

How far did the Colonial Powers of Britain and France penetrate the Culture of the Occupied Peoples?

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Introduction

The parts of the British Empire on which the sun never set were nonetheless surrounded by the colonial territories of other European states, which were as extensive as the British colonial possessions.² Francophonic culture now prevails in large swathes of northern and southern Africa and elsewhere, legacy on one level to the simple fact of French (and in some cases Belgian) colonial expansion, but in terms of the uptake of language, perhaps also testifying to the provision of education and the penetration of a colonizing culture on the colonized.

In this paper, I intend to set linguistic analysis of select former colonial territories alongside first hand intercultural experience. In doing so, I point out that the common historical conception of the scramble for Africa (which had parallel cultural movements in terms of scrambles for resources in the Middle East and Asia) can encourage historians to think of similarities rather than differences in European cultural activities.³ The notion of the scramble for Africa inscribes European imperial actions within the one unifying framework. Yet the way colonial powers behaved in Africa and elsewhere, and how the culture of an imperial power was encountered and reacted to by the colonized peoples, is by no means to be thought of as a singular or unitary process, and my encounters with language and language education in different parts of Africa is my starting point to analyse the extent to which French influence and education permeated colonized territories. I suggest that the linguistic residue in French-settled colonies signifies a commitment to both the establishment of education infrastructure and the potency of cultural imposition on the part of the French.

French encounters in post-colonial Africa

The points I make in this paper are empirical and derive from first hand experience with using the French language in Africa. In March 1978 I set out for what I thought would be a six month travelling experience which, however, turned into a 33 month odyssey. I set out optimistically and naively ignorant of the world outside of my home town. This cultural ignorance/innocence had to change rapidly if I were to survive the six months. Over time I

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² Alec G, Hargreaves, 'Introduction', in Hargreaves (ed.), *Memory, Empire and Postcolonialism: Legacies of French Colonialism* (Latham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), pp.1-11.

³ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (London: Random House).

found I came to enjoy the experience of meeting people of different cultures and languages in their home environment. I found I had a knack of being able to readily adapt to changing circumstances and did not stand out obviously as a tourist. In fact, I quickly changed from being a tourist to becoming a traveller. I stopped shaving, dressed simply, carried what I needed, ate local food and slept where I could. The initial fear of being in a foreign country quickly changed to one of wonder and appreciation of the myriad different lifestyles that I encountered in the initial, and only organised, phase of my travelling from Kathmandu to London on the back of a lorry.

Africa and the subcontinent was by this time largely post-colonial rather than colonial. As it well known, Harold Macmillan's 'Wind of Change' speech articulated the decline of British Africa and pragmatically acknowledged that the British Empire was modulating into the Commonwealth.⁴ Yet even earlier, Mountbatten's brief as viceroy of India was that he was to be the last viceroy and partition of the subcontinent and the abolition of the British monarch's emperorship all occurred before 1950. It is therefore naturally to be expected that just over 20 years later I would be travelling through lands that were in a reactive and nationalistic mode. They were reactive, in that overthrowing colonial dominance does not simply involve independence, but the active repudiation of many of the traits and legacies of the former colonizer. To a certain extent this reaction was experienced at the linguistic level. For example the newly independent Indian government abolished the use of the term 'ridings' as a term indicating a geographic unit. In doing so, they ceased to allow their country to be divided on maps using a term redolent of the English countryside. But nonetheless English had been the language of colonial administration and even the leaders of newly-independent India (and for that matter of Pakistan) found they had to use English as a medium of communication. Yet it was in India that I first encountered how little impact the English language had had in one of Britain's subjugated countries. I found that there were very few of the local Indians we encountered daily who had even a smattering of English. We soon learnt to stereotype and look for certain types of people – those who wore western clothes and appeared to be some type of executives or business people – who were members of the educated class. The second group were the Sikhs. When approached, the vast majority of them could converse in English and they became our popular 'linguistic targets'. There were, of course, a large number of hawkers who had a very limited level of English – limited to words and phrases associated with the items they were trying to sell – a type of restricted 'business' English.

