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Was the Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière (SFIO) also African? 1945–1960

ABSTRACT

This article looks at relations between Europeans and Africans within the sections of the Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière (SFIO) in sub-Saharan Africa. It is based on documentation and correspondence sent to the Paris centre, mostly sent by Europeans and held at the Office universitaire de recherche socialiste (OURS). There were, however, significant differences between the sections in French West Africa (Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea) and those in French East Africa (Chad, Oubangui-Chari, Congo-Brazzaville) and Cameroon. The relationships of domination inherent in the colonial situation were expressed more or less violently in different places. The way in which the Europeans in the African SFIO looked at the Africans in the sections was generally racist and unsympathetic, and thus said a great deal about power relations in the colonial world. In the end, these relationships of domination got the better of the sections, whose fate was definitively sealed by the advent of African governments and then independence, despite the short-lived experience of the Mouvement socialiste africain (MSA).

After the Second World War overturned imperial policies, nothing would ever be the same again: the Atlantic Charter of 12 August 1941, followed by the United Nations Charter of 26 June 1945, enshrined the right of peoples to self-determination, while the United States and the Soviet Union had expressed strong reservations about old colonial practices. Colonised people, referred to as 'natives' or 'indigènes', had fought alongside the allied forces and they expected their wartime sacrifices to be rewarded. 'Free France was African', as Eric Jennings put it.¹ In the capital of Free France, Brazzaville, Free French politicians and leading African colonial officials met at a conference held from 30 January to 8 February 1944, to set out new guidelines for the management of the empire. Although still cautious in its approach, the conference raised high expectations. Under the 1946 Constitution, the empire became the Union française (or French Union) and, from 1945 onwards, colonized peoples were represented in the assemblies of metropolitan France: the Constituent Assemblies, the National Assembly, the Council of the Republic and the Assembly of the French Union. Elected territorial assemblies were set up in the former colonies, now known as the Overseas Territories. The Defferre Law, named for the Socialist Minister for Overseas France, Gaston Defferre, was passed in 1956. This law set up elected governing councils and implemented universal suffrage in the French African colonies. In 1958, African territories voted, alongside the metropolitan French, in the referendum on whether to approve the

¹ Eric Jennings, *La France libre fut africaine* (Paris, 2014).

constitution of the new Fifth Republic. This process also gave African colonies the option of joining the French Community, which replaced the French Union.² The 'Yes' side won by a wide margin, except in Guinea where majority 'No' vote led to the territory becoming independent; other African colonies had to wait another two years for their independence.

These structural reforms went hand in hand with an unprecedented rise in nationalism and a politicization of the former 'subjects', who were now citizens of the French Union, a citizenship that had yet to be defined, and which would be the subject of many struggles for equality. In 1946, the first major inter-territorial African party was founded in Bamako, the Rassemblement démocratique africain (RDA), which was affiliated to the Communist Party until 1950. This same Communist Party also set up study groups (Groupe d'études communistes, or GEC) in Africa, rather than sections.³ Africans' growing desire to participate in political activity also benefitted the Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière, (SFIO), whose sections multiplied. Federations or sections were created in sub-Saharan Africa, as had been the case earlier in North Africa, as were African parties, which were therefore neither sections nor federations, and were autonomous but nonetheless affiliated to the SFIO. This was the case, for example, of the Parti social indépendant du Tchad (PSIT), founded in Fort-Lamy on 21 September 1950 and affiliated to the SFIO the same year, or the Démocratie socialiste de Guinée (DSG), founded in October 1954—and which took over from Yacine Diallo's Union franco-guinéenne—and affiliated to the SFIO. Finally, in January 1957, the Mouvement socialiste africain (MSA) was created in Conakry, integrating pre-existing SFIO federations and socialist parties, and adopting a pan-African approach.

While there is now a rich historiography on a period that has been called 'late colonialism', including studies by Frederick Cooper and Tony Chafer, and on African parties with the earlier work by Ruth Morgenthau, much still remains to be done on the day-to-day life of parties on African soil.⁴ Some studies offer a detailed picture of the power struggles and inter-partisan struggles of this period of decolonization, but they generally focus on a

² Law no. 56-619 of 23 June 1956

³ Jean Suret-Canale, *Les groupes d'études communistes (GEC) en Afrique noire* (Paris, 1994).

⁴ Frederick Cooper, *Français et Africains? Être citoyen au temps de la décolonisation*, trans. Christian Jeanmougin (Paris, 2014) and *Décolonisation et travail en Afrique, l'Afrique britannique et française, 1935-1960*, trans. François-George Barbier-Wiesser (Paris, 2004); Tony Chafer, *La Fin de l'empire colonial Français en Afrique de l'Ouest: entre utopie et désillusion*, trans. Jean Pasqualini (Rennes, 2019); Ruth Morgenthau, *Le multipartisme en Afrique de l'Ouest francophone jusqu'aux indépendances: la période nationaliste*, trans. Jean-Louis Balans and François Constantin (Paris, 1998).

particular territory without examining the logic of inter-African relations.⁵ Socialisms in Africa have recently been the subject of collective research, but this focuses mainly on the post-independence period.⁶ These studies primarily concern a socialism that was theoretically reformist but which was largely implemented by Europeans in Africa, a socialism that had little to do with Africa, and which was largely corrupted by the colonial order.

By focusing on the SFIO sections in French-speaking Africa, this article interprets the history of a political process that would inevitably lead to independence in Africa by highlighting the contradictions and deadlocks that marked the years 1945–1960. It also lends weight to a decentred view of the SFIO that acknowledges the ‘sub-Saharan manufacture of a Socialist colonial policy’, to paraphrase the title of an article by Claire Marynower, when Europeans refused to engage with African politicians in a meaningful way.⁷ The aim is not to consider the positions of the SFIO on the colonial question and more specifically on sub-Saharan Africa, a question partially addressed for the post-1945 period by Fabien Lascaux and a dissertation in progress on the inter-war period by Quentin Gasteuil.⁸ Instead, the aim is to go out into the field and attempt, when the sources allow, to examine the sections themselves, their operations and members, the relationships between Europeans and Africans, and some sense of what Africans and Europeans expected of the SFIO. The article therefore attempts a social history of the African sections of the SFIO, starting with the colonies and revisiting imperial history, the history of decolonization and the history of the political networks that came into being after the Second World War.

