

2014

## A Mission to What?: Education in Afrique Occidentale Française, 1903-1945

Sean Gravelle  
*Xavier University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/xjur>

---

### Recommended Citation

Gravelle, Sean (2014) "A Mission to What?: Education in Afrique Occidentale Française, 1903-1945," *Xavier Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/xjur/vol2/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Exhibit. It has been accepted for inclusion in Xavier Journal of Undergraduate Research by an authorized editor of Exhibit. For more information, please contact [exhibit@xavier.edu](mailto:exhibit@xavier.edu).

# A Mission to What?: Education in *Afrique Occidentale Française*, 1903-1945

Sean Gravelle

Nous taillons dans le neuf, comme on dit; nous connaissons mal encore cette rude étoffe qu'on nous confie, et nos ciseaux, ne craignons pas de l'avouer, hésitent souvent dans nos mains. Nous élaborons petit à petit une pédagogie indigène...et personne de vous n'oserait assurément soutenir que nous voyons en toute netteté, non seulement les moyens, mais le but même de notre enseignement.

--Georges Hardy, from the introduction to the inaugural issue of the Bulletin de l'Enseignement de l'Afrique Occidentale Française, January 1913.

**T**he education system which France established for her colonies in West Africa has long been the subject of interested study by historians. French colonial education policy was rooted in abstract philosophical notions and political ideologies that go to the root of her colonial enterprise. Historians have thoroughly explored the issue of education in the context of assimilation, association, the *mission civilisatrice*, the *mise en valeur*, and the *politique des races*, and shown how the resultant contradictions often caused trouble for the French. However, these questions have not always been central to their research, but rather addressed tangentially to other subjects, and the ultimate root of these contradictions has yet to be explored fully. This paper attempts to move in the direction of such an exploration by showing how these contradictions were inherent to France's education policy as the French defined it in relation to their colonial mission, and thus led necessarily to the various tensions which characterized the colonial experience. It is important, therefore, to begin with a thorough overview of the philosophy which underpinned French colonialism.

French Colonial Ideology: An Overview

French colonial ideology was associated with the concept of "assimilation"—that is, the principle whereby conquered lands were administered as an integral part of the French Republic, and the indigenous inhabitants were

encouraged and given the opportunity to completely transform themselves into Frenchmen and live as equal citizens of the Republic. This system is rooted in French Enlightenment philosophy, which emphasized the universality of human nature in the long-standing French tendency to centralize power and in France's perennial conviction of the superiority of her civilization. In the early days, when the French owned little beyond a few trading posts on the Senegal River and its environs, reality tended to conform to this vision. After the conquests of the late nineteenth century, however, the French turned away from the doctrine of pure assimilationism, both because of its practical difficulty in such a vast area as well as growing acceptance of pseudoscientific racism at the time.

Nonetheless, the spirit of assimilation lived on throughout the nineteenth century. In 1895, the French created a civilian government for their newly conquered territories, the Federation of French West Africa (*L'Afrique Occidentale Française*—AOF), and from its foundation, it functioned under the officially sanctioned ideology of the *mission civilisatrice*—France's mission to bring civilization to the purportedly savage African natives.<sup>1</sup> Rather than uplifting Africans by assimilating them directly into French society and culture, the AOF was to guide them on the natural course of evolution within their own cultures. This was accomplished through a variety of means, including the *mise en valeur* (sometimes, especially after 1924, translated as “rational development”) of the colonies, bringing scientific, technological, and economic progress, political changes to bring African society more or less gradually into conformity with French norms, and education both to further the *mise en valeur* and to inculcate French values in Africans from childhood.<sup>2</sup>

The details of the *mission civilisatrice* were hardly static. Before the First World War, although colonial policy called for Africans to progress within their own cultures, there was a marked emphasis on eliminating all African institutions which directly conflicted with the ideals of French civilization. In particular, the colonial governments fought a bitter struggle to minimize the power of the African chiefs, whose authority they had previously attempted to channel for their own purposes during the period of conquest. To the French, traditional rulers represented a form of “feudal” power which must be stamped out in order for African society to progress. This policy, called the *politique des races*, was outlined by a circular issued by Governor General William Ponty in 1909.<sup>3</sup>

A shift occurred around the time of the First World War, after which French officials began to speak more and more of “associationism” as an antidote

---

<sup>1</sup> Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-119.

to those past policies which they viewed as overly assimilationist. Rather than seeking to eliminate indigenous African authorities, they aimed to “associate with them,” involving not only chiefs, but also *évolués*—those few Africans who had been educated and actually assimilated as “black Frenchmen”—in the decision-making process so that they would first adopt French attitudes, and then pass them on to their subjects and compatriots. This change grew out of a period when metropolitan France was not only growing more conservative and appreciative of traditional authority structures, but also developing a real interest in the cultures of Africa.<sup>4</sup> It was also believed that this new policy was more benevolent and democratic by granting Africans more of a voice in their affairs and a greater ability to retain their own cultural institutions—all while still “evolving” toward the French ideal, of course.<sup>5</sup>

In reality, associationism had more complex motives and was not always as benevolent as the French claimed. The new advisory councils on which the chiefs and *évolués* sat generally had no real power, and efforts to establish true elective assemblies were rejected because the Africans were not considered ready for them. Furthermore, the concept of associating with native authorities, rather than spreading civilization to everyone, translated effectively to a dilution of the *mission civilisatrice*. Associationism was not born out of a greater respect for native culture or out of a desire to grant Africans more equality with the French. Rather, it was largely motivated by the desire of the French to consolidate their power by ruling in a more practical and efficient manner. Associationism was a means both to further the economic exploitation of the colonies and to maintain stability in the aftermath of the First World War.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, broadly speaking, the tension inherent in French colonialism can be seen as resulting from the contradiction between their two aims of bringing French civilization to the Africans and of maintaining an unequal relationship in order to effectively rule over them. We may now begin to consider how these tensions relate to education.

---

<sup>4</sup> It was only recently—1899—that the École Coloniale first began offering courses in African languages, and the French scholar of Africa, Maurice Delafosse (appointed director of political affairs by François-Joseph Clozel, Ponty’s successor as Governor General), was heavily associated with the political changes.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 174-211.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; Anne Summer and R.W. Johnson, “World War I Conscription and Social Change in Guinea,” *Journal of African History* 19, no. 1 (Jan. 1978): 25-38. The postwar era saw revolts by veterans whose promises from the French had not been fulfilled and demands by the *évolués* for greater equality and self-determination. Associationism aimed to reign in these dangerous forces by limiting the power available to chiefs and *évolués*. Furthermore, they hoped that the greater efficiency gained from delegating more power to the local chiefs would aid the *mise en valeur* of the colonies; that is to say, their economic exploitation.

