

Understanding colonial chieftaincy from its final phase: responses to the crisis of an institution in French-ruled West Africa and beyond, 1944-1960^{*}

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Introduction

The Second World War was a watershed with relation to the institution of so-called 'traditional chieftaincy'. In rather abrupt steps, the representatives of the colonial powers officially distanced themselves from a type of administration in which much of the activity on a local and regional scale involved African rulers. In the case of British West Africa, this change of direction was particularly spectacular: as the British had made a veritable doctrine of their 'indirect rule', in which the 'native leaders' retained a good part of local and regional responsibility and were only 'corrected' where necessary, the readjustment of this principle towards 'democratization' through the Hailey Report and other new interpretations of the political reality appeared as particularly radical.¹ In the French case, the wave of 'democratization' – including the introduction of the positions of elected territorial councillors who, theoretically, could rival the prestige if not the power of the chiefs – followed a climax of reliance on these chiefs under Vichy rule in the Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF), between 1940 and 1943.² In the Portuguese empire, there were attempts to strengthen the position of 'educated Africans' in comparison to the chiefs, but as there was no political empowerment linked to these evolutions, the crisis of these chiefs came much later.

After the war, the chiefs did not only lose their political prerogatives, as intermediaries in the political administration of the colonies.³ Their existence was also disconnected from one of the principal functions they had had in the territories of all colonial empires in sub-Saharan Africa: the administration of forced labour. In the French colonies,

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1 FLINT, 1983.

2 GINIO, 2006: 124-125.

3 LOMBARD, 1967.

the chiefs had filled the central role in the organisation of the labour tax, the so-called *prestations*, through which forced labour was orchestrated; in the British colonies, the demands for *communal labour* had normally been addressed to the chiefs, who then had to set up the schemes; in territories under Portuguese rule, the chiefs were essential in the process of drafting ‘vagabonds’ for corrective state labour or in view of their recruitment for labour contracts on the farms. Forced labour – ended in the French case by a general law in 1946, in the British colonies it disappeared more silently. Only the Portuguese continued with these practices up to 1961, although these became somewhat less intense during the 1950s. In all cases, the loss of the function weakened the chiefs. The situation was similar in the case of the particular ‘native jurisdiction’, abolished directly after the war in the British and French colonies, and, again, in 1961 in the Portuguese case. Before the abrogation of separate status for the ‘natives’, many chiefs had informally wielded the power to nominate the individuals to be punished – there hardly was any institution to which the victims of similar practices could appeal. From the moment when this lever was lost, the chiefs were naturally bereaved of a source of respect.⁴

Nevertheless, the ‘traditional rulers’ were unlikely simply to accept their defeat: the change was very rapidly decreed, and local societies would not change from one day to the other from systems of rule that had been established over four or five decades. In the transitional period of the late colonial states, the chiefs still had possibilities to react, and to adapt themselves at the changing circumstances. There is an extreme lack of research on the strategies of chiefs during this period.⁵ This is all the more regrettable as the attempts of chiefs to ‘fight back’ in a phase of existential threats against their position is very promising to help us come to a better characterisation of chieftaincy under colonial domination as a broader phenomenon.

We will use this position as a starting point to come, from the analysis of the chiefly response, to a model of chiefly interest, and capacities for adaptation for the whole of the colonial period. Our main example will be territories of AOF – Senegal, Guinea-Conakry, Upper Volta, and Côte d’Ivoire – as the principles of French colonial rule left less space to the ‘traditional rulers’, which made it difficult for them to define autonomous paths based on the precolonial concepts of political organisation. Comparisons to the situations under British and Portuguese rule will however be attempted whenever this is useful.

The end of chieftaincy in West Africa: a classical interpretation and its modifications

During the second half of the 1940’s and much of the 1950’s, opposition against ‘traditional rulers’ within the late colonial societies was a widespread phenomenon. Everywhere in West Africa, chiefs came under attack. Until recently, scholars have principally interpreted those outbreaks of political and sometimes physical struggle as the attempt of the oppressed, mostly rural populations to finish with arbitrary conditions introduced by

⁴ MANN, 2009: 349-352.

⁵ In cases such as Nigeria, where the chiefs survived the end of colonial rule and played a strong initial role within the postcolonial government, there is a more open approach to the margins of manoeuvre the important chiefs had, see for Ibadan WATSON, 2003: 117-144.

the colonisers and more or less opposed by the local people.⁶ While we will show that these processes normally were more complex, it is necessary to understand this particular scholarly perspective, which can already be regarded as a 'classical' paradigm.

The abolition of the whole institution of chieftaincy is, from that point of view, a necessary step to remove a relic of the colonial state, as Jean Suret-Canale has argued for Guinea-Conakry.⁷ In this interpretation, chieftaincy is something that has either been invented or grossly distorted by the European colonial administrations. On the one hand, in zones of so-called acephalous societies, 'societies without rulers', such as in Igboland in Southeastern Nigeria or among the Sereer of parts of Senegal, chieftaincy is regarded as having been something completely alien to the experiences of the local populations, and forced on them by the colonial power.⁸ In other contexts, more centralised rule had already existed, but, according to the 'classical paradigm', the Europeans changed the rules of the game, installing their own cronies as the repressive abusers of local structures and local wealth.⁹

Modernisation theory and *dependencia* modernism both contributed to a theoretical approach that regarded the chiefs if not as abusive, then, at least, as completely outmoded. Historians and sociologists celebrated the attack against chieftaincy led by sub-Saharan Africa's new, autonomous or already independent regimes.¹⁰ A striking West African case and an early test case was Ghana. Here, many chiefs were removed, although this mostly concerned the chiefs affiliated to the political opposition to Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP). Many of the latter lost their posts (or were 'destooled', as was said in the context of Ghana, alluding to the stools of chiefly rule). In earlier studies the activities of the CPP are simply regarded as an expression of the 'will of the people' to get rid of their oppressive chiefs.

