

## Mosher on Jones (2013)

Jones, Hillary. *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 276. ISBN: 978-0-253-00674-5

Sarah E. Mosher, University of North Dakota

*The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa* is a detailed study of the cultural and political history of Senegal that encompasses the time period from the late eighteenth-century to the end of World War I. Particular emphasis is placed on urban life during the second half of the nineteenth century. As Jones points out, this study is unique and fills a void in existing scholarship since the book examines the role of the *métis* in Senegal during the period when the colony economically transitioned to a system that operated without the slave trade. Rather than analyzing Senegal's colonial period from the perspective of colonists, soldiers, and clerics, Jones examines daily life in Saint Louis from the point of view of Muslim traders, Senegalese women, black Catholics, slaves, the African clergy, and French women of religious orders. A significant portion of this study examines *signares*, or women of property and social prestige who are the descendants of Senegalese women and European merchants or soldiers. Throughout the work, Jones employs the term *métis* rather than *mulâtre*, *indigène*, or *créole* since the word *métis* is devoid of negative connotations. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and "symbolic capital" are employed by Jones to establish a theoretical framework for this study. Family histories and their artifacts were key sources of historical information that informed Jones's research.

As the colonial capital of Senegal and the epicenter of *métis* society, the Atlantic port city of Saint Louis and its inhabitants are closely scrutinized in this work. While focusing on the *métis* of Saint Louis, Jones articulates how this group shaped and influenced the nature of French colonial power in Senegal. As the French expanded their colonial rule, the *métis* of Saint Louis served as mayors, journalists, and city council members. They spoke French and Wolof, attended French Catholic schools, and mirrored the habits, customs, and traditions that were characteristic of the French bourgeoisie in metropolitan France. At the same time, the *métis* had intimate ties to and knowledge of both urban and rural Senegalese society. Given their unique racial identity, the *métis* played an important role in shaping the cultural and political landscape of Saint Louis since they served as influential intermediaries and negotiators between the French officials and non-*métis* populations in Senegal. Among the strengths of this volume is the detailed discussion of the intricacies of the gum arabic or acacia gum industry and the important role of the *escales* or Senegal's river trading and shipping posts along the Atlantic Ocean.

The first two chapters examine the very nature of *métis* identity in Saint Louis while particular emphasis is placed on the role that women played in shaping society. The development of the gum arabic industry and its relationship to the social status of the *métis* is a core component of the second chapter. Chapters three and four discuss the visible ways in which the *métis* aligned themselves culturally with the bourgeois society of metropolitan France. Chapter four considers how the development of a free press served as a source of power and influence that often placed the *métis* in a relationship of opposition with French colonial officials. Together, these chapters show how the customs of *métis* families contributed to the reordering of colonial society. Chapter five outlines the battle between the urban *métis* elite and French colonial officials for power not just in Saint Louis, but also throughout the whole of the colony. In the final two chapters, Jones considers the rise and development of *métis* leadership in the urban political arena in the period spanning 1870–1914. Directly following the seven chapters and the conclusion are appendices that contain the family histories that informed this project. Jones also includes more than forty pages of detailed and extensive notes that further enrich this publication.

*The Métis of Senegal* would be an excellent text to teach in a graduate level history or civilization course that focus on the sociopolitical framework of West Africa during the nineteenth century. I highly recommend this book to scholars and students whose area of research considers French colonization in West Africa, the history of Senegal, *métis* or Créole populations, colonial politics and trade, and/or the role of women in colonial Africa.

**Volume:** 43.3-4

**Year:**

- 2015