INTRODUCTION

French presence on the western coast of Africa and commercial and military collaboration with the indigenous populations of Senegal date back to the seventeenth century. The native populations of the port-city of Saint Louis, colonial capital of Senegal founded in 1659, historically supported and benefited from French commercial activities in West Africa. During the transitional period leading to the implant of colonialism, the mainly Muslim Saint Louis elites played a major role in strengthening French power in the African hinterland. With the imposition of French territorial control on coastal areas, in return for their services a series of privileges were recognised to the community of African interpreters, brokers (traitants) and military collaborators, including modern education, the right to be judged by Islamic courts, the institutionalization of military collaboration through the creation of an African regiment, and reserved jobs in the colonial administration.

Trying to export metropolitan cultural and political institutions into Black Africa, France accorded important privileges to urban Senegal, recognizing a particular political and legal status for the African natives (originaires) of the Four Communes of Senegal: Saint Louis, Gorée, Rufisque and Dakar.1 The liberty enjoyed by the group of the originaires allowed constant interrelations and cultural exchanges with the metropolis and with the Communes’ shifting hinterlands. With a

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multi-level framework of trading partnerships, patron-client relationships, political allegiances, affiliations to social or religious associations, age groups, etc., the inhabitants of the Communes witnessed extensive migrations and diasporic movements, and a growing flow of material and symbolic goods in and out of Africa.

At the crossroad between European, African and Muslim institutions and values, the originaires could reconcile different political and constitutional models, contributing to new patterns of social organization within western Africa. Natural intermediaries between the colonial power and the societies of West Africa, the inhabitants of the Communes of Senegal assimilated the French language, values and ideas, becoming well acquainted with the Republican model that France proposed to the whole world. Creating social arrangements that shaped local and regional spaces, they contributed to the development of original “paths of accommodation”\(^2\) with the colonial authority. For the freedom they enjoyed, the originaires played a critical role in the spread of a tolerant Islam, demonstrating the compatibility of intelligent Muslim practice, economic success and European overrule.

Even if geographically limited, the experience of the Communes had profound impacts on regions administratively and politically united under French colonial rule. The Communes were ports, administrative and political centres, and nodes of economic and cultural exchange. As places where “social power is exercised by controlling labour, social reproduction, and meaning” they can be described as “borderless foci of social action”.\(^3\) Nodes imply contestation and negotiation in the production of social spaces, and the peoples and institutions that characterise the history of the Communes of Senegal showed a degree of autonomy defying the totalising projects of the colonial authority.

Crucial nodes in French West Africa, the Communes were profoundly marked by the experience of the two world wars and by the way the experience of war re-shaped inter-African and Franco-African relationships. In exchange of their participation to the First World War