The Education System of AOF: Description and Historiography

Throughout the colonial era, education remained central to the *mission civilisatrice*: colonial officials saw it as one of their primary tools to develop the Africans to fit the pattern of Europeans. One of the most well-known, and eloquent, exponents of this view was Georges Hardy, the *Inspecteur de l'enseignement de l'AOF* (inspector of education) appointed by Ponty in 1912. Ponty took a notable interest in education as part of colonial policy, and pursued it more vigorously than his predecessors. Hardy, an *agregé* (certified secondary and postsecondary instructor) in history, both spearheaded Ponty's education program and wrote in detail about education policy and philosophy, most notably in his book *Une Conquête Morale: L'Enseignement en AOF*. The title (*A Moral Conquest*) is revealing: according to Hardy, while the military conquest has been completed, the African people must still be won over in another way:

To transform the primitive peoples of our colonies, to render them, as much as possible, devoted to our cause and useful to our enterprises, we have but a limited number of means at our disposal, of which the surest is to take the native from childhood, to ensure that he diligently associates with us and puts up with our intellectual and moral habits for several successive years; in a word, to open our schools to him, where his mind will be shaped by our intentions.<sup>7</sup>

Before examining the ideology of colonial education policy in French West Africa in more detail, however, it is necessary to present a brief overview of the development of the colonial system of education and its basic characteristics. Before the era of expansion and the foundation of AOF, French education in Senegal followed a purely assimilationist pattern. In those early years, there were only a handful of mission schools in the small colony, operated by the *Frères de Ploërmel*. They primarily served Europeans and Christian blacks and *métis* of the Four Communes, and thus taught a curriculum essentially identical to that of schools in France. This provided a route for Africans to completely assimilate into French culture, becoming the *assimilés* or *évolués*.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Georges Hardy, *Une Conquête Morale: L'Enseignement en AOF* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2005), 6-7. (N.B. This is a reprint; the original was published in 1917.) Original text: « Pour transformer les peuples primitifs de nos colonies, pour les rendre le plus possible dévoués à notre cause et utiles à nos entreprises, nous n'avons à notre disposition qu'un nombre très limité de moyens, et le moyen le plus sûr, c'est de prendre l'indigène dès l'enfance, d'obtenir de lui qu'il nous fréquente assidûment et qu'il subisse nos habitudes intellectuelles et morales pendant plusieurs années de suite; en un mot, de lui ouvrir des écoles où son esprit se forme à nos intentions. » (All translations in this paper are by the author, unless otherwise noted.) For a thorough analysis of this particular text as it relates to the *mission civilisatrice*, see Pat Little, "Ambiguities of the 'Mission Civilisatrice' in Georges Hardy's *Une Conquête Morale: l'Enseignement en A.O.F.*," *Essays in French Literature* 41 (Nov. 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Denise Bouche, "Autrefois, notre pays s'appelait la Gaule...: Remarques sur l'adaptation de l'enseignement au Sénégal de 1817 à 1960," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 8, no. 29 (1968): 112-13;

As France dramatically widened its territorial reach at the end of the nineteenth century, however, this system became the exception, rather than the rule. In 1903, eight years after the creation of AOF, Governor-General Roume began the process of extending education throughout France's expansive newly-conquered territory. His decree of November 24 of that year, largely written by Lieutenant-Governor Camille Guy of Senegal (who, incidentally, was an *agregé* in history like Hardy), set up a state-run school system, supplanting the mission schools. This new system, which lasted until reforms after the Second World War, was profoundly different from its metropolitan equivalent and from its African predecessors, reflecting the change from pure assimilation to the reformulated *mission civilisatrice* described above.<sup>9</sup> It had two primary stated goals: first, to provide a rudimentary education to the mass of Africans, and second, to provide a slightly higher level of instruction to a small, carefully selected cadre of elites who would assist the French in colonial administration.<sup>10</sup>

The French succeeded far more at the latter goal than at the former: while they were able to train Africans to fill the necessary administrative posts, few Africans ever saw the inside of a classroom. Notably, primary enrollment in AOF was low even compared to other (e.g., UK) African colonies, at 0.5% of the total population (figures for the total school age population were not known).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, even for those who did have such an opportunity, the education they received was at best a diluted and truncated form of the French original. Instruction usually terminated after a few years and encompassed little beyond basic literacy in French, elementary arithmetic, and some practical skills.<sup>12</sup> Even the lucky few destined to be "elites" could only obtain, at best, a "post-primary" education geared mainly toward training for particular low-level colonial positions and lacking the equivalent of a French diploma.<sup>13</sup>

---

Tony Chafer, "Teaching Africans to Be French? France's 'Civilising Mission' and the Establishment of a Public Education System in French West Africa, 1903-30," *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale di Studi e Documentazione dell'Institut Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 56, no. 2 (2001): 192-93.

<sup>9</sup> Chafer, "Teaching Africans to Be French," 193-94.

<sup>10</sup> Peggy R. Sabatier, "'Elite' Education in French West Africa: The Era of Limits, 1903-1945," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 11, no. 2 (1978): 247.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 255-56.

<sup>12</sup> Remi P. Clignet and Philip J. Foster, "French and British Colonial Education in Africa," *Comparative Education Review* 8, no. 2 (Oct. 1964): 193.

<sup>13</sup> Bouche, "Autrefois, notre pays s'appelait la Gaule," 116; Sabatier, "Era of Limits," 250-51 ; Chafer, "Teaching Africans to Be French," 192-93. *Lycées* operated in St. Louis and Dakar which offered degrees equivalent to the *baccalauréat*, but these were the exception. For this reason, the *évolués* of the Four Communes resisted the changes heavily.

This intellectual attenuation was known as “adaptive education,” where “adaptation” consisted less of accommodation to African cultures out of respect for them and more of a watering down of the curriculum. Though seeking to inculcate at least something of their worldview in their students, the French wished to keep them at a lower level. The purpose of education was explicitly to increase colonial productivity (the *mise en valeur*): excessively abstract learning would serve no useful purpose. In fact, French officials were continuously worried that their schools would create overly pretentious *déclassés* and *déracinés*—Africans detached from their roots and finding a home neither in French nor indigenous society. The administration guarded against this by keeping the academic level low, and indeed even decreasing it in several reforms during the interwar period.<sup>14</sup> Thus, education in some respects preceded other areas of government policy in distancing itself from a supposed overemphasis on assimilation.

