Spatial Variations in Urbanization in Former French Africa, 1885-2004

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Despite sharing a similar colonial government and gaining independence in 1960, the former French colonies of Sub-Saharan West and Central Africa have experienced varying trends of urbanization. Landlocked nations Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad currently range from 18 to 39 percent urbanized while coastal nations Mauritania and Gabon are 38 to 73 percent urbanized. These trends towards coastal development show a reversal from pre-colonial growth in which many kingdoms (Ashanti and Sokoto) and cities (Kano and Timbuktu) developed further inland. What has caused this reversal in urbanization and spatial demographics?

This paper examines how changes in French administrative policies and colonial goals resulted in differing focal points of development in Africa. As French interests shifted between the interior and coastal sections of West and Equatorial Africa, resources and capital for development followed. While administrative policies from Paris shifted the spatial focus of the colonial government, it also resulted in localized economic and agricultural practices which contributed to rural-urban migration, increased urban unemployment and poverty, and deepened the economic crisis experienced throughout most of the region (Hope, 1998). This paper will examine the various phases of French colonial administrative policy, how these policies impacted regional economic practices and populations, and to what extent these policies impacted urban growth and demographics.

French activity in Africa

French activity in Africa can be divided into three periods; the pre-war period from the late 1800s to 1914, the inter-war period from 1915-1939, and the pre-independence period from 1940-1960. French goals in colonial Africa changed very little during these peri-
ods. France concentrated on appropriating, exploiting, and developing vast areas of land and resources in their colonies (Martin & O’Meara, 1995). France implemented various policies to accomplish this objective including programs of land tenure, developing transportation networks, and investing in or adjusting administrative centers. However, policy implementation varied between coastal and interior colonies. Also, policies enacted in one location often affected people in other places.

Methods

The initial phase of this research included identifying the major urban centers of former French Africa. These were identified by their reference as an administrative capital or governing center. The major urban centers of today with populations greater than 100,000 were identified with reports from the United Nations Statistics Division and listed in a table with collected population figures. Once these figures were collected, they were graphed as a scatter plot. This allowed for an analysis of population patterns and trends.

The second phase of this project involved researching the policies of the French colonial government, identifying colonial policies, and overlaying these with the population statistics of African urban centers. This resulted in an analysis of the growth of urban centers with the implementation of governing policies.

Data Sources

This research paper uses findings from annual French-colonial statistical reports, national censuses, statistics from the United Nations, and references in historical documents. Annual statistical reports include findings from censuses conducted by administrators in the territories of French Africa. In years when no census was taken, surveys and guesses of population figures were taken by colonial administrators and local chiefs. Often, the exact number of the European population in an urban center was given, while African populations were rounded off and estimated based on the number of houses found. These figures were found in statistical reports such as Annuaire Statistique de L’Afrique Occidentale Francaise and Memento
Statistique de L’Economie Africaine. The population charts of African urban centers are based on these findings and figures. Data for French administrative, economic and urban development policies have been compiled from historical documents and references including direct quotes and passages from administrators.

Results

Fourteen nations in sub-Saharan Africa experienced French colonial administrative policies prior to their independence. Nine of these nations, including Senegal, Mali (French Soudan), Niger, Guinea, Cote d’Ivoire, Togo, Benin (Dahomey), Burkina Faso (Upper Volta), and Mauritania were members of the administrative unit French West Africa. Gabon, Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, Chad, and Cameroon comprised the administrative unit of French Equatorial Africa (see Fig. 1).

French administrative policy altered the flow of rural migrants, seasonal workers, capital flow, and even the populations of entire villages. Populations and trade routes which had primarily involved interior areas were shifted towards the coast. Additionally, rural-urban migration is a self-perpetuating process. The vast majority of migrants are young adults with a high fertility rate (Hope, 1998). This facilitates faster birth rates in the urban centers while decreasing growth in rural areas and draining their potential workforce.

Pre-War Period Urbanization

Interior Colonies

In West Africa, the original economic plan involved modernizing traditional practices in the area. Subsistence farming would give way to modern plantation agriculture increasing production and revenue from the colonies. However, these efforts often failed as the labor force was too small and the idea of conscripting labor clashed with traditional practices of migrant laborers. Traditional economic practices often competed successfully with the French projects (Griffeth, 1985). As a result, the idea to modernize the local econ-
Figure 1: French Colonial Urban Centers, Urbanization Percentages, and Major Railways.

The economy changed to a policy of economic accommodation. From these successes, French policy was altered to increase a worker’s individual production. A large population of laborers developed as a response to increased benefits through an agricultural lifestyle. It was profit-
able for rural farmers of interior colonies to produce cash crops such as cocoa, coffee, cotton, peanuts, and palm oil for European markets (Martin & O’Meara, 1995).

