

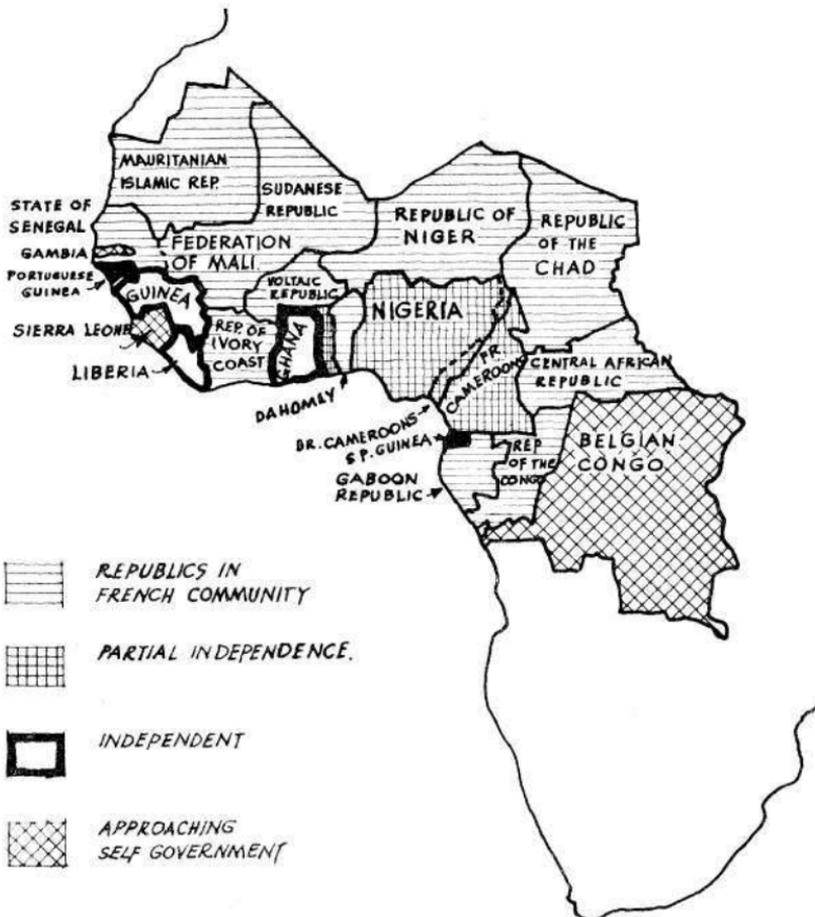
FRENCH WEST AFRICA (II): THE VIEW TO-DAY

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ALONG the road to independence, French-speaking Africa is now a long way past the point of no return. This is the main conclusion I came to after a brief tour of some parts of West Africa early this year.

Of course, the movement is erratic. Here and there, the destination is already reached: in Guinea, and now in Togoland and Cameroun (formally due for independence next year, but



already past the stage of "tutelage"). Elsewhere, in Niger or in Chad, the journey is scarcely begun (or else the travellers have been obliged to retrace many of their steps). But the *general* movement towards independence—or at any rate towards self-determination, which may not turn out to be the same thing—is now taken for granted both by the French and by the African peoples concerned.

What has really happened in French-speaking Africa, over these past many months, is the emergence of another large region where Africans have worked out, or are working out, a new relationship of equality with Europeans. That is one reason why a European, wandering in French-speaking Africa, must find plenty of encouragement to optimism. However much of a mess there may be in some other parts of Africa between Europeans and Africans, here in West Africa the strains are relaxed (with one or two exceptions) and the tensions are small.

