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ITINERANT TUKOLOR WEAVERS:
THEIR ECONOMIC NICHE AND ASPECTS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

by R.M. Dilley

What I describe in this paper are the weaving activities of Tukolor weavers who move from place to place in search of work. Weaving is a male occupation, and it is the men, often operating away from their home base, who leave their wives and families to follow an itinerant lifestyle. Only occasionally do entire families accompany the weaver during the course of his work. It must also be pointed out that itinerancy is only one of a number of strategies adopted by Tukolor weavers to exploit rural and urban cloth markets; their other weaving activities include, for example, settling permanently around a local cloth market in which there is a more constant demand for their cloth.

Despite entering these initial qualifications about the status of itinerant Tukolor weavers as peripatetics proper, I believe that the circumstances under which these weavers operate do highlight aspects of 'peripatetic studies' that should not be overlooked. In particular, the question arises of how to define 'peripatetics' who utilise both itinerant and sedentary adaptations; for indeed numerous examples of gypsies operating in this manner are cited in the literature (see for example Salo and Salo 1982; Williams 1982; Piasere 1985). A number of formal features defining peripatetic groups are applicable to itinerant Tukolor weavers and the socio-economic context in which they operate: for instance, Berland's notion of a peripatetics' niche (1982) can be shown to have relevance in this present example, and aspects of Rao's features of regular spatial mobility, a subsistence based on the sale of goods and services, and endogamy of peripatetic groups are all applicable to Tukolor weavers. Nonetheless, it is the dynamics behind the combination of peripatetic and sedentary strategies adopted by such groups that needs greater attention, I believe.

Thus, it is one of my aims here to show that, for example, a 'peripatetic-type economic niche' can be defined in the Senegalese cloth market; but who it is that occupies this niche by adopting the role of the itinerant depends as much on changes in the wider social organisation of the settled community as it does on characteristics of peripatetic-type groups *per se*. The approach I suggest here, therefore, is one that moves away from substantive definitions of peripatetics towards one that might be called a 'phenomenology of peripatetics'.¹ My use of this term refers to the two aspects of investigation: first, that in each instance the phenomenon of 'peripatetics' is the result of a particular set of circumstances related to the social, cultural and economic conditions prevailing in a given context, and which is specific to that particular context; second, that the experience and perceptions of the itinerant and the settled community should inform our analyses and conceptions of the phenomenon. Thus, I conceive of itinerant Tukolor weavers, as they themselves do, primarily as economic opportunists whose ways of exploiting the cloth market can involve them in either a settled or a peripatetic mode of livelihood, depending on the resources available in one or a number of localities.

Peripatetic groups are thought to occupy a particular type of socio-economic niche in relation to the host society they serve (Salo and Salo 1982; also Okely

1983, chp. 4). Salo and Salo suggest that they meet a demand for goods and services which are required either infrequently or by only a few people in sedentary society (1982:276). In addition, where small towns or villages may not be able to support a full-time specialist, a network of such sedentary communities on a peripatetic's itinerary can support the specialized services he offers (Berland reported in *ibid.*:277). These services do not usually rely solely on the provision of a single product but they span a range of diverse goods and various activities.

Although members of peripatetic groups are economically dependent on sedentary societies, there are often well-defined notions of social separation between the host and the peripatetic group (*ibid.*:278). In this paper I draw on the concepts of ethnicity set out by Barth (1969) and by Cohen (1969 and 1974) to investigate the social boundaries and cultural identities which separate weavers from the rest of the community, and which are used to distinguish between two groups of weavers from the same tribe.

A description and analysis of the types of socio-economic niche occupied by the two groups of weavers forms the first part of this paper. By taking a historical view, I try to show that there is a pattern to the type of adaptation one group of weavers has adopted under various political and economic developments in the region. This is followed by a section in which I investigate the relationships between the two groups of weavers in competition with each other for a place in the urban cloth market today. Members of each group have different notions of their own cultural identity, and these notions are utilised to create and maintain social boundaries between the two. This, I suggest, is a study of a process of boundary maintenance in the context of direct economic competition between groups, brought about by changes in the social constraints acting on one group of weavers in particular. These constraints previously restricted them from participating fully in itinerant cloth production.

I argue, then, that the existence of a 'peripatetic's economic niche' and the creation of social boundaries between the itinerant group and the sedentary community are conditions not sufficient in themselves to define who will occupy this social role. In the case of the Tukolor, the adoption of itinerant weaving activities by each of the two groups of weavers depends on changes affecting the socio-economic organisation of the sedentary community.

