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CLOTHING AS A MAP TO SENEGAMBIA’S GLOBAL EXCHANGES AT THE TURN OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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‘This cloth is for them such precious merchandise that they remain in admiration as they see pieces unfolded; just as we Europeans do with the gold these Marabout sometimes bring to sell’, wrote Pruneau de Pommegorge in his 1789 Description de la Nigritie. Late eighteenth-century written, visual and material sources on Senegambia suggest a broad range of interactions between western African consumers and traders within global textile markets. Large quantities of imported cloth were offloaded from ships near Saint Louis, Senegal and ferried ashore in canoes. They also flowed into Goree Island, and carried to ports along the Petite Côte south of contemporary Dakar and transported to many markets inland. The French slave trader Dominique Lamiral (1751–1800) wrote with equal parts outrage and marvel at how one process of local redistribution from the market to local people occurred as he saw it. Lamiral would receive visits from a local Moorish chief who, on an ordinary day, was not readily distinguishable as a figure of authority, being as ‘badly dressed and poorly fed’ as the poorest of his subjects. But on a trading day, the chief would turn up with an entourage of officials dressed in beautiful robes made of pagnes a locally woven strip-cloth. If the chief had no fine pagnes of his own, he would borrow some from a signare, one of the prominent female merchants in town known as doyennes of fashionable taste in Saint Louis. Negotiating prices, the chief would, ‘march about with gravitas, look around with a disdainful air, and have [Lamiral’s] words repeated to him by two interpreters even though he has well understood’.¹

Once this performance resulted in an acceptable exchange of goods, the Moorish chief and his entourage returned home where, as Lamiral saw it, social distinctions appeared to fade away. Those referred to as ‘slaves’ in front of Lamiral were free enough to eat from the same bowl and smoke from the same pipe as their chief. Also, the Moorish chief would quickly
distribute goods just obtained from the French, with 40 to 50 thousand French livres worth of merchandise – textiles, gunpowder, guns, accessories – given out within an hour or so: ‘When the chief had given it all away, if his people were still not satisfied, they would take even his shirt, saying to him, “you can still give up the shirt, the whites will not refuse you something to wear”’. 2

Lamiral, a staunch advocate for the slave trade during a period of revolutionary change in both France and its largest slave colony, Haiti, was no friendly observer of western Africans, despite his familiarity with Senegal. However, his description of trading suggests how the performance of power and status lubricated commercial negotiations in late eighteenth-century Saint Louis. His and other similar accounts also suggest something of the slipperiness of identification in which particular personas and claims could be made and unmade through dress. In Senegambia, cotton, as woven textiles, tailored garments and raw material, was a vital element of a political and a social economy that engaged a variety of social groupings that was heterogeneous in terms of language, ethnicity, religious practice and degree of wealth. Among them were merchant signares, riverboat labourers, European soldiers and merchants, Muslim clerics and itinerant traders, cooks, indigo dyers, enslaved persons, formerly enslaved persons and Catholic missionaries. By considering consumption and the clothing practices of this differentiated population, this chapter reveals something of the cultural logics underpinning western Africans’ engagement with late eighteenth-century global markets and offers insight into shifting social relationships over time.

As a vital consumer item, cloth makes historically visible a broad range of West African actors that have sometimes been elided in the historiography of the Atlantic slave trade. Already diverse in ethnic, linguistic and religious affiliation, some western African populations of the late eighteenth century had a wide variety of aesthetic choices and ideological models to choose from in shaping their own identities. This chapter argues that the importation of a wide diversity of textiles, apparel and accessories was shaped substantially by local consumer tastes and contingencies, departing from the tendency to emphasize the impact of external forces. Instead I suggest how contingencies and tastes such as those derived from the Saint Louis signares’ strategy of cultural alignment with both the French and their Muslim African trading partners, or the demand for indigo dyed cloth at Futa Tooro and at Gajaaga, had an impact on long-distance global exchange networks. People’s choices were influenced by environmental change, the rise of an Islamic reform movement, migration caused by war and enslavement and the push–pull dynamics of commerce between the coast and interior regions along the Senegal River. At Saint Louis, numerous observers have noted the urbane, cosmopolitan ethos of merchant signares whose clothing and home furnishings combined the material elements and symbols of myriad places to construct themselves as powerful and honourable elites. But this cosmopolitanism was not limited to
the Atlantic coast and could also be found in market centres and among certain especially mobile actors throughout the region. Attending to questions of consumption and fashion reveal western African consumers as actively participating in and shaping the global commerce in cotton textiles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This West African history of consumption and dress is entangled with the defining economic features of the eighteenth and nineteenth century globally: slavery, abolition, colonialism and industrialization. Tracing this history recovers the way dynamics within western Africa could and did make an impact on activities in other parts of the world. It also looks beyond the region’s peripheralization by the rise of European capitalism, to historicize the politics of fashion within the region through its complex and cosmopolitan engagements with the global transformations of the turn of the nineteenth century.

