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► To cite this version:

Marie-Albane De Suremain. Between political reserve and scientific change: French geographers and decolonisation in tropical Africa, 1945–1967. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 2019, 66, pp.9 - 19. <10.1016/j.jhg.2019.06.005>. <hal-03488746>

HAL Id: hal-03488746

<https://hal.science/hal-03488746v1>

Submitted on 21 Jul 2022

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**Between political reserve and scientific change: French geographers and decolonisation
in tropical Africa, 1945–1967**

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KEYWORDS: Decolonization, French West Africa, History of geography, Tropical geography

ABSTRACT

Between the end of World War II and the granting of independence to former French colonies in tropical Africa in 1960, a network of scientific research centres supported an emerging community of geographers. These scholars distinguished themselves by a strong commitment to fieldwork and empirical enquiry, rather than to theorization. Their investigations represented a break with the amateurism and relative lack of disciplinary rigour that characterized colonial geography, as practised by French administrators and military surveyors in inter-war Africa and Asia. Becoming connected to a broader scientific community in France and across the globe, many geographers at work during the post-war period of decolonization applied new scientific ideas to their research in tropical Africa. Through a detailed examination of institutions, researchers and publications, this paper shows how the activities of French geographers eschewed the exoticization of Africa and escaped the scholarly marginality of earlier research on tropical regions. However, although their investigations had started to be ‘decolonized’ in the 1950s, few French geographers were militant advocates of independence.

Between political reserve and scientific change: French geographers and decolonisation in tropical Africa, 1945–1967

In 1971, toward the end of a long career devoted mainly to the study of Algeria and the island of la Réunion, the geographer Hildebert Isnard (1904–1983) published a book entitled *Géographie de la décolonisation*, which stood in marked contrast with *Géographie et colonisation* written in 1933 at the peak of the French colonial empire by Georges Hardy (1884–1972), then director of the Ecole Coloniale in Paris that trained future colonial administrators.¹ Isnard explored to what extent the independence gained by former colonies also produced a geography of decolonization (Fig. 1). In his view, ‘to decolonize involves giving a country full control of its economy, culture, and social organization: in short, a restructuring of the abandoned legacy of colonization’.² He believed that decolonization required the implementation of policies that would ensure a sharp break with the colonial past. Drawing on the experience of a decade of independence for several states, especially in Africa, he offered a balance sheet rather than advocating political engagement. In this, his approach echoed the position adopted by most French geographers interested in newly independent African states. With the notable exception of Jean Dresch (1905–1994), Jean Suret-Canale (1921–2007) and, a little later, Yves Lacoste (born in 1929), the process of decolonization does not seem to have been a central feature of French geography.³

¹ H. Isnard, *Géographie de la décolonisation*, Paris, 1971; G. Hardy, *Géographie et colonisation*, Paris, 1933.

² Isnard, *Géographie de la décolonisation*, 117.

³ These three geographers, who may be described as ‘critical’ or ‘third-worlders’, adopted anti-colonialist positions. See G. Bowd and D. Clayton, *Impure and Worldly Geography: Pierre Gourou and Tropicality*, Abingdon, 2019, chapters 6 and 7; Y. Lacoste, *Géographie coloniale et géographie académique: approche épistémologique*, in: M. Bruneau and D. Dory (Eds), *Géographies des colonisations XV-XX siècles*, Paris, 1994, 343–348; H. Velasco-Graciet (Ed), *Les tropiques des géographes*, Pessac, 2008. On Suret-Canale, see P. Bianchini, *Suret-Canale: de la Résistance à l’anticolonialisme*, Paris, 2011.

Studies of the relationship between decolonization and the human and social sciences have relatively little to say about geography, apart from noting the declining interest in ‘tropical geography’.⁴ By contrast, many investigations have shown how decolonization in Africa transformed anthropology, ethnology, history and, especially, sociology. Indeed, Georges Balandier (1920–2016) offered a particularly brilliant analysis of colonialism from a sociological perspective.⁵ The published record suggests that French geographers who worked in African territories before and after independence usually set themselves apart from politics. But this relative reserve among these scholars should not lead to hasty conclusions. Between 1945 and the 1960s, conditions of research, foci of investigation and practices of geographical enquiry underwent important changes that permitted a re-evaluation of French geographical work in Africa, along with that of other social scientists, both during the colonial era and in the subsequent period of national independence. Rather than being Africanists who practised ‘colonial geography’ – and, as Gavin Bowd and Daniel Clayton put it, with this term hinging on the question of ‘whether there was anything intrinsically colonial about the geography of French overseas areas, or anything patriotically or practically French about their study’ – French scholars thought of themselves as geographers who happened to work in Africa.⁶ Never forgetting their European origin, they tended to be very discreet in public about their political views. Nonetheless, from the 1950s decolonization served to reinvigorate their ideas and research practices, notably around the contested notion of ‘tropicality’ – the centuries-old

⁴ For example, the special issue of the *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* on ‘the passage of colonial sciences to postcolonial questioning: invisible decolonization’ ignored geography. See, F. Cooper, Development, modernization, and the social sciences in the era of decolonization: the examples of British and French Africa, *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 10 (2004) 9–38; E. Sibeud, Des ‘sciences coloniales’ au questionnement postcolonial: la décolonisation invisible? *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 24 (2011) 3–16; B. Trépied, Recherche et décolonisation en Nouvelle Calédonie contemporaine: lectures croisées, *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 24 (2011) 159–187.

⁵ G. Balandier, La situation coloniale. Approche théorique, *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* 11 (1951) 44–79.

⁶ Bowd and Clayton, *Impure and Worldly Geography*, 96. The chief protagonists in this debate, which began in late nineteenth century, were the geographers Marcel Dubois and Lucien Gallois. See Pierre Singaravélou, The institutionalisation of ‘colonial geography’ in France, 1880–1940, *Journal of Historical Geography* 37 (2011) 149–157.

colonial discourse that configured ‘the tropics’ as the ‘temperate’ West’s exotic ‘other’ (in both environmental and racial terms, and with exoticism having positive and negative connotations), and with this discourse spanning art, science and government.⁷

Concentrating on the moment between French colonies gaining independence and the creation in 1967 of the Centre d’Etudes Géographiques Tropicales (Centre for Studies of Tropical Geography: CEGET) at Bordeaux, and attending to changes in research institutions and working conditions, this article traces the emergence of a new generation of geographical researchers working in Africa. Without forming a school of ‘tropicalists’ properly speaking, and remaining apart from anti-colonial politics, these geographers managed to renew approaches to and representations of Africa in the context of decolonization. As their enquiries became more ‘professional’, so those undertaking fieldwork in tropical Africa fitted more clearly into national and international networks of research. This nascent scientific community distanced itself progressively from the practices of colonial geography and adopted a much more attentive and respectful attitude toward African societies. While never completely escaping their sense of difference, and being reluctant to theorize or to offer systematic interpretations, members of the French geographical community greatly enhanced understanding of African societies and their geographies.

The following survey of the entanglements between French geography, geographers and decolonization in Africa, and particularly French West Africa, underscores the significance of a new set of state and non-governmental organizations and institutions in fostering this geographical community and shaping the passage from a colonial geography to a geography that was alive – if not entirely attuned – to projects and processes of

⁷ A. Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Paris, 1950, 36, coined the term *tropicalité* to identify such a mode of representation and engagement. See also David Arnold, ‘Illusory riches’: representations of the tropical world, 1840-1950, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 21 (2000) 6–18; F Driver and L. Martins (Eds), *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*, Chicago, 2005; J-P Raison, ‘Tropicalism’ in French geography: reality, illusion or ideal? *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 26 (2005) 323–338; Bowd and Clayton, *Impure and Worldly Geography*, chapter 1.

decolonisation. What follows should be placed in a wider context, since the research presented here chimes with Tony Chafer's general observation that:

Studies of French decolonization in West Africa have traditionally treated it as a planned and reasonably smooth process ... in stark contrast to the much more conflictual decolonization processes in Indochina (1947–1954) and Algeria (1954–1962) This approach has tended to give pride of place to the role of individuals – members of France's governing elites and African political leaders – who are portrayed as having successfully managed the transition to independence. While the importance of such individuals cannot be denied, it is important to recognize that French decolonization in West Africa was a contingent process ... that involved a multiplicity of French and African actors who were not in control of the policy agenda but who were, on the contrary, operating in a highly constrained context and constantly being forced to react to rapidly unfolding events.⁸

French geographers, and the ideas and institutions that shaped and were shaped by their work, were part of this multiplicity, and the aim here is to trace and examine the specific nature of their contribution.