Only very recently, serious doubts have been formulated on the aspect of the complete arbitrariness of chieftaincy under colonial rule. In a path-breaking article, Thomas Spear has pointed to 'the limits of invention', which means that a completely arbitrary rule was more than difficult to maintain for a chiefly ruler, who had at least to find some consent among the local populations.¹¹ Single scholars such as Richard Rathbone reversed their former positions admitting that chieftaincy had and has a prestige at least in some major cases.¹²

Paul Nugent in his latest broad outlook on postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa writes about a reappraisal of the role of chieftaincy in recent scholarship, but it is difficult to see that the changed perspective has already been profoundly introduced into historical analysis.¹³ Where chiefs are no longer represented as a fading force directly before and after decolonisation, their impact is not really discussed with relation to the tensions around the transfer of local and national power.¹⁴ The studies focusing on the renaissance of chieftaincy as an intermediary layer, from the 1980s, frequently lack a historical per-

6 MAMDANI, 1996; COQUERY-VIDROVITCH, 1985.

7 SURET-CANALE, 1970: 107-109.

8 AFIGBO, 1979; LENTZ, 2000: 597-599; TOSH, 1978: 42-44; HAWKINS, 1996: 207; SEARING, 2002: 413-414.

9 ALEXANDRE, 1970: 9-10; GESCHIERE, 1993; FIRMIN-SELLERS, 2001: 58; FALOLA, 2009: 80-81.

10 CROWDER & IKIME, 1978: 218; FISYI, 1995: 57-59.

11 SPEAR, 2003: 15-16, 25.

12 RATHBONE, 2000: 3-4; GOCKING, 2000: 218.

13 NUGENT, 2004: 105-106.

14 NEWBURY, 2003: 120-124; VAUGHAN, 2000: 45-68; NWAUBANI, 1994: 356-361; VAUGHAN, 1991: 309-311.

spective.¹⁵ What is obviously missing is an analysis of the exact nature of the tensions around chieftaincy in the last years of the colonial states: it is unclear from a comparative perspective which was the prestige still enjoyed by local chiefs, and which the responses of the late colonial state *and* its populations to emergent conflicts.

It is obviously difficult to show a broad panorama that allows a quantification of chieftaincy conflicts in West Africa. We are limited to concentrate on cases in which chieftaincy was indeed discussed as a crucial problem by the colonial administrations and the local populations. However, for our approach we can follow the colonial sources, because while being Eurocentric, they show us the way to the particular places and region where conflicts emerged. It is also advantageous to include into the picture cases from colonies with different degrees of internal conflict during the democratization and decolonization phase. While territories such as Senegal knew internal tensions that opposed different African political forces, Côte d'Ivoire was theatre of the conflict between one particular political party and the colonial administration. In Guinea-Conakry the tensions mainly concerned the members of antagonistic African parties, but the level of violence was particularly high. We will in the following regard the pressures on chiefs in these three exemplary arenas, after the abolition of forced labour and the *indigénat* had severely weakened the position of these chiefs.

Chiefs and democratisation of local politics: the end of chiefly authority in Senegal?

Due to a strong tradition of French presence on Senegal's soil, restricted to a handful of commercial bases it is true, but which gained from 1848 considerable political rights and constituted the nucleus of administrative control, the role of chieftaincy in this colony was somewhat obscured. The colonial administration in the rural parts of Senegal, apart from the Quatre Communes with their very particular political status, nevertheless relied upon so-called *chefs de canton* (paramount chiefs of a small 'traditional' district), village chiefs, and, in some cases, regional chiefs who had more of a symbolic status. These chiefdoms were installed after the French conquest of the precolonial states of Senegambia – Kajoor, Bawol, Siin, Saluum, Jolof, Waalo, and Fuuta Tooro – in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Many future chiefs had played an active part in the conquest on the French side. In the case of Senegal, there seemed to be little reflection about potential ethno-cultural solidarities from the part of the colonial authorities: Pulaar-speakers ("Tukulor") were installed in mainly Wolof-speaking areas, Wolophone chiefs and some Pulaar-speakers received chiefly posts in predominantly Sereer-speaking regions.¹⁶ Moreover, in the official French rhetoric, the role of the precolonial entities for the organisation of colonial rule was, for Senegal, presented as entirely irrelevant. The introduction of democratic structures after 1944 came as a complete rupture with former practices of colonial domination throughout West Africa. In the years of the

15 NOLTE, 2002: 371-373; VAN ROUVEROY VAN NIEUWAAL, 2000: 45-50; MILES, 1993: 42-43. Other works give a historical prelude, but which is not too enlightening with regard to the historical trajectory of the position in precolonial times and under colonial rule, see VON HELLERMANN, 2010: 263-266.

16 The role of ethnicity in Senegal's sociopolitical composition under colonial rule is a contested question, see GLASMAN, 2004, and KEESE, 2010: 559-561.

Second World War, Vichy repression and Free French initiatives to use the African resources for the war effort had considerably limited the freedom of local communities to decide their own affairs.¹⁷ The installation of the Fourth Republic in France meant, to the contrary, that for the first time policy-makers regarded it as inevitable to give to a considerable group of the local populations the right to elect their representatives in both the colonial capitals and in Paris. In the following, these deputies attempted to influence local decision-making in their constituencies, although, in the second half of the 1940s, they only had the task to vote over national laws in the metropole and to advise the colonial authorities in territorial matters, but not to interfere in the local processes. In practice, it showed to be impossible to separate both levels. The elected representatives used their new networks to carve out an important role for themselves in the regional theatres.

