

## French Approaches in Colonial Policy

Wallace G. Mills Hist. 317 3 French Colonial Policies

- ostensibly, French colonial administration is usually characterised as more 'direct rule' compared to the British; traditional authorities were largely ignored.
- French ideas about colonial policy (as in many things) were divided—assimilation <---> association.

### Assimilation

- this approach had its origins in the French revolution—equality, fraternity and freedom should apply to **anyone who was French**, regardless of race or colour; thus, rights of citizenship, including political rights, had been extended to residents of the cantons of Saint-Louis in Senegal in the 1790s.
- however, people in the conservative, catholic and monarchist tradition in France were never happy with this; in fact, political rights to people in Senegal became a weather vane of politics in France: when the republicans were dominant and controlled the constitution, the Senegalese had the vote, but when monarchists were dominant, they did not. This approach was never applied anywhere else in Africa, until after 1945.
- assimilation was predicated on a presumption of the superiority of French culture and 'civilisation'. As part of France's 'mission civilisatrice', when confronted by 'barbarian' people, it was the duty of France to civilise them and turn them into Frenchmen.
- while this implied a kind of equality (that Africans were capable of becoming Frenchmen), it also dismissed African culture as non-existent or at least without value; of course, the French tended to feel that way about almost everyone else too. French culture was the epitome and everything else was at best 2nd or 3rd rate! African society was seen as without history or civilisation, largely in a state of war and flux.
- 'assimilation' meant different things at different times; Michael Crowder (**Senegal**, see chap. 1-4) mentions 7 meanings over the history of Senegal.

- during the revolution, it was the métis population which was assimilated and able to seize opportunities available in the assimilation policy; after the restoration of 1815, the rights of non-white French in Senegal were downgraded.
- in 1833 (the constitutional monarchy of Louis Philippe), political rights were conferred on all free residents (although slavery had ostensibly been abolished during the revolution, domestic slavery was not finally abolished until 1848); as a

result, 12,000 Africans acquired voting rights in addition to whites and métis who already had such rights.

- also, Senegal got to elect a deputy to the National Assembly and a métis was elected; political rights were withdrawn under the empire of Louis Napoleon in the 1850s and 60s.
- Governor Faidherbe, during the empire in the 1860s, began the process of conquest and expansion of Senegal; the pattern in the newly conquered areas set the pattern for France's African empire; the privileges of the 4 communes of the coast were not extended into the interior and the policy was not assimilationist; here began the distinction between 'citoyen' and 'sujet'
- the right to a deputy was regained in 1871 in the 3rd republic; also, an elected body was established in Senegal in 1879, but only for citizens, not subjects. These were the last extensions of political rights in French Africa until 1944, and these rights often had to be fought for because administrators regretted them and wanted to end the restrictions on their authority (the people in the cantons had little interest in expansion into the interior).
- by 1900, local whites had lost political control in the cantons to the métis;
- leading up to 1914, there were major attacks on the rights and status of Africans; although their rights to vote were upheld, Africans in the cantons did not get full recognition of their status as 'citoyen'.
- in 1912 a law stated that only subjects of West Africa (i.e., not from Indochina or central Africa) could become 'citoyen' and set stiff conditions and requirements; as a result, 1914- 1922 only 94 'sujets' became 'citoyens'; up to 1937, only about 2,000 had managed to do it in all of French West Africa.
- during WW1, the first African was elected deputy and from that point, both whites and métis had lost political control to Africans in the cantons.
- thus, assimilation granted rights to Africans and, in theory at least, equality to those few who were considered assimilated; however, from the late 19th C until 1944, it was restricted and under attack.

- the great expansion of the French empire in the late 19th C had brought large numbers of Africans under French control and this provoked a far-ranging debate on colonial policy. There was a growing reaction in France against assimilation:

- some argued on racist grounds that Africans were inferior and thus incapable of full assimilation;
- others felt that the tremendous educational effort involved in making assimilation a reality was too much and that beyond some arithmetic and minimal literacy, training in agriculture and simple trades was more important.
- also, in the background was Algeria with a large, influential French settler population pushing for special privileges and rights as compared to the large Moslem population there.
- however, there was also a growing recognition that Africans had a very different culture.

