

France and Britain in tropical Africa
The intellectual consequences of a contrasted decolonisation

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The confrontation of the diverse orientations adopted by English speaking and French speaking research on Africa is complex, because we don't have only two partners: English and French-speaking scholars, but at least four of them: on one side, of course, the British and French founders of the field, which began to be explored with the years of decolonisation, but who were early followed by Anglophone and Francophone African researchers whose conceptions often opposed them new ideas. Besides, we don't have to forget a growing English-speaking American group, itself complex and sometimes contradictory because including African Americans researchers, with Africans from the diasporas, and, of source, white researchers who, once more, were the early founders of the discipline.

To better apprehend our topic, we will focus on my discipline: history of Africa, and we will privilege the early years of divergence, when British (and French) schools were not yet superseded by the American school of knowledge. We also focus on tropical Africa, putting aside South African historiography, which began earlier and was quite special, paralyzed as it was for many years inside South Africa by the *apartheid* regime.

My hypothesis is that British and French Imperialism, and especially British and French modes of decolonisation, much influenced the trends of research both sides, or rather four sides: British, French, Anglophone and Francophone research. This may help understanding why, while British and Anglophone research had for a while, in the late 50s and early 60s, a tendency to converge, on the opposite French and Francophone research then separately evolved. Then, after independence, rather the opposite occurred, French and Francophone research more or less going hand in hand for a while when Anglophone research more and more got its independence rather earlier than francophone one. Nowadays everything changed a lot, in particular with the

growing importance of American and African-American social sciences which themselves knew varied stages: they classically began in the 60s with the leading role of two white scholar, Philip Curtin and Jan Vansina (University of Wisconsin). They were soon enriched by the provocative influence of French and Francophone marxist anthropological school thanks to a number of translations into English in the early 70s (Claude Meillassoux, Samir Amin, etc.). Then, there was a new shift. From the 80s onwards, French scholarship usually rejected strongly this previous marxist heritage, not being aware that the same had been absorbed and was re-interpreted on the other side of the Atlantic. It was a time when the francophone world was not yet aware of so many books written in English. Francophone research was smaller in size and it globally became less inventive while the modern American school took the floor. This became obvious with the recent disputes concerning postcolonial studies. Fortunately, a cosmopolitan marriage occurs now, thanks to francophone African researchers now teaching in Anglophone (or even German) universities and nurtured with American knowledge, who re-imported in the francophone world, including France, their now international knowledge.

Things were not so simple. Meanwhile, diverse streams of African research occurred in diverse directions. Nevertheless, we'll try to summarize them avoiding as much as possible to exaggeratedly schematize it. My first point is to explain how different were the timing and trends of British and French decolonisation. Thence, I will infer why it influenced so much the Anglophone-Francophone historiographical divide.

Constrasted Decolonisations

In Sub-Saharan Africa, British and French colonialisms were rather similar, aiming at collecting the more head-taxes possible, exporting cash crops and recruiting the more male miners and workers possible paying them the least possible, and opposing as long as possible the making of trade unions and political parties. On the opposite, British and French de-colonisations were more contrasted, in spite of an apparent similar process: true war was usually avoided, except in the case of Kenya and Cameroon, the mother country modes of

government or constitution were adopted, and aid and welfare began the same way. As a matter of fact, the timing of de-colonisation was extremely different:

British decolonisation

For Britain, the very first de-colonisation occurred with the war of liberation, as early as in 1776. Then, the political shock for British was huge, as they believed for a while that it was the end of their economic prevalence. In fact, they early discovered that American independence was not a drawback for their own industrial revolution. Therefore, they did not hesitate to de-colonise all along the 19th century. Of course, they first de-colonised “White colonies”, such as Australasia or Canada; but their first African independence occurred as early as 1910 in South Africa in spite of the south African gold wealth, even if it concerned more white Africans than Black ones. As for their tropical colonies, as early as the midst 19th century the Cipaye riot in India had made British understand that Indian independence would come one day or another, and that it did not necessarily mean an economic drama. Sure, they thought that Sub-Saharan Africa independence would come later than it did in 1957 Ghana, but they were already accustomed to accept it. In other words, British, thanks to the Commonwealth building, had unceasingly learn that economic and political supremacy was not directly connected with their formal empire.

