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# The “Devès Affair” in Saint-Louis-du-Senegal: A Critical Assessment of the Sources, 1902–1911\*

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the validity and reliability of the testimonies and sworn depositions that the Peuvergne administration produced in July 1910 as evidence justifying Justin Devès’s suspension and removal from office as mayor of Saint-Louis, capital of French Senegal. The main argument here is that the “Devès Affair” was based on spurious charges. The article places the conflict in the broader context of the political and economic competition between the French colonial administration and the Bordeaux firms, on the one hand, and the Devès network, on the other.

**RÉSUMÉ** Cet article examine la validité et la fiabilité des témoignages et dépositions sous serment que l’administration Peuvergne produisit en juillet 1910 comme preuve justifiant la suspension et la destitution de Justin Devès de son poste de maire de Saint-Louis, capitale du Sénégal français. Mon argument principal ici est que “l’Affaire Devès” était basée sur des accusations fallacieuses. L’article place le conflit dans un contexte plus large de la compétition politique et économique entre l’administration coloniale française et les entreprises bordelaises, d’une part, et le réseau de Devès, d’autre part.

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\* Evidence for this study comes from the *Archives Nationales du Sénégal* (ANS) in Dakar, the *Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer* (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence (France), and the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (BNP) in Paris. I thank the Bryn Mawr College Committee on Faculty Grants and Awards for funding my broader research agenda out of which this article is drawn. Many thanks are due to Nwando Achebe, founding editor-in-chief of the *Journal of West African History* (JWAH), for her encouragement. I also thank the anonymous readers of the JWAH for their critical comments. Any shortcomings are mine. I owe special thanks to copy editor David Estrin for his good work correcting my omissions and lapses.

On July 15, 1910, Lieutenant-Governor Jules Peuvergne<sup>1</sup> suspended Justin Devès, mayor of Saint-Louis and one of the leading Creole families in Senegal, from office for a period of three months. He accused him for having abused his power (through extortion and various schemes), shown contempt for the colonial authorities (Governors Guy and Peuvergne and Governor-General William Merleau-Ponty), and squandered municipal financial resources.<sup>2</sup> By August 2, Peuvergne had gathered a voluminous dossier that contained forty-six pieces of evidence that he transmitted to Merleau-Ponty to back up his charges and ask for the mayor's revocation and criminal prosecution. A week later, Merleau-Ponty sent the dossier to Minister of Colonies Georges Trouillot in Paris, justifying his backing of Peuvergne's request in the name of the "dignity and prestige of the representative of the Government systematically frustrated by J. Devès, . . . municipal finances . . . , [and] public morality compromised by this mayor. . . ."<sup>3</sup> The decree of September 21, 1910 removed him from office. On October 7, Merleau-Ponty promulgated the decree in French West Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Most studies of the political history of colonial Senegal make passing references to the "Devès Affair," or the Peuvergne-Devès conflict, as a closed matter and its evidentiary basis as unproblematic.<sup>5</sup> However, what remain underexamined are questions of the reliability and validity of some of the pieces of evidence (testimonies and sworn depositions) that Peuvergne presented in support of his accusations against the popular mayor. Indeed, Peuvergne requested and received these documents from Dat (administrator in charge of native affairs in Saint-Louis's immediate hinterland); Dreyfus (administrator-in-chief and commander, Cercle of Thiès), helped by interpreter Amadou Séga; and de Copet (administrator of Tivaouane), with the assistance of

Kaïssa (chief, province of Saniokhor), and interpreters Amadou Sarr (secretary of Chief Kaïssa), and Abdoulaye N'diougua.

In the section of a confidential report to Merleau-Ponty devoted to the events leading up to the election of Justin Devès as mayor of Saint-Louis and as general councilor in 1909, Governor Peuvergne took the time to explain the steps he made to collect the evidence supporting his charges against the mayor. He stated that, in addition to the existing official correspondence obtained through administrative channels, he had also gathered, in July 1910 alone, new pieces of evidence related to Justin Devès's wrongdoing that eventually could be useful for further criminal prosecution. Peuvergne divided the new documents into two main categories. One category contained the depositions taken down in writing, under oath or affirmation, before an administration official, in reply to questions asked but "without influencing in any way the witnesses or discussing with them in any manner susceptible of disrupting or inciting them to give precisions in one or another sense." Another category included written testimony from the interested individuals themselves or on their behalf by people that they trusted. For example, Cheikh Ibra Fall, a Muslim cleric from Thiès, wrote his testimony in Arabic and had it translated into French by one of his disciples. Thus, the combined categories contained a total of twenty-two testimonies (letters) and sworn depositions from individuals from Thiès, Tivaouane, and Saint-Louis's immediate hinterland.

This study takes issue with the "new" pieces of evidence gathered in July 1910 and tries to revisit the case against Mayor Justin Devès. It argues that Governor Peuvergne was determined to destroy the political career and the economic, social, and ideological power base of a man who had given him and his predecessors so many headaches. However, realizing that he could remove the mayor from office but not secure his conviction and punishment for the alleged

wrongdoings, Peuvergne undertook to produce—indeed, to get his administration officials fabricate—fresh evidence that would stick in criminal prosecution. He was probably inspired by two files he found in his drawers when he took office in early 1909, which contained the accusations against Justin Devès—in 1903 by Ahmed Saloum and 1907 by Cheikh Sidia—concerning alleged questionable activities in Mauritania. Some of the new pieces of evidence even had the same object, that is, “Justin Devès’s schemes or intrigues.” They consisted of highly suspect testimonies and sworn depositions based on specific talking points that might have been circulated in advance for that purpose. The fact that Peuvergne ventured on this slippery slope (of criminal conspiracy?), a step that none of his predecessors found necessary, points to a broader issue of domination, accommodation, and contestation underneath the accusations and counteraccusations.

The article first presents the general context of the Peuvergne-Devès conflict, then discusses the reliability and validity of the “new” pieces of evidence in the dossier, which the administration produced in July 1910, and then tries to deconstruct the case against Devès,

### <1>**The Context**</1>

The “Devès Affair” did not take place in the vacuum. In order to understand, one needs to place it within the general framework of the transformations that had been taking place in the Senegalo–Mauritanian zone since the 1880s: the end of the old order and the beginning of colonial rule, with its gradual processes of conquest, consolidation, resistance and accommodation.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the growth of Saint-Louis in the framework of international commerce resulted in the emergence of an urban society dominated by the French political and economic elite; the *Métis* who dominated the municipal administration since the eighteenth century and the

General Council since its creation and had some economic power; and African elite. The latter grew as an outcome of the policy of assimilation.

In his study of the relationship between the *Métis* and the French colonists in Senegal during the last quarter of nineteenth century, François Manchuelle underlined the fact that the *Métis* did not form a monolithic bloc. Rivalries between the Descemet and the Devès clans negatively affected their ability to achieve some policy goals. Some of these goals included the restoration of the trade fairs (called the “escales”) held at particular sites on the banks of the Senegal River, which prevented Governor De Lamothe from reducing the power of the General Council over the interior of Senegal in the 1880s and 1890s or winning the 1893 election for deputyship.<sup>7</sup>

According to historian G. Wesley Johnson, both the French elite and the *Métis* formed an oligarchy who dominated the economy and politics in early colonial Senegal. He stated that the “French merchants from Bordeaux and Marseille led the economic penetration in the interior of French West Africa; [whereas] the *Métis* supplied the military chiefs, the bureaucrats, and the support of a powerful commercial coterie.” He argued that “rivalry, rather than cooperation, characterized the daily relations between the French and the *Métis*, and [that] the colonial oligarchy was only based on a *mariage de raison*.”<sup>8</sup> He made the important point that some of the new French families who arrived in Senegal in the last quarter of the nineteenth century “were irritated to see the *Métis* play such an important role in politics, the administration, and commerce.”<sup>9</sup> This situation led to the maintenance of a social distance between the Frenchmen and the *Métis*, the French administrators and merchants having only occasional friendships with *Métis* but rarely meeting the Africans in private settings, therefore resulting in increasing suspicion among them.<sup>10</sup>

