

FROM IMPERIALISM TO DIPLOMACY: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF FRENCH  
AND SENEGAL CULTURAL RELATIONSHIP

BY

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## **Introduction**

France and Senegal shared a special relationship for over 300 years that date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Saint- Louis was the first permanent French settlement in Senegal. Its geographical position meant that it commanded trade along the Senegal River. The four communes of Senegal (Goree, Dakar, Rufisque, and Saint- Louis) were the only place during the African colonial period, where African inhabitants were granted the same right as French. As the capital of French West Africa during the colonial period, Senegal was France's most important African territory. The French had a more concentrated and central presence there than in other colonies, so its culture became particularly ingrained into Senegalese life. The two countries have maintained the close ties since political independence. In spite Senegal obtaining it independence in 1960, it has maintained a positive relationship with France, and many elements of French culture introduced during the colonial period remain an important part of Senegalese identity. This paper examines the colonial language policy of French in Senegal as a form of cultural relationship between two nations.

## **Overview of Literature**

Since the beginning of the 1960s, there have been a number of studies devoted in part or entirely to French colonial language policy in Africa. Some of these studies have described the French language policy as being motivated by socio-political considerations where by Africans were subjected to a policy of cultural assimilation. According to Eyamba, overall, the picture that emerged from the literature is that French colonial language policy in Africa was dictated by (a) politico- considerations; (b) African intellectual desire to benefit from the same educational system as that offered in France; and (c) various local linguistic factors. The first factor has generally been interpreted in the literature as being la force motrice. Others have characterized it as an instance of linguistic imperialism and ethnocentrism while

still others, have view it as the result of perceived mutual socio-economic interests between the colonizers and the colonized.

More specifically, Alexadre states that:

The imposition of French as the sole language in colonial Franco-phone Africa was simply an extension of French monolingual policy adopted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and that its continuation to the detriment of African languages in the 1950s was due in part to the expressed wishes of African intellectuals to use French as the medium of instruction in French based system.<sup>1</sup>

Among African scholars who considered imperial policies to the detriment of Africans was Ngugi. According to him, “cultural imperialism annihilate a people’s belief in their names, their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves: for instance with other people’s languages rather than their own.”<sup>2</sup>

### **French imperialism in Senegal**

The French colonial possession began in 1884 when the European powers sat in Berlin and carved an entire continent with a multiplicity of people’s cultures, and languages in to different colonies. Berlin in 1884 saw the division of Africa into the different languages of the European powers. The real aim of colonialism was to control the people’s wealth: what they produce, how they produced it, and how it was distributed: to control in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life. Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control,

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<sup>1</sup> Eyamba G.Bokamba, “French Colonial Language Policies in Africa and their legacies “in David F.Marshall (ed) Focus on Language Planning: Essays in honour of Joshua A.Fishman volume 3. Netherlands, John Benjamins Publishing Company.1991.

<sup>2</sup> Ngugi Wa Thion’o, “Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature” Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers ltd.1981.

through culture, of how people, perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. The fact that the goal of colonialism was universal: extract economic benefits for colonizing government, France espoused an additional goal of transforming the African populations within its sphere into French citizens. Nowhere is this effort epitomized better than in Senegal.<sup>3</sup> French, however, took the idea of a united French Empire a step further with a policy of assimilation.

**Table 1. French Colonies and Protectorates in Africa**

COUNTRY	INDEPENDENCE DATE	ESTIMATED 1960 POPULATION
Affars&Issas (now Djibouti)	27 <sup>th</sup> June, 1977	N.A
Algeria	3 <sup>rd</sup> July, 1962	10,784,000
Central African Republic	13 <sup>th</sup> August, 1960	1,210,000
Chad	11 <sup>th</sup> August, 1960	2,660,000
Dahomey(now Benin)	1 <sup>st</sup> August, 1960	1,934,000
French Cameroon	1 <sup>st</sup> October, 1961	4,097,000
French Congo (People's Republic of Congo)	15 <sup>th</sup> August, 1960	900,000
French Sudan (Mali)	22 <sup>nd</sup> Sept, 1960	4,100.000
French Guinea	2 <sup>nd</sup> October, 1958	3,000.000
Gabon	17 <sup>th</sup> August, 1960	440,000
Ivory Coast	7 <sup>th</sup> August,1960	3,230,000
Madagascar	26 <sup>th</sup> June, 1960	5,393,000
Mauritania	28 <sup>th</sup> November, 1960	-
Mauritius	12 <sup>th</sup> March, 1968	656,000
Morocco	2 <sup>nd</sup> March, 1956	11,626,000
Niger	3 <sup>rd</sup> August, 1960	2,823,000
Senegal	20 <sup>th</sup> August, 1960	2,973,000
Togo	27 <sup>th</sup> April, 1960	1,440,000
Tunisia	20 <sup>th</sup> March, 1960	4,168,000
Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso)	5 <sup>th</sup> August, 1960	3,635,000 <sup>4</sup>

