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ARTISTS’ DEPICTIONS OF SENEGALESE SIGNARES:
INSIGHTS CONCERNING FRENCH RACIST AND SEXIST ATTITUDES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY *

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ARTISTS’ DEPICTIONS OF SENEGALESE SIGNARES

Introduction

Senegalese signares were renowned during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for their beauty, elegant dress, and enviable life-style. Signare, derived from the Portuguese senhora, designated a respected woman of property, and the most affluent signares of Saint-Louis and Goree possessed large houses, numerous domestic slaves, and considerable wealth invested in clothing, jewelry, and house furnishings.

This paper describes how signares were depicted by French artists and writers who visited Senegal from the close of the eighteenth century to the latter part of the nineteenth century. During a period of transition during which signares’ economic and social position drastically declined; signares changed from entrepreneurs with considerable wealth and independence to women living in reduced economic circumstances and largely dependent on attachments to European men. The five pictures accompanying the text, together with quotations from visitors to Senegal, illustrate how French attitudes towards signares changed during this period.

Historical perspectives on signares

To date there has been little historical research concerning women in West African societies, but there is much evidence to suggest that the arrival of Europeans from the fifteenth century onwards greatly enhanced economic opportunities for women. Portuguese traders visiting coastal and riverine societies soon learned that they had to reside where Africans insisted they trade, pay tolls and rents, and otherwise adapt to local patterns of commerce. One aspect of this “landlord-stranger relationship,” as it came to be termed, was the privilege accorded Europeans of marrying African women. Women in some societies may have exercised freedom of choice; more often, it is likely that they were designated by the ruling and trading elite which sought similar advantages from negotiating marriage alliances with European traders as they did with visiting African traders likewise constrained to adhere to landlord-stranger reciprocities.

In contrast to “stranger” Africans, however, incoming Europeans knew nothing, or next to nothing concerning African societies. This meant that African wives were invaluable to European traders as interpreters of languages and cultures and as intermediaries and collaborators in commercial exchanges; which meant, too, that African women could exploit these circumstances to their advantage and that of their families and relatives. Moreover, African wives were indispensable to sustain Europeans’ personal and psychological needs. Europeans were frequently ill from tropical diseases and other maladies, and between one-quarter and one-half of them died within a year of their arrival in West Africa. Without the care and nursing of African women, death rates would have doubtless been even higher than was the case. Euro-African (mulatto) children grew up in their mothers’ cultures. What they learned concerning European ways differed according to circumstances, but however much or little it contributed to preparing many of them to function as commercial intermediaries between their mothers’ societies and European traders.

Wherever they could, European trading firms attempted to enforce commercial monopolies, excluding vessels from other European countries and reaping the advantages of exclusive trade with local Africans and Euro-Africans. Senegal was one such area during the eighteenth century, where according to the fortunes of war France and Britain alternatively occupied Saint-Louis, which commanded the mouth of the Senegal River, and Goree, which served as the entrepot for trade with Cape Verde and the neighbouring coast. When they were in control, French trading companies excluded African and Euro-African inhabitants of Saint-Louis and Goree from participating in import-export trade with France and French possessions in the Americas and, insofar as they could, prevented them from exercising a
middleman role trading with neighboring African societies in Senegal. This policy might have succeeded had the employees of the French trading companies been able to deny themselves the companionship of African and Eurafrikan women and forgo opportunities collaborating with them in illicit private trading ventures. But such was not the case, for company officials and employees of every rank were irresistibly attracted to Wolof, Lebou, and Eurafrikan women and to the lucrative clandestine trading networks they organized. For their part, the female inhabitants of Saint-Louis and Gorée adroitly manipulated French passion and French cupidity to their own ends and those of their families.

