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Governing Gorée: France in West Africa Following the Seven Years' War

Andrew G. Skabelund

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Governing Gorée: France in West Africa Following the Seven Years' War

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In 1763, France had just suffered a devastating loss to the British in the Seven Years' War. In almost an instant, France's claims to West Africa shrank to the tiny island of Gorée off the coast of Senegal and a few trading posts on the mainland. This drastic reversal of fortunes forced France to reevaluate its place in the world and rethink its overall imperial objectives and colonial strategies, and in an effort to regroup, the French Empire sent a new governor, Pierre François Guillaume Poncet de la Rivière, on a mission to regain its foothold in West Africa. From this tiny island, France eventually succeeded in overturning its devastating losses and establishing itself as the dominant force in the region over the next two centuries, so deeply ingraining its influence into the core of West Africa that its imperial influence is still felt today.

Despite France's future success, Poncet's tenure as governor was fraught with mismanagement and poor planning. Poncet believed he had the full backing of the Duc de Choiseul, but Poncet's excessive zeal, inability to effectively employ and listen to subordinates, and rash interactions with the British undermined the French presence in the region and ultimately led to his dismissal. Poncet's governorship sheds new light on Choiseul's goals for the Senegambia region and his underestimation of what it took to establish a strong presence.

Keywords: Senegal, Gambia, Gorée, British Empire, French Empire, Poncet de la Rivière, Duc de Choiseul, Seven Years' War, *habitants*, signares, Cayor, Damel, Bar, Salum, Bawol, Armeny de Paradis

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## Introduction

On May 16, 1764, French engineer Armenty de Paradis lay asleep in his small straw hut on the island of Gorée, just off the coast of Senegal. Between ten and eleven o'clock at night, he suddenly awoke to the sound of rocks being thrown at his roof.<sup>1</sup> Afraid the rocks would soon break through or even destroy his hut, Paradis jumped up just in time to see the perpetrator retreat into a hut no more than two steps away. It was Bruno Chatelain, French sergeant of the African Volunteers and personal favorite of Governor Poncet de la Rivière. Paradis yelled at Chatelain for his impudence, and Chatelain stormed out of his hut, furiously demanding, "Who do you have a problem with?" Paradis cried, "With you, unfortunate. Go to my door, and you will see what. The rocks you throw at me today will smash it [my hut] one day." Chatelain replied with a stream of invectives, and Paradis responded that he was going to bring a complaint to Governor Poncet and have him punished.

Paradis dressed hurriedly and started off toward Poncet's house. Along the path, he heard someone running up behind him at full speed. Paradis turned around just in time to see Chatelain bearing down on him with his sword drawn, yelling, "You will not survive! Defend yourself!"<sup>2</sup> Paradis drew his blade, and they commenced battle, the noise of clanking swords filling the night air. Paradis soon gained the upper hand, wounding Chatelain in several places, most grievously in the thigh, and rendering Chatelain defenseless by breaking his sword.

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<sup>1</sup> Paradis to Choiseul (?), May 30, 1764, Archives Nationales d'Outre-mer, Aix-En-Provence, France (hereinafter ANOM), série E 338, 133. All translations by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Paradis to Choiseul (?), May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 133v.

After hearing the noise of the fight, the major of the island, Jacques Doumet de Siblas, and several sergeants came out to see the commotion. Doumet asked for Paradis' sword, which the engineer handed over, along with some broken pieces of Chatelain's sword.<sup>3</sup> Paradis was then escorted to Poncet, where Paradis commenced to tell him of Chatelain's misdeeds. To Paradis' dismay, the governor responded in a laughing and dismissive manner. Paradis protested that Chatelain had tried to kill him and that in defending himself, he had given Chatelain his just reward, but at that moment, a bruised and bloody Chatelain staggered in the door. The sight of him caused Poncet to explode in a fit of rage. "What of blood, of blood, oh unfortunate," he said, turning in anger to Paradis. "Now I see what you are capable of." Paradis objected, but the governor drowned out his voice with a stream of terrible cursing.<sup>4</sup> Paradis pled again for justice, but Poncet, as if possessed, called for the guards to take Paradis to prison.<sup>5</sup>

Being hauled off to jail was neither the beginning nor the end of Paradis' troubles with Poncet, and his experience mirrored that of many who interacted with the governor. Over the course of his governorship, Poncet demoralized and distanced potential loyal subjects, wasting time and energy by playing favorites instead of administering justice. Poncet had been commissioned to strengthen France's presence in West Africa, but his overzealous, rash personality actually weakened France's position. A short while after the Paradis-Chatelain incident, Poncet would be relieved of his position and called back to France. A decade later, he would die in utter penury.<sup>6</sup> Paradis, on the other hand, managed to survive his difficult time under Poncet and was eventually appointed

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<sup>3</sup> Paradis to Choiseul (?), May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 134.

<sup>4</sup> Paradis to Choiseul (?), May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 134v.

<sup>5</sup> Paradis to Choiseul (?), May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 135.

<sup>6</sup> Madame de Vittement, October 3, 1776, ANOM série E 338, 407.

commander of Gorée in 1777, an ironic twist of fate for two French officials on a small island off the coast of Senegal.<sup>7</sup>

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The end of the Seven Years' War in 1763 marked a major turning point for the French Empire. France had just suffered a devastating loss to the British, and almost overnight, France's holdings in West Africa shrank to the small island of Gorée off the coast of Senegal and a few trading posts on the mainland. This dramatic reversal of fortunes forced France's naval minister, Etienne-François de Choiseul, to reevaluate France's diminished place in the world. Determined to reestablish a strong imperial presence, Choiseul appointed Pierre François Guillaume Poncet de la Rivière as governor of Gorée and charged him with the task of putting France in the best position to recapture its former glory. With a tiny island and a few outposts, it would have been hard to imagine the broad influence France would eventually wield in the region, but in time, France succeeded in reversing the balance of power, and over the next two centuries, it became such a dominant force in West Africa that its legacy is still felt today.

Notwithstanding France's future strength in the region, the consolidation of such power progressed little under Poncet's administration. In sending Poncet to Gorée, Choiseul signaled his intention to challenge the British in the region.<sup>8</sup> Choiseul was also departing from the colonial organization that had existed prior to the war. The French trading company, the *Compagnie des Indes*, had previously handled the administrative affairs and trade of the colony, but with the appointment of Poncet, Choiseul was now

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<sup>7</sup> Paradis asks for an advance, July 30, 1777, ANOM, série E 328, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre H. Boule "The French Colonies and the Reform of Their Administration During and Following the Seven Years' War" (PhD diss, University of California, Berkeley 1968), 688.



bringing the administration of Gorée under the Naval Ministry's control.<sup>9</sup> Following the war, Choiseul foresaw a possibility of revolution in Britain's American colonies, and he was determined to capitalize on any opening such an uprising would offer. By strengthening the French colonial presence militarily and economically, Choiseul was certain France would be better positioned to challenge the British in the advent of a North American revolt and retake its lost West Africa territory.<sup>10</sup>

Choiseul chose Poncet to lead this effort because of his "war experience and recognized talent for both attack and defense of fortified positions."<sup>11</sup> Poncet was indeed a talented officer, but Choiseul did not realize that governing West Africa and expanding French power took much more than mere military talent. Poncet's administration of the island was often dictatorial and short-sighted; as his experience with Paradis shows, he alienated many of his officers and the island's *habitants*. When Poncet came to power, the French were in a very weak position, but his chaotic tenure as governor only made the situation more precarious. Although short-lived, the transition years under Poncet illuminate France's goals in West Africa following the Seven Years' War. Poncet's governorship not only reveals that France was actively trying to take back what it had lost during the Seven Years' War, but it also shows that in the process, Choiseul and Poncet fundamentally underestimated what it took to establish an enduring presence in the region.

In a letter of instruction to Poncet, Choiseul specifically told him to establish good relations with the native African kings in the region and find out what information he

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Delcourt, *La Turbulente Histoire de Gorée* (Dakar: Editions Clairafrique, 1982), 51.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and the Seven Years' War* (Lincoln: Lincoln Nebraska Press, 2005), 247.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre H. Boule, "Eighteenth-Century French Policies toward Senegal : The Ministry of Choiseul," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (Autumn, 1970): 316, 317.

could about British movements in Senegal. He advised Poncet to be cautious and avoid a written record of his actions, so as to avoid being found out. He also warned Poncet to be wary of the British, who were not to be trusted.<sup>12</sup> Choiseul saw that one of the best ways to strengthen the French position was to build ties with the African kings; strengthening these relationships would have the double effect of fortifying France's place in Senegambia and increasing the slave trade.

Despite his careful strategizing, Choiseul's emphasis on establishing military might and strong relationships with the African kings overlooked other important players in the colonization of West Africa. Choiseul did not emphasize the importance of fostering good relations with the *habitants* of Gorée (island inhabitants of mixed European and African descent), nor did he stress the importance of keeping order with the officers stationed on the island. Without the support of the officers and the *habitants*, solidifying the French position in the region proved difficult.

Poncet's governorship has often been overlooked in previous historical analysis, but his tenure offers invaluable insight into Choiseul's goals for the region and lack of understanding of what it took to establish a viable colonial presence. Most research involving the history of Gorée, Senegambia, or West Africa only mentions Poncet in passing. Jean Delcourt's four books, *L'Ile de Gorée*, *La Turbulente Histoire de Gorée*, *Histoire Religieuse du Sénégal*, and *Gorée, Six Siècles d'Histoire*, only briefly discuss Poncet's efforts to reestablish the French presence on Gorée, explaining that Poncet was dismissed for illicit trade. Historian George E. Brooks' book, *Eurafricans in Western Africa*, discusses Gorée under Poncet for a few pages, and although his coverage is more comprehensive, it is decidedly more focused on the *habitants* and provides little new

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<sup>12</sup> Pierre H. Boulle "The French Colonies and the Reform of Their Administration," 688.

information on Poncet's time as governor. Brooks relies heavily on Delcourt's research as well as on M. L'Abbé Demanet's 1763 historical account, *Nouvelle histoire de l'Afrique française*, both of which do not provide a complete picture of the time period. James Searing's book, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce*, focuses primarily on the slave trade and its effect on West Africa, and while it helps explain the context of the French presence during this time period, it does not explore Poncet's administration in any great detail. Sir John Milner Gray's *A History of the Gambia* provides some information on Poncet's governorship, but his British source materials are sparse concerning this time period.

Perhaps the most enlightening research on Poncet's time as governor is Pierre Boule's dissertation, *The French Colonies and the Reform of Their Administration During and Following the Seven Years' War*, and subsequent 1970 article, "Eighteenth-Century French Policies Toward Senegal: The Ministry of Choiseul." In this research, Boule concludes that France was secretly trying to rebuild its colonial presence despite overwhelming British odds. Boule argues that Poncet's bellicose overreaching in the region unnerved the British, who eventually pressured the French to get rid of him. Boule also rightly characterizes Poncet's tenure as a continuation of France's first empire as well as an effort to build for the future.

Although his article is informative and well-researched, Boule focuses primarily on Choiseul's motives. Because he concentrates on French ministerial objectives, he neglects many significant on-the-ground events in Gorée that not only shed light on what France was trying to accomplish but how. Boule relies heavily on documents from the C6 15 and F 71 files from France's Center for Overseas Archives, which contain

documents on the administration of Gorée from 1763-1768 as well as Choiseul's correspondence. However, these documents alone provide an incomplete picture of the French presence in West Africa during this time period.

Fortunately, the E series, which contains French colonial personnel files, provides the means to build on Boule's research and further illuminate French objectives for West Africa and Poncet's administration of Gorée. These personnel files provide invaluable insight into this time period. As of yet, no one has utilized them to reevaluate Poncet's administration or France's empire after the Seven Years' War, despite the clearer picture of Gorée that they provide. Within these documents lurk unsavory accusations against Poncet's administration, including accounts of unfair court-martials, dishonest appropriation of *habitants'* lodging and slaves, illicit personal trade, and conspiracy to assassinate dissenting junior administrators. These are just a few of the charges levied at Poncet, yet no historian has even mentioned them, let alone attempted to explain or contextualize them in France's broader objectives for West Africa. Poncet's actions show a French administration focused on establishing a strong military presence and expanding the French slave trade, often at the expense of restoring and fortifying Gorée or building good relationships with the *habitants* and officers. Both Choiseul and Poncet ignored the reality of what it took to establish and maintain a defensible presence in the region.

Ascertaining the truth of the accusations against Poncet is tricky, but regardless of their veracity, these accusations show the difficulties that arose when navigating the many interests facing a fledgling colony in Senegambia. Poncet's experience in particular illustrates how various interest groups converged or conflicted. He had many

interests to please, including his own soldiers and administrators, the *habitants* of Gorée, the neighboring British in the Gambian River region and the port city of Saint Louis, the various African kingdoms, French administrators back home, the Portuguese in neighboring Guinea-Bissau, and his own pocketbook. His incapacity to deal effectively with all these different interests eventually led to his dismissal and punishment.

Poncet's actions in West Africa support Boulle's contention that France was actively interested in expanding its presence in the region following the Seven Years' War. Unfortunately for France, doing so involved much more than establishing military outposts and a consistent slave trade, and Boulle's observation that Poncet was punished because of his tempestuous relationship with the British is only part of the story.

Poncet's failure was just as much due to his inability to deal with domestic interest groups on Gorée. What Poncet, and Choiseul for that matter, did not realize was it was very difficult to defend the ravaged island of Gorée in the face of angry British foes, especially when Poncet did not have the support of his officers and the *habitants*. Poncet's maltreatment of officers like Paradis put France in a dangerous situation.

The focus of this research encompasses Poncet's tenure as governor of Gorée, which began in May 1763 and ended with his recall by King Louis XV in December 1764; he was sent home on March 16, 1765. These months provide a unique perspective on French efforts and goals in West Africa and have been primarily organized thematically into four chapters. Chapter One explores Poncet's interactions and often difficult relationships with the *habitants* of Gorée. Chapter Two focuses on Poncet's divisive and often partisan treatment of the officers serving under him. The E series files provide new information that details Poncet's frequent harsh treatment of *habitants* and

officers. The documents also show that Poncet's inept dealings with these two groups undermined French security in the region and severely hampered French efforts to retake its position. Chapter Three investigates Poncet's efforts to build ties with the African kingdoms on the mainland. Here, the personnel files not only help illuminate French objectives for Senegambia but provide new insight into the dynamic relationship between the European and African powers. Although Poncet's greatest success lay in his relationships with the surrounding African kingdoms, even these relationships posed problems. Chapter Four examines Poncet's belligerent relationship with the British in both Saint Louis and Fort James. These interactions acutely display the military mandate Poncet believed he had received from the French government to take back the Senegambian region.

Throughout his time on Gorée, Poncet earnestly sought to fulfill his duty to his king and country. In his eyes, he was accomplishing everything he had been commanded to do, but his vision was clouded by a single-minded focus on reestablishing military strength and slave-trading routes. This focus blinded him to the realities on Gorée, which endangered the already tenuous French presence. In retrospect, it took much more to govern Gorée.

## Chapter 1: Poncet and the *Habitants*

When Poncet's replacement as governor, Jean-George le Baillif des Mesnager, arrived on Gorée on March 20, 1765, the island was in shambles. From Mesnager's observations, Gorée had been the home of "fury and injustice," and some of the French soldiers and workers had fled to Saint Louis. Others had been exiled to the mainland. Things had become so bad on Gorée that the inhabitants of the mainland did not dare bring provisions to the island without fear of being beaten or taken captive. Mesnager remarked that the island seemed to take new life and hope at his arrival, and the *habitants* were relieved that Poncet's rule had finally come to an end. He described Gorée as though it had been under the bondage of slavery, waiting for someone to free it from its chains, apparently unaware of the irony of thus describing a slaving island. His description made it clear that for those living on Gorée, life under Poncet had not been easy. In order to assuage the *habitants* of the island, Mesnager promised that the wrongdoers under Poncet's governorship would be investigated and punished back home in France to the full extent of the law.<sup>13</sup>

As Mesnager's account displays, Poncet bullied and repressed the *habitants* throughout his tenure. As governor, Poncet believed he had a blank check from Choiseul, and his sense of power either blinded him to the integral role the *habitants* played in maintaining the island or made him think he could run the island without their help or support. However, it is important to view Poncet's actions in context: the *habitants* and officers were sometimes unsavory characters themselves, something a strict disciplinarian like Poncet would have found hard to tolerate. The soldiers and sailors on

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<sup>13</sup> Mesnager to Choiseul (?), June 5, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 305-305v.

Gorée were often “brutal and undisciplined” and were not always the easiest to manage.<sup>14</sup>

The *habitants* also presented challenges because they conducted their affairs in a self-interested manner. Mesnager himself found that the interactions between the Europeans and *habitants* were so problematic that a year after replacing Poncet, he suggested separating the blacks and whites on Gorée by building a fort on the island’s hill to house the French soldiers. He even suggested drawing a line of demarcation between the two groups to keep them separated.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the *habitants*’ imperfections, Poncet’s poor treatment of the *habitants* was unwise. His tyrannical behavior displayed that both he and Choiseul lacked the vision to fully grasp the complexities of the island and the region. Despite its excellent harbor and strategic position, Gorée lacked any real natural resources, including fresh water. As a result, the *habitants* were crucial to French survival on the island. Along with being the lifeline for provisions and building materials from the mainland, the *habitants* were a powerful constituent group, and Poncet’s poor treatment of them weakened the French position in West Africa. By alienating them, he undermined Choiseul’s goals of establishing an enduring slave trade and solidifying the French position in order to take over British trading posts if the opportunity arose. The lack of emphasis Choiseul placed on fostering good relations with the *habitants* was reflected in Poncet’s behavior. Among other things, Poncet hurt the French relationship with the *habitants* by his unilateral property appropriations, his restrictions and undervaluing of *habitant* trade, and his efforts to procure *habitant*-owned slaves through dubious means.

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<sup>14</sup> George E. Brooks, *Euroafricans in Western Africa* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2003), 213.

<sup>15</sup> Mesnager to Choiseul (?), April 28, 1766, ANOM, série E 328, 41.



A majority of the *habitants* were the descendants of a tangled history of European and African interaction. From the Portuguese discovery of Gorée in 1444 to Poncet's arrival in 1763, European powers had vigorously and violently contested control of the island. During these three centuries, the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British had all controlled the island at different times. Due to its prime location, Gorée was a "natural first stopping point for ships trading on the West African coast, whether they were trying to purchase slaves or simply to load fresh water, meat, fish, and wood."<sup>16</sup> Because of this continual European influence, European men and native African women interacted, forming mutually beneficial relationships; some even "married according to the custom of the country."<sup>17</sup> More often than not, the European merchants and workers "married" African women, known as *signares*, in order to conduct personal—and unauthorized—trade. They found the *signares* attractive for their beauty and commercial links to the mainland, and they benefitted from having a wife to perform household tasks and care for them when they fell ill.<sup>18</sup> The women "married" Europeans in order to gain access to European goods as well as other material benefits, such as homes on the island.<sup>19</sup>

From the beginning to the middle of the eighteenth century, the *signares* and their children continued to grow in strength and power on Gorée, and through their marriages, they became slave owners themselves. When Poncet came to the island, nine out of twelve *habitant* households were headed by *signares*, and they had grown accustomed to

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<sup>16</sup> James F. Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 94.

<sup>17</sup> Searing, 96.

<sup>18</sup> George E. Brooks, "The Signares of Saint-Louis and Gorée: Women and Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth-Century Senegal," *Women in African: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 22 (hereinafter "The Signares of Saint-Louis and Gorée.")

<sup>19</sup> Brooks, "The Signares of Saint-Louis and Gorée," 44.

the significant role they played on Gorée.<sup>20</sup> For the French, this large *habitant* presence was a double-edged sword. The French enjoyed the benefits of the *habitant* traders, whose mainland connections allowed them to keep the island stocked with provisions. The *habitants* also possessed the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the difficult waters of the slave trade. Yet the *habitants* took many slaves for themselves, draining the French slave supply. Instead of sending the slaves across the ocean to Martinique, many remained on the island as property of the *habitants*. Not only was retaining slaves on Gorée antithetical to the French desire to enlarge the slave trade, but it increased demand for provisions on an island with limited natural resources that was already stretched for provisions.<sup>21</sup>

The *habitants* played a crucial role for the French, but their power was diminished due to the hardships they suffered during the Seven Years' War. The British controlled Gorée under several different commanders during the war. The first commander took the remaining French provisions for his personal use. Under the command of another officer, there was an explosion of gunpowder at the fort of Saint Francis that damaged several homes. Instead of fixing the buildings, the British burned the remaining carpentry wood as fuel. The British resorted to burning the wood because they had quarreled with the African kings of the mainland and were then unable to get provisions. Several fires also swept through the island, destroying property and personal belongings. Thus, the *habitants* were unable to carry out trade due to poor relations with their neighbors on the mainland and unable to rebuild their homes because provisions were in short supply.<sup>22</sup> It

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<sup>20</sup> Searing, 108.

