The Devil's Café au Lait: the Métis Question in Colonial French West Africa, 1870-1940

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The Devil's Café au Lait:  
the Métis Question in Colonial French West Africa, 1870-1940

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from  
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by

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Accepted for Highest Honors  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Introduction

The expression “café au lait” is one particularly colorful example of the many ways in which members of French imperial state referred to people of mixed-race. A mutation of a similar Arabic expression, the “café au lait” first appeared in French language letters and documents as a description of mixed-race people during the late nineteenth century. In 1921, Alfred Fouillée noted that “the Arabs say: God created white, God created black, the devil created the métis.” Similarly, in the 1930s a group of métis in French Soudan reported that village elders had told them their existence was unnatural because “God made coffee, He made milk, but He didn’t make café au lait.” A slight variation on the phrase also appears in a 1936 letter from the Governor of Senegal to the Governor-General of French West Africa: “We thus quote the proverb: God made coffee and milk, but not coffee with milk [café au lait].” This view of mixed race individuals as unnatural or undesirable was far from uncommon throughout French literature, imperial policy, and society. Over the course of the French Third Republic (1870-1940), a period of roughly seventy years, public opinion and colonial policy oscillated widely between a range of approaches to the so-called the métis question. The métis question, put simply, was the debate over what should be done about the thousands of mixed race children fathered by French soldiers, administrators, and merchants in colonies around the world. Was the French state responsible for these children? Were métis a dangerous class of potential rebels or a useful reservoir of ability and support? These and other questions ricocheted around the French

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empire, and in the latter half of the nineteenth century the French colonial administration founded schools and orphanages dedicated to bringing up métis children to be productive members of the French imperial project. French views of African women are also important to understanding the métis question, and are reflected in the way French administrators approached the challenge of managing the métis population of West Africa. Although French fathers certainly played a key role in the formation of the region’s métis population, they were notable principally for their absence. Indeed, it was the emotional and financial failures of the fathers of métis children that French authors cited in justifying the need for institutions dedicated to raising and educating métis. In 1936, a census listed just 637 métis living in Senegal. Of these, 202 are listed as having French fathers and 14 fathers from European countries other than France. The bulk of the remaining fathers were either métis or unknown. Despite this relatively small number, the métis question remained a crucial part of the French imperial project until independence swept through the French empire after World War II.

Métis, the French word for people of mixed race, carried with it an array of prejudices and stereotypes. Some French visitors to West Africa exulted métis as ideally suited to serving a crucial intermediary role between France and the people under its colonial rule because of their racial, cultural, and linguistic duality. Germaine le Goff, the headmistress of a school for girls in Rufisque, Senegal, explicitly stated the school’s goal as the formation of a “social, physical, and intellectual elite.” Le Goff further argued that French educated youths should be encouraged to intermarry to consolidate their civilized upbringings and ensure the passage of French values to the next generation. Others viewed métis as innately inferior and feared the formation of a group

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ecole normale de filles de Rufisque, Nécessité d’Éduquer la Femme Indigène. 1937. ANS O212(31).
of embittered individuals adrift between races and cultures and resentful of French colonialism. According to this line of thinking, the moral danger of métis children abandoned by their European fathers was severe. Without French intervention and proper instruction, métis children were doomed to inherit “only the vices of the two races.” Métis men were thought to be predisposed to a life of crime while their unfortunate female counterparts would inevitably resort to prostitution. Rather than shifting uniformly over time, these two contradictory views of métis potential coexisted throughout French colonization. Métis children and the intersection of race, gender, and colonial power they represented posed a problem for colonial commentators and administrators as they struggled to define the relationship between the expanding French empire and its colonial possessions.

This thesis will begin with a brief overview of the current scholarship on métissage in the French empire. Once this background has been established, I will examine four facets of métissage in West Africa: imperial policy, paternity, motherhood, and the lives of métis individuals. The first section will deal with the relationship between métis and the French imperial project, or the ways in which French legislators and colonial administrators envisioned the role of métis children and how these perceptions changed over time. The second section, paternity, will center around the French fathers of métis children in French West Africa. This chapter will provide an overarching summary of the relationships between French fathers and their métis offspring. Furthermore, it will deal with related issues such as paternity suits and the intense debate over whether or not métis children should be allowed to use their fathers’ French surnames. The third section focuses on motherhood and will consider both the African mothers

9 « Les garçons alimentant le rôle des tribunaux correctionnels ou de la Cour d’assises, les filles tournent à la prostitution. » Ibid.
of mixed-race children and how French women consciously took on the role of surrogate mother. In this section I will touch on the relationships between African women and French men and the impact mothering a métis child could have on a woman’s prospects in her community. The fourth and final section will revolve around métis children themselves. This chapter will touch on the education and social position of métis, as well as the debate over métis citizenship, and the formation of métis organizations in the last several decades of colonial rule. I will argue that the way métis were understood and treated by the French colonial apparatus is reflective of wider intersections of race, gender, and colonialism. French imperial reactions to métis individuals and the concept of métissage offer a fascinating glimpse into the prejudices and expectations of French colonialism in West Africa.
Chapter 1. Literature Review

The French colonial experience in West Africa has been the subject of a number of instructive analyses and is also relevant for wider examinations of gender and colonial studies. Many studies of French West Africa have focused primarily on the colonizers themselves or have limited their scope to the coast and its inhabitants. Throughout the scholarship on métissage and French West Africa there are several crucial French terms and phrases that appear often. It will be useful to briefly explain and translate a handful of these key terms as well as to sketch out geographic and temporal boundaries. The colonial federation of French West Africa, henceforth referred to as Afrique Occidentale Française (A.O.F.) was created in 1895 during one of the French empire’s periodic reorganizations.10 By 1904, after several territorial adjustments and additions, A.O.F consisted of six colonies: Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Dahomey (now Benin), Upper Senegal, and Niger (an amalgamation of modern Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger).11 In total, the colonies of A.O.F. spanned 1.8 million square miles of territory and brought most of West Africa under the umbrella of French control.12 Each colony was headed by local administrators who reported to the Governor General stationed in Dakar, Senegal. In 1919, the colony of Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) was carved out of Niger and the next year, in 1920, Upper Senegal and Niger were merged to form the new colony of French Soudan.13 Due to the outsize importance of Dakar, one of the region’s largest cities and the federation’s capital, Senegal boasted a disproportionately large number of French colonial staff and administrators and was home to a correspondingly large métis population. Furthermore, the secondary schools of A.O.F.

11 White, Children of the French Empire, 3.
12 Duke Bryant, Education as Politics, 18.
13 White, Children of the French Empire, 4.
were heavily concentrated in Senegal, particularly in the four coastal cities of Dakar, Rufisque, Gorée, and Saint Louis. Senegal is also the colony best represented in the archival record. All of the records of colonial A.O.F. were directed to Dakar and are now preserved in the collections of the Archives Nationales du Sénégal. Although this collection includes extensive documentation on other colonies, documents on Senegal are more numerous and often more detailed. For these reasons, the schools and orphanages for métis children in Senegal will be particularly important to this study. French Soudan is also of unusual significance because a number of the most engaging and detailed archival documents come from the two large orphanages for métis children in Bamako.

It will also be useful to define a handful of French terms and phrases that are crucial to understanding métissage in A.O.F. and which will be used throughout this study. Although there are many other words used to describe people of mixed-race, I will use the French métis. The related term métissage means miscegenation. In France, métissage was often depicted as a threat to traditional families and tied to issues of racial degeneration and depopulation.\(^\text{14}\) The term métis is linked to issues of racial categorization, violence, and the oppression of colonialism but generally carries less overt negatives stereotypes than do some other French terms.\(^\text{15}\) French words for mixed-race people that also appear in the literature include mulâtre, which is derived from the word mule and is more latently pejorative than métis, and sang-mêlé, which means literally “mixed blood.”\(^\text{16}\) Another term for mixed race people was mulot, which means field


mouse but was also used as a colloquial abbreviation of mulatto. In French imperial contexts, métis typically referred to children born of a European father and a non-white mother. The overwhelming majority of métis children were illegitimate. The term métis thus carried with it the dual stigma of both interracial heritage and illegitimacy. *Mariage à la mode du pays* means marriage according to local custom. *Mariage à la mode du pays* was used by French authors to describe relationships between French men and African women that, although not sanctioned by either the French state or Catholic church, were common and often long lasting. Such relationships were a crucial part of métissage in A.O.F. French writers often described colonized populations as *les indigènes*, which translated literally means indigenous peoples. However, the word “native” better captures the pejorative attitude inherent in the way *indigène* was used by contemporary French speakers. *Déclassément* describes the situation of a person adrift from society and who, bitter at their unmoored social standing, risks becoming a déclassé—one in the state of déclassément. Many French observers feared the métis population of A.O.F. would give rise to a class of anti-French déclassés. French fears about métis as déclassés arose from the idea that métis, taught from early childhood that they were superior to other colonized peoples but nonetheless subject to various limitations, would be unable to rise to the socioeconomic position they believed was rightly theirs. Moreover, for women *déclassément* was also closely associated with prostitution. The term *signare* is a French mutation of the Portuguese word *senhora* and is used to refer to métis women who entered into one or more mariages à la mode

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17 Saada, *Empire’s Children*, 34.
19 The phrase *mariage à la mode du pays* was not usually used to refer to marriages that were legally licensed by French law, such as those of the elite métis families of Saint Louis.
French merchants inherited both the term *signare* and the practice of *mariage à la mode du pays* from their Portuguese predecessors in West Africa.

In addition to the large body of literature on wider questions of race, gender, and imperial power, there are also a number of scholarly works that touch specifically on West Africa or the complex relationship between métis and the French state. Ann Stoler has written extensively on the issues that arise at the intersection of empire, race, and gender. In *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* Stoler focuses primarily on French Indochina and the Dutch Indies. Nevertheless, many of Stoler’s perceptive observations about the nature of rule and the “categorization problem” of métis can also be applied to French West Africa. Stoler notes, for instance, that in the Dutch Indies native women were responsible for their métis children but had few (if any) legal rights over them. A similar double standard was at play in A.O.F., where colonial administrators had the power to enroll any métis child considered “abandoned” in French institutions. Furthermore, in both A.O.F. and the Dutch Indies the standard of abandonment was a highly flexible one that could be easily adapted to meet the needs of the imperial state. Stoler also examines Dutch fears that mixed-race children would form a class of *blanken-haters* (white haters)—just as French officials worried about bitter métis *déclassés*. In the debates over the legal status of métis, and whether they should be classified as European or native, Stoler identifies a latent “tension between belief in the immutability and fixity of racial essence and a discomfiting awareness that racial categories were porous.”

For Stoler, the heart of the métis problem was rooted in the fundamental challenge mixed-race...
children posed for colonial control, which was predicated on identifying and differentiating “white” and “native.” Furthermore, in both French and Dutch colonies, debates over métissage laid bare the inherent clash between the inclusionary and exclusionary impulses of imperial rule.

Lorelle Semley, in *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France’s Atlantic Empire*, examines the ways in which legal debates, issues of gender, and new urban landscapes affected the perception of French citizenship in different parts of the rapidly expanding French empire. Semley also uses several crucial moments in French history as the lodestones for her wider arguments on the racialized, gendered perceptions of French citizenship over time. These moments include the French Revolution, the July Monarchy, the 1848 Revolution, and World War II, all of which had different implications in the colonial context than in metropolitan France. Each flash point revealed various realities about the construction of citizenship and to whom its privileges and responsibilities could and should be applied. Semley’s examination of the debate over citizenship is echoed by Alice L. Conklin’s detailed analysis of the French *mission civilisatrice*, or mission to civilize. In *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* Conklin adeptly traces shifting views on the imperial right or duty to “improve” the indigenous populations under its sway. The notion of a *mission civilisatrice* is directly related to the concerted effort by the colonial administration to create both a secular educational system and a network of schools and orphanages dedicated specifically to the care of the federation’s fatherless métis children.

On the subject of métis children and the métis question as it existed in A.O.F., Owen White’s *Children of the French Empire: Miscegenation and Colonial Society in French West Africa 1895-1960* is a seminal work. White’s detailed analysis of the role of métis individuals in

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26 Ibid., 43.
27 Semley, *To Be Free and French*, 12.
colonial French society and the organizations dedicated to caring for and educating them is a crucial jumping off point for any study of métissage in French West Africa. In addition to examining the attitudes of French society towards métis, White’s study also analyzes the ways in which métis conceived their own individual and collective identities within the French and African societies in which they lived. Kelly Duke Bryant, in Education as Politics: Colonial Schooling and Political Debate in Senegal, 1850-1914, specifically addresses the structure and function of the colonial education system, as well as the ways in which colonial schools shaped their pupils. Although Duke Bryant’s study provides crucial nuance on specific facets of the colonial education system (such as teacher requirements) which are otherwise largely absent from the literature, her research focuses on black African children. Indeed, viewed through the eyes of the black Africans in whom Duke Bryant is principally interested, métis are in many ways cast as the villains. Métis, after all, were elevated above other Africans by the colonial administration on account of their mixed-race heritage. The climactic moment of Duke Bryant’s narrative is the 1914 election of Blaise Diagne, Senegal’s first black deputy in the French National Assembly. Duke Bryant paints this development as a triumph for black Africans, an act of defiance against the powerful, French-aligned métis elite. However, like many other scholars Duke Bryant focuses largely (even exclusively) on a small number of elite métis families clustered in Senegal’s coastal cities, especially Saint Louis, Dakar, and Gorée. These métis families were affluent, socially and politically connected. Furthermore, they overwhelmingly lived in the Four Communes, elevating their status even further by classing them as French citizens rather than subjects. In 1848, the French empire had extended the rights and privileges of full French citizenship to those born in the so-called Four Communes: Saint Louis, Gorée, Dakar, and Rufisque. This placed their inhabitants in a unique and exulted position in the
colonial hierarchy as “citoyens” rather than “habitants”—citizens rather than subjects. Unlike *indigène*, which had a distinctly pejorative connotation, *habitant* means resident and was used to refer to differentiate between naturalized and foreign inhabitants of the colony. *Habitants* were French natural subjects in the colonies, had some rights, and were generally not marked out as foreigners by the imperial bureaucracy.

Emanuelle Saada’s analysis of the métis question in French Indochina in *Empire’s Children: Race, Filiation, and Citizenship in the French Colonies* is also indispensable. Saada argues that *métissage* was one of the great colonial problems faced by the French empire, along with pacification, education, public health, property issues, and the fate of colonized women.\(^28\) Saada also offers an in-depth examination of métis schools and the socio-legal complexity of the position occupied by métis communities in society. With regards to the legal issues surrounding métis, Saada notes that métis children were not only often absent from census records, but were also set apart by their classification as subjects rather than citizens.\(^29\) In “Wives of Circumstance”: Gender and Slave Emancipation in Late Nineteenth-century Senegal” Emily Burrill raises crucial questions about the use of colonial records to reconstruct the experiences of enslaved women.\(^30\) Burrill’s article uses correspondence between a West African trader and two French administrators to explore tensions over authority, slavery, and gender in Sine-Saloum, a coastal region of Senegal, in the late nineteenth century. Burrill notes that the colonial records in French West Africa overwhelmingly take the form of administrative reports or sanctioned memoirs. The voices of women and Africans are therefore rarely, if ever, available in their own words, an issue that has crucial implications for my own research.

\(^{28}\) Saada, *Empire’s Children*, 34.

\(^{29}\) Saada, *Empire’s Children*, 52.

\(^{30}\) Emily Burrill. ““Wives of Circumstance””: Gender and Slave Emancipation in Late Nineteenth-century Senegal.” *Slavery & Abolition* 29, no. 1 (2008).
Although there has been significant scholarship on French colonization of West Africa and on métissage generally, the specific experience of métis in A.O.F. remains understudied. This is particularly true of métis who were not members of the elite métis communities in the coastal cities of various colonies. In her book, *Métis of Sénégal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa*, Hilary Jones’s excellent analysis of métis families and their socioeconomic and sociocultural experience is limited to a relatively small number of very elite families.\(^{31}\) Furthermore, the geographic scope of Jones’s work is concentrated on Saint Louis and Gorée, wealthy coastal settlements that interacted with the colonial administration in ways not typical of A.O.F. As Jones notes, the fact that the mayors and other political leaders of Saint Louis and Gorée typically came from a handful of métis families is an indication of their political clout.\(^{32}\) The lives of these affluent métis families has limited bearing on the average experience of a métis child born in the interior of Senegal or elsewhere in A.O.F. Children of the urban families Jones examines had little in common with the poorer children attending French métis schools and orphanages and in whom I am principally interested. Similarly, although Saada’s meticulous examination of French Indochina is indispensable to any study of métissage, its geographic locale is far removed from French West Africa and is thus situated in a vastly different cultural context.

Although secondary sources provide crucial nuance and background, this project is rooted principally in primary sources. The Archives Nationales du Sénégal (National Archives of Senegal) offer a rich supply of documentary evidence on the lives of métis children and the views of the French administrators and educators who concerned themselves with the métis

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question. The archives include a wide variety of documentation about the schools and orphanages for métis established throughout A.O.F. In addition to information on meals, class schedules, uniforms, and school inspections, these administrative reports include letters to and from high ranking colonial officials that highlight the priorities and prejudices of the imperial education project. The archival record also contains valuable census information on the population of A.O.F, including the number of métis and the nationality of their fathers. Furthermore, there are a variety other types of documents such as the published *La QuinzaineColoniale (The Colonial Fortnightly)*, which offered suggestions for and criticisms of various imperial policies. To supplement the archival record, I will draw on a number of French language books from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Examples include *Azawar*, André Thiellement’s account of his time as an administrator in French Soudan in the early twentieth century, and *L’Art d’Aimer aux Colonies*, an “anthropological” examination of women in various French colonies from the 1890s which includes many colorful physical descriptions. Such accounts add nuance to the framework created by the archives and offer a contemporary French perspective on métissage. Although the archival record is expansive, it also poses various challenges. First, nearly all of the documents were written by white Frenchmen, most of whom were also members of the colonial apparatus in some form or another. When considering the documents, it is therefore crucial to keep in mind the bias inherent in these accounts. Descriptions of African women are particularly suspect. One French traveler claimed that African women frequently breast-fed their babies while the babies remained strapped to their backs.  

