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Metissage in Nineteenth Century Senegal: Hybrid Identity and French Colonialism in a West African Town

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Abstract

This article argues that Saint-Louis' peculiarity matched neither the identity of African societies of the interior nor that of metropolitan France. Nor was it identical to notions of sychretism or creolisation. On the contrary, this city gave birth to a cosmopolitan society with different national, ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities comparatively influenced as they were by their relationships with States and societies of the Senegal Valley region, and the trans-Atlantic trade. The article offers a re-reading of accounts by European travellers and officials combined with study of archival records, publications such as the *Moniteur du Senegal*, private papers and portrait photographs. Based on extensive fieldwork, the article sheds light on an overlooked aspect of African history and engages modern Atlantic and French colonial history by suggesting that these locations were not solely formed by elite European actors but by local inhabitants of the colonies and remote outposts.

Résumé

Cette étude soutient que les traits de l'identité saint-louisienne ne correspondaient ni directement aux sociétés africaines profondes ni à ceux de la France métropolitaine. L'identité saint-louisienne ne correspondait pas non plus parfaitement à la notion de syncrétisme ou de créolisation. Au contraire, cette ville a donné naissance à une société cosmopolite composé de différentes identités nationales, ethniques, linguistiques et religieuses de plus en plus façonnées par leurs relations avec les États et les sociétés de la vallée du fleuve Sénégal, le commerce transatlantique et par un discours sur la citoyenneté universelle et la démocratie républicaine qui a pris forme au XIXe siècle en France et dans les Antilles françaises. Cet article propose une relecture des écrits des voyageurs et fonctionnaires européens associés à une étude des documents d'archives, des publications telles que *Le Moniteur du Sénégal*, des documents personnels et des photographies de portrait. Sur la base de travaux de terrain détaillés, cet article met en lumière un aspect négligé de l'histoire de l'Afrique et éclaire d'un jour nouveau l'histoire coloniale française et Atlantique moderne en soutenant que ces sites n'ont pas été uniquement l'œuvre d'acteurs de l'élite européenne, mais également celle des habitants des colonies et des avant-postes reculés.

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The trans-Atlantic slave trade produced cultural transformations that shaped New World societies in profound ways. Plantation slavery gave rise to a specific race, class and gender order that influenced the development of new identities for people of African descent in the colonies of North America, South America and the Caribbean. Mintz and Price characterized the birth of African American culture in terms of Creolization in which people of African descent were stripped of their original identities in the harsh and polyglot confines of the slave ship.¹ Ira Berlin suggested that the charter generation of enslaved Africans in Anglo and Dutch North America actually developed Creole identities in the coastal forts and depots of the West African coast before experiencing the middle passage and plantation life. Others have rejected the notion that African American identity developed through creolization by showing the re-Africanization or regeneration of African identity in the Americas throughout the slave trade era (Lorand Matory 2005 and Sweet 2003).

While this research has contributed to a much broader understanding of the transformation of identity for Africans in the Americas, much less attention has been devoted to understanding transformations in society and identity for people who inhabited Africa's Atlantic coast towns.² Historians have examined Creolization in coastal locations such as Freetown or the Bight of Biafra, yet there remains a tendency to view West African coastal societies as static and unchanged from the era of the Atlantic slave trade to the establishment of formal colonial rule in the early twentieth century. In addition, the language that we use to understand African coastal identities in the era of the slave trade borrows too readily from the American context and thus obscures the specific realities of particular regions or towns on the continent. As one *métis* informant reminded me, 'we share commonalities with people of Martinique and Guadeloupe but Creolization in Senegal is not the same as the French Antilles'.³

The development of *métis* society in Saint-Louis du Senegal from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century offers an opportunity to investigate transformations in race, social class and gender identities for a West African coastal community that was linked to the Atlantic World in one respect and the French empire in another.⁴ Histories of inter-racial mixing in pre-colonial Senegambia concentrate on the role that African women called *signares*, who entered into customary marriages with European men, played in the formation of coastal societies. These unions, called *mariage à la mode du pays*, corresponded to understandings of marriage common among African populations of Senegal's interior. European officials or traders residing temporarily in the French settlement arranged marriages with a woman's family and provided the requisite marital exchange to formalize the union. By the

mid-eighteenth century, the children of these unions formed a self-conscious group of Afro-Europeans who carried the last names of their European fathers but were raised in the households of their African mothers. In the nineteenth century, the *métis* elite established themselves as a politically influential population of inter-related families who adhered to the teachings of the Catholic Church, constituted a property owning bourgeoisie and pursued French education. Adopting visible markers of identity in dress and comportment further established their identification with the educated elites of metropolitan France.

