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**AFRICAN INTERPRETERS, MEDIATION,
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KNOWLEDGE IN COLONIAL SENEGAL:
THE LOWER AND MIDDLE SENEGAL
VALLEY, ca. 1850s TO ca. 1920s**

presented by

Tamba Eadric M'bayo

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Tamba Eadric M'bayo

VOLUME I

A DISSERTATION

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

History

2009

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN INTERPRETERS, MEDIATION, AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN COLONIAL SENEGAL: THE LOWER AND MIDDLE SENEGAL VALLEY, ca. 1850s TO ca. 1920s

By

Tamba Eadric M'bayo

This dissertation investigates the lives and careers of African interpreters employed by the French colonial administration in Saint-Louis, Senegal, from about the mid 1850s to about the early 1920s. It focuses on the lower and middle Senegal River valley, where the French concentrated most of their activities in West Africa during the second half of the nineteenth century. All through the extended period of French territorial expansion and early colonial rule, Muslim African interpreters in Senegal performed multiple roles as mediators, military and expeditionary guides, emissaries, diplomatic hosts and treaty negotiators. As cultural and political powerbrokers who could straddle the colonial divide, interpreters were indispensable intermediaries for French officials in their relations with African rulers and the local population of the Senegal region.

Because African interpreters had close ties with the colonial regime, however, earlier post-independence studies on the colonial period in Senegal framed in the nationalist and resistance paradigms usually portrayed them simplistically as “collaborators” (read pejoratively as “unpatriotic” traitors or sellouts). This perception of interpreters created considerable misunderstanding about their intermediary roles during the colonial period. Yet, since historians studying Senegal have not carried out extensive empirical research on African colonial interpreters, this problem has persisted in the historiography of Senegal and French West Africa.

This dissertation addresses this historiographical lacuna and challenges the conventional understanding for its reductionist misrepresentation of African colonial interpreters in Senegal. Contrary to the received wisdom, the study suggests that African interpreters epitomized a paradox: while serving an alien French administration they not only defended the interests of their local communities but also strived to maintain some degree of autonomy. Second, the study proposes that interpreters occupied a propitious position as go-betweens to influence the creation of colonial discourse and knowledge as they could channel the flow of information between French officials and the African population. Evidence indicates that French officials, including Governor Louis Faidherbe, the “architect of Senegal,” and Xavier Coppolani, the “pacifier of Mauritania,” often relied on African interpreters for information about local politics, culture, history and the economy. As repositories of “local knowledge,” interpreters had the capacity to shape relations of power between the French and their African subjects.

Combining a variety of French colonial archival records, such as official correspondence and personnel files, with oral data comprising interviews, family biographies, and local narratives about the colonial period, the study reconstructs the experiences of Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal and assesses their intermediary position. In so doing, it aims to illuminate the complex worlds they traversed while mediating between French officials and Africans. The study also seeks to appraise the contributions made by interpreters to the production and dissemination of knowledge in colonial Senegal. In all, it offers a trajectory of interpretation for a nuanced understanding of African colonial interpreters and similar intermediaries as active historical actors rather than passive victims of French colonialism.

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This dissertation project began with a suggestion by my advisor Dr David Robinson that I explore African intermediaries in colonial Senegal to affirm their rightful place in the historiography of Senegal and French West Africa in general. The initial list of intermediaries I drew up included commercial brokers, especially *traitants* and *maîtres de langues*, informal liaisons, such as *signares*, and the more influential *grands marabouts*, all of whom mediated between the French colonial authorities and Africans in the Senegal region during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After subsequent discussions with Dr Robinson and some of my colleagues, however, I decided to focus on African interpreters employed by the colonial administration in Saint-Louis between the 1850s and early 1920s. The other intermediaries, I envisaged, could be a subject of a future project.

In my endeavor to track the activities of various interpreters in colonial Senegal, Dr Robinson's constant prodding kept me going even when it sometimes appeared I was groping through a dark alley. For this reason I wish to express my sincere gratitude to him for the time and energy he dispensed in bringing this work to fruition. I would also like to thank the members of my dissertation committee, Dr Leslie Moch, Dr Peter Beattie, Dr Laurent Dubois and Dr Walter Hawthorne, for their encouragement while working on this dissertation. Dr Moch was particularly generous with her time for some *tête-à-têtes*, which facilitated the writing process for me in no small measure. Likewise, the informal conversations I had with Dr Beattie about my work proved equally fruitful. I am also grateful to Dr Ben Smith, also of the History Department at MSU, for commenting on an earlier draft of the first chapter.

Research for this dissertation would not have been possible without the financial support I received from the following funding sources. First, I would like to thank the MSU Graduate School for partially funding a one-month pre-dissertation research trip to Senegal in summer 2002, which initiated my work on French colonial archival records housed at the *Archives Nationales du Sénégal* in Dakar. Next, and even more important, funding for the dissertation research proper came from the MSU Compton Peace Fellowship for dissertation research in Africa, which made it possible for me to spend eight months between May and December 2004 collecting archival materials and oral data in Senegal. And for this reason I wish to thank Dr David Wiley of the African Studies Center and Dr Anne Ferguson of the Women and International Development Program at MSU for opening up and sustaining this funding possibility for African graduate students at a time dissertation research funding for them is fast diminishing in a large number of American universities.

My work and stay in Senegal provided a unique opportunity for me to interact with a host of people whose help, one way or the other, obliges me to acknowledge them here. However, I cannot possibly mention all the names of the wonderful friends and acquaintances that made life in Senegal more pleasant for me than it would have been otherwise. Yet a few names easily crop up. First, I wish to say a big “thank you” to Dr Charles Becker and his wife, Angelique, who welcomed me as part of their family and put everything I wished for at my disposal—accommodation, food, Internet access and a formidable library. Next, my host family in Dakar, Madam Margot Barbara-Sylla, her son, Peeba, and daughters, Clo-clo and Antoinette, made me feel at home and provided a tranquil atmosphere conducive to both work and relaxation. My Senegalese colleague

and friend, Ibra Sene, has been a source of constant assistance since I began working on Senegalese colonial history at MSU. Through his intercession, I met various Senegalese scholars and other people who contributed in different ways to sustaining my interest in this project. I therefore want to thank Dr Ibrahima Thioub of the History Department at the University of Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in Dakar for his encouragement. Dr Abdoulaye Diop, also of UCAD, was helpful in taking time off his busy schedule to drive me around in Dakar on several occasions. In addition, Moussa Dieng was particularly patient in helping me find my bearing when I arrived in Dakar for archival and field research in May 2004.

I am grateful to Dr Saliou Mbaye, the former director of the *Archives Nationales* in Dakar, and his staff, especially Mr. Mamadou Ndiaye, for their tireless effort in providing help for all of us researchers from a wide range of disciplines trying to track down both familiar and obscure documents. It was with their assistance that I got access to a large chunk of the documents used for this study. The staffs of the *Centre de Recherche et Documentation du Sénégal* (CRDS) in Saint-Louis and the *Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire* (IFAN) in Dakar also assisted me in identifying and retrieving pertinent records for this project. I thank you all!

This dissertation owes a world of debt to my research assistant, “interpreter,” and friend, Pierre Cahors, of Dakar, who facilitated the interviews I conducted in Dakar, Saint-Louis, and Podor. Pierre also helped me transcribe the tapes and made it easier for me to report more accurately on the contents of the interviews than I would have managed all alone. I am also extremely thankful to all my interviewees and informants in Dakar, Saint-Louis, and Podor, who took time off their daily engagements to give me

audience and respond to my incessant queries. Their hospitality was quite humbling for me.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr Benjamin Lawrance of the University of California, Davis, for sharing with me the introduction to the edited volume, *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), while it was still in press. As is customary in projects of this kind, while I acknowledge the input of various mentors, colleagues, and informants at different stages of this work, the ideas expressed herein as well as the errors that accompany them are my sole responsibility.

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my late father, J. E., who imbibed in me the import of dedication, perseverance, and honesty. But for my dear mother Jane and the rest of my family, especially my brother Kai and sisters, Finda, Bondu, and Kumba, who provided more than just moral support during my long trek through graduate school, this dissertation would not have been completed. My wife, Adama, and daughter, Mariam, deserve special mention here for their patience and understanding during my long periods of “splendid isolation” while working on this dissertation. Finally, but no less important, Malik, my “Thanksgiving” son, this dissertation is for you!

PREFACE

When the French administration based on the coastal island of Saint-Louis began its territorial expansion into the Senegal River valley and adjacent lands in the 1850s, its officials had to rely on African intermediaries to mediate between them and African rulers, as well as the rest of the local population. After his appointment as governor in November 1854, Louis Léon Faidherbe (1854-61, 1863-65) faced the task of maintaining peace and security so that trade between the coastal settlements and interior could continue unimpeded. Envisaging a grand imperial project in the Senegal region, the governor set out to groom an indigenous corps of interpreters (and would-be chiefs) to serve as intermediaries between French officials and Africans in the lower and middle Senegal valley. To institutionalize the African interpreter corps of the administration in Saint-Louis, Faidherbe evoked precedents in Algeria, where he had served as an army engineer in the early 1840s, and the Senegal River trade network in which local interpreters mediated contacts and commercial transactions between different European and African interest groups. And the governor expressed his intentions in a number of administrative reforms he carried out, which, among other things, made African interpreters salaried employees of the administration. In 1856, Faidherbe reconstituted the *École de Otages* (renamed *École des Fils de Chefs et des Interprètes* in 1864) for “hostage” students—hitherto supervised by the Brothers of Ploërmel from Brittany since 1847—to provide institutional training for interpreters, translators, and prospective chiefs.

Interpreters were the most essential indigenous *fonctionnaires* the administration employed considering that their auspicious position allowed them to straddle the colonial

divide and facilitate interactions between the French authorities and the African population. As cultural and political powerbrokers, they had the capacity to manage the flow of information between the colonial authorities, local chiefs, and ordinary Africans. As such, interpreters could influence the construction of discourse and “knowledge” by each group. In colonial Senegal, as in Soudan Française and Guinée Française, therefore, interpreters became key players as go-betweens whose intercessions shaped relations of power between the French authorities and Africans.

Although African interpreters were important intermediaries during the colonial period, until recently scholars writing on Senegal and French West Africa in general tended to brush them aside as an unworthy subject matter for thorough empirical research. Historians especially rationalized their lack of interest in investigating the history of colonial interpreters by evoking earlier post-independence studies on the colonial period framed in the nationalist and resistance paradigms. Such studies typically vilified African interpreters and similar intermediaries simplistically as “collaborators” (read pejoratively as sell-outs or traitors reminiscent of Nazi collaborators). Yet, while the collaborator/resister dichotomy has now fallen out of favor among scholars, African colonial interpreters/translators have remained marginal figures in historical literature on Senegal and French West Africa.

This study engages the above historiographical problem by exploring the lives and careers of African interpreters in colonial Senegal from about the 1850s to about the early 1920s. More specifically, it investigates Muslim interpreters employed by the administration in Saint-Louis who functioned mainly in the lower and middle Senegal valley and its environs. The study aims primarily to provide a context for a critical

assessment of African colonial interpreters and similar intermediaries as active historical agents rather than hapless victims of French colonialism.

Over the seventy-year or so period the study covers, the area that became Senegal—as we know it today—experienced far-reaching political, economic, and social changes triggered by French military intervention, territorial expansion, and imposition of formal colonial rule by the late 1880s. Although formal colonial government only came about toward the end of the nineteenth century, I argue that Saint-Louis (the coastal capital) and much of the lower and middle Senegal valley began to exhibit all the trappings of colonial rule from mid century on. In contrast, the French sphere of influence hardly extended beyond Saint-Louis and a few military posts along the lower valley during the first half of the nineteenth century.

After his appointment as governor in 1854, Faidherbe immediately began to extend his jurisdiction forcefully inland along the Senegal River and adjacent areas. At various stages of the campaign to establish and sustain French hegemony, African interpreters provided much-needed support for French officials by performing multiple functions as emissaries, expeditionary and military guides, treaty negotiators, informants and agents. The French colonial archives indeed contain documented evidence of some interpreters who embarked on “perilous missions” for the administration as reconnaissance agents, military guides, and mediators of peace during conflicts in Kajoor, Trarza, and Walo, among other local states. In the process, a number of them were either captured or killed during combat, some under circumstances the available records do not make quite clear. Yet such endeavors illustrate the amount of risk certain interpreters were willing to take in performing their official duties, especially during the

turbulent years of the 1880s, the apogee of French expansion in the Senegal area. At the same time, entrusting interpreters with such demanding tasks speaks volumes about the level of dependency of French officials on their most trusted and competent African interpreters, whose familiarity with the local cultural and political landscape served them well in performing their manifold tasks.

African interpreters remained attached to their local community, however, and continued to look after its interests whenever necessary. From the 1840s on, for instance, interpreters joined other Muslims in Saint-Louis in petitioning and campaigning to draw the administration's attention to the peculiar situation of Muslim *habitants* who wanted an Islamic court set up to adjudicate their civil cases using Islamic law. The *habitants* of Saint-Louis then eligible for French political and legal rights were clamoring for French citizenship as policymakers and politicians in Paris debated the direction their policy of assimilation should take. As the Muslim community struggled to imprint its collective identity and make itself more visible in the civic life of Saint-Louis (dominated then by the métis community), several interpreters identified with its aspirations and offered their unreserved support. In fact working for a non-Muslim French administration did not put off the interpreters from fulfilling their religious and civic obligations. Instead, they embraced the compatibility of *daar al-Islam* (world of Islam) and *daar al-Kufr* (world of "unbelievers"), an issue over which Muslims in the region had yet to reach a consensus. Against this backdrop, the ambiguous position of Muslim interpreters (as intermediaries) in colonial Senegal spawned a protracted controversy scholars and the Senegalese body politic, especially Muslims, have debated for several generations.

Indeed the working relationship that evolved between Muslim interpreters and the colonial authorities in Senegal, as elsewhere in French West Africa, raises intriguing questions about their motivations, loyalties, and level of political consciousness. Additionally, questions arise about the construction of identity among the interpreters, hegemony, and accommodation to French colonial rule. Were African interpreters mere lackeys of the French authorities in colonial Senegal? How do we account for the presumably contradictory position of interpreters who served a colonizing regime but also defended the interests of their local community? As Muslims, how did the interpreters present and represent themselves while employed by a non-Muslim French administration? Addressing these and related questions hint at how we can begin to clear up the misperceptions about colonial interpreters in Senegal that have stifled our understanding concerning their motivations, aspirations, and accomplishments in their dealings with a colonizing power that had the wherewithal to impose its political will by military might whenever mediation and diplomacy proved intractable.

I have conceptualized this study in dialogue with other critical studies that have illuminated the complex roles of African colonial intermediaries rather than depict them simply in the same mold as conventional studies in which they emerge more or less as historical pariahs. A number of studies, including those by Nancy Rose Hunt, David Robinson, Raymond Taylor, and a recent compilation edited by Benjamin Lawrance, Emily Osborne, and Richard Roberts on different categories of African intermediaries, among others, have revealed the conflicts, negotiations, and accommodation that typified relations between African go-betweens, European colonial officials, and colonized

Africans.¹ By adopting a more judicious approach in analyzing archival, oral, and material sources and showing more sensitivity to the temporal and spatial specificity of European colonialism in Africa, the above studies with nuanced scholarship have enriched our comprehension of the dynamics of colonial encounters. Indeed understanding colonial relations as dialogic and symbiotic exchanges that involved confrontation, contestation, negotiation and accommodation allows us to reconstruct and appraise the histories of hitherto marginalized African intermediaries, such as interpreters, translators, and clerks, with more sensitivity to their proper historical context and place in African colonial historiography.

It is important to add that a number of studies on Native American and mixed-race intermediaries in the Atlantic World, including some European go-betweens who “went native” in the Americas from the 1500s on, have allowed me to situate this study in a broader context for comparative purposes. The works of Nancy Hagedorn, Frances Karttunen, Alida Metcalf and Margaret Connell Szasz, to name only a few, have been both instructional and inspirational.² Collectively, these studies bring out the crucial roles indigenous interpreters and translators, both men and women, played as commercial, diplomatic, cultural and political powerbrokers between Europeans and Native

¹ See Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon: Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000); Raymond M. Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans: Power, Authority and Society in the Nineteenth Century Mauritanian Gebel” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1996); Benjamin Lawrance, Emily Osborne, and Richard Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

² See, for example, Nancy Hagedorn, “Brokers of Understanding: Interpreters as Agents of Cultural Exchange in New York,” *New York History* 76, 4 (October 1995), 379-408; Frances Karttunen, *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Alida C. Metcalf, *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500-1600* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Margaret Connell Szasz, ed., *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

Americans in a variety of contexts across the Americas and throughout the post-Columbus era, up to the early nineteenth century.

In her study on the role of intermediaries in the colonization of Brazil between 1500 and 1600, Alida Metcalf, for instance, identifies three kinds of go-betweens who shaped relations between Portugal and Brazil. Physical go-betweens were responsible for creating material links between two or more worlds, while transactional go-betweens facilitated social interactions. The third group, representational go-betweens, depicted the “other” culture through texts, words, and images. With support from these distinct groups of mediators, Portugal gained significant advantage in Brazil over time, even though it did not exercise absolute control over the colony.³ Based on Metcalf’s taxonomy, then, the interpreters I investigate in this study were transactional go-betweens; they bridged the cultural and linguistic gaps between French officials in Saint-Louis and the African population in the lower and middle Senegal valley. Not only did they facilitate the day-to-day interactions between the French and Africans; they also influenced the kind of knowledge both groups produced and disseminated. To be sure, interpreters were conduits of official policies, cultural beliefs, worldviews, ideologies and moral values.

Exploring the history of indigenous interpreters offers a trajectory of empirical inquiry from a different direction that shines the spotlight on the nature of West African responses to European intrusion and colonial domination. This opens up a window for closer observation and deeper understanding of the intricate and contradictory ways colonial rule played out particularly in Senegal and French West Africa in general. Although marginalized in historical literature on French colonialism in West Africa, the study aims to show that the roles Muslim interpreters played as transactional go-

³ Metcalf, *Go-Betweens*, 9-12.

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between in colonial Senegal were crucial enough to warrant systematic empirical research and constructive analysis. As the chapters that follow will illustrate, the case of Muslim interpreters as they responded to the demands and dislocations triggered by French military expansion, conquest, and colonial rule in Senegal between the 1850s and early 1920s had all the ingredients of European/non-European encounters that metamorphosed into a complex web of relations over time.

Brief Note on the Chapters

The chapters that follow reflect a combination of chronological and thematic organization. This approach allows us to trace events sequentially and avoid a teleological construct that overlooks overlapping and concurrent historical events across space. The study also includes two biographical chapters on different groups of interpreters to show the heterogeneity of the interpreter corps created by the administration in Saint-Louis.

The introductory chapter lays out the scope of the study by presenting the major issues addressed: the ambiguity of the African colonial intermediary's position, in this case Muslim interpreters in Senegal, and the contributions of local interpreters/translators to the creation of colonial discourse and knowledge. The controversy surrounding Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal, as noted above, raises a thought-provoking question about the compatibility of *dar al-Islam* and *dar al-Kufr*. The chapter also examines the sources used to reconstruct this history of colonial interpreters in Senegal. In spite of the limitations of the written and oral sources, a careful reading of them allows us to piece together the fragmented and understudied history of this group of colonial intermediaries. A discussion of the methodology used in the study complements the

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section on sources. Then the final section of the chapter assesses the significance of the study, especially as it is the first full-length monograph on Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal.

Chapter 2 discusses the state of historical literature and historiographical issues scholars have debated in recent decades about African interpreters and similar intermediaries in colonial Senegal and French West Africa. Despite the paucity of studies on colonial interpreters and translators, some works have drawn attention to their importance as trans-cultural mediators and called for empirical studies to bring their histories to life. The chapter also discusses the major themes the study employs as an explanatory framework to bring together the different strands of arguments presented.

Chapter 3 outlines the ethnohistorical setting and temporal scope of the study. It begins with an overview of the geographic space and political economy of the lower and middle Senegal valley. And it emphasizes the import of the Senegal River trade in the economy of the region, which brought about frequent interactions between the French, métis, Wolof, Futanke and Moors, among other local groups. The chapter also takes a brief look at the period immediately before Faidherbe took over as governor in 1854. It contends that he built on an earlier plan of expansion conceived in the 1840s. Next, the chapter traces Faidherbe's early expansion and his efforts to gain control over areas adjacent to Saint-Louis, including Walo, which he annexed in 1855. The study suggests that the 1850s marked a watershed in the *longue durée* of Senegal's history insofar as the lower and middle Senegal valley began to exhibit all the trappings of colonial rule from then on.

Chapter 4 analyzes some of Faidherbe's reforms, focusing on those that underscore the importance of local interpreters in his broader imperial plan. It begins by tracing the formation of the *Direction des affaires politiques* (DAP), which coordinated the diplomatic, military, and intelligence affairs of the Faidherbe administration. Next, the chapter explains the transformation of the *École des Otages* into the *École de Fils des Chefs et des Interprètes*, which Faidherbe considered an answer to the personnel needs of the administration, especially the training and staffing of interpreters and translators. The chapter also discusses the governor's systemization of official procedures for recruiting interpreters as full-time employees of the administration. Finally, it explains the circumstances under which Faidherbe decreed the creation of a Muslim Tribunal for Saint-Louis in 1857 as Muslims became more vocal about their civil liberties and visible in the civic life of Saint-Louis.

Chapter 5 covers the period from the mid 1850s to the late 1880s, a period when the administration overcame resilient indigenous resistance in the Senegal valley. The area to the north of the Senegal River (present-day Mauritania), however, had yet to come under formal French control even as a kind of hegemony was in the making there. The discussion covers conflicts between the administration and the Trarza Moors, Al-Hajj Umar, Walo and Kajoor, to show the diverse roles interpreters played as envoys, military and expeditionary guides, and treaty-negotiators. Although the thirty years or so between the 1850s and 1880s spanned the administrations of governors Faidherbe, Jean Bernard Jauréguiberry (1861-1863), Jean Pinet-Laprade (1865-1869), François Xavier Michel Valière (1869-1876) and Briere de l'Isle (1876-1881), the chapter focuses on the governorships of Faidherbe and Briere. Both governors shared a similar vision of a

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French empire in West Africa encompassing the trading networks of the Senegal and Niger rivers. The chapter ends with a discussion of the diplomatic and political tussles between the administration and the Damel of Kajoor, Lat Dior, over the construction of the Dakar--Saint-Louis railway. Some interpreters were involved in the diplomatic exchanges between the administration and Lat Dior that sought to persuade him to allow the railroad to run through his territory.

Chapter 6 presents biographies of some of the administration's most important interpreters: Hamat Ndiaye Anne, Bou El Mogdad Seck, and his son Mamadou Seck. Although such interpreters hailed from prominent Muslim families and shared similar social, ethnic, and geographic backgrounds, they were by no means a monolithic group. Instead, they comprised a diverse mix of individuals whose personal aspirations as well as achievements varied markedly. The chapter details the specific jobs of the selected interpreters and illuminates some aspects of their social lives. A combination of archival records and oral data helps us reconstruct these biographies, however incomplete.

Chapter 7 focuses on a number of less-celebrated interpreters employed mostly at the lower end of the interpreters' hierarchy, although some became active mediators and achieved a measure of success in their own right. Others were simply ordinary interpreters whose careers did not result in any significant personal achievement or left a lasting impression on the administration. Although the archival records do not provide as much information on this random selection of interpreters as their more illustrious colleagues featured in the previous chapter, at least they allow us to get a glimpse of their identities, career paths, and some of their activities. Together, the two chapters help us

understand better that interpreters in colonial Senegal were a diverse group of individuals in spite of their common identity as Muslims.

Chapter 8 covers the period after the 1880s as the French sought to establish control over the area that became Mauritania at the turn of the century. Although Senegal was by then a full-fledged French colony, the area north to the Senegal River continued to pose its own challenges to the administration in Saint-Louis. The architect of the “pacification” of Mauritania, Xavier Coppolani, had to rely on the services of the young but experienced interpreter-cum-diplomat, Mahmadou Seck, whose familiarity with the cultural landscape and dynamics of local politics among the Moors made him an invaluable mediator for the administration. Yet by the early 1920s when the study ends, although interpreters continued to function within the administration, I argue that French officials no longer attached as much importance to their intermediary roles as they had done before the 1880s. A few interpreters such as Mahmadou Seck, however, continued to be active diplomats, peace negotiators, and cultural brokers in Mauritania, where the French were extending their control at the turn of the century.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	xxii
Abbreviation.....	xxiv
Chapter 1: Introduction: Historicizing African Interpreters in Colonial Senegal.....	1
1.1. Problematizing Interpreters in the Historiography of Senegal.....	6
1.2. Sources.....	23
1.3. Methodology.....	39
1.4. Significance of the Study.....	41
Chapter 2: Historiographic and Thematic Issues.....	47
2.1. Historical Literature and Historiography.....	48
2.2. Thematic Concerns: Muslim Identity, Knowledge and Power, Interpretation, and Hegemony and Accommodation.....	67
Chapter 3: Ethnohistorical Setting and Political Economy.....	84
3.1. Geographic Space, Political Economy, and Historical Moment.....	88
3.2. Prelude to Expansion: The Pre-Faidherbian Period, 1840s-1850s.....	105
3.3. Toward Early French Expansion: The Faidherbian Period, 1854-1863.....	119
Chapter 4: The Creation of an Indigenous Interpreter Corps: Governor Faidherbe, Reforms, and Long Term Results.....	126
4.1. The Direction of Political Affairs.....	128
4.2. <i>École des Otages</i> to <i>École des Fils de Chefs et des Interprètes</i>	141
4.3. Creating an Interpreter Corps.....	164
4.4. The Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis.....	177
Chapter 5: French Expansion, Commerce, and Conquest: 1850s to 1880s.....	190
5.1. The Senegal River Trade, Trarza Moors, and the Administration in Saint-Louis.....	195
5.2. Walo, Kajoor, and the Umarian Threat.....	207
5.3. Governor Louis Briere de l'Isle, Legacy of Faidherbe, and the Dakar--Saint-Louis Railway.....	225
Chapter 6: Interpreter Family Biographies.....	233
6.1. Hamat Ndiaye Anne.....	237
6.2. B. Bou El Mogdad Seck.....	245
6.3. Mahmadou Seck.....	258
Chapter 7: Inconspicuous Interpreters.....	267
7.1. Sory Konaré.....	271
7.2. Mandao Ousman Sow.....	275

7.3. Silli Diawara.....	279
7.4. Djiby Bathily.....	282
Chapter 8: The Mauritanian Challenge: “Pacification,” French Colonial Authorities, and African Mediators, ca. 1900-1920.....	289
8.1. The Road toward “Pacification”: France and Late 19 th -Century “Mauritania”.....	295
8.2. Coppolani and the “Pacification” of Mauritania.....	299
8.3. After Coppolani: The Conquest of Mauritania.....	309
Conclusion: African Interpreters, Mediation, and the Production of Knowledge.....	316
Bibliography.....	328

LIST OF FIGURES

Maps

Map 1.1.	A Contemporary Map of Senegal.....	9
Map 1.2.	The Middle Valley of the Senegal River.....	11
Map 3.1.	Nineteenth-Century States and Ethnic Distribution in Senegal.....	90
Map 3.2.	Main Political Entities in Pre-colonial Senegal, Late 18 th Century.....	97

Photos

Photo 1.1.	Aïnina Wane and My Research Assistant/interpreter, Pierre Cahors.....	2
Photo 1.2.	Ibrahima Mbengue, Archivist, National Archives of Senegal, Dakar.....	29
Photo 1.3.	Mahmadou Thiané, Retired Interpreter in Saint-Louis, and Pierre Cahors...41	
Photo 2.1.	With My Oldest Interviewee, Mouhamet M. Kane.....	51
Photo 2.2.	A Restaurant in Saint-Louis named after Mahmoudou Seck.....	62
Photo 3.1.	The French Fort at Podor.....	116
Photo 4.1.	A Group of Students at the <i>École des Otages</i>	149
Photo 4.2.	At the <i>École des Otages</i> in Saint-Louis.....	150
Photo 4.3.	A Façade of the Central Mosque in Saint-Louis.....	186
Photo 6.1.	Bou El Mogdad Seck (1826-1880).....	248
Photo 6.2.	Mahmadou Seck (1867-1943).....	259
Photo 6.3.	At the Tomb of Mahmoudou Seck in Saint-Louis.....	264

Tables

Table 4.1.	Table of Salaries and Enlistment of Interpreters in Senegal in 1862.....	166
Table 4.2.	Table of Salaries and Enlistment of Interpreters in Senegal in 1893.....	168

Table 4.3.	Table of Ranks and Salaries of Interpreters of Senegal in 1920.....	170
Table 4.4.	Table of Interpreters of the Judicial Service of Senegal in 1860.....	174
Table 4.5.	Table of Interpreters of the Judicial Service of Senegal in 1891.....	176

ABBREVIATIONS

ANS	Archives Nationales du Sénégal
A.O.F	l'Afrique occidentale française
ASD	<i>Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances</i>
BAE	Bureau des Affaires Extérieures
BAS	<i>Bulletin administratif du Sénégal</i>
BCEHSAOF	<i>Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique</i>
CRDS	Centre de Recherche et de Documentation du Sénégal
DAP	Direction des Affaires Politiques
DI	Direction de l'Intérieur
IFAN	Institut Français (Fondamental) d'Afrique Noire
MSD	<i>Moniteur du Sénégal et Dépendances</i>
RHCF	<i>Revue d'Histoire des Colonies Françaises</i>
RTS	Radiodiffusion Télévision du Sénégal
SAM	Service des Affaires Musulmanes
UCAD	Université Cheikh Anta Diop

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Historicizing African Interpreters in Colonial Senegal

When Bou El Mogdad Seck or Ibnu-l-mogdad (1826-1880) died of chronic diabetes¹ in Saint-Louis² around 10 p.m., on 24 October 1880, after about three decades of service as interpreter and, later in his career, Arabic translator for the French colonial administration, Governor Louis-Alexandre Briere de l'Isle (1876-1881) paid a fitting tribute to the astute and suave interpreter:

The qadi and tamsir can undoubtedly be replaced in the two functions he exercised by two black [Muslim] clerics. But what cannot be replaced is the influential Al-Hajj, the devoted and eminently intelligent servant who was of such powerful assistance in our relations with the Moors, the damel of Cayor, the sultan of Segu. This death occurring at the moment of inaugurating free trade on

¹ Aïnina Wane, a seventy-three year old *fonctionnaire en retraite* (see Photo 1.1), reckons that his great grandfather's (Bou El Mogdad) was the first case of diabetes in Saint-Louis documented by the colonial administration. During my research at the *Archives Nationales du Sénégal* (Hereafter ANS), however, I did not look specifically for a documented record to verify this statement. Aïnina Wane's mother Khadi was a daughter of Mahmadou Seck (1867-1943), a.k.a. Doudou Seck, a son of Bou El Mogdad, who also had an illustrious career as an interpreter and diplomat. Khadi was married to Baila Birane Wane. (Interview with Aïnina Wane; Saint-Louis, 24 August 2004).

² During the nineteenth century, the coastal settlements of Saint-Louis, Gorée, Dakar and Rufisque constituted the Four Communes for administrative purposes in Senegal. Saint-Louis and Gorée were the earliest, and the former was the seat of government for most of the period covered in this study. As early as 1833, residents of Saint-Louis and Gorée, *habitants* or *originaires* (mulatto and free Africans born in the communes), were given the same legal and political rights as French citizens, which generated acrimonious debates about the policy of assimilation in the metropole. For more on assimilation, see, among others, Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); Michael Crowder, *Assimilation: A Study of French Assimilation Policy*. Rev. ed. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1967); G. Wesley Johnson, ed., *Double Impact: France and Africa in the Age of Imperialism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985); Francois Manchuelle, "Assimilés ou patriotes africains? Naissance du nationalisme culturel en Afrique française (1853-1931)," *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 138/139, 35, 2-3 (1995), 333-368; Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Mamadou Diouf, "The French Colonial Policy of Assimilation and the Civility of the Originaires of the Four Communes (Senegal): A Nineteenth Century Globalization Project," *Development and Change* 29 (1998), 671-696.

the river, and as we begin large undertakings on the Niger, can only be considered a calamity for the administration of the colony.³

Governor Briere's description of Bou El Mogdad's death as a "calamity for the administration" was not an exaggeration of Mogdad's worth as interpreter, mediator, cultural and political powerbroker. In fact, the governor was aware that Bou El Mogdad had not only facilitated exchanges between French administrators, African leaders, and ordinary people but also influenced the flow of information, construction of knowledge, and on-the-spot administrative decisions of his French counterparts. During his lengthy service as a *fonctionnaire*, Bou El Mogdad served as emissary, diplomatic host,



Photo 1.1. Almına Wane, grandson of Mahmadou Seck (left) and Pierre Cahors (right), my Research Assistant/Interpreter.

Photograph by author (Saint-Louis, 24 August 2004).

³ ANS 2B 52, 759, Governor to Minister, 25 October 1880 (David Robinson's translation). Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 82-83; also quoted in Oumar Bâ, *La pénétration française au Cayor: Du règne de Birima N'Goné Latyr à l'intronisation de Madiodo Dèguène Codou* (Dakar: C.C.P., 1976), 285. *Tamsir*, as used in Wolof and Pulaar, is the equivalent of the Arabic word for "exegesis," *Tafsir*, which refers to someone knowledgeable enough in the Quran to articulate critical commentaries. *Qadi* (also *cadi*) means Islamic judge.

expedition guide and treaty negotiator for different governors from Governor Auguste-Léopold Protet (1850-1854) to Governor Briere, who publicly announced the demise of the versatile “middle figure.”⁴ In recounting Bou El Mogdad’s lengthy service to the administration, Briere remarked that even before his employment as a full-time salaried interpreter he had served one or two governors in an informal capacity.⁵

Bou El Mogdad worked for the administration during a critical phase of the French imperial venture in the Senegal River valley, especially after Governor Faidherbe assumed office in 1854 and began to push forcefully further inland from Saint-Louis.⁶ In the process, Faidherbe encountered the Trarza Moors who dominated the gum trade⁷ in the lower Senegal valley and Al-Hajj Umar Tal,⁸ the Futanke Muslim leader, whose military jihad farther east in the middle and upper Senegal River posed a threat to the governor’s vision of creating a commercial empire stretching from the Senegal River to

⁴ “Middle figure” is a term borrowed from Nancy Rose Hunt who uses it for intermediaries who brokered relations between Europeans and Africans in the Belgian Congo during the colonial period. I find the term appealing because it captures in a simple way the essence of the colonial interpreter’s task—mediating cross-cultural contacts and communication. See Hunt, *Colonial Lexicon*.

⁵ ANS 2B 52, 759, Governor to Minister, 23 September 1878; also cited in Bâ, *La pénétration française*, 285; Amar Samb, “L’école de Saint-Louis ou Bou El-Mogdad,” *Essai sur la contribution Sénégal à la littérature d’expression Arabe* (Dakar: IFAN, 1972), 73-106.

⁶ The French base in Saint-Louis, as Robinson suggests, was “a very modest operation” for much of the nineteenth century. I would argue, however, that even though formal colonial rule did not begin in Senegal until the late 1880s, the situation in Saint-Louis and the lower Senegal River after Faidherbe became governor displayed all the attributes of colonial rule. Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 78; *Muslim Societies in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 185.

⁷ Gum Arabic, also called gum acacia, is a natural gum derived from two species of the acacia tree, *Acacia Senegal* and *Acacia seyal*, which grew along the banks of the Senegal River, especially on its northern side in Trarza and Brakna, in present-day southern Mauritania. For more on the gum trade, see James Webb, Jr., “The Trade in Gum Arabic: Prelude to French Conquest in Senegal,” *Journal of African History* 26, 2/3 (1985), 149-168.

⁸ The most comprehensive study to date on Al-Hajj Umar Tal is David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

the Niger River.⁹ In this French imperial scheme, Faidherbe envisaged that key interpreters such as Bou El Mogdad would perform crucial roles as intermediaries, especially in dealing with relations between the administration and African leaders in “frontier” areas, territories where the French had yet to establish their authority over independent polities in the interior.

Aware of the increasing influence of Islam and the use of Arabic in the region, the administration adopted Arabic as the language of communication with African rulers. And to facilitate correspondence and diplomatic relations with these leaders, Faidherbe employed his leading interpreters from notable Muslims in Saint-Louis for not only their knowledge of Arabic but also the influence they wielded in the local community. A year before Bou El Mogdad passed away, the director of the *Direction des Affaires Politiques* (DAP), Joseph Galliéni, whose office was in charge of frontier relations, had stressed the need for interpreters with a command of Arabic: “Under this preoccupation I have strongly encouraged our best interpreters to learn Arabic.”¹⁰ Galliéni’s concern echoed that of Faidherbe who early on had created the Arabic translation service, which operated under the supervision of the DAP to deal with correspondence with African leaders and propaganda for the administration. Faidherbe appointed Hamat Ndiaye Anne (1813-1879), then *tamsir* of Saint-Louis, as Arabic translator, a position he held until Bou El

⁹ Memorandum by Governor Faidherbe approved by the Minister of Marine, Chasseloup-Laubat, May 1864,” in John D. Hargreaves, ed., *France and West Africa: An Anthology of Historical Documents* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 144-147.

¹⁰ Report of the Director of Political Affairs, Senegal, 8 July 1879, *Archives Nationales*, Section Outre-Mer (ANSOM), Senegal VIII, 23, quoted in Donal Cruise O’Brien, “Toward an ‘Islamic Policy’ in French West Africa, 1854-1914,” *Journal of African History* 8, 2 (1967), 304.

Mogdad succeeded him in November 1863.¹¹ Such appointments underline the importance the governor attached to the mediations of African intermediaries in his colonizing project. Overall, interpreters who turned out to be outstanding mediators usually had a good grasp of Arabic because of their Muslim background and Quranic schooling. Moreover, they wielded some influence in the local community.

Bou El Mogdad's death provided an opportune occasion for Governor Briere to reiterate the importance of interpreters in the French plan of expansion. Like Faidherbe before him, Briere was under no illusion about the difficulties of carving out a French empire in West Africa and the necessity of having dynamic African intermediaries who could defuse the tension and hostility generated by French intrusion (and subsequently political dominance) at the local level. Despite their subordinate position in the colonial hierarchy, interpreters had a more intimate relationship with local chiefs, traditional elites, and the rest of the African population than French officials. They could thus provide the much-needed liaison between the colonial authorities and Africans.

Although interpreters were important transactional go-betweens, as historian Alida Metcalf describes them,¹² however, the paucity of empirical studies on this group of intermediaries has meant a persistence of misunderstanding concerning their position in both academic and non-academic discourses on French colonial rule in Senegal. This

¹¹ *Feuille officielle du Sénégal et dépendances* 1863. Hamat Ndiaye Anne also became *cadi* and head of the Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis in 1857. His preoccupation with this job most probably led to Bou El Mogdad's appointment as Arabic translator.

¹² Metcalf, *Go-betweens*. Transactional go-betweens facilitated cross-cultural exchanges through their knowledge of different languages and cultures. They were vital in bringing understanding between the Portuguese and indigenous peoples in the Americas, even if they could do little to avert the wars and conquest that ensued from such encounters. Among the intermediaries Metcalf refers to as transactional go-betweens are interpreters, translators, negotiators, and cultural brokers.

study therefore responds to the pressing need for full-blown empirical studies on African interpreters and similar interlocutors of the colonial era.

1.1. Problematising Interpreters in the Historiography of Senegal

Although Governors Faidherbe and Briere, along with their respective directors of the DAP, were aware of the critical functions of interpreters, scholars working on the colonial period in Senegal have been less willing to admit their worth for research purposes.¹³ At best historians turn their attention to African interpreters only on a wider canvass of discussions centered on the evolution of French “Islamic Policy,” education, and commerce in colonial Senegal and French West Africa in general.¹⁴ Sure enough, a cursory glance at the historiography of the immediate pre-colonial and colonial periods in Senegal reveals a scholarly preference for political, economic, and military history preoccupied with elite political figures, nationalist and resistance heroes, *grands marabouts*, *signares* of Saint-Louis and Gorée,¹⁵ the slave trade and the *tirailleurs*

¹³ Exceptions ought to be made here, however. See, for example, Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, especially Chapter 4, 73-96; Samb, *Essai sur la contribution du Sénégal*, 73-106; Yves Saint-Martin, *Sénégal sous le Second Empire: Naissance d'un empire colonial, 1850-1871* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1989). For African interpreters in colonial French West Africa, see Henri Brunschwig, *Noirs et Blancs dans l'Afrique noire française* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), particularly Chapter 6, 105-123; Allan Christelow, “Algerian Interpreters and the French Colonial Adventure in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *The Maghreb Review* 10, 4-6 (1985), 101-106; A.S. Kanya-Forstner, “French Missions to the Central Sudan in the 1890s: The Role of Algerian Agents and Interpreters,” *Paideuma* 40 (1990), 15-35; Emily L. Osborn, “‘Circle of Iron’: African Colonial Employees and the Interpretation of Colonial Rule in French West Africa,” *Journal of African History* 44 (2003), 29-50; Christophe Garonne, “Les personnels indigènes en A.O.F.: les interprètes 1850-1938” (Thèse de maîtrise, Université de Provence, 1994-1995).

¹⁴ See, among others, Denise Bouche, “*L'Enseignement dans les territoires français de l'Afrique Occidentale de 1817 à 1920. Mission civilisatrice où formation d'une élite?*” 2 vols. (Thèse de doctorat d'Etat, Paris I, 1975); Martin Klein, *Islam and Imperialism in Senegal: Sine-Saloum, 1847-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968); Cruise O'Brien, “Islamic Policy”; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*; also “French ‘Islamic Policy’ and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Senegal,” *Journal of African History* 29, 3 (1988), 415-435.

¹⁵ The term *signares* refers to African or Eurafrican women (offspring of European and African relations) in colonial Senegal who wielded a lot of influence in the economic sphere because they were

sénégalais.¹⁶ As a result, both the academic accounts and their politicized renditions about Al-Hajj Umar, Lat Dior, Amadu Bamba, Blaise Diagne and Leopold Senghor, to name only a few, have become staple ingredients of contemporary Senegalese collective historical memory and discourse on French colonial rule. Likewise, the narratives of former *tirailleurs* recounting their experiences in Europe while fighting for France during World War I and II continue to animate a great deal of interest not only among *ancien combattants* themselves but also ordinary Senegalese from different social and ethnic backgrounds. To this day, it is common to hear romanticized recollections about the exploits of *signares* of Saint-Louis and Gorée during their heyday in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Such narratives have been recounted and re-embellished

wealthy traders and/or possessed property. They usually served as interlocutors for their European husbands or business contacts who were involved in commerce. For more on *signares*, see George Brooks, "Signares of Saint-Louis and Gorée: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth-Century Senegal," Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay, eds., *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), 19-44; Crowder, *Assimilation*; Hilary Jones, "Citizens and Subjects: Métis Society, Identity and the Struggle over Colonial Politics in Saint-Louis, 1870-1920" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 2003).

¹⁶ The list here is only suggestive. See, for example, Bâ, *La pénétration française*; Cheikh Anta Babou, "Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya: The History of a Muslim Brotherhood in Senegal (1853-1913)," 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 2002); *Fighting the greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853-1913* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007). Brooks, "Signares of Saint-Louis and Gorée;" Andrew F. Clerk, *From Frontier to Backwater: Economy and Society in the Upper Senegal Valley (West Africa), 1850-1920* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999); G. Wesley Johnson, *The Emergence of Black Politics in Senegal: The Struggle for Power in the Four Communes, 1900-1920* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971); Martin Klein, "Social and Economic Factors in the Muslims Revolution in Senegambia," *Journal of African History* 13, 3 (1972), 419-441; Joe Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999); Donal Cruise O'Brien, *The Mourides of Senegal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); *Saints and Politicians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation; Holy War of Umar Tal; Chiefs and Clerics: Abdul Bokar Kan and Futa-Toro, 1853-1891* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); James Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); 'God Alone is King': *Islam and Emancipation in Senegal* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002).

so often that they have taken on folklorist dimensions in the historical imagination of most Senegalese.¹⁷

While preoccupied with the group of indigenous historical figures listed above, however, scholars of colonial Senegal have overlooked African functionaries, such as interpreters, translators, and clerks, who mediated interactions between the French authorities, African rulers, and ordinary Africans on a daily basis.¹⁸ In hindsight, the nationalist and resistance paradigms that dominated earlier post-independence studies on French colonialism in Senegal were reductionist in approach and glossed over the complex circumstances interpreters and their likes faced. To all intents and purposes, the mode of analysis scholars employed did not produce a profound understanding of the historical context within which the aforementioned colonial intermediaries functioned; instead, it contributed to marginalizing them in historical literature on French colonialism in Senegal and West Africa in general. Taking into account that interpreters liaised regularly between European colonial officials and Africans, however, a careful

¹⁷ The information here comes from what I gathered through informal conversations with various Senegalese informants and acquaintances in Dakar and Saint-Louis during my archival and field research in 2004. Most of those with whom I discussed this issue tended to praise the *signares* for the wealth and social capital they possessed, which allowed them to facilitate commercial contacts between their French husbands or business partners and local merchants and traders.

¹⁸ Much to the credit of West Africanist historians, however, in recent years a few of them have turned the spotlight on interpreters, translators, clerks and letter writers. See, for example, Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*; Osborn, "Circle of Iron". In addition, the 8th Stanford-Berkeley Law and Colonialism Symposium, "Interpreters, Letter Writers, and Clerks: Mediating Law and Authority in Colonial Africa," held at Stanford University, California, from 2-4 May 2002, reaffirmed the call for more research focused on African intermediaries of the colonial period, especially interpreters, translators, clerks and *écrivains publics*. Among the papers presented at the symposium, some specifically covered colonial Senegal and French West Africa. For example, Ralph Austen, "Interpreters Self-Interpreted: The Autobiographies of Two Colonial Clerks"; Martin Klein, "African Participation in Colonial Rule: The Role of Clerks, Interpreters, and Other Intermediaries"; Saliou Mbaye, "Personnel Files and the Role of *Qadis* and Interpreters in the Colonial Administration of Saint-Louis, Senegal, 1857-1911"; Tamba M'bayo, "Indigenous Interpreters in the Making of Colonial Senegal: Bou El Mogdad, 1826-1880, A Preliminary Survey." The organizers of the symposium compiled some of the papers presented for publication. See Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*.

investigation and critical analysis of the history of such intermediaries bears great relevance to understanding better the complex dynamics of colonial interactions in Senegal as well as French West Africa. Indeed the exclusion of African colonial interpreters and translators in the historiography of Senegal and French West Africa is a notable oversight scholars have yet to rectify. By focusing on Muslim interpreters employed by the administration in Saint-Louis between the 1850s and early 1920s, therefore, this study aims to bring their experiences to life and provide a context for properly assessing their historical significance.



Map 1.1. A Contemporary Map of Senegal.

Source: <<http://www.greenwichmeantime.com/time-zone/africa/senegal/map.htm>>

I define the lower and middle Senegal valley as the area stretching from Saint-Louis, on the coast, to around Matam, located about 266 miles (429 km) up-river in the eastern part of Futa Toro, in present-day northern Senegal (Maps 1.1 and 1.2). In this geographic space, I include the former states of Walo along the coast, Kajoor to the south, Futa-Toro to the east, and Trarza and Brakna on the northern side of the Senegal River in today's southern Mauritania, where several interpreters performed their official functions. During the second half of the 1800s and early 1900s, the French were interested in this part of Senegal for a combination of political, economic, and strategic reasons. As the administration sought to extend its control into the interior and consolidate its position in the region from the 1850s onward, Muslim interpreters became ubiquitous figures in the lower and middle Senegal valley.

From the beginning, the exigencies of daily interactions between the French and Africans and the prospects of overseas commerce had prompted the use of African and Eurafrican cultural and commercial brokers, who made contacts and commercial exchanges easier between French merchants, their local associates on the coast, and Africans in the interior.¹⁹ The slaves, gum Arabic, gold dust, grains and hides acquired at the *escales* (seasonal trade fairs) along the Senegal River ended up in Saint-Louis, Gorée,

¹⁹ The intermediary role of Eurafricans as commercial brokers in the Senegambia region has a long history dating back to pre-colonial times and early contacts with Europeans along the coast of West Africa from the mid-fifteenth century onward. For more on this issue, see Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); Philip Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1975); Brooks, "Signares of Saint-Louis and Gorée"; *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), especially Chapter 9, 250-287; Jones, "Citizens and Subjects."

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and other coastal settlements for both local consumption and export abroad.²⁰ By the early nineteenth century, it had become customary for Eurafrican and African *traitants* (traders) operating in the *escales* to employ *maîtres de langues* or *tarjimans* (in Hassaniyya, the local language spoken mostly in today's southern Mauritania)²¹ who transacted business between merchants and traders from different geographic, ethnic, and “racial” backgrounds.²² These *maîtres de langues*, Robinson suggests, were the precursors of the African interpreters the administration in Saint-Louis began to employ in increasing numbers after Faidherbe became governor in 1854.²³ On this score, I concur with Robinson.

²⁰ After mid century, peanuts gradually became the dominant export commodity. By the 1870s, the rapid expansion of peanut cultivation, especially in the “peanut basin” of Kajoor, had overshadowed the gum trade. Moreover, the impact of peanuts on the political economy of colonial Senegal was important in the growth of the Muridiyya order, whose founder Amadu Bamba implored his followers to cultivate the crop as a means of sustenance and economic independence. See Brooks, “Peanuts and Colonialism: Consequences of the Commercialization of Peanuts in West Africa, 1830-1870,” *Journal of African History* 16 (1975), 29-54; Jean Copans, *Les Marabouts de l'arachide: La Confrérie Mourides et les paysans du Sénégal* (Paris: Le sycomore, 1980); Cheikh Tidiane Sy, *La Confrérie sénégalaise des Mourides* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1969); Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*.

²¹ *Traitants* were Eurafrican and African agents who transacted business in the interior on behalf of richer French and Eurafrican merchants (*merchants*) in Saint-Louis and the other coastal settlements. The Hassaniyya rendition of *maître de langues*, *tarjiman*, which literally means “translator,” was used for any mediator the French colonial documentation refers to as “minister” of the *roi*; it also applied to freelance brokers who facilitated transactions at the *escales*. For more on *traitants*, see Roger Pasquier, “Les traitants des comptoirs du Sénégal au milieu du XIXe siècle,” Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, ed., *Actes du Colloque Entreprises et Entrepreneurs en Afrique (XIXe et XXe siècles)*. 2 vols. (Paris: Harmattan, 1983), 141-163; Leland Conley Barrows, “General Faidherbe the Maurel and Prom Company, and French Expansion in Senegal.” 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., University of California, LA, 1974); Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, especially 31-33, 117-139.

²² Besides being linked to the overseas export commerce via Saint-Louis and other coastal settlements, the Senegal River trade was part of a wider commercial network connected to the trans-Saharan trade. Thus, merchants who frequented the *escales* were not limited to those that came from the Senegal River area. For more on the trans-Saharan trade and the local commercial network in the area immediately north of the Senegal River, see Ghislaine Lydon, “On the Trans-Saharan Trails: Trading Networks and Cross-cultural Exchange in Western Africa, 1840s-1950s” (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 2000); Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans.”

²³ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 32.

Around mid century, Faïdherbe, a military engineer who had served in Algeria in the 1840s during France's struggle with the Algerian people, began to put together a corps of local interpreters and translators to serve the administration.²⁴ The governor could recall the use of French military interpreters, since the 1830s, to liaise between colonial officials and the local Algerian population. Likewise, Faïdherbe was aware of the earlier practice of employing the *maîtres de langues* in the Senegal River trade network. Thus, his appreciation of interpreters/translators as an important cadre of administrative employees was rooted in precedents in both Algeria and Senegal. In contrast to Algeria, however, the interpreters in Senegal were indigenous personnel.²⁵

Muslim interpreters employed by the administration in Saint-Louis were not a homogeneous group, however. Instead, they represented a diverse mix of individuals from different localities, ethnic, and social backgrounds, just as they exhibited dissimilar levels of competence, education (Islamic and French), proficiency in languages and integrity. And in spite of their common background as Muslims, their level of political consciousness and general outlook toward French acculturation varied. Interpreters who spent most of their time in Saint-Louis were more likely to inculcate its cosmopolitan influences and become more familiar with the protocols of French bureaucracy than their colleagues posted to distant areas of the interior.

²⁴ Decision on the Organization of the Interpreter Personnel (No. 166), 15 November 1857, *Bulletin Administratif du Sénégal* 13 (January 1857).

²⁵ This is not to suggest that the French colonial administration in Algeria did not employ indigenous Algerians as interpreters. In fact, local Algerians, as Christelow shows, served the colonial administration as interpreters and translators. Some of them took part in reconnaissance missions sent across the Sahara as far as the Sokoto Caliphate in the late nineteenth century. See Christelow, "Algerian Interpreters."

Even though interpreters in colonial Senegal were Muslims, this did not deter them from forging a working relationship with the non-Muslim French administration. From their perspective, employment within the administration neither constituted a breach of their Islamic faith nor precluded the preservation of a certain degree of autonomy. Yet this situation raises an important question about the feasibility of making room for *daar al-Islam* (world of Islam) within the *daar al-Kufr* (world of “unbelievers”). For long, Muslims in the lower and middle Senegal valley, as elsewhere in West Africa, had debated this issue without reaching a consensus. The interpreters therefore faced the challenge of molding their Muslim identity accordingly as French presence in the lower and middle Senegal valley became more visible, an issue I pick up in Chapter 2. For the French, though, the necessity of administering a territory in which Muslims were becoming a majority²⁶ prompted the formulation of an Islamic policy of sorts. Faidherbe and his successors applied in inconsistent permutations throughout the second half of the 1800s and early 1900s.²⁷

At the outset, Faidherbe considered it imperative to woo the support of important Muslims in Saint-Louis, including some interpreters, to allay the fears of the Muslim population about the intentions of the administration, especially its attitude toward them. Perhaps it was no surprise to contemporary observers that the governor decreed the

²⁶ Paul Marty, *Études sur l'Islam au Sénégal*, 2 vols. (Paris: Leroux, 1917), 373-376.

²⁷ For more on French “Islamic policy,” see Christopher Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Cruise O'Brien, “Toward an ‘Islamic Policy’”; Jean-Louis Triaud and David Robinson, eds., *Les temps des marabouts: Itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française v. 1880-1960* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1997); Robinson, “French ‘Islamic’ Policy”; “France as a Muslim Power in West Africa,” *Africa Today* 46, 3-4 (1999), 105-127.

creation of a Muslim Tribunal for Saint-Louis in 1857,²⁸ amidst criticisms from Saint-Louisian Catholics that the administration was giving Muslims preferential treatment. Still, in the early 1860s, Faïdherbe took the unprecedented step of funding one of his key interpreters, Bou El Mogdad, to go on a pilgrimage (the hajj) to Mecca, a gesture the administration propagated to persuade other Muslim leaders about its tolerance and goodwill toward Muslims. After that, the governor capitalized on Bou El Mogdad's pilgrimage to launch a counteroffensive in a war of propaganda against Al-Hajj Umar's growing political influence. Chapters 5 and 6 will deal with these issues in detail.

Although a "fear of Islam" pervaded the political discourse of French colonial authorities in West Africa in the late 1880s and early 1900s, they, like their African counterparts, realized gradually the need to establish an enduring "workable and working" relationship, as Robinson contends.²⁹ For the *grands marabouts*, therefore, it made sense to relinquish political control to the French but maintain autonomy in the religious, social, and economic spheres. Equally, I argue that from the 1850s on, Muslim interpreters participated in the process of accommodation to French hegemony in Senegal to the extent that their mediations fostered understanding and coexistence between the colonial authorities and Africans. In the chapters ahead, a critical analysis of

²⁸ Announcement Promulgating the Imperial Decree of 20 May 1857 which Creates a Muslim Court in Saint-Louis (No. 104), Saint-Louis, 25 June 1857, *Bulletin Administratif du Sénégal* 13 (January 1857). For more on Muslim tribunals, see Dominique Sarr and Richard Roberts, "The Jurisdiction of the Muslim Tribunals in Colonial Senegal, 1857-1932," Kristin Mann and Richard Roberts, eds., *Law in Colonial Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991), 131-145; Cruise O'Brien, "Toward an 'Islamic Policy'"; Robinson, "French 'Islamic' Policy"; Rebecca Shereikis, "From Law to Custom: The Shifting Legal Status of Muslim Originaires in Kayes and Medine, 1903-13," *Journal of African History* 42 (2001), 261-283.

²⁹ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 3.

the various roles interpreters performed will make clear their agency in the affairs of the administration as well as their local community.

The perception that African colonial interpreters were dubious individuals motivated largely by self-interest has surfaced now and again in both academic and popular debates on colonial rule in French West Africa.³⁰ From this viewpoint, interpreters appear both as unscrupulous individuals, exceedingly predatory in instinct, who devised devious ways of extorting funds from other Africans, and as disloyal employees who twisted translations for their French superiors in pursuit of selfish goals. No doubt a number of studies have revealed that among the diverse mix of interpreters the French administration employed in its West African colonies, some were dishonest and had no scruples taking advantage of their office to enrich themselves through extortion from other Africans and using unconventional means to enhance their influence.³¹ Such interpreters exploited the inherent weaknesses of the colonial administration for purposes that at times conflicted with the expectations of the French authorities and tended to subvert the essence of colonial domination. As such, French administrators were often suspicious of the intentions of local interpreters, translators, and clerks and harbored misgivings about their trustworthiness. Similarly, the position of African interpreters within the administration, especially those close to high-ranking French officials who wielded some measure of political power, often elicited distrust and

³⁰ This negative image of interpreters is perhaps an unintended legacy of the success of Amadou Hampaté Bâ's popular "semi-autobiographical" novel, *The Fortunes of Wangrin*, which featured some illiterate and semi-illiterate interpreters in the Soudan Français, such as Racutie, who exploited the weaknesses of the nascent colonial administration to amass a substantial fortune, at least by local standards. Bâ, *The Fortunes of Wangrin*. Trans. by Aina Pavollini Taylor (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1987).

³¹ See Christelow, "Algerian Interpreters"; Osborn, "Circle of Iron."

envy from other Africans. Overall, though, interpreters who proved to be outstanding in office, more often than not, were men of integrity aware of the difficult task of maintaining a delicate balance between their personal and local communal interests and those of their French employers.

The recurring representation (read misrepresentation) of African colonial interpreters as dishonest, disloyal, and untrustworthy individuals has been overblown as a generalization. Besides being harsh and ahistorical, this assessment does violence to the heterogeneous mix of interpreters in colonial Senegal and the historical specificity of their individual careers and activities. Such a view, then, miscasts the early colonial period and the power of the colonial state vis-à-vis African employees of the administration. Hence, rather than view interpreters simply as self-seeking career opportunists and mere puppets of French colonial officials, as the conventional wisdom would have it, I propose a judicious analysis of the competing forces, constraints, and complexities of the worlds interpreters traversed as the French expanded into the Senegal valley from mid century on.

The study looks beyond framing colonial relations between the French and Africans in the traditional terms of "conquest" and "domination," which often implies that the latter were docile victims of French officials. Instead, it calls for re-conceptualizing colonizer/colonized relations as reciprocal and symbiotic historical encounters in which both the French and Africans contested and negotiated the terms of power relations as they grappled with contradictory and thorny policies as well as unfamiliar cultural values and practices. This approach allows us to situate local interpreters and similar intermediaries in their proper historical context, taking into

account both internal and external pressures that coalesced to make the colonial period a complex and challenging interlude for both the colonizers and colonized.

Similar works on Native American and mixed-race intermediaries in the Atlantic World—from the early 1500s on—have enriched this endeavor to reconstruct the history of Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal.³² Within this wider geographic and temporal context, it is noteworthy, for example, that the scenario in colonial Senegal wherein the colonial administration employed only male interpreters bore a striking similarity to that in the Americas where interpreters and translators in the post-Columbus era were overwhelmingly men. At the same time, some documented evidence exists of situations in which Europeans hired indigenous and mixed-race women to mediate relations with different Native American leaders and polities.³³ Perhaps the best-known cases are Doña Marina or La Malinche (ca. 1500-1527),³⁴ who accompanied Hernán Cortés in the early 1500s during his conquest of the Aztec Empire in Central America, and Sacajawea (ca. 1787-1812), the Shoshone woman, who traveled with Lewis and Clarke in the early 1800s during their exploration of Northwestern America.³⁵ In addition to her native tongue Nahuatl, Doña Marina was fluent in Maya and picked up Spanish along the way because of her intimate ties with the Spanish conquistadors. Indeed Doña Marina's

³² See, for instance, Hagedorn, "Brokers of Understanding"; "'A Friend to go between Them': The Interpreter as Cultural Broker during Anglo-Iroquois Councils, 1740-70," *Ethnohistory* 35, 1 (Winter, 1988), 60-80; Karttunen, *Between Worlds*; Metcalf, *Go-betweens*; Szasz, ed., *Between Indian and White Worlds*.

³³ Ibid; Karttunen, *Between Worlds*.

³⁴ For a first-hand account on Doña Marina's relationship with Hernán Cortés and his Spanish conquistadors, see Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*. Trans. with intro. by J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1963).

³⁵ Szasz, *Between Indian and White Worlds*; Colin G. Gallaway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

facility with local languages and her familiarity with cultural practices in her homeland equipped her well to provide intelligence and diplomatic services for Hernan Cortés while liaising between Native Americans and their would-be Spanish conquerors.³⁶

The cases cited above were exceptions, however, as women rarely gained employment as interpreters in diplomatic and bureaucratic circles in the Americas, just as in colonial Senegal. Instead, they were more likely to serve as interpreters in the commercial sphere, where they could look after the interests of their European business associates, spouses, and lovers, or in religious missions, after they had converted to Christianity. As historian Nancy Hagedorn points out in her study on interpreters in colonial New York during the eighteenth century,

Only two women ever became prominent diplomatic interpreters in New York—Hillette van Olinda and Madam Mantour—and both of them were gone by the late 1720s. ...After their departure, no woman again achieved prominence as a regular, salaried interpreter for the province. Women remained active in other areas such as trade, but they rarely stepped into the diplomatic arena and only occasionally become visible in the records.³⁷

From the examples above, it is fair to infer that the position of interpreter and translator in the Americas, as in colonial Senegal, was a male preserve for the most part, as evidenced by the appearance of only a handful of female interpreters in the extant records. In contrast to the diplomatic arena, however, the commercial and religious spheres offered women more opportunities to use their language skills and understanding of cross-cultural practices to serve as interpreters and translators.

³⁶ Karttunen, *Between Worlds*, 5, 24-25, 37-41, 86-87.

³⁷ Hagedorn, "Brokers of Understanding," 393.

Perhaps the absence of female interpreters in the colonial administration in Senegal reflected the growing influence of Islamic patriarchy in the region, which mostly confined Muslim women to the private space of their homes. Yet this may well have been the persistence of traditional African patriarchal hierarchies. Still, Saint-Louisian women, especially non-Muslim *signares*, had a long history of operating in the commercial sphere as cultural brokers who interceded between their French spouses or associates and Africans. In so doing, the *signares* overstepped the patriarchal boundary.³⁸ Even so, since the French colonial authorities were concerned about maintaining a semblance of tolerance toward their Muslim subjects, the administration acquiesced in upholding the patriarchal status quo for the most part and refrained from employing female interpreters. Little wonder then that the archival records consulted for this study did not reveal any evidence of female interpreters employed in an official capacity by the administration in Saint-Louis during the period under consideration.

I should add, however, that because of the proximity of prominent interpreters to high-ranking French administrators as well as the social capital they wielded within the local community, their daughters were prized targets for suitors seeking access to the corridors of power in Saint-Louis and a place among dignitaries in their local sociopolitical space. Robinson has shown, for example, how two influential interpreter families, the Anne and Seck, in late nineteenth-century Saint-Louis, cemented family ties

³⁸ It is important to note that a large number of *signares* were offspring of European and African relations, and they mostly adopted Christianity. Such women were more visible in the public space than Muslim women who were more inclined toward traditional female roles in the private domain.

through marriage.³⁹ This kind of social networking was particularly desirable for self-motivated and ambitious young men from the traditional elite seeking to enhance their status by marrying women from important families. Such marital bonds could be used to good effect in jockeying for political positions.

The foregoing discussion brings together different strands of subtexts, suggesting that the complex history of Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal requires constructive analysis to unravel their ambiguous position as transactional go-betweens. Because France, a non-Muslim power, sought control over a territory where majority of the population was becoming Islamized, the situation had far-reaching sociopolitical implications for Muslim interpreters. As such, some thought-provoking questions arise about hegemonic relations in colonial settings, the production of knowledge, and the construction of identity among indigenous intermediaries. What roles did African interpreters envisage for themselves as French expansion, conquest, and colonial rule unfolded in the Senegal region? What criteria determined the recruitment and promotion of interpreters within the ranks of the administration's African personnel? How did both the French colonial authorities and Africans understand the paradoxical position of interpreters? In what ways did the French policy of assimilation influence the construction of identity among interpreters given their Muslim background? To what extent did African interpreters as custodians of "local knowledge" contribute to the construction of colonial discourse and knowledge? What does the accommodation of

³⁹ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 83-85. Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad Seck were the two most outstanding interpreters in Saint-Louis to work for the administration until they passed away in 1879 and 1880, respectively. Bou El Mogdad married Hamat's sister Kumba. In addition, Hamat's granddaughter, Indu, became the wife of Mahmoud Seck (Doudou), son of Bou El Mogdad. Chapter 6 will elaborate on this issue.

French officials to Islam and the Muslim elite mean for understanding the social worlds of interpreters in colonial Senegal? Finally, how did the French mode of alliance, acquiescence, and control change over time with territorial expansion and the imposition of colonial rule?

The above questions underlie a number of themes that had a significant bearing on the course of events in colonial Senegal and therefore merit meaningful consideration in a study of this nature. Each theme, in varying degrees, defined the place of interpreters both within the administration and within their local society, which experienced significant sociopolitical and economic changes triggered by French intrusion, expansion, and colonial rule. Thus it is necessary to map out some kind of thematic schema around which the ongoing discussion will revolve in the chapters ahead. Chapter 2 will discuss in detail the major themes that underpin the study. For the time being, it suffices to mention that the themes center on: (i) Muslim identity and French assimilation; (ii) knowledge production and power relations in a colonial context; (iii) interpretation and mediation as processes of cross-cultural exchange; and (iv) hegemony and accommodation—to French colonial rule.

The next section of the chapter examines the various sources, both written and oral, that provide groundwork for the study. Despite the limitations of the French colonial archival materials, it is possible to extract ample information that allows us to piece together a history of African interpreters. In addition, available oral sources inform us about some aspects of the social world of colonial interpreters that get little to no attention in archival records. The chapter also explains the methodology adopted from the collection of data through the writing phase. Then the final section evaluates the

significance of the study as the first full-length work on Muslim African interpreters in colonial Senegal.

1.2. Sources

The qualitative and quantitative nature of the sources used to study colonial West Africa, whether Anglophone, Francophone, or Lusophone, poses a formidable challenge for scholars, especially historians who deal with both archival and oral sources. Both the indigenous and European sources that have informed empirical studies on the colonial era in West Africa have strengths and weaknesses that more or less determine the scope of the interpretations derived from them. Authored by different individuals with diverse interests, purposes, attitudes and audiences in mind, the sources reveal varying degrees of biases, omissions, and authenticity. Some of them privilege one historical actor or group over others, a tendency that often points to unequal relations of power between competing individuals and groups.⁴⁰ In this context, the historian whose work is to stand the test of time faces a daunting, albeit ultimately, rewarding task of collecting, collating, and interpreting a diverse body of evidence. In dealing with oral data, for instance, interviewing, transcribing, and translating materials could be time-consuming and expensive, particularly for those conducting research with limited financial means. Similarly, archival materials present their own peculiar problems, including omissions

⁴⁰ Michel-Rolph Trouillot provides a fascinating account of how power relations shape the production of history. See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). For a more recent study on “silences” within the context of African history, see Jacques Depelchin, *Silences in African History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2005).

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and selective privileging, some of which result from conscious choices archivists make about what to preserve or discard.

In truth, written, oral, and material sources all have the potential of enriching our understanding of the colonial past, just as their misuse could reinforce existing historical distortions, often with far-reaching epistemological implications.⁴¹ It requires no exaggeration to state that written records are as liable to “silences” as oral history and traditions.⁴² It is imperative, therefore, to subject the different sources at our disposal to the same kind of rigorous scrutiny, knowing too well that failure to do so will militate against making a meaningful contribution to the existing body of knowledge on African history.

The sources at the disposal of scholars studying the colonial period in Senegal comprise written records, oral data, and material culture that fit into two broad categories for analytical purposes: “internal” and “external.” The internal sources are those Africans themselves produced and transmitted for the most part through custodians of local history, such as griots, family elders, scribes, chiefs, religious leaders (especially marabouts) and interpreters. The oral accounts at times reflect different and conflicting

⁴¹ Since African history became a professional field of study about half a century ago, the Eurocentric orientation of a large number of earlier studies is an all too familiar subject scholars have debated now and again. Few historians today would deny that it took a generation of scholars to challenge the Eurocentric constructs that informed (read misinformed) past studies in African history, anthropology, and ethnography written mostly by European and American authors/scholars and later replicated by some of their African counterparts. For more on this issue, see, Depelchin, *Silences in African History*.

⁴² The pioneering work of Jan Vansina vindicating the utility of oral sources for the study of African history hardly needs any introduction. Moreover, several scholars recognizing the perceptiveness of Vansina's work added their voice to the debate about the validity of oral sources. See Vansina, *Oral Tradition; A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); David Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Thomas Spear, “Oral Traditions: Whose History?” *History in Africa* 8 (1981), 165-181; Elizabeth Tonkin, “Investigating Oral Tradition,” *Journal of African History* 27 (1986), 203-213.

versions of local or family histories that privilege certain individuals, families, or clans at the expense of others. As for the external sources, various groups of Europeans, including French administrators, military officers, merchants, travelers and missionaries, generated them. The documentation to a large degree reflects the specific interests of the different European authors, at times spiced with their Eurocentric predisposition.