In French Equatorial Africa, the economic policy of land appropriation to concession companies was less accommodating, harmful to the population, and only profitable through exploitation. According to an inspector in 1913, the powerful Compagnie Forestiere Sangha-Oubangui systematically neglected everything except collecting rubber (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1986). To foster the collection of resources on these lands, all who lived in its bounds were used as laborers.

Throughout French Africa, growth of interior urban centers and the overall population was minimal if not declining. Interior urban centers in Guinea and Mali experienced declines in population. Bamako and Kankan (see Fig. 2) likely decreased in population as seasonal migrant workers left for Senegal to cultivate cash crops (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1985).

*Coastal Colonies*

The pre-war period saw the initiation of several principal rail-
The Senegal-Niger line of 1905, linking Dakar to Kayes; the Conakry to Kankan line in Guinea, completed in 1914; the Abidjan to Bouake line in Cote d'Ivoire, and the Cotonou line to Save in Dahomey, both completed in 1912 (see Fig. 1), all caused a realignment of economic axes, causing populations to regroup (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1986).

This altered the orientation of commerce toward the coast through the port cities established as colonial administrative centers. For the majority of landlocked peoples living in French West Africa, inland expansion of transportation systems altered their attention toward the coast and away from Saharan caravan routes (Griffeth, 1985). New patterns of trade helped colonial authorities attract populations and secure labor resources from the interior toward areas favored for development (Pheffer, 1985). This created new urban centers while selectively draining older centers.

When examining the coastal urban centers of Dakar and St. Louis, we can see initial stages of urban growth (see Fig. 3). Dakar's population doubled from 1900 to 1914. This growth is expected with the emphasis of development placed on Dakar. Completion of Dakar's port in 1910 and railroad junctions centralized colonial adminis-
trative and economic activities to the city (Pheffer, 1985). While Saint-Louis displays growth, it is not as pronounced reflecting the emphasis placed on Dakar. In 1902, Dakar replaced Saint-Louis as the administrative capital of French West Africa. Not all coastal urban centers grew during this time period however. Population decreases in Conakry and Brazzaville, both port cities and administrative capitals, typify decreases in the overall populations of colonial Africa due to disease, conscription, labor recruitment, and relocation (see Fig. 3).

**Inter-War Period Urbanization**

*Interior Colonies*

The end of the war exposed the deplorable health conditions many Africans experienced. This was due to policies of relocation to new regions, troop recruitment, disease outbreaks, and natural hazards which magnified difficult living conditions. In many areas, the normal rhythm of social and economic life was disrupted by labor recruitment. Population densities fell below the level needed to maintain self-sufficiency (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1986). By the early 1920s, officials noted declines in population. A fifteen percent decline was observed in Cameroon and thirty percent declines in Congo and Central African Republic. In 1923, Albert Sarraut, the minister of colonies, noted that “Our policy must be to preserve the African people. Thus there is a need for a far reaching programme of metropolitan investment, for health and education services to improve African welfare and thus productivity” (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1986).

In the years following World War I, Paris enacted a strategy to spur economic revival. France encouraged colonies to maximize production, support the war effort, and aid in post-war economic reconstruction (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1986). Increased economic production was based on the availability of labor. In West Africa, this policy coincided with efforts to regroup thinly spread populations. In Upper Volta, Mali and Niger, cotton production increased from 189 tons prior to the War to 3500 tons in 1925. However, increased demands drove many in the region to flee. In the course of a decade, an
estimated 100,000 Mossi fled Upper Volta (Cordell & Gregory, 1982).

As economic production increased and France experienced a revived economy, the situation for African workers hardly improved. Wages did not increase consistently, leading to a growth of non-contracted migrant laborers traveling between colonies looking for better wages. Nearly 50,000 workers annually left Burkina Faso and Guinea to harvest groundnuts in Senegal. While wages did not increase with economic successes in the colonies, taxes did, rising from five francs before the war to twenty-five in 1930 and seventy-five in the prosperous economic zones (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1986).

Often, individuals increased production to pay off debts and taxes. By the 1930s, the combination of taxes and deflated commodity prices was too much for many farmers to tolerate. In most colonies, people paid more in cash than they earned. This compounded crises, such as demands for labor, food-production shortages from the exodus of young people, plagues, and famines. By 1936, traditional farmers abandoned hope of surviving off the land and fled to urban and administrative centers (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1986).