Senegal was no exception to this rule. As an early example, Jacques d'Erneville, general councillor of the region of M'Bour in Senegal and friend of the Senegalese deputy in Paris, Léopold Sédar Senghor, claimed to have a voice in the restructuring of administrative units. He attempted to influence the nomination of local chiefs in his constituency as early as in 1946.¹⁸

According to the 'classical' perspective on the evolution of chieftaincy after the Second World War, chiefs are only a remainder of the older mechanisms of colonial domination, and, in the 1950s, they were rapidly supplanted by elected representatives.¹⁹ Senegal is one of the territories where historians believe to find this process: in Senegal, chieftaincy is abolished after national independence on the level of the *canton*; on village level, the 'traditional' posts have survived until the current day, but these village chiefs are only second in importance to their almighty rivals, Muslim marabouts from the two dominant brotherhoods of the Muridiyya and the Tijaniyya. Already from the late nineteenth century, these marabouts have been the more important political force in rural Senegal.²⁰

In Senegal, the first territorial elections in 1947 were won by the Senegalese section of the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO), the French Socialist Party, which had already dominated the limited arenas of political life in the most politicised French colony in sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1930s. However, in the second half of the 1940s, a political movement led by the famous intellectual and poet Léopold Sédar Senghor and by Mamadou Dia, another leading political figure, split from the SFIO to found their own party, the Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais (BDS). The new political formation celebrated sweeping victories in most of the rural constituencies during the territorial elections of 1952 and 1957. The election campaigns led to protracted political struggles in the Senegalese countryside, which affected the chiefs.²¹ Although they were not being automatically eclipsed in their influence by the general councillors, the chiefs nonetheless had a problematic life whenever choosing the wrong side in the political battles.

One of those turbulent zones was the coastal region south of Dakar – the Petite Côte – where the populations were Sereer-speakers and a minority of Wolof-speakers, and

17 CHAFER, 2002: 43; BENOIST, 1982: 16-17.

18 BENOIST, 1982: 52-58.

19 This view is summarised in NUGENT, 2004: 130.

20 BABOU, 2007; BABOU, 2005; GRAY, 1988.

21 ATLAN, 2003.

where local rule had been characterised by instability in a region traditionally claimed before the final decades of the nineteenth century by the rulers of the precolonial states of Bawol and Siin. In the *canton* of M'Bayar-Nianing, Socé Fall, the chief, had survived an affair of fraud and an interim destitution only by unconditionally adhering to the SFIO, which supported his rehabilitation in the first two years after the Second World War.²² Given the changes in the equilibrium of political forces after Senghor and Dia had left the party, Fall consequently became a target of the leaders of the BDS.²³ After the BDS landslide victory in the 1951 elections for the French National Assembly, it became obvious that Socé Fall had set on the wrong horse.²⁴ The Sereer-speaking populations of Malikunda, in his district, started a wave of protests against the chief.²⁵ The 'traditional authority' in neighbouring Bayar *canton*, Armand N'Diaye, a BDS party member, added to Fall's difficulties by doing his best to discredit his colleague.²⁶ Nevertheless, Socé Fall survived riots and turbulence. In 1958, he is regarded by the administration as being "a respected chief", and there are no other indications than those claiming that the populations in his *canton* were now quite content. The chief had obviously re-established good relations with key persons in the *canton*: he had sought alliances with these local leaders, and this network-building allowed for political survival even in a period in which 'modernisation' was the word.²⁷ Only in 1959, did Socé Fall pay the price for his long-standing anti-BDS position. As soon as Senegal became an autonomous territory within the French Community, Fall was being removed by the new, autonomous Senegalese government.²⁸

It was approximately the same situation with Oumar Bayo Fall, chief in the M'Bayar *canton* of the *cercle* of Diourbel, which was a former region of precolonial Bawol, and in which local rule, supported by Murid Islamic mobilisation from the early decades of the twentieth century, was far more stable than at the Petite Côte. Oumar Bayo Fall was another supporter of the Socialist Party. After the split of the party in 1948, he went into trouble because of his political affiliations in a *canton* classified by the French as *senghoriste*. He had to struggle with the intrigues of enemies, and local populations refused to pay him the taxes, which was the most efficient means to make the colonial authori-

22 Archives Nationales Sénégalaises, Dakar (ANS), 11D1/1303, Administrator of Subdivision of M'Bour, *Notice de Renseignements concernant le Chef de Canton Sossé Fall – Canton du Bayar-Nianing (Subdivision de M'Bour)* (without number), 14 Aug. 1944; ANS, 11D1/1303, Administrator of Subdivision of M'Bour to Commander of Cercle of Thiès, *Remplacement Socé Fall Chef Canton M'Bayar Nianing* (n.º 205/C), 28 Dec. 1945, 1; ANS, 11D1/1303, Administrator of Subdivision of M'Bour to Commander of Cercle of Thiès, *Plainte contre ex-chef de canton Sossé Fall* (n.º 90/C.), 14 April 1946; ANS, 11D1/1303, Administrator of Subdivision of M'Bour to State Advocate in Dakar, *Plainte pour abus confiance contre ex-chef canton Sossé Fall* (n.º 104/C.), 29 April 1946: 1-2.

23 ANS, 11D1/1303, Lami, Commander of Cercle of Thiès, to Bailly, Governor of Senegal (n.º 676/AGC), without date: 1.

24 ANS, 11D1/1303, Goujon, Secretary-General of Senegal, to Commander of Cercle of Thiès, *Chefferies Cantons Nianing et Thor Diander* (n.º 1175/APA/2), 8 Nov. 1951.

25 ANS, 11D1/1303, Socé Fall, Chief of *canton* of Nianing, to Administrator of Subdivision of M'Bour (without number), 27 June 1951: 1.

26 ANS, 11D1/1303, Socé Fall to Administrator of Subdivision of M'Bour (without number), 26 June 1951: 1-2. On Armand N'Diaye and party politics, see ANS, 11D1/1303, Armand N'Diaye, Chief of *canton* of M'Bayar, to Administrator of Subdivision of M'Bour (without number), 17 June 1952: 1.

27 ANS, 11D1/1303, Berthet, substitute of Goujon, acting Governor of Senegal, to Administrator of Subdivision of M'Bour (n.º 1616/APA/2), 15 March 1954; ANS, 11D1/1303, Administrator of Subdivision of M'Bour, *Notes sur la Manière de Servir de Fall Sossé Chef de 6.ª classe du Canton de Nianing* (without number), 20 March 1958, 2.

