

Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*. Stanford: California. Stanford University Press, 1998. x + 367 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 US. ISBN: 0-8047-2999-9.

Review by David R. Watson, London, England, for H-France, May 2000.

This book, developed from a Princeton Ph.D. thesis of 1989, is a study of colonial policy in French West Africa under the six governors general who administered the area from 1902 until 1930. The governor general, based in Dakar, was placed over governors of the individual colonies ranging as far as Dahomey and the Ivory Coast to the east, and to Niger and Mauritania to the north. The office was created in 1895, primarily to ensure civilian control over the military, to prevent army officers undertaking further conquests without orders. However, it was not until about 1904 that the civil authorities were fully able to establish their control. Thus, the core of the book is a study of the six governors general between 1902 and 1930. The author provides a detailed and judicious account of these high officials and their policies, although with only minimal reference to policy making in the cabinet or Parliament in Paris. Instead, the policies are discussed within a framework of theory, the dichotomy of assimilation versus association explored by Raymond F. Betts in his classic book *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914* (New York, 1961). Conklin notes that this opposition is "to some extent useless", as all students of the subject are agreed that French colonial policy was a mixture of the two. Nevertheless, her own use of the terms shows that they are still valuable as classificatory categories, and one of her main conclusions is that there was a shift from the former to the latter at the time of the First World War. The difference between Betts' book and this one is that the former was concerned purely with theoretical debates in Paris, while this account is also a study of how the policies were applied in West Africa. The verdict is that policy moved from assimilation to "association"; that, when confronted with the difficulties of assimilation in practice, a pragmatic set of policies which were then characterised as association, were adopted. The turning point came during, and immediately after, the First World War.

The book begins with a discussion of the concept of assimilation, showing how it emerged from the wider idea, stemming from the Revolution, of France as the bearer of liberty, democracy and progress to the rest of mankind. This concept was transferred by geographers in the 1870s from a European to non-European context, and developed as the idea of a civilising mission, by which France would bring the moral and material advantages of modern civilisation to the "primitive" peoples of the non-European world. These ideas were developed by Paul Leroy-Beaulieu in his 1874 book *De la colonisation chez les peuples modernes*, although he thought that civilisation would mainly be spread by commerce and other peaceful contact, rather than by conquest. But in the 1880s, when republican leaders such as Jules Ferry

wished to embark on colonial expansion, it could be justified in these terms, as being for the mutual benefit both of France and of her new colonial subjects. The problem of reconciling the conquest by force of a vast new empire with republican, democratic ideology was resolved in the twin concepts of the civilising mission and the ensuing assimilation of the native populations to that of France. The ideal would be when schoolchildren all over West Africa could open their history textbook at the lines "Nos ancêtres les Gaulois". To achieve this end, four African institutions had to be eradicated: slavery which was widespread in the French colonies, "barbaric" customary law, "feudal" chieftainship, and native languages.

Conklin states that the first two governors general, Ernest Roume (1902-1907) and William Ponty (1908-1915), attempted to implement these assimilationist policies, although the resources at their disposal meant that achievements were limited. Certainly the basic infrastructure for economic development, ports and railways, were created, as were a few hospitals and schools. But the needs were enormous; plans for a railway system connecting up all the colonies, for example, were never completed. In addition the impact of these policies on native institutions created a political vacuum that the French administrative-military structure was too skeletal to fill up. Slavery, however, was abolished in theory in 1905.

A crisis resulted when attempts were made during the First World War to conscript large numbers of Africans for military service in France. There were revolts and widespread passive resistance in 1915-1916. This crisis coincided with a change of governors general, and the two factors led to a retreat from assimilation. François Clozel, governor general (1915-1917) was more sympathetic to African culture than his two predecessors. Himself an amateur ethnographer, he appointed a scholar Maurice Delafosse as his advisor. Delafosse, who had taught African languages in Paris, and written a book in which he argued that African civilisation was different from but not inferior to European, was in favour of cooperation with native elites, instead of destroying their influence as had been dictated by the earlier policies of opposition to "barbaric" customary law, and the "feudal" authority of chiefs. Delafosse's influence continued under the subsequent governor general, the short-lived Joost van Vollenhoven (1917-1918). He fell out with the Georges Clemenceau government when he advocated abandoning the attempt to recruit large numbers of native troops; he resigned office, returning to France to serve himself on the Western front where he was killed. The recruits were found however, partly as a result of the new policy of co-operation with traditional native elites. But another factor played a part. This was the role of Blaise Diagne, the first African deputy in the French Parliament, elected in 1914. His election was the result of an anomaly which illustrates the whole assimilation/association debate. Unlike the rest of the African colonial territories, the "four communes" around Dakar, which had been linked with

France since the eighteenth century, were treated as a full part of France, with municipal self-government and the right to elect a deputy. Until 1914 the deputies elected had always come from a small elite, the *assimilés*, old Catholic families, mainly of European descent or of mixed race; but by 1914 a new group had emerged; the *évolués*, of which Diagne was one; they were African, and mainly Muslim. Diagne co-operated enthusiastically with the recruitment drive, hoping to use it to extend full citizenship rights to the *évolués*, if not to the whole African population. Conklin shows how the authorities, after accepting Diagne's help during the war, managed to avert the consequences of real implementation of the assimilationist policy. Very few applications for full citizenship were ever accepted. And local government arrangements were changed by the creation of a new Colonial Council of Sénégal in which the *évolués* were outvoted by the chiefs of the hinterland who were appointed and controlled by the administration. This was the concrete application of association instead of assimilation.

The final chapters of the book document the application of this policy by governors general Martial Merlin (1919-1923) and Jules Corde (1923-1930). A major topic here is that of the system of compulsory labour imposed on the native population, either for public works or for agricultural labour on European-owned plantations, or by means of forced delivery of agricultural produce at low prices. Corde defended these arrangements against the condemnation of the International Labour Organisation, whose 1930 treaty banning forced labour France refused to sign, arguing that compliance would favour the more advanced British colonies. In fact, Conklin thinks that compulsory labour did not aid the economic development of the French colonies, but delayed their integration into the world economy.

Conklin relates this retreat from the assimilationist aspirations of the pre-1914 period to the more cautious associationist policies of the 1920s to a similar turn towards conservatism in France. She states that colonial policy was not simply a "magnifying glass" which exaggerated metropolitan trends, but that there was a two-way relationship; disillusion with the republican civilising mission helped to create suspicion of democratic values at home. Full consideration of this thesis would have been helped by a continuation of the analysis to 1939. While the idea of a rightwards shift in French attitudes is certainly not without foundation, it has to be tempered by consideration of the Left's electoral victories in 1924, 1932 and 1936. The idea of the civilising mission, and a sense of the importance of the Empire were popularised more than ever before by the Colonial Exhibition of 1931. They continued to dominate French opinion until the constitution-making of 1946. It was only then that the consequences of assimilation had to be faced; as Radical politician Édouard Herriot put it: was France to become the colony of her colonies? The process of adjustment that then took place was similar to the changes in West Africa detailed in this study.

Assimilation was possible when it applied to a tiny group in the old settlements around Dakar, but not to the enormous populations of the territories acquired after 1880.

However this remains an extremely valuable and wide-ranging discussion not only of colonial policy, but of its relationship to wider questions of developing attitudes in France. There is one mistake on a point of detail; it was not the Separation of Church and State, which only occurred in 1905, but the anticlerical interpretation of the 1901 law on Associations that led to the ejection of missionaries from colonial schools in 1903.

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