In this chapter, I explore consumption and dress within the broader context of Senegambia in three sections. I begin by establishing the social and economic context of Saint Louis, the island trading settlement on the Atlantic coast that was the gateway to the Senegal River, and to the gold, slaves and other commodities sought by European trading companies. I then consider the heterogeneous nature of the settlement’s population, the role of Eurafrican or *metis* habitants as merchants and taste makers of a Creole-dominated island society, as well as the range of textiles circulating in its ports and in the Senegal River trade to Gajaaga, several hundred kilometres inland. The following section considers evidence for the dress and material culture of a variety of ‘everyday’ people who inhabited, visited or worked in Saint Louis and the region with particular attention to *laptots*, a Wolof term for sailors, both enslaved and free, whose labour was critical to the movement of trade goods along the river. The final section reconnects the social transformations evident in coastal Saint Louis to the Islamic history of the broader region.

**Saint Louis: cosmopolitanism at the gateway to the West African Sahel**

Almost 10,000 people lived on the island of Saint Louis at the turn of the nineteenth century, diverse in both religion and ethnicity, including speakers of Wolof, Hasaniya Arabic, Serer, Fulbe, Bamana, French and English. Its population grew throughout this period as a generation of slave-holding Eurafrican elite families gained wealth and political power from their control of the gum trade on the Senegal River. They did so through their affiliation with the French imperial project, their embrace of Catholicism, their adoption of French civil law, French cultural mores and metropolitan fashions to project respectability and status. Eurafrican *habitants* (the term referred originally to those in houses built close to the European fort on the island) were instrumental in helping France to regain control of Saint Louis by ousting the much-disliked British who controlled the town for two decades.
By the late eighteenth century, consumers in western Africa were enmeshed — along with those in western Europe, Asia and the Americas — in a global market for consumable goods such as textiles and clothing, accessories like glass and coral beads, hats, tools, cooking implements and raw materials such as dye woods, iron, precious metals, cowrie shells, leather hides, alcohol and foodstuff. The last quarter of the eighteenth century is widely associated with the political revolutions reshaping British and French empires, and their American colonies, but it was also a turbulent period within western Africa. In 1776, a group of Fulbe Muslim clerics seized power in Futa Tooro — an interior region that was a key supplier of grain to coastal Saint Louis — from local leaders viewed as corrupt and insufficiently protecting Tukulor Muslim peasants from enslavement. Over the next 30 years, a new state led by the cleric Abdul Qader Kan launched a number of defensive and expansionist military campaigns. The implications of this political revolution were profound, as it proposed to reorder long-standing relations between clerics and rulers. It was part of a longer historical trajectory of Islamic reform in West Africa that, over the course of the nineteenth century, shaped the experience of millions of people.

Yet this was also a period when the mostly Christian community of Eurafri-can or metis habitants on Saint Louis enjoyed political and economic ascendance in the region, many having gained wealth as intermediaries between European merchants and the African markets of the interior. Living in stone houses near the centre of the town, they were often Catholic and dressed in European clothing, and filled their homes with the material goods obtained through overseas trade. They celebrated their wealth in late-night parties called folgar that featured drumming, dancing, palm wine and the ostentatious display of expensive clothing and accessories. According to Antoine Edme Pruneau de Pommegorge, ‘The usual way to praise those who have excelled in dancing is to fling a cloth or handkerchief over them, which they return to the person who has thrown it, making a deep bow to thank him’. 4

Many signares and habitants often spoke Wolof in addition to French (or more rarely English) and continued to pursue their own economic interests independently of French company traders. Though Catholic, signares were often associated with a religious pluralism that acknowledged and participated in both Muslim and Wolof practices such as celebrating Tabaski (the Eid festival), wearing protective talismans known as gris-gris or some Wolof naming practices for their children.5 It was this culturally flexible posture that actively integrated divergent and seemingly incongruous elements, which defines them as cosmopolitan figures.6 They sent their sons (and less commonly daughters) to be educated in France as was the case with Charles Thevenot, who returned after living for eight years in Paris to serve as both ‘mayor’ and Catholic priest to the habitant community.7 Thevenot had a brother-in-law, LeJuge, who travelled extensively to both Europe and India.8 Such Eurafrican men were described as wearing European clothing in Saint Louis. By contrast, the distinctive clothing of many signares reflected an urbane ethos that looked outward to the seas but
was also rooted in local discourses of taste, propriety and authority. Their signature tall head wraps were perhaps a local distillation of an eighteenth-century trend among French metropolitan elite women for large wigs and turbans, but were localized with an artfully arranged imported cloth in a style that became uniquely associated with Senegal. The use of imported cloth and ribbons to create large turbans was intended to convey the status and leisure of the wearer. The headdress, which Lamiral described as resembling ‘a tiara with a triple crown’, was said to indicate that the wearer was not a commoner obliged to carry items on her head.