28 ANS, 11D1/1303, Valdiodio N'Diaye, Senegalese Minister of the Interior, *Arrêté portant fin de détachement d'un Chef de Canton* (n.º 11261/MINT/APA), 5 Nov. 1959.

ties doubt the performance of a ‘traditional chief’.²⁹ Despite these odds, Oumar Bayo Fall managed to arrange himself with the local *notables*. After much effort in stylizing himself as “servant of the people”, he again became respected by the local populations.³⁰ In 1954, he could even permit himself an attempt at sabotaging the political campaign of the BDS in his *canton*, which did not have any outstanding but some success. Fall would escape with that unpunished.³¹ In the final years of the colony, he became a thoroughly well-respected chief, and he managed to make his son Babacar become the ‘traditional ruler’ in the neighbouring *canton* of Diet-Salao in as late as in 1957, with semi-autonomy of France’s African territories already being in place.³² The fact that in September 1957 he negotiated admission into the Bloc Populaire Sénégalais (which was then the new name of Senghor’s and Dia’s party) helped him to stabilise this position.³³

In other parts of Senegambia, the authority of the chiefs was less contested between 1945 and 1958. In the region between the Cap-Vert Peninsula and the mouth of River Senegal, important rulers had enjoyed considerable respect as *garmi yi* and ‘governors’ of provinces of the precolonial state of Kajoor, and this appears to have strengthened the institution of chieftaincy in this region during the twentieth century, even after the Second World War. Therefore, the family of the Sall in the area of Tivaouane – a real dynasty indeed – never had any difficulties with political struggles.³⁴ For a chief such as Sangané Sall, the only problems he encountered were those between Fulbe herdsmen and Wolof cultivators in his *canton*, which were endemic during the whole period of colonial rule (and beyond).³⁵ However, those problems were old, and while the chief did not always manage to prevent the adversaries from fighting, he at least knew how to deal with them without losing anything of *his* authority.

To guarantee a chief’s political survival in Senegal during the 1940s and the 1950s, a couple of factors were at least useful. Successful chiefs at the level of the *canton* frequently had some sort of ‘western education’. In the local arena, which increasingly became an electoral battlefield, these qualities made it easier for a ‘traditional ruler’ to be publicly perceived as standing at the same level as the general councillors. Chiefs also had obtained prestige as army recruits and soldiers. However, these characteristics – which mainly influenced the chief’s relationship to administrators and African clerks – were only a part of the picture. Most of the successful chiefs could equally boast of a ‘traditional’ family prestige in the larger region, if not necessarily in the particular district they administered: Socé Fall could claim succession from the *Damel* of Kayoor;

29 ANS, 11D1/95, Frament, Administrator of Central Subdivision of Diourbel, *Notes de l'Administrateur* (without number), without date.

30 ANS, 11D1/95, Berthet, Commander of *Cercle* of Diourbel, *Appréciations Générales du Commandant de Cercle* (without number), 2 March 1953.

31 ANS, 11D1/95, Stroh, Administrator of Central Subdivision of Diourbel, *Note à classer au dossier de M. Fall Oumar Bayo, chef du canton du M'Bayar* (n.º 332/C), 5 July 1954.

32 ANS, 11D1/95, Blaud, Administrator of *Cercle* of Diourbel, *Notes sur la manière de servir de Fall Omar Bayo chef de canton 8^{ème} classe* (without number), 3 Jan. 1957: 1; ANS, 11D1/95, Commander of *cercle* of Tambacounda, to Valdidio N’Diaye (n.º 77), without date.

33 ANS, Fonds Conseil de la Présidence du Sénégal, 203, Abdoul Aziz Ibra Wane, Ministry of the Interior, Information Service, *Cercle* of Diourbel, *Bulletin d'Information* (without number), 24 September 1957: 1.

34 ANS, 11D1/1393, Piganiol, Administrator of Subdivision of Kebemer, *Notes sur la Manière de Servir de Sangoné Sall chef de 4.º classe* (without number), 23 April 1957: 2.

35 ANS, 11D1/1393, Administrator of Subdivision of Kebemer, *Notes sur la Manière de Servir de Sangoné Sall chef de Quatrième classe* (without number), 3 March 1958: 2.

Oumar Bayo Fall had links to both the dynasties of the *Damel* of Kayoor and the *Teeñ* of Bawol; Sangané Sall referred to the ruling Tukolor family of the Fuuta Tooro.³⁶ The most important element of a strategy of survival, however, was to conform to the expectations of the local populations, particularly of the influential personalities, and, if any possible, to enter the networks of territorial councillors and other protectors. In the cases analysed above, the chiefs had energetically and successfully pursued similar strategies.

Against the expectations of many historians representing a 'radical' and anticolonial form of historiography, chieftaincy remained so prestigious in the Senegal of the 1940s and 1950s that the posts were actively sought for by many candidates. Some individuals, who could only claim a 'civilised' education and, eventually, a distinction as war veterans, mobilised all their means and contacts to obtain a 'traditional post'. In the case of Sada Maka Sy, a barrister in Podor, then Tambacounda, such an engagement could become a veritable obsession. However, together with several other cases, it shows that chieftaincy had lost very little of its attraction under the late colonial state.³⁷

It needs to be pointed out that in the case of French-ruled Senegal, the demands for adaptation were very high, even if several chiefs – as we have shown – were able to perform quite well in this context. Where politicisation was imagined to rely from the outset on the contribution of the chiefs, there was still less danger that these chiefs would get into conflict with the principal political parties in the making. In the Gambia, where the British colonial administrators planned with the United Party (UP) as main force, and the People's Progressive Party (PPP) as a competitor in very circumscribed 'Mandinka zones', things thus appeared to be even easier, and before the 1962 elections that surprisingly brought the PPP into power, this was indeed so.³⁸

