

Colonial Situations and Policies on the Move.

French and Muslim Law in the *Quatre Communes* of Senegal.

Four towns on the Senegalese coast known as the *Quatre Communes* were an outcome of a colonial project founded on the French assimilation policy. The communes were under the jurisdiction of French law and their inhabitants regarded as citizens of France and enjoy the privileges which were attached to French citizenship. Another unique characteristic of the communes was that due to the large Muslim population, Muslim tribunals were established which had jurisdiction on civil matters. This meant that there was a group of people, French citizens of Muslim faith, who could elect which judicial system would preside over their civil affairs. This group of people were known as *originaires*. This distinct characteristic was heavily contested throughout the years. To be a good and proper French citizen one had to abide by the French Civil Code. However, Muslim law has its basis in the Quran and is thus indispensable from faith. Consequently, French law and Muslim law in many matters are incompatible, and yet both were applied in the *Quatre Communes*.

At the beginning of the 20th century, due to the constant re-examination and modification of the *originaires*' privileges and status, a great number of Western educated *originaires* began to engage greatly in local politics, and with Blaise Diagne's election for deputy for Senegal in the *Chambre des députés* in 1914, a new chapter commenced. This victory brought about a drastic shift, one where Africans had gained power within the colonial framework which fought to maintain their colonial subjects in clear-cut legal subordination. Ultimately, as a result of the French colonial policy of assimilation, came the emergence of Senegalese nationalism.

Senegalese nationalism initially did not mean independence, rather it meant equality, pride and bettering oneself and one's people; "*Sénégal pour les sénégalais*". It emerged as an opposition to French colonial domination. 'Black politics' in Senegal as a whole was ahead of its time. The 'African consciousness' which occurred in the communes at the beginning of the 20th century was a vital step towards African nationalism and independence movements elsewhere in Francophone Africa. The *Quatre Communes* set the foundation for the rest of French speaking Africa. They became the exception of the French colonial empire. The quest of the *originaires* for political recognition and their success in Senegalese political institutions paved the way towards the political independence of Francophone Africa.

The democratic institutions which France had extended to Senegal were an expansion of the French ideals of assimilation and therefore functioned as a form of imposing colonial control. Political activity and the right to vote within the colonial system was a special privilege at a time where most colonial subjects were deprived of any human rights, let alone political ones. The assimilation policy taught the Senegalese that they could be equal to the French. Blaise Diagne's victory in the elections of 1914 signified a rise to power by Africans within the colonial system.