Peasants of the Empire. Rural Schools and the Colonial Imaginary in 1930s French West Africa

Harry Gamble

Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/15630>
DOI : 10.4000/etudesafriaines.15630
ISSN : 1777-5353

Éditeur

Éditions de l'EHESS

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 15 septembre 2009
Pagination : 775-804
ISBN : 978-2-7132-2208-5
ISSN : 0008-0055

Référence électronique

Harry Gamble, « Peasants of the Empire. Rural Schools and the Colonial Imaginary in 1930s French West Africa », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [En ligne], 195 | 2009, mis en ligne le 01 janvier 2011, consulté le 01 mai 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/15630> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesafriaines.15630

Cet article est disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

http://www.cairn.info/article.php?ID_REVUE=CEA&ID_NUMPUBLIE=CEA_195&ID_ARTICLE=CEA_195_0775

Peasants of the Empire. Rural Schools and the Colonial Imaginary in 1930s French West Africa

par Harry GAMBLE

| Editions de l'EHESS | *Cahiers d'études africaines*

2009/3 - n° 195

ISSN 0008-0055 | ISBN 9782713222085 | pages 775 à 804

Pour citer cet article :

— Gamble H., Peasants of the Empire. Rural Schools and the Colonial Imaginary in 1930s French West Africa, *Cahiers d'études africaines* 2009/ 3, n° 195, p. 775-804.

Distribution électronique Cairn pour Editions de l'EHESS .

© Editions de l'EHESS . Tous droits réservés pour tous pays.

La reproduction ou représentation de cet article, notamment par photocopie, n'est autorisée que dans les limites des conditions générales d'utilisation du site ou, le cas échéant, des conditions générales de la licence souscrite par votre établissement. Toute autre reproduction ou représentation, en tout ou partie, sous quelque forme et de quelque manière que ce soit, est interdite sauf accord préalable et écrit de l'éditeur, en dehors des cas prévus par la législation en vigueur en France. Il est précisé que son stockage dans une base de données est également interdit.

Harry Gamble

Peasants of the Empire

Rural Schools and the Colonial Imaginary in 1930s French West Africa

By the early 1930s, French colonial authorities were eager to demonstrate the progress they had made in the burgeoning field of “native education”. Authorities across the empire sought to show that they no longer provided metropolitan-style education and that the children of the empire were now being educated according to their own needs and particular aptitudes. The move away from metropolitan educational norms had intensified after the First World War, as part of a broader shift away from policies of assimilation. But if French officials were convinced that colonial policy had been put on a new footing, many foreign observers were less swayed. British observers, in particular, still found evidence of France’s penchant for policies assimilation (Dimier 2004a). The schools of the French empire continued to be cited as evidence of France’s desire to make Frenchmen out of natives (Mumford 1970). By hosting an Intercolonial Conference on Education in the Colonies and Overseas Territories—one of the more important conferences to be organized as part of the Colonial Exposition of 1931—French authorities hoped to present a very different picture¹. The conference was to showcase the development of new types of native education that corresponded to colonial—and not metropolitan—settings.

Delivering one of the opening speeches, Paul Crouzet, the Colonial Ministry’s point man on educational matters, admitted that “the myth persists that all the colored students continue to read in their school book and repeat: the Gauls, our ancestors [...]” (Caf 1932: 289)². Given the persistence of this stereotype, Crouzet noted that one of the conference’s central objectives was to present the multiform reality of education in the French empire:

1. Many of the papers presented at this gathering can be found in CONFÉRENCE AFRICAINE FRANÇAISE (CAF) (1932).
2. Unless otherwise indicated all translations are the author’s.

"It is important that we show once and for all that next to the metropolitan school systems, there are, overseas, dozens of other school systems, which, in each of the colonies, were specially constructed for the needs of the populations that have been entrusted to us. Studying the adaptation of each of these systems to its milieu is an indispensable task [...] because this adaptation is precisely the main difficulty with colonial education" (*ibid.*).

By the interwar period, each of the overseas administrations had constructed its own native school system, complete with its own regulations, curricula, and diplomas. Local administrations developed larger, better-staffed education departments that sought to consolidate their independence from the metropolitan Ministry of Public Instruction³. As the colonies worked to develop new forms of education that were "adapted" to local contexts, incompatibilities proliferated—not only among the various native school systems of the French empire, but also between "native schools" and "metropolitan schools". During the interwar period, the Colonial Ministry maintained only a skeletal education office, which, in 1931, was headed up by Crouzet⁴.

Although it meddled only intermittently in local educational policies, the Colonial Ministry was interested in finding and promoting general principles that could guide the development of education across the empire. By 1931, "adapted education" was a principle on which French colonial authorities could agree. At the Intercolonial Conference on Education in the Colonies, even the delegate from the centralized Ministry of Public Instruction (Henri Gautier) accepted that assimilationist education was inappropriate for natives. Gautier (Caf 1932: 291) declared that:

"There is one principle, in any case, on which I think we can all already agree: it's that France does not ask for us to produce a series of fake Europeans (*contrefaçons d'Européens*). She needs, to serve her and love her, human beings who have not been stripped of their own nature, and who come to her language, to her thought, and to her genius, less by negating themselves than by clarifying their own identity [*en se dégageant*]"⁵.

But if French officials could agree on the principle of adapted education, translating this principle into specific educational policies proved to be a complicated and controversial endeavor that was hardly complete in 1931. By bringing colonial education officials together in Paris, the Intercolonial Conference on Education in the Colonies proposed to compare and contrast the ongoing efforts of the various colonies and overseas territories.

3. The "old colonies" of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion, French Guyana, the Indian comptoirs, and Senegal's Four Communes were exceptions to this general trend. In these locales, the metropolitan Ministry of Public Instruction remained more involved and metropolitan-style education tended to remain the norm.
4. Crouzet's official title was *inspecteur-conseil de l'Instruction publique au ministère des Colonies*. Having been seconded by the Ministry of Public Instruction, Crouzet also had the title of *inspecteur de l'Académie de Paris*.
5. Gautier was "chef de cabinet" of the Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts.

Delegates from many parts of the empire could boast of important reforms that signaled bold new conceptions of “native education”. This was certainly true when it came to Indochina, where a string of reforms had produced a new Franco-Vietnamese school system for native children in Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin. First established in 1917-1918, this school system was significantly revised in 1924 and 1926, as officials struggled to agree on the contours and content of native education. If the new school system was to navigate a careful course between the preservation of tradition and a certain modernization, the sheer number of reforms points to lingering uncertainties about what preservation and modernization meant in the context of French Indochina. But if there were still hesitations, the interwar trend clearly led farther and farther away from metropolitan-style schooling. With each round of reform, instruction in French and other Western academic subjects was further reduced to make added room for instruction in local languages and local subjects. At the same time, Franco-Vietnamese schools turned increasingly towards vocational training in agriculture and crafts. Gail Kelly has shown how fully schools came to promote pastoral, neo-traditionalist visions of “native life”; these representations were designed to carefully orient and restrict the ways in which young Indochinese imagined themselves and their future (Kelly 1975, 2000b, 2000c; Lebovics 1992: 110-121).

From the reports given at the Intercolonial Conference on Education in the Colonies it was clear that school systems across the empire were moving in similar directions⁶. But if most of France’s overseas possessions could claim significant progress since the First World War, efforts in French West Africa seemed to have stalled. In his survey of the federation’s schools, Andrew Davesne delivered what amounted to a broadside critique. As inspector of primary education at the Government General in Dakar, Davesne could speak with authority. He quoted extensively from the most recent set of reforms, which dated from 1924; but after noting that “all these recommendations are excellent”, he concluded that “the goal that they define is far from being reached” (Davesne 1932: 88)⁷. As far as Davesne was concerned, French West Africa had yet to develop a school system that was adapted to the needs of Africans and those of the colonial state. He noted that practical training in gardening and manual trades was still underdeveloped and that schools still maintained an “excessive” focus on academics. In Davesne’s words (1932: 86): “Teaching, despite the official recommendations, is theoretical, bookish, [and] fairly poorly adapted to the needs of the present time.” After issuing his sweeping indictment, Davesne proceeded

-
6. Language policy remained one area where there were large differences. If local languages came to be widely used in the schools of Indochina and Madagascar, for example, this was never true of the schools of French West Africa or Algeria.
 7. Davesne was also the author of a new series of school books written specifically for African students. Launched in 1931, Davesne’s “Mamedou and Bineta” series soon came to be widely used in schools across French West Africa.

to sketch out a series of reforms, which, he argued, would put the federation's schools on the right track.

