

The Soninke Civilization: The Societal Organization and Its Flaws

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Abstract

This article studies the contemporary *Soninke* societal organization and its flaws. The *Soninke* families called *xabiilo* (clans) are stratified hieratically, but profoundly characterized by some social inequalities. According to the societal classification, each *xabiila* (clan) is in charge of a social function that must be ensured religiously and continuously. Thus it is in a societal dynamic characterized by some social inequalities (difference between people and endogamy) that the *xabiilo* maintain some reciprocal relationships through the *laadani* (customs). In spite of being thought to be the backbone of the *Soninke* societal organization, that stratification is biased by some social inequalities.

Keywords

Soninke, Society, *xabiilo*, *laadani*, Societal, Organization, Inequalities, Functions, Clan, Hierarchal, Rank

1. Introduction

The Soninke are black people who are said to belong to the group of Mande¹. They live in West Africa. They are concentrated in the upper valley of Senegal River in the countries such as Mali, Mauritania and Senegal. They have a traditional society underpinned by an organizational structure characterized by a stratification of the clans (*xabiilo*). They are conservative as far as traditions are concerned. Their way of life is typically traditional. The *xabiilo* (families or clans) are tightly linked by *laadani* (traditions) which are the societal contract of

¹The Soninke is classified in the Niger-Congo Languages. It belongs to the mande: Bambara, Mandingue, Malinke, Sousou, xasonke, Jaxanke, Jula...Despite the affinities, the Soninke is different from the other Mande Languages. A Soninke cannot understand Bambara or Jaxanke if he does not speak them basically. Therefore one must know that the Soninke is a separate language. One can understand it if only you can speak it. In fact, linguistically, it is classified in the Mande languages but in terms of communication the Soninke cannot convey a message in Soninke to make the other ethnic groups of Mande understand it.

Soninkara. All the Soninke villages are founded on the *laadani* which are thought to harmonize the social relationships and symbolize social cohesion and solidarity. The latter is at the core of Soninke people's societal life. Nevertheless, the Soninke community is also characterized by some profound social inequalities because people are not considered according to their knowledge and competences. The consideration is rather based on the social rank. Despite being aware of the inequalities through their religion, Islam and globalization, they refuse to change their way of life. This phenomenon is harming their moral and religious principles. Besides, it menaces the social cohesion between the *xabiilo* because we note the revolt of the lower class, the *komo* (slaves) in many *Soninke* villages.

In these following sections, we are going to deal with the Soninke traditional societal organization with its flaws embodied by an unequal stratification of the clans (*xaabilo*), endogamy and unfair division of the lands.

2. The Societal Stratification among the Soninke People

As human beings are social creatures who need organization in everything in their life, the Soninke people have divided their society into *xabiilo* (clans) in order to facilitate the collective life. Every *xabiila* has a specific responsibility or role to ensure for the society. Thus, they say: "*Sere su sikki ti noqu ya*" (Everyone has to ensure a responsibility or post). In fact, this societal organization is the backbone of *Soninkara*. It is religiously respected and strongly conserved till in this modern world. They have even exported this way of life out of the Soninke homeland. Wherever there is a Soninke community, there is this type of traditional societal organization. They bring this social dynamic wherever they go with them. For example in Dakar, the capital city of Senegal, there is a chief of the village for some *Debu*² called *debe gume*³. There, the villages who have a strong representation have built some community homes called *kompoo hoore*. They gather in this place to organize meeting (for the affairs of the village) or *baade*⁴. Besides, they have the "*debe nkesi*" (a money account of the village) which requires a contribution at the end of every month. It favors the unity of the village. It reminds the members who are out of "*kara*" (homeland) the importance of the "*kofō*" (association or collective life) in their life. For the Soninke people, only God, The Almighty, can live alone but the human beings need the collective life to survive.

Furthermore, in France where there is the greatest Soninke community's representation, they have the same traditional societal dynamic. As they like *kofō* (collective life), the Soninke of France are well organized in this western country. For each village, there is a societal organization copied from the traditional one of *kara*. There, they rent community homes for the gathering and the organization of the village's members and affairs such as *batu* (meeting) and *baade* (mourning). They have some bank accounts for saving up the contributions of the members.

²*Debu* is the plural form of *Debe* which means village.

³The *debe gume* is the chief of the village. He is the eldest man of the *debu gumu xabiila* (the family of the leaders).

⁴Mourning ceremony, people come to present their condolences by praying and giving their material support (money) to the relatives of the deceased.

Every Soninke man who works in France must contribute to the *debe nkesi* and *xabiila nkesi* in France. The purpose of the *debe nkesi* is to help the *karanko* (people of the village) according to their needs and to ensure the transport of the corpses to the homeland⁵. Among them, we can have the construction of a mosque or a dispensary or a school. And the *xabiila nkesi* helps the *kaaranko*⁶ to prepare the special events like *salli ngumboni*⁷ (for Eid el fitr or the celebration of the new Muslim year) or an aid. The Soninke people love living together and in solidarity. They say: “*kappe ado me dema nde na Soninko nbira mokho nya*”⁸ That is why the one who refuses to join this traditional societal organization is sidelined or even banned. This demonstrates that the Soninke people are conservative as far as traditions are concerned. They argue that one must live as his predecessors. In other words, a Soninke man must follow the path of his parents and grandparents by respecting and loving the social traditions. The conservation of these values is a duty on every member.

In actual fact, *gunne ado kani* (in the homeland and abroad), the Soninke people are well organized. The principal objective is to facilitate the collective life. Therefore, for the harmonious and peaceful way of life, the Soninke have stratified the *xabiilo* with specific social functions.

2.1. The Hooro

The *Hooro* constitute the upper societal class of *Soninkara*. They are composed of the *Tunka lemmu*, *Mangu*, *Nyinia gumu* and *moodini*. Each of these sub-classes has a specific role.

