Triangulating between Church, State, and Postcolony

Coopérants in Independent West Africa

*Triangulation entre Église, État et postcolonie : les coopérants dans l'Afrique de
l'Ouest indépendante*

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Coopérants in Independent West Africa*

Father Marguet left France on May 4, 1970 to spend twelve weeks in Franco-phone West Africa¹. He went to cities and small towns to visit French nationals teaching in West African Catholic schools. Though Father Marguet's trip occurred ten years after West African countries gained political independence, the number of French nationals teaching in the region had continued to increase. Known as *coopérants*, these recent high school and university graduates worked for the French government under the French development program called Cooperation.

Examining the role of *coopérants* in West Africa brings into focus both continuities and ruptures from the colonial to the independence period. It also illustrates how a range of actors deepened ties between France and West African countries at the very moment when many officials, both French and African, spoke of severing or loosening them. Recent work has begun to demonstrate the significance of Cooperation and *coopérants*. These studies, however, concentrate on the administrative apparatus of Cooperation and on the Maghreb more than on Subsaharan Africa, the latter of which in fact hosted more *coopérants* than any other region during Cooperation's tenure².

* I would like to thank Frederick Cooper, Elizabeth Foster, Sarah Griswold, Geoffrey Traugh, Kelly Duke Bryant, Jennifer Johnson, Megan Brown, Terrence Peterson, and Romy Sanchez for their helpful feedback. Special thanks also to Jean-François and Eloise Brière. This article is largely drawn from my PhD dissertation in History (KANTROWITZ 2015) based on research in Senegal, Benin, France, and Italy, where I consulted over a dozen archives, and conducted over sixty interviews with former students. Many of the archives I cite in this article are not official archives open to the public. In using the term postcolony, I gloss A. MBEMBE (2001), and with it I invoke his idea of multiple temporalities, of "multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias".

1. Dakar DNEC 3 S 27. Délégation catholique pour la Coopération (Service national). Rapport relatif au voyage en Afrique francophone du Père Marguet au sujet du Service national dans l'Enseignement catholique 4 mai-14 juillet 1970. Paris, 7 October 1970, p. 1.
2. For statistics on the number of *coopérants* in each region, see Figure II. On the Maghreb, see, for example, B. EL MELLOUKI RIFFI (1989), C. VISIER (2003), J.-R. HENRY & J.-C. VATIN (2012). On Cooperation from an administrative angle,

Coopérants and various Catholic organizations affiliated with the schools blurred the line between Church and state in West Africa—a multi-religious and largely Muslim region. *Coopérants* themselves were not necessarily practicing Catholics. However, most Cooperation-funded schools were Catholic. Father Marguet’s visit demonstrates how the French presence in early independence West Africa was increasingly entwined with the Church’s. Both secular accounts of African nation-building and an emphasis on French *laïcité* have partially obscured such Church-State linkages³. *Coopérants* demonstrate the primacy of French culture and language in the postcolony as part of the nexus between Church and State.

Scholars often look at Franco-African relations from an official, diplomatic—and therefore predominantly secular—angle. This article instead demonstrates that though these relations were shaped by French and African governments’ decisions, Franco-African relations were a product of everyday negotiations among *coopérants*, local teachers, clergy, and Catholic organizations as much as they were shaped by decisions of French and African governments⁴.

These everyday negotiations took place in a context where both French and African governments perceived a need for continued French involvement in education. Without formal political power in independent West Africa, French officials sought to maintain influence through French culture and language. The cultural landscape of newly independent West Africa was as uncertain as the political one: it was not clear whether Francophone ties would decrease as the region sought to strengthen affinities with an Arabophone world, especially in the case of Senegal. Schools were one of the main venues for the French government to exercise its influence.

African leaders, many of whom attended metropolitan or French-funded schools themselves, were often partial to the French educational system, and needed *coopérants* because they faced a dearth of locals who were adequately trained pedagogically while also possessing sufficient French language skills. Two African leaders with quite different relationships with France both received *coopérants* in their countries—Senegalese Leopold Senghor, *agrégé* in France, and Beninois Mathieu Kérékou, a Marxist who rejected much of French influence. Far from being a comprehensive

see P. CADENAT (1983), J. MEIMON (2005a, 2010: 53-65), R. BANÉGAS, R. MARCHAL & J. MEIMON (2007). Notable exceptions that look at education and other cultural aspects of Cooperation include A. BOURGI (1979), S. MESLI (2013), O. GOERG & M.-A. DE SUREMAIN (2014).

3. For more on the Church and French decolonization, see E. FOSTER and G. CHAMEDES (2015) and D. FONTAINE (forthcoming).
4. The other quotidian point of contact for *coopérants* was with students and their families. While these relations were mutually impactful on an individual level, *coopérants* were not directly accountable to these groups and thus they figured less into their overall strategies. On the student experience, see R. KANTROWITZ (2015).

consideration of all African leaders' viewpoints, their example nonetheless suggests that African leaders accepted *coopérants* for a diversity of reasons and helps explain why their presence endured.

This article examines how *coopérants* in Catholic schools fulfilled a range of roles in the postcolony: as the cultural currency of a newly technocratic French culture, as putative experts, as "good youth of value", as representatives of the Church, and as indispensable members of the educational system. *Coopérants*—whether Catholic or not—were constantly triangulating between the Church, the French state, and the postcolony. With administration thin on the ground, *coopérants*' daily interactions with West Africans were crucial. They—in concert with African officials and clergy—reconfigured Franco-African relations. Rooted in a deep history of Catholic missions, reinforced by mutual expediency for French and African officials alike, *coopérants*' prominence in West African education was the result of a concerted effort. Yet it gave rise to its own reality. *Coopérants* became central to the functioning of a particular cultural, religious, and educational landscape which they helped create: the continued prominence of French-style, French language education in independent West Africa.

