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# Geohistory of the Senegal River Bar in Atlantic Time

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**Abstract:** The problem of the bar in relation to the accessibility of Saint-Louis of Senegal does not date from today. Its acuteness at the apogee of the Atlantic trade is linked to the river-sea axis allowing the contact between the colonial establishment and its European metropolis, condition sine qua non of the trade with the Senegambian states. The mastery of the crossing of the bar, reputedly perilous, gave birth to the pilotage service, occupied by the riverside populations of Saint-Louis. The geohistorical approach, based on a sectoral analysis, will allow us to study the multiple dynamics, born of the perverse effect of the difficulties of the bar at the mouth of the river, in a large space, North Senegambia, at the time of the Atlantic trade. This study aims to clear the ground on an almost unknown area of Senegambian historiography. It is true that works in geography and history deal respectively with all natural phenomena and historical facts. But these works were carried out without a direct connection between these two disciplines of the social sciences. The desire to broaden the perspective of the analysis of geographical phenomena and historical events has led us to adopt a geohistorical approach that Segambian historiography seems to neglect.

**Keywords:** Barre, Saint-Louis, Atlantic Slave Trade, Senegambian States, Senegal River

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, floods, advance of the sea, shipwrecks, mortalities, etc., characterize the existential difficulties of the department of Saint-Louis which feed the press. These phenomena, directly or indirectly related to the bar at the mouth of the river, have experienced uncontrolled development since the opening of the breach in October 2003 [24]. The river floods of the city, classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000, are temporarily under control; but the tidal range and its result, the crescendo disappearance of the Gandiole and the Pointe de Barbarie constitute the other side of the new mouth. However, it seems that the question of the space-society relationship arose with acuity, in the absence of current technical and scientific progress, in this same area at the height of the Atlantic slave trade (18th – 19th centuries) and gave rise to relevant answers.

In other words, most of the natural difficulties observed today arose in this space during the Atlantic era, a period during which the fluviomaritime axis was the only road joining Saint-Louis to the rest of the world. The accessibility of the main French establishment in West Africa, whose

economic vitality is explained by the permanent communication with Europe, America and the interior of the African continent, via the mouth deemed dangerous because of the barre, turned out to be an interesting topic.

This study is part of the temporality of the Atlantic slave trade and particularly in the 18th and early 19th centuries. This is the height of the Atlantic trade which made Saint-Louis du Senegal the main French establishment in West Africa. The main products sought by Europeans in general and the French in particular were captives and gum. The desire to monopolize traffic in this area fueled the Franco-English conflict around the occupation of Saint-Louis du Senegal in particular [17].

The problem consists in explaining the fact that an amphibious space, difficult to access because of a bar, played a very important role in the Atlantic traffic of the XVIII-XIX centuries, to the point of becoming the main West African establishment and to arouse Franco-English covetousness.

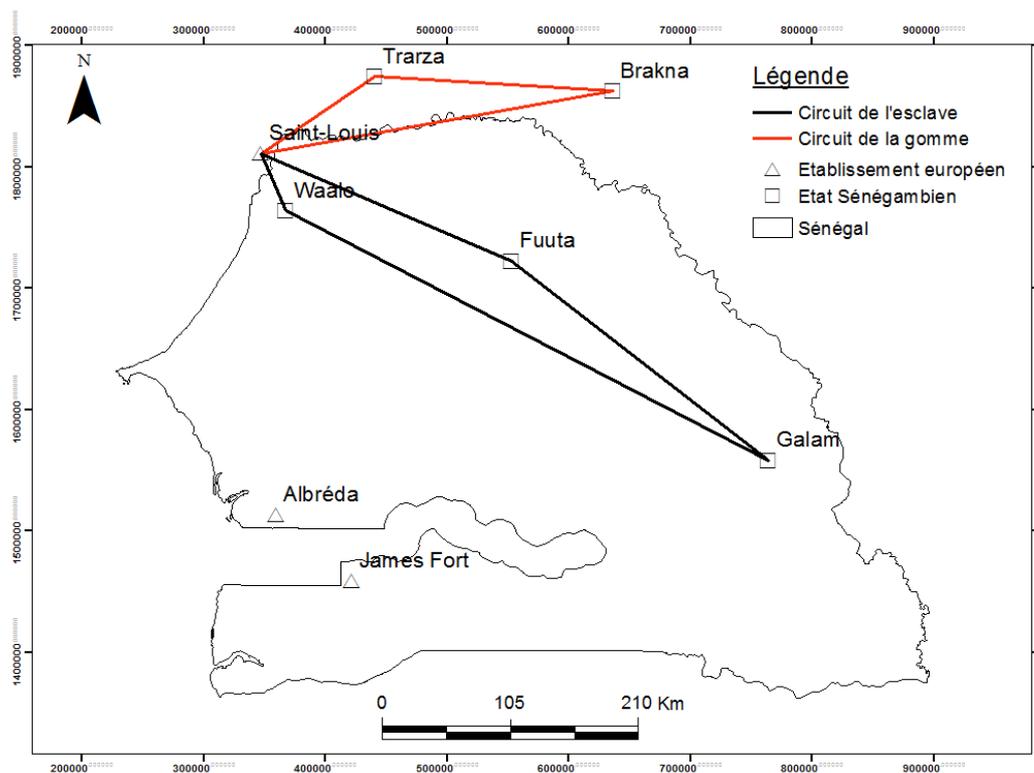
Considered the father of geohistory, Braudel defined it as the relationship between man and nature or "the study of an action and a reaction mixed, confused, endlessly repeated, in the reality of each day" [14]. The insertion of time in geographical issues is done according to two approaches,

