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The World in 1900

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Dakar, Senegal: A Segregated City of Hope

From 1884 to 1885, French delegates in Berlin affirmed the country’s influence over vast French West Africa. France had, however, influenced trade along Africa’s west coast since the seventeenth century, especially along the coast of what would become Senegal. In solidifying its rule over the area, France began to develop its empire in cities along the coast, including the new city of Dakar. While French Dakar was less than thirty years old at the time of the Berlin Conference, it would, by 1900, be a quickly developing city that would come to symbolize colonial administration and exploitation. Dakar in 1900 did not mean the same thing for all of its inhabitants. For French imperialists, it symbolized republican hope—a new imperial city that would benefit the capitalistic metropole and expand French values and the civilizing mission. For many Africans, the new city brought modernity and (albeit limited) political opportunity, but also urban segregation and economic exploitation.

The era of 1870–1914 has been described as an epoch of hope, but also one victim to capitalist tendencies and its shortfalls. For developing capitalist countries, this era naturally encouraged the domination of the “backward” world.[[1]](#footnote-1) In other words, according to historian Eric Hobsbawm, the creation of a colonial empire (as well as exploitation of the colony) was one aspect of the national and international development of a capitalist country.[[2]](#footnote-2) For Hobsbawm, states had several motivations for the development of their empire. The most important motivation was the economic dimension, which included the need for raw materials, labor, and the search for markets.[[3]](#footnote-3) Additionally, Europeans often desired to assert their superiority over the world of darker skins.[[4]](#footnote-4) Hobsbawm’s analysis of colonization is correct when regarding Dakar. Colonists in Dakar regarded the coastal city as the colonial administration for a region rich in raw materials that could benefit the metropole. However, both Europeans and colonists in Dakar at the turn of the century would not have guessed that the Great War would occur in several years. Instead, colonists regarded the exploitation of the colony’s economic resources as a benefit to their capitalistic values. Many Africans, however, attempted to survive among exploitation, forced labor, and often limited political representation.

French influence in western Africa began much earlier than the eighteenth century. In 1659, French explorers occupied Saint-Louis in what is now northern Senegal and mainly used it for trade.[[5]](#footnote-5) The population grew and by the French Revolution, 7,000 people, including 660 Europeans, lived in Saint-Louis.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, the French only began to really pursue economic expansion and colonial control in the second half of the 1800s, when France participated in what would later be called the “Scramble for Africa.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In the 1880s, their agenda included expanding along the African coast and conquering regions in the West African interior.[[8]](#footnote-8) At the Berlin Conference in 1884 and 1885, they were guaranteed a large area of land in West Africa, including what would become modern-day Senegal. By 1895, France founded the Federation of French West Africa, solidifying their control of the area and shifting control from the military to the civilian.[[9]](#footnote-9) With French development from the seventeenth century mixed with the expansion of the new imperialism of the Republic, coastal cities in Senegal were home to old traditions and institutions.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Much of this newer development was evident in the planning of urban spaces, which became a priority during the second half of the nineteenth century. The French developed urban areas because of a need for centers for administration and labor control, as well as an expanded metropolitan France.[[11]](#footnote-11) In the 1850s, the cities of Gorée and Saint-Louis were the French centers of trade. Gorée itself was an island and much of Saint-Louis was on an island, so its development was limited and the government looked elsewhere on the coast for urban expansion.[[12]](#footnote-12) By 1900, the French government established four communes: the aforementioned Saint-Louis and Gorée, as well as Dakar and Rufisque, both of which were close to Gorée and on the Cap Vert peninsula.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The government created Dakar officially in 1857.[[14]](#footnote-14) Before Dakar’s official creation as a city, the Cap Vert peninsula was sparsely populated by Lebu villagers, who numbered around 10,000 in the 1850s but would be eventually displaced.[[15]](#footnote-15) The development of the city is unique. Since Europeans had hardly inhabited the peninsula before the 1850s, city planners did not need to integrate a European settler habitat.[[16]](#footnote-16) By 1902, Dakar was made the administrative headquarters and the capital and construction for the Palace of the Government General began in 1903.[[17]](#footnote-17) Moving the capital to Dakar symbolized a “young imperial capital” that was “beckoning toward the future.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The city expanded quickly. By 1910, the population was 24,914.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Dakar mimicked Saint-Louis in its architecture style but also in its segregation.[[20]](#footnote-20) Much of the urban development of the city encouraged the creation of a seemingly European city but also pushed Africans to more rural spaces.[[21]](#footnote-21) The official goal of the white residential areas in the city were supposed to impress Africans and give them something to mimic, but also to pacify critics at home who were against the colonial mission.[[22]](#footnote-22) French city planners of colonial areas encouraged segregation during Dakar’s development. According to them, segregation would separate the habitat and culture of Africans from the French, but would still allow colonists to further the civilizing mission as well as control cash crops.[[23]](#footnote-23) Furthermore, Dakar’s Eurocentric nature is highlighted through original names of Dakar’s streets, which always bear the name of a famous Frenchman.[[24]](#footnote-24) Names of streets constantly reminded all in the city of the “superior” race and encouraged loyalty to the Republic.

