

CHAPTER 3

France and the Evolution of Sub-Regional Integration in Central Africa

The Case of CEMAC

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IDENTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Prior to 1870, French colonial possessions in Africa were limited to several offshore islands and commercial enclaves on the coastal fringes of Central and West Africa. Several reasons accounted for this timid acquisition of African territories, despite the fact that France had been involved in overseas colonial interests in other parts of the world for several millennia. Africa as a continent of savages was the preeminent idea that informed European reluctance to conquer it. However, this perception of Africa changed dramatically after the failure of the British and French condominium over Egypt and the Berlin Africa conference of 1884–1885. While the Berlin Conference laid down guidelines for acquiring territories on the African continent, the failure of the Anglo-French condominium over Egypt triggered a competitive and sustained scramble among European powers to acquire territories on the continent. In order to consolidate its position over its colonies, France created the *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF), in West Africa, which was made up of Mauritania, Senegal Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin. In Equatorial Africa, it created *Afrique Equatoriale Française* (AEF), a federated structure made up of present-day Gabon, Congo, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Chad.¹ Cameroon became part of the AEF and Togo joined the AOF as a result of the outcome of World War I.

Despite the diversity in culture, geographical location and artificial boundaries born out of European misconceptions of Africa, France still developed a coherent, well-polished common colonial policy for the administration of these countries.² The French African policy was characterised by the centralisation of policy formulation and decision-making, respect for administrative hierarchy and uniformity in the application of these policies. It is, however, important to note that the successful implementation of these policies was only possible after the French secured the collaboration of Africans through conquest. Within the prism of such understanding, and through a system called indirect rule, traditional African rulers became French agents for the penetration of French authority and culture in the traditional fold of many French African societies. In areas where there was no centralised authority, the French created traditional rulers and bestowed colonial symbols of power on them. The beneficiaries of this system of administration in colonial Africa were the traditional rulers.

This chapter attempts to evaluate how the formation of these loose federations of colonial possession informs French policy towards sub-regional integration in post-independent Africa. The emphasis will be on French policy towards the AEF and subsequently its role in the formation of the *Communauté Economique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale* (CEMAC). It will also be important to examine French policy towards CEMAC over time and to decipher to what extent this relation has had an impact on French geostrategic policy towards regional groupings and Africa in general. This is particularly important, as it will be recalled that during the decolonisation period, power was transferred to the federated states and not to the AOF and AEF. Gardiner further argued that richer nations, such as Côte d'Ivoire in the AOF and Gabon in the former AEF, had long objected to the use of their resources for the benefit of their poorer neighbours.³ During the formative years of the *Union Douanière Equatoriale et du Cameroun* and subsequently of the *Union Douanière et Economique de l'Afrique Centrale* (UDEAC), Congo Brazzaville and Gabon objected to the inclusion of Cameroon in the body. With the transformation of UDEAC to CEMAC in 1994, the new body was faced with enormous challenges in respect of statutory protocols and sovereign rights. The study therefore attempts to evaluate these challenges and to explore to what extent French African policy has influenced the growth of the organisation.

Methodologically, the chapter is an analytical narrative of the challenges and prospects of integration in the CEMAC zone. It focuses on the heterogeneous aspects of the region and how such aspects facilitate or impede integration. The research was based on interviews conducted in Cameroon and the CAR from 12 July to 4 August 2007. The opinions of citizens of the CEMAC subregion on the effectiveness and challenges of the integration process were sampled. Questions posed to informants were unstructured and did not follow a particular sequence or chronology. The responses were also diverse and varied. Interviews were conducted with diplomats of the six countries that make up the CEMAC subregion. I also had lengthy discussions on the subject with top-level cadres in the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the CEMAC Secretariat, External Relations, the Prime Minister's office, the police, and customs. The discussions centred on the level of preparedness of CEMAC institutions and organs in the implementation of CEMAC protocols and directives. I also conducted interviews at the Cameroon Institute of International Relations, the Cameroon Daily, *Fondation Paul Ango Ela*, and personnel at the University of Yaoundé, as well as with officials at the Cameroon Railway Corporation that transports most of the goods destined for Chad and the CAR, key countries in the CEMAC zone. I paid a visit to the Cameroon, Chad and CAR border post of Dompta and to the Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea border post of Kye-Ossi to experience the free movement of people and goods.

