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French Cultural Policy in Colonial Senegal: A Distortion of the African Identity

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ملخص:

شهدت الحقبة الاستعمارية ديناميكية فرنسية ملحوظة في الترويج الثقافي، لاسيما في افريقيا، حيث تم تبني سياسة الاستيعاب بشكل صارم لتحويل السكان الأفارقة الى مواطنين فرنسيين وتشويه هويتهم. وفي هذا الصدد، تعتبر السنغال خير مثال على تجسيد هذا الجهد الفرنسي الواعي والمتفاني. الى أي مدى نجحت السياسة الثقافية الفرنسية في تحقيق غزو ثقافي فرنسي طويل الأمد، وفي الوقت نفسه، في تشويه الهوية الافريقية في السنغال؟

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستعمار الفرنسي، السياسة الثقافية الفرنسية، التعليم الفرنسي، الغزو الثقافي، مستعمرة السنغال، الهوية الافريقية.

Abstract :

France epitomizes a civilization which the world has been in need to know and learn from. However, understandably the French attitude towards their culture as a means of international influence remained a distinguished fact both during the colonial and post-colonial eras. Indeed, France, has always consciously considered the official spread of its culture almost a sacred duty. For instance, the colonial era witnessed a French remarkable dynamism in the field of culture promotion overseas, particularly in Africa, where the Policy of Assimilation was strictly adopted to distort the African identity and transform the African populations into French citizens. In this respect, Senegal has remained the best example of the embodiment of this French conscious, devoted, and concentrated effort in the field of culture promotion. To what extent was the French cultural policy in colonial Senegal successful in achieving a French cultural long term invasion and being a source of distortion of the African identity there?

Key Words: French Cultural Policy, French Colonialism, French Education, Colonial Senegal, African Identity.

Introduction

France has had a distinguished relationship with Senegal for over 300 years. The seventeenth century witnessed the first permanent French settlement in Senegal, Saint-Louis. Its geographical location allowed it to control trade along the Senegal river. This, in fact, made of Senegal France's most important west African territory during the colonial era. Consequently, the French were seen more concentrated and had an outstanding presence in Senegal than in other colonies. Thus, a strong French cultural presence was registered in Senegalese life.

Indeed, the colonial era witnessed a remarkable dynamism in the field of culture promotion. For instance, to make Senegalese whole generation speak French, France ignored the Senegalese national languages and patois in its system of education in this French Colony. France adopted the policy of "Assimilation" which advocated "identity between colony and the mother country" though the nature of this identity varied from one exposition to another".¹ Accordingly, Senegalese people were granted French citizenship and achieved metropolitan status after having been imbibed with French education.

In fact, French colonial education in Senegal, mainly driven by the policy of assimilation remained the most efficient means through which France succeeded to complete its cultural invasion in this west African colony. Indeed, France imposed its language and culture while preparing and training a restricted class of selected Senegalese civil servants, interpreters and intermediaries that were expected to facilitate French colonial achievements and defend French interests in the long-term.

This paper focusses on the French cultural policy in colonial Senegal; based on assimilation, it relied on education to achieve a distortion of the Senegalese African identity. How was Senegal affected by the French colonial cultural policy? How was the French education a source of distortion of African Senegalese identity? Could Senegal detach from the French imposed culture once independent?

I- France and Culture Promotion During the Colonial Era

During the colonial era, France developed a conscious and concentrated cultural policy consisting in sharing the political values and education of the French elite itself.² It pursued a determined policy to spread its language through the setting up of schools with competent teachers trained to promote French political and cultural ideas. This French dedication to develop a concentrated cultural policy – in view of a long-term efficacy – was from the start very conscious, as expressed by Napoleon I who claimed – in his twilight reflections at St. Helena – that he had been obliged to conquer territories by the sword but the one who was to succeed him was to rely on the spirit for the latter proved its superior efficacy compared to the sword.³