In addition to the unique urban planning of Dakar, Senegal as a colony had its own version of colonial politics that allowed a rare amount of participation from Africans. In 1872, Senegalese cities were granted municipal councils that residents could elect and in 1884, Senegalese cities were allowed to elect their own mayors.[[25]](#footnote-25) However, not all residents could vote. All French citizens were guaranteed the right, but only Africans who were considered *originaires*—adult males born in the coastal communes—could vote.[[26]](#footnote-26) *Originaires* were also afforded the ability to vote for a deputy who would represent Senegal in the French legislature. That certain Africans were allowed participation in colonial governments as well as in a national representative encouraged this population to exercise their political rights to a degree that colonial subjects in other colonies, such as Algeria, could not.

Another unique aspect of Senegal is the *métis* population, who could not be as easily segregated form French spaces such they were both European and African. *Métis* families were usually Catholics who had gained wealth through trading and had origins in the early 1800s.[[27]](#footnote-27) By 1820, officials sought to ‘regularize’ racial mixing and emphasized the importance of the bourgeois traditions of family and marriage.[[28]](#footnote-28) The *métis* population garnered considerable political importance by the early twentieth century.[[29]](#footnote-29) In addition to their political monopoly—they held a majority of seats on President Jules Grévy’s General Council—they were adept at politics.[[30]](#footnote-30) Their influence shaped French republican institutions by introducing African political values.[[31]](#footnote-31) Citizenship in Senegal was as radical and inclusive as its politics; it excluded some, but was overall more progressive than other colonies. *Originaires* and *métis* enjoyed French citizenship but inland Africans were considered more “rural” and did not enjoy political rights.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Segregation continued in France as part of the developing industrial economy of Dakar and Senegal. Industrialization in the colonies was often limited, since colonies were to focus on raw materials, but in at least one key area, Senegal’s cities, including Dakar, were industrialized by colonists: railroads.[[33]](#footnote-33) Europeans ensured that resources in sub-Saharan Africa were invested in transportation services, mostly due to a desire for speed and efficiency. [[34]](#footnote-34) Therefore, the Government General developed a young federation to stimulate economic development as well as to expand conquest inland.[[35]](#footnote-35) The Senegal Railway, which would link the Senegal River with Niger, was constructed from 1879 to 1905.[[36]](#footnote-36)

While the railroad was a symbol of modernity, its development was not. For example, most labor on railroads was forced by colonial officials.[[37]](#footnote-37) While the French government outlawed slavery in 1848, it was not comprehensively prohibited in the colonies until 1905 and forced labor occurred until 1946.[[38]](#footnote-38) Additionally, the railroad was not supposed to educate or empower Africans. For example, railroad development was controlled and Africans were taught how to operate a railroad but not how to manage it or create their own.[[39]](#footnote-39) For Africans living in the colony in 1900, the railroad symbolized not the modern values of the Republic but instead the harmful product of a capitalistic system.

