

# Uncovering French Colonial Legacies in Two Malian Higher Ed Teacher Training Programs What Have We Learned and What's Next?

Talatou Abdoulaye, Ph.D.  
Utah Valley University  
talatoua@uvu.edu

**SUMMARY:** This paper attempts to summarize the central findings and recommendations of my dissertation. The main goal of that dissertation itself was to identify major characteristics of French colonial education in Soudan Français (present day Mali) before discussing ways in which, despite major education reforms, legacies that relate to those characteristics continue to, either consciously or unconsciously, be reproduced, altered, or challenged in two current higher education teacher-training programs in postcolonial Mali. The data collected and discussed offer insights into issues of reproduction, hybridity, and resistance play out across various data sources before examining ways in which they affect the subjectivities of preservice teachers graduating from the two teacher training programs investigated.

Data were collected from a wide range of sources, which include colonial and postcolonial legislations and documents, textbooks, retired and preservice teachers' responses to questionnaires, and Skype interviews of a focus group of preservice teachers. Methods of content analysis and narrative analysis were used to make sense of data collected while simultaneously calling in major concepts from postcolonial theory for a broader analysis and discussion.

The analysis and discussion of data collected revealed multiple instances of reproduction, resistance, and hybridity within the two departments, thereby positioning graduating preservice teachers to be likely to engage in similar practices potentially resulting in similar instances in their own future classrooms. Whether related to current, retired, or preservice teachers, it appeared that instances of reproduction, resistance, and hybridity sometimes occurred deliberately, though oftentimes not deliberately. The concluding section offers some possible pathways for Malian stakeholders to examine in order to address major educational issues that were revealed throughout this study.

**Keywords:** French colonial legacies, teacher subjectivities, reproduction, hybridity, resistance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Legacies from European colonization continue to shape current realities in previously colonized lands in ways that reveal serious postcolonial tensions and uncertainties (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989; Bhabha, 1994; Césaire, 1955; Conklin, 1997; Cooper, 2002; Fanon, 1961, 1967; Loomba, 2005; Moumouni, 1964; Mouralis, 1984; Rodney, 1982; Wa Thiongo, 1981, 1987; Willinsky, 1998). While researchers often disagree about the degree to which and the mechanisms by which those legacies have continued to survive, their combined work suggests that no area of life in the colonized lands was left untouched by the colonial encounter and that among all, colonial schools more than any other fields, were sites of organized and planned colonial violence against occupied lands and communities. Undoubtedly, in the eyes of these researchers, serious seeds of colonial violence were planted since those times, and colonial schools were positioned not only to grow but also to perpetuate that violence.

During their independence period in the early 1960s, new African states found themselves cornered between internal demands of nationalism, their chronic underequipment in terms of general infrastructure (including schools and trained elites) and a political pressure to get aligned in the Cold War context of the East/West divide (Igue, 2010). As a result, newly independent African countries abruptly found themselves facing a historical dilemma of whether to follow the Hegelian dialectic of letting history

take care of the contradictions and tensions mentioned above or relying on a Marxist framework by which a class (or a group of elites in this case) would have to resolve them. Regardless of the path they followed, it remains surprising that legacies of that colonial encounter continue, in many ways, to shape present-day lives in those countries more than half a century after their independence. This study aims to uncover the implications of those colonial legacies for schools in Mali (called Soudan Français [French Sudan] during French colonization) and, more specifically, the ways in which the subjectivities of preservice teachers graduating from two departments of Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENSUP) position them as likely agents of resistance, hybridity, reproduction, or any other instances.

### Research questions

1-What are the main characteristics of French colonial education in Soudan Français/Mali?

2-What role(s), if any, do ENSUP (Departments of History and Geography, and Philosophy and Psycho-Pedagogy) play in reproducing or challenging those characteristics today?

3- How do those characteristics impact preservice teachers trained by those two departments?