CONCEPTUALISING FRENCH COLONIAL POLICIES IN AFRICA

French interest in Africa grew proportionally with its commercial empire. By 1794 slavery was abolished, and all men, without distinction of colour, domiciled in French colonies became French citizens and enjoyed all the rights assured by the constitution.⁴ This important declaration was the cornerstone through which colonial French African

policy was anchored. In the first quarter of the last century this French African policy was generally known as assimilation. The assimilation policy was based on the fact that the local population in French-controlled areas would abandon their culture, adopt the French system of life and become like the French.⁵ Crowder argued that the French revolutionary doctrine of the equality of man and the superiority of European culture, particularly French culture and civilisation, informed this assimilative policy on the continent.⁶ Assimilation was built on the premise that there were no racial or cultural differences that education could not eliminate. Education of the African population became the quintessential factor in the success of French administration in colonial Africa. The fundamental aim of French colonial policy was not generally formulated because the French accepted African cultural values, but rather because they regarded Africans as 'a people without history, without any civilisation worthy of the name, constantly at war with one another and fortunate to have been put in touch with the fruits of French civilisation.'⁷ Men of letters, particularly in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, were accorded French citizenship and enjoyed all the rights and privileges that came with it. French involvement in Africa was therefore not generally considered an expansion of the French empire, but rather a moral obligation towards another human race, the African race. That explains why the French scramble for Africa was considered a civilising mission (*l'oeuvre civilisatrice*) rather than empire building.

French colonial administrators had trouble in the application of the assimilative policy. Several argued that Africans were not ready to abandon their culture to pursue the French civilising bandwagon generally. They proposed a policy of association with the African population. Exponents of the policy argued that Africans were culturally separate from the French and were therefore impossible to assimilate into French culture. Association therefore implied the acceptance of African culture as a tool for the administration of the colonies. The line between the French policy of association and Lugard's indirect rule became increasingly blurred in the final years of colonial rule. There were therefore no empirical differences between association and indirect rule. In the midst of all this, pragmatism became an important policy application formula. Despite all the difficulties associated with association, it became the dominant French colonial policy from 1910 to 1945.

Undoubtedly, the association policy also failed to achieve the desired results of providing metropolitan France with the necessary economic resources for the sustenance of France and its overseas territories. Because of these difficulties experienced in formulating an ideal African policy, Lord Hailey argued that 'the underlying assumption remained that, on a long view, the future of the overseas territories must be one of eventual integration with France in a larger political unit.'⁸ The integration of African people and their economies into the larger French society became another schematic and theoretical undertaking that characterised French Africa policy prior to 1960. Thus, it could largely be assumed that France did not have an ideal African policy prior to 1960. Its policy formulation and application have been characterised by inconsistencies and pragmatism, very different from the indirect rule colonial system that the British constructed and implemented with great admiration from their peers in India and Nigeria.

FRANCE AND THE CREATION OF WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICAN REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES

By 1960, the year of independence of many African countries, the concept of integration was not new, as the founding document of the AEF of 1901 portrayed. The harmonisation of monetary and economic policies of French colonial entities became the principal *leitmotif* for integration. These were the principal considerations put forward by France in the creation of AOF and AEF. It was also the underlying motive when the statutes of the AOF and AEF were changed after independence to give the newly independent countries some sort of political leverage over the new integrative frameworks. In West Africa, *l'Union Monétaire Ouest Africaine* (UEMOA), and in Central Africa, UDEAC, and subsequently CEMAC, became French monetary and economic instruments in directing the integration paradigm in Sub-Saharan Africa. In trying to justify the creation of these integrative frameworks, France, the dominant colonial power in Sub-Saharan Africa, was trying to find a formula to reorganise its former colonies into a grouping that would be most suitable for its own economic interests.⁹