Professionalizing geographical research in the French African colonies, 1940-1950

After World War II the creation of scientific institutions in French colonies in Africa, such as the French Institute for Black Africa (Institut Français d'Afrique Noire: IFAN), the Office for Scientific Research in the Colonies (Office de la Recherche Scientifique Coloniale: ORSC)

⁸ T. Chafer, Decolonization in French West Africa, in: *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia, African History*, Oxford, 2019, e-book
<http://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-166>

and the Office for Scientific and Technical Research Overseas (Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique d’Outre-Mer: ORSTOM), allowed a group of professional geographers to emerge. These research organizations were relatively autonomous from colonial authorities and gave rise to a different kind of activity from the colonial geography practised between the wars. During the 1950s, these new institutions changed in various ways as colonial territories approached independence.

A Committee for Historical and Scientific Studies in French West Africa (Comité des Etudes Historiques et Scientifiques de l’Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF)), similar to the nineteenth-century French learned societies, had been set up in 1916. Twenty years later, the Popular Front regime in France had very different scientific ambitions for its African colonies, which lacked a research school such as the French School of the Far East (Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient) established in Indochina in 1898. The idea for IFAN came from the International Colonial Exhibition at Vincennes in eastern Paris in 1931, but it was Marius Moutet (1876–1968), minister for the colonies, who enabled it to be created by decree on 19 August 1936, funded through the federal budget for the AOF.⁹ In his inaugural speech the general inspector of education in the AOF, historian-geographer Albert Charton (1893–1980), defined the objectives of the institute in very colonial terms: ‘Science is the auxiliary of colonization. Science is needed in Africa, so that France may know about the resources and peoples of Africa’.¹⁰ The institute was managed by the high committee for research in Paris and a council for scientific research in Dakar, chaired by the director general of public education. In practice, metropolitan influence was slight with the real management being

⁹ AOF governor-general Jules Brévié (1880–1964) stressed that Algeria, Morocco, Madagascar and Indochina already had academies, Archives IFAN, Dakar, Sénégal, A1-9. Rapport 1936, On installe à Dakar, un Institut français d’Afrique noire. The IFAN also received money from local budgets and from the Fonds d’Investissements pour le Développement Économique et Social (FIDES) after World War II.

¹⁰ Archives IFAN A1-9, Rapport 1936.

provided by its secretary-general, naturalist Théodore Monod (1902–2000), from the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris. Appointed in 1938, he was soon made director.¹¹

The IFAN really came into being at that moment and acquired two small offices in the former residence of the governor-general in the centre of Dakar. Initial emphasis was placed on ethnology but it was recognised that 'geographical knowledge of the AOF is insufficient. A vast, methodical enquiry must be launched to provide rigorous information'.¹² Monod defended the scientific autonomy and disciplinary range of his institute against the colonial authorities. Not surprisingly for a naturalist, he allocated an important place to the natural sciences alongside the human sciences. Holding a positivist view of knowledge, he encouraged data collection through empirical observation (fieldwork) and the collation of documentary and policy material by 'research section' (largely organised by discipline). Nine research sections were initiated: ethnology in 1941, then botany, zoology, prehistory and archaeology, oceanography, marine biology, anthropology and linguistics. Geography was the final section to come into being, in 1945, headed by Jacques Richard-Molard (1913–1951), a young scholar seconded from France on a scholarship whom Monod had met in Dakar.¹³ By 1948, the institute comprised a score of researchers, divided equally between the natural and human sciences. The organization of research at the IFAN marked a break from 'Africanism' as it had been practised between the wars, with relatively little distinction between disciplines and predominance given to ethnography and ethnology. The geographical section of the institute provided an institutional framework for research and freed it from control by the military and colonial administrators, who continued to produce many topographic, hydrographic and geomorphological accounts from reconnaissance expeditions and tours of

¹¹ Ethnologist Marcel Griaule (1898–1956), who had organised the Dakar-Djibouti expedition in 1931, was approached for this post but he declined the offer since he was already director of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris. A. Adandé, Témoignage sur la genèse de l'IFAN, *Bulletin de l'IFAN (B)* 2 (1996) 27–33.

¹² Archives IFAN A1-9, Rapport 1936.

¹³ R. Blanchard, Jacques Richard-Molard, *Revue de Géographie Alpine* 40 (1952) 5–16; T. Monod, Hommage à Jacques Richard-Molard: 1913–1951, *Présence Africaine* 15 (1953) 5–10

duty. The institute also included a 'French School for West Africa' that accommodated visiting researchers undertaking fieldwork.

After 1942, organization of the IFAN was modelled on the federal structure of the AOF. Personnel were sent from Dakar to establish centres in its component colonies: at Porto-Novo and Abomey in Dahomey (1942); at Saint-Louis for Sénégal and Mauritanie (1943); at Abidjan in the Côte-d'Ivoire, Niamey in Niger, Koulouba near Bamako for the Soudan, on the Boulbinet peninsula for Guinée (1944); and, finally, at Ouagadougou in Haute-Volta (1950). Three other centres outside the AOF, in the Cameroun, Togo and the Côte Française des Somalis, were also associated with the institute. Although very modest, these centres assisted the professionalization of research by accommodating researchers and aiding their fieldwork. In fact, some of these researchers took the liberty of not obtaining permission from colonial administrators prior to going into the field. Monod sought to promote a professional network of scientists in the AOF that would be as independent as possible of colonial authorities and research institutions in France, while being on an equal footing with metropolitan scholars and institutions. However, legislation in 1956 brought autonomy to various colonies, and the creation of the 'French Community' (*Communauté française*) in 1958 overturned the organization of the IFAN.¹⁴ A fragmentation of services across the former AOF ensued, dislocating the federal structure of the institute while also serving to anchor local research centres in colonial regions that were attaining independence. Dissolution of the AOF deprived these centres of federal funding, and their future depended on variable local circumstances. Their activity was reduced considerably, dealing a serious blow to Monod's AOF-wide scientific project. French personnel who were still attached to the institute had to find an alternative base, either in universities or, especially, at ORSTOM which had a very different model of scientific organization (see below).

¹⁴ The *Communauté française* was established on 4 October 1958 under the constitution of the Fifth Republic to embrace France and most territories of its former colonial empire.

The foundations of the Office for Scientific Research (ORSC) were also laid in the 1930s. In line with wishes expressed at the scientific conferences accompanying the colonial exhibitions of 1931 and 1937, the French (left-wing) Popular Front government established a Council for Overseas France (Conseil de la France d’Outre-Mer) within a higher council for scientific research responsible for organizing activities in the colonies.¹⁵ This initiative responded to a call for better knowledge of the natural environment, colonial conditions and the ‘systems of production to be created, and [the] necessary conditions for integrating local people into these productive systems’.¹⁶ Working to a very different ideology – one that was patrician-totalitarian – the Vichy regime terminated the Council for Overseas France in March 1941 and, on 19 November 1942, ordered that ORSC be established, reinforcing this by legislation on 11 October 1943. ORSC was attached to the Ministry of Colonies, while being chaired by the director of the Centre for National Scientific Research (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique: CNRS). Its objective was to create a body of researchers to work in the colonies, whose training and career expectations could rival those of their colleagues in France. The mission of ORSC was ‘to develop basic studies and applied research needed by the technical and administrative services charged with developing colonial territories ... and to assist those services not only in training their research specialists, but also by providing personnel and by undertaking investigations at their request’.¹⁷ ORSC embraced all the natural and social sciences that would operate in tropical Africa, including geography. Eminently colonial in structure, ORSC had to respond to changing political circumstances following the Brazzaville conference in 1944 and the creation of the French Union (Union

¹⁵ M. Gleize, *Un regard sur l’ORSTOM, 1943-1983*, Paris, 1985; C. Bonneuil and P. Petitjean, Recherche scientifique et politique coloniale. Les chemins de la création de l’ORSTOM, du Front populaire à la Libération en passant par Vichy, 1936-1945, in: P. Petitjean (Ed), *Les sciences coloniales, figures et institutions*, Paris, 1996, 113–161.

¹⁶ R. Combes, *ORSTOM, Organisation, activités, 1944-1955*, Paris, 1955, 13.

¹⁷ J-L. Trochain, Compte rendu d’activité et programmes de recherches de l’IEC, *Bulletin de l’IEC* 3 (1952) 3–112.

française) in 1946.¹⁸ By a decree of 28 May 1949, it became the Office for Scientific Research Overseas (Office de la Recherche Scientifique Outre-Mer), which enabled it to broaden its field of activity from the French colonies to embrace Latin America.¹⁹ By adding the adjective ‘technical’ to its title, legislation of 17 November 1949 transformed it into ORSTOM. This modification put a practical slant on future research, in line with earlier objectives for exploiting the resources and developing the economies of overseas territories. It also reinforced the authority of the Minister of France Overseas with regard to orienting research, approving programmes and evaluating their execution.