### Association

- the opposing idea was that the relationship between the conqueror and the conquered, of white and black peoples, should be one of 'association', not one of identity and merging; it emphasised cooperation between the rulers and the ruled.

- association was supposed to respect the cultural and political values and institutions of Africans; Africans could not and should not be turned into black French people.
- like Dual Mandate, it was asserted that economic development was for the mutual advantage of both France and Africans.
- to some extent, especially after 1918, proponents referred approvingly to the British model of indirect rule and claimed the intention to rule more indirectly, retaining traditional custom and law. Actually, conquering administrators like Faidherbe in Senegal, had done this much earlier and for many of the same reasons as the British—it was cheaper and provoked less resistance.

- however, in practice, implementation was always a bit superficial; at best, Africans and 'traditional' authorities were used only at the very bottom rung of the administration. They were subordinate cogs in the bureaucracy for carrying out policies which were developed by expatriate French officials with no real consultation with Africans.

- African societies were carved up into 'cantons' (districts) and chiefs who were not adequately efficient or subservient were deposed and replaced, often with little regard for traditional status. The Kingdom of Dahomey, which would have been an ideal candidate under the British system of 'indirect rule', was completely dismantled and no significant members of the royal family were employed by the colonial administration.

- eventually, advisory councils were started in each level of the bureaucracy (supposedly to provide knowledge about African law and custom), but they had no power and not much influence.

- in effect, there was a dual legal system set up—French law for whites, métis, African residents of Saint-Louis and the few Africans in West Africa who were naturalised ‘citoyens’; ‘sujets’ were subject to a system called **justice indigène**.

- in spite of the name it was not a real attempt to preserve or revive African law or justice; instead French administrators, assisted by African assessors, dispensed civil and criminal justice ostensibly according to African law, but mostly according to what the white official decided was African law or more usually, according to what he thought was natural justice. Of course, this produced a great deal of variation in the law and its administration.

- there was little machinery or penal provisions to curb an administrator; there were few appeals from his decisions except that he could not execute on his own authority (however, he presented the evidence to his superiors so usually he could get his decision confirmed).

- in addition, there was a system called **indigénat** which in fact allowed administrative tyranny; governors could define certain offences by decree, and persons could be tried summarily by local administrators.

- also, very heavy obligations were placed on the African population by the colonial administration:

- **prestation**—12 days of free labour (or its money equivalent) for public works and purposes.
- compulsory or forced labour paid at very low rates (conscription of labour).
- conscription in wartime.

- money taxes (as was frequently the case in Africa) were designed to force Africans to grow export crops or go out to work (we shall return to discuss this further).

- in practice, ‘association’ brought a greater degree of authoritarianism. It provided a rationale for withholding rights which were taken for granted in France (freedom of the press, trade unions, free speech etc) from African ‘sujets’. There was no development of these rights in Francophone areas of Africa before 1945. This was a sharp contrast with British colonies.

- curiously, this situation did not change during the Popular Front gov’t (made up of centre and left parties) in the 1930s. In fact, there seems to have been a division. Even

under republican gov'ts (including those left of centre), the colonies were under much more control by the military and conservative elements. While separation of church and state was being pushed in France, the colonial administrations in Africa were deep partners with missionaries.

## Development

- Albert Sarraut's *La Mise en valeur de nos colonies* was influential in setting out the idea of systematic development of French colonies; i.e., to treat the colonies like an estate or enterprise.

- in French West Africa, great efforts were made to increase exports (with statistics showing some considerable success) and to build railways into the interior, although most exports came from the coastal areas of better rainfall—peanuts, hardwoods, palm kernels and palm oil. Late in the 1930s cocoa and coffee were encouraged by the government; attempts to grow cotton with irrigation were not too successful.