Consequently, British colonial education policy was very different from the French one. British were favourable to a separate education for natives, respecting local customs and local languages. Nevertheless, as education mostly was private and based on voluntary missionaries, it began earlier and was usually larger than in Francophone Africa. Therefore, as early as the 50s, there were a number of young African scholars (in Gold coast, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, East Africa, and even Northern Rhodesia) while there were quasi none in Francophone Africa nearly exclusively concerned with primary education.

French late Imperialism

For France it was very different indeed. Never the Imperial mind was so strong as in the midst 20th century. It began to flourish with the International colonial exhibition in Paris 1931. Then it expanded during WWII, as well on the

Vichy regime side as on the *France libre* side¹. For the former, Marshal Petain used the Protocol of armistice to enhance French imperial mind, as the agreement with Nazis included that French would keep their navy to protect their colonies:² therefore Petain used it to let people believe that he remained independent from Germany. French colonial propaganda was greatly developed, there was a train for colonies several weeks a year, several colonial exhibitions and “colonial weeks” were organized, Colonial imperialism was taught at school, etc. As for De Gaulle, he needed to proclaim himself, and to have himself recognized, especially by Franklin Roosevelt, President of the US, who had a tendency to think that the Vichy regime was the legal French regime, that he was the right chief of French government. Therefore, he needed to proclaim it settled on a French territory. As the mother country was occupied, he did it in French Equatorial Africa, namely in Brazzaville, first with a speech in 1940, then by a national conference in January-February 1944.

Therefore, at the end of World War II, everybody in France, as well Gaullists as Vichysts, agreed only on one point: France was “la plus grande France”, from Dunkerque (a port in the North of France) to Tamanrasset (an oasis in the south of Algeria), and, besides, including all other French colonies. That was the reason why the French constitutional assembly unanimously voted in 1946, first the Lamine Gueye law, from the name of a Senegalese deputy in the French Chamber who proposed it, endowing all French former natives with French nationality, then the Union française, which asserted the same, making of France and its colonies the same whole.³ Nevertheless, the first constitution, at the beginning of 1946, was not accepted, and the second one, end of the same year, came back on the topic: former natives only received the Union française nationality, that more or less meant the principle without the reality. Nevertheless, there was a clear result: French Colonial people received a full

¹ C. Coquery-Vidrovitch (2006). “De la culture coloniale à la postcolonialité : le rôle de Vichy. In *Histoire de la colonisation. Réhabilitations, falsifications, et instrumentalisations* (Sébastien Jahan & Alain Ruscio eds). Paris: Les Indes savantes,: 73-90.

² Convention d’armistice franco-allemand, section « Démobilisation de la flotte ». . in Jacques Varin, *Été 40 : cent jours qui ébranlèrent la France*, Éditions de la Courtille, 1980: 119.

³ Proposed by Senegalese socialist deputy Lamine Gueye , voted April 25, 1946, promulgated May 7, 1946. But limited by the « Union française citizenship voted by the second constitution (end 1946). C. Coquery-Vidrovitch. 2001. “Nationalité et citoyenneté en Afrique occidentale française : originaires et citoyens dans le Sénégal colonial”, *Journal of African History*, 42: 303-305.

right to circulate inside the empire, namely to come to France as migrant workers without any pass. This has been well forgotten today. As a matter of fact, as the historian Fred Cooper demonstrated it,⁴ there was in the late 1940s' a kind of convergence between French colonizers and colonised people: these ones agreed with the French assimilatory conception, as French nationality ensured them with personal freedom and equality with French citizens; they were helped with this belief by the building of so-called 4 communes of Senegal, St Louis, Gorée, Rufisque and Dakar, which were made French municipalities in 1916, making of so-called *Originaires*, who had been born in these four cities, complete French citizens. Therefore for many years, as late as the dozen of de-colonization years, because of this model which did not exist at all in the British Empire, many francophone African politicians did not claim for independence, but rather for French citizenship.