Yet at its core, colonial education policy, like the *mission civilisatrice*, remained at least partially assimilationist, in that it attempted to inculcate something of French thought in its students. Crucially, education at all levels was conducted in French (in contrast with the British who used the native vernacular, at least early on).<sup>15</sup> While this was largely due to the logistical nightmare of developing instruction in the multitude of languages native to West Africa, some also justified it on the basis that it would better transmit the ideas of the superior French civilization which they hoped so much to spread.<sup>16</sup> This was not empty rhetoric, though: students at the École William Ponty, the most elite school in AOF (which mainly trained teachers) absorbed French culture in no small amount. They developed a proud common identity and a new worldview, and began to see themselves as special intermediaries between the French and the Africans.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, these same “*Pontins*” constituted a large part of the ruling class of the newly independent West African states and often pursued policies of continued cooperation with their former colonial power.<sup>18</sup> Even at the lower levels of education, the French hoped to mold the masses to their liking, for example, by teaching them work ethic, hygiene, and loyalty to France.<sup>19</sup> By spreading such

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.: 196-98; 206-07; Sabatier, “Era of Limits,” 255-57, 61.

<sup>15</sup> Clignet and Foster, “French and British Colonial Education in Africa.”

<sup>16</sup> Hardy, *Une Conquête Morale*, 145-54.

<sup>17</sup> Sabatier, “Era of Limits,” 265; Chafer, “Teaching Africans to Be French,” 203; Tony Chafer, “Education and Political Socialisation of a National-Colonial Political Elite in French West Africa, 1936-47,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 35 no. 3 (Sept. 2007): 440-43.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.: 437-40.

<sup>19</sup> Chafer, “Teaching Africans to Be French,” 196-97.

French knowledge, ideas, and attitudes, education played a concrete and central role in the *mission civilisatrice*.

Thus, education in AOF sought to bring French civilization to the native peoples, yet did not do so in order that Africans be equal partners with the French, but rather that they be better able to serve the colonial interests. Because of this, it embodies the fundamental contradictions of the *mission civilisatrice*. Much of the research in colonial education in AOF therefore attempts to sort out these contradictions. Early authors had the basic task of deconstructing the myth that French policy consisted of pure assimilation.<sup>20</sup> Later historians have followed in that path, but have also gone deeper. Studies by Sabatier<sup>21</sup> and Chafer<sup>22</sup> have given a general outline of the colonial system of education and have shown both how it was “adapted” from the start and how it served French political goals. Conklin, in *A Mission to Civilize*, gives a thorough and enlightening analysis of the *mission civilisatrice*, and in particular fits education into that larger context which explains French colonial education ideology much better than the assimilation-association spectrum.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Little examines the *mission civilisatrice* by focusing in on Hardy’s *Une Conquête Morale*.<sup>24</sup>

Other authors, examining more specific, concrete aspects of education, show how this ideology affected Africans and their interactions with the French. Kelly studied French portrayals of indigenous culture and noted how it was benignly trivialized, arguing that the French portrayed it simplistically in order to prevent the emergence of a native political consciousness.<sup>25</sup> Chafer, in another study, examines the “political socialization” of African graduates of the École Ponty, showing how they absorbed a common mindset from the French.<sup>26</sup> Sabatier studies particular student works from the École Ponty: the *cahiers* (reports in which the students observed and “rationally” analyzed some aspect of their own culture as a kind of capstone project) and student-written and -performed plays. She shows how, while these works were neither free expression

---

<sup>20</sup> Bouche, “Autrefois, notre pays s’appelait la Gaule.”

<sup>21</sup> Sabatier, “Era of Limits.”

<sup>22</sup> Chafer, “Teaching Africans to Be French.”

<sup>23</sup> Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*.

<sup>24</sup> Little, “Ambiguities of the ‘Mission Civilisatrice’.”

<sup>25</sup> Gail P. Kelly, “The Presentation of Indigenous Society in the Schools of French West Africa and Indochina, 1918 to 1938,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 3 (Jul. 1984).

<sup>26</sup> Chafer, “Education and Political Socialisation.”

of African identity nor resistance to French rule, they nonetheless allowed Africans to at least partially learn and appreciate the value of their own cultures.<sup>27</sup>

This paper builds on such past work. Others have already observed that the *mission civilisatrice* was beset by contradictions. In particular, while the French wanted to “civilize” the Africans, they constantly worried that they would go too far and produce dangerous *déracinés* and *déclassés*. This concern is largely what prompted both “adapted education” and “associationism.” I will argue that such tensions were the result of internal contradictions inherent in the use of education as a tool of the *mission civilisatrice*. Any French education would uproot Africans, so colonial officials were doomed to be forever pulling the ground out from under themselves, fighting against a phenomenon caused by their own ideological presuppositions and political policies.

First, revisiting Hardy, a more thorough examination will be made of the relationship between education and colonial ideology. This will show how an intensely abstract and philosophical attitude toward government was reflected in France’s approach to colonial education, and how its contradictions originated. Next, an analysis of texts more directly related to the schooling of Africans will show the concrete reality of this ideology. Investigating what type of education the French provided the Africans, and how the latter received it, will examine both the anticipated and actual effects of education of Africans. Finally, coming full circle, this information will support a reassessment of French beliefs about their colonies.

#### The Ideological Nature of French Colonial Education

The French colonial enterprise was very self-consciously philosophical, and education was no exception. From the establishment of a school system for AOF in 1903 by Governor General Roume, French officials framed the purposes of their education policy in terms of not only their practical goals, but their ideological ones as well. As Conklin observes, “The very decision to make the education of all Africans an objective of French administration in West Africa reflected this [i.e. republican] influence.”<sup>28</sup> In the metropole, the Third Republic used education as a tool in the consolidation of its rule by forming provincial peasants into *citoyens français*. In the colonies, education similarly served the goal of molding Africans into the kind of subject called for by their political philosophy. French schools would provide lay instruction intended to teach the rudiments of French language and thought, spreading civilization as rational French ideas permeated the minds of the natives. Unlike in the metropole, however, creating *citoyens républicains* was not the goal of the French in Africa.

---

<sup>27</sup> Peggy R. Sabatier, “African Culture and Colonial Education: The William Ponty School Cahiers and Theater,” *Journal of African Studies* 7, no. 1 (1980).

<sup>28</sup> Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 75.

Africans were to learn primarily practical skills so that they could work to advance the *mise en valeur* of the colony: their deep intellectual development was not necessary for colonial objectives. Insofar as the Africans were to evolve, it was to occur within their own cultures, not through assimilation into France.<sup>29</sup> Though Roume did not focus heavily on education or outline its philosophy in detail, his initial program planted the seeds for ideological development in the future.