The French, it must be said, have made heavy weather of accepting the idea (and the implications) of African self-determination. The main reason for this has not been any lack of intelligence or information—much less, any lack of a liberal tradition towards non-European peoples: it has been the enormous handicap of a series of right-wing governments of one label or another, governments which have stood for the most reactionary (and therefore the most stupid) interests in France. Time and time again the individual brilliance of administrators or the generous thought of Ministers has been defeated, stopped, or reduced to confusion by the baying of the Blimps. The initially sensible ideas of the French Union, way back in 1946, were killed stone-dead within a matter of weeks; and years of fruitless and fearful war were then allowed to make havoc of the genius of France and the wealth and welfare of the French (not to speak of the miseries that befell the Indo-Chinese). The wise and statesmanlike compromise with Tunisia, over a decade later, was followed almost at once by an attempt to turn the clock back in Morocco—and then by another appalling colonial war in Algeria, a war which continues to this day with a fearful toll in lives and decency.

But these disasters, it must be emphasised, owe almost nothing to the indifference of liberal opinion in France or to the lack of an understanding of what has been going on. The French, as a whole (if one can speak of any people "as a whole"), remain

well-informed, tolerant, occasionally brilliant, long-suffering, and prepared for change. They remain, in many ways, by far the most successful European people both in "understanding" Africans and in winning the friendship and affection of Africans. Anyone who doubts this should compare the standing, experience, and general ease of living of Africans in Paris and Africans in London. The first often become, at any rate for the time being, Parisians: the second often remain, even when Londoners are "kind" to them, uneasy exiles.

It is important to remember all this if only to correct one's judgment of French policy in colonial affairs. How can so tolerant and sensible a people become so futile in what they actually *do* in their colonial or former colonial territories? There is, I have suggested, only one explanation which will bear enquiry: the crassly conservative nature of French parliamentary majorities and thus of French governments over the past ten years or so. There has been a grim and grinding contradiction between the intelligence of Frenchmen and the stupidity of their policies.

This contradiction still exists in French affairs in French-speaking Africa; but with a difference. The difference is De Gaulle.

But how much of a difference? The final and complete answer to that, of course, will have to wait upon events—upon many events. Meanwhile, some tentative conclusions are possible. To begin with, France has now accepted Guinea as an "independent partner". Although no one in Paris would possibly admit this, Guinea today has almost the same relationship to France as Ghana has to Britain. Only De Gaulle, it seems to me, could have signed this acceptance, and made it good. Without De Gaulle there would surely have been the same weary protraction of argument and provocation, as one parliamentary lobby after another pushed policy this way or that: and in the end, no doubt, there would have been the same weary hostilities, the same "incidents", the same deployment of troops, the same disasters. But De Gaulle cut away from all that. Guinea and France are at peace today.

With the other territories of French West and Equatorial Africa, the situation is much less simple. But here too the same difference is present. In the old French Union (abortive as it was), the root idea was to keep these territories in colonial and subject status. That is not what the texts said; but it is

nonetheless what the policies meant. With the new framework introduced last Autumn—the so-called “French Community”—there is a change. There is a new willingness (by government, I mean—a large number of French *people* have had this willingness for a long time) to reckon with a genuine self-determination among Africans; and to accept the fact that genuine concessions need not by any means damage the foundations of “French presence” in West and Equatorial Africa. Of course there are reservations to be made; and a little further on I will suggest one or two of them. By and large, though, the new Executive Council of the Community is beginning to work with a flexibility which allows—or promises to allow—a great deal of political change. This, once again, is thanks to the decision of De Gaulle, whose prestige is great enough to allow him to overwhelm right-wing opposition, and whose ideas (however conservative) are at least clear enough to allow him to see that the old subjections are tenable no longer. Without De Gaulle, one cannot help thinking, the right-wing interests which now dominate the parliamentary life of France would rapidly fall back into their old muddle and misery.

In Algeria, of course, their muddle and misery continue as before.

With France willing to accept political change in Africa south of the Desert—so long as cultural and economic links with France remain strong and unbroken—what about the Africans? How do they react? What do they want?

My own answers are two in number; and neither, it seems to me, is open to much argument. First of all, a majority of politically-minded people in *all* these territories desire progress not only towards self-government, but also towards full sovereignty (though not necessarily towards independence of France). Secondly, powerful trends in *most* of these territories desire progress towards federal unification.