Therefore, at the end of the 50s and beginning of the 60s, colonial history was completely divergent between Britain and France. In Britain, India, the jewel of British tropical colonies, became independent in 1947. On the contrary, the French empire looked like more united than ever; the introduction of the 1944 preamble of Brazzaville declaration proclaimed that, not even independence, but self-governing was completely out of question, even in the long run. This was verified by three wars of liberation that France did not avoid: in Indochina, in Algeria and in Cameroon.

Contrasted Historiographies

These opposite streams resulted in different trends for studying African history, both sides: European and African sides.

The Anglophone advance

In West Africa, African history was borne with decolonisation. This is the reason why it began to organize in the Anglophone world (who had decolonised India in 1947) nearly one generation before the francophone one. The university level was much more developed in colonial Nigeria, Sierra Leone or Gold Coast

⁴ Frederick Cooper. 2009. « From Imperial Inclusion to Republican Exclusion ». *Frenchness and the African Diaspora* (Charles Tshimanga & Didier Gondola eds), Indiana University Press: 91-119.

where several universities have existed for long. Makerere technical school was established (in Uganda) in 1922. It gave birth to what was called a little later the “Dar es Salaam school”, well developed as early as the foundation of the East African University in 1963. On the British side, it began still earlier, with the foundation, in 1947, of two Faculty positions in African History: the former at the SOAS, university of London (Roland Oliver, who became later the head of the School), and John Fage, a great historian, first located at Legon university in Ghana (still then Gold Coast), before creating his department at Birmingham university a few years later. In French Africa, the unique colonial establishment (William Ponty school) trained primary schoolteachers, before Dakar university was created only in 1957, after it functioned a couple of years before as a college depending from Bordeaux (just a law school had existed since 1949).⁵ A French faculty position was only created in 1961 (Henri Brunshwig at the EPHE), before two faculty positions at last were created at the Sorbonne in 1962, in medieval and in modern African history, both of them being given to former colonial officers, as African history was not yet a recognized speciality.

This led to a contrasted formation of African younger scholars: Anglophone students were from the beginning, since the end of WWII, trained by British academics, with the same methods as their masters. Francophone younger scholars were trained by French specialists only from the beginning of the 60s, one generation later. Beforehand, they had to invent their own methods to master African knowledge. Therefore, Anglophone historians had written a lot on their countries history in the early 60s, with somewhat of an Oxbridge style, and they founded a classical African history. They were trained at home before going for their Ph. D. to England, and the best of them were graduated before independence or just after, specially from Nigeria and Gold Coast/Ghana: first generation African historians and anthropologists trained before independence were many and are well known, such as Ade Ajayi, I.A. Akinjobin, K. O. Dike, S. O. Biobaku, or Bethwell Ogot the doyen of Kenyan historians or, of course, Julius Nyerere (see Awasom’s paper on the question).

⁵ Senghor even asked for Dakar University – the only French speaking university South of the Sahara which was given its autonomy only in 1958 (as the eighteenth^t French university) – remaining French after independence (which of course was denied).

A provocative Francophone first generation

On the French side, there were nearly none.⁶ When they appeared, they were ignored or fiercely discussed by French academics: this was the case for Cheikh Anta Diop, who “rediscovered” the leading role of ancient Egypt for sub-Saharan African history, but whose Ph. D. was first denied in 1954 in Paris⁷, and accepted only in 1960. Cheikh Anta Diop’s ideas were commonsense, even if he somewhat exaggerated his thesis. For this reason, he was not accepted by classical scholars, including British *and* anglophone scholars who ignored him. They looked at him as a “French whim”. As a matter of fact, his ideas fitted with Francophone Black intellectuals’ ideas on *negritude*. This was inherited from their mother country so-called assimilationist theory which aimed at transforming every African mind into a “French mind”. Therefore Francophone Africans reacted, enhancing their own culture. On the opposite, Anglophone native people were not given the right to become Englishminded, and therefore they claimed for it: that is the reason why Wole Soyinka fiercely compared by joke *negritude* and *tigritude*. *Negritude* and Cheikh Anta Diop’s theories on the prominence of African Egypt were typically Francophone claims which were nearly impossible to understand by Anglophone people. The only one who succeeded in making it understand by his Anglophone counterparts was Alioune Diop. This fine Senegalese writer created in 1947 in Paris, with a team of young bilingual African and Caribbean fellows, his African periodical, *Présence africaine*, aiming at enhancing *africanity*, i.e. African culture and literature as equal as other world cultures.⁸ His journal was patronized by famous French intellectuals, such as philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and sociologist Georges Balandier. Alioune Diop played an extremely important part for the story of Francophone African culture praising *negritude*, but he remained nearly ignored by French and British africanists of the time.