namely that which favors the long term and that which relates to a sectoral analysis. This reflection will not be done by putting in order a narrative of the dynamics of space over the long term; although comparatively contemporary references are appropriate. This would amount to talking about the geological formation of this space. It is a question of carrying out a sectoral analysis by specifying the relations between societies of the past and their territory [20]. The approach adopted consists in looking at the plural dynamics of a space, born of the meeting of different societies in the time of the Atlantic through the magnifying glass of a place: mouth (bar).

To carry out this study, it is first important to describe both the place and the space in relation to the political and economic forces present. Basically, it is about linking spatial and temporal contexts to explain political, economic and social dynamics. Finally, it will be a question of analyzing the obstacles of the bar in times of peace on the one hand and their perverse effect ers in time of war on the other hand.

## 2. A Place in Space with the Dynamics of the Atlantic

The analysis focuses on a strategic place, the bar, integrating a large space with the dynamics of the Atlantic [25]. The space is constitutive of the European establishment of Saint-Louis of Senegal and the States Senegambians watered by the Senegal River. They are mainly the following state sovereignties: Cayor, Waalo, Fuuta, Trarza, Brakna and Galam [1, 7]. The political cartography of this relatively vast space makes the river the engine of social, political and economic dynamics, born of the meeting of different historical trajectories. Controlling the helm was tantamount to taking possession of the river-sea route to Sudan, linking the interior of West Africa to the Atlantic trading economy. Continental states are thus attached to the Atlantic Ocean. The sinuosity of the Senegal River crossing the territory of sovereign states such as Waalo, Fuuta, Brakna and Galam, made possible the establishment of politico-economic relations between Europeans and Africans [6].



O. GAYE, 2020

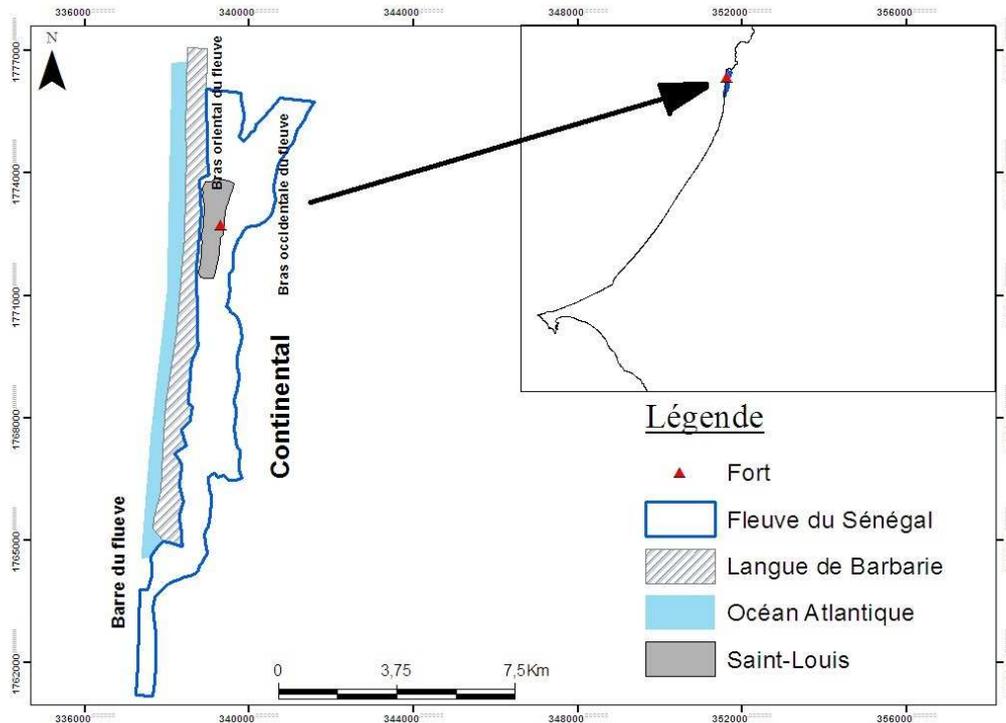
*Figure 1. Representations of state powers in Senegambia.*

