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*Tyus*

# ASSIMILATION

ILLUSTRATION BY KOFI TYUS

# The Forgotten Colonies

By Christian Filostrat

Guyane, Guadeloupe and Martinique are lands that history has forgotten. Anachronistic colonies in the age of liberation, they are the French regions of the Caribbean.

The assimilation by France of the Afro-Antilleans of Guyane, Guadeloupe and Martinique began before the French Revolution of 1789 had decreed these territories integral parts of the metropole. The 1685 Code Noir, for example, which proposed to give a semblance of legal protection to the slave against his master was, because it came from the metropole, already a conspicuous measure by which the Blacks could judge France in relation to their immediate masters, the white Creoles.

The Revolution was, however, the single most important factor in the French drive for the assimilation of the "Old Colonies." With its enunciation of the "Rights of Man and the Citizen," which applied also to colonial Blacks, the France of 1789 became the beacon of trust which has guided the French Antillean in his own belief that assimilation was indeed salvation.

It was precisely to consolidate the work of the Revolution with respect to colonial matters that Toussaint L'Ouverture drafted the first constitution since the "Code Noir" in St. Domingue, making his government a partner of the metropole in the exploitation of France's richest colony. Napoleon I's re-enslavement scheme, however, unleashed the Black man's desperate thirst for freedom in both Guadeloupe and St. Domingue. It was a Black general's (Magloire Pelage) trust in France which doomed Guadeloupe's chances for independence in 1802. As a result, slavery was re-imposed there as well as in Guyane and Martinique. It lasted until 1848.

## I. Sociology of Assimilation.

To Napoleon III "assimilation was in complete contradiction with the principles of the imperial government. The colonies

were considered by him as conquered territories, and their population as subjects and not citizens."<sup>1</sup> The return of planters' rule, the fear that slavery would be re-established, and the working pass law became—for the first generation of former slaves—the new reality. For the African indentured laborers who began arriving in 1852, existence was particularly harsh. The Creole Blacks (those fully assimilated) regarded them as unwelcomed competition for the meager salary they both strived for at the habitation.

Unable to strike at the planters, the Creoles struck at the indentured laborers. "African" became an epithet on the lips of the former slaves who further ostracized the newcomers. Moreover, the newly arrived Blacks were looked upon as a reminder of Africa of which the former slaves, as part of their creolization, were ashamed. Of this phenomenon, Frantz Fanon remarked that, in effect, "the colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards."<sup>2</sup> By rejecting the newer Africans in their midst, they cast out their own blackness and psycho-surgically aligned themselves with the white rulers. In the same vein of make-believe, they closed the economic gap between their own wretchedness and the dominating affluence of the whites and the people of color.

The African indentured laborer, in turn, looked to the metropolitan government for redress, identifying his Black brothers as the oppressors, rather than France's system of exploitation. As a result, the descendants of the indentured Africans, identified sometimes erroneously as darker, were closely associated with the government, which they served in the police force and the army. Also, as informers.

The reaction against Napoleon's rule, which had denied the colonies representation in Paris, was evident by 1875. To Emile Alcindor, "the situation at that time in the Antilles had become similar to those of the French Departments. There was, on

the legal point, no difference at least for the future."<sup>3</sup> There was, however, by the turn of the century, a foreboding apprehension that the interest of the metropole in Guyane, Guadeloupe and Martinique was waning. Indeed, France had turned almost exclusively toward Asia and Africa where it had acquired new possessions. Guyane, which had always suffered from a feeling of insecurity, was overwhelmed

*when a rumor spread that someone in France had suggested that Guyanese be deprived of their French citizenship and reduced to the level of subjects in the new African colonies and deprived of their elected councils, people showed their consternation, protesting that they were not Africans, and hoped their elected officials would act.<sup>4</sup>*

With regard to the other French colonies in the Antilles, dependency upon the metropole was at an equal level. Like spurned suitors, they endeavored to show their worthiness for the metropole's favors. Representatives to parliament were, for example, instructed to petition the government to give Guadeloupe, Guyane and Martinique the same "honor to die for France," as the decree of July 5, 1889 had given young Frenchmen.

Two years before the start of World War I, obligatory military service was finally achieved in the colonies. The population of these colonies had the decisive trump in the argument to solidify their amalgamation into France. During World War II, moreover, a great number of Martinique's young men risked their lives crossing the Dominican Channel in small canoes to join Charles de Gaulle's forces. It is, however, in light of perceived interest by the colonials that such a show of fidelity is to be analyzed.

