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African Dynamics in a Multipolar World

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*African Dynamics in a Multipolar World*

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**FOR JEAN-PIERRE CHAUVEAU: A PERSONAL TAKE, BY HENRI-**

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## Abstract

*The history of anthropology constituted itself at the interface of changing contexts, persons (academic and non-academic anthropologists) and institutions (research organizations, funding agencies, political and bureaucratic authorities). The recent publication of a Festschrift for Jean-Pierre Chauveau<sup>1</sup> and the panel we organized around the book for the ECAS conference in Lisbon, June 2013, provided two ideal occasions for an in-depth discussion on these complex linkages. The long run of this articulation of the country's history, the institutional commitment of ORSTOM/IRD and the personal involvement of Jean-Pierre Chauveau has allowed the latter to study in depth a wide range of topics, with ever more inspiration, thus building an 'anthropology between power and history' (the title of the Festschrift, published at the end of 2011, to honour his work). His deep involvement permitted Chauveau to bring out the interconnection between the region's plantation economy, issues of land and migration, a long-term history of settlement and exchange, state formation, the dispositifs of development and state formation, colonial and post-colonial governmentality. The productivity of this articulation of context, researcher and institution is also borne out by the broad audience interested in this work: specialists of Ivory Coast but also colleagues and observers interested in politics and issues of development in general. Henri-Michel Yéré takes here the opportunity to pursue this conversation and links in this stimulating paper different strands of the reflection – on development, state making and belonging – by focusing on the Ivorian postcolonial trajectory and the intellectual and political debates its qualification nurtured.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Une anthropologie entre pouvoirs et histoire. Conversations autour de l'œuvre de Jean-Pierre Chauveau*, eds Eyolf Jul-Larsen, Pierre-Joseph Laurent, Pierre-Yves Le Meur et Eric Léonard, 2011, Paris, IRD-APAD-Karthala

First foremost I would like to thank Jean-Pierre Chauveau and Peter Geschiere for inviting me to participate in this round table. What I am about to deliver here is not so much a paper as much as it is a series of reflections and notes, some of them drawn from my personal experiences. What you will not have are thoroughly researched conceptual contraptions; rather, I shall speak of the ways in which I encountered the work of Jean-Pierre Chauveau and how it inspired me.

Jean-Pierre: at the time of your retirement, Côte d'Ivoire, the country in which you have conducted such rigorous research, whose social and political dynamics you have unearthed many times in a brilliant way, that country is still not as far away from the edge of the precipice as we, here collectively, would wish it to be.

This situation stands in stark contrast to earlier times. In the 1960s and 1970s Ivorian studies had as a main bone of contention the question of knowing whether one could speak of an “exception” when it came to the Ivory Coast, as opposed to its neighbours and to the rest of the African continent.<sup>2</sup> A few decades later, wisdom commands that we reassess our readings, and that we pay renewed attention to the writings of those who warned us that there was no “miracle” taking place at all then; that the use of such language had a tendency to obscure the reality of the multiplicity of societal dynamics at play then; and that those realities were by far more interesting than the posture of admiration which participated in the validation of the idea that Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the political leader of the country at the time himself was an

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<sup>2</sup> For example: Zolberg, Arsitide, *One Party Government in the Ivory Coast* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964); Zolberg, Aristide and Foster, Philip (eds), *Ghana and the Ivory Coast: perspectives on modernisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Wallerstein, Immanuel, *Africa: the politics of independence, an interpretation of modern African history* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961); Campbell, Bonnie, ‘L’idéologie de la croissance: une analyse du Plan quinquennal de développement 1971-1975 de la Côte d’Ivoire’, in *the Canadian Journal of African Studies*, volume X, No 2, pp. 211-233; Tickner, Vincent, ‘International: Local Capital: The Ivory Coast Sugar Industry’, in the *Review of African Political Economy*, No 8, Capitalism in Africa, January-April 1977, pp. 119-121.

exceptional man who lent some of his precious aura to the country he led.<sup>3</sup> Jean-Pierre: you were of those who claimed that calling the country a “miracle” or an “exception” was equivalent to handing over the fate of Côte d’Ivoire to higher forces exerting control outside of the reach of the country itself. The country was made to look as if it were a mere function of trends it did not master, a spectator of its own life whose driving forces were sitting in what Samir Amin famously named the “Centre.”<sup>4</sup> Yet this did not make you a partisan of the Centre-Periphery approach, for as such the Centre-Periphery approach was nothing other than a mirror reflection of the “Ivorian Miracle” wishers, as it did not break the narrative of Ivorian social dynamics being a function of phenomena outside the reach of the Ivorians themselves.

