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French Colonial Reading of Ethnographic Research

The Case of the “Desertion”
of the Abron King and its Aftermath*

On the night of 17 January 1942, the Governor of Côte-d’Ivoire, Hubert Deschamps, had learned that a traitorous event had transpired—the King of the Abron people Kwadwo Agyeman, regarded by the French as one of their most loyal subjects, had crossed the border to the British-ruled Gold Coast and declared his wish to assist the British-Gaullist war effort. The act stunned the Vichy colonial administration, and it played into the hands of the Gaullists who used this British colony as a propaganda base. Other studies have analysed the causes of the event and its repercussions (Lawler 1997). The purpose of the present article is to use this incident as a case study of a much broader question—one that does not relate exclusively to the Vichy period in French West Africa (hereafter AOF)—namely, the relationship between ethnographic research and French colonial policy, in general, and policy toward the institution of African chiefs, in particular.

Studies about the general relationship between anthropology and colonialism have used various metaphors and images to characterise it. Anthropology has been described as the child of imperialism or as an applied science at the service of colonial powers. The imperialism of the 19th century and the acquisitions of vast territories in different continents boosted the development of modern anthropology (Ben-Ari 1999: 384-385). Anthropological knowledge of Indian societies, for instance, finds some of its origins in the files of administrators, soldiers, policemen and magistrates who sought to control these societies according to the Imperial view of the basic and universal standards of civilisation (Dirks 1997: 185; Asad 1973; Cohn 1980; Coundouriotis 1999; Huggan 1994; Stocking 1991). No matter

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how we choose to define the relationship, it is clear that anthropology greatly benefited from colonial governments. Colonial rule provided anthropology with field sites, research opportunities, grants, and protection from political violence and instability. It is much less obvious to what extent anthropological and ethnographic investigations contributed to the formulation of colonial policies. In fact, most of the time it is difficult to know how, or whether at all, any anthropological knowledge was used by colonial powers (Ben-Ari 1999: 385).

The affair of the Abron King offers us an opportunity to examine the effect ethnographic knowledge had on the decision making of a specific governor in that context. Following the crossing of the Abron to the Gold Coast Deschamps formulated a series of detailed policy proposals to ensure that such incidents would not recur. In his memoirs, written some thirty years later, he acknowledges that these policies were based on an ethnographic study — a book called *Le noir de Bondoukou* written by Louis Tauxier (1921), a member of the French colonial administration. The Abron affair, which took place during an extremely tensed and difficult period for France and its colonial administration in AOF can, thus, shed light on the complex relationship between ethnographic research and colonial policy.

French Colonial Ethnographic Research in AOF

Anthropological sciences won certain acclaim in France during the 1870s with the opening of the Ecole d'Anthropologie in Paris in 1876 and the Museum of Ethnography of the Trocadéro two years later. This continued with France's acquisition of new territories in Africa through the 1880s. The idea that ethnographic studies on African territories could assist colonial administrations in these areas was reflected in the publishing of two bibliographies, one of AOF in 1912 and the other on French Equatorial Africa in 1914. These bibliographies included all studies written on these two federations since 1850 and were considered, among other things, to be a useful guide for colonial administrators (Sibeud 1994: 640-641).

Ethnographic research in AOF was closely related to the colonial administration. In fact, prior to World War II most of it was conducted by colonial administrators. These administrator-ethnographers aspired to better know the populations under their authority. However, the French Ministry of Colonies did not officially encourage such research. Encouragement of and reliance upon ethnographic research was dependent on the personality of the colonial administrators in charge (*ibid.*: 652). Joseph-François Clozel, for example, took to supporting ethnographic research when he was Lieutenant Governor of the Sudan in 1909. When he was promoted to Governor-General in 1915 he further developed this trend. Apart from his own interest in ethnography, his friendship with one of the best known administrator-ethnographers, Maurice Delafosse, shaped his attitude toward

this anthropological science. Delafosse had established the Institut ethnographique international de Paris in 1910, together with Arnold Van-Gennep. He spent almost twenty years in West Africa as military officer, administrator and colonial scholar and in 1912 he published one of the most influential and comprehensive studies on the populations of AOF — *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (Robinson 1992: 233; Delafosse 1976; Grosz-Ngaté 1988; Van Hoven 1990; Amselle & Sibeud 1998).

Ethnography and French Colonial Policy toward African Chiefs

Ethnographic studies written by administrator-ethnographers like Delafosse occasionally influenced aspects of French colonial policy. Ethnographic research, for example, helped shape administrative, legal, and social boundaries (Robinson 1992); it influenced colonial policy regarding the institution of the African family (Wooten 1993), and to some extent it moulded policy on the integration of African "traditional" chiefs in the French colonial administration.