Over much of the late 1940s and the 1950s, in the Gambia's Upper River Division, the local chiefs were therefore able to ignore most of the democratisation process that was so violent for their 'colleagues' in 'traditional power' only a hundred kilometres further to the north. As political affiliations seemed to be clearly distributed, there were no alternative forces where potential adversaries of a ruling chief could turn to. In rural Gambia, the criteria of maintaining power consequently were less demanding: it was essential, however, to adapt to the wishes of the local *notables*. Influential *sefyfus* such as Yugo Kasseh Darammeh of Sandu District and Nanjang Sanyang of Kantora District were careful to work with the local 'big men'.³⁹ Only in this case of a stable co-operation was it possible to establish a real family dynasty for more than one generation as can be observed for the third seyfuship of the division, in the Wuli District. Here, the Wali family of Kanda Kassa Jawara had built up a strong claim for the chieftaincy, and this in spite of the fact that they did not have any reference to the precolonial heritage of this former independent state.⁴⁰ The authority of precolonial traditions was in any way less important than

36 ANS, 11D1/1303, Administrator of Subdivision of M' Bour, *Notes sur la Manière de Servir de Fall Sossé Chef de 6.^e classe du Canton de Nianing* (without number), 20 March 1958: 2; ANS, 11D1/1393, Auchapt, Administrator of Subdivision of Kebemer, *Notes sur la Manière de Servir de Sall Massamba Kangué chef de Canton Hors classe* (without number), 20 June 1959: 1.

37 ANS, 11D1/1095, Maka Sy to Colombani, Governor of Senegal (without number), 7 April 1955, 1; ANS, 11D1/1095, Tomasini, Commandant de Cercle of Tambacounda, to Colombani (n.º 181/CT), without date (arrives 10 Sep. 1956).

38 HUGHES & PERFECT, 2006: 134-159.

39 National Record Service of the Gambia (NRSTG), ARP 31/10, District Commissioner of Upper River Division, *Annual Report of the Upper River Division 1951* (without number), 22 May 1952: 18-19.

40 *Ibid.*: 17.

was the necessity to seek an alliance with influential local spokespersons. Under the prospects of liberalisation after 1945, populations were even in the Gambia reluctant against any behaviour of the chiefs that could be considered too autocratic. Therefore, *seyfu* Jawaru Kurubali of Fuladu East District suffered severe difficulties during a conflict with the native treasury scribe: under normal conditions, his authority would have been sufficient to easily get the upper hand, but his reliance on very authoritarian measures gave his opponents a foothold. The latter now claimed that the contender was a representative from an ancient chiefly family, while the chief in power was not.⁴¹ Only in the Gambia's Western Division do we find constellations in which local populations tried to mobilise the PPP against unpopular chiefs, such as in Kassagne, where the local 'traditional ruler' had in an early phase declared himself for the UP.⁴² However, similar mobilisation attempts rarely turned into open struggle such as in Senegal.⁴³ All in all, the chiefs of Gambia's different divisions did not get under any visible pressure from the changes in the political constellation inside of the country before independence. As from the outset the process of decolonisation in this small British colony was planned as based on the participation of the chiefs, there were less antagonisms between the new, 'modern' institutions and the existence of 'traditional power'.

In a broader panorama encompassing West Africa, one could nevertheless argue that the region of Senegal – such as indeed the Gambia – was an atypical case, as with regard to the nature of the transfer of power, the process was extremely calm. If there was a prolonged real struggle between rural populations and the colonial power following the Second World War, would this imply a process in which chieftaincy was seen as outmoded at an earlier stage? For the French empire in West Africa, the obvious test case is Côte d'Ivoire – a territory shaken by a violent struggle between 1947 and 1950.

The role of the chiefs in a proto-nationalist struggle: Côte d'Ivoire after the Second World War

In the 1940s, the colony of Côte d'Ivoire was the first French territory where local African politicians organised a strong and all-encompassing political party. The latter was based on the *Syndicat Agricole Africain*, a local union of coffee planters, and thus had, other than many of the newly founded political movements, some early potential of grassroots mobilisation. The *Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire* (PDCI) was from October 1946 part of the inter-territorial *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA) that comprised parties from all the French territories on the African continent. The RDA had delegates in the French National Assembly in Paris who, until 1950, were allied to the French Communists, receiving logistic support from the PCF.⁴⁴ The French administration saw in the group led by Félix Houphouët-Boigny, future Ivorian star politician and president of the independent country, a dangerous movement acting in

41 NRSTG, ARP 31/10, District Commissioner of Upper River Division, *Annual Report of the Upper River Division 1951* (without number), 22 May 1952: 17-18.

42 NRSTG, CRU 1/3, District of Commissioner Western Division, *Western Divisional Bulletin 15th July - 25th August, 1960* (n.º PA 13/3/26), 2 Sep. 1960.

43 NRSTG, CRU 1/3, District of Commissioner Western Division, *Western Divisional Bulletin 15th-30th June, 1960* (n.º PA 13/3/25), 6 July 1960.

44 BENOIST, 1982: 103.

the interest of Moscow and whose intention was to destroy the ‘traditional harmony’ in the country.⁴⁵

However, closer analysis shows that the leaders of the new political force in the territory of Côte d’Ivoire did not at all strive to destroy the institution of chieftaincy. In this territory, the notion of ‘traditional rule’ had still less connection to the existence of pre-colonial states, as political entities on the grounds that afterwards formed the colony, had been extremely fragmented. Their disappearance had been far less spectacular than in Senegal. Nevertheless, even more than in ‘peaceful’ Senegal, ‘traditional posts’ were an extremely important asset in the political struggles after the Second World War. The RDA attempted to support its own sympathisers within the local ‘noble families’, while rivals of the paramount chiefs in power swore allegiance either to Houphouët-Boigny or to his political rivals in an attempt at getting hold of the posts.

Thus, in the district of Agboville, a considerable group of inhabitants of the chieftaincy of the Abbeys called in 1949 the help of the RDA to get rid of François M’Bassidje, their highly unpopular Paramount Chief. However, the objective of the RDA campaign following these petitions was not the destruction of the local ‘traditional’ structures. Instead, the RDA militants protested to get Obodji Soboa, the predecessor of M’Bassidje, back into power.⁴⁶ Soboa had been a long-time favourite of the local French authorities, but he had become an important follower of the Ake fetish and had committed illegal levies of funds for the benefit of the fetish cult, which motivated the French to finally remove him in 1942.⁴⁷ The engagement of the RDA militants to get him back shows, however, that the memories of similar misdeeds were not necessarily very long, particularly when Soboa declared he would in the future act according to the wishes of his supporters.