Ethnographic Background

The two separate groups of weavers among the Tukolor of northern Senegal are the mabube, a closed, caste-like group of weavers and praise-singers, membership of which is prescriptive and hereditary; and the maccube, a group of bondsmen who weave and perform other tasks for their freemen masters. Both groups are integrated into a broader social hierarchy. This includes the rank of freemen who control agricultural and subsistence resources in the Senegal river basin, and who also hold political and religious offices. The inferior rank of nveenybe or men-of-skill comprises the caste-like groups of craftsmen and entertainers, of which the mabube are a part. Finally, the rank of bondsmen and bondswomen, rimaybe, is the lowest social estate and its members are of servile status employed in the households of their masters. Freemen compose approximately 65% of Tukolor society, the men-of-skill about 10% and the bondsmen and women around 25% (see also Diop 1965:70). Although the men-of-skill are embraced by the Tukolor social hierarchy, they are considered to be set apart from the main body of

society composed of freemen and bondsmen. They are despised and scorned for the nature of the occupations they practise, and feared for the magical powers they are thought to possess; yet they are respected for their craft skills. Moreover, whilst operating within a sedentary agricultural community, many of these craftsmen and entertainers adopt an itinerant strategy to exploit commercial opportunities in the region around the river valley. Leatherworkers, wood-carvers, musicians, praise-singers and weavers all engage in itinerancy either at particular times of the year or as a permanent economic strategy. The one exception to this is the waylufe, the group of smelters and smiths whose craft equipment is too cumbersome to allow them to be mobile.²

As Berland has pointed out, peripatetic groups often offer more than one specialist service or type of product (reported in Salo and Salo 1982:277). Indeed, the mabuŋe are weavers as well as praise-singers, slaughterers, ritual specialists, and curers and diviners; their womenfolk often specialise in hair-styling. However, in this paper I concentrate solely on the weaving activities of the two groups of weavers - the bondsmen and the mabuŋe - since the comparison highlights aspects of the social role of the itinerant.

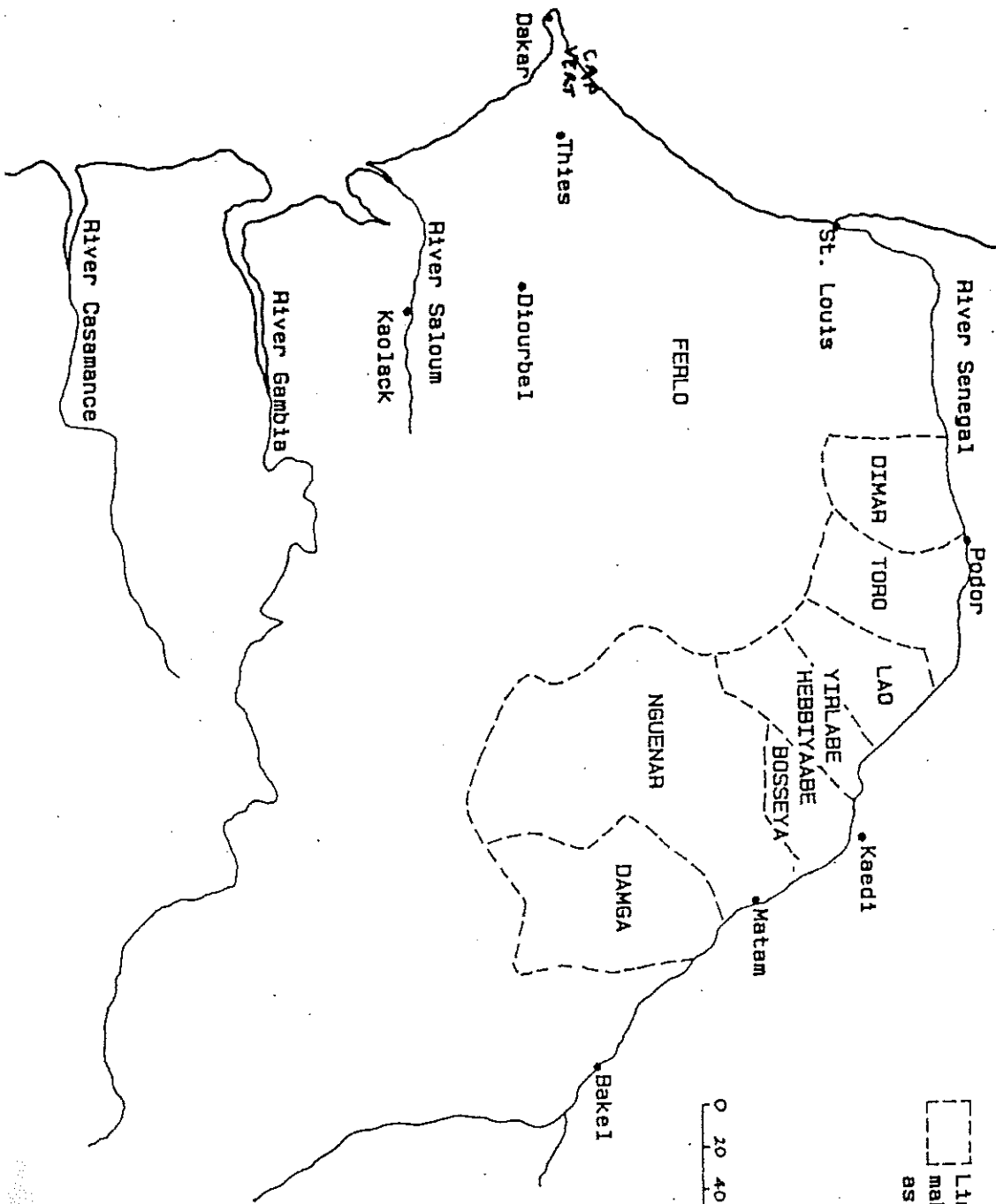
Both groups of weavers use the same loom, which can be easily transported even when cloth is still in production.³ The main structure of the Tukolor loom is made of four wooden posts set into the ground, to which a number of cross-members are lashed. This framework can be assembled in a morning. The warp threads and moving parts of the loom - the heddles, beater, pulley-block etc. - can be removed from the loom frame at any stage during weaving. After finishing work each evening the weaver removes these parts for safe-keeping at night, and they are replaced the following morning. Thus even when weaving a normal-sized warp roll with sufficient yarn for about ten pieces of cloth (about two weeks' work), a weaver can at any time pack up his threads, dismantle his loom and reassemble it in another location, while only losing around a day-and-a-half's work.

