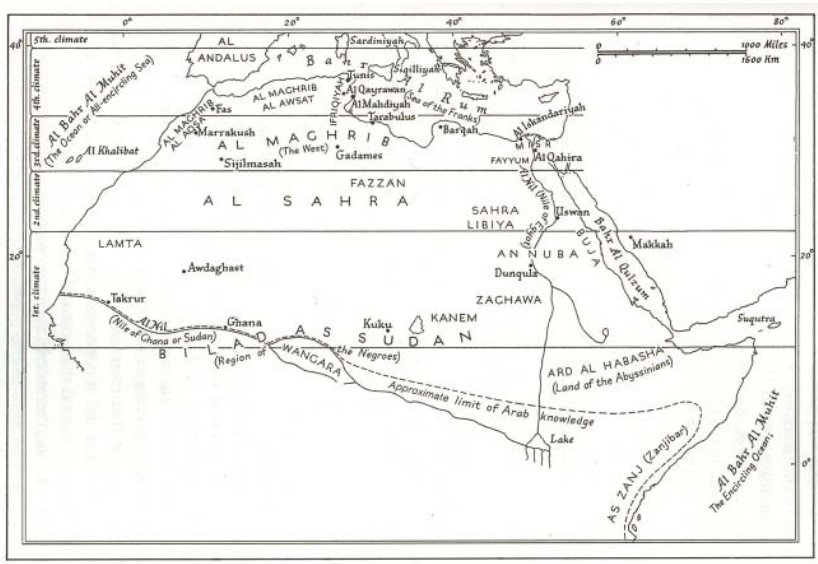
Figure 2. Piri Reis's Map of West Africa

Source: Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi (T.S.M.), No. H 1824

While such a comparison of the Portuguese and Ottoman systems regarding maritime activity is analytically problematic, due to fundamental differences in their approaches to slavery and enslavement, this comparison illuminates a critical, yet often misrepresented, aspect of Ottoman corsair operations within existing scholarship. For instance, these Ottoman corsairs were indeed not "Barbary pirates" as they are regularly named in the European sources (Duymus 2025d). Ottoman vessels present in the Atlantic regularly frequented Ottoman ports for resupply and the sale of captured goods. Moreover, these corsairs operated within a framework partly dictated by the Ottoman Empire, receiving intelligence regarding diplomatic relations with various states and adhering to corresponding operational constraints. For example, attacks on Muslim merchants or landings within territories considered Dar al-Islam (territories at peace with Islam) were prohibited. Furthermore, unlike the sixteenth-century European practice of utilising captives for chattel slavery, Ottoman corsairs primarily targeted individuals for ransom. Liberation typically resulted from the payment of a specified ransom following complex diplomatic relations. Consequently, two key criteria governed Ottoman corsair activity: targeting states classified as Dar al-Harb (territories at war with Islam) and capturing individuals whose rulers maintained diplomatic ties with the Ottoman Empire, facilitating ransom negotiations (Domingues da Silva 2017; Green 2012; Solow 1991; Engin 1998; İnalcık 2008; Bostan 2022; Gürkan 2025).

This characteristic may partly explain the missing interest of Ottoman corsairs in extending corsair operations south of the Canary Islands into West Africa, where the political status of the region was ambiguous—neither definitively Dar al-Harb nor Dar al-Islam—and consistent diplomatic channels were absent.[2] However, this does not preclude the existence of knowledge regarding West African territories. For instance, according to Robinson, already in the thirteenth century, there was a mind-map of Africa in Arabic traveller accounts, dividing the continent with certain climatic spheres (Figure 3) (Robinson 2004: 75).

2 Indeed, there might also be some technical aspects to this lack of interest. Upon going beyond Cape Verde, the Trade Winds that bring ships to the Caribbean coasts would make a turn back to the Mediterranean very challenging. That was the exact reason for the triangular travel routes of the European ships (Europe–West Africa, West Africa–Caribbean, Caribbean–Europe) that created the core dynamic for the Atlantic slave trade for centuries. Since the Caribbean was under the control of the European powers, the Ottoman corsairs might have considered not taking the risk to sail beyond Cape Verde.



