Mission to Civilize: The French West African Federation

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I. Introduction

Imperial powers like the Roman, Persian, Japanese, and Chinese, have always justified their conquests as a benefit to those that were conquered by virtue of bringing a superior civilization to their world.[1] Among imperial powers one of the most strident were the Second and Third French Republics.[2] The civilizing mission or what Girardet Raoul refers to as "colonial humanism"[3] came to define French colonial statecraft in the early part of the nineteenth century crusade to improve the lives of people that France saw as backward in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. For intellectuals like Leroy-Beaulieu, civilization was to be spread through commerce, trade and exchanges between peoples instead of through conquest.[4] By the early 1800s, the republican ideals that inspired the French Revolution had been slowly abandoned for a more forceful assimilationist policy exemplified by colonial expansionist policies. In the words of Governor Jules Brévié, the most important task for the French was to bring about "cultural renaissance"[5] to the indigenous people. Brévié – the governor-general of French West Africa from 1930–1936, and of French Indochina from 1936–1939 – called for a redefined mission with a focus on teaching colonized subjects to live according to "authentic African traditions."[6] As with the British before them, French policy was adapting to local context and shifting towards a more "indirect mode of rule,"[7] casting the foreign rule as the protectors of indigenous cultures.

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[1] Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton University Press, 2010); Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, *De La Colonisation: Chez Les Peuples Modernes* (Paris: Librairie Guillaumin et Cie, 1898).

[2] Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997); Christopher Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa, 1860-1960* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[3] Raoul Girardet, *L'idée Coloniale En France De 1871 À 1962* (Paris: Paris, La Table Ronde, 1972).

[4] Leroy-Beaulieu.

[5] Cited in James E. Genova, "Conflicted Missionaries: Power and Identity in French West Africa During the 1930s," *The Historian* 66, no. 1 (2004): 45.

[6] Ibid.

[7] See British pioneers of Indirect Rule F.D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh & London:

In this article, I set out to analyze the French imperial project in Africa with a focus on the Federation of French West Africa (consisting of today's Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal). I outline the contour of the colonial project, discussing the differences and similarities between the French mode of direct rule with the British preferred mode of indirect rule, arguing that in order to understand the methodology of rule, one must first understand the system of knowledge production that informed, shaped, and guided the colonial project. I will further show that a policy change occurred after the French experienced a crisis of empire. The new policy shifted focus from antagonism towards Islam to collaboration with Islamic representatives, from civilization to conservation, from a focus on progress to law and order, and a preoccupation with local custom while managing social and cultural differences (pluralism).[8] I will attempt to make an important contribution to the political and intellectual history of the largest colonial state in Africa, the French West African Federation.

II. Direct and Indirect Rule: Define, divide, and Conquer

Colonial projects in the Americas, Asia, and Africa rested on the assumed superiority of race and culture transmitted through education and the perfectibility of humankind.[9] In the French view, given this logic, one could slowly evolve and, if they were properly taught French values adopted French culture, become an evolué – a label used during the colonial era to refer to a native African or Asian who had "evolved" by becoming Europeanized through education or assimilation and had accepted European values and patterns of behavior – or even French. In French West Africa this ideology was personified in the works and contribution of various governor-generals like François Clozel (in office 1912–1917) and Jules Brévié (in office 1930–1936), scholars and administrators like Maurice Delafosse (1870–1926), and French military officers like Paul Marty (1882–1938).[10]

William Blackwood & Sons Ltd., 1929); Henry Sumner Maine, Sir,, *Ancient Law: Its Connection to the History of Early Society; Introduction by J.H. Morgan* (London, UK & New York, NY: J.M. Dent & Dutton, 1960). For an excellent analysis of French policies in West Africa see James Searing, "Accommodation and Resistance: Chiefs, Muslim Leaders, and Politicians in Colonial Senegal, 1890-1934," (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1985); Conklin; Harrison.

[8] M Mamdani, "What Is a Tribe?," *London Review of Books* 34, no. 17 (2012).