The dismantled loom frame packs down to a bundle of posts that can be carried on the shoulder, and the warp roll and other threads wrapped in a cloth can be slung over one's back. Some weavers do not carry around all the posts of their loom since cast-off timber or hewn branches found at each location can be used. The most important moving parts of the loom, made specifically by a wood-carver or by the weaver himself, which are attached to the warp threads, are always transported to each weaving location.

History of Mabufe Migration and Itinerancy

Of the two groups of weavers, it has been the mabuŋe who have adopted a pattern of migratory drift followed by local itinerant movement in response to pre-colonial political and economic developments in the region. They have been opportunistic craftsmen capitalising on the rise of commercial centres in the regions neighbouring Senegambia since about the 15th century and probably before. Evidence for this is suggested in records left by Arabic scholars and travellers, local chroniclers and oral histories. The formation of the empires of Tekrur, Songhay and Mali were the foci of migration for these craftsmen, and it was around these states that developed commercial centres which could be exploited by groups of itinerant weavers. For instance, circa 1400 a Fulbe community was established

MAP OF SENEGAL



Limit of Arrondissements which
 make up FUUTA TORO, today known
 as La REGION du FLEUVE.



as Massina on the Niger, and it included mabuße weavers as well as members of the Tukolor groups of courtiers and bondsmen (Delafosse 1912:I:229). Over a century later in 1550 Askia Dawda, the Soninke ruler, is reported to have installed 'mabbe' singers in special quarters at Gao, the capital of the Songhay Empire (*ibid*,II:104). These singers were in all probability mabuße; that is members of the specialised group of Tukolor weavers and praise-singers.

The ascendancy of the Empire of Mali in the 16th century produced a great political and commercial state which dominated large parts of the region. Leo Africanus passing through the area in 1529 observed that weaving was well developed there, and that large numbers of craftsmen and merchants of local and foreign origins were present (1956:464). Many of these craftsmen were no doubt mabuße weavers; and indeed a number of this group are referred to some time later in the Tarikh es Soudan (see Monteil 1965:479).

By the 18th and 19th centuries political and commercial might shifted back to the west, focusing on the Senegal river regions again, particularly with the rise of the Tukolor alمامate in Fuuta Toro. Curtin reports, for instance, that mabuße weavers were operating in Bundu, a small state on the upper reaches of the river, in the 18th century (1971:235). Moreover, the development of riverine trade by European merchants established on the coast drew commercial activities to the littoral regions, where weavers found new markets to exploit. In the 19th and early 20th centuries mabuße weavers were re-grouping themselves in the new administrative and commercial centres of the colonial period.⁴ Some were present in the town of St. Louis, the old French capital at its height at the turn of the century, and later they moved to the present-day capital of Dakar, as the political axis of the country shifted south to the Cap Vert peninsula, and as the wealth generated by groundnut cultivation increased.

Mabuße weavers have, therefore, adapted to shifts in commercial centres and market activities within the region. These transitions were matched by the weavers' capacity for mobility that allowed them to react to the growth or decline of economic centres which attracted merchants and traders from most regions of West Africa as well as from the Mediterranean coast (see for example Mauney 1961:380). This gave rise to a mobile population of craftsmen in which the mabuße weavers were particularly important in producing fabrics for the Muslim-dominated cloth trade (Monteil 1926). The new commercial configuration of the colonial period brought forth an adaptation involving mobility from the mabuße weavers, similar to one they had so often adopted throughout the course of history. The local itinerant strategies that these weavers adopt today are not, therefore, a unique response to a set of post-colonial conditions. Rather, it repeats a pattern of full-scale migration to a thriving cloth market and of local itinerant craftwork around that market. I now move on to consider this pattern of movement among present-day weavers.