Métis families of Senegal's coastal towns held much in common with free people of colour in nineteenth century Brazil, Louisiana or Guadeloupe but differed in particular ways. Called '*militaar*' in Wolof or 'mulatto' in French, the *métis* of nineteenth century Senegal more commonly referred to themselves as '*enfants du pays*'. While Senegal's *métis* lived in-between white and black worlds, their sense of identity was rooted in the particular history of signareship, the presence of Islam in the Senegal River valley and town residents' decision to opt for loyalty to France over sovereignty under the Wolof kingdoms. Historians have understood the social and cultural environment of Senegal's Atlantic towns as either the product of Creolization or as the outcome of a French policy of assimilation (Marcson 1976; Reyss 1983; Sackur 1999; Hargreaves 1965; Idowu 1968:1421-1447). Practices of tolerance, cross-cultural interaction and mutual dependence characterized the cosmopolitan environment of these Atlantic towns, yet cultural syncretism does not adequately capture the way that culture operated for town residents. The French idea of assimilation influenced official policy but suggests that African town residents passively accepted French cultural hegemony. While the *métis* pursued strategies of cultural assimilation at key moments, Muslim city dwellers rejected it. Colonial accounts tend to emphasize the idea of cultural assimilation as part of a unified narrative of imperial power; yet realities on the ground suggest a more complicated struggle over the nature of cultural change.

The concept of hybridity as a category of analysis provides a new lens in which to understand the transformation of identity and society in Senegal's coastal communities (Bhabha 1994; Young 1995; Amselle 1990, 1998; Verges 1999). The term hybridity is rooted in nineteenth century biological discourse that supported scientific racism and thus presents certain problems for escaping its past meaning. Postcolonial studies scholarship, however, reframes hybridity as an analytical concept that emphasizes the mutual construction of cultural identity in the 'contact zone'. Understanding hybridity in terms of the struggle between 'colonizer' and 'colonized' reveals rather than conceals the contradictions and ambiguities that shaped new race, class and gender

formations in Africa's nineteenth century colonial towns. Being *métis* in late nineteenth century Senegal did not involve a linear progression of cultural assimilation to France or generic mixing. Rather, the *métis* population developed a sense of dual identity grounded in the hybrid cultural environment of the towns that could be employed at key moments in response to the changing realities of life in a West African society under French rule.

Saint-Louis du Senegal: lieu du métissage

Saint-Louis and Gorée served as the centre of French military and commercial activity on the Senegambian coast in the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Saint-Louis became a strategic foothold for French trade interests along the Senegal River valley while Gorée provided access to export markets of slaves, gold and other commodities from Senegal's Petit Côte, the Gambia and Sine Saloum Rivers.⁵ Both locations gave rise to new African communities that provided skilled workers for the mercantile companies who ran the fortified outposts and for European ship captains. Located a mile off the coast of Senegal's Cap Vert peninsula, Gorée held strategic importance for Portuguese, Dutch and English merchants seeking trade with the Wolof aristocrats of the Jolof kingdom and the Serer of Sine-Saloum. While signareship gave rise to a small *métis* population on Gorée, the influx of African workers to the island resulted in the growth of an influential free black Catholic community, called *gurmets*.⁶ Gorée's economic role waned during the era of legitimate trade in the first half of the nineteenth century but regained its strategic importance as French imperial interests shifted to Senegal's peanut basin after 1850. In the 1860s, Gorée became the military and administrative centre of French expansion from southern Senegal to the frontier with Sierra Leone at the Southern Rivers Region (Guinea) (Barry 1985).

Saint-Louis, on the other hand, served as the nexus of *métis* social and cultural life from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. Called Ndar by the Wolof of the mainland, the island town is located where the Senegal River empties into the Atlantic Ocean. Stories of the town's origins suggest that the Walo Kingdom viewed the land as a peripheral location useful for fishing and salt collecting (Barry 1985). In 1659, the French built a fort on the location after obtaining rights to build on the land from the *brak* (king) of Walo. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, France granted a mercantile company exclusive rights to the export trade between Senegal and the French West Indies.

Signares and their *métis* children formed a property-owning class that played key roles in the provisional trade and acted as 'cross-cultural brokers' for European officials in their dealings with ruling elites in the Senegal River

valley. In the eighteenth century, Wolof speakers from the lower Senegal valley migrated to Saint-Louis. This group worked for the company government, learned some French and adopted Catholicism. In the mid and late eighteenth century, the *métis* and black Catholics constituted an emerging bourgeoisie, who called themselves *habitants*.⁷ They chose loyalty to France over sovereignty under the Wolof king. In 1758, when faced with British occupation, the habitants took up arms on behalf of France. When France regained control of the town in the revolutionary era, Senegal's habitants demanded protection under French law from the abusive practices of the mercantile company and adopted local traditions of democratic government in keeping with principles espoused by the French Revolution. By the late eighteenth century, free, propertied permanent residents of Saint-Louis considered themselves entitled to the same rights and responsibilities as metropolitan Frenchmen and Frenchwomen.⁸