Knowledge of the description of the bar is as old as the French presence in Senegambia. Descriptions and definitions of the phenomenon are similar, making an evolutionary analysis over time unnecessary. The bar is a moving dike of sand and mud, formed at the mouth of the river, changing its distance by 3 to 6 leagues from Saint-Louis du Senegal [5]. The Senegal River, in its course and its overflows from July to November, drains sand and silt,

continuously pushed back by the sea [20]. Lack of depth, muddy and sandy bottom constitute the main characteristics of the bar, [20]. Size and speed of the river in relation to the rainy season, create two openings, called passes [15]. The large pass, wider, 7 to 10 feet deep, with large and short waves breaking violently, allows ships of 7 to 8 feet draft to cross. The small passage of the bar, narrow, shallower, can only be crossed by a pirogue [11]. The variation in the

location of the bar passes has always made it necessary to probe before crossing. The study of the climate/bar ratio has defined two distinct and complementary periods, namely: safe, from January to August and dangerous, from

September to December [20]. According to studies made on the estuary of the Senegal River at the time by informed observers, the best months to cross the bar are April, May, June and July [15].



O. GAYE, 2020

Figure 2. The Senegal River estuary.



Source: OMVS, 2019

Figure 3. Senegal River.

This fluctuating natural phenomenon is located in a place (mouth) integrating a large political and economic space. The immediate physical environment of the bar is made up of several islands or islets. Winter floods, overflowing of the river, abundance of mosquitoes, breaking of the bar and its result of tidal waves, constituted the fundamental characteristics of this zone. It is a question of trying to understand how this amphibious space integrating the bar experienced economic dynamics in the time of the Atlantic. To do this, it is important to establish the relationship between space and economy.

Economics is often defined as: "knowledge of the phenomena concerning the production, distribution and consumption of wealth, material goods in human society" [25]. A human society supposes the occupation of a territory. The environment intervenes in the functioning of each phenomenon taken apart in the common whole. The geo-historical approach adopted here makes it possible to insist on the first two phenomena making it possible to define the economy.

First, it is a matter of establishing the space-production relationship. The physical characteristics of a territory determine its type of exploitation and production in relation to the economic potential that is specific to it. As Braudel notes, "space commands the economy and the social" [19]. His remarks were part of an analysis of the dialectical relationship between space, economy and society, where each element influences the others. On the time scale of the study, the main production activities in this area are agriculture, fishing and livestock. A market production activity developed at the opening of the Atlantic slave trade. They involved the trade in products such as captives, gum, gold, ivory, etc., sought after by Europeans, against guineas, firearms, brandy, etc., prized by Africans. Violence and insecurity, linked to the development of wars, kidnappings and raids in relation to the slavery mode of production, pushed back the old production activities of basic necessities in Senegambia such as millet [4].

Anachronistically, the excessive tertiarization of the economy in this space, with the explosion of market activity and the gradual abandonment of activities for the exploitation of direct consumer products, began in the 18th century. The Senegambians favored trade with Europeans to the detriment of other economic activities. A specialization of a large part of the population in trades and the development of para-commercial activities have emerged. The extroversion of production in northern Senegambia, no longer responding to the concerns of local societies but satisfying the demand of the Atlantic market, was noted [17]. All activity entered directly or indirectly into the satisfaction of the demand for Atlantic traffic. States having an open ocean or maintaining trading relations with the Europeans established in Gorée or Saint-Louis in Senegal, had their domestic slaves employed by trading companies as *laptots* [8]. The abandonment of agriculture in particular by the Senegambians of the north, reported by European travelers in the lead of Mollien, no

doubt making the myth of the laziness of the "Blacks" prosper in the eyes of the "Whites", is not unrelated to this tertiarization of the economy with Atlantic demand, resulting in the explosion of commercial service [19].