Village Weavers

There are different constraints acting on the two groups of weavers in rural areas, and these constraints affect the possibility of adopting an itinerant strategy. Bondsmen have until recently been tied to the households of their masters, and have been unable to work beyond the confines of the village or its surrounding districts without the master's permission. Weaving and cultivation of the master's plots of land were two tasks within a range of other activities the bondsmen performed, and

they were not free to pursue commissions for cloth from other households in the area. They were thus occupied virtually full-time by duties for the master's household. Today, obligations on bondsmen still restrict their freedom of movement and of employment, particularly if they remain in their home villages. Furthermore, the presence of bondsmen weavers in a village leads mabube weavers to seek employment beyond the limits of the settlement, since they are in competition with servile labour for local weaving commissions.

It is the mabu weaver, then, frequently with few agricultural commitments, who can adopt an itinerant lifestyle, since it is easier for him to relinquish his village obligations. Most of them operate as client weavers to one or more patrons who invite them in turn to weave for their households. When weaving in their home villages, the weavers' looms are usually set up in one spot under a weaving shed or caali, from where they complete each commission. Weavers who serve patrons beyond their home village transport their looms to each household to work. There, the patron feeds and houses the weaver for the duration of the commission, as well as supplying the yarns to be woven. Weavers usually travel alone from household to household, leaving their wives and families behind in their home villages. A weaver employed in this manner beyond his home village is known as a capaan, and his patron is called an njaatigi, who is expected to meet all the weaver's needs during his stay.⁵

The circle of movement of these mabu weavers is often restricted to a number of settlements in the vicinity of their home villages. Not all villages have resident weavers, so itinerants can supply a demand for cloth where it is not met locally. These movements can easily be accommodated to the cycle of cultivation if the weaver retains tenancy rights to land in order to supplement his subsistence from craftwork. Indeed, the period of most intense craft activity is during the slack agricultural season following the second harvest taken from the river flood plain. In the past this was also the season when cotton was harvested and spun for weaving, though little of this is cultivated today. Those mabube weavers not wishing to be tied to the rural agricultural cycle can adopt a wider circle of itinerancy. They visit the regional capitals of Podor, Matam or St. Louis up to 100 miles away, transporting their equipment by bush taxi or bus. These towns have a relatively undeveloped market distribution of cloth, and so weavers again seek out short or long-term patrons who commission their services. A weaver in search of employment in such a town sets up his loom on the street and starts weaving cloth to be hawked around from door to door at a later stage. Once his presence in the town is advertised by his activities on the street, he may well be approached by a patron. Little or no cloth produced in rural areas is distributed through market stalls; this is a development of urban weaving in the Cap Vert region.

Itinerant Urban Weavers

A market-oriented distribution of cloth in urban areas of the Cap Vert region is dominated by full-time merchants operating from market stalls. Tukolor weavers migrate to these thriving cloth markets and develop a number of local weaving strategies around them. For instance, they can supply a market trader, work in a group of settled weavers, or follow a lone itinerant lifestyle to meet a seasonal cloth demand.⁶ All three possibilities offer scope for the itinerant, as I will show later.

The urban cloth market is affected by two annual cycles. First, there is a

yearly slump in cloth sales during the period of cultivation from July to September when many townfolk return to their villages to tend to their plots of land. The inhabitants of outlying towns and villages of the region are more affected by this agricultural cycle than are the populations of larger urban centres who are employed in government and administration, industry, the service trades and business. And it is these smaller settlements, which cannot support a full-time weaver, that the itinerant serves from October to June. During the period of cultivation the itinerant often returns to the larger towns to supply the slightly more constant demand of the urban population.

A second cycle which affects cloth trading throughout the year is the round of Muslim festivals ordered according to the lunar calendar. The date of each festival moves by a few days each year and is not fixed to the agricultural seasons. Extra demand for cloth is created at these times, particularly at Tabaski (īd al adhā), by people purchasing new fabrics to celebrate the feast. During the time of fieldwork, Tabaski fell during the wet season, and so produced a minor surge in the cloth market during the traditional annual slump in sales caused by the period of cultivation.

The itinerant weaver exploits a demand for cloth which is seasonal, temporary and localised. On his itinerary are a number of locations within large towns and in outlying areas, which are visited throughout the year. At each place he has a number of contacts with whom he re-establishes a connection on each visit. His customers expect him at certain times of the year and know where to locate him; for the weaver returns to a particular patch where he sets up his loom and where he also finds lodgings. According to Berland (1982) and to Salo and Salo (1982), then, one could label these aspects of the market as the 'peripatetics economic niche'.

Apart from the common features of itinerancy shared by both types of weavers, there are some differences in the modes of organisation of itinerant bondsmen and mabuŋe weavers in urban areas today, and it is to these differences that I now turn.

Itinerant Bondsmen Weavers

Bondsmen who migrate to a town, after either gaining the permission of their freemen masters or possibly by emancipating themselves through a monetary payment or Koranic study, are freed from many of the obligations towards their masters' households. Yet, for the bondsman weaver operating within the market distribution of cloth, a number of constraints can affect the strategies he may consider. Most cloth traders in the markets of these towns are of freemen or of mabuŋe origins, and they can exploit the servile status of a bondsman weaver if he establishes a trading relationship with them. For example, bondsmen weavers are still considered by many traders to be acting in the role of servile dependents and are not treated on an equal footing with mabu weavers. Moreover, their status as moral individuals capable of giving or receiving hake - a mystical force, arising from moral obligation, which regulates economic transactions - is not frequently recognised.⁷ Thus, by becoming an itinerant weaver serving a peripheral cloth demand in outlying areas, bondsmen can by-pass such compromising relationships.