Although, Britain occupied Saint-Louis and Gorée during the Napoleonic Wars, the treaty ending the conflict resulted in the return of the two settlements in Senegal to French control. The year 1817 marked a new era for French imperialism in Senegal. Saint-Louis became the administrative headquarters of the French military and the most important commercial port for 'legitimate trade'. Gum Arabic from the acacia trees along the Senegal replaced slaves as the most valuable export from the Senegal River valley. 'Gum fever', as historian Roger Pasquier termed this period, had a profound effect on the Saint-Louis population (Pasquier 1987; Webb 1994). Private entrepreneurs from Bordeaux arrived in Senegal to capitalize on the gum trade. Some married the daughters of habitants in Church weddings. Others married African women according to *marriage a la mode du pays* that produced children (Pehaut 1883:48-69). Habitants established trade houses that specialized in the middleman trade between Bordeaux wholesalers in the town and Bidan (Mauritanian) rulers and their agents who controlled the supply of gum from the trade depots (called *escales*) on the north bank of the Senegal River. Métis men dominated the middleman trade until the 1840s when the fluctuation in gum prices caused financial ruin for habitant trade houses and Bordeaux merchants sought to suppress the profit margins of middlemen traders. In 1848, France declared an end of slavery 'on French soil'. Although intended for the plantation colonies of the Caribbean, the declaration resulted in property losses and a restructuring of the labour regime of the towns for *signares* and habitants who relied on slavery. In addition, the collapse of the gum market and Bordeaux merchants' restructuring of the colonial economy towards the peanut basin led to a period of financial insecurity for the *métis* elite and the rise of Muslim Saint-Louis traders who became the dominant intermediaries

in the peanut trade. Despite these setbacks, the *métis* population continued to play a dominant role in the political life of the colony. Socially, they developed a stronger sense of distinctiveness as a group with close cultural ties to French power in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Islam played a key role in the formation and development of Saint-Louis du Senegal because of the town's strategic relationship to regions of the Senegal River valley that experienced Islamization as early as the eleventh century. Trans-Saharan trade, the influence of Sufism and the presence of Sanhaja Berbers in the Western Sahara led to the gradual expansion of Islam among Bidan of the north bank of the Senegal and the Wolof, Pulaar and Soninke peoples of the south bank of the Senegal River. The population of permanent residents grew from 2,500 in the mid-eighteenth century to 5,000 to 6,000 by the 1780s.⁹ This growing population of city dwellers resulted, in part, from the migration of free people of Wolof and Soninke origin called *laptots* who came from the middle and upper Senegal to serve as workers and crewmen in the Senegal River trade. Many were Muslim or came from territories in which Islam had taken hold among the commercial and ruling elites (Manchuelle 1997). In the late eighteenth century, domestic slaves of *signares* and habitants constituted the vast majority of the African population. Habitants owned slaves who supplied household labour and could be rented out by the company government for public work. In Saint-Louis, slaves also filled the same wage labour occupations as *laptots* who served as crew for river trade expeditions (Searing 1993). By the mid-nineteenth century, the population of Saint-Louis du Senegal consisted of approximately 2,000 *métis* and several hundred European merchants and officials and an overwhelming majority of African traders and workers.

Saint-Louis du Senegal emerged as a thriving port town on the West coast of Africa in the nineteenth century. The coastal town gave rise to a multi-cultural and cosmopolitan urban society shaped by the rhythms of Atlantic commerce as well as its connections to the societies of the Senegal River valley. The inhabitants of Saint-Louis forged a new social and cultural environment that was neither strictly European nor purely African. European soldiers and merchants came from a variety of backgrounds (French, English, Alsatian and Irish). Wolof, Pulaar and Soninke people who settled in Saint-Louis came from regions long influenced by the presence of Islam. *Signares* established new Afro-European households that gave rise to a *métis* population biologically connected to both Africa and Europe. The articulation of distinctive *métis* identity is rooted in the formation of Saint-Louis society in the late eighteenth century.

Developing Dual Identity: The Origins of Métis Society (1750-1820)

While men controlled the rhythms of commerce and politics, the women of Senegal's coastal towns played key roles in shaping the cultural and social environment and transmitting cultural identity to their children. *Signares* adopted specific cultural practices that responded to the local realities of the coastal towns. They emphasized loyalty to France yet established practices that reflected the important role of Islam and African tradition in coastal society. European travellers in late eighteenth century Gorée and Saint-Louis noted the extraordinary beauty of the women of the towns, their taste for fine fabrics (from the East Indies imported by European merchants), Moroccan shoes and gold filigree jewelry fashioned by local goldsmiths from gold of Galam (on the upper Senegal).¹⁰ *Signares* relied on domestic slaves for household labour and also to conduct trade on their behalf in up- river trade expeditions. For these women, public processions accompanied by female slaves demonstrated their wealth and established their social standing in the towns. The consumption habits of *signares* moreover offer an example of West African patterns of globalization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Although official company policy forbade 'co-habitation' between African women and European men, most officials viewed it as a necessary aspect of life and commerce for European men in a distant and tropical location. Eighteenth century botanist Michael Adanson viewed signareship as a corruption of an administration that failed to regulate co-habitation between European men and African women. Despite metropolitan taboos regarding sexual relations between European men and African women in the colonies, inter-racial unions occurred. *Métissage* in Senegal's coastal towns, as Natalie Reyss observed, served as a means of survival for European men in a harsh and unfamiliar climate (Reyss 1983). By conforming to accepted marriage practices in the towns, European men solidified kinship bonds that facilitated commercial relations within African society.

Signareship afforded women of the towns the ability to establish respectable households. The male spouse presented her family with gifts to consummate the union and provided his bride with a house to establish their household in keeping with Wolof tradition of Senegal's mainland. The children that issued from these unions adopted the surnames of their European fathers, thus signalling their paternity by European men. In most respects these unions corresponded to expectations of marriage and family life common among African societies of the mainland but differed in two ways. The marriage ceremony occurred immediately rather than following an obligatory one or

two month courtship and the union dissolved upon the death or permanent departure of the male spouse from Senegal leaving a *signare* free to remarry (Brooks 2003:122-161).

