# Overview of French Imperial Ideology in Africa

N.T. Mentan\*

An ideology, Louis Althuser defines, is "an internally consistent body of thought characterized by its historical function within a given society." Ideology may take the form of images, myths, ideas, or concepts. Substantively, its content reflects the concrete interests of specific social classes. Historically, therefore, ideology seeks to justify the exercise for power by a ruling class through the implementation of its policies.

This overview of the ideology of French imperialism in Africa is thus an attempt to examine critically the historical and current thinking and practice of policies of domination, fragmentation and exploitation. To establish the relevance of this ideology to French colonialism and neo-colonialism in Africa, answers will be sought to two cardinal questions which simultaneously serve as aids to explanation and historical periodization. First, why did France embark on a hazardous adventure in the 1880s when she was experiencing a remarkable demographic decline, unsalutory economic growth, insecurity on its German frontier, and social instability as a result of crushing successive defeats inflicted by its European neighbours? Second, when decolonization became a fait accompli after the second world war, why did French public opinion<sup>2</sup> respond so eagerly to the call for "Greater France" which implied the retention of French political influence over newly independent African states, assurance of the continued exploitation of their productive forces, especially raw material and markets and maintaining these countries within the world capacity economy?

French imperial ideology after its traumatic defeat by Germany and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in 18703 can be better explained by peering into the psychological, military, political, and economic activities which gripped the nation. Logically, France would have deployed her resources to solve these teething problems which caused rife anxiety and disillusionment.

Instead, semi-mystic French colonial expansion attracted dreamers of a more perfect and safe French society outside Europe. That is, French military establishments, missionaries, merchants, and Saint-Simonian economists sought overseas what was unobtainable within the domestic and hostile immediate external environment. This quest for wealth, security, and prestige abroad necessitates the use of the above paradoxical questions as loose analytical stopping points for an incisive overview of French imperial ideology in Africa. Of course, the mechanisms of French imperialism were violence, commerce, investments, culture, international institutions, etc.

## French Military Expansion in Africa

By 1868, France was threatened with total extinction by Prussia and Germany. Journalists and politicians started to reiterate that "... either we remain as we are ... and fall into a shameful insignificance ... or, as eighty to a hundred million French, strongly established on both sides of the Mediterranean ..."4 Unlike the British whose trading companies undertook the military subjugation and administration of West Africa, the French state was directly sucked into military expansion in Africa.5

From Senegal to Congo, military fortifications were built to enable French conquerors to protect "Free trade" against their British rivals.6 French Ministers, particularly that of Marine and the Colonies, spoke optimistically of their immense empire stretching from Algeria to Senegal7 and the Congo.

French military expansion intensified in Africa when Louis-Alexandre Briere de l'Isle took over as Governor of Senegal in 1876. Briere sealed off conquered territories with protective tariff8 walls and popularized his military and commercial exploits at home. Burgeoning geographical societies, intellectuals, publicists, explorers, merchants, and deputies saw these exploits as a source of French regeneration.9 This regeneration rendered a double service to France. First, it was a psychological booster to a French populace traumatized by crippling military defeats in Europe. Second, Africa's "legendary wealth" was used to reconstruct beleaguered French industries and the mass exodus of refugees to Africa solved nag-

ging problems of unemployed and inflation.10

In 1879 Freycinet took over as French Premier and embarked on conquering vast territories along the Niger and Congo rivers. He immediately replaced Admiral Pothuau (February 1880) with an arch-expansionist, Admiral Jaureguiberry, who had secret orders to subdue Agades and Sokoto to open the Fulani empire to French trade and influence.11 With hopes for an amicable settlement of Anglo-French trade disputes smashed, Rouvier, a spokesman for Marseilles merchants, called for vigorous military and diplomatic action against British occupation. On January 25, 1883, Jaureguiberry tabled the commercial aggreement signed by the Compagnie Francaise de l'Afrique Equatoriale with Loko authorities along the Benue river for parliamentary ratification. He then proceeded to annex and negotiate treaties with Bonny and Calabar and the state of the Cameroon estuary to complete his expansionist ambitions.13

The activities of the French explorer Savorguan de Brazza along the Congo River became a "prelude to the partition of Africa". When de Brazza's treaty with the Bateke authorities far to the north of Stanley Pool was enthusiastically ratified by the French National Assembly in November 1882, he returned to the Congo to organize the new colony.14 Threatened by French insatiate lust for African territories, King Leopold of Belgium instigated Bismarck of Germany to summon the devious Berlin Conference of 1884 to discuss the Congo question. The Conference declared that there should be no further European conquests in Africa "without effective occupation", 15

French conquering marine officers imposed authoritarian rule over the vast and sparsely-populated territories grabbed from Algeria to the Congo River and Madagascar. This high-handed rule was adopted by French civilian successors who were often referred to as commandant.16 France has, with striking success, maintained most of these territories within its orbit till today lest "in a century or two she will be a secondary European power, and will count in the world little more than Greece or Romania (counted) in Europe"17 in the late nineteenth century.