MAP 4 The Arabs' conception of Africa in the thirteenth century C.E. Adapted from John D. Fage and Maureen Verity, *An Atlas of African History*, New York, 1978.

Figure 3. Arap Mind-Map of Africa in the 13th Century.

Source: David Robinson, Muslim Societies in African History (2004: 75).

The foundational cartographic understanding developed during this period was disseminated to the Ottoman Empire from the early fifteenth century onwards. A notable example is a map created by Al-Mursi al-Katib, a Tunisian scholar of Andalusian origin (d. 14??), dated 1461 and preserved within the Ottoman archives. This map demonstrably depicts continental climate zones of Africa (I.D.M., Asar-ı Atika, nr. 882). Similarly, Piri Reis's 1513 Atlantic map provides a detailed representation of the West African coastline (Figure 2) (T.S.M., No. H 1824).

Consequently, the limited Ottoman engagement with the West African coasts during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stemmed not from a deficiency in geographical knowledge, but rather from a strategic and technical calculation based on the region's complex legal status and the absence of established diplomatic relations compared to European counterparts. These diplomatic ties were crucial determinants in shaping

the operational parameters of Ottoman corsairs. This example shows that geographical knowledge did not automatically translate into political or military interest. Such interest rose from the Ottoman side only in the mid-nineteenth century, as will be seen in the following sections.

Expansion of Islam in Fuuta Jaloo and Fuuta Tooro (1600s-1850s)

The aforementioned complexities regarding the region's legal status and the absence of formal diplomatic ties underwent a fundamental transformation in subsequent centuries, driven by the expansion of Islam within Senegambia. While the Ottoman Empire experienced a gradual retreat from its global aspirations following the late seventeenth century, this period coincided with a profound religious and political metamorphosis in Senegambia. This transformation was characterised by the progressive dissemination of Islam, which subsequently emerged as the foundational pillar of the regional political order. Although Islam had been introduced to the area as early as the medieval period via trans-Saharan trade networks, it was not until the eighteenth century that it assumed a definitive, structuring political dimension (Robinson 2004: 45–52).

The dissemination of Islam into Senegambia unfolded within the framework of trans-Saharan trade networks linking West Africa to the Maghreb. Muslim merchants and itinerant scholars occupied a pivotal role in its incremental propagation (Levtzion and Hopkins 2000: 63–85). During this initial phase, Islam coexisted with indigenous political structures without displacing them, as its adoption was largely confined to commercial and intellectual elites. Consequently, Islam functioned primarily as a conduit for social prestige and esoteric knowledge rather than as a hegemonic political system. Commencing in the seventeenth century, however, the influence of Muslim scholars intensified significantly. The proliferation of Qur'anic schools facilitated the formation of distinct religious elites, a dynamic intrinsically linked to the development of Islamic intellectual networks across West Africa (Robinson 2004: 58–64). Furthermore, educational journeys and the pilgrimage (Ar. ḥajj) undertaken by Senegambian scholars to Mecca from the early seventeenth century onward facilitated the circulation of religious knowledge and practices. This scholarly mobility contributed to the integration of Senegambia into a transregional Islamic intellectual sphere, thereby fostering interaction with the Ottoman Empire, given that Mecca had been under Ottoman sovereignty since 1517 (Kane 2016: 145–152).