An assembly of around 15-20 bondsmen weavers operating in Dakar illustrates this particular strategy. They have set up their looms on waste ground by a road

junction, and here each independent weaver works alone producing cloth which is either exhibited on tables next to the loom to attract passers-by, or is hawked from door to door on a Friday. Each weaver also has an itinerary he follows throughout the year, leaving this permanent site to work elsewhere. He packs up his loom and moves to an outlying area or to a nearby village where cloth demand is seasonal. Once he has met local demand, he might either move to another locality on his itinerary or return to the permanent site in Dakar, from where he will make another excursion later.

Women patrons are also a source of employment for these bondsmen itinerant weavers. They commission cloth to be woven at their house, and there the weaver receives his subsistence, a cash payment for each cloth produced and occasionally lodgings. Some of these women traders are informal cloth traders who sell pieces through local networks of women living in their neighbourhood. This type of cloth outlet, known as commerce de mère à mère, is distinguished from that involving male stall holders who operate from the market-place. Commissions arranged by such women patrons can last for anything up to six months or a year depending on the scale of their enterprise. However, most of them usually commission a weaver for a few weeks to complete an order for a forthcoming festival, or for a child's naming ceremony or a marriage at which cloth is the customary prestation.

These cloth outlets through women patrons and the lone itinerant strategy of moving between different localities appear from field data to be domains in which bondsmen weavers are most numerous. Both of these ways of operating, moreover, by-pass the market-place, which is an area today dominated by freemen and mabube cloth traders who are likely to compromise the position of bondsmen weavers in their employ.

Itinerant Mabube Weavers

A number of Mabube weavers I came across adopted a mode of lone itinerancy, similar to the bondsmen's strategy, and some also worked for a number of women patrons at various times. However, many itinerant mabube weavers organise their activities in a different way, and I will highlight this type of craftwork here. The situation of a number of these weavers in the town of Diourbel, some 100 miles east of Dakar, illustrates this type of craft organisation, which is based on a historical mabube adaptation. Diourel has one of the most thriving cloth markets in the country, and fabrics produced there meet demand in local areas as well as supplying exports for consumption in Dakar. The local market is particularly affected by the seasonal cultivation of groundnuts, and the period of market depression often lasts until December, by which time groundnuts are ready for market and the cultivators start receiving an income from them. Cloth trading reaches a peak in January as the cash-crop revenue is brought in, but tails off again with the onset of the wet season towards June or July.

A number of itinerant mabube weavers, attracted by the wealth generated in Diourbel through the cultivation and processing of groundnuts, arrived in the town in the 1950s. They settled around the market and established groups of client weavers who worked under their supervision. Later, these weavers set themselves up as traders distributing through the market-place the cloths produced by their client groups. Today, these weaver/traders have settled more or less permanently in the town, and they provide a focus for other itinerant mabube weavers who exploit seasonal and regional demand for cloth.⁸ This type of organisation can be

illustrated by the example of one weaver/trader with whom I worked.

As one of the original itinerant weavers who arrived in the 1950s, this man is now a head weaver and cloth trader with a group of client weavers working in his household compound. He is their njaatigi, a patron or host, who houses and feeds his client weavers in much the same way as the village patron does. In addition, each weaver is paid a fixed sum of money for every cloth made. A number of weavers are now settled with him in the group, though previously they too had been itinerant. Other members of the group, however, are itinerants employed over the short-term. During the course of my fieldwork with him there were four long-term client weavers at the beginning of the annual slump in cloth sales in July. They wove throughout the wet season but had difficulty selling their cloths. By January, five other itinerant weavers arrived, two from neighbouring towns and three others from the Tukulor homelands almost 400 miles away to the north. Once the immediate post-harvest boom period was over, two of the itinerants left for Dakar along with one of the younger long-term client weavers. During the following year the composition of the group continually changed except for two long-standing members.

The itinerant weaver settling temporarily in one of these groups is not restricted to travelling alone, for his wife and family can also find lodgings with the head weaver. While the husband weaves for the household head, the wife is allocated tasks around the compound such as pounding millet, drawing water from the well and cleaning out the huts. This movement of whole families between locations is not common, and is only feasible if the weaver operates in such a group. This contrasts with most other forms of itinerancy which preclude the possibility of other family members accompanying the weaver, since money for lodgings must be found.

The various modes of weaving patronage and of cloth production and distribution described above form sectors of the cloth market. The sedentary weaver of whatever social category, usually operating around a large cloth market, supplies a demand for fabrics that is reasonably constant and is supported by a full-time employed urban elite.

The market that is supplied by the itinerant weaver is one that is seasonal, temporary and localised and, as we have seen, is exploited in a number of ways according to the social category of the weaver. It is this latter sector of the market which can be labelled the 'peripatetics' economic niche', over which there is competition for a place between both groups of weavers; indeed, there is competition between these two groups in both sectors of the cloth market.