⁵ Elisabeth Schmidt, *Mobilizing the masses: gender, ethnicity and class in the nationalist movement in Guinea, 1939-1958* (Portsmouth, 2005); Céline Pauthier, ‘L’indépendance ambiguë: construction nationale, anticolonialisme et pluralisme culturel en Guinée (1945-2010)’ (thèse de doctorat, Université Paris-Diderot, 2014); Florence Bernault, *Démocraties ambiguës en Afrique centrale* (Paris, 1996); Richard Joseph, *Le mouvement nationaliste au Cameroun*, trans. Danielle Michel-Chich (Paris, 1986); Klaas Van Walraven, ‘Barthélémy Boganda between charisma and cosmology: interpretive perspectives on biography in Equatorial African history’ in *The Individual in African History: the Importance of Biography in African Historical Studies*, ed. Klaas van Walraven (Leiden and Boston, 2020), 246-274.

⁶ Françoise Blum et. al., *Socialismes en Afrique/Socialisms in Africa* (Paris, 2021).

⁷ Claire Marynower, ‘La fabrique algérienne d’une politique coloniale socialiste, De Beni-Saf à Paris, en passant par Alger’, *Vingtième Siècle*, 131 (2016), 37-51. See also on this subject: Mouloud Aouimeur, ‘Le parti socialiste S.F.I.O. en Algérie 1920-1954’ (thèse de doctorat, Université Paris VIII-Saint-Denis, 1998).

⁸ Fabien Lascaux, ‘La S.F.I.O. et la décolonisation de 1945 à 1951’ (thèse de doctorat, Université du Maine, 1986); Quentin Gasteuil, ‘Socialistes français et travaillistes britanniques face aux questions coloniales et impériales durant l’entre-deux-guerres (1918-1940): une étude comparée’, (thèse de doctorat, Université Paris IV, in progress).

The history of the SFIO cannot be understood via the directives of a remote Parisian centre, but was made on a day-to-day basis by men on the ground (and they were men: women left no direct traces in the archives consulted). These men had their own sensibilities and their own position, a position of power given to them by the colonial situation, which conditioned their relations with Africans. Although the article focuses on European players and how they saw their relationship with Africans, it also tries to give a voice to the Africans, even if this voice is only implicit—like photographic a negative—in the letters of the Europeans. In this way, the life of the sections offers a mirror of racial relations in a colonial context. Far from a general history from above, this article aims to contribute to a history from below, at a local level. It is in everyday life that the balance of power, and the agency of the African and European actors on the ground, can be seen. This perspective equally allows the article to consider the success—or otherwise—of attempts to establish a metropolitan party in a land that was fundamentally alien to it, as well as the SFIO's loss of influence and disappearance with the march towards independence.

To address these subjects, we have access to the archives held at the Office universitaire de recherche socialiste (OURS), which consist mainly of correspondence between the metropolitan centre in Paris and the various African countries concerned.⁹ The Paris operation was represented by Georges Brutelle, deputy secretary-general of the party from 1947 to 1969, and André Bidet, former head of the Fédération socialiste, member of the party's steering committee and executive committee, and secretary of the Union française office from 1948 to 1958. This gives us an idea of what was happening on African soil, that is in all the territories that made up French sub-Saharan Africa, and also allows us to paint a portrait of some of the section leaders, both African and European. The OURS dossiers also include the Ernest Cazelles collection. Cazelles was a member of the steering committee from 1956 and then deputy general secretary from 1958 to 1969. His papers contain information on his tour of sub-Saharan Africa. Surprisingly, however, these archives contain no propaganda material for Africa. Perhaps there was none? That is what one request from Brazzaville seems to suggest, when it asked that the party send posters featuring black Africans, while another pleaded for brightly coloured cards. Nevertheless, it seems that SFIO contribution stamps were sold a little more cheaply in Africa (four francs,

⁹ O[ffice]U[niversitaire][de]R[echerche]S[ociale], Dossiers fédérations africaines: these files are classified by country. I only indicate the name of the country file.

whereas the usual average in the 1950s was between seven and sixteen francs).¹⁰ It was logical that contributions should be lower for Africans, who did not enjoy the same income levels, but it was less logical for Europeans in the colonies who, by comparison, enjoyed numerous financial advantages.

SFIO sections were created in all (or almost all) the territories of French sub-Saharan Africa. With the exception of Madagascar, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, these sections were created after 1945 (this article leaves aside Madagascar for want of sources, although it is one of the oldest federations, created in the early 1930s and reactivated in 1946 by V.P. Randrianasy).¹¹ The article concentrates mainly on Afrique Équatoriale Française (French Equatorial Africa or AEF), which remains the 'poor relative' of colonial historiography. AEF at the time included Middle-Congo, Ubangui-Chari, Gabon and Chad, but not Cameroon and Togo, which were territories largely under French control although southern Cameroon was under British control. The imprint left in AEF by what might be called the government of the concessionary companies was strong, and relations between indigenous inhabitants and Europeans were very difficult, no doubt because of the presence of this kind of colonial regime.¹² The presence of the religious missions was also much greater in AEF than in Afrique-Occidentale française (French West Africa or AOF), particularly in the sphere of education, which was not well received by Europeans in the SFIO. The AEF Europeans who were members of the SFIO were generally minor colonial civil servants, teachers or administrators, and were anti-clerical, as was the party in general. The AEF was further away in the eyes of the Parisian Centre, not only geographically but also in terms of imagination, and it appeared much more like a foreign and unknown land, wilder and less 'evolved'. In theory, all the sections and federations were mixed, as that was the policy of the SFIO, which had already been applied in North Africa, but this mixing varied from one area to another.¹³ It was sometimes very difficult to establish, particularly in the AEF and Cameroon where the 'whites', with a few rare exceptions, were overtly racist and hardly inclined to give up their prerogatives. It was easier in AOF where the nationals of the four communes of Saint-Louis,

¹⁰ There were normally twelve contribution stamps each year and one sheet with twelve boxes to stick them in. They could be bought all at once or month by month.