Oral history and traditions handed down from one generation to the next constitute an important component of the collective memory of the people of West Africa, just like most Africans elsewhere on the continent. And the increasing number of studies now drawing on oral history and traditions underlines their usefulness for reconstructing the African past. Complementing the oral sources is a smaller body of records written by Africans who attained some level of literacy in either an indigenous language (using Arabic scripts), Arabic, or French (and other European languages). Both the written and oral sources Africans produced, like those by European authors, exhibit different degrees of parochialism, inconsistencies, and biases. At the same time, the internal sources often articulate African voices seldom "heard" in written records authored by European officials. For this reason, they have proved invaluable for studying West Africa during the colonial period. The internal sources not only complement the written European records but also at times challenge and contradict what the latter state.

Likewise, material culture, including architecture, artifacts, visual art and music, has become an important component of the internal sources more scholars are tapping to enrich the history of the pre-colonial and colonial periods in West Africa.⁴³ Few decades

⁴³ See, for example, Peter Mark, *"Portuguese" Style and Luso-African Identity*; Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jane I. Guyer, "Wealth in People, Wealth in Things—Introduction," *Journal of African History* 36 (1995), 83-90;

ago, Africanist historians seldom paid much attention to these sources. Today, however, as scholars in various fields of research adopt an interdisciplinary approach, the hitherto neglected sources have added fresh insights to the interpretative repertoire current studies reflect.

In examining the written sources consulted for this study, it is worthwhile to consider the specific circumstances under which they emerged. For a fruitful appraisal of **their** provenance, therefore, the different authors, their specific purposes, and audiences **for** which the letters, reports, memoirs, monographs and travel accounts were produced **should** come under the spotlight for thorough scrutiny. In so doing, we induce a more **perceptive** interpretation of colonial interactions between French policymakers, officials **on the** spot, and Africans, particularly as exchanges between these groups created the **circumstances** in which the documents in question emerged in the first place.

In certain instances, the discourse embedded in the sources may have preceded **the** events and historical actors featured. Such a situation would have had the potential for **creat**ing misunderstanding especially among French officials who were unfamiliar with **local** history. In tackling the biases and omissions French colonial officials brought to **bear** on the archival records, therefore, it is sometimes necessary to read the **docu**mentation against the grain. A close reading of the written sources often teases out **what** they do not state, sometimes leading to meaningful insights. Much the same **observ**ation applies to oral sources that make up the bulk of the internal materials **Africans** produced. All told, both the internal and external sources have their respective

Mariane C. Ferme, *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History*.

merits and demerits, and their value depends to a significant degree on how meticulously we scrutinize them.

The French colonial archives in Senegal started to take shape in earnest after Faidherbe became governor in 1854. He began preserving administrative records in a more systematic manner, an undertaking that shaped up over time into the archives of Saint-Louis. The archives expanded slowly but in the long term became an important resource pool for scholars and administrators conducting ethnographic and historical research on colonial Senegal and French West Africa. Hence, most studies on the colonial period in this part of Francophone Africa often reflect the orientation and limitations of the archival records.

Today, among the French-written records housed at the National Archives in Dakar, we find official reports, correspondence, personnel profiles, administrative monographs, minutes and memos.⁴⁴ The records provide snippets of information on several interpreters, most times varying in scope and worth according to their rank and importance in the administration. The documentation also casts light on the hierarchical structure of the administration and the priorities that shaped its policies and praxis at different times of the colonial period. Through a critical reading of the records, we get a sense of the personalities and attitudes of their respective authors as evidenced by their understanding—but misunderstanding at times—of the events and historical actors documented.

⁴⁴ The ANS files are grouped into “series” comprising a range of different documents, as mentioned above. The list here provides a gist of what the different series contain: 1C (*dossiers de personnel*); 1G (*études générale: missions, notices, et monographies, 1818-192*); 2G (*rapports périodiques des gouverneurs et chefs de service depuis 1895*); 13G (*affaires politiques, administrative, et musulmanes: Sénégal, 1782-1919*).

One important set of documentation in the National Archives in Dakar for researching colonial interpreters, translators, and clerks in Senegal is the C series, “*Personnel*.” Subdivided into three parts, these records comprise 1C, *dossiers de personnel*, 2C, *statuts du personnel*, and 3C, *distinctions honorifiques*. The sub-series 1C and 3C are the most important of the trio for the purposes of this study. Besides the profiles of individual administrative employees, the dossiers contain confidential notes written by their immediate superiors. In addition, the files include correspondence between officials at different levels of the administrative hierarchy—*commandants de cercle*, *commandants de poste*, lieutenant governor and governor. Because the C series contains pertinent information on several interpreters compiled from the files of different French officials over time, it reflects to some degree how the chain of command worked at various levels of the administration and different moments of the colonial period.

Not all the *dossiers de personnel*, especially those on interpreters, have been catalogued and made accessible to the public, however. The ANS in Dakar still observes the one-year-rule pertaining to the personnel files for state employees. This means the files remain closed for one hundred years after the birth of an employee. Therefore, for an employee born in 1880, for example, his or her file would only have been available to the public since 1980. Researchers therefore do not have access to files that fall within the one-hundred-year period until they have been “declassified.” Although one of the archivists, Ibrahima Mbengue (Photo 1.2.), showed me a list of interpreters whose files they were working on during my archival research in 2004, the files themselves were not in the best of conditions. Not only was the storage room for the files humid (with no dehumidifiers) and somehow disorganized, it leaked whenever it rained. According to

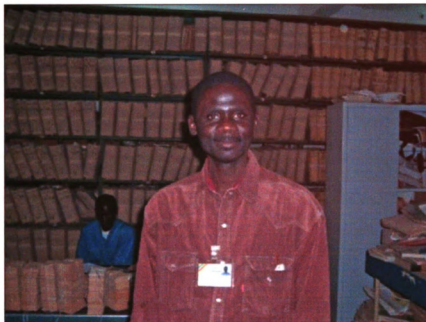


Photo 1.2. Ibrahima Mbengue, Archivist at the National Archives of Senegal, Dakar.
Photograph by author (Dakar, 20 July 2004).

Mbengue, budgetary constraints have not allowed them (archivists) to do all they ought to have done to preserve the documents in proper conditions.⁴⁵ The Director of the National Archives at the time of my research, Dr. Saliou Mbaye, bemoaned the financial difficulties the archives face each year because of its reliance on government subsidies. As Mbaye put it pensively, “Our hands are tied, so we cannot spend the meager amount of money the government allocates to the archives each year on the preservation of documents alone. And because our budget is extremely tight, we can only do that much.”⁴⁶ On a positive note, however, the archivists were aware of the necessity of working diligently in spite of the financial drawback to ensure that not all the documents are lost in the end.

⁴⁵ Personal communication with Ibrahima Mbengue (Dakar, 20 July 2004).

⁴⁶ Interview with Saliou Mbaye (Dakar, 22 July 2004).

The 3C sub-series (*distinctions honorifiques: 1882-1959*) comprises files on recipients of different awards, such as the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, Officer of the Legion of Honor, Knight of the Legion of Honor and Nicham Iftthikar, conferred by the administration in recognition of meritorious service.⁴⁷ These files contain information that varies in substance from one employee to another, so that files of interpreters with the highest rank (*1er degree*), for example, usually contain more information than those of auxiliary interpreters, who seldom featured in important administrative assignments. The information provided includes, among other matters, date and place of birth, ethnicity, marital status, rank, salary, language competence and accomplishments, including diplomatic, military, espionage and fact-finding missions accompanied. In addition, some of the files contain letters of recommendation written by a *commandant de cercle* or an official close to a governor nominating an employee for one award or the other. Such letters were sent to the Minister of the Navy and Colonies who made the final decision about the recipients of the awards. A sizeable number of interpreters who received awards appear in the huge collection of files that make up the 3C sub-series.

Another pertinent set of records is the *correspondance indigène*⁴⁸ comprising letters exchanged between the administration and chiefs, traditional elites, and, occasionally, ordinary Africans. In contrast to documents authored by French colonial officials, the letters that make up the *correspondance* offer a rare glimpse of the kind of

⁴⁷ Introduced by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802, the Legion of Honor comprises five categories: commander, grand officer, officer, knight and grand cross. These categories are hierarchical, with the commander the highest, followed by the officer, and then the knight.

⁴⁸ For this study the most relevant of such correspondences are found in the 13G (*Sénégal*) and 9G (*Mauritanie*) series that deal with political and administrative affairs including the administration's relations with Muslims.

issues that concerned Africans most in their dealings with the administration. For French officials, then, the letters gave them a sense of what Africans were thinking about the increasing French presence and its impact on their daily lives. In effect, the letters served as a barometer for French administrators to gauge the political undercurrents of the areas from which they originated.

The J series (*Enseignement jusqu'en 1920, 1802-1920*) is the most important collection for research on education in Senegal during the colonial period. This collection contains documents dealing with the organization and functions of Christian, “lay,” and Quranic schools;⁴⁹ it also has information on education at the “normal,” “technical,” and “professional” levels. Inspectors who occasionally took stock of schools by visiting them and/or requesting information from the heads of the schools prepared several reports. In addition, the records cover libraries, museums, and archives. For the purposes of this study, the records of the *École des otages* are the most relevant in the J series. They include statistics on students’ age, place of birth, ethnic background and so on, as well as letters from parents to the school authorities and vice versa. Information on the curriculum, lodging, and disciplinary rules of the school is also available from this set of records.

The M series (*Tribunaux judiciaires*) that deals with judicial matters is worth mentioning because it includes information on Muslim tribunals, “customary law,” and French law (as applied in the Four Communes). This series covers tribunals established in the other towns of the Four Communes, as well as Kayes and Kaolack, following the

⁴⁹ At the turn of the century, a medersa (Franco-arabe school) established by the French in Saint-Louis and expected to cater to the personnel needs of the Muslim court system turned out to be a short-lived experiment.

precedent set by the decree of 20 May 1857, which created the Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis.⁵⁰ Because some interpreters served as *cadi* and assessors of the Muslim tribunals, these records are relevant to any investigation on the judicial sphere of the colonial system.

In view of the primacy of the administration's imperial project, it is possible to discern from the archival records its major concerns at different times of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Faidherbe's preoccupation with the long-drawn campaign against Al-Hajj Umar's jihad, for example, generated numerous military reports about the protracted conflict that stand out in the archival collection of the 1850s and early 1860s.⁵¹ During this period Faidherbe also authorized a number of exploratory and "scientific" missions as far as northern Mauritania and Futa Jallon in present-day Guinea (Conakry) to the south. The governor instructed those chosen to lead the expeditions, among them, Captain Vincent, Lieutenant Eugène Mage, and Bou El Mogdad, the eminent interpreter, to provide detailed accounts of their respective missions.⁵² These efforts to gather information about local states, African leaders, and their subjects was part of a larger preoccupation with knowledge production the French authorities took up to help them get a better grip over the course of events. Indeed the French believed that acquiring such

⁵⁰ See note 28 above.

⁵¹ Of particular importance in this connection is the D series, *Affaires militaires*, which includes records on military personnel, defense, organization, military justice and so on.

⁵² See Capitaine Vincent, "Voyage dans l'Adrar et retour à Saint-Louis (1860)," *Tour du monde* (1861), 49-65; E. Mage, "Voyage au Tagant," *Revue algérienne et coloniale* (July 1860), 1-28; Bou El Mogdad, "Voyage entre Sénégal et Maroc," *Revue maritime et coloniale* (May 1861), 477-494. As explained earlier, Bou El Mogdad was on his way to Mecca on a pilgrimage sponsored by the administration via the overland route across the Sahara Desert, North Africa, and the Sinai Peninsula. A detailed report about his trip, especially the first leg to Morocco, was expected to provide information about geographic conditions, ethnic and political groupings, and the extent of Moroccan influence in the Adrar (northern Mauritania).

knowledge could determine to a significant degree the success of their imperial enterprise.

The period immediately before the French took formal control of Senegal in the late 1870s and early 1880s has its fair share of reports submitted by military officers and administrators covering the military campaigns and political issues of that period.⁵³ Such records informed a kind of repertory various *commandants de cercle* and governors later tapped to frame letters and reports transmitted to their superiors in Saint-Louis and Paris. In some cases, the letters and reports appear to have been written either to create a sense of urgency and secure better budget allocations or to serve as a reminder that serious work was underway in an administrative locality.⁵⁴ In addition to military and political concerns, the archival records reveal the importance of economic issues to the administration, especially the trade in gum and peanuts.⁵⁵ By the turn of the century, the use of *fiches de renseignements*, forms filled out by officials to monitor the activities of

⁵³ The G series, particularly the sub-series 13G, *Sénégal*, which covers the period 1782-1959, consists of documents on the administration's political relations with the local leadership and the people, including Muslim leaders. Officials stationed in various posts, such as Richard-Toll, Podor, and Matam, compiled reports to be sent to Saint-Louis. This series also includes the *correspondance indigène*.

⁵⁴ French officials were prone to framing reports sent to the metropole in ways that would create a good impression of them in the minds of policymakers and those who sanctioned promotion in the administration. Thus some officials had no scruples simply copying previous reports or passing on information gathered from hearsay as if it were firsthand, as long as it served their interest. See Clark, *Frontier to Backwater*, 4-5.

⁵⁵ The economic records give figures, sometimes approximated, on the annual volume of trade (import and exports), customs duties, and taxes that provided revenue for the colony. The Q series (*Affaires économiques*) is the most important documentation on economic matters and covers a broad range of topics: commercial laws, weights and measures, chambers of commerce and agriculture, and so on.

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chiefs and marabouts, underlined the administration's determination to stamp out what it perceived as "fanatical" Muslim opposition to its hegemonic power.⁵⁶

Besides the archival materials surveyed above, there are official bulletins, journals, and a newspaper, *Le Moniteur du Sénégal et Dépendances*, which gave the administration an outlet for publishing policy statements, circulars, decrees and statutes, as well as information about promotion, retirement, and administrative awards. The *Moniteur* also published official propaganda pieces, while another government publication, the *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances*, often reproduced information about administrative issues—decree, policy statements, and so on—that had been published elsewhere. In addition, the *Annales sénégalaises* contains official accounts of military expeditions and engagements undertaken during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵⁷

Complementing the official bulletins and newspaper was the *Revue du Monde Musulman*, a journal launched by the French Islamicist Alfred Le Châtelier (1855-1929) in the late 1800s, which published studies on Muslim societies in the Mediterranean region and French territories in western Africa.⁵⁸ A number of French officials drawing

⁵⁶ The *fiches de renseignements* were probably not as effective as colonial officials had envisaged because many administrators developed a habit of merely reiterating what their predecessor had registered about a particular marabout or chief. Misleading information about the "subversive" activities of some Muslim leaders and chiefs, for example, circulated among colonial officials who seldom took time to ascertain the veracity of the information received via hearsay and unconfirmed reports.

⁵⁷ Among the official publications are the *Journal officiel du Sénégal*, *Annales Sénégalaises de 1854 à 1885* (Angers: Paris, 1885), *Annuaire du Sénégal et Dépendances*, and the *Bulletin administratif du Sénégal*. Launched by Faidherbe, the *Moniteur du Sénégal et Dépendances* was the official newspaper of the administration and the only one at that time.

⁵⁸ Alfred Le Châtelier himself published two studies on Islam: *Les confréries musulmanes dans le Hedjaz* (Paris: Leroux, 1887) and *L'Islam dans l'Afrique occidentale* (Paris: G. Steinheil, 1899). In addition, Paul Marty's *L'Islam en Mauritanie et au Sénégal* and *L'Emirat des Trarzas* were published in the *Revue du Monde Musulman* (1915-16) and (1917-18), respectively.

on their experiences in North Africa took particular interest in studying Muslim societies in West Africa in the late 1800s and early 1900s, a period during which France pressed to give substance to its claim of being a Muslim power. Thus “scholar-administrators,” such as Robert Arnaud and Paul Marty, created a niche for themselves as Islamicists whose ethnographic studies influenced not only French policy and attitudes toward Muslims in Africa but also future research on Islam in western Africa. The ethnographic and historical accounts⁵⁹ and travel narratives, some of which did not reflect the views of the colonial administration, give us a glimpse of what individuals outside official circles thought about contemporary happenings.⁶⁰

Oral history did not become a strong attribute of the external sources because the colonial administration in Senegal documented and preserved its records in written form. Many French administrators relied on oral accounts provided by local people, however, especially custodians of local history, such as griots, intermediaries including interpreters, and relatives of historical actors, to compile official reports and monographs. For various reasons, including self-serving interests, the narrators of such accounts may have sanitized the information passed on to colonial officials. For the latter, however, the veracity of the information received was not always a priority, especially when it resonated with their initial thoughts or assumptions about a particular person, group, or place. Consequently some reports and accounts French administrators compiled more or less echoed local oral history and traditions transmitted by African informants. And

⁵⁹ See, for instance, Robert Arnaud, *Précis de la politique musulmane*, vol. 1: *Pays Maures de la rive droite du Sénégal* (Algiers: Adolphe Jourdan, 1906); *L'Islam et la politique musulmane française en Afrique occidentale française* (Paris: Comité de l'Afrique française, 1912); Marty, *Etudes sur l'Islam au Sénégal*; Louis Faidherbe, *Le Sénégal et la France dans l'Afrique Occidentale* (Paris: Hachette, 1889).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Boilat, *Esquisses sénégalaises*; Frédéric Carrère and Paul Holle, *De la Sénégambie française* (Paris: F. Didot, 1855).

considering that colonial officials rarely used other records to crosscheck information they acquired, the difficulty of ascertaining the provenance of such narratives requires no exaggeration.

Because written archival records and oral sources have their limitations, a growing number of West Africanist historians and social scientists have drawn on the material culture of the immediate pre-colonial and colonial periods to broaden their range of sources. Such works have utilized, among other evidence, colonial architecture, photographs, visual art and music to enrich our understanding of the colonial period.⁶¹ As more scholars embrace a cross-disciplinary approach to study the past, they have tapped with much resourcefulness hitherto underutilized sources and the wealth of information they hold.⁶²

The internal sources comprise those Africans themselves produced and include oral history, traditions, and reminiscences, as well as written records authored by individuals with backgrounds in Islamic or French education, or both.⁶³ The written

⁶¹ See note 43 above. It is important to add that such studies have not been limited to West Africa, however. Scholars working on other areas of the continent have contributed immensely to this burgeoning literature. See, among others, Hunt, *Colonial Lexicon*; Hamilton, *Imperial Majesty*; Camaroff and Camaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*.

⁶² See, for example, Mark Hinchman, "African Rococo: House and Portrait in Eighteenth-Century Senegal" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2000); Alain Sinou, *Comptoirs et villes coloniales du Sénégal* (Paris: Karthala, 1993); Anne-Marie Bouttiaux-Ndiaye, *Senegal Behind Glass* (New York: Prestel, 1994); Allen Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003). Taking the cue from such studies, African Art historian Dr. Raymond Silverman, a member of the dissertation committee during Hilary Jones' defense at Michigan State University in 2003, implored her to explore further the material culture of the métis of Saint-Louis to add more depth to her findings. See Jones, "Citizens and Subjects."

⁶³ A small number of individuals who attended French mission schools during the nineteenth century wrote on historical and contemporary issues. The métis priest Boilat, for example, wrote a study on mid-nineteenth century Saint-Louis and various ethnic groups in the Senegal River valley, which historians have found useful in spite of its shortcomings. See Boilat, *Esquisses sénégalaises*. In addition, Yoro Dia (1847-1919), a Wolof student who learnt enough French to document Wolof history, had his handwritten notebooks published in the early 1900s by Governor Henri Gaden and Robert Rousseau, a French

materials which are still under-explored are written in Arabic, French, and local languages, such as Wolof and Pulaar.⁶⁴ They complement and sometimes contradict the documentation European officials produced. Since they point toward a different perspective from colonial archival records, internal sources authored by Africans have proved immensely useful for scholars researching the Senegal region and West Africa during the immediate pre-colonial and colonial periods.⁶⁵

Oral sources, including local traditions, genealogies, hagiographies and reminiscences, have served as a counterweight to French-written records, whose preservation in the archives for the most part reflected the drift of French imperial interests and the priorities of colonial administrators. The documents French colonial officials prepared and preserved most times focused on concerns that did not resonate with the primary interests of Africans. As such, the colonial archival records seldom provide information that casts light on the thoughts of Africans on most issues French officials documented.

In certain instances when French administrators relied on local interpreters and similar informants for information, their authoritative persona would override the African

schoolmaster in Saint-Louis at the time. See Henri Gaden, "Légendes et Coutumes Sénégalaises, Cahiers de Yoro Dyão," *Revue d'Ethnographie et Sociologie* 3 (1912), 1-31; Rousseau, "Les Cahiers de Yoro Dyão: Etudes sur le Waalo."

⁶⁴ Historian Charles Stewart, for example, drew on local Arabic sources compiled by Mauritanian historian Haroun ould Cheikh Sidia Baba to reconstruct the history of his great-grandfather Shaikh Sidiyya al-Kabir (1775-1868). See Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*. Similarly, Cheikh Babou has used sources written in Wolofal, that is, "Wolof language written with Arabic script," in his dissertation on Amadu Bamba and the Muridiyya order. Bamba, members of his family, and some of his disciples wrote most of the materials, which now constitute a gem for studying the Muridiyya, as Babou's dissertation and his derivative book demonstrate. See Babou, "Amadou Bamba" and *Fighting the Greater Jihad*. Earlier on, Robinson had unearthed various accounts of Al-Hajj Umar's jihad, some of them written in Fulfulde using Arabic characters, which shed new light on the Islamic leader's life and times. See Robinson, *Holy War*, 21-30.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*; Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

voices, as corroborated by official letters, reports, and other documents the former wrote. French colonial officials hardly ever acknowledged an African informant as the original source of information in the written texts. For the same reason, French administrators were not keen about documenting the lives of interpreters and other intermediaries outside the colonial administration. As a result, colonial archival records are generally silent on the social and unofficial activities of African employees of the colonial state.

In contrast, family histories preserved through community and family elders and griots offer some information about the every day lives of interpreters seldom found in archival records. Yet such narratives are not without their own limitations, especially as a narrator may have preferred a version of history that promotes the interests of one particular interpreter family, clan, or ethnic group, often at the expense of others. Still, oral history and traditions not only fill in existing gaps but also help us correct persisting misperceptions, especially when written sources lack ample evidence to reconstruct the past in depth. This is usually the case when dealing with subaltern or marginalized historical actors, particularly some of the interpreters featured in Chapter 7.

Although scholars now generally acknowledge the validity of evidence from oral sources, questions about their authenticity and reliability continue to linger in some academic quarters. However, as more studies drawing largely on oral histories and traditions continue to demonstrate the same methodological thoroughness as those based on written records, the skepticism becomes more difficult to sustain even among die-hard critics of oral sources.⁶⁶ For this study, the information I gathered from oral sources about

⁶⁶ See, for example, Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*; Babou, "Amadu Bamba"; *Fighting the Greater Jihad*.

the interpreters and events documented showed a high degree of consistency when crosschecked against the extant written records.

1.3. Methodology

I conducted both archival and field research for this project in Senegal between May and December 2004. Archival research meant working mostly at the *Archives Nationales* (ANS) and the *Institut Français (Fondamental) d'Afrique noire* (IFAN), both in Dakar. I also spent several weeks going through the archival collection at the *Centre de Recherche et de Documentation du Sénégal* (CRDS) in Saint-Louis. In time, however, I discovered that most of the documents there duplicated those at the ANS in Dakar, where I collected the bulk of the archival materials used here.

Considering the period the study spans, the 1850s to early 1920s, I was not too optimistic about finding living interpreters who had worked during that period for interviews. At best I hoped to interview retired interpreters, their relatives, and acquaintances that lived during the colonial era, even though after the period covered in the study. Even for someone born in the early 1920s when the study ends, he or she would have been at least eighty-four years old at the time I conducted the interviews.⁶⁷ As it turned out, those interviewed—all of them men—were between the ages of sixty and ninety-four, underscoring the difficulty of finding old women informants who knew a

⁶⁷ It is unfortunate that this generation of custodians of local histories is passing away before historians have tapped such rich oral sources. Given the age bracket of the interviewees I dealt with during my research, none of them was old enough during the period covered in the study to provide a reliable firsthand account of their experiences. My oldest interviewee Mouhamet Macquillou Kane of Saint-Louis, for example, was born around 1910 and thus was only 10 years old by 1920, when the study ends. Although his reminiscences only covered the period from the late 1920s onward (by which time he would have been old enough to be aware of what was going on), Kane's insights were useful in recapturing the atmosphere of the colonial period.

colonial interpreter well enough to provide useful information about his life and career.⁶⁸

Most of those interviewed either had worked for the colonial administration or knew an interpreter or his family sufficiently well to talk about their history. One of my interviewees in Saint-Louis, Aïnina Wane, for example, is a grandson of one of the prominent interpreters, Mahmadou Seck, featured in this study. As a diplomat and cultural broker in southern Mauritania in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Mahmadou Seck's activities are well documented in the colonial archival records on Senegal and Mauritania.⁶⁹

I spent three months shuttling between Dakar, Saint-Louis, and Podor, situated along the Senegal River, to conduct interviews with the help of my research assistant and interpreter Pierre Cahors (Photo 1.3.), whom I first met at the ANS in Dakar.⁷⁰ The interviews were done in French and, occasionally, Wolof, with Pierre serving as interpreter. Besides French and English, Pierre is fluent in Wolof and Pulaar, both languages spoken widely in the northern half of Senegal. Because of his fluency in these languages, Pierre was able to win the confidence of Pulaar-speaking informants we encountered and spoke with in Saint-Louis and Podor, located in the western part of Futa Toro and inhabited mostly by the Futanke.

⁶⁸ While in Senegal doing my archival and field research in 2004, I could not track Judge Aissata Rabi Wane of Dakar, a granddaughter of Mahmadou Seck, for an interview. Robinson interviewed Judge Wane in 1997 when he conducted research for his book *Paths of Accommodation*.

⁶⁹ See Chapter 1, note 1. On Mamadou Seck, see Samb, "L'Ecole de Saint-Louis ou Bou El-Mogdad," in *Essai sur la contribution du Sénégal*, 73-106.

⁷⁰ Pierre Cahors, a schoolteacher, had a short stint as a researcher with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) office in Dakar. In this capacity, he assisted several European and African researchers who worked for the agency mainly on issues related to family health and nutrition. Pierre's father, a Togolese by origin, was transferred to Senegal just after the outbreak of World War II to work as a railway stationmaster in Thiés, where Pierre was born in the early 1950s.

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Photo 1.3. Mahmadou Thiané (left), a retired judicial interpreter of the Muslim Tribunal in Saint-Louis, and Pierre Cahors (right), my research assistant. Photograph by author (Saint-Louis, 30 July 2004).

Some of the interviews were semi-structured and allowed the interviewees to respond to specific questions, while they had ample scope to talk about general issues related to the colonial period. The questions posed elicited responses about family origins, genealogies, occupational and residential histories, encounters with French colonial officials and so on. In contrast, unstructured interviews included open-ended questions that allowed the interviewees to narrate their personal experiences, comment on interpreters and their families, and recount oral traditions related to experiences with the French handed down from previous generations. This flexibility in approach made the interviews less regimental and encouraged the informants to touch on issues, some of which the initial questions I had lined up for the interviews did not cover.

1.4. Significance of the Study

To date this study is the first to focus exclusively on the lives and careers of Muslim African interpreters in colonial Senegal. And its main purpose is to provide a nuanced and more profound understanding of the complex issues and conflict-ridden worlds African interpreters traversed from the period of French expansion in the 1850s to early colonial rule, up the early 1920s. Because the study spans about seventy years, its temporal scope allows us to not only track how the functions of interpreters changed over time but also assess the impact of their mediations at different phases of the French colonizing venture in the lower and middle Senegal valley. By tracing the course of events through the activities of African interpreters, the study proposes a trajectory of interpretation that illuminates the subtleties of colonial relations—their ever-changing nature, contentiousness, and multiple demands.

Earlier studies framed in the resistance/collaboration paradigm privileged nationalist heroes who took up arms to resist European colonization. However, since their dichotomous approach did not account fully for the fluidity and shifting nature of relations between Africans and Europeans, this limited our understanding of the intricacies of colonial encounters in Africa. By contrast, this study deviates from the convention of reducing colonial interpreters and similar go-betweens to mere collaborators. In so doing, it embraces a revisionist mode that views interpreters and their likes as active historical agents in their own right. Thus instead of cataloguing the activities of the “French architects of modern Senegal” and deducing that African interpreters were simply lackeys of colonial officials, the study pays a great deal of attention to the tensions, conflicts, and contradictions that underlined colonial relations in

Senegal. And through the gaze of the less-studied interpreters/translators, it aims to demonstrate that even with the apparent omnipresence of the colonial administration, its command structure was fraught with weaknesses and inconsistencies ordinary African employees, including interpreters, could exploit for reasons that often transgressed French colonial norms and expectations.⁷¹

More than a decade ago, historian Frederick Cooper pointed out the limitations of conventional binaries such as “colonizer” and “colonized” and called for understanding colonial relations in their multifaceted dimensions, that is, beyond categories that blur the fluidity, contentiousness, and contradictions of such relations.⁷² Other scholars adding their voices to this proposed research agenda turned the spotlight on less glorified African historical actors, among them commercial, cultural, and political powerbrokers, as well as interpreters, translators, and clerks who straddled the colonial divide due to their position within the administration. Robinson, Christelow, Hunt, Taylor and Osborn, among others, who have studied colonial encounters between Europeans and Africans in different parts of Africa, have underscored the importance of local intermediaries in influencing such relations.⁷³ This study thus complements the burgeoning literature on the social history of African colonial intermediaries by investigating Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal.

⁷¹ Other studies have shown how local interpreters sought to manipulate French officials or exploit the fragile colonial administration whenever the possibility arose. See, for example, Christelow, “Algerian Interpreters”; Osborn, “Circle of Iron.” Similarly, in *The Fortunes of Wangrin*, Hamphaté Bâ vividly portrayed interpreters in the Soudan Francaise who capitalized on the ignorance of French officials and used their position as intermediaries to get rich through dishonest means. See Hamphaté Bâ, *The Fortunes of Wangrin*. Trans. by Aina Pavollini Taylor (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1987).

⁷² Frederick Cooper, “Conflict and Connection: Rethinking African Colonial History,” *American Historical Review* 99 (Dec. 1994), 1516-1545.

⁷³ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*; Christelow, “Algerian Interpretes”; Hunt, *Colonial Lexicon*; Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans”; Osborn, “Circle of Iron.”; Lawrance et al, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*.

A current compilation, *African Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*, edited by Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, for example, looks into the activities of marginalized African colonial intermediaries, including “bush lawyers,” servants, and messengers, besides interpreters, translators, and clerks. Several chapters in the volume illuminate the agency of African go-betweens in shaping political and cultural relations that evolved between Europeans and Africans during the colonial period. Collectively, the chapters reveal how power, authority, and knowledge intersected and mutated in various colonial contexts across Sub-Saharan Africa.⁷⁴ By contrast, this study moves a step further than the abovementioned volume as it a full-length study of a particular colonial setting, the Senegal River valley, and a specific group of intermediaries, Muslim African interpreters, whose intercessions shaped relations of power between French officials and African leaders and their constituencies.

In addition, the study reaffirms the need to re-evaluate the constitution of the “colonial library,” as Gaurav Desai implores, by exploring the contributions Africans made to the construction of colonial knowledge and discourse.⁷⁵ Chapter 3 will elaborate on this theme. Indeed the case of Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal is an intriguing one to probe the mediations of indigenous intermediaries and evaluate their impact on the production of knowledge by both French officials and the African population. Because of their familiarity with the African cultural landscape and better understanding of the dynamics of local politics, African interpreters became repositories of “local knowledge”

⁷⁴ Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*.

⁷⁵ Gaurav Desai, *Subject to Colonialism: African Self-Fashioning and the Colonial Library* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

for French administrators and military personnel. Some indigenous interpreters often influenced their French superiors in making on-the-spot decisions, especially in the absence of directives from Paris that could not resolve urgent problems at the local level. Similarly, interpreters occupied a vantage position from which to shape the understanding Africans developed about the French authorities, official policies, and practices. By showing how these indigenous transactional go-betweens channeled the flow of information and stirred the articulation of competing discourses, the study introduces fresh perspectives on the production of knowledge in colonial Senegal and French West Africa. In other words, it shifts the cultural and political roles of African colonial interpreters and similar intermediaries from a tangential to a more central position in scholarly debates about knowledge production and power relations in colonial settings.

Because Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal were located at the center of the sociopolitical crosscurrents between French officials and Africans, their identity formation within the confluence of French assimilationist ideology and practice and African cultural bonds reveals a struggle between different cultural complexes. Caught between two conflicting worlds, as it were, interpreters faced the challenge of not only balancing their loyalties between a foreign French administration and their local community but also molding their identity as Muslims in response to the French presence in lower and middle Senegal valley. This paradoxical position of Muslim African interpreters has been the crux of the misunderstanding concerning their functions during the colonial period in Senegal. Against this backdrop, this study aims to clarify the longstanding misconceptions about African colonial interpreters and translators that have clouded our understanding of their politically charged intermediary functions. As

transactional go-betweens and active agents who traversed the sociopolitical worlds of both the French colonial authorities and the African population, interpreters embodied the conflicts and negotiations that underpinned power relations throughout colonized Africa. Investigating and reconstructing their history, therefore, illuminates the intricacies of colonial interactions between Europeans and Africans.

Although the study contextualizes how French colonial policy played out in Senegal, it is neither a study of French policy per se nor a history of French officials, such as Governor Faidherbe, who have featured notably in historical literature on colonial Senegal.⁷⁶ Instead, the study concentrates on Muslim African interpreters and seeks to assess the influence they brought to bear on daily interactions and power relations between Africans and the French colonial authorities in Senegal. It therefore broadens our comprehension of the nature of colonial rule in French West Africa. In all, the study bears great relevance to other works on colonial administrations in Africa and elsewhere in the world that reveal how indigenous employees functioned within comparable colonial structures.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Barrows, "General Faidherbe"; Alan Coursier, *Faidherbe, 1818-1889: Du Sénégal à l'Armée du Nord* (Paris: Éditions Tallandier, 1989); Robinson, "'French Africans': Faidherbe, Archinand, and Coppolani, the 'Creators' of Senegal, Soudan, and Mauritania," Melvin Page et al., eds., *Personality and Political Culture in Modern Africa* (Boston: African Studies Center, Boston University Press, 1998), 91-106.

CHAPTER 2

Historiographical and Thematic Issues

Despite the unquestionable interest of Africanist scholars in the colonial period, full-length empirical studies on African interpreters and translators are conspicuously absent from historical literature on colonial Senegal and French West Africa.¹ Yet considering the important, albeit ambiguous and controversial, role interpreters played as mediators between the French and Africans during the colonial period, it is difficult to justify the bankruptcy of scholarly works on the individual or collective experiences of such an important group of African intermediaries. This study therefore affirms the need to fill that hiatus in the historiography of colonial Africa. Indeed African colonial interpreters in Senegal were not only transmitters of information but also catalysts of cultural discourse. Their functions involved the dissemination, back and forth, of African and French ideas, ideologies, values and worldviews. As go-betweens who bridged the linguistic and cultural gaps between Europeans and Africans, interpreters personified the dialogic conflicts and negotiations as well as the ambiguities of colonial relations, a subject several scholars have explored in a variety of contexts across Africa and the world over.²

¹ Past studies on the colonial period in Senegal and French West Africa seldom considered African interpreters worthy of extensive empirical research. With time, however, several studies alluded to the different ways interpreters and similar intermediaries shaped colonial interactions between the French and Africans. See, among others, Brunschwig, *Noirs et Blancs*, especially Chapter 6, 105-123; Saint-Martin, *Le Sénégal sous le second empire*; Samb, *Essai sur la contribution du Sénégal*, 73-84; Robinson, *Path of Accommodation*; also *Chiefs and Clerics*; Osborn, "Circle of Iron"; Saliou Mbaye, "Personnel Files and the Role of *Qadis* and Interpreters in the Colonial Administration of Saint-Louis, Senegal, 1857-1911," in Lawrance et al., eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*, 289-295.

² The scholarly literature on the reciprocal and contradictory nature of colonial encounters has expanded in the last decade or so. These studies draw attention to the complexities and contradictions that typified relations between European colonizers and colonized peoples. See, for example, Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in*

The need to reconstruct the history of African colonial interpreters to clear up their paradoxical and ill-defined intermediary position requires no exaggeration. My point of departure in this chapter is to appraise the state of historical literature and the historiographical issues scholars have debated about African interpreters and similar intermediaries in colonial Senegal and French West Africa in recent decades. The chapter also explains the main themes underpinning the study, which, as the previous chapter indicated, center on: (i) the construction of Muslim identity vis-à-vis French assimilation; (ii) the intersection of knowledge and power in a colonial setting; (iii) interpretation and mediation as processes of socio-cultural exchange; and (iv) hegemony and accommodation to colonial rule.

2.1. Historical Literature and Historiography

Historical studies on the colonial period in Senegal and French West Africa generally portray African interpreters and similar intermediaries as either victims or docile subjects of French colonial rule, who were puppets and perpetrators of an imperial culture and ideology.³ From this perspective, African go-betweens did nothing more than carry out

the Colonial Contest (New York: Routledge, 1995); Mary-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Press, 1993). In the context of Africa's colonial experience, Desai's *Subject to Colonialism* proposes a study of colonialism conceived not as "a singular, monolithic structure but rather as a practice fraught with contradictions and tensions" (10). Desai engages the intricacies of colonial relations, stressing their shiftiness and contested nature. Desai, *Subject to Colonialism*.

³ I trace the genesis of this problem in part to the myopia some earlier nationalist and Pan-Africanist studies—written in the immediate aftermath of African independence in the 1960s—demonstrated in analyzing colonial encounters between Africans and Europeans. Instead of examining thoroughly the nature of colonial exchanges, numerous studies conceived in the nationalist genre at the time aimed typically at refuting European constructs of Africa and Africans and glorifying African nationalism, and, one might argue, with good reason. In the process, however, the studies hardly paid close attention to recapturing the nuances of colonial relations. Not surprisingly, many scholars of African history as well as nationalists adopted the then fashionable but reductionist collaborator/resister paradigm to censure African interpreters offhandedly as "collaborators," thereby invoking a stigma typified by Nazi collaborators during the Second World War. Since the roles indigenous interpreters played in the process of European

instructions from French colonial officials and hardly ever made any conscious decisions to transgress the norms of French rule. In other words, this view presupposes the absolute domination of subordinate Africans by French officials who left them no room to express any modicum of autonomy. Resonating with the outmoded collaborator/resister paradigm adopted early on by historians of Africa writing in the nationalist mode that reviled Africans who had associated with the colonial state one way or the other, this perception mirrors a skewed interpretation of how colonial interactions actually played out. Hence it falls short of recapturing in detail the conflicts and negotiations as well as the contradictions that typified the hegemonic relations between the French and Africans in colonial Senegal, relations that permeated the daily lives of the interpreters explored in this study. Yet much to the credit of scholars now writing on colonial encounters in Africa and elsewhere in the world, the consensus is that the collaborator/resister framework falls short of enriching our knowledge of the complicated nature and shifting permutations of colonial relationships over time.⁴

Bearing in mind that African colonial interpreters in Senegal were a heterogeneous mix of different personalities with varied motives and aspirations, any reconstruction of a monolithic picture to represent their collective identity would be historically misleading. Until recently, scholars studying colonial Senegal showed little interest in carrying out extensive empirical research on the history of indigenous intermediaries, especially interpreters, translators, and clerks who worked in the French

colonialism evinced ambiguities and contradictions in some respects, their pessimistic representation from the initial phase of “post-colonial” writing endured and only affirmed their marginalization in West African colonial historiography.

⁴ See, for instance, Robinson, “Beyond Resistance and Collaboration: Amadu Bamba and the Muridiyya of Senegal,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 21, 2 (1991), 149-171; Osborn, “Circle of Iron”; Clerk, “Imperialism, Independence, and Islam.”

colonial administration. The dearth of works on these go-betweens suggests that researchers have yet to explore at length the uncharted body of archival and oral sources germane to their history. In addition, historians face the challenge of conceptualizing new frameworks to redress the misperceptions about these middle figures and make clear their ambiguous intermediary position. Still, they will have to deal with the limitations of sources, including their fragmented and disorganized nature, as the preceding chapter explained.⁵ Given this backdrop, perhaps it should be no surprise that to date there is no single monograph focused solely on African colonial interpreters and translators in colonial Senegal.

Two decades or so ago, Henri Brunschwig, a prominent historian of French colonialism, underscored with remarkable insight the need to study African interpreters of the colonial era as active historical actors in their own right.⁶ Brunschwig recognized the control interpreters could exert over the flow of information and construction of knowledge, which could influence how the colonizers and colonized understood each other and forged ongoing relations of governance. Assessing the intercessions of interpreters in colonial French West Africa, Brunschwig remarked, “Their role was major during the period of expansion and establishment [of colonial rule]...because the commandant, on one hand, and traditional leaders, on the other, were often obliged to believe what the interpreter said, even if his translation was not trustworthy.”⁷ Evidence

⁵ At the time of my research, for example, some of the personnel files in the 1C series (*dossiers de personnel*) at the National Archives in Dakar had yet to be catalogued and made accessible to the public, as explained in the previous chapter.

⁶ Brunschwig, *Noirs et Blancs*, 105-123.

⁷ *Ibid*, 106.



Photo 2.1. With my oldest interviewee, Mouhamet M. Kane (left).
Photograph by author (Saint-Louis, 10 August 2004).

from French colonial archival records indeed reveals that the French *commandant de cercle*⁸ and local chief endeavored to put up with the official interpreter, whose vantage point within the administration allowed him to bestride the colonial divide and influence relations between French officials and the African population, often in significant ways. Reflecting on the perception ordinary Africans shared about the status and power of colonial interpreters, Mouhamet Kane (Photo 2.1), a retired senior administrative officer in Saint-Louis, observed:

In certain parts of the interior during the colonial period, people believed interpreters were as powerful as the French administrators under whom they worked. The local people elevated interpreters to a position of power most of

⁸ The *commandant de cercle* in French West Africa administered a unit called the *cercle*, which corresponded roughly with a province in British colonial administrative terms. At the local level, the *commandant* was the most powerful government official. Yet it was common for him to depend on his interpreter who was more familiar with local politics and culture and had a better rapport with local leaders and the rest of the African population.

them did not actually have. But that was what the people thought about the power of interpreters; they showed great respect for them, especially those who were close to high-ranking French officials.⁹

In fact some studies and documented cases reveal that certain interpreters wielded much more authority in their post and local community than their position in the colonial administrative hierarchy suggested.¹⁰

Although Brunschwig stressed the significance of African interpreters and implored historians to look into their histories more thoroughly for a better comprehension of colonial interactions at the local level, his work was limited in more than one respect, perhaps for obvious reasons. First, Brunschwig took a broad sweep of French West Africa rather than explore only one country, with the result that he dealt with interpreters in the different colonies in a generalized manner. Second, because he did not conceive the study to focus solely on colonial interpreters, he compressed his analysis of their activities in a single chapter of *Noirs et Blancs*. Yet the brevity of Brunschwig's work notwithstanding, his revelation that African interpreters were far more complex historical actors than the received wisdom had acknowledged sounded a clarion call for scholars to conduct more empirical research on African colonial interpreters, translators, and clerks.

⁹ Mouhamet Macquillou Kane, a ninety-four year old retiree, who served as a senior administrator in Saint-Louis during the first half of the twentieth century, expressed the above view drawing on his personal experience from the 1930s on. Although the period Mouhamet Kane spoke about was later than the period covered in this study, his reminiscences suggest that even as their duties were limited to routine tasks as time progressed, interpreters could still wield a lot more influence in their assigned locality than their position in the colonial hierarchy indicated. Interview with Mouhamet M. Kane (Saint-Louis, 10 August 2004).

¹⁰ A number of case studies have revealed how interpreters held their own among French colonial officials and local rulers. See, for example, Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*; Osborn, "'Circle of Iron';" Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*. Similarly, Hamphaté Bâ's *The Fortunes of Wangrin* shows how local interpreters, spurred by personal motives, sometimes sought to manipulate French officials and local chiefs.

Despite the timeliness of Brunschwig's plea, however, comprehensive empirical research on the experiences of African colonial interpreters and similar mediators only began to attract the attention of historians during the last decade or so. Besides the unsavory image of colonial interpreters inherited from the conventional understanding (read misunderstanding), which did very little to stimulate further research, the paucity of autobiographies, biographies, memoirs and other easily traceable records indigenous middle figures themselves wrote may have dampened the interest of historians and social scientists.¹¹ Perhaps this accounts to some degree for the lacuna in historical literature on African colonial intermediaries. However, as Robinson implores, with dogged persistence and painstaking effort to uncover untapped archival and oral sources, we could begin to retrieve the voices of indigenous colonial interpreters and translators and write their history in ways that are nuanced and perceptive.¹² Without attempting to belabor this point too far, though, suffice it to add that unearthing information about African colonial interpreters requires scavenging through an incongruent body of data scattered haphazardly in various archival records, as research for this project revealed.¹³

¹¹ Thus far, I only know about a handful of memoirs written by colonial interpreters in West Africa. See, for example, Mahmadou Seck, "Mémoire du Bou El Mogdad (jusqu'en 1903)," Bureau politique, Colonie de la Mauritanie, (ca. 1910), Archives de la République Islamique de la Mauritanie, E/2/124, cited in Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 271. Another is by Kouh Mokouri who worked for the colonial government in Cameroon during the post-Second World War period. By then interpreters in colonial French West Africa were limited to routine administrative duties. See Mokouri, *Doigts noirs: "Je fus Ecrivain-Interprète au Cameroun"* (Montréal: Editions à la page, 1963). In a slightly different vein, Robert Cudjoe, a Ghanaian interpreter who worked in Nigeria during the late colonial period, published an article based on his recollections of his experiences as a career interpreter. Cudjoe's account, however, focuses only on his interactions with the local population and does not help much in shedding light on his relationship with European administrators. See Cudjoe, "Some Reminiscences of a Senior Interpreter," *The Nigerian Field*, XVIII (1953), 148-64.

¹² Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 49-54.

¹³ The colonial records at the National Archives in Dakar highlight the difficulty of piecing together information on African colonial interpreters. To cite an example, the sub-series 3C, *distinctions honorifiques*, provides information about interpreters who received awards from the administration for meritorious service. Such information varies in content from one interpreter to another, however,

Additionally, historians have yet to assess the extent to which oral traditions and family histories could complement archival records in producing in-depth studies on colonial interpreters and similar intermediaries. The most obvious limitation of the colonial archival records, as noted in Chapter 1, is that they represent mostly an official rendition of events, often infused with the Francocentric assumptions of colonial officials. For this reason, oral traditions and family histories produced by Africans could enrich the sources at our disposal and contribute significantly to our reconstruction of the histories of African colonial intermediaries. Until now, though, in the absence of studies based on thorough empirical research, our understanding of the conflict-ridden world African interpreters inhabited, one wrought by the twin processes of European imperialism and colonialism, remains incomplete and calls for constructive redress.

Still, a number of studies alluding to interpreters and translators in Senegal during the immediate pre-colonial and colonial periods have underscored their importance as commercial mediators and cultural and political powerbrokers.¹⁴ Amar Samb's "L'école de Saint-Louis ou Bou El-Mogdad,"¹⁵ for instance, draws on French archival records, oral traditions, and Arabic texts to sketch a mini-biography of Mahmadou Seck (1867-1943) who, like his father Bou El Mogdad Seck, was a protégée of marabouts of the

depending on their importance, rank, and length of service. In many instances the information is limited to a few lines of biographical remarks or a list of personal accomplishments endorsed by a senior French official. Thus one has to look up additional information in another sub-series 1C, personnel files, for instance, which contains information ranging from the most essential to the mundane—place of origin, marital status, salary, ethnic affiliation and language competence: French, Arabic, Wolof, Serer, Malinké, Pulaar, and so on. Even when carefully collated, these archival vignettes only present a partial picture of the interpreter's life.

¹⁴ See, among others, Saint-Martin, *Le Sénégal sous le Second Empire*; Bouche, "L'enseignement dans les territoires française"; Barrows, "General Faidherbe"; Marcson, "European-African Interaction"; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation; Chiefs and Clerics*; Jones, "Citizens and Subjects."

¹⁵ Samb, "L'école de Saint-Louis ou Bou El Mogdad," 73-106.

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Awlâd Daïmân *zwaya* of Trarza.¹⁶ Besides cataloguing the numerous diplomatic and expeditionary missions the younger Seck undertook as a leading interpreter of the administration in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Samb reveals an erudite scholar who not only attained a high level of Arabic and mastered the local Hassaniya but also wrote poetry with the consummate skill of a seasoned scribe.

Although Samb's work allows us to get a glimpse of Mahmadou Seck's illustrious career and creative ability, its overarching concern is more literary than historical. Samb therefore only situates Mahmadou Seck's functions as interpreter and diplomat within his study's thematic preoccupation. Thus, the chapter highlights and assesses the contributions of the Senegalese "scribe" to "Arabic literature" in the Senegalo-Mauritanian area. Even as Samb points to the possibilities for writing the biographies of local interpreters, he treats Mahmadou Seck mainly as a literary figure and does not provide an in-depth historical treatment of his functions as interpreter, diplomat, and cultural broker.

Other studies have touched on African interpreters in discussions on French colonial policy and practice immediately before and after the establishment of formal colonial rule in the late 1880s. Denise Bouche, for example, whose work deals with French education in Senegal during the colonial period, has shown the importance French officials attached to the *École des Otages*, commissioned by Faidherbe in 1856, shut

¹⁶ The historical importance of *zwaya* clerics in promoting Islamic scholarship in Trarza and the Senegalo-Mauritanian zone is fairly well documented. See, for example, Samb, *Essai sur la contribution du Sénégal*; Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*; Taylor, "Of Sultans and Disciples"; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*.

down in 1872, and reopened in 1892.¹⁷ Bouche's study reveals the high expectations French officials entertained about the school's utility for the colonial project. Although various problems beset the school, most notably financial constraints, it continued to survive well into the 1920s. Chapter 4 will discuss the *École des Otages* in detail.

Yves Saint-Martin has also drawn attention to the centrality of interpreters in the French imperial enterprise, as exemplified in the expansionist policy of Faidherbe and his successors, especially Governor Briere.¹⁸ Faidherbe realized early on how crucial interpreters could be in assisting exchanges between French officials and Africans in the Senegal region. This prompted him to set up a school to train interpreters and translators as well as an interpreter corps within the administration to employ them. Saint-Martin notes that interpreters occupied key positions in the Arabic translation service attached to the *Direction des affaires politiques* (DAP) and the Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis created in 1857. Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad, both respected Muslim figures in Saint-Louis, turned out to be leading interpreters and mediators between French officials and the local population at a time the administration was struggling to win the support of Muslims in the region. By providing funds for Bou El Mogdad to make the pilgrimage to Mecca on two separate occasions,¹⁹ the administration reaffirmed its reliance on its Muslim go-betweens to help deal with the problems of governance French colonial policy and practice created in Senegal. Saint-Martin's brief analysis of

¹⁷ Evidence indicates that the initial closure of the school in 1872 was due to financial reasons. However, the school reopened in 1892, after a twenty-year lapse. For more on the *École des Otages*, see Bouche, "L'enseignement," Chapter 8, 321-356.

¹⁸ Yves Saint-Martin, *Le Sénégal sous le Second Empire*, 268-270.

¹⁹ During his first pilgrimage Bou El Mogdad left Saint-Louis on 10 December 1860 via the Sahara Desert and North Africa and returned toward the end of 1861. He went on his second pilgrimage in 1878, after traveling to France, along with his two sons, to witness the *Exposition Universelle*.

Faidherbe's administrative personnel points to the importance of interpreters, such as Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad, whose credentials as learned Muslims and possession of social capital empowered them to foster relations between Africans and French officials.

Together, the works of Amar Samb, Denise Bouche, and Yves Saint-Martin demonstrate how vital indigenous interpreters were as transactional go-betweens in the Senegal area during the colonial period. Under the exigent situation spawned by French expansion into the Senegal valley during the second half of the 1800s, interpreters emerged as indispensable functionaries assigned the tasks of leading diplomatic missions, guiding military and fact-finding expeditions, and negotiating official treaties.

In contrast to the selective attention African interpreters have received from scholars, historians of colonial French West Africa have focused much more on commercial brokers, usually *traitants* and *signares*, who interceded as cultural liaisons between the French and West Africans. Customarily, *signares* provided access to local trading networks for their European associates, spouses, and lovers, who happened to be entrepreneurs or merchants seeking commercial opportunities. The works of Philip Curtin, George Brooks, and Michael Marcson, among others, demonstrate the critical role such intermediaries played in facilitating contacts between the French, British, or Portuguese and Africans in the Senegambia region.²⁰ Because of their close ties with one or more of the interest groups they represented, commercial brokers for the most part operated as informal interlocutors. Knowledge of the protocols, cultural practices, and

²⁰ Curtin, *Economic Change*; Brooks, "Signares of Saint-Louis and Gorée." See also, Jones, "Citizens and Subjects;" Manchuelle, "Métis et colons;" Peter Mark, "The Evolution of 'Portuguese' Identity: Luso-Africans on the Guinea Coast from the Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History* 40 (1999), 173-191.

languages involved in mediating between the French, Portuguese, or British and Africans put local middle figures in a vantage position to liaise effectively between the negotiating parties. For this reason, the *maîtres de langues*, the immediate predecessors of administrative interpreters in Saint-Louis, emerged as crucial commercial brokers in the Senegal River trade during the early nineteenth century.²¹ Overall, even though Curtin, Brooks, Marcson and others contribute to our understanding of the functions of pre-colonial intermediaries, their works are limited for present purposes insofar as they only cover the period before the mid-nineteenth century, when Muslim African interpreters had yet to become full-time employees of the administration in Saint-Louis.

In contrast to the abovementioned works, however, the more recent study by Hilary Jones, “Citizens and Subjects,” which focuses on the *métis* of Saint-Louis, covers the period between 1870 and 1920.²² Jones traces the rise of the *métis* as key players in the political and socioeconomic transformations of the coastal town at a time the administration aimed to curtail their political and economic influence. At the same time, the *métis* commercial elite faced stiff competition from French firms, such as Maurel and Prom, which sought to monopolize both the export and local riverine commerce. In this context, as Jones shows, marriage often worked among the *métis*, especially *signares*, to open doors for economic, social, and political advancement through prospective French suitors, mostly entrepreneurs lured by the riverine commerce or administrators and military personnel posted to Senegal. Furthermore, Jones affirms the vital role some *métis*, both men and women, played as informal intermediaries who brokered commercial

²¹ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 31-32; Taylor, “Of Sultans and Disciples,” 81-148.

²² Jones, *Citizens and Subjects*.”

and social interactions between the French and Africans. Although Jones's study, like those discussed above, does not focus entirely on African interpreters, her discussion of cultural brokers reveals that their mediations between the French, Saint-Louisians, and Africans in the interior were an important feature of socioeconomic and political relations in colonial Senegal.

Other groups that had close contact with both Africans and Europeans that have received considerable attention from historians include European administrators, military personnel, missionaries and indigenous chiefs.²³ By contrast, African interpreters remain an enigma yet to be understood fully beyond their earlier image that stigmatized them as collaborators. If this explains why they have not attracted the kind of scholarly attention marabouts, chiefs, and *tirailleurs* have received over the years, then it is only fair to suggest that the earlier vilification of interpreters as historical villains condemned them to historiographical exclusion.

Even so I would hesitate to overemphasize the complete omission of African interpreters from the historical picture of colonial West Africa. In Amadou Hampaté Bâ's highly acclaimed novel *The Fortunes of Wangrin*, for example, the author's experiences during the early twentieth century inspired a memorable portrait of local interpreters employed by the colonial administration in the part of Soudan Français that

²³ See, for example, Pierre Alexandre, "Chiefs, Commandants and Clerks: Their Relationship from Conquest to Decolonisation in French West Africa," Michael Crowder and Obaro Ikime, eds., *West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status under Colonial Rule and Independence* (New York: African Pub. Corp., 1970), 2-13; Robinson, *Chiefs and Clerics*; Sara Berry, *Chiefs Know their Boundaries: Essays on Property, Power and the Past in Asante, 1896-1996* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001); Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857-1960* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991); Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*.

became Mali.²⁴ The central character of Hamphaté Bâ's narrative, Wangrin, in pursuing interests other than those sanctioned by French administrators, resorted to intrigue, chicanery, and deception, taking full advantage of the frailties of the nascent colonial administration in the early 1900s.

Hamphaté Bâ's clever fusion of history and fiction produces an evocative prose that not only brings a host of flamboyant and intriguing characters to life but also contributes in no small measure to illuminating the hegemonic and contested relations between African employees and their French employers. Although power relations between Africans and French officials were unequal for the most part, Hamphaté Bâ illustrates vividly that the former were by no means dormant and hapless victims of French colonial rule. Instead, interpreters and clerks made the most of the fragile administration in pursuing their own individual or communal interests whenever possible, often frustrating the expectations of French administrators in the process.

Yet, for all Hamphaté Bâ's insights and craftsmanship in recapturing the rich texture of sociopolitical relations between African *fonctionnaires* and French administrators in Soudan Français, it would be a distortion, historically speaking, for Wangrin and his likes to represent the diverse mix of African interpreters who accommodated to the demands of French colonial rule in various ways. Thus, it is difficult to exaggerate the import of historical studies, including biographies, on interpreters and other transactional go-betweens in colonial Senegal and the rest of French West Africa. This necessity encapsulates the goal of this study.

²⁴ Hamphaté Bâ, a Malian, was an employee of the French colonial administration and had a stint as clerk in present-day Burkina Faso. Hamphaté Bâ, *The Fortunes of Wangrin*. For more on Hamphaté Bâ, see Ralph Austen, "Amadou Hamphaté Bâ. From a Colonial to a Postcolonial Voice: *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul*," *Research in African Literature* 31, 3 (2000), 1-17.

Vindicating Brunschwig's earlier call for thorough empirical research on African interpreters and translators of the colonial period, a number of historians studying West Africa have drawn attention to their activities as both interlocutors and "framers" of knowledge, as Robinson puts it.²⁵ Robinson's *Paths of Accommodation*, for example, focuses on *grands marabouts* that emerged as key players in shaping relations between the French and Africans in the Senegalo-Mauritanian zone between the 1880s and 1920s. In opting for accommodation with the colonial administration, the marabouts acknowledged the political dominance of the French but maintained autonomy in the religious, social, and economic spheres. Moreover, in examining how members of Saint-Louis's civil society and African functionaries influenced relations between the administration and local community, Robinson profiles a number of interpreter families, including the Anne and Seck, who feature conspicuously in this study.²⁶

Besides tracing the genealogy of the two families, Robinson illustrates how Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad established their credentials well enough for the administration to depend on their mediations in dealing with both the Muslim community of Saint-Louis and independent states in the interior. Irrespective of their close ties with the administration, however, Robinson suggests that the interpreters were not oblivious of their personal aspirations, sense of independence, and responsibility to the Muslim community of Saint-Louis. As they ascended to prominence, both Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad accumulated ample social capital that enabled them to deploy their influence on either side of the colonial fence. In subsequent years, the administration

²⁵ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 51.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 79-85.

reaffirmed its trust in Bou El Mogdad by employing his sons Abdoulaye,²⁷ Mahmoudou,²⁸ and Aïnina²⁹ as interpreters.

Robinson's analysis reveals that the colonial administration depended on high-ranking interpreters to not only deal with the Muslim community of Saint-Louis but also



Photo 2.2. A Restaurant in Saint-Louis named after Mahmoudou Seck (Doudou).
Photograph by author (Saint-Louis, 24 August 2004).

²⁷ Ibid. After Bou El Mogdad died in 1880, the administration turned to Abdoulaye Seck, his eldest son, to continue his father's role as interpreter/diplomat, a role he performed until 1887 when he was shot and killed during a mission to Baol. (Interview with Aïnina Wane; Saint-Louis, 24 August 2004).

²⁸ ANS 3C 7, Legion of Honor, Proposition of 14 July 1910. Mahmoudou Seck, like his father, had an illustrious career, as his credentials testify. A passenger boat that still plies the Senegal River from Saint-Louis was named after Bou El Mogdad Seck, while a restaurant in Saint-Louis named "Bou El Mogdad" was in honor of Mahmoudou Seck (Interview with Aïnina Wane; Saint-Louis, 24 August 2004). See also, Samb, "L'école de Saint-Louis ou Bou El-Mogdad," 73-106.

²⁹ ANS 3C 9, Extract from the *Journal Officiel de la République*, no. 208, (8109), 3 August 1919. Aïnina Seck began his career as an *interprète auxiliaire* in 1893 and was *interprète en chef* by 1914. Between 1897 and 1908, he participated in six different missions sent to present-day Mauritania. In addition, he served as *qadi* of the Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis for several years. ANS 3C 9, The Lieutenant-Governor of Senegal to the Governor General of French West Africa, Dakar, 21 June 1919.

liaise with local leaders in the interior, including those in frontier areas the French had yet to control. At different times of their careers, Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad were responsible for Arabic translation at the Arabic translation service overseen by the DAP, which dealt with correspondence between local leaders and the administration. Key Muslim interpreters gave the administration confidence about its capability to handle with success the growing Muslim population in the West African territories brought under French control.

Overall, Robinson's *Paths of Accommodation* makes a strong case for further research into the history of interpreters and similar go-betweens, to assess their impact on relations of power between the French and Africans in the Senegalo-Mauritanian zone. The study pieces together snippets from a variety of archival and oral sources to trace the family histories of a number of interpreters. Moreover, it offers glimpses of the critical role African interpreters played in liaisons between the French, African leadership, and local communities in the Senegalo-Mauritanian zone. But for all the merits of Robinson's careful analysis, the intercessions of interpreters featured in his work appear to pale in the shadow of *grands marabouts*, such as Sidiyya Baba, Malik Sy, and Amadou Bamba, who occupy center stage in the study as key mediators of accommodation to French political dominance in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

In a fascinating study on colonial French West Africa, Emily Osborn has shown that in spite of French military dominance and conquest in western Africa, the administrative setup of the early 1900s displayed "the malleable underbelly of colonial rule,"³⁰ which low-level African employees with the right kind of language skills and cultural understanding managed to manipulate for their individual purposes. Osborn

³⁰ Osborn, "Circle of Iron," 31.

traces meticulously the activities of three local interpreters, Ousmane Fall and Oularé in Medine and Siguir (Soudan Français), respectively, and Kamissoko in Kankan (Guinée Française), to illustrate how African *fonctionnaires* “exploited the chasms of language and information of the early colonial period”³¹ for objectives other than those French administrators endorsed.

The imposition of French rule, Osborn points out, disrupted African social hierarchies to the extent that the colonial administration at times employed African interpreters, translators, and clerks of lowly origins, who used their official position to challenge the local elite and sometimes defraud ordinary Africans. The case of Kamissoko in Guinée is particularly revealing about local chiefs and functionaries conniving to create a niche for themselves at the expense of the colonial administration. Osborn’s analysis thus helps us understand that rather than serve passively as “translating machines,” some interpreters managed to transgress self-consciously the limitations their French employers imposed on them. By dint of their own initiatives, some interpreters wielded tremendous authority in the daily administration of colonial posts and courtrooms where they rendered their services. Interpreters, translators, and clerks, Osborn observes, had the capacity to exercise “linguistic monopoly” as they were well placed to guide the transmission of information between French officials and Africans. As a result, interpreters could affect how both groups understood each other and engaged in the production of competing discourses and knowledge for their respective purposes.³² Access to information and control over the written word, including their ability to use

³¹ Ibid, 37.

³² Ibid.

information as a bargaining chip, gave African interpreters, translators, and clerks some advantage to contest, negotiate, and redefine their intermediary position. Although Osborn refers to knowledge production and acknowledges its importance for understanding colonial encounters in Africa, however, her study does not explore the ramifications of the theme. Instead, she pays more attention to the manipulations of low-ranking African interpreters in furthering their selfish interests.

Altogether, the works of Hamphaté Bâ, Robinson, and Osborn put forward a compelling case to argue that however limited the power West African interpreters wielded because they ranked below French officials in the colonial hierarchy, their mediations were crucial in shaping relations of power between French colonial officials and colonized Africans. Indeed, the studies reveal the conflicts and negotiations that typified exchanges between African interpreters and French officials, suggesting that the latter did not always have their way in determining the outcome of relations between the administration and African population.

Even though the growing interest of Africanist scholars in indigenous colonial interpreters, translators, letter writers and clerks indicates a range of possibilities for tracing the histories of these understudied intermediaries, it is yet premature to assess the results of the current efforts to reinstate African go-betweens in mainstream African colonial historiography. Ultimately, the best gauge for measuring the success of these fresh attempts to ignite interest in African colonial middle figures will be the publication of new scholarly articles and monographs focused entirely on their careers and experiences. In this connection, the publication of a volume (2006) compiled from papers presented at the 8th Stanford-Berkeley Law and Colonialism Symposium, “Interpreters,

Letter Writers, and Clerks: Mediating Law and Authority in Colonial Africa,” held at Stanford University, California, in May 2002, represents a step in the right direction.³³

Edited by Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks* covers a diverse group of go-betweens across Sub-Saharan Africa and assesses their contributions to the making of modern Africa. Whether in French, British, or German colonies, African colonial intermediaries not only bridged the linguistic and cultural gaps between European administrators and their African subjects but also looked after local interests and often enhanced their personal wealth, status, and power by making the most of their official position. The volume illustrates that African interpreters, clerks, and secretaries operated both within and outside the colonial administration, often violating the limits colonial authorities imposed on them in pursuit of their own personal and/or communal interests. The duality and ambiguity that epitomize the functions of African colonial intermediaries, the editors observe, reflects in significant ways the “vernacular of colonial rule: the connotations and inflections that colonialism acquired in practice as it was negotiated by African elites, subject populations, and white officials and by the interpreters, clerks, and secretaries who mediated the encounters.”³⁴

Reconstructing the history of colonial interpreters in Senegal requires an approach that looks beyond dated paradigms, such as the collaborator/resister dichotomy, that limited our understanding of their intermediary functions for so long. It is instructive, therefore, to plot a trajectory of inquiry that allows us to analyze constructively the ambiguities and contradictions of French colonial rule, which created the conditions

³³ Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

under which interpreters discharged their duties. By grounding the study in certain themes that interlaced the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural dynamics of the late 1800s and early 1900s, the study proposes a reflective investigation of the turbulent and uncertain world Muslim African interpreters inhabited in colonial Senegal. The next section lays out the major themes of the study that provide an explanatory framework for the events and historical figures the succeeding chapters will discuss.

2.2. Muslim Identity, Knowledge and Power, Interpretation, and Hegemony and Accommodation

During the last few decades, several studies on colonial encounters in Africa (and elsewhere in the world) have revealed that the internal dynamics of colonial relationships were far more complex than previously thought.³⁵ Despite the unequal relations of power between European colonizers and colonized Africans, both groups fashioned out hegemonic relations typified by conflicts and negotiations in different contexts throughout the continent. Even with European military conquest and the imposition of political control over most of Africa, the resultant colonial state exhibited structural frailties, especially during the early period of colonial rule, immediately following the frenzy of the late nineteenth-century European “scramble.”³⁶ Operating on tight budgets,

³⁵ See, for example, Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, eds., *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, Book 1 (London: James Currey, 1992); Sarah Berry, *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993); Hunt, *Colonial Lexicon*; Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Thomas Spear, “Neo-traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa,” *Journal of African History* 44 (2003), 3-27.

³⁶ There is an extensive literature on the “Scramble for Africa” following the 1884/5 Berlin Conference which established the modalities for partitioning the continent. See, for instance, M. E. Chamberlain, *The Scramble for Africa*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1999); Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991); David L. Lewis, *The Race to Fashoda: European Colonialism and African Resistance in the Scramble for Africa* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987); R. J. Gavin and J. A. Betley, eds., *The Scramble for Africa* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1973).

compounded by a shortage of European personnel needed to staff extensive territories brought under control, colonial administrations in Africa had to make substantial use of African employees, typically in the lower echelons of the administrative hierarchy, to carry out the day-to-day affairs of the colonial state. In this context, local employees so inclined could exploit the weaknesses of the administration for their own personal or local societal interests. Thomas Spear, among others, has emphasized that European colonial authorities were most times limited in both material and human resources, leaving them with hardly any other viable options than to rely on African rulers and employees to carry out the daily business of the colonial state.³⁷

Additionally, European administrators were unable to exercise complete monopoly over local discourse, which Africans controlled for the most part and often made the most of to influence power relations with European colonial officials.³⁸ From the viewpoint of European administrators, then, it was necessary not to disregard African interpreters and similar go-betweens who occupied a vantage position as authors and disseminators of local discourse to shape how Europeans and Africans understood and related to each other. If interpreters could possibly exercise control over the creation of knowledge and discourse, it followed that they had the capacity to undermine the position of dominance European colonial authorities assumed over African subjects. This paradox in colonial relations warrants careful analysis of the intermediary role African interpreters

³⁷ Spear, "Neo-traditionalism." Whether European powers employed "direct rule" or "indirect rule" to govern their colonies, they had to rely on Africans in various spheres of the colonial state—administration, courts, police and military forces and so on—for it to function with any measure of success.

³⁸ Ibid, 6-13; see also, Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 3-29; Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26-30.

and similar middle figures performed in colonial Senegal—and elsewhere on the continent—insofar as relations between the French and Africans involved conflicts, negotiations, and accommodation.

The ambiguity of the colonial intermediary's position alluded to in historical literature provides a focal point to begin a discussion of the agency and construction of identity among Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal. These intriguing issues have set off thought-provoking debates and a rethinking among scholars about ordinary Africans and their colonial experiences.³⁹ In his incisive appraisal of Hamphaté Bâ's *The Fortunes of Wangrin*, F. Abiola Arele, for instance, draws attention to the vantage position of African interpreters from which they witnessed French colonial imposition unfold.⁴⁰ Arele directs his remark at Hamphaté Bâ's protagonist, Wangrin, and similar interpreters in Soudan Française, at the turn of the twentieth century, to highlight both the interpreter's omnipresence and ambiguous role as an intermediary:

It is indeed something of a paradox that the half-illiterate interpreter, placed between the world of the French colonial administration and that of the indigenous political system, placed also between the world of the common African and that of the local notables, should stand at the vantage point from which to view the colonial universe in the round and to understand the tensions with which it is wracked as it comes into being.⁴¹

³⁹ See, for example, V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Leroy Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Leo Spitzer, *Lives In Between: Assimilation and Marginality in Austria, Brazil, and West Africa, 1780-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Mark, "Portuguese" Style and Luso-African Identity; James E. Genova, "Conflicted Missionaries: Power and Identity in French West Africa during the 1930s," *The Historian* 66, 1 (2004), 45-66; Jones, "Citizens and Subjects."