During the colonial conquest of the territory that was to become AOF, a system of administrative rule was developed and more or less prevailed until the end of colonial rule in 1960. The territory was divided first into colonies, then into circles (*cercles*). These were further divided into subdivisions, provinces, cantons and villages. While the *cercle* was ruled by a French administrator, the smaller administrative units were usually headed by African chiefs (Conklin 1997: 110). Most of the chiefs who were integrated in this administrative system were not "traditional" rulers but were appointed and trained by the French. On rare occasions African chiefs who had ruled before French colonisation received the titles "superior chief" (*Chef supérieur*) or "king" (*Roi*) and were allowed to continue to rule over their territories (Delavignette 1950: 71-72, 79; Alexandre 1970a; Cohen 1971: 74-79; Conklin 1997; Cruise O'Brien 1975; Geschiere 1993; Van Rouveroy 1987). The most prominent example for such a policy was in Upper Volta where the traditional ruler of the Mossi, the Morho-Naba, was allowed by the French to continue to rule although he was divested of most of his powers (Skinner 1970).

Most studies that deal with the evolution of the French colonial policy toward chiefs distinguish between two stages. The first lasted until the First World War and is characterised by the total rejection African traditional rulers. This negative attitude was dictated mainly by ideological factors. The first French members of the colonial administration were, for the most part, Left-wing Republicans, anti-Royalist and anti-Clerical. They thus tended to suspect African "aristocratic" and religious rulers, whom they believed resembled their counterparts in Metropolitan France (Alexandre 1970b: 4). Adopting Western paradigms, these administrators inclined to see Africa as deeply immersed in the Feudal era from which France had

successfully emerged in the French Revolution. The rule of African chiefs, according to French colonial administrators, was a kind of feudalism that had to be eradicated in the name of the values of that revolution. The Governors-General before World War I took upon themselves to protect the rights of African individuals against the tyranny of their chiefs. This attitude was further developed by Governor-General Ponty (1908-1914) who saw in all chiefs and notables potential enemies. He envisaged eliminating all canton and province chiefs and transferring their duties to village chiefs, whom the *Commandant de Cercle* would supervise directly (Conklin 1997: 113-117).

The turning point in French policy toward African chiefs came during World War I. There were several reasons for this. First, the war proved to the French that retaining the chiefs as rulers was essential in keeping close contact with the majority of the population (*ibid.*: 197). Second, the emergence of the new elite of the *évolués* alarmed the colonial administration; it became concerned that this elite would supersede the old traditional one. When young educated Africans began to demand equal rights to those of the French and African citizens the *évolués* began to appear much more dangerous than any “feudalist” elite (*ibid.*: 159-165).

But the change of attitude towards African traditional rulers was also influenced by ethnographic research. This research was based upon certain ideological beliefs. Most of the administrator-ethnographers firmly upheld the ideals advanced by the French Revolution, especially regarding individualism, and condemned any form of social hierarchy-aristocracy, castes and slaves. They believed in the inevitable transformation of the West African societies into Western civilisation. This, however, did not imply any kind of equality between Africans and French. On the contrary, the belief in an eventual assimilation only intensified the notion of actual inequality between African societies and the French civilisation. But although the administrator-ethnographers despised African institutions and customs, they also saw the futility in eradicating them. The evolution they talked about was to be gradual and, in the meantime, colonial administration had to rely upon and respect at least some of the African institutions, such as chiefs, in order to mould African societies into a perfect re-make of the French Revolution (Van Hoven 1990: 179-185). The main conclusion of the ethnographic research conducted by Delafosse, for example, was that the French were deeply mistaken to regard the chiefs as dispensable and that they had to study and then work through indigenous political institutions (Conklin 1997: 176-177).

The conclusions offered by the administrators-ethnographers in their studies did not change the basic contempt felt by the colonial administration toward African traditional chiefs. The latter were still regarded as backward and feudal tyrants. This is reflected in the testimony of one colonial administrator who served in the 1920s, quoted by William Cohen: “We did not take the feudal lords very seriously; we found them rather ridiculous.

After the French Revolution we could not be expected to return to the Middle Ages... We just used to slap them on the back and were rather familiar with them" (Cohen 1971: 77).

The real change of attitude, then, was not in the way chiefs were regarded but in the belief that they could be turned into an effective tool of control and development. Robert Delavignette, who joined the French colonial service in 1919 and later became the director of the *École nationale de la France d'Outre-mer*, expressed this belief in his *Les vrais chefs de l'Empire*, in 1939. He suggested that the African canton chief did not have to be a feudalist but this was his natural inclination, as that is what he had been before the French conquest. However, if the French local administrators would supervise him closely, guide him and bring "modernity", meaning economic development, into his region, this feudalist could be turned into a real *fonctionnaire* (Delavignette 1939: 140).

Although ethnographic research had some influence on the policy towards chiefs it did not enhance its coherence. The French sought to strengthen chiefs while they continued to erode their authority. For example, after World War I they did not restore to the chiefs any powers to punish criminal offences that had been stripped from them before the war (Conklin 1997: 207). In fact, there was no doubt that all authority remained in French hands (Cohen 1971: 117). While chiefs were to be chosen according to "traditional" variants, such as customary legitimacy and mystical power, they were also required to undergo a four-year French education, at least¹ (*ibid.*: 115). The problem was that while the French were trying to rule through so-called "traditional" chiefs who derived their legitimacy from African customs and tradition, they were also trying to eradicate these same customs, which they saw as an obstacle to civilisation. The attempt to turn the chief into a modern vehicle of transformation while maintaining his "traditional" legitimacy in the eyes of his subjects often proved quite impossible.