The eighteenth century represented a decisive turning point with the emergence of Islamic reformist movements that precipitated the formation of states grounded in Islamic principles. The preliminary event that paved the way for radical transformations in the Senegambia region was the migration of Fulbe scholar Malick Sy into the Bundu region (present-day eastern Senegal), a sparsely populated territory in West Africa under the suzerainty of the Gajaaga State, in 1690. Benefiting from considerable autonomy, Malick Sy transformed a small Muslim community into a nascent yet rapidly expanding Islamic polity prior to his death in 1699 (Curtin 1975: 190–192). This successful precedent inspired other Fulbe scholars in neighbouring regions; by 1716, under the leadership of Bubu Malick Sy, Malick Sy's son, Bundu had emerged as the preeminent power along the upper Senegal River (Clark 1996: 28).

However, Fulbe scholars operating in neighbouring regions faced markedly distinct conditions. These territories were densely populated and characterised by a multiplicity of ethnic groups and political powers, rendering the peaceful establishment of an Islamic state, as achieved in Bundu, unfeasible. Consequently, a religious revolution (Ar. jihad) erupted in Fuuta Jaloo in the centre of Guinea during the 1720s under the leadership of the Fulbe scholar Alfa Ba. Although Alfa Ba was killed in 1725 while the jihad was ongoing, his son Ibrahim Sambegu assumed leadership, guiding the jihad toward the establishment of the Islamic state. He subsequently adopted the name Karamokh Alfa and assumed the title of *almamy* (Ar. *imam*) (Diallo 2002: 35–43). This transformation constituted a significant rupture in regional political history, forcibly replacing aristocratic legitimacy with religious legitimacy (Barry 1988: 120–135). Nevertheless, the Imamate of Fuuta Jaloo is distinguished by a unique political structure that integrates religious authority with consultative regional bodies. This system was predicated on a balance between the various provinces, each with its own local leaders, and the religious lineages (Camara 1992: 45–60).

Following the success of the jihad and the consolidation of the Imamate of Fuuta Jaloo, a parallel movement emerged in Fuuta Tooro in present-day northern Senegal during the 1770s, spearheaded by the Fulbe scholar Sulayman Baal (Wane 1981: 40–45). Upon Baal's death in 1775, amidst the ongoing jihad, a council of scholars elected Abd al-Qadir Kane as the new *almamy*, initiating the establishment of the Imamate of Fuuta Tooro (Ware 2014: 125). This succession was distinctive among the region's newly formed Islamic states, as Abd al-Qadir did not inherit leadership through dynastic right—as he was not Sulayman Baal's son—but was instead selected by the scholarly elite. In subsequent years, Abd al-Qadir oversaw significant

territorial expansion while simultaneously reinforcing his religious authority through scholarly discourse. Consequently, he attained the status of a heroic figure in the region, with narratives concerning his life profoundly shaping communal consciousness for centuries to come (Kane 2004: 544–560).

Consequently, by the mid-nineteenth century, these Islamic states, each possessing distinct characteristics, were accompanied by profound social transformations, particularly within the economic and educational spheres. These developments contributed to the emergence of a complex and multifaceted Islamic political landscape in West Africa, as these dynamics were not isolated phenomena but integral components of broader regional movements, notably including the establishment of the Hamdullahi and Sokoto Caliphates in the early nineteenth century (Bello 2019; Traore 2012; Kani 1999; Levtzion and Hopkins 2000: 63–85 and 200–215; Sanankoua 1990; Tahir 2023). Furthermore, the establishment of these Islamic states facilitated Senegambia's integration into the intellectual networks of the wider Muslim world. The scholarly centres of Fuuta Jaloo and Fuuta Tooro evolved into major hubs for the production and dissemination of Islamic knowledge (Hunwick and O'Fahey 2003: 23–30). In this context, the Ottoman Empire's renewal of global ambitions in the early nineteenth century intersected with the extensive dissemination of Islam, the expansion of Muslim communities, and the presence of well-established Islamic states in the Senegambia region. Consequently, from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, a new epoch commenced for Ottoman–Senegambian relations. While indirect relations existed through the visit of Senegambian scholars to Egypt and the Hejaz region, which were under the control of the Ottoman Empire (Kavas 2013: 7–61), their agency in propagating Islam in their homeland and institutionalising it as a political system rendered the region a focal point of subsequent Ottoman interest. Thus, these Senegambian agents constituted, in effect, an indirectly vital component of Ottoman–Senegambian relations. Furthermore, as will be examined in the following section, numerous Muslim merchants and pilgrims from the region supplied the Ottoman Empire with crucial intelligence regarding local conditions during the late nineteenth century.