This will never be said enough, so let me repeat it: One striking dimension of your work, Jean-Pierre, is that if one took the time to look into the many observations you have made and insights you have had about Côte d’Ivoire, one would be able to predict much of what has happened there in the 1990s and in the first decade of this century . One could say that this is an easy statement after the fact; but then I would like to tell a bit of a personal story here.

When in 1998, the incidents of Tabou took place, I was a second year economics student. A number of deadly clashes had taken place between “foreigners” – allochtones - referred to as Burkinabè farmers and local autochthones Krumen farmers in Tabou, an important cocoa-producing region in south-western Côte d’Ivoire. Broadly speaking, the clashes revolved around who was allowed to use land. The most spectacular outcome of these clashes was that up to 12,000 Burkinabè had to be “repatriated”. Such massive departures had not taken place since the riots of 1958, which pitted the supporters of a nationalist organisation, LOCI, against

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<sup>3</sup> Siriex, Paul-Henri. *Houphouët-Boigny, l’Homme de la Paix* (Paris : NEA, 1975)

<sup>4</sup> Amin, Samir. *Le développement du capitalisme en Côte d’Ivoire* (Paris : Editions de Minuit, 1967)

Dahomeyans and Togolese living in the Ivory Coast.<sup>5</sup> 1998 was the heyday of Ivoirité, a word associated with then-President Bédié's vast manoeuvres destined to oust his then opponent and competitor Alassane Ouattara from conquering the presidency.<sup>6</sup> Ivoirité, at times referred to as "policy", at times as "ideology", covers a set of political practices whose central articulation was the notion that the presidency of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire had to "remain" in the hands of an "Ivorian national" as so much had already been "taken over" by "foreigners", notably in the business sector.<sup>7</sup> The Tabou incidents marked a threshold; something had been broken in the image that I had of my own country over those particular incidents, a country which was a 'small West Africa', which had worked thus far fairly harmoniously. In my eyes, it was clear that "Ivoirité", and the atmosphere it had fostered, were entirely to blame for this sorry turn of events.

Many years later, as I was starting out as a Masters student, I came across Jean-Pierre's work for the first time in the shape of an article entitled "Colonisation, Economie de Plantation et Société Civile en Côte d'Ivoire", published in Cahiers de l'ORSTOM, vol. XXI, No1, 1985. There I found elements that assisted me in one of my favourite activities, that is to complicate the Ivorian question for myself. Consider this: this paper had been published in 1985, and it sought to capture what had made the Ivorian experience unique; for this purpose, it chose to focus on one particular social formation: the village plantation economy. As I was reading the article, I came across this sentence: (which I will read in French, followed by an English translation of my own):

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<sup>5</sup> See Yéré, Henri-Michel. *Citizenship, Nationality and History in Côte d'Ivoire, 1929-1999*. Doctoral Thesis submitted at the University of Basel (Basel: 2010), pp. 100-106. See also Gary-Toukara, Daouda. *Migrants soudanais/maliens et conscience ivoirienne. Les étrangers en Côte d'Ivoire (1903-1980)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008)

<sup>6</sup> See Bédié, Henri Konan. 'Mon Programme', in *Fraternité –Matin*, 28 August 1995.

<sup>7</sup> See Yéré, *Citizenship*, pp. 151-191.