<sup>21</sup> Searing, 109.

<sup>22</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), October 5, 1763, ANOM, E 338, 73.

was in these dire straits that Poncet found the *habitants*, who hoped his arrival portended a brighter, more stable future. They would be sorely disappointed.

Poncet alienated many of the *habitants* from the very beginning. As one of his first official acts as governor, Poncet forcibly took property from some of the *signares*. Upon arrival, the French had taken over some homes that the British had occupied, and Poncet paid rent to the *habitant* owners when they could provide the title of ownership. However, when the *habitants* were unable to present documentation, he regarded the property as previously belonging to the *Compagnie des Indes*, and as a result, declared that the homes now belonged to the king. Poncet even applied this logic to the homes of *signares* who had been married to members of the *Compagnie des Indes*, whose husbands had left them their homes. Poncet appropriated a home for himself that a *signare* claimed belonged to her but for which she could not provide proper documentation. Poncet refused to listen to her pleas and even repaired and built on to the home to show that she had no claim to it. In order to avoid future problems, Poncet called for all the *habitants* to bring him their property titles. He then had copies made and given to his clerk. However, he did not respect any of the titles made under the British if the building had existed before the British takeover of the island. For homes built during British rule, he made new titles so that the property was not in dispute. Poncet explained to Choiseul that because only four of the buildings that the French were using possessed the necessary titles, the cost of rent was not high.<sup>23</sup> Poncet clearly saw the benefit of disregarding *habitant* claims of ownership.

Poncet described to Choiseul the *signares*' property on the island, their custom of passing inheritance from the mother to the children, and their lack of documentation of

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<sup>23</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM série C6 15.

who owned what. It seems that Poncet wanted to emphasize that the *signares* did not pass down property the way Europeans did, and their backwards custom of bequeathing property to illegitimate children somehow justified taking their property. In describing his dealings with the *signares*, Poncet told Choiseul that he wished he could spare him such minutia in the details, but he believed himself obligated to tell of his behavior with regard to all of his subordinates because in carrying out duties to the king, one can often make enemies.<sup>24</sup> Although this paragraph also addressed his challenges with French officers, Poncet's words implied that his actions regarding ownership of the *signares'* property were not without debate.

The details of the controversy came to light when Paradis and a group of twelve *habitants* sent letters to Choiseul regarding Poncet's management of the island. Their accounts included details Poncet conveniently left out of his own letter. During the fires that swept the island under British rule, many *signares'* property titles had been burned. Among those affected was *signare* Marie Thérèse, whose home Poncet had commandeered for his own personal use, despite the conflicting testimony of various *habitants* and French officers like Paradis, who had been in the region before the war. Poncet reasoned that because Marie Thérèse possessed no title, her house belonged to the king. Both Paradis and the *habitants* argued that Marie Thérèse had received her home from Blaise Estoupan de Saint Jean, the previous governor of Gorée, who had financed its construction with his own money and given it to Marie Thérèse at his departure.<sup>25</sup> In his letter, Paradis noted that Marie Thérèse's real misfortune was that she owned a quality home with a nice garden, insinuating that Poncet had really taken the home

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<sup>24</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>25</sup> Marie Thérèse's ownership of the house is also confirmed in Jean Delcourt's *La Turbulente Histoire de Gorée* (Dakar: Editions Clairafrique, 1982), 46.

because he wanted it for himself.<sup>26</sup> The *habitants*' letter corroborated Paradis' version of events, explaining that Poncet had unjustly taken Marie Thérèse's home and that her documentation had been burned in a fire.<sup>27</sup> Poncet's brazen disregard of the *habitants*' opinions did little to strengthen relationships with them, and they soon became fearful and resentful of the governor.

Poncet's contempt for the *habitants* is epitomized in statements made after his return to France. Following his arrest and dismissal, Poncet tried to clear his name by slandering the *habitants*, especially the *signares*, and his words reveal his great disdain for them. In his attempts to discredit the testimony of the *signares*, he resorted to insults and name calling. He insisted that the French officials investigating him would never learn the truth from the "vile" *signares* because they would say whatever they thought the officials wanted to hear. He continued in the same vein, saying

the women, rather girls, sell their honor every day to the officers who are my enemies, where they prostitute their bastard children like themselves, and also sinful girls, devoid of any principal of honor and religion, we would never hear them before an honest tribunal equal witnesses: this bastard race would never be received in [a] justice [proceeding], it is necessary to have witnesses that are true, who are without reproach.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, Poncet was trying to clear his name, so he tried to present his accusers in the worst possible light, but the feelings he expressed directly reflect his treatment of the *signares*. For Poncet, the *habitants* held very little of value for the colony.

After Poncet's authoritarian home appropriation, his relationship with the *habitants* continued to worsen because he restricted trade and refused to pay fair prices for their services. The *habitants* had sincerely hoped Poncet's arrival would herald the

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<sup>26</sup> Paradis to Choiseul (?), May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 118v.

<sup>27</sup> *Habitants* to Choiseul (?), Date unknown, ANOM, série E 338, 209.

<sup>28</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), Date unknown, ANOM, série E 338, 108.

improvement of living conditions on Gorée, but they soon found, with bitter sadness, that things only got worse. They had been left in a difficult situation following the war that was made all the more dire because Poncet restricted their freedom to trade, which meant the *habitants* were unable to repair the damage to their homes caused by the war and the fire. To add insult to injury, Poncet used their slaves to carry out the work of the king, leaving the *habitants* without the means to rebuild their lives.<sup>29</sup>

The *habitants* explained to Choiseul that Poncet was running the island in a disorganized and dishonest manner. Under Poncet, the *habitants* struggled to feed themselves and their slaves. When they were lucky enough to get Poncet's permission to go to the mainland to trade for necessary supplies, Poncet would take half their goods for himself upon their return. These supplies had been purchased at a very high price from the mainland Africans, but Poncet paid the *habitants* only what he thought the goods were worth. The *habitants* had a very different view of what constituted a fair trade and believed they were being cheated. Poncet also set his price without taking into account transportation costs, which added a significant amount to the price of the goods. In addition, he was more concerned with getting his hands on any slaves that the *habitants* happened to bring back.<sup>30</sup>

By his actions, Poncet demonstrated that he cared more about the slave trade and his own personal gain than he cared about cultivating a strong relationship the *habitants*. While the *habitants* may have been overly optimistic about the arrival of the French, Poncet did not attempt to make their lives any easier; in fact, he often exploited them. It is possible that because of Poncet's focus on the slave trade, he was unable to see the

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<sup>29</sup> *Habitants* to Choiseul, Date unknown, ANOM, série E 338, 211.

<sup>30</sup> *Habitants* to Choiseul, Date unknown, ANOM, série E 338, 211v.

damage he was causing the *habitants*, but whatever the case may be, he did little to build strong relations with the *habitants*, whose friendship was essential to France's long-term survival on Gorée.

One of Choiseul's primary goals for Poncet was to increase the French slave trade, and after he had arrived on the island, Poncet asked the *habitants* to sell their slaves, not realizing that the slaves were the means of life for the *habitants* and often considered family.<sup>31</sup> The *habitants* refused. Paradis reported that after these efforts proved fruitless, Poncet began restricting *habitant* trade in order to put them in such a desperate situation that they would have no choice but to sell their slaves. Although impossible to know whether Poncet consciously restricted the *habitants'* abilities to get provisions so that they would have to sell their slaves, Poncet certainly used the conditions on the island to his advantage in an effort to obtain slaves.

When Poncet was unsuccessful in his efforts to encourage the *habitants* to sell their slaves, he resorted to more dubious measures. He accused the *habitants* of spurious charges, and as punishment for their alleged offenses, condemned them to slavery themselves unless they sold him their slaves. Paradis explained that Poncet condemned the *habitants* under the "least appearance of fault." He sardonically noted that Poncet had found this to be the least expensive way of acquiring slaves.<sup>32</sup> Poncet undoubtedly felt pressure to increase the slave trade, but he was also accused of trying to acquire slaves for himself. Whether he coerced the *habitants* for the sake of the French government or his own pocketbook is uncertain. However, it is certain that Poncet

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<sup>31</sup> Paradis to Choiseul (?), May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 119v.

<sup>32</sup> Paradis to Choiseul (?), May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 120.

alienated himself from the *habitants* by his deceitful allegations and self-serving punishments.

Gabriel Gaulfat was one *habitant* who personally felt the sting of Poncet's injustices. A free black whose affinity for the French nation was well known on Gorée, Gaulfat had even fought to defend the island against the British during the war. After Poncet's arrival, Gaulfat accompanied the governor to help reestablish the trading post of Portudal, formally of the *Compagnie des Indes*, on the Senegalese coast, where he served as translator.<sup>33</sup> During his time at Portudal, there was a skirmish between the French and the mainland Africans, and Gaulfat was one of the few who stood up to ward off the attack. Despite his valiant efforts, according to the *habitants*, it was Gaulfat who took the punishment for a lackluster defense. Poncet accused him of not being firm enough in his support against the attack and had him tied to a cannon and cruelly whipped. He then ordered Gaulfat to pay him one of his slaves or to be sold into slavery himself.<sup>34</sup> Gaulfat ultimately chose to give Poncet one of his slaves, who would not be returned to him until Poncet was replaced.<sup>35</sup>

The *signare*, Paule Marbas, suffered a fate similar to that of Gaulfat. Her misfortunes began with Poncet's domestic servant, Hervé, whom Poncet lodged in one of her family's huts. One day, Poncet discovered that Hervé had stolen provisions from him, which he had then stored in his hut and eaten. Poncet had Hervé arrested and then implicated Paule because she owned the hut that Hervé was staying in. According to Poncet's logic, because the storage and consumption of stolen goods had happened in the

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<sup>33</sup> "Imputations faites à Mr. Poncet de la Riviere cy devant Gouverneur de Gorée," 1768, ANOM, série E 338, 354.

<sup>34</sup> *Habitants* to Choiseul, Date unknown, ANOM, série E 338, 212.

<sup>35</sup> "Imputations faites à Mr. Poncet de la Riviere cy devant Gouverneur de Gorée," 1768, ANOM, série E 338, 354, 354v.



hut she owned, Paule was therefore responsible for Hervé's crimes. Since it was her property, she was guilty. As punishment, she was to pay for what was stolen. Paule protested this injustice, but the soundness of her reasoning only brought further punishment from Poncet, who had her beaten and then sent to jail.

While Paule was locked away, a formal search was made of her home and the other huts that belonged to her, but nothing was found that connected her to what Hervé had stolen. Despite a fruitless search, Poncet had Paule tied to a cannon and whipped and then forced her to work in public like a slave. After this punishment, Poncet gave her a choice; she could remain this way if she liked, or she could pay him three slaves to regain her freedom. The miserable Paule had only one slave, whom she gave to Poncet. She then asked her niece, Marie Angèlique, to give her two more slaves to finish paying the debt. To keep the honor of the family, Marie Angèlique complied, but Poncet was still not done. He chased Paule from Gorée, forcing her to seek refuge in Senegal.<sup>36</sup> Her experiences show that Poncet was willing to do whatever it took to increase the slave trade. Seeing examples like Paule's, the *habitants* realized that Poncet could make up any accusation or blow things out of proportion, and their own freedom would be jeopardized.

In writing to Choiseul, the *habitants* made clear the dubious nature of Poncet's accusations, and that the experiences of Gaulfat and Marie Angèlique were the norm rather than the exception. They lamented the stress of living under the daily threat of losing their money and their liberty, of being falsely accused of crimes and then threatened with disproportionate punishment. Given these circumstances, they had no recourse but to sell their own slaves, whom they regarded as their own children, to

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<sup>36</sup> *Habitants* to Mesnager, March 6, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 208.

passing merchant ships. Poncet's tyrannical actions created a very unstable, unpredictable situation for the *habitants*, and things got so bad that there is evidence of a threat of revolt. In one of his letters to Choiseul, Paradis explained that the great strength of Gorée came from the *habitants*. He continued, saying that there was an even more important reason to be gentle with the *habitants*, but he was not at liberty to elaborate.<sup>37</sup> Given the unstable context, it is no stretch to presume that Paradis believed that the *habitants* could turn on the French and revolt. Poncet was already suspicious that Paradis and other officers were trying to overthrow him, so Paradis would have been wary of including anything that hinted of insurrection, especially because Poncet was restricting mail at the time. Rumors and whisperings aside, it was evident that Poncet's treatment of the *habitants* was not leading to a sustainable French presence on the island.

Poncet disregarded the importance of the *habitants*: he did little to try to work with them and much to exploit them. A report to the French government on October 22, 1764, in a letter penned by an unknown author, explained that Poncet had managed to turn almost everyone against him. The unknown author explains that "The conduct that M. Poncet de la Rivière has had at Gorée since he has been Governor of this island does not permit one to believe that he can stay here much longer without fear of completely losing this colony."<sup>38</sup> The author continued, asserting that "we cannot hide our eyes [to the fact] that M. Poncet de la Rivière is more dangerous than useful...[and has] alienated the spirits of the officers, the employees, and the few inhabitants that are at Gorée."<sup>39</sup>

Poncet's mismanagement had wreaked such havoc on the island that there was a great

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<sup>37</sup> Paradis to Choiseul (?), May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 120.

<sup>38</sup> Unknown to Choiseul (?), October 20, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 162.

<sup>39</sup> Unknown to Choiseul (?), October 20, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 162.

fear that France would lose its West African holdings altogether. His treatment of the *habitants* jeopardized the continued viability of the French colony.

Poncet's zeal and personal interest in accomplishing his duties—establishing the slave trade and strengthening the French position against the British—led him to disregard the important role of the *habitants*. As his treatment of Gaulfat, Marie Therèse, and Marie Angèlique displays, Poncet was more concerned with short-term rewards than long-term strategy. He lacked the vision to see that as long as France was relegated to Gorée, the *habitants* were crucial allies for the French. Wronging them hurt the French position. Perhaps Poncet believed that since he had been ordered to prepare to win back Senegal from the British, the French would soon recover what they had lost in the war, and he did not need to build strong relations with the *habitants*. But France was a long way from winning back Senegal, and even if the campaign to retake the territory had been imminent, *habitant* support to defend Gorée would have been crucial. The unknown author of the letter showed an understanding of Choiseul's objectives for West Africa and explained that Gorée was too important to lose, both for the protection it provided for the slave trade and for the opportunity in times of war to destroy or take the British trading posts. The author argued that Gorée was too valuable not to have a wise man at the helm, someone who knew how to patiently prepare the way to profit from the situation of the island.<sup>40</sup> That person was clearly not Poncet. Two months after this anonymous letter was written, Poncet was recalled.

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<sup>40</sup> Unknown to Choiseul (?), October 20, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 162v.

## Chapter 2: Poncet and the Officers

On November 18, 1765, by order of Louis XV, a council of war met on Gorée to judge the fate of four French officers, “the sergeants,” accused of plotting to assassinate Paradis during his time on the island. The four men had previously enjoyed positions of power under Poncet’s governorship and had been the terror of officers and *habitants* alike. Very few had dared oppose the sergeants because they enjoyed Poncet’s favor and could generally do as they pleased. On the day the trial was held, the four men could no longer call on Poncet for help; he had left the island at least six months before and was locked away in the French castle of Landskron. The council found the Sous-Lieutenant of the French corps of African volunteers, Monsieur de la Planche, and his under-officers, Nicolas Husson, Mr. de Iger, and Mr. Moulinier, guilty as charged, and that very day, the men were broken on the wheel (*rompu vif*) and finished off with a firing squad.<sup>41</sup> For many on the island, both *habitants* and French alike, the sergeants’ execution marked an end to Poncet’s chapter of the island’s history.

The sergeants’ behavior and situation were symbolic of how Poncet treated his subordinates. He favored some and allowed them free reign, while others, often those providing pushback to his administration, he treated with impunity. Poncet’s lack of concern for Gorée stood in contrast to his focus on reestablishing the trading posts off the coast of Senegal. Slow to make repairs on the island, he made the already difficult living circumstances for the soldiers even harder. He also did not empower those who had the skills to deal with the challenges facing the island, choosing instead to appoint officers who were loyal to him. Poncet’s inability to organize the island, his mistreatment of

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<sup>41</sup> Doumet to French ministry (?), April 28, 1766, ANOM, série E 328, 40.

loyal French officers and workers, and his favoritism of certain officers destabilized the already precarious French control of the island and strength in the region. Poncet displayed confidence in his every move, but his pride blinded him to his own shortcomings and the real needs of others. Often, his alienation of officers only served to undermine his reputation back home, thanks to reports from different sources that he was mismanaging the island. Poncet might have also emphasized French expansion beyond Gorée because he stood to gain more personally from increasing the slave trade than he did in rebuilding and fortifying Gorée.

Before exploring Poncet's administrative blunders, it is important to note the difficult realities of governing Gorée at this time. For any administrator, even the most capable, the circumstances would have been daunting. Entering a new world with severe natural resource limitations on the island, Poncet found it difficult to know how to best husband the colony's resources. Gorée truly was, as Poncet observed, "a ship in the middle of the sea."<sup>42</sup> Gorée depended on the mainland for survival, and Poncet successfully reestablished the former trading posts with great speed. Even Paradis seemed to acknowledge that Poncet had done a decent job in reestablishing these important lifelines to the mainland.<sup>43</sup> Gorée was also sandwiched between two British forces, Saint Louis and Saint James, with strong support from the British crown. So any governor would have needed to perform an intricate balancing act to best protect French interests without appearing belligerent.

To make matters even more challenging, Poncet had a difficult time finding the resources to pay his soldiers their deserved wages. Any governor would have found that

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<sup>42</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>43</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, February 6, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 125.

the lack of funding from France made it difficult to keep everyone happy and execute their orders from the crown. Poncey faced the additional challenge of governing soldiers who were often unsavory characters themselves. To make matters worse, the island lacked any sort of mechanism to get rid of troublemakers. In fact, Poncey's replacement, Mesnager, also saw this as a problem and wanted to institute a mechanism to send poorly behaved soldiers back to France.<sup>44</sup> But even in the face of dire circumstances, Poncey managed to make things worse. His drive to extend French power neglected the core strength that should have come from a well-run island base. He installed poorly behaved officials in positions of power and supported them even when evidence implicated them in wrongdoing. Poncey may have thought the French would soon take control of the Senegal and Gambia rivers from the British and would no longer need a strong presence on Gorée, but these thoughts were misguided and overly optimistic.

Although the British left Gorée in disrepair, Poncey never successfully organized the island to create stability. Poncey's initiatives of reconstruction and construction on the island involved military designs or pet projects instead of a well-balanced approach to meet the needs of the officers, soldiers, and workers.<sup>45</sup> Poncey's main construction projects involved reestablishing trading posts along the Senegambian coast and Gambian river, not on Gorée.

Poncey's May 25, 1764, letter to French superiors displayed his focus on projects of a military nature—which in and of itself were not unimportant for the French—but his approach to the island was military when a comprehensive approach was needed. He ordered the construction of a powder magazine on the side of the main artillery that

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<sup>44</sup> Mesnager to Choiseul (?), 1765, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>45</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 13.

defended the harbor. Previously, the only other magazine was one was on top of the island's mountain, too far away to be serviceable in times of need. Poncet also built a gun-storage building that could house over eight hundred rifles. When he arrived, he found the cannons in disrepair, so he had them repaired and even more set up, so that by the time he wrote his May 25 letter, there were sixty functioning cannons.<sup>46</sup> Poncet's main focus for the island was strengthening its military position: he was both good at it and believed it to be his mission. Poncet also tried building a well, but it failed because the well could not keep out the salty ocean water. Poncet believed that if the ministry sent the best lime and bricks of Europe, he would be able to keep the water from being contaminated from the sea. He also established a stove for lime on the mainland, which he could transport back to Gorée already made. By making lime on the mainland, there was no need to worry about transporting wood and shells to fabricate it.<sup>47</sup> But aside from these few constructions, Poncet's main projects on Gorée displayed a real focus on strengthening the island militarily, and he neglected other vital constructions that were essential for a well-run island. Poncet's building efforts paled in comparison to the utter disorder of the island.

