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Introduction

This study is a contribution to the social, political and intellectual history of one of the largest colonial states in Africa – the Federation of French West Africa (AOF). The Federation grouped together the present-day states of Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. Between them they straddle all the major bands of climate and vegetation that are to be found in West Africa, and the indigenous population is correspondingly varied. Yet this vast and varied area was treated for over fifty years (1904–56) as a single administrative unit presided over by an alien government based in the Federation’s capital in Dakar. Muslims were to be found in all the colonies of the group – though the proportions varied from the exclusively Muslim society of Mauritania to the mainly animist and Christian societies of the southern coastal colonies of Dahomey and Ivory Coast. By examining French attitudes and policies towards Islam, it is possible to gain insight into both the political nature and the ideological underpinning of the colonial state of AOF.

A study of French relations with Islam can, it must be said, make little claim to originality. Scarcely had Africa been partitioned before French ‘experts’ were sent to investigate and report on Islam.¹ By 1915 two doctoral dissertations on the subject had been submitted to French universities.² Throughout the colonial period successive administrators, scholars and interested spectators produced a constant stream of works which were designed both to document Islam and to suggest what policies should be adopted towards France’s Muslim subjects.

The concern of scholars in the post-colonial era has, not surprisingly, shifted away from the administrative ‘problem’ of Islam towards an attempt to understand its internal dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa. In analysing what is perhaps its most striking feature, namely the huge increase in conversion to Islam over the past two centuries, scholars have focussed their attention on such themes as *jihad* and Islamic reform movements,³ the economic and social foundations of the expansion of Islam,⁴ the relationship between Islam and slavery in Africa,⁵ Islamic response to colonialism⁶ and, finally, the political economy of Islam in the twentieth century.⁷ At the

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same time scholars and Muslim leaders have been anxious to reintegrate African Islam – *Islam noir* as it is called in the French literature – into the mainstream of the worldwide Islamic experience.⁸ This has been in response to the affirmation of many colonial experts that African Muslims were not true Muslims because they practised a ‘bastardised’ form of Islam.

The present study is one which in many ways returns to the colonial perspectives but which attempts to take a more detached look by examining not so much the ‘problem’ of Islam but rather the ‘problem’ of French understanding of Islam. It is a study which is based, in contrast to most recent writing on African history, almost exclusively upon European written sources. This is not intended to be a boast, but nor is it a guilty admission. This study undoubtedly invites a complementary one of Islamic attitudes and policies towards France but I prefer to leave such a study to others more knowledgeable and competent than I.

The need to come to terms not only with the importance but also with the complex and often contradictory nature of the colonial state seems unquestionable, and this constitutes the first of the major themes of this study. The capitalist penetration of Africa that took place during the colonial era, the creation of an infrastructure within the colonies designed to meet the needs of metropolitan capital and the determination of Africa’s patently nonsensical boundaries have all had the profoundest of impacts on Africa’s political, social and economic development. Claims that the colonial era represented no more than an ‘interlude’ in African history⁹ do little justice to the enormity of change that has taken place over the last century. Yet at the same time it is necessary to add nuance to this ‘enormity of change’ for it is clear that there was much that colonialism did not change and much that the colonials never saw nor ever heard. Furthermore, change occurred in ways that colonial administrators could not anticipate, for Africans were not the dumb and passive recipients of colonial rule that was often imagined. They – if one may be permitted the generalisation – retained their own identity and took advantage of any new opportunity that colonial rule offered. In this they had much in common with the working classes of industrial Europe.¹⁰

Nor were the colonials homogeneous and all-powerful. Political intrigue and competition flourished within the small and isolated colonial societies. However much the rhetoric of colonialism may have stressed the altruism of the civilising mission, Frenchmen by and large went to the colonies for career reasons, and their principal concern was to advance as rapidly as possible up the complex hierarchy of bureaucratic promotion. As everybody knows, career building is a vicious and fiercely competitive process – and in the colonies it was no exception. However, at least for the early part of this study, Frenchmen not only had to look over their shoulders to keep an eye on their rivals but they also had to look out for a wide range of fatal diseases. At the turn of the century medicine had advanced sufficiently that Europeans need not expect to die in the Tropics. Nonetheless the death rate

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was still very high: in 1914 one in ten of the graduates of the Ecole coloniale, the training school for colonial administrators, would die within the first few years of serving in the colonies.¹¹

The second general theme running through this study concerns the problem of understanding other societies and cultures. Studies of European perceptions of non-European societies all rightly highlight the Eurocentric and innately racist nature of these perceptions.¹² This study will provide further examples of these characteristic perceptions but it is important to stress, as M. Rodinson has done in his critique of E. W. Said's *Orientalism*, that one should not be tempted into arguing that the perceptions of the western scholar or administrator are inevitably invalidated by his or her race and social class:

It was entirely true [writes Rodinson] that the conclusions of bourgeois scholars were partially, and to a greater or lesser extent according to the discipline, personality, *conjoncture* and specific cases, influenced by their class situation. But that does not mean that their conclusions were totally without relationship with what one has to call reality.¹³

Nevertheless, it is hard to disagree with Said's basic argument that the Muslim Arab world was grossly distorted in western perceptions, and that these distortions were well-suited to western political designs.¹⁴

Another point which Said stresses is the ahistorical nature of the western vision of the Arab world:

The Orientalist attitude ... shares with magic and mythology, the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are *because* they are what they are, for once and for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can either dislodge or alter.¹⁵

This ahistorical vision was evident in many European accounts of the African past and was, as we shall see, an important factor in the formulation of policy. However, it is important to recognise that Europeans often regarded their own past through similarly ahistorical eyes: the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collectors and chroniclers of European popular culture, for example, likewise assumed an unchanging, undifferentiated and timeless bucolic past.¹⁶

The third theme of this study is closely related to the second and concerns the contribution of the social sciences to colonial rule. The colonial era was characterised by, amongst many other things, a relentless pursuit of facts and statistics. The reasons for this are clear enough. Firstly, at the end of the nineteenth century the Europeans found themselves in nominal governance of vast areas of land about which they knew very little. There was, therefore, a lot of ground to be made up. Secondly, the model of government in Europe, with its increasingly bureaucratic and interventionist states, relied increasingly upon statistics. Thirdly, social scientists themselves made considerable claims for their discipline and at the turn of the century, a time when Durkheim wrote that 'Sociology is on everybody's

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lips',¹⁷ it was confidently predicted that government would soon be elevated to a science.

However, the forward march of Science was not without its obstacles. A debate between the anthropologist, Malinowski, and the future Governor of Kenya, Mitchell, conducted in the pages of *Africa*, the journal of the International African Institute, provides an excellent summary of the way in which the claims of 'Science' and the 'Practical Man' could sometimes conflict.¹⁸ (Mitchell argued that the 'Scientist' was incapable of reaching his conclusions with sufficient speed to be of any practical use to the colonial administrator and that, furthermore, the 'Scientist' lacked the broad range of skills that were essential to the 'Practical Man'. Malinowski countered that colonial rule urgently needed a base of scientific understanding of the colonised societies if it was to be both efficient and acceptable.) Even with the best will in the world it is not clear that administrators would have been capable of making use of the insights of social scientists. R. Buell, an early American political scientist who made a major study of the 'native policies' of the various colonial powers, reported that 'The French Colonial Office has an immense library and archives, but neither officials nor scholars can make use of them because of the lack of an adequate filing system.' Furthermore, he reported, government expenditure on the library was barely sufficient to cover the costs of book-binding.¹⁹ If this was the situation in Paris one would hardly expect it to be any better in the colonies – but it is, perhaps, as a symbol of the problem of using 'knowledge' in 'government' that Buell's anecdote is best remembered.

A final point related to this theme, and one which relates more specifically to the question of French attitudes towards Islam, is to realise that the positivist social sciences cut in several ways as far as Islam was concerned. For whilst it is true, as Peter Clarke has pointed out, that the commonly held notion that Islam represented a step up from animism owed a great deal to the ideas of Comte,²⁰ it can also be argued that the developments in the sociology of religion contributed to a more sophisticated understanding of 'primitive' religions in comparison to which Islam no longer appeared so superior. For example, when Durkheim argued that all religions are a means by which societies maintain cohesion and social order he undermined the 'superiority' of Islam over animism. It was now possible to argue, indeed, that animism was a superior religion to Islam because it was better suited to the temperament and way of life of African societies. This apparently academic consideration was to be of considerable practical importance in French policy-making.

The fourth theme of this study concerns the transposition by the French of their own metropolitan preoccupations and political battles to the colonies. Of particular significance were the Dreyfus affair and the battle over the secularisation laws, which between them dominated French political life at the turn of the century, deeply divided France and highlighted a particular conspiratorial style of French politics.²¹ Conspiracy was

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as potent a myth as it was a reality. It provided a useful opportunity to defame one's opponents whilst at the same time galvanising one's supporters into a show of solidarity against a well organised, yet shadowy, conspiracy. As a result a suspicion of conspiracy, verging on paranoia, came to be a characteristic of French political thinking. This tendency was partly a reflection of deep divisions within French society and partly a reflection, too, of the uncertain nature of international relations in Europe and of the widespread fear of German intentions. It is important to understand that the spy scandals and invasion scares which disturbed the peace of Edwardian Britain as much as of the French Third Republic and which provided such wonderful targets for the pens of metropolitan satirists²² had a serious and direct bearing on events in the outposts of empire.