⁴⁰ F. Abiola Arele, "Study in Ambiguity: Amadou Hamphaté Bâ's *The Fortunes of Wangrin*," *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 82-97.

⁴¹ Ibid, 88.

Sure enough, Arele affirms the tangled “web of human relations and the clash of various forces” that unsettled the interpreter’s world and compelled him to adapt to “the day-to-day realities of the system of colonial imposition.”⁴² As in the rest of French West Africa, military expansion and colonial rule in Senegal caused political and socioeconomic dislocations that affected Africans in the region, particularly those in Saint-Louis and adjacent areas near the coast.

Although the administration set the boundaries within which interpreters in colonial Senegal performed their official duties, they contested, negotiated, and accommodated to the realities of French military and political dominance. No doubt individual interpreters could do little to prevent French expansion inland from the coastal headquarters of Saint-Louis. Nor could employees of the administration use their collective bargaining power to force their French employers to abandon policies approved in Paris that had full military support for their forceful execution if necessary. Despite their lack of power, however, Muslim interpreters were aware of the administration’s limitations in both personnel and material resources. And this sometimes spurred certain interpreters to pursue their personal interests and/or those of their local community. In this context, a careful examination of the shifting configurations of power and the contradictions and weaknesses of the colonial state in Senegal will allow us to see how African employees, by dint of their adaptability and resilience, grappled with the sociopolitical and cultural ruptures French rule produced.

The multiple themes that weave the study together offer an interpretative trajectory to analyze critically the conflicting worlds African interpreters and similar intermediaries straddled in colonial Senegal. Indeed a fundamental issue underpinning

⁴² Ibid.

the study centers on Muslim African interpreters as employees of a non-Muslim French colonial administration, a situation that raised serious concerns among Muslims in the Senegal region. Especially for those who decried Muslims working for an alien administration (often branded incorrectly as “Christian”), their argument was couched in a language stressing the incompatibility of Muslims and a non-Muslim regime. Despite a long history of interactions between the French and the local population in the Senegal valley, the growing Islamization in the region brought about a heightened level of religious and political awareness among Muslims. As a result, they sought to make their presence felt in the civic life of Saint-Louis. Their demand for an Islamic court for Muslims in the town, for example, reflected their wish to make their collective voice heard in the affairs of the coastal headquarters and within official circles. In this context, Muslim interpreters employed by the administration faced a dilemma insofar as supporting the aspirations of their local community and honoring their obligations to their French employers all at once had the potential to create a conflict of interests. What did the interpreters make of their intermediary position? How did they present and represent themselves as Muslims serving a non-Muslim French administration? How did both the French and Africans understand and respond to the interpreters’ position, as contradictory as it appeared?

Any meaningful discussion of the above questions calls for locating them in the context of the French “policy of assimilation,” which several scholars have observed was not only fraught with contradictions from its inception but also never taken to its logical conclusion in practice.⁴³ Although assimilation turned out to be a botched guiding

⁴³ The literature on the French policy of assimilation is extensive and offers both conventional approaches to the subject and revisionist interpretations. See, for example, Betts, *Assimilation and*

principle, it influenced French attitudes toward Africans and shaped how both groups interacted over time. The French authorities realized early on that the rising tide of Islamization⁴⁴ could alter the course of events and worked cautiously toward some kind of understanding with Muslims in the lower and middle Senegal valley. Long before France made good of its image as a “Muslim power” in the late 1800s,⁴⁵ the administration espoused “tolerance,” especially during Faidherbe’s governorship, to express its goodwill towards Muslims in the region.⁴⁶ With time, though, French colonial officials entertained strong reservations about certain groups of Muslims, such as the Tijaniyya, believing that they were predisposed to a militant brand of Islam that could destabilize the status quo.⁴⁷

Association; Crowder, *Assimilation*; Conklin, *Mission to Civilize*; Diouf, “French Colonial Policy of Assimilation”; H.O. Idowu, “Assimilation in 19th Century Senegal.” *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 34 (1969), 194-218; Manchuelle, “*Assimilés ou patriotes africains?*”; Wesley Johnson, *Double Impact*. See also, Chapter 1, note 2.

⁴⁴ Marty, *Etudes sur l’Islam au Sénégal*; Lucy Behrman, “The Islamization of the Wolof by the End of the Nineteenth Century,” Daniel F. McCall, Norman R. Bennett, and Jeffrey Butler, *Western African History* (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1968), 102-131; Lucy Creevey (Behrman), “Muslim Brotherhoods and Politics in Senegal in 1985,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 23, 4 (1985), 715-721; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*.

⁴⁵ Robinson, “France as a Muslim Power.” Muslim power here refers to France’s increasing control over areas where the population was predominantly Muslim, as in the case of Algeria and other French West African colonies such as Mauritania and Mali.

⁴⁶ For this reason, the administration did not escape the censure of the Roman Catholic community of Saint-Louis, which believed it was privileging Muslims at their expense. Embittered Catholics referred derisively to Governor Faidherbe as a *marabout chrétien*, suggesting he was too attached to the Muslim community despite, presumably, his Christian European background. Indeed through his key interpreters Hamat Ndiaye Anne, the *tamsir* of Saint-Louis, and Bou El Mogdad, whom the administration sponsored to make the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1861, Faidherbe tried to cultivate mutual understanding with Muslim leaders and their constituencies in the lower and middle Senegal valley. See Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 81.

⁴⁷ In the view of the French, the Tokolor were “fanatics” generally predisposed to militant jihad. This perception of the Tokolor to a large degree was a result of al-Hajj Umar’s militancy in waging a jihad around mid century. By the end of the century, the view that the Tijaniyya embodied Muslim fanaticism was a dominant trope in French discourse on the practice of Islam among different local groups. See Alfred Le Châtelier, *L’Islam dans l’Afrique occidentale* (Paris: G. Steinheil, 1899).

Unlike Al-Hajj Umar who at some point decried “close association”—*muwalat*—with Christians or non-Muslim authorities,⁴⁸ Muslim interpreters working for the administration were less inclined to think that their ties with the French “polluted” their “abode.” Instead, they saw the need for cooperation, one built on the understanding that the French would respect the practice of Islam among Muslims. Optimistic about coexistence with the French, therefore, some leading Muslim figures in Saint-Louis, most notably Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad Seck, found no conflict of interests in working as interpreters/translators for the administration and looking after the interests of their local community at the same time.

The above backdrop makes a compelling case for probing the construction of identity among Muslim interpreters insofar as they traversed both the world of French officials and that of the African population. Especially because of their Islamic background, the situation the interpreters faced was particularly intriguing considering how French acculturation and its institutional expression, assimilation, played out in colonial Senegal. Although a detailed discussion of the policy of assimilation is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to emphasize that nineteenth-century French colonial officials espoused the redemptive power of assimilation, believing that it could not only uplift Africans but also prepare them to take on greater responsibilities in support of the French imperial project. In practice, however, the Francocentric and racist assumptions underlying the precepts of assimilation often belied this expectation.

Moreover, even though interpreters of the administration shared an identical Muslim background, they were far from being a monolithic group. On the contrary, they hailed from different ethnic, social, and geographic backgrounds, just as they reflected

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 120-121, 145.

dissimilar levels of Islamic education, linguistic abilities, and general competence. At the same time, it appears that they shared, at least to a certain degree, an esprit des corps as employees of the administration, suggesting the existence of some kind of corporate identity. Even so, it is difficult to push the idea of a corporate identity too far in the absence of a collective bargaining power, not to mention the individual aspirations of the interpreters and the paucity of sources about their daily activities.

Indeed French officials aimed to train African functionaries who would embrace French culture and handle the demands of their imperial enterprise with absolute commitment. In spite of the expectations of French officials, however, I argue that Muslim interpreters of the administration did not become as “Frenchified” as the more educated Senegalese elite of the early twentieth century.⁴⁹ At best the interpreters experienced what I describe as a selective kind of French acculturation to the extent that they sought to get the better of two different, often conflicting, worlds. On one hand, they wished to use their connection with the administration to enhance their social and symbolic capital. On the other, the interpreters were proud of their Muslim heritage and remained attached to their local community. This apparent conflict in their intermediary position meant they had to refurbish their identity as Muslims over time, especially as the French authorities continued to assert control over any polity in the Senegal region

⁴⁹ By the early twentieth century, Africans in the Senegambia region educated in French colonial schools were becoming an “elite” that could be separated from the rest of the population. Many of the so-called “Black Frenchmen” hoped to validate their right to French citizenship by embracing French education and culture. Their disillusionment with the failure of French policymakers to push assimilation to its logical conclusion reached new heights when the French reneged on the policy at the turn of the century and embraced one of “association.” For further discussion of these issues, see, among others, Nancy Kwang Johnson, “Senegalese ‘Into Frenchmen’? The French Technology of Nationalism in Senegal,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 10 (2004), 135-158; also “Senegalese into Frenchmen? The Politics of Language, Culture, and Assimilation, 1891-1960 (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 2001); W. Bryant Mumford, *Africans Learn to Be French* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970).

deemed vital to their wider imperial plan. Even with local opposition to French expansion, the administration did not relent in extending its control over the lower and middle valley in the closing decades of the 1800s. Thus, the onus was on local interpreters to adjust to the increasing French presence by redefining their identity as Muslims as well as their relationship with a non-Muslim regime.

The next theme around which I develop the second strand of my main argument is the relationship between knowledge and power within a colonial context, a subject scholars from different disciplines have explored in recent decades. No doubt Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism*, published in 1978, set the tone for many other scholars to engage in a cross-disciplinary dialogue about the epistemological dimensions of colonial relations.⁵⁰ V.Y. Mudimbe, for example, identified what he euphemistically termed the "colonial library," meaning the clusters of texts and representations that served as a basis for the "invention of Africa" by accentuating its "otherness," difference, and alterity.⁵¹ Accordingly, the accumulation of knowledge by European colonizers, Mudimbe argues, constituted a vital aspect of their colonizing enterprise aimed at facilitating control over Africans and refashioning their minds as colonial subjects. Acquiring knowledge about Africans, then, European colonizers presupposed, would make the maintenance of "law and order" in their colonies easier and ensure general

⁵⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*; Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000); Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*; Desai, *Subject to Colonialism*.

⁵¹ Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*.

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compliance with policies, draconian or otherwise, implemented to sustain their dominance.

For French colonial officials in Senegal, the acquisition of knowledge about Africans became a priority since most of them initially knew little to nothing about the people they governed.⁵² Moreover, only a handful of French administrators ever stayed long enough in one post to create a lasting sociopolitical network or master local languages sufficiently well to communicate directly with the indigenous people under their authority. Little wonder then that French officials looked up to interpreters and other African intermediaries for information about local societies, believing that a mastery of local knowledge about Africans would increase their capacity to exercise control over them. From the viewpoint of French officials, therefore, the need to know more about Africans was a pragmatic response to a situation in which they had to deal with limited resources, both human and material. For this reason, they considered African interpreters, translators, clerks, and chiefs in the Senegal valley invaluable repositories of information on local history, politics, culture, and the economy.⁵³

⁵² During the second half of the nineteenth century, an increasing number of French colonial administrators sought to obtain more knowledge about Africans and their societies. For this reason, military, "scientific," and expeditionary missions commissioned by the administration customarily had to provide detailed accounts about their excursions. In addition, administrative officers had to write regular reports about their units to acquaint the governor of the colony and officials in Paris about happenings in various parts of the colony.

⁵³ Governor Faidherbe exemplified the importance of acquiring knowledge about Africans by encouraging ethnographic and historical "studies" on the peoples of the Senegalo-Mauritanian region. Faidherbe himself not only undertook such studies but also provided a channel, *Le Moniteur du Sénégal*, for publishing them. Moreover, from the Faidherbian period on, the DAP was responsible for coordinating the intelligence and diplomatic affairs of the administration. At the same time, the Arabic translation service (supervised by the DAP), which dealt with correspondence between local chiefs and the administration, employed interpreters to serve as Arabic translators. Through their dealings with different chiefs and traditional elites, the two administrative organs filtered information on local politics, economy, culture and so on colonial officials found extremely useful in carrying out their administrative functions.

Any meaningful diagnosis of the colonial library, Gaurav Desai implores, ought to take cognizance of Africans who contributed in different ways to the creation of colonial discourse.⁵⁴ Desai argues that the colonial library was an arena of tension and struggle between colonizers and colonized. Yet, neither European colonizers nor colonized Africans succeeded in establishing an uncontested monopoly over the production of knowledge that accrued from the daily interactions between the two groups. Taking the cue from Desai, I argue that French officials relied on African interpreters for information about local societies, hoping to improve their chances of success in maintaining control over the local population. The challenge, then, is to determine the extent of the input, conscious or otherwise, Muslim interpreters brought to bear on the construction of discourse and knowledge during the period under study.

Four decades or so ago, the French Martiniquean-born anti-colonial political activist and scholar Franz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, affirmed tersely: “To speak a language is to take on a world, culture.”⁵⁵ Fanon emphasized the intimacy between language and culture, suggesting that the culture or “world” in which a language exists share such a deep-rooted affinity that it is impossible to separate them completely. Within this context, the interpreter’s task entails not merely conveying words and sentences from one language to the other but also capturing the cultural inflections underpinning those words and sentences. In order to provide the kind of understanding people from different cultural backgrounds need to relate to each other in meaningful ways, the interpreter must

⁵⁴ Desai, *Subject to Colonialism*, 4-13.

⁵⁵ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 38. Fanon’s chapter entitled “The Negro and Language,” 17-40, also deals with the conflict between “Parisian” French and its creolized version spoken in French colonies.

capture the nuances of both cultures—one, the “source,” and the other, the “target.” In a colonial situation, the interpreter’s role as a conduit of cross-cultural exchange acquired even greater significance. How Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal participated in the process of interpretation and mediation across cultures is thus the third theme the study explores.

Although the interest of scholars in cross-cultural colonial encounters in Africa and across the globe is unquestionable,⁵⁶ historians and social scientists have yet to analyze fully the role African interpreters played in shaping cross-cultural discourse and knowledge during the colonial period. Because interpreters occupied a vantage position from which to channel the flow of information between Europeans and Africans, they had the capacity to influence what both groups knew about each other. This kind of knowledge could have an impact on relations between the colonizers and colonized over time. Since Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal represented the administration in performing their official duties, they mediated an institutional form of cross-cultural exchange. Operating within a milieu where the French and Africans contested and negotiated their respective interests on a regular basis, interpreters were at the

⁵⁶ See, for example, Urs Bitteli, *Cultures in Conflict: Encounters between European and Non-European Cultures, 1492-1800*. Trans. by Ritchie Robertson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); John L. Camaroff and Jean Camaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 2: *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997); Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); David Lindenfeld, “Indigenous Encounters with Christian Missionaries in China and West Africa, 1800-1920: A Comparative Study,” *Journal of World History* 16, 3 (2005), 327-370; Fred Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross Cultural Encounters* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

crosscurrents of a complex social process that had far-reaching political and cultural implications.⁵⁷

Against the above backdrop, scholars of interpretation admit the difficulty of attaining perfection in interpretation in most cases of social interaction considering the vast differences in linguistic form.⁵⁸ Differences of meaning and reception, however minimal, surface in the linguistic adjustments interpreters and translators make while performing their task. This process usually involves more than simply transposing the spoken or written word. To all intents and purposes, then, interpreters engage in some form of “editing,” sometimes adding or deleting from the original speech or text. There is thus considerable room for slippages, omissions, and additions that could result in distortions and misunderstandings in communication. How far interpreters shape the interactions they mediate through their small—but sometimes sizeable—alterations in processing different languages is therefore a line of inquiry worthy of serious consideration.

Ideally interpreters perform their task to achieve some communicative or social goal desirable for better understanding between two or more interest groups. For Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal, mediations between the French and Africans involved the transmission, back and forth, of the ideas, ideologies, worldviews and moral convictions of both groups. The task immersed interpreters in the construction of discourse and knowledge both sides considered vital in pursuing their respective interests.

⁵⁷ For more on how West African employees of the colonial administration grappled with the political ramifications of their positions, see Jonathon Derrick, “The ‘Native Clerk’ in Colonial West Africa,” *Africa* 82 (1983), 61-74; Alexandre, “Chiefs, *Commandants*, and Clerks.”

⁵⁸ Brad Davidson, “The Interpreter as Institutional Gatekeeper: The Socio-Linguistic Role of Interpreters in Spanish-English Medical Discourse,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4, 3 (2000), 379-405.

In other words, interpreters pushed the idea of “neutrality” in interpretation to its limit given their position in the administration. As in comparable colonial settings, Muslim interpreters in Senegal carried out their functions “in [a] contested arena between being providers of a service and being agents of authority and control,” as Christopher Candlin argues.⁵⁹ Elaborating on this view, Cecilia Wadensjö sums up the interpreter’s position:

As do all professionalized intermediaries, interpreters work at providing a particular *service*. Simultaneously, they—of necessity—exercise a certain *control*. Obviously, there is a potential conflict between the *service* and the *control* aspects, which sometimes surfaces in dilemmas reported in the literature on institutional communication.⁶⁰ (Italics in original).

Indeed the potentially disruptive social component in institutional interpretation put the colonial interpreter in a critical situation. Selecting and privileging certain information as the voice of “authority” seemed to implicate him in promoting an imperialist agenda that mostly worked against the interests of Africans. For the Muslim interpreter in colonial Senegal, therefore, depending on his personality and resilience in coping with the pressure of operating between two opposing worlds, his personal ambition, career, and societal interests could have been on a collision course. In this situation, the conflict of interests and ambiguity the African colonial interpreter’s position epitomized could not have been more overt.

The last theme that informs the study revolves around hegemony and accommodation. During the last two decades, scholars from different disciplines—history, political science, anthropology, and literary studies—have engaged the subject of

⁵⁹ Christopher N. Candlin, introduction to Cecilia Wadensjö, *Interpreting as Interaction* (New York: Longman, 1998), xvii.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 68-69.

hegemony in their analyses of colonial relations in Africa.⁶¹ A fundamental issue they have addressed is the capacity of the colonial state to exercise control over Africans and the extent to which the latter acquiesced in the unequal relations of power that ensued. Although colonial powers met with resistance from several African leaders and their subjects, European military superiority ensured that fewer African resisters ever succeeded against the British, French, Germans, or Portuguese in the long term.⁶² In colonial Senegal, both the French and Africans sought to forge workable and working relations over time intended to serve their mutual interests.

In the immediate aftermath of European conquest, colonial officials realized that ruling a colony entailed more than just the possession and use of arms and ammunition. In fact, the nascent colonial state exhibited weaknesses that undermined the capacity of its officials to administer effectively their domain and subjects. Gradually, however, the colonial state expanded its administrative setup and enhanced its capacity to sustain its dominance through coercive measures and direct intervention in the political economy of the colony. In their study of the colonial state in Kenya, John Lonsdale and Bruce Berman, for example, drive this point home by revealing the contradictions and frailties the administration exhibited even as it expanded and became better organized.⁶³

Crawford Young has suggested, however, that with time the colonial state became

⁶¹ Sara Berry, "Hegemony on a Shoestring: Indirect Rule and Access to Agricultural Land," *Africa* 62, 3 (1992), 327-355; Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks, eds., *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1994); Shula Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*; Spear, "Neo-traditionalism".

⁶² A. Adu Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan, eds., *Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960*. Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race, and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919-1945* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁶³ Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, eds., *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, Book 1 (London: James Currey, 1992).

powerful enough to deal with recurrent challenges to its hegemonic power by exercising a monopoly over the means of coercion.⁶⁴ Still, Anthony Kirk-Greene reminds us that the colonial state's military capacity was limited and not sustainable for too long.⁶⁵ Due to the shortage in both human and material resources experienced by most colonial administrations, European officials were obliged to seek the services of African intermediaries and other local employees.

More importantly, the colonial state hardly ever succeeded in asserting complete control over the lives of Africans. Even those considered powerless "subalterns," as James Scott argues, were capable of fashioning out their own subtle ways of putting up resistance against domination.⁶⁶ Because of the structural weaknesses of most colonial states in Africa, European policymakers and administrators at best could only exercise "hegemony on a shoestring," to use Sara Berry's exquisite phrase.⁶⁷ To the extent that hegemonic relations between Europeans and Africans were fragile and contradictory, they involved contested and negotiated concessions in which each side sought to increase its advantage in the "bargain of collaboration," as Ronald Robinson phrased it four decades or so ago.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 95-133.

⁶⁵ Anthony Kirk-Greene, "The Thin White Line: The Size of the British Colonial Service in Africa," *African Affairs* 79 (1980), 25-44.

⁶⁶ James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁶⁷ Berry, *No Condition Is Permanent*, Chapter 2.

⁶⁸ Ronald Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration," Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, eds., *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1972), 117-142.

The case of colonial Senegal suggests that in the face of budgetary constraints and inadequate personnel, the administration in Saint-Louis had to rely on local employees—interpreters, clerks, messengers, guards and so forth—to carry out its day-to-day functions. Without the support of local chiefs, district headmen, and African functionaries, it is difficult to imagine how French colonial officials could have performed their duties with any measure of success. Hegemony and accommodation, therefore, as the study will reveal, were key elements for sustainable and workable relations to evolve between the French and Africans in colonial Senegal.

In the chapters that follow, the themes discussed above will provide a frame of reference to ground the study. Although I make no pretense of applying an overarching theoretical paradigm, the thematic concerns addressed in this chapter will weave the different strands of arguments presented in the study in a coherent manner. The next chapter introduces the ethnohistorical context, geographic space, and political economy of the Senegal River valley, the stage on which the interpreters explored in the study lived out their experiences.

CHAPTER 3

Ethnohistorical Setting and Political Economy

Although the Senegal River today marks the official boundary between the West African nation-states of Senegal and Mauritania to the north, the people inhabiting this area share a long history of trade, migrations, intermarriages, cross-river raids and a common religion, Islam, which predates the colonial period.¹ In the past the Senegal River trade encouraged frequent interactions between the Wolof, Futanke, Fulbe and other ethnic groups (*sudan* or “black”), who live mostly on the southern side of the river, and the Moors (who claimed partial descent to Arab ancestors and thus *bidan* or “white”), located on the northern side. Yet these identities, Raymond Taylor argues correctly, were fluid and unstable to the extent that long years of intermarriages and concubinage had blurred them.² As a result, it is more difficult today than it was in the nineteenth century to apply the *bidan/sudan* dichotomy, because people on either side of the river are offspring of parents who trace their descent to both *bidan* and *sudan* grandparents and great grandparents. Adding to the rich cultural mosaic of the river valley were a sizeable

¹ Islamization in the Senegambia region was a complex and long-drawn process spanning several centuries. Although militant jihads were part of this process, conversion to Islam occurred for the most part under peaceful circumstances. For the different trajectories of Islamization in the Senegal valley region, see, among others, Lucie Colvin, “Islam and the State of Kajoor: A Case of Successful Resistance to Jihad,” *Journal of African History* 15 (1974), 587-606; Robinson, *Holy War of Umar Tal*; Klein, *Islam and Imperialism*, especially Chapters 4 and 5, 63-113.

² For an enthralling discussion of identity construction in the Gebla area of southern Mauritania bordering the Senegal River, see Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans,” Chapter 1, 46-80.

number of French, métis, and other Africans in Saint-Louis who also depended on the riverine trade for their livelihood.³

Commercial interactions between the various groups mentioned above became more intense as first, slaves, and then, gum Arabic, dominated the economy of the river valley by the late 1700s and early 1800s.⁴ By the 1850s, however, peanuts were emerging as the most important export crop on the southern side of the river, where the state of Kajoor became the hub of the “peanut basin.”⁵ The potential of Kajoor as a major peanut-producing area influenced to a significant degree French interest in the Wolof state from mid century on. Chapter 5 will deal with this subject at length.

As the economic stakes in the river trade increased, rivalry intensified between local leaders competing for tributes from subordinate polities, control over the *escales* (seasonal trade fairs) and *coutumes* (customary “gifts”) they yielded, and the choice of mediators and warriors with whose allegiance any leader could tip the balance of wealth and power in his favor. The pattern of interdependence that evolved in the riverine trade allowed different social groups to participate in it in a range of capacities. Among the

³ For more on pre-colonial economic relations in Saint-Louis and the Senegal valley, see Marcson, “European-African Interaction”; on the pre-colonial economic history of the Senegambia region, see Curtin, *Economic Change*.

⁴ The acacia trees that produced gum arabic grew mostly in the Gebel plains of southern Mauritania. The gum trade became a viable source of income for the chiefs and traditional elites who depended on the labor of slaves, ex-slaves, and peasants to produce the crop. Taylor concurs with Webb’s view that “legitimate” trade was more influential than the slave trade in the economy of the desert edge and river valley. See Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans,” 9; Webb, “The Trade in Gum Arabic”; on the slave trade in the region, see Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce*; ‘God Alone is King.’

⁵ On Kajoor and the colonial administration during the mid-nineteenth century, see Lucie Colvin, “Kajoor and its Diplomatic Relations with Saint-Louis du Senegal, 1763-1861,” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1972); Mamadou Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle: Pouvoir cédé et conquête coloniale* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1990); Julian Witherell, “The Response of the Peoples of Cayor to French-Penetration, 1850-1900,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1964).

Moors, for example, the *zwaya* (clerical lineage) produced gum tapped from acacia trees through their slaves and *haratin* (descendants of freed slaves), while the *hassani* (warrior lineage) provided protection for merchants and caravans that frequented the *escales* along the Senegal River.⁶ To participate in the trade, the agents of French commercial houses, *négociants*, *métis* and African *merchants* and *traitants* from Saint-Louis were obliged to pay *coutumes* to the leaders of Trarza, Brakna, and Futa Toro who exercised control over the *escales* located in their respective territories.⁷ In addition, the administration in Saint-Louis paid local leaders their share of *coutumes*, usually calculated in proportion to the volume of trade at any given time.⁸

The gum boom during the first half of the 1800s had contributed to recurrent conflicts among local leaders, particularly in Trarza and Brakna, where animosity provoked by economic competition only aggravated existing political struggles.⁹ For much of the nineteenth century, therefore, factional fighting and its resultant fragmentation of power typified political relations both within and between different

⁶ The *hassani* of Trarza and Brakna were notorious for engaging in raids on caravans at the *escales*, just as they organized cross-river attacks on villages in Walo and Futa Toro, where they pillaged, assaulted, and kidnapped villagers who often could not protect themselves. By mid century, however, many villages in Brakna were pooling resources together to resist the predatory raids of the *hassani*. As far as the production of gum was concerned, the descendants of freed slaves in the river valley area most times continued to perform obligatory duties for their former masters, as was the custom.

⁷ The leadership of Trarza and Brakna controlled two of the most important *escales* by mid-nineteenth century, Désert and Escale du Coq, respectively. For a detailed analysis of the dynamics of the gum trade and how it affected the power struggles in Trarza and Brakna, see Taylor, "Of Sultans and Disciples," especially Chapter 2, 81-148; Pasquier, "Les traitants des comptoirs du Sénégal."

⁸ Governor Faidherbe estimated that the administration paid about 30,000 francs annually in customs duties, while merchants paid about 150,000 francs. Minutes of the Council of the Administration, 10 August 1855, cited in Marcson, "European-African Interaction," 5.

⁹ ANS 9G 4, The Escape of Mohamed Sidi, 1853; ANS 9G 4, War of the Bracknas against the Ouled Ahkmet, 1864; also, Taylor, "Of Sultans and Disciples"; see also, Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*; Paul Marty, *L'Émirat des Trarzas* (Paris: Leroux, 1919), 109-124; *Études sur l'Islam et tribus maures: Les Brakna* (Paris: Leroux, 1921), 53-78.

politics in the Senegal valley that depended on the riverine trade for revenue.¹⁰ However, the flux in the situation did not prevent the *maîtres de langues* alluded to in Chapter 1 from mediating transactions between gum buyers and sellers to procure their customary commission from the proceeds. Until about mid century, local leaders with stakes in the *escales* counted on the *maîtres de langues* to not only take stock of the volume of trade but also determine the amount of *coutumes* to expect.¹¹

This chapter provides an outline of the ethnohistorical context and geographic space the study covers, with Saint-Louis and the lower Senegal valley serving as its nucleus. A description of the physical environment, peoples, and political economy of the Senegal valley situates the cultural landscape Muslim interpreters traversed in its proper spatial and temporal contexts. As the chapter will reveal, different ethnic and social groups in the Senegal basin lived a symbiotic existence marked by cooperation, conflicts, and negotiations. As the stakes in the riverine trade increased and the French presence intensified, it became more difficult for local groups to exercise complete dominance over each other.

The chapter also examines the period immediately before Faidherbe became governor, which set the stage for the emergence of interpreters as full-time administrative employees. It then introduces some of the early attempts the governor made to extend

¹⁰ ANS 9G 2, Sidi is Murdered by His Brothers, 1871. Although Trarza experienced some measure of stability during the long reign of Mohammad Lhabib (1827-1860), the rivalry between him and his brother, Ahmad Laigat, dominated the politics of that polity for several years. After Mohammad Lhabib's assassination in 1860, his son Sidi (1860-1871) succeeded him. The power struggle continued, however, during which Sidi's brothers killed him in 1871.

¹¹ ANS 9G 10, The Custom of the King and Princes of the Trarzas, 1818-1846; ANS 9G 11, The Custom of the King and Princes of the Bracknas, 1838-1846. See also, Taylor, "Of Disciples and Sultans," 112-118.

French control beyond the limits of Saint-Louis into the interior, a subject I develop further in Chapter 5. The study suggests that Faidherbe followed a precedent set by his predecessors, most notably Governor Louis-Édouard Bouët-Willaumez (1842-1845), who sought to assert control over the riverine economy by curbing Traza incursions in the lower valley and curtailing the political and economic influence of the métis in Saint-Louis.

3.1. Geographic Space, Political Economy, and Historical Moment

The area under study, the lower and middle Senegal River valley, stretches from the coastal island of Saint-Louis, at the mouth of the river where it empties into the Atlantic Ocean, to around Matam, situated about 266 miles (429 km) inland, on the river, around the eastern edge of Futa Toro in northern Senegal. To the immediate south of the river valley, I include what before the French expansion inland were the states of Walo and Cayor, where the Wolof, the largest ethnic group in Senegal today, constituted a majority. On the northern side of the river, now part of present-day Mauritania, I include the southern parts of Trarza and Brakna, home of the Moors, whose long history of participation in the political economy of the river valley dates back to the pre-colonial period.

The choice of this geographic area as the focal point of the study is not accidental. On the contrary, I have considered three important factors in deciding to concentrate on this part of Senegal: (i) the centrality of this area to the wider context of colonial French West Africa; (ii) the common historical experience of the peoples in the valley region vis-à-vis French colonialism; and (iii) the availability of sources with evidence about the

activities of administrative interpreters between the 1850s and 1920s, the period covered in the study.

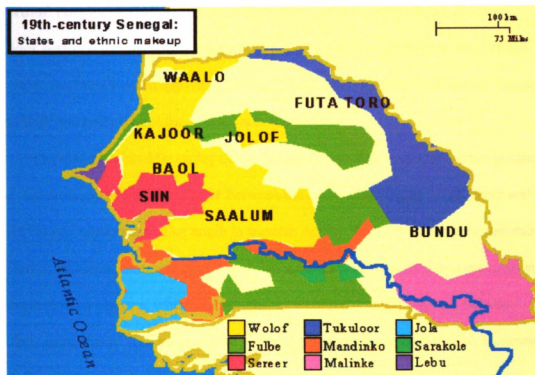
The lower and middle Senegal valley was the main arena of French activities in West Africa during the second half of the nineteenth century. Saint-Louis, the administrative capital, became the springboard for French expansion into the interior. Moreover, it was the residence of interpreters employed by the administration, even though most of them maintained family homes in their respective places of origin.¹² And throughout the 1800s, the town enjoyed an enviable position as the hub of the import-export trade linking coastal settlements to various *escales* along the Senegal River.

The *escales* fed the maritime commerce that connected the colony to its metropole and the rest of the Atlantic world.¹³ As part of a wider commercial grid, the lower and middle Senegal valley attracted diverse groups of *merchants*, *négociants*, *traitants* and *maîtres de langues* from the Saint-Louisian African, métis, and French communities. Similarly, the Wolof, Futanke, Fulbe, Serer and Moors of the interior eked out a living from participating in the trade in gum Arabic, peanuts, grains, slaves, gold dust and other

¹² During one of my trips to Saint-Louis, one of my informants, Aïnina Wane, identified a number of houses that once belonged to some interpreters of the colonial period. His great grand father's (Bou El Mogdad) house, now an empty lot occupied by *talibés* (disciples of Sufi marabouts), he said, once provided accommodation for visitors from the interior who made the trip to Saint-Louis. In addition, Bou El Mogdad kept a library, after returning from his first hajj in the early 1860s, which attracted guests from the Saint-Louis Muslim community for informal discussions centered on various aspects of Islam. The lot is located in the northern part of the island, which was the *quartier musulman* during the colonial period. (Interview with Aïnina Wane; Saint-Louis, 11 August 2004).

¹³ The history of Saint-Louis as a commercial post dates as far back as the mid-seventeenth century, when French sailors and merchants began to frequent the coastal island. Thereafter, various French mercantile companies, especially those based in Bordeaux and Marseille, became key players in the Atlantic commerce between the port settlement and France.

commodities.¹⁴ Given the above situation, Saint-Louis serves as an anchor to ground the study.



Map 3.1. Nineteenth-Century States and Ethnic Distribution in Senegal.

Source: <<http://www.geocities.com>>.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the areas adjacent to the lower and middle valley, particularly the states of Walo, Kajoor, Futa Toro, and the southern parts of Trarza and Brakna, were important to the French for one or more of the following reasons: (i) commercial potential; (ii) proximity to Saint-Louis; (iii) strategic location near the coast or along the Senegal River; and (iv) the perceived or real threat the political and/or religious leaders of the different polities posed to the administration. As

¹⁴ A blue strip of cotton cloth called *guinea*, imported from India, was also an important commodity in the Senegal River trade network. Worn widely in the Mauritanian half of the Senegalo-Mauritanian zone, *guinée* served as a medium of exchange for much of the nineteenth century. By mid century, though, the trade in slaves on the Senegal River was grinding to a halt as "legitimate" trade became more lucrative and attracted more people besides the ruling and commercial elites.

the administration extended its control beyond Saint-Louis, these factors influenced how French officials related to the *habitants* and other Africans of the coastal town, as well as the Wolof, Futanke, Fulbe, Moors and other ethnic groups in the interior. Because relations between the different groups of Africans in the river valley were not always convivial, the French often exploited the situation to interfere in local disputes, hoping to assert their authority over African leaders in the process.

The lower and middle valley of the Senegal River lies within the Sahel/Savanna zone that demarcates a kind of buffer between the arid Sahara Desert to the north and the humid Guinea rainforest further south in western Africa. With dry conditions and sparse vegetation, this area, like most of Senegal, has a climate characterized by two seasons, the dry and rainy seasons, which last roughly from November to May and June to October, respectively. The rainy season in the area around the Senegal River, however, is much shorter than in areas further south, such as the Casamance region. This means rainfall averages increase toward the south from the north. For pastoralists and sedentary cultivators of the Senegal basin, therefore, the availability of pasture and water has been an important factor in their way of life for centuries.

Because the part of the Senegal River the study focuses on is navigable all year round (up to Dagana and Podor) and has a flatter plain that attracted both nomadic herdsmen and cultivators, it accumulated a denser population over time than the upper valley further east.¹⁵ Commerce, pastoral activities, and sedentary agriculture shaped the lifestyle of different ethnic groups and relations between the Moors, Wolof, Futanke and

¹⁵ Andrew Clark's study on the Upper Senegal River examines the intersection of politics, society, and the economy during the colonial period, as well as the ecological effects the region experienced. See Clark, *From Frontier to Backwater*.

Fulbe in the valley region, as well as the French, métis, and assortment of Africans in Saint-Louis. The intersection of politics and economics often bred intense competition and conflicts, but also created opportunities for cooperation and alliances of convenience among the major players, who weighed their chances of success with care for each strategy adopted and alliance formed.

Before the demarcation of the colonial boundaries that now separate present-day Senegal from Mauritania, the Senegal River was a zone of convergence for diverse ethnic and “racial” groups attached to the riverine economy. With their interactions and overlapping histories dating back to pre-colonial times, the different groups together comprised an integrated cultural and commercial complex characterized by symbiotic relations between pastoralists, sedentary agriculturists, and merchants. However, rivalries and conflicts often strained relations between the different groups.¹⁶ In addition, although the riverine trade provided a source of income for people from different strata of the local communities, it was more lucrative for the commercial elite and political leaders than ordinary people who possessed little to no financial resources and social capital.¹⁷

Despite the economic interdependence of the different ethnic and social groups, conflicts between them occurred from time to time for various reasons. The Moors of

¹⁶ Robinson underscores these vibrant cultural links in the area that straddled the northern parts of Senegal and southern Mauritania, which he calls the Senegalo-Mauritanian zone. See Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*; “An Emerging Pattern of Cooperation between Colonial Authorities and Muslim Societies in Senegal and Mauritania,” in David Robinson and Jean-Louis Triaud, eds., *Le Temps des Marabouts: Itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française, v. 1880-1960* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1997), 155-180.

¹⁷ In Saint-Louis, for instance, ordinary Africans, including ex-slaves attached to the trade on the Senegal River, sought employment as deckhands (laptots), helmsmen, and pilots. A large number of métis in Saint-Louis were *négociants*, *merchants*, and *traitants*, who profited from the trade as they had access to capital that trickled down from French firms from Bordeaux and Marseilles involved in the gum and peanut trade. Webb, “Trade in Gum Arabic”; Marcson, “European-African Interactions.”

Trarza and Brakna (*bidan*), for example, sometimes claimed to be better Muslims than those with darker-skins (*sudan*), among them “black Mauritians,” Wolof, and Futanke. The Moors at times even rationalized their enslavement of other people in terms suggesting that the latter were not proper Muslims but rather practitioners of “paganism” or some form of it (read African traditional religions). More importantly, in their fervor to bring the northern part of the river valley under control in the late 1800s and early 1900s, French colonial officials found it more convenient to create what became Mauritania around the blown up ethnocentric construct of *bidan* identity than to question its veracity. As Robinson observes, “In the French view the Moors bore white racial features, possessed enormous stamina, and were superior to the Blacks in intelligence, avarice, and cunning. They practiced an Islam that was natural to their partially Arab origins.”¹⁸ Surely, French racial and racist presumptions could not have been more palpable.

Although Saint-Louis today no longer occupies the prominent administrative and commercial position it once enjoyed, the former capital was important within the administrative structure of colonial Senegal and French West Africa. In 1895, it became the capital of the French Federation of West Africa (*l’Afrique occidentale française*, AOF).¹⁹ That Saint-Louis and its métis community have received so much attention from

¹⁸ Robinson, “Ethnography and Customary Law in Senegal,” *Cahiers d’Études africaines* 126 (1992), 221-237.

¹⁹ In 1902, Dakar, located further south along the coast, succeeded Saint-Louis as the capital of the federation, although the latter remained the capital of Senegal until 1958. The decision to move the capital from Saint-Louis to Dakar had a lot to do with the better seaport facility of the latter city as the peanut economy boomed in the early twentieth century.

historians of the pre-colonial and colonial periods in West Africa attests to the historical importance of the former colonial headquarters.²⁰

Even as French colonial officials frowned on the much-discussed *mariage à la mode du pays* by which their compatriots consummated amorous affairs with local women (however temporarily), the relationships in time gave rise to a Eurafrican or métis community that rose to dominate commerce and politics in Saint-Louis by the late 1700s and early 1800s. A number of studies by West Africanist historians, most notably George Brooks, who has written extensively on Eurafricans and *signares*, and, more recently, Hilary Jones, who has traced the evolution of marital practices among the métis of Saint-Louis during the nineteenth century, have cast light on these conjugal affairs.²¹ Until their dominance began to wane in the second half of the nineteenth century, métis entrepreneurs were key players in the socio-economic and political life of Saint-Louis; they participated in the slave and mercantile trade in gum Arabic, *guinées*, grains, gold dust and peanuts.²² Among the *signares* and métis Brooks, Jones, and others have

²⁰ See, among others, Curtin, *Economic Change*; Brooks, "Signares of Saint-Louis and Gorée"; Marcson, "European-African Interaction"; H.O. Idowu, "Café au Lait: Senegal's Mulatto Community in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 6, 3 (December, 1972), 271-288; Françoise Manchuelle, "Métis et colons: La famille Devès et l'émergence politique des Africains au Sénégal, 1881-1897," *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 96, 4 (1984), 477-504; Crowder, *Sénégal*; Wesley Johnson, *Emergence of Black Politics*; Jones, "Citizens and Subjects"; Natalie Reyss, "Saint-Louis du Sénégal à l'époque pre-coloniale: l'émergence d'une société métisse originale, 1658-1854" (Thèse de 3ème cycle, Université Paris I, 1983); Searing, *West African Slavery*.

²¹ Ibid; see also Brooks, *Eurafricans in West Africa*; Sylvain Sankale, "A la mode du Pays...Chroniques Saint Louisiennes d'Antoine François Feuilltain, Saint-Louis, Sénégal 1788-1835" (Thèse de Doctorat, l'Université de Montpellier II, 1998). Jones discusses these marital relationships in Saint-Louis, highlighting their sociopolitical and economic implications during the nineteenth century. Jones, "Citizens and Subjects," especially Chapter 4, 111-136; "From Mariage à la Mode to Weddings at Town Hall: Marriage, Colonialism, and Mixed-Race Society in Nineteenth-Century Senegal," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 38, 1 (2005), 27-48.

²² Ibid. Jones argues, however, that certain métis in Saint-Louis continued to wield some degree of political and economic influence well into the early twentieth century. Jones, "Citizens and Subjects," Chapters 3 and 5; Wesley Johnson, *Emergence of Black Politics*.

studied, some were informal go-betweens who mediated contacts between the French and local population in the Senegambia region, well before Faidherbe created the corps of administrative interpreters I focus on in this study. As in the case of the official interpreters who emerged after Faidherbe became governor in 1854, the earlier go-betweens operated mainly from Saint-Louis.

Writing in 1853, the Abbé David Boilat estimated the population of Saint-Louis at about 12,336.²³ Robinson suggests a slightly higher figure, however, placing the population at approximately 15,000, out of which were about 7,000 ex-slaves (recently freed), 6,000 Africans (mostly Wolof and Muslim), 1,000 métis and 1,000 French merchants and their dependants, administrators, and military personnel.²⁴ In effect, the population of Saint-Louis around mid century comprised a heterogeneous mix of Wolof, métis, and French, in addition to the Futanke, Moors, Serer and other indigenous groups that flocked into the coastal town to participate in its growing commerce. The Emancipation Proclamation of 27 April 1848 that outlawed slavery in Saint-Louis, Gorée, and Sedhiou, in the Casamance region, encouraged more migrants from the interior to the coastal town, especially those fleeing from slavery.²⁵

²³ Abbé David Boilat, *Esquisses sénégalais* (Paris: Karthala, 1984. Reprint, Paris: P. Bertrand, 1853).

²⁴ Robinson reckons that the Saint-Louisian population had risen to 19,000 by the turn of the century. Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 31; *Chiefs and Clerics: Abdul Bokar Kan and Futa Toro, 1853-1891* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 31-33.

²⁵ The Emancipation Decree implicitly extended freedom to slaves in the interior because those who escaped bondage and set foot in any of the areas the proclamation covered automatically gained freedom. Not surprisingly, the increasing population of Saint-Louis during this period included a large number of ex-slaves and refugees who sought employment as domestic servants, attendants, and boat hands. Some of them joined the colonial army, the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, while others who acquired some level of literacy joined the administration to become messengers, clerks, and interpreters. For more on the emancipation of slaves in Senegal in 1848, see M. Gueye, "La fin de l'esclavage à Saint-Louis et il Gorée en 1848," *Bulletin d'IFAN* 28 B, 3-4 (1966); Roger Pasquier, "A propos de l'émancipation des esclaves au

Among the indigenous groups in Saint-Louis, the predominantly Muslim Wolof comprised the majority, while the mostly Catholic métis minority for long dominated local politics and commerce. At the same time, several Wolof Muslims were important political and religious figures within the Muslim community of Saint-Louis; a few became intermediaries between the French authorities, local leaders, and their constituencies.²⁶

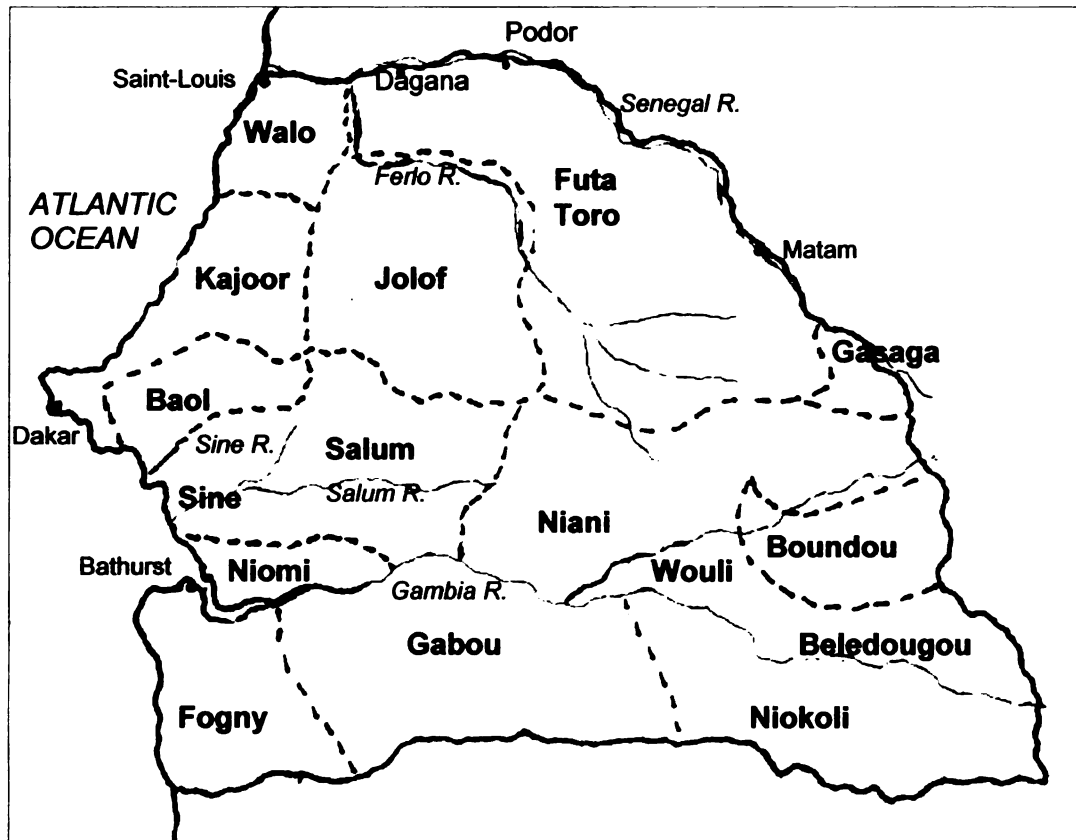
Saint-Louis had the largest number of French nationals in West Africa, made up mostly of administrative officials, military personnel, private entrepreneurs, company representatives and a handful of missionaries, who made little headway gaining converts in the valley region and had to shift their efforts to areas further south, especially the Casamance region.²⁷ In essence, the coastal island was the most cosmopolitan of all the French West African administrative posts, a position underlined by its leading political and commercial roles during the second half of the 1800s and early 1900s.

Located on the immediate southern side of the lower valley and the outer reaches of Saint-Louis, the state of Walo, like the nearby Kajoor to the southwest, was experiencing both internal and external problems that threatened its existence by mid

Sénégal en 1848, *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 54, 194-97 (1960), 189-208; Searing, 'God Alone is King'; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 33; *Chiefs and Clerics*, 31.

²⁶ Hamat Ndiaye Anne, for example, became the *cadi* of the Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis after its creation in 1857. Before then, his father, Ndiaye Anne, had been the *tamsir* of Saint-Louis. Similarly, Bou El Mogdad became assessor to the Muslim Tribunal. Moreover, he served as *cadi* after Hamat's death in 1879, but died of diabetes a year later, as explained in Chapter 1.

²⁷ Since the seventeenth century, both Portuguese and French Roman Catholic missionaries seeking converts had frequented the Senegambia region. The success of the missionaries, however, was limited mostly to the southern parts of Senegal, in the Casamance region. Today, Christians account for less than five per cent of Senegal's population of approximately 11 million.



Map 3.2. Main Political Entities in Pre-colonial Senegal (ca. late 18th Century).
Adapted from: <<http://www.senegal-online.com/anglais/cartographie/senegal-precolonial.htm>>.

century (Map 3.3).²⁸ In contrast to Kajoor, however, Walo was not agriculturally productive, because huge amounts of salt deposits in its soil hindered the cultivation of grains and other food crops. As a result, the area attracted a relatively smaller population.²⁹ Yet even though the administration in Saint-Louis recognized Walo's bleak agricultural potential, French officials considered it vital to bring the state under control in view of its strategic location near Saint-Louis and the Senegal River. Thus, Walo was

²⁸ For more on Walo, see Boubacar Barry, *Le Royaume du Waalo: Le Sénégal avant la conquête* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1985); Raymond Rousseau, "Le Sénégal d'autrefois: Etudes sur le Oualo, cahiers de Yoro Dyâo," *Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique* 14 (January-June, 1929), 133-211 (Hereafter *BCEHSAOF*); "Le Sénégal d'autrefois: Etudes sur le Cayor, cahiers de Yoro Dyâo," *BCEHSAOF* 16 (April-June, 1933), 237-298; on Kajoor, see Colvin, *Kajoor and its Diplomatic Relations*; Witherell, *Responses of the Peoples of Cayor*; Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*.

²⁹ The bulk of the staple millet that found its way into Saint-Louis, for example, came from the Futa Toro area to the east of Walo along the Senegal River. Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 26.

subdued immediately after Faidherbe became governor late in 1854. To stave off attacks from Trarza and Kajoor,³⁰ the governor declared a “protectorate” over the beleaguered state. Chapter 5 will provide details on this subject.

To the immediate south of Saint-Louis toward the coast lay the state of Kajoor, an offshoot of the defunct empire of Jolof that had fallen apart and shrunken in size by the seventeenth century.³¹ Kajoor and its neighbors, including Walo, for long vied for political dominance as each state attempted to fill the power vacuum left by the demise of Jolof. In their efforts to retain Kajoor’s integrity, successive damels (title of Kajoor’s ruler) struggled to maintain control over their restless population. By the second half of the 1800s, recurrent military attacks and random cross-river raids by the *hassani* from Trarza were threatening the existence of Kajoor, prompting local chiefs to wrest a large degree of autonomy from the damel.

Around mid century, the population of Kajoor was about 100,000, majority of them Wolof farmers who depended on the cultivation of millet and peanuts.³² During the dry season when farmers were not engaged in agriculture, a large number of them served as recruits in the traditional militias that organized raiding campaigns in the river valley and adjacent areas. For farmers who turned their attention to the cultivation of

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*; Babou, “Amadou Bamba,” 30-40.

³² Witherell reckons that Portuguese traders from Brazil most probably introduced peanuts in the Senegambia area around the sixteenth century. Over time French manufacturers realized that the oil extracted from peanuts imported from the region was of high quality and could be used for cooking, making soap and machine lubricants, and treating silk and wool. Thus, the demand for the crop in France began to increase from the mid-nineteenth century on and prompted the administration in Saint-Louis to encourage local farmers to plant peanuts for export. See Witherell, “Response of the Peoples of Cayor,” 20-26; Fernand Batude, *L’Arachide au Sénégal* (Paris: Recueil Sirey, 1941); Xavier Guiraud, *L’Arachide sénégalaise: monographie d’économie coloniale* (Paris: Librairie Technique et Économique, 1937).

peanuts, the raids were particularly disruptive as the crop became much more lucrative than ever before. Initially grown on a small scale for the local market, peanuts emerged as a profitable export commodity during the second half of the nineteenth century.³³ And realizing Kajoor's potential as a peanut-producing center, the administration in Saint-Louis took particular interest in extending its control over the unstable state. At the same time, local political and religious leaders were optimistic about the prospect of peanut cultivation, envisaging that it would provide a reliable source of income for ordinary Wolof farmers. Little wonder then that by the early 1900s, Amadu Bamba, founder of the Muridiyya order, was admonishing his *talibés* or disciples to cultivate peanuts in order to become self-reliant.³⁴

Futa Toro's location on the Senegal River made it an important gateway to the east and gave the middle valley state added significance in the eyes of the French. From mid century on, Faidherbe's ultimate imperial ambition in West Africa was to carve out a French commercial empire connecting trade between the Senegal and Niger rivers. The governor envisioned such a plan would challenge the increasing commercial influence Morocco was extending southward across the Sahara.³⁵ More immediately, though, the confrontation between Faidherbe and Al-Hajj Umar, which culminated in the Siege of

³³ In 1845, merchants in Saint-Louis and Gorée exported 187,717 kilograms of peanuts to France, a figure that rose sharply to 2,600,276 kilograms in 1850. *Moniteur du Sénégal et Dépendances*, 6 (May 6, 1856), 2. (Hereafter *MSD*).

³⁴ Tidiane Sy, *Confrérie Sénégalaise des Mourides*; Copans, *Marabouts de l'Arachide*; Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*; also, "Amadu Bamba," 253-259; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 217-219; Andrew Clark, "Imperialism, Independence, and Islam in Senegal and Mali," *Africa Today* 46, 3-4 (1999), 149-167.

³⁵ Governor Faidherbe to Captain Eugène Mage, 7 August 1863, in Hargreaves, *France and West Africa*, 151-153.

Medine in 1857, dominated relations between the administration and Futa Toro during the 1850s and early 1860s.³⁶ In addition, the Futanke of Futa had to contend with the raiding activities of the Trarza and Brakna *hassani*. And with time, villages in Futa learned to pool their resources together to resist the frequent attacks from their northern neighbors, who often rounded up captives to sell or retain as slaves and seized food, livestock, and other marketable commodities.³⁷

Today, the Fulbe comprise the largest nomadic group in West Africa scattered in almost all countries of the sub-region. Because of their dispersal, they go by different names in several West African countries. In Nigeria, for instance, they are known as the Fulani, a name derived from Hausa, whereas in Sierra Leone and The Gambia, their Mande designation, Fula, is more commonly used. In Senegal, the Fulbe who trace their origin to Futa Toro are called the Futanke. And the literature on colonial Senegal abounds in references to the Toucouleur (or Tokolor), the name nineteenth-century French colonial officials and “ethnographers” adopted to distinguish the Futanke of Futa Toro from their counterparts from elsewhere called Peul (or Peuhl).³⁸

For the nomadic and semi-nomadic Fulbe and Moors of the lower and middle Senegal valley, livestock-rearing has been the mainstay of their economic life for centuries. During the rainy season when grasses sprouted more easily for animals to feed

³⁶ Robinson, *Holy War*; James Philip Johnson, “The Almate of Futa Toro,” 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1974).

³⁷ Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans,” Chapter 4, 195-240.

³⁸ For more on how the French developed their understanding (and misunderstanding) of the different ethnic groups in Senegal during the colonial period, see Robinson, “Ethnography and Customary Law”; for colonial ethnography in French West Africa, see Ruth Ginio, “French Colonial Reading of Ethnographic Research: The Case of the ‘Desertion’ of the Abron King and its Aftermath,” *Cahiers d’Études africaines*, 166, XLII-2 (2002), 337-357.

on, Fulbe and Moorish herdsman had less trouble moving their herds of cattle, goats, and sheep (and occasionally camels) around. Little streams and wells dug to hold falling rain provided water for the animals to drink. During the dry season when rainfall became scarce, however, the herders had to cover longer distances in search of pasture for their livestock. They then had to rely a lot more on the Senegal River and its tributaries for drinking water for their animals than during the rainy season. The aridity of the land away from the river valley, especially to the north bordering the Sahara Desert, coupled with the presence of tsetse flies further south, limits animal husbandry to certain parts of Senegal.³⁹ Today's cattle herders in northern Senegal have not veered much from the practices of previous generations of pastoral nomads in that part of the country.

Fulbe and Moorish pastoral nomads lived a subsistence life trading milk, meat, and hides from their livestock with their neighbors, such as the Wolof, who mostly practiced agriculture. The Wolof produced grains, primarily their staple food millet, but also sorghum and peanuts, the latter cultivated mainly for the export market. In addition, some farmers planted maize (corn) and rice on a small scale. Although farmers and herders shared a symbiotic relationship, competition over limited resources, particularly arable land and pasture, sometimes caused conflicts between the two groups. The conflicts seldom degenerated into prolonged and large-scale warfare, however, and instead took on the form of local clashes and intermittent raids. Although majority of the Moors and Fulbe were herders and the Wolof predominantly farmers, members of both groups quite often practiced some form of mixed farming, allowing some family members to take care of animals while others cultivated crops.

³⁹ Clark, *Frontier to Backwater*, 31-38.

Known by most local inhabitants for their raiding activities across the Senegal River, the *hassani* of Trarza and Brakna habitually pillaged villages on the southern side for grains and other marketable possessions. Before the slave trade and slavery ended slowly from the 1850s on, *hassani* marauders captured and enslaved villagers during raids on villages. The bands of raiders also targeted merchant caravans, often operating under the passive gaze of their local chiefs and traditional elites. The raids at times served as compensation for the warriors, because their Moorish leaders now and again found it difficult to sustain their retinue and militias. As legitimate trade slowly replaced the slave trade and became more profitable in the region, the stakes in raiding activities increased for the participants.⁴⁰ In fact, the French colonial archival records contain letters in which French administrators as well as local political leaders along the river valley reported or complained about the predatory raiding activities of the Moors.⁴¹ Given the recurring nature and destabilizing effect of political rivalries in Trarza and Brakna, the French considered such letters concrete evidence that the Moors lived a life driven mostly by *siba* (dissidence) and/or power struggles.⁴² By mid century, among the Trarza Moors, the Awlâd Ahmad min Daïmân clan dominated politics under the leadership of Muhammad al-Habib (1826-1860), whose assassination in 1860 led to a protracted succession struggle among his sons and grandsons that embroiled the French in the fray.⁴³

⁴⁰ On the transition from the slave trade to legitimate trade in the Senegal valley region, see Searing, *‘God Alone is King.’*

⁴¹ ANS 9G 13, Arrest of Plundering Moors, Richard Toll, 4 April 1863.

⁴² Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*; Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans”; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*.

⁴³ ANS 9G 1, (17-21), War and Peace between the French Government and the Trarzas, 1855-1859.

With a long tradition of Islamization dating back to the pre-colonial period, the Moors prided themselves as practitioners of a purer form of Islam than their Wolof, Futanke, and Fulbe counterparts, as explained earlier. No doubt some Moorish lineages were Islamic clerics (*zwaya*) who ran Quranic schools, where some Wolof and Futanke Muslim families in Saint-Louis, Dagana, Podor and other towns in the river basin sent their children. Both Bou El Mogdad and his son Mahmadou, as we shall see, studied under Awlād Daïmân clerics in Trarza during their formative years. Yet “racial” and ethnic slurs concerning the practice of Islam surfaced from time to time and aggravated disputes between the Moors and their immediate southern neighbors.

French officials in Saint-Louis and their superiors in the metropole easily bought into the Moorish perception that their partial Arab ancestry made them more naturally inclined toward Islam than the Wolof, Futanke, and other ethnic groups. Although the French upheld this stereotypical construct of ethnic and/or “racial” identities rather uncritically and seldom found reason to question its reliability, it was difficult for them to apply the taxonomy to the Fulbe, who shared some physical traits that distinguished them from other local groups, but spoke Pulaar, a language unmistakably indigenous to West Africa, as Robinson explains.⁴⁴ This ethno-religious construct (read misrepresentation) influenced French discourse on the practice of Islam among different groups in the region in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

With France striving to establish itself as a Muslim power in the northwestern part of Africa, it was important for colonial administrators to demonstrate that they understood their subject population sufficiently well, however skewed their knowledge of

⁴⁴ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 77-79; “Ethnography,” 221-230.

them may have been.⁴⁵ This perhaps explains why French colonial officials related differently to various ethnic groups in the river basin, most times relying on information (read knowledge) acquired from African informants, including interpreters. French officials in Saint-Louis, for instance, believed the Tokolor were “fanatical” and more inclined toward military jihad, while the Soninke, to the east, appeared “moderate” and easier to cajole or subjugate.⁴⁶ Still, the French considered such knowledge vital for helping them impose their authority—military and political—over the indigenous people in the Senegal valley.

The study spans a period of about seventy years between the 1850s and early 1920s, which allows us to trace how the functions of interpreters evolved over time. Unlike other studies on the colonial period in Africa that locate the beginning of European colonial intervention in the 1870s or immediately after the Berlin Conference of 1884/85, the study considers the 1850s a watershed in the history of Senegal insofar as French expansion in the lower and middle valley was underway from then on.⁴⁷ Governor Faidherbe pushed aggressively inland to extend direct control beyond Saint-Louis and the lower valley. However, even though the French did not establish formal control over what became Senegal until the late 1880s, I argue that the lower and middle valley began to show all the trappings of colonial rule about three decades earlier.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid; Robinson, “French ‘Islamic’ Policy.”

⁴⁷ A number of scholars have made a similar argument against the grain of the received wisdom suggesting that the salience of the Berlin Conference of 1884 as the effective beginning of the colonization of Africa has been overstated. See, among others, C.W. Newbury and A.S. Kanya-Forstner, “French Policy and the Origins of the Scramble for West Africa,” *Journal of African History* 10, 2 (1969), 253-276.

Muslim interpreters participated actively in the main events that transpired in the lower and middle valley during the seventy-year or so period the study covers. Indeed the period marked a particularly tough transition in the *longue durée* of Senegal's history of encounters with the French that had started as far back as the mid-seventeenth century. By the second half of the nineteenth century, as subsequent chapters will show, Muslim interpreters were beginning to play a significant part in the developments in the lower and middle valley while French presence became more conspicuous.

3.2. Prelude to Expansion: The Pre-Faidherbian Period, 1840s-1850s

Around the mid-nineteenth century, the area under direct French control in the Senegal River region was limited to Saint-Louis and a few military posts in the lower valley that provided some sort of security for the riverine trade between the coastal headquarters and the *escales* or seasonal trade fairs along the river.⁴⁸ Yet recurrent breaches of security were common as Trarza *hassani* raided and pillaged farming communities now and again, especially in the state of Walo, which was then experiencing internal problems.⁴⁹ In the middle valley too Traza and Brakna *hassani* organized raiding expeditions against

⁴⁸ See Barrows, "General Faidherbe," 19-25; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 60-64. For a helpful nineteenth-century account on the lower and middle valley, see Anne Raffenet, *Voyage dans l'Afrique Occidentale (1843-44)* (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, 1846), especially 14-75.

⁴⁹ During this period, the state of Kajoor experienced its fair share of raids from the Trarza Moors whose *hassani* launched frequent attacks against their southern neighbors, extorted tribute from defeated leaders, and looted from their subjects. In addition, the possibility of gaining access to the Atlantic commerce, which provided commercial elites and political leaders with valuable items, such as guns and *guinée* (strip of cotton cloth), intensified the power struggle among local leaders in Walo, as Boubacar Barry underscores. Such cleavages affected relations between different social groups as well and undermined the ability of the crown in Walo to deal effectively with external threats. See Barry, *Le royaume de Walo*, 350.

villages in Futa Toro to seize agricultural produce and livestock.⁵⁰ Such marauding activities had a destabilizing effect on both commerce and agriculture in the Senegal basin, a problem the administration in Saint-Louis found worrisome as peanut production in Kajoor began showing signs of becoming a money-spinning export business.⁵¹

Since the early 1840s, the French had put into operation a broad-based policy aimed at ending the instability in the Senegal valley and eliminating the monopoly the Trarza Moors and Saint-Louisian *habitant* entrepreneurs exercised over trade in the lower valley. In addition, French officials intended to curtail the political influence the *habitant* elite wielded in Saint-Louis. And the administration hoped such initiatives would alter relations between Saint-Louis and the hinterland in ways that would bolster French interests in the end. This new French drive may not have come as a surprise to most observers in the metropole as the administration of François Guizot (1840-1848)⁵²

⁵⁰ Before the slave trade and slavery began to grind to a gradual halt from the 1850s on, cross-river raids involved the capture of villagers who were either kept for domestic use or sold to slave merchants. As explained earlier, the Moors often justified the enslavement of the *sudan* by claiming that the latter were not Muslims but rather “pagans” incapable of practicing a pure form of Islam. This rationale was common among some Muslim leaders in the sub-region, who saw the slave trade as a profitable venture from which to amass wealth by selling captives of raids and wars. For more on this topic, see Searing, *West African Slavery; ‘God Alone is King’*.

⁵¹ Before peanuts emerged as the main commodity in the economy of Senegal, gum Arabic was the most profitable produce of the river trade during the first half of the nineteenth century. Harvested mostly in the southern part of today’s Mauritania in the area called Gebba, gum was exchanged for *guinee*, imported from India. Until the 1850s, trade in the lower valley was the preserve of the Trarza Moors and their Saint-Louisian *habitant* partners, mostly *merchants*. And they were assisted by their *traitants* and *maitres de langues*, who served as intermediaries between European *négociants* and the local people of the interior. For more on the dynamics of this trade, see Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans,” Chapter 2, 81-148; Marcson, “European-African Interaction,” especially Chapter 4, 154-191.

⁵² Beginning in October 1840, Guizot was at the helm of the French administration for nearly eight years, the longest and last to serve under a constitutional monarch in France. Guizot was Minister of Foreign Affairs, and after the resignation of Marshal Soult some years later, he assumed the position of prime minister. The details of the renewed French interest in the Senegal area from the 1840s on does not fall within the scope of this chapter, however. A number of scholars have treated the topic more exhaustively elsewhere. See, among others, Marcson, “European-African Interaction”; Barrows, “General Faidherbe”; Jones, “Citizens and Subjects.”

adopted a more proactive policy in the Senegal region after 1840, fully aware of its economic potential and likely competition from other European countries, such as Britain, then poised in the nearby Gambia River area. Against this backdrop, Marcson observes, “The French effort of the 1840s foreshadowed the imperial drive of the 1850s.”⁵³ Indeed, it is difficult to disagree with Marcson’s observation.

This section discusses the period between the 1840s and early 1850s, when the administration attempted to assert more control over the political and economic affairs of Saint-Louis, the lower valley, and adjacent areas. By challenging the power of the Saint-Louisian commercial elite and Trarza political leadership and merchants who dominated the riverine trade, the French authorities hoped they would be in a better position to dictate the direction of politics and the economy in Saint-Louis and the rest of the lower valley. I argue that the program of expansion Faidherbe undertook was not entirely of his own making. More accurately, it originated from an earlier program envisioned by previous governors in the 1840s, particularly Governor Bouët-Williaumez. In contrast to his predecessors, however, Faidherbe entertained a much more elaborate imperial plan. For this reason, he announced himself as a tough-minded governor who would broach no opposition from any local leader venturing to interfere in his empire-building project. Through force, intimidation, diplomacy and political patronage, Faidherbe utilized the limited human and material resources at his disposal to establish a foundation for further French advances into the middle valley, and even beyond, long after he left office in 1865.

With the international market for peanuts starting to show signs of growth in the

⁵³ Marcson, “European-African Interaction,” 193.

early 1840s,⁵⁴ the government in Paris took the economic potential of the Senegal River valley and its surrounding area much more seriously than it had done in previous decades. French officials decided to adopt a more vigilant stance to maintain peace and stability in the region, hoping to stimulate commercial and agricultural growth. French interests in peanuts had been evident since the early 1830, when French merchants and industrialists took the cue from their British counterparts to explore peanut oil in manufacturing soap and candles.⁵⁵ Firms in Bordeaux and Marseille soon after prompted their *négociant* and *merchand* associates based in Saint-Louis to be unyielding in their effort to increase their stake in the river valley trade.⁵⁶ The decision by the French government in 1838 to send an exploratory team to assess the possibility of large-scale peanut cultivation in the Senegal region was a measure of the importance the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce (which lobbied for the expedition) and other French entrepreneurs attached to the crop.⁵⁷ Back in Senegal, in a similar mood, *négociants* and *merchants* in Saint-Louis with outstanding debts to collect from *traitants* and *sous-*

⁵⁴ It is important to add that peanut production in the Senegal region developed rather slowly. Between 1842 and 1843, for example, although the Marseille-based company, Régis, increased its peanut imports from 300 to 400 tons, the bulk of the crop came from the Gambia region. In fact Kajoor became an important producer of peanuts only in the late 1840s, while other nearby areas of production had to wait until the 1850s and thereafter to register any significant rise in exported peanuts. See Diouf, *Le Kajoor aux XIXe siècle*, 165-167.

⁵⁵ Ibid. As early as 1833, a French *négociant*, Jaubert, had presented a report to the Marseille Chamber of Commerce to lobby for government support to cultivate peanuts on a large scale in Algeria. A few years later, the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce would advocate in Paris for a similar project to study the agricultural potential of the Senegal River region. For more on this subject see Brooks, "Peanuts and Colonialism," 37-42.

⁵⁶ The Maurel and Prom Company was the most powerful company from Bordeaux operating in the Senegal region. The Régis firm from Marseille became a competitor to other companies, including the Dèves and Chaumet firm, which played an influential role in Saint-Louisian commerce during the nineteenth century. See Barrows, "General Faidherbe"; Marcson, "European-African Interaction."

⁵⁷ Brooks, "Peanuts and Colonialism," 35-36; Diouf, *Le Kajoor aux XIXe siècle*, 166.

traitants realized the potential of peanuts in the export market and began accepting the crop as payment for their debts.⁵⁸

The French plan of action in the early 1840s aimed to accomplish two vital goals: (i) to nullify French reliance on the *habitants* and (ii) consolidate French hegemony in the lower valley. French officials expected to accomplish these objectives by employing both a political and military strategy. In the case of the first, it would entail implementing policies tailored specifically to undercut the dominance of the *habitants* in the political and socioeconomic life of Saint-Louis. This plan would involve legislative and bureaucratic actions directed at the powerful *habitant* elite. In contrast, the military option aimed to stop the Trarza *hassani* from attacking and pillaging villages in Walo and Kajoor every now and then, because such incursions disrupted peace and prevented farmers from cultivating crops regularly and productively.