¹¹ OURS, Madagascar file, Daniel Mayer to Mr V.P. Randrianasy, Paris, 10 April 1946.

¹² Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1898-1930* (Paris, 2001).

¹³ A federation comprises at least five sections with a total of more than 100 members. This is the theoretical definition. In reality, the situation was more fluid.

Dakar, Rufisque and Gorée were citizens, and race relations—although marked by inequality—were less violent. In this sense the article examines relationships between Africans and Europeans in practice, through the ways in which relations of domination were inscribed in—or challenged by—the smaller groups that constituted the SFIO sections. Whatever the expectations or interests that prompted membership of sections, the crucial point to identify is what the colonial situation—to paraphrase Balandier—did to political practice when it was carried out in the name of a metropolitan party.

I

Europeans had fairly easily identifiable and predictable reasons for joining SFIO sections in Africa, but the same was not necessarily true of Africans. As far as Europeans were concerned, Fabien Lascaux's thesis points to two main reasons for joining. First, loyalty: Europeans continued to join and campaign as they had done in metropolitan France. Second, the desire to be part of an aid and support network. In addition to relations and friendships, membership of the SFIO could lead to certain benefits: several members applied for and/or were awarded the Legion of Honour, for example. At the crossroads of loyalty and obtaining various advantages, there was the weight that the party could wield in the appointments of its men to the colonies. In this case, the gain was reciprocal. The party wanted to push its pawns into Africa, and some SFIO members from metropolitan France wanted to make part of their career there.

In the party's archives, letters from Africans are not the most numerous, but there are nevertheless a few that mention their reasons for joining. They sometimes mentioned socialism itself, which was seen as part of the African heritage; they also mentioned the desire for equality, or electoral motivations, such as the desire to have the party's support in campaigns; they also mentioned the desire to build protection against the colonial administration and, finally, reasons connected to family or 'community' solidarity.

Socialism was the argument put forward in this letter written in 1951 by a Senegalese man, Souleymane Kane, to Guy Mollet, Secretary General and President of the SFIO:

I joined the Socialist Party because we Senegalese are born socialists from the cradle. Our way of life is the very doctrine of the party. We live as a family, around the same

table, with our possessions for the whole family and one person working to feed and support all their relatives, and that's why we're socialists. God created us that way and that's why Senegal will always be 200 percent socialist.¹⁴

This letter evokes a mythical socialism, part of Africa's heritage, which Kane hoped to rediscover in a partisan way with the SFIO. This claim was already in line with the discourse of Senghor, Julius Nyerere and Amílcar Cabral, who drew on European doctrines of socialism but affirmed a specifically African variety of socialism, already present in the original communities of the continent.¹⁵ Africa was said to be a continent predisposed to socialism because of its family structures.¹⁶ Numerous theoretical texts advocated an 'African path to socialism' based on an age-old tradition but revived with contemporary arguments. In any case, this is one of the rare letters—from Africans and Europeans alike—that raises what is in fact a question of doctrine, even of ideals.

The desire for equality was expressed, among other things, by a cooperative director speaking to the secretary of the SFIO in AEF:

Sir, it is with great pleasure that I have just received your address. I belong to the SFIO and the Human Rights League [Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (LDH)]. I have come to respectfully ask you to kindly instruct me and inform me more clearly [about] the purpose of these two sections, the SFIO and the LDH. I am keen and eager to work for my future. Will I, as soon as I subscribe [to the internal bulletin], have the same rights as a French citizen?¹⁷

This letter gives the pragmatic expression of a wider expectation that the party would act to put an end to abuses and injustices of all kinds, at a time when citizenship of the Union Française, legally acquired by the Lamine Guèye Law of 7 May 1946, was still largely undefined.¹⁸ It was also a time when the whole of French-speaking Africa was shaken by a

¹⁴ OURS, Senegal file, Souleymane Kane, B.A.O. clerk, to Mr Guy Mollet, Dakar, 30 October 1951.

¹⁵ See Blum et al., *Socialismes en Afrique*. Or, more specifically, Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté 2: Nation et voie africaine du socialisme* (Paris, 1974).

¹⁶ Senghor, for example, was a reader and admirer of the humanist Marx, while advocating an African path to socialism. *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Quoted in Lascaux, 'La S.F.I.O. et la décolonisation', unpaginated.

¹⁸ See Cooper, *Français et africains?*

wave of strikes, both before and after the promulgation of the Overseas Labour Code, the leitmotiv of the latter being equality. This same equality was also claimed by African MPs in the French National Assembly and the French Union Assembly. A letter from Joseph Ndongmo, secretary of the only Cameroonian section still active in 1950, in Dschang, to Georges Brutelle is also convincing in this respect. He warned the party about the rise of communism and/or the Union des populations du Cameroun (UPC), whose rise was fuelled by serious injustices. He gave as an example the very different treatment of black and white prisoners and the flagrant injustice suffered by Cameroonian students.¹⁹ If the SFIO did not act in favour of greater equality—‘Much will be asked of you because much has been given to you’—, it would leave the field open to the UPC. Eager to make a party whose centre was thousands of kilometres away more real, Joseph Ndongmo asked for photographs of Guy Mollet and Georges Brutelle. It is easy to understand the expectations expressed here. But the men of the SFIO, when they were Europeans, were not always staunch supporters of this equality, and even displayed the worst colonialist attitudes; a point we will return to later.

There were also electoral reasons for joining a SFIO section. The party’s support, whether financial or in terms of propaganda, was not negligible. It financed the campaigns for territorial and national assemblies of Ahmat Koulamallah in Chad and Jacques Opangault in Congo. Both men benefitted from SFIO support, even though this did not guarantee them victory since the party had to contend with the Rassemblement du peuple français (RPF) on its right and the Rassemblement démocratique africain (RDA) on its left.²⁰ Opangault was nonetheless elected to the territorial assembly, but failed to win a seat in the French National Assembly against Jean-Félix Tchicaya, founder of the Congolese Progressive Party, a section of the RDA. Similarly, Lamine Guèye, the strong man of the party in Africa, with his undisputed charisma, known throughout the continent and an exceptional member of the steering committee, had many setbacks against the young Senghor, who was also briefly a member of the SFIO and who left in 1948 to found the Bloc démocratique sénégalais (BDS), which was less assimilationist than Lamine Guèye’s SFIO. Whatever the successes or failures,

¹⁹ OURS, Cameroon file, Letter from Joseph Ndongmo to Georges Brutelle, Yaoundé, 28 July 1949.