Ottoman-Senegambian Relations (1850s-1910s)

The Ottoman Empire's renewed engagement with the Atlantic world after the 1730s assumed a distinctive character, particularly from the 1830s onward. Over roughly a century of intensive diplomatic, cultural, scientific, and commercial interaction with European powers, the empire embarked

upon a period of reform, called *Tanzimat* (Çakır 2001; Şakir 2020; Özyaşar 2022; Saydam 2024). These reforms enabled the Ottomans to revive their global aspirations—not through corsairs as before, but via economic development and diplomatic outreach. New manufacturing enterprises were founded, and Ottoman merchants began exporting their products to international markets. Simultaneously, the empire forged fresh diplomatic ties with Muslim communities and rulers across distant regions, notably in Africa. By the mid-nineteenth century, Ottoman agents (such as official envoys and traders who provided reports to the Ottoman administration) traversed routes from Timbuktu to Kuka, from Zanzibar to the Comoros, and from Khartoum to Cape Town (Kavas 2006).

A particularly noteworthy episode in these new global aspirations involved the deployment of two warships. In 1864, two princes, Sayyid Muhammad and Sayyid Abdullah, originating from the Comoros Islands and sons of Sultan Abdullah of Anjouan, arrived in Istanbul seeking Ottoman assistance to liberate their homeland from French encroachment (Özkan and Yılmaz 2023: 70–86). Concurrently, the Ottoman governor of Basra petitioned for naval vessels to safeguard the empire's economic interests in the region. In response, the Ottoman administration conceived an interesting solution.

The Ottoman authorities resolved to dispatch two warships from Istanbul to Basra, charting a circuitous course around the African continent while transporting the sons of Sultan Abdullah to their homeland for the organisation of a jihad. The captains received explicit orders to halt at numerous African ports and harbours, where they were to display the vessels to local populations and rulers, thereby inaugurating the first formal diplomatic contacts between the Ottoman state and African polities, particularly with the Muslims. Although the plan to deliver Sultan Abdullah's sons to the Comoros Islands was aborted at the last moment, the expedition set sail in 1865. After calling at Algerian and several West African ports, the fleet lost its intended trajectory upon departing Cape Verde due to the Trade Winds.[3] Within a few weeks the ships reached the Brazilian coastline, ultimately anchoring in Rio de Janeiro. Exploiting this unforeseen arrival, the crew invited Emperor Pedro II of Brazil to board the vessels, establishing

3 This is very probably due to the lack of detailed knowledge on the wind belts of the Atlantic Ocean by the Ottoman captains and engineers. Ships that wish to travel further south and east had to stay very close to the coast. Considering the Ottoman ships lost their route after Cape Verde, they were probably too far from the coast and caught by the Trade Winds. Ironically, it was exactly these Trade Winds that enabled Columbus to land on the Western Hemisphere in 1492 (Vigneras 1976: 49).

the inaugural direct diplomatic relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Brazil. Following necessary repairs, the flotilla resumed its voyage to Cape Town and, after traversing the coasts of East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, finally arrived in Basra (Korkmaz 2019: 87–112).

The engineering reports from the expedition provide scant detail concerning the encounters along the West African shoreline. Yet, it seems that the caution of the earlier Ottoman corsairs about sailing beyond Cape Verde caused a technical gap in the Ottoman marine regarding the nature of the Trade Winds. Nevertheless, this initial direct Ottoman presence, despite the navigational mishap, marked a pivotal shift in the empire's strategic interest in the region, as their global aspirations did not cease with this technical challenge but even increased.

