

French Colonial Legacies: Assimilatory Education and its Relevance in 21st Century Race Relations

By: Emma Massa

Thesis:

French assimilation came with negative outcomes, was self-serving for the French image, and came with racialized assumptions about indigenous Africans. For the scope of my research, I chose to focus on the countries of Morocco, Senegal and Cameroon, post-independence and examine not only what textbooks and children's literature from the late 90's and early 2000's showed in relation to the legacies of French colonization, I also will examine present day indigenous voices and what they have said about the negative impacts of colonial legacies in their countries. Individuals stated that they didn't know why they learned what they did, what they learned was ambiguous, they felt outside of their own culture, etc. This poster details two examples from my research.



Figure 1:1 "Massanbo School 1 a pupil reads on the board while the teacher another pupil looks on." Practicing enchainment.¹



Figure 1:2 "Ribenabo School 2 teacher writes in French."²

Desultory Assimilation:

Researcher Genevoix Nana studied the impact of English and French educational legacies in two Cameroonian bilingual schools (pictured above). She notes "the stress on learning French and getting words right from the start was such that pupils' mother tongue was viewed as a threat to their learning of the school language."³ A disparity was that the French that was taught was Basque region French, which is different than traditional Parisian French. French schools provided low levels of education that were not equivalent to institutions in metropolitan France.⁴ The French never intended to create indigenous elites who might effectively compete with them. Assimilation in French occupied countries was meant to keep Africans in their perceived 'place'.⁵