Marriage in the towns adopted to fit the necessities of coastal society in which trade dominated the patterns of European and African interaction. These arrangements benefited *signares* because it allowed women to develop their own ties to mercantile commerce independent of male traders and authorities who controlled access to Atlantic trade in the interior or male employees who worked for the company government in the coastal towns. It created a class of women entrepreneurs and property owners who held high social standing and who operated on the frontier of African and European interaction.

By the late eighteenth century, *signares*, habitants and gurmets identified with the Roman Catholic Church. Despite the fact that no permanent priest or clergy existed in Saint-Louis until the 1820s, *signares*, their métis offspring and black Catholics professed their affiliation to the church. In the absence of a parish priest, habitants granted the locally appointed mayor of the town the right to officiate Sunday mass and perform marriage, baptism and funeral rites. In a 1758 visit to Gorée, Revered John Lindsay noted that the inhabitants feared that the British would force them to convert to Protestantism and adamantly refused to abide by their religion. Writing about religion in Saint-Louis in 1789, Lamiral observed that 'mulâtres, mulâtresses, quarterons, négresses libres' and their captives lived on the south side of the island called 'quartier des Chrétiens' while the majority of incoming African and Muslim residents lived on the north side known by the Wolof term '*lodo*' meaning people of the countryside (Lindsay 1867:75-76).

Saint-Louis society, unlike Creole societies of the Caribbean, developed in relationship to the growth of Islam in the region. *Signares* celebrated *Tabaski* (the festival of *Eid*) with Muslims of the town. Writing in 1789, Lamiral described the religious environment of Saint-Louis:

All the *gens de couleur* and some *négresses* are Catholic but with a mix of *Mahométisme* and idolatry. They equally celebrate Christian and Muslim rites. Many of the Christian habitants are circumcised since baptism and they carry all the external marks of *Mahométisme*. There are those who after having been to mass still do the Salam. They pray with the same fervour to Jesus-Christ and Mohammed (Lamiral 1789:40).

Religion operated in eighteenth century coastal society in a similar fashion to the function of Islam among the Jula traders of the Mali Empire or the Berbers of the Western Sahara who specialized in trans-Saharan trade. Adopting Christianity reinforced the connection of coastal peoples to a monotheistic

tradition. For *signares*, identification with the Catholic Church did not preclude their interaction with and even participation in Muslim ceremonies and rituals. *Signares* and habitants considered themselves faithful members of the Catholic Church. When the English occupied Saint-Louis and Gorée in the mid-eighteenth century, town residents refused to adopt the British (Protestant) religion and appointed a notable black Catholic as their priest. In 1776, the inhabitants of Saint-Louis, under British occupation, sent a petition to London complaining that Governor O'Hara sought to abolish their Church and forbid them from practicing their religion.¹¹

Language served as another contested cultural form in Senegal under French colonial rule. From the imperialist perspective, the ability to communicate in French suggested progress in their 'civilizing mission'. In eighteenth century Saint-Louis, unlike other areas of European and African encounter, a Creole language did not emerge as the primary means of communication. Slaves and free people of colour adopted patois in the French Caribbean and in British colonies like Jamaica. Luso-Africans on Senegal's Petite Côte and the Southern Rivers of today's Guinea-Bissau spoke a creolized Portuguese language called Crioulo that developed in their interaction with Portuguese traders and officials beginning in the sixteenth century just as West African trade houses in the Bight of Biafra communicated in creolized English (Mark 2002 and Sparks 2004).

In Saint-Louis, French served as the language of company government but Wolof remained the primary language spoken in daily communication. *Signares* probably spoke very little French as Wolof served as the primary language of communication in daily life. European spouses of *signares* most likely adopted some level of proficiency in Wolof to communicate with their wives, workers and household servants. Métis and gurmets men probably spoke French and perhaps had some proficiency in reading and writing as they worked for the company government and served as intermediaries and interpreters for French officials. In some cases, European men provided their *métis* children with education by hiring a tutor among French soldiers or clergy in the colony. A few sent their *métis* sons to France for primary education in the early nineteenth century (Guillabert unpublished genealogy). Creole language did not develop as the language of cross-cultural interaction because African town residents and European strangers adopted mechanisms for communicating in Wolof or French depending on the situation.

Signareship provided the institutional mechanism for creating new Afro-European households that adapted to the needs of mercantile society and the nature of economic, political and social relations in the Senegal River valley. Women, both slave and free, played key roles in transmitting cultural codes

to *métis* children raised in *signare* households. The cultural practices adopted by these women facilitated communication and interaction across linguistic, religious and ethnic lines. *Signares* and habitants relied on social and cultural practices that allowed them to maintain close ties to French merchants and officials. At the same time, in daily life, they relied on mutually beneficial relationships with Wolof and Muslim people in the towns and with ruling elites and their agents in the Senegal River valley. The expansion of French imperialism, however, held new implications for shaping *métis* identity in the nineteenth century.