In Abengourou, Amoakon Dihye, the deposed Paramount Chief, tried to muster support from the RDA in the early 1950s. He wanted to become “Houphouët’s candidate” for the chieftaincy and hoped (in vain) that his allegiance to the party could bring him back on to the post, instead of Bonzou II installed as chief in 1950.⁴⁸ What Dihye demanded was a real plebiscite about the chieftaincy, which he indeed received after a wave of local protests.⁴⁹ The will of the majority of local people was, however, not to try it again with Amoakon Dihye.

Even the most prestigious chieftaincies in the territory, such as the paramount rulership of the Senufo, became the object of fierce struggle, as pretenders attempted to secure them with the support of the RDA. This was visible in the plots of different members of the leading Coulibaly family: the Paramount Chief Gbon Coulibaly himself, under the pressure of his family, resigned from his RDA membership. To the contrary, his son Dramane Coulibaly, hoping to get a foothold in the struggle for the succession of his ninety-year old father, had set his stakes onto the RDA; he was even arrested during the most violent tensions around the town centre of Korhogo.⁵⁰ Gbon’s decision to leave the

45 KEESE, 2005: 69.

46 CAOM, FM 1AffPol/2174/8, Béchar, Governor-General of French West Africa, to Coste-Floret, French Overseas Minister (n.º 680/INT/AP.2), 4 Aug. 1949.

47 CAOM, FM 1AffPol/2174/8, Péchoux, Governor of Côte d’Ivoire, to Béchar (n.º 1122/A.P.), 5 July 1949: 1-3.

48 CAOM, FM 1AffPol/2174/8, Cornut-Gentille, Governor-General of French West Africa, to Pflimlin, French Overseas Minister (n.º 356/INT/AP.2), 27 March 1952.

49 CAOM, FM 1AffPol/2174/8, Amoakon Dihye, former Paramount Chief of Abengourou, to Messmer, Governor of Côte d’Ivoire (without number), 1st Feb. 1956.

50 ANS, GGAOF, 17G 555, Police Services of Côte d’Ivoire, *Renseignements au sujet des craintes (manifestées par l’opinion) d’éventuels désordres pouvant être suscités dans le Cercle de Korhogo par Dramane Coulibaly (le manchot)* (n.º 3963/602)/PS/C), 30 July 1952: 1-2.

PDCI now deprived Dramane of his chances to inherit the throne. This made, on the one hand, of the political struggle for party dominance in the north of Côte d'Ivoire an internal affair within the 'royal family'.⁵¹ On the other hand, the alliance with the influential chief was an important asset for the leading Ivorian party. When Gbon Coulibaly publicly stated that he no longer wished to engage himself within the RDA, the political bureau sent the important party leader Ouezzin Coulibaly to personally talk to the old chief and make him return into the ranks of the party, in vain:

This step taken by the third important leader of the party was nevertheless interesting as it shows the extreme importance the RDA gives to keeping the old chief in his rank and files.⁵²

Therefore, it can be pointed out that – independently if concerning one of the few larger and more prestigious chieftaincies as in the case of Korhogo, or one of the smaller and local ones, such as in the other cases – the struggle for posts as chiefs was part of the picture in Côte d'Ivoire after the Second World War. Although the protest movement led by the PDCI-RDA had a very 'modern' agenda, focusing on social issues that linked to the abolition of forced labour, Houphouët-Boigny's particular political success of 1945, this did not mean that the chiefs were *per se* defined as enemies. To the contrary, much of the battle for chiefly posts operated in the way of collusion between territorial movement and candidates, and in which the French administration had not much to say.

The chiefs mobilise: the nationalist challenge and associations of chiefs in French West Africa

Contrary to what is normally written about French policy in West Africa in the 1940s and 1950s, the French officials there took the role of chieftaincy more serious than what emerges from the modernist rhetoric of the Overseas Ministry personnel.⁵³ This was obviously the case concerning the particularly prestigious chieftaincies. The rulership of the Moro Naba of the Mossi in the territory of Upper Volta, one of the few local kingdoms conserved in its structures by the French conquerors, was nearly automatically among those whose survival was regarded as priority by colonial administrators.⁵⁴ In the case of the Mossi, the presence of a conservative governor was particularly decisive: Gaston Mouragues, an official who was very sceptical towards any 'overzealous' attempts of democratization, was quite engaged to find a formula that guaranteed the participation of the 'traditional power' in local affairs. Mouragues did his best to argue that the 'traditional ways' of the country had to be respected.⁵⁵ However, while this governor successfully defended the paramount position of the Moro Naba and his fellow chiefs, he failed with his attempt at formalising the position of the kingdom within the legal framework

51 CAOM, FM 1AffPol/2174/8, Péchoux to Béchard (n.º 668/Info), 10 June 1950: 1-4.

52 CAOM, FM 1AffPol/2174/8, Béchard to Letourneau, French Overseas Minister (n.º 493/INT/AP2), 1st July 1950: 2.

53 On this rhetoric, see DIMIER, 2002: 180.

54 See, on their particular role, MICHEL, 2nd edition 2003: 40-41.

55 Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds "Dakar", 273, Mouragues, Governor of Upper Volta, to Béchard, Governor-General of French West Africa (n.º 3/A.P.S./Cf), 13 Jan. 1948: 3-4; CADN, Fonds "Dakar", 273, Mouragues to Béchard (n.º 16/Cab.), 18 Jan. 1950: 1-2.

of this territory. In spite of Mouragues's pressures, the question how chieftaincy was to be defined in the late colonial state was postponed again and again, until Upper Volta was finally independent and the new government of Maurice Yaméogo curtailed the rights of the chiefs in order to shut out a local competitor.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, in the Upper Voltan case, the chiefs themselves reacted. They attempted to create an institutional framework that helped them defending their interests and adapting to the necessities and pressures around them. In Upper Volta such an adaptation was rather easy for the chiefs of the strong Mossi aristocracy. They formed a *syndicat* – a type of a union of chiefs – to co-ordinate their efforts in participation in local policy:

The interest of this development appears to lie in the fact, in particular, that the Larle Naba is said to have exposed to the other family members [of the dynasty of the Moro Naba] that the objective of such an association is not only to defend the interests of the chiefs but, also, to make these chiefs understand that a certain evolution was necessary, especially as regards the local customs, such as the application of tattoos, the display of cadavers, the excision of girls etc. . . . the Larle added nonetheless to that discourse that he was not in favour of the interdiction of this last traditional practice.