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This study was conducted using postcolonial theory as a theoretical lens. Postcolonial theory is an analytical tool, which situates European colonialism at the roots of the challenges and the continuing legacies faced by the previously colonized territories. The theory revolves around a deep and complex examination of the impact, legacies and implications of European conquest, colonization and domination of non-European lands, people and the cultures of those people and lands. Postcolonial theory is therefore about “unpacking the politics of representation” (Hall, 1996) and, in some ways, an attempt to understand how much of the colonial past relates to the present.

Proponents of postcolonial theory have described it as a very multidimensional analytical tool, which is, regardless of time and space, always useful to examine and challenge any exploitative and discriminatory practices. It is for that reason that the theory has been used on all continents, though at varying degrees, to make sense of colonial encounters and their legacies. Proceeding with notes of caution, some proponents (Cooper, 2002; Loomba, 2005) have offered the theory in combination with other factors (including forms of agency from the colonized) to explain the current realities of the previously colonized countries. For instance, Cooper (2002) uses the combination of legacies of European colonization of Sub-Saharan Africa and the aspirations of the pre-independence African elites to explain the state of African countries today. Cooper (2002) notes {writes}:

No word captures the hopes and ambitions of Africa's leaders, its educated populations, and many of its farmers and workers in the post-war decades better than “development.” Yet it is a protean word, subject to conflicting interpretations. Its simplest meaning conveys a down-to-earth aspiration: to have clean water, decent schools and health facilities; to produce larger harvests and more manufactured goods; to have access to consumer goods which people elsewhere consider a normal part of life. To colonial elites after the war, bringing European capital and knowledge to Africa reconciled continued rule with calls for universal progress. To nationalists, a development that would serve African interests required African rule. After independence, new rulers could claim a place for themselves as intermediaries between external resources and national aspirations. But African rulers were in turn subject to criticism for

sacrificing development for the people to personal greed. (p. 91)

Other proponents of postcolonial theory like Ashcroft (1989), for example, argue that it emerges from the “inability of European theory” to effectively explain postcolonial writings. The theory builds upon an interdisciplinary approach, which encompasses perspectives from literary, political and religious studies (Rukundwa & Aarde, 2007). As Gyan Prakash (1994) describes, postcolonial theory has used diverse disciplines such as history, anthropology and literature to trigger a “radical rethinking of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and western domination” (p. 1475). The interdisciplinary approach of postcolonial theory makes it an important tool for cultural history, which is about using all available sources when analyzing past events.

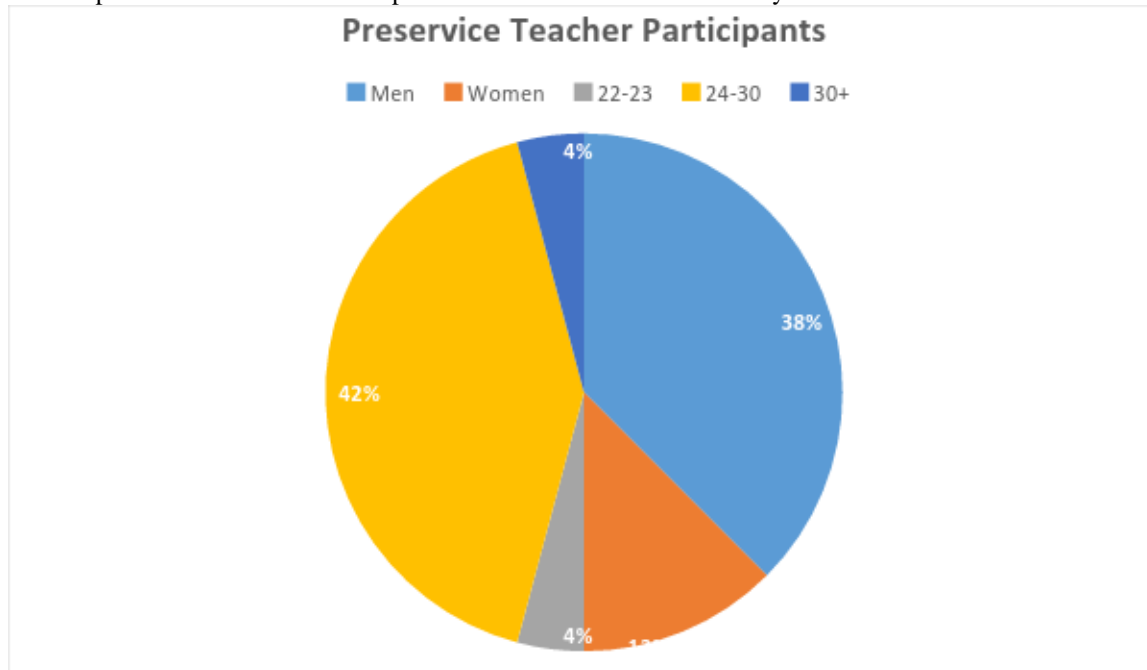
Postcolonial theory, by its very nature, therefore becomes what Hall (1996) calls “a sign of desire for some, and equally for others a signifier of danger” (p. 242). On the one hand, the emergence of the theory has provided strong lenses for new intellectual groups from previously colonized countries who found the “European Theory” (Ashcroft, 1989) incapable of explaining the colonial context and its implications for the contemporary world. On the other hand, postcolonial theory has been perceived by some critics to be an increasing threat which is nothing else than a part of the overall postmodern thought which has challenged the master narratives defining the traditional Eurocentric paradigms.

