



Review Article

French Colonial Policies in West Africa: Power Dynamics, Cultural Impositions and Economic Legacies

Tola Benjamin Kehinde ^{a,*}

^a Department of Political Science and International Relations, Covenant University, Canaan Land, KM. 10 Idiroko Rd, 112212 Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria.

* Correspondence: tola.kehindepgs@stu.cu.edu.ng (T.B.H.)

Citations: Kehinde, T.B. (2024). French Colonial Policies in West Africa: Power Dynamics, Cultural Impositions and Economic Legacies. *International Journal of Advances in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 3(1), 8-17.

Received: 16 November 2023

Accepted: 6 February 2024

Published: 29 February 2024

Abstract: The complex dynamics of French colonial policies in West Africa during European imperialism played a crucial role in streamlining administrative procedures and consolidating control over the indigenous African population. This colonial framework not only imposed a distinct sense of identity on African communities but also created deep stratification within these societies. Implementing the direct rule system, an essential aspect of French colonial administration, facilitated imposing laws and regulations that often marginalized traditional authority structures. As a result, a symbiotic relationship emerged between the African colonies and France, with the former serving as essential suppliers of resources crucial for sustaining France's growing industrial enterprises. This paper delves into the intricate nuances of the French colonial policies and their enduring impact on West Africa. By critically examining the assimilation and association policies, the study elucidates the power dynamics, cultural impositions, and economic implications that characterized the colonial experience of French colonies in West Africa. Unpacking the complexities of the colonial governance framework highlights the systemic disparities and cultural alienation perpetuated by the French colonial apparatus, underscoring the persistent socio-economic challenges and cultural subjugation that continue to shape the contemporary West African landscape. By exploring historical injustices and postcolonial complexities, the study emphasizes the urgent need for a holistic and inclusive approach to postcolonial development, advocating for preserving cultural heritage and promoting equitable socio-economic progress within the region.

Keywords: Imperialism; French Colonialism; Assimilation; West Africa.



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The intricate dynamics of French colonial policies within the West African region during the era of European imperialism were instrumental in streamlining administrative procedures and consolidating control over the indigenous African populace. This colonial framework not only imparted a distinct, albeit imposed, sense of identity upon the African communities but also engendered a profound stratification within these societies during the colonial reign. Establishing the direct rule system, a key feature of the French colonial administration facilitated imposing laws and regulations that often marginalized the traditional authority structures. Consequently, these political arrangements forged a symbiotic relationship between the African colonies and France, with the former serving as vital suppliers of resources crucial for the sustenance of France's burgeoning industrial enterprises. In essence, the French colonial policies in West Africa

were not merely mechanisms for economic exploitation and resource extraction but also intricate tools for reshaping socio-cultural and political landscapes (Müller-Crepon, 2020). Through the implementation of a direct rule system, French administrators sought to assert their authority and control over the region, often at the expense of the traditional power structures indigenous to the African societies.

The relegation of traditional rulers to a peripheral role within the administrative machinery not only weakened the traditional governance structures but also created a cultural dissonance within the African communities, wherein the imposed French identity clashed with the existing indigenous identities, resulting in a complex interplay of assimilation and resistance (Osborn, 2017). Furthermore, the interdependence between France and its West African colonies was not solely limited to economic exploitation; it also bore significant cultural and ideological implications. The influx of French governance practices and educational systems alongside the suppression of indigenous cultural expressions led to the gradual erosion of local customs and knowledge systems. Simultaneously, the introduction of a Westernized educational framework aimed at producing a workforce tailored to the needs of the French industries, thus perpetuating a cycle of dependency and subordination. As such, this paper seeks to elucidate the multifaceted dimensions of the French colonial presence in West Africa, unraveling the intricate layers of power dynamics, cultural assimilation, and resistance that shaped the trajectory of colonial governance and its enduring legacies.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate the subject matter effectively. The methodology utilised secondary data sources from diverse scholarly materials such as published journal articles, book chapters, and books. Employing thematic analysis, the data derived from these sources are meticulously examined and organized, facilitating a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the research. The foundation of this research design relies on a descriptive framework enhanced by a qualitative examination of the prevailing literature. This approach provides a robust foundation for analyzing and interpreting the study's findings.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Exploration of the West African Terrain

Contact between Europeans and West Africa can be traced back to the 15th century, coinciding with the era when major European powers embarked on ambitious voyages for overseas expansion and explored novel trade routes. This initial phase of European exploration was notably pioneered by the Portuguese, who began European interactions with the West African region. The imperative need for a labor force to exploit the newly discovered territories under the dominion of the formidable European powers precipitated the inception of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, fostering a complex web of commercial exchanges between African merchants and various European nations. Despite the intensification of trade activities between West Africa and Europe, the European knowledge of the hinterland of West Africa remained notably restricted, reflecting a limited understanding of the region's intricate cultural and socio-political dynamics.