²⁰ The RDA was the first major African anti-colonial party, whose founding manifesto was made public in September 1946 and whose first congress was held in Bamako in October of the same year, with Communist support. The RDA remained affiliated to the Communist Party until 1950, when its General Secretary Félix Houphouët-Boigny made what became known as a ‘strategic withdrawal’, affiliating the party with Mitterrand and Pleven’s Union démocratique et Socialiste de la Résistance (UDSR) and adopting a policy of cooperation with the administration.

the support of the party was not necessarily negligible. Also in the AEF, Jane Vialle was briefly tempted by the SFIO before founding her own party and then joining the Socialist group in the Council of the Republic. In 1947, Jean Silvanre, the West Indian Jules Ninine (Cameroon) and Yacine Diallo (Sudan) were affiliated to the Socialist group in the National Assembly and were elected with the party's support.²¹

The desire to build protection against the colonial administration, and therefore to build networks of help and support, also motivated Africans to join SFIO sections. However, conditions were not necessarily always favourable, and sometimes everything depended on the political positions of the governor or, higher up, of the Minister for Overseas France. The situation was not the same, for example, when Marius Moutet (SFIO) held the post as Paul Coste-Floret (Mouvement républicain populaire). The party made no mistake, for example, throwing its weight behind the appointment of Soucadaux, a socialist, as governor of Cameroon. On the other hand, there were sometimes very unfavourable circumstances for the socialists. Ahmat Koulamallah, Secretary General of the PSIT and later of the MSA in Chad, complained about the persecution and attacks suffered by socialists.²² These factors generally explain what can be considered as the fluidity of partisan identities. Yet another reason for taking an affiliation card was the desire to follow a charismatic man or someone with whom you were linked by 'ethnic' or kinship ties. This had its weight and, in this sense, the SFIO was an alliance system like any other.

II

The reasons Africans joined SFIO sections varied considerably. Within the AOF, Senegal was dominant on the African SFIO scene, but the SFIO Federation of Senegal was exceptional in every respect. First, because of its anteriority: it was created in the early 1930s and was joined in 1938 by Lamine Guèye's Senegalese Socialist Party. Second, because of its mixed membership: half Africans and half Europeans. And, third, because of its numerical importance: it had up to 6,000 members by 1951.

²¹ See: Karine Ramondy, 'VIALLE, Jane', *Le Dictionnaire biographique Maitron: Mouvement ouvrier, mouvement social*, 2015, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article172132>.

²² OURS, Chad File, Letter from Koulamallah to Brutelle.

There is no need to dwell here on the Senegalese SFIO, since it is undoubtedly the best known.²³ Instead, this part of the article begins by tracing the history of two sections, those of Cameroon and Ubangui-Chari, whose failures were essentially due to the overtly racist attitude of Europeans who were incapable of empathizing with Africans, and incapable—with a few exceptions—of campaigning for the rights of the colonized, or admitting that Africans could hold positions of responsibility. In this sense, the history of the SFIO sections in Cameroon and Ubangui-Chari are also examples of a certain colonialist attitude, European-centred on African soil and attached to its ‘white’ privileges, sometimes seeing the SFIO as a tool to reinforce these same privileges and, above all, not seeing it as an instrument of equality. In short, the SFIO in Ubangui-Chari and Cameroon operated as a condensed version of the colonial order, as a manufacturer of inequality and violence. This part of the article will then examine the sections in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Chad, where the situation was different again. In all three cases, it was the competition from a rival party, the RDA, which, it should be stressed, was exclusively African, that would cause problems. These examples show how the process of domination implied by the colonial system did not spare the sections of a party that was nonetheless socialist, albeit with notable differences from one imperial area to another.

The history of the Cameroon Federation offers an excellent example of the impact one man could have on the success or failure of a SFIO section, and of the role of overt racism in the failure of socialist initiatives. Even the exact date of its creation is not known, the Cameroon Federation seemed to be very active until May 1948, due to the energetic presence of metropolitan Gilbert Zaksas, treasurer-paymaster in Yaoundé, and Henri Battu, a former judge at the Yaoundé court, who briefly replaced Zaksas when he left. Zaksas asked for SFIO cards for members as well as founding up to twenty cooperatives, bush schools and educational and cultural associations. The principle behind these various ventures was simple: to anchor membership of the SFIO in concrete experiences, in short to give it meaning among the so-called ‘natives’. Thanks to Zaksas, the SFIO was able to triumphantly put forward the very important figure of 5,535 ‘registered comrades’ in seventy-eight

²³ See in particular François Zuccarelli, *La vie politique sénégalaise*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1988) ; Juliette Ruaud, ‘A la Lisière du vote. Socio-histoire de l'institution électorale dans le Sénégal colonial (années 1840-1960)’ (thèse de doctorat, Sciences Po Bordeaux/Université de Laval, 2021).

sections.²⁴ The departure of Zaksas, then Henri Battu, and apparently a man called Lefevre (about whom we have no information other than letters of tribute),²⁵ signalled not the end but the accelerated decline of the federation. Now deprived of energetic leaders, the federation was also subject to competition from the communists and the UPC. The Cameroonian deputy Jules Ninine and Jean-Baptiste Nitcheu-Tientcheu, a civil and financial services editor and secretary to the head of the Bamiléké region in Dschang, who had set up the local SFIO union in Dschang, complained that the party had abandoned Cameroon.²⁶ Nitcheu-Tientcheu proposed to the party that Ninine should be appointed federal secretary, but this was not followed up.²⁷ The party then sent Paul Alduy, president of the socialist group in the assembly of the French Union, who tried to reconstitute a bureau and appointed a man called Ricart as federal secretary.²⁸ The Africans did not seem to like this. Here is what section secretary Joseph Ndongmo had to say:

He [Alduy] made every effort to resurrect it [the federation]. But I can assure you that he made one small mistake. It was to contact almost exclusively European comrades in Yaoundé and to have followed the directives given by them without consulting the Africans.²⁹

One of the reasons for the failures in Cameroon can thus be attributed to the exclusivist European mindset, which went hand-in-hand with unabashed racism. As for Ricart, Ndongmo was clear that: 'This comrade, whom I know perfectly well, does not enjoy general esteem.'³⁰ Indeed, Ricart, an old colonial, seemed both ineffective and racist, to the point that the party sent a teacher, Freydier, on a mission to try and mediate.³¹ What

²⁴ 'La vie de nos fédérations: fédération du Cameroun', *Bulletin intérieur* n°31, June 1949. Quoted in Lascaux, 'La S.F.I.O. et la décolonisation'. Details are given in a document in the OURS, Cameroon file.