The central concepts of the theory are representation, identity/hybridity, subjectivity formation, resistance (as in talking back to the Empire), history, race, cultures, gender, and settler and native (Ashcroft et al. 1989, 1995; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988). As Loomba (2005) asserts, postcolonial approaches utilize both temporal and critical lenses to deconstruct Western master narratives about the rest of the world and those narratives, as Hall (1996) argues, need to be unpacked. Among all those main concepts of interest for the theory, this study concerns itself with the issue of subjectivities which, in my eyes, in a colonial/postcolonial context, might be better understood in relationship to concepts of hybridity, resistance or reproduction. For Bhabha (1994) the colonial encounter has left nothing untouched. It has impacted everything. As a result, communities who experienced colonization can now only claim a hybrid identity. It is from the notion of hybridity

developed by Bhabha (1994) that I argue one can see the importance of understanding postcolonial identities in relationship to the subjectivity, which I am interested in investigating in this study. Specifically, based on the insights of postcolonial work, I would like to examine ways in which Malian teachers' postcolonial subjectivities were formed and what this looks like in practice. For instance, do Malian teachers demonstrate aspects of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) and/or how do they embody resistance (Cesaire, 1955; Fanon, 1982; Loomba, 2005)? Do these themes or others that emerge make Malian preservice teachers more likely to continue to reproduce colonial educational

practices (both curricular and disciplinary) or not, more than fifty years after the country's independence, that are inherited from the colonial French Third Republic? <sup>1</sup> Thus, in this chapter I will weave this interest as a focal point to place relevant postcolonial theories in conversation with the issues I am looking at.

interviews; field note observations; screenshots; Facebook, Skype, and email messages; as well as from participants' responses to questionnaires. Data collected were entirely in French, which was not only participants' language of preference, but also the language in which all other sources (i.e., colonial and postcolonial textbooks, reports, legislation, and curriculums) were written. After the collection step, I translated all data into English and reported versions in both languages in separate spreadsheets and data tables (see Appendices). Finally, I used content analysis and narrative analysis methodologies guided by a postcolonial theoretical lens to analyze and make



### 3. METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Thus, in this study, I am using a qualitative design together with a postcolonial theory lens in order to assess what French colonial education looked like in Soudan Francais (present-day Mali) and also to better understand the subjectivities of postcolonial Malian preservice teachers who recently graduated from two ENSup departments: The Department of Philosophy and Psycho-Pedagogy and the Department of History and Geography that I describe above. Data were collected through various documents related to colonial education (decrees, circulars, reports, textbooks, curriculums, and pictures); focus group

sense of the collected data.

In order to do so, there were two groups of participants: 13 retired teachers and 12 preservice teachers. Each group answered two sets of questionnaires. Following Gast and Peak (2010), Krueger (1988), Morgen (1997), and Peek and Fotherhill (2009), in addition to responding to questionnaires, 6 of the preservice teacher participants were selected as a focus group with whom I followed up with two additional Skype interviews. Finally, I used the methodology of virtual ethnography to collect my data.