When Governor General Ponty came to office in 1907, he made it clear that education was a key priority for him; under his administration, it became even more entwined in the concept of the *mission civilisatrice*. First, he simply paid more attention to it than his predecessors, reforming the school system, developing a more standard curriculum and set of regulations, and attempting to increase enrollment. Additionally, he elaborated a more comprehensive philosophy of the purpose of education within colonial policy. Education would complement the *politique des races* by eliminating any African ideas or customs which conflicted with European civilization. Notably, he mandated the universal use of French as the language of instruction in the colonial schools, because “unless Africans learned to speak French, such measures as the eradication of ‘feudal’ vestiges and barbaric customs risked being misunderstood, and therefore remain incomplete. Instruction by the French in French, in other words, was the glue that would make all of France’s other civilizing measures stick.”<sup>30</sup> Ponty’s official statements show how he saw education, and French language instruction in particular, as an integral part of the noble mission of the French:

The diffusion of the French language will constitute a particularly flexible link between our subjects and us. Thanks to it, our influence will seep into the masses, penetrate them, and envelop them as a network held together by new affinities....My eyes are not closed to the long-term nature of this task of schooling in AOF. It seems to me that the shining influence of our language is but yet dawning among these races of inferior civilization, but you see the tenacious will with which we expand our efforts.<sup>31</sup>

His views were echoed and expanded by Hardy, who wrote extensively on the education philosophy of AOF. From the first sentence of Hardy’s introduction to

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 75-86.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 130-35.

<sup>31</sup> William Ponty, “Les Questions Scolaires au Conseil de Gouvernement,” *Bulletin de l’Enseignement de l’AOF* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1913) : 20-22. Original : « La diffusion de la langue française constituera un lien particulièrement souple entre nos sujets et nous. Grâce à lui, notre influence s’insinuera dans la masse, la pénétrera et l’enveloppera comme un réseau tenu d’affinités nouvelles...Je ne me dissimule pas que c’est une tâche de longue haleine que celle de l’œuvre scolaire en Afrique occidentale française. Je considère que nous ne sommes encore qu’à l’aube du rayonnement de notre langue parmi ces races de civilisation inférieure, mais vous voyez avec quelle volonté tenace nous multiplions nos efforts. »

*Une Conquête Morale*, it is clear that he takes an intensely abstract and philosophical approach to the entirety of colonialism: “If you asked me, ‘What is a French colony?’ I would gladly respond, ‘It is before all else the geometric place of general ideas.’”<sup>32</sup> He goes on to elaborate:

Fortunately, we have a vocation of colonizers in our blood; otherwise, we would never have suspected so. We hear the opposite affirmed every day...in a word, to squeeze the conquered country like a lemon and treat the inhabitants as slaves—this, we do not know how to do...Instead, consider the colonies as long-term investments, prepare without haste or suddenness the transformation of the country and its inhabitants, respect as much as possible the liberty and goods of the native, and bring him to understand and assist us in our intentions; this, of which so few nations are capable, plainly conforms to our aptitudes and tastes, and I maintain that this alone is worthy to be called colonization.<sup>33</sup>

This, then, is the *mission civilisatrice*: to make the native think with the European; the only tool with which to accomplish this is the school.<sup>34</sup> Education, therefore, is central to the colonial enterprise, because it is the means through which the new “moral conquest”—that is, the winning of the hearts and minds of the Africans—will be accomplished. Starting from this foundation, Hardy develops a set of principles to guide education policy on which he elaborates throughout the book. He specifically enumerates some of them near the beginning, and they are worth quoting here in full:

1. Measure the extent of instruction to the current and real aptitudes of the native.
2. Ensure that the native student perfectly internalizes the knowledge placed within his reach.
3. Adapt to the needs of the country and support step by step the work of civilization undertaken by the administration.
4. Avoid making education an instrument of social upheaval.
5. Keep the school as much as possible in accord with the familial and religious milieu.
6. Throughout these several precautions, keep and protect the school’s essential role of intellectual and moral perfection.
7. Choose teachers for natives with the greatest care, and form them especially for their task.

---

<sup>32</sup> Hardy, *Une Conquête Morale*, 5. Original: « Si vous me demandiez, « Qu’est-ce qu’une colonie française? » je répondrais volontiers : « C’est avant tout le lieu géométrique des idées générales. » »

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

8. The key is not to understand, but to practice.<sup>35</sup>

It is clear from these principles, and from Hardy's discussion and elaboration on them in the text, that to him, education is central to the *mission civilisatrice*, and therefore to the entire colonial enterprise. At the same time, the contradictions inherent in colonial education policy become visible in Hardy's writing.<sup>36</sup>

There is a very real tension between the goal of uplifting the native (point 6, for example) and the goal of Africans developing within their own culture. This leads to the precaution of keeping the curriculum "adapted" enough that students will not learn so much that they become *déracinés*. The socio-political aspect of this is admitted explicitly by Hardy in his discussion of point 4, in which he explains how their schools will lose credibility if they allow too much social advancement for those outside the traditional ruling classes. Thus, selection must be made at every level, to allow the advancement of only a select few.

Furthermore, at all levels, the content of instruction is simplified because of a belief that the natives might not yet be capable of as much knowledge as the Europeans (point 1). This is also the sense in which he elaborates on point 2: he does not mean that students should be taught knowledge more deeply until they understand it, but rather that they should not be taught material which is too advanced for them to understand. His attempt to resolve these internally conflicting goals motivates point 3, which at the same time calls for education to civilize Africans, but to do so in a way adapted to their condition. The result is that the instruction in civilization given to Africans largely consists of learning subjects such as hygiene and manual labor (the main topics of his discussion on that point).<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, he still wishes for students to be somewhat *francisés*: "It is important, finally, that the school makes an effort to strengthen the ties of sympathy that bind the native to the French cause..."<sup>38</sup> The persistence of this

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 14-22. Original text:

1. Mesurer l'extension de l'enseignement aux aptitudes actuelles et réelles de l'indigène.
2. S'assurer que l'élève indigène s'assimile parfaitement les connaissances mises à sa portée.
3. S'adapter aux besoins du pays et seconder pas à pas l'œuvre de civilisation entreprise par l'administration.
4. Éviter que l'enseignement des indigènes ne devienne un instrument de perturbation sociale.
5. Maintenir le plus possible l'école en accord avec le milieu familial et religieux.
6. Garder à l'école, à travers ces multiples précautions, son rôle essentiel de perfectionnement intellectuel et moral.
7. Choisir, avec le plus grand soin, les maîtres chargés de l'enseignement des indigènes et les former spécialement à leur tâche.
8. Le tout n'est pas de la connaître, c'est de la pratiquer.

<sup>36</sup> This is also observed by Chafer, "Teaching Africans to Be French:" 196-99; and Little, "Ambiguities of the 'Mission Civilisatrice.'"

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.; Hardy, *Une Conquête Morale*, 14-22.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 18. Original: « Il importe, enfin, que l'école s'efforce de consolider les liens de sympathie qui attachent les indigènes à la cause française... »

idea is one of the most important driving forces in the ideology of French colonial education.