Such local discourses ascribing high social status to the wearers of these headwraps contrasted with proscriptions elsewhere in the Atlantic for African and African-descent women to wear these as a sign of servitude. In 1789, the Spanish governor of Louisiana instituted a law governing the wearing of tignon headwraps directed at women of African descent, whether enslaved or free, insisting that they always cover their hair with a handkerchief scarf. The policy was intended especially to limit the social mobility of free women of colour by associating the wearers with the degraded status of the enslaved. Colonial authorities and slave owners alike in many plantation and urban slave societies sought to impose social hierarchy through customary law or less formal policies for clothing the enslaved, naming them or otherwise marking ownership of them such as through branding. But, as noted by scholars of dress in early American colonies, enslaved and free people of African descent often responded to these sartorial constraints with distinctive styles that seemed to undermine the logic of chattel slavery itself. In some cases, enslaved people obtained clothing of better quality and appearance than their officially allotted dress, which was worn for special occasions or celebrations – such as depicted in well-known paintings by Agostino Brunias of enslaved people in the late eighteenth-century Caribbean colonies. For Africans on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, headwraps and other forms of clothing were frequently made of Indian cottons such as madras, a loom-patterned check from southern India. Such cottons were heavily imported to African ports throughout the eighteenth century, and those cotton goods not sold there were commonly sent onward to destinations in the Americas where buyers purchased them to clothe enslaved labourers. Differences across the Atlantic in the meanings attributed to clothing and accessories made from these Indian cottons suggests how such meanings were embedded within specific social and economic contexts, and how differential constructions of class, race and gender emerged from these distinct Atlantic contexts at the turn of the nineteenth century.

In western Africa, women who were successful as merchant signares lived and worked at the convergence of at least two broadly different political economies: one European, Christian and Atlantic Ocean/maritime in character; and the other African, Muslim and Sahelian/Saharan. As elite players in a larger community of free Africans, signares were not subject to customary laws imposed by the French with whom they still interacted as host partners in commerce, rather
than as colonial subjects in the late eighteenth century. As property owners, wives and well-connected merchants, they were able to make demands of French authorities that added to their wealth and prestige. They were often Catholics who adopted aspects of European clothing and material culture and lived according to French civil code; but they were also known to modify that code to fit local understandings and dispensed with some European social mores on occasion. These advantages only evaporated when socio-economic changes increasingly favoured the public visibility of habitant men, that is, the brothers, sons and nephews of signares over themselves. These changes occurred as a new generation of French companies began to dominate the region’s export commerce and colonial interventions also increased. Nonetheless, signares maintained distinctive dress.

The outfits of signares featured the wearing of multiple cloths that were accentuated with gold jewellery imported from the interior and leather slippers from Morocco. As such they expressed forms of sartorial creolization. But this was only one iteration of larger regional patterns and should not be used to reify Eurafricans as uniquely ‘Creole’ and thus distinct from other Africans. Muslim and other residents of Saint Louis tended to reject forms of European cultural assimilation and were often distinguishable by dress even as they, like the Eurafricans, made claims on the French state as citizens. For example, in the late eighteenth century, the resident population of Saint Louis included people like Charles Scipio, a riverboat captain and successful African resident who spoke Wolof, Fulbe, Bamana, Fulbe, Arabic, French and English and was celebrated in Saint Louis for his military, diplomatic and commercial skills. Like the Eurafricans, Africans of diverse ethnic and religious affiliations also expressed forms of sartorial creolization – such as the incorporation of imported textiles and accessories like beads, hats or handkerchiefs into local dress. The island trading port settlement of Saint Louis was a cosmopolitan space because of the convergence and interactions of its diverse residents and visitors. But these residents would have exhibited differing forms and levels of cultural fluidity, linguistic, religious or sartorial, according to their affiliations and capacity.

These eighteenth-century manifestations of cultural accommodation, appropriation and adaptation in Saint Louis can be viewed as part of an older pattern of accommodation between different social groups and interests in the region. As Toby Green has argued, this tradition of cultural pluralism based on the accommodation of difference between hosts and strangers was particularly important to the history of Islam and of trade diasporas in western Africa and was linked to the expansion of the Mali empire in the fourteenth century. This background helps to contextualize the cultural pluralism of the signares of the late eighteenth century who are described in contemporary accounts as observing both Easter and Tabaski (the Muslim Eid festival), carrying rosaries as well as amulets known as gris-gris. The wealth of signares came from their control of enslaved labour that provided goods and services for the European fort, assisted European vessels to navigate the dangerous waters and provided the main labour force for vessels
trading along the Senegal River for gum resin, grain, gold and enslaved people. Both the British and the French at Saint Louis relied on them to supply labour that lubricated their imperial commercial projects.