During the years of World War I, colonial urban centers changed little in population, if they did not decline from conscription and out-migration. With immediate post-war policies promoting increased production and improved living conditions, colonial urban centers reversed their declines. However, as long as citizens living in rural areas survived with an agrarian lifestyle, there would be few reasons to migrate. Overall, interior urban centers demonstrated slower population growth than coastal centers. In Niger, transferring the colonial capital from Zinder to Niamey (see Fig. 4) caused only slight population growth (Njoh, 2004). In Mali, population growth at Bamako (see Fig. 4) was steady and likely augmented with farmers fleeing from interior sections of the colony. In Upper Volta, Ouagadougou (see Fig. 4) likely experienced population decline due to the use of the Mossi and other peoples as an “indispensable labour source for Senegal and the Ivory Coast” (Cordell & Gregory, 1982).
Coastal Colonies

France exploited its colonies by extracting human capital in the form of conscripted soldiers. Because of numerical inferiority to Germany, the French adopted a policy treating the African territories as a troop reservoir (Martin & O’Meara, 1995). However, conscription was not limited to World War I. From 1919 to 1939, conscription caused a number of young Africans to flee to nearby English colonies which did not retain this policy.

During World War I, numerous soldiers were recruited from Africa impacting demographics, altering economic practices, and disrupting family organizational schemes. French Africa supplied over 200,000 troops for World War I with tens of thousands dying on the battlefield (Martin & O’Meara, 1995). The recruitment process was alarming for most Africans. To counter resistance to recruitment, policy makers created bonus schemes including exemption from future labor taxes or conscriptions. Despite these, Africans fled into the bush, left the country or deserted. Thirty-five thousand Senegalese took refuge in the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. In Guinea, one of every five recruited fled to nearby Liberia and Sierra Leone. Whole districts in Guinea were emptied and others were reduced to half their
numbers (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1986).

In Senegal, the local populations were strained by soldier recruitment. As a result, production of millet fell by a half and groundnuts by a quarter. In Cote d’Ivoire, there was less of a strain by recruitment and the colony received migrant laborers from neighboring colonies. Subsequently, maize production increased eightfold and cotton production by a factor of fifteen (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1986). In Equatorial Africa, a similar program was launched in 1915. Rather than producing for France, every village was required to provide for troops stationed in Cameroon. In the end, only a quarter of all produce was left for local village consumption.

France enacted policies to increase colonial economic production. To accommodate these demands, forced labor was legalized. In 1912, work-taxes were enacted in Equatorial Africa ranging from eight to twelve days a year. In 1925 the policy was extended to fifteen days. In this region, recruiting campaigns were used for projects planned in areas far away from the main population. Between 1921 and 1932, nearly 130,000 men were recruited to work on the Congo-Ocean railway which often amounted to a death-sentence from poor health and working conditions (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1986).
As many farmers from interior colonies fled regions with high taxation and production demands, coastal urban centers experienced increases in population. From 1931 to 1936, Dakar and Abidjan combined to grow 71% and Conakry doubled. However, few of these people were employed. In 1936, there were only 167,000 wage earners in West Africa, barely one percent of the population (Vidrovitch-Coquery, 1986).

When examining the inter-war population figures for Dakar and Abidjan (see Fig. 5), an increase can be seen after 1930. Both centers grew slowly during the years of conscription and also show only slight growth during the economic boom years between 1920 and 1930. A spike can be seen in Abidjan’s population after 1934 when the city succeeded Bingerville as the colonial capital (OTAL, 2005). When examining population figures for Conakry (see Fig. 5), the population doubles between 1932 and 1936. Coastal urban centers in Equatorial Africa also demonstrate population growth following 1930. In Brazzaville (see Fig. 5), an influx of tens of thousands of workers was received during construction of the Congo-Ocean railway (The Dupuy Institute, 2000).

Pre-Independence Period Urbanization

Interior and Coastal Urban Centers

Following World War II, politicians in Paris re-examined colonial policies in Africa. An emphasis was placed on reform and development of urban and administrative centers. Reform occurred as economic and financial management. During the inter-war period, the colonies were expected to provide and assist France economically. After World War II, this was reversed. Emphasis on investment and development in urban centers became more pronounced and did not focus exclusively on coastal urban centers over those in interior regions. In 1946, politicians in France’s 4th Republic reversed the traditional ruling that the colonies should finance development from production based revenue and policies were made to abolish forced labor and improve general welfare. Goals to reform overall welfare of the African population involved investing in and relocating
administrative centers. In 1946, Cameroon’s administrative functions were relocated from Douala to Yaounde, while in 1947 the same transfer occurred in Burkina Faso from Bobo-Dioulasso to Ouagadougou (Njoh, 2004). In most instances of relocation, the welfare of the colonial administrator took priority. The moves in Cameroon and Niger situated administrators in a more favorable climate. In 1950, the Vridi Canal was completed linking Abidjan to the Atlantic Ocean (OTAL, 2005). This established Abidjan as the major port handling all goods coming in to West Africa. In 1957, Nouakchott was established as the capital of Mauritania with a population goal of 15,000 (BBC News, 2005).