The Origins of Cooperation

Cooperation was an old organization with a new name. After the Second World War, French officials attempted to reform their empire in order to save it. As part of these reform efforts, they created the Investment Fund for Economic and Social Development (FIDES) in 1946. It retained this name until 1959—one year before most West African countries became independent from France—when the government created the Ministry of Cooperation. FIDES funding for France's overseas territories went towards a range of infrastructural projects: from bridges to hospitals, from irrigation schemes to schools. For a variety of linguistic, cultural, and financial reasons, French officials chose French missionaries to run the majority of FIDES and Cooperation-funded schools.

Schools had long served as a way to imbue West Africans with French linguistic and cultural values. Yet the cultural stakes of education became particularly high with the trend towards universal education. No longer would education be the exclusive domain of elites; French officials aimed to educate all West African children of school age. Organizations like UNESCO championed this idea after the Second World War, and the international impetus of education for all continued in the postcolonial era. The students of these FIDES- and Cooperation-funded schools were part of a large generational shift where many more children received an education than in prior eras. The creation of FIDES was thus a turning point for the history of education in Francophone West Africa. Despite much excellent, relatively recent work on colonial-era models of French education in West Africa (Capelle

1990; Jézéquel 2002, 2003, 2005; Barthélémy 2010; Duke Bryant 2015), French-funded education in the region after independence remains understudied by scholars, especially historians⁵.

Greater numbers of children in schools required a correspondingly greater financial commitment from France. Indeed, French investment in education in West Africa increased after independence, accelerating a trend underway since the creation of FIDES. In Senegal, for example, the number of *coopérants* in education (the majority of which would have been teachers) went from 594 to 983 between 1961 and 1966⁶. During this same five years, educational personnel went from being 36% of the overall number of Cooperation personnel to 68% percent (See Figure I). Education across West Africa generally received a larger percentage of funding than the total combined spending on health, overall administration, and infrastructure. Further, education was the only sector to increase in this time period. In Senegal by 1976, there were 1,073 people working in education, out of a total of 1,373 *coopérants* in the country⁷.

In 1959, the same year FIDES changed names to Cooperation, the Debré law passed in the French National Assembly, allowing public funds to be allocated to Catholic schools (Bauberot 2004). Yet what was new in metropolitan France had long taken place in West Africa. Historians have already demonstrated that *laïcité* did not hold for France's empire but have only just begun to consider what this meant for the period after independence (Daughton 2008; Daughton & White 2012; Foster 2013). FIDES funding drastically increased the number of missionary-run schools and therefore the overall missionary presence. Already embedded in communities, long trusted with educating the local elite before state-run schools existed, the missions were a convenient choice. With missionary societies paying as much as half of the salaries and operating costs, they were financially attractive as well. Each school employed a mixture of European and African clergy and multinational, lay teaching staff.

The FIDES policy of funding missionary schools laid the religious, intellectual, and infrastructural groundwork for the network of *coopérants* and the continued presence of Catholic schools in West Africa after independence. Histories of the early independence period that emphasize secular, nationalist movements may miss the necessarily transnational religious networks that circulated within and beyond former French imperial boundaries as well as across newly established national ones.

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5. There are a few notable, manuscript-length exceptions to this temporal focus on the colonial period, including E. LANOUE's (2006) work on Catholic schools in Côte-d'Ivoire and P. BIANCHINI (2004).
 6. CADN Dakar Ambassade 403 Série ACT. Mission française d'aide et de coopération. Évolution des effectifs du personnel d'assistance technique du Sénégal.
 7. CADN MCAC Dakar 355. Fiche signalétique du Sénégal. Ministère de la Coopération. September 1976.

FIGURE I: EVOLUTION OF NUMBER OF IN TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PERSONNEL
IN SENEGAL⁸

Categories of Personnel	1.1.1961 Number of people	1.1.1961 % of total	1.1.1962 Number of people	1.1.1962 % of total	1.1.1964 Number of People	1.1.1964 % of Total	1.1.1966 Number of People	1.1.1966 % of Total
General Administration	139	8,5	85	6	39	2,5	24	1,5
Financial Services	102	6	84	6	77	5,5	54	3,5
Judiciary Services	135	8	99	7	53	4	36	2,5
Agricultural Services	85	5	99	4	53	4	69	5
Infrastructure	141	8,5	121	8,5	108	7,5	102	7
Post, Telegraph, Telephone	118	7	80	6	55	4	43	3
Health Services	367	16	119	8,5	90	6,5	89	6
Education	594	36	691	49,5	886	63	983	68
Miscellaneous	75	5	67	4,5	45	3	52	3,5
Total	1.656		1.400		1.410		1.452	
RECAPITULATION								
Administrative Services	376	22,5	268	19	169	12	114	7,5
Technical Services	344	20,5	255	18,5	220	15,5	214	15
Social Services	861	52	810	58	976	69,5	1 072	74
Miscellaneous	75	5	67	4,5	45	3	52	3,5
Total	1.656		1.400		1.410		1.452	

French Cultural Currency

In the aftermath of decolonization, French officials maintained their support of schools as a cornerstone of France's cultural policy. As formal sovereignty ceased to exist, cultural policy and other forms of soft power only grew in importance. Both French and African leaders found this domain

8. CADN Dakar Ambassade Série ACT 403. Mission française d'aide et de coopération. Évolution des effectifs du personnel d'assistance technique du Sénégal.

of influence to be more politically acceptable than other forms of assistance or intervention. It is worth keeping in mind that standing French armies in many West African countries and the creation of the CFA, the West African currency tied to the French Franc (and now tied to the Euro), were other ways France exercised influence, if not control. Yet, in examining cultural influence, another type of currency was at work besides the CFA, similarly pegged to French standards.

Coopérants became a prominent part of the *cultural* currency in the region—both as the medium of investment and the metric for measuring France’s cultural reach. France’s “fundamental preoccupation”, according to the Secretary of State in Charge of Foreign Affairs of Cooperation in 1966 writing to the French Ambassador in Dahomey, was to preserve its “cultural capital” in Africa⁹. In the context of the Cold War, officials hoped that Catholic schools would also help stymie Communism. Many French officials believed that primary education had degraded to a point where it was not certain whether French would prevail. The Secretary of State wrote “[t]he Africa that yesterday was French is not yet truly Francophone today”¹⁰. It was unclear whether West African countries would belong to a greater Francophone world, an Arabophone one, or something else entirely. For French officials it was imperative that West African schoolchildren learn in French.

