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Beneath the veneer of liberté, égalité & fraternité The French in Africa

A. W. HAMID



COLONIALISM AS SEEN BY AN AFRICAN IVORY CARVER

"They speak to us of courtesy, of hospitality. In this respect we are proud of our African, Arab traditions. But that is not the problem. For if some representatives of the French people come to see us under normal situations, we would welcome them with enthusiasm. Only the situation is not 'normal'. France has always dominated us and the Mauritanian people must demonstrate to the world on this special occasion that it no longer wishes to be colonised."

Such was the reaction of a wide cross-section of people in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, on the occasion of the visit of the French Prime Minister, Mr. Pompidou, during part of his African tour earlier this year. The welcome was cold and even hostile. Massive security precautions were taken as tracts were distributed proclaiming: "Pompidou, out of Mauritania! Pompidou, out of Africa!"

Mauritania is just one of the former colonies of France in Africa which formed part of a vast overseas empire. Some four and a quarter million square miles of Africa, twenty times the size of France, came under French political control. The process started with the invasion of Algeria in 1830 and was accelerated in the closing decades of the nineteenth century when the scramble for Africa among European powers was carried on in deadly, cut-throat earnest. The chief contenders were the British, the French, the Belgians, the Germans and the Italians. Spain and Portugal had already staked their claims. While the British were thinking of a continuous British zone from Cape to Cairo, the French were moving from the Atlantic north of the Equator eastwards from Senegal in the hope of linking up with Somalia on the Indian Ocean. To her north African colonies, France added in this period a major part of West Africa corresponding to the present states of Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Togo, Dahomey, Mauritania, Mali, Niger; of Equatorial Africa corresponding to the present states of Gabon, Congo Braz-

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zaville, Cameroon, Central African Republic and Chad, and of East Africa comprising French Somaliland or Djibouti.

This was the period of invasion which was undertaken with a violence and a destruction that many European accounts have naturally tended to play down. Then came that period of pacification which one renowned historian of Africa said was characterised by 'physical destruction' and exploitation. The explorer de Brazza returning in 1905 to the countries he had helped to win for France, observed bitterly that 'ruin and terror have been visited on this unhappy colony!' The military expeditions of the French from Senegal eastwards were seldom conducted with much respect for the 'rules of war'. The French Foreign Legion, often the dumping ground of French society, was noted for its atrocities and general lawlessness. (Rod Steiner, the infamous mercenary now on trial in the Sudan for various crimes, was a former French Legionnaire).

Despite these painful facts, there is a widespread impression that the French presence and influence on the continent has been largely beneficial to the Africans, bringing to them the civilising effects of a superior culture and bequeathing to them political forms, concepts and associations which were far superior to anything they had known or more advantageous to the colonies than the contribution of other metropolitan powers to their respective 'natives'. Despite its colonizing activities, despite the fact that it remains deeply entrenched in Africa—that it has at present its mini-Vietnam in Chad and still holds on to Djibouti, that it facelessly supplies arms to Portugal, South Africa and Israel—France still has moral standing in the Third World and enjoys more prestige, more *gloire* than other colonial powers.

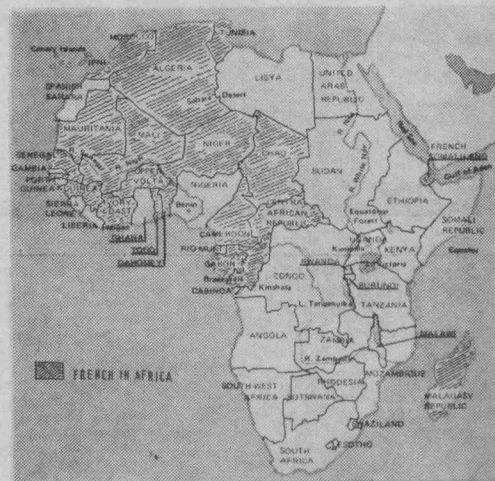
Why should this be so? Partly no doubt it is the result of the legacy and the romantic appeal of revolutionary France—*liberté, égalité, fraternité* and all that. Partly it is the result of a rather complex form of control over the colonies which was deceptively mild and which gave the semblance of preserving equality and freedom of choice for the Africans vis-a-vis Frenchmen.

This complex form of control began to show itself up particularly after 1870 when the colonial policy of the Third Republic saw France giving overseas possessions direct representation in the French National Parliament and pursuing the fiction of 'assimilation.' It has been argued that this policy was the result of the strong Roman tradition which has haunted France's all colonial enterprises and tended to make the extension of French citizenship a more consistent aim than any other. In this vein Marshal Lyautey (b. 1859) the greatest of all France's colonial servants could

boast that France was a nation of 100 millions. (It may be remarked that France's record on the treatment of her citizens of colour compares very favourably with that of Britain). The aim of 'assimilation' was that colonial peoples should absorb French culture and acquire French civilization so that they might become French citizens. With the conquest of vast new tropical and sub-tropical lands, 'assimilation' in terms of the Rights of Man, it has been observed, sank below the horizon and was replaced by a policy of 'association'. This policy had the limited aim of transforming a native *elite* into full French citizens and at taking this *elite* into partnership in administration. This elite, ingratiating and pampered by France, was pithily branded by the natives of French-held Morocco as the '*beni oui-oui*'—the tribe of yes-men. 'Association' had far-reaching effects on post-colonial Africa creating a large gulf between the culture, outlook and aspirations of leaders and administrators on the one hand and the people whom they governed on the other.

