Politics, Local Power, and Violence: Decolonization of French West Africa in Colonial and African Perspectives

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Colonialism, or the exploitation of an area and native inhabitants by a foreign power, relies on violence and hierarchy to achieve its goals of control. This system rests on the assumption by the colonizer that they are in some way superior to the native inhabitants, which those inhabitants must contend with and often fight against. Due to the unsustainability and brutality of colonial structures, the colonized group usually may only achieve independence or self-rule through their own doing, and rely on internal and external methods, peacefully and/or violently pursued. The broad variety of avenues that decolonization can follow are dependent on the colonizing group and the native group, based on their actions and reactions within a local and global frame. This process involves both groups, which are rarely mutually exclusive, and the true power of native inhabitants in their struggle dispels the notion of "independence intentionally granted [by colonizer] as a 'gift.'"[1] French West Africa, a federation of French-controlled territories in Western Africa, decolonized and reformed into independent entities during a community-led self-rule movement that reached its apex in the 1950s, with competing visions of differing social and economic groups. While it was less violent than similar conflicts such as the decolonization of French Algeria and French Indochina, French West Africa's decolonization still harbored violence and the colonial system relied upon strong coercion, strain upon native communities, and erasure of place names that are indicative of the overt and covert processes behind the exploitation that seeks to sustain colonialism.

The history of French West Africa often begins through a French lens, which pretends that French explorers found new lands to name and people to rule over with no previous structures or histories. The truth, however, is that many different groups of people with rich cultures, flourishing trade routes, and advanced political structures inhabited Western Africa for

[1] Tony Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France's Successful Decolonization* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), 3.

millenia. Entities such as the "Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and Hausa empires and states… contributed to a diverse and complex social environment" that European people had to learn about and interact with carefully.[2] After centuries of being but one player in this web, France employed primarily military means to gain gradual control of the region throughout the nineteenth Century until it officially "created a civilian administration in West Africa in 1895."[3] West African pre-French political boundaries were incorporated into this new federation, but their names were often erased or changed to conform with French conventions. This territorial administration was structured differently from mainland France; while French citizens enjoyed their fought-for rights of voting and other forms of political participation and protection, most African people who lived in French West Africa were considered "subjects." These subjects had significantly less rights regarding safety, participation and representation in the government. Only a small area of the expansive Federation granted French citizenship to native African people. This area was a special case in French West Africa and was labeled the Four Communes, which were the four nearby cities of Dakar, Gorée, Rufisque, and Saint-Louis in Senegal, which, in 1848, "won the right to elect a deputy to the French National Assembly in Paris… and had also been French citizens since 1916."[4] In the swath of land which included present-day Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Benin, and Togo (from 1916 onward), 15.5 million African people were considered by the French to be subjects, compared to the 100,000 French citizens of the Four Communes.[5]

The French West African system of government was headed by a governor-general in the coastal city Dakar that answered to the government in Paris, specifically to the Minister of

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[2] Ali B. Ali-Dinar, "French In West Africa," University of Pennsylvania Africana Studies Center.
[3] Elisabeth Fink, "Elections and Political Mobilization in the Time of Decolonization: Voting in Postwar French West Africa" (PhD diss., New York University, 2015), 5.
[4] Chafer, *End of Empire,* 27.
[5] Ibid, 28.

Colonies. This governor-general presided over lieutenant-governors who controlled areas of the interior territory; these were French people subservient and loyal to France rather than the places they were governing.[6] French West Africa's economic model also represented the interests of mainland France; its chief aims were "promoting export crops in the coastal region… [and] undertaking works of public utility (chiefly the means of communication)," both of which relied and were built upon "the use of forced labor" of African people. The French also forcefully relocated many African people due to export needs closer to the coast, which eroded traditional composition of place.[7] Colonial forces upheld the administrative and economic system through intimidation and outright violence. African people, facing often inhuman conditions and constant output goals, often protested and found ways to resist. However, the colonial government used further violence to uphold their system of exploitation. One example of the brutal suppression of dissent occurred at Thiés in September 1938. In response to a nonviolent strike, the government "sent in troops, who apparently panicked when confronted by the strikers; they opened fire, leaving six workers dead and 60 injured."[8] The French perpetrated these acts of violence frequently, and the threat of physical coercion was omnipresent in the minds of workers.