Catholic schools and a host of Catholic organizations ensured that *coopérants* had a venue for exporting their cultural currency. The Catholic Delegation to Cooperation (DCC), founded in 1968, streamlined and formalized linkages between Cooperation, education, and the Church. The DCC facilitated the recruitment, training, and placement of *coopérants* in West African schools, attempting to standardize what was a more ad hoc process under FIDES. It was as part of this Catholic network that Father Marguet journeyed to West Africa. Upon his return to France, he lobbied Catholic officials to expand the role of the DCC, pending approval from the National Council of the French Episcopate¹¹. French officials, both Catholic and not, took their role as a given and were chiefly concerned with the quality of their involvement in West Africa. The DCC Secretary General Father Boissonnet firmly expressed this stance in declaring: “Cooperation is a fact. It is even a human necessity. But WHAT Cooperation do we need to carry out? The ‘why’ appears to be answered by everyone, albeit with different

9. CADN Cotonou Ambassade 14. Section titled “I. Les Caractères originaux de la politique française de coopération avec les États africains et malgache”, p. 1. Dahomey is present-day Benin.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 3. Section titled “Chapitre IV: Enseignement et Formation”.

11. Dakar DNEC 3 S 27. Délégation catholique pour la Coopération (Service national). Rapport relatif au voyage en Afrique francophone du Père Marguet au sujet du Service national dans l’Enseignement catholique 4 mai-14 juillet 1970. Paris, 7 October 1970, p. 6.

nuances. What is left is to specify the ‘how?’”¹². As cultural currency, then, *coopérants* were neither entirely certain of what cultural values they were to export, nor to what end.

French nationals teaching in West Africa were a heterogeneous group of older clergy, young seminary students, and *coopérants*—some of whom were born into the Catholic faith but were not necessarily observant. Regardless of their degree of adhesion to the Church, they were all in a delicate position in two respects: first, they were in majority Muslim or multi-religious countries, and second, they did not always agree with African clergy. This affected the day-to-day workings of the DCC. Father Marguet relayed the opinion of certain DCC officials, who were none too pleased with African clergy: “Certain posts are occupied by perfectly inefficient African priests. In these cases [the ministry of Cooperation] has no competent interlocutor to discuss problems of Cooperation and the DCC”¹³.

African clergy tended to be more conservative than many of the *coopérants*, seminary students or not, who ascribed to more liberal interpretations of Catholicism¹⁴. African and French clergy who were more senior (both in rank and age) often agreed more with each other than with the younger generation of seminary students and *coopérants*¹⁵. Though there were certainly nationality—and race-based fissures, here the differences were generational. *Coopérants* often found that the schools reflected what they viewed as a retrograde version of Catholicism. *Coopérants* came to West Africa to work in French Catholic schools at the very moment when the Church was reevaluating its role both within and outside of Europe.

“Very Technical Assistants”

A changed Church reflected a changed Europe and French officials sought to shape the new post-imperial order. When they re-baptized FIDES as Cooperation, they at once embraced the model of a mutual partnership and jettisoned all explicit reference to their own responsibility for economic and social development. Indicative of these changes was the fact that *coopérants* were also known as “technical assistants”, or, in the words of one Dahomean official, “very technical assistants”¹⁶. This nomenclature registered a recalibration in French official thinking. Culture, in effect, was reduced to a specialized ingredient the French could provide, rather than the expansive idea of *la mission civilisatrice* or even *mise en valeur*, which in previous

12. *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

15. *Ibid.*

16. CADN Cotonou Ambassade 14. “La Coopération internationale”, n.d. [1972?], p. 1.

eras of French colonialism motivated more comprehensive attempts to transform African society¹⁷.

French officials and organizations maintained their expertise, hosting symposia and conferences on a range of issues related to education in Africa. However, this was largely in a theoretical or academic context, or at the highest of ministerial levels. The impact of these circles on the daily lives of students and teachers—both French and African—is difficult to trace. The foot soldiers of Cooperation were the *coopérants* who taught. They were the opposite of experts. Somewhat akin to the American Peace Corps volunteers, they were young, generally recent graduates of high school, university, or seminary with little to no professional training¹⁸. Prior to departing for Africa, *coopérants* often had no exposure to the region, perhaps only having read about French West Africa or the French Union in textbooks as schoolchildren. Therefore, they were experts only insofar as they possessed French passports and spoke French as their native language. Their status as non-experts does not fit easily with existing studies that emphasize the role of experts in development projects¹⁹.

French Cooperation officials abandoned larger infrastructural projects from the colonial era not only because they were costly, but also because, unlike schools, French culture was not an essential ingredient. Presumably French officials were as good at building bridges as they were schools, but schools could be sustained with cost-effective, non-expert *coopérants* and would better ensure the future of French culture and language than bridges would. This suggests that despite the designation of *coopérants* as “technical assistants”, technical expertise itself was neither France’s unique post-independence niche nor priority. What France could uniquely offer was its language, culture and pedagogy.

Coopérants were a part of broad debates about France’s role and aims in West Africa. They helped repurpose colonial-era ideas of *la mission civilisatrice* and of economic and social development into concepts of “technical assistance” and “cultural cooperation” that were more palatable but no less central to Franco-African relations.

17. This is consistent with F. COOPER’s (1996) argument about labor and decolonization. A. CONKLIN (1997: 23) translates “*mise en valeur*” as “rational economic development”.

18. For a look at Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries, and other Americans who taught abroad, see J. ZIMMERMAN (2008: 22) who finds too, that teachers after the Second World War were more likely to consider their impact on local cultures. This puts the French postwar shift into a broader context.

19. Here I chiefly refer to T. MITCHELL (2002). However, the literature around experts and development continues to grow (outside of the discipline of history) with more recent works such as W. EASTERLY (2013).