Some French *négociants* and *habitant* entrepreneurs in Saint-Louis, however, expressed trepidation about military campaigns, fearing that they could only create more instability and disrupt trade further. Yet subduing the Traza Moors militarily gained increasing support in official circles as French policymakers and administrators envisioned peanut cultivation and exportation becoming the mainstay of the economy of Senegal region in the near future. For both the administration and French entrepreneurs, agricultural commerce was the key to prosperity in the region. Interim Governor Edouard Pageot des Noutières (1842-1843), for example, believed that if the Trarza Moors were to

⁵⁸ Marcson, "European-African Interaction," 193-195; Webb, "Trade in Gum Arabic"; *Desert Frontier: Ecological and Economic Change along the Sahel, 1600-1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), especially Chapter 5, 97-131.

be defeated and forced further north into the desert, “the result [would] be the dominance of France and the growth of its trade.”⁵⁹

The details of the French efforts to undercut the power of the *habitants* and subdue the Trarza Moors militarily have received much attention from other historians and fall beyond the scope of this chapter.⁶⁰ Put succinctly, the French introduced institutional and legal changes in Saint-Louis during the 1840s to challenge the authority of the *habitants* in municipal councils, reduce their role in the judicial system, and probe the legitimacy of their marriages consummated *à la mode du pays*.⁶¹ However, despite the sweeping changes in Saint-Louis, French officials realized later on that the *habitant* commercial elite continued to exercise considerable influence in local commerce. In fact relations between the coastal town and the interior depended for the most part on the patronage and credit facilities *habitant* entrepreneurs provided. Likewise, the administration’s attempts to subdue the Trarza Moors by military means were not as conclusive as the French authorities had anticipated. The *hassani* continued to carry out their habitual incursions into Walo, Kajoor, and Jolof.⁶²

⁵⁹ ANS 2B 20, Pageot des Noutières to Minister, 23 August 1842.

⁶⁰ For more on this subject, see Marcson, “European-African Interaction,” Chapter 5, 192-218; Jones, “Citizens and Subjects,” Chapter 3, 80-110; Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans,” Chapter 4, 195-240.

⁶¹ In the city’s governing body, an administrative council comprising five bureaucrats and two notables appointed by the governor replaced the governor’s council, which previously had five local notables elected by *habitants*. Similarly, in the legal system, the Court of First Instance (made up of two *habitants*, two *négociants*, and a professional magistrate) which had adjudicated legal cases since 1822 was reorganized to reflect the diminishing role of the *habitants*. In 1844, the court had only one *habitant* and one *négociant* who had the right to vote on criminal cases but could only play an advisory role in civil and commercial cases. By 1847, pressure to remove non-professionals from the court had increased enough for them to be eliminated altogether. Marcson, “European-African Interactions,” 199-208. For more on *mariage à la mode du pays*, see Jones, “Citizens and Subjects” and “From Mariage à la Mode to Weddings at Town Hall.”

⁶² Barry, *Le royaume du Waalo*, 275-285.

At the core of the Saint-Louisian entrepreneurs' (merchants with considerable capital accumulated over the years) ability to continue influencing trade with Africans in the interior was their credit system that kept Trarza merchants, local political leaders, and African *traitants* indebted to their business allies in the coastal capital. Additionally, by providing lodging, food, and storage for goods and livestock, as Marcson observes, the *habitants* played their customary role as hosts to Moorish and other traders and visitors from the interior who frequented Saint-Louis.⁶³ Consequently, even with competition from French *négociants* and the administration's efforts to limit *habitant* influence in politics and commerce, their long-standing cooperation with the Moorish commercial elite was difficult to dissolve all at once. Governor des Noutières admitted candidly to the ineffectiveness of the French policy: "A very big error, as I see it, prevailed again today in the formulation of the foreign policy of Senegal. We appeared to believe that it sufficed to maintain good relations with the natives in order to measure up to the relentless demands of local commerce."⁶⁴

Des Noutières' remark attests to the failure of French policymakers and administrators to understand fully the dynamics of historical ties between various indigenous players in the local commercial network. Although conflicts between the Trarza Moors and their southern neighbors were common, trade in the lower valley necessitated cooperation between Moorish merchants, political leaders, and their *habitant* business partners in Saint-Louis. In other words, the common commercial interests of the key participants in the riverine trade often took precedence over their mutual hostilities.

⁶³ Marcson, "European-African Interactions," 208-209.

⁶⁴ ANS 2B 20, Pageot des Noutières to Minister, 23 August 1842.

Until Faidherbe's tenure began in 1854, the administration's effort to reduce the power of the Trarza Moors, as historian Charles Stewart observes, had the unintended effect of strengthening their position in the political economy of the river valley.⁶⁵ In spite of the initial setbacks, however, the administration did not relent, let alone abandon, its goal of asserting firmer control over events in the lower and middle valley. With time, French commercial interests drove the administration to interfere in political disputes among local leaders (some of whom were key players in the riverine trade), hoping to exploit such occasions to influence the course of events.

The administration tried out different strategies in its effort to establish a commanding position in the politics and economy of the lower and middle valley. In 1843, Governor Bouët-Willaumez,⁶⁶ for instance, took the initiative of inviting the *roi* de Brakna al-Mukhtar W. Sidi on board his boat anchored on the Senegal River, at the Escale du Coq, for what was supposed to be a routine diplomatic exchange of goodwill and mutual friendship. In a dramatic twist of events, however, the governor arrested the Moorish leader, ferried him off to Saint-Louis, and exiled him swiftly to Gabon in Central Africa.⁶⁷ The incident not only made a bold statement about Bouët-Willaumez's intention to exercise control over the riverine trade at all costs, but also foreshadowed the

⁶⁵ Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*, 91-92.

⁶⁶ As part of his effort to extend French influence in the river valley, Governor Bouët-Willaumez took a tour of the Falémé River late in 1843. He passed through Seneboudou where he signed a treaty with Amady-Sadda, the Almamy of Bondou. The governor also visited the gold mines at Kéniéba before returning to Saint-Louis in March 1844.

⁶⁷ For more on French interference in mid-nineteenth century Brakna, see Taylor, "Of Disciples and Sultans," 118-132.

increasing French presence in the river valley. Furthermore, the event exposed the vulnerability of local leaders to French intimidation and aggression.

One major step the administration took in response to the situation in the river valley was to identify its main concerns and outline ways of dealing with them more efficiently, as evidenced by a dispatch of 6 November 1844.⁶⁸ The follow-on commission was not only to look into the root problems of the administration's failure to assert control in the river valley, but also find practical ways of solving them. The recommendations Bouët-Willaumez made in that dispatch would have a significant bearing on French expansion in the Senegal valley from the 1850s on. It therefore makes sense to quote extensively from the governor's proposals to contextualize his major concerns and proposed plan of action, which his immediate successors drew on in their bid to extend French authority over the river valley and adjacent areas:

- Here are the main conditions of the plan I have drawn and the general results, which I think necessary to accomplish myself, or prepare for my successors:
- tolerate no band of Moors in plundering on the left bank;
 - put Wallo under our direct sovereignty, eventually, and divide it into four cantons whose chief towns would be Dagana, Richard-Toll, Mérinaghen, [and] Lampsar, controlled directly by our agents; from these cantons link up Gandiole, the saltworks, as far as and including Dakar-bango and the lime deposits;
 - make this kingdom, thereafter, the refuge of all subjects maltreated by their chiefs and encourage agriculture and cattle-rearing there;
 - work on the break-up of Fouta, which is becoming worrisome because of its spirit of domination, the fanaticism of its population, and the extent of its territory; do not allow it to commit any act of violence without punishing it vigorously;
 - reduce progressively and eliminate as soon as possible state customs among Moorish as well as Black leaders;
 - make the customs duties on goods proportional and not [based on] the tonnage

⁶⁸ ANSOM, *Sénégal VII* 10 c., Bouët-Willaumez à ministre, 6 novembre 1844, cited in Saint-Martin, *Le Sénégal sous le second Empire*, 162.

of the boats.⁶⁹

Bouët-Willaumez disclosed his primary challenges without any ambiguity, proposing direct intervention, military or otherwise, to dismember states considered potential rivals of the administration and subdue those capable of destabilizing peace in the region. Accordingly, the need to tackle these problems with more certainty in large part paved the way for the creation of the BAE in 1845.⁷⁰

Buoyed by the prospect of becoming a more competitive imperial power, the government of the Second Republic in Paris, after 1848, gave the administration in Saint-Louis more political and financial support than the previous Orleanist regime had been willing to provide.⁷¹ Governor Auguste Protet (1850-1854), Faïdherbe's immediate predecessor, took up the task of stabilizing the situation in the lower and middle valley. Although Protet expressed reservations about launching an all-out military campaign against the Trarza Moors, he still believed peace in the region called for defeating them militarily.⁷² The Minister of the Navy and Colonies, Theodore Ducos, remained skeptical about military action, however, convinced that a protracted war against the Trarza Moors could prove too costly for the administration.⁷³ Yet the minister's cautious approach did not deter Protet from making repeated appeals to Paris, between 1850 and 1852, for

⁶⁹ Ibid, 163.

⁷⁰ ANS 1B 43, Minister to Governor, 21 November 1845.

⁷¹ Saint-Martin, *le Sénégal sous le second Empire*, Chapters 9 and 10, 161-203; Marcson, "European-African Interactions," 222-241, 258, 264; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 60-62.

⁷² ANS 2B 30, Governor to Minister, 23 August 1850.

⁷³ ANS 1B 56, Minister to Governor, 27 June 1851.

additional troops to be dispatched to Saint-Louis in case military offensives against the Trarza Moors turned out to be inevitable.⁷⁴

French *négociants* in Saint-Louis continued pressing their case for the administration and policymakers in Paris to take decisive steps to guarantee security in the river valley.⁷⁵ Although both French and local entrepreneurs in Saint-Louis were wary of military campaigns, most *négociants* considered it imperative for the administration to fortify military posts along the river and protect the *escales*, where the bulk of the trade in gum, peanuts, grains and other commodities took place. After much prevarication, the minister granted Protet's request, approving the dispatch of reinforcement for Saint-Louis in 1853.⁷⁶ In the following year, Protet tried to make French presence more visible in the middle valley and decided to restore the fort at Podor,⁷⁷ located about 138 miles up the Senegal River from Saint-Louis, much to the displeasure of the Almamy of Futa Toro.⁷⁸ Led by Lieutenant-colonel Louis Faidherbe, the army engineer who would succeed Protet as governor, the construction team began its work on the fort on 27 March and finished on 1 May 1854. Occurring at a time the administration was under pressure from French and *habitant* commercial interest groups

⁷⁴ ANS 2B 30, Governor to Minister, 5 May 1850; 19 April 1851; 14 April 1852.

⁷⁵ As head of the French court system in Saint-Louis, Frédéric Carrère supported a group of entrepreneurs in Saint-Louis calling for the government to take immediate action against the Trarza Moors. Together with Paul Holle, Carrère wrote a detailed account of mid-nineteenth century Senegambia highlighting internal trade and relations between Saint-Louis and its hinterland. See, Frédéric Carrère and Paul Holle, *De la Sénégambie française* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1855).

⁷⁶ ANS 1B 61, Minister to Governor, 25 July 1853.

⁷⁷ The original fort at Podor was first constructed in 1744 by Pierre Barthélémy, the then Governor of the Concession du Sénégal for the Company of the Indies. The restoration work undertaken in 1854 involved about 2000 soldiers under the command of Lieutenant-colonel Faidherbe.

⁷⁸ Barry, *Le royaume du Waalo*, 301.

in Saint-Louis to appoint a more forceful governor capable of enforcing stability in the river valley, this move made an audacious statement about Protet's determination to bring the situation under control by any means possible.



Photo 3.1. The French Fort at Podor (built in 1744 and reconstructed in 1854).
Photograph by author (Podor, 12 October 2004).

Until the departure of Protet from office in the second half of 1854, French *négociants* in Saint-Louis continued to make demands for the administration to adopt a more proactive stance to create an atmosphere conducive to free and secure trade in the river valley. Under the leadership of the influential entrepreneur Hilaire Maurel, they forwarded a petition to the Minister of the Navy and Colonies that would influence the course of events in the river valley later on.⁷⁹ The *négociants*, among other things, called for a complete restructuring of the administration in Saint-Louis and longer mandates for

⁷⁹ Pétition des commerçants européens, 28 août 1854, cited in L. Capperon, "Protêt, gouverneur du Senegal," *Revue maritime* (1956), 14-21.

future governors. In addition, they proposed that military campaigns sanctioned by the administration henceforth be sensitive to the commercial needs of the region. Finally, the petition recommended Louis Faidherbe as the successor of Protet.

Although his appointment did not go down well with certain Saint-Louisian métis entrepreneurs who despised the monopolistic propensity of French *négociants*, Faidherbe became governor in December 1854.⁸⁰ Soon after, he began to pursue an aggressive policy of expansion that reflected to a significant degree the proposal Bouët-Willaumez had put forward a decade earlier. Through the mediations of local intermediaries, especially Saint-Louisian Muslim interpreters, however, Faidherbe and his successors attempted to pepper their military options with diplomatic efforts to diffuse the foreboding generated by French intrusion in the river basin. The administration entrusted its key interpreters with the task of liaising with local rulers, including those outside its area of jurisdiction.

Meanwhile, in the river valley to the east outside the administration's sphere of control, Al-Hajj Umar had declared a military jihad and started a recruitment drive for his army in Futa Toro. This situation exacerbated the instability in the middle valley fueled by the incessant power struggles between different lineages making a claim to local leadership.⁸¹ Together with the predatory activities of the Trarza and Brakna *hassani* and retaliations from the local Futanke and Fulbe inhabitants, the chronic political conflicts

⁸⁰ For more on this topic, see Marcson, "European-African Interactions"; Diouf, *Le Kaajor au XIXe siècle*; Jones, "Citizens and Subjects."

⁸¹ It was typical of the French to attribute political problems in Futa Toro to the arrogance and fanaticism of the "Tokolor," as Robinson explains. Robinson, *Holy War*, 138-149.

and Umar's jihad made the middle valley a volatile zone by the time Faidherbe formed the interpreter corps of the administration.

The French military expansion inland reconfigured relations of power between the administration and local rulers, as well as different social groups in the Senegal valley.⁸² Faidherbe's military campaigns, among other things, disrupted the activities of the *maîtres de langues* and undermined their alliances with various interest groups in the river trade network.⁸³ By the late 1850s, the Muslim interpreters on whose language acumen, social capital, and intimate knowledge of the local cultural and political landscape French officials depended had begun taking up important assignments as military and expedition guides, emissaries, and treaty negotiators.⁸⁴ The vicissitudes of local politics and French penetration inland converged to produce a challenging situation for the interpreters in mediating relations between their French employers and the African population.

The next section discusses the early attempts Governor Faidherbe made to bring certain polities in the river basin under control. Just as the late 1850s marked a new

⁸² With the emancipation decree for slaves passed in 1848, relations between different social groups in Saint-Louis and neighboring areas experienced a radical transformation. Slave-owning *habitants* in Saint-Louis, for example, not only lost their slaves but also began to feel the brunt of the economic competition from French firms in the growing legitimate commerce. In addition, ex-slaves could seek employment within the administration as *tirailleurs*, porters, guides, and even interpreters rather than depend on the patronage of their ex-masters and mistresses.

⁸³ By the second half of the nineteenth century, the métis commercial elite of Saint-Louis had started to lose the dominant position it once commanded in the import/export trade. Besides the administration's efforts to limit the influence of the métis in the riverine economy, especially the exportation of peanuts, competition from French firms with more capital made it more difficult for individual métis entrepreneurs to maintain the privileged economic position they had enjoyed before. See Jones, "Citizens and Subjects," especially Chapter 3, 80-110.

⁸⁴ ANS 3B 84, Governor Faidherbe's Instructions to Lieutenant M. Brossard de Corbigny, 9 April 1859. In briefing Lieutenant de Corbigny about his trip to Kajoor and Dakar in 1859, for example, Governor Faidherbe indicated that Bou El Mogdad, one of his chief interpreters, would accompany the delegation as its official interpreter mainly because he (Bou El Mogdad) had known the Damel of Kajoor over a long period.

beginning for French expansion in the lower and middle valley, so Faidherbe's reforms (discussed in Chapter 4) prepared the stage for interpreters to emerge as key players in the political and diplomatic exchanges that ensued in later years. Somehow inevitably, French preponderance in Saint-Louis and the lower valley around mid century turned into full-blown colonial rule by the end of the 1800s. African interpreters, as the study will reveal, were active actors in the political and social developments of that period.

3.3. Toward Early French Expansion: The Faidherbian Period, 1850s-1860s

Governor Faidherbe occupies a privileged position in the historiography of colonial Senegal only a few Senegalese historical figures have enjoyed.⁸⁵ Both official colonial and contemporary popular discourses contributed to the construction of a "Faidherbian myth" that has filtered through current scholarship and political debates. For most French colonial administrators, biographers, and contemporary scholars of the colonial period in Senegal, Faidherbe was the "architect of Senegal," mainly because he laid the institutional groundwork and set the tempo for the conquest of what became Senegal by the last decade of the 1800s.⁸⁶ Although we could raise questions about the originality of some of Faidherbe's ideas and reforms, there is hardly any doubt that his accession to power marked a new phase of French militarism and forays into the Senegal valley.

⁸⁵ Here we may cite Amadu Bamba, Blaise Diagne, and Leopold Senghor among a small number of Senegalese historical personalities that scholars have given as much attention as Faidherbe in the literature on colonial Senegal. See next note below for works on Faidherbe.

⁸⁶ See, among others, Georges Hardy, *Faidherbe* (Paris: Editions de l'Encyclopédie de l'Empire Français, 1947); Barrows, "General Faidherbe"; Alain Coursier, *Faidherbe, 1818-1889: Du Sénégal à l'Armée du Nord* (Paris: Tallandier, 1989); Robinson, "'French Africans': Faidherbe, Archinand, and Coppolani, the 'Creators' of Senegal, Soudan, and Mauritania."

As early as 1855 Faidherbe succeeded in subduing and annexing the neighboring state of Walo, an episode that announced his determination to push the administration's area of control beyond the limit previous governors had recognized. Despite an "unholy alliance" between the armies of Walo and Trarza, Faidherbe's 600-man strong contingent (and 1,200 volunteers) proved too strong for the combined forces of his adversaries. Immediately after subjugating Walo, the governor issued a stern warning to the vanquished leadership and its people, threatening serious repercussions if they continued their alliance with the Moors:

If you persist in remaining united with the Moors and take Ely as leader, it is of no use that you return to your country and that you build huts and sheds, because I will burn them for you. It is also futile that you cultivate millet, as you will not harvest [it]. I have told you, and I repeat, Waalo will be separated from the Trarzas or remain uninhabited.⁸⁷

Faidherbe did not expect this forewarning to be taken lightly, especially as within ten days of attacking Walo he demonstrated the brutality of his campaign by burning twenty-five villages and seizing one hundred and fifty prisoners, two thousand cattle, three camels and fifty asses.⁸⁸ Moreover, Faidherbe forced the Trarza *hassani* to retreat from the beleaguered state, although Moorish traders continued to trade in Wolof areas on the southern side of the river.⁸⁹ Chapter 5 will elaborate on this subject.

In contrast to Faidherbe's militant approach, the first half of the nineteenth century had witnessed different governors experimenting with defensive policies that ultimately failed to either maintain peace and security or guarantee the administration an

⁸⁷ ANS 13G 91, Governor to the People of Waalo, 1 March 1855.

⁸⁸ *Annales sénégalaises*, 17.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 5-22.

unassailable position to dictate the terms of commercial and power relations in the river valley.⁹⁰ Mamadou Diouf has identified three main reasons for the failure of the French to assert significant control over the course of events in the Senegal area before the 1850s: (i) the frequent changes of governors that undermined the implementation of a consistent policy; (ii) the unwillingness of the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies to provide adequate financial support for military operations in the river valley; and (iii) the absence of solid, long term financial investments by commercial firms operating in the region.⁹¹ Together, these factors hampered French efforts in asserting the kind of dominance—political, economic, and military—that would have allowed the administration to strengthen its grip on commercial and agricultural activities in the Senegal basin. From the 1840s on, the need to provide security in the river valley for trade and agriculture to thrive became a persistent problem succeeding governors in Saint-Louis strived to resolve. In pursuing this goal, I argue that Faidherbe was the most aggressive of all the nineteenth-century governors in Saint-Louis.

According to Leland Barrows, however, “There is no proof that while he was governor, Faidherbe even envisaged the total occupation of Senegal, even though the later generation of French conquistadores who conquered French West Africa claimed that they were fulfilling Faidherbe’s legacy.”⁹² Fair enough, Barrows acknowledges that

⁹⁰ It is noteworthy that between 1831 and 1850 ten different governors, excluding interim governors, headed the administration in Saint-Louis. The longest serving governor was Governor Baudin, who was in office from only 1847 to 1850. It makes sense to deduce that the frequent change of governors during this period did not augur well for the implementation of a consistent policy in Senegal. Felix Briguad, *Études sénégalaises 9, Connaissance du Sénégal: Histoire moderne et contemporaine du Sénégal* (CRDS: Saint-Louis, 1966), 7-11.

⁹¹ Diouf, *Le Kaajor au XIXe siècle*, 171.

⁹² Barrows, “General Faidherbe,” 230.

in later years Faidherbe expressed no regrets about the outcome of French expansion in Senegal despite bemoaning the brutality that had accompanied it. Yet Barrows' argument above is somehow preposterous as it presupposes a geographic and political space, Senegal (as we know it today), that did not exist until after the 1880s. Even more compelling, evidence indicates Faidherbe had a grandiose plan mapped out that looked beyond the Senegal valley. The governor made this clear in a memorandum drafted for Napoleon III, in July 1863, to acquaint him with French commercial and territorial interests in West Africa. In the memo, Faidherbe expressed firm determination to pursue his colonizing plan:

Those who are resisting our plan for colonization and development would receive no more supplies with which to do so, and caravans from the interior would henceforth follow the routes we saw fit to indicate. The great projects which might be conceived for extending our influence towards Timbuctu and the upper Niger would henceforth have a large and solid base....⁹³

The governor certainly had a vivid sense of the ultimate goal of his imperial project. Establishing a strong foundation in the lower and middle valley was only a first step in his larger scheme of affairs in West Africa. And a precondition for pursuing this ambition was restructuring the administrative setup in Saint-Louis to make it more efficient in dealing with local problems. Equipped with the right kind of personnel, among them interpreters and translators, Faidherbe believed he could begin to tackle with more grit the recurrent problem of insecurity that had plagued the lower and middle valley for so long. Consequently, French control would extend beyond the coastal headquarters of

⁹³ Archives Nationale, Section d'Outre-Mer, Paris, Afrique VI/II/a, cited in Hargreaves, *France and West Africa*, 147.

Saint-Louis into the interior and pave the way for further expansion eastward. Chapter 4 will elaborate on the reforms Faidherbe carried out.

A detailed discussion of the factors underlying Faidherbe's expansionist plan or the course of events it brought about is beyond the scope of this chapter.⁹⁴ More importantly, it may be recalled that Faidherbe's appointment as governor came in the wake of pressure from French and *habitant* entrepreneurs in Saint-Louis on the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies to employ someone capable of bringing stability to areas in the Senegal valley where they conducted their commercial business.⁹⁵ Thus, as soon as Faidherbe took over the governorship in December 1854,⁹⁶ he began to push steadily, but vigorously, beyond Saint-Louis into the interior. For the governor, insuring stability meant taking decisive steps to put in place a more efficient administration and utilizing whatever resources available to flex his muscles, both militarily and politically. Toward this end, Faidherbe's letter to the Damel of Kajoor, Birima N'Gone Latyr, just after the governor had defeated the Trarza Moors in defense of the post at Richard Toll, in April 1855, illustrates amply how he intended to combine military strength and intimidation to good effect. In making his intentions clear to the Damel, Faidherbe spoke plainly but menacingly: "I have defeated the King [Mohamed El-Habib] of the Trarzas, Ely [El-Habib's son], the Brack [sovereign of Walo] and their army at Lébar.... I inform you

⁹⁴ For a more detailed treatment of Faidherbe's exploits, see Barrows, "General Faidherbe."

⁹⁵ For more on military campaigns undertaken by the administration during the Faidherbian period and after, see *Annales Sénégalaises*.

⁹⁶ Imperial Decree, 1 November 1854, appointed Faidherbe as governor of Senegal. Bâ, *La pénétration française*, 21.

about these matters so that you and Cayor know the entire truth.”⁹⁷ Taking advantage of his recent military success, the governor impressed on the Damel of Kajoor that he would brook no opposition from those who intended to resist French expansion into the interior.

Still, Faidherbe faced a bigger challenge that had the potential of derailing his empire-building program. By mid century, Al-Hajj Umar had declared a military jihad in the Upper Niger and appeared poised to advance into the adjacent Senegal valley, thereby posing a threat to areas that supplied merchants in Saint-Louis and Gorée consignments of gum, peanuts, and grains. Since the earlier confrontation with Algerian resistance in the late 1830s and early 1840s, French officials in Saint-Louis and elsewhere in West Africa had grown ever more wary about certain Muslim groups identified as “fanatic,” emphasizing the need to either keep them under close surveillance or “pacify” them if need be.⁹⁸ As France strived to sharpen its image as a Muslim power in the second half of the nineteenth century, a growing sense of trepidation crept into the minds of French officials about Islamic orders, such as the Tijaniyya, believed to be predisposed toward militant jihad.

Earlier on, Faidherbe’s combination of force, intimidation, and diplomacy had laid the foundation for France’s increasing Muslim responsibility in West Africa.⁹⁹ The

⁹⁷ ANS 3B 91, Governor to Damel, 23 April 1855; also Bâ, *La penetration française*, 28.

⁹⁸ By mid century, a number of ethnographies on different groups in Senegal influenced colonial authorities to make certain assumptions about the Wolof, Serer, Tokolor, Moors, and other groups. See, for example, Boilat, *Esquisses Senegalaises*. Whereas the Wolof were often associated with drunkenness, the Tokolor represented an embodiment of Muslim fanaticism. Among the various Islamic orders, the administration was particularly suspicious of the Tijaniyya, perceived to be more inclined toward fanaticism and thus extremely dangerous. French colonial administrators found such taxonomy useful in delineating administrative boundaries in subsequent years. For more discussion on how ethnography influenced colonial rule in French West Africa, see Robinson, “Ethnography and Customary Law;” Ginio, “French Colonial Reading.”

⁹⁹ ANS 19G 1, State of Affairs of Islam in French West Africa, 1906-1916.

governor forced his way into playing a decisive role to shape the balance of power in the lower and middle valley. But even as the administration began to gain the upper hand over some polities in the Senegal valley, it continued to struggle with pockets of local resistance in different parts of the Senegal region well into the 1890s. Eventually, in 1886, the bastion of local military resistance, Lat Dior, was killed by a contingent of French colonial troops at the battle of Dekheule.¹⁰⁰ In retrospect, the chain of events that culminated in the imposition of formal colonial rule in Senegal by the 1880s had their roots in the 1850s, when Faidherbe began to push forcefully into the lower and middle valley from Saint-Louis. In so doing, he established the foundation for the vast colonial holding that became *L'Afrique occidentale française* (AOF) or French West Africa in 1895.

The next chapter will examine the reforms Governor Faidherbe introduced to set up interpreters and translators for the multiple roles they played in the late nineteenth century. By focusing on the *Direction des affaires politiques*, the *École des Otages*, the interpreter corps and the Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis, the chapter aims to show how Faidherbe planned to deal with the myriad problems the administration faced. The reforms he undertook had a lasting impact on the colony, compelling his successors to invoke him every so often as a benchmark to gauge their successes and failures. Moreover, the conflict-ridden world the French presence brought about prompted Muslim interpreters to make conscious decisions about negotiating, contesting, and accommodating to the realities of European colonial rule.

¹⁰⁰ Diouf, *Le Kaajoor au XIXe siècle*, 280-286.

CHAPTER 4

The Creation of an Indigenous Interpreter Corps: Governor Faidherbe, Reforms, and Long Term Results

Governor Faidherbe's accession to power in 1854 marked a new beginning for the French imperial enterprise in the Senegal region. In pursuing his goals, Faidherbe was quick to realize the need for an interpreter corps to make contact and communication possible with African leaders and their constituencies, including those in frontier areas of the Senegal valley outside the administration's control. Anticipating the challenges such a critical undertaking could pose, the governor introduced a number of reforms to put the administration on a sounder footing so that it could resolve local problems more efficiently. Faidherbe indeed needed a functional administration with the right kind of personnel to support his colonial aspirations. In his view, stability in the river valley was a precondition for the region's prosperity, especially as it depended mostly on commerce and agriculture.

This chapter deals with some major reforms Governor Faidherbe undertook to bring in more dynamism to the administration and set his imperial plan in motion. The restructuring program underlined the importance of interpreters and translators in the governor's broader political and military plans. As indigenous intermediaries, interpreters could perform a range of functions as informants, military and expeditionary guides, treaty negotiators, emissaries, diplomatic hosts and so on. And their mediations could have far-reaching significance for not only the daily interactions between the French officials and the African population but also the decisions the former made on the spot about policy implementation. The chapter suggests that although Faidherbe's plan of

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expansion originated from an earlier program conceived in the 1840s, he was a pragmatic strategist who tailored his reforms to serve the specific needs of the empire-building project he conceived. I situate the reforms in a long-term perspective to track how they evolved over time.

The chapter first examines the creation of the *Direction des Affaires Politiques* (DAP), the successor of the *Bureau des Affaires Extérieures* (BAE) established in 1845. The DAP functioned as the central administrative organ for coordinating Faidherbe's military, diplomatic, intelligence and undercover operations; its importance hardly requires any exaggeration. Next, the chapter traces the setting up of the *École des Otages* in 1856 (renamed *École des Fils de Chefs et des Interprètes* in 1864) for training indigenous interpreters/translators and prospective chiefs expected to serve French interests. It then discusses the formalization of the interpreter service as a full-time career within the administration. To this end, Faidherbe laid out the conditions of employment, ranks, and remuneration. Finally, the chapter analyzes the circumstances leading to the creation of a Muslim Tribunal in Saint-Louis in 1857. As the chapter will reveal, some interpreters not only played an important role in advocating for the tribunal but also served it as appointed officials.

The chapter aims to show that as early as the mid-1850s the foundation had been laid for French expansion into the Senegal valley and its environs. And it culminated in the imposition of formal colonial rule in Senegal by the late 1880s. As the colonizing scheme progressed, interpreters had to perform various functions, as indicated above, in mediating between the French authorities and the local population. Because of their language skills and ability to traverse two different and often conflicting worlds,

interpreters occupied a vantage position to liaise between their French employers and African kinfolk. Yet while performing their official duties, they were mindful of their individual as well as communal interests. In fact their position in the administration put interpreters in good stead to serve those interests whenever the opportunity arose.

Overall, however, scholars have paid little attention to this paradox about the intermediary role of Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal. A fundamental concern revolves around whether Muslim functionaries could serve a non-Muslim administration and yet maintain their fidelity to Islam and their local community without a conflict of interests. Put differently, how feasible was it to make room for *daar al-Islam* (world of Islam) within the *daar al-Kufr* (world of “unbelievers”) during the period under study?

4.1. The Direction of Political Affairs

An institution almost synonymous with the Faidherbe administration was the DAP,¹ a derivative of the BAE created in 1845, to deal with local states and the chronic instability in the lower and middle valley. The DAP, however, turned out to be a more purposeful department than the BAE to the extent that it coordinated Faidherbe’s diplomatic, military, intelligence and undercover activities. As the centerpiece of the administration, the office concentrated mostly on frontier affairs, that is, relations with polities then outside the French sphere of control in the Senegal River area.

As the administration pushed inland from its coastal base in Saint-Louis, Faidherbe would investigate the state of affairs through espionage agents, furnish his commanding officers with essential logistics, initiate diplomatic liaisons when necessary

¹ For more on the *Direction des Affaires Politiques*, see Henri Labouret, *Monteil. Explorateur et soldat* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1937).

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and employ the most effective method of exerting control over local states that mattered in his imperial plan. Coordinating these critical engagements affirmed the DAP as the most vital administrative division. With its director answerable directly to Faidherbe and supported by a team of French and African military and civilian personnel, the DAP carried out its operations with full official support and more drive than the BAE or earlier offices had managed to do.

At the inception of the DAP Faidherbe appointed its director Louis Alexandre Flize, a marine officer whose reputation for discipline and hard work the governor believed would serve him well in handling the demands of the job.² And complementing Flize were Faidherbe's most influential interpreters, Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad Seck, who at different times of their careers were translators at the Arabic translation service supervised by the DAP. The Arabic translation service not only took charge of communication with local leaders but also handled official propaganda.³ Besides the two interpreters mentioned above, official publications of that period list another, Tiécoro, who worked with the DAP during Faidherbe's tenure.⁴ In addition, Ousman, another interpreter who was a monitor at the *École des Otages*, joined the team at the DAP after the school's initial closure in 1872.⁵ Faidherbe's decision to delegate the

² Saint-Martin, *Le Sénégal sous le second Empire*, 259-290.

³ Bou El Mogdad and Flize developed strategies for the administration to counter the growing political influence of Al-Hajj Umar. Similarly, at the turn of the century, the DAP, under the directorship of Martial Merlin, sent off Amadu Bamba into exile in Gabon on what were trumped up charges of plotting against the colonial administration in Saint-Louis. Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 214-217; Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*; also "Amadu Bamba," 304-315.

⁴ By 1859, Tiécoro and Bou El Mogdad were the only first class interpreters, while Hamat Ndiaye Anne, a more senior interpreter, was *interprète du gouverneur hors classe*. Like Bou El Mogdad, one of the languages listed against Tiécoro's name was Arabic. *Annuaire du Sénégal et Dependances*, 1859.

⁵ Bouche, "Enseignement," 339-341.

supervision of the *École des Otages* to the DAP underscored the office's authority and the school's political role, besides its obvious instructional function.

Faidherbe's conception of the DAP may well have been inspired by the operations of the *bureau arabe*, first established in Algeria in 1839 to take charge of "Muslim affairs" during France's struggle with the Algerian people.⁶ Because the administration in Saint-Louis had long failed to come up with a coherent and consistent policy to restore stability in the lower and middle valley, Faidherbe adapted the operations of the DAP to the specific needs of the situation in the Senegal basin. Flize, the director of the DAP, was responsible for recruiting soldiers for the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, the local military force Faidherbe established.⁷ The director also enlisted "volunteers" to supplement the troops during military campaigns. For the recruitment operation, Flize relied on Hamat Ndiaye Anne's influence as *tamsir* of Saint-Louis to get local support and boost the number of volunteers he could sign up.⁸ In essence, the DAP symbolized Faidherbe's resolve to empower the administration so that it could impose its authority in the river valley and adjacent areas, a challenge his predecessors had met with limited success.

We may recall that Governor Bouët-Willaumez's recommendations had led to the creation of the BAE in 1845, which thereafter took charge of "external affairs" in the

⁶ As the French encountered more resistance from the Algerians, French officials with expertise in Algerian political issues and culture served the bureau and advised the French government about its policies in Algeria. See Patricia M. E. Lorcin, "Imperialism, Colonial Identity, and Race in Algeria, 1830-1870: The Role of the French Medical Corps," *Isis* 90, 4 (Dec. 1999), 653-679.

⁷ Although French military personnel continued to engage actively in military missions in Senegal during this period, Faidherbe saw the *tirailleurs sénégalais* as a cost-effective option that could avoid the lengthy wait for military reinforcement to arrive from France. In time, the *tirailleurs* grew in size to comprise artillerymen from all over French West Africa. They would fight alongside French soldiers in Europe during both world wars. For more on the experiences of these West African soldiers during World War I, see Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*.

⁸ Robinson, "Faidherbe, Senegal, and Islam: A Discussion" (MA thesis, Columbia University, 1965), 67-70.

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Senegal valley.⁹ Even so, the administration was unable to find a lasting solution to the instability that plagued the area. In fact, the BAE often got embroiled in disputes with Saint-Louisian interests groups, both political and commercial, including the long-reigning Mayor Jean-Jacques Alin (1829-1848), who made no secret of serving the interests of the métis community.¹⁰ The constant bickering between administrators and local personalities with stakes in both the economy and politics only made the BAE ineffectual in dealing with its tasks.

During the 1840s, relations between Saint-Louisian métis entrepreneurs and the administration for the most part tended to be lukewarm, if not acrimonious. In time, the administration sought to break up the monopoly the métis commercial elite and the Trarza Moors exercised over the riverine trade, as Chapter 3 explained. Yet the BAE lacked the resolve to mastermind a strategic program that would have given the administration an advantage over its African competitors in the local economy. Aware of this shortcoming, therefore, Faidherbe set up the DAP with a view to sort out the administration's major concerns in the interior. Foremost on the governor's list of priorities was finding a practical solution to the unstable conditions in the river valley, the bane of political and economic undertakings for much of the early 1800s. Once this goal had been achieved, Faidherbe envisaged eastward expansion toward the Niger River would be a feasible objective.

⁹ ANS 1B 45, Minister to Governor, 21 November 1845.

¹⁰ As Mayor of Saint-Louis, Jean-Jacques Alin also had stakes in the riverine commerce between the coastal town and the interior. His long-standing relations with the royalty of Trarza meant he pursued policies in the hinterland that were often at variance with the administration. As such, this did not endear the mayor to most French officials at the time.

At the outset Faidherbe granted the DAP a significant amount of power without being stupefied by the persistent demands of the métis of Saint-Louis, who still had strong ties with Africans in the interior where the office concentrated its operations. Saint-Louisian métis entrepreneurs had long enjoyed a favorable position in the riverine economy, because traders in the hinterland depended on their credit facilities. So even as their political privileges came under increasing censure, the administration could ill-afford to downplay the economic influence the métis commercial elite wielded in the river valley economy. For Faidherbe especially, it was unthinkable that the métis of Saint-Louis, some of whom had been less than enthusiastic about his appointment as governor, should dictate the outcome of political and economic relations in the region.

Although the DAP outlived the Faidherbe administration, it faded in importance for a while after 1865. Not until 1876 when Governor Briere became governor did the office once again begin to play the same sort of influential role it had performed earlier. That the DAP remained dormant between 1865 and 1876 was due in part to the restraint Paris imposed on the immediate successors of Faidherbe, governors Pinet-Laprade and Valière, by tightening budget allocations to its colonies after the Franco-Prussian War (July 1870-May 1871).¹¹ Thereafter, though, the DAP continued to function until the turn of the century before the *Service des Affaires Musulmanes* (SAM) took over its responsibilities. Robert Arnaud (1873-1950) took charge of the SAM, and after him, Paul

¹¹ The war ended with the signing on the Treaty of Frankfurt on 10 May 1871. The treaty not only gave Germany the city of Strasbourg, but also Alsace and the northern portion of Lorraine. This loss of territory was a source of resentment in France during the years leading to the outbreak of World War I. In the spirit of *revanchism* and public support for the war, France vowed to take back control of Alsace-Lorraine.

Marty (1882-1938).¹² Incidentally, the frontier areas with which the office had been preoccupied were under French control by the 1890s.

After 1865 the most active phase in the existence of the DAP, as noted above, was during the Briere administration. Like Faidherbe before him, Briere envisioned a French empire extending from the Atlantic coast to the Niger River in which commerce would be the mainstay of the economy. With Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad still active in service, Briere hoped the vastly experienced duo with their intimate knowledge of local politics and culture would help develop relations between the administration and local states in the river valley. The challenging conditions under which French expansion was unfolding during the last quarter of the nineteenth century demanded the presence of such experienced mediators. In this context, Hamat Ndiaye Anne's death in 1879 dealt a severe blow to Briere's plan of expansion, a loss summed up in the governor's expression of regret that over the years the administration had neglected finding suitable replacements for its tested but aging interpreters.¹³

Notwithstanding Hamat Ndiaye Anne's death, however, Briere was not completely bereft of competent personnel as he could still count on the service of Bou El Mogdad. In addition, the director of the DAP, Joseph Galliéni, a veteran in colonial affairs, was experienced enough to resuscitate the fledging *esprit des corps* within the administration evoked by the governor's remark. Thus despite Briere's misgivings about the shortage of experienced interpreters, his eastward expansion remained on track, especially as the Conseil Général in Saint-Louis could only censure but not veto his

¹² The most notable interpreter the *Service* employed at the turn of the century was Mahmadou Seck, who was an important mediator and cultural broker as the extended French control over Mauritania early in the twentieth century. See chapters 6 and 8 below.

¹³ ANS 2B 52, no. 523, Governor to Minister, 2 July 1879.

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decision in matters concerning the interior. Although the governor shared budgetary authority over Saint-Louis with the Conseil Général, he maintained a prerogative over operations in the hinterland.¹⁴

Briere's expansion toward the Niger meant he had to encounter the inheritors of the Umarian legacy, especially Amadu Sheku, the Sultan of Segou, who continued to wield substantial authority in the middle Niger. Aware of the threat the second-generation Umarian leadership could pose to French interests in Khaso, Briere commissioned Galliéni, late in 1880, to seek an accord with Amadu in Segou intended to avert a face-to-face military confrontation.¹⁵ Briere was well aware of the insecurity a war with the Umarian forces could generate in the Senegal valley. Nor did he want a situation in which engagement in war could shift the local balance of power in favor of France's rivals, especially Britain, at that time hovering in the Gambia River area. Weighing in on the implications of the situation, Kanya-Forstner points out that, "Briere was prepared to negotiate with the Tokolors only in order to deceive them, and in Galliéni he found a willing partner for the deception."¹⁶ From this perspective, Galliéni's visit to the Umarian capital of Segou was almost certainly a calculated move by Briere to lure the jihadists into complacency so that any military offensive launched by the administration against them

¹⁴ Robinson, "Intelligence, Planning and Expansion in French Imperial Senegal: The Direction des Affaires Politiques," Unpublished paper presented at the African Studies Association Conference, Washington DC, November 2004.

¹⁵ The governor hoped Galliéni would be able to negotiate a peace treaty that would also cover commercial relations with Amadu. For more on the Niger Plan and Galliéni's mission to Segou, see A. S. Kanya-Forstner, *The Conquest of the Western Sudan: A Study of French Military Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 72-83.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 74.

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would have a better chance of success. Indeed Briere was willing to try out any means possible to achieve his long-term goal.

Against this backdrop, Bou El Mogdad's death in October 1880 was another setback for Briere, a loss he lamented with much concern over the future of French expansion toward the Niger River.¹⁷ To the extent that his ultimate objective of connecting the Senegal and Niger rivers in a unified commercial network had yet to be accomplished, Briere acknowledged the difficulties created by the demise of Bou El Mogdad, whose mediations had helped build relations with local leaders, such as the Damel of Cayor and the Sultan of Segu. Bou El Mogdad's death, then, could not have occurred at a more inopportune time, particularly as the administration was contemplating getting a telegraph line between Saint-Louis and Medine to run through Abdul Bokar Kane's domain in Futa Toro. The shortage of seasoned interpreters was by then evident and stalling the progress of Briere's imperial project. Not surprisingly, the completion of the telegraph line in 1885 was more due to the effort of some influential métis and Muslim leaders in Saint-Louis than the intervention of any administrative interpreter, as Robinson observes.¹⁸

The incapacity of the DAP to function at its best at that time was not simply down to the absence of experienced and high-profiled interpreters, however. Instead, a combination of factors undermined the administration's efforts to perform more efficiently. To start with, the period witnessed frequent changes of governors, a trend reminiscent of the immediate pre-Faidherbian period, the 1840s and early 1850s, discussed in Chapter 3, when the government failed to settle for a single governor to

¹⁷ See Chapter 1, 1-2.

¹⁸ Robinson, "Intelligence, Planning, and Expansion."

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reign over an extended period. With the quick succession of governors, it was difficult for the administration to put together a sustainable plan of action. Besides, the emergence of municipal institutions in Saint-Louis in the early 1870s shifted administrative attention—at least for the time being—from territorial concerns to internal politics as Saint-Louisian politicians and officials got preoccupied with local elections. Finally, the intermittent outbreak of epidemics, especially cholera and yellow fever, did little to energize the DAP during that period.¹⁹ One problem after the other continued to challenge the DAP in ways French officials in Saint-Louis had not anticipated.

Perhaps the most controversial and sensational incident to hit the DAP during the last quarter of the nineteenth century was the Jeandet Affair, an episode historians have treated in detail elsewhere.²⁰ The analysis here, therefore, is only a condensed version of the narrative. With a military background that augured well for him to rise in the colonial hierarchy, Abel Jeandet joined the DAP in 1887 and became its director a few years later. Apparently eager to gain success within the shortest time possible, he took charge of a military contingent sent to Futa Toro in 1890 to subdue Abdul Bokar Kane. At that time, the administration was consolidating its territorial acquisitions following Lat Dior's death in 1886 and victory over Kajoor. For French officials in Saint-Louis, it made sense to build on that success and move into the middle valley and, possibly, farther.

¹⁹ Governor Pinet-Laprade himself died of cholera on 17 August 1869. For more on the yellow fever and cholera epidemics and other health issues in Saint-Louis, see Kalala Ngalamulume, "Urban Growth and Health Problems, Saint-Louis from the Mid Nineteenth Century to World War I," Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1996; also, "Keeping the City Totally Clean: Yellow Fever and the Politics of Prevention in Colonial Saint-Louis-du-Sénégal," *The Journal of African History* 45, 2 (2004), 183-202.

²⁰ See, for example, Manchuelle, "Metis et colons"; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 65-66, 109-111; *Chiefs and Clerics*, 152-155.

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In all likelihood, Jeandet saw the Futa Toro assignment as an ideal opportunity to boost his credentials. In Podor he scolded and demoted a sergeant of the *tirailleurs*, a punishment to which the latter reacted by assassinating Jeandet. The court martial commissioned by Governor Léon Clement-Thomas (1888-1890) found the sergeant and his two accomplices guilty of murder, leading to their summary execution in Podor, part of which was within the French sphere of direct control.²¹ The execution in turn ignited vehement criticism against the administration for, among other things, its hasty adjudication of the case and disregard for “human rights,” especially as Podor—at least its town square and fort—was within French jurisdiction. In the view of many local observers, mostly the residents of Podor and the métis and other Africans of Saint-Louis, the administration had not carried out the due process as it would have done in its coastal headquarters or metropolitan France. Thus the outcry over the Jeandet Affair continued unabated even after Clement-Thomas left office and Henri Félix de Lamothé became governor (1890-1895).

Aware of the ill feeling the miscarriage of justice—in the view of most Africans—had bred between the administration and local inhabitants, Governor de Lamothé attempted to defuse the tension by transferring officials at the DAP involved in the case to other French territories. He went on to reshuffle the personnel of the judicial service and the *Direction de l'Intérieur* (DI) so that those advocating recrimination against officials involved in the case had little to no scope to influence its outcome. In

²¹ Even though Podor was not within the “colony” of Saint-Louis, its fort and town square to all intents and purposes were a French domain. Thus those who criticized the administration for authorizing the execution were quick to point out the disregard for humane standards by the French officials. Gaspard Devès, the Saint-Louisian métis entrepreneur, among others, expressed indignation over what many considered the administration’s “perversion of justice” and sought to raise public opinion against it in Saint-Louis.

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fact de Lamothe received support from the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies, which persuaded the French court to drop the charges against the officials implicated in the case.²² The furor over the Jeandet Affair fractured relations between the administration and local inhabitants and ignited indignant reactions, suggesting that the imposition of French colonial rule in Senegal and its disempowerment of Africans did not deter them from confronting the administration whenever they felt aggrieved.

During de Lamothe's tenure, Martial Merlin (1860-1935), one of the most enigmatic French administrators to serve in Senegal, joined the DAP and later became its director in 1893. Like Jeandet before him, Marlin took charge of some important assignments as the administration consolidated its territorial gains from the 1890s on. Merlin had in his team of local personnel his trusted interpreter and confidant, Mahmadou Seck, who was fast becoming a remarkable diplomat, treaty-negotiator, and cultural broker by the turn of the century.²³ Fully aware of the significance of local support from different constituencies in both Saint-Louis and the interior, Merlin was quick to cultivate working relations with important Muslim figures, including the key interpreters of the administration. He sought to foster rapport with the Saint-Louisian civil society as well as improve diplomatic ties with the local leadership of the interior.

Merlin took a significant step to improve relations between the administration and local communities by grooming a new generation of chiefs who would be loyal to the

²² Robinson, "Intelligence, Planning, and Expansion."

²³ Mahmadou Seck was part of the Blanchet Mission of 1900 that was held in captivity in the Adrar in today's northern Mauritania while negotiations went on to secure the release of Blanchet and his colleagues. For more on the Blanchet mission, see Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, Chapter 8; Geneviève Désiré-Vuillemin, ed., "A propos du rapport de l'interprète Bou El Mogdad sur la mission dans l'Adrar en 1900," by Mahmadou Seck. *Mélanges et Documents, Revue d'Histoire des Colonies Françaises* 39 (1952), 103-126; A. Gruvel and R. Chudeau, *A Travers la Mauritanie Occidentale de Saint Louis à Port Etienne* (Paris: Larose, 1909).

French and serve their interests. For this reason, he recruited young men from various “royal” families in the river valley and central Senegal to be trained as future chiefs under the new colonial dispensation.²⁴ Merlin himself escorted the new recruits to Tunisia in 1893, where they enrolled in the franco-arabe *lycée* of Tunis. To all intents and purposes, this gesture was an affirmation of the seriousness the governor attached to his vision. Afterward, when Merlin returned to Senegal as Governor-General in 1919, his method of governance included the use of local chiefs in a form of indirect rule reflecting the system he had envisaged earlier on in his career.

Merlin’s competence and forceful personality was never in doubt from the beginning. After de Lamothe left the governorship in 1895, he became interim governor until Jean-Baptiste Chaudié (1895-1897, 1898-1900) arrived to begin his term as the first Governor-General of French West Africa.²⁵ At that time the administration was becoming paranoid about the growing reputation of Amadu Bamba, founder and leader of the Muridiyya order, whose support base was expanding rapidly among rural farmers and other underprivileged people in Wolof-speaking areas.²⁶ Although there was no concrete evidence indicating that Bamba was planning to launch a military jihad in the tradition of Al-Hajj Umar, Merlin and the DAP issued an indictment containing a detailed account of Bamba’s alleged plot. Using the official report as evidence of Bamba’s intention to

²⁴ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, Chapters 3 and 11; “Intelligence, Planning, and Expansion.”

²⁵ At its inception, French West Africa comprised four territories: Senegal, Guinea, Cote d’Ivoire and Dahomey, while the Haut-Senegal-Niger was still under a separate military administration. Saint-Louis became the administrative capital of French West Africa while its governor took the title of governor-general.

²⁶ For more on the Murids, see Babou, “Amadu Bamba;” *Fighting the Greater Jihad*; Cruise O’Brien, *Mourides of Senegal*; Cheikh Tidiane Sy, *La Confrérie sénégalaise des Mourides* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1969).

destabilize the region with his jihad, the administration exiled the Murid leader hastily to Gabon even before Paris had time to review the charges against him.²⁷

By the turn of the century when the administration was slowly extending its control over Mauritania, the DAP for all practical purposes was no longer functioning. Instead, a similar organ, the *Service des Affaires Musulmanes* (SAM), the brainchild of Governor-General Ernest Roume (1902-1907), had taken over its tasks. Armed with impeccable credentials as an “Islamist” with considerable experience in Algeria, Robert Arnaud became the head of the SAM, as mentioned above. Together with Xavier Coppolani (1866-1905), the architect of Mauritania’s “pacification” in the early 1900s, Arnaud authorized several missions, some of which Mahmadou Seck, the young but experienced interpreter, served as diplomat, military guide, and cultural broker. Chapter 6 will provide a detailed discussion of Mahmadou Seck’s career.

The DAP emerged as an important department to coordinate the military, diplomatic, and clandestine operations Faidherbe considered vital for the restoration of peace and stability in the lower and middle valley. Over time, other governors, especially Briere and his immediate successors, maintained the office and continued using it to extend administrative control over areas that came to constitute present-day Senegal by the late 1880s. The effectiveness of the DAP in influencing the outcome of events

²⁷ After seven years in exile, Bamba returned to Senegal in 1902. As news about his tribulations and fortitude spread, Bamba attracted more followers. Fearing a backlash from the presence of Bamba, the administration again decided to send him into exile, this time to neighboring Mauritania. There Bamba was placed under the supervision of Sidiyya Ba, a prominent marabout the French had courted as an ally for several years. While in exile, Bamba received a revelation in 1904 that inspired him to launch the Muridiyya order. The administration allowed Amadou Bamba to return to Jolof in 1907, where he was put under the close surveillance of two administrators. Still uneasy and unsure of what to do with Bamba, the administration ordered a third exile in 1910. Bamba stayed in exile until 1912 before returning to Bawol, where he was confined to his compound in Diourbel. For more on Amadou Bamba, see Babou, “Amadou Bamba,” also *Fighting the Greater Jihad*; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, especially Chapter 11.

depended on not only the priorities of the governor in office but also the personality of its director at any given time. Although the office was particularly efficient during Faidherbe's term, it became somehow dormant after he left office in 1865. And it was not until the 1870s, during the Briere administration, that the DAP once again emerged as a dynamic division. By the turn of the century, the DAP's functions for all practical purposes had passed on to the SAM, which became fixated on gathering information and clamping down on suspected radical Muslim marabouts and chiefs. At the same time, the office was involved in coordinating diplomatic and military missions as the administration pushed to extend French control over what became Mauritania early in the 1900s. In this regard, a number of interpreters, notably Mahmadou Seck, not only continued to accompany diplomatic, expeditionary, and military missions but also hosted prominent local leaders who visited Saint-Louis at the invitation of the administration.²⁸

4.2. *École des Otages to École des Fils de Chefs et des Interprètes*

In 1856, Governor Faidherbe took control of a group of "hostage" students who had been supervised by the Brothers of Ploërmel from Brittany, since 1847, and set up the *École des Otages* or School of Hostages.²⁹ But the school Faidherbe reconstituted as a training

²⁸ In 1898, Mahmadou Seck made a remarkable contribution to the administration's diplomatic efforts to consolidate its hegemony in southern Mauritania by bringing Sidiyya Baba, the influential Sufi leader, to Saint-Louis on an official visit. A few years later, Baba helped the administration, especially Henri Gouraud, to bring southern and central Mauritania under French control. ANS 1G 243; ANS 9G 14. For more on Sidiyya Baba, see Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, Chapter 9; see also Dudu Seck, "Mémoire de Bou El Mogdad (jusqu'en 1903), Bureau politique, Colonie de la Mauritanie, Archives de la République Islamique de la Mauritanie (RIM) E/2/124 cited in Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 271.

²⁹ The term *otage* or "hostage" in the context of nineteenth-century Senegal did not carry the negative connotation its contemporary usage conveys. Rather, the name of the school derived from the practice of hosting "hostages" or sons of chiefs and traditional elites from the interior in Saint-Louis so that they could get some form of French education. By entrusting the administration in Saint-Louis with their sons, local leaders were expressing goodwill toward the French and their willingness to cooperate with them for their mutual benefits. Since the early nineteenth century, leaders in Kajoor, Trarza, and other neighboring polities had sent their sons to Saint-Louis as *otages*. French officials hoped the students who

ground for interpreters, translators, and future chiefs turned out to be significantly different from that inherited from the Brothers of Ploërmel. In 1864, the *École des Otages* was renamed the *École des Fils de Chefs et des Interprètes* to reflect more accurately the school's most important purpose.³⁰ Among the students recruited were potential heirs to chieftaincies in areas that were of interest to the administration so that they could acquire some measure of French education, albeit elementary. Prospective chiefs with a certain level of French education, Faïdherbe believed, would offer the administration dedicated service, especially in governing polities where the traditional leadership could be intransigent about compromising its sovereignty. Indeed this could have far-reaching sociopolitical implications for a region where Islamization was gaining ground rapidly.

After taking over the supervision of the hostage students, the Brothers had found it difficult to handle them as effectively as they wished and as the administration expected.³¹ Thus the Brothers were hard-pressed to account for the unproductiveness of their efforts. Not only did the hostage students lack motivation, the Brothers complained, their disciplinary record left a lot to be desired. They disregarded the regulations of the school, attended classes irregularly, and most times arrived late and left before the end of

went through this schooling system would end up as intermediaries prepared to assist the administration in cementing relations with political entities outside Saint-Louis.

³⁰ ANS J2, Letter of a Naval Clerk, Teacher of Hostage Students, to the Governor of Senegal, August 1863. At the suggestion of Gayon, a French naval officer employed as instructor at the school, its name was changed from *École des Otages* to *École de Fils des Chefs et des Interprètes* in 1864.

³¹ The Brothers of Ploërmel first appeared in Saint-Louis in 1841. Before 1847, the administration had found it difficult to deal with the "hostage" situation for a number of reasons—limited finance, lack of trained teachers, poor housing facilities for the students, inadequate food, clothing and so on. Thus when the Brothers took up the responsibility of taking care of the hostage students, the administration expected them to deal with the situation more successfully. The sources do not indicate, however, whether from the onset the administration and the Brothers agreed on what kind of education the hostages should receive. This, as we shall see, later became a source of misunderstanding between the Brothers and the administration. See Georges Hardy, *L'Enseignement au Sénégal de 1817 à 1854* (Paris: Emile Larose, 1920).

school. After school they spent very little time studying at home, preferring instead to go out for long hours, only to return late at night. Indeed these were just some of the difficulties the head of the Brothers, Frère Etienne-Marie, complained about, which he admitted were making the situation untenable for him to continue supervising the hostage students.³² In truth, it was only because Governor Protet persuaded Frère Etienne-Marie to persevere that he continued taking charge of the *otages*.³³ By then, though, it was evident that the Brothers had become disillusioned about the future of the students, especially as their influence on them had been negligible up to that time. Despite the efforts of the Brothers, the Muslim *otages* did not readily embrace Catholicism.

It is quite plausible that the uninspiring attitude and indiscipline of the *otages* the Brothers bemoaned had gotten out of hand and made it more difficult for them to run the school as best they could. At the same time, it is likely that the Francocentric presumptions of the Brothers about Africans, especially those from the interior with no previous dealings with Europeans, influenced their attitude toward the hostage students. In such a case, it would have been difficult for the Brothers to win the confidence of the students and vice versa. Moreover, since the records we rely on for information about the comportment of the *otages* are those the Brothers themselves documented, we can only surmise that they may well have overblown the limitations of the hostage students. The extant records, however, do not reveal similar complaints about the indiscipline and lethargic attitude of the hostage students from 1856 right through the initial closure of the

³² F. Etienne-Marie à Supérieur général, 18 février 1854. Correspondance des frères directeurs, II, 72-73, cited in Bouche, "L'Enseignement," 327.

³³ Ibid, 328.

school in 1872. Instead, similar criticisms only resurface in one or two records of the early 1890s, after the school reopened, as we shall see below.³⁴

Evidence indicates that the conditions under which the hostages lived with their *habitant* host families in Saint-Louis before 1856 were not always the most ideal. Besides poor lodging facilities, the hostage students were most times neither cared for properly nor well fed by the *habitant* families. In a six-page letter addressed to Governor Auguste Baudin (1847-1850), Frère Euthyme, a concerned Brother, drew attention to the plight of the hostage students affirming, “The children are suffering”! He then went on to catalog a number of problems they faced, including insufficient food rations, which often forced the students to spend time fishing rather than studying.³⁵ Frère Euthyme complained also about the lack of proper clothing for the Muslim *otages*, who appeared in sharp contrast to Christian Saint-Louisian students usually dressed in European clothing, the apparent preference of the Brothers. It seems then that the Brothers inherited a problem-ridden institution that the available sources indicate was not entirely of their own making. Still, they found it more and more difficult to cope with the day-to-day problems supervision of the hostage students brought about.

Moreover, because the choice of education for the *otages* was a potentially controversial and delicate sociopolitical issue, the Faidherbe administration struggled to respect the Brothers’ freedom to teach strictly in accordance with their long-established Catholic orientation in education.³⁶ Conversely, the Brothers were dissatisfied with the

³⁴ The complaints came from Raoul Portes, a Saint-Louisian instructor employed to teach at the *École de Fils des Chefs et des Interprètes*, after it reopened in 1892.

³⁵ ANS J2, F. Euthyme to Governor, 6 January 1848.

³⁶ Although Faidherbe had a knack for persuading Catholic mission schools in Saint-Louis to open up their doors to Muslim students without pressurizing them to convert to Christianity, the Catholic

administration's efforts to compromise their pedagogical tradition by insisting on a less orthodox and secular kind of education, open to all, regardless of cultural background and religious creed. Perhaps it was inevitable that the Brothers and the administration would part ways in time over the future of the hostage students.

Although the impasse might suggest an ideological conflict between the administration and the Brothers, Faidherbe was more concerned about a backlash from the Brothers' Christian influence on relations with Muslims in Saint-Louis and the lower valley. Especially in Saint-Louis, this issue could have far-reaching political and social ramifications the governor was particularly sensitive about and anxious to handle in an auspicious manner. Even though the obvious reason for the administration to host the *otages* in Saint-Louis was to provide rudimentary French education for the sons of chiefs and traditional elites from the interior, the Brothers were inclined toward doctrinaire Catholic teaching and unaccustomed to observing restrictions on their proselytizing efforts. But as one might expect in a region where Muslims were becoming more conscious of their cultural and religious identity, the possibility of the Brothers inculcating Christian values in the hostage students did not go down well with Muslim parents. From Faidherbe's point of view, therefore, dealing with the hostage students required careful consideration and decisive resolution to ward off resentment from the Muslim community.

It may not be farfetched to infer that Faidherbe's qualms about the Brothers stemmed from his bullish republicanism and the wave of anti-clericism that was common

community in the town, especially the *métis*, were reluctant to make such an accommodation. The *métis* put pressure on missionaries to uphold their earlier practice of enrolling only students from Christian backgrounds. Such interference from both the administration and the local community did not meet with the approval of the Roman Catholic missionaries, however. See Barrows, "General Faidherbe."

among French government officials at that time. This tendency, Donal Cruise O'Brien suggests, was particularly strong among officers of the marine infantry who served in the colonies.³⁷ And the negative attitude toward Christian missionaries in French governmental circles often translated into "some degree of official preference to Islam as a means of expressing an anticlerical point of view," Cruise O'Brien concludes.³⁸ Even so, the extent to which such official anti-clerical propensity accounted for Faidherbe's gritty attitude toward the Brothers is difficult to ascertain.

What is more evident, though, is that Faidherbe did not want the Brothers' influence to register a negative impact on the good relations he was cultivating with Muslims in Saint-Louis and nearby areas in the river valley. Explaining his decision to take control of the hostage students from the Brothers, Faidherbe insinuated to the Minister of the Navy and Colonies what he considered their basic flaw: "The chiefs of the river [the Senegal] that confide their children to the governor of Senegal so that under his eyes they learn French, do not give them to be sent outside and be brought up in the Christian religion."³⁹ Faidherbe was quite right about the expectations of local chiefs and other dignitaries in the interior who chose to send their sons to Saint-Louis under the patronage of the administration. As Islamization gained momentum in the Senegal valley, it became more improbable that the chiefs and local personages would appreciate any form of "indoctrination" and conversion of their sons and heirs to Christianity.

Faidherbe therefore considered it essential to have a secular school that would not only cater to the specific needs of the administration but also appeal to the local

³⁷ Cruise O'Brien, "Towards an 'Islamic Policy.'"

³⁸ Ibid, 301.

³⁹ ANS 2B 31, Governor to Minister, 18 January 1856.

population, particularly Muslims. The governor believed this would prepare them to embrace French culture and conform more easily. Like most of his contemporaries in similar positions at that time, Faidherbe saw virtue in the French *mission civilisatrice* and believed in its redemptive powers for Africans brought under the French imperial umbrella.⁴⁰ In setting up the *École des Otages* in 1856 the governor also took into account political considerations, which only added more weight to the criticisms he levied against the Brothers:

It is necessary that these children be in Saint-Louis; that they know the governor, the directors of external affairs, and all the agents who serve as intermediaries between their homeland and us. It is necessary, as much as possible, that they accept us with affection and that their education is advanced very quickly, so that they are not in a school with a large number of pupils and where, not being Christian, they are regarded with disfavor.⁴¹

It is implicit in Faidherbe's statement above that the school run by the Brothers would not have fulfilled the long-term objectives he harbored for the hostage students. Accordingly, the governor hoped the new school would respond to "the necessity of forming an indigenous elite to help us in our civilizing mission and at the same time assure a supply of interpreters for the various languages of the country...."⁴² In other words, the school had to be functional to the extent that it would produce a literate crop of prospective African functionaries predisposed to assisting the French carry out the day-to-day functions of the administration.

Proclaiming the *École des Otages* a "special school" for training interpreters, a decree issued in 1861 affirmed its main objective, that is, "A special school which will

⁴⁰ For more on the French *mission civilisatrice*, see Conklin, *Mission to Civilize*.

⁴¹ ANS 2B 31, Governor Faidherbe to Minister, 18 January 1856.

⁴² Hardy, *Faidherbe*, 368-369.

bear the title of school of the hostages... and created in Saint-Louis to raise and educate sons or parents of chiefs of the countries indicated by the Governor, and young people who appear intelligent enough to become interpreters.”⁴³ Faidherbe was optimistic that the school would prepare the much-needed African interpreters, translators, and future chiefs for the administration to defuse local resistance, handle its increasing territorial acquisition, and normalize the shortage of local personnel.

To get the school running, the administration employed an instructor (2400 francs annually), an interpreter (600-1200 francs), a monitor (600 francs) and a launderer/cook (720 francs). As for the students, each was to receive a monthly stipend of 3 francs and daily rations of food and supplies, including candles and soap. In addition to lodging, the administration furnished the students with mattresses, bedcovers, and mosquito nettings. They also received school uniforms at the beginning of the school year and mid way through each year.⁴⁴

Limiting the initial enrollment of students to fifteen (increased to thirty by 1861), Faidherbe estimated the annual budget for the school at 7872 francs, an amount the Minister of the Navy and Colonies approved without much ado.⁴⁵ That the governor put the school under the direct supervision of the DAP was a statement of his intention to use the limited education Africans acquired to promote the French imperial cause, together with its ideological and cultural appendage, *la mission civilisatrice*. To this end, Faidherbe was keen to recruit students for the school from different states in the river

⁴³ Decree Announcing the Creation of Special School for Hostages, on 5 March 1861, *Bulletin administratif du Sénégal* 3 (Mars 1861).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ministre au gouverneur, no. 66, 22 février 1856. A.N.S.O.M. Senegal X 5c., cited in Bouche, “L’Enseignement,” 330.



Photo 4.1.

Ecole des Otages

Yoro-Diao

Demba

fils du chef Fara-Penda du Walo

fils du roi Sambala du Medine

Ousman, gardien des otages

A Group of Students at the *École des Otages*, ca. 1850s/1860s.

Source: Oumar Bâ, *La pénétration Française au Cayor* (Dakar: C.C.P., 1976).

valley and adjacent areas, and even farther. As he explained to the Minister of the Navy and Colonies,

It is necessary to have children of Oualo, Cayor, Fouta, all states of the River, [and] even the Maures for [the sake of] peace. It is necessary to teach to them our language for the convenience of our relations with their homeland. It is necessary to raise them so that they are good in something, [and] once they return home, that they respect and love us.⁴⁶

With students from such a broad stretch of geographic area in the Senegal basin, the governor hoped they would serve as catalysts to propagate French political and cultural influences in the long term.

⁴⁶ ANS 2B 31, Governor Faidherbe to Minister, 18 January 1856.

Indeed the initial group of students registered at the school hailed from different parts of the river valley, and even beyond. Denise Bouche has identified the specific localities from which they originated: Walo, Khasso, Futa Toro, Galam (in the upper valley between Bakel and Medine), Boundou and the Rivières du Sud.⁴⁷ Encouraged by the recruitment of students from this wide geographic space, Faidherbe anticipated that in the next two decades or so most chiefs in the region would be alumni of the school.⁴⁸ In fact, by 1859, almost all the major polities in the Senegal valley had at least one student attending the *École des Otages*. This trend, from Faidherbe's point of view, augured well for the future of French hegemony in the region insofar as over time ex-students of the *École des Otages* would be harbingers of French civilization in their respective places of origin and administrative posts.



Photo 4.2. At the *École des Otages* (renovated) in Saint-Louis. (Notice the plaque with the same portrait of the group of students above). Photograph by author (Saint-Louis, 24 September 2004).

⁴⁷ Ibid, 331.

⁴⁸ ANS 2B 32, Governor to Minister, 7 February 1857.

In terms of pedagogy, the school adopted a practical approach and focused mainly on teaching basic French (reading, writing, and grammar), arithmetic, and geography.⁴⁹ The students also learned Arabic, which at that time was an official language of communication, as explained in Chapter 1. Apart from Ousman, the interpreter employed as monitor, Bou El Mogdad, one of Faïdherbe's key interpreters, taught Arabic (and translation) at the school for a while after 1857. Since the students were from a Muslim background, learning Arabic was not expected to pose as much difficulty as French. For this reason, M. Gayon, the French naval officer in charge of French instruction and mentorship, proposed inviting native French-speaking pupils in Saint-Louis to the school so that they could help their African peers improve their grasp of French.⁵⁰

Of all the students who attended the *École des Otâges* in the 1850s and 1860s, few excelled like Yoro Diao (Photo 4.1 above), son of Madio Khor, a chief in Walo. Assuming that Raymond Rousseau is correct about Diao's date of birth, which he reckons was 1847,⁵¹ Diao would have been barely thirteen years old when the administration terminated his schooling and appointed him an administrator/chief of Faso in Walo. Soon after his appointment, however, the administration recalled Diao from his post. We may infer that his tender age, inexperience, and the daily demands of the job combined to overwhelm Diao, prompting the administration to relieve him of his duties. Quite remarkably, however, Diao wrote the first French account of Wolof oral traditions, first published in the *Moniteur du Sénégal*, the newspaper Faïdherbe launched to provide a

⁴⁹ Bouche, "L'enseignement," 332.