A key commodity imported into Saint Louis and traded along the river were indigo-dyed cotton cloths imported from India known as *guinées*. Africans admired such cloths for the intensity of their dark blue or black with a coppery red sheen visible on the surface produced from over saturation, as well as for added starch—a characteristic that has also been mentioned as desirable to consumers in other parts of West Africa.²⁰ Like plain white cotton cloth, they were commonly worn on the body as wrappers, turbans or tailored into garments and exchanged as currency against a number of other goods in local and trans-Saharan markets. The cloths may have been particularly desirable because the indigo dye used was said to rub off on the wearer’s skin and thus provide protection from the sun’s rays or because the indigo colour was believed to repel mosquitoes.²¹ European textile manufacturers endeavoured to reproduce indigo cloths for the West African market throughout the period, but the French also relied on manufacturing in their colony at Pondicherry in southern India to supply them to Saint Louis in West Africa, which were preferred by many buyers well into the nineteenth century.²² The long-term preference for the particular qualities of this cloth, which fed a centuries-old trans-Saharan and regional commerce in indigo cottons, suggests how West African market conditions, consumer tastes and fashion in fact shaped networks of suppliers in Europe, Asia and the Americas.²³

Beyond indigo *guinées* cloths, an inventory kept by Louis Lamiral, of the Compagnie de la Guyane operating in Saint Louis from 1778 to 1781, gives some sense of the wider variety of textiles, apparel and accessories that were available there and at ports along the Senegal River. They included *gingas* (variously patterned woven cottons from India); two types of cotton stockings; slippers; Moroccan leather; two colours of a coarse linen cloth (’toile’); pieces of Nankeen cotton from China, handkerchiefs from India and from Cholet, France; three colours of Rouen-made *Siamoise* cloths (cotton and silk blends inspired by the visit of ambassadors of the King of Siam to Louis the XIV in 1685); several skeins of silk thread; fine cloth for robes; ‘Negro hats’ (’Chapeau a negre’); ‘Negro smocks’ (’Cassaque a negre’); linen sheets and several varieties of coral and glass beads.²⁴

Other goods regularly mentioned in similar trade accounts include scarlet wool cloth, Silesian linens, *indiennes* (printed French cotton or cotton-linen blend cloths inspired by Indian prints) and *romals* (loom-patterned Indian cotton handkerchiefs). In Nantes, an Atlantic port city whose economy grew from its links to the slave trade in Africa, manufacturing houses emerged in the mid-eighteenth century producing *indiennes* printed imitations of Indian cottons for export to Europe, Africa and the Americas. One of the city’s largest manufacturers, Favre Petitpierre et Compagnie, could produce up to 26,000 pieces of printed cloth in the 1780s.²⁵ This company produced a book of block-print
designs for *indiennes* it intended for commerce in Africa, which features 162 distinct patterns including stripes, flowers, paisley, abstract forms animals and scenes of African villages (Figure 6.1).

The collection of block prints is believed to have been created later in the company’s lifespan, after 1815 when illegal slave trading continued to flourish from Nantes until the French state officially ended such activity in 1831. While there are apparent differences in pattern design among these prints from those of *indiennes* typically produced for the European market (such as scenes of African village life), it is not clear the degree to which they were created based on specific information about African consumers or attempting to appeal to tastes in particular markets. No other company documents or correspondence from the company that might provide further insight into its operations or design process were preserved in local archives after it disbanded in 1847. It is not clear whether and how many of these block print designs might have been sold in Senegal. An 1824 cargo list from a French slaver, the *Jeune Louis*, lists cloth prints produced by the company valued at over 35,000 francs, or

*Source*: © LACMA, Costume Council Fund M.83.190.281.
65 per cent of all merchandise shipped, being sold in the Bight of Biafra region. However, as Senegal was an important trading port for France throughout the company’s existence, it is likely that some of the company’s goods arrived there aboard vessels from Nantes, along with the other categories of textiles mentioned above. Each of these goods implies a distinct sector of a diverse consumer market that accessed goods produced in Europe, Asia and other parts of Africa through Saint Louis and the Senegal River trade.