"Good Youth of Value"

In a confidential telegram to Parisian officials in 1966, the French Ambassador to Senegal quoted French President Charles De Gaulle and the Prime Minister as saying that technical assistance "should not last ten years, or twenty years, but one hundred years because history has demonstrated that without a long impregnation, the influence of a country quickly disappears"²⁰. The Ambassador noted that De Gaulle had even drawn a historical parallel between technical assistance in the postcolony and the Roman legions in Gaul, stating that Roman influence had survived there because they had occupied the area for several centuries.

De Gaulle's military reference to the Roman legions was actually quite apt, since *coopérants* teaching in West African schools were often doing so to fulfill their military service. Officials' debates about these particular recruits demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to how motivations and spiritual background might correlate with locals' perceptions of Europeans in West Africa. French officials concluded that everyone, whether military, civilian, religious, or layperson, needed to embody a "real missionary spirit" before going to West Africa²¹. This significant blurring between religious and lay personnel proved to mirror the place of Catholic schools in West Africa itself. While deeply imbued with religious values and run by religious personnel, they also performed a civic function, and served a majority Muslim population in some regions.

DCC officials attempted to ensure that those *coopérants* chosen were Christian enough for the institutions awaiting them. Officials admitted that this was a challenge, noting that since "[t]he missions have not 'evolved' as fast as the mentality of the French youth, the absence of regular religious practice is a real obstacle to sending good youth of value to missions"²². If, as shown in the previous section, these *coopérants* were to be technical agents of French culture, then the DCC was the agency that helped monitor the content of such culture, screening potential *coopérants* for the right "spirit", providing them with a pre-orientation, and priming them for what to expect or think of their work in West Africa.

One subset *coopérants* known as VSNA, the French acronym for Volunteers for Active National Service, attracted special attention. The VSNA worked in schools, hospitals, and as engineers²³. They had access to military facilities in West Africa such as the hospital and the supermarket on the base,

20. CADN Dakar Ambassade 403 Série ACT. "Télégramme-Départ" Diffusion: Secret. Destinataire: Diplomatie - Paris, 5 July 1966.

21. CNAEF 63 CO 9. "Note d'information sur la délégation catholique de la coopération", n.d., p. 2.

22. CNAEF 63 CO 3/1. "La délégation catholique pour la Coopération (D.C.C.)". Abbé André Boissonnet, General Secretary, 8 May 1974, p. 6.

23. CNAEF 63 CO 3/1. "La délégation catholique pour la Coopération (D.C.C.)", Abbé André Boissonnet, General Secretary, 8 May 1974, pp. 1-2.

and were paid a lower salary than civilian *coopérants*²⁴. The care DCC officials took with the VSNA reveals a central ambivalence about how the motives of *coopérants* could affect their work in West Africa. The French Army Vicariate and the Catholic Committee of French Friendship in the World was initially in charge of this special category of *coopérant*. After 1968, the task of overseeing the VSNA fell to the DCC, which was partially created for this very purpose.

French officials had reservations about combining the two groups of people: those who came to fulfill their military service and those who volunteered for other reasons. In a 1966 meeting, officials asked, “Should we mix the civilians and the military? [This could be] dangerous, because the problems are very different ([in terms of] duration, spirit)”²⁵. The officials elaborated: “[There is] danger in mixing those who go out of generosity, and those who go to cut down on their military service. Should we send members of the military to teach in Catholic schools if they go because they cannot do anything else?”²⁶.

While it was certainly a concern that some taught in West Africa merely to avoid military service, this formulation oversimplified a divide between those who went for “pure” reasons and those who went for less pure ones. For many VSNA, Cooperation was a way to enhance their careers while also being of use to African countries. Jean-François Brière was a VSNA who worked as a teacher in Senegal starting in 1970. With a bachelor’s degree in history, he saw teaching as more useful, and more related to his studies, than serving in the military²⁷.

A 1969 survey found that almost half of the VSNA were in Senegal partially or entirely to avoid military service. Some of the other teachers and missionaries at schools in Senegal complained about the VSNA, saying they were not well trained and implying that they were disrespectful of older, more seasoned teachers²⁸. However, another report found that with time, the other teachers and staff viewed the VSNA in a more positive light. *Coopérants*—whether VSNA or not—were unfortunately sent back to France just as they were starting to learn enough to become really valuable to the schools they were serving²⁹. Indeed, educational officials in West Africa such as Mr. Clerici, in charge of teaching, complained to officials at the

24. Jean-François Brière, interview, Albany, NY, 3 June 2015.

25. CNAEF 63 CO 9. “Jeunes enseignants en mission. Compte-rendu de la Commission ‘Coordination, Statut, et Session’, Réunion du 9 février 1966, 14 h.,” 9 February 1966, p. 2.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Jean-François and Eloise Brière, interview, Albany, NY, 3 June 2015.

28. CADN Dakar Ambassade 608. “Questionnaire concernant les volontaires du Service national en service au Sénégal”, January 1969, p. 8.

29. Dakar DNEC 3 S 27. “Rapport relatif au voyage en Afrique francophone du Père Marguet au sujet du Service national dans l’Enseignement catholique, 4 May-14 July 1970”, [letter dated] 17 October 1970, p. 5.

ILLUSTRATION I: JEAN-FRANÇOIS BRIÈRE'S FRENCH ARMY "LIVRET INDIVIDUEL"³⁰

— 2 —

RENSEIGNEMENTS COMPLÉMENTAIRES

Marié le
à Mlle

Photographie

Signes particuliers

Couleur :
— des yeux :
— des cheveux :

Taille : 1.76

Signature du détenteur : *[Signature]*

Homme (1) de la classe
de recrutement de 1965

A RENNES le 15 mars 1970

(1) Appelé, engagé volontaire, ajourné, exempté, dispensé ou dépayé d'obligations militaires.

— 3 —

DÉCISIONS OU ACTES LIANT **BRIÈRE Jean François**

au service national ou modifiant, suspendant ou supprimant l'obligation de servir.