Davesne was hardly the only critic of native education in French West Africa. Georges Hardy, the director of the *École coloniale* in Paris, echoed his assessment. Before taking over at the *École coloniale*, Hardy had headed up the education departments of AOF (1912-1919) and the Moroccan Protectorate (1920-1926). No French official could speak more authoritatively than Hardy on the subject of "native education". At the May 1931 session of the International Colonial Institute—held in Paris to coincide with the opening of the Colonial Exposition—Hardy reported on the state of education in all of France's African possessions⁸. He noted the general move towards localized education, which "tries to adapt itself exactly to the aptitudes, habits and needs of the milieu". Hardy (1931a: 334-335) summed up this adaptation process, noting:

"The limiting of vocabulary, the selection of examples and subjects for exercises, the systematic invocation of folklore, the place given to local history and geography, etc.—everything seeks to disorient [*dépayser*] as little as possible the child's mind, and it is assuredly this grand idea of adaptation that dominates the entire pedagogical movement in France's African colonies."

But if Hardy lauded the progress that had been made in Morocco and Madagascar, in particular, he found little to praise when it came to French West Africa. He observed that, since his own departure from Dakar in 1919, "a whole series of measures seemed to indicate a trend away from policies of adaptation and a return to principles of assimilation that we thought were out of date". Hardy went on to note, however, that it was more a case of "wavering principles" than of a "concerted reaction". If the development of adapted education had been interrupted, Hardy (1931a: 282) concluded his report more optimistically, noting that since the previous year, "a new inspiration has been driving education in AOF". If Hardy and Davesne felt free to issue such criticism, it was partly because the new governor general of AOF, Jules Brévié, was himself a well-known critic of the federation's school system.

Upon arriving in Dakar in 1930, Brévié had promptly indicated that he would be seeking new solutions to the problem of "native education". Albert Charton, who served as inspector general of education in AOF throughout Brévié's tenure, was equally committed to far-reaching reform. Together, Brévié and Charton sought to do nothing less than refound the federation's school system; as a result of their efforts, AOF would soon go from being a laggard to being a leader in the field of "native education". As I argue below, the education reforms that were conceived and implemented after

8. Founded in 1894, the Brussels-based organization promoted—through its meetings, commissioned reports, and publications—regular exchanges among the imperial powers. This particular session included a full discussion of "education for natives". See INSTITUT COLONIAL INTERNATIONAL (1931).

1930 were part of a broader effort to rethink “progress” in French West Africa. Through school reforms of the 1930s, colonial authorities worked to map out a “middle way” that would reconcile African tradition with a new colonial modernity.

Redefining Colonial Education in French West Africa

Jules Brévié had been a key participant in the reappraisal of French colonial policy that occurred at the end of World War One. In 1923 he had published an influential treatise on native policy that included a preface by Maurice Delafosse, France’s leading Africanist. As director of political affairs in Dakar during much of the First World War, Delafosse had been instrumental in bringing about new understandings of African societies and how they could be more effectively administered (Amselle & Sibeud 1998; Conklin 1997: 176-187). Brévié shared Delafosse’s concerns about the disintegration of African societies and the untoward consequences that this would have, both for Africans and for French colonial rule. In his book, Brévié sought to diagnose the process of “detribalization” so that it might be more effectively combated. He warned that new native policies were urgently needed and that, if these policies were not forthcoming, the colonies would soon be faced with hordes of *déracinés*, who would complicate the task of colonial rule. In diagnosing the mistakes that had been made in French West Africa, Brévié was especially critical of colonial schools and their effects on local populations.

Brévié’s fundamental criticism was that the colonial school system was almost entirely oriented towards the selection and training of elites, who, as a result of their education, moved away from traditional societies. Brévié declared that colonial schools were churning out too many “graduates”, many of whom would never find employment in the colonial administration or in French firms. Along with other colonial officials, Brévié worried that these products of the colonial school system were forming an embittered and dangerous group that could challenge French authority. Of former students who failed to find suitable employment, Brévié dismissively wrote: “They are the products of an excessively hasty assimilation. They are *déracinés* who have broken away from their milieu and who have been unable to establish themselves in ours, and who, suffering from this isolation, in which they do not have any moral support, any consolation, are destined to play these ridiculous or harmful roles” (Brévié 1923: 301).

He insisted that schools needed to stop creating these “unwholesome individuals”, who, separated from their natural communities, were destined to join the floating masses that gathered around urban centers (*ibid.*). To curb these dangers, Brévié argued for new restraints on elite education.

Indeed, Brévié argued that elite education should no longer be the administration’s primary focus. His book pointed to a more urgent problem that had scarcely been addressed: the education of the “African masses”.

Brévié contended that “individual” education, aimed at producing new African elites, had hardly contributed to the progress of the African masses. Worse, by producing “detribalized” elites, colonial schools had helped to undermine the very foundations of native societies. What was needed, Brévié stressed, were new forms of “collective education” that would target entire tribes. Brévié imagined that, by fully adapting themselves to local customs and belief systems, these forms of education could stabilize and carefully modernize traditional societies and thereby provide a solid foundation for the new colonial order (*ibid.*: 301-305)⁹.

When he took over as governor general of French West Africa, Brévié was all too aware of the sweeping school reforms that had been implemented elsewhere in the empire. After 1930, Brévié would introduce a battery of education reforms that would have a deep impact on education of all levels. But the first priority of the new governor general was to quickly invent and implement a new type of school for the African masses. Brévié (1930) could observe that, after several decades of French occupation, colonial schools had scarcely penetrated the African interior: in 1930, the colonial administration still operated a mere 335 schools, in a federation that covered an area eight times the size of metropolitan France and had a population close of to fourteen million. Only 41,000 children were enrolled in these “official schools”¹⁰. Brévié insisted that the very future of French West Africa depended on the development of “mass education” that could reach and transform rural communities across the federation. He made it abundantly clear, however, that mass education did not simply mean opening more schools of the existing variety. What was needed, Brévié argued, was a new type of “rural school”. Founded as of 1930, these schools were promoted by the Government General throughout the decade and until the end of the Second World War. Rural schools, and the specific type of education they provided, marked an entire generation of African students¹¹.

9. In the introduction to his book, Brévié (1923: xvi) noted: “Nous concluerons en indiquant un programme d’éducation collective [...] qui nous paraît susceptible d’arrêter dans chaque groupement, cette désagrégation des affinités ethniques sans lesquelles nous nous trouverons bientôt, dans toute l’Afrique Occidentale, en face d’une poussière d’individus qui, ne bénéficiant plus, dans leur formation morale, de la discipline de la famille et du clan, augmenteraient considérablement les difficultés déjà grandes de notre œuvre civilisatrice.”

10. These figures do not include private schools run by French religious orders, whose students numbered approximately 6,000. In 1932, the head of education in Mauritania wrote his governor to deplore the fact that the colony had only seven schools and a grand total of 439 students. The author also remarked that only 1.4% of the colony’s budget went to education. Report dated 17 March 1932, Centre des archives diplomatiques de Nantes, Fonds Dakar, 357. Although Mauritania lagged well behind other colonies, colonial education remained embryonic and woefully underfunded throughout the federation.

11. This major movement to reform colonial education has still only received cursory attention from scholars. The fullest account can be found in BOUCHE (1982: 276-286).

In his first annual address to his administration, Brévié (1930) laid out his vision of rural schools:

“This native school, which we must see one day in each group of villages, is the rural school, liberated from ambitious academic curricula, it’s a farm and a workshop, a dispensary and an experimental field [...] we need to concern ourselves with practical realities, with improving native life right on the spot. In order for natives to go to school, schools must first go to the natives”¹².

This early definition captured many of the features that would come to define rural schools in the 1930s: a sharply diminished focus on academics, an substantially increased emphasis on practical training in agriculture and manual trades, and a push to better integrate schools into the fabric of village communities. Brévié’s directives were amplified by the inspector general of education, Albert Charton. Charton did not mince words when he described the education that rural schools should deliver. In one of his first sets of instructions, he insisted: “No curricula that are too academic, no pompous lessons, no civic education, we are staying in the bush, in our village, the horizon stops there”¹³. The emphasis on limiting the horizons of African students was not entirely new. Since the founding of federation’s school system at the beginning of the century, officials had argued that colonial education needed to remain carefully circumscribed¹⁴. But as we will see, during the 1930s, these arguments were taken much farther as colonial authorities mapped out a more restrictive vision of “progress” and how it should be pursued in the African interior. In circular upon circular, Brévié and Charton made clear that rural schools were to chart a careful course between providing and limiting education. By offering only a truncated education, almost entirely oriented around local life and its improvement, rural schools were to scrupulously avoid producing *déracinés*. These new schools did not award any type of diploma, for diplomas indicated the possibility of further education, of becoming something other than a peasant, and this is exactly what colonial authorities now wished to discourage. After completing several years of summary schooling, students were to return to the land, where they would become colonizers of sorts, spreading techniques and ideas that would improve native life and bring villages more fully into the colonial economy.