Figure 1: Retired teachers' backgrounds and levels of education discussed

<sup>1</sup> French Third Republic (1870–1940) refers to the period that covers that country's most violent

colonial (thereby educational) expeditions and occupations.

Figure 2: Preservice teachers by gender and age

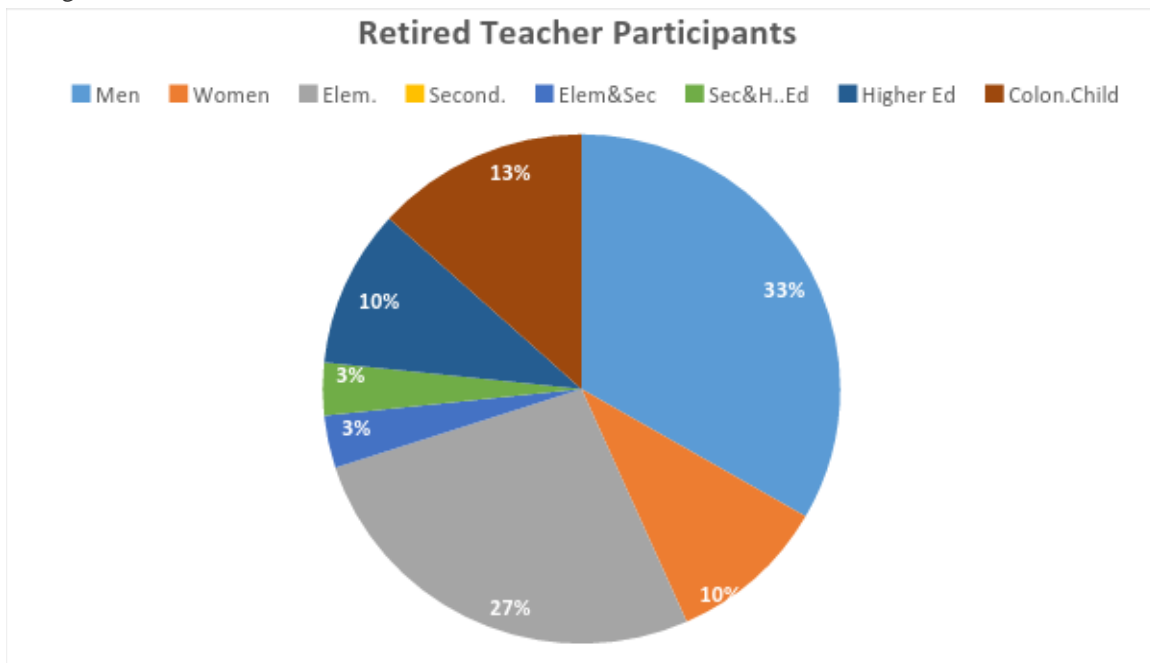
#### 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of data was done in the following ways. First I looked at primary and secondary texts, which include the 1923 circular on education, Reffemel and Sanderval's

French government commissioned reports, *Mamadou et Bineta* series textbooks and spreadsheet of participants responses to my questionnaires. I applied directed content analysis techniques (Budd, Thorp, & Donohew, 1967; Linkvist, 1981; McTavish & Pirro, 1990; Tesch, 1990; Weber, 1990; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) that allowed me to generate a better grasp of the major characteristics of colonial education. Using this foundation, I then analyzed the participants' follow up responses to my questionnaires, transcripts of my Skype focus group interviews, screenshots taken during those interviews and current curriculum

relationship with my research questions. I offer in this chapter a detailed description of the process mentioned above as well as an analysis and discussion of the major categories and themes that were generated throughout my collected data. All of the themes and categories that were discussed simultaneously by data sources have been grouped and discussed under the same subtitle/subheading.