Mentionner, dans l'ordre chronologique, le séjour au centre de sélection, les décisions des conseils de révision et des commissions de réforme (aptitude au service national, sursis d'incorporation, dispense de service actif, dispense des obligations d'activité au service national, incorporation, réforme temporaire n° 1 ou n° 2, réforme définitive n° 1 ou n° 2), ainsi que les actes (engagements, rengagements, commissions, etc.) faisant l'homme au service ou les circonstances (deces, retraite, etc.) faisant cesser le service.

Chaque inscription doit être datée et porter la signature et le timbre de l'autorité qui l'a prescrite.

Les différentes périodes d'exercices seront également inscrites dans ce tableau, ainsi que les services effectués dans un corps de défense.

Arrêté accordé par le Conseil de Services de la classe 1965 au titre de l'article 83 de la loi du 31 Mars 1928.

RENNES le 15 Mars 1970

PAR DÉLÉGATION
Le Capitaine LERIDON
Chef de Service

[Signature]

Appelé le 10-09-1970
au Service de la Coopération au titre du Secrétariat d'Etat aux Affaires Étrangères chargé de la Coopération

A rejoint le 10-09-1970
Incorporé sous le n° 05732

services comptant du 01-09-1970

Affecté en qualité d'enseignant au SENEGAL
mis en route le 01-10-1970 par voie maritime

Débarqué le 05-10-1970 DAKAR

With permission from Jean-François Brière.

DCC that once VSNA finished their service, they abruptly left, disrupting the institution where they were placed³¹.

The authors of the 1969 survey thus demanded that more supplementary contracts be granted to the VSNA so that they could serve in the same school for a minimum of two years. However, these supplementary contracts cost more and were often not financially feasible³². When the VSNA learned they did not receive their supplementary contract, some officials reported that they made less of an effort in their work thereafter. They concluded that the VSNA were "in essence ephemeral and passing through"³³. This was not good for students, who were "tossed every year between different teachers and different methods"³⁴. Concern over the motives of VSNA and *coopérants*

30. Jean-François Brière's "livret individuel" shows that he deferred his military service from 1965 to 1970. It also details how he worked for Cooperation as a teacher in Senegal, departing by boat on 5 October 1970.

31. CNAEF 63 CO 9. Letter to Monsieur le Secrétaire général de la DCC, from Monsieur CLERICI chef du service de l'Enseignement et de la formation — secrétariat d'Etat aux affaires étrangères chargé de la coopération. 18 June 1971.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

33. CADN Dakar Ambassade 609. "L'Assistance technique française" 1972, p. 8.

34. *Ibid.*

makes sense in a context where their numbers were so significant: more went to West Africa than any other world region. (See Figure II). This numerical reality had to do with a set of factors: insufficient numbers of locally trained teachers, the perceived need for French-speaking teachers, a relatively “successful,” non-violent decolonization, and the long history of French missions and teachers in West African schools³⁵.

FIGURE II: NUMBERS OF TEACHERS, TECHNICIANS AND DOCTORS SENT BY THE DCC SINCE ITS CREATION IN JANUARY 1968 TO THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES AND FRENCH DEPARTMENTS AND OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973
French West Africa	286	292	280	293	281	182
Foreign regions:						
North Africa,						
Latin America, Near,	175	159	117	113	92	71
Middle and Far East						
French Departments	55	74	59	57	44	46
and Overseas Territories						
TOTAL of Coopérants	516	525	456	463	416	299
fulfilling their National	(147 S/ 85 R)	(87 S/ 91 R)	(109 S/ 90 R)	(82 S/ 75 R)	(42 S/ 47 R)	(43 S/ 24 R)
Service						
Spouses that obtained	21	32	75	94	72	63
a post through the DCC						
General TOTAL of personnel	537	557	531	557	489	362

S = Seminary students R = Clergy³⁶

Representatives of the Church

Coopérants were charged with representing the Church as well as France. French governmental and Catholic officials alike worried that a negative perception of the VSNA would reflect poorly on the missionaries and on Catholicism. One report from Senegal stated that when locals saw a white person, they assumed that this person was Christian. Hence, the reputations of the two were linked³⁷. Here the reputation went both ways: the French

35. On France's decolonization process in West Africa as “successful”, see T. CHAFER (2002).

36. CNAEF 63 CO 3/1 “Annexe 1, Effectifs en enseignants, techniciens ou médecins envoyés par la D.C.C. depuis sa création en Janvier 1968”, “La délégation catholique pour la Coopération (D.C.C.)”, p. 6. Abbé André Boissonnet, General Secretary. 8 May 1974.

37. Dakar DNEC 3 S 27. “Rapport relatif au voyage en Afrique francophone du Père Marguet au sujet du Service national dans l'Enseignement catholique 4 May-14 July 1970”, [letter dated] 17 October 1970, p. 8.

government wanted *coopérants* to represent France positively, while at the same time *coopérants* often had to contend with French missteps that preceded them.

Officials' reservations about the VSNA notwithstanding, they continued to be sent to West Africa in significant numbers. Indeed, in discussions about recruitment needs for the Catholic schools, the VSNA came up in a different light: officials needed a constantly rotating set of the VSNA to replenish and staff the schools. In the 1970s there were signs and rumors that the funds for the VSNA to serve as *coopérants* were to be reduced. Perhaps this is one reason why Father Marguet—whose trip to West Africa for twelve weeks in 1970 opened this article—was sent to examine the state of Cooperation and *coopérants*. After his trip, he and other French officials urged that the DCC be granted more authority in recruiting the VSNA as well as civilian *coopérants* should the numbers of the VSNA be reduced³⁸.

Sometimes the DCC received requests on behalf of individual schools for teachers qualified to teach specific subjects. In May 1969 for example, Father Georges Hounyeme, the National Director of Catholic Education in Dahomey, wrote to Father Boissonnet of the DCC to request teachers for specific subjects at several junior seminaries, middle schools, and high schools³⁹. At the end of his letter, Hounyeme implied that Boissonnet had gone over his head in initiating direct contact with these institutions. Hounyeme said that while this was the DCC's right, he preferred they went through him first, because he may have a better sense of the needs of individual schools⁴⁰. Thus the DCC both empowered local missionary groups and clergy while also at times superseding them.