Consequently, whenever possible, in their imperialistic expansion and thereafter, French leaders adopted both cultural penetration and force. Despite their use of the sword, they never neglected the importance of cultural penetration in view of the lasting results this could ensure. As a French deputy asked his colleagues in 1900: “What political operations or armed invasions was ever able, with less expense, to produce such important and lasting results?”⁴ Having had as their ultimate objective the cultural and political integration of their colonial peoples, the French were overtly aggressive in this effort.⁵ Their policy was particularly guided by Napoleon III who realized after his defeat in the Franco-Prussian war the implications and potential involved in Napoleon I’s intentions as he became aware of the usefulness of the cultural component to spread influence.⁶ Thus, education stood as a major channel through which culture could be transmitted and thus, exert its influence.

II- French Colonial Education in Senegal: An Efficient Tool of Cultural Invasion

No one can deny the special relation between culture and education for through education as a whole process, culture can be transmitted to succeeding generations.⁷ Thus, wanting to make Senegalese people heirs of French civilization, France had a complete

control on the educational system in this colony. After it had demolished the traditional educational system there, France imposed French education whose standards and curricula were the same as in France. This policy precisely meant the communication, transmission, acquisition of French knowledge, competences, beliefs, habits and ideals. Besides, it would produce “French” Senegalese, for instance, in hope that loyalty to France and whose detachment from the local environment would be secured as native culture was excluded from curricula in schools. The teaching in these schools made no reference to Senegal as an African colony with its native culture and history, they rather concentrated on French civilization, history and grandeur. Worse than this, local geography and history were not or scarcely taught, with a view to brainwashing the Senegalese into being convinced they belonged to France. In a net-shell, the French system of education, concentrated on persuading children of the virtues of the colonial system and French culture.⁸ In other words, France was not preoccupied with the tailoring of an education matching the Senegalese situation.

In fact, the French adopted policy of assimilation in Africa was severe enough to provide the appropriate atmosphere for the flourishing of the French language. For instance, it imposed to a 12.8% on the printing or publication of books in African language for use in the so called “village schools”. Besides, the customs service imposed the same tax on imported books in foreign languages such as German and English. The French colonial language policy’s evolution was designed by a series of decrees, ordinances, official memoranda, and practical decisions taken by the colonial administrators. In this respect, the ordinance of Villers Cotteret, issued in 1539 by King François I, stood as the crucial piece of legislation that drew the evolution of the French colonial language policy in Africa. It made French the official language of the French Kingdom, thus, it excluded Breton, Basque, Occitan, German and many others.⁹

However, it is worth noting that the conception of assimilation was not valued by the natives. For instance, citizenship was not widely sought even among those whose education entitled them to it.¹⁰ Accordingly, assimilation as a policy was left behind but was practised and followed at cultural level in schools through the educational

programmes. In this context, the French colonial power revealed the intentions to train an elite of young people to help them as a first step, then they intended to focus on the whole race in an attempt to imbibe them with the French education to leave a lasting imprint.¹¹

In addition, in French educational policy in Senegal, a significant discrimination between the elite and the mass was registered. While the first category (very limited) received complete French education, the second one, namely the mass (where they were allowed to go to school) only received an elementary education which essentially focused on teaching them the French language. From the beginning, the French officials insisted on the fact that the chiefs and all those with whom they came in daily contact should speak French.¹² For instance, the French imposed education in French from the first day Senegalese children joined school.

Thus, French colonial policy relied on cultural invasion, on building up a cultural infrastructure, on attempting to erase the culture of the colonized country, Senegal, building up a whole new culture, and investing in the very long-term.¹³ French cultural policy towards Senegal during the colonial period was, indeed, based on a strong belief in the equality of men and at the same time as on acceptance of the superiority of European, and French civilization, in particular.¹⁴ Consequently, the Senegalese were considered as Barbarians fortunate to be in touch with Frenchmen.¹⁵