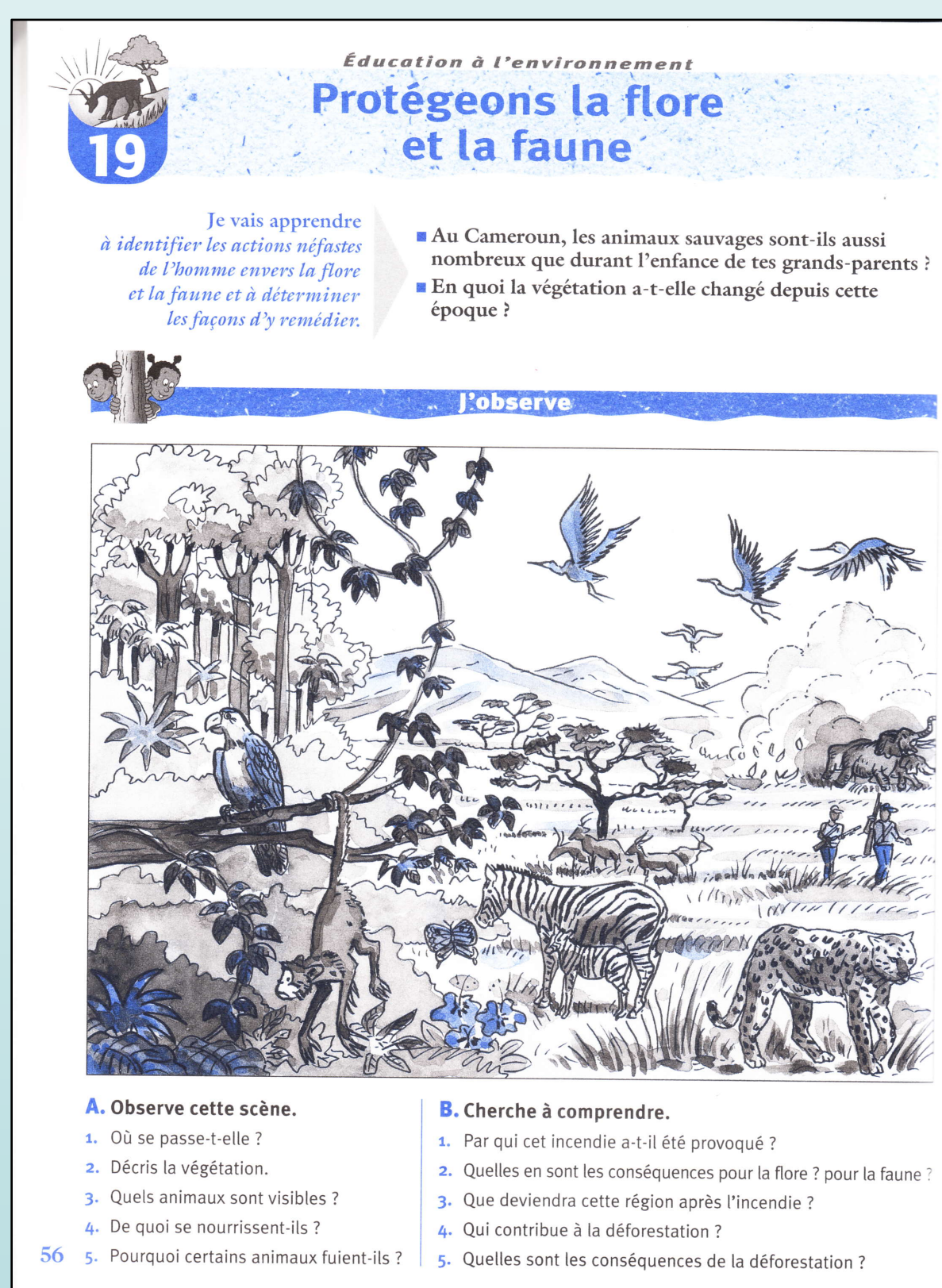


Figure 1:3⁶

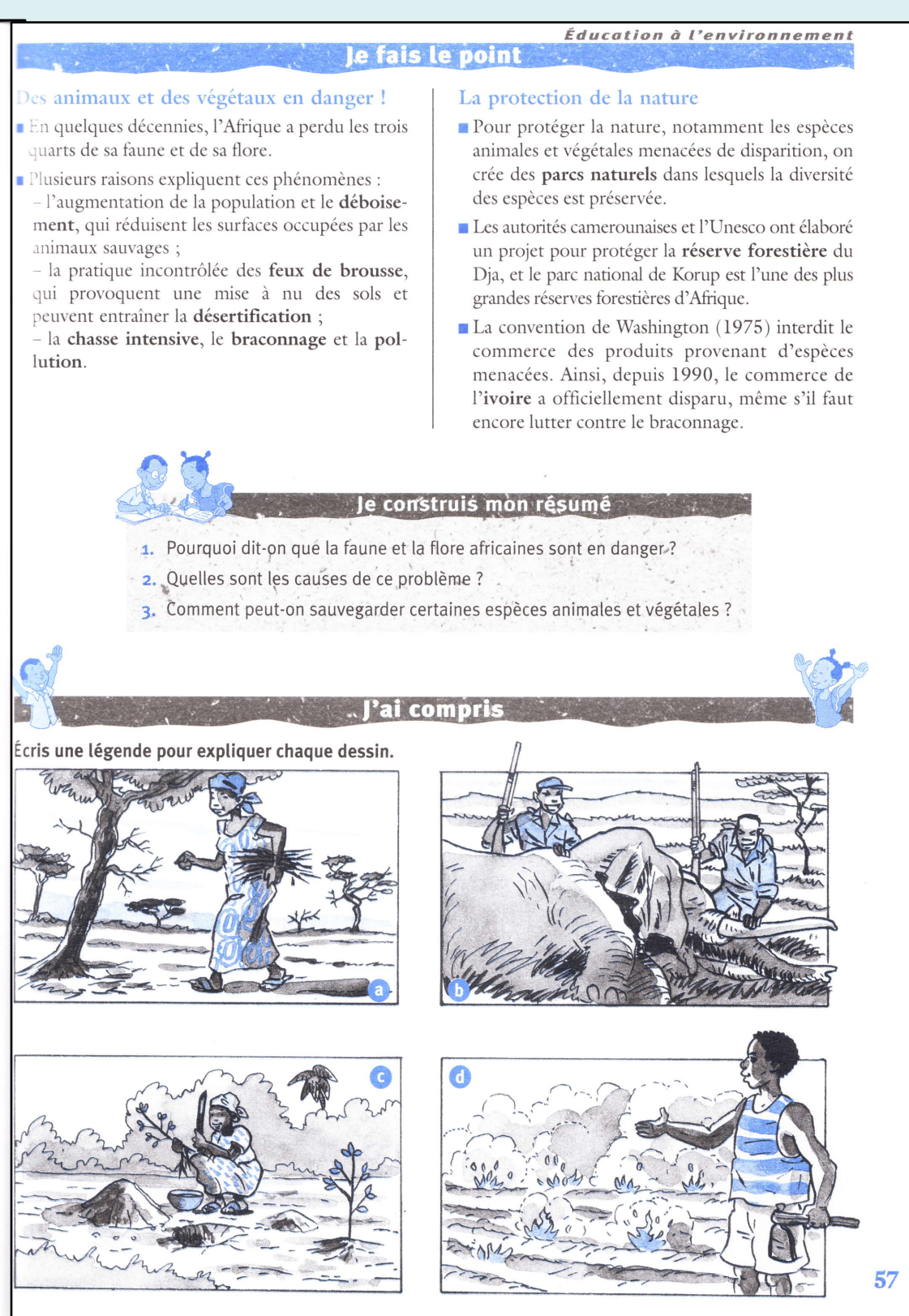


Figure 1:4⁷

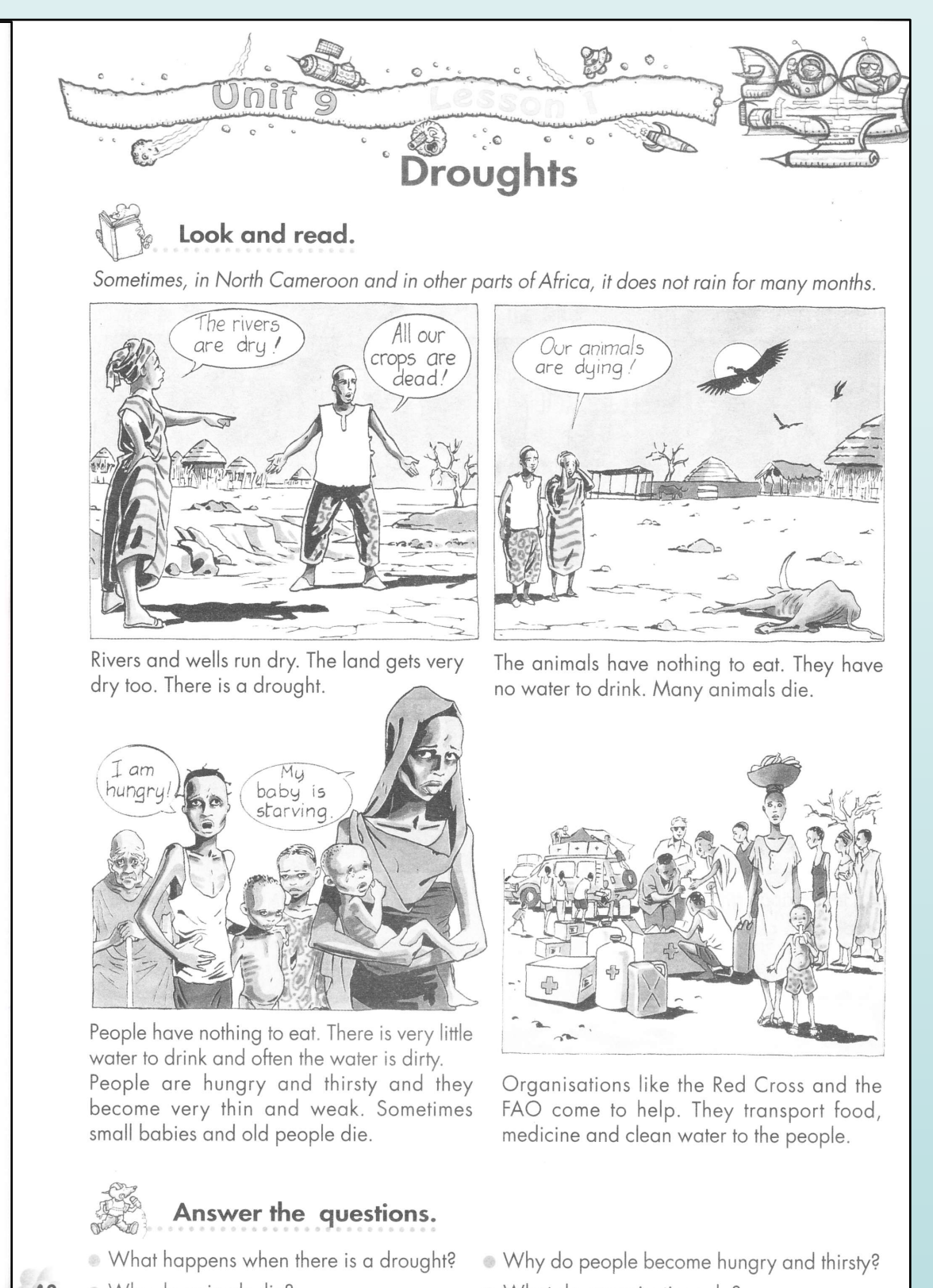


Figure 1:5⁸

Racialized and Stereotypic Assumptions:

Pictured above, Cameroonian students, in the early 2000's, are given prompts at the top stating that plants and animals are in danger and then gives them a section on the protection of nature. Note: the actions are performed by indigenous Africans; this subtly plays a role in racism. The prompts are **le déboisement**- deforestation, **feux de brousse**- bush fires, **la désertification**- desertification, **la chasse intensive**- intensive hunting, **le braconnage**- poaching and **la pollution**- pollution.(Figures 1:3-4) This example as well as *Pupil's Book (CM2)* published by Macmillan, portray common themes the news airs about the misfortunes of African countries. Drought, famines, and blights. White westerners then are coming in to 'rescue' them through foreign aid. (Figure 1:5)

