

2024

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Recommended Citation

Weaver, Gabriela E. (2024) "Reframing Perceptions of Signares in French Colonial Senegal," *Swarthmore Undergraduate History Journal*: 5 (1), 288-303. 10.24968/2693-244X.5.1.10
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/suhj/vol5/iss1/10>

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Reframing Perceptions of Signares in French Colonial Senegal

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Abstract: Fifteenth to nineteenth-century French Colonial Senegal was a period of unprecedented cultural contact and convergence in Western Africa. With these interactions came new social hierarchies and the emergence of the signare identity. Signares were wealthy mixed-race and African Women who became involved with French men. This paper examines nineteenth-century art by Frenchman David Boilat and Stanislas Darondeau, and the eighteenth-century house of signare Anne Pepin. It critiques the racism and sexism depicted within Boilat and Darondeau's work as well as its misinterpretations by contemporary scholars Mark Hinchman and George E. Brooks. Signares were knowledgeable entrepreneurs rather than manipulative and seductive women, which I argue with the support of contemporary scholars Marylee Crofts and Hilary Jones' work. As I complicate existing research and develop an alternative narrative, I urge readers to question the diverse narratives about these African and mixed-race women in French Colonial Senegal.

Introduction

From the fifteenth century when Europeans first made contact with West Africans in Saint-Louis and Gorée, a new cross-cultural context emerged that was influenced by the social dynamics of Europeans, mixed-raced individuals, and West Africans. Signares, wealthy mixed-race and African Women, entered into temporary marital unions known as *le mariage à la mode du pays* with French men. These women became some of the wealthiest property owners in Western Senegambia (also simplified to Senegal in this paper) by working as intermediaries between African middlemen and French traders. Despite the significant influence these women had in the region, there are no surviving accounts written by them. The only primary sources referencing them are sexist, racist traveler's accounts and portraits, such as those of mixed-race African priest David Boilat and Frenchman Stanislas Darondeau, which reflect Eurocentric ideologies. Biased sources from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries influenced later analyses.

Modern scholars from 1980-2015 offer divergent interpretations of the racial dimensions of the signares in eighteenth and nineteenth century Saint-Louis and Gorée. George E. Brooks and Mark Hinchman glorify the region and overlook the sexist and racist beliefs characteristic of this era. Scholars such as Marylee Crofts and Hilary Jones are more attentive to race relations, capturing a broader perspective of what signares' lives might have looked like. This paper will critique Boilat and Darondeau's art and challenge Brooks' and Hinchman's interpretations of their work and other accounts, which discount signares' agency and misrepresent them. Then, I will analyze the architecture of the time and argue, with the support of Crofts and Jones, that

signares were knowledgeable entrepreneurs who filled an essential role in French Colonial Senegal.

When French colonists found themselves in an unfamiliar landscape, they became involved with knowledgeable African women (later known as signares) to ensure their survival and prosperity. In the seventeenth century, the French claimed the islands of Saint-Louis and Gorée in Western Senegambia. The first wave of colonists came in search of gum arabic and, as a result, sought to form relationships with local Africans who could acquire these goods for them.¹ The French encountered many challenges because they did not know the landscape or local food sources, and many had never performed domestic labor.² French men found themselves vulnerable and many fell ill. This is what led their relationships with Africans to be vital to their basic survival, and ultimately, their success in extracting wealth from the region.

As French men began having intimate relationships with local African women many moved into roundhouses, structures with round morphologies and conical roofs. These women filled the role of domestic caretakers, cooking and washing their clothes. African women learned French, bridging the language gap barrier between Europeans and Africans. Being bilingual, they were uniquely suited to assist French traders and African middlemen with business affairs.³ By the mid-1800s, these relationships between African women and French men evolved into a culture of signares. *Le mariage à la mode du pays* became the formalized practice for uniting French men and African and mixed-race women with the approval of local African officials. While these relationships could be mutually beneficial, bringing wealth and status to both

¹ Dwight Carey. "Early Colonial African Landscapes: The Case of Senegal." Lecture at Amherst College, Amherst MA, September 14, 2022.