²⁵ OURS, Cameroon file, Yaoundé, Letter from Joseph Ndongmo, secretary of the Nessa section to Comrade, secretary of the SFIO party, 12 February 1949: 'Although dying, the Cameroon Federation will not be able to forget the valiant comrades called Battu and Lefevre who during their stay here preached socialist doctrine not only in words but above all in deeds and deserve the name of militants in the full sense of the word...'.
²⁶ OURS, Cameroon file, Letter from Ninine to Brutelle, Douala, 8 November 1948.

²⁷ OURS, Cameroon file, Letter from Nitcheu-Tientcheu to Brutelle, 18 November 1948

²⁸ See André Balent, 'ALDUY, Paul', *Le Dictionnaire biographique Maitron: Mouvement ouvrier, mouvement social*, 2021, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article9829>.

²⁹ OURS, Cameroon file, Letter from Ndongmo to Brutelle, Yaoundé, 2 May 1949.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ OURS, Cameroon file, Yaoundé, Letter from Brutelle to Soucada, 12 February 1949; Letter from Joseph Ndongmo, secretary of the Nessa section to Comrade, secretary of the SFIO party, 7 February 1951.

followed was a lengthy correspondence peppered with complaints from Freydier, who was working in poor conditions—he was a teacher in the bush, with no vehicle at his disposal, even though the party had promised him a detachment. Nonetheless, Freydier worked hard to shore up support, proposing the creation of a Cameroonian party based on the model of the Sudanese Progressive Party.³² But he became increasingly disillusioned. He noted the violent racism of his fellow Europeans and the near-apartheid situation in Cameroon:

the colonialist spirit is everywhere; you have to hear the women talking to the blacks, they even beat them. I saw some runt with a goatee slap a black man who could have sent him 30 metres away with a flick of his wrist. I am frowned upon by white people because I am polite to black people and, through their reserve, white people everywhere show their disapproval of me.³³

Freydier ultimately left empty-handed in 1951, unable to carry out his mission, providing Brutelle a departing picture typical of an overtly racist, old colonial attitude:

I will end up believing what others have told me: they're niggers! In any case, what I have seen here is that the civilization we give to the advanced ones is poorly assimilated by them and they use it solely for their own ends. They have boundless pride when they have a certificate of studies well below the level of those in France, they declare themselves to be writers and when they are instructors they teach with authority, tamers in short, speaking broken French, they declare that they want to earn as much as a teacher and the Lamine Guèye law does not help matters: we should react by completing the spirit of this law with equal work, equal pay and equal competence. [...] The blacks all own land [...] They have no money [...] They buy several women from 20 to 100,000 CFA francs...³⁴

As this example demonstrates, Europeans sent to Africa often made little attempt to understand and to have a lucid perspective on the societies from which they were trying to

³² OURS, Cameroon file, Letter from Freydier to Bidet, March 1952.

³³ OURS, Cameroon file, Letter from Freydier to Brutelle, 20 March 1951.

³⁴ OURS, Cameroon file, Letter from Freydier to Brutelle, June 1951

recruit. Their contempt for 'niggers' and their so-called 'nature' was on display, as was their hostility to progressive measures, such as the one put to the vote by Lamine Guèye, a SFIO socialist and member of the steering committee from 1954 onwards, who had, on the contrary, made the Senegal federation a success. In contrast, the Cameroon federation continued its slow agony, more or less dragging along the cooperatives set up by Zaksas.

The AEF federation, based in Brazzaville, had much in common with the Cameroon federation. A de facto segregation seemed to be the rule. It was founded by a schoolteacher named Pierre Gamache who became secretary general of the AEF general education inspectorate.³⁵ Gamache is generally known to historians of the French workers' movement for donating his collection of books and pamphlets, a gesture which helped Jean Maitron lay the first documentary brick of the Centre d'histoire sociale du syndicalisme (now the Centre d'histoire sociale des mondes contemporains). Gamache left the AEF in 1948 and was succeeded by a certain Cazaban-Mazerolles, who appears to have been fairly active in the federation, if we are to believe the abundant correspondence with Paris. Joseph Bégarra,³⁶ chairman of the Socialist group at the Assemblée de l'Union française and who had a long Algerian past behind him, wrote to Brutelle on 12 April 1954 on this matter:

Cazaban has organized the party in Brazzaville very well, taking local realities into account. Sections have been created according to the different races, and he has appointed a leader for each section who already enjoy a certain authority as local traditional chiefs.³⁷

This organizational structure contradicted the SFIO's principles of mixing, but nobody seemed to mind. However, it is notable that Africans were almost never mentioned in correspondence with the Paris head office, except when it came to elections. For example, when Cazaban-Mazerolles was considering running for mayor of Brazzaville in 1954³⁸ and

³⁵ See Jean Maitron, 'GAMACHE, Pierre, Virgile', *Le Dictionnaire biographique Maitron: Mouvement ouvrier, mouvement social*, 2010, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article76259>.

³⁶ See Gilles Morin and Jean-Louis Planche, 'BÉGARRA, Joseph, Antoine', *Le Dictionnaire biographique Maitron: Mouvement ouvrier, mouvement social*, 2021, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article16103>.

³⁷ OURS, AEF file, Letter from Bégarra to Brutelle, 12 April 1954.

³⁸ OURS, AEF file, Bidet and Brutelle at Cazaban-Mazerolles, 30 August 1954.

