

African Entrepreneurship: Muslim Fula Merchants in Sierra Leone. By Alusine Jalloh. Ohio University Center for International Studies: Monographs in International Studies. 1999. 288pp.

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How and why did the Fula community in Sierra Leone –a marginalized, Muslim, immigrant community– succeed economically in a Christian dominated and often hostile business environment? This question is one of considerable interest for historians of Sierra Leone but also for economists and political scientists interested in the roles played by minorities in African economies.

To answer these “how” and “why” questions, Alusine Jalloh provides a detailed study of the commercial activities of the Fula in Sierra Leone, concentrating on the period 1961-1978. Jalloh centers his book on the study of particular sectors: the livestock trade, merchandise trade and the motor transport business. An introductory chapter gives an overview of Fula social structures and migration patterns. Two final chapters consider the relations between Islam, politics and business for the Fula trading community. There is also a rich study of the diamond industry tucked away in the motor transport industry chapter and a small study of the real estate sector included under the merchandise section.

I argue that Jalloh succeeds in answering the “how” question but fails in helping us to understand “why”. Jalloh does a good job at describing Fula success but a poorer job at explaining it.

In answer to the “how” question, historians will find a rich description of the economic activities of the Fula community. We find out what sectors the Fula community chose to work in and how they succeeded in those sectors; who they employed and how they chose to invest their capital. We are told how aspects of the Fula culture, in particular the Fula’s emphasis on kinship relations and Islam, helped Fula businessmen to prosper. And we learn how the Fula paid politicians for political protection. Jalloh has, in some instances, collected very detailed data to support his descriptions. He has,

for example, collected annual data on the total number of cows slaughtered in Freetown and the price per head of cow over the period to demonstrate the striking growth of the market during the period. All these help to provide a rich description of how the Fula settled in niches and prospered.

Jalloh makes a compelling case that Islam played an important role in the Fula’s business success. He argues that the shared set of values helped solidify group relations among the Fula. If it is the case that social capital matters in the way that Jalloh says that it does, Jalloh provides a compelling case of why Islam may bolster Fula social capital. Jalloh argues that Islam provided a ready-made consistent set of business guidelines that could be used within the community. For Fula traders, religion not only provided guidelines but, Jalloh argues, fear of damnation acted as a third party enforcer of oral contracts within the community. The existence of such a shared framework helped businessmen to solve coordination problems and reduce their transaction costs.

The “how” story is of course complex, and so we learn not just how aspects of Islam benefited commerce, but also how they hindered it. Jalloh shows how some tenets of Islam were compromised once confronted with the realities of business in Sierra Leone.

Jalloh also provides a nuanced account of political forces. The Fula survived politically in Sierra Leone in the period although there clearly was discrimination against them by government. We gain some insight into how the Fula interacted with government. Many Fula businessmen remained apolitical insofar as that was possible, but others used their economic resources to gain political access. In general, the Fula maintained a policy of supporting the government in power – typically through direct financial contributions. However, again there were compromises – the Fula were by no means united politically at key moments in the country’s history. Instead, prominent businessmen supported different parties and tried to use political forces to gain economic advantages.

We are provided then with a rich profile of Fula activities. But many historians, economists and political scientists may be more interested in

Jalloh's attempts to answer the "why" question. This –more difficult– aspect of Jalloh's project is less successful.

There are a number of "why" puzzles related to the success of minority groups in African economies. One class of puzzle relates to wealthy minorities. Why, for example, do Lebanese entrepreneurs invest in Dakar invest in fixed assets such as real estate while others concentrate on more liquid assets? Why do Indians in Accra invest in manufactures while other immigrant groups focus almost exclusively on trade? How do some minority groups succeed in maintaining a position of relative economic prosperity in a country while others (such as the Indian community in Amin's Uganda) find their assets expropriated by the state? Why are some minorities (such as the Mauritians in Senegal in 1989) harassed by local populations while others conduct their affairs unmolested? There is another class of "why" puzzles related to the success of ethnic groups in business. Poor government performance is often blamed on ethnicity –it is said that strong kinship groups may pressure political actors to employ inefficient family members rather than more efficient outsiders. But kinship arguments are also used to explain the success of ethnic groups in the private sector. Why is it that kinship relations work well for some groups in business but seem to have detrimental effects on the workings of the State?

