

Islam and Arabic, Limits to the French Colonial Mission: A Comparative Study of Senegal and Gabon

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AUTHOR BIO

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ABSTRACT

The French Empire primarily used assimilation during their formal colonial activities in Africa. The lasting impacts on African nations culturally and socially can be seen today. It is critical to examine how the Empire utilized the French language and Christianity as tools to establish dominance in a region. Furthermore, it is equally significant to analyze the effectiveness of these tools in different colonies where there are simultaneous influences of different cultures. This paper examines the interplay of power between the two simultaneous influences by doing a comparative analysis of the two former colonies Gabon and Senegal; the study focuses on the influence of the French language and Christianity during colonization, and the ways in which it was ultimately diminished by the simultaneous establishment of Arabic and Islam in the same region. By closely scrutinizing the interactions between religion (Islam and Christianity) and languages (French and Indigenous languages), this paper reveals the significant weight that language and religion play in influencing the effect of France's colonial attempts, showing that modern day colonial impacts are the products of not just the needs for physical control of resources and land, but also the result of cultural dominance.

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INTRODUCTION

European powers have been establishing their presence on the continent of Africa since the fifteenth century, beginning (officially, at least) with the Berlin conference in 1884. One such European power involved in the division of Africa was the French empire. A key strategy that the French empire used to control and assimilate all of her colonies is converting locals to Christianity and enforcing widespread use of the French language. However, this strategy did not see the same effects in all of her colonies: those colonies that were introduced to Arabic and Islamic languages and cultures prior to French occupation seem more resistant to the sweeping effects of French colonization. This paper argues that the initial introduction of Arabic and Islam to a colony prior to the French's occupation in 1884 greatly diminishes the effectiveness of the French's political and social policy in assimilating locals, and prevented their endeavors from having a significant presence in the state today. Furthermore, this paper argues that for a religion to become dominant in a region, there are usually three types of strategies used: first, an event in which a religion acted to the benefits of the majority of the population such as the resistance against French; second, an event that was threatening enough to instill fear and thereby create a following; or third, an event that was able to dominate over pre-existing religions by erasing their significance and presence. A notable example that this paper will analyze is the significant difference in the presence of Christianity and French in Gabon, where Islam and Arabic presence were minimal prior to 1884, as compared to Senegal, where Islam and Arab presence shaped the area for centuries before the French came. Senegal and its history entwined with Islam especially will be discussed at length.

CONTEXT

As noted by researcher Scott Bade's article "The British Aren't Coming: Why the French Intervene in their Former African Colonies and the British Do Not": "The French had a presence in West Africa dating back to the 1600s—most prominently in Senegal, which was a major point of embarkation for slaves to the New World" (Bade, 2015, p. 11). This indicates that even before the occupation in 1884, Europeans played a significant role in shaping the Africa we know today with the long-lasting goal of domination and control. Therefore, it is critical to understand the parties and factors that shaped their rule to better grasp the societal, political, and cultural challenges that we see today.

Brief History of French Missionaries in Africa

In Malika Sahel's "French Missionaries' Education In Colonial Algeria: An Instrument of Evangelization," she states:

Though the presence of Christian missionaries is traced back to the sixteenth century, their work became very important towards the end of the eighteenth century. This period coincided with the regain of interest in religious matters in Europe which led to the necessity to bring Christianity to 'the heathen people of Africa' and fight any other non-Christian religions, particularly Islam (Sahel, 2019, pp. 66–67).

This quote makes clear how Islam has been historically regarded as an obstacle by Europeans seeking to convert Africans, and supports the claim made by this paper that Islam acts as a significant opposition force to France's

attempts at dominating culturally and politically in a region.

THE FRENCH EMPIRE'S CIVILIZING MISSION

The primary principles that guided France's colonial endeavors in Africa were assimilation and association—the latter of which was elaborated on in Raymond F. Bett's *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890–1914*. As Bett describes in his text:

Assimilation can be considered the traditional colonial doctrine of France. Although variously interpreted, in essence it meant that the colony was to become an integral, if noncontiguous, part of the mother country, with its society and population made over—to whatever extent possible—in her image (Bett, 1960, p. 8).

Assimilation will be the topic of this paper, since it is the principle that guided the empire's initial attempts at dominance in Africa.