1) The *Tunka lemmu*

The *Tunka lemmu* is the highest social class in *Soninkara*. They are responsible for leading (*mereye*). In other words, they are the first leaders of the Soninke society. Thus people say: “*Tunka lemmu nya foni mereye*.”⁹

Certainly, the rest of the *Hooro* can be leaders of the villages. However, they cannot lead a *kutiye* (region or province) with the presence of the *Tunka lemmu*. In a nutshell, the leadership is specific to the *tunka lemmu*. They are the aristocrats of the Soninke society.

2) The *Mangu*

The *mangu* are the right hand of the *tunka*. The latter cannot go without his *mangu*. They constitute the shield of the *tunka lemmu*.

Bathily (1989) writes: “Le *mange*, dit-on, devait marcher devant son *batu mpaaba* (...) son ‘patron’ pour lui servir de bouclier. ”

“It said that the *mange* must walk ahead of his *batu mpaaba* (leader) his ‘boss’ to serve him as a shield.”

They are the warriors and the mediators of *Soninkara*. They manage the army

⁵The *Soninke* people do not like to bury their corpse in the French church yards.

⁶People of the *Soninke* villages are called *kaaranko*.

⁷*Salle* means prayer but here it signifies feast. *Gumbo* (singular) means bull—*gumboni* (plural)

⁸Associate and help each other is a part of the *Soninke* people’s way of life.

⁹The leadership belongs to the *Tunka lemmu*.

and the diplomacy. Thanks to their bravery, they help the *tunka* (king) to manage the security and the stability of the city. They are considered the most courageous in the battle field. They can sacrifice themselves to serve the *tunka*. And they are proud of it because it is their social role.

Bathily (1989) writes: "...les rapports entre les *mangu* et les royaux avaient plus de valeur que l'or et l'argent, et que le mange "est l'œil, l'oreille, les mains et les pieds du royal."

The relation between the *mangu* and the royal kings was more valuable than gold and silver, and then, the *mange* "is the eye, the ear, the hands and the foot of the king."

In fact, the *mangaxu* is a social value which reflects bravery and integrity. All the members of this societal clan must have these values in order to perpetuate their social function.

3) The *Moodini*

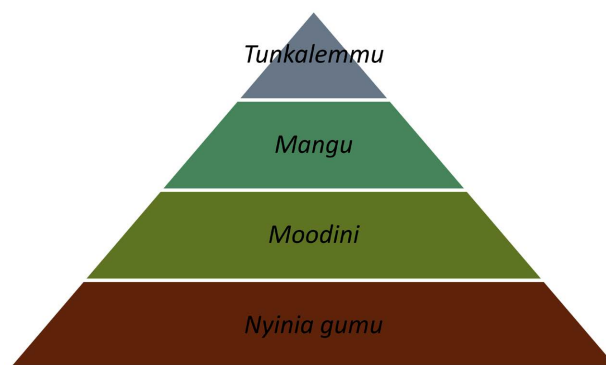
The *moodini* are in charge of religious affairs. They lead the congregational prayers in the mosques. They teach and preach Islamic science in the *mayise* and *hara nyibu* which constitute the traditional school. They are responsible for the marriage alliance, the naming of the new born and the mourning prayer briefly whatever is religious office. They are well respected by the *Soninke* community. Thanks to their noble function, people offer them an annual gift called *jakka* which comes from the harvest.

4) The *Nyinia gumu*

The *nyinia gumu* are the owners of lands. They are responsible for giving or buying properties. No one else has the right to attribute a land. This is a specific societal role of the *nyinia gumu*. As the issue of property is sensitive, the leaders of the *Soninke* people have entrusted some families with the management of the lands.

To sum up, the *hooro* are responsible for leading and managing the society. They hold the monopoly of the political power. Both the executive and the judicial are for them. They also manage the religious affairs and properties.

Figure 1 shows the rank of the *Soninke* upper class on the basis of the social traditional hierarchy of the families in *Soninkara*.



Source: Author's data collected in some *Soninke* villages in the area of Bakel (north east of Senegal in 2020).

Figure 1. The hierarchal classification of the *hooro* (Free men).

2.2. The Nyaxamalo

The *nyaxamalo* are in the middle class. *Nyaxamalahu* is a concept which refers to both the social status and the role of the *nyaxamalo*. The vocationally-linked social functions are an essential feature of them. They handle the craft techniques of Soninkara. Their specialties are:

- Metalworking;
- Woodcarving;
- Pottery-making;
- Leatherworking;
- Weaving;
- Music making and entertainment (Tamari, 1991: p. 224).

In addition to their craft and musical activities, the *nyaxamalo* play some special roles such as conciliation and mediation in the interfamilial or inter-village disputes, convey of (the chief's) message and marriage transactions.

They are responsible for keeping the social peace between the members of the society. In other words, they are considered peace keepers. They play an important role in the resolution of conflicts (*sirondinde*) between two people (husband-wife; brother-brother; neighbor-neighbour), families and villages. They are never at ease once they hear there is a problem in the social relationships. In fact, they are great conciliators (*sirondindaano*). For that reason, being *nyaxamala* requires some skills in communications. The *nyaxamalo* are reputed to be great speakers. They have the "art of speech". Thanks to the latter, they appease the anger of people and put joy in their heart. They are thought to hold the "magic of speech". When they praise people, they cannot prevent from offering them presents.

Furthermore, they are the monitors of the meeting. When the people of the village organise a "*botu*"¹⁰ at the square or under the palaver tree, the *nyaxamala* steers the assembly. The notables ask him permission before speaking.

They are composed of the *togo* (or *tago*), *sakko*, *geseru*, *jaaru*, *maabu* and *garanko*. The people of this clan have professions. They are different from the other *xabiilo* thanks to their qualifications.

1) The *Togo/Tago*

They occupy the highest rank of the *nyaxamalo*. They work metal (iron, copper, gold and silver) as well as wood. They are both blacksmiths and jewelers. They are in charge of making the rustic work's materials, doors, door locks, handles, reins, stirrups, weapons (knives, swords, arrows and rifles) and jewels. They also fabricate some items of furniture.