The fifth theme is more specific. It concerns the attempt to identify the level at which colonial policy in AOF operated. At one extreme AOF represented part of France's world-wide strategic interests. It so happened that France's most important and oldest overseas possessions lay across on the other side of the Sahara desert from AOF and that the indigenous population there was overwhelmingly Muslim. France's 'Muslim Empire' was further increased after the First World War with the share out of the Ottoman Empire between France and Britain. At this level Islamic policy in AOF was practically synonymous with imperial policy. At the other extreme, AOF represented a federation of parochial governments, isolated parish councils whose perception of policy and strategic interest was necessarily limited and for whom the dictates of the imperial bureaucrats in Paris may well have been quite meaningless. The federal government in Dakar was placed between the parish politics of the local *cercles* and the imperial politics of the Empire. This study attempts to cover the totality of this range. By focussing on particular case studies one can appreciate the conflict of interests inherent in the federal government's position as half-way house between the parish pump (or more appropriately village well) and the Colonial Office in the rue Oudinot.

The final theme is the one around which the book is organised: the attempt to impose a sense of periodisation on the events that were taking place and the ideas that were taking shape. The book is divided into four main parts. Part I covers the second half of the nineteenth century as the French started to penetrate into the interior away from their long held coastal trading entrepôts. The coverage of events in this section is not intended to offer a comprehensive account of French relations with all the Muslim societies of the interior but rather to highlight some of the dilemmas facing the French in this first phase of colonial rule. Particular attention is paid to the Algerian experience as this was to be a formative one for colonial rule in West Africa in the early twentieth century. Part II covers the years from around the turn of the century to the start of the First World War in which administrators attempted to apply the knowledge gained by French rule in Algeria and in which, too, the growth of Arab nationalism and

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Germany's activities in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East preoccupied colonial minds and to a certain extent distorted their perceptions of local realities. The watershed in French relations with Islam is described in Part III which analyses the burst of scholarly enquiry that took place between the start of the First World War and 1920 and which contributed to a significant shift in French appraisal of Islam, leading to the establishment of a stable system of alliances and coalitions based on a commonly held understanding of *Islam noir*. Part IV analyses the operation of what I have called the French stake in African Islam during the 1920s and 1930s. During these years the French administration established very close and very rigid alliances with a limited number of Muslim leaders who to a very large extent had been identified as potential allies by the scholar-administrators described in Part III. Although briefly disrupted by the Vichy regime this highly personalised pattern of relationships continued through to the achievement of independence in French West Africa, and this later period is briefly considered in the Epilogue.

Part I

1850–1898: Nineteenth-century origins of French Islamic policy

Je demeure convaincu que la construction d'une mosquée au Sénégal est un premier pas vers le progrès dans cette colonie. Ne pas adapter aujourd'hui par bienveillance une mesure si utile et si désirée, serait s'exposer à y recourir plus tard par nécessité. . . . On a trop longtemps attendu pour que le christianisme fasse maintenant beaucoup de prosélites au Sénégal, la très grande majorité de la population y professent l'islamisme, et parmi cette population se trouvent bon nombre d'individus qui sont en possession de l'estime publique, et qui marchent vers l'aisance et la propriété. Or la propriété engendre le patriotisme chez les hommes . . . et le patriotisme constitue les citoyens utiles sur qui repose l'avenir d'un pays. (Commissaire de la Marine, Rapport à M. le Gouverneur, 16 December 1836, ANSOM Sénégal et Dépendances X, 3 quat.)

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The French presence in West Africa dates back to 1637 and the establishment of a trading post in St Louis on the mouth of the River Senegal. For the next two hundred years the French remained on the coast where they competed with Dutch, English and Portuguese merchants for a share in the trade in slaves, gold, gum and animal hides. It was not until the early nineteenth century that the French began seriously to contemplate extending their influence to the interior of the country. Colonel Julien Schmaltz, appointed Governor of the colony in 1816, constructed forts in Bakel (1818–19), Dagana (1819) and Richard Toll (1824) which were intended to provide the infrastructure for the exploitation by French colonists of the Senegal River valley. However, construction of the forts met with fierce resistance and within a short space of time the projects for agricultural development were abandoned. French interest turned again to trade.¹

