CHAPTER EIGHT

GOVERNOR, SAVANT, ADOPTED SON: ST LOUIS, 1919–1927

From the Native Point of View

In December 1918, Gaden brought Gouraud up to date with the latest developments in Mauritania. The Moors in general, Gaden reported, seemed loyal to the French and an emirate in Tagant had been established where an Emir, named Abdur Rahman, loyal to the colonial cause had been installed. The result was complete security and an end to brigandage in the area, he stated (JHG-HJEG, 19.12.18). Shaykh Sidiyya and his family had fallen on hard times since the religious leader had not felt it proper to conduct a customary tour of the territory to see his disciples and followers to collect their offerings (ziarra) during the war. The Shaykh considered that this would have been an abuse of his talibes; but by the end of 1918, his son and nephew were forced to start on a tour of collection in the country to relieve the family’s predicament. Gaden reported too that Saad Buh was dead and his sons remained united, committed to their late father’s policy of cooperation with the colonialists; later many of them came to address Gaden as ‘father’ and treated him as a figure of authority (JHG-HJEG, 20.7.19).

The only blemish on this picture was the position of the Emir of Adrar, Sidi Ahmed Ould Ahmed Ould Aida, the man Gouraud had set up in office after his conquest of the region. The Emir was brought to St Louis in the summer of 1918, since his ‘presence was becoming dangerous for our [French] authority’, as the official dispatch from the Governor General’s office in Dakar explained to the Minister of Colonies. In fact, the Emir was creating problems for the French in Adrar and among the ‘grand nomads’ of the north. The Emir’s links with the faction of the late Ma el Ain in was a concern to the French, and El Hiba’s forces were gaining strength and influence in the region. In addition, one specific group of Moors had suffered from armed raids, assassinations and brigandage, and they in turn had sought the assistance of factions not yet submitted to the French. These factions could have joined forces to move against the Emir and the colonialists. Furthermore, Gaden was unhappy with the calibre of officers he

1 See 9 G 35, ANS for the file on the Emir’s presence in St Louis.
had under his command, and the situation in Adrar was a testament to their poor grasp of political relations. Gaden argued that to arrest and deport the Emir would have made ‘an unfavourable impression from the native point of view’, and so the *commissaire* summoned Sidi Ahmed to St Louis to defend himself against the accusations made by the oppressed group of Moors.² This was a clever piece of diplomacy by Gaden, who needed to have the Emir removed from Adrar as soon as possible and at the same time give the impression to local Moors that the Emir had important business to discuss with the *commissaire* in his office in St Louis. By this ploy, Gaden saved faced for the Emir and stopped him turning dissident and making common cause with El Hiba’s men. The Emir was accompanied by a group of chiefs, but they were soon on their way back north to return for the date harvest. In effect, the Emir was now detained at Gaden’s pleasure, the danger was averted and no untoward political incident had occurred. Not contained in the official documentation on this incident were Gaden’s private thoughts about Commandant Modat in Atar, who had been operating as a quasi-prime minister to the Emir and had allowed the impoverishment of one group of Adrar Moors, who were the source of the complaint.

Gaden also devised another scheme to deal with groups of Moors still resistant to French annexation of their territories. He tried to keep in contact with such groups so as to maintain his sources of intelligence and also to keep open the doors to negotiation. He had been working with the Ouled Khalil faction, trying to persuade them to come on board the colonial ship, but the task had not been easy. So Gaden decided to create a new category of native persons for dealing with such groups. Rather than their being considered simply as either ‘dissidents’ or ‘notables’, he referred to factions like these as ‘foreigner friends’ (*étrangers amis*) who were treated as being neither for nor against the French cause, but who could be brought within the colonial sphere of influence. These groups were at liberty to conduct their seasonal migrations and movements without interference and would pay only a light tax in camels to the authorities. Some had already taken up this option, and others appeared to be interested in this intermediate category of affiliation.³

While Gaden brought changes to the landscape of Mauritanian politics in the latter half of 1918, the French government was about to reorganise the civil territory. Gaden got wind from Delafosse at the end of 1918 that the

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² See Gaden’s letter dated 7th July 1918 to the Governor General, 9 G 35, ANS.