The Institute for Central African Studies (Institut des Etudes Centrafricaines: IEC) was created on 18 June 1946 as a colonial branch of ORSC and later of ORSTOM. It really took off thanks to funding from the Investment Fund for Social and Economic Development (FIDES). Under the direction of botanist Jean Trochain (1903–1976), the IEC was housed initially close to the French government building in Brazzaville, but in 1947 moved to modern premises near Bacongo, to the south of the city. Its objectives included stimulating, promoting and undertaking all kinds of scientific work in French Equatorial Africa (AEF): organizing and coordinating scientific work in the region; drawing up programmes of work and ensuring collaboration between scientific organizations in France and other countries with regard to AEF; and establishing archives, libraries and scientific collections necessary for studying central Africa in general.²⁰ A further responsibility involved setting up local research centres in each of the component territories of AEF. In the words of director Trochain, ‘Experience across the world has shown that plans for economic and social development must draw upon a profound knowledge of all aspects of the environment, not simply human ones but also

¹⁸ All legislation passed under the Vichy government was invalidated at the Liberation, but the ORSC was confirmed by an order of the Provisional Government of the French Republic on 24 November 1944. The French Union (1946–1958) was a political entity created by the French Fourth Republic to replace the colonial system, known as the French empire. Gleize, *Un regard sur l’ORSTOM*, 7.

¹⁹ M-L. Sabrié, *Histoire des principes de programmation scientifique à l’ORSTOM (1944-1994)*, in: Petitjean (Ed), *Les sciences coloniales, figures et institutions*, 223–235.

²⁰ J-L. Trochain, *L’Institut d’Etudes centrafricaines*, *Bulletin de l’IEC* 1 (1948) 1.

physical (climate, soils) and biological (vegetation, fauna, and their interaction) elements; as a consequence, detailed scientific studies must precede and then accompany the execution of such plans'.²¹ In this way, science in general, and geography in particular, was conceived as an auxiliary to colonization. The IEC was linked closely to colonial authorities, with its administrative council chaired by the secretary-general of the government of AEF.

As with the IFAN, institutional changes in the French colonies had a direct impact on the organization of the IEC, albeit in a different way. By a decree of 15 July 1957, the IEC lost its relative autonomy and became a component service of ORSTOM. This simplified the situation of its personnel when the French Congo acquired independence in 1960. Moreover, the creation of the French Community in October 1958, leading to the disappearance of the Ministry for France Overseas, had important implications for ORSTOM. In December 1959, the Study Organization for the Expansion of Scientific Research (Association d'étude pour l'expansion de la recherche scientifique: AEERS) held a conference in Dakar and Abidjan that investigated the contribution of scientific and technical research to the economic and social development of African countries. It concluded that 'fundamental research has primacy, independently of the preoccupations of applied research that influence economic and social development in the short term', and stressed that Africans needed to have access to 'the highest levels of scientific knowledge and research, and on equal footing with the best scholars in France and other countries' – although, as a large body of anti-colonial thought and postcolonial literature shows, far fewer francophone Africans were empowered through education than was espoused. It was a struggle to draw African knowledge and institutions of knowledge production out of their position subordination to white/French knowledge systems,

²¹ J-L. Trochain, Les études poursuivies par l'Institut d'Etudes Centrafricaines depuis sa création, sur le territoire de la République du Congo, *Bulletin de l'IEC* 19–20 (1960) 127–188.

without, as Frantz Fanon decried in 1952, having to renounce their ‘blackness’.²² Even so, while acknowledging the commitment of scientists to the development paradigm and its steeping in imperial values, the outlook of AEERS presented a criticism of the very ‘applied’ priorities of ORSTOM. In turn, the latter was reorganized by a decree of 9 August 1960 which gave it the task, among others, of developing an infrastructure to enable fundamental research in all scientific domains. Its cooperative vocation entrusted it with gathering basic information on which partner states might ground their development plans and also undertaking fundamental research needed by specialized applied institutes.²³ After independence was granted to French colonial territories, ORSTOM signed agreements with the new states to enable its research centres to pursue their activities. It also became the host organization for scientists that had lost their institutional base with the end of colonialism. Seven technical committees covering different scientific disciplines were created by decree on 9 August 1960, but this system was changed completely on 8 July 1964 when sixteen technical committees were established, corresponding to specific themes or objectives, and four-fifths of whose members came from outside bodies such as the CNRS and various national research institutes. This reorganization involved important changes to the objectives and scientific management of ORSTOM.

The IFAN and ORSTOM had different models of scientific organization and espoused different philosophies. In 1954, Théodore Monod was pressured to merge the two institutions but firmly refused to cooperate in order to defend the scientific independence of the IFAN and to avoid being constrained to work on research with colonial objectives and applications. However, this was not divisive. Scientific establishments in the colonies shared common goals by supporting the professionalization of research and facilitating the mobility of

²² Gleize, *Un regard sur l'ORSTOM*, 1985, 68; F. Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris, 1952, 17–18; C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, Colonial history and decolonization: the French imperial case, *European Journal of Development Research* 3 (1991) 28–43.

²³ Gleize, *Un regard sur l'ORSTOM*, 72, 76.

scientists, thereby helping African territories to develop research capacity. For example, the Society for Cameroun Studies (Société d'Etudes Camerounaises), founded in 1935, was reorganized on 9 May 1944 as a local branch of the IFAN, thereby giving it a more important place among professional researchers. Subsequently, a ministerial order of 20 December 1949 set up the Institute for Research in Cameroun (Institut de la Recherche du Cameroun: IRC) at Yaoundé, with ORSTOM drawing on the FIDES to invest in equipment and to pay the wages of European personnel, with other expenditure being covered by local sources. Geographer François Bonnet-Dupeyron (1915–2001) was made director of the IRC, which had six branches. One of these included geography and employed a geographer named Roland Dizian. In general, researchers moved between institutions as opportunities arose. Thus, Balandier depended on ORSC when he was director of the IFAN centre at Conakry in Guinée from November 1946 to April 1947. Similarly, ethnologist Paul Mercier (1922–1976) was a research attaché of ORSC seconded to the IFAN centre in Dahomey while it was being created at the end of 1944 and then to the sociology section of the IFAN at Dakar. Geographer Paul Péliissier (1921–2010) was preparing to move to an ORSTOM posting at Douala in Cameroun, when a directorship became vacant at the IFAN in Dakar, which he duly occupied. Like other researchers, and as previously noted, he did not always seek permission from the colonial authorities before undertaking fieldwork in the countryside of Sénégal.²⁴ Working beyond the confines of the colonial administration, the different IFAN centres received scientists from France under a variety of arrangements. Among seven researchers visiting the centre in Guinée in 1948–1949 was Jean Dresch, professor of colonial geography at the Sorbonne, who had come to complete his investigation of rice cultivation in the Southern Rivers region. In general terms, the organization of research activities in tropical Africa was

²⁴ Interview with Péliissier, 25 September 1995; see also Y. Théodat, Entretien avec Paul Péliissier, *Echogéo* 1 (2007).

neither controlled nor coordinated by the Ministry of France Overseas (Ministère de la France d’Outre-Mer), but was managed by local research institutes.

The publications of these institutes played an important role in diffusing knowledge and supporting scientific networks that extended beyond colonial administrative divisions. The IFAN first published a *Bulletin* in 1938 but this became so voluminous that it supported two series from 1954: A for natural sciences and B for social sciences, where geography was well represented. This periodical published original research articles as well as notes and reviews summarizing material from leading French journals – notably the *Cahiers d’Outre-Mer* and the *Annales de Géographie* – with substantial coverage of African geography, as well as from selected foreign journals. The *Bulletin* diffused research undertaken by French scholars in Africa and publicised the results of investigations of foreign researchers working there. The IFAN also published important research monographs in its *Mémoires* series, and a collection entitled *Initiatives Africaines* aimed at a wider audience. Radio broadcasts, often by Monod, spread research findings about tropical Africa to the general public. Information about the activities of the IFAN’s local centres was circulated in the *Notes Africaines* series. Each centre published its own periodical, but many of these did not appear regularly.²⁵ In addition, the IFAN centre at Douala in the Cameroun had its own series of *Mémoires*, as did the IEC at Brazzaville, which produced its own bulletin. These publications were taken not only by the various research centres in French tropical Africa but also by major libraries in Paris and by most universities in France. Geographers at the IFAN and the IEC also published in the *Cahiers d’Outre-Mer* and the *Annales de Géographie*, which had a much wider readership than the *Bulletin de l’IFAN* and allowed scholarship about French territories in Africa to be disseminated more widely.