Another important contributing factor Johnson identified was the electoral politics promoted by the Third Republic in the framework of municipal institutions, the General Council, and the Chamber of Commerce, which created a harsh competition between not only *Métis* and candidates supported by Bordeaux-based firms, but also among the *Métis*, especially in Saint-Louis and Gorée.<sup>11</sup> By 1900, two rival families dominated competition among the *Métis*, that is, the Carpot family, represented by François Carpot, who was *député* between 1902 and 1914, and the Devès family, whose leader was Justin Devès, mayor of Saint-Louis and president of the General Council. To complicate the matter, there were also jealousies between the *Métis* of Saint-Louis and those from the Second Arrondissement (Gorée, Dakar, and Rufisque).<sup>12</sup>

David Robinson argues that although most of the citizens of Saint-Louis supported the French colonial rule and its expansion in West Africa, “. . . some of them had a great deal to say about how, where, and when that extension occurred, and they did have some ability to force changes. This is why the administrators of Senegal and the federation, beginning with Léon Clément-Thomas in 1888, worked so assiduously to reduce the powers of the electoral institutions.”<sup>13</sup> The *Métis* citizens who controlled the electoral institutions were among those who had a lot to say about the direction of change. This was particularly true for the Devès, who had vast commercial interests, close ties with African leaders, and “the knowledge, experience and confidence to defend their kind of regime in the Senegalo–Mauritanian zone.”<sup>14</sup>

Hilary Jones underlined the fact that “Justin Devès’s electoral victory generated new surveillance from the administration,” which accused him “of publicly defying their authority and considered him a threat to the colonial system in his role as mayor.”<sup>15</sup>

<1>**Testimonies and Sworn Depositions: Questions of Reliability and Validity**</1>

Referring to the pieces of evidence collected in July 1910 (see Table 1), Peuvergne took great pains to explain that he had managed to protect the integrity of the testimonies and sworn depositions by keeping intact the stylistic incorrectness as well as the obscure passages that he could have easily clarified. He prided himself for “refraining from making grammatical or literary corrections that could have altered the spontaneity of the depositions and for reproducing them in their original rigorous form.” He remained convinced that it was the direct reading of the documents (i.e., in their original form) that helped him form “the conviction and the material proof of the serious abuses perpetrated by Mr. Justin Devès, using his position as mayor.” In Peuvergne’s opinion, the documents “spoke for themselves” and simply established “the truth”; he did not feel the need for additional personal interpretations.<sup>16</sup>

Table 1. List of Witnesses’ Testimonies (Letters) and Sworn Depositions

Witnesses/Location	Type	Date	Subject	Piece no. in the dossier
Ahmed Saloum/Mauritania	Letter	January 21, 1903	Justin Devès’s schemes/intrigues	18
Cheikh Sidia/Mauritania	Letter	April 11, 1907	Justin Devès’s schemes/intrigues	19
Yoro Oury/Tivaouane	Letter	June 24, 1910	Not given	21
Amadou Sega/Thiès	Deposition	July 9, 1910	No given	23
Oumar So/Thiès	Deposition	July 9, 1910	Not given	24
Brochet/Thiès	Deposition	July 10, 1910	Not given	26
Aug. Blondin/Thiès	Deposition	July 10, 1910	Not given	27
Diembo Fall/Thiès	Deposition	July 12, 1910	Not given	22
Sheikh Ibra Fall/Thiès	letter	n.d.	Justin Devès’s schemes/intrigues	25
Sira Dia/Tivaouane	Deposition	July 16, 1910	Not given	29
Demba Ba/Tivaouane	Deposition	July 16, 1910	Not given	31
Zimmar Fall/Tivaouane	Deposition	July 17, 1910	Not given	30



Bodièle Tolèl/Gae	Letter	July 17, 1910	Justin Devès's schemes/intrigues	34
10 notables/Dagana	Letter	July 17, 1910	Justin Devès's promises to restore slavery	35
Chief Magnang Niang/Gandiolais	Letter	July 19, 1910	Justin Devès's schemes/intrigues	36
Chief Maissa M'Baye/Saniokhor	Letter	July 19, 1910	Justin Devès's schemes/intrigues	37
Demba Niagna/Saint-Louis	Letter	July 20, 1910	Justin Devès's schemes/intrigues	17
Late Diop/Tivaouane	Deposition	July 20, 1910	Not given	32
N'Diougua M'Boulé/Tickhmate, Saniokhor	Letter	July 20, 1910	Justin Devès's schemes/intrigues	38
Biram Coumba Noro/Tivaouane	Deposition	July 22, 1910	Not given	33
Diemba Fall/Thiès	Deposition	July 22, 1910	Not given	39
Sanane Tine/ Thiès	Deposition	July 22, 1910	Not given	40
Goura Gueye/ Thiès	Deposition	July 23, 1910	Not given	41
Baba Lo/Thiès	Deposition	July 23, 1910	Not given	42

Source: ANFCAOM/3G3/5, pieces 57–59, Summary of the pieces of evidence sent to the Governor-General of French West Africa, Merleau-Ponty, by Cabinet Chief. Documents Attached to the Report no. 971 of August 2, 1910.

The quality of Peuvergne's "new pieces of evidence" leaves a number of questions unanswered. Let us start with the witnesses. In the description of the ways he went about collecting the evidence, Peuvergne did not explain how the selection of witnesses took shape and where and under what circumstances the administration officials wrote down their sworn depositions or the witnesses produced their testimonies. But the fact that the sworn depositions were taken and testimonies written down long after the events they described and were produced in one month alone (July 1910) in three different cities under the supervision of interpreters and chiefs who were paid agents of the colonial administration increases the historian's suspicions

about their reliability and validity. It is evidently clear that the witnesses did not tell facts about Justin Devès's past behavior, statements, and actions. They were probably reporting stories centered on talking points circulated in advance by the Peuvergne administration, and they seemed to have had personal interests in the events they reported on or had ulterior motives for describing the events as they did.

Now let us turn to the questionnaire used. All the witnesses had to answer the following two leading questions: a) "During the municipal elections in Saint-Louis, some propaganda warfare went on in [your city]. Rumors circulated related to the unlimited powers of the new Mayor, [and] the promises made by him or on his behalf. Do you know something about them? Can you testify to the precise facts known to you personally?" b) "I gathered that you were present when some indigenous people gave Justin Devès some money in exchange for certain services he would render them. Is it correct?"

The framing of the leading questions enabled Governor Peuvergne to develop his theory of the case against Devès. Although allowing for a longer response, the leading questions also subtly pointed the witnesses' answers in a certain direction, that is, to focus on the rumors about "the unlimited powers of the new mayor and the promises he made" or on eyewitness accounts of extortion of money. Even if the leading questions were open questions, the succeeding questions became more restrictive at each step. For example, one follow-up question was "who spread the rumors about the extent of the new powers of the elected mayor?" Another was even more specific: "Did Amadou Cissé, a former slave of the Devès family, serve as the news monger of these rumors?" or "Are you aware of similar practices [extortion of money]?"

The testimonies and sworn depositions contain variations of the same message emphasizing three main points. The first point of the message related to the promises Justin

Devès allegedly made during the races for election to the municipal council, the General Council, and the deputyship to several individuals about the favors he would make to them, including the restoration of slavery and the resolution of certain cases before the courts. The second point concerned the statement showing that, once elected mayor, Justin Devès would become the “King of Saint-Louis” and would have more powers than Governor Peuvergne or Governor-General Merleau-Ponty. The third and final point of the message had to do with instances of the extortion of cows or cash in exchange for favors, especially the appointment of new chiefs in various territories of Senegal. The fact that the witnesses’ answers to questions have the same narrative structure is a good indication that either they were fabricators of stories or, more likely, that they were told what to say in preparation for the testimonies and sworn depositions.