In addition to marine activities, Ottoman merchants also pursued overland routes toward West Africa. The mass production of textiles and paper in port cities such as Izmir enabled merchants based in Tripolitania to distribute these commodities through local merchant networks from Ghadames, Murzuq, Kano and Timbuktu deep into West Africa via trans-Saharan trade networks. Moreover, the spread of Islam throughout the far reaches of West Africa facilitated regular pilgrimage caravans linking Fuuta Tooro and Fuuta Jaloo with Ottoman territories—including Tripolitania, Egypt, and the Hejaz—thereby fostering reciprocal exchanges of information and merchandise.[4] Consequently, for instance, the papers produced by the *Izmir Kağıt Fabrikası* (operational from 1844 to 1855) circulated as far as Fuuta Jaloo, where they were incorporated into local family archives.[5]

While Ottoman agents were trying to reach Senegambian Muslim communities through diplomatic channels and merchant networks following the 1850s, the same interest also existed among some Senegambian Muslim communities. In the early 1860s, a considerable group of emigrants from the Fuuta regions travelled to Istanbul and settled in the city. In fact, in 1866, this community became so large in Istanbul that the city administration had to take some measures to organise their settlement and manage to overcome language barriers (B.O.A., MVL, 874/68). In the following years, the community continued to grow; however, it seems that the rulers of

4 Indeed, the dissemination of Islam in the very early ages around the Sahel region already enabled dense trade connections between the western Sahel region and Anatolia as well as Egypt since the fourteenth century (Silverman 2015: 375–395).

5 For example, see the papers imported from Izmir in a private archive in Lélouma (Guinea): Fonds El Hadj Alpha Mamadou Diallo Lélouma, Lélouma (Guinea). We are grateful to Alfa Mamadou Diallo Lélouma for this information.

Fuuta Tooro and Fuuta Jaloo did not prefer to use this reciprocal interest and exchange for creating a diplomatic channel with the Ottoman Empire, as no single diplomatic exchange could be found so far.[6]

Nevertheless, the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 became a turning point for the Ottoman Empire's connection with Senegambia. Although the Ottoman delegation was initially excluded from the Berlin Conference, Ottoman diplomats recognised the conference's pivotal relevance for Africa's future and mounted a concerted diplomatic effort to obtain representation (Ibrahim 2024). Because the conference did not partition the continent but rather established the principle of division (Craven 2012), the Ottoman Empire resolved to monitor the whole of Africa, with particular attention to Muslim communities and Islamic states. Accordingly, the western African littoral, especially the Senegambia region and its links to Fuuta Tooro and Fuuta Jaloo, became a focal point not only for Ottoman economic and diplomatic activity but also for intelligence gathering.

Deeply interested in the Muslim communities and Islamic states in Senegambia, the Ottomans decided to gather intelligence on the region. For this, the Ottoman authorities relied on two principal information streams. The primary source comprised European newspapers. Ottoman consuls stationed in major European capitals, particularly Madrid, Paris, London, Rome, and Berlin, regularly surveyed the press to extract any references pertaining to the Senegambian territories and the Islamic states there. For example, as early as 1885, European newspapers relayed to Istanbul the report of an individual identified as Sambou Waron (sic!) who purportedly proclaimed jihad against French domination in the Senegambia region, mobilising approximately ten thousand fighters near Timbuktu and advancing toward Sierra Leone (B.O.A., HR. SYS., 59-20). This was very probably the war of Mahmadu Lamine Drame (also known as Ma Lamine Demba Dibassi) (B.O.A., MVL, 874/68) in the Imamate of Bundu against French forces, and was rather limited in its scope despite the exaggeration