²⁵ These were *Etudes dahoméennes* (Cotonou), *Etudes éburnéennes* (Abidjan), *Etudes guinéennes* (Conakry), *Etudes mauritaniennes* (Saint-Louis), *Etudes nigériennes* (Niamey), *Etudes sénégalaises* (Saint-Louis) and *Etudes soudaniennes* (Bamako).

Geographers working in French tropical Africa also participated in conferences, thereby reinforcing their presence in broader French and international scientific networks. After World War II, Monod sought to extend the zone of influence of the IFAN to the whole of Africa. In 1945, he organized the first international conference of West Africanists at Dakar, which brought together ethnologists, geographers and natural scientists, with participants coming from Great Britain, Portugal and Spain as well as France. Other conferences of this type met at different locations in Africa: at Bissao (1947), Ibadan (1949), Fernando Po (1951), Abidjan (1953), Sao Tomé (1956) and Accra (1959). The IFAN was represented at many international gatherings. Thus, Richard-Molard attended the inter-African congress on food and nutrition held in October 1949 at Dschang in Cameroun. This multi-disciplinary event involved scientists from francophone, anglophone and lusophone parts of the continent, as well as from South Africa.²⁶ In September 1955, Charles Toupet (1900–2000) attended the conference on ‘development factors in the tropical world’ organized by the International Geographical Union at Kampala in Uganda and presided over by the British geographer Dudley Stamp (1898–1966). The event was reported in the *Bulletin de l’IFAN*.²⁷ Working beyond the confines of colonial divides, British, French and Portuguese geographers shared their common interest in land use in tropical areas of the world and, as a result of these new structures for supporting research, a community of professional geographers came into being that broke with the old practices of colonial geography.

The emergence of a new community of professional geographers in French Africa

²⁶ J. Richard-Molard, A propos de la faim de l’Afrique. Alimentation et nutrition en Afrique noire d’après la conférence de Dschang, *Bulletin de l’IFAN (B)* 3 (1951) 908–915.

²⁷ Un congrès de géographie tropicale en Uganda, *Bulletin de l’IFAN (B)* 3–4 (1956) 514–516; Toupet published his own presentation as La vallée de Tamourt: transformations agraires et sociales, *Bulletin de l’IFAN (B)* 3–4 (1956) 509–513.

Before World War II, publications by professional researchers who had undertaken fieldwork in sub-Saharan Africa were few and far between.²⁸ Inter-war ‘Africanism’ was defined by a certain amateurism and the absence of disciplinary rigour. Work of a geographical character was often undertaken by soldiers and administrators, who were not professionally trained or were engaged in the very specialized task of producing maps for military use. Major works synthesising African geography were written by scholars based in France.²⁹ With support from the new scientific structures in French Africa, a generation of professional geographers emerged who participated in French and international research networks but whose work was very different from old-fashioned colonial geography. Within the framework of ORSC, the status of ‘researcher’ was adopted by decree on 26 July 1946. Scientists recruited under this regime committed to serve for ten years in French territories overseas. Tens of university-educated researchers came to develop their careers in Africa, including a number of geographers.

Two of the French pioneers in the geography of West Africa were Jean-Charles Leclerc (1914–1946), lecturer in colonial geography at the University of Lyon in 1945, and Richard-Molard, who led the geography section of the IFAN from 1945 to 1949. Both died very prematurely in climbing accidents in the Nimba mountains in Guinée, Leclerc in 1946 and Richard-Molard in 1951.³⁰ Jean Dresch was another important pioneer, a brilliant geographer and militant communist, who adopted a very critical stance on colonization.³¹

²⁸ The publications of Yves Urvoy (1900–1944), who investigated the physical geography of the Niger basins, and of François Bonnet-Dupeyron (1915–2001), who worked on livestock rearing, should be mentioned but there were few geographers in this field.

²⁹ For example, the volume covering central Africa in the great *Géographie Universelle* series published by Armand Colin between the world wars was Fernand Maurette, *Afrique équatoriale, orientale et australe*, Paris, 1938; P. Singaravélou (Ed.), *L’Empire des géographes. Géographie, exploration et colonisation, XIX-XXe siècle*, Paris, 2008.

³⁰ A. Allix, Jean-Charles Leclerc (1914–46), *Etudes Rhodaniennes* 23 (1948) 76–82.

³¹ Jean Dresch was professor of colonial geography at the Institut de Géographie of the Sorbonne and at the Ecole de la France d’Outre-Mer. He visited Africa in 1948–1949 with funds from the Committee for the Centenary of the 1848 Revolution, arriving at Dakar in October 1948. He investigated aspects of physical and economic geography, returning to France in 1949 after visiting the Casamance area, both French and Portuguese Guinée, the Côte-d’Ivoire and the Soudan. He published an article on rice cultivation in the Three Rivers region:

After being received at the IFAN for a short period in 1948–1949, he focused his subsequent research on Morocco and the eastern Mediterranean. Two other major figures emerged among the new generation of French geographers based solidly in sub-Saharan Africa: Gilles Sautter (1920–1998) and Paul Pélissier (1921–2010), both of whom had been taught by the doyen of tropical geography in France, Pierre Gourou (1900–1999).

Sautter had been taught by Gourou at the University of Montpellier during World War II and passed the demanding *agrégation* examination in 1945 before teaching geography in the high school (*lycée*) in Laon and then at the Lycée Claude Bernard in Lyon.³² He was seconded from school teaching to join ORSTOM from 1948 to 1953 and headed the geography section of the IEC.³³ Based in Brazzaville, he collected material for his doctoral thesis on the geography of under-population in the French Congo, as well as gathering information for a population map of Gabon and the Moyen Congo.³⁴ He also studied rural-urban migration and questions surrounding urban development and land ownership around Brazzaville and in the Woleu N'Ten area. This period in Africa was the springboard for the rest of his career, and he exemplifies how professional geographical research in colonial territories emerged during the 1950s and subsequently advanced out of the margins of the discipline in France. Recruited by the CNRS as a researcher during 1953–1954, he taught at the University of Strasbourg (1964–1967), before becoming a full-time director of research at the VIth Section (social sciences) of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, and then

La riziculture en Afrique occidentale, *Annales de Géographie* 58 (1949) 295–312. See J. Dresch, *Un géographe au déclin des empires*, Paris, 1979. The anti-colonial views of Jean Suret-Canale won't be outlined here, but see J. Suret-Canale, Quelques aspects de la géographie agraire au Sénégal. Le cercle de Louga, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 1 (1948) 348–367.

³² Success in the very demanding *agrégation* examination, involving written and oral components, qualifies graduates to teach advanced classes in *lycées* and to lecture in universities.

³³ F. Pinton (Ed), *Tropiques, lieux et liens. Florilège offert à Paul Pélissier et Gilles Sautter*, Paris, 1989, 9–10; G. Sautter, *Parcours d'un géographe, des paysages aux ethnies, de la brousse à la ville, de l'Afrique au monde*, Paris, 1993.

³⁴ G. Sautter, *De l'Atlantique au fleuve Congo: une géographie du sous-peuplement*, two volumes, Paris and The Hague, 1966.

professor at the Sorbonne (1967–1986).³⁵ He chaired the scientific committee of geography at ORSTOM between 1963 and 1973.

Sautter was replaced at ORSTOM by Pélissier, another Africanist geographer with whom he had founded the laboratory of African sociology and geography at the CNRS in 1967. Trained by Gourou and Louis Papy (1903–1990) at the University of Bordeaux, Pélissier replaced Richard-Molard as head of the geography section at the IFAN in 1951. He stood down in the following year because he felt that the conception of science promoted by its director, Théodore Monod, was too influenced by the positivist culture of the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris.³⁶ In 1953, Pélissier joined the new Institute for Advanced Studies (Institut des Hautes Etudes) at Dakar, which became a university in 1957. There he developed a more professional approach to research in the years leading to national independence, and also undertook the necessary fieldwork for his doctoral thesis on the peasantry of Sénégal.³⁷ He returned to France in 1961 and lectured at the nascent university college in Rouen (which became the University of Upper Normandy in 1964). On several occasions he returned to teach at the University of Dakar and at other universities in francophone Africa and Madagascar, and to contribute expertise to rural development schemes. In 1967, he initiated the teaching of tropical geography at the new faculty of arts and social sciences at Nanterre, which became the Université Paris X three years later. From 1973 to 1982 he chaired the scientific committee for geography at ORSTOM.

Both having been students of Gourou, Sautter and Pélissier were undoubtedly the most brilliant French geographers engaged in studying African colonies at the moment of independence. They directed many research projects and, rather than founding a school of disciples, created a whole community of geographers whose members they encouraged and

³⁵ P. Pélissier, Gilles Sautter, 1920–1998, *Journal des Africanistes* 68 (1998) 297–299.