Especially relevant to the current inquiry is his discussion on teaching the French language. Hardy begins by acknowledging that there are those who think that Africans should not be taught at all, but he has no time for these “*obscurantistes*”—he takes it for granted that Africans must be given some kind of education, since the colonizer has a mission beyond simply exploiting the colonized peoples. Interestingly, however, he takes a very practical turn—brushing aside claims that French is an intellectually superior language, he simply points out that, given the plethora of languages in AOF, it would be logistically impossible to teach in all of them. One must be chosen, so in the (claimed) absence of a native *lingua franca*, he chooses French.<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, instruction in French had an intellectual as well as a practical dimension for Hardy. Rather than as an end in itself (i.e., to promote the superiority of *la belle langue*), however, it was a means to an end: to ultimately make the African student absorb at least part of the French worldview.<sup>40</sup> This entailed a delicate balance: while the student would hopefully pick up some of the French *mentalité*, the bulk of the content of his education was still to be in practical matters. Hardy acknowledged that educators must be on their guard to preserve the intellectually and morally formative aspect of the school which, in the best French Enlightenment tradition, aims to “form the mind, to give habits of reasoning, to develop the faculties of observation and of good sense.”<sup>41</sup> At the same time, it was paramount to prevent studies from becoming too abstract and cerebral: they were ultimately educating the peasants, farmers, and laborers of tomorrow, not scholars and scientists. Indeed, discussing the study of written French, Hardy emphasizes that its purpose is to teach clear, precise writing in everyday language, and that “we should not worry ourselves about initiating them to the beauties of our classic literature.”<sup>42</sup> In order to accomplish this, French must not be taught as a subject by itself, but rather should be integrated with the other studies. As the student learns French, he also learns knowledge which will be useful in his life, and gradually becomes more French and less “savage.”<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 145-50.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 149-50.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 20-21. Original: « ...à former l’esprit, à donner des habitudes de raisonnement, à développer les facultés d’observation et de bon sens. »

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 152. Original: « ...nous ne nous soucions pas de les initier aux beautés de notre littérature classique... » Interestingly enough, he goes on to say that he would prefer them to read authors such as Jules Verne, apparently considering him to be a lower form of writing.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 151.

These discussions between colonial officials show the importance of French language instruction for understanding the ideology of colonial education. We can see how official policy was confused and somewhat contradictory. Compare, for example, the differing reasons for teaching French: was it simply a matter of expediency, as Hardy claimed, or to spread French culture, as Ponty claimed but Hardy denied (at least on the surface)? The French could not decide whether, and how much, they wished to assimilate the Africans. Regardless, they still did teach French, and no matter how much they fought against the emergence of *déracinés* through adapted education, a French education was an uprooting experience for Africans. I therefore next explore how this ideology related to the actual practice of education, and reveal how this uprooting occurred.

#### French Colonial Education Ideology in Practice

The practice of education in colonial AOF reflected both the goals and the contradictions of French ideology. One author who examines this is Gail P. Kelly, who compares the portrayal of native cultures in AOF with that in French Indochina and finds striking differences. Analyzing textbooks, curriculum guides, and student notebooks, he argues that portrayals were inaccurate in both colonies, but in different ways. In AOF, which had no single strong, unifying nation-state prior to the European conquest, indigenous cultures are portrayed neutrally or benevolently (bordering on paternalistically), but inaccurately. Blacks are usually either lumped together as an undifferentiated group, or are viewed as individuals or villages within French-defined geographic units such as the *cercle*.

Either way, the existence of pre-colonial societies is ignored or downplayed. Those cultural descriptions which do exist are shallow and trivial rather than providing anything that could awaken distinctive cultural identities. Thus the French did everything they could to prevent the development of a “shared political culture,” and therefore “the schools...avoided making too many distinctions between Africans and French, between France and Africa,...or between primitive and modern.”<sup>44</sup> Kelly contrasts this strongly with Indochina, where the existence of the advanced pre-colonial nation-state of Vietnam was not only acknowledged, but emphasized through descriptions comparing it highly unfavorably with enlightened French rule. Thus the French depictions of indigenous society were responses to the pre-colonial political cultures of those societies.<sup>45</sup>

While Kelly provides an incisive analysis of colonial education, he leaves his conclusions open-ended, saying that “one possibility for future examination is the relationship between the school curriculum and the emergent colonial

---

<sup>44</sup> Gail P. Kelly, “The Presentation of Indigenous Society:” 542.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 523-42.

economic and political structures.”<sup>46</sup> Re-examining some of the same sources in these terms shows that, rather than simply trying to suppress the development of an indigenous political culture over and against French rule, the French in Africa were actively trying to develop a certain political culture (or at least a worldview) that advanced their goals and cooperated with their rule. This naturally follows from the political and ideological nature of French colonial education that has already been explained. Framing Kelly’s work in this context will thus help to expand his thesis. In particular, we will revisit the text *Moussa et Gi-gla: Histoire de Deux Petits Noirs* (*Moussa et Gi-gla: Story of Two Little Blacks*).

This book was a reader for schoolchildren in AOF, published in several printings from 1926 until at least 1946 (the year when the edition I accessed was printed). It tells the story of two young African children who travel around AOF in the employ of a Frenchman and learn about a variety of topics.<sup>47</sup> In the preface, the authors list three purposes for the book. The first two are to complete the student’s instruction in reading through an enjoyable story and to “aid his moral, social, and practical education” by showing him various aspects of the world around him. The third objective is worth quoting in full:

To make him know and love France, to show him our country as the most glorious, the most advanced in civilization, the first among all as much by the courage of her soldiers as by the merits of those who have made her famous, especially those who have brought prosperity and progress to West Africa. “Africa produces men,” said Faïdherbe. Let us make of these men Frenchmen who are happy and proud to be such.<sup>48</sup>

Like the other French officials, the authors of this book saw themselves as acting in tandem with colonial policy. But in what manner? Kelly has some suggestions, based on his analysis of this and other texts. An overarching theme is that colonial educational materials gave the impression that “indigenous society was an amorphous black mass”; i.e. they largely ignored cultural distinctions.<sup>49</sup> Although there are some exceptions—at times the text does acknowledge ethnic differences between Africans, for instance—this is generally true. Most chapters focus on topics such as geography (including local wildlife, agricultural products, natural

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 542.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.: 527; L. Sonolet and A. Pérès, *Moussa et Gi-gla: Histoire de Deux Petits Noirs* (Paris : Armand Colin, 1946).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., v. Original: « 3. Lui faire connaître et aimer la France, lui montrer notre pays comme le plus glorieux, le plus avancé en civilisation, le premier de tous autant par le courage de ses soldats que par les mérites de ceux qui l’ont illustré, particulièrement de ceux qui ont apporté en Afrique occidentale la prospérité et le progrès. « L’Afrique produit des hommes » disait Faïdherbe. Faisons de ces hommes des Français heureux et fiers de l’être. »

<sup>49</sup> Kelly, “Presentation of Indigenous Society,” 530.

features, etc.), European technology, and moral lessons. There is little space dedicated exclusively to African culture or pre-colonial society. However, the book's content is not only notable for what it excludes—native cultures, as Kelly observes—but for what it includes as well, through which shines the particular message France wanted to impart.