6 This is indeed a striking point, considering that, even during the French invasion of the region after the 1880s, prominent anti-colonial war leaders such as Samory Touré (d. 1900), Boubacar Biro (d. 1896), Ahmadu Tall (d. 1897), and Mahmadu Lamine (d. 1887) did not attempt to reach the Ottoman Empire, while as will be seen in the following pages, the Ottomans closely monitored the jihad of Mahmadu Lamine. Did they consider the Ottoman Empire irrelevant for asking help due to the distance or visible weakness of the Empire at the moment? Did they consider the Ottoman Empire not a possible ally despite common Islamic heritage because of reasons not clear for historians? How did they perceive the emigration of some of their communities to Istanbul? These are open questions that hopefully further research might answer one day.

of the newspaper (Clark 1996: 1–23). Another illustration occurs in 1893, when the Ottoman consul in Madrid conveyed that French officials were formulating a scheme to construct a railway linking Algiers to Dakar, thereby reinforcing their colonial foothold (B.O.A., Y.A.HUS., 250-5).

The Ottoman authorities also drew upon a second vein of intelligence: reports supplied by Ottoman merchants and Muslim pilgrims travelling within Africa. In 1888, Sultan Abdülhamid II (d. 1918) instructed his special envoy, Besim Bey, to produce a detailed assessment of the Senegambia region. Besim Bey consequently delegated the task to Rıza bin Ali, who gathered information from merchants and pilgrims. Rıza bin Ali's resulting dossier referenced the Fuuta Jaloo area and noted that the Kalfa islands[7] remained autonomous at that time (B.O.A., Y.PRK.MYD., 6-87). Yet, in 1889, it is reported that these islands were invaded by French forces (B.O.A., Y.A.HUS., 209-35). From the same line of source, in the same year, some reports were received informing that the French colonial administration in Senegal was obstructing local Muslims' ability to undertake the Hajj pilgrimage (B.O.A., Y.A.HUS., 365-29).

After 1890, even Ottoman newspapers began to turn their attention toward the Senegambia region. For example, the newspaper *Ceride Gazetesi*, published in Edirne (modern-day Turkey) between 1890 and 1892, recorded in its 25 September 1890 issue that British missionaries were attempting to penetrate the interior regions of the Gambia and Guinea in order to propagate Christianity against Islam, thereby laying the groundwork for a prospective colonial incursion (*Ceride Gazetesi*, 25 September 1890: 1). In this regard, the existence of Muslim communities and Islamic states in Senegambia intersected with the Islamic Union policy of the Ottoman Empire,[8] letting Istanbul establish relations with the region (Sır 2022; Eraslan 2023).

Notwithstanding their capacity for intelligence gathering, the Ottoman Empire was powerless to intervene against the French colonial conquest of the Imamates of Fuuta Tooro, Fuuta Jaloo, and Bundu following the 1890s. Moreover, to date, no extant records indicate that these states attempted to establish diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Porte, despite such

7 We believe that these might be the Bijagós Islands on Bissau's offshore, as only these islands in the Senegambian coasts were more or less independent during the late nineteenth century (Henry 1994: 66–68). However, these islands were not invaded in 1889 by the French forces, as the mentioned Ottoman report states.

8 The main idea of this policy was to bring all Muslims in the world together under the religious authority of the Ottoman caliph, without necessarily being part of the Ottoman Empire (Sır 2022; Eraslan 2023).

initiatives being relatively common elsewhere in Africa, as evidenced by the case of the Comoros. Nevertheless, the subjugation of these Islamic polities under French colonial rule did not preclude the Ottoman Empire from pursuing connections within Senegambia. This persistence was partly rooted in the Ottoman Caliph's theological and political conception of universal responsibility over all Muslim communities, irrespective of their specific political allegiances. Consequently, the Ottomans continued to gather intelligence and cultivate ties with Muslim populations in Senegambia. Additionally, a new dynamic emerged in the early twentieth century, characterised by the migration of Ottoman merchants, predominantly from the Lebanese provinces, to West Africa.