Moreover, given that in some places the interpreters and even some chiefs who were on the payroll of the colonial administration supervised the witnesses’ answers, it is not easy to distinguish between the witnesses’ views and those of the interpreters, who also had their own agendas. In the case of Amadou Séga in Thiès,<sup>17</sup> the star witness and the interpreter were the same person. In addition to his three-page sworn deposition, he also helped translate other witnesses’ depositions. In Tivaouane, the majority of the witnesses gave their sworn depositions in presence of Administrator de Coppet, assisted by Chief Kaïsa M’Baye and his secretary and interpreter Amadou Sarr, and by interpreter Abdulaye Diouga. In Saint-Louis’s immediate hinterland, Chief Magnang Niang of Gandiolais submitted his testimony.<sup>18</sup> And ten notables from Dagana signed one testimony.<sup>19</sup> How Administrator Dat managed to get a single story from ten notables is not entirely clear. Was he operating under time pressure or did he not bother to

collect each notable's version of events simply because he knew it was a formality and the details did not matter? This is probably the best example of fabrication.

In any case, one can argue that the interpreters were in a position to influence the witnesses. In addition, the chiefs who offered testimonies had important interests to protect.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the suspect nature of the "new" evidence generated by the Peuvergne administration shows that the witnesses were not in a good position to observe the events they described. None of them seem to have been acquainted with Justin Devès. All the evidence suggests that there was a criminal conspiracy against the popular mayor and general councilor. How did Peuvergne use the documents he helped produce? How did he build his case against Mayor Justin Devès?

### <1>**The Case against Mayor Justin Devès**</1>

Based on all the testimonies and sworn depositions he had solicited and assembled as well as additional archival materials, Governor Peuvergne built his case against Mayor Devès and transmitted the dossier to Merleau-Ponty on August 2, 1910.<sup>21</sup> His synthesis contains three sections: contempt for the Lieutenant-Governor, abusive interference in the "Native Affairs" policy, and promises of reinstatement of slavery and the slave trade. .

### <2>**Contempt for the Lieutenant-Governor**</2>

Peuvergne began his report with the identification of what he saw as Justin Devès's negative character traits before he ran for mayoral elections, including his arrogant attitude, rough hostility against the administration, and his insulting acts against "almost all the governors." He then explained how, after he became mayor of Saint-Louis "without the intervention of the administration," Justin Devès used his position as a "new force," a tool, and a platform for his anti-administration rhetoric and hostility. Peuvergne also affirmed that the new mayor prided himself for having "accessed the throne of Saint-Louis," acquiring an authority that

was “far superior to that of the Lieutenant-Governor [Peuvergne] and of the Governor-General [Merleau-Ponty],” and becoming “the master of the colony.” He drew the conclusion that with such a mindset the mayor made it a point that his targets would be aware of his negative character traits or attitudes, chief among them the fact of his “ignoring the authority of the chief of the colony” in an “inconsiderate, brutal and uncouth manner.” Peuvergne then mentioned some specific instances or incidents where Devès’s alleged hostile attitude toward him and Interim Governor Gaudart clearly expressed itself.

The first incident placed Mayor Justin Devès in opposition to Gaudart, secretary-general first-class, who became interim lieutenant-governor when Peuvergne was on administrative leave between July 7 and November 13, 1909. Before describing the incident, Peuvergne made use of a binary opposition and compared and contrasted the men’s character traits: Devès: arrogant, authoritarian and violent, and rejecting all forms of control; Gaudart: naturally kind, conscientious, conciliatory, calm, courteous, reserved, and avoiding conflicts and disagreements with the members of the elected bodies, in general, and the mayor of Saint-Louis, in particular. These differences would lead to the likelihood that whatever Interim Governor Gaudart would propose in the exercise of his functions, especially specific control measures, the mayor would reject.

The incident occurred during one Municipal Council meeting when, in response to Gaudart’s “indulgent observations” about the approval of the supplementary budget—including the hiring of a gardener to look after the coconut trees—Devès engaged in an “inconsiderate diatribe” on the respective powers of the governors and the mayors. He then persuaded the councilors to adopt a resolution hostile to Interim Governor Gaudart, who gently reiterated his remarks both verbally and in writing. In a written response, Devès tried to be conciliatory but

even the “calm and reasonable” members of the Private Council<sup>22</sup> reached the conclusion that his letter contained “insufficient excuses.” One of them, the public prosecutor, warned against any initiatives that would appear as weakness on the part of the administration and his suggestion received unanimous support from the members of the Private Council.<sup>23</sup>

Peuvergne’s objective in including this incident in the dossier was to underline the continuity in Devès’s hostile attitude toward colonial administration officials, to show that it preceded his administration, and to avoid reducing the “Devès Affair” to a personal conflict or to opposition to his administration alone.

The second incident took place after Peuvergne returned to Senegal in November 1909 and resumed his work. He explained that it was a matter of public knowledge that, upon his return, he tried to avoid giving the mayor any pretext for showing his “bad rapports or acts of hostility.” Therefore, he dealt with him with as much courtesy and conciliatory attitude as “the dignity of [his] function” permitted him. However, his “excessive kindness” was no match for Devès’s “systematic combativeness.” Soon, the tenuous peace gave way to an open conflict over a project to shut down the Blanchot School and transfer more than 200 students to (a largely black) Brière de L’Isle School that the mayor wanted to pursue despite objections from Peuvergne and the head of the Education Service. Peuvergne was furious that Devès even rejected his suggestion to consult, at least, with the General Committee of Public Education. He attached two reports addressed to the chief of the Bureau of Education that contained evidence showing that Mayor “Devès was caught in an obvious offence of lying.”<sup>24</sup> Peuvergne also blamed Devès for misleading the Municipal Council concerning his (governor’s) real intentions and for accusing him of preparing to abuse his power when he reported the incident to the Municipal Council, which led the Municipal Council to adopt a measure giving the mayor a free

hand to act concerning the transfer of students. Again, using a binary opposition, Peuvergne described the “indisputably moderate and conciliatory tone” of his letter to the mayor, warning him to refrain from implementing the measure in question.<sup>25</sup> He contrasted the inoffensive nature of the suggestion he made to the mayor—which was “unlikely to provoke any irritation”—with the “inconvenient violence” contained in the mayor’s reply. He reproduced the portion of Devès’s response that bothered him the most: “It seemed to me that no one could ever have doubts about my intentions. The smallest suspicion to this effect would hurt my feelings. I would not accept it.”<sup>26</sup> Peuvergne left out what came before that: “. . . I am not one of those [people] who do not want to take responsibility. I am a man who can defend himself by any means necessary.”<sup>27</sup>

Choosing his words carefully, Peuvergne represented himself as a sage and reasonable man, while depicting the mayor as almost a lunatic. He described his own response as “calm and dignified,” where any reasonable person—unlike Devès—could find “a lesson of deserved convenience and a useful warning for the future.” He went on the offensive, articulating what he believed to be the “Devès doctrine,” that is, in all matters, including education, Devès’s opinion prevailed over anybody else’s and he always relied on his position as mayor and pretended “to be in control, the only one in control, above the Governor [Peuvergne] and against him.” Peuvergne accused Devès of imposing his doctrine on the teachers, to whom he allegedly granted special allocations to ensure their loyalty. The evidence supporting this view consisted of a request for a meeting issued by the mayor showing that “the mayor *will preside over* the council of teachers in order to discuss all questions concerning the pedagogical organization of the school (emphasis in the original). Peuvergne felt that he could not let Devès encroach on his (the governor’s) prerogatives or those of the head of the Education Service, so he had to stop him.”<sup>28</sup>

Another trait Governor Peuvergne found intolerable in the mayor's behavior was his tactic of sharing the content of his "rude letters" to him with third parties either before or after delivering them, while making offensive comments vis-à-vis the authorities. He was especially worried that the mayor's slightest actions, hostile attitude, and "excitations" could circulate among the indigenous people and undermine "the respect for the chief of the colony [Lieutenant-Governor] and divert the *indigène* from the respect he generally professes for the French authority. . . ." Here again, Peuvergne clearly acknowledged the effectiveness of the counterhegemonic strategies and propaganda warfare used by Devès and the strength of his power base or network.