This would lead us to presume that the ideas discussed for some time already by the Governor softly make their way.⁵⁷

The goal of similar associations obviously was to define, internally, which positions should be reformed in order to retain a local support base. The impetus for chiefs organising themselves for such an objective and in similar ways, did not need any particularly strong dynasty. In the district (*cercle*) of Thiès in Senegal, to which belonged the *sub-division* of M'Bour, a number of important chiefs created their own association. In the Senegalese context, their objective was to counter the influence of the general councillors who eclipsed them with their prestige. The French Governor Bailly was distrustful in the beginning against any such measure, fearing that the organisation might pose a challenge to the administration more than to the 'educated natives' sitting in the General Council of Senegal. However, after getting used to the chiefs defending their interests, the local administrator became increasingly positive and recognised the success of the association, which continued to live until independence.⁵⁸

The same solution was sought, however, in French territories where the institution of chieftaincy was under early pressure because of the activities of a strong local party that had an anti-chieftaincy agenda. This is in particular the case for Guinea-Conakry, where the Parti Démocratique de la Guinée (PDG-RDA), still while being an opposition party in the mid-1950s but growing steadily, pursued an aggressive course against

56 For the political activities of the Moro Naba Kougri at the occasion of Upper Voltan autonomy in October 1958, see CAOM, FM 1AffPol/2181/4, Moro-Naba Kougri to Berthet, High Commissioner of Upper Volta (without number), 17 Oct. 1958, and CAOM, FM 1AffPol/2181/4, Berthet to Cornut-Genille, French Overseas Minister, and Messmer, High Commissioner of French West Africa (n.º 538/SD/Cab), 22 Oct. 1958: 4-5.

57 CADN, Fonds "Dakar", 273, French Security Service of Upper Volta, *Renseignements: Chefs Coutumiers du Pays Mossi* (n.º 997/SU/C), 24 Dec. 1952.

58 ANS 11D1/1382, Bailly, Governor of Senegal, to Lami, Commandant de Cercle of Thiès, and Lantier, Commandant de Cercle of Tambacounda (n.º 422/APA/2), 8 May 1950; ANS 11D1/1382, Lami to Bailly, Governor of Senegal, *Association des Chefs Coutumiers – Réf: Votre lettre n.º 422/APA/2 du 8 Mai 1950* (n.º 216/ACC), 12 May 1950: 1-2.

the chiefs. The different chiefs in the territory – successors of a precolonial state in the case of the Fuuta Jallon Highlands, holders of more individualised posts within the rest of the territory – had early established links to different political parties, but not to the PDG. It thus was the strategy of Sékou Touré, the party leader, to attempt not to replace local chiefs by other candidates from rival houses or from their family, but to supplant them by own local party cells.⁵⁹ The method to break the power of the local chiefs normally was brutal violence. Touré's party profited where possible from the unpopularity of several chiefs, and intimidated the rest of the populations to distance themselves from the local *notables* by sending around armed gangs. The French administration in de-colonising Guinea did not really see the effect of this strategy, and did not counteract. The attacked chiefs attempted to mobilise within the other major parties – which made of open terror by the PDG troops a series of armed clashes between different supporters.⁶⁰

Both the chiefs themselves and the French administration attempted to rescue the institution of chieftaincy in Guinea. The French Governor Jean Parisot in 1954 organised a conference of the most important paramount chiefs of the territory in an attempt at discussing with them the practice of chieftaincy with a view to its modernisation. At this occasion, it became also visible how different the position and the prestige of the chiefs were in the distinct regions of Guinea-Conakry. In the Futa Jallon, the paramount chiefs Almami Elhadj Ibrahima Sori Dara Barry Almami Alfaya and Almamy Elhadj Aguibou Barry Almamy Sorya still counted on widespread respect for their 'traditional rights'. They expected to maintain the privileges they enjoyed in relation to their subjects, including unpaid labour on their fields and presents, while hoping to obtain others such as additional payment from the French state. On the other hand, David Sylla, Paramount Chief of Basse-Côte, suffered strongest from the loss of authority and pledged for French help to rebuild his reputation. The Malinke Chief Koly Kourouma, initiator of the conference together with Parisot, was the most innovative in his proposals. Seeing that the intimidation campaign of the PDG was successful particularly in those parts of Guinea where chiefly abuses were common, he demanded for a better practice of chiefly power, including payment by the colonial system and more democratic consultation on the local level. Thus, even where the institution of chieftaincy as a whole was under siege, the 'traditional rulers' still enjoyed sufficient support to make an attempt at counter-mobilisation.

The collective initiative of chiefs could have very different degrees of success, varying from territory to territory. In many cases, their activity did not have any success at all, mainly because after independence the newly formed governments in former French West Africa did their best to destroy all organisations that could become an alternative nexus of power. Even so, it shows that chiefs *did* adapt to the environment of party politics. They did their best to survive. With the very particular exception of Guinea-Conakry, at no point was the existence of 'traditional rule' broadly challenged in the 1940s and 1950s.

59 SCHMIDT, 2007: 53-55.

60 SURET-CANALE, 1992: 134-135; CHARLES, 1992: 366-367.

Radical politics versus clandestine continuities: the maintenance of influence of former chiefs after the abolition of chieftaincy in Guinea-Conakry

Koly Kourouma's initiative in Guinea came by far too late. In March 1957 already, the PDG celebrated a sweeping electoral success, partly through violence and gang terror. After this election, the party could form a one-party government for the then-autonomous territory. The abolition of chieftaincy was one of the first major steps decided by this new territorial government in Conakry.⁶¹ After Guinean independence in October 1958, the role of the chiefs was increasingly taken over by the local prefects, who normally were followers of the PDG.⁶² Some of the dismissed 'traditional rulers' fled to neighbouring Sierra Leone or Liberia and attempted without much success to build up a guerrilla movement in the border regions.⁶³ However, even these dramatic changes do not imply that the new regime had no lasting impression of the prestige that still lay within chieftaincy.