Deschamps, the Vichy Administration and the Incident of the Abron King

Hubert Deschamps started his colonial career in Madagascar, on which he wrote his doctoral thesis. His interest in ethnography was reflected in the subject he chose for that thesis: *Les Antaisaka. Géographie humaine, histoire et coutumes d'une population malgache*. He joined the colonial service in AOF following a request by Governor-General Pierre Boisson, who has just been appointed as the High Commissioner of French [sub-Saharan]

1. Governor General Jules Cadre (1923-1930) made school attendance obligatory for all sons of chiefs and notables (CONKLIN 1997: 199).

Africa by the Vichy government. Deschamps served as the Governor of Côte-d'Ivoire until 1943, when AOF was transferred to Gaullists.

The new governor's interest in ethnography was reflected in his policy during this short period. He saw, for example, the colonial administrators' unfamiliarity with African languages as part of their more general ignorance of African life and cultures. In 1941 he tried to reduce this ignorance by establishing the "centre of native studies" (*Centre d'études indigènes*). One of the Governor's cabinet members headed the centre. He was assisted by African secretary and an African and European team whose members were chosen according to their acquaintance with ethnology and African languages and life. Subjects studied in the new centre included agricultural work, nutrition, accommodation, social customs, festivals and art. One of the first actions of the centre was to award a sum of 5 000 francs to the "native theatre of Côte-d'Ivoire" (*Théâtre indigène de la Côte-d'Ivoire*) towards equipment. Deschamps also established a museum and an art centre so that, according to him, African art would be given the place it had had before the coming of Europeans and that the future generations could enjoy art objects made by Africans before they were influenced by western art².

Although this article concentrates on the way in which this particular French colonial administrator read an ethnographic study, we cannot ignore the fact that his rule coincided with an especially tensed and eventful period in French colonial history in AOF — the Vichy period. The situation in which the colonial power was partly occupied by another European power was unprecedented and extremely embarrassing. The fact that the other French Sub-Saharan federation, AEF, was ruled by the Free French Forces who claimed to represent "the true France" only contributed to the difficulty of the colonial administration in AOF to convince Africans that "business was as usual". An added complexity was the tense relations with the British in West Africa, whose colonies became Gaullist camps from which Africans living in AOF were called upon to revolt against the Vichy authorities and assist the British and Gaullist forces (Akpo-Vaché 1996; Ginio 2000).

The Vichy policy towards African chiefs was not fundamentally different than any previous policy. Nevertheless, the issue of "traditional" chiefs did receive special attention due to these awkward circumstances. As in the First World War, African chiefs proved again to be an essential link between the colonial administration and the African population. This time, however, the question of maintaining African loyalty was even more complex. The Vichy colonial administration aspired to strengthen and emphasise the status of chiefs. Already in August 1940, the minister of the colonies, Henri Lemery, dealt with the issue of legitimacy of chiefs and their ability to effectively control the population under their authority. In a letter he sent to Boisson he wrote that in order to prevent the disappearance

2. Archives nationales (AN), 2G41/22 (200mi/1829), Côte-d'Ivoire — Rapport politique et social, 1941.

of tradition it was necessary to demand that the chiefs be obeyed and respected. He claimed that rapid and unorganised evolution, especially among young Africans, undermined their authority. Lemery suggested prohibiting Africans from leaving their villages without a legitimate motive and the chief's permission³. Following this letter, the directory of political and administrative affairs (*direction des affaires politiques et administratives*) issued new instructions under the title, "Native Policy". The instructions recommended reinforcing the authority of African chiefs. It was asserted that chiefs must receive more prestige and that respect toward them must be ensured. This goal was to be reinforced by training them, awarding them financial incentives and by closely cooperating with them⁴. In March 1941 the Governor of Guinea suggested an additional way to boost chiefs' authority — to install at the entrance to their houses official signs painted in the colours of the French flag. He thought that such a step would be highly efficient due to the "sensitivity of the natives to such external symbols". The expenses, he proposed, would be born by the chiefs themselves⁵.

African chiefs, especially those high ranked such as canton and province chiefs, were well aware of the new situation and of its potential. Knowing that the colonial administration was more alert than ever to questions of loyalty, some tried to score points by accusing rival chiefs of stashing weapons⁶. Or, in return for their allegiance, they requested to be appointed to higher positions or to receive other benefits⁷. Some chiefs opted to assist the Gaullists situated in the British West African colonies, either for immediate benefits or, apparently, in the hope that in case of a British victory, they would be rewarded for their actions⁸.

The most powerful example of a successful manipulation of the new circumstances, however, is the crossing of the Abron King with his son and several thousand of his subjects to the British-ruled Gold Coast on that

3. Archives nationales, Section d'Outre-mer (ANSOM), Affaires politiques, Carton 928, dossier 7, 16 August, 1940.

4. Archives nationales du Sénégal (ANS), 17G/119 (17).

5. ANS, 17G/119 (17).

6. See for example a complaint of a former canton chief submitted to the Governor of Côte-d'Ivoire against three canton chiefs. ANS, 13G/22 (17).