Study Abroad:

I was able to experience firsthand French Education and its nationalistic impact on school aged children and their parents. In an impromptu conversation with my host sister introduced her experience as Moroccan schoolgirl. The amount of information they learned about France instead of Morocco was eye opening. When she was showing me her schoolbooks and novels, I noticed that they all were based in France: white wealthy European girls were all she had exposure to.

Conclusion:

French assimilation in colonial education came with 3 major connotations for indigenous Africans in Morocco, Senegal and Cameroon: major negative outcomes, was self-serving for the French image, came with racialized assumptions with indigenous Africans and was quite contradictory in nature.

References:

- ¹ Genevoix Nana, Children, *Their Schools and What They Learn on Beginning Primary School: English and French Educational Legacies in Cameroon Schools*, (Cambridge: Scholars Publisher, 2013), 165.
- ² Genevoix Nana, Children, *Their Schools and What They Learn on Beginning Primary School: English and French Educational Legacies in Cameroon Schools*, (Cambridge: Scholars Publisher, 2013), 201.
- ³ Genevoix Nana, Children, *Their Schools and What They Learn on Beginning Primary School: English and French Educational Legacies in Cameroon Schools*, (Cambridge: Scholars Publisher, 2013), 163.
- ⁴ Peggy R. Sabatier, "Elite" Education in French West Africa: The Era of Limits, 1903-1945." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 11, no. 2 (1978): 248.
- ⁵ Curtis Keim, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the African Mind*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009), 5.
- ⁶ Champions, *Sciences et Éducation À L'environnement Hygiène Pratique et Éducation à la Santé CM2* (EDICEF, 2003)56-57.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Champions, *Pupil's Book CM2* (Macmillan, 2002) 48.