Despite nearly two years' time to improve conditions on the island, its physical situation remained essentially the same as when it was transferred from the British. Poncet's only real effort to deal with lodging needs consisted of the repairs he made to Marie Thérèse's home. Poncet undoubtedly wanted to be more comfortable as he tried to work out the intricate plans for rivaling the British, and he had a room, basement, office,

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<sup>46</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>47</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

and kitchen repaired.<sup>48</sup> The officers and soldiers under him had to survive in quite different circumstances, living in huts and homes belonging to the *signares* on the island.<sup>49</sup> Poncet's focus on his own accommodations did little to endear him to his subordinates, who were living in difficult circumstances. Poncet poorly planned and executed other construction projects, which stood in stark contrast to the repairs he made to the home acquired from Marie Thérèse. The offices of the French government still lacked significant cover, floors, doors, and windows. Against the advice of Paradis, Poncet built another level on to the company store. The foundation proved to be too weak to support the addition, making it necessary to rebuild the whole building. Many provisions were lost due to a lack of cover from the elements, and the magazines Poncet had built soon fell into disrepair.<sup>50</sup>

Although Poncet's reconstruction projects were not well executed, their mismanagement paled in comparison to how he treated his subordinates. When Poncet arrived on Gorée, he was accompanied by eighteen officials and one hundred fifty soldiers, sailors, and craftsmen.<sup>51</sup> Issac Luduger, the surgeon major, and Chaulnay, the surgeon second, were the officials charged with tending to the health needs of the French arrivals. Not only did they have to navigate the difficult process of adjusting to a new land, but they did so while trying to fulfill their duties to the crown under a governor who often proved uncooperative. Luduger and Chaulnay's services were not needed immediately after arrival because the administrators and workers arrived in good health.

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<sup>48</sup> "Imputations faites à Mr. Poncet de la Riviere cy devant Gouverneur de Gorée," 1768, ANOM, série E 338, 358.

<sup>49</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>50</sup> "Imputations faites à Mr. Poncet de la Riviere cy devant Gouverneur de Gorée," 1768, ANOM, série E 338, 358.

<sup>51</sup> Jean Delcourt, *Gorée, Six Siècles d'histoire*, (Dakar: Editions Clairafrique, 1982), 46.



However, this health might have given Poncet a sense of complacency and made him overlook the importance of preventing disease on the island. This unfounded confidence would have allowed him to justify his poor treatment of his surgeons. Poncet's interactions with the surgeons showed that he was not an accommodating administrator and that he was focused on the objectives of jumpstarting the French slave trade and gaining favor with the African kings.

Upon arrival, the French had to make do with the limited buildings left by the British, and they were forced to use the ground floor of the hospital for supplies. The three bedrooms above the ground floor were used for lodging the workers. Poncet must not have realized the seriousness that sickness could pose because when disease hit the French officers and soldiers, he refused to allow the surgeons to use the rooms to isolate the stricken soldiers.<sup>52</sup> Instead of supporting Luduger in fulfilling his medical duties, Poncet made him work as a regular soldier and mistreated him several times with insults and beatings followed by imprisonment.<sup>53</sup> Although there may have been more reasons why Poncet disliked Luduger, one of the main reasons he ran afoul of Poncet was his insistence that they build a hospital.<sup>54</sup>

As Luduger and Chaulnay fell out of favor with Poncet, he replaced them with the harbingers, who, in a normal military situation, were charged with scouting out lodgings for the army; the harbingers had little knowledge of the practice of medicine. They did not know what they were doing and treated the sick with liberal use of the island's limited medical supplies, expending Gorée's stock in three months. Then, in an effort to rectify the difficult circumstances he had created, Poncet reinstated the two surgeons to

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<sup>52</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, February 6, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 128.

<sup>53</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 239.

<sup>54</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 14v.

their official positions. Chaulnay took one group of ill soldiers to the mainland to try to heal them, but the post was so little supported by Gorée that they survived because of the kindness of the mainland Africans, who gave them fish. Chaulnay, not wanting to live under such difficult circumstances, eventually left for Senegal where he was paid handsomely for his medical skills.<sup>55</sup> Luduger eventually deserted to Senegal as well.<sup>56</sup>

Sickness erupted several times during Poncet's tenure on Gorée, and he had not adequately empowered the surgeons to take care of the problems. Poncet's inept reaction to health concerns was symbolic of his attitude towards governing Gorée. Paradis, someone with extensive experience in the region, remarked, "of all the tasks of the administration of Gorée, the concern for the sick is surely the most essential."<sup>57</sup> Paradis, with a touch of irony concerning Poncet's handling of medical concerns, explained that it appeared "that Mr. Poncet surpassed himself to govern in the greatest disorder."<sup>58</sup> It is unlikely Poncet maliciously neglected the sick. He probably felt justified in his treatment of the surgeons and his hesitancy to build a new hospital. He often chose not to trust people who ran afoul of his favor. The surgeons had clearly done something to bother Poncet, but denying adequate medical attention to the whole island was not a justified or wise response. Poncet continued to train his focus on the military aspects of Gorée and on reestablishing the former trading posts and the slave trade, underestimating the disorganized state in which Gorée remained and the importance of taking care of medical challenges.

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<sup>55</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, February 6, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 128.

<sup>56</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 240.

<sup>57</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, February 6, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 127v.

<sup>58</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, February 6, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 127v.

Even near the end of his time on Gorée, Poncet's vision for the island was still concentrated on protecting it from military attack, and he put forward a plan made by Mr. de Grand Jean, the geographical engineer, to improve the French military position on the island. Poncet feared that the island remained in an indefensible state from all sides and that even the mountain that appeared inaccessible at first sight could be attacked quite easily from different places. But Poncet expressed hope that if the island were to be fortified, it would be "perhaps the best place in the world," and even in its sorry condition, he believed it would provide "a good defense."<sup>59</sup> Poncet's proposal clearly displayed his military approach, as he appeared to believe the island's most pressing concern was its vulnerability. He might have also believed Choiseul was most concerned about the military viability of the island because he used it to segue to his request for more help and funds to accomplish more in the region.

While Poncet neglected the physical needs on the island, he also created problems by mistreating useful officers and workers while favoring those who were not the best behaved. As in the case of the surgeons, the island suffered a great deal because of Poncet's rash decision-making and mistreatment of officers who were trying to fulfill their duties. Poncet also made enemies by favoring certain officers over others. Even when these officers proved inept, he sometimes supported them over those trying to fulfill their duties to the French crown. When disputes arose, instead of judiciously seeking for the truth, he supported those he favored involved in the incident. Where he was unable to find the truth of the matter, he saw intrigue and refused to be moved, despite the protestations of the innocent. Perhaps nowhere was this more visible than in his treatment of Paradis.

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<sup>59</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

Paradis was a battle-tested officer who had made his mark during the French defense of Saint Louis during the Seven Years' War. Even though the French ultimately lost, the French commander, Estoupan de la Brue, wrote Paradis' father, Armeny de Benezel, who was the general director of the *Compagnie d'Afrique* at Marseille, singing Paradis' praises. Estoupan's letter was filled with admiration and warmth for Paradis' service:

M(onseigneur), you will soon see your dear son again who merits all the tenderness that you have for him and by consequence a better fortune; you have no doubt heard of our misfortune, but you will have the consolation to learn that the bravery of your son held him back three days and he was the only one who had the opportunity to distinguish himself.<sup>60</sup>

Paradis had fought bravely commanding mainland Africans and manning a small artillery station equipped with six small cannons at the entrance of the Senegal River. Paradis continued fighting even with a wounded leg until they ran out of ammunition and were ordered to retreat. Paradis fought without food, choosing to forgo what was sent to him in order to encourage his men, and despite the difficult circumstances, they were still able to sink a British schooner and brigantine. Estoupan found that Paradis had done "all that one could require... [not just] for a man of his age; but even all humanity."<sup>61</sup> While holding off the British, Paradis kept his wits about him, and through great skill and judgment, was able to inform Estoupan of the size of the British forces, which allowed them to communicate their predicament to Estoupan's brother at Gorée. Although Estoupan did not elaborate further on what Paradis did to accomplish this, it involved some risky business that had Paradis been caught, he surely would have been hung.

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<sup>60</sup> Copy of the letter of Mr. Estoupan de la Brue to Mr. Armeny de Benzel, August 1758, ANOM, série E 328, 52.

<sup>61</sup> Copy of the letter of Mr. Estoupan de la Brue to Mr. Armeny de Benzel, August 1758, ANOM, série E 328, 52.

When Paradis retreated to Saint Louis, Estoupan was concerned to see him so exhausted, and he feared that Paradis' health had been severely compromised, but even Paradis' extreme fatigue did not stop him from being everywhere trying to repel the British until they forced the French to surrender.<sup>62</sup>

Estoupan continued his effusive praise to Benezel, telling him he had reason to praise the Lord, who had given him "a praiseworthy child in so many ways."<sup>63</sup> Estoupan acknowledged that Paradis was not perfect, but according to what he knew of him, he had the seeds of virtue, the ardor of his age, liveliness, and great sensibility. Estoupan declared to Benezel that his son "will make a great subject, [if] God cares to place him in a theater where he can put to use his talents and merits."<sup>64</sup>

It appears that Paradis spent four years in the Senegambia region before he fought in the Seven Years' War and then returned to France to recover from the injuries he sustained defending the French holdings in Senegal. His 1763 trip was a return voyage to the area, and he had more experience in the region than Poncet. Unfortunately for Paradis, this return voyage would not be accompanied by Poncet's glorious praise of his valor. On this trip, Paradis would end up walking three days in the burning sand from the point of Dakar to Saint Louis in order to find transport home to France to plead his innocence against Poncet's charges.

Although Paradis knew the area much better than Poncet, his advice was rejected by the governor on several projects. After they arrived on the island, Paradis proposed to

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<sup>62</sup> Copy of the letter of Mr. Estoupan de la Brue to Mr. Armenty de Benzel, August 1758, ANOM, série E 328, 52v.

<sup>63</sup> Copy of the letter of Mr. Estoupan de la Brue to Mr. Armenty de Benzel, August 1758, ANOM, série E 328, 52v.

<sup>64</sup> Copy of the letter of Mr. Estoupan de la Brue to Mr. Armenty de Benzel, August 1758, ANOM, série E 328, 52v.

Poncet that he fulfill the orders he had received from the French ministry to repair and reconstruct the garrison, whose roof was in shambles and provided little protection from the elements, and the stores for supplies and provisions. Poncet did not take kindly to his suggestions and refused his request with “harshness to which he [Paradis] had never been exposed.”<sup>65</sup> Paradis, however, was not discouraged and tried again, only to be threatened with being discharged.<sup>66</sup>

There were several reasons why repairing the island was not a priority for Poncet. One reason was the shortage of wood and lime needed to make such repairs.<sup>67</sup> According to Paradis, the ship that was supposed to be used to obtain such supplies for the colony was being used by Poncet for his own personal trade.<sup>68</sup> Whether Poncet was trading for himself or the king is not readily apparent, and he may have been trading for both, but his focus on trade and outward expansion made it impossible for Paradis to make the necessary repairs. The time soon came for Paradis to make his report to the French ministry regarding the repairs he had been commissioned to make, but Paradis did not want to write a lengthy critique of Poncet in his report. Instead, he attempted to reconcile himself with Poncet, explaining he did not want to be critical of him and asked him if they could cooperate for the good of what needed to be done. Paradis’ actions were noble, but instead of rectifying the situation, he only embittered Poncet even more.<sup>69</sup>

Poncet, possibly nervous about the trouble that a questioning and critical Paradis could cause, looked for the means to silence him. The opportunity arose when Poncet decided to dismantle a few longboats and use the wood as fuel for the kitchens of the

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<sup>65</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 12v.

<sup>66</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 12v.

<sup>67</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 12v.

<sup>68</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 13.

garrison. Paradis tried to get Poncet to see that the wood could be used for rebuilding the dilapidated buildings of the island, but Poncet remained undeterred in turning the useful material into fuel. Poncet had an even fierier furnace prepared for Paradis. He ordered Paradis to a small, round straw hut and prohibited him from exiting.<sup>70</sup> The isolation proved to be the easier of the challenges, as the extreme heat on the island beat down upon the hut, making it an particularly harsh punishment. Poncet's wrath remained kindled, and he stirred up the sergeants, including Chatelain, against Paradis. The sergeants in turn harassed Paradis while he was in his stifling imprisonment. Poncet's next move was to offer to reinstate Paradis if he would admit that he had been wrong and sign a statement to be sent to the crown. Poncet sent Doumet to arrange such a *mea culpa*, but Paradis would not budge because he did not believe himself guilty.<sup>71</sup>

To make things even more uncomfortable for Paradis, Poncet began restricting Paradis' visits from officers who were sympathetic to his predicament. The more determined his visitors were to visit, the more harshly they were repulsed. Garnier proved to be Paradis' most loyal friend, but this support only earned him Poncet's wrath. Poncet came up with other ways to make life hard for Paradis, and he forbade any officers to bring Paradis meals from their table. Poncet also intimidated a *signare* who was helping provide food to stop her from doing so. Paradis' last help came from a loyal servant, who was also a son of an officer, but Poncet had him brought to his home and threatened to have him tied to a cannon. He was then hired by Poncet to work elsewhere.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 13v.

<sup>71</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 14v.

Utterly defeated, Paradis decided to write to the French Ministry on December 25, 1763 and explain his challenging circumstances. Meanwhile, Paradis' health continued to deteriorate. Whether as a result of his letter or due to his failing health, Poncet released him on January 1, 1764. Paradis regained his strength, and he resolved to not cross Poncet by suggesting projects that he knew would be rejected. He decided to focus all his energy on the plans that the ministry had given him, even if it proved impossible to accomplish them.<sup>73</sup> Despite his new approach, Paradis found it very difficult to accomplish his duties without the support of Poncet. Paradis did not have any money or lime to fix the lodgings for the troops. Poncet had sent fifty of the one hundred twenty men to the trading posts to gather wood and water for supplies, and Paradis seemed to believe that a few could be spared to start repairs on the island. Paradis also believed Poncet misused the seventy Africans he employed, many of whom could have been spared to help build a garrison and a storage facility for the king's goods. Paradis, and probably several others, bristled at Poncet's refusal to let lime be used in the service of the king, when Poncet himself used some "to fulfill his ideas on a brackish water well that provided somewhat salty water for his garden" and to make the additions onto the home he had commandeered from Marie Thérèse.<sup>74</sup>

Paradis kept his head down and focused on his work while trying to avoid the attention of the governor, but his luck did not hold. At the beginning of May 1764, an uneasy Poncet called together all the officers of the garrison. Poncet expressed his fears that he had displeased them, and he asked if he had done any injustice to any one of them. If they could prove it, he was prepared to make amends. He explained that he had heard

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<sup>73</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 15.

<sup>74</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 118, 118v.



that some people were planning a revolt against him and he would do everything in his power to stop it.<sup>75</sup> It seemed to have escaped Poncet why several of the French officers did not like him: they deeply resented his violent fits of rage and harsh treatment. Paradis explained that Poncet boasted every day that he was going to “drive the officers as his slaves” and he “supported this language by his behavior.”<sup>76</sup> Poncet could not see how his martinet disposition did little to build relationships of trust and loyalty among the officers and workers.

An uncomfortable silence followed Poncet’s speech, and the *garde magasin* was the first to speak. He explained that the officers complained that he closed the stores of the king even though they provided the merchandise destined to pay for their duties. As a result, they were able to obtain only what was absolutely necessary. Despite his apparent efforts to appear kind, Poncet launched into a spirited defense, claiming that he had never done it. But despite his protestations, no one came to his defense. Without any support, he then turned to Paradis and asked him if he was one of the complainers. Paradis asked him not to question him on something that he did not deserve to be interrogated about, but because Poncet had brought the subject up, Paradis reminded him that he had been refused thirty Francs of the one thousand that the king owed him.<sup>77</sup>

Poncet responded that he was far from suspecting him, and that he would always give him the justice he deserved. The other officers asked Poncet to clear up the injurious suspicions and pay them much more respect. Everyone left the meeting discontented.<sup>78</sup> In an effort to gain back the trust of those he had mistreated, Poncet

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<sup>75</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 14v.

<sup>76</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 15.

<sup>77</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 15.

<sup>78</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 15v.

offered Paradis and Garnier fifteen captives each to make up for incomplete payments, but they refused him, trusting that they would be paid in France. They explained to Poncet that they could not participate in commerce of which the king paid the costs. Their refusal only irritated Poncet even further against Paradis and Garnier.

The sergeants, who had Poncet's full backing, continued to terrorize *habitants* and officers alike. Chatelain and Paradis in particular did not get along. A few days before their fateful sword fight, Paradis and Chatelain had a scuffle in broad daylight. Paradis visited Doumet and reported the incident, asking for justice to be served. Resigned to the condition of the administration, Doumet said, "I am in despair my dear friend that I cannot speak to Mr. Poncet, who said before to this Sergeant to keep doing what he's doing, that he had nothing to support him that he would always support him. I can no longer make any type of representations without exposing myself to his violence."<sup>79</sup> A few days later, Chatelain and Paradis had their midnight battle after Chatelain threw rocks at Paradis' hut and attacked him from behind. When Doumet came out to see what was going on and took Paradis' sword, several sergeants had also gathered, some remarking that if they had arrived there before Doumet, they would have punished Paradis themselves.<sup>80</sup> Doumet led Paradis to Poncet, where he treated him dismissively until the injured Chatelain staggered in. Upon seeing Chatelain, Poncet reacted violently, steadily building until he pulled out his sword, about to lunge at Paradis before other officers held him back. Instead, he called for Paradis to be taken to prison.

Poncet's decision to punish Paradis hinged on the story of the broken sword mentioned in the introduction. Poncet believed Chatelain's version of the event, which

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<sup>79</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 133.

<sup>80</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 19.

claimed Paradis had attacked an unarmed Chatelain and the broken sword belonged to Paradis not Chatelain. Poncet believed this version because the sergeants produced a sword that appeared to belong to Chatelain, fully intact, which contradicted Paradis' story that he had broken Chatelain's sword. Poncet would later admit he had made a mistake by believing this version of the incident and not siding with Paradis, and he claimed the sergeants tricked him into believing Paradis was guilty.<sup>81</sup> However, given Poncet's behavior, it is difficult to believe he was trying to find the truth. Even if he were telling the truth, his claim displays his incompetence in administering justice on Gorée. Several witnesses later reported that Poncet had verbally and physically intimidated them when they offered stories contrary to Chatelain.<sup>82</sup> Poncet was likely looking for every reason to support Chatelain and also punishing and possibly getting rid of the irksome Paradis.

Doumet and a sergeant d'ordonnance led Paradis to a prison, where he was held among criminal blacks and soldiers, and there, Paradis prayed to the heavens to support his innocence and avenge him. While Paradis spent the night in prison, Poncet called for witnesses. Among the witnesses, volunteers Mr. Boisceroise and Mr. Lary, along with a free-black Christian, were brought forward to be deposed. Their stories supported Paradis' version of events. Poncet was not pleased and hit both Boisceroise and Lary. After berating and mistreating them, he threatened them that he would have them shot if they ever spoke to anyone of what they had seen.<sup>83</sup> Poncet must have believed it would be best to get rid of Paradis altogether and ordered him to be executed the next day.

The next morning, on May 17, between six and seven in the morning, Doumet arrived at the prison with four riflemen, their bayonets affixed on the end of their guns,

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<sup>81</sup> Poncet to Choiseul, March 6, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 362v, 363.

<sup>82</sup> Extrait des informations, June 5, 1765, ANOM, série E 55.

