

THE CHALLENGES OF COLONIAL RULE IN WEST AFRICAN SAHEL – THE CASE OF FRENCH WEST AFRICA 1900 – 1930

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Taking the example of French West Africa, this article addresses specific aspects of the current crisis in the West African Sahel from an historical perspective. Precisely, it focuses primarily on political challenges and some particular aspects of environmental threats in the first decades of the 20th century. Sixty years after their independence from France, the countries in the West African Sahel are considered world-wide as the states in permanent crisis. Their leaders have been accused of an inability to secure peace and stability for their people. This article argues that the study of the period when the Western Sahel was ruled by the French colonial administration may deepen our understanding of the issues important for this region today. Informed by current scholarship and the colonial reports from French West Africa, this article offers some thoughts on the various challenges that the colonial state faced in west African Sahel at the beginning of the 20th century.

Keywords: Western Sahel, colonialism, France, instability, Islam, environment.

Introduction

In 1914, the colonial administrators in French Soudan reported on disastrous food crises in the region between Ségou and Timbuktu. It was the result of three years of drought and contemporaries talked about the most devastating famine in one hundred years. Although the written evidence was lacking, the colonial authorities estimated the number of victims at between 250,000 and 300,000. The report from the village of Bandiagara illustrates the situation:

Two semi-arid years (1911, 1912) followed by one year of complete drought inevitably resulted in a terrible famine. In reality, cereals as well as forage from the harvest of 1913 and 1914 were completely lacking; hence the high mortality of peoples and animals. [...] A large section of

the population is forced to nourish itself from the fruit of the trees and then solely from their leaves. [...] in February 1914, the villages began to depopulate. Death is followed by the exodus of many of those who survived and move towards the regions less affected. In the village of Bandiagara alone, approximately ten people died per day for many weeks. In sum, the famine of 1913/1914 has decreased the population of the district by about the third. Concerning the livestock, everything suggests that it will have been reduced by half.¹

This case of famine was not unique to the Western Sahel in the first decades of the 20th century. According to Boureima Alpha Gado, the populations of Fulani, Songhai, Gourma and Mossi retained in their collective memory three great famines from the colonial period. The famine of 1901 – 1903 called *lse-neere*, the sale of children; in 1913 – 1914 known as *gande-beeri*, endless, and the famine of 1931 – 1932, which was caused by a massive invasion of locusts.²

The aim of this article is not to discuss the detailed history of famines in the West African Sahel under the conditions of colonialism. However, this anecdote from the French Soudan is a good starting point for the discussion that follows.³

Sixty years after independence from France, the countries in the West African Sahel such as Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger are considered world-wide as states in crisis. A variety of indexes regularly produced by international organisations have classified them among the poorest and the most politically unstable nations in the world.⁴ The Sahel (from the Arabic word *sāhil*, coast) is generally understood as a zone of semi-desert and savannah in sub-Saharan Africa, stretching along the southern border of the Sahara from the Atlantic Ocean in Senegal and Mauritania, through Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, northern Nigeria and Chad towards the Indian Ocean in Soudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

¹ BELIME, E. *Les travaux du Niger* (1942), p. 17.

² GADO, B. A. Sociétés paysannes et insécurité alimentaire en Afrique Sahélienne. Stratégies de survie et méthodes de lutte contre les famines dans les anciennes colonies de l'AOF. In BECKER, Ch. (ed.). *AOF. Réalités et héritages. Sociétés ouest-africaines et ordre colonial, 1895 – 1960*, p. 558.

³ In this article I use the French transcription of “Soudan” that refers both to the geographical space south of the Sahara as well as to the colony of Soudan or French Soudan, today Mali. The name “Soudan” is used only to designate a country in Eastern Africa.

⁴ See for example the last *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2019. Illuminating Inequalities*. Published by United Nation Development Program (UNDP), 2019. [online] [cit. 1 October 2020]. Available from < <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2019-MPI>>; see also *Fragile States Index Annual Report 2019*, pp. 6–7 [online] [cit. 1 October 2020]. Available from <<https://fundforpeace.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/04/9511904-fragilestatesindex.pdf>>.

Since the end of the 1960s the world media has constantly reported on the underdevelopment of this region and the Sahel quickly became, especially in Western imagination, the symbol of endemic poverty and crisis in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵ The frequent conflicts, insurgencies, coup d'états or civil wars in the postcolonial period have significantly contributed to reinforcing such a perception. Since the beginning of the 21st century, particularly the West African Sahel has remained the focus of international attention predominantly because of the significant rise in terrorism, ethnic violence, demographic explosion and clandestine migration.⁶ The issues of environmental degradation and climate change have occupied a particular place in these debates. According to data from the United Nations Office for Western Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) from 15 July 2019, worsening environmental conditions are having a significant impact on tension and conflict in countries such as Mali, Chad, Niger or Nigeria.⁷ Many other reports as well as the global media are constantly reporting on the insecurity and poverty in West African states whose leaders are often accused of being unable to secure peace and stability for their people. As a result, it has become a commonplace that the Western Sahel is a region in permanent crisis.⁸

The increase in the number of such reports underscores the needs for a better understanding of the Sahel in different historical contexts. The traditional periodization of African history into a pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period certainly has its logic in academic practice or in the construction of the historical narrative but it may also lead to simplistic interpretations. When discussing poverty, insecurity or environmental degradation in Africa south of the Sahara, many of the writings and debates refer predominantly to the era of African independence. As Nic Cheeseman rightly pointed out, political scientists are likely to use post-colonial Africa as a kind of laboratory for

⁵ On this subject see MANN, G. *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel. The road to nongovernmentality*; BONNECASE, V. *La pauvreté au Sahel: du savoir colonial à la mesure internationale*.

⁶ Council of the European Union. *The Council conclusions on the Sahel, as adopted at the 3688th meeting of the Council on 13 May 2019*. Brussels 13 May 2019 [online] [cit. 1 October 2020]. Available from <<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9103-2019-INIT/en/pdf>>.

⁷ *Activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel. Report of the Secretary-General. 15 July 2019* [online] [cit. 1 October 2020]. Available from <<https://unowas.unmissions.org/reports>>.

⁸ *The Sahel Trap*. In: *The Africa report*, 5. May 2020 [online] [cit. 1 October 2020]. Available from https://mcusercontent.com/6f73d53fb63e8c665c4e3800d/files/ae8e2fc0-f2e5-4fc4-ad74-6390df24ca60/PDF_SAHEL_2020.pdf; see also MANN, G. *From Empire to NGOs in West African Sahel. The Road to Nongovernmentality*, p. 3.

studying the failures of states to build democracy.⁹ There is no doubt that this approach has been of significant importance for history and social science. On the other hand, I argue that it has also contributed to the commonly held view that ineffective governance, famines, epidemics, conflicts or rebellions concerned only the period of independent African states. Not surprisingly, in Western society there is still a widespread opinion, that colonialism in Africa, even after taking into account the oppressive and exploitative character of its rule, was at least able to secure peace, political stability or food security.¹⁰

This study aims to be a contribution to these debates. Based on the current scholarship and primary sources it views the current crisis in the West African Sahel from an historical perspective, more precisely during the first three decades of the twentieth century. During this period, most of this region was part of French West Africa, which was officially established by the French Ministry of the Colonies in 1895. Until its dissolution in 1958 – 1960, French West Africa was made up of eight colonial territories: Senegal, Mauritania, French Soudan (today Mali), Niger, Guinea, Upper Volta (today Burkina Faso), the Ivory Coast and Dahomey (today Benin). Except perhaps for the latter, all of these colonies are today the countries considered in one way or another as the “Sahel states”.