This paper proposes, based on Bett's work, that the adoption of French language and culture (including religion) by colonial subjects was of the utmost importance. Seeing as the foundation of colonization is based upon the erasure of local cultures and religion, it is crucial for the colonizing state to create a blank slate on which their ways of living and thinking can be imposed upon. The imposition of French ideas is also important to ensure loyalty from colonial subjects by forcing a sense of empathy toward French ideals, which in turn would work to minimize resistance. In other words, assimilation creates an artificial hierarchy where the colonizer's ideals are considered superior in all ways. This research further suggests that the

foundation of this civilizing mission would be to first erase the so-called uncivilized languages already dominant in the soon-to-be-occupied region, seeing as language is the basis of a person's understanding; or, as the philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt puts it: "Language is the formative organ of thought" (Von Humboldt, 1988, p. 45). This will be elaborated on in the following section.

Core Principles of French Assimilation

First, it was important for the French empire to instill a common, shared identity amongst its various colonies who all spoke different languages. The language itself was seen as a promoter of loyalty to the French national identity. Second, as seen in Alice Conklin's *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* when she was discussing the colonial French education in Africa, she quotes Governor General Ponty's words:

"He will not be able to erase from his memory the uplifting notions which, through the intermediary of this language, we will have caused to penetrate. The words may disappear, but the ideas will remain, and the ideas, which are our own and whose use endows us with our moral, social and economic superiority, will little by little transform these barbarians of yesterday into disciples and auxiliaries" (Conklin, 1997, p. 84).

It is my view based on this reading that the widespread usage of the French language throughout all French colonies was a primary goal of the empire, and viewed by authorities as the key to civilization. While language may not have been ultimately successful in completely erasing Indigenous language and becoming the

lingua franca of all colonies, it was nevertheless invaluable as a conduit for translating French ideals onto new colonies..

PRE-COLONIAL RELIGIOUS AND LANGUAGE LANDSCAPE IN GABON AND SENEGAL

Prior to 1884, as stated in Douglas Yates's book, the *Historical Dictionary of Gabon*, "Islam came late to Gabon and used to be a religion of foreigners, mainly of Senegalese troops imported to sustain French colonial rule from the [nineteenth] century and of Hausa traders who arrived during the [twentieth] century. There is no evidence that either group actively sought to spread their Islamic faith to the Gabonese" (Yates, 2017, p. 309). This presents the most significant difference in the result of colonization in Senegal and Gabon, which is the lack of Islam resistance. This, as Sahel's "French Missionaries' Education In Colonial Algeria: An Instrument of Evangelization" notes, is a primary concern for missionaries.

In addition to minimal contacts with Islam prior to French colonization, Gabon was also the home of a large variety of local religions. As highlighted in James W. Fernandez's *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa*,

"The Fang are mainly from the village of Assok Ening and the family of Mba M'Oye, Clan Bukwe, Oyem District, Northern Gabon. The Banzie appearing here have a wider provenience for we consider two other chapels beside the Bwiti chapel in Assok Ening: the mother chapel at Kougouleu, the Libreville region, close to the coast, and the Ayol Chapel midway between the coast and

northern Gabon" (Fernandez, 2019, p. 243).

This would seem to indicate that Gabon did not have a unifying religious practice prior to the introduction of Christianity during colonization; instead, various local religions were practiced without written records, with traditions passed down orally. Furthermore, to differ from Senegal, Gabon experienced a combination of limited exposure to foreign influence and a lack of a single, centralized language to unify Gabonese. The lack of a unifying language is made clear in Ndinga-Koumba-Binz's article "From foreign to national: a review of the status of the French language in Gabon", stating that "the ethnic group Fang speaks Fang, the Bapunu speak Yipunu, the Bavili speak Civili, and the Banzebi speak Yinzebi, et cetera" (Ndinga-Koumba-Binza, 2011, p. 138).

This raises the question of the vulnerability of Indigenous languages during the French colonization. Especially since there is a limited population that speaks each language, making it hard to overcome the spread of French language throughout the country and organize meaningful resistance unlike Wolof which is spoken widely in Senegal. Moreover, this suggests to me that education of youths was particularly useful in Gabon as a colonial strategy since the scattered Indigenous languages spoken in Gabon are easily diminished in their influences when the line of language succession is cut.

Senegal Before 1884

As Margari Hill introduced in their article "The Spread of Islam in West Africa: Containment, Mixing, and Reform from the Eighth to the Twentieth Century", it should be noted that "while the presence of Islam in West Africa dates back to the eighth century...it is

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apparent that the early presence of Islam in West Africa was linked to trade and commerce with North Africa...North African traders were major actors in introducing Islam into West Africa” (Hill, 2009, para. 1). In stark contrast to the minimal historical presence of Arabic and Islam in Gabon, Senegal has been in contact with Arabic and Islamic cultures since the eight century through commerce with traders. This paper suggests that the mutually beneficial trading relations early on between muslim traders and locals contributed to setting a foundation for a positive reception toward the religion.