They are well respected in *Soninkara*. Moreover, people fear them because of their magic power. They are said to possess the power of the fire. That is why when someone is burnt; people bring them to the *togo* for the *maasande*¹¹. Thanks to their qualification, people can cultivate the earth for the crops and adorn themselves with the jewels.

Furthermore, the *togo* are responsible for circumcising the Soninke young

¹⁰*Botu* means meeting.

¹¹*Maasande* is the fact uttering some magic words to heal a person.

boys and excising the girls. They are considered to be proficient in this traditional operation which used to be a great challenge for the youth. The women provide some (secret) female products and hairdressing.

2) The *Sakko*

The *sakko* come after the *tago*. They occupy the second place among the *nyaxamalo*. They are qualified in woodcarving. We can say that they are the carpenters of *Soninkara*. They make mortars, pestles, wood bowls (*nore*), shelves, stick, seats and canoes. They are believed to possess the power of the trees. On account of that power, people fear them.

As the *nyaxamalo* have overlapping functions, the *sakko* play the role of mediator and conciliator as well in certain circumstances such as interfamilial or village disputes. This function constitutes an essential feature of the *nyaxamalo* of *Soninkara*.

3) The *Geseru* and *Jaaru*

The *geseru* and *jaru* are both praise-singers and genealogists. The difference between these two *nyaxamalo* is the former, is nobler than the latter. According to the Soninke oral tradition, the *gesere* was formerly a *hoore*. He became *nyaxamala* when his brother cut off his thigh a piece of meat to feed him. Therefore, to be grateful to his brother, the *gesere* say: "I will be your praise-singer (Soninke oral tradition)."

They accompany the *tunka* in the royal court. They play the role of advisor. The *tunka* or the rest of the *hooro* consult them in their private affairs. They are good speakers. Besides, when there is a ceremony in the village, the *jaru* ensure the animation. They make people happy by telling story or by praising or by singing. They use some musical instruments such as *dondonge*¹² and *ganbare*¹³ to attract people. One of our informers says: "*jare* means heal." Therefore, they heal people by making joy, appeasing and settling their anxieties and problems.

Moreover, they are the depositary of the oral traditions. They are specialist in telling *tarikhu* (history), story tales (*khiisa*) and *danbe* (genealogy). They know many secrets of the *xabiilo* (families). Many people fear the tongue of the *jaare* on account of what they know and their magic speech. They are the masters of speech, archivists and the memoir of the Soninke society (*Soninkara*). This traditional function is fundamental so that a traditional training is ensured to prepare the next generation. In fact, it is a *gace* (shame or deception) when a *jaare* is not able to tell the *tarikhu* and the *danbe* of people. They also play an important role in the resolution of the conflict or misunderstanding between people.

4) The *Maabu*

The *maabu* are in charge of pottery. They make products from clay such as *gumbe* (small canary), *lalle* (big canary), *ande* (incense devise) and *benge*¹⁴. All their items are made of earth. Thanks to the products of the *maabu*, people can keep water which is a vital source in their homes.

5) The *Garanko*

¹² *Dondonge* is small drum.

¹³ *Ganbare* is kind of lute.

¹⁴ *Benge* is an utensil used for cooking couscous.

The *garanko* occupy the lower rank of the middle class (*nyaxamalo*). They are the specialists of leather. They make shoes and many other things with this matter (leather). In addition to that, they train the horses. They are said to be proficient in that task. Moreover the *garanko yaxaru*¹⁵ tattoo the gum of the women which is a sign of beauty and adult.

6) The *Fina* and *Tagadumma*

These categories of the *nyaxamalo* are considered to be the lowest because they are the praise-singers of the middle class.

The *fina* are like the *jaaru*. They know the genealogy (*danbe*), history (*tarikhu*) and *khiisa* (story tale) by heart. They are the depository of the oral traditions. They possess a musical instrument called *ganbare* which they play when telling story.

The *tagadumma* are the praise-singers of the *togo*, *sakko* and *garanko*. They are *nyaxamalo-nyaxamalo* (griot of the middle class).

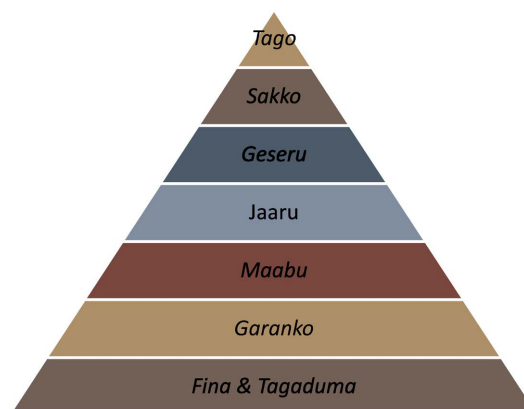
Bathily (1989) writes: “les forgerons avaient leurs propres griots que l’on appelle *taga-duma* et dont la profession était de réciter la généalogie de leurs patrons et de chanter leurs louanges à l’occasion des cérémonies familiales.”

“The blacksmiths had their own griots that are called *taga-duma* and whose profession was to recite the genealogy of their bosses and praise them on the occasion of familial ceremonies.”

They animate the ceremonies of the *nyaxamalo* with a musical instrument called *jubure* (tambourine) (Bathily, 1989: p. 223).

The *nyaxamalo* occupy a paramount position in the Soninke society. Their qualifications and their social services are important to the eyes of the people. That is why they are loved by the *hooro* (the upper class) who say that they cannot be anything without their *nyaxamalo*. They have overlapping functions: crafts and mediation and conciliation.

Figure 2 shows the subdivision of middle class families. They are ranked in accordance with the social traditional hierarchy of families in the Soninke society.



Source: Author's data collected in some Soninke villages in the area of Bakel (north east of Senegal in 2020).

Figure 2. The hierarchal classification of the *nyaxamalo*.

¹⁵ *Yaxare* (singular) means woman, *yaxaru* (plural).