### French Imperialist Economic Ideology

When the question of colonization arose in the nineteenth century France had a "consistent" economic ideology of exclusion and monopoly embodied in its Colonial Pact (Pacte Colonial). 18 The Pacte Colonial was the "outgrowth of (France's) indus-

<sup>\*</sup> Lecturer, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

trial policy" premised on four enduring principles, namely (1) the colonies could only admit goods that originated from the metropole; (2) they could only export to the metropole on a duty—free basis; (3) they could not set up their own manufacturing industries; and (4) they had to rely on the carriers of the metropole for the transportation of both their exports and imports.<sup>20</sup>

The French Finance Minister during the reign of Louis XIV in the latter half of the seventeenth century, Jean Baptist Colbert, is generally regarded as the architect of the Pacte Colonial. His interest in colonies derived from his desire to bolster France's fiscal and balance—of—payments position.<sup>21</sup> Colbert's economic policies inspired French Saint—Simonian economists like Jules Ferry, a renowned member

of the colonial lobby.

Ferry's theory of economic expansionism rested on four indissolubly connected concepts, namely: industrialization, protection, markets, and colonies.<sup>22</sup> To him, French industrialization was seen to be impossible without rigid protection; industrialization and protection implied an outright ban on any form of industrialization in the colonies:

the installation of industries (in the colonies) must only be encouraged there to the extent to which they can do no harm to metropolitan industries. The latter must be complemented and not ruined by the former. In other words, colonial industry is to do what French industry cannot do — to send products where metropolitan industry cannot go.<sup>23</sup>

This Franco-African division of labour condemned French Africans to being suppliers of labour, raw materials, and markets while France reserved for itself industrial production and the export of manufactured goods. This theory ordained what Arghiri Emmanuel calls "unequal exchange".<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, colonization became inevitable to French economic development, French colonies were thenceforth classified into: (a) "colonies de commerce ou de comptoirs" which included embryonic trading posts dotted in the wilderness of "tropical natives" and destined for "no expansion"; (b) "colonies agricoles ou de peuplement" or colonies for agricultural settlement; and, (c) "colonies d'exploitation" or colonies whose geographical conditions were repugnant to French settlers.<sup>25</sup>

Fundamentally, these classifications were irrelevant since the subordination of all the colonies rendered their exploitation automatic. At least, there is no evidence of exploitation in one French colony and development in another. It was an imperialist relationship in which the colonies had a definite contribution to make to French "wealth" and "prestige" — both sides of the same imperialist coin harmonized during the Third French Republic (1871-1910). At no time were the colonies seen as entities or as potential ones. 26 For instance, even primary capital milked out of Africa by Frenchmen was repatriated for domestic investment while semi—industrial operations were totally suppressed. 27

In effect, the general ideology of French economic imperialism was, and is today, to be "economical" by piling up reserve funds from its colonies for use and investment in the metropole. The impoverishing head—or—pool tax became the lynchpin of France's colonial fiscal system aimed at annihilating an African economic initiatives. Taxation of Frenchmen and firms was minimal. Compulsory cash—crop production and sale by the colonies to French buyers at paltry prices and force labour were pursed.<sup>28</sup>

### **Ideology of Cultural Expansion**

The approach of French colonialists to the promulgation and propagation of their culture and language stood in wild contrast to that of the British.<sup>29</sup> The French language was seen as an embodiment of their fundamental worth and achievement which symbolized much more than a cognitive carrier of cultural values, beliefs, and artefacts. French cultural expansion became such a sacred object that it was central to the consummatry value system of the colonial "culture industry".<sup>30</sup> Unlike the British to whom English was an instrumental value of colonialism, French was used as a consummatory value of the "mission civilisatrice" (civilizing mission) since France could not "be resigned to playing only the role of a second—ranked nation in the world."<sup>31</sup>

French clerics like Abbe Raboisson became militant idealogues of French linguistic and cultural messianism calling on the colonialists "to transform, according to (France's image), the people over which she extended her sovereignty, to imbue them with "her spirit, her heart and her faith". In fact, V. Thompson and R. Adloff have given an apt summary of French linguistic presupposition worth quoting at length:

Persuaded by tradition that they had a 'civilizing mission' to fulfill, the French colonizers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were certain that West Africa was, from the cultural standpoint, a tabula rasa, upon which the political and social institutions of the Metropole should be traced. 'Assimilation' was the term frankly applied to this process, whose most conspicuous manifestation was the setting up of an educational system that employed French as its sole linguistic vehicle.<sup>33</sup>

'Assimilation' as a policy became a crusade as from 1794 with a pretension that "all men, without distinction of colour, are French citizens" because "the colony was to become integral; if non-contiguous, part of the mother country". This was why, as P.F. Lacroix observes.