In the early nineteenth century the gum trade was the most lucrative trade of the region. Gum, which was extracted from the acacia trees which grew wild along the southern edges of the Sahara, was brought by Moorish traders to seasonal markets held in three riverside locations in the lower river valley.² The French merchants generally found themselves in a weak bargaining position at the markets: not only were they forced to pay a number of taxes to the Moorish chiefs who controlled the trade, but they also risked losing their share of the trade completely to English traders on the Mauritanian coast if they attempted to put pressure on the Moors to offer better terms. Within St Louis the merchants – dominated by trading companies from Bordeaux – were the most powerful and most stable political force. As such they were able to exercise great influence on the colonial government, especially as there was such a high turnover in colonial officials.³ In the mid-1830s, the Bordelese merchants persuaded the government to take up arms against the Trarza Moors who dominated the gum trade. However, the fighting remained inconclusive for two decades. In the 1850s the authorities in St Louis, with backing from the Naval Ministry in Paris to whom they were responsible, revived the earlier scheme for expansion into the interior in order to secure French control over the

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commercial opportunities of the region. The merchants were particularly impressed with the work of the naval engineer, Louis Faidherbe, who was posted to the colony in 1852. When the French suffered unexpectedly high losses in the construction of the latest of the forts in Podor in 1854, Faidherbe won the backing of the merchant community for nomination as Governor of Senegal. In the following decade under Faidherbe's guidance French expansion into the interior was set on a course of no return.

Within the West African interior which the French were now seeking to control, Islamic reform movements had been the most dynamic political force since the mid-eighteenth century.⁴ Not only had they created powerful centralised states which nurtured scholarship and greatly widened the sense of Islamic community, but they also established a precedent and a model for warfare for others to follow which had less harmonious results. Indeed, the violence associated both with the waging of *jihād* together with the massive enslavement of conquered peoples to sustain the economies of the *jihād* states had a traumatic effect on West African society.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the rival imperialisms of French merchant interests and Islamic reformers came into conflict in the upper valley of the River Senegal. By 1855 Faidherbe had conquered the Trarza Moors and was starting to negotiate with leaders in the upper valley who resented the growing influence of al-Hajj Umar Tall who had launched his *jihād* in 1852 on the border between the Futa Jallon and the kingdoms of upper Senegal. By 1854 Umar's forces had conquered most of the eastern Senegambia and in February the following year Umar was writing to the Muslim community of St Louis in the following terms:

Now we will take action by the power of God. We will not waver until we receive a plea of peace and submission from your tyrant [the Governor], for our Master said: 'Wage war on those who do not believe in God nor in the last judgment, who do not conform to the prohibitions of God and his Prophet and who, having received revelation, do not follow true religion, until they pay tribute, for they are in the minority position.'⁵

For over two hundred years the Europeans had been tolerated by Muslim leaders. For the most part confined to their coastal enclaves and willing to respect the authority of their African neighbours, Europeans could easily be accommodated within an Islamic model of good neighbourliness which had a ready-made place for the *dhimmi* or 'protected person'.⁶ However, it was clear that in the second half of the nineteenth century the basis of this relationship was being radically altered as French military imperialism⁷ in the Senegambia and in the upper valleys of the Senegal and Niger Rivers was able to impose its own terms of 'good neighbourliness'.

2

French Islamic policy in Senegal and Algeria

In late 1854 Faidherbe was appointed Governor of Senegal with instructions to pursue a policy of expansion into the interior of the colony at minimum cost to the treasury. Within months of his appointment he had successfully brought an end to the war with the Trarza Moors thereby establishing French control over the lower valley of the Senegal River. Faidherbe then waited for the river level to rise to enable him to continue his advance upstream. He immediately made inroads into the Umarian domination of the upper river valley by establishing alliances with Umar's enemies in Medine and Bundu and constructing a fort in Medine.¹ However, back in St Louis the French were acutely aware that Muslims greatly outnumbered Christians and there was very real concern within the French community that the local Muslim population would answer Umar's call issued in early 1855 to reject French rule. This concern was translated into a wide range of opinions about what policy the French authorities should adopt towards Muslims within the town of St Louis. Education policy, which had been the subject of quite heated debate for a number of years,² became the litmus test of French attitudes towards Islam in the colony.

There were certainly those amongst the French community who argued that no concession at all should be made towards Muslims. Others expressed pious hopes that eventually French education would train a new class of pro-European Muslims on whom the colonial power could call for support.³ However, Faidherbe argued that unless French education itself, which at this stage consisted of two mission-run schools in St Louis, was willing to change and moderate the overtly Christian nature of the instruction offered to African pupils, then there was little chance of education ever reaching the minds of young Muslims, let alone transforming them. He, therefore, called for the appointment of two secular teachers to the mission-run schools in St Louis. He told the naval minister in Paris that he would have *liked* to be able to consider Muslims as a 'mere anomaly' in our small Senegalese society but that unfortunately this was unrealistic: