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- 1 At the close of the 1950s, in a time of innocence and in the first blush of courtship, Senegalese leader Léopold Sedar Senghor and his Soudanese counterpart Modibo Keita made a pilgrimage to Mali's Dogon plateau to witness "authentic" African culture in what was then still the French Soudan. Political independence and a proposed federation between the two emerging nations were on the table. While the spectacle of masked dances probably did not seal the deal between Senegal and Soudan, the mix of culture and politics was generative, and the Mali federation was born. The federation fell apart faster than a bad marriage, but the relationship between cultural authenticity and political legitimacy proved enduring. James Genova tactfully avoids mention of the first union and the messy divorce—which fall outside his period of interest—but his *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa* helps us to understand better what happened and why cultural tourism was a logical element of late colonial nation-building.
- 2 In *Colonial Ambivalence...*, James Genova poses an intriguing problem, that of the relationship between "culture" and political community in the context of French colonial rule in West Africa. Wisely, he approaches that abstract relationship via those most invested in it, "the numerically small class of French-educated elites [who] came to be regarded by themselves and the colonial rulers as occupying such a strategic position in the imperial setting" (or as he often writes, "the colonial field"); (2). Over six densely written chapters, Genova argues that the presumption of a relationship between cultural authenticity and political community and legitimacy lay behind the

ethnographic projects of the interwar period and the emergence of the philosophy of *négritude*. What's more, he contends that elite elaborations of the idea of "culture" are key to understanding post-war anti-colonial politics. By drawing out the problem of culture and its uses by both West African elites and colonial administrators, Genova sets out to "illustrate the perils inherent in claims to civil and political rights made on the basis of cultural difference or specificity" (3). This is an ambitious and innovative project.

- 3 Genova's book makes for interesting if occasionally laborious reading. Following a brief introduction and a chapter recounting the familiar but necessary tale of Blaise Diagne's rise to prominence during the First World War, Genova treats us to one of the most extended historical treatments in English of the activities of West African radicals in interwar France. The third chapter illuminates the ties between ethnography and governance between the wars, and it tackles the "politicization of culture" head-on. Chapter Four brings us back to the French-educated Africans known as "*évolués*" and the political context in which the philosophy of *négritude* was elaborated. Having surveyed the competing values of authenticity and mimicry, the book then turns to the "colonial ambivalence" that characterized the 1930s and that reigned in the post-war years after having reached a nadir under Vichy (a regime that was many things, but not ambivalent!). A sixth and final chapter takes the reader through the dismantling of the federation of French West Africa in 1956, when a great degree of internal political autonomy was passed down to the colonial territories that would soon become independent nations. Genova's conclusion suggests that while this balkanization was successful, decolonization remains incomplete. Between the First World War and the *Loi cadre*, he argues, a "hegemonic framework emerged that privileged the idea of cultural 'authenticity' and particular notions of the 'true' forms of French and African social organization that were based on assumptions of essential and immutable differences between the two" (p. 273). Genova suggests that "alternative notions of 'authenticity'" should now be developed (p. 282).
- 4 Here lies the rub. Having set the trap of "culture", Genova gets caught in it. A fundamental misunderstanding of West African politics is to blame. The author's original questions, as I understand them, are essentially, how did the idea of culture become politicized in colonial West Africa? Who made use of it, and how? These are very good questions, so good they beg another one: How is it that—broadly speaking—ethnicity did not become politicized, given that it was the container in which "culture" was so often thought to be held? Genova never asks this question, but he assumes the answer—ethnicity framed politics and became the venue of anti-colonial and nationalist politics. In so far as it closes the circle, the answer serves his purposes, but it is flat wrong. Politics in 1950s West Africa was not "tribal" or "ethnic" (p. 259), and neither was political violence (or for that matter, social organization...). In fact, one wonders if Genova has become trapped in the archive, unable to break out of the political language he sets out to critique.
- 5 *Colonial Ambivalence...* is many things, and one of them is a rendition of Herman Lebovics' *True France: the Wars over Cultural Identity* (1992) in a colonial West African setting. This makes sense, in so far as Lebovics was one of Genova's dissertation advisors at SUNY-Stony Brook. Yet whereas Lebovics navigates interwar French politics with authority, Genova is adrift in West African waters. This is a pity, because he did a formidable amount of trawling through the archives at Aix-en-Provence, and to a lesser

extent at Dakar. In fact, Genova might rely a tad too heavily on the “*Affaires politiques*” files at Aix and too little on archival holdings in West Africa itself. He also misses some important contributions to the secondary literature. To give one example, colonial ethnographer and administrator Maurice Delafosse is a key figure in Genova’s argument, but the invaluable volume Jean-Loup Amselle and Emmanuelle Sibeud edited on Delafosse is absent from the bibliography¹.