During the early 1930s, Brévié and Charton pressured the various colonies to convert their “village schools”, of an older conception, into new

12. These new schools were referred to variously as “écoles rurales”, “écoles populaires” and “écoles rurales populaires”. Here they will simply be called rural schools.
13. Report entitled “L’Enseignement massif et l’école indigène”, 21 Octobre 1930, Archives nationales de la République du Sénégal (hereafter ANS), O 22/31.
14. On colonial schools prior to the 1930s, see BOUCHE (1968: 114-120, 1975, 1982: 272-276); GIFFORD & WEISKEL (1971); CONKLIN (1997: 75-86, 130-139); DÉSAMMAND (1983: chap. 4-6).

rural schools. No colony adopted these new guidelines with more alacrity than French Sudan. Frédéric Assomption, the seasoned director of education in French Sudan, had experimented with various kinds of adapted education during the 1920s. After 1930, he emerged as a key supporter of the Government General's plans to refound the colonial school system. In a circular to all the teachers in French Sudan, Assomption offered a succinct but telling description of the pedagogical approach that was to be used at rural schools. Each of the academic subjects—which he listed as morality, history, geography, science, and hygiene—was to be limited in scope, concentrating on the local, the familiar and the observable. Assomption recommended that lessons on morality touch on the following points: “Family, the village, France. Life in a society. The nourishing earth, the charm of rural life, its advantages. The farmer: the satisfaction of being useful, of producing. The good farmer: thrifty, provident, assiduous, tenacious, etc”¹⁵. Regarding history lessons, Assomption urged: “Teach the history of the village and the canton, exclusively through anecdotes. Three essential points. a) the village before the French arrived b) the village at the beginning of and during the French conquest c) the village under French rule” (*ibid.*). All of the subject matter for geography lessons was also to be found within a small radius, encompassing the village and its immediate environs. “Do not take up general subjects”, Assomption admonished. He added: “Keep to things that are visible and verifiable. The village, its location, its different quarters. The surrounding land and its features” (*ibid.*). Lessons on science and hygiene were to follow this same general pattern.

Agricultural training was a core component of the education provided at rural schools. From the beginning of the century, agricultural training had rarely been completely absent from colonial schools. But aside from the years of the First World War—when colonial schools were drawn into broader efforts to supply the metropole with agricultural products—such training had remained rather marginal. School gardens were often little more than neglected plots in which teachers and students alike took scant interest¹⁶. The official school programs of 1924 claimed that “school gardens exist at almost all schools during part of the year at least”. But if the 1924 programs encouraged schools to teach some basic agricultural skills, such training did not even figure in the weekly schedule that indicated how the thirty-hour school week was to be divided up¹⁷. The situation changed markedly after 1930, as rural schools came to include not only gardens, but also barnyards, fields and small plantations. School farms were supposed to be educational: they were to show schoolchildren and

15. Assomption's circular to “personnel enseignant du Soudan français”, n.d. (early 1930s), ANS O 226/31.

16. On agricultural education prior to 1930, see BOUCHE (1975: 628-631, 831-835, 1982: 272-276).

17. “Arrêté fixant l'organisation générale de l'enseignement en Afrique occidentale française”, 1 Mai 1924, *Journal officiel de l'AOF*, 10 Mai 1924, pp. 313, 320.

villagers the immediate advantages of new crops and improved farming techniques. From the beginning, however, the boundary between agricultural training and agricultural production proved tenuous; this was especially true in French Sudan, the pacesetter in the field of rural education. By 1933, this colony's schools had already put a combined total of 102 hectares under cultivation; by 1936, this figure had almost quadrupled, to 404 hectares. By then, schools in French Sudan had also come to possess a total of 159 oxen, 1,000 sheep, 600 goats, 1,500 chickens, 138 hogs, 250 rabbits, and 530 pairs of pigeons¹⁸. Throughout Brévié's tenure, the Government General held French Sudan up as a model that other colonies would do well to follow. To spur local authorities on, officials in Dakar published colony-by-colony figures that showed the state of agricultural production on school farms¹⁹. As these rankings suggest, success in rural education was increasingly measured in agricultural—and not academic—terms.

The proceeds of school farms provided another measure of success. Money made from the sale of school crops, produce and livestock went to *mutuelles scolaires*, or school-run savings associations²⁰. After taking in 25,000 francs in 1933, *mutuelles scolaires* in French Sudan increased their annual proceeds to 65,000 francs in 1936²¹. Colonial officials imagined that *mutuelles* would serve as “a school of work, solidarity, and providence”, and thus contribute to the moral and material progress of rural Africa²². By demonstrating the advantages of saving, consumption, and investment, these school-run associations were also meant to bring rural communities more fully into the colonial economy. If *mutuelles* returned some of their profits to students in the form of meals, clothing, and occasionally toolkits and plows, much of their revenue was funneled back into school budgets, where it was often used to expand and better equip school farms. Education officials hoped that, with the help of *mutuelles*, rural schools might become partially self-supporting. The Government General, and the colonies themselves, had never been inclined to spend large sums of money on education and, notwithstanding Brévié's new calls for “mass education”, the 1930s were no different²³. In publicizing its campaign to establish rural schools

18. “L'École rurale au Soudan”, *Bulletin d'information et de renseignements*, no. 121 (24 November 1936).

19. See, for example, the “Rapport statistique d'ensemble pour l'année scolaire 1934-1935”, *L'Éducation africaine*, no. 93 (January-March 1936): 63-67.

20. If plans to develop school *mutuelles* dated back to the First World War, the implementation of these plans had been rather haphazard. As of the early 1930s, *mutuelles* were promoted more systematically. On the early history of school *mutuelles*, see BOUCHE (1975: 835-839).

21. “L'École rurale au Soudan”, *op. cit.*

22. “Les Mutuelles scolaires”, *Bulletin d'information et de renseignements*, no. 96, 7 April 1936, p. 13.

23. If the percentage of total expenditures (local and federal budgets combined) devoted to education rose from 2.9 to 3.54 between 1927 and 1932, this did not mean that new sums of money were being channeled towards schools. Rather,

across AOF, the Government General made sure to note just how inexpensive these schools were to build and operate. But far from seeing these rustic schools as a Depression-era expedient, officials in Dakar contended that rural schools represented the way of the future.

If rural schools were quickly set up in French Sudan, they met strong resistance in coastal Senegal, Ivory Coast and Dahomey, where populations had grown accustomed to an earlier generation of colonial schools. In these areas the trimming of academic lessons and the addition of heavy doses of agricultural training were bitterly contested. Given the extent of local resistance, authorities in Senegal, Dahomey, and Ivory Coast were slower to implement the new directives. But Brévié and Charton kept pressuring these colonies to comply and, by the mid-1930s, they had begun to fall into line. In its report on the 1934-1935 school year, Charton's department described each colony's efforts to develop rural education. The section on Senegal read: "All the schools in the interior have become rural schools, equipped with gardens, fields, nurseries, draft animals, and some livestock. At many schools, students are learning to yoke oxen, horses and donkeys, and to use plows, seeders and harrows." Describing the situation in Dahomey, the report noted: "After overcoming some initial reticence, education in Dahomey has been clearly oriented towards agricultural activities; the results of this past year are most encouraging"²⁴. Officials in Dakar continued to criticize authorities in Ivory Coast for not doing enough to "ruralize" that colony's primary schools. In response to this mounting pressure, the local administration took a series of new measures that took effect in 1935-1936. It was established that, henceforth, rural schools would only provide three and a half hours of classroom instruction per day. The rest of the school day (two to three hours) would be spent performing manual tasks in artisanal workshops or, more often, on school farms. And whereas children had previously started school as early as age six, it was now decreed that they could not begin before age nine. Rural schools involved difficult agricultural work—clearing land, digging, plowing, planting, watering—that could not realistically be done by children younger than nine. With these reforms, the Government General could finally write that "practical, artisanal and agricultural education are being vigorously developed in Ivory Coast"²⁵.

it meant that the budgets for education were trimmed with more restraint than were other budgets. "L'Emprunt de l'AOF et l'enseignement", ANS, O, 146/31. Moreover, as this report indicates, when French West Africa secured a large loan from the metropole in 1932, only one half of one percent of the borrowed sum went towards education.

24. "Rapport statistique d'ensemble pour l'année scolaire 1934-1935", see also Brévié's letter to the governor of Dahomey, 3 March 1936, ANS, O 507/31.
25. Quotation from "L'École rurale en Côte-d'Ivoire", *Bulletin d'information et de renseignements*, no. 77, 27 September 1935, pp. 14-15. See also "L'Enseignement en Côte-d'Ivoire", *Bulletin d'information et de renseignements*, no. 207, 5 December 1938; "La Réforme scolaire de 1935 en Côte-d'Ivoire", *Bulletin d'information et de renseignements*, no. 223, 17 July 1939, pp. 366-367.