³⁶ He was succeeded as head of the geography section by Gérard Brasseur in 1951 and Charles Toupet in 1954. Toupet was responsible for completing the *Atlas de l'ouest africain*, Dakar, 1968.

³⁷ P. Pélissier, *Les paysans du Sénégal: les civilisations agraires du Cayor à la Casamance*, Saint-Yrieux, 1966.

accompanied in the field. These younger researchers rejuvenated geographical work on tropical Africa, but earned less personal renown than their mentors.³⁸

After World War II at least a dozen French geographers started their professional careers in tropical Africa where they undertook relatively long periods of fieldwork. Many continued their work after independence and were based at local research centres – often inherited from the IFAN or dependent on ORSTOM – or were employed to teach in secondary schools or nascent universities. Some were paid by the French state as part of its programme of cooperation with developing countries, others were employed by the newly independent states.³⁹ In this way, Gérard Brasseur (1923–1998) set up the Centrifan at Bamako-Koulikoro in the early 1950s, before joining the federal centre at Dakar where he replaced Pélissier as head of the geography section. He investigated water supplies in Sénégal and the palm groves of Porto Novo, and in 1967 defended his state doctorate on settlements in Mali.⁴⁰ After returning to France he was employed by ORSTOM. Brasseur also worked with C-R. Hiernaux on a project to produce an atlas of West Africa. Hiernaux taught in secondary education at Abidjan from 1946 to 1948 and was then seconded to the IFAN where he directed the geography section of the Côte-d'Ivoire research centre for a year. His successor, from 1949 to 1955, was Gabriel Rougerie (1918–2008), who had taught for three years at the *école primaire supérieure* at Bingerville and was especially interested in biogeography.⁴¹ He returned to France in 1959 and lectured at the University of Besançon and was then professor at the Université Paris VII (1967–1986). After some time in Dakar, Hiernaux headed the

³⁸ C. Blanc-Pamard and R. Pourtier, Gilles Sautter ou le bonheur d'être géographe, *Annales de Géographie* 108 (1999) 201–206; J-L. Chaléard, Autour de Paul Pélissier, *Echogéo* 13 (2010).

³⁹ The case of François Bonnet-Dupeyron (1915–2001) must be considered separately, since he was rather older and between the wars had published articles on livestock rearing in Sénégal and Mauritanie. He directed the Institut d'études camerounaises at Yaoundé from 1951 to 1961, and then returned to France where he became director of the ORSTOM centre at Bondy, northeastern Paris.

⁴⁰ G. Brasseur, *Le problème de l'eau au Sénégal*, Saint-Louis, 1952; G. Brasseur, *La palmeraie de Porto-Novo*, Dakar, 1953; G. Brasseur, *Les établissements humains au Mali*, Mémoires de l'IFAN, Dakar, 1968.

⁴¹ G. Rougerie, *Le façonnement actuel des modelés en Côte-d'Ivoire. Les pays Agni sud-est de la Côte-d'Ivoire forestière*, Dakar, 1960.

geography section and then the whole IFAN research centre at Conakry in Guinée (1951–1958). After Guinée gained independence in 1960, he returned to Dakar until 1965, finally joining ORSTOM. In Haute-Volta, Georges Savonnet (1920–2009) was employed at the IFAN centre at Ouagadougou in the 1950s. His first publications were on Sénégal, especially the town of Thiès, and then he specialized on Haute-Volta and its contacts with Côte-d’Ivoire. After independence, he directed the Côte-d’Ivoire research centre that was created in 1962.

Several young geographers came to tropical Africa to undertake fieldwork leading to the *diplôme d’études supérieures* (DES) qualification.⁴² One of these was Jean Gallais (1926–1998), who was a student of Charles Robequain (1897–1963), who occupied the chair of tropical geography at the Sorbonne’s Institut de Géographie.⁴³ Aged twenty-five, Gallais joined the IFAN in Dakar in order to research the Lébou people. Together with Savonnet, between 1953 and 1957 he published articles in the *Bulletin de l’IFAN* on the town of Thiès in Sénégal. Then he undertook applied as well as pure research, especially in relation to development projects in the Niger valley. He participated in a three-year programme of tropical research in human geography that was financed by ORSTOM and supervised by Robequain and Gourou, who held the chair of tropical geography at the Collège de France and was also professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Between 1956 and 1960, Gallais accompanied groups of students for six-month periods of tropical fieldwork. In 1961, he was recruited to teach at the University of Strasbourg and defended his doctoral thesis on the interior delta of the Niger.⁴⁴ In 1967, he moved to the chair of tropical geography at the University of Upper Normandy, and in 1988 to the Sorbonne. Edmond Bernus (1929–2004), another student of Robequain’s, received a grant in 1952 from the Institute of Advanced

⁴² This was roughly equivalent to a master’s degree by research.

⁴³ D. Retaillé, Jean Gallais, 1926–1998, *Annales de Géographie* 108 (1999) 90–95; P. Péliissier, Jean Gallais, 1926–1998, *Journal des Africanistes* 68 (1998) 294–295; H. Clout, Charles Robequain, 1897–1963, *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies* 32 (2016) 79–103.

⁴⁴ J. Gallais, *Le delta intérieur du Niger. Etude de géographie régionale*, two volumes, Mémoires de l’IFAN, Dakar, 1967.

Studies in Dakar in order to prepare a DES in Guinée. He also published an article on the village of Kobané in the Haut-Niger.⁴⁵ In 1955, at the age of twenty-six, he replaced Rougerie as director of the geography section of the Centrifan at Abidjan and focused his research on Côte-d'Ivoire.⁴⁶ Then he made contact with the Centrifan at Niamey and developed interests in the population of the Sahara. After 1960 he joined ORSTOM.

Gilles Sautter certainly played a dominant role at the Institut d'Etudes Centrafricaines (IEC) in Brazzaville, but Guy Lasserre (1920–2001), yet another of Gourou's pupils, was another IEC researcher who wrote about equatorial Africa as well as the French Antilles. He was a lecturer at the University of Bordeaux who was seconded to the CNRS in 1952 and subsequently published articles in the *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* on towns and villages in French Equatorial Africa, as well an article and a book on Libreville.⁴⁷ In 1956, he became senior lecturer in colonial geography at Bordeaux; two years later his post was retitled 'tropical geography' to take account of the political changes under way. This was the start of a prestigious professional career that included directorship of the CEGET (1967–1981).⁴⁸ Other young geographers started work in central Africa. Among these was Pierre Vennetier (born 1928) who began research at the IEC in 1958, working on relations between town and country at Baongo and on the city of Brazzaville.⁴⁹ He also investigated the Congo-Oubangui navigation system and fishing activities on the Congo coast before returning to France where he spent the rest of his career at the University of Bordeaux.⁵⁰ Some French geographers combined school teaching in Africa with part-time research. This was the case for Jean Cabot

⁴⁵ E. Bernus, Kobané, un village malinké du Haut-Niger, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 9 (1956) 239–262.

⁴⁶ E. Bernus, Kong et sa région, *Etudes éburnéennes* 8 (1960) 239–324; E. Bernus, Abidjan. Notes sur la ville d'Abidjan et sa population, *Bulletin de l'IFAN* (1962) 54–84.

⁴⁷ G. Lasserre, *Libreville, la ville et sa région: Gabon-AEF, étude de géographie humaine*, Paris, 1958.

⁴⁸ A. Huetz de Lemps, Guy Lasserre, 1920–2001, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 64 (2001) 345–368.

⁴⁹ P. Vennetier, Banlieue noire de Brazzaville. La vie rurale et les rapports entre la ville et la campagne à Baongo, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 10 (1957) 131–157; P. Vennetier, Brazzaville: alguns aspectos de uma cidade da África francesa, *Boletim Paulista de Geografia* 34 (1960) 11–40.

⁵⁰ P. Vennetier, La navigation intérieure en Afrique noire: le réseau français Congo-Oubangui, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 12 (1959) 321–348; P. Vennetier, Uma aldeia de pescadores na costa conguesa, *Boletim Paulista de Geografia* 36 (1960) 11–25.

(1923–1999), who taught in Tchad from 1951 to 1958, while also investigating a village in the middle Logone valley for a DES that was supported by the IEC.⁵¹ He continued to work on this region for his doctoral thesis, supported by ORSTOM.⁵² He was then funded by the CNRS from 1960 to 1964 and subsequently taught at several universities in North Africa and France, as well as serving as the first rector of the University of Tchad (1971–1975).