<sup>83</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E, 328, 18v.

and they escorted Paradis to Poncet, who waited with a “terrible air of Radamanthus, but far from having the [same] honesty and fairness.”<sup>84</sup> Poncet once again launched into a tirade, calling Paradis an assassin and a villain. Poncet told him that he would be tried and surely hung. Paradis, believing in his innocence, welcomed the possibility of a trial, responding, “I command you to do it...clearly I am the assassinated one, the soldier [Chatelain] following the rigor of the proceedings will have his fist cut off and will be punished with the death of which you vainly menace me.” In an apparent attempt to shake Paradis’ confidence, Poncet exclaimed, “there are many witnesses, he [Chatelain] told me to have found you at his home trying to kill him, [with you] having come out of your house with sword drawn in hand and to have attacked him unarmed, it is therefore false that his sword broke.” Poncet, true to form, then launched into another vicious outburst criticizing Paradis. Paradis tried to tell his side of the story, but Poncet interrupted him at every turn, not wanting to listen.

Paradis finally asked Poncet to bring Chatelain’s sword, and a complete sword was produced. Poncet exclaimed, “It is well that of Chatelain, I recognize it.” Paradis responded that the broken sword may have very well been Chatelain’s sword, so one of Chatelain’s friends may have provided a sword for him to commit his crime.<sup>85</sup> Paradis further argued that Chatelain had attacked him and he had broken the sword he was carrying. Paradis asked Poncet to look at the sergeants’ swords to make sure they had not replaced one of their swords with Chatelain’s broken one. One sergeant responded that his sword was broken, but he had broken it long before, a possible cover story for the Chatelain’s broken sword.

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<sup>84</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E, 338, 136v.

<sup>85</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 137.

Poncet probably believed he could bully Paradis into admitting his wrongs or accepting guilt for something he had not done, but Paradis proved a worthy adversary, demanding to have the trial Poncet had threatened him with and confront the witnesses against him. Paradis requested that if he were to hold the trial, Poncet should be the judge and not his accuser. He then asked Poncet to make sure that “he was not distancing himself from the ordinances and power that the king had conferred upon him.”<sup>86</sup> Poncet launched into yet another lengthy tirade full of insults for Paradis, likely frustrated with Paradis’ response and cognizant of the diverging witnesses that would appear if a trial were held. He then ordered Doumet to escort Paradis to his hut with a sentinel placed at the door.<sup>87</sup>

At the hut, Doumet told Paradis how Poncet had intimidated the witnesses the night before in order to ensure their silence and Paradis’ punishment. After about an hour, Paradis was escorted back to Poncet, who asked him to forget the past. He told him he believed he was innocent but said he could no longer keep him on the island because the sergeants would try again to take his life. Poncet gave Paradis the choice between going to Dakar or Bin, the two closest mainland African villages to Gorée.<sup>88</sup> Paradis asked Poncet why it would not be possible to send the sergeants away, but his petition proved fruitless.<sup>89</sup> Poncet was keen on punishing Paradis, and he had no intention of punishing his favored officers. Paradis chose Dakar, and Poncet ordered Doumet to transport him there. At Dakar, Paradis lived among the natives for a month, helped by his ability to speak the language, and kept in their good graces by continual presents. But

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<sup>86</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 137v.

<sup>87</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 19.

<sup>88</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 19v.

<sup>89</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 138.

Paradis' living conditions proved difficult. He was cut off from any support from Gorée, and lived in constant fear of possible actions that could be taken against him by the Africans.<sup>90</sup>

Paradis, suffering at Dakar, tried his best to keep his spirits up. He kept in contact with his friends on Gorée, among them Garnier. Communication proved difficult because they had to correspond in secret to avoid Poncet's eyes. One of his letters to Garnier asked for help finding someone to transport a letter to Saint Louis so it could be sent along to Choiseul. The *habitant* carrying the letter to Garnier dropped the letter in front of some French soldiers. Realizing what he had done, he nervously and hastily put it away, but his actions had drawn too much attention, and the soldiers searched him and found the letter, which they promptly turned over to Poncet.

When Poncet read Paradis' letter, he immediately construed it as a plot to overthrow him with the aid of the British. Poncet may have interpreted it this way because he truly believed the threat or because it was a convenient way to slander Paradis and undercut his significant criticisms. Because Poncet viewed things on the island through such a military lens, he probably thought it was a plot to overthrow him, and he reported it back home. Poncet was already afraid of intrigue on the island, so he viewed events warily. In this case, he could also play the conspiracy to his advantage against Paradis. The rather innocuous letter took on the shadows of conspiracy when viewed through Poncet's paranoid eyes, and he underlined the parts he found most dangerous. Paradis began the note by requesting that Garnier ask Dulate, Poncet's former secretary chased away for stealing, for forgiveness for not being able to write. Poncet took Paradis' next line as a clear signal that Paradis and Garnier were planning something

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<sup>90</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 19v.

against him: “Ask the first what he has to say about what interests us so much.” For Poncet, this unknown person was clearly a contact they were using to try something against him.<sup>91</sup>

The next dangerous line was “To God, Adieu, my good friend and my salutations of friendship to our friends encouraged to always follow the path of virtue, its recompense is next.” Paradis was simply telling Garnier to keep trying to do the right thing in the service to the king, but Poncet could never have imagined that he himself was not walking in the path of virtue. He concluded that Paradis was planning something insidious, while Paradis simply wanted to provide words of encouragement for his friends struggling under Poncet’s harsh governing.

Paradis ended his note with a paragraph that Poncet saw as a clear effort to subvert his authority. He asked Garnier to get a servant of Farquin to escort a trusted friend who had never been to Senegal and needed help, and Paradis would provide the necessary payment. Paradis had some letters, mainly his complaint to Choiseul, to be transported back to France. He told Garnier to have the carriers leave the island under the pretext of getting chickens. Poncet had expressly prohibited sending correspondence to Senegal without his approval, so he interpreted this subordination as an attempt to overthrow him with possible help from the British. With the evidence of Paradis’ letter, Poncet decided to get rid of him.

Upon seeing Paradis’ letter, Poncet wrote an angry response to Paradis, saying, “I knew your spirit was to revolt, and I had been content at the beginning to punish you weakly, with the hope of correcting you.”<sup>92</sup> For Poncet, the letter marked the end of his

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<sup>91</sup> Copy of Paradis’ letter to Garnier, May, 1764 ANOM, série E 328, 7.

<sup>92</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 20.

ability to trust Paradis, especially because Paradis appeared to be recruiting others to subvert Poncet. Poncet explained that he was forced to abandon him and to prohibit the whites and blacks from communicating with him for fear that he would be able to seduce even more against him. Poncet settled Paradis' account and gave him three days to stay at Dakar or Bin, after which he ordered him to leave. Poncet appeared especially angry with Paradis' contacts in Senegal because he had prohibited anyone from writing there without first showing him their letters. Poncet told Paradis he did not fear for him because he apparently had contacts in Senegal who could help him. He told him, "you can therefore make your retreat there or among the blacks. Do not plan on coming back here and looking to seduce me by your promises."<sup>93</sup> He then told Paradis if he were to stay longer than three days at either Bin or Dakar, he would consider him a "rebel, enemy of the tranquility of the Colony."<sup>94</sup>

Paradis found himself denied of help of every kind. He had no money, bread, or clothing. Paradis had no choice but to make his way to Senegal, so he took an escort made up of blacks, whom he promised to pay once they arrived. It took him three days of difficult travelling to arrive at Senegal, traversing burning sand while surviving on millet soaked in water. Paradis knew he could not make the difficult journey from Dakar to Saint Louis without a strong escort because robbers lay in wait to spring upon hapless travelers. Paradis' previous four years of experience in the region proved very useful in knowing what to do in the circumstances in which he found himself. Paradis arrived at

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<sup>93</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 21.

<sup>94</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 21.



Saint Louis, suffering from fatigue from such a difficult journey, but he had escaped any major hardship along the way.<sup>95</sup>

Ironically, Paradis arrived asking for help from the same British he had fought so hard against from taking possession of Senegal. He found a very sympathetic Governor Barnes, who gave him lodging and a place at his table, allowing him to wait for a decision from the French court regarding his situation. Barnes had already heard stories of Poncet's treatment of Paradis from French and black deserters from Gorée, so he understood the situation. At this point, Barnes had probably also grown tired of Poncet's antics and may have seen supporting Paradis as a way to get back at Poncet. Whatever the case, his treatment of Paradis also displayed that the British efforts for cordial relations greatly exceeded Poncet's efforts.

Barnes reported his protection of Paradis back to his superiors in Britain, who responded with an order to send Paradis away as soon as possible. They also criticized Barnes for giving a French engineer such access to the British position. Although Paradis had been bedridden for a month with sickness, Barnes was forced to send him away on January 28, 1765, for the Barbary Coast, but he did so with a letter praising him for his good behavior while in Senegal. Paradis' ship hit a storm, and he ended up in Grenada, where he stayed for a month, still sick. He made his way to Martinique, where he caught a ride on the ship *La Folle* and arrived in Brest on May 19, 1765. Paradis' long and difficult journey had come to a close.

It seems Paradis' reports to the French ministry of Poncet's misconduct held great weight, especially given his reputation of bravery in the Seven Years' War. Paradis was no slouch, and his letters were probably all the more compelling because of his character.

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<sup>95</sup> Paradis to Choiseul summary, July 15, 1765 (?) ANOM, série E 328, 21v.

His experiences on Gorée did not reflect well on Poncet. In defending his record, Poncet argued that he could not tell if Paradis was guilty for attacking Chatelain because there were too many conflicting testimonies, but for him, the broken sword seemed to prove Paradis' guilt. Poncet's choice to punish Paradis and let Chatelain go displayed his poor choice in officers. Instead of empowering Paradis to do what was necessary on the island, he criticized and abused him. Given the lack of resources and manpower to carry out the French goals in the region, the crown could ill afford to lose such a valuable officer as Paradis.

Poncet made life difficult for other officers besides Paradis; Boucher, a friend of Paradis, also had a difficult time. Like Paradis, Boucher was ready to prove himself with his newfound responsibilities upon arrival at Gorée. Paradis wanted to make Boucher his assistant and design engineer, and Boucher proved a helpful aid to his efforts to improve the island. But when Poncet imprisoned Paradis, Poncet forbade Boucher to visit him. Boucher wanted to learn more from Paradis' expertise and continued seeing him in secret, "profit[ing] from his lessons."<sup>96</sup> Poncet caught wind of the secret visits and threatened to have him tied to a cannon if he were found visiting Paradis again. Poncet then put Boucher to work as a stepper, under the orders of a worker who had the authority to lead him by the rod and force him to work all hours of the day.

After about a month, Poncet then sent Boucher to the mainland to construct a lime oven with two other whites and some blacks. Poncet did not send enough provisions to support the workers, and the whites and blacks began to complain, threatening to desert for Senegal. The two whites eventually left, and when Boucher informed Poncet, Poncet harshly criticized him and blamed him for the desertions. Poncet then sent Boucher to

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<sup>96</sup> Boucher to Choiseul (?), March 8, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 215.

Joal to man the trading post. Both he and the blacks helping him fell ill, and he sent a letter to Poncet explaining that he was no longer “in a state to look over the safety of the trading post.”<sup>97</sup> Boucher also could not account for some of the supplies that had gone missing. Poncet told Boucher that he did not believe his story and that he was only pretending to be sick. He blamed him for the loss of provisions, and he charged it to Boucher’s account.<sup>98</sup>

Poncet eventually had Boucher replaced, and when the extremely ill Boucher returned to Gorée, he found a detachment of four riflemen and a corporal waiting for him. They led him by bayonet to Poncet. Boucher “had at that time a fever and...was in a state to be pitied because it [the fever] had not left.”<sup>99</sup> Poncet called Boucher a “rascal and a thief” and said that if he had not been sick, he would have thrown him in prison.<sup>100</sup> Here again, Poncet displayed his harsh temperament and his lack of care for the situation on the island. Poncet probably saw Boucher as an ally of Paradis and therefore a threat, so he found reasons to treat him poorly. Poncet also failed to understand that by not providing enough support for his subordinates, they were unable to accomplish their tasks efficiently.

Poncet also spread fear throughout the island with his threats of violence and death. Poncet displayed a violent and rash temperament, so it is easy to imagine him making threats in the heat of the moment or boasting of his own strength without really planning on following through. Poncet even admitted he sometimes acted rashly in angry outbursts. In a letter after his dismissal as governor, he appealed to Doumet to help him

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<sup>97</sup> Boucher to Choiseul (?), March 8, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 215.

<sup>98</sup> Boucher to Choiseul (?), March 8, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 215v.

<sup>99</sup> Boucher to Choiseul (?), March 8, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 216.

<sup>100</sup> Boucher to Choiseul (?), March 8, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 216.

against the complaints and charges against him, saying “you...know me better than anyone. We lived together, and you did not see anything certainly wrong in me other than my fits of rage.”<sup>101</sup> But because he so often beat subordinates and punished different officers, workers, and *habitants*, those around him would not have seen his threats of death as simple exclamations of passion. Several witnesses testified to Mesnager that Poncet solicited their help for his plans to kill the Mayor of Gorée and bury him afterwards in Poncet’s garden, saying he would strike the first blow from behind. To two others, he proposed to kill M. de Luppé, the commander of *La Diligent*, and in his letter to Jacquier at Albreda, he expressed his desire to get rid of Debat of the British fort on Saint James Island. He hired another volunteer and gave the order to poison all who displeased him.<sup>102</sup> Poncet believed he had the full backing of his superiors in France, which probably encouraged his bullying. But these threats did not help create an environment of stability on the island, and the officers and workers lived in fear of falling out of favor with Poncet.

Poncet began to change his version of the events during his governorship once he realized that he was being replaced for his behavior. In a letter to Doumet that he wrote on board the *Salomon*, just before beginning his voyage back to France on March 16, 1765, Poncet appeared sapped of strength and more conciliatory to the criticisms against him. He admitted he had attracted the hatred from the officers on the island by his “rage and for not believing the villain Chatelain was guilty.”<sup>103</sup> Here Poncet admitted two things he had never been able to admit while governor. The first was that he had

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<sup>101</sup> Poncet to Doumet, March 16, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 230v.

<sup>102</sup> “Imputations faites à Mr. Poncet de la Riviere cy devant Gouverneur de Gorée,” 1768, ANOM, série E 338, 358v.

<sup>103</sup> Poncet to Doumet, March 16, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 230v.

mistreated people with his quick temper and the second that he had completely misjudged the Chatelain-Paradis incident. Poncet, who had been so willing to support Chatelain throughout all his escapades on the island, now found it necessary to throw him to the wolves. He expressed a desire to justify himself “fully” concerning “the fraud Chatelain.”<sup>104</sup> The formerly favorite Chatelain was now considered to be “the fraud;” the speed with which Poncet turned on Chatelain showed how he must have known that his behavior was not all circumspect. Chatelain, whom Poncet had so vigorously and violently defended, was now very easy to betray when convenient.

Chatelain, for his part, turned on Poncet once he was gone from the island. He testified to Doumet that “Poncet had absolutely forbidden him to recognize M. Paradis as the engineer of the king....that he [Poncet] had given him [Chatelain] a blue cloth, that is to say, that no one could do him harm, and even more that he should not have a regard for anyone and to follow his [Poncet’s] orders.”<sup>105</sup> Chatelain added that if he had refused Poncet, he would have been killed.<sup>106</sup> But Chatelain’s testimony against Poncet is a complex affair; Chatelain expressed remorse for testifying against him and even sent him a letter asking forgiveness for saying bad things about him, claiming that he had only done so because Doumet threatened to have him hung.<sup>107</sup> Doumet’s threats of having Chatelain hung likely stemmed from the fact that Chatelain’s actions against Paradis merited execution, and there was plenty of evidence for having him hung if he did not comply with the investigation. Chatelain and Poncet had a close relationship, and it is hard to believe that Poncet did not realize what he was doing by trusting Chatelain and

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<sup>104</sup> Poncet to Doumet, March 16, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 230v.

<sup>105</sup> Extrait des informations, June 5, 1765, ANOM, série E 55.

<sup>106</sup> Extrait des informations, June 5, 1765, ANOM, série E 55.

<sup>107</sup> Chatelain to Poncet, No Date, ANOM, série E 338, 278.

his friends while mistreating Paradis. Chatelain escaped execution for his actions against Paradis, but his four friends, the sergeants, were not as lucky. They were executed for threatening Paradis' life after the sword fight. There was plenty of evidence that they sought retribution against Paradis: Poncet sent Paradis to the mainland to escape possible retribution, and they made comments about wanting to kill Paradis following the fight. The four sergeants were in many ways the fall men who paid the ultimate price for Poncet's mismanagement of the island.

At best, Poncet's administration was motivated by his deep desires to fulfill the king's goals in the region, and he believed he had complete power on the island to accomplish those goals. His fits of rage and intimidation of the officers and soldiers could be construed simply as a desire to fulfill his duties. Choiseul had given Poncet substantially more authority than previous governors on the island, but officers like Paradis wondered if Poncet had taken it too far.<sup>108</sup> Choiseul also neglected to provide Poncet with a framework to manage the administration of the island with a comprehensive approach. Choiseul's focus beyond Gorée was reflected in Poncet's actions, both on and off the island. Those who opposed Poncet were seen as disloyal saboteurs, people attempting to subvert his authority and possibly stage a coup. Poncet's behavior suggests that although he did care deeply about rooting out the British and establishing the slave trade, he was also looking for glory for himself and possible personal gain. Officers such as Paradis and his questioning inhibited his free rein. He believed he had complete backing from Choiseul and was not circumspect in whom he empowered on the island. He also displayed an inability to really care for the island's functions and maintenance; he met those who did care, such as the surgeons, Paradis, and

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<sup>108</sup> Paradis to Choiseul, May 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 140.

Boucher, with stiff resistance. Poncet's desires for personal gain also contributed to his problems running the island. He probably hoped to strike it rich while at the same time carrying out his duties to the king. Although illicit trade was all too common for authorities in the region, Poncet also mismanaged many other aspects of the island, and therefore his dishonesty served as yet another symbol of his poor behavior rather than an anomaly to an otherwise competent administration. Poncet made too many enemies on Gorée, and he did not recognize his mistakes until it was too late.

### Chapter 3: Poncet and the Africans

On February 6, 1764, César Gabriel de Choiseul, the Duc de Praslin, wrote to Poncet from Versailles. Praslin, cousin of Choiseul, was serving as the French minister of state at the time, and he commended Poncet for his work. Poncet must have read the letter with pride, and the effusive praise made him believe his actions were in line with the French crown's goals. Praslin asked Poncet to keep him updated on developments. He also mentioned that he knew enough of Poncet's "zeal" and "actions" that he had no doubt that Poncet would know how to fulfill his duties in a judicious way. Praslin's interest and praise centered on Poncet's reestablishment of trading posts throughout Senegambia and his efforts to bolster the slave trade. Praslin also displayed a keen interest in the development of relationships with the different African kings. "I received with great satisfaction the details that you addressed me concerning the manner in which you have begun to rebuild the possessions and the credit of the country in Africa. I infinitely approve the care that you take to accommodate the sovereigns on the mainland, and I hope that our commerce will earn a great deal."<sup>109</sup> Praslin's interests centered on the slave trade and relations with the African kings, which reflected the goals of his cousin, Choiseul, in the region. It is therefore no wonder why Poncet believed his mission lay beyond Gorée; and if he were to please his leaders, he needed to conform to these goals. The other unstated French objective was to rival the British, but Praslin would have been reticent to put such an inflammatory plan in writing.

The French hoped to gain the trust of the different African kings and use those connections to increase the slave trade. It is among these different African kingdoms that

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<sup>109</sup> Praslin to Poncet, February 6, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 65.



Poncet had the most success throughout his time as governor; he gained valuable land from the Damel of Cayor and enjoyed strong relations with the King of Bar. His interactions with the King of Salum, however, proved rocky, and Poncet's approach once again displayed his militaristic mindset that often sparked more conflict than resolution of the issues at hand. Poncet's success also may have had less to do with his actions than with the circumstances the French found themselves at the time: many African kings were happy to have the French back in the region, so their trust of the French was not fully based on their interactions with Poncet. Part of their warm welcome may be attributable to their desire to play the French and the British off each other. Before delving into Poncet's actions in the region, it is important to explain the complicated region he navigated. Poncet's main interactions were with the kingdoms of Cayor, Bar, and Salum, and these exchanges not only shed greater light on the French objectives in the region but the dynamic interplay between the Europeans and the African rulers during this time period.