It is my contention that the study of the period when Western Sahel was ruled by the French colonial administration may shed new light on the issues important today.¹¹ The present-day countries in this region are the legacies of colonialism and I share the view of Merise Jalali who pointed out, that colonialism “generated countries whose geographies almost destined them to perpetual hardship”.¹² Nevertheless, it is not the goal of this paper to discuss the

⁹ CHEESEMAN, N. *Democracy in Africa. Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform*, see the introduction, pp. 1–32.

¹⁰ As an example of current academic writing on this topic see the controversial article GILLEY, B. The Case for Colonialism. In *Academic Questions*, 2018, Vol. 31, 167–185. [online] [cit. 1 October 2020]. Available from <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12129-018-9696-2>>. The article was first published in the journal *Third World Quarterly* in 2017. It provoked huge controversy and much criticism from thousands of academics. The author as well as the editors of the journals even received death threats. As a result, the article was withdrawn from the journal but was republished by *Academic Questions* in 2018.

¹¹ A good introduction to the history of the French relations with the states in the Sahel since the 19th century onwards is to be found in ROCHE, Ch. *Histoire des relations des pays du Sahel avec la France*.

¹² JALALI, M. *Tuareg Migration: A Critical Component of Crisis in The Sahel. Migration Policy Institute*. [online] [cit. 1 October 2020]. Available from <<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/tuareg-migration-critical-component-crisis-sahel>>

goods and bads of colonialism in Africa.¹³ My aim here is to demonstrate that the careful reading of the colonial reports and publications of various kinds reveals how the French colonial administration in Western Sahel faced similar challenges to the post-colonial states in this region, only in a different context.

Frederick Cooper defined the colonial state in Africa as a *gatekeeper state*. According to Cooper, colonial regimes “had weak instruments for entering into the social and cultural realm over which they presided, but they stood astride the intersection of the colonial territory and the outside world”.¹⁴ Thanks to superior military force they were able to impose their authority over their claimed territory and could easily control the import and export of goods from their colonies or the distribution and collection of resources. However, the colonial regimes “had trouble extending their power and their command of people’s respect inward” and failed to gain legitimacy and to routinize their authority.¹⁵

In this article I rely on this definition and I will demonstrate what threats and challenges the colonial state faced in the Western Sahel in the first decades of the 20th century. I will focus predominantly on the different aspects of its political insecurity and instability. I start by scrutinizing the Western Sahel as a unit of historical analysis and then I provide an introduction to the political transformation of the Western Sahel during French colonial expansion. Subsequently, in selected examples I will demonstrate what political threats and challenges were reported in the Western Sahel at the beginning of the 20th century and how they were treated by the colonial administration. For this purpose, I will use mainly the reports on the political situation in different colonies of French West Africa which are preserved in the Senegalese national archives in Dakar. And finally, I will demonstrate how some contemporary scientists warned that the worsening environmental conditions in the Western Sahel could challenge the political stability and even threaten the existence of whole states in the region. I will examine this issue by using the example of Edward Percy Stebbing’s study from 1935 on the processes of desertification in French West Africa as well as in British Nigeria.¹⁶

¹³ For a critical review of the existing literature see ZHOU, T. M., MACHENJERA, P. Colonialism, Poverty and (Under-) Development in Africa. In MAWERE, M. (ed.). *The African Conundrum. Rethinking the Trajectories of Historical, Cultural, Philosophical and Developmental Experiences in Africa*, pp. 33–97.

¹⁴ COOPER, F. *Africa since 1940. The Past of the Present*, p. 5

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 156–157.

¹⁶ STEBBING, P. E. The Encroaching Sahara. The Threat to the West African Colonies. In *The Geographical Journal*, 1935, Vol. 85, No. 6. pp. 506–519.

I argue that this interdisciplinary and comparative approach will provide a more complex view of the topics discussed and will deepen our knowledge of the historical development of Africa south of the Sahara. Given the huge ethnic diversity of the Western Sahel, this study considers primarily the geographical area rather than focusing on a particular population. I will examine the above-mentioned issues in the context of the following colonies of French West Africa: Senegal, Mauritania, Upper Volta, French Soudan and Niger.

I must emphasise that this article lays no claim to being exhaustive since the colonial archives offer great potential for studying issues important for West Africa today. However, I argue for the need to develop a more complex understanding of the Sahel than as it is often represented in many of today's news reports and security analyses. In this regard, this study aims to challenge the above-mentioned oversimplifications about development in this region and in Africa in general.

Colonial Western Sahel

To take the Western Sahel as a unit of historical analysis requires a short introduction. From the geographical perspective, according to Robert Stock, "the Sahel is a transnational zone of drought-adapted vegetation between the savannah and the desert".¹⁷ It is often understood as a semi-desert, arid region of extreme climate uncertainty with random cycles of humid and dry periods. Stretching from the Atlantic to French Soudan, this zone on the southern edge of the Sahara has been an area of contacts between pastoralist and sedentary agricultural communities diverse in ethnicity as well as in social and economic practices.¹⁸ Throughout the centuries, the farmers and herders in the Sahel established complicated but effective systems of production and common trade. However, their interactions were frequently accompanied by tension and violent conflict caused by a variety of factors: political and social ambitions, increase in population or competition over resources, primarily the land for farming and pastures.¹⁹

¹⁷ STOCK, R. *Africa South of Sahara. A Geographical Perspective*, p. 156; see also CHERLET, M., HUTCHINSON, C. REYNOLDS, J., HILL, J., SOMMER, S., VON MALTITZ, G. (eds.). *World Atlas of Desertification*, pp. 190–194.

¹⁸ DURMONTIER, B. *L'Afrique : du Sahel et du Sahara à la Méditerranée*, p. 25.

¹⁹ A comprehensive analysis of farmer-herder conflicts in West Africa by the turn of the 20th century may be found in a special issue of the journal *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 2006, Vol. 40, No. 1, For a good overview of this topic from historical perspective see particularly the introductory

Bonnecase and Brachet argue that the word “Sahel”, designating a specific geographical space in West Africa, was already used in the Arab chronicles in the 17th century which dealt with the Songhay empire centred in the regions of Gao and Timbuktu.²⁰ From Arabic the word “Sahel” entered local languages such as Bambara, Fulani and Tamasheq. The 19th century European travellers and explorers in this region used the word Sahel only rarely. The use of the term remained predominantly the preserve of the local African languages in which the Sahel could refer to various places.²¹

It is important to emphasise that during the colonial conquest in the 19th century, the French referred to this area primarily as “le Soudan”. The word originated from the Arabic “bilad al-Soudan”, the Land of Blacks, used by medieval Arab merchants to designate the plains in West Africa. In the first half of the 20th century the term “Soudan” continued to predominate the French colonial writings. However, a number of scientific articles and reports from the first decades of the 20th century suggest that the term “Sahel”, and especially its adjectival form “sahélien/sahélienne” were frequently used particularly by scientists studying the geography and climate of French West Africa.

For example, André Aubréville, a prominent French botanist and inspector of the colonial waters and forests in French West Africa, in 1936 described the colony of Niger as situated largely in the “zone sahélienne”. He even distinguished different zones within the Sahel such as “la zone présahélienne”, “la zone sahélienne”, “la zone présoudanaise”.²² Equally, another scientist studying the colony of Niger in the 1930s, Serge Frolow, published an interesting article about the climate particularities of Niamey, the capital of the colony of Niger, in which he used terms such as “le climat sahélien” or “le climat soudanais et sahélien”.²³

However, it must be emphasised that some colonial writings applied the word “Sahel” to a particular administrative region. Such was the case of the

article MORITZ, M. *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 2006, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 1–40.