- 6 Historians who make it through Genova’s prose will find much to debate. On the largest scale, Genova’s argument that the *Loi cadre* of 1956 “effectively ended French rule in West Africa” (226) may generate discussion, and it seems to be at odds with his contention that decolonization never happened. More narrowly, others will take issue with his characterization of the often-overlooked Soudanese militant Tiémoko Garan Kouyaté. Genova puts Kouyaté at the center of interwar anti-colonial politics, but previous historians have argued that Kouyaté’s motives and practices gradually marginalized him within the small network of West African radicals. Genova does not detail Kouyaté’s decline, and omits mention of evidence uncovered by Philippe Dewitte that indicates Kouyaté was in the pay of the Minister of Colonies by the late 1930s, and may possibly have attempted to collaborate with the Nazis before being executed by them².
- 7 Elsewhere, Genova makes some mistakes. Guinea was not the only African nation of the ex-AOF to abolish the chieftaincy (p. 260); Mali, for one, did the same. The entire colonial administration of the AOF did not support the Vichy regime (pp. 191-192, 195); in fact many administrators were either jailed for their resistance activities or fled to neighboring territories, particularly British-held Gold Coast. De Gaulle did not lead African troops into Paris (199); the ranks had been “whitened” and sub-Saharan Africans were left behind in southern France. These are errors of fact. While they do not impede the development of Genova’s argument, a series of analytical confusions does.
- 8 Prominent among these is an occasional blurring of the very social categories central to his analysis. This problem is most acute in relation to his descriptions of the *évolués* and *originaires*. These two categories are not the same, but Genova often treats them as if they were. The first term, now considered pejorative, was widely used in the colonial period to refer to Africans who had some modicum of French education and who took on European dress, habits, and so on. It did not refer to their political status. By contrast, and as is well known, the *originaires* of the Four Communes of Senegal were considered French citizens irrespective of their level of education or assimilation, and even if the terms of that citizenship were often in dispute. In other words, the category of the “*originaires*” was an explicitly political one, and while many *originaires* may have been *évolué*—or vice versa—many others were not. Genova occasionally acknowledges this distinction, but in Chapter One, where it is crucial, he tends to ignore it. Along the same lines, what might have been an interesting distinction between “civilization”—Senghor’s central concern—and “culture” is blurred rather than plumbed.
- 9 Similarly, in this book as in many others, Senegal tends to stand in for French West Africa as a whole. This synecdochical technique is by no means peculiar to Genova, but here it simultaneously obscures what is unique about Senegalese political history and writes the rest of the sub-region out of the analysis. In Genova’s rendering of post-war politics, Senghor occupies center stage, Houphouët-Boigny is reduced to a supporting role, and such figures as Mamadou Konaté, Modibo Keita, and Sékou Touré appear

scarcely, if at all. These sins of omission are minor and common, but in the context of Genova's larger argument they are something more than venial. Genova wants to link "the loss of 'national identity' in France and the 'crisis of institutions' that has afflicted much of sub-Saharan Africa", a region in which he sees "the disintegration of administrative systems... [and] the ascendancy of local, ethno-tribal loyalties over and against the state" (3). Leaving contemporary France aside, Genova's vision of today's Africa seems remarkably bleak and deeply indebted to the notion of the "ethnic" or "tribal". Most importantly, there is an analytic sleight of hand. Can Senegal be our synecdoche for the first half of the argument, and be entirely absent from the second, when it no longer provides grist for the mill? Which of the eight nations of the former AOF would provide the evidence Genova needs? Would any of them? And if they did, one might ask, what's "culture" got to do with it?

- 10 And the *évolués*? Houphouët-Boigny and others would undoubtedly be surprised to be called "modern griots" as they are throughout the book. Keita and Touré would surely have objected, as would many griots! (One might also point out that, next to Senghor himself, Touré was the West African leader most invested in the political implications of cultural authenticity and the least "assimilated". No mimicry there). Finally, even Senghor would have been sorely disappointed, at best, to be told that in the late 1950s "the fundamental referent in the construction of local identities and the foundation of the system of governance in West Africa remained that of the tribal group" (p. 259). If that was so and the nation-builders were wasting their time, then why bother making the trip to the Dogon plateau?
- 11 These are big criticisms of a complex work. Others will undoubtedly read Genova's book rather differently than I do. Scholars of Senghor's political life and thought will find much to chew on, and historians of West Africa will see new light shed on post-war politics. Those of us excited by Mahmood Mamdani's recent writings on politico-cultural identities and colonial legacies will be intrigued to find an adventurous new voice tackling similar questions in a French colonial context. That said, those looking for an authoritative work on colonial intermediaries might do better elsewhere, and scholars of France should approach this work with caution, reading it alongside other analyses of colonial and post-colonial West Africa. Above, I characterized Genova's book as "ambitious". Perhaps it is too ambitious, and it leads us to expect too much. It is also a brave book, and I will look forward to future work from this author that reflects those same qualities with greater care and precision.

NOTES

- 1.. J.-L. Amselle & E. Sibeud (dir.), *Maurice Delafosse : entre orientalisme et ethnographie. L'itinéraire d'un africaniste (1870-1926)* (Paris : Maisonneuve et Larose), 1998.
- 2.. P. Dewitte, *les Mouvements nègres en France, 1919-1939* (Paris : L'Harmattan), 1985, pp. 382-384.