[9] Lugard; Maine; Leroy-Beaulieu; Searing.

[10] Conklin.

Karuna Mantena defined indirect rule as "patterns of rule—actual institutional configurations—but more centrally, for purposes, a distinct philosophy of rule that self-consciously contrasts itself to more direct or interventionist policies."[11] According to Mamdani, indirect rule as a mode of governance sought "not just to acknowledge difference but also to shape it."[12] Writing about the British imperial project, Mamdani notes that the institutional legacy of colonialism was a mode of rule undergirded by set of institutions: "racialized and tribalized historiography, and bifurcation between civil and customary law," an administrative apparatus that distinguished between natives and non-natives; privileges the natives and discriminates against non-natives.[13] The central feature of the British colonial policy was simple: first define and remake the subjectivity of the ruled, and then divide in order to effectively rule.[14] Mamdani noted that colonial statecraft was "quintessentially modern" mode of rule. It sought

"not just to acknowledge difference but also to shape it."[15]

If the India of Sir Henry Sumner Maine[16] (1822–1888) was the incubator in which the British tested their earliest ideas in modes of rule,[17] then it was the Algeria of Governor Louis Faidherbe (1818–1889) that served for France as the testing ground where it experimented with rule over a large Muslim population. In his seminal work, Christopher Harrison[18] offers a nuanced analysis of French policies in West Africa and its evolution alongside social sciences. Harrison shows how French intellectual thought and government policy towards African colonies, African people and cultures were inextricably linked to major debates in France and the impact these debates on such topics as secularization of the state after the Dreyfuss Affair[19] and how these played out in the colonies.

The thread running through Harrison's *France and Islam in West Africa, 1860-1960* (1988) is the relationship between the French colonial

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[11] Mantena, 190.

[12] Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule : Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1-2.

[13] ibid.

[14] Ibid..

[15] *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 1-2.

[16] Maine.

[17] Mamdani, *Define and Rule : Native as Political Identity*; Mantena.

[18] Harrison.

[19] Eric Cahm, *The Dreyfus Affair in French Society and Politics* (London, New York: Longman, 1996).

and Islamic authorities in Francophone West Africa. The first period (1850–1898) focuses on French policies as they were informed by lessons from Algeria, with an emphasis on containing the Sufi Brotherhoods. An example of this was Xavier Coppolani, an explorer and self-styled Islamist for the French colonial government, who devoted his time working on treatises about pre-colonial Muslim culture and ways to use it to serve French colonial project.

In the second period (1898–1912), French policies became focused around the conspiratorial roles of the Sufi Brotherhood and fears of Islam. The French like the British before them faced a deep fundamental crisis of colonial rule: for the British these were marked by the 1857 uprising in India and the Morant Bay rebellion in the 1860s in Jamaica.[20] For France, it was some forty years later and was seen by events surrounding various crises such as the Futa Jallon crisis and the trial of Thierno Aliou, the *Wali* of Goumba, in 1911. The global backdrop to which the French project unfolded during these years also included the Revolution in Persia (1906), the deposition of both the Ottoman and the Moroccan Sultans (1908), the growing radicalism of

Egyptian nationalism, and the first Italian-Sanusiyya War.[21]

In the third period (post-1912), French administrators like François Clozel, Maurice Delafosse, and Arabic linguist and soldier Paul Marty faced resistance and the colonial project needed to be reconfigured. It is the contribution of these scholars-administrators that added value to the notion of respecting and conserving traditional African systems, religions, customs, and beliefs. It can be seen as a prelude to the shift to indirect rule. The French crisis in this period, forced conscription of Africans to fight alongside the French during the First World War beginning in 1914 – led to a re-conception of the colonial mission. The conscription began with the Senegalese known as the *Tirailleurs*, African soldiers who constituted the colonial infantry in the French Army. France's enormous losses on the Western Front lead to an expanded recruitment of Frances's great conscript army in French West Africa, Central and Eastern Africa. This period was marked by insurrection that threatened the colonial state. Andrew and Kanya-Forstner note that by "the end of the War French

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[20] Mamdani, *Define and Rule : Native as Political Identity*.

