FRENCH WEST AFRICA: THE BACKGROUND

BASIL DAVIDSON

How many English-speaking people who are involved or interested in African affairs know anything of French-speaking Africa? The number must be small: considering the shift and drama of the French-speaking African scene, astonishingly small. Guinea, for most of us, will have joined the family of independent nations from a void of outer darkness. Where is Dahomey? Where is the Gaboon? If their very existence is less of a geographical legend than Timbuktu, it is only because we have seldom heard even so much as their names. Those wide spaces on the map of Africa—French West and Equatorial Africa—must have populations and therefore politics: not many English-speaking people, whether in Africa or elsewhere, could say, perhaps, much more of them than that.

And yet the shift and the drama in French-speaking Africa have lately been, and still are, as manifest and militant as anywhere else on the Continent. Apart from the 13 million people of the Belgian Congo, who must also be said to form part of "French-speaking Africa" (while allowing for a curious Belgian aberration in attempting to teach them Flemish as well), these peoples number more than twice as many as the peoples of the Union of South Africa; and all of them, diverse though they are, now move strongly and even rapidly towards self-government and equality of rights. Though less numerous than the peoples of Nigeria and Ghana (who number together about 39 millions), their achievements cannot be said to be any less important in demonstrating an African will to independence. In 1957, for example, some 4,700,000 people in French West Africa voted for territorial assemblies endowed with many of the attributes of self-government (as well as for deputies elected on a basis of equality of rights to the National Assembly in Paris). A year later one of their leaders, Gabriel d'Arboussier, could claim that imminent emergence of these territories as "fully sovereign and self-governing countries" ought to be regarded as "among the grand achievements of modern Africa". Then a few months after that, and following the same line of thought and intention, Prime Minister Sekou Touré proclaimed the independence of Guinea; and recently, in December, 1958, Senegal declared

itself a republic within the "French Community", and so did the Soudan, and so did the Gaboon, while others follow in their wake. On top of this, both French-speaking "trusteeship territories" in West Africa, Togoland and Cameroun, are due for independence in 1960.

Does this mean that huge colonial units are now beginning to disintegrate, with independence, into a patchwork of little nation-states? Both to offer an answer to that vitally interesting question, and to provide a sample of the quality of thought and utterance among leaders of opinion in this "other West Africa", I should like to preface what follows by quoting from a recent declaration of M. d'Arboussier to the United Press agency. He was speaking of the need for unity among the diverse peoples of "French formation", but his remarks have wider application. I know of no other African politician who has put the matter so clearly and so well. Worth noting also is the date of these remarks—May 1958, or long before the dramatic events of last autumn.

"The time of small and jealous nationalisms", remarked d'Arboussier, "is past and done with. We Africans may have come late to the family of modern peoples. We have suffered for it. We are still suffering for it. But perhaps we have learned some useful lessons from seeing what others have done and not done. I think that most of us would like to spare our countries the misery of small-minded nationalism—just as we should like to spare them the misery of an economic anarchy that is without planning or subordination to the common good."

Born in Djenné, a city of some eight hundred years of learning and literate tradition, d'Arboussier likes to draw historical parallels. "African history," he opinioned on this occasion, "has so often been the history of large units. All the great African states of our past were large or very large, and included many peoples. This was true of Mali as of Songhay, great West African states of the Middle Ages; and of others on the Continent. But what the organisers of those old feudal states did by conquest, we in our day will do by federalism and by free consent.

"So we see French West Africa surmounting both colonialism and its own petty loyalties of tribalism, and emerging as a great and sovereign federation—just as we see French Equatorial Africa emerging as another. I go much further than that. My own deep hope is that we are moving towards the federal unity

of the whole of West Africa—whether French or British or other.

"I am willing to forecast that within ten years from now we shall have come together to found a great new federal state, bilingual in French and English, that will include Ghana and Nigeria as well as our own West Africa. Not a unitary state, you understand, but a federation of federations—a loosely organised but highly progressive and modern association of fifty or sixty million African people."