The third incident allegedly provoked by Devès took place during the opening ceremony of the session of the General Council. According to official protocol, the governor always attended such opening ceremonies accompanied by the members of the elected bodies (in this case, the members of the Municipal Council, not the general councilors, who were already seated), the civil servants, and the military officers present in the city. However, in this instance, the records indicate that the municipal councilors and Devès boycotted the ceremony, and their absence triggered a chain reaction leading to the incident discussed here. Their absence was a retaliation to the omission, made by Governor Peuvergne in a thank-you notice to the residents of Saint-Louis, published in the *Journal Officiel*,<sup>29</sup> of their presence and that of Theodore Carpot and some members of the General Council among the officials who welcomed, on May 15, 1910 Governor-General Merleau-Ponty, his wife, and some of his collaborators upon arrival at Saint-Louis train station. The thank-you notice also did not mention their presence among the officials who accompanied the illustrious guests the next day during the boat cruise to the mouth of the Senegal River. When Devès brought the matter to his attention,<sup>30</sup> Peuvergne was on a shaky



ground but he found a good justification of the omission, which he attributed to “an unfortunate oversight; but only an oversight on the part of a civil servant redactor of the notice that I didn’t read.” Irritated by Devès’s attitude and having his sincerity questioned, Peuvergne went on the offensive. “Such an oversight,” he stated, “could have been spontaneously and usefully corrected by a new insertion in the *Journal Officiel* that could not have cost anything either to the loyalty or to the ordinary breadth of vision of the Lieutenant-Governor.” What bothered him the most was the fact that he was kept in the dark concerning the decision made by Devès and the municipal councilors not to accompany him to the opening ceremony of the General Council session. In conclusion, Peuvergne warned Devès that it was impossible “to consider your decision and your letter differently than a well-thought out affirmation and a formal notification of your desire to sever all relations with the Governor of the Colony, a desire that had manifested itself, without foundation, in other circumstances.”<sup>31</sup>

In his confidential report to the Governor-General Merleau-Ponty, Peuvergne confessed that the previous notice contained “involuntary omissions” made by the redactor of the notice but that he did rectify his oversight mistake in the following issue of the *Journal Officiel*, which would have satisfied anyone but Devès.<sup>32</sup> He remained convinced that Devès had used his oversight as “a pretext to publicly affirm his victory over the Lieutenant-Governor and to proclaim that he had led him to capitulate,”<sup>33</sup> a move that Peuvergne saw as a provocation that required his firm response, dated May 30, 1910.<sup>34</sup> He characterized his own response as “calm and loyal” and contrasted it with the mayor’s “presumptuousness.”

Peuvergne saw the absence of the mayor and the municipal councilors at the ceremony and Devès’s response to his thank-you notice to city residents as “serious and absolutely inexcusable . . . facts of impropriety vis-à-vis the chief of the colony.” One possible explanation

for this claim may have to do with the fact that the authorities in Saint-Louis always made an extensive use of forms of domination that relied heavily on public ceremonies, given their centrality to the process of production of hegemony. The General Council (1820–48, 1879–1920), which comprised first sixteen (ten from Saint-Louis and six from Gorée) and later twenty (ten from Saint-Louis and ten from Gorée) members elected by direct universal suffrage by French citizens and the *originaires*, was one of the key institutions in Senegal.<sup>35</sup> General councilors gave their opinions on the budgets and revenues and expenditures accounts of the colony and its needs. Therefore, its opening ceremonies offered an ideal platform for the deployment of the discursive practices about French-ness, the “Civilizing Mission,” and empire, and for the assertion of hegemony. Given that Devès was also an influential member of the General Council, the general perception was that his absence from such an important ceremony was an expression of his contempt for Governor Peuvergne and his administration; his absence sent a strong message that he stood for alternative perspectives and policy choices and for counterhegemony.

The fourth complaint related to another instance of Devès’s contempt for Governor Peuvergne, which he allegedly manifested itself during another General Council session, presided over by the governor and attended by the mayor. Governor Peuvergne complained that, “during one of the most solemn occasions of the exercise of his functions,” Devès “never stopped making his presence patently obvious, giving the impression of defying and provoking the chief of the colony.” The first thing Peuvergne observed was the change in Devès’s seating behavior and spatial arrangement in the room during the General Council session. Indeed, instead of seating in the space usually reserved for general councilors, Devès chose to seat in the

space that was reserved for the general public, surrounded by some of his aides, the majority of whom were former captives of his family, which had been involved in the slave trade.

This piece of evidence presented detailed information about some of the ways in which Devès manifested his contempt or disregard for Governor Peuvergne. His seating behavior was one of the most visible expressions of contempt; it clearly signified his rejection of the governor's authority and an assertion of his own pride, dominance, and status. Peuvergne did not elaborate more on what he found defiant and provocative in the mayor's specific gestures. However, one can imagine Peuvergne paying a close attention to the mayor's body language, movements, and positions (including facial emotion expressions, gaze, pupil dilation and constriction, and probably showing the sole of his shoes), which would have provoked redness on Peuvergne's face and forced him to interrupt his opening speech and his responses to the questions raised by the general councilors during the debates over the budget with moments of hesitation, pause, and silence.

Governor Peuvergne also contended that Devès's real intention was to bring more general councilors into dissidence, but without success. He prided himself for not only receiving the General Council's vote of confidence at the end of the session<sup>36</sup> but also during the toast pronounced by the president of the General Council during the official dinner.<sup>37</sup> He also mentioned having received from the deputy mayor, the first councilor, and several municipal councilors the assurance that Devès's views, expressed in his letter to the governor (no. 987) of May 1910, related to his absence from the opening ceremony of the General Council, did not represent the opinion of the Municipal Council as a whole.

In Peuvergne's view, all the "facts" in his confidential report—including the mayor's insulting attitudes, acts of provocation, encroachment upon the normal authority of the governor,

abuse of power, and administrative and financial irregularities—would have constituted sufficient evidence justifying a decision to suspend or remove Devès. Instead, he opted in favor of allowing an “impartial” mission of investigation led by an inspector of colonies from Paris who could examine the dossier.

## <2>Administrative and Financial Irregularities</2>

The minister of colonies, Georges Trouillot, appointed Inspector of Colonies Fouque to investigate the allegations of administrative and financial irregularities by Mayor Justin Devès. Fouque was ending his inspection mission in Dakar and was preparing to return to Paris when he received an order from Paris to lead a mission of verification to Saint-Louis. On June 13, 1910, Fouque concluded his investigation and issued his report.<sup>38</sup>

Fouque’s investigation of Devès’s performance underlined a number of management problems and a “total disregard” for regulatory stipulations. These included selling undeveloped municipal land regardless of the official guidelines but only by “pretending to rely on the deliberation of the Municipal Council of March 27, 1895 that was never approved by the local authority”; creating unnecessary new positions; giving various types of compensation to the police personnel under irregular conditions; and illegally hiring teachers for city schools. Inspector Fouque saw in the illegal hiring practices of teachers and various types of compensation to the police personnel a way for Devès “to favor his personal politics and remove the personnel in question from the necessary and regulatory subordination to the chief of the colony.” In other words, his intended goal was to recruit teachers and police officers into his network.

