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Senegal's Politics of Stamp Issuing: From French Colonial Office to Home Country for the African Diaspora

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Introduction

Postage stamps and related objects are miniature communication tools, and they tell a story about cultural and political identities and about artistic forms of identity expressions. They are part of the world's material heritage, and part of history. Ever more of this postal heritage becomes available online, published by stamp collectors' organizations, auction houses, commercial stamp shops, online catalogues, and individual collectors. Virtually collecting postage stamps and postal history has recently become a possibility. These working papers about Africa are examples of what can be done. But they are work-in-progress! Everyone who would like to contribute, by sending corrections, additions, and new area studies can do so by sending an email message to the APH editors: Ton Dietz (dietzaj@asc.leidenuniv.nl) and Jan Jansen. You are welcome!

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Egypt postage stamp 1914:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4b/Post_Stamp_Egypt.jpg

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SENEGAL'S POLITICS OF STAMP ISSUING: FROM FRENCH COLONIAL OFFICE TO HOME COUNTRY FOR THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

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Abstract

In the mid-nineteenth century France intensified its colonization of West Africa's Atlantic Coast. Contemporary to this, on a global scale, post stamps were introduced to improve the organization of postal traffic. The first stamps from Senegal, France's first colony in West Africa, therefore testify to the general era in which stamping of mail became a common practice. The imagery for Senegal's stamps of this era was similar as used for the stamps in the other French colonies around the world, stressing economic interests in the French Empire. In that period Senegal's stamps were used in all territory occupied by the French in West Africa. After 1885 France started to occupy the interior of West Africa, subsequently followed by administering it in territorially defined colonies. In that period Senegal became one of the colonies of "Afrique Occidentale Française". From the start of the twentieth century until the country's independence in 1960 [1958], Senegal's issues followed the stamp issuing policy that France developed for all the AOF colonies. After independence Senegal developed its own style, characterized – in comparison with other African countries – by much attention for nation-transcending imagery of Africa's heritage and history.

Introduction: The political scope of this paper

In 1659 France founded Saint-Louis as a foothold for its commercial activities in the delta of the Senegal River and its hinterland, a settlement which would become France's administrative centre for the large territories it occupied in West Africa. The intensification of this colonization process may be dated to around the 1850s when Louis Faidherbe reorganized the separate French trading posts along the West African Atlantic coast into a "Protectorate".¹ Faidherbe also introduced a system of conscription of Africans into the French army as "*tirailleurs [sénégalais]*". Later, a phase of more systematic colonization began, in the decades after the 1885 Conference of Berlin during which the European powers decided to partition Africa, and a series of occupations West Africa's interior followed.

During the first half of the twentieth century France reorganized the administration of its [still increasing] occupied area in West Africa a number of times. During one of these adjustments frontiers were imposed on the colonies that are still in use as national borders. Postal reorganizations often followed these administrative ones, and during one of these reorganizations, in 1902, the seat of the French administration was moved circa 200 kilometres to the south, from Saint-Louis to Dakar.

At least two of these reorganizations were a direct reaction by France to the pressure of European politics. During World War I France restructured and upgraded the administration of its colonies, including Senegal, in order to increase conscription rates for the French army. During World War II France reconsidered its colonial mission so as to guarantee the colonies' loyalty, for example promising – "At last...!" one may say – to abolish forced labour. Plans were sketched too for

¹ For analysis and references for Faidherbe as "Patarapa/Fèdèrèba, the ancestor of the white people" in popular imagination and for Faidherbe on stamps in French West Africa, see Jansen 2022.

further economic development of the colonies, and, last but not least, autonomy from the metropole was promised.

In 1958 President De Gaulle proposed that French colonies should either vote for immediate independence, giving up all further support from France, or they should renew their partnerships with France. All colonies except Guinea voted for the new partnership.² It was a political watershed, and, as part of the following developments, Senegal formed a short-lived and unsuccessful polity with the neighbouring colony of French Soudan, called “Fédération du Mali” (capital: Dakar). In 1960 that federation split into the Republics of Senegal and Mali.

Since its independence in 1960 Senegal has been a democracy and has maintained diplomatic relations with France. Active too on the international political and diplomatic stage, Senegal has often been acknowledged for its voicing of broader African concerns.

Senegal as “primus inter pares” in colonial French West Africa

The period of Faidherbe's administration [1852-1865] historically falls within the first decades of using stamps for postal services in France. The first stamps from Senegal testify rather to the general era in which stamping of mail became a global phenomenon than of something particular for Senegal or West Africa. These first stamps' imagery followed/copied the imagery of France's stamps for national use and they attested of France's pride as an empire. In 1849 France issued its first stamps for national use, and in 1859 France issued the first series for the “Colonies de l'Empire Français”. These stamps for the colonies featured the imperial eagle [see Figure 1]. When used for mail coming from Senegal, these stamps were cancelled with the letters “GOR”, an abbreviation of “Gorée” – the infamous

² For Guinea's stamp issuing policy during its early years of independence, see Jansen 2022.