In front of these conclusions, though, one must put a great many “ifs and buts”. The best way to explain them is to consider these territories more closely as they are today.

First of all, there are those which are already in possession of full sovereign rights, or are about to acquire them: Guinea, and Togoland and Cameroun in 1960.

Guinea, let it be said, is a great success from the African point of view. Thanks to sound leadership, sound political preparation, and sound decisions at the point of crisis, Guinea

today is a viable and forward-looking State whose impact on the rest of West Africa will be felt increasingly across the coming years. There are noticeable, no doubt, a great many growing pains: a shortage of cash in the till, a shortage of experienced administrators, a shortage of teachers and technicians of every kind. The residue of tribal hostilities—between Foulah and Sousou and Malinké—is not yet quite drained away and may still cause difficulties, though I should doubt if it will cause any serious crisis.

One can be wrong in such judgments. I spent only three weeks in Guinea, and travelled only 1,200 miles through its vast interior: I don't suppose I talked at length to more than a couple of hundred Guineans in that time. But it seemed to me, by the time I left, that Guinea was firmly and confidently set upon its forward path. The new Guinean administrators whom I met and talked with in the interior were often over-worked and under-experienced, conditions they made no bones about admitting. To offset these disadvantages, they pointed out, they were men of the country—and they could rely on public sympathy and public support to a degree never possible to the colonial administrators who had preceded them.

I think they are right about this. One's over-riding impression of people in Guinea is that they wanted independence, they are glad and proud that they have got it, and they are willing to go a long way towards helping to make it work. Moreover, one can overestimate the lack of experienced personnel. To people all over French-speaking West Africa, Guinea has become a pole of attraction: they see it as the pioneer of a new kind of life, a better kind of life, in every part of this quarter of the continent. And they come to Guinea in their ones and twos, and even in their half-dozens and their dozens, to put their talents at its service. One meets there French-trained veterinaries from the savannah country, intellectuals from Dahomey and Senegal, teachers from the Ivory Coast and the Sudan—people for whom the narrow world of tribal loyalty has lost its savour, and for whom the world of tomorrow means a renaissance—in modern terms—of the large West African unities of long ago.

Bankrupt? That, of course, is what silly people (and a number of sensible people who ought to have known better) said about Guinea when the first weeks of independence were over. At that time, the French banks in Guinea had turned off all

credit, and Frenchmen returning to France had taken large quantities of local money out of circulation. There was—to a lesser extent there still is—great difficulty in finding the cash to pay for the ordinary services of public life. On the day of my arrival—in January—two senior officials explained to me with wry laughter that they had had no salary for three months. But this shortage of cash affected only a minority of people in the towns and cities: it scarcely touched the mass of the peasantry, who live now as they have always lived—in an economy largely of subsistence. It is a shortage which will be overcome without much difficulty. Beyond that, the economy of Guinea is a remarkably strong one—if only because Guinea, exporting iron ore to Britain, has a sterling balance; and also, exporting bauxite to Canada, a dollar balance. The big mining corporations never misunderstood the position: almost from the first day of independence, they made it clear that they would continue with their operations; and since then, they have committed themselves to still larger investments of capital in Guinea.

MALI—originally Senegal, Soudan, Upper Volta, and Dahomey; but now reduced to Senegal and Soudan—is in a different posture. Both Senegal and Soudan are now self-governing republics within the French Community; as well as that, they are federated together as the State of Mali, complete with a constitution, assembly and federal government of its own. The question is: how stable is this arrangement?

The first point to notice is that Senegal and Soudan belong together economically: the crops of the Soudan go out through Senegal, and the consumer goods of France come in from Senegal. The second point is that the political grouping now dominant in both would probably have chosen independence—at the time of the great referendum last Autumn—if they had thought they could get away with it: as it was, they voted for De Gaulle—for mere autonomy within the French Community—as the best thing open to them at that time. What these political groupings would probably choose today—if they could get it—would be to join Guinea in an enlarged federal State, independent but closely linked to France (for none of them wants to cut its links with France—something that many Frenchmen still find hard to believe). They would like, in short, to be “Dominions” within a French Commonwealth: as it is, they have to be content with being self-governing States in a Community whose decisive acts of policy are framed and carried out by France.