Jacques Opangault was the party's candidate for the second college.³⁹ Cazaban-Mazerolles had a very clear opinion about Africans. Here is what he wrote to Brutelle in the letter announcing his election as General Secretary of the Federation:

First of all, let us note that Muslim populations are more stable in their convictions and wiser than African populations. This being said, as a general principle valid everywhere, let us grant the party card only to recognized and influential leaders and to people who clearly stand out from the crowd through their understanding and recognized honesty.⁴⁰

The Ubangui-Chari section was constantly complaining, through its coordinator Gandji Kobokassi, about the total silence of Brazzaville, and therefore of Cazaban-Mazerolles, who was nevertheless often approached. This silence can be explained by a desire not to take sides in the real crisis experienced by the Ubangui-Chari section, with the indictment of its leader Kobokassi, who the Europeans managed to get rid of. Taking an interest in the history of this section, as we are about to do, also means taking the measure of colonial violence in one of the poorest territories of the French Union, a violence which did not spare the SFIO sections.

III

The racism of the European socialists in Ubangui-Chari was just as violent and, if one may say so, even more destructive than in Cameroon. Founded by a man who knew the AOF first, and who seemed less prejudiced than his colleagues, the Ubangui-Chari section was subsequently truly scuttled by the Europeans simply because of the repeated attacks and trials against its main African leader.

The section was founded in 1945 by the surveyor E. Alibert, who had been secretary of the SFIO Federation in Senegal and general secretary of the Force Ouvrière (FO) union of surveyors, also in Senegal, but who soon left, leaving it in the hands of an astonishing

³⁹ Until 1955, there were two colleges (except in Senegal): the first reserved for Europeans and assimilated groups, and the second for 'advanced' Africans.

⁴⁰ OURS, AEF file, Letter from Cazaban-Mazerolles to Brutelle, 5 February 1951.

character whose merits, denied by Europeans, we would like to reassess here. Alibert was also one of the rare Europeans to have acted, it seems, according to egalitarian principles:

Here we came very close to victory. As the only militant European in our young BANGUI section, with four pennies and an unfortunate car that broke down in the middle of the election campaign, we won a great moral victory against financial and clerical reaction [...] And I must point out in favour of our comrades the exemplary conduct of our young indigenous people. There were many offers of money, except for one or two, none of the others agreed to betray the party, and yet they are young in the party and all have starvation wages. But they hope for the victory of socialism.⁴¹

Alibert wrote to Georges Brutelle on his departure in 1947, two years after the creation of the section : 'I still hope that the SFIO party will take the demands of the natives seriously. I have done my utmost to maintain the socialist faith. It will last for a while, but not forever'.⁴²

Alibert left the section in the hands of A. Gandji-Kobokassi, who seems to have been very active. He made the section prosper, set up a section of the Ligue des droits de l'Homme, some Company Social Groups (Groupements sociaux d'entreprise, GSE) and a cooperative. The three pillars of the SFIO had a section, GSEs, and a cooperative. But Gandji-Kobokassi was very quickly accused by the Europeans in charge of his surveillance via SFIO and by Cazaban-Mazerolles of being a swindler who only gambled for personal gain, setting up an illegal traffic of affiliation cards, among other things. Gandji was put on trial several times. Gandji's first charge and summons to court followed a fight with a Greek restaurant owner, Klimis, who refused Black African access to his establishment. Gandji was merely trying to put into practice a motion passed by the SFIO socialist section of Bangui, at its meeting on 5 July 1947, which he had signed expressing the following wish:

The section asks that in Ubangui-Chari the natives be free to buy in shops like Europeans [...] It is astonished and regrets that the native populations of the territory

⁴¹ OURS, Ubangui-Chari file, Alibert to Jules Moch, n.d. [November-December 1946].

⁴² OURS, Ubangui-Chari file, Letter from Alibert to Georges Brutelle. 1 October 1947

of Ubangi-Chari still live, despite the adoption of the CONSTITUTION, under a regime of inequality dictated by racism.⁴³

It seems clear that this motion was not respected by the Greek hotelier, as confirmed by the testimony of the Songomali deputy candidate.

Comrade Gandji Konbokassi was arrested on Monday 22 March 1948 following a dispute with a hotelier. We were not present to tell you exactly how the dispute started, but according to the information we have gathered, it was because of the way this hotelier treats his workers and his absolute refusal to receive coloured citizens in his hotel.

At the court we attended, we heard the prosecutor say many things other than the subject of his arrest. The comrade was accused of supporting the union in Bangui. He is accused of having a section of the Ligue des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen in Bangui, etc.⁴⁴

In the light of this indictment, it is clear that Gandji's trial became a political one. This should have won him the support of the European members of the SFIO, but it did not.

Gandji explained himself at length to Brutelle, Pierre Commin, the president of the Ligue des droits de l'Homme, Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Governor General of the AEF, sending telegrams and letters and asking for the party's help.⁴⁵ In this brawl, he seems to have been right from an ethical and socialist point of view, but a first offence he had allegedly committed came to the surface: stealing a chicken at the age of 12. Gandji was finally acquitted of the charge of 'threats' by the Bangui magistrates' court on 10 June 1948.⁴⁶

A second case further damaged Gandji's reputation. He was charged with failing to reimburse sums paid to him by SFIO subscribers for a trip to Bamako to attend the first RDA congress. Here, as elsewhere across AEF, Gandji's trip to Bamako was prevented by the

⁴³ OURS, SFIO Socialist Party, Bangui section, Motion, 7 September 1947.

⁴⁴ OURS, Ubangui-Chari File, Letter from Songomali J.B. to Brutelle, Bangui, 23 March 1948

⁴⁵ For example : OURS, Ubangui-Chari File, Letter from Gandji-Kobokassi to Georges Brutelle, Bangui, 19 April 1948.