New industry could not fully orient the population to the new order, however. Instead, colonial officials gave schools this task.[[40]](#footnote-40) This assimilation was exclusive. By 1900, education was mostly provided to children of *métis* families.[[41]](#footnote-41) African children’s curriculum was designed to reinforce notions of loyalty, so, when expanded, it could expand the French Empire’s influence to indigenous towns.[[42]](#footnote-42) However, before 1903, most education was administered by the Catholic Church as a result of France’s Catholic tradition and missionaries in Africa.[[43]](#footnote-43) In 1903, the *laïcité* in metropolitan France ensured that education would be free of religion, therefore encouraging republican values but not Catholic ones. The Government General passed in 1903 an education plan, but it would take years for this to come into practice.[[44]](#footnote-44) Therefore, in 1900, most educated Africans were *métis* children, already privileged in French colonial hierarchy due to their European lineage. The majority of non-*métis* Africans were not educated by French institutions by 1900.

Overall, assimilation strongly influenced the African populations of coastal Senegal, including Dakar, and legacies of this assimilation last today, through, for example, street names and railroads. In 1900, though Senegal was a newer colony and Dakar a newly developed city, France employed their civilizing mission to assimilate. To French colonists in Dakar, the city symbolized hope for an expanded French nation, destined to expand their capitalism and “civilize” backward nations, but did not forewarn a European conflict.

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (Vintage: 1987), 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 59, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, 65–67. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *The History of African Cities South of the Sahara: From the Origins to Colonization*, trans. Mary Baker (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2005), 300–301; David Nelson, “Defining the Urban: The Construction of French-Dominated Colonial Dakar, 1857–1940,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nelson, “Defining the Urban,” 230; Harry Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa: Battles over Schools and the Colonial Order, 1900–1950* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Elizabeth A. Foster, *Faith in Empire: Religion, Politics, and Colonial Rule in French Senegal, 1880–1940* (Stanford University Press, 2013), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Foster, *Faith in Empire*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Liora Bigon, *French Colonial Dakar: The Morphogenesis of an African Regional Capital*, Studies in Imperialism (Manchester University Press, 2016), 6; Liora Bigon, “Urban Planning, Colonial Doctrines and Street Naming in French Dakar and British Lagos, c. 1850–1930,” *Urban History* 36, no. 3 (2009): 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Cities*, 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa*, 15; Nelson, “Defining the Urban,” 229; Hilary Jones, “Rethinking Politics in the Colony: The Métis of Senegal and Urban Politics in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century,” *The Journal of African History* 53, no. 3 (2012): 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Cities*, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Bigon, “Urban Planning,” 434. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Nelson, “Defining the Urban,” 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, 236; Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nelson, “Defining the Urban,” 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid, 226. Bigon, *French Colonial Dakar*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bigon, *French Colonial Dakar*, 6–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Nelson, “Defining the Urban,” 228, 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Bigon, “Urban Planning,” 447–448. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Cities*, 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Foster, *Faith in Empire*, 3–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Hilary Jones, “Rethinking Politics in the Colony,” 329; Foster, *Faith in Empire*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hilary Jones, “Rethinking Politics in the Colony,” 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid, 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid, 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid, 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Foster, *Faith in Empire*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. James A. Jones, *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World: Workers of the Chemin de Fer Dakar-Niger, 1881–1963* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), xviii. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Cities*, 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Hilary Jones, “Rethinking Politics in the Colony,” 3; James A. Jones, *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World*, xix. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Robert O. Collins and James M. Burns, *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. James A. Jones, *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World*, xviii. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid, xviii, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa*, 4–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Nelson, “Defining the Urban,” 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa,* 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid, 5–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)