The manifestations of this willingness to integrate its African possessions rested on the fundamental idea of indissoluble linkages between a dominant Europe and a dominated Africa. As Ropivia argues, this form of union had the misfortune of limiting the capacity of African states to define their own autonomous integration strategy.¹⁰ Thus, in the formative years of African integration thinking, France dictated the pace and terms according to which her colonies could come together. In pursuit of these economic expansionist tendencies, acculturation became a strong instrument for the propagation of integrationist ideals. Martin argues that cultural osmosis entails elements of an ideology and policy that have been used to reinforce France's presence overseas. After World War II, this policy and ideological outlook came to be typified by the vision of *France-Afrique* as a single geo-political entity.¹¹

In tandem with the prevailing *France-Afrique* concept, several political heavyweights in France also proposed a rather skewed *Eurafrique* concept of relations with the continent. The concept was based on the premise that France is and should be the leading European country in Africa, and as such its policy towards the continent should be geared at emancipating the African people, following the French revolutionary principles of *liberté-égalité-fraternité*. In an attempt not to jeopardise its special relationship with its African entities, France successfully requested, during the negotiations leading to the Rome Treaty of 1957, that its African interests be taken into account. Ropivia further argues that France's insistence on a comprehensive section in the Rome Treaty on its interests in African countries paved the way for the establishment of France-supported regional economic commissions in Africa. He further states that the 1964 Yaoundé Convention on Euro-African association laid the groundwork for the establishment of the now famous France-Africa annual summit.¹²

The success of the integration paradigm in French Africa has been widely attributed to the actions of the politicians within the French governing elites and the enlightened leadership of a small number of African leaders who were deeply loyal to France. Chafer argued that their political apprenticeship as deputies in the French National Assembly

had prepared them for their role as leaders of the new African nations that emerged from the federations of French West and Equatorial Africa.¹³

FRANCE AND CEMAC

To state that France played a major role in the establishment and sustenance of CEMAC is to state the obvious. As far back as 1901, French imperial administrators were instrumental in creating the AEF, which among others was intended to harmonise the economic, transport, customs and monetary policies of French polities in French Equatorial Africa. This French involvement in the AEF, though paternalistic in nature and at times pragmatic, ensured a quasi-free transfer of political power from France to national political figures with strong ties to French colonial administrators. It is in the context of this political transformation that French Africa attained independence in 1960, personally supervised by General Charles de Gaulle. In underscoring the important role that these newly independent countries played in the development agenda of the region, France proposed the formation of a well-structured economic integrative framework to consolidate the financial and monetary policies that the newly created *Banque des Etats de l'Afrique Centrale* (BEAC) had started to implement since its creation in 1961. It should be noted that prior to 1960, the currency emission institution of the *Union Douanière et Economique* (UDE) was the French-created and Paris-based *Banque Centrale des Etats de l'Afrique Equatoriale et du Cameroun*. This central banking institution of all UDE countries was transferred to Cameroun in 1961 and renamed BEAC.

France argued that the industrial and developmental gains of all French Equatorial African countries coming together under one sub-regional economic unit far surpassed its disadvantages. It was in recognition of this argument that the former AEF countries, including Cameroon, signed the treaty establishing the UDEAC on 8 December 1964.¹⁴ Prior to the setting up of the franc zone, France had reached agreement with AEF countries on the free flow of capital and French imported goods. Conversely, during the negotiations leading up to the establishment of UDEAC, it advised all member states of UDE to adopt an investment code under which foreign private investment was guaranteed against the risks of nationalisation and non-transferability of profits or capital.¹⁵ The investment codes adopted by UDEAC countries granted firms special status by exempting them from paying corporate profit taxes, import duties taxes and taxes on raw material. The tax system also allowed for an import-intensive economy system and guaranteed a market for the resultant high cost of a domestic production cycle.¹⁶