- conditions in French Equatorial African were much more difficult; many areas were remote from the sea and land was not too fruitful. There were formidable transportation problems and little trade was established in the area before WW1.

- in the international agreements by which France got recognition for its claims to the area, no customs duties were allowed. As the French parliament gave little financial assistance, the colonial administration had a very difficult time to get revenues; as a result, the FEA gov't placed very heavy taxation and labour demands on the population and also raised revenue by letting 'concessions'.

- 'concessions' gave private companies wide powers over large areas to exploit specified natural resources; the gov't often provided a lot of assistance in meeting the labour requirements of the companies. Eventually, a number of scandals came to light showing the consequences of such a system. French officials had great powers and few controls. For example, Africans were forced to provide labour, often having to migrate for long distances, for little money, and working conditions often were very poor; substantial numbers of men died, and families and local communities were disrupted. The abuses were not always carried out for the private enrichment of the officials; often it was the only way to carry out some of their development projects, but the impact on Africans was severe either way.

- **La Mise en valeur** set out deliberately to develop the classical model of the colonies supplying raw materials and being a market for French manufactured goods in what became known as the **pacte coloniale**. However, the system did guarantee markets and (to some extent) prices for products from the colonies in France. This was of some

value during the depression in the 1930s when prices and demand for raw materials on world markets plummeted. British colonies got no protection, but were fully exposed to the vagaries of the world market.

- this system was renewed and expanded after 1945 and remained in effect after independence; France even negotiated special terms for its former African colonies in the E.E.C. Only recently have the arrangements been significantly reduced.

- in theory, Sarraut's **La Mise en valeur** was supposed to benefit both France and its colonies, but benefits to Africans were much more limited:

- export products were shipped out raw or with very little processing; e.g., most palm oil was shipped out in kernels without being processed into oil so that there was little processing let alone manufacturing.
- or course, the exchange of raw materials for manufactured goods has a disproportionate volume and value for the latter (i.e., a lot of raw materials are exchanged for much smaller quantities of manufactured goods. Also, prices of raw materials tend to go up more slowly and fall more quickly than the latter.
- the opening of railroads often squeezed out African traders and middlemen or forced them into remote, not very accessible areas, away from the railroads; Africans were unable to compete with the credit resources or the privileged treatment accorded French or 'Syrian' (i.e., Lebanese) traders.

- except in Algeria, there was no large influx of French settlers so that there were not the great struggles over the land that took place there. The promotion of export crops was usually within the context of African peasant exploitation.

- not having to withstand white settler demands for land did not always mean security of tenure for Africans as most officials were not aware of local traditions. Most officials assumed that Africans merely went out to some uncultivated piece of land and began to work it as long as they liked; officials failed to perceive the depth and complexities of African land tenures. They failed to appreciate the need to allow land to be fallow in order to recover fertility. Thus, they sometimes alienated land arbitrarily; they might decide that because land was not being cultivated currently, it could and should be turned over to someone else who would.

- in coastal areas, Ivory Coast and Guinea, they did give long and short term leases to European companies and individuals for plantations.

## **Labour and Taxation Issues**

- forms of domestic slavery and servitude had existed in African societies since long before the Europeans arrived and the transatlantic slave trade initiated. Domestic

slavery had been abolished in Senegal in 1848, but the massive conquests of the scramble period brought the French into control of areas where it was widespread. It was a difficulty because abolition would produce disruption and opposition; the new colonial regimes were anxious to avoid such reactions.

- nevertheless, the regimes did begin to abolish domestic slavery although some critics argue that this was more for economic reasons (to free up labour and allow it to be more mobile in order to meet the needs of the development policies) than for humanitarian reasons. Undoubtedly, there is some truth in these criticisms.