The mabu perceive the whole realm of weaving as their exclusive domain to which they have a primary claim deriving from their status as members of the socially recognised category of craft experts. To them, bondsmen weavers have encroached upon their rightful territory, and thus they are protective towards it. The sector in which the mabu retain a large presence and a firm control is in the more profitable area of supplying the market-place through client groups headed by a mabu weaver/trader.

The bondsmen, for their part, have gained access to the cloth market where it has involved them in the least contact with mabu weavers and traders, that is working as a lone itinerant or for women patrons. They now occupy a position in what has been defined as the peripatetics' economic niche through their adoption of

itinerancy: a strategy that represents a line of least resistance for them. Furthermore, the use by mabu itinerants of organised groups of client weavers controlled by a mabu weaver/trader may be seen as a response, which draws on an established pattern, on the part of the mabu to close ranks in the face of encroachment from bondsmen onto this sector of the market. In addition, there are other social factors which may be shown to have similar repercussions, and these are the topics of the next section.

The Maintenance of Social Boundaries

In this section I want to investigate how the mabu strive to retain their control over aspects of cloth production, and how they try to protect the type of economic niche they have exploited throughout history by the creation of social boundaries. It can thus be seen that they try to maintain themselves as a closed and exclusive group against possible intrusion by other weavers, particularly the bondsmen today.

Barth says that ethnic groups are categories of self-ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and he urges a shift of focus from the internal constitution and history of separate groups to ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance (1969:10). While following his call for the investigation of social boundaries between the two groups of weavers, I believe, however, that the content as well as the form of these groups must be considered, since the very symbols of group identity also have constraining effects on individuals (Cohen 1974:xiii). Also, I am uncertain of the use of the term 'ethnic group' for these two groups of weavers from the same tribe, and it might be more appropriate to consider them as 'informal interest groups' (Cohen 1969:4). The strife between the two groups of weavers, which causes the mabu to stress their identity and exclusiveness (features of Cohen's definition of ethnicity), stems from the changes in the social position of bondsmen weavers, who are now in direct competition with mabu weavers for a particular niche in the same sector of the cloth market. Before I consider bondsmen-mabu relations I must first briefly describe the freemen's perceptions of these weavers.

Freemen's Perceptions of Bondsmen and Mabu Weavers

Both groups of weavers are distinct in the minds of the freemen. Bondsmen were and still are to some extent considered to be household possessions of freemen masters. Indeed, Tukolor Islamic law defines the status and rights of bondsmen. Mabu weavers, on the other hand, are considered to be 'nyaagotoobe' or 'beggars' who perform craftwork and praise-singing for freemen patrons. They are often economically independent of any one freeman household, but they must exchange goods or services for subsistence. They are thought to be untrustworthy and negligent towards their children, since the household heads are often weaving away from home. The itinerant particularly is accused of being unreliable and irregular in his work. They are said not to complete orders on time, to fight shy of work when the patron is not at home, and to sell off the occasional cloth commissioned by the patron to a passer-by; the weaver then claims insufficient yarn was ordered to meet the patron's requirements. These ideas arise in the minds of the freemen because, as itinerants, these weavers are not so strongly bound by the social constraints of the local community, and they move on once a conflict emerges.

Bondsmen-Mabube Relations

One might have expected to find close assimilation of the two groups of weavers by virtue of their common interest in weaving. However, there is little or no integration of the two. Mabube weavers have little respect for bondsmen who weave, and they consider them to be inferior craftsmen who are due none of the acclaim reserved for a mabu jarno or master weaver. No self-respecting mabu weaver would work in a group of bondsmen weavers unless he were its headman or master weaver (jarno). A bondsman weaver does not assume the title jarno when he is skilled in the craft, but is referred to simply as mawdo or elder. Bondsmen do occasionally work in mabube weaving groups and one was present for a time in Diourbel during my stay. However, they must be circumspect in their relations with their mabu neighbours, and refrain from flaunting new designs they have created or from indicating the quality of their weaving. Such imprudence by a bondsman is thought to precipitate a magical attack by a mabu weaver, against which the bondsman has little defence; for the mabube are feared by all Tukolor for the incantations and spells (cefi and bolle baleeje) they are thought to possess. These magical verses can cause illness and misfortune to afflict a bondsman weaver who rouses the jealousy of a mabu.

The mabube, therefore, consider themselves superior to bondsmen weavers not merely in the practical or technical aspects of the craft, but also in relation to a body of weavers' lore (gandal mabube), over which they try to retain a monopoly. The exclusion of the bondsmen weavers from this body of lore, which includes the sets of verses and incantations used for offensive or protective magic, makes them susceptible to the malicious intentions of the mabube. Since the bondsmen have no specific means of countering presume mabube malevolence, they are usually deferential towards them and will avoid working in their groups. An illustration of the fear they have of any mabu, whether he is a weaver or not, is the case of a bondsman weaver who took on a commission from an urban patron. After setting up his loom and starting to weave, the bondsman then discovered that his patron was a mabu, though not a weaver. Fearing a magical attack, the bondsman immediately packed up his loom and moved on to work elsewhere.