These geographers shared similar working conditions and fieldwork experiences but they neither formed a school of ‘tropicalists’ nor used that adjective to describe their work.⁵³ Nonetheless, they produced an important body of research on the human geography of the various territories of French tropical Africa after mid century. Sometimes their enquiries converged around a common theme, despite having different starting points. For example, Pélissier and the ethnologist Louis-Vincent Thomas (1922–1994) found themselves conducting research in the Casamance area of Sénégal, albeit using different methods. Pélissier travelled around the countryside and conversed with farmers, while Thomas spent his time in a hut with a few informants. But these different practices did not prevent the two Frenchmen from having important scientific exchanges and forming a common outlook on the challenges facing the people they met – problems and uncertainties surrounding land tenure, credit, markets and state governance.⁵⁴ Another example involved the geographer Georges Savonnet and the demographer Louis Massé who adopted intersecting approaches in their studies of the social and spatial impact of the growth of the town of Thiès and its surrounding villages.⁵⁵ By contrast with the lack of disciplinary rigour that tended to characterize the work of French Africanists between the world wars, the organization of research through the IFAN

⁵¹ J. Cabot, Kim, village du Moyen-Logone, *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Etudes Centrafricaines* (1953) 41–61.

⁵² J. Cabot and J. Diziain, *Population du Moyen-Logone*, Paris, 1955; J. Cabot, La culture du coton au Tchad, *Annales de Géographie* 66 (1957) 499–508; J. Cabot, Le problème des koros (Moyen Logone), *Annales de Géographie* 70 (1961) 621–633; J. Cabot, *Le bassin du Moyen-Logone*, Paris, 1966.

⁵³ On this point see Raison, ‘Tropicalism’ in French geography.

⁵⁴ Interview with Pélissier, 25 September 1995.

⁵⁵ G. Savonnet, *La ville de Thiès: étude de géographie urbaine*, Dakar, 1955.

and ORSTOM often gave rise to very productive multi-disciplinary enquiries, despite some continuities remaining from earlier ‘colonial geography’.

However, very few Africans found a place in this new community of researchers, and even fewer in geography than in ethnology.⁵⁶ As in the days of ‘colonial geography’, Africans were often valuable informants during field surveys, but were not always mentioned in published studies. Only rarely did they appear as authors of geographical work. The very weak provision of higher education in the French colonies and the fact that it was extremely difficult for Africans to study in France contributed to making their presence exceptional. Nonetheless, historian Abdoulaye Ly (1919–2013), who passed the *agrégation* teaching examination and obtained a doctorate from the University of Bordeaux in 1955, became director of the history section of the IFAN before moving into a career in politics. The first professional *sénégalais* geographer was Assane Seck (1919–2012), who taught at the University of Dakar as assistant to Pélissier. Researching the middle Casamance area, Seck was the first African geography student to complete a DES.⁵⁷ From 1956 to 1966 he worked, with guidance from Robequain, on a state doctorate that investigated Dakar as an African metropolis, and then became a university teacher.⁵⁸ With Abdoulaye Ly, he founded the *Regroupement Africain-Sénégal* party in 1958 and from 1966 was absorbed in a political career, occupying several ministerial posts until 1983.

The examples of Seck and Ly illustrate how high level scientific careers could develop alongside very heavy political commitments to newly independent nations. However, these two figures were exceptional. Most French geographers did not adopt overtly political

⁵⁶ For ethnology, we must note the decisive role played by Alexandre Senou Adandé (1913–1993), who came from Dahomey and was the workhorse of the first ethnology section from its beginning, soon becoming its director. From 1941 he was supported by Thiam Bodiel. See A.S. Adandé, *Le maïs et ses usages dans le Bas-Dahomey*, *Bulletin de l'IFAN (B)* 1 (1953) 220–282, which considered agricultural production from the point of view of an ethnologist rather than of a geographer.

⁵⁷ A. Seck, *La moyenne Casamance. Etude de géographie physique*, Travaux du Département de Géographie, Institut des Hautes Etudes, Dakar, 1955.

⁵⁸ A. Seck, *Dakar, métropole ouest-africaine*, Mémoires de l'IFAN, Dakar, 1970.

positions regarding the independence of former colonial territories, especially since they were foreigners in these new states. Pélissier declared that he wished to maintain a certain distance from politics so as not to usurp the place of citizens of these new countries.⁵⁹ He preferred to place his knowledge and competence at the service of various African states, according to their needs. In fact, his political discretion did not form an obstacle to his many scientific missions in Sénégal and across West Africa after 1960. There were, however, geographers who adopted an explicit position in favour of decolonization and openly expressed their views in political solidarity with the new states; views that were often based upon communist convictions. Despite being discreet in term of politics and, in most cases, not directly criticizing the colonial situation, most French geographers were concerned to break with the representations and practices of ‘colonial geography’ as, for example, exemplified by Marcel Dubois (1856–1916) at the start of the twentieth century and developed by others between the world wars.⁶⁰ They wished to remove themselves from the colonial goals of that form of geography and develop a scientific discipline that was less orientated by the objectives of ‘economic exploitation’ and was more attentive to the complex relationship between African societies and their environments, while avoiding determinist explanations. A great range of geographical work during the 1950s and 1960s has been labelled as ‘tropicalist’, with political issues being left in a ‘black box’ so as not to have to take the colonial situation into account in order to explain the spatial organization of African societies.⁶¹ Yet characterising post-war tropical geography in this way ignores the new elements that this generation of geographers brought to the study of tropical Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. Even if they did not launch a complete ‘decolonization’ of investigation, they managed to change the operation of scientific work, and their questioning of the ‘colonial’ approach had a political dimension of its own.

⁵⁹ Interview with Pélissier, 25 September 1995.

⁶⁰ V. Berdoulay, *La formation de l'école française de géographie, 1870-1914*, Paris, 1995. Dubois held a chair of colonial geography at the Sorbonne.

⁶¹ Balandier, *La situation coloniale*; M. Bruneau and D. Dory (Eds), *Les enjeux de la tropicalité*, Paris, 1989.

Indeed, the lack of interest of tropical geographers in the study of colonial rule as such has been emphasized many times.⁶² However, in the light of the post-war political and social upheavals, it would be difficult to extend to all colonial territories and all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences the finding that ‘new thinking about how to analyze social and economic change in colonial situations emerged first not in the academy but in colonial bureaucracies themselves’.⁶³ Investment by the French colonial administration in the field of sociology, a relatively new discipline, and in economics, was certainly more sustained than in human geography.⁶⁴ However, the comparative lack of interest of colonial authorities in certain disciplines may in fact have been an advantage for the development of a more autonomous and original branch of scientific work. The emergence of locally rooted research structures, such as the IFAN and ORSTOM (especially after the 1964 reform), and even the young University of Dakar operating in connection with national scientific networks and international organizations, supported the development of rich and sometimes critical discourses on the effects of French colonialism, and particularly how it had overhauled and destroyed pre-colonial connections between people and environment.

If we exclude the work of Georges Balandier and the scientific and political activities of researchers inspired by Marxism, the discretion of social scientists, and of geographers in particular, in avoiding politics was widespread. This is less surprising if we remember that at the same moment the historian Fernand Braudel (1902–1985), figurehead of the ‘Annales school’ of historians and social scientists, was promoting the study of *la longue durée* (long periods of time) and ‘structures’ as opposed to brief events in political history, which he saw

⁶² Bowd and Clayton, *Impure and Worldly Geography*; Bruneau and Dory, *Les enjeux de la tropicalité*; M. Bruneau, Tropicalité, tropicalisme, géographie tropicale: évolution d’un débat, des géographies francophones aux géographies anglophones, in: Velasco-Graciet (Ed), *Les tropiques des géographes*, 171–188.

⁶³ Cooper, Development, modernization and the social sciences, 9.

⁶⁴ A higher council for sociological research overseas was created on 26 July 1956. Presided over by the Minister for France Overseas, it worked in close collaboration with the ORSTOM, see Trochain, *Compte-rendu*, 110.

merely as foam on the surface of waves.⁶⁵ During the 1950s, approaches to the history of Africa that broke with ‘colonial’ practices were in their infancy.⁶⁶ We may also hypothesize that the political dimension in geopolitics – developed during the nineteenth century in a version that comprised geographical determinism and was later employed by the Nazis – served as a foil. However, that ‘discretion’ changed when Yves Lacoste (born 1929) reintroduced a political dimension to geographical thinking in France, notably in his book *La Géographie sert, d’abord, à faire la guerre* (Geography serves firstly to wage war) published in 1976, and by means of the journal *Hérodote* that he founded in the same year.⁶⁷ An examination of the work subsequently produced by French geographers on tropical Africa reveals the extent to which their approaches changed and they incorporated the notion of decolonization.