⁵⁰ ANS J2, Gayon to Governor, 6 August 1863.

⁵¹ Bouche, "L'enseignement," 337; Rousseau, *Le Sénégal d'autrefois: Etudes sur le Oualo*, 133-211.

propaganda outlet for the administration and a medium for publishing historical and ethnographic accounts about the local people, history, culture, religion and so on. In later years Diao's study became a priceless resource for different generations of colonial administrators and researchers to tap in writing about the Wolof.⁵²

Indeed Yoro Diao belongs to a category of intermediaries American historian Alida Metcalf has called representational go-betweens. In her study *Go-betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500-1600*, Metcalf explores the role of different groups of intermediaries in shaping relations between Portugal and Brazil.⁵³ In so doing, she draws on the work of literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt, who has looked at "representational practices" to reveal how different individuals, especially writers and sculptors, transmitted knowledge about the New World and Native Americans to European audiences.⁵⁴ Metcalf, however, broadens the meaning of go-between to include three categories. The first group she calls physical/biological go-betweens, that is, individuals who were responsible for creating material links between the New World, Europe, and Africa. These agents carried diseases and transported flora and fauna, including both wild and domesticated varieties, across the Atlantic world. And this group not only comprised European sailors, colonists, and passengers but also African and Native American slaves, some of whom were taken to Europe. The second group Metcalf calls transactional go-betweens, because they facilitated social interactions between different groups of people as translators, negotiators, and cultural brokers. Then the third type, the representational

⁵² See, for example, Barry, *Le royaume du Waalo*; Amadou Wade, "Chronique du Walo Senegalais," (commentary by Vincent Monteil), *Bulletin de l'IFAN*, 1961, 440-498; Babou, "Amadu Bamba," 46-47.

⁵³ Metcalf, *Go-betweens*.

⁵⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possession: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

go-betweens, includes those whose writings, drawings, mapmaking and oral traditions had a significant bearing on how Europeans and Native Americans viewed each other. In this context, Metcalf considers historians representational go-betweens insofar as they position themselves between the past and present to “interpret past cultures and represent them for modern readers.”⁵⁵ Thus, if we use Metcalf’s categorization, Diao was a representational go-between to the extent that his writing influenced generations of French administrators and scholars as well as their African counterparts searching for historical and ethnographic knowledge about Wolof society, culture, and history. Yet Diao was also a transactional go-between in the sense that his training at the School of Interpreters aimed to prepare him as a cultural mediator and political powerbroker.

In all, about one hundred and seventy students went through the *École des Otages* before the administration shut it down on 1 January 1872, citing financial reasons for its decision.⁵⁶ Although there were only twenty students enrolled in the school at the time, it seems the administration found the cost of running it high due to its budgetary constraints. Could French officials have reasoned that over the years the school had not been as productive as they anticipated to justify its continued existence? While the administration’s high expectations reechoed Faidherbe’s optimism about the school’s output, the rate at which students dropped out worried French officials. The poor retention rate prompted the French instructor M. Gayon to propose that officials determine the number of years students were expected to spend at the school from the

⁵⁵ Metcalf, *Go-betweens*, 11.

⁵⁶ Bouche, “L’enseignement,” 339-341.

start of their schooling rather than allow them or their parents to make such an important decision.⁵⁷

Despite the drawbacks, as Bouche observes, several students went on to serve the administration as interpreters and translators. In a number of instances, some of them in fact took up dangerous assignments with expeditionary and military missions. Mandaou, one of the two sons of the monitor at the school, for example, died of gunshot wounds sustained in combat while accompanying an expedition to Kong commissioned by the administration in 1895. Similarly, another former student, Silman Sily Penda, died when a contingent he was escorting came under attack at Goundam in 1894.⁵⁸ Although the archival records do not give exact figures about the number of interpreters who died while accompanying expeditionary or military missions, the known cases of casualties suggest that several more may have been caught in the line of fire. One of Bou El Mogdad's sons, Abdoulaye Seck, also an interpreter, was killed while accompanying a mission to Baol in 1887.⁵⁹

Some students who attended the school, however, opted not to take up positions within the administration and instead looked for alternative employment as *laptots* (deckhands), servants, commercial assistants, and so on. Yet the extant archival records do not provide the reasons behind the students' decision to forego administrative service. We may infer, therefore, that they may have been under pressure from their parents and relatives not to serve a non-Muslim administration. In such instances, the students would have preferred working with their relatives or other Africans rather than the work in the

⁵⁷ ANS J2, Gayon to Governor, 6 August 1863.

⁵⁸ Bouche, *L'Enseignement*, 339.

⁵⁹ See Chapter 3, note 27.

administration, especially as low-grade African interpreters who ranked below French employees of a comparable position. Alternatively, it could have been that students who did not perform well in school did not feel confident enough to assume administrative responsibilities. Hence, they may have preferred less demanding jobs outside the administration to escape the censure of French officials monitoring their daily performance.

The initial closure of the School of Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters in 1872 coincided with a period of administrative retrenchment and inactivity in the lower and middle valley that marked a sharp contrast to the aggressive expansionism of the Faidherbian era. And it was not until Governor Briere's term began in 1876 that the Senegal valley once again experienced a flurry of French activities. However, the *École des Fils de Chefs et des Interprètes* had to wait until 31 March 1892 before it reopened and started a new life as the *College des Fils des Chefs et des Interprètes*.⁶⁰ To be sure, Briere's lamentation following the death of the *cadi* and interpreter Hamat Ndiaye Anne in 1879 highlighted the shortage of experienced interpreters, a problem the School of Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters and the interpreter corps had been expected to sort out:

Since a certain number of years, we seem to have lost sight of the need to maintain a devoted personnel that can at some point provide substitutes for the aged interpreters and translators who have had occasion to prove, by outstanding services, their commitment to our cause and their fidelity in the performance of their duties.⁶¹

At a time the administration was pushing to strengthen its position in the middle valley, Briere's comment pointed to the need for an institution like the *École des Fils des Chefs*

⁶⁰ Decree (no. 129), A Propos Regulations of the College of the Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters, 27 May 1893, *Bulletin administratif du Sénégal* 5 (1893).

⁶¹ ANS 2B 52, no. 523, Governor to Minister, 2 July 1879.

et des Interprètes that would begin the training process for interpreters before they joined the administration. Despite Faidherbe's optimism early on, the school seemed to have lost its drive after his departure in 1865; its closure in 1872 undermined its objective, albeit temporarily, of preparing future African interpreters, translators, and chiefs. Against this backdrop, the school's reopening in 1892 marked a renewed effort by the administration to respond to the demands of the new colonial dispensation.

Still, the Conseil Général of Saint-Louis was for long obdurate about reopening the *École des Fils de Chefs et des Interprètes* for reasons we can only deduce. Financial constraints, the school's record of average success, and the priorities the Conseil Général set itself, among other matters, may have contributed in varying degrees to the foot-dragging over the school's restoration. Nor did the frequent changes of governors, especially after Briere's tenure, help to expedite the decision to reopen the school.⁶² In fact Briere's plea did not yield any immediate fruit considering that it took slightly more than a decade before the Conseil Général reached a consensus about reestablishing the school.

Reechoing the sentiments Briere had expressed early on, Governor Léon Émile Clément-Thomas (1888-1890) appealed to the Conseil Général in 1888 about the necessity of reopening the school: "The Direction of Political Affairs presently maintains, on its endowment, nine sons of chiefs in the different schools of the colony.... [It is necessary] to augment these resources in order to support us, or else recreate the old

⁶² As in the 1840s, the 1880s was plagued with rapid changes of governor to the extent that there were ten different governors between the tenure of Governor Brière and de Lamothe, who assumed office in September 1890 and remained there until May 1895.

school....”⁶³ The governor’s remark emphasized the shortage of funds, making it difficult for the DAP to continue supporting students whose responsibilities the School of Interpreters would have been more suited to undertake. Despite the rationale behind Clément-Thomas’ plea, however, the Conseil Général with its strong métis constituency had its own interests to look after and was less enthusiastic about allocating funds for the immediate reopening of the school. But by 1892, the colony’s budget had been separated from that of the “protectorate,”⁶⁴ and the arrangement seemed to have encouraged the Conseil Général to give its seal of approval for the school’s revival. Under its new name, then, the inauguration of the *College des Fils de Chefs et des Interprètes* took place on 31 March 1892.

Following the trend set by Faidherbe, the College continued under the supervision of the DAP, with Hamet Fall, a senior interpreter, overseeing administrative and disciplinary matters.⁶⁵ The instructor employed was Raoul J. Portes, a Saint-Louisian who had taught at the *l’école laïque* in Saint-Louis for several years. Yet we know little about Portes and his teaching career from the available evidence. As was the case during the first phase of the school in the 1850s and 1860s, a monitor and an Arabic instructor were included among the staff. Although the College did not undergo any radical transformation in terms of pedagogy, it offered a slightly wider range of subjects. Besides French, Arabic, and geography, other subjects, including history, elementary science,

⁶³ Conseil général. 1ère séance de la session ordinaire, 11 décembre 1888. Discours d’ouverture de gouverneur Clément Thomas. Comptes rendus imprimés, 7-10, cited in Bouche, “L’Enseignement,” 343.

⁶⁴ For administrative purposes, the Four Communes were separated from the rest of Senegal designated protectorate (after the 1880s), whose populace were regarded as *sujets*, in contrast to the *habitants* of the Four Communes who could aspire to French citizenship.

⁶⁵ Bouche, “L’Enseignement.”

agriculture (theory and techniques) and aspects of French and Islamic laws, became part of the curriculum.⁶⁶

Reminiscent of the late 1840s and early 1850s when the Brothers of Ploërmel supervised the hostage students, Raoul Portes, the instructor, attempted to run the College in a manner that did not resonate with the expectations of some officials, particularly Martial Merlin, the director of the DAP, and Hamet Fall, his confidant and interpreter, who kept a keen eye on the school. In contrast to Hamet Fall who preferred to have students brought up in a way that would not dissociate them from their African cultural heritage, Portes sought to stifle most traditional influences. From the outset, the instructor levied criticisms against most aspects of the school. This was evident in a report submitted to Governor de Lamoignon in which Portes not only catalogued the shortcomings of the school, but also made specific recommendations listed below, among others, in his conclusion:

1. The masters and the supervisor would be accommodated at the school;
2. It would be officially forbidden to speak ouolof;
3. Promenades would take place under the control and authority of the supervisor; [only] a day of exit a month [will be] granted;
4. The front entrance of the secondary school would always be kept closed....⁶⁷

From the above, it is fair to suggest that even though Portes may have had well-meaning intentions, his rigid approach appeared excessive in the estimation of the authorities. As evidenced in his report, the instructor embraced a stern attitude toward discipline. And as he put it, "A rigorous discipline is the fundamental condition to assure the proper

⁶⁶ Garonne, "Les personnels indigènes en A.O.F.," 26-27.

⁶⁷ ANS J7, Report on the Operation of the College of Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters, R.J. Portes to the Director of Political Affairs, 26 May 1892.

functioning of an institution of education and instruction; it is very essential.”⁶⁸ By itself, Portes’ approach to discipline may not have been enough to cause a rift between him and his superiors. Yet when combined with his condescending attitude toward the students and insensitivity to the administration’s expectations, these factors were enough to raise concerns among officials and parents of the children attending the school. Portes showed much disdain for African traditions, including Wolof, which apparently precipitated his fall out with Hamet Fall. In the end, Portes’s rigid stance on how the school ought to have functioned did not endear him to the administration, which did not take long to make a decision about his immediate future.

Although the circumstances surrounding Portes’ appointment as instructor do not come up in the archival records, it is clear that his credentials and outlook turned out to be inadequate to secure the job for him permanently at the College. At the beginning of the school year in 1894, therefore, Governor de Lamothe decided to send Portes back to the *l’école laïque* and replaced him with a younger French instructor, M. Garrigues. Despite insinuating some dissatisfaction with the governor’s decision, Portes had very little choice but to accept it:

During the meeting which you were kind enough to grant me last February 17, you indicated to me your intention, after the Easter holidays, to send me to the nondenominational school of Saint-Louis and to replace me at the College of Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters by the adjunct instructor Mr. Garrigues. Deeply respectful of the authority of my bosses, I honorably come to declare to you—as I have already done—that I am so inclined, and I accept the exchange of posts which you offered me.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ ANS J7, Portes to Governor, 14 March 1894.

After Portes' departure, however, the records do not indicate any dramatic changes at the College. Instead, courses continued to be taught much the same way as they had been before. Perhaps the only development worth mentioning was the introduction of four different levels within the school's curriculum: preparatory, elementary, middle and superior.⁷⁰

It is important to note that even though its name gives the impression of a post-high school institution to present-day readers and observers, the College in fact operated more or less at an elementary level. Most of the students had little to no background in Western education before joining the school. Teaching them thus aimed mainly at providing the rudiments of French education to help the students develop a certain level of literacy that would allow them to be functional within the administrative system. Because the students continued to be recruited mostly from the river valley and adjacent areas, they were familiar with the local languages and cultures in that area. This was expected to serve them well in carrying out their intermediary functions. Moreover, by the late nineteenth century, many chiefs in the river valley appeared to have been willing to send their sons to the College, most probably convinced that French political control over their territories was just a matter of time. Thus, it was up to them (the chiefs) to adjust to the shifting status quo. Not surprisingly, by 1895, the school had run out of space for new students, prompting a number of parents to write to the administration expressing their disappointment.⁷¹

⁷⁰ ANS J 7, Detailed Program of Studies at the College of Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters, 13 May 1903.

⁷¹ ANS J7, Samba Tianka *chef du canton* of Dimar to Hamet Coury, 6 March 1895; ANS J7, Birame Pathé N'diaye to the Director of Political Affairs, 25 February 1895.

Toward the end of the century, the administration was anxious to recruit more interpreters to meet the demands of its increasing territorial acquisition and administrative responsibilities. And to ensure the recruitment of the most promising candidates, the Director of Indigenous Affairs issued a circular in 1898, asking administrators in the various *cercles* to identify the best students in schools within their respective administrative units and send them to the College. The students were to be trained to respond to the “exigent circumstances” French officials believed would be difficult to handle with any degree of success in the absence of such local support.⁷² Recognizing the importance of training the right kind of indigenous interpreters and translators, therefore, the administration made all possible effort to recruit students deemed promising and most likely to succeed as functionaries.

Between 1892 and 1903, about sixty-nine students between age eight and twenty-five went through the College. Some of them ended up as chiefs after leaving the school, while others became secretaries and assistants to their fathers, uncles, or brothers, who were well placed in the political circles of their local communities, as Bouche explains.⁷³ At one time or the other, polities such as Walo, Jolof, Baol, Guidimakha and Dimar had chiefs who were former students of the College. Other ex-students took up positions as monitors before becoming instructors, interpreters, and chiefs. Still, some became employees of the Public Works Department and the Post and Telecommunication Department.⁷⁴ Again, because the archival records do not shed light on certain aspects of

⁷² ANS J1, Circular no. 447, The Director of Indigenous Affairs to Administrators of the *cercles* of Thiès, Sédhiou, Sine-Saloum, Bakel, Podor, 25 March 1898.

⁷³ Bouche, “L’Enseignement,” 352-353.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

the students' lives at the College, it would be revealing to know what determined their choice of jobs after they left the school.

In September 1903, the College became a branch of the *École Normal de l'A.O.F.*, which was renamed *École Normal William Ponty*, after Governor-General Amédée William Merlaud-Ponty (1908-1915). The school continued to produce a small number of interpreters up to the outbreak of World War I. After the war, in 1922, the merged College reverted to its previous name, *École des Fils de Chefs et des Interprètes*.⁷⁵ And under a new arrangement, the Lieutenant Governor of Senegal was to direct the school. Although the curriculum more or less remained the same, the duration of studies was fixed at four years. At the end of their four-year study, the students had to take a matriculation examination made up of both written and oral sections. While the written exam focused on French composition and French/Arabic translation, the oral included a portion on civic responsibilities, analysis of a letter written in French, and translation of another into Arabic.⁷⁶ A committee made up of an inspector of administrative affairs, the director of the DAP, the *cadi* of Saint-Louis, the superintendent of the school and an instructor of the final year class was responsible for assessing the matriculation exam. Although the administration discontinued the use of Arabic as an official language in 1911,⁷⁷ the school continued to teach it. But instead of employing a local instructor to teach the language, an Algerian with a diploma from the *Médersa*

⁷⁵ Decree of 27 May 1922, *Journal Officiel de l'A.O.F* (1922).

⁷⁶ Garonne, "Les personnels indigènes en A.O.F."

⁷⁷ William Ponty, "Circular no. 29, On the Subject of using French in Translations of Verdicts at Indigenous Tribunals and for Administrative Correspondence," Dakar, 8 May 1911, *Journal Officiel du Sénégal et Dépendances* (18 May 1911), 346-7.

supérieure d'Alger taught both Arabic and Islamic Law. By 1927, the school had become a part of the *École primaire supérieure Blanchot*.⁷⁸

Although scholars have lauded the creation of the *École des Otages* as one of Faidherbe's outstanding innovations, French officials in Saint-Louis had muted the idea of establishing a similar institution since the early nineteenth century. In fact, as early as 1823, the authorities in Saint-Louis had recruited some hostage students at the *École mutuelle*, where they learned to read and write basic French. Among the students were seven children from chiefs in Kajoor and Galam, while officials also tried to persuade chiefs in Trarza to send their children to the school.⁷⁹ The idea of having students from the interior in a boarding school of sorts in Saint-Louis, therefore, had mutated in various forms long before Faidherbe established the *École des Otages* in 1856. For Faidherbe, though, setting up the school was part of a wider scheme of reforms geared toward supporting French expansion inland. In his usual brazen manner, the governor believed that even the local African leaders had realized the importance of the school as French presence in the river valley became more visible: "The leaders of areas the most distant feel privileged to send their sons here, because they understand that very soon nobody will become chief without having being through the school."⁸⁰ Faidherbe had no doubt about the utility of the school for extending French political power in the river basin. To this end, the basic French education and instructions Africans received while training as interpreters and translators were a vital aspect of the administration's plan to utilize local intermediaries as an option to complement its use of military force.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 33.

⁷⁹ ANS 2B 8, Commander and Administrator for the King to Minister, 18 October 1823.

⁸⁰ Cited in P. Cultru, *Histoire du Sénégal du XVe siècle à 1870* (Paris: Larose, 1910), 365.

That the *École des Otages* survived in different forms well into the early 1900s suggests that French officials in Saint-Louis realized how important it was in their colonizing project in the Senegal region and West Africa in general. However, it is somehow ironic that when the school shut down in 1871, the main reason given for the decision was financial constriction. This would suggest that perhaps after Faidherbe's tenure, the school no longer ranked high on the administration's list of priorities. Indeed Faidherbe had invested time, energy, and financial resources in creating the *École des Otages*. And by setting up the interpreter corps within the administration as a corollary of the school, the governor intended to utilize the limited French education Africans received to facilitate his imperial program. Faidherbe's vision of efficient administrative machinery, then, looked beyond his tenure into the distant future. In this sense, the School of Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters and the interpreter corps exemplified such long-term ambitions.

4.3. Creating an Interpreter Corps

The French colonial archival records and official publications, such as the *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* (ASD) and *Bulletin administratif du Sénégal* (BAS), reveal an uneven placement of African interpreters in different branches of the colonial administration: political and local affairs, diplomatic relations, courts and tribunals, and military and exploratory missions.⁸¹ In whatever capacity interpreters served the administration, they were responsible for bridging the language and cultural gaps

⁸¹ The information official publications provide includes updates about the ranks and salaries of interpreters as well as awards and promotion they received. Again, one looks in vain for information about the personal lives of the interpreters in these official records. Still, we get a glimpse of the structure of the interpreter corps and the changes it went through during the period covered in the study. This section has benefited immensely from information gathered from these sources.

between French officials, African leaders, and the rest of the indigenous population. In carrying out their functions, interpreters had to draw on their language skills, social capital, and knowledge of local cultures, politics, and history to create understanding—although inadvertently misunderstanding at times—between the French and Africans.⁸² The multiple roles performed as diplomats, informants, treaty negotiators and guides for expeditions indeed validated them as “essential interpreters,” a term Sol Plaatje, the versatile South African interpreter, used for such intermediaries.⁸³

The institutionalization of the interpreter’s service as a full-fledged career within the administration in Saint-Louis started when Faidherbe modified the age-long practice of earlier governors, who hired interpreters only for specific assignments performed on a temporary basis.⁸⁴ Faidherbe was familiar with the functions of French military and indigenous interpreters in Algeria, since the 1830s, as well as the *mâitre des langues* in the Senegal River trade during the first half of the 1800s. These precedents gave him a reference point from which to create the interpreter corps in Saint-Louis. In Faidherbe’s long-term plan, the School of the Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters was to be a feedlot from which to obtain a steady supply of trained interpreters and translators for the

⁸² Brunschwig, *Noirs et Blancs*, 105-123; Osborn, “Circle of Fire”; Christelow, “Algerian Interpreters and the French Colonial Adventure”; Raymond Mopoho, “Statut de l’interprète dans l’administration coloniale en Afrique francophone,” *META* XLVI, 3 (2001), 615-626.

⁸³ Sol Plaatje himself was a court interpreter in South Africa in the early twentieth century. The phrase “essential interpreter” is the title of Plaatje’s account of his experiences as a government-employed interpreter whose fluency in several languages including Sechuana, Sesutu, Dutch, and English qualified him to serve the judicial system as a court interpreter. See Brian Willan, ed., *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997).

⁸⁴ Interpreters, especially those who operated within the commercial sphere, have a long history of serving as mediators between Europeans and Africans in the Senegambia region. They worked with different clients mostly on an ad hoc basis and were paid for specific transactions, missions, and expeditions, after which they looked for other assignments. See, Curtin, *Economic Change in Pre-colonial Africa*. Following the earlier trend of taking up temporary assignments, one of the interpreters featured in this study, Bou El Mogdad, worked for a number of governors during the late 1840s and early 1850s before he became a full-time employee of the administration after Faidherbe became governor in 1854.

administration. And the governor envisioned that his successors would benefit from his initiatives insofar as trained and competent African interpreters would be available to them to foster French interests in the region.

One major component of Faidherbe's reforms was formalizing the conditions of service for interpreters, including the procedures for recruitment, ranking, remuneration, promotion, dismissal and so on. A decree of December 1862⁸⁵ endorsed the first cadre of interpreters: "Interpreters employed under the service of the Director of Indigenous Affairs, district officers, and supervisors of posts will form a special body divided into titular interpreters and auxiliaries."⁸⁶ Interpreters with titles (employed permanently) included the highest rank of principal interpreter, followed by the first, second, third and fourth-class interpreters, respectively (Table 4. 1). As one may expect, their salaries reflected the pecking order, with the principal interpreter earning 3000 francs annually, while the fourth class interpreter received only 1000 francs, a third of the former's salary.

Rank	Number	Salary
Principal Interpreter	1	3000 francs
1 st Class Interpreter	2	2400 francs
2 nd Class Interpreter	3	1800 francs
3 rd Class Interpreter	6	1200 francs
4 th Class Interpreter	8	1000 francs
Auxiliary Interpreter, 1 st Class	n/a	800 francs
Auxiliary Interpreter, 2 nd Class	n/a	600 francs

Table 4.1. Table of the Salaries and Enlistment of Interpreters in Senegal in 1862.
Source: *Feuille Officiel du Sénégal*, 1 December 1862.

Grouped into two classes, the first and second, auxiliary interpreters received a salary of 800 francs and 600 francs, respectively. The governor himself appointed both the

⁸⁵ *Feuille Officielle du Sénégal*, 9 December 1862.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

interpreters with titles and their non-titled auxiliary colleagues. Unlike the titled interpreters who were permanent employees, however, the governor determined the number of auxiliary interpreters employed at any given time depending on the specific needs of the administration.

Such was the importance attached to the position of principal interpreter that candidates for the post were restricted to those who had served as first class interpreter for at least three years. As the decree stipulated, “No one can be appointed principal interpreter if he had not served as first class interpreter for three years.”⁸⁷ In all likelihood this criterion was to ensure that aspiring candidates for the position would have become familiar enough with the protocols and demands of the job before attaining the highest rank in the hierarchy of interpreters.

In the years immediately after Faidherbe left office in 1865, there were no remarkable changes in either the conditions of service for interpreters or the nature of their job. As the administration went through a period of retrenchment coinciding with an outbreak of cholera in 1868 that had severe consequences for Saint-Louis,⁸⁸ the momentum of French expansion petered out in the following decade. Although interpreters continued their functions during the governorships of Pinet-Laprade (1865-1869) and Valière (1869-1876), it was only after Governor Briere’s appointment in 1876 that the kind of territorial expansion Faidherbe had initiated two decades earlier once more came to life. After a period of relative inactivity, then, Briere, like Faidherbe before

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ngalamulume, “Urban Growth and Health Problems.”

him, understood the need for competent interpreters who could measure up to the challenges of the job.

The next important step taken to organize the interpreter personnel occurred in 1893⁸⁹ when Senegal was already under formal French colonial rule. The number of interpreters supervised by the DAP was only seventeen, a reduction of three from the twenty that had been maintained since 1862. Moreover, the ranks of interpreters were modified slightly so that instead of only one class of principal interpreter, there were now two with a salary difference of 600 francs between them (Table 4. 2). The other four classes of permanent interpreters did not change, however. While interpreters of the third class received a salary increase of 300 francs (since 1862), the other three classes got only a 200-franc increment each.

Rank	Number	Salary
Principal Interpreter, 1 st Class	2	3600 francs
Principal Interpreter, 2 nd Class	2	3000 francs
1 st Class Interpreter	2	2600 francs
2 nd Class Interpreter	3	2000 francs
3 rd Class interpreter	4	1500 francs
4 th Class Interpreter	4	1200 francs

Table 4.2. Table of the Salaries and Enlistment of Interpreters in Senegal in 1893.
Source: *Journal Officiel du Sénégal*, 27 November 1893.

As in the 1860s, the recruitment process remained competitive, and the ability to read and write both French and Arabic continued to be a prerequisite for the job of interpreter.⁹⁰ The governor was still responsible for making appointments for both permanent and auxiliary interpreters, even though he could consider recommendations

⁸⁹ *Journal Officiel du Sénégal*, 27 November 1893.

⁹⁰ Considering that many interpreters in colonial Senegal hardly spoke proper French, let alone write it well, it is doubtful whether the administration insisted on this requirement at all times when recruiting interpreters.

from the director of the DAP and other high-ranking officials. For promotion from one rank to another, a minimum of two years of service was required, with the only exception being the position of principal interpreter for which the mandatory three years as first class interpreter continued to be in effect.

Saint-Louis was the pacesetter for the rest of French West Africa as far as administrative reform and policy implementation were concerned. Hence, after the precedent set in 1862, a similar statute establishing a special interpreter corps took effect later in Benin, in June 1892, Soudan Française in November 1895, and Côte d'Ivoire in July 1897.⁹¹ The selection process and criteria for recruitment, however, varied slightly from one colony to the other. In Soudan Française, for example, a committee of administrative officials screened prospective interpreters and selected those that met the administration's needs. In Dahomey and Côte d'Ivoire, the expectation was that candidates should read and write French, at least at a basic level, and demonstrate the ability to communicate in no less than two local languages.⁹² In contrast to Senegal, however, knowledge of Arabic was not a criterion for employing interpreters in either Dahomey or Côte d'Ivoire.

The reorganization of the Government-General in French West Africa on 18 October 1904 had a significant bearing on the administrative setup, especially in relation to interpreters.⁹³ Still, it was not until 1910 that the Governor-general of French West Africa, William Merlaud-Ponty (1866-1915), began taking steps to establish a uniform

⁹¹ For details about administrative interpreters in other parts of French West Africa, see Garonne, "Les personnels indigènes en A.O.F.," 34-66.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ For more on administrative reforms concerning the Government-general in French West Africa, see Conklin, *Mission to Civilize*.

system for interpreters in the constituent colonies. To this end, he looked into their conditions of service, including recruitment, promotion, ranking and discipline, among other matters.⁹⁴ Between 1910 and 1914, Ponty enacted a number of statutes to establish a standardized system for the interpreter corps in the different colonies: Côte d'Ivoire, 22 November 1910; Niger, 9 April 1912; and Dahomey, 25 February 1914.⁹⁵ By the early 1920s, when the study ends, the administration of the Government-general had put in place a common standard for its interpreter personnel across French West Africa.

Rank	Salary
Principal Interpreter, 1 st Class	7000 francs
Principal Interpreter, 2 nd Class	6000 francs
1 st Class Interpreter	4500 francs
2 nd Class Interpreter	3800 francs
3 rd Class Interpreter	3200 francs
4 th Class Interpreter	2500 francs
Auxiliary Interpreter, 1 st Class	2000 francs
Auxiliary Interpreter, 2 nd Class	1700 francs
Auxiliary Interpreter, 3 rd Class	1500 francs

Table 4.3. Table of the Ranks and Salaries of Interpreters of Senegal in 1920.
Source: *Journal Officiel de l'A.O.F.*, 31 August 1920.

The hierarchy of interpreters in 1920 comprised two classes of principal interpreters followed by the first, second, third and fourth-class interpreters. In addition, there were three classes of auxiliary interpreters (Table 4. 3). A decree of 27 May 1922, however, created a slightly modified hierarchy of interpreters comprising two grades of chief interpreters, five grades of principal interpreters, and five grades of interpreters.⁹⁶ By then the administration had decided to eliminate the auxiliary class that had existed up to 1920, as indicated above. The official records available in the French colonial archives

⁹⁴ Decree of Upper Senegal and Niger, 23 August 1910, *Journal Officiel de l'O.A.F.*, 1910.

⁹⁵ For details of these decrees, see Garonne, "Les personnels indigènes en A.O.F.," 53-58.

⁹⁶ Decree of 27 May 1922, *Journal Officiel de l'O.A.F.*, 1922.

do not explain the rationale behind the administration's decision to do away with the auxiliary ranks. Yet we may infer that, most likely, the administration did not wish to continue paying functionaries who had little to no official duties to perform on a regular basis. With the colonial state well entrenched by the early 1920s and French officials streamlining their personnel and functions, auxiliary interpreters were in a difficult position to keep their place in the administration. After World War I, the conditions for recruiting interpreters in French West Africa grew more selective and rigid, especially as French citizenship and military service became part of the criteria for employment.⁹⁷

Although the administration at times experienced difficulties recruiting interpreters of the right caliber, it was vital for those employed to communicate in the language/s of the people in whose locality they performed their duties. To be sure, majority of the interpreters who worked in the lower and middle valley could speak one or more of the dominant local languages, such as Wolof and Pulaar. In addition, because they had spent some time in Quranic schools during their formative years, most of them could read and write at least basic Arabic.⁹⁸ Moreover, several interpreters could speak French reasonably well, although fewer were able to read and write it fluently. Those who became key interpreters, however, usually had a good understanding of spoken French and could write it well enough to perform their official duties. Not surprisingly, they handled important assignments for the administration.

⁹⁷ See Garonne, "Les personnels indigènes en A.O.F.," 59-61.

⁹⁸ A number of interpreters attained a high level of Arabic because they studied in Quranic schools in southern Mauritania supervised by *zwaya* clerics of the Alwâd Daïman clan who were known in the region for the excellent scholarship. Among others, Bou El Mogdad and his son, Mahmadou, were protégées of the Alwâd Daïman clerics.

The DAP and the Arabic translation service, for example, employed interpreters designated Arabic translators who were responsible for translating officials documents, including correspondence between the administration and local leaders.⁹⁹ The archival documentation contains a substantial amount of original letters (written in either French or Arabic) and their translated versions, which bear the signatures of interpreters who worked at the Arabic translation service at one time or the other. In most instances, the letters translated were those considered important by a senior official, presumably the director of the DAP, who supervised the Arabic translators. Among such letters were those from local chiefs and Muslim leaders, either allies or adversaries of the administration, concerning political and religious issues in their localities, relations with French officials, and inter-state and ethnic conflicts, among other matters.¹⁰⁰

The official reason given in the *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* for choosing Arabic as an official language for correspondence and courtrooms reveals the pragmatic approach French officials adopted by weighing their chances of success with different options: “Arabic is, in effect, the only ‘written’ language used by Muslims of the Senegambia. Every native leader—even when he has no knowledge of Arabic—has besides him a secretary who writes in this language his correspondence with Europeans as well as with the other blacks.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, even if local chiefs happened to be literate in

⁹⁹ At different times of their careers, Hamat Ndiaye Anne, Bou El Mogdad, and another interpreter, Tiécoro, served as Arabic translator attached to the Arabic translation service during Governor Faidherbe’s term of office. Moreover, Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad served as *cadi* of the Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis, although the latter served only briefly before his death in 1880. This suggests that their knowledge of the Quran and Arabic was good enough for the Muslim community of Saint-Louis to accept them as credible judges.

¹⁰⁰ ANS 13G 139, Al-Hajj Umar to Governor, 25 June 1847; ANS 1D 13, Damel to Governor, 19 April 1859.

¹⁰¹ *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances 1894-1895*.

Arabic, they usually had close ties with Muslim clerics or scribes, who assisted them with their correspondence and financial records. From the French viewpoint, therefore, it made perfect sense to employ Arabic as an official language in the Senegal region. This would facilitate exchanges between the administration and political leaders as well as marabouts. In light of the long-standing history of Islamic influence in the area and the growing momentum of Islamization at that time, interpreters with some knowledge of Arabic and French were essential interlocutors for both the French authorities and African population.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Saint-Louis was already cultivating a distinct Muslim character of its own.¹⁰² Muslim *habitants* of the town had succeeded in petitioning the administration to allow the construction of a mosque (apparently with subsidy from the administration) in the Muslim quarter of the island in 1848.¹⁰³ Moreover, they gained access to Islamic law with the creation of the Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis in 1857, as the next section will reveal. In this context, interpreters and translators with a working knowledge of both French and Arabic were not only important in diplomatic and political affairs but also in the judicial branch of the administration.¹⁰⁴ Sure enough, the key interpreters Faidherbe and his successors relied on were well-respected Saint-Louisian Muslims who had gone through Quranic schools,

¹⁰² Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 101-105.

¹⁰³ Boilat, *Esquisses sénégalais*, 207-208; Frédéric Carrère and Paul Holle, *De la Sénégambie française* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1855), 14;15; Anne Raffanel, *Voyage dans le pays des Nègres*, 2 vols. (Paris: Chaix et Cio, 1856), 246-248.

¹⁰⁴ In 1911, however, the administration decided against the continued use of Arabic as an official language in Senegal. Thereafter, French was the sole language used for administrative purposes. In all probability this decision had a lot to do with not only the growing number of Africans who could now speak and/or write at least elementary French but also the threat—perceived or real—French officials believed some Islamic groups such as the Tijaniyya posed to the colonial regime.

acquired a respectable standard of Arabic, and learned French well enough to communicate directly with their French counterparts. At the same time, even less influential interpreters could create their own niche in the local court system they served.

No doubt the judicial branch of the administration needed interpreters to serve in courts and tribunals. As far back as the early 1840s, one or two Muslim notables in Saint-Louis had served the Court of the First Instance in an advisory capacity to assist French magistrates who presided over cases involving Muslims.¹⁰⁵ By contrast, the creation of the Muslim Tribunal in Saint-Louis was a significant development insofar as Hamat Ndiaye Anne, the *cadi* of the tribunal, and Bou El Mogdad, the assessor, were given the mandate to act autonomously.¹⁰⁶ Getting the administration to establish the tribunal was an official recognition of the growing sense of Islamic identity and collective force among Muslims in Saint-Louis. To be sure, prominent Muslim interpreters within the administration assisted in pressing their case.

Rank	Number	Salary
1 st Class Interpreter	1	1200 francs
2 nd Class interpreter	1	1000 francs
3 rd Class Interpreter	1	800 francs

Table 4.4. Table of Interpreters of the Judicial Service of Senegal in 1860.
Source: *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances*, Decree of 18 May 1860.

Interpreters who served the judicial branch of the administration were assigned work in the Muslim tribunal. A decree of 18 May 1860 confirmed three positions for judicial interpreters divided into three classes, each with its corresponding salary: a first

¹⁰⁵ Bernard Schnapper, *Les Tribunaux Musulmans et la politique coloniale au Sénégal (1830-1914)*, *Révue Historique de Droit Français et Étranger* 1 (1961): 90-128.

¹⁰⁶ *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances*, 1860, 78.

class interpreter received 1200 francs, the second, 1000 francs, and the third, 800 francs (Table 4. 4).¹⁰⁷ Although there was no mention of the other conditions of service (which we may presume corresponded with those for other administrative interpreters), the decree stipulated the ability to communicate in Wolof as a criterion for employment. Because Wolof was the most widely spoken local language in Saint-Louis and its environs, including Walo and Kajoor, its choice as a required language made perfect sense to the French.

Considering that the criteria for employing interpreters in the judicial service included knowledge of specific local languages besides Wolof and Arabic, their position was more demanding than it was for interpreters in other departments. One of the three judicial interpreters was responsible for Arabic translation, another for Pulaar, and a third took charge of Soninke and Malinké or Bambara. As was the case with other interpreters, the governor appointed court interpreters and could consider recommendations from the head of the judicial service. The latter, though, was responsible entirely for rotating interpreters between the various courts and tribunals.¹⁰⁸

The 1890s witnessed some changes in the hierarchical structure of interpreters within the judicial service. In contrast to the decree of 1860, the 30 December 1890 decree¹⁰⁹ was more specific about the conditions of service for interpreters. Instead of just three grades, the decree confirmed the new pecking order as follows: two classes of principal interpreters, with the first class earning 3600 francs and the second 3000 francs.

¹⁰⁷ Decree of 8 May 1860, *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances*, 1860.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Decree of 30 December 1890, *Journal Officiel du Sénégal*, 1890.

Below the two classes of principal interpreters, the first, second, and third classes received a salary of 2400 francs, 1800 francs, and 1500 francs, respectively (Table 4.5).¹¹⁰ While the salary difference for the first four classes was 600 francs between each class, the difference between the second and third class interpreter was only 300 francs. In all, the remuneration for interpreters of the judicial branch was at par with those of other branches of the administration, including the DAP. At a time the French were experimenting with “assimilation” in the legal system through a “unification of jurisdictions” involving French magistrates who administered Islamic and customary law for Muslims, as Christelow observes, local judicial interpreters were especially valuable in courts and tribunals.¹¹¹

Rank	Number	Salary
Principal Interpreter, 1 st Class	1	3600 francs
Principal interpreter, 2 nd Class	1	3000 francs
1 st Class Interpreter	1	2400 francs
2 nd Class Interpreter	1	1800 francs
3 rd Class Interpreter	1	1500 francs

Table 4.5. Table of Interpreters of the Judicial Service of Senegal in 1891.

Source: *Journal Officiel du Sénégal*, 30 December 1890.

Bearing in mind their potential for facilitating or subverting the French imperial project in the Senegal valley, Muslim interpreters faced a daunting task walking on a political tightrope in performing their intermediary roles. Notwithstanding their language skills and ability to traverse the colonial divide, interpreters were ordinary men often driven by their own ambition and self-interests. Thus dealing with their different, and sometimes conflicting, interests was a dilemma colonial interpreters and similar intermediaries faced now and again during their career. The challenge for Muslim

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Christelow, “Muslim Judge and Municipal Politics,” 6.

interpreters in colonial Senegal was even more apparent because religion and politics were too often interlaced. Their personal aspirations besides, they had to be concerned about their affiliation with the administration, their performance on the job, and their obligations to their local community. In short, Muslim interpreters had difficult choices to make while mediating the hegemonic relationship between their French employers and African kinfolk, a complex engagement that involved navigating the crosscurrents of French imperial and local pressures.

4.4. The Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis

The clamor by the *habitants* of Saint-Louis and Gorée (and later Rufisque and Dakar) to have the same legal and political rights as French citizens in the metropole was a sensitive issue the Faidherbe administration could not afford to ignore.¹¹² By then Muslims in Saint-Louis were increasing in number and becoming more aware of their collective identity and vocal about their civil liberties.¹¹³ The administration thus faced the challenge of sorting out the problem about the “special status” of Muslims with prudence or risk storing up local agitation for the future. Muslim *habitants* in Saint-Louis were demanding an Islamic court to adjudicate their civil cases involving marriage, divorce, and property inheritance, among other matters. Bernard Schnapper explains that Muslim campaigners in Saint-Louis cited Algeria as a point of reference “to demand

¹¹² There was some ambiguity, however, surrounding the granting of French “citizenship” and extending the legal and electoral rights of citizenship to the Muslim *habitants* of Senegal and its dependencies. The problem seemed to revolve around the fact that qualified Muslim *habitants* could acquire French citizenship, but as French citizens, they would get no special privileges regarding their personal status. See Johnson, *Emergence of Black Politics*; Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1928); Dominique Sarr and Richard Roberts, “The Jurisdiction of Muslim Tribunals in Colonial Senegal, 1857-1932,” in Kristin Mann and Richard Roberts, eds., *Law in Colonial Africa* (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH, 1991), 131-145.

¹¹³ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 79-80, 101-105.

from the French government the same legal guarantees that Algerians had then.”¹¹⁴ They pleaded to the French authorities to recognize their legal and political rights as Muslims but not to subject them to French laws that did not resonate with Islamic laws.

Schnapper sums up the case of the Muslim *habitants* succinctly,

They asked to be granted the rights accorded to the Muslims of Algeria: namely, that it be recognized and decreed that in no case would the Muslims of Saint-Louis be subject to civil laws that were contrary to their religious laws; and that to accomplish that there should be constituted a court made up of their religious leaders, to whom would be referred disputes that are both religious and civil in nature.¹¹⁵

Indeed various decrees enacted earlier in the nineteenth century and the introduction of French magistrates to handle Muslim cases, especially during the 1840s, had contributed to the rising expectations of Muslim *habitants* about their place in Saint-Louisian society and the wider French Empire.¹¹⁶ As early as 1830, a local decree had approved application of the French Civil Code in Senegal and its dependencies, which signified an official endorsement that the *habitants* of Saint-Louis and Gorée were entitled to the same legal rights as French citizens. The decree made it clear that all “persons born free and living in Senegal or its dependencies will have the rights of a French Citizen as guaranteed by the Civil Code.”¹¹⁷ In granting the legal rights of French citizens to Muslim *habitants*, the enactment presupposed the same set of laws would

¹¹⁴ Bernard Schnapper, “Les tribunaux musulmans et la politique coloniale au Sénégal (1830-1914),” *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 39 (1961), 90-128, 91.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 94.

¹¹⁶ Saliou Mbaye, *Histoire des institutions coloniales française en Afrique l'Ouest, 1816-1960* (Dakar: Imprimerie Administratif, 1990).

¹¹⁷ Cited in Sarr and Roberts, “The Jurisdiction of Muslim Tribunals,” 133; Johnson, *Emergence of Black Politics*, 79; Lamine Guèye, *Etapes et perspectives de l'Union française* (Paris: Editions de l'Union française, 1955), 30.

apply to all concerned regardless of religious, cultural, and geographic backgrounds.

From this perspective, we may infer that French policymakers at that time neglected the fact that the *habitant* population in Saint-Louis comprised a growing number of Muslims, a social and demographic factor that could have far-reaching political, religious, and legal implications for the applicability of French citizenship in the Four Communes.

On 24 April 1833, a similar decree reaffirmed the principles of its 1830 precedent stating, "Every free person possesses, in the French colonies, civil rights and political rights under the conditions prescribed by law."¹¹⁸ Although the decree by no means granted French citizenship to the *habitants*, many among them interpreted it as an official recognition of their status as French citizens. Just like the 1830 decree, the edict presumed the universality of French law, failing to take into account the peculiar circumstances of Muslim *habitants* who preferred Islamic laws.

Against this backdrop, Schnapper argues that the controversy surrounding the Muslim Tribunal in Saint-Louis, which Faidherbe sought to resolve in 1857, had its roots in the French legal declarations of the early 1830s.¹¹⁹ I subscribe to Schnapper's view because even if French policymakers had thought of putting a benign face on the policy of assimilation, they did so without careful consideration of its political, legal, and cultural ramifications. As a result, they failed to foresee a situation in which certain Muslims could qualify for French citizenship but still prefer to preserve their religious and cultural heritage. In this regard, the statutes above probably would not have aroused the kind of acrimonious debates they spawned had it not been for the budding political

¹¹⁸ Sarr and Roberts, "The Jurisdiction of Muslim Tribunals," 142.

¹¹⁹ Schnapper, "Les tribunaux musulmans."

awareness of the Muslim *habitants* in Saint-Louis. Although they welcomed the idea of acquiring the legal and political rights of French citizens, the Muslim *habitants* were inclined toward retaining their Islamic heritage and identity.

Arguing that the urban space French colonial rule created was crucial in molding the peculiar identity of the Muslim *habitants*, Mamadou Diouf emphasizes that they adopted a positive and “universalist” attitude, which put them in good stead to bargain with the colonial authorities rather than merely capitulate to their subordinate position as a foregone conclusion.¹²⁰ From this point of view, the Muslim *habitants* did not simply use their Islamic culture as a defensive mechanism against French cultural assimilation. Instead, they carved out their own identity with sensitivity to the specific political and socioeconomic transformations brought on by French colonial rule. According to Diouf,

The deep significance of Muslim religion and practices in the everyday life of the *originaires* [*habitants*] was manifested in the stubborn quest for a special status from the moment the decision was made in 1840 to apply the metropolitan Civil Code and Penal Code in the colony. While there was now an explicit questioning of traditional marriages and rules of inheritance, in the domain of the family, however, one observes an informal preservation of Islamic laws.¹²¹

In effect, the Decree of 1840 endorsed the application of the French Civil Code in Senegal and its dependencies. Accordingly, all freeborn persons residing in Saint-Louis and Gorée were entitled to the rights of French citizens to the extent that the Civil Code sanctioned them.¹²² Even so, Muslim *habitants* did not do away with their demands for formal recognition of an Islamic court to arbitrate their civil cases. In this regard, Diouf disagrees with the conventional view that French cultural imposition through assimilation

¹²⁰ Diouf, “French Colonial Policy of Assimilation.”

¹²¹ Ibid, 686.

¹²² Ibid. 687; Etienne Leroy, “Le Code civil au Sénégal,” in M. Doucet and J. Vanderlinden, *La Réception des systèmes juridiques: Implantation et Destin* (Brussels: Bruylant, 1994), 298.

(both policy and praxis) deprived the *habitants* of an authentic identity. For the Muslim *habitants*, then, in spite of any advantages that could accrue from the acquisition of French citizenship, they considered official approval of an Islamic court a logical outcome of their unusual situation. Indeed Saint-Louisian Muslims, including the interpreters the study investigates, had no qualms about the “legitimacy” of their cause.

For the Muslim *habitants*, like other Muslims elsewhere, Islamic law (*Sharia*) was inseparable from faith because it is rooted in the Quran. For this reason, the sanctity of marriage and family life could not be divorced from Islam. Whereas the French Civil Code evolved within a tradition centered on the legal separation of church and state, Islamic law derived its authority from religion because the Quran is its source. This fundamental difference between the two forms of jurisprudence made the extension of French political and legal rights to the Muslim *habitants* more complex and problematic.

Before 1857 Muslim *habitants* felt a sense of injustice and dispossession because the administration’s response to their demands fell short of their expectations. They questioned, among other concerns, the rationale behind appointing French officials in Saint-Louis to preside over cases for Muslim *habitants*, while some local Muslim personages played only an advisory role in the process.¹²³ Most Saint-Louisian Muslim *habitants* remained skeptical about the administration’s sincerity to deal head-on with their demands. In hindsight, the 1840 ruling that permitted professional French magistrates to preside over the Court of the First Instance did very little to assuage the

¹²³ Mbaye, *Histoire des institutions coloniales*; Sarr and Roberts, “The Jurisdiction of Muslim Tribunals.”

fears of the Muslim *habitants*, especially as *cadis* could only participate in an advisory capacity in court proceedings involving Muslims.¹²⁴

Christelow argues cogently that this French approach to resolving the problem in Senegal was grounded in the policy of assimilation, “the judicial corollary of which was the ‘unification of jurisdictions,’ so that Islamic or customary law would still be applied, but by French magistrates.”¹²⁵ In their attempt to forge a sort of compromise legal framework, policymakers in Paris experimented with the idea of using French magistrates as custodians of Islamic law, which they themselves did not understand fully and had no confidence in. Such an anomaly was bound to catch the attention of the Muslim *habitants*, who expressed misgivings about ad hoc arrangements that only reaffirmed the reluctance of the French authorities to deal with their problem with conviction. Yet even as the administration was reeling under the tension created by the situation, it showed little inclination of yielding to the demands of Muslim *habitants* as they persisted in pressing their case.

Still, the efforts of the Muslim *habitants* appeared to have paid off when Governor Baudin convened prominent Muslims in Saint-Louis, in December 1847, to form a consultative committee that would advise French officials presiding over Muslim cases.¹²⁶ Baudin’s initiative at least demonstrated that he was willing to engage in dialogue with Muslim leaders to help find a practical solution to the problem. Although French citizens in the metropole were reluctant to concede that Muslims in Saint-Louis

¹²⁴ In addition, a court of appeal was set up. Mbaye, *Histoire des institutions coloniales*.

¹²⁵ Allan Christelow, “The Muslim Judge and Municipal Politics in Colonial Algeria and Senegal,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, 1 (1982), 6, 3-24.

¹²⁶ Sarr and Roberts, “The Jurisdiction of Muslim Tribunals.”

should have recourse to Islamic law, the administration found it difficult to disregard their demands without considering a possible backlash that could work against French interests in the region.

A decree of 22 April 1848 had been expected to set up a more authoritative Islamic judicial body to replace the consultative committee Governor Baudin convened in the previous year.¹²⁷ However, the revolutionary events in France that year derailed the decree initiated by the Minister of the Navy and Colonies. Thus, after the Second Republic replaced the Orleanist monarchy, the proposed plan to set up a more authoritative Muslim body failed to materialize. It would appear nonetheless that Paris was beginning to realize the need to deal with the problem concerning the Muslim body politic in Saint-Louis more resolutely, however begrudgingly. Yet in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution, the new government in Paris pledged support for the Muslim *habitants* but did not respond to their case with the same level of urgency as it did to the issue of slavery in Senegal, as shown by the Emancipation Decree of 27 April 1848.¹²⁸

In consequence, a major challenge Faiherbe faced was how to deal with the Muslim *habitants* to avert future conflicts that might have unforeseen results for the administration. The governor's immediate response to what had become a perennial problem for the French authorities was a decision to set up a consultative committee on Muslim law in 1854. Despite the reluctance of Paris to make allowance for Islamic law in

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ M. Gueye, "La fin de l'esclavage à Saint-Louis et il Gorée en 1848," *Bulletin d'IFAN* 28 B, 3-4 (1966); Roger Pasquier, "A propos de l'émancipation des esclaves au Sénégal en 1848," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 54, 194-97 (1960), 189-208.

its legal framework, Faïdherbe realized early on that setting up an authoritative Islamic institution to deal specifically with Muslim concerns would have to come sooner than later. Hence the decree issued in 1857 setting up a Muslim Tribunal for Saint-Louis¹²⁹ empowered the court to deal with “jurisdiction...in matters of family law, inheritance, and related civil matters.”¹³⁰

From the standpoint of the Muslim *habitants*, the tribunal represented the administration’s affirmation of their “corporate” identity as distinct from that of the Christian métis/African and French communities in Saint-Louis. It marked the culmination of a struggle started more than a decade earlier when the Muslim *habitants* had started to petition the administration to authorize the creation of a separate Islamic court for Muslims. As indicated earlier, Saint-Louisian Muslims had been quick to cite Algeria as a working example of French endorsement of the legitimacy of Islamic courts.¹³¹ Hence, besides giving the Muslim *habitants* recourse to Islamic law, the tribunal was an important concession from the administration even as the issue aroused virulent indignation in France.

Michael Crowder has observed that, “Many Frenchmen felt it quite illogical that an African with four wives could be a citizen.”¹³² Although sanctioned by the Quran, the Muslim custom of polygyny that allowed men to marry up to four wives was at odds with

¹²⁹ “Decree Promulgating the Imperial Decree of the 20 May 1857 which Created a Muslim Court in Saint-Louis,” 25 June 1857, *Moniteur du Sénégal* 66, 30 June 1857, 2-3.

¹³⁰ Sarr and Roberts, “The Jurisdiction of Muslim Tribunals,” 134.

¹³¹ Christelow, “Muslim Judge and Municipal Politics”; Roger Pasquier, “L’influence de l’expérience algérienne sur la politique de la France en Senegal,” in *Perspectives nouvelles sur le passé de l’Afrique Noire et le Madagascar—Mélanges offerts à Hubert Deschamps* (Paris: La Sarbonne, 1974), 263-268.

¹³² Crowder, *Assimilation*, 23.

the French idea of citizenship premised on a monogamous marriage and rooted in the 1789 Revolution. No doubt Faidherbe was aware of French public opinion in the metropole, but it was unlikely to dissuade him from responding to the situation in Saint-Louis as he deemed fit. Dealing with a precarious situation in which he at times felt uncertain about how best to maintain peace and security, Faidherbe opted for a “benevolent” disposition toward Muslims, hoping to win their trust and cooperation.

Although the creation of the Muslim Tribunal was a welcome idea among Muslims in Saint-Louis, however, the planning of the court itself was not exactly what they had anticipated, as Christelow observes.¹³³ In fact they had expected elections to be held for the position of *cadi* and an appeals court made up of twenty-two notable Muslims. But Faidherbe’s idea of the court drew inspiration from the Algerian model in which the *cadi* owed his office to the colonial administration. Accordingly, the governor went on to appoint a *cadi* to preside over the tribunal’s proceedings in Saint-Louis.¹³⁴

Hamat Ndiaye Anne, the *cadi* Faidherbe appointed, was a highly qualified candidate for the position. He hailed from an influential Muslim family, had served as *tamsir* of Saint-Louis for several years, and worked for the administration as a principal interpreter/translator.¹³⁵ Put differently, Ndiaye Anne possessed the right credentials, including ample social capital, to add credibility to the Muslim Tribunal and win the confidence of Muslims in Saint-Louis. The *cadi*’s appointment, however, aroused criticisms from some Muslims in Saint-Louis, who questioned his close ties with the

¹³³ Christelow, “Muslim Judge and Municipal Politics.”

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 78-81.

administration. The climax of this episode, as Robinson explains, was when Hamat Ndiaye Anne was compelled to defend himself publicly at the main mosque of Saint-Louis (Photo 4.3).¹³⁶



Photo 4.3. A Façade of the Central Mosque in Saint-Louis (first built in 1848). Photograph by author (Saint-Louis, 24 September 2004).

From Faidherbe's point of view, the appointment of Ndiaye Anne as *cadi* was a pragmatic decision to choose a candidate who commanded great respect even among the administration's strongest critics. Thus, the most important consideration for the governor was to meet the expectations of most Muslims in Saint-Louis, as he could not possibly satisfy all of them individually. By appointing Hamat Ndiaye Anne as *cadi* and third deputy mayor of Saint-Louis, Faidherbe ensured that his confidant and highest-paid interpreter owed his position more to him than to the Muslim community.¹³⁷ Furthermore, as Christelow underscores, "Since there were no formally recognized African institutions

¹³⁶ Ibid. Hamat Ndiaye Anne was able to vindicate himself in front of those who had questioned his ability to serve as *cadi* in manner that would not make him a mere mouthpiece and "rubberstamp" official of the administration.

¹³⁷ Christelow, "Muslim Judge and Municipal Politics."

in the communes, the office of *cadi* became a focus of political competition.”¹³⁸

Throughout the nineteenth century, then, the position of *cadi* remained an important office to which successive governors continued to appoint high-profiled members of the Muslim community, whose allegiance could bolster the administration’s authority among Muslims in the region.¹³⁹

Cruise O’Brien has argued that, “Faidherbe’s attitude to Islam was often ambiguous, but he repeatedly stressed the need for neutrality in religious matters.”¹⁴⁰ Certainly the governor professed “freedom of conscience” as far as religious faith was concerned.¹⁴¹ And he may well have believed that neutrality in religious issues could serve his purpose well. Even so, Faidherbe never lost sight of the situation facing him, one in which politics and religion were so intertwined that it was hardly enough to adopt a neutral stance to avoid a headlong Muslim/Catholic collision in Saint-Louis. In fact both groups for the most part learned to accommodate to each other, especially as Muslims had become a majority in Saint-Louis by mid century.¹⁴²

A more serious problem for Faidherbe was how to secure the loyalty of Muslims who manifested different persuasions to the extent that the French authorities believed some to be more fanatical than others. It is thus reasonable to suggest that if, on one hand, Faidherbe showed any inclination to support Muslims at the expense of Catholics in

¹³⁸ Ibid, 15.

¹³⁹ The list of *cadis* for Saint-Louis were as follows: Hamat Ndiaye Anne, 1857-1879; Bou El Mogdad, 1879-1880; Amadou Ndiaye Sarr, 1880-1904, Becaye Ba, 1904-1911; Souleyman Seck, 1911-1913; Ainina Seck 1913-1941.

¹⁴⁰ O’Brien, “Toward an ‘Islamic Policy,’” 305.

¹⁴¹ Hardy, *Faidherbe*, 90.

¹⁴² Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 31.

Saint-Louis it may well have been inspired by his bullish republicanism and anticlericism. On the other hand, Faidherbe's assessment of what was a delicate and potentially explosive situation pretty much shaped his attitude toward Muslims in Senegal. His concern about maintaining a healthy rapport with Muslims at a time relations between French officials and the *habitants* of Saint-Louis were far from being cordial initiated what crystallized over time into an Islamic policy of sorts. And this in a sense underlined the governor's long-term project of "creating a modern colony" in Senegal, as Diouf suggests.¹⁴³

In retrospect, the initiatives Faidherbe took paved the way for France to emerge as *une puissance musulmane* in the northwestern half of Africa by the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁴ In this regard, I concur with Robinson's observation: "Faidherbe was the author of a carefully constructed policy which differentiated among Muslims and served the French well in the late nineteenth century."¹⁴⁵ Determined to accomplish his goals at whatever cost, the governor on occasion moved a step ahead of official approval of his decisions from the metropole, responding to situations on the spot with contingency measures he expected to make up for a coherent colonial policy Paris found difficult to formulate over time.¹⁴⁶ Indeed Faidherbe was not a complete stranger to dealing with

¹⁴³ Diouf, "French Colonial Policy of Assimilation," 689.

¹⁴⁴ For more on France as a "Muslim power", see Robinson, "French 'Islamic' Policy"; "France as a Muslim Power in West Africa" A revised version of the second article also appears as chapter 4 of *Paths of Accommodation*, 75-96.

¹⁴⁵ Robinson, "French 'Islamic' Policy," 420.

¹⁴⁶ The contradictions and inconsistencies that bedeviled the French "policy of assimilation" throughout the nineteenth century is a well-known theme in French colonial history. Despite the rhetoric behind assimilation, policymakers in the metropole never managed to take the policy to its logical conclusion. By the early twentieth century, French officials were toying with a "policy of association" in French West Africa, aimed at regenerating African values and institutions. For a fascinating discussion of this subject, see Conklin, *Mission to Civilize*.

large groups of Muslims within a colonial context. As a military engineer, he had served in Algeria during the 1840s, when France waged war against the Algerian people. As one might expect, therefore, his Algerian experience served him well during his tenure in Senegal, where he confronted a multi-religious setting with a strong Islamic component he could ill-afford to take lightly.

It is hardly surprising then that Faidherbe relied on key Muslim interpreters to handle the Muslim community of Saint-Louis as well as those in the rest of the lower and middle valley. By appointing Hamat Ndiaye Anne as *cadi* and Bou El Mogdad Seck as assessor of the Muslim Tribunal, the governor gave the court the kind of legitimacy it needed to be taken seriously at the local level. Faidherbe hoped that this would convince the Muslim body politic that the administration was responsive to its concerns. Despite skepticism among some Muslims and spiteful reproach from the Saint-Louisian Catholic community, which branded the governor a *marabout chrétien*,¹⁴⁷ Faidherbe understood how important it was to maintain some kind of balance that would not tilt local opposition, especially among Muslims, against the administration.

The next chapter will trace the early stages of French expansion, from the 1850s to the 1880s, to highlight the multiple functions of interpreters as the administration attempted to impose its authority over the riverine economy, subdue the Trarza Moors, and contain Al-Hajj Umar's military jihad. The chapter also traces the activities of interpreters as the administration set out to subjugate Walo and Kajoor. Finally, it examines Governor Briere's expansion inland, which in several respects echoed Faidherbe's grand plan of imperial conquest in the region.

¹⁴⁷ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 81; "France as a Muslim Power."

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**AFRICAN INTERPRETERS, MEDIATION, AND THE PRODUCTION OF
KNOWLEDGE IN COLONIAL SENEGAL: THE LOWER AND MIDDLE SENEGAL
VALLEY, ca. 1850s TO ca. 1920s**

By

Tamba Eadric M'bayo

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CHAPTER 5

French Expansion, Commerce, and Conquest: 1850s to 1880s

Well before the imposition of formal colonial rule over the area that became Senegal in the late 1880s, commerce along the Senegal River, particularly in the lower and middle valley, prompted frequent interactions between traders and merchants from different ethnic groups and social classes. The French, métis of Saint-Louis, Wolof, Futanke, Trarza and Brakna Moors, and Serer, among others, all had a stake (in varying degrees) in the riverine trade, which became more competitive as the Atlantic slave trade ended slowly from the mid-nineteenth century on.¹ Local political leaders relied on revenue derived from the *escales* or seasonal markets located along the river and trading posts on the Atlantic coast to accumulate wealth and increase their political power. In addition, the pastoral and agricultural activities of some of the ethnic groups mentioned above were a vital part of the socioeconomic relationships between different communities in the Senegal basin. The Trarza and Brakna Moors to the north of the river, for example, depended on agricultural foodstuffs cultivated by Wolof farmers on the southern side. Likewise, Futanke pastoralists in the middle valley exchanged milk, meat, and hides for grains, such as millet, grown by neighboring farming communities. At the same time, both the Trarza and Brakna Moors were adept at acquiring essential commodities by

¹ The “legitimate commerce” that prevailed after the demise of the slave trade allowed more people to participate as individual traders and merchants than had been possible during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. For more on the Atlantic and local slave trade in the Senegambia region, see, among others, Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*; Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*; Searing, *‘God Alone is King’*; also *West African Slavery*.

asserting control over trade as well as using force against nearby villages to pillage and extort tributes from them.²

Indeed the *escales* along the Senegal River were sites of frequent commercial exchanges that brought together local and “foreign” merchants and traders as well as pastoralists and cultivators in a symbiotic relationship. Yet the *escales* also attracted raids and ignited conflicts, most times involving Trarza and Brakna *hassani*, who attacked and commandeered commercial caravans destined for the *escales*, in the same way they raided villages across the Senegal River to loot marketable merchandise and agricultural products. Because of the disruption to commerce and agriculture spawned by the incursions and politically motivated conflicts, security concerns preoccupied French officials in Saint-Louis for several decades. From the 1840s on, successive governors attempted to enforce stability in the river valley, hoping it would stimulate steady commerce at the *escales* and productive agriculture in village communities.³

Meanwhile, the military jihad launched by Al-Hajj Umar in 1852 attracted French attention as it gained momentum in the upper Senegal River, especially after Faidherbe

² Since the 1770s, Trarza *hassani* had been collecting tributes from Wolof farmers in villages on the southern side of the Senegal River. The inability of chiefs in Walo to provide protection for their subjects only encouraged the *hassani* to continue their incursions with impunity until the administration decided to put a stop to them by the mid 1800s. Before the Atlantic slave trade ended slowly in the second half of the 1800s, it was common for *Hassani* raiders to attack Wolof and Futanke villages in Walo and Futa Toro to acquire captives for sale to slave merchants on the Atlantic coast. See Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans,” especially Chapter 3.

³ ANS 2B 20, Pageot des Noutières to Minister, Saint-Louis, 23 August 1842. As early as the 1840s, interim governor Edouard Pageot des Noutières had emphasized the need to defeat the Trarza Moors militarily if the administration was to assert control over the Senegal River trade. Various governors after him echoed the same concern. But French policymakers initially did not support an all-out military campaign against the Trarza and Brakna Moors for fear that it might have a backlash that could be detrimental to both trade and agriculture in the region. By the late 1840s, however, French merchants had lobbied enough for Paris to commit itself to providing more military and financial support for the administration in Saint-Louis, as we shall see below.

became governor in 1854.⁴ Before his jihad, Umar had adopted a conciliatory attitude toward the administration. In a reported meeting with Governor Ernest Bourdon and M. Caille, the director of the BAE, at Bakel in 1847, Umar declared,

I am the friend of the white men. I want peace and detest false dealing. When a Christian has paid the custom, he must be able to trade securely. When I am alimami of Futa you will have to build a fort for me; I would keep the country in order and completely friendly relations would be established between us....⁵

No doubt when Al-Hajj Umar started his jihad at first the French were not so much a target as local states, such as Bundu, where Islam had yet to gain mass appeal. In his homeland Futa Toro, where the French had control over the fort at Podor, Umar embarked on a massive recruitment campaign for his jihad. And as the Futanke leader advanced westward toward Saint-Louis, the administration grew more apprehensive about the possible effects his jihad could have on French ambitions in the region.

Although Umar showed some hesitation in confronting the French headlong, Faidherbe realized early on that the emergent Umarian state could hinder French expansion in the east toward the Niger River. Thus, with the assistance of his foremost interpreters, the governor sought support among local marabouts, political leaders, and their constituencies in the river valley. Faidherbe launched a propaganda campaign to dissuade marabouts and other local leaders from embracing Umar's cause. I argue that key Muslim interpreters, such as Bou El Mogdad, provided the kind of legitimacy the administration needed at that critical moment to lend credence to its claim of tolerance toward Muslims in the region. The main task for the interpreters, then, was to get other

⁴ For a comprehensive treatment of al-Hajj Umar's military jihad, see Robinson, *Holy War of Umar Tal*.

⁵ E. Mage, *Voyage dans le Soudan Occidental* (1868), 221-2, cited in J. D. Hargreaves, eds., *France and West Africa*, 131.

Muslim and political leaders to reject Umar's militancy in order to avert military confrontation between the jihadists and the administration. From the interpreters' standpoint, Umar's jihad had the potential of fracturing the working relationship the administration was cultivating with Muslims in the region for peaceful coexistence.

After the relative inactivity of the late 1860s, Governor Briere's term of office, from 1876 to 1881, marked another phase of French expansion.⁶ He pursued a policy that resonated with the initiatives Faidherbe had taken in the 1850s and early 1860s. Briere not only shared Faidherbe's vision of carving out a commercial empire that would encompass the Senegal and Niger River networks, but also believed that the empire would challenge the spread of Moroccan influence in northwestern Africa and southward across the Sahara.⁷

Meanwhile, the administration planned to construct a Dakar--Saint-Louis railroad to connect the peanut basin of Kajoor to the better port facility of Dakar, further south on the coast, considered vital for international maritime commerce.⁸ However, to get the Damel of Kajoor to accept the plan for the proposed railroad to pass through his territory required both intimidation and diplomatic efforts on the part of the administration. As the

⁶ Besides the cholera epidemic of 1868 that hit Saint-Louis with severe effects, the 1860s was a quiet decade for the administration as far as expansion in the river valley was concerned. The Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), which ended in defeat for France, discouraged expansion because of the budget crisis triggered by the war. France not only lost the war but also had to pay Germany reparations. This meant the French government could ill-afford to spend taxpayers' money on colonial ventures. To the extent that administration in Saint-Louis operated on a tight budget, it was hard pressed to limit its military engagements.

⁷ For the wider implications of France's imperial ambitions in West Africa vis-à-vis Morocco, see Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 76-77, 89-94, 185-188.

⁸ Because of the sand bars and shallow waters around the island of Saint-Louis, it was not an ideal spot for large ocean-going vessels to berth. As the import/export trade expanded from mid-century on, Dakar emerged as the favored site for a port that could accommodate larger vessels and meet the demands of the increasing external commerce in the Senegal region.

chapter will reveal, the administration commissioned Bou El Mogdad to accompany an official mission to Kajoor in an effort to persuade the damel about the goodwill behind the railroad project.

This chapter builds on Chapter 3 by presenting certain episodes between the 1850s and 1880s, the period of French expansion in the river valley, to highlight the mediations of certain interpreters who participated in some of the major developments of that period. The archival documentation, however, does not always provide direct evidence about the intermediary roles interpreters played in some of the conflicts. Nor do oral accounts help us much in this particular context. This obviously raises questions about the sources themselves, their authorship, the process of archival preservation, and the limitations of oral accounts discussed in Chapter 1. The drawbacks notwithstanding, the conflicts offer a context in which we can begin to understand the complexity of the challenges Muslim interpreters faced in colonial Senegal while mediating between different groups whose conflicting interests could defy resolution by diplomacy or mediation.

The chapter first discusses the dynamics of commercial relations in the lower river valley, where the Trarza Moors had monopolized trade for much of the early nineteenth century. However, by mid century the administration was keen on curtailing their influence in the riverine economy and stopping their raiding activities across the Senegal River to the south. Next, the chapter analyzes the conflict in Walo that led to its annexation by Governor Faidherbe in 1855, followed by a discussion of the administration's protracted effort to subjugate Kajoor.⁹ The chapter then examines the

⁹ Barry, *Le royaume du Waalo*; Colvin, "Kajor and its Diplomatic Relations"; Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*.

conflict with Al-Hajj Umar which preoccupied Faidherbe for much of his tenure. Next, it analyzes Governor Briere's plan of expansion between 1876 and 1881, proposing that he inherited Faidherbe's vision of French imperial grandeur in West Africa. This legacy would have far-reaching political and socioeconomic consequences for the peoples of the Senegal region. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the conflicts and diplomatic wrangles between the administration and the Damel of Kajoor triggered by the construction of the Dakar--Saint-Louis railroad. All told, the chapter lays out the competing forces that shaped the world of Muslim interpreters in Senegal as the French extended their sphere of control beyond Saint-Louis into the interior.