²⁰ BONNECASE, V., BRACHET, J. Les „crises sahéliennes“ entre perceptions locales et gestions internationales. In *Politique Africaine*, 2013, Vol. 2, No. 130, pp. 5–22, 8. The authors mention particularly the great chronicles *Ta’rīkh al-Fattāsh* and *Ta’rīkh al-Sūdān*, translated into French in the early 20th century.

²¹ Ibid.

²² AUBREVILLE, A. Les forêts de la colonie du Niger. In *Bulletin du Comité des études historiques et scientifiques de l’Afrique Occidentale Française*, 1936, Vol. XIX, No. 1, pp. 1–96.

²³ FROLOW, S. Notes sur le climat de Niamey. In *Bulletin du Comité d’études historiques et scientifiques de l’Afrique Occidentale Française*, 1936, No. 1, Vol. XIX, pp. 150–188.

town of Nioro in the western part of French Soudan.” In 1920, Paul Marty, an inspector of Islam in French West Africa, published a book “*Etudes sur l’Islam et les tribus du Soudan*”, (Studies on Islam and Tribes in Soudan).²⁴ Based on Marty’s careful observation and research, this exhaustive work in four volumes provides a detailed description of Islam and its various practices in the colony of French Soudan in the early 20th century. In one of the last chapters, where he discussed the Nioro district, he wrote about “Nioro du Sahel” or Nioro in the Sahel. He emphasised that the term was borrowed from local terminology but the important fact is that Marty used the word “Sahel” in terms of political geography and not as a climate zone. What is more, Marty defined it as the “Western Sahel” inhabited by a Muslim population:

Nioro in the Sahel is, in local terminology, the vast territory between the eastern borders of Mauritania, Hodh and the region of Kayes. In short, it is the Western Sahel. In our understanding of administrative geography, it constitutes the vast district of Nioro, including its two subdivisions of Nioro and Yélimané [...] the territory of the Sahel is completely Islamised.²⁵

Nevertheless, until the second half of the 20th century, scholars continued to define the Sahel almost uniquely from a perspective of physical geography and as a particular climate zone. According to historians such as Allan Hill and Gregory Mann, it was the dramatic drought at the beginning of the 1970s that marked a fundamental milestone in the global perception of this region.²⁶ The long dry period in the Sahel in combination with demographic growth resulted in extensive famine. Firstly, it appeared particularly in Mali but it quickly affected the other countries in the region. The subsequent humanitarian crisis shocked the whole world and the Sahel attracted the unprecedented attention of the world’s media. In response to the disastrous effects of the famine, the Sahel Institute was founded in 1976 in Bamako. It originally brought together eight countries: Cape Verde, Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Mauritania, Chad, Niger and Burkina Faso. The founding of the institute thus defined for the first time the Sahel as a “geopolitical” region.²⁷ In the following years the Sahel quickly

²⁴ MARTY, P. *Etudes sur l’Islam et les tribus du Soudan*.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 200–201.

²⁶ HILL, G. A. (ed.). *Population, Health and Nutrition in the Sahel. Issues in the Welfare of Selected West African Communities*. (2nd edition), p. 2; MANN, G. *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel. The road to Nongovernmentality*.

²⁷ HILL, G. A. (ed.). *Population, Health and Nutrition in the Sahel. Issues in the Welfare of Selected West African Communities*, p. 2. Today, the organisation also brings together other African countries: Benin, the Ivory Coast, Guinea Bissau, Guinea and

emerged as the geopolitical term widely used by journalists, academics or politicians.

From Jihad to French Colonial State

The French conquest of the Western Sahel was to a large extent a long war against powerful jihadist movements and Islamic states. The acquisition of the Western Sahel by France took place between approximately 1850 and 1910 when this part of Africa was integrated into French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa. Naturally, the French expansion evoked a mixture of reactions among the local Muslim clerics. While some were more or less indifferent, or even supported the presence of the new power in the region, there were many who perceived it as a Christian attack on the *Umma* and fervently called for a holy war.²⁸

It is important to emphasise that at the time of French colonial expansion, the jihad against the infidels was nothing new in the vast plains south of the Sahara. Islam as a significant political as well as economic factor had been present in West Africa since at least the eleventh century. For hundreds of years it remained largely the business of the political elites and the higher class of merchants who profited primarily from the trans-Saharan trade with Muslim states in North Africa. It was not until the 19th century that Islam became the main religion in the Western Sahel. It was a result of the reformist Islamic movement that had flourished in the West African plains since the end of the 18th century, led by influential Muslim clerics who criticised the traditional elites for their corruption and impure religious life.²⁹ Some of them, such as al-Ḥājj Umar, Ahmadou Tall, Samori Touré or Usman dan Fodio, the sultan of the Sokoto Caliphate, became successful political and military leaders who under the banner of Islam created powerful and influential empires across West Africa. Although these leaders and empires had never formed a united front

Togo. The prime aim of the Sahel Institute is to conduct research in the fields of demographic development, desertification and regional self-sufficiency in food production [online] [cit. 1 October 2020]. For more information, see the Institute's website at <https://insah.cilss.int/>

²⁸ ABDALLAH, D. O. Guerre Sainte ou sédition blâmable. In ROBINSON, D., TRIAUD, J. L. (eds.). *Le temps des Marabouts. Itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française (1860 – 1960)*, p. 119.

²⁹ ROBINSON, D. *Paths of Accommodation. Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania 1880 – 1920*.

against colonialism, they all strongly opposed the colonial conquest and the French were able to defeat them only after long and devastating wars.³⁰

The French colonial expansion into the Sahel began shortly after Louis Faidherbe became the governor of Senegal in 1854.³¹ He extended French authority into the valley of the Upper Senegal river where he defeated the empire of al-Ḥájj Umar Tall in Futa Toro. His aim was to continue the conquest and to reach the Niger river. However, the situation in the French “Second Empire” under Napoleon III. prevented him from undertaking further campaigns. The French conquest of the Sahel was renewed a decade later when France sought to re-establish its status as a world power after its catastrophic defeat in the war with Prussia in 1870/1871.³² Between approximately 1880 – 1910 the French led a number of military campaigns from Senegal, Algeria and Gabon towards the Niger river and to lake Chad in order to unite their colonial possessions in Western and Central Africa. In 1898, the French republic and Great Britain signed the convention of Niger that definitively marked the diplomatic partition of this region between the two powers.³³

As mentioned above, the French conquest of the Western Sahel met both with the collaboration of the local population but also with fierce resistance. However, in three decades of colonial wars the French conquered all the important centres such as Bamako in 1883, Segou in 1890, Nioro in 1891, Timbuktu in 1894, Gao in 1899 – 1903 and Zinder in 1899. The same year, the three French military expeditions from Algeria, Senegal and Gabon reached Lake Chad.³⁴ The last obstacle to French dominance in the region, Rabah, the sultan of Bornu, was defeated in April 1900.³⁵ By the turn of the 20th century, the Western Sahel from Senegal and Mauritania to Lake Chad was officially part of French West Africa.

In 1913, André Lèguillette, a teacher on the Senegalese island of Gorée, published the first official history of French West Africa.³⁶ This work can be considered as the first attempt to synthesise the historical development of

³⁰ DION, I. *Vers le lac Tchad. Expéditions françaises et résistances africaines*, p. 16.

³¹ As already mentioned in the introduction, the French understood it as the conquest of Soudan, not as the conquest of the Sahel.

³² For a good overview of the the French penetration into Western Soudan see especially KLEIN, A. M. *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*; ROCHE, Ch. *Histoire des relations des pays du Sahel avec la France*, see particularly Chapter 2, pp. 41–83.

³³ BAUDAIS, V. *Les trajectoires de l'état au Mali*, p. 91.

³⁴ On the French expedition to Lake Chad see DION, I. *Vers le lac Tchad. Expéditions françaises et résistances africaines*.