Decolonization and French geography

During the 1950s French geographers in tropical Africa tended to avoid all forms of environmental determinism and no longer sought to explain how African societies occupied their land by reference to natural features.⁶⁸ The work of Richard-Molard, who was a little older than members of the new generation of geographers and was already dead when their work started to appear, presented certain ambiguities. In his book *L’Afrique occidentale française* he described the spatial organization of tropical Africa with respect to climatic and environmental characteristics that he presented in a zonal fashion. Hence, he distinguished Saharan Africa, the Soudan (with a tropical climate including a dry season), and the equatorial

⁶⁵ F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen au temps de Philippe II*, Paris, 1949. This point is developed in connection with Gourou and his students in Bowd and Clayton, *Impure and Worldly Geography*, 37–38, 68, 184–186, 210–212.

⁶⁶ S. Dulucq, *Ecrire l’histoire de l’Afrique à l’époque coloniale, XIXe-XXe siècle*, Paris, 2009.

⁶⁷ Y. Lacoste, *Géographie du sous-développement*, Paris, 1965; Y. Lacoste, *Aventures d’un géographe*, Paris, 2018.

⁶⁸ M-A. de Suremain, Découper des objets de recherche en Afrique: circonscriptions, zones, régions ou terroirs? in: H. Blais, F. Deprest and P. Singaravélou (Eds), *Territoires impériaux. Une histoire spatiale du fait colonial*, Paris, 2011, 59–82.

or Guinée zone, with two rainy seasons. In his words, the various savanna landscapes ‘best demonstrate environmental zonation in west Africa, with west-east bands being loosely aligned and slightly inclined toward the south, as a function of climatic factors first of all, and then of soil and hydrology’.⁶⁹ He envisaged African societies in terms of ‘ways of life’ (*genres de vie*), rather as Fernand Maurette (1878–1937) had characterized them before World War II, as reflecting ‘adaptation to natural conditions, above psychological and ethnic factors that are rather similar everywhere. [Natural conditions] have helped to produce different groups of people with varied customs that are related to the environments from which each of them has to obtain a subsistence’.⁷⁰

However, when Richard-Molard worked at a more detailed scale he abandoned climatic zonation and geographical determinism. In his report on the inter-African conference on food and nutrition held at Dschang in 1949, for instance, he returned to the question of ‘knowing to what extent mankind is dependent on the physical milieu and on the sociological environment’, concluding forcefully that ‘the human factor comes first’.⁷¹ For him, African societies were actors in the transformation of natural environments, as a function of their culture and strategies. He also argued that densities of population and the relative poverty of some rural areas ‘derived more from human factors than from aspects of the natural environment’.⁷² The development of regional studies in geography, based on fieldwork, emphasized the diversity of spatial conditions and allowed an escape from the simple zones shown in textbooks. This was exemplified at a conference on tropical agriculture held in Uganda in 1955. Here Richard-Molard distanced himself from colonial practices contrasting errors of interventionist colonial farming that were not adapted to local conditions with opportunities offered by forms of tropical agriculture that took both the fragile environment

⁶⁹ J. Richard-Molard, *L’Afrique occidentale française*, Paris, 1949, 43.

⁷⁰ Maurette, *Afrique équatoriale, orientale et australe*, 47–48.

⁷¹ Richard-Molard, A propos de la faim de l’Afrique, 909.

⁷² J. Richard-Molard, Les terroirs tropicaux d’Afrique, *Annales de Géographie* 60 (1951) 350.

and the culture of local people into account. Nonetheless, he continued to characterize African groups and their behaviour in a very essentialist manner, not stereotyping them according to environmental determinism but according to a kind of ethno-social schema that had colonial antecedents.

These ambiguities were also present in a great collective project to produce ethno-demographic maps covering the whole of West Africa that was launched by Monod and Richard-Molard, and whose first sheets were seen through to publication by Pélissier. But the latter questioned both the reliability of demographic data ‘drawn from administrative surveys undertaken without sufficient resources’, and also the very possibility of identifying and delineating the spatial distribution of ethnic groups. He challenged the use of linguistic and ‘racial’ criteria, the latter being ‘as imprecise in Africa as elsewhere’. Rejecting an ethnic approach, he proposed to study the distribution of population groups in relation to elements of human geography, such as ‘types of cultural landscape, ... ways of life, social organization, etc. but also the sense that each group has of its own originality and autonomy’. Operating in a very pragmatic way, he brought together under a single colour on the map ‘populations linked by the least questionable criteria, whether those be *genres de vie*, historical traditions, language or anthropology’ that may be read as an attempt to move away from colonial categories.⁷³ Pélissier was more interested in what population groups actually did than in any essentialist identities. Ultimately, by undertaking fieldwork and interpreting detailed aspects of human life, French geographers shed light on how African societies devised very complex strategies of adaptation in varied environments.

As they moved away from the small-scale, zonal approach, French geographers in tropical Africa abandoned the notion of *genres de vie* in favour of that of *terroirs*, which

⁷³ P. Pélissier, *Notice: Carte ethnodémographique de l'Afrique de l'Ouest*, feuille 1, IFAN, Dakar, 1952; M-A. de Suremain, *Les cartes ethnodémographiques de l'Afrique occidentale: les enjeux d'une construction (1952–1963)*, *M@ppemonde* 4 (2008).

emphasized the role of village communities in appropriating and managing territories. These researchers eschewed colonial representations that claimed members of African societies behaved in archaic and often irrational ways, being rooted in ‘traditions’ described by amateur ethnologists captivated by exoticism. Jean Dresch and Jean Suret-Canale were precursors of this kind of reinterpretation, but they were not the only ones. In 1953, Pélissier became interested in how Sénégalaise Sérér farmers refashioned their environment in their own unique way.⁷⁴ Later on, he drew together various complex interactions between social groups and their natural settings in his doctoral thesis devoted to agrarian *civilisations* in Sénégal.⁷⁵ In central Africa, Sautter showed that differences in population density on the Mbé plateau (Congo) owed nothing to environmental determinism since the Batéké people knew how to take advantage of limited water supplies.⁷⁶

Far from perpetuating colonial or specifically ‘Africanist’ representations, French geographers in tropical Africa had access to conceptual equipment espoused by national and international communities of geographers. They attempted to identify ‘regions’, even if sometimes it seemed difficult to abstract these from climatic zones or ethnic areas. Thus, Sautter argued that ‘history runs into the present in the form of ethnic groups rather than regions’.⁷⁷ Above all, French geographers recognized the potential of the notion of *terroir*. In 1957, a conference at Nancy brought together geographers and historians working on African as well as European areas, who stated that little research had been done on African *terroirs*.⁷⁸ They invited scholars to investigate them, drawing on work by ethnologists, sociologists and botanists. In 1964, Sautter and Pélissier revealed their great collective project to produce an

⁷⁴ P. Pélissier, *Les paysans sérères. Essai sur la formation d'un terroir du Sénégal*, Travaux du département de géographie, 1, Institut des Hautes Etudes, Dakar, 1953, also published in *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 6 (1953) 105–127.

⁷⁵ Pélissier, *Les paysans du Sénégal*.

⁷⁶ Sautter, *De l'Atlantique au fleuve Congo*.

⁷⁷ G. Sautter, L'étude régionale. Réflexions sur la formule monographique en géographie humaine, *L'Homme* 1 (1961) 82.

⁷⁸ E. Juillard, A. Meynier, X. de Planhol and G. Sautter, Structures agraires et paysages ruraux. Un quart de siècle de recherches françaises, *Annales de l'Est* 17 (1957) 1–188.

atlas of *terroirs* in tropical Africa. This involved ‘following an agreed common method, respecting the same general plan, and publishing a homogenous collection’ in order to assemble ‘representative examples of the wide variety of agrarian landscapes in Africa to produce a typology of land use’.⁷⁹ In this way, two dozen monographs on *terroirs* in west and central Africa and Madagascar were published, each one containing various maps and diagrams.⁸⁰ There was no attempt to cover vast areas in the encyclopaedic fashion of Monod’s ethno-demographic maps, but rather to focus on in-depth studies from which a typology might be devised. Social and generational changes were at the heart of the analysis as were very detailed diagrams produced by geographical researchers.⁸¹ This was far from the colonial vision of a patchwork of African groups, each dominated by the natural environment and rooted in their own traditions. Giving preference to a geographically constructed scale of observation, such as that of the *terroir* or the region, allowed scientists to break away from the administrative units and frontiers imposed by colonization.