Aussi longtemps que la terre restera abondante, l'expansion se poursuit et la main-d'œuvre suit, mais lorsqu'elle devient rare (comme dans le centre-ouest) apparaît sur le plan de la main-d'œuvre une concurrence entre planteurs qui bien souvent se traduira en conflits ethniques sur le foncier.<sup>8</sup>

(So long as land remains abundant for cultivation, the workforce shall follow suit along with the expansion of cultivation. But as soon as land becomes scarce, competition shall become rife between farmers over the workforce which will translate into ethnic conflicts over land.)

As simple a realisation as this may look, it gave me an opportunity to move one scale down in my own explanatory framework of what was going on in the country. It allowed me to move from the plane of grand concepts ( this time around “Ivoirité” was to be blamed, just as “neo-colonialism” or “ capitalism” had been blamed for other things...), to seeing the specifics of a situation, with its own dynamics and particulars. Reading this started me out on the way of thinking of the Tabou incidents on their own terms. In a sense, after seeing that what had happened in Tabou in 1998 could have been foreseen already in 1985, thanks to the deep engagement of two researchers – Jean-Pierre Dozon co-authored the article with Chauveau – it occurred to me that the fact that these incidents took place at the time during which Ivoirité was the talk of the town *could have been a sheer coincidence*.

Another one of the leading themes of this 1985 article revolved around ethnicity. You must understand that being myself a citizen of Côte d'Ivoire, there are issues that are a given when one grows up in a certain environment, such as the ubiquitous notion of ethnicity. Your ethnicity is a “normal” attribute, not something as Chauveau puts it, that is “*continuously shaped either by old processes or by new phenomena*.”<sup>9</sup> In the context of living the Ivorian day-to-day

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<sup>8</sup> Chauveau, Jean-Pierre ; Dozon, Jean-Pierre, “Colonisation, Economie de Plantation et Société Civile en Côte d'Ivoire”, in *Cahiers de l'ORSTOM*, vol. XXI, No1, 1985, p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Chauveau, Dozon, ‘Colonisation’, p. 63

life (“le vécu quotidien”), one hardly thinks of ethnicities as “*historical products which carry meaning only in so far as they are read against the background of a totalising historical context.*”<sup>10</sup> Such ideas are today the standard understanding of ethnicity, a historical phenomenon whose definition is highly dependent on the context in which it operates.<sup>11</sup> But when I read it then— quite a while ago, in the youth of my studies — I wondered how it was possible that we were still taught to know our country as an amalgamation of fixed ethnicities which were described as the main vehicles carrying “the history of the nation” into its present day.<sup>12</sup>

What this paper offered was specific language to name reality as it was unfolding, so as to capture what made Ivorian society distinct from other human societies, and within Ivorian society, the many societies that made the fabric of that world. To have taken the country seriously, on its own terms, and not just as a variable in the greater scheme of international forces operating at an international level: reading this was a relief indeed.

What is astonishing is that all of this was known when historians and sociologists in the country itself went on to continue to give to the country an image of its own past that was literally stuck in its ethnicities. It is to wonder as to what kinds of conversations were being had between Jean-Pierre’s work and that of the body of researchers of the Université Nationale de Côte d’Ivoire. I am not saying that the chiasm (in terms of orientation, not of quantity) between the solidity of the record of Jean-Pierre’s research and the output of research pertaining to the origins of the nation by Ivorian researchers is to be blamed for the many misunderstandings that still have allowed for the ethnicisation of politics to take place before our eyes in an accelerated fashion in the past twenty years or so. Many more elements are accountable for this, and I will

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<sup>10</sup> Chauveau, Dozon, ‘Colonisation’, p. 63

<sup>11</sup> Amselle, Jean Loup; M’Bokolo, Elikia, *Au coeur de l’ethnie: ethnies, tribalisme et Etat en Afrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1985, 1999). See also Erikssen, Thomas Hylland, *Ethnicity and Nationalism : Anthropological Perspectives* (London : Pluto Press, 2002)

<sup>12</sup> Loucou, Jean Noël. *Histoire de la Côte d’Ivoire. Tome I : La formation des peuples* (Abidjan : CEDA, 1984.)

