

Constructing Dakar: Assimilation, Association and Power in French African Urban Development

By Dustin Harris, Simon Fraser University

Abstract: Founded in Senegal in 1857, the French West African capital of Dakar visually projected France's assimilationist vision of colonial power. This paper addresses the current scholarship on French African urban development by offering an introductory analysis of the interaction and convergence of assimilation and association in Dakar before 1914. It questions the impact this interplay had on the French understanding of assimilation as a category of colonial power. The impact of both cultural theories on African city-dwellers is also examined to highlight how this population responded to and transformed French colonial planning ideology.

The development of cities was a significant element of French colonial power in Africa. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, cities served as centers for the economic, administrative and military activities of France's African colonies. However, their importance not only rested in the functions they served. In French Africa, cities became laboratories for the physical, visual and spatial implementation of French cultural theory. In other words, the theories that influenced French conceptions of colonial power were inscribed in the French African urban landscape.

My current graduate research at Simon Fraser University focuses on the importance of cultural theory in the French development of the city of Dakar, Senegal before 1914. Founded in 1857, Dakar functioned as a focal point of French colonialism in West Africa, so much so that in 1904, the city was named the capital of the French West African Federation. Throughout the period that I study, cultural theory was important to the physical development of the city as well as to power relations within it. However, while a number of scholars of French history have studied Dakar, none have focused on the role of cultural theory in the city's colonial history.¹ My study of Dakar thus serves two purposes. First, it not only examines the influence of cultural theory in the urban morphogenesis of Dakar, but it also questions the role colonial urban development played in changing conceptions of French colonial power. Second, my study addresses the existing scholarly research on the influence of cultural theory in French colonial urban development in

¹ See Raymond F. Betts, "Dakar: Ville Impériale (1857-1960)," in *Colonial Cities: Essays on Urbanism in a Colonial Context*, eds. Robert Ross and Gerard J. Telkamp (Dordrecht and Boston, 1985), 193-206; Derwent Whittlesey, "Dakar and the Other Cape Verde Settlements," *Geographical Review* 31, no. 4 (1941), 609-638.

order to rethink the existing analytical frameworks that dominate studies of French African urbanism. Therefore, to understand what is at stake in an examination of a French African city like Dakar, it becomes important to outline the main approaches of the studies that acknowledge the influence of cultural theory in French African urban development.

In the current scholarship, French colonial urban development is cast analytically and theoretically within the examination of modern power conducted by scholars such as Michel Foucault. Colonial cities are highlighted as the sites where, in the guise of cultural theory, colonial conceptions of power and society were imposed through the physical and visual organization and representation of space. Two cultural theories that elevated to the status of colonial doctrine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been examined for their significance in this regard. The first theory, known as assimilation, was exemplified by colonial policies that sought to remove “all differences between [the] colonies and the metropole and at giving their inhabitants full civic rights obliging them to the same duties” as French citizens.² In the colonial urban environment, assimilation’s influence was expressed through the destruction of indigenous African settlements (urban or other) and the creation of new European cities in their place. The second theory, known as association, influenced colonial policies that preserved and utilized indigenous institutions, while underlining a desire to allow Africans to develop on their own under French supervision.³ In French Africa, the associationist approach to urban development was expressed by efforts that sought to respect indigenous urban norms while introducing modern forms of planning and architecture in the African urban environment.

When examining the works of scholars who study the impact of these theories in French African urban development, we can highlight three main approaches in the current scholarship on French African cities.

The first approach examines how colonial cities were used to instill and project specific visions of colonial power, which often accorded with French cultural theory. This approach can clearly be seen in David Prochaska’s analysis of the influence of assimilation in the development of the French Algerian city of Bône. Arguing that a “grammar of perception” is needed to analyze French colonial cities, Prochaska examines how the street names and postcards of Bône were used as symbols to express the city’s definite and permanent French colonial identity. He contends that “the French street names of Bône reflected an

² Jean Martin, *Lexique de la Colonisation Française* (Paris, 1988), 25.

³ Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (Basingstoke, 1996), 233.

extremely biased, distorted, and unrepresentative reading of the city's history. The Algerians are virtually absent; only two streets have clearly Muslim names."⁴ Similarly, according to Prochaska, the "public" picture postcards of the city revealed "first and foremost a primarily European town with very few examples of Islamic architecture or of [...] Algerians."⁵ In his study, Prochaska thus identifies French colonial power as a manipulative force. Through a consistent downgrading of indigenous Algerian culture and a concomitant glorification of French culture, he argues that the street names and postcards of Bône produced and ordered a vision of the city that accorded with assimilationist theory.⁶