**Sailors and everyday dress in a West African Atlantic port**

The *habitant* commercial houses of Saint Louis worked for the French factory, but they also traded on their own account and allowed some of their skilled dependents to do the same, especially sailors known by the Wolof-language term *laptots*. These sailors were viewed as critical to navigating the Senegal River and also as a critical source of maritime labour at a time of frequent war when it was in short supply. Seasonal commerce along the river was an essential part of business at Saint Louis because it was how local merchants there accessed enslaved captives, gum resin, gold and even the grain that fed the town, which did not produce its own food. An analysis of a partial mid-century occupational census suggested that 40 per cent of the African men residing in Saint Louis were labourers in the river trade, including riverboat captains, language interpreters and general labourers. Although many *laptots* were enslaved, owing a portion of their income to their patron, whether that be the European company or a signare, there were also some, such as Charles Scipio mentioned earlier, who were ‘free’ wage labourers able to keep their earnings for themselves and build wealth. In describing wages for *laptop* sailors conducting trade for the Compagnie du Senegal, Pere Labat noted that: ‘in addition to their ordinary wages, we give them a certain profit from their own trading’. When riverboats passed through shallow sections of the river, the disciplined *laptop* crew members pulled the vessel forward from the banks using ropes, work that they performed rhythmically accompanied by drummers, the encouragement of a praise singer and their own singing and dancing. *Laptops* were considered essential to a successful trade voyage to the interior, serving not only as physical labour but also sometimes as negotiators and soldiers armed with rifles or swords. In 1765, a governor of the French colony on Gorée Island formed an auxiliary military unit of 82 *laptots* armed with rifles and led by local free mulatto African residents of the colony. In an image produced of four members of this unit, the *laptots* are distinguishable as either ‘free’ or enslaved by clear differences in their uniform clothing. Both Eurafrican and African *laptots* who were ‘free’ appear in company-issued infantry uniforms with a collared top coat, a shorter blue waist coat, knee-length breeches, white stockings and a black felt tricorn hat. By contrast, those enslaved are shown with simpler outfits of undyed, canvas-like cloth: a long-sleeve jacket with cloth buttons and no collar, ankle-length loose-fitting trousers and
a round-shaped hat of the same cloth with yellow wool trim or tassels. Unlike, those depicted as ‘free’, the lower status *laptops* were barefoot. These images suggest some important social distinctions among this group of labourers employed directly by the French, some of whom experienced some mobility during their lifetimes. But numbers of these labourers worked for Eurasicans or Africans, had little contact with Europeans and/or dressed themselves in local rather than European styles such as local breeches known as *dhiata* and loose tunic-like tops called *mboube*. In the 1770s, Gabriel Bray, an artist traveling aboard the British ship *Pallas*, produced a number of images of African sailors he saw in the ports visited between Senegal, Sierra Leone and Ouidah in the present-day Republic of Benin, depicting them wearing locally made white cotton shirts, breechclouts and white caps as they paddled standing in their canoes (Figures 6.2 and 6.3). In addition to this dress for labour, the successful return of a months-long commercial voyage to the interior market of Gajaaga was a cause for celebration during which *laptops* were known to appear on-board the boat in fine clothes newly purchased at interior markets. These included garments such as expensive *ckous-sabes* (cloaks) and brightly coloured, wide cloth belts, both specialty products of Soninke-speaking Gajaaga that were often embroidered with wool or silk, suggesting the circulation of regional fashions within western Africa.

The mobility of African *laptops* was not limited to western Africa itself. As sailors aboard British or French ships, some travelled around the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, wearing the same standardized apparel given to European

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**FIGURE 6.2** ‘African Canoe Men Paddling Through the Surf’, *Pallas*, January, 1775, watercolour by Gabriel Bray.

mariners of their class, which was often deckhand, pilot or cook.\textsuperscript{32} Five such sailors were captured off the coast of the Bahamas aboard a British ship by an American privateer at the beginning of hostilities during the American Revolution in November 1776. A manifest for the captured British ship \textit{Swallow} lists five Senegambians among its crew members, all free: Jack Bamberry (Jack Bambara), Mamanly (Momeda) Sana, Alsimeer (Algema), Ganserry (Gansare) and Famsey (Tamsa), who were to be paid, £1 6s per month for their labour on a slaving voyage from Senegal to Barbados and Mississippi that was to return to Senegal.\textsuperscript{33} The Americans intercepted the vessel after it had delivered 93 enslaved people to Mississippi and was returning across the Atlantic. After capture, the men were taken to Providence, Rhode Island where they were detained until they were eventually turned over to the British authorities in a prisoner swap, where their trace in the archival record ends.

\textbf{FIGURE 6.3} ‘A Sailor Bringing Up His Hammock’, Pallas, January 1775, watercolour by Gabriel Bray.  
However, in a further testament to the larger presence of such *laptots* in the eighteenth-century Atlantic and Indian Oceans, the *Swallow* was also found to be carrying four letters – all written by the same hand in ungrammatical French – from other Senegambia sailors (perhaps picked up from a separate vessel) sending messages to their families in Saint Louis. ‘Give my compliments to Cuiba Sione Ditwaller’, Boubou Birame Guibe wrote to Madame Yaye Birame in one of the recovered letters that give insight into the experience of these sailors and that of their communities.

Tell her that I am doing well thanks be to God. Tell Birama Jacques to put the tapa [*‘tapade’ from Wolof for ‘enclosure’ or ‘compound’*] [in order] that I will pay when I come to Senegal … Madoune [Madame?] Walo promised to give me some things. Tell her to put them at the head of my bed.34

Guibe’s expressed concern from overseas about his return to the ‘tapade’ or compound in Senegal, and about contributing to and accessing the material objects within it, demonstrate the ways in which *laptots* were thoroughly embedded in Atlantic commercial networks, through which people, goods and raw materials from Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas flowed. Though the British vessel *Swallow* had its venture interrupted, the expectation was that sailors on such voyages would have had direct access to some of the best goods circulating through these networks and opportunities through their own private trading or ‘smuggling’ to bring them to their households and home communities.35

Although much detailed evidence of their lives is lacking from historical archives, the *laptots* were change agents who took opportunities afforded by their gender, skills, physical capacity and linguistic dexterity to obtain a level of mobility and access to income that other groups of enslaved people or free labourers could not. They would have had an interest in marking themselves as socially distinct in large ways and small – as evidenced by spending on large gatherings and special clothing to celebrate successful trading.