Loyal to the old centralist and unitarian propensity which has always been one of the characteristics of our governmental policy, consciously or unconsciously imbued with a complex of linguistic superiority all the more ardent because realities do not always correspond to their desires, French functionaries are to be found who think that the essence of our activity in Africa must be to "sell (or give) French", without considering either the real desires of the Africans or of the conditions imposed by the facts. 36

The phrase "France d'Outre Mer" (France Overseas) became a justification for imposing the French educational system on its colonies in Asia, Africa, and America. The French language acquired so much salience in the early years of the Third Republic that Africans were divided into French citizens and subjects. This stratification enabled the four communities of Senegal (as citizens) to send representatives to the Chamber of Deputies in 1872 to the exclusion of other African colonies classified as subjects. The use of proficiency in the French language as a somatic factor in the award of French citizenship notwithstanding, seldom did more than 10% of the French African population know French.<sup>37</sup>

France's policy of cultural "assimilation" lost its practicality with the rapid expansion of the empire. Passions and ambivalence on French imperialism had appeared and reappeared in the 1880s and again at the end of the Fourth Republic respectively. French fears and anxieties about the sunset on its empire were very crucial to "the idea of a multicontinental state in which Africans and French would eventually be

equal partners." This expansionist crusade was not only military, economic, and cultural. It had its political dimension as well.

# **Ideology of French Political Domination**

French publicists like Prevost-Paradol had long been belabouring themselves about the theme that Africa:

must not be for us a trading post, as India, nor merely a camp and a training field for our army, even less an experimental area for our philanthropists. It is a French land which should be populated, owned and cultivated as soon as possible by French people, if we want it one day to weight in our favour in the arrangement of human affairs.<sup>39</sup>

In this vein, the political significance of "assimilation" became "that system which tends to efface all differences between the colonies and the mother—land, and which views the colonies simply as a prolongation of the mother—country beyond the seas." Assimilation, a form of subordination, implied the same laws, official hierarchy, local councils, tribunals, educational system, etc. To French politicians, differences in conditions might exist but not the Code Napoleon. If the Code did not fit, the fault was with the "natives" who had to be administratively subordinated as a French "department" or "commune".

The impracticality of the Code Napoleon apart, the myth of "Greater France, of a Franco-African Community in which men of different races and colour drawn together by French culture (and would cooperate politically) on the basis of liberte, egalite, et fraternite" has endured from 1885 till date lest France would be a "secondary power in Europe". To avoid the impending catastrophe, France realized from her terrifying defeats in the two world wars:

If the overseas territories detach themselves from the metropole, or if we allow our forces to become hung up there, how much will we count for between the North sea and the Mediterranean. Should they, on the contrary, remain associate with us, why then the way would be open for our action on the continent.<sup>43</sup>

This expansionist goal dubbed "the secular destiny of France" enabled France to conscript an estimated 1,000,000 Africans who served in the French army twice as long as the French themselves during the first World War. "This military contribution of Africans to France was repeated in the way of men, foodstuffs, and raw materials during the second World War.

The use of Africans to promote the so called "secular destiny of France" inspired General Charles de Gaulle when he returned to power in February 1958. Convinced, as Abbe Raboisson, that "the greatness of empires is always at its peak at that moment when their colonial expansion is at its maximum, and their decadence always coincides with the loss of their colonies". 45 De Gaulle evolved political strategies to shore up the crumbling empire.

De Gaulle was aware of the historic events which shook the foundations of the French empire, namely: (1) the collapse of the Fourth French Republic (and the consequent birth of the Fifth Republic in 1958) due to its inability to cope with the Algerian War of Independence; (2) France's traumatic defeat in Indo-China (1954); (3) the First non-aligned Conference at Bandung (1955) with two independent African states (Ghana and Egypt) in the lime-light; (4) the increasing nationalist struggles for independence in Algeria, Cameroon, Tunisia, and Morocco; and (5) the Suez

Crisis (1956) in which France burnt her fingers.

