BOOK REVIEW

The Conquest of the African Mind: History, Colonial Racism, and Education in Senegal and French West Africa

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The Conquest of the African Mind: History, Colonial Racism, and Education in Senegal and French West Africa (1910 – 1945) is a book written by Silvester Trnovec, a researcher in African History at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava. In his writings, he directs his attention to West Sub-Saharan Africa, especially its modern history of the 19th and 20th centuries. In addition, he conducted archival research in Senegal, Tunisia, France, and the United Kingdom. Currently, he is working on the international research project Fontes Historiae Africanae (Sources on African History) under the auspices of Union Académique Internationale in Brussels.

The Conquest of the African Mind will take its readers to French West Africa (FWA), established in 1895. This new colony turned more than 12 million Africans of different ethnic origins into French subjects. As a part of their so-called "civilizing mission", France originally planned to incorporate all its citizens into French culture after assimilating. This attitude was changing over time, and substantial effort was made to educate at least a part of the population in a similar way that was usual in contemporary France. Those so-called assimilés played an important role in the administration of the colony. Since schools were probably the most important
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institutions where African peers could get in touch with the French culture and have a chance to incorporate themselves into it, the book focuses mostly on them. In my humble opinion, this area of study is probably one of the best ways how to understand the relations in the colony because the arguments made about these relations can be supported by archival research, something not so common in many different areas of African history.

The book is divided into four main chapters, accompanied by the conclusion and the introduction. In the introduction, the author outlines the whole concept of the book; he explains his methodology and the most relevant theoretical frameworks which can be applied to this type of study. On a few pages Trnovec explains everything important for the study, which is a sign that he is well-versed in this issue and he is capable of critically select the most important information, so he does not burden the reader with an excess of unnecessary information.

The first chapter named Colonial Senegal and Public Schools in French West Africa provides the reader with the most relevant information about the colony of FWA, such as the bureaucratic structure of the colony and its impact on the general public. In addition, Islam as a social factor is also discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, it focuses on the establishment of the public schools in the colony, which took place in 1903.

The Official History of French West Africa is the second chapter's name. It discusses how history of FWA was taught to its citizens. Most of the official materials issued by the French administration were instructions for the teachers, but there is valuable information about this process even in them. People in French colonies were taught about French history on a large scale; only the information that was believed that may lead to public unrest was omitted (such as French involvement in the slave trade). On the other hand, the history of the colony prior to the arrival of Europeans was only taught to a limited extent, and all great achievements and material evidence of existing civilizations were attributed to the white race or their close relatives. Furthermore, the time before the European arrival was depicted as barbaric, cruel, or brutal, and children in the schools were taught that only with the help of Europeans could African civilization live in peace and prosperity.

The third chapter, Population and Primary Schools in Senegal, describes the structure of the colonial schools in FWA and the hierarchy of schools, but more importantly, it discusses ethnic composition in the schools or the timetable of students. The author also touched on the topic of problems with the attendance of
pupils. The chapter ends with the example of questions from the official exam from different regions which took place after the second year at regional school.

The *Colonial Mind* is the name of the fourth chapter. It discusses how a significant part of the FWA population became more or less assimilated into the French culture. The generation raised in French public schools did not have any memory of the continent before the colonization. For this reason, especially those accommodated in the schools’ dormitories were under the significant influence of a different culture.

The *Conclusion* summarizes the most important findings of the book. Despite France’s proclaimed, "civilizing mission", the reality in the colony was different. The colonial schools taught their pupils that they were inferior to French people and their culture, that their history before the French arrival was irrelevant. The ethnic differences among the pupils were marginalized; they were taught that differences among them are minimal and that there are just members of the backward black race. Because of the lack of schools and teachers and the resilience of FWA’s citizens (only around 15% of children attended those schools), this new form of identity was never shared by the large number of people in FWA.

The book as a whole gives a very balanced impression. It is easy to read, and the Trnovec’s style is very pleasant. Beyond its engaging content, the book includes a map and several interesting illustrations which charmingly complement the text. The argumentation is always supported by sufficient evidence, and the conclusion is driven from what seems to be logical. The author’s knowledge of the region, its history, and its social aspects is notable. I strongly recommend this book to everybody interested in Africa’s history, colonialism, nationalism, schooling, or human rights issues.

**Reviewed Literature**