To the uninitiated, it can quickly become confusing when discussing the various African kingdoms that the French and British interacted with in the Senegambian region. Poncet dealt with many kingdoms: Cayor and Jolof to the north and Bar and Bar-Salum (Salum as Poncet called them and as they will be referred to here) to the south, which were situated on the north side of the Gambian River. In the middle of these different groups were the Lebu, who settled primarily on the Cape Verde peninsula. Bawol (known as the Kingdom of Thin to Poncet) and Siin were also in situated in the middle. An ethnic minority, the Sereer, settled both in Salum and toward the coast inside the

kingdoms of Bawol, Siin, and Cayor; the Sereer were a group that had resisted Islam, Christianity, and slavery.

To understand the different groups and dynamics Poncet dealt with, it is necessary to go back several centuries. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Jolof kingdom controlled the states of Waalo, Cayor, Jolof, and Bawol, and they influenced the Siin and Saluum courts. The Jolof used local leaders called *laman* to maintain control over these areas. The *laman* were the leaders of the separate states but also extensions of Jolof control. It was the *laman* who collected goods and taxes such as “cattle, slaves, horses, cloth, various agricultural products, and white sand of Cayor to decorate the court of the king.”<sup>110</sup> A contemporary Portuguese account described the process thus: “Each year the lords of the country, in order to stand well with him, present him with horses, which are much esteemed owing to their scarcity, forage, beasts such as cows and goats, vegetables, millet and the like.”<sup>111</sup> Over time, the power of the Jolof kingdom over the other states diminished; this was in part due to the Bawol and Cayor trade with the Portuguese.<sup>112</sup> Even though the kingdoms of Cayor and Bawol were already somewhat independent before they broke away,<sup>113</sup> the Portuguese trade on the coast provided Cayor and Bawol with access to Portuguese horses, iron, and swords. These goods, although not entirely decisive, facilitated the breaking up of the Jolof kingdom.

In 1549, the prince of Cayor, Amari Ngoone Sobel, led Cayor against the Jolof and won independence.<sup>114</sup> This marked the beginning of the disintegration of the Jolof Empire, which featured extensive social unrest and fighting, so much so that documents

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<sup>110</sup> Searing, 13.

<sup>111</sup> Searing, 13.

<sup>112</sup> Searing, 13

<sup>113</sup> Searing, 14.

<sup>114</sup> Searing, 12

show that from 1526-1550, more slaves of Wolof origin were imported than during any other time period. When the Jolof kingdom broke apart, there was a significant increase of slaves taken to the coast and sold to the Portuguese, who then transported them throughout Europe and the Americas.<sup>115</sup>

After his victory, Amari became the supreme ruler of the “dual-kingdom” of Cayor-Bawol and continued the process of shifting the kingdom’s power to the south and southeast. Amari’s concentration of power in a centralized Wolof state extended to the south. He usurped the local authority of the Wolof and Sereer *laman* and encroached upon the power of local Lebu leaders, who had previously directed their local communities with more autonomy but now had to accept the supremacy of the new monarchy.<sup>116</sup>

Amari also diminished the former *lamans*’ strength by increasing his authority over them and increasing the monarchy’s ties to Islam. During his rule, Amari founded a new capital, *Mbul*, and at the same time created a new head *laman* with the title *jawrin Mbul*, who was in charge of the important *laman* council of electors, *laman jawatil*. The council’s role, which had previously provided some pushback to the king, was severely diminished now that Amari could personally appoint an ally to control their decisions. Amari also increased the role of the Moors of Cayor, *Naaru Cayor*. To those who “accepted a client status,” he gave land grants and presents. Successive kings of Cayor would continue to diminish the role of the *laman* and increase the power and authority of the *marabouts*, or spiritual leaders, who aligned themselves with the royal family.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Sweet, 89.

<sup>116</sup> Searing, 14.

<sup>117</sup> Searing 16.

The monarchy's succession, as established by Amari, was matrilineal in nature. This pattern of succession grew out of the "competition between children with different mothers in the polygamous household."<sup>118</sup> The maternal side of the family was considered to be the "owner" of material goods and wealth, most importantly, slaves and cattle. Both the slaves and different caste groups would align with different maternal lines, and these loyalties provided power and competition as the different groups jockeyed for position.

Although men ruled the royal matrilineages, women played integral roles within the political system and also influenced the scene through their control of material wealth. The *lingeer*, or queen, was often the king's mother, sister, or aunt. The *lingeer* was even more powerful than the king's first wife (*awo*). The women of the matrilineages oversaw the work of the slaves, both field and domestic, and played a significant role in the aristocratic families.<sup>119</sup> Over time, Cayor became the most powerful state in the region; though there were several dynastic disputes and wars, it remained a central power over the next century.

The time period from 1695-1860 is known as the Wolof Old Regime. This time period began with the royal matrilineage Geej's consolidation of power over both Cayor and Bawol and ended with French governor Faidherbe's incursions into the interior. The story of the Geej matrilineage centers around Latsukaabe Fall, who legend says came from humble beginnings and eventually became king over both Cayor and Bawol. The old system that Latsukaabe started was characterized by a tyrannical military regime that

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<sup>118</sup> Searing, 15.

<sup>119</sup> Searing, 16.

was “dominated by aristocrats and their slave warriors.”<sup>120</sup> Slavery also expanded as a result of aristocratic despotism.

Latsukaabe replicated Amari’s control of both Cayor and Bawol, something that most leaders since Amari had been unable to do. Latsukaabe achieved this feat through military means and not necessarily through any legitimate claims to the throne. Latsukaabe came from Bawol, and his matrilineal line, the Geej, had never previously controlled Bawol or Cayor. In order to counter claims of illegitimacy, Latsukaabe relied on his miraculous personal history, a myth that follows the founding king archetype. According to legend, Latsukaabe was a cripple from birth and unable to walk without crutches. His brothers were embarrassed with the shame that his disability brought upon the royal family, and they persuaded their father to drive Latsukaabe away. Latsukaabe sought refuge with his maternal uncle, who was a Fulbe shepherd. As he lived the life of a shepherd, Latsukaabe was healed from his infirmity and eventually gained the strength to challenge his brothers for the throne.<sup>121</sup>

According to legend, a *marabout* gave Latsukaabe magical powders which he used against his brothers to prevent their battle wounds from healing. Wolof custom dictated that the king must be completely healthy, so he used the extra time it took his brothers to heal to court the support of the “notables, nobles, and royal slaves of Bawol.”<sup>122</sup> There are many stories of Latsukaabe’s kindness and generosity toward the nobles, and when his brothers had finally recovered from their injuries, Latsukaabe was able to convince the council of electors to choose him as king over his brothers.

However, Latsukaabe’s brothers did not relinquish their desire for the throne easily, so

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<sup>120</sup> Searing, 18.

<sup>121</sup> Searing, 19.

<sup>122</sup> Searing, 20.

Latsukaabe challenged them to fight and eventually killed each brother to win the throne. It was this legacy and central power at Cayor that Poncet had to negotiate with during his time as governor of Gorée. However, despite Searing's explanation of a dual-kingdom power situated in Cayor, Bawol appeared to have some autonomy from Cayor. In order to establish a trading post at Joal, Poncet dealt with the king of Bawol rather than Cayor, indicating a certain amount of independence.

As soon as Poncet arrived on Gorée, he set to work reestablishing French links to the mainland Africans. He sent the necessary customs and presents to the Damel, who was the King of Cayor. The Damel in return said he would allow the French to reestablish the trading posts that had existed under the *Compagnie des Indes*.<sup>123</sup> Poncet also gained favor with the Damel by rescuing one of his brothers, who had been a prisoner on board a British ship. Poncet offered nine slaves to replace the Damel's brother, and he expressed confidence that the Damel would repay him in kind or through other merchandise.<sup>124</sup> This rescue actually led the Damel to cede land from the coast of Cape Verde (the coast to the north of Dakar) to the French and ensured French access to the points of Dakar and Bin.<sup>125</sup> Poncet's rescue of the Damel's brother stands as his greatest achievement with regards to the Africans.

With the agreement with Cayor, Poncet reestablished the trading posts of Bin and Dakar on Cape Bernard and Cape Manuel. However, he envisioned these acquisitions as more than mere supply posts for Gorée: he saw them as launching pads for future endeavors in the region. To the north of Cayor and along the Senegal River lay the fort of Bamboue, which had previously belonged to the *Compagnie des Indes*. The value of

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<sup>123</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), October 5, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 15.

<sup>124</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), October 5, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 15v.

<sup>125</sup> Summary of Mesnager letter, January 29, 1767, ANOM, série C6 15.

the fort of Bamboue lay in its proximity to the gold mines that Poncet wanted to exploit. The Africans of the Kingdom of the Foules, situated near the fort of Bamboue, had taken control of the fort when the French lost it during the Seven Years' War, and they were guarding it from the British, awaiting the French return. Poncet explained, "they tell us constantly that they are holding it for us,"<sup>126</sup> but British control of the Senegal River and Poncet's insufficient funds made it impossible at the time to seize such a tempting source of wealth.

Poncet had great visions for the fort and put forward a plan to access the mines. He explained that if he "had the funds...he would send a caravan of camels laden with merchandise to take possession of the area, with a dozen of the most independent Europeans and an equal number of the most diligent blacks. The camels would carry with them enough supplies to sustain the fort for a long period of time."<sup>127</sup> Poncet also noted that the twelve cannons on the fort would provide a good defense if they brought the necessary powder. Despite Poncet's optimism for such a project, the French would most certainly have been unable to keep a remote French station stocked when supplying Gorée and its coastal trading posts had already proven difficult.

Poncet continued to sketch out this potential project and explained that if his plan were approved, he would send word to Siratique, King of the Foules. Together, they would organize caravans that would run through his country between the fort of Bamboue to Dakar and Bin. Poncet would also "seize the first favorable moment to place a small garrison in the fort of Bamboue."<sup>128</sup> Poncet, ever eager to discount British concerns, argued that the British could not have any problems with them retaking the fort

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<sup>126</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>127</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>128</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

and that the French were well within their rights from the Treaty of Paris to do so. It is unlikely, however, that the British, especially given Poncet's other actions, would have reacted kindly to such French efforts.

To make matters more difficult, the French would have to travel through Cayor and Jolof to reach the mines of Bamboue. Poncet did not express any concern about the Damel's amenability to such a plan, but the King of Jolof, Bourbaylof, would have likely provided more resistance. Poncet, confident in his military genius, boasted that if Bourbaylof did not want to accommodate him, he would "make war on him through the Damel."<sup>129</sup> Poncet explained the rivalry between the two kingdoms and said he would give the Damel "presents of powder and balls in order to engage him to attack Bourbaylof" and that he could even "furnish him a detachment and cannons."<sup>130</sup> Poncet's plans centered on military maneuvering, and he gave little thought to the potential consequences of military action, nor did he mention any non-violent avenues for placating the King of Jolof.

Poncet then explained that the French would initially have to hide their interests in exploiting the mines and instead gain the friendship of the neighboring kings by trading with them. How waging war with Jolof through Cayor would lead to better relations with the different kingdoms was not entirely understandable, but Poncet, blinded by the prospect of easy gold, was fixated on the prospect of the riches the mines could provide. He believed the mines of Bamboue would allow the French to found an establishment "as rich as that of Brazil, of which the mines are not as abundant as those"

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<sup>129</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>130</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.



of Bamboue, and he proposed putting himself at the head of the operation.<sup>131</sup> Poncet saw in this venture just as much potential for his own personal gain as he did for that of the French crown. Poncet once again displayed his interest in projects for the crown that he could benefit from at the same time.

Poncet, overly optimistic, believed the project would only cost the French government 100,000 francs to begin, and after two years of development, the French would be ready to make the “grand expedition.” At this point, Poncet proposed that the French would send him troops to explore the mines. Poncet explained that he “would only ask for three hundred whites of whom two hundred and fifty men would be light cavalry and fifty artillery.” He would also take six hundred blacks that he would form into companies and arm like Europeans. Poncet said in addition, he would take half the troops of the Damel and other allies to fortify their position. Poncet saw the value in using Africans, who were well suited for the hard work in the region. He explained that “if these blacks had been raised in France...he would take an even greater part, as they would understand French, they would be able to discipline them like Europeans.”<sup>132</sup> Because they were “acclimated and accustomed to the heat, [they] would be worth infinitely more than the Europeans for work.”<sup>133</sup>

Poncet envisioned an enduring presence in the Bamboue region and was not interested in “temporary profits” such as the Moroccans had previously extracted from the mines. Poncet explained that “it is on the work of the blacks that it would be engaged, thus, the more workers there were, the more that would be gained.” Poncet envisioned a quota of one *gros* of gold a day; thus, if the French could get “ten thousand

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<sup>131</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>132</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>133</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

black workers in their service in the mines, they could count on ten thousand *gros* of gold each day.”<sup>134</sup> Poncet saw an endless supply of gold in the mountains of Bambooue, and it could also function a possible place to send misbehaving whites for punishment. If they allowed the whites to keep one fourth of what they found, they would be happy to go and work there. Poncet believed that if they treated the whites well enough, they would not desert to the neighboring African kingdoms.<sup>135</sup>

It is somewhat difficult to pinpoint Poncet’s motivation for such an expansive project. Poncet’s letters demonstrated that he was trying to impress his superiors. He seemed to have a plan for everything and believe in the ideas he was putting forward. One striking detail he left out of his plans was how to address health concerns. It is hard to imagine the French being able to care for the health needs of Europeans so far inland. Poncet’s solution for disease rested on his grand scheme of getting Africans to work, but this plan would have been much easier in theory than practice.

But Poncet, clearly enthused, appeared dazzled by the possibility of striking it rich in the gold mines. By offering to lead the project, Poncet stood to gain the most by its success. Poncet wanted to get the ball rolling, telling Choiseul that as soon as he sent the funds, he would get to work. But Poncet’s plans ignored the reality on the ground. Poncet had done little to repair and restore Gorée, so sustaining an additional colonial outpost would be difficult. Although Poncet presented ambitious goals, he neglected the small projects that were truly necessary to keep the French position in the region strong.

Poncet also displayed a callous nature toward the Africans. He saw no problem with sparking war between Cayor and Jolof for French gain. While this approach may

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<sup>134</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>135</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

not have been out of the ordinary for a European, Poncet did not seem to believe there could be any possible blowback from the British or other African kingdoms. Poncet's military mind may have been helpful during the Seven Years' War, but as governor, he needed to cultivate a more diplomatic approach.

The record regarding Bawol is less extensive than that of Cayor, but Poncet also sent the King of Bawol the token offerings. The king did not respond right away; however, he did allow the infantry officer, Jacquier, who was captaining the longboat, the *Volage*, to establish a trading post inside his kingdom at Joal.<sup>136</sup> Over a year later, and not long before the French recalled Poncet, Poncet sent the *habitant* mayor of Gorée, Louis Kiaka, to Portudal. Poncet gave Kiaka instructions to work in concert with the French resident, Beauvillian, to repair and improve the trading post of Portudal. Another main reason for his trip was to make contact with the King of Bawol and tell him the British had given him poisoned brandy. Poncet likely wanted to inhibit British trade with the king of Bawol, but it is ironic that he would accuse the British of poisoning, because Poncet became very angry when he believed the British had told the King of Salum the French had offered him poisoned brandy. Poncet also appeared to tell Kiaka to offer the King of Bawol sixty bars for inhibiting the British from going to Senegal.<sup>137</sup> Poncet desired strong relations with the Africans not just for trade but as means to rival the British.

While Poncet engaged the kings of Cayor and Bawol to the north, he also interacted extensively with the kings of Bar and Salum along the Gambia River. The French presence on the river began long before Poncet arrived, when the French

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<sup>136</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), October 5, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 12.

<sup>137</sup> Poncet to Louis Kiaka, January 11, 1765, ANOM, série E 338,166.

*Compagnie du Senegal* first founded the trading post of Albreda on the river in 1681.

The trading post was only five kilometers downriver from the British fort on Saint James Island. Over the next two centuries, the British and French would compete for trade with the Mandinka state of Niimi. The Mansas of Niimi, who were rulers of the area known as the Kingdom of Bar, required the European powers to pay tributes in order to trade and land on the north side of the Gambia River.<sup>138</sup> Just up the river, close to where the British were stationed, lay the Kingdom of Salum, composed of the Sereer. During Poncet's tenure, Salum allied itself with the British. During this time, the French and the British would continue to compete for the favor of both kingdoms.

It took a bit longer to reestablish the French trading post at Albreda, but the Kingdom of Bar offered a warm welcome for the French. The King of Bar had protected Albreda when the French suffered their losses during the Seven Years' War, and he forbade the British from taking over, despite a few attempts to gain access. A black Christian named Faudet served as the king's representative, and, partial to the French, he consistently refused British presents to gain access to the trading post.<sup>139</sup> The King of Bar also favored the French because British interlopers from Liverpool and Bristol had sailed past the Kingdom of Bar, refusing to pay the "customary dues" during the Seven Years' War. They had done so despite British officials' efforts to get them to pay.<sup>140</sup> Poncet reported that the British governor, Debat, unsuccessfully tried to bribe the King of Bar away from the French. These stories very well could have happened, but Faudet also could have been playing up the British attention in order to get better payments and

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<sup>138</sup> Brooks, 145.

<sup>139</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), October 5, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 15v.

<sup>140</sup> Brooks, 263.

increased loyalty from the French. Poncet would have also been ready to think the worst of the British and find reasons to fight them.

Poncet continued to reach out to Faudet and the King of Bar. He fixed some of Faudet's guns and had Jacquier present them. Faudet had also asked Poncet to provide a sawyer to work on some projects, but Poncet did not have the men to spare. However, it is very telling that Faudet felt comfortable asking for such a service, which was out of the ordinary customs and presents. As the French increased their presence on the Gambia, tensions began to rise between Bar and Salum.<sup>141</sup> Poncet wrote to Jacquier at Albreda concerning his relationship with Faudet. Jacquier appeared to be having trouble communicating and working with the aging representative. Poncet asked Jacquier to "have much consideration for him [Faudet] from now on. You note to me this man is old, and that he begins to repeat himself. I had not perceived that myself, and he spoke to me with great energy and great reason. Visit him often, if he speaks a little, let him speak without showing any contempt. Respond to him with reason."<sup>142</sup> Poncet also sent along several presents and told Jacquier to do his best to support Faudet and give him what he could from his stores, despite the lack of French supplies. The French could not afford to lose the support of the Kingdom of Bar. Poncet admonished Jacquier to "always consider Faudet and the King of Bar as your friends and Mr. Debat as a concealed enemy."<sup>143</sup> Poncet saw the Kingdom of Bar as an essential buffer against British competition, and he did not want to lose it.

While Poncet solidified relations with the Kingdom of Bar, he also reached out to the King of Salum, but his efforts were less than successful. All of the kings in the region

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<sup>141</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, February 8, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 63.

<sup>142</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, April 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 111, 111v.

<sup>143</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, April 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 111, 111v.

had responded favorably to Poncet's overtures except for the King of Salum, who sent no response at all. Due to conflicting stories, Poncet's reaction to the King of Salum's rejection is somewhat difficult to decipher. In his version of the story, Poncet sent the four envoys in another attempt to gain the king's favor. During their visit, a British merchant convinced the King of Salum that the French were offering him poisoned brandy, so the king ordered their immediate arrest.<sup>144</sup> Poncet explained that this British merchant was an interloper on the Salum River and the captain of a ship belonging to Debat. It is, however, unclear how Poncet came to know of the poisoned brandy story in the first place.

French officers who criticized Poncet later said he had been frustrated with the failed overture and rashly sent four Africans to the king to send his reproaches.<sup>145</sup> The King of Salum did not take the criticism well, and he had the four envoys taken captive and sold to the British merchant who traded with him. The captives were then taken to Fort James.<sup>146</sup> It is hard to tell which version of the story is true. But even as rash and zealous as Poncet was, it would be hard to imagine him reacting angrily so quickly to a king he was trying to woo.

Once Poncet realized he was not going to convince the King of Salum to leave the British and join the French, he turned his military mind to the situation of the Gambia, pitting the King of Bar against the King of Salum. It is unclear who started the conflict between Bar and Salum, and both the French and British likely fanned the flames, but Poncet proved to be the rasher and more volatile of the leaders. At some point, Faudet must have reported to Poncet through Jacquier that Salum was making preparations for

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<sup>144</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 237.

<sup>145</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 236v.