If the Government General had spearheaded the conversion of village schools into new “rural schools”, its efforts did not stop there. In their drive to set colonial education on a new course, Brévié and Charton also focused on regional schools. Located in large villages and small towns, regional schools had always been superior to village schools²⁶. Whereas the latter offered only the first few years of primary schooling, regional schools offered the full course of primary education, through the *cours moyen*. Since the beginning of the century, regional schools had played a central role in the training of the new African elite: students at these schools could often prepare for the primary school certificate examination, which opened up new career prospects and the possibility of further studies at the federation’s higher primary schools²⁷. With the onset of the Depression, Brévié’s administration moved to clamp down on the federation’s 72 regional schools, so that they would not turn out more graduates than the colonies could absorb. In a 1932 circular to the governors, Brévié warned: “If we are not careful, it is at regional schools that we run the risk of producing ‘*déracinés*’, unable to find their place among Africa’s new elites, but resistant to traditional native life, in which they appear as foreign bodies.” Of students whose education ended at a regional school, Brévié noted: “Most of these young people who fail to make the cut at school, become part of the floating masses of potential, importunate candidates for petty jobs. Proud of their useless knowledge, embittered by their early disappointments, they are incapable of readapting to their native milieu”²⁸. While recognizing that regional schools needed to maintain small competitive sections to train the required number of elites, Brévié now insisted that most students be funneled into new sections that would provide a more rudimentary education, oriented towards the African interior. General subjects that might transport students away from their local milieus were carefully trimmed back. At the same time, regional schools were soon equipped with workshops, barnyards, vegetable gardens, tree nurseries, fields and plantations so that students could receive practical training in farming and manual

26. When Governor General Joost van Vollenhoven visited a certain number of village schools in 1917, he was shocked by what he saw. Most were tumbledown, unhygienic structures that lacked everything in the way of educational materials. Most of the teachers at village schools were poorly trained “*moniteurs*”, who were often only semi-literate in French. van Vollenhoven concluded that village schools were hopeless and that, in the future, all schools should be designed according to the regional school model. van Vollenhoven’s “*Circulaire au sujet d’un plan d’action scolaire*”, 5 October 1917, *Journal officiel de l’AOF*, 6 October 1917.

27. A primary school certificate hardly guaranteed a spot in a higher primary school, since there was only one such school per colony. To attend these schools, candidates also had to successfully pass an entrance exam. The extremely “Malthusian” structure of the educational system in AOF ensured that only a diminishing trickle of students went on to higher primary schools and then to the professional schools located near Dakar.

28. Brévié’s circular to the governors of AOF, 30 March 1932, ANS, O 22/31.

trades. And whereas farms at understaffed and underfinanced rural schools usually remained relatively modest in size, farms at regional schools often expanded into large operations. With these reforms, colonial officials sought to ensure that regional schools would no longer be in the business of producing “*déracinés*”.

Les Paysans noirs, Agricultural Production and the Colonial Imaginary

These large-scale efforts to reform colonial education need to be situated within the context of the Great Depression. The economic crisis shined a light on the worsening plight of rural African societies: steep declines in the market prices of export crops added significantly to the hardships of rural communities that were already beaten down by heavy taxation and forced labor. To many colonial officials, the Depression years revealed an accelerating breakdown of societies that seemed to be losing their hold on rural populations. Officials were acutely aware of the quickening pace of migration, which brought growing numbers of Africans into the federation’s urban centers²⁹. Nowhere was this trend more pronounced than in Dakar, where the population—which had already swelled from 32,000 to 54,000 between 1921 and 1931—surged to 92,000 by 1936 (Hodgkin 1957: 67)³⁰. These trends alarmed French officials, who did not see how newcomers could be absorbed at a time when opportunities for formal employment were shrinking. With the combined effects of accelerating migration and widespread job layoffs, French West Africa faced—for the first time—the specter of significant urban unemployment. In this context, colonial authorities found new reasons to imagine that “true Africans” were peasants who remained firmly rooted in the African countryside. By preaching the virtues of rural life and “rootedness”, rural schools were to help combat the growing pull of towns.

The Depression also highlighted the problem of agricultural production in French West Africa. Making the colonies “produce” took on new urgency as the metropole and the empire pulled together to weather the economic crisis. As part of *le repli impérial*, the metropole and the empire came to form an even more heavily protected trading bloc; the colonies

29. On the Depression’s effects in rural Africa, see especially COQUERY-VIDROVITCH (1976: 386-424, 1990: 227-243).

30. Urbanization had always been most advanced in Senegal. By 1934 Senegal had ten towns of more than 5,000 inhabitants, including AOF’s two most populous towns: Dakar and Saint-Louis. By comparison, French Sudan had seven towns of more than 5,000; Guinea and Ivory Coast each had five; Niger had four; Dahomey had three; and Mauritania had none. Despite the growing currents of migration, there were still only four towns in AOF with populations in excess of 20,000: Dakar, Saint-Louis, Bamako and Porto-Novo. Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, *Bulletin d’information et de renseignements*, no. 32, 18 October 1934, pp. 16-17.

were summoned to provide the metropole with increased quantities of raw materials and agricultural exports³¹. Brévié's entire tenure as governor general was colored by the protracted economic crisis and by the new production demands that it placed on the West African colonies. Arriving in Dakar just as the depression was beginning to unfurl, Brévié (1930) roundly declared: "I want to tell you of my intention [...] to make production in general the linchpin of the policy of West Africa." If boosting and harnessing agricultural production had long been a priority of colonial authorities, results had remained disappointing.

In their efforts to introduce and promote export crops, colonial authorities had relied heavily on forced cultivation. In many areas, Africans were required to work in "*les champs du commandant*", which were devoted to export crops. In other cases, individual African farmers were forced to produce certain quantities of export crops, or face punishment through the *indigénat*. These practices intensified during the First World War, as French West Africa was called upon to contribute to the war effort by supplying larger quantities of export crops. At the end of the war, forced cultivation continued, as the imperative of wartime *ravitaillement* gave way to that of *la mise en valeur* (Roberts 1996: chap. 8; Conklin 1997: 214-235). However, by the end of the 1920s, efforts to compel African farmers to grow certain crops were coming under new scrutiny³². Efforts to spur agricultural exports had also focused on European-owned agricultural enterprises, plantations and forestry concessions. But as a result of the exploitative working conditions and wages that they proposed, these enterprises usually had difficulty attracting sufficient amounts of African labor. Rather than improving working conditions and raising wages so that they might attract free labor, these enterprises often looked to the colonial administration for help. If colonial authorities frequently agreed to round up laborers for these private ventures, this sort of coercive recruitment grew more problematic, especially after the International Labor Office drafted a 1930 treaty outlawing the use of forced labor in the colonies. Although France refused to sign the treaty until 1937, international opinion could no longer be ignored³³.

31. The empire became the metropole's most important trading partner just prior to the Depression; this interdependency only increased during the years that followed. The classic account of this Depression-era economic strategy is found in MARSEILLE (1984: chaps. 6-8).

32. During the 1920s, the Colonial Ministry sent more inspectors to report on these practices, which proved harder to justify in the face of international pressure to curtail the use of forced labor. In 1930, the Colonial Ministry issued a decree limiting the compulsory cultivation of export crops. Henceforth, such practices theoretically required pre-approval from the governor general; approval was to be granted only for the purposes of experimentation and education, CONKLIN (1997: 223-235).

33. On the forced recruitment of laborers for private firms, and the problems that this raised, see COOPER (1996: 31-43, 50-56), ROBERTS (1996: chap. 7), CONKLIN (1997: 235-245).

Efforts to make French West Africa “produce” took other directions as well: by the end of World War One, proposals for large-scale irrigation projects along the Niger River had begun to capture the imaginations of certain French officials. These projects, which gained broader support in the 1920s, called for stretches of the Niger River to be transformed into cotton and rice-growing basins that would serve as an economic engine for the entire federation. Undertaken as of 1925, irrigation projects began to siphon large sums of money from colonial budgets. With the official creation of the semi-autonomous Office du Niger in 1932, these irrigation schemes were pursued even more vigorously. Once lands were finally irrigated, farming families were recruited to live and work on tracts administered directly by the Office du Niger. But, once again, African labor proved elusive and the administration found itself in a familiar role, coercing farmers into moving to these new settlements³⁴. Large-scale irrigation schemes and the Office du Niger had never been above criticism, and, during the 1930s, soaring costs and elusive payoffs would lead to growing protests³⁵. However, Brévié’s administration continued to firmly support the Office du Niger, even though this meant diminished resources for other depression-era efforts to spur agricultural production. But even as the colonial administration made heavy investments in irrigation projects along the Niger River, it became increasingly attracted to another vision of agricultural production and modernization that was crystallizing around the figure of Robert Delavignette.