As with other European imperialists, the colonial enterprise of the French saw the triumphant alliance of the three C's—Commerce and Christianity bringing Civilization to Black Africa. (The phrase recalls the title of the missionary radio station, ELWA—Evangelical Love Winning Africa). So far as commerce was concerned the French in their equatorial territories for example, 'applied the same frantic system of exploitation by concession companies that had made such havoc in Leopold's Congo'. Brazza, mentioned above and after whom Congo Brazzaville is named, officially employed as an explorer by the Ministry of Public Instruction became the high-souled agent of ruthless commercial exploitation.

The economic development of the colonies was conditioned by the needs of the colonizer. A classic case is Algeria. Before its intensive occupation by the French, the fertile coastlands had produced valuable food—cereals and mutton—needed for an expanding population. The French settlers has no interest in growing food for the home market and turned to producing wine for export. The area under vines rose from a mere 4,000 acres in 1830 to no fewer than 750,000 acres in 1953. This change has produced a distortion in Algerian life which even now it is difficult to rectify. In other parts of Africa the interest in raw material and minerals was paramount. The colonial economic circuit can be schematised thus: African raw materials and unskilled labour, European capital and high level personnel, Europe receiving the raw materials and profits and exporting the finished goods to Africa. In the case of former French colonies this circuit has not been broken and continues to be characteristic of post-colonial Africa.



A classic case of how the needs of the Africans were forgotten and their culture sublimated by the European economic circuit can be seen in the import of 'booze'. The old cultural order especially in the towns was liquidated in the literal sense of the word. In 1951 French West Africa was importing fifteen times more alcoholic liquor than in 1938; alcohol accounted for 8% of the Ivory Coast's imports in 1953 and 9.6% of Dahomey's and this was not exceptional. Perhaps the booze formed an essential element of French *haute culture* and had the effect at the same time of drowning local cultures and values. It may be noted that Muslims form the vast majority in all the colonies of French West Africa, and also of French equatorial Africa with the exception of Gabon (24%) and Congo Brazzaville (20%). Muslims make up more than 70 per cent of the inhabitants of Africa formerly or at present under the control of France. The drive to make Frenchmen out of this population had a damaging and disastrous effect on the language and education of Africans, particularly of the Muslims. Strict measures were taken to curtail the teaching of Arabic for example, so that we have the spectacle of many North African leaders and citizens not being conversant with their own mother tongues. In many areas the Muslim population remained deeply suspicious of French education.

While then France had a largely negative influence on the 'development' of Africa, Africa has often proved to be of immense benefit to France. In the military sphere, for example, the black troops of Senegal have played a popular and 'honourable' role in the French army. French North Africa served as a springboard for the liberation of metropolitan France during the Second World War at a time when one tenth of the French Army was recruited from her overseas colonies.

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At the end of the Second World War, changes in French colonial policy began to appear. The French Empire was converted into the *Union Française*. But this did not point to the road of rapid 'decolonization'. The tenacity with which France, her professional colonial administrators and settlers held on to the idea of Empire is best seen in their bitter, bloody and protracted struggle to retain Algeria as *Algerie française*.

By the beginning of the fifties, the *Union Française*, that liberal-minded successor to the *l'Empire Française* had lost its sheen of hope and promise. French administrators, backed by the soldiers and the *sûreté* were gravely misunderstanding the political realities of changing conditions when ordinary people were beginning to take a hand in the control of their own affairs. The imperial frame of mind was beginning to reassert itself. The year 1951 for example saw violent clashes in the Ivory Coast in which many Africans were killed. Hundreds of 'agitators' were thrown into jail. The unrest and the hostility to France were characteristic of much of French Africa in the fifties.

A major attempt to mitigate abuses and placate the Africans came in 1956 when Guy Mollet, the socialist premier of France who was party to the British Suez adventure, took two Africans into his Cabinet and tabled the *loi cadre* which aimed at reviving the spirit of Brazzaville. In 1944 de Gaulle, Felix Eboué the thick-set African from Cayenne, the French South American pepper port, and other African leaders had met at Brazzaville to make a blueprint for a new economic and political structure of a greater France-African community. The Brazzaville Declaration although it specifically ruled out any definition of French Africa without France, yet spoke of decentralization of administration, of economic development in which the needs of the African territories would receive equal recognition with those of France, of the abolition of forced labour and of the *indigenat* (the legal differentiation between French citizens and French subjects) and the conferring of French citizenship to all those living within the boundaries of the French Empire.