2.3. The *Komo*

The *komaxu* is the status of servitude. The *komo* used to be the servers of the *hooro* and *nyaxamalo*. They constitute the lower class of the Soninke society. Most of them were strangers. The *komaxu* was the societal condition to settle in the Soninke villages. And some others were bought or captured during war time. Pollet & Winter (1971) write: “On les acquérait des *dyula* qui eux meme ceux les procuraient sur les grands marches du Ségou, de Sikasso, du Wasulu et de la Cote d’Ivoire (...). C’étaient des Peuls du Masina, des Bobo, des Somono, des Senufo mais surtout des Bambara...”

“People purchased them from *dyula* who bought them in the great markets of Segou, Sikasso, Wasulu and Ivory Coast (...). They were the Pular from Masina, Bobo, Somono, Senufo but above of all Bambara.”

However, being the lower class is not synonym with “good-for-nothing” or beast according to the Soninke psychology. The *komo yaxaru* ensured the household by cleaning, cooking and pounding the millet. The *komo yigu* ploughed the fields of their masters and take care of the horses (Pollet & Winter, 1971: p. 243).

Moreover, the *tunka* or their masters used them as infantry when there was war. As for the *komo yigu hoore*¹⁶, he used to accompany the *tunka* or chief of the village but he was not free.

The class of the *komo* also includes different categories:

1) The *Jaagarafu* or *Waanakunko*

The *jaagarafu* occupy the highest rank among the *komo*. They are the servers of the leaders (*tunka* (king) or *debegume* (chief of the village)). They play the role of adviser and messenger of the royal court and the *botunpaaba*¹⁷. Moreover, they are the general receiver of the land office fees. They are great servers of the *tunka* and *debegume*. As the leaders cannot move, the *jaagarafu* go to the nearest land and the farthest one to convey their message.

Pollet & Winter (1971) state: “Ces captifs de la catégorie supérieure sont à la disposition collective des chefs de leur village (...). La fonction essentielle de ces captifs est d’assurer des taches d’exécution ayant trait à la vie publique du village...”

“The captives of the higher category are in the service of all the chiefs of the village (...). Their principal role is to ensure the tasks of execution related to the public affairs of the village.”

The *jaagarfu* are used as collective *komo* by the chiefs of the village. As their master was dead without no heir, the chiefs use them in this way maybe to avoid a conflict between them.

2) The *komo raganto*¹⁸

They were the captives of war. The people caught during the conflict moment become automatically the servers of the *tunka* or the chief. They used to do the

¹⁶The head of the *komo*.

¹⁷The masters (chiefs) of the village.

¹⁸*Raga* is the radical which means capture or catch; *ante* is a suffix. *Kome ragante* (singular) means a captive of war—*komo raganto* (plural).

hard works (*golu khoto*) such as ploughing (*soxoye*) and chopping wood (*suwa kereye*).

Traoré (1985) writes: “Généralement, c’est le captif, le prisonnier de guerre réduit à l’état servile. Le Kome-ragante-captif est employé aux besognes les plus dures, comme la culture, soit à d’autres fins, telle que la vente.”

“Generally, it is the prisoner, the war captive reduced to the servile state. The *kome-ragante*-captive is employed to the hardest works such as ploughing or some other purposes such as selling.”

3) The *komo xobonto*¹⁹

The servers that were bought by the *hooro* are called *komo xobonto* (Traoré, 1985: p. 97). They used to be in charge of the household and the rustic works.

Among the Soninke, life is collective and everyone has to ensure a social function basing on the societal contract. These categories of the *komo* (*raganto-xobonto*) used to serve their masters; and in return the latter must keep afford them. They give them shelter and food. Nevertheless, when their families enlarged, they were given lands by their masters to build their own houses. It is up to them to keep their families afford. Then, the children of these captives were called *komo saardo* (Traoré, 1985: p. 97).

4) The *Saardo*

Those who were born in the houses of their masters used to be called *saardo*. In other words the children of the *komo raganto* and *komo xobonto* born under the shelter of their *kaman*²⁰ became *komo* automatically.

Pollet & Winter (1971) state: “...l’esclave nouveau-né appartient à un individu, un maître (*Kaman yugo*) celui de sa mère.”

5) The *komo bagandinto*

The relationship between the *Kaman yugo* and the *kome* could attain a certain degree which provided freedom to the captive: *bangande* (enfranchisement). Or some of them, with the consent of their masters, repurchased their liberty (Traoré, 1985): *dubangande* (self-liberation). Then, the *komo* who were freed were named *komo bagandinto*. They have their own houses. Nevertheless, they keep maintaining good social relationships on account of the *maremmaaxu*²¹.

6) The *komo hooronto*

Some masters taught their servers Islamic science and freed them by giving their daughters in marriage. This category of server is called *kome hooronte*. In actual fact, the *komo hooronto* are different from the *komo bagandito*, although they are all free. The former are nobler than the latter. Despite his freedom, the *kome hooronto* are not considered as a real free people by the upper social class of Soninkara. Moreover they cannot marry with the *hooro* (Traoré, 1985: p. 102).

In actual fact, the *komo* of the contemporary Soninke are far different from the former ones. We can even say there is no *komaaxu* nowadays but only the

¹⁹*Xobo* (radical) means buy; *te* suffix (singular), *to* suffix (plural): *komo xobonte* (singular) signifies a purchased slave, *komo xobonto* (plural).

²⁰Singular: *kamane* means master plura: *kamani*.

²¹*Maremmaaxu* can be translated into kinship. It is a strong social bond.