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is important to remain aware that such bias pervades the historical record. Moreover, accounts authored by métis individuals themselves are scarce and those that do exist tend to date from the last years of colonial rule.

To counter the bias of sources produced by French authors and help contextualize the administrative documents, I read several books by West African authors. These novels, although not directly linked to my primary interest in the schools and orphanages established for métis children, provide vital nuance to depictions of life under French colonial rule produced by French authors. Amadou Hampâté Bâ, one of West Africa’s best known authors, was born in Bandiagara (in modern Mali) around the year 1900. Bâ attended both French and Quranic schools as a child and later accepted a position in the colonial administration of Upper Volta. His memoirs, *Amkoullel, l’enfant Peul* and *Oui mon commandant!* are a rich account of his life in colonial French West Africa and offer an invaluable counterpoint to the depictions of African life and society proffered by French authors. The autobiography of Auoa Kéita, *Femme d’Afrique: la vie d’Auoa Kéita raconté par elle-même*, likewise provides a refreshing female and African perspective on French colonial rule in West Africa. Kéita was born in Bamako in 1912 and later spent several years as a pupil at the Orphelinat des Métisses in Bamako. Kéita’s account of her time at the Orphelinat is an interesting complement to the numerous colonial documents about the school and its occupants.
Chapter 2. Imperial Policy


Over the course of France’s long entanglement with West Africa, imperial policies and attitudes towards métis varied tremendously. Before proceeding to an examination of the lives métis children and their parents, it will be helpful to establish the wider framework of the imperialist world in which these individuals lived. Where métis should fit into colonial society played an important role in debates over the nature of race, the moral responsibilities wrapped up in conceptions of colonization, and the complex interactions between French and African influences. Over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, French administrators commonly depicted the French school and the African family as competing forces in a fierce pitched battle over the fate of métis children. Debates over citizenship, both in metropolitan France and in the empire, often materialized during crucial moments in French history. These flash points included the French Revolution, the July Monarchy, and the First and Second World Wars.35 However, citizenship and race took on different connotations in the context of the colonies.36 Both the way métis children were perceived by French colonial authorities and the changeable position they occupied as members of the wider French empire will be examined in this chapter. Colonial administrators in West Africa conceived of a complex educational system that would not only fulfill France’s moral responsibility to métis children but also provide the federation with a new generation of loyal, French-speaking laborers, teachers, merchants, and public servants. In West Africa, the seventy-year period of the French Third

34 From the heading of a letter from one provincial director to another. 1938. ANS O338(31).
36 Semley, To Be Free and French, 12.
Republic brought momentous changes including the consolidation of French rule, the introduction of a secular education system, and a rapidly evolving sense of the French empire’s *mission civilisatrice*. The *mission civilisatrice* (mission to civilize) was a moral and material crusade for improvement that shaped myriad facets of life under French colonial rule. For these reasons, as well as the paper trail left by a newly elaborate colonial bureaucracy, the period from 1870 to 1940 offers a unique opportunity to examine the relationship between métis and the French imperial state in West Africa.

Imperial policy towards métis changed significantly over the course of the French Third Republic and was affected by a variety of domestic and international factors. In metropolitan France, issues such as the debate over legalizing paternity suits and panic over the declining national birth rate had profound implications for attitudes towards métis children. Furthermore, the archival records suggest an intense interest in the practices of other colonial powers, particularly the United Kingdom, as well as a general desire to be viewed favorably on the world stage. One of the ultimate goals of colonial officials involved in raising and educating métis children was to ensure the passage of the French language and French socio-cultural practices to a new generation. Germaine le Goff, the headmistress of the large Ecole normale de filles in Rufisque, Senegal, wrote a long essay titled “The Need to Educate Native Women” which emphasized the importance of educating girls as well as boys. Citing a passage written by a young Senegalese girl at her school, le Goff argued that “the native woman is the queen of her house” and that “she exercises over her subjects her full power.”

The influence the African woman conjured by le Goff wielded in the domestic sphere meant that “it is important to educate

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37 Ecole normale de filles de Rufisque, Formation des élèves sages-femmes, Nécessité d’Eduquer la Femme Indigène. 1937. ANS O212(31).
her to help us in our civilizing work."\textsuperscript{38} Le Goff’s forceful support for female education is augmented by her suggestion that French-educated young men and women—particularly those of mixed-race—should be encouraged to marry one another to cement their enlightened upbringings. As evidence for the wisdom of this approach, she admiringly reported the success of British missionaries in the Zambezi River Valley who “have long understood the necessity of creating enlightened homes” and actively sought to “marry their female catechumens to their male catechumens.”\textsuperscript{39} Le Goff further explained that the British actively supported the establishment of these anglicized families of educated métis and Africans by arranging “interviews, meetings, little parties” all of which took place “under the eyes of benevolent missionaries.”\textsuperscript{40} Once a marriage had been successfully arranged, the missionaries congratulated the happy couple and “of course, wish[ed] for them to have many little Christians.”\textsuperscript{41} In contrast with the success of the British missionaries, le Goff sketched out the fate of the educated métis and African men in French colonies left to marry African women untouched by the virtues of European civilization. Le Goff invited the reader to imagine an “evolved” métis man who, upon returning to his village, “lives all his life surrounded by absolutely uncultivated women … surrounded by women and children who often think only of extracting from him as much money as possible to spend on nonsense.”\textsuperscript{42} Instead, Le Goff argued that “in order for our houses of education to bear all their fruits the young girls must marry educated youths from our schools.”\textsuperscript{43}

Le Goff’s vision of African village life overpowering the influence of a French education was a common one. Many members of the colonial administration considered time spent with

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
African families actively detrimental to the moral and intellectual development of métis children. In 1937, one school inspector wrote that boarding schools were particularly important for métis children (as opposed to day schools) because it was imperative that they no longer live “two lives so different and sometimes so opposite: life at school, family life, there should be only one life – that of their educational residence.”\(^4\) Five years earlier, in 1932, the administrator in charge of education in French Soudan offered a similar conception of the home and school lives of métis students as diametrically opposed forces locked in a zero-sum game. The administrator suggested that métis children spend as much time as possible under the watchful eyes of their school masters and teachers. This was especially true of children admitted to métis orphanages and boarding schools on scholarships, who, through the generosity of the colonial government, should “continue to benefit from the free boarding scheme for the duration of the school holidays.”\(^5\) Such children, as wards of the French state, could “only exceptionally be authorized by the Governor of the colony to visit their relatives for a certain period of time, with all the necessary guarantees.”\(^6\) The desire to supplant the influence of métis children’s African families with French schooling was a driving force behind the establishment of boarding schools and orphanages specifically for métis children. Only long-term exposure to French education could safely ensure the inculcation of the French language and, most importantly, French sociocultural mores.

On March 1848, Louis Husson, the Provisional Interior Director for Senegal gave a speech that included the memorable phrase “Long live work! Long live marriage!”\(^7\) Although

\(^4\) Inspection de l’Enseignement, 18 January 1937, ANS O212(31).
\(^5\) A l’Article N°1537 du 11 Aout 1932 Reorganisant les Orphelinats de métis et métisses du Soudan Français. 1932. ANS O531(31).
\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Caroline Séquin, Sex on the Move: Prostitution, Race, and Imperial Mobility in the French Atlantic, 1848-1947 (PhD diss, University of Chicago), 32.
Husson was principally concerned with curtailing prostitution, it is clear that he and other French colonial officials considered the formation of appropriate families a crucial piece of the imperial project. During the late nineteenth century and continuing into the early twentieth century, many French officials were deeply concerned with France’s declining birth rate—particularly in light of the nation’s recent defeat in the Franco-Prussian War.\textsuperscript{48} Concern about the holistic health of French civilization was augmented by the booming industrial might of the United States and Germany, which loomed threateningly over French power on the world stage. Elizabeth Pedersen, in her study of paternity suits and theater in France at the turn of the nineteenth century, succinctly captures the anxieties of a sociopolitical environment in which “the fate of every child was a matter of national security.”\textsuperscript{49} The fear of depopulation was intimately connected to the desire of officials to foster the development of healthy families.\textsuperscript{50} Some commentators explicitly linked métissage with depopulation, arguing that sterility due to racial mixing (métis were commonly stereotyped as sterile) was a driving force behind the low national birth rate.\textsuperscript{51}

For much of the history of the French empire, French visions of how métis and Africans should be educated and their role in francophone society can be marshalled into two principal camps: assimilation and racial determinism. These two theories were not mutually exclusive and frequently competed or coincided over the course of French colonial history. Until the mid-nineteenth century, assimilation dominated colonial discourse. The ultimate goal of colonial officials was to create a métis population as in line with metropolitan French culture and practice as possible. By the late nineteenth century, however, the view that racial characteristics were

\textsuperscript{48} Conklin, \textit{A Mission to Civilize}, 57.
\textsuperscript{49} Pedersen, \textit{Legislating the French Family}, 121.
\textsuperscript{50} Pedersen, \textit{Legislating the French Family}, 9.
\textsuperscript{51} White, \textit{Children of the French Empire}, 15.
immutable was increasingly influential. This shift had profound implications for the relationship between the colonial state and métis individuals. Rather than trying to integrate métis, the impetus turned to helping métis and African populations “evolve” to a degree considered appropriate to their inherent abilities.\(^{52}\) French observers posited a wide range of assessments of the moral and intellectual potential of métis. This spectrum of opinions about métis posed an obvious conflict with conceptions of racial characteristics as set in stone. After World War I, assimilationist rhetoric was largely supplanted by “association”, which focused more broadly on the need to integrate members of the African elite into French rule of West Africa.\(^{53}\)

The notion that France had some level of responsibility for métis children appears frequently in the archival record. In her study of the late colonial period (between the end of World War II and 1960), Rachel Jean-Baptiste argues that the absent white father often invoked in descriptions of unhappy métis children represented the wider moral failure of the French empire. The imperative to “civilize” colonized populations and promote the spread of French values was a crucial part of French conceptions of the colonial state. In *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* Alice Conklin extensively analyzes the evolution of the ideology underlying the French *mission civilisatrice*. Beginning in the 1870s, French writers, politicians, and elites began to assert that France had a unique obligation to civilize the indigenous people under its influence.\(^{54}\) The concept of the *mission civilisatrice* was founded on the assumption that by virtue of history, temperament, and industrial strength French culture was inherently superior.\(^{55}\) The French empire thus had both a duty and a right to shape other cultures in its own image. Before World War I, the *mission civilisatrice* was

\(^{52}\) Duke Bryant, *Education as Politics*, Duke Bryant, 17.


rooted in two guiding mores: the belief that standards of living could be raised through the “rational development” (typically referred to as mise en valeur) of colonial resources and the idea that African societies could mature within their own cultures so long as no conflict arose with the driving principles of French civilization. In the period after World War I, the mission civilisatrice developed a strong emphasis on fostering progress in West Africa that would be demonstrably useful to the French imperial project. The headmistress of the school for girls in Rufisque wrote a 1937 treatise on colonial education in which she argued that “today the moral authority of France over the natives is sufficiently powerful that we will be assured of convincing them [to send their children to French colonial schools].” This new set of priorities included a focus on integrating African elites, attempts to improve hygiene, and a conception of what “civilizing” entailed that dovetailed neatly with French interests in the region (notably ease of resource extraction). Education was an important facet of the mission civilisatrice in both phases, first as a method of encouraging the mise en valeur of African societies and later as a tool for developing and integrating teachers, administrators, medical corps auxiliaries and other useful members of the imperial apparatus.

The responsibility, or lack thereof, of French fathers and the French state to métis children was a cornerstone of wider issues relating to the morality of French imperialism. The archival record makes clear that the primary goals of French colonial administrators were the establishment of French as the dominant language and the creation of a social group loyal to France. One report from 1924 on the state of education in French Soudan lays out this ambition in precise terms: “the spread of spoken French is a necessity … The teaching of the French

56 Conklin, A Mission to Civilize, 7.
57 Conklin, A Mission to Civilize, 8.
58 Nécessité d’Eduquer la Femme Indigène, 1937, ANS O212(31).
59 Conklin, A Mission to Civilize, 8.
language – [achieving] functional language [ability] must therefore be the main concern… all other lessons are dominated by it and have value only to the extent to which they study French.\textsuperscript{60} Teaching children to speak and write French was a crucial part of the overarching scheme to produce an educated elite loyal to France. Not only did the French language represent the gateway to Christianity and a civilized life, but it also served to anchor métis children to the French community in West Africa. In a 1938 report on the métis schools of Niger, one administrator outlined the intimate connection colonial officials saw between a French education and the ability of métis to rise above their African origins. The administrator asserted that “it is a fact that the native of West Africa, the more he is instructed, the more he searches to imitate Europeans in his way of living.”\textsuperscript{61} This same report also reveals a crucial barrier—European education could only do so much to ameliorate the innate (and inferior) qualities of métis and Africans. After all, the administrator also commented that even when an educated métis sought to mold himself in the French model “he imitates not only the good, but often also the defects [of Europeans] which sometimes he amplifies.”\textsuperscript{62} Similarly contradictory notions of métissage and the role that métis children could and should play in colonial society persisted throughout the French Third Republic.

Although colonial administrators commonly espoused their commitment to providing care and education to métis children, the degree of investment in institutions for métis youth varied tremendously between colonies. At one point the co-ed orphanage for métis children in

\textsuperscript{60} « La diffusion du Français parlé est une nécessité … L’enseignement de la langue française – langage en action s’entend doit donc être la grande préoccupation … Tous les autres enseignements sont dominés par lui et n’ont de valeur qu’autant qu’ils à l’étude du français. » Enquête Générale sur l’enseignement en A.O.F., 1924. ANS O531(31).
\textsuperscript{61} Ecoles du Niger, Rapport d’inspection (Orphelinat de Métis de Zinder), 1938-1939. ANS O175(31).
\textsuperscript{62} « Il est un fait que l’indigène de l’A.O.F. plus il est instruit, plus il cherche à imiter l’européen dans sa façon de vivre. Mais malheureusement, il n’imite pas seulement ce qu’il a de bon, mais souvent aussi les défauts que parfois il amplifie. » Ibid.
Zinder (in modern Niger) went seven years without an inspection. A note from the 1938 evaluation complained that no record remained of the school’s earlier assessments.\(^\text{63}\) Furthermore, the 1938 inspector reported that many of the children he encountered spoke little or no French. To underline the lack of French language education at the school, the inspector wrote that “Marie-Antoinette, Queen of France, had a very whimsical spelling. It will not be shocking to see our young girls not only trampling on French grammar but ignoring it almost completely. If one of them writes one day to the chosen of her heart ‘freind I luv you a lot, alot and I want reelly to be your wyf for lyf’ I think the chosen will find reading this sweet note as lovely as if it were written by a more grammarian woman.”\(^\text{64}\) Despite the inspector’s criticisms of the orphanage’s educational prowess, the 1938 inspection revealed a significant improvement in the school’s overall living conditions. A previous inspection in 1929 (probably the last until 1938) found the orphanage in a disgraceful condition of disrepair. The inspector described the buildings as run-down and infested with termites and noted that a boy had died of beriberi shortly his arrival.\(^\text{65}\) Beriberi, also called thiamine deficiency, is caused by a shortage of vitamin B due to poor diet and nutrition.\(^\text{66}\) The death of a boy in residence at the orphanage is therefore highly suggestive that the children were suffering from malnutrition. The orphanage in Zinder was, admittedly, extraordinarily remote. It is of little surprise that such an isolated institution escaped the notice of colonial administrators for long periods of time. However, a 1921 evaluation of the métis orphanage in Porto-Novo, the capital of Dahomey, reported that it was “simply a boarding

\(^\text{63}\) Rapport d’Inspection, Orphelinat de Métis et Métisses de Zinder, 1938. ANS O175(31).
\(^\text{64}\) « Marie-Antoinette reine de France avait une orthographe très fantaisiste, il ne sera pas choquant de voir nos jeunes filles non pas piétiner la grammaire française mais l’ignorer presque complètement et si l’une d’elle écrit un jour à l’élu de son cœur : ‘ami je tême beaucoup, boucou et je ve bien être ta fame pour la vi’ je pense que cet élu éprouvera à la lecture de ce billet doux une joie tout aussi vive que s’il était écrit par une femme plus grammairienne. » Ibid.
\(^\text{65}\) White, *Children of the French Empire*, 86.
\(^\text{66}\) Ibid.
house in the sense that no actual education is given, the children frequent the diverse educational establishments of the town.” Investment in raising and educating métis children did not vary uniformly over time or geography. Despite the poor example of the orphanage in Porto-Novo, institutions for métis children in or near colonial capitals were typically both larger and better-funded than their rural counterparts.