The *loi cadre* went some way in placating the political grievances of the Africans but it did little to solve its economic problems: for every £3 worth of goods Equatorial Africa imported, she sold £2. Moreover it had no say in the pricing of its two main products, wood and cotton. It remained poorer, despite the greater political freedom, than the neighbouring Belgian administered colonies.

In 1958, major events seemed to have taken place. France turned, in the summer of that year, to de Gaulle to restore her stability and her honour which meant the closer identification of French Africa with

France. De Gaulle, noted for his rule by referendum, in September 1958 presented Africa with the choice of independence with an end to French financial aid or autonomy within this French Community and continued economic 'assistance'. One month before the referendum he made one whirlwind trip through Africa promising more schools, roads, dams, a better standard of living for the people and holding out that a vote for the Community would not bind a territory to France indefinitely. "In effect," said a Frenchman in Gabon, "de Gaulle said 'Take our money as long as you need it; if ever you want complete independence just drop me a postcard.' "Later, independent states began to realise that independence involved infinitely more than the 'dropping of a postcard'. For the moment however *la Communauté Française* dominated by France was to retain control of foreign affairs, defence, currency matters, overall economic planning and higher education. After this what was left to the promise of autonomy was obviously very little but the offer was made to sound benevolent and generous. "On the day of the referendum, bare-breasted Bakongo women and Ubangi damsels with plates in their lips jostled with pale Arab bedouins, Frenchmen with existentialist beards and sallow mulattos from Libreville to cast their votes." The Gaullist victory was decisive and overwhelming. Only Guinea exercised the right to opt for independence which it received in October 1958. Such was the solicitude and benevolence of France towards her colonies, that even telephones and office equipment were taken away by its administrators from Guinea when it decided to 'break' with France.

Most of the colonies then, as a result of the referendum remained tied to France and the constitution of the community laid down that a member State of the Community may become independent and thereby ceases to belong to the community. But amendments added in June 1960 provided that 'A member State of the Community may also, by agreement, become independent without ceasing to belong to the Community by reason of that act,' and that 'An independent State not belonging to the Community may, by agreement join the Community without ceasing to be independent.' Article 1 of the Constitution stated that "The Community is founded on the equality and solidarity of the peoples composing it."

African States showed readiness to take full advantage of the amendments of 1960. A series of separate agreements made during 1960 and 1961 produced two results: Madagascar, Chad, Central Africa, Congo, Gabon and Senegal won independence but remained within the so-called "Second Community" (*Communauté renouvelée*). The four States of the *Conseil de*

l'Entente—Dahomey, Niger, Upper Volta, and Ivory Coast—asserted total independence and in April 1961 entered into agreements with France outside the Community. Mali (formerly Soudan) separated from Senegal in 1960 and also left. In June 1961 Mauritania followed suit.

The year 1960 which officially marked the end of colonial rule in the political sense for many French African countries was also the very year (according to Paul Robert's *Dictionnaire de la Langue française*) when the term 'neo-colonialism' was born. Did this year really mark a watershed in the relationship of France with her African colonies and how does independent Africa now regard the Gallic fatherland? The questions are not yet resolved as can be seen from this dialogue from the book *Dramouss* (translated into English as *A Dream of Africa* by Camara Laye of Guinea, described by the B.B.C. as the first writer of genius to come out of Africa. He had just returned from Paris to Conakry, the capital of Guinea.

"I took the bus into town; it very soon reached the suburbs. There, poverty was common as dirt. At Madina and Dixinn in particular, dwellings were very rickety; they seemed to keep up by some sort of miracle; they displayed more of the art of the equilibrist than that of the architect.

"So these are the outskirts of Conakry!" my neighbour in the bus said in a low voice.

"Yes," I replied in the same low voice. "You don't seem too pleased about it."

"No. There's nothing here. Absolutely not one single presentable dwelling or building! For that matter, the *colons* never wanted us to have anything presentable. They only think, and always did, of lining their wallets, in order to be able to spend delightful leaves in Europe. That's all the *colons* think of, not the welfare of the African."

"I don't agree with you," I replied.

"What? You mean to say you're on the side of the *colons* now?"

"I'm not on anyone's side. I'm concerned with the truth. And besides I don't think the moment has yet come in which to condemn or blame the *colons*. That moment will come when we are able to prove, through our abnegation, through our work, through our concrete achievements, that we are superior to the *colons*."

"No, no!" my fellow-passenger repeated. "Those people never did anything for us."

"You must admit, all the same, my dear sir, that colonisation has given us a great deal."

"No! It has kept us back."

"Kept us back! . . . Well, certainly, there were some negative aspects, I admit, in colonialism. But when everything's taken into consideration, the influence of colonisation on this country was beneficial."

He fell silent, and from that moment never spoke to me again."