⁴ John Aldred, *British Imperial and Foreign Policy, 1846-1980* (Oxford: Heinemann, 2004), p.95.

This surprised me as Britain had been trading with India since 1619 when they were given permission to trade at Surat and were first granted a foothold in the country in 1639 when they established a ‘factory’ – warehouse – in Madras. Over the years British influence spread, gradually either eliminating other European possessions in India (Denmark, Austria) or restricting their influence over the centuries (Portugal, France, Netherlands). By 1765 the British influence (the East India Company) was so strong that Robert Clive defeated Mughal forces and the Mughal emperor gave the Company rights over Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa which included a territory of some 25 million people. The Company became in reality a sovereign power and Clive became the first British Governor of Bengal.⁵

Over the succeeding centuries British influence expanded until Britain controlled most of the country and Queen Victoria assumed the title of Empress of India in 1876. Her son, grandson and two great grandsons all reigned as emperors. Throughout these centuries the British focus throughout its empire was on organised profitable trade and what needed to be done to ensure that stability. This was a model that was used repeatedly throughout what came to be known as the British Empire. There was no general effort to anglicise the population as long as there was an educated bureaucracy competent in English to ensure that trade and administration could continue. There was little cultural or linguistic imperialism. Of course this point cannot be stretched absolutely. Certainly missionaries from the Church of England and from nonconformist traditions were all active in India, although to this day the number of Protestant Christians in India is an entirely nominal number of the total population and the original purpose of Anglican missions in India was to provide for the spiritual needs of the resident British officers.⁶ Certainly the process of Christianization, or indeed of any attempts to inculcate Britishness were limited.

My travels continued and we crossed into Afghanistan on the afternoon of the 28th April 1978 when unbeknownst to us a rebellion had started earlier that day – and is still continuing today. Our lorry was halted halfway up the Kabul gorge by terrified armed soldiers. They thought that we were possibly troops on the way to attack them. Upon realising that we were non-threatening tourists they turned us around and sent us to a village several kilometres down the gorge where we were ‘invited’ to stay for the next few days – until they had finished slaughtering the former regime’s supporters throughout the country. Upon our release we were sent to Kabul where we had to stay for the next couple of weeks.

⁵ www.indianchild.com/british_invasion_in_india.htm, accessed July 20th, 2012.

⁶ O.L. Snaitang, ‘Christianity and Change among the Hill Tribes of Northeast India’, in *Christianity and Change in Northeast India* (eds T.B. Subba, Joseph Puthenpurakal and Shaji Joseph Puykunnel), (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2009), p.150.

This time communication was nigh on impossible – nobody appeared to speak English except for a military officer who saw me with a camera, interrogated me, and finally said ‘You are free to go.’ No one had said before that that I was not free to go, but the weapons trained on my chest by his soldiers certainly gave that impression. Throughout the whole of my time in Kabul and Afghanistan I met no other local person who had any English whatsoever. Successive British administrations had made several attempts during the time of the Indian Empire to ‘acquire’ Afghanistan and were repulsed each time. They certainly had not linguistically influenced the citizens of that country in any way that I saw, or rather heard.

Many months later, after hibernating in the kitchen of a hotel in the Swiss Alps as a dishwasher for the winter, and acquiring French, I began the next stage of my travels. In 1979 I hitched south through Europe, crossed the Mediterranean to Tunisia, and had my first taste of French influence in the Maghreb. I was linguistically astonished. Everyone appeared to be able to speak French and most people had done their schooling through the medium of French rather than Arabic or Berber. This was surprising as the French influence was not all that long, historically speaking. France invaded Tunisia in 1881 and made it a protectorate, a loose use of the term as many Tunisians would have preferred to be protected from the French rather than by the French, as can be seen by the number of insurrections that initially took place. Tunisian independence finally took place in 1956.⁷