The large schools and orphanages for métis children in Bamako, the capital of French Soudan, and in Dakar, the capital of both the colony of Senegal and the federation of A.O.F., stand out as particularly large and well-documented. The Orphelinat des Métisses de Bamako, founded in 1912, earned a reputation as the premier institution for métis children in West Africa. The school’s success hinged on the exceptional number of its pupils who surpassed the usual primary school course taught to métis children and went on to careers as teachers or medical auxiliaries (particular midwives). Unusually, the school also accepted some local girls as day students provided they had completed the basic primary education course and expressed a desire to work either as teachers or for the colonial medical corps. Indeed, a report on the school in December of 1937 ordered that while African girls with appropriate qualifications could take advanced courses along with métis girls, they should not be permitted to board. The inspector wrote that “The boarding school in this establishment must be reserved for mixed-race girls. The natives may not be admitted except in the case that there are available places within the usual limits.”

A desire to maintain separation between métis children and other students was not unusual. The bulk of the documentation surrounding métis institutions suggests that colonial

68 White, Children of the French Empire, 85.
69 Inspection de l’École, Orphelinat des Métisses de Bamako, Visite les 16 et 17 Novembre, 1937, ANS O685(31).
administrators aimed to separate métis and other African children to the extent that it was fiscally possible to do so.

In 1937, the Orphelinat des Métisses de Bamako became the subject of a scandal that eventually reached the highest echelons of the French colonial administration in West Africa. The problem began when the school doctor discovered that two métis girls had become pregnant during the summer holiday. Furthermore, both girls reported that the fathers of their unborn children were black. Concern over what should be done about the situation (and who was to blame) ricocheted around the colonial administration and quickly arrived on the desk of Jules Marcel de Coppet, then Governor-General of West Africa. The Governor of French Soudan wrote the following letter to Marcel de Coppet explaining the situation: “I have the honor to draw your kind attention to the case of two young mixed-race girls who, despite the active surveillance exercised by the staff of the Bamako Orphanage, are pregnant. Marie Coulibaly, eighteen years old, and Julienne Kone, fifteen years old. Their expulsion, if it satisfies the administrative rules, cannot solve the problem of the prospects of these two future mothers and their children who remain wards of the colony. Experience has shown, in fact, that too often, left to themselves in similar conditions, these young girls will be doomed to prostitution and misery.” The experience to which the Governor referred was not a hypothetical one. Six years earlier, a young girl named Marie Camara had fallen pregnant and been summarily expelled from the Orphelinat. After leaving the Orphelinat, Marie went to live with her mother and became a prostitute. When a teacher from the orphanage went looking for her two years later it emerged that both Marie and her child had died, Marie from syphilis and the baby from tuberculosis. The tragic deaths of Marie Camara and her child doubtless weighed heavily on the minds of the

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71 White, Children of the French Empire, 87.
administrators considering the appropriate response to the pregnancies of Marie Coulibaly and Julienne Kone. Ultimately, Marie Coulibaly was entrusted to the care of a local métis family and Julienne Kone was apprenticed to a European dressmaker.72

The prediction that the two girls would inevitably resort to prostitution was typical of wider views of métis children. Over the course of French colonial rule in West Africa, the desire to shape métis children into useful members of the imperial project competed with a fear that the métis population would develop into a threatening class of anti-French prostitutes, criminals, and general ne’er-do-wells. Colonial ethnographers in the nineteenth century frequently argued that métis children would inevitably become alienated from both African and European societies.73

The hypothetical danger of the métis population was typically depicted as springing from resentment due to the fact that métis would be unable to achieve the elevated social status which they believed was theirs by right.74 In 1913, Victor Augagneur, a former Governor-General of Madagascar, argued that if métis children were afforded preferential treatment they would create a class of uncontrollable déclassés and consider themselves superior to “les indigènes.”75

Furthermore, Augagneur suggested that the pretentions of métis communities would embitter the colony’s other subjects, who would blame the French for elevating the métis population above them in the first place. The notion that métis children existed in a state of unique moral danger was not limited to white observers. The Union international des métis (International Union of Mixed-Race Persons) was founded in 1957 with the goal of advocating for the financial, moral, and educational support of métis children. Membership of the Union international des métis was

72 Ibid.
74 Sâada, *Empire’s Children*, 53.
comprised mainly of métis from A.O.F. As late as the early 1960s the organization’s official magazine, *L’Eurafrican*, described a particular, gendered moral danger to métis children left unattended. Métis boys, shunned by both French and African society and thus stripped of meaningful economic opportunities, would ultimately turn to crime. Similarly, young mixed-race women unable to marry respectable men of either race would resort to prostitution with white men to support themselves and their children.

Despite the clear disconnect between the plans of high-ranking colonial officials and the actual reality in métis schools, there is ample evidence that officials conceived of a complex educational system that would carry deserving métis children from early childhood to marriage (for girls) or a successful career (for boys). On January 9, 1937, the Governor-General Jules Marcel de Coppet issued a circular to the Lieutenant-Governors of French West Africa outlining the current situation of métis children and criticizing the lack of a federation-wide educational system dedicated specifically to fatherless métis. Marcel de Coppet wrote that “despite present interest in the plight of abandoned mixed-race children, there is currently in French West Africa no overall organization, no unity of views, no plan of action that can give the problem a rational and final solution.”

According to Governor-General Marcel de Coppet, in 1937 there were just six institutions operated by the French state and specifically designated as orphanages for children of mixed race: two in Bamako (French Soudan), one for boys in Mamou and one for girls in Kankan (Guinea), one in Ouagadougou (Upper Volta), and one in Zinder (Niger). Marcel de Coppet also noted critically that both Dahomey and Côte d’Ivoire opted to pay religious institutions to care for some of the métis children within their borders.

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77 Ibid.
disproportionately large métis population, conducted a separate review and was therefore not included alongside the other colonies. Marcel de Coppet’s overview of the state of métis education also included a census of the children under the care of the colonial administration during the 1935-1936 school year.\textsuperscript{78}

\textit{French Soudan}
Bamako orphanage for mixed-race boys … 70 students
Bamako orphanage for mixed-race girls … 38 students

\textit{Côte d’Ivoire}
Ouaguadougou secular orphanage … 22 girls, 11 boys
Mossou religious orphanage for mixed-race girls … 55 students
Abidjan religious orphanage for mixed-race boys … 8 students

\textit{Guinea}
Kankan orphanage for mixed-race girls … 36 students
Mamou orphanage for mixed-race boys … 38 students

\textit{Dahomey}
Catholic boarding school … 23 students
Village schools … 20 students
Scholarship holders living at home \textit{[Boursiers dans leur famille]} … 2 students\textsuperscript{79}

\textit{Niger}
Zinder co-ed orphanage … 21 girls, 23 boys

Marcel de Coppet further requested that the governor of each colony indicate which métis boys were suitable candidates for a newly created Foyer de Métis in Dakar. The boys would be selected according to “their aptitudes and their qualities” and those considered eligible should “have their preparation and their education monitored, and if necessary, take the scholarship exam.”\textsuperscript{80} Marcel de Coppet did not express any opinion on what should be done with regards to

\begin{center}
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\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{79} This is the only reference I have seen to scholarships awarded to students not attending colonial boarding schools, for which there was an annual fee. Presumably, these two children attended nearby French schools of some type while living at home. No clarification is given in the document. \\
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the education of métis girls. Excluding Senegal, the total number of métis children officially under the care of the colonial administration in 1935-1946 is just 367—a remarkably small figure considering the frequency with which the “métis problem” appears in the archival record. Indeed, the apparent disconnect between the size of the métis population of A.O.F. and the degree of concern with which colonial officials approached the métis question is apparent throughout the French Third Republic and has been observed by numerous scholars.81

In 1938, shortly on the heels of his critique of métis education in A.O.F., Governor-General Marcel de Coppet replied enthusiastically to a new proposal suggesting that métis boys be sorted into educational streams on the basis of scholastic merit. The plan hinged on the idea that around the age of twelve “boys will be divided into three groups, according to their intellectual possibilities.”82 The first group, made up of the most gifted boys, would be sent to Dakar to live in the city’s large Foyer de Métis and attend the école normale William Ponty. Founded in 1903 when the secular school system of A.O.F. was created, William Ponty was reserved for men and occupied the pinnacle of A.O.F.’s hierarchical education system. The school specialized in preparing its students for careers as high level teachers, doctors, and colonial administrators.83 In 1937, the year before Marcel de Coppet’s report, William Ponty was relocated from Gorée to Sébikhotane, near Rufisque. The new campus in Sébikhotane was a former military barracks, and part of the school was later converted into a prison after Senegal became independent. To graduate from William Ponty, students were required to spend a summer writing about an assigned topic, usually centered on a particular cultural or traditional

81 See Alice Conklin’s A Mission to Civilize and Owen White’s Children of the French Empire.
83 White describes William Ponty and the other federal schools of A.O.F., all of which were located in or around Dakar, as open only to a “chosen few”. Children of the French Empire, White, 63.
practice. In 1949, the prompt was “the child in the family milieu” and asked students to report on which community members had authority over children and how this authority was expressed. The reports that emerged from this assignment offer a valuable anthropological insight into colonial A.O.F. Many of the students chose to report on their own communities and were thus uniquely positioned to grasp various cultural, ethnic, and linguistic complexities. The very best of this elite cohort might even hope to advance to studies in metropolitan France with the assistance of newly established scholarships. A number of William Ponty graduates later became prominent independence leaders, including the first presidents of Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, Benin, and Burkina Faso, the first prime minister of Senegal, and several notable African writers and poets.

The second group, of middling ability, would enter the schools of their home colony. An article in *La Quinzaine Coloniale* on the métis problem heartily supported the idea of separating the children into meritocratic classes and clarified that the intermediate group could serve as primary school teachers and civil servants. The members of the third and final cadre, comprised of the boys judged least promising, were “destined for a local life” and would remain at their orphanages for an education “oriented towards agriculture and artisanal work.” The plan to divide métis boys according to perceived potential is revealing of wider French imperial intentions for two reasons. First, the plan is complex and depends on a well-organized,
hierarchical educational system that extended across all of A.O.F. Second, the suggested jobs towards which métis of each ability class should be directed are all clearly useful to the French colonial apparatus.

The 1938 education plan for métis children was in many ways very similar to the original outline composed in 1903 by Camille Guy, then Lieutenant-Governor of Senegal. The 1903 framework separated the educational system into four branches: primary, professional (vocational), higher-primary, and commercial or teacher training.90 The primary schools were the focal point of the new system, and were further divided into three sub-categories: village, urban, and regional schools. The village schools, which could be established in any area with an adequate number of pupils (usually between thirty and forty), were run by French-trained African teachers and focused intensively on spoken French.91 The village school course usually lasted between three and six years and could also include some instruction in writing, basic arithmetic, or agriculture.92 Guy’s plan, which was enthusiastically embraced by Governor-General Roume, underlined the importance of manual training. Indeed, Guy noted that African populations were “particularly skilled in the manual arts.”93 After completing primary school, the best students could advance to the regional schools located in the capital of each school district. Regional schools—like the orphanages and boarding schools for métis children—were run by French instructors and followed a curriculum intended to train a new African elite. The three-year course designed for students at the regional schools included French language, reading, writing, math, geometry, French history, science, and in some cases Arabic.94 The focus on

90 Conklin, A Mission to Civilize, 79.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
93 Conklin, A Mission to Civilize, 78.
94 Conklin, A Mission to Civilize, 79.
reading and writing at the regional schools was explicitly designed to create a class of literate personnel loyal to France who would be able to serve as the translators, teachers, and auxiliaries crucial to the success of the *mission civilisatrice*. Many of these same goals would later be applied specifically to métis education with the creation of a separate educational stream reserved for métis children.

The fear of métis as *déclassés* was in many ways a continuation of earlier concerns about the education of Africans. Throughout the 1890s and early 1900s many French observers warned against excessive education of Africans due to the supposed danger of removing colonial subjects from their traditional way of life.\(^95\) In the case of both métis children and educated Africans more generally, the primary fear of French observers was the formation of a separate class removed from African communities and yet simultaneously shut out of European society. In 1911, Arthur Girault, a colonial legislator, expounded on this point at length. Girault wrote that “treat métis as a class apart and ask yourselves what feelings will germinate in the minds of these men. Rejected by all sides, they will become *déclassés*, and, I would add, the most dangerous *déclassés* from the point of view of maintaining European domination … We in France must not forget that failure to understand this has in the past had disastrous consequences for us. The basic reason for France’s loss in the eighteenth century of Saint-Domingue, which was her finest colony, was in the division of whites and mulattoes. The former did not know how to accept the assistance which the latter loyally offered them. If they had accepted it, the island of Saint-Domingue would without doubt have remained a French colony.”\(^96\) The desire to avoid

\(^{95}\) White, *Children of the French Empire*, 77.

the development of a class of métis déclassés manifested in myriad ways, and sometimes led colonial administrators to opposite conclusions.

In 1908, the education inspector Jules Mariani wrote that “despite the care which he generally receives from his mother’s family” the métis child was “deprived of his share of paternal inheritance and will find himself with a generally higher level of intelligence in a situation inferior to that of a native. We are therefore duty bound to take care of him.” Mariani’s assessment thus supported the colonial system of specialized schools and orphanages for the care and education of métis children. Other administrators, however, interpreted the need to situate métis in an intermediate social position by emphasizing that métis children should not be allowed to develop an inappropriate sense of their superiority to other Africans. In 1907, the head of the orphanage for métis children in Porto-Novo, Dahomey, wrote a letter to the colony’s governor criticizing the poor conditions in which the children lived and arguing that the “delicate” métis boarders should not be forced to live “in the native fashion.” In his response, the Governor unsympathetically contended that it was important that the children not become accustomed to luxury and that they be “raised in the conditions of the milieu in which they must evolve.” This exchange clearly reveals the tension between a desire to elevate métis children above other Africans and the reality that métis, even those raised and educated in French institutions from infancy, could never fully assimilate into French society.

The period of the French Third Republic saw a number of important changes in the relationship between the French Empire and its colonial possessions in West Africa. The

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99 Ibid.
consolidation of French rule, shifting interpretations of the *mission civilisatrice*, and the creation of a formal education system fundamentally altered the relationship between the colonial administration and the region’s métis population. Documents written by members of the colonial apparatus reveal a strong desire on the part of French authorities to separate métis children from their African families and cultures. In this way, métis children could be raised as French speakers loyal to France. It is clear that despite the relatively small métis population, the so-called métis question intersected with wider concerns of empire and French rule in West Africa. Justifications of the responsibility the French state owed métis children were often linked to the epidemic of absent French fathers at the root of the “métis problem” in A.O.F. The next chapter will examine the fathers of métis children directly, as well as the related issues of legal recognition and the fierce debate over paternity suits.
Chapter 3. Paternity

“Establishing paternity will often be very difficult…”

Throughout French involvement in A.O.F., métis children were often seen as “incidents de voyage”—an unfortunate but largely inevitable consequence of colonial rule. In 1912 the Minister for the Colonies, Albert Lebrun, authored a circular arguing that the abandonment of métis children by French fathers undermined the moral superiority at the heart of the French imperial project. Despite urging fathers to assume at least some responsibility for educating their métis offspring, Lebrun’s circular stops well short of suggesting legislation requiring any such care. In fact, the circular conveys a tacit acceptance of mariages à la mode du pays and other interracial relationships as an unavoidable reality of colonial society. In 1916, one French observer suggested that French men abandoned their métis children, usually in infancy, as much as ninety percent of the time. Occasionally a French father would officially claim métis children by having their names included in the état civil, the civil registry of births, deaths, and marriages. Métis children recognized by their fathers were called métis reconnus and could use their father’s surname and exercise the same rights as any French citizen. More commonly, however, fathers either gave money to the child’s mother without undertaking any formal recognition of the child or simply left the colony without making any provisions of support whatsoever. These legally unrecognized children, called métis nonreconnus, accounted for the vast majority of métis in West Africa. The colonial schools and orphanages dedicated to métis

101 White, Children of the French Empire, 34.
102 White, Children of the French Empire, 37.
103 White, Children of the French Empire, 38.
children were created specifically as a stand-in for the absent French fathers of métis nonreconnus.

For most of the French Third Republic, French observers adopted a relatively nonchalant attitude towards marriage à la mode du pays. Although the social acceptability of such relationships declined over time, the shortage of European women (French or otherwise) in West Africa meant that interracial relationships were often considered inevitable. Furthermore, mariage à la mode du pays had been a standard feature of French colonial life for centuries. In the early nineteenth century, many prominent French officials—including several governors of Senegal—lived openly with African women. As late as the 1930s mariage à la mode du pays was evidently both widely practiced and widely tolerated by French colonial administrators and other officials.¹⁰⁴

André Thiellement’s autobiography Azawar chronicles his time as the youthful administrator of Tahoua, a desert region of northwestern Niger populated by the Tuareg people, during the mid-1930s. Thiellement was born in Paris in 1906, graduated from the Ecole Nationale de la France d’Outre-Mer, and went on to a long and successful career as a French administrator, diplomat, and chess champion. Azawar offers an uncommonly frank and detailed glimpse into the nature of mariages à la mode du pays as well as the reasons French men desired such relationships. Thiellement notes, for instance, that “even the passing coupling of two different races is inevitably a battle, especially when love is not involved.”¹⁰⁵ This alarming attitude succinctly captures the entitlement with which some administrators approached the populations under their control. The specific gendered nature of Thiellement’s breezy acceptance

¹⁰⁴ See André Thiellement, Azawar (Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue, L’amitié par le livre, 1949)
¹⁰⁵ « L’accouplement même passager de deux races différentes est forcément une lutte, surtout quand l’amour ne s’en mêle pas. » Thiellement, Azawar, 38.
of interracial relationships as an inevitable “battle” becomes grimly clear in a later episode in which he rapes a Tuareg woman who refuses to submit to his “seduction.” Azawar includes a lengthy discussion in which Thiellement’s predecessor, Michier, tells him at length about the practical values of taking a Tuareg wife for the duration of his posting in Niger. Entering into a mariage à la mode du pays and gaining a “sleeping dictionary” was, according to Michier, “the only way to learn Tamachek fast enough and to begin to understand what happens under those blue veils.”