5.1. The Senegal River Trade, Trarza Moors, and the Administration in Saint-Louis

Since the eighteenth century, a cutthroat political system had developed in the emirates of Trarza and Brakna, where a number of powerful *hassani* groups competed against each other in each region. By the first half of the 1800s, both states relied heavily on the riverine trade centered on the production and sale of gum Arabic¹⁰ while the abolitionist movement against the slave trade and slavery gathered momentum. Political leaders and their *hassani* militias struggled to monopolize the trade, often fueling recurrent factional conflicts and vendettas. All throughout the nineteenth century, the close link between politics, commerce, and agriculture was crucial in defining power relations in the lower and middle valley. Both Trarza and Brakna became more volatile as competing leaders and their constituencies vied for dominance—political, economic, and military.

¹⁰ For more on the gum trade, see Webb, *Trade in Gum Arabic*; Taylor, "Of Sultans and Disciples," especially Chapter 2.

Strategically placed at the mouth of the Senegal River, the small island of Saint-Louis—in contrast to Gorée further south on the Atlantic coast which for long relied on the slave trade¹¹—became the hub of the commercial network that linked the riverine economy to the international commerce of the Atlantic world. Gum Arabic, peanuts, gold dust, grains and slaves were traded to cater to both domestic and international demands. As gum Arabic emerged as the most important export commodity in the riverine trade, French interest in the lower and middle valley increased steadily.¹² By mid century, however, peanuts had surpassed gum as the main export crop in the Senegal basin, compelling the French to take the economic prospect of productive areas, such as Kajoor, even more seriously.¹³

By the time peanuts became the major produce of the region the producers of gum Arabic, mostly Trarza and Brakna Moors, had accumulated a lot of wealth. The wealth at their disposal allowed the *zwaya* and local leaders to boost their social capital and political power. By the same token, the gum trade facilitated the growth of *hassani* military and political influence. In fact, since the early 1800s, Trarza and Brakna *hassani* had exercised control over the *escales*, allowing them to demand tolls from gum sellers and collect *coutumes* (gifts) from the French, métis, and other African merchants and traders from Saint-Louis and other towns along the Senegal River. The *coutumes* were a

¹¹ Scholars have argued about the historical importance of Gorée as a slave outpost because other areas further south on the western coast of Africa exported a lot more slaves. The small island of Gorée located just south of the Cape Verde Peninsula in Senegal was an entrepôt for slaves bound for the Americas until the early nineteenth century when its role declined considerably. Slave exports from Gorée began about 1670 and continued until about 1810. For more on Gorée and the Atlantic slave trade, see Searing, *West Africa slavery*, especially Chapter 4.

¹² Marcson, “European-African Interaction,” especially Chapter 4; Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*.

¹³ George Brooks, “Peanuts and Colonialism: Consequences of the Commercialization of Peanuts in West Africa, 1830-1870,” *Journal of African History* 16 (1975), 29-54; Copans, *Les marabout de l'arachide*.

lucrative source of revenue for not only political leaders Trarza and Brakna but also rival *hassani* groups that clashed sporadically over control of the *escales*. By mid century, before the administration could come up with a serious plan to counter the commercial monopoly and raiding activities of the *hassani*, the leaders in Trarza and Brakna had pretty much entrenched their grip on the economy of the lower and middle valley.

During the trading season the sale of gum took place for the most part at the *escales* and at specific times. With trade concentrated in these designated locations, the collection of tolls and taxes was much easier for the *hassani*. The income generated from the tolls, taxes, and *coutumes* encouraged the Trarza and Brakna *hassani* to maintain control over the *escales* at all costs. As the trade in gum increased in volume, so did the *coutumes* the French authorities had to pay. This only frustrated French officials in Saint-Louis, who believed that French entrepreneurs and their Saint-Louisian business partners would only maximize their profits if the monopoly the Trarza Moors exercised over the gum trade ended.

In order to accumulate wealth the *hassani* relied more on the collection of tolls and taxes than actual participation in the trade itself as buyers or sellers.¹⁴ They depended on the *coutumes* from the administration and other Europeans along the coast to augment their income. Trarza and Brakna leaders and their *hassani* retinue quarreled now and again over the distribution of revenue derived from the tolls and *coutumes*. By having the *escales* under their control, the *hassani* increased their martial capacity with guns

¹⁴ The *hassani* generally did not engage much in productive labor and relied on their warrior ethos and predatory activities to eke out a living in an environment that was not particularly kind to its inhabitants, especially when we consider the aridity of the Sahel and desert region in which the Moors lived. Despite their proximity to the Senegal River, the Moors were inclined toward pastoral activities when they engaged in productive labor. Others were merchants and traders, while the *zwaya* relied on the labor of slaves and their descendants to tap gum Arabic derived from acacia trees that grew on the northern side of the Senegal River in present-day southern Mauritania.

purchased mostly from European merchants or their local agents in Saint-Louis and towns, such as Podor and Richard-Toll, along the Senegal River.

The administration was equally concerned about the frequent raids the *hassani* launched on Wolof and Futanke villages in the lower and middle valley. For the *hassani* who pillaged and extorted tributes from subdued villagers, Walo and Futa Toro were easy targets and came under frequent attack. And attempts by different *hassani* factions to retain control over villages only aggravated ongoing political struggles between local leaders in Trarza and Brakna.¹⁵

The dominance the *hassani* exercised over the collection of *coutumes* and taxes in the gum trade was not as absolute as one might be tempted to think, however. In fact, some local chiefs in whose territories the *escales* were located formed alliances with certain political leaders to protect their own interests rather than rely on the *hassani* militias, whose allegiance could shift from time to time. It was difficult, if not impossible, for the *hassani* to maintain complete control over the activities of the numerous merchants, traders, and intermediaries that frequented the *escales*. Some buyers and sellers simply avoided the *escales* to dodge paying the tolls and taxes levied on them.¹⁶ Although the presence of French military posts in the lower and middle valley could have a restraining effect on the predatory activities of *hassani* militias, internal rivalries among them was a recurring source of conflict that fragmented power in both Trarza and

¹⁵ Taylor, "Of Sultans and Disciples," Chapters 2 and 3; Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*; Paul Marty, *L'Émirat des Trarzas* (Paris: Leroux, 1919), 109-124.

¹⁶ Some gum sellers and buyers often tried to trade their commodity outside the *escales* in order to bypass the tolls and taxes and maximize their own profit. Despite the reprisals that were bound to follow such attempts to avoid paying the dues to the *Hassani*, traders with very little capital and thus with relatively less profits to make and sellers with equally small amount of gum to sell were often prepared to take the risk of avoiding gum sales at the *escales*.

Brakna.¹⁷ Historian Charles Stewart has argued, however, that the fragmentation of power among the Moors has been overblown in the literature on the political and social structures of pre-colonial Mauritania.¹⁸

By mid century, the conditions described above had compelled French administrators in Saint-Louis to ponder seriously about enforcing control over the riverine trade. From this period on, *hassani* dominance over pastoral and agricultural communities that had been coerced into tributary relations began to wane slowly. Yet some *zwaya* groups continued to increase their wealth and power, while Trarza and Brakna political leaders still harbored the ambition of extending their authority across the river to the south.

While factional struggles intensified in Trarza and Brakna in the early 1850s, conflicts in Walo and Futa Toro also escalated. In Walo, the Crown and subordinate chiefs had struggled over power for several years, prompting not only Trarza leaders and their *hassani* band of fighters but also the administration to intervene every so often.¹⁹ From the viewpoint of French officials, it was imperative to stop the Trarza leadership from extending control over states on the opposite of the Senegal River. As mentioned above, the administration in Saint-Louis reckoned that French entrepreneurs and their local business partners would only make more profits from the riverine trade if the Moors were subdued and the *escales* controlled. It cannot be exaggerated enough that merchants and traders found the tolls and taxes paid out to the *hassani* exploitative and burdensome.

¹⁷ For more on how commerce, especially the gum trade, influenced power relations in southern Mauritania in the nineteenth century, see Taylor, "Of Sultans and Disciples."

¹⁸ Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*.

¹⁹ Barry, *Le royaume du Waalo*, 267-284.

The effectiveness of the control the Moors exercised over trade depended to some degree on a network of intermediaries (commercial brokers) and local chiefs that served different commercial interest groups and political constituencies. Until about mid century, the number of mediators increased as the gum trade expanded; and when they realized the tremendous influence the *hassani* wielded in the trade, resentment to the latter's authority grew alongside a yearning for its reduction. The brokers hoped this would increase the profits they could make from their activities. As divisions and conflicts between political leaders as well as the dominant *hassani* in Trarza and Brakna intensified, their hangers-on and brokers grew more determined to exploit the fragile relations between different factions and look after their own interests.

By the 1850s, Muhammad Lhabib (1826-1860), the most powerful political leader in Trarza, had been in power as *roi* for several decades despite opposition from some *hassani* belonging to his constituency. To preserve his power, Lhabib sought allies among other *hassani* groups in Trarza, the Wolof in Walo, and *habitant* merchants and traders in Saint-Louis.²⁰ These ties with neighboring states in turn obliged Trarza and Brakna leaders and *hassani* militias to watch with keen interest the state of affairs in Saint-Louis, Walo, Futa Toro and Kajoor. In fact some conflicts in Trarza were related to the interests Moorish leaders and *hassani* factions had in neighboring states across the river, which kept the French on frequent alert. Officials in Saint-Louis were aware of the difficulty of imposing political control over areas ruled by Traza or Brakna as opposed to

²⁰ To strengthen his influence in Walo Muhammad Lhabib got married to Djeumbodj, a senior female chief in Walo, in 1832, as this would give his heirs a claim to the throne of Walo. Djeumbodj was a daughter of Yerim Mbagnik, head of an important lineage that made claims to the Brakship. At that time, Mambodj Malick was the Brak of Walo. For more on this, see Barry, *Le royaume du waalo*, 256; Taylor, "Of Sultans and Disciples," 100; Ba, *La pénétration française*, 28-29.

those under local chiefs in Walo, Futa Toro, and Kajoor. Thus successive governors from Bouët-Williaumez to Faidherbe were anxious to stop Trarza and Brakna from extending control over territories south of the Senegal River.²¹

Against this backdrop, the administration was poised to challenge Trarza dominance in the lower valley from mid century on. From time to time the authorities in Saint-Louis gave support to Walo so that its leaders and subjects would resist attacks from Trarza. For their part, Trarza leaders and their subjects seldom reached a consensus over what line of action to take against what they considered serious threats from Saint-Louis.²² While some leaders preferred a diplomatic and conciliatory approach, hoping to settle disputes with the administration through dialogue, others favored military action, believing that this would stop undue French interference in local affairs.

Faidherbe aimed to exploit the recurring internal rivalries between Trarza and Brakna leaders and factions to not only weaken their control over trade in the river valley but also undercut their influence in Walo, Futa Toro, and Kajoor. In a letter addressed to the Damel of Kajoor in April 1855, for example, Faidherbe stated in blunt terms his intention to deal with the Trarza incursions forcefully rather than ignore them: “I would like to know if you [have] give[n] up on defending Gandiole and Toubé against Mohammad-El-Habib, because if you do not want this country anymore, I will take it instead of letting it be taken by the Moors.”²³ It was clear that the governor no longer

²¹ As early as 1844, Governor Bouët-Williaumez had recommended that the Moors be prevented from launching attacks on villages on the southern side of the Senegal River. ANSOM, Sénégal VII 10 c., Bouët-Williaumez à ministre, 6 novembre 1844, cited in Saint-Martin, *Le Sénégal sous le second Empire*, 162.

²² Colvin, “Kajor and its Diplomatic Relations”; Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*; Barry, *Le royaume du Waalo*.

²³ ANS 3B 91, no. 18, Governor to Damel, Saint-Louis, 25 April 1855.

wanted the Trarza leader and his *hassani* cohorts to continue menacing neighboring peoples without reprisals from the administration.

In previous decades, the administration's failure to put a coherent policy together in response to Trarza and Brakna threats reflected disagreements between different interest groups in Saint-Louis: French administrators, representatives of French firms (from Bordeaux and Marseille) or *négociants*, and *habitant* merchants and traders.²⁴ The monopoly the Trarza enjoyed in the gum trade, often in collaboration with their Saint-Louisian *habitant* partners, meant French *négociants* were restricted to import/export activities in Saint-Louis without much control over the riverine trade itself. Little wonder then that the *négociants* issued several petitions to the administration demanding more effort to suppress the Trarza incursions and ensure security and free trade in the lower and middle valley.²⁵ Indeed the *négociants* believed this would allow every interest group to participate in the riverine trade on a level playing field and thereby maximize their profits.

It may be recalled that up to the mid 1840s the *habitant* commercial elite had felt privileged enough to influence commercial policy in Saint-Louis, sometimes at the expense of French *négociants*, especially as the Mayor of Saint-Louis Jean-Jacques Alin (1827-1848) made no secret of supporting the interests of the métis community. As a result, *habitant* merchants and traders became a source of constant irritation for French

²⁴ See Barrows, "General Faidherbe, Chapter 4; Marcson, "European-African Interaction," Chapter 5.

²⁵ ANS 13G 33, "Documents incomplets: rapport sur la suppression des escales" (Valantin petition); *Deuxième Pétition adressée à M. le Gouverneur du Sénégal* (Bordeaux: Imprimerie Mme. Veuve Grugy, 1854) cited in Barrows, "General Faidherbe," 175-177. Faidherbe's appointment as governor came just after representatives of French commercial firms in Saint-Louis, especially Maurel and Prom from Bordeaux, had written a petition to express their concern about the security situation in the river valley. See, Petition of August 28, 1854, cited in L. Capperon, "Protet, Gouverneur du Senegal," *Revue Maritime* (1956), 14-21.

négociants, who longed to see the commercial influence of their rivals deflated, if not destroyed. The frequent changes of governors, as explained in Chapter 3, had plagued the administration, however, making it difficult for it to pursue a coherent and durable policy.²⁶ The string of interim governors appointed during that period meant the *habitants* continued to overshadow French *négociants*, for some time, in wielding influence in the riverine trade. Similarly, the long-standing ties between the *habitants* and the Trarza Moors did not help the administration's effort to assert its dominance in the lower valley.²⁷ On occasion, even when the *roi* of Trarza had disputes with the administration, Mayor Alin continued to enjoy a steady relationship of friendship with him.

By the time Faidherbe became governor in 1854, however, a shift had occurred in the balance of power in Saint-Louis that influenced the struggle between the administration and the Trarza Moors. From the late 1840s on, the influence of the Mayor of Saint-Louis began to wane as the *habitants* also faced more competition from French firms.²⁸ The Emancipation Decree of 1848 that put an end to slavery in Saint-Louis and areas within French jurisdiction compounded the situation by causing financial ruin for many slave-owning *habitants*. And with more military and financial support coming from Paris during Governor Protet's term of office, the administration was in a better position than ever before to employ military force against Trarza.

²⁶ Diouf, *Le Kajor au XIXe siècle*.

²⁷ See, Taylor, "Of Sultans and Disciples," 195-196; Marcson, "European-African Interactions" 192-218.

²⁸ By the 1850s the presence of Bordeaux and Marseille merchant houses, especially the firm of Maurel and Prom, meant *habitant* merchants and traders in Saint-Louis could not continue to enjoy the privileged position they had in commercial relations a decade earlier. For more on this politics of commerce pitting the *habitants* against the French in Saint-Louis, see Barrows, "General Faidherbe; Jones, "Citizens and Subjects"; Marcson, "European-African Interactions."

The conflicts between Trarza and the administration between 1855 and 1858 gave local peoples—who for years had experienced the brunt of *hassani* violence, enslavement, forcible seizure of property and demands for tribute—an opportunity to put up resistance against their oppressors. Little wonder then that the administration found villagers willing to serve as volunteers in order to fight alongside the *tirailleurs* during Faidherbe's military campaign against Trarza. Confident of ending the threat posed by the Trarza leadership and *hassani* militias, Faidherbe asserted bluntly in May 1855:

I have already proven to everybody that Mohamed-El-Habib, said to be so powerful, is nothing in front of the French. Even if all the kings of the country were to unite against me, I will do what I have decided to. If I do not have enough force, France will send me two, three, [or] four times more as long as I will request.²⁹

Bragging besides, the governor was confident that Paris would provide additional military support for the administration when necessary. Therefore, Faidherbe could afford to speak brusquely about his resolve to subdue Trarza.

A number of historians have treated the details of the conflicts between Faidherbe and the Trarza Moors, so we need not regurgitate them here.³⁰ More importantly, after his military success against the Trarza Moors, Faidherbe signed a treaty with the vanquished leadership stipulating that the *roi* and his successors henceforth recognize the territories on the southern side of the river as a French domain. According to Article 1 of the treaty concluded on 20 May 1858,

The king of Trarza acknowledges on his behalf and his successors that the territories of Oualo, Gaé, Bokol, Toubé, Dialakhar, Gandiole, Thionq, Djiaos and N'diogo belong to France, and all those who live or dwell [there] later are subject

²⁹ ANS 3B 91, no. 18, Governor to Damel and all Chiefs of Cayor who are not Moors, Saint-Louis, 1 March 1855.

³⁰ See, for example, Barrows, "General Faidherbe," Chapter 9; Taylor, "Of Sultans and Disciples," Chapters 3 and 4.

to the French government, and therefore can not be subjected to any kind of charges or some sort of dependency on other chiefs than those which the governor of Senegal will provide them.³¹

The treaty also affirmed the immediate resumption of commercial relations between the French and the Moors. And gum for sale was to be brought to Saint-Louis, Dagana, Podor, Saldé, Matam, Bakel or Médine at any time of the year. In other words, gum and other products from Trarza were to be made available to buyers under conditions acceptable to both the French and Trarza Moors.

The available archival documentation and oral accounts do not provide clear-cut evidence about the specific roles Muslim interpreters in Saint-Louis played during the conflict between Trarza and the Faidherbe administration. Yet the sources indicate that Bou El Mogdad facilitated diplomatic liaisons with Sheikh Sidiyya al-Kabir (1775-1868) of Boutilimit,³² who visited Saint-Louis for the first time in an effort to strengthen relations with the administration. Such diplomatic gestures were an attempt by French officials to try out a non-military option with local states outside their sphere of control. To this end, the administration depended on the mediations of Bou El Mogdad, whose social capital, reputation in Trarza (where he had his Islamic education), and understanding of local politics allowed him to initiate contacts with local religious and political leaders. Through these mediations, the official practice of hosting visiting marabouts and political leaders in Saint-Louis developed and would continue in the years ahead, as Chapter 6 will show. Although the contact with Shaikh Sidiyya took place

³¹ Peace Treaty with the King of Trarza, 20 May 1858, *Annales sénégalaises*, 397.

³² Sheikh Sidiyya was a learned jurist and Sufi mystic belonging to the Qadiriyya order. Although he hailed from a relatively uninfluential zwaya clan, the Awlad Ibri, he led them to emerge as one of the most powerful sociopolitical groups in the Gebila, southern Mauritania, by the time he passed away. Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 82; Marty, *Etudes sur l'Islam au Sénégal*, 1, 18-19.

toward the end of Faidherbe's term of office, the ties established were strong enough to continue beyond his administration.³³

It may not be farfetched to infer that Faidherbe was under too much pressure from French commercial houses, their lobbyists in Paris, and business representatives in Saint-Louis to risk starting his term with protracted diplomatic negotiations with the Trarza leadership that may have been construed (read misconstrued) as a sign of indecision or weakness on his part. Faidherbe, after all, had been appointed to replace Governor Protet, who apparently had not shown the kind of resolve expected of him in dealing with the Trarza threat. At that time, Mohammed Lhabib, the Trarza leader, had shown repeatedly that he was capable of disrupting French plans for expansion, especially given his proximity to Saint-Louis and his growing political influence in Walo. In all likelihood this explains why, as early as 1854, Faidherbe had suggested that Gandiole be brought under French control as soon as possible.³⁴

We can only conjecture why the archival documentation contains no direct evidence of the intercessions of interpreters during the conflict with Trarza. This would be in sharp contrast to official responses to conflicts in the same area years later.³⁵ Did the situation then call for immediate military action and no other option? Could Faidherbe have decided that a military campaign would best serve his purpose since he

³³ ANS 3B 93, no. 78, 20 November 1864; ANS 13G 123, no. 12, 18 November 1865; ANS 13G 123, no. 60, 11 September 1866.

³⁴ SOM: Senegal IV 19b: Faidherbe, "Rapport," 9 July 1854, cited in Barrows, "General Faidherbe," 252.

³⁵ In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Mahmadou Seck, the interpreter who spent his youth in Trarza and was fluent in Hassaniya, established diplomatic liaisons with several Trarza religious and political leaders, such as Saad Buh and Sidiyya Baba. For more on this subject, see Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, Chapters 8 and 9.

had to react to the demands of French entrepreneurs and firms such as Maurel and Prom? What is clear, though, is that in contrast to the Trazra conflict, Faidherbe sought the support of local Muslim and political leaders by deploying his key interpreters as mediators during his protracted struggle with Al-Hajj Umar, as we shall see below. It is noteworthy also that the manner in which the administration handled conflicts with local leaders at the turn of the century was different from Faidherbe's approach to the conflict with Trarza. To establish diplomatic ties with Trarza and Brakna, for instance, the administration sent several delegations of French officials accompanied by Mahmoudou Seck, the young and versatile interpreter, as Coppolani was plotting the "pacification" of what became Mauritania in the early 1900s.³⁶

5.2. Walo, Kajoor, and the Umarian Threat

War between the administration and Walo was almost inevitable by the early 1850s. By then relations between Walo and Trarza had created an atmosphere of insecurity in the lower valley, which the administration found worrisome because of its likely effect on trade and agricultural productivity in the area. Breaches of peace and security were common as Trarza leaders and *hassani* militias exploited internal problems in Walo in a bid to extend their political influence there. And *Hassani* attacks on villages in Walo only exacerbated the existing insecurity in the state. This situation led the administration to suspend its payment of *coutumes* to Walo on 10 October 1850, citing the failure of local chiefs to clamp down on *hassani* cross-border raids, looting, and banditry as the main reason behind its decision.³⁷ Walo then reacted a month later by banning all trade

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ ANS 13G 23, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 10 October 1850.

crossing into its territory.³⁸ And the strained relationship between the administration and Walo deteriorated further following an attack on a military post at Mérinaghen, which its attackers looted later that year. This prompted the administration to demand compensation from Ndate Yalla (c. 1810-1860), the reigning queen of Walo, thereby affirming the displeasure of French officials over the conduct of Walo. For Governor Protet, it was becoming more likely that problems between Walo and the administration could no longer be resolved through diplomacy and negotiation. In a letter to the Minister of the Navy and Colonies, Protet made it clear that it would not be long before Walo saw military action:

War is today necessary, [and] we shall have it eventually; it is better to choose our time, therefore, because I am convinced that you will send me the means to make it [war] ... against the Trarzas and the entire river if it is necessary. Because, it is the only means to guarantee our influence and trade on the river for a long time.³⁹

The governor had no doubt that the *roi* of Trarza Mohammad Lhabib had become too influential in the affairs of Walo, while his *hassani* had free reign pillaging and demanding tributes from villagers.⁴⁰

While French *négociants* called for suspending commerce at the *escales* and creating well-fortified permanent trading centers in Dagana and Podor, Protet contemplated responding to their demands with decisive action.⁴¹ Thus, when the governor left Saint-Louis on 18 March 1854 on a trip to Podor, he meant to make a strong statement about his intention to handle events that threatened security in the lower and middle valley with a great deal of firmness. With Lieutenant Faidherbe in charge of a

³⁸ ANS 2B 30, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 5 November 1850.

³⁹ ANS 2B 30, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 15 May 1851.

⁴⁰ ANS 2B 30, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 1 August 1851.

⁴¹ *Annales sénégalais*, 1.

team of military building engineers, the fort at Podor was renovated within a month, as explained in Chapter 3. The French presence in Podor, as we may expect, did not go down well with the Almamy of Futa Toro and local chiefs, who regarded it as an audacious threat to their sovereignty. Still, the administration's decision to renovate the fort at Podor underscored its need for a secure base in the middle valley from which to direct operations in the interior.

After succeeding Protet as governor, Faidherbe did not have to wait for long before responding to events in Walo. He immediately tried to deal with the threat the Trarza leadership posed to the unsettled state, where Ely, son of Mohammad Lhabib and Djeumbodj, had been earmarked to become brak or king, after Ndate Yalla. For Faidherbe, then, there could be no hesitation in his reaction to such developments. He would not stand by and watch Trarza capture Walo as was becoming more likely. Little wonder then that Faidherbe was brash about his intention: "We [the administration] want to render the states of the left bank independent of the Moors.... I am going to attempt the execution of this program with what I have in hand.... We will try to take the millet and beef of the enemies."⁴²

When Faidherbe launched his military campaign against Walo in January 1855, he adopted a particularly brutal method. Besides burning down several villages,⁴³ the governor attacked the capital of Walo, Nder, to register his disapproval of its support for Trarza against the administration.⁴⁴ However, Faidherbe's decision to wage war against

⁴² ANS 2B 31, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 19 January 1855.

⁴³ *Annales sénégalais*, 5-22.

⁴⁴ During the conflict the Queen of Walo, Ndate Yalla, on whose side Faidherbe claimed he had intervened turned out to be looking for support from the Trarza leadership against the administration. Barrows, "General Faidherbe," Chapter 17.

Walo was not just a matter of retaliation against the beleaguered state. Instead, the governor aimed to gain a stranglehold over Walo at the expense of Trarza, whose increasing influence was a cause for much trepidation among French officials in Saint-Louis. Not surprisingly, Faidherbe's attack on Walo led to the immediate expulsion of Moors from the state, although some merchants and traders were allowed to stay if they could refrain from activities the administration deemed inimical to its interests.⁴⁵

The military attack on Walo triggered a massive flight among local inhabitants fleeing from the *tirailleurs* and volunteers the administration had recruited. The forces welcomed Faidherbe's campaign with great enthusiasm and took advantage of the situation to loot and gain booty. Walo-Walo refugees fled to western Futa Toro and northern Kajor, seeking a safe haven to either begin life anew or wait for a return to normal life in Walo. Although the war dragged on intermittently for about two years, Faidherbe had annexed Walo as early as 30 December 1855.⁴⁶ He then went on to divide the vanquished state into five *cercles* and appointed a different chief over each of them. The governor assigned the *Commandant* of Dagana the responsibility of supervising the chiefs and reporting directly to him.⁴⁷

The new administrative restructuring aimed at decentralizing Walo and replacing traditional chiefs with appointees the administration deemed loyal, reliable, and supportive of the French cause. But because the appointed leaders had not inherited their chieftaincy, the local people questioned their legitimacy. Less concerned with such local

⁴⁵ *Annales sénégalais*, 18-22.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Barry, *Le royaume du Waalo*, 285-286.

opposition, however, Faidherbe even took the risk of entrusting the Crown of Walo to Yoro Diao, who at that time was a student at the *École des Otages*.⁴⁸ Yet neither Diao, who was barely thirteen years old, nor his elder brother Fara Penda, whom he recommended instead for the brakship, was experienced enough to handle the demands of the position. As a result, the administration was obliged to reverse its decision. It is worth emphasizing that the appointments were entirely Faidherbe's wish to fill the void created by the overthrow of the brak with a successor he thought would be susceptible to his control. In this regard, the governor's initiative presaged the practice of appointing "warrant chiefs" with no traditional claim to political power, which became a feature of the colonial administration in Senegal and other parts of West Africa, such as southeastern Nigeria, among the Igbo, in the late 1800s and early 1900s.⁴⁹

Faidherbe rationalized his brutal campaign against Walo by claiming that the Walo-Walo had been reluctant to show support for the administration, fearing reprisals from the Trarza Moors. According to the governor, "Other inhabitants of the country [Walo], when I ask them to join us, answer me that in six months we shall abandon them to the vengeance of the Moors, as we did in 1835."⁵⁰ Faidherbe's qualms about the allegiance of the people of Walo suggest that the French military campaign did not receive widespread support from the Walo-Walo despite the administration's claim that the war was in their best interest. From Faidherbe's point of view, Walo would be better

⁴⁸ See Chapter 4, 152-154.

⁴⁹ Barry, *Le royaume du Waalo*, 281-284. For more on warrant chiefs in colonial Nigeria, see A. E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891-1929* (New York: Humanities Press, Inc., 1972).

⁵⁰ SOM: Senegal 1 41b, Faidherbe to MMC, Saint-Louis, 3 April 1855, no. 148, quoted in Barrows, "General Faidherbe," 273.

off under French rule than to preserve its independence and remain exposed to the frequent incursions and possible subjugation by the Trarza Moors.

By imposing chiefs without the traditional legitimacy the local inhabitants had become accustomed to recognize, however, the French annexation of Walo disrupted the status quo. The imposition of French rule ushered in a period of ad hoc arrangements, some of which Faïdherbe himself had not thought out thoroughly. More importantly, the treaty of 1 January 1860 reaffirmed Walo's annexation and gave the Walo-Walo no obvious advantage:

Art. 1. The inhabitants of the Oualo, definitely and forever annexed to the possessions of France in Senegal, are subjects of the French emperor. They have his representative the governor as leader in Senegal. An officer delegated by the latter, and resident in Taouey, watches Oualo directly.⁵¹

In the broader context of French colonial and assimilationist policies, Walo's status as a French protectorate meant that the Walo-Walo were not entitled to the legal and political rights of French citizens since they were only *sujets* of France.⁵² Moreover, Walo's subjugation meant a loss of autonomy the brak had long enjoyed despite his inability to stave off attacks from Trarza. By seizing control of Walo, then, the administration took a preemptive step to thwart Trarza's ambition of extending its political power across the Senegal River.

The archival records reveal no direct evidence of the active involvement of interpreters in mediations with the leadership of Walo before the war or during the peace negotiations that followed annexation. We may infer then that the administration

⁵¹ *Moniteur du Sénégal*, 27 décembre 1859, cited in Barry, *Le royaume du Waalo*, 342.

⁵² Unlike the *habitants* of the Four Communes who could aspire to French citizenship, the rest of Senegal's population were considered *sujets* and subjected to the *Code de l'indigénat*. This meant they had to settle civil and family matters in customary courts and not the French court, which heard cases only for French citizens.

probably did not make use of mediation to resolve its strained relationship with Walo. Had the French authorities opted for diplomacy, it is most likely that the exchanges would have been documented at one level or the other of the administration. Faidherbe may have decided against diplomacy because he wanted immediate results without giving the Moors more time to continue their disruptive incursions. Military action, therefore, was a better option from the governor's viewpoint. By contrast, as we shall see below, Faidherbe relied on the mediations of interpreters during his protracted struggle with Al-Hajj Umar. Likewise, the case of Kajoor reveals that the administration sent diplomatic missions with interpreters to solicit the damel's cooperation during negotiations over the construction of the Saint-Louis--Dakar railroad.

As peanuts emerged as a profitable export commodity by mid century, this concern became a key factor in relations between the administration and Kajoor. Since the 1840s, peanuts had started to surpass gum Arabic as the most lucrative agricultural produce in the Senegal basin.⁵³ In 1845, for example, the amount of peanuts exported to France from the Senegal area totaled 187,717 kilograms, a figure which reached a staggering 2,600,276 kilograms by 1850.⁵⁴ French merchants in Saint-Louis representing commercial houses in Bordeaux and Marseille welcomed the prospect of making handsome profits from the peanut trade. Yet this could only happen if the administration ensured security for traders and commercial brokers to carry on their business without threats from nearby states, especially Trarza and Brakna.

Because politics and commerce in the Senegal valley were so intertwined, the peanut basin in Kajoor became a site of competition, tension, and conflict, which pitted

⁵³ ANS 2B 31, Governor to Minister, 20 February 1855.

⁵⁴ *Moniteur du Sénégal* 6 (6 May 1856), 2.

French officials against the leadership of Kajoor. At the same time, the Trarza Moors often made the most of the advantage their caravans and transportation gave them in the commercial orbit to interfere in local disputes with a view to increasing their chances of making more profits. For Faïdherbe, therefore, it made sense to bring Kajoor under control to prevent Trarza or Brakna from encroaching on an area that was becoming the hub of the peanut economy.

In Kajoor itself, the increasing production of peanuts generated new social and political tensions that undermined traditional relations between rulers and their subjects.⁵⁵ For ordinary farmers, the trade in peanuts offered new opportunities the gum trade had not given them. As far back as most of them could remember the ruling elite and their commercial partners had always monopolized commerce, especially when it involved Europeans. By contrast, the peanut trade made it possible for even small-scale farmers to produce and sell a crop whose demand and price the local ruling elite did not control.

Kajoor's emergence as the peanut basin redefined its relationship with the administration in Saint-Louis. French administrators now began to not only take its economic potential more seriously but also mused over plans to subdue the state and bring it under control. For French entrepreneurs and *habitant* merchants and traders in Saint-Louis, the opportunities for more profits from the peanut trade were most welcome, even if they would have to compete with Trarza commercial brokers to maintain their customary role, as Lucy Colvin argues.⁵⁶ Trarza merchants, traders, and *maîtres de langues* had been active players in the riverine trade for generations. Long before peanuts

⁵⁵ Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*, 171-180.

⁵⁶ Colvin, "Kajoor and its Diplomatic Relations," Chapter 7, 253-300.

became the dominant crop in Kajoor, caravans owned by the Moors had provided transportation for trade goods and agricultural produce.⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, the Trarza Moors saw the expanding peanut trade as another phase of their traditional role as commercial brokers and carriers of merchandise and produce, a role for which *habitant* merchants and traders aimed to challenge them.

The administration was well aware of the influence the Trarza and Brakna Moors wielded in neighboring states, particularly Walo and Futa Toro. For this reason, French officials were concerned that Moorish leaders should not extend that influence into Kajoor as well. No doubt tensions and conflicts between Kajoor and the administration were quite common. Local disputes between the damel and his chiefs more often than not caught the attention of French officials in Saint-Louis, who monitored the activities of the Moors in case they tried to influence the outcome of political affairs in Kajoor.

Indeed the earlier defeat and annexation of Walo strained relations between the administration and the northernmost province of Kajoor, N'Diambour, where certain villages became a refuge for the royal family from Walo and its supporters who had fled from the conflict. To compound the problem, the death of Damel Maissa Tende II (1832-1855) led to a brief succession struggle in Kajoor from which his grandson, Birima Ngoné Latyr, emerged as successor.⁵⁸ Amidst these developments, Baol, led by Teigne Tie Yacine, seceded and continued to defy Birima's attempts to bring it back under the crown's control. For the French, then, such problems were signs that Kajoor was

⁵⁷ Taylor, "Of Sultans and Disciples," Chapter 2; Marcson, "European-African Interaction," Chapter 4.

⁵⁸ Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*, Chapter 12.

degenerating into chaos and an urgent response was necessary to stabilize the state by bringing it under administrative control.

Faidherbe encroached on the sovereignty of Kajoor by extending control over the northern towns of Gandiole and Toubé, whose proximity to Saint-Louis was reason enough for the administration to capture them before Trarza could do so. To diffuse the tension the seizure of the two towns provoked, Faidherbe allowed the customary taxes and tributes paid to the damel to continue. The governor was ready to do everything possible to prevent Kajoor from becoming the easy target for Trarza that Walo had been before the administration intervened.

Faidherbe's decision to attack N'Guik in 1856 and Niomré in 1858, both in N'Diambour, may be understood—and with good reason—as an attempt to intimidate the damel and local chiefs of Kajoor with his military power. The governor defended the two attacks on N'Diambour by claiming that certain groups from Walo opposed to the administration were using N'Guik as a base to attack pro-French villages.⁵⁹ Ironically, Faidherbe conceded that the attack launched against Niomré was atypical of the administration as it was "... outside the line of policies which we have adopted in Senegal, and which consists of protecting in general settled blacks and farmers against Moorish nomads and looters, and particularly among the blacks, the marabouts and harmless workers against the banditry of the tiédo."⁶⁰ On one hand, Faidherbe attempted to justify his military action, putting the blame on anti-French dissenters from Walo. On

⁵⁹ SOM: Senegal 142b: Morel to MMC, Saint-Louis, 11 July 1856, cited in Barrows, "General Faidherbe," 659.

⁶⁰ SOM: Senegal 143a: Faidherbe to MMC, Saint-Louis, 1858, no. 142 bis., cited in Barrows, "General Faidherbe," 659.

the other hand, he insisted that such an aggressive line of approach was unusual for the administration, suggesting that military action had been used only as a last resort. Yet previous episodes discussed earlier indicate that the governor had employed military force whenever he considered it imperative to get immediate results. It is thus fair to suggest that Faidherbe was ambivalent about the kind of policy to adopt toward Kajoor. Unlike his responses to Trarza and Walo, he handled Kajoor in a manner intended not “to antagonize the Damel before he [Faidherbe] was prepared for a confrontation,” as Colvin argues.⁶¹ In effect, Faidherbe was not averse to trying out diplomacy and mediation to settle his differences with the damel of Kajoor if it could work to his advantage. Otherwise, the door was open for military action.

In 1859, Faidherbe assigned Brossard de Corbigny the task of leading a diplomatic and fact-finding mission to Kajoor, instructing him to acquaint the damel with and persuade him about a number of projects the administration aimed to accomplish in the state.⁶² Faidherbe had in mind, among other things, the construction of a telegraph line between Saint-Louis and Gorée to run through coastal Kajoor, the erection of three caravan posts, and the damel’s approval of the administration’s control over Gandiole, Tuubé, Jalaxar and the area around Rufisque. Included in the mission to Kajoor was the versatile interpreter Bou El Mogdad, who was to serve as mediator since he had known the damel for several years. It was the governor’s hope that Bou El Mogdad’s presence would work in the delegation’s favor. Faidherbe was cautious in instructing Brossard de Corbigny about his purpose: “...I must seriously try to normalize our relations with

⁶¹ Colvin, “Kajor and its Diplomatic Relations,” 319.

⁶² ANS 3B 84, no. 6, Instructions of Governor Faidherbe to Lieutenant M. Brossard, Saint-Louis, 9 April 1859.

Cayor, and I want everybody to be persuaded that I prefer regulating them peacefully than by force....”⁶³

Unlike the cases of Trarza and Walo examined earlier in the chapter, the governor chose to explore diplomacy to get the damel to cooperate with the administration. Instead of using military force, which would have deepened the antagonism between Kajoor and the administration, Faidherbe relied on his emissaries to negotiate an accord with the damel that would allow the projects to go ahead. At the same time Faidherbe did not rule out the possibility of a military campaign should the damel prove to be intransigent. Indeed relations between the administration and Kajoor in the past had shifted between amity and hostility.

In Faidherbe’s view, Bou El Mogdad was the right kind of local intermediary the delegation to Kajoor needed because his presence could be crucial in determining the kind of reception received from the damel. This was extremely important considering that the administration had not always shown goodwill toward Kajoor. In contrast to the previous cases examined above, Faidherbe opted for diplomacy this time, even if it could take much longer to “normalize” relations with Kajoor. Clearly, the urgency with which the governor had responded militarily to the Trarza threat had been toned down. Faidherbe now thought it prudent to engage in dialogue with the damel and probably wait for an opportune moment to confront him militarily if need be. It is plausible to suggest that the defeat of Trarza and annexation of Walo had eased the pressure off Faidherbe to show his tenacity in restoring security in the river valley, which French *négociants* in Saint-Louis, their business partners in Bordeaux and Marseille, and lobbyists in Paris had demanded all along.

⁶³ Ibid.

Certain questions remain about Faidherbe's involvement in Kajoor, however. Did the governor, for example, purposely stir up trouble in Walo, including the revolt of the marabouts in N'Diambour, to destabilize the state? Was the treaty of 1860 between the damel and Faidherbe actually signed by the two parties? Historians studying Senegal during the nineteenth century have addressed some of these questions exhaustively elsewhere; besides, they fall outside the scope of this chapter.⁶⁴ More importantly, long after Faidherbe left office, the administration continued to show concern about Kajoor and from time to time interfered in its affairs. In fact, it commissioned a number of military expeditions and adopted a policy of systematic reprisals to intimidate the damel and his subjects, especially after Lat Dior became damel on 28 July 1870.⁶⁵ In one instance, for example, a military column headed by Captain Canard marched into Kajoor on 25 November 1870, mainly to make French presence felt in Diander.⁶⁶ Unruffled by the show of French military strength and intimidation, however, Lat Dior strived to reclaim Kajoor's borders as they had been before 1862. Moreover, the damel was open about his interests in Baol, which led to a treaty with the administration proposed by Governor Valière on 12 January 1871.⁶⁷ In striving to unify Kajoor and Baol, Lat Dior was following his predecessors; and until his death in 1886, his relationship with the administration vacillated between hostility and amity.⁶⁸ As the Dakar--Saint-Louis

⁶⁴ Bâ, *La pénétration française au Cayor*; Colvin, "Kajor and its Diplomatic Relations"; Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*; Barrows, "General Faidherbe."

⁶⁵ Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*, 247-248.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ ANS 13G 5, Treaty with Cayor, 12 January 1871. The administration gave Lat Dior a go-ahead in Baol in return for endorsing its control of Gandiole and Jander.

⁶⁸ After two defeats by the army of Ahmadu Sheku in July and September 1874, Lat Dior realized the need to ask for the intervention of the administration. Governor Valière was willing to respond to Lat

railroad project began to take center stage, the administration continued to interfere in the affairs of Kajoor during Governor Briere's tenure, as the next section will show.

Yet the challenges facing the administration from mid century on were not limited to Trarza, Walo, and Kajoor, however. Al-Hajj Umar's military jihad coincided with the early phase of French expansion into the lower and middle valley. With the fort at Podor restored in 1854, the administration was poised to push further eastward into the upper Senegal valley whenever the opportunity arose. Meanwhile Al-Hajj Umar was becoming more commanding in the east and approaching his homeland Futa Toro. With time, Futa Toro would become one of two main arenas in the conflict with the French; the other was Bundu.⁶⁹

When Umar extended his recruitment campaign into Futa Toro, he expected to receive massive support from his Futanke kinfolk, whom he believed would embrace his jihad against the Bambara, his main target at the time.⁷⁰ At the same time, the increasing French presence in the middle valley added another dimension to Umar's jihad. To strengthen their position in Futa Toro, the French exploited cleavages between the two leading lineages then vying for power.⁷¹ This in fact made it more difficult for the Futa Toro leadership to mobilize a united front against the administration. Not even popular

Dior's request by stipulating conditions of his own. Kajoor and the administration thus entered into an alliance of convenience. ANS 2B 73.

⁶⁹ Robinson, *Holy War*, 148-152.

⁷⁰ Umar also targeted the Mandinka, Khassonke, and Soninke.

⁷¹ One faction was led by Mamadu Biran Wan of Mbumba, who had close ties with the Alcaty and had been able to accumulate a lot of wealth over the years through ownership of land and slaves as well as tolls from trade siphoned from the Crown's share. The leader of the other faction was Eliman Rinjaw Falil of the Ac lineage from Bossea province, who had been involved in Futanke politics since the early 1800s. He supported candidates for the Almamyship opposed to Mamadu Wan, although the strong ties between the latter and the Alcaty could not be breached. For more on this issue, see Robinson, *Holy War*, 145-148.

calls for retaliation against the French for taking over Podor in 1854,⁷² as the local people understood it, was enough to galvanize the competing factions into action against the administration. Thus, the stage was set for an unsettling situation by the time Al-Hajj Umar dispatched a mission to Futa Toro to promote his movement and enlist fighters for his jihad.⁷³

As support for Umar's jihad increased, the need for more arms and ammunition for his combatants became more serious. To secure weapons for his increasing band of militants, Umar had to target caravans destined for French river posts.⁷⁴ Around this time, he extended his jihad into Bundu, an area that would remain under his control until the late 1850s.⁷⁵ The jihad in turn set in motion waves of displaced people fleeing to safer areas, such as Bakel, where the French had reinforced their post and could provide some measure of protection for refugees.⁷⁶ For its part, the administration was cautious enough not to carry out any operation that could provoke the jihadists into direct military confrontation. By mid-January 1855, Umar had attacked Karta and defeated its army. As thousands of local inhabitants fled from the Umarian forces, about 2000 prisoners were captured and drafted into the jihadist army.⁷⁷

⁷² The Almamy of Futa Toror, Rassin Ndiatch, was deposed in the aftermath of the French "occupation" of Podor in 1854. Al-Hajj Umar apparently was instrumental in getting the Almamy out of office. For more on this, see Robinson, *Chiefs and Clerics*, Chapter 2; *Holy War*, Chapters 3 and 4.

⁷³ Ibid, Robinson, *Holy War*, 145-147.

⁷⁴ ANS 13G 166, no. 84, Commandant of Bakel to Governor, 19 October 1854.

⁷⁵ Robinson, *Holy War*, 156.

⁷⁶ In addition to Bakel, the administration reinforced its post at Senudebu further south, on the River Faleme, in 1854.

⁷⁷ Robinson, *Holy War*, 160.

With his fighters increasing in number, Umar had to find a solution to his pressing need for weapons. This compelled him to order the confiscation of merchandise stored at depots in Khasso and Gajaga, which a contingent of jihadists ransacked and gutted in February 1855. Umar's army captured some *traitants* and took the arms looted. The jihadists also diverted the rest of the merchandise seized to Tamba, where it was to be exchanged for other supplies needed to sustain the jihad.⁷⁸ Realizing that the French could take action against him for the attacks, Umar immediately launched a campaign to boycott French trade, hoping it would hurt the administration and French entrepreneurs to a point where they would take no further action against his jihad.

By then Umar was responding to a French embargo on arms that was proving to be effective and frustrating for the jihadists in their search for more weapons. Although he ransacked factories owned by Bordeaux firms, Umar spared Muslim *traitants* from Saint-Louis serving as agents for the French companies. In fact some of the *traitants* supported Umar's jihad despite their commercial ties with French *négociants* and the firms they represented. No doubt French officials in Saint-Louis were perturbed to learn that some Saint-Louisian *traitants* were supporting Umar's cause.

In a now well-publicized letter written early in 1855, Umar addressed the *traitants* of Bakel and the Muslim community of Saint-Louis. He explained his reasons for confiscating the goods at Khasso and Gajaga. And Umar assured them that his attacks had been directed at "Christians [Europeans]... because they have committed injustices many times."⁷⁹ Then he went on to complain about the French embargo, which he said

⁷⁸ Ibid, 161.

⁷⁹ ANF/OM, SEN I 14b, Letter to Faidherbe, 11 March 1855; trans. by Robinson, *Holy War*, 162-164.

had targeted him particularly, as his enemies still had access to weapons. Umar ended his letter on an ominous note, warning those who decided to defy him to reconsider the consequences of their decision:

Children of Ndar, God forbids you to be in relations of dependence [*muwālāt*] to them [the French]. Whoever joins them becomes an infidel, like them. As it is said, ‘Do not live among the Jews and Christians or you will become one of them.’⁸⁰

Umar made a case for his increasing hostility toward the French, which he blamed on their growing presence in the middle valley, the arms embargo against his jihadists, and the insistence of the administration to return refugees to their places of origin. In Umar’s view, these actions constituted opposition to his jihad. Despite the French embargo and propaganda against the jihad, however, Umar gained more support in Saint-Louis and its environs. Moreover, the jihadists continued to get arms from local gunrunners and smugglers eager to exploit the conflict and make more money.

The details of the course Umar’s jihad took and the clashes with the French culminating in the siege of Medine in 1857 and defeat for the Umarian forces are beyond the scope of this chapter.⁸¹ More important for us here is the role the administration’s interpreters, particularly Bou El Mogdad, played during the protracted conflict between Umar and the French. The Umarian jihad spurred anxiety among French officials and compelled Faidherbe to mount a counter-campaign aimed at undercutting Umar’s increasing support. Hence Faidherbe had to rely on his key interpreters, Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad, hoping that their influence within the Muslim community of Saint-Louis would help garner support for his counter-Umarian drive.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ For more on these issues, see Robinson, *Holy War; Chiefs and Clerics*.

Apparently assisted by Flize the director of the DAP, Bou El Mogdad succeeded in convincing the administration that funding him on a pilgrimage to Mecca would be an effective way of thwarting Umar's growing political influence. A letter addressed to the administration through the director of the DAP was carefully framed to suggest that Umar had taken advantage of his pilgrimage to Mecca to make a name for himself. Bou El Mogdad argued, therefore, that the best way to persuade the people about the administration's affability toward Muslims was to provide concrete evidence of it by funding his hajj. In the letter, Bou El Mogdad was not in the least complimentary about Umar's intentions, even though he may have been convinced that the Futanke leader meant every bit of his actions. Instead, the interpreter was emphatic in pointing out what he considered Umar's opportunistic inclination:

You know, M. le Directeur, how important it is in this country for any man who wishes to do either good or evil to possess authority; this authority is achieved by enjoying superiority over one's compatriots. Al Hajj Umar is an example of this.⁸²

Bou El Mogdad went on to suggest that Muslim leaders willing to cooperate with the French could become more powerful if they received financial support from the administration to go on the pilgrimage. The politically astute interpreter was well aware that the ultimate respect for Islamic leadership, in the view of local Muslims, rested on performing the pilgrimage. Given the circumstances, it was an easy decision for Faidherbe to provide financial support for Bou El Mogdad's first pilgrimage to Mecca in

⁸² ANS 1G 27, Bou El Moghdad voyage à travers le désert, 1861; also, Hargreaves, ed., *France and West Africa*, 148-150, culled from Bou-El-Mogdad, "Voyage par terre entre le Sénégal et le Maroc," *Revue Maritime et Coloniale*, 1 (1861), 477-492. Faidherbe instructed Bou El Mogdad to provide a detailed report about his overland journey through Trarza and the Adrar on his way to North Africa en route to Mecca.

1861.⁸³ In return, the administration expected that this precedent would serve to send a strong message to the Muslim population about its commitment to foster good relations with Muslim leaders and their constituencies for peaceful coexistence in the region.

At a time Al-Hajj Umar's popularity was increasing, the administration's decision to establish dialogue with the Muslim community in Saint-Louis and nearby areas through its main interpreters underscored Faidherbe's pragmatic response to a problem that was much larger than merely defeating the jihadists militarily. Dealing with a subject population that was becoming Islamized in growing numbers was a major concern Faidherbe sought to respond to in a manner that would not alienate most Muslims in the Senegal valley. This, as has been argued, was the basis of a Muslim policy that evolved in the late 1800s while France struggled with its Muslim population in western Africa.⁸⁴ Certainly the war of propaganda the administration engaged in against Umar was only the beginning of more serious efforts to woo Muslims in the region. In this connection, an even more enduring legacy the administration left about its seriousness of purpose was its sponsorship of Bou El Mogdad's hajj to Mecca. Thereafter, the practice of government funding for Muslim leaders to go on the pilgrimage continued in Senegalese political culture long after Faidherbe and well into the present.

5.3. Governor Louis Briere de l'Isle, the Legacy of Faidherbe, and the Dakar--Saint-Louis Railway

By the time Faidherbe left office in 1865 Saint-Louis was developing into a French stronghold that was in a better position than two decades earlier to control the lower and

⁸³ Before Bou El Mogdad died in 1880, he made a second pilgrimage to Mecca in 1879, also funded by the administration.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Robinson, "France as a Muslim Power"; *Paths of Accommodation*, Chapter 4.

middle valley. Instead of merely overseeing a string of vulnerable trading and military posts along the Senegal River, the administration had proven its military strength and shown the Trarza Moors that they could no longer threaten Saint-Louis without fear of repercussions. Yet the administration still had a long way to go if Faidherbe's ultimate imperial ambition of creating a French West African commercial empire was to be accomplished. Although the annexation of Walo occurred with relative ease, Kajoor was turning out to be a more difficult proposition for the administration to handle. In fact Governor Valière had to recognize Lat Dior as Damel of Kajoor before Paris could endorse his (the governor's) campaign against Amadu Sheku in Futa Toro.⁸⁵

By then trade was showing signs of impressive growth, especially with the increase in the production of peanuts.⁸⁶ And because Kajoor was the most productive area in the peanut economy, the administration now paid constant attention to the state. In fact the Dakar--Saint-Louis railroad project underscored Kajoor's growing economic importance. If completed, the railroad would make it easier to transport peanuts produced in the peanut basin to the port-town of Dakar further south for export abroad.

Amidst a host of problems, including the outbreak of yellow fever in Saint-Louis (1867)⁸⁷ and budgetary constraints triggered by France's defeat in the war with Prussia

⁸⁵ Saint-Martin, Y. "Une Source de l'histoire coloniale du Sénégal: Les rapports de situation politique (1874-1891)," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 3 (1965), 192-202. Governor Pinet-Laprade apparently had accepted the return of Lat Dior to Kajoor in 1869 so that he could be used against Ahmadu Sheku, whom the administration considered a greater danger. Ahmadu Sheku capitalized on the famine and outbreak of disease in the 1860s to send out a political and religious message suggesting that some kind of divine retribution was befalling the local inhabitants for associating with "infidels."

⁸⁶ Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*, 263-286.

⁸⁷ When yellow fever struck Saint-Louis in August 1867, it spread so rapidly that it overstretched the resources of the colonial authorities and had a heavy toll on the coastal settlement. By the time the disease receded at the end of October, it had killed about three hundred Europeans and thousands of Africans. See Archives of the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit, Chevilly-la-Rue (ACSE), *Bulletin Général*, 6, 42 (1866-67), 183-4, cited in Kalala Ngalamulume, "Keeping the City Totally Clean: Yellow Fever and

(1871), policymakers in Paris were reluctant to authorize military expeditions from Saint-Louis.⁸⁸ Not surprisingly, the late 1860s and early 1870s were relatively quiet in terms of military expansion in the river valley. Besides Governor Valière's defeat of Amadu Sheku in Futa Toro and his deposition of Chief Sidiyya in Walo, Paris authorized few military campaigns between 1866 and 1875.⁸⁹

Briere de l'Isle's appointment as governor on 20 April 1876, however, marked the beginning of a new period of expansion in the Senegal area. The governor supported the setting up of the *Commandant Supérieur du Soudan occidental*, which was vital in the conquest of the western Sudan.⁹⁰ Even more important for the purpose of this chapter, the Dakar--Saint-Louis railroad project was launched during the Briere administration.⁹¹ After several conflicts and diplomatic exchanges between the administration and the Damel of Cayor, Lat Dior, the railroad was completed in 1885-1886. Incidentally, Lat Dior was killed in battle on 26 October 1886, just after the railroad project had been finished.⁹² The inauguration of the Dakar--Saint-Louis railroad, Diouf argues, marked the virtual end of Kajoor's independence.⁹³

the Politics of Prevention in Colonial Saint-Louis-du-Sénégal, 1850-1920," *Journal of Africa History* 45, 2 (2004), 183-202.

⁸⁸ Kanya-Forstner, *Conquest of the Western Sudan*, 55-56; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 62-63.

⁸⁹ Kanya-Forstner, *Conquest of the Western Sudan*, 55-56.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*, 263-286.

⁹² Ibid, 282.

⁹³ Ibid, 263-265; see also, Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 63.

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While Governor Briere sought to carve out a commercial empire in West Africa he had to contend with criticisms from French *négociants* and métis merchants, who were skeptical about any plan likely to create an atmosphere of instability and jeopardize agriculture and commerce.⁹⁴ By the late 1870s, however, France was once again looking favorably to extending its territorial holdings in West Africa to prevent other European powers, especially Britain, from grabbing territories that were of interest to France. With financial support from Paris and revenue collected from local customs at his disposal, Briere was in a better position than his immediate predecessors had been to pursue his imperial ambition.⁹⁵

Indeed Briere shared Faidherbe's fixation on security, a precondition for commerce and agriculture to prosper in the region. Thus adequate troops and well-maintained fortifications along the Senegal River had to be given a priority. Still, as in Faidherbe's case, Briere's superiors in Paris did not always endorse his proposals regarding the necessity of military action in the river valley. Such reservations notwithstanding, Briere was able to force the issue and even sent a contingent of troops to subdue Abdul-Bubaker in Futa Toro in 1877, after which the administration declared a protectorate over Futa Toro, Lao, and Irlabé.⁹⁶

However, an even more challenging matter for Briere to handle was getting the damel, Lat Dior, to accept the Dakar--Saint-Louis railroad project without thinking about a loss of sovereignty. Even after Lat Dior and the administration signed a treaty in September 1879 authorizing the railroad project to go ahead, relations between Kajoor

⁹⁴ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, Chapter 5.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Kanya-Forstner, *Conquest of the Western Sudan*, 58.

and Saint-Louis continued to be unpredictable. Not surprisingly, Lat Dior found reason to revoke the earlier agreement he had concluded with the administration:

We have learnt that the emir of N'Dar [the governor] has the intention to begin work on the railway in Cayor. I absolutely refuse and will never in my life accept [this]; there is no other leader in Cayor than me; I am the king who directs everything and by whom all are guided.⁹⁷

It is clear from the damel's statement that he could not trust French officials to carry out the railroad project without undermining his independence. Much as Lat Dior may have wanted to benefit from the economic wealth peanut production in Kajoor could bring, he was reluctant to sacrifice his sovereignty to the French. Indeed the damel's protracted standoff with the administration reflected his determination to preserve his independence in the face of French military power, intimidation, and diplomatic overtures.

By the 1880s, the administration and French firms operating from Saint-Louis were exercising tremendous influence in Kajoor. Kajoor indeed had become a polarized society in which various leaders were vying for power. In this context, Demba War Sall,⁹⁸ the head of the crown ceddo, for example, commanded a significant constituency that could not be overlooked in the political affairs of Kajoor. By contrast, both Lat Dior and his successor, Samba Laobe Fal, had their power base weakened by the administration and French firms in Saint-Louis, who collaborated with their allies in Kajoor to further their own interests. Thus Lat Dior found it increasingly difficult to defend Kajoor's independence while negotiations were underway over the Dakar--Saint-

⁹⁷ ANF (SOM), S I dossier 66b, cited in Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*, 270.

⁹⁸ Demba War Sall remained a dominant political figure in Kajoor until his death in 1903. As an ally of the French, after the demise of Lat Dior in 1886, Demba became the leader of the Confederation of Cayor. See Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 202.

Louis railroad. Briere's successors would be handed the task of completing the railroad project after he left office in 1881.

Work on the Dakar-Saint-Louis railroad started in December 1882 under the direction of the first chief of operations, Alexis Blois, a retired army officer. But construction was marred by the death of five French agents representing the *Société de Construction des Batignolles*, the contracting company,⁹⁹ who had been hit by the yellow fever epidemic that swept across Dakar that year. Fearing that the death toll would increase among the workers, the company relocated them to Saint-Louis while about 300 French workers rescinded their contracts in France before they could travel to Senegal.¹⁰⁰ It was not until late January 1883 that the first group of workers arrived in Dakar to start work. Yet not much work was done during the first year of construction. In fact by March 1883, only about 9 miles of roadbed and 1.2 miles of track had been laid from Saint-Louis. And from Dakar, only 8 miles of roadbed and 2.4 miles of track had been finished by then. Work on the railroad progressed so slowly that two months later the track laid from Dakar had only barely doubled.¹⁰¹

Although the last spike was installed on 14 May 1885, at Kebermer-N'Dande, signaling the completion of the railroad, it was not ready for official opening until June.¹⁰² The construction had been fraught with problems from the beginning of the

⁹⁹ To carry out its work in Senegal, the *Société de Construction des Batignolles* set up a limited company, the *Compagnie du Chemin de Fer de Dakar à Saint-Louis* in 1883. The company started with a capital of 5 million francs to undertake the construction and operate the railroad.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Edward Pheffer, "Railroads and Aspects of Social Change in Senegal, 1878-1933," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1975), 98.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 100.

¹⁰² ANFOM Senegal I 73, Governor of Senegal to Minister of the Navy and Colonies, 14 May 1885, Saint-Louis, cited in Pheffer, "Railroads," 103.

project. Besides the disagreement between the administration and the Kajoor leadership, the company had to deal with the scarcity and inexperience of the workforce, climatic conditions, and logistical problems, including the transportation of materials, especially for the construction of bridges. In all, the *Société de Construction des Batignolles* received 12,680,000 francs for the job, that is, about 78,513.93 francs per mile.¹⁰³

While the construction was going on the French were able to stifle any resistance from Lat Dior by depending on their ally Samba Laobe, who was preferred as *damel*. Thus local resistance in Kajoor to the construction project itself was minimal. At the same time dispute between the French and the *damel* arose over the right to tax commerce around each *escale*, which only increased the number of taxes merchants had to pay. Because the administration could not resolve the tax problem with Lat Dior and found it equally difficult to annex Kajoor, it decided instead to divide the state into six provinces. Naturally Lat Dior opposed this violation of Kajoor's sovereignty; and the French responded by launching a military offensive that ultimately led to Lat Dior's death on 26 October 1886, at the battle of Dekheule.¹⁰⁴

Despite Lat Dior's long-drawn opposition to French imperial expansion, however, the letters he wrote to the administration expressing his condolences after Bou El Mogdad passed away in 1880 suggest that he held the influential interpreter in very high esteem. Bou El Mogdad had known Lat Dior for well over twenty years, and since the days of Faidherbe the interpreter had been a mediator between the administration and Kajoor. Lat Dior's letter expressed his sincere grief over the death of Bou El Mogdad: "The goal of this letter is to inform you that we have learnt about Bou-el-Moghdad's

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*, 280-286.

death. When I knew with as much pain as terror [about his illness],... I was about to go and see him; the news of his death has [metaphorically] hung me....”¹⁰⁵ A similar sentiment was expressed in a letter to the governor written by Fara-Kaba Demba Mare, the head of the army in Kajoor: “This cruel loss has put despair in our heart, and God had never inflicted a greater astonishment on us.”¹⁰⁶ Bou El Mogdad’s influence as cultural and political power broker extended beyond Saint-Louis and won the admiration of even those opposed to the French colonial administration.

This chapter attempted to provide glimpses of the roles interpreters played in various developments in the lower and middle valley between the 1850s and 1880s. It illustrated the difficult circumstances that made the job of an interpreter so demanding. Because the archival sources do not always provide clear-cut evidence about the activities of the interpreters, however, we have to make inferences sometimes and even speculate about what may have happened in certain instances. Still, we do get indications that in cases where the administration opted to use diplomacy rather than military action, interpreters like Bou El Mogdad proved to be useful mediators, as the next chapter will reaffirm.

¹⁰⁵ ANS 13G 260, Lat Dior to Governor, 14 November 1880.

¹⁰⁶ ANS 13G 260, Fara-Kaba Demba Mare to Governor, 14 November 1880.

CHAPTER 6

Interpreter Family Biographies

When Scottish historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) remarked in 1841, “The history of the world is but the biography of great men,”¹ he was in all probability expressing sentiments reflecting the state of historical writing at that time and contemporary discourse on the historian’s craft. Today, since generations of historians have shown that historical writing entails a lot more than merely chronicling the deeds of great men, Carlyle’s view would be considered sexist and anachronistic. Indeed an extraordinarily diverse group of historical actors, including women, peasants, factory workers, gays and lesbians, the “wretched of the earth,”² ethnic minorities and “subalterns,”³ constitutes a rich repository historians have tapped to reconstruct the past. In the process they have covered the complex political, social, economic, cultural and intellectual dynamics of a variety of historical settings in both time and space, across the globe, where the experiences of innumerable individuals and groups transpired.

Although Carlyle’s view about the essence of history may no longer be tenable considering its reductionist slant, he nonetheless draws our attention to a form of historical writing—biography—which still carries much weight in the historical

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* (New York: Wiley and Halsted, 1859), 26.

² This is the title of Franz Fanon’s work that called attention to downtrodden colonized peoples and their struggle for political and social justice. See Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

³ The use of the term subaltern has transcended its conventional meaning of subordinate military officer to include a wider range of marginalized and underrepresented peoples across the world. From its initial focus on Asian, more specifically Indian, subalterns in the early 1980s, Subaltern Studies have become global to the extent that scholars dealing with Latin America and Africa have engaged similar discourses in their studies.

profession.⁴ Historians and other social scientists, however, continue to debate the viability of biography as a “legitimate and venerable mode of historical discourse.”⁵ The problem apparently centers on the capacity of biographical studies to produce the level of analytical complexity and interpretative incisiveness academic historians customarily expect. Yet the skepticism they express somehow fails to notice how often biography has captured with much insight the dialectical relationship between individual life experiences and the diverse political, social, and cultural milieu traversed and influenced by the historical actor in question and vice versa. Put differently, biography locates the individual in a wider world and looks at how the private and public domains intersect and influence each other.

In her essay “Biography as History,” Lois Brenner drives this point home by making a strong case for biography as a genre with laudable attributes scholars, especially academic historians, have downplayed or even neglected altogether:

At its best, biography, like history, is based on archival research, interweaves historical categories and methodologies, reflects current political and theoretical concerns, and raises complex issues of truth and proof. It challenges the analyst to move beyond easy platitudes to engage in what Clifford Geertz famously called “thick description.”⁶

Banner’s comment on biography as a productive genre for reconstructing the experiences

⁴ For more on this issue, see, among others, Lloyd E. Ambrosius, ed., *Writing Biography: Historians and their Craft* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2004); Ben Pimlott, “Is Contemporary Biography History?,” *The Political Quarterly* 70, 1 (1999), 31-41.

⁵ David Nasaw, “Introduction: AHR Roundtable, Historians and Biography,” *The American Historical Review* 114, 3, June 2009, 573.

⁶ Lois W. Banner, “Biography as History,” *The American Historical Review* 114, 3 (June 2009), 580; Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture,” in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

of “unknown, inarticulate, unlettered men, women, and children”⁷ resonates with what feminist, labor, and social historians have done with the “new biography” since the 1990s. These scholars have been able to interrogate the categories of class, gender, race and ethnicity, which invariably intersect with individual life experiences captured in biographical studies. In so doing they have unraveled “the shifting and multifaceted nature of individual personality” while cognizant of “the diversity and complexity of movements and institutions...”⁸ in a wider global context.

As a narrative form, biography has its merits, no doubt. At its best, it provides great insight into the personality, identity, aspirations and flaws of an individual while it lays out the particular historical circumstances that influenced (and were influenced by) the individual. From this perspective, biography is a powerful vehicle for chronicling the past of humankind, great or small, especially as it captures the protagonist at close range grappling with personal challenges as well as the complex forces of societal relationships that shape his/her life. Through its capacity to personalize the experiences of people, biography allows us to relive the histories of individuals often submerged in the larger context of events that take center stage in other genres of historical writing.

Through a biographical mode, then, the present chapter and the next aim to bring to life the experiences of a number of interpreters, some of whom were prominent intermediaries between the French authorities and Africans in the lower and middle Senegal River valley at crucial moments during the mid to late 1800s and early 1900s. The more illustrious interpreters who served as emissaries, expeditionary and military guides, treaty negotiators and diplomatic hosts for visiting dignitaries in Saint-Louis are

⁷ Nasaw, “Introduction,” 576.

⁸ Banner, “Biography as History,” 581.

the subject of the current chapter. By contrast, other interpreters receive only modest attention as ordinary employees in the French archival documentation; and many of them made no lasting contribution to the administration or influenced the course of events in the lower and middle valley to any significant degree. Yet a few did achieve some measure of success in their own way. Chapter 7 will focus on the lesser-known interpreters, whose exploits pale in the shadow of the illustrious careers of the Anne and Seck families featured in this chapter.

The archival documentation from which the bulk of the information on interpreters comes reflects to a certain extent their hierarchical standing and importance in the administration. Accordingly, the records of interpreters covered in this chapter generally contain more information than those presented in the next chapter, even when the latter at times played a part in one or two important administrative affairs during their career. Even so, there are gaps in the records on either group of interpreters that make it difficult to reconstruct a more comprehensive history. The limited written sources on ordinary interpreters especially only allow us to get glimpses of their lives and careers. Similarly, although oral traditions provide some information about the activities of well-known interpreters, they tend to be reticent on their less accomplished colleagues.

In spite of the limitations of the existing sources, however, a closer look at the interpreter corps reveals that they were by no means a homogeneous group despite their common identity as Muslims. More accurately, they represented a diverse mix of individuals from different ethnic and social backgrounds, who also exhibited dissimilar levels of political consciousness, competence, integrity and ambition. In reality some interpreters were more proficient than their colleagues were in French and Arabic, just as

their outlook toward life, especially in relation to French cultural influences, differed a great deal. Interpreters assigned on duty in the interior away from the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Saint-Louis were less likely to adopt French customs or learn more about the intricacies of administrative politics. Moreover, leading interpreters, such as Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad, accumulated ample social capital over time that most of their colleagues could only dream about throughout their career. Hence prominent interpreters could traverse the colonial divide with much more confidence and ease than ordinary interpreters could manage. Thus the likes of Hamat Ndiaye Anne and Bou El Mogdad had the capacity to influence how relations of power played out between French officials and Africans, at times in significant ways.

The chapter first traces the life and career of Hamat Ndiaye Anne, whose father Ndiaye Anne worked with the administration and gained considerable respect among Muslims in Saint-Louis for his integrity and reverence for Islamic learning. Next, the chapter examines the career of Bou El Mogdad, whose lengthy service spanned three decades. In fact Bou El Mogdad's influence lasted well over two generations as his sons Abdoulaye and Mahmadou also became important interpreters during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The final section of the chapter focuses on the younger of the two brothers, Mahmadou, who carried on his father's mantle after his elder brother Abdoulaye was killed while accompanying a mission to Baol in 1887.

6.1. Hamat Ndiaye Anne (1813-1879)

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, Saint Louis began to attract a steady flow of African traders, merchants, Muslim clerics and runaway slaves from the interior seeking

a place in the bustling commercial life the coastal town had started to experience.⁹ Most of the new migrants envisioned that Saint-Louis would offer them better opportunities for economic prosperity and social mobility missing in their hometowns and villages in the interior. Wolof, Futanke, Serer and Moors, among other ethnic groups, converged on the coastal island to add to its mix of French expatriates, métis, and African *habitants*. Among the numerous people who settled in Saint Louis in the early 1800s, the Anne family would become one of the town's most influential Muslim families during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Ndiaye Anne, the head of the family, hailed from a respected Futanke clerical lineage of Futa Toro, in the middle Senegal valley, a pedigree that earned him considerable respect within the growing Muslim community of Saint-Louis.¹⁰ His wife was related to Ndiak Moktar Bâ, a “commercial and political broker,”¹¹ who wielded some degree of influence in Podor, located about 138 miles (223 km) east of Saint-Louis, along the Senegal River. It did not take long before the administration noticed Ndiaye Anne's leadership role in the Muslim community. Because of his piety and moral probity, he became *tamsir* or head of the Muslim religion in Saint-Louis, a title the

⁹ The French regained control of Saint-Louis from the British in 1817, after it had been under a short spell of British control during the Napoleonic wars beginning at the turn of the century. From then on, various French entrepreneurs and firms became increasingly interested in exploring the commercial potential of the Senegal River trade, which anchored in Saint-Louis and connected to the import-export trade on the coast. With the Atlantic slave trade gradually fading after bans from various European nations in the early 1800s, gum arabic emerged as the most important export commodity from the lower and middle valley. However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, peanuts dominated the economy of the area.