These reflections, it seems to me, could hardly be improved upon as an introduction to French-speaking African politics at the start of 1959: not, of course, because every French-speaking African politician agrees with d'Arboussier (though most of them do), but because the underlying trends and ideas and hopes that move these peoples and their parties, and give them driving power, are all expressed in what he said. The future may not turn out just like that: but *that* is how the future ought to be. That is how most Africans in these territories want it to be. Not the petty sovereignties of nationalist Europe—not "Balkanisation". Not the weary waste of strife into which the Spanish American republics, seizing their freedom, immediately fell—not "South-Americanisation". On the contrary: a federal unity across frontiers whether tribal or colonial—the sort of unity which, without repressing differences, will accentuate similarities. The sort of unity, in brief, which will give fragmented peoples who are otherwise poor and weak and far from the main lines of thought and movement in the modern world a chance to share, to share on terms of equality of right, in the triumphs and advances of the nuclear age. Is it asking too much?

# # #

Such unity must seem, on the mere face of it, hard to imagine and harder still to obtain.

In the seven million square kilometres of West and Equatorial Africa (excluding Cameroun and Togoland), there dwell some 25 million people: a thin population thinly scattered, but for a few big cities and close-packed rural areas, throughout a vast land of great diversity of climate, vegetation, soil, water supply, and natural wealth. Along the arc of this tremendous rainbow of peoples—with its southern tip at Brazzaville on the Congo river and its western tip in the Atlantic at Dakar—there are clans and tribes and nations of an almost bewildering variety of language, culture, historical experience, habits, means of

livelihood. There are peoples who are as technologically primitive as some of those who live in the forests of the Congo, and peoples who are as technologically advanced as some of those who live in Dakar, Abidjan, Bamako, Niamey, Conakry. There are men of learning and of long literary tradition (as, for example, the intelligentsia of Gao or Djennê) and men of none (as, for example, the greater part of the population of Equatorial, almost as sadly deprived of schools as Angola or Mozambique). Peoples of the tropical forest: food-collectors, hunters, fishermen, farmers. Peoples of the shelterless savannahs of the north: herdsmen, nomads, itinerant traders.

In medieval times, as d'Arboussier observed in his declaration to the United Press, the lands between the northern limit of the tropical forest and the southern limit of the Sahara Desert—the broad belt of savannah which the Arabs called Bilad-es-Sudan, the Land of the Blacks—were often unified by strong conquerors. At its apogee about 1350 A.D., the Mandingo empire of Mali was paramount from the Atlantic to Lake Chad; and the empire of the Songhay, a hundred and fifty years later, was not much narrower. Yet it remained for European colonialism to place a single rule over the forest as well as the savannah; and thus to give an administrative unity to the whole of West Africa but for the British morsels—some of these, however, very big morsels—and such other non-French ruled countries as Liberia and Portuguese Guinea.

This administrative framework imposed by the French gave rise, as time went on, to twelve distinct territories that were grouped together into two main areas of administrative authority, each with a Governor-General—respectively French West and French Equatorial; and to these, for practical purposes, the two former German colonies of Togo and Kamerun (each divided, in 1918, between France and Britain) were added, initially as League mandates and afterwards as UN trusteeships. And thus it may be seen that the consequences of French imperialism in most of West Africa have been of the same unifying order as were those of British rule in most of India.

A few facts and figures may be useful. They should be read against a background of the all-important fact that these countries are contiguous. They lie together on the map.

		People
West	Dahomey	1,614,000
	Guinea	2,505,000

	Soudan	3,642,000
	Ivory Coast	2,481,000
	Mauritania	615,000
	Niger	2,334,000
	Senegal	2,214,000
	Upper Volta ..	3,324,000
	Total ..	18,729,000
Equatorial	Gaboon	392,000
	Middle Congo ..	733,000
	Ubangi Shari	1,103,000
	Chad	2,452,000
	Total	4,680,000

These population figures, UN estimates of several years ago, understate the actual numbers of today. With Cameroun and Togo, there should be some thirty millions in French-speaking Africa south of the Sahara.