The exodus from the old trades of food production to those of merchants is noted. This is explained beyond the insecurity of space, linked to the slave mode of production on an intra- or inter-state scale, by the seasonal nature of agricultural production [19]. The same was true for the cyclical bad weather characteristic of droughts, epizootics and very frequent locust invasions in Senegambia. Natural disasters, often described in travel chronicles, were accompanied by massive population movements to European settlements, Saint-Louis in the lead. Some families sometimes preferred to sell their members to slave traders for the survival of others [4]. Analyzing the decline of the "mestizos" in Saint-Louis from an economic point of view, Boilat points out their renunciation of all professional activity with the exception of commerce [5].

Then, the space-distribution relationship is established through circuits and means of transport. In relation to commercial circuits, studies on the Atlantic slave trade have sufficiently addressed them [2, 10, 13, 14, 16, 21, 22]. It should be remembered that beyond the land or long-distance trade routes of the Dioula, the main route linking Europe and Africa through Senegal is river-maritime. In this circuit, the means of transport par excellence is the ship. The deep-draught slavers, unable to enter the river, passed the baton to the helm canoes or their small boats, capable of plying the river under the control of the pilots [8, 15, 18]. All activities are directly or indirectly conditioned by river-sea transport. Travel was by sea and river, hence the representation of Saint-Louis as "a ship at mooring" [23]. In this economic context, the bar occupies a strategic place. Controlling this place was equivalent to taking possession of Saint-Louis and having a stranglehold on Atlantic traffic in northern Senegambia, following the destruction of the European trading posts of Arguin and Portendick [3, 15]. The bar is the entry and exit door on the river-maritime axis of Saint-Louis leading to Sudan. Supplies, relief of troops, correspondence from Saint-Louis with both the European metropolis and its annex counters on the Senegal River, passed through the bar [17]. Nautical knowledge of the mouth as well as control of the main axis became a *sine qua non* for the occupants of the island.

### **2.1. Obstacles of the Bar in Peace Time**

The analysis in peacetime of the bar, a place in space with the dynamics of the Atlantic, focuses on its obstacles. It is done in relation to the double dependence of Saint-Louis vis-à-vis the European metropolis and the African hinterland with plural sovereignty. The *su report* bordering the establishment to the metropolis is at the same time economic, political and military; that vis-à-vis the African hinterland is commercial. This *de facto* dependence informed agreements on the terms fixed by politico-economic treaties, signed

between the colonial establishment and the Senegambian states.

The interdependence of the double dependence of Saint-Louis was such that a crisis or breakdown in communication vis-à-vis one or the other caused difficulties in the overall functioning of the establishment. However, the Senegambians' need for trafficking, linked to the appetite provoked by European products in these societies and the plurality of actors in the hinterland, made the first dependency dependent on the second. In other words, if contact with Europe is maintained, it was possible to trade with the Senegambian state or states in the context of Euro-African conflicts manifested by the cancellation of commercial activities.

Thus, the obstacles of the bar are of more concern. They put a strain on the accessibility of Saint-Louis in Senegal and had a negative impact on Atlantic traffic. An obligatory passage, the bar made communication between the metropolis and its main establishment, the West African liaison station for Atlantic trade, impossible. The permanent supply of Senegal with European products to feed the traffic with the Senegambians was necessary. Supplies for the Atlantic slave trade, relief of civilian and military personnel, administrative correspondence between Saint-Louis and the metropolis, passed through the bar, reputed to be dangerous for causing shipwrecks of all categories. Cases of total or partial loss of supply products particularly fuel travel relationships from the 17th to the 19th century [17]. However, the difficulty of communication between Saint-Louis and the metropolis made the establishment vulnerable to threats of attack. In the Franco-English rivalry for the occupation of Saint-Louis in particular, the strategy of the attackers consisted in reinforcing this natural blockade by an embargo. The embargo, characteristic of the maritime blockade of Saint-Louis du Senegal, leads to a permanent breakdown in communication. The main axis leading to the establishment of Senegal was thus closed. This strategy in peacetime, and as a prelude to an attack, causing food and commercial crises, has more than once made the military defense of the establishment of Senegal unsustainable [17]. The capitulation of Saint-Louis, defended by the French, for example in 1809 for the benefit of the English, is partly explained by the long blockade of the British fleet [21].