The French Assimilation policy was based on the idea of expanding French Culture to the colonies outside of France. Natives of these colonies were considered French citizens as long as the culture and customs were adopted. This also meant they would have the right and

<sup>3</sup> See Laura Fenwick, "British and French Styles of Influence in Colonial and Independent Africa: A Comparative Study of Kenya and Senegal".2009.

<sup>4</sup> Eyamba G.Bokamba, "French Colonial Language Policies" Op. Cit.P.180.

duties of French citizens. The enforcement of this policy was so strict that the printing or publication of books in African language for use in so-called “village schools” was subjected to a 12.8% tax. Imported books in other languages (e.g German, English) were levied the same amount of tax by the customs service. The French colonial language policy evolved series of decrees, ordinances, official memoranda/communiqués, and practical decisions made by colonial administrators in the colonies. The most important piece of legislation that shaped the evolution of the French colonial language policy in Africa was the metropolitan ordinance of Villers-Cotteret, issued in 1539 by King Francois I. This ordinance made French the exclusive official language of the French kingdom, thus disallowing the use of Breton, Basque, Flemisch, Occitan, Germany, etc, in official language.<sup>5</sup> The logic of French educational and language policy was to have the acceptance and co-operation of the indigenous through diplomacy. According to George Babiniotis “there is no other way, more direct, more substantial, no shorter way to get to know a people than by learning their language”. Language is one of the major ways that a culture is perpetuated. The policy of assimilation was not limited to culture alone, it played out in multiple arenas. Politically, the Senegalese were granted representation in the Chambers des Deputes in 1848, notably over a century before any other West African state. Residents of Saint-Louis and Goree were granted French citizenship, including voting rights, in 1848. These African elite became known as the *originaires*. The *originaires* if literate in French and familiar with French customs, they could work in administrative institutions and participate in the political and social life of the colony.<sup>6</sup> However, this policy was substituted in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the policy of association as it proved difficult to implement.

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<sup>5</sup> Eyamba G.Bokamba, “French Colonial Language Policies in Africa”. Op.Cit.P.177.

<sup>6</sup> Mamadou Diouf, “The French Colonial Policy of Assimilation and the Civility of the Origaires of the Four Communes (Senegal): A Nineteenth Century Globalization and Change” 29(4).2002.

Considering from the point of view that French imperialist policies created a close ties between the metropole and the colonies even after the decolonisation. Politicians in Senegal began to advocate for an expansion of the assimilation policy. The aim was that by making Senegalese citizens equal to French citizens Senegal would have greater leverage in its relationship to France. As such, the movement toward an independent Senegal was a bloodless one as the Senegalese did not want to cut ties with the nation who had informed so much of their society.

### **French and Senegalese Diplomatic Relations: Post- independence**

One of the most defining diplomatic partners Senegal has after the independence was France. Leopold Sedor Senghor, the first President of Independent Senegal advocated close relations with France and negotiation and compromise as the best means of resolving international differences. As a result of the cultural ties between Senegal and French, Senegal has been in the forefront in supporting functional integration among French-speaking West African states through the West African Economic and Monetary Union. While insisting on defining a truly African identity, Senghor emphasized certain aspects of French culture within Senegal, including language. He made French the official state language, a policy for which he received much criticism.<sup>7</sup> Although approximately one-third of the population belongs to the Wolof ethnic group and Wolof is spoken by more than 70 percent of the population, French remains the official language of Senegal and proficiency in it still increases educational opportunity, access to the media, and career mobility in Senegal. To instate French, a language that only a certain percentage of the population speaks, as a national language ensured that, France and Senegal would forever be engrained into their cultural and national character.