Jihadism, or the struggle against enemies of Islam, also contributed to the entwinement of Senegalese politics and society with Islam. In Stephen Harmon’s web article “Jihads in Senegambia,” he writes:

The jihad of Nāir al-Dīn represented an attempt by the marabouts to seize power from the traditional elites, creating in the process a theocratic state. Nāir al-Dīn was a scholar and a teacher of one of the maraboutic, or Zawiya, clans of the Moors. Following a classic Islamic reform pattern, he sought to build a Muslim theocracy that would transcend ethnic and class divisions and would resemble the ideal community of the Prophet (Harmon, 2022, para. 2-3).

The implications of a successful founding of an Islamic state in Senegal is that Islam has interacted with the Senegalese society since the eight century as noted by Hill, affecting trade and education long before French colonial rule came into play. In this case, it would be reasonable to suggest that perhaps the Islamization of Senegal created a sense of identity within the Senegalese, resulting in loyalty to the Islamic state. When the French

powers intervened in the nineteenth century, a challenge to overcome that was not faced in Gabon was the difficulty of instilling the European ideologies of behavior and religion for Senegalese when there is already a united Islamic identity in Senegal.

Fiona McLaughlin explains in the book *Language and National Identity in Africa* that “Senegal can best be described as a predominantly Wolof-speaking nation, while on the international scene it is a francophone state” (McLaughlin, 2008, p. 79). Interestingly, although Islam was influential in some coastal areas prior to the introduction of French, Arabic was never made popular as a spoken language in Senegal. Instead, Islam was made popular through Wolof. This may suggest that the resiliency of Wolof in the face of French influences may be tied to its role in the practice of Islam in Senegal. In comparison, the lack of linguistic associations with religions in Gabon may contribute to the dominance of French in Gabon today.

COMPARING THE SUCCESS OF COLONIZATION STRATEGIES IN GABON AND SENEGAL

In Reed’s “Gabon: a Neo-Colonial Enclave of Enduring French Interest,” he notes that “the beginning of Gabonese politics dates back to 1900, when the Brothers of Saint Gabriel arrived at Libreville to establish the Ecole Montfort, as well as a similar boys’ school in 1901 at Lambarene” (Reed, 1987, p. 289). It is logical to infer that the implications of the Catholic faith of significant political leaders in Gabon is the result of its elitist connotations within the Gabonese upper class, this connotation also reinforcing the importance of faith and the Church. Hence, missionary schools serve the function of producing individuals who have the ability to influence Gabon on a national

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scale. Other factors that weakened the hold of local religions included the destruction of Indigenous religious relics and symbols, the adaptation of traditional faiths with Christianity, and the sparse density of communities that discouraged a strong, organized resistance against Christianity.

In Douglas Yates's *Historical Dictionary of Gabon*, it is stated that

“Gabonese communicate with one another and with the outside world through the vehicle of the French language. They read French books, newspapers, and magazines. They listen to French radio and watch French television. A fortunate few who pursue higher education abroad study in French universities and *grandes écoles*” (Yates, 2017, p. 295).

This clearly points to the idea that there exists a relation between the ease of acceptance of the French culture in Gabon during colonization and the current, largely French-sympathizing political and social atmosphere. This led me to conclude that the creation of an elite class with control of the rest of the country's public citizens is perhaps essential to securing the lasting legacy of an empire in its colony. This is founded on the logic as seen previously in Bett's definition of association that “a more flexible policy which would emphasize retention of local institutions and which would make the native an associate in the colonial enterprise” (Betts, 1960, p. 8).

However, it is my opinion that it is also equally important that all non-elite members of the state be integrated into the French-assimilated society for the empire to be successful in their endeavor, since clear

separation of classes can lead to negative sentiments, as seen in the case of Senegal.

Aisha Balarade Bawa in her article “From Imperialism to Diplomacy: A Historical Analysis of French and Senegal Cultural Relationship” discusses the paradox where France promotes assimilation and learning the French way by reasoning that all men deserve equality and access to the same European education, while it is simultaneously clear that this idea is grounded in the belief that French culture is in fact superior in all ways to local Senegalese culture.

As she writes:

France and Senegal shared a special relationship for over [three hundred] years, dating back to the [seventeenth] 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 places during the African colonial period where African inhabitants were granted the same rights as French (Bawa, n.d., p. 2).