By the mid-eighteenth century the salient features of ‘signareship’ had evolved. European men were constrained to contract traditional marriages with all the responsibilities and obligations that entailed. Mariage à la mode du pays (marriage local style) as the French termed it, included paying a dowry to the woman’s parents, supplying a wedding feast, providing the woman with a dwelling, and adhering to accepted norms of marital practices, including sexual fidelity. Children bore their fathers’ names, and a European was expected to purchase a slave for each child to provide for its support. When a European husband died or returned to Europe at the end of his service, the signare was free to remarry. Signares successful in commerce and marriage acquired handsome residences with European furnishings and owned numerous domestic slaves. Female slaves ran the household and the male slaves were employed as sailors, ship-builders, coopers, blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, and weavers. Fortunately indeed was the European who contracted a marriage with a signare possessed of a large household and skilled labor force! Wealthy signares could choose among trading company employees, ranking government officials, and military officers.

The apogee of signares’ wealth and influence was in the 1780’s, after which they experienced a long diminuendo. Monopolistic trading companies were abolished at the time of the French Revolution, ending the remunerative illicit commerce which signares and company employees had opportunistically exploited. The suppression of the slave trade after 1807 significantly diminished Senegal’s commerce, which did not fully recover until the 1830’s with a prosperous gum trade along the Senegal River, followed in the 1840’s by the commercialization of peanuts. Nonetheless, life in the trading communities at Saint-Louis and Gorée continued much as it had in the eighteenth century, with newly arrived French traders, administrators, and military and naval personnel adapting to the seductive lifestyle created and sustained by signares.

Signares long retained considerable economic independence. They possessed houses, domestic slaves, and much gold and silver jewelry which was readily negotiable to finance trading ventures or for other purposes. Domestic slaves were an important source of income, inasmuch as signares hired them to European and Eurafrikan traders at Saint-Louis and Gorée, and to British and Eurafrikan traders living in The Gambia as well. There were many commercial and family ties between Senegal and The Gambia, for many of the British traders established there had lived at Saint-Louis and Gorée when they were occupied by British forces during the Napoleonic Wars. With the return to French rule, British traders, signares, and their families and dependents moved to The Gambia and founded a new trading community at Bathurst. Bathurst, today Banjul, was constructed by slave artisans, including many hired from signares at Saint-Louis and Gorée. Other domestic slaves were hired from Senegal as mariners on trading vessels.

The French colonial government’s abolition of domestic slavery in 1848 caused signares an irreparable economic loss and deprived them of much of their self-reliance. Signares became increasingly dependent on attachments to European men, and their economic decline came to be reflected in diminished social status. Moreover, signares were adversely affected by the

(Lamiral, L’Affrique et le peuple Africain)
Artist unknown.
(Frey, Côte Occidentale d'Afrique)
Artist: Darondeau.

(Charpé, La Fondation de Dakar; reproduced from Boilot, Esquisses Sénoalyennes)
Artist unknown.
colonial administrators dispatched to conquer and rule West Africa. Many of these new arrivals were imbued with racist attitudes which supported and justified the objectives of European conquest and domination of Africans.

Both France and Senegal experienced the consequences of the virulent racism which swept Europe in the nineteenth century. Portrayals of Africans in French literature changed from the "natural man" extolled by Rousseau and "brothers" declared by the ideologues of the French Revolution, to Africans being denigrated as an inferior species of beings with abhorrent features and despigished social and cultural institutions, such views purportedly being supported by the advance of scientific inquiry. William Cohen has written perceptively and trenchantly concerning these developments in French attitudes concerning Africa and Africans:

"There were two outlooks on race (in France), on the one hand egalitarianism, inherited from the Enlightenment, and on the other, racism: developed in the nineteenth century... The assertion of black inferiority paralleled claims for the need of white rule and domination over the African continent. And thus a racial and imperialist theme developed together; decades before conquest was launched, intellectually preparing Frenchmen for the imperial role they were to play."