During this epoch, the primary focus of European powers revolved around the acquisition of able-bodied men, considered vital for labor-intensive plantations in the New World. France emerged as a pivotal player among the European nations involved in this intricate trade network, actively engaging in trade relations with West African merchants. Historical data indicates that France contributed to approximately 11% of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, primarily originating from the Senegambia region. Establishing strategic trading posts in Saint Louis and the Island of Goree, France solidified its presence within the West African coastal territories, securing a firm foothold in the lucrative trade of human commodities. However, with the gradual decline and eventual abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade along the West African coast, a significant shift occurred in the trade dynamics, leading to an increased demand for various agricultural commodities sourced from the West African region. This transformative phase marked the emergence of what historians commonly call "Legitimate trade" in West Africa, signaling a notable transition from the reprehensible slave trade to a more conventional and lawful form of commercial exchange (Brooks, 1975).

The increasing necessity to acquire raw materials and minerals from West Africa to sustain Europe's rapidly expanding industrialization drove a heightened European interest in penetrating deeper into the unexplored territories of the African continent. This interest was compounded by the under-consumption prevalent in European economies and the genuine desire to access new markets for surplus goods. Consequently, this convergence of economic imperatives precipitated the scramble and partition of Africa, leading to various European powers' forceful occupation and colonization of the continent (Awingsong, 2015). The pivotal Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 marked a crucial turning point in the history of African colonization. This landmark diplomatic assembly established the guidelines for European countries seeking to assert control over African territories (Barbour, 2023). It mandated securing treaties with local rulers to validate territorial claims. It emphasized the principle of "effective occupation," demanding a visible military presence from claiming European powers in the territories they sought to control. Consequently, the repercussions of the Berlin Conference instigated the entry of France and other European nations into the heartlands of Africa, prompting

the implementation of carefully devised administrative systems aimed at efficiently subjugating and governing the indigenous African populations.

The incursion of France and other European powers into the African hinterlands was not merely an act of territorial expansion but a comprehensive effort to establish administrative structures that facilitated effective governance and zealously safeguarded their economic interests within the colonized territories. This colonization process led to the imposition of administrative mechanisms characterized by centralized control, often at the expense of indigenous power structures. Consequently, this complex interplay of colonization highlighted the underlying dynamics of exploitation and dominance inherent in the colonial project, underscoring the critical importance of analyzing this historical epoch to understand the intricate socio-economic and political developments that shaped the relationship between colonial powers and the African continent (Harris, 1911).

3.2. Origin of Assimilation

The conceptual origins of the assimilation policy, often associated with the French colonial enterprise, can be traced back to earlier historical contexts, predating the French adoption of the idea. The principle of assimilation finds its roots in the annals of the Roman Empire during its expansive phase, particularly evident during the reign of Julius Caesar when the process of assimilation led to the Latinization of various regions that were previously considered barbarian. This historical precedent illustrates a formative instance of assimilation as a tool for cultural integration and the expansion of imperial influence. The proliferation of the assimilation concept gained further traction during the era of overseas expansion and exploration, characterized by the quest for new trading routes and territories. Notably, disseminating the Christian faith to indigenous communities in newly discovered lands emerged as a pivotal objective for Spanish, Portuguese, and French missionaries accompanying traders on these ventures. During this epoch, assimilation primarily denoted spiritual equality, underscored by efforts to integrate local populations into European colonizers' spiritual and cultural frameworks. As it pertained to spiritual parity, this assimilation paradigm laid the groundwork for subsequent iterations of the assimilation policy within the context of European colonial ambitions (Betts, 1960).

The genesis of the assimilation policy within the specific context of France can be traced back to the era of Cardinal Richelieu, a prominent clergyman who ascended to the position of Chief Minister under King Louis XIII of France. Notably, Cardinal Richelieu espoused the idea that indigenous populations, upon their conversion to Catholicism, could be regarded as "citizens and natural Frenchmen," thereby laying the groundwork for an assimilationist approach to governance. This initial iteration of assimilation policy under Richelieu underscores the intertwining of religious conversion and political inclusion within the framework of French colonial ambitions. However, it is crucial to note that the assimilation policy in France underwent a significant transformation, transitioning from a primarily religious paradigm to a more pronounced political construct following the tumultuous period of the French Revolution. Historians highlight the pivotal role of the French Revolution in reshaping the contours of the assimilation policy, shifting its focus from religious assimilation to broader political integration. This transformation marked a critical juncture in the evolution of the assimilationist approach in France, reflecting the profound impact of revolutionary ideals and the reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and its diverse citizenry (Betts, 1960).