First, the book holds up certain types of relationships between different groups of people as the ideal. From the beginning, the authors emphasize that although Moussa and Gi-gla have different ethnic and religious backgrounds, they still can become friends by “rising to the ideal of brotherhood in the great black family.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, when a friendly stranger later in the story rescues our two heroes from a storm, the reader is admonished, that “*all the Blacks are brothers and they must help one another.*”<sup>51</sup> It seems as though the French view solidarity as a distinguishing trait of civilized people, one which the Africans must adopt. Yet the call of *fraternité* takes on a different tone with relation to the French. It may be that “kindness has no color,”<sup>52</sup> but this statement is quickly qualified:

There is, to the contrary, an advantage for a Black to find himself in the service of a White, because Whites are more learned, more advanced in civilization than Blacks, and, thanks to them, the latter can make more rapid progress....On their end, Blacks render service to Whites...for the work of all kinds which they have undertaken...*Thus the two races associate with one another and work in common for the prosperity and happiness of all.*<sup>53</sup>

By presenting colonial subjugation as a kind of symbiotic relationship, the authors attempt to convince their African readers to accept their place in the colonial order. Indeed, this passage is, in some ways, nothing more than a rephrasing of the core tenets of the *mission civilisatrice*, except with an audience of young students in mind. Passages such as this make it clear how France's abstract philosophical principles carried through to the classroom.

Secondly, there do exist a few exceptions to Kelly's broad observation that indigenous societies and states were ignored or glossed over. Particularly striking

---

<sup>50</sup> Sonolet and Pérès, *Moussa et Gi-gla*, vi. Original: « ...de s'élever à une idée de fraternité humaine dans la grande famille noire. »

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 124. Original: « ...*que tous les Noirs étaient frères et qu'ils devaient s'entr'aider.* » (italics in the original for this and the two following citations.)

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 83. Original: « *La bonté n'a pas de couleur.* »

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Original: « Il y a, au contraire, avantage pour un Noir à se trouver au service d'un Blanc parce que les Blancs sont plus instruits, plus avancés en civilisation que les Noirs et que, grâce à eux, ceux-ci peuvent faire des progrès plus rapides...De leur côté, les Noirs rendent service aux Blancs...pour l'exécution des travaux de tous genres qu'ils ont entrepris...*Ainsi les deux races s'associent et travaillent en commun pour la prospérité et le bonheur de tous.* »

was their section on the Kingdom of Dahomey. Several pages are devoted to a gruesome description of human sacrifices regularly carried out by the kings of Dahomey, complete with an illustration of an executioner holding a severed head and a bloody sword. The chapter ends with the characters singing the praises of the glorious French who have liberated them from this awful tyranny.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, a narration of Tuareg raids on pre-colonial Timbuktu ends with Moussa proclaiming, “with a serious air on his little figure, ‘Like you, Moktar, I will serve France faithfully!’”<sup>55</sup> These are hardly trivializations of pre-colonial society. Rather, quite the opposite: the authors seem to be exaggerating its negative qualities in order to indoctrinate their readers with love for France. This was one of the most common goals of education cited by colonial officials (as we have seen), and was key to their entire purpose of educating Africans. Yet it quickly points to the ambiguity of the French desire for Africans to develop loyalty to a country of which they would never fully be a part: here again are the conflicting goals at the heart of colonial education.

Thirdly, the portrayals of France and of France’s relation to her colonies help to round out the view that Africans are better off for having been colonized. Kelly claims that school materials mostly ignored France, or portrayed it in imprecise terms. They neither mentioned cities in France nor “aircraft at Orly,”; “indeed,” Kelly adds, “the text of *Moussa et Gi-gla* was written taking great pains, even when discussing Bastille Day, not to talk too much about the metropole.”<sup>56</sup> While this, again, is generally true, it is the exceptions that prove the rule. Interestingly, *Moussa et Gi-gla* does discuss (albeit briefly) Bordeaux, Marseille, and Paris (complete with an illustration of *la Tour Eiffel*).<sup>57</sup> Moreover, while the text does, as Kelly points out, give a superficial account of Bastille Day in chapter 48, it is followed by an epic (though again somewhat cursory, so as not to inflame too much native passion for *la liberté*) telling of the Revolution of 1789 and the Napoleonic Wars in chapter 49.<sup>58</sup> As for the omission of “aircraft at Orly,” it turns out that aviation was not as neglected as Kelly believes: chapter 14 explains and depicts hot air balloons, dirigibles, and airplanes, not forgetting to mention the brothers Montgolfier, two Frenchmen who first flew in a balloon.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 30-32. Indeed, they are even precise enough to provide the name of Dahomey’s last king (Béhanzin) and the date he was “vanquished” by the French (1892) (Ibid., 26).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 12. Original: « ...avec un air sérieux sur sa petite figure, ‘je ferais comme toi, Moktar, je servirai fidèlement la France.’ »

<sup>56</sup> Kelly, “Presentation of Indigenous Society,” 539.

<sup>57</sup> Sonolet and Pérès, *Moussa et Gi-gla*, 105-110.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 204-15.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 51-54.

By itself, aerial transport is perhaps not terribly relevant, but it is an example of a common theme throughout the book. It is filled with descriptions of intriguing European technologies that have improved life for the African, or heroic French exploits in the name of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. These images, which dominate the text, are yet another example showing how eager the French were to highlight the benefits of civilization which they brought to the Africans. Though their education would hardly be sufficient to learn how to build airplanes, colonized subjects would learn that such technologies are what make people modern and civilized.

This brief examination of *Moussa et Gi-gla* shows how one textbook was used to advance the colonial agenda by developing a certain mindset among African students. In fact, the close connection to official French policy is seen right on the cover, which identifies it as one of the “publications exécutées par ordre du Gouvernement Général de l’Afrique Occidentale Française” (“publications carried out by order of the Government General of AOF”). Furthermore, the time period in which it was used (1926 through at least the Second World War) corresponds to the heyday of “associationism.” Thus, at the very time when the French were most emphasizing the traditional power of the chiefs and the adaption of colonial rule generally, and education specifically, to African culture, Africans were still learning about the benefits of French culture.