² Carey, "Early Colonial African Landscapes: The Case of Senegal."

³ Dwight Carey. "The Case of Senegal Continued." Building Colonial Cities, Lecture at Amherst College, Amherst MA, September 19, 2022.

parties, the racist and sexist beliefs of French men meant they could also be strained, painful, and difficult for the women involved. Marriage for domestic labor and economic gain did not guarantee mutual respect or equality.

Signares in Art

Eighteenth and nineteenth century traveler's accounts provide a very narrow window into what signares' lives were like, but demonstrate the writers' sexist and racist biases, which prevailed at the time. Their writing focuses on the physical appearance and character of mixed-race and African women, making it challenging to construct a holistic narrative about them. Analyzing these primary accounts provides insight into European travelers' varied attitudes toward signares (as objects, laborers, exotic beauties, among other things) and how modern historians drew conclusions about signares' roles in Saint-Louis and Gorée.

David Boilat captured nineteenth century perceptions of signares in his portrait on the right. This woman is poised regally, her head held high, arms placed neatly on her lap; she appears refined, polite, and well-mannered. Despite a seemingly positive portrayal of the signare, French men believed signares were conceited and greedy due to their poise and attire. To the first point, the subject's choice to maintain eye contact with the portraitist may be interpreted as confidence derived from vanity. One Frenchman went as far as to say signares “are so fastidious about their appearance that they carry a



Figure 1: Boilat, David, “Signare,” 1853, New York Public Library Digital Collections.

little mirror with them... so that they may feast their eyes on their own good looks.”⁴ The fashionable attire of the signares provides additional evidence to support the French men’s claim, given that many travelers believed their choice to indulge in luxuries stemmed from self-centeredness.

Despite these perceptions, the signares’ dress reflects their high status, wealth, and connection to the global world. The money signares made from working as trade intermediaries enabled them to afford products from across the globe, including the highest European fashion of the time. Hilary Jones explains the global reach of these women, writing, “They wore the *grande pagne* (wraparound cloth) of African women with a *chemise* of fine fabric, Moroccan shoes, and imported cloth from India (*guinées*) as a head wrap.”⁵ Jones also mentions how signares paired European embroidered shirts with skirts made by local weavers.⁶ Signares’ attire reflects a blending of styles, and their appearance marked Senegal as a center of cultural contact and convergence, a fact blatantly ignored and twisted in the traveler’s accounts.

In addition to commenting on signares’ gentility and vanity, travelers characterized signares as erotic, sexually desirable, and exotic. One French man wrote that they were “sweet, seductive, and voluptuous.”⁷ Similarly, French scientist Michel Adanson objectifies signares noting, “Their skin is fine and extremely soft. Their eyes are large and black; their mouths and lips are small...many are perfect beauties.”⁸ These idealized facial features—unblemished skin, small lips, and large eyes—are also illustrated in David Boilat’s portrait. Racism clouds French

⁴ Marylee S Crofts, “Economic Power and Racial Irony: Portrayals of Women Entrepreneurs in French Colonial Senegal,” *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society*, no. 19 (1994): 216–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43007777>, 220.

⁵ Hilary Jones, *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 36.

⁶ Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 91.

⁷ Crofts, “Economic Power and Racial Irony,” 220.