The DCC's contact with *coopérants* often began before they arrived in West Africa. A DCC committee composed of about fifteen religious organizations trained the young teachers⁴¹. They designed a course for students in their last year of high school and for university students who were getting their bachelors degree. The goal was to better cater to the needs of missionary organizations who sought pedagogically and spiritually prepared teachers. The curriculum they offered covered catechism, information on missionaries, an introductory course on Africa, and another on pedagogy. The registration form for the course informed prospective teachers: "Africa has a need

38. Dakar DNEC 3 S 27. Délégation catholique pour la Coopération (Service national). Rapport relatif au voyage en Afrique francophone du Père Marguet au sujet du Service national dans l'Enseignement catholique 4 mai-14 juillet 1970. Paris, 7 October 1970, p. 6.

39. Junior seminaries, or *petits séminaires*, are for younger children, and are where aspiring priests went before attending seminary.

40. Cotonou Archêvêche. "Abbé Georges Hounyeme à Monsieur l'Abbé Boissonnet, Délégation catholique pour la Coopération", 14 May 1969.

41. CNAEF 63 CO 9. "Pre-DCC" letter from C.F.J.E. Comité pour la formation des jeunes enseignants pour l'Afrique, n.d [1966/7?].

for teachers, but especially for trained and qualified teachers, AN ACCELERATED TRAINING IS INDISPENSABLE”⁴².

Through these training courses in France, the DCC served a central role not only in coordinating and recruiting teachers, but also in facilitating transmission of certain ideas about Africa, Christianity, and teaching. European and African priests ran sessions organized by Interservice, one of the organizations that worked with the DCC⁴³. Thus the DCC and the Catholic organizations that were a part of it provided a platform for learning about Africa through a decidedly Catholic lens. In some courses, African priests taught about Africa and shaped this lens.

French officials considered those *coopérants* recruited via the DCC to be more committed to their jobs and to rural development than those recruited otherwise. In his report Father Marguet praised those who, in their spare time after school, ran sports clubs, adult literacy classes, and other activities. Yet officials in West Africa questioned the efficacy of such pre-departure training⁴⁴. Another report, written around 1972, asserted that having a week of intensive training “only brings fragmentary information without lengthy practice”⁴⁵. The authors suggested that these trainings should instead present the real problems that the VSNA would encounter depending on the country to which they were assigned⁴⁶. Still many *coopérants* received no pre-departure training at all, as was the case for Jean-François Brière⁴⁷.

Despite its training workshops and decision making role in France, the DCC had little to no presence on the ground in West Africa. Thus the coordination, from the ideological to the practical, largely ended on French soil. The individual schools were generally responsible for paying, housing, and providing for the teachers once they arrived⁴⁸. In the case of the VSNA in Senegal there was a Welcome Committee that offered training sessions. One such session held in Dakar for a week in 1968 consisted of a series of presentations by Senegalese administrators and teachers on history, geography, administrative organization, the constitution, educational problems, rural development, touristic sites, and health and hygiene in Senegal⁴⁹.

42. *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

43. CNAEF 63 CO 9. Interservice. Programme de la session de préparation au départ. Poissy, 19-25 August 1967.

44. Dakar DNEC 3 S 27. “Rapport relatif au voyage en Afrique francophone du Père Marguet au sujet du Service national dans l’Enseignement catholique 4 Mai-14 Juillet 1970”, [letter dated] 17 October 1970, p. 6.

45. CADN Dakar Ambassade 609. “Assistance technique française”, 1972, p. 7.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Jean-François Brière, interview, Albany, NY, 3 June 2015.

48. See, for example: Archévêché Cotonou. To Father Boissonnet from Father Superior Michel Durif, Director of the *Petit Séminaire* of Parakou, Dahomey “Demande de personnel pour la rentrée scolaire de septembre 1973”, 10 November 1972.

49. CADN Dakar Ambassade 608. January 1969. “Questionnaire concernant les volontaires du Service national en service au Sénégal”, pp. 4-6.

The case of the *coopérants* and the DCC demonstrates that despite the history and reputation of centralization for both France and the Catholic Church, exchanges between *coopérants*, Cooperation officials, African and French clergy, and others reveal a highly decentralized landscape and a shifting sense of purpose. Individuals and local factors largely determined administrative boundaries and educational responsibilities.

"An Essential Element" or "A Dangerous Complicity?"

Despite their minimal training, French *coopérants* were crucial staff for West African schools facing a shortage of locally trained and qualified teachers. Thus African officials generally disputed the terms of Cooperation, but not its existence. In not disrupting the *status quo*, *coopérants* served elite African interests as much as French ones. This demonstrates that the axis of shared interests between elite Africans and the French government forged under the colonial period did not disappear after decolonization. Dahomean leaders in the early era of Mathieu Kérékou's Marxist revolution often preferred *coopérants* to local teachers due to what some thought was an inferiority complex. *Coopérants* were, in the words of one official, "hypocritically courteous and calculatingly docile" and thus leaders often preferred them to African teachers who may have wished to challenge authority or air different opinions⁵⁰. Though this view perhaps oversimplified a divide between the political beliefs of *coopérants* and African teachers, it is nonetheless instructive. Some West African leaders may have feared insurrectionism from their own, local workforce more than the ramifications of the continued presence of French nationals.

Even if West African leaders wanted to do without *coopérants*, to completely replace them would have been an enormous task. A secret telegram from 1966 quoted the President of Senegal, Leopold Sedar Senghor, as saying:

"We are still [...] a young nation and we cannot dream of renouncing technical assistance on a military level or on the level of education and economy. We cannot fly with our own wings, before a long time, at least a generation. It is therefore essential that French technical assistance in Senegal [...] and other Francophone African states be planned and organized for over twenty years"⁵¹.