3.3. French Assimilation Policy

The concept of assimilation within the context of French colonial policy has elicited diverse interpretations among scholars, reflecting the multifaceted nature of its implementation and the various dimensions through which it permeated the colonial landscape. For some historians, assimilation stands out as a predominant and enduring feature of the French colonial enterprise during the age of imperialism, functioning as a means of integrating conquered territories into the overarching body politic of France. This perspective underscores the profound impact of French assimilationist policies in reshaping the social and political fabric of the colonized regions, aligning them more closely with the cultural and administrative frameworks of the French homeland. Contrarily, certain scholars view assimilation as an instrument of equality, fostering a sense of unity among diverse racial and cultural groups, in stark contrast to the pervasive 'colour bar' characteristic of British colonial territories (Rush, 2002). This alternative interpretation emphasizes the role of French assimilation in fostering a more inclusive and egalitarian society within the colonial context, albeit within the confines of the French cultural hegemony.

From an administrative standpoint, assimilation is characterized by imposing a uniform set of regulations across all colonies, often disregarding variations in size, religious composition, racial background, social organization, economic development, or geographical distance from France. As noted by Lewis (1962), this administrative uniformity underscored the centralizing tendencies of the French colonial apparatus, emphasizing the consolidation of administrative control under the auspices of the French metropolitan authority. Furthermore, within the cultural sphere, assimilation entailed the propagation of the French language among non-European populations, serving as a powerful instrument for disseminating French culture and values across colonial territories. This linguistic assimilation was pivotal

in fostering cultural homogeneity and reinforcing the bonds between the colonies and the French homeland. Economically, the notion of tariff assimilation elucidates the French customs policies vis-à-vis its colonies, encapsulating the intricate web of economic interdependence that characterized the colonial relationship. The assimilation policy engendered a close-knit union between colonial territories and the metropolitan country, portraying the colonies as an extension of the French homeland reinforcing the symbiotic economic relationship underpinning the colonial enterprise (Lewis, 1962).

The implementation of the assimilation policy within the African colonies under French rule was predominantly driven by the administrative expediency and priorities of the French government. With the overarching aim of streamlining governance and consolidating control, the French colonial administration underscored the paramount importance of imparting the French language and cultural norms to the local populations in the colonies. As a result, the assimilation policy emerged as a strategic tool to foster a sense of shared identity and integration within the colonial framework, aligning the African colonies more closely with the cultural and administrative paradigms of the French homeland. Significantly, the strategic testing of the assimilation policy was notably exemplified in the four communes of Senegal, which served as crucial experimental grounds for the practical implementation and assessment of the policy within the broader context of French West Africa. This experimental approach underscored the meticulous planning and calculated execution employed by the French colonial authorities in tailoring the assimilation policy to the unique sociocultural dynamics and administrative complexities of the African colonies. The strategic significance of the Senegalese communes as a pioneering testing ground elucidates the deliberate efforts by the French government to ascertain the efficacy and implications of the assimilation policy, underscoring its instrumental role in shaping the trajectory of colonial governance in French West Africa.

3.4. Assimilation Policy in the Four Communes

The four communes of Senegal, comprising Goree, Dakar, Rufisque, and Saint Louis, occupied a unique and pivotal position within the broader framework of the French colonial enterprise in West Africa. These four communes stood as exceptional enclaves where the indigenous African population was afforded the same legal rights and privileges as their French counterparts, setting them apart as distinctive exceptions within the colonial landscape. Goree and Saint Louis, renowned as crucial trading hubs, had already established their significance as strategic points for French commercial interests (Crowder, 2023). In this context 1848, a significant milestone was achieved, granting the residents of Goree and Saint Louis the right to elect representatives to the esteemed French National Assembly. This historic development marked a significant departure from the norm within the colonial framework, underscoring the unprecedented recognition of the indigenous population's political agency and citizenship rights within the Senegalese communes. Subsequently, in 1880, the extension of these rights to Rufisque further underscored the gradual expansion of the assimilation policy, signifying an increasing acknowledgment of the rights and responsibilities of the African populace within the French colonial context. Notably, this progression of granting political representation and citizenship rights to the indigenous population culminated with Dakar being granted similar rights in 1887, thereby solidifying the comprehensive incorporation of the four communes of Senegal into the legal and administrative fold of the French colonial system.

The distinctiveness of the four communes of Senegal, in terms of recognizing indigenous rights and citizenship privileges, underscores the strategic significance of these locations as experimental hubs for the practical implementation and assessment of the assimilation policy within the broader context of French West Africa. This exceptional status accentuates the nuanced evolution of colonial governance and the complex interplay of power dynamics that characterized the intricate relationship between the French colonial administration and the indigenous African populations within these pioneering communes. The institutionalization of the assimilation policy within the socio-political fabric of the four communes in Senegal brought about a distinct categorization of the African inhabitants within these regions, commonly referred to as "Originaires." This distinct group of Originaires enjoyed the full legal status of French citizens, effectively setting them apart from other African populations residing within the broader French colonial territories. This demarcation marked a significant departure from the prevailing colonial norms, underscoring the unique status and privileges accorded to the inhabitants of the four communes due to the assimilation policy's implementation.