In the colonies under study, it was—until recently—unthinkable for the inhabitants to conceive themselves outside France's umbrella. And although intergenerational mobility seldom occurs, members of the lowest class have, since emancipation, continued to put their hopes for a better life for their children

into France's hands. Concomitantly, men of the lower class from these colonies are the ones who, in proportion to their numbers, have most often given their lives in France's wars, including those to maintain its colonies. The metropole has rewarded the colonies with departmentalization, and during visits to these colonies, French officials never fail to mention the fact that, "All France remembers the glorious part you played in her victories in the two World Wars."<sup>5</sup>

24 In response to permanent disappointments at its unfulfilled aspirations to be lifted from abject poverty, the lower class of the French Antilles and Guyane rejoin that of Haiti in the "belief in fatality [which] removes all blame from the oppressor."<sup>6</sup> To them, "the cause of misfortunes and poverty is attributed to God: He is fate."<sup>7</sup> Sighs are there as common as the nagging songs of the black birds! Besides impotent fatalism, the lower class has put the people of color on a pedestal. Confounding the achievements of this group with their biological and phenotypical proximity to the rulers, a color tinge becomes a panacea that only illegitimacy can satisfy. The person of color, in accordance with tradition, seldom enters into a legal union with a member of the lower class.

## II. Political Assimilation of Antilles/Guyane

The defeat of Napoleon III at the hands of the Prussians opened the door to the Third Republic on September 4, 1870. With the return of the Republic, the war between Royalists and Republicans ended—the latter having finally won. The leaders of 1848, particularly the indomitable abolitionist Victor Schoelcher, were present to reimpose universal male suffrage and representation of the colonies to parliament in Paris. The 1875 French constitution provided two seats for deputies and one for a senator from each colony in the French National Assembly. The Third Republic extended metropolitan laws to Guyane, Guadeloupe and Martinique—making these colonies, even at that time, virtual departments.

Five important events marked the growing political assimilation of these colonies into the French nation. They were: The institution of the jury system in 1880, the law of 1884 organizing the colonial municipalities according to the same system used in France, the 1884 government decision recognizing the right of workers to organize both in the metropole and in the colonies, the extension of the draft in 1911, and the application of the metropolitan custom system to the colonies in 1928.

It was, however, the opening of public schools in the colonies in the 1880s which was the most influential or far-reaching work in the history of French colonization during the Third Republic. Prior to that time, a great number of elementary schools in the colonies were run by Catholic congregations for the benefit of white youngsters with a few geared toward the education of the offspring of wealthy colored people. This latter group attended the "enseignement mutuel," which came into prominence in the 1820s. In 1851, an alternating system of scholarships for children of color and whites had been established by the Governor-General so that such children could attend a Lycee [secondary school] in France. There were no schools for free Blacks or slaves until 1882.

The conflict between the Republic and the Catholic Church, which at that time was still the ally of the Royalists, found its battlefield in the French educational system. Indeed, until 1882, the Church had dominated primary and secondary education in France. Half the boys and all of the girls in France attended Catholic parochial schools. Increasingly, to a growing number of Republicans, Catholic education loomed as a threat to the Republican equalitarian way of life. By dint of a series of laws passed by the Jules Ferry government, the Catholic orders were put out of the teaching business in French public schools. At the same time, the law of June 16, 1881, made education free, and the law of March 28, 1882, made elementary education compulsory.

There was, however, a world between one's house and the assigned school. The government made no provision, until 1946, to assist parents in the colonies in sending their children to elementary schools. Education was then, from the beginning, of an elitist orientation that was made more so by the competitive examinations for the French Civil Service. The government did provide extensively for scholarships to the Lycee, and for further studies at the university and the School of Colonial Administration in France.

The school is the cradle of acculturation. It is also at the school bench that colonization has its success assured. Had it been left to the white planters to decide the fate of education in the colonies, only their offspring would have enjoyed its fruits. In countless letters to the governors, the planters expressed their fears of educated Blacks in the colonies. But France perceived things otherwise, because education was an integral part of its concept of the "mission civilisatrice." The town of

Bordeaux in France, which had been the major port in the triangular trade, was made the center of education for all the French colonies. And, until 1973, curricula and major exams given in the colonies were prepared there. The curricula were steeped in the French tradition of classical education, and fitted perfectly with the predominant French notion that Africans and their descendants were devoid of culture whom France had a duty to impregnate with its own culture. History was a particular subject wherein France found the opportunity to show itself in the best light, and Africa—when not projected as a barbaric continent—was depicted as an "extension of Western conquest."

Until 1970, students who had successfully passed the baccalaureate and wished to study for careers other than elementary school teaching, had to travel to France. This trip to the metropole climaxed the elitist process of the assimilationist educational system. It was intended to immerse the colonial student in the bosom of French culture and then present him as a model to the colonies. Consequently, a Guadeloupean could shout in 1936, "Vive la France," upon seeing Governor Felix Eboué, who found the correlation "beautiful and was moved by it."<sup>8</sup> This was truly, as the philosopher Sartre has said, the "Golden Age" of assimilation.<sup>9</sup>

In 1909, a decree which would have joined the "old colonies" of Reunion, Guyane, Guadeloupe, and Martinique to the mother country as Overseas Departments of France, was prepared but never adopted because of France's involvement in World War I. At the end of the war, in which the colonies of the Caribbean sent more than 35,000 men (of whom more than 23,000 were wounded, killed or taken prisoner), assimilation as a French policy reached a dead end. A new policy muted from the old began to take shape.<sup>10</sup> That policy was equality status for the settler-colonies of Guyane, Reunion, Algeria, Guadeloupe, and Martinique. Equality meant departmentalization. This new policy of equality reached full bloom during the socialist-communist concordat of the Popular Front of 1936-1938.