The second approach that can be identified in the current scholarship centers on locating the development of colonial cities within colonial power/knowledge relations. One scholar who exemplifies this approach is Paul Rabinow, who studies associationist-influenced urban development in the French Protectorate of Morocco under resident general Hubert Lyautey between the years 1912 and 1925. In his study, Rabinow asserts that following associationist principles, Lyautey sought to establish a "social modernity" in Morocco that involved identifying and strengthening existing indigenous Moroccan social forms and practices while introducing a "technical modernity, with its advantages of hygiene and science."⁷ According to Rabinow, the colonial city became the main site to visually extol this vision of colonial power, as Lyautey sought to develop "dual cities" that preserved existing indigenous Moroccan cities (or medinas) while at the same time constructing around them *villes nouvelles* (or new cities) that introduced modern European urban planning principles.⁸

In order to achieve this program, Rabinow argues that Lyautey hired well-trained architects and planners who worked not only to preserve and re-create what were considered Morocco's best architectural forms, but also to forge new forms of social and economic planning within Morocco's colonial cities.⁹ The complex interplay of colonial power/knowledge relations which Rabinow outlines in French African urban development is thus quite clear. In Morocco, colonial power not only created a situation where the knowledge of French planners and

⁴ David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920* (Cambridge and New York, 1990), 213.

⁵ Prochaska, *Making Algeria French*, 213.

⁶ Prochaska, *Making Algeria French*, 214.

⁷ Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norm and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1989), 285.

⁸ Rabinow, *French Modern*, 288.

⁹ Rabinow, *French Modern*, 312.

architects was utilized to shape urban environments, but the efforts of planners and architects also became important functions of the production and maintenance of colonial power.

The third significant approach in the current scholarship is expressed by Gwendolyn Wright, who focuses on colonial cities as the sites where efforts to transform colonial societies took place. In the cities of French Morocco, for instance, Wright argues that under associationist policy, Lyautey sought to maintain what he labelled the timeless continuity of Moroccan culture by refusing to provide modern amenities to city-dwellers in the indigenous medinas.¹⁰ Additionally, according to Wright, the development of *villes nouvelles* was intended to transform French city-dwellers. She contends that an example of this is expressed by the Protectorate's construction of theatres, department stores and markets to draw "Europeans into a public life of leisure, consumerism and civic pride."¹¹ To achieve this vision of colonial society, Wright argues that urban planning policy in Morocco was authoritarian: "Administrative power was unchecked by law; neither Europeans nor Arabs had recourse to the courts if they did not agree with the general principles or the specific interpretations of the planner or inspector."¹² In this regard, she highlights how colonial planning practices and policies were utilized to produce social spaces that allowed for the smooth operation of colonial power, and suggests that these spatial transformations controlled how city-dwellers functioned within the physical environment. In her view, the power involved in the development of colonial cities was inescapable, and removed all agency from both French and African city-dwellers outside of the dominant colonial elite.

Now that we have examined the works of Prochaska, Rabinow and Wright, it becomes important to assess where my study of Dakar engages with and moves beyond the current scholarship on French African urban development.

One aspect of the current scholarship that I think is still useful to a study of a French African city like Dakar is its focus on the colonial city as the site where colonial officials envisioned implementing their goals and ideals of colonial power. Wright, for instance, states that:

[F]or Lyautey, as for the professionals he brought to the colonies, the role of the city was critical. It provided an expression of diversity in

¹⁰ Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago and London, 1991), 88, 152-153.

¹¹ Wright, *The Politics of Design*, 106.

¹² Wright, *The Politics of Design*, 142.

apparent social harmony; a tool for economic and artistic development; and a strategy for creating and maintaining order.¹³

As the current scholarship demonstrates, inherent in this process throughout French Africa was the desire to inscribe cultural theory in the built environment. Adhering to this focus, we can discern this same process in the development of Dakar.

While Dakar was established in 1857, its importance to French colonialism was highlighted well before the first French structures were erected on the city's site. In 1856, the military commander on the French island post of Gorée claimed that Dakar would

become, one day, by its military and maritime position, [...] by the readiness of its reliable harbour and of a rather easy defense, the capital, the large commercial city and the seat of the general government of all our establishments on the Western Coast of Africa.¹⁴

Included in this process was a desire to transform Dakar into a major metropolis of "French population and influence."¹⁵ At the time of Dakar's occupation, the doctrine of assimilation governed French colonial policy in Senegal. Thus, with power over the city's development, the French envisioned that Dakar would not only function as a center of French efforts to assimilate the indigenous African population of Senegal, but that it would also physically, spatially and visually embody assimilationist principles by extolling the superiority and permanence of French culture.

A clear example of this sentiment was articulated by the first plan for the city drawn in 1856 by military engineer Emile Pinet-Laprade. Following assimilationist ideals, the plan envisioned a European city developing on Dakar's site according to a gridiron pattern of straight and diagonal streets that discouraged the survival of indigenous settlements, monuments and architecture. According to the plan, the city's grid would completely erase the thatched huts, graves and mosques that existed on Dakar's site before 1857. Instead, the plan's main features were a central boulevard that was punctuated midway by a plaza intended for a church.