In 1943, regulation of urban development in France was broadened to cover similar activities in the colonies. In 1945, law was passed requiring territories to create urban development plans. Urban centers from Dakar to Brazzaville implemented this plan (Njoh, 2004). Architects in Paris designed city plans while workers and departments in the colonies implemented them. While most plans were drawn up in the 1940s and 1950s, they were not implemented until after independence in 1960 (Njoh, 2004).
Following World War II, colonial investment focused on the colonial urban centers and the capitals and territorial headquarters, especially Dakar, Abidjan, and Brazzaville. The interior populations continued serving as a reservoir of labor. Now, they were needed in the booming economies of the coastal areas (Njoh, 2004). Facilities such as schools, colleges, hospitals, and religious institutions were constructed. These required an initial labor force for construction and fulltime employees afterwards (Njoh, 2004). Urban centers with job opportunities and institutions facilitating economic advancement attracted rural migrants.

Urban centers throughout West and Equatorial Africa experienced tremendous population growth. In Dakar the population nearly tripled, in Abidjan the population quadrupled, and in N’Djamena the population increased tenfold (see Fig. 6). Even when colonial administrators relocated operation, both cities demonstrated growth. Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire (See Fig. 7) both grew, although Pointe-Noire grew faster with the completion of the Congo-Ocean Railway, its port, and its brief tenure as capital of the French-Congo (Adloff, Decalo, and Thompson, 1996). In Cameroon, Douala and Yaounde
Figure 8: Douala/Yaounde Population Comparison, Pre-Independence Period

Figure 9: Bobo Dioulasso/Ouagadougou Population Comparison Pre-Independence Period
In Figure 11, population statistics for Abidjan were collected from estimates given by the Institut National De La Statistique Du Republique De Cote D’Ivoire (http://www.ins.ci/) for 1990 through 2005. These estimates give Abidjan the appearance of linear growth which is not a typical way in which a city grows.

(See Fig. 8) grew following an administrative transfer, as did Bobo Dioulasso and Ouagadougou (See Fig. 9) in Burkina Faso.

Post Independence Urbanization

Following independence, growth in African urban centers increased rapidly. Newly independent nations in Africa retained the same policies implemented during the 1940s and 1950s. The urban center remained the focal point of government and private sector investment (Hope, 1998). In some instances, the continuation of colonial policy resulted in the relocation of national capitals. In 1983, Yamoussoukro (see Fig. 10) was designated Ivory Coast’s new national capital replacing Abidjan (Scaruffi, 2005).

In these urban centers, the populations have increased to such a degree that famines, diseases, droughts, and small-scale wars have not impacted their growth. Only full scale civil war temporarily stops
orientation of the economic axis developed with the initial French colonial policy of developing transportation networks to the interior and extracting labor and resources towards the coast, and continued with increased production demands and burdens of taxation on interior agricultural areas following World War I. Following World War II, France invested heavily in coastal urban centers to attract skilled laborers, other Europeans, and potential colonial administrators. When colonial rule was replaced by national governments, policies favoring coastal development at the expense of interior regions were continued.

This type of study can benefit future urban planners dealing with population issues in large urban centers. One problem is that rural-urban migration is a self-perpetuating process. The vast majority of migrants are young adults with higher fertility than the urban population as a whole. The long-term contribution of rural-urban migration becomes much greater, as does the loss experienced by the rural population (Hope, 1998). Equatorial Africa appears to have a more stable situation. The nations of French Equatorial Africa currently have a larger portion of the population urbanized than their
West African counterparts (See Fig.1). While the fastest growth and urbanization rates are found in West Africa, Equatorial Africa appears to have reached a stable situation.

Despite receiving less funding for urban economic development, it appears that many in French Equatorial Africa fled rural areas as a response to harsh exploitation by concessionaires. A consistent stream of migrants flowed into urban centers like Bangui and Brazzaville. This, coupled with the population decline in Equatorial Africa in the early 1900s may explain differences in urbanization percentages. Subsistence survival would have been extremely difficult in these areas. Equatorial Africa subsequently started a rural-urban migration sooner than West Africa.

Even though urban centers throughout Africa are growing at a rapid pace, those closer to the coast are larger. Attempts to relocate administrative urban centers from the coast to the interior as seen in Cote d’Ivoire and Cameroon have not been able to reverse the trends of population and funding moving to the coastal urban centers. The French had a lasting impact on the populations of West and Equatorial Africa. Ports, administrative centers, and economic opportunities were invested in and developed faster along the coast under French rule. This trend was carried over following independence by various African nations. As a result, migrating families continue to follow the trail to economic opportunity which leads to the urban centers along the coast.

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