⁸ Crofts, 222.

perceptions of their beauty. A 1789 traveler's account reads, "Seeing the women of Senegal, one regrets only that they are not white. Apart from that, they are full of grace and kindness."⁹ This French man acknowledges his perceived inferiority of these women before any descriptors are supplied, implying that they are secondary. Racism obfuscates their positive attributes. French men also believed these women manipulated them with their beauty, seducing them to exploit them for profit and status.¹⁰

Stanislas Darondeau's 1842 portrait displayed on the right reflects the perceived grace, vanity, and sexual desirability of signares but uniquely contrasts them with a racist, heavily stereotyped illustration of African women. Upon examining this painting, historian George E. Brooks points out the lighter skin of this signare and the improbability that she would have been so fair skinned.¹¹ By painting her in this way, Darondeau may have been trying to reduce the potential distaste and shock of the realities of French colonial interracial relationships. Furthermore, Darondeau juxtaposes the signare against other seemingly uncivilized bare-breasted

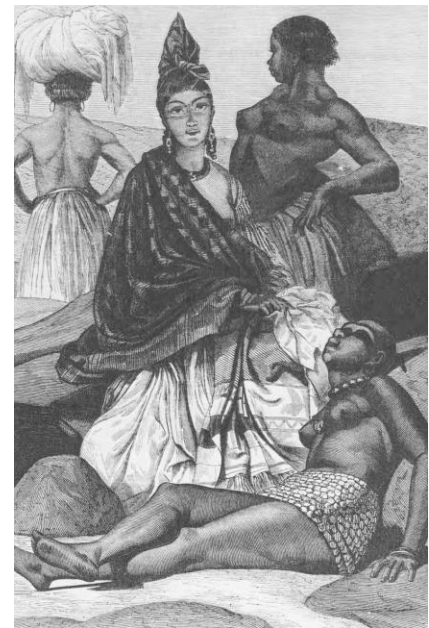


Figure 2: Darondeau, Stanislas. "Unnamed Portrait," 1860. Included in George E. Brooks article "Artists' Depictions of Senegalese Signares."

African women whose bodies are displayed brazenly. He painted the signare as respectable, modern, and distinctly different from African women in the eyes of the French. Another distinguishing feature is the conical hat of the signare. Many African women (such as the women in the background) wore bundles on their heads to carry things while they worked; while the

⁹ Crofts, "Economic Power and Racial Irony," 220.

¹⁰ George E Brooks. "Artists' Depictions of Senegalese Signares: Insights Concerning French Racist and Sexist Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century." (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 87.

¹¹ Brooks, "Artists' Depictions of Senegalese Signares," 83.

conical hat symbolized that one did not have to work because of their wealth.¹² This image is deceptive on many accounts, curated to contrast the signare against other African women.

Darondeau's idolization of signares dismisses the racism they experienced.

European art and written accounts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveal the racism and sexism that undergirds the emphasis on high social standing and physical beauty in their portrayal of signares. Brooks falls victim to these incomplete narratives. He begins his 1980 analysis "Artists' Depictions of Senegalese Signares" by introducing them as "renowned during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century for their beauty, elegant dress, and enviable life-style."¹³ Following the pattern of primary art and literature, Brooks seems to reduce signares to their physical characteristics and wealth, deeming these their most significant attributes. Fueling the stereotype that signares are seductive, he writes, "European men found Senegalese women irresistible, and the ungovernable passions they aroused are reputed to have ruined many careers."¹⁴ Brooks also claims that "relations between Africans and Europeans were long unaffected by the spread of racism in Europe," citing the "highly flattering" nature of artistic representations from the nineteenth century.¹⁵ He marks the 1870s as the turning point when racism "arrived" in Senegal, but it was ever-present as French men dismissed the personhood of Africans while exploiting them to gain access to the land's resources. In fact, the signares' success was based on navigating the colonial context to benefit themselves socioeconomically.

Brooks acknowledges positive attributes of signares, commenting on their roles as caretakers and language interpreters. Nonetheless, like eighteenth and nineteenth century travelers, Brooks argues they acted solely for their economic gain. He concludes, "European

¹² Carey, "The Case of Senegal Continued."

¹³ Brooks, "Artists' Depictions of Senegalese Signares," 77.

¹⁴ Brooks, 83.