<sup>146</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 237v.

war against Bar, because Poncet wrote Jacquier, telling him to inform Faudet of the British support for Salum and let him know it was the British who wanted to make war with them through Salum.<sup>147</sup> By saying this, Poncet tried to both strengthen the French relationship with Bar and further alienate it from the British. Poncet believed the British were trying to get the King of Salum to push the French out of Albreda, but Faudet did not need Poncet to tell him that the British were likely behind the movement.

According to Poncet, Debat bribed the King of Salum with presents to make war against Bar, with the added enticement of pillaging Albreda if they won. Although it is certainly plausible that Debat may have tried to stir up the Kingdom of Salum against the Kingdom of Bar, it is not entirely clear how Poncet would have learned of this in the first place. He may have just assumed that this was the case, as he easily found reasons to believe people were working against him. Faudet could have also reported this to Poncet, but Faudet would not have been an uninterested party in his testimony, and there is no clear indication how he would have known what the secret conversations between the British and King of Salum entailed.

Whatever the case, the King of Bar made defensive preparations, and Poncet took advantage of the situation by arming Albreda.<sup>148</sup> According to Poncet, the King of Salum's forces attacked the villages situated on the outside of the Kingdom of Bar and suffered great losses. During the King of Salum's offensive, he had left his interior defenseless. Poncet, seizing this opportunity, ordered Duval and Aussenac of the ship *Les Deux Amis de l'Orient* to attack and burn the villages of Salum, taking nine captives

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<sup>147</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, February 8, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 63.

<sup>148</sup> Poncet to Dubuq, September 10, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15;

of which he kept six for himself.<sup>149</sup> This attack made a great impression on the King of Salum, who was then afraid of running afoul of Poncet in the future.

But the attack on Salum did not arise out of concern for the King of Bar. Poncet had started thinking about his plans in the midst of a hostage debate with the British, and in a letter, he told Jacquier to tell the King of Bar's representative, Faudet, that Bar should not expect Salum to attack it. Poncet did not initially believe the King of Salum would attack, despite what he thought were British urgings. Poncet reasoned that the King of Salum would have a hard time crossing the necessary rivers without being seen. A successful attack force would probably make up three-fourths of his troops, which would be hard to hide along the river.<sup>150</sup>

Poncet appeared more interested in using the conflict between Bar and Salum to his advantage, rather than trying to smooth out the situation. He was able to justify fortifying Albreda, and he also wanted to flex his military strength in the region. The motivation for the incursion likely hinged on retribution for his spurned overtures and his four envoys that had been taken captive. Poncet wanted to show his strong hand, impress the King of Salum with his power, and possibly take a few captives at the same time. It is also entirely possible that Poncet did not know of the King of Salum's attack on the King of Bar when he sent the ship to attack the interior of the Kingdom of Salum, or he may have made the story up later to justify his actions. Whatever the true story, Poncet's plan was not a complete success because he also heightened tensions with the British, who were already wary of his intentions. Poncet all too often appeared ready to use force when problems required a softer hand.

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<sup>149</sup> "Imputations faites à Mr. Poncet de la Riviere cy devant Gouverneur de Gorée," 1768, ANOM, série E 338, 356v, 357. ; Excerpt from letter written by Poncet, May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>150</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, February 25, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 73.



A few months later, Poncet took a slaving trip up the Gambia River. Poncet was forced to wait at Albreda for caravans stopped at Yanimaron, a village further up the river that lay beyond the British fort on Saint James Island. Poncet did not want to try to pass the island, so he sent for the caravans to come down. Poncet reported that the British tried to get their ally, the King of Salum, to stop the caravans from travelling through their kingdom, but he refused.<sup>151</sup> Poncet believed his attack had intimidated the King of Salum so much that the King did not want to risk having the French attack once again. Poncet also reported that the King of Salum wanted to improve relations with the French and he was supposed to send a representative to work towards this goal.<sup>152</sup> It is possible that this was either the truth or wishful thinking on Poncet's part because the representative was never sent, and at the time of Poncet's letter, he was already in trouble for his actions as governor, among them for his attack on the King of Salum. While he may have gained some respect, it only made the British angry and more hostile to the French presence.

The French relationship with the Kingdom of Bar was also not as sure as Poncet made it sound or appeared to believe. One of the main reasons the Kingdom of Bar supported the French was Faudet's influence, and he was growing old and weak. By the time Poncet had been recalled, there were signs that the strong French alliance with Bar was cracking amidst strong British competition. Poncet's antagonistic actions had likely spurred the British to further contest the French on the Gambia. Not long after Mesnager arrived, the British offered the King of Bar to make up for all the customs the British had not paid in the past and to double the price of future customs if they gave them exclusive

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<sup>151</sup> Poncet to Dubuq, September 10, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>152</sup> Poncet to Dubuq, September 10, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

rights to trade at Albreda. Faudet apparently refused the offer, but Mesnager explained that “it is not doubtful that if Faudet, who is very old, died, the trading post of Albreda would be closed that same day.”<sup>153</sup> The Kingdom of Bar supported the French more because of Faudet than anything Poncet had done to build up relations. The French position also proved to be much more precarious than Poncet reported to his superiors back home. Although the French enjoyed strong relations with Bar, the situation could change in the blink of an eye at the death or whim of an individual.

Poncet’s actions reflected Choiseul’s emphasis on the importance of building strong ties with the African kingdoms surrounding Gorée. However, Choiseul gave Poncet too much leeway, and Poncet believed all his actions were in line with his French superiors, even though his decisions created other challenges that jeopardized France’s other long-range goals for the region. Destablizing the French relationship with the British was one consequence of this myopic vision. Because both Choiseul and Poncet were hyperfocused on France’s relationships with the African kingdoms, they overlooked other relationships and plans that were essential to establishing a stable position in the region.

Poncet’s greatest successes as governor came through interactions with the African kingdoms, but it is likely that any French governor would have enjoyed many of the same achievements. Although Poncet enjoyed considerably better relations with different African kingdoms than he did with the *habitants*, and French officers and workers, his relationships with the African rulers were helped by many things out of his control. The Kingdom of Bar already had a good relationship with the French before his arrival, which was only helped by previous independent British ships that had run afoul

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<sup>153</sup> Mesnager to Choiseul, June 13, 1765, ANOM, série C6 15.

of the Kingdom of Bar for not paying the appropriate customs. Poncet's main success lay in his rescue of the Damel's brother, but even he did not imagine the possible benefits that such an action would bring. Poncet also may have extended the French influence, but that came at the cost of stability on Gorée and as well as the French and British relationship. All in all, Poncet's record with the different African kingdoms remains a mixed bag, and many of the positives were not a result of his initiatives.

## Chapter 4: Poncet and the British

When Poncet arrived on Gorée on September 12, 1763, he and the French captain M. de Luppé worked quickly to negotiate the prompt surrender of the island. Cautious about overwhelming the small British garrison of thirty-one soldiers, Poncet unloaded only an equal number of French troops. Once the French took control of the island, the small British garrison was boarded on de Luppé's ship to be transported to Saint Louis, or what they called Senegal. The British were unable to reach Saint Louis without help because they had only one ship in the harbor, a slaving vessel bound for the Gambia River. Once the British had boarded de Luppé's ship, the French on Gorée raised the French flag on Fort Saint Michel and sang *Te Deum*. The British remained on de Luppé's ship until September 26, but at that point, de Luppé grew anxious about his other commissioned duties from the French crown, so Poncet ordered that the British garrison be loaded onto M. de Rozier's ship, *La Solide*, and they left for Saint Louis in mid-October 1763, finally leaving the French in sole control of the island.<sup>154</sup>

Poncet treated the British with great hospitality as they waited for passage to Saint Louis, frequently inviting the officers to eat at his table. The former British commander of the island, Mr. de Bunbury, was grateful to Poncet for his kindness and wanted to compensate him for his care. He offered him expensive presents, but Poncet refused them, so Bunbury instead offered him a mortar of grenades and two cannons. Poncet accepted these gifts. He had the cannons placed on the front of the coastal trading schooners, and he kept the mortar for himself, which was really only good for

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<sup>154</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), October 5, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 12v, 13.

fireworks.<sup>155</sup> Poncet hit it off well with Bunbury, and even though the island was in shambles, he did not hold that against the British. The immediate transition of the island appears to have gone smoothly, with no French officers under Poncet complaining about the initial transfer, except for his treatment of de Luppé. Poncet likely approached the beginning of his governorship with more caution and prudence than he did the rest of his tenure, and his good relationship with Bunbury probably played a role in how he treated the British on the island at its takeover. But this beginning was the only real bright spot in Poncet's interactions with the British, and his relationship with them steadily deteriorated.

Soon after Poncet arrived at Gorée, he reestablished and refortified the French presence at Albreda. As the French and British jockeyed for power and influence in the region, many of their conflicts revolved around Albreda. While most historians have focused on the arming of Albreda as the main friction point between the British and French, they have ignored Poncet's rash actions and behavior that unnerved the British well before he fortified the fort: Poncet supported French officer Salvigny despite Salvigny's incivility towards the British commander Debat on the Gambia; Poncet took the British ship *The Sussex* hostage; and he attacked Salum, which was the only British ally on the river. All of these actions increased the friction between the two nations. In some ways, Poncet's hostage taking was a greater source of tension between the British and French than his arming of Albreda. Although the French fortification of Albreda was not insignificant, the culmination of Poncet's many actions was what ruffled the feathers of the British. Poncet's relationship with the British started off decently, but through many aggressive and poorly planned decisions, he eventually wore their patience thin.

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<sup>155</sup> Poncet to Dubuq ( ?), January 18, 1768, ANOM, série E 338, 398, 398v.

Poncet's problems with the British sometimes involved the African kingdoms on the mainland, which he hoped to sway in his favor against the British.

Even during more amicable times, such as the beginning of Poncet's tenure, communication between the French and the British was not easy. The records contain several examples of miscommunications between Saint Louis and Gorée that occurred even when both sides appeared to be trying to get along. After the transfer of power on Gorée, the French and British had a few misunderstandings. One concerned the free movement of *habitants* between Gorée and Saint Louis. On September 25, 1763, British Governor Barnes wrote the French on Gorée informing them that if any *habitants* of Saint Louis wanted to go live under the French at Gorée, they would be free to do so, but they would have to forfeit their "inclosures," or land. *Habitants* who wanted to visit their family members on the island would also be free to do so, provided they obtained proper approval from British authorities beforehand.<sup>156</sup>

Despite this letter, rumors spread through *habitants* visiting from Saint Louis that Governor Barnes had confiscated property from *habitants* who had merely been visiting the island. Governor Bunbury, who was still on Gorée at the time, wrote a letter to Governor Barnes at the beginning of October, informing him of the swirling rumors. On October 16, 1763, Governor Barnes wrote Gorée hoping to clear up this matter and informed them that the rumors were false.<sup>157</sup> This misunderstanding did not appear to have a significant impact on relations between the French and British, but it displays how complicated communication could be even when on good terms. Simple communications

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<sup>156</sup> Barnes (?) to Poncet, September 25, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 9.

<sup>157</sup> Barnes (?) to Poncet (?), October 16, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 23.

could be misunderstood, and other individuals, such as the *habitants* or mainland Africans, could interpret actions differently and share their version with others.

Another example of miscommunication happened in December 1763. Poncet wrote Bunbury, who was still at Saint Louis awaiting transport to Britain, regarding slaves of Mr. Salvigny. Poncet had somehow received information that the slaves were being detained by the governor. Governor Barnes wrote back saying he knew nothing about the situation and appeared perturbed by Poncet's requests. "You say that I have detained certain slaves belonging to M. de Salvigny, which you had desired captain Bunbury to demand of me. I do not know what foundation you have for this assertion, but I can freely declare to you that I am an absolute stranger to the affair...If M. de Salvigny has any effects here, I know nothing of them, nor do I wish to know."<sup>158</sup> It is interesting to note that Poncet chose to write Bunbury, whom he must have felt more comfortable asking for help and who he thought might curry favor with Governor Barnes. Once again, this was an example of a simple miscommunication, but it also showed that Poncet's relationship with Barnes was not the strongest. Barnes' tone was exasperated and annoyed.

The first real sign that Poncet's approach meant trouble with the British happened along the Gambia River. Most of Poncet's problems with the British understandably had some connection to the Gambia because the British controlled the Senegal River and the Gambia River was where the French were making their greatest efforts to build up the slave trade and compete with the British. On November 31, 1764, Poncet wrote Salvigny, who was captaining a ship on its way to the Gambia to trade with the King of Bar and strengthen the French presence at Albreda. Salvigny's ship was probably at Joal

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<sup>158</sup> Barnes to Poncet, December 12, 1763, ANOM, série E 338.

or Portudal, trading posts situated further down the Petite Côte between Albreda and Gorée, when he received the letter. Poncet informed Salvigny that a British ship had stopped at Gorée. Poncet had welcomed it and even secured promises from its crew, possibly concerning not trading at Albreda, but he urged Salvigny to reach the Gambia as soon as possible in order to beat the British. For Poncet, the spirit of competition with the British was high. He then urged Salvigny to not stay a long time in the Gambia and to try to trade through Mr. Polchet, who was stationed at Portudal or Joal and well-versed in trading on the Gambia and with the King of Bar. If Polchet was unable to help, then he should try to trade with the King of Bar under Polchet's name.<sup>159</sup>

But Poncet's plans to beat the British ship to the Gambia River hit a snag when it became apparent that Polchet was sick and could not make the trip. Upon hearing this news, Poncet speedily sent Mr. de Grand Jean from Gorée to Portudal to join Salvigny's ship. Grand Jean was to help trade with the King of Bar and solidify the French presence at Albreda; he had orders to stay at Albreda, working on rebuilding until Polchet regained his strength and could replace him. Poncet also planned on sending French officer Mr. Rozier du Rezier to Gambia as soon as he returned from Saint Louis after transporting the British garrison.<sup>160</sup> Rozier's trip to Saint Louis actually had a momentary positive effect on the French and British relationship. It sparked a kind note from Governor Barnes on November 6, 1763. Barnes, who had not met Poncet in person, mentioned that he had heard good things about him from others, including Mr. Rozier. Barnes also asked for future correspondence and offered the standard hand of help if Poncet were to need it.<sup>161</sup> But this letter was only a momentary bright spot, and events after this letter turned the

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<sup>159</sup> Poncet to Salvigny, November 1, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 25.

<sup>160</sup> Poncet to Salvigny, November 4, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 26.

<sup>161</sup> Barnes to Poncet, November 6, 1769, ANOM série E 338, 27.



French and British relationship sour. Poncet wanted to send Rozier to assist Salvigny at Albreda if possible, but Poncet ordered Salvigny to set sail for the Gambia as soon as Grand Jean arrived.<sup>162</sup>

Poncet's zeal and competitive nature towards the British provided one of the greatest challenges to a constructive French and British relationship. Poncet warily eyed most British ships in the region, and, maybe for good reason, told the officers under him to not trust certain British ships and traders and to get the Africans on the mainland to see them as pirates.<sup>163</sup> But Poncet also hatched plans and schemes that could have sparked greater conflicts with the British beyond the Senegambia region rather quickly. In one of his letters to Salvigny, Poncet told him that at the return of the armed longboat, he would send it with a detachment to join the other boat anchored at the mouth of the Boursalum River, and they were to shoot any British ships that entered or left the river.<sup>164</sup> Poncet may have been referring only referring to British interlopers, but he does not make the distinction, and he seems all too willing to go after the British if the opportunity arose. It is this attitude that really caused tensions to rise.

On November 10, 1763, Poncet wrote another letter to Salvigny informing him of a British ship and captain who had become stranded at Gorée, but this ship did not appear to be the one that Salvigny was supposed to beat to the Gambia. Poncet also wanted to inform Salvigny that Rozier was going to hurry to Gorée as quickly as possible and that as soon as he arrived, Poncet would send him to the Gambia River on the ship that Mr. de

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<sup>162</sup> Poncet to Salvigny, November 1, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 26.

<sup>163</sup> Poncet to Salvigny, December 4, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 44.

<sup>164</sup> Poncet to Salvigny, November 28, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 43v.

Gradis had promised. Poncet's letter portrayed an earnest desire to get the slave trade going in the Gambia.<sup>165</sup>

On November 17, Poncet wrote to Salvigny, who had arrived at Albreda. Poncet wanted Salvigny to trade for slaves right away at the best price possible. Salvigny was also to trade using the merchandise on behalf of several different people on Gorée: Mr. Pallieau, Fabre, and the surgeon. It is unclear what these other officers on Gorée wanted the slaves for, but they could have wanted them to help with their duties on the island, or they may have been involved in the slave trade themselves. Poncet restricted conducting the actual slave trade negotiations to Salvigny, and in his absence, Grand Jean had authority to take over. Poncet gave Salvigny a month to make the trade, and if he was unable to get a full supply of slaves within that time frame, he was supposed to return. Poncet promised to send a longboat to transport Salvigny and send him back to France for other duties. They were also supposed to leave one thousand bars worth of merchandise at Albreda.<sup>166</sup> It was not much later that Jacquier, lieutenant of the infantry at Albreda, left Gorée on December 15 and arrived on Albreda soon after to serve as the French representative at the trading post.<sup>167 168</sup>

Salvigny's behavior after his arrival at Albreda bothered the British governor on Saint James Island, Debat. During the several weeks that Salvigny was on the Gambia, Debat became very angry with his behavior. Debat found Salvigny's actions at odds with Poncet's civil and kind letters, but unbeknownst to Debat, Salvigny was only acting in line with Poncet's vision for the region. Salvigny first irked Debat with his arrival at

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<sup>165</sup> Poncet to Salvigny, November 10, 1763, , ANOM, série E 338, 30.

<sup>166</sup> Poncet to Salvigny, November 17, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 39.

<sup>167</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, February 8, 1764 , ANOM, série E 338, 63.

<sup>168</sup> Poncet to Salvigny, December 15, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 51.

Albreda, where he delayed sending Poncet's letters for three days. When he did send the letters, they were brought by a black man and contained an inadequate apology. Debat appeared annoyed both with the delay and the fact that a black man had brought the letters rather than someone of a higher rank.<sup>169</sup> Debat, however, overlooked Salvigny's insulting behavior, believing that he had acted in ignorance and that his actions did not represent what Poncet desired.<sup>170</sup> Poncet suspected Debat may have also wanted recognition that the British fort was the preeminent force on the river, but Debat's letter avoided any hint that that was the case.

Salvigny had not been at Albreda long when two of his sailors deserted and arrived on Saint James Island, offering their service to the British. Debat wisely turned them away, saying he could not take them in without a letter from their officers. Debat correctly understood that receiving and harboring deserting French sailors and officers would do little to maintain peaceful French and British relations in the region. A few days after this incident, two more French sailors took a canoe and, under the cover of night, arrived at Saint James Island. Salvigny and Jacquier arrived on the island that morning as well, presumably to conduct other matters of business, but they told Debat of the two men who had escaped the previous night. Debat, who had heard nothing of the two men before Salvigny and Jacquier's visit, assured them he would deliver them if they showed up. Debat and the French officers decided to take a walk around the island, and while walking they chanced upon the canoe the deserters had used to get on the island.<sup>171</sup>

After Salvigny and Jacquier had returned to Albreda, Salvigny wrote a menacing letter to Debat, probably accusing Debat of harboring the deserters. Debat found

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<sup>169</sup> Debat to Poncet, January 28, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 61.

<sup>170</sup> Debat to Poncet, January 28, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 61v.

<sup>171</sup> Debat to Poncet, January 28, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 61v.

Salvigny's letter offensive, especially because Debat had previously sent back other deserters and deserved to be trusted rather than insulted. Debat would have liked to have turned the two deserters over to the French immediately but was unable to do so that day because the rules of the British garrison stipulated that a report of the arrival of the canoe and two men must be made before they were turned over, and the report could not be made until the next morning. Had Salvigny waited until the next morning, he would have been able to have the men.<sup>172</sup>

Debat left it up to Poncet to punish Salvigny how he saw fit but made it clear that if it were up to him, he would punish such an officer severely. Debat explained to Poncet that Salvigny's behavior was more than just a small incident: it had possible larger-range consequences by disrespecting the British crown. Debat explained to Poncet:

You no doubt know, sir the respect that is due to each other's flag, the one I have the honour to hoist, in this case is insulted, I presume and hope this conduct is far from being agreeable to your sentiments and that what is requisite on the occasion will be done; as it will in future promote that harmony you seem so anxious for and which in every respect I would contribute my utmost to improve.<sup>173</sup>

Debat was clearly upset but trusted Poncet to discipline Salvigny, whom he found to be a disrespectful officer. At this point, Debat still believed that Poncet desired peaceful relations with the British. In this dispute, control and access to the Gambia River were at play; by not recognizing the British, the French were trying to assert their control. Poncet could have been more careful with his words and actions regarding Debat, but he believed he had the full backing of French officials and that he was accomplishing their goals by setting the stage to take back Senegal.