In stark contrast, other African populations within the French colonial domains were designated subjects of the Empire, subject to governance under the colonial penal code. This demarcation accentuated the differential treatment and legal categorization of various African communities within the broader colonial context, reflecting the intricate layers of hierarchical stratification and the uneven application of colonial policies prevalent within the French colonial administration. The contrasting legal statuses of the Originaires and the remaining African subjects within the French colonies epitomize the multifaceted nature of the assimilation policy and its nuanced implications for the social and political dynamics within the colonial framework. This distinction underscored the complexity of the assimilationist approach, highlighting its potential for fostering a sense of inclusion and its capacity to perpetuate disparities and hierarchical divisions within the colonial society. As such, this distinctive categorization of the African populace within

the French colonial territories reflects the intricate interplay of power dynamics and the multifaceted socio-political ramifications that characterized the implementation of the assimilation policy in the Senegalese communes.

The conferred literacy in the French language, coupled with a comprehensive understanding of French history and customs, allowed the Originaires to pursue careers within administrative institutions and actively engage in the political and social spheres of the colonial community. This emphasis on education and cultural assimilation underscored the French colonial administration's efforts to cultivate a cohort of African elites capable of effectively participating in the governance and management of the colony. Nonetheless, despite the ostensibly progressive provisions granted to the Originaires, their practical exercise of rights was often circumscribed by various limitations inherent within the colonial system.

These limitations manifested prominently in the sphere of political representation, which over the years remained largely dominated by the French colonists, thereby impeding the equitable participation of the Originaires in the colony's political life. This disparity was particularly evident in the composition of the political representation in the esteemed French National Assembly, where the absence of African representation underscored the persisting asymmetries within the colonial power structure. Notably, the groundbreaking political achievements of certain exceptional individuals within the African Originaire community were significant milestones in the gradual expansion of political rights and representation. Galandou Diouf's election as a legislator councillor in Rufisque in 1909 marked a seminal moment in African political participation within the French colonial context, laying the groundwork for subsequent advancements in the struggle for political inclusion. In 1914, the historic breakthrough was further solidified with the election of Blaise Diagne as the first African Originaire to secure a seat in the French National Assembly, symbolic of the persistent efforts to dismantle the barriers to political representation and advocate for the rights of the African populace within the colonial framework. It was not until 1946, with the ascension of Amadou Lamin Gueye as the Senegal representative to the National Assembly in France, that all African subjects attained full voting rights, consequently achieving a significant milestone in the quest for political equality and the realization of the egalitarian principles advocated by the assimilation policy.

3.5. Features of Assimilation Policy in French West Africa

Features of the Assimilation Policy in French West Africa encompassed various socio-political characteristics that delineated the complex dynamics of colonial governance and cultural assimilation within the region. These features underscored the intricate interplay between colonial power structures, cultural hegemony, and the stratification of social hierarchies that permeated the French colonial framework in West Africa:

1. **Division in classes of people:** The implementation of the assimilation policy precipitated a pronounced categorization of social statuses within the French West African colony. Notably, the designation of "Originaires" conferred a superior social standing upon a select group of Africans, distinguishing them as more privileged in comparison to other African populations, who were relegated to the status of "subjects of the Empire." Citizenship concessions were exclusively reserved for the Originaires, emphasizing the differential treatment and privileges granted to specific segments of the African populace. Additionally, the recognition of Mullatos, individuals of mixed African and French heritage, as French citizens underscored the intricate nuances of racial classification within the colonial social hierarchy, perpetuating a system of preferential treatment based on racial heritage and parentage (Crowder, 2023).
2. **Restricted education:** Education was selectively limited, primarily confined to the designated communes, thereby creating disparities in educational access and opportunities between various segments of the colonial society. The restriction of education underscored the deliberate efforts by the colonial authorities to control and shape the intellectual development of the indigenous populace, reinforcing the hierarchical structure and consolidating the French cultural hegemony within the colonial educational framework (Ricart-Huguet, 2021).
3. **Marginalization of traditional rulers:** The assimilation policy marginalized the significance of traditional rulers within the local administration, marking a pivotal shift towards implementing direct rule mechanisms. This deliberate marginalization of traditional authorities served to weaken indigenous governance structures, reinforcing the centralized control and administrative authority vested in the French colonial apparatus, thereby underscoring the pervasive nature of colonial domination within the socio-political landscape of French West Africa.
4. **Mission Civilisatrice:** The assimilation policy was underscored by the overarching ideology of "Mission Civilisatrice" or the mission of civilization, epitomizing the paternalistic approach adopted by the French government. This ideological framework propagated the belief in the French responsibility to enlighten and civilize the African populace according to the standards and values espoused by the French cultural paradigm. Jules Ferry's espousal of this concept underscored the inherent paternalism and cultural imperialism intrinsic to the assimilation policy, framing the colonial endeavor as a civilizing mission aimed at instilling French cultural norms and values within the African colonial subjects.