- **villages de liberté** were set up. Ostensibly, these were places where people freed from slavery could go, but soon they came to be seen primarily as labour reservoirs which the colonial administration could draw upon. A great deal of pressure and coercion was applied; labour from these places was conscripted, not only for public purposes (building roads, railways etc.) but also in some cases to provide for private companies (in mining for example). As a result, it is charged that, in some cases, the **villages de liberté** were little better than forced labour camps.

- the taxation system was used as a major tool by colonial administrations to achieve their goals, not just to gain revenues:

- taxes were levied to stimulate Africans to collect natural materials for export (rubber, palm kernels, shea butter etc.); while the potential was limited, it did stimulate exploitation of these resources.
- some farmers shifted their production to export crops in order to get money for taxes. This could lead to reduced quantities of food for consumption with increased malnutrition. Also, repeated growing of the same export crops year after year, depleted fertility of the soils even faster than regular traditional agriculture would have.
- taxation was also used to force large numbers of Africans to provide labour. This was common everywhere in Africa, but it often created special problems in French areas. Many people (men especially) in the sudanic areas were forced into long migrations to employment opportunities either constructing railroads or to the relatively prosperous areas on the coast. Large numbers travelled to the Gold Coast where production of peanuts and cocoa was booming and labour was in demand; migrants had to travel hundreds of miles (usually on foot) with little assistance, and the result was a good deal of hardship, illness and even death.
- the relatively prosperous coastal areas of FWA (Ivory Coast, Guinea and Dahomey) provided some revenues for development and government. In FEA, there were no significant prosperous areas and the taxation and labour demands

on Africans were very great to achieve any services or development at all; this resulted, as noted earlier, in a number of scandals.

## Education and Public Services

-gradually, some gov't services were introduced and expanded, but these programmes were always severely hampered by inadequate funds and resources.

- western medical treatment was slowly expanded, but many observers argue that it was a long time before benefits were approximately equal to the disruptiveness of diseases introduced from outside and the large scale migrations induced by colonial policies exacerbated the problems and carried new diseases into even remote areas.

[**Caveat:** populations in many areas of colonial Africa began to grow quickly so something was producing this effect. Certainly, it was not increased fertility so it must have been a consequence of a decline in death rates.]

- education expanded very slowly except in Senegal and to a lesser extent in Dahomey. In these latter areas, a full hierarchy (elementary, secondary and even post secondary with the opening of the Polytechnic in Dakar) was developed early. However, it was always a very slender system with a small elementary school base; there was no mass education. There were a number of reasons for this:

- most of the inland peoples in the FWA were Moslem. For the most part, education was provided by missionaries, but most missionaries were kept out of Islamic areas; also, the people were not much interested in education provided by Christian missionaries.
- the French always insisted on French as the language of instruction and this slowed the process. Only those who had acquired a high level of proficiency in French could acquire education.
- the curriculum was almost exactly the same as in France, even the same textbooks. One famous history textbook began "Our ancestors the Gauls ...". Thus, 'assimilation' lingered on even in the era of 'association'.
- the French education system has always been (and continues to be) elitist—i.e., it focuses on a minority of the most talented and tries to develop their capabilities to a very high level; the elite are separated at an early age from the majority (streaming); education of the majority does not have as high a priority.

- this tendency was exaggerated very much in Africa; only a tiny minority were provided with any education, but there was opportunity to go all the way, even to university degrees at French universities. This last required a very high level of assimilation (only a minority of French people could achieve this) and involved very gifted, outstanding individuals. On the other hand, most of the population received no education whatever!

- academic programmes at the Polytechnic in Dakar did begin to train people in agriculture and veterinary science—also, some medical technicians and partly trained medical practitioners; however, the numbers in these programmes were very limited.

- mostly, education was designed to train men for the bureaucracy as clerks, administrators, etc.

- in this area, the French were freer of colour prejudice and discrimination than the British, and Africans could make their way in the bureaucracy along with whites; there was probably not absolute equality, but a few were reaching high positions by the end of the 1930s. The first African governor was appointed in French Equatorial Africa during WW2. This man had a very important role; he threw his support behind DeGaulle and the Free French—the first governor and high official in Africa to do so.