7. There are several examples for such requests: a petition of several people of Dyola origin from Casamance to the Minister of the Colonies asking that their chiefs be appointed instead of chiefs belonging to other ethnic groups. These Dyola reminded the Minister that they had fought for France. ANSOM, Aff. Pol., Carton 635, dossier 11, 22.7.1940. The Mossi King, the Morho-Naba, requested that one of his clerks be appointed as canton chief, AN, 19G/3 (200mi/2837), and that a son of a friend be awarded a scholarship although the school claimed he did not deserve it, AN, 5G/11 (200mi/2116), Réorganisation du commandant indigène en Côte-d'Ivoire (1936-1948). While the Dyola's request was denied, both requests of the Morho-Naba were approved.

8. See for example a case in which a chief from Guinea was cast off after being caught spying for the Gaullists. Another chief was arrested for distributing Gaullist pamphlets and for speaking against the French. ANS, 13G/22 (17).

January night in 1942. This was regarded as one of the major acts of protest committed against the colonial administration in the Vichy period. Some studies examined the incident as an example of African loyalty to the Gaullist cause. Others totally rejected this possibility and presented the crossing as an example of African manipulation of the situation, claiming that discontent was not in any way related to “big” ideological issues but rather to local politics⁹. Nancy Lawler studied it in the context of migrations from the French to the British colonies, a phenomenon that also existed before the war. She demonstrated how this act was rendered much easier due to the new circumstances (Lawler 1997).

Lawler’s interpretation and Akpo-Vaché’s affirmation that the crossing reflected the fact that Africans perfectly understood the divisions among the French and knew how to exploit them both seem tenable and convincing. I do not intend to suggest here a new interpretation but to examine the incident, or more accurately the events that followed it, from a different perspective. The “atrociousness” of the affair in the eyes of the embarrassed colonial administration led the Governor of Côte-d’Ivoire to demonstrate that he was investing all his efforts in preventing a recurrence of such incidents. As noted, he formulated detailed proposals concerning the necessary preventive steps to be taken based on a specific ethnographic study. These proposals can shed light on the way in which studies of administrators-ethnographers were used by the French colonial administration and their ability to influence colonial policy.

The King of the Abron was one of the few traditional rulers who were allowed to continue to rule after the French conquest. He was referred to by the colonial administration as a superior chief and he ruled over the canton chiefs. While most of his duties were taken away from him, he was still allowed to collect customary tributes from his subjects and was appointed according to the customs of the Abron, as these were perceived by the French. Kwadwo Agyeman, the King who moved to the British-Gaullist side, had ruled over the Abron Kingdom since 1922. When World War II broke out, he declared his allegiance to the French and even sent three of his sons to fight so as to set example to his subjects. The passage to the Gold Coast was probably inspired by his son as a result of disputes between the King and the French *Commandant*. The latter apparently did not approve of the King habit of extracting so-called gifts from his subjects

9. Jean-Noël Loucou presents this act as a proof of the African resistance to Vichy and support of De Gaulle. Other researchers are much more sceptical about the ostensible ideological motives of the king. Jean Suret-Canale says that it is difficult to establish what was more determining—local politics or broader considerations, while Catherine Akpo-Vaché asserts that the migration of the king and his court to the Gold-Coast does not in any way reflect resistance to the Vichy regime in particular, but testifies to the perfect understanding of the inner divisions of the colonial power and the ability of Africans to take advantage of them (AKPO-VACHÉ 1996; LOUCOU 1980; SURET-CANALE 1964).

and forced the King to return them. The ambition of the King's son to inherit his father's crown contrary to Abron custom (as discussed below), was another factor that induced the "defection". As we shall see, this question of inheritance became central in the aftermath of the incident, when Deschamps tried to decide whether to abolish the institution of Superior Chief or to appoint a new one and, in this case, who to choose.

According to Deschamps' memoirs, when he was informed of the incident his first move was to return to his house in Abidjan and read Louis Tauxier's detailed ethnographic study. It was in this book, *Le noir de Bondoukou*, that Deschamps sought—and found—guidance that would help him determine his next moves (Deschamps 1975: 255). Before I turn to the conclusions Deschamps drew from this work, it is important to say a few words about the book and its author.

Born in 1871, Tauxier joined the colonial administration in 1905. He spent his entire colonial career in AOF, unlike many French administrators who frequently moved between colonies in different parts of the world. This allowed him to satisfy his eagerness for ethnographic and linguistic research (Lester 1942: 256). According to the entry dedicated to him in the biographical dictionary of the French colonial service, he used to read everything available on any place he was posted and to methodically study the local populations, languages, customs and traditions. In 1931 his efforts were officially recognised when he received a medal for the quality of his ethnographic studies. He was a member of the historical and scientific committee of French West Africa (*Comité historique et scientifique de l'AOF*) from its inception in 1916 and was a co-founder of the Society of Africanists (*Société des africanistes*). *Le noir de Bondoukou* was one of eleven ethnographic studies he wrote, and he also published numerous articles in ethnographic journals, such as the *Revue d'ethnographie et des traditions populaires*. In short, Tauxier was a genuine representative of the "administrator-ethnographer" and, indeed, was hailed as "un véritable ethnographe" (Cornevin 1975: 582-584).

Tauxier wrote *Le noir de Bondoukou* in 1921. It was a part of a series, called *Études soudanaises* that included studies on other regions: for example, *Le noir du Soudan* was published in 1912 and *Le noir du Yatenga* in 1917. The book presents the history and customs of the peoples living in the *Cercle* of Bondoukou during the French occupation, meaning the Koulango, Dyoula, Abron and several small ethnic groups such as the Gbin that Tauxier refers to as "etc.". He dedicates six chapters to the Abron—three to their history and three to their customs concerning the family, public authorities, and religion. The physical description of the "typical" Abron reflects the paternal and even racist atmosphere that dominates the book: "Le type physique de l'Abron est simple et assez semblable à lui-même: l'Abron est grand, généralement bâti, sans rien d'excessif ni d'athlétique du reste, donc plutôt beau garçon. Il paraît intelligent" (Tauxier 1921: 79). A bit further, Tauxier described the Ashanti, who tried to impose themselves

on the Abron, as related to them “mais sans doute d’une race plus pure, moins mélangée d’éléments nègres inférieurs” (*ibid.*: 82).

Let us now see how the policy suggested by Deschamps regarding the institution of superior chief was influenced by Tauxier’s book. The first problem Deschamps had to tackle was how to re-establish the political order in the *cercle* of Bondoukou. This was to be achieved quickly if further immigrations and other disorders were to be prevented. The French did try to bring the King back and Deschamps even promised him that, should he decide to return, the matter would be considered in the “spirit of friendship” between the French and his ancestors. However, when it became clear that the King was not returning, Deschamps had to contemplate his next step. At first, he briefly considered having the institution of *Chefferie supérieure* abolished, claiming that it had only caused problems and that this was an opportunity to eradicate the Abron “feudal” system once and for all. Given his Republican background, the reference to African traditional rulers, as “feudalists” was strong in Deschamps’ mind. However, he soon concluded that such a move was against all political logic as it was only liable to increase the “traitor” king’s prestige in the eyes of his subjects¹⁰. He now had to decide whom to appoint as the new King. Presenting himself as a protector of Abron tradition, Deschamps felt that he had no choice but to appoint the successor according to the customs of the Abron. In this point it is obvious that Deschamps was not at all familiar with their customs. He believed that the Abron inherited the throne in a matrilineal line, meaning that the eldest son of the King’s sister had to inherit the reign. This indeed was the explanation he gave for the King’s defection—he had been encouraged by his son, who knew the French administration would not allow him to become King. To be sure, this version of Abron tradition was not so far fetched. In fact, one of the first French messengers to visit the Abron in 1888, Louis Gustave Binger, received the same impression (Tauxier 1921: 111, n. 4). What Binger did not notice and Deschamps did not know was that although the heir was indeed the maternal nephew, the throne was also transferred between two families—the Zanzan and the Yakassé. In fact, Deschamps only discovered this in Tauxier’s book: “Tauxier m’avait appris que deux familles royales alternaient au pouvoir” (Deschamps 1975: 255). It is rather surprising that Deschamps had to learn about this tradition from Tauxier, because even following the French occupation of the Abron Kingdom, its Kings continued to be chosen alternately from these two families, the last one hailing from the Yakassé dynasty. The only explanation for Deschamps’ ignorance in this matter is the fact that the last King had been in power for twenty years before the affair (e.g.: far longer than Deschamps had been in AOF). In any case, this provided the perfect solution to Deschamps’ problem. He could appoint a

10. ANS, 5G/31 (17).

King from the rival dynasty, thus potentially avoiding further trouble and still preserve Abron tradition.

The fact that the new King was the legitimate heir did not suffice, as far as Deschamps was concerned. He wanted to ensure that the population would not see the new King as a French creation. He gave considerable attention to the coronation ceremonies of the King and the new canton chiefs, making certain that they were flamboyant and impressive. They were to be reported in the local press and he himself was to attend some of them in order to imbue them with further respectability. The ceremonies were to be conducted according to Abron tradition and endow the King and chiefs as much mystical power as possible. Deschamps, however, described the coronation of the new King, which he attended, as taken out of the Middle Ages. This was probably the closest he could imagine African tradition. This wish to give the coronation ceremony an air of mysticism reflects a more general inclination of French, as well as British, colonialism to see customary order as something that "is encapsulated in ritual and supernatural belief, in traditionally legitimate norms, in flamboyant ceremonial and magic incarnation" (Fields 1985: 65).

Deschamps insisted that after the ceremonies were over respect for the King and chiefs would continue to be manifested. One of the main causes for King Kwadwo Agyeman's "betrayal", according to him, was the attitude of the local administrators toward him. Deschamps singled out for criticism the *Commandant* Rober, who behaved according to him, in a tactless manner. Deschamps claimed that his refusal to allow the Abron King to collect his tributes from his subjects was due to ill judgement caused by sleeping sickness, and not to any moral considerations. He insisted that respect for the King and chiefs by local administrators must be extended so as not to decrease their esteem in the eyes of the population. He emphasised that the superior chief, in particular, must be upheld as a real King under French patronage. For example, administrators were to receive him at the door when he visited them and lead him to the door upon departure. He was to be supplied with arms, permitted to live in the royal palace and receive the confiscated property of the former King. Deschamps reminded his administrators that Clause 28 of the *indigénat* enabled them to reinforce the chiefs' authority by punishing whoever tried to contest it. This authority was also to be preserved by the efficiency of the chiefs' leadership and it was the colonial administration duty to encourage them to be efficient. The King would have to report to his superiors regularly about local life and events. They would have to listen to him attentively, respond to his requests when justified, correct his mistakes in a friendly manner, obtain his confidence, and become his advisors. Deschamps went on to suggest that the King be informed about world events and the rehabilitation of France so that he could become an effective tool of counter-propaganda¹¹.

