The wealth of Africa
French West Africa

Teachers’ notes

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**THE WEALTH OF AFRICA: USING THESE RESOURCES**

This educational resource consists of 16 sets of resources on African civilisations, countries and themes.

Each set of resources includes:

- Teachers’ notes
- Students’ worksheets
- A presentation

Download the resources free at www.britishmuseum.org/schools

**Teachers’ notes**

These are intended to provide background material for teachers, but can also be referred to by students who want more contextual information.

**Students’ worksheets**

These are stand-alone worksheets which can be downloaded as classroom resources or viewed on the interactive whiteboard. They are self-contained, with tasks and questions and a limited number of sources in which the language has been slightly amended to make them more accessible to the likely reading ages of the students. They are also designed to be used independently of the teacher, e.g. for homework.

If teachers do not wish to spend more than one or two lessons on French West Africa, then the sheets will prove ideal for small project work, with groups of students taking one sheet, finding interesting and relevant information, and reporting back to the rest of the class. A specimen lesson plan along these lines is given below.

**Presentation**

This provides a simpler and more visual introduction to the topic. It contains some of the images and sources found in the other sections, and can be shown on the whiteboard or used at home to give an overview of the main topics covered.

**Your feedback**

Please help the British Museum improve its educational resources for schools and teachers by giving your feedback. The first 250 teachers or tutors to complete the online survey before 12.00 on 1 September 2011 will receive a printed set of illustrations of African civilisations by artist Tayo Fatunla. Visit www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica to complete the survey and for terms and conditions.
LESSON SCHEME: FRENCH WEST AFRICA IN AN HOUR

Aim
To decide how successful France was at ruling its West African colonies.

Starter: Impressions of French West Africa
Scroll quickly through the images in the presentation, and get feedback from students on their first impressions, especially on what they consider French rule to have been like. (10 minutes)

Research
Divide the class into groups with one group per resource sheet. Each group has to look at the question at the top of the sheet, and decide on the answer by studying the sources. The group should note 5–10 relevant facts that it can feed back to the rest of the class as evidence of its answer. (20 minutes)

Feedback
Each group feeds back its findings, opinion and evidence to the rest of the class, who could take notes. (15 minutes)

Discussion
The central question of the effects of French rule can be debated – whether there were any benefits to being colonised; who did well out of it, etc. (15 minutes)

Homework
e.g. Argue the case for or against colonialism using French West Africa as an example.
Introduction

France’s attitude towards its colonies, especially those in West Africa, was significantly different from Britain’s, and the historical development of the two provides an interesting contrast. On the surface, France seemed more prepared to integrate the areas under its control, both among themselves, and with the mother country. In practice this did not work as well as hoped, though the transition to independence was apparently smooth, and a close relationship was maintained even afterwards. These resources look at the French attitude towards its colonies in West Africa, and examine whether its experience was as successful as French politicians liked to maintain.

Why study French West Africa?

The French colonial experience provides an interesting comparison with the British, and helps to put the latter into context. Teachers who are trying to judge how successful Britain was with its colonies can use this section to compare another country’s actions in the same part of Africa. However, the topic can also be studied as a separate example of European colonialism in its own right.

Teachers and pupils studying the Key Stage 3 History syllabus for the English National Curriculum will find this section directly relevant to the British Empire module.

In terms of the wealth of Africa, this section is a case study of an alternative approach to organising a colony, and of an attempt to improve the economy of an area comparatively poor in natural resources.

Geography

Although covering a vast area on the map, French West Africa was relatively thinly populated, mainly due to the geography of the territories. Much of the land consisted of the Sahara Desert, especially in modern-day Mauritania, Niger and Mali. South of this was the Sahel region of scrub and semi-desert, leading down towards more fertile areas near the coast of Guinea, Senegal, Ivory Coast and Benin. These last four also contained forested areas and good, fertile farmland – one of the reasons why they were significantly more prosperous than the other territories. However, there were few natural harbours along the south coast, and only in Senegal was the coastal water deep enough for large ports to be built. Partly for this reason, Senegal was the richest and most developed of the territories.