⁴⁶ OURS, Ubangui-Chari file, From the minutes of the registry of the magistrates' court of Nagui, jugement correctionnel, Hearing of 10 June 1948

colonial administration. Despite being unable to travel, Gandji kept the money. However, it is not clear how he could have gone back to the all the SFIO subscribers to return the sums paid to him. In any case, it was not the out-of-pocket subscribers who took Gandji to court, but Governor Chalvet, head of the Ubangui-Chari territory, suggesting the colonial authorities were out to get him.⁴⁷

Finally, a third lawsuit was filed, this time for the bankruptcy of Coopérative ousanguienne d'exportation that he had set up. His detractors also accused him of having attended the SFIO congress during a trip to Paris. However, Gandji was in Paris at the invitation of the Ligue des droits de l'Homme, the congress of which he attended. The fact that he wanted to attend the SFIO party congress at the same time was natural for an SFIO activist. Nevertheless, he borrowed the sum of 100,000 francs from the party, which he probably never paid back, although how could he?⁴⁸

While we cannot not know whether Gandji was guilty or innocent, or perhaps both, what is important is that the Europeans, namely C. Lefevre, Inspectorate General of Administrative Affairs and Robert Martet, were quick to denounce an African for advancing his own personal interests, even as they did not hesitate to take advantage of their socialist affiliation.⁴⁹ As we have seen, they used the party to obtain a post in the colonies, or to secure certain privileges for their children. Gandji was certainly recognized as having a few qualities: 'Properly dressed, well presented, speaking very good French, talkative, displaying a violent anti-communism, Gandji seems to me to be intelligent, dynamic and skilful'. But these attributes were used only to denigrate him: 'Gandji [...] appears as a man who, starting from nothing, was able to learn to read and write and thus become a superior employee, but also appears as being unscrupulous.⁵⁰ Gandji was accused of selling cards as white people's '*gris-gris*' (a *gri-gri* was an amulet used to ward off evil spirits). But can we not consider the insistent requests made to the Centre by Europeans to obtain the Legion of Honour, or a professional promotion, as white people's '*gris-gris*'? Even if Gandji had paid himself through memberships, it would not be a crime, and accusing him of not taking the

⁴⁷ OURS, Ubangui-Chari File, Gandji-Kobokassi, Bangui prison to Georges Brutelle, 31 December 1948.

⁴⁸ Acknowledgement of debt. Paris, 6 September 1949.

⁴⁹ OURS, AEF File, Letter of Lefevre to Brutelle, Brazzaville, 16 September 1949; OURS, Ubangui-Chari File, Brutelle to Martet, Paris, 19 December 1949. Brutelle asked Martet to admit him to the section. Martet replied that it was impossible (he would be the only white member). He suggested that the party should brutally disown Gandji. OURS, AEF File, Robert Martet to Georges Brutelle, 19 January 1950.

⁵⁰ OURS, Ubangui-Chari File, Martet to Brutelle, 6 December 1949.

doctrine into account was a bit rich insofar as, most of the time, electoral considerations took precedence over matters of doctrine among Europeans of the SFIO.

Brutelle hesitated for a long time, but finally let go of Gandji. We do not know what became of him. What is certain is that none of the Europeans who were present and who brought him to trial were capable of setting up a socialist section in Ubangui-Chari. And so Ubangi-Chari was lost to the SFIO. With the SFIO section in Oubangui-Chari, we have the most extreme case of opposition between European and African members. We'll now look at other reasons that may have weakened the party. One of these was undoubtedly competition from the RDA, whose first congress Gandji had wished to attend, but was unable to do so. This is particularly the case in Ivory Coast, Guinea and Chad.

IV

The Ivory Coast federation seems to have been plagued by internal divisions. The leadership and the majority of its members were African. Like the *Démocratie socialiste de Guinée* (DSG), it had to face the RDA and its strongman leader, Félix Houphouët-Boigny. In Guinea, the RDA also had a charismatic leader in the trade unionist Sékou Touré, founder of the *Parti démocratique de Guinée* (PDG-RDA). While in Chad, Gabriel Lisette, founder of the *Parti progressiste tchadien*, a section of the RDA, offered another man of international stature. As an exclusively African party, the RDA could exert a real attraction on members who were sometimes dissatisfied with the SFIO, and who were attracted by African leaders who could defend African interests better than the white members of the SFIO.

The movement towards the RDA could manifest itself either as a desire for alliance or as a defection like that of Dr Guirandou Ndiaye, member of the Ivoirian section of the SFIO:

As long as there was only one SFIO problem, the RDA did not refuse any collaboration. But, from the moment when antagonistic local African parties and certain SFIO sections were grouped together to form the MSA [*Mouvement socialiste africain*], the RDA, according to all logic, could no longer see, in the coalition of its adversaries, anything but an opposing party. From that moment on, we said to

ourselves that it was no longer possible for us to continue to be part of the MSA, which will hardly, in the eyes of the Africans, represent socialist thought and spirit.⁵¹

The reasons for abandoning the SFIO are clearly expressed here. It was a question of being fully 'involved' in Ivorian society, while remaining socialist. It was also a way of saying that the SFIO was in some ways outside that society.

But the competition between political parties also sometimes led to violent clashes. The DSG appears to have been at least as active as the Ivory Coast federation. It was formed after the dissolution of the SFIO section and was dominated by two men, one African and one European. The African was Ibrahima Barry, known as Barry III, a tax inspector, and the European was Jean-Paul Alata, treasurer-paymaster in Conakry and then director general of personnel at the high commission, who would later recount his experience of Guinean prisons in *Prison d'Afrique*.⁵² After serving as minister, Barry III also fell victim to Sékou Touré and was executed in 1971. As always, it was the European, in this case Jean-Paul Alata, who corresponded with the Paris centre and described the situation. He thought highly of Barry III:

I think your choice of Barry Ibrahima is an excellent one. He's young, committed, intelligent and has a thorough education that should enable him to master many difficult situations. He has not lost touch with the local community, he belongs to a great family.⁵³

But Alata also highlights that was true of all the sections. The Europeans were there to organize but also to control the Africans. But the latter were less and less willing to play second fiddle, especially at a time of major strikes for equality. They had the example of specifically African parties, where no European was there to command.

⁵¹ OURS, File Côte d'Ivoire, Letter from Dr Guirandou N'Diaye, Adviser to the Union française, to Mr Pierre Commin, Secretary General of the SFIO party and to Maître Lamine Guèye, President of the African Socialist Movement, Abidjan, 26 April 1957.