[slave] trade center, on the coast of Dakar, that was occupied by France between 1677 until 1960, and that was administratively attached to Saint-Louis – or “SNG”, an abbreviation of “Sénégal”.³

Until the 1880s France issued five stamp series for its colonies. After the eagle series came “Empire Français” issues with Napoleon III’s bust. A third series, “Repub[lique] Franc[aise]”, showing a bust of Ceres [the Roman goddess of agriculture], appeared in the early 1870s – in the meantime France had become a republic and new stamps were necessary. The fourth series of stamps, as well “Republique Française”, was issued in the late-1870s and depicted an allegory of Peace and Commerce [for this image, see Figure 2]. The fifth series, “République Française/Colonies” was issued in 1881. It showed an allegorical design of Commerce [see Figure 1].

Many French colonies “appropriated” the stamps from the 1881 issue by printing new values onto them, and Senegal did the same, overprinting 20 centime stamps with either “5” or “15” and 4 centime stamps with “10” [see Figure 1]. In 1892 the same practice of overprinting with new values was applied to 15 centime stamps which became “75”, while the 5 centimes stamp received a “1” to symbolize “1 franc” although now with “Sénégal” added [see Figure 1]. As the overprints were made locally with simple technology, they are not highly standardized; it is no wonder that Senegalese stamps from the 1880s have inspired numerous forgeries... [for an example, see Figure 1].

³ The Yvert catalogues give “GOR” and “SNG” for stamps from the colony of Senegal. However, https://www.timbres-de-france.com/collection/colonies_francaise/senegal/senegal-1.php suggests that only “GOR” has been used for the very first stamps of the French colony of Senegal. I thank Ton Dietz for this reference.



Figure 1, from left to right: 1 centime, olive-coloured stamp of the issue featuring the imperial eagle; two lila-brown 4 centime stamps with the allegory Commerce, overprinted with the value “10 [centimes]” in different fonts to be used for Senegal; green 5 centime stamp with the allegory Commerce, overprinted with the value “1 F[ranc] Sénégal”; black 1 centime stamp with overprint “Sénégal”, not catalogued, so far considered a forgery [private collection].

In 1892 Senegal issued stamps for the first time as an autonomously functioning administrative postal unit – “Sénégal et dépendances” – which suggests a loose definition of the territory covered by the postal services [which was in line with the contemporary ongoing process of occupation of West Africa]. For those first stamps for Senegal the “Peace and Commerce” design from 1870 was used. The design for these stamps was, in that period, similar for all French colonial postal units: the colony’s name was simply added in blue, black or red [see Figure 2].



Figure 2: Two stamps [real size] with the allegory “Peace and Commerce” from the 1892 issues for “Sénégal et dépendances”.

This production of stamps for the colony of Senegal as an administrative postal unit must be appreciated historically within the global development of postal

services. In 1874 the UPU [Universal Postal Union/Union Postale Universelle] was founded so that members could safely mutually recognize each other's stamps and tariffs. This was a major improvement on the existing system of bi-lateral treaties between countries. The twenty-one countries that founded the UPU promised to deliver mail from abroad with the same service as they gave to domestic mail. Senegal's production of overprinted French stamps in the 1880s, instead of printing their own, as it did in the 1890s, is therefore a sign not so much of claiming autonomy as a polity, but of its joining in the rapid development of postal services worldwide.

From 1892 onwards Senegal's stamp issuing policy is analogous to the developments that have been described in this series for Mali.⁴ The reason for that is France's decision to rule its West African colonies as one administrative unit, Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF), a sort of federation of seven colonies. Within the AOF, its members issued their own stamps, although rather often using a design that was used as well by the other AOF members. At the end of World War II the AOF members shifted to communal stamp issuing, and this situation continued until the colonies' independence.

The images of the three designs for a stamp series from Senegal from the first decades of the AOF era perfectly summarizes France's multi-layered colonial engagement with Africa 1) as a place to realize economic development and profit by infrastructural intervention, 2) as a place with a highly civilized culture ["Islam noir"], and 3) as a place of exotic adventure [see Figure 3]. Senegal may have had a position as *primus inter pares* within the AOF as at the end of the colonial era a series of stamps [including a souvenir sheet] to celebrate Dakar's 100th anniversary actually celebrated France's agenda for Africa [see Figure 4] .

⁴ See Jansen 2018; see also some images in Jansen 2022.



Figure 3: Stamps [real size] from the first decades of the twentieth century that represent France's multi-layered engagement with West Africa: 1) the Faidherbe bridge represents economic development by infrastructural intervention, 2) the mosque at Diourbel represents West African Islam as a highly civilized culture ["Islam noir"], and 3) the image of an African woman represents Sub-Sahara Africa as a place of exotic adventure.



Figure 4: Souvenir sheet with the series to commemorate Dakar's centenary. Note that the imagery of all six stamps alludes to the introduction of new technologies, development and progress, i.e. France's development agenda.