11. ANS, 5G/31 (17).

As Deschamps must have learned from Tauxier's book the question of protecting the King's "traditional" customs was tricky. Although he considered any scruples Rober might have had in regard to the King's tributes collecting as ridiculous, he was aware that this traditional custom was problematic. He asserted that the question of the King's customs must be dealt with tactfully. He knew that the new King should not be allowed to behave in an unjust manner toward his subjects. He was not particularly troubled by the moral implications of the King's conduct but more by the potential results of a discontented population. If we are to believe Deschamps' claim that he had read Tauxier's book cover to cover, then he must have learned from it that at least some of the Abron customs continued to be practiced under French rule. According to Tauxier, the decision to preserve these customs as long as they did not contradict the "principles of civilisation" was taken at the moment of the final conquest, in 1898, when a revolt of a chief of the Zanzan family, by the name of Papé or Paimpi, was crushed and the chief was executed. The French administrator who supervised the execution decided to allow the Abron to conduct the chief's funeral according to tradition, although they had to omit the customary sacrifice of slaves (Tauxier 1921: 124). This kind of "barbaric behaviour" would not be permitted by an administrator who has just executed a man without a trial. Further on Tauxier recounts the customs that brought the lion's share of the King's income: "Enfin, et c'était là sans doute le revenu le plus important, il y avait les fameuses 'coutumes' judiciaires, dont nous devrions parler ici comme de l'impôt le plus sérieux du royaume." These "judiciary customs" were paid by the party that was found guilty by the King. Tauxier quotes Captain Benquey who wrote about the Abron judiciary system and asserts that these payments were very high. Most of the money went to the King and the rest was divided between his official spokesman and some other assistants. Tauxier explains that this was a way to finance the judicial procedures; however he notes that "il est évident que le noir avec son tempérament d'enfant usait et abusait des coutumes".

By taking away the King's control over the judicial system and transferring it to the *commandant de cercle* the King was also denied this major source of income. Other forms of taxing were permitted, but these were to be regulated by the colonial administration. For example, the King and other chiefs were entitled to a fixed share of every hunt conducted by their subjects; village chiefs as well as higher-ranked chiefs and the King received a portion of the estates left by their deceased subjects; also, taxes were imposed on commerce within the Kingdom (*ibid.*: 308, 338, 341, 342, 351). Tauxier does not say which of these customs were preserved or how exactly they were regulated. In fact, it is quite obvious that the colonial administration did not define clearly the customary tributes that the chiefs and King of the Abron were allowed to collect. While trying to solve this issue, Deschamps noted it as the core of the problem. In the absence of any

written and defined rules administrators had to improvise over the question of customs, using their own judgment. As a solution, Deschamps suggested something that had been generally tried before but with no success—a codification of the Abron customs¹². This would determine, according to him, which customs were acceptable and which had to be eradicated. He even went so far as to suggest formulating the constitution of the Abron Kingdom. Deschamps realised that this was beyond the scope of the colonial administration, so instead he suggested that it be carried out by a newly established Council of Notables (*Conseil des notables*), different from the administrative council that already existed. Although he did not say so, this idea was probably also inspired by Tauxier's book. In the section about the Abron judicial system Tauxier quotes the discussion of Benquey of the institution of jury. Benquey claimed that such an institution did not exist in the Abron judicial system. The King was indeed surrounded by eminent advisors, but he could easily ignore their suggestions. In a footnote, Tauxier objects to this view, saying that this "Council of Notables", as he calls it, that always assists the King in trials did have an influence over the King. It is possible to assume that this was the basis of Deschamps' suggestion. This council would enable him to control tradition by using a "traditional" institution. The formulation of the Abron constitution was to be the council's first task. Its members had to define the judicial authority of the King and chiefs, as well as the restrictions over the sanctions the King may impose. This was to be done in writing so that it would be easy to establish when abuse of traditional authority began. When, according to the definitions of the council, such abuse indeed took place it was its duty to notify the chief concerned discretely, without publicly embarrassing him. Deschamps pointed out that it was essential that the rebuke came in the name of tradition. This traditional definition of the boundary between chiefs' authority and its abuse was, in his view, the answer to the indecisiveness of the local administrators whenever they suspected that the King or his chiefs of unjust behaviour. In such a case, they would have to consult the council and leave the decision to its members¹³.