¹⁵ Brooks, 82.

artists did not see beneath the women's masks," saying if they had done so, they "might have heard the rich, deep laughter of Senegalese women discussing how they manipulate French men to their advantage."¹⁶ Ending by saying signares were manipulative indicates that Brooks did not see beneath their "masks" either. He takes European descriptions and depictions as fact, characterizing signares based on their physical appearance and relationships with French men.

Twenty-first century architectural historian Mark Hinchman also does not deeply question primary source material, using travel narratives to support his argument that relations in French Colonial Senegal were mostly amicable. He calls Senegalese women fastidious about their appearance, reiterating the words of French travelers.¹⁷ He argues that signares controlled the production of their image, but why would they have chosen to depict themselves in a manner which reflects Eurocentric ideologies? Hinchman concludes that because African and mixed-race women influenced their portrayal in portraits, they shaped the stereotypes that French travelers imposed on them.¹⁸ He speaks to the agency of signares, but he does so primarily to support his claim that they controlled their portrayal.

Hinchman's interpretation of eighteenth-century French scientist Michael Adanson's traveler's accounts is striking. He describes Adanson as "exemplary" for his objectivity, citing his "statements about the relative nature of beauty" as an example of "his unbiased observational powers."¹⁹ The statements to which Hinchman refers objectify and eroticize signares, referring to their soft skin, small lips, and other facial features. When Hinchman chooses to acknowledge Adanson's insults of Senegalese women, he brushes them off, saying Adanson was "absent-

¹⁶ Brooks, "Artists' Depictions of Senegalese Signares," 87.

¹⁷ Mark Hinchman. *Portrait of an Island: The Architecture and Material Culture of Gorée, Sénégal, 1758-1837*. (Lincoln: Nebraska Press, 2015), 286.

¹⁸ Hinchman, *Portrait of an Island*, 201.

¹⁹ Hinchman, 166-167.

minded.”²⁰ Hinchman consistently praises Adanson’s scientific work and traveler’s accounts, ignoring the sexism and racism within them. He fails to recognize that *none* of the travelers to French Colonial Senegal were unbiased observers; further, Hinchman does not acknowledge how these travelers’ perceptions of race and gender influenced their work.

Examining art and traveler’s accounts paints a limited picture of signares, particularly because they paid little attention to their non-physical attributes. Their racist insults and sexual objectification deem their accounts as unrepresentative of the role of signares in French Colonial Senegal. Primarily, these accounts confirm the wealth and high social standing of these women, partially displayed by their choice of imported and local clothing. There is also truth to signares using their relationships with French men to gain wealth and status, but portraits such as Boilat’s and Darondeau’s obscure these narratives and dismiss the racism and systems of control these women navigated while doing so. Unfortunately, we only have the European perspective of the era, given that illiterate signares did not preserve records that would address the gaps and biases of surviving documentation. To construct a more objective narrative of the signares’ day-to-day lives—with whom they interacted, their professional and personal ambitions, and the context in which they lived—one should examine their visual legacy. The architecture of their homes and possessions within them position signares in the Senegalese context.

The Architectural Record

The well-preserved Maison Pepin house, home to signare Anne Pepin in eighteenth century Gorée, Senegal, provides an alternative narrative centered around the daily lives of signares. The home is split into two stories with the main bank of rooms (arranged en filade) at

²⁰ Hinchman, *Portrait of an Island*, 167.



Figure 3: D'Hastrel, Adolphe, "Maison de la signare," 1839, Included in Mark Hinchman's *Portrait of an Island*.

the far end, a large central courtyard, and the enslaved people's quarters and storage spaces at the front facing the street. These homes were expansive, inhabited by signares' enslaved people, and filled with luxury goods, reflecting the wealth and status of the women who owned

them. There are distinctly public and private spaces. The signare and her family's rooms were private, and their enslaved people inhabited both the public courtyard and their private quarters. In the image above, one can see enslaved people working in the central courtyard. The courtyard was primarily occupied by female enslaved people who watched children, washed clothes, and cooked in the space. Some male enslaved people, particularly sailors and fishermen, spent the day laboring outside the compound, although weavers and carpenters worked inside it.²¹ The courtyard also served as a place for hosting gatherings referred to as *folgars* with "music, dancing, wine, and other refreshments" where women in the community could "observe and be observed."²² The space was one where enslaved people, traders, visitors, and other community members were constantly coming and going. The signares' economic pursuits, position as trade intermediaries, lavish lifestyles, and global connections brought people of different races and classes together in their homes. The layout of their homes, particularly the large courtyard, enabled them to do so. The architecture suggests a narrative detailing the economic success of