Signaires would share the same indignities and humiliations as other Africans, plus the obloquy of French women and priests who condemned their association with French men and denigrated their children as "fruit du péché". Signaires, long respected as wives and partners in commerce, came by the 1870s to be regarded as courtesans, or worse, by some Frenchmen newly arrived in Senegal with little appreciation of what signareship had represented in past times.

Artists' depictions of signaires, 1780s-1870s

What is most noteworthy about French artists' representations of signaires is that they were highly flattering and continued to be so until the 1870s. This is remarkable, for it suggests that relations between Africans and Europeans were long unaffected by the spread of racism in Europe. Until the 1870s, it would seem, Frenchmen newly arrived in Senegal adapted to long-established social practices at Saint-Louis and Gorée, holding in check, sloughing-off, or rejecting racist ideas they may have acquired in Europe. Examination of artists' depictions of signaires suggests that such may—or may not—have been the case.

Illustration 1 shows the earliest known picture of a signaire, which appeared in a book published in 1789 by Dominique Harcourt Lamiral. The picture was probably made according to Lamiral's instructions by a French artist unskilled in depicting Africans; however, except for physical features, the portrayal corresponds to written descriptions, including the signaire's distinctive turban, loose flowing gown adapted from the French shift, the female dependent or domestic slave carrying a parasol. One special feature of this picture is the signaire's energetic and forceful stance; this contrasts with depictions of signaires in the nineteenth century, which invariably show them in static and passive postures. Indeed, the active pose of the signaire is highly appropriate, given the extensive economic role of signaires of the time and their prestige in the trading community at Saint-Louis and Gorée. The following description by Pruneau de Pommegorge provides an excellent commentary on the picture published by Lamiral; moreover, the description would serve with few modifications until well into the nineteenth century.

"The women on the island (Saint-Louis) are, in general, closely associated with white men, and care for them when they are sick in a manner that could not be bettered. The majority live in considerable affluence, and many African women own thirty to forty slaves which they hire to the Company. Each year the domestic slaves make the voyage to Golam engaged as sailors; they bring back to their mistresses fifteen, twenty, even up to thirty weight of gold for the sale of two hogsheads of salt which they are permitted to embark duty-free. The women have some of this gold made into jewelry, and the rest is used to purchase clothing, because they admire, as do women everywhere else, fashionable clothing. Their mode of dress, characteristically very elegant, suits them very well. They wear a very artistically arranged white headkerchief on the head, over which they affix a small narrow black ribbon, or a colored one, around their heads. A shift à la française, ornamented; a bodice of taffeta or muslin; a skirt of the same and similar to the bodice; gold earrings; anklets of gold or silver, for they will wear no others; red morocco slippers on the feet; underneath their bodice a piece of two clots of muslin, the ends of which dangle between their breasts—this appeared when they go out in public; they are followed by one or two young girls who serve as their chambermaids, likewise dressed, but somewhat more lightly and a little less modestly than is our custom... The women being thus escorted when they go out, they frequently encounter a griot (a type of man who sings someone's praises in return for money); in such instances he does not lose the opportunity to precede them declaiming their praises with all the exaggerations he can think of, and some immodesties which they know, the women being so flattered that in the rapture excited by this adulation they often fling some of their garments to the griot when they have nothing left in their pockets to give them."

Something of signaires' lifestyle may be appreciated from surviving residences at Saint-Louis and Gorée. Signaires and their families lived on the upper story of a dwelling, with the kitchen and storerooms on the ground floor. Weavers, carpenters, and other slave artisans carried on their activities inside the compound surrounding the residence. Signaires gave flogars, balls or dances which were highly popular diversions for the island-bound communities of Saint-Louis and Gorée. Flogars featured music, dancing, wines, and other refreshments. They provided signaires, aspirant-signaires, and other women in the community with the opportunity to display their beauty, richest garments and jewelry, observe and be observed.