¹⁰ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 80-81.

¹¹ Ibid.

French authorities recognized with all due respect.¹² The position of *tamsir* embodied a consensus of reverence among members of the Muslim community for its holder.

Before the administration formalized the position of interpreter as a full-fledged career, Ndiaye Anne was among a number of *maîtres de langues* French officials, entrepreneurs, local merchants and traders hired on an ad hoc basis to interpret and translate letters and official documents. The *maîtres de langues* also brokered commercial transactions between diverse interest groups in Saint-Louis and Africans in the interior who operated in the riverine trade network, as explained in chapters 1 and 3.

As an interpreter employed by the administration, Ndiaye Anne handled Arabic correspondence with chiefs and other Muslim leaders in the interior. At that time, the 1840s, French control was limited to Saint-Louis and a few military posts in the lower valley. For this reason, communication with African leaders in the interior was vital for the administration to make its presence felt, even if this did not always get its desired effect. Indeed local interpreters and translators could make contact and rapport easier between French officials and local leaders in the interior.

From the early 1840s on, Ndiaye Anne and his son, Hamat (1813-1879), assisted in rallying Muslims in Saint-Louis, who petitioned the administration to set up an Islamic court for arbitrating their civil cases (see Chapter 4). In making their case to the administration, Muslim leaders in Saint-Louis pleaded: “We beg to request for us a Muslim court to consider our civil disputes, because it is necessary for this country,

¹² Ibid; Saint-Martin, *Le Sénégal sous le second empire*, 268-270; Carrère and Holle, *Sénégal sous le second empire*, 239-243; Colvin, “Kajor and its Diplomatic Relations,” 90.

especially for marriages and inheritances.”¹³ While the political wrangle over French political and legal rights for *habitants* dragged on, the Muslim community of Saint-Louis was growing in confidence about its place in the town’s civil society. Muslims became more vocal about their civic and legal rights and pressed for official recognition from administrators in Saint-Louis. Even as Ndiaye Anne performed his tasks as interpreter/translator for the administration, he nurtured the interests of the Muslim community and ignited a similar responsibility in his son Hamat. By the time Ndiaye Anne decided to retire from public functions, Hamat was in a vantage position to take up his father’s civic responsibilities.

Hamat Ndiaye Anne was born in Saint-Louis not too long after his father relocated from Futa Toro. Although the archival records do not provide specific information about his early upbringing, Hamat most likely began to learn the Quran from an early age, with his father’s guidance. Consistent with a practice among learned Muslim families in Saint-Louis and towns in the river valley, Hamat’s father sent him to neighboring Trarza, north of the Senegal River, to study under the *zwaya* of the Awlâd Daïman clan.¹⁴ In this context, Hamat shared a similar educational experience with his would be brother-in-law Bou El Mogdad, whose biography is traced in the next section of this chapter.¹⁵

¹³ ANS M8, piece 12, Local Chiefs of Saint-Louis to Governor (undated). Those who signed the letter included Fara Biram, Mambay Goné, Massaer Sar and Yaro Gueye.

¹⁴ Saint-Martin, *Le Sénégal sous le second empire*, 268-270.

¹⁵ As Robinson explains, Bou El Mogdad got married to Hamat’s sister, Kumba, who had three children, including Mahmadou Seck. Mahmadou took up his father’s profession and became an outstanding interpreter and cultural broker for the administration in the late 1800s, as the next section of this chapter will reveal.

As early as the mid 1840s the administration had recognized Hamat as the right person to take over his father's functions.¹⁶ After the creation of the BEA in 1845 to handle relations between the administration and local states in the interior, Hamat took up the functions of official interpreter. In this capacity he had to correspond with indigenous leaders, accompany military and exploratory missions, and negotiate and assist in drafting treaties. In essence Hamat embodied the spirit of the cadre of interpreters Faidherbe envisioned in making the interpreter service a full-time career within the administration.

Even before the Faidherbe administration Hamat had started carving out a niche for himself within the Muslim community of Saint-Louis. It may not be farfetched to suggest that his father's influence paved the way for Hamat to become a leading figure in the affairs of the town's Muslim community. Yet there is hardly any doubt that Hamat himself possessed impressive credentials for leadership; his sound Islamic education and moral integrity were qualities Muslims in Saint-Louis valued as vital ingredients for such an important role. Little wonder then that after the completion of the grand mosque in the northern section of Saint-Louis, the Muslim quarter, in 1848, the Muslim community chose Hamat as their *imam*, as Omar Sarr explains.¹⁷ The decision to choose Hamat as *imam* was an affirmation of the high esteem in which the Muslim community of Saint-Louis held the *tamsir*.

¹⁶ ANS 13 G 255, Correspondence with Local Chiefs; 13 G 256, Correspondence with Local Chiefs; see also Colvin, "Kajor and its Diplomatic Relations," 89-91.

¹⁷ An imam is a head of a Muslim community who also carries the responsibility of leading prayers in the mosque. (Omar Sarr's interview with David Robinson, 4 June 1985). <<http://www.aodl.org/robinson/audio.php>>.

Because of the social capital and respect he commanded in Saint-Louis, Hamat Ndiaye Anne proved to be an indispensable intermediary for the administration throughout his lengthy career spanning slightly over three decades. After setting up the Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis in 1857, Governor Faidherbe had to ensure that Muslims would not doubt the credibility of the court following a long period of bureaucratic vacillation. Although Muslims in Saint-Louis may have been disappointed that they did not elect officials of the tribunal, Faidherbe's appointment of Hamat as *cadi* and Bou El Mogdad as assessor¹⁸ was not completely off the mark as first choice candidates of most Muslims in spite of reservations from some of them.

As *cadi* of the tribunal Hamat had the right credentials, moral authority, and social capital to give the court tremendous credibility. Some Muslims in Saint-Louis, however, believed that Hamat's close ties with Faidherbe and the administration would not augur well for his position; they feared that being an appointee of the governor would compromise Hamat's autonomy. Such skepticism was particularly rife among Muslims who decried any form of association with the administration, believing that it was irreverent for a Muslim to work for a non-Muslim regime. To crown it all, as Chapter 4 revealed, Hamat had to defend his position in front of a Muslim congregation at the grand mosque in Saint-Louis.¹⁹ In the end, he convinced the gathering about the practicality of working with a non-Muslim administration without compromising his faith and integrity. This incident shows that most Muslims in Saint-Louis were pragmatic

¹⁸ See Chapter 4, 185-188.

¹⁹ See Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 80-81.

enough to realize the importance of having someone of the *cadi*'s stature, knowledge, and experience to "represent" them within the administration.

By the time Hamat became *cadi* of Saint-Louis in 1857 he had received a Legion of Honor award in recognition of outstanding administrative service, an accolade the French authorities reserved for only a select few of their African employees.²⁰ After Hamat became *cadi* and third deputy mayor of Saint-Louis, however, he appeared to have become too busy with his new appointments to continue the task of translating at the Arabic translation service of the DAP. Hence Bou El Mogdad was appointed chief translator at the Arabic translation service in November 1863.²¹

The court records covering Hamat's tenure as *cadi*, to the best of my knowledge, are absent among those on the Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis currently available at the ANS in Dakar.²² Considering the length of time Hamat served as *cadi*, however, one would have expected to come across at least a handful of archival documents on cases brought to the tribunal during his term of office. It would have been informative, for example, to know more about the sort of cases he presided over and their outcomes. Were the Muslim litigants at all times satisfied that the *cadi* had meted out justice appropriately as expected under Islamic law? Alternatively, were there cases of miscarriage of justice? As *cadi*, did Hamat always uphold the moral uprightness and

²⁰ *Moniteur du Sénégal et Dépendances*, 6 avril 1869, no. 679, 53; Abdou Salam Kane, "Coutume civile et pénale toucouleur (Cercle Matam) - 1907" in Bernard Maupoil, eds., *Coutumiers Juridiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*. Tome 1 – Sénégal (Paris: Librairie Larose, 1939), 58.

²¹ See Chapter 1, note 11.

²² During the course of my research at the National Archives, I did not come across such records. The M series covering the activities of the Muslim Tribunal of Saint-Louis contains no documentation on specific cases Hamat Ndiaye Anne handled as *cadi*. Ghislaine Lydon also makes a similar observation. See Lydon, "Obtaining 'Freedom' at the Muslims' Tribunal: Women, Divorce, and Islamic Law in Colonial Senegal," Paper presented at the African Studies Centre in Leiden, May 4, 2006.

neutrality expected of him? Alternatively, did his ties with the administration influence the way he dispensed justice? Answers to such questions would have shed more light on Hamat Ndiaye Anne's function as *cadi* vis-à-vis his relationship with senior French administrators in Saint-Louis. In turn, we would have been able to assess with more certainty the degree of autonomy the *cadi* exercised in carrying out his duties in the Muslim Tribunal.

The death of Hamat in 1879 was an emotional event for not only the Muslim community of Saint-Louis but also Governor Briere and the administration. Before he passed away, plans had been underway since the previous year for Hamat to visit the *Exposition Universelle* in France during his annual leave.²³ The administration expected that upon his return to Saint-Louis in August of that year, Bou El Mogdad and Mamadou Racine, a sub-lieutenant of the *tirailleurs* who apparently impressed French officials with his quick grasp of French and understanding of local politics, would then depart for France.²⁴ Governor Briere emphasized in his letter that the administration could not afford the absence of both the *cadi* and his understudy at the same time.²⁵

Occurring just when the administration was getting apprehensive about finding suitable replacements for its more experienced interpreters, Hamat Ndiaye Anne's death was unwelcome news for Governor Briere, who had yet to accomplish his imperial ambition of extending French control beyond the Senegal valley into the Niger basin. Still, the governor could seek solace from the presence of Bou El Mogdad, who

²³ ANS 2B 52, no. 295, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 6 April 1878.

²⁴ Mamadou Racine was a son of a local chief, and this could have worked in his favor in getting the administration to support his trip to France.

²⁵ ANS 2B 52, no. 295, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 6 April 1878.

commanded as much social capital and deference among the local populace as the erstwhile *cadi* Hamat Ndiaye Anne.

6.2. Bou El Mogdad Seck (1826-1880)

The son of Abdoulaye Seck and Yacine Gaye, Bou El Mogdad Seck was born in Saint-Louis in 1826.²⁶ His father, a Wolof trader and cleric from the region of Dagana around the western edge of Futa Toro, settled in Saint-Louis during the early 1800s, most probably to seek his fortune in the budding commerce of the coastal island. While living in Saint-Louis, however, Abdoulaye Seck continued to maintain close ties with his rural past through his religious contacts and activities.

Although there is no extant contemporary account detailing Bou-El Mogdad's early socialization, it is highly probable that he began learning the Quran under his father's tutelage at an early age. Abdoulaye Seck then sent his son to one of the Trarza *médersas* run by marabouts of the Awlâd Daïman clan in present-day southern Mauritania.²⁷ Known for their discipline and rigorous pedagogical regime, the *médersa* cultivated Bou El Mogdad into an ardent student who attained a high standard in classical Arabic. This would serve him well afterward on his return to Saint-Louis, where he began to ply his trade as an interpreter/translator. Bou El Mogdad also acquired a remarkable fluency in Hassaniyya, the language of the Trarza Moors, which put him in good stead to liaise with Moorish leaders later on in his career. After he returned to Saint-Louis, he had

²⁶ Bâ, *La pénétration française*, 285-286; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 81.

²⁷ Charles Stewart provides useful information about early education in Quranic schools in the Trarza region of southern Mauritania. Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*.

a short stint as an *écrivain public* (scribe), writing and translating letters and petitions on behalf of clients from different strata of the Saint-Louisian society.

A decade or so earlier, in 1843, some concerned Muslims in Saint-Louis had signed a petition addressed to the administration demanding the creation of an Islamic judicial body that would apply Islamic law to cases for Muslims concerning family, matrimony, and property inheritance. Bou El Mogdad was one of the signatories of the petition, together with Ndiaye Anne and his son, Hamat, as the previous section indicated. The 1843 petition and successive appeals by the Muslim community alerted the administration to the conundrum underlying the issue of French citizenship for Muslim *habitants*. Amidst the growing agitation among Muslims, Bou El Mogdad and Hamat Ndiaye Anne played an active role to get administrative approval for constructing a mosque in the *quartier musulman* of the Saint-Louis, a project completed in 1848.

Bou El Mogdad began working for the administration at a time Muslims in Saint-Louis were already on track making their presence felt in the town's political life.²⁸ As Muslim *habitants* continued to express concern about their legal and political rights vis-à-vis French citizenship, the issue became more politicized by the time Faidherbe became governor in 1854. Ensuing developments would have a direct bearing on Bou El Mogdad's career as Faidherbe attempted to woo the Muslim community of Saint-Louis into a stable working relationship.

Before the administration employed him officially in the early 1850s, Bou El Mogdad served a number of governors in an informal capacity as interpreter, informant, and military guide. Recounting Bou El Mogdad's work experience in 1878, Governor Briere explained:

²⁸ Sarr and Roberts, "Jurisdiction," in Mann and Roberts, eds., *Law in Colonial Africa*, 132-135.

Before being employed as a salaried employee Mr. Si-El-Hadj Bou-El-Moghdad served different governors for ten years; he undertook several missions either alone or with officers to the fullest satisfaction of the administration. Since Governor Protet's [term] he has assisted with twenty-two military campaigns or expeditions and today he has [to his credit] twenty-three years of official service; he has been an Officer of the Legion of Honour since 1869.²⁹

From Briere's statement, it is clear that Bou El Mogdad gained a wealth of experience working with the administration under a long sequence of different governors at the helm. He drew on his knowledge of Arabic, French, and local languages, including Wolof, Pulaar, and Hassaniya, as well as his intimate understanding of local politics to establish himself as one of the administration's most versatile and influential interpreters.

In the portrait of Bou El Mogdad below (Photo 6.1.), which first appeared in *Tour de Monde* in 1861, he is dressed in a traditional gown (*sabador* in Wolof and *boubou* in French) worn in Senegal and much of West Africa, especially by Muslims. On the left side of his upper chest are two medals representing awards he received from the administration in recognition of his outstanding service. By displaying the medals Bou El Mogdad probably intended to draw attention to the importance of his official position and his proximity to French officials who wielded a significant degree of power. The folded scroll in his hands conveys the idea that he worked with documents in his official position, thereby emphasizing that he was an educated functionary.

Bou El Mogdad's stern demeanor in the photo below hints at a strong-minded personality with a firm sense of purpose. The display of Muslim prayer beads around his neck was presumably a statement about his title, Al-Hajj, affirming that he had been on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Otherwise, he may have simply intended to call attention to his commitment to Islam. More importantly, the portrait was part of the publicity Faïdherbe

²⁹ ANS 2B 25, no. 759, Governor to Minister, Saint Louis, 23 July 1878.



Photo 6.1. Bou El Mogdad Seck (1826-1880).

Source: *Tour de Monde*, 1861.

launched in an attempt to counter the growing support for Al-hajj Umar's military jihad in the lower and middle valley. Faidherbe was hopeful that Muslims would respond favorably to the public image of such a high-profiled functionary who had performed the hajj, and this would help win the support of marabouts and local Muslim political leaders for the administration.

In hindsight Faidherbe's appointment as governor appears to have favored Muslims, especially those in Saint-Louis whose support he strived to win so that he could

build up a strong local support base. Apart from his desire to project an image of tolerance toward Muslims, the governor was keen to preserve the town's Islamic heritage and identity.³⁰ By decreeing the creation of a Muslim Tribunal in 1857, then, Faïdherbe officially sanctioned the practice of Islamic law for Muslims in Saint-Louis.³¹ The decision underlined his quest for accommodation with the Muslim community to quell attempts by his detractors to mobilize public opinion against the administration. His appointment of Hamat Ndiaye Anne as *cadi* and Bou El Mogdad as assessor was more than a superficial attempt to woo prominent Muslim figures to support his administration. More accurately, the appointments reflected to a significant degree the governor's respect for the Islamic tradition of learning and piety, however much he exhibited a revolutionary French republicanism and an anticlerical disposition.

Hamat Ndiaye Anne's appointment as *cadi* and third deputy mayor of Saint-Louis, as explained above, paved the way for Bou El Mogdad to head the translation service for Arabic correspondence at the DAP.³² These appointments indeed suggest one or two things worth pointing out. First, the Muslim community and the administration were beginning to forge a mutual dependency even as the mere presence of the French alienated certain Muslims and provided reason enough for them to vilify foreign intrusion. Second, the administration's interpreters, especially those ranked high in the

³⁰ For most French officials serving in overseas colonies at that time, the idea of tolerance was rooted in the Enlightenment thoughts of *philosophes* as well as the ideals of equality, fraternity, and liberty propagated by the French Revolution of 1789. Exponents of the French *la mission civilisatrice* borrowed these ideas in their attempt to export French culture abroad. However, French ideals and praxis in colonial settings were often at variance with each other. Still, Faïdherbe was pragmatic enough to understand the need for a realistic solution to the problem posed by the peculiar situation of Muslim *habitants* in Saint-Louis.

³¹ "Decree Promulgating the Imperial Decree of the 20 May 1857 which Created a Muslim Court in Saint-Louis," 25 June 1857, *Moniteur du Sénégal* 66, 30 June 1857, 2-3.

³² Bou El Mogdad's appointment took effect on 11 November 1863. *Feuille officielle du Sénégal et dépendances* (1863).

pecking order of local personnel, were becoming important for legitimating French rule at the local level. Yet a lingering problem was how to deal with the reconfiguration of power relations between the administration and civil society in Saint-Louis represented by diverse groups in terms of religion, race, class and gender.³³ To what extent could Muslim interpreters influence these relations of power?

Bou El Mogdad assisted the administration in its correspondence and diplomatic liaisons with local leaders, some of whom were in the interior outside the French sphere of control. Equally, he played host to a number of indigenous leaders who visited Saint-Louis as the administration attempted to forge domestic alliances in the river valley and its environs. For instance, Bou El Mogdad used his connections with Trarza to build up diplomatic rapport with some of the Moorish leaders, such as Sheikh Sidiyya al-Kabir (ca. 1780-1868) of Boutilimit, whose visit to Saint-Louis gave the administration much hope about its chances of success in getting other local leaders to cooperate.³⁴

In Bou El Mogdad the administration found a formidable transactional go-between to deal with its frontier relations. He accompanied several expeditions, including military and fact-finding missions; the latter sought information about local states in the interior, potential allies, and the feasibility of commercial relations. In briefing Lieutenant Brossard de Corbigny about his trip to Kajoor and Dakar in 1859, for instance, Faidherbe explained that Bou El Mogdad would accompany the mission, because he had known the

³³ Wesley Johnson, *Emergence of Black Politics*; Jones, "Citizens and Subjects"; George Brooks, "Signares of Saint-Louis and Gorée"; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, Chapter 5, 97-116.

³⁴ ANS 3B 93, no. 78, 20 November 1864; ANS 13G 123, no. 12, 18 November 1865; ANS 13G 123, no. 60, 11 September 1866; ANS 13G 123, no. 67, 17 December 1866; ANS 13G 120, no. 76, 8 June 1856. Stewart suggests that the French showed an ambiguous attitude toward Sheikh Sidiyya because, on one hand, Faidherbe commended his mediation efforts but, on the other, he remained apprehensive of the Sheikh's possible collaboration with dissident elements in Trarza and Brakna against the French. See Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*, 86-97; also, Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 82.

damel of Kajoor for several years and was best suited to win his trust.³⁵ By sending the mission to Kajoor, Faidherbe also hoped to assure the damel that he would not support “Ndiambour, Wolof, and Baol” in case of war against Kajoor, contrary to public opinion at the time.³⁶ Given that the administration knew very little to nothing about Kajoor at that time, Bou El Mogdad’s role as mediator and expedition guide was particularly important for Faidherbe in his search for local allies as well as information he probably intended to use at an opportune time.

In 1860 Bou El Mogdad was part of an exploratory expedition headed by Captain Vincent that made a long trip to the Adrar in the northern part of Mauritania.³⁷ The journey was for Bou El Mogdad a precursor to his overland trip across the Sahara en route to Mecca the following year, the first of two pilgrimages he made funded by the administration. Historian Charles Stewart observes that in authorizing Bou El Mogdad’s first hajj, Faidherbe instructed him to provide a detailed geographical description of the first leg of his journey between Saint-Louis and Mogador.³⁸ This was part of Faidherbe’s wider project of collecting systematic information about areas as far south as Futa Jallon in present-day Guinea. In this connection, Bou El Mogdad served the dual role of transactional and representational go-between who provided invaluable information for French officials using his “local knowledge” and understanding of the African cultural landscape.

³⁵ ANS 3B 84, Instructions of Governor Faidherbe to Lieutenant de Vaisseau M. Brossard, Saint-Louis, 9 April 1859; also Bâ, *La pénétration Française*, 148-150.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Capitaine Vincent, “Voyage dans l’Adrar et retour à Saint-Louis (1860),” *Tour du Monde* (1861), 148-150.

³⁸ Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*, 171-172.

Apart from his diplomatic responsibilities Bou El Mogdad played a role in transforming the *École des Otages* into the *École des Fils de Chefs et des Interprètes*. To make the school more relevant to the administration's goals in the Senegal region, Faidherbe put it under the direct supervision of the DAP, a move that presaged the laicization of colonial education in French West Africa in the early 1900s.³⁹ More immediately, though, because instructors the school could employ were in short supply, Bou El Mogdad served as instructor for a while after 1857,⁴⁰ teaching Arabic and translation as well as mentoring the would-be interpreters/translators.

The colonial authorities in Saint-Louis recognized Bou El Mogdad's importance in mediating relations with Muslims and providing assistance for French officials in dealing with daily events in the lower and middle valley. For this reason, the administration paraded him to other Muslim leaders as an example of cooperation between the local leadership and French officials that could be beneficial for both parties. No doubt the need to control certain parts of the interior, mainly to ensure that trade continued without disruptions from popular leaders, such as Al-Hajj Umar, was a priority for the administration in the late 1850s. In this context, Bou El Mogdad, with the assistance of Flize the director of the DAP, succeeded in convincing Governor Faidherbe to send him on a pilgrimage to Mecca as part of the effort to counter Umar's growing political influence. In a letter written to the administration through the director, Bou El Mogdad stated his case in pragmatic terms:

You know, M. le Directeur, how important it is in this country for any man who wishes to do either good or evil to possess authority; this authority is

³⁹ Bouche, *L'enseignement*, I, 119-214; Conklin, *Mission to Civilize*, 71-86.

⁴⁰ Robinson, "French 'Islamic' Policy," 421-423; Bouche, *Enseignement* I, 322-341.

achieved by enjoying superiority over one's compatriots. Al Hajj Umar is an example of this. He was only an unknown inhabitant of Alwar who, having been expelled by his own people profited from the bit of Arabic he knew to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca; it was this journey that allowed him subsequently to play such an important role.⁴¹

Indeed Bou El Mogdad's appeal for funding his hajj came at a time Faidherbe had concluded that Al-Hajj Umar was a threat to French interests in the middle and upper Senegal valley. It was clear by then that the Umarian state established in the wake of the military jihad could hinder Faidherbe's plans for expansion eastward. Bou El Mogdad was well aware of Faidherbe's ambition and tactful enough to make the most of it in making his case for the pilgrimage. He emphasized that if Muslim leaders who were supportive of the administration could undertake the hajj, they would wield more power:

Since such is the trust which the peoples of Senegal accord to merit, I think it would be most advantageous that some of the marabouts who are loyal to the French should achieve supremacy over those who still retain the old prejudices. As you know, the strongest marabouts are already those who serve French interests; but they would enjoy more influence still if they were not merely enabled to visit Paris and Algiers, but allowed to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, like Al Haj.⁴²

Besides Bou El Mogdad's knack for persuasive language, his letter reveals that he was conscious of what concerned the colonial authorities most at the time; that is, how best to maintain their authority in the face of opposition from local leaders, such as Al-Hajj Umar. Bou El Mogdad tried to convince his employers that only intransigent marabouts (with Al-Hajj Umar obviously in mind) were opposed to the French presence in the interior. For French officials, then, it must have been gratifying to know that certain

⁴¹ ANS 1G 27, Bou El Moghdad, *Voyage across the Desert*, 1861; (trans.) in Hargreaves, ed., *France and West Africa*, 148-150, culled from Bou-El-Mogdad, "Voyage par terre entre le Sénégal et le Maroc," *Revue Maritime et Coloniale*, 1 (1861), 477-492.

⁴² Ibid.

marabouts identified with French interests, marabouts willing to accommodate to the foreign political rule of a non-Muslim regime. Bou El Mogdad then went on to berate Al-Hajj Umar who, he claimed, had capitalized on the ignorance of the people to launch his military jihad. To counter Umar's mounting popularity and political authority, therefore, he suggested that it would be in the best interest of the French authorities to empower cooperative marabouts by funding their pilgrimage. In the eyes of Senegalese Muslims, Bou El Mogdad emphasized, performing the hajj was an act that gives marabouts the ultimate legitimacy—that sanctioned by Allah.⁴³

Faidherbe's initiative of sending public figures like Bou El Mogdad to Mecca underscores the importance he attached to gaining the confidence of notable Muslim figures. For the governor, official sponsorship of this kind was intended to not only persuade other Muslim leaders about the goodwill of the administration but also animate propaganda against Al-Hajj Umar. To challenge the jihad, it was imperative for the administration to win over Muslim leaders and their constituencies before the Futanke leader could sway them to support his cause. State sponsorship of loyal local leaders and marabouts for the pilgrimage to Mecca continued long after Faidherbe's term of office. Mamadou Diouf has observed that the practice is still an important aspect of present-day Senegalese political culture.⁴⁴

As one might expect, Muslims who believed Bou El Mogdad's work for the administration was a case of misguided loyalty did not support his position. Such a view resonated with that of leaders, including Al-Hajj Umar, who remained skeptical about the

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Diouf, "The French Colonial Policy," 684.

motivations of *fonctionnaires* like Bou El Mogdad. From Umar's perspective, it was difficult to see what future role other than a subservient one within the administration Bou El Mogdad and similar intermediaries envisioned for themselves and their kinfolk.

Yet, in practice, Bou El Mogdad embodied what Sol Plaatje termed an "Essential Interpreter,"⁴⁵ the title of a manuscript he wrote around 1908, emphasizing the importance of the interpreter in determining the outcome of court cases in South Africa. Writing from personal experience, Plaatje pointed out that the fate of both litigants and accused persons depended largely on how well (or poorly) interpreters performed during court cases. Furthermore, he criticized the tendency of court officials to underpay competent interpreters or employ less experienced ones who were willing to accept less pay, but frequently caused a "miscarriage of justice" due to their faulty translations. With his rich experience as a court interpreter, Plaatje understood the intricacies and demands of the job and the impact interpreters could have on the lives of people in dealing with court cases. Certainly, the title of Plaatje's work could not have been more appropriate for the delicate position Muslim interpreters occupied as transactional go-betweens who mediated the hegemonic relations between French officials and Africans in the lower and middle Senegal valley.

In nearly three decades of service under different governors from Faidherbe to Briere, Bou El Mogdad gave the administration tremendous confidence in dealing with a precarious situation only few French officials would have handled all by themselves with any degree of success. Because of Bou El Mogdad's integrity and standing within the local community, he could persuade other Muslims to adopt a similar disposition, which

⁴⁵ During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sol Plaatje, the South African writer and political activist, served as clerk and court interpreter in Mafeking (South Africa). Brian Willan, ed., *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997), 15-17, 50-60.

enabled the administration to establish workable relations with a good number of indigenous leaders between the 1850s and 1870s. It is fair to suggest that Bou El Mogdad's recompense for his lengthy and dedicated service to the administration included two pilgrimages to Mecca. Moreover, he traveled to Marseille with his two sons, Abdoulaye and Mahmadou, to witness the *Exposition Universelle* in 1878, a trip for which the administration provided financial support.⁴⁶

Bou El Mogdad received several accolades from the administration for outstanding services only a handful of Africans ever obtained. The Minister of Maritime Affairs and the Colonies Chasseloup-Laubat was delighted to write to the Governor of Senegal in 1861, informing him that Bou El Mogdad had been awarded a medal of knighthood.⁴⁷ The minister went on to express hope that Bou El Mogdad's return from the pilgrimage with the title Al-Hajj would help win more support for the administration among the local population. Chasseloup-Laubat was relying on Bou El Mogdad's symbolic capital to endear Muslims to the administration amidst strong opposition from some sections of the Muslim community. In 1869, the administration recognized Bou El Mogdad as an officer of the Legion of Honor,⁴⁸ demonstrating again the high esteem in which French officials held the indefatigable interpreter.

After Hamat Ndiaye Anne died in 1879, the administration confirmed Bou El Mogdad as *cadi* and *tamsir* to succeed him on 16 May 1880.⁴⁹ A few months later, on 24

⁴⁶ ANS 2B 52, no. 759, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 23 September 1878.

⁴⁷ ANS 1B 79, Minister to Governor, letter 154, Paris, 22 July 1861.

⁴⁸ ANS 2B 52, no. 759, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 23 September 1878.

⁴⁹ I disagree with Ghislaine Lydon who claims that Bou El Mogdad never served as *cadi* and thus disputes Allan Christelow's assertion to the contrary. The archival records indicate Bou El Mogdad served as *cadi* after Hamat Ndiaye Anne died in 1879. Bou El Mogdad, however, died the following year.

October 1880, however, Bou El Mogdad finally succumbed to chronic diabetes, an affliction that had not interfered with the string of engagements he undertook during his marathon career. Yet even as Governor Briere spoke with emotion about the loss of Bou El Mogdad, he never lost sight of the impact the interpreter's death could have on French imperial ambitions in the Senegambia region:

This death occurring at the moment of inaugurating free trade on the river, and as we begin large undertakings on the Niger, can only be considered a calamity for the administration of the colony.⁵⁰

It is unlikely that Briere was exaggerating when he stated that Bou El Mogdad had assisted the administration in twenty-two combats and expeditions during his career lasting slightly over three decades.⁵¹ In reality Bou El Mogdad's influence as an interpreter, translator, and mediator spanned several generations insofar as his sons Abdoulaye and Mahmadou took up their father's career and worked for the administration.

Even those opposed to what was developing into French political dominance in the lower and middle valley by the late 1870s realized what the death of Bou El Mogdad could mean for future relations between the French and Africans. Despite Lat Dior's (Damel of Kajoor) standoff with the administration, his letter of condolences addressed to Governor Briere was unequivocal about his respect for Bou El Mogdad:

Governor Briere recommended Bou El Mogdad's appointment as *cadi* on a salary of 7,000F annually. ANS 2B 52, no. 532, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 2 July 1878. Lydon, "Obtaining 'Freedom' at the Muslims' Tribunal," note 44, 11; Christelow, "Muslim Judge and Municipal Politics." See also, M'Baye, "Cadis et Interprets," 7; "Personnel Files"; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 82.

⁵⁰ ANS 2B 52, no. 759, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 25 October 1880. (trans. by Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 83).

⁵¹ Ibid.

We are so shattered by this sad news that we can hardly distinguish night from day, the sky from earth, and the elephant from the ant; because this man was the palladium that protected the island of Saint-Louis and all Muslims. I swear in the name of God that I have lost my protector and support.⁵²

In later years, especially during the 1880s and 1890s when the administration most needed interpreters of the same caliber as Bou El Mogdad, French officials found it difficult to find a suitable replacement for the deceased interpreter. One exception, however, was his son Mahmadou Seck, who became an extraordinary political and cultural broker at the turn of the century as French hegemony was taking shape on the northern side of the Senegal River in the land of the *bidan*.

6.3. Mahmadou Bou El Mogdad Seck (1867-1943)

Mahmadou Seck (a.k.a. Doudou) was born in Saint-Louis on 24 September 1867.⁵³ His early years of education were similar to that of other children of literate Muslim families in the region, who most times began learning the Quran under the guidance of their father, a close relative, or marabout in their neighborhood. Bou El Mogdad taught his son the Quran until he sent him off to Trarza to continue his education under the reputable Awlâd Daïman clerics that had also tutored him.⁵⁴ Doudou spent most of his youth in Trarza, where he developed a remarkable fluency in Hassaniya.⁵⁵ With his knack for

⁵² ANS 13G 260, Lat Dior, Damel of Cayor, to Governor, 14 November 1880.

⁵³ This section has benefited from both archival documentation and information provided by Amar Samb in his effort to provide a mini-biography of Mahmadou Seck, whose literary contributions in Arabic he covers in a compilation on Senegalese who wrote in Arabic. See Samb, *Essai sur la contribution*, 73-84. There is a conflict regarding Mahmadou Seck's date of birth provided by Samb and one of the archival records, which indicates that Mahmadou Seck was born in February of 1870. See ANS 3C 7, Proposal for the Cross of Officer, 14 July 1910.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Samb reckons Mahmadou Seck spent fifteen years in Traza pursuing his Islamic education before returning to Saint-Louis to begin his career with the administration. See Samb, *Essai sur la contribution*, 73-84.

learning Arabic, he turned out to be an outstanding student and cultivated impressive literary skills particularly in writing poems and letters.⁵⁶ By the time he returned to Saint-Louis, Mahmadou had a striking command of Arabic and an appreciable knowledge of Islamic law.



Photo 6.2. Mahmadou Seck (1867-1943).

Source: Centre de Recherche et de Documentation du Sénégal (CRDS), Saint-Louis, Senegal.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Samb's compilation of texts written in Arabic by Senegalese "authors" includes tracts from various poems Mahmadou Seck wrote. The poems were inspired mostly by Quranic verses but dealt with Mahmadou's own experiences and relationships with people around him. One of the poems, for example, is a eulogy dedicated to Amadu Bamba, the founder of the Muridiyya, who was a friend of Mahmadou Seck. Bamba died in 1927. The first line of the poem reads, "Je ne vois plus l'existence offrir du plaisir à mon âme après le départ de cet ami."

Two years before Bou El Mogdad died in 1880, at age eleven, Mahmadou and his elder brother Abdoulaye had accompanied their father to France to see the *Exposition universelle* in 1878.⁵⁷ This early exposure to French influence probably facilitated Mahmadou's grasp of French. For the administration, Mahmadou Seck was a fitting replacement for the late Bou El Mogdad and his eldest son Abdoulaye, whose career as an interpreter ended abruptly when he was shot and killed in 1887 while accompanying Lieutenant Minet on a mission to Baol.⁵⁸

Mahmadou Seck began working for the administration as a full-time interpreter on 1 July 1887, when he was barely twenty years old.⁵⁹ He learnt French at a rapid rate and impressed most French officials with his flair for languages. Despite his youthful age, Mahmadou assumed similar responsibilities his father had taken up during his extensive career. He worked at the Arabic translation service, translating correspondence with political and religious leaders in Trarza and Brakna, the Damel of Cayor, and the *Almamy* of Futa Toro, among others.⁶⁰ While the administration was consolidating its position in the Senegal region and preparing to extend its authority in Trarza and Brakna, Mahmadou Seck became an indispensable envoy, diplomatic host, mediator of conflicts and treaty negotiator. His familiarity with the cultural and political landscape of southern Mauritania, where he had spent most of his youth, made him the right kind of cultural

⁵⁷ ANS 2B 52, no. 295, Governor to Minister, Saint-Louis, 23 July 1878. Governor Briere was supportive of Bou El Mogdad as he was preparing for the trip to France. The administration covered the cost of transportation for Abdoulaye and Mahmadou, Bou El Mogdad's sons.

⁵⁸ Interview with Aïnina Wane (Saint-Louis, 24 August 2004).

⁵⁹ ANS 3C 12, Summary State of Agents and Civil Servants of Mauritania Proposed for the Legion of Honor, 1922. Mahmadou Seck was nominated for the *Commandeur de la Legion* award.

⁶⁰ Samb, *Essai sur la contribution*, 77.

broker the administration needed at that time. With his presence, the French authorities could tone down their reliance on military operations, which could prove costly in both material and human terms, especially if plans did not work out as expected.

In the long sequence of missions Mahmadou Seck accompanied across the Senegal River into present-day Mauritania, the first, in 1892, took him all the way to the Adrar in the northernmost part of the country. The purpose of the trip was to establish diplomatic ties with the Emir of Adrar and negotiate an alliance of friendship with him in an effort to stave off the spread of Moroccan influence in the northwestern part of Africa. In a letter to the Governor of Senegal, the Emir of Adrar Ahmet Ben Sidy Ahmet acknowledged that Mahmadou Seck's intervention had been part of the reason he (the emir) had agreed to sign a treaty of friendship with the French:

The goal of this letter is to inform you that we have cemented our friendship by a treaty. Many marabouts of my country wanted to prevent me from allying myself with you. But I did not have to listen to them because of two things: 1. The French have always shown me only friendship. 2. Mahmadou Bou-el-Mogdad was very nice with me because his brother was a friend of mine.⁶¹

Besides emphasizing that some local Muslim leaders opposed the idea of forming an alliance with the French, the emir explained why he found it difficult to reject the proposition Mahmadou Seck had presented to him. Like most Moors in Trarza, the emir held the Seck family in high esteem, because of their reverence for Islamic learning and pedigree as cultural brokers. Amar Samb has observed that Mahmadou Seck was so well respected and popular among the Moors that it would have been difficult to tell that he

⁶¹ ANS 9G 14, Ahmet Ben Sidy Ahmet, King of Adrar, to Governor of Senegal (trans. M. Fara Biram Lô, Saint-Louis, 21 September 1892). The emir was referring to Mahmadou Seck's elder brother Abdoulaye, who was killed in Baol in 1887. See page 258 above.

was not originally from Trarza.⁶² In fact he was on good terms with most of the notable marabouts in Trarza: Saad Buh, Sidiyya Baba, and Ahmed Ould 'Aïd. Likewise, on the southern side of the river, Mahmadou Seck enjoyed cordial relations with important local political and religious leaders, including Amadu Bamba and Khali Madiakhaté Kala.

When Sidiyya Baba visited Saint-Louis for the first time in 1898, Mahmadou Seck was responsible for persuading him to do so. This was part of the administration's effort to make good of its claim of being a Muslim power by forming alliances with influential marabouts in the region. Because Sidiyya Baba wielded tremendous political influence in Trarza and the rest of the lower and middle valley, French officials were anxious to foster diplomatic relations with him. By the turn of the century when the administration became more involved in the affairs of southwestern Mauritania, French officials depended on their ties with Sidiyya Baba to provide Xavier Coppolani a base from which to contrive the pacification of Mauritania. Sidiyya Baba gave logistical support to the administration during campaigns in Brakna in 1903-4, Tagant in 1904-5, and the Adrar in 1908-9. The ubiquitous Mahmadou Seck served all these missions as interpreter and cultural broker. Then, together with Louis Frerejean, he identified the corps of Coppolani after he was shot and killed by the *hassani* of Sîdi Seghir Ould Zein, who had been involved in a conflict with Ahmed Saloum.⁶³ Chapter 8 will elaborate on these issues.

⁶² Samb, *Essai sur la contribution*, 77.

⁶³ According to one of my informants in Saint-Louis, Aïnina Wane, the *hassani* who killed Coppolani speared Mahmadou Seck's life out of respect for his family, as they were known for their Islamic credentials and integrity among Muslims in the region. (Interview with Aïnina Wane; Saint-Louis, 24 August 2004).

By 1901 Mahmadou Seck was principal interpreter (*hors classe*), a position only the most distinguished interpreters ever attained.⁶⁴ A year earlier, he had accompanied the Blanchet Mission as chief interpreter on a long trip to the Adrar in northern Mauritania. Led by Paul Blanchet, the “scientific mission” left Saint-Louis at a time various groups, among them, the Kunta, Idawaish, and Awlad Bu Sba, were contesting control of the Adrar. In addition, the Moroccan royal house was interested in extending its authority over the area.⁶⁵ Governor-general Ballay⁶⁶ requested Mahmadou Seck to provide a detailed account of the journey to the Adrar, a report that subsequently appeared in the *Revue d'Histoire des Colonies Françaises* years later.⁶⁷ The report contained detailed information about the project. In his account to the governor-general, Mahmadou Seck outlined the purpose of the mission:

By the decision of 19 March 1900, you honored me by placing me at the disposal of Mr. Blanchet, head of a commercial mission going to explore the provinces of the Moors of West Africa, and at the time charged me with the specific mission to Moctar Ould Aida, new Emir of Adrar, ...to give me information about the tribal groupings living in the Adrar, Tiris and Ouad-Noun; about the extent of their influence, [and] the number of guns they have at their disposal, etc....⁶⁸

Mahmadou Seck went on to recap the delegation's interactions with the Moorish chiefs, especially Saad Buh, who assisted them by providing local guides to accompany them

⁶⁴ ANS 3C 7, Table of Proposals for Officer of the Legion of Honor, 30 August 1910.

⁶⁵ The departure of the Blanchet Mission from Saint-Louis in March 1900 coincided with the death of the emir, which gave rise to a succession struggle. For more on the subsequent events, see Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 171-173.

⁶⁶ Governor-general Noël Eugène Ballay was the first governor of French Guinea in 1891. He later became governor-general of French West Africa in 1900 and died in Saint-Louis in January 1902 during a yellow fever epidemic.

⁶⁷ Désiré-Vuillemin, Geneviève, ed. “A propos du rapport de l'Interprète Bou El Mogdad sur la mission dans l'Adrar en 1900,” by Mahmadou Seck. *Mélanges et Documents, Revue d'Histoire des Colonies Françaises* 39 (1952), 103-126.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

until they arrived in another chief's territory. During their journey, the mission was attacked and its members captured. Mahmadou Seck sustained a bullet wound in the ensuing skirmish.⁶⁹ He would recuperate in time, however, to take part in the protracted negotiations that led to the eventual release of the captives.⁷⁰

Mahmadou Seck passed away in Saint-Louis in the morning hours of Friday, 27 November 1943, after an extensive and illustrious career that matched, if not surpassed, his father's three decades of service with the administration.⁷¹ It is no exaggeration to



Photo 6.3. At Mahmadou Seck's Tomb in Saint-Louis. Aïnina Wane and I, on the right. Photograph by author (Saint-Louis, 24 August 2004).

state that the younger Seck played a far more important role than his father had done in facilitating relations between the Trarza leadership and the administration. His long sojourn in Trarza, coupled with his fluency in Hassaniyya, gave Doudou Seck essential tools that allowed him to participate with a lot of grit in the political and diplomatic

⁶⁹ ANS 3C 7, Proposal for the Cross of Officer, 14 July 1910.

⁷⁰ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 171-173.

⁷¹ Interview with Aïnina Wane; Saint-Louis, 26 August 2004.

exchanges that ensued as the administration sought to “pacify” Mauritania in the early 1900s. His numerous missions across the river included some perilous encounters that nearly cost him his life. Yet not even the assassination of his French boss Coppolani in 1905 could dissuade Mahmadou Seck from engaging in the affairs of southern Mauritania. In 1908, together with Sidiyya Baba, they brought together several warring factions among the Moors at a round-table conference aimed at restoring peace.⁷² In essence, Mahmadou Seck exemplified the quintessential cultural broker and mediator; he strived to bridge the gulf between a non-Muslim administration and a local population that valued its Islamic culture and African heritage as much as its independence. For Mahmadou Seck, however, the necessity of working out some form of accommodation between the colonial authorities and Africans superseded the acrimony generated by the French presence in the Senegal valley.

The Anne and Seck families more or less became synonymous with the profession of interpreter during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Incidentally, both families cemented their relationship through intermarriages, as Robinson has shown.⁷³ As the administration attempted to respond to the “Muslim factor” in the lower and middle valley, it sought Muslim allies who could bring together different constituencies of Muslims. Hamat Ndiaye Anne, Bou El Mogdad Seck, and Mahmadou Seck embodied the right kind of mediators needed to legitimize the administration’s authority and lend credence to its claim of being a benevolent Muslim power among the local populace. But image besides, Faidherbe and his successors were concerned about making the administration work in an atmosphere where the secular and religious could coexist

⁷² Samb, *Essai sur la contribution*.

⁷³ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 82-85.

genially. Indeed it was becoming more difficult for the administration to rely on military force alone to govern its subject population. Thus the need for outstanding Muslim mediators and cultural brokers could not have been desirable enough for the administration in Saint-Louis.

The next chapter will build on this one by presenting snippets of biographies on interpreters who do not count among those considered the most outstanding of the administration's interpreters but nonetheless were part of the interpreter corps. Some of them, though, attained some measure of success, as the chapter will reveal. The paucity of information in the archival records on these lesser-known interpreters makes their stories more difficult to reconstruct. For the most part, therefore, we get only glimpses of their careers and experiences.

CHAPTER 7

Inconspicuous Interpreters

In the previous chapter, I focused on interpreters who were among the most outstanding the administration in Saint-Louis employed during the period under investigation. Certain members of the Anne and Seck families especially excelled in their career as interpreters and proved to be indispensable cultural and political powerbrokers, winning tremendous respect from both the administration and the Muslim community in Saint-Louis and neighboring areas. Both families were well known and held in high esteem in Trarza, where their sons acquired Islamic education and won the admiration and respect of their mentors, the *zwaya* of the Awlâd Daïman clan, as well as their peers among the Moors and other local inhabitants. And this would serve them well later on in their career as interpreters/translators in Saint-Louis where they had to deal with both French officials and indigenous people.

The Anne and Seck families produced two generations of interpreters who witnessed French preponderance in Saint-Louis and the lower valley during the early 1800s transform steadily into full-blown colonial rule by the end of that century. More importantly, because they wielded a good deal of influence the Anne and Seck interpreters helped to build a trajectory of accommodation for the French and Africans in Saint-Louis and the rest of the lower and middle Senegal River valley. In so doing, they exemplified the quintessential indigenous intermediary, combining social and symbolic capital with knowledge of the local political and cultural landscape to bridge the colonial divide. The French colonial archival records provide ample, though speckled, evidence that allow us to piece together with much precision the biographies of these two

interpreter families. And oral accounts corroborate most of the information the archival documentation provides on both families.¹

In contrast to Chapter 6, this chapter deals with interpreters about whom we get mostly fragmentary evidence regarding their family and social background and slightly more data about their career and job-related activities. Nor do oral accounts provide much useful information about some of them, partly because the collective memory of people tends to retain little information on subaltern historical actors. Even so, the available archival records indicate that a number of these interpreters participated in some official missions, for example, the exchanges between the administration and the Damel of Kajoor, Lat Dior, over the construction of the Dakar--Saint-Louis railroad.² Surely, such interpreters warrant inclusion in the study especially as they help us appreciate the heterogeneity of the administration's African personnel.

Some interpreters the chapter deals with began their career inconspicuously as "office boys" or servants, guards, messengers, and so on.³ Others joined the administration as auxiliary interpreters employed provisionally and placed in the lowest

¹ The interviews I conducted in Saint-Louis, Dakar, and Podor provided information on the Seck and Anne families that was consistent for the most part with what the archival records state. Moreover, while in Dakar in 2004, the national television in Senegal, Radiodiffusion Télévision du Sénégal (RTS), broadcast a weekly discussion program focused on local history to recognize the contributions of indigenous people to the historical development of Senegal during the immediate pre-colonial and colonial periods. One of the episodes featured Bou El Mogdad Seck and his son Mahmoudou Seck because of their intermediary roles between the French and Africans in the Senegal area during the colonial period. The discussion panel included two local historians and Aïnina Wane, one of my interviewees and a grandson of Mahmoudou Seck. Their discussion of the Seck family covered information substantiated by the data I acquired from both archival and oral sources.

² In April 1881, the administration dispatched a delegation to Kajoor on a fact-finding mission about the feasibility of the Dakar--Saint-Louis railroad project. The delegation comprised two French engineers representing the Construction Firm of Batignolles and an interpreter, Samba Fall, who the administration gave the responsibility of presenting the engineers to Lat Dior, the Damel of Kajoor, and liaising between them during negotiations. See Garonne, "Les personnels indigènes en AOF," 19-20.

³ The archival records reveal several cases of indigenous interpreters, translators, clerks and other functionaries who hailed from obscure backgrounds and managed to move up the administrative hierarchy of the African personnel. In one such case, Emily Osborn has traced the career of Boubou Penda, who was

rank of the interpreters' hierarchy.⁴ Gradually, a number of them gained promotion to higher ranks. With few exceptions, though, promotion could be limited to only one or two levels above their original point of entry in the administration. Yet on occasion, a small number of the interpreters excelled and gained official approbation for outstanding services. Even then, this could take several years, as the administration had no preset timetable for promoting its employees. In all, since a good number of interpreters were anonymous in major administrative engagements for lengthy spells of their career, the archival records are most times silent on their official activities.⁵

Within the group of lesser-known interpreters covered in the chapter, we also observe marked differences in their level of competence, knowledge of French and Arabic, political awareness, integrity and achievements. The limited information gleaned from the existing sources about their place of origin, ethnicity, educational level and accomplishments suggests that this group of interpreters was a much more diverse mix of individuals than those discussed in the previous chapter. By juxtaposing both clusters of

at first a domestic servant for a French administrator, Ernest Noirot, but later on became his interpreter, aide, and confidant. Boubou Penda served Noirot for twenty years in Senegal and French Guinea (present-day Guinea, Conakry). While Noirot was working in French Guinea, early in the 1900s, he and Boubou Penda got embroiled in scandals about extortion and "abuse of power." Although Noirot was fond of presenting Boubou Penda as someone from an elite family background, most Africans who knew better were never convinced. See Osborn, "Interpreting Colonial Power in French Guinea: The Boubou Penda-Ernest Noirot Affair of 1905," in Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*, 56-76.

⁴ It was common for some individuals to begin working for the administration in Saint-Louis as employees with nothing to do with interpreting and/or translating. Gradually a few of them were drafted into the interpreter corps, most likely because they had demonstrated a knack for learning French through their daily interactions with French officials. The names of auxiliary interpreters appear at the bottom of the list of interpreters compiled and published in official publications, such as *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* and *Bulletin Administratif du Sénégal*.

⁵ In the 3C series of the personnel files, for example, we only get information about interpreters and other employees who received one award or the other from the administration for their dedication, loyalty, and achievements. Thus, the names of interpreters who did not receive such official recognition do not appear in the series; and this means we have to search elsewhere in the archival records for information about them.

interpreters, therefore, it will become evident that their collective Muslim identity masks the reality of an interpreter corps made up of an eclectic grouping of distinctive personalities, competence, integrity and accomplishments.

Because the extant records do not allow us to reconstruct a composite history of the interpreters, we only get glimpses of their careers and experiences. As in the case of those covered in Chapter 6, archival records seldom offer concrete information about their social life and endeavors outside the administration. Where information is available in the official documentation, it is more often than not sketchier for ordinary interpreters than their more accomplished colleagues. It is quite possible that French officials reckoned that subaltern employees had not done enough to warrant documenting their official engagements. Yet a careful scrutiny of the scanty records available reveals that a number of interpreters rose within the ranks and achieved some measure of success in their own right. In other words, the more motivated and ambitious interpreters of the group under consideration did not allow their humble origins or mediocre start to their career to thwart their ambitions. The case of Silli Diawara (1840-?), for example, as we shall see below, reveals the sort of challenges many interpreters from modest backgrounds faced. Yet even without impressive credentials from his previous jobs, Silli Diawara aspired to the highest rank interpreters in Saint-Louis could attain, by dint of his resilience and dedication.

In some cases, the personnel files at least provide basic information on employees: date and place of birth, date of employment, marital status, years of service and so on.⁶ Still, incomplete records in the French colonial archives, as noted in the

⁶ When available, the 1C series of the personnel files usually contains information on individual interpreters and other employees the administration compiled and maintained as a personal file for each

introductory chapter, make it difficult for researchers to track the career of certain interpreters. Drawing on such nebulous records, this chapter presents snippets on some inconspicuous interpreters, who on occasion, and in different ways, made their presence felt in the interpreter corps. A number of them wielded more influence and power than their rank within the administration would bring to mind.

7.1. Sory Konaré (1843-?)

The career of Sory Konaré was atypical of most interpreters the administration in Saint-Louis employed, in the sense that he only became an interpreter at the mature age of thirty-six, on 28 December 1879. Born in 1843, in Saint-Louis, Konaré began working for the administration as an “office boy”/servant on 7 December 1873, when he was already thirty years old.⁷ For the next six years, he continued working in that capacity until his career as interpreter took off. The archival records do not provide any background information about his job track before he started to run errands and perform other menial tasks for French officials in Saint-Louis. Thus, it is difficult to retrace how Konaré navigated his way through earlier occupations prior to his employment in the administration.

In the absence of written records and oral accounts that document in detail the life and career of Sory Konaré, we have to make inferences from the fragmented pieces of evidence available. While we do not know the exact nature of Konaré’s occupation

employee. The files of employees of the state are subject to the one hundred-year rule, as explained in Chapter 1, meaning that the files only become accessible to the public a hundred years after the birthday of an employee. During my archival research in 2004, the files of several interpreters named on a list the archivists at the ANS gave me had not yet been processed and made available to the public. In the absence of these files, the information we retrieve on some interpreters tends to be minimal and hardly enough to even reconstruct a partial history of their careers.

⁷ *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* XI, 25 (1889), cited in Garonne, “Les personnels indigènes en AOF,” 68-69.

before the administration employed him as a servant, it is unlikely that he attended the School of the Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters, which typically recruited students at an early age, as Chapter 4 illustrated. Besides, the school's records in the French colonial archives do not include Konaré's name. It is therefore reasonable to rule out the possibility that he attended the school. Given his obscure background, then, it is not easy to pinpoint what motivated Konaré to start working for the administration at his relatively advanced age. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that had he been successful at his previous job he would have quit it for employment as a servant in the administration. Alternatively, did he envisage that once employed by the administration opportunities for personal advancement would be available to him? Did the idea of working for the French as a way of enhancing his status lure Konaré? Answers to such questions could possibly reveal clues about not only Konaré's motivations, but also his take on the increasing French presence in the lower and middle Senegal valley during the 1870s and 1880s.

The social background of most interpreters, especially the low-ranking and ordinary sort, tends to be elusive due to the difficulty of tracing their family history through the existing archival records. In some instances, official publications that provide information about ranks, languages, and salaries of interpreters offer no precise information about low-grade interpreters, besides the specific languages they spoke.⁸ Yet for our purposes here, any information that gives us some indication of their birthplace and family background from which we could extrapolate about their social class, educational level, and so on would be of use.

It is possible that Konaré's promotion from servant to third-grade interpreter in December 1879 was some form of recompense for his six-year service to French officials

⁸ See, for example, *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* and *Bulletin Administratif du Sénégal*.

in Saint-Louis.⁹ The archival documentation makes no mention of any outstanding qualities he possessed that would have endeared him to his French employers. Nor did he receive any awards for services rendered to the administration, which the 3C series of the personnel files would have indicated. Moreover, we know little to nothing about his language skills, including his competence in Arabic, which would have allowed us to surmise about his educational background. Nonetheless we may infer that he displayed a good deal of perseverance and worked hard at the menial tasks he performed. As a result, French officials in Saint-Louis considered it fitting, at least, to give him an opportunity to prove himself as an interpreter, especially if he had been able to acquire an understanding of basic French through his association with them.

Sory Konaré's career path demonstrates that several individuals took different routes to become interpreters, translators, and clerks. Some of them started with jobs that were unrelated to interpretation and translation, but eventually got the opportunity to serve the administration as interpreters. This suggests that in some cases formal training was not a precondition for employment as an auxiliary or low-grade interpreter, especially before Faidherbe instituted such preparation for interpreters/translators in the 1850s. In fact, several interpreters learned their trade on the job instead of going through the School of the Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters I discussed in Chapter 4. Indeed official interpreters recruited in the 1850s included those who had been on the job for several years before their employment in Saint-Louis. In later years, some interpreters who joined the administration were products of the School of the Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters. Against this backdrop, Konaré could be considered fortunate insofar as

⁹ *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* XI, 25.

French expansion in the lower and middle valley from the 1850s on created a demand for local interpreters the administration employed at various levels.

We do not know how long Sory Konaré's career as interpreter and functionary in Saint-Louis lasted. Did he get promotion based on his perseverance and dedication? How did his career evolve, and what did he do in his post-administration years? Answers to such questions would have helped us get a clearer picture and better understanding of the career development of Sory Konaré and similar subordinate administrative employees with limited opportunities for upward mobility.

Nonetheless, Sory Konaré's brief narrative underscores a recurrent problem the French grappled with in their African colonies, that is, the difficulty of finding suitable African men to work for the administration. Osborn drives this point home in her study on French Guinea at the turn of the twentieth century, observing that "...usually the only ones willing to do so [work with the French] were slaves, former slaves, or descendants of slaves."¹⁰ Little wonder then that the likes of Sory Konaré who hailed from humble social origins and had little to nothing to show by way of pedigree were willing to bid their time and wait assiduously for the right opportunity within the administration. For such low-grade functionaries, though, this could mean carrying on mundane tasks in the shadows of anonymity for several years.

7.2. Mandao Ousman Sow (1853-1895)

¹⁰ Osborn, "Interpreting Colonial Power," 58. The situation in Saint-Louis during the second half of the 1800s favored the French because several indigenous intermediaries who worked with the administration hailed from elite family background, as Chapter 6 revealed. For more on African recruitment by French officials during the colonial period, see Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts*; "Faire du Nègre". Military Aspects of Population Planning in French West Africa, 1920-1940," in Dennis D. Cordell and Joel W. Gregory, eds., *African Population and Capitalism. Historical Perspectives*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994, 95-108.

Mandao Ousman Sow was born in Saint-Louis on 5 July 1853, around the time the French were contemplating making their presence in the lower valley more visible. His father Ousman, an interpreter, was the *moniteur* at the *École des Otages* after Faidherbe took charge of it in 1856.¹¹ Not surprisingly, Mandao enrolled at the school in 1864, at age eleven. The archival records do not reveal how he fared on in school, however. Yet after attending the school for only six years, Mandao started working for the administration as an interpreter on 11 May 1870, at age seventeen.¹²

Unlike Sory Konaré's career discussed above, Mandao's began to take shape quite early. After attending the school for interpreters for a while, he most likely showed a good deal of promise French officials could not help but notice. Mandao thus gained the attention of his supervisors as a potential interpreter much earlier than the older Konaré, who initially entered administrative service as a servant. For a start, Mandao's career path meant working as a third-class auxiliary interpreter with the DAP, the division Faidherbe made the most important office of his administration, as explained in Chapter 4. Five years later, on 29 June 1875, Mandao gained promotion to the rank of second-class auxiliary interpreter.¹³ Then after a year, on 29 April 1876, he became a first-class auxiliary interpreter. During this early phase of his career, however, Mandao seldom got official approval to accompany expeditionary, military, and diplomatic missions. In truth, military campaigns from Saint-Louis in the early 1870s were rare after France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871.

¹¹ See Chapter 4, 149-154. Mandao was one of the pupils of the School of the Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters who appeared in a group portrait during the Faidherbe administration (Photo 4.1, 149).

¹² Mandao earned 360 francs as a trainee interpreter. See *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* XI, 25.

¹³ *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* XI, 25.

Mandao's promotion to third-class interpreter in 1880, however, coincided with the resumption of French expansion in the lower and middle valley during the Briere administration (1876-1881). Thereafter, he featured in different missions the administration authorized in the 1880s and early 1890s. By age twenty-seven, Mandao was already in the good books of the administration to assume the responsibility of assisting official delegations as an informant, guide, and emissary. In April 1882, for example, he had the difficult assignment of visiting Kajoor to find out how the damel, Lat Dior, was dispensing justice in his state.¹⁴ There is no suggestion in the archival records concerning what the administration hoped to derive from such information. Yet it may not be farfetched to suggest that French officials anticipated uncovering something they could use against Lat Dior in case negotiations over the construction of the Dakar--Saint-Louis railroad stalled or were derailed.¹⁵

French officials in Saint-Louis also assigned Mandao to accompany Joseph Galliéni and his troops in a campaign against Mamadou Lamine in December 1886.¹⁶ This initiative was part of the French attempt to assert more control over the area that would become Soudan Française by the end of the 1800s. In 1887, Mandao was part of another mission headed by Captain Quiquandon that visited the gold-producing area of Bambouk. Indeed, by the late 1880s, the administration in Saint-Louis was consolidating conquered territories to delineate the colony of Senegal more properly and stave off encroachment from rival European powers, such as Britain.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Chapter 5, section 3, 226-232.

¹⁶ Garonne, "Les personnels indigènes," 84-85.

Mandao's services as a transactional go-between and military/expeditionary escort received official endorsement when the director of the DAP recommended him for a first class silver medal of honor in 1890. By then he had risen to the rank of first class interpreter and was earning a salary of 2,400 francs annually.¹⁷ The director observed that "...maybe [Mandao is] the best of our interpreters." He then went on to praise him for his impressive translations, emphasizing, "Mandao translates admirably and provides understanding of the native interlocutor with the little nuances of the idea he expresses."¹⁸ In 1893 the director of the DAP recommended Mandao for the Nichan Iftikhar award, an accolade reserved for exceptional achievements in French colonial circles. In stating his case, the director described Mandao as "very brave, extremely devoted, and highly intelligent."¹⁹ After making his way to the top of the hierarchy for interpreters, Mandao's career ended abruptly when he was shot and killed in combat while escorting a mission to Kong in 1895, as explained in Chapter 4.²⁰ In all, he accompanied around thirty-five missions during his career.

Mandao Ousman Sow and Sory Konaré took different paths to become interpreters for the administration in Saint-Louis. Mandao went through the School for the Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters and spent six years as a trainee interpreter before he was employed by the administration to serve as an auxiliary interpreter. By contrast, Konaré took the alternative route of getting employed as a servant and relying on hard work and the munificence of French officials to pave the way for him to become an

¹⁷ Before the abrupt end of his career, Mandao attained the highest rank of principal interpreter on 16 February 1889, earning an annual salary of 3600 francs. See *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* XI, 25.

¹⁸ Ibid; see also Garonne, "Les personnels indigènes," 84.

¹⁹ Cited in Garonne, "Les personnels indigènes," 84.

²⁰ See Chapter 4, 154.

interpreter. As it turned out, Mandao was much more successful than Konaré, who only became a third-grade interpreter in 1879 when he was already passed his prime. In contrast to Konaré, the accolades Mandao received from his French bosses indicate that they held him in high esteem because of his diligence, intelligence, and mastery of the art of interpretation/translation.

The difficulty of uncovering information about interpreters who accompanied military and exploratory missions, besides those, such as Mandao, who received awards for their services, does a disservice to interpreters like Konaré who received no formal recognition from the French authorities. Such interpreters become “isolated” in the sense that they do not belong to any particular group of employees classified in the archival records, such as judicial interpreters or employees of the postal and telegraphic services, whose activities we could trace by checking the records of the offices where they worked. And in the absence of personal files on individual employees or in cases where the files contain only minimal data, we end up with more information on the likes of Mandao Ousman Sow than on employees such as Sory Konaré.

7.3. Silli Diawara (1840-?)

Unlike Mandao Ousman Sow who belonged to a younger generation of interpreters, Silli Diawara was not a product of the School of the Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters. Although the archival records offer no information about his social class, we know that Silli Diawara was born on 16 June 1840, in Bakel, located in the Upper Senegal River valley.²¹ It is difficult, if not impossible, to tell whether he was an offspring of a local elite family. Yet considering that the administration recruited a large number of employees from obscure social backgrounds, he could well have been one of numerous

²¹ *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* XI, 25. For location of Bakel, see Map 1.1, 9.

motivated young men from humble origins who sought social mobility by working for the administration.

Just like Sory Konaré above who had a checkered career, Silli Diawara took on different jobs before he became an interpreter in Saint-Louis. At age twenty-two, for example, he had a six-month stint as a guard responsible for overseeing condemned convicts. This experience probably inspired him and paved his way for employment as a police officer on 20 December 1862.²² Almost two years later, on 3 September 1864, however, he left the police force and became a servant attached to the governor's office.²³ The archival records provide no reason why Silli Diawara gave up his job as a police officer for a less inspiring position as a servant. Did he consider working more closely with French officials as an "office boy" a better prospect for career advancement than his previous job? Was he attracted to the governor's office, albeit as a servant, simply because of the power and prestige local people associated with that office?

Silli Diawara's career as an interpreter did not begin until 5 January 1865, at age twenty-five, when he was employed as a second-class auxiliary interpreter. Yet he did not get the rapid promotion he probably envisaged. Instead, he had to wait for eleven years before he moved up to the rank of first-class auxiliary interpreter on 1 May 1876.²⁴ Then during the Briere administration, Silli Diawara became a tenured fourth-class interpreter on 15 January 1880. Thus, after an eleven-year wait for his first promotion, he did not come up for another until after three and a half years. Put differently, Diawara's progress

²² Ibid.

²³ *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* XI, 25

²⁴ Ibid.

during the first decade and half of his career was sluggish and promotion from one rank to the other eluded him for lengthy spells of his career.

By the time Silli Diawara joined the interpreter corps some students from the School of the Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters had started to serve the administration as interpreters. And perhaps this explains why his career got off to a slow start. In retrospect, a decree of 1862 issued by the administration stipulated that with effect from 1 January 1865, an examination/competition would constitute part of the hiring process for interpreters working for the administration.²⁵ This regulation favored the recruitment of students from the School of the Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters who had received formal training for the vocation. By contrast, employees such as Silli Diawara without formal training/education and no impressive credentials from previous jobs may have found it extremely difficult to convince French officials about their potential and competence as interpreters/translators.

For Silli Diawara, therefore, his rise to the top was a tedious journey only a handful of interpreters were able to endure. Evidence indicates that after 1869 he was part of two expeditions the administration sent to N'Diagne and Méké. These assignments appear to have worked in his favor, as his promotion to the rank of first-class auxiliary interpreter in 1876 testifies. From then on Silli Diawara was much more active in administrative affairs than he had been all throughout the first decade of his career. Thus, after an uncertain and undistinguished beginning to his career, Silli Diawara gradually found a way to prove his mettle to his French bosses. In 1883, for example, he accompanied a military detachment to Kajoor, after which he received a first-class silver medal of honor. French officials in Saint-Louis were quick to notice the great strides Silli

²⁵ *Feuille Officielle du Sénégal*, 1862.

Diawara had taken in steadfastly pursuing a career that appeared to have been at odds with his previous jobs as a warden of convicts and then a police officer.

On January 1889, Silli Diawara was given a glowing recommendation for another silver medal of honor, with generous compliments about his length of service and presence during several expeditions in the Senegal area. The letter made reference to "...his presence during a number of French missions, the excellent remarks received from different officials and particularly Colonel Coronnat, following an expedition to the Ripp in 1887," and "call[ed] for a special honorary reward to demonstrate that we [the French] do not forget our trustworthy servants."²⁶ It may not have come as a surprise to French officials in Saint-Louis at that time that Governor Clément Thomas endorsed the recommendation without much deliberation.

In a career spanning twenty-six years, Silli Diawara proved beyond doubt that even those from obscure origins could aspire to become exemplary intermediaries through sheer determination, perseverance, and willingness to learn on the job. When he was promoted to the rank of principal interpreter in 1891, it thus marked a logical conclusion to his erratic career as a functionary, who on more than one occasion had been put to the test by his French employers. In that same year, Governor Henri de Lamothe nominated Silli Diawara for a Nicham Iftikhar (the cross of knight) award. And in his submission, de Lamothe noted that Silli Diawara had demonstrated unflinching support for the administration to the extent that after returning from an expedition to Boal in ill health, he still endeavored to accompany another to Djoloff.²⁷ Accordingly, Silli

²⁶ *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* XI, 25; Garonne, "Les personnels indigènes," 91.

²⁷ *Annuaire du Sénégal et dépendances* XI, 26.

Diawara was decorated with the Nicham Iftikhar award on 30 January 1892, marking the culmination of a career that had all the ingredients of the proverbial “rags to riches” story, albeit within an African colonial context.

7.4. Djiby Bathily (?)

The career of Djiby Bathily is reminiscent of Wangrin’s, the protagonist in Amadou Hamphaté Bâ’s novel *The Fortunes of Wangrin*, who was involved in financial malpractices, including embezzlement and swindling, while taking advantage of his official position as interpreter to acquire personal wealth.²⁸ Bathily’s career was marred by numerous accusations of swindling involving different people that forced the administration in Saint-Louis to take action against him. He borrowed money from several acquaintances without any intention of repaying them. In some instances, he purchased goods on credit from various traders, only to resell them to other people without paying the creditors any sum of money. After receiving numerous complaints from several victims of Bathily’s swindling schemes, the administration decided to conduct an investigation, which forced him to resign from his job on 20 May 1905.²⁹ Although a year later Bathily wrote to the lieutenant governor of Senegal asking to be reinstated and posted to another colony in West Africa, his request was turned down.³⁰

²⁸ Hamphaté Bâ, *Fortunes of Wangrin*.

²⁹ ANS 13G 76, Lieutenant Governor to Governor-general of French West Africa, Saint-Louis, 28 November 1905.

³⁰ ANS 13G 76, Djiby Bathily to Lieutenant Governor, Tivaouane, 17 July 1906. Bathily claimed that he had tendered his resignation without proper reflection over the consequences of his action. And he suggested that he would welcome being posted to Guinea Française, Soudan Française, Dahomey, Côte d’Ivoire or even Casamance, where he had worked before.

The archival records do not reveal much about Djiby Bathily's social background and the early phase of his career. We do not know, for example, his exact date and place of birth; nor is there any mention of when he began working for the administration. It is also unlikely that he attended the School of the Sons of Chiefs and Interpreters, because the school's records do not mention his name. Thus, we are left with only partial information about Bathily's career, which only became relevant to French officials because his fraudulent activities attracted administrative attention.