For instance, in 1792, France decreed that “all men, without distinction of colour, domiciled in French colonies, [were] French citizens, and enjoy all the rights assured by the Constitution”.¹⁶ Besides, in 1833 a Royal order asserted that “any person born free or having legally acquired his liberty enjoys in the French colonies: (1) civil rights; political rights under conditions prescribed by law”.¹⁷ As a result of these two laws, 12000 Senegalese, illiterate to the greatest extent, were granted the full rights of French citizens. Among these, a group of less than 1000 was converted to Christianity either by their French, mulatto or Christian African masters.¹⁸ In fact, such a conversion operation of illiterates into full-scale model of French citizens was not to be productive if it excluded local culture, and whose programmes were tailored regardless of native environment. Indeed, Senegalese

culture was dismissed to be replaced by French ideals and way of thinking and through it political and economic reliance on France in the long-term.

III- The Impact of the French Colonial Cultural Policy

In 1960, Senegal obtained its independence from France. Yet, the special relationship between the former coloniser and the colonised has been maintained. Indeed, a positive atmosphere prevailed between the two countries and important factors of French culture imposed during the colonial era were maintained as essential components of Senegalese identity during the post-colonial era.¹⁹ Thus, the impact of French colonial policy in Senegal remained tremendous since it distorted the Senegalese African identity.

The impact of the French aggressive policy of assimilation can mainly be illuminated for instance by the Senegalese approach of the French language after independence. Indeed, the French has remained the official language whereas African more common languages like Wolof have been excluded from the curriculum. In fact, the Senegalese political authorities did not manifest any tendency to promote African languages when Senegal became independent. On the contrary, the first article of the Senegalese Constitution has preserved the privileged place for the French language.²⁰ Such an approach indicates that those people trained by France were so influenced by French culture through the received education that they behaved like the French, that they reinforced their country's dependence on France. Even if the latter left, its interests were to be preserved by the Senegalese Constitution.

To further illustrate the impact of the aggressive policy of assimilation that distorted the Senegalese educational sphere and facilitated the acculturation of the Senegalese elite trained by France, one can cite Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first President of independent Senegal. He embodied the manner in which the French University completed this African elite "Frenchification", as Senghor's words suggest:

And with docility we accepted the values of the west; its discursive reason and its techniques...Our ambition was to become photographic negatives of the colonizers “black-skinned Frenchmen”. It went even further, for we would have blushed, about our black skin, our frizzled hair, our flat noses, all for the values of our traditional civilization... our people..., secretly, caused us shame!²¹

In fact, Senghor had very firm convictions about his own native culture and his own origins but always promoted French cultural interests with much vainglory. He had been more French than the French themselves in his defence of the French language and values. He even went so far as to claim in a private conversation that he had forgotten his “Sérène”, his mother tongue.²² He even typically adopted the French way of thinking and the French way of life to the extent of reflecting French prejudices towards the “Anglo-Saxons”. He once declared that he feels very little inclination for English civilization and that such an attitude was the result of “an affair of situation of culture”.²³

Moreover, Senghor found difficulty adjusting to his native environment on his return from the west. He could never ally himself with the common Senegalese people. His own “negritude” philosophy was well defended by him but his life-style jarred with its ideals.²⁴ For instance, in 1963, Senghor left Dakar for his annual vacation in his Normandy house without even waiting for the end of the first Organization of the African Unity (OAU) Council of Ministers meeting.²⁵ After leaving power, he came back and settled in Paris for years.

Thus, French colonialism shaped the Senegalese education whose impact continued to dominate even during the post-colonial era. Educational problems have been recognised by many influential people in Senegal, such as Leopold Sédar Senghor. The fact that the Senegal educational scene continues to be dominated by the French colonial education system, using the French language rather than one of the more common Senegalese local languages, like the Wolof, is in itself a

distortion of a harmonious and a fruitful educational system that could be accessible to those wide Senegalese groups who do not speak French. Indeed, the maintaining of French language as the most privileged language and the colonial structure carries on issuing problems for the Senegalese system.²⁶ Through the promotion of French education in Senegal the impact of the French education system which favoured the elite,²⁷ extended to become an efficient means of French cultural invasion.