106 Michier also helpfully informed Theillement that some Tuareg women are passably attractive even by French standards and that it is their custom to refuse to sleep with their husbands for the first three nights.107 Theillement and Micher’s calm approach to mariages à la mode du pays is echoed in a 1939 issue of the Quinzaine Coloniale which noted that, although common, “legitimate marriage has not sanctioned these unions, which are sometimes brief or sometimes last for years.”

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After communicating his desire for a Tuareg wife who was “healthy, pretty if possible and not too stupid” to local chiefs, Thiellement was presented with three women: Tawarat, Tarhedeyt, and Mariama.109 The first, Tawarat, he describes as “a nice enough person” but later dismissed after discovering that she had previously been married to several other Frenchmen.110 Thiellement’s rejection of Tawarat also reveals his desire to use a mariage à la mode du pays to cement his own social position. One of Thiellement’s prime concerns about Tawarat is that she occupies a low position in the Tuareg caste system. However, he is later assured that whites are

106 « Sleeping dictionary, vous connaissez ? C’est le seul moyen d’apprendre assez vite le Tamachek et de commencer à comprendre ce qui se passe sous ces voiles bleus. » Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 « Le mariage légitime n’a pas sanctionné ces unions tantôt brèves ou qui, parfois, durent pendant des années. » La Quinzaine Coloniale, April-May 1939, ANS O685(31).
109 « J’avais bien spécifié ... que je désirais une Targuie, saine, jolie si possible et pas trop bête. » Thiellement, Azawar, 40.
110 « Tawarat était une assez agréable personne ... », Ibid.
considered entirely outside the Tuareg social structure and the caste position of his wife is thus irrelevant to his own prestige. Perhaps as a reaction to Thiellement’s complaints about Tawarat’s lack of social capital and history of relationships with Frenchmen, the second woman with whom he is presented is the virginal daughter of a local chief.111 The woman, Tarhedeyt, refused to have sex with Thiellement despite “[his] attempts at verbal seduction” and was instead “content to tighten her dirty veils more closely around her.”112 After failing to persuade Tarhedeyt to accept his advances, Thiellement ultimately resorted to raping her. The book presents this development in an utterly guileless tone that makes it clear that Thiellement viewed his treatment of Tarhedeyt as perfectly acceptable and expected his readers to do likewise. The third and final candidate is Mariama, a beautiful young woman between eighteen and twenty-four years old. Thiellement describes Mariama as possessing a mixture of timidity and haughty grace and the two subsequently entered into a mariage à la mode du pays that lasted throughout Thiellement’s service in Niger.113

It is important to be cautious about the way French writers depict the African women with whom they were involved. Thiellement was writing for a French audience more than ten years after he left Niger and his racial and cultural prejudices are clear throughout Azawar. In 1927, another French author writing about Senegal offered an anatomically dubious description of Wolof women. The book L’art d’aimer aux colonies was published shortly before Thiellement arrived in Niger. The author, Docteur Jacobus X, claimed that although Wolof women were beautiful “after the first child, everything changes. The beauty of the breasts and the body

111 Although she was presented as the desirable daughter of a chief, it is likely that the woman was actually of low social status in Tuareg society. For instance, she could have been the chief’s daughter by a slave.
112 « Mes tentatives de séduction verbale … restent absolument sans succès. La jeune fille se contente de resserrer plus étroitement autour d’elle ses voiles crasseux. » Thiellement, Azawar, 44.
113 Thiellement, Azawar, 46.
generally whither quickly. The breasts elongate and become like the udders of a goat, to which they offer a certain resemblance. When the child wants to nurse, the mother leans to one side, at the same time passing her breast under her arms, and so continues her work while breastfeeding.”

114 Docteur Jacobus was the pseudonym of Louis Jacolliot, a French colonial judge in Tahiti and Chandernagor. Jacolliot wrote a number of works under his own name and a handful of pseudonyms. Although the incongruities in L’art d’aimer aux colonies are much more acute than those apparent in Thiellement’s memoir, they should nevertheless serve as a warning about the strong prejudices at play in contemporary French society. Notwithstanding these limitations, the description of mariage à la mode du pays in Azawar is instructive for several reasons. First, both Michier and Thiellement perceive interracial relationships as socially acceptable, commonplace, and actively useful for French colonial administrators. Michier told Thiellement a Tuareg wife will help him quickly learn the local language, Tamachek, while Thiellement hoped to marry a woman of high status to secure his social position. Second, one of the women the Tuareg chiefs presented to Thiellement had in fact been married to several other Frenchmen—likely Thiellement’s predecessors as regional commandant.115 Finally, Azawar is Thiellement’s personal memoir and he would have therefore had obvious motivations to depict himself in a favorable light. Nevertheless, Thiellement straightforwardly recounts his use of threats to coerce Tarheydet into sleeping with him—a scene that any modern reader would certainly interpret as sexual assault. This suggests that the superiority and entitlement with which Thiellement viewed African women and his sexual behavior in relationships with them was

114 Jacobus, L’art d’aimer aux colonies, 193-194.
115 It was not uncommon for African woman to marry whichever Frenchman was currently in a certain position. This practice was evidently long established by the time André Thiellement was stationed in Niger in the 1930s. When Victor Vernueil, a French naval officer, arrived in Senegal in the 1840s he encountered an elderly woman who had been married to several of his predecessors.
within the bounds of propriety at the time. Thiellement’s treatment of Tuareg women may have actually served as a performance of colonial masculinity. Just as France conquered West Africa so Thiellement and other French administrators conquered African women. Michier’s advice to Thiellement that force is often required to “persuade” Tuareg women to submit to sexual advances underlines this reality.

In addition to administrators like Thiellement and Michier, French fathers of métis children came from all walks of life. Although a 1939 issue of the *Quinzaine Coloniale* confidently asserted that “the military element is the principal factor in the case of illegitimate métis” in reality the ranks of métis fathers included men from every level of the French administration and social hierarchy. The practice of *mariage à la mode du pays* was, for most of French colonialism, both commonly practiced and widely accepted. Official French policy was characterized by tacit acceptance of such relationships despite strident opposition from religious groups, particularly Catholic clergy. One nun, Sister Rosalie Javouhey, argued that *mariage à la mode du pays* was no better than keeping a concubine. François Blanchot took an African wife during his second term as governor of Senegal (1802-1807) even while he remained legally married to a woman in France. This relationship produced three mixed-race daughters, all of whom took their father’s surname (two later married into prominent Senegalese métis families). Blanchot was far from the only high ranking official to engage in *mariage à la mode du pays*. Another nineteenth century governor of Senegal, Louis Léon Faidherbe, entered into a *mariage à la mode du pays* with Dioucounda Sidibe, a fifteen-year-old Senegalese girl. Sidibe

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116 *La Quinzaine Coloniale*, April-May 1939, ANS O685(31).
117 The Abbé Boilat, in his *Esquisses Sénégalaise*, also argued against the immorality of *mariages à la mode du pays* as did many other contemporary clerics. Jones, *The Métis of Sénégal*, 75.
subsequently lived with Faidherbe in the governor’s palace. Three years after their marriage, Sidibe gave birth to a son, christened Louis Léon Faidherbe after his father.\(^{120}\) After World War I, mariages à la mode du pays declined for a variety of reasons. More and more men began bringing their wives and children along with them to postings outside of France and interracial unions of all types became increasingly stigmatized. However, as late as the 1920s the Governor of Dahomey had several publically acknowledged métis children. Blanchot was by no means unusual—many French men who entered into relationships with African women maintained wives and families in France. Protecting these French families was a key piece of attempts by the colonial administration to prevent illegitimate métis children from taking their father’s surnames or pursuing paternity suits.

Many métis children had fathers who were themselves métis. French officials actively sought to promote marriages between educated métis men and women. One of the primary goals of institutions for métis girls was to prepare the next generation of wives and mothers. The 1937 inspection of the Orphelinat des Métis in Kankan, Guinea, reported happily that over the course of the 1935-1936 school year ten girls had married. The husbands of these girls included seven teachers, a postman, a mechanic, and a European.\(^{121}\) The profession of the sole European husband was not recorded. Evidently, the fact that the husband was European was all the colonial administration needed to know about him. A 1936 report on the métis population of Senegal includes the race and nationality of each individual’s mother and father as well as their age, matrimonial state, employment status, and employment type. The report is a fascinating, detailed

\(^{120}\) Ibid.
glimpse into the métis population of Senegal and the intense interest with which the French colonial administration monitored it.

**1936 Report on the métis population of Senegal**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of métis in Senegal: 637</th>
<th>By age group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classification by sex</td>
<td>Less than 20 years … 376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: 309</td>
<td>20 to 40 years … 147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female: 328</td>
<td>More than 40 years … 114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By father’s nationality</th>
<th>According to marital status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French … 202</td>
<td>Single … 116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian … 8</td>
<td>Married … 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish … 1</td>
<td>Widowed … 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German … 2</td>
<td>Children … 368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swiss … 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Métis … 290</td>
<td>By occupational status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrian … 61</td>
<td>Employed … 191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moroccan … 17</td>
<td>Unemployed … 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native … 10</td>
<td>No career … 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown … 43</td>
<td>Women and children … 377</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By mother’s nationality</th>
<th>By type of occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French … 3</td>
<td>Civil servant … 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Métis … 118</td>
<td>Merchant … 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native … 516</td>
<td>Farmers, workers and laborers … 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown … 43</td>
<td>Profession (lawyers, etc) … 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several features of the survey that particularly intriguing. First, métis account for the largest single group of fathers by “nationality” and a significant minority of mothers. The métis population of A.O.F. included not only children of interracial couples but a substantial number of multigenerational métis families. The use of “métis” as a nationality is striking, since the vast majority of métis fathers listed were probably French nationals. Despite this, the attribution of French nationality was evidently reserved for white fathers. Second, the French goal of employing métis men in the colonial administration in various capacities appears to have been

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successful. Roughly half of the employed men listed are categorized as “civil servants”, an expansive group that likely included soldiers, medical auxiliaries, teachers, and administrators. Third, the survey lists three métis with French (and presumably white) mothers. The entire impetus of the métis question hinged on the duty of the French state to serve as a stand in for absent French fathers. In his 1917 book on education in A.O.F. (which he refers to as “a moral conquest”), Georges Hardy wrote that although many other children are attached to the memory of a missing mother, métis children were instead fixated on their lost fathers. Hardy claimed that “it is their father that these orphans in name [most métis children had at least one living parent] invoke at all times, it is to their father that they refer what they feel in them that is better and more noble.”

Hardy’s comment dovetailed well with the vivid images of métis children neglected by their African mothers conjured by other colonial writers. As will be examined further in the next chapter, one justification of the system of orphanages created for métis children was that métis youth were better off in the care of their fathers’ compatriots than with their African families. Finally, the survey makes no mention of whether the métis listed were legally recognized or not. This oversight is surprising because legal recognition was one of the primary methods colonial administrators used to sort métis children. A 1937 letter from the Governor of Senegal to the Governor General of West Africa mentions a previous inquiry from Dakar about the “number and condition of recognized and unrecognized métis.” The 1936 survey of métis in Senegal thus paints a nuanced picture of both the colony’s métis population and the preoccupations of French administrators.

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Métis children that were recognized as legitimate or recorded on the état civil were called métis reconnus (or occasionally métis recueillls) and could inherit their father’s wealth. French men often left their business interests in the colony to their métis children, a practice that helped create a cohort of affluent, elite métis families in coastal Senegal. Métis reconnus, like the offspring of governors Faidherbe and Blanchot, were often baptized into the Catholic church and bore their fathers’ European surnames. However, most métis children were not openly claimed by their fathers and the debate over whether or not illegitimate métis children should be allowed to use their fathers’ surnames was highly controversial.

Métis children not legally recognized by their fathers, métis nonreconnus, typically lived with their mothers or maternal relatives in African communities—a lifestyle French observers disparagingly referred to as à l’indigène. Métis nonreconnus vastly outnumbered métis reconnus and comprised the population of children for whom the colonial orphanages and schools were created. A 1938 survey of 241 métis with French fathers in Dahomey found that only fifteen percent were recognized on the état civil.125 Similarly, in French Soudan, only 22 of the 274 métis surveyed—less than ten percent—were formally recognized by their fathers.126 Twenty years earlier, in 1916, Louis le Barbier described métis children abandoned by their fathers as “these unhappy little creatures” but did not suggest trying to end interracial liaisons.127 Le Barbier, a colonial administrator who wrote extensively about métis children in Côte d’Ivoire, estimated that French fathers abandoned their métis children in as many as nine out of ten cases.128 The fathers of métis nonreconnus typically provided little or no support to their métis children after leaving the colony. However, in 1917 a French observer wrote that “some have a

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125 White, Children of the French Empire, 39.
126 Ibid.
127 La Côte d’Ivoire, Louis le Barbier in White, Children of the French Empire, 34.
128 White, Children of the French Empire, 37.
paternal fiber developed enough to continue to care for their children in Africa. Back in France, they send the mother some money, they ensure that the toddlers learn and become honest people.”\(^\text{129}\) This assessment probably included a healthy dose of wishful thinking—the archival record strongly suggests such arrangements were not the norm. In a 1926 letter, for instance, the Governor of Senegal wrote that the vast majority of métis children in the colony were “not recognized by their father, who has often returned to France before their birth.”\(^\text{130}\) This assessment is supported by the observations of many other French writers and administrators, as well as by the available information on children enrolled in métis schools and orphanages.

French fears over métis as a class of potential troublemakers and déclassés centered primarily on métis nonreconnus. In January, 1913, an article in the *Quinzaine Coloniale* expounded at length on the potential danger of an organized métis population and made repeated mention of the specific risk of métis nonreconnus. The article reported with alarm that “at the present time unrecognized mixed-race children, rejected by whites, badly received by the natives whom they scorn, constitute a caste apart, living simultaneously on the fringe of French society and the margin of native society.”\(^\text{131}\) Furthermore, the risk posed by métis nonreconnus meant that “it is thus useless and even dangerous to give them a European education, to open to them the rungs of French society. It is important, on the contrary, to keep them rigorously in the ranks of the native population.”\(^\text{132}\) The argument made by the author of the *Quinzaine Coloniale* article was uncommonly harsh. Most French writers, even those concerned about métis for one reason or another, believed that the French empire had both an opportunity and a duty with regards to

\(^{129}\) Hardy, *Une Conquête Morale*, 70.


\(^{132}\) Ibid.
métis education. The article’s ire was directed specifically towards métis reconnus. Many French observers believed that the root cause of métis déclassement was resentment against French society. Métis reconnus, by definition either legitimate or legally recognized by their fathers, were considered significantly less likely to harbor festering anti-French sentiments. Although métis reconnus did benefit from their legally defined status, they were nevertheless excluded from some facets of French society and subjected to bias on account of their mixed-race heritage. The long struggle by métis in A.O.F. to lay claim to French citizenship is an indication of the barriers even métis reconnus faced.

In a 1936 letter, the Governor of Senegal divided the colony’s métis population into four groups, ranked by degree of potential assimilation into French society. The Governor noted that between the four groups “the moral and social character of métis differs profoundly.” The classifications were hierarchical and carried serious implications for the “moral and social character” of the individuals. The baseline barometer used by the Governor was whether the métis in question were métis reconnus or métis nonreconnus. The first of the four groups was comprised of “recognized children, raised and educated in European families or having a European education and habits.” The second group, also made up of métis reconnus, included métis with European surnames who were raised and educated in public or private institutions but whose fathers “merely pay the maintenance fees to such institutions, no more.” Unlike the first two groups, the third category was comprised of métis nonreconnus who “often bear the family name of their indigenous mother” and attended educational institutions of some type but “whom

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134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid.
in reality are not being cared for by any parent.”¹³⁷ The fourth and final category consisted of métis who were totally unassimilated—perhaps even unexposed—to French culture and society. These children, all of whom were métis nonreconnus, “live with their mother or their indigenous relatives and in the same conditions as them.”¹³⁸ The two most important components of the Governor’s classification of métis children were whether or not they were legally recognized by their fathers and the degree to which they were assimilated into French society through education, lifestyle, or upbringing. The explicit moral judgements found throughout this categorization reveal the importance of the legal rights and social capital available to métis reconnus but denied to their unrecognized counterparts. The Governor expounded at length on the supposed qualities and aptitudes of each type of métis. In his descriptions of the first two groups, comprised entirely of métis reconnus, the Governor complimented the ability to master both French and African languages and listed several jobs for which such individuals were especially suited. The Governor suggested that métis reconnus “are sufficiently developed to provide, in general, very good elements for the administration, the army, agriculture, and local commerce. Both [groups of métis reconnus] speak and write French fluently, and most of them also know one or more indigenous dialects.”¹³⁹ This optimism was not extended to the third and fourth categories of métis, those made up of métis nonreconnus. Rather than extolling their potential, the Governor instead warned that “unfortunately one finds in these last two categories, the third in particular, a certain number of embittered individuals. Rightly perhaps, some individuals, with European aspirations, feel abandoned by their father and put responsibility for their misfortune on the entire white race.”¹⁴⁰ The Governor’s assessment of métis nonreconnus

¹³⁷ Ibid.
¹³⁸ Ibid.
¹³⁹ Ibid.
¹⁴⁰ Ibid.
was by no means unusual. Even colonial administrators who argued that métis could usefully serve France often viewed the issue through the lens of the “métis problem.”