Already in the 1880s, an increasing number of Ottoman merchant vessels were visiting West African ports, especially those of Senegambia.[9] Some traders even established permanent residences in the region. To facilitate liaison with local authorities, the Ottomans began to appoint vice-consuls. The first vice-consul (a French merchant active in the region called Max Astrié) was appointed for the coasts of Guinea, being active in Boulam and Bissau in 1884 (Société académique franco-hispano-portugaise de Toulouse 1887: 21). The Ottomans also instituted a *Şehbenderlik*[10] in Dakar in the 1890s. However, the empire's fiscal difficulties and the modest size of the Ottoman mercantile community led to the closure of this office in 1895 (B.O.A., HR.TH., 160-9). When in 1908, a large number of communities in the Lebanon province began to immigrate to the Senegambian coasts, this triggered the Ottoman authorities to make detailed registers of these people in order to estimate whether Istanbul should open new consulates in the region (B.O.A., HR.İD., 11-11). After completing their registers, considering the large number of Ottoman citizens in the region, the Ottomans decided to re-open the *Şehbenderlik* in Dakar in 1909, and a French jurist named Geoge Vidal, who was already working in Dakar as a lawyer, was appointed as *Şehbender* (B.O.A., BEO., 3673-275437). After his resignation in 1913, a British officer in Dakar, called Mr. Stormon, was appointed as the new

9 This expansion had a dual character with the ongoing European colonisation in the region exactly in the same era. While the Ottoman merchants took the advantage of new trade activities in the region following the European colonial invasion, the Ottoman administration took the advantage of these expanding Ottoman merchant networks to monitor the European colonisation in the region (Brosselard-Faidherbe 1889: 20).

10 *Şehbenderlik* was a traditional institution in the Ottoman Empire. It was opened in the ports of foreign countries where the Ottoman merchants were active. Its aim was to manage the relations between the local administration and the rights of the Ottoman merchants. Later, most of the *Şehbenderlik* were integrated into the western consular system.

Şehbender (B.O.A., HR.SFR.3., 696-61). The following years proved the necessity of this consul for the Ottomans. For example, in 1912 the adjudication of a commercial dispute originating in Biga (modern-day Çanakkale, Turkey) involving a local trader and an Ottoman merchant, Esed Abdullah al-Haccar,[11] who resided in Khombole[12] (present-day Senegal), was transmitted to Dakar (B.O.A., HR.UHM., 129-24). Furthermore, Dakar became the diplomatic centre for the whole Senegambia region. For instance, in 1914 a merchant from the Lebanon province named Emin Hamud al-Neccar asked for the heritage of his deceased son in Bafata (present-day Guinea-Bissau), and the information was sent to Dakar.

The outbreak of several wars after 1911 once again turned the eyes of Istanbul to Senegambia. In 1912, to support resistance forces in Tripolitania against the Italian colonial invasion, the Ottoman foreign office sent a secret agent to Guinea in order to buy weapons from the black markets and smuggle them to Benghazi.[13] With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Ottoman authorities became increasingly aware that the French Empire was conscripting soldiers, among them Muslims, from the Senegambia region to fight against the Ottomans. Consequently, a substantial body of reports detailing the composition and origins of these troops was forwarded to the Ottoman government and the sultan throughout the period 1914–1918.[14] Ottoman merchants residing in Senegambia likewise continued to appear in official Ottoman records up to 1918. Following the occupation of Istanbul by British and French forces that same year, the Ottoman state effectively lost its sovereignty. Thus, the Ottoman relations with Senegambia came to an end.

11 The name of the merchant implies a connection to Ottoman Lebanon. Following the 1860s, there was a large emigration from the Ottoman Lebanon region, mostly merchant families. These families travelled along Mediterranean coasts but also reached the American continent and West-African coastal cities. In the case of West Africa, they actively joined the local businesses. However, only a small number of these Lebanese merchants continued to have trade or juridical relations with the Ottoman Empire, and most of these lived on the Senegambian coasts (Nouhou 2012: 135–151).