By persuading these African countries to adopt such an investor-friendly tax system, France ensured that its investments in the region were protected by legislation and the political leadership of each and every member country of the union. It further ensured that all the necessary integrative ingredients were in place to guarantee a wider consumer base and greater return on all its investments. With this in mind, France continued to play a pivotal role in the durability and sustainability of the UDEAC. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, UDEAC member states underwent fundamental transformation as a result of political pluralism and the onset of an economic crisis. Pursuant to its rigid financial policy, France devalued the CFA franc, the monetary value of the UDEAC, in January

1994. It is against the backdrop of this bleak economic situation in the region that the constitutive act of the CEMAC was signed in N'djamena, Chad in March 1994. Though CEMAC only became operational in 1999, Miti and Kilambo argue that the revitalisation of UDEAC and the subsequent creation of CEMAC were in part aimed at salvaging the bankrupt Central African economies that the Structural Adjustment Programme, SAP, had failed to keep afloat.¹⁷ Despite the changing political and economic climate that necessitated the creation of the CEMAC, the role played by the World Bank's Regional Reform Programme and the French Ministry of Co-operation cannot be overstated.

CEMAC seeks to create a single common external tariff for all CEMAC countries, abolish the existing set of indirect taxes, eliminate the regional single tax system, and phase out the import tariff and indirect tax exemptions granted under national investments codes.¹⁸ The nexus of CEMAC is therefore to promote trade and the economic development of its member states. The beneficiaries of this system of integration are big businesses and in most cases these big businesses are all aligned to the French political elites. The *Société Générale de Surveillance* is an interesting case, as it handles all CEMAC importing and transiting operations at the Douala seaport. Another important company with ties to the French Government, which also covers a huge chunk of the telecommunication market in the region, is Orange. It constitutes more than 60 per cent of the mobile telecommunication market in all the countries that make up CEMAC and is by far the preferred mobile telecommunication supplier to the governments of the region.¹⁹

Such biased investment opportunities towards the French also ensure that the CEMAC economies remain at subsistence level and for the most part remain primary exporters of primary goods and semi-finished products.²⁰ Ropivia further argues that the perpetual deficit in integrative instruments in the CEMAC, such as good roads and telecommunication infrastructure, is the handiwork of the French. The main beneficiaries of this state of underdevelopment in the region are the French, who have perfected a one-dimensional trade pattern in their favour. This one-dimensional trade system also ensures that no giant industrial projects are undertaken in the region to rival metropolitan industries, which might result in the loss of metropolitan jobs.²¹

At the time of the independence of most AEF countries in 1960, thanks to their state of underdevelopment, their economic and political survival depended on the help and 'generosity' of the former colonial power, France. Such help and generosity took the form of signing several accords with France in the domains of military, technical, economic and cultural co-operation.²² These paternalist and neo-imperial leanings were implemented against French political elites and the in-vogue *tiers mondistes* philosophy, which called for a liberal French policy towards its former colonial possessions.

BEAC AS AN INSTRUMENT OF FRENCH NEO-IMPERIALISM IN THE CENTRAL AFRICA SUBREGION

Though the activities of the BEAC only started at its present site in 1972, its creation could be traced to 1853 with the establishment of the *Banque de Sénégal*. The *Banque de Sénégal* was an extension of the *Banque de France* in colonial Africa. Its principal function was the issuing of money to AOF and AEF member countries. The authority to emit money was transferred to the *Caisse Centrale de la France d'Outre-Mer* in 1944 and subsequently

to the *Banque des Etats de l'Afrique Equatoriale et du Cameroun* in 1959.²³ The articles establishing BEAC were only signed in 1972 between France and member states of CEMAC, namely Cameroon, CAR, Gabon and Congo Brazzaville. Equatorial Guinea only joined CEMAC and the BEAC in 1985.²⁴ BEAC has therefore been the central bank of CEMAC member countries and the lender of last resort to member countries.