European men found Senegalese women irresistible, and the unoverworn passions they aroused are reputed to have ruined many careers. Commenting on this, a French historian remarks that judging from the portraits of the women such a fatal attraction was easily understandable. If so, what is remarkable about the artists' portraits of signaires is that the women are not depicted as one might expect: the signaires portrayed are beautiful and richly attired, to be sure, but they do not project joie-de-vivre, and certainly not sensuality. Why this should be the case is an interesting question.

Illustrations 2 and 3 are portraits of signaires made by a French artist, Darondo, who arrived in Senegal in 1841 and died there the year following, and by an unknown artist a decade later. Note the distinctive apparel of the signaires, which is strikingly set-off by the European furnishings in their residences. The women are depicted as dignified, serious, graceful, sedate, demure, and passive; they are not shown as joyful, energetic, or forceful and, most emphatically, not as sensual, voluptuous, provocative, or "sexy"! Their breasts and thighs are covered and their shapes are concealed by the folds of their garments. Note especially their faces: they have "European" features with very light pigmentation. To be sure, most, if not all, signaires by the 1840s were Euraficans, but it is improbable that their skin was so light—in some paintings lighter than women from southern France or other Mediterranean countries! One may wonder if Darondo or the other artists were capable of painting Africans or Euraficans. Yet the same artistic stylization of signaires is graphically evident in Illustration 4, a picture dated from 1860. Here again is the "classic" signaire portrait—a calm statuesque young woman with a pallid "European" face—but posed in juxtaposition with young African women who contrast with her in every respect. They have bare breasts, lumpy limbs, and are presented as carnal and voluptuous—the embodiment of what people in France might have thought African women were like.
Evidence is lacking concerning artists’ intentions and the patronage they received from Frenchmen associated with the signares whose portraits they painted. One may speculate that Frenchmen living in Senegal were concerned that the people of France (including their relatives and friends) would see representations of the famed signares of Senegal which reflected creditably upon themselves. Likewise, artists visiting Senegal may have formed attachments with signares and shared the same concern. And it may be, too, that wealthy signares commissioned artists to portray them as having light-colored skins and European physiognomies. These and other considerations may have influenced the artists and the principal “message” of the portraits is unmistakable. The women portrayed are not courtesans or “loose” women, and they certainly are not “Natives”. They are estimable women who are the partners of Frenchmen living in Senegal, and, presumably, the mothers of their children—except that their children are not depicted.

This last point must be emphasized: what is not recorded can be more important than what is recorded. Only one picture depicting a signare with her children has been located. The absence of children suggests another omission that is even more telling: not a single picture has been found that depicts a signare together with a Frenchman, not to mention a family grouping including their children!

To sum up, signares were depicted as young, beautiful, passive, and light-skinned with “European” features; only their elegant garments were exotic. They were not depicted as mothers, as mature or aging women, or as sharing domestic life with French partners. Artists thus recorded an extremely limited perspective on signares’ lives, and the impression conveyed is that Senegal is a “never-never land” inhabited by beautiful signares who are almost like European women (except for their dress) and whom Frenchmen may possess without acquiring marital or family responsibilities.

Race-relations in Senegal were transformed from mid-century onwards by the influx of large numbers of Frenchmen, many of whom arrived with racist notions of white superiority and the inferiority, barbarism, and depravity of Africans. Signares and African women of Saint-Louis and Gorée were not unattractive to the newcomers, but the latter viewed them in a manner demeaning both to the women and to themselves. Senegalese women came to be portrayed in literature and travel writings as avaricious, seductive, and depraved; they preyed on Frenchmen, especially young men. Such is notably the case in a novel set in Senegal published in 1881, *Romans d’un spahi* by Pierre Lotté (pseud. Louis Marie Julien Viaud), which went through numerous editions and had enormous influence on French public opinion. *Romans d’un spahi* chronicles the “unnatural” attraction of a French soldier for Fatou Gaye, a young Wolof woman. Her “impure” and animalistic passion, aided by the debilitating African climate and magic charms, held the young soldier in thrall. Racist views current in Europe were transported to a Senegalese setting with a vengeance: the author describes Africans in bestial terms, comparing Fatou Gaye’s hands to those of a monkey and describing an African male as a “big black gorilla.”