Thus, it is clear that Deschamps took Tauxier's study very seriously. He read the book with the purpose of finding solutions to the problems he

12. Governor-General Roume (1902-1907) was the first to ask his administrators to compare and find commune points in African customary law that would be compatible with the basic principles of the "natural law" (*droit naturel*) in the purpose of codifying customary law. His successor, William Ponty, (1908-1914) pushed in the same direction. However, Ponty's successors realised the impracticability of collecting and comparing local customs. See ROBINSON (1992: 231-234). The British also attempted to codify customary law but faced an opposition of local administrators saying that such a codification would prevent the evolution of this law and thus would become an obstacle to civilisation. See SHADLE (1999).

13. ANS, 5G/31 (17).

faced following the crossing of the Abron King, and achieved this. Tauxier's book gave him, first of all, a "traditional" way around appointing the new King out of the former king's own family. It also provided him with a "traditional" institution with which he could control the "traditional" customs of the new King. However, in order to assert whether this ethnographic research did indeed influence the Vichy colonial policy, we should also examine the reaction of the Governor-General, who was the one to decide whether to implement Deschamps' suggestions.

"Methods that Are not Ours": Boisson's Response to Deschamps' Suggestions

When Deschamps formulated his ideas in a letter to the Governor-General Pierre Boisson he probably suspected that the latter might disapprove, so he tried to allay what he thought would be Boisson's main concern about the Council of Notables. He admitted that establishing this council would constitute a form of indirect rule different than the one usually practiced in the region of *Basse-Côte* (the southern part of Côte-d'Ivoire). However, he noted, this form of rule had been successfully applied in the Empire of the Mossi. Furthermore, he emphasised that the Abron were sensitive to the example of indirect rule practiced by the British over the Ashanti across the border.

As he predicted, Boisson was not particularly enthusiastic. In responding to Deschamps' proposals he warned against the use of "methods that are not ours" and reminded the Governor that the indirect administration in the neighbouring British colonies did not guarantee the loyalty of either the chiefs or the local populations. Boisson agreed in principle to the idea of a council of notables but objected to giving it an official name and stressed that in no way was it to replace the administrative council. He was also concerned that customs recognised by the suggested new council, in spite of them being contrary to the principles of French law, might subsequently become official. Boisson believed that the best way to maintain close contact with the chiefs was to administratively control them. If the chiefs continued to feel that they were being left alone, the abuse of their authority was bound to persist, because customs for a superior chief represented the major part of his income. Boisson concluded that this delicate problem would not be fully solved until the chiefs are persuaded to renounce these customs, which were, according to him, opposed to French perceptions and might cause discontent among the "masses"¹⁴.

Boisson's response expressed a notion that dominated French colonial policy towards chiefs well before Vichy — that the best way to control Africans was to be in constant contact with them. Chiefs were to be used

14. ANS, 5G/31 (17), 25 August, 1942.

as auxiliaries, as Governor-General Van Vollenhoven put it in 1917, but they were in no way to substitute for the *commandant de cercle*. The view that chiefs had to be closely supervised and guided by the local administrators who should try to be in direct contact with the population persisted after the negative attitude toward them slightly changed. However, this was no easy task. The main obstacle to keeping close contact with Africans was the absence of any incentive to learn local languages due to the high rotation of administrators¹⁵. By the time an administrator would learn an African language he was transferred to a place in which he was unable to use it. In fact, until the outbreak of World War II few colonial administrators spoke any African language. During this period the administration did little to change this situation (Cohen 1971: 126-127).

The first serious attempt to tackle this issue was made in 1938 by George Mandel, Minister of the Colonies. He issued a decree requiring administrators to remain in the same post for five consecutive years. This decree, however, was hardly implemented as it was annulled by the Vichy regime (*ibid.*: 126), probably because it wished to keep the option of transferring administrators whenever it chose. Mandel also proposed a monthly raise of 5 000 francs (about 10% of the salary) to every administrator who was familiar with the language spoken in his territory (*ibid.*: 127). The Vichy colonial administration did try to implement this idea. However, it encountered difficulties while trying to find two officials to judge who deserved this bonus: the only two Europeans knowledgeable enough in African languages were also the only two candidates for the bonus¹⁶.

In spite of these difficulties, Boisson firmly believed that vesting too much power in the hands of a "traditional" African institution was dangerous. He was convinced that Deschamps' ideas were not compatible with the French way of governing colonial populations. Neither the sensitivity of the Abron to the way their people was ruled over the border nor their "traditional" customs were able to overturn Boisson's rejection of most of Deschamps' proposals.

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The 1942 crossing of the Abron King from the French-controlled Côte-d'Ivoire to the British-ruled Gold Coast was a traumatic event for the Vichy colonial administration. It resulted in a set of policy proposals promoted by one colonial administrator who read one ethnographic study. In spite of

15. For example, between 1929-1933, five governors ruled Côte-d'Ivoire. The *commandants des cercles* also served short periods in one place, some even less than a year. One reason for this high rotation was the wish of the Ministry of the Colonies to prevent administrators from becoming too independent. See COHEN (1971: 124-126).

16. ANSOM, Affaires Économiques, Cartons 86, dossier 4, 12 Nov. 1940.

the development of colonial ethnography after World War I and its apparent influence over the French colonial policy towards chiefs, the effect of ethnographic research over colonial policy has been limited. William Cohen claims that the colonial administration did not encourage its members to conduct ethnographic research in the inter-war period and did not formulate its policy according to such research. Deschamps was, then, one of the few exceptions to this rule. Due to his personal interest in ethnography and linguistics he was convinced that understanding the customs, history, and languages of African populations was crucial in formulating colonial policy.