The Colony of Senegal and Dependencies is a discontinuous set of territories, linked by the river. They were the coptoirs of Podor, Galam and Albréda and the administrative center of Saint-Louis. Making the latter the administrative center was equivalent to ensuring its permanent link with the other peripheral territorial pockets, forming together the colony of Senegal and dependencies in the 18th century. If the trading posts on the Senegal River such as Podor and Galam are indirectly linked to the accessibility or not of the bar; those of Albréda and Gorée (in the event of joint possession with Saint-Louis) are dependent on the passes of the mouth. The occupation of Saint-Louis subsequently and exclusively conferred control of the trading posts of Podor and Galam on the river.

The main blocking aspect of the bar that caught the attention of the administration is the sinking and its result, the loss of human life and the destruction of trade goods. The pilotage service, consisting among other things of preventing shipwrecks and, where necessary, rescuing people and property, has considerably reduced the mortality of people on the helm. This anthropogenic action to deal with the difficulties associated with the helm, with the use of helm pilots for the transport and transshipment of people and goods respectively, was reported very early on [12]. The function of the pilot is important for the establishment of Saint-Louis to the point of becoming a public service in the same way as the jobs of language teachers and town criers in the administration. Sounding, beaconing by buoys, transport of the crew and transshipment of goods, rescue and piloting of ships entering and leaving the river, together constituted the piloting service which was going to be perfected. The administrative function of "Jean Barre", of the "bar pilot", of the "helm laptots" feeds travel relations. One of his first acquaintances comes from Jannequin de Rochefort who designates Jean Barre, "master of the river", [12]. The author does not say whether the latter helped or not the crew of Captain Lambert, director of the Rouen and Dieppe Company, to cross the bar. He also claims that he allowed them to settle in his village, Bieurt. De La Courbe gave full descriptions of the helm and pilotage service, which were largely taken up by his successors. The smugglers or pilots and laptots had at their disposal two boats parked in front of the bar. When a shallow-draft ship was at the helm, a major pilot and his crew, made up of laptots, took control of the said boat. The mission ended only when the ship arrived at the port of Saint-Louis [15]. The major pilot and his crew returned to their posts by the canoe having followed the said vessel, picking up and saving respectively, if necessary, objects and people who had fallen into the water. The cockpit, 2 leagues from Gandiole, also housed the helm pilot's house and the village of laptots under his direction [5]. Boilat reports the establishment of a communication system in the 19th century between Saint-Louis and la barre, through 5 semaphores spread out over the Pointe de Barbarie [5]. This system reveals the military function of the pilotage service. Its role was thus to inform, by the permanent surveillance of the coast, Saint-Louis on the threats of attack.

## ***2.2. Perverse Effect of Wartime Bar Obstacles***

The question structuring this sub-part of the reflection is the following. Did the military factor in the context of conflicting inter-European rivalries take precedence over logistical considerations (transport - transshipment - port activities, in general) on the choice of site? In other words, see if the inter-European conflict around the occupation of Saint-Louis in particular explains the settlement on a site which in peacetime caused difficulties threatening the European presence in this part of Africa. Trade and port activities pushed the French to settle in Africa [23]. These factors must have suggested a territory straddling the ocean and the continent, easily accessible for the needs of port

activities linked to the slave trade.

It is known that from Saint-Louis you can see the ocean, but the island did not meet the criteria. According to the logistical transport of the time, Saint-Louis was difficult to access because less of the point of barbarism than of the bar. Ships cannot land on this elongated strip of sand. The use of landing craft on the Pointe de Barbarie would consist only of bringing people and goods down to the beach. It was then necessary to tranship goods and make the men walk to the east bank of the river to finally embark them in other canoes bound for the port of Saint-Louis. Thus, disembarkation crossing the Pointe de Barbarie was not a profitable option because of the ancillary services of transport and portage of goods that would necessarily result. The other fluvio-maritime access route is certainly dangerous but more economical if the crossing of the bar is successful. The main concern of the Saint-Louis administration has always been to reduce the danger coefficient of the bar. All the governments of Saint-Louis, before and after Faidherbe, have sought solutions to this existential difficulty of the island in relation to the accessibility of the bar.

