

The Ongoing Relationship Between France and its Former African Colonies

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IJ BENNEYWORTH, JUN 11 2011

For almost a century and a half France maintained a substantial colonial empire in Africa, stretching from the Maghreb through the Western and Central sub-Saharan regions. Though direct rule ended in the early 1960's, French influence over its former possessions continued. Through political, security, economic and cultural connections, France has attempted to maintain a hegemonic foothold in Francophone Africa, both to serve its interests and maintain a last bastion of prestige associated with a legacy of past mastery. However, do these relations retain an essentially colonialist character? To determine this we shall first briefly analyse the main rationale behind France's imperial expansion; its 'mission to civilise'. We shall then explore France's more recent and existing relationships with its former possessions, and conclude.

During the post-1830 colonial expansion we see the nurturing of the French rationale for justifying the notion of empire while at the same time lauding Republicanism. As Charbonneau points out, in many spheres of French thought "the history of continental France is very often considered to be separate from that of imperial France... The constructed distinction allowed the Republic to maintain claims of universalism. It allowed a denial of the intrinsic contradictions of the Republic that were often blatant in the (ex-) colonies" (2008, p.281). Civilising efforts included the development of colonial infrastructure, especially in railway transportation and healthcare provision. However, the cornerstone of *Mission Civilisatrice* was attempted social engineering through efforts at improving the natives' quality of life, politics and education, but often in the promotion of French interests and ideological and governmental traditions; a recurring trend.

Slavery was no longer legally recognised from 1905, however forced labour largely remained, though the fact that it was regulated supposedly made it less exploitative, and the imperative to continue infrastructure improvements and instil a productive ethic into the 'workshy native' supposedly justified such compromises (Conklin 1998, p.438). Contradictions could also be found in colonial justice. A 1903 decree, further reformed in 1912, called for greater respect of the legal customs of different West African groups, yet the general approach was always that customary law was to be respected so long as it did not conflict with French standards of 'civilisation' nor impeded the hoped-for progress towards that ideal (Conklin 1997, pp.119-120). French Republican sentiment influenced how the local chiefs and their peoples were viewed; tyrannical and in need of liberation respectively. However, it was still necessary to maintain many chiefs to assist in tax collection and enforcement of French regulations. Some chiefs took advantage of reduced French manpower during the Great War to rebel, often leading their peoples who had as little regard for the French ideal as the French did towards their old, 'feudal' system (Conklin 1998, pp.427-428). France hoped to expand and entrench its cultural and linguistic agenda, if not for full assimilation of non-Maghreb Africans, then at least in the hope that some kind of moral osmosis would ensue (ibid. p.429). Given the failure to seriously commit the required resources, such educational programming was another example of ambition crashing against the rocks of, at best reality, at worst indifference, for even by 1950 illiteracy rates in French colonial areas were between 95% – 99% (Cumming 2006, p.158).

If there is a theme running through France's colonial era it is one of trying to forge an African character that adhered to native identity melded with a French ideal, with the moral compromises necessary to realise this vision made more palatable by seasoning them with claims to social progress. France was essentially a Republic that ruled over the

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supposedly ideologically incompatible notion of 'subjects' rather than citizens. French colonial mentality was a product of its time, as was the belief that the measures enacted were unquestionably positive. This protective mentality formed a strong connection, ensuring French intent to maintain future influence.

Within a twenty-year period France's African colonies passed from its control, though Charles de Gaulle still perceived "that French world power and French power in Africa were inextricably linked and mutually confirming" (Charbonneau 2008, p.281). Though De Gaulle's *Communauté Franco-Africaine* tried to keep the system intact – not least through threatening to sever French support, as a dissenting Guinea discovered to its cost – the African colonies, already used to de facto if not de jure sovereignty thanks to Defferre's Framework Law (Shipway 2008, p.20-21), rapidly declared independence. Though a dazed France largely accepted this, we see early initiatives to maintain ties with former colonies through economic and security agreements, and it could be argued that the breakup of the colonial federations into their constituent states made them more reliant on France than they would have been if unified. "Decolonisation did not mark an end, but rather a restructuring of the imperial relationship" (Chafer cited in Charbonneau 2008, p.281), and we see this in *Françafrique*; the political, security, economic and cultural relations that, though diminished somewhat, remain today.