³⁵ DION, I. *Vers le lac Tchad*, p. 19.

³⁶ LEGUILLETTE, A. *Histoire de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*.

French West Africa from the precolonial period to the creation of the French colonial state. The conclusion of the book depicts the creation of French West Africa as a victory of the French “civilising mission”:

In less than half a century, France transformed the landscape between the Sahara, the Atlantic and Chad. Violence and endless wars were replaced by peace and security: thanks to them, order came in the place of anarchy, and small tyrannical states were replaced by an organized and stable administration, bringing general welfare. [...] Step by step, they [Africans] begin to realize the benefits of civilized life and advance on the path of progress.³⁷

This example demonstrates how the official colonial discourse represented French West Africa as a “transformed land” in peace and prosperity. The reality was, however, much more complicated. At the beginning of the 20th century, much of the French West Africa, especially in the Sahel and Sahara, was far from being a pacified or prosperous state. Nevertheless, one of L  guillette’s conclusions was correct and uncontroversial: the significant political and administrative transformation of “the landscape between the Sahara, the Atlantic and Chad”.

The Governance of the Western Sahel

The conquest was followed by the establishing of the colonial administration. The government of French West Africa was officially created in 1895 but, as shown above, the conquest of much of its proclaimed territory had only just begun.³⁸ As a result, the organisation of the colonial administration was a complicated process that was determined by the advance of the military campaigns and the pacification of particular regions. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Western Sahel was formally divided between the colony of Senegal and the colony of Upper-Senegal-Niger. While Senegal, the oldest French colony in sub-Saharan Africa, was already conquered and pacified by the end of the 19th century, in the first decade of the 20th century much of the Upper-Senegal-Niger was still administered as a military territory. It was

³⁷ Cited in TRNOVEC, S. *The Conquest of the African Mind. History, Colonial Racism, and Education in Senegal and French West Africa 1910 – 1945*, p. 34.

³⁸ For the historical background and an overview of the creation of the Government General of French West Africa see BECKER, C. (ed.). *AOF. R  alit   et h  ritage. Soci  t  s ouest-africaines et ordre colonial, 1895 – 1960*.

between 1911 and 1920 that Upper Senegal-Niger was divided into three other colonies – French Soudan, Upper Volta and Niger.³⁹

The colonial administration was highly centralised. All important decisions were made in Dakar, the prestigious capital of French West Africa and the seat of the Governor General. Despite his dependence on the Ministry of Colonies, the Governor General was a powerful political figure with significant prestige. His office granted him important autonomous rights in the areas of finance, education, justice or regarding the colonial army deployed in French West Africa.⁴⁰

Each colony within the French West Africa was an autonomous unit and was administered by a Lieutenant Governor whose seat was in the capital of the particular colony. For Senegal and Mauritania, it was the old French colonial town of Saint-Louis. For French Soudan it was Bamako, for Niger it was Niamey, for Upper Volta it was Ouagadougou, for Guinea it was Conakry, Bingerville for the Ivory Coast and Porto-Novo for Dahomey. All Lieutenant Governors were directly responsible to the Governor General in Dakar.

The colonies were divided into further administrative regions or districts known as *cercles*. At the head of each *cercle* was a French administrator, called a *commandant de cercle*. Out of all French colonial officials, he was the one in closest contact with the subjected African population, which made him one of the most important figures in the colonial administration. He was responsible for the enforcement of the Governor's laws and decrees at the local level. He was also responsible for taxation and enjoyed a wide range of judicial and military powers to ensure law and order. However, his authority largely relied on the loyalty of native chiefs who were the heads of local villages.⁴¹

The conquest and the establishing of the colonial administration divided the Western Sahel into the borders that with only minor changes represent its transnational division today. It is a historical fact that since independence the colonial borders have been crucial aspect of various conflicts and crises across West Africa. However, a number of scholars increasingly warn that the role of colonial borders can be in some cases over-estimated.⁴² The suggestions of Pierre Boilley on the Tuaregs in the Western Sahel and Sahara are of particular

³⁹ BAUDAIS, V. *Les trajectoires de l'état au Mali*, pp. 92–93.

⁴⁰ *Exposition coloniale internationale de 1931. Gouvernement de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*, 1931, pp. 39–41 [online]. Available from <https://gallica.bnf.fr>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² ZHOU, T. M., MACHENJERA, P. Colonialism, Poverty and (Under-) Development in Africa. In MAWERE, M. (ed.). *The African Conundrum. The Rethinking the Trajectories of Historical, Cultural, Philosophical and Developmental Experiences in Africa*, pp. 33–97.

importance. In his recent article on the northern borders of present-day Mali, Boilley deconstructs the recurring argument that numerous Tuareg insurgencies against the Malian state in the last six decades were primarily the result of the colonial division of the Azawad region, the traditional homeland of the Tuareg population, between different colonial territories such as Algeria, French Soudan and Niger.⁴³ Although he allows the colonial division of Azawad a significant degree of importance, he argues that the colonial borders cannot be the sole explanation of the frequent rebellions in this area. Boilley demonstrates that the establishing of the colonial borders between the French Soudan, Algeria and Niger reflected not only the purposes of the French colonial administration but that it took into consideration the political division of the different Tuareg factions and their spheres of influence. He puts forward the theory that in the case of these recurrent rebellions, it was the marginalisation of Tuaregs in the colonial and postcolonial states that matters more than the colonial partition of their traditional living space.

Islam in the Reports on the Political Situation

Each year, the colonial administration in French West Africa produced a large number of reports of various kinds. The colonial officials and inspectors across the colony regularly reported to the authorities in Dakar about the political situation, economic development or about the colonial education in their administrative units. The reports on the political situation are of particular importance for this study. They reflected the attitudes of the African population towards the colonial administration, the activities of Muslim preachers or analysed the issue of security. Given the geographic and ethnic heterogeneity of French West Africa, the content of the reports varied from region to region. All Lieutenant Governors regularly gathered the reports from the *cercles* or military territories of the colony they administered. On the basis of the data collected, they drew up annual reports for the whole colony which were sent to the central offices in Dakar where the most important points were summarized in the annual reports on French West Africa. Regarding the Western Sahel, these reports provide a unique insight into various aspects of the interaction between the colonial administration and African society in this region.

Islam as an important political and social factor occupied a particular place in the reports. Scholars exploring the subject of Islam in French West Africa

⁴³ BOILLEY, P. Nord-Mali: les frontières coloniales de l'Azawad. In *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 2019, Vol. 53, No. 3, pp. 469–484.

generally agree that the French colonial administration and the Muslim authorities were able to create a fragile but functioning mode of mutual respect and coexistence.⁴⁴ During the colonial period, Muslim communities in French West Africa expressed their religious identity in terms of belonging to one of the three main Muslim Sufi orders, also called brotherhoods: Tijānīya, Qādirīya and Murīdīya. As there was no central religious authority in West Africa, the Muslim communities in the rural areas as well as in the colonial towns clustered around the local clerics known as *marabouts*. They led the popular qur'anic schools and some of them were great Muslim intellectuals who usually enjoyed great respect and authority.⁴⁵

The French experience of violent confrontation with Muslim armies in North Africa, and in Algeria in particular, continued to shape the colonial policy towards Islam also in West Africa.⁴⁶ The colonial administration in Dakar paid particular attention to the questions of religion, and to Islam in particular.⁴⁷ The colonial officials and administrators across French West Africa carefully monitored the behaviour of *marabouts* and their attitude towards what the French called “notre cause” or “notre action”. The following example of the political report on the *cercle* of Podor in 1924, a town and administrative region on the middle flow of the Senegal River, is a good illustration of such a survey:

The survey of the *marabouts*, in a discreet way, enables us to conclude that in the district there was no religious centre hostile to our action. They merely teach the Qur'an to their pupils, few in number, who then leave to continue their religious education with a more influential sheikh, usually in Mauritania [...].⁴⁸

The report on the annual political situation in the same *cercle* of Podor from 1931 shows how the loyal attitude of the Muslim population towards French rule was often measured by their willingness to send their children to French

⁴⁴ ROBINSON, D. *Les sociétés musulmanes africaines. Configurations et trajectoires historiques*, pp. 255–275.