The next logical question to ask is what effect such an education actually had on Africans; it is thus instructive to examine sources written by Africans themselves. Among the most important of such sources are the so-called *cahiers* (literally, “notebooks”) at the École Ponty. These were essentially reports prepared by the students during their summer break, when they were asked to study their own home village or region and investigate a particular topic of ethnographic or anthropological interest (food, family structures, customs, beliefs, etc.). While their reliability as true anthropological research is questionable, they are invaluable as a documentation of the meaning of education for Africans in AOF.<sup>60</sup>

The program began in 1933, and a few of the first *cahiers* were published in the *Bulletin de l’Enseignement de l’AOF*, a journal, founded by Georges Hardy in 1913, through which teachers in AOF communicated with each other. They are prefaced by a description, written by Albert Charton (*Inspecteur de l’enseignement* at the time)<sup>61</sup>, which explains the purpose of the new experiment. He would first like students to give an “exact description of known facts,” while “avoiding false literary descriptions.” It is also important to “turn the attention of our future teachers to the rational understanding of their original milieu,” so that they may “find...respect for living traditions [but also] a feeling for necessary

---

<sup>60</sup> Sabatier, “African Culture and Colonial Education,” 4.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

transformations.”<sup>62</sup> Thus he wishes to form students’ minds in such a way that they understand the world in a more rational manner, detached from the mindset of their original environment. These comments of Charton are contextualized by statements he made just the previous year, following the departure of Désiré Dupont, a director of the École Ponty who had advocated a French curriculum and metropolitan diploma for Ponty students:

There were evidently some unfortunate results from this premature experiment: changing around the curriculum, lack of adaptation of the material studied [to African realities], aroused student ambitions and resultant disappointment, accentuation of the bookish character of the school. I think that at present the situation is almost back to normal, the obsession with diplomas not so strong, and the moment has come to reorganize the school program.<sup>63</sup>

For Charton, then, the *cahiers* were in part a means of keeping the French-educated African elite connected to their own cultures enough that they might be a bridge between the two worlds, rather than being completely uprooted. Sabatier provides us with the context to see how this dynamic played out, showing how this exercise did not do much to support native culture. First, the students were hardly learning anything new—they were simply recording various aspects of everyday life which most likely seemed trivial to them. Moreover, it is known that on occasion, students simply submitted fictitious *cahiers* in order to fulfill the assignment. In general, students saw the assignment as primarily a distraction from the other (more French) parts of their education, in which they were learning things they had not known before. Second, their professors knew little to nothing about their societies, and thus graded them less on content and more on French language proficiency. Finally, there is the simple fact that, as school assignments for the French, the students’ accounts can hardly be expected to be free from the bias of self-censorship. For all these reasons, the *cahiers* cannot be unequivocally regarded as free expressions of African culture or as valid anthropological data. However, in some sense, by presenting at least some bit of African culture as worthwhile, assignments such as these might have mitigated the effects of *déracinement*, helping Africans retain at least some pride in their heritage.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> A. Charton, « Les Études Indigènes à l’École William Ponty, » *Bulletin de l’Enseignement de l’AOF* 22, no. 84 (Jul.-Dec. 1933) : 20-22. Original : « ...description exacte de faits connus...d’éviter les fausses descriptions littéraires...tourner les regards de nos futurs maîtres vers la connaissance rationnelle de leur milieu original...trouveront...le respect des traditions vivantes, le sentiment des transformations nécessaires. »

<sup>63</sup> Charton to governor general, August 24, 1932. AOF Archives 0-303-49, quoted in Sabatier, “African Culture and Colonial Education,” 3. Translation by Sabatier.

<sup>64</sup> Sabatier, “African Culture and Colonial Education.”

Nonetheless, Ponty graduates remained notable for their view of themselves as educated Frenchmen. The extent of this is shown by how deeply the attitudes described by Charton—the ability to describe matters-of-fact dispassionately, to view their own cultures as rational external observers—implanted themselves into the students and revealed themselves through their writing. For example, the African student Sanon Sanny wrote a paper on indigenous festivals, ceremonies, and traditions in the region of Sia or Bobo-Dioulasso. Throughout the piece, he maintains a dispassionate tone, as called for. While describing the scenes with remarkable vividness, he rarely lets his own commentary through. The few times when he does are therefore instructive. First, when describing the costume of the young ladies during a funeral ritual, he claims that “you would doubtless be stunned to see in these beings, so close to nature, as much pride as in a maiden all decked out in gold and silver jewelry.”<sup>65</sup> It would seem as though he no longer holds his home environment as normative, but understands how European culture is held up as the standard (whether or not he actually believed that is, perhaps, unknown). Thus he can relate to a reader who finds it surprising that a girl clad in native garb could be “proud.” Even more strikingly, he makes an offhand comment that implicitly rejects what is presumably his religious patrimony: “This god, which is only a piece of wood...”<sup>66</sup> Not only have his aesthetic tastes changed, but his entire worldview seems to have become more European through education. At the very least, though, we see him critically examining his own culture from a perspective almost as if he were an outsider—just what Charton wanted.

This change in attitudes is found outside the *cahiers* as well. For example, another issue of the *Bulletin* contains what seems to be a serious, scholarly, and straightforward article on native hunting customs and their relations to religious practice. The author speaks from the perspective of a European social scientist, includes footnotes, cites other articles, and at the end, expresses the hope that “this sketch may...awaken...initiatives which will certainly contribute to the more perfect knowledge of the psychology of the West African races in order to better support French action in this country!”<sup>67</sup> Yet the author is no Frenchman, but rather a lowly African *instituteur* from the Soudan, Mamby Sidibé. The fact that someone could appear so completely assimilated in a society that claimed to have rejected assimilationism is quite amazing.

---

<sup>65</sup> Sanon Sanny, “Les Fêtes Indigènes,” *Le Bulletin de l’Enseignement de l’AOF* 22, no. 84(Jul.-Dec. 1933) : 202. Original : «...vous vous étonnerez sans doute de voir dans ces êtres si près de la nature autant de fierté que dans une demoiselle chamarrée de bijoux d’or et d’argent. »

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 203. Original : « Ce dieu, qui n’est qu’un morceau de bois... »

<sup>67</sup> Mamby Sidibé, “Premières Notes sur la Littérature Orale, les Croyances et Coutumes Indigènes: La chasse dans ses rapports avec les croyances religieuses les mœurs et les coutumes indigènes au Birgo,” *Bulletin de l’Enseignement de l’AOF* 18, no. 69 (Jan.-Jun. 1929) : 72-73. Original: « Puisse cette esquisse [sic]...éveiller... initiatives qui contribueront certainement à la connaissance de plus en plus parfait de la psychologie des races oust-africaines pour pouvoir mieux seconder l’action française en ce pays! »

These sources, combined with the analysis of *Moussa et Gi-gla*, show how French education was in fact developing new modes of thought in Africans, even though the French took such pains to “adapt” it to native African society. French efforts, then, did not suppress the formation of a political culture; instead they created one in the image of France, especially among the elite *Pontins*. As has been mentioned above, the elites occupied a special place in the colonial system and they knew it. They viewed themselves as intermediaries between French and African culture and were very proud of their status as “modern.” No matter how much the French attenuated their education, this select group was leaving school with a new way of looking at the world inherited from the French, yet still their own.<sup>68</sup>

#### Conclusion: Understanding the French Reaction

This survey of French education in colonial West Africa has shown how, despite the best efforts of the French, contradictions stubbornly persisted. They tried their best to elaborate a coherent philosophy, armed with the theoretical might of the *mission civilisatrice*, but remained mired in the tension between civilizing the African while not uprooting him. The French struggled to make sense of this and to hold on to their beliefs in spite of the problems with them until the bitter end. Writing in 1940, Henri Labouret described the broad differences between the older policy (which he dismissed as pure assimilation) and the newer policy of association; as he goes on, the reader sees more and more how invested he is in the latter, seeing it as a solution to numerous problems he blames on assimilation. One can sense his frustration when he complains about those who “instead of building upon the foundations established by local culture, ... preferred to pull down the whole edifice, so as to replace it by something which was in accordance with their own habits and traditions.”<sup>69</sup> Yet he later uses his assimilationist views to explain why the Africans should not be given the ballot while they are “not yet ready to make good use of it.”<sup>70</sup> He is clinging to his ideology for dear life, because it is all he has to deal with the contradictions of an imperial republic.