In unofficial diplomatic missions, the new rulers in Conakry still used the 'traditional elite'. Thus, for gaining influence in neighbouring Guinea-Bissau, the Guinean administrator of Sareboido sent the deposed district chief (*chef de canton*) as his agent.⁶⁴ Moreover, when he himself had to go to Portuguese territory to negotiate in a case of kidnapping, the same administrator took it for granted that he had to address, on the other side of the border... the local chief!⁶⁵

The situation in Guinea-Bissau shows that chiefs kept some influence in situations of armed conflict. In this small territory where social and political reform was delayed, leaders with an agenda of modernisation were behind the armed revolt of the 1960s (at least according to what is pointed out in most studies about the war of liberation). The writings of revolutionary leader Amílcar Cabral, an ally and erstwhile friend of Sékou Touré, were hostile enough to any future role of the chiefs.⁶⁶

This did not diminish the influence of the chiefs during the war. However, it is near to fully ignored that chiefs played a vital role in organising a network of local support, and that the emissaries of the rebel groups knew this well and addressed the 'traditional rulers' first. This was still more strongly the case for the Movimento da Libertação da Guiné Portuguesa, like in the activities of its agent Mamadu Carimo.⁶⁷ In the leading ranks of this rebel group, second to Cabral's movement before the outbreak of the revolt, we find a majority of chiefs.⁶⁸ On the other hand, chiefs could also play a catalytic role in quelling the rebellion locally. Thus, Joaquim Baticam Ferreira of Teixeira Pinto categorically

61 SLOWE, 1991: 110-111.

62 Diplomatic Archives of the French Foreign Ministry, Paris (MAE), Direction Afrique-Levant, 1953-1959, Guinée, 6, Katz, French Consul in Freetown and Bathurst, to French Foreign Ministry, Directorate Afrique-Levant (n.º 15/AL), 13 Jan. 1959.

63 MAE, Direction Afrique-Levant, 1953-1959, Guinée, 6, Katz to French Foreign Ministry, Directorate Afrique-Levant (n.º 29/AL), 27 Jan. 1959: 1-2.

64 Arquivo Nacional da Torre da Tombo, Lisbon, Portugal (ANTT), AOS/CO/UL-32A-1, Portuguese Secret Police (PIDE), *Informação* - [Fronteira com a República da Guiné] (n.º 864/60-GU), 26 Dec. 1960.

65 MAE, AOS/CO/UL-32A-1, PIDE, *Informação* - [Fronteira com a República da Guiné] (n.º 531/60-GU), 15 April 1961.

66 CABRAL, 1974: 86-87.

67 ANTT AOS/CO/UL-32-A-1, PIDE, *Informação* - [MLGC] (n.º 721/61-GU), 12 May 1961.

68 ANTT AOS/CO/UL-32-A-1, PIDE, *Informação* - [MLGC] (n.º 904/61-G.U.), 30 May 1961.

refused to work with any of the rebel movements, and his attitude posed major difficulties for the rebel leaders in the area.⁶⁹ Far from being an anachronistic factor in the region under decolonisation, the chiefs thus even played a role in West Africa's only major war of liberation.

Conclusion

It is obvious that in many zones of decolonising West Africa, chieftaincy was far from being outmoded. However, the limits of what chiefs could afford to do for their personal well-being if not material enrichment were more restricted than what had been widespread half a century earlier. It was no longer possible to practise an abusive form of chiefly rule that only focused on self-enrichment. However, this did not minimise the attraction those posts held for the locals. The examples for tensions around chieftaincy from Côte d'Ivoire show that competition for chiefly posts was fierce. In the rural areas, being a chief remained an attractive option.

Adaptation was the way to go for the chiefs, and such a strategy would be pursued by the successful holders of a chieftaincy. In the 1940s and 1950s, West African chiefs were likely to be caught in party politics at some point of their career, and perhaps yet at the losing side in an electoral battle. Our examples from Senegal (and from the Gambia) or from Côte d'Ivoire, point exactly in this direction. Clever representatives were nevertheless capable to balance the odds: the best strategy was to concede to the wishes of the local notables whenever possible, this involving a course in which the chief corresponded to local customs as defined not by himself or by some metaphysical customary guides, but by constant renegotiation, to the favour of the locals.

Local populations respected chieftaincy as long as the chiefs accepted their boundaries. Ambitious individuals, even if far away from formulating any dynastic claims, would therefore not hesitate to aspire for a post as chief. Elections of rulers remained to be real and important events. Even where chieftaincy was abolished during the course of decolonisation, the new rulers knew that informal loyalties to 'traditional rule' were still existent. They were not embarrassed to use these links for their own political objectives, as in the case of the two Guineas.

Thus, historians are not to be surprised by the fact that in many postcolonial West African countries chieftaincy has again become an important factor, particularly from the 1990s. On the one hand, the prestige of the institution was, in many cases, unbroken. On the other hand, it is a myth that the decolonising colonial powers and early autonomous and independent governments embraced an unambiguous policy of 'modernisation' and of a removal of the chiefs. In fact, most late colonial administrations were caught in the contradiction between their commitment to create democratic and modernised structures and a rather instinctive impression that the 'traditional rulers' were still important. The attempts of European officials to react on this situation were manifold. What the colonial regime did not accomplish in the transitory period to decolonisation was a regulation of the position of chiefs that would have been viable for the time after. Thus, after independence, it was easy for the new authoritarian regimes to finish with a potential or existing opposition coming from local 'traditional' leaders.

69 ANTT AOS/CO/UL-32-A-1, PIDE, *Informação – [Guiné Portuguesa]* (n.º 163/61-GU), 8 Feb. 1961.

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