12 Khombole was situated along the Dakar-Bamako railway line and became a hub of the colonial peanut economy. The Syrian-Lebanese presence in Khombole is linked to this economy (de Garine 1962: 218–265).

13 Since the coasts of Tripoli and Benghazi were under the control of Italian marine invasion forces, it seems that the Ottoman military aimed to transfer weapons from Guinea to Tripoli via land. It is however not clear from the source if this was actually carried out (M.S.B.A.T.A., 110-9-1-5, 54-251-1).

14 For an example about Muslim Senegalese in the French empire who were sent to Çanakkale for attack, see B.O.A., DH.EUM., 3.Şb. 5-13.

Conclusion

This study has sought to reconstruct the fragmented yet significant history of Ottoman–Senegambian relations from the earlier historical context in the fifteenth century to the direct connections in the nineteenth century, challenging the prevailing narrative that views the Ottoman Empire as disconnected from the Atlantic world, and the Senegambian region as having no connections with the Ottoman mainland. By adopting a global Afro-Ottoman perspective and integrating disparate sources, from Ottoman court registers and European newspapers to local oral traditions and merchant correspondence, we have uncovered a complex web of historical contexts and interactions.

Initially, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Ottoman presence in the Atlantic was defined by the maritime dominance of corsairs. While these forces pushed as far north as Iceland and as far west as Newfoundland, their strategic avoidance of the West African coast was not due to a lack of geographical knowledge, as evidenced by the detailed cartography of Arab and Ottoman captains, but rather a calculated adherence to the legal frameworks of Dar al-Harb (territories at war with Islam) and Dar al-Islam (territories at peace with Islam), as well as technical complications. Without established diplomatic channels or a clear legal definition of the region by the Ottomans, and being beyond the Trade Winds, the Senegambian coast remained outside the operational scope of Ottoman naval power.

The second phase, spanning the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, was characterised by an internal transformation within Senegambia itself. The rise of the Islamic states of Bundu, Fuuta Jaloo, and Fuuta Tooro created a new political and religious landscape. These states, founded by Fulbe scholars, established Islamic legitimacy and institutional structures that later served as the bridge for Ottoman engagement. Crucially, the scholars, Muslim merchants, and pilgrims from these regions acted as vital agents, integrating Senegambia into the broader trans-regional Islamic intellectual sphere centred in Mecca and Istanbul, thereby laying the groundwork for future relations between the Ottoman Empire and Senegambia.

The final phase, from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, witnessed a diplomatic and commercial outreach driven by the Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms and the geopolitical pressures of European colonial states. The Ottoman Empire, recognising the strategic importance of the region connected to their Islamic Unity policy amidst the "Scramble for Africa," utilised intelligence gathered from the European press and from

local Muslim networks to maintain a presence in the Islamic part of Africa. The establishment of *Şehbenderlik* offices in Dakar and the appointment of vice-consuls alongside the Senegambian coasts marked the formalisation of these ties. While the leading figures in the region did not initiate any direct diplomatic exchange with Istanbul, some communities immigrated to the Ottoman capital in response to the Ottoman interest. Even as the French colonial administration dismantled the independent Islamic states in Senegambia, the Ottoman Caliphate maintained its spiritual and economic claim over the region's Muslim communities, viewing them as part of a global Muslim community (Ar. *ummah*) under its protection, as well as the Ottoman diaspora there.

Ultimately, the history of Ottoman–Senegambian relations is not merely a footnote in the history of the Ottoman decline or European colonial expansion. It is a testament to the global interplay of Ottoman and Senegambian agencies that, through imperial and Islamic ambitions as well as administrative and religious reforms, paved the way for the connections between these two distant regions. Future discoveries of archival materials may well allow scholars to fill remaining gaps and elucidate further details of these complex relations.

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