Recent geopolitical events have spurred realignment of French foreign policy from being too African-centric, yet old habits die hard when French interests are involved, which have often revolved around energy resources and raw materials. In the 2009 Gabon presidential election, France stood accused by an angry populace of allowing Ali Ben Bongo to defraud the electorate, echoing the support it gave his oil-wealth plundering, anti-democratic father Omar (Crumley 2009a). Such interference, real or imagined, is true to form. As with the chiefs of colonial past, France has sought to maintain its interests by influencing African internal affairs, whether it be helping the likes of Cameroon, Gabon and Senegal to avoid coups thanks to security guarantees (McGowan 2003, p.357), or when in 1993 France, via state owned oil company Elf-Aquitaine, sought to influence the Congo parliamentary elections by denying essential loans needed to pay civil servants (Martin 1995, p.15-16).

Despite open summity between French and African leaders, personal ties and political networks have counted for much. Given the secretive nature of Franco-African relations at elite levels – especially the machinations of the African advisory 'Cells' in the French presidency (Marchal, p.357 and p.359), and lack of public oversight in development and private/public corporate involvement (ibid, p.357) – it is little wonder this environment is deemed ripe for entrenching mutually beneficial relationships and influence. From the early ties between Felix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire and French elites (ibid, p.361) to President Sarkozy's recent trips to former colonies with business entourages in tow (Crumley 2009b), such relations have made reform of political *Françafrique* difficult, to the frustration of not just Africans but also of French diplomats. Jean-Christophe Rufin, recently ambassador to Senegal, believes that "the old, shadowy, compromising, cynical habits of trading political and business favours has just gotten more manipulative and opaque" (Crumley 2010). Replacing direct rule for substantial influence may not be 'colonial' per se, but neither is it a decisive break from the past.

Just as France has supported new 'chiefs' to safeguard its interests, it has also endeavoured to preserve the centralised, socialised, free-market-suspicious model of government institutionalised in its former colonies, with much of its development funding going to central governments instead of sub-state or non-state actors. In continuity with the double standards exhibited during colonialism, in 1990 President Mitterrand announced renewed enthusiasm for encouraging democratic transition via French aid, but statistics actually demonstrated *increases* of aid to authoritarian regimes, generally countries in which France had economic and security concerns (Martin 1995, p.15). Such prioritising of central governments – and indeed the shoddy levels of education, economic dynamism and political maturity initially bequeathed by colonialism – has arguably perpetuated social and democratic underdevelopment in many former colonies and encouraged reliance on France, though this itself is gradually eroding due to security and economic developments as detailed below.

A significant piece of the post-colonial jigsaw was France's substantial military presence. This, in addition to a broad license to intervene through defence agreements with nearly half of Africa's states, all helped France become known as the *gendarme* of Africa (Charbonneau 2008, p.282). With permanent military bases originally found in Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Djibouti, Gabon, Cameroon and the Central African Republic, responsibility to 'defend' Africa

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from Communism during the Cold War dovetailed with French interests in maintaining regional hegemony.

The post-Cold War need to professionalise the military, along with recognition that some deployments were redundant, encouraged reforms that reduced troop numbers and closed bases, though forces remained stationed in politically volatile countries. Greater professionalism and force projection meant that interventionism was still viable, especially via the *La Force d'action rapide*, a 44,500 man force established in 1993 (Martin 1995, p.13). Between 1997 and 2002 France launched thirty-three operations in Africa, though ten of those had mandates or fell under United Nations command, suggesting that broader humanitarian concerns have become increasingly important to France, with acceptance of multilateral involvement and moves towards using interventionism to promote security and development rather than prioritising often morally dubious order and stability (Charbonneau 2008, p.283).

France has good cause to seek to improve its image. Numerous resentments have built-up against it due to political interference and armed interventions, not least the legacy of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. French forces facilitated the training and expansion of the *Forces Armées Rwandaises* from 1990-1993, and provided huge shipments of arms (McNulty 2000, pp. 109–110). Though stabilisation was the chief motivation France effectively if unwittingly helped militarise Rwanda prior to a pre-planned massacre. Shock at these events, and a growing chorus of humanitarian advocacy in French civil-society, have seen recent governments reform the terms of their African military cooperation and engagements, as noted above. France has been amicable to certain withdrawals, such as the pullout of 1200 troops and transfer of base sovereignty to Senegal in 2010 (Bamford 2010), yet still retains the will and capacity to intervene, as demonstrated in Ivory Coast when French forces, long in-theatre under *Force Licorne*, assisted in overthrowing Laurent Gbagbo, albeit with UN endorsement (Howden 2011).

Ultimately France has successfully used its security presence since decolonisation to exert influence in countries where it has interests, maintaining both regional hegemony and its vision of order and stability. While that strength is still potent, strategic rationales for maintaining substantial presences are weakening and, in addition to wary French and African public opinion, recent initiatives by the African Union also threaten to further weaken France's interventionist reflex, such as the 2004 creation of the Peace and Security Council and its African Standby Force to – supposedly – allow Africans to intervene in their own affairs (Williams 2009, p.614).