These multifaceted features of the assimilation policy in French West Africa illuminate the complex interplay of power dynamics, racial hierarchies, and cultural hegemony that shaped the trajectory of colonial governance and cultural assimilation within the region, underscoring the enduring legacies of colonialism in shaping contemporary social and political structures.

3.6. Aspects of the Policy of Assimilation Introduced in French West Africa

Political Assimilation: The policy of political assimilation introduced in French West Africa represented a strategic maneuver by the French colonial administration to assert comprehensive control over the administrative and political landscape of the region. Under the centralized federation of French West Africa, governance and legislation were meticulously orchestrated from the corridors of power in France, consolidating the overarching authority of the French government over the colonial territories. The legislative framework, carefully crafted in the heart of the colonial metropole, epitomized the entrenchment of a centralized legislative control mechanism that reinforced the colonial hegemony and perpetuated a system of governance dictated by French legal norms and administrative regulations. The appointment of key administrative figures, ranging from the colonial minister and the governor-general to the lieutenant governors, commandants du cercle, and chefs du subdivisions, exemplified the deliberate efforts by the French government to ensure the effective implementation and enforcement of colonial policies, simultaneously facilitating the unchecked exploitation of the region's abundant resources. This centralized administrative structure not only facilitated the systematic extraction of valuable resources from the colonies but also consolidated the French government's firm grip on the political and economic affairs of the region, effectively subjugating the indigenous African populations to the dictates of the colonial authorities.

Furthermore, the centralized legislative control exerted by the French authorities was paralleled by a systematic erosion of the traditional authority held by local chiefs and indigenous rulers. This erosion of local political power, along with the undermining of traditional institutions, underscored the concerted efforts by the French colonial administration to dismantle the existing power structures and assert the supremacy of the colonial apparatus. Consequently, the policy of political assimilation in French West Africa not only solidified the colonial grip on the region's political machinery but also facilitated the strategic suppression of indigenous political autonomy and authority, ultimately perpetuating a system of governance characterized by hierarchical dominance and centralized control.

Economic Assimilation: The policy of economic assimilation within the framework of French colonial rule in West Africa manifested through a distinct set of measures and practices that underscored the prioritization of French economic interests within the colonial territories. This economic dimension of the assimilation policy served as a crucial mechanism for systematically exploiting the colonies' natural resources, primarily to bolster the economic competitiveness of France on the global stage. As such, the colonies were primarily established as resource-generating hubs, supplying raw materials essential for the sustenance and growth of French industries. The strategic focus on harnessing natural resources to serve French economic interests was accompanied by the implementation of colonial laws that facilitated the French government's unimpeded control and regulation of economic and financial policies within the colonies. This regulatory framework, meticulously devised to cater to the colonial metropole's economic priorities, underscored the French authorities' pervasive influence in dictating and shaping the economic trajectory of the colonies, reinforcing the hierarchical economic relationship between the colonies and the French homeland.

Moreover, the introduction of the Franc as the standardized currency in the colonies, replacing indigenous trading methods such as cowry shells, exemplified the deliberate efforts by the French colonial administration to establish a uniform economic system that aligned with French financial norms and practices. This monetary standardization not only facilitated the streamlining of economic transactions but also reinforced the economic subordination of the colonies to the financial imperatives of the French colonial apparatus. In terms of infrastructure development, the construction of vital transportation and logistical networks primarily ensured the efficient transportation of resources to the ports, enabling their smooth exportation to the French homeland. Consequently, while facilitating the extraction and export of resources, the built infrastructure often failed to cater to the developmental needs and aspirations of the local African population, reflecting the exploitative nature of the colonial economic relationship. Despite the transformation of many African countries into sovereign states, the lingering vestiges of the economic assimilation policy continue to shape the contemporary economic dynamics and relationships between former colonies and their erstwhile colonizers, underscoring the enduring legacies of colonialism within the global economic landscape.

Cultural and Social Assimilation: The facet of cultural and social assimilation within the French colonial framework in West Africa represented a concerted effort to supplant indigenous cultural practices and traditions with the ideals and norms of French civilization, thereby fostering the erasure of African cultural heritage and the imposition of Western cultural paradigms. This assimilationist approach operated on the premise that the African way of life was inherently inferior and uncivilized, necessitating the wholesale adoption of French cultural values and societal norms as the benchmark for societal progress and development. Under the auspices of the cultural assimilation policy, the indigenous population was systematically coerced into abandoning their traditional cultural practices and embracing the French way of life, perpetuating a process of cultural erasure and subjugation. This cultural imposition not only

undermined the rich tapestry of African cultural heritage but also reinforced the cultural hegemony of the French colonial apparatus, perpetuating a system of cultural dominance that relegated indigenous traditions and practices to the periphery of societal consciousness.