Jalloh's study does not provide answers to these questions. To see this we may turn to the key question asked by Jalloh: why did the Fula do well?

We have already considered two of the explanations provided by Jalloh – the role of Islam and the role of political activity. We saw that Islam played a role – but that the role was sometimes ambiguous. We are not told, however, how the role of Islam compares to that of other religions among other groups. Were the functions fulfilled by Islam *particular* to Islam? Similarly, we saw that the Fulas engaged in national politics, in an often non-unified manner. Yet we also know that political parties in Sierra Leone often had ethnic affiliations. How did the Fula's political activity relate to those of other groups? Did the Fula make politics work better for them than did other groups?

To answer the question as to why the Fula did so well, Jalloh also points to the Fula's willingness to take on risk and their access to capital. Were the Fula willing to take on risk? More pointedly, were the Fula more willing to take on risk than other sections of the business community? And if so, why? Jalloh does not provide a strong case that they were. Indeed, it is notable that Jalloh repeatedly points out that the Fula were particularly hesitant to surrender ownership shares or commercial information outside very close family groupings. It is possible that this prevented these entrepreneurs from creating large-scale industries, possibly preventing their movement into manufacturing. Similarly we want to know whether the Jalloh had more access to capital than other groups? than the Krio or the Lebanese community for example? Jalloh does not provide us with this comparative information.

Jalloh points to a third set of factors for the success of the Fula: the general expansion of demand in the Sierra Leonean economy (and in Freetown in particular), resulting in part from the growth of the diamond industry and urbanization. Clearly this is a system-wide effect. It is one that may be necessary to explain the good fortunes of any group. But it does not help us to understand the relative business successes of any particular group, such as those of the Fula.

A fourth set of explanations that Jalloh repeatedly points to involves cultural explanations. These oftentimes appear somewhat circular - it seems that a prime explanation for why Fula businessmen did well was that they are good businessmen. In his conclusion, Jalloh characterizes the Fula as "well organized, shrewd, low-key," as people who "had considerable self confidence, enjoyed taking on new problems and identifying solutions, and demonstrated a considerable capacity for savings and reinvestment".

Finally, Jalloh argues that "kinship ties" or "kinship networks" played a central role in the success of Fula businesses. Often "kinship ties" is used without further explanation as if it were obvious that kinship relations are necessarily good for business. It is said for example in the case of the cattle industry that kinship control of retail is good for cattle rearers and butchers and that employing kinsmen is more cost-effective.

For the Fula in Sierra Leone both arguments may be correct. But this begs the question as to *why* it works like that in Sierra Leone. Jalloh provides some answers to these questions. He argues for example that shared culture reduces training costs – in effect there is a more automatic “fit” between workers. It may also be that it reduces monitoring costs – Jalloh argues that kin employees are more likely to have their employers’ interests at heart. Jalloh also argues that in some cases kinship ties served to facilitate collusion. This may increase rents accruing to businessmen who would otherwise be in competition.

These are all plausible arguments. But there are important aspects of the role of kinship relations that we still do not have answers to. Why is it not the case that pressures from kinsmen results in overstaffing or pressures to employ underqualified workers rather than resulting in cheap labor? Why were successful Fula businessmen, such as Alhaji Bah able to employ kinsmen without monetary remuneration rather than have to succumb to pressures to pay above the market price? Why did the domination of a group of kinsmen in one part of the production cycle (such as in retail) not cause monopsonistic problems for producers further up the chain?

Why do so many questions remain unanswered? In part it is the way Jalloh approaches the issues he is engaging: he writes more like a reporter than an investigator. In part also the work is limited by the methodology employed. Jalloh undertakes a series of studies of the activities of Fula élites. This provides much detailed information of the “how I done it” variety. At no point, however, are the problems faced by the Fulas or the methods used by them compared in any detail with the problems faced and methods employed by other groups in Sierra Leone or in other countries. We are given little indication of if or why Islam was more helpful than Christianity for businessmen. Nor do we know if or why the Fula’s reliance on kinship networks was more or less beneficial than that of other trading groups. Pushing for answers to these questions will help us to focus on what aspects of Fula culture were really key to the group’s success.

While I argue that Alusine Jalloh fails to answer some of these deeper questions regarding why the Fula prospered when other groups did not, his book provides a carefully researched source of information for researchers who wish to push these more comparative questions further. Jalloh’s contribution to this research project may turn out to be very valuable indeed.