⁵² See John F. Straussberger, 'BARRY, Ibrahima (dit Barry III)', trans. Céline Pauthier, *Le Dictionnaire biographique Maitron: Mouvement ouvrier, mouvement social*, 2016, <http://maitron-en-ligne.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?article185165>; Jean-Paul Alata, *Prison d'Afrique: 5 ans dans les geôles de Guinée*, (Paris, 1976)

⁵³ OURS, Guinea file, Letter from Jean-Paul Alata to André Bidet, 9 June 1954.

As in the Ivory Coast, the temptation to form an alliance with the RDA was great, but was definitively put to rest by the clashes and deadly riots in September 1956.⁵⁴ The DSG also fell victim to the rather radical and hostile attitude towards the canton chiefs of Barry III, himself the son of a chief. Although Barry III never achieved the electoral success of his predecessor Yacine Diallo, perhaps because of the aforementioned hostilities, he nevertheless played an important political role as co-founder of the DSG and then founder and first secretary general of the MSA (Conakry Congress, 1957).

Like the DSG, the Parti social indépendant tchadien was autonomous and affiliated to the SFIO. André Labrouquère, thanks to his experience with the SFIO federations in Indochina, is said to have been behind its creation, but the party was undoubtedly dominated by a charismatic man: Ahmat Koulamallah, 'son of the Sultan of Chad', whose few letters to Brutelle show how elegantly he spoke French and depict him as a scholar.⁵⁵

The Parti social indépendant tchadien was founded during an assembly held in September 1950. It was given statutes and applied for affiliation to the SFIO. As a sign of the hopes placed in him, Ahmat Koulamallah was invited to Paris at the beginning of 1951 and, as Brutelle later told Henry, they, in a sense, rolled out the red carpet for him: 'We did our best. Ahmat Koulamallah was honoured by the Conseil National, the *Populaire*, the French Overseas Ministry and even the Elysée Palace, considering that he was received by Prefect Mecheri.'⁵⁶

But the hoped-for successes, particularly at the polls, did not occur. A letter to Bidet from a man called Yves Delay, which he believed to have been written on Koulamallah's behalf, nevertheless struck an optimistic note, while attempting a psychological and ethnic analysis of his African interlocutors.

Before I finish, it remains for me to explain the psychology of young African politicians in Chad. On the whole, they are young people under the age of 30,

⁵⁴ See Pauthier, 'L'Indépendance ambiguë'.

⁵⁵ See Gilles Morin, 'LABROUQUÈRE, André, Pierre, Robert', *Le Dictionnaire biographique Maitron: Mouvement ouvrier, mouvement social*, 2021, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article136580>. OURS, Chad File, 'The President of our grouping, the son of the Sultan of Chad and who was the RPT leader (sic), has taken all his troops with him, which, with the exception of Lisette, includes all the parliamentarians of Chad. The best elements of the RDA are now with us...' Letter from André Labrouquère, 6 October 1950. He attributed this success to Rosenfeld's visit.

⁵⁶ OURS, Chad file, Letter from Brutelle to Henry, 5 April 1951.

consumed with ambition, who, depending on the position or situation offered to them, will move from one political movement to another and vice versa.

They are impatient and seize any situation that arises without thinking about the repercussions of their decision in the future. Despite this, they have one undeniable quality: they love their country and 'think Chad'. Because of their difficult beginnings in life, and the difficulties they have encountered in creating a situation for themselves, they all have fundamentally socialist feelings but little understanding of the subtleties that differentiate the parties. As a last resort, they adopt the movement that seems most likely to create a situation for them.

In short, they need direction. Many of them, for the time being, are united with Mr Lisette, who has just created posts for them. But as far as the Muslims are concerned, they will all, for more or less personal reasons, return to Koulamallah, who is of their race, as soon as they feel that he has won the day. With him, they will feel more confident.⁵⁷

This optimism was not shared by Brutelle, who called Koulamallah to account for the disastrous election to the territorial assemblies results for the MSA in 1957, when turnout rates in Ubangui-Chari and Batha were 12 per cent and 11per cent respectively. Here, as elsewhere, the Europeans in the SFIO, such as Yves Delay, while admitting some qualities in the Africans, agreed on the need for them to be led. It is not surprising then that many of them preferred the RDA, in which they were masters.

V

The history of the SFIO in Africa was certainly not one of triumphant success, despite the work of a few men of goodwill, both Africans and Europeans. Sections failed to win power at local level, membership consistently declined and Africans were consistently shut out of meaningful positions within the architecture of the different sections. Perhaps the endeavour of creating sections was already a dead end before it had even begun? Africans had little interest in joining, and the party, through the voice of Brutelle, sometimes admitted its powerlessness when it came to equality. The metropolitan centre was often

⁵⁷ OURS, Chad file, Letter from Yves Delay to André Bidet, 23 May 1957.

more progressive than the Europeans that were on the ground in Africa, old colonialists who set themselves up as experts in African psychology, and whose certainties on the subject were matched only by their ignorance of African societies. Whatever happened, the Europeans were there to control the Africans who, according to them, still needed guides, even though independence was becoming inevitable, something of which they were apparently scarcely aware.

With the end of the Second World War came the fight for equality, which was hardly the rule in SFIO cells, where co-education was sometimes untenable because of the prevailing overt racism. From 1946, the SFIO also faced fierce competition in Africa from the first major African party, the RDA. The only chance that the sections and federations would have had to survive, or to leave their mark or maintain relations with independent Africans, would have been to take part in the fight for equality which was being waged by the RDA, the trade unions and the African parliamentarians. But this did not happen. Moreover, when one of their members, like Gandji, was prosecuted for fighting for equality, the Europeans present did not support him. On the contrary, they brought further accusations to the table. In short, the SFIO did not survive African independence, and any renewed links with the Socialist International, as in the case of Senghor in Senegal, would happen much later and on a completely different basis. By taking a closer look at the life of the sections on the ground, as this article has done, the archaism that characterised the relationship between Africans and Europeans becomes apparent, an archaism that was blind to change and so inevitably doomed this experiment to fail. Nevertheless, other forms of socialism, which were specifically African or inspired by a pure and hard Marxism that was not that of the SFIO, did flourish in independent Africa after all.