²¹ Hinchman, *Portrait of an Island*, 223.

²² Brooks, "Artists' Depictions of Senegalese Signares," 83.

signares without attributing them to greedy and manipulative personalities, as implied by European travelers.

The two stories of the house mark social divisions. The signare and her family could observe their enslaved people at work in the courtyard below from the gallery. The enslaved people's quarters were also on the ground floor, physically placing them below the high-class signares. Another feature of note is the signares' placement of storage spaces for trading goods. In the image, these flank the main bank of rooms. Signares stored goods from around the world, including French wines, Indian cloth, gold, and blue cotton.²³ The placement of these goods suggests business was conducted at the front of the home where signares' goods were displayed. Signares' elevated living quarters and their centrality to business deals demonstrated their success and status within this colonial society.

Signares' homes also reflected their global connections through features adopted from different cultures. For example, the central dirt courtyard reflects those of traditional African compounds. The materials used in construction are local; masons used *argamasse* (Goréen mortar), limewash, *chaux* (plaster), clay, and in later years, paint. By contrast, the double spiral staircase resembles European palace architecture. Signares also constantly altered and expanded their homes, which was customary in Europe as a display of wealth.²⁴ While there were both French and African elements to signares' homes, they were uniquely adapted to suit the needs of each signare.

Mark Hinchman analyzes the architectural features of the Maison Pepin house in *Portrait of an Island*. He acknowledges the role of signares in shaping Saint-Louis and Gorée, commenting on how their homes reflect their wealth, status, and agency—glorifying the

²³ Hinchman, *Portrait of an Island*, 329.

²⁴ Hinchman, 225.

women's success and dismissing their struggles. Hinchman describes the signares house as "her base of operations, it affirmed her status, it was a source of income, and it stood as a symbol of her familial and social life."²⁵ These functions are accurate, but his analysis falsely characterizes French Colonial Senegal as harmonious, ignoring social divisions within the home.

Repeatedly, Hinchman omits and overlooks details that reveal the complexities and challenges signares face in French colonial cities. He spends a great deal of time discussing how their wealth was displayed. Hinchman references inventories of Anne Pepin and other signares' homes, commenting on their Indian mosquito nets, French gourds, and English mirrors.²⁶ While examining material possessions provides insight into the lives of signares, Hinchman is so caught up with specifics that he spends little time analyzing their implications. He only emphasizes the wealth and status of signares rather than fully contextualizing their role and position in society.

Hinchman covers interracial marital unions between French men and African and mixed-race women in just one and a half pages. He explains that French men entered these relationships for "pragmatic reasons, such as arranging for food, washing clothes, lodging, and sex," but that doing so consistently resulted in the formation of "an ongoing emotional attachment."²⁷ While there may be some truth to his assertion, Hinchman does not provide evidence to support it—how are affection and emotional attachments guaranteed, for example? Hinchman argues that signares had amicable, affectionate relationships with French men, which elevated their status and increasing their wealth. He only briefly mentions their role as trade intermediaries to explain how they came into this wealth and an additional benefit gained by French men when they

²⁵ Hinchman, *Portrait of an Island*, 133.

²⁶ Hinchman, 329.

²⁷ Hinchman, 170.

became involved with signares. Hinchman's primary focus is on the positives, painting Western Senegambia as a bustling colony full of trade, wealth, and easy living, but such was not the case.