Transformations in Métis Society and Identity, 1820-1870

By the late nineteenth century, the *métis* elite of Saint-Louis and Gorée appeared as an inward-looking group who closely resembled French colonialists. A cadre of *métis* men pursued higher education in metropolitan France and achieved professional status as lawyers, doctors or military officers. Métis families no longer viewed signareship as a viable option preferring for their daughters to marry men of similar social standing instead. A few sought European mates but marriage within the group became more common for young men and women of this generation. Most *métis* families proclaimed their affiliation to the Catholic Church and maintained close ties to Christian clergy in the colony. Their dress and comportment, as exhibited in portrait photography, shows that *métis* men and women cultivated a public image of themselves as equals to members of the educated classes of late nineteenth century France.¹² At the same time, *métis* men and women were born and raised in colonial society. They were similar but not quite the same as their metropolitan counterparts.

Transformations in *métis* identity occurred at the same time that French interest in Senegal expanded from mercantile commerce to formal colonial rule. After regaining possession of Saint-Louis and Gorée from Britain in 1816, the restoration monarchy experimented with establishing plantations in Senegal in order to generate economic production from the colony. Although the plantation scheme failed, gum fever attracted French commercial interest to Senegal and provided an economic boon to habitant intermediaries. As Saint-Louis emerged as Senegal's most important nineteenth century export centre, French officials embarked on a more aggressive policy of cultural imperialism. Saint-Louis became the administrative capital of the Senegal colony but also the place from which France imagined its 'civilizing mission' would spread.¹³

In the first half of the nineteenth century colonial officials expressed ambivalence about French occupation of territory beyond the coastal enclaves. They understood the problem of pushing French cultural imperialism in the Senegal River valley; where Islam had made significant inroads, and yet Christianity served as a central aspect of French imperialism. Appointed Governor of Senegal in 1816, Colonel Schmaltz received orders to focus the cultural objectives of French imperialism on the Christian inhabitants of Saint-Louis who already had 'ties of kinship and friendship' with the people of the Senegal River valley and could serve as their agents on the ground. The naval ministry charged the Holy Ghost Fathers (Spiritains) with appointing a parish priest for Senegal. In 1819, the Sisters of Saint Joseph de Cluny arrived in the colony to provide civilian medical services, education for *signares* and an orphanage to train 'jeunes négresses'.¹⁴

Ironically, the clergy considered *signares* the most suitable candidates for evangelism and turned their attention towards eliminating signareship. The clergy considered *mariage à la mode du pays* immoral and implored young *demoiselles* to marry according to the teachings and practices of the Church. In 1834, Abby Manahan claimed to have performed eight church weddings among the most esteemed *métis* families of Saint-Louis; Crespín, Pellegrin, O'Hara, d'Erneville and Descemet among them (Benoist 2007 and Guillaibert unpublished). Habitants, thus, opted for marriage rites officiated by the local clergy and recorded in the civil registry of the towns. A public announcement of the promise to marry at the town hall preceded the church wedding. The mayor served as the officer of the civil state legitimizing the union and any children issuing from the union in the eyes of the French state. A royal decree of 5 November 1830 extended the civil code to residents of the colony, thus strengthening claims to citizenship among those who adopted notions of marriage, family and inheritance consistent with French law.¹⁵

As the *métis* responded enthusiastically to the clergy and French legal systems, *mariage à la mode du pays* disappeared gradually. Some Bordeaux merchants and French administrators married *métis* women in Church weddings since marriage to the habitant elite shored up their networks in the colony. French merchants and officials as well as some habitant men continued to observe *mariage à la mode du pays* despite attempts by the administration and the Church to eliminate the practice and control the growth of the mixed-race population in the colonial capital. By the 1860s habitant families considered marriages that conformed to the teachings of the Church and recorded by the civil registry as appropriate for their class position. Making a good match depended upon marriage to a family of equal social and economic standing.¹⁶ For sons and daughters of the *métis* elite, marriage within the group became

the most viable option as few single European women resided in the colony and the majority of French soldiers and administrators looked to extra-marital relations with African women rather than marriage to *métis* women. Nineteenth century racial ideologies thus rendered African women as unsuitable for marriage while *métis* women of high socio-economic standing had fewer options within colonial society.

In addition to eliminating *mariage à la mode du pays*, the clergy sought to instil stricter adherence to Christian practices by rooting out 'superstitious' practices among Saint-Louis residents. According to members of the Catholic orders, women proved the most difficult to convert. The clergy routinely complained that *signares* brought gris-gris to mass and continued to engage in 'superstitious practices'. Missionaries wrote of convincing *signares* to throw all their gris-gris (amulets) into the sea following mass as a signal achievement (Benoist 2007 and Boilat 1984). By insisting on purity of religious practice the clergy sought to transform *signare*-headed households into ideal versions of the respectable bourgeois household. While outward expressions of religiosity of the *métis* elite increasingly conformed to this ideal, oral tradition suggests that knowledge and even observation of local beliefs and practices continued to operate within the *métis* community.¹⁷

The French language continued to serve as a marker of modernization for colonial observers. Administrators recognized the need for French schools to cultivate local intermediaries who could serve as clerks and bookkeepers for the administration and for the trade houses. For French officials, women again appeared as the most viable option for instilling French cultural values in the colony. Although the Sisters of Saint Joseph de Cluny arrived in Senegal to provide medical services at the civilian hospital, they considered their most important mission to provide proper moral and religious instruction for *signares* and their daughters. David Boilat, an ordained priest and member of the *métis* population, complained that *signares* did not speak French to their children in the home. Speaking at the annual award ceremony for young girls of the Sisters School, Boilat implored fathers to speak French in the home as necessary to produce 'educated youth, virtuous daughters and civilized persons' (Boilat 1984:12-14 and Bouche 1975).