# # #

For rather more than fifty years, accordingly, the greater part of this piece of Africa has undergone centralised rule. But it has also undergone—what may be even more important—*direct* rule. There is a big point to be made here. Consider, for example, the contrasts today between (French) Niger and (British) Northern Nigeria, where government has been by *indirect* rule. Both territories, or the larger part of them, had had in the past a common language (Hausa), a common history, a common trading system. But whereas the British since 1900 have conserved the strong Emirate system which they conquered—using those tough old feudal potentates as their instruments for indirect rule, and thus leaving the political situation much the same as they found it—the French have imposed their rule directly on the mass of their colonial subjects.

The French, in short, have destroyed "their" Emirs and thus cleared a way for the party-parliamentary system which now exists in French Niger, but is very far from existing, except in name and ceremony and in two or three of the big towns, in Northern Nigeria. Politically, the one territory is far advanced: the other is in the Middle Ages. Understandably enough, those in power in the two territories want very different things: most politicians in Niger want independence within a federal

unity with neighbouring peoples; but most politicians in Northern Nigeria would prefer continued dependence, if they could choose it, to an independence which must increasingly open their country to influences that are disruptive of Emirate dictatorship.

Not that all chiefly hierarchies have disappeared from French-speaking Africa. Many remain. Some are of ancient lineage. A few conserve their popularity and power. And across the whole reach of their empire the French have also created a class, or rather a caste, of "nominated chiefs": men raised to chiefly rank for the purposes of more or less direct rule, paid by government, maintained as puppets, and rightly regarded in the popular eye as "men belonging to the French". Before the latest elections in the Niger, for instance, it was widely suspected that the French meant to "organise" an elected majority composed precisely of these nominated chiefs who, "belonging to the French", would then connive in an undoubted French ambition of turning the Niger into an "overseas department" of France itself, and thus of extending southward the area of metropolitan rule which already exists in the two "departments" of the Sahara. And it was only because Sekou Touré and his party in Guinea had carefully removed from office all such men "belonging to the French" that they were able, last autumn, to be sure of a negative vote in the Gaullist referendum —and thus obtain their independence.

Yet when due and proper allowance is made for the influence of these chiefs "belonging to the French", it remains true that direct rule in French Africa has undermined much of the tribal and traditional separatism and parish-pumpism that still bedevils British-speaking West Africa. It may be relatively easier for French-speaking Africans to achieve a federal unity among themselves since their territories march with one another, and since they have long known centralised rule: over and beyond that, though, they have the advantage of this levelling process of French imperialism.

# # #

Another large difference has separated the French from the British approach; and reacted accordingly on African responses.

The liberal face of British imperial rule, at least in non-settler colonies, has always looked toward the eventual creation of independent nation-states, "daughters of the Commonwealth" but not otherwise integrated with the Mother Country.

The idea has been, as it were, to sponsor suburban off-prints of the Metropolis (Wimbledon rather than Whitechapel, of course) —complete with flags and anthems, wigs and gowns and as much as possible of the muffled old mumbo-jumbo of Westminsterial procedure: parliaments and proper hierarchies and establishments of power ascending, step by step, to the lofty summits of a mystical Crown: and, underlying all these, distinctive *nationality*. But the liberal face of French colonial rule has looked for something entirely different: for the liberal face of French colonial rule is the face of Marianne, daughter of the Revolution and mother of the Rights of Man, recognising no racialist or nationalist barriers and gradations but proclaiming her great message of equality, liberty, and fraternity from a plinth marked *citizenship*.

Now we are not concerned, here, with the gulf between promise and fulfilment, which is, of course, often a wide one: the point of interest is that whereas British rule has evoked, by reaction, a demand for equality of nationality, of nationhood, French rule has generally given rise to a demand for equality of citizenship, of individual rights. It has seemed obvious and inevitable that British colonies in West Africa should turn themselves into new African nations (even when, as with Ghana, they are composed of widely various peoples). But in French West and Equatorial, at any rate by the beginning of 1959, it has not appeared to seem obvious or inevitable to any significant body of opinion that African destinies can be fulfilled only by an organic and nationalist separation from France. On the contrary, one finds rather the reverse of this opinion—that French-speaking Africa would gain rather than lose by continued association, even close association, not only among its constituent parts but also with a France which should pledge itself to a genuine equality of rights, to a genuine equality of citizenship within a "French Community". And so, although honoured in the breach rather than in the fulfilment, this grand old Jacobin tradition of the French has also played its part in moving these peoples towards a federalist future.