A colonial official, author and publicist, Delavignette sought to raise new interest in rural Africans and how they might be persuaded to produce for the colonial economy. In 1931, Delavignette published *Les Paysans noirs*—a book that won that year’s Grand Prize for Colonial Literature and had a powerful impact on colonial thinking³⁶. The title of Delavignette’s book was itself quite suggestive: at the time, French authorities tended to see rural Africans as “laborers” and not as “peasants”. In proposing the new label of “black peasants”, Delavignette sought to encourage a more positive view of rural Africans that would appeal to French sensibilities³⁷. Peasants had long occupied an important place in France’s self-understanding and this was particularly true during the troubled 1930s. In a nation buffeted by economic crisis and transformation, immigration and rural out-migration,

34. On irrigation schemes and the Office du Niger, see ROBERTS (1996: chap. 6 & 10), SCHREYGER (1984: chap. 1-3), CONKLIN (1997: 224-225), LABOURET (1931: 25-27).

35. Under the Popular Front, in particular, the Office du Niger would be directly called in to question. See COOPER (1996: 89-91), COQUERY-VIDROVITCH (1999: 158-162), ROBERTS (1996: 238-242).

36. COHEN (1971: 100-101) notes the deep impact that this book had on young colonial administrators. On Delavignette, see COHEN (1971: 100-104, 127, 134; 1977: intr.), GIRARDET (1972: 265-273), MOURALIS & PIRIOU (2003), DIMIER (2004b: 53-58).

37. Preface to the 1946 edition of *Les Paysans noirs*, DELAVIGNETTE (1946b: 10).

and social and political unrest, peasants served as iconic figures who evoked steadfastness, tradition, and authenticity. Peasants, and the rural and regional traditions that they incarnated, offered a symbolic refuge where an increasingly anxious nation could still find reassurance and harmony³⁸. With the interwar erosion of national confidence, many would turn away from the modernism and universalism of the *Belle Époque* and seek inspiration in a rural and regional past that now seemed as vital as it was endangered³⁹. But if rural and regional tropes provided something a refuge, they were also used to map out a future, where the “excesses” of modernization would be domesticated in a particularly French way. This was particularly evident in the 1937 Paris World’s Fair, where displays of rural and regional France pointed to the careful modernization of tradition⁴⁰. In promoting the category of “black peasants”, Delavignette sought to extend these important French tropes to a distinctly colonial context⁴¹.

In *Les Paysans noirs*, Delavignette offered a thinly disguised account of his own experiences and initiatives as a bush administrator in Upper Volta, between 1927 and 1931. Delavignette was shocked by prevailing approaches to agricultural *mise en valeur*, whose impact was especially stark in Upper Volta. Coercion was routinely used to make local populations produce cash crops such as cotton and peanuts for the colonial economy. More troubling still was the coercive recruitment of large numbers of laborers, who were regularly packed off to plantations and forestry concessions in Ivory Coast, or to railway construction projects outside of Upper Volta. Altogether, between 1920 and 1930, some 84,000 laborers were requisitioned to work in other colonies. And this figure does not include the laborers who were rounded up to work on projects within Upper Volta (Delavignette 1946a: 183). Delavignette worried that, by forcibly recruiting and exporting so many able-bodied men, colonial authorities were draining the lifeblood out of rural societies. In writing *Les Paysans noirs* he hoped to show that Upper Volta was capable of providing more than a steady flow of laborers; he described a new kind of rural development that would stimulate agricultural productivity on the spot, within existing communities.

In *Les Paysans noirs*, Delavignette relates the efforts of a commandant who worked to understand the underlying realities of his deeply unsettled district and to carefully to restore confidence in colonial authority. In his efforts to sow the seeds of a new prosperity, this commandant made it clear that he wanted to work through—and not against—the structures of local

38. This is how Anne-Marie THIESSE (1991: chap. 7) understands the broad-based surge of interest in regional and rural France. For two general accounts of France in the 1930s, see BERSTEIN (1993), WEBER (1994).

39. Such a turn in France’s artistic communities is captured in GOLAN (1995).

40. This point is convincingly made by PEER (1998).

41. On connections between visions of rural France and visions of the colonies, see DIMIER (2004b: 53-58), LEBOVICS (1992 : chap. 3).

peasant communities. If peanuts were a valuable export crop, peasants in this district were still reluctant to produce them for the colonial economy. Rejecting the usual expedient of force, this particular commandant sought to convince local peasants of the tangible advantages of peanut cultivation. These advantages became clearer when the commandant introduced a mechanized press (for the extraction of peanut oil) that made peanut cultivation more profitable. Thanks to the commandant's careful intervention, peanut harvests soon rose dramatically. But if these peasant villages now contributed more directly to the colonial economy, they also found a local prosperity that strengthened village life and fostered a climate of confidence. Delavignette's basic contention was that plans for *la mise en valeur* should preserve and build upon the extended peasant family. This, he argued, was "the solid and healthy foundation of French West Africa", whose disintegration would only produce "an anarchic crowd of individuals" (Delavignette 1931: 104).

If Delavignette had come to see peasant communities as the natural foundation of societies inhabiting the savannah, from Senegal to Niger, he did not think these communities could be preserved in their present state. Delavignette acknowledged that these communities and their traditions had been deeply disrupted by French colonialism and that there was no turning back. He declared that "nothing would be more illusory that such a return too the 'good old times'" (*ibid.*). The challenge was to help peasant communities find a new equilibrium so that they could continue to play a leading role in the new Africa. For Delavignette, finding and promoting this new equilibrium was the role of the colonial administration, and especially the commandants who lived in contact with local peasant societies. Delavignette (1931: 110-111) counselled: "Leave the family free to choose its land and its work traditions. Approve of the religious rites of the farm. Control the use of the seed and make sure that the experiment that is going to be carried out does not undermine traditional crops. Exercise this control through tours (*tournées*)."

Concerned with balancing preservation and modernization, Delavignette (1931) worked to promote what he called "l'Afrique du juste-milieu". He suggested that this Africa was intrinsically in keeping with the French temperament: "We French, who like the cultivated earth, who value a sense of balance and of divine moderation, we can only feel at home in such an Africa" (*ibid.*: 103).

During the early 1930s, such a vision of rural Africa and its development made deep inroads into the colonial establishment. Delavignette (1946a: 10) contended that "from 1932, in West Africa, Equatorial Africa, and in Cameroon, the doctrine of the African peasantry was established, around the respect and development of family farming". In that year, the Colonial Ministry sent a policy statement to Dakar summing up this new "doctrine":

"Black Africa is an ensemble of peasant societies. Give the black peasant new tools, more modern instruments of work, make his field bigger, open new and fertile land, give him the sense of prosperity, the taste for savings and foresight, the desire

for work which returns something, give value to his fields, improve his village and his diet, dig him wells, attach him to the soil that he lives on and which he knows as the nourishing Mother, bring him out of the era of hand cultivation to the age of plow cultivation, this is not an impossible enterprise; it is to produce a human work of education and balanced progress, to lead the black peasant to a new type of life"⁴².

If this peasantist vision crystallized during the Depression in French West Africa, similar visions were also being promoted in other parts of the French empire. Georges Hardy, the influential director of the *École coloniale*, stressed this convergence, when he declared, in 1932: "The word peasant has lately made its official entry into the colonial vocabulary. It is given a place of honor in governmental speeches. Some original and profound works such as *Les Paysans noirs* have taken this as their title; in all of our possessions, policies are being shaped which aim to reinforce or restore the peasantry"⁴³. This empire-wide priority had already been revealed at the International and Intercolonial Conference on Native Society—one of the more important conferences organized as part of the 1931 Colonial Exposition. Having presided over this gathering, Hardy summed up the conference's main conclusions, noting: "All the reports have concurred in their calls for, depending on the case, the establishment or the restoration of true peasantries, capable of providing native societies with the material well-being, the moral security and the stability that seem to be indispensable conditions for any progress" (Hardy 1931b: 609). As Hardy suggested, colonial officials had begun to focus on peasants and peasantries precisely because they were seen as stabilizing forces, around which a deep and gradual program of modernization might be organized. But if peasantries were now seen as essential foundations for safe and enduring progress, they were found to be everywhere deficient. In some parts of the empire "true peasantries" did not yet exist, while in other areas native peasantries were seen as archaic and disintegrating. In either case they were unable to progress on their own and needed the guidance of France, a country that was particularly well qualified in matters relating to peasants and peasantries.

Like Delavignette, Hardy argued that these visions were leading to a new appreciation of rural populations; but this was a rehabilitation of a rather limited kind. Describing the colonial establishment's newfound interest in "peasants", Hardy noted that "all these brown, black or yellow men, whom we saw as enslaved to the natural world, resigned, passive, given over to obscure and lazy chores, we now discover in them a deep force, an imperious attachment to the nourishing earth, an aptitude for great

42. "Note; Économie Générale de l'AOF", prepared by the ministry's services économiques and encolored in Albert Sarraut's correspondence to Brévié, 22 August 1932. Cited in COOPER (1996: 33-34).