Abandoning Wolof for French, in the estimation of colonial authorities, served as the key to reproducing colonial society. Mothers and wives held primary responsibility for ensuring that future generations spoke French not Wolof. The *métis* elite responded to these changes by considering themselves as representatives of the promise that French colonialism held out for progress and modernization. In 1864, Louis Descemet authored his own Wolof-French phrasebook.¹⁸ From a highly esteemed habitant family, Descemet pursued higher education in France with the assistance of a government scholarship.

He began his career as secretary to General Faidherbe but resigned due to health reasons. The same year, Faidherbe, considered the architect of French colonialism in Senegal, published his own dictionary. Whereas Faidherbe sought to educate military officials arriving in the colony of the languages spoken in the Senegal River valley, Descemet aimed to educate Wolof speakers in the towns. Descemet argued that rote memorization, a method adopted by religious instructors in the colony, proved ineffective because the instructors did not know how to communicate the meaning of French words to Wolof speakers. Instead Descemet offered translations of Wolof phrases into French that would allow Senegalese to comprehend the language.¹⁹ The phrase book not only shows that Wolof remained the dominant language in the towns despite the French presence but also shows that the *métis* elite carved out a niche for themselves as most capable of teaching Wolof speakers French because of their understanding of both worlds.

In addition to the expansion of French colonial rule in the mid-nineteenth century, the growth of Islam in the Senegal River valley helped to consolidate group identity for the *métis* elite. Fulbe cleric Umar Tall emerged in the mid-1840s as the leader of a Tijaniyya (Sufi) order. A native of the Fulbe states of the middle Senegal, Umar Tall built a community of faithful supporters who followed his vision of re-establishing an Islamic state in the middle Senegal through jihad. By the early 1850s, the French and the Umarians were engaged in a struggle for power over control of the middle and upper Senegal.²⁰ Saint-Louis labelled Umar a fanatic and began to see Umar's expansionist aims as threat to French supremacy on the coast and in the river trade depots. Umar Tall recruited supporters from among the Saint-Louis Muslim community in support of his expansionist aims.

Consequently, administrative policy focused less on cultural imperialism and making France a 'friendly' power to Muslims in the region took precedence in political affairs (Robinson 2000). France relied increasingly on Muslim traders who had established important trade houses in the trade depots of the middle and upper Senegal. Colonial authorities also bolstered the institutional presence of Islam in Saint-Louis by erecting a mosque on the North side of the island, creating a Muslim tribunal headed by a notable Muslim cleric and establishing Koranic education for Muslim students of the town who attended French schools. Faidherbe elevated key Muslim scholars to positions of influence as interpreters and translators in the political affairs office. While cultural assimilation remained an objective of French imperialism, French officials in Senegal considered it more important to develop a positive association between the French presence and Islam in the Senegal River valley.

The *métis* elite responded to the changing landscape of colonial society by emphasizing their distinctiveness as a population that shared the same cultural outlook as metropolitan Frenchmen and women. In describing the habitants of Saint-Louis, Boilat wrote, 'they are all mulattos, who carry honourable rank in society, they are all Christians, of good breeding, and in general, educated and religious'. (Boilat 1984:209). Despite Boilat's insistence on an idealized view of Christian habitants, his words capture the transformation of *métis* identity from the era of the *signares*. Cultural transformations rarely occurred in a linear direction in which local customs and traditions disappeared entirely in favour of the cultural aims of colonialism. The *métis* considered themselves as the embodiment of French cultural assimilation yet they continued to operate in a Senegalese environment. In assuming positions of power in the local assemblies established in Senegal by Third Republic France in the 1870s, the *métis* elite argued that they held specific knowledge of the local environment and relied on a network of kin and clients that reached into the frontier of French expansion in the country. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the *métis* elite found it more advantageous to emphasize their close affiliation to French society rather than African society.

Conclusion

Writing about the emergence of colonial cities in Africa, historian Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch argues that continuity played as important a role as that of rupture for urban societies (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1993:15-18). Colonial cities in Africa, as elsewhere, became locations of cultural exchange where the populations did not live by agriculture alone and looked outward for social, cultural and economic development. *Métissage* in Africa's coastal towns, operated as a mechanism for responding to changes brought about by colonial rule just as interaction and engagement characterized the emergence of African cities before European contact. The city served as an instrument for spreading French imperialism but the colonial town never existed as a purely European creation.