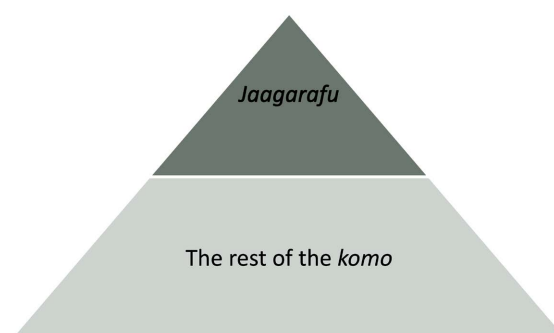
term void of its former connotation remains because they no longer work for their masters or are in the servile state. They have their own houses thanks to the migration to France and the Western education (school). In many Soninke villages, we notice that they are wealthier than their former masters. Only the societal relationship is maintained between them. Certainly, the name *kome* is always used but they are free now. Nonetheless, their status in the societal hierarchy still exists because the Soninke people are strongly conservative.

For one of our informers, Makhadji, this was the reality of a context in the past days. Each epoch has its own realities. The *komaxu* was an ancient practice of the Soninke people. That is why it cannot disappear easily as the descendants of *Jabe Sise*²² consider religiously the social institutions.

According to one of our informers, S. Soukhouna²³, this societal organization is a great necessity for the collective life. Some people must be leaders (for the management of the society) and others skillful workers, peace keepers (for the satisfaction of the needs and the peaceful life in the social relationships) and workers (for the crops). That involves interdependence between the *xabiilo*. For him, everyone is *hoore* because *hooraaxu* is a question of good morality. It does not depend on the patronym (family name). He says that The Almighty God has angels that He has appointed for some special tasks whereas He is Omnipotent. Therefore, the societal organization is logical as the human beings are not perfect. To his point of view, human beings are social creatures who complete each other. Thus, this societal stratification of the *xabiilo* seems to be an evil necessary for making the collective life possible in Soninkara.

Furthermore, Madiakho Tandjigora²⁴ argues that the Soninke people have an impeccable societal organization sociologically speaking. Every *xabiila* is in charge of a specific task to serve the society. This is intelligent for him.

Figure 3 shows how the lower class families are simply ranked contrary to the upper and middle classes



Source: Author's data collected in some Soninke villages in the area of Bakel (north east of Senegal in 2020).

Figure 3. The hierarchal classification of the *komo*.

²² *Jabe Sise* was the first king of the Ghana empire (Wagadu).

²³ Samba Soukhouna is a great traditionalist in the village of Manael located in the county of Bakel. He is a garanke (shoe-maker).

²⁴ Madiakho Tandjigora is a great and famous schoolar in Soninkara.

3. The *Laadani* (Customs)

The main factor of the reciprocal relationships or *laadallemaxu* (family partnership) between the *xabiilo* (clans) is the *laadani*. They are in the core of the Soninke system of life. The latter are nearly immutable (Traoré, 1985: p. 89), for they are thought to be both the roots of the society and the bridges between the *xabiilo*. The *laadani* are some moral obligations that are to be taken into great consideration and ensured continuously. That is why they reflect in any organization of the individuals in Soninkara. Even the boys and the girls' associations in the villages called *fedde* are shaped following the Soninke social hierarchy. That is to say the *laadani* are indoctrinated in the mindset of the youth in order to ensure the perpetuity of the customs. People consider that the Soninke community owes its existence to the *laadani* between the *xabiilo*. Thence, it is a condition sine qua non to grasp firmly to them.

The *laadani* have established interdependence between the families so that the upper class cannot go without the middle and the low classes and vice versa. Thus, for the harmonization of the social bonds and the social cohesion, the Soninke leaders, via *laadani* have educated the members (male and female, young and adult) of *Soninkara* the attachment to the group, the participation to the collective life, the social integration, the belief in *koffo*, the common vision of the societal group, the acceptance and the respect of the social values and rules. As a result, the Soninke people have always a collective consciousness. For them, life is collective and it is materialized through the *laadani*. Besides, they aim the "common good". This is the reason why they are religiously considered. The one who loathes or violates them is represented as an enemy or threat to the social group.

Furthermore, we can say the *laadani* are the symbol of the social solidarity which describe the traditional societal relationships of the Soninke clans. The members of this traditional society have common values and a strong collective consciousness. Regarding to the *laadani*, they feel they have moral obligations to ensure imperatively for showing social solidarity. That is why the assistance and mutual assistance is obligatory between the members. It is an expression of what the Soninke call *saraaxu* (obsessive-compulsive personality) and *maremaaxu* (kinship). For example, when there is an event or ceremony (*nyakha* (wedding ceremony) *siyinde* (naming ceremony), *baade* (mourning) or any accident) of fortune or misfortune, one must honor one's personality by assisting one's fellow creatures physically (by one's presence) and materially (by donating).

Traoré (1985) writes: "Le plus souvent, il s'agit de cérémonies principalement de la vie: mariage-*yaxu*—rasage-*siyinde*—initiation-*sallinde*—deuil-*baade*. Dès l'instant qu'une de ces situations se présente dans une famille, c'est la famille *laadallema* qui s'occupe de tous ses travaux: de l'égorgement au dépeçage des animaux sacrificiels, à la cuisine et au partage des biens. Le *laadallema* sert de très souvent de messenger, d'envoyé de sa famille partenaire, pour lui servir de jambe et de bouche auprès d'une autre famille, par exemple dans le cadre de

conclusion d'alliance (*muurunde*). Le *laadallema* sert aussi de conciliateur dans sa famille partenaire. La contrepartie de tous ces services rendus est d'abord la réciprocité..."

"Very often, it is mainly about ceremonies: wedding-*yaxu*—naming ceremony-*siyinde*—circumcision-*sallinde*—mourning-*baade*. Whenever, there are any of these occasions in a family, it is the family partner, *laadallema* which manages all the tasks: from the cutting the throat to the dismemberment of the sacrificial animals, the cooking and the division of assets. The *laadallema* very often serves as a messenger of his family partner so as to be his foot and mouth near another family, for instance in the framework of the marriage conclusion (*muurunde*). The *laadallema* also serve as a conciliator in the family of his partner. The compensation of all these given services is first reciprocity..."