⁴⁵ ROBINSON, D. *Paths of Accommodation. Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880 – 1920*, p. 16.

⁴⁶ SEESEMAN, R., SOARES, F. B. Being as Good Muslims as Frenchman. On Islam and Colonial Modernity in West Africa. In *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 2009, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 91–120, 93.

⁴⁷ In 1906, the colonial administration in Dakar established a specialised institution – *Le Service des affaires musulmanes*, the Department of Muslim Affairs. Its task was to collect and evaluate information on Islam in French West Africa.

⁴⁸ Archives nationales du Sénégal (ANS) 2G 24, *Sénégal. Cercle de Podor. Rapport politique annuel d'ensemble 1924. Marabouts et islam*.

schools. In the part dedicated to the political situation and Islam in the district, the report stated:

To varying degrees, the whole population of the district are Muslims. Despite this, the Toucouleur people send their children to French schools when we persuade them that there is no incompatibility between a French and a qur'anic education. The same is not true of the Fulani who remain more recalcitrant and [...] strive by all means to remove their children from French influence.⁴⁹

The fears of the colonial administration in Dakar that a reformist Islam could challenge the fragile colonial order can be demonstrated by the fact that the administrators regularly reported even the nonexistence of “fanatical” marabouts in the concerned region. The same report from Podor states that “nothing is known about the fanatical marabouts in the district [...] the principal religious personalities show intelligence and a great broad-mindedness”.⁵⁰

In Senegal and Mauritania, the Tijānīya brotherhood attracted the particular attention of the colonial authorities. The reason for this was historical experience from the beginnings of the French colonial expansion into the Senegal River in 1860s, when the governor Louis Faidherbe fought against the army of the Muslim leader al-Ḥājj Umar Tall, affiliated to the Tijānīya. Since then, for colonial administration the Tijānīya label became a byword to designate the Muslim fanatics committed to jihad.⁵¹ However, scholars such as Dedou Ould Abdallah and Yahya Wuld al-Bara have shown that despite the mixed legacy that al-Ḥājj Umar Tall left among the Muslim population as well as in the French perception, in the first decades of the 20th century the most influential marabouts of the Tijānīya brotherhood were loyal to the colonial administration.⁵²

⁴⁹ ANS 2G 31 (82) *Sénégal. Cercle de Podor. Rapport politique annuel d'ensemble 1931. Situation religieuse et islam*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ SEESEMAN, R., SOARES, F. B. Being as Good Muslims as Frenchman. On Islam and Colonial Modernity in West Africa. In *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 2009, Vol. 39, No. 1, p. 154.

⁵² ABDALLAH, D. O. Guerre Sainte ou sédition blâmable. In ROBINSON, D., TRIAUD, J. L. (eds.). *Le temps des Marabouts. Itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française (1860 – 1960)*. Paris: Karthala, 1997; AL-BARA, Y. W. Les théologiens mauritaniens face au colonialisme français: études de fatwa-s de jurisprudence musulmane. In ROBINSON, D., TRIAUD, J. L. (eds.). *Le temps des Marabouts. Itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française (1860 – 1960)*. 1997.

Nevertheless, the important point is that the French colonial officials remained vigilant in relation to Tijānīya marabouts. The political report on the situation in Senegal from 1930 reveals that they monitored their activities very carefully. In August 1929, the marabout Yacouba Sylla preached in favour of the social and religious reform of the Tijānīya in the town of Kaédi in southern Mauritania, close to the border with Senegal. Despite the opposition of the Muslim authorities, he was able to gather followers from various backgrounds – merchants, scholars, slaves or former slaves. Because of the danger that such reforms, or any deviations from the Tijānīya orthodoxy, could represent for the colonial order in Mauritania and Senegal, the French exiled him to Ivory Coast. Nevertheless, his followers continued to spread his teaching and regularly came into conflict with local authorities and inhabitants of the town. This led the colonial administration to the violent suppression of the movement when the guards killed more than 20 followers of Yacouba Sylla in the streets of Kaédi and hundreds of them were imprisoned or sent into exile in different corners of French West Africa.⁵³

The colonial authorities were aware that such reformist movements could easily spread across the wider region and gain the support of the larger Muslim population especially in times of serious economic crisis, such as that in 1931 affecting the whole French West Africa. Yacouba Sylla thus represented a serious threat for colonial order. Despite the fact that the Muslim authorities affiliated to the Tijānīya brotherhood both in Senegal and Mauritania refused the reforms of Yacouba Sylla, the authorities in Dakar surveyed carefully the activities of his followers in different regions of the river Senegal:

The special theories professed in Mauritania by illuminated Yacouba Sylla who provoked the tragic events of Kaédi in February 1930 were spread on the left bank of the river [Senegal] by two brothers of this marabout, namely Kemba Sylla and Demba Sylla. [They] agitated in favour of their brother's doctrine, but their immediate followers, numbering 300, were quickly drowned in the mass of the orthodox [Tijānīya followers]. The influential marabouts of Senegal affiliated to Tijānīya are all entirely devoted to our cause.⁵⁴

⁵³ HANRETTA, S. *Islam and Social Change in French West Africa: History of an Emancipatory Community*, pp. 1–2.

⁵⁴ ANS 2G 30/4, *Sénégal – Rapport annuel politique 1930, résumé* (manuscript).

The Report on the Political Situation in French West Africa in 1930

The political report on French West Africa from 1930 provides another good illustration of the various problems and challenges the French colonial administration faced in the Western Sahel in the first decades of the 20th century. First of all, the report reveals that in 1930 the overall colony was in an exceptional economic crisis.⁵⁵ Yet, in the context of the great economic depression that since 1929 spread across the world one could say that such findings and observations are not surprising. In this regard, the report warned about the falling price of peanut or oilseed which affected primarily the colonies or regions based on monoculture products. On the other hand, it also underlined the negative impact of the harsh environmental conditions, especially in the regions just south of the Sahara:

The colonies with various food crops and diversified agricultural resources are experiencing a loss-making year due [...] to the abnormal invasion of the locusts arriving in swarms such as the natives say they have not seen for 30 years. The sub-desert regions have been no less affected. [...] They withstand with difficulty the unfavourable climatic conditions as well as the harmful insects.⁵⁶

The colonial administration observed with apprehension the reactions and behaviour of the African population to these unfavourable economic developments. The French administrators feared that falling incomes and the food crisis among the indigenous population could encourage anti-French feelings and possibly result in the demonstrations of disobedience or even widespread unrest.⁵⁷ However, the interesting fact remains that in 1930 only few protests were reported in relation to this difficult economic circumstances. Nevertheless, a careful reading of the report suggests not only a constant fear of the reactions of the African population to the economic crises in French West Africa, but it also reveals the persistence of the real instability and insecurity, particularly in the Western Sahel and Sahara which had their origins in the local historical context.