Senegal's stamps after independence

The short-lived Fédération du Mali published few stamps, most of them depicting animals, but three with a political dimension. The first overtly political stamp shows the territory and flag of the federation, the second celebrates its membership of an African organization and the third celebrates the 300th anniversary of the town of Saint-Louis (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: First-Day Cover of the 1959 air mail stamp of the Mali Federation that celebrates the 300th anniversary of Saint-Louis. Note the federation's flag, with its characteristic "kanaga" sign [based on a Dogon mask].

After becoming the Republic of Senegal the nation's stamp issues show a remarkable reluctance to place nationalistic ideas or images on its stamps. Almost absent too are images of serving presidents. Senegal's stamp issues are divided between showing on the one hand interest in international organizations and

treaties, global initiatives, or major sports events such as a number of series featuring – of course! – the Paris-Dakar rally; and on the other hand referencing national concerns, such as national folklore and art. There were, in comparison to other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, few series with animals [wildlife conservation] and flowers and in the 1990s Senegal avoided falling into the trap of allowing foreign producers to encourage seemingly endless series of thematic stamps; at least not so inextricably as most of its neighbouring countries did.

Unique to Senegal, in comparison with its former AOF partners, is that its stamps herald Africa and Africans and their heritage, which links them to the African diaspora. In that respect Senegal retained its position in colonial times when Dakar's perspective stretched beyond the frontiers of the colony of Senegal.

Over the years Senegalese stamps have represented different political imaginings of Africa. In the early years of independence the image of Africa featured ideas of the Négritude philosophy, thus stressing Sub-Saharan Africa, naturally enough since Senegal's president Léopold Senghor (1960-1980) was a theoretician of the movement. The souvenir sheet of the issues for the 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts uses a terminology that, to our present-day standards, is obsolete and politically incorrect, but which illustrates how Senegal expressed its responsibility for promoting African artisanal production [see Figure 5].



Figure 6: *Souvenir sheet [real size] that illustrates Senegal's mission to voice and empower "Africa".*

The 1980s marked a change to images of diasporic Africa, without doubt connected to the popularity of Alex Haley's family history *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, which reconstructed the origins of Haley's own family in the Gambia and Senegal river basin. Published in 1976 it was soon followed by a television adaptation that attracted millions of viewers. Over the years the book's success has brought numerous Americans of African descent to The Gambia and to Senegal.⁵ The Gambia, has even institutionalized a bi-annual *Roots International*

⁵ For the impact of *Roots* on West Africa, see Donald Wright 1981, 2011.

Festival (formerly called *Homecoming*), during which people can visit the sparse remnants of the Atlantic slave trade.

Senegal, though, has a more dramatic stage to offer: the Island of Gorée [see Figure 7]. Gorée was a trading post and is believed to be a location from which the slave trade was organized. In 1978 Gorée was recognized as a UNESCO site which has tended to encourage the belief that deportation of slaves was organized via the Island. Gorée has become the place for many cultural activities with strong heritage components, such as the Gorée Diaspora Festival [a stamp series was dedicated to its fifth edition in 2010].



Figure 7 Souvenir sheet of a 1985 series to promote the Island of Gorée, with an image of the House of Slaves on the highest value.

Senegal too has actively empowered people in the African diaspora by issuing stamps that offer them a less doleful family origin than descent from enslaved people. An example of that is the 1992 issue of two stamps featuring Bakari II [see Figure 8] a figure whose fame was launched in the twentieth-century as an African ruler who sailed “to the ends of the ocean”. Bakari II’s voyage is supposed to tell of an African diaspora that predates Columbus and the Atlantic slave trade. Although that “fact” is nowadays a sort of received wisdom among educated people in West Africa and is shared in mainstream media, the story is however entirely a twentieth-century hoax. Bakari’s existence is based on an incorrect nineteenth-century translation of the fourteenth-century Arab author al-Umari.⁶ However, although the idea itself is based on a textual error, I would nevertheless suggest that the story’s acceptance among educated people is afforded by a quest for decolonizing [academic] epistemologies. It is in line with questions raised by the Négritude philosophers, too.



Figure 8: Two stamps from 1992 [slightly enlarged] commemorating the West African ruler Bakari II.

⁶ For details, see De Moraes Farias 2015.

It is both interesting and rather confusing to see Senegal's postal services empowering the highly contested idea of Bakari II, thus positioning postage stamps outside their usual framework of representing national histories and shifting them to the world of identity politics. I suggest that it is part of a global trend of downgrading national history at least, as "dead facts from the past that don't matter anymore," and creating a stage for "heritage" that is actively produced and supported by stakeholders in search of identities. I see that as being in line with the present-day paradigm shift in the status of scientific knowledge from "autonomous and true" in modernist epistemologies to "an asset with market value" in post-modernist [post-truth?] epistemologies. From that perspective one may conclude that Senegal's stamps give an account of major questions mankind has been struggling with since 1850.

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