Visual images of West Africans published in the pages of European travel narratives from the period, though limited in number and scope, offer additional insight into the dress habits of diverse groups of West Africans. Most of these images were engravings produced in Europe, and while some were not based on first-hand or detailed information, others such as those by Bray, were sketches made on-site or based on eyewitness reports and sought to convey specific information about a particular place. By the late eighteenth century, Jacques Grasset de Saint Sauveur, a Canadian-born former French diplomat, attempted an encyclopaedic survey of African dress from around the continent, producing several dozen images in a volume entitled *Encyclopedie mondiale du costume*, published in 1784. Later editions appeared under slightly different titles, sometimes featuring additional images in 1788, 1796 and 1806.
In Paris, Saint Sauveur worked with a workshop of engravers to produce his images based on travellers’ reports. Though well travelled, and having served as a diplomat in Cairo, Sauveur never visited anywhere else in Africa. The production of these images and the circulation of information about West Africans in Europe was of course part of the larger expansion of Enlightenment ideas about science, nature and commerce throughout the eighteenth century. Information about clothing and material habits, both in narrative descriptions and in images, contributed to the rapid expansion of European knowledge production, often Orientalist in its conceptions of Africa and Asia, while also feeding critical details about regional tastes and cultural practices to commercial actors seeking potential business ventures in Africa. European cloth manufacturers sometimes sent product samples in letters instructing traders travelling to West Africa to determine whether they pleased buyers, and they were among the readers imagined by compilers of encyclopaedia intended for commercial and general audiences. Information about African dress and clothing practices would have interested textile manufacturers in England and France, some of whom became key advocates for imperial expansion in parts of Africa.

The 1796 version of the work, *Encyclopédie des Voyages*, includes 66 engravings depicting a wide range of men and women in different parts of Africa from Egypt and the Maghreb through parts of West, West Central and Southern Africa. But the largest group of subjects depicted are in Senegambia, accounting for 25 of the total number of images. Prefaced by Sauveur’s overview of social and economic life in Senegal, the images depict women and men from a range of backgrounds that begin to suggest the heterogeneity of populations in Saint Louis, Gorée and nearby regions such as Waalo and Cayor. Sauveur depicts the clothing of common men and women as incorporating a number of standard elements, such as the wrapper (*pagne*) worn by a woman tending a field, or the two-piece garment consisting of one cotton cloth wrapped around a man’s waist, the other tied with a knot over one shoulder and hung on the upper body. Another man was shown in ankle-length cotton breeches over a long tunic of coloured stripes, a matching turban, walking stick and an earring. Accessories for men often included a necklace, an armband and bracelets made of leather adorned by amulets, anklets made of beads, leather sandals and a leather pouch that carried tobacco and a pipe. Commoner women are represented as wearing a wrapper of either striped or printed cloth, while being nude above the waist, except on festival days, when they adorned themselves with beaded earrings and jewellery arranged across the upper body ‘with a lot of grace’ (Figures 6.4a, 6.4b, 6.5 and 6.6).

Sauveur noted a particular taste for fashion in Saint Louis, stating people’s desire to distinguish themselves in society resulted in frequent changes in taste and clothing styles: ‘The young people that want to [be attractive] have their tunics and breeches painted with bands of colour, flowers and with other lovely designs’.
FIGURE 6.4A AND 6.4B Two sample *indiennes* patterns for African trade, Favre Petit- pierre et Compagnie, Nantes, c.1815.

Source: © Musée d’Histoire de Nantes ref. no. 941.8.9.
Sauveur admired the talent of women who painted cloth, which, if his account is to be believed, suggests another artisanal industry adding value to local cloth (and possibly to imported white cloth) to accommodate buyers’ changing tastes. Unfortunately, there is no more evidence of what those local cloths he observed were, how they were made or what inspired their designs. However, the desire of buyers for novelty is apparent. In addition to the types of cloth mentioned by Sauveur, the images of his encyclopaedia also depict forms of sartorial creolization as people combined elements of imported and local goods such as men wearing striped or red sashes with fringes or a tricorn hat, as well as how those in traditionally proscribed social roles such as jéli praise singers (itinerant performers who were paid with food, iron or cloth) or herbalists created novel assemblages from diverse goods within their reach.