In the social realm, the policy of cultural assimilation translated into the enforcement of coercive labor practices, often without commensurate monetary compensation, thereby perpetuating a system of exploitative labor relations that further marginalized and disenfranchised the indigenous population. The imposition of forced labor not only underscored the systematic subjugation of the African populace but also underscored the exploitative nature of the colonial social hierarchy, reinforcing the pervasive power differentials that underpinned the colonial relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. Consequently, the cultural and social assimilation policies within the French colonial context not only facilitated the erosion of indigenous cultural practices and societal norms but also perpetuated a system of exploitative labor practices that systematically disenfranchised and marginalized the indigenous African population. The enduring legacies of these assimilationist policies continue to reverberate within the contemporary socio-cultural dynamics of the region, underscoring the complex interplay of power dynamics and cultural imperialism that characterized the French colonial enterprise in West Africa.

3.7. Policy of Association in French West Africa

The introduction of the Policy of Association within the French colonial framework in West Africa marked a significant departure from the assimilationist approach, reflecting a paradigm shift towards a more collaborative and inclusive model of governance that acknowledged the significance of indigenous cultural traditions and institutions. The Association policy, conceived as a response to the challenges and limitations inherent within the assimilation policy, epitomized the French government's recognition of the need for a more equitable and mutually beneficial relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Contrary to the assimilation policy, which sought to enforce a rigid cultural and social conformity framework, the Association policy emphasized the importance of fostering a reciprocal and cooperative partnership between the African colonies and the metropolis. This shift in approach acknowledged the indigenous population's distinct cultural identity and societal structures, underscoring the imperative of respecting and preserving African cultural heritage and institutions within the colonial governance framework.

Central to the Association policy was the notion of cooperation and collaboration, recognizing that the partnership between the French authorities and the indigenous institutions would yield a more sustainable and harmonious relationship, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and ownership in the governance of the colonies. This collaborative approach was perceived as more culturally sensitive and pragmatic, as it was thought to be more cost-effective and less susceptible to local resistance and dissent. The Policy of Association, therefore, represented a fundamental reorientation in the French colonial strategy, reflecting a more nuanced and inclusive approach to governance that sought to bridge the cultural divide and foster a more harmonious relationship between the colonial authorities and the indigenous African populations (Fafunwa & Aisiku, 2022). This policy shift underscored the French government's acknowledgment of the inherent value of African cultural heritage and the need for a more holistic and collaborative approach to colonial governance that prioritized mutual respect and cooperation.

The implementation of the Association policy in French West Africa, despite its ostensibly collaborative and inclusive undertones, has garnered significant criticism from scholars who argue that, in practice, it closely mirrored the fundamental principles and mechanisms of the assimilation policy. This critical perspective highlights the enduring legacy of colonial exploitation and oppression embedded within the fabric of the French colonial enterprise, emphasizing the perpetuation of power differentials and the systematic marginalization of the indigenous African populations within the colonial territories. As underscored by various scholars, the nuanced interplay between the assimilation and association policies reflects the complexities and contradictions inherent within the French colonial governance framework. While the Association policy purported to acknowledge and respect African cultural traditions and institutions, it operated within a broader context of colonial dominance and subjugation, perpetuating a system of hierarchical power dynamics that favored the colonial authorities at the expense of the indigenous populace. The strategic implementation of auxiliary instruments within the Association policy served as a means to consolidate and perpetuate French control, limiting the active participation of Africans in the policymaking process and effectively undermining their agency and autonomy within the colonial governance structure. The division of African communities into distinct cantons or districts, overseen by compliant chiefs who aligned with the interests of the colonial administration, underscored the strategic manipulation of indigenous power structures to reinforce colonial dominance and control.