A view of this matter that is often heard—and with which I agree—is that the future of Mali will be union with Guinea, together with effective “Dominion” status; *provided* that the French prove flexible enough to allow this natural development to take place. There will otherwise be stagnation—and trouble. The dominant peoples of Soudan and Senegal are also the dominant peoples of Guinea: and between Upper Guinea and Soudan, indeed, there is no dividing line except an artificial frontier on the map. For the moment, though, plans for a union of this kind are in abeyance. Soudan and Senegal are testing out their new self-governing institutions, and political people there have enough on their hands—perhaps for several years.

Next come a series of new self-governing but dependent Republics whose posture is much less clear.

UPPER VOLTA is sandwiched between Soudan-Guinea on one side and the Ivory Coast on the other; and the ambitions of its leaders reflect this situation. They want to have good relations with Mali and with Guinea; but they cannot afford to quarrel with the Ivory Coast—their main route to the sea. That is why Upper Volta at first joined Mali and then withdrew. The Ivory Coast objected.

The IVORY COAST objected because its politics are entirely dominated by Dr. Félix Houphouët-Boigny and his henchmen. These are men whose nationalism has taken them in two curiously opposite directions—towards a reinforcement of parish-pump tribalism (“The Ivory Coast for Ivory Coasters, and out with the foreigner”: foreigners being, oddly enough, not Frenchmen, but immigrants from Dahomey and Togo); and, secondly, towards close links with France. Thus you have the strange situation in the Ivory Coast that Dr. Houphouët—as a well-known French administrator commented—is eager for federation with Bretons and Normans and Burgundians, but dead set against federation with Guineans, Togolanders, or the people of Dahomey. The truth of the matter is that the Ivory Coast is lost, for the moment, in the petty miseries of tribalism—the worst of which was the expulsion of many thousands of “foreign” Africans last winter. For long regarded as the decisive leader in French West Africa, Dr. Houphouët’s star is waning fast: given the kind of African chauvinist light this star has been shedding lately, nearly all his neighbours are understandably glad of this.

DAHOMEY's difficulty is mainly geographical. An isolated Dahomey makes no economic sense: but with which of its neighbours should a self-governing Dahomey join itself? Logically, with Togoland to the west or with Western Nigeria to the east; but neither, for different reasons, is practical politics for anyone concerned. Then with Niger to the north? But Niger is an impoverished and distant territory, and the junction would be difficult. At first Dahomey also joined up with Mali—which made little sense either; and then withdrew, and is now wondering a little uncertainly what to do next.

NIGER's position is much less satisfactory. Here, last Autumn, there was a strong movement for immediate independence—for voting "no" to De Gaulle—but this movement was defeated by one kind of colonialist hocus-pocus or another; and the Niger today is a good deal less self-governing than any of its neighbours. The natural thing for the Niger to do, of course, would be to join Northern Nigeria, for both belong by long tradition to the same trading area, the same language area (Hausa), and the same historical memories. Some of Niger's leaders, indeed, were even accused by the French of "plotting" to join Nigeria last Autumn—and these accusations were made with great bitterness, since the hand of *perfidie Albion* was also said to be in the "plot". It is very doubtful if Albion, on this occasion, had any perfidious intentions; but the French are hard to convince. They have reasserted their control over Niger in no mean way; and have found there a number of convenient stooges.

MAURITANIA, far to the west, I have left to the last in this quick look at French-speaking West Africa, because it really falls outside this picture. Its slender scattered population of cattle-keeping nomads, Arabic-speaking Berber or Tawreg, belongs rather to the Desert; and part of its loyalties goes northward to Morocco. The Moroccans—newly re-established in their own independence—claim Mauritania (Moor-italia—or *Shinqit* in the history of the western Arabs and Berbers) as part of their own heritage; and some Mauritians agree with this. Others do not, and these others are at present in the ascendant and have made agreements of friendship, though not of federation, with Mali to the south of them. Probably there will be several oscillations between these two points of view: the outcome is uncertain, but the advantages of autonomy for the chiefs of Mauritania (and this is a society of chiefs and followers) seem

likely to outweigh the sentimental memories of past union with Morocco.