Bathily's problems came to a head in 1905 when the administration received a number of complaints about him swindling people in Diourbel, where he was serving as a fourth-class interpreter.³¹ French officials in Saint-Louis were concerned as this was not the first time such accusations had been levied against Bathily. Earlier on in his career, before 1900, while working in Casamance (southern part of Senegal), Bathily had been involved in similar malpractices that obliged the administration to transfer him elsewhere; thus he ended up in Diourbel. This time, Bathily was accused of buying a horse on credit and then reselling it immediately, even before paying his creditor any money. The accusations also revealed that Bathily had borrowed money now and again from different people—40 francs from a teacher Abdoul Karim Diouf and 50 francs from a guard Mamar, for example—until he had incurred debts of about 1500 francs. The amount of Bathily's debts was more than his annual salary of 1200 francs for a fourth-class interpreter.³²

³¹ ANS 13G 76, Lieutenant Governor to Governor-general, Saint-Louis, 28 November 1905.

³² Ibid.

A letter written by the Lieutenant governor of Senegal to the Governor-general of French West Africa in November 1905 reveals the details of Bathily's case.³³ The accused, for example, purchased a horse priced at 150 francs on credit from a trader Moumar Samba on 17 January 1905. Then, two months later, on 17 March, he bought another horse valued at 500 francs from Kalado Guasse. After that he bought a third horse for 700 francs from another trader Alioune Thiam. Bathily then acquired an additional horse on credit for 150 francs from a security guard Barbakar Kio, but only paid him 25 francs. The letter states that Bathily went as far as buying a sheep at the market in Diourbel for 11 francs and reselling it to the *cadi* Amadou Diagar without paying the vendor the money he owed him for the sheep. Bathily eventually sold all the horses he had purchased on credit without settling his debts with his creditors.³⁴

It is not clear from the archival records why horses fascinated Bathily. Yet considering that he bought them only to resell them, it seems most likely that their market value and chances of making quick profit lured Bathily into his unconventional business practices. Although he did not intend to repay his acquaintances, Bathily borrowed money from them to continue the habit he had developed over the years.

In a letter addressed to the Governor-general of French West Africa Bathily attempted to provide an explanation for his impropriety. As far as he understood his predicament, "After all the services I have rendered the government of France, I have been rewarded with a removal from office," suggesting that Bathily felt a sense of injustice about his resignation. He explained that although his moneymaking schemes and

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

numerous debts had been highlighted in the investigations, he was not the only one (presumably functionary) in the *cercle* involved in buying and selling goods. Bathily drew attention to his situation, emphasizing, "I am married, I am the head of a family, and I do not earn enough in my present situation..." He then continued pleading his case by suggesting that, "I will have, I believe, been obliged to pay my debts without punishment."³⁵

Bathily apparently tendered his resignation before the investigations the administration conducted had been concluded. Such a decision suggests that he was probably aware that the outcome of the case would tarnish his career. Thus, he decided to resign rather than wait for the administration to dismiss him, thinking of his untimely resignation as some form of exoneration. Yet the lieutenant governor had made his position abundantly clear after accepting Bathily's resignation: "Moreover, the reasons Bathily invoked for his reinstatement do not appear to be likely and have not been taken into account. In effect I disagree that family responsibilities are a sufficient reason to explain the high amount of his debts and to excuse the illicit operations he executed."³⁶

Indeed Bathily's attempt to get the administration to reinstate him after his fraudulent activities became known was unsuccessful. French officials in Saint-Louis were apparently convinced he would resort to the same malpractice if given another chance. Such cases of malpractice and abuse of power appear to have occurred more often among low-grade interpreters/translators than their more prominent and higher-

³⁵ ANS 13G 76, Djiby Bathily to the Governor-general of French West Africa, Louga, 30 January 1906.

³⁶ ANS 13G 76, Lieutenant Governor to Governor-general, Saint-Louis, 28 November 1905.

ranking counterparts.³⁷ Yet it would be historically inaccurate to conclude that low-ranking African colonial employees were more prone to corrupt practices than others who were higher up in the administrative hierarchy. Put differently, the tendency to abuse power and take advantage of an official position to amass personal wealth and defraud other people during the colonial period cut across official rank, social class, racial and ethnic boundaries.

Besides the problem that forced Djibril Bathily to resign from his administrative position, we know very little else about what he accomplished during his career. The official records are silent on what happened to him in the aftermath of the scandal that ended his job as an interpreter. In his letter to the governor-general, however, Bathily mentioned that he would wait in Louga for his reply; and he insinuated that he could relocate to Portuguese Guinea without indicating why he preferred that location.³⁸ Bathily may have concluded that without an official pardon and reinstatement, it would be extremely difficult for him to continue earning a living in the Senegal area. He even went further to claim that he could no longer farm because he has lost the ability to do so; nor could he become a trader without the necessary capital. Given his limited options in

³⁷ The few cases of malfeasance, abuse of power, and fraud in the French colonial archival records I consulted for the study do not allow me to draw firm conclusions about which set of employees were more likely to engage in such malpractices. Although the cases of Boubou Penda and Djiby Bathily suggest a tendency among low-grade employees to exploit their position within the administration for personal gains, the case of Fara Biram Lo (1826-1880), another interpreter who became chief of Merinaghem (1904-1907), in Dagana, shows that even highly placed individuals could use their office for similar reasons. A commission set up to investigate allegations of abuse of power and "exactions" against Fara Biram Lo found reason to compel him to retire as a way to preclude legal action against him. For a brief survey of the case, see Saliou Mbaye, "Personnel Files and the Role of Qadis and Interpreters in the Colonial Administration of Saint-Louis, Senegal, 1857-1911," in Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*, 289-295.

³⁸ ANS 13G 76, Djiby Bathily to the Governor-general of French West Africa, Louga, 30 January 1906.

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Saint-Louis, therefore, Djibril Bathily probably wanted to start life afresh in a new environment where people did not know much about his shady background.

Together with the previous chapter, this chapter presented biographies of a random selection of interpreters to demonstrate the heterogeneous nature of the interpreter corps in Saint-Louis. Representing diverse family and social backgrounds, motivations, competence, integrity and accomplishments, the interpreters explored in both chapters were an eclectic mix in terms of personal attributes notwithstanding their common identity as Muslims. Although the extant sources, both oral and written, do not allow us to reconstruct a more comprehensive biography of most of the interpreters, we do get a fair sense of their lives and careers. As the personal files of interpreters and other employees who worked during the colonial period are declassified and made accessible to the public at the ANS in Dakar, I anticipate that future research will fill in the existing gaps the study has highlighted.

The next chapter picks up the unfinished account started in Chapter 6 about the administration's attempt to extend control over the area north of the Senegal River in the early twentieth century. In the last section of Chapter 6, which focused on Mahmadou Seck's life and career, I set the stage for the discussion that follows by providing an outline of relations between Saint-Louis and Trarza and Brakna while Coppolani plotted the "pacification" of Mauritania before his sudden death in 1905.³⁹ Chapter 8 elaborates on the "Mauritanian challenge" with a discussion of the problems the administration in Saint-Louis encountered and strived to solve with a combination of intimidation, diplomacy, and military force. In this connection, French officials continued to rely on

³⁹ See Chapter 6, 262-265.

political and cultural brokers, such as Mahmadou Seck, to mitigate the strong-arm military tactics of the administration with mediation and political solutions.

CHAPTER 8

The Mauritanian Challenge: “Pacification,” French Colonial Authorities, and African Mediators, ca. 1900-1920

In the final section of Chapter 6, I discussed the career of Mahmadou Seck, the young and dynamic Senegalese diplomat, informant, cultural and political powerbroker, who assisted French officials in Saint-Louis in their push to extend hegemony over the northern side of the Senegal River in what is today Mauritania. Mahmadou Seck had long-standing connections in Trarza, where he, like his father Bou El Mogdad Seck, received Islamic education from the *zwaya* of the Awlâd Daïman clan during his formative years. Because of his impressive credentials and respect for the Seck family in Trarza, the administration could not have made a better choice of calling on Mahmadou Seck to liaise with various marabouts and political leaders among the Moors from the 1880s onward.¹

Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century Mauritania posed a different kind of challenge to the French authorities in Saint-Louis than they had encountered south of the Senegal River. If establishing formal control over the colony of Senegal in the late 1880s had been a straightforward contest between the French and their local adversaries, such as Lat Dior and Samba Laobe, the last two damels of Kajoor, the area to the north of the river would turn out to be a much more complex scenario. Not only were the political configurations in Trarza, Brakna, Tagant and the Adrar complicated by the presence of rival clans and factions embroiled in repeated usurpations, assassinations, and vendettas, but external players, especially the Moroccan royal court, Germany, and Spain, often

¹ Interview with Aïnina Wane (Saint-Louis, 24 August 2004).

interfered in the local conflicts and gave their allies among the Moorish leaders moral, armed, and logistical support.² For the French, therefore, establishing dominance in the northwestern part of Africa had to center on asserting firm control over the area to the north bordering their colony of Senegal.³

By 1901, the French government had reviewed and endorsed a proposal to make France the dominant power in that area through a master plan of “pacification.”⁴ The architect of Mauritania’s “pacification,” Xavier Coppolani, a Corsican born in Algeria, had considerable experience in that country and developed a reputation as an Islamicist with notable credentials; and this assured policymakers in Paris that he was the right candidate for the tough task ahead. Besides his experience in Algeria, Coppolani spent some time during 1898 in the Soudan, where he succeeded in dealing with the Allouch

² The beginning of the twentieth century was a time of anxiety for the French government over its West African territories. And part of the problem was the growing influence of Morocco in the northwestern part of the continent, which was bound to have an impact on areas such as Mauritania and Senegal, located on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. Moroccan claims over parts of the Sahara could not escape the attention of France given its long-standing interest in the Maghreb and its desire to keep hold of its West African colonies.

³ By the 1890s, the French were in effective control of the colony of Senegal, especially after Lat Dior died in battle in 1886. Thereafter, French administrators in Saint-Louis were not only concerned about consolidating their territorial holdings south of the Senegal River, but also extending their authority across the river to the north. Yet the administration was apprehensive about marabouts and groups considered “fanatical” and likely to embrace militant jihad and resist French rule. Thus, the administration adopted a system of surveillance to keep an eye on the activities of so-called radical Muslim leaders and their followers, who were inclined to taking up arms. “Pacification,” then, was a corollary of the surveillance scheme the French relied on at the turn of the century. For more on French surveillance, see Robinson, “The Murids: Surveillance and Collaboration,” *Journal of African History* 40, 2 (1999), 193-213; *Paths of Accommodation*.

⁴ A commission convened in 1901 by the French Prime Minister, Waldeck-Rousseau, had the responsibility of providing a blueprint for administrative reform in the French colonies of western Africa, including the area to the north of the Senegal River (Mauritania). The commission presented Coppolani’s plan of “pacification” to the French government as a striking and pragmatic project. Geneviève Désiré-Vuillemin, *Contribution à l’histoire de la Mauritanie, 1900-1934* (Dakar: Clairafrique, 1962); d’Otton Loyewski, “Coppolani et la Mauritanie,” *Revue d’Histoire des Colonies Françaises*, 32 (1938), 1-69, cited in Alfred G. Gerteiny, *Mauritania* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968).

and Mechdouf groups of the Hodh.⁵ Such first-hand experiences allowed him to frame his “pacification” of Mauritania in terms of negotiation, intimidation, and military action, as and when necessary. Ultimately, he believed, this approach would ensure long-term peace and security in Trarza, Brakna, Tagant and the Adrar, while local leaders would benefit from French protection and commerce, much like ordinary inhabitants, the most vulnerable to the frequent raids, pillages, and extortionist practices of the *hassani* militias. From the viewpoint of French policymakers and colonial administrators, the Mauritanian challenge presented a true test for France’s claim as a “Muslim power,” that is, its stature as a non-Muslim nation governing territories where Muslims constituted a majority of the population.⁶

This chapter picks up the discussion on the spread of French hegemony across the northern bank of the Senegal River at the turn of the century, a subject I broached in the biography of Mahmadou Seck presented in Chapter 6. It aims to examine critically the complicated situation the French faced in dealing with a host of rival political and religious leaders and their constituencies in Trarza, Brakna, Tagant and the Adrar. I center the discussion on the French praxis of “pacification” as conceived by Coppolani, but also look into the role of African mediators in shaping relations of power between the French and the *bidan* during a particularly tense and unstable period of colonial intervention in Mauritania. Thus the chapter casts the spotlight on not only the key *bidan* players, particularly the three marabouts, Sidiyya Baba (1862-1924), Saad Buh (ca. 1850-

⁵ In the Soudan, his long-time friend, Robert Arnaud (1873-1950), another Islamicist with considerable experience in Algeria, joined Coppolani. It was during this period that Coppolani began to muse over his plan of “pacification.” Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 72-74; Gerteiny, *Mauritania*, Chapter 10, 102-115.

⁶ Robinson, “France as a Muslim Power;” *Paths of Accommodation*, Chapter 4, 75-96; “French ‘Islamic Policy’ in Late Nineteenth-Century Senegal.”

1917), and his older brother Ma El Ainin (1838-1910), but also other indigenous intermediaries, such as Mahmadou Seck, the tenacious interpreter and diplomat from Saint-Louis, who escorted several French missions to Mauritania. In hindsight, the first ever visit Sidiyya Baba paid to Saint-Louis in 1898 through Mahmadou Seck's intercession augured well for future relations between the administration and the *bidan* leadership at a time French interference in Mauritania was provoking embittered sentiments from different political and religious constituencies in the emirates.⁷

In the first part of the chapter, I trace the historical context in which Coppolani conceived his plan of "pacification" in response to both local and external forces that were influencing the course of political developments in the area north of the Senegal River at the turn of the century. In retrospect, during the 1850s, the Faidherbe administration had attempted to gain political control over the emirate of Traza through military intervention, albeit with limited success, presaging the later "pacification" of the early 1900s.⁸ By the last decade of the 1800s, French officials in Saint-Louis were seeking allies among the Moorish chiefs and marabouts, particularly those who were unlikely to embrace military jihad and the formation of an Islamic state, and instead were open to the idea of French rule in the interest of political stability and peaceful coexistence. Likewise, the administration sought out local leaders believed to be predisposed to armed resistance or military jihad against the French administration in

⁷ The main opposition to the French came from Ma El Ainin, a Qadiriyya Sufi marabout, whose stronghold in the Adrar the French considered a bastion of militant jihad and fanaticism, especially after Coppolani's assassination in 1905. In fact, the French harbored a strong suspicion that Ma El Ainin may have had a hand in plotting Coppolani's death. A year later, the Moroccan court sent an envoy, Mulay Idris, to Ma El Ainin, which only incensed the French even more as it confirmed their misgiving about Morocco's interference in the affairs of the emirates, especially the Adrar. See Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 92-93.

⁸ See Chapter 5, 195-207; Barrows, "General Faidherbe," Chapter 9; Taylor, "Of Sultans and Disciples," Chapters 3 and 4.

order to isolate them and disempower their constituencies. In this connection, the French authorities in Saint-Louis drew on a long tradition of acquiring knowledge about the people they governed, which informed their views, attitudes, and policy in Mauritania at the turn of the century.⁹

The second section discusses the details of Coppolani's "pacification" project and its implementation, highlighting major developments between 1902 and 1905 when he pursued his goals in Mauritania. It also examines the Adrar campaign of 1908, after a three-year lull following Coppolani's assassination in 1905. As the chief French administrator in the conflict-ridden emirates of the *bidan*, Coppolani initiated a plan of action to foster affable and working relations with the dominant leaders in Trarza, Brakna, Tagant and the Adrar.¹⁰ By initially adopting a peaceful approach, he hoped the local leaders would see reason to cooperate with him rather than take up arms against the French, in which case he would consider military action against them. In facing the Mauritanian challenge, Coppolani was bound to deal with Muslim leaders whose influence crisscrossed different locales on the north side of the Senegal River as well as certain areas across the river, to the south. Sidiyya Baba, the youngest marabout of the trio, commanded a substantial following in Brakna and wielded a great deal of influence in Trarza, the middle Senegal valley, Boal, Kajoor and Sin Salum.¹¹ The older Saad Buh,

⁹ See Chapters 2 and 4; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, Chapters 2 and 4.

¹⁰ Coppolani initially arrived in Saint-Louis as a delegate from the French government and later became a commissioner of Mauritania, the position he held until his death in 1905. Gerteiny, *Mauritania*, 102-103; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 63-64.

¹¹ In Brakna, Sidiyya Baba contended with opposition from the Ijaydba, a *zwaya* group that had allies among the factions within the emiral houses. The Ijaydba also formed alliances with Futanke groups opposed to Sidiyya Baba. Marty, *Etudes: Brakna*, 83-92, 154-175; Robinson *Paths of Accommodation*, 182.

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based in Trarza, was not only powerful in Trarza and Brakna, but also had an extensive Fadiliyya network stretching to the Adrar in the north and across Walo, Cayor, Baol and Salum to the south.¹² Ma El Ainin, an elder brother of Saad Buh, was the most powerful marabout in the Adrar, and his influence spread across areas bordering the southern part of Morocco and the coastal vicinity to the west (Spanish Sahara). He also maintained strong ties with the Moroccan court and had easy access to the sultan. The discussion will focus on how the three marabouts responded to Coppolani's plan and the kind of relations that developed between them when he took charge of French affairs in Mauritania.

The last section of the chapter will focus on the period of conquest in Mauritania after the premature death of Coppolani in 1905. Following his demise, Colonel Henri Gouraud (1867-1946) took charge of the rest of the campaign to bring the northern part of Mauritania, the Adrar, under French control.¹³ The discussion will trace the most important developments as France moved closer toward bringing Mauritania under formal colonial rule, a goal achieved by 1920. At the same time, the section will keep track of the pursuits of African mediators during the second phase of the "pacification" project in Mauritania.

¹² Mohammad Fadi, Saad Buh's father, was founder of the Fadiliyya order, which he considered a rival branch of the Qadiriyya. The Fadiliyya order approved of initiation into multiple Sufi orders and thus appealed to a broad spectrum of Muslims in the Senegal and Mauritania region. Marty, *Etudes sur l'Islam maure: Cheikh Sidia, les Fadelia, les Ida ou Ali* (Paris, 1916), cited in Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*.

¹³ Gouraud served in the Soudan Française in the 1890s and was in charge of a military unit that captured Samori Touré (ca. 1830-1900) in 1898. Touré, a Dyula leader, resisted the French for more than a decade, using guerilla-like tactics and securing European-made arms from various sources along the West African coast.

8.1. The Road toward “Pacification”: France and Late 19th-Century “Mauritania”

During the 1850s, conflicts between the administration in Saint-Louis and Trarza led to a French declaration of a “protectorate” over the Moorish emirate.¹⁴ Yet French control over the northern bank of the Senegal River was anything but effective. The leadership in Trarza and Brakna continued to be independent for the most part, while rival clans and factions among the Moors were often in conflict because of political rivalry and/or the need to gain control over vital resources—water wells, gum-producing and grazing land, the *escales* and so on. After 1865, Faidherbe’s immediate successors did not undertake any major military campaigns across the river to the north. As long as the Moors did not threaten Saint-Louis and its immediate environs, the administration was content to have the status quo in Trarza and Brakna readjust itself.

During the 1870s and 1880s, the Moors continued their habitual inter-clan conflicts spurred most times by political and economic causes. And various *hassani* militias continued to launch raids and pillage villages along the riverbank. Firearms purchased from commercial firms in Saint-Louis and German and Spanish compradors along the Atlantic coast fueled conflicts in Trarza, Brakna, and the Adrar.¹⁵

By the end of the 1800s, the colonial authorities in Saint-Louis were still worried about the precariousness of the political situation in Trarza and Brakna and the prospect of military jihad among marabouts and their followers opposed to French intervention.

¹⁴ Peace Treaty with the King of Trarza, 20 May 1858, *Annales sénégalaises*, 397; see Chapter 5, 195-207.

¹⁵ In 1884, Spain claimed a protectorate over the coastal area from Cape Bojador to Cap Blanc (at the present border with Mauritania). Agreements between France and Spain in 1900, 1904, and 1920 extended the boundaries of the protectorate. The Germans sold firearms to any local faction, clan, or chiefs willing to pay for the weapons. Thus, warring factions among the Moors could secure firearms without necessarily being allies of the Germans.

Thus French officials increased their effort to acquire knowledge and learn more about not only their Muslim adversaries among the *bidan*, but also the wider community of Muslims in the territories they governed in western Africa. In this situation, Alfred Le Châtelier (1855-1929), an Islamicist with considerable experience in the Maghreb and impeccable credentials to show for it, proposed to carry out a study of Islamic Sufi orders at a time aversion to orders such as the Tijaniyya was common among French colonial officials. That three French ministries, the Colonies, Foreign Affairs, and War, all endorsed Châtelier to conduct his study could have hardly surprised contemporary observers aware of the growing apprehension among French officials about marabouts and groups believed to favor military jihad in western Africa. Indeed, considering that their West African colonies comprised a majority Muslim population, French officials were particularly fretful about Sufi orders with large numbers of followers in the Senegal and Mauritania area.¹⁶

In 1899, Le Châtelier published his study, *L'Islam dans l'Afrique occidentale*.¹⁷ Although his findings did not bring about a radical rethinking of French views about Muslims in West Africa, it did refute some common perceptions and validated others. Le Châtelier's mixed bag of old and new formulations about Muslims in the region, for example, reaffirmed the much-maligned fanaticism of the Tukolor and their penchant for

¹⁶ The case of Amadu Bamba and the Muridiyya order is the best example of the French "fear of Islam" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that compelled colonial officials to resort to measures one might consider inconsistent with their "tolerance" toward Muslims that had been part of French colonial discourse since the Faidherbe administration in the 1850s. Martial Merlin charged Amadu Bamba with plotting to launch a military jihad and exiled him to Gabon in 1895 even before Paris had time to review the case properly. Babou argues that the governor's office did not have a preconceived plan to get rid of Bamba but subordinate officials translated their personal agenda into official policy, referring to Merlin and his associates. See Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*, Chapter 5, 115-140; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, Chapter 11, 208-227.

¹⁷ Le Châtelier, *L'Islam dans l'Afrique occidentale*. See Chapter 1, 34-35.

military jihad. And although he affirmed the ascendancy of Saint-Louis as a Muslim center, he went further to state (erroneously) that the Tijani were a majority among resident Muslims in the coastal headquarters. Contrary to the dominant school of thought, the “Algerian” Islamicists, however, as Robinson notes, Le Châtelier concluded that Sufis were not only autonomous but comprised a diverse mix of Muslims.¹⁸ Confident in the transformative power of *la mission civilisatrice*, Le Châtelier saw virtue in bringing the different Muslim groups under administrative control, with French education and modernization serving as the cornerstone of future policies vis-à-vis colonized Muslims.

In retrospect, Le Châtelier’s work displayed obvious limitations. Nonetheless, it continued to influence French views and shape attitudes toward Muslim groups in West Africa. Until Robert Arnaud and Paul Marty began to publish their studies from 1906 on, Le Châtelier’s *L’Islam dans l’Afrique occidentale* was the authoritative text on Muslim affairs in western Africa for French policymakers and colonial administrators. Thereafter, Arnaud’s *Precise de la politique musulmane* became a sort of official compendium used to prepare French administrators who had to deal with Muslims in West Africa.¹⁹ Marty’s works *L’Islam en Mauritanie et au Sénégal* and *L’Emirat des Trarzas* were both published in the journal, *Revue du Monde Musulman*, founded by Le Châtelier, who was also the editor.²⁰ The salience of these works in shaping official French views and

¹⁸ The analysis in this portion of the chapter has benefitted from the insights provided by Robinson, who has treated exhaustively relations between the French and Muslims in the Senegalo-Mauritanian zone during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. See Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*; “France as a Muslim Power;” “French ‘Islamic’ Policy.”

¹⁹ Arnaud, *Precise de la politique musulmane*. See Chapter 1, note 59.

²⁰ Marty, “L’Islam en Mauritanie et au Sénégal. Le groupement tidiani d’Al-Hadj Malik (Tidiania Ouolofs),” *Revue du Monde Musulman* 31 (1915-16), 367-373; *L’Emirat des Trarzas*.

attitudes, which in turn formed the basis of a policy centered on accommodation and surveillance, lies in revealing how knowledge and power intersected as the “pacification” of Mauritania got underway. It was clear that French officials in Paris relied on their Islamicists from North Africa to produce the sort of knowledge on Muslims in western Africa they considered vital for dealing successfully with the intricate and unstable situation in Mauritania.

The formation of the Service of Muslim Affairs (*Service des Affaires Musulmanes*, SAM) by Governor Ernest Roume in 1905 was a logical outcome of the efforts by the French to institutionalize both policy and praxis in a more formal manner. Roume appointed Robert Arnaud to head the office. And drawing on his experience as an Islamicist familiar with North African models, Arnaud set about to organize the office and establish the procedures that influenced its activities in later years. The new office was responsible for collecting and circulating information about Muslim societies and marabouts. Conceived in the tradition of the DAP, which provided a knowledge base for French officials through its information-gathering efforts, archives, and oral traditions during the second half of the nineteenth century, the SAM surveyed Muslim societies and marabouts and distinguished between them to find ways of controlling their activities. French administrators used the *fiches de renseignement* to keep track of marabouts, scholars, and mystics and collate information about their religious affiliations and activities.²¹

In 1912, Governor-general William Ponty brought in Paul Marty from Tunisia to head the office. Marty continued to build on the work of his predecessor Arnaud and

²¹ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*; “French ‘Islamic’ Policy,” Cruise O’Brien, “Toward an ‘Islamic Policy’”; Harrison, *France and Islam*.

published several volumes on Islam in West Africa, as indicated earlier. By then the “pacification” of Mauritania was in its advanced stages, after Coppolani’s assassination in 1905. Yet we may recall that earlier on Governor Roume had provided a great deal of support for Coppolani to carry out the “pacification” of Mauritania. And he recruited Arnaud to head the SAM, which furnished officials with vital information/knowledge on marabouts and Sufi orders. With their vast experience in “Muslim affairs,” both Arnaud and Coppolani worked together to bring southern Mauritania under French control. Indeed the “ideological” underpinning of “pacification” in Mauritania rested on years of French efforts to make sense of how best to deal with their Muslim subjects. This experience had started during the 1830s, in Algeria, which became a sort of laboratory that informed later patterns of knowledge production and power relations with colonized Muslims in both Senegal and Mauritania in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

8.2. Coppolani and the “Pacification” of Mauritania, 1902-1905

While the “ideological” build-up to French colonial rule in Mauritania stretched over several decades from the mid 1800s to the early 1900s, the conquest itself occurred within a much shorter period. By 1902, the stage was set for Coppolani to launch his program of “pacification,” which Governor-general Roume supported with a good deal of enthusiasm and optimism. Roume himself introduced a number of reforms that would have a bearing on the future of Mauritania. In 1902, Dakar replaced Saint-Louis as the capital of the French Federation of West Africa that had been created in 1895, which resulted in the reorganization of the French territories of West Africa into four colonies: Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Senegal, and Soudan. Moreover, a governor-general took charge

of all four colonies from his office in Saint-Louis. With Roume's reform, Mauritania was incorporated into the territories of the federation. Still, the French had yet to establish effective control over that area. As the next logical step in the French consolidation of its western African colonies, then, Coppolani had to move northward across the Senegal River to deal with the complex web of power relations in the emirates, where certain marabouts also held sway. There, he would experiment with the policy of "pacification," which he had prepared and succeeded in persuading both French policymakers in the metropole and colonial officials about its feasibility.

Coppolani was certainly aware of the factions and divisions that characterized the political landscape of Mauritania. Political leaders, military heads, marabouts and commercial elites were all involved in a constant struggle to maintain control over their respective constituencies, accumulate wealth, protect their power base and extend their influence whenever possible. From Coppolani's point of view, the situation could work to his advantage if he could choose the right allies and bid his time to strengthen his position at the expense of those unlikely to embrace his "pacifist" overtures. In this connection, he chose to start by cajoling the marabouts and commercial entrepreneurs, whose symbolic, social, and economic capital together mirrored the tremendous influence they wielded.

Trarza was Coppolani's springboard for launching his plan and assessing its immediate outcome. If successful, he would move further east into Brakna, then Tagant, and northward into the Adrar. In the process, though, he would have to contend with opposition from Morocco and its claim to control the Sahara.²² Indeed Moroccan interest

²² Moroccan expansion southward into the Sahara Desert and the northwestern part of Africa had a long history dating back to the expansion of the Almoravids in the eleventh century. At the time, opposition to the North African onslaught had come only from indigenous Africans immediately south of the Sahara Desert. By contrast, the spread of Moroccan influence during the nineteenth century meant competition

in the Ardrar just outside its sphere of control to the south and Trarza further south was no secret to the French. And even though Morocco itself was relatively weak, the French considered its ambitions a real threat to their interests in northwestern Africa. For this reason, French colonial officials linked the “pacification” of Mauritania to the ultimate goal of conquering Morocco. And with feuding political leaders and *hassani* militias in Trarza vying for power and providing the *raison d'être* for Coppolani’s intervention, the “pacifier” was set to explore how Sufi marabouts could “become agents of the state” and contribute to “the work of improving Islam and moving it in the direction our [French] civilization.”²³

In Saad Buh and Sidiyya Baba, Coppolani found two allies of the administration in Saint-Louis who could take a chance with his “pacification” plan even if they were not entirely sure about its outcome. Of the two marabouts, Saad Buh’s ties with the administration preceded that of his rival in Trarza, Sidiyya Baba.²⁴ Yet Saad Buh was much more reluctant to accept French rule in Mauritania than Sidiyya Baba, whose relations with the administration grew stronger at the turn of the century. Moreover, because Ma El Ainin, Saad Buh’s elder brother, was calling for military jihad and

with European powers, such as France and Spain, which had interest in acquiring territories in the western Sahara, Mauritania, and Senegal. Mitchel Abitbol, “Jihad et nécessité: le Maroc et la conquête française du Soudan occidental et de la Mauritanie,” *Studia Islamica* 63 (1989), 159-177; Daniel Rivet, *Lyautey et l'institution du protectorat français au Maroc, 1912-1925*, 3 volumes (Paris: - L'Harmattan, 1988).

²³ Arnaud and Coppolani, “Le Panislamisme et La France,” *Revue Franco-musulmane et Saharienne* 1, 4 (1902), 30-38, cited in Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 89.

²⁴ Saad Buh had a long-standing relationship with the administration dating back to the late 1860s, when he began carving a niche for himself within the Muslim community of Saint-Louis by proclaiming his Sharifian descent, *baraka*, and spiritual powers. Marty, *L'Emirat de Trarzas*. Over time, Saad Buh offered services to the administration in return for favors and gifts from French officials. As his Fadiliya order extended its network across the Senegal River to the south and gained more followers in Saint-Louis and the rest of the lower and middle valley, Saad Buh developed the practice of making annual collection tours sanctioned by the administration in the areas it controlled. He thus became increasingly dependent on collections from farmers in the peanut basin. Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 164-173.

organizing resistance against the French in the early 1900s, the administration found reason to cast suspicion over the intentions of its older ally.

Before Saad Buh's relations with the French began to founder, however, he had offered invaluable service to the administration in the late 1800s. He had close ties with local leaders in the Senegal area, such as Lat Dior of Kajoor and Albury Ndiaye of Jolof, who were members of his Fadiliyya order and received counsel from him. Thus, Saad Buh was able to mediate between them and the administration on different occasions. In Kajoor, he had to intervene and advocate for calmness as the construction of the railroad in 1881 began to unsettle the population.²⁵

The administration also relied on Saad Buh for assistance when French officials ran into danger during official missions in Mauritania. This was the case when he offered protection to Lieutenant Léon Fabert in 1891 while on an exploratory mission that would have taken him to the Adrar. Although in the end Fabert could not make the trip, Saad Buh did take the initiative of communicating with Emir Si Ahmed in an effort to facilitate Fabert's mission in the volatile area. The ensuing treaty, a year later, was due to Fabert's effort. And Mahamdou Seck who served as interpreter during Fabert's mission had nothing but praise for their host Saad Buh.²⁶

Likewise, in 1900, the administration in Saint-Louis called on Saad Buh to offer protection to a scientific mission led by Paul Blanchet to explore the Adrar. The mission was to investigate the salt deposits near the coast and the Adrar. The situation in the Adrar, however, was dangerous as rival groups were fighting to assert their dominance.

²⁵ For more on the construction of the Saint-Louis--Dakar railroad, see Chapter 5, 226-232.

²⁶ "Mémoire de Bou El Mogdad" cited in Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*. For more on Saad Buh, see *Paths of Accommodation*, Chapter 8, 161-177.

The Idawaish, Awlad Bu Sba□, and the Kunta were all in contention, while threats of a military jihad spearheaded by the Moroccan court loomed large.²⁷ And because Saad Buh's brother Ma El Ainin supported the call for military jihad, relations between the two brothers would sour with time.²⁸

In these circumstances, the Blanchet mission, as explained in Chapter 6, left Saint-Louis accompanied by Mahmadou Seck and a small column of *tirailleurs* (local soldiers). When the group was attacked in Atar (in the Adrar), the ensuing skirmish resulted in the death of eight people killed by the *tirailleurs*, who then fled back to Saad Buh's base, but not before others of the group had been captured. In the end, Saad Buh had to travel to the Adrar, where he arranged the release of the hostages by paying a ransom for them. Within his *bidan* constituency, however, Saad Buh's intervention to free the members of the mission did not go down well with some of his followers, who decried him for his ties with an "infidel" administration. They even branded him a "marabout chrétien,"²⁹ suggesting that his association with a non-Muslim (presumably Christians) ally had compromised his Islamic faith.

Although Saad Buh received compensation for his services and the valuable information he provided the administration in the form of gifts and the collection tours he made in French-controlled areas to the south, he grew more cynical about French expansion north of the Senegal River into the land of the *bidan*. Indeed the French

²⁷ Ibid. Robinson has provided a detailed account of this episode and what follows is a brief summary.

²⁸ Ibid. Saad Buh and Ma El Ainin maintained a healthy relationship for several decades before this period. In fact, they were so close that Saad Buh facilitated the marriages of two of his daughters to El Ma Ainin's sons. In later years, the latter's two sons got married to Saad Buh's daughters. See also, B. G. Martin, *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

²⁹ Désiré-Vuillemin, *Mauritanie*, 74-75; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 172.

continued to heap pressure on Saad Buh by increasingly putting him in situations that he felt challenged and even compromised his belief that Muslims, especially the *bidan*, were better off ruling themselves than looking up to French overlordship. Hence, it is in this spirit that Saad Buh expressed his concerns to Coppolani in 1902 about French rule over the emirates on the northern side of the Senegal River.

In the years ahead, even the collection tours Saad Buh undertook across the river to the south became a cause for concern among French officials in Saint-Louis. In 1905, for example, his tour of Gandiole, Louga, Tivaoune, and Thies raised objections from the authorities in Kajoor and Baol as well as the governor of Senegal about not only the armed entourage Saad Buh took along, but also the exploitative nature of the tours themselves.³⁰ With Ma El Ainin continuing his call for a military jihad against the French, the administration grew more skeptical about Saad Buh's loyalty and paraded Sidiyya Baba even more brashly as the co-architect of "pacification" in Mauritania.

With the political situation in the emirates unstable for the most part, Sidiyya Baba endorsed Coppolani's plan of "pacification" from the beginning. Since the assassination of Muhammad Lhabib, the emir of Trarza, in 1861, the emirate had been embroiled in a continuous struggle as rival candidates of the emiral house contested political power.³¹ Although Sidiyya Baba and other marabouts constantly sought a political solution through mediations, they were unable to rally the family and their factions around a single leader. With no solution in sight while the civil strife continued in Trarza during the 1890s, Sidiyya Baba pondered new and radical ways to restore peace

³⁰ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 173-174

³¹ *Ibid*, 183.

and stability in southern Mauritania. With the situation getting more tense and violent in 1897, the French were forced to intervene between the Ijayba and Sidiyya in order to secure their trading interests.³² A significant outcome of the French intervention was that Sidiyya Baba paid an official visit to Saint-Louis in 1898, his first ever to the coastal headquarters, as indicated earlier. From then on the marabout and the French authorities engaged in a reciprocal relationship of support and cooperation that paved the way for Sidiyya Baba to embrace Coppolani's "pacification" as a co-partner.

Sidiyya Baba was unequivocal and consistent in his support for Coppolani's plan. In this connection, a significant step he took was to manifest his support for "pacification" by issuing a *fatwa* in January 1903, which the French authorities publicized everywhere in the region.³³ Such was Sidiyya Baba's commitment to the French cause that even after Coppolani's death in 1905 he to give support to Henri Gouraud, who pushed on with the conquest of the rest of Mauritania, after his predecessor had secured the southern area.

The *fatwa* was explicit about Sidiyya Baba's conviction that acceptance of French rule in the land of the *bidan* was a necessity, because the Moors (as Muslims) were weak to challenge the French. He emphasized the futility of military jihad because it would only expose their weakness. It was thus foolhardy for Muslims not to accept French rule as the latter had shown that they had no intention to disrupt or prevent the practice of Islam among the *bidan*. To the contrary, the French would be willing to continue

³² Ibid.

³³ As Muslim leaders in the Maghreb sought to adjust to the increasing European presence in the late 1800s and early 1900s, they issued *fatwas* to manifest their desire to accommodate foreign rule. Marabouts in Senegal and Mauritania who issued *fatwas* invoked North African precedents to frame theirs. Sidiyya Baba as well as Amadu Bamba, the founder of the Muridiyya order, issued their respective *fatwa* at a time the French were extremely wary of Sufi marabouts and military jihad.

supporting Islamic institutions that promoted worship, learning, and the rule of law.³⁴ In short, French rule could restore peace by ending the state of anarchy (*fitna*) that had consumed *bidan* societies for decades.

From the French perspective, the *fatwa* was an endorsement that could not have come at a better time and from a more suitable local dignitary. Considering Sidiyya Baba's pedigree and his stature among the *bidan*, Coppolani had no reason to think that the *fatwa* would not have its desired effect. To have received such massive support from a leading *bidan* marabout indeed was a testament that France had emerged as a "Muslim power."

The relationship between Sidiyya Baba and the administration in Saint-Louis developed to a point where he was entrusted with the custody of Amadu Bamba, founder of the Mouridiyya order, after Martial Merlin arranged his arrest and second exile.³⁵ In May 1903, the administration deported Bamba to Trarza and put him under Sidiyya Baba's guardianship, where he remained until 1907. This episode was a demonstration of the strong ties that existed between Sidiyya Baba and French officials in Saint-Louis. Just as Merlin and his closest associates perceived Amadu Bamba as a threat to French hegemony, so they saw Sidiyya Baba as a "pacifist" marabout to be trusted with sensitive official issues.

The support Sidiyya Baba gave the French was evident in various campaigns undertaken by French officials across the Senegal River to the north in the early 1900s.

³⁴ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 178-179.

³⁵ See note 17 above. Amadu Bamba's first exile in 1895 took him to Gabon where he remained until 1902. For more on Amadu Bamba and the French colonial authorities in Saint-Louis, see Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*; Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*.

Brakna saw French action in 1903-4, followed by Tagant in 1904-5, and then the Adrar in 1908-9. Sidiyya Baba's base in Boutilimit gave the French a strategic location from which to coordinate their campaigns. In fact, it became a training ground for a camelry troop supervised by Jean-Baptiste Théveniaut, the French administrator in Boutilimit between 1905 and 1907.³⁶ Sidiyya Baba not only provided additional camels for the French but also put his Awlad Abyayri troops at their disposal. During the campaign in Tagant, for example, Sidiyya Baba supplied up to a thousand camels in addition to troops from the Abyayri. More importantly, the marabout delivered important information to the French and assisted in developing strategies for the "pacification" and conquest of Mauritania.³⁷

When Sidiyya Baba travelled to Dakar in June 1908, his aim was to present a case for the conquest of the Adrar. Although Coppolani had been able to bring southern Mauritania under French rule by the time he was assassinated in 1905, Sidiyya Baba was doubtful whether the French could continue to exercise control over the area without conquering the Adrar. In presenting his case to governor-general Roume, he had the support of Gouraud, who had replaced Coppolani to continue the conquest of the rest of Mauritania. Indeed Roume and his immediate officials, general secretary Martial Merlin and the director of Muslim affairs, Robert Arnaud, had pondered the conquest of the Adrar for sometime. And they saw Sidiyya Baba as a counterweight to Ma El Ainin, who still wielded considerable influence in the Adrar. Thus, Sidiyya Baba and Gouraud were able to impress Roume about the urgency of carrying out a conquest of the Adrar.

³⁶ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 185-186.

³⁷ Ibid, 184-188.

For Sidiyya Baba, it was necessary that the French assert control over all the emirates, including the Adrar, because this was the only way he could deal with the local coalition that threatened the Sidiyya network. With opposition from the Ijaydba, Idawaish, and the Awlad Bu Sba□, Sidiyya Baba believed only French conquest could guarantee the long-lasting peace and security that could protect his family fortunes. For this reason, he saw the conquest of the Adrar as a precondition for the French to maintain dominance over the southern part of Mauritania that had been “pacified” by the time Coppolani was killed.

The preparations for the campaign in the Adrar started during the second half of 1908 under the command of Colonel Gouraud, who was assisted by Henri Gaden (1867-1946), the future Lieutenant governor of Mauritania.³⁸ Sidiyya Baba’s base in Boutilimit became the center of operations for Gouraud’s troops, supported by supply columns from Saint-Louis and northwestern Soudan.³⁹ Sidiyya Baba himself provided logistical support as well as an Abyayri contingent. By January 1909, Gouraud had defeated his adversaries and set up a post in Atar, the capital of the Adrar. He then installed a member of the emiral family, who became the French representative. In his memoirs, Gouraud acknowledged the tremendous support Sidiyya Baba had given the French throughout the campaign in the Adrar.⁴⁰

³⁸ Gaden joined the French colonial army in 1894. He played a part in the campaign against Samori Touré that led to his capture in 1898. After participating in the Adrar campaign, Gaden eventually became lieutenant governor of Mauritania in 1920. He retired in 1927 and remained in Saint-Louis conducting ethnographic and linguistic research. He lived with his Senegalese wife, Coumba Cisse until his death in 1939. For more on Gaden, see, Roy Dilley, “The Construction of Ethnographic Knowledge in a Colonial Context,” in Mark Harris, ed., *Ways of Knowing: New Approaches in the Anthropology of Experience and Learning* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 139-157.

³⁹ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 187-188.

⁴⁰ Henri Gourard, *Souvenirs d’un africain: Au Soudan* (Paris: P. Tisne, 1945).

With the conquest of the Adrar complete, Sidiyya Baba felt more secure that the French could maintain peace among the *bidan*, and he could continue to consolidate Sidiyya holdings. In return for his services to the administration, Sidiyya Baba got official approval to go on collection tours in French-controlled areas south of the Senegal River and received several gifts (cash) from the administration.⁴¹ In the aftermath of the campaign in the Adrar, the marabout continued to give support to the French. During World War I, he backed the French and decried the Ottoman for supporting the Axis forces. He continued to visit Saint-Louis and Dakar to renew his commitment to the French cause. Until his death in 1924, Sidiyya Baba remained an ally of the French, unlike Ma El Ainin.

8.3. After Coppolani: The Conquest of Mauritania

Among ordinary *bidan* in northern Mauritania, Ma El Ainin grew more and more in stature as the embodiment of military jihad while the French continued to demonize him as an obstacle to peace and stability. He also had mass appeal among the *hassani* who saw the French intervention as a threat to their existence. Ma El Ainin's appeal extended to southern Mauritania among *bidan* constituencies that understood the French intrusion in terms of an "infidel" onslaught on the *daar al-Islam*. Besides, he had long-standing relations with the Moroccan court that always surfaced in French assessments about Ma El Ainin's power—perceived or real. In December 1896, he had visited Marrakesh in under the auspices of the Sultan of Morocco Mawlay ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (1894-1908) amidst great pomp and pageantry. Accompanied by a 200-strong *bidan* entourage, Ma El Ainin

⁴¹ A record of cash gifts the administration gave out in the various colonies of French West African appears in the files ANS 17G 24.

was given a state reception befitting any sovereign ruler at the time. The sultan hosted Ma El Ainin at his palace in Mogador where he stayed until he returned to the Adrar in February 1897.⁴² Likewise, when Ma el Ainin made a follow-up visit to Marrakesh in 1906, the reception he received even surpassed his earlier visit. This only added more gloss to his growing reputation among his followers and *bidan* who supported military jihad against the French. And with the visit to the Adrar of Mulay Idriss as an envoy of the Moroccan crown in that same year, the French had no doubt that Ma El Ainin had the full support of the Sultan in the event of an anti-French military jihad. According to historian Mitchel Abitbol, Mulay Idriss had official instruction to supply weapons to Ma El Ainin's fighters in preparation of attacks on French positions in Mauritania.⁴³ Indeed Ma El Ainin's influence in Mauritania and his ties with the Moroccan court was enough to instigate immediate French action.⁴⁴ From this perspective, the French attack on the Adrar in 1908-9 was more or less a foregone conclusion.

Well before the Adrar campaign, the French had tried to deal with the threat posed by Ma El Ainin and his constituency by banking Saad Buh's assistance to get his brother to renounce military jihad. In contrast to Sidiyya Baba who embraced Coppolani's "pacification" with no reservations, Saad Buh had become more critical of the French intervention in Mauritania even though he could not do much to prevent it. Resigned to accepting French dominance as a *fait accompli*, then, Saad Buh still maintained the Faidiliyya and *zwaya* tradition of decrying military jihad. At the same

⁴² Abitbol, "Jihad et nécessité," 172-177.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Gerteiny, *Mauritania*, 112-115.

time, he continued providing supplies for French missions from Saint-Louis in Mauritania and tried to influence other *bidan* marabouts to tone down their opposition to the French Presence. The lingering dilemma for Saad Buh was how to get Ma El Ainin, who continued to call for resistance against the French, to accept the imposition of an “infidel” regime in the land of the *bidan* (read *daar al-Islam*).⁴⁵

Saad Buh apparently had written a letter in 1906 intended to dissuade Ma El Ainin from his pro-jihad stance, after Mulay Idriss, the Moroccan envoy, visited the Adrar. The governor in Senegal wanted the letter publicized before it reached Ma El Ainin. But over accusations that Saad Buh was using the letter to rekindle his relationship with the administration, he had to clear his position especially among officials in Saint-Louis who were skeptical about his reliability. When Governor-general William Ponty published the letter in 1909, about a thousand copies of it (original and French version) were circulated throughout the French colonies in West Africa. For the audience in the metropole, the French version of the letter appeared in the *Bulletin du Comité de l'Afrique Française*.⁴⁶

In the letter, Saad Buh adopted an orthodox Fadiliyya position to present a poignant argument against military jihad. He emphasized the disunity among the Muslim body politic and drew attention to the depredations jihad has often caused for all, including defenseless women, children, the elderly and sick. In Saad Buh's view, jihad was counterproductive, because in its wake violence and exploitation affected Muslims more than those the jihad is aimed at. The marabout noted that the French were in a better

⁴⁵ Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 174-176.

⁴⁶ Although the letter gained wide publicity, Robinson reckons that it may not have reached Ma El Ainin himself—at least not before the French authorities in Saint-Louis had prepared it for public consumption. Ibid.

position than his kinfolk (*bidan*/Muslims) as their superior weapons and wealth gave them an obvious advantage. Finally, over time, the French had shown respect toward Muslims and their institutions, indicating that acceptance of French rule would augur well for the practice of Islam. In short, Ma El Ainin's military jihad would have a far more negative impact on *bidan* society than would be the case if the French were allowed to rule over Mauritania.⁴⁷

Still, after Coppolani's death, Ma El Ainin was quick to take advantage of the situation to appeal to all *bidan* to resist the French militarily. He claimed that support from Morocco would be forthcoming in the event of war against the French. Indeed Ma El Ainin brandished his close ties with the Sultan of Morocco in a propaganda stunt that was effective among not only his *bidan* followers, but also those outside his constituency in southern Mauritania.⁴⁸

From the viewpoint of the Sultan of Morocco, interference in the Adrar and the rest of Mauritania was a critical international issue. For a start, Morocco's military weakness meant the Sultan could not take unnecessary risk in Mauritania that might jeopardize his own country's independence. Indeed military interference in the Adrar could prove too costly for the Moroccan court, both in military and political terms. Despite Ma El Ainin's endorsement of the Sultan's spiritual authority, the latter no longer wielded the kind of spiritual influence his predecessors had enjoyed in Mauritania up to the sixteenth century.⁴⁹ Finally, Ma El Ainin himself was aware that in the event of a successful campaign against the French (with Morocco's help) he would have to reject

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Abitbol, "Jihad et nécessité."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

the Sultan's suzerainty over Mauritania. And with Germany manifesting interest in Morocco, Ma El Ainin could not replace one European "infidel" nation with another.

In the intervening after Coppolani's death, Ma El Ainin continued to acquire firearms through purchases made from German and Spanish gunrunners doing a brisk business in the area of Rio de Oro near the Atlantic coast. The area in fact became an important supply line for both weapons and food while Ma El Ainin prepared for military confrontation with the French.

By 1910, the French were in virtual control of Morocco.⁵⁰ Ma El Ainin found it difficult to accept the situation as he could not give in to a sultan controlled by an "infidel" government. Out of desperation, Ma El Ainin prepared for a march on Fez with a troop gathered from different groups in the Adrar. When he clashed with the forces of General Moinier on 23 June 1910, Ma El Ainin was defeated and forced to retreat to the south. He died in Tiznit on 28 October 1910, ending the protracted threat of jihad he had posed to the French since the turn of the century.⁵¹

Following the declaration of a French protectorate over Morocco in 1912 (Treaty of Fez), the French believed their success there was a prelude to the conquest of Mauritania. Since the last quarter of 1907, the French government had put its forces in Mauritania under the command of Colonel Gouraud. And it was under his leadership, as explained above, that the *colonne de l'Adrar* overran Atar in the Adrar in January 1909. By July of that year, Ma El Ainin's forces fighting on two fronts, one led by his sons

⁵⁰ Germany recognized French authority in Morocco in November 1911, and Spain did the same in 1912.

⁵¹ Abitbol and Gerteiny agree on Ma El Ainin's successor. He named El Hiba, among his twenty-one sons, as the inheritor of his *baraka*. El Hiba proclaimed himself Sultan in May 1912, and then launched an attack on Marrakesh three months later. The city was captured in August 1912, but Colonel Mangin defeated El Hiba's forces a month later. French control over Morocco continued from then on. See Abitbol, "Jihad et nécessité," 174-175; Gerteiny, *Mauritania*, 112-113.

Sheikh El Quāl and Sheikh Hassana, and the other led by Ould □īda, the Emir of Adrar, were defeated.

The French operation in Mauritania continued in 1912, when the Emir of the Adrar Ould □īda was captured after the battle of Tichitt.⁵² The dethroned emir then decided to cooperate with the French, hoping to regain his position. After he was brought back to Atar, Ould □īda assisted the forces of Colonel Mouret in a campaign against Smara in 1913.⁵³ To compensate the deposed emir for his cooperation, the French decided to reinstate him as emir of the Adrar. However, because he continued to support two sons of Ma El Ainin, El Hiba and Laghdaf, his position was later revoked. Such political uncertainty underscored the difficulty the French had in finding reliable leaders even after their military success against the *bidan*.

As the French brought more territories under their control in Mauritania, they introduced administrative reforms intended to create a uniform system. They outlined the responsibilities, rights, and prerogatives of the chiefs; and they put the *zwaya* in charge of administrative and judicial functions in view of their level of literacy. At the same time, the *zwaya* continued their traditional role as spiritual leaders, educators, and judges. The *hassani* were also given the responsibility of maintaining order and security, under the supervision of French administrators. Colonel Patey, Gouraud's successor, however, did very little to eliminate the numerous traditional taxes levied by different clans for protection, education, and other services.⁵⁴ Yet a semblance of peace and security did emerge in the aftermath of the French conquest of Mauritania.

⁵² Gerteiny, *Mauritania*.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

By 1920, Henri Gaden was Lieutenant governor of Mauritania, the land of the *bidan* he had helped to subdue and bring under French colonial rule. Indeed the success of the French colonial project in Mauritania owed a lot to the initiative Coppolani took to introduce a plan of “pacification” that combined negotiation, accommodation, intimidation, and military force. To this end, the knowledge on Muslims in western Africa produced by the French Islamicists from the Maghreb, whose experience stretched from Algeria to Senegal, the Soudan, and Mauritania, was a critical aspect of the effort to see France emerge as a “Muslim power” by the early twentieth century. But even with the “expertise” of the French Islamicists, it is doubtful whether the French would have succeeded without the assistance of the African intermediaries, among them, Mahmoudou Seck, who accompanied most of the important French missions to Mauritania, as explained in Chapter 6. Nor could the French have done much better without the mediations of their allies among the *bidan*, especially Saad Buh and Sidiyya Baba, who used their influence to facilitate accommodation to French rule and tone down military confrontations with their accompanying fatalities.

CONCLUSION

African Interpreters, Mediation, and the Production of Knowledge

Until a decade or so ago the historiography on the colonial period in Senegal and French West Africa revealed only passing references to interpreters, translators, clerks and similar intermediaries.¹ Earlier studies of the immediate post-colonial period passed them off simply as either passive victims of European colonial rule or “collaborators” in the colonial enterprise. Yet historians afterward made little effort to carry out empirical studies on such transactional go-betweens of the colonial period. The result was a persistent misrepresentation of the complex, and often contradictory, roles interpreters/translators played in mediating between European colonizers and colonized Africans. Indeed, thus far there is no single monograph that deals exclusively with African colonial interpreters and translators in Senegal or any other former French colony in West Africa.

In colonial Senegal where Muslim interpreters facilitated interactions between the French and indigenous people, their intermediary position generated even more controversy because they were employees of a non-Muslim administration. This raised a critical question about the compatibility of the *daar al-Islam* and the *daar al-Kufr*, an issue over which Muslims in the Senegal region had yet to reach a consensus. The debates spawned by this religious element of the Muslim interpreters’ role during the colonial period only added more cloud over their intermediary functions over time. And

¹ The only exception was Henri Brunshwig’s 1983 publication *Noirs et Blancs*, a general study on French West Africa that included a chapter on local colonial interpreters. Brunshwig appealed to historians to undertake empirical research focused on African interpreters of the colonial period (see Chapter 2).

in the absence of full-length empirical studies focused on the lives and careers of interpreters, translators, clerks and similar transactional go-betweens, the negative impression and misconception inherited from earlier post-independence/nationalist studies continued to inform both scholarly and public discourse until about a decade or so ago. Since then a number of scholarly works have underscored the importance of various categories of African colonial intermediaries—commercial brokers, marabouts, chiefs, interpreters, translators, clerks and so on—despite the dearth of monographs on any single category (see Chapter 2).² From these more recent studies, we have learnt that the roles African colonial intermediaries played were far more complex than previous studies had led us to believe. The imposition of European colonial rule in Africa posed serious challenges for both the colonizers and colonized even though the latter were at the receiving end of the violence and dehumanization that accompanied the conquest of African territories in the late 1800s.

Consequently, one of my main aims in undertaking this study has been to bring Muslim interpreters/translators back to center stage of the scholarship on colonial Senegal and French West Africa. However, instead of presenting them merely as either passive agents or collaborators as past studies had done, I have endeavored to reconstruct their history with particular attention to the complex worlds of French officials and diverse groups of Africans they traversed in their capacity as middle figures. Thus contrary to the conventional wisdom, I have argued that Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal embodied a paradox: while employed by a non-Muslim French colonial regime, they struggled to preserve some degree of independence and pursued their own individual

² An exception here is Robinson's *Paths of Accommodation*, which deals with the *grands marabouts* of the Senegalo-Mauritanian zone between 1880 and 1920.

as well as societal interests. A second strand of my main argument has been that interpreters occupied a propitious position to influence the construction of discourse and knowledge by both the French and Africans. To all intents and purposes, Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal were conduits of information that flowed between their French employers and African compatriots. But they not only transmitted information about official policies, local politics and history; the exchange of cultural beliefs, worldviews, and moral values were part of their mediations. As custodians of official information as well as “local knowledge,” therefore, they had the capacity to shape relations of power between the French authorities and Africans to the extent that their intercession could influence how both groups understood each other. From this perspective, Muslim interpreters embodied the multidirectional and dialogic nature of colonial relationships Gaurav Desai has emphasized in his study on the impact of literary and cultural knowledge on power relations between Europeans and Africans during the colonial period.³

It is important to bear in mind that French officials in Saint-Louis, like other European administrators elsewhere in colonial Africa, seldom had adequate resources at their disposal. In addition, their knowledge of the peoples and lands they ruled were just as limited. Not only were competent European administrators difficult to recruit for colonial services, they were expensive to maintain within the restricted budgets African colonies operated. Because proficient Europeans for the most part were unwilling to serve in isolated stations in the colonies, only few officials were available at most posts in various colonies. Even more important for the purposes of this study, European officials were most times uninformed about the peoples and localities they served. Nor did most of

³ Desai, *Subject to Colonialism*.

them spend enough time in one station to get a good understanding of the local language and culture or establish long-lasting social networks among the people they governed. Out of necessity, then, European colonial administrators in Africa had to depend on indigenous employees to run the daily affairs of the colonial state.⁴ It is in this context we should understand the importance of Muslim interpreters/translators in colonial Senegal insofar as they had frequent contacts and intimate relations with African chiefs, the traditional elites, marabouts and ordinary Africans than French officials, who most times preferred to keep their distance in trying to preserve their perceived racial superiority. Because of their ability to traverse the colonial divide, therefore, Muslim interpreters were in a favorable position to impact the local texture French colonial rule took on in the lower and middle Senegal valley.

My point of departure in the study, the 1850s, marked a watershed in the long history of encounters between the French and Africans in the Senegal River valley. That period coincided with the Faidherbe administration, which launched a series of military campaigns against neighboring states, such as Walo and Trarza, as the French pushed aggressively inland from their coastal headquarters in Saint-Louis. I have argued that from that moment on, the lower and middle Senegal River valley began to exhibit all the trappings of colonial rule, nearly three decades before the European “scramble” started in the rest of Africa.

⁴ William Cohen, Thomas Spear, Berman and Lonsdale, and several other scholars have emphasized this point in their studies. See, among others, Cohen, *Rulers of Empire: The French Colonial Service in Africa* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1971); Spear, “Neocolonialism;” Berman and Lonsdale, eds. *Unhappy Valley*; Klein, “African Participation in Colonial Rule: The Role of Clerks, Interpreters, and Other Intermediaries,” in Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*, 273-285.

At the local level, the 1850s also witnessed the rise of Al-Hajj Umar, the Futanke marabout, whose military jihad preoccupied Governor Faidherbe for much of his tenure. Umar's defeat at the hands of the French illustrated that even gutsy and protracted resistance from local leaders could not easily derail the empire-building project Faidherbe and his successors aimed to pursue. In hindsight, the defeat and death of Lat Dior, the damel of Kajoor, in 1886, symbolized a partial fulfillment of the long-term plan Faidherbe had envisioned. And it was up to his successors to continue building on the legacy he had left.

More importantly, the Faidherbe administration laid the foundation for interpreters and translators to become full-time employees of the colonial state. Such a move clearly underlined the importance Faidherbe attached to this cadre of indigenous employees, who served the administration in a variety of capacities: military and exploratory escorts, informants and agents, emissaries, treaty negotiators and diplomatic hosts. With his mind clearly set on the long-term needs of the administration, Faidherbe transformed the *École des Otages* (renamed *École des Fils de Chefs et des Interprètes* in 1864) into a school for training interpreters, translators, and potential chiefs, who would be literate, dependable, and prepared to work in the interest of the French empire. Despite its closure in 1872, the school reopened in the early 1890s and continued to exist right through the 1920s, the end of the period covered in the study (see Chapter 4).

I suggested that by the 1920s interpreters were no longer playing the important intermediary roles they had performed as expedition guides, diplomats, and treaty negotiators during the late 1800s and at the turn of the century. After all, the frontiers—areas outside the jurisdiction of the administration—where the interpreters had operated

had been incorporated into the colonial states of Senegal and Mauritania by the early 1900s. Thus even as interpreters continued to work in the administration after the 1920s, their functions were more or less of the routine administrative kind than the crucial roles they had performed before the conquest of Senegal and the “pacification” of Mauritania. Indeed, during the period under investigation Muslim interpreters were essential transactional go-betweens whose mediations facilitated accommodation between the French authorities and their African subjects.

To understand the full complexity of the worlds Muslim interpreters traversed while mediating between their French employers and African compatriots, I introduced four major themes that provided an explanatory framework for the study. The themes bear relevance to the transformations French intervention and colonial rule brought about in the lower and middle Senegal valley as well as outlying areas that were incorporated into Senegal by the 1890s. I therefore explored the construction of identity among the Muslim interpreters, especially as the French colonial project championed the so-called policy of assimilation, which, in retrospect, was fraught with contradictions from its very inception. All the same, working for a non-Muslim administration meant Muslim interpreters had to redefine their identity as Muslims, whose faith and religious practice would remain intact in spite of their affiliation with an “infidel” French administration. Hamat Ndiaye Anne, for example, had to convince a Muslim congregation at the central mosque in Saint-Louis that his position as *cadi* of the Muslim Tribunal would be autonomous notwithstanding that Faidherbe had appointed him as head of the tribunal (see Chapter 4).

Another theme I dealt with was the intersection of knowledge and power in a colonial setting, which offered a platform to explore how the “ideological” and “literary” underpinnings of French colonialism shaped power relations between “governors” and “the governed”—in this case French officials in Saint-Louis and Africans in the lower and middle Senegal valley. Although within the colonial hierarchy African employees ranked below their French counterparts, interpreters, translators, and clerks had the “power of words” as they channeled the flow of information between their French employers and Africans. Thus, they could use their position as middle figures to redefine their relationship with their French employers by pursuing their personal or societal interests, often at the expense of the expectations of the colonial authorities.

At the same time, the French sought to acquire knowledge about their African subjects in order to empower themselves and rule them more effectively. Besides ethnographic studies undertaken by French “scholars”/administrators, colonial officials relied on information (read knowledge) passed on to them by African informants: interpreters, chiefs, village elders, griots, and so on. The veracity of such information, however, was often not as relevant as the gratification of having African sources provide information about local history, politics, culture, and so on. Indeed the French were fully aware of the importance of gaining knowledge about the Muslim population under their control as evidenced by the numerous studies carried out by French Islamicists, such as Alfred le Chatelier, Robert Arnaud, and Paul Marty, among others, who drew on their Maghrebien experience to produce knowledge about Islamic societies in western Africa. The studies contributed to building the confidence of the French about their ability to govern Muslim subjects and legitimating their credentials as a “Muslim power.” To be

sure, such knowledge shaped French views, attitudes, and official policies vis-à-vis Muslims in western Africa during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The “pacification” of Mauritania in the early 1900s marked the culmination of decades of constructing knowledge on Muslims in northwestern Africa to facilitate French domination of the *bidan* (see Chapter 8)

The third theme the study addressed was translation as a socio-cultural process insofar as Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal were involved in not only the transmission of words, but also cultural values, worldviews, and beliefs. The complexity of the interpreter’s function becomes even more apparent when we consider that Muslim interpreters had to deal with a non-Muslim regime, an alien system of government, and different cultural values. In carrying out their multiple tasks, interpreters had to do more than simply interpret and translate words. They had to transmit the cultural nuances and inflections of the languages they worked with. In the process of translating and interpreting, then, they engaged in some form of editing by adding or omitting words, phrases, and even sentences as they sought understanding between two or more parties. Colonial Senegal was an intriguing case because French culture encountered Muslims and Islamic institutions, and the “clash of cultures” was often evident in the difficult mediations Bou El Mogdad, Mahmadou Seck, and other intermediaries, including Saad Buh and Sidiyya Baba, engaged in to induce accommodation involving the French and their Muslim subjects.

The final theme in the study featured hegemony and accommodation in a colonial situation. Because the colonial state was unable to assert absolute power over its subjects, the acquiescence of Africans was necessary to make the administration functional. In this

context, Colonial Senegal was no exception. French officials realized the futility of depending continually on military strength. Even Faidherbe, arguably the most aggressive governor in nineteenth-century Senegal, understood the importance of interpreters, translators, and chiefs who could facilitate interactions between French officials and the local population. Unless the governor could work through African middle figures, it was unlikely that he would succeed with the use of force alone. Thus during his protracted struggle with Al-Hajj Umar, Faidherbe had to depend on the social and symbolic capital of Bou El Mogdad and Hamat Ndiaye Anne to win the support of other Muslim marabouts and their followers. In short, Muslim interpreters were crucial in laying the foundations for hegemonic relations and accommodation to evolve in colonial Senegal. A critical examination of the specific context in which Muslim interpreters functioned allows us to see their impact on the acquiescence of Muslim subjects in any form of hegemonic relations with the French.

From the standpoint of research and methodology, the challenges posed by any attempt to reconstruct the history/histories of colonial interpreters in Senegal become more obvious especially when dealing with the sources. I drew mostly on French colonial archival records and limited oral sources to put this study together. Despite the limitations of the archival documentation, they provided the kind of details a study of this nature could not sacrifice. A careful scrutiny of the archival records, at times involving reading against the grain, opened up the contextual nuances that shaped the writing and preservation of the sources. To date, not all the personal files of colonial interpreters are available to researchers, because the ANS in Dakar observes the one hundred-year rule on personal files of state employees in Senegal (see Chapter 1). In most cases, the files on

prominent interpreters such as Bou El Mogdad yielded more records and information than those of subaltern interpreters (see Chapter 6 and Chapter 7). Indeed, we do observe that the interpreter corps was a heterogeneous mix of individuals with different motivations, levels of competence, education, and accomplishments. The key interpreters, among them Hamat Ndiaye Anne, Bou El Mogdad, and Mahmoudou seck, possessed more social and symbolic capital and could straddle the colonial fence much more easily than less important interpreters were able to do. Little wonder then that the achievements of the more illustrious interpreters during the period under study drew the attention of French officials responsible for collecting and preserving official records that became the French colonial archives.

The oral sources underlined the difficulty of finding interviewees old enough and well informed about an interpreter or his family to provide a productive interview. Hence the interviews I conducted were limited to few individuals, all of them men. I made use of both “formal” interviews and informal conversations with different informants in Dakar, Saint-Louis, and Podor. For the most part the interviews confirmed the information provided in the written records. Where they diverged, it was most times a matter of perspective than the “bare facts” of the matter. Naturally, the oral sources reflected African voices seldom “heard” in the archival records, besides the *correspondance indigène* that provided insights into the issues indigenous chiefs and the ruling elites were concerned about. By combining both the written and oral sources, the study strove to provide a balanced picture of the activities of the interpreters investigated. Still, information about their social life outside the administration seldom appeared in the archival records or featured prominently in the memory of the informants I interviewed.

It is reasonable to conclude that the relative importance of a Muslim interpreter in colonial Senegal depended on his personality, social and symbolic capital, position in the administration and relations with the rest of society. In some instances interpreters could make use of their position in the administration, however low, to gain personal wealth and influence in their community. Overall, however, it was easier for interpreters from influential families, such as the Anne and Seck, to accumulate wealth, social and symbolic capital, and promotion in the administration than their colleagues who hailed from obscure backgrounds. As the case of Djibi Bathily demonstrated, some interpreters could be tempted to resort to extortion, bribery, and swindle to enrich themselves (see Chapter 7). Generally, interpreters in the lower echelon of the interpreter hierarchy were more likely to abuse their office in this sort of way than the key interpreters would do. Yet the archival records on colonial Senegal I consulted for the study revealed one or two cases in which high-profiled interpreters were involved in administrative malpractices. As a result, they were reprimanded, fined, and/or sacked.⁵ Still, for prominent interpreters this was an unusual occurrence as they commanded ample social and symbolic capital that could be transformed into economic capital if they so desired.

The nature of colonial rule meant Muslim interpreters in colonial Senegal faced difficult challenges in creating a balance between their individual aspirations, civic obligations, and official responsibilities. They had to ensure that their ties with the French

⁵ ANS 1C 5905, Inspection of Administrative Affairs, Report no. 60c. In the case of Mambaye Fara Biram Lô (1869-1926), he began working for the administration in 1887 as a third class interpreter and rose through the ranks to become a first class principal interpreter in 1896. Fara Biram Lô subsequently became chief of Ross-Mérinaghem, a part of the district of Dagana, near the Senegal River. Although Governor Martial Merlin made gracious remarks about Fara Biram Lô when he nominated him as an Officer of the Legion of Honor in 1915, the people of Ross-Mérinaghem accused him of abuse of power and exactions in 1922. The indictment indicates the malpractices took place between 1916 and 1921. After the administration found evidence suggesting that some of the allegations were true, Fara Biram Lô was compelled to retire.

administration did not compromise their faith and practice as Muslims. At the same time, they had the responsibility of working as employees of the administration, which involved mediating between the French and Africans. The dilemma of their intermediary position, then, could best be understood as a paradox, since as active protagonists Muslim interpreters faced tough choices in the changing circumstances of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Ironically the demanding situation French imperialism and colonialism spurned in the lower and middle Senegal valley made it possible for the interpreters to tap their knowledge, social and symbolic capital, and networking skills to navigate through the complex French and African worlds that came together as French intervention and colonial rule unfolded after the 1850s. Muslim interpreters for the most part showed a good deal of resilience in promoting understanding between two different, and often conflicting, worlds for accommodation on both sides of the colonial divide.

By the 1920s when the study ends, the colonial administration in Senegal, like others elsewhere in Africa, had become much more bureaucratized than it had been two decades earlier. The French authorities tried to streamline the administration and make it more efficient. By that time, as historian Ralph Austen observes, African colonial functionaries were carrying out mostly “banal and generally petty bureaucratic chores.”⁶ This period, however, marked a sharp contrast to the late 1800s and early 1900s, when Muslim interpreters were the key transactional go-betweens serving as military and expeditionary escorts, diplomats, treaty negotiators and so on. In these capacities, as the study revealed, some of them left an indelible mark on the complex political, social, and cultural transformations of the lower and middle Senegal valley during their careers.

⁶ Ralph Austen, “Interpreters Self-Interpreted” *The Autobiographies of Two Colonial Clerks*, in Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, eds. *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*, 163.

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Interviews

Mouhamet M. Kane, Saint-Louis, 10 August 2004

Boubou Mamadou, Podor, 3 August 2004

Saliou Mbaye, Dakar, 22 July 2004

Ibrahima Mbengue (Personal communication), Dakar, 20 July 2004

Mahmadou Thiané, Saint-Louis, 30 July 2004

Aïnina Wane, Saint-Louis, 24 August 2004

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