[21] Harrison, 29.

Africa had sent 450,000 soldiers and 135,000 factory workers to Europe."[22]

This third period marked a near total turnaround to indirect rule for the French and the use of a methodology that preserved traditional mode of rules and established order through native institutions. Both direct and indirect rule were not necessarily consecutive phases of colonial rule. The shift in the aftermath of the crisis of empire, marked by intense struggle over the legitimacy of colonial rule, uprisings that challenged colonial hegemony in Syria, Morocco, and various parts of the empire forced the French to reconfigure the mission in West Africa.[23] This led to a policy that not only sought to assimilate but also was determined to manage difference: "the practice shifted from religious conversion to spreading the rule of law. And yet the claims for civil law as the universal marker of civilisation coexisted with the recognition of different systems of customary law." [24]

III. Islam and Colonial Rule

In the earliest phase of French conquest and pacification, Islam was presented as a conquering ideology in North Africa.[25] From the conquest of Algeria (1830s onwards) to the colonization of West Africa (broadly, with the exception of Senegal, 1880s onwards), the dominant ideology remained intact from one school of administrators to the next.[26] Islam was seen as contaminating African modes of thought and exchanges between Africa and the rest of the world were ignored and all influences and forms of Islam, all notion of progress was explained in terms of outside influence and an external civilizing forces acting upon Africans. For the French, there was no alternative history where Islam could have otherwise been accepted, adopted, Africanized, and integrated into the African society. Africans needed to be rescued from the tyranny of Islam, the administrators reasoned. The pioneers of this view, Octave Depont and Coppolani[27] claimed that the key to the Islamic influence and acceptance lay in the

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[22] C. M. Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, "France, Africa, and the First World War," *The Journal of African History* 19, no. 1 (1978).

[23] Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918-1940* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 211-38.

[24] Mamdani.

[25] For a good study on French attitudes toward Islam in Algeria and the impact of French colonial rule and forced assimilation policies on Muslim institution see Charles-Robert Algeron, "Les Algériens Musulmans Et La France (1871-1919)," *Revue Historique* 243, no. 2 (494) (1970).

[26] See Chapter II in Searing, 86-170, and discussion of "La Politique Indigene: 1915-19" on pages 435-448.

[27] Coppolani later became an advisor to the Governor General of French West Africa and specialized on Mauritania.

sword but more importantly in compromises with the local beliefs and customs.[28]

However, this view of Islam changed from the early 20th century onwards. Islam was set apart in Marty's analysis and led to a change in policy: from antagonism towards Islam to collaboration with Islamic representatives. This policy sought to distinguish the universal civilization from local custom while managing social and cultural difference (pluralism).[29] The changes in policy was not a smooth progression, however, and several contradictory policies were enacted to deal with the challenges that the French were faced with in the 1910s–1930s.

First, a policy was put forward where Islam was constructed as civilizing the Africans. This attitude was reflected in the systematic attempts to build and elevate Islam above African religions. Second was the reduction of any forms of African expression and thought to fetishism. In the hierarchy of progress, Islam ranked higher than fetishism. The political objective was to bring the empire closer to Islam and construct the ideological image of France as being a 'Muslim Power', thus strengthening the legitimacy to rule

Muslim subjects. When that failed, the French moved to isolate and attack Islam.

Between 1908 and 1915, under the Governorship of William Ponty, a crisis of rule emerged, requiring immediate attention at the same time as France became engulfed in World War I. The main question was how to establish order and what to do with Islam in West Africa. The answer according to Ponty was to brush Islam with the stigma of slavery. Ponty advocated for a repositioning of France as the protector of the mass from the tyranny of Islam and the oppressive Marabouts. All major Marabouts had to be under surveillance and their activities monitored and data collected and shared across the vast confederations of French West Africa.