The debate over whether or not métis children should be able to use their fathers’ French surnames offers a window into the barriers many métis faced assimilating into French society. This was a striking deviation from the practice of Dutch authorities in the Dutch East Indies. In 1939, the *Quinzaine Coloniale* published an extensive comparison of the Dutch approach to métis children in the Dutch East Indies with French policies in A.O.F. The Dutch administration “does not have to collect unrecognised children, not unrecognised children born to a white man and a white woman nor children born to mixed-race parents, nor any unrecognised child.”

However, Dutch colonial authorities nevertheless recognized a wide variety of people as “in effect Dutch in the eyes of the law.” This expansive group included: legitimate children or legally recognized children of Dutch men, illegitimate children of Dutch mothers, illegitimate children recognized by neither parent born in the Dutch East Indies, children of naturalized Dutch citizens of either sex or whose parents have lived at least eighteen months in a Dutch colony, and any abandoned child without proof of alternate nationality. The author noted that the admirable unifying theme of the Dutch approach to nationality was that “it embraces all the products of crossing the European race with others and Christians of any race.”

The examination of Dutch practices by the author of the *Quinzaine Coloniale* article quoted above was explicitly intended as a critique of the strict limitations on métis in place in French West Africa. Even métis children who were raised and educated from infancy in French West Africa.

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141 *La Quinzaine Coloniale*, Pour les métis en A.O.F., April-May 1939, ANS O685(31).
142 Ibid.
143 The expansive Dutch policy reported by the *La Quinzaine Coloniale* includes nearly all people living in the Dutch East Indies. However, the purpose of the *La Quinzaine Coloniale* article was to paint French policy in West Africa as uncharitable in comparison to the practices of other European powers.
144 *La Quinzaine Coloniale*, Pour les métis en A.O.F., April-May 1939, ANS O685(31).
institutions, baptized as Catholics, and christened with French first names were expected to use their mother’s family name to avoid any embarrassment to their father’s family in France. Barring métis children from using their fathers’ surnames also helped ensure they would not make claims on the property or estates of French men. In 1907, the Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Senegal and Niger wrote a letter asking the Governor-General of A.O.F. for his opinion on the use of French surnames by métis children under the care of the colonial administration. The Lieutenant-Governor noted that “the documents relating to the Educational Service reveal that frequently mixed-race children in our schools are listed under the surname of Europeans having visited or resided in the colony without any forthcoming authorization that the interested Europeans have consented to the use of their surname.” Furthermore, “in the wake of these errors, it has happened that an act of notoriety destined to make up for the lack of a birth certificate has attributed, in a form equivalent to that of the civil registry [the état civil], the name of a European who lived in the colony to a non-recognized métis.” For métis nonreconnus, neither legally recognized by their fathers nor inscribed on the état civil, to take French surnames was considered both presumptuous and inappropriate. The problem with métis nonreconnus using their fathers’ names was a question more of illegitimacy than race—it was perfectly acceptable for legitimate métis children to carry French surnames. However, the complex social implications of fathering a mixed-race child added weight to concerns about illegitimacy. The Lieutenant-Governor explicitly outlined this concern in his letter to the Governor General: “This practice may result, at least in public opinion, in a presumption of paternity that is perhaps inexact, and in any case not expressly desired by the owner of the name in question.” In 1917,

146 Ibid.
Georges Hardy concurred with the image of unrecognized métis children eager to lay claim to French surnames. In *A Moral Conquest: Education in French West Africa*, Hardy wrote that métis children “suffer from having a European first name coupled with an indigenous family name: Paul Sidibé, Émile Diallo, and they deploy a thousand tricks to display their father’s surname.”

Hardy’s assertion that métis children often tried to use their father’s name even when not legally recognized does appear to have some basis in fact. In 1911, a fourteen-year-old métis boy named Paul wrote a series of letters to Madame Pion-Roux. Pion-Roux was the headmistress of the orphanage for métis children in Ségou and Paul was one of her charges. In the letters, Paul consistently calls himself “Paul Gourard” and is clearly aware of at least some basic information about his paternity.

Gourard was the surname of his French father, whom Paul describes as a captain in the colonial infantry. However, Paul was evidently a métis nonreconnus—Pion-Roux unfailingly addresses him as “Paul Coulibaly”, obviously his mother’s surname. Indeed, the debate over the use of French surnames by métis children was directly linked to the struggle to legalize paternity suits unfolding in France.

In 1912, the French Senate legalized paternity suits in France for the first time in more than one hundred years. Although they had been legal for a brief period in the eighteenth century, the 1804 Napoleonic code banned paternity suits of all types. Despite explicitly outlawing paternity suits the code did allow “maternity suits”, which enabled children to sue their mothers for financial support. The 1912 law marked the end of decades of intense debate over whether or not paternity suits should be legal and, if so, who should be able to pursue them.

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147 « Ils souffrent d’avoir un prénom européen accouplé à un nom de famille indigène : Paul Sidibé, Émile Diallo, et déploient mille astuces pour arborer le nom de leur père. », Hardy, *Une Conquête Morale*, 73.
148 White, *Children of the French Empire*, 80.
149 Ibid.
150 The irony of this distinction was, presumably, lost on the Code’s authors. Eds. Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1998), 45.
In 1907, as debate over legalizing paternity suits was reaching fever pitch in France, the Lieutenant-Governor of Senegal wrote a letter to the Governor-General of A.O.F. expressing his concerns about proposed changes to Article 340 of the Civil Code, which dealt with judicial recognition of paternity. The Lieutenant-Governor noted that in June, 1879, the Court of Appeal had decreed that “natural descent cannot be proved without facts of civil status, it can result in serious difficulties for the families and even for the métis themselves who can see contested the name they carry in good faith.” Of particular concern was the prospect of women in the colonies naming French fathers in paternity suits on behalf of their mixed-race children.

The law marked an advance in women’s rights in some regards. However, an amendment added shortly before it passed clarified that the new paternity suits extended to the colonies only in cases where both parties were French citizens or the colony’s governor approved the suit of a foreigner or French subject. The vast majority of people in the colonies, including any indigenous women who might attempt to bring paternity suits against French men, were subjects rather than citizens. Although many colonial governors supported the law, all of those who opposed it were in Africa. Furthermore, the law included the onerous requirement—this time aimed at poor women in metropolitan France—that the woman bringing the suit produce written proof of her relationship with the man in question. This combination of restrictions made it functionally impossible for African women to use the legal system to hold absent French fathers accountable.

Despite the numerous hurdles in place to prevent colonial women from suing French men, changes to the legal code regarding paternity suits nevertheless generated considerable

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152 Eds. Clancy-Smith and Gouda, Domesticating the Empire, 53.
153 Pedersen, Legislating the French Family, 121.
concern among the colonial administration of A.O.F. Crucially, the 1912 law did not allow women who were not French citizens to pursue legal recognition of their child’s paternity without express permission from the governor of the colony. Debate over extending more accessible paternity suit rights to women in French colonies continued for several decades. In 1930, a new decree awarded the status of common law citizen to all métis children who had not yet reached the age of majority.\textsuperscript{154} As common law citizens, métis children suddenly became eligible to bring paternity suits against French men. One month later, the Lieutenant-Governor of Niger wrote a letter to the Governor-General of A.O.F. arguing that changes to the Civil Code regarding legal recognition of paternity were both unnecessary and unhelpful. The Lieutenant-Governor suggested that based on his experience “the situation of a child, born of a black woman and a European offers no particularities” and that “the majority of the blacks see with pleasure the marriage of their daughters to Europeans, and if such a union begins to dissolve, they are then further in demand for marriage amongst the natives.”\textsuperscript{155} Even unrecognized métis children, able to count on the support of their mother’s families or the colonial administration, were not in need of expanded access to paternity suits. Furthermore, the Lieutenant-Governor argued that if such suits were allowed in A.O.F. they would inevitably cause serious problems for all parties involved. Of particular concern was the specter of African women suing blameless Frenchmen in the hope of securing their finances. The Lieutenant-Governor included a hypothetical scenario to illustrate how grasping métis children and their mothers would misuse the legal system.

According to the Lieutenant-Governor, “the establishment of paternity will often be very difficult; many native customs permit married women to have a sort of official lover and this

\textsuperscript{154} White, Children of the French Empire, 148.
mentality can continue in a marriage with a European who cannot exercise anything except an illusory watch over the woman most of the time. Finally giving to black women or métis children the possibility of a legal inquiry into paternity could open the door wide to an abusive path … the woman will see nothing but an easy method to obtain numerous and abundant subsidies for her personal maintenance and secondarily for that of her offspring. The child will find the possibility of acquiring a name and a fortune.”\textsuperscript{156} As a result of this inevitable malfeasance, the Lieutenant-Governor concluded his critique of any proposed changes to laws surrounding paternity suits by emphatically stating that “for these different reasons, I consider a law authorizing the judicial recognition of paternity unenforceable, in the current state of affairs, in the colony of Upper Senegal and Niger except in the case of natural children born of a relationship between two Europeans.”\textsuperscript{157} This was hardly a concession, since children born in the colonies to unmarried European parents were already entitled to bring paternity suits under the 1912 law. The debate over extending paternity suits to colonial women exposed French fears that native women would pursue French men in court. This concern mirrored attempts to strictly manage the use of French surnames by métis nonreconnus and wider efforts to control the position of métis in colonial society.

The French fathers of métis children were for the most part absent physically, financially, and emotionally. The majority of métis children never met their fathers, who often moved back to France while their children were infants or even before they were born. The distinct division between métis reconnus and métis nonreconnus is indicative of wider attempts by the colonial administration to dictate the position of métis in Francophone society. The lengthy debate over whether or not métis nonreconnus should be allowed to use their fathers’ surnames offers further

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
insight into the limits placed on métis assimilation. The conclusion that permitting *métis nonreconnus* to use French surnames would prove “embarrassing” to French men and their families is particularly revealing. Evaluating the fathers of métis children is an important stepping stone to understanding métis lives in colonial A.O.F., despite the fact that such men typically played only tangential roles in the lives of their offspring. Nevertheless, the absent father was an important trope of French depictions of métis and a cornerstone of the sense of moral responsibility that led to the creation of schools and orphanages dedicated specifically to métis children. The mothers of métis children were also a crucial facet of the “métis problem” in French West Africa. The complexities of métis motherhood will be examined in the next chapter.
Chapter 4. Motherhood

“She is lazy, the native woman. She is incredibly lazy.”¹⁵⁸

Despite their centrality to both the lives of métis individuals and the so-called “métis problem”, the mothers of métis children are not well represented in the written record. Moreover, the depictions of African women provided by French sources (and even some later métis writers) are often uncharitable ones. The archival record does include some snippets of letters written by the mothers of métis children to school staff or colonial officials. However, even these rare female voices are filtered through the perceptions and arguments of French writers. Additionally, the letters authored by métis mothers that appear in the archival record are universally affirming of the colonial administration and its approach to dealing with métis children. It is deeply unlikely that all of the African women who entrusted their children to the French colonial state were completely satisfied with this arrangement. Furthermore, recurring depictions of African mothers as neglectful (or otherwise inadequate) were a staple of French justifications about the need for schools and orphanages dedicated to raising métis children. Criticism of African mothers was compounded by the intentional introduction of new surrogate mothers in the form of French teachers and headmistresses. As will be examined in detail in this chapter, French colonial sources include a variety of hints about the simmering tensions between the mothers of métis children and colonial schools and officials. In addition to delving into these issues, this chapter will examine the agency of African women involved in interracial relationships and the implications mothering a métis children could have on a woman’s position in her own society.

¹⁵⁸ « … elle est indolente la femme indigène, elle est incroyable indolente. », Nécessité d’Eduquer la Femme Indigène, 1937, ANS O212(31).
The first interracial relationships in West Africa developed in Senegal as early as the fifteenth century between newly arrived Portuguese merchants and African women. Indeed, the French term *signare*, commonly used to describe African women who had successive relationships with more than one European man, is a mutation of the Portuguese *senhora*. *Signares*, who by the late nineteenth century were often but not always mixed-race, tended to be prominent women in their communities and could gain significant economic and social prestige from their connections to European society. European men in such relationships benefited from access to local trading networks and communities and were able to more quickly master local languages. Despite some early attempts by French companies to ban the practice, French traders in West Africa quickly began to enter into temporary relationships with African women, called *mariages à la mode du pays*. By the late eighteenth century *mariages à la mode du pays* had developed a standard form. Such relationships bound participants together with mutual obligations (financial, emotional, and so on) and usually included a public ceremony in a form acceptable to the indigenous community. In many cases, the man agreed to pay the bride’s family either a one-time or monthly bride price. Indeed, French observers often used the monthly bride price as evidence of African approval of the practice, since the short-term payments implied recognition that the relationship could come to an abrupt end. At this early stage, any children that resulted from such relationships were typically given their father’s surname.

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163 Ibid.
When Victor Verneuil, a young French naval officer, arrived in Saint Louis in the 1840s he had a series of enlightening encounters with Senegalese women. Verneuil’s account of his time in A.O.F., Mes Aventures Au Sénégal: Souvenirs de Voyage was published in 1858 and reveals that practically all of his contemporaries engaged in mariages à la mode du pays. On his first evening in town, one old woman greeted him and “wished [him] a pretty woman during [his] stay in Saint Louis.”\textsuperscript{164} Several days later Verneuil encountered an elderly signare who had been married to the twelve previous men in his post—and who expected to marry him in turn. The signare was surprised to discover that Verneuil’s predecessor had failed to inform him that he was expected to enter into a mari-age à la mode du pays with her. Verneuil and the signare then had the following exchange. Verneuil asked the signare, “Please explain more clearly, what do you mean you are the wife of my position, and why do I have to marry you?”\textsuperscript{165} The signare replied “You have to marry me, because for thirty-five years I have been the wife of all your predecessors. Twelve have come already, each leaving me with at least one child.”\textsuperscript{166} Relationships between signares and European men gave rise to many of French West Africa’s prominent métis families, particularly in parts of coastal Senegal such as Saint Louis and Gorée. However, the practice of métis children taking their father’s surnames declined steadily over the course of the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, métis children were overwhelmingly not legally recognized and appear in French records under their mothers’ African surnames.

Views on mari-age à la mode du pays in West African communities varied widely according to several factors. One of the most important was the relative strength of French

\textsuperscript{164} Verneuil, Victor, Mes aventures au Sénégal: souvenirs de voyage, (Paris: Jacottet, 1858), 14.
\textsuperscript{165} Verneuil, Mes aventures au Sénégal, 25.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
control over the region. In 1910, the Société Antiesclavagiste issued a survey intended to illuminate the practice of *marriage à la mode du pays* in French West Africa. The survey consisted of several questions sent to colonial administrators around West Africa. Respondents from Côte d’Ivoire noted that the majority of the Gouros in the region were strictly opposed to *marriage à la mode du pays* but would consent to such arrangements under French pressure.\(^\text{167}\)

In Upper Senegal and Niger, where resistance to French rule was often intense, the colonial administration resorted to taking women as sexual partners by force—a practice that continued well into the 1930s.\(^\text{168}\) Other key factors were the disparate marriage practices in place between regions and ethnic cultures and different approaches to the notion of illegitimacy. The repercussions for African woman who engaged in *mariages à la mode du pays* could be severe. In many regions, particularly those where Islam was strongest, a woman could be barred from remarrying a man of her own culture after a *mésalliance* with a white man.\(^\text{169}\) In other areas, women were allowed to remarry provided they had not given birth to a métis child.\(^\text{170}\) André Thiellement’s *Azawar*, published in 1949, includes a fascinating account of an attempt by Thiellement’s wife to induce a miscarriage. One day, Thiellement and Mariama, his Tuareg wife in a *mariage à la mode du pays*, were travelling by camel with their retinue when Mariama suddenly fell to the ground. Although she was not harmed, Thiellement ordered the convoy to stop for the night. The next morning, Mariama refused to eat or drink anything and later sent one of her attendants to inform Thiellement that she was ill and wished to return to her parents’ village, which was nearby. Realizing that Mariama was actually pregnant, and that her fall from

\(^{167}\) White, *Children of the French Empire*, 21.  
\(^{168}\) Ibid.  
\(^{169}\) A *mésalliance* is an unsuitable marriage, the term carries both legal and social implications. White, *Children of the French Empire*, 21.  
\(^{170}\) Ibid.
the camel was an attempt to force a miscarriage, Thiellement asked another Tuareg travelling with his retinue why Mariama tried to abort the pregnancy. Initially disconcerted by his frank question, the man replied “Ah! You have understood, Koumanda [commander], you know well the way of the people of the bush. You know well, the women of Azawar, if they have a child by a Frenchman, they can never remarry with a man of their country.” Mariama’s relationship with Thiellement therefore constricted her choice of partner from her own culture. However, some African women were able to remarry after a mariage à la mode du pays, even one that resulted in children.