Furthermore, the deliberate exclusion of indigenous rulers who resisted colonial domination from the administrative apparatus epitomized the systematic marginalization of voices that challenged the status quo, perpetuating a culture of subservience and compliance within the colonial governance framework. The gradual erosion of African customary law and the establishment of advisory councils designed to provide an illusion of inclusion further underscored the intricacies of power dynamics and cultural imperialism that shaped the colonial governance structure, ultimately perpetuating a system of governance that prioritized the interests of the colonizers over the rights and autonomy of the indigenous

African populations. The maintenance of a rigid distinction between French citizens and colonial subjects within the legal framework of the French colonial administration in West Africa was characterized by the deliberate segregation of legal codes, where the privileges and protections afforded by the French legal system were exclusively reserved for white settlers and assimilated Africans. Concurrently, millions of unassimilated Africans were relegated to the confines of the indigene system, which, in theory, was purported to uphold African customary law within the realm of civil and criminal justice administration. In practice, however, the indigene system operated as an extension of the colonial apparatus, functioning by the vested interests of the French government and their indigenous collaborators. This system, ostensibly established to uphold African legal traditions and customs, was systematically manipulated to serve the colonial agenda, perpetuating a culture of subjugation and exploitation that reinforced the subordinate status of the indigenous African populace within the colonial legal framework (Konate, 2022).

The operation of the indigene system not only facilitated the arbitrary exercise of power by colonial officers, who retained the authority to incarcerate African subjects without due process or fair trial, but also perpetuated a system of coercive labor practices that effectively coerced Africans into volunteering for unpaid labor within the civil service. The imposition of this labor requirement underscored the exploitative nature of the colonial relationship, further disenfranchising the indigenous population and perpetuating a system of economic subjugation that reinforced the hierarchical power dynamics within the colonial framework. Consequently, the segregation of legal codes and the systematic subjugation of the indigenous population within the indigene system underscored the enduring legacy of colonial oppression and exploitation, underscoring the complex interplay of power dynamics, racial hierarchies, and the systematic erosion of indigenous rights and autonomy within the French colonial legal framework in West Africa (Chamelot, 2022). Apart from Senegal, the educational advancement across French West Africa was characterized by a sluggish pace of progress, largely attributable to the predominant Muslim population in the West African hinterland and their apparent reluctance to engage with Christian missionary schools (Jacob, 2020). Compounded by the exclusive nature of the colonial school system and the imposition of French as the sole language of instruction, the educational landscape remained fundamentally detached from the cultural and linguistic realities of the indigenous African population. The curriculum, mirroring that of France, failed to accommodate the diverse needs and cultural aspirations of the African populace, thus perpetuating a system of educational alienation and cultural dissonance within the colonial educational framework.

The Post-World War II era witnessed the burgeoning emergence of nationalist movements across Africa, prompting the French government to recalibrate its approach toward its colonies, particularly in West Africa (Grier, 1999). In response to the growing momentum of nationalist sentiment and the demand for increased autonomy and self-determination, the French authorities adopted a more conciliatory stance, fostering a policy environment that recognized the imperative of safeguarding the welfare and interests of the colonial subjects. This shift in policy orientation facilitated the granting of certain fundamental rights, such as freedom of assembly and the formation of political associations, which served as pivotal concessions designed to appease the growing demands for political participation and self-governance within the colonial territories. While representing a marked departure from the earlier repressive colonial policies, these measures reflected the French government's acknowledgment of the shifting dynamics of colonial governance and the need to accommodate the evolving aspirations and demands of the African populace within the broader framework of the colonial enterprise.

3.8. Enduring Legacies of French Colonial Rule on West Africa.

The impact of French colonial rule on West Africa is a testament to the enduring legacies that continue to shape the region. One of the most conspicuous effects is adopting the French language as the Lingua Franca in many of France's former colonies. This linguistic legacy permeates various aspects of society, with profound implications for the educational sector. In the realm of education, the imprint of colonialism persists. The French language, introduced through colonial imposition, remains dominant in academic institutions. Educational systems in these former colonies operate primarily in French, influencing curriculum design, and academic discourse and ultimately shaping the opportunities available to Francophone West Africans. The enduring linguistic legacy serves as a constant reminder of the historical underpinnings of the region's educational framework. However, the impact extends beyond language and education, encompassing the region's social fabric.

Colonial boundaries, arbitrarily drawn by the French, have led to the dislocation of African communities that once shared a common history. The disproportionate division of ethnic groups such as the Yoruba, Baruba, Hausa, Akan, Kru, and Fulani across different sovereign countries has resulted in enduring social and cultural challenges. This fragmentation has given rise to issues of cultural dissonance, identity struggles, and occasional inter-state tensions, highlighting the deep-rooted consequences of colonial interventions. Economically, the former French colonies in West Africa still bear the marks of their colonial past. The adoption of the West African CFA currency, pegged to the Euro, underscores the ongoing economic ties between these nations and their former colonial power (Koddenbrock & Sylla, 2019). Economic activities within these countries continue to depend heavily on France, shaping trade dynamics,

investment patterns, and financial policies. Moreover, the presence of French military officers in some of these former colonies reinforces the geopolitical influence wielded by France in the region.