By the year 1930, the French colonial administration in Western Sahel was still struggling to impose its authority over the local African population in a number of regions. What is more, in some instances it was necessary to use

⁵⁵ ANS 2G 30, AOF – *Rapport politique d'ensemble 1930. Direction des affaires politiques et administratives. Rapport politique – année 1930.*

⁵⁶ ANS 2G 30, AOF – *Rapport politique d'ensemble 1930*, p. 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3

exemplary power and violence. Such was the case with Domathéon, a village in the *cercle* of Batié in southern Upper Volta. Inhabited predominantly by the Lobi and Birifor people, by the end of the 1920s the population of this region was still fiercely opposed to colonial rule. Being one of the centres of this resistance, on 15. December 1929 the village of Domathéon was destroyed and its population massacred by a French mobile detachment from Batié.⁵⁸

The report on the political situation in French West Africa in 1930 reflected this event and confirms that further similar actions were undertaken in the *cercle* of Batié at the beginning of that year. In July 1930 the mobile detachment was still actively operating around the *cercle* in order to impose French authority. The report referred to these military operations as “the plan of political sanitation”.⁵⁹ However, it was the power used against the village of Domathéon that had a decisive impact on breaking the resistance. This demonstrates how in 1930 the stability and authority of French colonial state in some regions of Western Sahel still depended on the manifestation of power and, if needed, on using violence in order to intimidate the African population:

The severe lesson inflicted on the rebellious population of the village of Domathéon the previous year (15 December 1929) bore fruit. The tours of recognition and taming are carried out with success. At no time were there any violent reactions requiring us to resort to using force. From April (1930), all the tax was collected. On July 14th, the population gathered in the chief town of the Cercle (Batié) to take part in the celebration of the National Holiday were present in large numbers, with the exception of those who belonged to two regions that had not yet been brews by the mobile detachment.⁶⁰

Another interesting case comes from the colonies of Mauritania and French Soudan, where the regular conflicts among the nomads – Moors and Tuaregs – living on the edge of the desert and in the Sahara were reported in 1930. According to the report, these conflicts occurred each year between different factions of the nomads and often resulted in violent clashes and frequent fatalities.⁶¹ The colonial administration watched and monitored them carefully

⁵⁸ KAMBOU-FERRAND, J. M. Guerre et résistance sous la période coloniale en pays lobi/birifor (Burkina Faso) au travers de photos d'époque. In FIELUX, M., LOMBARD, J., KAMBOU-FERRAND, J. M. (eds.). *Images d'Afrique et sciences sociales. Les pays lobi, birifor et dagara*, pp. 92–96.

⁵⁹ ANS 2G 30, AOF – *Rapport politique d'ensemble 1930*, p. 6. The transcription of the factions I use here is the same as in the document.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

and occasionally intervened to calm down the situation. Despite the fact that in 1930 the report underlined the decreasing frequency of these conflicts, the colonial officials still reported instances of local unrest. They had their roots in the region's long and complicated history and were often influenced by the harsh environmental conditions. Such was, for example, the conflict over the wells in south eastern Mauritania:

One Soudanese faction, namely the Ahel Hajaj of the Ouled Bella tribe, who make up part of Mauritania and part of the *cercle* of Néma, attacked the Tiguiguit wells of the Ahel Soumad faction originating from Tichitt... driven by a long-held grudge. The incident caused one death and several injuries. After the joint intervention of the administrative authorities the culprits were arrested and given exemplary sentences...⁶²

Another similar incident was reported from the *cercle* of Nara in west-central French Soudan close to the border with Mauritania: "...breaking the law, the Idabouck nomads, [organised] in gangs and armed, began to carry out a series of acts of plunder around [the *cercle* of Nara]. Judicial repression was not slow in coming and did not even spare their chief who was sentenced to 15 years in prison."⁶³

To conclude this section, the report made the general statement that "...[Although] the instances of disorder and rapine could not be yet considered as extinct among the itinerant tribes in the North, a clear improvement must be noted thanks to the regular implementation of the judicial system".⁶⁴

These examples from Mauritania and French Soudan demonstrate one important issue. In each case the report underscored how the colonial state was able to solve or calm the conflicts or acts of disobedience of the nomads in the Western Sahel by the resolute action of the colonial administration, both military and judicial. The judicial aspect is particularly emphasised in the report as well as the ability to punish the main actors in a legal way.⁶⁵ In my opinion, this can be read in two ways: firstly, that despite the frequent conflicts the French were able to establish in this part of the Western Sahel a more or less effective administration that enabled them to solve the issues of stability and security. And secondly, that this emphasis on the "action judiciaire" was to a

⁶² Ibid., p. 12.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 12. The transcription of the nomads as Idabouck that I use here is the same as in the document.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶⁵ The relations between the French colonial administration and the African population in French West Africa were defined by the series of the repressive laws known as the "Code de l'Indigénat", the native code.

large extent intentional. Stressing the effective judicial governance over and above military intervention was an important part of French colonial discourse in order to legitimise the colonial project. Bringing peace, prosperity and justice to “backward and barbarian” Africans was central to the French imperial ideology of the “civilising mission”.⁶⁶

Here it must be underlined that during the colonial period, the French regarded the nomadic Moors and Tuaregs from two different perspectives: firstly, they were sources of the constant fear of danger for the colonial order; and secondly, they were subjects of significant mystification in the colonial imagination. The latter is true for the Tuaregs in particular. According to Baz Lecocq, French colonial discourse depicted the Tuaregs usually as the fierce and mythical “warriors of the sands”. This stereotype had its roots in the fervent resistance of the Tuaregs against colonial conquest when they several times defeated the French colonial troops. What is more, in 1916, almost all Tuareg federations revolted against the French occupation and the pacification was not complete until 1920. This massive uprising led to a kind of paranoiac fears in French colonial circles that such revolts might be renewed.⁶⁷ “What the Zulu and the Masai are to the British stereotype of warrior tribes”, Lecocq argues, “the Kel Tamasheq (Tuaregs) are to the French.”⁶⁸

The political report on French West Africa in 1930 provides some very interesting data also on the colony of Niger. Compared with other territories of French West Africa in the first decades of the 20th century, Niger was undoubtedly the least developed colony in terms of effective administration, infrastructure, economy as well as colonial education. What is more, in 1930 much of its land was still administered as “military territory” and given these circumstances, force often supplemented the colonial authority.⁶⁹ This example of the attitude of some herders and nomads towards the colonial administration illustrates clearly these conditions:

[...] the Fulani nomads, extremely mobile, persist in neglecting everything that does not relate to their cattle. The Toubou of the

⁶⁶ On this subject in the context of colonial education see TRNOVEC, S. *The Conquest of The African Mind. History, Colonial Racism, and Education in Senegal and French West Africa 1910 – 1945*.

⁶⁷ LECOCQ, B. *Disputed Desert. Decolonization, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Mali*, pp. 128–129.

⁶⁸ LECOCQ, B. *Disputed Desert*, p.127. Scholars like Baz Lecocq who study Tuareg society prefer to use the term “Kel Tamasheq” rather than “Tuareg”. The Tuareg people call themselves “Kel Tamasheg” (those who speak the tamasheg language).

⁶⁹ *Exposition coloniale internationale de 1931. Le Niger*, pp. 17–19.