Its main functions include the standardisation of the exchange rate with other convertible currency, the pooling of foreign reserves in an account at the French Treasury and the full convertibility of the CFA franc to the French franc (euro). Member states and France jointly determine the monetary policy, notably foreign exchange allocation, money creation, interest rates and credit policy.²⁵ In the eyes of CEMAC members and other stakeholders of BEAC, the French contribution ensures policy credibility and standardisation of the FCFA *vis-à-vis* other convertible currency and the *Banque de France* as the lender of last resort of the BEAC. Thus, monetary and financial developments in individual countries are linked to those of France and other African countries who are members of the franc zone.²⁶

As a way of enforcing its financial policy and perpetuating its neo-imperial financial policies in African economies, the articles of BEAC entrust France to appoint three of the 13 board members. The others are divided as follows; Cameroon four, Gabon two, CAR one, Chad one and Equatorial Guinea one.²⁷ The Central Bank is also obliged to operate a special account at the French treasury as a means to guarantee its financial solvency and to ensure that the CFA franc is convertible. As of June 2007, the amount from the CEMAC Central Bank in the French treasury stood at 4,5 trillion CFA francs.²⁸ The French have not accounted for the interest rate accruing from such a deposit, even after the coming into force of the euro in 1999. Many pundits argue that this is the highest form of neo-imperialism and treachery that the French are perpetuating on African economies. This comes at a time when the total external debt of CEMAC stood at \$19,9 billion, representing more than 40 per cent of the gross domestic product of CEMAC countries.²⁹

Through the board of the Central Bank, France defines and puts in place the strategic monetary policy of member states of the Union. Inflation targeting and employment statistics in member states are set by the French through their representative on the college of questors. Through the college of questors, France is also able to regulate the mass monetary circulation in member states and to a large extent determine the budgetary allocation of member states to strategic development areas. It is important to note that through this committee, France is able to control the political, economic and monetary policies of member states. Many have argued that French involvement in BEAC is a perfect example of the manifestation of French neo-imperialist policy on the continent.³⁰

THE CEMAC ZONE AND THE DONOR SYNDROME

Africa has been bedevilled by an insatiable need for donor funding and debt relief packages. Although the Gleneagles G8 summit in July 2005 recognised the importance of official development assistance (ODA) to African economies and efforts to attain the millennium development goals, little has trickled down to these economies after such a public display of goodwill to the African situation by members of the G8. The substantial increase in ODA promised to African states at this summit suggested an increase of 50

per cent from US\$25 billion in 2004 to US\$50 billion in 2010.³¹ Joannidis argues that the promised overall increase in ODA flows to African states does not necessarily mean the injection of new money, but rather a re-evaluation of the donor strategy that was used in the past. This would involve the full cancellation of the multilateral debt of countries qualifying under the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiatives undertaken by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1996.³² Several CEMAC countries, sponsored by France, have qualified for such benefits and thus will be forever grateful to France for being in the vanguard and making such an effort to alleviate the conditions of these states. Cameroon and Congo Brazzaville are perhaps the greatest beneficiaries of such IMF initiatives and have had their debt at the Paris Club and with the IMF completely written off.

In the CEMAC region, France has initiated a series of actions aimed at enhancing the economic competitiveness of member states. One such initiative is the signing of the *Contrats de désendettement-développement*, commonly referred to as C2D contracts. These contracts will enable countries that have attained the HIPC completion point to channel their budgetary savings from debt cancellation into spending aimed at reducing poverty, especially in the field of health and education.³³ Cameroon and Congo have benefited from such initiatives, and this has permitted the stabilisation fund at the CEMAC Central Bank to channel scarce resources to developmental projects in Chad and CAR, two conflict-ridden countries of the sub-region. It has been argued that the C2D initiative is perhaps France's boldest and most specific contribution to an enhanced HIPC initiative and civil society in the economic life of the countries of the sub-region.