In *Children of the French Empire*, Owen White tracks the lives of three métis siblings born at the turn of the twentieth century: Pierre, Èmile, and Germaine Kamara. The children’s parents were Makoura Kamara, a Bambara woman, and Monsieur Delassus, a colonial doctor. Delassus never recognized any of his métis offspring and later rejoined his wife and children in France. As was common practice, Delassus remained legally married to his French wife throughout his time in West Africa and his mariage à la mode du pays with Makoura Kamara. After Delassus’s departure, the children’s mother sent them to the métis orphanage in Ségou, French Soudan, and remarried to a Bambara man. This is significant because in many parts of West Africa women who engaged in relationships with European men, particularly those with métis children, were unable to remarry within their own culture. Social stigma within African

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171 « Soudainement, avec un cri, Mariama est tombée de son chameau… Elle se relève sans trop de mal apparent, mais je décide pour plus de sûreté de passer la nuit là… Le lendemain, Mariama reste couchée et refuse le lait qu’on lui apporte … Au soir, la femme d’un goumier vient me dire : Mariama est malade, elle demande la permission de se faire soigner chez ses parents à elle, dont le campement n’est pas loin d’ici… C’est évident ! Mariama a voulu se débarrasser du fait de son ventre … Dis-moi pourquoi Mariama s’est avortée ? La question un peu brutale désarçonne un moment le vieux renard, mais il se reprend vite : Ah ! Tu as compris, Koumanda, tu connais bien la manière des gens de brousse. Tu sais bien, les femmes de l’Azawar, si elles gagnent un petit d’un Français, elles ne peuvent pas plus se remarier après avec un homme de leur pays. » Thiellement, *Azawar*, 57.
172 White, *Children of the French Empire*, 166.
173 Ibid.
174 Ibid.
communities could force constrain women to serial relationships with European men. The Kamara siblings were among the first generation of métis children to come of age after the creation of the colonial education system. Pierre, the oldest of the three children, was born in 1897 or 1898 followed by Èmile in 1900 and Germaine in 1902. White notes that one of the teachers at the orphanage in Ségou commented on Èmile’s unusually light skin color and failure to achieve academically. Although the teacher did not explicitly link skin color to expectations about scholastic performance, the connection of these two apparently unrelated observations about Èmile is suggestive of the teacher’s ingrained ideas about racial attributes and intelligence. Unlike his younger brother, Pierre proved a model student and in many ways embodied the hopes colonial administrators had for métis children. After excelling at the orphanage in Ségou, Pierre advanced to the local école régionale [regional school] and then to the école normale William Ponty in Dakar. He went on to become a teacher at the École Professionelle de Bamako, a prestigious appointment. Although the mother of the Kamara children was able to remarry a man of her ethnic group, she appears to have been able to do so only after entrusting her three métis children permanently to the colonial administration. This suggests that even in societies where women formerly engaged in mariages à la mode du pays were able to remarry within their community, some degree of stigma remained attached to métis motherhood.

The agency of women who entered into mariages à la mode du pays varied tremendously. Some, such as the old woman who propositioned Victor Verneuil, chose such relationships in expectation of social and financial gain. However, mariages à la mode du pays could also take on a more coercive form more similar to prostitution than a consensual

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175 Ibid.
176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
relationship. André Thiellement’s choice of three women presented by a Tuareg chief provides an example of how native women could lack agency with regards to interracial relationships. At least one of the women, Tarhedeyt, clearly did not choose to be with Thiellement of her own free will. As was perhaps the case with the presentation of Tarhedeyt, a relationship with a European man could have significant benefits for the family of the woman. In one particularly striking example from French Equatorial Africa, a young girl from Gabon was “gifted” to a French man in exchange for 500 francs, a dog, some sacks of rice and sugar, a crate of wine, and an umbrella. 

African women who entered into relationships of any duration with European men, including those of mixed-race, were often stereotyped as prostitutes. Between 1860 and 1914 the label “prostitute” was functionally synonymous with terms used to describe women in interracial relationships in Libreville, the capital of Gabon. Although doubtless exaggerated, the link between women in interracial relationships and prostitution does appear to have had some basis in fact. The 1910 survey conducted by the Société Antiesclavagiste with the assistance of colonial authorities showed that many of the women in mariages à la mode du pays entered into prostitution after the departure of their partner. The survey was sent to local administrators across A.O.F. and contained two questions. The first question was whether temporary marriages with “outsiders” (non-Africans or Africans from outside West African cultures) were socially and culturally permissible in native communities. The second asked for additional information detailing the circumstances under which marriages between African women and “outsiders” were permitted by communities and their consequences for the parties involved.

178 White, *Children of the French Empire*, 22.
180 Ibid.
181 Ibid.
questionnaire also included sections devoted to the “criminality” and “sexual morality” of métis, a focus that reveals the preoccupations of the survey’s French authors.  

As late as the mid-twentieth century, some métis authors expressed concern about the sexual reputation and moral well-being of the mothers of métis children. In her examination of female sexuality and métis identity in West Africa during the last decades of French rule, Rachel Jean-Baptiste argues that “Francophone African and French societies both represented African women who had interracial sex, and their children, as degenerate.” In the issues of L’Eurafricain, the official magazine of the International Union of Mixed-Race Persons published between 1945 and 1960, Jean-Baptiste finds two frequent characterizations of sexually respectable African women. These tropes reveal a determination on the part of métis groups to defend both the black mothers of mixed-race children and mixed-race women as sexually honorable. Jean-Baptiste labels the tropes of African women found in the magazine la maman noire [the black mother] and la jeune fille métisse [the young mixed-race girl]. La maman noire was a self-sacrificing figure who, after being impregnated and abandoned by a white man, devoted herself to raising her métis children. This portrayal is a sharp deviation from French stereotypes about the indifference or ineptitude of even well-meaning African mothers—an important component of claims that French institutions would take better care of métis children than their maternal families.

The second trope, la jeune fille métisse, focused on mixed-race women. According to the writers of L’Eurafricain, young mixed-race girls were highly vulnerable to a life of prostitution or

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183 Ibid.
185 Jean-Baptiste, “Miss Eurafrica”, 573.
serial short-term relationships with white men. Fortunately, this fate could be averted by marriage to a métis man. The stereotype of *la jeune fille métisse* that appears in *L’Eurafrican* mirrors French preoccupations about métis girls. The archival record is rife with the concerns of French administrators that without the proper (European) upbringing and education métis girls would inevitably fall into prostitution. Moreover, teaching métis girls to be proper wives was an integral part of the 1937 education plan for mixed-race children and a founding mission of the schools for girls created across West Africa. Concern about the sexual respectability of métis women and girls was not limited to West Africa. In French Indochina, for instance, one colonial official claimed (without providing any evidence) that some mothers sold their mixed-race daughters into prostitution when they reached puberty. In fact, the French men in many *mariages à la mode du pays* did pay either a one-time or recurring bride price to the woman’s family. This practice could create a financial incentive to enter daughters into relationships with European men. In the face of social stigma, and the overwhelming odds that the child’s father would fail to legally recognize their child or provide any financial support, African mothers were often reduced to both material poverty and diminished social respectability.

The institutions established for métis children were called “orphanages” and French writers often referred to métis children as orphaned. In reality, many métis children in A.O.F. had surviving fathers in France or elsewhere and the majority lived with their mothers before entering French schools. Furthermore, many of the orphanages and boarding schools for métis children required monthly attendance fees, which were usually paid by the child’s maternal family. Although the fee could be waived for poor or truly abandoned children, the expectation

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186 Ibid.
187 Ibid.
188 Saada, *Empire’s Children*, 45.
that children would be supported at least to some extent by family members highlights the incongruity of using the word “orphan” to describe métis children. The headmaster of the métis orphanage in Bingerville noted that although most children were brought to the school by colonial officials, a significant number were enrolled by their mothers.\textsuperscript{189} Similarly, the 1938 report on the orphanage of Zinder included brief backgrounds of five children, all of whom had previously lived with their mothers. Many French observers openly disapproved of African women raising métis children. The standard at which the colonial administration could remove métis children from their families was often summarized as “moral and material abandonment.”\textsuperscript{190} In practice this guideline proved highly flexible and allowed officials to enroll in colonial institutions virtually any métis child living with African family members.

It is clear that French officials and observers believed that métis children were better off in the federation’s schools and orphanages than with their African mothers. A 1939 issue of the \textit{Quinzaine Coloniale} invited the reader to envision the plight of métis children left to live with their maternal relatives. According to the \textit{Quinzaine Coloniale} “solitude, isolation, nostalgia are the accomplices of desire: the children born in village homes, in the huts of the bush and find food and shelter, sometimes even tenderness, as long as the [French] man is present. But the hour sounds of impatiently awaited notice, changing of post, of departing to other places and the child remains in the care of the mother who, not able to give him what he needs, abandons him. He becomes an orphan given up to his own care, the toy of fate, of inescapable destiny, he is a miserable person without resources, without hope and who will succumb to the unequal battle if the local administration does not receive him and assure his upkeep and his education.”\textsuperscript{191}

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\textsuperscript{189} White, \textit{Children of the French Empire}, 55.  \\
\textsuperscript{190} White, \textit{Children of the French Empire}, 56.  \\
\textsuperscript{191} \textit{La Quinzaine Coloniale}, Pour les métis en A.O.F., April-May 1939, ANS O685(31).
\end{flushleft}
observers consistently disparaged and questioned the ability of African women to appropriately raise métis children. The portrayal of African mothers as lacking was deployed to justify French colonial efforts on the behalf of métis children, as well as the practice of admitting children with living relatives to institutions ostensibly intended for orphans.

While stories of neglectful or absent mothers of métis children abound, it is also clear that even attentive mothers were often considered inadequate. A 1913 edition of the *Quinzaine Coloniale* laid out the danger of leaving métis children to the supervision of their mothers. The author argued that “in the case of girls, special supervision must be exercised and in the case of immorality of the native mother, a prompt intervention is necessary.” Even more than twenty years later such views had evidently not abated. In 1937 Madame Gugliemi, the headmistress of the orphanage for métis girls in Kankan, Guinea, told a school inspector that “returning from vacation, [the girls] are in need of being bathed, groomed, and fed because in the environments of their mothers—they do not always find the care they require.” Furthermore, all of the children at the orphanage took a weekly dose of the antimalarial drug quinine, a medical regime that was inevitably interrupted by school holidays. The intellectual task of French schools was considered outside the bounds of care that African mothers were equipped to provide. The headmistress of a girl’s school in Senegal wrote that a French education would “destroy the superstitions rooted strongly in their race, especially in women, and lead them to think about the serious questions of life that their mothers themselves have never thought of.” Moreover, another headmistress noted that “these are not abandoned children for the most part, but children

192 *La Quinzaine Coloniale*, 25 Janvier, 1913 ANS O715(31).
194 Ibid.
195 Ecole normale de filles de Rufisque, Formation des élèves sages-femmes, ANS O212(31).
who were entrusted to us. Their mothers come see them at the orphanage and do not forget them.”

French observers were well aware of the incongruity of labelling métis children as orphans. In a 1929 report on his travels in West Africa, the journalist Albert Londres noted that métis children “constitute the strangest category of orphans: orphans with a mother and a father.” In the late 1930s many of the orphanages in A.O.F. finally began to adopt the more neutral title foyer, meaning home or residence hall. When the large residential school for métis children in Dakar was created under the 1938 educational plan it was named the foyer de métis rather than orphelinat de métis, as had been the standard practice in previous decades.

The impetus to separate métis children from their mothers by installing them safely in boarding schools reveals the extent to which colonial officials believed African women could derail the benefits of French education. The desire to firmly cement métis children in colonial society manifested in explicit attempts to replace the African mother with a new, more appropriate French mother. The headmistresses of métis schools and orphanages were encouraged to serve as surrogate mothers for their charges, an effort that was underlined by policies discouraging children from returning home to their African families during school holidays. In 1937, Germaine le Goff, headmistress of the influential school for girls in Rufisque, confidently asserted that “an adoptive mother always has a superiority over a true mother; the ability to choose the child she is going to adopt.”

Interestingly, the notion of selecting children for French schools based on various merits extolled by le Goff seems to conflict with French arguments about the transformative power of European education.

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197 Terre d’élèbe, Albert Londres, in White, Children of the French Empire, 60.
198 Ecole normale de filles de Rufisque, Formation des élèves sages-femmes, 1937, ANS O212(31).
The reports of school inspectors confirm the expectation that French teachers and headmistresses would consciously take on the role of surrogate mother. The 1937 inspection of the métis orphanage in Kankan included a glowing review of the school’s headmistress, Madame Guglienli. The inspector wrote that “M. Guglienli … is very dedicated to the establishment entrusted to her. She is, for these girls, an attentive mother, gentle and firm, anxious about the physical health as well as the moral health of her children. The good condition of the girls and their success on leaving the school is due to her intelligent care.”

Several decades earlier, in 1912, French politician Auguste Terrier received a collection of letters written by the children of the Orphelinat de Ségou to the school’s headmistress, Madame Pion-Roux. Pion-Roux explained to Terrier that she “endeavored with these poor children to replace the father who forgot them and the mother who could not and did not want to take care of them.” Indeed, the children’s letters to Pion-Roux include an assortment of endearments that suggest she encouraged them to view her as a surrogate mother. A number addressed her as “my dear second mother” and concluded with “your beloved son” or “your beloved daughter.” Madame le Goff, Madame Guglienli, and Madame Pion-Roux were the headmistresses of schools in three different colonies and yet all three explicitly positioned themselves as the surrogate mothers of the children under their care. French portrayals of African women as unfit or uncaring mothers were thus underlined throughout the institutions of A.O.F. by the deliberate introduction of superior French maternal figures.

200 The letter of Paul Coulibaly, mentioned in the previous chapter, was one of these. White, Children of the French Empire, 82.
201 Institut de France 5928 vol. 2, in White, Children of the French Empire, 82.
202 Ibid.
In 1937, Madame Guglienli, the headmistress of the métis orphanage in Kankan lamented that although it would be best if all the children remained at the school throughout the year it was difficult to prevent them from returning to their African families. Madame Guglienli asked the reader to consider whether or not it was “possible to refuse to allow these children to go home, while the mother asks for them and while local administrators give favorable reports on the mother?”\textsuperscript{203} Indeed—despite Madame Guglienli’s disapproving opinion of the mothers of her pupils—the girls of the orphanage in Kankan whose mothers lived nearby were allowed to visit them on the first Sunday of every month.\textsuperscript{204} Madame Guglienli’s critiques of the mothers of métis children were echoed by numerous other administrators and officials. In 1947, the Governor of Dahomey questioned the utility of the French empire pouring money and time into raising and educating métis children who returned to their African families at every opportunity.\textsuperscript{205} Despite attempts by French officials to restrict contact between métis children and their African families, some mothers went to extraordinary lengths to see their children. The mothers of two children at the métis orphanage in Ségou travelled all the way from Tombouctou for a visit—a roundtrip of nearly one thousand miles.\textsuperscript{206} This is hardly the behavior of mothers happy to be relieved of the burden of caring for their children.

The mothers of métis children navigated complex social forces both in their own communities and in their dealings with the French colonial apparatus. French depictions of African mothers as morally and materially lacking coincided with efforts to install French women as the new surrogate mothers of the métis children under their care. The agency of

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\textsuperscript{203} Rapport d’Inspection Orphelinat des Métis de Kankan Visite de 10 Mai 1937, Directrice: Mme Gugliemi, Institutrice Ordinaire Apres 18 Mois du Cadre Supérieur, ANS O685(31).
\textsuperscript{204} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{206} White, \textit{Children of the French Empire}, 59.
\end{flushright}
African woman in interracial relationships, ranging from prostitution to long-term *mariages à la mode du pays*, could vary tremendously. Furthermore, although some women were able to remarry after the departure of their French partners others could not. The experience of the mothers of métis children therefore varied widely by region and culture. Despite French attempts to paint African mothers as negligent, the archival record suggests that many women remained in touch with their métis children across vast distances and years of separation. The experiences of African women are difficult to access directly in the written record. Nevertheless, the mothers of métis children played a key role both in the lives of métis individuals and in wider debates about the métis problem in A.O.F.
Chapter 5. Métis lives

“These half-breeds, far from inheriting the good qualities of their parents, acquire only the vices of the two races.”

This chapter will deal directly with the lived experiences of métis people in colonial French West Africa. The archival record contains a wealth of information about life in métis schools and orphanages, as well as the types of jobs and sociocultural positions occupied by métis adults (not all of whom attended French schools). One of the defining features of the métis question during the French Third Republic was the issue of métis citizenship. The métis organizations and associations that formed in the twentieth century delved into various issues of métis life, including recommendations for and responses to colonial policy. The arguments of métis groups and authors laying claim to French citizenship, either on a case-to-case basis or as a wider social class, provide a valuable insight into the ways in which métis individuals interacted with and navigated French colonial society.

Rising at seven a.m. each morning, the boys of the Orphelinat des Métis in Bingerville, Côte d’Ivoire, dressed in khaki pants and a cotton shirt and spent several hours working the school grounds. Their female counterparts likewise woke at seven a.m., donned their cotton dresses and blue berets, and passed the early morning learning various household skills. At one p.m., the children sat down to lunch for a main course of either rice, cassava, corn, potatoes or bananas along with a complement of fish, or perhaps beef on some special occasions. The

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209 Ibid.
210 Ibid.
bulk of the day was taken up by lessons, with a special focus on French language learning, followed by a brief period of recreation, dinner, and bed. Created in 1910, the métis orphanage in Bingerville offers a unique insight into the highly structured daily lives administrators envisioned for the children living in numerous schools and orphanages throughout A.O.F. The school’s meticulous founding document lays out a precise plan of its intended educational mission and routine. Only métis boys and girls younger than fifteen and found to be free of contagious diseases would be admitted. Furthermore, children of either sex could be summarily expelled for bad behavior at the headmaster’s discretion. The school offered eight fully funded places each year for children who colonial administrators determined were either totally abandoned or whose maternal families were unable to pay the standard fee of twenty-five francs per month. Children entered the Orphelinat des Métis at age five and remained enrolled there until age fifteen, after which they would either begin work or enter one of the vocational programs or federal secondary schools. Some of the best male students might to advance to William Ponty, the prestigious école normale in Dakar. The founding statements, school inspections, teacher reports, and other documents surrounding the métis schools and orphanages of French West Africa provide an invaluable insight into the experiences of métis children. School uniforms, admission requirements, fees and scholarships, meal plans, schedules, and curricula for various ages and abilities are all carefully laid out. For instance, each boy at the Bingerville Orphelinat des Métis would be provided with two pairs of khaki pants, a hat, and three cotton shirts. The girl’s uniform included three dresses, two cotton shirts, and a blue beret. Children of both

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211 The Lieutenant-Gouverneur of Côte d’Ivoire tentatively set the number of fully funded places at eight a year, since the cost of paying for such students fell on the colonial administration which was short of funds. Ibid.