⁶ Sophie Dulucq. 2009. *Aux origines de l'histoire de l'Afrique. Historiographie coloniale et réseaux de savoir en France et dans les colonies françaises d'Afrique subsaharienne (de la fin du 19^{ème} siècle aux indépendances)*, Presses universitaires de Toulouse.

⁷ Cheikh Anta Diop. 1954. *Nations nègres et Culture*, Paris, *Présence africaine*.

⁸ Valentin Mudimbe (ed.), 1992. *Présence africaine 1947-1987, The Surreptitious Speech*, Duke University Press,

Therefore, in the first ten years after independence, African knowledge on Africa diverged:⁹ Anglophone scholars, well trained by British academics, published a remarkable number of serious works, mainly nationalist studies, claiming for the place of history in African societies but not so different from their British masters, going along the classical university tendency to write history mainly with written records. Francophone scholars were still silent because not yet trained, or not listened to because they did not necessarily accept the classical mother-country way of thinking and writing¹⁰. They were very few but daring: the very first global history of Africa South of the Sahara written in French was published by a Burkinabe (then from Upper Volta) historian, the first Francophone historian to obtain the French difficult and praised competition known as *Agregation d'histoire*. Joseph Ki-Zerbo had been writing it for ten years; he was ignored by Anglophone young scholars because he was not translated (this impressive sum for the time is just being translated in 2011!). The book was published in 1972,¹¹ ten years after the two first British historians of Africa, John Fage and Roland Oliver, published the first edition of their very known and reprinted *Short History of Africa*. Therefore Anglophone were trained by British scholars, Francophone were rather trained *against* or at least without French scholars. Of course we need to introduce light and shade into this assertion: Prof. Ogot struggled to introduce the study of Oral Traditions in the field. This also was French Prof. Yves Person's main struggle, at the university of Dakar, then of Paris, in spite of a great defiance from other French academics.

In spite of this different schedule in Africa, in the former mother countries, both sides, a modern way of writing African history started at one and the same time:¹² at the eve of independence, a British writer and a French writer, both of them not historians at first, launched in Britain and in France a new

⁹ C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997- " Réflexions comparées sur l'historiographie africaniste de langue française et anglaise", *Politique africaine*, 66: 91-100.

¹⁰ The most classical one, but for his topic (premodern Atlantic slave trade), was another Senegalese historian, Abdoulaye Ly, who defended his dissertation in 1956 but did not produce more because he turned to leftist politics.

¹¹ Joseph Ki-Zerbo 1972. *Histoire de l'Afrique noire : d'hier à demain*, Paris : Hatier.

¹² See C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1999. "The Rise of Francophone African Social Science: From Colonial Knowledge to Knowledge of Africa", *Out of One, Many Africas, Reconstructing the Study and Meaning of Africa* (William G. Martin and Michael O. West eds),. University of Illinois Press: Urbana & Chicago: 39-53.

mode of discovering African history before colonialism: on the English side, a journalist, Basil Davidson in 1959¹³, on the French side a geographer, Jean Suret-Canale in 1958¹⁴, both of them were marxist scientists (Suret-Canale was a communist). For years, students used their basic books. Another common point was launching the same year 1960 two innovative specialised journals: *Journal of African History* in Britain, *Cahiers d'Études africaines* in France¹⁵.