Before the French occupation of Tunisia, most education was based upon Islamic studies taught by imams at local mosques, with added subjects such as maths, medicine, botany and astronomy.⁸ Some schools had been set up for the children of French colonists who had been living there before the occupation and their schools had been open to the French and to the children of interested local families. With the establishment of the protectorate, French ideas of a more modern Europe began to influence Tunisians and they began to see the advantage of studying subjects that were of more practical value such as business and commerce, agriculture, sanitation, banking and finance and so schools were established where the teaching was through French and had a more modern and worldly influence. This did not mean, however, that Islamic studies took a back seat; rather that there was a blending of moral studies along with practical studies. Several educational systems developed that ran side-by-side where, for example Islamic schools might teach their traditional subjects, but also introduced into the curriculum history, hygiene and the

⁷ Gregory White, *A Comparative Political Economy of Tunisia and Morocco: On the Outside of Europe Looking in* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001), p.81.

⁸ Martena Tenney Sasnett and Inez Hopkins Sepmeyer, *Educational Systems of Africa: Interpretations for Use in the Evaluation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p.95.

French language. Other schools taught a curriculum identical to metropolitan France. Over time a French educational system came to be well viewed by the secular élite, and then by the wider community in general.

Tunisia seemed to have found an ideal blend of cultures, taking the best from both worlds and making it work. You could order local food in French and the waiter who served the meal could be wearing jeans or a *djellaba*. Islamic adherence was certainly evident in all aspects of life and the Tunisian culture/lifestyle remained undeniably Berber/Arabic with the addition of the French language and a cultural understanding of differences between people of different countries and beliefs.

On leaving Tunisia I crossed into Algeria near the town of El Oued in the Sahara Desert and proceeded to hitch my way north to the coast. I was quickly picked up by a man going almost to the coast, a distance of around 700km. I was a little wary of travelling in Algeria as at that time the government was very anti-western and they were commemorating the 25th anniversary of the beginning of the War of Independence from France. They had gained their independence as recently as 1962 in a struggle that had cost them hundreds of thousands of lives. This struggle was part of France's own process of decolonization. Although no French leader articulated a sense of the 'wind of change' as had Macmillan, in so evocatively pinpointing the end of his empire, post-war France's administration nonetheless began a slow process of decolonization. Eventually de Gaulle threw off France's final colonial territories.⁹

In Algeria, the media were reliving the war and nightly were showing on television films and documentaries of the atrocities carried out by the French forces and the colonists. This concerned me as everyone I met in Algeria assumed that I was French, and this was only 17 years after the war had ended. Much to my surprise there was no animosity shown to me. The peoples attitude was one of forgiving, if not forgetting. To them it was now just history, past and finished. I later found this to be a common thread in the philosophy of Muslim people that I met. They did not appear to bear grudges. This was in strong contrast to the situation in Australia at that time with regard to many/most people's attitudes towards the Japanese and the atrocities committed by them during WWII.

Once again there were the strong remnants of the French presence with respect to the use of French and the education system in Algeria. Although there was a process of Arabisation in place, the 130 year influence in the Algerian education system was difficult to change overnight. There was also the existing state of bilingualism (Arabic/French) or

⁹ Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.6.

even trilingualism (Arabic/Berber/French) of many of the inhabitants of the country. Arabisation did not appeal to everyone, especially the Berbers for whom Arabic was a foreign language. We should recall the exceptionally systematic French education system that the colonizers had brought with them. From the Napoleonic period, education in France (and then in French colonies) defined itself by the uniformity of the curriculum and the standardization of teaching practice. Famously, Napoleon instituted a system in which every schoolboy in France would be translating the same passage of Latin at the same time on the same day. Although this is perhaps an historical exaggeration, it nonetheless testifies to the characteristics of the education system brought by the French.¹⁰