As I mentioned earlier, the analysis of data collected through historical documents, colonial education legislation, diaries and reports, textbook contents as well as participants' responses to questionnaires and Skype interview questions generated a vast and complex array of categories, subcategories, topics and themes including instances of assimilation; discrimination, elitism, violent classroom and disciplinary practices; unique teacher vs. student



and teaching materials from the two departments under investigation. Finally, I applied narrative analysis techniques (Ochs, 1999; Ochs & Capps, 2001) to triangulate the first set of findings generated from primary and secondary source analysis. As a result of this process I found many categories and themes in common and a few other ones that emerged separately. I then analyzed and discussed those categories and themes in

roles in colonial and postcolonial classrooms; negative views and silencing of local languages; denigration of local indigenous cultures and history; and reproduction; hybridity and resistance, which all frequently came up. All these instances are revealed in sometimes very complex and intertwined ways. With respect to my research questions, in the following section I focus on the findings that specifically discuss

characteristics of colonial education in French Sudan/Mali as well as issues of reproduction, hybridity and resistance or any related theme(s), in the ways they appear in the data collected.

In the process of doing so, I first analyzed major colonial legislation, reports, diaries, curriculum and textbook contents in order to better grasp major characteristics of colonial education before delving into other data sources. I applied techniques of a directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Budd, Thorp, & Donohew, 1967; Linkvist, 1981; McTavish & Pirro, 1990; Tesch, 1990; Weber, 1990) to examine various primary and secondary sources, which include French colonial education legislation (the “Circulaire de 1923” [1923 Circular], diaries and French government-commissioned reports, textbooks and curriculum contents. First, I analyzed the 1923 Circular and then followed up with a look at other sources. I argue that because the 1923 Circular is one of the most important legislation which framed all other educational policies in French West Africa during almost half of the duration the French Third Republic (1870-1940) [the scope of this circular outlived the Third Republic and continued officially up to the 1960s and even beyond], it needed to be analyzed and understood on its own. Such an approach will allow readers to not only understand its importance, but also to better grasp ways in which that key legislation has fundamentally influenced educational policies, classroom practices, curriculums and textbook contents of colonial schools and even beyond.

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including instances of assimilation; discrimination, elitism, violent classroom and disciplinary practices; unique teacher vs. student roles in colonial and postcolonial classrooms; negative views and silencing of local languages; denigration of local indigenous cultures and history; as well as instances of reproduction; hybridity and resistance, which all frequently came up. All these instances are revealed in sometimes very complex and intertwined ways. With respect to my research questions, in this chapter, I focus on the findings that specifically discuss the characteristics of the colonial education in French Sudan/Mali as well as instances associated with reproduction, hybridity and resistance or any related theme(s), in the ways they appear in the data collected.

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Such an approach might also allow readers to, not only understand its importance, but also to better grasp ways in which that key legislation has fundamentally influenced educational policies, classroom practices, curriculums and textbook contents of colonial schools and even beyond. In addition to the 1923 circular, excerpts from *Mamadou et Bineta* series, *La Famille Diavara*, *Pages Africaines*; *Massa*

*Kokari, lievre d’Afrique*; articles from Mali’s current Constitution, *La Raison dans l’histoire*; the *Géographie Universelle* textbook, the *Atlas colonial*, representations of the donkey head “symbole”, interview transcripts, and questionnaire responses from participants were also discussed and analyzed.

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importance, but also to better grasp ways in which that key legislation has fundamentally influenced educational policies, classroom practices, curriculums and textbook contents of colonial schools and even beyond the analysis and discussion of data collected through the steps identified constitute grounds for the following recommendations, which might be useful in order to get rid of French colonial legacies in the programs under investigation. Additionally, these recommendations might also open new windows for Malian preservice teachers graduating from those two departments.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1- Raising Malian preservice teachers' awareness (through a more critical training) about the history of their country and the history of education in their country in relationship to French colonial history. This critical training should be widened, at some point, to include French West Africa, Africa and the World and should be conducted in the two teacher training departments of ENSup of Philosophy Psycho-Pedagogy, and History and Geography, with a bigger emphasis on the department of Philosophy, Psycho and Pedagogy, as data suggest. Such a training should also aim at sharing with preservice teachers more critical perspectives, less oppressive and humiliating ways of teaching and assessment. Evaluations should be less elitist and open to students conducting their own projects, either individually or in groups, if they wish to do so. The overall goal here is to train preservice teachers in order to provide them with more useful tools for deconstructing inherited textbooks, curriculum materials as well as oppressive practices. Finally, the training should offer them tools that they could use across the curriculum and across disciplines so that they could use them regardless of the discipline or subject matter they will be assigned to teach in their future classrooms.