In Ponty's *politique des races,* he noted that the first phase of the conquest required the abolition of slavery and slave trade; the second phase required the abolition of tyranny and ethnic exploitation.[30] According to him, "We provoked this progression by abolishing slavery. Now we find ourselves obliged to abolish the hideous tyranny of kinglets and chiefs, whose authority from now on must depend on us and be based on our own domination."[31]

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[28] Harrison, 21.
[29] Mamdani.

[30] Cited in Searing, 239-40.
[31] Ibid.

Another innovation was Ponty's decree issued in May of 1911 which banned the usage of Arabic in juridical and administrative matters. This shift moved French to become the language of the state and provided a point of emphasis in the protection of Africans from the contamination of Arab-Islamic influences. Then there was the development of *l'Islam Noir* as a counter to the North African form of radical Islam. This shift marked a powerful change in the subjectivity of Muslims in West Africa. The shift in policy when faced with resistance can be seen also by the shift in 1914 from the focus on the assimilés, who came from Catholic families of European descent and mixed heritage to a focus a new class, the évolués, Africans who had obtained the status of French citizens. The latter were trained to work in administrative positions. The best know example of the new class of educated Africa was Blaise Diagne, the first African elected to the French National Assembly.

According to Conklin, Governors Ernest Roume and Ponty's job was to carry the mandate to civilize through assimilationist policies. However, their mandate was too vast and their resources very limited so many plans involving economic development and infrastructure (ports and railways), hospitals and schools were never completed.[32] The major stresses caused by the First World War and the post-war political, economic and military environment disrupted this policy direction. When failure was imminent, French policymakers had to come up with an alternate mode to legitimize their rule and also reduce the cost involved with the colonial project. Resistance and economic cost weighted heavily on the mind of those in Paris and led to a systematic reduction of large military expenditure.

To result of the reconciliation between the demand for a military presence in the colonies and the call to reduce military expenses led to creation of various intermediary institutions to help alleviate the cost of massive French presence in the region: there was a call to forge a strategic alliance with the Muslim leadership. This could be seen as a shift from direct to indirect rule and marks a departure from seeing Islam as a threat to modifying Islam to suit the colonial project. In Algeria this was the incorporation of the Sufi Brotherhood into the system during the 1920s and 1930s; in West Africa it was illustrated by the close collaboration between Marabouts with administrators. The first case is best exemplified

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[32] Conklin.

by the case of Algeria and the invention of *Islam Noir* as a way to distinguish between the forms of Islam practiced by Arabs from that practiced by Africans in French colonies. This methodology can also be seen as a way to contain and split North African radical nationalists from the West African group, define them separately and contain them collectively, an effort to fragment and prevent the unification of a force that the French feared would lead to disorder and ultimately defeat, if containment failed. A political line was drawn to severe the relationships between North and Western Africa.

IV. Rethinking the Mission Civilisatrice

As France continued to face opposition in its colonies, there was a call to rethink the *Mission Civilisatrice or* Civilizing Mission, the bywords of French colonial expansion under the Third Republic exemplified by policies designed to convert colonial subjects into French people.[33] In her book, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (1997), Alice L. Conklin notes that "to be civilized was to be free from specific forms of tyranny: the tyranny of the elements over man, of disease over health, of instinct over reason, of ignorance over knowledge and of despotism over liberty."[34]

The ideology of the conquest required a framing of Africans as subjects not citizens with duties, but few rights.[35] To this, Conklin shows that colonial statecraft was in large part an act of state-sanctioned violence.[36] The republican ideals of freedom, social equality and liberal justice were reserved for citizens only and not subjects. In spite of the contradiction between professed ideals and lived reality, the French republicans never saw the glaring contradictions between their democratic institutions and their imperial ambition.[37] If Conklin offers details of French colonial policy under the governors general who administered the area from 1902 until 1930 in West Africa and the shift from assimilationist policies towards association,[38] Harrison offers both the reality in the colonies and the policy making in the cabinet and legislature in Paris along with the ideas that were informing governance practice in West Africa. 'Association', the idea championed by ethnologist, ethnologist

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., 5.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

[37] "Colonialism and Human Rights, a Contradiction in Terms? The Case of France and West Africa, 1895–1914," *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 2 (1998).
[38] Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914* (New York: New York, Columbia University Press, 1961).