In the Soninke system of life, the assistance and the mutual aid between the *laadallema* (family partners) of the social group is the essence of life. It weighs so heavily on the Soninke people's mind that they have a compulsive disposition. To know and ensure the *laadani* for the *laadallemaxu* (social partnership) is both fundamental and obligatory. At any cost, traditional social solidarity must be shown whenever the situation requires it. This tradition must be taught to the younger generation for the durability of the collective consciousness and the "common good". Otherwise one can risk *gace* (disgrace). People must uphold the honor of their families by doing their traditional duties. Even if the act of solidarity lacks sincerity, they do not heed that.

Actually, that solidarity is mechanic. People act automatically for the sake of the reciprocal social functions under the fear of *gace*. They feel in themselves a sort of debt they have to pay back to their *laadallema* (family partner) in a best way to honor their personality. This is the reason why, the adults constantly urge the younger generation to know them by heart and ensure them with pride. Usually addressing to the youth, they utter: "You must follow the path of your fathers, for we have found our fathers behaving like that."²⁵

In fact, in *Soninkara*, a person can make himself noticeable by his assistance to his family members and neighbors as he can make himself hated when he fails to respect the customs. According to the Soninke people's way of thinking, the social solidarity is a great mutual value which bonds the families and the clans so much that they will be comparable to a body²⁶. When one part is aching, the whole body feels it. In other words, the families or the clans are like bricks and the *laadani* are the cement which joins them together. As the latter has created a bond of interdependence between the *xabiilo*, it explains the reason why they matter much to the Soninke people. The one who is against them is considered as an alienated or even enemy of the society. He might be sidelined.

The Soninke people generally utter: "*Oro faabani ado kisimani nyi ku laadani*

²⁵This speech is usually uttered by the old people.

²⁶This speech is commonly uttered in *Soninkara*.

ya hamma. Ku laadani ino tappa.”

“We have found our fathers and grandfathers on these customs. These customs build relationships.”

Regarding the *laadani*, the Soninke people are radical. They do not want any change.

They say: “*Soninke nga na meli ke be a ti dungene a walla.*”²⁷ “When the Soninke people grasp firmly to something, they do not accept to abandon it.”

Moreover, the Soninke *laadani* are not equal between some families. This issue has even created some frustrations in the modern Soninke society. For example in our home village Manael in the county of Bakel, the *sakko* (*nyaxamala*) and the *konekunda ko* (the Kones family (*kome*)) do not get on well because of one *laada*. When the Kones organize *nyakha* (wedding ceremony) for a young female, the *sakko* ensure what they call *khusumantaxu*²⁸ whereas the Kones do not have this opportunity from their family partner. That is to say some families gain more benefits than their family partners. And the result of this unfairness has caused the split of some family partners in the Soninke community.

This is especially frequent between the *hooro* and the *komo*. Many *komo* who consider that these *laadani* are both unfair and a symbol of submission to their former masters have cut ties with them. Thence, in the modern Soninke society, the *laadani* have become the cause of conflict between the upper class and the lower class. On the one hand, the *hooro* consider the positive aspect of the customs such as social cohesion and stability; on the other hand, the *komo*, in a negative view, regard the customs being not advantageous for them and they benefit more the leading class.

4. The Social Inequalities in Soninkara

The constitution of the traditions for the societal life in *Soninkara* is not fortuitous. According to Nicoué GAYIBOR there is no causeless tradition. Any expression of the tradition implies an end, plays a role which nature is first and foremost social or political. Thence, we can enumerate some of the goals that are claimed by the traditions through their content:

- Justify a power;
- Obtain material advantages;
- Maintain the social or political prestige of the group (Gayibor, 2008: p. 17)...

Actually, the traditions through which the old people try to demonstrate the quintessence of the social hierarchy are far from being flawless and fair. This social classification of the *xabiilo* favors the upper class over the rest of the society. It provides them a high standing or station, pre-eminence and dominance

²⁷We usually hear this speech in the Soninke villages.

²⁸*Khusomantaxu* is a service that is provided by a lady who has experience in marriage for the bride so as to accompany her through the honeymoon week. The lady is called *khusomanta yaxare*. Her role is to advise the new bride, teach her the woman's secrets, clean her room and cook for her for one week. In return, she will be plied with presents when she leaves.

(Diagne, 1967) over the other clans. The social inequalities derive from here. It touches three aspects: categorization, unfairness in the application of the traditional laws and endogamy.

4.1. The Unequal Categorization of the Social Classes

The unfairness in the Soninke people societal organization lays first and foremost in the discriminatory categorization of the clans. The latter is not fortuitous. There is a code residing in this stratification. Thus, the *hoore* is superior to the other social classes. In that status of inferiority, the *niaxamala* also has a rank more comfortable than the *kome* who occupies the lower position. Beyond the idea of being superior to the others, the *hooro* have a poor consideration towards the *nyaxamalo* and above all the *komo*. Besides, they always want to be looked up to and respected by the *nyaxamalo* and *komo*. As they gain social prestige from their status, they do not want to see it flagging.

Timéra (1996) writes: “Le statut traditionnel est davantage pris en compte par ceux qui en tire un certain profit. En effet, les nobles de la chefferie et les marabouts insistent avec fierté sur leur rang et tiennent davantage à l’endogamie et au respect des hiérarchies. Dans les communautés villageoises qu’ils dirigent presque toujours, ils défendent jalousement leur préséance.”

“The traditional status is more taken into account by those who benefit from it. As a matter of fact, the nobles of the leading class and the marabouts insist proudly over their rank and hold on more to the endogamy and to the respect of the hierarchies. In the village communities where they almost always lead, they defend their precedence jealously.”

They always like holding the feeling of superiority towards the other social classes.