History

As early as 1659 France had founded a trading post at Saint-Louis on the coast of Senegal, but it was not until the 1850s that the governor, Louis Faidherbe, started moving into the interior in a deliberate attempt to take over more territory. Military expeditions gathered pace and more and more territory was taken throughout West Africa, enabling France to claim significant amounts of land at the Berlin Colonial Conference of 1884–1885. A drawback of this was that France found it difficult to rein in some of its military commanders on the ground, who tended to launch expeditions on their own initiative. A solution to this problem was the formation of a single unit, the Federation of French West Africa in 1895, under the control of a governor-general in Dakar, Senegal.
At first, this Federation consisted only of Senegal, Soudan (Mali), Guinea and Ivory Coast. It was joined later by Dahomey (Benin) in 1904, Mauretania (Mauritania) in 1920, Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) in 1921, and Niger in 1926. Each territory was ruled by a lieutenant-governor, who reported to the governor-general, who in turn was under the control of the Minister for Colonies in Paris.

Whereas the British attempted, wherever possible, to practise indirect rule, that is maintaining the power of local chiefs and acting in a supervisory role over them, the French attitude to governing their colony was more rigid. They favoured a power structure where orders came from Paris through the governor general and lieutenant governors to the commandants de cercles (the rough equivalent of British district officers), and then to the chiefs who controlled villages and small towns. These chiefs, however, were rarely the traditional ones, but people who the French regarded as loyal and who they appointed. Traditional authority, therefore, was largely replaced.

The philosophy behind this was that of assimilation. Using the French Revolutionary concepts of fraternity and equality, the French were, at least in theory, determined to regard the Africans as people with the same rights, duties and loyalties as all other French men and women. This meant that all would be potential citizens of France. Thus all Africans were encouraged to speak French (in contrast, in British colonies, British officials were expected to learn African languages), and to be educated in French manners and culture.

In practice, however assimilation was little more than association. Far from being regarded as completely French, Africans would only be French by association. Some might become full citizens, but in practice this amounted to a handful each year. The measure that showed assimilation to be merely theoretical was the legal code, or Indigénat, which was applied only to Africans, and which established a different legal system, and allowed taxation and forced labour.

After the First World War, there was a change in French thinking, stimulated partly by protests and revolts against conscription of Africans to serve in the French army. Copying the British model, the French began to reinstate the traditional chiefs, realising they were best equipped to provide the tax-collecting and forced labour functions from among their people. After the Second World War, the Indigénat was scrapped since it had become a focus of resentment among Africans.

In 1958, the Federation of French West Africa was formally ended and each of the eight territories was offered the choice of full independence or remaining with France. Only Guinea felt confident enough to formally separate – the others chose to stay with the mother country. This result was used by French politicians to indicate the success of France’s colonial policy in West Africa, but others have seen it as a weakness. By excluding Africans from levels of power, there was not an obvious group of African leaders who could take over the running of the countries, and therefore many felt they had little choice but to stay with France.
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Economy

France was faced with the same problems as Britain in trying to make the colony pay for itself, and some of its solutions were similar. Taxation was introduced and forced labour, the corvée, used for public works.

The main criticism of France was that it failed to stimulate diversification of the economies of the territories within French West Africa. There was a heavy reliance on single crops, especially groundnuts in Senegal, Mali and Niger, which accounted for over 90% of commerce. Only in Ivory Coast was there a greater variety of products.

Another shortcoming was the transport system, which did little to unify the colony or to provide for trade between the different territories. Railway lines in each territory tended to link the coast with inland areas, but did not join up together. Roads were neglected and lagged behind the vastly smaller British colonies of Ghana and Nigeria.

For a time the French tried to integrate the different territories further by organising the budget so that richer states such as Senegal and Ivory Coast contributed more than the others, but this proved to be unpopular.

The economy was also hindered by the lack of an educated class. The French rulers insisted that all schooling had to be done in French, and imported their own teachers, many of whom were of poor quality and had little understanding of African cultures. Pupils nearly always were forced to board, with the result that few were educated to a high standard.
REFERENCES


Crowder, M, 1968, West Africa under Colonial Rule (Hutchinson)


Zay, E, 1892, Histoire Monétaire des Colonies Françaises (Montorier)
Your feedback

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