4. Conclusions

The French colonial policies implemented in West Africa were primarily designed to serve the interests of the French colonial government, perpetuating a system of exploitation and cultural subjugation that entrenched a hierarchical power dynamic between the colonizers and the colonized. This colonial enterprise engendered a stratified social structure within the local population, perpetuating disparities and inequalities that endure to this day. The imposition of the French language and cultural norms fostered a process of cultural assimilation that sought to supplant indigenous traditions and values with the ideals of French civilization, further marginalizing the rich tapestry of African cultural heritage. Also, the economic implications of the colonial policies continue to reverberate within the contemporary landscape of the former colonies, perpetuating a system of economic subordination that subverts the autonomy and sovereignty of these independent states. Despite attaining sovereign status, these former colonies remain trapped within the neocolonial framework, reflecting the enduring legacy of the French colonial enterprise in West Africa. The far-reaching consequences of the French colonial policies underscore the enduring legacies of colonialism, emphasizing the imperative of addressing historical injustices and fostering a more equitable and inclusive framework for postcolonial development and cooperation. It is essential to recognize and reconcile the profound impact of colonialism on the socio-political and economic dynamics of the region, fostering a collective commitment to fostering sustainable development and promoting the preservation of cultural diversity within the framework of mutual respect and cooperation.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, T.B.H.; methodology, T.B.H.; validation, T.B.H.; formal analysis, T.B.H.; investigation, T.B.H.; resources, T.B.H.; writing—original draft preparation, T.B.H.; writing—review and editing, T.B.H.; project administration, T.B.H.; funding acquisition, T.B.H. An author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank Covenant University, Nigeria for supporting this research and publication. The authors would also like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Awingsong, M. A. (2015). The colonial testament: An economic re-interpretation of Europe's motives for colonizing Africa. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(1), 8-14.
- Barbour, K. M. (2023). A Geographical Analysis of Boundaries in Inter-Tropical Africa 1. In *Essays on African population* (pp. 303-324). Routledge.
- Betts, R. (1960). *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory 1890-1914*. New York, Columbia University press.
- Brooks, G. E. (1975). Peanuts and colonialism; consequences of the commercialization of peanuts in West Africa, 1830-70. *The Journal of African History*, 16(1), 29 -54.
- Chamelot, Fabienne. "The politics of French colonial archives. Mainland France, French West Africa and the Indochinese Union." PhD diss., University of Portsmouth, 2022.
- Crowder, M. (2023). *Senegal: a study of French assimilation policy*. Taylor & Francis.
- Grier, R. M. (1999). Colonial legacies and economic growth. *Public choice*, 98(3-4), 317-335.
- Fafunwa, A. B., & Aisiku, J. U. (Eds.). (2022). *Education in Africa: A comparative survey*. Taylor & Francis.
- Harris, N. D. (1911). French colonial expansion in West Africa, the Sudan, and the Sahara. *The American Political Science Review*, 5(3), 353-373.
- Hopkins, A.G. (1970). The creation of a colonial monetary system: the origins of West African currency board. *African Historical Studies*, 3(1), 101-132.
- Jacob, C. (2020). *Schools and Colonialism In French West Africa-Contesting French West Africa: Battles over Schools and the Colonial Order, 1900–1950*. By Harry Gamble. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. Pp. 378. \$50.00, hardcover (ISBN: 978-0-8032-9549-0). *The Journal of African History*, 61(2), 291-292.

- Koddenbrock, K., & Sylla, N. S. (2019). Towards a political economy of monetary dependency: The case of the CFA franc in West Africa (No. 19/2). MaxPo discussion paper.
- Knight, M. M. (1933). French colonial policy- the decline of association. *The Journal of Modern History*, 5(2), 208-224.
- Konaté, D. (2022). Imprisonment and Citizenship in Senegal, 1917–1946: The Case of the Originaires. *Punishment & Society*, 24(5), 790-806.
- Lewis, M. D. (1962). One hundred million Frenchmen: the assimilation theory in French colonial policy. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 4(2), 129-153.
- Müller-Crepon, C. (2020). Continuity or change? (In) direct rule in British and French colonial Africa. *International Organization*, 74(4), 707-741.
- Osborn, E. L. (2017). 'Circle of iron': African colonial employees and the interpretation of colonial rule in French West Africa. In *The Rise and Fall of Modern Empires, Volume I* (pp. 273-294). Routledge.
- Ricart-Huguet, J. (2021). Colonial education, political elites, and regional political inequality in Africa. *Comparative Political Studies*, 54(14), 2546-2580.
- Rush, A. S. (2002). Imperial Identity in Colonial Minds: Harold Moody and the League of Coloured Peoples, 1931–50. *Twentieth Century British History*, 13(4), 356-383.
- Sabatier, P. R. (1978). Elite education in French West Africa: The era of limits, 1903-1945. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 11(2), 247-266.
- Saul, M. (2004). Money in colonial transition: cowries and francs in West Africa. *American Anthropologist*, 106(1), 71-84