212 Ibid.

213 Ibid.
genders also received six tea towels, a mattress and blanket, and one full set of dinner utensils.\textsuperscript{214} In a report to the Governor General in 1936, one administrator suggested that each home or boarding school for métis children “be installed as comfortably, as attractively as possible, each with its garden, its orchard, its little estate.”\textsuperscript{215} Although the school inspections suggest the reality of life in métis orphanages often fell short of administrators’ lofty aspirations, the detailed plans for such institutions offer a wealth of information about their intentions.

Despite the structured curriculum laid about by administrators, the reports of school inspectors paint a picture of a rather haphazard education. In 1937, one inspector included a scathing review of the French language instruction at the Orphelinat des Métisses de Bamako. The inspection wrote that “there is a total lack of method in the teaching of French”, and further complained that “the French lessons (vocabulary, reading, spelling) are never plain lessons in French but disguised lessons in other things, science, history, geography, housekeeping, childcare, etc…”\textsuperscript{216} Despite his critiques, the inspector conceded that “there are, however, very good students here … most of whom will be able to receive their Certificat d’Etudes.”\textsuperscript{217} Although the inspector of the Orphelinat de Métisses thought the school’s curriculum there was too lax, other administrators disagreed about the type of education métis children should receive. Germaine le Goff suggested that African pupils (including métis) should be exposed only to information that was directly relevant for the roles administrators envisioned for them. Le Goff argued that “for us to be their only initiators into knowledge of the French language they should

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{215} The Certificat d’Etudes was a diploma awarded upon completion of French primary school education. The diploma indicated knowledge of basic knowledge of writing, reading, mathematics, history, geography, and science. Rapport pour Monsieur le Gouverneur General de l’A.O.F., 17 November 1936, ANS O715(31).
\textsuperscript{216} Inspection de l’École, Orphelinat des Métisses de Bamako, Visite les 16 et 17 Novembre (M. Cros), 1937, ANS O685(31).
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid.
not have at school books written for Frenchmen.”\textsuperscript{218} Instead, the children should learn from “a book made for them, a book that will support our lessons...”\textsuperscript{219} Le Goff and the school inspector were both writing in 1937, in neighboring colonies. Their conflicting views about the teaching of French in institutions for métis children are indicative of wider debates about the degree to which métis should be allowed and encouraged to assimilate into French society.

Letters written by métis children provide a poignant glimpse into their lives in French schools and orphanages. The letters from Paul Coulibaly to Madame Pion-Roux, the headmistress of the orphanage in Ségou, have already been examined in an earlier chapter. However, Paul was not the only resident of the orphanage to correspond with Pion-Roux over the course of 1911. The letters of some of Paul’s classmates were also passed on to a French government minister and have been preserved as a result. Like Paul Coulibaly, the other children at the orphanage had French first names and African surnames. Réné Ahmoudou, age fourteen, updated Madame Pion-Roux on the baptisms of various students. Réné’s letter explicitly reveals a heavy Catholic presence in the orphanages of the colonial administration. The secular education system was created in 1903 with the specific intent of replacing Islamic instruction and private Catholic institutions. However, even the secular colonial schools included a heavy dose of Catholicism as part of their overall program of Gallicization. The children of the métis orphanage in Ségou evidently attended mass every week. Réné informed Pion-Roux that “there are many métis who are baptized and they [presumably Catholic clergy] gave us our baptism certificate. They gave us our first communion also. Every Sunday we go to mass. Paul Diarra, Paul Kourouma, and Étienne want to be baptized, they have already passed the exam.”\textsuperscript{220}

\textsuperscript{218} Ecole normale de filles de Rufisque, Formation des élèves sages-femmes, ANS O212(31).
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{220} White, \textit{Children of the French Empire}, 80.
Twelve-year-old Paul Kourama (likely the same friend mentioned by Réné) also wrote about his baptism and noted that Étienne was baptized Joseph while both he and another Paul were baptized Pierre.²²¹ Paul Kourama was evidently an unusually promising student, his letter also indicates that he was being groomed for a medical career and encouraged to work hard to secure a place at one of the federal schools in Dakar. On the subject of his new medical lessons, Paul wrote that “they are teaching me to do many things at the dispensary. Every morning if I go to the dispensary I take an exercise book with me to make note of all they teach me. Dr. Moreau is now giving me lessons in medicine because before I only knew how to do dressings.”²²² Paul Kourama’s letter demonstrates that métis boys were actively shepherded towards certain career paths, just as recommended by numerous colonial administrators. The letters of Paul Kourama, Paul Coulibaly, and their classmates at the orphanage in Ségou are helpful because they were written by métis children rather than French observers. Even when the voices of métis children are available, they are almost always filtered through French authors such as teachers or school inspectors.

The autobiography of Aoua Kéita offers a rare female voice in colonial French West Africa. Furthermore, Kéita’s autobiography touches on the Bamako Orphelinat des Métisses, one of the largest and most influential institutions for métis children in all of West Africa. Published in 1975, *Femme d’Afrique: La vie d’Aoua Kéita raconté par elle-même* follows Kéita from her birth in 1912 in Bamako, French Soudan, through her career as a student, midwife, politician, and staunch advocate for Malian independence.²²³ Kéita’s father, Karamogo Kéita, fought with the French army in World War I and worked as a member of the colonial hygiene service.²²⁴ Her

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²²¹ Ibid.
²²² Ibid.
mother, Mariam Coulibaly, was from Côte d’Ivoire. Perhaps as a result of his connection with
the colonial administration, Keita’s father managed to secure her a place as a day pupil at the
Orphelinat des Métisses. Although Kéita was neither métis nor the mother of métis children, she
was one of the few black African children allowed to attend classes at the Orphelinat des
Métisses in Bamako.225 As was examined in an earlier chapter, colonial administrators explicitly
sought to separate métis children from other pupils and stipulated that non-métis children from
the surrounding region should be admitted to the school only if all available places could not be
filled by children of mixed-race. Kéita’s recollections of her time as a student at the Orphelinat
include a number of interesting observations about both her French teachers and her métis
classmates. Initially, Kéita was refused admission to the school. When she arrived with her father
for an interview, the French teacher “expressed some reservations about my enrollment because
of the spots on my arms and legs.”226 The archival record supports the notion that children could
be refused from French educational institutions for health reasons. The founding document of the
large Orphelinat des Métis de Bingerville ordered that no children suspected of suffering from
contagious diseases be admitted.227

Kéita’s autobiography also includes a number of observations about her métis classmates.
Kéita notes that the métis girls in her class generally had “four or five years of study more than
us [the black students].”228 This is understandable, since métis children often entered French
orphanages very young and were generally exposed to a more expansive curriculum than was
available in the village schools open to the general population. The métis girls of the Orphelinat

226 Kéita uses both “bouton” and “lésion” to describe the marks on her skin. Ibid.
227 N°519 – ARRETE portant création d’un orphelinat de Métis, Le Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Côte d’Ivoire,
228 Kéita, Femme d’Afrique, 25.
des Métisses—at least as portrayed by Kéita—had apparently been inculcated with a clear sense of their own superiority. The dim view the métis girls took of their black classmates manifested most directly in a series of threats aimed at preventing Kéita from securing a position as the first ranked student in the class. Kéita wrote that “[she] was scared stiff of these girls who always threatened [her]. Several times, they drew [her] to a corner to tell [her] ‘If you ever are classed first here, we’ll break your ribs.’”229 Despite a rough beginning, Kéita later became close friends with several of the métis girls in her class. French observers and administrators openly viewed métis as morally, physically, and intellectually superior to other Africans. This attitude evidently did not pass unnoticed by the children in métis schools and orphanages. In his letters to the headmistress of the Orphelinat des Métis in Ségou, young Paul Coulibaly repeatedly refers to black Africans as “les indigènes”—the natives.230 *Indigène*, the French word used to describe all non-métis Africans, carried a distinctly pejorative connotation. Paul’s condescending attitude towards *les indigènes*, apparently shared by the girls of the Orphelinat des Métisses and likely many métis children across A.O.F., was doubtless encouraged by his French guardians.231

The Orphelinat des Métisses in Bamako acquired a reputation for academic excellence based principally on its strong record of sending students on to the federal schools in Dakar. Indeed, in the mid 1920s, after receiving her certificate of primary studies from the Orphelinat, Kéita was admitted to the prestigious Ecole de médecine de Dakar.232 *Femme d’Afrique* provides a valuable counterpoint to French sources about life in colonial A.O.F. Kéita’s autobiography and official French records often offer different perspectives on the same practice. For instance,

230 Both Aoua Kéita and Paul Coulibaly lived in the colony of French Soudan and Paul’s letters were written in 1911, one year before Kéita’s birth.
231 White, *Children of the French Empire*, 83.
both colonial documents and Kéita mention health exams as a prerequisite for admission to French schools.

Myriad French sources confidently asserted that métis children were better off with their father’s compatriots than with their mothers or in African communities. However, a 1950 article by a métis author in *L’Eurafricain* revealed the understandable emotional pain of young métis children separated from their mothers. The author wrote that “Here then is our young presumed Durand or Dupont in an establishment baptized ‘orphanage’… It would have been better to leave him to the loving affection of his mother, where, if he would not have acquired a perfect education, something which is no less lacking in these government homes, he would all the same have benefited from the maternal tenderness which, whatever anyone says, has a great influence on children. Numerous examples demonstrate it: at times a bitter melancholy, a deep spiritual sadness spontaneously overcomes them.” In 1937, the Lieutenant-Governor of French Soudan also commented on the difficulty of separating métis from their families. However, his suggestion was not to allow métis children to remain with their mothers but to enroll them in French institutions at the youngest age possible. In a letter to the Governor General of A.O.F., the Lieutenant-Governor contended that “in the current state of affairs we leave métis children with their families far too long. Experience shows that, in fact, very often from the moment they leave that this hinders their development and makes them long resist even the most attentive care.” The Lieutenant-Governor also complained that “the current organization does not arm us sufficiently against métis who have learning difficulties [attardé] or suffer from incurable diseases. Despite the annoyances their presence causes in a boarding school, the dangers that

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they sometimes cause for their classmates, we are obliged, by simple humanity, to keep them in the orphanages.”

Here the Lieutenant-Governor suggests that even métis children who offer no possible benefit to the colonial administration, and who are in fact a burden to care for, must nevertheless be taken from their families and placed in French institutions.

The idea that institutions for métis children would adequately replace African families was widespread among French administrations. In addition to positioning French women as surrogate mothers, officials also recommended that school administrators try to create a sense of community among students. In 1937, one school inspector visiting the Orphelinat des Métisses in Bamako asserted that “life at the institution must become effectively for these young orphans a family life.”

Some métis authors supported the establishment of institutions dedicated to bringing up métis children and exhorted the French state to take an active role in guiding métis lives. In April of 1937, a letter to the French Minister for the colonies by “a group of métis” laid out several “very humble grievances” with the situation of métis in West Africa. The letter asked that all métis children be “from birth, stated on the état civil with first names and French surnames (whatever it is: Bois, Table, Bane, Etoffe Terre, Fleuve, etc… etc…) even if they are not recognized by their father.” The authors further requested that métis children be entered into “establishments special to them” beginning at age two. This suggestion mirrors the recommendations of numerous colonial administrators, who often advocated enrolling métis children in French-run institutions as early as possible. Within the institutions themselves, the group appealed to the Minister to “give as far as possible to the young métis, European clothing,

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235 Ibid.
236 Inspection de l’École, Orphelinat des Métisses de Bamako, Visite les 16 et 17 Novembre (M. Cros), 1937, ANS O685(31).
237 Bamako, le 15 Avril, A Monsieur le Minister, 1937, ANS O685(31).
238 Ibid.
239 Ibid.
a purely French instruction and education.” The letter also critiqued the situation of educated métis, who, despite marrying other métis, working for the colonial administration, and “educating their children, however numerous, in the European way” were unable to “access senior management [positions] to enable them to maintain their rank in society.” These deserving métis families were thus in constant danger of slipping down the socioeconomic ladder or reverting to non-European habits. This risk was augmented by the fact that “although their way of life is European, they are, in their administrative and commercial situation classified as natives. Their greatest ambition ... is to serve France, especially in the colonies they serve as a social liaison, their children, the ‘vanguard of the Republic’ in the colonies, worthy of their grandfathers who conquered many of these same lands.” A 1936 administrative report on the métis question commissioned by the Governor-General echoed several of the concerns outlined by the métis of Soudan in their letter to the metropolitan government in Paris. The report’s author wrote that in French Soudan, “the system displays in my opinion a double stumbling block: it produces mainly civil servants and contributes to the constitution of an autonomous social group, isolated, lacking in vigor; it leaves out of its efforts two categories: the unfit, those weak children unable even to enter the lower ranks, and on the other hand the most gifted, those individuals who blame themselves for being unable to overcome the social barriers that stop them definitively.” The difficult socioeconomic position of educated métis families was a key argument in the debates about French citizenship.

The claims by métis writers of French cultural identity were echoed by the explicit desire of colonial administrators to install the French language as the mother tongue of métis children.

240 Ibid.
241 Ibid.
242 Ibid.
In 1937, the Lieutenant-Governor of French Soudan wrote a letter to the Governor General of West Africa outlining the colony’s current efforts to support its métis population. The Lieutenant-Governor noted that although children could already be admitted to most institutions at six years of age, he had recommended to the head of the educational service that the minimum age be lowered. According the Lieutenant-Governor, the goal of schools for métis children should be to prepare them to earn their Certificat d’Etudes and then to enter careers in various branches of the colonial administration or civil service.

French administrators had very clearly defined ideas about the occupational paths métis children should be directed towards. Métis boys were often encouraged to pursue careers in education, medicine, or the military. In 1939, the minister in charge of the colonies wrote a letter to the Governor-General of A.O.F. ordering that “the military vocation should be encouraged for young métis who could be admitted later to the military schools.” The Minister envisioned two general paths for high-achieving métis boys. The first, as noted above, would be “towards the military schools.” The second, for métis boys with outstanding academic records, would be “towards the secondary or professional schools of the metropole, by the creation of a certain number of scholarships with this intent.” By 1939 France was embroiled in the beginnings of World War II, so the impetus to direct métis boys towards military service is perhaps unsurprising. However, the notion that métis boys were an ideal class of colonial public servants and soldiers had been widespread since the beginning of the twentieth century. The Foyer de

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245 Ibid.
247 Ibid.
248 Ibid.
Métis in Dakar was intended to serve as a springboard into careers in the colonial administration or further studies in France itself. In a 1936 report to the Governor General on the métis question in A.O.F., one administrator noted that “the children who are admitted here [to the Foyer de Métis] will live a European life, it will not be forbidden think of preparing them for metropolitan professions.”

A 1936 survey of the jobs occupied by métis in French Soudan lists a wide variety of careers. I have organized the report’s findings into the chart below for ease of comprehension.

1936 Report on jobs occupied by métis in French Soudan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Originally from French Soudan and residing there</th>
<th>Originally from Soudan and not residing there</th>
<th>Originally from other colonies of A.O.F. and residing in Soudan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magistrates</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior civil servants of the treasury</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial service workers</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auxiliary doctors</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auxiliary veterinarians</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auxiliary pharmacists</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwives</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school teachers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school instructors</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military scouts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publishers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio workers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.T.T. [Post office and</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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249 Rapport à Monsieur le Gouverneur general, 17 November 1936, ANS O 685 (31).
250 Emplois Occupés par les Métis, 1936, ANS O685(31).
One noteworthy trend in the report is the dominance of medical careers. Of the 128 employed métis listed, 56 had a medical job of some variety. This high proportion means that slightly more than forty percent of the employed métis adults in French Soudan in 1936 worked in the medical sector. The preeminence of medical careers is interesting because of the open desire of French officials to push educated métis men and women towards careers in the military, medicine, or the civil service. That so many of the métis adults in French Soudan did indeed have medical jobs suggests that the colonial apparatus was successfully funneling métis children into particular professions. The letters of Paul Kourama to Madame Pion-Roux show that by age twelve Paul had been singled out for a medical career by his teachers and assigned to shadow a doctor in the town dispensary. With the exception of a handful of male doctors and pharmacists, the majority of the métis pursuing medical careers were women. The single most common profession was midwifery, likely as a result of the large school for midwives in Dakar, towards which promising girls (not exclusively métis) were directed. In addition to midwifery, nursing (listed under the feminine form *infirmière*) is also one of the most common careers, with 9 métis
nurses recorded. After graduating at the top of her class in the Bamako Orphelinat des Métisses, Auoa Kéita spent three years at the Ecole Sages-Femmes in Dakar. Kéita then returned to French Soudan and worked as a midwife in Gao. The métis midwives listed in the survey likely followed similar paths. Interestingly, the report lists only six métis with military careers. This seems to contradict the frequently stated desire of colonial administrators to direct métis boys towards the military, particularly since French efforts to encourage medical careers appear to have been more successful.