- **commandant de circle** was the equivalent to the district officer in the British system; however, they had great powers—administrator, magistrate, tax collector etc.

- much depended upon their personal qualities; they were often much closer to the African population than their British counterparts (the aloofness of the British has often been complained of); commandants often stayed in the same area for long periods of time and often had African mistresses (such behaviour in British colonies was the end of one's career if discovered).

- sometimes, the commandant was pictured as a paternal figure, understanding the needs of his flock and doing his best to help them and look after them; on the other hand, the commandant has been pictured as a tyrant, having very large powers far from the checks of higher authority and untouchable by the complaints of his charges.

- probably, there were examples of commandants at each of these extremes with most somewhere in between.

- the French always claimed that their colonialism was freer of the racism which underlay British attitudes; in some ways this was true, but it was probably truer in France than in Africa (in Britain too, the racial lines were drawn less rigidly than in the colonies). Those Africans who climbed to the pinnacle in education usually were accepted and had good careers in France and to some extent in the colonies. This was more true after 1945.

### **Assimilation vs Association**

- though association was officially adopted as policy for the French African colonies, habits of mind and attitudes of administrators tended still to have strong assimilationist biases. As a result, implementation of association was often half-hearted without much

effort to get to know African tradition and custom. At best, in sparsely populated areas, especially in Islamic areas, association meant non-interference in religious matters and often little interference in other areas as well.

- however, in most practice, French officials tended to implement French ways of doing things in administration and in law.; the belief in the superiority of things French held by many, probably most, Frenchmen working in the colonial administrations meant that they would tend to promote things French.

- Association did involve a much more authoritarian approach to governing in Africa up to 1944 or 45 and provided the rationale for withholding rights from Africans; an African press, trade unions and political activities were all suppressed up to 1945.

- after 1945, the approach was explicitly assimilationist; the African colonies were treated as an integral part of France—France outre mer. Africans in the colonies were given rights to elect representatives to the French parliament, to have a free press, trade unions and political parties.

- suddenly, all these things flourished; most trade unions and political parties aligned and affiliated themselves with similar organisations in France (with many of the same divisions between socialists, communists and moderates).

- Francophone areas did become very much assimilated into the French political system, although less so in the colonial bureaucracy which remained separate and under the ministry of colonies. The highly centralised bureaucracy directing regional and local affairs from Paris was recognised as not entirely appropriate for the African colonies. Much more was decided by local colonial governments.

- however, African politicians were oriented to Paris, and a number of Africans served in French cabinets during the 1940s and 50s.

- when DeGaulle indicated in 1962 that African areas would be given a choice either to remain part of greater France or to become independent, the initial response of most African politicians was that they would choose to remain part of greater France. The only exception had been Guinea where the leaders had been allied to the communists. Except in Algeria where the independence struggle was so bitter and violent, there had been no vociferous independence movements in French African colonies.

- it appears to have been the example of what was happening in British colonies that changed things; Ghana had become independent and Kwame Nkrumah was emerging as a leader, holding conferences to encourage independence in Africa. Nkrumah was in fact playing a large role on the international stage, playing off the superpowers against each other, promoting Pan-Africanism as a means of taking Africa from a position of subordination and dependence to a position of influence in the world by African unity

and becoming one of the leaders in the non-aligned movement. Francophone leaders were participating in an integral way in the affairs of a major power, one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. However, Nkrumah was showing the possibility of playing on an even bigger stage—the world. Also, by playing off the superpowers, it seemed that Nkrumah would get sufficient aid to develop Ghana in a generation or two. Thus, independence seemed the route to rapid, overnight development (of course, it did not work out that way).

- also, in the wake of the 'winds of change' policies of Britain's Macmillan government, most of the British colonies were independent or had their dates of independence scheduled over the next 2 or 3 years.

- therefore, within a few months, the francophone African politicians changed their minds and all now wanted independence.