The second list of irregularities related to budgetary matters. According to Inspector Fouque, there were no records expenditures whatsoever; some purchases even exceeded the

financial means available; the mayor allegedly had spent a lot of money on meals, expensive cookies, and luxurious cigarettes during both rounds of the recent election for the deputy of Senegal. He also allegedly spent money to reward some municipal councilors for the services they had no business rendering given their status, and the stipends they received were far superior to those paid previously for the same service. For example, Inspector Fouque explained that one former municipal councilor hired as a borough surveyor for the city, received the excessive salary of 10,000 francs, and convinced the city to buy a car belonging to his wife for 730 francs. The city had also rented in the past the same car for meeting the objectives of the municipal road services and, in three months, its owner earned over 1,600 francs paid for by the municipal budget. The mayor also allegedly used municipal funds to pay for the transportation costs of bringing the municipal councilors who were involved in commerce in the trading posts on the banks of the Senegal River to Saint-Louis so that they could attend the Municipal Council meetings. The city also paid for their lodging.

Inspector Fouque had also noticed that Devès was risking running out of funds in the budget allocated to him under the label of costs of representation for the 1910 fiscal year: by early July he had already spent 6,700 out of 10,000 francs. He had overspent by 1,283 francs. What Peuvergne also found perplexing was the fact that on July 12, that is, two days before his suspension from office, Devès used 100 francs from his costs of representation line item budget to pay for his trip to Dakar even though the trip was for personal reasons. Peuvergne insisted that Devès continued to squander municipal funds “when he knew that he would be suspended from office on 15 July, for I didn’t want to take this measure on the eve of the national holiday to avoid any unjust appreciation of an administrative act that was indispensable.”

Peuvergne explained that the mayor's apparent lack of fiscal discipline had to do with his refusal to follow the rules governing municipal expenses, which consisted of seeking prior approval of the governor before engaging a planned expense. Again, using a binary opposition approach, Peuvergne underlined the fact that previous mayors of Saint-Louis as well as the mayors of other communes (Gorée, Dakar, and Rufisque) had always followed these regulations. However, in his view, Devès had none of the qualities of a good mayor, which involved being "more inclined to follow the financial regulations, more deferential and more open to advices, to indications based on the prevailing texts issued by the local administration." Peuvergne came across as a generous leader, slow to anger who, instead of suspending the mayor on the eve of the national holiday celebration (July 14) and provoking an "unjust appreciation of an indispensable administrative notice," postponed his decision and waited for the right moment in order "to put an end to a deplorable state of affairs." Let us turn now to the third and last part of Peuvergne's report on Devès.

### <2>**Abusive Interference in Native Affairs Policy**</2>

Peuvergne saw these grievances as "the most absolute evidence" he needed to back up his charges against Devès in order to avoid giving the impression that the conflict opposing the two men was strictly personal. To be credible, therefore, Peuvergne had to show continuity in Devès's behavior, starting with the period before the governor's tenure. He commented on this in three documents.

The first document Peuvergne presented related to Devès's interference in the internal affairs of Mauritanian polities was official correspondence from former Governor-General Noel Eugène Ballay (November 1900–January 1902) to the minister of colonies, dated March 7, 1902. Ballay's letter dealt with events that took place in the context of a power struggle in the Trarza

region between two candidates to the Emirate: Ahmed Saloum and his cousin and rival Ould Sidi Mohamed Fall. Ahmed Saloum had the support of the French colonial authorities in Saint-Louis before whom he had signed a statement that placed the Trarza region under French protectorate. Ould Sidi could count on his standing as the disciple of Cheikh Sidia, a respected Muslim and Francophile marabout (cleric), whose influence extended beyond the Trarza region to include the Brakna, Tagant and part of Adrar regions; popular support in the Trarza region; and the support of some influential families in Saint-Louis, especially within the business community. But before Saloum could consolidate his power base—and probably because of the perception that he was an ally of a “Christian power”<sup>39</sup>—an important segment of the population in the Trarza region rejected his claims to be Emir and, instead, pledged their allegiance to Sidi Ould Mahomet Fall, who declared the *jihad* (holy war) against the “Christians.” Taken by surprise by the turn of the events, Ahmed Saloum retreated and found refuge at Dagana, a French post in Senegal. In response, the colonial administration in Saint-Louis rejected the *fait accompli* and ordered a Senegalese chief from the Waloo province to send fifty of his cavalymen to join the “precarious forces” of Ahmed Saloum and drive Ould Sidi out of power. The counterattack was successful and Saint-Louis imposed an illegitimate chief upon the Trarzas. However, by the end of February 1902, Ahmed Saloum’s camp fell to Ould Sidi’s followers and all the chiefs who had pledged their allegiance to him only few days before defected to Ould Sidi’s forces. The presence of François Devès in Sidi’s camp, signaled by eyewitness reports, convinced the authorities in Saint-Louis that he was the instigator of the attack in question. His intended goal was to collect the “Khafor” or right of way of 25,000 francs per year from the caravans crossing the territory on the way to French trading posts on the banks of the Senegal River.

Peuvergne quoted a passage from Ballay's letter in which he explained his Mauritanian policy, which "consisted in ruining the influence that the Devès brothers exercised over Sidi and to show the latter that Ahmet Saloum remained under our protection, that we will never abandon him and that we will never tolerate any foreign interference into the affairs of the Moor tribes."<sup>40</sup>

The second document Peuvergne offered to show continuity in the Devès brothers' hostile attitude toward some of the colonial authorities was a letter from Ahmed Saloum, dated January 21, 1903, to Xavier Coppolani, ethnographer and colonial official. Coppolani had spent a great deal of time trying to understand the complex local ethnic and religious realities of the Moors and had argued for French annexation of the territory that would become Mauritania. Unfortunately, Peuvergne did not give more details about the evidence contained in Saloum's letter. He contented himself to mention that the document in question contained "some of the Devès brothers' anti-French maneuvers and of one of its members, *Justin*, the suspended mayor of Saint-Louis" (emphasis in original).<sup>41</sup>

The third and last document in this category was a letter from Colonel Montané-Capdebose, commissar of the government general in Mauritania, forwarding a correspondence from a Muslim marabout, Sidia ben Mouhamed (Cheikh Sidia) from the Trarza region, dated April 9, 1907. Cheikh Sidia (Baba) was in favor of the extension of the French domination in Mauritania and had developed a friendship with Coppolani that was characterized by regular exchanges of gifts. Written in Arabic and translated in Saint-Louis by interpreter Bou-El-Mogdad, his letter dealt with a request he received from an agent of the Devès family in which they asked him "*to discredit the acts of the Government in Mauritania and to commit this religious Chief, on whom we had founded our action, to take his distances from us*" (emphasis in original). In this letter addressed to "his friend Montane," Cheikh Sidia stated that during his



visit to Saint-Louis in March and April he had received a visit from a man named Mohamed Mokhtar Ould Toussi, who identified himself as an emissary of Hyacinthe, brother of Justin and son of Gaspard Devès, and that Hyacinthe's message focused on three main points. First, Toussi warned the Moors about "the perfidies of the French Government" because "very often the good it does to people is later replaced by evil." Second, he announced that preparations were under way to take over Adrar, a place where the Devès clan had economic and commercial interests. Third, he underlined the fact that the French were responsible for the recent trouble that had resulted in the displacement of many people among the Moors. Finally, he reminded Cheikh Sidia that the governor in Saint-Louis "had failed to keep his word given to Moulazc [chief of the Eleb], and that this fact is likely to prevent men of his rank to come back in the country."<sup>42</sup>

According to Cheikh Sidia, that was the second time he heard this message, the first time being back in 1897 when he met with Hyacinthe Devès in the Trarza region. However, he did not want to enter into a conflict with members of the most powerful Creole families and he opted for accommodation. Therefore, in response to Toussi, he confessed that he was a poor man who did not pay attention to politics; he added that a comprehensive agreement existed between the leaders of the land and him and that he would enjoy his possessions in the land of the Trarza as well as in the Adrar only when peace would return.