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Shambram, 'Levolution du patrimoine: Identity Politics and cultural Policy in Contemporary Senegalese Art, 1960-2010" Op.Cit.P.20.

The promotion of French culture and language *La Francophone* in Senegal, and support for higher education, therefore, remain prime areas of action for the French government. To this end, France supports a number of education institutions in Senegal and itself remains the preferred destination for Senegalese students, more than 9000 of which currently (2013) are studying in France.

In terms of economic ties, more than 250 French firms operate in Senegal, over 100 of them subsidiaries of French companies (not all of them large) or with minority shareholdings in Senegalese firms; the remainder are mainly small and medium-sized French-owned business established locally under Senegalese law and usually with private Senegalese partner. These firms produce in excess of EUR 2 billion of goods and services annually and account for 20% of the total employment in the formal sector, with more than 90% of staff recruited locally (15000 in permanent jobs and several thousand seasonal workers). They contributed 25% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 28% of tax revenues and account for 14% of Senegal's exports and 18% of its imports.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 2. Major French Companies in Senegal, 2012**

Company	Investment
France Telecom	Owens 42.3% of telephone operator sonatel.
Eiffage	Civil engineering company. Investing EUR 87 million in a EUR 202 million project to design, build and operate a new toll motorway from Dakar to Diameniadio construction.
Senegaleise des Eaux	Subsidiary of the saur Group. Manages the water supply system on a 10-year lease contract from the Senegalese
Societe Generale de Banques au Senegal (SGBS)	Subsidiaries of societe Generale of France. Second-Largest and most profitable bank in Senegal
Banque Internationale pour le Commerce	Owens 54.1% by BNP Paribas, 24.9% by the

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.P.9.

etl'Industrie du Senegal (BICIS)	Senegalese state. Third largest bank in Senegal
Sococim	Subsidiary of Vicat.Cement and aggregates producer <sup>9</sup>

The maintenance of extensive cultural ties however, benefitted both France and Senegal. Each of the two countries continues to be an important part of the other's foreign relations, with regular official ministerial visits in either direction. France largest Embassy in Sub-Saharan Africa is in Dakar and Senegal traditionally sends one of its most senior diplomats to Paris. Nonetheless, there was a distinct cooling in relations during the latter part of the Wade Presidency as French concerns about governance issues increased. In spite Wade's diversifying Senegal's foreign relations with US and Asian countries France remains a major part of Senegal's foreign relations.<sup>10</sup>

### **Summary**

The paper explored the historical links between a former colonial power France and its former colony Senegal. The special relationship between the two countries predates the colonial period and has continued into post-independence. The importance of French culture in strengthening the relation cannot be over emphasized. In spite Senegal obtaining it independence in 1960, it has continued to enjoy a privileged relationship with France. The significant French economic and diplomatic presence and the continuing importance of the French language –although increasingly challenged by growing spread of English –mean that relations between the countries remain strong.

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<sup>9</sup> Tony Chafey, "Franco-Senegalese Relations 2000-2012" Op. Cit.P.7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.P.16.

## Endnotes

1. Hannah Shambram, 'Levolution du patrimoine: Identity Politics and cultural Policy in Contemporary Senegalese Art, 1960-2010. Htt://digital commons.conncoll.edu/art/histhp//
2. Eyamba G.Bokamba, "French Colonial Language Policies in Africa and their legacies "in David F.Marshall (ed) Focus on Language Planning: Essays in honour of Joshua A.Fishman volume 3. Netherlands, John Benjamins Publishing Company.1991.
3. Ngugu Wa Thion'o, "Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature" Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers ltd.1981.
4. See Laura Fenwick, "British and French Styles of Influence in Colonial and Independent Africa: A Comparative Study of Kenya and Senegal".2009.
5. Mamadou Diouf, "The French Colonial Policy of Assimilation and the Civility of the Origaires of the Four Communes (Senegal): A Nineteenth Century Globalization and Change" 29(4).2002.
6. Tony Chafey, "Franco-Senegalese Relations 2000-2012" Op. Cit.P.7.