Saint-Louis du Senegal emerged as a contact zone where colonial hybridity developed in response to the changing nature of African and European interaction. The emergence of a self-conscious *métis* population illustrates the contradictions inherent in French cultural imperialism and its articulation within African societies. *Signares* played central roles in developing new Afro-European households and transmitting cultural identity to their mixed-race offspring. In the late eighteenth century, these cultural practices demonstrated loyalty to French rule but relied on a more flexible understanding

of religion that corresponded to the importance of Islam and local customs of the Senegal River valley. After 1820, habitant households emphasized their distinctiveness among town residents as a group with close cultural affiliation to French power.

Historians have under-estimated the transformation of cultural identity for the inhabitants of Africa's Atlantic coast towns. Scholars writing about people of mixed racial ancestry in twentieth-century Senegal considered them as a people wholly identified with the French without examining how and why this transformation occurred.²¹ The concept of Creolization does not adequately address the ways in which people of Saint-Louis developed mechanisms for moving between culture groups. Creolization, as understood in the New World context, implies the fusion of culture identities to produce something entirely new. Eighteenth-century Saint-Louis residents, Christian and Muslim, developed a means for communicating in the appropriate language and engaging in the appropriate religious observation given the situation. Forging a dual sense of identity allowed the métis population to move in-between both worlds.

The French idea of assimilation simplifies the cultural transformations that developed in Senegal's Atlantic coast towns. Assimilation suggests that French cultural hegemony produced Afro-European societies that conformed strictly to metropolitan ideals. The idea of assimilation conceals rather than reveals the heterogeneous nature of Saint-Louis society. The concept of cultural assimilation obscures the variety of responses that town residents adopted in response to the expansion of French rule. In a few cases, *métis* men opted to marry African women, recorded their unions in the civil registry and claimed the children of these unions as their legitimate heirs according to French law.²² In the late nineteenth century, some *métis* disassociated from the Church joining the freemasons and, in one case, joining a Sufi order in Senegal's peanut basin. Understanding *métis* identity simply as mimicry does not allow for a fuller understanding of why certain individuals chose Senegalese citizenship over French citizenship at the moment of independence or why some opted to marry within African society.

Hybridity is a thorny concept. It is laden with nineteenth century meanings of miscegenation as biological inferiority. As a category of post-colonial analysis it provides a new lens in which to understand the history of African and European interaction and the implications it held for shaping new ideas about race, class and gender within African societies.

Notes

1. For an early work on African American identity, see Mintz and Price, *The Birth of African American Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press 1976). On revisionist approaches to the formation of African American Identity, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1993) and Ira Berlin, 'From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America,' *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, 2(Apr 1996), 351-288. For a critical interpretation on the development of race and class in the formation of African American identity in North America, see Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1998).
2. Robin Law and Kristin Mann, 'West Africa in the Atlantic Community: The Case of the Slave Coast', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 56 (1999), 310. For an interpretation of the role of Central Africa in the charter generation, see Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 236-242. For recent works that examine transformations in identity for coastal communities in West Africa, see Robin Law, *Ouidah: A Social History of a West African Slaving Port 1727-1892* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004); Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2007) and Mamadou Diouf, 'Assimilation coloniale et identités religieuses de la civilité des originaires des Quatre Communes (Senegal)', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34, 2(2000): 565-587.
3. F. Brigaud, Interview with author in Saint-Louis, Senegal, 4th December 2000.
4. 'Mulatto' was the common term used to describe people of mixed racial ancestry in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. I prefer the term *métis* as it is commonly used to refer to inter-racial populations among French speakers today and it avoids pejorative connotations of infertility associated with the word 'mulatto'.
5. The extent of the trade in slaves that passed through the two ports remains the subject of scholarly debate. The debate regarding Gorée's role in the Atlantic slave trade centred on the dedication of Gorée's Maison des Esclaves as a UNESCO world heritage site. See the articles from the proceedings of a conference on this subject. Djibril Samb, ed., *Gorée et l'esclavage* (Dakar: IFAN 1997) and Djibril Samb, ed., *Saint-Louis et l'esclavage* (Dakar: IFAN 2000).
6. I use the spelling 'gourmet/gourmette' or gurmét meaning 'noir baptisé' introduced by Abbé David Boilat in his 1853 work on the people of Senegal. The word comes from the Portuguese term grumete which referred to a hired African seaman. For more on the difference between the *métis* and black Catholic populations of Gorée and Saint-Louis, see Abbé David Boilat, *Esquisses Sénégalaises* (Paris: Karthala 1984, reprint 1853). On the etymology of terms for different population in the commercial towns see George Brooks, *EurAfricans in Western Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press), 17.
7. The term *habitant* initially referred to people who lived outside of the 'habitation' or the fort that housed company employees. My research shows that in the mid-eighteenth century, the term *habitant* included Africans who were closely identified with the company. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, David Boilat describes habitants of Saint-Louis exclusively as 'mulattos who carry honorable rank.' Boilat, *Esquisses Sénégalaises*, 209.