What then can we then learn from this case about the impact ethnographic studies might have had on French colonial policy? At first sight it appears that ethnographic research could have influenced and even shaped colonial policy. If we take a closer look, however, it seems that it only had an effect on administrators who were themselves interested in ethnography and considered it an important factor in the decision-making process. Deschamps was such an administrator, but he was a rare example. The colonial administration, in general, did little to encourage the administrators to study the societies in which they were serving. Sometimes administrators were even forbidden to do ethnographic research. Delavignette complained in a critical article in 1931 that the administrators had lost contact with the indigenous populations and had failed to research the societies in which they were working. He remarked that missionaries and occasional travellers were contributing far more to the understanding of the local societies while “the administrators live on the fruits of old works” (Cohen 1971: 127).

This attitude is well reflected in Boisson’s reaction to Deschamps’ report. The Governor-General was particularly deterred by the idea of handing control over chiefs’ customs to an African institution. Giving Africans the power to decide which traditional customs were acceptable and which were not seemed to Boisson extremely dangerous. This was as far as he was concerned, “indirect rule” in the broader sense of the term, as practiced by the British, and he did not believe in it. Boisson wanted the chiefs to be supervised solely by the French local administration despite the many obstacles that hindered such control. It is not clear whether he was aware of the source of Deschamps ideas; as Deschamps did not mention this in his report to Boisson we can assume that he at least did not suspect that Boisson would view Tauxier’s research as obligating in any way. Deschamps was probably aware that not everyone shares his regard for ethnographic knowledge. This case study, thus, reflects the potential influence of ethnographic research, as well as its limits.

When the Vichy period in AOF was over and De-Gaulle took over the federation the new colonial administration re-appointed Kwadwo Agyeman in place of the Vichy-appointed king. When the King died in 1953 his son was named his successor. This was, in fact, the first time since the

French colonial conquest that the King of the Abron was not appointed in line with the customs of the Abron¹⁷. The motive that stood behind this decision is clear. The King's son, who had contributed greatly to the propaganda effort of the British and Gaullist, had to be rewarded for his actions, whatever his real motives were. This decision also proves that political considerations were the primary factors that shaped French colonial policy. Ethnographic studies such as Tauxier's work on the Abron ways of life could have aroused interest among colonial administrators and may have even be used occasionally by an administrator who believed in ethnography, but whenever conclusions drawn from ethnographic studies contradicted political considerations these heavy tomes soon found themselves back on a shelf to gather dust.

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17. From the rule of the first king appointed by the French, Kwaku Agyeman (died 1896), all the kings hailed from the two dynasties alternately, except when Kwame Adingra inherited the reign from his father in 1953. See the dynastic list given in TERRAY (1995: 1035).

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ABSTRACT

One of the most consequential events of the Vichy period in French West Africa was the "defection" of the Abron King and a large entourage of court members from Côte-d'Ivoire to the British-ruled Gold Coast. This article uses this "affair" as a case study for a broader issue—the relationship between ethnographic research and French colonial policy. According to the testimony of the Governor of Côte-d'Ivoire at that time, Hubert Deschamps, he was inspired to offer suggestions as to how to act following the 'defection' after reading an ethnographic study written twenty years earlier. The comparison between his suggestions and the study in question allows us to examine in detail the way ethnography could influence colonial policy. At the same time, the reaction of Governor-General Pierre Boisson to Deschamps' ideas underscores the fact that although such ethnographic studies had a potential influence, especially over Governors who were attracted to this science, they also had their limits when in conflict with political considerations.

RÉSUMÉ

L'usage de l'ethnographie par l'administration coloniale française : à propos de la « désertion » du souverain abron et de ses conséquences. — L'un des effets majeurs de l'ère de Vichy sur l'Afrique occidentale française fut la fuite de Côte-d'Ivoire du souverain abron ainsi que d'une partie de sa cour vers la Gold Coast alors sous domination britannique. Cet article utilise cette affaire comme une étude de cas servant à rendre compte d'une question plus large, celle du rapport existant entre l'ethnographie et la politique coloniale française. Selon le témoignage du Gouverneur de Côte-d'Ivoire de l'époque Hubert Deschamps, ce dernier fut amené à faire des propositions susceptibles de résoudre cette affaire après avoir consulté une étude ethnographique réalisée vingt ans auparavant. La comparaison établie entre les

propositions de Hubert Deschamps et l'étude en question permet d'évaluer l'impact de l'ethnographie sur la politique coloniale. Parallèlement, la prise en compte de la réaction du Gouverneur général Boisson, face à la position de Deschamps, relativise le poids des textes ethnographiques dans la prise de décision proprement politique.

Keywords/mots-clés: Abron, Côte d'Ivoire, French West Africa, Vichy, African chiefs, colonial policy, customary, ethnography/*Abron, Côte-d'Ivoire, Afrique occidentale française, Vichy, chefs africains, politique coloniale, droit coutumier, ethnographie.*