FIGURE 6.5 ‘Costumes de Différents Pays: Negresse de Qualité de l’Isle St. Louis dans le Sénégal. Accompagnée de son Esclave’, hand-tinted engraving on paper by Jacques Grasset de Saint-Sauveur, 1797, 26.3 × 20.3 cm.
Source: © LACMA, Costume Council Fund M.83.190.287.
Some of the sartorial innovations in local dress were mediated and popularized by elites who were sometimes fascinated and charmed by aspects of European dress and military uniforms. The Swedish evangelist and abolitionist Karl Wadström described an encounter in the late 1780s with Buurba Sin, ruler of a Serer-speaking area inland from the Petite Cote south of Saint Louis. As a small token gift, Wadström thought to present Buurba Sin with a few polished metallic sleeve-buttons, manufactured in Birmingham, and used as fasteners and decoration on waist coats, coats, breeches, dresses and shirts. However, Wadström’s gift led to an unexpected demonstration of power by the king:

On my shewing him for what purpose they were intended, he appeared much mortified that his shirt had no button-holes; but observing that that of a mulatto from Gorée was furnished with them … [the king] insisted
on exchanging shirts with him, in our presence; a demand with which the man was forced to comply. Transported with his new ornaments, the king held up his hands to display them to the people.  

**Islamic reform in West Africa during the age of Atlantic revolutions**

Throughout the nineteenth century, Islam expanded in the interior at the same time as French colonial power and cultural influence expanded from its bases on the Atlantic coast, creating a dynamic between the coast and interior that had profound implications for the history of consumption and fashion. A defining event of the last quarter of the eighteenth century in Senegal was the rise of an Islamic state in the Futa Tooro, which transformed dynamics across the Sahel region supplying food and commercial goods to Saint Louis. The state had emerged from a reformist movement responding to a growing series of conflicts over the capture and sale of enslaved Muslims to Christians at Saint Louis and the lack of resolve of an earlier regime of rulers to prevent it. It represented the culmination of tensions building for years along the 600-mile long Senegal River valley between numerous parties including the Trarza Moors, Wolof rulers in Waalo and Cayor and especially with the French company based on the coastal island of Saint Louis.

In the 1780s, Almamy Abdul Qader Kan, ruler of the Futa Tooro, imposed a ban of all slave trading with Saint Louis – blocking the passage of river and caravan traffic crossing his lands. Further, he escalated his conflict with Saint Louis by banishing slave raiding in his territory and attracting thousands of peasants to resettle there with a promise of lands to farm and protection from capture. French and Eurafrican merchants at Saint Louis were alarmed by these moves and abolitionist observers in Britain, like Thomas Clarkson, cited them as evidence in support of ending the slave trade. However, as a strategic response to the Atlantic and global markets, Kan’s embargo of trade with Saint Louis did not fit neatly with the discourses of either French slavers or British abolitionists. Kan’s outrage at the enslavement of Muslims did not speak to the enslavement of non-Muslims, who could be legally enslaved. Nor was his conflict with the French a rejection of commerce with Europeans, but an insistence that it should only occur within certain parameters. The emergence of the reformist state of Futa Tooro was part of a longer trajectory of Islamic reform movements that stretched across West Africa, which included the birth of the Sokoto Caliphate in northern Nigeria (1804) and broadly made an impact on ethnic and religious affiliation as well as political relations between Muslim and non-Muslim populations across the Sahel. Although these movements impacted millions of people, they are not usually considered in the context of the ‘age of revolutions’ transforming Europe and the Americas of the same period. Recent work by Africanist historians has argued for a reconsideration of this general oversight, as neglecting
to attend to this African Muslim response to the expanding Atlantic economy dominated by Europe misses a key factor shaping later periods and contemporary global relations.

In responding to a growing European influence on the coast, Kan’s aim was not to reject overseas commerce but to control it by harnessing it to a project of Islamic reform, building mosques, establishing Qur’anic schools and promoting agriculture and certain forms of industry. Kan’s worldview and social agenda were shaped by his lineage and scholarly background, which connected him to some of the most important scholars and Muslim holy places in western Africa. The physical itineraries of scholars like Kan – which included temporary stays at places in contemporary Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Guinea and several other countries – give a sense of the vast distances connected by networks of Qur’anic teachers, students and their ideas. The itineraries of these scholars overlapped with those of Muslim merchants who settled in diverse ethnic communities across the region who also participated in long-distance caravans connecting major centres. This pattern helps to explain why European merchants and travellers through the region were often guided by African Muslims who shaped their understanding of the region’s social and economic order (Figure 6.7). Both merchants and scholars were purveyors of particular forms of dress – with styles covering more of the body with cloth made of plant fibres rather than of animal skin or by-products – and must be considered for their influence on shaping regional taste and fashions.

Seeking to expand territory in 1796, Almamy Kan sent a white cloth to the Damel of Cayor, Amari Ngoone Ndeela, demanding that he shave his head and wear the turban to symbolize submission to the new state and that he cease his personal consumption of trade liquor, imported French ‘eau de vie’.

Cayar traded in slaves with the French and habitants of Saint Louis in exchange for horses and Spanish piasters that were refashioned into bracelets and other jewellery. Possessing a large cavalry, the Damel and his officials were known to appear in public on horseback and magnificently dressed in garments of local manufacture whose ample sleeves and proportions, along with silver adornments and feathers incorporated into their headwear, signalled their wealth and power.