The social inequalities are inherent (Diallo, 2015: p. 1) to the Soninke societal organization. This is obviously noticeable on the hierarchical classification of the *xabillo* (families). Then Tandian (1999) states: “La société Soninké est une hiérarchisée et très inégalitaire, on y distingue les *hooro*, *niaxamalo* communément appelés gens de castes et les *komo* (esclaves).” Regarding this, we can see that the *hooro* (nobles) are superior to the other social classes namely the *nyaxamalo* (praise-singers) and *komo* (servers). If all human beings are born free and equal according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in *Soninkara*, this is not the case. Among the Soninke people, a person is born to be whether a *hoore* or a *nyaxamala* or a *kome*. He is going to be what his parents are for his all life. Actually, a person cannot change his social status in *Soninkara*. Even the *komo* who were freed are not really free. They are still called *komo* (servers).

Traoré (1985) writes: “...l’affranchissement ne dispense que du travail servile mais ne fait pas entrer l’affranchi dans la catégorie des *hooro*.”

“...the enfranchisement only dispense from the servile work but it does not integrate the freed slave in the *hooro* class.”

In fact, it seems that these social classes of the Soninke people are configured to remain immutable and eternally. The leading class is egocentric and does not encourage any change, for they do not like the other social classes to rival with them. They have always kept the privilege of their status so as to take advantage on the other social classes. They are proud of their free status and want the others to be their followers. They are the *batu npaabu* (the fathers to follow). In other words the *nyaxamala* (joy or feast-maker—praise-singer) is to walk behind his *batu npaabe* (father to follow). That custom makes him content and proud. As to the *kome*, he must execute the orders of his *kamane* (master) promptly and work for him day and night without wage.

Then, the *komo* are badly considered in *Soninkara*. They have no voice in the affairs of the Soninke society. One of our informers says: “A *kome* cannot express his ideas in the presence of his *kamane* (master). He dares not” (interview with B. Cissokho, 2020). During the meeting, the *komo* sit down on the ground in a peculiar way which is thought to be relevant to the features of this social category. That posture is both a sign of submission and inferiority. It is called *misikiinan takhe* (sitting position of the poor) or *nyokonlonge* (Pollet & Winter, 1971: p. 246) (sitting down on one leg bent and the other upright). They have no right to take the floor (interview with B. Cissokho, 2020). Their master or former master monopolizes the speech, the management and the leadership. All the political decisions are taken by the leading class. In fact, the *nyaxamala* and the *kome* are just subordinates.

Furthermore, the *kome* is considered not to be complete. That is to say he is like a half human being. His idea does not matter. His master’s opinion is sufficient as he is under the wing of his *kamane* (master). That is why his thinking is not necessary. This demonstrates that the fundamental rights of those who are called *komo* in *Soninkara* are not respected at all. Here lays the great injustice because it is the human dignity which is tread upon. A human being must be respected unconditionally without regarding his age, sex or condition. This fact has biased the Soninke social organization. Islam does not admit this kind of consideration towards one’s fellow creatures. Neither does the western democracy. However, the greatest flaw in *Soninkara* is: people think they are the best society. Consequently, their way of viewing and doing are also best.

“*Soninko ira simma ime tayi*”²⁹ “The Soninke people think they have no equal.”

The Soninke people are proud of themselves. Even though, they are aware of their social flaws, they will not change. They know the truth but they prefer clinging to the obsolete customs which embody fanatic and unfairness. That is why many people especially the younger generation find it absurd the fact of considering the difference between people. For them, it is merely segregation.

And the *nyaxamala*, even if he is free he is a follower of his *batu npaabe*. Whenever the latter goes, he wants to be accompanied by his praise-singer. The *batu*

²⁹This speech is generally uttered by the Soninke Muslim scholars.

npaabe usually says that he is nothing without his *nyaxamala*. Nevertheless, the *hoore* considers the *nyaxamala* as *fo bure yiiga* (ill-gotten eater) and loquacious (Bathily, 1989: p. 218). The term *nyaxamala* is usually used to humiliate a garrulous person.

Among the *nyaxamalo*, there is a family which is poorly regarded in the whole Soninke society: the *garanko* (the cobbler). Generally, the people of this family are believed to be “jinx”. People, usually, say that when you meet a *garanke* early in the morning you may not have a peaceful day. Something unlucky can affect you. That is why, they return on their paces when they see the *garanke* on their way. Moreover, they loathe traveling with him/her thinking he/she can bring misfortune. This is nothing but a mere superstition.

Beyond the poor consideration that the *hooro* have towards the others, there is an inequality in the application of the social laws in the Soninke villages. The other clans have noticed that the *hooro* fear to apply the laws on the people of their *xaabila*³⁰. When it is about a *nyaxamala* or *kome* who is guilty, the law is automatically applied on him. This is among the greatest injustice in *Soninkara*. In fact, there is hypocrisy in the social life of the Soninke people. Some of them utter “we are equal”, but that is not sincere inside their hearts. When they are alone, they say the contrary. The *hooro* always think they are superior. That is why they manipulate the judicial power as they want. The problem is they always consider all the advantages are theirs.

4.2. The Possession of the Lands

In addition to the inequalities in the social categorization of the clans, we have as well the issue of land in *Soninkara*. There is a blatant unfair division of the lands in *Soninkara*. The leading class possesses all the lands in the Soninke villages. That is to say, the one hundred percent of the lands belong to them because the first settler according to the traditions. The *nyinya gumu* (landowners) are *hooro*. They have both the monopoly of the chieftainship and the landed ownership.

Pollet & Winter (1971) write: “De plus, pour le coutume, il n'existe pas de terres vacantes, puisque le terroir tout entier qui a été pris en détention par certains clans, depuis des siècles et de façon définitive.”

“Besides, there is no vacant land according to the custom as the whole soil has been monopolized by some clans since centuries and forever.”

The possession of the whole soil by a few families in the Soninke villages is utterly unjust. Certain families have no land to plough. For that purpose, they have to borrow it from a landlord. Some land owners can ask *dyaka* which is a kind of payment to the borrower. Even though the latter cultivates for a century, he cannot appropriate it. And the owner can take it whenever he wants. Besides, what renders it difficult for those who do not possess arable lands, the landowners refuse to sell their lands in some villages. They prefer lending than selling because the latter means loss.