During the colonial period Africans were subjected to intense cultural pressures. Some abandoned their traditional ways, only to be disparaged for “aping” Europeans. The enormity of the European cultural assault directed towards Africans generally and Senegalese in particular may be appreciated from Illustration 5 depicting a young Senegalese woman who has forsaken her traditional dress for the current Parisian mode, combined with a mocking description of signares penned by Adolphe Burdo, a Belgian who visited Saint-Louis briefly in 1878.

The following passage of the woman, that her ankle is exposed to view, and that her bosom is emphasized. Burdo writes:

*"The Signare is a comical object, with her full figure squeezed into a corset too small for her, muffled up in petticoats, panniers, and trunks, her recalcitrant feet forced into boots with high heels of the Louis XV fashion, and a hat of the Watteau, Rubens, or Niniche style jauntily set on her frizzly wig. When one sees her walking about in this guise it is difficult to keep one’s countenance, for she is evidently a martyr to her boots, her stays half suffocate her, and she is embarrassed with her train, which she vainly tries to hold up with grace. Nevertheless, ridiculous as she often is, the eye of the European, tired of the repulsive nudity of the negro, rests with some relief on this yellow belle.""

Burdo’s derogatory and insensitive remarks are characteristic of many European writers in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Short-term visitors to Africa, many of them, their accounts frequently pandered to the preconceptions and prejudices of European readers. Indeed, Burdo, who visited Senegal only briefly and records superficial impressions, surely was misinformed for it is unlikely that the young woman depicted would have been addressed as “signare” by Senegalese or resident Europeans.

Few, if any, signares abandoned their elegant and distinctive dress, and for years to come many Frenchmen continued to live with signares and share their attractive life-style. But the traditional patterns of signareship could not be sustained in the new colonial and racist era. Signares and their descendants came increasingly to be rejected by Europeans, while they in turn attempted to sustain a privileged position in Senegalese society by maintaining an identity separate from the general African population. The consequences of this segregation and self-segregation are described in a novel written by a Senegalese author in the 1930s which depicts a young Saint-Louis métisse attempting to inculcate newly-arrived and liberal-minded young Frenchmen with racist attitudes denigrating Africans flaunted by her and her friends.

**Concluding remarks**

This paper has attempted to delineate French-Senegalese relations over a hundred year period by means of artists’ depictions of signares. It will not have escaped the reader’s notice that the signares’ portraits are only surface representations of the women: nothing, or very little, of their personalities is recorded. It must also be apparent that the women must be reckoned highly successful individuals measured against the society and opportunities of their time—which is to say that behind those impusive, bland, pale facial masks and inhabiting those clotheshorses bodies were capable and savvy women who knew how to get what they wanted, and who contrived effective strategies to maintain their positions of privilege long after economic and social circumstances had greatly altered to their disadvantage. European artists did not see beneath the women’s masks, their “public presentation,” but viewing their portraits and reflecting about them one comes to suspect that if it were possible to listen “off-camera”—which is to say “off-artist”—one might have heard the rich, deep laughter of Senegalese women discussing how they manipulate Frenchmen to their advantage.
Notes


4 Antoine Edmé Pruneau de Pommegorge, Description de la Négrité. Amsterdam, 1789, pp. 2-6.


9 Darondoue depicts the interior of a residence with a signare and two young and very light-skinned children. Frey, Côte Occidentale d'Afrique, p. 16. Additional pictures of signares not cited in this paper are found on pages 7, 8, 9, 11, 17, 44-46, 125, and 196-197.

10 An example is V. Verneuil, Mes aventures au Sénégal; souvenirs de voyage. Paris, 1858, which may be a spurious account fabricated from previously published works.


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