In relation to Mouzc, Ould Sidi, and their followers, Cheikh Sidia offered important details. He confessed that it was at his request that the French government presented the Moor leaders in question with peace proposals several times despite the great damage they had caused in the country but that they never respected their promises to the government. Concerning Moulaye, he confirmed that he died of natural causes and that the colonial authorities were not responsible for his death; they only asked for the payment for the goods he had taken. At the end

of the letter, Cheikh Sidia chose between the French and the Devès network. He put himself on the French side: “From now on,” he wrote to his “friend” Colonel Montane, “whenever I will learn something that would be detrimental to the administration, I will let you know.”

This piece of evidence offers insights into the *modus operandi* of the Devès network in the Senegalo–Mauritanian zone. It shows that the individuals who formed the nodes of this network operated according to their own interests and the various (and changing) power relations, and that Cheikh Sidia, his disciple Ould Sidi as well as Mouzc, Moulaye, and their followers in Trarza, Brakna, Tagent, and part of Adrar were probably once important nodes of the Devès network in Mauritania. The evidence also indicates that individuals forming the nodes of the network could leave the network when it was in their interest to do so. This was the case for Moulaye, who had left the network and remained in the government camp until he died, as well as Cheikh Sidia, who abandoned the network and developed a close friendship with Coppolani.

Turning to the most recent events following Devès’s election to mayor of Saint-Louis, Peuvergne affirmed that he had collected “a great quantity” of documents that corroborated his assertions but that he also wanted to leave the prosecutor a free hand for judicial investigation, just in case it took place. Therefore, he selected the depositions that contained the “precise declarations” that he quoted in his report. He started with eleven depositions related to “the advent of Justin Devès to the throne of Saint-Louis and to his greater powers than those of the Governor of Senegal [Peuvergne] and of the General Government [Merleau-Ponty].”<sup>43</sup> He affirmed that the “rumor” in question circulated “everywhere among the indigenous population.” He believed Justin Devès, his family, or his agents probably spread the rumor.

Peuvergne's other grievances related to Devès's alleged interference in native affairs policy (*politique indigène*) and the promises he allegedly made during the electoral campaign to several individuals about the favors he would make to them once elected mayor. Peuvergne affirmed that he was in possession of depositions containing "indisputable proof of these numerous facts."<sup>44</sup> However, he discussed a few depositions as illustrations.

### <2>**Promises of Reinstatement of Slavery and the Slave Trade**</2>

The last grievance Peuvergne had against Devès concerned promises the latter allegedly made to some of his constituents to reinstate slavery and the slave trade. He based his charge on seven depositions, including the letter from ten notables from the trading post of Dagana.<sup>45</sup> In Peuvergne's opinion, the notables' testimonies established "in a clearer and most affirmative way Justin Devès's direct promises on this particular point." However, he did not quote any passages from any of these documents.

### <2>**Peuvergne's Final Remarks**</2>

At the end of his lengthy confidential report to the Merleau-Ponty, Peuvergne believed he had demonstrated that Devès had managed to systematically denigrate and discredit his authority as governor of Senegal among the local population. He repeated his charges that the mayor had committed serious irregularities, abused his power, and wasted municipal funds in his administrative and financial management of the municipal resources, as uncovered by Inspector Fouque. Peuvergne also reiterated his claim that Devès had taken advantage of his position to misrepresent the extent of his power vis-à-vis his (Peuvergne's) and Governor-General Merleau-Ponty's powers in the eyes of the local population, and to interfere with native affairs policy in the protectorate regions through false promises and the extortion of funds. He described Devès as "a permanent opponent of the French administration" and concluded that his dismissal was

amply justified and in conformity with the article 86 of the law of April 5, 1884. He warned Merleau-Ponty that Devès's resumption of his duties as mayor after his three-month suspension would have serious repercussions on public opinion and the local population, who would face his "maneuvers and lies" again. He feared that the public would view such a move as "a proof of the impotence" of the Government of the Republic against the power that Devès pretended to possess. Thus, Peuvergne was very pleased when, on September 21, 1910, a ministerial decree removed Devès as mayor of Saint-Louis.

### <2>Justin Devès's Responses and Initiatives</2>

Justin Devès did not and could not respond to the "rumors" about his "ascension to the throne of Saint-Louis" because of the secrecy surrounding the production, in July 1910, of the witnesses' testimonies and sworn statements and the confidential nature of Peuvergne's report to Merleau-Ponty. However, he vigorously defended his decision to close the Blanchot School.<sup>46</sup> He also demonstrated that Governor Peuvergne was to blame for the incident that led the Municipal Council to boycott the opening ceremony of the General Council.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Devès, in his response to Inspector Fouque's report of his management of the municipal affairs came across as both combative and dismissive, especially concerning his alleged disregard for regulatory stipulations, disorder in the communal administration, and squandering of the municipal financial resources.<sup>48</sup> Peuvergne found the mayor's response to Fouque's report to be "ridiculous," even "insulting," and the tone "arrogant." He also found the mayor's comments concerning both men (Peuvergne and Fouque) during the investigation, drawn from Demba Niagna's testimony,<sup>49</sup> as "inexcusable."<sup>50</sup> Peuvergne confessed that what bothered him the most was not that Devès made comments denigrating French colonial officials' leadership style but rather the fact that these comments were made "in the presence of the *indigènes* by a man whose

power many *indigènes* believed in.”<sup>51</sup> The governor’s main fear was that such comments from a popular politician could not only undermine his authority and legitimacy but also encourage the local population to disrespect administration officials. The new details filled an important gap in Peuvergne’s story, that is, the rationale for the mayor’s contempt for the governor and the inspector. The local population could interpret mayor’s hostility and his derogatory comments as a call to rise up against a government seen as incompetent or illegitimate.

On the legal front, Devès traveled to Paris after his removal and hired two legal counsels for assistance in figuring out his options. Having examined his dossier, his counsels reached the conclusion that the removal was unwarranted. He successfully made his case before central administration officials in Paris.

Upon returning to Saint-Louis in January 1911, Devès shared the content of the letter containing his counsels’ legal opinions of his removal, written on his counsel’s cabinet letterhead, with his friends and allies. One of them, Théodore Carpot, president of the General Council, shared his optimism and confided to him that even his removal could be voided if there were no changes in the personnel at the ministry of colonies in Paris, in which case he would be able to resume his position as mayor of Saint-Louis. Carpot also alerted him about persistent rumors that had circulated in Senegal during his absence that the former mayor had sought and obtained the removal of Peuvergne from Senegal and the removal of François Carpot, deputy of Senegal in French Parliament, and that more removals would follow in the near future. He urged the former mayor to deny these rumors, especially among the *indigènes*, who were the most credulous.<sup>52</sup>

By mid-January, aware of a decision to transfer Peuvergne to Guadeloupe, Devès adopted a strategy of subversion. He reproduced and circulated a letter, dated December 15, 1878, by

which then Governor G. Brière de l'Isle renewed his confidence in Mayor Gaspard Devès (Justin's father) by reappointing him (Gaspard) to another three-year term as mayor of Saint-Louis. The letter emphasized Gaspard Devès's "well known devotion to the public service," which represented, in the governor's eyes, "a sure warranty of the care that you will continue to give to the management of the interests on behalf of which I am making a new appeal to your patriotism."<sup>53</sup> Justin Devès's objective in distributing copies of this letter in Saint-Louis's streets was to undermine one of Peuvergne's central claims: that the Devès had always opposed the colonial administration. His initiative bothered Peuvergne who, fearing that Justin Devès might be tempted to convince the illiterate urban poor that he was the intended recipient of the letter in question, brought the matter to the attention of Interim Governor-General Clozel.<sup>54</sup>

### <2>Peuvergne's Desperate Quest for a Criminal Prosecution</2>

In the meantime, waiting with impatience for an official response from Paris to his avalanche of telegrams, Peuvergne urged once more the public prosecutor's office in Saint-Louis to open a criminal investigation against the former mayor. He described him as an "individual who has judicial antecedents [but] who would not hesitate to intimidate, suborn and even sequester indigenous witnesses called to testify against him." He was worried that the lack of urgent action could "cause damage to the prestige of the French authority."<sup>55</sup> However, Merleau-Ponty believed that Peuvergne had achieved his goal of removing the mayor but that his evidence for judicial prosecution was "insufficient." He did not share Peuvergne's determination "to trample on a defeated enemy," so he advised him to think carefully and calmly, seek the best advice, and ponder the serious consequences of his initiative before engaging in a dangerous course of action. His hesitation was justified by the fact that "the facts are old" and that Peuvergne was preparing to leave the colony anyway.<sup>56</sup>

## <2>Interpretation</2>

The French authorities' search for hegemony in Senegal faced various challenges at different times from various social, religious, or political actors. The "Devès Affair" was one of those instances. Most of the disagreements took place between the elected mayors of Saint-Louis and the members of the colonial administration, especially the governors and interior directors, because they were constantly working together.