The Jacobins of France had, since the French Revolution of 1789, given—congruent with their own interests—support to Antilles/Guyane's social claimants. As the drive for full French citizenship intensified during the inter-war years, the "New Jacobins," who in the 1920s and the 1930s had become (among other things) the trade unionists of the Communist-led union of the C.G.T. and C.G.T.U., supported—again openly—the colonials' as-

pirations. The French Communist Party was motivated at that time in its support and even recruitment of colonials to its banner by one overriding factor: the rise of fascism throughout Europe.

In France, the fear of Bolshevism was, in turn, manifested by the formation of extreme right royalist movements, such as the Croix de Feu (Cross of Fire) in 1927. These movements were opposed not only to organized labor unions, but also to the Republic itself and its "Rights of Man."

Many Blacks from Antilles/Guyane and elsewhere were naturally drawn into supporting and joining forces with the sworn enemy of Fascism: the Communists. It was, to a great extent, a case of the enemy of an enemy becoming a friend. The overwhelming cause for the support was the fact that in the Antilles the line was also drawn between the Creoles (who had aligned themselves with the Fascists) and the Blacks as well as the people of color, who enjoyed the support of the Communists against the Creoles.

The support which the Left needed from the colonies in the struggle against the Rightists was very instrumental in furthering the full citizenship aspirations of colonial Blacks. Felix Eboué, for example, was promoted to the governorship of Guadeloupe, thanks to the coming to power of the Popular Front. Eboué remained governor as long as the Front held power in France—two years.

The Fascist regime of Admiral Robert in the Antilles and the backing it received from the white Creoles (those with long colonial roots) caused a left-wing backlash at the end of World War II. "It [was] logical that the election that followed the war should have delegated two communist deputies out of three,"<sup>11</sup> wrote Fanon. One of these communist deputies was Aimé Césaire. His candidacy in the election of 1945 under the banner of the French Communist Party was in diametrical opposition to the views he had held in enunciating his concept of Negritude 10 years earlier. Césaire had maintained then, in his criticism of the *Legitime Defense* group, that subservience to a European ideology was to pre-empt the fact that the Black man was Black first and always.

It was, moreover, essentially from the Negritude stance, argued Césaire, that the Black man must extirpate himself from the "colonial situation"—not through a Western ideology or organization to which his Negritude would be subordinated. Yet in 1945, Césaire—abandoning the Negritude precepts as well as circumventing Léon Damas' arguments against "departmentalization" in *Return from Guyane*—embarked in the subserviency he had

warned against 10 years earlier. He faithfully followed the French Communist Party line, reverting in 1956 to his previous stance.

To Césaire and other Black leaders who believed in federation as a means toward leveling the power of the white Creoles, providing to Antilles/Guyane metropolitan social and economic benefits such as family allowances and salaries in relation to the cost of living, and protecting Antilles/Guyane against U.S. threats of annexation in payment for overdue war debts incurred by France, the French Communist Party was—as it had been against Fascism—the natural ally of all those who clamored for full French citizenship.

Susan Frutkin, in commenting on this alliance, stated:

*For practical purposes, the Communist Party of Martinique, as an arm of the French Communist Party, offered badly-needed support and experience as well as a vehicle to national political power for these new political leaders. This was of considerable importance for those who believed that solutions to [Antilles/Guyane's] problems might come from above, from a government which had the interests of the working class and possibly the [B]lack colonials at heart.<sup>12</sup>*

In the flush of triumph after the war at the demand of Césaire and others, the Fourth Republic's Constituent Assembly voted, March 19, 1946, law number 46-451 classifying as French Departments Guadeloupe, Martinique, Reunion, and Guyane. With this ultimate decree in France's equalitarian arsenal, the 311 years of colonization has culminated with Guyane, Guadeloupe and Martinique becoming integral parts of France. The Governor was replaced by Paris with a Prefect: the roads of the colonies became "route national;" the public services, the judiciary and the police force became an extension of the force in the metropole. In 1959, the Ministry of Overseas Departments and Territories (D.O.M.-T.O.M.) replaced the Ministry of the Interior, which until that time had had authority over them. The change of ministries has been the only major recognition by France.

In 1960, the locally-elected General Councils, which had until then held a purely advisory position vis-a-vis the Governor and the Prefect, were given an important vote in the finance and legislation regarding their respective departments. As part of the continuing departmentalization, the 1970s has seen the opening of an Antillean university whose

major outlet is in Guadeloupe. And a television station has also been set up in each department to broadcast nightly French news, translated American series, as well as shows imported from France.

In 1970, to underline the unique link France has had with the Caribbean colonies since the 17th century, they were—in addition to being departments—given the status of French Regions. The Prefects, therefore, serve departmental as well as regional functions. They also head locally-based advisory regional councils, which have limited financial and legislative powers. □

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