N'Guigmi region remain difficult to command. Due to their particular nature and their propensity to live from the rapine, far from all kind of direct control, attempts were made to organise a particular intelligence service within these tribes.⁷⁰

When dealing with the sedentary population of Niger in 1930, the report underlined the populations living in the region of Manga, in the south-eastern part of the colony, who continued to live “the same rough life” and resisted French authority. The colonial officials in the region constantly complained that the local people firmly refused the obligations imposed on them, the taxes and public works in particular. The Boudouma people living on Lake Chad, refused any contact with French civilisation: “[...] they keep isolating themselves on the islands of [Lake] Chad and continue to refuge with passive stubbornness from the whole of administrative life. Hardly accessible, they have escaped our influence.”⁷¹

Until 1930, the Saharan part of Niger was beyond the control of the French. According to the report, it was the Italian military campaign in neighbouring Tripolitania that led the French for more intensive military action. With the help of the loyal meharist detachments they occupied the plateau of Djado and Madama near the frontier with Italian Tripolitania.⁷² To spread French influence and authority over the peoples inhabiting this huge desert region the administration carried out constant military operations of various kinds: “[...] unexpected and rapid movements of the meharist units circulating outside the usual itineraries, a very attentive policing of tribes, frequency of surveys [and] overflying the plains obviously strengthened our authority over these so far relatively little-visited regions.”⁷³

⁷⁰ ANS 2G 30, AOF – *Rapport politique d'ensemble 1930*, p. 4.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁷² *Méharistes* were special units of the colonial army employed by the French colonial administration particularly in the Saharan region of French West Africa and Chad. They were recruited among the loyal nomad population such as Moors, Tuaregs as well as Arabs. They played a crucial role in securing French authority in the Sahara during the colonial period. ROCHE, Ch. *Histoire des relations des pays du Sahel avec la France*, p. 52.

⁷³ ANS 2G 30, AOF – *Rapport politique d'ensemble 1930*, pp. 4–5.

The Threat of the Extension of the Sahara Desert in Colonial Western Sahel - Stebbing Revisited

From November 1930 to June 1931, Edward Percy Stebbing, a professor of forestry at the University of Edinburgh, visited the British and the French colonies in West Africa in order to study the deforestation and desertification in the region just south of the Sahara desert. He summarized his findings in a famous and oft-cited article with the disturbing title, “the Encroaching Sahara”.⁷⁴ Based on careful observations in Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, French Soudan, Niger and Nigeria, he argued that the Sahara Desert had been slowly spreading towards the south. Stebbing, like many scientists of his era, put forward the theory that this process resulted from human activity, in particular the practices of indigenous agriculture and pastoralism. According to him, the Africans had been cutting down and burning the tropical forests, bush, or savannah in order to turn them into farming and pasture land. As a result, the trees, a natural barrier to the desert, diminished, the soil eroded and the sand inexorably moved towards the South. Such a reading of environmental degradation was quite common in the 1930s and 1940s and reflected the colonial debates about deforestation and desertification in what is currently understood as the Sahel.⁷⁵ As Monica Van Beusekom noted, climate change had not yet become a real issue and deforestation was at the centre of scientific interests.⁷⁶

However, for this study Stebbins’s report is significant from another point of view. He was among the first scientists to warn that environmental degradation, regardless of the causes, could threaten the existence of whole states in the West African Sahel:

There are number of colonies, British and French, on or to the south of the indefinite and indeterminate edge of the Sahara Desert. Conterminous with the boundary of the Sahara, or well within it, are the colonies of French Soudan; Haute Volta (French), with the Ivory Coast and Gold

⁷⁴ STEBBING, P. E. The Encroaching Sahara. The Threat to the West African Colonies. In *The Geographical Journal*, 1935, Vol. 85, No. 6, pp. 506–519.

⁷⁵ Among many others who defended this theory was the French botanist André Aubréville (1897 – 1982), the Inspector General of the Waters and Forests in French West Africa. He is credited with introducing the term “desertification” into scientific usage.

⁷⁶ VAN BEUSEKOM, M. M. From Underpopulation to Overpopulation: French Perceptions of Population, Environment, and Agricultural Development in French Soudan (Mali), 1900 – 1960. In *Environmental History*, 1999, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 198–219.

Coast to the south; Niger (French), with Nigeria to the south; and Lake Chad to the east with British Cameroons. Considerable parts of the French Colonies of Niger, Haute Volta (North), and French Soudan lie within the Sahara, while Southern Algeria is entirely within the desert. Portions of Northern Nigeria must now be held to lie within the problematical southern boundary line of the Sahara. If the Sahara is advancing south, all the colonies enumerated are threatened, to a variable degree, by the Great Desert.⁷⁷

Although he did not clearly specify the particular threats that “the encroaching desert” represented for colonial states on the edge of the Sahara, in various parts of his article he mentions the struggle for resources of the affected population, the diminishing number of human settlements and the migration of the people towards the regions with more suitable living conditions. In this regard, he perfectly informs current discussions about the crisis in the West African Sahel.

During his journey across the Western Sahel in northern Nigeria and in the French colonial territories of Niger and French Soudan, Stebbing gathered the set of data that enabled him to estimate the extent of desertification. According to him, in the last three centuries the Sahara was advancing towards the south at the pace of 1 km per year.⁷⁸ Based on his investigation, he even attempted to draw a line on the map to determine the advance of the sand towards the south. From west to east, this line went from Niore, Sokoto and Asongo in French Soudan and continued to Tahoua, Zinder and Lake Chad.⁷⁹

To underline the threat of the expanding desert, Stebbing argued that the lands north of this line, which in his day were a poor, dry savannah and semi-desert, were once a green land with great forests, rivers, fields and grassy meadows and pastures. He supported his theory by historical Arabic writings on the great empires in West Africa in the precolonial period. In particular, he used the example of the Songhai Empire in the 15th century. Its capital was in the ancient town of Gao on the left bank of the Niger river, approximately 90 km to the north above Stebbing’s line. According to his reading of the Arab historian Muhamad Kâti, who travelled in Soudan in the 15th century, it was certain that the region of Gao but also the whole zone between Gao, Agadez and Egyptian Soudan were in the 15th century a green and fertile land with plenty of water. He argued on the basis of the journey of the Songhai King Aksia Muhamad, who undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1496 – 1497. According

⁷⁷ STEBBING, E., *The Encroaching Sahara. The Threat to the West African Colonies. In The Geographical Journal*, 1935, Vol. 85, No. 6, p. 507.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

to Arab sources, king Muhamad departed from Gao with hundreds of soldiers, slaves, servants, family members and with a large number of camels, horses and donkeys. For Stebbing, such an expedition and long journey by the royal court would not have been possible if the country between Gao and Egypt had not been a fertile land:

For neither horses nor donkeys can be used for riding and transport unless pasturage and water are available at fairly close intervals; and the fact that Muhamad took his wife and great retinue and was absent for a year indicates that a very different state of affairs existed in the countryside he traversed to that existing at the present day.⁸⁰

In addition to these writings, Stebbing argued that the material evidence of this changing environment could be still seen in the country. The French colonial officials furnished him with information about the abandoned villages in desert zones in French Soudan, north of the line Nioro-Gumbu-Sokoto, that were permanently inhabited in the past. Equally, in the dry zone between Tahoua and Agadez in Niger, he mentions the ruins of the villages inhabited in the 18th century that could be “still discernible in the sand which overwhelmed them”.⁸¹

Admittedly Stebbing was not an historian and his ambition was not to discuss the causes that led to the collapse of the great empires in precolonial West Africa. Moreover, there is no doubt that in his argumentation Stebbing used much imagination, for which he received serious criticism from his contemporaries. In 1936, for example, the prominent French botanist André Aubréville published an article on the forests in Niger in which he argued that Stebbing’s demonstration was misleading. Aubréville argued that the dry Azawagh basin, spreading in eastern French Soudan and northwestern Niger was not purely desert. He emphasised that in his time there were numbers of depressions with vegetation and full of wells providing splendid water which made it possible to send the caravans from Agadez to Bilma across Azawagh on a yearly basis.⁸² Such scientific discussion from the 1930s is none other than a good illustration of how the impact of the worsening environmental degradation on the existing states in the Western Sahel preoccupied the then scientific community.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 514.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 514–515.

⁸² AUBREVILLE, A. Les forêts de la colonie du Niger. In *Bulletin du Comité d’études historiques et scientifiques de l’Afrique Occidentale Française*, 1936, Vol. XIX, No. 1, p. 75.