Métis girls, of course, should be raised to become virtuous wives and mothers. Furthermore, métis girls were specifically encouraged to marry métis or European men. A 1913 article in the Quinzaine Coloniale, confidently asserted that “as for the girls, sufficiently educated and well-brought-up, they will easily marry Europeans of modest status.” Securing appropriate métis wives was a crucial part of efforts to cement the position of French-educated métis men. Indeed, educating women was overall seen as necessary not for the edification of the girls themselves but in order to ensure the formation of francophone families. This concern also applied to educated men who were not métis, sometimes referred to as évolutés, or sophisticates. In 1937, the Governor-General of A.O.F. wrote to the region’s Lieutenant-Governors about his concern that if “the individual is instructed and not the family, in the homes of the évolutés [developed/advanced] natives, the woman, and through her the home and the family, remain confined to the traditional way of life.” Similarly, in 1938 a colonial administrator responding to a questionnaire wrote that “if he abdicates [European morals], and he will abdicate, because he must live, he must maintain affectionate relationships with his old parents, he must marry one—

252 La Quinzaine Coloniale, 25 January 1913, ANS O 715 (31).
or several—women who did not go to the école normale or any European school, he will no longer have the aide of the morals which we tried so painfully to inculcate in him.” Although the explicit goal of French institutions for métis girls was to raise worthy future wives and mothers, the large number of midwives in French Soudan indicates that some métis women were able to pursue careers of various types.

The debate over whether or not métis should be able to lay claim to French citizenship raged for much of the duration of the French Third Republic. Throughout this period colonial authorities remained deeply wary of granting citizenship to métis as class. Citizenship came with considerable privileges, and allowing métis to become citizens would have put them on more equal footing with white French nationals. Citizens also benefited from different, more lenient rules about forced labor and military service. Perhaps most importantly, citizens could not be subjected to the notorious indigénat, the convoluted colonial justice system. A Quinzaine Coloniale article in 1913 criticized the barriers to citizenship for métis in French Indochina as well as in West Africa. According to the article, “children born to unknown fathers but with the characteristic traits of the white race appealed to the courts to have their filiation recognized, or at least their status as Frenchmen [qualité de Français] and French citizenship. They have always failed in these efforts, and have been forced, by the nationality of their mother, to be simple French subjects.” The article also noted the serious nature of the division between citizen and subject for métis in French colonies around the world. The author further argued that “the consequences [of being classed as natives] are often extremely shocking given the inferior

254 Enquête sur la culture des maîtres indigènes, leur niveau de vie, leurs revendications (réponse au questionnaire du 2/12/1938), 1938, ANS O 175 (31).
255 White, Children of the French Empire, 127.
256 Ibid.
257 La Quinzaine Coloniale, January 25, 1913, ANS O715(31).
condition, compared to that of French citizens, of native French subjects who are governed by the [laws for indigenous people] for all that concerns his personal and family status, who has no political rights and to which liberal professions and administrative careers, with the exception of a few substandard posts, are not accessible.”258 The debate over métis legal status accelerated in the early 1900s, around the same time other aspects of French colonial rule (such as the secular education system) were crystallizing. Although citizenship laws were strict in the majority of French West Africa, the Four Communes were an important exception. The Four Communes was the name given to four cities in Senegal with the same legal status as communes in metropolitan France: Dakar, Rufisque, Gorée, and Saint-Louis.259 The Diagne laws of 1915 and 1916 extended citizenship to all those born in the Four Communes.260 The Diagne laws were passed during World War I, and citizenship for residents of the Four Communes was thus linked to conscription.

In 1902, the case of two métis brothers in Dahomey attracted considerable sympathy and attention in France. Xavier and Achille Béraud were the children of Monsieur Médard-Béraud, a high-ranking French administrator, and Antoinette Brun, a métis woman from Dahomey.261 Both brothers left well-paying jobs with the English colonial administration in Lagos, Nigeria to work for the French campaign to conquer Dahomey.262 As a result of their cooperation with the French, several members of the Béraud’s family members in Dahomey were executed by King Béhanzin, the king of Dahomey. In 1896, both Xavier and Achille Béraud applied for French citizenship.263 Although French authorities both in Dahomey and in Paris agreed that the brothers

258 Ibid.
259 Jones, Métis of Senegal, 19.
260 White, Children of the French Empire, 135.
261 Semley, To Be Free and French, 189.
262 White, Children of the French Empire, 125.
263 Ibid.
deserved citizenship, naturalization was by law only available to non-French nationals. The Béraud brothers were already French subjects and were therefore ineligible. Public sympathy for the Béraud brothers sparked intense debate about the need to create a path to citizenship for deserving French subjects. In 1912, the debate culminated with a new naturalization decree allowing some French subjects in A.O.F. to apply for French citizenship. However, the 1912 naturalization decree included a number of conditions that ensured the barrier to citizenship remained high. Applicants were required to show proof that they were at least twenty-one years old, could read or write French, had evidence of financial support and good character, and had either served the French administration for at least ten years or demonstrated commitment to French interests in some other way. Furthermore, candidates had to agree to accept French law and be registered on and bound by the French Civil Code. Both Xavier and Achille Béraud finally became French citizens in 1914, almost twenty years after they first sought citizenship. Achille Béraud’s wife, Candida Bénédicte de Medeiros, and their only child, Clotilde Marie Louis Béraud, also received French citizenship. Although the 1912 decree did create an opening for French subjects to become citizens, in practice the strict requirements proved difficult to meet. Between 1914 and 1922 just 94 French subjects in West Africa successfully petitioned for French citizenship. Overall, relatively few métis in A.O.F. became French citizens.

Calls for métis citizenship emerged again after World War I. Furthermore, increasing demands for citizenship from métis groups seeking to have their French heritage, education, and

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264 Ibid.
265 Eds. Clancy-Smith; Gouda, Domesticating the Empire, 66.
266 Semley, To Be Free and French, 189.
267 Ibid.
268 Eds. Clancy-Smith; Gouda, Domesticating the Empire, 66.
culture recognized were amplified by growing criticism of colonialism in France. In *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* Alice Conklin aptly captures contemporary French criticisms of the colonial system. Conklin summarizes these critiques as hinging on the argument that a nation of *citoyens* should by definition not possess *sujets*. In November 1928, a new decree allowed métis in Indochina—even those not legally recognized by their fathers—to apply for French citizenship. The shift by the colonial administration in Indochina spurred officials in French West Africa to seriously consider expanding the path to citizenship for métis. In Dahomey, Lieutenant-Governor Fourn—who had several métis children himself—argued that métis who displayed admirable qualities such as effort, perseverance, and intelligence should be allowed to claim French citizenship. Finally, in 1930, a new decree allowed métis in A.O.F. (including *métis nonreconnus*) to apply for citizenship.

The late 1920s and 1930s marked the coming of age of a generation of métis individuals that had grown up in French schools and orphanages. Many of these métis adults had been raised from a young age in French institutions, given French educations, and taught to dress, act, and behave like Europeans. This cohort of métis formed part of a French-speaking African elite that was increasingly impatient to be placed on more equal footing with Europeans. The 1930s also saw the creation of métis organizations in some urban areas of A.O.F. The decree of 1930, like the earlier 1912 naturalization law, included onerous restrictions. Two women were refused citizenship for marrying African men and one man who had lived in the Orphelinat des Métis in

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270 White, *Children of the French Empire*, 140.  
271 White, *Children of the French Empire*, 141.
Kayes for nine years was initially rejected on the basis of a report that he once wrote an insulting letter to one of his teachers.\textsuperscript{272}

Even after the passage of the 1930 decree, métis communities continued to face serious barriers to social and economic integration into French society. In 1937 a French administrator wrote a letter to the Governor General of French West Africa criticizing the stringent citizenship standards and expressing his support for a more accessible path to métis citizenship. The administrator argued that “it is certain that some young métis, now teachers and auxiliary doctors, would be capable of fully embracing European culture and life.”\textsuperscript{273} One of the most common reasons that administrators refused applications for citizenship under the 1930 decree was a failure to adequately absorb or display French culture and values. Perhaps one reason administrators were reluctant to grant métis French citizenship was that civil servants with European legal status were far more costly to maintain than those classified as native. For instance, under the 1903 education plan African teachers earned 1500-2400 francs while European teachers made 3000-6000 francs.\textsuperscript{274} Indeed, pay was a crucial concern for métis civil servants. In the military and across the colonial administration European legal status guaranteed access to a higher pay scale and better housing.\textsuperscript{275} A significant proportion of métis adults worked for the colonial administration in the teaching or medical services. The vast majority of métis—those lacking French citizenship—were also paid according to the lower pay scale. This concern is implicit in the letter written by a group of métis from French Soudan to a French minister. The letter describes in detail how difficult it is for métis families to maintain European

\textsuperscript{272} Eds. Clancy-Smith; Gouda, Domesticating the Empire, 66.
\textsuperscript{274} Duke Bryant, Education as Politics, 54.
\textsuperscript{275} Stoler, Carnal Knowledge, 93.
lifestyles and afford to educate their children appropriately on the low salaries paid to non-
Europeans.\textsuperscript{276}

After World War II, métis advocates began to face increasing opposition from black
Africans. In 1954, Senegalese political leaders rejected a request from the colonial administration
to allocate land in Dakar for a new métis orphanage.\textsuperscript{277} The orphanage’s opponents contended
that all African children should be treated equally, regardless of skin color. Furthermore, several
members of the Dakar assembly questioned the very existence of a “métis problem” or the need
to grant métis any special opportunities or privileges.\textsuperscript{278} The colonial administration neatly
avoided a head-on confrontation about the orphanage by removing its budget from the control of
African leaders.\textsuperscript{279} However, the clash between Senegalese leaders and the colonial
administration over the métis orphanage in Dakar marked the beginning of a series of similar
disputes. Around the same time, the assembly in Benin asked the French government to shutter
the schools and orphanages reserved for métis children.\textsuperscript{280} Instead of remaining isolated in
French-run establishments, métis children would be sent back to their maternal families and
raised like all other children in Benin. As independence loomed in French West Africa, special
treatment for métis children across the region came under serious pushback.

The pressure to eliminate any and all privileges for métis played a crucial role in sparking
the formation of métis organizations. The most influential of these was the Union International
des Métis (International Union of Mixed-Race Persons), which held its first meeting in April,
1957. The groundwork for the Union International des Métis was laid by earlier organizations

\textsuperscript{276} Bamako, le 15 Avril, A Monsieur le Minister, 1937, ANS O 685 (31).
\textsuperscript{277} Jean-Baptiste, “Miss Eurafrica”, 577.
\textsuperscript{278} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{279} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{280} Ibid.
such as the Société de Secours Mutuels des Métis de la Guinée Française (Mutual Aid Society of the Métis of Guinea), which was formed in 1933. Within a decade after the creation of the Société de Secours Mutuels des Métis de la Guinée Française, similar groups had sprung up across French West Africa, including in Côte d’Ivoire, French Soudan, and Niger. Like the Union International des Métis, these organizations served a variety of functions, particularly as charities, social communities, and political lobbying groups. After 1944, members of the Société de Secours Mutuels des Métis de la Guinée paid 100 francs to join and subsequent fees of 25 francs per month.\textsuperscript{281} In return, the society functioned as a rudimentary social safety net. Members who were unemployed could claim support from the organization for four months and if a member died the society would help family members pay funeral costs.\textsuperscript{282} The society also had a general fund for various philanthropic efforts towards the poor métis population of Guinea. For instance, the society covered the payment of burial costs for some poverty-stricken métis who were not members.\textsuperscript{283} The direct ancestor of the Union International des Métis was the Association Philanthropique des Métis Français en A.O.F. (Philanthropic Association of French Métis in French West Africa), founded in Dakar in July, 1944.\textsuperscript{284} In November of 1946, Louis Patterson, then the organization’s president, wrote to the French colonial minister to express his concern about allowing colonial assemblies to dictate policy towards métis. Patterson asked the minister to consider whether the French empire was going “to cast the métis into the mass of the population after forty years of just and unremitting effort to make him the self-conscious son of a European?”\textsuperscript{285} In 1949, the Association Philanthropique des Métis Français en A.O.F. was

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\textsuperscript{281} White, \textit{Children of the French Empire}, 172.  \\
\textsuperscript{282} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{283} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{284} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{285} Jean-Baptiste, \textit{“Miss Eurafraica”}, 577. 
\end{flushleft}
reconstituted into the more expansive Union des Eurafricans de l’A.O.F (Union of the Eurafricans of French West Africa).\textsuperscript{286} In 1950, the organization expanded yet again to include French Equatorial Africa.\textsuperscript{287} Finally, in 1957, the organization reached its final and most influential form as the Union International des Métis.\textsuperscript{288}

One of the driving forces behind the creation of the Union International des Métis was Nicolas Rigonaux, a Senegalese métis and the leader of the Union des Eurafricans de l’A.O.F. Rigonaux also created the organization’s magazine, \textit{L’Eurafrican}, which was devoted to various issues facing the métis population of West Africa. \textit{L’Eurafrican} criticized both French and African societies for excluding métis children and was a fierce advocate for financial and educational support of métis more generally. The Union International des Métis fought long and hard for the paternity provision of the Code Civil to be applied to A.O.F. without reservations—an effort that was ultimately successful.\textsuperscript{289} The organization also created grants and scholarships to pay for the education of destitute métis children and to support students and the unemployed.\textsuperscript{290} In 1951, Rigonaux and the Union des Eurafricans de l’A.O.F. et l’A.E.F. gave a total of 20,000 francs to métis orphanages, of which 5,000 francs were specifically earmarked to buy the children toys.\textsuperscript{291} Finally, in 1952, the organization opened its own home for métis boys in Dakar under the direction of Nicolas Rigonaux and his wife.\textsuperscript{292} The last issue of \textit{L’Eurafrican} was published in 1960, shortly before independence brought an end to the federation of French West Africa.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{286} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{287} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{288} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{289} White, \textit{Children of the French Empire}, 177.
\item \textsuperscript{290} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{291} A.E.F. is an abbreviation for Afrique équatoriale française (French Equatorial Africa). White, \textit{Children of the French Empire}, 178.
\item \textsuperscript{292} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Reconstructing the experiences of métis children is a crucial piece of understanding the “métis problem” in colonial French West Africa. Living and studying in métis orphanages was a defining experience for the generation of métis that came of age after the establishment of the colonial education system in 1903. The letters written by and about métis children living in such institutions, as well as French administrative documents, contain a rich tapestry of information about their day-to-day life. Debates over access to French citizenship, the complex socioeconomic position of métis, and the relationship between métis and black African communities all took on increasing urgency in the first half of the twentieth century. The formation of métis organizations, such as the Union International des Métis, helped articulate the challenges faced by many métis children across West Africa. Although the imperial framework and family situation of métis children adds important background, no inquiry into the métis question in French West Africa is complete without considering the lives of métis individuals.
Conclusion

Over the course of the French Third Republic, the relationship between the French imperial state and the métis population of West Africa took on a variety of forms and meanings. The establishment of schools and orphanages across the federation of French West Africa provided a platform for colonial officials and teachers to debate and evaluate myriad aspects of métis lives and their socioeconomic status. Métis children blurred the boundary between colonizer and colonized and posed a moral and institutional challenge for the French empire as it consolidated its hold over West Africa. Both French officials and métis organizations struggled to define the place that métis populations occupied in French and African societies. The imperial state, French fathers, African mothers, and métis individuals themselves all played important roles in shaping the métis question in French West Africa over the course of the French Third Republic.

The complex system created to shepherd métis children towards futures as useful members of the French imperial project left a rich tapestry of documents in its wake. Decades of French concern about métis déclassés competed with the desire to forge a new class of loyal, Gallicized civil servants and families. The practice of mariage à la mode du pays, which had roots that extended back far beyond the beginning of the French Third Republic, was a key feature of French colonial life. The mixed-race children that resulted from such unions sparked numerous debates in metropolitan France and in the colonies about citizenship and what it meant to be truly French. By piecing together archival sources, with added nuance provided by scholars who have worked on related topics, it is possible to construct a relatively developed understanding of the world in which the métis children of French West Africa lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ideally, future studies of métissage in West Africa will
include more métis and African voices. Combatting the overpowering French perspective of colonial rule is one of the greatest challenges of studying the métis question. Incorporating African perspectives adds desperately needed balance to the self-serving reports of the colonial administration, which although detailed, are inevitably tinted by the prejudices and goals of their French authors.

Although the métis population of French West Africa was always relatively small, the métis question weighed heavily on the minds of the colonial administrators of the region for decades. Perhaps the imperial fascination with métis communities stemmed from their inherent challenge to the divisions between French and African at the heart of colonial rule. Whether métis should be considered European or African was a question the French empire never truly resolved. The ambiguous legal status of métis children in French West Africa was a direct representation of the ambivalence with which French administrators approached their assimilation into French society. The development of increasingly vocal métis organizations challenged French precepts about their socioeconomic position, moral and sexual respectability, and racial categorization.

Between 1870 and 1940, French rule in West Africa was transformed by a series of organizational and ideological shifts. However, the issue of the métis question remained a constant fixture of colonial discourse. The French empire may have held métis at arm’s length, but it was a tight hold indeed.
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