43. From an article that HARDY published in *Outre-Mer* in 1932, cited in PIRIOU (2003: 185).

patience, and disdain is replaced by esteem" (*ibid.*). In arguing that most natives could be understood as "peasants", colonial authorities sought to promote an imagined closeness between the metropole and the empire. These were years when peasants loomed large in France's self-understanding; by extending peasantist tropes to the empire, colonial authorities sought to create symbolic bridges. Hardy captured this movement when he observed: "It's a kinship between us and them that is revealing itself, it's a family that is coming back together [...] for we too are peasants and proud of it. We know well that in these times of crisis our deepest vigor and the coherence of our history come from this" (*ibid.*).

But even as they stressed newfound affinities, Hardy and Delavignette sought to underscore fundamental differences. Determined to avoid anything that might signal a return towards discredited notions of assimilation, colonial officials emphasized that native peasantries would have to be defined and promoted within distinct colonial contexts. Delavignette's expression "*les paysans noirs*" captured these conflicting impulses, which led colonial officials to suggest a new closeness while also reasserting core differences. At the close of the International and Intercolonial Conference on Native Society, Hardy stressed that "the reports have also stated their opposition to any general formula that would simply equate native peasantries with our European types of peasantries. Here more than elsewhere, we must take into account local customs and respect, as far as possible, the framework of local tradition. [...] Solutions can only be local, and must vary from region to region and from ethnic group to ethnic group" (Hardy 1931b: 609).

Visions of "*paysans noirs*" and their progress within the colonial order were significant not only for what they included, but also for what they elided. If peasantist discourses suggested a new harmony and even a new "colonial humanism"—(Girardet 1972: chap. 9; Wilder 2005: part 2; Copin 2003)—realities in the African interior were another matter. During the early to mid-1930s, the colonial administration bore down harder than ever on rural communities: the combined pressures of the economic crisis, heavy taxes, and forced labor led to new levels of misery and migration. To migrants who escaped to towns, the countryside could seem like an increasingly forbidding place. Carefully crafted discourses about a placid and laborious *Afrique paysanne* and its gentle modernization were used to mask these more unseemly realities. Normative discourses about *l'Afrique paysanne* were also used to deflect attention away from other categories of Africans, whose place in the colonial order seemed more problematic. Frederick Cooper has convincingly shown how French officials refused to imagine that Africans could establish stable and productive lives as part of an emerging African working class. Instead of seeing "workers", whose working lives could be understood and organized according to European norms and standards, the colonial administration preferred to see temporary laborers, who would eventually return to their villages and their peasant

ways⁴⁴. In a similar vein, discourses about *l'Afrique paysanne* were used to challenge the position and legitimacy of the *évolués*. The colonial administration's descriptions of African peasants were calibrated so as to point up the deficiencies of *évolués*, who were increasingly portrayed as uprooted, inauthentic, and unreliable. If the administration expressed a new fondness for peasants it was also because, unlike both workers and *évolués*, they seemed incapable of making collective demands or staging collective protests. Colonial authorities could claim to speak on their behalf⁴⁵.

Rural Schools: from the Popular Front to the Second World War

Having worked to demonstrate and normalize the peasantist vocation of French West Africa, important colonial reformers like Brévié, Delavignette and Hardy found it easy to endorse the development of rural schools. Already in 1932, Brévié (1932) could assert with confidence that "Africa is a world of peasants; our primary schools must first and foremost be schools for peasants". Delavignette did not question the paring back of academic lessons or the addition of heavy doses of practical training in agriculture; for him, these were positive signs that proved that the administration was finally concerned with *l'Afrique paysanne* (Delavignette 1935a: 387-388; 1946a: 217-218). Delavignette noted approvingly that the rural school "does not award diplomas; it does not open up doors to professions. It is turned towards the land. It will be truthful to a particular land (pays); here a school of riverside communities; there a school of the savannah; elsewhere a school of the forest. It will express all of the rural and artisanal truth of this land. It will bring the entire village to school" (Delavignette 1935a: 387). Through descriptions like this one, Delavignette suggested that colonial schooling was finally reaching down to the most authentic and essential substratum, not so that it could be preserved in some fossilized form, but so that peasant societies could be guided towards a harmonious synthesis of African tradition and colonial modernity.

Intent on projecting harmonious visions of *l'Afrique paysanne* and its careful modernization, colonial officials closed their eyes to the many abuses that had sprung up around rural schools—from the gutting of the primary school curriculum to the imposition of long hours of heavy farm

44. See COOPER (1996: part 1). Cooper argues that during the Popular Front period the colonial administration briefly considered recognizing the category of urban African workers, before backing away from the full implications of this move. It was only in the years following World War Two that colonial authorities finally tried to normalize and better structure this category. On attitudes towards African laborers and "workers", see also Brévié's long letter to Colonial Minister Marius Moutet, 14 July 1936, Centre des archives d'outre-mer (hereafter CAOM), 17G, p. 255.

45. Pierre BOURDIEU (1977) has usefully pointed out how "peasants" generally function as a "classe objet", defined by and for others.

labor. Colonial officials continued to claim that rural schools were winning the support of local populations, but in reality little attention was paid to African opinion⁴⁶. Local opposition to rural schools was generally ignored or suppressed, at least until the Popular Front period (1936-1938)⁴⁷. Given the colonial administration's sustained propaganda in support of rural schools, it is not surprising that Marcel de Coppet, the Popular Front governor general, initially endorsed these schools. In his first formal address, he applauded Brévié's bold initiatives in the field of education, noting that "the results obtained in the last six years have been remarkable"⁴⁸. But by early 1938, de Coppet's views had begun to shift. As he set out on an extended tour of French Sudan at the beginning of 1938, de Coppet was determined to take a new look at rural schools and their putative accomplishments. During his visits to schools in French Sudan, de Coppet made some unsettling discoveries. He learned that, in many areas, local populations did their best to avoid rural schools, which they saw as new form of *corvée*. De Coppet also discovered that local officials routinely applied administrative pressure to ensure that schools had enough students. This situation had led to various abuses: in the village of Ké-Macina, de Coppet learned that a canton chief had begun a profitable business, exacting 250 francs from families who wanted to make sure their children would not be selected for school. De Coppet reported that the situation in Ké-Macina was far from unique⁴⁹. These discoveries caused de Coppet to lose faith in the entire rural school movement; upon returning to Dakar, he bluntly reported to members of his administration that "rural schools have not achieved their goal, namely, a mass education adapted to the native milieu and capable of improving living conditions". De Coppet insisted that "this education has scarcely won the approval of local populations, upon which its success depends; the great majority of students endure it, against the will of their families, whose consent was acquired by coercion". De Coppet added that this unappealing and physically arduous type of education had only strengthened students' determination to migrate to towns in search of office jobs.

46. As should be clear, I dispute Bouche's largely positive assessment of the rural school movement, see BOUCHE (1982: 276-284). She writes for example that "l'école rurale n'avait que des avantages: elle ne coupait pas l'enfant de son milieu, ou du moins juste assez pour lui inculquer [...] des habitudes d'hygiène et l'expérience de méthodes agricoles plus productives. Tirant une partie de ses ressources du travail des élèves, l'école rurale était peu coûteuse et, par conséquent, susceptible d'une expansion rapide" (*ibid.*: 282).

47. On the Popular Front period in AOF, see esp. CHAFER and SACKUR (1999), COHEN (1972), COOPER (1996: 73-109), and BERNARD-DUQUENET (1985).

48. Coppet, "Discours", Conseil de Gouvernement, December 1936, cited in *L'Éducation africaine*, no. 95, July-December 1936, pp. 219-220.

49. De Coppet to Laborde, who succeeded Charton as inspector general of education, April 1938, ANS O 45/31. De Coppet's directeur de cabinet also wrote reports on the schools visited during this tour. They are found in CAOM, 17G, 378.

He concluded: "I don't think I'm exaggerating when I write that rural schools [...] have failed and backfired. The matter needs to be completely rethought"⁵⁰.

Coming in 1938, when the Popular Front coalition was already deeply embattled, de Coppet's doubts did not lead to a broad rethinking of educational policy. With the end of the Popular Front moment, and de Coppet's final departure from Dakar in October of 1938, doubts about rural schools and their efficacy were quickly squelched in colonial circles. In March of 1939, Colonial Minister Georges Mandel wrote Pierre Boisson, the interim governor general of AOF:

"You have reported that opposition to rural schools has been voiced in certain regions. It is important to first stress that the academic institutions founded in French West Africa are firmly established; their principles and orientation cannot be put up for discussion'. Boisson quickly wrote back to reassure Mandel, noting: 'I will be careful to make sure that no doubts remain in this area'"⁵¹.