The distinctions between these two groups of weavers do not arise, therefore, merely through a difference of position each occupies in the cloth market; but they rest on a difference in the cultural identities of the two groups.

Mabube Notions of Social Identity

It is around their body of lore (gandal mabube) that the mabube's notions of social identity are located. Indeed, the experience of the itinerant mabu weaver exploiting foreign cloth markets has impressed itself on this secret body of lore. The following is an incantation used in a song to protect a weaver:

Aliif yo Allaahu nangube
Tanjala Tanjala fatanyan
Seekum Beekum
Kamkum kamakum
Kamdulaay

This verse invokes Allah's protection in the opening phrase, and then continues in

translation:

Allah watch over me
A stranger in a strange land
Protect me.

This is followed by a rhythmic alliteration representing the sound of the shuttle as it passes from one hand to the other as the weaver begins work.⁹ The call for protection in this verse reflects the mabube's sense of vulnerability as an itinerant group which has operated at the periphery of settled communities throughout much of its history. The weaver's concern is not only for his own personal protection from malevolent forces, but also to safeguard the niche in which he operates. Moreover, the protection of this economic niche from encroachment by other weavers gives rise to a series of self-ascriptive notions of identity which serve to maintain the mabube as an exclusive, closed and secret society.

1. Endogamy. The mabube are endogamous, though this rule is extended to include other craftsmen and entertainer groups of the same social rank. Non-mabu females are often assimilated into the mabube through marriage, but non-mabu males marrying in usually practise the occupation of their father (woodcarving, leatherwork etc.). Those who do take up mabube identity are distinguished by other members who refer to them as 'mabus with one leg', that is through only one line of descent. The rank of men-of-skill excludes bondsmen, and so no integration of the two groups of weavers takes place through marriage.

2. Descent. Membership of the mabube is hereditary and does not depend on whether an individual takes up the socially allotted craft. Also, there are nine patronyms associated solely with this group. The mabube trace putative lines of descent back to a mythical ancestor, and these pedigrees are recited to prove one's membership of the group. Indeed, my first task on starting a weaving apprenticeship was to learn my teacher's asko or pedigree going back 16 generations to their mythical ancestor before I could be taught weaving or any of its lore. Moreover, a secret greeting known only to the mabube is used when meeting an unknown weaver. In reply to this greeting the stranger should recite his asko and thus prove his true mabu identity. By virtue of this notion of putative descent from a mythical ancestor, all mabube consider themselves to be kinsmen (mabube fof ko bandiraabe); and it is this sense of common ancestry which is used as a banner of cultural identity between dispersed groups of itinerant weavers. However, learning the origins of another weaver working the same area does not necessarily engender an atmosphere of co-operation between two mabube. But it does define the respect that each owes the other, and guarantees that neither is a bondsman imposter. The principle of descent, therefore, provides a method both for the definition of group membership and for the exclusion of non-mabube (cf. Okely 1983:68).

The exclusiveness of the system of constructed pedigrees not only restricts the access of other weavers to the group, but it preserves a monopoly over their secret body of lore. Since this body of lore contains prescriptions for weaving magic helpful to the craftsman in the course of his occupation, as well as offensive magic that can be used against others, this possession is a valuable tool to maintain social boundaries. Indeed, the threat of magical intervention and attack is used by the mabube to reinforce the differences between the two groups.

3. Symbolic Boundaries. Okely has described the animal categories of English Gypsies, specifically their self-identification with certain species, as a means of drawing symbolic boundaries around the group (1983:77-104). Mabube weavers identify themselves with the hyaena, an animal their ancestors are supposed to have eaten according to myth. The hyaena is considered by all Tukolor (even the mabube) to be unclean meat that is never normally eaten. It is also portrayed in Tukolor oral literature as stupid, greedy, ungrateful, treacherous, deceitful and a liar by nature. Moreover, the hyaena is a roaming scavenger, and this image corresponds with the lifestyle of the itinerant mabu weaver. The association of the hyaena with the mabube reflects, therefore, many of the stereotypes attributed to these weavers and in particular to aspects of their itinerant mode of craftwork, which is seen to be a type of opportunistic scavenging. Although I came across no bondsman who had actually concocted a putative line of descent from the ancestor, many of these weavers do claim that they are his descendants. In their myths, Malal is said to have been taught weaving by Juntel, the mabube's ancestor, and thus he claims a share in aspects of weaving lore. They recognise in these myths the inferiority of Malal compared with Juntel, and this is a symbolic step in the identification of the bondsmen as weavers who form an informal interest group with a claim to a particular niche in the cloth market.