Through the first decades of the Twentieth Century, French rule over French West Africa remained unchanged. With France's occupation by Nazi Germany in World War II, however, the Vichy regime of Nazi rule over France extended into French West Africa. Some characterize this period as one of brutality and rule with an iron fist, where new commanders "cracked down on any kind of real or perceived dissent, and rural producers struggled under brutal production quotas."[9] From an African perspective, however, colonial officials "continued to use forced labor

[6] Al-Dinar, "French West Africa."
[7] Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *French West Africa* (Stanford University Press, 1957), 249.
[8] Chafer, *End of Empire,* 34-5.
[9] Fink, "Elections and Political Mobilization," 6.

and ruled them through the same *indigénat* as before the war, [meaning] the change to [from Vichy to] the Free French regime represented just another imposition by Whites."[10] Rule by German or French people overseas did not do much to change the reality of forced labor for most Western African people. Additionally, many African soldiers fought on the front lines of the war and many of these soldiers were held in prisoner of war camps. They often received little from France for their efforts and suffering compared to French soldiers. One dispute over proper payment from France led to the Thiaroye (Tiaroye) Massacre, in which African veterans, "angered by delays in receiving the back pay they had been promised, held commanders hostage. French military command stormed the troops, killing dozens and injuring hundreds."[11] World War II and its aftermath illuminated the need for independence to many West African people.

The wartime and post-war French government had to reckon with a change in viewpoints about colonialism and were "cognizant of how World War II showed colonized people around the world that French rule could be overthrown."[12] The first response to growing calls for local governance was the Brazzaville Conference of 1944, which slightly reformed the French West African government by instituting "African representation in the French National Assembly and the increase of local councils in West Africa."[13] These changes, however, occurred slowly and were a result of African insistence and resilience. Rather than a benevolent acceptance of requests, French policy was concerned with limiting the ramifications of opposition to its colonial system and retaining power in the region. The system of voting in French West Africa exemplifies this outlook, where politicians worked to "expand elections and [make] them appear legitimate while dismissing outright the possibility of a one man one vote system."[14] On top of

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[10] Chafer, *End of Empire,* 55.
[11] Fink, "Elections and Political Mobilization," 7.
[12] Ibid, 8.
[13] Al-Dinar, "French West Africa."
[14] Fink, "Elections and Political Mobilization," 12.

this, because of deficits in income and spending in the colonies, in the 1950s France decided that "stress was to be placed on increasing production," especially from private investment "without the participation of, or benefit to, its native inhabitants."[15] Increased production quotas fueled increased mandatory migration, scrambling traditional structures and fracturing communities. The French naming and renaming of towns and cities that focused on production was a further attempt to instill a sense of French hegemony. New policies did open new avenues for African political participation, but each advancement was mired in attempts to prevent full citizenship with the end goal of extracting all possible wealth for France.

Resistance to French rule always existed, but the postwar period saw extreme growth in strong groups that organized, held meetings, and actively participated in civic and everyday life. West African leaders and followers entangled themselves in a complex web of global decolonial struggle, which informed their local forms of resistance. The character of these organizations and their members was varied and did not just represent one view; farmers, owners, lawyers, students, and countless other groups organized with themselves and each other in a dynamic and broad system. Many West African anti-colonial groups were led by the youth, and, beginning around 1950, global "communist satellite organizations, such as the World Federation of Trade Unions and the World Federation of Democratic Youth, escalated in the colonies. They had a significant ideological influence on the emerging nationalist movement in French West Africa."[16]

West African people kept themselves acutely aware of the progress gained by violent rebellions in other French colonial territories. War in French Indochina by native forces expelled France from the region in 1954, "Morocco and Tunisia achieved independence in March 1956… and the Algerian Revolution had begun on 1 November 1954."[17] These wars occupied the minds

[15] Thompson and Adloff, *French West Africa,* 261.
[16] Chafer, *End of Empire,* 145.
[17] Chafer, *End of Empire,* 145.

of West African people in part because they "fought in substantial numbers on behalf of the French in both Indochina and Algeria."[18] While movements protesting colonialism grew in French West Africa, France sent marginalized people to overseas wars where they witnessed the struggle (and often success) of other marginalized people firsthand. Place within the colonies played a role in public consciousness; relocations and increased cultural transmission between people in different parts of West Africa helped spread ideas across large distances within the colonies. This growing global consciousness of possible and probable decolonization along with alternative modes of governmental systems was a grassroots movement controlled by native forces.

