CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SEVEN YEARS’ WAR IN WEST AFRICA: THE END OF COMPANY RULE AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE HABITANTS

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The Seven Years’ War brought an end to a long period of peaceful co-existence between French and English merchants trading in Senegambia. France went on the offensive in 1756, conquering and occupying Minorca and striking at British trade in West Africa, the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. When Great Britain struck back at France’s colonial empire after 1756, British attacks on colonial outposts threatened to become permanent seizures of territory, rather than to serve as negotiating chips at an eventual peace. In 1758 Great Britain undertook the conquest of the French possessions of Saint-Louis and Gorée, ports long controlled by the French East India Company. The first direct conflict between Great Britain and France over possessions in West Africa set the stage for future conflicts over the next fifty years. After 1758, when the tides of war moved decisively in favor of the British, French diplomacy shifted to acquiescence in the loss of Canada combined with a vigorous defense of French interests in North Atlantic fisheries, the Caribbean, and trading rights in West Africa and in India.¹

When historians have considered this aspect of the Seven Years’ War they have focused on colonial rivalries and on the economic value (or not) of Senegambia’s export trade in slaves and gum. This chapter argues that the true prize of the conflict was the “colony” of Saint-Louis, which consisted of an African urban population of three thousand, the so-called habitants (free persons of property), and their slaves. Gorée was, by contrast, merely a naval station with a very small population. When Great Britain retained Saint-Louis at the peace and gave up Gorée, it got the better part of the bargain, but fostered desires for revenge on the part of the French, who recaptured Saint-Louis in 1779.

¹ For the best overall account see Jonathan R. Dull, The French Navy and the Seven Years’ War (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).
The focus on Saint-Louis was not misplaced, but it was not based simply on the gum trade, as many historians have argued, most notably Prosper Cultru, André Delcourt and Philip Curtin. This argument is based on the idea that the gum trade (whatever its absolute value) was unique to the strip of coast between Cap Blanc (in Mauritania) and Saint-Louis du Sénégal, the premier settlement of the French Company of the Indies in West Africa. Without disputing the importance of the gum trade, I argue that it was the maritime labor system that developed on the Senegal River that made this “colony” valuable. Under the French Company the Senegal River became a nursery of “slave sailors” that lowered the Company’s operating costs and spared the lives of European sailors in Senegambia. The Company exported this labor system to Louisiana and the Ile de France (Mauritius) by exporting skilled slave sailors and slaves to train, knowing that the Senegal settlement could renew its own maritime labor force locally. This was a real asset in an era when the scarcity of sailors and ships put constraints on French naval and colonial power.

Historians and the Colonial Dimensions of the Seven Years’ War

The irruption of warfare in Senegambia raises a number of questions. One school of thought sees the Seven Years’ War emerging from colonial conflicts in North America and then engulfing Europe and the entire French and British empires. In this scenario, war in Senegambia simply reflected the escalation of the conflict between Great Britain and France. Unlike other frontiers between the French and British empires, Senegambia was peaceful during most of the wars of the eighteenth century. French merchants on the Senegal River made deals with British merchants in the 1740s to settle tension and avoid war.

The main source of tension in Senegambia was the privileged access of the French to supplies of Gum Arabic, a vital raw material for the textile industry. The French claimed a monopoly on the entire region where gum exports were important. In fact the British frequently carried on a vigorous contra-band trade by sending out naval escorts for convoys of merchant vessels. The situation was more comparable to that in the Indian Ocean than to North America. In the Indian Ocean French and British merchants also tried to maintain their neutrality in periods of war. The French and British Companies had fought in India during the war of the Austrian succession and tensions remained after 1748. But both France and Great