It is often thought that French geographers working in tropical Africa concentrated mainly on the countryside and did not have much interest in towns.⁸² Of course, most of the local population was rural at the time of decolonization, but that assumption required considerable revision during and after the 1950s. In practice, geographers studying African towns often worked with sociologists or demographers. In AEF, thirteen of twenty-nine enquiries undertaken by the social sciences section of the IEC between 1948 and 1960 were focused on Brazzaville or Pointe-Noire. Among geographers, Sautter studied rural-urban migration and Vennetier examined interaction between town and country and the various

⁷⁹ P. Péliissier and G. Sautter, Pour un atlas des terroirs africains, *L’Homme* 4 (1964) 57.

⁸⁰ P. Péliissier and G. Sautter, Bilan et perspectives d’une recherche sur les terroirs africains et malagaches, *Etudes Rurales* 37–39 (1970) 7–45. Each monograph was published separately. The 530 page, triple volume of *Etudes Rurales* presented information from many of them.

⁸¹ Suremain, Découper des objets de recherche en Afrique, 77.

⁸² See C. Fournet-Guérin, Les villes d’Afrique subsaharienne dans le champ de la géographie française et de la production documentaire: une géographie de villes ‘fantômes’? *L’Information géographique* 75 (2011) 49–67.

districts of Pointe-Noire.⁸³ Between 1948 and 1964 the *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* published eighteen articles on African towns and villages, mostly in AEF, and on the 'black' districts of Brazzaville and Libreville (by Lasserre), the towns of Cotonou (Paule Brasseur-Marion) and Thiès (Georges Savonnet), the suburbs around Brazzaville and urbanization in Congo-Brazzaville (Vennetier) and the city of Dakar (Seck).⁸⁴

With the exception of Jean Dresch, French geographers were less forthcoming than sociologists or demographers in studying social changes linked to urbanization during the 1950s, concentrating instead on rather descriptive studies of urban settlements and landscapes.⁸⁵ Some, like Lasserre, considered it desirable to stabilize the African population as 'a solid rural peasantry' and questioned the urbanization of villages that spawned the 'black' districts of Brazzaville.⁸⁶ In the early 1960s, however, many new studies challenged colonial ideas that towns were essentially 'western' creations. They emphasized that truly African towns were growing very rapidly, with special features such as the integration of agricultural activities within urban space.⁸⁷ This 'Africanité' was one way of distinguishing tropical towns from the Western cities that were taken implicitly as being the norm. French geographers emphasized that urban development was one of the major challenges for African societies and that urbanization provided an element of emancipation from 'traditional' village life, thereby enabling social relations to be recomposed. In addition to examining major

⁸³ M. Soret, Sciences humaines en République du Congo, *Bulletin de l'IEC* (1960) 170.

⁸⁴ G. Lasserre, Villes et villages d'AEF, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 8 (1955) 93–99; G. Lasserre, Les Brazzavilles noires, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 9 (1956) 314–320; P. Brasseur-Marion, Cotonou, porte de Dahomey, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 6 (1953) 364–378; Savonnet, *La ville de Thiès*; Vennetier, Banlieue noire de Brazzaville; P. Vennetier, L'urbanisation et ses conséquences au Congo, Brazzaville, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 16 (1963) 263–280; P. Vennetier, Les marchés africains de Pointe-Noire, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 17 (1964) 238–239; P. Vennetier, *Pointe-Noire et la façade maritime du Congo Brazzaville*, Brazzaville, 1968; Seck, *Dakar*.

⁸⁵ J. Dresch, Villes d'Afrique occidentale, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 3 (1950) 200–230. In 1956, the International African Institute and UNESCO published in English and French sixty pluridisciplinary enquiries on *Aspects sociaux de l'industrialisation et de l'urbanisation en Afrique au Sud du Sahara*, edited by C.D. Forde. Economics and sociology were represented particularly well alongside geography. The section presenting papers given at the conference in Abidjan in September–October 1954 focused on West Africa, including material on sociology (Georges Balandier, Paul Mercier, André Hauser), demography (Louis Massé), and living standards (Yves Mersadier), but none dealt with geography.

⁸⁶ Lasserre, Villes et villages d'AEF, 99; Lasserre, Les Brazzavilles noires, 315.

⁸⁷ P. Vennetier, La vie agricole urbaine à Pointe Noire, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 14 (1961) 60–84.

questions of ‘development’ and ‘modernization’ associated with Eurocentric models of urban growth, Jean Gallais and other French geographers showed an interest in African urban cultures and adopted new approaches to studying towns. Gallais demonstrated that it was through their way of being (*manière d’être*) that the town dwellers of Dia and Djenné in Mali distinguished themselves from villagers.⁸⁸ The impact of decolonization on urban development was also studied. Marie-Louise Villien-Rossi examined the transformation of Bamako as it became the capital of the new state of Mali and adopted socialism as its model for development.⁸⁹ An indication of how this theme became a preoccupation was provided by the presentations at the international conference on urban growth in black Africa and Madagascar that was held at Bordeaux in 1970, under the chairmanship of Gourou. In addition, French geographers investigated migration and societal change in tropical Africa in relation to decolonization, with a double issue of the *Bulletin de l’IFAN* in 1960 being devoted entirely to migration, which had been the focus of the social sciences section of the Seventh Congress of West Africanists in April 1959.

Conclusion

In some respects French geography had come a long way in a short time. This was partly because older debates over environmental determinism – and the zonal approaches to understanding the world’s physical and human geographies that had been mixed up with such debates – had been supplanted by political events and a more urgent need for detailed local knowledges that served national (and often nationalist) aspirations, and, by the late 1950s, by rapid urbanization and a new set of rural-urban dynamics. French geographers were in some ways receptive to change, but in others cautious about what change would bring. African villages and traditional terroirs had a paradoxical place in this: French geographers both

⁸⁸ Gallais, *Le delta intérieur du Niger*.

⁸⁹ M-L. Villien-Rossi, Bamako, capitale du Mali, *Bulletin de l’IFAN (B)* 1–2 (1966) 249–380.

deprecated their shortcomings as bulwarks of stasis and backwardness, and lamented the way their rapid unhinging in situations of decolonisation portended environmental and cultural problems, if not chaos. In many cases, their reservations about decolonisation were rooted very much in a present day and on-the-spot assessment of the difficulties and dilemmas of decolonisation rather than nostalgia for empire.

However, this article has shown that most French geographers working in tropical Africa in the period immediately before and after independence did not adopt explicit political positions in their work. Neither explicitly denouncing the colonial situation nor arguing in favour of decolonization has often been recognized by critics as a characteristic of tropical geography (and not just in France), and as evidence of its apolitical, if not conservative, outlook. Yet when one looks closely at the diverse research produced by French geographers working in colonial territories at that time, it is possible to recognize a clear change in the way African societies and their spatial relations were examined. African geographies changed, and French geographers changed – to some degree (and the caveat is important) – with them.

Rejecting environmental determinism and conditioning by basic ethnic identities, French geographers directed their attention to the various strategies of African societies, their knowhow and their ways of managing and exploiting land, most notably by reference to the notion of *terroir*. This change in approach was produced through new networks of institutions which produced new communities of researchers, and may be seen as an expression – albeit a fraught expression – of a decolonization of the scientific gaze in that it eschewed older colonial conceptions of knowledge, society and territoriality, and acknowledged both contemporary change and the myriad challenges involved in leaving older colonial geographies behind. Geographers' studies of urbanization and mobility, and of the spatial expressions of social change in rural areas, were attuned to questions of decolonisation. Even

so, such investigations did not escape a certain tendency to view African societies, territories and villages as expressions of ‘the other’, when measured by the yardstick of western norms and modes of study. The legacy of colonialism also meant that Africans were used as informants but only rarely became independent authors of scholarly work. Yet, the analysis presented here of research at the time surrounding political independence in 1960 allows us to refine such assessments and to conclude that a form of decolonization of scientific enquiry by French geographers had started in tropical Africa during the 1950s, without necessarily being accompanied by militant political expressions in favour of national liberation.

This decolonization was, therefore, tentative rather than transformative, but it is important to recall it and probe its hesitations rather than disparage such enquiries as politically immature by the standards of a late 1960s and 1970s radical – Third Worldist and Marxist – geography. One of the most important facets of this work around the time of independence in French Africa was geographers’ commitment to fieldwork – to close and cautious study – and to the role that the new network of institutions, funders, fieldwork projects and conference exchanges played in promoting this orientation and nurturing a set of scholars who were more than passive witnesses to decolonisation. The case of French geographers and decolonisation in Africa during the 1950s and 1960s raises interesting questions about the outward facing (non-Western) and piecemeal nature of disciplinary change in post-war geography, and how it intersected with changing metropolitan ideas about what geographers thought they could bring to understanding a world in transition.

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Edited by Dan Clayton and Miles Ogborn

Figure 1. Decolonisation in Africa, 1951–1977.