The later 1950s brought an even greater degree of community-led, bottom-up movements and an increasingly tight-knit world system of decolonial struggle. In French West Africa, "African leaders across the ideological spectrum shared a disenchantment with the Soviet Union; they looked instead to the Bandung Conference and Third Worldism."[19] The importance of the Bandung Conference to the distinctly community-led local struggle of the people cannot be understated. This April 1955 conference "was attended by delegations from 24 newly independent states in the [so-called] Third World" and by countries still fighting for independence, such as "Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria." Members "defended the absolute right of all peoples to self-determination," and in particular supported ongoing struggles against France.[20] Anti-colonialism groups formed by formerly colonized countries gave hope and solidarity to others such as those in French West Africa. The latter half of the 1950s evidently showed growth of anti-colonialism as its own ideology, which was cemented in global and local consciousness.

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Fink, "Elections and Political Mobilization," 185.
[20] Chafer, *End of Empire,* 145-6.

West African leaders took inspiration from these other struggles and conferences to form their own campaigns and political groups. For instance, Léopold Sédar Senghor, the poet, politician, and eventual first president of Senegal in 1960, "cited Tunisia's Neo-Destour movement and the autonomy it achieved as an inspiration." To him, new global political and cultural exchange bolstered "pan-Africanism, overcoming political divides, particularly between French West Africa and and British-ruled Nigeria and Gold Coast." Large-scale global exchange and regional exchange within French West Africa impacted each other, and Senghor's global consciousness helped him gather support within the colonies. Political formation, however, was far from simple, and the issues of social stratification, competing visions, and infighting were always present. Sékou Touré, union leader, politician, and first president of Guinea in 1958, admitted that his popularity was "not only due to the progressive ideas I espouse… [but also] because I'm the descendent of a famous family." This fame was a double-edged sword, however. Touré's family name was "held in high esteem in Mandingue areas" in Guinea and in places such as Côte d'Ivoire which "helped forge stronger trans-territorial links between movements," but other areas where the public disliked his family stiffly opposed him.[21] Name, both of family and place, was evidently important, which further elucidates the importance of both community and place name.

Political groups formed or run by these leaders were not just extensions of them; they were dynamic and constantly shifting entities that morphed, fragmented, or combined with others in a fluid, interconnected process. Félix Houphouët-Boigny, prominent politician who contributed to major French and West African policy decisions, led the large, powerful, pan-African party Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA). This organization, which "intended to unite African leaders across party affiliations" was joined and molded by African

[21] Fink, "Elections and Political Mobilization," 185.

planters, politicians, professionals, farmers, and many more, each with their own outlooks and loyalties.[22] These outlooks brought progress, but also caused major rifts in the organization. From its creation in 1946, the RDA had been aligned with the French Communist Party (PCF), but in 1950, under Houphouët-Boigny, it disaffiliated from the PCF.[23] This disaffiliation "produced a split within the emerging nationalist movement" between Houphouët-Boigny and others who thought that "a policy of cooperation with the government would produce more benefits for Africans" versus other members such as Gabrield'Arboussier, "who believed that the best means of putting an end to the colonial system was through an alliance… with the international forces of anti-imperialism."[24] The conflict between cooperation and independence rested at the heart of the public, showing that full independence did not follow one predestined track, but happened as a result of deliberation and careful, incremental decision-making.

As seen above, parties such as the RDA generally espoused a moderate stance over colonial rule, while others took a more radical anticolonial stance. In an area as large and varied as West Africa, smaller groups were often different from larger groups and from each other. Place names, from the larger colony to towns, factored greatly into party names and visions. For instance, various groups formed from regional branches of the RDA and advocated for a full severing of ties with France, such as Côte d'Ivoire's Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI). The PDCI "was a grassroots mobilization… [that] underscores the difficulty of the colonial administration when faced with political action that blurred the boundaries between anticolonial revolt and political mobilization." While France attempted to suppress many political organizations, including the RDA at times, the PDCI was considered a much greater threat than the RDA and was deemed an "insurrectionary movement." The PDCI further

[22] Ibid, 103-4.
[23] Chafer, *End of Empire,* 106.
[24] Chafer, *End of Empire,* 118.

fragmented "between those who advocated fighting back and hunkering down and those who advocated trying to appease the administration."[25] Student and youth movements, as well, oftentimes took a more fully anti-colonial stance. In 1957 youth organizations across French West Africa joined "to form the Conseil de la Jeunesse d'Afrique (CJA) and were united behind an unequivocal demand for independence: 'The Congress declares that the only way of setting the oppressed peoples of Africa completely free is through the struggle for national independence.'" Youth groups sometimes formed their own ecosystem or operated as a youth branch of a larger organization, but almost always they supported full independence.[26] As seen, options always existed without a single plan of forward movement, but the addition of rights and some degree of self-rule were resounding agreements.