And French-speaking Equatorial and Central Africa?

Here the development towards independence is much less pronounced. These sparse peoples are desperately short of schools, money, and material means; and their politics are still largely in the "tribal stage"—which means that their political parties (as no longer in most of West Africa) are little more, often enough, than "voting armies" for outstanding individuals. Yet even here—and all these Equatorial populations number only a million more than the population of Soudan alone—there are interesting things to be seen and heard.

All four territories—Gaboon, Middle Congo, Oubangui-Shari, and Chad—have formed themselves into a customs union. In economic terms this may be little more than a formality; yet it should be interpreted as symbolic of a drive towards unity which is powerful in Equatorial Africa just as it is further to the west.

Middle Congo and Oubangui-Shari have changed their names—and here too the symbolism is interesting. Thus Oubangui-Shari has become the CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC; and just before his unhappy death in an air-crash, its principal political leader, M. Barthélèmy Boganda, had proposed the interesting idea that this new Central African Republic ought to be regarded as the core of a future "United States of Latin Africa"—of French-speaking, Spanish-speaking, Portuguese-speaking Africa. The late M. Boganda, an intelligent man, knew perfectly well that anything of that kind would be exceedingly hard to achieve: his intention was to get ideas—large ideas—into circulation. He knew—as others know—that these years ahead will be years of tremendous change and growth; and he wanted the framework to be a wide one.

The old Middle Congo—having Brazzaville as its capital—has become the REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO.

CHAD and GABOON have kept their names unchanged.

It is unreal to consider these French-speaking equatorial territories without bringing in the largest of them all—the BELGIAN CONGO. Here indeed the growth of nationalist sentiment—and of nationalist organisation—has been much more rapid than anyone a few years ago could have well believed possible. Less than a decade back, these Congo populations of Belgian colonialism were without any authentic voice outside

their messianic conventicles (and the leaders of these were mostly in prison or detention): today there are several political groupings, several nationalist newspapers, and quite a bit of legal room to move around in. Broadly speaking, two main groups may be distinguished. The first is that of the Abako, an independence movement based largely on the powerful and cohesive Bakongo people of the Congo estuary—they who formed the old African state of the Mani-Congo in the 15th century. The second is that of groupings which stand, with more or less conviction, for an all-Congolese nationalism. All these groups have the great disadvantage of having still to acquire a genuinely political life of their own—but they also have the great advantage of not being face-to-face with an organised European settlers' power. If Belgians can bring themselves to face the implications of peaceful change, they should be able to reach a reasonable compromise with all or any of these groups. But it remains to be seen whether Belgian opinion can make this imaginative effort.

And the immediate future?

Continued growth of ideas and institutions towards "independence and unity": this will be the dominant trend, a trend which goes hand-in-hand with the same trend in British West Africa (and, indeed, in British East Africa as well). The biggest thing that has happened, perhaps, is not the emergence of a large number of independent or autonomous States—though that is not a small accomplishment—but the transformation of politics from "personalities *plus* voters" to "parties *plus* policies". Much more quickly than many had expected, most peoples in this quarter of the continent have moved on from merely voting for an influential man to voting for a party with political ideas. This means, inevitably, a vast amount of political strife (especially between the old chiefly hierarchies and new parties of the "common man"—parties like the C.P.P. in Ghana and the Parti Démocratique Guinéenne in Guinea); but it also means a reinforcement of the ideas of sovereignty and nationalism. Along the road to independence—to independence and unity (no matter how much political strife there may be; and there will be plenty of that)—all this part of Africa, to repeat my opening sentence, is now a long way past the point of no return.

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