On receiving the Almamy Kan’s demands for submission to his sovereignty, the Damel refused, setting off a bitter military struggle in which the Almamy’s fighters were famously routed at the town of Bunguye. Hundreds were reportedly killed, sold into slavery through Saint Louis or scattered in defeat, while the Almamy himself was taken captive. The victorious Damel held the defeated Almamy prisoner for three months before allowing him to return to the Futa Tooro, according to Mungo Park who heard an account of the events several months later from local jeliw or praise singers who proclaimed the Damel’s actions near the Baﬁng river in the foothills of the Futa Jallon.

Despite this setback, Almamy Kan recouped his forces and, the following year, his army launched eastward, intervening on one side of a succession dispute in Bundu. This victory was short-lived, however, as respect for the state’s authority
had begun to fade and internal dissension increased. A strategic alliance between Kan’s enemies led to his death during a battle in Bundu in 1806, opening the way once again for increased European commercial presence throughout the Senegal River valley. Nevertheless, his reformist rule left an enduring mark on the social relations in the region. It set the tone for another Islamic reform movement Umar Tal, resisting the expansion of a colonial regime at Saint Louis in the 1850s. The expansion and ‘reform’ of Islam across the western Sahel and the Senegal River valley shaped the context and the rationale for the region’s engagement with global commerce. The turn of the nineteenth century was a pivotal period of transformation in a centuries-long process that also challenged the dynamic of power relations between interior polities, such as at Futa Tooro and Gajaaga and the coast.

Conclusion

In Saint Louis, African-born habitants protected their access to foreign sources of wealth and imported commodities by embracing French cultural
norms and civil code, which they used to acquire benefits from the French state for themselves and their children. Yet for many, this did not necessarily imply a rejection of alliances with Muslim or other Africans, including sharing in religious celebrations or observances. As merchants, they helped to shape a preference for particular goods such as Indian cottons along lines that were specific to African tastes, such as the preference for indigo cottons.

The cultural ecumene of early nineteenth-century Saint Louis was cosmopolitan in its embrace of overseas and regional influences, but in ways that may have confounded the ideological expectations of their contemporaries both in Paris and in the Futa Tooro. Their festive folgar parties were occasions for luxurious displays of wealth through fashion, adornments such as gold jewellery and beads and grooming. At these folgar events, which lasted into the early hours of the morning, people drank alcohol, danced to drumming and there was some socializing between people of different backgrounds and social rank. These were spaces where fashion and material culture articulated the negotiation of social status between individuals and groups resident in Saint Louis.

Such a scene suggests, in stark terms, the imbrication of fashion with power in late eighteenth-century Senegal and how this was attached to transregional or ‘global’ commerce. The appropriation of foreign textiles, clothing and accessories such as Indian indigo cottons, printed French indiennes or brass buttons served to express forms of interpersonal or group distinction and sometimes also to project authority. In some places, when permissible by the ruling elite, the appropriation of particular items was accompanied by the popularization of these items among the limited number of people who could access them. This process was also driven by local conditions and consumer tastes, which shaped market trends generally with their preference for cotton cloths with loom patterns or with bright, colourfast dyes that were suitable for West African climate conditions and comparable to local varieties of cotton cloths. The circulation of these goods throughout the region was highly uneven, with different segments of the Senegambian public accessing them only through proximity to certain elite actors or centres of power and wealth. Their adoption as clothing, whether in combination with local textiles and accessories or not, articulates the history of fashion in Senegal at the dawn of an era understood largely as a prelude to a colonial project associated with delivering civilization and modernity. Into the nineteenth century, dress mediated the countervailing forces of an expanding colonial power from the coast, and the expanding influence of Islam from the Sahelian interior – a process informed by a longer tradition of tolerance for cultural pluralism in the region. It is an embodied history of social and economic relations, which reveals pre-modern forms of cosmopolitanism in West Africa linked to the global circulation of people, goods and ideas.
Notes


2 Lamiral, *L’Afrique et Le Peuple Affriquain*, 120.


4 Antoine Edme Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de La Nigritie* (Amsterdam and Paris: Chez Maradan, 1789), 122–123.


7 Searing, *West African Slavery*.


15 Semley, *To Be Free and French*, 93.


17 Saugnier and Bessire, *Relations de Plusieurs Voyages à La Côte d’Afrique, à Maroc, Au Sénégal, à Gorée, à Galam*.


29 Non-cote, ‘Uniformes Des Corps Des Laptots de Goree’, 1765, ANOM.


34 ‘Arnold Family Business Papers; Documents for the Swallow’, 22 August 1776.


40 Carl Bernhard Wadström, *Observations on the Slave Trade: And a Description of Some Part of the Coast of Guinea, During a Voyage, Made in 1787, and 1788, in Company with Doctor A. Sparman and Captain Arehenius*, by C. B. Wadstrom, Chief Director of the Royal Assay and Refining Office; Member of the Royal Chamber of Commerce, and of the Royal Patriotic Society, for Improving Agriculture, Manufactures, and Commerce in Sweden (London: printed and sold by James Phillips, George-Yard, Lombard-Street, 1789), 21.

41 Searing, *West African Slavery*.

42 Searing, *West African Slavery*.