Indeed, at the end of the decade, the prospect of another European war was used to justify an even greater focus on agricultural training and production at schools across French West Africa⁵².

Far from being discredited during the Popular Front period, rural schools were exported to other parts of the French empire. Officials who had worked to found rural schools in French West Africa took their experiences with them as they took up new posts. Upon leaving Dakar in January of 1937, Albert Charton went on to become head of education at the Colonial Ministry, where he could influence policies across the empire. The Popular Front appointed Brévié as the new governor-general of Indochina. Once he had arrived in Hanoi, Brévié moved quickly to develop a network of rural schools for the peasants of Indochina⁵³. Pierre Boisson, who had served as secretary-general of Brévié's administration in Dakar, went on to become commissioner of Cameroon during the Popular Front period.

50. De Coppet to Laborde, April 1938, ANS, Série O, 45 (31).

51. Mandel to Boisson, 9 March 1939; Boisson to Mandel, 20 March 1939, ANS O 230/31.

52. In his directives to the governor generals, Mandel wrote: "Dans mes instructions concernant la mise en valeur, je vous ai prescrit, pour l'enseignement diffusé dans la masse, d'accentuer son caractère professionnel, pratique, agricole et artisanal. Je veux aujourd'hui préciser ces instructions et marquer la nécessité d'associer étroitement l'enseignement à la mise en valeur immédiate et en profondeur de notre domaine d'outre-mer." Mandel to governor generals of AOF, AEF, Madagascar, and Indochina, the commissioners of Togo and Cameroon, and the governor of New Caledonia, 18 November 1938, Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes, Fonds Dakar, p. 340.

53. An ordinance, dated 9 July 1938, called for the creation of a new type of "rural school" in Indochina. This ordinance was published in *Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine, Bulletin général de l'instruction publique*, no. 2, October 1938, pp. 19-23.

There, Boisson sought to promote, almost without modification, the educational policies that he had helped to develop in Dakar⁵⁴. Boisson would return to Dakar, in July of 1940, to help rally French West Africa to the Vichy Regime. After being named high commissioner of French Africa (essentially governor general of AOF), Boisson remained a strong supporter of the rural school movement. In the area of educational policy, continuities with the 1930s outweighed wartime innovations. Indeed, with their focus on *l'Afrique paysanne* and *le retour à la terre*, rural schools anticipated important aspects of the Vichy Regime's program for national and imperial renewal⁵⁵.

It was not until the Brazzaville Conference, in early 1944, that French authorities began to look for other solutions to the problem of education in French West Africa (Caf 1944: 43-44; Bouche 1982: 285-286). With the end of the war, and the move away from coercive recruitment, the deep unpopularity of rural schools was laid bare. Across the interior of French West Africa, many families withdrew their children from schools; the colonial administration faced the growing problem of "la désertion scolaire" without the old expedient of administrative pressure. It is hardly surprising that recruitment problems were especially acute in French Sudan, where the rural school movement had been most aggressively pursued (Capelle 1990: 46, 81-82). During the immediate postwar years, the rural school movement was officially repudiated, both by African politicians and by French reformers. But if times had unquestionably changed, many colonial officials expressed nostalgia for rural schools and the visions that underlay them⁵⁶. Under the early Fourth Republic, educational reform took a new turn, as the schools of French West Africa were progressively brought under the *tutelle* of the French Ministry of National Education (Capelle 1990). This postwar reform movement, which brought metropolitan education to AOF, needs to be understood, in part, as reaction against rural schools and their narrow vision of "peasants' progress".

54. Boisson's circulars nos. 63 and 167 to "les chefs de région", 27 March 1937 and 6 October 1937, CAOM, Commission Guernut, p. 52.

55. On the Vichy period in French West Africa, see esp. AKPO-VACHÉ (1996), GINIO (2006), and GAMBLE (2007). For a broader perspective, see CANTIER and JENNINGS (2004).

56. During his tour of French Africa at the dawn of the Fourth Republic, the Catholic intellectual Emmanuel MOUNIER (1948: 61-62) was surprised by how many colonial officials referred nostalgically to rural schools.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AGERON, C.-R.

1978 *France coloniale ou parti colonial?* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France).

AKPO-VACHÉ, C.

1996 *L'AOF et la Seconde Guerre mondiale (septembre 1939-octobre 1945)* (Paris: Karthala).

AMSELLE, J.-L. & SIBEUD, E. (eds.)

1998 *Maurice Delafosse: entre orientalisme et ethnographie: l'itinéraire d'un africaniste, 1870-1926* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose).

BARTHÉLÉMY, P.

2003 "La Formation des Africaines à l'École normale d'institutrices de l'AOF de 1938 à 1958. Instruction ou éducation?", *Cahiers d'Études africaines* XLIII (1-2), 169-170: 371-388.

2004 *Femmes, africaines et diplômées: une élite auxiliaire à l'époque coloniale. Sages-femmes et institutrices en Afrique occidentale française (1918-1957)*, Thèse de doctorat (Paris: Université Paris 7-Denis Diderot).

BERNARD-DUQUENET, N.

1985 *Le Sénégal et le Front Populaire* (Paris: L'Harmattan).

BERSTEIN, S.

1993 *La France des années 30* (Paris: Armand Colin).

BETTS, R.

2005 [1960] *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).

BOUCHE, D.

1968 "Autrefois, notre pays s'appelait la Gaulle... Remarques sur l'adaptation de l'enseignement au Sénégal de 1817 à 1960", *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, 29: 110-122.

1975 *L'enseignement dans les territoires de l'Afrique occidentale française de 1817 à 1920: Mission civilisatrice ou formation d'une élite?*, vol. 2 (Lille: Atelier de reproduction des Thèses).

1982 "L'École rurale en Afrique occidentale française de 1903 à 1956", *Études africaines offertes à Henri Brunschwig* (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS).

BOURDIEU, P.

1977 "Une Classe objet", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 17-18: 2-5.

BRÉVIÉ, J.

- 1923 *Islamisme contre naturisme au Soudan français: essai de psychologie politique coloniale* (Paris: Ernest Leroux).
- 1930 *Discours prononcé par M. J. Brévié, gouverneur général de l'AOF à l'ouverture de la session du conseil de gouvernement, décembre 1930* (Gorée: Imprimerie du gouvernement général de l'AOF).
- 1932 *Discours prononcé par M. J. Brévié, gouverneur général de l'AOF à l'ouverture de la session du conseil de gouvernement, novembre 1932* (Gorée: Imprimerie du gouvernement général de l'AOF).

CANTIER, J. & JENNINGS, E. (eds.)

- 2004 *L'Empire colonial sous Vichy* (Paris: Odile Jacob).

CAPELLE, J.

- 1990 *L'Éducation en Afrique noire à la veille des indépendances (1946-1958)* (Paris: Karthala & ACCT).

CHAFER, T. & SACKUR, A. (eds.)

- 1999 *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion* (New York: St. Martin's Press).

CHARTON, A.

- 1933 "Les Études indigènes à l'École William-Ponty", *Bulletin de l'enseignement de l'Afrique occidentale française* 84: 199.

COHEN, W. B.

- 1971 *Rulers of Empire: The French Colonial Service in Africa* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press).
- 1972 "The Colonial Policy of the Popular Front", *French Historical Studies* 7 (3): 368-393.
- 2003 "Robert Delavignette et les responsabilités de l'administrateur colonial", in B. MOURALIS & A. PIRIOU (dir.), *Robert Delavignette: savant et politique (1897-1976)* (Paris: Karthala): 125-135.

COHEN, W. B. (ed.)

- 1977 *Robert Delavignette on the French Empire: Selected Writings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).

CONFÉRENCE AFRICAINE FRANÇAISE (CAF)

- 1931 *Congrès international et intercolonial de la société indigène (5-10 octobre 1931)*, vol. 1 (Paris: Exposition coloniale internationale).
- 1932 *Congrès intercolonial de l'enseignement dans les colonies et les pays d'outre-mer. Paris, 25-27 septembre 1931. L'Adaptation de l'enseignement dans les colonies* (Paris: Henri Didier).
- 1944 *La Conférence africaine française: Brazzaville (30 janvier-8 février 1944)* (Alger: Commissariat aux Colonies).

CONKLIN, A. L.

- 1997 *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

COPIN, H.

- 2003 "Delavignette et l'émergence d'un humanisme colonial", in B. MOURALIS, & A. PIRIOU (dir.), *op. cit.*: 13-28.

COOPER, F.

- 1996 *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

COQUERY-VIDROVITCH, C.