Senghor's sentiment reflects a numerical reality of dependence that would take time to overturn. In 1960, Senegal counted 330 secondary school teachers. Of those who held the highest level of qualification, 33 were

50. CADN Cotonou Ambassade 14. "La Coopération internationale", n.d. [1972?], p. 1.

51. CADN Dakar Ambassade 403 Série ACT. Télégramme-Départ. Secret. From: Ambassade de France, Dakar. Destinataire: Diplomatie Paris, 18 April 1966, p. 3.

Senegalese and 153 were *coopérants*⁵². Of those with midlevel qualifications, 66 were Senegalese and 78 were *coopérants*⁵³. In Dahomey, the numbers were similar⁵⁴.

From the very first Senegalese educational plan after independence, written by the Technical Commission of Education and Formation of Cadres for the years 1960 to 1964, officials reported that they should orient their educational system towards training enough locals to replace all of the *coopérants*. They estimated that they would need to train approximately 1,600 students to do so. Yet they also mentioned that due to the duration of their schooling, these students would likely not enter the workforce until at least 1970⁵⁵. Well-educated Africans often opted for more remunerative jobs than teaching, thus exacerbating the teacher shortage. The fact that *coopérants* earned much more than their local peers likely contributed to this problem.

Despite the higher wages that *coopérants* enjoyed, their life was far from easy. Father Marguet reported on the hardship and isolation that many *coopérants* experienced, which he believed could and should be mitigated⁵⁶. Outside of urban centers like Dakar where *coopérants* socialized often, *coopérants* in rural areas had little outside contact⁵⁷. Father Marguet concluded that the DCC should make regular visits to appraise the moral, material, and financial conditions of the *coopérants*⁵⁸. For their part, *coopérants* believed their standard of living could be improved if there were better facilities to school their own children, more generous housing allowances, improved housing conditions, and more support from the Ministry of Cooperation for their workers' union.⁵⁹

African leaders faced a dearth of locals to assume jobs previously held by FIDES workers in the colonial era⁶⁰. Similarly, French officials lacked an entirely new pool of people to be *coopérants*: many upper-level officials

52. Highest level of qualification, "*cadres supérieurs*", was classified as one of the following: *cadres supérieurs*, *agrégés*, *certifiés* or *licenciés*.

53. Mid-level of qualifications is *cadres moyens*. Dakar DNEC 8 R 8. "Commission du plan: Rapport de la commission technique de l'enseignement de la formation des cadres et de l'information. Première période quadriennale du Plan 1960/1964", p. 17.

54. SMA Paris. "Statistiques", *Église de Cotonou*, 1967, p. 19.

55. Dakar DNEC 8 R 8. "Commission du plan: Rapport de la commission technique de l'enseignement de la formation des cadres et de l'information. Première période quadriennale du Plan 1960/1964", p. 10.

56. Dakar DNEC 3 S 27. "Rapport relatif au voyage en Afrique francophone du Père Marguet au sujet du Service national dans l'Enseignement catholique 4 May-14 July 1970", [letter dated] 17 October 1970, p. 12.

57. Jean-François and Eloise Brière, interview, Albany, NY, 3 June 2015.

58. *Ibid.*

59. CADN Dakar Ambassade 822. "État d'esprit des Coopérants", Mission française de Coopération à Dakar, n.d.

60. The dearth of trained locals was despite the Africanization policies put into place beginning in the postwar era (PINTO 2013).

had also worked under FIDES. Officials wondered whether they could use former functionaries from the colonial service to work in independent West Africa. Indeed, as Julien Meimon (2005a) has shown, many of the FIDES personnel worked in similar positions for Cooperation⁶¹. French officials believed that West Africans rejected the principle of the former overseas administration rather than the individuals that comprised it. Those who went to Africa after decolonization needed “a different etiquette”⁶².

Coopérants thus sought to distinguish themselves from others serving abroad. In a letter written sometime after 1966, *coopérants* deplored rules limiting their length of service:

“Your department [Cooperation] seems to ignore that the place of French teachers in Francophone Africa is not at all comparable to that of their colleagues who serve abroad traditionally. We do not represent, in effect, a means to diffuse French culture among an elite, but we are, and have been for a long time, an essential element for national education for African countries and Madagascar. We certainly believe that Franco-African Cooperation needs reforms and adaptations, but there is no doubt that the way the measure was announced will only slow down the necessary reforms [...]”⁶³.

Here, the *coopérants* offered two main arguments: that they were different from others working abroad and that they fulfilled an essential role, serving African countries as much as they were serving France. They also were careful to state that they were not merely catering to the elite. This was in keeping with the idea of universal education. Further, *coopérants*’ distancing from elites may have reflected the viewpoint that while elites were more capable of handling matters themselves, most Africans still needed French assistance.

Yet still others pointed to *coopérants*’ central role as a reason that French officials should radically rethink Cooperation. In one report representing the more extreme end of these views, the author deplored the high number of French teachers in African schools as propping up something that was not functioning well and could not be sustained. This report starkly compared Cooperation to a noose: “We sustain the [educational] system like the noose sustains the hanged, in providing half the professors (except in primary schools) and a third of the budget of the University: at this level, and by the results, it is no longer cooperation, but a dangerous complicity”⁶⁴.

61. CADN Dakar Ambassade 403 Série ACT. “Le Problème de l’assistance technique française aux États de la communauté. Unsigned and n.d., p. 2.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

63. CADN MCAC Dakar 772. “Groupement des Agents de l’assistance technique en service au Sénégal”. Le bureau de la section “enseignants” à Monsieur le Secrétaire d’État aux Affaires étrangères chargé de la Coopération. Document written by secretary C. Ferte, p. 1.

64. CADN MCAC Dakar 772. “Réflexions critiques sur la coopération culturelle”, November 1976, p. 2.

Still other officials cautioned that the problem lay in the fact that aid that had not changed over time, with African leaders having little say over where the aid went. The Minister of Cooperation wrote to the Ambassador of France to Senegal in 1976 and asserted: “The modalities of our aid in the cultural sector have only slightly changed for many years [...] Certain forms of this aid that were justifiable ten or fifteen years ago, today have an anachronistic character that does not escape our partners”⁶⁵. It is important to note the reference to African countries as “partners”, in line with the rhetoric and orientation of Cooperation. The Minister’s statement reflects an acute awareness of the temporal rupture of independence alongside simultaneous continuities that undergirded the two eras—a central tension of Cooperation.