2- Data collected and analyzed in this study call for more critical trainings of the current faculty in the two departments under investigation. I suggest that such faculty trainings be conducted under a professional development format to mitigate resistance. Given the lack or limited number of faculty in some disciplines, as some participants discussed, it may be necessary for the Malian government to create more opportunities for graduate studies, so that people trained in disciplines (or areas of specialization) where there is a lack or limited number would come back and teach in the departments. This will

most likely increase and encourage intellectually useful challenges and professional growth.

3- In the eyes of many participants to this study, mostly preservice teachers, splitting up the department of Philosophy and Psycho-Pedagogy into two departments seemed to be a recommendation that would strengthen scholarship within each entity. The same recommendation of splitting was suggested for the department of History and Geography.

4- Improving work conditions for both students and teachers in order to reduce frustrations leading to more and more activism and strikes on the ENSup (Philosophy, Psycho-Pedagogy, and History and Geography) Campus. Beyond other material aspects (like more scholarships, better stipends and salaries) discussed by participants, this could be done by offering more and better internet access to students and faculty so they could use libraries and other didactic tools available online.

5- The necessity of getting rid of the Eurocentric inclinations of the curriculum and textbook contents and the need to gear those contents more towards Malian and African thought and realities before including thought from the rest of the world. To this point, an analysis of curriculum contents and participants' responses revealed that this needs to be done more for the Philosophy and Psycho-Pedagogy department than for the History and Geography one. In doing so, it is very important that more critically minded faculty and students (teachers in training) be at the center of these curriculum and textbook reforms so they can own them and identify more with them. Participants in those reforms should also include in-service high school and elementary school teachers, who have displayed in their classrooms their willingness to critically venture out of the status quo created and maintained by the current curriculums and textbooks. The reforms should result in writing and publishing better textbooks for ENSup departments and grade-level classroom use. The contents of those textbooks should be guided by the necessity to get rid of the Eurocentric inclinations of curriculum. Teaching in the two ENSup departments should go beyond written texts to incorporate oral materials (oral histories, tales, legends, guest speakers from older generations) in order to strengthen that move beyond Eurocentric textbooks. This is an important move given the fact that oral history is documented to play a big role in Malian and African epistemologies.

6- Methods of evaluation appear to be

heavily failing students. This may be a legacy of the elitist characteristic of colonial education I discussed earlier. Many participants suggested that changes are necessary in the ways evaluations are currently conducted in the two departments with regard to their integrity and morality. This recommendation could be addressed through the training and awareness raising that I discussed earlier.

7- Data revealed that more administrative supervision is needed, especially in remote areas from Bamako, the capital city. It appeared that the absence of administrative supervision is, in the eyes of many participants, one of the possible reasons why some of French colonial educational legacies continue to be reproduced by teachers (preservice and retired) in remote areas. Likewise, data also revealed that the absence of administrative supervision might make many preservice teachers likely to reproduce those colonial legacies in their future classrooms.

8- A better application and followup of major reform decisions is needed. Educational reforms must be assessed in terms of their expected goals, their successes and failures, their limitations and ways to improve them. These processes should be conducted before any other reform is initiated.

9- Disciplinary practices must be reviewed in order to get rid of harsh and humiliating practices like the “symbol” and corporal punishment, some of which, though banned by current laws, not only continue to be used by teachers, but also are viewed favorably by many preservice teachers. To this point, it appeared that Malian teachers (retired and preservice) appear to be very conservative. A mere change of law, or reform recommendation is not enough to get teachers to start applying that change, reform or recommendation.

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