Contextual Realities of the Signares

Transitioning from identifying misinterpretations of the signares, Crofts' and Jones' work reveals the true nature of signares' lives in French Colonial Senegal. As discussed above, signares entered temporary marital unions with French men. The system of exchange between these men and women went in both directions as signares acted as caretakers and trade intermediaries while French men expanded their opportunities to gain wealth and social prominence. However, these relationships were complex; each couple navigated cultural differences. Because of their race and gender, the French viewed signares as inferior, and this was amplified by the explicit power imbalance dynamics of colonialism. Still, French men's ideologies did not deter them from taking advantage of the benefits of forming relationships with signares. Jones writes, "Colonialism worked its way into the intimate spaces of home, courtyard, kitchen, and bedroom occupied predominantly by women."²⁸ The French exemplified this by inhabiting African spaces and exporting their goods, exploiting their power.

Signares were entrepreneurs with knowledge of the landscape, business acumen, and fluency in Wolof and French. Crofts references the intelligence of signares and discusses how it has only been acknowledged in some of the most recent scholarship. Despite the signares' profound influence that shaped French Colonial Senegal, they are largely erased from the record, which is told "through the lens of male power and privilege."²⁹ Nevertheless, the success of the French would not have been possible without the resources and knowledge signares provided.

²⁸ Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 4.

²⁹ Jones, 21.

Signares “instilled European tastes and values in their children but also reinforced the link between coastal people and African societies of the mainland.”³⁰ They blended African and European cultures, creating a new context that did not perfectly model French or Wolof societies. It was signares whose intelligence and influence shaped French Colonial Senegal.

Conclusion

Signares’ attire and homes support the claims that these women were wealthy and of a high social class while revealing the ways these women facilitated trade and established connections to those across the region and world. Cultural convergence in Saint-Louis and Gorée is exemplified in signares’ dress which blended fashion styles from European embroidered shirts to Moroccan shoes. The blending of cultures is also reflected in signares’ homes constructed with local materials and featuring European styles, such as double spiral staircases. Signares’ homes were constructed to support the comings and goings of enslaved people, visitors, traders, vendors, and other community members.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century signares and the cultural context they created reflected themes of many European colonies. The travelers’ accounts and artistic depictions of signares demonstrated white supremacy. Racial divisions blurred as Africans, Europeans, mixed-race people, and foreigners interacted, though Europeans strongly desired to preserve the boundaries of whiteness. Colonizing nations falsely believed they had more control and influence. In reality, Africans, particularly mixed-race and African signares, played the most significant role in shaping Saint-Louis and Gorée. Even within the confines of the home, French men consumed locally sourced foods and lived under roofs made of local materials. The wealth generated in

³⁰ Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 31.

French Colonial Senegal was made possible by the African and mixed-race women who looked after French men and put them in contact with African middlemen. The French take more credit for the region's economic prosperity and culture than is due.

Another critical aspect of colonies is cultural convergence and globalization. As discussed previously, signares wore clothes from around the world, blended European and African architectural styles, and participated in the global economy. Africans, French men, and other foreigners lived in close proximity, interacting with each other frequently. A globalized world was formed from trade and connections between members of different cultures. A textile producer in India could be traced to a signare in Western Senegambia or a French trader possessing porcelain to China. Even though most of these people never met, they influenced one another by participating in the global market.

When analyzing these relations, one must recognize the most abundant (and sometimes only) documentation is that of European colonizers. Analyzing art and architecture provides a unique lens through which to understand the experiences of signares. Still, there are gaps and biases in primary source material, and many perspectives such as those of signares and Africans will never be fully reconstructed. What is excluded from the record is just as important, if not more so. Through examining and critiquing the works of artists and scholars of the eighteenth through twenty-first centuries, I have determined that signares were knowledgeable entrepreneurs who played a crucial role in maintaining amiable relationships between the French and Africans. Even without detailed accounts from signares and other colonized peoples, through studying the spaces they occupied, one may begin to write them into the historical record.

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