Some officials critiqued what they saw as *coopérants*’ role in perpetuating an educational system ill-adapted to the needs of the country. One report on Senegal noted that the economy was mainly agriculturally-based, and yet the schools were graduating students without agricultural skills, with few employment options⁶⁶. French officials provided *coopérants* for a French-style, literary education, not a technical or agricultural one⁶⁷. France’s sizeable influence on and presence in education in the West African post-colonies, then, delayed and in some cases hindered a more radical or comprehensive reconceptualization of the educational structure and curriculum aligned with the needs of these newly independent countries.

Reconfiguring Franco-African Relations

African historians have established that decolonization was not a clean break politically nor economically. The case of the *coopérants* proves that the same was true of culture. Exporting language, culture, and pedagogy had long been a part of the French empire, and this exportation increased—largely via *coopérants*—after independence in West Africa. The continued presence of French nationals has had important consequences for the educational sector in West Africa: the French-style curriculum, the fact that French remains the language of instruction, and the prominent place many FIDES—and Cooperation-funded Catholic schools maintain today. This French-style education, in turn, shaped a key generation of schoolchildren, many of whom went on to hold prominent posts in their countries. Independence meant not only that African leaders and clergy had to adapt to a new relationship

65. CADN MCAC Dakar 772. F. Wibaux, Minister of *Coopération* to the Ambassador of France, No 037567, 11 October 1976.

66. CADN Dakar Ambassade 609. “Réflexions sur l’évolution et les perspectives de l’assistance technique au Sénégal”, 5 July 1974, pp. 1-2.

67. This was also a result of the failures of rural schooling initiatives in the interwar years, which H. GAMBLE (2009) discusses.

with France, but also that the French government and Catholic organizations had to adapt to new conditions in West Africa. The Franco-African relationship was a product of everyday negotiations as much as it was a consequence of decisions made in Dakar, Paris, or Vatican City.

The fact that Catholic organizations were some of the primary motors driving Cooperation sheds light on the ways in which the French presence abroad, even after 1960, was intertwined with the Church's reach—a durable cultural legacy that the local population inherited and repurposed. As Africans replaced foreign-born teachers, administrators, and clergy, French culture became embedded in institutions that West Africans made their own. While French *coopérants* triangulated between Church, state, and post-colony, African Catholics were part of all three of these nodes. Indeed, they point to a different triad—Francophone, African, and Catholic—that was increasingly at play within and beyond the educational realm. Independence presented an opportunity for African clergy and African-based Catholic organizations to realize their own visions of an independent West Africa.

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ABSTRACT

After decolonization, *coopérants* went to West Africa to teach under the French development program Cooperation. France's investment in the culturally charged realm of education demonstrates how ties deepened between France and West Africa at the very moment that many spoke of loosening or severing them. While scholars often look at Franco-African relations from an official or diplomatic angle, this article reveals how these relations were a product of everyday negotiations between *coopérants*, local teachers, clergy, and transnational Catholic organizations as much as they were shaped by the decisions of French and African governments. *Coopérants* played many roles: they were the cultural currency of a newly technocratic French culture, religious representatives of the Church, putative experts, and indispensable teachers in countries not able to fully staff their schools with locals. *Coopérants* reveal how France's presence abroad after decolonization was intertwined with the Church, even in majority Muslim and multi-religious countries such as Senegal and Dahomey. France's involvement and *coopérants'* presence have had important consequences for education in the region, including on the curriculum, the fact that French remains the language of instruction, and the prominent place that many Cooperation-funded Catholic schools maintain today.

RÉSUMÉ

Triangulation entre Église, État et postcolonie : les coopérants dans l'Afrique de l'Ouest indépendante. — Après la décolonisation, les coopérants sont allés en Afrique de l'Ouest pour y enseigner sous l'égide de la Coopération, un programme français de développement. L'investissement français dans le domaine de l'éducation — profondément lié à celui de la culture — montre comment les liens ont été resserrés entre la France et l'Afrique de l'Ouest au moment où beaucoup parlaient de les rompre, ou du moins de les desserrer. Si les chercheurs ont souvent étudié les relations franco-africaines à travers une approche diplomatique ou officielle, cet article démontre comment ces relations étaient produites par les négociations quotidiennes entre coopérants, enseignants locaux, clergé, et organisations catholiques, autant qu'elles étaient influencées par les décisions des gouvernements français et africains. Les coopérants ont joué plusieurs rôles : ils ont été la monnaie d'échange d'une nouvelle culture française technocratique, des représentants religieux de l'Église, des experts putatifs, et des enseignants indispensables dans des pays qui n'avaient pas assez d'enseignants locaux. Le tournant pris par les enjeux des relations franco-africaines et l'histoire à grande échelle des écoles catholiques missionnaires dans l'Afrique de l'Ouest une fois traduits par le biais des coopérants — autant les catholiques que les non catholiques — aboutissent à une constante triangulation entre l'Église, l'État Français, et la postcolonie. Le cas des coopérants explique comment la présence française à l'étranger après la décolonisation est liée à celle de l'Église, même dans les pays majoritairement musulmans et multi religieux comme le Sénégal et le Dahomey. L'engagement français et la présence des coopérants ont eu des conséquences importantes concernant l'éducation dans la région. Le fait que le français demeure la langue officielle de l'enseignement et la place importante qu'un grand nombre des établissements auparavant financés par la Coopération ont gardé aujourd'hui en sont les meilleures preuves.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Senegal, Dahomey, West Africa, Catholic Church, *coopérants*, cooperation, decolonization, teaching/Sénégal, Dahomey, Afrique de l'Ouest, Église catholique, *coopérants*, coopération, décolonisation, enseignement.