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<sup>172</sup> Debat to Poncet, January 28, 1764, ANOM, série E 338. 62.

<sup>173</sup> Debat to Poncet, January 28, 1764, ANOM, série E 338. 62.

On January 19, 1764, Debat wrote Jacquier regarding Salvigny and the two French deserters. He was still upset with Salvigny's "impertinent letter," and as a result, he could not yet send the two deserters back.<sup>174</sup> Whatever Jacquier had written to Debat previously, it must have pleased him because Debat invited him over to Saint James to talk about the issue over dinner and offered to send his own rowboat to pick him up. Debat probably did not feel comfortable working with Salvigny, and getting Jacquier away from Albreda where they could have a frank conversation probably felt like a good idea.<sup>175</sup>

While there is not a record of Poncet's response to Debat, Poncet's letters to Salvigny and Jacquier make it clear that he had no problem with the way Salvigny had behaved. Salvigny had written Poncet telling of some problems with the British. On November 28, 1763, Poncet wrote a letter to Salvigny, probably responding to Debat's frustration with not being visited as soon as Salvigny had arrived on the river. Poncet saw this reaction as Debat's effort to assert British dominance and to show them that the rulers of the Gambia were the British. He told Salvigny that he was not surprised with Debat's response; "they [the British] have always acted this way in regard to us; but thankfully we have the ability to do them as much harm as they [can], that they do not have any more strength than us."<sup>176</sup> Poncet's self-assured temperament was evident in his analysis, and he showed little fear of the British position. He also thought of the situation in military terms and not necessarily on a personal level. It is important to note that Poncet did not urge Salvigny to be prudent in his dealings with Debat but simply dismissed Debat's concerns as the British just being British.

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<sup>174</sup> Debat to Jacquier, ANOM, January 19, 1764, série E 338, 40.

<sup>175</sup> Debat to Jacquier, ANOM, January 19, 1764, série E 338, 40.

<sup>176</sup> Poncet to Salvigny, November 28, 1763, ANOM, série E 338, 42.

Poncet also wrote to Jacquier in February 1764 to give orders and to respond to Debat's January letter. Poncet argued that Debat's complaints were baseless and that it was not Salvigny's duty to report to the British as soon as he had arrived. Poncet explained that politeness would dictate that the last should visit the first, and if the French were to visit first, they would appear to be submitting to the British flag. There was no need to recognize the British fort's superiority over the trading post of Albreda, and Salvigny's delay had probably been caused by his sickness and not through any malicious intent. However, Poncet probably did not say any of these things to Debat and let him know that it had all been just a simple misunderstanding.<sup>177</sup>

Poncet conveniently left out any mention of the French deserters, which had been Debat's main concern in his letter, not the fact that Salvigny had not visited him right away. Poncet may have misinterpreted Debat's letter, which was written in English because he wanted to express his feelings clearly, and he generally wrote in French. But it is more likely that Poncet saw any affront to the French as British efforts to control and relegate the French to a position of submission, when the situation on the ground was different. His military mind saw military problems and solutions when the reality on the ground proved much more complex.

Despite these disagreements and potential sources of conflict, Debat tried to forget his problems with Salvigny and smooth things over. In January, he wrote to Albreda, hoping to catch Salvigny before he left for Gorée. He wanted to send a few bottles of beer to Poncet along with a letter and some young pigeons. He also invited Jacquier, with whom he seemed to have developed a friendship, to dine with him the next

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<sup>177</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, February 8, 1764 , ANOM, série E 338, 63.

Sunday.<sup>178</sup> Although Debat was not completely satisfied with Poncet's resolution of the matter, he decided that he would "say no more on the subject." After weeks of heated disagreements about the deserters, Poncet decided he wanted only one of them turned back over. Debat expressed his willingness to do so under the condition that the French "forgive him all his past offences on account of his youth."<sup>179</sup> Debat thanked Poncet for the offer to keep the second deserter, but Debat mentioned that this deserter's "want of knowledge in the English tongue"<sup>180</sup> made him more of a hindrance than a help and would send the second deserter where the deserter desired. Debat, in an attempt to offer an olive branch, ended his letter telling him of the English cheese and fourteen young pigeons he was sending Poncet's way.<sup>181</sup> Once again, Debat displayed a willingness to forgive and move on. He also showed an unprecedented care for the French deserters whom he had no need of supporting. Debat also probably hoped this was the end of the major disagreements with the French in the future and was willing to live and let live, but the next conflict was already brewing on Gorée, and it would soon break forth.

The next French and British conflict revolved around a British captain named Thomas Gray and his ship of Sussex, but it began with the completely unrelated incident when the King of Salum spurned Poncet's overtures, took his four envoys captive, and sold them to the British merchant who traded with him. The captives were then taken to Fort James.<sup>182</sup>

In his version of the story, Poncet sent the four envoys in a second attempt to gain the king's favor. While they were there, the British merchant convinced the King of

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<sup>178</sup> Debat to Jacquier, January 27, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 41.

<sup>179</sup> Debat to Poncet, February 19, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 69.

<sup>180</sup> Debat to Poncet, February 19, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 69.

<sup>181</sup> Debat to Poncet, February 19, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 69.

<sup>182</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 288.

Salum that the French were offering him poisoned brandy, so the king ordered their immediate arrest.<sup>183</sup> Poncet explained that this British merchant was the captain of a ship belonging to M. Debat and an interloper on the Salum River.

For Poncet, the situation of the four envoys was more important than it would initially seem. One of the four captives, Kekouta, was a free black and reportedly the only pilot of the Gambia River the French had. Poncet was especially concerned with his capture because of the dangerous nature of the river and the importance of a pilot for navigating these hazards.<sup>184</sup> Not having a pilot for the Gambia River would have been devastating for French efforts to reestablish trade at Albreda. The trading post was key to French plans to rival the British in the Senegambian region, so losing their best pilot concerned Poncet a great deal. Poncet immediately wrote to Debat requesting that he return the Africans if they somehow made it to Saint James Island; Debat responded that he would send them his way if they came into his possession.<sup>185</sup> Poncet, who saw schemes in most everything, did not trust Debat and was very keen on getting his pilot back, but he was essentially powerless to do anything but wait. But as fate would have it, Poncet soon had an opportunity to gain what he saw as bargaining chips to ensure the return of the pilot and the other three captives.

Poncet's chance to try to force the British hand came on February 8, 1764, by way of a violent gale of wind on the navigation route named the Road of Senegal, which hobbled the British ship *The Countess of Sussex* and forced it to seek refuge on Gorée. A strong northeastern wind struck *The Sussex* and caused the boat to pitch very hard in the choppy waters. Captain Thomas Gray extended a cable and dropped an anchor, but the

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<sup>183</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 287.

<sup>184</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 287.

<sup>185</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 288.



gale only increased the next morning, causing extensive damage to the ship and forcing him to leave his best anchor behind.<sup>186</sup> The crippled ship limped into the port of Gorée the next day, and after a small misunderstanding involving the French shooting at the ship, Poncet welcomed Gray and his crew and helped to provide for their needs. The ship had been on its way to pick up the British garrison that had been on Gorée and were awaiting transport in Senegal. The ship was in poor shape, having lost its anchors and broken its cables. Poncet accommodated the ship for three days and also gave Gray permission to travel to the mainland to seek water, wood, and ballast weights.

Gray and his ship had been visiting the mainland for four days when a dispute broke out between two Africans of the mainland and Mr. Smith, a representative of the British trading committee. Poncet said that Smith had insulted the French and offered the Africans “100 bars gueralf and 50 of gold” to rise up with the British to overthrow the French at Gorée, but this story proved to be false.<sup>187</sup> It is not readily apparent whether Poncet devised a scheme before or after the two Africans’ argument with Smith to accuse the British of attempting to overthrow the French, but at some point Poncet bribed the two mainland Africans to pretend that the English had offered them great rewards to rise up against the French. With this pretext, Poncet sent Salvigny, captain of the port of Gorée, on a cannon longboat with twelve riflemen to take Smith captive and escort Gray and his ship back to Gorée.<sup>188</sup>

When they arrived back on the island, six riflemen took Smith to Poncet’s home, where Poncet mistreated him and accused him of trying to excite the Africans of the mainland against the French. Poncet cursed Smith, calling him a spy and threatening to

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<sup>186</sup> Thomas Gray statement, February 26, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 79.

<sup>187</sup> Poncet to Debat, date unknown, ANOM, série E 338, 105.

<sup>188</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 238v.

have him hung.<sup>189</sup> Poncet expanded his threats and disdain to the English stationed at Senegal, whom he said he did not fear and that they were only a bunch of libertines led by a merchant of a governor.<sup>190</sup> Poncet then ordered Smith to be placed in an African hut with posted guards.

Gray, who believed the accusations against Smith were false, complained to Poncet for detaining the ship and asked if they could leave, but Poncet refused and threatened to punish him even more if he was not quiet. Gray, however, did not back down and told Poncet that he had insulted the English crown by his behavior and that he should not detain him because he was supposed to be transporting the English troops back to Great Britain. Gray offered to pay the ransom if he would just let him leave.<sup>191</sup> Gray petitioned Poncet, telling him to punish those who were guilty, but that he who was “quite innocent” should not be detained, especially because his ship was bound for Senegal to carry home the British garrison that had served on Goree.<sup>192</sup>

Meanwhile at Saint James Island on February 14, which was possibly the same time Poncet was detaining Gray’s ship, Debat wrote French officials at Albreda. At this point, Debat had only been informed of the four captives from Goree, and he assured the French that if the king of Salum sold the four Africans to his ship or his second’s ship, they would keep them at Saint James and turn them over to the French. Debat explained that it was common for the king of Bar and Salum to make war with one another and take prisoners. He did not seem to think that the capture of Poncet’s emissaries was out of the

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<sup>189</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 239.

<sup>190</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 239v.

<sup>191</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 239v, 240.

<sup>192</sup> Thomas Gray to Poncet, February 26, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 82.

norm for the region.<sup>193</sup> He was trying to emphasize that what happened was not out of the ordinary and seemed to be hinting that Poncet was overreacting. He was also still smarting with Salvigny's behavior at Albreda and not overly concerned with helping Poncet, given Poncet's lack of concern for his previous complaints. But Debat had little idea of the trouble brewing on Gorée.

On February 25, 1764, Poncet sent a letter and goods to Jacquier to trade and build up Albreda. Poncet told Jacquier he had taken Gray captive and sent a copy of the letter he was sending Debat so Jacquier could see what Poncet was saying. Poncet also told Jacquier not to trust Debat and to not go to Fort James unless accompanied by many reliable Africans. Poncet expressed confidence that Debat would turn over the four captives for the release of Gray's ship and Smith. Poncet, in the midst of rising tensions that he apparently did not recognize, also sent down the cannons to be placed on Albreda. He justified it by saying the French could "have them as much as the English have at Fort James."<sup>194</sup> His only concern was getting the permission of the King of Bar because Albreda was situated in his kingdom. Poncet believed that if the British had cannons, then the French were also justified in arming themselves. Poncet, probably in attempt to repay the favor to Debat's gifts, sent a case of red wine to Debat.<sup>195</sup>

Along with Poncet's letter, a letter written by Gray to Debat was sent down pleading for the help of Debat. Gray expressed embarrassment at having to ask Debat, a person he had never met, for help. Gray explained what had happened with Smith to Debat and that Poncet was willing to forget the incident if Debat would release the four captives from Gorée who had been captured by the King of Salum and were currently

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<sup>193</sup> Debat to Poncet, February 14, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 67v.

<sup>194</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, February 25, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 72.

<sup>195</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, February 25, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 72, 72v.

being held at the Fort of Saint James. Gray said that if the blacks on Saint James were not turned over to the French, then his ship would be detained until Poncet heard back from the Court of France, which would require a significant amount of time. Gray was anxious to set sail because he was charged with picking up the king's troops and Bunbury in Senegal and transporting them back to England. Poncet also accused the British of engaging the King of Salum to take the four Africans captive.<sup>196</sup> On February 25, Gray also wrote officials in England explaining his situation. He gave a quick summary of his difficult predicament and explained that there was "no good understanding between the Governor of Senegal and the Governor of Gorée." The person Gray was writing appeared to be a friend because he asked him to give his wife his love but to not tell her of his difficult situation.<sup>197</sup> Unfortunately for Gray, he had wandered in the line of fire between the French and the British, with Poncet firing most of the shots.

Poncet's February 25 letter to Debat accompanied Gray's and told Poncet's version of the story. Poncet explained that when he had originally heard of the Gray's event on the mainland, he was tempted to let it go, but given past incidents, such as when the governor of Fort James had offered 500 bars to the King of Bar to chase the French out of Albreda, or when the same governor offered the same amount to Salum to pillage Albreda. Poncet could not risk such an event happening again, and so he was taking the matter seriously. Poncet accused Mr. Thue, an officer under Debat, of stopping his four envoys to Salum under the specious pretext that they offered poisoned brandy. Poncet offered to forgive the offenses and release the British if the four were quickly returned.<sup>198</sup> It is hard to believe that Poncet, who was looking for any reason to rival the British,

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<sup>196</sup> Gray to Debat, February 25, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 76.

<sup>197</sup> Gray to Gentlemen, February 25, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 78v.

<sup>198</sup> Poncet to Debat, date unknown, ANOM, série E 338, 105.

would so easily forgive them for two large wrongs to the French. It is obvious that Poncet desperately wanted the four envoys sent home, especially Kekouta, who was valuable for many reasons, and he was willing to take somewhat rash measures to make sure he was returned. In his letter to Jacquier, Poncet made it clear that he was holding the ship for the express purpose of getting the slaves back, not to avoid having the Africans on the mainland rise up against him, nor to punish them for their behavior. Debat could easily see through Poncet's ruse, and he was shocked with Poncet's behavior.

While this dialogue was proceeding between Debat, Jacquier, and Poncet, Poncet had to make sure that he had justifiable reasons to detain the British ship. He brought the two Africans forward to claim that they had been offered money to attack the French. The first African, who had actually been mistreated by the British when they had ruled the island, readily testified that he had been offered 100 bars to rise up against the French. The second was a little more hesitant to testify and stammered the same story, but he explained that it had been another officer who had made the proposition. After these testimonies, Smith was sent back to prison, and the Africans were threatened that they would be beaten and taken captive if they did not stick to their story.<sup>199</sup> They were then sent away with presents for playing their roles.<sup>200</sup>

Debat quickly wrote Jacquier on February 28, after receiving Poncet's letter. Debat was surprised that Poncet would have arrested a British official on "the deceiving words of the blacks." Debat thought he had made it clear to Jacquier and Poncet that he would return the four envoys, especially Kekouta, who was a subject of the French

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<sup>199</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 241.

<sup>200</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 241v.

king.<sup>201</sup> Debat expressed his desire to “be in friendship” with the French nation and expressed fear “that these violent acts will interrupt in some ways the peace that must subsist today between the two nations.”<sup>202</sup> Debat was frustrated with Poncet, yet he offered to send some slaves to Albreda for assurance that they would turn the four envoys over. Debat really hoped to keep the ship from being detained, and he invited Jacquier over for dinner to discuss what to do.<sup>203</sup> Debat appeared to be at a loss with how to deal with Poncet, who was clearly attempting to assert French strength. Ironically, Poncet, who was so ready to dismiss *habitant* or African testimony against him, used it so willingly against the British.

On March 1, Debat wrote Jacquier with the good news that the four envoys that had been captured by the King of Salum had arrived on the island. Debat argued that this handover would prove the “injustice of your (Jacquier’s) thoughts and of the governor of Gorée” towards the British.<sup>204</sup> Debat sent them to Albreda with his officers of Jen and Gale to be examined by Jacquier, but he told Jacquier that the “unjust processes” would not “pass in silence in England” and that the “justice” of the French court would not “permit these officers to do all that they want in this country.”<sup>205</sup> Debat closed his letter by asking for a receipt for the four people, likely not wanting to be accused of not turning them over if the French somehow lost the four while transporting them back to Gorée.<sup>206</sup>

While Poncet held the British ship at Gorée, several officers of the garrison began to get nervous and petitioned Poncet, questioning his brash behavior and sharing their

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<sup>201</sup> Debat to Jacquier, February 28, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 90.

<sup>202</sup> Debat to Jacquier, February 28, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 90v.

<sup>203</sup> Debat to Jacquier, February 28, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 91.

<sup>204</sup> Debat to Jacquier, March 1, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 92.

<sup>205</sup> Debat to Jacquier, March 1, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 92.

<sup>206</sup> Debat to Jacquier, March 1, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 92v.

fears of possible dangerous repercussions. But Poncet dismissed their counsel, telling Major Doumet, “you’re always afraid.”<sup>207</sup> Poncet eventually allowed the ship to leave for Senegal, but Smith was still held and not allowed to leave until the four Africans were returned. During this time, Poncet tried many different ways to get Smith to sign a paper similar to the one written by Gray, but his caresses and threats proved useless, and he eventually had to let Gray go to Senegal. Those who did not like Poncet explained that this conflict was the source of the subsequent problems with the British.<sup>208</sup>

On March 6, Debat penned a lengthy and emotional response to Poncet concerning recent events. Debat summarized Poncet’s version of the events, mentioning the allegations about the brandy poisoning but refusing to cover all the “several allegations against” him that were “so weak they don’t merit attention.”<sup>209</sup> Debat expressed frustration with Poncet’s inability to trust him when he had given his word that he would return the four subjects and found it strange that Poncet seized British property and imprisoned “one of its subjects to release four men justly bought.”<sup>210</sup>

In his letter, Debat drew upon a similar example that occurred on the Gambia in 1745. Orpheus, a previous British governor of the fort, was taken captive by the King of Bar, and all the garrison and the natives believed that it had been at the invitation of the French in Albreda.<sup>211</sup> The British tried to win Orpheus’ freedom through a lot of merchandise but were unsuccessful. The French pressured the King of Bar to execute Orpheus, and they “executed him in a barbarous and inhumane death.”<sup>212</sup> Instead of

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<sup>207</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 241v.

<sup>208</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 241v.

<sup>209</sup> Debat to Poncet, March 5, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 101v.

<sup>210</sup> Debat to Poncet, March 5, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 101v.

<sup>211</sup> Debat to Poncet, March 5, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 101v.

<sup>212</sup> Debat to Poncet, March 5, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 102.

taking revenge on the French, who had clearly sponsored part of the activity, Orpheus' second in command took revenge on the Africans. The British killed more than sixty Africans and kept an even greater number captive until the issue was resolved. Debat shared this story to show that Poncet's behavior was out of line with precedent in the region, and he should not have taken it out on the British in such a way.

Debat explained that he had not tried to harm the French in any way and that the accusations that he had tried to get the King of Bar to uproot the French at Albreda were completely false. In fact, it was the French and Mr. Salvigny who had tried to get the King of Bar to attack Debat. Debat had hosted the king on the ship of war *The Phoenix*, who enjoyed his time and then went back to the mainland. During this time, the French under Salvigny offered a great present to the King of Bar, and rumors began to swirl that the King of Bar wanted to take Debat's life, but the king assured Debat that was not the case and called Debat his "best friend."<sup>213</sup> The King of Bar was ready to swear this in the presence of Jacquier and others that Debat had never "risen against or use[d] evil against the French nation."<sup>214</sup> Debat also shared another story from 1754 about M. de St. Jean who had been a French officer at Gorée and much more prudent than Poncet. Debat seemed to be comparing him to Poncet, saying St. Jean "makes honor to the nation and will always add a new luster to the character of a good man."<sup>215</sup>

Debat then turned to what was happening on the North American continent, where there were reports of the French stirring up Native Americans against the British, who had not made any reprisals. Debat then gave a fiery line saying "firm and vain in our treaties we do not look for any vain pretext to destroy that which is sacred by all these

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<sup>213</sup> Debat to Poncet, March 5, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 102.

<sup>214</sup> Debat to Poncet, March 5, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 102v.