Outside the EU, France is the highest contributor of ODA to countries of the CEMAC zone. Between 1990 and 2002, France loaned more than 200 million French francs to its French African friends. Cameroon alone received 600 million French francs in a loan from France in 1993,³⁴ just after the reintroduction of multiparty politics. On a visit to Cameroon on 2 October 2007, Jean Marie Bockel, the French Secretary of State for Co-operation and Francophonie, reiterated France's desire to maintain its military bases in the CEMAC and to continue helping countries in the region in their fight against HIV/AIDS, low school attendance of girls and the eternal fight against poverty.³⁵ He also reaffirmed France's commitment to allocate 65,6 billion CFA francs annually to CEMAC countries over the following six years. He furthermore announced that France would be spending an additional 352,83 billion CFA francs over a five-year period within the framework of the HIPC initiative.³⁶

Militarily, France maintained three bases in the region. The Libreville base was primarily meant to guard French oil investment in Gabon and Congo Brazzaville. Elf Aquitaine, which is a French government oil concession, operates several oil rigs in Cameroon, Gabon and Congo Brazzaville, with investment in the region amounting to over US\$23 billion. France also has bases in N'djamena and Abéché in Chad. The Chadian bases were informed by Muammar Ghadafi's interest in the Chadian natural resources of the Aouzou Strip, in the northern part of the country. Though France argued that the continuous presence of French troops in the region was in line with its military cooperation agreement with countries of the region, many argued that the presence of the French was in line with France's policy of supporting dictatorial regimes and client states. France's sole mandate was to protect French interests in the region. By 1994, at

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the peak of the Cameroon-Nigeria dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula, there were about 1 500 French marines at the Limbe and Ekodotiti naval bases in Cameroon. The presence of French marines in Cameroon was another way in which France wanted to honour its military cooperation agreement with Cameroon, which *inter alia* obliged France to come to the aid of Cameroon in case of foreign invasion.

The survival of the CEMAC zone is of extreme importance for the continued relevance of French-African policies. This is critically important, as several French-African states have begun to question the intermediary role that France is playing between Africa and its European partners. After the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994, many African economists called for the Africanisation of the currency and monetary reforms in the zone. The Africanisation debate has, however, not received the necessary support from African political leaders. France has therefore used this lukewarm response of African leaders to the Africanisation of their currency to reinforce its presence in the French-African financial market space. This reinforcement has taken the form of long-term loans to countries in the region and the consolidation of the CEMAC special deposit at the French treasury. France has also taken the lead in renegotiating CEMAC external debts with other members of the G8 and the Paris Club. It can therefore be argued that CEMAC was born of French-African policy formulation, which was aimed at consolidating France's African possessions into single exploitative units feeding the French metropole with African raw materials. These African possessions have been serving this purpose for decades, and France is not ready to give up on this just yet.

CONCLUSION

France has always considered its former African colonies as a sort of *pré carré* or better still a preserved domain in the articulation of its geostrategic interests on the continent. This has not only necessitated a realignment of its African policies; it has also engendered the development of genuine African relations with other Western countries. This chapter argues that, although France was the initiator and guarantor of the integration debate in the Central African sub-region in the early part of the last century, its continuation of such a policy during this period of globalisation is nuanced. Though handicapped by a rudimentary telecommunication infrastructure, the road network has drastically improved as a result of the Chad-Cameroon pipeline. The telecommunication sector has also been stimulated by the building of an Orascom relay centre in Douala, Cameroon. The chapter further argued that France has played a significant role in shaping the integration structure in the region. Its role in directing the monetary and financial policies of the CEMAC zone is equally important.

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