¹³ Wright, *The Politics of Design*, 83.

¹⁴ "Le Chef de Division, Commandant Supérieur de Gorée et Dépendances, Mauléon au Ministre (1856)," 59 (*Archives F.O.M. Gorée I 1 a*) in *La Fondation de Dakar (1845-1857-1869): Documents Recueillis et Publiés par Jacques Charpy*, ed. Jacques Charpy (Paris, 1958), 92.

¹⁵ "Le Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies, Hamelin, au Commandant de la Station des C.O.A., Commandant Supérieur de Gorée de dépendances [Paris, le 21 juillet 1857]," 82 (*Archives G.G. A.O.F. 6 B 67*) in *La Fondation de Dakar*, ed. Charpy, 133.

Land facing the plaza was reserved for administration buildings. Within the city, plans were also made to build a presbytery with a school and a town hall. Similar to Haussmann's approach in Paris, and reflecting the military-led development of the city, the central *Boulevard National* was designed perpendicular to a military circle located along the coast to provide colonial troops access throughout Dakar.¹⁶

However, as we might imagine, there is not always agreement between how power is envisioned and how it is practiced. A reluctance to delve into this discord is a criticism that can be levelled against the scholars that I outlined above.

One area where this problem can clearly be seen in the current scholarship is in its view of assimilation and association as separate and unchanging categories of colonial power with little interaction and convergence. Wright claims that "both approaches were fundamentally variations of the colonial exercise of power over a subject people."¹⁷ However, as scholarship on these cultural theories has demonstrated, assimilation and association did not exist separate from one another. Instead, both theories were the subject of intense debate in France and her colonies, where the issue of the proper way to rule colonial societies was at stake.¹⁸ Therefore, while we must recognize the separate power dynamics created by both theories, we must also understand how French colonial rule evolved in accordance with changing colonial situations and metropolitan conditions, and analyze the impact this evolution had on colonial conceptions of power and urban development. To properly address the development of French African cities, colonial power should not be viewed as static and beholden to a specific cultural theory, but rather as a contested term that varied in its implications for colonial rule.

I plan to address this issue in my study of Dakar. For instance, before 1914, a considerable effort was made to transform Dakar into the French city originally envisioned in Pinet-Laprade's 1856 plan. Before the turn of the century, the pattern of the original plan was implemented through the colonial administration's introduction of French land tenure laws in the city that accorded to the French Civil Code. Under this code, French

¹⁶ Ambe Njoh, *Planning Power: Town Planning and Social Control in Colonial Africa* (London and New York, 2007), 99; see also "Observations du Directeur du Dépôt des fortifications, le Colonel Roux, sur le projet de deux batteries à élever aux pointes Dacar et Belair de la presqu'île du Cap-Vert [18 mars 1857]," 71 (*Archives G.G. A.O.F. 6 B 67, 13 G 304*) in *La Fondation de Dakar*, ed. Charpy, 119-120.

¹⁷ Wright, *The Politics of Design*, 74.

¹⁸ See Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914* (New York and London, 1961); John Chipman, *French Power in Africa* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989); Michael Crowder, *Senegal: A Study in French Assimilation Policy* (London, 1962).

settlers were permitted to justify their land entitlements, which began a process that had the commodification of land as its ultimate goal. Visually, French officials imported building materials from France that were used to construct “human settlements that conformed to the principles of urban design that were in vogue in France at the time.”¹⁹ In the early years of the twentieth century, the city’s layout was quintupled with a freer pattern of streets similar to that of Paris that shot through the city’s existing grid with diagonal avenues.²⁰ Throughout the city, a number of French cultural emblems were also erected, including a *hôtel de ville*, theatres, cafés and boutiques. Furthermore, the continuing influence of assimilation in the city was clearly expressed by the three-million-franc Governor General’s Palace that was constructed after Dakar was named the capital of French West Africa in 1904. Located on the highest bluff at the south of the city, this gubernatorial structure, which blended multiple European architectural styles, was built to advertise the might and grandeur of French culture by impressing upon the indigenous populations of French West Africa the permanency and power of the French occupation.²¹

However, while Dakar visually projected France’s assimilationist vision of colonial power, the governing approach in French West Africa changed dramatically before 1914 in response to growing support for associationist ideals in France. Under Governor General Ernest Roume, assimilationist policies were rejected in favour of policies that perceivably demonstrated respect for indigenous West African customs, as French officials encouraged “the peoples of the federation to evolve within their own African cultures.”²² This belief was apparent in Roume’s approach to colonial education. He asserted that the metropolitan curriculum, which was being used in French West Africa, needed to “adapt” to the special needs of indigenous Africans, and created a federal school system in 1903 to accomplish this objective.²³ Therefore, the vision of power suggested by Dakar’s urban geography did not accord with the policies enacted on the ground in the city. Instead, within the city, two conceptions of power existed simultaneously. For this reason, my research focuses on the interaction between assimilation and association in Dakar, which prompts me to ask a number of questions: Did the introduction of associationist-influenced

¹⁹ Njoh, *Planning Power*, 21-27.