Justin Devès's case was not the only one in the records. Some mayors before him also had conflicts with administration officials. For example, the harsh tone of the correspondence between Mayor A. de Bourmeister of Saint-Louis and the interior director in August 1886 is a good example. Indeed, having learned about the departure of Governor Genouille while reading the circular letter from the interior director, Bourmeister protested "in the most energetic way on behalf of the [urban] population . . . against the inconvenient way your administration informed me about . . . Governor Genouille's departure." While carefully reading the circular letter, he fulminated with rage when he noticed that, as "the first magistrate of the city [and] elected by direct universal suffrage," he found himself, in order of precedence, "ranked below the president of the Chamber of Commerce, who emanates from a narrow suffrage." He then warned, "I am alerting the department [of colonies in Paris] about the issue. . . ." <sup>57</sup>

However, no contest was so open and so disturbing than the one engaged in by Mayor Justin Devès in Saint-Louis. Involving an elected and popular mayor, general councilor, and a member of one of the leading Creole families in colonial Senegal, such a challenge was daunting; it created a crisis of legitimacy for the Peuvergne administration and pushed Peuvergne past his limits. Peuvergne's response was swift but also a little Machiavellian.

A closer look at the dossier shows that Peuvergne suspended and got Mayor Justin Devès removed from office based on spurious charges. The Peuvergne administration produced testimonies and depositions from individuals who apparently had ulterior motives or personal interest for describing Justin Devès's past behavior, statements, and actions as they did. These documents raise serious questions about their reliability, validity, and objectivity. Their narrative line seems highly suspect. Justin Devès did engage in some administrative and financial irregularities. Some administration officials who had legitimate disagreements with the mayor over a number of issues did find his leadership style combative. Misunderstandings, miscommunications, and individual egos played out in the interaction between municipal and colonial administration officials. However, the various administrative and financial irregularities in the dossier did not amount to crimes; and Devès offered an aggressive defense against those charges. Johnson has shown that candidates for the Municipal Council courted the urban African voters and their local leaders to whom they offered bags of rice, sugar, and tea.<sup>58</sup> However, such practices could be explained away based on cross-cultural (mis)communication or unproven quid pro quo. In addition, the charges related to interference in the native affairs policy and promises to reinstate slavery and the slave trade were most difficult to substantiate. Peuvergne did not demonstrate by what mechanisms Mayor Devès would have been able to appoint chiefs and to reinstate slavery in the colony of Senegal.

Is the Justin Devès who emerges from Peuvergne's correspondence with Merleau-Ponty and from the witnesses' testimonies and depositions, who refers to himself as the "King of Saint-Louis" and the only "leader of the colony," who makes fantastic promises to and allegedly extorts from so many individuals, the "real" and popular mayor and general councilor Justin Devès? Is his alleged defiance (almost "madness") a construction by the Peuvergne



administration? These are the questions that come to the historian's mind when reading these problematic testimonies and depositions. Therefore, as primary sources, we need to read these documents with skepticism. However, taken in the context of political and economic competition, these documents reveal a great deal about the threat Devès and his network posed to the colonial administration and Bordeaux firms. They also shed light into Peuvergne's performance as a decision maker who acted under conditions of uncertainty and had limited information about how both Devès and Merleau-Ponty would react to his decision to suspend the first. In consequence, he chose a course of action that would have guaranteed one of the two desired outcomes, that is, the removal of Devès as mayor, by helping produce highly unreliable supporting documents. However, Peuvergne failed on his second desired outcome, which consisted of convincing the general prosecutor and Merleau-Ponty to launch a criminal investigation against Devès. At the end, the conflict made Peuvergne's own position vulnerable and led to the decision, dated January 10, 1911, to transfer him to Guadeloupe, whereas it emboldened Devès, who traveled to France after his removal and took credit for the transfer decision.

Peuvergne traveled from Senegal to Guadeloupe with the conviction that Justin Devès, "the unscrupulous agitator" who had "raised the question of [skin] color" unknown in Senegal,<sup>59</sup> "the con artist," had escaped the charges of extortion of funds and fraud, and got away with his "anti-European sentiments."<sup>60</sup> He left behind intact "the legend that there is in Senegal a man who can defy the Law and the Government of the Republic."<sup>61</sup> Devès would be reelected mayor of Saint-Louis a year later. In 1913, he would defeat Theodore Carpot and become the president of the General Council. However, following his death on June 22, 1916,<sup>62</sup> the colonial authorities took their revenge on him by rejecting his supporters' petition to build, on one of the public

spaces in Saint-Louis (to be named “Justin Devès Square”), a monument in his memory bearing the following inscription: “The *Indigènes* Grateful.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peuvergne served as interim governor (between June 10 and October 17, 1908) before his appointment as governor on February 9, 1909 but he actually began working only on May 2. Gaudart served as interim governor before Peuvergne’s arrival. After working for two months, Peuvergne took an administrative leave from July 7 through November 13. Again, Gaudart served as interim governor. Peuvergne resumed his position on November 13, 1909 and worked until January 10, 1910, when he was transferred to Guadeloupe.

<sup>2</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 35: Governor Peuvergne’s ordinance dismissing Mayor Justin Devès from office. See also ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 56: Governor Peuvergne to Governor-General, no. 971, August 2, 1910.

<sup>3</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 59: Governor-General Ponty to minister of colonies, no. 2301 of August 8, 1910 related to the revocation of J. Devès, Mayor of Saint-Louis.

<sup>4</sup> ANFCAOM, 3G3/5, piece 57: Journal Officiel A.O.F., “Decret du 21 septembre 1910 revoquant M. Justin Devès de ses fonctions de Maire de la commune de Saint-Louis (Senegal),” October 8, 1910, 625.

<sup>5</sup> G. Wesley Johnson raised questions about the conclusion reached by Peuvergne and his intended goal of suspending Mayor Justin Devès from office but not his evidence. He stated, “It is difficult to tell, from contradictory official reports that followed (his suspension and revocation) whether Devès was really heading a lucrative political ‘machine,’ doubled by an enterprise of extortion of funds, or if the administration, alarmed by the rise of his influence and pushed by Carpot, did not try to nip his success in the bud.” See G. Wesley Johnson, *Naissance du Sénégal contemporain. Aux origins de la vie politique modern (1900-1920)* (Paris: Editions

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Karthala, 1991), 152. Hilary Jones was not sure if the allegations against Justin Devès were “partially true or not at all.” See Hilary Jones, *The Métis of Sénégal: Urban Life and Politics in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 177. See also Kelly Duke Bryant, ““The Color of the Pupils”: Schooling and Race in Senegal's Cities, 1900-10,” *Journal of African History* 52.3 (Nov. 2011), 299-319. The author takes Amadou Segá's deposition for granted, as an unproblematic piece of evidence.