Another of Stebbing's observations, this time from northern British Nigeria, provides an interesting comparative perspective. During his visit to Geidam he noticed a poignant fact. "[...] the village itself has grown into a small town of some importance. It is curious to realize that up in this region the population is actually increasing while the means of supporting it are obviously and visibly decreasing."⁸³

He noted a similar tendency in what he called the "remains of the Great Bornu Forest" in the region between Kano, Damaturu and Geidam.⁸⁴ In accordance with the scientific trends of the colonial era he assumed this zone of dry savannah and semi desert was once covered by large forests that were reduced to small enclaves owing to intensive deforestation for agricultural purposes and the subsequent advancing of the desert. The study he made led him to the conclusion that the population and the size of the herds in this area had increased substantially. He saw the reason for that growth primarily in the migration of people from the northern regions, where the impact of the advancing desert was the most significant. Here, again, he warned that while the population had increased, the environmental conditions for productive agriculture were significantly worsening:

The population in this region is extraordinary dense, due to the influx from the north, and some changes in the methods of agriculture would appear imperative if a further migration to the south is not enforced upon it. Up here the agricultural use of the forest is accompanied by browsing and grazing of large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and goats. [...] An examination of the forests soil displaces a varying depth of the pure sand on the surface, the Sahara being only 60 miles distant.⁸⁵

Regardless of the validity of his theories on deforestation in the Western Sahel and savannah, these remarks of Stebbing's are worth of mention from another point view. In the area he studied in Northern Nigeria he noticed the relatively frequent disputes among the African population over land for cultivation. He interpreted these conflicts as direct consequences of environmental degradation as well as the growth of the local population:

[...] Obviously a forest treated in this fashion would gradually degenerate, and with an increasing population the periods elapsing between visits for farming would become shorter, until land hunger, or

⁸³ STEBBING, E. The Encroaching Sahara. The Threat to the West African Colonies. In *The Geographical Journal*, 1935, Vol. 85, No. 6, p. 509.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 509.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 509.

bush hunger, began to supervene. Some of the last inter-tribal fights which we suppressed were undertaken to acquire fresh bush for cultivation.⁸⁶

It is exactly in relation to these last points that Stebbing's reflexions remain significant and inform the current debates on the Western Sahel. Already in 1931 he attempted to demonstrate that if serious steps were not be taken, the worsening environmental conditions would not only increase the number of conflicts over resources but would represent a serious threat for the stability of any states in this region.

Conclusion

The very fact that the West African Sahel became almost a synonym for "crisis" invites historians to revisit this region from different historical perspectives. The colonial period, when much of the Western Sahel was part of the French colonial empire, is of particular importance. The French conquest and subsequent establishment of the French colonies in West Africa by the turn of the 20th century reconfigured the local structures of power and created the conditions for the most significant political, social and economic transformation of this region in modern history. If the present-day states in the Western Sahel are the heirs of colonialism and if since independence they have experienced so many crises such as endemic poverty, economic instability, political and religious violence or environmental threats, it is appropriate to ask whether the French colonies in West Africa faced in the Sahel the same or similar challenges.

From the historical perspective, the international perception of the Western Sahel as a region in crisis is relatively new and could be dated back to the early 1970s. On the other hand, this article has argued that the political and economic instability as well as some threats linked to the particular environmental conditions were already significant issues for the French colonial administration in the first decades of the 20th century. Given the huge territory and the ethnic heterogeneity of French West Africa, these challenges varied from colony to colony and from region to region. During the period studied of 1900 – 1930 a number of violent confrontations between the French colonial army and various African peoples continued to occur in the Sahel and Sahara. Like the governments of many postcolonial states, the government of French West Africa struggled to impose its authority over all populations living within the

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 507.

colonial borders and often had recourse to military force. While some colonial territories of French West Africa such as Senegal or Dahomey were already more or less pacified by the end of the 19th century, a number of regions in French Soudan, Mauritania, Niger or Upper Volta required strong military operations even in the 1920s and 1930s. On the other hand, the colonial officials also reported serious violent confrontations between Africans themselves. These conflicts were often rooted in the local historical context and accelerated by harsh environmental conditions. The example of the reports from Mauritania and French Soudan revealed the frequent confrontations between different factions of nomads inhabiting the Sahel and the Sahara. When they threatened to spread across a wider region and destabilize the colonial order, the administration was obliged to intervene in them with resolute force.

In recent years, states in the Western Sahel such as Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger have experienced a serious rise of what we call today radical Islam. This phenomenon significantly contributes to the destabilization of the whole region. In 2013, it led to the French military intervention in Mali in order to save the integrity of the state. At the time of writing this article, the French army still operates against jihadism in the West African Sahel. As this study has emphasised, reformist Islam and jihad in the Sahel were already a hot topic for the French colonial administration by the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, though the context was different. The reformist Islamic movement that spread across the Western Sahel and savannah of West Africa in the 18th and 19th century significantly shaped the process of the French colonial conquest. Islam proved to be not only a strong state-building force but also an effective mobilizing force to counter French colonialism. During the second half of the 19th century, at least two generations of Africans from the Atlantic coast in Senegal to the Lake Chad experienced long and devastating wars between the French colonial army and various African Muslim leaders who called for a jihad against the European conquerors and those who were their allies. These wars left a lasting mark on the historical memory of the local populations but also on the memory of the French colonial administrators. The example of the reports on the political situation in Senegal shows how the colonial administration carefully monitored the development of a reformist Islam, especially within the Tijānīya brotherhood, for fear of its potential impact on the rise of anti-French attitudes among the African population.

Nevertheless, the teaching and the attitudes of the reformist marabouts in the Sahel were not the only concerns for the French colonial officials in terms of security and stability. The report from 1930 on the political situation in the colony also demonstrates the serious concerns about the potential impact of unfavourable economic development on the political stability and colonial order. The economy and food security of French West Africa was based

primarily on an agriculture oriented towards cash crop products and on the work of the African farmers. However, by the end of 1920 the general economic situation of French West Africa was in serious crisis owing to the fall in price of the cash crop products on the international markets but also owing to the harsh environmental conditions particularly in the Sahel region. The colonial officials carefully monitored the behaviour and attitudes of the Africans towards the French colonial administration. They feared not only open expressions of disobedience but even the widespread unrest in the regions most concerned.

The issue of environment only underlines the constant challenges the French colonial administration faced in the Western Sahel in the early 20th century. Recurrent drought with frequent insect invasions caused a number of famines in the Sahel, such as the one in 1914 in French Soudan. The French colonial administration failed to provide food security for all its African subjects, which resulted in a disastrous famine in the most affected areas. However, this was not the only challenging issue in terms of environment. In 1920 and 1930 the colonial scientists who studied the nature and climate in French West Africa and British Nigeria were seriously preoccupied by the questions of deforestation and the spread of the sand from the Sahara into the Sahel and savannah. Today, their views on desertification may be considered as obsolete since our understanding of the environmental changes in the Sahel is now much subtler especially in terms of the climate change. However, some of the conclusions of the colonial-era scholars such as Edward Stebbing remain significant, most importantly, the concern that environmental degradation and population growth would threaten the stability and even the existence of the French and British colonial states lying on the southern edge of the Sahara.

To sum up, addressing these particular issues that were important for the Western Sahel in the context of the colonial period demonstrates that the present day crisis in this region should not be explained only as the failure of the post-colonial states in facing political and environmental challenges. Such conclusions are very simplistic and reinforce the stereotypical image of Africa as a continent that was reportedly not able to profit from the gains of colonialism. On the contrary, this article has argued for the need to approach these issues of the Western Sahel in the wider context of the development of this part of Africa in modern history.⁸⁷

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Abbreviations:

ANS – Archives Nationales du Sénégal

AOF – Afrique occidentale française

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