France's economic ties in Africa have run as deep as political and security ones. Twenty years after decolonisation France still imported significant percentages of raw materials and its energy dependence on Africa had risen from 30% in 1950 to 80% for 1988-89, including 100% uranium imports from Gabon and Niger, key to a mainly nuclear powered France, and 70% of oil company Elf-Aquitaine's world-wide extractions were from African deposits (Martin 1995, p.9-10). Recently however, these links are becoming less significant. Africa accounted for less than 5% of France's foreign trade at the end of the last century, when at the same time the trade balance between them was around the same level as between France and its EU partners (Marchal 1998, p.360), which can have only increased with Economic and Monetary Union. Nevertheless, Africa remains a significant export market and target for French investment. As the chart below demonstrates for the 2000-2008 period, trade levels between France and the African region as a whole (inclusive of Northern, Sub-Saharan, Eastern and Southern, and CFA zones) have consistently been in the billions of euro's, experiencing a marked upturn after 2007, perhaps validating Sarkozy's trade missions.

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(National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies 2009)

A major break in economic ties between France and its former colonies occurred in January 1994 with the 100% devaluation of the CFA (*Colonies françaises d'Afrique*) franc, a currency region which had been pegged to the French franc for decades, though separate but interchangeable Western and Central African CFA francs continue. This measure itself preceded the July 1994 Abidjan doctrine, where France followed the Bretton Woods institutions' conditions for budgetary aid, meaning it could no longer 'pick up the bills' of client states (Marchal 1998. p.358). Another example of declining French economic influence in Africa in the face of encroaching liberalism was the Cotonou Agreement on free-trade reached with the EU in 2000, further revised in 2010, as the successor to the Lomé Conventions (European Commission 2010). This reflects a recent trend of major powers attempting to stake commercial claims in France's 'backyard', not least China, which in 2003 lay second behind France as the biggest exporter to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), some 11% and growing (Tull 2006, p.464), creating the possibility of a new Fashoda Syndrome directed at China instead of France's traditional competitors in Africa.

French bilateral aid has always been principally directed towards its former colonies, at one stage reaching 85% of official development assistance (Martin 1995, p.11). Though France remains a huge donor, given the increased channelling of aid through the EU, IMF and World Bank, it has been encouraged to increase distribution outside Africa, though France is still inclined towards its own grand gestures alongside these partners, such as a recent pledge of near \$540m to aid Ivory Coast's recovery (McClanahan 2011). Nevertheless, with aid itself a means to exert influence cuts due to the recent financial crisis, as well as this multilateral-influenced redistribution, can only erode French power. With direct-rule long past and France's African security presence diminishing, the stick no longer retains the impact it once did. However, with French economic ties eroding, the carrot may also start to look meagre, with potential consequences for preserving long-term French influence.

Despite these concerns, France strives to maintain its cultural legacy, with a significant portion of development funding going towards education, scholarships and cultural institutes. Various inter-governmental organisations and conferences have operated under the hub of the *Agence de coopération culturelle et technique* in an effort to institutionalise the linguistic, cultural and educational links between France and francophone Africa, and even the dedicated *Ministère de la francophonie* was set up in 1988 (Martin 1995, p.8). Promotion of the French language is a priority, not only for encouraging conditions conducive to positive economic relations within *la francophonie*, but also, as mentioned above regarding *Mission Civilisatrice*, because of the strong French connection between their language and the values and culture of the 'Latin' world, distinct from the English speaking Anglo-Saxon world and its less-than-admired traits. As the originator, France plays a significant cultural role and places great importance on maintaining that legacy in Africa, especially the resulting identity-construction encouraged within *la francophonie*, though, as Martin points out, "to the extent that it implies the inclusion of people outside France in the culture of France itself, francophonie is a truly neo-colonial concept" (ibid, p.5).

As France's global influence wanes, the African 'backyard' has been its best opportunity to maintain a strong influence and relative hegemony; a reasonable assumption given that French involvement has directly contributed to socio-political conditions in these former colonies. Admittedly there has been an erosion of French influence, whether by choice, circumstance or African leaders' gradual detachment. That said, even if they are diminished, France retains numerous and important stakes in the security, economic, cultural and associated political ties between it and Africa. Consequently it can be posited that, even if France no longer exercises the status and power it once enjoyed, a neo-colonial relationship has developed since decolonisation. However notable French influence though, it is nevertheless diminishing and even if present relations may be deemed neo-colonial, this is likely a phase of finite duration.

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