After independence

After independence, differences maintained. In Anglophone African universities inherited from the colonial period, scientific collaboration went on hand in hand between young radical scholars, either British (or Canadian) or national ones, endowed with the same diplomas acquired in the same universities. Their collaboration was fruitful for two major schools: the so-called school of Dar es Salaam, and the school of Ibadan (where Michel Crowder collaborated with Ade Ajayi). Meantime, in the only Francophone University of Dakar till the 70s, there was a special weigh: that of the “Thèse d’Etat”, a masterpiece demanded to become Full Professor in France (and in francophone universities till a few years ago). Very few African students were able to write it, by lack of time or of previous formation. Therefore, till the early 70s, Dakar university was ruled by French Professors: collaboration with African colleagues was not equal but hierarchised, and all African students in History needed to come to France to achieve their Graduate studies. Historical graduate studies became possible in Dakar only in 1974, when we resorted to subterfuge: I was recognized by Dakar university as head of the graduate school thanks to an annual visit (six weeks a year) to cover the reality of teaching and work realized by my Senegalese colleagues. This lasted until, at last, a few of them defended their thèse d’Etat, only at the very beginning of the 80s. Nevertheless, from the 70s onwards, an African “École de Dakar” was borne. Nowadays accompanied by other universities in other States, it is still one of the major cradles of

¹³ Basil Davidson. 1959. *Old Africa rediscovered : the story of Africa's forgotten past*, London: Gollancz.

¹⁴ Jean Suret-Canale. 1958. *Afrique noire occidentale et centrale*, Paris: Éditions sociales.

¹⁵ We may note another coincidence comparing the origins of social science research in Africa: the *Rhodes-Livingstone Institute* was created in Northern Rhodesia in 1937, while the *Institut français d’Afrique noire* (now *Institut fondamental d’Afrique noire*) was created in Dakar in 1938.

Francophone African historians. A proof of how much thèse d'Etat brakes research is Cameroun: Cameroun being bilingual, English and French, is the only Francophone state where research is more developed at the university level, because promotion is connected with Ph. D. rather than with thèse d'Etat. Thèse d'Etat was suppressed several years ago in French Universities, but only last year in Dakar.

Anyhow, in both cases, African research remains closely connected with English speaking or French speaking research in the former colonies. This is clear when you look at some specialised fields, as I did a number of years ago with an overview paper dealing with research in urban history¹⁶. In Anglophone view, urban history is dominated by sociological and cultural fields. In Africa, cities have been mainly studied by sociologists, focusing on urban social and cultural hybridations, with a special look on urban associations. In French speaking Africa, urban studies are rather dominated by spatial studies; the first scholars to question urbanisation were geographers, then urban planners, focusing on space and the built rather than on culture and the mind. You might go on with comparisons in other fields: African research is largely influenced by the language used by research, all the more so as the language barrier was great not so long ago between English and French. Ideas circulated only through translations. This was extremely important for French influence in the 60s and 70s, when an exciting series of French Marxist studies were translated in English, dealing with so-called Third World and under-developed countries and discussing African questions (Samir Amin, Claude Meillassoux, Arghiri Emmanuel, and even myself, when my article on an "African Mode of Production" was translated three times within a few years!)¹⁷ It was a time when most French scholars little read English while many British scholars still read French (nowadays the opposite is true: French more and more read English, while most

¹⁶ "The Process of Urbanization in Africa. From the Origins to the Beginning of Independence. An Overview Paper". 1991. *African Studies Review*, vol. 34(1): 1-98 (originally *key-note paper*, *African Studies Association*, Atlanta, USA, 1989).

¹⁷ My joke in the 70s, when I was only known in the Anglophone world by this paper, was to say that my name was "Ms Mode of Production". It was published in English: - in *Perspectives on the African Past*. 1972 (G.Wesley Johnson ed.), Temple: Boston,: 33-51. - in *Relations of Production* (David Seddon ed.), East Anglia University: 261-288. -in *African Social Studies* (Gutkind & Waterman eds.) 1976. Londres: Heinemann, 1977: 77-92.

English speakers no longer read French). Unfortunately, with the decay of such theories, French intellectual influence declined. French lost contact for a while with English thinking. Then, reading in English becoming more and more necessary, the gap comes to an end, but meanwhile misunderstandings accumulated.