Summary and Conclusion

In the villages of the Tukolor homeland the presence of bondsmen weavers represents a source of local competition for mabube weavers who seek weaving commissions from patrons. The adoption of an itinerant strategy by the mabube is related to this: for, by moving beyond the confines of the settlement these weavers can establish a wider circle of patrons not available to the restricted bondsman. The bondsmen, protected in some sense by the umbrella of servitude to their masters, do not come into direct conflict with the mabube since weaving is patron-based in the villages of Fuuta Toro. However, with the migration of many bondsmen to urban areas, there has opened up a range of opportunities for them to exploit within an open, market-oriented distribution of cloth. Moreover, they are thrown into direct confrontation with mabube weavers in this market.

The mabube attempt to protect their historical economic niche by the construction of social boundaries, which are aimed at preventing the bondsmen from encroaching too far onto it.

In addition to this, the sobriquets by which the hyaena is known suggest that it has a sinister nature: 'baleeru' means 'black' in a figurative sense, and 'ndu bawli reedu' means 'the one with the black stomach', in other words 'he who has malicious intentions'. This association with things sinister refers to the mabube's possession of a body of lore, said also to be black (gandal balewal), and is the reason why other Tukolor are fearful and mistrusting of them.

The mabube's self-identification with the hyaena is, therefore, a means of forming a sense of separate social identity from other Tukolor by associating with the negative symbols of the wider community. Furthermore, the pejorative nature of the image serves to detract would-be imposters from adopting mabube identity. From the freeman's point of view this association is a symbolic justification of their

attitudes towards them as social inferiors. For the mabube, however, it protects them from intrusions by bondsmen weavers and others: it is the protection of their minority status (cf. Okely 1983:104).

Bondsmen Weavers' Notions of Social Identity

With the adoption of an itinerant strategy by bondsmen weavers operating beyond the major cloth markets, it appears that they are constructing their own sense of cultural identity through symbols similar to those used by mabube weavers. Bondsmen claim, for instance, that the mabube's mythical ancestor had a servile who was instrumental in bringing weaving from the spirits to man, as depicted in mabube mythology. This mythical bondsman, Malal, has become a symbol of bondsman identity in the craft. However, the development of urban cloth trading has opened up a lucrative position for the mabube to occupy, and a number of previously itinerant weavers have now established themselves as cloth traders with groups of client weavers. Unless a bondsman weaver is willing to work within such groups or to supply a freeman trader, he must adopt an alternative strategy in cloth production and distribution. This strategy involves becoming a lone itinerant weaver operating outside the market distribution of cloth. To some extent, then, the roles of itinerant and settled weaver are now being reversed, with the once itinerant mabube establishing contacts in and around the market-place, while the bondsmen have gained access to the temporary, seasonal and localised work of the lone itinerant.

In this West African example, the 'peripatetic adaptation' must be seen as one possible strategy of craftwork adopted under specific socio-economic conditions of the wider community. Changes in the socio-economic organisation of the settled community have meant that the peripatetics' niche is not the sole preserve of one particular group. Thus despite the boundaries erected by mabube weavers that allow them to lay a claim to a particular economic niche, the participation of the bondsmen weavers in it rests on changes in their social position in the Tukolor social hierarchy.

Notes

1. The basic approach suggested here has much in common with that developed by Piasere in his paper.
2. Similar patterns of itinerancy are adopted by other West African craftsmen, musicians and specialists; see for example, W. d'Azevedo 1973:288-340.
3. Well suited to the itinerant weaver, most versions of the horizontal narrow-strip loom found in West Africa are easily transportable and quickly set up. See V. and A. Lamb 1974:24, and J. Picton and J. Mack 1979:107.
4. Many French writers in the early part of this century believed that weaving was passing into decline (e.g. Monteil 1926, Henry 1906 and Etesse 1929). However, it seems apparent now that rather than receiving a 'coup de funeste', weavers were most likely re-orienting themselves to the new colonial conditions (see Dilley 1984:58).

5. This form of patronage of itinerant weavers is most likely similar to the type of service the mabube would have entered into during their excursions into the territories of the pre-colonial empires, particularly of Mali, in the past. Indeed, this Tukolor institution is modelled on a Malinke form of patronage, for the term njaatigi is a word borrowing of the Mandinka jati or jatigi which refers to a landlord or host who stands as patron to itinerant Jula traders. (See Wright 1977:33-43).
6. See for a detailed comparative analysis of rural and urban weavers, Dilley 1986.
7. This topic is discussed more fully in Dilley 1986.
8. Cf. Salo and Salo 1982 who describe the settlement and urbanisation of peripatetic Romnichel horse traders in New England.
9. Such verses are often said by the mabube to be in the language of the spirits, though in fact parts of this one are a mixture of modified Arabic and Mandinka. Rather than denoting mabube origins among the Mandingo, as suggested by Gaden's interpretation of other mabu vocabulary, I would argue that it is evidence of mabube word borrowing adopted during their historical movements through the Empire of Mali in the course of itinerant weaving. Cf. Okely's discussion of language and race among Gypsies, in which she suggests that certain forms of Romanes developed between merchants and travelling groups on trade routes (1983:9). I hold a view similar to the one she develops, in that language borrowings do not necessarily denote racial origins, and that secret vocabularies, however acquired, take on a sociological significance in terms of group identity.

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