Faced with these problems the political operators of the Fourth French Republic were stampeded into Loi Cadre (autonomy for French colonies) reforms of 1956. These Loi Cadre reforms sanctioned the fragmentation of the two French West and Equatorial African Federation into twelve tiny but manageable states. Each state was invested with marginal powers whereas France controlled Finance, Defence, External Affairs and Security.<sup>46</sup>

As the first leader of the Fifth Republic, General de Gaulle cobbled up constitutional structures for a Franco-African Community to contain African demands for independence and unity. He then set out on a tour of French African territories proselytizing that:

We are going to show the world that the Franco-African Community stands for the betterment of human beings, not only from the material point of view but intellectual and moral as well.<sup>47</sup>

De Gaulle, nevertheless, knew that independence for African colonies was imminent. As an urbane politico—military strategist the General equally knew that his last trump card was to maintain French interests in Africa through "indirect colonialism".

### Implications for French Inderect Colonialism in Africa

The economic, political, military and cultural aspectsof French colonialism have remained operative in Franc Zone Africa today despite over a score of years of "independence". This phenomenon is not a historical accident. Indirect colonialism became the only feasible method in De Gaulle's agenda for the "continuation of (French) imperialist exploitation of economically backward" French African states during the post—colonial era. The fundamental objectives of imperialism (inequality, domination, and exploitation) were to be intact. Neither French military establishments, cultural crusaders, missionaries nor colonial politicians and civil administrators were suitable bedrocks of French capitalist imperialism. Tap—roots of capitalist production, exchange, and accumulation had to be sunk deeper and made to function automatically and a conducive atmosphere created to facilitate French corporatist imperialism.

French corporatist imperialism required an "economic ideology" of two variants First, it required an "ideological unity" based on the premise that wealth comes through production while poverty is the consequence of not knowing how to produce. Second, it equally required the concealment (from Africans) of the "ideology of the expropriators" which is based on the fact that wealth is obtained by seizure and exploitation and that poverty is the result of this exploitation. In the light of this "unity" in Franco—African perception of development, Africans would be made to believe that the colonial system (of underdevelopment) and economic development are compatible and, hence, the elimination of colonial institutions would not be a necessary prerequisite to African economic development.<sup>50</sup>

This economic "ideology of the producers" enabled France to ensure undisturbed maintenance of the Franc Zone monetary institutions and practices in Africa till today. And the Franc Zone system developed in intensity as the hand—maid of the creation of branches of French transnationals in Africa with guarantees of "freedom of exchange and capital flows" to the benefit of invading French firms. As the

organized purveyor of credit and creator of money for foreign and domestic parasitic bourgeoisies, the Franc Zone has effectively served as a conduit system for the accumulation of capital and its transfer from Africa for the development of "mother" France. Money supply to African economies, holding of African reserves, control of its trade, loans, and investment, in fact, all economic activities in Franc Zone Africa have been under the minute surveillance of the imperial monetary system.

Other aspects of thee Franco-African cooperation agreements<sup>52</sup> were merely guidelines for maintaining a "stable" environment to make Africa "safe" for multilateral exploitation, domination and underdevelopment by international finance capital within the capitalist world system. The agreements sealed a "contractual relationship", a collaborative arrangement between the French bourgeoisie and the "native agents" of imperialism in French Africa. These indirectly colonized African states have been ruled by the indigenous allies of French imperialism at the behest of the international bourgeoisies.

#### Conclusion

This historical overview of the development of the ideology of French imperialism has highlighted its military, economic, cultural, and political dimensions. First, France's colonial military expansion was a response to its insecurity in Europe due to the devastating defeats reaped from the Prussions and Germans in the nineteenth century. Second, its inability to cope with capitalist competition in Europe after the industrial revolution necessitated its drive for protected overseas markets and sources of raw materials. Third, France's demographic decline due to the ravages of war and economic hardship made French imperialists search for colonies on whom to impose so called French "cultural civilization". The forcible spread of French culture abroad thus became a messianic cultural crusade. And, finally when independence for French African colonies become imperative, imperial France was fundamentally threatened.

French imperialists, therefore, devised an "indirect" form of colonialism to maintain the fragmentary states within its capitalist orbit. The ubiquitous French monetary system was intensified, and occassionally adjusted, to negotiate capitalist accumulation. The French Franc Zone became the pillar for the extraction of surplus value from Africa for the development of the "autocentric (French) centre" and the underdevelopment of the "extraverted (African) periphery". This process of development and contradictory subordination and exploitation represents two opposite sides of the dialectical unity called imperialism, be it of the direct or indirect form.

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