By 1980 I had worked my way down the west coast of Africa. Once again I found that knowledge of French enabled me to travel relatively easily through Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal until I got to The Gambia, where, by this time my funds were virtually non-existent. I managed to get a job teaching (on local salary) in the local state high school, Gambia High School – in fact, it was the only state funded high school in the country. There were three other high schools - one Islamic and two Catholic (one for boys and one for girls.) This was the first country I had been in for a very long time where the official language was English – theoretically – but I was soon disillusioned by the reality. I was amazed that the British, in spite of their long occupation of the country had not done more to educate the people. A priest in the neighbouring Catholic school also commented on this lamentable shortcoming:

When Brother Florentine Mathews (1863-1886) arrived from Ireland some of the strain was eased regarding the teaching of English. It is important to note here that The Gambia was a British Colony at this time and little or no education was being provided for the people except by the Mission Churches.¹¹

In spite of the church inspired education, there was little effect upon the locals with respect to their religious beliefs. In speaking with the then principal of St Augustine's School (Catholic) Fr. Gough stated that more than 95% of the students in his school were Muslim and that there was no way they were likely to become Christians. He saw his role as educating the young, those who would become future leaders of their country, rather than proselytising. This attitude led to his recall to Ireland by his religious order.

The Gambia High School was only created in 1959 by the amalgamation of two schools (boys and girls) formerly run by the Wesleyan Mission and later by the Methodists

¹⁰ Bob Moon, *Education in France: Continuity and Change in the Mitterand Years, 1981-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.89.

¹¹ Fr. Michael J. Flynn CSSp, *St. Augustine School Newspaper: Sunu-Kibaro* (Banjul, The Gambia, 1983).

coming under state control.¹² I was engaged to teach Senior Economics and Junior Geography and was appointed the Sportsmaster. Economics was being offered for the first time in the country and for the first semester they had not had a teacher, but they did have a curriculum that was standard for Anglophonic West African countries. They also did not have any textbooks for the teacher or the students, but they did have a curriculum. There was no photocopier, overhead projector, library books on economics or electricity, but there was a curriculum. The children spoke English to various degrees, although there was one boy who could not produce one comprehensible statement.

I lived with a local family who spoke no English, except for the father who was a driver for an NGO bureaucrat. In the town of approximately 40,000 people I was the only white man and was therefore an object of interest and entertainment for the locals who loved to come and chat to me in Wolof, Mandinka, Serere, Jola or one of the other local languages as none of them spoke English. My room would be filled every evening (until I learnt to shut the door which meant I was asleep) with locals happily chatting together, with me smiling politely until my jaws ached. Actually, whenever I stepped out of the school grounds I was in virtually a non-English speaking zone, in spite of English being the official language. The British who had been there since they occupied the land in 1758 and had been given exclusive rights to trade along the Gambia River by the Portuguese in 1588 (authorised by Queen Elizabeth I) left very little legacy of British culture and English language when they granted independence to The Gambia in 1965.

After a few months of living there I thought I would take a trip 'upcountry' to see what life was like in the interior. I spent the night in a hut in a small village where the children had never seen a white man before and either ran away in terror or squealed in delight. Of course nobody spoke English, yet a few people came up and spoke to me in French. That said it all. Even there, there was a French influence, yet English was not spoken in an officially English speaking country.

How can these differences be explained? To me it seemed that there was a great philosophical divide between the two nations. Both saw colonies as a way of enhancing their wealth and power but the British seemed to be content to leave it at that. They preferred to use a network of locals (collaborators, some might say) to run the countries for them. Where the British did establish schools it was for the children of the élite and the British administrators and whose sole function was to provide English speaking staff to run the burgeoning public service in places such as India. The French on the other hand, to me

¹² www.accessgambia.com/information/gambia-high-school.html, accessed July 20th, 2012.

at least, seemed to take a more moral stand. Many of their sub-Saharan colonies were created during the 'Age of Enlightenment' where the belief in a noble savage as outlined by Rousseau and Voltaire gave an air of romanticism and respect to the 'conquered' people who had not been tainted by the evils of civilisation. The respect became mutual and the French in many cases lived in harmony with the locals, at least until they wanted independence. It was only in some of the former French colonies that I ever heard and read comments such as 'When is this independence going to end?'