This large-scale drama, so fundamental to understanding AOF, played out on a smaller scale in education. Other authors have discussed these issues, but this paper has attempted to center on education to more fully understand why they were so persistent. We have seen, first, that the colonial authorities elaborated a detailed philosophy and policy of education, grounded in the *mission civilisatrice* which was central to the colonial venture generally. We have then seen the push and pull of the contradictions inherent in this ideology as education was carried

---

<sup>68</sup> Chafer, “Education and Political Socialisation,” 442-46.

<sup>69</sup> Henri Labouret, “France’s Colonial Policy in Africa,” *Journal of the Royal African Society* 39, no. 154 (Jan. 1940): 30. Originally in English.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

out in the colonies: education was “adapted” to the African environment—i.e., watered down—while at the same time still designed to fulfill France’s mission to civilize the Africans. I have shown how, on the one hand, adaptation preceded the broader dominance of associationism within colonial circles (the former occurring from 1903, the latter primarily after the First World War). On the other hand, no matter how much education was attenuated, France’s civilizing ideology allowed enough to shine through that Africans were still becoming a little French, even in the heyday of associationism. In response to this tension, the French continued to limit education more and more in order to prevent the schools from producing *déracinés*, yet their fears never went away.

Therefore, rather than incidental and extrinsic, these tensions were intrinsic and internal to education as the French conceived it for West Africa. As long as they continued to believe that the purpose of education was to civilize the African, students would become “uprooted” no matter how “adapted” their education became. Thus, the French were fighting against themselves: the *déracinés* of whom they were so afraid were their own making, because of their choice to use education the way they did in colonial policy. Because of this, the drama continued throughout the colonial era until the Second World War.

This paper is only attempting to begin the investigation of these issues by refocusing the discussion of education in AOF on these contradictions and their causes. There is much room for future research to broaden and deepen these results. Some possibilities are broadening the time period (before 1903 or after 1945), examining these or other primary sources more in depth, or studying the influence of Islam on these aspects of education in AOF, which has been left aside here. Regardless of the future direction research in this area takes, it will surely be fascinating. Education was of the greatest importance in France’s colonial venture, and thus understanding their education policy is of the greatest importance to historians today.

#### Bibliography

Bouche, Denise. “Autrefois, notre pays s'appelait la Gaule...: Remarques sur l'adaptation de l'enseignement au Sénégal de 1817 à 1960.” *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 8, no. 29 (1968) : 110-22.

Chafer, Tony. “Education and Political Socialisation of a National-Colonial Political Elite in French West Africa, 1936-47.” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 35 no. 3 (Sept. 2007): 437-458.

---. “Teaching Africans to Be French? France’s ‘Civilising Mission’ and the Establishment of a Public Education System in French West Africa, 1903-30.” *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale di Studi e Documentazione dell’Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente* 56, no. 2 (2001): 190-209.

- Charton, A. "Les Études Indigènes à l'École William Ponty." *Bulletin de l'Enseignement de l'AOF* 22, no. 84 (Jul.-Dec. 1933): 19.
- Clignet, Remi P. and Philip J. Foster. "French and British Colonial Education in Africa." *Comparative Education Review* 8, no. 2 (Oct. 1964): 191-98.
- Conklin, Alice L. *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Hardy, Georges. *Une Conquête Morale: L'Enseignement en AOF*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005. (Reprint of an original published in 1917.)
- Kelly, Gail P. "The Presentation of Indigenous Society in the Schools of French West Africa and Indochina, 1918 to 1938." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 3 (Jul. 1984): 523-542.
- Labouret, Henri. "France's Colonial Policy in Africa." *Journal of the Royal African Society* 39, no. 154 (Jan. 1940): 22-35.
- . "Review of *Africans Learn to Be French, a Review of Educational Activities in the Seven Federated Colonies of French West Africa, Based upon a Tour of French West Africa and Algiers Undertaken in 1935* by W. Bryant Mumford." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*. 10, no. 3 (Jul. 1937): 362-63.
- Little, Pat. "Ambiguities of the 'Mission Civilisatrice' in Georges Hardy's *Une Conquête Morale: l'Enseignement en A.O.F.*" *Essays in French Literature* 41 (Nov. 2004).
- Ponty, William. "Les Questions Scolaires au Conseil de Gouvernement." *Bulletin de l'Enseignement de l'AOF* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1913) : 20-22.
- Sabatier, Peggy R. "'Elite' Education in French West Africa: The Era of Limits, 1903-1945." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 11, no. 2 (1978): 247-66.
- . "African Culture and Colonial Education: The William Ponty School Cahiers and Theater." *Journal of African Studies* 7, no. 1 (1980): 2-10.
- Sanny, Sanon. "Les Fêtes Indigènes." *Le Bulletin de l'Enseignement de l'AOF* 22, no. 84 (Jul.-Dec. 1933) : 200-09.

- Sidibé, Mamby. "Premières Notes sur la Littérature Orale, les Croyances et Coutumes Indigènes: La chasse dans ses rapports avec les croyances religieuses les mœurs et les coutumes indigènes au Birgo." *Bulletin de l'Enseignement de l'AOF* 18, no. 69 (Jan.-Jun. 1929) : 47-73.
- Sonolet, L. and Pérès, A. *Moussa et Gi-gla: Histoire de Deux Petits Noirs*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1946.
- Summer, Anne and R.W. Johnson. "World War I Conscription and Social Change in Guinea." *Journal of African History* 19, no. 1 (Jan. 1978): 25-38.

---

About the Author

Sean Gravelle (class of 2014) graduated with a B.A. in history and a B.S. in mathematics, as well as minors in French and physics. While at Xavier, he was involved in campus ministry, student orchestra, and Phi Beta Kappa. He was also a member of the editorial board for the 2013 issue of XJUR. This fall he will enter the Ph.D. program in mathematics at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "A Mission to What? Education in *Afrique Occidentale Française*, 1903-1945" was sponsored by Dr. Christian Strother of the history department.