<sup>215</sup> Debat to Poncet, March 5, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 103.



men, but we will always have the spirit and resolution to chase away all powers, who dare infringe on our rights.”<sup>216</sup> Debat displayed to Poncet that he was not willing to be pushed around anymore and that the British were not going to allow Poncet to keep acting in such a way. Debat finished his letter telling Poncet he had previously hoped they would live “extremely happily together in the union that we are commanded by our masters,” but that it was up to Poncet to fix the problems that had been created.<sup>217</sup>

Poncet did not take kindly to Debat’s “impertinent” letter and wrote Jacquier his feelings on the subject. Poncet, somewhat densely, did not believe that Debat would dare send his letters on to the British minister because it would be against Debat. Poncet found Debat’s letter scatterbrained and disorganized, and despite his energy, Poncet was sure Debat was only going to cause the British to lose their position in the Senegambia. Poncet, once again seeing conspiracies everywhere, accused Debat of being a man of bad faith and warned Jacquier that Debat wanted to get rid of both him and Albreda. Poncet forbade Jacquier and any other Frenchman to visit Debat. Poncet also argued that he did not need to know or follow the established uses of Albreda because the trading post belonged “to the King of France, as James Fort belongs to the King of England, we do not owe any preeminence to James Fort.”<sup>218</sup> Poncet once again seemed fixated on not recognizing the British presence, even though Debat did not mention anything concerning this in his letter and seemed more concerned about living in peace rather than establishing dominance over the French.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Debat to Poncet, March 5, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 102v.

<sup>217</sup> Debat to Poncet, March 5, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 103v.

<sup>218</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, March 20, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 97.

<sup>219</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, March 20, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 97.

Poncet also commended Jacquier for explaining to Debat that Poncet had not stopped Gray's ship for the four Africans. Poncet justified taking the ship first because of the French policing powers and the subsequent intrigue on the mainland. Although Poncet justified taking Gray's ship hostage, he could not escape the fact that he offered to forgive Smith and let Gray go if Debat insured that the captives were brought back. By his actions, Poncet linked his hostage taking with the four captives, and it was made even more serious because he bribed the two Africans to make up the charges. Poncet told Jacquier to "end correspondence with such a man," and if Debat asked for payment for the four slaves, to tell him that he had not received any orders from Poncet.<sup>220</sup> Poncet's refusal to pay for the four captives displayed his utter contempt for the British, with whom he could have had better relationships, but he seemed to think he served the French crown's purposes by being antagonistic and angry.

On March 21, Poncet responded angrily to Debat and said that he did not take kindly to Debat using previous examples in Africa and the Americas that had nothing to do with him. Poncet said he did not believe the story of Orfeus because the French did not want to take over Fort James. Poncet mocked Debat's line of "Firm and strong in our treaties, we do not search in vain pretexts to destroy that which should be sacred among good men, but we still have the spirit and resolution to punish all the powers who will infringe on our rights."<sup>221</sup> Poncet mocked this line exclaiming, "Here is some great zeal. One cannot disagree, that it is written with erudition!" Poncet then went on to ask what he had done to break the peace between the countries. Poncet argued that he had helped any ship that had come into his harbor and that it was only after Smith tried to get the

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<sup>220</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, March 20, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 97v, 98.

<sup>221</sup> Poncet to Debat, March 21, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 99, 99v.

Africans to rise up against the French that he took the ship captive. Poncet then reiterated the charge that Debat had tried to get the King of Bar to overthrow the French at Albreda, and he accused the British of engaging the King of Salum to take the four captives, and the proof was that he sent them to Albreda within twenty-four hours after the reception of Poncet's letter.<sup>222</sup>

Poncet finally let Gray leave, but only under the condition that the captain write an affidavit that his time spent on Gorée had only been because of the unfortunate winds and that he had not been held against his will. Poncet did not release Smith until the four envoys had been returned from the King of Salum.<sup>223 224</sup> While Poncet argued that these stories of him holding the English with fabricated justification were completely false, his version of the events is less than reliable. Poncet himself wrote to Debat that he was holding the British ship captive, so he had no reason to have Gray write this letter except for damage control or to protect himself if he were accused of inciting war between the two countries. It is hard to tell whether Poncet truly believed he had the moral high ground over Debat after getting the two mainland Africans to accuse Gray, but he might have felt justified because he believed that Debat had done a similar thing by convincing the King of Salum to take the four envoys captive. Poncet also believed he had the upper hand over Debat because he found that Debat's most recent letter had been menacing and prideful, and he mocked Debat for what he saw as peacocking around and strutting his feathers. While Poncet could have calmed the situation down by thanking Debat for his help and by trying to make restitution for the four slaves bought on the British dime, Poncet broke off contact with Debat and told Jacquier to do the same.

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<sup>222</sup> Poncet to Debat, March 21, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 99v.

<sup>223</sup> Accusations, March 13, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 241.

<sup>224</sup> Gray statement, February 27, 1764. ANOM, série E 338, 87.

Despite Poncet's warnings to Jacquier, it appears that he and Debat continued a friendly relationship. On 7 March, Debat wrote Jacquier that he was sending two necklaces for his daughter but that he was mortified he could not provide different types of jewelry.<sup>225</sup> And on 15 March, Debat wrote Jacquier telling him he would send for a few fine "verrots" (glass beads) for a necklace for his daughter.<sup>226</sup> On March 25, Debat expressed his frustration with Poncet to Jacquier, saying "I am very angry for these difficulties, but it is he (Poncet) who began by violent acts, and would like to continue them. I am very obliged to you Monsieur by your civilities since your arrival in this country, in wishing you all kinds of happiness."<sup>227</sup> Debat still felt warmly to Jacquier, and he seemed genuinely upset that things were not better between the British and the French. Although Poncet argued that Debat only wanted to subvert Albreda, Debat's correspondence was for the most part civil and understanding towards Poncet's behavior at the beginning, and Debat only responded with a negative tone once Poncet had raised the stakes with his recalcitrant behavior.

On April 30, Poncet wrote Jacquier, berating him for continuing to correspond and visit Debat. Poncet was concerned that Jacquier had lost the trading post to the British with his behavior. "M. Debat is a very shrewd man," he wrote, "and you will not gain anything more by continuing to see him, because he will finish by tricking you. You must therefore see him as an enemy very concealed and capable to chase you from the trading post, at whatever price it takes."<sup>228</sup> Poncet reiterated several times his forbidding of Jacquier to visit Debat, whom he saw as a "scamp," and told him to stop all French

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<sup>225</sup> Debat to Jacquier, March 7, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 96.

<sup>226</sup> Debat to Jacquier, March 7, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 94.

<sup>227</sup> Debat to Jacquier, March 25, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 107, 107.

<sup>228</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, April 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 111.

ships from visiting him as well. Poncet, in violent discourse, said he was going to “write against him, and if I catch him, I will have him tied to a cannon.”<sup>229</sup> Poncet had begun to see enemies everywhere, and he could not believe that Debat was simply trying to be friendly and ensure peaceful relationships between the two countries. Poncet must have gotten it into his mind that Debat was consistently seeking to undermine the French, possibly because Poncet was constantly seeking to undermine the British, and he did not deal with Debat judiciously. Poncet’s approach to the British was on military terms, when he needed a more diplomatic approach.

On September 20, 1764, Debat wrote a kind letter to Jacquier, in what seemed like a farewell letter. It is possible that Jacquier was being replaced for not following Poncet’s orders to cut off ties with the British. Debat thanked Jacquier for his kind letter and wished him “all sorts of happiness.” Debat related to Jacquier that he would always remember his kindness, and he hoped that in the future he would be able to render help to a few brave French men either in time of war or peace. Debat seemed to be saying that he would like to repay Jacquier’s kindness to other French men with whom he would come into contact.<sup>230</sup> But relationships on the Gambia continued to deteriorate, and Poncet’s behavior only made it worse.

On May 25, 1764, Poncet sent a coded letter to his superiors in France. Poncet explained the situation with the British and told of his connections at Saint Louis with the African mayor Tevenot, who sympathized with the French. For the previous three months, Tevenot, whom Poncet called more a master of the river than the British, and other *habitants* had been revolting against the British presence and had beaten the general

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<sup>229</sup> Poncet to Jacquier, April 30, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 112.

<sup>230</sup> Debat to Jacquier, September 20, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 161.

from one side to the other. Poncet also explained that the Kingdom of Bar had declared war on the British in the Gambia, where events had probably devolved even more since the event of the four captives.<sup>231</sup> Poncet then explained, “The English attribute these events to me, but they have no proof.” Historian Boulle took this to mean that Poncet was admitting his role in the events, which is very possible given his previous behavior trying to undermine the British at every turn.<sup>232</sup> Poncet, then with bravado and gusto, exclaimed, “If I had sufficient funds today, I could have them [the British] kicked out of Senegal and the Gambian river, without a single European having anything to do with it.”<sup>233</sup> Despite Poncet’s boldness, his thoughts were clearly wishful thinking. It would have taken an incredibly large influx of funds and support to enact such a plan, and at that point, the French were not even providing enough money to pay their soldiers and officers on Gorée, let alone fund a major offensive against the British. This letter also sheds light on Poncet’s desire to quickly uproot the British from the Senegambia, and although Choiseul’s goals were to eventually retake what they had lost to the British, Poncet was moving too quickly and without enough caution to pull off a defeat of the British.

One might have expected Poncet to be a bit more prudent after facing some stiff resistance, but Poncet believed he had the unilateral backing of Choiseul and wanted to accomplish his mission of retaking the Senegambian region. Poncet continued to antagonize the British by attacking Salum, fortifying Albreda, and trying to go past Saint James Island to trade.

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<sup>231</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>232</sup> Boulle, 318.

<sup>233</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15. (Translation in part Boulle’s)

Poncet's final major action regarding Albreda and the British was a slaving trip up the Gambia River in July and August of 1764. Here, Poncet attempted to get the slave trade going and flex his muscles along the way. Unfortunately for Poncet, it was the worst time of the season to make the trip because trade was not as good and the weather contributed to perfect breeding conditions for mosquitoes. Poncet sent envoys and presents to the chiefs of slave caravans to get them to come to Albreda to trade, and he was successful. Poncet reported that Debat unsuccessfully tried to stop the caravans from making it to Albreda. Here Poncet might have been exaggerating, or Debat may have been sick of dealing with Poncet and decided he was going to give some pushback. Debat unsuccessfully tried to get the king of Salum to stop the caravans on their way.<sup>234</sup>

Poncet's arrival, accompanied with a hundred soldiers and a thirty-gun frigate, appeared to have made an impression on Debat, who reported Poncet's actions back home. Poncet "landed with full military honors and mounted a military guard at Albreda."<sup>235</sup> Poncet likely continued fortifying Albreda, which he justified by a fear of an attack from the King of Salum, but he was also trying to rival the British fort at Saint James. Poncet's presence probably unnerved Debat, especially given their past interactions. Poncet also wanted to go past the Saint James Island, "if not by fair methods to use foul," but sickness broke out among his crew and stopped him from trying.<sup>236</sup>

Poncet waited for the caravans for a month, only to find that more and more of his crew were getting sick. He knew the caravans were close, so he did not want to leave without having made a trade. Poncet sent Salvigny with a detachment on land, hoping

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<sup>234</sup> Poncet to Dubuq (?), May 25, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>235</sup> Sir John Milner Gray, *A History of the Gambia*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1940), 229.

<sup>236</sup> Gray, 229.

they would fare better than they had on the ship. Poncet followed two days behind, and Salvigny was able to make the trade in eight days. Poncet then had to hire Africans from the mainland to help man the ship home because all of the crew except Salvigny and Poncet were sick.<sup>237</sup> Poncet's trip had been somewhat successful regarding the slave trade, and he had made Debat nervous, but Debat's reports and complaints made it back to the British, who finally decided to take action regarding Poncet's behavior. For the British, this was the last straw, and they sent a fleet of four ships to disarm Albreda.

Before the British ships had been sent down to Albreda, the French had recalled Poncet and commissioned Mesnager, who immediately set about resolving the hostile relations with the British. Mesnager sent Mr. Girard to be the new French representative at Albreda. Mesnager gave Girard orders to make amends with the British and to gain respect for the French flag "by good behavior rather than by force."<sup>238</sup> He also told him to meet with Debat within twenty-four hours.<sup>239</sup> Both of these orders lay in stark contrast to Poncet's behavior. Despite these initial attempts, the British forceful reaction to Poncet's belligerence was already underway. When Mesnager got wind of the imminent arrival of the four British ships, he tried to send a letter to the British at Saint Louis, only to have it intercepted by those very British ships passing by Gorée headed straight for the Gambia River. As soon as the British ships arrived on the Gambia River, the French ally, the King of Bar, took all the goods of Albreda to keep them safe from the British, and they armed themselves with guns, powder, and balls, swearing they would not allow a single Englishman to come ashore.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Poncet to Choiseul ( ?), September 10, 1764, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>238</sup> Mesnager to Girard, March 8, 1765, ANOM, série E 206.

<sup>239</sup> Mesnager to Girard, March 8, 1765, ANOM, série E 206.

<sup>240</sup> Mesnager to Choiseul ( ?), June 13, 1765, ANOM, série C6 15.



The British captain Graves who leading the expedition realized he was not going to be able to take Albreda without force, so he sent Captain Garnier's ship to Gorée to explain they had been ordered to use any means possible in war against the French to destroy Albreda. Graves, who seemed to be bit like Poncet, was a zealous man and wanted nothing more than to win the honor of his country.<sup>241</sup> Mesnager, who had not received any directives concerning Gambia, assumed it would be best to try not to support Poncet's past excessive behavior, believing the best route would be to try to avoid any conflict with the British. The situation was dangerous enough that any wrong move could spark all out war with the British.

Garnier, a British officer acting as a mediator between Gorée and Barnes, passed Mesnager's letter appealing for softer relations to Graves, but Graves responded by anchoring his two frigates in range of Albreda, threatening to destroy it by "iron and fire" if Girard did not take down his cannons. The king of Bar wanted to attack Graves, believing he had been wronged by the British actions, which were an invasion of his kingdom's sovereignty. Girard was caught in the middle of a difficult situation, with the British threatening to destroy the fort, and the kingdom of Bar wanting to fight the British for the perceived insult. The French tried appeasing Graves through Debat by explaining French efforts to improve relations, but despite these attempts to show Graves French good will, he remained committed to his orders to destroy Albreda.<sup>242</sup> Graves found his "instructions...too precise and his zeal was too strong," and explanations did nothing to dampen his fervor and desire to destroy the French fortifications.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Mesnager to Choiseul (?), June 13, 1765, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>242</sup> Mesnager to Choiseul (?), June 13, 1765, ANOM, série C6 15.

<sup>243</sup> Mesnager to Choiseul (?), June 13, 1765, ANOM, série C6 15.

Despite Graves' commitment to his orders, Mesnager held out hopes that they would be able to negotiate a peaceful resolution with the British through Garnier. As these negotiations were starting to take shape, the French resident Girard fell ill. Garnier and his surgeon came on land to treat Girard and they gave him some medicine, but upon returning to their boat, the king of Bar's troops ambushed and shot at them. Garnier was able to escape, but his surgeon was captured. The ambush only served to make Graves angry, who saw the attack as sponsored by the French, and became even more combative. The British sent a message to shore telling the French they would be held responsible if anything happened to the surgeon.<sup>244</sup> Girard hurriedly sent off a letter to Mesnager, informing him about the urgent new developments.

Mesnager quickly wrote letters to Graves, Garnier, Debat, and Faudet to try to defuse the conflict and to get the British surgeon released. This seemed to calm the situation, and Mesnager promised to take down everything at Albreda that could cause the British to become angry. The British let Mesnager know that if it had been Poncet in charge, they would have forcibly removed him from Gorée and taken him to London. Mesnager was hopeful for future good relations with the British on the Gambia, but he also believed that Albreda would still be a difficult place to keep and a constant source of friction between the two countries.<sup>245</sup> The six cannons at Albreda were taken down and transported to Gorée, and Mesnager was able to avoid sparking a major war against the British.

Mesnager's experience proved that Poncet had gone too far and had not been prudent in his interactions with the British. Poncet's earnestness to stake out a claim on

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<sup>244</sup> Gray, 230.

<sup>245</sup> Mesnager to Choiseul ( ?), June 13, 1765, ANOM, série C6 15.

the Gambia River and his lack of civility worried the British and made it impossible for a British representative like Debat, who had been trying to work with the French to cooperate. Mesnager observed that Poncet believed he could support by force what he should have tried to reinforce by better politics.<sup>246</sup> While one must be mindful that Mesnager wanted to show his superiors back in France that he handled things better than Poncet, his observations remain true. Poncet had once again displayed his desire to accomplish Choiseul's objectives quickly without thought of the potential consequences. What caused the British to worry about Albreda was not the arming of it per se, but France's perceived feared intentions in arming it.

As brazen as Poncet's interactions with the British proved, he saw his actions as consistent with Choiseul's directions. Choiseul had ordered Poncet to be cautious and distrustful of the British, counsel which Poncet took to heart. In the context of Choiseul's warnings, Poncet could have conceivably believed he was justified in threatening Debat and treating Barnes with contempt. In addition, Poncet's hopes and zeal in uprooting the British reflected Choiseul's keen interest in retaking the territory France had lost in the Seven Years' War. As with so many other orders, Poncet overzealously implemented Choiseul's goals, taking them too far. Choiseul did not advocate retaking the lost French possessions right away and at any cost, and he turned against Poncet once Poncet's recalcitrant behavior had created many problems.

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<sup>246</sup> Mesnager to Choiseul ( ?), June 13, 1765, ANOM, série C6 15.

## Conclusion

On December 22, 1764, King Louis XV announced at Versailles that Mesnager, “given proof of his zeal, valor, honor, good behavior,” would be replacing Poncet at Gorée. The King charged Mesnager with making sure the inhabitants of Gorée lived in “union and harmony one with another” and to make sure the administration controlled the costs and kept the stores and hospital adequately supplied.<sup>247</sup> Poncet took his replacement hard, and he spent the next eleven years before his death trying to regain his standing with the French government and his place in society. Poncet wrote many different letters to Choiseul and other government officials asking for his name to be cleared.

Poncet tried different appeal processes and stayed abreast of the developing rumors in the colonies. He proffered many conspiracy theories of those trying to thwart his governorship and career, including arguing Mesnager and his allies had bought his position as governor.<sup>248</sup> It remains difficult to gauge the validity of most of his accusations, as Poncet the governor had often displayed a propensity to see intrigue where none existed. He later claimed Doumet had been seeking to undermine him the whole time. He argued that Doumet and Paradis had been enemies with each other, which led Doumet to trick Poncet regarding Chatelain’s sword.<sup>249</sup> But Paradis never mentioned any conflict with Doumet in his letters, which leads to the conclusion that Poncet was trying to revise and reinterpret what happened on the island to his advantage.

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<sup>247</sup> Louis XV to Mesnager, December 22, 1764, ANOM, série E 338, 165.

<sup>248</sup> Means of recusal and complaints made by Poncet de la Riviere, December 23, 1765, ANOM, série E, 338, 400.

<sup>249</sup> Poncet to Choiseul (?) on Doumet, April 20, 1765, ANOM, série E 338, 255.

Even if there was intrigue on the island to oust Ponce from his position, he certainly gave his enemies a surfeit of material to complain about and provided plenty of fodder to report back home. His harsh treatment of the *habitants* and officers undermined French stability on the island and in the region, and he consistently focused on aspects beyond the island at the expense of the condition of the island. Ponce also displayed a desire to go toe to toe with the British when a much more prudent approach was warranted. His reckless behavior vis-à-vis the British sparked violence and possible war, something that neither the British nor French wanted at that time. While his interactions with the different African kingdoms proved more successful, it is hard to give Ponce much credit for the positive developments he oversaw.

Choiseul sent Ponce to the Senegambia to restore the French position in the region, and Ponce trusted in Choiseul's support for forceful actions. But Ponce did not husband his efforts, and he quickly wore out his welcome. Ponce's personal trade interests also undermined his credibility with his subordinates, who saw him as furthering his own personal greed instead of the interests of the colony. The dilapidated state of Gorée only reinforced this perception. Ponce's vision of personal glory and wealth came to a crashing end when the King recalled him. On March 16, 1765, he was escorted from Gorée to be imprisoned in the castle of Landskron, never to see Gorée again.

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