



Desertification Nation:

Echoes of French Colonialism in Senegal During Times of Water Shortage

Framing:

How have colonial practices and infrastructure contributed to current discourses around desertification?

Focus:

How did the development of French colonial infrastructure change the perceptions of water distribution during times of water scarcity in postcolonial Senegal?

Thesis The French colonial legacy of social and political power dynamics has played an instrumental role in shaping the development and access to water infrastructure in Senegal. I argue that postcolonial relations between Senegal and France are most evident when the French government provides aid during times of water shortage. The history of human interactions within West African regions of aridity paired with climatic data presented in this paper will ultimately prove the duality of human and non human factors contributing to desertification.

Colonialism

"a particular relationship of domination between states, involving a wide range of interrelated strategies, including territorial occupation, population settlement, and extraction of economic resources by the colonizing state."

Desertification

is defined by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) as "land degradation in arid, semi-arid, and dry subhumid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities."

Case studies

1. From **1968-1973** it is estimated that **250,000 people died** due to lack of food and water resulting from desertification. Precipitation was 50-60% lower than the 50 year average.

2. On September 12th **2013**, the pipeline that brings water from Northern Senegal to the capital of Dakar broke, leaving **40% of the 3 million people** living in Dakar and its suburbs without fresh water.

Discourses

Sarkozy's 2007 speech in Dakar displays the tension present between the former colonial power and the Senegalese.

The Senegalese book *Cycle de Sécheresse, Cycles of Drought*, gives insight to Senegalese opinions on neocolonialism.

Interviews with: history professor Ibou Diallo, author of *Cycle de Sécheresse*, and a water treatment director for French water company *Sénégalaise des Eaux*

Conclusion The legacy of French colonial power dynamics between Senegalese social classes results in disproportionate access to infrastructure, especially during times of water shortage. While it is convenient to blame colonialism for all the problems in West Africa, the issues related to drought involve factors such as historic cyclical weather patterns, increase in population, and changes in the use of the land. There is no one driving force that can be blamed for desertification. The distribution of information that has shaped people's understanding of drought is representative of the class dynamics that were established during colonialism.

References

- Chafetz, Tony. *End of Empire in French West Africa: France's Successful Decolonization?* Oxford, GBR: Berg Publishers, 2002, 60-65.
- DeMenocal, Peter, Joseph Ortiz, Tom Guilderson, Jess Adkins, Michael Samthein, Linda Baker, and Martha Yarusinsky. "Abrupt Onset and Termination of the African Humid Period: Rapid Climate Responses to Gradual Insolation Forcing." *Quaternary Science Reviews* 19, no. 2000 (2000): 347-61.
- Foley, Jonathan A., Michael T. Coe, Marten Scheffer, and Guiling Wang. "Regime Shifts In The Sahara And Sahel: Interactions Between Ecological And Climatic Systems In Northern Africa." *Ecosystems* 6 (2003): 524-39.
- Glantz, Michael H. *The Politics of Natural Disaster: the Case of the Sahel Drought*. Praeger Special Studies in International Economics and Development. New York: Praeger, 1976. 178.
- IPCC, 2007: *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, 10.2.6 Desertification [Solomon, S., D. Qin, M. Manning, Z. Chen, M. Marquis, K.B. Averyt, M. Tignor and H.L. Miller (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA.
- Roquet, Dominique. "Partir pour mieux durer: la migration comme réponse à la sécheresse au Sénégal?" *Espace populations sociétés. Space populations societies*, no. 2008/1 (June 1, 2008): 37-53.
- Sow, Cheikh C. *Cycle de sécheresse et autres nouvelles*. Collection Monde noir poche; 17. Paris: Hatier, 1983.