<sup>6</sup> For more details on these processes, see David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> François Manchuelle, “Métis et colons: la famille Devès et l’émérgence politique des Africains au Sénégal, 1881–1897,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 96. XXIV-4 (1984): 481, 493–95.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *Naissance du Sénégal contemporain*, 119.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 135–36.

<sup>13</sup> Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 110–11.

<sup>15</sup> Jones, *The Métis of Sénégal*, 176.

<sup>16</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57: Rapport no. 971 of August 2, 1910.

<sup>17</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 23: deposition of Amadou Segá, son of Diallo Segá and Tissibé N’Diaye, forty-eight years old, interpreter at Thiès, July 9, 1910.

<sup>18</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 36: Chef du Gandiolais to governor of Senegal, July 19, 1910.

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<sup>19</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 35: Notables of Dagana to governor of Senegal, n.d.; the signatories are Khayar Diop, Bakhao Diop, Missine Gueye, Attou Seck, Sambarka, Birama Cissé, Adiouna Diall, Balla Diall, Souleymane Thiouba, and Massopo Lô.

<sup>20</sup> For more on interpreters, see B. Lawrence, E. L. Osborn, and R. Roberts, *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees of Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Tamba M'Bayo, *Muslim Interpreters in Colonial Senegal, 1850–1920: Mediation of Knowledge and Power in Lower and Middle Senegal River Valley* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> ANFCAOM/2G3/5, Confidential report, Governor Peuvergne to Governor-General Ponty, no. 971, August 2, 1910.

<sup>22</sup> The Private Council (*Conseil Privé*) was the new name given to the Administrative Council in 1830; it became the Administrative Council again between 1840 and 1884, before being split into two—the Private Council focusing on territories under direct administration and the Administrative Council for territories under the protectorate. The Private Council served as a consultative body, which advised the governor on the issues on the agenda. It was presided over by the governor and included the top administration officials and two notables. For more information, see Saliou Mbaye, *Guide des Archives de l'Afrique Occidentale Française* (Dakar: Archives du Sénégal, 1990), 67–68.

<sup>23</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/1: Extrait du process-verbal no. 12 of the Private Council, October 9, 1909.

<sup>24</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/2: Calvayrac, Director of L'École Blanchot, to Head of Education Service, February 19, 1910; see also report no. 403 a.s. classroom fittings at École Brière de l'Isle.

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<sup>25</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/4: Governor to mayor of Saint-Louis a.s. École Blanchot, no. 147 of February 24, 1910. See also Mayor of Saint-Louis to governor a.s. École Blanchot, no. 908 of February 25, 1910.

<sup>26</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/6: Governor to mayor of Saint-Louis a.s. suppression of École Blanchot, no. 159 of February 28, 1910.

<sup>27</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/8: Justin Devès to governor, February 25, 1910.

<sup>28</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/7: Request for a meeting of Council of Masters, April 1, 1910.

<sup>29</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/11: “Voyage de M. le Gouverneur Général à Saint-Louis,” in *Journal Officiel du Sénégal*, May 26, 1910, 385–86.

<sup>30</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/9: Mayor Justin Devès to Governor Peuvergne, a.s. absence of the Municipal Council to the opening ceremony of the General Council, no. 987 of May 30, 1910.

<sup>31</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/10: governor to mayor, no. 450 of May 30, 1910.

<sup>32</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/12 “Voyage de M. Le Gouverneur General à Saint-Louis,” in *Journal Officiel du Sénégal*, June 2, 1910, 421.

<sup>33</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/9: Mayor Justin Devès to Governor Peuvergne, a.s. absence of the Municipal Council to the opening ceremony of the General Council, no. 987 of May 30, 1910.

<sup>34</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/10: Governor to Mayor, a.s. response to letter no. 987, no. 459 of May 30, 1910.

<sup>35</sup> For more on the General Council, see Mbaye, *Histoire des institutions coloniales françaises en Afrique de l’Ouest*, 151–54.

<sup>36</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/13: Motion voted by the General Council, n.d.

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<sup>37</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/14: Speech given by Th. Carpot, president of the General Council, during the official dinner on June 11, 1910.

<sup>38</sup> Archives Nationales du Senegal (ANS)/1Z8, piece 23: “Report by M. Fouque, Inspector of Colonies,” June 13, 1910.

<sup>39</sup> See G.-M. Désiré-Vuillemin, “Coppolani en Mauritanie,” *Revue d’histoire des colonies* 41, nos. 148–149 (1955): 291–342.

<sup>40</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57: Confidential report, Governor Peuvergne to Governor-General Merleau-Ponty, no. 971 of August 2, 1910, 24–25; Peuvergne referred to the letter of Governor Ballay to minister of colonies, no. 462 of March 7, 1902; concerning Coppolani, see also G.-M. Désiré-Vuillemin, “Coppolani in Mauritania,” *Revue d’histoire des colonies* 42, nos. 148-149 (1955): : 291–342.

<sup>41</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/18, Ahmet Saloum to Coppolani, January 21, 1903. Coppolani became the “delegate of the General Government in Trarza” in May 1903 and “General Commissar of the Government General in Mauritania” on October 26, 1904. Some Moor factions opposed to the extension of French domination during his “Tagant-Adrar mission” in 1905 and assassinated him on May 12, 1905.

<sup>42</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/19: Colonel Montane-Capdoboso to governor, no. 109 of April 17, 1907; see also piece 19 bis: testimony of Cheikh Sidia, April 9, 1907.

<sup>43</sup> They included the following pieces: ANFCAOM/3G3/5, pieces 57/22, 57/23, 57/24, 57/25, 57/27, 57/31, 57/33, 57/34, 57/35, 57/38.

<sup>44</sup> See ANFCAOM/3G3/5, pieces 57/22, 57/23, 57/24, 57/25, 57/26, 57/29, 57/34, 57/36, 57/39, 57/40, 57/41, and 57/42.

<sup>45</sup> See ANFCAOM/3G3/5, pieces 57/20, 57/28, 57/30, 57/31, 57/32, 57/33, 57/35

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- <sup>46</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/5: Mayor Justin Devès to Governor Peuvergne, no. 908 of February 25, 1910.
- <sup>47</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/9: Mayor Justin Devès to Governor Peuvergne, no. 987 of May 1910.
- <sup>48</sup> ANS/1Z8, piece 26, “Response to the observations presented by Inspector of Colonies Fouque” by Justin Devès, July 1, 1910.
- <sup>49</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/17, Demba Niagna to Governor Peuvergne, July 20, 1910.
- <sup>50</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 57/1: Governor Peuvergne’s confidential report to Governor-General Ponty, no. 971 of August 2, 1910.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 72: Théodore Carpot to Justin Devès, January 17, 1911.
- <sup>53</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 71: Governor Brière de l’Isle to Mayor Gaspard Devès, no. 171 of December 15, 1878.
- <sup>54</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 70: Governor Peuvergne to Interim Governor-General Clozel, January 17, 1911.
- <sup>55</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 73: Official telegram, Peuvergne to prosecutor general, January 18, 1911.
- <sup>56</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 84: Official telegram, Ponty to Peuvergne, January 26, 1911.
- <sup>57</sup> ANS/IB61, Mayor to Interim Interior Director, no. 103 of August 14, 1886.
- <sup>58</sup> Johnson, *Naissance du Sénégal contemporain*, 129.
- <sup>59</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 85, Governor Peuvergne to Governor-General Ponty, January 28, 1911.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>61</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/5, piece 76: Official telegram from Governor Peuvergne to Governor-General Ponty, January 21, 1911.

<sup>62</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/6, piece 12: Official telegram, Governor Cor to Governor-General Clozel, no. 462 of June 22, 1916.

<sup>63</sup> ANFCAOM/3G3/6, piece 15: Municipal Council meeting minutes, August 26, 1916.