³⁰We have experienced this injustice in Manael, a small village in the county of Bakel.

In fact, the possession of the lands by some noble families has provided them power over the other social classes notably the *nyaxamala* and the *komo*. It is a mean of manipulating when they attempt to revolt against the *laadani* which privilege the *hooro* over the rest of the society. The revolutionaries have been always threatened to leave the soil on which they have been dwelling for years. That is to say the monopoly of the lands by the *nyinya gumu* constitutes an arm to dissuade any dissident. This fact has happened in three Soninke villages such as Tuabou, Baalou³¹ and Laani.

4.3. The Endogamy in *Soninkara*

The hottest issue that is more criticized in the modern Soninke society is the lack of possibility for people to marry each other freely. According to the Soninke custom, marriage is only possible between *hawanco* (people of the same clan). This tradition cannot be ignored in *Soninkara* because it is a condition *sine qua non* for the matrimonial status. This practice is religiously considered. Those who tempt to violate can undergo severe punishment by their *xabiilo*. The *hawancaxu*, in marriage issue, is fundamental. It is so much anchored in the Soninke people's mindset that they refuse categorically the matrimonial union of two individuals from different *xabiilo*.

Traoré (1985) states: "Le *xawanca*, c'est l'individu du même rang social qu'Ego, qui appartient à la même catégorie sociale. Cela entraîne une relation d'égalité dans le procès social. Ainsi un *hoore* ne peut être *xawanca* d'un *kome*, par ce qu'ils ne pas semblables, égaux dans la hiérarchie sociale. Les relations de *xawancaxu* ne peuvent se vérifier qu'à l'intérieur d'un groupe social. Un *hoore* est *xawanca* d'un *hoore*, un *kome* d'un *kome* et *nyaxamala* d'un *nyaxamala*. Le *xawancaxu* est le premier critère à remplir pour demander en mariage un membre de la famille partenaire."

"The *xawanca*, it is the individual of the same social rank as his ego, who belongs to the same social category. It involves a relationship of equality in the social process. Thus, a *hoore* cannot be *xawanca* of the *kome* because they are not alike, equal in the social hierarchy. The relationships of *xawancaxu* can only be verified inside a social group a *hoore* is *xawanca* of a *hoore*, a *kome* for a *kome*, a *nyaxamala* for a *nyaxamala*. The *xawancaxu* is the first criterion for asking a member of the family partner for marriage."

Any negotiation cannot be done over this issue. Certainly the relationship between the *kome* and his *kamane* has changed so much that the former master has accepted that the *komaxu* (servitude) no longer exists in this modern world. However, the marriage between people from different clans is not admitted in *Soninkara*. The Soninke consciousness is disturbed when this question is mentioned. Those who have overstepped this traditional limit have been excommunicated from their *xabiilo* (families). This usually happens in the Soninke com-

³¹Tuadou is the former capital of Gajaaga located in Senegal. Baalou is located in Senegal as well. Laani is a Soninke village in Mali.

munity residing in France. In *kara* (Soninke homeland), this is not imaginable.

Endogamy, in *Soninkara*, is the principal boundary between the *xabiilo* (clans). People take it that they cannot blend their blood. A *hoore* cannot marry a *nyax-amala* or a *kome* and vice versa. To their mind, this traditional practice that they call *xawancaxu* is essential for the continuation of a *xabiila* (clan or family). Otherwise, people will be bewildered. Subsequently, they will not know to which family they belong because of the blood blend. This will be disastrous because a person must have a *danbe* (genealogy and *xille* (familial tradition) according the traditional Soninke way of life. Among the Soninke, the problem is when people marry each other without regarding the *xawancaxu*, the *xabiilo* will be extinguished. And that phenomenon can mark the end of *Soninkaxu* (the original Soninke cultural identity). This is as well the reason why they refuse to marry with the strangers (Traoré, 1985) or neighboring societies such as Pular, Moor, Wolof and Bambara.

In fact, the *xawancaxu* is a genetic trait of the Soninke people. Psychologically, a Soninke is disturbed when he or she talked about marriage without *xawancaxu* within *Soninkara*. Even if two young people love to distraction, they cannot dare to approach marriage near their parents. The reason is that it is not possible to have a matrimonial union without regarding *xawancaxu* in the Soninke Society. Thence, love is not sufficient to found the first social institution in *Soninkara*. Even though two young people from different *xabiilo* have children in their relationship, they cannot marry each other. That is to say, the Soninke people prefer illegitimate relationship and offspring (bastards) to the marriage out of clan. So, in view of the *xawancaxu* which prevents them from fulfilling their dreams, many Soninke young people are indulged in the illegitimate relationship. The worst thing of this issue is, it even affects the conjugal life. Some boys in the Soninke villages keep on having relationship with their former girlfriends married to their *xawanco* (compatible social marital partners). Therefore, adultery is a result of the *xawancaxu*. This vice is destroying much the Soninke moral values but they are still sticking to it. They prefer to preserve their customs, even though the modern people find many of them obsolete. This demonstrates the conservative attitude of the Soninke people.

5. Conclusion

The Soninke people love living together. For that purpose, they have set up a societal organization to make it possible. Thus, they have stratified the *xabiilo* (clans) and each *xabiila* has a specific task. Therefore all the members of the society have become useful. In *Soninkara*, there are no untouchable people and the contribution to the collective life is a duty of every member. This stratification of the *xabiilo* (clans) constitutes the Soninke societal organization. The one who is against this way of life is considered the enemy of the society. The Soninke are conservative and hate social disorder. Regarding the evolution of science in every domain, many customs of the Soninke people, however, seem out-of-date. Their societal organization is tarnished by some social inequalities such as the

superiority of the *hooro* who have a poor consideration towards the other clans, the monopoly and manipulation of all the powers by the leading class, the misallocation of the lands, endogamy and many other false rules which embody injustice in *Soninkara*. Then, in a world stressed by the development of sciences and technology plus the globalization, shouldn't the Soninke people review their social organization?

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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