The position at the moment is that there are two significant parties, or rather federations of parties, in the eleven territories of West and Equatorial (Guinea having seceded). The more extensive and influential of these has been, and probably still is, the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africaine* (R.D.A.); while the second, a much newer grouping of territorial parties, is the

Parti du Regroupement Africain (P.R.A.). Their opposition to one another consists neither in ideology nor conflict of aim, but partly in a clash of personalities and partly in a difference of view about tactics. Both want independence, and both want it as soon as they can get it: old-style conservatives, socialists, near-Communists, straightforward "nationalists without label" may be found in both of them. Europeans in West and Equatorial belong to both parties, and may also be found in territorial governments formed by one or other of them. Even after its break with France, Guinea's R.D.A. government still retained Frenchmen (though not official Frenchmen) in its cabinet; and I believe, while writing this, that they are still there.

But for Houphouet-Boigny, R.D.A. leader in the Ivory Coast and an ardent advocate of "territorial sovereignty" *without* close federation, all the important leaders in French West desire a federated unity, and see in that an essential condition of further progress; and the position is much the same, though less clearly defined, in Equatorial. Ideally, they would like to have two large federations, West and Equatorial, which would be joined together in turn by federal links and joined, as a confederation, to France itself—though with equality of rights. Whether they can reasonably hope for this, with politics in France now turned resolutely rightward, is of course another matter.

At the outset of 1959 two immediate issues dominated the minds of all these African leaders. The first was whether the newly-elected National Assembly of France, by any standards the most right-wing assembly since the foundation of the Third Republic in 1871, could possibly be expected to have the imagination, intelligence, and sense of reality to preside over a "French Community" within which all constituent parts would have a genuine equality of rights; and, if not, what to do about it. The second issue was whether the "federalists" in Africa would succeed in triumphing once and for all over the "separatists."

On the second issue the answer seemed already clear enough. Even Houphouet-Boigny was feeling obliged, by the end of 1958, to make "federalist noises"; and his control of the R.D.A. seemed on the wane. A better measure of the way things were really going, though, was provided by a clause written in the new constitution of independent Guinea—a clause that was forthwith copied into the new constitution of the republic of Senegal and, apparently, into that of the republic of Soudan as well.

This clause says more for the reality of French-speaking African aspirations to a common future, to a broadly shaped and federalist future, than whole pages of exegesis. "The Republic," declares article 34 of section 8 of the Constitution of Guinea, "may conclude agreements for association or community with any African state, going as far as partial or total abandonment of sovereignty, in order to realise the unity of Africa". Agreements for union with Ghana, that is: but also with Senegal and Soudan and Upper Volta and any others who may be willing. And the Government of Senegal which copied that clause into its own constitution is, we may note, a P.R.A. government; while the Government of Guinea, when it drafted that clause, was an R.D.A. government. The trend toward unity, it seems, is the trend which carries the day.

But on the other issue—the issue of whether or not this new French Assembly can possibly be expected to think in terms of genuine partnership and equality of rights with ex-colonial peoples—all is obscurity and doubt. For this Assembly is anything but a revolutionary and enlightened body, even in the Jacobin sense of 1789: in that sense, indeed, it is a most reactionary and counter-revolutionary assembly. If its effective power in French Africa is nothing like the power of its predecessors, it is still considerable: large enough, in any case, to cause much damage and provoke delay, and ambitious enough, perhaps, to try to put the clock back even at this late hour in the day of independence. It seems unlikely, even very unlikely, that the grim fate of Indo-China and Algeria can still be visited on French West and Equatorial: yet one has to admit, in face of this Assembly, that the thing is still possible. The questions for 1959 therefore seem to be: What will this Assembly try to do or un-do in French Africa; and how will French-speaking Africans face up to their new situation?

(To be continued)