The wealth creation activity of European states, trade, aroused their desire for the African coast for the needs of the Atlantic slave trade and to have access to African products. On the scale of the West African coast, rivalries have opposed the Dutch, the Portuguese, the French and the English. In northern Senegambia they were led by England and France, following the Dutch capitulation at Portendick at the beginning of the 18th century, leading to the destruction by the French of the trading posts of present-day Mauritania [15]. This rivalry resulted in a commercial war with a military or militaristic vocation, hence the interest of the martial dimension in the choice of these establishments. We witnessed a militarization of this mercantilist colonization. The year 1763 was a turning point for the French, a fundamental break with the old regime (before this year). The management board of the commercial company is replaced by an administration made up of soldiers. The era of Company Directors is over. We entered that of the Governors [22]. Thus, Saint-Louis knew, following the French reoccupation of 1779, the second phase of its fortification after the construction and the various reconstructions of the fort since its foundation.

The perverse effect of the bar appears in full light, particularly important to make the defense of Senegal natural. The factors that motivated the choice of the French installation in Saint-Louis, beyond and in relation to the bar, had the perverse effect. This perversity is a function of the extent of its contradictory impacts in times of war and peace. In times of peace, many inconveniences are noted, generally linked to the accessibility of the island of Saint-Louis, and subsequently to supplies, trade, mortality, shipwreck, destruction of material and consumer goods or slave trade, in short the economic vitality of the island. In times of war, the question was posed differently. The main disadvantage related to accessibility turned into an advantage. It was thus a question of establishing the geography of the military defense

which made the bar the natural shield of Senegal. Did the natural defense protect Saint-Louis from attacks or not? This question formed the cornerstone of the concerns of the precolonial administrations of Saint-Louis from the 17th to the 19th century in the context of conflicting inter-European rivalries. According to De la Courbe, the answer was yes. Saint-Louis is protected against English threats in particular, because the advantage from the military point of view went to the occupant of the place who was aware of its variations [8]. For Durand, the inconveniences of the bar in times of peace constituted in times of war the security shield of Saint-Louis and its annexed trading posts [15]. Golberry, author of a military strategy to counter the English attacks in the 18th century in Saint-Louis, thinks that the fortification of this natural element of defense, by a fixed battery opposite the mouth and a fleet of two armed ships, would make Saint-Louis of Senegal impregnable [18].

The bar is also at the origin of conflict between Saint-Louis and the neighboring States in general and Cayor in particular. These are conflicts around the looting of wreckage in Gandiole, Cayor province located at the mouth of the Senegal River [9]. The business of looting in the apprehension of the Senegambian States or companies is the right to appropriate both goods and personnel from ships wrecked on the coast or on the river. The rescued crew is released after payment of a ransom by the administrators of Saint-Louis. This organized robbery activity from the point of view of Europeans is a right for Africans. It developed less on the whole coast than on the province of Gandiole sheltering the bar. The resurgence of shipwrecks has made the bar a hotbed of tension in Senegambia where military conflicts were decisive. The particularity of the conflict between Saint-Louis and Cayor compared to that with the other neighboring States, is the exclusivity of the looting of wreckage in Gandiole as a triggering factor.

### 3. Conclusion

Ultimately, it is clear that the bar has played an important role in the history of Senegambia. It was the basis of the choice of the establishment of the French in West Africa in general. Its ability to be able to protect the presence and interests of the French was decisive, especially in the context of conflict around the question of the monopoly of African trade. This economic competition had its counterpart on the military level. These are conflicts to appropriate colonial settlements on the West African coast in general. It was a military action of the colonial establishment effective in times of war; insofar as the bar was a kind of natural defense of the island of Saint-Louis du Senegal in the 18th - early 19th centuries. However, in times of peace the military design of the bar was unsuited to the intrinsic functions of the establishment. The advantages turned into major obstacles in the functioning of the establishment. In this perspective, it was a question of measuring the extent of the difficulties caused by the bar in the supply and trade of Saint-Louis. In fact, trade is the deep source of the foundation of the

establishment of Saint-Louis by the company of Rouen and Dieppe. All traffic necessarily passed through the fluvio-maritime axis joined by the bar to the estuary of the Senegal River. Controlling the helm during the period under review meant having a stranglehold on the main French establishment in West Africa. Indeed, the installation in Saint-Louis gave the European occupiers the power to control the two main circuits of the Atlantic slave trade, namely gum and slaves. The desire to monopolize these products exacerbated the Franco-British rivalry in Senegambia, which led to military conflicts. Thus, Saint-Louis du Senegal experienced three English occupations following as many French capitulations. French women (1693; 1758-1779 and 1809-1817). The impact of the bar in the functioning of the European colonial establishment of Saint-Louis du Senegal was manifested even in its relations with neighboring states, trading partners. The bar was also at the origin of many conflicts between the European colonial establishment and the Senegambian States.

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