

Leonard, Douglas. 2019. *Anthropology, Colonial Policy and the Decline of French Empire in Africa*. London, England: Bloomsbury Academic. £25.50, \$34.12

French colonization in Africa from the 1840s to the 1960s was always incompatible with the African people who lived in the Empire. France lacked any real consent of the native people who lived there, or, as author Douglas Leonard writes, “The basic ‘asymmetry’ of the relationship doomed it to failure” (1). To stabilize and strengthen its African colonial empire, the French government made an attempt to reform the socioeconomic and political systems in Africa by using data and information provided by its African subjects but gathered by male and female French colonial officials. Africans were able to manipulate and use these attempts at reform to dismantle the system of French colonization by incorporating their voice into the conversation.

Leonard argues in his book that, to understand the failure of French colonial rule in Africa, historians must take what historian Jonathan Wrytzen calls a “transactional” (3) approach that is neither top-down nor bottom-up. This allows people to understand how French colonial officials gathered knowledge about the cultural, political, economic, and social lives of their subjects. Throughout the twentieth century, French colonial rule had to include academic

input to maintain its power. Over time, French officials learned that collaboration with native Africans was more beneficial to their colonial projects.

Leonard takes on an ambitious task of understanding French colonial policy and why it failed by studying the interpersonal connections of mid-level bureaucratic French scholars and the native Africans. These men and women built colonial policy around acquired information to try to assimilate African subjects under their rule. The colonial officials wanted information about the diversity of the local population, their harvests, and the political dynamics of the tribes. They believed that by giving their African subjects a voice in the official happenings of their colony that that this would make them less likely to resist French rule. Leonard brings attention to these colonial interventions through the lives of individuals in an attempt that “transcends national or racial divides” (45).

Leonard argues the method of knowledge-gathering in Africa had to be flexible and transparent. That way it could consider human systems as entities that change and evolve over time. These French scholars believed that using some of the methods of the natives would create a more humane form of colonial rule. To do this, they used documents written by Africans in hopes of creating a deeper social

understanding. These sources were both translated and interpreted by French colonial officials, so despite the attempt to use native sources, they were often used in ways that would benefit the French government.

The French tried to follow an associationist model based on previous French scholarly research on Africa. Leonard describes the associationist model as a system that emphasizes the importance of maintaining native structures. This meant viewing their subjects as having some intellectual capabilities with some valuable contributions. Within this model, they were worthy of dialogue with the French on the state of their own affairs. However, the French officials within this model rarely ever acknowledged these important contributions.

Leonard presents the evolution of French colonial policy in Africa through the lives of several key colonial officials and anthropologists. Some of these men maintained alliances with African thinkers and served as interpreters and translators of African social construction. They developed relationships with their colonial subjects involved in their own governance as soldiers, administrators, advisers, and governors. Then, they went on to teach the next generation of anthropologists, sociologists, and others who became French colonial officials. In this way, the

information and methods that had been implemented in West Africa, including contributions by native Africans, became a part of the latest form of sociological study in France.

The author's biographical approach details men who employed and often exploited their African subjects in French Sudan, Madagascar, Algeria, and Morocco to try and improve colonial policy and strengthen French control. These goals often were at odds with each other. Using the information, they gathered from their African subjects, they employed a "divide and rule" policy of role of native social groups to weaken collective resistance. These Frenchmen gained key information to reform native social and political structures, such as local leadership in villages, using dialogue with local informants, colleagues, and collaborators. These colonial officials formed relationships with African thinkers and received information about African history and social construction. His biographical examples trace French intellectual thought and colonial policy, but his sources are largely European in origin.

Leonard's most valuable example is his examination of the colonial officer Louis Faidherbe. He was an early governor of the French colony of Senegal. He is the focus of chapter one and sets the stage for the other chapters because all of Leonard's other

biographical examples were influenced by Faidherbe. He engaged in an exploitative form of scholarship that deliberately ignored and disregarded the information and contributions that the natives had presented, but the academic community generally rejected this work but did influence colonial some individual colonial soldiers and governors such as Joseph Gallieni and Hubert Lyautey.

Leonard's study almost certainly would have been strengthened by using more sources from native Africans. In his introduction he writes that historians should do further work with African sources but he himself neglects to use many of these sources. Additionally, he certainly addresses the background and education of each of these men but does not spend much time discussing the political situation in France and how domestic conditions in France impacted colonial policy in Africa, other than suggesting France was generally supportive of ethnological investigations.

Overall, Leonard's argument is fairly compelling: French administrators sought to understand and thus exploit the social, intellectual, and political situation in Africa to rule more effectively. Subsequently, native African sources began to be viewed by French officials as more legitimate. Through this process, native Africans took the work being done by French colonial

officials, expanded upon it by inserting themselves into the communication networks of French colonial officials, and changed the methods of French sociology. The colonial officials would educate their successors based on the information that they had gathered during their time in West Africa and thus French sociology evolved unwittingly with the influence of native Africans. West Africans were able to engage in dialogue with colonial officials and express some of their needs and desires. The published work of these French colonial officials demonstrated to the rest of Europe that considering native voices in their foreign policy could make for more effective colonial rule while at the same time inadvertently undermining French colonial rule in Africa.

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