With official and unofficial groups making their disillusionment with the colonial government visible, France was pushed to adopt a reform law called the Loi-cadre. A growing problem in French West Africa was that "territories most distant from Senegal… were becoming increasingly irritated by the centralization of power in Dakar." Through protest and through influential African figures such as Houphouët-Boigny, France instituted the Loi-cadre in June 1956. This reform was ambiguous on specifics, and "simply established the principle… that government councils would be instituted in the territories and that the territorial assemblies would have increased powers." This law, like others mentioned before, "sought to maintain French dominance by keeping control of certain strategic areas of 'high' policy… such as foreign affairs, defense, and monetary policy. It also maintained French cultural influence." In addition, territorial governments were now responsible for many of the decisions that were unpopular with the public.[27] This fragmentation contributed to the individual consciousness of each colony, and

[25] Fink, "Elections and Political Mobilization," 103-4.
[26] Chafer, *End of Empire,* 206.
[27] Chafer, *End of Empire,* 165-6.

"it has been suggested that this fragmentation was an attempt by France to create a destabilized and fragmented West Africa."[28] Further distinction between places within the larger federation gave greater importance to place names within each colony.

Although the Loi-cadre aimed to create a more fragmented system of government, most colonies followed a similar pattern of voting for independence and gaining it in 1960. However, Guinea was a notable exception that deserves mention. Guinea was the only colony that voted to oppose a 1958 referendum by France that "proposed a continuation of colonialism pending the time when the colonists had helped fashion out a constitutional framework that would include each of them in a commonwealth of nations." This complete break with colonial France while other colonies voted to stay at the time has many possible answers, but one likely explanation is that "while parties in other territories generally were dominated by the… elites who had a stake in the colonial system, the Guinean RDA [branch] was led by low-level civil servants and trade unionists who were frustrated by the strictures of colonial rule."[29] Those who fared slightly better under colonial rule were less agreeable to a complete overhaul of the system, while the more directly marginalized people were able to collectively sever their ties to French rule.

The other colonies had, by this time in 1958, "functional national assemblies." The process of decolonization was not instant, but was instead a process with significant push and pull from colonial and African governments and leaders. The votes against independence in most of the colonies in 1958 illustrates this point; until independence, people considered different avenues towards different degrees of self-rule. However, two years after this vote, the colonies all voted to become their own countries in 1960, dubbed "The Year of Africa."[30] In the words of the Parti de la Fédération Africaine (PFA), created by ex-members of the RDA and another party

[28] Al-Dinar, "French West Africa."
[29] Toyin Falola, *A History of West Africa,* (Routledge, 2023), 358-9.
[30] Falola, *History of West Africa,* 358-60.

shortened to the PRA, the colonies generally reached "national independence in the context of the interdependence of nations." Except for the Mali Federation, a combination of Mali and Senegal that "only lasted a few months," nationhood was based on the borders of the colonies, and these nations developed into a complex network of nations that interacted with each other and others around them, such as Nigeria and Ghana.[31] Additionally, some nations took their place names back or created new, community-based names; Haute-Volta (Upper Volta) became Burkina Faso in 1984, meaning "land of the proud and honest people" from three different languages of the region, and Soudan français (French Soudan) became Mali based on the Mali Empire.[32] The celebration of place names was central to reclaiming and molding cultural identity.

While it is true that French West Africa's process of decolonization was less violent compared to other struggles of the time, it is important to remember that the colonial system was built and maintained on violence and overwriting traditional communities, and colonial politicians always used both violent and political means to uphold the system of colonialism. Leaders and groups operated in a dynamic system involving worldwide events, French policy, competing interests, and differing views of degrees of independence. Newly formed countries formed their own governmental structures, organizations and names of places, and geopolitical relationships. However, France's lasting legacy of violence and control has persisted through independence, and the region and African people to this day have had to contend with further French interests when running and living in their countries.

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[31] Chafer, *End of Empire*, 212.
[32] Spurlock Museum of World Cultures, "Senufo-Tagba of West Africa," University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

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