- 1976 "L'Afrique coloniale française et la crise de 1930: Crise structurelle et genèse du sous-développement", *Revue française d'outre-mer* 63: 386-424.
- 1990 "La Colonisation française, 1931-1939", in J. THOBIE ET AL. (dir.), *Histoire de la France coloniale*, vol. 2, 1914-1990 (Paris: A. Colin): 211-308.
- 1999 "The Popular Front and the Colonial Question. French West Africa: An Example of Reformist Colonialism", in T. CHAFER & A. SACKUR (eds.), *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion* (New York: St. Martin's Press): 155-169.

DAVESNE, A.

- 1932 "Rapport sur l'Afrique occidentale française", in *Congrès intercolonial de l'enseignement dans les colonies et les pays d'outre-mer*. Paris, 25-27 septembre 1931, *L'Adaptation de l'enseignement dans les colonies* (Paris: Henri Didier): 85-106.

DELAVIGNETTE, R.

- 1931 "Notes sur l'Afrique du juste-milieu", *Outre-Mer: revue générale de la colonisation* 2: 103-119.
- 1935a "Pour les Paysans noirs, pour l'esprit africain", *Esprit* 4: 367-390.
- 1935b *Soudan-Paris-Bourgogne* (Paris: Grasset).
- 1946a *Service Africain* (Paris: Gallimard).
- 1946b [1931] *Les Paysans noirs* (Paris: Stock).

DÉSALMAND, P.

- 1983 *Histoire de l'éducation en Côte-d'Ivoire*, tome 1, *Des origines à la Conférence de Brazzaville* (Abidjan: Éditions CEDA).

DIMIER, V.

- 2004a *Le Gouvernement des colonies, regards croisés franco-britanniques* (Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles).
- 2004b "For a Republic 'Diverse and Indivisible'? France's Experience from the Colonial Past", *Contemporary European History* 13 (1): 45-66.

GAMBLE, H.

- 2007 "The National Revolution in French West Africa: *Dakar-Jeunes* and the Shaping of African Opinion", *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 10 (1-2): 85-103.

GENOVA, J. E.

- 2004 *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914-1956* (New York: Peter Lang).

GIFFORD, P. & WEISKEL, T. C.

- 1971 "African Education in a Colonial Context: French and British Styles", in P. GIFFORD & W. R. LOUIS (eds.), *France and Britain in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial Rule* (New Haven: Yale University Press): 663-711.

GINIO, R.

- 2006 *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).

GIRARDET, R.

- 1972 *L'Idée coloniale en France de 1871 à 1962* (Paris: La Table ronde).

GOLAN, R.

- 1995 *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars* (New Haven, CT-London: Yale University Press).

HARDY, G.

- 1917 *Une Conquête morale: l'enseignement en AOF* (Paris: A. Colin).
 1931a "L'Enseignement aux indigènes: possessions françaises d'Afrique", in Institut colonial international, *L'Enseignement aux indigènes: rapports préliminaires. XXI^e session de l'Institut colonial international*, Paris, 5-8 mai 1931 (Bruxelles: Établissements généraux d'imprimerie).
 1931b "Rapport général", in *Congrès international et intercolonial de la société indigène (5-10 octobre 1931)*, vol. 1 (Paris: Exposition coloniale internationale): 605-627.

HODGKIN, T.

- 1957 *Nationalism in Colonial Africa* (New York: New York University Press).

INSTITUT COLONIAL INTERNATIONAL

- 1931 *L'Enseignement aux indigènes: rapports préliminaires. XXI^e session de l'Institut colonial international*, Paris, 5-8 mai 1931 (Bruxelles: Établissements généraux d'imprimerie).

JOHNSON, G. W.

- 1971 *The Emergence of Black Politics in Senegal: The Struggle for Power in the Four Communes, 1900-1920* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
 1997 "The Rivalry between Diagne and Merlin for Political Mastery of French West Africa", in C. BECKER, S. MBAYE & I. THIOUB (dir.), *AOF, Réalités et héritages. Sociétés ouest-africaines et ordre colonial, 1895-1960*, vol. 1 (Dakar: Direction des Archives du Sénégal): 303-314.

KELLY, G. P.

- 1975 *Franco-Vietnamese Schools, 1918-1933*, Ph. D. thesis (Madison: University of Wisconsin,).
 2000a *French Colonial Education: Essays on Vietnam and West Africa* (New York: AMS Press).
 2000b [1978] "Colonial Schools in Vietnam: Policy and Practice", in G. P. KELLY, *French Colonial Education: Essays on Vietnam and West Africa* (New York: AMS Press): 3-25.
 2000c [1985] "Educational Reform and Re-reform: Politics and the State in Colonial Vietnam", in G. P. KELLY, *French Colonial Education: Essays on Vietnam and West Africa* (New York: AMS Press): 45-72.

LABOURET, H.

1931 "Le Paysannat indigène en Afrique-occidentale française", in *Congrès international et intercolonial de la société indigène* (5-10 octobre 1931), tome 1 (Paris: Exposition coloniale internationale de Paris): 18-29.

1941 *Paysans d'Afrique occidentale* (Paris: Gallimard).

LEBOVICS, H.

1992 *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press).

MANN, G.

2006 *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press).

MARSEILLE, J.

1984 *Empire colonial et capitalisme français: Histoire d'un divorce* (Paris: Albin Michel).

MICHEL, M.

2003 *Les Africains et la Grande Guerre: l'appel à l'Afrique, 1914-1918* (Paris: Karthala).

MOUNIER, E.

1948 *L'Éveil de l'Afrique noire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).

MOURALIS, B. & PIRIOU, A. (dir.)

2003 *Robert Delavignette: savant et politique (1897-1976)* (Paris: Karthala).

MUMFORD, W. B.

1970 [1937] *Africans Learn to be French: A Review of Educational Activities in the Seven Federated Colonies of French West Africa, Based upon a Tour of French West Africa and Algiers Undertaken in 1935* (New York: Negro Universities Press).

PEER, S.

1998 *France on Display: Peasants, Provincials, and Folklore in the 1937 Paris World's Fair* (Albany: State University of New York Press).

PIRIOU, A.

2003 "Les Enjeux d'une 'Afrique du juste-milieu'", in B. MOURALIS & A. PIRIOU, (dir.), *op. cit.*: 185-204.

ROBERTS, R.

1996 *Two Worlds of Cotton* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

SABATIER, P.

1977 *Educating a Colonial Elite: The William Ponty School and Its Graduates*, Ph. D. thesis (Chicago: University of Chicago).

SCHREYGER, E.

- 1984 *L'Office du Niger au Mali: la problématique d'une grande entreprise agricole dans la zone du Sahel* (Wiesbaden: Steiner).

SENGHOR, L. S.

- 1938 "La Résistance de la bourgeoisie sénégalaise à l'école rurale populaire", in *Congrès international de l'évolution culturelle des peuples coloniaux: rapports et compte rendu*. Paris, 26-28 septembre 1937 (Paris: Exposition internationale de Paris): 40-44.

STOLER, A. L.

- 2002 *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

THIESSE, A.-M.

- 1991 *Écrire la France: Le Mouvement régionaliste de langue française entre la Belle Époque et la Libération* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France).

WEBER, E.

- 1994 *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York-London: W. W. Norton).

WILDER, G.

- 2005 *The French Imperial Nation State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press).

ABSTRACT

During the Great Depression, authorities in French West Africa launched an ambitious program of educational reform centered around "rural schools". These new schools were part of a broader effort to rethink African societies and their development within the colonial order. Neither assimilationist nor associationist, rural schools were designed to train a new generation of African "peasants", who would embrace a dose of modernization while remaining deeply attached to their native soils. By promoting a new vision of *l'Afrique paysanne*, rural schools sought to limit the growth of urban populations and deflect attention from the demands of African workers and *évolués*.

RÉSUMÉ

Les paysans de l'empire : écoles rurales et imaginaire colonial en Afrique occidentale française dans les années 1930. — Pendant la grande crise économique, les autorités en Afrique occidentale française ont lancé un vaste programme de réforme éducative centré sur les « écoles rurales ». Ces nouvelles écoles faisaient partie d'un effort plus général pour repenser les sociétés africaines et leur développement au sein de l'ordre colonial. Ni assimilationnistes ni associationnistes, les écoles rurales avaient comme mission de former une nouvelle génération de « paysans » africains qui accepteraient une mesure de modernisation tout en restant profondément attachés à leurs terres.

En proposant une nouvelle vision de l'« Afrique paysanne », les écoles rurales ont cherché à limiter l'expansion des populations urbaines et à faire dévier l'attention des revendications des travailleurs africains et des « évolués ».

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: French West Africa, Jules Brévié, Robert Delavignette, Georges Hardy, agricultural production, colonial development, colonial education, great Depression, *mise en valeur*, *paysans noirs*, rural schools/*Afrique occidentale française*, Jules Brévié, Robert Delavignette, Georges Hardy, *production agricole*, *développement colonial*, *enseignement colonial*, *Grande Dépression*, *mise en valeur*, *paysans noirs*, *écoles rurales*.