8. See copy of 1787 petition by habitants of Senegal to the Etats-Généraux demanding right to free trade and protection against the abusive practices of the mercantile company in M. Lamiral, *L'Afrique et Le Peuple Affriquain* (Paris, 1789).
9. Population statistics from this period are fragmentary. A population survey conducted in 1754, seven years before British occupation, described the population of permanent residents as 2,500. In 1789, Lamiral wrote that '300 habitants libres, negres ou mulâtres' lived in the town with around 5,000 to 6,000 slaves. His numbers are somewhat exaggerated but are corroborated by other travellers' accounts of the same period. M. Lamiral, *L'Afrique et Le Peuple Affriquain* (Paris, 1789). For a study of census records for Saint-Louis, Gorée and the Senegal colony, see Charles Becker, V. Martin and J. Schmitz-Chastanet, 'Les premiers recensements au Sénégal et l'évolution démographique' (Dakar: ORSTOM 1983), p. 3. On the 1754 study see James Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), pp. 103-104.
10. Many of these accounts come from the mid and late eighteenth century. See Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie* (Paris, Maradan, 1789); Reverend John Lindsay, *A Voyage to the Coast of Africa in 1758* (London, 1867), 78; Lamiral, *L'Afrique*, 49-53. Consequently, their perceptions of life in the towns and the role of signares is influenced by their view of the exotic African woman and also racial thinking based on their concept of slavery, free people of colour and their view that they were inherently excluded from the French nation.
11. The articles of capitulation granting Britain control over Senegal in 1763 stipulated that 'free mulattos and negroes' be protected in their liberty, property and religion. See 'Petition presented by the inhabitants of Senegal to request redress for the injustice done to them by Govr O'Hara', 22 August 1775 in John Hargreaves, ed., *France and West Africa: an Anthology of Historical Documents* (London: Macmillan, 1969).
12. Portrait Photographs Devès Family, 1Z11, ANS and Xavier Ricou, *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial* (Dakar: Riveneuve éditions 2007).
13. The Senegal Colony at this time consisted of Saint-Louis, Gorée and a few river trade posts along the Senegal River.
14. The permanent clergy consisted of one *préfet apostolique* (lay priest). Seven sisters arrived in Senegal to provide charitable services. Anne Marie Javouhey founded the order to educate young girls in France and Reunion (then Ile de Bourbon) before establishing a presence in Senegal. Joseph de Benoist, *Histoire de l'église catholique au Sénégal* (Paris : Karthala, 2007), 88-94 and Geneviève Lecuir-Nemo, *Anne Marie Javouhey* (Paris : Karthala, 2001).
15. 'Actes de Mariages' Etat Civil, Commune de Saint-Louis 8M/52 (ANS).
16. Ibid, 1861-1863 and 'Matricule de la Mission Catholique à Saint-Louis' (notes taken by Oumar Ba in 1966).
17. Fatou Niang Siga, *Reflets de modes et traditions saint-Louisianes* (Dakar: Editions Khoudia). My conversation with informants during a year-long research fellowship in which I held formal interviews and informal conversations with informants in Saint-Louis and Dakar Senegal confirmed this.
18. The fact that the two books appeared at the same time with similar titles raises questions about Descemet's contribution to the Faïdherbe dictionary. Louis Descemet, *Recueil d'environ 1,200 phrases françaises usuelles avec leur traduction en regard en ouolof de Saint-Louis* (Saint-Louis: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1864). See also,

Louis Léon César Faïdherbe, *Vocabulaire d'environ 1500 mots français avec leurs correspondants en Ouolof de Saint-Louis, en Poular, Toucouleur du Fouta, en Soninké, Sarakollé de Bakel* (Saint-Louis, 1864).

19. I am grateful to Fiona McLaughlin for her clarifications about the Descemet phrasebook. See Fiona McLaughlin, 'On the Origins of Urban Wolof: Evidence from Louis Descemet's 1864 phrase book.' *Language in Society* 37 (2008), pp. 713–735.
20. For a contemporary account of El-Hajj Umar Tal's 1846/47 tour of Bakel and Podor and his letter to the faithful 'children of Ndar', see Frederic Carrère and Paul Holle *de la Sénégambie française* (Paris, 1855), pp. 194-196. For a critical perspective on the account see Yves Jean Saint-Martin, *Le Sénégal sous le second empire: naissance d'un empire colonial, 1850-1871*, (Paris: Kathala), p. 57 and David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 124, 162-163.
21. This appears in seminal works on Senegal's political history by G. Wesley Johnson and François Zuccarelli. Rita Cruise O'Brien made this observation in her study of French settlers in twentieth century Senegal. She goes as far to say that 'the old métisse families of Saint-Louis... have a select group of French friends...who point out that they are not really Senegalese.' This may have been true from the French perspective in the years following independence but in Senegal today the *métis* families that remain emphasize their Senegalese-ness. See Rita Cruise O'Brien, *White Society in Black Africa: The French of Senegal* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 264-265.
22. The most striking example of this is the marriage between Madeline Tambe and Gaspard Devès. Devès married Tambe after his first marriage in a habitant family ended with the death of his first wife. The couple married officially in 1889 just before the marriage between their son and the daughter of another habitant family. While not common, other unions like this existed. Although only 'proper' unions were recorded in official documents, birth records and family reminiscences suggest that other such unions existed. 'Devès, Pierre Gaspard et Magdeline Fatma Daba Daguisery dite Magdeleine Tamba', Civil Registry of marriage, Commune of Saint-Louis, ANS 9 Mai 1889.

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