Creating a division in social class was a key strategy for the French empire to gain control in Senegal. By creating the four communes, the French evidently hoped to recruit to its empire local francophiles who could then aid in fortifying the power of the French power in Senegal. In addition, the offer of obtaining French citizenship for African residents of the four communes can be understood as a strategic policy to create an elite Francophile class of Senegalese. If this effort had succeeded, the presence of an elite class would have been

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important in the fact that these individuals would have been afforded privileges that other Senegalese would have been denied whilst being subservient to the French. However, at the same time, the French would proclaim its belief in “equality” to eliminate any notions of rebellion from these Senegalese elites. Meanwhile, the would-be Senegalese elites would belong to a class distinct enough from those outside of the four communes that there would be a lack of a social bridge for Senegalese commoners to rebel by banding together. This distinction between classes is made clear when the inhabitants of the four communes were exempted from colonial policies such as forced labor, as outlined in Nancy Nneoma Nwaukwa’s paper “A comparative analysis of strategies adopted by the British and French colonial system and its effect on West Africa” (Nneoma Nwaukwa, 2024).

In Rudolph T. Ware’s *The Walking Qur’an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa*, he states that “From the 1830s forward, jihad movements based in communities of the Qur’an fought for their independence from increasing French encroachment. They sought to prevent a different kind of bondage from overtaking the Muslim communities they had struggled so hard to build” (Ware, 2014, p. 168). This prompts me to reflect on the question of how a particular method of spreading religion in an area affects locals’ receptiveness to it, as well as their willingness to defend it. More specifically, it is known that Islam is a foreign religion to Senegal (brought via trade), just as Christianity is foreign to Gabon (introduced via colonization). Prior to the resistance led by Islamic leaders, Islam was not a majority religion by any means in Senegal. This paper presents the argument that the first and third strategies as proposed in the introduction are arguably more effective, both in terms of establishing initial dominance and in

defending the religion against other religious forces after establishment.

The first strategy is clearly seen when Islamic leaders raised in defense of Senegalese society against France’s colonialism as noted by Ware. This event allied the religion with the majority of the inhabitants of Senegal, which in turn garnered sympathy and a public following.

The unifying nature of Islam is a great point of distinction that undoubtedly contributed to the lasting presence of Christianity in Gabon and the lack of it in Senegal. As Islam established itself as a centripetal force in Senegal, it became part of a national identity. Thus, when the French empire attempted to assimilate the Senegalese by forcing upon them the French national identity, Islam naturally became a counter resistor to this effort.

In Gabon, religions are localized to independent communities and cannot serve as a joining point of resistance since there lacks a religious common ground. Therefore, there was little sense of national identity to bring locals together in a joint act of cultural preservation. In this case, the French empire was successful in instilling Christianity as a common religion and served their objective of unifying the Gabonese under French national identity.

According to McLaughlin’s words in *Language and National Identity in Africa* as seen earlier in the paper, Wolof is the dominant language spoken by the majority of Senegalese despite French being Senegal’s official language. Furthermore, in Ware’s book *The Walking Qur’an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa*, he notes that “Senegal has a higher percentage of Muslims (96 percent)” (Ware, 2014, p. 35). The data suggests to me at first glance that French is embraced by Senegalese solely based on the fact

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of its status as the official language. However, the only reason that French achieved such prominence in Senegal is through its legal status as the official language. Without its legally binding status, there is great cause to believe French would fall short of its current importance in official Senegalese institutions. This then supports that Islam—and with it, the presence of widely spoken Wolof—did in fact discourage the wide adoption of French by the average Senegalese.

The status of French as the official language also implies a deep entrenchment of neo-colonialism in Senegal, where Senegal maintains dependency on France, thereby inevitably relinquishing some degrees of autonomy and adopting French as the official language. This suggests a distinction to be made between the resistance of the people of a nation against colonization and the resiliency of a nation's political structure and social expectations.

The Islamic resistance in Senegal during colonization can be described as a silent Jihad to a certain extent. While the French empire's goal of assimilation was united through all of her colonies, it was not achieved in Senegal with the resistance of Islam. Another point to note is the role of Arabic—while not a spoken language in Senegal, it was, and still is, the language used in the study of Islamic teachings and texts such as the Quran. The written language of Arabic further strengthened the resiliency of Islam with extensive written records of the religion that is not just limited to the region of Senegal but throughout North Africa, which cannot be easily wiped out and replaced as was the case of the religions of Gabon.

The research and analysis presented in this paper delves into factors that contributed to vulnerabilities of a region's culture and society

in the face of western powers. Specifically, expanding on reflections of the role of religious and language-based resistance and colonial strategies. A wider implication extending to present-day former French colonies in Africa is the importance of awareness of the distinct history of states prior to colonization, in order to effectively engage processes of decolonization, as made clear in the vastly differing situations in Gabon and Senegal.

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