This was recently confirmed with controversial disputes. One is specifically French: the reticence facing so-called subaltern and postcolonial studies. Here we come back to what I explained at the beginning of the paper: the different timing of the Imperial mind in Britain and in France. Obviously, British leading research on the South aims at studying the Orient rather than Africa: thence the at once echoing of Edward Said's critic on *Orientalism*¹⁸. It is revealing that a similar critic of *Africanism* was also published in English about the same moment, while the author, Valentin Mudimbe, is a French speaking Congolese. Why was *Orientalism* translated in French nearly at once (1980), while Mudimbe's works, much more important given French proximity with Africa, is still waiting to be translated, while it was well-received in the Anglophone world?¹⁹ My answer is: partly at last, it may be explained because British had been prepared for long, and they were ready for de-colonisation; French still are not. "England-Africa" not actually ever exist, while "Françafrique" still is. It is quite interesting to note that postcolonial ideas (borne as *subaltern studies* in India) sound nearly obsolete in the English-speaking world as they were repeated and repeated again since the early 80s, while they have been, till very recently, fiercely opposed by French scholars, among the most known and supposed to be competent academics on African studies (Jean-François Bayart,²⁰ Jean-Loup Amselle,²¹ among a number of others). It may partly be because of a typical reciprocal French and British cultural "nationalism", making both of them defiant towards the competing partner; more convincing is the fact that postcolonial studies ask us to get rid of our Western viewpoint and instinctive feeling of superiority. This prejudice was inherited from centuries of our

¹⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978. Translated *L'Orientalisme: l'Orient créé par l'Occident.*, Le Seuil, 1980, second ed. 2005.

¹⁹ Valentin Mudimbe. 1988. *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994. *The Idea of Africa. ibid.*,

²⁰ Jean-François Bayart. 2010. *Les études postcoloniales, un carnaval académique*, Paris, Karthala.,

²¹ Jean-Loup Amselle. 2008. *L'Occident décroché. Enquête sur les postcolonialismes*, Paris, Stock.

“colonial library”, preventing us to listen to others’ voices which may be as well founded as ours. Surprisingly, this is still quasi impossible for a number of my French fellow-citizens, including historians and anthropologists. Only our imperial history and unconscious heritage allows to explain why a number of them rejected a few common sense ideas, such as: France culture is made of all its heritages, including colonial heritage, therefore colonial history is an essential part of France history; we cannot understand France history without including French imperial history, we don’t have to put it only as a side parenthesis²². Probably (specialists will tell if I am right or not) British imperial history was so inclusive of British history that this kind of denial is less possible there?

Once more, Francophone African historians and French historians have a tendency to oppose one another. Rejected by most French social scientists, anthropologists as well as historians, as useless (Bayart) and even dangerous (Amselle) concepts, postcolonial ideas were first imported in France by two Senegalese historians teaching in US universities at the very end of the 1990s²³. They claim for *afrocentricity*, which is not synonymous with *afrocentrism* as a few French scholars misunderstood it.²⁴ Afrocentricity means that Africans claim for their right to write their history using an African viewpoint confronting it with world history, and no more just depending on European history and knowledge. Sure, this conception has been, for now half a century, the purpose of so-called “Cultural area-studies” launched by historian Fernand Braudel in his EHESS (École des hautes Études en Sciences sociales), inspired from the faculty structure of American universities. It was generalized by French “Africanist” researchers, whose temptation was nevertheless to rather avoid international confrontations.

Francophone researchers, African specialists from Africa and from the diasporas, definitely are more open than French ones; ironically, the new generations also are becoming more open than Anglophone (African, American

²² See: C. Coquery-Vidrovitch. 2009. *Enjeux politiques de l'histoire coloniale*, Marseille, Agone,

²³ Mohamed Mbodj. 1998. Conclusion, in *Des historiens africains en Afrique : logiques du passé et dynamiques actuelles*, Paris: L'Harmattan (laboratoire Tiers-Mondes, Afrique): 351-355.

Mamadou Diouf (éd.). 1999. *L'historiographie indienne en débat : colonialisme, nationalisme et sociétés postcoloniales*, Paris, Karthala ; Amsterdam: SEPHIS.

²⁴ François-Xavier Fauvelle. 2000. Introduction *Les afrocentrismes. L'histoire des Africains entre Égypte et Amérique*, Paris, Karthala,

and even British) researchers because they fluently master more languages: French besides English, therefore easily enough Portuguese and Italian, and of course at least two or three local and national African languages. Nowadays, African studies have unceasingly to be internationally confronted to other viewpoints and other specialists all over the world. This is the main contribution of postcolonial studies, and the reason why they sometimes do not fit with a not yet decolonised France.