not go into them here. Still I have to interrogate such a formidably missed opportunity to operate a return over long-held certainties – an opportunity which was sorely missed when a historical perspective over the coming together of the country was needed. As such, it became difficult to look beyond certain realities during the 1990s, for the intellectual spaces had already been invaded by the ethnicising rhetoric. I believe it is possible to widen this problem to many other areas of African studies; what I am referring to is the extent of the engagement between African studies as an international field of study and the community of African researchers, lecturers, academics based on the continent, whose agendas may at times look very different from the preoccupations of “African studies” as such.<sup>13</sup> In Côte d’Ivoire, in the 1990s, academia fully participated in the articulation of the concepts that gave life to Ivoirité, which operated on the premise that to be an Ivorian one had to be from a set of defined ethnicities, thus effectively closing the Ivorian community at least at a symbolic level.<sup>14</sup> Had they not read what I had read? What can a sociology of Côte d’Ivoire’s and Africa’s intellectuals tell us as far as the discourses that they produce is concerned?<sup>15</sup>

I went on to write a PhD with a focus on the notion of citizenship and nationality in Côte d’Ivoire. In my work I attempted to engage with the circumstances in which a group of people living on the territory of the French colony of Ivory Coast started to refer to themselves as *being from the Ivory Coast*; it seemed to me that the moment people started to use the appellation of the colonial territory as a tool to push forward claims to the colonial administration, a change in the quality of the relationship to a new identity referent was at play. In a study that spanned

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<sup>13</sup> Andreas Eckert has referred to this problem a number of times.

<sup>14</sup> See notably in Cellule Universitaire pour la Diffusion des Idées du Président Henri Konan Bédié (CURDIPHE, editors), ‘L’Ivoirité ou l’esprit du nouveau contrat social du Président Henri Konan Bédié: Actes du Forum CURDIPHE du 20 au 23 mars 1996’, in *Ethics*, No1, October 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Arnaut, Karel, les “Hommes de terrain”: Georges Naiangoran Bouah et le monde universitaire de l’autochtonie en Côte d’Ivoire, in *Politique Africaine*, No112, December 2008.



across seventy years (1929-1999), I demonstrated that this moment occurred at a time during which nobody could be suspected of using this reference as a tool to claim any sort of political autonomy; in other words, “nationalism” as we came to know it in African studies was not at play during the 1930s, the time at which this moment occurred for the first time. I then went on to look at the different ways in which being an Ivorian was defined, for instance through the nationality code. I looked at the Ivorian National Assembly archive to understand how Parliament had come to formulate its view of the Ivorian national community through law at the time of Independence in 1960-1961. I also investigated failed attempts by the government to create a supranationality at the level of Conseil de l’Entente member-states in the mid-1960s. I replaced the notion of Ivoirité within the history of a longer debate which had been recurrent in the Ivory Coast over the relationship between people born in the territory and those who had come from outside the territory.

To some extent, my work remained at a general level, as it focussed on the discourses of what we commonly call “élites” in African studies. There was never an assumption on my part that what élites had to say was more important than what “ordinary people” think and say, but it is fair to say that it did not offer enough room to “the ordinary person.”

What might have been missing is a point of interconnectedness between the “high spheres” and the plight of the “ordinary person.” I find Jean-Pierre’s work has been exemplary in making this interconnectedness obvious. And I would recommend that these points of interconnectedness be one of the ways forward into the future of research on Côte d’Ivoire. There is currently a renewed interest in understanding urban dynamics in Africa, by focusing notably on middle-sized towns, a hitherto untapped area of research. As researchers, resting on the wealth of knowledge already generated by Chauveau on the long conversation that urban and

rural areas entertain, we must move towards lowering the barriers implicit in the way we refer to some areas as “rural” and some as “urban”. The degree of interpenetration between the two is such that it calls for the invention of novel instances that capture the permanence of their mutual making and unmaking: not as parallels, neither as reflections of one another through some kind of deformed mirror, but as a togetherness which is a novel social formation indeed.

I would like to leave it there for now and thank you for your attention.

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