However, in other parts of French empire, cultural impact did not mean alienation between elite and people necessarily. Thus, Bourguiba and other North African francophone elite members never lost touch with their peoples though they were steeped in French culture.

Conclusion :

Thus, the most important sphere of dominance remained the mental universe of the colonized; a well calculated control through which culture, of how colonial people saw themselves and their relationship to the world. European colonialism's main target was to extract economic gains from the colonized African territories, France distinguished itself from its counterparts with a more lucrative colonial long-term investment, an additional goal, the distortion of the African identity and the transformation of the African populations of its colonies into French citizens. In this respect, Senegal remained the best example of the embodiment of this French devoted effort that extended the idea of a united French empire with the adopted policy of assimilation.

Endnotes :

¹ M. Crowder, West Africa Under Colonial Rule, Evanston: North-Western University , 1968, p. 166.

² R. O’Neil and J. R. Vincent, The West and the Third World, Essays in Honour of J. D. B. Miller, London: Macmillan Academic and Professional LTD, 1990, p. 69.

³ Quoted in P. H. Coombs, The Fourth Dimension of Foreign Policy: Educational and Cultural Affairs, New York: Harper and Row, 1964, p. 79

⁴ Idem.

⁵ M. Crowder, Senegal, A Study in French Assimilation Policy, London: Institute of Race Relations, 1962, p. 1.

⁶ P. H. Coombs, op. cit, p. 79.

⁷ As British sociologists among others - have demonstrated, the relation between culture and education is indeed a close and even organic one.

J. C. Forquin, Ecole et Culture. Le Point de Vue des Sociologues Britanniques. Bruxelles : De Boeck-Wesmael s. a, 1989, p. 8.

⁸ M. Crowder, op. cit, 1968, p. 378.

⁹ E. G. Bokamba, “French Language Policies in Africa and Their Legacies” in David F. Marshall Focus on Language Planning: Essays in honour of J. A. Fishman Volume 3. Netherlands, Benjamins Publishing Company, 1991, p. 177.

¹⁰ A. J. R. Groom and P. Taylor, The Commonwealth in 1980s, London: Macmillan Press, 1984, p. 167.

¹¹ Quoted by M. Crowder, op. cit, 1968, p. 380.

¹² Idem

¹³ F. Colonna, A. Djeghloul and M. EL Korso, Lettrés, Intellectuels et Militants en Algérie 1880-1950, Alger : Office des Publications Universitaires : 04-88, p. 6.

¹⁴ Michael Crowder, op. cit, 1962, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 2.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 10.

¹⁷ Idem.

¹⁸ Idem.

¹⁹ A. Balarab Bawa, “From Imperialism to Diplomacy: A Historical Analysis of French and Senegal Cultural Relationship”, Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, <https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org>>2013-08-acd.

²⁰ P. Dumont, *Le Français et les Langues Africaines au Sénégal*, Paris : Karthala, 1983, p. 23.

²¹ J. L. Hymans, Léopold Sédar Senghor, *An Intellectual Biography*, Great Britain: Western Printed Service LTD, 1971, p. 16.

For further details about complexes of inferiority as analysed by Frantz Fanon, in this regard see: *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Paris : Seuil, 1971, and *Les Damnés de la Terre*, Paris : Editions François Maspero, 1961.

²² Ibid, p. 28.

²³ Ibid, p. 17.

²⁴ R. O'Neil and R. J. Vincent, op. cit.

²⁵ Idem.

²⁶ R: ED Halo, "The Impact of French Colonialism on Senegalese Culture", Right for Education, November 24, 2021, <http://rightforeducation.org/2021/11/24/the-impact-of-french-colonialism-on-senegalese-culture/>.

²⁷ J. Fisher, "Senegal's Government is Promising a 'Systematic Change' in Education" LSE, May 22, 2024, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africantle/2024/05/22/senegals-government-is-promising-a-systematic-change-in-education/>.

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