²⁰ Whittlesey, “Dakar and the Other Cape Verde Settlements,” 629.

²¹ G. Wesley Johnson, *The Emergence of Black Politics in Senegal: The Struggle for Power in the Four Communes, 1900-1920* (Stanford, 1971), 34, 70.

²² Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, 1997), 74.

²³ Conklin, *Mission to Civilize*, 74-80.

policies in French West Africa change the French conception of assimilation as a category of colonial power? Or did this influence the conceptualization of a hybrid approach to colonial rule? Also, what role did urban planning and architecture in Dakar play in the interaction or convergence of both approaches?

A final criticism that I address in my research is the failure of current scholarship to analyze how indigenous African populations experienced and responded to colonial urban development. For instance, while Prochaska argues that the perception of Bône as a French city was a part of French efforts to downgrade indigenous Algerian culture, he does not question if or how indigenous Algerians responded to these efforts during the colonial era. In other words, the analytical approach taken by scholars like Prochaska, Rabinow and Wright presents French power in colonial urban development as absolute and all-encompassing, and thereby refuses the possibility of indigenous African agency within French African cities. However, as a number of scholars of British colonial cities in Africa, such as Garth Andrew Myers, demonstrate, colonial strategies of urban development were continually met with and transformed by the tactics and spatial lifeworlds of indigenous African city-dwellers.²⁴ While the approaches to colonial power and urban development taken by France and Britain differed, we cannot assume that indigenous populations in French Africa were idle watchers and receivers of French urban planning and policy initiatives. I argue that an analytical framework must be adopted that incorporates African experience and agency within examinations of the development of French African cities.

To incorporate this framework, I borrow from James Scott's assertion that while we may not have access to primary documents explaining a given subordinate group's hidden transcript, it can still be inferred from practice.²⁵ In Dakar, for instance, while early assimilationist efforts in the city involved destroying existing African villages and incorporating their populations into the city's extending grid, many groups (including the Lebou, the original inhabitants of the Cape Verde peninsula) maintained their cultural sovereignty by moving to the north of the peninsula where the French were not active.²⁶ As a result, throughout the nineteenth century, a distinct "African zone" formed on the outskirts of Dakar that was in direct opposition to

²⁴ See Garth A. Myers, "Colonial and Postcolonial Modernities in Two African Cities," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 37, no. 2-3 (2003), 328-357.

²⁵ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990), 190.

²⁶ "Le Commandant de Gorée au procureur imperial [le 30 avril 1858]," 95 (*Archives G.G. A.O.F. 4 B 27*) in *La Fondation de Dakar*, ed. Charpy, 145.

assimilationist planning and architectural efforts in the city. Instead of growing from the infilling of the city's grid, this "African zone" grew in a spontaneous and asymmetrical fashion, starting with a single, isolated structure, and growing by the accretion of additional buildings. Furthermore, this zone contained elements closely reflecting a style of life that was distinctly African, expressed through the development of pre-colonial forms of architecture, as well as the practice of producing food on the land around residential dwellings.²⁷

In the early twentieth century, as the expanding city began to overlap with the peripheral "African zone," French officials were forced to redefine the identity of the city itself. In the French vocabulary of the city, the "African zone" became the *zone semi-urbaine*, a term implying that it had a rural character.²⁸ Additionally, French colonial authorities released a map of Dakar in 1906 which placed the "African zone," labelled *Quartier Indigène*, in a blank space outside of the city.²⁹ While more research on this topic is needed, we can clearly see that not only were French assimilationist efforts resisted by indigenous Africans in Dakar, but also that the spatial existence of the peripheral "African zone" significantly affected French colonial planning ideology.

In conclusion, I argue that we need to move beyond the static conception of power and lack of attention given to African city-dwellers in the existing scholarship on French African urban development. To understand the development of Dakar, we not only need to focus on the city as the site where the goals and ideals of French colonial power could be implemented, but also as the site of a complex interplay between differing conceptions of colonial power and African resistance.

²⁷ Winters, "Urban Morphogenesis in Francophone Black Africa," *Geographical Review* 72, no. 2 (1982), 141-145.

²⁸ Winters, "Urban Morphogenesis," 141-145.

²⁹ Betts, "Dakar," 194.