Maurice Delafosse, called for the administration to work with African institutions, shaping them in subtler ways, co-opting them whenever possible, rather than trying to crush them by force as was the case with doctrine of assimilation. However, James Searing shows that the relationship between imperial France and the African elites was double edged sword. Colonial chiefs acted as intermediaries between the colonial administration and the rural population. The chiefs also maintained underground patronage networks to safeguard their social status, whereas France viewed these chiefs as corrupt and oppressive to their societies. In French West Africa, one of the earlier counter-elites were Muslim leaders who would go on to replace the aristocracy as the community leaders in the countryside. The elites of the *Four Communes* would organize the earlier resistance movement to colonial occupation.[39]

At times conflict that resulted and how the views of Africa from France also informed policymaking in the colonies and the realities in colonies influenced politics in France. We see a non-linear process unfolding between the center and periphery, lessons learned and transfer of lesson to the reality on the ground, effects of fear

and paranoia of the unknown, the 'other' and how it influenced decisions and outcomes on the terrains. What is clear from the analysis, is that there is a problem with the notion that France had a systematically unified policy in dealing with colonies. What emerges is a complex set of policies, contradictions, adjustments when crisis arose between citizens and subjects. We are introduced to a France that was not always confident in its dealings but showed suspicions towards the intentions of the colonized, anxiety, fear, and compromise when geopolitical realities on the ground imposed upon policymakers forcing them to become pragmatic.

Conclusion

In this article I sought to revisit French colonial policy in West Africa by showing the adaptability of colonial administrators to local and global events. The original mission to civilize Africans and the non-Western world faced resistance at every turn that, combined with the impact of World War I, turned into a mission to establish law and order, containing the influence and mobilization of Islamic leaders in West Africa. The ideology of the conquest and colonization of

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[39] See chapters 3 and 4 in Searing.

Africa required a framing of Africans as subjects with few rights, not citizens with duties.[40] The republican ideals of freedom, social equality and liberal justice were reserved for citizens and not subjects.

In the first period (1850-1898), French policies focused mainly on containing the Sufi Brotherhoods. In the second period (1898-1912) French policies shifted to a focus on conspiratorial roles of the Sufi Brotherhood and fears of Islam. Islam was presented as a conquering ideology in North Africa. Then in the third period, French administrators like François Clozel, Maurice Delafosse, and Arabic linguist, Paul Marty were facing resistance and the colonial project needed to be reconfigured. The final period was a reconfiguration of the colonial mission: from assimilation to cultural preservation, the notion of respecting and conserving traditional African systems, religions, customs, and believes. This marks a turn from direct to indirect rule. It can be seen at this point as a prelude to the shift to indirect rule. As Mamdani noted the colonial statecraft was a "quintessentially modern" mode of rule. It sought "not just to acknowledge difference but also to shape it."[41] However, the French still maintained an inclination towards assimilation, which was the precept of the *Mission Civilisatrice*. The main characteristics were the deployment of ethnographers, the birth and emergence of anthropology, sociology, linguist and other forms of social sciences to study the people being ruled, to understand their mode of thoughts so that they could be ruled effectively.

In the aftermath of the crisis of empire, the French shifted focus from antagonism towards Islam to collaboration with Islamic representatives, from civilization to conservation, from a focus on progress to law and order while managing social and cultural difference. Throughout the period of conquest, French imperial policy relied on political and intellectual thought produced in France and in the colonies by colonial administrators. To understand the mechanism and ideology of conquest requires that one engages with the system of knowledge production that informed, shaped, and guided the colonial project in Africa.

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[40] Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*.

[41] Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, 1-2.

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